

THE SCIENCE OF THE SOUL¹

by Swami Abhayananda

It has been well established that the eternal Self, or God, is the ultimate Identity of everyone; but we have to ask, ‘what is it that makes “individuals” of each of us?’ Why does one person have a passion for music and another for physics? Why does this one become an architect, and the other becomes a writer of fiction; this one a neurobiologist and this other a stock broker? These are questions about the individual soul-characteristics with which each of us is born. We cannot deny that such differences exist among human beings, even though we are united as one at the Source. One person is born with every advantage; another is born infirm and in very limited circumstances. How do we account for such differences? Clearly, each individual is endowed with his or her own unique characteristics, qualities, virtues and vices by which each is set apart from the others. These may extend to physical characteristics, but they belong primarily to an interior reality, which we have traditionally termed ‘the soul’.

For those who have experienced the one eternal Self, the previous identification with a separative individual self is seen to have been produced by our erroneous conviction that we are a distinct ‘I’ embodied in a distinct body. Having known the eternal Self to be one and transcendent, we tend to explain our previous sense of self as merely a limited ‘reflection’ or ‘contraction’ of the Divine Consciousness and pass over the whole subject of ‘soul’ as though it were identical in all respects with the one Divine Self, ignoring the distinctiveness of individual souls. But many questions continue to arise: What of individual characteristics? What of individual free will, and the culpability of the individual? What about individual karma? Mustn’t karmic choices attach to a separate reincarnating entity? So many questions! And, while we repeatedly encounter the barriers to knowing the answers to these questions, still we cannot cease from seeking answers. For the overarching desire to *know* is one of the most evident characteristics of being human! And, just as surely, that inherent desire is a Divinely implanted one, leading us, slowly but surely, toward the clarity of a Divine understanding.

Certainly, the *physical* characteristics of our bodies are encoded in our DNA, and these physical characteristics are passed along from one generation to the next. But the genetic makeup of our DNA pertains only to our *physical* lineage, and has no rulership over, nor any relation to, our soul

characteristics. By “soul characteristics”, I mean those subjective proclivities that constitute our ambitions, our life-purposes, our primary interests, our passion, the direction of our focus in life. These proclivities arise and persist within us as individuals in a manner wholly unrelated to our physical lineages or ancestry. Some would claim that such proclivities arise accidentally in the course of one’s early learning experiences; but to others, these proclivities appear to be imprinted within the very fabric of our souls. But how and why?

Is it merely a random accident that determines one’s path in this life, or is there an evolutionary continuity, a carrying forward of the interests and talents, the virtues and vices, the karma of past good and bad deeds, from one incarnation to the next? If not, we live but once, under positive or negative circumstances, purely by accident; and there is no ongoing consequence to any of our actions. If there is no retention of soul-identity across lifetimes, then personal evolution halts at the end of this current life, and no trace remains of the hard-won qualities of the soul, and there is no consequence for atrocities committed. In this case, life is, as Shakespeare characterized it, “a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”

Fortunately, there is some evidence that order prevails and has always prevailed in God’s universe. From the earliest times, this order has been observed and noted by men who gazed, intrigued, at the lights in the heavens passing in their predictable courses overhead. And perhaps by revelation, perhaps by an extraordinary leap of inference, some Chaldean ancestor thought to compare the characteristics of his own soul with the pattern of the planets in effect at his birth, and discovered there an unlikely correspondence. In subsequent times, other early star-gazers continued his study, and no doubt regarded this correlation of soul-qualities and planetary positions as “the science of the soul”, but we have come to refer to it as Astrology.

The synchronous relationship between the Sun, moon, and planets and the human psyche, or soul, may readily appear to be an implausible if not impossible relationship if we regard it as occurring in a classic (Newtonian) mechanical universe. But this interconnecting relationship between the planetary environment and the soul appears in an entirely new light when it is seen to operate in a universe of Spirit, in a universe imaged in the Mind of God. And though astrology has been continually practiced for more than

four thousand years, it has been, and probably shall always continue to be, practiced and understood by only a very small group of people. This is because the development of the intuitive faculty required for its comprehension and practice is confined to but an advanced few.

To the many, a belief in the effectiveness of astrology is considered to be the epitome of ignorance. Those who feel this way cringe at the very suggestion of a connection between the planetary environment of the solar system and those living within that environment, citing the absence of empirical evidence for such a claim. However, the claims of Astrology begin to seem plausible when one is able to examine the astrological correspondences in the charts of well known individuals with certain marked characteristics. An examination of the astrological charts of such various famous people can help us to understand the seemingly inexplicable correlation that exists between the planets of the solar system and the lives of humans living on the planet Earth.

