

# Do the Physical Planets Hold Clues Into Their Meaning as Astrological Principles?

by Ray Grasse



During a conversation in 1978 with a yogi and astrologer by the name of Shelly Trimmer, I was intrigued by a remark he made about the significance of Jupiter in the horoscope, and how its qualities were reflected in this planet's astronomical features.

For astrologers, he said, Jupiter represents a person's broader capacity for logic and their philosophical perspective on life (as opposed to Mercury, which is more about processing *data* or *information*, and not so much about moral and philosophical perspectives). In terms of mythological

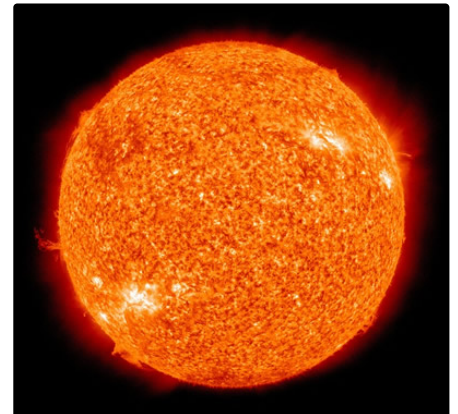
symbolism, that's why Jupiter is related by some esotericists to the figure of Moses, since he was the great *law-giver*, the arbiter of society's morality and values.

But that symbolic function was reflected in this planet's role in our solar system, too. He explained: "Jupiter is so large compared with the other planets that it establishes the plane of the ecliptic for the entire solar system." In other words, its gravitational presence is so great that all the other planets are forced to fall into line with its orbit, thus making it the *astronomical* "law-giver," as it were. In an analogous way, the astrological Jupiter establishes the framework of our ideological and moral perspectives throughout life, he concluded.

I thought a great deal about that way of looking at things long after that conversation, and wondered just how far it could be applied to the other bodies in our solar system. What I'd like to do here is expand upon some thoughts I first touched on in my book *The Waking Dream*, and we'll begin with the two luminaries.

## The Sun

The most obvious feature of our Sun is the simple but profound fact it's the only light-emitting body in our system. Whereas all the other planets and their moons shine by its reflected light, the Sun is completely self-illuminating. Symbolically, that speaks to the fact that the astrological Sun is the source of *consciousness*, the essential "ground zero" by which everything else in the chart draws meaning and significance. Although all the other bodies in the horoscope possess a certain meaning of their own, to some extent that's always in reference to the Sun. For that reason any planetary aspects to the Sun are especially important to study as conduits for (or blockages of) that essential light and the expression of one's core identity.



The fact that the Sun is the central hub of our local system also sheds light on the role it's played in traditional tables of correspondence formulated by mystics through the centuries, based on the so-called "law of analogy." Hence, as the Sun is to the other bodies of our solar system, so gold is to all metals, a king is to his kingdom, honey is to all foods, the heart is to one's bodily organs, and so on. In other words, the Sun embodies the principles of *centrality* and *preeminence*, and within the horoscope is the symbolic "king" around which everything else in the chart is essentially subordinate.

Being the illuminator of the daytime, the Sun also holds a decidedly extravertive and worldly significance. As I wrote in *The Waking Dream*: "As the orb which illuminates the daytime world, this archetype governs the outer world in general, and thus one's public self-expression. In our lives, the Sun is linked symbolically to fathers and other prominent individuals—those we might call 'stars'—along with all creative or theatrical institutions and situations involving public exposure or recognition."<sup>1</sup>

But while the Sun represents the core awareness of our being, its fiery nature harbors potential dangers, too. Like the desert Sun at noon, where excessive heat can make nourishment or even survival impossible, the Sun in the chart can overpower or “dry up” whatever it comes into contact with, a condition astrologers refer to as *combust*. When overemphasized in a chart, the Sun's influence can give rise to an extreme focus on outer concerns like career or fame without the counterbalancing effects of reflectivity and the inner cultivation of soul—factors governed by our next body, the Moon.

