

Signs are the Least Important Level in Astrology

by Bill Herbst

*Version 1.4 (posted on 8 November 2022)
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When people talk about astrology who are less than full-tilt boogie students but have more than just a casual interest in the system, what they talk about — the astrology techno-jargon they throw around — is, almost invariably, Signs. That is to say, they refer endlessly to the Twelve Signs of the Zodiac — Aries, Taurus, Gemini, Cancer, etc. These people (who amount to just about everyone) talk very little if at all about planets, and they hardly ever refer to houses. They don't mention aspects at all, hardly ever even bring up elements (fire, earth, air, and water) and never refer to modes (cardinal, fixed, and mutable). Their understanding of cycle theory, which is the very heart of astrology, is either minimal or completely non-existent.

All of these other layers of astrological understanding within the structural composition of technical astrology are more important than Signs of the Zodiac. Not just a little more, but a ton. Like, head and shoulders more important. And yet, if we listen to what passes for public discourse about astrology, Signs dominate all those snippets of conversation.

And when most people talk about Signs, they aren't referring to Signs as action-based archetypes or filtering perspectives about how reality works. No, they are almost always referring to Sun Signs — personality categories that supposedly indicate what "type" of person you are, according to the month of your birth.

Why is this? Well, the most pragmatic answer is that Sun Signs are all most people know about astrology (as pitiful and wrong-headed as that is). Yes, they may have heard about certain other noteworthy astrological events that have crept closer to mainstream awareness, such as Mercury retrograde or the Saturn Return, or they might be aware of an upcoming eclipse, but they really don't know what any of those occurrences represents nor how to interpret them in someone's life.

If you live in America or pretty much anywhere else in the modern world and you don't choose to go down the rabbit hole of intensely pursuing the technical study of astrology, the only thing you're likely to be exposed to is Sun Signs. Not that most people are aware of the extraordinary complexity and nuance of astrology.

In the public mind, astrology is pretty much a crude system of twelve types of people. Sure, actual astrologers probably refer to other factors, but the public still assumes that everything in astrology begins and ends with those twelve categories.

Needless to say, that's garbage and not true at all. Not only is it wrong, it's downright stupid. But then, as H.L. Mencken quipped a century ago, no one ever lost money by underestimating the American public's intelligence.

Oddly enough, however, I don't blame the public for this crude and naïve misunderstanding. No, the blame for such unsophisticated tomfoolery should be placed squarely at the feet of astrologers themselves.

See, in the 1920s and 1930s, American astrologers had a problem. In America, unlike in India or China, astrology was mocked and derided. It wasn't "scientific" and was regarded as bogus, akin to old wives' tales, black cats, and other superstitious nonsense. (Of course, occultism thrived under the surface culture within America as freemasonry and theosophy, but that's a different story.) Astrologers wanted a way to market their system to the public so they could make a living. Along with publishers eager to make a buck, they came up with a brilliant idea — Sun Signs! Since almost everyone knew the date of their birth, astrologers could tell the public that each person was described by a single Sign, based solely on the position in the Zodiac of the Sun at birth. It was the lowest common denominator. Genius!

That solved two of great difficulties with astrology as a personal discipline. One was astrology's requirement for precise and accurate birth information — the full date and exact time of an individual's first breath at birth, along with the specific location of that birth on the earth. While most people know the date and place of their birth, many (probably most) do not know the exact time. Some people can obtain this information from hospital records or family Bibles, but not everyone. If you don't know your actual birth time, you might as well give up on astrology as a personal discipline and study some other esoteric or occult system instead — tarot or palmistry or trance mediumship. Without complete and accurate birth-data, astrology will never reveal its secrets about your life. With no birth time, all you'll ever get from astrology is generic information, some of which will be misleading at best and fundamentally wrong at worst.

The other difficulty that Sun Signs did away with was the daunting complexity of astrology. Charts are very much like life — they're complicated, and chock full of paradox, contradiction, and nuance, all of which defy easy understanding.

