Why Astrology is a Pseudoscience

Paul R. Thagard

PSA: Proceedings of the Biennial Meeting of the Philosophy of Science Association, Vol. 1978, Volume One: Contributed Papers (1978), 223-234.

Stable URL:
http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0270-8647%281978%291978%3C223%3AWAIAP%3E2.0.CO%3B2-W

PSA: Proceedings of the Biennial Meeting of the Philosophy of Science Association is currently published by The University of Chicago Press.

Why Astrology Is A Pseudoscience

Paul R. Thagard[1]

University of Michigan-Dearborn

Most philosophers and historians of science agree that astrology is a pseudoscience, but there is little agreement on why it is a pseudoscience. Answers range from matters of verifiability and falsifiability, to questions of progress and Kuhnian normal science, to the different sorts of objections raised by a large panel of scientists recently organized by The Humanist magazine. Of course there are also Feyerabendian anarchists and others who say that no demarcation of science from pseudoscience is possible. However, I shall propose a complex criterion for distinguishing disciplines as pseudoscientific; this criterion is unlike verificationist and falsificationist attempts in that it introduces social and historical features as well as logical ones.

I begin with a brief description of astrology. It would be most unfair to evaluate astrology by reference to the daily horoscopes found in newspapers and popular magazines. These horoscopes deal only with sun signs, whereas a full horoscope makes reference to the "influences" also of the moon and the planets, while also discussing the ascendant sign and other matters.

Astrology divides the sky into twelve regions, represented by the familiar signs of the Zodiac: Aquarius, Libra and so on. The sun sign represents the part of the sky occupied by the sun at the time of birth. For example, anyone born between September 23 and October 22 is a Libran. The ascendant sign, often assumed to be at least as important as the sun sign, represents the part of the sky rising on the eastern horizon at the time of birth, and therefore changes every two hours. To determine this sign, accurate knowledge of the time and place of birth is essential. The moon and the planets (of which there are five or eight depending on whether Uranus, Neptune and Pluto are taken into account) are also located by means of charts on one of the parts of the Zodiac. Each planet is said to exercise an influence in a special sphere of human activity; for example, Mars governs drive, courage and

---

PSA 1978, Volume 1, pp. 223-234

daring, while Venus governs love and artistic endeavor. The immense number of combinations of sun, ascendant, moon and planetary influences allegedly determines human personality, behavior and fate.

Astrology is an ancient practice, and appears to have its origins in Chaldea, thousands of years B.C. By 700 B.C., the Zodiac was established, and a few centuries later the signs of the Zodiac were very similar to current ones. The conquests of Alexander the Great brought astrology to Greece, and the Romans were exposed in turn. Astrology was very popular during the fall of the Republic, with many notables such as Julius Caesar having their horoscopes cast. However, there was opposition from such men as Lucretius and Cicero.

Astrology underwent a gradual codification culminating in Ptolemy's Tetrabiblos[20], written in the second century A.D. This work describes in great detail the powers of the sun, moon and planets, and their significance in people's lives. It is still recognized as a fundamental textbook of astrology. Ptolemy took astrology as seriously as he took his famous work in geography and astronomy; this is evident from the introduction fo the Tetrabiblos, where he discusses two available means of making predictions based on the heavens. The first and admittedly more effective of these concerns the relative movements of the sun, moon and planets, which Ptolemy had already treated in his celebrated Almagest [19]. The secondary but still legitimate means of prediction is that in which we use the "natural character" of the aspects of movement of heavenly bodies to "investigate the changes which they bring about in that which they surround." ([20], p. 3). He argues that this method of prediction is possible because of the manifest effects of the sun, moon and planets on the earth, for example on weather and the tides.

