

Humanistic Astrology: A Critique

This 'more spiritual' form of astrology may be praiseworthy in its aims, but analysis shows it to be scientifically and philosophically empty.

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Astrology studies the relationship of a person to the surrounding cosmic environment at a particular time. The important aspects of the surrounding cosmic environment vary in time according to what are considered relevant and usable factors in helping people live a richer and fuller life. In the past, only the relationships between the then seven known planets and background constellations were considered; today astrologers include nine planets and the moon against the background of the earth's orbit. In the future, according to Dane Rudhyar, other scientific discoveries may be considered relevant and usable (Rudhyar 1971a, p. 8):

In other words, ten variables are considered sufficient to interpret and to attribute meaning to all past and present events or personal crises and to enable the Astrologer to predict future developments. Moreover, the relatively simple formula which a birth-chart constitutes is said by the Astrologer to define the very character of the "native" — even though human character is quite a complex affair! Obviously, it can only do so if the ten variables represent ten basic qualities of existence which may manifest at any and all levels of the human personality. We, therefore, are leaving altogether the scientific realm of quantitative measurements and in Astrology we are operating in terms of the organic interplay between universal qualities or life rhythms.

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Astrology attempts, Rudhyar continues:

. . . to show that underneath the complexity of traits of human character and of types of natural events and processes of existence, *one can distinguish a few basic qualities and patterns of relationships*; and it has claimed that these few basic factors could be related to the simple motions and interrelationships of the main components of the solar system; i.e., of our closest cosmic environment.

The main distinction between conventional astrology and humanistic astrology is in their orientations: conventional astrology is concerned with essentially practical matters, such as personality, relationships, vocation, and prediction; humanistic astrology is concerned exclusively with helping people understand themselves and their potentials and is generally more spiritual. The materialism of conventional astrology tends to be overemphasized by humanistic astrologers, and many conventional astrologers (especially those outside the United States) would deny that their astrology has ever been other than person-centered.

Another distinction is seldom recognized. The conventional astrological consultation is typically a one-time session in which the astrologer does most of the talking. The humanistic astrologer attempts to do less talking over more sessions, thus drawing out the client as in orthodox counseling and psychotherapy. The distinction is not a unique one because a counseling approach is used by many astrologers who do not subscribe to humanistic doctrine.

Origins

Humanistic astrology originated in the United States in the 1920s, largely as a reaction against the not-unexpected failure of the popular astrology of the day to satisfy spiritual needs. Until recently humanistic astrology has remained a largely American phenomenon.

The basic approach was formulated by Marc Edmund Jones, a Presbyterian minister and Theosophist-occultist who combined astrological ideas with then-current psychological theories in an attempt to relate occult and philosophical concepts to horoscope factors. Jones's approach was extended in the 1930s by the Theosophist-composer-poet-painter-astrologer Dane Rudhyar. Rudhyar incorporated the ideas of Jungian psychology and Eastern mysticism, and eventually coined the term "humanistic astrology." Later he was to develop "transpersonal astrology."

Rudhyar has been the main driving force behind humanistic astrology through his many lectures, over a thousand articles in astrology periodicals, and twenty-five books, the first of which was his best-known work, *The Astrology of Personality*, published in 1936.

Humanistic astrology did not really catch on until the U.S. astrology boom in the late 1960s. Since then it has developed minor variations; but, because the basic approach of Dane Rudhyar is common to them all, we restrict our analysis to his teachings.

The Astrology of Dane Rudhyar

Rudhyar's astrology is (in his own words) "non-scientific, subjective and purely symbolic" (Rudhyar 1979b). The means (i.e., chart style, astrological factors, and basic symbolism) are similar to those used by conventional astrologers; a humanistic birth chart is indistinguishable from a conventional birth chart. The difference lies in the ends: in conventional astrology the aim is usually fairly specific; in humanistic astrology the aim is not to indicate anything specific but to provide meaning (Rudhyar 1971). The humanistic approach is thus at once appealing, uplifting, and nontestable, and no doubt therein lies its attraction. In other words, in contrast to those astrologers who see astrology as an art or science, the humanistic astrologer sees it as a philosophy of life.

