IDEAS OF ORDER: THE MEANING AND APPEAL OF CONTEMPORARY ASTROLOGICAL BELIEF

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Astrology is a belief system that has existed for almost 2,500 years. This enduring form of belief has not been effectively studied by scholars and thus we know little about why beliefs commonly stigmatized as superstitions continue to appeal to people today. My research, based on fieldwork and interviews with astrologers in the Portland, Oregon area, demonstrates that the longevity of this belief system may be attributed to its ability to provide meaning and purpose to people. Throughout history, astrology has been adapted to and has evolved within the cultures in which it exists, and its latest adaptation reveals a close connection to the New Age movement. Astrological worldviews, which assume a correlation between predictable celestial cycles and human activity, are rooted in a premise of fatalism, but this analysis reveals a nuanced view of fate that often is empowering rather than limiting.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Astrology has ancient roots: it is as old as Western civilization itself. How is it that this archaic belief system has survived into the twenty-first century? Why does it persist—thrive, even—despite centuries of ridicule and debunking efforts by skeptics and rationalists? To answer these questions, we must start by understanding what astrology is, how people in the astrological community use it, and what it means to them. Astrology is often seen by those outside the community as either fortune telling or pseudoscience, neither of which accurately describes how those within the community view it. An emic perspective shows that astrology today is more often used as a spiritual tool for finding meaning and purpose in one's life. While those who "believe" in astrology do not necessarily share a common belief system, they do share a common belief in a world where astrology is possible—that is, where a complex, symbolic system correlated to planetary motions can reveal one's authentic self and provide guidance for spiritual growth in a useful way.

One of the challenges of studying the astrological community is terminology. In popular culture, most people understand the term "astrology" to mean a "belief" in the daily or weekly horoscope columns found in newspapers and magazines. Such columns are also known as "Sun sign horoscopes"[1] because they are based only on the sign of the zodiac that the sun is passing through on the day of one's birth. While newspaper horoscopes are usually written by astrologers using real astrological techniques, they are far too general to be truly useful to any one individual. To assign the term "astrology" to this simplistic form of popular entertainment is to miss, and misunderstand, the complex

symbolic system that adherents might refer to as "real astrology." If astrology were a language (an apt analogy), Sun sign horoscopes would be based on a single letter of the alphabet, which is obviously not enough information to convey much meaning. It is important, therefore, to make a distinction between these two variations that fall under the popular umbrella of "astrology," as the two groups do not share the same understanding of astrology. Sociologist Claude Fischler distinguished these two groups by referring to the astrology of Sun sign horoscopes as "mass astrology," and the astrology of professionals and students of the full system as "learned astrology" (1974, 282). This distinction is rarely clear or even understood in our culture. In other words, when the mainstream media refers to astrology, it almost always gets it wrong. Reading a Sun sign horoscope column and thinking one understands astrology is like taking a yoga exercise class and thinking one fully understands Hinduism.

Learned astrology (which I will call "astrology" here), then, is something different than generally supposed. Its followers are a much smaller group than that encompassed under mass or popular astrology. For the purpose of this study, learned astrology refers to a level of astrological knowledge that allows a person to analyze (or "read") his or her own birth chart (that is, a map of the position of the planets and certain calculated points at the moment of a person's birth). This requires a person to understand the conventional meanings of zodiac signs, planets, the "house" system, and the geometric relationships known as "aspects" that structures a birth chart. (See the Appendix for definitions of astrological terms.)

"Do you believe in astrology?" Conversations about astrology often start with this question. Sometimes the question is sincere, but often it is tinged with incredulity or,

worse, condescension, an undertone of "Do you *really* believe in *that*?"[2] Nicholas Campion notes that "the whole notion of belief is a highly problematic one and…many astrologers resist the proposition that they even believe in astrology" (2012, 87). This may explain why the astrologers I spoke to rarely answer this question with "Yes." In fact, the two most common answers tell us something about how astrologers see their craft. First, "No, I don't *believe* in astrology" is an answer that jars the questioner out of a particular approach to a topic they know nothing about; from the perspective of an astrologer, the question about belief demonstrates a misunderstanding of the subject. Second, the rhetorical response, "Do you believe in a hammer?" reflects the astrologer's perspective that astrology is a tool, and as such it is used because it is effective and produces observable results, not because of any underlying belief system that relies on faith.

Astrology and the contemporary astrological community are topics almost completely ignored by folklorists and scholars in general. Most approaches to the topic deal with mass astrology rather than the actual form of astrology practiced by people who call themselves astrologers and participate in astrological communities. Few scholars have investigated how astrology is really operating in the lives of people who use the full astrological system. A small but thriving community of astrologers (professional and amateur) continues to practice this ancient art or "technical craft" (Faracovi 1998, 117) despite the pervading belief, in even the most progressive and tolerant communities, that astrology has been disproven or rendered obsolete by modern science. Why then does astrology continue to persist as a belief system? Answering this question will yield insight into the way people in the astrological community seek meaning in their lives,

which contributes to our understanding of how people seek meaning in general. In the words of Portland astrologer Mark Dodich, "How can you dismiss something that doesn't go away?"[3]

When I asked several astrologers in the Portland, Oregon area why they use astrology, all of them had the same, succinct answer: "It works." The question of belief is for them, in many ways, irrelevant; it seems that one who knows how astrology works also knows *that* it works, otherwise there would be no reason to invest the significant effort it takes to learn the astrological system. While they each had different ideas, or even no ideas, about how astrology works, they agreed that it was an effective tool that serves a range of purposes: Astrology helps with self-understanding; it provides meaning and purpose in life; it helps one see patterns in both external events and subjective feelings over time; it helps explain "why" for questions from the mundane to the existential; it is a way of understanding one's "fate" and how it works with "free will"; it provides context for life's difficulties and helps one understand the best way to handle them; and, above all, it is a way of finding order amid the chaos and randomness experienced in most ordinary lives. In this way, astrology is simultaneously a spiritual tool and a practical one. Astrology is in many ways a kind of belief system, a form of lived religion, yet it requires no particular faith or belief. One can master the art of astrology regardless of one's spiritual beliefs, or even with no spiritual belief at all. Astrologers assert that it works whether you "believe" in it or not; it's more like "gravity" or a natural law, than, say, faith in deity. For astrologers, the use of astrology is a rational choice based on empirical evidence. Learning the full system of astrology is no small task, so those who undertake such study often do so after having experiences that show

them, first, the efficacy of astrology, and second, the complexity and flexibility of the system.

To explore the reasons behind astrology's continued existence, I must also pose several other questions: What is astrology, from the perspective of those who practice it? How and why does that perspective differ from popular views of it? What does a twenty-first century astrologer (amateur, student, or professional) believe and practice, and what can those individuals tell us about both the astrological community and the natural human drive to create (spiritual) meaning in one's life? What are the features of astrological communities and what purpose do they serve? What motivates someone to do the difficult, time-consuming work of learning astrology when there are so many other, easier spiritual paths? How has American religious history and culture influenced the way astrology is practiced and conceptualized today? Why do new forms of astrology develop (particularly "evolutionary astrology," which began gaining popularity in the United States in the 1980s), and how are those forms different from what preceded them? What prevents astrology from being more widely understood? In investigating and attempting to answer these questions, I try to paint an accurate picture of a particular, often misrepresented group of believers and demonstrate what astrology means today and why it exists as something far more than an irrational superstition in the lives of its practitioners. For this, I base my analysis on interviews conducted in 2015 with ten astrologers who live in and around Portland, Oregon. With this emic and fieldwork-based method, I attempt to understand why astrology persists and to explain its ongoing appeal for astrologers and the needs it fulfills and how those needs relate to other belief systems. I also explore how the notion of fate (and one's ability to negotiate it) plays into

astrological belief. In addition, this thesis provides a brief history of astrology and an overview of its various manifestations as a backdrop for this enduring cultural phenomenon that has persisted and thrived in Western culture for almost 2,500 years.

In the next chapter (Chapter II), I provide a review of the literature and analysis of representations of astrology in a number of ways. In the late nineteenth century, folklorists saw astrology as a "survival," something doomed to extinction and thus superstitious in nature. Renowned critical theorist Theodor Adorno analyzed newspaper horoscope columns in the 1950s and determined that astrology promoted passivity and submission to social and cultural forces. These scholars focused on mass astrology, not the learned astrology I discuss in this thesis. To understand astrology as it is understood and practiced by astrologers, I investigate the literature of folk religion and folk belief, lived or vernacular religion, the "seekership" mentality that emerged after World War II, and astrology's relationship to the New Age movement. I also provide an overview of the literature I used in my brief history of Western astrology (Chapter III), followed by a discussion of contemporary astrology's relationship to the New Age movement (Chapter IV). In Chapter V, I trace the origins of fate and fatalism in astrology and suggest that astrology's nuanced fusion of fate and free will serves an empowering psychological function. In Chapter VI, I discuss the various schools of thought found among contemporary astrologers, demonstrating that astrology is a thriving, vibrant belief, despite the continued mainstream cultural bias against it. Finally, in Chapter VII, I provide a case study in which I consider astrology as a cultural force in Shakespeare's time as a way of demonstrating astrology's ongoing appeal as a language not of the stars but of the human condition. Throughout these chapters, I include the voices of real

astrologers—that is, people who are committed students of astrology or practicing astrology professionally.

NOTES

1. When referring to the Sun and Moon as astrological concepts, I will follow the convention of capitalizing them.
2. Sometimes this is represented in the form of a pick-up line from the 1970s, "What's your sign?"
3. Quotes from named astrologers throughout this work refer to the Portland-area astrologers I interviewed between January and October of 2015, unless otherwise noted.

CHAPTER II

SUN SIGNS, SURVIVALS, AND SUPERSTITIONS: REPRESENTATIONS OF ASTROLOGY

Folklorists have been mostly silent on the topic of astrology, save for two articles from the 1890s, both published in the *Journal of American Folklore*. Neither article demonstrates an understanding of the craft and practice of astrology by astrologers, although this problem is not unique to folklorists; the same confusion of "mass" astrology (that is, Sun sign horoscopes in newspapers and magazines) with astrological practice seems to be the norm in academic literature. In an 1890 article titled "Survivals of Astrology," Monroe B. Snyder, an astronomer, argues in favor of collecting the "folk-lore of the heavenly bodies and meteorology" (127), which is a more accurate description of what he suggests than the word "astrology"; however, the article demonstrates that he does not know the difference. He acknowledges the importance of astrology to astronomy, noting that "astronomy, issuing from the early astrology, is not only the oldest but the most perfect of sciences" (131). Throughout the article he equates astrology with astrological "superstitions" (for example, moon lore about the best time for planting) rather than the full system of astrology practiced by astrologers. He ends his article by articulating his true intention in suggesting that such folklore be preserved: "It is only by a strict record and explanation of all the facts in connection with them [astrological survivals] that we may the more effectually assist progressive science in extinguishing the last vestige of these 'errors and fears,' and thus make room in the human heart for the noblest reverence and the purest worship" (131). In other words, we can only see astronomy in all its glory if we can remove this pesky astrological superstition that people

confuse with real science. (Astronomers are often the most vehement critics of astrology, sometimes noting with frustration that students fail to understand the difference between astrology and astronomy. In addition, the persistent notion that belief in astrology can be defeated by better science education demonstrates a misunderstanding of why astrology continues to appeal to people.) By referring to such folklore as "survivals," which was the norm at the time, Snyder clearly places astrology in the category of dead and gone or, at best, no longer useful, the prevalent notion at the time that folklore is archaic, ancient, and "dying out." He fails to recognize the existing and evolving tradition of astrology that has indeed survived for over two millennia. The second article, published in the *Journal of American Folklore* in 1898, is also by a scientist, H. Carrington Bolton. It is titled "A Relic of Folklore," again implying a system that is obsolete. This article is neither insightful nor respectful: Bolton refers to astrology as "a persistent popular superstition" (113); claims that Greek philosophers "elevated it to a pseudo-science" (114) when in fact astrology was the science of its day (as Snyder acknowledged in his article); asserts that astrology "kept the intellect in a 'dreary bondage of ignorance and superstition'" (115); and concludes that astrology is a "wicked stupefaction of the mind" (117). Such an approach, which was typical at the time in folklore studies, can hardly lead to greater understanding of vernacular practices of belief.

Into the early twentieth century, astrology was widely seen as a superstition or a kind of pre-scientific thinking and thus not suited to serious study. In 1957, the noted German cultural theorist Theodor Adorno published a lengthy article (seventy pages) in which he analyzed four months' worth of Sun sign horoscopes published in the *Los Angeles Times* (Adorno 1957). It seemed that astrology had finally merited serious

academic study, given Adorno's stature and the immensity of the article. Unfortunately, Adorno did not actually study astrology or astrologers, but rather an instance of the "mass astrology" of popular culture, not the "learned astrology" used for spiritual purposes and self-understanding (which is the focus of my study). Adorno did not investigate the reasons people might read daily horoscopes by, say, asking them,[1] nor did he interview the astrologer who wrote the columns he evaluated. Instead, he used these seemingly benign horoscopes to describe and evaluate an imagined readership, thereby reinforcing his own Frankfurt School theories about the mindset of people in 1950s America—a post-war, capitalist society where people were unknowingly oppressed by the mass culture. In assuming that those who read such columns believed them and, more importantly, acted on the advice given in them, Adorno presents a thorough but flawed analysis, an analysis based on an assumption that reinforces his conclusion: people are passive "victims" and want some outside authority to tell them how to live.

For Adorno, astrology was a representation of any kind of escapist, irrational, or superstitious thinking; consequently, readers of horoscope columns were themselves superstitious and willing to submit to an invisible authority (whether it be "the stars" or the astrologer himself). In Adorno's view, if we can blame the stars for our troubles, we are much less likely to recognize the hidden social and cultural forces that operate in our lives, and thus less likely to challenge the totalitarian systems to which we are subject. Astrological horoscopes, by this reasoning, reinforce the status quo, demonstrating the tendency toward uncritical and irrational thinking that Adorno thought resulted in the complacency required for an oppressive, capitalist economy. Unchecked and unchallenged, such uncritical thinking could lead to fascism.

While I will not dispute Adorno's conclusions about mid-twentieth century American people and culture, his use of astrology to prove his point misrepresents the system used by those in the learned astrology community. In this he is not alone among scholars, and he exemplifies what folklorist David Hufford (1982) calls "traditions of disbelief": he starts from the premise that astrology is absurd, and adapts it accordingly to his (quite astute) critique of mass culture. However, as Hufford has shown, if one starts from such a premise, one's understanding of the belief will be limited because "the research design begins with the question 'Why and how do some people manage to believe things which are so patently false?'" (1982, 47). Adorno seems to start from precisely this position, as he assumes intellectual deficiency on the part of believers; a sampling of quotations from his article include: astrologers "accept it because it *exists*, without much reflection" (22); astrology is "ready-made, carefully prepared and predigested irrationality" (32); "really educated and intellectually fully developed persons would look through the fallacy of astrology….Those who can read the phony signs of the stars believe that they are in the know" (86-87), and, shockingly, at one point he compares astrology to "other irrational creeds like racism" (29). After assuming a lack of critical thinking among astrologers (by which he actually means "horoscope readers," despite the fact he does not clearly make this distinction), he explains their belief based on what he has already theorized about the culture he witnessed in the United States. In other words, Adorno is not wrong about people's tendency to submit to and be motivated by invisible cultural forces, but he is wrong in assuming that astrology, as a whole, reinforces passive acceptance of a socially-determined fate. (See Chapter V on Astrology and Fate below for a more thorough treatment of this topic.) As a result, this influential

work in the history of astrological scholarship tells us nothing valid or useful about the people who practice learned astrology. It does show Adorno's clear—and common for the time—bias against astrological belief, as well as his theoretical approach to "dangerous" ideologies. His work also demonstrates some of the problems with an entirely etic approach to belief, especially beliefs that are widely unpopular or stigmatized: he makes unrealistic and generalized assumptions about readers of horoscope columns (e.g., that they believe in "astrology" as he defines it, and that they all follow the advice given rather than, say, reading the column for entertainment). In short, Adorno fails to include the perspective of actual astrologers. Ironically, those knowledgeable about the full system of astrology seem to be striving for the same thing as Adorno: an "authentic" existence unmediated by mass culture.[2]

The climate for academic considerations of astrology improved somewhat in the 1970s, when Robert Wuthnow, the renowned sociologist of religion, conducted a survey to learn more about belief in astrology among the general population in the United States. Astrology was unquestionably part of the counterculture at this time, and many books were being published on the topic thanks to its affinity with the emerging New Age movement. Wuthnow (1976) wanted to know how astrology functioned in the life of believers. Although Wuthnow's approach is etic, and he makes little distinction between mass and learned astrology, he recognized that astrology was a social phenomenon worthy of study and that it operated as a kind of religious expression. His data showed that people who believed in astrology—note that this group presumably includes a large percentage of people in the mass or popular astrology category, not the category I address in my research—are more likely to feel marginalized, to be associated with the

counterculture (as defined in the 1970s), and to be women. People who believe in astrology are less likely to participate in an organized religion, which is unsurprising given that astrology often provides solace and meaning in ways associated with religious or spiritual belief. While Wuthnow's work is more accurate and insightful than Adorno's reductionist approach, it still fails to answer some of the key questions about astrology as a belief system, such as why it remains a compelling topic of interest, what existential needs it might fulfill, and how people use it to create meaning and understand the world.

In the 1990s, Shoshanah Feher was the first sociologist to survey the learned astrology community, noting that astrology is often superficially associated with fortune telling (as Adorno saw it) rather than being viewed as a tool for spiritual seekers. She recognized that at the time of her research, the social science community had not truly studied astrologers or their beliefs (Feher 1992a, 179). While Wuthnow studied the popular astrology community by surveying the general public, Feher conducted her survey by collecting data from attendees at a national astrological conference (1992a, 1992b, 1994).[3] Because the information provided at such conferences is intended primarily for people with intermediate to advanced knowledge of astrology, and thus a serious commitment to it, it is safe to assume that this group is a representative segment of the learned astrology community, including those who practice astrology professionally. Feher found that many people in this astrology community had beliefs that overlapped with those of the New Age movement. While not all astrologers shared this belief system, New Age spirituality was a common theme among those who integrated astrology into their daily lives or spiritual practices. Feher suspects that many people in this community first embraced astrology as part of the 1960s counterculture,

and then integrated astrological beliefs as they moved into the New Age community (1992b, 92). People in this group were much less likely to see astrology as a divinatory or predictive tool, as it is commonly characterized in the popular media. Rather, astrology was used as a tool for self-understanding, a way to help people work through psychological issues or to promote spiritual growth. Because Feher's research focused on an "in group" of astrologers, her analysis is much more emic and respectful than previous studies. She found that this astrological group formed a supportive community based around a shared commitment to astrology.

Astrology in Everyday Life: Folk Religion, Belief Studies, and the Vernacular

In 1974, Don Yoder defined "folk religion" the following way: "Folk religion is the totality of all those views and practices of religion that exist among the people apart from and alongside the strictly theological and liturgical forms of the official religion" (1974, 14). He notes that at the time he published this seminal definition, the discipline of Religious Studies examined belief at the institutional and theological level but neglected practices or beliefs that existed outside of those norms. Unfortunately, the same was true in Folklore Studies, particularly in America. He argues that this is due to the lack of adequate categories in which religion and belief could be contained without resorting to terms such as "superstition" (9). In his concept of folk religion, individual religious belief was either an offshoot of institutional belief or doctrine or a syncretic form of institutional religion and native religion (12). In other words, there was no room in Yoder's definition for a folk religion entirely outside the bounds of an institutional religion.

Twenty years later, Yoder's student, Leonard Primiano, took issue with this definition in his work on vernacular religion, calling it "residualistic" in its focus on an official/unofficial religious dichotomy (1995, 39-40). In Primiano's view, Yoder's definition leaves folk religion open to value judgments that privilege the official over the popular or personal, a similar problem that astrology faces today. The term "folk religion" implies that "religion somewhere exists as a pure element which is in some way transformed, even contaminated, by its exposure to human communities" (39); the inference is that folk religion is a corruption of a more authentic, institutional religion. Primiano claims that folklorists have understood folk religion well by understanding what people experience and how they practice their belief rather than attempting to analyze only what they believe. Moreover, in Primiano's view, a belief system's relationship to an official religious organization is irrelevant; what matters is the way a belief system is lived and experienced by believers at a personal level. Religious validity, he argues, should be "established by the inner experience and perception of the believer" (1995, 40) rather than by its relationship to a formal religious institution. The discipline of Folklore Studies is ideally suited to the study of belief systems that are both out of the mainstream and out of the ordinary, as well as belief systems of individuals. Thus folklorists are also well suited to study astrological belief, which is usually disparaged by the scientific community and the educated elite, including many in academia, who reject it as a model of superstitious thinking. Furthermore, religious groups frequently reject astrology as a subject related to witchcraft or other threatening practices. Even the mainstream media, which serves to promote popular forms of astrology, often ridicules such belief. Because astrological belief is also embraced in certain Western subcultures (such as

Neopaganism) and countries such as India and China, while also maintaining a culture of its own, it merits deeper understanding.

Folklorist David Hufford suggests that academic work on the subject of belief has in fact promoted "traditions of disbelief." In these traditions, personal beliefs (particularly beliefs considered to be supernatural) are treated skeptically, assuming a lack of sophistication among people who hold beliefs deemed to be superstitious or false (Hufford 1982; 1983, 24). Hufford argues that when such scholarship starts from the position that the believer is simply wrong, it cannot adequately represent the way belief functions and the purpose it serves in believers' lives. This position must be recognized as subjective, as we all operate within certain belief systems, even if that belief modality is disbelief. Hufford advocates a reflexive approach to the study of belief, one in which folklorists are able to understand beliefs that a purely rationalistic approach would immediately reject as false and thus unworthy of study. In other words, disbelief is not a position of neutrality, but a statement of (other) belief. Because "knowing is an experience that is had by someone" (Hufford 1995, 57), scientific knowledge and spiritual or supernatural knowledge share a common connection—humans as the interpreters of that knowledge. Hufford notes that the scholarly study of spirituality has been hindered by academia's own "particular spiritual tradition: atheistic, anti-institutional and secular" (1995, 66). Hufford is not promoting relativism, but rather the acknowledgement of the biases and beliefs we bring to the table when studying any belief system, whether it is one we agree with or not. One important result of such reflexivity is respect: beliefs can only be blindly denigrated if we stand outside of them without understanding them.

Hufford's work is important for the study of astrological belief because prejudice and assumptions about astrology are not only rampant in our culture, they are widely acceptable, and such attitudes have no doubt limited attempts at a broader understanding of it. In fact, not understanding astrology may be taken as a sign of one's scholarly credibility: "Since it was taken for granted that astrology was merely superstition and credulity, incompetence in the field could, unexpectedly, become a virtue" (Faracovi 1998, 115). A lack of astrological knowledge is a badge of academic honor; likewise, any scholar who knows enough about the full system of astrology to address it with any authority and validity (which is not an insignificant undertaking) might be perceived as a believer, undermining his or her academic credibility. Historian Lynn Thorndike demonstrates this when he adds a footnote in his otherwise even-handed article, "The True Place of Astrology in the History of Science," that begins, "It should hardly be necessary for me to state that I do not share this belief or have any faith in the methods of astrology" (1955, 278). As we have seen, without a more complete understanding of the astrological system, it is impossible to understand why it persists as an important belief system for people.

Marilyn Motz is another scholar who advocates for the study of belief as a crucial component in Folklore Studies: "The concept of belief is so central to the discipline that it is hard to talk about folklore without talking about belief" (1998, 340). Folkloristics today is not about gathering up evidence of what people believe, a collection of obscure survivals and oddball folk beliefs, but rather an investigation of how people believe. Folk belief was not eliminated by scientific rationalism, as nineteenth century scholars predicted; instead, it is alive and well in old and new and emerging forms. Hufford

advocates for a "methodological symmetry" in which "all beliefs are 'problematic,' that is, they all require explanation, and they all raise the question of why they are held" (2010, 142), including scientific or so-called "rational" belief. Moreover, science and belief should not be viewed in opposition to one another. Science is one way of knowing, and belief is another way of understanding the world. Because science focuses on measurable data, by nature it "is only denotative" (Motz 1998, 343) rather than connotative. Science cannot quantify metaphor, or symbolism, or poetry, or aspects of the human imagination, which limits our ability to describe the full range of human experience (as every storytelling culture can attest). When we allow scientific rationalism to denigrate belief (without acknowledging its own underlying belief system), we are allowing hegemonic cultural powers to silence the voice of the "folk," from diverse cultural backgrounds, who have legitimate and personally powerful beliefs.

