

LINE ON LIFE

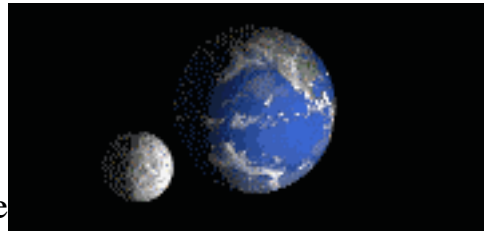
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The Fiction of Astrology *

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Of any pseudo-psychology (false-psychology), the most popular one seems to be **astrology**. A 1991 survey indicated that 25% of Americans believe in astrology. Another 22% are not sure if the stars and planets affect their personality traits and behavior. Why do most psychologists see this as fiction? Why does the public still tend to accept astrology?

Studies have repeatedly shown that astrology has no scientific validity. Here are some of the problems that lead most scientists to reject astrology.



1. Why do astrologers select the birth date over the time of conception? Conception — not birth — determines your fundamental genetic characteristics. (Could it be merely that the time and date of the birth can be easily determined?)
 2. Of the gravity pulls exerted on a baby at birth, those of the attending physician are greater than any star or planet (excluding the earth, of course).
 3. Since the time astrology began, the zodiac has shifted one full constellation. This shift tends to be ignored by most astrologers. (If these astrologers call you a Scorpio, you really are a Libra, and so on.)
 4. Repeated scientific studies have found no connection between astrological signs and leadership, physical traits, career choices, or personality traits. No connection has been found between the "*compatibility*" of astrological signs and the marriage or divorce rates of couples.
 5. Over 3000 predictions by famous astrologers were investigated by several studies. Only few were accurate. Of the "*successful*" predictions, they were typically either vague — "*There will be a tragedy in the eastern United States in the spring.*" — or easily guessed from current events.
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We will uncritically accept almost any statement, as long as it goes along with our belief systems.

There are at least three reasons why many people still believe in astrology _ even though it does not work. Many people show **uncritical acceptance** of astrological predictions. Most astrological charts are made up of *flattering* traits. Of course, if described with *desirable* traits, most of us would tend to accept our description. In contrast, would you accept this description?

Virgo: You are the logical type and hate disorder. Your nitpicking is unbearable to your friends. You are cold, unemotional, and usually fall asleep while making love. Virgos make good doorstops.

Even if astrological descriptions contain both good and bad traits, we may still accept them, as with the following description.

"You have a strong need for other people to like you and for them to admire you. You have a tendency to be critical of yourself. You have a great deal of unused energy, which you have not turned to your advantage. While you have some personality weaknesses, you are generally able to compensate for them. Your sexual adjustment has presented some problems for you. Disciplined and 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 pride yourself on being an independent thinker and do not accept others opinions without satisfactory proof. You have found it unwise to be too frank in revealing yourself to others. At times you are extroverted, affable, sociable, while at other times you are introverted, wary, and reserved. Some of your aspirations tend to be pretty realistic."

In a 1963 study, this same description was read individually to 79 college students who had taken a personality test. Only five of the 79 thought it did not adequately describe them. A similar, 1991 psychological study found that people rated the above profile as more accurate than their actual horoscopes!

Reread the description. Notice that it gives both ends of personality dimensions ("At times you are extroverted... while at other times you are

introverted...."). Acceptance of this description is based on the **fallacy of positive instances** _ remembering aspects that support your self-image, but ignoring the rest. Astrologers rely on this distortion.

Stated in such *general* terms, the above description can apply to almost anybody. This demonstrates the **Barnum effect**, named after the famous circus showman, P. T. Barnum, whose formula for success was, "*Always have a little something for everybody.*" To demonstrate this, read *all* of the 12 daily horoscopes in newspapers for several days. The predictions for other signs will fit you just as well. (If you have friends you want to convince, switch the horoscopes and signs around to see if they will still accept them as accurate.)

* Adapted from Dennis Coon's *Introduction to Psychology: Exploration and Application*, Brooks/Cole Publishing, 1998, pages 24-25.