

ASTROLOGY

A Skeptic's Guide

The basic proposition of Western Astrology is that your personality and fate are influenced by the apparent positions and motions of heavenly bodies.

The Twelve Signs of the Zodiac

In Astrological theory, the interesting part of the sky can be divided into twelve roughly equal regions, named for the major groupings of stars that inhabit them. These constellations, all viewable from the Northern Hemisphere, each occupy the Eastern horizon at sunrise for approximately one twelfth of the year, and each in turn forms the background against which the sun rises. They are the Sun Signs or Signs of the Zodiac. Your birthday coincides with one of these signs. If you were born on (say), April 5th, the Constellation of Aries was the sun's background in your dawn sky, so you are an Aries person. Your behaviour and fortunes throughout your life are affected to a degree by this accident of birth.

Astrologers agree on the dates of the Signs of the Zodiac. (To be an Aries, for example, you must have been born between 21st March and 20th April inclusive, in any year.) They also claim that the positions of the moon and other planets at the time of your birth relative to these same twelve constellations are necessary to fine-tune their predictions.

Some Problems for Astrology

1. No-one has ever demonstrated any physical phenomena which explain how astronomical bodies might affect outcomes in the way that astrologers claim they do. We've known since Newton's time that ALL astronomical bodies attract each other by a force called gravity. We also know that according to the laws of gravity, the effect of distant objects like the planets on us is tiny. Farther objects like stars exert negligible attraction to the Earth. Do the laws of Astrology follow different rules?

2. Serious statistical studies of personality and behaviour do not show any tendency for similar types of people to group according to their birthdates.

3. The dates upon which Astrology is based do not agree with the modern sky. They were relevant 2000 years ago in the Julian, rather than our modern Gregorian Calendar. A small, continuous change to the alignment of the Earth's axis of rotation has shifted the positions of the constellations appreciably over those 2000 years. The number of days that the Sun actually rises in each sign has changed. Virgo has increased from 31 to 45 days, while Scorpio has declined from 30 to just 7 days. Worse still, the Sun now "rises" annually in not twelve, but thirteen different constellations. For eighteen days of the year the Sun rises in Ophiuchus! Modern astrologers are divided between traditionalists who ignore this fact, claiming that only the twelve 2000 year old signs are valid, and "new-agers" who have enthusiastically embraced "The Serpent Holder" as a powerful new influence on human lives.

The situation is complicated further if the moon and planets are considered. Astrologers would like the moon and planets to revolve around the Sun in the same plane. With the exception of Pluto, they very nearly do. However, slight inclinations in their orbits cause them to pass not only through the thirteen constellations mentioned thus far, but sometimes into Cetus (The Whale) and (rarely) Orion (the Hunter). By this count, the number of Signs is fifteen, rather than twelve.

| Sign | Name | "Official" period | Actual period Dates | days |
|-------------|--------------------|--|---|------|
| Ophiuchus | The Serpent Holder | Not mentioned | Nov 30 th to Dec17 th | 18 |
| Sagittarius | The Archer | Nov 23 rd to Dec 22 nd | Dec 18 th to Jan 18 th | 32 |
| Capricorn | The Goat | Dec 23 rd to Jan 20 th | Jan19 th to Feb 15 th . | 28 |
| Aquarius | The Water Carrier | Jan 21 st to Feb 19 th | Feb 16 th to Mar 11 th | 24 |
| Pisces | The Fish | Feb 20 th to Mar 20 th | Mar 12 th to Apr 18 th | 38 |
| Aries | The Ram | Mar 21 st to Apr 20 th | Apr 19 th to May 13 th | 25 |
| Taurus | The Bull | Apr 21 st to May 20 th | May 14 th to Jun 19 th | 37 |
| Gemini | The Twins | May 21 st to Jun 21 st | June 20 th to Jul 21 st | 32 |
| Cancer | The Crab | Jun 22 nd to Jul 23 rd | Jul 22 nd to Aug 9 th | 19 |
| Leo | The Lion | Jul 24 th to Aug 23 rd | Aug 10 th to Sep15 th | 36 |
| Virgo | The Virgin | Aug 24 th to Sep 23 rd | Sep16 th to Oct 30 th | 45 |
| Libra | The Scales | Sep 24 th to Oct 23 rd | Oct 31 st to Nov 22 nd | 23 |
| Scorpio | The Scorpion | Oct 24 th to Nov 22 nd | Nov 23 rd to Nov 29 th | 7 |

Why Be Concerned?

It is often claimed that astrology is just "a bit of fun" and that "no-one seriously believes in it." Groups like the Skeptics who have concerns over the proliferation of professional astrology into the 21st century are often told to "lighten up."

A brief glance at ads in "New Idea" or similar magazines might suggest that;

- A lot of people are taking astrologers seriously, and are consulting them.
- At the rates they are charge, astrologers very much wish to be taken seriously.

We are entitled to ask a couple of questions of those that make a living at astrology.

In 2005, a survey was taken of the claims of astrologers advertising in Australian media. Many claimed to be "Australia's Best / Most Accurate Astrologer".

Is it not reasonable to ask each astrologer to provide documentary evidence to support such a claim; consisting of a list of ALL correct AND incorrect predictions made by that person over the last twelve months, so that we can confidently take note of their percentage of accurate predictions?

It does not matter how assertively astrologers are in trumpeting their skill. Nor does it matter whether they honestly believe that they have a special gift. Until they can comply with this simple request for data, should they be taken seriously?

How many astrologers specifically predicted the greatest natural event of recent times, the December 26th 2004 Tsunami before it occurred? We'd suggest none.

Two links:

<http://www.astrology.com/> ("The Leading Astrology Website since 1995")

<http://skepdic.com/astrology.html> (A skeptical look at Astrology with several follow-up links)

Two classroom exercises:

[http://www.keypoint.com.au/~skeptics/Classroom Astrology Exercises](http://www.keypoint.com.au/~skeptics/Classroom_Astrology_Exercises)