

***The Dawn of Astrology* by Nicholas Campion (Hambledon, Continuum, 2008)**

**Review by Angela Voss (Feb 2009)**

In many ways *The Dawn of Astrology* is a tour de force, a vast historical overview of the cosmological, philosophical and metaphysical threads which have woven into the colourful tapestry of astrology in all its forms from the first evidence we have of human beings' relationship with the stars to the theological debates of the early Christian period. Nicholas Campion has researched extensively and attempted a synthesis of perspectives and practices which undoubtedly benefits from his own dual status as academic and practitioner. He surveys varying attitudes, objectives and critiques of astrology whilst remaining sympathetic to the underlying premise that astrology 'works' – that is, that all peoples at all times have found meaningful correspondences between life on earth and planetary configurations, from the divinatory omen-reading of the ancient Mesopotamians, to the mechanistic predictions of the classical astrologers. As a historical synthesis, this book is impressive and full of detailed information on key figures and texts. However, I would like to devote the main part of this review to considering possible limitations in this approach to a subject such as astrology.

Campion presents a bird's eye view, as it were, of complex trends, personalities, textual transmissions and cultural movements, and this is undoubtedly extremely useful, particularly for the growing number of students at undergraduate and masters level in this area of study. However, in covering such a vast sweep of history from a purely objective perspective, there is a danger of what I would term 'cultural relativism' in relation to the questions raised by the very nature of the subject matter – questions which arise from the need to understand *astrology* itself, which penetrate beyond the accounts of its manifestations. If there is any underlying 'truth' that a relationship with the heavens may reveal, then there is also a need to discriminate between levels of human response to this revelation. The great philosophers that Campion discusses – Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus—are concerned with metaphysical and existential questions that *matter*, undoubtedly, to all those concerned with the nature of the soul and the cosmos, and therefore practices of astrology or divination become highly charged areas of contention and investigation. I would like to see Campion grappling with the implications of such philosophical perspectives by, to a certain extent, entering into them, because that is the only way their reality can be opened up for us, and the only way we can begin to judge for ourselves whether Plato's theory of knowledge, say, involving an 'imaginal' cosmic journey, can be regarded in the same light as the 'natural scientific' assumptions of a Roman astrological 'cookbook' author. These are different orders of philosophical reflection, and surely beg the question of what exactly 'astrology' is, and how we are to evaluate the way it is practised. It is, I would suggest, extremely difficult to do justice to thinkers like Plato and Plotinus within a *historical* survey of a subject which in itself has profound metaphysical dimensions. It is like trying to contain a 'vertical' movement of levels of being within a 'horizontal' trajectory of survey and textual information. The danger is that in attempting to encompass such a huge field, extreme and superficial statements are made to sum up particular schools of thought, for instance, that the core of Plotinus' thought is "body-hating" and "world

renouncing" (p. 262; not the conclusion incidentally of recent scholarship)<sup>1</sup>; or that the Gnostics saw the cosmos as "fundamentally rotten" and the Neoplatonists saw it as "essentially good" (p.277). Such statements belie the complexity of issues at stake and are laden with assumptions; even more so the suggestion that evangelical Christians had an "emotional obsession" with "salvation through Christ" and suffered from a "chronic fear of demons" (p.288). Campion suggests it is a "weakness" of Plotinus' metaphysical position that he does not give any interpretative system for his understanding of stars as signs (page 262), and that Porphyry and Iamblichus "agonise" over getting the right balance between freedom and predetermination, "trying desperately to find a third way between these two poles" (page 263). "Agonise"? Both these comments suggest that the reflection of the neoplatonists on matters cosmic is somehow lacking in philosophical depth and subtlety, whereas in fact Iamblichus' thinking is so contemplative and unitive that any notion of desperate intellectual striving would be anathema to him. As for Plotinus, from his lofty vantage-point he is simply not concerned with interpretation, so why should it be a weakness if he does not address it? These are just a few examples of the kind of tone which permeates the book, and which unfortunately indicate a lack of serious engagement with the fundamental premise of Platonic thinking which discriminates between 'divine' and 'human' modes of discourse. If all is approached from the historical/literal level, then the symbolic/spiritual mode of perception will necessarily be reduced to its limited terms of reference, from which vantage point "internal contradictions" appear to undermine "the Platonic position on astrology" (p.263). In fact, the Platonists were very clear about the differences between the kind of limited human judgement that pre-supposed a 'fixed' fate, and the prophetic "gift of the soul" (to quote Ficino)<sup>2</sup> which enabled insight into the individual's participation and choice in the unfolding of their destiny.

