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AUGUSTINE ON FATE AND ASTROLOGY REVISITED¹

Abstract

In De civitate Dei V,1-11 reevaluating Stoic fate, Augustine develops a new understanding of fate which is changed from Stoic rational order to a voluntary order attributed to the will of God and eternally spoken by God. In these chapters, apart from the presentation of philosophical views on this topic, the bishop of Hippo pays particular attention to the refutation of astrological practices which, at his time, were very common in the Roman Empire not only among the Roman elite but it permeated various strata of society as well. Ordinary people sought the advice of astrologers for personal matters such as marriage, business ventures, and health. Moreover, astrology and other forms of divination often intersected with religious beliefs and practices. The Romans were deeply superstitious, and astrology provided a means of understanding and influencing fate. Although at his younger age, Augustine had been strongly influenced by astrology, as becomes clear particularly in his Confessions, later as a bishop he was fighting against these practices not only in his theoretical works but also in his sermons and exegetical homilies. The aim of this article is therefore to see how Augustine's views of astrology and fate presented especially in his homilies on John's Gospel (In Iohannis Evangelium tractatus 1-16) fit into his discussion on God's foreknowledge, human free will and responsibility summarised in the opening chapters in Book V of his De civitate Dei.

Keywords: astrology · natal horoscopes · Saint Augustine · fate · exegetical homilies.

The cause of the greatness of the Roman Empire is therefore neither chance nor fate; for it is beyond doubt that human kingdoms are established by divine providence. If anyone attributes them to fate because he uses the term "fate" to mean the will or power of God, let him keep to this judgment but correct his language. (Augustine, *City of God* V,1)

This citation from the opening chapter of Augustine's *De civitate Dei* V introduces the main themes treated by the author in the first eleven chapters

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where he addresses particular topics regarding fate, divination and the role of gods in human affairs. His discussion is set against the backdrop of pagan beliefs and practices, which he seeks to refute and replace by Christian doctrine while focusing on the explanation of the concept of “fate” (lat. *fatum*) as understood by Roman philosophers, especially Cicero and Seneca², as well as on the view presented by astrology which he condemns on many grounds, mainly in his *Confessiones* but also in the homiletic oeuvre. From many literary sources we learn how popular astrology was in the Roman Empire not only with the Roman elite but also among ordinary people.³ For Augustine, the idea that stars or other physical entities could determine human fate contradicts the Christian understanding of God’s providence and human free will. (Augustine, *City of God* V,1)

In his *De civitate Dei* Augustine criticises the practice of astrology, including natal horoscopes, which were commonly used in his time to predict individuals’ futures based on the positions of stars and planets at the time of one’s birth. However, already in his *Confessiones* we learn about his fascination by astrology (Augustine, *Confessions* IV,3,4) which becomes also evident in his exegetical homilies on John’s gospel where the practice of natal horoscopes is undisputedly condemned while other superstitious practices might be tolerated to a certain degree. The aim of this article is thus to see how Augustine distinguishes these practices and, further, understand what makes him refute one and accept the other. Moreover, I will try to demonstrate how these views on the topic fit into his concept of God’s providence and human free will presented in Book V of his *De civitate Dei*.

1. Augustine on astrology in his theoretical treatises

When Augustine became a residential bishop, he undertook the work on biblical exegesis called *De doctrina Christiana* where in Book II he criticises various forms of divination, including astrology, sacrifices and