Rudhyar's style of writing is abstract, frequently obscure, and long-winded. Furthermore, Rudhyar himself states that the very nature of his astrology denies any objective evaluation (Rudhyar 1979b); thus for every page of the books examined one could ask: Why should anyone believe this? What evidence is there for this claim? Nowhere are answers provided.

Whatever our views about such disdain for facts, we would have no grounds for objection if Rudhyar presented humanistic astrology purely as a hypothesis—i.e., as ideas or beliefs—together with a discussion of why he believes it to be true, an indication of its merits and demerits, an outline of alternative hypotheses and why his should be preferred, and suggestions for experiments whereby his hypothesis could be proved or disproved. But Rudhyar does none of these things. Instead, everything is presented as gospel. He gives no hint of uncertainty, no survey of opposing views, no reference to findings from relevant scientific research, and indeed no evidence of clear thinking (see Wright 1982).

The result is at best a travesty of scholarship; at worst it is irresponsible, especially as Rudhyar is promoting a technique that, if applied to seriously disturbed persons, could conceivably be harmful. It has all the features shown by Gardner (1957, 1981) to be characteristic of the many strange pseudosciences (e.g., dianetics) that have periodically beset the world; this alone is strong grounds for suspicion. So it is not surprising that, despite Rudhyar's vast literary output spanning 45 years and the general thirst of psychologists for new approaches, his ideas have failed to achieve serious consideration in the psychological literature. Indeed this is the first critical survey to have appeared anywhere.

Although Rudhyar's approach is based upon unavailable evidence, we have been able to isolate a number of claims or attitudes that are sus-

ceptible to analysis. These are that humanistic astrology (1) deals with individual uniqueness whereas science does not, (2) is not concerned with precise character analysis or prediction, (3) is not empirical, (4) is holistic, and (5) embraces philosophical relativism. To these may be added (6) Rudhyar's response to criticisms of the kind we will make.

1. *Humanistic astrology, unlike science, deals with uniqueness of individuals.* Rudhyar (1970, p. 460) tells us that "modern science is obliged to ignore the individualness of every living entity," whereas humanistic astrology "deals essentially with the individual."

The first part is incorrect. It is true that science does aim at the general in the form of laws, but it does not follow that it is indifferent to individuals. The search for general laws is conducted in order to understand the individual members of a class of entities or events. Indeed, an ultimate test for a scientific theory is whether or not it explains individual events. For example, a test of a theory of learning in psychology is whether or not Johnny will learn better under the conditions specified by the theory. If it doesn't work then we reject or revise it.

Furthermore, every person is unique in that he has his own personality and physical characteristics, but he is not unique in that he shares many characteristics (chemical, psychological, and biological) with other human beings. Only because of these commonalities can we understand specific interactions between people. Theories in psychology and the social sciences are no doubt less complete than those in the physical sciences, but there has been enough progress in the past 50 years to enable us to deal with individuals. Rudhyar is simply wrong.

Rudhyar would have a point if humanistic astrology performed better than alternative theories. But he presents no comparative tests to demonstrate that this is so, and as far as we know neither does anyone else. All we have are unsupported statements and innuendo, and clearly this is not enough.

2. *Humanistic astrology is not concerned with precise predictions and precise character analysis.* Conventional astrology claims to be able to describe an individual's personality and the main features and events of his life. Rudhyar eschews such an approach. He rejects conventional astrology as outmoded and confused. He tells us that he sees:

. . . no value in the prediction of exact events or even of precise character analysis. Since I started writing on astrology in 1933, I have received many letters from people telling me how fearful or psychologically confused they had become after consulting with a well-known astrologer and being given biased character analyses and/or predictions of illness, catastrophe, or even death. Statistical research may help to show how unscientific such predictions usually are, but to me what is most necessary is to give to the question I have consistently asked, "What is astrology FOR?"—a more basic, philosophical and spiritual answer. (Rudhyar 1979a, p. 85)

According to Rudhyar (1971b), astrology should be used instead to help an individual to better understand his innate potentialities:

. . . its essential purpose is to inspire a greater understanding of the many factors and processes in an individual life, and to provide guidance in times of crisis and decision making. Such an approach to astrology is “holistic” in that it deals with the whole person, and with the birth chart as a whole, rather than with isolated planets or aspects labelled “good” or “bad.” It refers to any single happening, phase of growth, or period of crisis, to the entire life-cycle from birth to death. At times, it may even be able to suggest what conditions in the past were responsible for present difficulties, just as a pharmacist may infer from a doctor’s prescription the nature of the illness which the medicine is intended to cure.

