Astrology, one of the oldest of the occult sciences, is, in a sense, the ancestor of astronomy, but it cannot be entirely separated from it. In fact, the Latin words *astrologia* and *astronomia* both designate what is today called “astrology.” Even in English, the term *astronomy* had both meanings until the beginning of the Enlightenment. The Greek word *mathesis* ‘learning’ can mean specifically “astrology,” while *mathematikos* is not so much a “mathematician” as an “astrologer.” In the ancient world, as today, astrology was based on mathematics and astronomy. The interest in astronomy and its development as a science in the modern sense can be explained in part by its practical value to the astrologer. And even though astrology may appear to be nonsensical to a modern scientist, it has been called the most “scientific” of all the occult sciences.¹

Astrology had its beginnings in Mesopotamia, among the Chaldeans, who seem to have been a caste of Babylonian priests, though the name was originally used for the inhabitants of Kaldū in southeastern Babylonia. They probably used their astronomical knowledge to establish calendars and determine the dates of religious festivals. In later antiquity, every astrologer, whether he came from Mesopotamia or not, was called a “Chaldean.”² Meanwhile, the Assyrians had conquered Babylonia and developed astrological techniques. Their king, Ashurbanipal, compiled an enormous archive in which astrological charts were kept on clay tablets, probably matching predictions with events, but also, it seems, establishing reliable ephemerides—that is, tables showing the computed or observed place of a heavenly body from day to day over many centuries—so that errors could be corrected. Although some lenses made of rock crystal have been found, neither the Babylonians nor the Assyrians may have had precision instruments with which to observe the stars. Perhaps the clear skies of the region made telescopes less necessary than they are today. In any event, the mathematical techniques and the methods of teamwork that were developed during this period were quite advanced.³
There are two main types of ancient astrology: (1) “judicial” astrology (first attested in Chaucer), which predicts from celestial or meteorological phenomena the future of the king or the country (whether there will be wars, famines, and floods, or good harvests, peace, and prosperity); and (2) horoscopic astrology, which relates to the character and fortune of an individual. The first type seems to be older than the second; for a long time astrology was apparently a privilege of kings. But both types are based on the belief that the position of the planets in the zodiac determines the future of an individual and, if this individual happens to be a king, that of his country as well.

The horoscope of a child born on April 29, 263 B.C., may be quoted as an example of Babylonian astrology: “At the time [of birth] the Sun was in 13:30° Aries, the Moon in 10° Aquarius, Jupiter at the beginning of Leo, Venus with the Sun, Saturn in Cancer, Mars at the end of Cancer. . . . He will be lacking in wealth. . . . His food will not satisfy his hunger. The wealth that he has in youth will not remain [?]. For thirty-six years he will have wealth. His days will be long.” (The rest of the text is obscure.)

In this Babylonian nativity, the Sun is very strong in Aries, the second-best position for it, after its natural place in Leo, and so the prediction mentions longevity and health. But if a planet was in a sign opposed to its natural rulership, only evil could come; thus, in the Babylonian chart, Saturn in Cancer is unfavorable (Cancer is opposite to Capricorn, where Saturn has its home), and so loss of money and possessions, a wasting away of material things, is predicted.

From Babylonia, astrological lore traveled to the other Hellenized parts of the Middle East, especially Egypt, but also to Greece. In the early decades of the third century B.C., a Babylonian priest, Berossus, dedicated a work on Babylonian history (now lost) to King Antiochus I (324–261 B.C.), the second ruler of the Seleucid Empire, an important outpost of Greek civilization in the East. This work, which included astrological doctrine, probably made its way to Egypt, where an ambitious astrological text ascribed to “Nechepso” and “Petosiris” was composed in the second half of the second century B.C. Nechepso and Petosiris claimed to have derived their knowledge from the god Hermes, but it seems reasonable to assume that they were familiar with Babylonian sources.

The new doctrine then spread through the Greek world and was eagerly discussed by the different philosophical schools. Aristotle had already described the stars as beings with supernatural intelligence, incorporeal deities, and ascribed to them a rational sort of influence on life on earth. Most Stoic philosophers accepted astrology because of their belief in fate and their acceptance of the law of cosmic sympathy. Astrology was
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rejected, however, by skeptics within the later Platonic Academy (e.g., by Carneades) and outside it (e.g., by Sextus Empiricus).

Something ought also to be said about the way astrology was treated in Old Testament times. The people of Israel knew, of course, that it was a prestigious art among their neighbors, the Babylonians and the Assyrians, and there is some evidence that, at times, even in Israel, the powers of the stars were recognized, though these powers were considered subordinate to Yahweh, not independent of him. In one of the oldest surviving pieces of Hebrew literature, the Song of Deborah, written after Barak’s victory over Sisera, we read (Judges 5:20): “The stars have fought from heaven above; the stars in their courses have fought against Sisera.” But the Song of Deborah is intended as a hymn of thanksgiving to Yahweh.

Isaiah (or rather the “Second Isaiah,” a later prophet) scorned the Chaldean astrologers (Isaiah 47:13): “Let your astrologers, your stargazers who predict your future month by month, stand up and save you.” He groups these astrologers with the magicians as “advisers” of the king and the people of Babylon: they claim to be able to save their nation, but they are all doomed. This attitude seems to be more typical of the Old Testament.

In the Book of Daniel, which, according to tradition, was composed in the sixth century B.C. at the court of Babylon, Daniel is made chief of the “wise men” of Babylon, that is, the astrologers and magicians (Daniel 2:48), and yet he remains faithful to the laws of his religion (Daniel 1). Hence, it may have been thought permissible for a Jew to practice astrology under certain circumstances. The Book of Daniel is believed by many scholars to have been written in the second century B.C., however, and if that is true, it reflects the ideas of the Hellenistic period.

It was, in fact, in Egypt that astrology found fertile soil, as magic had. Here the precepts formulated by the Chaldeans were organized into a system. Astrologers were now available to ordinary people, and they were consulted on all kinds of matters—business, politics, love. Some astrologers, like the one in Propertius 4.1.7–20, might even claim for themselves the status of a seer or hierophant, thus sharing with the magician a kind of occult knowledge that gave him power and impressed his clients. But there is also genuine “astral mysticism,” corresponding to the religious feelings that alchemists sometimes experienced: see Ptolemy’s epigram [no. 121] and Vettius Valens’ testimony [no. 123] that astrology has freed him from fear and desire.

The earliest Greek horoscopes are preserved on papyri or graffiti from the first century B.C., but the practice itself must be much older. Indeed, the belief in astrology, as well as the belief in daemons and magic, was practically universal for many centuries. The symbol for Taurus, the sign of Venus, whom Julius Caesar claimed as his divine ancestress, was spread
by his legions through many countries. Augustus had his horoscope pub-
lished, and the symbol of Capricorn, his native sign, was stamped on the
coins he issued.

Astrological Handbooks

Because astrology was a highly technical subject in antiquity, it was taught
from handbooks, some of which have survived. Unfortunately, none of
them covers every aspect thoroughly enough for one to learn how to
become a practitioner from it. The authors of these handbooks were
probably reluctant to divulge their craft as a whole and thus held back
certain information for their more advanced students.

Here it is possible to give only a brief survey of the more important
texts. Many more are extant in the great libraries of Europe, but only
a fraction have been published, even though their contents are roughly
known.8

One of the earliest texts that is still extant was written under Augus-
tus and Tiberius at the beginning of the first century A.D. It is not a
handbook at all, but a didactic poem written in hexameters. About its
author, Manilius, almost nothing is known. Since didactic poems are
never meant to be exhaustive technical treatises, it is not surprising that
no one could learn from this work how to cast a nativity. It offers a certain
amount of technical information, but for the most part it deals with the
philosophical basis of astrology and the beauty of its concepts. It might be
called an invitation to study the subject more thoroughly from other
sources, but it does not take the place of such a work.9

Ptolemy, whose *Tetrabiblos* was written in the first half of the second
century A.D., was one of the greatest scientists of his age as well as a fine
mathematician and an able astronomical observer. In this work he at-
ttempts to prove “scientifically” the influence of the stars on human life
and on life on earth in general. At the beginning he deals with critics and
skeptics (anticipating some of the arguments of Sextus Empiricus *Against
the Astrologers*, which was written c. A.D. 200). Then he states the basic
doctrines of astrology. The planets have their properties through sharing
one or more of the four elemental qualities: hot, cold, dry, and moist.
Elsewhere he deals with more technical questions, such as the determina-
tion of the exact time of birth by means of an astrolabe—no other devices
are fully reliable.

Vettius Valens, the author of *Anthologiae (Excerpts)*, lived at about the
same time as Ptolemy. His voluminous work comes closer to a systematic
textbook than those just mentioned, even though the title suggests that it
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is not complete. It seems to have been written for a fairly advanced practicing astrologer who wanted to add to his experience.

Firmicus Maternus (c. A.D. 335) wrote an introduction to astrology entitled *Libri Matheseos*. Like Ptolemy, he deals with such philosophical questions as destiny versus free will and finds a compromise along Neo-platonist lines: the soul, being divine, is not wholly dependent on the powers represented or indicated by the stars. In a slightly different form, this argument would also appeal to a Christian, and it seems that Firmicus did convert to Christianity at one point in his life. He quotes many older authorities—Nechepso, Petosiris, and others—but tries, at the same time, to give the elementary information that they omitted, especially as far as the technique of casting a horoscope is concerned.

From the time of Augustus we have a strange piece of classroom eloquence composed by Arellius Fuscus (*no. 102*), a celebrated professor of rhetoric, for the benefit of his students. It is based on a story about Alexander the Great, who was warned by the Chaldeans (i.e., astrologers) against entering the city of Babylon (Plut., *Alex.* 73, etc.). The story gains its point from the fact that Alexander died in Babylon in 323 B.C. Arellius, however, pretends to be one of Alexander's advisers, urging him to disregard the warnings, and he does it in such a way as to discredit astrology and the techniques of so-called divination altogether.

Pliny the Elder, who preserves so much magical lore, attacks astrology (*Nat. Hist.* 2.6 [= p. 189 of the Loeb Library ed.]). He denies any close alliance or “sympathy” between the stars and mankind; he ridicules the traditional symbolism that connects bright stars with riches, and to him the “celestial mechanism” is just that. At the same time he seems to believe in an influence of the stars that has not yet been discovered (least of all by astrologers): “Their nature is eternal; they weave into the fabric of the world and mingle with its weft.” Such a beautiful image! And it was used by a skeptic who would have liked to believe.

Astrology was primarily an occult science or discipline based on mathematics and very complex rules of interpretation, but it coexisted with a more popular brand or version. Not everyone who believed in the influence of the stars could possibly have understood the whole system and cast horoscopes himself. We find the most amazing misunderstandings and oversimplifications of astrological doctrine in the banquet scene (ch. 39) of Petronius’ novel *Satyricon*, which was written in the time of Nero. There the author makes fun of a half-educated nouveau riche called Trimalchio, who tries to impress his guests with unusual dishes and fancy table talk. He tells them, among other things, that people born under the sign of Aries will own many sheep and have a lot of wool, but they might
also turn out to be quarrelsome pedants. According to the same pseudo-authority, those born under the sign of Libra will become druggists or butchers, because scales will be their indispensable tool. This kind of primitive astrology was probably accepted widely throughout antiquity, but it seems like a parody of the “royal” tradition of the serious astrologers. A good example of practical astrology is the horoscope of Hadrian, who was born in A.D. 76 and died as emperor of Rome in A.D. 138.

The Christian Attitude toward Astrology

For a long time the attitude of the Christian Church toward astrology was ambiguous. We have seen that in the apocryphal Wisdom of Solomon, which was probably written by a Hellenized Jew in Alexandria around the time of Christ’s birth, Solomon claims to have received from God all sorts of occult knowledge, including “the changes of the solstices and the vicissitudes of the seasons; the cycles of the years and the positions of the stars.” This, no doubt, is a paraphrase of astrology as it was understood in Alexandria at the time. Although the Wisdom of Solomon was and is not universally acknowledged as canonical, it had great influence on early Christian writers; Augustine quotes it almost eight hundred times.

There is no evidence that Jesus and his disciples believed in the power of the stars, but the story of Jesus’ birth, as told in the Gospel according to Matthew (2:1–12)—not in the other Gospels—brings the Magi from the East to Bethlehem because they had seen a star that announced to them the birth of the king of the Jews. As pointed out before, these were priest-kings, or Chaldeans, and their knowledge of occult science, including astrology, could easily be defined in terms of chapter 7 of the Wisdom of Solomon; in fact, the Solomon of Wisdom is a combination of the historical Solomon with an oriental priest-king who has occult knowledge, and the book spells out the powers that were commonly ascribed to such “divine men” at the time of the birth of Christ.

Since the Magi recognized in the newborn child a fellow king worthy of their adoration, they must have already seen in him powers that they themselves possessed. Hence, if Jesus had grown up to become a priest-king of this particular type, he would have been the perfect magus, the perfect exorcist, the perfect astrologer, but also a great secular ruler. Not all of this was in the stars—or in the Star—and yet the stars did not lie. The story is so much a part of the Christian tradition that it would seem to confirm a general belief in the role of heavenly bodies as messengers of great events rather than as divine powers and agents, which is, in fact, a compromise between Judaism and the astral religion of other Near East-
ern civilizations. The only power is with Yahweh, but one should not ignore the signs in the sky.

The “darkness over the whole land” that began while Christ was hanging on the cross and ended shortly before he died is reported by Matthew (27:45), Mark (15:33), and Luke (23:44–45). It may be understood as an eclipse of the sun (at least this seems to be Luke’s interpretation, though the text is not certain). If viewed in this way, it would form an antithesis to the bright star that shone at the time of Christ’s birth. Thus, Christ’s birth and death are seen as cosmic events; the universe could not be indifferent to such happenings.

Curious passages are found in the Book of Revelation: at the beginning (2:28) Jesus promises to the faithful ones the morning star; toward the end (22:16) he himself is compared to the morning star; elsewhere (1:20) stars serve as symbols for angels. This has an interesting parallel. In a magical papyrus (PGM I.74–75) a star is called an angel, which could reflect the belief held by contemporary Platonists (Philo of Alexandria, Plant. 12, among others) that the stars are living beings endowed with reason.

In his Letter to the Galatians (4:3ff.) Paul chastises the Christian congregations in Galatia for still “worshiping the elements [ta stoicheia]” and observing special days, months, seasons, and years. The meaning of elements is much disputed, but one plausible explanation is that Paul has in mind the “heavenly bodies,” and the special occasions the Galatians still observe are the old pagan festivals connected with the sun, the moon, and other heavenly bodies, for the calendar is based on their motions. Paul warns the Galatians not to make a special celebration to honor the new moon, for instance, because this comes dangerously close to the old astral religion, which is incompatible with the Word of God.