## Moon

While the Sun is the great illuminator of our world, the Moon serves as the great mirror to that brilliance. “Radiant with the reflected light of the Sun, the Moon is associated with the principle of reflectivity and the archetypal feminine in all her aspects. In our lives the Moon governs water, mirrors, women, and the emotions.”



Whereas the Sun is outgoing and dynamic in its assertive projection of self, the Moon is therefore reactive, introverted, and the indicator of our *emotional responses* to situations. In contrast with the Sun, the Moon archetypally rules the night side of life, that time “when we retreat from the glare of the marketplace into our own private world.” Thus it also relates to our dreams, feelings, and the fluid realm of fantasies.

Which brings us to an especially important aspect of the Moon's astronomical features. Unlike the Sun, which is the central light for all the bodies in our solar system, the Moon is solely a *local* body, and thus holds astrological relevance only for those of us on Earth. That reveals a great secret about its role in the chart, too. Whereas the Sun astrologically pertains to factors that are more objective and visible for

the whole world to see (such as reputation, surface behaviors, and professional activities), the Moon is more concerned with those dimensions of life that are “closer to home”—i.e., more emotional and less obvious for the general public to see. In contrast with the Sun, configurations involving the Moon are thus experienced more subjectively, more internally.

Also note how light from the Sun makes any objects or environments appear sharply defined and distinct, whereas the pale light of the Moon makes distinctions seem blurred and colors muted. Symbolically, that hints at how our emotional perception is more integrative and holistic in nature, geared towards relationships and felt connections rather than fine details and rational distinctions.

Then there is the fact of the Moon's changeability over time, as seen in its various phases during the course of a month. At one point one might look up and see a thin sliver hovering above the horizon, while two weeks later it will appear as a brilliant orb radiating in the night. That offers a beautiful symbol for the changeability of our emotional natures, as well as the famed “moodiness” of those born under its influence.

## Mercury

The most obvious feature of this body is the fact that it's the closest to the Sun of all the planets, its orbit never carrying it far away from that solar hub. It therefore embodies a faculty of consciousness that operate just outside of spirit—namely, the *mind*. From *The Waking Dream*:

“The planet closest to the Sun, Mercury is symbolic of the mind, which likewise serves as messenger between spirit and soul, consciousness and matter. Through the principle of Mercury (in Greek, Hermes), we understand meaning in all its forms. For this reason, Mercury/Hermes governs all symbolic systems. The word hermeneutics, the art of symbolic interpretation, is based on this association. The fastest of the planets, Mercury hints at the speed and changeability of the mind's operations.”

For as close as it is to the Sun, it is fundamentally distinct, in a way that recalls a quote from poet Paul Valéry: “*At times I think, and at times I am.*” Being separate from that central point of being



is what allows the mind to perceive distinctions, to compare and weigh alternatives. As such, Mercury is the source of all the gifts that rationality offers, from philosophy and science to all forms of genius and creativity. But by the same token, that sense of separation from unity is also the source of all our sufferings and sense of alienation from Spirit, even from ourselves. That fateful interval from the Sun to Mercury thus represents the mythic step out of the “Garden” in which one now has access not only to the potentials bestowed by the tree of knowledge of Good and Evil, but all of its problems as well.

In yogic terms, that movement relates to the descent of energies from the level of the head down to that of the throat, or the *Vishudhha* chakra—and with that comes what's referred to as *ahamkara*, or “ego-maker”: the awareness of one's own sense of separateness and uniqueness. (Notice how we even refer to that lump in the throat as the “Adam's Apple”!) From the standpoint of the Sun, there is awareness of pure being but not yet of distinctness or separateness; it is only with Mercury that one acquires the gift—and curse—of the comparing mind, and in turn of individuated consciousness.