Rudhyar (1975a, 1977) claims that the planetary positions at the time of an individual’s birth reveal the set of potentialities imprinted in the genetic code at birth but do not reveal what precise events or relationships will actualize these potentialities.

He tells us (1977, p. 34):

Everything in your chart is what it has to be, if you are to fully actualize what you were born for, what God meant you to be when you joined the company of the living . . . Allow it to serve its purpose.

This raises the question, How does Rudhyar know that the potentialities shown in the horoscope are in fact correct? The answer he gives (1979b) is that the issue is not whether the indication is correct but whether the individual sees it as valid. But if the correctness is irrelevant, why should anyone master Rudhyar’s system and go on to so much trouble to erect a horoscope for people? Why not just give everyone the same horoscope or variations on a theme? Clearly, if correctness is irrelevant, the system becomes theoretically barren and, in practice, bankrupt. The validity supposedly seen by the individual is discussed under the next heading.

3. *Humanistic astrology’s truths are not empirical.* Rudhyar (1979a, p. 84) tells us that he is “only interested in astrology as a means to help human beings give a fuller, richer meaning to their lives and to their relation to the universe in which they live.” He denies that astrology gives empirical truths (Rudhyar 1970, p. 459), i.e., truths based on observation or experience; rather it is sufficient if “after having studied . . . his . . . birthchart, (an individual) . . . is able to feel a direction and purpose in his life” (Rudhyar 1970, p. 7).²

Rudhyar is saying that what matters is not whether our beliefs are based on fact but whether they make us feel better. This reduces astrology to the role of a celestial placebo, to be consumed as directed regardless of the underlying reality. As with any placebo, there can be no objection to

its use provided it is honestly named. But Rudhyar provides no such label: there is no indication that his gospel is only a hypothesis or that (as shown by a large body of psychological research) the supposed benefits can be entirely explained without the need for astrology. In the food industry this kind of deception was outlawed years ago. Why should we be more accommodating when our potentialities are at stake?

Rudhyar's way of putting this is obscure, perhaps deliberately so. For example, in the previous quote he does not define what is meant by a "fuller, richer meaning" to life. Would more money, becoming taller, changing one's appearance, or becoming more self-satisfied contribute to a fuller or richer life? If so, how would astrology help to accomplish these things? Consider also the following from Rudhyar (1975b, p. 24):

The essential factor in the transformation of man's consciousness is the transmutation of the "solar" I into the "galactic" We. In this We-consciousness the principle of interpenetration operates. This is the galactic dimension of existence. In it, the sense of the separateness of isolated (i-so-lated!) entities (which are strictly and exclusively what they are) vanishes. Everything not only is related to everything else, but, I repeat, every entity—every mind, too—interpenetrates every other entity. As the consciousness of an individual person is able to operate in this spiritual dimension, it begins actively and formatively to participate in the process of integration of humanity at the level at which the formation of a "pleroma" (or fullness) of Man is possible—the level of the spiritual mind or supermind. At that level unanimity in consciousness prevails, yet each participant in the pleroma—or as a true occultist would say in the "White Lodge"—retains the ability to operate.

Here Rudhyar seems to be saying something like "When you join the club, everybody benefits." The critical reviewer is obliged to ask: Are these statements really true? If so, how does Rudhyar know all these things? Could anything falsify these claims? If not, what is being claimed? If they are based on his own experience, one cannot deny that they may have been of significant value for him, but how does he know that they are not merely subjective experiences that do not reveal any reality beyond the experience itself?³ (See Carloye 1980 on this point.)

