

Understanding Chart Movement

Part Two: A Visual Metaphor

by Bill Herbst

Version 1.5 (posted on 25 July 2023)
© 2023 by the author, all rights reserved

*This week's commentary is the second and concluding post of an expanded excerpt from my textbook, **Houses of the Horoscope**. Last week's post explained a simple formula for the three main chart elements (planets, signs, and houses). This week's installment offers a metaphor to help visualize how charts move.*

Understanding the functions and meanings of planets, signs, and houses is essential in learning astrology, but even mastery of all those separate elements doesn't in itself prepare students to comprehend what a chart is and how it moves.

Charts seem to be static, but they're not. They're just stop-action. Everything is actually in motion. In movies, motion is an illusion created by running past our brains and vision 24 still frames per second. Charts are the opposite: The movement within the heavens is "real," and charts are a snapshot of the view from a particular moment in time and space. Understanding the freeze frame of an astrological chart is greatly enhanced if we have a clear sense of the relative motions that the snapshot doesn't capture or reveal.

To that end, a visual metaphor composed of various analogies may come in handy. These analogies won't necessarily be "realistic," but they'll be simple enough to help us grasp the movements that will bring to life our view of astrological charts.

Imagine that you're in a helicopter about 2,000 feet above the ground. Next, imagine that you can look down directly beneath you to see a circular railroad track. This track is divided into twelve different sections. These are analogous to the houses of an astrological chart. It might help to visualize the ground inside the track as if it were a pie, where we've cut the pie into twelve slices. That's often how the houses are graphically displayed in a chart.

On the track is a train. This train has twelve cars in all — the engine, ten Pullman cars, and the caboose — and the entire train completely fills the track. In other

words, the length of the train is exactly the same as the circumference of the circular track, so that the front of the engine touches the rear of the caboose.

TRACK = HOUSES

The circular track is like the houses of an astrological chart with their twelve numbered sections that delineates the personal space of the native — above, below, east, and west. This circular section of track doesn't move, of course. It just sits there, fixed in the ground. In much the same way, the houses of a chart appear to remain fixed and unmoving in the chart. The 1st house (the eastern horizon, rising sun or morning point) is always on the left of the chart; the 7th cusp (the western horizon, setting Sun or evening point) is always on the right; the 10th house cusp (directly overhead on the upper vertical meridian, the noon or midday point of the Sun) is at the top of the chart, while the 4th house cusp (at the lower end of the vertical meridian, the midnight position of the Sun) is at the bottom of the chart, directly underfoot.

The Vertical and Horizontal Axes (Meridian and Horizon)

Beginning students in astrology are often confused about the angles of the chart, the horizontal and vertical axes, which divide the chart into hemispheres and quadrants. The horizon marks east and west, which are reversed from a typical map: in an astrological chart, east is on the left, west on the right. Thus, the sun rises in the east (morning) at the left end of the horizon line and sets in the west (evening) at the right end of the horizon line.

That horizontal axis drawn through the center of the chart also graphically defines the upper and lower hemispheres — separating the visible sky above from the other half of the sky we can't see because it's hidden from our view under the earth. Students tend to interpret the Meridian or vertical axis in the simplest, most obvious way, as indicating up and down. They usually think of the Midheaven as UP, while assuming that the Lower Heaven is DOWN.

UP and DOWN = OUTWARD and INWARD

That Up-Down orientation is understandable, but the chart shows more than that. The earth is spherical, like a ball, so if everyone on the globe pointed UP at the same time, we wouldn't all point in the same direction. That applies also to everyone pointing DOWN. Yes, the verticality of the chart *appears to be* UP and DOWN, but really it's OUTWARD and INWARD (either outward into the big cosmos or inward toward a single point at the center of the earth). Another way to think about the upper and lower hemispheres of the chart is as Big World versus Small World. The top or sky half of the chart represents our collective experience (social, shared, and relatively objective) versus the bottom or earth half symbolizing our individual experience (personal, private, and relatively subjective).

