

Astrology and the social sciences: looking inside the black box of astrology theory

by Ken McRitchie

Abstract

Astrology texts provide details of astrological practice and interpretation, but astrology theory has not been well described. One approach to theory is to consider astrology as a study of natural symmetries rather than a study of causal interactions. Simplified versions of astrological frames of reference bear a suggestive resemblance to various patterns of personality and behavior that are identified within the social sciences, particularly those that deal with shared values, skills, and beliefs. Astrological operations within these frames of reference suggest similarly identifiable patterns of love, development, and a mechanism of psychological projection. A research program of further study should confirm and account for these similarities through a cross-disciplinary analysis and correlation of empirical findings.

What is the theoretical basis of astrology? I first encountered this question several years ago in a private conversation with a University of Toronto philosophy professor. The professor, who taught a course on science and pseudoscience, had asked me for some books on astrology theory. I tried to name a few authors and books, but realized that I could not easily give the professor what he wanted. Although astrology has an extensive literature of implementation and interpretation, astrology theory in modern terms is hard to find. The thing that stuck with me long after this meeting was that the professor did not ask for an astrological mechanism, as others had done, but for astrological theory, and this was new to me.

I could appreciate the professor's request. In any discipline, theory is necessary to describe and test beliefs, eliminate errors, and explore new ideas. Theory is essential to any discipline. To many critics who are unfamiliar with the traditions and practice of astrology, the theory of astrology, if it exists at all, seems like a black box filled with confusion. Astronomical factors go into the box and interpretations are pulled out of the box. Without clearly defined theories of astrology, the transformation of astronomical input to astrological output seems to these critics to have no explanation other than intuition, delusion, or deception.

I began to wonder what an astrology theory would be like if it were accessible and well defined in the modern mind. To satisfy the professor's request, I began to reverse-engineer astrological ideas and reassemble them as rudimentary theory that could form the basis of a research program. I examined the definition of astrology, its basic

Contact the author at: ken_mcritchie@encosm.net and www.encosm.net

principles, its frames of reference, how it could be simplified, and how it could be compared to models and systems in the social sciences. Drawing upon Western psychological astrology in particular, I looked for patterns that could be limited and defined. I was concerned more with consistency than with being inclusive, comprehensive, or historical. Like science theory, astrology theory, if there were to be such a thing as generally understood today, needed to be reduced to simple, falsifiable concepts that could be worked to explore ideas and remove errors.

There has been criticism from both skeptics and astrologers (Phillipson, 2000; Hand, 2005; Tarnas, 2006) that the vague, multi-valenced associations that are typical in Western psychological astrology make it seem as though almost any combination of astronomical factors can be made to mean almost anything. Thus it is possible for skeptics of astrology to design controlled tests that exploit the fuzzy logic of psychological astrology by examining only highly deterministic one-to-one matchings. In the absence of theory and statistical sampling, these tests simply test whether astrological interpretation A exactly matches non-astrological B and the results are nearly always no better than chance.¹

Such tests as these are done with little or no understanding of astrology and its limitations. These tests simply bash the black box of astrology theory from the outside to elicit perceived defects and errors. On the other hand, statistical tests that explore the incidence of a single observed trait or feature in sample populations have shown greater success for astrology, although they are not well known in mainstream science.² It seemed to me that if the black box of astrology theory could be made more transparent, then the errors produced by the one-to-one matching tests could be understood and the more successful statistical trait research would have a supportive structure upon which to build.

Cosmos and astrology

To clarify astrology theory, there first needs to be a more rigorous definition of astrology. The term *astrology* itself means the study of the celestial bodies, but how accurate is this definition? Do astrologers actually study the Sun, Moon, planets, and stars, or do they study some process? My own exploration of astrology led me to think that astrology is actually the study of cyclic events that are observed within astrological frames of reference. Importantly, planetary properties are not directly observed by any cause and effect mechanism, nor are they divined, but instead are indirectly inferred through the logical examination their placements within the symmetries of these frames of reference.

This inference of environmental symmetry carries an important non-intuitive implication. It should be supposed in astrology that, as part of the design economy of nature, events within a *microcosmic* environment, such as the life circumstances of an individual, mirror in consistently understandable ways the events within a symmetrically related *macrocosmic* environment, such as the celestial environment surrounding the individual. It is these environments, as they are measured and mapped by the astrological frames of reference, which form the basis of the astrological chart. The proper understanding of these environments is therefore essential for our understanding of both the astrological properties of the planets and the character of individuals.

