

Astrology, Scepticism and Knowledge **A Dialogue between Dennis Elwell & Garry Phillipson**

Introduction

The most controversial part of *Astrology in the Year Zero* has undoubtedly been the inclusion, in chapters 9 and 10, of an interview that is almost entirely sceptical towards astrology. This piece, entitled *Research into Astrology*, was recorded with Geoffrey Dean, Suitbert Ertel, Ivan Kelly, Arthur Mather and Rudolf Smit (who took on the collective name 'the researchers' for the occasion).¹

A little while after the book's publication in 2000, Dennis Elwell emailed me to say that he was 'dismayed' by this section of the book. Since Elwell is undoubtedly a serious thinker whose ideas merit close attention, I asked him if he could elaborate. The discussion that ensued between us follows in this document. Dennis also engaged in a series of exchanges with Dean, Kelly, Mather and Smit.²

This dialogue originally appeared in *The Astrological Journal* Sept/Oct 2001. It has been revised slightly for publication here.

Garry Phillipson – February 2006

GP: What are your objections to chapters nine and ten (*Research into Astrology*) of *Year Zero*?

DE: Chiefly that the cynics (sceptics would be too kind a word) were allowed to have their say unchallenged. They could impugn with impunity. Their contribution was against the spirit and tone of the book, in which the rest of us chatted informally about what we did and thought as astrologers. It was as if we were invited to a convivial meal, only to find Hannibal Lecter among the guests.

Personally, had I realised that Dean and company were attempting to hijack the project my own contribution would have been very different, which is why the belated opportunity offered by the website is so welcome. What they said undermined everything else in the book, and indeed its own justification.

I object that people who are essentially in the demolition business should be dignified as 'researchers'. Genuine researchers have an open-minded and impartial approach, but these cynics long ago flagged up their extremist opposition, and were unlikely to be moved from it.

There was also the implication that nobody has been doing research supportive of astrology. The cynics boast of the man-hours they have spent putting their objections together, but this is sheer impertinence. As it has come down to us

today astrology is the accumulated result of centuries of investigation, the work of many hands, and in the light of the understanding and culture of the time.

In the last century many astrologers conscientiously worked to establish by direct observation what was dependable, and what was not. Goodness knows how many man-hours this has involved. Yet here are a handful of dissenters, driven by whatever motives one can only guess, seeking to reduce all that honest effort to rubble.

GP: I think an important consideration is the type of book which *Year Zero* sets out to be. In putting it together I wasn't aiming to write the last word about the truth of astrology; rather, I wanted to include a range of experience and views, putting on record the diversity that actually exists. Given that many people, whether they have investigated the question or not, think astrology has been demolished by science, the book would be incomplete if it passed over the issue.

Neither did the 'researchers' have a free hand. The dialogue shuttled to and fro between us at least ten times, with me asking questions, raising objections and pushing for clarification each time. I didn't see my task as being to hammer out a formulation that we could all agree on - we would still be talking. Rather, the aim was to try and cover the most common arguments which come up when science meets astrology; then to probe the researchers' logic, evidence, and the assumptions on which their statements rest. As a result of this approach, I feel that it should be possible for someone who wants to attack the sceptical position on astrology to read through those two chapters and get a good picture of the criticisms they will need to address, and perhaps a few clues about promising places to start.

As for the overall balance of the book, chapters 2 - 7 contain many examples of astrologers getting successful results, spectacularly so in some cases, from their readings. And chapters 11 and 12 contain some excellent material (from scientifically-trained astrologers Bernadette Brady, Pat Harris and Lee Lehman amongst others) which evaluates and criticises a number of issues from the researchers' chapters, including their core assumption that astrology should perform under statistical analysis.

If we accept that it is science's place to pronounce the final word on whether astrology is or is not valid (and that, I think, is a very big if) then, it seems to me, the researchers have a point. Astrology as most of us practise it today has not performed well in most scientific tests. And we need to face this fact before we can progress – whether this 'progress' consists in the formulation of more relevant tests, or in the conclusion that, whatever astrology is, it cannot be tested and measured in the same way as simple physical processes.

