

A LADY IN TASMANIA

1982

Astrologers seem in general to be very interested in the question of prediction, but very uninterested in that of predestination. Yet it is surely impossible to divorce the two. If a matter is predicable, it must – to the degree which it is predictable – also be predestined.

As one looks at history it seems that by and large astrologers have seen prediction as their particular concern, while theologians have argued learnedly about predestination. Never the less at the same time both – in the practical events of their lives – appear equally to have sought to exert their own freedom of choice and will.

This apparent confused state of mind may perhaps also have been aggravated by the various statutes which outlawed the practice of fortune telling. Thus English law from the 16th century strictly forbade any person to “exercise of any kind of witchcraft, sorcery, enchantment, or conjuration, or undertake to tell fortunes”.

Australia naturally followed English legislation, and all states had various Vagabond Acts which similarly proscribed fortune telling. In general astrologers tried to side step such legislation by disclaiming any ability to make direct predictions of the future, but only the ability to foresee ‘likelihoods’.

However by the mid 1970s there were many who felt the legislation to be inappropriate, and some more militant souls (not astrologers) in Australia were publicly telling fortunes and being prosecuted for their trouble. I myself had a small pamphlet published entitled *The Astrologer and Australian Law*, in which I concluded, “The problem with fortune telling lies not in that it does not work, but in that so many believe that it might”. Happily during the 1980s, these laws were repeated throughout Australia.

The issue of prediction – and hence by association predestination – was therefore one which was much alive in the Australian community (and I suspect elsewhere as well) at this period. It was also at this time that I came across Dr. J. E. Orme’s book *Time, Experience, and Behaviour*. This brought home to me the fact that the other ingredient in the Prediction-Predestination dilemma is our understanding of the nature of time.

It was these particular circumstances which led to the writing of the essay which follows.



Sometimes – for a variety of reasons – one particular event or circumstance becomes the centre around which a whole set of experiences or ideas seem to develop. For me one such focus was related to a set of detailed yearly predictions which I was asked to prepare for the year 1974 at the request of a lady living in Tasmania. For September

and October of that year I made the observations that “in some way you may yourself be involved in travel” and that “the changes (of this period) would seem to be very helpful for you”.

Some time later I received a letter from my client which read in part, “Thank you very much for my forecast for the year 1974. It is almost uncanny – considering the events which have taken place. I was offered a plane fare to England and return by one of my very old friends who thought that I was run down..... My plane reservation is booked for the 14th October”.

Being a conscientious graduate of the (English) Faculty of Astrological studies, I had always taken the trouble to include a preface with all of my written work for clients, as I had been carefully taught to do. Part of this read, “Remarks on the possibilities for the future should be understood as indicating the probable outcome of the potentials of the birth-moment only. Astrology attempts to indicate a life pattern, but the way in which this finally becomes evident in our experience must ultimately depend upon ourselves.”

There appears to me to be two things which we value above almost all else in our society. These are sex and freedom. I must confess that I am more than a little confused about both, but perhaps especially so about the latter. It was George Bernard Shaw who said that “sex makes a very great difference on a very few occasions”. Certainly the same could be said of freedom, if indeed it can be said at all.

Like most astrologers, I feel a degree of smug satisfaction if my delineation of a birth chart is greeted with an over-awed approval by the person whose horoscope it is. However my lady in Tasmania has always – in a sense – worried me.

I guess that I have quite frequently thought of astrology as if it were a kind of psychological short cut, and that astrologers and psychologists really have similar ends in view. Both seek so to understand a person’s nature and the strengths, weaknesses of that nature, so that the reactions of that person to the events of life may be both understood and anticipated. The psychologist does this by recourse to various techniques of experiential analysis, while the astrologer seeks to do it by his or her interpretation of the birth chart.

Now while such a point of view seems to be perfectly valid if one is thinking about how a certain person will react given a particular relationship or circumstance, it really falls to the ground totally with regard to that sequence of events which my lady in Tasmania experienced. There is obviously no possible analytical mechanism by which a psychologist may come to the conclusion that “next October you will be given an opportunity to travel”. This can only be said if we are prepared to use concepts concerning the way that the world works which generally astrologers – just as much as any one else – find difficult to accept.

