

The Mars Retrograde of 2016

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Intro: Astrological Meanings of Mars

In astrology, Mars is the planet that symbolizes masculine drives, essentially all the testosterone-based experiences of human assertion or aggression, desire or lust, penetration or invasion/conquest, and conflicts (both interpersonal and collective, whether as argument or violent confrontation). Speed, sex, and accidents all have Martian components. Mars is emotional, but its expression is kinetic and physical. Mars does not reflect; it ACTS, spontaneously and with full force. Mars is sharp, hot, urgent, and focused on the object at hand, like an arrow or rocket aimed at a target. This is the fight element of the fight/flight imperative — provocative in active mode and rising to the occasion when challenged. Mars is the lead alpha dog on our sled dog team, the cutting edge of our reality. It is every hungry predator hunting for a meal.

Mars is terrific for cutting through overly complicated or confusing issues to get us off our butts and into gear for real-world problem-solving. This can be brilliant or disastrous, depending on the situation. An example of Martian brilliance would be shared sex that results in powerful and satisfying orgasms for both partners or even perhaps the creation of a new life; examples of Martian disaster include rape or the whole human history of tragic invasions in war).

Mars is lousy for anything requiring patience and forbearance, such as negotiation, diplomacy, or compromise (all of which are Venusian traits). Mars is passionate (as opposed to Venus, which is loving), definite, and committed (all black and white, no shades of gray). Mars is not sufficiently secure to be truly confident. Instead, it demonstrates bravery and either bravura or bravado, depending on the maturity of the actor. Mars is stereotypically macho in its lean toward the adolescent, but it can be extraordinarily skilled, such as the surgeon who wields a scalpel with great dexterity, or the archer who can hit the bull's eye dead center every time.

In our charts, Mars indicates the cutting edge of our life-experience — what we want, how we fight, and where these desires and combative encounters occur, whether by choice or forced by circumstance.

OK. So, how do we track Mars movement through our natal charts and pinpoint the time periods of its greatest impact in our lives?

Mars Cycles and Transits

The planet Mars makes one complete cycle around the Sun (or circuit of the zodiac) roughly every two years---25 1/2 months on average, during which it will make various contacts (cycle activations) with all the symbolic points within our natal charts. In my particular method of using astrology, each natal chart has 15 major symbolic points---11 bodies and 4 angles (east/west and up/down). [Other astrologers may fill natal charts with many more symbolic points---either by adding more bodies (asteroids, comets, planetoids, etc.) or mathematically-derived points (nodes, Arabic parts, midpoints, etc.) but 15 major symbolic points is enough for me.

So, in my particular system there are 15 different Mars cycles, each of which has 14 specific angles of activation (called "transits") within each cycle. These are based on fractional divisions of the circle:

- conjunction – a moving and fixed point aligned at 0° of separation
- semisquare – 1/8 of the circle or 45°, both waxing and waning
- sextile – 1/6 of the circle or 60°, both waxing and waning
- square – 1/4 of the circle or 90°, both waxing and waning
- trine – 1/3 of the circle or 120°, both waxing and waning
- sesquiquadrate – 3/8 of the circle or 135°, both waxing and waning
- inconjunct – 5/12 of the circle or 150°, both waxing and waning
- opposition – 1/2 the circle or 180°

Other angles based on division of the circle by 7 and 9 are symbolically relevant, but they are considered minor transits of a more "occult" nature. Some astrologers use those; most don't.

Of the 14 angles, the most critical are the four quarters of each cycle — conjunction, the waxing and waning squares, and the opposition. These quarterly phase transitions are the points of clearest and most potent impact. At those transits in each of the 15 cycles we are likely to experience most strongly the various Martian traits, urges, and manifestations.