The European Renaissance is heralded for the rise of modern science, but occult arts such as astrology and alchemy flourished as well. Arthur Koestler has described Kepler's interest in astrology: not only did astrology provide Kepler with a livelihood, he also pursued it as a serious interest, although he was skeptical of the particular analyses of previous astrologers ([13], pp. 244-248). Astrology was popular both among intellectuals and the general public through the seventeenth century. However, astrology lost most of this popularity in the eighteenth century, when it was attacked by such figures of the Enlightenment as Swift [24] and Voltaire [29]. Only since the 1930's has astrology again gained a huge audience: most people today know at least their sun signs, and a great many believe that the stars and planets exercise an important influence on their lives.

In an attempt to reverse this trend, Bart Bok, Lawrence Jerome and Paul Kurtz drafted in 1975 a statement attacking astrology; the statement was signed by 192 leading scientists, including 19 Nobel prize winners. The statement raises three main issues: astrology originated as part of a magical world view, the planets are too distant for there to be any physical foundation for astrology, and people believe it merely out of longing for comfort ([2], pp. 9f.). None of these

objections is ground for condemning astrology as pseudoscience. To show this, I shall briefly discuss articles written by Bok [1] and Jerome [12] in support of the statement.

According to Bok, to work on statistical tests of astrological predictions is a waste of time unless it is demonstrated that astrology has some sort of physical foundation ([1], p. 31). He uses the smallness of gravitational and radiative effects of the stars and planets to suggest that there is no such foundation. He also discusses the psychology of belief in astrology, which is the result of individuals' desperation in seeking solutions to their serious personal problems. Jerome devotes most of his article to the origins of astrology in the magical principle of correspondences. He claims that astrology is a system of magic rather than science, and that it fails "not because of any inherent inaccuracies due to precession or lack of exact knowledge concerning time of birth or conception, but rather because its interpretations and predictions are grounded in the ancients' magical world view."([12], p. 46). He does however discuss some statistical tests of astrology, which I shall return to below.

These objections do not show that astrology is a pseudoscience. First, origins are irrelevant to scientific status. The alchemical origins of chemistry ([11], pp. 10-18) and the occult beginnings of medicine [8] are as magical as those of astrology, and historians have detected mystical influences in the work of many great scientists, including Newton and Einstein. Hence astrology cannot be condemned simply for the magical origins of its principles. Similarly, the psychology of popular belief is also in itself irrelevant to the status of astrology: people often believe even good theories for illegitimate reasons, and even if most people believe astrology for personal, irrational reasons, good reasons may be available.[2] Finally the lack of a physical foundation hardly marks a theory as unscientific ([22], p. 2). Examples: when Wegener [31] proposed continental drift, no mechanism was known, and a link between smoking and cancer has been established statistically [28] though the details of carcinogenesis remain to be discovered. Hence the objections of Bok, Jerome and Kurtz fail to mark astrology as pseudoscience.

Now we must consider the application of the criteria of verifiability and falsifiability to astrology. Roughly, a theory is said to be verifiable if it is possible to deduce observation statements from it. Then in principle, observations can be used to confirm or disconfirm the theory. A theory is scientific only if it is verifiable. The vicissitudes of the verification principle are too well known to recount here ([9], ch. 4). Attempts by A. J. Ayer to articulate the principle failed either by ruling out most of science as unscientific, or by ruling out nothing. Moreover, the theory/observation distinction has increasingly come into question. All that remains is a vague sense that testability somehow is a mark of scientific theories ([9], ch. 4; [10], pp. 30-32).

Well, astrology <u>is</u> vaguely testable. Because of the multitude of influences resting on tendencies rather than laws, astrology is incapable of making precise predictions. Nevertheless, attempts have

been made to test the reality of these alleged tendencies, using large scale surveys and statistical evaluation. The pioneer in this area was Michel Gauquelin, who examined the careers and times of birth of 25,000 Frenchmen. Astrology suggests that people born under certain signs or planets are likely to adopt certain occupations: for example, the influence of the warlike planet Mars tends to produce soldiers or athletes, while Venus has an artistic influence. Notably, Gauquelin found no significant correlation between careers and either sun sign, moon sign, or ascendant sign. However, he did find some statistically interesting correlations between certain occupations of people and the position of certain planets at the time of their birth. ([5], ch. 11, [6]). For example, just as astrology would suggest, there is a greater than chance association of athletes and Mars, and a greater than chance association of scientists and Saturn, where the planet is rising or at its zenith at the moment of the individual's birth.

