

Two Problems in Astrology

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Every system that humans create or discover for understanding reality comes with inherent problems. Before we begin to study any particular system, whether it's physics or plumbing or astrology, we may not know about the problems, but they await us. After we go down the rabbit hole and explore the systems in depth, the quandaries reveal themselves as unsolved puzzles, contradictions, or paradoxes that must be dealt with. The more knowledge and expertise we acquire about a certain system, the more we have to grapple with those problems.

This commentary is about two of the many problems that come with astrology. They seem opposite, but they're connected. One is too much information. The other is too little information.

Too Much Information

The first problem I want to discuss is too much information. Astrological charts are maps of the heavens erected for a specific moment in time from the vantage point of a particular location in space. These maps are composed of numerous symbols – typically *planets* (major bodies of the solar system, usually ten or more), *signs* (twelve), and *houses* (twelve). The most basic way that meaning is derived from charts is through an interpretive process called *delineation*. This combines the symbols in various ways defined by each chart – planets are associated with certain signs and houses, and, in addition, they have mathematical alignments (called *aspects*) to other planets and significant points in the chart.

Every astrological symbol is an archetype with a wide range of interpretive meanings. For instance, the connotations of the planetary symbol Uranus include individuality, originality, eccentricity, singularity, separation or isolation from others, social unacceptability, rebellion and revolution against authority, unusual or abnormal experiences, sudden shocks, unexpected changes, unpredictability, flashes of mental insight, and even electricity. And all those are just some of the possible ways that Uranus can be interpreted. The same diversity of meanings applies to every planet, sign, and house.

The chart shows us the connections between the various symbols. As we consider the many paired symbols, the possible meanings multiply. If a given planet and sign each have 20 meanings (perhaps many more than that, but I'll use 20 here), then combining that planet and sign in a particular chart yields

400 different possible meanings. Some of these permutations will make little or no sense, so let's say that we can throw out half of those possibilities. That still leaves 200 interpretations for a single planet-sign pairing. Every one of those 200 delineations can be expounded on at great length. Entire textbooks are written about the meanings of planet/sign and planet/house combinations or interplanetary aspects.

For example, Saturn in Capricorn in a natal chart has a deep resonance with traditional authority. It could mean the person grew up under a stern father or is him/herself a stern and demanding parent. It also corresponds to deep ambition, usually through work and career, and even more especially in business, through the drive to achieve excellence, success, or status in society. Further, that pair implies an innate over-sensitivity to failure and may indicate a long-term struggle to overcome obstacles on the road to achievement in the marketplace. All these interpretations and many more are possible for that one pair of symbols.

How many different symbolic pairs are in a chart? Well, if we consider that every planet is moving through a sign, occupies one house and usually rules another, and has typically at least two major aspects (and perhaps more) to other planets, then the *minimum* number of pairs is 50 – that's 50 pairs with 200 interpretations each, a total of 10,000 possible delineations. Beyond pairs of symbols, however, are triads, quartets, and overall planetary patterns in the chart. So, add another 10,000 or so further interpretations. On top of that, each of those 20,000 possible delineations may influence, reinforce, contradict, or alter any of the others.

No astrologer can juggle all the possibilities. The result would be cortical brownout – fried brains. In reality, however, astrologers don't actually take into account all the different possibilities. We don't identify all the permutations. That's not how human brains work. Brains are organized for patterns. We are pattern-seeking, pattern-recognizing, and pattern-creating creatures. Some elements stand out, while others receded into invisibility. Astrological interpretation is based on a kind of "fuzzy logic" that is often more intuitive than rational, more poetic than literal.

Part of what makes astrology both vexing and beautiful is that it's a system of symbols. Symbols are not concrete; they're not discrete bits of data. They're archetypal and amorphous, encompassing many shades of meaning. On the one hand, that makes rational analysis very difficult – astrology is not "science." On the other hand, our brains are hard-wired to deftly handle the complexity and uncertainty of symbols.

How do astrologers deal with the overwhelming amount of information in a chart? We apply the organizing filter of *context*. Context is critical to the accurate and artful interpretation of a chart. And therein lies the second problem.

Too Little Information

The second problem with astrology is that astrological charts provide very little (if any) context.