Astrology was preserved in the West after the Enlightenment thanks largely to an undercurrent of Western esotericism (described by scholars such as Wouter Hanegraaff and Antoine Faivre). Hanegraaff defines Western esotericism as knowledge that has been rejected or ignored by the dominant culture, such as "occult" knowledge, a term which traditionally marks such knowledge as inappropriate for academic study (1995, 108). Michael Barkun offers a similar term, "stigmatized knowledge," by which he means claims believed to be true "despite the marginalization of those claims by institutions that conventionally distinguish between knowledge and error—universities, communities of scientific researchers, and the like" (2013, 25). Barkun puts astrology in a subcategory of stigmatized knowledge he calls "superseded knowledge"; that is, astrology was once recognized as a valid source of knowledge (in fact, a legitimate form

of science) but was later rejected and replaced by other claims (27). Such knowledge moves through various cultures in what sociologist Colin Campbell called the "cultic milieu," which he defines as "the cultural underground of society…it includes all deviant belief systems and their associated practices" (1972, 122). This notion of a heterogeneous yet unified cultural underground of beliefs that fall out of the mainstream was later expanded and rebranded by Christopher Partridge as "occulture" (2004, 2012), which he defines as "the new spiritual environment in the West; the reservoir feeding new spiritual springs; the soil in which new spiritualities are growing" (2004, 4). Astrology's continued existence in the twenty-first century is no doubt due to the interest in esotericism and the thriving of the cultic milieu and the occulture that allowed it to survive by going underground, where it was protected and preserved despite attacks from religious, scientific, and secular authorities. Although rejected by mainstream institutions of power, astrology flourishes in these vernacular contexts, providing meaning and offering possibilities for understanding the world and informing important life decisions.

Lived Religion, Seekership, and the New Age Movement

By examining astrology from the folkloric perspective of belief studies, we can understand its practical, "as lived" quality. The specific spiritual worldview that underlies astrology is often less important than its application in people's lives. In her book *Lived Religion*, Meredith McGuire echoes Leonard Primiano when she notes that

> religion-as-lived…is not necessarily logically coherent. Rather it requires a practical coherence: It needs to make sense in one's everyday life, and it needs to be effective, to "work," in the sense of accomplishing some desired end….This practical coherence explains the reasoning underlying much popular religion, which may otherwise appear to be irrational and superstitious (2008, 15).

For those who see astrology as part of a spiritual worldview, such practical uses represent one way in which the sacred both pervades and arises from the profane (McGuire 2008, 31-32). Astrology continues to thrive among people of various spiritual persuasions because, according to its users, it works. It provides them with a thematic framework for understanding particular issues and identifies temporal boundaries that help explain why a person feels a certain way and how long it will last; it is practical while also providing spiritual solace. The practical and useful aspects of lived religion are its foundation: "efficacy and experience are builders, consolidators and maintainers of belief, however and wherever expressed" (Bowman and Volk 2012, 10). Astrology exemplifies lived religion in this way. It is described by its users as a tool, a language, and an "organizing principle" for life. Its power is both in its mundane application and in its spiritual appeal.

Robert Wuthnow has made a distinction between the spirituality of dwelling, in which one feels secure and rooted in sacred physical spaces and established traditions, and the spirituality of seeking, whereby people look for the sacred in fleeting moments and a range of new religious ideas. In the former, one feels secure and grounded; in the latter, one feels free, not bound to a particular sacred space or an unchanging (and inherited) ideology and thus able to find spiritual resources and ideas that are personally meaningful (Wuthnow 1998, 3-8). That freedom allows people to construct their own, individualized spiritual narratives. Astrology fits within the "seekership" behavior that, according to Wade Clark Roof (1999), has become more and more common since the end of World War II. He notes a "qualitative shift from unquestioned belief to a more open, questing mood" that is the result of a "deep hunger for self-transformation that is both genuine and personally satisfying" (1999, 9). As with astrology, people are now more

likely to seek a personalized spirituality that works in a practical sense in their day to day lives, not as a belief system that promises salvation at some later point; seekers want to feel good about themselves and their circumstances now. Seekership is also a kind of bricolage model that gives people the opportunity to choose their spiritual tools and to create a narrative for their life, one that "affirm(s) who we are and what gives identity, purpose, and meaning to our existence" (Roof 1993, 298) while also providing a sense of agency and control. Roof argues that we create our own spiritual narratives as a way of creating a coherent order out of our lived experience (1993, 299), which on the surface may seem chaotic and meaningless, and is also perhaps assumed to be chaotic and meaningless within a rationalistic worldview. Such narratives allow people to create the individualized object of their quest, "some final *telos* to which life is directed" (Roof 1999, 164; see the "Teleology" section in Chapter V for more on this idea). Today's seekers have a "striking openness to the force of 'raw inner yearnings'" (Roof 1999, 88), a notion captured by Portland astrologer Andrea Gehrz, who describes how an ancient astrological text equates a person's natal chart to the "heartfelt longings" people experience. Seekership, then, allows people to create, by incorporating their own lived experience, a meaningful, purposeful, and authentic life within a culture that appears increasingly shallow and materialistic, and astrology gives them a tool for doing this.

Astrology can be an isolating belief system; the culture at large misunderstands it, astrologers often find that friends and family members dismiss their interest in the topic, and people often start learning astrology on their own through books and websites. Local astrological communities, whether through formal astrological organizations (such as the Oregon Astrological Association [OAA] or the Washington State Astrological

Association), organizations that offer astrology classes (the Portland School of Astrology, for example), or astrologically-themed Meet-Ups, give astrologers a place to connect with like-minded people. The astrologers I spoke with, who are all part of the OAA in some way, whether as members or regular attendees at lectures and other events, said that they participated in an astrological community because they enjoyed being around people who "speak the same language." They enjoy interacting with people with whom they can use astrological language as a kind of shorthand. For example, the following statements, documented during my interviews, all would be immediately understood and meaningful to astrologers: "I'm Mercury ruled," "Saturn is opposite my Moon right now," "I'm a double Virgo," "I'm a Leo, Aries rising, angular Mars—you're gonna get it full force," "I can't tell a story like a Leo tells a story!" These are high-context groups, or groups where "meaning and action are more directly related to context than to the simple denotation of words themselves" (Toelken 1996, 57). An outsider visiting a meeting of astrologers would have a hard time understanding what was being discussed, as astrological language uses both simple stereotypes and complex planetary arrangements to describe particular character traits, events, and the emotional experience of them. Astrological conferences, such as the annual NORWAC (Northwest Astrology Conference) which takes place in Seattle each year, create a temporary group that might be described as a *Bund*, "an elective form of sociation in which the main characteristics are that it is small scale, spatially proximate and maintained through the affectual solidarity its members have for one another in pursuit of a particular set of shared beliefs (Hetherington 1994, 2). Michel Maffesoli[4] (1996) coined the term "neo-tribe" to describe a similar concept. Nancy Ammerman, after Maffesoli, refers to such like-minded communities as "spiritual tribes"

(Ammerman 2014). Although members of an astrology group may have professional careers or otherwise be upstanding members of the wider community, they share a marginal status that comes from their belief in astrology in a culture that largely dismisses it as a superstition or mindless entertainment. While most people in this community may not feel marginalized in general, it is unlikely that many of them, say, are comfortable talking about astrology at work or with their extended family. Therefore, astrological folk groups are an important way for people to interact with others who not only accept but understand their interest in astrology. These groups act as safe and supportive communities for astrologers to increase their understanding of their craft while also engaging with people who share their enthusiasm both for astrology itself and the question for meaning and authenticity it represents for them.

Nature religion and Neopaganism can be found at the edges of astrological belief. For some Neopagans, astrology's direct connection to natural cycles, particularly the cycles of the Moon, demonstrates a universal interconnectivity that informs their spirituality. This connection is perceived as rational, as one astrologer notes: "This little world that we live in is fascinating to me, so the connection between the celestial movements and what's happening with us, and our own lives, totally makes sense to me." Another astrologer suggested that although astrology, for her, was not really a belief, "There is a core belief that's at the core of my use of astrology, which is that the universe is, like, one humongous entity and that we are part of that entity….It's a tool, yeah, but it has to come from an idea that somehow we're all connected and that we all have influence and are influenced by one another, and by the whole." Because the Moon is easily viewed and its cycles clearly represented by its changing shape in the night sky, the

Moon is often the way astrologers (as well as Neopagan groups) engage most directly with the planetary cycles represented by the astrological system. Many astrologers I spoke with said that while they may not follow all planetary motions on a daily basis, they tried to always be aware of "where the Moon is" (that is, in which astrological sign). Sabina Magliocco (2004) and Sarah Pike (2004) have both written on Neopagan culture, and while their work makes limited reference to astrology, it demonstrates the way in which like-minded people form spiritual communities that share a common language and belief. In her work on nature religion, Catherine Albanese observes that, much like astrology, "Nature religion in American has flourished among a cadre of people who, largely without systematic 'seminary' exposure to high religious or academic tradition, have thought and acted for themselves" (1990, 15). For those drawn to seeking, a spiritual system grounded in the natural world and an immanent rather than transcendent sense of the divine is appealing. Albanese's work on the history of religion in America further demonstrates that esoteric and occult ideas were not uncommon in the country's early days; it would not be surprising to find metaphysical works in colonial libraries, including almanacs and works of astrological medicine (2007, 73-75).

There is no single, overarching belief system in which astrology sits; astrology can work within, or outside of, any sort of spiritual system—as long as one's belief allows for a system like astrology to exist. In fact, astrology has routinely aligned itself with a belief system operating within its current cultural and philosophical environment (Faracovi 1998, 120), from its origins in Greek philosophical and mathematical thinking to Renaissance science to Theosophy. As noted, astrology today often finds a home in the New Age movement. Like the New Age movement, astrology can help people "to be

liberated from oppressive and corrupting socialized identities" (Hunt 2003, 135). Social pressures to be in a relationship, to have children, or to work a steady job may go against a person's natural inclinations, which are reflected in an astrological birth chart. A birth chart is a way of legitimizing a particular identity in that it represents an ideal, what one is "meant to be." But how one achieves this ideal of self-actualization is not prescribed, leaving room for a highly individualized spiritual path to that identity, one that "(has) the potential to transcend the boundaries set by sexist, racist, and classist social norms" (McGuire 2008, 183). Stephen Hunt notes that New Age groups "(do) not constitute a unified, coherent, or highly mobilized movement" (Hunt 2003, 132), and the same could be said of the astrology community. Spiritual seekers today choose their own values and beliefs and then look for spiritual communities that match. They may take bits and pieces from a variety of traditions; it is this mix-and-match quality that has helped the New Age movement grow in popularity since its inception in the 1980s (Hunt 2003, 131). This aspect of New Age culture is also why it makes an ideal home for astrology. However, it should be reiterated that while many people in the learned astrology community consider themselves part of the New Age movement (as do many members of the mass astrology community), not all do; even astrologers who share New Age-type beliefs may choose not to identify with the New Age movement itself, preferring instead to embrace what they see as older, and less commercial, esoteric beliefs that easily align with astrology.

Primarily a Western phenomenon, the New Age movement's rise in popularity starting in the 1970s correlates to a disenchantment and dissatisfaction with traditional religious institutions and a growing interest in a personal, experiential form of spirituality (Fuller 2001, 1). But New Agers are dissatisfied with more than religion; they are often

also unhappy with society and culture at large (Hanegraaff 2000, 291) and "its materialism, competitiveness, together with the importance it attaches to playing roles" (Heelas 1996, 18). In New Age thinking, if it can be generalized as such, our hollow, secular society is believed to corrupt one's authentic self, and to "leave no room for certain dimensions of personal human experience" (Hanegraaff 2000, 291). In Paul Heelas's assessment, New Agers, then, are people who believe that "inner spirituality—embedded within the self and the natural order as a whole—serves as *the* key to moving from all that is wrong with life to all that is right" (1996, 16). The primary focus of the New Age movement is individualized spirituality, or the belief that "the Self itself is sacred" (Heelas 1996, 2). Under the New Age umbrella may be found eclectic spiritual beliefs and practices including channeling, alternative or natural healing methods, crystal healing, past life regressions, psychic abilities, spirit entities such as angels or ghosts, neo-shamanism and Neopaganism, and astrology (Pike 2004, 22-23).[5] In fact, a particular form of astrology, evolutionary astrology, seems to be a product of astrology's intersection with the New Age Movement, which will be discussed in Chapter VI.

Sociologists Shoshanah Feher and Robert Wuthnow have noted that women are overrepresented in astrological communities (Feher 1992a) and among believers in mass astrology (Wuthnow 1976). Feher has collected data on gender and astrological belief among learned astrologers. She suggests a parallel between women drawn to astrology and women drawn to the New Age movement. Feher notes that "because traditional religion has been defined by men, women have not had a voice" (1992a, 184); this leads women to choose "feminine" approaches, such as those promoted by the New Age movement that involve intuition, creativity, and a holistic worldview. Robert Wuthnow

similarly concluded that the higher number of women who claim a belief in mass astrology (Wuthnow surveyed the general public) was related to astrology's appeal among those who are socially marginalized (1976, 160). Sabina Magliocco, in her work on paganism, notes a similar appeal: beliefs that cannot be proven by science are often used as a way of "gleaning oppositional power—secret, magical knowledge that conveys understandings more 'authentic' than those proffered by the dominant culture" (2004, 13).[6] Today, younger astrologers are attuned to issues of gender identity and social justice (Wolf 2014) and are using astrology in innovative ways to promote social change; there is now a "queer astrology" movement and astrology still tends to be most popular among countercultural or non-mainstream people. While I do not address these topics in detail in my research, they are emerging in the astrological community and would be a fruitful area for future study.

Fate, Fatalism, and Astrology

Because the premise of astrology rests on predictable astronomical cycles, it cannot escape the criticism that it is a fatalistic system of belief. Today, such criticisms often come from a somewhat simplistic position: one either has free will, or one does not. The ancient Greek worldview from which astrology was born had a more nuanced concept of fate. Modern astrologers believe that free will and fate operate together in an individual's life, and thus an investigation of such beliefs is necessary. Leonard Doob (1988), Daniel Wojcik (1997) and Evelyn Au (2012) have written about fate and fatalism in a contemporary, psychological context; this research is helpful to consider in conversation with an overview of fate beliefs in ancient Greece as described by William

Chase Greene (1944) and Nicola Denzey Lewis (2013). The way fate is understood among astrologers reveals how astrology works in people's lives, and is discussed more thoroughly in Chapter V below.

Astrology in Historical Context

The history of astrology is in many ways reflective of the history of Western civilization, despite the dearth of academic study on the subject and modern cultural biases. As Nicholas Campion observes, "The entire attempt to demonstrate that astrology is a form of historical error – pseudoscience in some sceptical language – is actually pseudohistory – history pursued in the absence of evidence" (2012, 97). Campion's assessment matches that of historian Lynn Thorndike, who argues for astrology's legitimate place in the history of science by noting, "During the long period of scientific development before Sir Isaac Newton promulgated the universal law of gravitation, there had been generally recognized and accepted another and different universal natural law, which his supplanted. And that universal natural law was astrological" (1955, 273). Several scholars have written helpful histories of astrology. Tamsyn Barton provides a discussion of astrology from its origins in ancient Mesopotamia through Egypt, Greece, and Rome, and into the early Christian era in her work, *Ancient Astrology* (1994). This era is also addressed by David Pingree (2001), a skeptical but effective historian of ancient science and its transmission. S. J. Tester's *History of Western Astrology* (1987) is a comprehensive treatment of the history of astrology from its ancient Greek philosophical roots to its development into a complete system in Hellenistic Greece and on through the Enlightenment. Benson Bobrick, a freelance historian, has written a

popular history of astrology called *The Fated Sky* (2005) that offers a detailed cultural history. Nicholas Campion is a British historian who has written a two-volume work on the history of astrology, as well as works on astrology's relationship to millenarianism (1994), and Western religion and the New Age movement (2012). Campion has also been the editor of the journal *Cosmos and Culture*, a publication of the Sophia Center at Bath Spa University, which addresses astrology in an academic context.

Astrology's place in Renaissance England has been competently covered (although not without bias) by Don Cameron Allen (1941) and Eugenio Garin (1983); the seventeenth century is thoroughly and fairly treated by Ann Geneva's work (1995); and Patrick Curry has written about astrology in Victorian and Edwardian England (1992). This latter period was an important bridge between "traditional" astrology and the modern psychological or spiritual version more common today. Robert Hand, an American astrologer held in high esteem by the international astrological community, has written a timeline of Western astrology in both the West and the Middle East (1998), which lists key dates in astrology's journey through various cultures and into the eighteenth century. The next chapter of this thesis provides a more thorough treatment of the history of Western astrology, and Chapter VII provides an investigation of astrology in Shakespeare's time.

Although the academic literature addresses many aspects of astrology, as noted here, what often seems to be largely (though not entirely) missing is the voice of astrologers themselves, an emic perspective that represents and respects astrological belief as a legitimate way of viewing the world. Astrology has been a part of Western culture for a very long time, and its expression in current society it deserves closer

attention. Folklorist Barre Toelken reminds us that "what we call folklore exists because it says something that otherwise would not get said" (1998, 92). What needs to be said here is that astrology matters to people. Regardless of whatever individual spiritual belief systems people in the astrology community may hold, they share a desire to feel connected to the rhythms of the heavens, to see the sacred in the mundane. Astrology is ultimately a search for personal authenticity and meaning. In the astrological worldview, each individual has a birth chart that provides a unique map of his or her true self. According to those learned astrologers I spoke with, when one learns how to read the chart using the techniques of astrology, one often feels better informed about how best to seek what is most personally authentic. In reference to the appeal of "authenticity," Regina Bendix notes, "The continued craving for experiences of unmediated genuineness seeks to cut through what Rousseau called 'the wound of reflection,' a reaction to modernization's demythologization, detraditionalization, and disenchantment" (Bendix 1997, 8). Astrological belief gives people a way to remythologize, retraditionalize, and re-enchant not just their own lives but the entire cosmos; a world viewed through an astrological lens is ensouled and meaningful. Rather than regarding astrology as a silly superstition practiced by irrational or ignorant people, it is more accurate to view it as a complex system that provides meaning, consolation, and community for people who cannot find those things in traditional religions or other cultural institutions. Those who understand this system confirm that it "works" for them. The simple statement, "Do you believe in astrology?" is not really an effective question. The study of belief helps us to find better questions in our search for the fullest understanding of what it means to be human, and this thesis explores the role of astrology in that search.

NOTES

1. Adorno acknowledges that "limitations of research facilities prevented real field work and forced us to concentrate on printed material rather than on primary reactions" (24). However, had he done fieldwork, it seems unlikely that he would have sought out the minority of learned astrologers and instead, as many other scholars have done, assumed that mass astrology is the only astrology and interviewed members of the general public about their astrological belief.
2. Adorno's study was a content analysis of horoscope columns for the purpose of addressing what he saw as a large-scale social phenomenon—that is, belief in astrology, a belief he defined as represented by readers of horoscope columns. I would argue that reading a horoscope column does not prove or even imply belief in astrology at all, because the majority of horoscope readers actually know nothing about astrology except their Sun sign. Thus Adorno is correct in identifying such readers as part of mass culture, but misleading when he assumes that they represent astrology as a whole. Most learned astrologers would say similar things about people who unquestioningly accept and act on Sun sign horoscope columns; although using accurate astrological symbolism, these columns are so generalized as to be practically useless as an astrological tool (although perfectly acceptable as entertainment). Adorno assumes learned astrologers to be similarly uncritical and unreflective (because in his view they believe something absurd), but give the appearance of "semi-erudition" (29). Learned astrologers are defensive and eager to avoid the label of "determinist," based on his reading of astrological magazines. By contrast, my interviews showed that today, learned astrologers generally avoid defending their beliefs against ignorant skeptics (although most would welcome a conversation about astrology with a person willing to be fair-minded about it), not because it cannot be defended but because it is simply a waste of their time. In addition, the astrologers I spoke with accepted a complex interrelationship of fate and free will and did not avoid the question of determinism.

   Adorno both oversimplifies and overanalyzes the astrology in his sample. Sun sign astrology columns use only a bare-bones approach to the astrological system. That said, if one assumes that Adorno is referring only to mass astrology, his arguments have some validity. Anyone who accepts a Sun sign horoscope as authoritative and takes action based on it is acting both without rationality and also without the benefit of the full astrological system. Adorno notes that "there is no uniformity about the basic interpretation of heavenly signs among astrologists" (29; note that the preferred term for one who practices astrology is "astrologer"), which is again not entirely true; astrology is a symbolic, metaphorical system, and while it is accurate to say that no two astrologers will describe a particular celestial arrangement in exactly the same way, descriptions among learned astrologers will share thematic similarities. There is an obvious consistency, even in the columns Adorno presents in his article, if one has a deeper understanding of the astrological system.

   In sum, Adorno makes several incorrect assumptions: that newspaper horoscopes represent a key part of astrology; that readers treat such horoscope columns as something more than entertainment (learned astrologers may read such columns, but they are aware of the limitations); that astrologers are relinquishing personal

responsibility to an outside authority (in this case, the newspaper astrologer, who is himself affected by the market culture in which he lives) and thus reinforcing the status quo. This latter assumption is particularly interesting because for the learned astrologers I interviewed, astrology offers them the opposite experience. They see astrology as a tool that helps them fight against the status quo and to uncover a kind of authenticity that is found outside of mainstream cultural influences. Adorno correctly sees popular astrology as a tool that can reinforce cultural norms and foster blind acceptance of one's fate by "blaming it on the stars," but this is not how learned astrologers understand astrology.

3. Note that Feher's data does not include people who could not afford the registration and travel costs associated with a multi-day conference, or self-taught people who may not be aware of such conferences. For that reason, it is possible that her demographics were skewed toward older and more financially stable people than the astrological community at large. This may also contribute to a higher than expected correlation with the New Age movement, which also tends to attract older, middle class people (and women in particular).
4. In an interesting coincidence, Maffesoli was involved in a controversy involving astrology. He supervised the Ph.D. thesis of Elizabeth Teissier, a well-known astrologer in France. While her thesis was ostensibly about the reception of astrology in French society, it was later determined to be lacking a theoretical foundation in sociology by two separate committees. Maffesoli still defends the thesis and his role as thesis advisor, claiming that astrology deserves to be studied as a sociological phenomenon (although he later admitted that the thesis contained some flaws). See Dawes 2010.
5. Although Pike puts Neopagan religion under the New Age umbrella, many scholars do not, but instead regard it as a nature religion in which the divine is immanent in all natural and living things. Pike's list is included here to demonstrate the wide range of beliefs and practices that may be, and frequently are, thought to be part of the New Age movement's vast and often nebulous reach.
6. It is interesting to note that in this work (2004), Magliocco gives a history of magic without mentioning astrology at all, which is striking considering that magicians often used astrology in their work. She even mentions alchemy as a protoscience, when astrology was in fact an even earlier "protoscience" (I would prefer the term "early science," which is less pejorative and more accurate).

CHAPTER III

A BRIEF HISTORY OF WESTERN ASTROLOGY

Humans have been observing the sky for the whole of recorded history. Researchers now believe that prehistoric cave paintings from over 16,000 years ago in Lascaux, France, represent star maps (Whitehouse 2000). Ancient peoples had a detailed understanding not only of the regular cycles of the moon and the sun but also the planets; they had distinguished the moving planets (our word "planet" comes from the Greek for "wanderer") from the fixed stars that comprised the constellations. Historical evidence shows that Sumerians in the third millennium BCE were using a form of astral divination based on constellations. At some point in prehistory, ancient peoples began associating what they saw happening in the sky with what was happening on earth; for example, a table of astronomical observations that has been dated to 1646 BCE includes with its observational data a list of celestial omens (Barton 1994, 12). In this period, planetary bodies were considered deities who were able to influence terrestrial life and, to some extent, be influenced by human behaviors. It is believed that the desire for more accuracy in tracking planetary motion (for divinatory and ritual calendrical purposes) led to the development of the twelve-sign zodiac, which can be dated to the fifth century BCE (Tester 1987, 14). The zodiac is a twelve-part division of the ecliptic (the apparent path of the Sun around the earth) into equal thirty degree segments. Those segments were assigned symbolic "signs" with distinct meanings.[1] These signs, and similar divisions known as houses, became the structural foundation for what we today call horoscopic astrology, or the astrology of individual character and destiny.

