

More Problems with Astrology

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Every so often, I write about problems I've encountered with astrology over my half century as a working professional astrologer in private practice. There are a boatload of them. This is not unusual or unique to astrology. Every system, practice, or discipline carries its own particular weirdness. We may not know about the weirdness when we first encounter astrology or plumbing or theoretical physics or sex and intimacy, but unless we remain at the most superficial level, we're likely to discover that things are more complicated and much stranger than we knew or were led to believe. This stripping away of our naiveté is a natural part of growing up and maturing, not that understanding that necessarily makes the process of giving up our illusions any easier.

Some problems are technical, arising from within the astrological system itself. An example of this kind of conundrum would be the fact that quadrant house systems (Placidus or Koch, for instance) do not work for birth charts of people born above the latitude of the Arctic Circle or below the latitude of the Antarctic Circle latitude. The reason for this is that those two extreme regions of the earth at the poles undergo periods of many months where the Sun never rises or sets. In those latitudes at the very top and bottom of the world, some parts of each year have 24 hours a day of daylight or 24 hours a day of nighttime.

OK, so what? Why is that a problem? Well, astrological charts are maps that are drawn according to divisions of a circle in two different directions — east and west (i.e., horizontally rising and setting), and up and down (actually, vertically outward and inward).

In a quadrant house system, the eastern horizon or Ascendant is the point of sunrise, while the Midheaven, the upper (outward) direction of the vertical axis or meridian, is the sun's highest point in the sky. Normally, the horizon and meridian are roughly at right angles to each other. The precise angle between the horizon and meridian varies, both by seasons and by daily rising signs of short or long ascension, but, in general, we're talking about a something that looks like a cross and defines four quadrants that can then be subdivided into three houses each.

The lower-left or First Quadrant contains the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd houses. In the lower-right or Second Quadrant, we have the 4th, 5th, and 6th houses. (All six

of these houses are below the horizon.) The upper-right or Third Quadrant contains the 7th, 8th, and 9th houses, and finally in the upper-right or Fourth Quadrant, we find the 10th, 11th, and 12th houses. (These last six houses are all above the horizon).

Here's the problem: At the poles, the Sun never rises above the horizon for six months and never sets below the horizon for the other six months. So, let's say that a human baby is born to a female researcher in an Antarctic scientific research station close to the South Pole. Depending how close to the Pole the birth is, odds are almost assured that the birth will occur during either perpetual night or perpetual day. With a quadrant house system, the Midheaven (marking the Sun's highest point in the sky and symbolically defining the beginning of the 10th house) will be UNDER the horizon, literally BELOW the Ascendant.

Well, crap. How can the 10th house be below the 1st house? It can't. Literally, we can't erect a traditional natal chart for that baby using any quadrant house system. We are forced to use Equal Houses, which define the 1st House cusp as the Ascendant and then assign each successive house cusp 30° of the ecliptic further.

Does this mean that quadrant house systems are bogus? No. Because so few humans are born above the Arctic Circle or below the Antarctic circle, quadrant house systems work quite well for 99+% of humanity.

My point, however, is that quadrant systems do present something of a mathematical problem in astrology. And don't even get me started about births off the earth in a space station. That hasn't happened yet, but it's only a question of time before some female astronaut has a baby while on a mission in space, and then astrologers will go nuts and tear out their hair arguing about how to draw up and interpret a "natal" chart for someone born in space.

Anyway, the technical problems with astrology go on forever. No one tells you about the contradictions and paradoxes before you begin to study astrology, but go deep enough down the rabbit hole and you will find them.

Other problems in astrology have nothing to do with the system itself, but rather with human psychology and our tendency to be unconsciously self-deluded, to have unrealistic expectations, or simply to have been misinformed by the lousy superficiality and foolishness of what passes for mainstream knowledge and questionable wisdom.

For instance, the number one question I've been asked by clients over my 50 years as a working astrologer is: "When will this shit end?" Translated, what the question means is that my client has been going through a period in his or her life of difficulty, failure, suffering or some other unpleasant experience. In truth,

that's often what motivates people to request an astrological "reading" (or what I prefer to call a "session").

