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The Outer Planets in Astrology: Reality Outside the Box

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Imagine that you have no security and live in a cardboard box. While that may seem to be the unfortunate situation of an drunken derelict or impoverished homeless person, it is, in fact, the basic, if metaphorical condition of every human being.

We have no real security. Though we are built neurologically to seek some form of security, the structures that most of us go after or achieve are transitory. Many philosophies and every religion correctly point out to us the ephemeral nature of physical life. Everything we achieve in this world – homes, careers, marriages, money, health – is entropic, and can disintegrate before our eyes at any time. Or wear out. Or be taken from us. Most of us will sicken as we age and suffer mounting losses of people and possessions we once held dear. Even if some manage to seemingly hold onto their fortunes, death will finally take our achievements from us. The hourglass will eventually run out. Every one of us will die. In two hundred years, all six billion human beings currently alive on this planet will be dead.

While we are here, we live in cardboard boxes. These boxes may seem like palaces – solidly built, impressively appointed, luxuriously decorated – but that security is false, nothing but artifice. All we own and everything we possess are finally 'cardboard.' Sooner or later, they will deteriorate to dust.

This is not to suggest that we should give away all our possessions, divest ourselves of our comfortable cardboard boxes, and walk the streets in sackcloth. No, it is perfectly natural to enjoy our limited time in these bodies and circumstances to whatever extent we can, all the more so because our reveries are often so brief.

Life on earth is not only short and brutish, but chock full of unpleasant events that are far too painful to face, except rarely, and then only because circumstances force us to confront them. Like staring directly into the sun, any prolonged focus on the overwhelming, seemingly uncaring, and often cruel facts of raw reality would render insane all but the strongest and most fortunate among us.

So who can blame us for feathering our nests as we can and concentrating on temporary happiness within our tiny, artificial worlds? We much prefer the apparent stability of our cardboard boxes to our existential uncertainty, and we maintain our escapist dreams by painting the inside of our boxes, not with brushes and acrylic, but with a thick coating of beliefs, attitudes, and selectively filtered experiences, which are then further modified by faulty memory.

Despite fleeting, momentary glimpses where I sense, feel, or intuit the presence of the vast realities beyond my expectations, the world I see and feel most often is not objective or transcendent at all, but instead, merely the picture I've 'painted' on the inside of my cardboard box. In my heart of hearts, I know that this picture is false, but I usually substitute it for reality. Not every minute of every day, of course, but very often. As silly as it sounds, I tend to live as if I believed that life were no bigger than I am at this moment. In this, I am not different from most of us. The particular paintings on the inside walls, ceiling, and floor of my cardboard box may look different from yours, but the tendency to mistake our current paintings for reality is a near universal commonality, part of the ordinary human condition.

Vision as a Holographic Movie

Neurologically, vision is a good example of this phenomenon. From the seat of consciousness located for most people just behind the eyes, we look out at the world. Or, at least, we believe we are looking out. Our brains are hard-wired to fool us into this conceit. Actually, what we see with our eyes is not the literal world at all, but a representation of that world pieced together from the sensory impulses of our eyes' rod-and-cone receptors, sent via electrical nerve signals to the brain, then compiled and "corrected" for coherence and meaning, and finally projected upside down on the inside back surface of our braincap, like images viewed on a screen, except infinitely faster and with more sophistication than any man-made projector can achieve.

Vision is a near-perfect illusion, this sensation of "looking out," when, in fact, it is a brain-generated and wholly artificial image. Vision works, but it's not real. We just assume that what we see is objective reality.

For instance, all changes of light and color along a flat plane are interpreted by the human brain as edges. In evolution, an edge was a potential danger (like the edge of a cliff), and those brains that could better recognize edges had an improved chance of surviving to reproduce. As a result, all of our modern brains

are descended from those few ancient brains that mutated their visual processing toward "edge-sensitivity." In our experience of sight, every edge is altered with heightened emphasis, just like turning up the contrast on a television set, but selectively – only at the edges. Within the tiny sliver of the light spectrum that our eyes and brain can perceive, we live in an entirely artificial theatre of enhanced visual clarity and heightened contrast.

How would the world appear to us if we could "see" the ultraviolet or infrared part of the light spectrum? I don't know, but I think it would be a vastly different experience. Considered from psychological or spiritual levels, what would life be like if we could transcend our limited beliefs or parochial attitudes? What if our expectations about life did not come so much from programming, imprints, and selectively interpreted memories? I'm not sure, but I imagine that too would be very different.