As for the labours of astrologers past - certainly there is a place for respect toward them, but surely not at the expense of our attempts to question and discover the subject for ourselves now. If you believe that astrology is capable of being conclusively demonstrated via statistics and tests, then I'd suggest that your complaints should be directed more at the astrologers who have failed to come up with the goods, than those who remind us of this fact.

DE: On the vital question of tests, I feel that something should be made abundantly clear. Astrologers make statements of one sort or another, and these statements – which are experience based – are either correct or incorrect. (That is to put it brutally, since statements that are say 75 per cent correct could still be very useful.) Measured on the scale of correctness or otherwise astrology thus becomes falsifiable, a much praised virtue.

Therefore it is not unreasonable to propose that it is on their actual statements that astrologers should be judged. The catch is that many such statements might not yet be provable according to the exacting standards of formal science. For example, my composite picture of Sagittarians includes a candour which can be taken to the point of embarrassment, along with an inclination to offer unsought advice, characteristics probably connected. But where are the scientific tests which might confirm it? I don't think they exist, and it is not incumbent on astrology, with its limited resources, to do the work of professional psychologists by establishing a yardstick for candour which could be applied across the whole population, never mind Sagittarians. Even if we agreed that using a self-report personality inventory would be a valid procedure, who is going to organise a large scale field test? Who is going to fund it?

Critics have argued that if something is true it can be shown to be true. But because something is unproved does not mean it is unprovable. Given enough resources, and given enough astrologers interested in the unprofitable exercise of trying to convince die-hard sceptics, I believe many astrological statements could be verified beyond reasonable doubt.

I would stress again that astrologers need to be judged on what they actually claim, not what others might choose to claim for them. Instead of basing itself on astrology's clear statements some research perversely comes at the problem from the exactly opposite direction. One website is looking for the astrological 'signatures' of suicide and alcoholism - categories which may not be coherent groupings, neither in astrology nor psychology. Expecting the heavens to endorse what might be purely arbitrary categories can be a waste of time and effort. Propensities to suicide or alcoholism may lie outside the compass of the heavens.

Astrologers can perhaps be blamed for failing to mount an intellectually credible defence, or produce more solid results. The lack of firm ground on which to make a stand has contributed to a loss of nerve in our own ranks, under the attack from the direction of scientific scepticism, spearheaded by Geoffrey Dean. The onslaught led a few astrologers to desert the fold, and left others milling around aimlessly like startled sheep looking for a new place to shelter. Perhaps classical astrology, or horary astrology, or Vedic astrology, or whatever, would provide a safe haven?

The ordinary reader may not realise that while the 'researchers' represented themselves as impartial, the evidence points to the opposite. Thirty years ago Dean and his lieutenant Arthur Mather produced the ironically titled *Recent Advances in Natal Astrology*, which behind the smoke screen of reviewing the literature set out to undermine astrology's fundamental tenets. As early as page

15 of this opus of 600 pages the real thesis is announced thus: 'Astrology can be largely explained by intuition, gullibility and [statements of] universal validity.'

This compilation, long out of print, was assisted by many believing astrologers, blind to its devastating intent. It was the classic Trojan horse, and hence my alarm to find its foal skipping through your pages.

The Deanites have maintained their rejection of astrology down the years, with increasing acerbity, and readers must judge for themselves the likelihood of their shaking off their prejudice at this late stage. Dean and Mather are reputed to have already endured one shattering of their beliefs, sorrowfully turning their backs on their 'beloved' astrology when it failed to measure up to objective tests. Readers less trusting than myself may wonder if this U-turn ever happened, or whether from the outset the aim was to discredit astrology by infiltrating its ranks.

They should consider that Dean admits to a range of what he would view as scientifically justifiable deceptions, such as giving astrologers bogus charts for himself and conducting experiments in which subjects were kept in the dark as to the real purpose.

