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Astrology's Critics a Dedicated Bunch

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Anti-astrology polemic has morphed into something especially ugly in the current century



Some 40 years ago, the statement of 186 leading scientists against astrology appeared in the September/October 1975 issue of the *Humanist* magazine. Commenting on the event, the late Philosopher Paul Feyerabend of the University of California at Berkley explained that the *Objections to Astrology* statement produced by the late astronomer Bart J. Bok and friends consists of four parts.

"First, there is the [statement](#) proper, which takes about one page. Next come 186 signatures by astronomers, physicists, mathematicians, philosophers and individuals with unspecified professions, eighteen Nobel Prize Winners among them. Then we have two articles explaining the case against astrology in detail.

"Now what surprises the reader whose image of science has been formed by the customary eulogies that emphasize rationality, objectivity, impartiality and so on is the religious tone of the document, the illiteracy of the 'arguments' and the authoritarian manner in which the arguments are being presented. The learned gentlemen have strong convictions, they use their authority to spread these convictions (why 186 signatures if one has arguments?), they know a few phrases which sound like arguments, but they certainly do not know what they're talking about."

When Duty Calls...

In launching his campaign to stamp out astrology 40 years ago, Professor Bok made no attempt to hide the fact that he was motivationally driven to protect wooly-thinking college students from themselves; he worried aloud that astrology was winning converts among the more impressionable minds on campus and was determined to do something about it.

In an article that accompanied the *Objections* statement in the *Humanist* magazine, Prof. Bok put his reputation as an expert on the subject on the line. He told readers that, over the years, he had checked out the heavens on an almost nightly basis and never once observed the sun, moon, stars or planets influencing outcomes on the earth below. Ergo, we had his personal assurance that nothing – no special connections between the heavens and earth – could possibly exist. He further assured the faithful that astrology had been tested by science and found wanting. Only the evidence he mustered was paltry at best.

The anti-astrology polemic from the 1970s has progressed into something especially ugly in the current century. The organization of professional skeptics Prof. Bok helped to organize in the 1970s has morphed into a vigilante mob of self-styled skeptical inquirers. Their methods are often underhanded, and their objectives are to smear anyone they consider to operate outside the parameters of their narrow definition of mainstream science.

In an ongoing sleazy operation, members of the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry (CSI) pose as impartial editors on Wikipedia. However, these skills, known as sock puppets, are in fact committed to rewriting articles and reverting all edits that do not comply with their extreme beliefs. They also puff up and sanitize biographies of outspoken rationalists. Their tactic is to collude covertly as a clique, and to edit and patrol pages as tag teams to ensure that any topic on the fringe

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of science is classified as pseudoscience. These sock puppets insert warnings that these observations have been widely discredited by the scientific establishment and support their claims by citing their own unscientific 'skeptical' publications and sham debunking experiments conducted by their associates.

Blindsided by the Moon

Another strategy from the Bok era calls for CSI organization stalwarts to openly challenge any published research that offers the slightest hint of a positive result for astrology. The response may take the form of a follow-up study that intends to produce a different result or outcome. Or, more likely, what we get is a critique or re-examination of the results from an existing study – with a hard or jaundiced look at the methods used to arrive at them.

For example, in the May/June 2015 issue of the journal *Nursing Research*, astronomer Jean-Luc Margot from the prestigious Astronomy Department at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) belatedly critiqued a 2004 study by a team of healthcare professionals from the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain. The Spaniards had the gall to scientifically test lunar lore and publish a successful result, which could not be allowed to go unchallenged.

Eva Roman, PhD, RN, is a professor in the University's School of Nursing and was corresponding author of the study, titled *The influence of the moon on the number of admissions related to gastrointestinal bleeding*. She says the study arose from the perception among nurses and physicians at the teaching hospital's Gastrointestinal Bleeding Unit that the number of admissions to the unit appeared to be higher on days with a full moon. Over a 738-day period that included 25 full moon days and 713 non-full moon days, the Spanish research team was able to demonstrate that the mean number of admissions to the bleeding unit was significantly higher on full moon days than on non-full moon days.

Compellingly, the statistical significance for the study was hundreds to one against the likelihood the result occurred by chance; in fact, the researchers found that admissions for gastrointestinal bleeding almost doubled on full moon days vs. non-full moon days. Various statistical methods were used to evaluate the data, and the difference between the two groups was statistically significant in all of them.