The statements themselves are less than clear. We can visualize an entity interpenetrating another entity, but not countless entities interpenetrating one another. It is easier if interpenetrate means "have an effect on," but if that is what Rudhyar means why doesn't he say so? "Everything is related to everything else," says Rudhyar. Does he mean that everything is causally related to everything else (in which case he is contradicting his own anti-mechanistic thesis), or just related in the sense that everything in the universe has a common origin? The statement is at least trivially true, because one can always find a relationship between two or more things—even if it is just the relationship of simply being different.

The symbolism chosen by Rudhyar to convey meaning is so obscure that one wonders how it could give richer meaning to anyone's life. Such a masterly incapacity for clear expression can only frustrate understanding, but perhaps that is the whole point: too much understanding might, as with the Emperor's New Clothes, prove disastrous.

4. *Humanistic astrology adopts a holistic view of man and the universe.* Rudhyar uses holism both in its normal sense (i.e., to indicate humanistic astrology's concern with the whole person) and as a last-ditch stand against criticism.

In the latter case his use of holism involves not only attributing more to the whole than exists in the sum of its parts, but also the assumption that to examine an isolated part *in reductio* is meaningless. Just as a note alone has essential meaning only insofar as it is part of a melody, Rudhyar contends that life can only be understood when it is considered in relation to its much larger wholes—the earth, the solar system, and the universe (Rudhyar 1977, p. 32). To the questions “How can I know where I belong in this universe? or How can I find the musical score showing what my part is, where my life melody fits?” he responds (Rudhyar 1977, pp. 32–33):

The sky is the answer. Your birth chart [horoscope] and the way it unfolds its human birth potential is your score. It is the message of the universe to you—a message in the celestial language of symbols. But it has to be deciphered, decoded. Astrology provides you with the technical means.

Rudhyar (1977, p. 33) admits that astrology may not be the only way of finding one's place in the universe but that it is “the most universal, the clearest and most encompassing way—if it is properly used.” If an attempt is made to show otherwise, “it is not being used properly.” Compare this with faith healing: If you have faith you will be healed; if you are not healed this shows you have insufficient faith! An astrology like Rudhyar's, which is based on holism; can be neither proved nor disproved by scientific methods. By involving holism, astrology is elevated above criticism.

Rudhyar's argument can be easily refuted when it is reversed: If the individual parts don't work then the whole is not likely to work either. Furthermore, the argument is demonstrably invalid: If it were true, then reductionist approaches like behavior therapy or even car repairs would not work. Here our example is doubly relevant because, as Eysenck (1978) has shown, behavior therapy not only works well but works in such areas as bed-wetting and fear of spiders, where holistic therapies like psychoanalysis have failed absolutely. So the mere attribution of holism is no guarantee of benefit. We do not find this inconvenient fact mentioned anywhere in the writings of Rudhyar or his followers.

Rudhyar's use of holism involves other distortions. Thus he (1979a, p. 84) contrasts his own approach to that of the materialists: “If one

accepts the philosophy of Cartesian mechanism or 19th century 'scientific' materialism and the concept of every human being as a separate, essentially self-determined atomistic kind of individual, then man is understood in a certain way" (we are not told exactly what way but presumably it is mechanistic). His own view is a "holistic approach which is the foundation of the most recent physical theories in which the universe is shown to be a web of relationships, and all separate objects—including even atomic particles—are taken to be nothing but particular relationships" (Rudhyar 1979a, p. 83). There is a great difference between Rudhyar's astrology and modern physics, however. The recent physical theories have been arrived at through the testing of previous theories that have been rejected because they could not account for certain recalcitrant phenomena. Quantum mechanics, for example, is a physical theory developed to account for such phenomena, and it was subjected to much testing before it was accepted. By contrast, Rudhyar's theories do not seem to have been arrived at by the testing of anything.

Similarly Rudhyar (1979a, p. 84; see also 1971, p. 8) tells us that "the symbolism of astrology can be very useful—somewhat as the symbolism of group algebra has proven useful in interpreting the tracks produced by nuclear particles when atomic nuclei are violently broken down." The analogy is invalid. We can test the usefulness of group algebra and can demonstrate its predictive value, but nowhere does Rudhyar cite tests that demonstrate the value of astrology.