They might further wonder what this arch critic of astrology was doing in Edinburgh recently, ostensibly lecturing on his research into unsuspected planets. Has he finally become convinced that there might be genuine planetary influences? Or what?

Any lingering doubts about his impartiality should be dispelled by the fact that he and Ivan Kelly, another contributor, belong to the astrology group of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, whose acronym (CSICOP) fortuitously describes their self-appointed role as thought police. Anybody who follows the activities of this curious organisation, obsessed with rooting out irrationality in all its forms, will realise the improbability of their ever conceding the smallest crumb of credibility to astrology, which they hope and believe may have finally found its niche in the mausoleum of mankind's superstitions.

Which is why Dean has set out to discredit what he mistakenly imagines to be the one remaining crumb of evidence, namely the Gauquelin results, by suggesting that whatever statistical validity they ever possessed can be explained by parents tampering with the birth of their offspring, or with its registration. Another member of the team, Suitbert Ertel, is currently disputing this improbable theory, a spectacle which serves as a splendid example of how true scientists resolve their differences.

As for the evidence for Dean's theory, suffice it to say that if he applied to it his own exacting standards of proof it would be rejected as idle speculation. I have tactfully suggested to Ertel that he may be the victim of one of those stories newspapers are amused to run on April the First. If that were to prove the case (and maybe we shall have to wait for Dean's candid confessions) the spectacle of Ertel canvassing midwives to find if there is any evidence of the practice lingering today must have occasioned him special relish.

Incidentally, Ertel has already adopted his hero Gauquelin's utter disbelief in astrology, save for the solitary relevance of the diurnal position of various planets in births of the eminent. No impartiality there. Even less in the case of Kelly, his blunderbuss poised to let fly even at any harmless evidence of lunar influences, which of course could be physical and not astrological at all.

When I first heard Dean's hypothesis on parental tampering I thought it must be an elaborate spoof, since when I have been assured that he is really, really, serious. Let me mention a theory of my own. A disproportionate number of recorded births seem to have occurred as the clock is striking the hour. This may be a hitherto unsuspected law of nature, but Dean's theory alerted me to a more sinister possibility, namely that here is a hangover of an age-old superstition which favours whole numbers and abhors fractions as from the devil. An elaborate thesis, stiff with references, could be written in justification.

Dean discovered that the exception to this rule is midnight births, which he tells us is superstitiously avoided because it is the witching hour. An alternative explanation has been suggested, to the effect that because 'midnight' could apply to one day as well as the next, practical parents, unconcerned about astrological implications, remove any ambiguity by recording the birth slightly earlier or later.

