

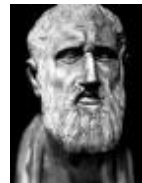
Stoics

What was it that made fatalistic astrology astronomy survive in the face of persistent onslaughts from the best minds of the Greek world? Frederick Cramer proposes in *Astrology in Roman Law and Politics* (1954) that one answer is that there was a faith which was as deep as the skepticism of their enemies, a faith in reason. Astrologer/astronomers and their followers believed that through the ages since the creation of the world, there have been chains of cause and effect relations which have obeyed immutable laws of nature which not even a deity can contravene. They believed that the cosmos functions like a well-designed machine constructed on rational principles and governed entirely by rational laws of nature.

Some philosophers of the Hellenistic era found in rational fatalism something scientists of all ages have hoped for, assurance that their concepts of the nature of things possess cosmic validity in space and time. These philosophers became supporters of fatalism, and championed fatalistic astrology/astronomy. Their logic seemed to them to be sound. That some stars – for instance, the sun – have some powerful influence on people is unquestionable. Five other celestial bodies besides the sun and moon were known whose orbits wandered among the fixed stars, the five then-known planets of our solar system. It was thought that these were also likely to influence mundane affairs.

Among those who were strict fatalists were the philosophers known as Stoics. However, not all Stoics were strict fatalists. Some of them argued that people have free will to choose moral attitudes to predicted inevitable future events, knowing that they will occur, and when they occur.

Stoicism, founded by Zeno of Citium (364–262 B.C.) was one of the foremost philosophical doctrines of the Hellenistic era. Stoics were prime supporters of astrology. On the whole they tried to base their views on what they took to be the best physical science of their time, and they did a fair bit of theorizing about the nature of things.



The Stoics differed among themselves as to the constitution of nature. According to David Hahn in *Origins of Stoic Cosmology* (1977) Zeno defined nature as "a craftsmanlike fire, proceeding by a path to genesis." Hahn emphasizes that Zeno meant that nature *is* fire, one of the four basic elements in the Aristotelian theory of the constitution of nature – air, fire, water and earth. Zeno's dynamic "fire" suggests the concept of energy as used in present-day science. Here Zeno differs sharply from Aristotle, for whom fire or heat was the most active and important element in nature, but still only a tool that nature uses to accomplish its ends, and not nature itself. The Stoic Cleanthes held a similar view, although he seems to have spoken of "vital heat" rather than fire as the substance that holds together the cosmos. Hahn comments that the most striking thing about the three functions of heat in Cleanthes view is that they correspond to the three functions of soul in Aristotle,



the nutritive, perceptive and rational faculties of the soul. What for Aristotle is caused by soul, for Cleanthes is caused by the vital heat. The Stoic Chrysippus held a theory of pneuma. The pneuma, according to Chrysippus, is a kind of mixture of fire and air, and it is what the material "world-soul" is made out of. In Chrysippus' view, it is the pneuma which holds everything together.

Some of the Stoics were as strict, or stricter, determinists than Laplace was. Pierre Simon Laplace (1749-1827) is a symbol of belief in the usefulness of Newton's laws of classical mechanics for predicting the future and retrodicting the past, on the basis that the future and past are completely determined, and completely describable by means of these laws. According to Newton's prescription, this is to be done by setting up differential equations using his laws of motion, and solving them to find expressions from which quantitative predictions and retrodictions can be derived. In his works, Laplace asserts that all events, no matter how momentous or insignificant, follow certain mathematically formulable laws of nature just as surely, he says, as the revolutions of the planets follow from Newton's laws of motion and gravitation. When people don't know what links some events to the rest of the universe, they may attribute them to final causes, goals to which they tend, or to divine purpose, or to sheer chance. But, he says, these are only expressions of our ignorance of true causes. An event can't occur without a cause. For example, we make choices only when we are caused to, for otherwise our choices would be the result of blind chance, which Laplace rejects. We should regard the present state of the world as the effect of its previous states, and the cause of its subsequent states. An intelligence who could know at a given instant values for all the forces or momenta which propel nature, and values for the positions of all the bodies in it, could enter these values into statements of the laws of mechanics and calculate future or past momenta and positions. However much of nature is determined by forces and positions – Laplace evidently believed this to be all of nature – could be predicted or retrodicted in this way. However, Laplace says, the human mind offers only a weak idea of such an intelligence, as seen in the perfection which it has been able to bring to astronomy and mechanics.



It has been said that Stoics invented astrophysics because they believed that the same physical laws apply throughout the universe. They believed that such laws determine everything that happens. Nevertheless, they maintained we are still free in the sense that we can always choose or not choose to accept *stoically* what's going to happen. Accepting what will happen constitutes living according to Nature. Whether or not we live according to Nature makes no difference to what happens. What is bound to happen will happen anyway. But how we accept what happens makes a great difference in the quality of our lives. We can act in conflict with Nature, and suffer disappointment and pain and grief. Or we can walk with Fate, and achieve peace. Furthermore, some Stoics believed that since all things are constituted of the same stuff and subject to the same laws, there is a kind of universal cosmic sympathy among things, which is what makes divination and astrology work.