The first known natal horoscope (or chart for the moment of birth) cast for an individual dates from 410 BCE. While this artifact contains many of the elements of what we today would consider a horoscope, it was more likely a sophisticated form of divination rather than the descriptive and predictive astrology that would later be developed in Hellenistic Greece (Pingree 2001, 4). The origin of the system of horoscopic astrology as we know it today may be said to be a combination of Babylonian astronomical data with Greek cosmology (Barton 1994, 22) and, in particular, Greek mathematics (Tester 1987, 11). Scholars believe that a Babylonian named Berosus was the first person to bring Babylonian astrology to Greece in the early fourth century BCE (Tester 1987, 16). After Alexander the Great's conquests created a unified Hellenistic world, astrological ideas spread rapidly. The Hellenistic system of astrology, in which the essential structures of natal horoscopes were defined (signs, planets, houses, the "angles" of the chart), is believed to have originated in the intellectually progressive city of Alexandria, and it is clear that early astrology was influenced by Egyptians. Hermes Trismegistus, a legendary Egyptian figure (probably a composite of several Greek and Egyptian writers) whose writings form the basis for the occult system known as Hermeticism (a key element in the Western esoteric tradition), was also credited with producing texts that included philosophical, religious, and technical discussions of astrology around this same time period (Barton 1994, 26). This system of astrology was dispersed throughout Alexander's empire, from Alexandria in Egypt in the West and all the way through Persia and India in the East.

What historians have not been able to figure out is how, exactly, this system of Hellenistic astrology came to be developed. We have evidence of astronomical tables

and omen literature from ancient Babylonia millennia before the development of the twelve-sign zodiac, evidence of the first natal horoscope in the fifth century BCE, and a fully formed astrological system among the Greeks starting around the first century CE. However, historians have no concrete evidence for how one became the other—"there seems no half-way house between the celestial omen-literature and the detailed theory and practice revealed in citations or compilations of texts" (Barton 1994, 29)—although the connection between them is undeniable. Scholars largely agree that horoscopic astrology was a product of the Hellenistic period, and particularly the multicultural and intellectual environment of first century CE Alexandria; claims in astrological texts relate the system to Hermeticism, so its connection to Egypt is fairly certain. Astrology was not solely a Greek development, but nor was it Babylonian or Egyptian; it seems that aspects of all of these cultures came together at a key moment in history to create the astrological system.

Religion and science were not distinct then, and yet astrology appealed to Greek intellectuals because "they were rational, and because it was a rational system, or could be made to look like one" (Tester 1987, 18). The Greeks applied their (much older) concept of the four elements—fire, earth, air, water—to the astrological system, which they felt reflected an ordered cosmos (cosmos means "order" in Greek, as opposed to "chaos") (Tester 1987, 59). An ordered cosmos is a harmonious cosmos. As Campion notes, "Greek philosophers such as Plato saw themselves cracking a code contained in the cosmos. The dialogue between heaven and Earth concerning the future direction of history was ultimately institutionalized as astrology" (Campion 1994, 31). Cracking that "code" was a form of natural philosophy, or the earliest form of science. To think of

astrology as some sort of superstition or folk religion in this era is to project our own modern views onto a profoundly different cultural situation where astrology was a serious, scholarly pursuit. But we can see here a foreshadowing of the holistic thinking of Western esotericism and, later, the New Age movement.

In the Roman Empire, astrology (in its Hellenistic form, as the Romans themselves made no significant contributions to the Hellenistic astrological system (Tester 1987, 49)) is known to have been used by the Roman emperors for divinatory purposes: astrology functioned "as the activist management of politics" (Campion 1994, 31), and Augustus used astrology to legitimize his position as the first Roman emperor. But as the Roman Empire declined, so did its educational systems, which astrology required for its survival (Tester 1987, 112). As a technically sophisticated system, astrology required advanced mathematical knowledge, astronomical tables and instruments, and books—all things that were hard to come by in early medieval Europe (Bobrick 2005, 61). But all was not lost: astrology in the eastern Byzantine Empire and Arabic and Persian cultures continued to thrive and develop. Ancient Greek astrological texts were translated into Arabic, and Arabic astrologers made significant contributions to the craft. Hellenistic astrology, having largely died out in Western Europe, thus became a kind of Arabic astrology with the help of Arab, Jewish, and Persian scholars (Bobrick 2005, 67-70). The synthesis of these systems would become the foundation for the medieval Latin astrological tradition. It is through these translation efforts that astrology was reintroduced to the West—in Latin translations of largely Arabic translations of Greek texts (Hand 1998, 13). During the Middle Ages, astrology was everywhere; its symbols were found in art and literature and it was an important part of science and

medicine. During the Renaissance, astrology developed an "increasingly eclectic quality resulting in more techniques and a somewhat less systematic coherence than in the earlier material" (Hand 1998, 16). Although historians often fail to mention it, many of our greatest astronomers were also adept at astrology (although not necessarily practitioners themselves), including Nicolaus Copernicus, Tycho Brahe, Johannes Kepler, Galileo Galilei, and Isaac Newton.

Astrology at this time also moved beyond the realm of the privileged and the educated into the masses in the form of almanacs. Once astrological information could be reproduced in printed form, it became part of the market culture and was widely consumed by those who knew little of its technical background. This in turn led to the publication of astrological literature by people who were not astrologers, further diluting its complexity. Such astrological almanacs still exist and are popular among fans of mass astrology. (Some professional astrologers today are self-publishing almanacs that appeal to learned astrological communities but are not of interest to mass market publishers.) Popular astrological lore revolved largely around Moon cycles or Sun sign horoscopes, which did not require the complex mathematical calculations and detailed understanding required for a natal chart. An indication of the popular appeal of astrology is illustrated by Shakespeare's ready use of astrological imagery in his works (Bobrick 2005, 178; see the Case Study in Chapter VII). But astrology soon lost its cultural hold, and such almanacs were nearly its only remaining vestiges through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Tester 1987, 241). Astrology's decline was not, as is commonly assumed, because scientific rationalism argued compellingly against it, as science and astrology had coexisted for centuries. Rather, it was more directly the influence of institutional,

and specifically Christian, religion, where a monotheistic God is transcendent rather than immanent (Campion 1994, 40), leaving less room for the mystery or personal spiritual experience that was a key feature of astrology for its adherents. For its earliest practitioners, astrology was a kind of natural law, rational and ordered and reflective of a world infused with the divine; the celestial and the mundane worked together as part of a larger cosmic order. In monotheistic religion, God is separate from the material world, capable of creating and violating natural law. If astrology could predict the future based on the position of the planets, then, from a Christian perspective, God's authority was challenged, and the human need for salvation was suspect. Astrology's reputation was not helped, of course, by charlatans looking to make a quick buck among the uneducated masses, whether through hastily produced almanacs or specious astrological readings. As its technical apparatus was lost, its value—and efficacy—was reduced.

In the late nineteenth century, astrology's modern version was created, or reinvented, by the British Theosophist and astrologer Alan Leo. Leo was heavily influenced by the spiritual teachings of Theosophy (itself a product of Western esoteric ideas) such as reincarnation, karma, and the evolution of the soul (Bobrick 2005, 268); the idea of an evolving soul comforted those whose understanding of the world had been rocked by Darwin's theory of human evolution (Curry 1992, 125). Leo reinterpreted the astrological tradition in an attempt to modernize it; he applied astrology to purely internal, spiritual matters rather than mundane, predictive ones, making astrology a spiritual tool. Astrology then became "fully and openly Theosophical" (Curry 1992, 134), at least in Leo's interpretation of the system. Leo is credited with beginning the process of simplifying astrology so that anyone could learn it from a book, rather than

through an advanced mathematical and philosophical education coupled with a technically rigorous apprenticeship. He was the first to mass market the equivalent of Sun sign horoscopes. Unfortunately, his work, now sufficiently simplified, was then imitated widely by those with little knowledge of astrology, leading to astrology's reputation for fortune telling and a call for stricter enforcement of laws against such pursuits (Curry 1992, 142-143). After being charged with fortune telling, a crime in nineteenth century Britain, Leo made a deliberate effort to separate astrology from its predictive past—that is, the techniques and theories that were essentially the foundation of astrology—and began calling it "the science of tendencies" (Curry 1992, 149), which sounded a lot more like the new academic discipline of psychology. In the early part of the twentieth century, Carl Jung used astrology in his psychological practice, finding it useful in difficult cases; he sometimes used astrological charts "in order to have a further point of view from an entirely different angle…(to) elucidate certain points which (he) otherwise would have been unable to understand" (Bobrick 2005, 279). In the 1930s, Dane Rudhyar was the first astrologer to fully incorporate Carl Jung's ideas of archetypes and the collective unconscious into astrology. His theories laid the groundwork for psychological or humanistic astrology, the astrology of self-understanding and self-actualization, that became very popular in the 1960s and 1970s and later was embraced by those who identified with the New Age movement.

The intersection of the New Age movement and psychological astrology led to the development of yet another form of astrology in the 1970s: evolutionary astrology. Then, in the 1990s, a small group of astrologers began attempting to recover the ancient astrological tradition through the translation of ancient texts. This work has resulted in

the introduction of many new (or newly known and used) astrological concepts and techniques which are not always compatible with newer forms of astrology. The astrological community today is quite diverse and constantly evolving, both reinforcing and contesting the commonly-held New Age approaches.

NOTES

1. The thirty degree divisions known as "signs" are not the same thing as the constellations, the fixed star groups along the ecliptic, that share names with astrological signs. Constellations are not of equal size, and, due to the astronomical phenomenon of precession, they do not line up with astrological signs. Despite having the same names, astrological signs are not equivalent to the constellations. In Western astrology, zodiac signs are based around the seasons, a system known as the "tropical zodiac": the first sign of the zodiac, Aries, starts at the spring equinox every year, regardless of the sun's actual position relative to the constellations. Skeptics commonly assume that astrologers do not understand this distinction and use it as a way of attacking astrology (such as the "thirteenth sign" controversy; see Friedman 2011 for a report on this in the mainstream press). See Truzzi (1975, 906) for a scholar who misunderstands this; see Fraknoi (2010, 3) for a scientist and skeptic who assumes that astrologers use constellations rather than the tropical zodiac.

CHAPTER IV

CONTEMPORARY ASTROLOGY AND THE NEW AGE MOVEMENT

The New Age movement sets itself apart from other "spiritual but not religious" belief systems in the modern West in its fascination with esoteric, or occult, beliefs and practices. Astrology is one of those practices. Many people living in the modern, secular West today would place astrology within the New Age movement (perhaps before summarily dismissing it), and they would not be entirely wrong: astrology has adopted, and even informed, New Age ideas in its journey through the twentieth century. But nor would those people be entirely right, as "astrology's inclusion as a New Age discipline is taken for granted by academics who have not engaged either with astrologers or their works" (Campion 2012, 52). Astrology is both enmeshed in and stands outside of the New Age movement. Its longevity in our secular, rational age, despite centuries of misunderstanding, criticism, and even hostility and persecution, speaks to astrology's appeal and adaptability to various cultural environments. Astrology has operated within the purview of pagan priests, ancient philosophers, Roman emperors, medieval scientists and popes, Renaissance kings and queens, Enlightenment era magicians, nineteenth century occultists, participants in the 1960s counterculture, and, finally, the New Age movement. Today, many astrologers are likely to be familiar with and use New Age ideas, but astrology as practiced, with its long and colorful history, cannot be adequately contained under the "New Age" umbrella. Today's astrology shares with its ancient ancestor a common mathematical and symbolic system, but it does not require or impose a common belief system. All forms of astrology share a worldview with the New Age movement in which humans are engaged with and participate in a meaningful and

evolving cosmos. For New Agers, that evolution may be seen as a linear path to a utopian "Age of Aquarius," while pre-New Age forms of astrology see divine order in the regular and rhythmic—and thus predictable—cycles.

The New Age movement is neither new nor, strictly speaking, a movement. It lacks the organizational structure to be a true movement (Heelas 1996, 16); rather, the term "New Age movement" encompasses a range of loosely connected spiritual beliefs and practices that share some overarching similarities, such as a focus on the individual, a rejection of materialism and formal religion, a desire for self-improvement, an interest in esoteric or mystical ideas, and a holistic worldview. While these elements appear to be a modernist rejection of organized religion, they are instead very old ideas that began to reemerge in the mid-1970s in response to the social and cultural changes of the 1960s. What is today called the New Age movement seems to have been created in the countercultural movements of that time. In fact, it is more accurately viewed as a descendant of those movements rather than part of them. Unlike those countercultural movements, which were politically charged and seeking broad, societal change, the New Age movement represented a turn inward and a turn away from established religious organizations. The inward focus of New Age spirituality does not represent a new spiritual paradigm; rather, it has its roots in Western esoteric traditions. As Wouter Hanegraaff notes in his study of the New Age movement, it "can be regarded as a contemporary manifestation and transformation of Western esoteric currents and traditions which originated in the early Renaissance….(and) have taken on radically new forms under the impact of processes of secularization since the period of the Enlightenment" (2000, 293). Hanegraaff argues that the New Age movement is a

product of its "cultic milieu," a term he takes from sociologist Colin Campbell. According to Campbell (1972), the cultic milieu is "a constant feature of society" (121) and "the cultural underground of society" (122); it "includes the worlds of the occult and the magical, of spiritualism and psychic phenomena, of mysticism and new thought, of alien intelligences and lost civilizations, of faith healing and natural cure" (122)—which no doubt includes astrology; and it is "united by a common ideology of seekership" (123)—all elements that are today part of the New Age movement.

Rather than being a brand new spiritual form or a kind of postmodern religion, the New Age movement is instead an idealization of our Romantic past (Heelas 1996, 216). In the nineteenth century, emerging rational and scientific thinking mixed with magical and occult ideas found in the cultic milieu. In the twentieth century, divorced from organized religion but incompatible with a dead, mechanistic universe, esoteric ideas were carried forward within the cultic milieu until they found a suitable mainstream cultural phenomenon to adhere to. The New Age movement, a product of a secular, materialist, and rationalistic culture with a heavy emphasis on individual freedom and choice, became fertile soil for those esoteric ideas (which had previously manifested themselves in Spiritualism and Theosophy, among other groups). Human beings did not lose their need for spiritual expression as their culture became secular; instead, many attempted to find more secular, or perhaps less rigidly orthodox, ways to express their spirituality. Because Western esoteric traditions already had an individual focus and an emphasis on personal, lived experience, the New Age movement gave those traditions a channel through which they could emerge into the mainstream. The New Age thus serves as "a clear and consistent manifestation of secular religion" (Hanegraaff 2000,

307). New Age religion is "secular" because it is "a complex of spiritualities which are no longer embedded in any religion…but directly in culture itself" (2000, 303); today, we in the West are usually free to choose our religion, even if we are born into a particular religious tradition. The secular religion of the New Age rests on a series of ostensible contradictions. It is at once highly individualistic and holistic, secular and spiritual, practical and mystical, focused on the radical self-acceptance of one's divine perfection yet also one's inherent perfectibility through efforts toward personal growth. New Age ideology has a strong emphasis on participation and experiential learning, of doing more than believing; as one engages with New Age spirituality, one becomes an agent of one's own education and evolution. Many of these key themes are reflected in astrology today as well.

Individualism and Holism

It is common for people who identify with the New Age movement to feel trapped in socially or culturally defined roles, ones that do not allow them to be "who they really are," that is, to be their authentic selves. This disenchantment with socially prescribed roles, the materialistic culture that creates them, and hierarchical religious systems that seem to offer no solutions make New Age thinking very appealing to those looking to ease their dissatisfaction. The solution is found in a kind of re-enchantment of that over which one has most control: oneself. The individual self is the central figure in New Age thinking, which has "its logical center not in God but in the Self of each individual" (Hanegraaff 1999, 157). One becomes one's own spiritual authority. New Age spirituality is more accurately described as "spiritualities" (or various folk or vernacular

variants): this multitude of beliefs and practices does not limit itself to or imbed itself within any particular religious tradition.

In addition to the intense focus on the individual, within New Age spiritualities there is also a sense of connection to a larger whole. One's individual actions are believed to impact the planet, all of humanity, or the universe, and individual spiritual growth supports the evolution of humankind at large. This "universal interrelatedness," as Hanegraaff notes, is like "a network in which every point is connected to every other point but in which no point has a privileged status" (1996, 128). In this way, New Age thinking is like the astrological worldview which sees celestial cycles reflected in all parts of life, and no one astrological planet or point is more important than any other; rather, it is the relationship between them that determines their relevance. All parts of an astrological chart work together in a complex, integrated network, and astrology acts as a universal language for describing and explaining both mundane and spiritual events. Even the most atheistic astrologer is influenced by astrology's inherent tendency to reinforce a holistic worldview, where celestial events tell us something about human events. While most astrologers use astrology for personal understanding, some use it to consider broader cultural and historical events, a practice known as "mundane astrology." For example, astrologer Gary Lorentzen sees astrology as "a language of history and social process," a way of understanding patterns of human behavior at a macro level and over the span of many years.

Moreover, the New Age movement includes an element of progressive millennialism. Many New Agers hold the belief that by improving themselves and attempting to engage with the world at a spiritual rather than material level, they are

improving the health and well-being of the planet, and potentially ushering in a spiritual Golden Age. That New Age has a name: the Age of Aquarius. The Age of Aquarius is a modern astrological concept based on an astronomical effect known as precession (or precession of the equinoxes), which was first identified in the second century BCE. This forthcoming age is imagined to be more spiritually enlightened, a more peaceful and harmonious age. Although this terminology is clearly astrological (Aquarius is an astrological sign), its New Age meaning is millennial. The New Age's Age of Aquarius is expected to be a change for the better. But astrology's symbolism has been, until the twentieth century at least, morally neutral. Historically, within the system of astrology the sign of Aquarius has been associated with humanitarian efforts, revolution, and progressive new ideas, but it is also associated with eccentricity, mental rigidity, cold rationalism, and unpredictability. New Agers may associate the Age of Aquarius with the warm, fuzzy feelings of a revolutionary Golden Age, but that is a misrepresentation of the traditional symbolism of Aquarius. In other words, the Age of Aquarius may be dawning, as defined by the astronomical precession of the spring equinox from Pisces to Aquarius, but there is nothing astrological that says that shift must bring a positive outcome. In this way, an older, esoteric system—astrology—is used to sanction the New Age's progressive millennialism by applying only Aquarius's most positive and optimistic delineations.[1]

Events such as the Harmonic Convergence of 1987 have attempted to tap into the collective spiritual power of humanity to bring forth this New Age (Wojcik 1997, 207), but such group efforts seem to be the exception rather than the rule; individual improvement remains the clear focus of the New Age. At a personal level, New Age

beliefs and practices serve as a kind of personal progressive millennialism, whereby people are attempting to usher in their own Golden Age—that is, finding the spiritual keys to happiness (or perhaps "enlightenment") in their own lives. Personal growth becomes a new kind of individual salvation (Hanegraaff 1996, 46). Astrology is one tool to support this individualistic effort to pursue the proper path to growth: "the practice of astrology is based around the paradox that, although the future is predetermined, knowledge of what is to come enables human beings to amend it" (Campion 2012, 18). Knowledge is power: the sense of understanding the forces at work, both now and in the future, that astrology may provide can help one prepare effectively and creatively for potential challenges or hardships. Astrology affords a structure or a plan to enable people to navigate their daily lives, whether it be through dietary practices, decisions about travel and employment, or how to prepare for unexpected change in ways that are more spiritually aware and thus more effective and manageable. In this way, astrology serves as a practical tool as much as it is a source of spiritual guidance for adherents.

Meaning and Personal Growth

The New Age movement emphasizes active participation in personal growth and evolution, but within a philosophical framework in which we are already complete, divine, and perfect. In this view, one must dust off the socialized self, tarnished by materialism, dualism, and rationalism, and find the "true" self that hides beneath: "The inner realm, and the inner realm alone, is held to serve as the source of authentic vitality, creativity, love, tranquility, wisdom, power, authority and all those other qualities which are held to comprise the perfect life" (Heelas 1996, 19). And yet, these ideas are being

explored within a consumer culture that sells perfectibility as a product. While New Agers recognize the inauthenticity of the socialized self, they also engage in an unending quest for perfection of that self, which leads to spiritual practices that are wide but not necessarily deep. Because only personal experience can reveal what works in this paradigm, New Age spirituality becomes a spirituality of constant seeking and dabbling; it is only through sampling a variety of belief systems that one can find meaningful experience. Ironically, this quest does not lead to perfection; rather, it leads to endless perfecting, a focus on doing rather than being or believing. One is responsible for one's own spiritual evolution, and it requires ongoing vigilance.

Modern (and popular) astrology seems to deny, or simply ignore, the obvious deterministic implications of its system, but many astrologers are aware of the way that both fate and free will work together in a birth chart (see Chapter V). One's birth chart is one's perfect life, the symbol of the greatest person one can become; it is perfect just as it is. Some astrologers seem to believe that with the right kind of effort, one can be anything one wants to be, and the chart can help one play to strengths and mitigate weaknesses. However, they also acknowledge that one's birth chart is fixed and unchangeable in the sense that a person only has one chart. One comes to understand one's own astrology through personal experience; a Venus transit feels one way, a Saturn transit feels another, Mercury retrograde periods may or may not be particularly problematic, and the ongoing experience of these cycles informs one's understanding of them. Free will, in the context of astrology, depends on one's own choices and actions within the fixed frame of the natal chart, which is itself subject to the regular celestial cycles from which it is created. (It should be noted that many astrologers do not see a

causal connection between celestial motion and human activity; the symbols in a chart are viewed as signs rather than causes, reflecting a profound relationship between heaven and earth without implying an outside agent or force.) A natal chart cannot be changed, but one can attempt to live the symbolism of the chart to its highest potential. Like the New Age movement, modern astrology allows a person to say, "I can do something to live a better, more authentic life, despite the handicaps of my social, religious, or cultural past; I am free to choose the life I want to have." New Age spirituality is a constructed spirituality, one created to serve an individual purpose and based on personal experience rather than a set of traditional beliefs (Heelas 1996, 172). The downside to this self-determining philosophy is that it places all the responsibility for personal happiness—or lack thereof—on the individual, a responsibility that some people are not fully ready to embrace. This reinforces the "dabbling culture" often found among New Agers, who may keep trying different things until one system fulfills their needs in a way that is personally acceptable.

The predicament of personal responsibility is manifested in the material culture and consumerism often (negatively) associated with the New Age movement. People spend money on books, workshops, "shamanic" journeys, energetic healing, crystals, rituals, and readings by psychics, astrologers, or tarot readers. The New Age is big business. But as with astrology, New Age believers express a range of levels of commitment. While a large number of people may be attracted to certain New Age practices or beliefs, those that stay involved do so because what is offered matches their own values and their own level of investment (Heelas 1996, 183). Many people are attracted to astrology at the popular level (e.g., newspaper horoscopes), and many fewer

people attempt to learn enough astrology to, say, read their own birth charts. Still fewer people invest the time it takes to learn astrology in any sort of comprehensive way. Similarly, casual New Agers may spend a relaxing weekend at a workshop, but return to their everyday lives unchanged. For those who are seriously committed to personal growth, however, such participation can be helpful, if not transformative. In astrology, one's ability to achieve the highest level of personal growth is believed to depend on a deep and comprehensive understanding of the complexities of one's birth chart.

Esotericism

Hanegraaff argues that the modern New Age movement found its ideas in Western esoteric traditions that have existed for centuries outside the dominant culture (2000, 292). Hanegraaff notes that around the fourteenth century, "the 'discovery of nature'…produced a twofold result: on the one hand, a secularization of the cosmos at the expense of the sense of the sacred and, on the other hand, a revival of *magia* in the sense of a participatory philosophy of nature" (1996, 386). This participatory worldview or *magia*, which includes astrology, is the basic principle of Western esotericism, and eventually became the underlying worldview found in the New Age movement. When secular forces offer a vision of the world that is utterly rational and mechanistic, spiritual movements arise to fill the gaps. Hanegraaff notes, "Nothing indicates (or has ever indicated) that normal, ordinary people are particularly eager for a worldview which will prevent them from perceiving a deeper meaning in their everyday lives" (2000, 306); within the secularized world there is still a need for the sacred. When disenchanted people seek deeper meaning in their lives, they may encounter a rich stew of

interconnected spiritual ideas—Campbell's cultic milieu with its "rampant syncretism" (Campbell 1972, 125-126). Such a variety of spiritual choices allows for the "intentional, deliberate, self-directed approach to the cultivation of religious meaning" (Besecke 2007, 171), which has also been called "reflexive spirituality" (Roof 1998, 217). Reflexive spirituality is the ability to "maintain a constant awareness of the ever-increasing variety of religious meanings available in the modern world and to seek spiritual wisdom by intentionally but critically assimilating those meanings into one's own spiritual outlook" (Besecke 2007, 171).