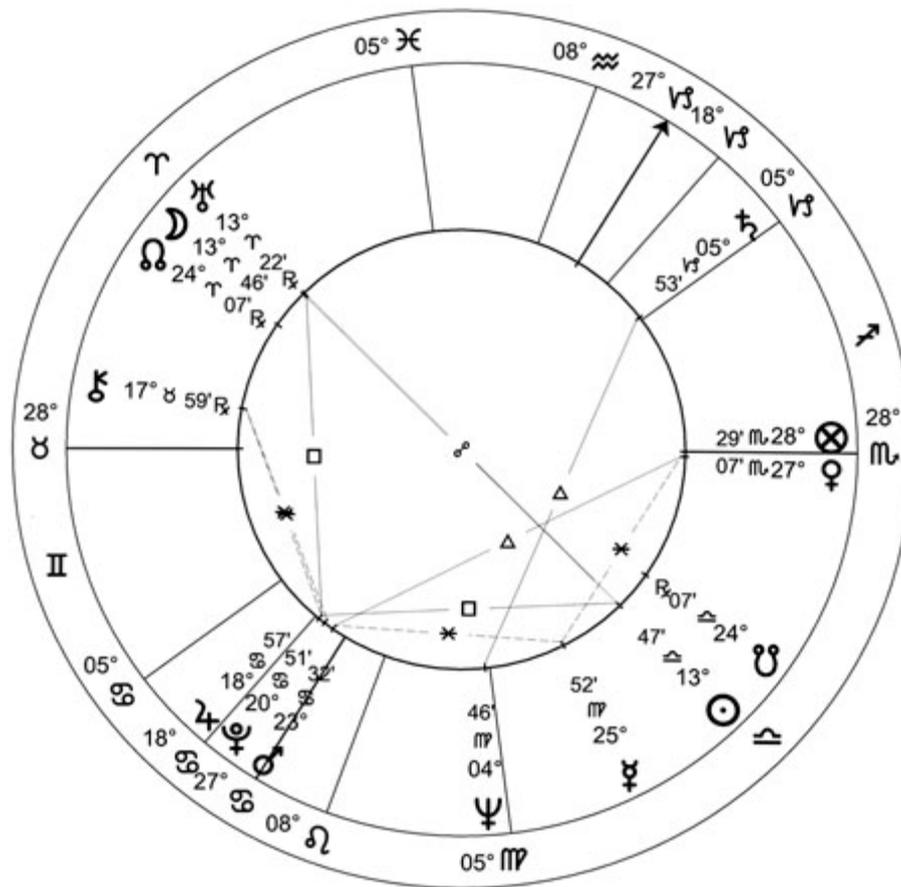
Naturally, Dean resists this erosion of his theory, in which he may well discern a sinister attempt by the covens still active today to cover their tracks

GP: The issue of open-mindedness versus prejudice is certainly an important one. Personally, I subscribe to the view (cited in the discussion of open-mindedness in *Year Zero*) of Henry H Bauer - that we can only be truly open-minded towards things we know nothing about.

³ So I have no problem in agreeing that the researchers are not 100% open-minded; I don't think it's humanly possible, particularly for people who have devoted as much effort to a subject as they have. Nor would I deny that they argue forcefully - stridently, even - to make their points. But you're no shrinking violet yourself!

At a practical level, I'd say that it's of limited interest and use to speculate whether, and to what extent, prejudice influences the researcher's arguments. If prejudice has intervened, then there should be faults in their evidence and/or arguments. So, do you have any such cases you would like to raise?

DE: Consider the reference to Naylor and the R101 disaster (pp 142-3). This great airship crashed on 5 October 1930, and Naylor had alerted his newspaper readers to the lunation of 7 October, which implicated Uranus.



Above - the lunation that caught Naylor's eye: 7 Oct 1930, 18:55 GMT, London, Campanus cusps.

This ominous eclipse was already in place, awaiting the voyage of the R101 to India. The eclipsed Moon in the 12th house was not only conjunction Uranus but in virtually exact parallel of declination, and opposed by SA/PL and MA/SA. Jupiter (on the travel axis by Campanus) was semisquare Neptune, appropriate for an airship. Saturn on the 8th cusp in Capricorn (India) is parallel Jupiter and Mars.

One thing that might be said about newspaper prediction is that you have to be very careful to avoid a situation where your intervention could damage commercial interests, an indiscretion which could prove costly. After the publicity involved in the loss of the Herald of Free Enterprise I was plagued by phone calls by parents whose chicks were about to cross the Channel, and wanted reassurance that it was safe.⁴

So Naylor was not going to advise that the wise course was not to travel in the R101. Remember that this was a national event. The maiden voyage of the airship, which carried the hopes of Britain being in the forefront of the new age of aviation, had already received publicity. Naylor must have looked at his charts and winced.

I don't know anything about his methods, but today astrologers would have picked up the fact that the lunation was not only closely conjunction Uranus, in that pioneering sign Aries, but in symmetrical opposition with Saturn/Pluto, often doom-laden, and Mars/Saturn, which can typically involve disastrous fires. Many of the passengers were incinerated beyond identification.