In a well-known passage in his Letter to the Romans (8:38–39), Paul writes: “I am convinced that neither death nor life nor angels nor supernatural powers, that neither the present nor the future nor cosmic forces above or below, that no other creature can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus, our Lord.” He uses the words archai and dynames, hypsoma and bathos, which I have translated as “supernatural powers” and “cosmic forces above and below.” He probably meant the angelic and daemonic powers who were thought to be organized like an army or a political hierarchy, but he may also have been thinking of the stars and their influence, because hypsoma and bathos are astrological terms. What Paul tells the Christians in Rome is not to be afraid of daemons or other supernatural powers, some of which may be embodied in stars as astral spirits and thus endowed with a semidivine status.

We have seen that the Scriptures do not offer a clear position on
astrology, although Paul certainly regarded it as a threat. His concern shows how deeply rooted these ancient beliefs were.

No wonder we find conflicting views among the early Christian writers. Origen (c. A.D. 185–255), who was perhaps as much a Platonist as a Christian, believed, like Philo, that the stars are rational (or spiritual) beings that take an interest in humans and foretell many things, although they do not cause events to happen. He argued, however, that astrology as a science is beyond human powers. God taught it only to the angels; the astrology practiced on earth is inspired by evil spirits and therefore is not only worthless but dangerous.\textsuperscript{16}

Similarly, Tertullian (c. A.D. 160–225) considered astrology to be an art invented by the fallen angels; no Christian should consult one of its practitioners. In his view the Magi had been astrologers, but that did not make the art itself respectable. It had been allowed to exist until the birth of Christ, but anyone who practiced it afterward exposed himself to the wrath of God. In this case Tertullian wholeheartedly agreed with the Roman law that made it a crime for astrologers to enter Rome.\textsuperscript{17}

Augustine (A.D. 354–430), in his later years, attacked astrology, although as a young man he had believed in fate as spelled out by the movements of the sun and the moon and the other planets.

Manicheanism was a form of gnosis named after Mani, a religious teacher who was born circa A.D. 216 in Babylonia. The religion he taught was similar to Christianity but it contained many elements that the Church rejected. Mani believed that there was a powerful principle of evil in the world, as opposed to God, the principle of good. He also believed that human lives were ruled by the stars, and since the stars themselves were either daemons or the tools of daemons, man needed a religion that included astrological lore to deal effectively with these powers.\textsuperscript{18}

Mani’s doctrine appealed to Augustine for a short time, but Augustine eventually turned away from it completely. Some of the most eloquent pages he ever wrote are devoted to a refutation of astrology, as can be seen in the first seven chapters of Book 5 of his \textit{City of God}.

Augustine’s main argument concerns babies who are born at almost the same time—particularly twins—but whose lives turn out totally differently: one becomes a senator, the other a slave, for instance. Such cases had been studied by Stoics who believed in astrology—by Posidonius, for example—and they had seemed satisfied by the evidence. Their critics were not. To silence the critics, a Roman Neo-Pythagorean, a contemporary of Cicero’s by the name of Publius Nigidius, devised an ingenious experiment. He assembled a group of skeptics around a potter’s wheel and, after whirling the wheel with all his strength, tried to strike it as fast
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as he could at a spot he had already marked. But this proved impossible, for the wheel turned too fast, and the old and new marks did not coincide; in fact, they were at a considerable distance from each other. According to Nigidius, this showed that twins cannot have identical personalities and destinies, because the celestial spheres revolve with such incredible speed that even a few minutes or seconds make all the difference in the world. The experiment must have impressed Nigidius’ friends, for they called him “Nigidius Figulus,” or “Nigidius the Potter,” and that is how he is described in scholarly works to this day.

More than three centuries after Nigidius’ death, Augustine was still concerned about the possible merit of the experiment, and he proceeded to refute it, saying that it was more fragile than the pottery made by the rotation of the wheel.

The Stars and the Belief in Fate

Astrology and fatalism go together. Many philosophers and theologians have found this combination appealing; others have objected to astrology on the grounds that it excludes free will. The poet James Kirkup has expressed the dilemma as follows: “I like to believe in astrology; at the same time I feel I shouldn’t. But there is something in the fixed order of the stars and in their peculiar aspect at the moment of our birth which is inevitable and fated. I believe in the stars as some rationalists believe in God.”

The ancient concept of fate or destiny (heimarmene) had its roots in religion, but it was developed by the Stoics, who defined it as the law according to which all things that have happened have happened, all that are happening are happening, and all that will happen will happen. To the Stoics, at least to most of them, the stars were an expression of this concept because they moved according to eternal laws. Hence, almost all Stoics believed in astrology.

Stoic fate is not blind, however. It is rational, and in itself it is a manifestation of the cosmic logos, which is divine. This doctrine of fate and necessity was one of the main points of controversy between the Stoa and other philosophical schools, especially the Platonists and the followers of Aristotle, who wished to maintain the autonomy of the human soul and the transcendence and providence of divine powers.

Strangely enough, the astrologer who claimed that he was able to predict someone’s fate accurately also believed that he could help that person accept what was foreordained. This acceptance of the inevitable was an important tenet of Stoic ethics. It is reflected in Vettius Valens in a
passage that shows that an astrologer could play a role analogous to a modern psychiatrist [no. 123]. While announcing a disaster, he might actually soften the blow.

Astrologers who were also practitioners of magic thought they could break or counteract the influence of the stars and offer a way out by recruiting the help of supernatural powers. Christianity and the mystery religions also provided a release from the shackles of determinism through salvation.

Notes on Astrological Technique

The principles and the technique of astrological prediction have not changed a great deal since the late Hellenistic period. We no longer believe in a geocentric universe; three new planets (Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto) have been discovered; and because of the “precession of the equinoxes” the sun is no longer in Aries during the time that it is supposed to be there, from March 21 to April 20; and yet a horoscope today is still, as it was then, “a geocentric map of the solar system at a given moment of time,” and its interpretation follows pretty much the same lines that the ancient astrologers followed.

One of the most important elements of the horoscope is the “ascendant,” the degree of the ecliptic that is rising at the moment of birth. Today this is considered to be one of thirty degrees of one of twelve constellations. Originally it may have been a particular star within the constellation, for it was called horoskopos ‘watcher of the hour’.

The ascendant determines the so-called first house, and this brings us to a curious construction. While the “planets” (which included the sun and the moon) and the twelve signs of the zodiac correspond to heavenly bodies (though the sum of our planets is no longer that of the ancients, and the signs of the zodiac are no longer where they are supposed to be), the division of a chart into twelve houses has no basis in the universe as we know it. This division is based on spherical trigonometry, which in itself must be a mystery to many astrologers. Several systems of establishing the houses are used today, but none of them, it appears, predates the Renaissance. The ancient systems were much simpler.

What is remarkable about the principle of the houses is the fact that it catches in a net, as it were, the main areas or aspects of a person’s character and life. The first house, determined by the ascendant, tells the astrologer what he wants to know about the personality, the self, its potential and its realizations. Any planets that happen to be in that section of space at the time of birth will have a special influence on the person’s character and destiny.
The second and third houses are easily found by the ancient astrologer after the ascendant has been determined. If Taurus is the ascendant, the second house is in Gemini, the third in Cancer, and so on. The twelfth house will take us back to the sign just preceding the ascendant, in this case Aries.

The second house gives information about the person’s property and possessions, his or her financial success. The third house concerns brothers and sisters, but also one’s peer group and education. The fourth house has to do with parents, the home, one’s roots. The fifth house tells about one’s loves, one’s children, one’s hobbies (a curious but not totally illogical correlation). The sixth house indicates one’s health, but also the hard work one has to do. The seventh house is the house of marriage, partnerships, and (ironically) enemies. One is almost tempted to say that in such traditional lore the wisdom of long experience is evident; one has only to think of family relationships in Greek tragedy! The eighth house is the house of death, the subject’s, but also that of the people from whom he may inherit. The ninth house was thought to relate to a person’s intellectual and spiritual life, his philosophy and religion, but also his travels; there is some logic in this, too, for at least since Herodotus, the chief way to extend one’s horizon intellectually was to travel to countries with ancient traditions; there were very few public libraries where one could consult the latest reference works. The tenth house offered clues to one’s domicile, profession, social life, status, and conduct of life in general. The eleventh house revealed the nature of one’s friendships (as distinguished from the loves revealed by the fifth house), but also, it seems, one’s political associations and hence one’s political ambitions, for the ancient system of patronage was nominally a “friendship,” but it could also be a kind of “mafia.” Finally, the twelfth house, graphically close to the first, was the house of troubles and tribulations, illness and betrayal, enemies and disgrace.

Even from this brief survey, it becomes clear that the ancient system of twelve houses preserves a great deal of human experience. At one time there were only eight houses, but as life became more complex, the number apparently had to be increased. Life today is even more complex, and still the ancient system has something to say. It certainly has the capacity to receive many thousands of interpretations. At the very least, it would serve the astrologer as a kind of reminder as he considers the answers to possible questions asked of him. At the same time, it is a great psychological tool, one that was designed long before modern psychology and psychiatry evolved.

The other elements to be considered in interpreting the chart of the zodiac are, as mentioned above, the planets located or placed in the signs.
Each of the planets has its “house” or “houses,” which in this case means the sign or signs of the zodiac in which it feels at home: for the sun this is Leo; for the moon it is Cancer; for the others there are two favorite domiciles, one diurnal, one nocturnal. The planets have their greatest and most beneficial influence if they are in the appropriate house at the time of birth—for instance, if Venus is in Libra and the birth takes place during the day, or if Jupiter is in Pisces and the birth takes place at night.

The locations of the planets in the signs of the zodiac and in the twelve trigonometric houses are important, but so, too, are the “aspects”: the number of degrees between one planet and another, one planet and the “cusps” (the dividing lines between one house and another). Opposition (180° or thereabouts) and tetragon (ideally 90°) are considered unfavorable, whereas trigon (c. 120°) and sextile (ideally 60°) are considered favorable.

Since it takes the sun about thirty days to pass through one sign of the zodiac, and an enormous number of people with different characters and destinies are born during that time, each sign is subdivided into three decans, or 10° segments roughly corresponding to the ten days the sun seemed to spend there. These decans modify the general character of the sign. One particular planet is in charge of it, but there is also great variety as to the names and functions of the planets.

From our point of view, there is some scientific thinking in all the occult arts of antiquity, at least since the Hellenistic era and afterward, but there is also an element of “pseudoscience” or “superstition” (in the sense of prelogical thought), and the two elements are closely intertwined. The progress made—alchemy developing into chemistry, for instance—rests, up to a certain point, on the separation of reality from fantasy, of exact observation and reasoning from wishful thinking. Let us not forget that, though medicine was not what it is today, there were excellent physicians in Athens or Alexandria or Rome. Some astrologers made valuable astronomical observations and some alchemists stumbled upon great discoveries.

As long as astrology was closely connected with religion, it could not be “scientific” in the true sense of the word. The names of the planets, as they are still used today—Venus or Jupiter—are those of the ancient gods, and they reflect their character, as we know it from the ancient myths. Gradually, the Greek philosophers (who were the first scientists) weakened the authority of the inherited religious conglomerate and laid the foundation for modern science. How could the sun be a god if it was a “mass of incandescent matter,” as Anaxagoras declared? Or how could the planetary gods influence our lives if they took no interest in us, as Epicurus, the father of atomism, taught?
Progress was slow, it seems today, because the accumulation of old beliefs and traditions opposed any creative, revolutionary impulse. History offers many examples, from Socrates to Galilei. Some great philosophers, like Plotinus, still believed in certain aspects of magic, and some great scientists, like Ptolemy, were convinced that the stars ruled life on earth.

In a famous passage of his *Annals* (6.22), Tacitus speaks about the astrologer Thrasyllus, a noted scholar and one of Tiberius’ closest advisers. To find out whether his predictions were reliable, Tiberius planned to kill him, and Thrasyllus saw from his stars that he was in great danger.

Tacitus’ comments are those of an enlightened, highly educated contemporary, and they are well worth quoting. He writes: “When I hear a story like this, I cannot make up my mind whether human lives are ruled by fate and by a necessity that cannot be changed or by coincidence. You will find that even the greatest philosophers of ancient times and those who adopt their doctrines disagree, and that many of them are convinced that the gods do not care about our beginnings, our end, and our existence in general; this is why very often bad things happen to good people and why those who are not so good are fortunate. Others, however, believe that fate controls human lives, although this depends not on the planets, but on the first causes and the natural connexions of causes. At the same time, they admit that we are able to make our choices in our lives; but once we have made a choice, the consequences follow in a certain order.”

A little later, Tacitus continues these thoughts: “Besides, most people cannot give up the idea that the moment of birth determines the rest of their life, and whenever something does not happen as predicted it is because those who predicted it misled them by their ignorance. Thus, they say, the art of divination loses its credibility, even though past periods and our own age have witnessed clear proofs [that it can work].”

Evidently, Tacitus himself could not make up his mind. On the one hand, he calls astrology a *superstitio* (*Histories* 2.78.1), and he denounces the astrologers as “disloyal to the powerful and untrustworthy for the hopeful: they will always be banished from our state and kept under control” (*Histories* 1.22.1). When he tells the tragic fate of Libo Drusus who was accused of planning a conspiracy against Tiberius (*Annals* 2.27.2), he mentions that this man had consulted sorcerers, astrologers, and dream interpreters, and he places those in the same category as the necromancers: “The promises of the Chaldaeans, the rituals of the *magi*, the interpreters of dreams . . . [and] those who conjure up the souls of the dead with their incantations.” On the other hand, Tacitus shows a certain respect for the more successful practitioners (*Annals* 4.58.2–3).
No doubt most of Tacitus’ contemporaries believed that the stars tell the truth. The emperors from time to time banished the astrologers and the sorcerers, sometimes along with the philosophers, probably for political reasons, not because they wished to protect the people from charlatans. It was always possible that a practitioner of the art who knew a little more than the others could predict the time of death of the emperor and hit on the name of his successor.

The idea that we can understand the principle behind the movements of the heavenly bodies and that we can project them into the future on the basis of written records and mathematical calculations may go back to the fourth millennium B.C. The wish to represent the movements of the sun, the moon, and the planets by mathematical tables or by graphic models led to a new kind of higher mathematics, a universal language designed to explore an intellectual process within the mind of a cosmic god who controlled everything on earth and in heaven. If you learned to understand this language, you understood past, present, and future.

The regular movements of the heavenly bodies were a miracle in themselves, and there was a message in the miracle. The various relationships of the planets among themselves could be understood as interactions among divine beings which, collectively, determined all forms of life on earth.

It is very likely that the roots of Greek astrology can be found in the astral religions of Mesopotamia, just as Greek mythology now appears to be an adaptation of older Near Eastern mythologies. Without a firmly established cult of the planetary deities, the whole growth of astrology as a combination of a cosmic religion and scientific astronomy seems unthinkable.

But there may be another component as well. Animal worship is attested in ancient Egypt, and it has left its traces not only in Greek mythology but also in Greek astrology, although the cult itself seems to have disappeared long before Homer. The fact that the Greek and Roman astrologers operated with theriomorphic powers (Aries, Taurus), identified with certain signs of the zodiac, along with anthropomorphic ones (Mars, Mercury), identified with the planets, is often overlooked. Sagittarius, incidentally, may be the Centaur, a combination of man and animal. These powers seem to correspond to ancient animal deities, which were originally the totemic animals of powerful tribes and families. Taurus, for instance, may be none other than the Minotaur, the bull-god worshiped on Minoan Crete.