It seems by observation that one of the axioms of a western understandings of life is that men and women possess free will, and – judging by prefaces of the kind which the Faculty of Astrological studies urges upon its students – western astrologers seem to be as anxious to uphold this point of view as much any one else. When challenged

that astrology appears to negate freedom of the will, most will defend their practices by quoting that old Latin tag which roughly translates as, “The stars incline but do not compel”. A thought of course echoed by Shakespeare’s line, “The fault, dear Brutus, lies not in our stars but in ourselves”.

But to return to my Tasmanian lady. It seems to me that I am faced with two alternatives. Either I must have been involved in an almost impossible coincidence or accident, or else in fact – from the chart – I did predict an event in which her own volition, her own free will, her own feelings, and her own attitudes, had no influence at all upon the circumstances which transpired. However, if matters of this kind are indeed predictable – things in which the person principally concerned has no causative part in that series of events which create those circumstances in which he or she finds herself – then it seems to me that we need to think quite carefully about our understanding of freedom of action or free will.

Now while I think that it is true (as I said previously) that the vast majority of people in our society are dedicated to the concept of freedom of action and free will, it is one of those things that we know exactly what it is that we believe until we are asked to describe it. In practice, when we come to consider any specific issue, it is often quite difficult to decide whether a particular action or decision that we have taken, has been made freely or not.

Let us take as an example, an imaginary person in prison. We will say without hesitation, “Of course, he is not free”. By this we mean that he is not free to go where he wishes, or to do as he likes. Yet are any of us? Besides, the prisoner may very well say that even in his situation he still does have some very real freedoms which he is able to exercise. He is free to sit up or lie down, to choose what he will read, or to think as he pleases.

However our prisoner – like ourselves – also suffers a second imprisonment. This is his imprisonment to his birth, his heredity, his environment, his nature, his experiences, and so on. Even within the prison’s walls, the prisoner is also a prisoner of himself. As well as within walls of stone, he lives as well in that personal prison which places its own peculiar restraints upon his ability to exercise his will freely.

Just the same, it is hard to divest ourselves of the idea that we are not free (say) to learn from our mistakes, or that we do not have a freedom to choose our relationships or at least some of the circumstances of our lives. Unfortunately, the more one thinks about this, then the more it seems to me that the whole structure of astrology argues against such a point of view.

Most astrologers (I am sure) will suggest that a person whose seventh house contains a number of badly aspected planets will not only find difficulty in one marriage, but will quite likely experience similar problems arising in any subsequent relationship. It is indeed a statistical fact – as well as an astrological one – that people have a marvellous propensity for re-experiencing the same kind of situation as that which has already given them much personal pain, and from which they have sought to escape. We have been reminded of this quite recently, as apparently the divorced wife of the notorious Yorkshire Ripper has formed a personal relationship with a man serving a prison term for the murder of his wife and family!

I think also that we need to remember that the use of the houses in astrological interpretation presupposes a world in which not only are our responses to various circumstances predetermined, but also that the actual realisation of such experiences in our lives is equally inescapable. That is, a horoscope does not simply suggest that if we happen to become involved (say) in occult associations, then our reaction to these experiences will be of such and such a kind; but that it is of the nature of our life that we will be drawn into such circumstances. It says that these things will by nature form a necessary part of our experience, and that it is of the essence of our being that such circumstances should be encountered.

Incidentally, I do not think that we can avoid this dilemma by abandoning the house structure. The Ebertin system (for example) seems simply to transfer the same interpretive structure back onto the planets and their mid-points.

Perhaps what I am saying is this. If we are concerned that the question of human free will appears to be compromised by the use of the predictive techniques of astrology, then I fear that the solution is not to give up prediction, but to abandon astrology entirely. Every natal chart is by its nature a predictive document. Indeed, if it were not, then there would be little point at all in the practice of astrology.