Part of the perversity of human existence is that the paintings inside our cardboard boxes often represent nightmares as well as happy dreams – either hopes of heaven or fears of hell, and usually both. We paint not only Rembrandts and Monets, but Goyas and Picassos as well. Out of the infinite possibilities of what objective reality may hold, most of us boil down these possibilities to a narrow few that are customized to our personal angels and devils. We may not know much about true reality, but we are intimately familiar with the extreme joys and terrors of the homemade movie that we take to be reality, and in which we star.

So, given the reduction to absurdity that is inherent to the human condition, how do we escape our own escapism? How do we achieve parole from our velvet prisons? How does the vast, objective reality that exists beyond our little dreams make itself felt when we are so soundly asleep?

This is the function of the outer planets in astrology – Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto.

The Inner, Visible Planets

The more inward astronomical bodies used by astrology – Moon, Sun, Mercury, Venus, and Mars – tend to be tied in experience to the ebb and flow of our artificial 'painted images.' They're close to us, part of our local cosmic neighborhood. In our natal charts, these planets are part of the palette of colors we use to paint the inside of our boxes. In moving cycles, our reactions to the brief one- or two-day transits of these more inward planets are generally connected to the ongoing maintenance of our cardboard boxes, the constant re-feathering of our own nests. Not that the transits of such cycles are always pleasant – far from it – but they are usually interpreted by us as a need to alter slightly the interior of our boxes. We tinker with our paintings, tweaking them, adding a different shade of color or texture here or a perhaps a new form or figure there. The paintings, however, as well as the cardboard boxes in which we live, remain intact, for the most part. The inner planet cycles simply don't have sufficient power to change us.

When we get to Jupiter and Saturn, the subjective quality of our paintings begins to be stretched or tested. Here we deal with society, with the collective beliefs of those around us. We encounter the power and apparent authority of shared

assumptions, both in expansion (Jupiter), which is to say, the opportunity to assimilate larger views and thus make our paintings more comprehensive, and in constraint (Saturn), the restrictions necessary to bring us into line with the accepted status quo. Jupiter and Saturn are all about stretching the rules of animal life and social organization by finding advantage in them, or being bound and corrected by conformity to those very same biological and cultural rules.

As moving cycles, Jupiter transits feel good, while Saturn transits feel bad. That is not their essential meaning, but it's almost universally the way they feel to our egos. Our paintings are judged according to how well they connect to those of others in society. When our critics praise our paintings (meaning that our styles agree with and support their equally artificial realities), then we are granted opportunities for greater acceptance (Jupiter). If, on the other hand, our critics reject our paintings because theirs differ, then we are judged outlaws and suffer the discipline of forced correction – the pressure to edit of our paintings to bring them more into line with common beliefs, attitudes, and experience (Saturn).

To some extent, Jupiter and Saturn represent what feels like an 'outside-the-box' experience. Their natal meanings and transit cycles go beyond the unique paintings we're busily creating inside our individual cardboard boxes by introducing two new elements: first, the collective beliefs that make up the story and style of a particular culture, and second, the physical laws that govern life on earth.

The former is yet another kind of artifice – collective beliefs are powerful in their impact, but no more inherently true or correct than individual beliefs. The latter, however, does add a more authentic reality, but a limited one that specifically applies only to the biological rules governing animal life on this small planet.

Mess with Jupiter, and you may alienate your neighbors or perhaps your priest, which can result in subtle ostracism or lost social opportunities. Mess with Saturn, however, and you challenge the police or Mother Nature, both of which have a somewhat more direct and vindictive reaction through imprisonment or pain. So Saturn is certainly more raw than Jupiter, but neither is transcendently real.

Jupiter and Saturn do not truly move outside the boxes. They integrate the paintings of others into our own by operating at the level of privilege – either enhancing our status by offering new privileges in culture and life, or by removing existing privileges as a kind of punishment for refusal to conform with others, especially those in authority who run the social game. In fairness, Saturn is not always punishing; often it represent merely the hard work of obedience, almost like a dues-paying investment through forced adherence to hierarchical rules that can pay off later, down the road. The result of the investment, however, always comes through Jupiter, whether as a dividend payoff or as a simple vacation from effort. Saturn tells us where, when, and how to work; Jupiter tells us where, when, and how to get the rewards. Saturn does not confer rewards, but identifies work that may eventually lead to rewards. Jupiter does not confer work, but the squandering of its rewards may lead eventually to the necessity of more work.

Neither, however, brings us into contact with an objective reality. For all their importance and implications for participation in the collective, Jupiter and Saturn

are still about paintings inside cardboard boxes. They act on our paintings, but not on our boxes. To get outside the box, we must look to the outer planets.