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- 2 Concerning fate, Augustine challenges the Stoic and pagan notion that everything is predetermined by a series of causes, which could be understood and influenced by divination. He contrasts this with the Christian view that while God’s providence does indeed govern the universe, it does not negate human free will. Humans are capable of making choices, and their moral responsibility lies in these choices rather than in a predetermined fate (Augustine, *City of God* V,1).
 - 3 On the importance of astrology in Graeco-Roman antiquity see e.g. F. Cumont, *Astrology and Religion among the Greeks and Romans* (1912); F. H. Cramer, *Astrology in Roman law and politics* (2011); T. Barton (ed.), *Ancient astrology* (2003); S. Bobzien, *Determinism and freedom in Stoic philosophy* (1998); S. B. Noegel et al. (ed.), *Prayer, magic, and the stars in the ancient and late antique world* (2003); R. Beck, *A Brief History of Ancient Astrology* (2007). On fate and free will see e.g. R. Brouwer, *Divine and Human Will in Imperial Stoicism* (2020); R. Brouwer – E. Vimercati, *Fate, Providence and Free Will: Philosophy and Religion in Dialogue in the Early Imperial Age* (2020). For more information on the relationship of Early Christianity to astrology see e.g. T. Hegedus, *Early Christianity and Ancient Astrology* (2007); E. A. de Mendieta, *Fatalisme et liberté dans l’antiquité grecque* (1973).

the interpretation of natural phenomena, dismissing them as superstitious rather than manifestations of divine will (*Teaching Christianity* II,23,36). Among these practices that contradict true Christian faith, he pays particular attention to astrology:

Nor are those exempt from this kind of pernicious superstition who are called genethliacs because of their examination of birthdays, but are now more commonly called astrologers. While they do indeed note and follow the true position of the stars when someone is born, and sometimes even prognosticate it, still by claiming to predict from their observations either our actions or the consequences of our actions they wander very far from the truth, and sell uneducated people short with a wretched slavery. Because whenever a free man goes in to one of these astrologers, he pays him money in order to come out the slave of either Mars or Venus, or rather of all the constellations. These were given the names of animals because of a certain resemblance, or of human beings to do them honor, by those who were the first to fall into this error, and who then passed it on to posterity. (Augustine, *Teaching Christianity* II,21,32)

From the *Confessions* we further learn that Augustine was devoted to astrology for certain time at his younger age. It is, however, not clear enough when this fascination occurred for the first time in his life. Tim Hegedus, who in his book *Early Christianity and Ancient Astrology* summarises the previous views of prominent scholars on this topic (Hegedus, 2007: 45-46), suggests with reference to *On the happy life* 1,4 that Augustine became first “enamoured of philosophy” and subsequently became “a follower of astrology as well as of Manichaeism.” (Hegedus, 2007: 47) How long he was involved with astrology is not clearly known but based on his own testimony we learn that it definitely went on for some time:

I made no move whatever to break off my habit of consulting those charlatans whom people call „mathematicians“⁴, for I took the view that no sacrifice was being offered by them, nor any prayer addressed to spirits in the practice of divination. Nonetheless true Christian piety is consistent with its own principles in rejecting and condemning astrology. (Augustine, *Confessions* IV,3,4)

As Hegedus rightly observes, Augustine’s break with astrology (*Confessions* VII,6,8–10) took place perhaps when he was thirty-one years old (*Confessions* VIII,7,17), shortly after he had left the Manichees. (Hegedus, 2007: 47) Thus it seems that “astrology had a longer hold on Augustine than did Manichaeism” (Ferrari, 1977: 247–248) and this happened despite the attempts of his friends Vindicianus and Nebridius who tried to persuade Augustine of astrologers’

4 Here Augustine shows his knowledge that the word *mathematici* was traditionally a popular term for the astrologers.

vanity and malice (*Confessions* IV,3,5–6). In fact, for Augustine of particular importance were those astrological predictions which proved successful. It was finally Firminus and his anecdote regarding two men born in the same moment in a different social milieu that made Augustine, for the first time, agree with Vindicianus who had been convincing him of the fact that successful astrological predictions should be viewed as the result of chance:

...when true predictions were offered by diviners who studied horoscopes, such things were the product of luck, not skill; but when false predictions were made, they resulted not from the practitioner's lack of skill, but from his luck letting him down. (Augustine, *Confessions* VII,6,9)

Finally, Augustine came to understand why natal horoscopes might exercise such negative influence on those who rely upon them:

When people say, „The sky is responsible for your sin, so you cannot avoid it“, or „Venus did this, or Saturn, or Mars“, they invalidate our whole salvation. They are suggesting that human beings are guiltless – humans who are flesh and blood and putrid pride! – and that the fault lies with the creator and controller of sky and stars. And who is this? You, our Lord, sweetness and the fount of justice, who will repay each of us as our actions deserve, and do not disdain a broken and humbled heart (cf. Mat 16:27). (Augustine, *Confessions* IV,3,4)

These words echo the views presented by Ambrose in his *Homilies in Hexaemeron* which Augustine might have heard shortly after his arrival in Milan:

What reward is there for a Christian, if in his activities and labors he follows the dictates of necessity, not those of his own free will? There, where destiny decides, personal initiative is held in no esteem. (Ambrose, *Hexaemeron* IV,4,19)

In Augustine's view it becomes also evident that what distinguishes Christian and pagan types of divination, is the submission to God. The reliance on natal horoscopes and other forms of foretelling the future deprived people of their free will and dissuaded them to be responsible for their actions. These ideas bring us back to Book II of *De doctrina Christiana* where Augustine says:

And what the apostle said about idols and about the sacrifices which are offered in their honor (cf. 1 Co 10:19-20) is to be taken as applying to all the imaginary signs that either draw people to the worship of idols or of creation and its parts as though they were gods, or that have to do with remedial charms and other observances which have not been publicly promulgated by God to promote love of God and neighbor, but which instead distract the hearts of wretched people in pursuit of their own private appetites for temporal goods. (Augustine, *Teaching Christianity* II,23,36)

So one of the decisive elements of Augustine's final refuting of astrology was the fact that it did not promote neither love of God nor of the neighbour, but instead it incited people's appetites and greed for temporal things, not the desire to lead a good Christian life.

2. Condemnation of astrology in exegetical homilies

In our analysis of Augustine's views on astrology we will now proceed to the examination of his exegetical homilies, namely the first series of his *Tractates on John's Gospel* which the bishop of Hippo delivered to his Christian audience in his episcopal see probably in the winter of 407/408.⁵ These homilies were preached in the period of his culminating controversy with the donatists, so Augustine had to be very persuasive in refuting these heretics. However, this was not the only topic he had in mind when explaining verse by verse this biblical text. Among other topics the critique of astrology stands out in several of these homilies. In Tractate 6, Augustine grieves the practice of astrology spread among his faithful in the following way:

Pagans resort to idols publicly, do they not – or at least they used to. Christians now seek out fortune-tellers and consult astrologers secretly. (Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of John* 6,17)

In fact, the beginning of the 5th century was already marked by the persecution of all pagan magicians, southsayers or astrologers who would lead people astray from the Christian belief. Subsequently, these superstitious practices were officially condemned by Codex Theodosianus published in 438.⁶ Nevertheless, both ordinary people and the elite were not willing to give up visiting the astrologers, so they usually did it in secret. It becomes clear in Augustine's exegetical homilies where he puts his critique of astrology alongside with the refutation of the Manichaean doctrines, which we bring forth in support of the argument that Augustine himself practised astrology during his Manichaean years:

First of all, watch out, lest, just as the Manichees found a pretext for their lack of faith in what our Lord said, *What is it to me and to you,*

5 On the dating of *Tractatus in Iohannis Evangelium* 1-16 that Augustine presented in parallel with his *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 119-133 see more closely M. Andoková – R. Horka, *The Chronology of Augustine's Tractatus in Iohannis Evangelium 1-16 and Enarrationes in Psalmos 119-133*, *VoxPatrum* 72 (2019), p. 149-170.