These findings and their interpretation are highly controversial, as are subsequent studies in a similar vein [7]. Even if correct, they hardly verify astrology, especially considering the negative results found for the most important astrological categories. I have mentioned Gauquelin in order to suggest that through the use of statistical techniques astrology is at least verifiable. Hence the verification principle does not mark astrology as pseudoscience.

Because the predictions of astrologers are generally vague, a Popperian would assert that the real problem with astrology is that it is not falsifiable: astrologers can not make predictions which if unfulfilled would lead them to give up their theory. Hence because it is unfalsifiable, astrology is unscientific.

But the doctrine of falsifiability faces serious problems as described by Duhem [4], Quine [21], and Lakatos [15]. Popper himself noticed early that no observation ever guarantees falsification: a theory can always be retained by introducing or modifying auxiliary hypotheses, and even observation statements are not incorrigible ([17], p. 50). Methodological decisions about what can be tampered with are required to block the escape from falsification. However, Lakatos has persuasively argued that making such decision in advance of tests is arbitrary and may often lead to overhasty rejection of a sound theory which ought to be be saved by anti-falsificationist strategems ([15], pp. 112 ff.). Falsification only occurs when a better theory comes along. Then falsifiability is only a matter of replaceability by another theory, and since astrology is in principle replaceable by another theory, falsifiability provides no criterion for rejecting astrology as pseudoscientific. We saw in the discussion of Gauquelin that astrology can be used to make predictions about statistical regularities, but the nonexistence of these regularities does not falsify astrology; but here astrology does not appear worse than the best of scientific theories, which also resist falsification until alternative theories arise.[3]

Astrology can not be condemned as pseudoscientific on the grounds proposed by verificationists, falsificationists, or Bok and Jerome.

But undoubtedly astrology today faces a great many unsolved problems ([32], ch. 5). One is the negative result found by Gauquelin concerning careers and signs. Another is the problem of the precession of the equinoxes, which astrologers generally take into account when heralding the "Age of Aquarius" but totally neglect when figuring their charts. Astrologers do not always agree on the significance of the three planets, Neptune, Uranus and Pluto, that were discovered since Ptolemy. Studies of twins do not show similarities of personality and fate that astrology would suggest. Nor does astrology make sense of mass disasters, where numerous individuals with very different horoscopes come to similar ends.

But problems such as these do not in themselves show that astrology is either false or pseudoscientific. Even the best theories face unsolved problems throughout their history. To get a criterion demarcating astrology from science, we need to consider it in a wider historical and social context.

A demarcation criterion requires a matrix of three elements: [theory, community, historical context]. Under the first heading, "theory", fall familiar matters of structure, prediction, explanation and problem solving. We might also include the issue raised by Bok and Jerome about whether the theory has a physical foundation. Previous demarcationists have concentrated on this theoretical element, evident in the concern of the verification and falsification principles with prediction. But we have seen that this approach is not sufficient for characterizing astrology as pseudoscientific.

We must also consider the community of advocates of the theory, in this case the community of practitioners of astrology. Several questions are important here. First, are the practitioners in agreement on the principles of the theory and on how to go about solving problems which the theory faces? Second, do they care, that is, are they concerned about explaining anomalies and comparing the success of their theory to the record of other theories? Third, are the practitioners actively involved in attempts at confirming and disconfirming their theory?

