

The hoax known as astrology (Ch. Varvoglis, Reserve professor of the Physics Department of the Aristotelian University of Thessaloniki)

Date : Αυγούστου 21, 2011

At the beginning of every year, many people seem eager to learn what that New Year has in store for them. So, we wonder, is it possible for certain people to predict the future? Is Astrology really a science? Astronomers say “NO”!

The planets Uranus, Neptune and Pluto were unknown, until 200 or so years ago, i.e., well AFTER the formulation of the “laws” of astrology. Are these three planets of any astrological significance? If they are, then the horoscopes drawn prior to their discovery must have been wrong. If they don’t play any role, then how do they differ, from the other planets that “play a role”?

Towards the changing of the year, our televisions, newspapers and magazines are filled with astrological predictions for the new year 2003. Could all this pseudo-literature actually have anything to do with reality? The scientific reply is simple and to the point: Of course it doesn’t. It is commonly acknowledged, that astrology has become a part of everyday life. This is evidenced, by the regular columns with horoscopes in most newspapers and magazines, as well as the frequent presentations of astrological predictions on TV and radio programs. Even the most mistrustful have begun to have a positive approach to astrology, based on the argument that “so many people are involved with it, that surely it must have some dose of truth”. Unfortunately, very few people realize that this “fashion” is becoming dangerous. It is obvious that it is only beneficial to obscurantism, by driving people to fatalism, since it professes that their acts are not attributed to their own free will. There is yet another problem however, which does not become apparent from the very start: there are many people who believe in astrology that influence public opinion, as well as the future of the land (e.g. politicians and artists). Faith in astrology cannot only lead people into erroneous decisions; it can also bring into decision-making centers

people outside of the political system.

Faith and divination

The phenomenon of faith in astrology is deep-rooted. This form of divination originated from the peoples of Mesopotamia, because there (unlike ancient Greece), the power of the priesthood prevailed and not the rationalism of the natural philosophers. Thus, by linking astronomy to religion - as evident in the naming of the planets (Venus, Mars, Jupiter, etc.) - and in conjunction with their ignorance of how insignificant a position Earth has in the Universe, the perception that the planets influenced our lives came into being.

Is there any real scientific basis in astrology? The answer is assuredly negative, since none of the known forces of physics can verify any kind of influence of the planets on our daily lives. (For example, a nearby body such as -for example- an obstetrician's, exerts a gravitational force six times that of Mars, on a newborn baby!) Besides, if astrology were a science, then the daily horoscopes of all astrologers would be in full agreement amongst themselves, since they would be based on the same scientific data.

Beyond this simplistic thought however, astrology has a hard time trying to give a satisfactory reply to many other problems. One of them is the astronomical phenomenon of zodiac transition (shift), according to which, the position of the 12 signs changes in the heavens, slowly but surely. For example, in our time, during the period of 21st March to 20th April, the Sun is in the constellation of Pisces, and not Aries, as mentioned in the horoscopes. So, how does this agree with the fact that astrologers have linked each person's character with the characteristics of the zodiac sign that relates to his date of birth?

The positions of Venus

Another problem arises from the fact that astrologers draw up horoscopes on the basis of the planets' positions in the heavens, without concerning themselves about their comparative mass, or even their actual distance from Earth. For example, Venus' alignment with the Sun is considered as having the same astrological significance, regardless whether it is moving between the Sun and the Earth, or, aligned with the Earth but behind the Sun, even though in the second case it is five times further away from the Earth. This idea was of course conceived at a time when people believed that the planets rotate around the Earth and not around the Sun. But then, why don't other objects of our solar system play an astrological role also - for instance, the satellites of other planets, or asteroids, or even the planets of other planetary systems, which are being discovered by the dozen over the past years? It

might be worth mentioning here, that the furthestmost planet of our system - Pluto - is in actual fact only a large asteroid.

The planets Uranus, Neptune and Pluto were discovered during the last 200 years - definitely after the formulation of the "laws" of astrology. Do these planets have any astrological significance? If they do, then the horoscopes prior to their discovery were faulty. If they have no astrological influence, then how are they different to those planets that do have "astrological influence"? Not to mention, that it is extremely difficult for someone to explain exactly how their astrological influence was "discovered". It certainly can't be attributed to the planet's names, since they were given with random criteria by contemporary astronomers.

Furthermore, the argument that their astrological influence is attributed to personal experience cannot be supported, for the simple reason that these planets move at such a slow pace around the Sun, that, from the time they were discovered until today, they have still not passed through all twelve zodiac signs.

Statistical surveys

Unfortunately, it is not easy to counterpoise all the above arguments opposite the widespread belief that "astrology works". How many of us hasn't glanced at our horoscope - even if only just "for fun" in a newspaper or a magazine - only to see that many predictions indeed came true? Could it be, that astrology is indeed a science, just like physics and chemistry? Fortunately, queries like these can be resolved in the same way as the effectiveness of a medicine or the consumption of fuel by an automobile; in other words with statistical studies, and many have been made. The basic idea is very simple: a sample of assorted people is selected and through some objective method, an attempt is made to determine the percentage of success in the horoscopes that are drawn up for them by various astrologers. Perhaps the best statistical study of its kind was the one organized 18 years ago in the U.S.A. by Sean Carlson, professor of Physics at the University of California and the official union of American astrologers, published in the accredited magazine "Nature". 30 of the most acclaimed astrologers - all members of the union - were given all the data that they each considered necessary for them to calculate the individual horoscopes of four different people. The horoscopes that were composed by each one were distributed among the other astrologers randomly. Along with each horoscope, they were given the psychological profile of three people, of the type that was agreed from the start between Carlson and the astrologers; one of the profiles belonged to the person of the horoscope while the other two profiles were random ones. The astrologers had to find which psychological profile matched each horoscope that was given to them. By replying at random, the astrologers should attain a success rate of 33,33%, since the possibility of randomly choosing the correct horoscope is one in three. From the

beginning, the astrologers had foretold that their success rate would be greater than 50%. The final result was 34%, a percentage that not only was lower than the agreed "limit" of 50%, but even statistically it did not deviate significantly from the 33,33%.

In other words, if a medicine had a healing percentage of this proportion, it would never be given a permit to be put into circulation. Logically, an equivalent result should signal the end of astrology in people's minds. However, people will always feel the need for hope and psychological support during their difficult moments, and astrologers will always be there to offer it - at a price of course...

Newspaper "THE BEMA", 19-01-2003.

Article Code: B13767H071

Translation by A.N.

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