When we speak of “Greco-Roman astrology” we usually think of the highly sophisticated system that took its shape during the Hellenistic period and included archaic elements as well as a psychological typology.
borrowed from various philosophical schools. Add to this a symbolism based on religious concepts and give it a mathematical basis. The result is astrology.

Obviously, a system of this kind, having developed in the course of many centuries, had contradictions within itself. How can you reconcile the belief that the astral gods, or any gods whose intentions are revealed by the astral bodies, have absolute power over things on earth with the belief that religion, with its rituals, prayers, and sacrifices, is able to neutralize or modify this power? Whether our future is really determined by the stars in the sky (and this seems to have been the original idea) or by an invisible being whose plans are announced by the stars does not make much difference. If our destiny is predetermined by a god, nothing that we do will change it.

At the same time, torn between fear and hope, people will do almost anything to avoid the worst. Only very few are strong enough to live up to the Stoic ideal of the “wise man” who cheerfully accepts the decrees of fate. In his *Scientific Problems* (*Naturales Quaestiones* 2.35), Seneca writes: “What is the purpose of expiations and [ritual] safeguards, if fate cannot be changed? Allow me to adopt the rigid doctrine of those who abolish such practices and consider them nothing else but placebos for sick minds.”

The ancients tended to range their deities in hierarchic structures, mirroring the powerful clans, dynasties, and bureaucracies they had to deal with on earth. In the Homeric epics, the gods are the members of an extended family ruled by Zeus. Every deity has his or her place in the structure. They often fight with each other, as it happens in families, and these feuds may affect mankind. They have their moods, and they are vulnerable in some ways, just like human beings.

From their personal experiences of the caprices of the rich and powerful, the ancients—Babylonians, Persians, Egyptians, and Greeks alike—imagined a heavenly hierarchy similar to the bureaucracies and armies they knew on earth. The supreme god was like a mighty king who had to be respected and pleased at all times.

Astrology, in a sense, is a practical application of the idea of a heavenly hierarchy. The planets and the constellations have their definite places in it, but their powers are not always the same. Although their character is generally known, much depends on their position in the zodiac and in respect to the other planets. All these factors determine whether their influences are strong or weak, good or bad.

If we look at astrology in this way, it seems essentially like a guessing game based on certain rules. Originally, these rules must have been quite simple, but with time they grew more and more complex. By the end of
the first millennium B.C., every day of the week, every hour of the day was ruled by a celestial power. For every situation, important or trivial, one could, in principle, consult an astrologer. Should I buy this house? Should I go on this trip? Should I take a bath? Should I get married? Far from being a sort of placebo for sick minds, as Seneca calls it, astrology had now become a source of fears, doubts, and pressures. This is what Paul of Tarsus has in mind when he says: “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:12).

NOTES

4. Ibid., p. 455.
8. The *Catalogus Codicum Astrologiæ Graecorum* surveys the mass of material in astrological handbooks that is preserved in many libraries. The first volumes of the catalogue were compiled under the direction of F. Cumont (Brussels); 12 volumes have been published since 1898.
11. The treatise *Why Paganism Is Wrong* (De Errore Profanarum Religionum), also ascribed to Firmicus, seems to indicate that at one time he was a Christian. It was not impossible to be a Christian and a believer in astrology, though the Church officially condemned astrological doctrine.
17. Ibid., pp. 462ff.
19. This experiment, briefly reported by Augustine in *City of God* 5.3, has not been properly interpreted, I believe. Nigidius must have smeared some ink on his
fingert, set the wheel in motion, and touched it. He then tried to touch that same
spot again as the wheel was still spinning.

20. See M. David, Les Dieux et le destin en Babylone (Paris, 1949); Onians,
Origins of European Thought, pp. 303ff.


22. Fatalism is the only philosophical principle underlying fairy tales, according
to Krappe, The Science of Folklore, p. 28. Sometimes the fairies are only agents of
fate; certainly there is a linguistic link between the words fairy and fate.


25. See MacNeice, Astrology, p. 244. This excellent work by a student and
friend of E. R. Dodds who is chiefly remembered as a fine poet has not received
the attention it deserves. The chapter on ancient astrology is especially valuable.
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This extract is from a *suasoria*, a type of rhetorical exercise that formed an important part of higher education in the early Roman Empire. Students had to pretend that they were persuading a mythical or historical character to take, or not to take, a certain course of action, after which the teacher would give his own version. Such exercises were considered a good preparation for a career in politics. This piece is taken from a collection of excerpts from model speeches made by famous professors of rhetoric in the Augustan age. In this instance the professor is Arellius Fuscus, one of the teachers who had a certain amount of influence on the poet Ovid, who is said to have excelled in this genre.

What we have is a brief outline of the original speech, some parts of which were more developed than others. It was written down many years later by Seneca the Elder, father of the famous philosopher. It states very clearly the case against astrology—in fact, against all forms of prophecy and prediction. In some parts the Latin text is corrupt, and even where it seems reasonably certain, one cannot always be sure of the meaning.

Arellius first builds up the typical diviner as a kind of superhuman being who surely descends from the gods or the stars (or at least pretends that he does). It is the same kind of irony that we find in Propertius’ *Elegies* 4.1, where a Persian or Egyptian astrologer boasts about his divine ancestors. The Latin words *agnoscat suum uatem deus* must therefore mean “let the god [i.e., Apollo] acknowledge the prophet as his own [i.e., his descendant],” not “the god must acknowledge him as a prophet,” for the latter could be taken for granted.

The second paragraph begins with the words “If all this were [really] true, why do not men in every generation pursue these studies?” By “these studies” Arellius Fuscus means “all the known techniques of predicting the future” or “all the fraudulent claims that seers make.” If astrol-
Astronomy were an exact science in which all forecasts came true, everyone would want to be an astrologer. In fact, most people at that time knew a little about astrology—perhaps interpreting it in a garbled, nonsensical way, like the uneducated nouveau riche Trimalchio, in Petronius’ *Satyricon* (ch. 35), but usually understanding enough to follow the technical explanations of a professional astrologer.

In the same context Arellius calls the astrologers “those who throw themselves into the battle of the Fates” (reading *proelia* rather than *pignora*, the mechanical repetition of a word that made sense a few lines before but none whatsoever here). This, too, is ironic: the astrologers see themselves as the heroes or protagonists in a sort of cosmic battle, fighting to save their clients from the impact of fate.

Astrologers also like to advertise themselves as psychotherapists, because they can prepare their clients for the blows that fate has in store for them. But their false predictions, Arellius argues, make nervous wrecks of many who are told that they will die soon, but who live on and on in fear and anxiety. Others are given the hope of a long life, but instead meet an early death without being prepared for it; they, too, are fooled by the practitioners of a pseudoscience.

Seneca the Elder, *Suasoriae* 4.1–3 (from a speech by Arellius Fuscus)

*[After having been warned by a seer, Alexander the Great deliberates whether he should enter Babylon.]*

What kind of a man is this who pretends to know the future? Surely the fate of a person who chants prophecies at the order of a god must be very unusual. He cannot be content with the womb from which the rest of us—those who know nothing of the future—are born. No doubt the person who reveals the commands of a god is marked with some divine symbol. Yes, of course: a seer stirs up fear in a king, in the ruler of the universe! That man whose privilege it is to frighten Alexander must be great himself, must stand high above the common lot of mankind. Let him name the stars among his ancestors! Let the god acknowledge the prophet as his own [son or progeny]! He who reveals the future to the nations cannot live his life within the same boundaries [as ordinary men]; his personality must be outside all the necessities of fate.

If all this were true, why do not men in every generation pursue these studies? Why do we not from childhood approach nature and the gods as far as that is possible? After all, the stars are accessible, and we can mix with gods! Why do we sweat away at eloquence? It is useless. Why do we get calloused hands from handling weapons? It is dangerous. Can there be a better investment of talent than knowledge of the future? But those who “throw themselves into the battle of the Fates,” as they say, want to
know about your birthday, and consider the first hour of your life the indicator of all the years to follow. They observe the motions of the stars, the directions in which they move: whether the Sun stood in threatening opposition or shone kindly on the nativity; whether the baby received the full light [of the Moon], the beginning of her waxing, or whether the Moon was obscured [at the time] and hid her head in darkness; whether Saturn invited the newborn child to become a farmer, Mars a soldier to go to war, Mercury a successful businessman, or Venus graciously promised her favors, or Jupiter would carry the child from humble origins to tremendous heights. So many gods swarming about one head!

So they predict the future? To many they have promised a long life, and yet the day [of death] was suddenly upon them without any warning; to others they have predicted an early death, and yet they lived on, plagued by pointless fears [text uncertain]. To some they have promised a happy life, but Fortune quickly sent them all kinds of harm.

You see, we share an uncertain fate, and these are all fictions concocted by clever astrologers, without any truth in them. Will there be a place on earth, Alexander, that has not witnessed a victory of yours? The Ocean stood open to you, and Babylon should be closed?

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Agrippa, Augustus’ trusted adviser, lectures the ruler on the danger represented by sorcerers and astrologers. They claim to be able to predict the future, and sometimes they seem to be right. In a sense, they are more dangerous when they tell the truth—for instance, when they predict correctly the death of the emperor—than when they are telling lies. Prophecy is necessary and has always been part of Roman rituals, but it has to be done within the proper channels, for example, through the inspection of the entrails of an animal. Astrology is considered a foreign science. But the greatest danger is seen in the formation of secret societies within the state. They can be downright subversive and lead to revolution. We know of several other expulsions of astrologers [mathematici] and sorcerers, sometimes together with philosophers, for instance, in 16 or 17 A.D., under Tiberius, and again in 68 A.D., at the end of Nero’s reign.

Dio Cassius 49.43.5; 52.36.1–2

[33 B.C.] Agrippa . . . drove the astrologers and the sorcerers [goetes] out of the city. . . .

[29 B.C., Agrippa addresses Augustus.] You should hate and punish those who introduce foreign elements into our religion, not only for the sake of the gods—for if someone shows disrespect for the gods, he could
hardly have respect for anyone else—but also because people of this kind adopt foreign customs, and this may lead to conspiracies and gatherings and secret societies, which is not at all what a monarchy needs. You should not allow people to be atheists or sorcerers. We do need prophecy [mantike], and you certainly must appoint predictors and augurs, so people who want to consult them on some matter can approach them. But no mages [mageutai] whatsoever can be tolerated. For such men often incite the population to revolutions, either by telling the truth or, more often, by telling lies. Quite a few of those who pretend to practice philosophy actually do the same. Just because you have had good experiences with Areius and Athenodorus—fine and decent men—you should not think that all the others who claim to be philosophers are the same. For the men who hide behind such a façade do enormous damage to society as well as to individuals.

104

Manilius, a Stoic, is the author of a didactic poem on astrology. We know very little about him, except that he must have lived under Augustus and Tiberius. His poem, in five books, is by no means a complete introduction to astrology. It deals with certain aspects, leaving others out, and it offers digressions that are often of great interest to us but not strictly necessary from a technical point of view. Manilius may never have intended to cover the whole subject, or he may not have had a chance to finish his work. He, like Lucretius, the Epicurean, offered more than technical or philosophical instruction: he wanted to convert his readers to his own world view. While Lucretius preached Epicureanism as a kind of religion, Manilius preached an astral religion based on Stoic ideas, a religion that promised insight into the nature of the universe.

In the present text Manilius describes astrology as a gift of the god Hermes. If this is not the Greek Hermes but the Egyptian Hermes Trismegistus, it means that Manilius considered astrology to be an Egyptian science, revealed to the priests long ago and kept secret. By studying the divinely revealed principles and applying them to practical matters, these priests established, over the centuries, the science of astrology as Manilius knew it. At the beginning of the long process there was revelation, but afterward a good deal of empirical research was done by men.

According to Manilius, the progress of astrology is just one chapter in the general progress of human civilization. He takes it for granted that magic and the other occult sciences produce concrete results, because they proceed from scientific facts and apply well-tested techniques.
It was by a gift of the gods that the earth was permitted a more intimate knowledge of the universe. For if they had wanted to keep it a secret, who would have been clever enough to steal the cosmic mystery that controls everything? Having but a human mind, who could have attempted such a gigantic task, wishing to appear to be a god against the will of the gods and reveal the movements of the heavenly bodies in the zenith and the nadir, underneath the earth, and describe how the stars obey their orbits as they travel through space? You, god of Cyllene [Hermes], are the author and the origin of this great sacred tradition. Thanks to you, we know the farther reaches of the sky, the constellations, the names and movements of the stars, their importance and their influence. You wanted to enlarge the face of the universe; you wanted the power of nature, not only its appearance, to be revered; you wanted mankind to find out in what way god was supreme.

Nature, too, offered her powers and revealed herself. She did not find it beneath her dignity to inspire the minds of kings; she made them touch the summits that are close to heaven. They brought civilization to the savage peoples in the East whose lands are divided by the Euphrates and flooded by the Nile, where the universe returns and soars away, high above the cities of dark nations.

Then the priests who offered worship in temples all their lives and who were chosen to express the prayers of the people obtained by their service the favor of the gods. The very presence of the divine power kindled their pure minds, and god himself brought god into their hearts and revealed himself to his servants.

These were the men who established our noble science. They were the first to see, through their art, how fate depends on the wandering stars. Over the course of many centuries they assigned with persistent care to each period of time the events connected with it: the day on which someone is born, the kind of life he shall lead, the influence of every hour on the laws of destiny, and the enormous differences made by small motions.

They explored every aspect of the sky as the stars returned to their original positions. They assigned to the unchangeable sequences of the fates the specific influence of certain configurations. As a result, experience, applied in different ways, produced an art; examples pointed the way; from long observation it was discovered that the stars control the whole world by mysterious laws, that the world itself moves by an eternal principle, and that we can, by reliable signs, recognize the ups and downs of fate.

Before this, life had been primitive and marked by ignorance. People
had looked at the outward appearance of the creation without any under-
standing; with amazement they had stared at the strange new light of the
universe. Sometimes they mourned as though they had lost it; then again
they were glad because the stars seemed to be born again [text uncertain].
They could not understand the reasons why the days varied in length and
why the nights did not always fill a standard measure of time; why the
length of shadows was unequal, depending on whether the sun was
withdrawing or returning. Ingenuity had not yet taught mankind crafts
and arts. The earth lay wasted and fallow under ignorant farmers. There
was gold in the hills, but no one went there. The ocean, undisturbed, hid
unknown worlds: men did not dare entrust their lives to the sea and their
prayers to the winds; they thought what little knowledge they had [was]
sufficient.

