

# An Introduction to Archetypal Astrology

Written by: Richard Tarnas Tags: archetypal astrology, archetypal cosmology, Cosmos and Psyche, Richard Tarnas Posted date: January 3, 2011 | No comment

A birth chart or natal chart is a portrait of the heavens at the moment of one's birth. The Sun, Moon and planets are positioned around the chart to reflect their positions around the Earth when one was born. For example, where the symbol for the Sun is located in the chart reflects the time of day one was born: thus, if one were born at noon, the Sun would be at the top of the chart (called the Midheaven), while if one was born at dawn the Sun would be shown rising on the left side of the chart near the eastern horizon (called the Ascendant).

The main difference between the natal chart and the astronomical reality it portrays is that the natal chart has two dimensions rather than three, and it does not reflect the varying distances of the planets from the Earth. What the birth chart does convey is the exact pattern of angular relationships existing between the planets and the Earth at the time and place of one's birth. The basic principle of astrology is that the planets have a fundamental, cosmically based connection to specific archetypal forces or principles which influence human existence, and that the patterns formed by the planets in the heavens bear a meaningful correspondence to the patterns of human affairs on the Earth. In terms of individuals, the positions of the planets at the time and place of a person's birth are regarded as corresponding to the basic archetypal patterns of that person's life and character.

Astrology makes possible a further understanding of one's life – its cycles, its ups and downs, the crises and the breakthroughs, the periods of major change and transformation – through the study of transits. Transits occur when the planets currently in the sky form certain geometrical patterns with respect to the planetary positions at one's birth. The nature of those patterns – which planets are involved and how they are positioned – appears to correlate in a strikingly consistent way with the archetypal character of the experiences one tends to have at that time.

## Three Primary Issues

To begin, I would like to address three important matters that people usually need discussed when approaching astrology. The first concerns the nature of archetypes, the second involves the question of determinism vs. free will, and the third concerns the nature of astrology's causal mechanism, or why it works. These three issues are closely interrelated.

First, what is an archetype? Archetypes can be understood and described in many ways, and in fact much of the history of Western thought from Plato and Aristotle onward has been concerned with this very question. But for our present purposes, we can define an archetype as a universal principle or force that affects – impels, structures, permeates – the human psyche and human behavior on many levels. One can think of them as primordial instincts, as Freud did, or as transcendent first principles as Plato did, or as gods of the psyche as James Hillman does.

Archetypes (for example Venus or Mars) seem to have a transcendent mythic quality, yet they also have very specific psychological expressions – as in the desire for love and the experience of beauty (Venus) or the impulse towards forceful activity and aggression (Mars). Moreover, archetypes seem to work from both within and without, for they can express themselves as impulses and images from the interior psyche, yet also as events and situations in the external world.

Jung thought of archetypes as the basic constituents of the human psyche, shared cross-culturally by all human beings, and he regarded them as universal expressions of the collective unconscious. Much earlier, the Platonic tradition considered archetypes to be not only psychological but also cosmic and objective, as primordial forms of a Universal Mind that transcended the human psyche. Astrology would appear to support the Platonic view as well as the Jungian, since it gives evidence that Jungian archetypes are not only visible in human psychology, in human experience and behavior, but are also linked to the macrocosm itself – to the planets and their movements in the heavens. Astrology thus supports the ancient idea of an *anima mundi*, or world soul, in which the human psyche participates. From this perspective, what Jung called the collective unconscious can be viewed as being ultimately embedded within the cosmos itself.

The issue of free will vs. determinism: It used to be believed that astrology revealed a person's destined fate, that the birth chart was rigidly deterministic. Properly understood, however, astrology can serve to greatly increase personal freedom, rather than limit it. Partly this is because awareness of the basic archetypal structures and patterns of meaning in one's birth chart allows one to bring considerably more consciousness to the task of fulfilling one's deepest potential, one's authentic nature. But astrology's emancipatory character also derives from the fact that the more deeply we understand the archetypal forces that affect our lives, the more free we can be in our dealings with them. If we are altogether unconscious of these potent forces, we are like puppets of the archetypes: we then act according to unconscious motivations without any possibility of our being intelligent agents interacting with those forces. To the exact extent that we are conscious of the archetypes, we can respond with greater autonomy and self-awareness. This is of course the whole rationale for depth psychology, from Freud and Jung onward – to become conscious of the unconscious, to release ourselves from the bondage of blind action, to explore and experience the hidden forces in the human psyche. Astrology's great merit is that it seems to reveal very precisely which archetypes are especially important to each person, how they interact with each other, and when and how they are most likely

to be expressed in the course of each life.

