

Editorial: Astrology

Of the 36 elected Presidents of the United States, up to and including Richard Nixon, 29 were born on or between 1 October and 30 April. This figure was given in a letter to the Editor of *New Scientist* published on 25 September 1975. The author calculated that the odds were a hundred to one against this being a chance phenomenon. He added that only three out of eight who have succeeded to the Presidency from the Vice-Presidency have birthdays in the same period. Clearly there is more than a frivolous trendiness, or a calculating sensitivity to the current need for high student enrolment, behind the willingness of Harvard University to announce a new course on Astrology under the dignified title of Natural Science 9.

The letter arose from a special feature on astrology in the Autumn issue of *The Humanist*, the journal of the American Humanist Association and the American Ethical Union. The journal is predictably and cogently caustic about the superstitions of late twentieth century America. When T. S. Eliot noted that

To communicate with Mars, converse with spirits,
To report the behaviour of the sea monster,
Describe the horoscope, haruspicate or scry,
Observe disease in signatures, evoke
Biography from the wrinkles of the palm
And tragedy from fingers

are traditional 'Pastimes and drugs, and features of the press', he seemed to be resigned if not reconciled to the prospect that they

always will be, some of them especially
When there is distress of nations and perplexity
Whether on the shores of Asia, or in the Edgware Road.

The Humanist is more optimistic, and hopes by an application of argument, statistics and appeal to scientific authority to persuade us that Comets weep and Leonids fly without making Saturday a bad day for meeting new people or Friday afternoon a good time for dealing with urgent business. The argument is chiefly found in Bart J. Bok's article 'A Critical Look at Astrology', and the statistics in Lawrence E. Jerome's 'Astrology: Magic or Science?' Professor Bok does astrology the honour of supposing that the forces it speaks of are among those otherwise known to science, and patiently rules out gravitational and radiational influence from the reckoning. Mr Jerome is unimpressed by the hypothesis that there is a causal link rather than an accidental correlation between the eleven-year

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sunspot cycle and the annual fluctuations of the lynx and rabbit populations of Canada. It is pleasant to find that James R. Barth and James T. Bennett, who 'tested the claim of an influence of Mars on military careers and found no significant correlation', had the sang-froid to publish their findings in the *Journal of Irreproducible Results*.

Some of the scientific authority is imported from the United Kingdom. 'Objections to Astrology: A Statement by 186 Leading Scientists' is signed by Sir Peter Medawar, Sir Fred Hoyle, Francis Crick and Sir Alan Cottrell as well as by Linus Pauling, B. F. Skinner, Paul A. Samuelson and Hans A. Bethe. Though all the scientists are leading, some are more leading than others. The 18 Nobel Laureates have signed separately, forming a first division like that reserved for the nobility in the 'Forthcoming Marriages' column of *The Times*.

Whether Eliot was right or wrong, it is doubtful whether the statement will have much effect, and this is partly because of a paradoxical tension that is implicit in any such enterprise. A one page manifesto followed by several columns of signatures is bound to present an air of dogmatism, even if the object of its strictures is 'the unquestioning acceptance of the predictions and advice given privately and publicly by astrologers'. Readers with a healthy sense of independence may also hold back from unquestioning acceptance of the bare assertion that 'It is simply a mistake to imagine that the forces exerted by stars and planets at the moment of birth can in any way shape our futures'.

The Editor of *The Humanist* is a philosopher, Professor Paul Kurtz of Buffalo. It is a pity that he did not allow himself some space to enlarge upon the epistemology of the subject. Though a belief in astrology is certainly a mistake it is not quite such a simple mistake as the scientists suggest. If it were an isolated and straightforward blunder, capable of being briefly and conclusively exposed, there would be no natural place for their own document, which has the tone and idiom of ecclesiastical anathema rather than the keen unpassioned beauty of a great machine like Euclidean geometry or Newtonian mechanics. Wherever a question involves conflict between one pervasive outlook and another, even if one of the outlooks prides itself on its loyalty to reason and the other is brazenly challenging the authority of science, the issues will include some that are too informal and amorphous to be settled in a few brisk moves. This is not a reason for suggesting that rational methods do not apply to such questions, but for understanding the scope of reason and the variety of its methods more widely than they are often understood by 'scientific humanism' and some other modern philosophies. The irrationalist will be more likely to come home to reason if the rest of us recognise and try to show that its house has many mansions. The lines that we have quoted from *Four Quartets* were composed in one of those mansions. From another window in the same house comes the voice of Mr Donald Swann, singing an argument

from *At the Drop of Another Hat*—an argument that is all the more persuasive for being somewhat oblique:

And I gaze at the planets in wonder
At the trouble and time they expend,
All to warn *me* to be careful
In dealings involving a friend.