H. Rackham says in an introduction to Cicero's *De Natura Deorum (On the Nature of the Gods)*, 1933, 1951: "The Stoics . . . held that the universe is controlled by God, and in the last resort is God. The sole ultimate reality is the divine Mind, which expresses itself in the world-process. But only matter exists,

for only matter can act and be acted upon. Mind therefore is matter in its subtlest form, Fire or Breath or Aether. The primal fiery Spirit creates out of itself the world that we know, persists in it as its heat or soul or tension, is the cause of all movement and all life, and ultimately by a universal conflagration will reabsorb the world into itself. But there will be no pause. At once the process will begin again, unity will again pluralize itself, and all will repeat the same course as before. Existence goes on for ever in endlessly recurring cycles, following a fixed law or formula (*logos*). This law is Fate or Providence, ordained by God." This is reminiscent of Indian beliefs in *yugas*, discussed in Section 1 above in connection with the temple at Angkor Wat in Cambodia.

Some Stoics held that the 'Logos' is God, and the universe is perfectly good. Badness is only apparent. Evil, they said, only means the necessary imperfection of the parts viewed separately from the whole. Stoic systems were deterministic, but in some of them they found room for freedom of the will. Man's acts like all other occurrences are the necessary effects of causes; yet man's will is free, for it rests with him to either willingly obey necessity, or to submit to it with reluctance. Man's happiness lies in using divine intellect to understand the laws of the world, and in submitting to them.

In his *L'Astrologie grecque* (1899) Auguste Bouché-Leclercq says of Stoic attitudes toward astrology: "That which especially predisposed the Stoics to declare themselves guarantors of astrological speculations, and to look for demonstrable reasons for them, was their unshakable faith in the legitimacy of divination, of which astrology is only one particular form. They never wanted to depart from a kind of reasoning that their adversaries considered a vicious circle and which can be summarized like this: 'If the gods exist, they speak; in fact they speak, therefore they exist'. The conception of beings of superior intelligence that would be forbidden to communicate with man appeared to them to be nonsense." However, Bouché-Leclercq says, an ordinary person wants to know the future in order to avoid predicted dangers. On the face of it, this involves the person in a contradiction. For he or she wants to be able to modify what has been predicted to be certain to happen.

It appears, though, that we can escape from this contradiction by holding that when we divine the will of the gods, we find what will happen if such and such conditions aren't met – a sacrifice or other offering is not made, or the like. Bouché-Leclercq argues against this. He says: "If the future is conditional, it cannot be foreseen, since the conditions could be too, in which case there would be no more place among them for free acts, with freedom escaping by definition because of the necessity of arriving at a decision set down in advance."

That is, if some future outcomes depend on and can be influenced by actions previous to the outcomes, then the outcomes cannot be predicted. For if they could be predicted, then what previous actions will be taken could also be predicted, since the previous actions are themselves future outcomes. Thus there is no real choice possible among previous actions to be taken.

Bouché-Leclercq assumes here unrestricted divination. On the other hand, the Stoic Epictetus (1st century A.D.) says that a diviner can see some things which will happen in the future (death, danger, disease), but not others (what is good or

bad)). To this extent, he doesn't admit unrestricted divination. He says: "What can the diviner see more than death or danger or disease or generally things of that sort? Does he know what is expedient, does he know what is good, has he learnt signs to distinguish between good things and bad, like the signs in the flesh of victims [animals sacrificed]? Therefore that is a good answer that the lady made who wished to send the shipload of supplies to Gratilla in exile, when one said, 'Domitian will take them away': 'I would rather', she said, 'that Domitian should take them away than that I should not send them.' What then leads us to consult diviners so constantly? Cowardice, fear of events. That is why we flatter the diviners. 'Master, shall I inherit from my father?' "Let us see; let us offer sacrifice.' 'Yes, master, as fortune wills.' When he says, 'You shall inherit', we give thanks to him as though we had received the inheritance from him. That is why they go on deluding us." (*Arrian's Discourses of Epictetus*, II.47, in *The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers*, 1940, edited by Matheson & Oates). No matter what diviners say is portended, we should do what's good, not what's bad. One is free to choose a moral attitude to what's inevitable.

Bouché-Leclercq continues: "The Stoics valiantly accepted the consequences of their own principles. They used them to demonstrate the reality of Providence, the certainty of divination, and they went into ecstasies at every turn about the beautiful order of the world, due to the punctual carrying out of a divine plan, as immutable as it is wise. But they were no less decisive in rejecting the moral consequences of fatalism, above all the 'lazy reasoning', which always ends by letting inevitable destiny alone. Chrysippus turned out prodigies of ingenuity to loosen, without breaking, the links with Necessity, distinguishing between necessity properly so-called, and predestination, between 'perfect and principal' causes and 'adjuvant' causes, between things fated in themselves and things "cofated" or fated by association; trying to distinguish, from the point of view of fatality, between the past, of which the contrary is in reality impossible, and the future, of which the contrary is also impossible, but which can be conceived as possible. All things considered, the Stoic school succeeded in saving only the freedom of the Sage, which consists in freely wanting what the universal Intelligence wants. The Sage exercises this freedom better, the better and longer in advance he knows the divine plan."

