

Week 4

Astrology



Social Psychology of the Paranormal
OLLI Spring 2026
Barry Markovsky

Why are we covering this topic?

- highly popular
- undisputedly, a paranormal claim
- strong social-cultural dimensions



History

- Origin: Mesopotamia, ~2000 BC
 - Omens were everywhere
 - Simpler practice, e.g., a single planet moving near a single star
- Horoscopes: ~500 BC
 - More complex “model”:
7 heavenly bodies, 12 zodiac signs



Claims

- Positions of planets & stars determine...
 - personality traits and behavioral tendencies for lifetime
 - relationship success or failure
 - major and minor world events
- “It’s the oldest science”
 - “an off-shoot of astronomy”
 - “based on thousands of years of observation”
 - mathematical and algorithmic

Claims

- “Astrological charts predict major and minor events”
 - global wars and conflicts
 - earthquakes, hurricanes, floods
 - elections, sporting events
- Many “explanations” offered
 - gravity
 - magnetic fields
 - particles
 - electromagnetism
 - tidal forces

Typical Interpretation

lightcasting 2:20

Free Chart Readings

Why astrologers believe

- Great antiquity and durability
- Found in many cultures
- Many great scholars have believed in it
- Stars and planets known to affect things
- It's an art... a philosophy... a science





Counseling astrology

- ~50% of professional astrologers are “counselors”
- Meet with clients in multiple sessions
- Chart-inspired advice for short-term problems
- Cheaper than psychotherapists

A screenshot of the website for SHER INSTITUTE. The header features the text "SHER INSTITUTE" in a large serif font, with "ASTROLOGY & METAPHYSICS" below it in a smaller font. Underneath is the tagline "A Mystery School for Spiritual Transformation". The background of the header is a dark blue space-themed image with planets and a classical building. Below the header is a red navigation bar with white text for "HOME", "ABOUT", "PHILOSOPHY", "WATCH", "READ", "CLASSES", "SERVICES", and "CONNECT". Below the navigation bar, there are two columns: "Social Links" with Facebook and Twitter icons, and "Astrological Counseling Methods" with a paragraph of text.

SHER INSTITUTE
— of —
ASTROLOGY & METAPHYSICS
A Mystery School for Spiritual Transformation

HOME ABOUT PHILOSOPHY WATCH READ CLASSES SERVICES CONNECT

Social Links

fb

Newsletter

Astrological Counseling Methods

Using more than 35 years of experience as a therapist I offer private counseling sessions for those who are seeking a more holistic approach to therapy. During these many years of experience I have used astrology as one tool to help a client gain deeper insights into their basic needs and help them expand their understanding of themselves. Also, over the last decade or so I have been a consultant to therapists who also wish to advise their clients in a deeper, more holistic manner. In both my practice and my work



Counseling astrology

- Counselors dismiss errors
 - “Client doesn’t know himself”
 - “Astrologers can make mistakes; not astrology”
 - “Another factor was responsible”
 - “The manifestation is atypical”
- Bottom line: Astrology is never wrong!

Free Personalized Chart Interpretation?

Identical interpretation given for

- East coast vs. west coast birthplace
- different date
- “unknown time” in MA vs. 2:14 pm in NE

Problems

- Based on magical associations
 - gods' made-up characteristics given to planets
 - Aphrodite: beauty → Venus
 - Hermes: shrewd & swift → Mercury
- Made-up characteristics given to constellations
 - Lion, fish, crab, archer, ...
 - Different across cultures and astrological systems
 - Constellations' shapes aren't inherent.
Stars' distances vary widely

Problems

- Unresponsive to new evidence & failed tests
 - Linda Goodman: “Its truth is eternal!”
 - Equinox precession
 - **** Signs now off by nearly a month ****
 - Signs “remember” their 2,500 yr old meanings??
 - Discovery of new planets
 - Astrologers should have noticed their influence and predicted them

