

# The Four Faces of Mercury

by Michael R. Meyer

## Introduction



Everyone familiar with astrology and its tools knows the planet Mercury refers to mental activities and faculties of the mind. According to natal astrology, the position of Mercury in your birth chart symbolizes the quality of energy (the zodiacal sign occupied by Mercury) propelling your mind through the areas of experience (revealed by Mercury's house position) where it best functions. But this is not the most **fundamental** approach to determining and understanding mental temperament, because it fails to focus on the cycle of Mercury as a whole, and on Mercury's particular cyclic phase at the time of birth.

This section presents a valuable, easy-to-use technique allowing you to discover your fundamental mental type. It provides a four-fold classification of mental temperament derived from the major turning-points of the cycle of Mercury. Of ancient origin, the technique of "mental chemistry" was reintroduced into astrology during the early part of the twentieth century by the eminent astrologer Marc Edmund Jones. It was later refined and reformulated by Dane Rudhyar according to the humanistic

approach to astrology.

One of the first things a student of astrology learns about Mercury is that because its orbit lies inside the Earth's, it is never more than twenty-eight zodiacal degrees from the Sun. From our geocentric point of view, and because the Earth never passes between Mercury and the Sun, Mercury does not make the entire 360 degree cycle of aspects with the Sun. These factors create an unusual situation characterizing the cycles of two planets lying inside Earth's orbit—Venus and Mercury. Instead of forming a single conjunction and a single opposition with the Sun during each cycle, Mercury and Venus form with the Sun two different types of geocentric conjunctions—termed inferior and superior.

The approximately 116-day cycle of Mercury begins with the **inferior conjunction** with the Sun. It is a celestial situation where the Sun, Mercury and Earth are aligned, with Mercury standing between the Sun and Earth (see accompanying sidebar). Occurring in the middle of Mercury's twenty to twenty-four day retrograde period, the inferior conjunction inaugurates Mercury's waxing hemicycle, which is analogous to the period between the New Moon and the Full Moon. Because Mercury's cycle opens with Mercury leaping from setting behind the Sun in the west to rise **before** the Sun in the eastern morning sky, Rudhyar termed this half of Mercury's cycle **Promethean**, for the mythological titan who stole the fire of the gods and gave it as a gift to humanity.

Mercury turns direct nine to fifteen days after the inferior conjunction, and about a week later Mercury reaches its greatest distance from the Sun. A few days later, Mercury begins moving through the zodiac quicker than the Sun (or more than one degree a day). The **superior conjunction** occurs when Mercury is at the far side of the Sun, and while moving close to its maximum speed of about  $2^{\circ}15'$  a day. It is analogous to the Full Moon and marks the beginning of Mercury's waning hemicycle, during which Mercury sets in the early evening **after** the Sun. Rudhyar termed the waning Mercurial hemicycle **Epimethean**, for the always backward-looking brother of the forward-looking Prometheus. About four to five days after the superior conjunction, Mercury's daily motion matches the Sun's, and about two weeks later it turns retrograde. Then, ten to fifteen days after turning retrograde, the cycle closes with the inferior conjunction.

## The Four Faces of Mercury

The brief look at the Mercury cycle presented above provides the foundation for the four-fold classification of Mercury types: Promethean-Retrograde, Promethean-Direct, Epimethean-Retrograde and Epimethean-Direct. They are Mercury's four "faces," each representing a particular mental temperament.

It's easy to determine your Mercury type. First locate the Sun in your birth chart. If Mercury is **clockwise** from the Sun, it is Promethean. On the other hand, if Mercury is **counterclockwise** from the Sun, your Mercury type is Epimethean. If you're simply looking-up someone's data in an ephemeris, notice if Mercury is ahead or behind the Sun in the zodiac. If the Sun is further along the zodiac than Mercury, then Mercury is Promethean. If Mercury is further along the zodiac than the Sun, then Mercury is in its Epimethean phase. While you're at it, check to see if Mercury is retrograde (indicated by the character Rx in Mercury's column above the date row). For example, if Sun is ten degrees Leo and Mercury is two degrees Leo, retrograde, then Mercury is Promethean-Retrograde. In a horoscope, retrograde planets are indicated by the Rx symbol. In *Khaldea 2001*<sup>TM</sup> ephemeris and chart graphics, retrograde planets in displayed red.