This was in fact the point which St. Augustine of Hippo sought to make in the 4th century AD. In his work *The City of God* he admits to the accuracy of astrological techniques. However he argues that if events in a person's life are indeed predictable, then this must obviously limit God's freedom to order the world as he chooses. This naturally poses an impossible dilemma. Therefore he suggests that astrology must be a device used by the devil himself in order to deceive us in our understanding of God's nature. It must therefore be eschewed by Christians.

Later Christian writers however modified this rather extreme view by saying that the use of astrology in areas which impinged upon God or man's free will was certainly not permissible, but that its use in the prediction of "natural" events was indeed beneficial. Thus one was allowed to predict earthquakes, pestilence, or disaster, but not when a great prince would marry. It all became rather complicated.

Still, I am fairly sure that most people – while being prepared to admit that perhaps life and the exercise of free will is a bit more complex than we generally care to admit – feel that the idea that life may be totally predetermined is quite abhorrent. Such a concept would seem to reduce us to the level of automatons running along a set of tracks from which we can never deviate, and reduces the whole process of intelligent and meaningful living to a nonsense. What point is there in trying to make decisions if we have no alternatives anyway? Or bearing hardships for the sake only of obtaining the inevitable?

Now that of course is a quite serious issue. Predictability, predestination, and free will, all involve questions that involve our basic understandings of what life is about. The lady in Tasmania challenges me to understand the meaning of my own existence. Because I seem to be the observer of a totally predetermined set of events in her life, then I must find it exceedingly difficult to argue that my own life can be an exception to this inherent structure of things.

In a matter of such fundamental importance as this, we would rather naturally expect to find a great abundance of philosophical or religious speculation available to the inquirer. Alas almost the opposite seems to be the case. Like the Victorian attitude to sex, it appears that we all know that free will exists, but that it is not proper to talk about it in nice company.

Philosophers (for example) appear to have been far more interested in the question, “How do we know what the world is really like?” than in the one, “What does it mean?” Christian religious thought has been much more concerned with the issue of whether God – by means of his infinite knowledge – is able to know the predestined eternal destiny of each individual person, than whether or not I am fully free to eat the cheese sandwich in front of me. However the general consensus of Christian theologians seems to be that by and large we are free to make choices in most every day affairs.

One of the few modern writers who has been concerned to any degree with the question of free will is a German theologian named Emil Brunner. In an essay on human nature he says, “The animals and God have no responsibility; the animals because they are below the level of responsibility, and God because he is above it. The animals because they have no freedom, and God because he has absolute freedom. Man however has limited freedom. This is the heart of his being man, and it is the ‘condition’ on which he possesses freedom”.

I think that actually Emil Brunner is saying something that reflects pretty accurately what most people – and most astrologers – believe in their heart of hearts. God can do what he likes; we can sometimes do what we like; and animals do what they have to do. We are people of limited freedom, and it is often suggested that the more a person is aware of his or her own true nature (and in such a process astrology will have an important role to play) then the more we are able to exercise freedom of will. It is only the ignorant and the unenlightened who are the victims of their own destiny. Indeed, the truly enlightened man or woman (so we imagine) must have freedoms far beyond any that we are able to contemplate.

But is it true or reasonable to say that God can do what he likes? If I say to you, “Black is white”, then I have spoken a nonsense. It is surely no less a nonsense to say “God is free to make black white”. If this were so then the whole universe would simply tumble into chaos, as there would be no ground upon which anything could continue without the threat of continual and instant annihilation either into its opposite or into nothingness.

That is, even the freedom of God is limited by the creation for which he is responsible and in which he is (presumably) still involved. If then God is not able to do freely as he might wish, it is doubtful if we are.

With this kind of thought in the back of our minds, let us return to our question about prediction and free will. What I am suggesting is not that there is no such thing as free will, but rather that freedom of the will – like every other aspect of our experience – operates in its own specific and properly defined area of our life.

You see, most people have difficulties with the idea of prediction because it suggests that the future is already set and unchangeable; and that is something that they do not wish to believe. People want the freedom to be able to mould the future in ways which will be acceptable to them, and bring to themselves personal advantage.