Equinox Precession

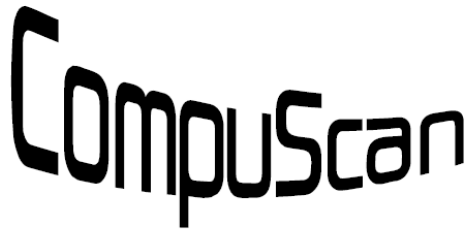
[Bill Nye on precession of the equinox 1:15]

Problems

- No research program
- Ignores physical properties of planets -- mass, size, distance, temp, age, rotation, etc.
- No reasonable theory
 - Gravity? Mother's effect on newborn is 20 x mars'
 - Tidal Force? Mother's is 11 trillion times that of mars
 - Electromagnetic field? Different types and strengths across planets
 - Particles? Planets don't emit any.

The “Barnum” Effect

[[Randi Astrology Test video](#) 1:30]



IMPORTANT: PLEASE READ THIS FIRST

Thank you for participating in our *CompuScan* demonstration project. The analysis printed below was derived from the information you provided. It is tailored for you and *only* you, based on your unique data. Our inferential algorithms have been refined over the years based on feedback given to us by thousands of participants such as yourself.

Please read your personal description carefully. Then answer the questions about how closely the description fits the way you see yourself. This will help us to determine the accuracy of our methods, and help us to further improve them in the future. Thank you for your assistance.

CompuScan Analysis Data, Case 229-44c97-401v.4

1 > Subject's Name:	SethWorthinger	<
2 > Subject's Birthdate:	6/24/82	<
3 > Subject's Birthplace:	Waterloo, IA	<
4 > Subject's Favorite Color:	purple	<
5 > Subject's Favorite Number:	58	<

CompuScan Results

You have a need for other people to like and admire you, and yet you tend to be critical of yourself. While you have some personality weaknesses you are generally able to compensate for them. You have considerable unused capacity that you have not turned to your advantage. Disciplined and self-controlled on the outside, you tend to be worrisome and insecure on the inside. At times, you have serious doubts as to whether you have made the right decision or done the right thing. You prefer a certain amount of change and variety and become dissatisfied when hemmed in by restrictions and limitations. You also pride yourself as an independent thinker and do not accept others' statements without satisfactory proof. But you have found it unwise to be too frank in revealing yourself to others. At times you are extroverted, affable, and sociable, while at other times you are rather unrealistic.

Please provide your honest answers to the following questions:

1. How well does the *CompuScan* analysis describe your **specific** qualities?

PERFECT EXCELLENT GOOD FAIR POOR NOT AT ALL

2. How well does the *CompuScan* analysis describe your **general** qualities?

PERFECT EXCELLENT GOOD FAIR POOR NOT AT ALL

Please write any additional comments below or on the back.

“Barnum” Effect

Scientific tests

- Sun sign tests, e.g., Aries-extroversion: All failed
 - Exception: poorly-designed studies, e.g., self-reports w/ respondents who *knew* which characteristics & signs were supposed to match
 - Same bias occurred when bogus descriptions given to respondents prior to self-reports
- Physical characteristics: Failed
- Compatible signs: Failed
- Occupation: Failed
- Medical disorders: Failed

Shawn Carlson's Test

- Published in *Nature*, 1985
- Cooperation w/ major astrology orgs. and astrologers
- Randomizations, control groups, double-blinds



Carlson Test

- **Part I:** 177 horoscopes interpreted by 30 astrologers
 - S's asked to pick their own chart from set of three
 - Agreed-upon criterion for success: **50%**
 - Expected success from random guessing: **33.3%**
 - Actual success rate: **33.7%** (no better than ch



Carlson Test, Pt. 2

- 116 subjects took California Personality Inventory (CPI)
- Astrologers: Which of 3 CPIs matches S's horoscope?
 - Agreed-upon criterion of success: 50%
 - Random: 33.3%
 - Actual success rate: 34%, no better than chance
- Summary: Study designed in cooperation with astrologers, with low bar for success, still showed no support for astrology

More tough questions

- Genes (physical traits) fixed at conception, not at birth. How can position of planets matter?
- Childhood experiences, social influences, etc., affect people in known ways. How do planets?
- “At birth” claim:
 - What about caesarian birth?
 - When is birth? (Process takes time!)
 - Why don't astrological forces have prenatal effects?
- Pres. Reagan & a number of world leaders throughout history have used astrologers to make major decisions. Are you comfortable with this?

