

The Mars Retrograde of 2022-2023

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In the 22 years of this current century, I've written newsletters or commentaries about Mars Retrograde on four occasions: in 2005, 2007, 2009, and 2016. Of these four, the 2016 commentary was the most comprehensive. Here we are again at another Mars Retrograde. This current commentary is essentially an edited reprint of the 2016 essay, with updated technical data to fit this particular Mars retrograde of late 2022 to early 2023. Also, this commentary is longer than my standard weekly blog post — eight pages rather than my typical four or five. I'd rather the essay were shorter, but there's a lot to unpack here, so read whichever parts you like and ignore the rest.

Intro: Astrological Meanings of Mars

In astrology, Mars — the “Red Planet” — symbolizes masculine drives, essentially all the testosterone-based experiences of human assertion or aggression, desire or lust, penetration or invasion/conquest, with all the predictable conflicts (both interpersonal and collective, whether as argument or violent confrontation) of such activities. 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. Examples of Martian brilliance would be the shared sex that can result in powerful and satisfying unions or even the procreation of a new life, as well as surgeries that can be and often are life-saving; contrasting examples of Martian disaster include fatal car wrecks, rape, or war, especially the modern variety that includes civilians as targets.

Mars is lousy for anything requiring patience and forbearance, such as negotiation, diplomacy, or compromise (all of which are considered Venusian traits in astrology). Mars is passionate (as opposed to Venus, which is more gently loving), definite, and committed (all black and white, no shades of gray, with almost no nuance or subtlety). 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 a circuit around the zodiac) roughly every two years — 25 1/2 months, to be a little more precise — during which it will make various contacts (cycle activations) with all the symbolic points within our natal charts. My particular system uses 15 different Mars cycles. The transits within each cycle to which I pay most attention are the four quarters of each cycle — conjunction, waxing and waning squares, and opposition. These quarterly phase transitions are the points of clearest and most potent impact.

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 place in the zodiac.

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 are presumed to 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 about half a sign. The average arc of the Martian retrograde loop is 14°, but the exact arc varies from 10-18°, depending on the particular cycle.

Standard Mars Transits

A “standard” Mars transit (meaning one that occurs during the 18 months of Mars’ direct motion) has an effective duration of 1-2 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 1-2 day transit can and rightly should be considered minor, just a blip on the radar screen.

This is not to suggest that major experiences don’t occur during Mars transits. They can, but the odds are slim. The greater likelihood is that, during those 1-2

days, the person will *feel* more Martian — with a greater sense of urgency and less patience in all activities, as well as a reduced capacity for bearing up under frustration and a correspondingly shorter fuse for outbursts of temper. This “heat” or “inflammation” is likely to be both stimulating and aggravating.

During Mars transits, we are 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 we’re aware of our altered tendencies. We may or may not feel more vital, but we will almost certainly burn through our available energy more quickly on days when Mars is active in our charts. How that feels depends on the individual. For instance, person who is young and vital is more likely to feel exhilarated by a Mars-stimulated outpouring of kinetic energy, whereas a person who is old or chronically ill may feel exhausted or used up. Either way, during Mars transits 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 Martian-active days being mildly more assertive, but a few days — especially during peak moments — feeling considerably more concentrated and extreme. We may be surprised by these moments of sudden aggression, heat, frustration, or anger, and wonder what’s going on inside ourselves to produce such feelings or behaviors. Or, by contrast, we could experience no detached reflection at all and simply assume that the provocation is coming at us 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, as well as the sudden shift from one to the other, 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 revealing 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 contains both way too much information and not nearly enough information. We have to find a way to assess, consider, and factor in many 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 1-2 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 1-2 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 1-2 days. A retrograde loop Mars transit, by contrast, is a three-pass event, with the exact angle of the activation formed at three different times over the six months — direct at the beginning of the transit, 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 unhappy experience.

Over a complete life of say, 80 years, people will experience more than 30 Mars retrograde loops. Many of these loops will be relatively mild and inconsequential. A few, however, are likely to activate our 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 torpedoes, 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.” After all Mars is rash, and 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 2022? That will depend on various factors: Mars’ natal condition, the area of someone’s chart in which Mars is retrograding, and how many potent Mars transits occur in the chart during its retrograde loop.

This year, Mars goes retrograde in late Gemini to early Sagittarius. On September 3rd, 2022, Mars, still in direct motion but slowing down, reached **8° 08’ of Gemini** — the point to which it will later retrograde back. That point marked the beginning of the first of three phases, which I call “Set-up.” Then, week-by-week, Mars continued to move forward, but ever more slowly, until this coming Sunday, October 30th, when it will reach **25° 37’ of Gemini**. 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 — 8° 09’ of Gemini — on the 12th of January, 2023, 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 25° 37’ of Gemini on March 2nd, 2023, when the whole Loop will be over.

So, three phases: **Set-up, Retrograde,** and **Resolution,** unfolding over the period from early September, 2022, until early March, 2023 (74 days retrograde, 193 days in all), and covering an arc of 17° — about half a sign or 4.7% of the zodiac.

Everyone who has significant symbolic points in their natal charts in that middle span of Gemini — from 8° to 25° — will experience Mars retrograde transits as conjunctions (beginnings of new two-year Martian cycles). Desires will be stimulated in many directions, and activities are likely to move from one challenge to another without much organization or coherence. That could be fun or exhausting, depending on the individual. Also, those with significant natal points at 8-25° of any of the other three mutable signs — Virgo, Sagittarius, and Pisces — will also experience potent Mars transits that last about six months. Basically, Mars oppositions to Sagittarian points imply overstimulation and potentially too much activity, especially social, while Mars squares to Virgo and Pisces symbols indicate conflicts involving increased frustration (Virgo) and greater confusion (Pisces).

Collective Meanings of this Mars Retrograde

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

The fact that this current Mars retrograde occurs entirely within the zodiacal sign Gemini implies that the characteristic tone of aggression over the next five months will be tactical rather than strategic. Considered from an astrological perspective, much of the violence that happens in the world is likely to be piecemeal, provoked by momentary impulses in response to temporary conditions, rather than as part of a larger, more coherent plan of action. Ascribing any overarching meanings to whatever occurs — military, political, social, and economic — should be discouraged, as such generalizations will probably lead to incorrect conclusions.

Considered purely from an astrological perspective, the world is likely to fragment wildly over the next six months, with a commingling of apparently good, bad, and weird results. This half-year is presumed to be largely anecdotal, and not a period on which we can accurately base future trends.

This is not to suggest that everything will be fine, nor that we are safe from violent episodes, either natural or man-made. No, we are as much at risk now and over the coming months as at any other time, but there's less likelihood of consistency or sensible meaning to whatever happens. It's more of crap shoot or 52-card-pickup right now.