That is, we want the freedom to be able to change things for our benefit. We want to be free to be able to arrange our lives so that certain things will not happen. We want the freedom – and perhaps even more importantly – to have the hope of being able to change ourselves into people who will be more attractive, or richer, or healthier, or braver, or more popular than we perceive ourselves to be at the present time. Now that (I think) may not be all that much different from wanting the freedom to be able to change black into white.

On the other hand, if we take the point of view that freedom is the quality of being able to attain what is possible, we may be able to understand things in a different way. I exercise my free will when I seek to become truly myself; not when I seek to become something different. My freedom of will lies in the area of my own self, not in the area of re-ordering or changing the structures of the world about me (which is a mesh of inter-related actions and energies) simply in order to achieve what I consider to be a personally desirable goal at one particular time in my life.

One of the things that we need to recognise in this regard is that the ability to change things or to change ourselves, requires not only an ability to change the future, but also the ability to change the past. The way that I will behave tomorrow – or the events which will occur to me – are the result of processes already long under way. If it were possible for me suddenly to become immensely rich or powerful, this would require not simply the addition of some new quality into my life, but also the undoing and rebuilding of much that has made me the person that I am today.

For my Tasmanian lady, not to have been offered a plane ticket when she was – and for her progressed chart not to have suggested travel when it did – would have demanded changes to a very large number of diverse and complex circumstances. First of all it would have required that she should have been born at a different time or place; yet the circumstances of her birth were obviously themselves the end of a long process that involved a large number of complex issues. Secondly, it would also have required the reshaping of a number of events not only in her own life, but presumably also in the life of her generous friend.

Any event in our life, no matter how apparently unimportant, is always the culmination of a web of events and circumstances that stretch back and back until they are lost from sight. If we wish to have the freedom to alter the future by some present act of self decision, we need also to have the power and the freedom to reshape the past. If we accept a world in which history is fixed, we may well have to be content to accept one in which the future also may not be tampered with. Yet if the exercise of free will is of the kind which I have suggested – that is, the free acceptance of who we are and the rejoicing in our own uniqueness – then this freedom is in no way limited should the future be as unalterable as the past.

I have a kind of feeling that deep down many people may sense this to be so. All astrologers are no doubt frequently confronted by people apparently asking questions

about the future; and asking for predictions to be made from their charts. Of course simply by the fact that they have asked – and we have indicated that we will try to answer their questions – commits all of us to a predictable universe. I am sure too that should some predictions fail to be fulfilled in some gross way, we will no doubt seek to explain this not by denying the predictability of experience, but by some failure of technique or interpretation.

However if we think about these requests carefully, I am sure that we will find that in probably a majority of cases the request for prediction made by a client is really not so much a request seeking information about future events, as a seeking of information about his or her own self.

Let us suppose that we are asked the question, “Will my husband leave me?” or “Will my son die as a result of this accident?” To say simply, “Yes”, or “No”, is not in fact to answer the question in any adequate way. The question that the person is really asking is, “Should this event come to pass, what will happen to me?” The client does not so much need to know what the future will bring in detail, as to know that whatever it does bring, she will survive as a person.

In the end, I suspect, it is rather unimportant what events the future actually brings into my life. The importance of the future is that – whatever does happen – it will provide me with the opportunities I need for the exercise of my free will. That special and personal freedom of will which allows me to take a particular circumstance into my experience and through it to become more fully myself.

In this respect it is perhaps worthwhile to make the point that I am not simply talking about what we usually perceive to be the peaks (or the valleys) of our experience. Let me put it this way.

We sometimes behave as if there are two quite different sorts of decisions that we make in life. There are the major ones that determine our ultimate destiny, and there are minor ones that simply correspond to some small and limited circumstance which has no-going effect. Thus (for example) to buy a cheese sandwich is a minor decision, and in which we may presumably enjoy virtually perfect freedom of choice since no major direction in our life will be determined by it. However to decide what occupation we shall enter is a decision which will have ultimate and far reaching consequences, and therefore may be seen to be one which is part of some overall plan or destiny. In this case our freedom may be restricted by the ultimate goals which fate has decreed for us.