This consideration of astrological environments is non-intuitive because it requires a strange type of symmetry, one that we are not accustomed to in our everyday experience. In the worldview of astrology, we need to consider a *cosmic symmetry* that exists between smaller and larger worlds. This symmetry is defined by the relatively concentric boundaries and perceived directions that unify the microscopic and macroscopic worlds. One boundary would be the behavioral circumstances in the life of the individual and another would be the cycles in the planetary environment that surrounds the individual. These two boundaries are suggested by the ancient hermetic maxim, “as above, so below; as below, so above”.

To more fully grasp this idea of cosmic symmetry, a more recent concept that is somewhat similar is seen in the infinite regression of self-similar structures within fractal geometries that iterate at different microscopic and macroscopic scales. This “self-similarity” property of fractals is a type of cosmic symmetry between large and small worlds. As far as it resembles fractal self-similarity, which is well understood, the idea of cosmic symmetry is conceptually valid as a mapping principle for correlating behaviors, and this concept, as it stands, can potentially provide a way to illuminate the black box of astrology theory.

Provided that the natal chart of an individual at the microcosmic boundary is accurately aligned within its macrocosmic celestial environment by using accurate birth data, it should be possible to reliably map behaviors from the boundary of one world to the other by observing cosmic symmetries. The application of these symmetries, and our accumulated observations within them, should provide the factors we need to infer astrological meanings.

This concept of cosmic symmetry between macro- and micro-worlds is consistent with the widely accepted presumption in astrology that no causal mechanism directly acts between the celestial bodies and the individual. This astrological connection has been described as being acausal and synchronistic, as well as diachronic (Tarnus, 2006), which means that the connected events occur or change over time. The diachronic synchronicity between the astrological macro- and micro-world boundaries can be considered to be a natural feature of space and time.

Organizational principles: determining what astrology is and is not

To better understand space, time, and the other organizational concepts used in astrology, we need to define some basic principles, which will establish the astrological paradigm. Principles are desirable in any discipline to provide points of understanding and agreement in discussion. Principles can separate astrological concepts from non-astrological concepts and guide the development of astrological theory.

There are five basic principles that we can use, which are illustrated by ancient maxims or aphorisms that can be associated with astrology, including the hermetic maxim already described. These principles serve to astrologically organize information that connects the world of the individual to the celestial environment surrounding the individual. They deal

with the significance of space, origin, time, number, and pattern as they relate to astrology. The principles are briefly summarized as follows:

- Correlativity: “What is below is like what is above, and what is above is like what is below, to accomplish the miracle of the one thing”. Microcosms and their macrocosms are natural, symmetrical, and aligned. Cosmic environments consist of comparative frames of spatial reference that unify the microscopic and macroscopic worlds.
- Nativity: “All things are born from the one thing by adaptation”. Each individual, whether it is a person, thing, or an event, is a microcosm born at the center of its own macrocosmic universe. Each individual has its own planets, identifies with its native circumstances, and has a sensitive dependence on its initial configuration within the world of experience that is known and shared among other individuals.
- Co-evolution: “The music of the spheres”. All cosmic boundaries centered on the individual move in concert with the individual. Cosmic environments delimit cycles, which all resemble each other developmentally. Microcosms and their macrocosms are diachronically synchronous.
- Correlation: “The stars incline and impel; they do not compel”. Cosmic environments delimit observable propensities. Populations and individuals develop tendencies related to features within these environments. Species of meanings are identified by the incidence of features that increase with eminence and extreme.
- Co-relevance: “It is written in the stars”. Singular observed tendencies and their symbolically specified meanings associate in patterns as a language of interpretation. Microcosms and their macrocosms are functionally coherent.

Accepting these principles means that some ideas that have been previously adopted within Western astrology need to be re-examined. For example, the precessional movement of the tropical signs of the zodiac through the starry constellations that have the same names must now be rejected in principle. The constellations, which are simply imaginative designs, are not natural, symmetrical formations and do not constitute a consistent and legitimate astrological frame of reference within this paradigm.

This rejection of constellational significance, however, is in keeping with normal astrological practice in which the stars are considered individually, and not as constellational aggregates. Furthermore, in accord with these principles, the galactic center, which represents a celestial body like the stars and planets, does describe an applicable long-term cycle as it moves through the zodiacal signs.