The question about comparing the success of a theory with that of other theories introduces the third element of the matrix, historical context. The historical work of Kuhn and others has shown that in general a theory is rejected only when (1) it has faced anomalies over a long period of time and (2) it has been challenged by another theory. Hence under the heading of historical context we must consider two factors relevant to demarcation: the record of a theory over time in explaining new facts and dealing with anomalies, and the availability of alternative theories.

We can now propose the following principle of demarcation:

> A theory or discipline which purports to be scientific is pseudoscientific if and only if:

1) it has been less progressive than alternative theories over a long period of time, and faces many unsolved problems; but
2) the community of practitioners makes little attempt to develop the theory towards solutions of the problems, shows no concern for attempts to evaluate the theory in relation to others, and is selective in considering confirmations and disconfirmations.

Progressiveness is a matter of the success of the theory in adding to its set of facts explained and problems solved ([15], p. 118; cf. [26], p. 83).

This principle captures, I believe, what is most importantly unscientific about astrology. First, astrology is dramatically unprogressive, in that it has changed little and has added nothing to its explanatory power since the time of Ptolemy. Second, problems such as the precession of equinoxes are outstanding. Third, there are alternative theories of personality and behavior available: one need not be an uncritical advocate of behaviorist, Freudian, or Gestalt theories to see that since the nineteenth century psychological theories have been expanding to deal with many of the phenomena which astrology explains in terms of heavenly influences. The important point is not that any of these psychological theories is established or true, only that they are growing alternatives to a long-static astrology. Fourth and finally, the community of astrologers is generally unconcerned with advancing astrology to deal with outstanding problems or with evaluating the theory in relation to others.[4] For these reasons, my criterion marks astrology as pseudoscientific.

This demarcation criterion differs from those implicit in Lakatos and Kuhn. Lakatos has said that what makes a series of theories constituting a research program scientific is that it is progressive: each theory in the series has greater corroborated content than its predecessor ([15], p. 118). While I agree with Lakatos that progressiveness is a central notion here, it is not sufficient to distinguish science from pseudoscience. We should not brand a nonprogressive discipline as pseudoscientific unless it is being maintained against more progressive alternatives. Kuhn's discussion of astrology focuses on a different aspect of my criterion. He says that what makes astrology unscientific is the absence of the paradigm-dominated puzzle solving activity characteristic of what he calls normal science ([14], p. 9). But as Watkins has suggested, astrologers are in some respects model normal scientists: they concern themselves with solving puzzles at the level of individual horoscopes, unconcerned with the foundations of their general theory or paradigm ([30], p. 32). Hence that feature of normal science does not distinguish science from pseudoscience. What makes astrology pseudoscientific is not that it lacks periods of Kuhnian normal science, but that its proponents adopt uncritical attitudes of "normal" scientists despite the existence of more progressive alternative theories. (Note that I am not agreeing with Popper [18] that Kuhn's normal scientists are unscientific; they can become unscientific only when an alternative paradigm has been developed.) However, if one looks not at the puzzle solving at the level of particular astrological

predictions, but at the level of theoretical problems such as the precession of the equinoxes, there is some agreement between my criterion and Kuhn's; astrologers do not have a paradigm-induced confidence about solving theoretical problems.

Of course, the criterion is intended to have applications beyond astrology. I think that discussion would show that the criterion marks as pseudoscientific such practices as witchcraft and pyramidology, while leaving contemporary physics, chemistry and biology unthreatened. The current fad of biorhythms, implausibly based like astrology on date of birth, can not be branded as pseudoscientific because we lack alternative theories giving more detailed accounts of cyclical variations in human beings, although much research is in progress.[5]

One interesting consequence of the above criterion is that a theory can be scientific at one time but pseudoscientific at another. In the time of Ptolemy or even Kepler, astrology had few alternatives in the explanation of human personality and behavior. Existing alternatives were scarcely more sophisticated or corroborated than astrology. Hence astrology should be judged as not pseudoscientific in classical or Renaissance times, even though it is pseudoscientific today. Astrology was not simply a perverse sideline of Ptolemy and Kepler, but part of their scientific activity, even if a physicist involved with astrology today should be looked at askance. Only when the historical and social aspects of science are neglected does it become plausible that pseudoscience is an unchanging category. Rationality is not a property of ideas eternally: ideas, like actions, can be rational at time but irrational at others. Hence relativizing the science/pseudoscience distinction to historical periods is a desirable result.

