

The astrological reforms of Marsilio Ficino and Johannes Kepler

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This paper examines the astrological reform attempts of Marsilio Ficino and Johannes Kepler. It discusses the methods by which they sought to reform astrology as well as how these devout Christian men reconciled their ideas of astrological influences with that of free will. Though they strove to accomplish their goals through fundamentally different means, both desired to reform astrology in order to increase understanding of cosmological influences, improve the lives of humans, and obtain better insight into the mind of the Creator. This paper also considers historiographical issues relating to the study of Ficino and Kepler's astrological ideas, and it questions the common practice of minimizing the significance of astrological beliefs of figures important in the history of science. Instead, it argues that, as astrology formed a central part of their worldviews, there is much to be gained from an investigation into Ficino and Kepler's thoughts on this matter.

This paper compares and contrasts astrological reform attempts by Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) and Johannes Kepler (1571-1630). Though a devout Christian and Catholic priest, Ficino was excited by ideas found in the works of Plato and Neo-Platonists, and he strove to bring the best of Greek ideas into Florentine society. His translation of the works of Plato and of many Neo-Platonic and Hermetic texts were of pivotal importance for subsequent Renaissance thought. Kepler, trained as a mathematician and greatly influenced by his teacher Michael Maestlin's belief in Copernicus' heliocentric cosmos, sought to bring about significant astrological reforms in an effort to improve the accuracy of astrology. This essay will examine the primary goals these men had in their astrological reforms, the means by which they sought to achieve them, and how they reconciled their belief in astrological influences with that of God and free will.

Before proceeding into an analysis of Ficino and Kepler's astrological reforms, it is worth briefly noting prevalent attitudes among scholars regarding the study of astrological ideas. Though much scholarly attention is given to discussion of certain aspects of these men's lives, such Kepler's three laws of

planetary motion and Ficino's importance in translating Platonic and Neo-Platonic texts into Latin, the astrological ideas of these men have not generally been a favored subject of extensive analysis. As Patrick Curry observes, 'within the academy, astrology has too often been examined as purely a failed version of something else: an ersatz religion, or pseudo-science, or vulgar rather than educated belief.'¹ This practice of downplaying the significance of astrological ideas has made gaining insight into the astrological beliefs and practices of historical figures challenging, since aspects of their ideas which differ markedly from those acceptable in the modern understanding of science are often minimized, ignored, or briefly explained away as an example of the 'superstitious' ideas of the times periodically surfacing in an otherwise great mind. For example, in his recent book on Kepler's contribution to astronomy, David Love mentions the 'unfortunate fact' that Kepler 'had a deep and enduring belief in astrology, and that this was an integral part of his worldview.'² Another example of scholarly distaste for astrology can be seen in a recent edition of a popular introductory level college astronomy textbook, which states, 'Astrology is not at all connected with astronomy, except in a historical context (they had similar origins, and hence the same root), so it does not really deserve a place in a text on astronomy.'³ Accordingly, in this book's discussion of the ideas of men like Copernicus, Kepler, and Newton, only those consistent with contemporary understanding of science are mentioned; any ideas differing from the current scientific framework are conveniently omitted, thereby remaking these men in the image of modern scientists. However, some scholars question the merit of such an approach to the history of astronomy. Along such lines, Anthony Aveni argues for the study of all aspects of astrological and astronomical beliefs, not just those favored in modern science. As he notes, 'If we disregard the metaphysical side of our ancestors' outlook, and focus only on those aspects of their astronomy that closely resemble our

¹ Patrick Curry, foreword to *Astrology and the Academy: Papers from the Inaugural Conference of the Sophia Centre*, Bath Spa University College 13-14 June 2003, ed. by Nicholas Campion, Patrick Curry and Michael York (Wiltshire, Cromwell Press, 2004), p. xii.

² David K. Love, *Kepler and the Universe: How One Man Revolutionized Astronomy* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2015), p. 118.

³ Jay M. Pasachoff and Alex Filippenko, *The Cosmos: Astronomy in the New Millennium*, 4th ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p.16.

own - at the same time discarding astrology and mythology on the trash-heap of mysticism, then I think we may be missing an important part of humanity's outlook on the universe.⁴ In this spirit, this essay will examine astrological reform attempts of Ficino and Kepler in order to better understand the astrological context underpinning much of their work.

