

IS IT TRUE?

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While this essay is (I trust) fun, at the same time it deals with an issue of continuing importance – as well as continuing frustration – for astrologers.

It would appear on the surface to be a reasonable stance to adopt, that if a sufficient number of people vouch for the truth of a certain thing, then the matter is something which should be treated with some seriousness. Not only can astrologers point to many thousands of years of tradition, but can also find any number of people today who will say, “Yes, astrology works.”

They are therefore sometimes surprised when their personal conviction is rejected, and they are told that they are being completely unscientific and that there is no valid acceptable evidence to support their claims.

To a degree the dilemma is of astrology’s own making. Astrologers often make much of the fact that their study is quite unlike the occult arts (with which it is frequently associated). They are built upon intuitive or mystical processes, whereas those of astrology are strictly mathematical. This seems to imply that astrology may be better considered as a science rather than an art, and to have its ‘scientific’ nature rejected out of hand is therefore particularly hurtful.

This I think became very evident when the Competitions (dealt with later in this essay) were launched, and the astrological response to them was totally rejected. What I have tried to suggest is that some of our discomfort is probably due to our misconceptions about what science can and cannot do, and what it can and cannot handle.

I am sorry that the original correspondence which took place in 1981 and 1982 was lost by the time that the essay was written. Recent attempts to track down copies of the *Astrologers’ Forum* have also not been successful. However this does not materially effect the nature of the arguments presented, although it certainly denies the reader the delights of Dr. Dean’s often vivid prose.



Astrologers in general seem to take themselves rather seriously.

I have a complete set of the Journals of the Federation of Australian Astrologers from Volume One, Number One. If the readers of this publication did not take astrologer seriously I doubt if they would find in the pages of these journals much that could be considered to be of a high level of entertainment.

I fear therefore that this essay may somewhat lower this accustomed high standard, and offer rather lighter fare. It is certainly in one sense quite serious, but also (I must admit) somewhat tongue in cheek. So the reader must make of it what he or she will.

Let me begin therefore by asking that most terrible and fearsome question which all astrologers quake to hear, and the more serious they are about their discipline the less they wish to hear it. It is that simple question, "Is it true?"

The mid 1970's were quite exciting days for many astrologers. Michael Gauquelin had produced several statistical studies on the relationship of rising planets to professions, and a number of other authors had drawn our attention to a whole series of correspondences between events in the natural world and solar, lunar, and planetary configurations. There was also the work of Nelson who claimed that radio transmission was adversely affected when planets formed "hard:" aspects, but was enhanced by "easy" ones .

Astrologers rather naturally felt that their discipline had suddenly gained a high degree of scientific respectability. Some dared to suggest that even if astrology had not actually been proven to be scientifically true, then at least the gateway for this to occur had been well and truly opened and astrologers could now work with confidence towards this much desired goal.

Late in this period Geoffrey Dean and Arthur Mather published their book *Recent Advances in Natal Astrology*, a compendium of recent astrological techniques. It was however a book really quite critical of astrology, in that it saw the vast majority of astrology's claims to be unsubstantiated. One area that drew their particular attention was the claims made by astrologers for the effectiveness of the zodiacal signs in character delineation. As a result, in 1980 they offered a prize of \$500 to anyone who could demonstrate the validity of the signs in astrological work. Alas - in their judgement - no entry was worthy of the reward.

In late 1981 they offered a second prize - this time of \$1,000 - to anyone who could validate the effectiveness of the signs. The rules for the contest were quite specific, and appeared simply to require an unambiguous demonstration that the zodiacal signs were an effective technique for the determination of character. When the time came in late 1982 for the announcement of the winner's name to be made, once more astrologers had been found wanting in the eyes of the prize givers

Geoffrey Dean made this astrologically disappointing announcement - among other places - in a small broadsheet called *Astrologers' Forum*, which was being published privately at that time by an astrologer named Dymock Brose in New South Wales. Presumably having nothing better to do with my time, I wrote a letter to the broadsheet in which I suggested that I thought that perhaps the whole thing had been a joke by the prize givers on astrologers, which they (in their serious self-importance) had failed to see. It seemed to me to be obvious from the terms of the contest that the prize could never be won.

This provoked a marvellous and furious correspondence for over a year in the news letter. I had hoped to be able to produce for the reader's delight some of the more interesting of these literary gems, but I am afraid that my own copies of the

correspondence seem to have been lost, and I have unfortunately been unable to find copies elsewhere. So the best that I can do is to try to reproduce for you the saga as I saw it from my point of view, and deny the reader the pleasure of Dr. Dean's often colourful responses. However I hope that the drift of my arguments will be perceived just the same.

The rules for the prize contained - in part - the following clauses.