Another telling feature of Mercury involves its closeness to the Sun's intense heat, making it impossible for any moisture or life to exist on its surface. Symbolically, that equates well to how the mind is itself comparatively “dry” in nature, being largely geared towards logic and factual analysis, with little direct grasp of emotions, sentimentality, or empathy. While that can be especially useful in matters of science, business, or the law, it's not quite so helpful when it comes to relationships and matters of the heart!

## Venus

It's fitting that one of the most beautiful lights in the night sky should be associated by astrologers with matters of beauty and love. Its brightness in magnitude is second only to that of the Moon, which likely tells us something important about its magnitude as an organ of the human soul as well.



But there is more than meets the eye to this planet, and quite literally so. For starters, it rotates in a reverse direction on its axis from every other planet (excepting Uranus), thus giving rise to the odd fact that its days are longer than its years! This seems to suggest there is something different about this planet, perhaps implying that its romantic or emotional impulses “flow in the opposite direction” of ordinary embodied life.

Even more dramatic is the extraordinary heat which exists at the planet's surface beneath those luminous clouds, which scientists attribute to a runaway greenhouse effect. That gives Venus an average temperature of 864 degrees F—making it

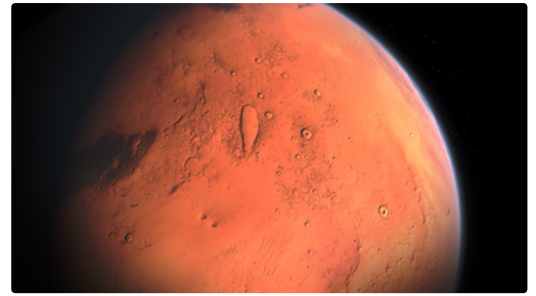
even hotter than the surface of Mercury, despite that latter body's closeness to the Sun. What could this mean? From *The Waking Dream*: “...just as the beauty of this planet conceals an inferno of raging heat at its surface, so the hedonistic pleasures of Venus can incinerate the unwary in its fiery crucible—note, for instance, its association with the word *venereal*. Thus this archetype must be approached with greater caution than planets like Mars or Saturn, which exhibit their dangers up front for all to see.” Interestingly, in the Vedic cosmologies of India the planet Venus is viewed in a decidedly mixed way, being associated with the figure *Shukra*—guru/teacher to the *Asuras*, the demonic entities locked in eternal battle with the more spiritually-minded *Devas*.

Another interesting feature of Venus is the fact that its orbit traces out a pentagram shape over time. If you were to look down on the Earth from above the plane of the solar system, you would see the Sun appear to go around the Earth; from that perspective, over the course of eight years Venus will go around the Sun thirteen times, and trace out the image of a five-pointed star. In different cultural systems, five-pointed stars have held various meanings. For the ancient Pythagoreans, it was a mystic symbol of perfection; for sacred geometers it is associated with the Golden Section; for some occultists it represents the principle of the *microcosm*, while in a related way some yogic mystics regard it as symbolizing the sacred “doorway” in the heart of the “Third Eye,” or Ajna Chakra. In a general way, it all seems to suggest something important about this planet as a key toward unlocking our spiritual potentials, while its deceptively hot temperatures may warn us of what can happen when those Venusian energies are unwisely diverted.



# Mars

The most obvious feature associated with this planet is, of course, its *redness*, a color often associated with blood, energy, anger, and fire. Scientists inform us that this color is due to the presence of iron oxide, and its resulting rust. Interestingly, in traditional tables of correspondence, iron is the metal most associated with the planet Mars, which was an association made long before scientists knew anything about the chemical composition of the Red Planet.