Why believe?

- ~ 25% - 72% of U.S. adults believe
- Reasons?
 - Psychological
 - Social psychological
 - Sociological
- The usual sources
 - media
 - authorities
 - families
 - friends



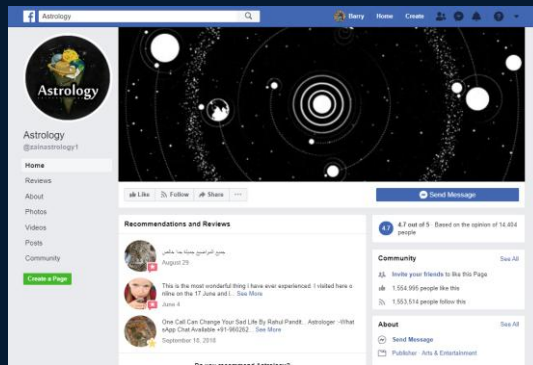
In Sum

- Foundations: magical thinking
- Perpetuation: confirmation bias, sociocultural support, rhetorical “outs”, **feels good**
- Mechanism: unknown forces
- Theory: none
- Evidence: none supportive, much falsifying

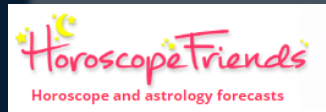
Videos!

- [[Neil deGrasse Tyson](#) 6:15]
- [[Nick Uhas Skeptical summary](#) 14:45]

#	Best Horoscope	Alexa
1	Astrology Zone	5,797
2	Astrodienst	8,026
3	Horoscope.com	8,032
4	Astrosage	8,559
5	Astrology.com	10,601
6	Ganesha Speaks	11,578
7	Cafe Astrology	12,924
8	Astrology Zodiac	14,143
9	AstroYogi	20,051
10	Astrostyle	23,976
11	Astroseek	27,972
12	Astrotheme	31,648
13	Astrology King	39,667
14	Future Point	43,688
15	Elsa Elsa	49,376
16	Clickastro	57,425
17	Jonathan Cainer	63,232
18	Indastro	68,735
19	Astrocamp	84,725
20	AstroVed	86,698
21	Astrology Future Eye	97,869
22	Astrocenter	108,154
23	Cyberastro	112,042
24	YESicanchange	119,528
25	The Astro Codex	119,796
26	Daily Horoscope	120,760
27	Astrolis	133,047
28	Astrolabe	141,301
29	AstroTalk	154,724
30	MyKundali	159,428
31	Find Your Fate	159,462
32	Boho Astro	164,316
33	Astrosafa	169,411
34	Astrology Weekly	196,331
35	Jessica Adams	204,220
36	Linda Goodman	208,117
37	Shrvinayaka Astro	209,941
38	C.I.A.	211,013
39	Astrovidhi	214,843
40	Horoscope Friends	238,616
41	Free Will Astrology	240,599
42	Russell Grant	243,040
43	Free Horoscopes	252,637
44	The Astrologer	261,700
45	Ask Oracle	279,321
46	Astrologylover	298,754
47	Horoscopes.co.uk	308,036
48	Sasstrology	311,653
49	Mystic Medusa	332,722
50	Serennu	335,171



Astrology sites



Astrology King's listing: 50 most visited astrology sites

<https://astrologyking.com/best-horoscopes/>

end