The recovery of religious meaning is, for such seekers, an exercise in metaphor. A mechanistic worldview implies a literal worldview, one in which everything can be measured and explained in objective terms. A spiritual worldview, by contrast, finds that "mythological thinking (is) more powerful than literal thinking" (Besecke 2007, 174). Without myth and metaphor, the ability to connote or signify is lost to bland literalism: "To look at the world literally—to see only apparent, surface meanings—is to miss most of the story; by its very nature, transcendent meaning lies beyond the simple surface correlations" (Besecke 2007, 175). Antoine Faivre and Karen-Claire Voss (1995, 53) refer to this as the human "mythic capacity," which is more than a simplistic reaction against modernity; it is a key reason that esoteric ideas survive over time. Esoteric systems appeal to New Age spiritual seekers because such systems allow people to construct profound meanings from their own experiences; as Heelas notes, "New Agers *always* discern connections beneath the surface of things" (1996, 33, emphasis the author's). Astrology is naturally a metaphorical system, whereby planets, zodiac signs, calculated points, and the invisible structure that contains them exist within the

mechanistic cycles of the cosmos and are imbued with deeper meaning; the sacred and the mundane, meaning and mechanics are holistically interconnected. Thus one's astrological chart becomes a metaphorical map of one's true self, and astrology is the key to translating that map into meaning.

NOTES

1. That this is a modern and specifically New Age understanding of astronomical ages seems clear if one considers the advent of the Age of Pisces, customarily marked around the time of the birth of Jesus. If this same idea of astronomical ages had been part of the astrological system of that time—and the concept of precession has been understood by astrologers since the second century BCE (Tester 1987, 161)—surely the birth of an anticipated messiah, in the culminating sign of the zodiac, would have heralded a Golden Age. I suspect few would argue that the last 2,000 years have been such an age.

CHAPTER V

FREEDOM IN LIMITATION: ASTROLOGY, FATE, AND FREE WILL

As mentioned, one of the foremost criticisms of astrology, from ancient times to the present, is that its entire premise rests on the notion of fate. Astrologers believe that one's physical position in the cosmos at birth says something about the kind of life that person will have and about one's life purpose. In addition, from the moment of one's birth, a lifetime of planetary transits (and a host of other calculable astronomical events) can be described in detail. If this is how astrology works, how can it be anything but fatalistic? One scholar even calls astrology an "offshoot" of fatalism (Greene 1944, 8). Astrology certainly implies a fatalistic worldview, but understanding astrological fatalism requires a nuanced understanding of fate. The fatalism that is inherent in contemporary astrology does not necessarily leave one feeling out of control, helpless, or powerless; instead, it provides practical information that can be used to improve one's life or even to avert a particular fate. In his work on fatalistic beliefs, Helmer Ringgren notes that "one of the functions of what we normally call religion is to help man to adjust himself to the realities of life, to give him some kind of understanding of what happens to him, to enable him to relate himself in some way or other to what he regards as his destiny or fate" (1967, 7). As a belief system, astrology does exactly this. With a proper understanding of fate, we can see that astrology operates as a way of reconciling natural laws with the subjective human experience of those laws. Today, astrology works as a system that allows its adherents to navigate their fate and feel a sense of control even in difficult circumstances. For astrologers, both fate and free will are always at work, paradoxically yet unapologetically.

Astrology was born in a culture—Hellenistic Greece—in which the concept of fate was multifaceted and seriously considered by philosophers. The word *cosmos* originally meant "order" (in contrast to *chaos*). The regularity of planetary motion and the seasons was seen as "a moral pattern for an orderly human society" (Greene 1944, 33). Ancient Greek philosophers were very concerned with establishing the world as an ordered place, because an ordered world was a moral world. Astrologers carried this idea one step further: the ordered cosmos correlated with human experience, and thus the predictability of the cosmos represented something predictable about a human life. Today, many people are familiar with the "pessimistic notion of fate" reflected in ancient Greek tragedy (Wojcik 1997, 146), where predetermined events unfold before a knowing audience and characters are helpless to stop the inevitable, and inevitably tragic, result. But it is also an orderly result: the implication is that Oedipus will end up blind and exiled no matter which path he chooses, that in fact any choice is only an illusion, because he is destined to make the very choices that lead him to his prescribed fate. In this sense, fate works more like natural law than divine decree; once a series of events is set in motion, the action proceeds along a predictable path. Yet as audience members, we sense how ignorance leads Oedipus to his fate: if only he had known a few more facts or been more aware, he could easily have avoided this result. An individual's fate is never as simple as it seems to an outsider. It has many levels of complexity in which external events intertwine with internal compulsions. The fate found in astrology is a mix of several different concepts that have been developed and changed over time; it would take a scholar of ancient Greek philosophy to define them properly. For the purposes of this paper, I will not attempt to distinguish the subtleties these concepts may have had in

various time periods or in specific philosophers; instead I will define the terms broadly within the context of astrological thinking, old and new.

Greek Concepts of Fate

In order to understand the notions of fate that underpin astrological thought, we must examine the multivalent nature of fate in the Greek culture from which astrology emerged. *Heimarmene* is the Greek word that comes closest to our modern definition of fate.[1] By the time of the Hermetic writings (such as the *Corpus Hermeticum* attributed to the legendary Hermes Trismegistus, which dates to the second or third centuries CE), *heimarmene* had become directly associated with astrological fate (Lewis 2013, 92). It was viewed as a kind of "enslavement to the cosmos," because one's fate was determined by the celestial gods and reflected in a natal horoscope or birth chart; *heimarmene* was imagined to operate like cosmic law and "part of the process of becoming" (Lewis 2013, 9, 87).[2] On its surface, this kind of fate is unalterable; it is fixed at the moment of birth. It is unlike the modern, deterministic, and limited concept of fate, however, in that *heimarmene* can be worked with or even escaped through spiritual wisdom. In other words, although the planetary "gods" present a particular set of fixed conditions—the position of the planets at the time of birth is irrefutable—the person to whom such conditions are assigned has the ability to adapt in a variety of ways to those conditions. *Heimarmene* was part of a religious worldview that is not unlike the evolutionary, spiritual worldview that underlies astrological belief today: "The whole trend of Greek thought, therefore, in its higher levels if not in the consciousness of average men, is from an external toward an internal conception of life. It turns…from passive endurance of

external evil to the positive creations of the will and character" (Greene 1944, 9). By shifting one's focus from the external world to the inner world, one has the ability to master fate.

The *Moirai* are commonly represented as "the Fates" in Greek mythology, and the singular (and older) term *moira* represents the concept we today would call destiny (Greene 1944, 16). The word *moira* originally meant a share or a portion, which eventually came to mean one's allotted lifespan. Our lifespan is always limited; death is the ultimate, unavoidable fate. In Greek mythology, the three *Moirai* came to personify destiny and thus are responsible for one's "thread" of life: one of the Fates spins the thread, another measures the thread, and finally one cuts the thread. This kind of fate, a sort of cosmic order, is unalterable; it carries a determinism similar to heredity (Greene 1944, 16). Just as one's DNA determines certain predictable characteristics, such as eye color or hair color, *moira* determines the unchangeable elements of a person's life. Likewise, an astrological birth chart identifies fixed elements of one's character or life path. This is what gives astrology its apparent predictability, allowing astrologers to develop (or discover) complex calculations to identify significant moments in a person's life, from fortunate career peaks or the birth of children to serious illnesses or even death. In Greek mythology, even the gods are subject to *moira*, but they also act as its agent in upholding it as a kind of natural law (Greene 1944, 17). *Moira* and *heimarmene* are sometimes used interchangeably to refer to unalterable fate, but the fact that there are two distinct words for similar ideas speaks to the subtlety with which ancient philosophers treated the notion of fate.

Ananke is the concept of necessity, which is similar to the idea of inevitability. It works with but follows *heimarmene*; while *heimarmene* represents a holistic concept of fate acting on one's life, *ananke* is the necessary, causal result of specific actions. It operates at an earthly level rather than spiritual one and it lacks an end goal or purpose. In a modern, psychological sense, it might refer to what we would call subconscious behaviors or compulsions. If something is necessary in the sense of *ananke*, it is not under our conscious control (Lewis 2013, 119-120). *Ananke* is not automatically harmful: Without appetite, we would starve to death; but too much appetite can lead to obesity and early death. This concept does not imply that such behaviors can never be controlled, only that they may feel unavoidable from an individual's perspective. Moreover, using one's reason (and free will) to resist compulsions was an important practice for spiritual growth to ancient philosophers, so *ananke* can serve as a catalyst for growth in people who are able to rise above raw instinct. In a modern astrological sense, such growth comes from the understanding of one's nature as reflected in a birth chart, which turns the unavoidable into something manageable. In another sense, *ananke* refers to the inevitable result of something based on previous events; in this way, it is similar to the concept of karma in Eastern religions, a natural law of cause and effect. If you throw a ball into the air, *ananke* tells us that the ball will fall back toward you, because natural law requires this; what goes up must come down. The ball will fall toward us, but we can choose to catch it, choose to let it fall on the ground, or, if we are ignorant, let it hit us on the head. In astrology, *ananke* reveals itself in the regular planetary cycles. For example, a Mars transit produces necessary, Mars-themed results. How one chooses to respond to those results—with awareness and will, or unconsciously and based on old habits—is

where one's free will is believed to operate and allows one to escape the worst effects of *ananke*.

Tyche (also spelled *Tuche*) represents the concept of fortune, luck, or chance (Greene 1944, 299). In ancient Greece, Tyche was deified as a goddess who would later be associated with the Wheel of Fortune. (The Roman version of this Greek deity is Fortuna.) When one is subject to *tyche* (or *Tyche*, the goddess), one is experiencing a random, undeserved, or accidental bit of luck (or, less commonly, misfortune). Whereas *heimarmene* and *moira* operated on the whole of one's life, *tyche*, like *ananke*, was associated with particular events. An individual cannot control *Tyche*; however, once Tyche was conceived of as a goddess, people felt compelled to worship her as a way of appeasing her or persuading her to bestow favor (Doob 1988, 17; Greene 1944, 277). Thus the concept of *tyche* allows for free will on the part of the gods that can interfere with the free will of humans. In astrology, *tyche* is not purely random, although it is experienced in that way by an individual. *Tyche* is associated with the Part (or Lot) of Fortune, a calculated point in a chart whose location and sign placement indicate the area of life in which one will find fortune and luck. Also, the fifth and sixth houses in a natal chart are said to represent "good fortune" and "bad fortune," respectively.[3] Thus, someone born with a favorably designed fifth house or Part of Fortune is a "lucky" person who experiences positive results from *tyche*.

Pronoia is the concept of divine providence or dispensation. It serves as one way out of an earthly fate, as through some kind of salvific act. *Pronoia* is often seen as working in tandem with *heimarmene*; for the Stoics in Hellenistic Greece, the two terms were virtually indistinguishable (Lewis 2013, 89). *Pronoia* is generally associated with

positive outcomes, closer to divine grace than the random chance of *tyche*. It is interesting to note a connection that the word "pronoia" has with modern astrology. Rob Brezsny is an astrologer best known his weekly Sun sign astrology column, "Free Will Astrology," which is found in free alternative newspapers such as the *Eugene Weekly* and Portland's *Willamette Week*. Brezsny wrote a book titled *Pronoia Is the Antidote to Paranoia: How the Whole World Is Conspiring to Shower You with Blessings* (North Atlantic Books, 2009). Readers of his astrology column will recognize in this title Brezsny's unfailingly positive approach to astrology, and to life; he advocates an enthusiastic attitude as the best response to the difficulties life brings. Brezsny is using the word "pronoia" in its psychological sense, as coined by Fred H. Goldner: pronoia is "the delusion that others think well of one. Actions and the product of one's efforts are thought to be well received and praised by others" (1982, 82). It is not clear how serious Goldner is in developing this as a real psychological disorder, but any "delusion" is presumably problematic. Brezsny, however, uses the term without irony and celebrates it as a positive state fueled by free will, as his astrology column's name suggests. This psychological usage implies that *pronoia* is an approach one can freely choose. In ancient Greek thinking, *pronoia* was an unearned divine blessing; Brezsny's approach is to choose belief in unearned divine blessing as a way of recognizing the divine blessings one already has. This results in both gratitude and acceptance for what is, rather than frustrated or painful wishing for what might be. It is not a psychological disorder here, but a willful act designed to bring spiritual wisdom—the antidote to fate.

In the astrological worldview, at any given moment in a human life, all of these factors are at play at various times and in relation to various events and experiences.

What is the appropriate response given the multivalent forces at work? This is the same problem faced by an astrologer looking at a chart. The best response from an astrological perspective is a psychological and spiritual one not unlike that promoted by Rob Brezsny. One must accept fate before one can determine how best to work with it. In the astrological worldview, radical free will is inefficient; without the structure of one's astrological purpose, as reflected in a birth chart, one can waste time and effort on things that are not appropriate for a particular time, or even simply not meant to be. Astrology helps people focus their efforts on those things that can be changed, improved, or more gracefully endured.

Teleology

The spiritual idea of fate from which ancient astrology developed rests on the concept of teleology. Teleology is the study of final causes (in the Aristotelean sense), of goals, of purposeful growth toward a predetermined end. A common metaphor used for understanding teleology is the growth of an acorn into an oak tree. When one plants an acorn, that acorn will not grow into a tomato plant or a rose bush or a giraffe. An acorn cannot grow into anything other than an oak tree. The acorn is, we might say, fated to be an oak tree. However, the nature of the oak tree that a particular acorn becomes depends on many complex and interrelated factors. If the acorn lacks water and nutrients early in life, it may grow into a small, weak oak tree. If the acorn has robust resources early in life, it may grow into a strong oak tree. But even an acorn with a fortunate beginning must deal with a host of environmental factors that exist outside the acorn itself. Will the oak tree grow straight and tall, spreading its branches widely? Will the oak tree be bent

or crooked due to disease, wind, or damage from one particularly nasty storm? Will the tree live a long, healthy life, or will the tree be cut down to make way for a new stretch of road?

While oak trees are not usually thought to have free will, we can see how this metaphor can apply to a human life. Astrology assumes that each person has a purpose, an end goal, a *telos*, which springs from a seed that is planted at the moment of birth. That seed is described in one's birth chart. Astrologer Andrea Gehrz, who has written on the concept of teleology for the astrological community (2015a), asserts that "the soul participates in planting its own seed," so a sense of purpose accompanies the particular astrological chart one is born with. One's *telos* in life is most often described as some sort of spiritual achievement rather than a particular worldly goal. It is the difference between saying, "It was Barack Obama's fate to be President of the United States" and "It was Barack Obama's fate to use his experience and wisdom to try to effect change on a large scale." Astrologers cannot predict the former, because free will allows for many different paths to an end goal; but an astrologer can attempt to predict the latter. In the end, only Barack Obama himself can determine what will become of the seed that was planted, and only Barack Obama, in whatever form, could be the result of that particular seed. In other words, that seed was not specifically a "president of the United States" seed, but it was a seed that carried that potential; in Andrea's words, "It's like the chart wires our mechanism to grow into a certain thing." And not every seed carries that same potential, which is where fate comes in to play.

Whether the word "teleology" is used or not by astrologers—it frequently is not—the concept of "life purpose" or "soul purpose" is an important one in modern astrology.

Even though the astrological system is literally an analysis of predictable, regular astronomical patterns—that is, the mechanistic behavior of a clockwork universe—astrologers who use this system find important meaning in those patterns. That meaning is what makes the idea of fate palatable, or even particularly appealing, to people who practice astrology.

Astrological Fate

Astrology's reputation as a fatalistic belief system has been one cause of its dismissal by those unfamiliar with the complexities of its system. When denouncing Sun sign astrology columns, skeptics often note that everyone born under the Sun sign of Leo, say, does not have the same kind of day, as predicted by such columns; therefore, astrology is obviously false. This criticism also implies that any system that is fatalistic, or even has elements of fatalism, is false. Individuals in modern, Western societies certainly have the sense that they are agents in their own lives and can choose to act, or not, in any given situation. If that is true, then their lives are not strictly determined, and "fate" does not exist: all people have the free will to live whatever life they choose to live. But this idea relies on a simplistic idea of fate: if I have choice, then there is no fate; if I have no choice, then fate exists. Can fate and free will coexist? Astrologers believe they can, and this notion is not so far-fetched when one accepts a nuanced concept of fate in the same way that ancient philosophers did.

What is fatalism? Some of the difficulty with this concept is the term itself. In English, the words "fate" and "destiny" are often used interchangeably, and almost always in a deterministic sense. If a distinction can be made, it is this: fate is usually

something negative, an inescapable situation, while destiny implies something more positive (Doob 1988, 6), something "meant to be." Generally speaking, fate is understood to mean that we cannot change the future (Cahn 1967, 9); when fate is operating, we should be able to predict future events in the same way that we can speak with certainty about past events. Using this definition, it makes sense that most people would reject this idea. Until the future has happened, nothing concrete can be said about it. It may rain tomorrow, or it may not. The future is always contingent, always a potential rather than a given. Until it rains, we cannot say with certainty that it has rained. Even today's most complex scientific theories posit probabilities rather than certainties. The modern human condition is based on the idea that we are free—too free, perhaps—to choose our way in life.

On the other hand, do we really have absolute free will? One scholar notes, "One can predict with almost complete certainty, from a knowledge of enculturation practices, the language (a person) will speak, the kind of clothing he will wear, the foods he will frequently or never eat, and perhaps his life expectancy" (Doob 1988, 35), an observation that seems true to even the most rigid proponent of free will. That which is inevitable is, at some level, one's "fate," even if precise details cannot be foretold. When fatalism is taken out of a theoretical context and applied to a practical one, it becomes a bit fuzzy. Robert Hand is a prominent American astrologer who has spoken about the nature of fate. Hand notes that from its origins, astrology has been subject to three levels of fate. At one level, we are subject to the fate of natural law. That is, we are physically embodied. We are not eternal. We cannot fly (without the aid of machinery). We cannot leap over tall buildings. We cannot walk through walls. We are physically limited, which means that

certain things simply are not possible. This kind of fate is inescapable. In addition, we are subjected to fate when we are in a state of spiritual ignorance. It is this second level of fate that astrology addresses. If a person is ignorant, that person is incapable of responding creatively and effectively to the events in his or her life. Hand notes, "There is nothing in astrology for which there is only one response" (Hand 2010); nonetheless, it is possible to limit the range of your responses by relying on habitual or unconscious behavior (such as that described by the Greek notion of *ananke*) as a guiding force in your life. The way to escape this fate—and it is escapable—is to become aware of one's options. Personal options are not infinite, however; one is still subject to natural law, but there are more options with awareness than ignorance. The third and final level of fate, according to Hand's understanding of astrological philosophy, is "the unfolding of who you are." One cannot stop this kind of fate, Hand notes, but one can mishandle it. On the other hand, if people manage this level of fate well, they will achieve their highest spiritual purpose—that is, their reason for existing at this particular time. If one is limiting one's potential because of ignorance, one will not grow properly—into a healthy, strong oak tree—but rather some lesser version of one's potential self.

Hand notes the limitations of physical laws, but one is also limited by social and cultural environments. Someone who is born into poverty in India may have exactly the same birth chart as a person born into wealth in the United States, but those two people will have different levels of "fate" working in their lives. The person born in India cannot, for example, in spite of any efforts on his or her part, become President of the United States; the country's law would not allow it. Hand summarizes the idea this way: "Life is fatalistic, but astrology isn't" (2010). Astrology certainly had a more strongly

fatalistic tone throughout its history until the modern era and the advent of psychological and spiritual astrology, but this was due to the limitations created by the social, economic, or political forces of the cultures in which astrology operated. Astrology is adapted to its cultural milieu by its practitioners; thus in cultures that allow little room for movement beyond one's station in life, one's ability to achieve was limited. For example, a slave or a woman in ancient Greece did not have the same life options and freedom of will available to a twenty-first century American. And, like natural law's limitation on physical actions, cultural laws can limit one's opportunities.

Rhea Wolf is an astrologer who has been involved in the nascent queer astrology movement. This movement is an emerging approach to astrology that attempts to break down the ways conventional astrology is sometimes used, unconsciously or overtly, to judge or label people. Such judgments rely on a sense of stereotyping and determinism that can be painful to people who live in a society that actually does allow them the freedom to be "who they are" in a way not possible in earlier eras. Although social limitations based on race, gender, or religious belief still exist, they are far less restrictive in modern Western societies than they once were. In addition, things we once accepted as fate are now subject to revision and redefinition: for example, an astrologer cannot see gender, gender preference, or sexual preference in an astrological chart. What an astrologer can see is the way someone is "wired" to interact with the world around them. When an astrologer believes that he or she can fully know a person just from the person's astrological chart, that astrologer is using astrology to make unfair or untrue presumptions about a person, essentially putting that person "into a box" that limits self-expression. While twentieth century astrology became predominantly psychological and

spiritual rather than merely practical, it carries with it the historical baggage of binary thinking, prescribed social norms, and strict gender delineations. Astrology is a 2,500-year-old system that has been redefined throughout time by culturally dominant (and usually male) points of view. Although astrology has a complex and rich philosophical and theoretical foundation, its practice is, as it has always been, a product of the specific culture and time in which it exists. At a basic level, queer astrology wants to improve the language used when translating the symbols of astrology, to "divorce astrology from its Western, Euro-centric bias" (Wolf 2014, 51). For instance, Mars and Venus have traditionally been associated with "male" and "female" and their associated mythic archetypes; queer astrology strives to represent planets and signs as gender-neutral "energies" rather than binary gender associations. Queer astrology also considers the way queer theory and feminist theory have given us new tools for investigating limitations imposed by culture. Awareness of these cultural limitations is yet another way out of the ignorance that traps people at this level of fate.

How does culture affect the way any given astrological arrangement is expressed? Wolf cites an example from an interview she conducted with astrologer Yolo Akili: how is a white, male Scorpio (Sun sign) able to access his Scorpio-ness differently from an African-American female Scorpio? By using a Sun sign as an example, Akili is oversimplifying astrology in this context, putting it in the "horoscope column" space that most astrologers criticize; but in its simplicity, he is also making a profound point about the way a cultural lens affects one's ability to live authentically. Although astrologers know an individual is more than one's Sun sign, Sun signs can be, and are, used to define and stereotype. Akili's example demonstrates that in mainstream American culture, a

white male is much more able to access, and is more comfortable accessing, the passion, intensity, charisma, and power of the Scorpio archetype, which is ruled by the planet Mars in the astrological system (and traditionally gendered male).[10] Using Akili's example, if an African-American woman accessed those same traits in their fullest expression, her experience would likely be negatively reinforced by that same culture. She would be treated differently or even stigmatized, perhaps as a feared, sexualized, or demonized object, but as an object nonetheless. A white man with Mars qualities would have advantages in life both because those qualities are more celebrated in men but also because he would be able to live his authentic self more freely within his culture. He could fully embrace his fate. For a black woman, such qualities might be obstacles to authentic self-expression in a culture that would criticize such qualities as "uppity" or indicative of a woman who does not "know her place" (see reports of the criticisms of Michelle Obama in the conservative media for examples of this kind of racism and sexism aimed at powerful African American women, e.g., Russell 2015, Smith 2015). Thus a black woman would struggle against her potentiality because of external cultural pressures over which she has no control.

At its core, queer astrology serves as a reminder that a person is more than an astrological chart; understanding a person through astrology requires a conversation and a relationship with that person. A chart tells an astrologer something about a person—inclinations and preferences, perhaps—but it doesn't reveal the most important part of a person: how that person's lived experience has helped create that person. Astrology in a spiritual sense is a language that describes a soul's purpose, but a birth chart is nonetheless a reflection of the experience of an individual human who is physically

bound to the earth. The realm in which an astrology chart plays out is in our material reality; the chart reflects an individual's response to the events that occur in that material reality. Even the simplest chart has dozens of elements to consider in describing a person (seven to ten planets, twelve "houses," twelve zodiac signs, calculated points like the Ascendant or Midheaven, and the relationships between them). But no matter what an astrologer sees in the symbols in a chart, the chart is never the whole story. By accepting fate, astrology can help people write their own, authentic stories with the awareness of the stories that might be written for them by the culture at large. In this view, astrology allows people to escape the fate of ignorance and to subject themselves to the fate of becoming, of achieving the purpose of the seed that was planted at the moment of birth.