This means that roughly every two years we go through 60 separate Mars transits (in my implementation of the system). They are all unique, varying in both interpretation and importance, with differences that depend on many variables, most obviously the natural hierarchies of significance and the particular configuration of the natal chart in question. For instance, the four transits of the Mars-Sun cycle will always carry a core importance compared to

transits from other Mars cycles, since the Sun is the central body in astrology and at the top of the planetary hierarchy.

By contrast, the transits of the Mars-Neptune cycle are typically less important, because Neptune is an outer-planet that is much lower in importance on the hierarchical scale. The sign placement of the outermost planets in our natal charts is more a collective than an individuating factor, since they move through the zodiac so slowly that their zodiacal positions are shared within a sub-generational cohort. In other words, everyone in your high school graduating class has Neptune in approximately the same small section of the zodiac, within 4-5°.

On the other hand, a Mars-Neptune transit may be elevated in importance if Neptune's natal position is on an angle or in close aspect to a more important body. Also, if an individual's chart is undergoing a Neptune transit to natal Mars, for instance, which represents a major period of 1-2 years, then the Mars-Neptune transits that occur within that period can represent significant triggers for expression of the longer, more important cycle activation.

Determining the potential importance of an individual Mars transit is part of the skill and art of being a competent astrologer.

The Retrograde Loop

From our perspective here on earth, all bodies orbiting the Sun periodically exhibit retrograde motion. As those orbiting bodies move counterclockwise through the ecliptic (i.e., the zodiac), every so often they appear to slow, then stop, then reverse direction and move backwards against the background of fixed stars in our heavens. After a period of some months moving backward (clockwise), they gradually slow and stop again before resuming direct motion in their journeys around the ecliptic.

This phenomenon is caused by the parallax effect of two bodies moving in different orbits and at different speeds around the same central point (the Sun). Mars is the next planet out from the earth — our nearest planetary neighbor. When the earth "overtakes" Mars (meaning that we pass Mars from our inner orbit), it appears to move backward in our heavens. The entire retrograde loop takes about seven months and happens only once during each two-year Martian trip through the zodiac.

In the science of astronomy, the apparent backward motion of any astronomical body is dismissed as an illusion and therefore regarded as meaningless. In astrology, however, perspective matters — point of view contains meaning —

and the direction of a body's motion viewed from our geocentric perspective carries valid symbolic implications for life on earth.

For about 18 months of its roughly two-year cycle, Mars moves forward, in direct motion, at a rate of just shy of half a degree per day through the ecliptic. During that year and a half, Mars will move through almost the entire zodiac — a little more than 11 signs. When its retrograde loop begins, however, as Mars passes the degree to which it will later retrograde back, a period begins where Mars remains for seven months in a very small section of the zodiac, jockeying back and forth within an arc of only 10–20°. The exact arc of the retrograde loop varies from one two-year cycle to another.

Standard Mars Transits

A "standard" Mars transit (meaning one that occurs during the 18 months of Mars' direct motion) has an effective duration of 2-4 days, during which all the Martian qualities noted above "act on" the symbolic points of our chart with which Mars aligns. In the pantheon of astrology, a 2-4 day transit can and rightly should be considered minor, just a blip on the radar screen.

This is not to suggest that major Mars-toned events might not occur. They can, but the odds are slim. The greater likelihood is that during those 2-4 days you will *feel* more Martian — with a greater sense of urgency in all activities, less patience, as well as a reduced capacity for frustration and correspondingly shorter temper.

You're likely to be more inclined to act to solve problems (grabbing the bull by the horns, so to speak) and quicker to anger when challenged, whether or not you're aware of those altered tendencies. You may or may not feel more vital, but you will almost certainly burn through your available energy more quickly on days when Mars is active in your chart. Life takes on the feeling of a flat-out sprint rather than the careful, steady pacing of a long-distance run — a hundred-yard dash instead of a marathon.