Cosmic environments: a reductionist approach

Western astrology uses three spatial frames of reference, each of which is based on symmetrical features found in nature. These reference frames precisely measure the three main *cosmic environments* studied in astrology, which unify the microscopic and macroscopic worlds. These are the zodiacal signs, the diurnal house sectors, and the aspects (which are basically the phase angles that the planets make with each other).

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Each of these cosmic environments, when reduced to its most basic components, consists of a horizontal *axis of equality*, and perpendicular to this, a vertical *axis of hierarchy*; see Figure 1.

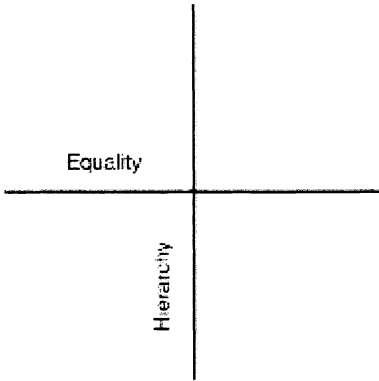


Figure 1. Symmetry defined by equality and hierarchy

In the signs, these axes are the equinox (equality) and solstices (hierarchy) respectively. In the houses, they are defined by the horizon and meridian respectively. In the aspects, they are defined by the new/full and the first-quarter/last-quarter planetary phases respectively.

For the purpose of theory development, we shall use a simplified four-stage cycle that is based on the equality and hierarchy axes only, rather than the complete twelve-stage cycles that are traditionally used for the astrological signs and houses, or the multiple stages used for aspects. This four-stage cycle is helpful because it identifies basic features in the astrological environments that are similar to several patterns or

systems that are described by the social sciences. Once these simple patterns are identified, the more traditional astrological themes, such as the elemental fire, earth, air, and water divisions, can be added to provide a more complete description such as one would find in a typical astrological textbook.

Comparable systems in the social sciences

Astrological theory can be better understood and appreciated if it can be directly compared with conceptually similar theories of personality and behavior within the social sciences. This comparison would be all the more meaningful if we can find good fits that have no direct or implied connection to astrology. Six of the seven personality and social theories that are described in the following sections were developed independently of astrology, but lend themselves to comparisons with simplified astrology.

Three of these theories astrologically describe personality in terms of shared values, skills, and beliefs, as they relate to our simplified environments of the signs, houses, and aspects respectively. These are compared to similar concepts in the social sciences. The astrological properties of the planets themselves do not resemble anything in the social sciences and are represented here by a separate astrological theory of urges. And finally, the dynamic operations within the three astrological environments are compared to behavioral theories of love, development, and psychological projection, as identified within the social sciences. Moreover, the astrological theory of projection illustrates how all of these theoretical functions of astrology work together.

Theory of values

The four-cycle frame of reference that describes our simplified version of the astrological signs bears a resemblance to various established four-fold systems of *values*. In the context of this discussion, values are the individual and oftentimes shared sense of

what is interesting, important, ethical, purposeful, and meaningful. Values are taken here to be *inner* attributes of the personality.

Included within the broad understanding of values are the qualities known from ancient times as *virtues*, such as courage, prudence, honor, and ambition. In more recent times, values have appeared as the four stages of civil society and moral order that were described by Scottish Enlightenment philosopher Henry Home (aka Lord Kames, 1758). In the mid-twentieth century, many thinkers wrote about values. Examples are the four social behaviors described by sociologist David Riesman (1950), the four-step hierarchy of needs described by psychologist Abraham Maslow (1954), and an essentially four-fold pattern within the psychographic profiles described by social psychologist Arnold Mitchel (1983). I have chosen these last three social scientists from among many authors with similar ideas because they represent a thread of development that culminates with Mitchel's large-scale empirical research, which could be of potential interest to astrology.

Each of these social scientists perceived values as a hierarchical series of steps that ascend in the same order. In astrology, however, there is no simple up and down hierarchy. Instead, astrology postulates values as a developmental cycle that repeats and evolves. Table 1 lists a simple key-word comparison showing the relationship of the four-fold value types.

Table 1. Comparison of the four main value types.

I Value	Virtue	Kames	Riesman	Maslow	Mitchel
me	courage	hunter/ fisher	individualist	Physical needs	experiential
us	prudence	pastoral/ nomadic	family/tradition	safety/ neighborhood	belonger
you	honor	agricultural/ communal	conformist	love/ friends	societal
them	ambition	commercial/ contract	autonomous	esteem/ competence	achiever

The key words associated with the astrological sign quadrants are shown in Figure 2.