Related to this issue is the question of our birth, and how random is the fate by which we are assigned something as weighty as the birth chart with its specific configuration of planets. I personally believe that the circumstances of our birth are not accidental, but are in some sense a consequence of our spiritual and karmic character. Like many others, I have come to believe that we choose the circumstances of our lives, we choose the family and culture and age into which we are born, and that this choice is somehow made from a higher level of our spiritual being than that of which we are usually conscious.

From this point of view, the birth chart is not the randomly allotted prison structure of our inexorable fate, but can be seen rather as defining the basic structure of our potential unfolding – suggesting the personal gifts and trials that we have chosen for this lifetime to work with and evolve through. Astrology illuminates the fundamental archetypal dynamics that profoundly condition our lives, which is not to say they absolutely determine our lives. Because our personal response to life always contains an element of unpredictability and potential freedom, and because astrology gives a greater understanding of our basic archetypal complexes and their timing, then a knowledge of our birth chart and transits can significantly increase the range of options, flexibility and intelligence with which we approach life. The study of astrology can be extraordinarily liberating.

Finally, the issue of a causal mechanism, or why astrology works: It seems unlikely to me that the planets send out some kind of physical emanations that causally influence events in human life in a mechanistic way. The range of coincidences between planetary positions and human existence is just too vast, too experimentally complex, too aesthetically subtle and endlessly creative to be explained by physical factors alone. I believe that a more plausible and comprehensive explanation is that the universe is informed and pervaded by a fundamental holistic patterning which extends through every level, so that a constant synchronicity or meaningful correlations exists between astronomical events and human events. This is represented in the basic esoteric axiom, “as above, so below,” which reflects a universe all of whose parts are integrated into an intelligible whole.

From this perspective, the planets themselves are not “causing” anything to be happening in our lives, any more than the hands on a clock are now causing it to be 7:30 PM. Rather, the planetary positions are indicative of the cosmic state of the archetypal forces at that time. The fact that the planets constantly seem to indicate these things with such accuracy simply suggests that the cosmic order is much more profound and pervasive than our conventional beliefs have assumed. But the relationship between a specific planetary pattern and a human experience is best seen as one of meaningful correlation or correspondence, not one of simple linear causality.

There is, however, a sense in which causality does enter into the astrological perspective, and this is the sense of archetypal causation (comparable to Aristotle’s concepts of formal and final causes). While the physical planets themselves may bear only a synchronistic connection with a given human experience, that experience is nevertheless being affected or caused – influenced, patterned, impelled, drawn forth – by the relevant planetary archetypes, and in this sense it is quite appropriate to speak, for example, of Saturn (as archetype) “influencing” one in a specific way, or as “governing” certain kinds of experience.

But why should the cosmos have established a systematic correspondence between planetary patterns and archetypally patterned phenomena in human lives? There are many possible answers to this question, not the least of which might point toward a kind of intrinsic aesthetic splendor in the universe, an overflow of cosmic intelligence and delight that reveals itself in this continuous marriage of mathematical astronomy and mythic poetry. But in more pragmatic human terms, my sense of astrology is that the constant coincidence between planetary positions and human lives exists as a kind of universal code for the human mind to unravel, so that we can better understand ourselves and our world, rediscover our deep connection to the cosmos, and be more complete human beings.

## About the author

### Richard Tarnas

Richard Tarnas is a cultural historian and professor of philosophy and depth psychology at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco, where he is founding director of the Philosophy, Cosmology and Consciousness graduate program. His first book, *The Passions of the Western Mind*, is required reading at many Universities. At the website for his second book, [www.cosmosandpsyche.com](http://www.cosmosandpsyche.com), he provides an in-depth description of the archetypal forces and the planetary “aspects” that impact them.