All these adrenalin-charged feelings vary in intensity from one day to the next and from one Mars transit to another, with most days being mildly more assertive, but a few days — especially during peak moments — feeling considerably more heightened and extreme. You might be surprised by these moments of sudden aggression, heat, frustration, or anger, and wonder what's going on inside yourself to produce such feelings or behaviors. Or, by contrast, you could experience no detached reflection at all and simply assume that the provocation is coming at you from the outer environment, which may or may not be the case.

In the broad diversity of programming, temperament, and consciousness that both unites and separates us as human beings, some people are extraordinarily sensitive to changes occurring within themselves, while those at the other end of the bell curve haven't a clue about inner process and simply act out. The variations are nearly infinite, not merely from person to person, but from time to time. We may be sensitive at one point and completely on auto-pilot at another. Both awareness and its absence remain profound mysteries of human existence.

This is why we can't apply textbook chart interpretations to everyone across the board. Programming matters. Temperament matters. Circumstances matter. And consciousness matters. As good as the astrological system can be, it never specifies a single meaning to a particular symbol or a configuration where multiple symbols interact. To accurately predict an individual's experience, astrology itself is both too much and not enough. We have to find a way to assess, consider, and factor in the various intangibles (particularly circumstance and consciousness/maturity) to refine and limit the many possible meanings of a given transit for a particular person. Beyond all that is the ultimate wild card, that life itself is unpredictable. Life may smile on us or toss banana peels in our path. As a result, the discipline of astrology becomes an exercise in humility. Astrology can expand our knowledge and understanding, but it also reveals how much we don't know.

For most people, most of the time, the overall potential impact of a standard 2-4 day Mars transit is a short, sharp spike in the day-to-day baseline of our life-energy. These spikes of amplified assertion or aggression occur, on average, about three times per month for any individual during the 18 months of Mars' regular direct motion.

Mars Transits During the Retrograde Loop

A Mars transit that occurs *within* the retrograde loop is an entirely different matter, however. That event is not a mere 2–4 days, but *more than six months!* Not only that, but a regular Mars activation is a single-pass transit, meaning that the angular relationship will be exact only once in the 2–4 days. A retrograde loop Mars transit, by contrast, is a three-pass transit, with the exact angle of the activation formed at three different times over the six months — direct at the beginning of the six months, then later retrograde (somewhere within the six months, then again direct at the end of the half-year. This means that the symbolic implications are both more complex and more powerful.

Let me use a metaphor to illustrate the difference. Let's say that you go through a week where for a couple days you can't sleep well. Something is disturbed in your outer circumstances or within your psyche, and your stress levels are elevated enough that you can't get into REM state of deep sleep. During those

couple of days, you may find yourself cranky or otherwise upset because you're not getting the rest you need, and it's an aggravation. But after those two days — four at the outside — your stress levels subside and you resume your normal sleeping patterns, so that you can catch up on the sleep you lost fairly quickly and recover your more typically sunny temperament.

OK, now assume that you go through a period of six and a half months where you can't sleep. That's two full seasons back-to-back where you are sleep-deprived. Such an event is not simply a temporary aggravation. Instead, it's a major problem, one that is likely to affect your entire life in potentially major ways. Your productivity goes down, your contentment and happiness are fractured perhaps to the point of despair, and even your perceptions become warped. This is much worse than simply being an unhappy camper or grouchy for two days. Your ability to function at all levels of your life is seriously affected for a period of time that feels like it will never end.

Now, that example is entirely negative, and it leaves a very one-sided impression that is, thankfully, inaccurate. I don't want to imply that Mars transits are all bad in their effects. Like everything in astrology, Mars transits are two-sided: some expressions of any Mars transit are pleasing to our egos, while others are not. Enjoyment alternates with difficulty, but not in a precise one-to-one oscillating rhythm. Rather, we experience each category in changing vicissitudes — some of the good stuff, then some of the bad stuff. Often, the two are intermingled, so that we're getting some of both almost simultaneously. So, let's use a different metaphor to more accurately describe the process.

