

The Enchanted Cosmos - Symbolism, Synchronicity, and the Astrological World View

by Ray Grasse

The universe is composed of stories, not atoms.

--Muriel Rukeyser, "The Speed of Darkness"



I recently met with a client whose natal horoscope included an especially volatile Mars positioned exactly on his 4th-house cusp—the segment of the horoscope relating to home and domesticity. During the course of our conversation, the young man told me of a curious event that occurred at the moment he was born. Exactly as his mother was at the hospital giving birth to him, a small fire broke out back at the family home, causing extensive damage to one of several bedrooms.

A curious synchronicity, I thought, considering the "fiery" pattern in his chart relating to the home—but also considering the ongoing pattern of domestic turbulence this individual

experienced throughout his life ever since.

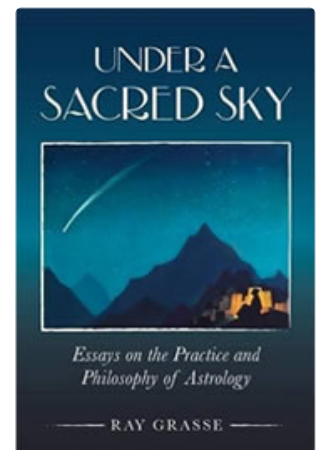
Over the years of researching various aspects of symbolism and synchronicity, I've encountered many such stories, not only from clients but a variety of historical sources as well. In many Native American cultures, for example, it's well known that special attention was paid to signs or symbols occurring in the environment at the moment of a child's birth. So if a child was born at the moment a deer happened to run by, that child might be named Running Deer, in the belief that personality would grow up to express qualities of swiftness or gracefulness.

Likewise, in the Tibetan tradition, if an earthquake occurred at the moment of a child's birth, this might be taken as a sign that the individual would somehow have an unusual destiny, and might likewise "shake the world." Western classical history tells us of similar symbols or omens that accompanied the births of figures like Alexander the Great, Socrates, and Plato. Indeed, there are few traditional cultures which did not place emphasis on such symbols or "coincidences" around the births of men and women.

As with astrology, signs like these have traditionally been thought to reflect the destinies or characters of the individuals involved—with or without added consideration of the celestial configurations of the moment. Applying this approach to my "fiery" client's case, any esotericist worth their salt would have immediately recognized an important insight into this person's life simply from observing the symbols in the environment around his birth—in this case, "Martian" symbols.

Simply put, while the starry sky offers a profound map into the soul and destiny of an individual, it is by no means the only map available within the symbolic landscape of our environment.

Examples like this open a window into an important but often overlooked dimension of astrology, and invite us to reconsider a very old question: How does astrology work? If there is indeed a vital connection between the celestial bodies and our lives down here on Earth, what specifically is the mechanism involved?



This essay is taken from Ray Grasse's book "Under a Sacred Sky" which can be ordered at wessexastrologer.com or amazon.com

Dueling Approaches

Over the millennia, a wide range of theories have been put forth to explain astrology's inner workings, most of which can, in simplest terms, be classified into one of two primary groups: causal, or force, explanations, and acausal, or synchronistic, explanations.



According to the causal model, humans are influenced by means of an energy or force transmitted from celestial bodies to creatures down on Earth. For some writers, that's explainable in terms of an already known force like electromagnetism or gravity. Astrophysicist Percy Seymour, for example, writes about the complex way the Solar System interacts with the Earth's geomagnetic fields: "The whole solar system is playing a symphony on the magnetic field of the Earth...We are all genetically 'tuned' to receiving a different set of melodies from the symphony." ¹ For still others, this causal force consists of an energy in nature that's yet to be discovered

by science, and may even be paranormal or occult in nature, as was believed by Renaissance magical philosophers like Cornelius Agrippa. In either case, such "force" theories hold that celestial forces act upon humans by means of a classical cause-and-effect mechanism—in short, this affects that.

On the other hand, the acausal or synchronistic explanation believes that the secret of astrological influence won't ever be found in any purely mechanistic theories of cause-and-effect, but only in conjunction with a more holistic worldview that views all phenomena as embedded in a deeper network of interconnectedness and meaning. According to writers like Dane Rudhyar and H.P. Blavatsky, the planetary patterns at the moment of birth don't cause particular traits or tendencies so much as reflect them. The simultaneity of celestial and earthly events are, to use Carl Jung's terminology, a "meaningful coincidence," with the position of the planets and the life of individual's lives representing joint expressions of the same underlying pattern of meaningfulness.