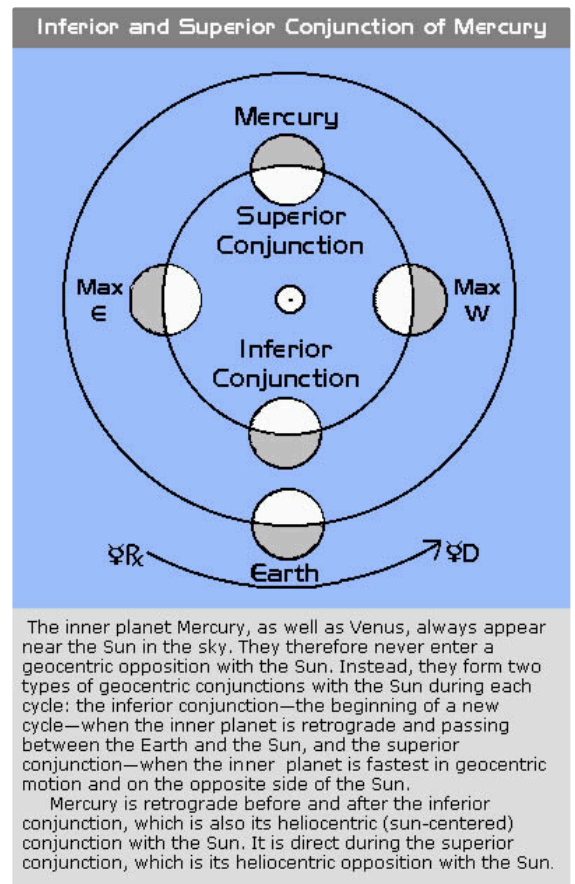
The following depictions of Mercury's four faces are expressed in general terms. They provide launching platforms for your own insight and understanding into the types. Don't apply them rigidly. As with everything astrological, much depends on the horoscope as whole. In a subsequent section, "Venus Morning Star, Venus Evening Star," we'll take a similar look at Venus and its cycle. Then, in Section Five, we'll refine our look at the inner planets even further and consider the sequence of Mercury, Venus and the Sun in the horoscope.

The graphics illustrating each of Mercury's four faces provide examples of the positions of the Sun and Mercury for each type. The position of the two bodies within the wheel, however, is arbitrary. Mercury types are not determined by the position of the Sun and Moon within the horoscope wheel, but by Mercury's direction from the Sun (clockwise or counterclockwise) and whether its motion is direct or retrograde.

## The First Face of Mercury: Promethean-Retrograde

**Mercury shows its first face at the beginning of its cycle.** Born anew from the cycle just closing, the Mercurial faculties of mind and communication have been impressed with a new quality of will, purpose and energy — symbolized by the zodiacal and house positions of the inferior conjunction which inaugurated the new cycle. But it will take the entire cycle for this new quality of fully unfold. Now, at the beginning of the cycle, it is pure potential — suggested by the astronomical fact that at the inferior conjunction Mercury is closest to the Earth, with its dark side facing the Earth.

Like the waxing hemicycle of the lunation cycle (from New Moon to Full Moon), the entire Promethean hemicycle of Mercury denotes eager, impulsive, spontaneous, form-building, involutionary and constructive activity. It suggest a restless mind concerned with new ideas, seeking new forms of creative expression.





Mercury begins its cycle during its retrograde period. A situation providing a symbolic key to one of the mysteries of the human mind and to Mercury's dual nature — our mind and mental faculties develop counterpoint to the instincts of biological life and whatever is grounded in the past. The technological feats such a mind makes possible can greatly enhance life. But concentrated mental activity can also lead human individuals to live and work against the imperatives of life and nature. The Promethean threads a cutting edge. In mythology, it was Prometheus who gave the fire of mind to infant humanity. A rebel challenging the dominion and authority of the gods, the gods in turn exacted from Prometheus a severe penalty — perpetually having his liver eaten out by a vulture, only to have it regenerated and devoured again and again, until rescued by Hercules.

**If your Mercury type is Promethean-Retrograde, you possess a mind seeking independence from biological limitations and the dictates of social convention.** It does so because it is **driven by an intuitive impulse** to realize a new quality of being, the full nature of which you may not as yet clearly or fully understand. But independence from natural compulsions and social convention often leads to a more or less violent rebellion against the past and its traditions, or from anything which holds back your mental eagerness.

Eventually, the Promethean-Retrograde type generally tires of resisting whatever she feels hinders her freedom. Then mental combativeness gives ways to a powerful intuitive identification with, and a creative contribution to, something greater than the person.