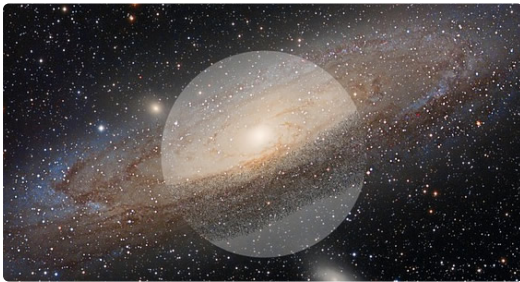
Aside from its color, astronomers sometimes speak of the surface of Mars as appearing heavily “scarred,” due to various geologic and atmospheric factors. Besides an assortment of impact craters, Mars has the largest canyon in our solar system, *Valles Marineris*, as well as the imprints of two massive tsunamis that ravaged its surface at different times in its history. Combined with the fact that Mars also plays host to the largest dust storms of any planet in our solar system, it's natural to wonder if such features don't say something about the turbulent energies and bruises sometimes stirred up by this planet in our horoscope.

# Jupiter

At the start of this article we already saw one of the most distinctive facts about Jupiter—namely, how its size establishes the plane of the ecliptic for the entire solar system, and how that correlates well to its role as the symbolic “law-giver” in our own lives.

But more generally, that massive size seems to suggest a quality of expansiveness in whatever areas it touches in the chart. Astrologically, Jupiter has long been associated with hope, positivity, and laughter, and wherever it's placed in the horoscope likewise indicates where we, too, have the potential for abundance and “bigger things.” But if Jupiter is afflicted, there can be difficulties allowing for that sense of abundance to express itself—or, conversely, where we may be prone to expand *too* much and not exercise a judicious sense of restraint.

# Saturn



From *The Waking Dream*: “Of all the planets in the solar system, Saturn exhibits the most visible and dramatic ring system. Symbolically understood, that reflects this planet's long-standing association with the archetypal principles of limitation, matter, structure, and time—in all their constructive and destructive aspects. Without its influence, nothing would have structure or shape, all growth would proceed unchecked; yet when overemphasized, structure becomes constriction and confinement, strangling life and preventing development. In our

lives, Saturn thus governs all events which provide limits and structures or test us in any way, including governmental figures or law enforcement officials, parents, delays, or constricting conditions of any sort.”

Several planets have ring systems, but none quite so dramatic as those which encircle Saturn. As a symbol of constriction, rings are neither inherently good or bad, but simply a principle of life that can be experienced in either constructive or destructive ways. We're all familiar with negative instances of constriction, of course, but a more positive expression would be the way we cement our feelings of commitment in relationships by wearing a ring—specifically on the finger associated by occultists with the Sun, the natural ruler of the 5th house of romance, pleasure, and joy. In other words, the ring symbolizes that we're now curtailing and channeling our essential life-expression towards a single other, rather than dispersing it in more open-ended, unstructured ways. It's an act of extreme limitation, yet in a way that's associated with a deepening of love.

Which brings us to a particularly unexpected feature of this ringed planet. Despite its astrological reputation for “heaviness,” Saturn has such a low density that it would float if placed in water! Could that be saying there is something more subtle and “light” to this planet's influence than generally realized? Think for example of the happiness that results from having successfully learned the lessons of Saturn,

like the aforementioned person who commits to marriage and is able to make it work; or the yogi who feels liberated as a result of their prolonged self-control. When Aristotle said that with discipline comes freedom, he may well have been revealing a great truth about Saturn.

## Uranus

A valuable key to understanding the trans-Saturnian planets lies in the way they circumscribe such broad orbits in space, extending progressively further out from that solar hub. Symbolically, this suggests that they relate to progressively broader and more collective or even universal concerns rather than just one's own personal, provincial interests.

As the first of the trans-Saturnians, Uranus therefore takes on special importance as a “threshold” state demarcating the boundary between personal and collective, local and universal. When Uranus is strongly emphasized in a horoscope, the individual straddles the fence between these two domains, and will generally have easier access to the energies of the collective *zeitgeist*. But unlike Neptune and Pluto, this will generally express itself in more *mental* ways, as in the case of an inventor (like Ben Franklin), a scientist (like Albert Einstein), a media pioneer (like Walt Disney), or a political activist (like Karl Marx).