And yet, anyone with an inquisitive and critical intellect must ask, 'How could such a correspondence be possible?' By what possible means could the positions of the Sun, moon and planets at the moment of an individual's birth constitute the psychological framework of that individual? And how could the angular relationships of the continuing movements of those planets to their positions at birth have the slightest effect on that individual's evolution and development?

These are questions that have been asked of the defenders of astrology for the last two millennia; and the lack of any verifiable (or even unverifiable) theories to account for the correlations purported by astrologers to exist between planetary patterns and human character, psychology, and behavior is the primary reason cited by skeptics for their rejection of the claims of Astrology. No electromagnetic-type fields of force have been discovered to account for it; no observable 'planetary rays' seem to be present; no viable theory of universal sympathy or synchronicity has even been put forward. How then account for either a causal or an acausal synchrony between the angular positions of the Sun, moon and planets and the minds and bodies of human beings living on earth?

Most astrologers admit they haven't a clue as to how the planets and human consciousness are connected. 'We see the effects of this correspondence,' they say, 'but we do not understand the mode of its efficacy.' And they

point out that the same is true of so many phenomena—like the force of gravity, and the weak, strong and electromagnetic forces. Certainly we know they exist and operate, but no one knows *how* they work or why. We know that gravity exists by observing its effects, though we don't fully understand the mechanism behind it or how to reconcile it with our quantum theories of the microcosm.

Likewise, we see the effects of molecular formation in the objects around us and in ourselves; but we don't really understand why the elementary particles form out of the initial burst of light-energy, or where the force comes from that causes them to bind together into molecules and from thence into larger living structures. Indeed, what is it that constitutes the life-force of sentient beings? How does it originate? And how does it operate? And what of that most fundamental phenomenon: light? It is a complete mystery. The ambiguous wave-particle duality of light, shown by many different experiments in the scientist's lab, reveals the indefinability of light at the quantum level. We know it is, but we don't know *what* it is or *how* it works.

The observed correlation of the positions of the Sun, moon and planets in the solar system with the lives and psyches of the inhabitants of Earth fits right in with all those other unsolved mysteries. We see and experience the connection, though we can't explain the why or how of it. Clearly, the subjective and objective data accumulated tells us that such a correspondence exists. Yet, the critics tell us that astrology *cannot* work in the material and mechanistic universe which science has presented this universe to be. 'In a universe such as contemporary science describes,' they say, 'astrology cannot possibly work!' And, of course, they are right. Therefore, either something is wrong with the astrological idea of correspondences between planets and people, or there is something wrong with the model of the universe which contemporary science portrays. Perhaps the answer to how astrology works must be sought in an entirely different framework of understanding from the usual empirical cause-effect framework in which most of us operate.

Let us look then for some alternative answers from one of our foremost thinkers on the subject of astrology: the author of the watershed classic, *Cosmos And Psyche*, Richard Tarnas. In that book, Tarnas suggests that astrology, from its earliest beginnings, is based on a worldview which he refers to as a "primal" one, a mindset that sees the inner and outer worlds as

co-constituents of an all-embracing world-Soul (*anima mundi*) that permeates both cosmos and psyche. In this “primal” worldview,

The human psyche is embedded with a world psyche in which it complexly participates and by which it is continuously defined. The workings of that *anima mundi*, in all its flux and diversity, are articulated through a language that is mythic and numinous. Because the world is understood as speaking a symbolic language, direct communication of meaning and purpose from world to human can occur. The many particulars of the empirical world are all endowed with symbolic, archetypal significance, and that significance flows between inner and outer, between self and world. In this relatively undifferentiated state of consciousness, human beings perceive themselves as directly—emotionally, mystically, consequentially—participating in and communicating with the interior life of the natural world and cosmos.²

This “primal” mindset is contrasted with the “modern” mindset, influenced as it is by the methods and conclusions of the empirical sciences, which assumes a distinct separation between subject and object, between self and world, allowing for no breach of this cognized barrier. The demands of this empirical mindset have taught us to see the world objectively, divorced from human subjectivity, and this perceptive framework has effectively erected a mental defensive barrier against the “primal” worldview. In the primal (or mystical) worldview, all in the universe is one organic and interrelated whole, and each separate element fits into that whole as an integral component. All things do indeed move together of one accord; not a sparrow falls nor a grain of sand is moved by the currents on the ocean’s floor that is not coordinated with all else in a continuum of Divine interaction. All is contained in the Mind of God, as images contained in a dream are contained and coordinated in the mind of a dreamer.