1. The entry must demonstrate that the tropical sign hypothesis is true it is not enough to show, for example, that soldiers tend to be born under Sun Sign X..... The entry must demonstrate that each sign is of a different nature.
4. The entry must be supported by facts whose interpretation is unambiguous.

Now of course the temptation for astrologers to take up this challenge is very great indeed. I suppose all of us can quote the cases of any number of people whose character and actions reflect in remarkable ways some prominent sign in their charts. However, being rather innocent souls we may not have actually realised what we were being asked to do by the prize givers, should we have decided to become involved in such an exercise. Or that should we have failed to attain the judges' requirements, we could then be hoist with our own petard. That is, our critics could turn the tables and say that astrologers had been totally unable to demonstrate the scientific validity of a concept central to their work.

Let us begin by taking the second of the conditions, The entry must be supported by facts whose interpretation is unambiguous.

Facts of course are always unambiguous, that is why they are facts. However their interpretation is very seldom not ambiguous. Let us take the simple example of the sun, which is a pretty obvious fact. For many thousands of years people interpreted their observations of the fact of the sun by saying that it moved around a fixed earth. Today we interpret our observations by saying that the earth moves around a fixed sun.

The facts and the observations are unchanged. What we observe is quite unambiguous, but obviously the interpretation is not. The thing that has swayed our opinion towards the acceptance of the concept of a fixed sun is neither fact nor observation, but mathematics. If we wish to predict planetary positions, then the mathematics are far easier and more accurate if we use a helio centric system. Thus our unambiguous scientific fact that the earth moves around the sun is - in the end - really not much more than a mathematical convenience. The thought that science may decide what is true or untrue on the grounds of what is convenient (or inconvenient) for its systems, should not be disregarded too quickly I assure you.

Of course we now happen to believe that our solar system is itself at the edge of a rotating galaxy that is moving through space at enormous speed. Yet it all still looks the same, and we have not yet found it convenient to take into account the movement of our whole system through space in our mathematical calculations.

Various scientific models or theories change the way that we look at the world, but they do not change the world itself. Science is a way of interpreting nature (and of course not the only way) but it is not nature itself. Indeed the whole history of science is a history of the re-interpretation of nature. There is no totally true scientific theory. There is no interpretation of nature which is not in some way ambiguous. Professor John Wheeler of Princeton University - in a collection of essays concerned with science's present understanding of issues related to particle physics entitled *The Physicists Conception of Nature* - wrote, "The review one by one of the fixed points of physics has not left a single one unquestioned". If science cannot find one unambiguous principle for itself which is not open to question, it is perhaps rather unfair to ask astrologers to do this for a prize of \$1,000.

My own sun is in Aquarius and I have Pisces rising with a number of planets in that sign. As an Aquarian I can point to the facts that I was an engineer and am an astrologer. All most appropriate. As a Piscean I can also draw attention to the fact that I am a priest. Again appropriate. Now those facts - both astrological and personal - are quite unambiguous. But can there ever be an unambiguous interpretation of them? It is no more possible to demonstrate unambiguously that my Aquarian sun has a relationship to my engineering vocation, than it is to demonstrate unambiguously that there is no relationship. One may hope to hold possibilities or even probabilities, but to hold certainties one must first seek to lay hold of the very heart of the universe itself.

So be of good cheer, should we fail to demonstrate the tropical sign hypothesis by "facts whose interpretation is unambiguous" we stand in the very best of scientific company.

But this particular issue is (I fear) but a by-path to the central demand of the prize rules; that is, to demonstrate that the tropical sign hypothesis is true. Or as our title has it, "Is it True?"

This challenge requires us initially to have some sort of fairly clear concept of what science is, what scientists do, and what scientific knowledge is. In a book titled *What is This Thing Called Science* Professor Chalmers of Sydney University describes the commonly held idea of science in these terms. "Science starts with observation. The scientific observer should have normal unimpaired sense organs and should faithfully record what he can see, hear, etc., to be the case with respect to the situation he is observing, and should do this with an unprejudiced mind. Statements about the world, or some part of it, can be justified or established as true in a direct way by an unprejudiced observer's use of his senses. The statements so arrived at then form the basis from which the laws and theories that make up scientific knowledge are to be derived". This is known as inductive science, in which a law is induced (or deduced) from the results of a series of observations.

Our picture of a scientist is then of a person conducting a series of experiments or observations centred upon some event in nature. He does this with a totally open and unprejudiced mind - noting carefully and accurately the results of his observations - and from these is able to make a general statement about the way that the world works. We then say that this statement is scientifically true.

If we were to apply this method to the question of zodiacal signs, one would presumably select a large number of people with undeniably “Aries” characteristics, and if all of these persons were then found to have a strongly emphasised Aries sign in their birth charts, one could then inductively form law about the sign of Aries which would be scientifically true.

