

# Mercury Retrograde (Again)

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Last week I came across a news report online from *The Washington Times* whose headline announced that “science” had debunked astrology. Over my 44 years as a full-time, working astrologer, I’ve seen many such reports, but this one was particularly strident. Here’s the lead sentence from the text of the article:

*“Scientists have once and for all debunked astrology’s central claim — that our human characteristics are molded by the influence of the sun, moon and planets at the time of birth — in the most thorough scientific study every conducted on the subject.”*

The study referred to — about “time twins,” meaning people born on the same day within minutes of each other — had found no correspondences between the character and lives of the pairs, which (or so the article stated) “proved” that astrology was bunk.

I won’t even begin to argue about the numerous statements concerning astrology in the article that were incorrect, since my point here is not to defend the system I use.

We live currently in a time of great disunity and conflict. We disagree among ourselves about reality — what it is, how it works, and the ways we should deal with it. I think this has probably always been true, since human beings are notoriously contentious, but the extreme polarization we see today — with didactic disagreements and no-holds-barred arguing — does seem more obvious than in earlier periods.

Arguments over “science” are particularly intense these days. Love it or hate it, science has become immensely powerful and carved out a position of dominance in modern civilization. It has also become a football to be kicked around. We want science on our side to “prove” whatever we believe, and we excoriate science if it doesn’t support our beliefs. Tabloid journalism invokes science in both directions: “*Science PROVES the Existence of Life on Mars!*” or “*Science DISPROVES the Theory of Evolution!*”

Study any system for a long time and in sufficient depth — whether carpentry, cooking, chemistry, or the cosmos — and the result, not always but often, is that one learns to shy away from the sweeping pronouncements that headlines use in their attempts to throw out a wide, lowest-common-denominator net to grab and catch the attention of readers. Life may appear one way viewed from a distance, but close-up examination usually reveals quite different perspectives.

From the vantage point of the general public, which is to say, people who have not studied astrology in depth, certain parts of the system may become at least vaguely familiar. For instance, most people know their Sun signs. They may or may not admit that, but it is part of astrology-as-mass-entertainment and has spread throughout the culture.

People who have gone a little further or been exposed to somewhat more astrology have often heard of other, at least slightly more sophisticated parts of the system. These might include, for instance, the Saturn return, as well as Mercury Retrograde. This is not to suggest that the general public necessarily understands these astrological components, but simply that they are aware of them or may even have formed ideas about what those elements mean.

In decades past, I've written about Mercury Retrograde, but I hope it will be worthwhile to revisit it here in this commentary.

### **Retrograde Motion**

Viewed from the earth, all the bodies of the solar system except the sun and our moon exhibit periodic retrogradation. In their motion through the heavens against the background of fixed stars, they appear to slow down, stop, back up, then stop again before resuming direction motion. This is caused by the parallax factor — the earth is in orbit around the sun, so bodies in other orbits appear to change speed and direction.

Some people assert that retrogradation is an "illusion" and therefore wrong. In astrology, however, perspective matters. If we want to use the heavens to "decode" meanings, astrology holds that it's correct to view and interpret the heavens from the vantage point of the observer. If we lived on the sun, we'd use a heliocentric viewpoint, but we live on the earth, so the astrology we use here is typically geocentric.

But enough background info. What about Mercury and its Retrograde Loop?

Mercury is the planet closest to the sun (which is lower-case astronomically, but capitalized as the "Sun" in astrology). Its orbit is so close to our star (Sol) that, from earth, it never appears further from the Sun than 28° of arc. It's fast, too, completing one orbit around the Sun in 88 days. On average, Mercury goes retrograde three times per year, roughly once every four months.

## **Mercury as a Symbolic Function**

In astrology, Mercury is the symbol for rational thought, communication (both written and verbal), and the urge to explore the immediate environment, either literally, through actual movement, or virtually, through mental investigation and observation (thinking, reading, watching, learning).

In an individual's birth chart, Mercury's condition — meaning its sign, house associations, and aspects to other planets and symbolic points in the chart — reveals the characteristic ways each of us approaches the experiences listed above. Mercury doesn't specify someone's level of intelligence, but it does indicate the importance of mentality and how it is shaped in personal experience and expression.

## **The Mercury Retrograde Loop**

Like all bodies that exhibit retrograde motion, a Mercury retrograde "loop" has three phases and two "stations." First comes the Setup Phase (sometimes called the "Entry Shadow") where Mercury continues its normal, direct motion but gradually slows down. That first phase ends at Mercury's retrograde station, where it has slowed to a stop, appears motionless for a day or so, and changes direction. That station kicks off the actual retrograde phase, where Mercury seems to move backwards through the heavens — slowly at first, then faster, then slower again. That middle (and most intense) phase ends at Mercury's second station, where it once again slows to a full stop, appears motionless, and then resumes direct motion. In the third phase (called the Resolution or "Exit Shadow") Mercury moves forward one more time over the same section of the zodiac through which it just backed up.