As time went by, the human mind grew sharper. Hard work made the
poor creatures more ingenious. The heavy lot that each man had to carry
forced him to look out for himself. They began to specialize and compete
intellectually, and whatever [through] intelligence and experience they
discovered by trial, they happily communicated and contributed to the
common good. Their speech—barbarous before—now conformed to
rules of its own. The soil—uncultivated before—was now worked over
for all kinds of crops. The roving sailor traveled across the sea, uncharted
before, and connected by trade routes countries that had not known of
each other before. Gradual progress led to the development of the arts of
war and peace, for experience always generates one skill from the other.
Not to mention the commonplace: men learned to understand the lan-
guage of birds, to predict the future from entrails, to break snakes by
incantations, to conjure up ghosts and stir the depths of Acheron, to
transform day into night, night into day. Human intelligence, always
eager to learn, overcame everything by trying hard, and human reason
did not set an end or a limit to its efforts until it had climbed up to the sky
and grasped the mysteries of nature by its principles and seen everything
there was to see.

Men understood why clouds are shaken by the impact of tremendous
thunderclaps, why snowflakes in winter are softer than hail in summer,
why flames come out of the ground, why the solid earth quakes, why rain
pours down, what cause produces winds. Reason delivered us from the
awesome feeling that nature inspires: it took Jupiter’s lightning and thun-
dering power away and assigned the noise to the winds, the flame to the
clouds. After human reason had connected every phenomenon with its
true cause, it set out to explore the structure of the universe, starting at
the bottom, and attempted to grasp the whole sky; it identified the
shapes, gave the stars their names, observed the cycles in which they
traveled according to eternal laws. It realized that everything moves according to the divine power and the aspects of the universe and that the stars by their manifold configurations change our destinies.

Near the beginning of his poem Manilius places a Stoic cosmogony. It is a dramatic account of the creation of the world, comparable with certain passages in Lucretius and with the beginning of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. These two poets clearly influenced Manilius, but his account is different; he speaks of the elements in rapid motion for a time, until they find their place in the universe: fire soars up to the ethereal zones, earth leaps through water, and so on. The drama of creation is presented in a truly spectacular manner. One idea that emerges is typically Stoic: Nature knows her business quite well and is no “blundering novice”; all the philosopher has to do is study her ways.

The suspension of the earth in space seems to have been a scientific problem much discussed in Manilius’ day. He offers a simple explanation. The earth is round, and so is the universe that rotates around it. The sun, the moon, and all the planets are round, and so are the gods. As the universe travels through space (an amazingly modern concept), its rotation produces a kind of centrifugal action. Manilius or the author he is following may have seen a simple physical experiment demonstrating such an action, but one should keep in mind that Manilius’ views were not shared by most of his contemporaries.

At the end of the passage, Manilius affirms his belief in a cosmic god whose spirit (*pneuma*) is the breath of the universe. This divine element is immanent in the world and keeps it alive, as it were. The whole cosmos is one huge living and breathing organism, according to this concept, and just as in the human body the condition of one part may affect another part, what happens in one region of the universe may affect what happens in another region. This is a clear statement of the principle of “cosmic sympathy,” which is so important in astrology and in the occult sciences in general. Since this principle is often attributed to Posidonius, who firmly believed in all kinds of divination, it is possible that Manilius used him as a source.

Manilius 1.149–254 (154 placed before 159, and 167 placed after 214)

Flying fire soared upward to the ethereal zones, spread along the very top of the starry sky, and made from panels of flames the walls of the world. Next, spirit sank down and turned into light breezes and spread out air through the middle of the empty space of the world. The third element...
expanded [in the form of] water and floating waves and poured out the ocean born from the whole sea. This happened so that water might breathe out and exhale the light breezes and feed the air, which draws its seeds from it [the water]; also, that the wind might nourish the fire, which is placed directly under the stars. Finally, earth drifted to the bottom, ball-shaped because of its weight: slime, mixed with drifting sand, took shape as the light liquid gradually evaporated. More moisture withdrew and became pure water, and so the oceans were filtered, and land built up, and flat expanses of water came to lie next to hollow valleys. Mountains emerged from the seas. The earth, though still locked on all sides by the ocean, leapt through the waves, and it remained stable because the firmament kept at every point the same distance from it, and by falling from all sides preserved the middle and lowest part from falling. Bodies hit by blows coming from inside remain as they are, and because of the centripetal force, they cannot move very far.

If the earth did not hang in balance, the sun would not, as the stars appear in the sky, drive its chariot from the point of its setting and would not return to its rising; nor would the moon, below the horizon, pursue a course through space; nor would the morning star shine during the early hours of a day after having given its light as evening star at the end of a day. Actually, the earth has not been thrown down to the lowest point. It remains suspended in the center. This is why the whole space [around it] allows passage, so that the firmament may set underneath the earth and rise again. For I cannot believe that the stars that appear at the horizon rise by coincidence, nor that the firmament is created anew again and again, nor that the sun dies every day and is reborn. Over the centuries the shape of the constellations has remained the same. The same sun has risen from the same quarter of the sky. The moon has gone through its phases over the same number of days. Nature keeps to the ways that she herself has made. She is no blundering novice. The days travel around the earth with the light that never fails and show the same hours now to these, and now to other, regions of the earth. If you travel eastward, the East moves constantly farther away, as does the West if you travel westward. What is true for the sun is true for the sky.

Why should one be surprised that the earth is suspended? The firmament itself is suspended, too, and not supported by any base. This is clear from its very movement and from the fact that it travels fast through space. The sun moves without support, as it skillfully directs its chariot now this way and now that, keeping within its turning points in the sky. The moon and the stars travel through cosmic space. Similarly, in accordance with celestial laws, the earth is suspended. Therefore, the earth has been allotted a hollow space in the center of the atmosphere, equidistant
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at every point from the nadir. It is not flattened out to form a plain, but it has the shape of a sphere, which rises and falls at the same time at every point. This is its natural shape. Thus, the universe itself, because it turns round and round, gives a spherical shape to the stars. We see that the sun and the moon are round, spherical: the moon is looking for light for its extended body, but its globe as a whole does not receive the sun's rays, which hit it at an oblique angle. This is the lasting, abiding form, very much like that of the gods. It has no beginning, no end, in itself, but is like itself on its whole surface, identical with itself throughout. Similarly, the earth stays round, imitating the shape of the universe, and being the lowest of all heavenly bodies, remains in the very center.

For this reason we cannot see all the constellations from every point of the earth. You will never spot the shining light of Canopus until you have crossed the sea and reached the banks of the Nile. Those who live directly under the Bear look for it in vain: they inhabit the slopes of our globe, and the curves of the terrain in between deprive them of the sky and limit their view. The moon proves that the earth is round. When, at night, it is plunged into dark shadows, undergoing an eclipse, it does not frighten all the nations at the same time. First the countries in the East go without your light; then those that are directly under the center of the sky [at the end you roll with tainted wings to those in the West]; later the brass is struck among the nations at the end of the world. If the earth were flat, the moon would rise only once over the whole world, and its eclipse would be bewailed everywhere at the same time. But since the outline of the earth follows a gentle curve, the moon appears now to these lands, now to others, rising and setting at the same time. It moves along a belly-shaped orbit, and it combines an upward with a downward motion. It comes up over some horizons and leaves others behind. Hence we conclude that the earth is round.

On its surface live many different tribes of men and wild beasts and birds of the air. One inhabitable zone stretches toward the North, another is situated in the southern regions: it actually lies beneath our feet, but it imagines itself above us because the terrain hides the gradual slope, and the path ascends and descends at the same time. When the sun has reached the western horizon and looks down on our part of the world, a new day wakes up sleeping cities in that other part and brings back to them with the light of day their round of daily duties. By now, there is night for us, and we invite slumber into our bodies. The ocean divides and at the same time connects the two regions.

This organic structure of the huge universe, its individual parts composed of different elements—air, fire, earth, and the flat sea—is ruled by the divine power of spirit. God breathes through the whole in a mystic
way and governs it by mysterious means. He controls the mutual relationships between all parts through which one [part] transmits its strength to another and [in turn] receives another’s strength. As a result, cosmic sympathy reigns forever among a variety of phenomena.

In his defense of astrology as a part of Stoic doctrine, Manilius naturally has to attack Epicurus. The Epicureans did not deny that gods existed, but they rejected any involvement of the gods in human affairs. The Stoics, on the other hand, believed that there was a permanent force in the history of the world, and that it excluded the element of chance. The constellations that Manilius saw in the sky at the beginning of our era were the same constellations that the Greeks had seen during the Trojan War. To Manilius, this permanence was definitely the expression of a divine will.

But in the course of history the world had seen striking changes. The descendants of the vanquished Trojans had conquered the descendants of the victorious Greeks. This, too, had happened in accordance with the divine will. Thus, for Manilius, nothing is left to chance; everything happens according to a cosmic scheme, and astrology is the science that explores the hidden intentions of the deity.

It is easy to recognize the bright constellations, for they do not show any deviation in their settings and risings. They all come up at regular times to display their own light, and appearances and disappearances follow a certain order. Nothing in that immense structure is more marvelous than this principle and the fact that everything obeys certain laws. Nowhere does confusion interfere. Nothing deviates in any direction or moves in a larger or smaller orb or changes its course. Is there anything else so overwhelming in appearance, yet so sure in its rhythm?

To me no argument seems as forceful as this, for it shows that the world moves in accordance with a divine power and is, in itself, god, and has not been put together at the whim of chance. But this is what Epicurus wants us to believe: he first built up the walls of the universe from tiny seeds and dissolved them into these seeds again. He also thought that the seas and the land and the stars in the sky, as well as the ether, consisted of atoms, and that in the vast space whole worlds were formed and dissolved again and new worlds created. He also said that everything would return to the state of atoms and change its appearance.

But who would believe that such huge conglomerations of matter could be created from tiny particles without a divine will, and that the
world is the result of casual combination? If chance gave us this universe, let chance govern it! But then why do we see the stars rise in a regular rhythm and accomplish their course as if it had been ordered by a command, never hurrying ahead, never lagging behind? Why do the same stars always grace the summer nights, the same stars always the winter nights? Why does every day impose a certain configuration upon the sky as it comes and a certain configuration as it goes? When the Greeks sacked Troy, the Bear and Orion already moved frontally toward each other; the Bear was content to move in a circle at the top, Orion to ascend toward her from the opposite direction as she turned away, always running over the whole firmament to meet her. Even then men were able to tell the time of dark night by the constellations, and the sky had established a clock of its own. How many realms have tumbled since the sack of Troy? How many nations have been led into captivity? How many times has Fortuna distributed slavery and supremacy throughout the world and reappeared in a different shape? Did it not rekindle the ashes of Troy and give [the Trojans] supreme power without a thought of what had happened? And now it is the turn of Greece to be weighed down by the fate of Asia Minor! Why bother to enumerate the centuries and tell how many times the fiery sun has come back to illuminate the world on its varying courses?

Everything born under the law of mortality must change. The earth does not realize that it is ravaged by the passage of time and that it changes its face over the centuries. But the firmament remains intact: it conserves all its elements; long periods of time do not increase it nor old age diminish it; nor does it swerve from its movement the least bit or lag in its course. It will always be the same because it always was the same. Our forefathers did not see it changed; our descendants will not see it changed. It is god: he will never change. The sun never takes a detour toward the Bears that lie across the sky. It does not change its direction, going from West to East, bringing the dawn to lands that have never seen it. The moon does not grow beyond its normal sphere of light but keeps the rhythm of its waxing and waning. The stars that are attached to the sky do not fall down on the earth but accomplish their orbits in measured periods of time. All this is not the work of chance but the planning of a supreme god.

The Milky Way did not play an important role in ancient astrological theory, but as a striking celestial phenomenon it had to be discussed. After reviewing some older theories, Manilius revives one that Cicero’s Greek
source in the *Republic* 6.16 had proposed: the Milky Way is the place in heaven where the souls of heroes go when they die. These souls are of the same substance as the stars themselves, and so, through their affinity, will be drawn to them. The catalogue of great Roman statesmen and soldiers, following Greek heroes, statesmen, and philosophers, ends with Augustus, who is still alive at the time Manilius’ text is written, but who is promised by the poet a preeminent place in heaven after his death. Manilius must remember Cicero’s “Dream of Scipio” (*De Republica*, Book 6) as well as the passage in Virgil’s *Aeneid* (6.756ff.) in which Anchises points out to his son in the underworld the series of heroes who will shape Roman history for centuries to come.

From the following text it would seem that the promise of life after death was also a part of astrological doctrine. If one believed in the survival of the individual soul (not all Stoics did), the souls had to be ranked in some way. Thus the Milky Way offered itself as a convenient dwelling place for superior souls. It was prominent and visible—the very opposite of Hades, the great “Invisible One.”

*Manilius* 1.758–804

Could it be that the souls of heroes, the great men who are worthy of heaven, once they are freed from their bodies and released from the earthly sphere, come here to inhabit a heaven of their own, living ethereal years and enjoying the universe? It is here that we honor the descendants of Aeacus, of Atreus, the savage son of Tydeus, and the ruler of Ithaca who conquered nature by his triumphs on land and on sea, as well as the king of Pylus, famous for his triple life-span, the kings of Greece besieging Troy [the camps of the generals and heaven (?) and Troy conquered under Hector (?)]. . . and the black son of Aurora and the Thunderer’s offspring, the ruler of Lycia. Nor will I pass you by, virgin daughter of Mars and the other kings that Thrace sent and the nations of Asia Minor and Pella, famous because of the Great [Alexander], nor all the clever men who possessed mental strength and intellectual powers, whose whole status was in themselves: Solon the Just, Lycurgus the Austere, Plato the Heavenly, and he who produced him [i.e., Socrates] and through his condemnation effectively condemned his Athens, and the conqueror of the Persians whose fleets had covered the seas, but also the Roman heroes of whom there is already a large number: the kings, with the exception of Tarquinius; the Horatii, an offspring who was a whole army; Scaevola, who achieved glory by mutilation; Cloelia, a virgin more heroic than men; Cocles, who carried the Roman walls he protected; Corvinus, who acquired his spoils and his name from the raven who was his comrade-in-arms, who carried Phoebus in the bird; Camillus, who, thanks to Jupiter,
gained heaven and established Rome (again) by saving it; Brutus, who founded a state he had taken over from a king; Papirius, the avenger in the wars against Pyrrhus; Fabricius and Curiius, two equals, and the third victory, Marcellus and Cossus before him, having killed a king [text and meaning uncertain]; the Decii, who competed with their prayers and had similar triumphs; Fabius, who won through delays; Livius, who conquered murderous Hasdrubal with Nero as his colleague in the war; the Scipios as military commanders, sealing together the fate of Carthage; Pompey, conqueror of the world by his three triumphs, after having been leader before his time; Cicero, who gained heaven by his eloquence; moreover, the great sons of Claudius; the prominent members of the family of the Aemilii; the famous Metelli; Cato, who was superior to his fate; and Agrippa, who served under the arms of his own Mars [text uncertain].

The Julii are descended from heaven, taking their origin from Venus, and they will return to a heaven ruled by Augustus, together with Jupiter, among the stars, and there he will see in the assembly of the gods the great Quirinus on an even higher level than the shining circle of the ethereal way. Up there is the seat of the gods; this one, nearby, is for those equal to them, who follow their example through their valor.