Though Ficino and Kepler both were avid reformers of astrology, they had somewhat different goals for their reforms. Ficino, also trained as a physician, was quite concerned with the healing of individuals. In his studies of the works of Plato and Neo-Platonists, he sought to find ways he could utilize the ideas of these thinkers in his attempt to create better strategies for the healing of disease and for general well-being. Astrology was a major aid to this endeavor. In *On Obtaining Life from the Heavens*, Ficino notes that the celestial influences should be taken into account when making medicines. As he observes, 'For I have found by long and repeated experience that medicines of this kind are as different from other medicines made without astrological election as wine is from water.'⁵ In other words, in order to maximize the healing potential of a remedy, it should be made under the appropriate astrological influence. Thus to Ficino, astrology could, when combined with the proper actions at the proper times and with the appropriate musical additions, be used for the healing of the soul and body, which can be seen as a form of sympathetic magic. Regarding Ficino's approach, Angela Voss observes, 'Through appropriate ritual, the human spirit becomes aligned with the planetary spirit and will then automatically and naturally receive the gift of that planet as it vibrates in sympathy, like two strings of a lute.'⁶ Via sympathetic resonance with the cosmic influences, healing can take place. Thus in his work, Ficino strove to create an improved system of astrology which could be used to improve the lives of people on earth.

⁴ Anthony F. Aveni, *Ancient Astronomers* (Washington D.C., Smithsonian Books, 1993), p. 164.

⁵ Marsilio Ficino, *On Obtaining Life from the Heavens*, trans by Angela Voss, in Marsilio Ficino, *Western Esoteric Masters Series* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2006), p. 109.

⁶ Angela Voss, 'The Astrology of Marsilio Ficino: Divination or Science?', *Culture and Cosmos*, 4(2), Sophia Centre Press,(2000), 29-45, (pp. 38-39).

Kepler, in contrast to Ficino, did not seek to employ the power of the planets via ritual or magic. One of his chief concerns was the management of the state; as Campion observes, Kepler's 'goal was to establish an astrology which could help the government effectively avoid conflict.'⁷ Kepler lived during the Thirty Years War; thus it is understandable that the welfare of states and the maintenance of civil calm would be a major focus for him. He felt that current astrological practices were in great need of reform, and he desired to create changes in astrology so that better predictions could be made. The extent of his reforms were quite extreme: he sought to create an entirely new format for understanding celestial influences. He advocated the elimination of the zodiac and houses and envisioned a new system centered around aspects. In *On The More Certain Fundamentals of Astrology*, Kepler set out to illustrate those things in astrology he believed had sound reasoning behind them and offer proposals for the improvement of astrological calculations. By understanding the influences of the heavens upon human affairs, rulers could be better prepared to act in times of potential political instability or civil unrest and be proactive in the preservation of the state. As Kepler remarks, 'I would think that it is not entirely useless for leaders and rulers of people to be taken up with such considerations; for in order to rule the multitude one must have great skill and an awareness of those forces that affect human dispositions in a group.'⁸ Thus while Ficino seems to have been focused on how to harness the planets for use in the healing for the individual, Kepler appears to have been more concerned about utilizing their influence in order to maintain political stability.

Both Ficino and Kepler believed that by understanding astrological influences, one could choose a different course of action and thereby alter one's fate. Both men shared the idea that fate was not entirely inevitable, and by working with planetary influences, one could change the outcome of a situation for the better. However, the exact means by which one could alter the future differed between the two. For Ficino, astrology was very participatory in nature. To obtain the maximum benefit from astrological influences, one needed to participate in actions with the cosmos. For example, Ficino recounted

⁷ Nicholas Campion, *History of Western Astrology, Volume 2: The Medieval and Modern Worlds* (London: Continuum Books, 2009), p. 141.

⁸ Johannes Kepler, *On the More Certain Fundamentals of Astrology*, (Prague: 1601), trans. by Mary Ann Rossi with notes by J. Bruce Brackenridge, *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 123(2) (1979), Thesis71, p. 104.

how the Pythagoreans brought balance to their perhaps excessively Saturnine natures by singing Jovial songs and by wearing white clothing.⁹ Additionally, he notes that the celestial properties one is desiring to attract can be infused into the material world by the use of 'lures.'¹⁰ By enacting the proper rituals, the heavenly influences can be brought in for human use. Such participatory astrology, Voss argues, 'opened a new dimension for astrology in the light of the autonomy and divinity of the human soul' and allowed the individual to gain insight from the celestial influences and thereby improve themselves.¹¹ Such self-improvement is a key feature of Ficino's astrological ideas. For him, the point of working with planetary influences is to work in concert with the heavenly realm in order to make one's life run more smoothly.