Because the Promethean-Retrograde phase lasts from ten to fifteen days, it is seen in only about one out of ten birth charts. Great minds and influential thinkers are found among Promethean-Retrograde types, including [Aldous Huxley](#). A member of England's most prominent scientific family, Huxley migrated to America, where he became a famous novelist and social critic. Always a futuristic thinker, Huxley's Promethean-Retrograde Mercury is clearly shown in his best-known novel, **Brave New World**.

Mercury's character is traditionally said to be asexual, and its significance in a natal chart doesn't vary much between men and women. Women born during Mercury's Promethean-Retrograde phase, however, often find themselves engaged in challenging traditional roles and in defining a new image of woman. Some of the most outstanding icons of new womanhood are Promethean Retrograde types. [Victoria Woodhull](#), an early feminist of the nineteenth century and one of the most Promethean women of the modern era, is exemplary of the type. [Chrissie Hynde](#) — who opened the way for women to work as creative and musical principals in the world of rock music — is a contemporary icon whose legacy has a tremendous impact on creative young women. The editor of **Cosmopolitan** and author of **Sex and the Single Girl**, [Helen Gurley Brown](#), is another Promethean-Retrograde woman.

[Read more about the Second Face: Promethean Direct at \[www.khaldea.com\]\(http://www.khaldea.com\)](#)

## The Third Face of Mercury: Epimethean-Direct

**Mercury puts on its third face during the superior conjunction, analogous to the opposition and the Full Moon.** Now is the moment the "seed message" impressed upon Mercury at the beginning of its cycle receives the light of meaning. It is also when Mercury is brightest and smallest, because most distance from the Earth and its biological compulsions. About five days after the superior conjunction, Mercury appears as an "evening star" near the in the western horizon, setting shortly after the Sun. The mind is most objective and deliberate in its operation about forty days after the superior conjunction, when Mercury's velocity is reduced to match the Sun's daily motion (after which it begins moving through the zodiac slower than the Sun). At the same time it also reaches its maximum distance from the Sun (corresponding with the waning square aspect and the third-quarter lunation type), representing a high degree of mental deliberation.

During the Epimethean hemicycle, what Rudhyar calls the "evolutionary, associative and generalizing aspect" of the mind dominates. The Epimethean-Direct mental type is characterized by a growing sense of a long-range, objective and historical perspective. It symbolizes a mind in which eagerness and impulsiveness have given way to careful deliberation. Here the calculated risk replaces the intuitive gamble. It is often seen in the birth charts of gurus, spiritual teachers and religious leaders — transmitters and custodians of the many particular traditions.

If your Mercury type is Epimethean-Direct, you probably have a practical, objective and analytical mind leading you to act on the basis of facts and past experience rather than on hunches and gut-feelings. Your well-organized mental faculties enable you to manage people and run things. But in doing so, you may need to keep an open mind and avoid rigid thought patterns.

**As a third face of Mercury type, you are success-oriented and work hard to fulfill plans and goals.** To realize your goals, you draw upon knowledge acquired through past experience and by observing the achievements and mistakes of others. Indeed, this is the main area where Promethean types and Epimethean types most differ in their approach: Promethean types eagerly forge ahead to pursue a vision or intuition flash; Epimetheans, regardless of how intuitive and impulsive they may be, tend to first distance themselves mentally and attempt to look at things objectively, to consider what past experience can offer the situation. Epimetheans can be daring and radical thinkers, but they tend to see their free-thinking as part of a tradition operating within a historical context or movement.

The Epimethean-Direct type is seen in the birth charts of three of the most influential minds of the nineteenth century, individuals whose work figures largely in the development of the collective mentality of the twentieth century. Karl Marx, [Charles Darwin](#) and [Sigmund Freud](#). Their work has made, in much different ways, a tremendous impact on current mentality. They formulated revolutionary theories based respectively on the study of historical and political precedents, the observation of biological types, and the study of psychological processes and disturbances. Leaders of the Bolshevik Revolution, [Lenin](#) and Trotsky, are also examples of Mercury's third face. Other examples include [Albert Einstein](#), [J. Krishnamurti](#), George Gurdjieff and Indira Gandhi.

[Read more about the Fourth Face: Epimethean Retrograde at \[www.khaldea.com\]\(http://www.khaldea.com\)](#)

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**MICHAEL R. MEYER** has been a leading figure in the humanistic astrology movement since the 1960's and is today its foremost proponent. His best-selling "A Handbook for the Humanistic Astrologer" is one of the most widely read books on serious astrology published during the 20th century. Michael is the founder of [khaldea.com](http://khaldea.com) and its [Rudhyar Archival Project](#), as well as the creator and developer the Khaldea Ephemeris7z, the Khaldea Calendar and Khaldea7z.