In fact the whole book suffers from a lack of clarity when it comes to the vastly differing kinds and levels of knowledge subsumed under word "astrology". Addressing the difficulties astrologers faced with Christian doctrine, Campion states "theological arguments are unassailable. You either accept them or you do not but you cannot defeat them with logical evidence". Of course you can't – they are of a totally different order from logic. But exactly the same could be said about divination, for the problem is not theology versus logic, but insights gained through *revelatory* means versus the conclusions of human reason, whatever 'artificial' method may be used to access the former. As mentioned above, these are two orders of knowledge which are found within Platonic thinking and colour all subsequent arguments about astrological practices – the result being that one can no longer talk about "astrology" without assessing the *qualitative* differences between historical, literal, symbolic and spiritual approaches to the cosmos. Without this framework, it is impossible to locate, philosophically, Campion's many anecdotes of astrologers' predictions and society's reaction to them, and one is left unsure whether they were charlatans or prophets. More seriously, on page 240 Campion implies that the Delphic Oracle was an astrologer, and that its warning to the emperor Nero was somehow written in the heavens as a 'truth'. However, it is in the very nature of oracles and omens that there is no infallible, objective 'truth' out

---

<sup>1</sup>See for example the work of Zeke Mazur and Margaret Miles

<sup>2</sup>In Marsilio Ficino, *Disputatio contra iudicium astrologorum*

there, and in this respect these divinatory forms are opposed to the ‘machine of destiny’ model of the Stoic astrologers. This is surely confusing literal and symbolic modes. Besides, as far as I am aware, there is no evidence that the Delphic Oracle ever consulted the heavens, but acted more in the capacity of a medium.

Which brings us to the question of how an ‘objective’ approach to astrological phenomena can address the *real* ‘biggie’ – the questions of fate, destiny and freewill, and how we are to understand human attempts to grasp some greater picture or cosmic law at work. Without addressing what these terms may *mean*, the danger is a reduction of all thinking on the matter, from Empedocles to the Church Fathers, to the same common denominator – namely, a sort of empirical/rational assessment based on the wide-angled lens of the impartial observer (or not so impartial, as St Augustine for one is given a hard time for his anti-astrological views, with little attempt to take on his theological position with any seriousness). The condemnation of astral determinism, that great “machine of destiny” that classical astrology has appropriated is, and always has been, a standard theological defence. But far more subtle is the position of Augustine regarding *the divinatory moment* of the meaningful omen, yet its implications are all but ignored here. Campion remarks in passing that for Augustine “an astrological forecast appeared to be right in the same way as a volume of poetry might fall open at a page which was meaningful at that moment” (pages 282-3), but don’t we need to ask *why* this is a theological problem, given that a random passage of poetry or scripture could legitimately be an indication of God’s will? The radical, spontaneous and totally unpredictable manifestation of the meaningful sign is surely the most fundamental and controversial phenomenon within astrology, and it is also prevalent in all orthodox religious traditions – and how can one tell who gives such a sign? At what metaphysical level can one claim to differentiate between the insights of the prophetic astrologer and the revelations of the prophetic Christian? These epistemological issues are crucial and require the historian to step down from the pedestal and grapple with the knife-edge questions that are as relevant today as two thousand years ago. Astrology still suffers from being solely defined as ‘foretelling the future’, orthodox Christianity still accepts the sign but rejects the stars, divination has lost all connection with philosophy, let alone metaphysics, and astrologers themselves still compete and argue their various positions. Unless astrologers, believers and academics all address the fundamental issue of what is happening when a sign is ‘realised’ by an individual in the world, prejudices and separatism founded on the limitations of literalist interpretations will continue to hold sway.

To conclude, I am full of admiration for Campion’s syncretistic skills, his ability to hold an enormous overview together, pack in the detail and bring astrology to the forefront of history. But such a book as this reveals, I think, that such skills are not enough to do justice to the magnitude of the subject. Astrology, as an esoteric discipline, does not lend itself well to a purely exoteric history. It is a mirroring of inner and outer worlds that reveals its nature insofar as the inquirer encompasses “the planets within” as well as “without”. This does not imply any lack of scholarly rigour or discrimination, quite the opposite, but it does imply a careful and informed examination of the *premises* of the philosophies under consideration and a sympathy with the radically different pre-enlightenment understanding of ‘knowledge’ as participation in and affinity with the cosmos.

I have highlighted the problematic of the neoplatonic and early Christian attitudes to astrology because I am most familiar with these issues: about earlier Babylonian and Mesopotamian worldviews I am not qualified to comment, but it would seem to me that Campion covers these periods with more expertise—or perhaps it is simply that they are more suited to a purely historical approach as the complexities of philosophical speculation about the stars have not yet arisen. However, if astrology matters to Nicholas Campion, as it undoubtedly does, how much more would its study gain from a greater depth of philosophical, psychological and spiritual reflection in combination with his extensive historical research skills. The time has come for the study of astrology to be located within contexts that do justice to its profound implications about the nature of human knowledge, particularly if the study of its *practice*—not just its history—is to be brought into the Academy. Unfortunately the book also suffers from more than a few textual errors, which one suspects are due to insufficient proof-reading, and a literary style that would have benefitted from more haste, less speed.