What does that mean? Let's assume that we're having lunch together in a restaurant, and we look out the window and see what appears to be a flying

saucer fly past. If I have a chart that strongly emphasizes the upper/outward or sky hemisphere, my first impulse is to ask you if you saw what I saw. If you say yes, then that validates my experience. Holy crap! I just saw a flying saucer, and I know it was real and valid because you saw it too. If you say no, you didn't see anything, I'll tend to dismiss my own experience. Maybe it was just swamp gas.

If, on the other hand, you have a strongly emphatic lower/inward or earth hemisphere chart, then your personal experience alone is all you need for validation. Whatever your experience is real, and you don't really care what other people or society believes. You might ask me what I saw, but my response yea or nay won't change your experience. You saw a flying saucer! That's all that matters.

The Twelve Sections of the Track

Each pie-shaped section inside the track represents one house. If we wanted to get fancy, we could imagine various coordinated color schemes to represent the elemental qualities of each house or section of track. For instance, we could use reds for the 1st, 5th, and 9th houses (the "fire" houses), green for the 2nd, 6th, and 10th (the "earth" houses), yellow for the 3rd, 7th, and 11th (the "air" houses), and blue for the 4th, 8th, and 12th (the "water" houses). Then we could add different colors to blend the elemental qualities with the modal or axial relationships. In the zodiac, modes are called *cardinal*, *fixed*, and *mutable*, while for the houses they're renamed *angular*, *succedent*, and *cadent*. Pastels might work. But it's your visualization, so hire your own imaginary painters and do it up however you wish.

For now, though, let's keep it simple and just imagine that the track has twelve sections.

TRAIN = THE ZODIAC AND ITS SIGNS

The train of twelve cars symbolizes the zodiac, with its twelve signs. The engine represents the sign Aries while the caboose is the sign Pisces. The train moves continuously around the track, but relatively slowly. Our train is just a "local" — each day it makes a single round trip, one complete daily circuit of the track.

This is what happens in the heavens from our vantage point as the Earth turns on its axis. We humans on the earth's surface have the experience of remaining stationary, and we perceive the heavens around us turning one complete cycle in a 24-hour period. That's why the sun appears to "rise" and "set."

Some critics (idiots and damned fools) accuse astrologers of not knowing the "objective" motions of the solar system, implying that we don't understand that the earth revolves around the sun or turns on its axis. Well, that's just silly. Of course we understand. That's not the point.

The issue is one of perspective. No one speaks of “earthrise” or “earthset.” We talk in terms of our own subjective experience — sunrise and sunset. For the most part, natal astrology is a human-centered discipline. Personal astrology attempts to symbolically decode the mysteries of an individual life (or the collective group existence of humanity within civilization) through the lens of the cosmos, so we use the perspective that best applies. It’s not the case that the objective perspective of science is “true” and the subjective perspective of astrology “false.” No, they’re different realms of experience, with different perceptions, rules, and implications. Both can be “real” and “correct.” In fairness, astrology can also calculate heliocentric charts, for anyone who wants to see things from the vantage point of the Sun. But we don’t live on the Sun; we live on the earth.

From our human viewpoint, the zodiac train makes one trip around the house track every day. As a general rule, each car (sign) takes roughly two hours to travel over a certain section of track (house), although that varies because the train doesn’t move at a constant speed, instead fluctuating through a series of gradual accelerations and decelerations. So imagine the train speeding up a little then slowing down again twice each day as it makes its daily circuit around the track. [For the technically-minded, this is referred to in astrology as “signs of long and short ascension,” but for now, just focus on the train’s one complete trip each day around the track.]

So far so good. Next we’ll add the planets, and this is where the metaphor gets interesting, as well as a bit more complicated.

PASSENGERS = PLANETS

The planets are like passengers on the train. How many passengers are aboard? Traditional astrology uses ten bodies (the Sun and Moon, called “lights,” and the eight major planets). Since the 1970s, advances in the science of astronomy have allowed us to identify literally thousands of additional bodies in the solar system, so astrologers now have the option of adding many, many other symbolic passengers to the train — asteroids, comets, etc. Some astrologers’ charts are littered with passengers, while other astrologers prefer to stick to only the major bodies. I personally use eleven celestial bodies in my chart — the ten standard ones plus one asteroid called Chiron.

