

# Astrology isn't a Science, but Your Horoscope is More Real than You Think

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People talk a lot of shit about astrology...

*"I think it's a bunch of bullshit" – Seth Macfarlane*

...and they've got a point.

We came up with astrology ages ago back when science meant looking up at the stars and making up stories. Astrology isn't science but it is something lots of people identify with and used to explain their feelings, their issues, their relationships; and astrology may even be more than that.

Once upon a time astrology was really useful for science and maybe science could still learn a lot from astrology, even if you think it's bullshit.

## **CHAPTER 1: WAY BACK WHEN**

Once upon a time astrologers were scientists. The ancient Babylonians were clever enough to notice that Stars moved in patterns and they seem to affect daily life. The moon seemed to control everything from the tides to women's periods. It also just got really hot outside when the Sun was in a constellation that looked like a crab – well, sort of like a crab.

Maybe the Babylonians figured they could resolve the chaos on Earth if they understood the Stars better so they started collecting data and using that data to tell stories.

They actually became really good at predicting things like eclipses; of course, they thought eclipses were omens and they only cared about predicting them so they could protect their Kings from the angry gods. Side Note: if the ancient Babylonians wanted to trick a God out of killing their king they'd hide the king, appoint a fake king in his place then sacrificed the fake King so the real King survived every time.

We think the truth, though, is that the ancient Babylonians were doing incredible astronomy for their time. Astrology was driving scientific discovery and this was just the beginning.

## **CHAPTER 2: 2,000 YEARS LATER**

2,000 years later ancient people in Greece and, maybe India, discovered the earth revolves like a gyroscope. This movement is called precession and it happens incredibly slowly but astrology required such precise observations these people were able to notice that the earth is in fact revolving on a cycle that takes tens of thousands of years to complete.

The fact that they noticed this is pretty incredible. A lot of these astrologers probably understood astronomy better than most of us do stay and the discovery of precession changed astrology too.

Western astrology started correlating Sun signs to the seasons instead of to the Stars. It's why your Sun Sign is tied to the time of year you were born. That means if you were born in the beginning of summer, you'd be a cancer regardless of where the crab constellation actually is in the sky.

Astrology had evolved with Science but astrology had a problem. Astrology was all built around the idea that the Sun planets and all the stars revolved around Earth; and as science started suggesting otherwise, the astrologers made a bad bet and doubled down. Astrologers started ignoring science.

## **CHAPTER 3: THE FALL OF ASTROLOGY**

Enter the scientific revolution. With new tools like telescopes scientists were redefining the way we understood the universe; but not everyone was on board. For years Europe's last official court astrologer, Jean-Baptiste Morin, tried to defend astrology; it didn't go well. It got so bad he started openly predicting the deaths of former friends. Scientists made him a public laughingstock to convince the rest of Europe that astrology wasn't real science.

Around the same time a college student named Isaac Newton went to the local fair and picked up an astrology book. It didn't make sense to him but he wanted to understand it better so he started studying mathematics and eventually discovered that physics could explain the connections between earth and the stars far better than astrology ever could. Astrology lost.

#### **CHAPTER 4: BUT ASTROLOGY NEVER REALLY DIED**

Today, astrology is still something scientists like to make fun of but astrology is still a popular way to understand the universe. More than 40% of Americans think astrology is at least sort of scientific but astrologers themselves aren't very good at explaining how. One astrologer tried to tell me that quantum entanglement could explain astrology.

Astrology is especially well-suited to the way we communicate on the internet; from memes, to horoscopes, to personality quizzes - astrology has taken over web culture. It's also taking over the apps on your phone.

"We're completely floored by how much response we got." -- that's Banut Guler co-founder of Co-Star, a new social astrology app. Co-Star takes a NASA doodle on stars and planets and turns them into personalized predictions based on algorithms tuned by professional astrologers. Guler says it doesn't actually matter if people believe in astrology; the better question, she says, is whether it helps people.

#### **CHAPTER 5: HOW ASTROLOGY HELPS PEOPLE**

Co-Star was really popular from the moment it launched rising to one of the most popular lifestyle apps in the App Store. It has a download rates of nearly one thousand per hour and Guler has a theory about why:

*"On social media, or whatever, everyone's got this really polished version of themselves but using astrology they're having really earnest conversations about who they are and what kinds of people they love and which kind of people break their hearts and why they're having a like emotional hard time. Having even a language to talk about these things with, it just gives people a way to do that."* – Banut Guler

People don't love astrology because it's scientific, they love it because it's a powerful social tool. But maybe astrology can describe more than our emotional well-being and how we relate to others. Actually, some scientists are trying to figure out exactly how much of astrology is grounded in physical reality and they're doing some legitimate research.

## **CHAPTER 6: BIRTH SEASONS AND HEALTH**

Dr. Russell Foster is a circadian neuroscientist at the University of Oxford and he says there's something about astrology that is actually pretty scientific: "At its basic level astrology is saying that when you're born will influence your biology." Foster has spent years studying how the seasons affect who you are. It's one of astrology's core ideas and he says there's real science to back it up.

For instance, schizophrenia is more common for people born during January, February and March. Seasonal Affective Disorder is more common among people born in March and April.

*"It could be changes in your mother's physiology depending upon when you were conceived or the sort of signals that the mother gave you after birth as a result of feeding on breast milk. There is absolutely a statistical impact of when you were born on a whole range of our different parameters." - Dr. Russell Foster*

When you're born can affect everything from your lifespan to your height and weight. Your birth season can influence your personality and even your likelihood of developing an eating disorder or mental illness. Astrologers have always believed some version of that.

The stars and our bodies all follow natural rhythms and actually that idea has made astrology an important medical tool for centuries.

## **CHAPTER 7: MEDICAL ASTROLOGY**

This story starts around 500 years ago, "astrology and medicine had a long marriage" -- that's Dr. Lauren Kassell, a philosophy of science lecturer at the University of Cambridge. Kassell studies from the earliest surviving medical case books written around the year 1600. Medical records written by doctors using astrology.

At the time lots of doctors didn't actually write things down, they would simply treat patients on the spot based on their most obvious symptoms. But doctors who used astrology did things differently.

They had to draw astrological charts and, in the process, they wrote down lots of information about the patient; and they used all that information to make medical predictions - sort of like doctors do today.

*"They could use astrology as a diagnostic to try to work out how the timing of the illness would then foretell what was going to happen next in the disease because the art of prognostication is what doctors do" - Dr. Lauren Kassell*

Medical predictions based on astrology probably didn't lead to the best health outcomes, but medical astrology led to some of the earliest surviving medical journals which methodically tracked patient symptoms; and that's a practice central to modern medicine.

And Kassell says there's another practice modern doctors might want to take from those medical astrologers. The 17th century doctors Kassell studies treated patients using remarkable amounts of information: from bodily functions, to family histories to the positions of the stars.

Today, modern medicine is also learning to embrace complexity. That's especially true in what's called individualized medicine, where doctors study their patients down to the genetic level to design treatments for them specifically.

*"As we move into individual medicine I think there are lessons that it can learn from an older kind of medicine. Can actually say the complex number of factors that contribute to any single person's health and whatever illnesses they may suffer from rather than these blanket correlations." - Dr. Lauren Kassell*

Your Sun sign or whether Mercury's in retrograde won't actually affect you but that doesn't mean astrology has no value. Astrology can tell us a lot about how natural rhythms affect our health; it can help us reflect on our relationships and on the way we make decisions and, for what it's worth, you can help people feel connected with ancient history and the universe.

Astrology isn't science but maybe that's the wrong way to think about it.