When I asked astrologers whether they believed that astrology was a function of fate or free will, all of them, without hesitation, said "both." In other words, astrologers are committed to the idea that every individual has the freedom to make choices in life. But they are also committed to the idea that some things are beyond an individual's control—such as our natal chart. Each person is born with a particular arrangement of planets and points that define "who you are."[5] To believe this astrological premise is to subscribe to a certain kind of fate that is not unlike biology or genetics. Some people are "fated," genetically, to have blue eyes, and some are fated to have brown eyes. Biological determinists might argue that some people are fated to be introverted, or aggressive, or highly intelligent, or sociopathic; from there it is only a short leap to the idea that the personality traits described by astrology could have a biological basis. But biology is not destiny, or at least not anymore, and the same is true in astrology. We have the freedom to choose how to work with much of what we have, for better or for

worse, but not everything: I can change my hair color, but I cannot make myself shorter. Astrologically speaking, I can learn to manage my emotions more effectively, but I cannot make myself less emotional if I am astrologically wired to process information in an emotional way (that is, if I have many water signs in my natal chart, astrologically speaking). Astrology's message is that one must accept what is, and then make the most of it. But what "is," astrologically, is still a kind of fate. Astrologer Jessica Lanyadoo, in an interview with Rhea Wolf, describes it this way: "So much energy is wasted in trying to be something you're not, or trying to fix something that is just what you are. I believe that, if we can accept our limitations, then they don't have to limit us anymore" (Wolf 2014, 53).

Astrologers describe fate in remarkably similar ways, even though their foundational spiritual beliefs may be quite different. C.M., who believes in reincarnation and past lives, describes astrological fate in this way:

> We choose the pattern that we want to look at, the problems we want to work on, the lessons we want to learn [in this lifetime]. So we set it up…. the chart is the script. It's the outline…. it's like we take the script and now we've put the people on the stage and we've gotten the setting, and we've gotten the props, and we've done all this stuff. And then we have the external circumstances that trigger certain scenarios. And that's the director calling action. But how we respond, whether we choose to follow this script, or choose to develop in different directions, that's the free will part of it.

Melanie Gurley, who uses astrology in her work at her personal consulting business, Beautiful Learning, describes the combination of fate and free will as "not exclusive"; life presents opportunities as a kind of fate, but the response to them is up to each person, a process she fondly calls "choose your own adventure." Lauren Balin, an evolutionary astrologer, notes the free will aspects found in astrology: "We create meaning. And it's

not that the planets are doing anything to us…We are changing the story." But she also acknowledges certain limitations:

> Astrology is kind of like DNA…You come in with a certain set, like an outline or some parameters. But there's some permeability within that….Now we realize we can change our genetics through diet and exercise…so we realize that there are certain things that we can change when we become conscious of it. And so that's kind of how astrology is….There's certain things that they call "fated fates," which would be your genes, your race…the country you were born in, but beyond that, everything else is what you do with it….You have a certain set of "fated fates," and then the rest is free will.

Linda, a longtime student of astrology who has recently begun doing astrological readings professionally, describes fate as "the unseen forces that are driving us." Mark Dodich, a professional astrologer with a focus on esoteric astrology (which was developed by Alice Bailey and thus shares some ideas with Theosophy) says, "Fate is, you brought this certain lesson into your life that you have to deal with….But the free will is, at what level do you choose to operate?" Rhea Wolf, an astrologer and self-identified witch whose ideas are informed by gender and feminist theory, calls astrology "a 'why am I like this' tool," and acknowledges fate when she says that astrology is helpful for "recognizing the limits of our ability to create our own story." She says fate and free will are both aspects of being human. It is striking how comfortable astrologers are with the concept of fate, but it is clear that while fate is a limiting mechanism, it is not perceived as burdensome or even negative. Instead, this notion of a malleable fate serves as a comforting boundary, the acceptance of which gives people a sense of more freedom within the parts of their lives over which they actually do have control.

Negotiable Fate

What makes someone adopt a system that is fatalistic—in any sense of the word—when notions of fate and fatalism are widely rejected in modern Western culture? Contemporary philosophers believe that the issue has been solved, yet according to philosopher Steven Cahn, "the major arguments in support of fatalism have never been refuted: they have merely been ridiculed, derided, and misunderstood" (1967, 12). Fatalism, like astrology, is a laughable notion to many Western minds. But in the astrological view, fatalism does not mean strict determinism, and fatalistic beliefs can actually serve a legitimate, even healthy, psychological purpose.

Daniel Wojcik, in his study of fatalism and apocalyptic beliefs, notes that "all people seek, to some degree, a sense of control, certainty, predictability, and inevitability" (1997, 135). He uses the notion of external and internal locus of control to understand how people respond to fears of societal upheaval or breakdown. If one has an internal locus of control, then events are believed to be "determined and controlled by one's own efforts," while an external locus of control indicates that events are controlled by "externally determined forces outside oneself" (135). In a truly fatalistic system, one perceives only an external locus of control, which leads to feelings of helplessness in the face of uncertainty and unpredictability. Regarding the fatalism that accompanies apocalyptic beliefs, Wojcik argues that "fatalistic modes of thought provide a framework for interpreting events otherwise considered to be haphazard, uncontrollable, or incomprehensible, reducing uncertainty and offering a sense of control and meaningful explanations for situations in which personal action is believed to be futile" (135). Such thinking shares with the astrological view a common desire to give meaning to difficult

events in life. Both systems of thinking can lead to feelings of utter helplessness due to events beyond one's control when unaccompanied by supportive belief systems. For apocalyptic believers, religion—from fundamentalist religious groups to certain UFO sects—is often where people turn for support. Astrologers find support in the consistency and predictability of celestial motions and the metaphoric language of astrology. Astrology's appeal to those who embrace it is that it can identify what is fated while also giving one a way to interpret a situation and find appropriate solutions. Any large societal crisis may be described astrologically, but how that crisis affects an individual is revealed in that individual's birth chart, and no two people have the same chart. Astrology thus provides a personal prescription for navigating difficulty; it takes a perceived external locus of control and turns it inward. To an outsider, it may seem that astrology assumes only an external locus of control: the stars determine one's fate. But this is a misunderstanding of astrological belief. Astrology does not assume a causal relationship between planetary movements and human life; rather, it posits a correlative relationship. The planets and stars do not act *on* us; they are reflected *in* us. While one may feel trapped by circumstance, personal action is not regarded as futile in the astrological system. But it is asserted that useful action is only possible—one can only feel an internal locus of control—when one is able to escape the ignorant state in which one cannot see all the options for action.

An astrologer has an internal locus of control insofar as he or she operates within the limitations of the birth chart. This means that every wished-for outcome is not guaranteed by our own free will. If my wish is to play professional basketball, but I lack ball-handling skills (because I was born in an area without good coaches or teams to

practice with), or do not like to practice (a personality trait that can be described astrologically), or only grow to be five feet tall (as determined by my genes), then my desired outcome will be limited by my "fate." While there are always stories about people from humble origins rising to unexpected greatness through their own perseverance and hard work, an astrologer asserts that a certain level of fate is at work in those success stores. But in every one of those stories, it is believed that a person could have made different choices that would have led to a less-optimal outcome. People who use astrology come to understand not what specific events will happen at which time, but the *quality* of that time. Astrologer Andrea Gehrz compares this kind of time to clock time: "A clock on the wall is looking at quantitative time. Like, is it 10 o'clock in the morning? Is it 11 o'clock in the morning? We're counting time. But what astrology is doing is looking at, how does this morning feel? How do I feel today? How am I going to feel next Thursday?" In other words, will one's choices feel easy, or will they feel difficult? Will one feel energetic or depressed? Will one feel angry, lonely, compassionate, friendly? Those feelings may be "fated" by a particular transit, but one's response to them is not, as long as one works to overcome unconscious, habitual reactions. In this view, if a person can see that he or she is likely to feel energized, that person can plan to work on an important project. If the person is going to feel social, he or she can plan to get together with a group of people. If one knows one is going to be feeling angry and also cannot avoid going to a family's holiday dinner, one can prepare oneself and plan strategies for managing one's behavior based on the dynamics of that group. (A savvy astrologer would also look at the charts of family members and prepare accordingly.) Without this knowledge, one may sense an external locus of control and

respond in a reactive rather than proactive way. When one is reactive, one is more strongly subject to *ananke,* the necessity that results from our unconscious, compulsive acts—that is, fate.

Astrology's value as a potentially fatalistic system is that it sets realistic expectations for what is possible. In Western culture, especially in the United States where the idea of the American Dream promises endless prosperity and happiness to anyone who works hard enough, the concept of inherent limitation is anathema, and even more so when that limitation is believed to be related to the positions of planets at the moment of birth. Yet it can be argued that fatalistic views may have psychological value. Evelyn Au, et al. (2012) studied the idea of "negotiable fate" using groups from two societies with different levels of constraint on freedom to pursue individual goals—the United States and China. Negotiable fate is defined as "the belief that individuals can negotiate with fate for control, and they do this by exercising personal agency within the limits that fate has determined" (Au 2012, 931). The authors note that this approach may be summarized by the adage, "When life gives you lemons, make lemonade" (932). Their research attempted to measure the level of agency an individual felt when faced with "fated" situations, or situations over which the person had no direct control. For this study, the United States was considered to be relatively free of constraint, while China was considered to be heavily constrained, in the sense that people there have less control over their lives. The study showed that people who live in the United States, and thus already have a belief in personal freedom and free will, were less likely to believe in the concept of "negotiable fate." When faced with "fated" situations, or situations in which they are heavily constrained, people in the United States did not see themselves as having

any agency. By contrast, people who participated in the study in China were more likely to accept their "fate" while also seeing themselves as agents; their goal became making the best of a bad situation rather than simply giving up. Thus, the Chinese participants in the study believed much more strongly than American participants in the idea that fate could be negotiated. However, Au notes that both groups shared a similar (low) level of belief in true "fatalism," which was positively associated with avoidant rather than coping behaviors (938), or removing oneself from a situation rather than trying to actively manage it. So pure determinism, in which there is no possibility of an internal locus of control, leads to avoidance (or denial) regardless of one's cultural background. But the kind of fatalism most of us face, where we are limited by social, cultural, economic, or other factors, leads those who accept those limitations to find coping strategies rather than trying to deny that those limitations exist.

This study by Au helps illustrate the bias against fatalistic thought in the United States (and, presumably, most Western countries): in general, people in the West reject fate and fatalism in any form because our cultural norms assure us that personal effort and perseverance will inevitably result in a positive outcome. Self-determination is both highly valued and expected, to the extent that anyone who is not "a success" may be perceived to be responsible for his or her circumstances, or fate. (For example, illegal immigrants, welfare mothers, or other economically disadvantaged people may be blamed for their circumstances and scapegoated in negative political rhetoric as drains on society who are not working hard enough, rather than viewed as, say, victims of an unfair economic system.) To accept a fatalistic premise in America today is to go against cultural norms. There are, of course, exceptions to this, as with certain religions in which

one's fate is believed to be in God's hands, or life circumstances are seen as a result of God's will; but these ideas are generally not reinforced by the cultural mainstream. The common rejection of fatalistic thinking is one reason it is so easy (and acceptable) to reject astrology as a system that is perceived as encouraging belief in fatalistic thought. Yet in the astrological view, those who accept the possibility of fate are better able to "make lemons out of lemonade" in difficult situations; believers assert that they are afforded the chance to make the best out of a bad situation (or to make the "even better" of out of a good situation), which accounts for the ongoing appeal of astrology. In my fieldwork, none of the people I interviewed seemed concerned that their use of astrology was viewed as superstitious, or just ignorant, by mainstream culture. When asked how they dealt with skeptics, my informants responded with indifference. They explained that astrology worked for them in powerful ways, it was useful, and it made them feel empowered and capable; the mainstream rejection of it was thus of no concern to them.

Ultimately, the astrological view seems aligned with Au's study, which suggests that "belief in negotiable fate can help individuals remain active in coping and sustain positive views of the self when they perceive many constraints in their life space….even though this belief was also linked to the perception of the world as being fixed" (Au 2012, 939). Although Au's work specifically examined differences between two distinct societal groups, it also notes that those differences can manifest between individuals within a particular country as well—as is clearly reflected in the beliefs found among astrologers and non-astrologers. As demonstrated, the fatalistic aspects of astrology are not limiting or demoralizing to a person who believes in negotiable fate. In fact, such beliefs may improve self-esteem and help people to feel that they have agency over the

parts of their lives they can control. This can give them a sense of control that is a basic psychological need (Au 2012, 933; Wojcik 1997, 135), which is a primary function that astrology serves among its adherents. Debora Tramposh, one of the astrologers I interviewed characterized it this way:

> A lot of people…if they don't know [their astrological situation], they wouldn't understand, "Why do I want to sleep so much all of the sudden? And why don't I want to go out and do my job? And I'm irritated. What's wrong with me? I gotta go get some antidepressants!" Right? You know. So, it totally helps me understand, and be able to cope.

It provides them with a sense of control over life's complexity and unpredictability, not in the sense of creating particular, idealized outcomes but by helping people understand underlying meaning and purpose.

Fate and free will thus work in tandem in an astrologer's life. Fate is believed to set out the parameters within which one must work, and then one's individual choices and free will, as understood and utilized through astrological insights, make the best of them. Astrology teaches that fate is negotiable, and then provides the tools for negotiating it. I suggest that this is, and always has been, its appeal. Although contemporary astrology is generally more spiritual and psychological than early astrology, it is nonetheless a system that has provided helpful information for people as they navigate the uncertainties and inevitable disappointments of life, offering a sense of control, comfort, and order to people trying to navigate the vagaries of everyday life.

NOTES

1. Although all such terms are also represented as gods and goddesses in the Greek pantheon, here I use them as concepts that inform early astrological thinking rather than as deities.
2. This "process of becoming" is essentially the concept of teleology.

3. The philosophical reasoning for this association relates to astrological aspect doctrine. To summarize briefly: Because the fifth house makes a favorable aspect (relationship) to the Ascendant, which represents the owner of the chart, it is in a position to support that person. The sixth house makes no aspect to the Ascendant, and thus it cannot help the person and may in fact represent difficulty.
4. A technical point of clarification: Modern astrologers assign Pluto as the primary ruler of Scorpio, and some astrologers use Pluto and Mars as co-rulers. Astrologers who use "traditional" rulerships—that is, the original rulerships that existed for the first two millennia prior to the discovery of the outer planets Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto—give Mars, and only Mars, rulership over the sign of Scorpio.
5. Within the ancient Greek philosophy on which astrology is founded is the idea that one's soul chooses a particular time to be born, so as to ensure a lifetime in which the appropriate spiritual growth can happen. (This then becomes part of our *telos*.) However, in our embodied, earthly state, we have no remembrance of making this choice and thus we still must work overcome our ignorance. This notion is heavily emphasized in evolutionary astrology, which also uses astrological charts to describe how past lives and karma inform the current life.

CHAPTER VI

CONTEMPORARY ASTROLOGY: VARIATIONS ON A THEME

Astrology today is not a monolithic, institutionalized system. It has no governing body or central authority, and so it is always being adapted and reinterpreted as its users apply it to their current cultural milieu. That said, broadly speaking, astrology can be subdivided into three main branches, or three different approaches to its basic structural and symbolic system: psychological astrology, evolutionary astrology, and traditional astrology. While these can be thematically separated, in practice there is considerable overlap; note that not all forms of astrology in practice today overlap with the New Age movement (see Figure 1), as is commonly assumed. At least one form of astrology can be seen as a product of the New Age movement (evolutionary astrology), while the others

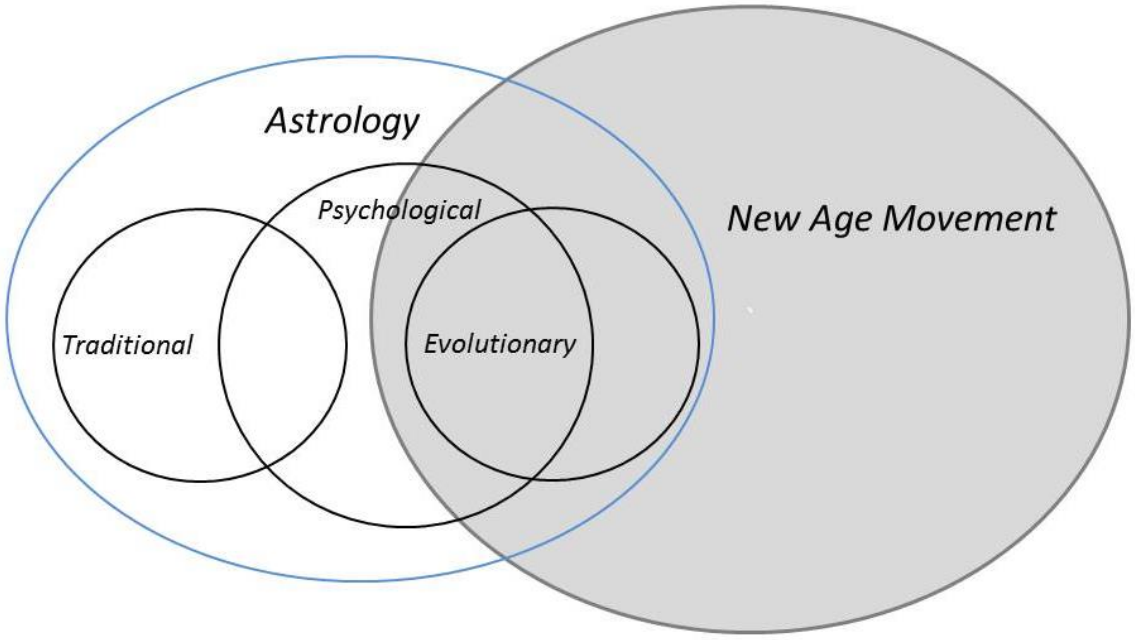

Figure 1. Astrology's Relationship to the New Age Movement

have varying degrees of affinity with the New Age. These three branches may be defined, very generally, as follows.

Psychological Astrology

Also known as humanistic astrology,[1] psychological astrology was the predominant form of astrology practiced in the late nineteenth and first two-thirds of the twentieth century. It represents the modernization and simplified transmission of an incomplete understanding of the medieval astrological tradition (which was itself an incomplete version of the original Hellenistic tradition). Psychological astrology incorporates ideas from psychology, Carl Jung in particular. This approach emphasizes astrological symbols as archetypes, which Jung viewed as both components of the human psyche and also forces that act on or affect the human psyche. In addition, Jung's concepts of synchronicity (meaningful coincidence) and the collective unconscious (a kind of universal mind shared by all humans, from which archetypes are produced) are used in psychological astrology. Astrologers have always been interested in patterns and the ordered motions of the cosmos, so Jung's ideas were easily adapted to the astrological system, where "a disciplined alertness to significant pattern in the outer world as well as inner begins to develop as an essential aspect of living a more conscious life" (Tarnas 2006, 56). Psychological astrologers seek understanding of one's true self as described by the archetypal astrological symbolism in one's birth chart.

Astrologers using this approach regard the birth chart as a map to self-actualization, which is the goal of personal growth; in this way it anticipates New Age thinking. The concept of a permanent and evolving soul is usually at the foundation of

this belief system; belief in reincarnation may or may not be included but commonly is. Psychological astrology incorporates Western esoteric ideas (such as those adopted from Theosophy and Spiritualism) that also later influenced the New Age movement and is the foundation from which evolutionary astrology springs. Psychological astrology permeates nearly all forms of astrology practiced today.

Evolutionary Astrology

An increasingly popular form of astrology (perhaps the most popular version in the United States) with distinctly New Age roots, evolutionary astrology is based on the channeled (dreamed) teachings of Jeffrey Wolf Green, a Seattle astrologer who first started lecturing on his method in the 1970s (Green n.d.). It can be assumed that Green's introduction to astrology came through the psychological model that was common at that time, making his new method a syncretic combination of psychological astrology and New Age (Western esoteric) ideas. Evolutionary astrology heavily emphasizes the concepts of reincarnation and karma (in its Westernized interpretation), which are also found in psychological astrology, but places greater emphasis on the evolution of the soul through many lifetimes, thereby identifying "the past evolutionary context of any individual, why he or she had that past, and how that past has conditioned the individual to the present state of conditions in his or her life" (Green 1985, xxiv). Green's form of evolutionary astrology focuses on the planet Pluto[2] as a symbol of the soul and the nodes of the Moon as symbols of the path of spiritual development required in this life. (Since its discovery in 1930, Pluto has been associated with profound transformation that occurs by way of a metaphorical death-and-rebirth process, as its name for the Roman god of the

Underworld would suggest.) Evolutionary astrologers outside of the "Green" school frequently make use of concepts from psychological astrology, such as archetypes, and may or may not include the same emphasis on Pluto. In fact, many astrologers calling themselves "evolutionary astrologers" are using a combination of evolutionary and psychological astrology rather than Green's particular method. Evolutionary astrologers of the Green school often identify themselves as such, as it is a system related to but unlike previous forms of astrology, which tend to emphasize the Sun, Moon, and Ascendant sign and may view Pluto as a "transpersonal" planet, or a planet more influential at a generational level than at an individual level. (Astrologers may refer to the "Pluto in Leo" generation, for example, which is essentially equivalent to the Baby Boom generation.) Many who today identify themselves as evolutionary astrologers identify with Steven Forrest, a major figure in the astrology community today, who uses the concept of an evolving soul but does not place such a heavy emphasis on Pluto. (Green, by contrast, rarely makes appearances; his daughter and various others trained in his methods carry on his teachings.)

The original "evolutionary" form of astrology is clearly informed by New Age sensibilities given that Green claims to have received the teachings in a dream, in much the same way that many teachings associated with the early New Age movement were channeled (for instance, the Seth teachings channeled by Jane Roberts starting in the 1960s, and the Michael teachings, channeled by a group of friends in the 1970s). Hanegraaff notes that channeling was a significant element in the origin of the New Age movement, arguing that "New Age religion must to a large extent be considered a religion of revelation" (1996, 27), with channeled teachings making up one of the

movement's most popular categories. Stephen Hunt has similarly remarked, in reference to the New Age movement, "If spiritual knowledge comes from learning to listen to an inner voice, the light within, then each person's revelation is as good as any other" (2003, 133).

A primary appeal of evolutionary astrology is that its suggestion that any hardship or difficulty in this life was a choice one's soul made before deciding to incarnate. This echoes the "things happen for a reason" refrain often found in other New Age ideologies and provides both meaning and a sense of purpose. Lauren Balin is an evolutionary astrologer (trained by Steven Forrest, not Green) who first learned the psychological model of astrology. However, the evolutionary model appealed to her because it was more distinctly spiritual:

> Here is a system whereby I can move away from just description, or even psychological, to enter into the realm of spiritual and reincarnation. And life purpose, like why you might have the chart you have…. they came up with a formula by which you could actually read past lives in the chart….the psychological, the descriptive, and the spiritual all kind of came together.

The notion that evolutionary astrology, particularly its focus on karma, provides a reason for particular areas of difficulty in life (past karma must be worked out in this lifetime as a part of one's spiritual path) is a comfort to her and allows her to accept some of the painful events in her life and is part of a larger, meaningful process. Like other New Age beliefs, evolutionary astrology provides an attractive alternative to the idea of a single, difficult lifetime by emphasizing one's connection to a divine, eternal, and ultimately benevolent source. If one is part of a benevolent source, then any difficulty in this life is clearly for one's spiritual benefit and can be better accepted as part of a larger plan.