Joining Roman in the test was Ignasi J. Gich, MD, PhD, a Senior Statistician in the Department of Clinical Epidemiology and Public Health; and German Soriano, MD, PhD, a consultant to the Department of Gastroenterology. At no time did this team of qualified academics pretend to define the mechanism by which the moon might have affected the number of admissions to the Gastrointestinal Bleeding unit. The study was solely designed to determine not why but if a full moon correlated with increased admissions to the unit, which from a clinical perspective is important to know. The team's affirmative findings were unequivocal.

Prof. Margot's critique of the Barcelona study, *No Evidence of Purported Lunar Effect on Hospital Admission Rates or Birth Rates*, was published in the May/June 2015 issue of *Nursing Research*. In it, he challenged everything from methods to motives, and indulged in the same sort of "illiterate" arguments Prof. Bok was called on earlier.

An Astrological Perspective

In an article for the *Astrological Journal*, Peter Marko, a research astrologer living in Ottawa, Canada, says some true-believing astronomers "still feel it's their duty to educate the gullible public on how much harm astrologers can do to them, and how stupid those people are who believe in astrology." He asks: "How does a California astronomer focusing on the characterization of asteroid dynamics and the investigation of planets' interiors get interested in decade-old research on the moon phases by Spanish healthcare professionals?"

Only the learned astronomer knows for sure, but where he's coming from is hardly a mystery. Marko says the online background page for Prof. Margot's critique starts with the following introduction under the heading: *What is this article about?* "Some professionals who work in emergency rooms or maternity wards believe that the number of hospital admissions or human births is larger during the full moon than at other times. This belief is incorrect," he writes.

Prof. Margot moves on to the following section headings: *Why should anyone care? Why worry about erroneous beliefs? How prevalent is this problem? And what can we do about it?* Readers might reasonably wonder whether the article is science or sermon. Like Prof. Bok before him, the UCLA astronomer appears to be "on a mission to cleanse people of a dangerous heresy," Marko observes.

In warning to the task, Prof. Margot delivered a condescending lecture on "the basic standards of evidence." However, the Spaniards proved to be the better scientists as they fluently responded to

criticisms related to timing, methods and motives. According to Peter Marko, the astronomer failed to come up with a single technical criticism that was not swiftly and easily refuted by the Spanish team.

This is not necessarily a poor reflection on Prof. Margot's critical abilities: the Barcelona study was a simple, straight- forward experiment. All things being equal, any knowledgeable researcher working the data should arrive at the same conclusion. Only Prof. Margot found a way around the obvious by expanding his critique to include two earlier lunar cycle studies that separately involved hospital admissions and birth rates. We have Prof. Margot's word that both of these studies were flawed. He shares his insights on where things went wrong in these studies and slyly uses these revelations to dismiss the research by Roman and others as "an instructive example of these shortcomings."

Mechanism Missing

In his 1975 article for the *Humanist* magazine Prof. Bok made the point that of the four known physical forces in nature only gravity is a likely candidate to explain how astrology works because it operates over long ranges. However, Bok and colleagues went to great pains to discredit the idea linking astrology and gravity, effectively leaving astrology without a "mechanism" to explain how it works.

Prof. Margot chose to run the data from the Barcelona study and surprised himself by finding significant deviations from chance in the data, which would normally mean that the data correlates with the moon's phases. However, he dismissed his own findings because, he claimed, "there is no known plausible lunar related mechanism that could explain such variations."

The UCLA astronomer stacked the literature review section of his critique. He used only sources well known in the community for their anti-astrology bias, and purposefully focused on dated examples while ignoring more recent developments. For example, although it was widely publicized at the time he was writing his critique, Prof. Margot chose not to comment on the 2013 study by Prof. Christian Cajochen of Basel, Switzerland. Cajochen is the researcher who unintentionally demonstrated that subjects who came into his sleep laboratory during a full moon took five minutes longer to fall asleep and, on average, had 20 minutes less sleep. What's more, test subjects spent 30 percent less time in restful deep sleep. This finding was so significant the Swiss psychologist waited four years before publishing the result for fear true-believing skeptics might brand him as a lunatic (his word).

It's not especially comforting to realize that a team of skeptical inquirers stands at the ready to bat down any attempts by the curious to explore forbidden lines of inquiry. This tactic thwarts scientific and intellectual inquiry in the same way religious orthodoxy attempted to achieve this end in a different era. It's time for the scientific community to acknowledge there's more to astrology than sun sign columns; the evidence is everywhere if the investigator has courage and knows where to look.

About the author

Edward Snow

Edward Snow is Managing Editor of the Astrology News Service (ANS). He is a former news reporter and publicist and has managed PR programs for national and regional clients. He has been a student of astrology for many years.

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