The Outer, Invisible Planets

Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto are invisible to the unaided eye. Therefore, their symbolism represents qualities that are not part of the physical world of the senses that we normally identify as reality. Their discovery over the past three centuries – Uranus in 1781, Neptune in 1860, and Pluto, first proposed mathematically in 1905, then actually located in 1930 – imply that the urges for experience they represent are very recent developments in human consciousness. These are the new kids on the block, and what they bring is nothing short of world-changing.

Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto are the wild-cards of the solar system, the jokers in the symbolic deck. As with all the planets, they symbolize urges for expression and experiences in life that alter our relationship to our paintings, both in how we perceive these works of art and how we may edit them as we continue to revise and paint over. More importantly, however, and unlike any of the visible planets, these three symbols confront the cardboard box itself, each in its own special way. Normally, our boxes are invisible to us, like the water around the fish; during the major transits of Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto, especially those involving significant natal points (inner planets or angles), they correspond to unexpected shocks and strange experiences that strip away our comfort and reveal the box. They do this by allowing a more transcendent reality to make contact with our lives through the box itself.

Uranus – awakening, or radical individuation by shock

Imagine that you're sitting inside your cardboard box, living your life as you normally do, secure in the belief that your painting on the inside walls and ceiling of the box is indeed reality. Then imagine that suddenly and without warning a lightning bolt arcs down from the heavens and strikes your box.

Your first reaction is literally shock. You reel, disoriented. As the electric jolt subsides, however, and you return to your senses, you look around your box to see what's happened. Most of the box is still intact and unchanged, but the lightning bolt has struck one wall, burning through like a laser and leaving a gaping hole. As you peer through the hole, you are astonished to discover ANOTHER REALITY outside your box. The hole may be small enough that you can glimpse only a little of what's out there, but it is a revelation nonetheless.

Uranus punches holes in our assumptions about the nature of reality by provoking sudden shocks that disrupt the rhythm of specific habits and routines. Certain of our old beliefs and attitudes are challenged by something new, something radical, something from beyond our expectations. In the words of Monty Python, "And now for something completely different..." The effect is both exciting and unsettling, and our reactions may vary from wild exhilaration to sickening nausea.

Uranian periods are extreme but inconsistent. Soldiers often report that war involves days, weeks, or even months of tedious boredom interrupted by

heightened moments of adrenaline-laced terror. Uranus operates in similar fashion. Brief outbursts of dramatic change awaken us, lifting us out of our routines. But those bursts end as suddenly as they began, and are then followed by long stretches where nothing happens. During these quiet calms between storms, we may feel oddly alienated, not only from others, but even from our former life as well. Having been jolted, we wait with expectancy for the next shock.

During a significant Uranian time, we encounter life's unpredictability – in ourselves, in our circumstances, and often in both. We discover the freedom to be different, either by willfully asserting our independence or through forced separation from others.

A curious by-product of Uranian revolutions, especially when they come out of us rather than at us, is that we often embrace them with our entire persona. Having changed directions suddenly and radically, we nonetheless insist to ourselves and others that this new and shocking reality is not different, but how we have always been. We do this for protection of the ego, to maintain continuity. And we believe it, too, even though others may see right through our propaganda.

No matter which direction the revolution comes from – out of us or at us – Uranus provokes the collapse of an old reality that has probably been under stress for some time. Loyalty is a Uranian trait, right up to the moment of betrayal. Then we encounter a new reality, unpredicted and unexpected, one that represents a dramatic contradiction to the rest of our lives. That new reality may be refreshing or chaotic, but it will disrupt all our equations and challenge all our theories.

Coming out the other side of a Uranian experience, we have the choice of embracing or rejecting what was offered, either by renovation or repair. If we were positively stimulated by our glimpse of a brave new world, we may choose to punch further holes through our boxes, giving up our quest for security in favor of a more openly experimental approach to life. Or, if the new reality was too shocking or upsetting, we may repair the hole, papering it over in the hope that we can return to the comforting familiarity of our former routines and beliefs, to keep at bay what seemed to us the unpleasant chaos outside our boxes.

Neptune – universalization, or transcendence by dissolution

Imagine that you're sitting inside your cardboard box, living your life as you normally do, secure in the belief that your painting on the inside walls and ceiling of the box is indeed reality. Then imagine that slowly, almost imperceptibly at first, the walls, ceiling, and perhaps even the floor of the box begin to change. Where they were once solid and opaque (making an ideal surface upon which to paint your personal version of reality), they become first translucent, and then transparent. The walls of your box are still there, still standing, but they're dissolving, morphing into windows. And imagine that this change happens so gradually and so subtly that you don't realize it's happening at all.