In reaching back 70 years to discredit this prediction, the critics do something which every hands-on astrologer will recognise as extraordinary. They insist that the disaster came too early. They tell us that: 'The crash occurred when the Moon was 33 degrees from conjunction, a long way from modern orbs of a degree or so.'

Now it will be news to those working in this field that whatever is signified by a lunation must manifest when the lunation is exact, to within a degree or so, which means a couple of hours or so. Poor dears, we have been labouring under the delusion, shared by every misguided authority on the subject, that a lunation has a spread of time in which to manifest its significance.

Moreover this was not a new moon but a full moon, and in fact a lunar eclipse. Various authorities, and modern experience, affirm that an eclipse can manifest in advance of exactitude, and a couple of days is well within the time frame. So what are the critics doing, with their Moon 33 degrees from conjunction?

I'll tell you. They are trying to score a point, bolstered by the magic of exact numbers, which may seem to the uninitiated to be valid, but which to those familiar with the subject is rubbish. It is one of those cases where if Dean and company don't know, they should know, and if they do know, then they are guilty of dissembling. They can take their pick.

For this and other reasons I think their contribution should have been subject to, how shall one say it, more critical thinking.

GP: It's an interesting point, and I think it throws light on the problems which astrologers and sceptics have in talking to one another. The researchers' argument is that, 1) Although he was in the right ballpark, Naylor got the timing wrong (he picked out 8th - 15th October, the crash happened on the 5th); and 2) 'later studies of air disasters did not confirm any link with the Moon and Uranus' - therefore, the episode is inconclusive and can't be counted as a proof of astrology.

Against this, astrologers can object that it is almost impossible to get every detail of a prediction accurate (an issue discussed in *Year Zero*, p107-8), and that to write such an incident off as 'chance' is a choice which, itself, involves a leap of faith (or should that be, 'leap of scepticism'?). The point could also be made that the complexity of chart interpretation renders it meaningless to expect lunation-Uranus aspects to reliably link to air disasters.

So far as I can see, both positions are tenable; I subscribe to the astrologer's view rather than the sceptic's, but I don't see that the sceptical position is obviously ridiculous. I think it's a loss if we can't understand the way astrology

looks when it's evaluated from a sceptical perspective - hence (as I already said) the aim with Year Zero of presenting a balanced range of positions.

DE: Naylor's predictions might seem a little amateur by modern standards, since this was a long time ago when newspaper astrology was just getting off the ground. But one interesting thing might be said about the timing of such disasters. It all depends on what you think is happening. Often the physical event serves as a trigger for something else, which may not be realised on the day, nor yet for many days.

So a little peripheral vision is needed. A disaster comes complete with a series of after-shocks, so to speak, which in the case of the R101 were as much part of the significance of the eclipse as the precipitating event itself. It is a question of reading what the charts are actually saying.

The meaning of the crash took time to dawn, and was the subject of continuing debate and recriminations. Britain, in the grip of a recession, had looked forward to leading the world again with this revolutionary airship, the largest and most lavishly appointed aircraft the world had ever seen. Now the dream lay in ruins on a French hillside, and with it the prospect for airships in commercial use.

That nasty shock, that unexpected reversal, was the primary significance of this eclipse, which of course had been in the pipeline long before flying was thought of, even by the birds! As I say in my book *Cosmic Loom* (p 40), in what topsy-turvy universe do meanings precede the events which will come to be associated with them?

The Government had put its weight and money behind this project. That same year a young engineer named Frank Whittle took out patents on his revolutionary turbojet engine. At the time, nobody was interested.

But all this is by the bye. Forget Naylor and ask what our scholar critics are doing trying to apply an orb of 33 degrees to the canon of eclipses. Nor do I understand the reference to studies of air disasters disconfirming a link with the Moon and Uranus. Are they talking about an eclipsed Moon? This casual observation, like so many others, would seem in need of fuller discussion. It seems fishy to me, straight off the red herring slab.