Manilius speaks once more of the “mutual sympathy” that reigns in the universe and of the “sum total of things,” which always remains the same, thus anticipating a law of modern physics, it seems. Manilius believes in a supreme god who has created the universe and keeps it moving, but as he puts it, “movement feeds the creation: it does not change it”—a remarkable phrase.

I shall sing of the god who rules mysteriously over nature, the god who permeates the sky, the land, and the sea and who governs the whole immense structure with a unifying bond. I shall sing how the life of the whole universe is based on mutual sympathy and how it moves by the force of reason because a single spirit inhabits all its parts and radiates through the whole world, spreading itself through everything and giving it the shape of a living creature. If the whole mechanism were not built firmly out of sympathetic elements and did not obey a supreme master, and if providence did not rule the tremendous potential of the universe, the earth would not be stable nor would the stars observe their orbits (in fact, the universe would go astray and move aimlessly or else stand still.
Manilius now develops the concept of “cosmic sympathy” in an attempt to prove the validity of astrology as a science. Part of his proof is empirical: thus he speaks of sea creatures that change their shapes according to the movement of the moon. Such data had been compiled by Posidonius.

Some of the thoughts expressed in this passage are beautiful and profound and seem to belong to an ancient philosophical tradition that emerges and reemerges throughout antiquity and cannot be traced to a specific school. The rhetorical question “Who could know heaven except by the grace of heaven?” is very similar to Plotinus’ axiom that the human eye must have an element of the sun in it in order to see the light of the sun.

But Manilius also operates with a concept dear to the Stoics, the consensus gentium, the “agreement of all nations.” His argument becomes rather emotional and rhetorical, although in the end he professes not to care whether the majority of mankind listens to him. He must have encountered more than a few skeptics in his lifetime, but he is content to “sing” for the chosen few.
imitating your waxing, Delia, and your waning. This is why you, too,
turn your face back to your brother’s chariot and then turn it away again,
reflecting the amount of light he left you or gave you: you are a star at the
expense of a star. Finally, take the cattle and the dumb animals on earth:
they will never know anything about themselves and the laws of nature,
but when nature reminds them, they lift up their souls to the heaven,
which is their father; they watch the stars and cleanse their bodies when
they see the horns of the waxing moon. They foresee the coming of
storms, the return of fair weather. Who can doubt after this that man is
connected with heaven . . . [something appears to be missing from the
text] . . . man to whom nature gave wonderful gifts: the power of speech,
a superior intelligence, and a quick mind? Does not god descend into
man alone and dwell in him and seek himself? Not to mention other arts
to which is given such an enviable power, a gift beyond our estate . . . [not
to mention the fact that nothing is given by a law of equal distribution
which shows that the universe is the work of one creator, not of matter;
not to mention the fact that fate is predetermined and inescapable, and
that it is the characteristic of matter to suffer, of heaven to exert pres-
sure.] . . . who could know heaven except by the grace of heaven? Who
could find god unless he were part of god himself? Who could actually
see and grasp in his limited mind the enormous structure of this vault that
stretches into infinity, the dances of the stars, the never-ending wars of
planets and signs . . . [and land and sea under the sky and what is under
them] . . . if nature had not blessed our minds with a special vision and
had turned a mind related to her toward herself and taught us this mar-
velous science? How, if not by something that comes from heaven and
invites us to heaven and to the sacred fellowship of nature? Who could
deny that it would be sacrilege to grasp heaven against its will, to capture
it, so to speak, and drag it down into one’s soul? But there is no need for
long digressions to prove something that is manifest: people do believe in
our science, and that must give it authority and weight. Our science
never deceives itself nor does it deceive anyone. The method must be
followed according to rule, and it is trusted for the right reasons. Things
happen as they were foretold. Who would dare to denounce as false what
Fortuna confirms? Whose vote would win against such an overwhelming
majority?

All this I would like, inspired by the deity, to carry in my song as high
as the stars. I do not compose poems in the crowd and for the crowd.
Alone, free, I shall drive my chariot, as if racing on an empty course, and
no one will come from the opposite direction or drive along with me on
the same track. I shall sing a theme for heaven to hear, and the stars will
marvel and the world rejoice at the song of its poet. I shall also sing for
those to whom the stars generously granted knowledge of their ways and their meaning: a very small group in the whole world. But large is the crowd that loves wealth and gold, power and the insignia of power, a life of leisure full of soft luxury, sweet and entertaining music and pleasant sounds that touch the ears. These things are understood with much less effort than the doctrine of fate. But to learn thoroughly the law of fate is also part of fate.

110

Ancient astrology was a science, but it was, at the same time, more and less than its practitioners claimed. Much of it was based on mathematical calculations, but the result of these, the chart, had to be interpreted according to a complex system of rules, and that part was more an art than a science; it could not be learned entirely from textbooks but required a certain amount of experience, and a dose of intuition certainly helped. The astrologer often had a chance to talk to the client and assess him, just as the dream interpreter did. It was different, of course, when a baby was born and the nativity had to be cast then and there.

By Manilius' time the astrologer had become a sort of personal adviser, a psychotherapist. His contact with many different types of clients over the years must have given him an excellent opportunity to study human nature. Manilius may have lived through the last years of the civil war, and this experience may have convinced him that the world is ruled by conflict, by strife. At the same time, friendship and love—the highest values in life, though difficult to attain—are promised by the stars.

We seem to hear the voice of a practitioner of the ancient art of astrology who has lived through difficult times and has shared the secrets of many clients. His experience confirms what his astrological studies tell him: to hate may often seem easier than to love, but it is love that we must recognize as the great cosmic force.

Manilius 2.567–607

The many different relationships between the signs cause enmities and produce hostility in so many ways and in corresponding numbers. For this reason nature has never created out of herself anything that could be more important, more precious than the bonds of friendship. Throughout so many generations of men, so many ages and periods, among so many wars and afflictions, even in times of peace, whenever the situation calls for a friend, it is almost impossible to find one. There was only one Pylades, only one Orestes who offered to die for the friend; in centuries theirs was the only competition for death; it was unique in that one
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wanted to die and the other refused to yield. And yet two men were able to follow their example: punishment could barely find guilt to punish; the bondsman wished that the accused would not return, and the accused feared that the bondsman would gain him his freedom. But how large is the sum of crimes throughout the centuries! How utterly impossible to absolve earth from its burden of hate! Sons had their fathers murdered for money, and the tombs of mothers . . . [something is missing from the text] Phoebus brought darkness and deserted the earth. Why mention the sack of cities, the profanation of temples, disasters of all kinds in the midst of peace, poisonous mixtures, ambushes in the marketplace, slaughter inside the city walls and a conspiracy that lurks beneath the cloak of friendship? Evil is everywhere among the people, and the whole world is full of insanity. Right and wrong are confused, and injustice makes brutal use of the law itself; crime is more powerful than punishment. No wonder: under many signs men are born for discord; hence peace has disappeared from the world; the bond of trust is rarely found and is given to few; the earth is caught in a conflict with itself, just as heaven is; the human race is ruled by the law of strife.

III

Although Manilius believes in gods or a cosmic god, he also operates with the concept of nature, physis. It is difficult to say whether nature is a separate entity or just a convenient term to designate all that is divine and creative and permanent in the universe. Perhaps it is a compromise between traditional polytheism, a more advanced form of Stoicism, and the specific world of the astrologers, who might be bound by Stoic doctrine, but who, in Manilius’ time, were more likely to be eclectics. That the universe controls itself is a fundamental idea in this context, and “nature” seems to be just a convenient term for an autonomous, all-embracing organism in which every thought, every dream, every experience, and every action is somehow located and accounted for. Astrology, therefore, can be considered a symbolic language that expresses this truth.

For many ancient thinkers, the nature of the universe was not a scientific fact to be explored by scientific means; it was a mystery, and once fully experienced and understood, it would furnish them with a set of rules to deal with practical problems such as assessing someone’s personality and predicting someone’s future.

Manilius 3.47–66

Nature, the origin of everything and the guardian of mysteries, built up the enormous structures that form the walls of the world and encircled
our globe, which hangs exactly in the center, with a widespread flock of stars. By certain laws she organized heterogeneous parts—air, earth, fire, floating water—into a unity and ordered them to feed one another so that harmony would rule over all these discordant principles and the world might endure, held together by the bonds of a reciprocal covenant. To make sure that nothing was missing from the overall scheme and that everything belonging to the universe was controlled by the universe itself, nature also made the lives and the destinies of mortals dependent upon the stars, so that, in their tireless revolutions they could control the success of human undertakings, the privilege of life, and fame. To those stars [i.e., the signs of the zodiac] which occupy the middle part, the heart of the universe, so to speak, to the stars that outdo the sun, the moon, and the planets but are also outdone by them, nature gave dominion: to each [sign] she consecrated its own role and fixed [there] forever the sum total, so that the idea of fate would be concentrated into a single whole.

Manilius here discusses the twelve “houses” into which the astrologers divided the space around the earth. These regions are represented by twelve radii in the standard astrological charts today, with the earth at the center. Unlike the signs of the zodiac, however, they do not correspond to anything in nature: they are a construction. Each house represents an aspect of a person’s character and life.

Different methods of predicting someone’s life-span were used by the astrologers. This one is based on two rules. First, the astrologer considers the ascendant, that is, the first house. If the first house coincides with Aries (i.e., if the sign of Aries is rising at the moment of birth), this adds 10 ⅓ years to the life of the individual. This is not the whole life-span, for the position of the moon also must be considered. If the moon is in the first house in a favorable position (i.e., in a sign that agrees with her), this grants a life-span of 78 years. It is not clear from the context whether these two figures have to be added: 78 + 10 ⅓ = 88 ⅓. This seems a rather high figure, considering the average life expectancy at that time. If one adds the life-spans granted by all twelve houses and divides by 12, one arrives at an average of just under 55 years. The highest figure is 78, and this would have been considered a ripe old age in Manilius’ time. In Cicero’s “Dream of Scipio” (De Republ. 6.12), which Manilius probably had read, Scipio Africanus the Elder predicts to Scipio Africanus the Younger his death at the age of 56; he gives special significance to this product of 7 × 8, numbers that he calls “perfect.” Thus, ancient numerology confirms astrology.
I have shown what kind of life, throughout distinct periods of time, comes our way at any given moment. I have also shown to what star each year, each month, each day, each hour, belongs. Now I must explain another principle that applies to the span of a person’s life: it tells how many years each sign is supposed to grant. You must consider this theory carefully and keep in mind the figures if you wish to predict the length of a life by the stars. Aries gives $10 \frac{2}{3}$ years, Taurus $12 \frac{2}{3}$, Gemini $14 \frac{2}{3}$, Cancer $16 \frac{2}{3}$, Leo $18 \frac{2}{3}$, Virgo $20 \frac{2}{3}$, and Libra the same number. Scorpio equals the number of years that Leo gives, and those of Sagittarius correspond to those of Cancer. Capricorn gives $14 \frac{2}{3}$, Aquarius $12 \frac{2}{3}$. Aries and Pisces not only share their borderline but also their power: they both give $10 \frac{2}{3}$ years.

In order to understand the calculation in determining the length of life, it is not enough to learn the fixed number of years given by each sign. The “temples” [houses] and “parts” of the sky also have their own gifts to grant, and they add their specific amounts in a well-defined sequence when the whole configuration of stars is right. Now I shall discuss only the decrees of the “temples”; later, when the whole structure of the universe has been clearly understood and the different sections are not scattered here and there in a confusing fashion, the whole combination with its distinct powers will be approached. [Something seems to be missing from the text here.]

If the moon is in a favorable position in the “temple” of the first cardinal point, where the sky returns to the earth, and if it is rising and holds the ascendant, the course of life will be increased to 80 years minus 2. When it is placed in the zenith, it will be the same number (i.e., 80) minus 3. In the region of its setting it is less generous than 80 by 5 (i.e., 75 years). At its very lowest point it is considered to give 60 years plus 12. The trigon of the horoscope [i.e., of the ascendant], which rose first and is on the right side, grants 60 plus 8. The trigon on the left, the one that follows the preceding signs, gives 60 plus 3. The third “temple” from the horoscope, which is also the one next to the zenith, gives 60 years minus 3. The “temple” that appears below, separated by an equal distance, grants as its gift a life of 50 years. The place directly under the rising horoscope allows 40 years to come and go, adds 2 more and leaves you still young. The one that precedes the zone of the rising quarter gives 23 years to those who are born under it and snatches them away when they have just tasted the bloom of youth. The “temple” just above the setting allows 30 years and increases them by 3. The “temple” at the very bottom brings
Manilius is an astrologer and a poet, but he is also a philosopher. In the manner of the philosophers of his age, he offers help and advice to those who are confused, distressed, or worried about the future. Lucretius, over a half century before, had offered the same kind of service, from the Epicurean point of view, in his poem *On Nature*, which Manilius certainly knew. But Manilius is a Stoic; he believes in fate and in divine Providence. Since there is nothing we can do to change the realities of life, and since everything is for the best, even if we do not see it right away, we ought to accept everything that happens to us. This, in fact, is the secret of happiness. Stop worrying about the future, Manilius says: what must be, will be, and there is no way you can influence the course of events.

Although Lucretius and Manilius belong to different schools of thought, they tell us indirectly how unhappy, how neurotic the people were for whom they wrote. We may assume that most of the mental and emotional disorders known to modern psychiatry existed in one form or another in antiquity, even if they were not recognized or described in scientific terms. Most physicians probably did not know how to treat them. In extreme cases exorcists were called in, and for the milder forms of depression or neurosis philosophers were available, but some philosophers, like Apollonius of Tyana, were also exorcists and had the reputation of being sorcerers. Philosophers in general not only lectured; they also listened to their students when they talked about their problems, and offered them advice.

Life had its complexities then as now, and when Manilius says, “We always act as if we are about to live, but we never live,” we feel the truth of this today as his contemporaries must have felt it.

Manilius deals particularly with the *paradoxa* of fate. History as he knows it, from the heroic age to Augustan Rome, is full of absurdities. The unexpected, the unpredictable, always happens, yet astrologers claim to be able to foresee even bizarre events. Fate decreed that the ancient power of Troy would survive in one man, Aeneas, and because he landed in Italy, Rome, once a small village, became the center of an empire.

The poet sounds rather smug as he looks down the flight of the centuries and concludes that all this had to happen as it did for the greater glory of Rome. But the lesson he states applies to any person who may feel that some failure or defeat is final and that the future has nothing in store. “Don’t despair,” the Stoic philosopher says, “and don’t try to change what
cannot be changed. Put your trust in divine Providence; it will work for you as it did for Rome.”

A certain amount of historical lore and personal experience has gone into this diatribe, which is meant to comfort ordinary people in the daily disappointments and frustrations of their lives. After stating his case as forcefully as possible, Manilius adds a caveat: fate cannot be used as an excuse for crime, nor should the good and virtuous lose their rewards, just because it could be said that fate acts through them. This is clearly an attempt to reconcile Stoicism with the legal and moral conventions of the time.