A larger reality begins to shine through your painting. Slowly, as the walls of your box become more and more transparent, the light from outside changes

your painting from the everyday reality you expect into, well, something akin to the stained-glass windows of a church. Other colors and shapes blend and merge with the colors and shapes of your former painting, which now glows with an unearthly luminosity.

This would be wonderful if there were no distortion. If we could be sure that our new windows were clear, we could rejoice in the certainty of an enlarged, objective view. But that's not the case with Neptune. Our ego boxes are still present. Our fictions – our hopes, dreams, and fears – are still the filters through which this larger view of reality reaches us. When positive, this new perspective feels like authentic transcendence (and indeed may be in some special cases). Unfortunately, what we take as transcendence is usually the enlargement of the ego through exaggeration of existing beliefs. Too often, this is not real magic, but sleight-of-hand, mere Hollywood special-effects. We believe the illusion, but it remains just that, an illusion. And that sets us up for disillusionment later.

Where Uranus was sudden and shocking in its action, Neptune is gradual and subtle. Where Uranus was the jolt of an electric cattle prod, Neptune is the drug slipped into our drinks. Where Uranus confronted and challenged our assumptions, Neptune highlights our old beliefs, expanding and exaggerating them to grandiose proportions. Where Uranus was sporadic, Neptune is cumulative. The effect builds over time, causing us eventually to forget the pragmatic limits of our former perceptions.

When we finally notice the changes, we wonder what happened and when it occurred. We can't define the process or rationally understand the changes because the effect is non-specific. It's happening everywhere, so we have nothing against which to compare it, except memory, which is dream-like and phantasmagorical anyway.

Everything flows with Neptune. Concentrations of strength dissipate and the current takes us. The experience may be pleasurable and inspiring or vulnerable and threatening. We might feel one with the cosmos or utterly at risk of harm. This is like walking on water, weightless, floating, and our reaction may be delight or dread.

We may feel enthralled by the evanescence of the new light shining through, embracing the seeming magic with evangelical fervor. Or we may fear that we are drowning in confusion and incoherence, in effect, losing our minds. Is this new vision "real," or have we become delusional? Are we inspired or insane?

While in the seduction of Neptune, we cannot distinguish reality from fantasy. Whatever we feel, we believe. If it looks like a duck, walks like a duck, and quacks like a duck, it must be a duck, or so we imagine. Submerged and dissolved into the experience, we buy the package, whatever it is – ineffable beauty or cringing victimhood, perfect romance or utter paranoia. No longer watching the movie, we become the movie. Those glistening images flickering on the silver screen pull us in. The script bleeds into our reality, gradually displacing the ordinary with the fantastic, which we then take to be reality, whether normal or not.

Either by transcendence or escape, Neptune provides us with a sabbatical from the routines of work. Coming out of a significant Neptune period, we return to the pragmatic efforts necessary to maintain our lives. We may see that our life is

a mess and is now much in need of renewed organization and rededicated discipline. On the other hand, we may feel that much of our previous work has been rendered meaningless in light of what we experienced, and that former ambitions and duties are simply no longer worth the effort. One way or another, we will redefine our work.

Pluto: transformation, or renewal by death and rebirth

Imagine that you're sitting inside your cardboard box, living your life as you normally do, secure in the belief that your painting on the inside walls and ceiling of the box is indeed reality. Then imagine that you feel this rumble from deep below you. It's a tremor, the precursor of an earthquake. There's a shiver as the rumbling waves ripple up through the ground, through the floor of your box, through you, and through the box itself. Then the tremor stops.

Later, there's another tremor, this one bigger. Ooh, that shakes things up. And still later, but not as much later as the second preshock was after the first, a third and even more powerful tremor hits. Well, you can see where we're going with this, right up the Richter Scale. Right to the Big One, as they might say in California.

Rather than act directly on our paintings, Pluto simply destroys our cardboard boxes. Like an earthquake, or like the Big Bad Wolf, Pluto huffs and puffs and rattles the ground until our precious little reality structures come tumbling down around our heads.

Pluto represents the great endings and beginnings within life. Remember back in the 1980s when Mount St. Helen's reawakened as an active volcano and eventually erupted? The ecological devastation was awesome. Seemingly everything within a 50-mile radius was destroyed. Trees, plants, and animals were incinerated to carbon dust by the heat of the pyroclastic cloud, smothered by ash, washed away and buried by mud flows, or drowned by the floods that followed. The photos of the aftermath were astonishing: A bleak, gray landscape of total obliteration.

This is what Pluto does, and it's not pleasant.