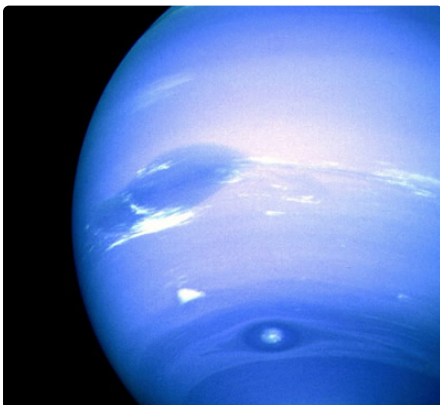


Besides the fact that Uranus rotates on its axis in a clockwise direction, it's also unusual for the fact that its entire axis is tilted sideways, with its north and south poles positioned where other planets have their equators. It's therefore well-suited in symbolism as an eccentric and “revolutionary” influence in our lives, with its location in the horoscope indicating where we will tend to be unconventional, innovative, or even rebellious in our approach to situations.

## Neptune

Another way to look at the trans-Saturnian planets is not simply in terms of how broad their orbits are, but in terms of their *depth*. For observers here on Earth, the fact that they represent progressively distant points in space suggests that they symbolize *progressively deeper levels of the collective unconscious*.

By comparison, Uranus is—under ideal conditions—partially visible to the naked eye, and therefore represents a kind of threshold state between *conscious* and *unconscious*. Note how the glyph for Uranus resembles an antennae, which is a technology designed to pick up electromagnetic waves on the boundary between material and immaterial; that is, while subtle, those waves are still ultimately physical in nature. That relates well to the borderline symbolism associated with the astrological Uranus, which represents a faculty of consciousness that allows us to pick up subtle wavelengths from the collective mind-field.



But Neptune is the first planet that's *completely invisible* to the naked eye, and therefore represents a true opening to the invisible world beyond surface appearances. For mystics, it's therefore the organ by which spiritual and supernatural realities are perceived and contacted. It's not coincidental that the birth of modern *spiritualism*, whereby mediums communicate with the spirits of the dead, took place just two years after the discovery of Neptune, when the Fox sisters of upstate New York claimed to have made contact with the spirit world.

In the arts as well, that sense of “lifting the veil on the visible” was paralleled by the important movement known as *symbolism*, exemplified in literature by such figures as Edgar

Allen Poe, Herman Melville, and Charles Baudelaire; and in painting with the founding of the Pre-Raphaelites in 1848 and later figures like Odilon Redon, Gustave Moreau, Jean Delville, and Paul Gauguin. What creative geniuses like these espoused was as an aesthetic of *suggestiveness* that hinted at layers of meaning beyond the obvious, often involving supernatural themes and hidden networks of

“correspondence.” Though artists and poets had incorporated symbolic ideas and themes in their work before this (William Blake being a prime example), it was as though the discovery of the first fully invisible planet inaugurated a major new phase of art based wholly on unseen dimensions of meaning.

But precisely because Neptune provides us with a window into the beyond, it can just easily open us to the darker dimensions of that unseen world, too, and prompt an escape from our existing, more tangible one. I once knew an artist who painted brilliant canvases depicting beautifully imaginative landscapes done in a surrealistic style, and his horoscope displayed several extremely challenging aspects to Neptune. While doing research on an unrelated subject one day, I happened to discover that he shared a birthday with a famed serial killer, who used deceit and misdirection to trap victims and fulfill his own dark fantasies (and who eventually died via lethal injection). Though their horoscopes were similar, it underscored for me just how differently two individuals could utilize that channel to the unseen represented by Neptune.

## Pluto

Whereas Neptune opens the door to the collective unconscious, it is with Pluto that we truly plunge into the watery depths of being. Astronomers have used different methods to convey just how distant this planet is, such as the fact that it takes light traveling 186,000 miles a second a full eight minutes to get from the Sun to the Earth, whereas it takes a *five hours* for light to reach distant Pluto.