On the other hand, this form of astrology has been criticized by other astrologers, including some of those I interviewed, for being too directly associated with New Age thinking, which is seen as diluting the astrological system. Linda finds it too "culty" for her taste, somewhat dogmatic or, as she says, "too 'this is the way'" and thus requiring a particular, fixed set of beliefs; Linda was not convinced by evolutionary astrology's shift in focus to Pluto and the Moon's nodes as it was not in keeping with her understanding and experience of astrology. Gary Lorentzen, who knows Jeffrey Wolf Green personally and was part of the astrological scene in Seattle when Green was developing this method, also challenges the evolutionary paradigm. Gary has a bachelor's degree in Buddhist Studies and gained a Buddhist perspective on astrology while serving in Vietnam in the 1970s. He rejects the Westernized view of reincarnation that informs evolutionary astrology. In Eastern religions, reincarnation is often seen as an unfortunate fact of life. Asian religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism provide methods for escaping this cycle of birth and rebirth. In the West, reincarnation, for those who believe in it, is seen as a much more positive light. Reincarnation is a kind of "do over," a chance to make right what went wrong in a previous lifetime. The goal of reincarnation is not to escape the cycle of birth and rebirth but to continue growing spiritually through each new incarnation. For a student of Eastern religious thought, this reinterpretation is troubling. Gary, who identifies as an atheist, makes a key distinction between the astrology he practices and evolutionary astrology in terms of the language of belief: evolutionary astrology is "something in my mind that you have to believe. You have to believe in that interpretation of what reincarnation is…. It's a very Western approach to reincarnation, and not a Buddhist one, at all. So I always had a problem with that." Astrology for Gary

is a tool, just like any tool he keeps in his toolbox in the garage. When he needs a hammer, he uses a hammer; when he needs astrology, such as when planning for a trip or considering the impact of an event in the news (Gary practices mundane astrology; see below for a definition), he turns to astrology. Gary does not consider it a spiritual system and it is not about personal growth. Thus the evolutionary astrology model does not appeal to him.

Evolutionary astrology also has been criticized, as has New Age thinking, for its tendency to "blame the victim" and to diagnose all problems as spiritual in nature and the result of personal choice rather than, say, the result of random accidents or tragedies, or socio-cultural factors that impose hardship. The evolutionary model asserts that one's soul chooses to be born with a particular birth chart, at a particular time, into a particular family, and so on, with the purpose of working out the karma of previous lives in this one. A person who is raised in a home full of abuse and neglect is thus culpable for his or her suffering. One's soul, which is one's higher self or the part of oneself that is connected to "source," "spirit," "the divine," or God, chose this life intentionally, but upon incarnation, one's physical manifestation "forgets" the soul's purpose. The evolutionary approach to astrology, then, provides a map of that purpose and helps to explain where a person needs to focus his or her spiritual growth. But what does this mean for people who commit suicide or become addicts, for example, as a way of attempting to escape their suffering? In the evolutionary model, these people are simply ignorant of their purpose. This model is comforting to some, but offensive to others who feel that it is too "me" focused and dismisses the realities of human suffering on a broader scale. Obvious questions are raised: Did everyone who died on 9/11 choose to

be killed by terrorists? Did children starving to death in Africa, with no access to the spiritual path advocated by the evolutionary approach, ask for their suffering? Why would a soul choose a life of suffering without an astrological chart that provides the necessary character traits and tools to overcome that suffering? Evolutionary astrologers would argue that with enough spiritual knowledge and understanding, anyone can overcome life's difficulties. Other forms of astrology, including psychological astrology, tend to be more open to the idea that sometimes bad things just happen, and one's chart can tell an astrologer how a person might react to those outside forces.[3]

Traditional Astrology

Traditional astrology includes Hellenistic astrology and medieval astrology; in essence, it is astrology as practiced from its earliest forms (as far as those can be determined today) until the Enlightenment. This system of astrology began to be recovered from ancient texts in the 1990s, as much of its technical and theoretical foundation was lost when the astrological tradition waned during the Enlightenment era. This branch also includes several specialized, event-oriented, and technique-dependent forms of astrology:

- *Horary astrology* is a divination method used for answering specific questions. A chart is cast for the moment the astrologer understands the question, and then specific techniques are applied to determine the answer to the question. (The idea is that the astrologer is serving as a channel for divine wisdom that is revealed in a particular moment, that is, the moment the astrologer fully understands the nature of the

question.) Horary astrology is heavily rule-based and does not incorporate modern ideas from psychological or evolutionary astrology.

- *Mundane astrology*, believed to be the oldest form of astrology, is the study of celestial cycles in relation to worldly events. Mundane astrology is also used to study social movements, weather and natural disasters, political events, and financial markets.
- *Electional astrology* is a tool for selecting ("electing") an auspicious time in the future for an important event, such as a wedding, starting a business, making a major purchase, beginning an important new project, and so on. Like horary astrology, it is heavily rule-based.
- *Medical astrology* associates signs and planets with parts of the body, and a person's astrological chart is used to diagnose and treat illnesses, relying on ancient philosophical concepts such as the four humors (blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm, which were also used to describe temperament) and the four elements (fire, earth, air, water). Medical astrology is a holistic rather than mechanistic model that also uses plant medicine, principles of alchemy, and astrological correspondences (for example, the sign of Aries rules the head and the sign of Pisces rules the feet).

For modern astrologers, traditional astrology is a "new" form of astrology, or rather a newly rediscovered and revitalized form. Astrologers are able to study and use traditional astrology today thanks largely to Project Hindsight, an effort initiated in the early 1990s by several astrologers to begin the tedious and time-consuming work of translating ancient Greek astrological texts into English. One of the problems with the few existing translations of ancient astrological texts was that they were translated by

people with no knowledge of astrology, and thus important details were lost or obscured; of course, the un-translated texts were completely inaccessible to English speaking astrologers. The privately-funded project was modeled on Renaissance efforts to restore lost knowledge through translation, and its goal was to give modern astrologers "easy access to their own tradition" (Project Hindsight 2004), a tradition whose lineage had been severed during the Enlightenment. This was followed by efforts to translate Latin, Arabic, and Hebrew astrological texts. This work is still ongoing by members of the astrological community who also have skills in the requisite languages.[4] As these texts are being translated and made available, astrologers are studying them, testing them, and attempting to recreate the astrological tradition and the detailed and precise techniques that have been lost over time.

This kind of astrology tends to be event-oriented and externally focused, and its language is highly deterministic (given that it was developed in an era when people lived highly prescribed lives). While modern traditional astrologers work to soften this language and educate people about the nuances behind such words as "benefic" and "malefic" (terms that are assigned to particular planets, seemingly marking them as objectively "good" or "bad"), modern evolutionary astrologers in particular tend to reject this system as too fatalistic. Like New Agers, such astrologers prefer an "it's all good" approach to their spiritual growth, and a system that is in any way fatalistic goes against the New Age emphasis on personal responsibility (not to mention casting doubt on the very idea of free will). Traditional astrologers would counter that criticism with the suggestion that astrology has always allowed for the operation of free will—the knowledge gained from understanding one's chart, for example, gives one the

opportunity to make the best life possible—but, as discussed, astrology by definition has an inherently fatalistic component in the natal chart and the predictable cycles of the planets. In this view, to assume that an individual has unlimited (material) potential when one's birth chart says otherwise is not only a mistake but unfair (cruel, even) in the eyes of a traditional astrologer. Instead of the overtly optimistic "it's all good" approach, traditional astrology tends to take a "do the best you can with what you've got" approach. It is practical and realistic while also appealing to spiritual notions of individual meaning. Although traditional astrologers may accept reincarnation and karma as forces active in an individual's life, they do not assume that such forces can be read in an astrological chart.

This recent return to traditional astrology may be seen as a rejection of the New Age spirituality found in evolutionary astrology—and for some, it is that—but it is perhaps more appropriately viewed as a return to astrology's philosophical and esoteric roots, some of the same roots which inform the New Age movement. Modern astrology is often criticized by skeptics for being too general and vague, and also too dependent on "intuitive" interpretations of charts, which leads to easy acceptance by gullible people who may then be taken advantage of. (This problem is compounded in the case of astrologers who bill themselves as psychic or intuitive, because it may not be clear whether a particular reading is based on the astrological system or information received some other way.) Modern astrology, and evolutionary astrology in particular, are essentially syncretic forms of astrology that have merged a simplified, twentieth century astrological system with psychological and New Age spiritual concepts of self-actualization, self-determination, and evolution of the soul used to create something

rather different (save the basic astrological symbols and structure) from its ancient source. Traditional astrology is a far more detailed, precise, and complex system to perform, requiring tables and calculations that modern astrology does not use, although computer programs help with this.[5]

While the purest form of traditional astrology is viewed as a process of following strict rules, many practicing traditional astrologers incorporate elements of psychological astrology into their work. They understand that while psychology proper was not available to the Hellenistic world and does not appear in ancient astrological texts, psychological principles—and, of course, the experience of being human—are nonetheless evident. Today, there is no reason not to incorporate concepts from psychology into astrology as its traditions and belief systems evolve; however, traditional astrologers incorporate new ideas that fit within the existing philosophical and theoretical astrological traditions. In other words, traditional astrology would not redefine how to read an astrological chart (as evolutionary astrology does), but might offer updated versions of how certain significations are understood as social norms have changed over time. In addition, traditional astrologers have found ways to include the outer planets—Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto—into chart readings without the guidance of ancient texts. Those who study and promote traditional astrology are advocating a strong intellectual and historical foundation for their tradition that can be coupled with its spiritual dimension.

Modern astrology is firmly rooted in Western esotericism (nearly a century ahead of the New Age movement). One could argue that astrology represents the most ancient foundations of that esoteric tradition, as it dates back to nearly five centuries BCE and is

used in many other esoteric systems (such as alchemy and magic). Participants in the New Age movement and astrology adherents are both practicing what anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski described as supernatural (or perhaps simply mystical) "magic." Faced with a complex, confusing, and materially rich but seemingly spiritually poor world where religion has been replaced with rationalism, many people in Western society are left feeling disenchanted and disconnected. Malinowski notes that "both magic and religion arise and function in situations of emotional stress" (1954, 87). In the feeling of powerlessness and anxiety that accompanies disenchantment, many people seek not just deeper meaning, but something to do, some action to take to improve one's situation. New Agers turn to a wide array of spiritual tools—channeling, energy healing, crystals, tarot cards, and so on. Astrologers turn to the craft of astrology to help them explain the nature of the present moment, to help them make sense of the past, and to give them guidance for the future. It is human nature to long for meaning and purpose, so one turns to "magical belief and practice" which are "not taken from the air, but are due to a number of experiences actually lived through in which man receives the revelation of his power to attain the desired end" (Malinowski 1954, 82). With both New Age practices and the most modern forms of astrology, personal experience is the guide; intuition trumps dogma and doctrine. Older forms of astrology, on the other hand, depend on a system that was once much more technical than it is today, but nonetheless represents a worldview in which the cosmos is invested with meaning. Like the New Age movement, astrology is individualized, capable of giving meaning and purpose, and decidedly esoteric. It gives people a vocabulary for talking about the struggles that are part of the human condition. And perhaps most importantly, it gives people a way to engage with

their "fate" as an active participant. In this regard, challenges in life are not obstacles but a necessary part of the journey.

NOTES

1. Humanistic astrology and psychological astrology are not precisely the same thing in the minds of some astrologers, but these two ways of conceptualizing astrology emerged at roughly the same period of time (during the first half of the twentieth century) and thus share much in common and are often conflated. For the sake of brevity and in keeping with common usage among the astrological community, I am treating them here as one and the same.
2. Despite its downgrade to "dwarf planet" by astronomers, Pluto is still considered an important planet by modern astrologers; evolutionary astrologers give it particular emphasis. Some psychological astrologers and most traditional astrologers treat Pluto, as well as Uranus and Neptune, as a "transpersonal" astrological influences, meaning that they operates at a level that transcends an individual identity and are thus not used for describing mundane matters in a person's life.
3. For more on the differences and conflicts between traditional and modern astrology, see Brennan 2014. In this podcast, Hellenistic astrologer Chris Brennan has a debate with modern evolutionary astrologer Eric Meyers. Meyers' views may represent the most extreme version of the evolutionary astrology approach, but the distinctions between the two systems are fairly clear in this debate.
4. These translators are both competent in the languages they translate and the history and practice of astrology, which puts them in the unique position of translating ancient ideas for a modern, astrologically-savvy audience. Some of the astrologer-translators active today include Dr. Benjamin Dykes (Ph.D., Philosophy), who translates Arabic texts; Dr. Robert Hand (Ph.D., History), who translates medieval Latin texts; and Demetra George (M.A., Classics), who translates ancient Greek texts.
5. The relative inaccessibility of traditional astrological techniques to modern psychological or evolutionary astrologers places traditional astrology squarely in astrology's esoteric history, but also makes it less palatable to a New Age mindset which prefers answers (core truths, even) that are available more intuitively—that is, without authoritative books, charts, or rules that must be followed to the letter.

CHAPTER VII

ASTROLOOGY IN SHAKESPEARE'S TIME: A CASE STUDY

Scholars usually look at astrology through the lens of culture or history. A more useful task may be to look at culture and history through the lens of astrology. Unfortunately, few scholars feel it necessary to acquire any astrological skills themselves in order to understand its true function in culture or as its own complex and multifaceted system, resulting in astrology's less than stellar (pun intended) reputation. To demonstrate the use of astrology as a metaphorical tool for revealing human character and its importance within Western culture, it is constructive to look at astrology in William Shakespeare's time. At this tipping point between medieval magical, superstitious belief and the empirical rationalism of the Scientific Revolution, astrology was thoroughly integrated into science and medicine, art, culture, and language. How does astrology look in a time when it was not yet stigmatized knowledge? In what follows, I present two examples of how Shakespeare incorporated astrology and astrological concepts into his work. By looking at the way astrology operated in this era, we see that astrology acts as a symbolic, metaphoric language with which people can contextualize their lives, the good and the bad, and find purpose and meaning in an increasingly rationalist and disenchanted world. This is indeed the way astrology operates for many people today, despite the fact the astrological system has evolved and changed since then.

Astrology was relegated to the corners of culture by the rise of science, because the new scientific language—mathematical rather than metaphorical, singly signifying rather than multivalent, a "taxonomic austerity" (Geneva 1995, 269)—was proving to be

useful in many important ways (such as understanding the material world and determining the cause of disease). While astrology's language could not be held within that emerging, and limited, scientific paradigm, it is also true that astrology's primary challenge throughout history came from religion, not science. That the debate about astrology was largely religious speaks to the actual function of astrology in culture, that is, as an indication (if not evidence) of humankind's integrated, nondualistic position within an ensouled cosmos. Even if some astrologers today may claim that astrology is not a belief system, it nonetheless depends on a belief that there is a connection, causal or otherwise, between humans and the heavens.

Astrology in Shakespeare's Era

Astrology is very much like a language, with the structures and rules that implies, which is used to describe human character and behavior (and even fate or destiny) using archetypes and mythology. Even from its earliest days, astrologers understood astrology as functioning in two ways: one is predictive and divinatory and concerned with omens, a branch known as judicial astrology; the other is natural astrology, which understood astrology as an innate phenomenon in which the heavens reflected information that could be used to predict weather, find auspicious times for planting crops, and other important mundane matters. This latter understanding was more common among learned astrologers, while the former was common among the masses and clever entrepreneurs posing as astrologers (this latter group can be blamed for much of the well-founded criticism of astrology as a pseudoscience or superstition, and also as a scheme preying on the naïve and credulous). In the hands of a writer such as Shakespeare, astrology is also

a language of rich metaphor. Any references to astrology in Shakespeare contain a quantitative element (what a particular celestial arrangement would mean, practically speaking, to an astrologer) and a qualitative element (what the same thing would mean symbolically, mythically, or even culturally to a member of one's audience). Shakespeare's works contain hundreds of classical and literary allusions, and many of his astrological references worked no differently from those. But astrological allusions contain within them the echoes of more specific astrological meanings: Shakespeare uses astrology as a shorthand (and poetic) way of describing his characters and the challenges they face. His astrological allusions are not simplistic but rich and nuanced. Textual and historical evidence suggests that Shakespeare had an understanding of that additional layer of meaning, and that he used it to dramatic effect.

Shakespeare lived and worked in the late sixteenth century and early seventeenth century, as the Renaissance was hurtling toward the Enlightenment. He was a man of his time, and as such, he knew something about astrology; scholars agree that most people living in Elizabethan England believed in and understood astrology at some level (Allen 1941, 182; Camden 1933, 70; Overholser 1959, 336; Parr 1953, 69; Sondheim 1939, 248). The terms "astrology" and "astronomy" were often used interchangeably up through this period—Shakespeare himself never used the former in his work, using the latter (and its variants) to refer to what we would today call astrology (Overholser 1959, 338). Elizabethan-era astrology was not new or even newly developed; like its medieval predecessors, it faithfully used techniques and significations found in classical Hellenistic and medieval Arab sources (Sondheim 1939, 246). Although the astrology had not changed, the astronomy of the period was developing quickly thanks to the celestial

discoveries of astronomers like Copernicus, Galileo, Brahe, and Kepler. But astronomers educated at universities—these four among them—were also trained in and often practiced astrology, as was the custom at the time.

Despite the revelation that the earth was not the center of the universe in physical terms, the system of astrology maintained its traditionally geocentric perspective. The Copernican Revolution did not, as Nicolson notes, "(strike) at the root of established astrology" (1956, 5); it merely sent astrology and astronomy on two different and quite distinct trajectories going forward. Astrology's purpose was always more akin to religion than to science; Copernicus simply made this distinction clearer. Moreover, astrology could remain geocentric because it was always a system that describes human experience from an earth-bound perspective. That it attempted to describe the physical reality of the solar system, albeit incorrectly, for many centuries prior to Copernicus does not take away from its function as a humanistic system (again, not unlike religion)—unless, of course, one mistakenly thinks it still claims to be a science.

The question of whether astrology and astronomy were known to be different and understood separately during Shakespeare's time is a matter of some debate among scholars, and an important topic given Shakespeare's use (or not) of the terms. Garin asserts that "one must totally reject the argument, presented as if it were a commonplace, for the possibility of a clear separation, in the Renaissance, between astronomy and astrology" (1983, 24); the two were intertwined in the Renaissance mind in such a way that a modern, Western thinker cannot understand that culture without grasping this idea. Allen asserts the opposite: "Astrology was not confused with the science of astronomy" (1941, 52), but then softens his position by noting that "the astronomer might practice

astrology, but he knew when he crossed the line that limited the domains of the two areas" (54). In other words, he acknowledges that both astronomy and astrology played a role in the thinking of the time, but learned people understood the differences between them (which differs from Garin's definition only in degree). Moyer takes the middle road: "a scholar might use the two terms 'astronomy' and 'astrology' in ways consistent with modern usage, but might also reverse them" (1999, 229), while also noting that both astronomy and astrology were taught in medieval European universities (1999, 228). So even reviewing the literature of the time leaves us with the potential for confusion, because anyone writing in that era would not be making a distinction between the two in the same way we would today, even though the writer likely had a good understanding of the difference. Geneva perhaps comes closest to a balanced view when she writes,

> Astrology in seventeenth century England was not a science. It was not a religion. It was not magic. Nor was it astronomy, mathematics, puritanism, neo-Platonism, psychology, meteorology, alchemy or witchcraft. It used some of these as tools; it held tenets in common with others; and some people were adept at several of these skills. But in the final analysis it was only itself: a unique divinatory and prognostic art embodying centuries of accreted methodology and tradition (1995, 9).

Astrology, then, was something unique and complex, something conventional and emerging, something between science and art, something folkloric and profoundly human. The rise of the rational may have been displacing earlier superstitious ideas, but in astrology, humankind had "a language system [that] occupied the middle ground between the abstract symbolic system of classical mathematics and common discourse…between divine and human language" (Geneva 1995, 269). It connected people to the cycles and rhythms of nature, reaffirming an ancient intuition about the human relationship to the physical world. In its symbolism, astrology showed that

something could be metaphorically true and real even if it might not be literally true or real. One may identify with one's astrological profile despite the lack of evidence for a mechanism for its validity. The natural and the supernatural were not, and perhaps still are not, distinct in an astrological worldview (Garin 1983, 77).

Although the belief in all forms of astrology was widespread in Shakespeare's day, arguments against it were nothing new. Claudius Ptolemy, the author of the famous, second century CE astrological text *Tetrabiblios,* was not himself an uncritical believer, and he published this work in an effort to put limits on and give scientific structure to astrology. During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the arguments against astrology came not from science but theology (Camden 1933, 26, 44; Allen 1941, 100); indeed, "the astrologers' main battle was not to prove that their art was scientific, but…that it was not incompatible with Christianity" (Geneva 1995, 9). If astrology were valid as a description of character and, worse, predictive of future events, one's free will was suspect. Without free will, there was no need for salvation, and without a need for salvation, one could argue that there was no need for the Church. There is a strategic and practical reason that William Lilly (1602-1681), perhaps the most famous English astrologer, named his magnum opus *Christian Astrology*. Of course, astrology is pre-Christian in origin and can be called Christian only insofar as one accepts God's position as the ultimate controller of celestial movements; but it clearly works within a pagan worldview as well, as it was developed in the polytheistic cultures of ancient Babylonia and Greece. Even philosopher Pico della Mirandola's famous *Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem* (Disputations against divinatory astrology), published around the turn of the sixteenth century and whose arguments against astrology became so

standard that many are still widely (if unknowingly) used today, was moved by concern for astrology's apparent conflict with Christianity's view of (and need for) free will, not a disbelief in humankind's relationship to the stars. But the result of his attack on astrology was significant: Pico's arguments gave educated laymen the tools to argue against astrology, while arguing effectively in favor of astrology required considerably more technical knowledge: "To be a ranking member of the astrologer's profession in the sixteenth century required a mastery of astronomy and mathematics, sciences in which the stupid never excel. To be an opponent of astrology, one needed only enough Latin to read Pico and abridge his arguments" (Allen 1941, 100). In other words, astrology was a complicated system and its practice required significant technical and mathematical expertise and training, yet those who were critical of it did not truly understand what they were being critical of. They were, rather, critical of the popular idea of astrology. This is no different from the way astrology is treated today by skeptics.

Scientists, on the other hand, rarely dismissed astrology entirely, and in fact, neither did Pico; he specifically argued against "divinatory" or judicial astrology, not natural astrology (that is, the more "scientific" form of astrology that was used for medicine, meteorology, and related subjects). As one seventeenth century scholar notes, "It has been shown that the very scientists responsible for the new philosophy [of the Copernican and Scientific Revolutions] were either themselves astrological practitioners or involved in attempts to bring about its reform—not extinction" (Geneva 1995, 12). Francis Bacon, considered to be one of the fathers of modern science, confirms this notion: "As for Astrology, it is so full of superstition, that scarce anything sound can be discovered in it. Notwithstanding, I would rather have it purified than altogether

rejected" (quoted in Allen 1941, 150). Many scientists and lay people alike rejected the popular astrology of charlatans and tricksters (a real problem for astrology's image, both then and now) and the practice of judicial or predictive astrology while confirming a belief in a connection between humans and the heavens (Allen 1941, 102; Camden 1933, 68; Moyer 1999, 247).

Scholars have noted that Shakespeare's use of astrological language and allusions demonstrates two things: first, that Shakespeare's audience was fairly well versed in astrological concepts; second, that Shakespeare himself, along with his audience, held some sort of astrological beliefs, all in keeping with the customs of the day. The true nature of those beliefs is lost to history, but that does not keep scholars from speculating. The consensus seems to be that Shakespeare's understanding of astrology was at least as much as but perhaps no more than what could have been acquired by anyone—meaning anyone who was literate—who had access to the astrological almanacs published plentifully at the time (Aston 1970, 158; Camden 1933, 72; Parr 1953, xi, 57; Sondheim 1939, 250). Although Shakespeare was not an astrologer himself, his understanding of the practice was fairly deep and complex by today's standards; by Elizabethan standards, his understanding was typical of any learned, non-scientific person.

For Shakespeare and his audience, astrological knowledge was in large part a product of market culture. For those outside the elite classes who did not have access to university educations, knowledge of astrology came from customary folk belief and, perhaps more importantly, published almanacs which contained weather predictions, information about Moon cycles and the best days for planting, and other practical information based on astrological calculations. Such almanacs were widely available and

drove popular interest in and knowledge of astrology (Moyer 1999, 244); as a result, Shakespeare could make fairly sophisticated astrological references in his plays and be perfectly understood by his audience (Rusche 1969, 163; Aston 1970, 158; Camden 1933, 72). These publications included prognostications about weather and celestial omens such as eclipses and comets. Such popular astrology is not unlike the Sun sign astrology of today with its newspaper horoscopes. It was predictive, divinatory, and, for many of the people who engaged with it, superstitious. It is this popular, mass-marketed form of astrology that was most often the subject of criticism from detractors, again not unlike today. This kind of "judicial" astrology, with its predictions for the future, both implies and creates a superstitious relationship between humans and the heavens, one that is fixed, predestined, and causal, and thus one that must be feared or awed. Like popular Sun sign astrology today, almanacs represented a form of astrology aimed at people seeking either pure entertainment, on the one hand, or definitive predictions rather than spiritual counsel or a tool for self-reflection on the other. This kind of "superstitious" astrology left it open for criticism and abuse by those looking to make a quick profit from people's fears.