5. *Humanistic astrology adopts philosophical relativism.* Rudhyar adopts a relativistic response to criticisms; he contends that every position begs the question against its competitors. His relativism is a cultural or epochal relativism. He states (1979b): ". . . to me the question is not whether any method and its findings are 'true' or based on 'belief' but whether they are *valid* in the present state of our western civilization." And (1980): ". . . facts can only be defined as something which the consensus of at least relatively intelligent and mentally developed human beings belonging to a particular culture in a particular period consider objectively and measurably 'real.'" And (1980): "It is the mind which, on the basis of the paradigms of a particular culture, sets the rules for the interpretation."

Relativists like Rudhyar are frequently puzzled by the inability of others to see the apparent obvious truth of their positions. They are puzzled because, if their belief that relativism is true is sufficient for the truth of relativism, then they cannot be mistaken about the truth of relativism. In which case relativism is a proven, true belief. And, since every proven, true belief is an item of knowledge, it follows that relativism is true and the relativist knows it.

The relativist *thinks* he knows relativism is true but he does not; his "knowledge" is illusory.

(1) The pivotal premise in his argument is:

(P) Belief in relativism is proof of its own truth.

The general conclusion he is trying to establish is:

(C) Belief in p is proof of the truth of p .

His argument is a textbook example of circular reasoning; it begs the question, for the truth of the premise presupposes the truth of the very conclusion it is intended to prove.

- (2) The relativist has forgotten that the quest for knowledge begins with the recognition of the fact that some of our beliefs are false. The fundamental difference between knowledge and belief is that it is possible to believe something that is false but that it is impossible to have knowledge and be mistaken.

In arguing that he cannot be mistaken in his relativism when he believes it is true, the relativist not only begs the question but obliterates the distinction between knowledge and belief by making it impossible for *any* belief to be false. This is absurd, for if no belief can be false then no one can be mistaken about anything they believe. In particular, it means we cannot be mistaken in what we believe. But we believe relativism is false. Therefore relativism is false.

However, to say:

- (a) What is valid or true is just a matter of cultural belief.

It is just a misleading way to say:

- (a') Not everyone believes the same things to be true.

And this is not a contentious claim; it is a rather trivial fact confirmed by everyday experience. It is just a confusing way of drawing attention to the fact that people (and societies) differ in what they believe to be true. As anthropologists and sociologists are forever reminding us, people's beliefs about themselves, others, and the universe in which they live are relative to a great many things. *Beliefs are relative* to one's time and place, to the culture in which one lives, to the available evidence and to each individual's experience. The problem is to determine which of these varying and conflicting beliefs are true. It is with the recognition of the relativity of our beliefs that the search for knowledge begins. Relativism, then, is the problem, not the solution.

The view that truth *is* relative is not a contention about the nature of truth at all. Rather, it focuses attention on the tenuousness of our *knowledge* claims by emphasizing the contingency of the *evidential* basis on which they rest. It reminds us of the constant need to reassess our claims to know in the light of the latest and best available evidence. If our evidence changes we may have to change our convictions. In short:

Truth is absolute but our knowledge of the truth is relative to the evidence we have.

Although the relativity of conflicting beliefs proves we do not know everything, the fact that our knowledge in general is incomplete does *not* in itself prove a person does not know what he claims to know in a given instance.

6. *Rudhyar's response to criticisms.* We have seen that Rudhyar considers the correctness of astrological indications to be largely irrelevant; what matters is whether the indications are seen to be valid by the person concerned.

This argument has been criticized by Dean and Mather (1977, p. 2). They point out that such validity is purely subjective. Rudhyar and his followers "do not mention that subjective assessments are demonstrably unreliable, that the same argument could be used to validate anything from tea leaves to a million dollar check, and that benefit does not necessarily imply validity."

Examples of the last point would be a placebo and a chat over the garden fence that was beneficial even though (unknown to the participants) only polite lies were exchanged.

If a person believes he can fly, according to Rudhyar, the results of the belief are valid for that individual (even though the belief is mistaken) and he should benefit from it. Thus the mistake doesn't matter. This obviously becomes indefensible should his belief lead him to jump off a cliff.