The belief here (or at least the hope) is that clients' personal astrology will reveal the not only the reason for their difficulties, but will also tell them when the travail will end. The fact that so many people want this kind of information is very understandable, and sometimes astrology can in fact illuminate what's happening. Yes, I have experienced in my practice times where I could and did tell someone precisely how long their suffering would last. But that's rare, the exception rather than the rule. If I'm completely honest with myself, I'd admit that I've probably given people "ending times" for their difficulties more often than I should have. In reality, I'm always somewhat uncertain about that, and I've probably responded badly to the social pressure to give people what they want, even though it may prove incorrect.

Most of the time, I can see fairly plainly in the natal chart and transits the symbolic roots of my clients' difficulties, whatever they may be. Charts provide little context, however, so I always ask my clients to tell me the stories of what's been happening to them. I'm frequently amazed by how perfectly matched — almost custom-tailored — the real events are to the symbolic implications.

The problem, though, is not so much why crappy stuff is happening, but the wish to know when it will end. People generally would like astrology to be able to pinpoint when life will get better — when the worm will turn, the dark clouds pass, the rains end, and the sun shine again.

That wish presumes a clear and obvious correspondence between certain experiences and specific astrological events. Sadly for us, however, the correspondence is neither simple nor straightforward.

For instance, it's not rare to undergo difficult transits. In fact, it's much more common than most people presume. As a general rule, I'd say that charts contain major transits that are likely to correlate with difficult or stressful experiences AT LEAST half the time.

One reason it's hard for an astrologer to pinpoint the end of suffering is that charts often contain multiple and overlapping transits that could be associated with the unpleasant circumstances or difficult psychological experiences. In that case, pinpointing a definite end point may not be possible, since the transits tend to cascade through time. One ends, but others are ongoing, and later, a new one may begin.

Another reason is that nothing in astrology is one-sided. The public has been led to believe that some parts of astrology are "good" ("favorable" or "fortunate") while others are "bad" ("malefic" or "unfortunate"). Nothing could be further from the truth. Every symbol in astrology is both and can be good or bad,

wonderful or terrible. Yes, some parts of astrology lean more obviously toward ease or stress — Saturn, for example, is almost never “easy” and is often quite “hard.” By contrast, Venus and Jupiter tend to be easy and feel good to our egos. But that doesn’t mean that they ARE good. (Both Venus and Jupiter can be excessive and selfish.) So, the very idea that some events in one’s personal astrology are plainly either good or bad is not only wrong, but quite foolish. The same logic applies to looking for the “bad” transits to end.

Something I’ve said before is timely enough to be reiterated here, and I want to state it definitely and unequivocally: *People are not good or bad as humans because of their charts.* They’re good or bad because of their character, and that exists outside the realm of astrology. *Also, no one has a good or bad life because of his or her natal chart.* Charts can be wonderful or terrible depending on mysterious factors we don’t understand. Charts can be interpreted from the bias of either slant — good or bad, wonderful or terrible — but the slant comes from us as astrologers. The chart itself is neutral.

The most important reason that it’s difficult to astrologically define an end point in time to our travails is that, once underway, the damage done by our problems (whether outwardly circumstantial or inwardly psychological) tends to continue even after the original stimulus for the trouble has subsided. Life occurs in the momentary here-and-now, of course, but it also occurs in extended phases that unfold over time. Once broken, life doesn’t magically heal and return to its former pristine state.

It’s sometimes said that “*whatever doesn’t kill me makes me stronger,*” but in fact that’s bullshit. Anything that takes us down harmfully can and probably will weaken us. Sure, healing can occur, but vitality diminishes over time. People sometimes characterize themselves as “survivors,” but the hard truth is that no one survives forever.

All transits in astrology have beginnings and endings. Every cyclic alignment starts at one point in time, then ends down the road at a later point in time. Even the longest outer-planet transits are over within one to three years, and many other significant transits are measured in months. But that doesn’t mean that when a particularly challenging or difficult transit ends that everything will magically return to hunky-dory.

Sorry, that’s just not how life works.

I don’t want to be harsh about any of this and tell my clients (or myself) to *Get Over It, stop wanting Life to be easy, and just Grow Up, dammit!* No, I’m sympathetic to how exhausting our suffering can be. I admit it — I do wish that life were easier for all of us. Mostly, though, it’s not.