As for your attempt to achieve a balance, full marks for noble Libran motives. But it is not always easy to see where the balance is to be struck. If I were compiling the experiences and ideas of, say, parish priests, would I feel the book to be incomplete without introducing an adversarial view, perhaps by agnostics? Or would I need to rope in the hundreds of other Christian denominations I had not consulted? What about inviting Satanists to join the party?

Whether balance is necessary in such enterprises is debatable, but the problem with Year Zero is that an imbalance was actually created by the seeming gravitas of the 'research' chapters, in contrast to the rest, which comes across as rather jolly and disorganised. After all, here were five scholars joining forces - we are told for a full year - to land a body blow intended to knock the wind out of your book.

The objective was to convince readers that, when it came to proving astrology's claims, 'the chance of a positive result strong enough to overturn the present predominantly negative evidence seems remote.' (p 165)

They are saying, never mind about all that froth, this is the hard science, unpalatable though it may be. It reminds me of how astrology went out of fashion in the first place, and made me uneasy for the same reason. While it is popularly imagined that astrology declined because scientific truth came into the ascendancy, there was more to it than that. In fact it was a victory for the Saturn ethos - authoritarian, structured, boundary-setting. The story is told by James Burke in *The Day the Universe Changed* (1985), the companion volume to a BBC television series.

Burke recounts that at one time medicine was in direct and unfavourable competition with astrology, with astrology dominant as late as 1600. Both presented themselves as 'scientific', and both had their own explanations for disease. On the one hand medicine relied almost exclusively on bleeding and purging, which could themselves be fatal, while astrologers used a range of herbal remedies, a gentler approach.

Burke goes on: 'Astrology was not regulated by law: anyone could practise. Astrologers catered for the majority, a cross-section of the adult population, principally in country areas. They dealt with general problems defined by their clients, such as pregnancy, adultery, impotence, careers, and so on. In its use of herbal remedies astrology, unlike medicine, was remarkably efficacious. Astrologers were, however, ranked only as craftsmen.

Medicine on the other hand was elitist, predominantly urban, practiced by a smaller, more coherent group which was attempting to develop professional forms of regulation and control with the aim of excluding non-members and of better controlling the market. Medicine fitted the contemporary view of the use of knowledge, for although it was largely incapable of curing people, it concentrated on classifying and labelling what was observed.

Burke tells us that as science became increasingly institutionalised during the Restoration, medicine more easily fitted its constraints than the anarchic, disorganised practice of astrology. But even then, neither discipline could claim to be more efficacious than the other.

He concludes:

There were no breakthroughs in the ability to cure which would explain the triumph of medicine over astrology. But by 1700 astrology had lost its influence and support. The "medical" view of disease had become the accepted model for reasons that had much to do with the ability of the physicians to organise, as well as the fact that their procedures fitted the overall model – and virtually nothing to do with the scientific superiority of their methods over those of astrology.

It makes you wonder whether astrology is forever destined to be in competition with the dead hand of orthodoxy. But while it refuses to be cramped by the black

box of scientific materialism, it retains its potential power to lead human thought out into brighter vistas.

GP: Personally, I think that astrology will always be a maverick subject. This seems consistent with the art's own symbolism - whether you consider astrology to be ruled by Mercury (as per tradition) or Uranus, you have something which is elusive, volatile, hard to pin down. So perhaps it is in its nature to remain on the fringes of orthodox acceptance.

The view one takes on this will, I suppose, depend largely on whether astrology is viewed as entirely scientific by nature, working by clearly discernible rules which could (at least in theory) be applied by a computer; or whether one considers judgement to depend on a non-rational, indefinable quality of the astrologer's mind.

Anyway, given that I was set on talking to people of a sceptical persuasion, surely you would agree that it was better for me to seek the participation of a group who can comment on astrology from a basis of experience, rather than (say) Richard Dawkins?

DE: At least Dawkins and others might have given the real reason why scientists reject astrology out of hand. They do not see how the planets could possibly bring about their alleged effects, and moreover there is scant evidence, at least in their terms, for such an unlikely proposition. Astrology, still 'anarchic and disorganised', continues to defy the overall model, yet has largely failed to develop a model of its own, from which scientific orthodoxy might ultimately learn something.

