

The persistence of astrology

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If you're like me, you encounter *USA Today* only when you're staying at a hotel that offers the newspaper to guests for free. The last time I read it was on 8 August, a date I recall because I saved that day's paper. On the front page of the Sports section was a story entitled "Charting the stars." Its subject: former NFL running back Ricky Williams's enthusiasm for astrology.

As Wikipedia succinctly puts it, astrology is the "study of the movements and relative positions of celestial objects as a means for divining information about human affairs and terrestrial events." That the motions of the Sun's planets and Earth's moon influence terrestrial events is not absurd. The diurnal tides raised by the Moon are the influence's most striking manifestation. Subtler and less familiar is the wobble in Earth's rotation axis induced by the gravitational fields of Venus and Jupiter. Every 405 000 years, the wobble has its largest amplitude, and seasonal differences are at their most intense. In a research paper published in May, Dennis Kent and his collaborators found evidence for the cycle in the isotope record of zircons going back millions of years.¹

But it is absurd to assert, as astrologers do, that the planets influence human character and that those influences are stamped on us at the moment of our birth. Isaac Newton was born prematurely on 4 January 1643. If his mother had carried him for the full term, the Sun could have been in Aquarius, not Capricorn, when he emerged from her womb.

Williams's love of astrology is evidently sincere. He finds studying and interpreting the movements of celestial objects to be a source of order, comfort, and enlightenment. "I think the logic that most of us use is the logic that's been handed down to us from our culture, from our parents, etc.," Williams told *USA Today* reporter Josh Peter. "Astro, meaning stars, one of our logic, came from somewhere older, deeper, richer. That's my idea. So it's to start to create more of an objective way to see our world and ourselves."

Why do Williams and others persist in believing in astrology? Besides the comforting sense of preordainment, perhaps they also value the shortcut to understanding people's characters. If an astrology adherent meets a stranger whose birthday is on 1 October—the publication day of this issue—he or she will know that the stranger, being a Libra, is kind, gentle, and a lover of beauty, harmony, and peace, according to online astrologer GaneshaSpeaks. I note that Heinrich Himmler and Ayatollah Khomeini were Libras.

It's tempting to dismiss astrology, given its ridiculousness.



But the urge to believe in it or something like it has repercussions beyond harmless horoscopes. Like astrology, personality tests such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator purport to slot people into a modest number of categories (16 in MBTI; 12 in astrology). Even though psychologists have demonstrated MBTI's invalidity and ineffectiveness, even though MBTI is inconsistent with current theories of personality, human resources departments still use it to inform personnel decisions.

Another insidious threat from astrology comes, I'm sorry to say, from the media. Peter's *USA Today* story is devoid of skepticism about astrology. Given how assiduously journalists challenge the claims of politicians, government officials, sports coaches, and CEOs, their timidity in the face of astrology's adherents is striking. It's as if journalists treat astrology like a religion and therefore a personal belief that's worthy of respect, rather than what it is: junk science.

Lastly, there's the troubling prevalence of horoscopes in women's magazines. In a June post to Exemple, "a site created by spiritual, magical, and lore enthusiasts," astrologer SylviaSky reviewed the horoscopes in newsstand magazines. The best, she wrote, appear in *Elle*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Marie Claire*, *Seventeen*, and *Town & Country*. Not up to scratch, because their horoscopes lacked "real astrology," were *Glamour*, *Star*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Tiger Beat*, and *In Touch*. Ironically, "real astrology" turns out to mean "astronomy"—that is, accurate knowledge of the planets' positions in the ecliptic plane.

Printing and distributing a full-color, glossy magazine is expensive. That horoscopes survive in women's magazines is evidence that the magazines' editors know that their readers appreciate them. After all, an editor's job depends on satisfying readers. So I hope a future editor of, say, *Elle* decides to kill the horoscopes department because her readers, thanks to improvements in science literacy, no longer want them.

Reference

1. D. V. Kent et al., *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. USA* **115**, 6153 (2018).

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