Synchronicity and Symbolism

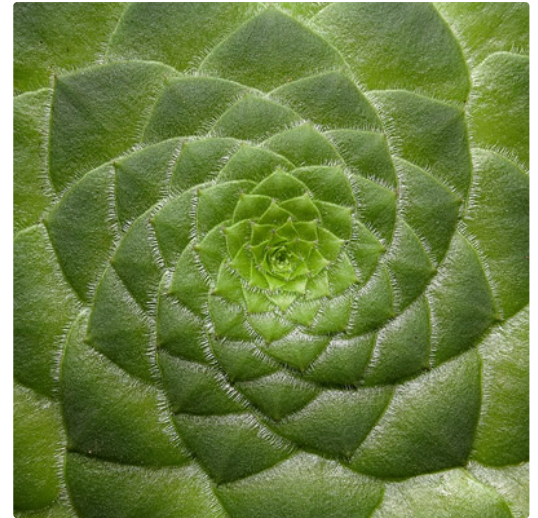
In this essay, we will look more closely at the idea that astrology is indeed synchronistic—but with a twist. The "mechanism" of astrology could be more accurately described as symbolism, whereby celestial events not only connect acausally with earthly happenings but incorporate dimensions of symbolism and meaning beyond all surface appearances. As evidence for this point, consider the fact that of all the myriad techniques and theories employed by astrologers, the vast majority are entirely symbolic in character, with little or no basis in empirical, concrete reality. Here are just a few examples:

- The complex network of hidden correspondences believed by astrologers to link the diverse areas of our lives, in ways that are profoundly metaphorical and archetypal in nature.
- The otherwise perplexing division of both houses and zodiacs specifically into twelve segments, suggesting an archetypal rather than practical basis. (Why not eight? Six? Or, more logically, four?).
- The method of classic progressions, based on a day-for-a-year movement of the planets from their position at one's time of birth.
- The art of horary astrology, whereby horoscopes are cast for such seemingly intangible things as questions.
- Astrology's employment of planets positioned below the horizon in casting horoscopes. In any purely force-based model, subtle influences like this (all the more minimized in the case of distant planets like Pluto or Neptune) would logically seem blocked by the sheer mass of the Earth; in the symbolic model, though, such factors simply assume more hidden dimensions of meaning.
- The vast array of abstract points and "parts" employed in Arabic, Vedic, and some Western schools of astrology, arrived at through purely mathematical or symbolic, rather than observational, means.
- The mysterious manner whereby horoscopes seem to operate even after their owners' deaths. For instance, mythological scholar Joseph Campbell achieved his greatest fame posthumously, when a series of televised interviews with him by Bill Moyers appeared on public television shortly after his death—right at the point when Campbell would have been experiencing his Uranus return. In a similar way, when Clint Eastwood's film about J. Edgar Hoover premiered in late 2011, it occurred just as transiting Pluto (the planet of resurrection) began crossing over Hoover's natal

Sun-sign planets. If astrology is based on a causal "force" of some kind, how could it operate after the person is not even alive anymore?

As one final example of astrology's symbolist dimension, consider the widely-used concept of retrogradation. A planet like Mercury is said to be retrograde when its skyward path relative to the Earth reverses itself. In actuality, of course, Mercury is traveling in its orbit around the Sun just like the Earth is. However, in much the same way that a train overtaken by a faster train might seem to be moving backward when in fact it's still moving forward along its own path at a steady rate of speed, the reversal of Mercury is a perceptual illusion caused by its position relative to the Earth's slower orbital path.

When Mercury's apparent motion reverses itself for several weeks at a time, business contracts begun then seem to develop complications, communications may stall, and technical difficulties arise. While most contemporary astrologers also allow for the possibility of positive effects accompanying these periods, these are generally seen as involving more psychological or spiritual levels of experience.



The effects of a Mercury retrograde are observable and borne out by personal experience; but the cause-and-effect or "force" model can't possibly account for them. It's clearly nonsensical to speculate about the existence of "backing up" rays or "retrograde emanations" coming from the planet itself, since the retrograde phenomenon has nothing to do with the objective status of Mercury itself. Rather, the celestial "reversal" of Mercury is better understood as a metaphor for conditions taking place for humans, existing only in relation to the phenomenological dynamics of observers on Earth.

Astrology, then, as the yogi and mystic Shelly Trimmer once suggested, is best defined as astronomy, symbolically interpreted. Said another way, astrology uses the same essential facts as astronomy but infuses them with a symbolic or qualitative dimension that's absent for the conventional scientist. As seen by astronomers, for example, Jupiter is simply a large gaseous planet with certain measurable properties, traveling at a particular speed, in a particular orbital path. For astrologers, however, Jupiter symbolizes a particular set of qualities: expansiveness, joviality, excess, exploration, spiritual learning.

Importantly, this symbolic dimension can't be grasped through strictly scientific or quantitative means. If one traveled to that distant planet and took samples of its gasses, or tried using instruments to measure its energy fields, one still wouldn't be able to isolate the symbolic meaning associated with the planet by astrologers. And that's because astrological interpretation requires a perceptual shift, a kind of metaphoric knowing.