Rudhyar's response (1979a, 1979b, 1980) to this criticism evaded the issue by saying his approach can be understood only in terms of his entire life's work, by debating the meaning of the words "fact" and "reality," by invoking the error of Newtonian mechanics in the light of more recent physical theories, by denying that the scientific method can ever present us with truth, by simply begging to differ, or by successively deflecting the issue back to validity (which is where we came in): "If a Christian mystic says . . . [he knows that] his destiny is to be reunited with the Father, it would be utterly foolish for me to try to tell him that this knowing is not valid—that it is only a belief and not a fact" (Rudhyar, 1980). However, faith, of whatever intensity or conviction, is insufficient to establish the truth of what is believed. If it were, all beliefs would be equally legitimate and equally defensible.

In effect Rudhyar has defined his position as being beyond science; hence any scientific arguments are automatically irrelevant. "To reduce astrology to a practice susceptible to [objective analysis] . . . is to me to repudiate its very special character as a discipline of understanding—a path to broad psycho-spiritual wisdom" (Rudhyar 1980).

It will not do to claim, as Rudhyar has, that humanistic astrology is a way of life rather than a set of beliefs, as if this absolves humanistic astrol-

ogy of its responsibility to establish the truth of its claims. The argument, such as it is, fails, for a person's way of life is a reflection of his beliefs. Consequently, justifying a way of life requires the establishment of the truth of the beliefs underlying it.

The real foundation of Rudhyar's thesis, and of his defense against criticism, is nontestability. The issue is thus not whether Rudhyar's ideas make sense but whether anything that has no provision for the elimination of error is worth having.

If it could be shown that the clients of humanistic astrologers really do become more contented or have fuller, richer lives than clients offered alternative approaches, such as orthodox counseling, religion, one of the secular humanisms, or (as a control) nothing, then there would be some reason for taking his claims seriously. But once again Rudhyar presents no studies showing this to be so. If it is argued that (for whatever reason) such a demonstration is impossible, then humanistic astrology can be dismissed. If such a demonstration is possible, then the onus is on Rudhyar and his followers to provide it. Until this demonstration is forthcoming, there is clearly no reason to believe in either the principles or the practice of humanistic astrology.

Conclusion

The humanistic astrology of Dane Rudhyar is praiseworthy in its aims and shows an undoubted breadth of vision and concern for humanity. But it is dressed in obscurity and obfuscation. Worse, it rests on a radical subjectivism (relativism) that entails that no belief about anything could be false, thereby obliterating the distinction between knowledge and belief. It is therefore no surprise that his theory has no provision for detection and elimination of error. Buyers should accordingly beware.

Notes

1. The notion of synchronicity plays a strong role in humanistic astrology. This position discards the notion that the constellations and planets have a causal relationship to events on earth. Instead, advocates argue that astrology is predicated on planetary and stellar *correlations* with terrestrial events. They contend that the pattern of any instant of time on earth is reflected in the angular relationships of heavenly bodies. Astrological theory therefore postulates *a-causal* relationships between the cosmos and terrestrial events. This absolves the astrologers of engaging in the difficult task of looking for a causal mechanism for their alleged relationships.

However, synchronicity does not seem to be without its serious problems. First, the concept is scientifically sterile. It is a dead end, since it does not encourage the search for new antecedent-consequent relationships. It can only be used to "explain" events after the fact. Second, the theory of synchronicity appears to be conceptually muddled. The synchronistic idea that the meaningfulness of some coincidence or relationship is found in nature is wrong. Meaningfulness must be linked to a point of view or perspective, and a point of view cannot be divorced from an interpreter who "owns" that point of view (Zusne

and Jones 1982).

2. Rudhyar (1977b, p. 34) reacts with horror to the view that astrology should be investigated by scientific means:

If it could actually be proven by statistics and all the modern scientific techniques that it is a science, reliable in its predictions, great possible harm could be done to humanity. For it would at once be used by governments and big business to control the lives of people and to establish an astrologically determined caste system through a rigid analysis of what supposedly every person is capable of doing, in general and at any particular time.

3. The humanistic astrologer Michael Shallis (1981) argues that astrology rises from a totally different world-view from that of science and is not a system of knowledge in the way science is. He believes that astrological knowledge is acquired through *intuition*.

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