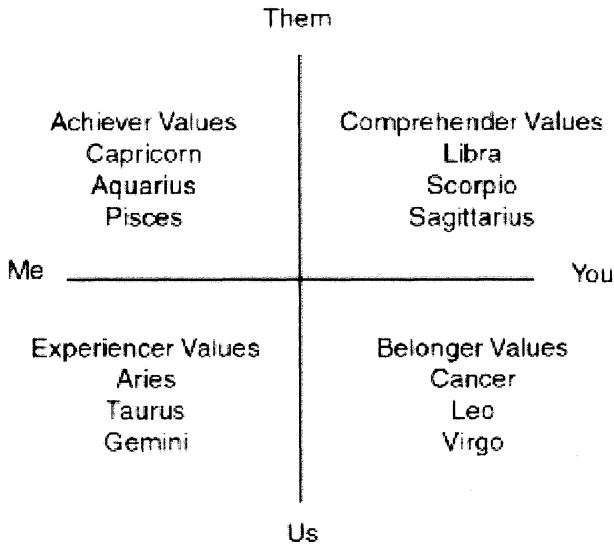


Figure 2. Values defined by the grammar of identity.

The structure of this figure reflects a more general *grammar of identity* that is formed by the two major axes. The axis of equality (the peer axis) represents one-to-one relationships of equality, where the value of *me* opposes the value of singular *you*. The axis of hierarchy (the parental axis) represents collective relationships, which is the common ground of agreement between “me” and “you”. On this axis, the value of *us* opposes the value of *them*.

- A *me-directed* person values his or her own experiences, feelings, and needs above all else.
- An *us-directed* person values his or her membership within a family or community group above all else.
- A *you-directed* person values association with a partner or close friend above all else.
- A *them-directed* person values reputation and position as a representative of a public organization above all else.

Four-fold systems of values are fairly pervasive in today’s society and can even be found in the popular Harry Potter novels by J.K. Rowling. For example, in the novels the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry consists of four schools that are suggestive of these values: Gryffindor (courage), Hufflepuff (prudence), Ravenclaw (honor), and Slytherin (ambition). There are even numerous online “sorting hat” quizzes derived from the novels that in theory would approximate the sign quadrants. More psychologically refined values tests, similar to the approach demonstrated by Mitchell, should correlate to

the distribution and preponderance of planets within the sign quadrants of sample astrological charts.

Theory of skills

The astrological reference frame of houses appears to associate with skills and aptitudes. Skills can be thought of as the *outward* adaptations of the personality to the everyday environment. These are one’s calling in life and what one is good at doing. By applying our simple grammar of identity to skills, we can posit two fundamental skills that one can express in relation to those people who are one’s equals. One can either compete or cooperate. Similarly, we can posit two fundamental skills in relationships of hierarchy. One can take either a supervisory or subordinate position. Skill in all four of these areas is necessary for survival, but exactly how they are proportionally expressed is unique to the character of the individual.

By synthesis of these four skill polarities, four main skill roles can be defined. These roles can be given suitable names such as: *performer* (competitive + subordinate), *provider* (subordinate + cooperative), *coordinator* (cooperative + supervisory), and *administrator* (supervisory + competitive). Figure 3 shows how these roles fit into the house coordinates. In theory, the distribution and preponderance of planets within the house quadrants of sample astrological charts should correlate to the strength of skills in each of these four areas.

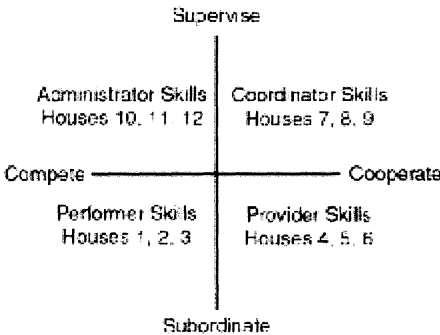


Figure 3. Role identities defined by adaptive skills.

These meanings that are derived from the astrological environment of the houses compare suggestively to some of the multiple intelligence personalities described by psychologist Howard Gardner (1983). In particular, Gardner’s *interpersonal* intelligence suggests cooperative skills, and Gardner’s *intrapersonal* intelligence suggests the more self-oriented competitive skills. This example suggests a basis for further research involving sample populations.