But there remains a challenging historical problem. According to my criterion, astrology only became pseudoscientific with the rise of modern psychology in the nineteenth century. But astrology was already virtually excised from scientific circles by the beginning of the eighteenth. How could this be? The simple answer is that a theory can take on the appearance of an unpromising project well before it deserves the label of pseudoscience. The Copernican revolution and the mechanism of Newton, Descartes and Hobbes undermined the plausibility of astrology.[6] Lynn Thorndike [27] has described how the Newtonian theory pushed aside what had been accepted as a universal natural law, that inferiors such as inhabitants of earth are ruled and governed by superiors such as the stars and the planets. William Stahlman [23] has described how the immense growth of science in the seventeenth century contrasted with stagnation of astrology. These developments provided good reasons for discarding astrology as a promising pursuit, but they were not yet enough to brand it as pseudoscientific, or even to refute it.

Because of its social aspect, my criterion might suggest a kind of cultural relativism. Suppose there is an isolated group of astrologers in the jungles of South America, practicing their art with no awareness of alternatives. Are we to say that astrology is <u>for them</u> scientific?

Or, going in the other direction, should we count as alternative theories ones which are available to extraterrestrial beings, or which someday will be conceived? This wide construal of "alternative" would have the result that our best current theories are probably pseudoscientific. These two questions employ, respectively, a too narrow and a too broad view of alternatives. By an alternative theory I mean one generally available in the world. This assumes first that there is some kind of communication network to which a community has, or should have, access. Second, it assumes that the onus is on individuals and communities to find out about alternatives. I would argue (perhaps against Kuhn) that this second assumption is a general feature of rationality; it is at least sufficient to preclude ostrichism as a defense against being judged pseudoscientific.

In conclusion, I would like to say why I think the question of what constitutes a pseudoscience is important. Unlike the logical positivists, I am not grinding an anti-metaphysical ax, and unlike Popper, I am not grinding an anti-Freudian or anti-Marxian one.[7] My concern is social: society faces the twin problems of lack of public concern with the advancement of science, and lack of public concern with the important ethical issues now arising in science and technology, for example around the topic of genetic engineering. One reason for this dual lack of concern is the wide popularity of pseudoscience and the occult among the general public. Elucidation of how science differs from pseudoscience is the philosophical side of an attempt to overcome public neglect of genuine science.

Notes

[1]I am grateful to Dan Hausman and Elias Baumgarten for comments.

[2]However, astrology would doubtlessly have many fewer supporters if horoscopes tended less toward compliments and pleasant predictions and more toward the kind of analysis included in the following satirical horoscope from the December, 1977, issue of Mother Jones: VIRGO (Aug. 23-Sept. 22). You are the logical type and hate disorder. This nitpicking is sickening to your friends. You are cold and unemotional and sometimes fall asleep while making love. Virgos make good bus drivers.

[3]For an account of the comparative evaluation of theories, see [26].

[4]There appear to be a few exceptions; see [32].

[5]The fad of biorhythms, now assuming a place beside astrology in the popular press, must be distinguished from the very interesting work of Frank Brown and others on biological rhythms. For a survey, see [5].

[6]Plausibility is in part a matter of a hypothesis being of an appropriate kind, and is relevant even to the acceptance of a theory. See [26], p. 90, and [25].

[7]On psychoanalysis see [3]. I would argue that Cioffi neglects the question of alternatives to psychoanalysis and the question of its progressiveness.

References

[1] Bok, Bart J. "A Critical Look at Astrology." In [2]. Pages 21-33.