In this respect cheese sandwiches do not normally figure prominently in horoscopic predictions, but work and employment are generally felt to be a quite proper subject for predictive work.

Let me briefly recount a personal story.

I was riding my motor cycle from Adelaide to Sydney, and camped at a small country town overnight. After I left in the morning I crossed a river a mile or so outside the town. When I came to the bridge I found that the river was in flood and had risen about 18 inches over the roadway. I had to decide whether or not I should attempt to

ride across the bridge, or push my motor cycle through the water and so fairly obviously get my feet wet.

I decided to attempt the former. About halfway across the bridge a semi-trailer came from the other direction, and the surge of water which this vehicle created swamped my engine. The motor stopped, and I had to push the bike across to the other side. When I got there it was necessary to disassemble the fuel system to remove the water.

So in fact I got my feet wet after all. But (dear reader) before you laugh at the apparent inconsequentiality of my failure to exercise my right to decide my fate freely, there is a little more to add.

I finally left the river an hour or so later than was my plan. In the evening of that day a truck pulled out of a side road, the driver of which did not see me on my motor cycle with the setting sun behind me. I collided with the vehicle, as it was impossible for me to brake on the road's gravel surface.

The front forks of my motor cycle were bent, and I spent the next two days hitch-hiking into the nearby large town with my front wheel and forks to have these straightened and repaired. To fill in my idle town, I wandered into the new Anglican Church, and from its bookstand took a small manual on Anglican Church belief. From that point onward I began to find my previous religious attitudes unsatisfactory. This eventually led not only to a change in my religious faith, but also finally to my entering the priesthood of my new allegiance.

Now in retrospect those series of events at the bridge obviously constituted a major turning point in my life. This being the case, one would assume that they would belong to those things which should be predictable and designated in the horoscope in some way.

However, it strikes me that a decision about whether to get one's feet wet or not is intrinsically not a lot more important than one concerned with what kind of sandwich filling should be bought. If one is worthy of predetermination, so it would seem should be the other. I have then a feeling that there may be no unimportant decisions in life, and that there are no events which happen that do not have the possibility of being the harbingers of great and wondrous things.

Now, I am what I am today because of a seemingly trivial issue in my past. I also believe that I cannot change what I am today, because I am unable to change this past. It is also fairly obvious that I cannot change the present. I cannot – at this instant – suddenly transport myself and become the master of a harem in some dark and distant land where a fate worse than death awaits any who would challenge my desires. It seems therefore to matter little if also I am unable to alter a future which I have not yet experienced. The future – in other words – is not the matter upon which free will operates. Free will is a quality of our being, not a technique or tool for manipulating tomorrow.

If there are any areas in which determination – or predestination, or predictability (call it what you will) – operates, then it seems to me that it must operate in every event in the life of every person who lives. This is the kind of rule which can sustain no

exceptions. Freedom does not comprise an ability to alter the future - any more than it is an ability to alter the past or present – but only in that quality of existence which allows us to accept what is, and then to be able to use this so that we may become what we truly are by nature.

Or perhaps to use another analogy. If you catch a train from Adelaide to Melbourne, you are not especially disturbed should you arrive at your predicted destination at the predicted time. The significance of the journey (should it have one) will rest in your reaction to it or the reason for it. It is not the knowability of the future which disturbs us, but rather the thought or fear of our reaction to it.

But what if – you may say – our astrologer should forecast that this particular train was to be involved in an accident, would we not then decide to avoid the journey? No doubt we would, but perhaps later be confronted by the news that a friend or relative had died in it. Perhaps it was proper that we should have avoided the accident in order that we could experience the other tragedy associated with it.

One is reminded of the Pope whose astrologer forecast that he would die in Jerusalem. Naturally the pontiff decided never to visit Jerusalem, only to die by an assassin's hand in the Jerusalem Chapel of the Church of St. Mary the Less. It is unwise to assume that we have the freedom to side step life's path.