In Shakespeare's era, astrologers themselves, and those with a more complex understanding of astrology (or perhaps human nature), rejected any system that eliminated free will from the equation. Axioms dating back to Ptolemy insist that "the stars incline, they do not compel" and "a wise man rules the stars" (Sondheim 1939, 245). Astrological symbolism is a language in which certain human characteristics can be understood, if one is fluent in the language, but the stars do not cause a person to be a certain way because, as noted previously, we have the free will to choose to be something

other than what our natural inclinations lead us to be. It is not uncommon for people to feel capable of growth and change in their lives, and this experience is compatible with the astrological system. Nonetheless, without the ongoing printing of such works, which preyed on both the human "craving for evidence of causality" (Parr 1953, 247) and "a feverish desire to know something of the future" (Allen 1941, 47) and were thus notably popular with the masses, Shakespeare's astrological language may have fallen on deaf ears, and Shakespeare himself may never have understood this ancient art well enough to make allusions to it. Astrology's survival depended on market culture because the full system was too complicated for the average person to learn; yet without popular demand for something astrological, albeit in greatly simplified form, the market for astrologers themselves might have disappeared completely. And so it was that popular astrology promoted the survival of the "real" astrology practiced by learned men.

Shakespeare's Astrological Imagination

Marjorie Nicolson, in her discussion of the history of science's impact on literature and the human imagination, notes, "(Shakespeare's) poetic imagination showed no response either to new stars or to other spectacular changes in the cosmic universe…. His imagination was not stirred by concepts far removed from man's experience" (1956, 42-43), and "Shakespeare's astronomy is still largely astrology" (1956, 97). Nicolson provides a clear, albeit unintentional, explanation of astrology's cultural function, separate from the science of astronomy to which it was still somewhat precariously linked: astrology and its symbols said something valuable about human characteristics and the human condition. The radical discoveries in astronomy did not impact

Shakespeare's view of the universe because he was not interested in the scientific aspects of celestial bodies and their movements. The earth was the center of his universe, not because of any lack of progressivism in his thinking or inability to encounter new ideas—as Nicolson notes, "The intelligent layman of the seventeenth century was aware of the so-called Copernican hypothesis" (1956, 2)—but rather because his business was the subjective human experience of life on earth. He was interested in the human condition, in "holding a mirror up to nature"—meaning the messy, complex, and ever-emerging human nature lived by real people, not the mechanistic, physical, and material world that was the domain of scientists. Whether Shakespeare "believed" in astrology, and how much he did or did not know about it, is not the point. Shakespeare himself is a product of his culture and his historical era, but that culture and era are products of previous cultures and eras, all of which held the language and possibilities of astrology within them as a particular measure of humankind.

In one of the most famous astrological passages in Shakespeare's work, in *King Lear*, the villain Edmund recounts the astrological circumstances of his birth. Although such symbolic descriptions mean little to us today, in Shakespeare's time his audience would have gleaned their precise meaning. After Gloucester declares to Edmund that recent eclipses "portend no good to us" (I.ii, 104[1]), putting both the characters and the audience in an astrological frame of mind, Edmund delivers the following soliloquy (in prose, perhaps demonstrating astrology's position as a quotidian topic):

> This is the excellent foppery of the world, that when we are sick in fortune—often the surfeits of our own behavior—we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and stars, as if we were villains on necessity, fools by heavenly compulsion, knaves, thieves, and treachers by spherical predominance; drunkards, liars, and adulterers by an enforc'd obedience of planetary influence; and all that we are evil in, by a divine thrusting on. An admirable evasion of whoremaster

> man, to lay his goatish disposition on the charge of a star! My father compounded with my mother under the Dragon's tail, and my nativity was under Ursa Major, so that it follows, I am rough and lecherous. [Fut,] I should have been that I am, had the maidenl'est star in the firmament twinkled on my bastardizing (I.ii, 118-133).

Edmund places no stock in the kind of astrology that uses the stars as an excuse for one's own behavior (a view that is widely shared by most astrologers today, by the way)—"fools by heavenly compulsion." Clearly he is criticizing Gloucester for his fearful and superstitious approach to eclipses, as we learned in the dialogue just before this one: "These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us. Though the wisdom of nature can reason it thus and thus, yet nature finds itself scourg'd by the sequent effects….This villain of mine comes under the prediction there's son against father: the King falls from bias of nature; there's father against child" (I.ii, 103-106, 109-112). Gloucester represents an astrological approach that was quite common in Elizabethan England (and, at the time *King Lear* was first staged, real eclipses such as those about which Gloucester speaks would have occurred within recent memory of the audience). It may be tempting to project a modern view onto this speech and assume that Edmund's position represents Shakespeare's own views on astrology, turning the speech into a rationalist manifesto against a dying and increasingly irrelevant art. This is an unprovable assertion, given that Shakespeare no doubt created many characters who make proclamations with which he did not agree. In addition, the views expressed by Edmund are consistent with the worldview of many astrologers and critics alike, who believed that the "stars do not compel" (Camden 1933, 61; Geneva 1995, 10; Moyer 1999, 247; Sondheim 1939, 245), and that one had the free will to avert the most dire predictions (or, more precisely, "tendencies" or "inclinations") revealed by an

astrological birth chart. Edmund can thus be seen as criticizing a particular, popular, and deterministic notion of astrology, in much the same way that skeptics criticize astrology today—that is, as superstitious belief or magical thinking. In other words, Edmund's response to Gloucester was not unreasonable for anyone with knowledge of astrology beyond the folk level in Elizabethan England, and it likely represented a common view of educated elites. Edmund is correct in arguing that he is able to improve upon the worst fate revealed in his nativity (or birth chart), but he misses a critical point: one escapes fate when one strives for spiritual wisdom, not when one acts on one's base impulses. That Edmund is dismissing negative character traits that prove to be precisely true by the end of the play reveals which direction his free will takes him.

Edmund goes on to explain the astrological circumstances of his own birth: he was conceived under the "Dragon's tail," which is the common name for what astrologers today know as the South Node of the Moon (a node is the point at which an orbiting planet crosses the plane of the ecliptic, or the Sun's apparent path across the sky) . The Moon's South Node was considered a malefic influence—that is, dangerous or capable of causing harm—in the astrology of the time; this astrological comment thus foreshadows potential difficulty for Edmund. However, it is interesting to note that most astrologers throughout history have not used the time of conception to calculate birth charts, as the time of conception is rarely known (Rusche 1969, 162). So why did Edmund—and Shakespeare—include this reference? It shows that Shakespeare was aware that conception was sometimes used in calculating an astrological chart. Ptolemy's work was readily available in English translation in Shakespeare's day, and while Ptolemy was not necessarily the best source of astrological knowledge and technique overall, he was

known to use the time of conception in constructing charts when such a time was available. Regardless of the calculation techniques used, the mention of the South Node is revealing to an Elizabethan audience, but lost on us today. All pre-modern astrology was far more fatalistic than what we know today, where free will reigns; in Shakespeare's time, astrology was commonly used to make firm declarations about one's personality (even within the context of the possibilities of free will), much as Edmund does, rather than simply a person's psychological tendencies and potential. But this fatalism was more a function of the strict class divisions of that culture than a function of the astrology; that is, astrology is more fatalistic in cultures where people's options are limited (as discussed in Chapter V). Yet, despite Edmund's reference to the "Dragon's tail," this configuration with the South Node alone is not enough to "doom" Edmund to an evil disposition in the eyes of an astrologer, or an astrologically savvy audience (Rusche 1969, 161). A birth chart contains many factors that must be considered before making a firm judgment; Shakespeare's audience would have understood this, so the astrological reference creates a kind of dramatic tension as the audience anxiously watches the astrological circumstances of Edmund's birth unfold throughout the course of the play.

Edmund continues to add layers of foreshadowing by noting that he was born under Ursa Major, which according to the texts of the time would have placed him under the influence of the planets Venus and Mars (Rusche 1969, 163). Mars was considered a malefic planet and thus capable of causing harm. But Venus was a benefic planet, whose job was to bring good fortune. To someone who simply understands the basic meanings of the planets in astrology, this information is interesting but hardly tells the whole story;

such elements must always be considered within the full context of a natal chart. Any astrological element considered harmful by itself may be mitigated—or enhanced—by other factors in the chart. We know from Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblios* that when Mars and Venus are in contact and *also* under a malefic influence (such as that of the South Node)—that is, Mars and Venus are arranged in a difficult aspect, or relationship, to the South Node—the negative influence of Mars is increased and Venus's mitigating influence suppressed (Rusche 1969, 163). So the audience's understanding of Edmund's description of his nativity depends on the understanding of this subtle difference; Mars and Venus in Edmund's chart are not understood in isolation but as part of a troubling entanglement. A modern audience would miss this entirely and see Edmund's speech as ironic in light of his later behavior in the play (which seems to prove the very idea he is dismissing, that one's personality can be determined from planetary positions at birth or conception). To Shakespeare's audience, this passage is not ironic; it follows logically that from the evidence provided, based on the astrological knowledge of the time, Edmund would be "rough and lecherous": his malefic Mars is being amped up by its connection to the Dragon's tail, and any beneficial effects from Venus are lost. Indeed, what makes Edmund's speech revealing for Shakespeare's audience is that the astrological configuration described was "part of the stock of general astrological knowledge" (Aston 1970, 186). Edmund defends his villainous ways by claiming that he would be just as evil even if he had been born under the "maidenl'est star," or a more positive astrological influence. However, Shakespeare's audience knew otherwise, so this speech serves as a foreshadowing of the destruction to come later in the play. Edmund's fate is sealed by the ignorance revealed in his behavior, not his astrology, but

his astrology provides a worst case scenario for the audience to anticipate. In this way, Shakespeare combines the quantitative astrological data and the qualitative, metaphorical meanings of that data to create a dramatic and poetic rendering of a key character in the play.

Shakespeare is doing many things in this passage. First, he demonstrates his understanding of the astrological vernacular of his day. There is no evidence that Shakespeare studied astrology, could cast horoscopes, or had anything but a practical and metaphorical understanding of it. But astrological language pervaded his culture, and it is not unreasonable to think that his combination of "Dragon's tail" and "Ursa Major" came out of popular knowledge, such as one of the astrological almanacs that were very common at the time, rather than a deep understanding of astrology. However, the speech opens with an indication that Shakespeare did understand the different levels at which astrology worked. It could be both superstitious, as Gloucester demonstrates, or it could be descriptive of potential personality flaws, as Edmund's nativity implies. Shakespeare also makes use of real astronomical events in his noting of "late eclipses" in Gloucester's speech that comes right before Edmund's, which shows an awareness of the impact of real astronomical events on his culture. Finally, his use of astrological language operates metaphorically to build a profile of Edmund's character and to foreshadow the tragedy to come.

In a more comedic vein, Shakespeare uses a similar formula in the following exchange in the first scene of *All's Well That Ends Well*:

> Helena: Monsieur Parolles, you were born under a charitable star.
> Parolles: Under Mars, I.
> Helena: I especially think, under Mars.
> Parolles: Why under Mars?

> Helena: The wars have so kept you under that you must needs be born under Mars.
> Parolles: When he was predominant.
> Helena: When he was retrograde, I think, rather.
> Parolles: Why think you so?
> Helena: You go so much backward when you fight. (I.i, 190-200)

In this passage, like the one from *King Lear*, we have precise astrological language. Mars is a malefic planet and also one associated with warring and aggression, as its mythological profile might suggest. (Mars is also associated with sex and passion; in the lines previous to those above, Helena compares sexual conquest of women to war, merging the two standard significations of Mars.) A retrograde Mars, when the planet appears to be moving backwards through the zodiac from our perspective on earth, is considered less powerful and possibly more malefic—that is, having more potential for harm, or unpredictable or destructive outcomes, depending on other circumstances in a particular horoscope; it is not considered a favorable position. Parolles has already been demonstrated to be coarse and vulgar; Helena's use of the image of Mars here is used to show him to be an idiot as well. First, he does not understand Helena's reference to Mars, which would have been well understood by Shakespeare's audience (and is simplistic enough that even modern audiences are likely to pick up on its most obvious meaning). Mars was known as a difficult influence, and Mars is mythologically understood as the god of war, an association that is also found in astrology. Being born "under Mars" is not auspicious; Mars is not a "charitable star" as Helena jokes while Parolles remains oblivious. While such an astrological arrangement might predispose him to a military career, Helena uses this, and the astronomical concept of retrogradation, to insult Parolles further: he is a coward who runs from a fight. Helena argues that Parolles was not only born under the potentially harmful influence of Mars, this Mars is

also retrograde. Helena takes the astrological imagery and makes it literal in describing Parolles: just as Mars moves backwards in the sky, Parolles moves backward is battle. Shakespeare here is combining three distinct elements: astronomical events (the retrograde motion of a planet), specific astrological meanings (Mars as a symbol of war and sexuality), and astrological metaphor (Mars can be a difficult planet, and Parolles is an unpleasant character who must be uneducated or a fool if he does not understand such astrological language). The use of astrological language allows Shakespeare to paint a complex portrait of this character in a sophisticated, poetic way. Shakespeare could have demonstrated Parolles' character in many different ways, but he chose astrological language because its rich and allusive shorthand works as a kind of humanistic poetry, and describing humans poetically was Shakespeare's aim. But his shorthand only works because his audience had a broad cultural understanding of his astrological allusions.

It is interesting to note that these passages in both plays come very early: Edmund's speech is in the second scene of the first act, and Helena's verbal joust with Parolles is the very first scene of the play. This suggests that Shakespeare is using astrological language and archetypes for character development, as a way of encapsulating a character's proclivities or orientation to the world without having to state them explicitly. It is both poetic and efficient. Astrology's ability to serve as a metaphorical, poetic language is its power: astrology has survived for two and a half millennia because it can tell us something about human nature in profound and beautiful ways—just like Shakespeare and the other great poets of the age who used astrology in their writing.

Astrology as a Poetic Language

If we set aside the kind of astrology associated with astral determinism, or judicial astrology, we are left with an astrology that is subject to free will and allows for human engagement with the natural world in a co-creative and participatory way. This was closer to the understanding of astrology by astrologers (though not the masses). The stars do not determine one's fate; with wisdom and awareness the indications of one's birth chart can be used to their best potential or even overcome entirely. Likewise, Shakespeare's plays were not ultimately about politics or religion, ambition or romance, but rather the human condition in a world that seems chaotic, random, or worse, fated. How does one cope with simply being human, especially in a world that was becoming more rational, more concrete, more modern and scientific? Astrology was the poetic and analogic voice of the human spirit. Although this study has been synchronic in its particular focus on Shakespeare's time, astrology is better viewed across history, which shows that "the heavens possessed their own peculiar grammar, embodying a pattern of intelligible symbols meant to be decoded by human cryptanalysts" (Geneva 1995, 269). Such a broad view shows that the function of astrology, at its core, has changed little over the centuries even as our understanding of it has been watered down in modern times. Shakespeare's plays often reference destiny; this sense of destiny is both held within the astrological system and rejected by its human practitioners, a contradiction that mirrors the complexity of the human condition itself. In astrology "myth revealed itself to be inseparable from reality, rigorous science from transfigurative fantasy, clear reason from turbid magic, religion from superstition, and finally mathematical calculi from the mysticism of numbers" (Garin 1983, 14). The analogy of astrology to language is an apt

one, as it demonstrates astrology's function as a tool for the communication and understanding of something not easily communicated or understood:

> the whole of astrology is nothing other than the translation of reality into celestial language, an illustrated projection of the whole, in which the fantastic figures of the imagination transcribe the movements of the psyche, the stirring of the affections, the processes of the generations, the chains of concepts. To know how to read all those languages…helps one to understand even better the life of the world (Garin 1983, 74).

Clearly the astrological language of Shakespeare's day could not be understood like other mathematical or alphabetical languages. It could not be quantified or empirically proven. It was complicated, opaque, metaphorical, and yet "its multiple denotations reflected the universe it signified, each sign's meaning mirroring an animistic hierarchy of being" (Geneva 1995, 272). It was, in its own way, poetry. Astrology both provided rhetorical devices and mythological framework for overt discussions of the human condition, but also an intuitive alternative to the age's quest for a precise, objective, mathematical language to describe the world. As a robust understanding of astrology waned in the seventeenth century (no doubt helped by the vast number of popular almanacs that sold a simpler, more fatalistic form of astrology), the gap it created "left only poetry to safeguard the metaphorical conception of the universe" (Geneva 1995, 282).

Astrology acts as a metaphor for Shakespeare's common premise, that character shaped destiny (Parr 1953, ix). But astrology is also a symbol of a "of a perfectly ordered universe in which each element reflected and signified all others" (Geneva 1995, 269), where destiny (meaning astrological symbolism) can shape character (through free will). It was its own universal law, not restricted by new laws of mathematics and physics; it is a profoundly human law, writ large in the stars. (And prior to Isaac Newton, it was "the

only generally recognized universal law" [Geneva 1995, 264].) It is this aspect of astrology, its ability to communicate a sense of order and connection and correspondence between humans and the natural world, that has carried it through the centuries and up to the present day.

Like any expression of folk culture, astrology survives because it serves some aspect of culture in an important way, giving a voice to the human experience which might otherwise go unheard, and adding to our understanding of what that human experience means. Astrology acts as an "ancient Theory of Everything" (Geneva 1995, xvii). Likewise, Shakespeare survives as one of the greatest playwrights in history because he does the same thing, holding a mirror up to nature in all its raw, chaotic, delightful, tragic, and profound beauty, to show us something about what it means to be human. Astrology provides a sense of deeper order in one's life, an order that can be not just intuited but intellectually understood. Astrology works as a tool of self-understanding but also a tool for understanding other people. Whether used as a shorthand description of character (as Shakespeare used it), a means for spiritual growth, or a practical tool for planning and timing life events, astrology challenges the randomness of human experiences and give people a sense of both meaning and control in their lives.

NOTES

1. All references to lines in Shakespeare's plays are taken from *The Riverside Shakespeare* (1974). Astrological terminology used in this section is more fully defined in the Appendix.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

As this study has demonstrated, for us to understand the learned astrology community, we must start by setting aside pervasive and popular ideas about astrology and talk to the astrologers themselves. What astrologers believe and what most people think astrologers believe is not the same thing. Leonard Primiano notes that "vernacular religion as an approach to understanding religion…emphasizes the study of the belief systems of religious people. This means a consideration of the contents and motivations of the actual beliefs of people" (1995, 51). In other words, the way to understand a belief system is to understand the actual people who participate in that belief system. Although it would be a stretch to call astrology a religion, it clearly is a belief system, and in some cases it may fulfill religious functions. Primiano's suggested approach has been largely ignored by scholars when it comes to astrology, and the resulting misconceptions about astrology have led to its dismissal as superstitious, ignorant, and unworthy of serious study. Talking to real astrologers and serious students of astrology tells us a great deal about not just astrology, but the ways people find meaning through their belief systems. In astrology, meaning comes through a deep sense of order. In our disenchanted, postmodern world, this is a comfort to people who may struggle to find meaning elsewhere in their lives. Astrology does not reveal "the meaning of life," but it does reveal individual meaning for individual lives. In addition, it provides meaningful prescriptions for action that allow people to feel a sense of control over their "fate."

Christopher Partridge suggests that "Western culture is not becoming less religious…it is, for a variety of reasons, becoming *differently* religious" (2013, 116,

emphasis the author's). This correlates with the assessment of other scholars (Roof [1999] and Wuthnow [1998] in particular) who argue that despite the apparent secularization of Western culture, people still seek meaning in spiritual ways. Astrology is a belief system that suits the needs of the disenchanted Western mind. Although astrology has a clear, practical application, it also holds the spiritual notion of a symbolic connection between the cosmic sphere and the earthly one. If we see the modern, mechanistic worldview as disenchanted, as Max Weber claimed (cited in Hufford 2010, 145), then astrology becomes one way that modern people can see the world as re-enchanted; that is, they see themselves as actively participating in a meaningful, holistic, and integrated cosmos. The human impulse toward a spiritual perspective seems "irremovable," according to Partridge (2004, 43), so a culture that is heavily secularized and a worldview that is mechanistic fails to meet innate human needs, which in turn causes people to seek religious or spiritual fulfillment in other ways. As Partridge notes, this idea of re-enchantment "is *not* a return to previous ways of being religious, but rather the emergence of new ways of being religious, ways which meet the new wants and needs of new Western people" (2004, 44).

These new ways of being religious thrive because people can adapt them to the spiritual needs of the current culture; likewise, astrology's practical use and ability to provide an understandable structure and order to life have served fundamental human needs since its origins. Today's astrologers use key symbolism from that original system to create a different, more inherently appealing reality than the one presented to them by the mainstream scientific and academic worldviews. They choose to find meaning where others see emptiness or dead matter. For ancient astrologers, the world was animated,

part of them, and beautifully ordered; today, astrologers return to that worldview but add psychological and eclectic and esoteric spiritual beliefs to the system as a way of enhancing the meaning found there. Astrology, like poetry, is a language of metaphor and symbol. While its symbols can be described and defined, using astrology to read a person's birth chart is not simply a rote, denotative task. It requires synthesis and integration of symbols, and it always leaves room for one's active engagement with the symbolism of one's chart. It also requires negotiation of the relationship between the external world, as reflected in the position of the planetary symbols in a chart, and the internal world, or how those symbols are experienced by an individual person. The end result is an individualized prescription for both practical action and spiritual growth.

Early folklorists argued that "superstitious" beliefs fall away or are relegated to perfunctory habits (such as knocking on wood or saying "Gesundheit" after a sneeze) as the world became modernized, and such acts have lost their original, belief-based meanings. Many people assume astrology is in the same category, that science has disproven it and what remains is only quaint superstition or a kind of pitiful irrationality. For its believers, astrology is none of these things. It is a thriving, evolving system with new adaptations emerging over time, just like any modern religious belief system. Astrology's longevity suggests that it holds a particular appeal that goes unrecognized by those who do not understand its use and practice, and my fieldwork demonstrates this to be true. What an outsider sees as "superstition" may be, for an insider, a perfectly rational system based on a different perspective of "natural law" (Doob 1988, 2). As Marilyn Motz argues, taking an emic approach to belief opens us up to a broader and more nuanced understanding of the people who hold particular beliefs: "Rather than

viewing belief as the opposite of knowledge, we can examine the process of believing as a way of knowing" (1998, 340). Astrology is a particular way of knowing the universe and, in particular, one's place in it—physically, temporally, and spiritually. The astronomer or astrophysicist observes, measures, and strives to understand the mechanism of the cosmos; the astrologer takes those observations, measurements, and mechanisms and derives meaning from them.

So what is real astrological belief if it is not a pernicious superstition or harmless entertainment found in newspaper horoscopes? While astrologers may not fully agree on how astrology works or even what astrology means as a whole, they do agree that astrology is practical. People use it because it works for them in consistent, effective, and demonstrable ways. In addition, a distinctive characteristic of astrology is that while astrologers claim that astrology requires no belief to be effective, its very efficacy seems to produce a sense of belief. Rather than faith serving as a precursor to results (as is common in many religious beliefs), astrology's results may in fact create belief. Two of the astrologers I interviewed referred to this idea in similar ways. Jaysen Paulson playfully described the way "belief" works in his experience of astrology:

> It's constantly just so surprising and accurate that you're almost like, there is almost a little belief. You're just like, oh! It did it again! (Laughs) Or sometimes you don't think it will, or, or that you just use the tool and you're like, this is what's gonna happen, and then it does, and you're like, aahh! It's like, almost like, it is kind of shocking, and provoking a belief, where you're like, "It did it!" (Laughs).

Melanie Gurley expressed a similar wonder at astrology's efficacy: "You don't even know that it does [work] until, the more you dig…and gosh, it really works. It's so crazy. Even I'm still like, what? It works? Yeah. And I'm sold. But it's still shocking. 'Cause it's crazy. (Laughs) And so precise." Part of astrology's practicality also comes from its

perceived ability to characterize the quality of time, and to mark key periods of activity—or lack thereof—in a person's life. Because astrology uses regular and predictable planetary cycles, it does have a built-in timing mechanism; the Moon makes one full circle of the astrological zodiac each month, Jupiter makes one full circle about every twelve years, and so on. But in astrology that timing mechanism is meaningful as a qualitative, not simply quantitative, measure. It helps people understand how a particular time period is going to feel from an individual's subjective perspective, and thus whether one should act or wait for a more suitable time. While the practice of astrology does include watching larger, societal movements that relate to astrological cycles,[1] most individuals use astrology to help them deal with everyday struggles in useful ways.