**Manilius 4.1–118**

Why do we waste the years of our lives worrying? Why do we torture ourselves with fears and vain desires? We grow old before our time with constant anxieties, and we lose the life that we want to prolong. Since there is no limit to our wishes, we can never be happy. We always act as if we are about to live, but we never live. The more someone owns, the poorer he is, because he wants even more: he does not count what he already has but only wishes for what he does not have. Nature needs and demands but little for itself, but we in our prayers build up a high structure from which to fall. With our profits we buy luxuries, and with a life of luxury, extortion. It is the ultimate price of wealth to squander wealth.

Set your minds free, mortal men; let your cares go and deliver your lives from all this pointless fuss. Fate rules the world; everything is bound by certain laws; eternities are sealed by predetermined events. We die the moment we are born, and on the beginning depends the end. Fate is the source of wealth and power and, more often than not, poverty: it gives us at our birth abilities and character, vices and virtues, losses and gains. No one can renounce what is given nor claim what is denied to him. No one can catch Fortune by praying against her will or escape her if she comes close to him. Everyone must bear his appointed lot.

Would the flames have given way before Aeneas? Would Troy, triumphant on the very day of its destruction, have survived in one man if Fate did not make the laws of life and death? Would the she-wolf of Mars have nursed the twins exposed to die? Would Rome have grown out of shacks? Would shepherds have brought the thunder to the Capitoline hill? Would Jupiter have agreed to being locked up in his citadel? Would the world have been conquered by a conquered people? Would Mucius have extinguished the fire with blood from his wounds and returned victorious to Rome? Would Horatius single-handedly have barred the bridge and the city to the attacking enemy? Would a young woman have canceled a
treaty? Would three brothers have been killed by the heroism of one? No army won such a victory: Rome relied on a single hero, and it was brought down, even though fate decreed that it should rule the world.

Why mention Cannae and the enemy army close to the walls of Rome? Why mention Varro, who was great because he fled, and Fabius, who was great because he delayed? Did not the fortress of Carthage after the battle of Lake Trasimene admit defeat, although it could have won the war? Did not Hannibal, imagining that he had been caught in our net, pay for the downfall of his race with an inglorious death? Think of the battles in Latium and think of Rome fighting against herself. Think of the civil wars and of the Cimbrian helpless in the presence of Marius, who was helpless in prison himself. This was the man who became an exile after having been consul many times, and he was consul again after having been an exile. His downfall was like that of Libya, where he went into hiding, but then he came out of the ruins of Carthage and conquered Rome. Never would Fortuna have allowed this, had it not been decreed by Fate.

Pompey, you had overthrown Mithridates’ empire. You had cleared the sea of pirates. You had been awarded triumphs after wars that had ranged over the whole world. You could now claim the title “the Great.” Who would have believed that you were murdered on the shores of Egypt, with only a little wood from a shipwreck to burn your corpse, the remnants of a shattered boat serving as a pyre? Can there be such a complete reversal without the decree of Fate? Julius Caesar was born of heaven and returned to heaven, but after his victory, when he had successfully ended the civil war and held high office in times of peace, he could not escape the violence predicted so many times: holding in his hand information about the conspiracy against him and a list of names, he obliterated with his own blood, before the eyes of the whole Senate, the evidence. Why? Because Fate must prevail.

Should I list cities destroyed, kings overthrown? Need I mention Croesus on the pyre, or Priam’s headless corpse on the shore, with not even Troy as his pyre? And Xerxes, whose shipwreck was more terrible than any sea could inflict? Should I bring up the king of Rome whose mother was a slave girl? Fire that was rescued from fire and flames that destroyed a temple but gave way to a man?

How often does sudden death come to the bodies of the strong! How often does death run from itself and roam through the flames! Some have been carried out for burial but returned from the grave: they were given two lives, others barely one. You see how a trivial ailment can kill and a more serious one will get better. Medical science is helpless, logic and
experience baffled, therapy harmful, neglect beneficial, and procrastination often stops the disease. Food can be dangerous, poison harmless.

Sons turn out worse than their fathers or rise above their parents: they keep a nature of their own. Success [of a royal house?] comes with one man and goes with another. One who is madly in love can either swim across the sea or ruin Troy. Another’s serious manner is well suited to the framing of laws. Sons kill their fathers, parents their children, and brothers meet armed in bloody combat. All this violence is not the work of men: they are forced to commit these atrocities; they are driven to their own punishment and the mutilation of their limbs.

Not every age has brought forth a Decius or a Camillus or a Cato, whose spirits remained unconquered in defeat. The raw material is there in abundance, but it will do nothing against the will of fate. The poor may not necessarily expect to live fewer years, nor can immense wealth buy a long life. Fortuna carries a dead body from a stately home; she commands a pyre and orders a tomb for exalted persons. How great is the power that orders the powerful around!

Is it not true that virtue can be unhappy and vice successful, that rashly conceived actions are rewarded and careful planning fails? Fortuna does not judge the merits of a case and support the deserving; she moves casually and indiscriminately among the crowd.

So there is something else, something greater that forces and controls us and subjects all that is mortal to laws of its own. To the men that are born from it, it assigns the years they will live and the ups and downs of their fortunes. Often it joins the bodies of animals and men, and such a birth will not grow from the seed; for what do we have in common with beasts? When was an adulterer ever punished for his sin by a monstrous birth? It is the stars that introduce new shapes; it is heaven that crossbreeds features. After all, if there were no chain of Fate, why would it be handed down to us? Why, at certain times, are all things that will come to pass prophesied?

And yet this doctrine does not go so far as to defend a crime or to cheat virtue of the rewards that it deserves. No one will hate poisonous plants the less because they do not grow of their own free will but from a particular seed; nor will tasty food be less popular because Nature, not a deliberate choice, gave us these crops. In the same way, men’s merits deserve greater glory because they owe their achievements to heaven. On the other hand, we must hate the wicked even more because they are destined for crime and punishment. It does not matter where crime originates; it is still crime. The very fact that I interpret Fate in this way is ordained by Fate.
We have a comprehensive astrological handbook in Latin, entitled *Mathe-seos Libri* (*On Learning*, i.e., *On Astrology*). Its author, Iulius Firmicus Maternus, a senator from Sicily, worked on it between circa 334 and 337 and dedicated it to Mavortius, a high official.

He considers his science as something sacred, something that can only be revealed to those who are worthy and will swear a solemn oath. He compares this commitment to the initiation rites of the mysteries, which also had to be kept secret. He mentions Orpheus, the legendary founder of the Orphic mysteries, but he mentions also Pythagoras and Plato, two philosophers who reserved part of their teaching to a small group of disciples. Firmicus does more or less the same thing: he holds back parts of his science, and it is not possible to become a practicing astrologer just by reading his book. Perhaps he intended to leave the rest to oral instruction.

We look at one horoscope in particular, the only one that concerns a historical person. Firmicus uses it to illustrate the ups and downs of Fortune, and as an example for the importance of the *antiscia*, the shadows thrown by heavenly bodies at each other. This is a rather obscure point of astrological doctrine (it is not the same as the aspects), and it was apparently neglected by some practitioners who, because of that, missed part of the picture.

Firmicus does not give us the name of the native, but he has been identified by ancient historians as Ceionius Rufius Albinus who was consul in 335 and prefect of Rome from 30 December 335 until 10 March 337. This is exactly the period during which Firmicus was busy composing his work. The father of the native whose own life is somehow reflected in the nativity of the son, C. Ceionius Rufius Volusianus, was consul in 311 and again in 314. Firmicus no doubt knew one or the other (or both) personally.

The other treatise that is preserved under his name is of a completely different nature. *De Errore Profanarum Religionum* (*On the Error of the Profane Religions*) is an attack on paganism (especially some mystery cults), which, he says, should be radically suppressed by the state. After having been a great admirer of Plotinus (*Math. 1.7.14–22*), he must have converted to Christianity and abandoned his former loyalties altogether.

From the horoscope that I will furnish below in detail, you may be able to learn how powerful the *antiscia* [i.e., the “shadows” thrown by heavenly bodies at each other] are and how they work in principle.

In this man’s nativity the Sun was in Pisces, the Moon in Cancer,
Saturn in Virgo, Jupiter in Pisces, in the same section as the Sun, Mars in Aquarius, Venus in Taurus, Mercury in Aquarius, in the same section as Mars. Scorpio was the ascendant.

The father of this native was sent into exile after having been consul twice. The native himself was exiled for the crime of adultery but suddenly recalled and first appointed administrator of Campania, then governor of Achaea, then governor of Asia Minor, and finally prefect of the city of Rome.

Now someone who knows nothing about the theory of the antiscia, seeing the Sun in the same position as Jupiter, in the fifth house from the ascendant, that is, the House of Good Fortune [the following words are corrupt; one would expect a reference to the opposition of Jupiter and Saturn] would have foretold a father who was fortunate, prosperous, powerful, and so on, and made the same prediction for the native himself. But he will be unable to say anything about the exile and the incessant intrigues against him, unless he pays attention to the principle of the antiscia. Remember, I said that Pisces sends an antiscium to Libra and vice versa. Therefore, the Sun and Jupiter, both positioned in Pisces, are sending an antiscium to Libra, the sign in which he [the Sun] is humiliated and brought down; and this happens precisely in the [House of] Bad Fortune. It indicates the notorious exile of the father.

Jupiter, whose power and influence the beam of the antiscium transfers from the sign of Pisces to the sign of Libra, placed in the twelfth house, that is, the [House of] Bad Fortune, produced many enemies both for himself and his father, and gave them power.

At the beginning of his astrological handbook, Ptolemy attempts to explain in scientific terms why astrology works. To us, this may look like pseudoscience. After all, we know that the sun is not a planet, and new planets have been identified in the solar system, planets whose specific influences remain to be determined. Nevertheless, in Ptolemy’s day, this explanation was the best he could come up with, and his authority was such that his theories were widely accepted.

Astrology, Ptolemy argued, was partly empirical, partly intuitive, partly theoretical. Its practitioners seem to have been convinced that, generally speaking, it produced results. Perhaps they forgot their failures and remembered only their successes. But skeptical outsiders demanded some sort of proof, and since statistics of failure and success were hard to evaluate, if they were kept at all, theories like Ptolemy’s had to be devised in order to impress the skeptics.
Ptolemy operates with two concepts—that of the “ethereal substance,” borrowed from Aristotle, and that of “cosmic sympathy,” borrowed from Posidonius—but he also offers some empirical evidence. The influence of the sun and the moon on all sorts of natural processes on earth was recognized and could be substantiated by many observations. Since in astrological terms the sun and the moon were “planets,” all planets were thought to influence organic and inorganic conditions on earth.

This particular section of Ptolemy’s work is more of a diatribe than a manual. It is aimed at skeptics and critics, and while it uses traditional material (e.g., it points to the farmer’s almanac), it also introduces a scientific hypothesis.

Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblus* 1.2.1–8

It is quite clear to everyone and can be explained briefly that a specific force emanates and spreads from the everlasting ethereal substance and that it moves toward the whole region about the earth. This region is constantly subject to change because the main elements of the sublunar [lower] sphere, fire and air, are surrounded and controlled by motions in the [upper] ethereal region. But they themselves surround and control everything else, earth and water and then plants and the creatures that live on earth and in water.

Somehow the sun, together with the atmosphere, always influences everything on earth, not only by the changes that take place during the seasons each year—creatures being born, plants bearing fruit, waters flowing, bodies changing—but also by its daily course around the earth when it gives out heat, moisture, dryness, and fresh air in a logical order and in accordance with its configurations in relation to the zenith.

The moon, being closest to the earth, releases a tremendous discharge on the earth. Most inanimate things and animate creatures live in sympathy with the moon and change along with it: rivers increase and diminish their flow according to the light of the moon; oceans turn their tides in accordance with the rising and setting of the moon; plants and living beings as a whole or in part grow and shrink in rhythm with the moon.

The transitions of fixed stars and plants also produce important conditions in the atmosphere—heat, wind, snow—which in turn influence accordingly what happens on earth. Furthermore, their aspects in relation to each other, as they meet and mix their influences, create many different developments. The power of the sun prevails if one looks at the overall structure of quality [text uncertain], but the other heavenly bodies, to a certain degree, either contribute to this or oppose it. The moon does this more obviously and more continually—for instance, when it is
new, at quarter, or full. The other stars do this at greater intervals and less obviously—for example, in their risings and settings and their mutual approaches.

If you look at it this way, it must seem logical to you not only that things already fully formed are by necessity affected by the motions of these heavenly bodies but that the germination of the seed and its maturity are shaped and formed according to the condition of the atmosphere at the time. The more observant farmers and shepherds make guesses about the winds that blow at the time of fertilization and the sowing of the seeds, and they can tell about the quality of the outcome. Important events predicted by obvious aspects of the sun and the moon are registered not by trained scientists but by careful observers in general. For instance, we look at future events, and some of them are caused by a major force and a simpler order, and this is obvious even to untrained minds—well, even to some animals. I am talking of the seasons and the winds as they happen year after year. The sun is generally held responsible for these changes. Things that are less generally known are seen necessarily by trained observers. Sailors, for instance, know the peculiar signs of winds and storms as they come up in certain intervals, caused by the aspects of the moon and the fixed stars with the sun.

Like Manilius [no. 104], Ptolemy believes that astrology is a divine art, and that it is revealed to mankind as a special favor of the gods. How, then, can it go wrong, as it admittedly sometimes does? The art itself is not to blame, Ptolemy argues; rather, the fault lies with the imperfect human beings who practice it. To illustrate the problem, he compares astrology with the art of navigation and with medical science. We do not discredit navigation as an art because navigators sometimes make mistakes. What Ptolemy says here about the “beauty” of astrology, he also says in a short poem [no. 121].

We see from this excerpt (as from no. 102) that the art that Ptolemy, Manilius, and others thought divine had its critics in antiquity. Among other things, these critics objected to the habit astrologers had of finding out as much as possible about the native, his family, his background, and so on, instead of limiting themselves to the information they found in the stars. In reply to this, Ptolemy remarks that physicians, too, interest themselves in certain aspects of an illness that are, strictly speaking, outside the realm of medical science. The whole person must be considered, he says. Artemidorus gives the same advice to the interpreter of dreams.
It would be wrong to dismiss this type of [astrological] prediction completely only because it sometimes can be wrong. After all, we do not discredit the art of navigation as such simply because it is often imperfect. When we deal with any art, but especially when we deal with a divine art, we must accept what is possible and be happy with it. It would be wrong to demand—in a typically human, haphazard manner—everything from it and to expect final answers, which it cannot give, instead of quietly appreciating its beauty. We do not blame physicians who talk about the disease in general and about the patient’s “idiosyncrasy” when they examine him. Why should we object to astrologers when they include in their diagnosis the native’s nationality, country of origin, manner of upbringing, and other given circumstances?