We also need to remember that whenever we try to think about this question of free will, prediction, or predestination, we are also talking about our understanding of time. Dr. John Orme is one of the few people who have written to any extent on this question. His main conclusion in his book *Time, Experience, and Behaviour* is that whatever time is like, it is certainly not like whatever a clock measures. He draws a picture of our experience which is similar to a cork floating upwards in a long tube of liquid. As the cork moves upwards, experiences pass our mind and they are recognised as the present. If we reach downwards into the past we have memory, and if we can reach upwards into the future we have precognition.

Dr. Orme also suggests that there is no reason logically why we should believe that cause and effect work from past to future. It may indeed work the other way about, and the present and the past that we know are caused by an ultimately necessary future. Perhaps in the sense that we could say that our presence on the train in the Adelaide station is caused by our necessary destination at Melbourne.

I would also wish to argue that our enjoyment of the present will not necessarily be inhibited by the knowledge of a fixed future. The film which we see is no less enjoyable – and no less a present experience – because we happen to know that its end is not only predetermined, but already exists within the projector.

This is perhaps going a little bit further than is necessary for our purpose. I only want to make the point that the question of freedom or free will may contain many more issues that we may at first imagine; and that the idea of a predictable world is not so frightening or confining as we may tend to believe. Personally I believe that it is no more appropriate for me to complain that I cannot choose to be what I am not, than it is for a dog to complain that it is not a pig, or a grasshopper and elephant. To change myself – or to change the future – is not the prerogative of free will. Free will acts on

a totally different area. It acts upon will, not history. It is concerned with my ability and right to become that one truly unique individual whom I know as myself.

In this sort of context, my own free will means to me three things.

Firstly, I exercise it in being prepared to accept my given nature, dark patches, warts and all. I am free to accept or reject myself. If I do reject myself, then my life will be one of dissatisfaction and fruitless struggle to be other than what I am. Obviously in the end I cannot escape from myself, but my own nature can fight against my will until my personality is totally atrophied.

Secondly, I can exercise my free will in accepting the circumstances in which I find myself. I can freely believe that these are those particular situations which are necessary and essential if I am to become the person that I really am.

And thirdly, I can exercise my free will in seeking to bring together all the varying parts of my nature into one accepted and harmonious whole. Perhaps in the same way that an ocean is filled with varying currents and yet is still a single ocean. So all the forces and energies of my life are bound together for the fulfillment of one single nature.

Finally – to draw to a conclusion this rather rambling essay – I would also like to suggest that the responsibility of the astrologer does not end with the delineation of the birth chart, nor with the production of a set of yearly predictions, no matter how accurate these may prove to be. The real subject of astrology is not planetary aspects, houses, signs, midpoints, transits, nor progressions, but people. Astrology is a tool to use for the benefit of people, as is medicine, psychiatry, or law.

People come to astrologers because they are seeking, and their quest has often been unfulfilled by the systems of the society in which they live. People come because they want to know themselves, to understand their own lives, to find a pattern for their existence, to make sense of their tragedies, and to find an assurance about their own selves. To pass them off with a treatise about planetary aspects, or a dry list of predictions based upon primary or secondary directions is (in the words of Jesus) to give your son a stone when he asks for bread.

Perhaps I am a little critical, but I think that often the meetings of astrological societies spend too much time drawing charts upon blackboards – charts which without exception we describe as “interesting” – and then making obvious conclusions about known lives from often obscure and ill-defined astrological data. The real and final test of the astrologer is whether he or she is able to speak meaningfully – not about the chart – but to the person whose chart it is. So that in the end that person can say, “That has made my life more understandable, more acceptable, more joyful, and more hopeful”. Unless we can solve the problems of people, there seems to me to be little point in trying to solve the problems of astrological techniques.

So in the end my lady in Tasmania and her generous friend have led me to places that were as unexpected as her own travels. Just the same, I hope that somewhere along the not very well directed course of this perhaps unexpected diversion from the main

stream of astrological topics, the reader may have found a morsel of interest or perhaps even of stimulation.

Never-the-less I hasten to add that given the things which I have written, it was of course inevitable, inescapable, and necessary that you should now be reading these words. All other doors were in fact shut to you. But please take some comfort – because even in this matter – as in all the other events of your predetermined and predicable life – you have still been able to exercise your total and absolute free will.