Theory of beliefs

The astrological reference frame of aspects, which are simply the degree alignments of the waxing and waning phases that the planets each make with one another, associates in astrology with the individual’s belief system. The four major aspects of interest in this simplified version of astrology are the conjunction, waxing square, opposition, and waning square. In the more familiar terms of the Sun-Moon phases, these four aspects are represented by the new, first quarter, full, and last quarter phases respectively. These four aspects, which operate between all of the planets, are traditionally thought to be associated with potential conflicts, and this suggests a connection with beliefs because conflicts often stem from strongly held beliefs.

In the psychologically broader sense, beliefs can also be associated with patterns of attitudes, temperaments, outlooks, assertions, opinions, goals, biases, habits, and unconscious perceptions. When viewed as such, beliefs can be appreciated as the emotional component of the personality that is expected to mature with development over time. A person with a clear purpose in life might expect to learn with experience how to respond appropriately and competently in situations that involve conflict and emotional tensions.



Figure 4. Beliefs defined by the cycle of maturity phases

Referring to the literature of the social sciences, the meanings of the four major astrological aspects compare favorably to the four-fold system of emotional intelligence that was originally described by psychologists Peter Salovey and John Mayer (2004). This concept of emotional intelligence has been subsequently popularized by Daniel Goleman (2006). The basic types of emotional intelligence as they compare to an interpretation of astrological aspects are listed in Table 2. Figure 4 postulates this interpretation relative to the associated astrological axes and quadrants. Statistical research that uses the methods of Salovey and Mayer can provide data for correlation and should account for the strength and preponderance of aspect types in sample astrological charts.

Table 2. Astrological aspects compared to emotional intelligence types.

Aspect	Astrological interpretation	Salovey/Mayer
conjunction	belief in self-confidence	emotional identification/expression
waxing square	belief in self-reliance	emotional facilitation/application
opposition	belief in self-restraint	emotional recognition/understanding
waning square	belief in self-discipline	emotional management/detachment

Theory of love

The importance of how the houses align within the signs in the natal configuration of any individual can be appreciated by the potential for conflict between values (what one feels is important and interesting) and differing skills (what one can do well). In the unfolding of this theory, one of the major ways that this potential conflict is resolved is through the expression of love. Modern astrology has placed great emphasis on interpersonal love relationships.

As discussed earlier, the horizon axis (a component of the astrological houses) represents adaptive relationships of equality, because the horizon is where all things are on the same physical level. Thus the planets or signs that are on the horizon in any natal configuration should indicate relationships with people who are equals to the native, including love relationships with equal partners. Because the horizon axis intercepts two zodiacal signs, one in the east and one in the west, this would mean that there are six pairs of opposing horizon signs that can be associated with the values that the individual seeks to express in a love relationship with an equal partner. Although the signs in these six polarities oppose each other, each pair has common attributes that define and balance their opposition to one another.

With knowledge of the astrological signs, the six polarities of horizon signs can be found to compare with the six categories of love styles that were originally researched and described by sociologist John Alan Lee (1975), as postulated in Table 3. Further research that correlates the questionnaire-based findings of Lee with a survey of horizon signs in sample astrological charts should account for these similarities.

Table 3. Comparison of horizon signs with categories of love style.

Horizon polarity	Lovestyle	Lee
Aries/Libra	<i>Eros</i>	physical/infatuation
Taurus/Scorpio	<i>mania</i>	possessive/mysterious
Gemini/Sagittarius	<i>ludus</i>	playful/flirtatious game
Cancer/Capricorn	<i>pragma</i>	practical/status-minded
Leo/Aquarius	<i>storge</i>	affectionate/friendly
Virgo/Pisces	<i>agape</i>	unselfish/altruistic

Theory of urges

The planets are the material bodies that are measured within the astrological frames of reference. The astrological maxim, "The planets impel", suggests that the planets represent inner urges, intents, and desires that motivate the personality or drive actions. As yet, there exists no defined system or set of urges within the social sciences that would directly compare with the astrological meanings of the planets considered strictly as urges.

However, the statistical findings of Michel Gauquelin (1988) seem to indirectly support this interpretation of planetary urges through empirical observation. At risk of oversimplification, the astrological meanings of the planets, when reduced to the extreme, appear to resemble a kit of simple but powerful tools that the individual uses to shape his or her world and develop as a person. These tools can be used, for example, alternatively to fill or empty, to bond or split apart, to expand or reduce, to evade or capture, and to mobilize or set. A much-simplified list of the theoretical meanings of the planetary urges is postulated in Table 4.