Perched in that far-away point in space, Pluto's mythological reputation as Lord of the Underworld is a fitting one. Not surprisingly, the period immediately around its discovery in 1930 was notable for stories involving the *criminal* underworld, centering particularly around Chicago crime boss Al Capone. When strongly emphasized in a chart, it indicates an ability to access the psyche's subterranean realm, with all of the turbulent and dramatic energies contained therein. For psychologists like Sigmund Freud or Carl Jung, it was an invaluable ally in their exploration of the human unconscious, while for singer Mick Jagger it fueled a career based on singing about life's passions, as well as its “darker” impulses—including even a sympathetic anthem for the devil!



Because of the time it takes light to travel, we also know that the further out into space we gaze, the further into the past we are seeing. Literally, when we look at Pluto through our telescopes we are seeing how that planet looked several hours earlier. Viewed symbolically, that suggests that Pluto has something important to do with “the past” in our own lives, such that whenever it triggers in the horoscope old issues or memories may resurface into the light of day. That's not necessarily unpleasant. When transiting Pluto came along and trined one older client's natal Venus, a lover from years earlier came back into her life and resurrected passions she had nearly forgotten about. I heard no complaints about Pluto that time.

Also, Pluto's orbit is highly unusual in that it's not on the same plane as the other planets, but is inclined at an angle of 17 degrees to that plane, in addition to which its orbit isn't elliptical so much as oval. Combined, these cause it to move far closer to the Sun at times than at others, and even cross over Neptune's orbit on occasion. That seems an appropriate symbol for the extremism often associated with Pluto, which can lead to wide disparities in behavior from light to dark, and from sacred to profane.

And in light of Pluto's association among astrologers with sexuality, snakes, and all things serpentine, it struck some of us as particularly synchronistic that when NASA's New Horizons spacecraft took its first close-up photographs of this distant body, its texture was described by astronomers as looking exactly like “snakeskin”!

## Bringing it All Back Home

But what about our own home planet, “Mother Earth”? We don't actually use it in horoscopes as with the others, simply because it's the very center of the chart and the ground on which we stand. But that doesn't mean it lacks a meaning or significance of its own. Is there anything we can learn about this body from studying its geological or orbital features? I'd suggest a few things.



For starters, the most obvious feature of our planet when viewed from space is the fact that it's largely covered in *water*. Symbolically, that may suggest this is a planet where the lessons being learned are largely *emotional* in nature. While it's possible other planets and celestial bodies have their own range of emotional and experiential states to offer, Earth seems to serve up something unique—namely, embodied life in complex physical forms that consist primarily of water. If there happen to be wayward souls wandering the cosmos looking for a planet where they can engage in the full spectrum of emotional experience in especially vivid ways, ranging from divine compassion to the most intense hatreds and jealousies, this would seem to be the place!

Add to that the fact that Earth is perched specifically between Venus and Mars, which suggests this is a kind of cosmic “way-station” between the energies and lessons of those two bodies. Like children caught up in a cosmic custody battle, humans are torn between the animalistic, warlike impulses of Mars and the comparatively loving urges of Venus, and our challenge seems to be one of striking a balance between these opposing archetypal forces.

But there is another “polarity” involving our planet which may hold another key toward illumining our place on the evolutionary path. I'm referring to the fact that our Moon appears to be exactly the same size in our sky as our Sun, a feature which makes total eclipses possible. While that similarity is something we take for granted, it's an exceedingly rare feature among planetary bodies— nor has it always been the case with ours. Scientists inform us that the Moon has slowly been moving away from the Earth over millions of years' time, such that it will eventually appear smaller to us than it does now (which of course means that it appeared larger in the past than it does currently). Perhaps that tells us something important about this point on the cosmic timeline, in that there exists a certain balance of archetypal male and female for those of us alive on Earth now. Could this epoch in our planet's long history represent a “window” during which its inhabitants can achieve something otherwise hard to attain, with the balancing of polarities mystics sometimes refer to as the “marriage of the Sun and Moon”? It would be nice to think so.