However Professor Chalmers goes on to point out a number of rather large gaps in this process. In the first place it is obvious that the scientific observer is not and cannot be without prejudice. The observations which our scientist makes are done to develop a certain law or to prove a certain theory. He is not simply “looking at nature” at all, but he has actually already decided only to look for one particular thing and ignore all the rest. He has already decided what is important and what is unimportant. He has already decided what can - and what cannot - influence his observations.

The scientific method therefore is not and can not be unbiased or unprejudiced. Always it knows what the results ought to be, or what it wants them to be, and will often discard a large number of observed facts in order to maintain its predetermined theories.

Secondly, the scientist does not simply observe, but is always a participant in the operation. To observe nature, he must do things to nature. Just the year before last a real scare was thrown into the scientific community when it was suggested that a number of fundamental assumptions about cell and tissue structures were wrong. This was because the processes used to prepare specimens for the electron microscope significantly altered their structures, and so the theories had then been based upon observations which did not reflect the true state of things.

This particular scare seems to have gone away, but the issue still remains. The experimenter is a part of the experiment. The scientist is therefore neither impartial nor passive in his observations. This being the case, the results obtained are not as unprejudiced or beyond challenge as some would wish us to believe.

But there is another and more serious flaw in the process. Let us suppose that you have read a great many books on astrology, and found them all without exception to be totally boring. You may then decided to induce the general law, “All astrology books are boring”. Now this is an astrology book (of sorts), so it is quite logical to conclude, “This book will be boring”. The trouble with the commonly accepted scientific method is that it is in fact illogical. How does a series of past events determine the nature of one that has not yet occurred?

Bertrand Russell told the tale of the inductivist turkey. This turkey found that on the first morning in the turkey farm he was fed at 9 am. However being a good inductivist, he did not jump to conclusions. He waited until he had collected a large number of observations under a wide variety of conditions - on different days of the week and under different weather conditions. Finally he concluded, “I will always be fed at 9 am”. He made this inductive conclusion on the 24th of December, and on the 25th of December he was Christmas dinner.

The trouble with induction is that if you want to believe something is true, it appears to give you sound evidence for doing so. If you do not want to believe something, you can always find a logical reason for not believing. This is because in the end induction cannot prove that something will always be true, and so you can have any number of perfectly good reasons for not believing what you do not want to believe: insufficient examples, incorrect method, unsound assumptions, and so on. Rule Number One for the \$1,000 prize stated, "The entry must demonstrate that the tropical sign hypothesis is true." Considered in this light, it may be somewhat more difficult to attain this goal that we at first suspected.

Of course our dilemma is not one confined to astrologers, but one that gnaws at the vitals of all scientists. So it was that a philosopher named Karl Popper suggested that if it is indeed the case that we are never in the end be able to prove anything to be true, then perhaps we can prove that something is not true. That is, should you find that this essay is a scintillating intellectual delight, then obviously our law, "All astrology books are boring," has been proved to be untrue.

Thus if astrologers should claim "A person with the sun in Aries will in all cases clearly display the nature of that sign in character and attainment", then it would not (I suspect) be too difficult to disprove that statement. However should we say, "People with Aries prominent in their charts are above average in its corresponding nature", then I think that it would be a far more difficult operation to falsify that statement. And if it cannot be falsified, then it may properly remain as a reasonable working hypothesis until it is.

One wonders therefore how many successful entrants there would be for a \$1,000 prize addressed to the scientific community whose rules stated that "The entry must demonstrate that the tropical sign hypothesis is **untrue** and must demonstrate that each sign is **not** of a different nature, and that people with prominent signs are **not** above average in corresponding nature".

If it is appropriate for science to see its action as that of advancing sensible working hypotheses about the way that the world works, and to retain these until they are shown to be false in some aspect, it is perhaps not too unreasonable to allow astrologers to do the same.

But unhappily - or perhaps happily, I do not know which - life is not even as simple as that. Let us take an example;

Thesis : All cats have four legs.

Observation : Yesterday I saw a cat with three legs.

Conclusion : The thesis that all cats have four legs has been shown to be false.

The trouble with the idea that science can only really know what is not true, is that you have to know that the way you have proved a thing not to be true, is itself true! And as we cannot prove that anything is true, that is rather difficult.

Now the end result of all this - and which Professor Chalmers writes about in his book - is that science is not the definitive without question true blue way of looking at the world, but simply a way. One way among other ways. It is a framework which can handle a great many events successfully and well. But it is limited in its methods and

theories, and there are many things that it cannot handle at all well, and even some which it cannot handle at all.