If you eat three meals each day, then that's more than 500 meals over six months. Imagine that 150 of those meals are dreadful. Some meals are worse than others, of course, but overall, those meals aren't very satisfying. The food itself may be low-quality, or it might be badly prepared, or you might not be in the mood for a dish that would otherwise taste good. One way or another, though, something gets in the way of your satisfaction.

The other 350 meals are mostly fine, however — tasty and delicious. In addition, the 150 that aren't good are spread throughout the six months, so that on a given day, you might have a tasty breakfast, a lousy lunch, then a wonderful dinner. You could have days where all three meals are bad, or a week where only half your meals are sub-par, so it's a mixed bag. And a good meal will taste that much better after a couple of bad ones, probably even tastier than usual, since it's such a relief to feel contented. In other words, there's an ebb and flow. It's not uniform or all one thing, and the pattern varies unpredictably.

That's somewhat akin to what a three-pass, six-month-plus Mars transit feels like. The difference between both metaphors (whether sleeping or eating) and

an actual Mars retrograde-loop transit, however, is that the day-to-day experience of being sleep-deprived or not enjoying a third of your meals is likely to be something you're constantly aware of. Not so with a six-month Mars transit. Whether we experience the extended Mars "effect" as positive or negative — and we will definitely experience both poles, probably often — human consciousness is not configured to accurately track these states. Whether in the positive or negative mode, we tend to lose focused awareness over the repetitions as the brain's tendency to routinize and habituate kicks in. Animals are designed to work with stress as a short-term burst, an adrenalin rush, like a sprint. We're not built to handle the marathon of chronic stress. Yes, we may retain a kind of "overall awareness" of our situation, but, even in the most dreadful circumstances or states, adaptation occurs. It's a little like a built-in auto-pilot that kicks in and takes over to protect us from sustained anxiety.

This fact of our biology is one reason why Mars retrograde transits are potentially so explosive. We forget that we're operating under a chronically heightened state of adrenalin-readiness (like being on red alert at DefCon1), and when some urgent confrontation occurs — either at us from the environment or out of us through our own self-expression — and jolts us back to awareness, we're surprised or even shocked. This isn't a big deal when the expression is positive, but it can be horrific when the manifestation is negative, especially if we've been experiencing pointed difficulties or emotional travail frequently over past months. We may even succumb to a kind of cumulative PTSD, where we are eventually traumatized by the recurring theme of threats that cause conflicted or unpleasant experience.

Over a complete life of say, 80 years, people will experience more than 30 Mars retrograde loops. Many of them will be relatively mild and inconsequential. A few, however, are likely to activate their natal charts in a significant way or at a time when other, usually longer transits indicate extreme or sustained duress. Those rare periods can be watersheds of serious importance, with dramatically heightened energy potential and a strong tendency to push forward assertively.

In those rare but special times, we are strongly motivated to exert ourselves to break through existing obstacles and forge ahead to create new conditions. I might suggest that some care be taken to stop short of the kind of "damn the torpedos, full speed ahead" recklessness that could result in needless conflict or even injury. I might also advise not biting off more than can chew. Odds are, however, that those of us for whom this Mars retrograde is a big deal in our charts wouldn't likely be able to take that advice, since our "blood will be up." Testosterone doesn't like being tempered. Instead, I'll simply wish us good luck in enjoying the ride.

Structure and Timing

How do we determine if one of those watershed Martian periods might be at hand for our individual natal charts in 2016?

This year, Mars goes retrograde in late Scorpio to early Sagittarius. On February 17th, Mars, still in direct motion but slowing down, reaches **23° 03' of Scorpio** — the point to which it will later retrograde back. That point marks the beginning of the first of three phases, which I call "Set-up." Then, week-by-week, Mars will continue to move forward, but ever more slowly, until April 17th, when it will reach **8° 54' of Sagittarius**. This is called the *Retrograde Station*, where Mars appears motionless in the heavens, and from which it will gradually begin to back up. This "station" is the beginning of the middle phase of the loop, "Retrograde," where Mars will exhibit backwards motion for two and a half months, until it slows and stops again back at the original point — 23° 03' of Scorpio — on the 29th of June, at its *Direct Station*. That's the beginning of the third and final phase, "Resolution." Following the direct station, Mars will slowly and gradually resume direct motion, until it once again reaches 8° 54' of Sagittarius on August 22nd, when the whole Loop will be over.

