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DISCUSSION REVIEW
 ASTROLOGY – FAD, FICTION OR FORECAST?


INTRODUCTION

Astrology has been used as an example of the non-scientific – and hence of the implausible – by philosophers and non-philosophers alike. For example, we find the following statement signed by 192 leading scientists:

Those who wish to believe in Astrology should realise that there is no scientific foundation for its tenets...It is simply a mistake to imagine that the forces exerted by the stars and planets at the moment of birth can in any way shape our futures.  
...the continued uncritical dissemination of astrological charts, forecasts, and horoscopes by the media...can only contribute to the growth of irrationalism and obscurantism (p. 10 [3]).

There is no doubt that such criticism is justified of much of astrology. But there is at least one contemporary theory – that of Gauquelin – which would seem to have many of the features of a science, as well as some claims to plausibility. To be fair, it must be pointed out that Gauquelin does not classify his theory as astrology (p. 236 [9]). His critics – including signatories of the above statement – disregard this disclaimer however, and there seems good reason for so doing, viz that Gauquelin’s theory ('GT' for short) does follow squarely in an astrological tradition of explaining correlations between planetary configurations at times of birth and character traits, in terms of "planetary influences".

It is this theory – as presented in Gauquelin’s books [9], [10] – which I shall be discussing here. For a philosopher of science, the interest in doing this is twofold.

First, a study of the reactions which Gauquelin’s work has excited among scientists makes an interesting case study of how the credibility of theories is attacked and defended in the market place of science. Second, there is an interest in setting the record straight about some of the more...
extravagant claims which some philosophers have made about astrology. For example, Kuhn writes:

astrology could not have become a science even if the stars had, in fact, controlled human destiny (p. 9-10 [15]).

On the contrary, we shall argue that not only is astrology — qua GT — testable in a full blooded Popperian sense, but it also seems to have a "hard core", "positive heuristic", etc. — which are the features that Lakatos demands of a theory, qua member of a scientific research program (see concluding section). These same features also allow GT to qualify as part of a "paradigm", in the Kuhnian sense. (See the articles by Kuhn and Lakatos in [15].)

This still of course leaves the question of whether GT is plausible. To merely show that some current astrological theory is scientific, at the expense of exposing its implausibility, would be somewhat of a Pyrrhic victory for astrology.¹ I shall however argue (in section 3) that there is a significant part of GT — the part consisting of certain statistical generalisations — which does have some plausibility. Unfortunately the same cannot be said for the rather sketchy "explanations" of these correlations which GT tentatively proposes.² In particular, in section 2, I shall show (contra Feyerabend's claims in [7]) that these explanations are inconsistent with accepted scientific theory and other statistical data (despite their vagueness!). The question of how this affects the overall credibility of GT will also be discussed.

1. THE TWO PARTS OF GT

There are two parts to GT. The first is a battery of statements of the form:

(P1) There is a positive correlation between being born under astronomical configuration x and being successful in profession x'.

Unlike the traditional astrologers, Gauquelin does not rely on a background theory of "magical correspondences" (to use the words of one of his critics p. 38 [3]) in order to establish (or even suggest) the planets correlated with various professions via (P1). Rather he analyses statistically which astronomical configurations are correlated with particular profes-