No, to market any system to a mass audience, especially an audience as badly educated as the American public, it has to be simple and straightforward (even if it's not...). Sun Signs were the invention that allowed astrology to be reduced through oversimplification. Never mind that the whole idea of each person being

associated with a single Sign was ludicrous. There was money to be made! And so, astrologers and publishers went to work throughout the 1920s and decades that followed cranking out books and magazines for popular consumption that asked and answered the immortal question: *What's your Sign?*

Every dimension of life — from personality traits through love and sex through jobs and career were exhaustively interpreted for each sign. This was done rabidly by the ambitious astrologers eager to market themselves, despite the fact that they knew the system didn't actually work that way. The most famous of these many tomes was Linda Goodman's "Sun Signs," a book first published in 1968 that became a perennial best-seller.

At times, some effort was made to qualify the excesses of the over-the-top material being presented about "Librans," "Leos," or "Capricorns." Certain Sun Sign books contained more technical (and truthful) explanatory chapters attempting to inform readers that all this endless Sign stuff was too general, and that real natal charts contained a wealth of very specific indicators that went far beyond the simple monthly alignment of the Sun in the Zodiac and often contradicted what was written in Sun-Sign books and magazines. In addition, a few astrologers attempted to de-couple Signs of the Zodiac from human beings to restore their meanings as process archetypes rather than character traits. Most of that fell on deaf ears, however. The public preferred a simplistic system of quick-n-dirty personality typing that was false but easy to learn rather than a ridiculously complicated system stuffed to the gills with unresolvable paradoxes, ironic contradictions, and endless nuance.

Needless to say, I'm not a fan of such books. Nor do I approve of teaching beginning astrology to new students by starting with the Signs of the Zodiac. Either planets or cycle theory are better as starting points for learning astrology.

Sessions with clients have been my livelihood for the past 50 years. When I do a session, my intention and strong preference is to conduct the conversation in English. I don't like speaking in astro-jargon. The technical language of astrology is terrific to think in, but it's downright lousy as a vehicle for spoken communication. Clients, however, frequently talk to me in "astrologese." This happens most often when they refer to relationships in their life. They will say to me something like, "*My daughter, who's a Gemini,*" or "*My Virgo mother,*" or "*My Aries ex-husband.*" Apparently, clients believe that by referring to people's Sun Signs, they're offering me useful information. It may be useful to them, but not to me.

Sure, I understand the futility of railing against something so widespread within the public that it might as well be a universal. After all, it's not the public's fault that astrology is presented to them in such a cockeyed and misleading manner. It's just that having to hold my tongue to avoid insulting otherwise well-meaning people gets really old after awhile. For the first thousand clients who referred to

other people as if they were signs, I handled it pretty well. I didn't get angry and verbally smack them. I kept silent and let the conversation move on. After 50 years and ten thousand times, though, I've grown really tired of it. My patience is frayed.

And don't get me started on all the other idiocy that abounds in this country about astrology, such as ridiculous articles that pop up in the media every decade or so with click-bait headlines like "*Astrologers report that All the Planets are Lining Up!*" or "*Missing 13th Sign Finally Discovered!*"

While some people who know nothing about astrology are no doubt duped or taken in by those bogus articles, I'd like to think that most people aren't so gullible. Of course, given the descent of America into Crazy Town lunacy over the past four decades, that's probably putting way too much faith in the public. Having spent my entire adult life pursuing a discipline and a career that many people regard as false or even immoral, one might think that I'd be better prepared for the widespread insanity that has now emerged full-blown after centuries spent lurking in the dark shadows of the American psyche.

These days, the arguments for and against astrology appear almost quaint, given the complete disintegration of public discourse throughout almost every dimension of society and culture. Still, the more things change, the more some things remain the same. Sun Signs continue to rankle me, even after half a century. Of the 90 million Americans who profess a belief in astrology (as reported by polls), I think it's quite probable that for a majority of them, Sun Signs *are* astrology.

Don't get me wrong: I don't want to get rid of the Zodiac. Signs hold a relevant and meaningful place in the middle of the astrological hierarchy. But if I had a magic wand and the power to alter the collective zeitgeist, I might be tempted to remove Signs of the Zodiac from public consciousness, at least for awhile. A year or two, or maybe ten.

But then, if wishes were horses, we'd all ride away...