6 *Codex Theodosianus* 9,16,4: „Let no one ask a haruspician, an astrologer, or a soothsayer (*hariolus*). Let the perverse faith of the augurs and diviners (*vates*) be silenced. Let the astrologers, magicians, and all others, whom the people call 'criminals' (*malipheans*) because of the greatness of their deeds, do nothing in their field. Let that curiosity which leads to an interest in divination be forever silenced, for by the sword of vengeance he will be struck down, and the sentence of death will not escape him who denies his obedience to these precepts.“

woman? so the astrologers may find a pretext for their lack of faith when the Lord says, *My time has not yet come*. And if he said in the way astrologers take it, when we have committed sacrilege by burning their books; but if we did the right thing, as in the time of the apostles, then the Lord did not say in that sense, *My time has not yet come*. This, you see, is what these seducers, themselves seduced, say in their empty chatter. "You can see that the Christ was controlled by fate, from his saying, *My time has not yet come*." So whom must we answer first, the heretics or the astrologers? Both of them, after all, come from that serpent, eager to corrupt the virginity of the heart which the Church preserves in the integrity of her faith. (Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of John* 8,8)

In the following paragraph, Augustine explains that Christ as God possesses the foreknowledge of future events, and, consequently he says that the words "My time has not yet come" refer to the act that should be carried out by Christ's divinity, therefore it cannot be realised astrologically. Thus no one has the right to claim that Christ was under the control of fate (cf. *Homilies on the Gospel of John* 8,9).

In paragraph 10, Augustine presents an important argument that the will of Christ as God stands above the fate and stars which were created by God:

In my opinion, brothers and sisters, the heretics have been answered; now let us answer the astrologers. And how do they attempt to convince us that Jesus was under the control of fate? They say, „Because he himself said, *My time has not yet come*.“ So then, we believe him; and if he had said, „I do not have a time,“ he would have precluded the astrologers. „But look,“ they say, „he said it himself: *My time has not yet come*.“ So then, if he had said, „I do not have a time,“ he would have precluded the astrologers, they would have had no grounds for their false accusation. But now, because he did in fact say, *My time has not yet come*, what can we possibly say against his own words? (Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of John* 8,10)

And immediately the bishop adds:

Astonishingly, astrologers try to convince Christians that Christ lived under a time determined by fate by trusting in Christ's own words. So let them believe Christ, then, when he says, *I have the authority to lay down my life, and to take it back again; nobody takes it from me, but I myself lay it down of my own accord, and again I take it back* (Joh 10:18). So is this authority then under the control of fate? Let them produce a human being who has authority over deciding how long he will live, when he will die; they most certainly will not be able to. So let them believe God then, when he says, *I have the authority to lay down my life, and to take it back again; and let them inquire why he*

said. My time has not yet come, and no longer find there a reason to place the maker of the skies, the creator of the stars and the one who arranged them in order, under the control of fate. Because, if fate were from the stars, then the creator of the stars could not be held to that necessity. Let it be added that not only did Christ not have what you call „a fate“, but neither do you, nor I, nor he nor she, nor any human being whatsoever. (Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of John* 8,10)

Moreover, Augustine does not stay only with theological arguments against astrology. He clearly realises what negative impact this practice has on Christian moral life. Obviously, he considers astrology to be a kind of slavery into which people sell themselves voluntarily when they consult astrologers who themselves seduced by the serpent seek to seduce others and propose their fallacies to the public. Sadly, they set up their nets to catch human beings in public places. These idiotic people, as Augustine claims, go to the astrologers to buy such masters as the astrologers want to give them – be it Saturn or Jupiter or Mercury, or anything else with a sacrilegious name. They enter freely, pay cash and come out as slaves of “error, and his mistress, greed” (Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of John* 8,11).