So, three phases: **Set-up, Retrograde, and Resolution**, unfolding over the period from mid-February until mid-to-late August (73 days retrograde, 187 days in all), and covering 16° — about half a sign or 4.4% of the zodiac.

Everyone who has significant symbolic points in their natal charts in late Scorpio to early Sag will experience Mars retrograde transits as conjunctions (beginnings of new two-year Martian cycles). Also, those with significant natal points at any of the other three arcs in the four quarters of that span — late Aquarius to early Pisces, late Taurus to early Gemini, and late Leo to early Virgo — will also experience potent Mars transits that last more than six months.

Collective Meanings of this Mars Retrograde

While the interpretive implications of the Mars Retrograde for any particular individual are obviously beyond the scope of an article such as this, I can offer some insights into the possible effects and impact for humanity as a whole.

The Mars-Scorpio connection of this year's Retrograde Loop implies greater potency and power, as well as more conflict, than was indicated by the two most recent Mars retrogrades in Libra (2014) and Virgo (2012). The question of raw power and its appropriate uses should be significant, as well as the ways that power is applied — openly or in secret, with full disclosure or hidden under wraps and obfuscations. The connection to Sagittarius implies that the range of applied power will be far-reaching and more difficult to conceal. Scorpio is like a laser, very pinpoint and precise, whereas Sagittarius is like a shotgun.

This dynamic reminds me of the air war during World War II, where the Allies discovered that the supposedly precision bombing campaigns against Germany and Japan using high explosive armaments were almost completely ineffective, so the switch was made to "area" or "saturation" bombing using incendiaries. The results during 1945 were devastating, with 50 cities in those two Axis countries decimated by firestorms, along with a toll of civilian dead that was almost inconceivable.

As unpleasant as that reference is, it leads inescapably to the current jihads being waged by Islamic extremists and the "war on terror" mounted in counterpoint. The danger of the Mars Retrograde is not so much escalation — although that's certainly possible — but generalization, where the impact on civilians is amplified. I don't wish to focus only on the profound negativity of war and violence, but that is probably the single most obvious implication for the collective dimension of this Mars Retrograde. That's the bad news. The good news is that the extended retrograde also represents an ideal time to reconsider the dubious wisdom of violence as a tactic to achieve aims.

Concerns about violence in society have increased over recent years. Rape in the military and on college campuses, domestic sexual abuse, excessive violence by the police, and long-term injuries in contact sports have all spawned active and growing social protest movements. These causes are likely to gain more traction during the Mars retrograde. The institutions in question — the military, law enforcement, and professional sports (especially football) — are already on the defensive and scrambling to alter their policies and cultures. Those push toward reform will probably deepen during the Mars Retrograde.

Beyond the specific institutions mentioned above, large institutions in general (social, commercial, political, religious, educational, medical, etc.) are under increasing pressure during the second half of this Uranus-Pluto decade, and the primary symbolism of the 2016 Mars Retrograde (in Scorpio-Sagittarius) is to reveal to the public more of what was previously hidden. As a result, we can reasonably expect additional revelations concerning corruption or malfeasance in the corridors of power. That's not new, but Mars could conceivably accelerate or amplify the process.

In that vein, look for further whistle-blowing concerning secretive security policies that have governmental sanction, especially with regard to sophisticated data-collection monitoring programs that are increasingly powerful and networked globally. Privacy may already be an archaic concept in this technologically wired world, but the fight for individual rights goes on regardless.