Things are “scientific” if they fit into this framework, and “unscientific” if they do not. But this has nothing whatever to do with whether or not they are true; because science can no more prove a thing to be true than it can prove a thing to be untrue. Science is a tool for achieving certain physical goals, and its worth is determined not by questions about “truth” but by how well it assists us to achieve these goals.

However because it has in fact been so successful in its proper field (it has enabled us to do a great many very interesting and amazing things) there has been a tendency to want to allow it to become the arbiter for the whole of life. Thus if a thing is described as “unscientific”, this somehow denigrates and casts a shadow of suspicion over it.

For this reason both astrology and religion have sometimes sought science’s blessing, and both have usually been offended when they have had their overtures treated rather shabbily. But I would suggest that the proper test for astrology is not whether all or some parts of it are scientific (which is really little more than a question of intellectual curiosity) but the same test that we apply to science itself. That is, whether or not it is a good tool for achieving those goals which are inherent in its framework and nature.

The fundamental difference between the scientific framework and the astrological framework can be fairly clearly seen in the way that both go about their business. First of all, both accept belief in the usefulness of a certain way of going about things. And both - in a strict philosophical sense - may be in equal difficulties in proving that their results are ultimately true in some way never to be questioned ever again. However both may claim with equal justification that within their given framework their systems work.

Now the scientific process goes something like this. Our scientist first of all evolves a theory. Let us suppose his theory is that grape juice, naturally fermenting, will reach an alcoholic content of about 12%. He therefore buys a large assortment of wines - different brands, different grapes, different colours, from different areas - and tests each for its alcoholic content. All have about 12%. The theoretical assumption is now able to be generalised as a scientific law.

But next consider a wine judge. He will take all those same wines because they have a 12% content. That is his starting point, not the end of his journey. He will then assess each wine individually: its taste, colour, aroma, dryness, crispness, and so on. He will gradually eliminate bottle after bottle until finally he has chosen what he believes to be the most perfect example of wine.

For the scientist that one bottle is an undifferentiated unit which carries in itself no particular scientific significance. To the wine judge it is the final goal of his whole process.

I would suggest that the astrological process is not dissimilar to that used by our wine judge. When we first look at a birth chart we begin with its gross functions : “Your sun is in Aries and you have Sagittarius rising”. From that point we begin a process

of refining, adding, subtracting, and qualifying until eventually we have a delineation that as far as is possible reflects the nature of one unique human being. Science sees us in our commonality; astrology tries to see us in our uniqueness.

There is then a very real sense in which the goals of science are diametrically opposed to those of astrology. Science, by the essential nature of its methods, cannot deal with the unique but only with the common. We all know that when we try to reduce astrology to its common forms we end up with bad astrology. But that means that the only astrology that science can handle is bad astrology; because as soon as it becomes good astrology it becomes bad science.

This is perhaps well illustrated by Michael Gauquelin's books. He appeared to demonstrate quite clearly that certain planets rising corresponded to certain professions. In his book *The Cosmic Clocks* he wrote, "Planetary heredity seems to point the way to a scientific study of individual destiny". What is interesting is that nothing of the kind has happened. Both scientist and astrologer said of Gauquelin's work, "Well fancy that!", and promptly turned away and went on with other things. The reason for this apparently surprising neglect of such an important work, may lie in the last six words of the quotation, the scientific study of individual destiny.

The scientist does not want to study individual destiny any more than he wishes to study a wave or an insect as an individual. The Gauquelin results are an interesting scientific curiosity, but one that really leads the scientist nowhere. He does not wish to progress along the path of individualisation.

But the astrologer likewise has found no way ahead in Gauquelin. As a technique Gauquelin's work is far too imprecise to be of any practical value in specific cases. Thus as a scientific validation of astrology it is a doorway that neither scientist or astrologer really wishes to open any further. "Science" and "destiny" are not easy bed fellows.

So we return to our question, "Is it true?"

I think that I have simply wanted to suggest that this is not a question that can be answered by performing some kind of sophisticated statistical process. One does not find truth by performing experiments.

Of course on the other hand I would not wish to discourage any one from pressing along that enticing road that leads to the holy grail of astrology: the quest for the perfectly reliable failure free astrological system which is in some ultimate way, true.

However I think that truth - unlike facts - is a very personal thing. Facts we can all hold in common, but truth must possess qualities of meaning and satisfaction that bare facts cannot.

In June 1983 yet another prize was offered in the series. This - curiously - had rather different rules. These stated, "The prize will be awarded for convincing evidence that the accuracy of chart interpretations cannot be explained by non astrological features." For the present purpose 'convincing evidence' is that which is convincing to the judges.

So perhaps in the end astrology does not have to be true after all, to be of value even to those of a scientific turn of mind. Rather it needs to be personally convincing.

Now that is surely a most interesting concept, even though it may indeed be considered by some as a rather novel scientific principle.