According to Ptolemy, medical astrology was first developed in Egypt, and it seems to have been a fairly sophisticated discipline. The physician-astrologer would examine the patient and also cast his nativity, which would give him additional information about the patient’s state of health. The stars might tell him about the weak points in the patient’s organism, or they might warn him of an impending crisis. If, after having made a prognosis, the physician-astrologer hesitated to choose between two types of treatment, the stars might indicate which one was preferable. Again we see the doctrine of sympathy and antipathy at work.

Ancient medicine obviously was not the science it is today, and so the combination of medicine and astrology should not surprise us. If, in a given society, most people believed that the stars either cause or indicate human illness, along with everything else that happens to human beings, this society would also expect the stars to reveal the cures for the illness, and a physician who ignored astrology altogether might have fewer patients than one who weighed the influences of the stars in his diagnosis.

As far as [astrological] predictions are concerned, it seems that even if they are not infallible, their potential at least is most impressive. Similarly, prevention works in some cases, even if it does not take care of everything; and even if these cases are few and insignificant, they should be welcomed and appreciated and considered an unusual benefit.

The Egyptians were aware of this. They developed this technique further than anyone else by thoroughly combining medicine with astro-
logical prognosis. They would never have established certain means of prevention or protection or preservation against conditions that exist or are about to exist in the atmosphere, in general or specifically, if they had been convinced that the future could not be changed or influenced. In fact, they placed the possibility of reacting by a series of natural abilities right after the theory of fate. They combined with the possibility of prediction the useful and beneficial part of the method they called “medical astrology” because they wanted to find out, thanks to astrology, the specific nature of the mixtures in matter and the things that are bound to happen because of the atmosphere and their individual causes. They felt that without this knowledge any remedies must fail, since the same remedies would not be appropriate for all bodies and all affections. On the other hand, their medical knowledge of sympathetic or antipathetic forces in each case and their knowledge of a preventive therapy for an impending illness as well as the cure for an existing disease enabled them as much as possible to prescribe the correct treatment.

I 1 8

The ancient astrologers made an effort to determine the moment of their client’s birth as closely as possible because they knew that the nature of the universe was changing from second to second. The conventional time-measuring devices used in everyday life were not accurate enough; only an astrolabe would do. The term astrolabe originally meant “star-taking,” and the instrument used by Ptolemy himself may have been a very simple affair. In the Middle Ages three distinct types of astrolabe emerged: (1) a portable armil, that is, an instrument consisting of a metal ring fixed in the plane of the equator, sometimes crossed by another ring in the plane of the meridian; (2) a planisphere, that is, a polar projection of part of the celestial sphere; (3) a graduated brass ring with a movable index turning upon the center.

The ancients probably knew at least one of these types, but Ptolemy is not very explicit about how to use them. In his time the astrologers still observed the sky, but they also had charts and ephemerids, and they kept records of striking celestial phenomena. They noted the exact time when the moon was full, and so on. Thus the “astral time” of a person’s birth could be defined in terms of the lapse in time since the most recent phenomenon was recorded.

Ptolemy, Tetrabiblos 1.3.1–3

Often there is a problem about the foremost and principal fact, the fraction of the hour of birth. In general, only observation by a “horoscopic”
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[i.e., hour-watching] astrolabe at the very moment of birth can, for a trained observer, give the exact time. Almost all other “horoscopical” instruments that most serious astrologers use are in many ways capable of errors: sundials, because of their incorrect position or the incorrect angle of the “gnomon” [i.e., a pin or triangular plate that casts a shadow]; water clocks, because of the stoppage and irregular flow of the water for various reasons, or just by accident. Thus it seems necessary to explain first how to find by a natural, logical method the degree of the zodiac that would be rising, using as a premise the degree of the hour known nearest to [the time of] birth, which is determined by the method of “ascensions.” We must then take the syzygy [i.e., conjunction or opposition] of two heavenly bodies immediately preceding the birth—it may be a new moon or a full moon—and when we have determined the exact degree of both luminaries [i.e., sun and moon] if it is a new moon, or, if it is a full moon, the exact degree of the one that is above the earth, we must see what stars control it at the time of birth.

I19

Mars and Saturn are generally considered “bad” planets, but their harmful influence can be weakened if they are in “honorable” positions at the time of birth, that is, in a sign where they feel at home—for example, Mars in Aries, Saturn in Aquarius. If both are in hostile signs, they produce the types of people that Ptolemy lists, or perhaps one should say that they create the disposition toward a criminal career. From this catalogue of more or less repulsive types, the astrologer has to pick the one that fits other aspects of the nativity.

Ptolemy, Tetrabiblos 3.13.14–15

Saturn associated with Mars in honorable positions produces people who are indifferent [or: steadfast], hard-working, outspoken, obnoxious, boastful cowards, austere in conduct, pitiless, contemptuous, harsh, quarrelsome, rash, chaotic, devious, hijackers, wrathful, inexorable [reading adeetous with Camerarius, 2nd. ed., 1553, for adektous] demagogues, tyrannical, grasping, haters of their fellow citizens, fond of strife, vengeful, evil through and through daredevils, impatient, pompous, vulgar, pretentious, oppressors, unjust, uncondemned [reading akatakritous with Camerarius, 2nd ed., 1553, for akataphronetous], haters of their fellow men, inflexible, unchangeable, but at the same time cautious and practical, not to be defeated by their rivals and generally successful. In the opposite positions, he [Saturn, allied with Mars] makes robbers, pirates, forgers, wretches, dirty profiteers, lawbreakers [reading athesmous with
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Camerarius, 2nd ed., 1553 for atheous], cold-hearted, violators, crafty, thieves, perjurers, murderers, eaters of forbidden foods, evildoers, homicides, poisoners, impious, robbers of temples and graves, and totally depraved characters.

We know of several astrological handbooks in Greek verse, but most of them are lost. One that is preserved is entitled Apotelesmatica (Influences) and is attributed to Manetho, an Egyptian high priest of the third century B.C. who compiled a history of Egypt.

The six books, as we have them, seem to have been written by different authors. Books 2, 3, and 6 form a coherent poem whose author has inserted his own horoscope (6.728–50). It is that of a person born in A.D. 80. Book 4 appears to be a complete poem in itself, and Books 1 and 5 are collections of fragments. These portions may date from the second and third centuries A.D.

Our excerpt deals with the nativity of entertainers, such as acrobats and clowns. The author stresses that their work involves hardships and risks, and for him, they definitely belong to a lower social class. It is clearly not very desirable to be born under these stars. At the same time, he conveys a certain degree of compassion with their lives. They travel a lot and they are homeless—like gypsies. The author, whoever he was, has a remarkable gift for description, and he loves unusual words.

Manetho, Apotelesmatica 4.271–85

When the untiring Sun looks at the fiery star of Mars, hitting him with swift rays [i.e., is in the same house] and in quartile aspect to [certain] signs of the zodiac along its heavenly path, namely two-horned Taurus, panting [?] Leo and Aries, the sign of spring for suffering mortals, he [the Sun] creates athletes who are real daredevils, anxious to please their audiences, working long hours, crazy about performing, treading the air with their footsteps, tumblers who jump from [?] the top of the theater [or: circus-tent?], carefully timing their act between heaven and earth, actors, masters of farce and humorous invective, [entertainers] who will grow old in foreign lands, buried by strangers, birds of the earth, creatures who are citizens of no city, dull-witted, needy, ugly, telling obscene jokes, without undergarments, completely baldheaded, whose lives provide as much low-class entertainment as their art.
This short poem by Ptolemy sums up what might be called the religious feeling that here and there shines through in his technical handbook [see no. 116]. It is not so much an awareness of the power that his craft gives him. It is not a feeling of humility in the face of the universe. It is a religious experience: by interpreting the will of the gods from the movements of the stars, Ptolemy feels that he is directly in touch with the gods.

It has been said that Kepler, the greatest astronomer and astrologer of the seventeenth century, died of malnutrition because he charged such modest fees that he could not pay the grocer’s bills. But in his work, too, one encounters a spirit of exaltation that transcends the worries of everyday life.

Ptolemy, Anthologia Palatina 9.577

I know that I am mortal, the creature of one day. But when I explore the winding courses of the stars I no longer touch with my feet the earth: I am standing near Zeus himself, drinking my fill of Ambrosia, the food of the gods.

This text from the second or third century A.D. was once part of an astrological handbook. It deals with the various constellations of the planets: conjunction (0° distant), opposition (180° distant), and trine (120° distant). The significance of each constellation depends on its own nature (trines are usually favorable), the nature of the planets involved, and the positions of the planets in the signs of the zodiac. The astrologer’s art consists in weighing all these factors and in determining their overall meaning.

The symbolism behind this particular reading is fairly obvious: Mercury indicates good opportunities, especially in business deals; Jupiter stands for power, prestige, and authority; Mars suggests aggressiveness. Such symbolism works in different ways on different levels, however, and much depends on the native’s position in life.

Tebtunis Papyri, no. 276

. . . If, moreover, Mercury is in conjunction, and Saturn is in an irregular situation, . . . from an unfavorable circumstance. If Mars, at the same time, is in opposition to Saturn, while the constellation [?] mentioned before continues to exist, [this will wipe out?] the profits of transactions. Saturn in trine with Mars signifies [bad] fortune. Jupiter in trine or in
conjunction with Mars makes great kingdoms and empires. Venus in conjunction with Mars brings about fornication and adultery; if, moreover, Mercury is in conjunction with them, they produce scandalous lusts. If Mercury is in conjunction with them, this causes successful business transactions, or [it means that] a man will earn a living by . . . or by his wits [text uncertain]. . . .

If Mars appears in trine with Jupiter or Saturn, this produces great happiness, and he [the native] will acquire great wealth and. . . . If Jupiter and Saturn form this aspect, and Mars comes in conjunction with either . . . he will obtain [wealth] and collect a fortune but spend it and lose everything. If Jupiter, Mercury, and Venus are in conjunction, they bring about glory and empires and great prosperity; if the conjunction takes place at the morning rising [of Venus], that person will have prosperity from youth onward.

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Vettius Valens, an astrologer of the second century A.D., considers it his duty to tell a client the truth about his future and to help him face that truth. Most people are unable or unwilling to accept their fate; in fact, they like to trick themselves by believing in Chance and cherishing Hope and letting these pseudodivinities control their lives. We are always ready to hope that Fate will not be as harsh as the serious astrologer predicts, and we are more than willing to anticipate a sudden change in Fate due to Chance. Our prayers may foster new hopes, but these hopes are in vain. We must try to be good soldiers of Fate and obey orders as best we can. Or, using another image, we must be like the professional actors, who play their roles and leave the stage when the plot demands their exit. During the performance we must play the role assigned to us by Fate and make the best of it, even if we do not like it very much.

The self-discipline that Vettius Valens demands is the self-discipline of Stoic ethics, and his message is essentially the same as Manilius’ [no. 113].

Vettius Valens, Anthologiae 5.6.4–12 (p. 219 Kroll)

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 and, by compulsion and deception, 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, but sometimes as dark and cruel. Some she raises up in order to throw them down; others she flings into
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obscurity to lift them up in greater splendor. The other [Hope] is neither
dark nor serene; she always 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. Sometimes Hope offers firm expectations, but actually she has
abandoned you already and is gone to others. She seems to be close to
everyone, and yet she stays with no one.

Those who are not familiar with astrological forecasts and have no
wish to study them are driven away and enslaved by the goddesses men-
tioned above; they undergo every kind of punishment and suffer gladly.
Some find part of their expectations fulfilled, so they put up higher stakes
and wait for a permanently favorable outcome, without realizing how
unstable things are and how easily accidents can happen. Some who have
been disappointed in their expectations, not just occasionally but again
and again, surrender body and soul to passion and live dishonored and
disgraced, or else they exist as the slaves of fickle Chance and treacherous
Hope and never are able to achieve anything in life.

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 hap-
pens in any given situation, even if we do not agree. For if one refuses, “he
will suffer anyway and get no credit” [Cleanth., frag. 527 Arnim].

In his textbook Vettius Valens tells us about the joys of astrological re-
search. The following passage reads almost like a prose paraphrase of
Ptolemy’s short poem [no. 121]. To these men, astrology was clearly more
than a profession, more than a science: it was a vocation, and it left them no time, nor any desire, for the popular pastimes and amusements of the day, such as horse races, concerts, plays, the ballet. Vettius Valens seems to believe that all so-called pleasant experiences contain in themselves, or are inevitably followed by, an element of pain. This is not true in the case of the investigation of the sky: it conveys an experience of pure joy. This might be said of any kind of research that demands hard work and long hours, progresses slowly, but brings, as a reward, great insights and discoveries. Some alchemists speak of their craft in equally enthusiastic terms.

Vettius Valens, *Anthologiae* 6.1.15–16 (p. 242 Kroll)

I never got carried away by the various kinds of horse races or by the sharp crack of the whip, or by the rhythmic movements of dancers, nor did I enjoy the superficial charm of flutes and poetry and melodious songs or anything else that attracts an audience by a certain art or by jokes. I never took part in any harmful or useful occupations that were divided between pleasure and pain. I had nothing to do with disgraceful and troublesome courtesans [*hetairas*, Usener’s conjectural restoration of a missing word]. But once I had experienced the holy, reverent contemplation of celestial phenomena, I wished to cleanse my character of every kind of vice and pollution and leave my soul immortal. I felt that I was communicating with divine beings, and I acquired a sober mind for my research.

I25

In his lectures Plotinus, the most eminent Neoplatonist, dealt with magic and occult science in general. He himself appears to have had “psychic” gifts, and he was once told that he possessed a guardian spirit of a higher order than most mortals, and he was also able to protect himself against powerful black magic (Porph., *Plot.*, chs. 53–55, 56–60).

Among the lectures of the master that Porphyry—himself a serious student of occult practices—published in six groups of nine books called the *Enneads*, there is one dealing with astrology (3.1.5). In this context Plotinus does not reject the possibility that the stars may guide our lives; in fact, he accepts the Stoic doctrine of “cosmic sympathy” which underlies much of astrological thought. But for him the stars do not act as causes by themselves; they are only indicators of things to come. They cannot direct our mind, our will, nor can they shape our character. Because the stars are divine beings, they certainly cannot be held responsible for the evil in this world.

If this is the case, Plotinus must assume the existence of a power higher
than the stars, a power that rules or influences both the stars and our destinies, and the stars must merely function as a set of cosmic instruments giving important information to those who are able to read them correctly.

For Plotinus all modes of beings are determined by a kind of expansion or "overflow" of a single impersonal and immaterial force that he calls "The One" or "The Good." The problem of evil would require a special discussion: Plotinus considers it essentially a form of nonbeing represented by the world of the senses insofar as it has a material base; thus he eliminates the concept of an evil cosmic soul as an antagonist of "The Good."

In this particular lecture Plotinus wishes to restrict and reduce the exaggerated claims of the astrologers without actually denouncing their craft. As he sees it, there is such a thing as heredity, and beyond heredity and the powers above there is something that we may call "our own," that is, our own individuality. Thus, one’s life, one’s personality, may be the product of all three influences.

It would follow from this statement that not everything in a person’s character and life can be seen in the stars, and that the astrologer who relies only on the stars is bound to give us false or incomplete information about ourselves.