We, who are but insubstantial images in that Mind imagine in our turn that we are, and all about us is, substantial, real, a solid edifice of reality that we can cling to and hang our hats on. But even this body which we label “I” is but a fleeting shadow, a flickering image on a passing screen in the Mind of the One whose bodies all these truly are. We exist in a dream-world, a projection of a dancing spray of lightbeams upon an infinite expanse of Thought.

In our accustomed “modern” view of a universe of material effects from material causes, all separately isolated from one another, the seemingly dead planets circling the Sun have no bearing whatever on the minds of men on

earth. In such a world of independently moving subjects and independently moving objects, how could there possibly be a correlation between the two? Impossible! Inconceivable! But—suppose a world all magically interconnected, a world intimately pervaded by a unified Consciousness whose single will governs all—why then, the possibility of a coordination, or synchrony, between the planets of the solar system and its inhabitants no longer seems so dubious.

In the Indian religious tradition, this phenomenal world is referred to as *Maya*. *Maya* is the Thought production of the Divine Mind. It is a play of light and energy; this light-energy forms the substance of *Maya*. We must grasp it as a Whole, without attempting to reduce it to elementals or causal relationships. Within it there are cohesive forces, but these too are irreducible to separable elements, just as it is impossible to define the elements or cohesive forces within our own dreams or fantasies. There are no individual elements or forces; the universe, like a dream, is a Whole, and operates as a Whole. Under the spell of *Maya*, we are deluded into believing that we are our bodies and are independent entities separate and distinct from the world of our experience.

It is only through an occasional glimpse of clarity that we become awakened to the truth that we live within the one Spirit, one world-Soul, and that this body and all nature is His; that it is an illusory world made of projected light, thought, and images in which all things are united and joined in the one all-pervading Spirit. In the delusive world of *Maya*, where all appears solid and permanent, the planets moving in the heavens appear to be only inert objects, disconnected from our lives and minds. But, in the revealed world of the living Spirit, there is an active force that interconnects the heavens and the earth and all that exists in one Consciousness, deliberate and entire, guiding and directing every soul and everything in this universe by Its power.

Now, astrologers must possess something of this primal worldview in order to accept and account for the interplay between cosmos and psyche, between world and self, in the universal consciousness that is the *anima mundi*. And it is here, at the most fundamental level, that we discover the great divide between the “primal” and “modern” worldviews, as well as between those who are able to accept and embrace astrological principles and those who are not. From the “primal” perspective, to look for *empirical* proofs for astrological “influences” is irrelevant and beside the point. The connection

between planetary positions and human psychology is neither physical nor mental; it is a consonance taking place within the one Spirit—a Spirit or Soul that is both immanent and transcendent, that resides in the individual’s innermost being, and yet is all-pervasive, that acts not only as the Providence and guiding Logos of all things and all beings, but as the very Self of those beings.³ For those of us to whom experience has taught the truth of such notions, the rationale for astrology is thus rendered adequate; and for those to whom such notions are nonsense, Astrology must also appear to be nonsense.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES:

1. This chapter, as well as the following chapter, is adapted from material appearing in a previously published book: Swami Abhayananda, *The Divine Universe*, New York, iUniverse, 2008.
2. Richard Tarnas, *Cosmos And Psyche*, N.Y., Viking, 2006; p. 17.
3. Mystical experience reveals that in the Absolute Spirit, the divine Self (*Atman*), there is no individual soul (*jiva*). The one Spirit is seen to be undivided; it is common to everyone and everything. For many, this revelation rules out the existence of a separate and independent ‘soul’ with distinct characteristics peculiar to each individual. Where then does this notion of an individual ‘soul’ come from? And if such a thing exists, how can it be accounted for? It’s true that the individual ‘soul’ does not exist in an absolute sense; but it does exist in the phenomenal universe as a quality of embodiment. The tendencies and habits (*karma*) that constitute an individual soul are the qualities previously established on a subtle, psychic, level, and which become the characteristics reincarnated in a new birth. And because all things move together of one accord, this set of characteristics is reflected in the planetary arrangement existing at that individual’s birth.

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