In his emphasis of appropriate action in response to astrological conditions, Ficino espoused a somewhat different perception of planetary influences commonly considered to be detrimental. In his understanding, a particular planet's influence could be beneficial or harmful to a given person, based upon that person's choices in life. If a person were to make lifestyle and career choices which harmonized with the planetary influences they were born with, a planet's influence upon that person may be benign, yet if that person attempted to live in a manner incongruent with his or her blueprint, the planet may make its more negative side known. For example, Ficino notes that Saturn is beneficial to those who are leading a scholarly life, but that it is 'most hostile of all, however, to people professing the contemplative life and not practicing it.'¹² Simply, Saturn does not look favorably upon hypocrites. However, if one born under the influence of Saturn truly embraces the 'life sequestered and divine,' Saturn will actually be a pleasant, supportive influence.¹³ Voss notes this shift in interpretation of typically malevolent influences and observes that to Ficino, 'the experience of Saturn would depend upon the corresponding level

⁹ Marsilio Ficino, *On Obtaining Life from the Heavens*, trans by Angela Voss, in Marsilio Ficino, Western Esoteric Masters Series (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2006), Chapter 2, p. 119.

¹⁰ Ficino, *On Obtaining Life from the Heavens*, Chapter 26, p.174.

¹¹ Angela Voss, *Introduction to Marsilio Ficino*, edited by Angela Voss, Western Esoteric Masters Series (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2006), p. 29.

¹² Ficino, *On Obtaining Life from the Heavens*, Chapter 22, p. 160.

¹³ Ficino, *On Obtaining Life from the Heavens*, Chapter 22, p. 159.

of the individual's identification with matter.'¹⁴ So if one leads a more contemplative and less mundane sort of life, one will no longer be encountering the unpleasant effects of Saturn. Thus to Ficino, the secret to living a good life is to live in a manner compatible with one's predominant planetary influences.

Like Ficino, Kepler advocated a thorough understanding of celestial influences affecting humanity, as this could be useful in altering the course of events. Though Kepler did not share Ficino's enthusiasm for engaging in rituals to bring down the proper planetary influences, he was just as convinced that action in response to knowledge of astrological factors was essential to create the best possible outcome. He asserts, 'Astrology clearly has some say in political and military matters,' since there is 'agreement of human dispositions with celestial configurations.'¹⁵ In other words, there is a correlation between what is going on up in the heavens and how people are behaving on earth, so it would be wise for governments to be aware so they can respond accordingly. Regarding the management of the state in the event of astrological influences which could aggravate civil unrest, Kepler advises, 'let the causes exasperating people's dispositions be taken quickly away, or by the introduction of some new deterrent, let their minds be changed.'¹⁶ So for Kepler, a most useful way to respond to planetary influences was to consider ways in which they might endanger the stability of the government, and then create social policies which could keep such instability in check. As Campion summarizes, 'Kepler advocated a mixture of social reform and tough government to ward off revolution, and strong generalship to win wars.'¹⁷ Though the planets may predispose particular earthly consequences, their influence was not inevitable, as action could be taken to counteract potential problems.

Unlike Ficino, Kepler did not appear to be as concerned with revising astrological meanings of the heavenly bodies, and his analysis of the astrological properties of planets did not show significant change from those of earlier astrologers, such as Claudius Ptolemy, whose *Tetrabiblos*, dating from the second century CE, remained the definitive influence upon astrologers.¹⁸

¹⁴ Voss, *The Astrology of Marsilio Ficino: Divination or Science*, p. 40.

¹⁵ Kepler, *On the More Certain Fundamentals of Astrology*, Thesis 68, p. 103.

¹⁶ Kepler, *Thesis 71*, p. 104.

¹⁷ Campion, *History of Western Astrology*, Volume 2, p. 141.

¹⁸ Ptolemy, Claudius, *Tetrabiblos*, trans. F.E. Robbins (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1940).

What had changed though, was the model of the universe he was using. By breaking with the geocentric model of the universe and advocating a heliocentric one, Kepler was in need of new explanations of planetary influences. As Bruce Brackenridge recounts, 'Previously the powers arose from the juxtaposition of the planet to the sun and the moon; now, with Kepler's adoption of the Copernican system, these juxtapositions have changed . . . The powers are derived instead from a consideration of the optical properties of each planet.'¹⁹ In addition to the mechanism of celestial influence transmitted from the heavenly bodies to the earth via light, which Kepler terms 'physical causes,' Kepler states that there are also 'geometric causes' of astrological influences, which have to do with the geometry created between planets as they move. The geometric cause which Kepler devotes most attention to in *On the More Certain Fundamentals* is aspects. As Kepler explains, this cause, 'takes into account the rays of pairs of stars as they meet on earth and form a geometric angle.'²⁰ Though some of these geometric angles were already in use in astrology, Kepler added three additional aspects (the quintile of 72°, the biquintile of 36°, and the sesquiquadrature of 135°) and considered aspects to be of central importance in his astrological revisions.²¹ In large part, Kepler's reforms were focused upon creating an astrology focused upon geometry and measurements that would make sense in light of the new heliocentric perspective.