Astrology is not, never was, and never will be a stand-alone system. If we are to interpret an astrological chart in a way that's relevant and accurate, we need to understand the context, and that must come from outside the chart and beyond the astrological system itself.

Astrology textbooks, especially the kind that contain “cookbook” interpretations, may leave the impression that their delineations come directly from the chart, but they don't. Astrologers who write such textbooks (I wrote one) may or may not realize that they're imposing context from beyond the chart, but they are. That's true of all natal interpretations that describe “character” or personal history. It's also true of all interpretations custom-tailored to a particular chart of cycle activations through transits or progressions and their likely correspondences in actual experience.

Whether I'm looking at a natal chart or a specific cycle activation in time, I need to know the subject of the symbolism. Is it a person? If so, is that person male or female? What nationality or culture? The chart itself won't tell us, because that information is not contained in the chart. It comes only from outside. Astrology does not know or care what life it's describing. It presents only the symbolic map of a certain time-space moment. As an astrologer, I need to understand, at least to some extent, the context behind the chart I'm looking at.

That's why I've done “sessions” with clients rather than “readings” for clients. Oh, I can do a straight “reading” and do on occasion, but mostly my work is interactive. I bring the tools of astrology, my client brings a real human life, and we put them together in a long conversation to make sense of the person's life-journey and what's happening now. Sessions are literally co-creations. That way, I get all the context I need direct from the source.

Of all the different kinds of context we might use to interpret charts, the most important to me has always been what, for lack of a more precise term, I'll call consciousness. Charts themselves say almost nothing about consciousness. While they are brilliant in describing the characteristic ways that a given person might naturally become more self-aware or more aware in general, they don't (and can't) tell us whether that person is paying attention as he/she moves through life, growing and learning over time. And consciousness – through awareness, perspective, and maturity – makes a huge difference in the interpretation of the natal chart and the ongoing flow of cycle activations throughout the life. The way that seems to work, however, is complicated.

Everything about astrology is two-sided. The symbols and their combinations are neither inherently good nor bad. Anything we examine within a chart offers

both positive expressions that we would presumably like and negative expressions that would cause us difficulty or suffering.

When I was a young astrologer in my 20s, I believed (or, more accurately, I *hoped*) that growing consciousness would improve how we experience our lives, allowing the more positive and sanguine possibilities in ourselves (and our charts) to emerge, and minimizing the negative potentials. Over the past 40 years and many thousands of sessions with clients, I've concluded that my optimism was unfounded.

Time and time again, I've worked with people whom I regard as smart, loving, and mature (in short, exemplary human beings who seemed to me to be progressing in the development of their consciousness) who were getting hammered by life. Judging from their charts and the real-life difficulties they faced, no "improvement" had occurred in the likelihood of their having experiences that corresponded to the "positive" interpretations of their charts and cycles, despite their best efforts over decades of work on themselves. In fact, I've had times when I wondered if the opposite might be true. Could it be possible that "evolved consciousness" somehow caused more negative challenges, as if the climb became more difficult as one moved up to mountain? I wouldn't suggest that this is true in any systematic way, but what I have concluded is that no easy, simple, across-the-board formula exists.

Along the way, I've encountered many supposedly universal spiritual laws espoused by various people. These overarching "rules" include such beliefs as "you create your own reality" or "life never gives us more than we can handle" or "what doesn't kill me makes me stronger." I'm very dubious about the validity of these and other simplistic aphorisms. Yes, I have no doubt that they are sometimes true, but not invariably. For me, "spiritual sound-bites" fall far short of being profound universal truths.

I don't know (and hold out no hope of discovering) any easy guidelines for living – astrological or otherwise – that insure pleasure rather than pain, or joy rather than suffering. I'm not suggesting that life is meaningless, only that it cannot be manipulated to guarantee that our egos get what they seek. While I accept that our decisions matter, especially in the cumulative sense over time, the interplay between choice, character, circumstances, destiny, fate, and perhaps even luck is finally very mysterious. Life offers both ecstasy and agony, and they can flip from one to the other almost instantly. Nothing in astrology prevents or transcends that.

Despite the problems discussed in this commentary – too much and too little information – astrology remains an extraordinary system to help us create meaning and maintain coherence. It's great to be happy, satisfied, and fulfilled, but even when we're not, astrology can assist us in making sense of our lives.