These ideas are also reflected in Tractate 10 where Augustine shows what pernicious effect astrology has on the lives of individual Christians. He claims that this act never remains an isolated sin but, as a consequence, it will generate other sins. Referring to Isaiah 5:18 he says that everyone who adds sin to sin, braids a rope for themselves. This happens whenever the sins that have been committed are covered with other sins:

You commit a theft; in order not to be found out, you look up an astrologer. It should have been enough for you just to have committed a theft; why do you want to join sin to sin? There you are, two sins for you. When you are forbidden to approach an astrologer, you revile the bishop; that makes three sins. When you hear, „Put him out of the church,“ you say, „I am going over to the party of Donatus“; that adds a fourth. The rope is getting longer; be afraid of the rope. What is good for you is that you should correct yourself by scourging yourself with the rope lest it be said at the end, *Bind him hand and foot, and cast him forth into the outer darkness* (Mat 22:13). Everyone, you see, is entangled in the threads of his own sins (Prov 5:22). The first is something said by the Lord, the second by another book of scripture; but in fact each is said by the Lord. Human beings are bound by their own sins and cast into outer darkness. (Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of John* 10,5)

So in Augustine's view those who consult astrologers, do not stay with one sin only, but add one sin to another. That is why he considers this practice to be dangerous for Christian moral life much more than other superstitious practices to which he also points out in these exegetical homilies. For

instance, in Tractate 7 we read about the Christian practice of putting the book of gospels to one's head in order to get rid of a headache:

When you have a headache, we praise you if you have put the book of the gospels to your head instead of having recourse to an amulet! For human frailty has come to this, and men who hurry to amulets must be so lamented that we rejoice when we see that a man, confined to his bed, is tossed by fever and pain and yet has placed hope anywhere else except that he put the gospel by his head, not because the gospel was made for this but because it has been preferred to amulets. Therefore, if it is put by the head so that a headache may be eased, is it not put by the heart that the heart may be healed of its sins? [...] Let what be done? Let it be put by the heart; let the heart be healed. It is a good thing, a good thing, that you do not fuss about the body's health, except that you ask for health from God. (Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of John* 7,12)

This practice, although superstitious in itself and thus not praiseworthy as such, should be however more tolerable than other superstitious practices including astrology and the wearing of amulets since it does not mislead Christians from their path towards God. On the contrary, if in their faith they are healed, it can promote the love of God and neighbours in them as has been pointed out in the previous section of this article.

3. Augustine's critique of astrology

As we have seen above, Augustine argues against astrology on several fronts and his objections are basically fourfold. First and foremost, his objections are theological. He asserts that belief in astrology conflicts with Christian doctrines of free will and divine providence. In fact, if people's lives were determined by celestial movements, it would undermine the Christian belief that individuals have the freedom to choose between good and evil, and that God is actively involved in the world, responding to prayers and guiding human affairs.

Consequently, this influences moral life of Christians. If people believe their fate is sealed by the stars, they might feel absolved of personal responsibility for their actions which leads to moral decay.

Thirdly, Augustine points out logical inconsistencies and contradictions within astrological practices. For instance, he challenges the notion that celestial bodies which do not possess rational souls, could influence human behaviour and decisions, which are guided by reason and free will.

Finally, he also provides empirical evidence against astrology in his treatises based primarily on the famous argument of the twins. He notes the cases where people born at the same moment, under the same astrological conditions, lead vastly different lives. Thereby Augustine questions the

reliability of horoscopes. This observation already uttered by Augustine's predecessor Cicero (*On divination* 2,41-90), attacks the core of astrological claims that the stars at one's birth dictate one's destiny.

4. Conclusion

Augustine seeks to establish Christianity as a rational faith that does not rely on the whimsical and often contradictory interpretations of signs and omens inherent in astrological and divinatory practices. By arguing against the rational basis of astrology, he positions Christianity as superior, not only morally but also intellectually. Through his arguments, the bishop of Hippo aims to shift the focus from a fatalistic view of human existence driven by impersonal forces or capricious deities, to a Christian worldview where a benevolent God governs all things with omnipotence and perfect goodness where human beings have a meaningful role and moral duties derived from their relationship with this God. Augustine's arguments had a lasting impact on Christian theology and helped to shape medieval attitudes toward astrology and divination. His views contributed to the eventual marginalisation of these practices within Christian communities, though they would resurface and be debated throughout Medieval and Renaissance periods.

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