[2] ----------, Jerome, Lawrence E., and Kurtz, Paul. Objections to Astrology. Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1975.

[3] Cioffi, Frank. "Freud and the Idea of a Pseudoscience." In Explanation in the Behavioral Sciences. Edited by R. Borger and F. Cioffi. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970. Pages 471-499.

[4] Duhem, P. The Aim and Structure of Physical Theory. (trans.) P. Wiener. New York: Atheneum, 1954. (Translated from 2nd edition of La Théorie Physique: Son Object Sa Structure. Paris: Marcel Rivière & Cie, 1914.)

[5] Gauquelin, Michel. The Cosmic Clocks. Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1967.

[6] ----------. The Scientific Basis of Astrology. New York: Stein and Day, 1969.

[7] ----------. "The Zelen Test of the Mars Effect." The Humanist 37(1977): 30-35.

[8] Haggard, Howard W. Mystery, Magic, and Medicine. Garden City: Doubleday, Doran & Company, 1933.

[9] Hempel, Carl. Aspects of Scientific Explanation. New York: The Free Press, 1965.

[10] ----------. Philosophy of Natural Science. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1966.

[11] Ihde, Aaron J. The Development of Modern Chemistry. New York: Harper and Row, 1964.

[12] Jerome, Lawrence E. "Astrology: Magic or Science?" In [2]. Pages 37-62.

[13] Koestler, Arthur. The Sleepwalkers. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964.

[14] Kuhn, T.S. "Logic of Discovery or Psychology of Research." In [16]. Pages 1-23.

[15] Lakatos, Imre. "Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes." In [16]. Pages 91-195.

[16] ---------- and Musgrave, Alan.(eds.). Criticism and the Growth

Knowledge. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970.

[17] Popper, Karl. The Logic of Scientific Discovery. London: Hutchinson, 1959. (Originally published as Logik der Forschung. Vienna: J. Springer, 1935.)

[18] ----------. "Normal Science and its Dangers." In [16]. Pages 51-58.

[19] Ptolemy. The Almagest (The Mathematical Composition). (As printed in Hutchins, Robert Maynard (ed.). Great Books of the Western World, Volume 16. Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1952. Pages 1-478.)

[20] -------. Tetrabiblos. Edited and translated by F.E. Robbins. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1940.

[21] Quine, W.V.O. "Two Dogmas of Empiricism." In From a Logical Point of View. New York: Harper & Row, 1963. Pages 20-46. (Originally published in The Philosophical Review 60(1951): 20-43.)

[22] Sagan, Carl. "Letter." The Humanist 36(1976): 2.

[23] Stahlman, William D. "Astrology in Colonial America: An Extended Query." William and Mary Quarterly 13(1956): 551-563.

[24] Swift, Jonathan. "The Partridge Papers." In The Prose Works of Jonathan Swift, Volume 2. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1940-1968. Pages 139-170.

[25] Thagard, Paul R. "The Autonomy of a Logic of Discovery." Forthcoming in the Festschrift for T.A. Goudge.

[26] ----------. "The Best Explanation: Criteria for Theory Choice." Journal of Philosophy 75(1978): 76-92.

[27] Thorndike, Lynn. "The True Place of Astrology in the History of Science." Isis 46(1955): 273-278.

[28] U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare. Smoking and Health: Report of the Advisory Committee to the Surgeon General of the Public Health Service. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1964.

[29] Voltaire. "Astrologie" and "Astronomie". Dictionnaire Philosophique. In Oeuvres Complètes de Voltaire, Volume XVII. Paris: Garnier Frères, 1878-1885. Pages 446-453.

[30] Watkins, J.W.N. "Against 'Normal Science'." In [16]. Pages 25-37.

[31] Wegener, Alfred. "Die Entstehung der Kontinente." Petermanns Geographische Mitteilung 58(1912): 185-195, 253-256, 305-309.

[32] West, J.A. and Toonder, J.G. The Case for Astrology. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973.