However many passengers we use, they’re all moving gradually through the train, very slowly changing seats, passing through one car until they run out of seats and have to move to the next car. They move backwards through the train, from the engine toward the caboose, in a direction opposite to the train’s movement over the track.

In other words, the train moves over the track once each day in a clockwise direction as the passengers move much more slowly and counterclockwise through the cars of the train. In addition to that, the passengers are moving

through the train, from one car to the next, at different speeds. In fact, they travel through the cars at vastly different speeds.

For instance, the Moon, the fastest-moving body in traditional astrology, is the astrological equivalent of a little kid with ants in his pants who can't sit still and bounces from one seat to the next, changing cars about every two and a half days, or every two and a half "trips" the train makes around the track. To get through all twelve cars of the whole train takes the Moon almost one month, or roughly 28 trips. [That's what a "month" is — the length of one passage of our Moon around the heavens through the soli-lunar cycle, from one New Moon to the next.)

At the other end of the speed scale, Pluto is like an old man who can barely walk. He takes two steps and has to rest seemingly forever. Currently, it takes Pluto about 15 years just to move from one car to another. That means it will take him nearly 5,500 complete daily trips of the train just to get out of one car and into the next. And that's fast for Pluto. He stays in some cars as long as 22 years. All told, to make even a single passage through the twelve cars of the entire train takes him more than 90,000 trips.

Since Mr. Pluto is very, very slow, it's a big deal when he changes train cars (signs). Pluto moved into the "car" called Capricorn in 2008, and he's now entering the next car, Aquarius, in 2023-2024. He'll take 20 years to move through the Aquarian car before entering the Pisces caboose.

RELATIONSHIPS = ASPECTS

Since the passengers move through the train at different speeds, they often pass one another. Sometimes they sit in adjacent seats in the same car, and sometimes they can look out the window and see another passenger moving through the opposite car all the way on the other side of the circular track. The relationships of the individual passengers to one another as they move through the cars represent the geometrical or angular contacts planets form with each other as they move through the zodiac. These connections are called *aspects*, and they highlight the changing energetic connections of one planet to another. We can think of the matrix of these aspect connections as similar to the circuit diagram of an electrical device.

Now, imagine all these various and different motions happening together, all at once, and in time. Everything is constantly moving, shifting, changing relationship to everything else. At any given moment, a certain passenger is in a certain car of the train, which is moving over a certain section of track, and the passengers as a group form a kaleidoscopic pattern; sometimes they're all together, sometimes they're spread out, sometimes they all occupy one half the train, leaving the other half empty. The variations are endless, as are the recurring patterns that form and change, but they never repeat exactly.

TAKE A SNAPSHOT

If we took a photograph from our helicopter, freezing the various motions, stopping the action like a slice out of time, then we would have a picture of the train, the track, the passengers, and their relationships to one another. Signs, houses, planets, and aspects.

Erecting a natal chart by hand with ephemerides and tables of houses is like developing that photo in a darkroom, which is how most astrologers worked many decades ago. We had to laboriously calculate the exact positions within all the various motions. Now, however, we use computers to erect charts, which are equivalent to the digital cameras in smart phones — instant snapshot.

That's essentially what a horoscope is — a picture of all these complex celestial motions and their interrelationships, frozen at an instant in time, as seen from a specific point of view in space.

In natal astrology, our point of view is that of an individual human being taking life's first breath, establishing both bodily independence and the life-rhythm of prana. When we look at a natal chart with all those arcane symbols dotted around the circle, all those colored lines drawn inside the circle between the symbols, what we're seeing is an accurate diagram of the different celestial motions as they were configured from that particular infant's vantage point at birth. We're looking at a mandala of that individual's view of the solar system, his or her unique perspective on the cosmos. And we seek to understand the symbolic meanings of that time-space moment.

Learning the various movements is simple but essential. If you understand what you're really seeing when you look at a natal chart, whether it's your own or someone else's, then you'll have a tremendous head start toward using astrology with reverence as well as savvy.