

# On Astrologers

By Bertrand Russell

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## On Astrologers

There is always something pathetic about a great and ancient tradition which has fallen on evil days. The astrologer, as one pictures him in the past, is an aged sage with a long white beard, speaking in a slow and trance-like manner, and felt by his auditors and himself to be possessed of mystical lore. In his most glorious days, he controlled the destiny of nations: among the Chaldeans, he stood to the King in the same relation as the Governor of the Bank of England now stands to the Prime Minister. In ancient Rome he was revered, except by a few rationalistic Emperors, who banished from the City all "mathematicians", as they were called. The Arabs consulted them on all important occasions; the wisest men of the Renaissance believed in them, and Kepler, the great astronomer, had to become an astrologer in order to win respect and a livelihood.

Astrologers still exist; it has been my good fortune to know several. But how different they are from the magnificent beings of former times! They are, so far as I have come across them, hard-working and highly meritorious business men or women, with an aged mother or an invalid husband to support. They follow by rule of thumb the ancient formulae about the House of Life and planets in the ascendant and the rest of it, but their language is sadly modernised, and their horoscopes, instead of being inscribed cabalistically upon parchment, are neatly typed upon the best quarto typing paper. In this, they commit an error of judgement which makes it difficult to have faith in their power of deciphering the future in the stars.

Do they believe themselves in the sciences that they profess? This is a difficult question. Everything marvellous is believed by some people, and it is not improbable that professional astrologers are of this type. And even if they are aware that their own performances are largely guesswork and inferences from information obtained otherwise, they probably think that there are superior practitioners who never resort to these inferior methods. There was once a worthy man who made a vast fortune by professing to have discovered how to make gold out of sea water. He decamped to South America before it was too late and prepared to live happily ever after. Unfortunately another man professed to have made the same discovery; our friend believed in him, invested all his money in the new process, and lost every penny. This incident shows that people are often less dishonest than they might be thought to be, and probably professional astrologers are in the main honourably convinced of the truth of their doctrines.

That this should be possible is creditable to them but very discreditable to our educational system. In schools and universities information of all sorts is ladled out, but no one is taught to reason, or to consider what is evidence for what. To any person with even the vaguest idea of the nature of scientific evidence, such beliefs as those of astrologers are of course impossible. But so are most of the beliefs upon which governments are based, such as the peculiar merit of persons living in a certain area, or of persons whose income exceeds a certain sum. It would not do to teach people to reason correctly, since the result would be to undermine these beliefs. If these beliefs were to fade, mankind might escape disaster, but politicians could not. At all costs, therefore, we must be kept stupid.

*28 September 1932*