This model would be essentially holistic, and there are signs that new ideas are taking shape which might propel science in such a direction. What is called complexity theory is encouraging thinkers in several fields to recognise that 'isolates' may be networked in meaningful ways. Perhaps astrology could steer complexity theory into multiplexity theory, to stress that reality (with consciousness as its ground?) simultaneously contains manifold messages.

So with the arrival of enough virgin minds, and as scientific prejudice begins to die away along with its holders, there could be an eventual rendezvous with astrology. It will be no thanks to Dean and his cohorts, who have been following a different agenda. You may argue that at least they know what a chart looks like, but then the Trojan horse was already inside the city gates, wasn't it?

GP: You particularly objected to the researchers' suggestion that astrologers need to improve their general education, and in particular their critical thinking skills.⁵ Could you explain your objections?

DE: Well, it's patronising, it's condescending. In any debate you cannot seriously claim a monopoly on objective thought, no more than you can credibly allege that those who take a different view to your own must be deficient in their general education.

There is nothing wrong with critical thinking, in the right place. But introductory astrology texts, of which they complain, are hardly the right place. In common with beginners' books generally, they get down to the business of giving their readers hands-on knowledge. It is tongue-in-cheek, and merely mischievous, for them to suggest that introductions to any subject (and most of all astrology!) must contain instructions on how to think.

In every subject there is a 'given', basic information which has to be accepted before, paradoxically, you can reach a position where you are capable of judging its value. As the Dean team put it (p 159): 'Critical thinking is about evaluating evidence, judging conclusions, and considering alternatives.' But knowledge and skill in many areas has to be acquired through uncritical thinking. If you want to strain teacher's patience, be forever asking 'why?', question every conclusion, and suggest looking at alternative possibilities.

There is a more important philosophical dimension. To imply that astrology must be amenable to critical thinking, because they desperately want it to be, would turn it into a different sort of animal. The reason is that critical thinking is analytical and reductionist, whereas the truth of astrology depends not so much on analysis as synthesis, and its ability not to reduce but enlarge meanings. It is essentially holistic.

There are two equally valid approaches to understanding anything. We can break it down into its constituents, to see how it's put together. Alternatively we can view it as itself belonging to a larger scheme. In other words, we can see it as a whole or a part. In his *Recent Advances* Dean writes: 'No amount of holism leads to the understanding of a clock unless it has been taken to pieces first. It is a fact of life that all complex problems have to be simplified in order to be tackled, and everything is won or lost by the way it is simplified. Hence reductionism must precede holism if we are to gain genuine insight, and neither is dispensable.' (p 2)

But all those bits and pieces are trivial beside the perspective of the clock as part of a larger scheme. Hence, if I look up 'clock' in the dictionary it does not tell me that it is a box containing gears, flywheels, assorted screws, and so forth. It says that a clock is a device for indicating or measuring time. The essence of the clock, therefore, does not lie in its innards, rather is it a concept involving purpose, intention. Its predecessor, the sundial, is even more informative here, since no demolition of the gnomon, no examination of its metal, will explain what it's for.

If we place anything in its larger context, seeing it as part of a system, we enter the realm of meaning, concepts, purpose, intention. The ultimate role of astrology is to collect the parts into wholes, to put the bits of the giant jigsaw together so that they become more comprehensible precisely because of their interrelationships. This process leads in the opposite direction to reductionism. For instance, going back to my picture of Sagittarians, I would view their candour as the everyday expression of a respect for truth, and their offering of advice as part of an innate respect for wisdom. These are high-level concepts, and I would say they are beyond the reach of what is described specifically as critical thinking, though not beyond thought itself.