Here is how it appeared in the 2nd century A.D. to a Stoic astrologer, Vettius Valens, from his *Anthologiae* (in *Arcana Mundi, Magic and the Occult in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, Georg Luck, 1985): "Fate has decreed for every human being the unalterable realization of his horoscope, fortifying it with many causes of good and bad things to come. Because of them, two self-begotten goddesses, Hope and Chance, act as the servants of Destiny. They rule our lives. By compulsion and deception they make us accept what has been decreed.

"One of them [Chance] manifests herself to all through the outcome of the horoscope, showing herself sometimes as good and kind, sometimes as dark and cruel. The other [Hope] is neither dark nor serene; she hides herself and goes around in disguise and smiles at everyone like a flatterer and points out to them many attractive prospects that are impossible to attain. By such deceit she rules most people, and they, though tricked by her and dependent on pleasure, let themselves be pulled back to her, and full of hope they believe that their wishes will be fulfilled; and then they experience what they do not expect.

“Those who are not familiar with astrological forecasts and have no wish to study them are driven away and enslaved by the goddesses mentioned above. They undergo every kind of punishment and suffer gladly. But those who make truth and the forecasting of the future their profession acquire a soul that is free and not subject to slavery. They despise Chance, do not persist in hoping, are not afraid of death, and live unperturbed. They have trained their souls to be brave and are not puffed up by prosperity nor depressed by adversity but accept contentedly what comes their way. Since they have renounced all kinds of pleasure and flattery, they have become good soldiers of Fate. For it is impossible by prayers or sacrifice to overcome the foundation that was laid in the beginning and substitute another more to one's liking. Whatever is in store for us will happen even if we do not pray for it; what is not fated will not happen, despite our prayers. Like actors on the stage who change their masks according to the poet's text and calmly play kings or robbers or farmers or common folk or gods, so, too, we must act the characters that Fate has assigned to us and adapt ourselves to what happens in any given situation, even if we do not agree. For if one refuses, as the Stoic Cleanthes said, “he will suffer anyway and get no credit”.”

Tamsyn Barton is skeptical about considering Stoics to have been as much devoted to astrology as has been claimed by some. In her *Power and Knowledge: Astrology, Physiognomics, and Medicine under the Roman Empire* (1994), she says in connection with the flourishing of astrology in Late Republican Rome: “Much has been attributed to the influence of the Stoic Posidonius on Rome on elite Romans in the generation before Cicero and Julius Caesar in making astrology intellectually respectable. But, as A. A. Long (1982) observes, the older authorities who formed this consensus, such as Cumont, were writing at a time when it was fashionable to see Posidonius' trademark everywhere. Long rightly casts a skeptical eye over the evidence for Stoic enthusiasm for astrology in the early period. It is true that in Stoicism the existence of the gods required divination and that astrology would suit the Stoic search for natural signs revealing the order of the universe, but the evidence is scanty. . . . This is the period in which horoscopic astrology takes off in the Hellenistic world, and it could be seen as a natural move from other sorts of divination. He concludes, however, that astrology was at most a subordinate feature of Stoic interest in divination.”

On the other hand, Barton says: "Long is surely right to recognize that the Stoics cannot be convincingly isolated as the determining factor in the rise to prominence of astrology in Rome, though he overstates the case against their interest, in this period. It seems clear that Stoic ideas, as generally diffused among the ruling elite, did lend themselves to the support of astrology, and that their concept of cosmic sympatheia (harmony) binding together the heavens and the earth became the first axiom of philosophical astrology.” The reference to Long is A. A. Long, "Astrology: arguments pro and contra" in *Science and Speculation: Studies in Hellenistic Theory and Practice*, 1982.

Hellenistic astrologers might have welcomed Laplace's deterministic methods of prediction. His methods would have enabled them to calculate past and future positions of stars with apparent certainty. Such calculations are the basis of deterministic astrology. Frederick Cramer says that in Republican Rome from 140 B.C. to the death of Julius Caesar in 44 B.C., the more a person adhered to

Stoicism, the more liable he or she would be to accept fatalistic astrology. The 96 years from the consulate of Laelius (140 B.C.) to the death of Julius Caesar encompassed a crucial period in the history of astrology in the Roman republic. In 139 B.C. astrologers had been summarily expelled as undesirable foreigners. By the time of Julius Caesar's death, the majority of Rome's upper class had been converted to a belief in it. To a humanist who believed in rationalism and the governance of nature by immutable laws linking cause and effect, astrology was scientific, and it linked mundane causality with the cosmic laws which regulated the movements of the stars and ruled the universe.

For Stoics, the starry sky was the "purest embodiment of reason in the cosmic hierarchy, the paradigm of intelligibility, and therefore of the divine aspect of the sensible realm." (Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 2nd edition, 1963). In his *Meditations*, VII.47, Marcus Aurelius (121-180 A.D.) tells us that we should watch the stars in their courses as if we were running along with them, and that we should continually think about how the elements change into one another, for such thoughts wash away the foulness of life on earth.