

Cecil Adams on Astrology

Dear Cecil:

I trust you can settle a matter that threatens to create a vast rift between my love and I. What is the absolute, unequivocal straight dope on astrology? My girl maintains that while horoscopes in newspapers may be rubbish, astrology as a whole is not. She believes that a person's traits are dictated by their astrological chart (i.e., time of birth, position of planets, etc.) and that a person's zodiac sign may be guessed by simply observing them. In fact, she has done this on occasion. I say astrology is completely illogical, and that her predictions are the result of a 12-to-1 shot paying off. Cece, set my lady straight. — B. Hayes, Chicago

Cecil replies:

Couple problems you got here, B. Number one, it's "between my love and me," not I. (For that matter, it's "couple problems you've got," not you got, but when I massacre the language it's art.) Number two, don't count on me to get your girlfriend turned around. My powers of persuasion are awesome, but experience shows these people are immune to argument.

The usual objections to astrology boil down to: how the hell could it possibly work? After all, the stars are unthinkably distant, and the planets, an essential part of astrology, revolve around the sun, not the earth. Besides, what's so magical about the time of your birth—wouldn't it make more sense if your personality were determined by the time of your conception? On top of everything else, astrologists don't even agree on how to do charts—check out the difference between tropical and sidereal zodiacs sometime.

But this is not what astrology buffs want to hear. To them it doesn't matter that there's no plausible basis for astrology; they claim it just "works." By this they mean a skilled astrologer can give you genuine insights into your personality. In this they're undoubtedly correct—but the credit goes not to astrology per se but to the practitioner.

Many experienced astrologers are pretty fair amateur shrinks. In the course of a one or two hour consultation they can usually get a good fix on your problems. Back this up with a lot of BS about Mars conjunct Uranus and the effect is convincing—and what the heck, it may even do you some good.

But to say astrology can be helpful doesn't mean it has any objective validity. Studies have shown that (1) astrologers trying to deduce someone's personality from his chart do no better than chance; (2) astrologers studying the same chart come to opposite conclusions as often as not; (3) the birth dates of people with occupations linked to certain signs (e.g., politicians, scientists, soldiers) are in fact randomly distributed throughout the zodiac; and (4) couples with "incompatible" signs get married and divorced at the same rate as compatible couples.

The fact is, people who want to believe in astrology will convince themselves it works no matter what. In one study of 22 astrology buffs, half were presented with their real horoscopes and half were presented with fake charts saying the exact opposite. Both groups said their horoscopes were 96 to 97 percent accurate.

So maybe you'd better give this relationship some thought. If your girlfriend's not rational now, what's she going to be like when you're arguing about who's supposed to feed the cat?

—CECIL ADAMS