A Symbolic Cosmos

But we need take this one vital step further. The worldview underlying astrology doesn't regard simply the planets as symbolic and meaning-laden, but all of reality, too. To the symbolist, the heavenly bodies are but threads within a far greater tapestry of affinities. As Emerson wrote,

Secret analogies tie together the remotest parts of Nature, as the atmosphere of a summer morning is filled with innumerable gossamer threads running in every direction, revealed by the beams of the rising sun! 2

Thus, when a child is born, the symbolist can find important clues pointing to the child's character and destiny everywhere—in the flight of birds, the movement of clouds, and other natural signs and omens; in coincidences and events in the lives of the parents and their community; in political and social happenings; as well as in the position of the stars and planets at the moment of birth.



The mystical Neoplatonic philosopher Plotinus, who is often misinterpreted as being critical of astrology, echoes this understanding. In *Ennead II.3*, his primary essay on this subject, Plotinus criticizes the simplistic understanding of astrology which holds the stars "cause" things to happen on Earth. Rather, Plotinus argues that astrological influence is based on a philosophy of cosmic unity. Since all things emanate from the One, or the Divine Source, all things are intricately coordinated or "enchained" with one another and are

therefore "signifiers" of each other within a supremely regulated design—the stars no less so than birds or any other phenomena. "The wise man is the man who in any one thing can read another," Plotinus wrote. ³

In other words, the stars and planets are meaningful, just as every other object or event in existence is meaningful, since all things are equally intertwined within a grand universal order. As Plotinus remarks elsewhere, one would have to be far removed from the awareness of Divine Unity to think that anything is truly accidental or the result of chance.

Given this philosophical framework, questions of "mechanism" almost seem misplaced. Does a Native shaman who names their child "Swift Eagle" because of the great bird circling the village during their birth, ask what manner of force emanated from the eagle towards the child, influencing its personality and destiny? Do they wonder by what means this force is transmitted, or its precise speed? More useful than such queries is an appreciation of the wonder of a universe in which such synchronicities occur, in which meaning expresses itself in manifold and multi-dimensional ways, not only through planets and people, but animals, weather, colors, landscapes—in short, every perceivable thing, both large and small.

As Plotinus wrote,

All things must be enchained, and the sympathy and correspondence obtaining in any one closely knit organism must exist, first, within the All. ⁴

Even asking what influence the planets have on human beings conceals a fundamental misconception, since the planets themselves are only facets of a larger picture in which each element interlocks with the other in a mutually arising symphony of meaning.

One final analogy may help make this point clearer. Imagine a play where the lead character finally awakens to a truth he's long hidden from himself. As the playwright penned the scene, the moment of his breakthrough is accompanied by the image of a rising Sun depicted at the back of the stage—a dramatic device meant to complement the change of heart experienced by the character.

Now, how should we understand the relationship between the sunrise and the psychological change of character? Are there any secret "rays" emanating from the mock-Sun to the lead character which a scientist could measure and quantify? Is there some energy field set up amongst the characters acting on stage, or amongst the objects and props which comprise the backdrop? Clearly, there isn't. Nonetheless, there is a connection between the character's psychological shift and the change of lighting on stage—but it's a symbolic rather than causal one. Each element in the story unfolds within a larger framework of meaning and is interpretable only in relation to a transcendent, or "implicate" ground of reference—the dramatic design conceived in the mind of the playwright.

Here, as in astrology, meaning can only be accessed through the lens of symbolic understanding. In much the same way, each person's life-experience represents a unique and highly personalized context of meaning. The seemingly unrelated events of someone's daily life—which include, among other things, the positions of the stars and planets in the sky—are best understood as mutually arising elements in a greater field of significance, the archetypal script of a life and consciousness, as reflected in the horoscope.

The astrological worldview is, therefore, one in which each person's life is regarded as a living book of symbols, unlocked through the key of metaphoric knowing. Like a kind of "waking dream," each person's world is an archetypal drama containing multiple levels of resonance and interconnectedness, encoding information about the past, present, and future.



The astrological cosmos is indeed, using Muriel Rukeyser's wonderful phrase, a world of stories rather than atoms, better understood through the eye of the poet than the measurements of science. Like solar systems in stately procession around a vast galaxy, so all personal stories are nested within greater stories, broader contexts of meaning, each level providing a deeper and broader perspective on the meaning of that personal dream, the personal horoscope. Like Ezekiel's "wheels within wheels," the astrological cosmos is a vast web of ascending hierarchies, each increasingly objective vantage point yielding a more complex worldview, each one apt and true for that level." A subtle chain of countless rings," wrote Emerson, "the next unto the farthest brings..." 5 It may be, as mystics have suggested, that all personal dramas converge on an ultimate hub of meaningfulness, variously known as the Tao, Brahma, the Cosmic Dreamer, the Ground of Being, or, simply, the Absolute. At this still center point, perhaps, a great consciousness holds the enchanted cosmos in balance. As the German philosopher Schopenhauer expressed it over a century ago:

It is a vast dream, dreamed by single being; but in such a way that all the dream characters dream too. Hence, everything interlocks and harmonizes with everything else. 6
