



WHY CORRELATIONAL RESEARCH IN ASTROLOGY IS DOOMED TO GO NOWHERE...

...And we should get on with it anyway

Let me start with a confession: when I started working with astrology, some 15 years ago now, I was quick to think that as a trained methodologist and researcher, I might be able to take astrological research to the next level with better research designs, multivariate testing and some more of that stuff. How cute of me 😊. Meanwhile, I have been amazed for years that this approach to astrological research is still so dominant in the astrological literature.

The (necessary) failure of astrological correlation research

How does this form of research work? You take a phenomenon, event, character trait or condition and try to link it to astrological symbolism. I will take an example that I saw recently. It is chosen completely at random, I could have chosen dozens of other examples.[1] A fellow astrologer discovers a connection between the death of a loved one (the event) and the centaur Chiron. She sees that it is activated by progressions or is itself active in progressions in the horoscope of relatives. She then searches for more examples, seeing her hypothesis confirmed that Chiron is often 'active' in the horoscope of people who lose a loved one.

This kind of astrological research is widely encountered. What's wrong with it? Quite a lot. Let's start with the most convincing argument one can use to refute this kind of research: empiricism itself. If there is one constant in the empirical research on astrology over the last -say- 2,000 years, it is that while these kinds of connections exist in the minds of astrologers, they never (as in: never!) stand up under critical empirical tests. Cicero wrote it in his *De Divinatione* back in 44 AD, a group of very eminent scientists wrote it in a manifesto in 1975 ('Objections to astrology'), and Geoffrey Dean has made it a crusade to bring this simple fact to the astrological him/her/they: astrology doesn't work.[2][3] At least not in this way, I'll add for my part.

To clarify my point, it is important to involve a so-called ontological theorem, that is, we need a statement about the nature or reality of astrological symbols and their relation to the reality of the material realm in which we live. Every astrologer knows: an astrological symbol can be indicated at the material level by the most diverse phenomena. Saturn is a planet, time, death, your mother-in-law, lead, et cetera. However, the reverse is also true: any phenomenon in matter can indicate a variety of symbols. To stay with the example of the death of a loved one: for one loved one this means loss (Neptune), another may experience grief or the end (Saturn), yet another experiences powerlessness (Pluto). But it is equally possible that the relative experiences something substantial about connections (Venus) or that the world view expands through the event (Jupiter). In short, the death of a loved one has no single symbol and certainly not one that we as outsiders can assign to it. And what is true of the death of a loved one is true of all phenomena in matter. We can now see why empirical correlation research ('when a loved one dies, we see Chiron active') can never yield anything.

Correlation versus analogy

The English philosopher and astrologer Geoffrey Cornelius points out the distinction between a correlation and an analogy in this context[4]. I briefly summarise his idea here in my own words. A correlation indicates the connection of phenomena in the material realm (people who smoke a lot are more likely to die of lung cancer), an analogy in astrology indicates an astrologer assigning an astrological symbol to a material reality: a client talks about mother and the astrologer looks at the Moon in the horoscope. According to Cornelius, this activity, of seeing the analogy, is of a substantially different quality than establishing a correlation. To see analogy requires mental activity. Or more precisely: to see an analogy, the astrologer links a spiritual reality (astrological symbolism) to a material phenomenon (a person, behaviour, a planet, a rock). In other words, to see astrological symbolism 'at work' requires human signification; without an astrologer, there is no astrological symbolism. It is precisely this aspect that is missing in correlation research: it lacks the spiritual activity of the astrologer, narrowing astrological symbolism down to a one-dimensional manifestation in matter. This explains -again- why this type of research has never yielded anything.

Living vs. dead interpretation and the 'participation mystique'

The amazement I mentioned earlier has to do with the fact that astrologers use research methods they know do not work. To quote Cornelius again, he makes a distinction that every astrologer knows from his own experience: the distinction between what I will call living and dead interpretation of astrological symbolism. A dead interpretation is one in which rules are applied without the astrologer experiencing the truth of the symbolism: the astrologer gets a plutonic person in front of him or her and starts talking - purely on the basis of available knowledge - about power/powerlessness, unconsciousness, et cetera. In fact, anyone can make such an interpretation, including the untrained astrologer: a matter of looking up information. A living interpretation, on the other hand, is characterised by the fact that the truth of the astrological symbolism is experienced by the astrologer. This experience is sometimes referred to as a 'participation mystique'. A designation of the French anthropologist Lévy-Bruhl, who uses it to express that people are able to connect mystically or mysteriously with a spiritual reality that is below, behind and above the material reality. In fact, this is the great mystery of astrology (and numerous other esoteric approaches).

I suppose most astrologers believe that the meaning of astrological interpretation lies somewhere in this mystery. What is surprising then is that they nevertheless do astrological research in a way that leaves out this crucial active ingredient.

Truth in spirit and matter

As astrologers, we live in both a spiritual and a material reality. Both realities have their own laws and (thus) their own truth. The truth in matter lies in empirical facts, the truth in spirit we can know only in our hearts (and requires consciousness). I believe the spiritual reality of astrological symbolism touches us at that level. That is probably why we all started astrology at one time or another. At the same time, we live in a material realm as well and at that level we encounter distinction, duality, facts and disagreements. In my case, this explains why I went to study astrology when my mind initially told me: the facts can't be right. At this material level, we also encounter the empirical correlation research that shows that the supposed links between empirical phenomena and astrological symbolism do not exist.

So should we just give up? Sure not, we are all entitled to our hobbies on the material plane. For instance, I myself enjoy writing these texts. I suspect this kind of material activity can also help us access the truth dimension in spirit, where the actual astrological work takes place. So my motto would be: let a thousand flowers bloom because they are one flower.

Endnotes

[1] I am grateful to the astrologer in question, because through her I came up with the idea for this article.

[2] There are many sources. <http://www.astrology-and-science.com/index.htm> is a good starting point of relevant authors, arguments, research reviews, et cetera. The work of Dean and other sceptics can be found at: https://www.csicop.org/about/about_csi, among others.

[3] One exception is always mentioned: the research of French statistician Gauquelin on the so-called 'Mars effect' (athletes have mars significantly more often just above the ascendant or on the MC). There is much to be said about this, but I am willing to concede that one of the many thousands of studies over the centuries has confirmed astrology. Draw your own conclusions.

[4] The website <http://www.cosmocritic.com> has some of Cornelius' writings. Most elaborate are his ideas in: Cornelius G. (1994) *The Moment of Astrology: Origins in Divination*, London: Arkana Penguin Books.

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