The Entry and Exit Phases (Setup and Resolution) are typically 14-19 days long. The middle Retrograde Phase is usually 18-24 days in duration.

When people ask, "*Are we going through yet **another** Mercury retrograde?*" — their question almost always refers to the initial two phases, which take 5-6 weeks combined. Those first two phases are the period during which we usually encounter at least some of the unexpected delays or setbacks commonly associated with Mercury retrograde (more about those correspondences in a minute). During the third phase, we move toward resolution of any delays or setbacks. The Resolution or Exit Phase is not generally considered to be very significant in the Retrograde Loop, although it probably should be.

Below is a short list of the typical difficulties commonly associated with the Mercury Retrograde Loop:

- **communication problems**

(at all levels — thinking, writing, speaking, conversations, documents, contracts, mail)

- **misunderstandings**  
(in one's own mind as faulty perception/analysis/thinking, or between oneself and others)
- **promises or agreements that may be betrayed or cannot be kept**
- **delays or disruptions in schedules and appointments**  
(unexpected cancellations, no-shows, rescheduling)
- **trouble in traveling**  
(plans change or fall through; disruptions during traveling)
- **failures of machinery, especially electronics**  
(car trouble, appliance breakdowns, computer malfunctions)
- **unexpected difficulties in getting new ventures underway**  
(especially anything requiring precise advance planning)

A great deal of astrological advice is offered surrounding Mercury Retrograde. *"Don't do this, don't do that, be careful with this other thing."* Much of the advice about what to not do or what to avoid during a Mercury Retrograde — some of which is quite specific — boils down to a single admonition:

**"Consider not attempting to move ahead (at least, if you can, and if life permits). Do whatever must be done, but — wherever possible — slow down, take a break, and reconsider where you are, where you've been, and where you're headed."**

That's not a hard-and-fast rule, but it's a pretty sound recommendation, and it resonates nicely with the advice offered frequently by astrologers to use the period of the Mercury Retrograde Loop to "clean up old and unfinished business." That's often easier said than done, of course, but it's worth keeping in mind, and it goes with the symbolism of backing up before moving forward again.

A Mercury Retrograde Loop is a pause, essentially — a pause for reflection, a time that's built into Life's ebbs and flows when we can benefit from a reassessment. It's a great time for temporarily turning inward and not pushing forward into the outer environment. Think of it as sabbatical — not a vacation, but a time of letting things in your outer life cool out and come to rest while you listen to the music of your inner life.

Probably the best resource to help navigate a Mercury Retrograde is patience, a quality that's often in short supply in our lives, but is all the more valuable when we can call it forth from within.

Mercury Retrograde has two contexts: general and specific. At the general level, the Retrograde Loop applies to all of us together, since it happens in the heavens for everyone simultaneously. The specific level is about how a particular Mercury Retrograde operates for different individuals. We can assess the potential

importance and/or difficulty of a given Mercury Retrograde for a given person by noting what personal cycles will be activated by Mercury in transit through his/her chart.

An ordinary Mercury transit in a personal chart is a single-pass event lasting usually one day or less, and typically not more than two days at the outside. Mercury transits during a Retrograde Loop, however, are three-pass events that last for up to seven weeks. That's a long time, friends, to undergo nervous excitation in any of the many ways it can occur.

Even if a certain Mercury Retrograde Loop is smooth or insignificant in our personal charts, we may interact with others who are getting their bells rung, and that will likely spill over onto us. So, Mercury Retrograde tends to pull in everyone.

I would love to write that we can all "manage" Mercury Retrogrades by following simple guidelines. Too many variables exist, however, for any such claim to be true. Sometimes we breeze through a particular Mercury Retrograde Loop happy and unscathed; other times we get frazzled and flattened. Astrology offers some ability to predict which might be the case for any individual, but not always dependably and never perfectly. Life is bigger than astrology and contains too many wild-cards in its deck. Attempts to "control" life with astrology frequently backfire, and I think we are well-advised to use the information astrology provides with a grain of salt, as well as generous helpings of humility, grace, and gentleness whenever possible.

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*The Setup Phase of the current Mercury Retrograde Loop began on July 24th. The middle Retrograde Phase occurs from August 13th to September 5th, followed by a final two-week Resolution Phase that ends on September 19th.*

*The arc within the zodiac covered by this particular Mercury Retrograde extends from 29° of Leo to 12° of Virgo.*