In fairness, Pluto usually gives ample warning. It rumbles in numerous preshock tremors, saying "Get the hell away from here. Move your ego to a safe place." Sometimes we pay attention to the warnings and move in time. Often, however, we can't heed the warnings because we can't get away from ourselves and our lives. We're simply too involved in them to detach and step back.

So the volcano erupts, and the earthquake hits. Pluto doesn't bother showing us a new reality; the Ruler of the Underworld and Lord of Hades simply destroys the old reality in fire and brimstone. That's the death.

And the rebirth? Well, remember the photos of the area around Mount St. Helens taken barely a year or two after the eruption? Brightly colored flowers were growing through the drab ash, vegetation was sprouting everywhere, and even wildlife was in evidence in criss-crossing animal tracks. Turned out not everything had died. Billions of plant seeds survived the maelstrom, as did certain insects, and some small animals. And even where everything had been

killed, life quickly flowed back in to fill the void. Seeds were carried by wind and water, and by birds who flew over. The act of destruction had cleared the landscape and made the soil incredibly fertile once again. Those scarred hills and valleys were soon teeming with new vegetation, and that brought the herbivores, who were followed up the food chain by the carnivores. In a scant 50 years, even the trees and forests will have regenerated, and no one but geologists and historians will know that a cataclysmic eruption had ever occurred.

Pluto acts to cleanse and purge the contents of our deepest unconscious. The shadow of these beliefs and attitudes erupts into external manifestation in the life. Like a bulldozer, these subconscious eruptions either bury or push aside whatever is in their way, and the process is ruthless, a confrontation with overwhelming and irresistible force that the ego cannot win. Get out of the way, or get run over. Surrender or die.

In the wish to offer solace, some astrologers suggest that Pluto targets only those parts of our lives and psyches that are used up or have lost vibrant meaning, as if Pluto wielded a delicate scalpel and surgically cut out only diseased tissue. Well, I've seen Pluto operate in my own life and the lives of thousands of other people, and I can attest that it is not a careful surgeon with a sharp scalpel. Rather, Pluto is a butcher with a blunt mallet who pounds all the meat, diseased or not, into pulp. That may upset some readers, but I would remind them that cleansings and purges are an inevitable part of life for human beings. The old and the new in our lives are not well delineated. The sick or damaged parts of our psyches are not separated from the healthy parts by neat fences. Like the Hindu god Shiva, Pluto necessarily sweeps away everything in its path, whether old and damaged or not. That is the only way to get a truly fresh start.

Curiously, I've known many people who have undergone profound periods involving multiple Pluto transits where apparently nothing happened at all, neither during nor after the transits. No eruptions, no cleansings, no effects period. Assuming that I am not misinformed nor wrong about what I've seen, I believe that some of us are innately more sensitive than others to Pluto's symbolism, and also that certain times in life are more ripe for massive change than other times, as if a set of unknown conditions were required for Plutonian transits to "trigger."

Conclusion

The progression of the outer planets is toward greater mystery – Uranus is obvious, Neptune is obscured, and Pluto is often invisible. Some astrologers have suggested that Plutonian transits accumulate over the life until they finally reach critical mass, and only then erupt into profound death-and-rebirth experiences. That may or may not be true. I do know, however, that when Plutonian eruptions occur in our lives, they do so gradually, over a long period of time, and everything is affected.

We may find or build new boxes to live in, and we may create similar or different paintings for their walls, but we ourselves will be permanently changed.

And so it goes. The rest of the planets show who we are in essence (Sun and Moon), how we connect with others (Mercury, Mars and Venus); the opportunities offered and adjustments required to live in the social world

(Jupiter and Saturn), and the necessary experience of healing whatever wounds we suffer along the way (Chiron).

The outer planets – Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto – then take us into a different realm entirely. They move us beyond the confines of our familiar cosmic neighborhood, our little ego box, transcending the solar power of the small self and giving us a taste – tantalizing or terrifying – of the awesome perspective of Galactic Consciousness.

Outer planet visitations may be shocking (Uranus), seductive (Neptune), or overwhelming (Pluto). We may cling to our egos through the first two levels, by embracing the willfulness of Uranus or the grandiose fantasies of Neptune, but, like the dragon eating its own tail, such seeming expansions of ego are mere preludes, setting us up for the final act of Plutonian destruction of the self.

What follows, if we're lucky, is the spiritual rebirth into true humility and deep reverence, the palpable awareness in our cells and our consciousness that life is not only bigger than we are, but infinitely more mysterious. There may be humans on this planet who are already there at birth and thus do not need to go through such profound changes. For most of us, apparently, the transformations are part of the journey.

