

# (Re-)Legitimizing Astrology

by Dr. Francesca Po

Search "astrology" in Psychology Today or any other mainstream clinical magazine and you will find pages of scathing articles claiming its relationship to narcissism and lack of scientific legitimacy in general. It would come as no surprise for anyone to think that many in the scientific community would likely align with this critical position as well.

From the perspective of many Abrahamic faiths, astrology is perceived as a violation of the First Commandment,

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*You shall not have other gods beside me.*  
- (Exodus 20:3, Deuteronomy 5:7)

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Source: [philpace](#), [Pixabay](#)

Many religious people have been taught to dismiss – even fear – astrology because of this.

Despite what appears as a general cultural antipathy towards astrology in our culture, in other cultures, namely in India, astrology and science comfortably coexist: everyday people, highly educated professionals, as well as scientists, consult astrology in their daily lives. In fact, it is so pervasive in Indian culture that one would not start a business without consulting an astrologer. (McCarthy, 2014)

Furthermore, interest in it has increased, especially in recent times. Between 2016 and 2017, YouTube videos on astrology experienced a 62% increase in views, Facebook posts on astrology experienced a 116% increase in views, and Twitter posts experienced a 600% increase in engagement. (Posner, 2018)

Are we experiencing cultural regression, or have we gotten astrology wrong? This article aims to address common critiques about astrology and points at the latter—perhaps astrology is more legitimate than we give it credit for after all.

## It's not science-based

Speaking as a social scientist who knows how astrology functions, there is undoubtedly a gap in knowledge when it comes to evidence-based research on astrology. It is not completely non-existent, however: notably, the work of cultural historian Richard Tarnas and those who study beside him are doing this important research. In his book, "Cosmos and Psyche", he investigates four sets of planetary alignments and demonstrates their correlations to major events in human history. (Tarnas, 2006) Colleagues of Tarnas also recently released a film series called "Changing of the Gods", which demonstrates the correlations of the Uranus-Pluto cycle to events in human history. (Ausubel & Schwartzberg, 2022)

What Tarnas and his contemporaries are doing is not unlike what astrologers have always done for thousands of years: through careful observation of the movements of the Moon, Sun, planets, and other major bodies in the solar system, and how they align with one another, astrologers also observed that events on Earth correlated with particular alignments. Here lies how astrology functions: while there is no causal connection between the cosmos and individuals – the planets are not causing anything to happen to us – their alignments indicate specific potentials available at any given point in time.

What is science but presenting information using the scientific method? While there is definitely room for more evidence-based research on astrology, much of why it even exists to begin with is through the evidence of educated observations throughout history.

## There's no room for free will

As already indicated in the previous section, the idea that the cosmos is *causing* things to happen on Earth is an uninformed assumption about how astrology functions. There are correlations between alignments and events on Earth, but there is no causal connection.

There is, however, a predictive nature to astrology, but it is neither deterministic nor fatalistic—individuals remain free agents and maintain free will. In the same way that science can reliably predict the movement of the major bodies of our solar system and not have that kind of predictability threaten humanity's free will, astrology can also make predictions of potentials that exist at any given moment in time without threatening free will. It is the job of the astrologer to point at these potentials, and that of the individual to choose what they want to do with the potentials available to them.

Consider this: if one walks to the edge of a cliff, there is the potential of (1) stepping away or (2) jumping off, and not of swimming in the sea. Certain circumstances led to that moment at the cliff where there are really just those two options – stepping away or jumping off – and just because swimming in the sea is not an option at that specific moment in time, does not mean that the individual does not have free will. Astrologers merely point at the actual available options.

## Horoscopes are inaccurate

One common misrepresentation about astrology that pervasively perpetuates its demise is the popular understanding of horoscopes or "Sun/star sign astrology", one of a handful of practices that many practicing astrologers call "popular" or "pop astrology". Astrology is much, much more complex than generic predictions about one's life based on one's Sun sign.

Firstly, there are many uses for astrology—it is not simply for individuals seeking guidance for one's life. Taking just this one use of astrology, however, popular astrology has already over-simplified an extremely complex process. If one were to seek guidance in one's individual life, the very first step would be to acquire an analysis of one's "natal" or "birth chart"—or, prior to popular astrology, one's "horoscope". A natal chart, in short, is a map of the solar system from the perspective of Earth at the precise date, time, and location of one's birth. That said, the analysis of the location of the Sun at the moment of one's birth is only a small fraction of the many things that a natal chart can provide.

That said, there is a level of truth to just the interpretation of Sun sign astrology, in that the Sun represents, among other things, the ego, identity, and public life. Confirmation bias is pervasive to the archetype of the Sun (which I will address in a later section), what the Sun represents in one's natal chart, which is how and why horoscopes may resonate to enough people for it to be as popular as it is today.

Some who are a bit more versed in astrology than the average person might know another form of popular astrology called the "big three", which is the location of one's Sun, Moon, and Ascendant. Still, understanding the interpretation of one's Big Three can be just as unhelpful as just understanding the Sun sign. The Moon can represent one's unconscious, emotions, and personal life, and the Ascendant can represent one's initial impressions to and from the external world, which are all important dimensions of one's life, but these can still miss some other important details.