Are financial and economic matters impacted by this Mars Retrograde? Probably, but that has more to do with the current fragility of those systems than with the specific symbolism of the Retrograde. Markets and money are no longer the robust sectors they once were. Deception and illusion are employed more and more by authorities to prop up eroding public confidence in national and global economies; it wouldn't take much Martian heat to burn off some of that fog.

In medicine, a vaccine to prevent infection by the AIDS virus has been getting closer, and the symbolism of this Mars Retrograde is relevant to that arena (STDs and public health), so we might see a breakthrough in 2016.

The Sabian Symbols for Mars' Two Stationary Degrees

To reveal other possible dimensions for what this year's Mars Retrograde Loop may indicate for collective humanity and civilization in general, I'll close by offering the Sabian Symbols for the two stations in the loop when Mars is motionless and changing direction.

The 360 Sabian Symbols are a set of scenes or images — one for each degree of the zodiac — that were created in a single day in 1925 by astrologer and metaphysician Marc Edmund Jones and one of his students in the Sabian Assembly, a psychic named Elsie Wheeler. Over almost a century, the Sabian Symbols have proven to be a wellspring of inspiration and an extraordinary, coherent sequence of uncanny symbolic poetry. Earlier in my career, I was sufficiently impressed by the Sabian Symbols to write an entire book about using them as a divinatory tool to explore intimacy, entitled **The Oracle of Love**.

Below are the scenes for the two stationary degrees of the Mars Retrograde Loop:

Scorpio 24: *“Crowds come down the mountain to listen to one man.”*

This scene carries two clear but contradictory meanings. One is that certain individuals may have special knowledge relevant to and needed by the collective. The other is the gullible public surrender to a huckster or snake-oil salesman.

That brings to mind the coming presidential election in the U.S. at the end of 2016. The February through August timing of the Mars Retrograde Loop coincides with the height of the campaign season for the current crop of candidates and speaks to the difficult issue of Americans succumbing to a demagogue who offers simple answers to complex problems. That Pied Piper approach to governing too often leads to disaster.

The poetry of the scene, along with the inherent Martian symbolism of the Retrograde Loop, point to the possibility for acrimonious conflict and many confrontations around this issue as the field of candidates is winnowed down to two. Looks like we might have a political firestorm on our hands.

Sagittarius 9: *“A mother leads her children up a flight of stairs.”*

That scene makes me think of the growing crisis around immigration and refugees in the world. How will civilization respond to the millions of human beings displaced from their homes and countries as they flee the violence of wars, political instability, or economic hardship? Should we close our borders and turn our backs on such needy, frightened people? Or should we welcome them with open arms and provide the refuge of a safe haven? The inscription on the Statue of Liberty reads:

Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses, yearning to breath free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,
Send these, the homeless, tempest tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door.

Those lofty sentiments were part of 19th-century American idealism, but they were contentious then and have remained so ever since. Even during the height of the Ellis Island wave of immigration in the early 20th-century, not everyone was allowed in. Are those ideals no longer relevant in 21st-century Fortress America?

I don't have an easy answer, but the Sabian Symbol poignantly illuminates the issue as one of protective nurturing, and the Mars Retrograde Loop implies even more heated debate about the problem than has occurred already.

Epilogue

Whether or not the correspondences with issues and events that I've written about here prove to be relevant, I have no doubt that the coming year is likely to bring numerous unanticipated surprises that aren't mere outgrowths of current headlines, but will include new developments that resonate to the Uranian-Plutonian tenor of our times. Radical changes are afoot — tectonic shifts in culture, in nature, and in consciousness. The Mars Retrograde Loop of 2016 is yet another symbolic confirmation that these shifts are both deep (Scorpio) and far-ranging (Sagittarius). Despite the inherent conflicts associated with Martian symbolism, the Retrograde Loop is likely to bring new revelations (Scorpio) and enlarged perspectives (Sagittarius)