Although astrologers find comfort in the practical information they can glean from this orderly system, the issue of belief is more problematic for them. The astrologers I interviewed were dissatisfied with the question, "Do you believe in astrology?" Gary Lorentzen noted, "When you hear that, then you know it's the wrong question." He clearly separates religious belief from his use of astrology, noting, "No, I don't *believe* in astrology like some people believe in Jesus, or whatever. It's not that kind of belief. Not at all." For Gary, the practice of astrology is like solving a mathematical equation. The astrologer assembles all the pieces and then works toward a solution using astrology's logical structure. To him, this does not require belief: "I mean, do you believe in mathematics?" he asks. Of course, this question depends on how you define "belief." Astrologers seem to eschew the word "belief" because it is commonly associated with "faith"—that is, a belief that is held to be true despite a lack of evidence. It should be noted that the Pacific Northwest is an area known for its reticence

to embrace organized religion and institutional beliefs, as it is one of the most highly unchurched areas of the United States; while many of my informants were not born in the Pacific Northwest, all of them choose to live here, which perhaps points to a cultural openness to alternative belief systems and explains the aversion to "belief" as a term for how astrology operates in their lives. Astrology, for Gary and for many other practitioners, is a rational process, not a spiritual one, and one supported by empirical evidence obtained through personal experience. Mark Dodich, who does find spiritual value in astrology, nonetheless asserts, "It's not a belief system like a religion. It truly is a tool." In addition, some astrologers are careful to distinguish their areas of belief from astrology. When asked if she saw astrology as spiritual or practical, C.M. made a distinction between her belief in reincarnation and past lives as part of her spiritual practice and her use of astrology. She said, "Is [astrology] emotionally satisfying? Yes, but not in a sense of I believe in something I can't see. That's the past life stuff. I'll give it that. But astrology is practical. It's totally practical. Absolutely practical." Astrology's function is often perceived as so practical that "belief" seems a misnomer. Yet the practice of astrology cannot be divorced from belief, because its foundation is one that is fundamentally in conflict with the modern scientific worldview. In other words, at some level astrology relies on belief because it does not seem to fit what science tells us about the way the world works.

The worldview offered by astrology is distinct from mainstream religious worldviews, particularly Christian doctrinal views, in its acceptance of fate. How can sin be the fault of an individual if one's life is predestined? In astrology, fate works in tandem with free will, and the astrological system provides useful information for

navigating one's fate. Astrological fate represents the broad boundaries within which one works, not a prison cell from which one cannot escape. When one understands one's limitations as understood in astrology, one does not waste time pursuing fruitless endeavors, choosing instead to invest one's time where it is more likely to produce positive results; one can swim with the current or swim against the current, but the former is a considerably more efficient way to get where one is going. Astrological fatalism seems to reduce the number of choices available to individuals, but astrologers believe it simply eliminates what is not possible. This notion of fate does not guarantee either positive or negative outcomes because free will operates in this system, but it is maintained that ignorance of astrology may result in more wasted effort than using astrology to inform one's choices. Astrology works as a tool to focus one's options so that the available choices are both limited and possible. While on the surface a fatalistic system seems quite unappealing to most people, astrologers see it as providing realistic guidance and an explanation for one's difficulties, particularly in a culture that values the idea that with enough hard work and perseverance, anyone can achieve anything. Astrology's notion of fate appeals to people's real experience of life, where hard work and perseverance sometimes results in nothing of note. In the same way that some Christian groups claim that "God has a plan" as a way of understanding times of difficulty, most astrologers believe that the regular cycles of the planets reflect an unfolding plan operating in an individual life. However, the force behind astrological fate is not usually believed to be supernatural, but entirely with the natural world. The primary difference between a divine plan and an astrological one is that astrologers assert that they can see the astrological symbolism that will be in play by tracing the regular

motion of the planets, and prepare accordingly—that is, astrologers can negotiate their fate. Also, in retrospect, events can be interpreted through the lens of astrology in order to give them meaning and justification. This turns a deterministic kind of fate, with an external locus of control (that is, God), to an internal (and often spiritual) kind of fate with an internal locus of control more in the hands of individuals. For astrologers, this is empowering and a source of hope rather than despair. Thus behind astrology's usefulness as a practical tool lies a paradoxical belief: by virtue of its imposed limitations, astrological fate actually frees people to become who they are meant to be rather than what outside forces tell them they should be.

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James said, "Were one asked to characterize the life of religion in the broadest and most general terms possible, one might say that it consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto" (quoted in Hufford 2010, 114). If one uses this definition of religion, then astrology certainly has religious features: the astrological system presumes an unseen order which is reflected in the position of the planets and certain mathematically calculated points on an individual person's birth chart, and astrologers use that information to make decisions about how best to adapt to and negotiate that order. The engagement with that unseen order creates meaning and purpose for people; they can choose to work with the orderly celestial arrangements astrology reveals to them rather than unknowingly working against them. In addition, astrological knowledge allows them to work within the real constraints in their lives and to make the most of their particular situation, that is, to negotiate their "fate" (Au 2012). Like any belief system, astrology can produce superstitious behavior, but such behavior is

considered to be the result of ignorance; astrology is only truly fatalistic when one fails to understand the fullness of its meaning and the options it reveals.

Astrology's affinity with religion is also revealed using the definition proposed by renowned anthropologist Clifford Geertz. He saw religion as a cultural system rather than simply a set of beliefs. His definition of religion as a cultural system consists of five parts: "(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic" (1979, 79-80). Astrology seems to fit this characterization. It is certainly a system of symbols. Symbols, according to Geertz, both express what we understand about the world and shape the world to our understanding. Astrological symbols appeal to people because while they refer to abstract zodiac signs or real celestial objects, in the astrological system these symbols represent specific human qualities and reflect human experiences. In addition, both one's "moods" and "motivations" are reflected in different readings of a natal chart. A natal chart is seen as both a statement of what is—a map of one's true self, or one's "mood"—and what may be—a description of what is possible, the goal one is driving toward in one's lifetime, or one's "motivation." For Geertz, religious symbols create a meaningful order, not just in everyday life but as representative of transcendent truths. Symbols must, in his view "affirm something" (81), in particular that life may be understood and it is not, as experience might otherwise lead one to believe, utterly random and meaningless. Geertz notes, "Any chronic failure of one's explanatory apparatus, the complex of received culture patterns…one has for mapping the empirical world, to

explain things which cry out for explanation, tends to lead to a deep disquiet" (83). This "deep disquiet" is much like the sense of "disenchantment" many people in the modern West feel, as documented by researchers, as previous models of belief have been replaced by scientific rationalism—which, though beneficial in many ways, has little value as a balm for mental, emotional, or spiritual crisis. My fieldwork demonstrates that astrology helps people understand, as C.M. puts it, "the whys and wherefores of things." Astrology is a kind of "explanatory apparatus." A religious system is effective because of its "aura of factuality," by which Geertz means that one first believes in the authority of religious symbols and then embraces them as an authoritative reflection of some "real" reality (86). Astrology works in this way because its symbols are believed to reflect both the reality of physical points in the cosmos, but also the symbolic meaning of those positions in an individual's life; one difference, however, is that astrologers often experience astrology's efficacy before investing fully in "belief" in the system. Finally, Geertz argues that religion is "sociologically interesting" because it shapes one's reality (87). Astrologers certainly use astrological symbolism as a lens through which they view the world; they tend to define events in broad, archetypal terms as a way of infusing them with meaning. To summarize Geertz's definition, a religious system has symbols that are meaningful and give a sense of order to one's life, and belief in these symbols both shapes and is shaped by one's personal experience of the world. In this context, astrology may be seen as having elements of a religious system; at the same time, its orderly, logical structure helps to explain its ongoing appeal in a secular age.

The astrologers I interviewed would not characterize astrology as a religion, largely perhaps because the word "religion" is most often associated with organized,

traditional systems that are perceived as limiting or even oppressive. Moreover, astrologers tend to see astrology as a natural system rather than a supernatural one. Thus their rejection of the idea that astrology is a belief or, worse, a religious system is likely related to cultural understandings of these terms rather than how I use them here. But astrologers do share a common belief: they believe in a world in which a system like astrology can and does work for them in profound and meaningful ways. For an astrologer, the cosmos is not dead and mechanical, but ensouled—not by an anthropomorphic deity, but by some sort of animating force that connects the natural world and one's internal world. Some astrologers see this force as benefic (particularly those with New Age spiritual leanings), some see it as disinterested, but in either case it reveals a connection. Thus astrologers believe that the astrological language, as spelled out in a chart, gives them meaningful information, whether that information is viewed as supportive and helpful (as from a loving source) or as indifferent but understandable (like mathematics or natural law). This explains why astrologers can hold spiritual beliefs from the atheistic to the deeply spiritual. Astrological belief is not specifically about spiritual matters; rather, it implies that the positions of the planets and the symbolism assigned to them say something important about both the mundane, like the best time to take a trip, and the existential, like one's core personality traits and the nature of one's calling in life. What astrologers by and large do *not* believe is that the planets and their positions in the sky "cause" events to happen in a person's life, as a transcendent deity might. If the astrological information in a chart reflects the unseen order, then the planets are subject to the same unseen order as humans are. For astrologers, the system of astrology is a way of understanding the invisible ways in which our seemingly random

lives are structured. The order revealed in a birth chart is a comfort to people, as it helps them answer the question "why" about their lives: Why am I like this? Why am I feeling this way right now? Why do I react the way I do? Why did this thing happen to me? Why am I suffering? These are all questions astrology helps people answer in concrete ways. Unlike most formal religions, astrology has no deities and requires no particular faith. But like religion, it provides order, meaning, and guidance, particularly through times of difficulty. Astrologers use the astrological system first and foremost because they believe they have empirical evidence of its efficacy. So while belief is part of the astrological worldview, it appeals because it is useful in clear and distinct ways. C.M. sees it this way:

> Astrology is the organization and structure of life. It helps me feel as though there's some kind of pattern and meaning to life and there's, we're not just, you know, specks of dust that got pulled together by the wind and blown away again….The rules are the rules are the rules. And so to me, that's, it's a structure for life. It's an organizing principle.

Melanie Gurley says that astrology helps her interpret life, but she also finds it helpful for planning; she feels that "it's like clarity, it offers perspective." She gives the example of a woman who is experiencing difficulty with her husband. As an astrologer, Melanie can see that the difficulty is not just one issue, but three separate issues with distinct astrological correlations. This helps her to tease apart the issues and advise specific, targeted solutions for her client. Lauren Balin, an evolutionary astrologer, explained an astrological chart in this way:

> I would call astrology a life map….It's a map, but it allows you to get a larger perspective of where do you want to go, where are you coming from, what's the lay of the land? And that's kind of how I look at the chart. I can really look back at trends and events in my life, allowing me to also go forward and think what might happen. It gives me sort of a bigger picture of my life story and why and

> how certain things occurred in my life. So it really is like my guidance system. It's like my personal GPS for life.

So while Lauren has an evolutionary approach to astrology that is distinctly spiritual, it still contains a very practical and ordered element. For Gary Lorentzen, astrology's structure and order comes from using it as a tool: "I'm a pragmatist. Above all. And if I want things to work well, then I time things according to where the planets are."

In understanding this affinity for astrology as a form of belief, it becomes apparent that it is a type of a belief that is consistently reinforced by the real-world experience of the astrological system in action. For this reason, astrologers have little need for outside validation of astrology, nor do they need an authority or guru or particular doctrine from which to work. Experience is what convinces them to use this system, and they use it because it continues to work in their view. On the other hand, many astrologers take a critical approach as well, perhaps because there is no one authoritative source for astrological knowledge and the best and the worst of astrology is easily accessible today on the Internet. Rhea Wolf puts it this way:

> You don't have to believe in it. I think that that's also part of the skepticism, like, "Oh, this is a religion," or it's something magical, mystical, that you have to believe in and have faith in and all of that. And it's actually not true. Just see if it works. If it's a tool that works for you, then great, use it. If it's a tool that doesn't work for you and you don't like it, don't use it…. It's not like I need other people to believe in it. I just wish that they would be more informed before they launch criticisms at it. 'Cause I'm all about critiquing it.

Nonetheless, there is a perception among astrologers that astrology is more often attacked, and misunderstood, than other belief systems. Wolf argues that "there are way more damaging strains of, like, New Age pseudoscience kind of thought, that have come out in the last few decades, that nobody seems to have any problem with. (Laughs.) Or that don't get attacked as frequently as astrology does." It seems that astrologers are

more likely to be seen as bad scientists by outsiders (particularly scientists and skeptics) than believers in something spiritual or religious; in other words, its threat to the mainstream is its presumed claim to scientific plausibility, or "pseudo-rationality" in Adorno's view (1957, 23), not its core beliefs. Most astrologers simply want their belief system to be better understood by the mainstream because they believe astrology to be such a useful tool, one from which others could benefit. While none of the astrologers I interviewed hides their astrological beliefs (several of them practice astrology professionally), neither do they proselytize, as this can make others uncomfortable given that astrology is so widely misunderstood. They regard astrology's position as stigmatized knowledge as unfortunate, but not something easily remedied by a few advocates. This shows why it is important to let learned astrologers speak for themselves, rather than making assumptions about what astrology is, what it claims to do, and what people who practice it believe about it.

Despite the complex feelings that astrologers themselves hold about the nature of belief, astrology can be seen as a belief system that sometimes fulfills religious or spiritual functions. But astrology is not, as is frequently assumed today, a purely New Age belief system (except, perhaps, for the most spiritualized forms of evolutionary astrology). And even modern astrologers are often unaware of the philosophical and mathematical structures that underpin their system. Astrology is undoubtedly a very old system. Its rules and mechanisms and symbolism continue to be debated and developed today, even as older forms of astrology are recovered and redeveloped for a modern audience. Both astrologers and skeptics may believe, incorrectly, that astrology's structures—from the twelve-sign zodiac to the twelve-house system to the signs and

planets and aspects themselves—were developed based solely on empirical observations by Mesopotamian sky-watchers over thousands of years. However, astrology was largely developed in the early scientific imagination of ancient Greek philosophers who wanted to uncover and make use of the "unseen order" that organized the cosmos, because an ordered world was beautiful and it could be rationally understood. Astrology proved to be a vehicle that allowed people at some level to understand how the world works, much like science and religion do today. Moreover, astrology helped people understand their fate—that is, the random events, both fortunate and devastating, that occur within every human life span, as well as areas of limitation and areas of strength. Astrology answered the question "why" without resorting to a transcendent or indifferent deity: What we see in the sky, we experience in ourselves. The legendary Hermes Trismegistus is credited with the expression "as above, so below." However, this a simplification, or even a corruption, of the original text, found in a work called *The Emerald Tablet*. A more complete translation goes something like this: "That which is below is like that which is above, and that which is above is like that which is below to do the miracles of one only thing" (this translation is attributed to Isaac Newton in Dobbs 1988, 183). In other words, we are not a reflection of the cosmos any more than the cosmos is a reflection of us. The "above" and the "below" work together.

"Oh! Blessed rage for order," wrote Wallace Stevens in his poem "The Idea of Order at Key West": humans crave order, consistency, and explanations for the unknown. We feel better when we know how things work and why they happen. This compulsion has driven scientific discovery since the human brain evolved the capacity to analyze the external world. Astrology serves this need by providing a framework in

which the human imagination can act upon what is observed and measured in a way that creates meaning and re-enchants a world viewed by many as mechanistic, secularized, and disenchanted. What is "other," or separate and outside of one's subjective experience, in the modern worldview is integrated and wholly within in the astrological model; the cosmos and humankind are in a co-creative and participatory relationship. As my interviews with astrologers reveal, the astrological worldview allows people to feel empowered and in control in a word that otherwise seems chaotic, random, and without meaning. Astrology allows individuals to observe and predict celestial patterns as they continue to unfold over time. This sense of order and the meaning it creates is why astrology persists, and why perfectly rational people continue to use this system as a practical tool and the basis for their spiritual beliefs.

NOTES

1. For example, Richard Tarnas's book, *Cosmos and Psyche* (2006), gives an erudite and thorough analysis of several astrological cycles as they relate to pivotal periods in Western political, social, and cultural development.

APPENDIX

GLOSSARY OF ASTROLOGICAL TERMS

Age of Aquarius: A New Age concept that has been adopted by astrologers which posits a new, presumably Golden Age that has been or will be triggered by the shift from the Age of Pisces into the Age of Aquarius. This shift is measured by an astronomical phenomenon known as "precession of the equinoxes" (see below). For the last 2,000 years or so, the Sun has been in the sign of Pisces at the spring equinox, but due to precession, it will eventually move into the sign of Aquarius, signaling the start of a new age. The idea that the Age of Aquarius will be a shift to a more evolved, harmonious spiritual state is specifically New Age, not astrological.

Ascendant: The "rising sign," that is, the sign of the zodiac that is rising over the eastern horizon at the moment of birth. This is a key point in a natal horoscope.

aspect: The relationship made between two planets or points. Certain aspects are considered easier or more favorable (such as a trine, 120 degrees, or a sextile, sixty degrees) or more difficult or challenging (such as a square, ninety degrees). Aspects may be made between planets and points in a birth chart, between transiting planets and a birth chart, or between transiting planets alone.

astrology: "The study of the correlation between celestial objects and earthly events" (Brennan 2011).

benefic: The term from ancient astrology applied to the planets Jupiter and Venus, indicating their influence as positive or reflecting favorable or preferred outcomes or characteristics.

birth chart: Also known as a natal chart or horoscope, a birth chart is literally a map of the heavens at the moment of birth, calculated for a person's particular geographic location.

constellation: Any of the named groups of stars in the celestial sphere. Twelve of these are found along the ecliptic and share names with signs of the zodiac. However, these constellations and the astrological signs of the same name are not equivalent. (This is a common misconception used by skeptics to "disprove" astrology.)

cusp: The start of an astrological house or sign. A planet located near the end of one house or very early in a house is "on the cusp" between those two houses. Likewise, a planet that is located very near the end of one sign or very early in a sign is "on the cusp" between those two signs.

ecliptic: An imaginary band across the sky that represents the Sun's apparent path around the earth. (The earth orbits around the Sun, of course, so the ecliptic represents the path the Sun appears to travel from the vantage point of earth.)

fixed stars: The unmoving stars in the heavens, as distinguished from planets. Arcturus is a fixed star; Venus is a moving star (planets were "wandering stars" to the ancients).

horoscope: See "birth chart." In popular or "mass" astrology, this term is applied to brief astrological forecasts based on one's Sun sign that can be found in newspapers and magazines. In ancient astrology, "horoscope" was used to refer to the Ascendant. Today, it more commonly refers to an entire chart in learned astrology.

house: One of twelve divisions of a birth chart that represent specific areas in one's life (e.g., work, marriage, health). The houses represent an imaginary division of the ecliptic into thirty degree segments. In an astrological chart, houses represent the areas in one's life that are described by the symbolism of planets and signs of the zodiac, depending on their placement within a particular chart's house structure. Today there are several commonly used house systems. Traditional astrologers use the Whole Sign house system, in which each house is equivalent to one sign of the zodiac. Evolutionary astrologers of the Jeffrey Wolf Green school often use the Porphyry house system; this is a "quadrant" system in which the Ascendant marks the start (cusp) of the first house and the Midheaven marks the start of the tenth house, and the other house cusps are calculated by dividing each quadrant of the house into three sections. Other common house systems, named after their creators, are Placidus (used by many psychological astrologers), Regiomontanus (often used by astrologers practicing horary astrology), and Koch.

judicial astrology: Astrology that is used for divination or prediction; that is, astrology used to make "judgments" about the future. This is the form of astrology most often rejected by religious authorities in pre-modern astrology because of its apparent fatalism. Modern psychological astrology, applied to the birth chart of an individual, is a descendant of this form of astrology.

malefic: The term from ancient astrology applied to the planets Saturn and Mars, and also the South Node of the Moon, indicating their influence as negative or reflecting unfavorable, not preferable, or detrimental outcomes or characteristics.

Midheaven: The point directly overhead at the moment of birth; the highest point in a birth chart. The Midheaven is abbreviated MC, for *medium coeli*, Latin for "middle of the sky." Along with the Ascendant, it is one of the most important points in a birth chart.

natal chart: See "birth chart."

natural astrology: Astrology that is used to predict natural phenomenon such as weather. This from of astrology was largely accepted by religious authorities as the more "scientific" form of astrology. Broadly speaking, this is the branch of early astrology that later developed into astronomy. In its less scientific form, it can also be found in the modern practice of mundane astrology.

node: The point at which a planet's orbit crosses the ecliptic. While all planets have nodes (except the Sun), the nodes of the Moon are the most commonly used in modern astrology.

North Node: The North Node of the Moon, or the "ascending node," that is, the point at which the Moon's orbit crosses the ecliptic on its way north or above the ecliptic. The North Node is 180 degrees opposite the South Node.

planet: In astrology, all of the moving celestial bodies (as compared to the "fixed stars") are considered planets, thus the Sun and Moon are planets, as are Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn; modern astrologers also include Uranus, Neptune and Pluto. Some astrologers use even more celestial bodies (e.g., the asteroids Chiron, Vesta, and Juno, the dwarf planet Ceres, and so on) that are often collectively referred to as "planets."

precession of the equinoxes: An astronomical phenomenon caused by a wobble in the earth's axis. Because of this wobble, the earth's relationship to the fixed stars shifts slightly over time, about one degree every seventy-two years. Ancient astronomers were aware of the phenomenon—the second century BCE astronomer Hipparchus is credited with discovering it. However, modern astrologers began to use precession as a way of describing astrological "ages": the "age" we are in is determined by that constellation or sign of the zodiac (astrologers are not in agreement on this point) where the Sun is found on the date of the spring equinox. Because signs of the zodiac are thirty degrees wide, this means that about every 2,160 years, the Sun moves to a new sign at the spring equinox, and it makes a complete trip around the zodiac in about 26,000 years. (If constellations are used to determine ages, then the length of an age will vary depending on the width of the constellation.) When the early astronomers were first developing a system of astrology in the years before the birth of Christ, the Sun was in the sign of Aries at the spring equinox. Jesus' birth is believed to have either ushered in or happened very early in the Age of Pisces (the equinoxes precess—that is, move backwards—through the zodiac). Astrologers and New Agers now believe that we are either in or on the cusp of a new age, the Age of Aquarius (see above).

retrograde: A planet is "retrograde" when it appears to move backwards in the sky. In astrology, all planets except the Sun and Moon have retrograde cycles of varying lengths. Retrogradation is often abbreviated "Rx" in an astrological chart. Each planet has a predictable retrograde cycle with different meaning depending on the nature of the planet but also the nature of the retrograde cycle itself. A planet

may be retrograde in a natal chart or may go retrograde as a transiting (moving) planet. The planet Mercury goes retrograde more often than any other, about three times per year, so its retrogradations are perhaps the best known in popular culture. Mercury retrograde periods are associated with problems related to communication, travel, and technology for some people.

rising sign: See "Ascendant."

rulership: In the astrological system, planets are said to "rule" certain zodiacal signs. For example, the Sun rules the sign of Leo, and Venus rules the signs of Taurus and Libra. "Traditional" rulerships do not assign zodiac signs to the "outer" planets, that is, those discovered after the system of astrology was in place—Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto. Astrologers using "modern rulerships" do give those planets rulership over particular zodiac signs.

sign: One of the twelve signs of the zodiac (Aries, Taurus, Gemini, Cancer, Leo, Virgo, Libra, Scorpio, Sagittarius, Capricorn, Aquarius, Pisces). In common parlance, one's "sign" is the sign the Sun is in at the moment of birth. Note that although signs share names with constellations, they are not equivalent.

South Node: The South Node of the Moon, or the "descending node," that is, the point at which the Moon's orbit crosses the ecliptic on its way south or below the ecliptic. The South Node is 180 degrees opposite the North Node.

Sun sign: The sign of the zodiac in which the Sun resides at the moment of birth. See "sign."

transit: A connection or relationship made between an orbiting planet and the fixed location of a planet or other point in one's birth chart. Transits are one method used to predict future influences based on the nature of the planets and/or points involved.

topical zodiac: The zodiac system used by most Western astrologers, in which the signs of the zodiac are correlated to seasons of the year. In the tropical zodiac, the sign of Aries (the first sign of the zodiac) begins on the spring equinox, not when the Sun is in the constellation of Aries. The signs of the tropical zodiac are not in sync with the fixed star constellations of the same name.

zodiac: The twelve astrological signs, each representing a thirty degree division of the 360 degree circle of the ecliptic.

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