Ficino and Kepler alike dealt with the issue of the relationship between God, free will, and planetary influences. In *The Book of the Sun*, Ficino comments upon the likeness between the heavenly bodies and the divine. He proclaims, 'the invisible things of God, that is to say, the angelic spirits, can be most powerfully seen by the intellect through the stars, and indeed even eternal things - the virtue and divinity of God - can be seen through the Sun.'²² According to Ficino, by studying God's creation, humans have a window into the mind of God himself. Similarly, Kepler felt that in doing his work, he was

¹⁹ Bruce Brackenridge, *Foreword* to 'On the More Certain Fundamentals of Astrology', by Johannes Kepler, (Prague: 1601), trans. by Mary Ann Rossi with notes by J. Bruce Brackenridge, *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 123(2) (1979), p. 88.

²⁰ Kepler, *On the More Certain Fundamentals of Astrology*, Thesis 36, p. 96-97.

²¹ Kepler, *Thesis* 38, p. 97.

²² Marsilio Ficino, *The Book of the Sun*, trans by Angela Voss, in Marsilio Ficino, *Western Esoteric Masters Series* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2006), Chapter 3, p. 192.

uncovering the secrets of God's creation. Regarding understanding the cosmos, Campion observes Kepler's belief that 'To explain its operation was therefore to understand God's working in the world.'²³ Thus to study astrology was to better understand the creator. Though the planets and their ability to influence humans came about through God's creation, individuals' destinies were not fixed, both Ficino and Kepler agreed, and humans, especially when in possession of astrological knowledge, could alter their future. Throughout *On Obtaining Life from the Heavens*, Ficino describes the manner in which outcomes may be altered via proper action in response to celestial influences. Likewise, Kepler saw a cosmos created by God in such a way that the planets certainly affected humans, yet their power was not complete, everything was not predestined, and through free will, humans could respond to these influences. Thus both Ficino and Kepler maintained an astrology which enabled the coexistence of a monotheistic creator, celestial influences, and free will.

This paper compared and contrasted the astrological reform attempts of Marsilio Ficino and Johannes Kepler. Both sought to enact astrological reforms which would improve human lives. Ficino was focused upon the ways in which astrology could be utilized, as part of appropriate rituals, to effect healing, while Kepler was more concerned about using astrology to help rulers maintain peace and prevent conflict. By practicing an improved form of astrology, the lives of humans could be improved as well. For Ficino, this meant revitalizing and adapting practices derived from ancient sources, such as Pythagoras, Plato, and Neo-Platonists and by adopting lifestyle choices which harmonized with one's chief astrological influences. To Kepler, the surest way to improve astrology was, as he described, to 'throw away the nonsense and keep the hard kernel.'²⁴ That is, to focus upon aspects and other geometrical facets of astrology, and to cease the study of things such as houses and zodiac signs. Both men shared a deep reverence for the Creator, whose grand plans could be glimpsed at more fully through their astrological reforms. In their ideas, evidence of both continuity with tradition and innovation can be seen. Though their astrological ideas have not garnered as much attention in the modern world as some of their other contributions, their views on the impact of the heavens in everyday life was an essential part of their worldview, and as

²³ Campion, *History of Western Astrology*, Volume 2, p. 136.

²⁴ Kepler to Maestlin, 15 March 1598, letter 89, 1. 177, KGW 13, p. 184, cited in J.V. Field, *Kepler's Geometrical Cosmology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 127.

such, need to be examined along with their more mundane ideas. As Curry advocates, 'Astrology too is . . . a way of being in the world. It is not a flawed or failed version of something else, but fully itself to the same extent . . . as being a historian, or scientist, or anything else: fully, in a word, human.'²⁵ By studying Ficino and Kepler's thoughts on astrology, deeper insight can be obtained into their thinking on a subject which permeates all aspects of their work.

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²⁵ Patrick Curry, 'The History of Astrology: a Diagnosis and a Prescription', in *Horoscopes and History*, ed. by K.von Stuckrad, G. Oestmann, and D. Rutkin (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2005) 261-274.

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