GP: I'd like to pursue your observation that the 'researchers' claim their position to be somehow definitive. Take this statement from them:

Rather than demonstrate their claims under artifact-free conditions, or specify what research would be relevant or how controversies and disagreements might be dealt with, astrologers retreat behind a smokescreen of speculation about the nature of truth, reality, perception, language, and so on.⁶

I wouldn't want to deny that a lot of nonsense has been spouted over the years in attempts to defend astrology. But when the 'researchers' suggest, as they do repeatedly, that ideas about astrology which don't lead to tests are of no value, they are saying that science is the primary arbiter of reality, with any questions about how we interpret and understand that reality having only secondary significance. So I agree with you here, I believe they do think of science as having a monopoly in determining what is real. The fact that this is in itself a philosophical position – and therefore capable of being challenged in philosophical terms – is a point which, it seems to me, they never properly get to grips with. This is one of the themes of chapters 11 and 12 of *Year Zero*.

Whilst I therefore find the researchers' case less convincing than they do, I don't find their conviction as implausible as you sometimes seem to. As you say in *Cosmic Loom*, "if (astrology's) testimony is valid it means we have mistaken the nature of our reality."⁷ So to really understand astrology must entail a radical switch of world-view, and I see no reason to doubt that intelligent people might, in all sincerity, decide to keep their world-view rather than their astrology.

So far as critical thinking goes – I take your point on this, but don't think that critical thinking, in itself, has to lead towards reductionism, provided we begin with an adequate definition. Critical thinking can include the possibility of neither accepting nor rejecting an assertion but simply working with it as a hypothesis and seeing what happens.⁸ On that basis we could say that many of us, including some who would now see themselves as sceptics, used critical thinking to test and validate astrology.

I think there is something to be said for developing critical thinking within astrology, though not perhaps in quite the form that the 'researchers' have in mind. You mentioned the problem of astrologers cluttering up their approach by adding one technique after another. This is, surely, a consequence of a naïve model of astrology, under which, more methods of analysis, more sources of information, have to be a Good Thing. If (as some astrologers argue) astrology is more akin to a language than to a physical science, then what is needed is for the astrologer to figure out an approach to chart-reading which is consistent and coherent, rather than comprehensive. To point out that it is neither possible nor desirable to incorporate every possible point, body, and technique in one's astrology seems to me like the kind of critical thinking which would be very useful in introductory books on astrology.

I think you and I agree that the questions raised here are vital, for astrology and indeed for our understanding of this world and our place in it. I suppose what is at issue between us is, whether or not the inclusion of the researchers' chapters in *Year Zero* was the best way to encourage discussion and promote

understanding. It still seems to me that, in the context of the entire book, those two sceptical chapters do not overpower the astrological chapters. They certainly pose questions for astrologers: if we disagree with what is being said here, why? What are the weak points in the arguments? But what I have heard from readers suggests that they generally go away grappling with these issues, rather than being convinced by the sceptical case. And so long as it incites astrologers to talk about astrology's big questions – as we have done here – I think *Zero* will be worth something.

[End]

Notes

¹ An extended version of the interview can be found at: www.astrozero.co.uk/astroscience/research.htm

² See: www.astrozero.co.uk/astroscience/elres.htm

³ "Having explicitly learned certain things, scientists and science have at the same time learned implicitly that other things are not so. We could then be truly open-minded only about things that we do not yet know about at all." - p.77, Henry H Bauer, 1992: *Scientific Literacy and the Myth of the Scientific Method*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press (quoted p.174, *Astrology in the Year Zero*).

⁴ Dennis had warned of such a disaster. This episode is discussed in [this article by him on skyscript.co.uk](#), and in p.105-6 of *Year Zero*.

⁵ See Section 7 of [The Researchers Researched](#) for Dennis's comments; p158-9 of *Year Zero* for the remarks on critical thinking which provoked him.

⁶ *Astrology in the Year Zero*, p.152.

⁷ *Cosmic Loom*, p.ix.

⁸ Based on article, *Informal Logic* in Ted Honderich, 1995: *Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, Oxford: OUP (which identifies 'Critical Thinking' with 'Informal Logic').

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