Plotinus seems familiar with the principles and techniques of contemporary astrology. He must have read at least one of the current manuals and noted a number of fallacies in order to discuss them in his lecture. He probably also had contacts with some practitioners through his students. Hence, in spite of his criticism, he may be considered a reliable source, and his treatment of the subject fills a few gaps in our knowledge of ancient astrology.

Plotinus, *Enneads* 3.1.5–6

But perhaps... the motion, the course, of the stars controls and guides every single thing, depending on the relative position of the planets, their aspects, their risings, settings, and conjunctions. On this basis people predict everything that will happen in the universe concerning every single person, and especially everyone’s destiny and personality. They say that one can see the other living beings and the plants grow and diminish because of their sympathy with the planets, and that they are affected by the planets in other ways as well. Moreover, they claim that the regions of the earth are different from one another in regard to their relationship to the universe, especially to the sun. Living creatures in general, as well as plants, conform to their regions, as do human shapes, sizes, colors, tem-
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pers, desires, ways of life, and characters. Hence the motion of the universe controls everything.

In answer to this one must say first of all that [the partisans of astrology] ascribe to . . . [other] principles what is ours—acts of will, passions, weaknesses, impulses—but give us nothing and leave us like rolling stones, not like human beings who have work of their own to do in accordance with their own nature. Surely one must give to us our due; at the same time, some influences from the universe obviously join what is our own and belongs to us. One ought also to distinguish between the things we do ourselves and the things we experience out of necessity, and not attribute everything to these [cosmic forces]. No doubt something reaches us from those regions and from the differences in the atmosphere—for instance, heat and cold in our individual temperature—but something also comes from our parents. We are certainly like our parents in our appearance and also in the irrational impulses of our soul. On the other hand, even if people are similar to their parents in appearance, you may see a great deal of difference in their character, their way of thinking—not corresponding to the regions—so that phenomena of this kind probably come from another principle. Our resistances to our physical temperaments and to our desires might also be mentioned at this point. But the astrologers look at the constellations of the stars and tell us what is happening to every individual, using this as evidence that the events were caused by them, as if the birds, for instance, were the cause of what they [merely] indicate, as would everything the diviners look at when they predict the future. But one can be more precise in looking at this.

Whatever an astrologer predicts, looking at the positions occupied by the stars at the moment of someone’s birth, is supposed to happen, not only because the stars suggest it but also because they bring it about. And when they talk about a person’s noble birth—meaning that he comes from a distinguished line of fathers and mothers—how is it possible to say this if the parents already had what the astrologers predict from a particular constellation?

They also tell the fate of the parents from the nativity of the children and the character and fate of the children from the nativity of the parents—children that are not yet born!—and they predict the death of a brother from the horoscope of his brother, what will happen to the husband from the horoscope of his wife, and vice versa. Well, how could the position of the stars in relation to an individual cause what has been predicted from the horoscope of the parents? Either the situation as it existed earlier will have to be the cause, or if it is not, the later one cannot be the cause either.
Moreover, the likeness between parents and children shows that good looks and bad looks are inherited and are not caused by the movement of the stars. It is only reasonable to assume that all kinds of living creatures are born at the same time as men, and that all of them ought to have the same fate, since they share the same position of the stars. How are men and other living creatures produced at the same time by certain constellations?

But in truth all individual things come into being in accordance with their own nature: a horse because it comes from a horse; a human being because he or she comes from a human being, and any particular human being because he or she comes from the same type of human being. Admitting that the movement of the universe contributes something—though it must leave the main contribution to the parents—admitting also that the stars act on the physical parts of us in many physical ways, giving us heat and coolness and the physical mixtures resulting from those: how can they influence our character, our way of life, and that which is least dependent on physical mixture, such as becoming a teacher or a geometrician or a gambler or an inventor? And how could a bad character be sent by the stars? They are divine, after all. In general, they are supposed to give all the bad things when they are in bad condition, for instance when they set and pass under the earth—as if something different were happening to them when they set, from our point of view, while, in fact, they always move on the heavenly sphere and keep the same position in relation to the earth. One must not say that a god, looking at another god in one position or another, becomes worse or better, so that they do good things for us when they are feeling good and vice versa.

No, we must say that the stars move for the preservation of the universe. But they also offer another service: those who look at their constellations, as if they were a kind of writing, those who can read this kind of writing, read the future from their patterns, interpreting their meaning by the systematic use of the principle of analogy, just as if someone said: “When the bird flies high, it means outstanding deeds.”
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should remember that the planets were named after the Greco-Roman gods, who had divine power but not divine love and forgiveness, and who were, in fact, ruled by every human passion and emotion.) Many people in Plotinus’ age probably had no difficulty believing that astral gods actually caused all the evils in the world—sickness, crime, war—because they were angry. But this, Plotinus says, is unthinkable.

There is another possibility: the stars are not favorable or unfavorable per se, but they emit a positive or a negative radiation, depending on their position in the universe. Or else some are favorable, others unfavorable, all the time, but their positions modify the intensity of their (positive or negative) radiation.

Plotinus sums up the various doctrines of the astrologers before he delivers his attack on them. First, he considers whether or not the planets have souls. Obviously, if they have souls, they also have a will of their own, and they can intentionally hurt us. But they are divine beings and therefore they do not want to hurt us. They certainly cannot be bribed. If the planets have no will of their own, they might conceivably be forced by their positions and constellations to affect us adversely. Plotinus here seems to refer to that part of astrological doctrine that establishes some kind of pecking order in heaven. A planet may be basically benign but may also be temporarily demoted within the celestial hierarchy and can even be forced to do something bad against its nature.

This whole concept of a celestial empire in which everyone has a certain position but can move up or down, having greater authorities above and lesser authorities below, reflects somehow the hierarchical structure of the great powers of the ancient world: Babylonia, Egypt, Persia, Rome. In such a hierarchy it was possible for a good and enlightened official or commander to hurt the people under him because an order had come from above. It was also possible for a wicked and corrupt governor to do something good, against his will, because he was bound by his instructions. The way huge political and administrative structures had functioned over many centuries must have influenced people’s thinking about the greatest structure of all—the universe. They could probably best conceive of it in terms of their own day-to-day experiences in their small world.

In his lecture, Plotinus attacks this kind of model of the universe. He refuses to see the planets as exalted heavenly bureaucrats who are unfair to ordinary people because of pressure from above or because they happen to be in a bad mood at a particular time.

In the first printed edition of the *Enneads*, as well as in Marsilio Ficino’s Latin translation, a curious passage (par. 12) appears following paragraph 5. It seems to defend astrology against the kind of criticism that Plotinus levels at it, although it never attacks his main doctrine. Scholars have
suggested that this is a short paper delivered by one of Plotinus’ students. Ancient philosophers sometimes encouraged their students to contradict them and to try to build a strong case against them, for the sake of argument, as an exercise in dialectics. The teacher was thus forced to find new arguments for his own position or to refute the objections that seemed to weaken it. Paragraph 12 could well be the summary of such a critique, found among the papers of the master and edited along with them. It could also be an excerpt that he himself composed as he read an astrological treatise, planning to use it in class as an aide-mémoire. At any rate, it seems to belong here, not after paragraph 11, where most editors place it. The paragraph traditionally numbered 6 does not continue the argument of paragraph 5 but appears to be a rebuttal to paragraph 12.

Plotinus, Enneads 2.5.1–5.12.6

1. I have said elsewhere [Enn. 3.1.5] that the course of the stars indicates what is going to happen in individual cases, but does not itself, as most people think, cause everything to happen. My argument offered some proofs, but now I must discuss it more accurately and in more detail, for to think of it this way or that makes quite a bit of difference.

People say that the planets in their courses not only cause things in general, such as poverty, wealth, health, and sickness, but also ugliness and beauty, and, what is most important, vices and virtues and also the actions that result from them in every given case, on every given occasion, just as if they were angry at men over matters in which men do not wrong them, since men are the way they are because the planets made them that way.

It is also said that the planets give so-called benefits to people not because they love them but because they [the planets] are either unpleasantly or pleasantly affected according to the place they have reached in their course. It is also said that they are in a different mood when they are in their zenith and when they are descending.

But what is most important? People say that some of the planets are good and others bad and that those which are supposed to be good give bad gifts and the good ones become evil. People also think that the planets, when they look at each other, cause one thing, but when they do not look at each other, something else, as if they were not what they are by themselves but were one way looking at each other, another way not looking at each other.

They also think that a planet is good when he looks at such and such another planet, but if he looks at a different one, he deteriorates, and that it makes a difference whether he looks at him in such and such an aspect or in another one. They also believe that the mixture of all planets is different again, just as a blend of various liquids is different from any of the
ingredients. These and others of this kind are the general opinions. We now ought to examine and discuss each point individually; this might be a good starting point.

2. Should we assume that the planets have souls or not? For if they have no souls, they offer nothing but heat or cold. Now, if we assume that some stars are cold, they will influence our destiny only as far as our bodies are concerned, since there is a bodily motion in our direction, one that would not produce a significant change in our bodies, since the effluence from every single star is the same and since they are mixed together into a unity on earth, so that there are only local differences, depending on our distance from the stars. The cold star will have the same kind of influence, but according to its different nature.

How, then, can they make some people wise, some foolish, some schoolteachers, others professors of rhetoric, others kithara players and professionals in other arts, and also some rich, some poor? How can the stars be responsible for the other things that do not have their cause and origin in a blend of bodies? How, for example, can they give a person such and such a brother, a father, a son, a wife, make a person prosper for the time being, or become a general, a king? But if the stars have souls and do all this on purpose, what have we done to them that they would hurt us, especially since they are established in a divine region and are divine themselves? That which makes men evil does not belong to them, nor does anything good or bad happen to them either because of our happiness or our misery.

3. “The planets do not do these things of their own free will but because they are forced by their positions and aspects.” But if they are forced, all of them surely ought to do the same things in the same positions and under the same aspects. What difference can it actually make to a planet if it passes now through this portion of the zodiac, now through that? It does not even move along the zodiac itself, but far below it, and wherever it may be, it is in the region of heaven. It would be ridiculous for a planet to become different according to each sign through which it passes and to hand out different gifts and to be different when it is rising, when it is at the center, and when it is declining. For it certainly does not enjoy being at the center, nor is it distressed or inactive when it declines. Another planet does not grow angry when it is rising, nor is it in a good mood when it is declining. One of them is even better when it is rising, nor is it in a good mood when it is declining. For each individual planet is, at any given time, at the center as far as some are concerned, but declining as far as others are concerned, and when it is declining for some, it is at the center for others. Surely it cannot be, at the same time, cheerful and depressed, angry and benevolent. And, of course, it is absurd to say that some of them are cheerful when setting, others when rising. For this
would mean, again, that they can be cheerful and depressed at the same
time. And then: why would their grief hurt us? But it is totally inadmissible
that they should be cheerful at one time and depressed at another.

They are always in a serene state and enjoy the good they have and the
good they see. Each has its own life all by itself, and each has its own good
in its action. This has nothing to do with us. Generally speaking, living
creatures that have no relationship to us can affect us only incidentally,
not through their main activity. Their activity is not aimed at us at all,
except that they, like birds, may incidentally act as signs.

4. It is also absurd to say that a planet is happy when it looks at \[forms
an aspect with\] another planet, and that another planet feels differently
looking at another one. What enmity could be between them? About
what? Why should it make a difference whether two planets form an
aspect of 120° or 180° or 90°? And why should one form an aspect of this
sort with another and then, when it is in another sign of the zodiac,
nearer to it, not form any aspect at all?

Generally speaking, how can they ever do what they are supposed to
do? How can each one act by itself? How can all of them together
produce an effect that is different from their individual effects? They
certainly do not form an agreement between themselves and then act
against us, executing their decision and reaching some sort of compro-
mise. None of them forcefully prevents the influence of another, and
none of them condones to another under pressure a field of action. And to
say that one planet is glad when he is in the region of another, while the
other is affected quite differently when he is in the region of the former—
is it not like saying that two people like each other, adding that A likes B
while B hates A?

5. Astrologers also claim that one planet is cold, stating in addition that
the farther away from us it is, the better for us, as if its evil influence on us
were in its being cold; and yet it ought to be good for us when it is in the
opposite sign of the zodiac. They also teach that the hot and the cold
planet in opposition are both dangerous for us; actually there ought to be a
mixture [of temperatures]. They say that one planet enjoys the day and
becomes good as it warms up, whereas another one being fiery enjoys the
night, as if it were not always day for them, I mean light, and as if the
other planet, being high above the earth's shadow, could ever be over-
taken by darkness.

Their theory that the full moon in conjunction with such and such a
planet is favorable, but unfavorable when she is waning—this theory
could be turned upside down, if this sort of thing is admissible at all. For
when she is full as far as we are concerned, she would be dark to that
planet which moves above her in the other hemisphere, and when she is
waning, as far as we are concerned, she would be full from the point of view of that planet; so she ought to do the opposite when she is waning [as far as we are concerned], since she looks at that other planet with her full light. To the moon herself it would make absolutely no difference what phase she is in, since one half of her is always illuminated. It might make a difference if she were getting warm, according to their theory. But the moon could get warm even if she is dark from our point of view; and when she is good to someone, she is full for him; could this not serve as a proof by analogy?

12. The side of the moon which looks toward us is dark in relation to the regions of the earth. It does not hurt the regions above. But since that [which is above] does not help, being far away, this [i.e., the conjunction] is supposed to be less favorable. When the moon is full, it is sufficient for what is below, even if that planet is far away. When the moon shows her dark side to the Fiery Planet (Mars), she is supposed to be good to us, for his power prevails, since it is more fiery than it needs to be for him. The bodies of living creatures that come from there [the higher regions] vary according to their temperature, but none of them is cold. Their position indicates this. The planet called Jupiter has a well-balanced blend of fire, and so does Venus. For this reason, because of their similarity, they are supposed to be harmonious. They are alien in nature to the planet called Mars because of its mixture and to Saturn because of its distance. Mercury, being indifferent, assimilates himself to all, it seems.

All of them contribute their share to the whole, and their relationship with one another is such that it benefits the whole, as does each individual part in one single living creature. They are there for its sake, as, for instance, the gallbladder serves the whole body, but also the organ next to it, for it is its duty to arouse an impulse and also to keep the whole body and the organ next to it from dangerous excess. Similarly, there must be, in the universe, some such organ whose function it is to produce sweetness. There also are eyes. Everything shares a common experience through its irrational part: thus it is one and there is one single harmony.

6. But it is surely total nonsense when astrologers call this planet Mars and this one [reading Aphroditen tende themenos] Venus and make them responsible for adultery when they form a certain aspect, as if they satisfied their mutual desire from the wantonness of human beings. Assuming that they look at each other, how could anyone accept that they enjoy the sight but nothing else beyond that? What kind of life is this for the planets, anyway? Innumerable living creatures are born and exist, and to each the planets are supposed to allot such and such a thing: to give them fame, make them wealthy or poor or frivolous, and transfer all their activities to them. How can the planets possibly be responsible for all this?