In order to make a comprehensive analysis of an individual's life, it is necessary to know the location of *all* of the planetary bodies, and how they interact with one another, and not simply the Sun, Moon, and Ascendant. Those who do not resonate with Sun sign or big three astrology likely do not resonate with it simply because the location of the other planetary bodies in their natal chart are more significant. Popular astrology oftentimes "does not work" for many people because it is a grossly incomplete understanding of astrology.

## It's cognitive bias: placebo, narcissism, confirmation bias, the Barnum Effect

At best, critics of astrology often dismiss its effects to placebo; that a healing modality "does not have to be real to have real effects". (Posner, 2018) However, these "real effects" are often further criticized as merely effects of cognitive biases, particularly confirmation bias and the Barnum effect.

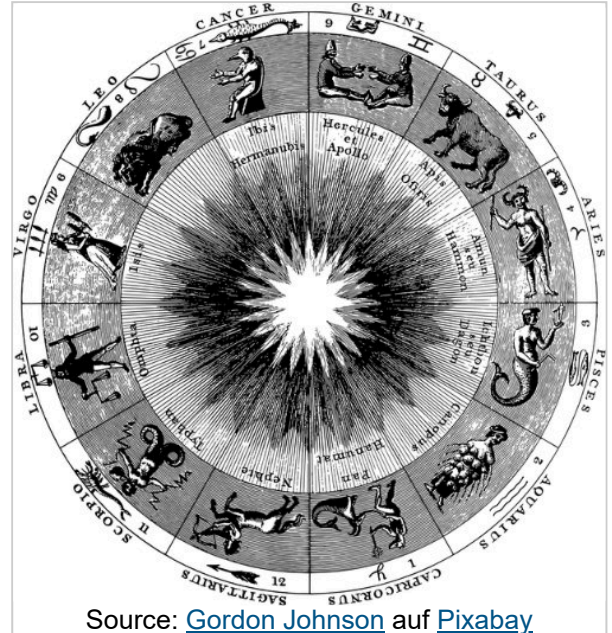
Confirmation bias, in short, is the bias of agreeing with something because it is what one wants to see. For example, if John sees himself as a positive person, he will resonate with statements and predictions that confirm this self-understanding that he is a positive person. In fact, John may be a negative person, so what he resonates with may not be an accurate reflection of reality.

Confirmation bias is the primary reason why many critics of astrology find it to be narcissistic. Any psychologist knows that one's understanding of oneself is rarely the complete picture of oneself—we all have our blind spots. Those who constantly confirm and seek to confirm only one's own self-understanding runs the risk of an overdeveloped ego or narcissistic traits.

Returning to Sun sign astrology, in a natal chart, the Sun can represent the ego, identity, and public life. That said, even astrologers would agree with the criticism that confirmation bias is at work in popular astrology, and that following only Sun sign astrology runs the risk of narcissistic traits.

The Barnum effect, in short, is the cognitive bias that defends the criticism that astrological predictions are stated in such vague and generic ways that anyone could identify with these statements; that astrology is not falsifiable. Again, this may be true for much of popular astrology. However, when doing more in-depth analyses of natal charts, astrology can be surprisingly very specific—in the same way that no two people are exactly alike, no two natal chart analyses are exactly alike.

While cognitive biases may indeed be present in some forms of astrology, particularly popular astrology, skilled practitioners are also critical about them. Astrology is a complex system that produces specific results that are not simply effects of cognitive biases.



Source: [Gordon Johnson](#) auf [Pixabay](#).

## It's against my religion

As mentioned in the introductory section, many Abrahamic faiths consider astrology to be a violation of the First Commandment. In section 2116 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, it states,

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*Consulting horoscopes, astrology ... all conceal a desire for power over time, history, and, in the last analysis, other human beings, as well as a wish to conciliate hidden powers. They contradict the honor, respect, and loving fear that we owe to God alone.*  
- (United States Catholic Conference, 1994)

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This statement makes inaccurate assumptions about the uses of astrology. While I cannot speak for all people who use or practice astrology, it does not necessarily require a "desire for power over time, history, and, in the last analysis, other human beings, as well as a wish to conciliate hidden powers", nor does it "contradict the honor, respect, and loving fear that we owe to God alone." In the same way that there are people who violate the First Commandment in their idolizing of money, fame, or addiction, it would be a safe assumption that there will be those who might use astrology for these reasons. However, it is arguable that astrology is more of a healing modality than an established religious tradition.

There are many pious, God-fearing people that find no necessary contradiction between their faith and astrology. Furthermore, they might even find it complementary and strengthening to their faith. (Campion, 2012) To this end, if conceived as more of a religious tradition, the Catholic Church also states in the papal encyclical, *Nostra Aetate*,

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*The Church, therefore, exhorts her sons, that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men.*

*- (Pope Paul VI, 1965)*

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If astrology is used humbly towards God, it has the capacity to

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*recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among [humanity].*

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## **Concluding thoughts**

This article is not intended to be a comprehensive defense of astrology, but an overview of its common critiques, shedding light on how many of them are based on popular misconceptions and uninformed assumptions. While this may not change anyone's mind about their position on astrology, my hope is that it at least encourages others to investigate astrology more deeply than they did before.