

Is astrology a pseudoscience?



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In order to ascertain whether or not something is a pseudoscience or 'fake' science, one must first know what pseudoscience is. Here, I am going to illustrate the many different points which distinguished philosophers such as Michael Radner, Denise Radner and Paul Thagard have made on what is a pseudoscience to evaluate astrology, which is the study of how the heavenly bodies such as the planets and the constellations affect us and instead offer that Astrology is simply not science, much like religion or poetry is not like science.

Already, if one were to look up Astrology in a collection of online dictionaries, there will be definitions such as ' a pseudoscience claiming divination by the positions of the planets and sun and moon' however whether the writer of such definitions knows why or how astrology is a pseudoscience remains a mystery, perhaps they, like the 192 scientists and 19 noble prize winners who signed the statement against astrology Bart Bok, Paul Kurtz and Lawrence Jerome, support it being a pseudoscience because it goes against their instincts and rational thinking which is really not enough evidence for anything to be classified as a pseudoscience. For example the three most important issues raised by the statement which was signed by these scientists proclaimed that:

Astrology originated as part of a magical world view.

However so did chemistry (it arose from alchemy) and doctors used to believe that the body was made of humours and today even honour the Hippocratic origins of medicine by still making the Hippocratic Oath.

The planets are too distant for there to be any physical foundation for astrology.

While the planets are distant, there are certainly ways distant objects can influence our lives. For example if the sun were to explode, that would certainly make an impact upon our daily lives.

People believe in astrology out of longing for comfort.

While some people believe astrology out of longing for comfort, so they too, believe in religion or the existence of gravity every time they jump so that one does not fear that whenever one jumps one may drift off into space and thus this does not define astrology as a pseudoscience.

If there is anything to speak for astrology as a science it would be that astrology uses the scientific method. The scientific method as developed by many scientists like Einstein as well as well known philosophers such as Kuhn, Popper, Feyerabend and Lakatos consists of observation, hypothesis, experimentation and verification. As astrology focuses on observing the location of the sun and the planets as well as their effect on people, which is the basis of astrological charts and readings it clearly satisfies the first condition. When an astrologist makes a chart of someone's birth and makes reading upon that of how their life will be like, that is a hypothesis. The subject living his or her life is the experiment and at the end of their life they can verify whether or not the reading came true. Verification is strongly focused on the results not falsifying the hypothesis but even for lack of that, does an experiment falsifying the hypothesis make it unscientific? High school chemistry experiments were still science experiments even if the <https://assignbuster.com/is-astrology-a-pseudoscience/>

results were not what we expected to them to be. Thus we can say, yes astronomy does follow the scientific method, although through experiments such as one conducted by a French psychologist Michel Gauquelin, where he sent the horoscope of a criminal to roughly 150 people as their horoscope and 94% believed it fit them¹, we can see that actual verification may be something difficult to achieve when it comes to astrology, most likely because of how vague and all encompassing the readings prove to be.

To some of us, the fact that astrology doesn't make sense in that there are no physical forces in play from planets millions of miles away is enough to declare astrology a pseudoscience. However, as is pointed out by various astrologists, Einstein's theory of curved space seemed absurd until it was proven true and many similarly absurd proposals are still considered science.

Philosophers through the ages have also debated (although mostly just agreed) that astronomy is a pseudoscience. One of the most famous demarcations of science is Karl Popper's theory of falsifiability; however astrology can't be classified as a pseudoscience using this. Thagard brought up the points very well in his article 'Why is astrology a pseudoscience' that Popper himself said that 'no observation ever guarantees falsification' because the hypotheses can always be changed and thus falsification can only be a category if a better theory is invented². Thus although no hypotheses made by astrologists can convince them that astrology doesn't work, astrology can technically be replaced by a modern day Ptolemy-maybe the composition of the planets affect us instead of the gods that rule them or something and thus is falsifiable.

Speaking of the gods however, therein lays one of the greatest weak points that show astrology as something that isn't very scientific. Science is the same through all languages, hydrogen is still an atom made of a proton no matter whether its name is in English or Chinese. The planets, named after Greek gods are not the same across languages yet names of things appear to be of the utmost importance to astrologers. Venus who is named after the goddess of love deals with the emotional side of things while Mars is the god of war and thus if you're born under the house of Mars you will be 'evil, warlike and contentious because of [your] choleric nature'³.

Even more worrisome is that the 12 zodiac constellations arose from the Babylonians around the same time the Chinese and Hindus had 28 constellations. Furthermore, the names of the constellations appear to also affect people who are born when they're in the sky, for example people that are born when the sun is in the quadrant of the sky where Aries the Ram is are supposed be aggressive and assertive like the animal itself.

This leads us to the various marks of pseudoscience that D. and M. Radner have set out of which being able to satisfy any one of these conditions is considered to be unscientific⁴.

Anachronistic Thinking

Their first demarcation refers to reverting to age old theories that once held fruition in the past. Astrology is a fairly age old theory that was the origins of astronomy whereby in the past astrologers were also astronomers and observed the movements of the planets and the stars. As the correlations of the position of the planets and stars appear to have been passed down from the beginning of astrology from observations made on how the planets affect

people from thousands of years B. C., this does seem to apply. Furthermore the moon and the sun are still considered planets in astrology and one would think if Astrology was kept up to date, that someone would have removed them from the equation. In comparison, in order to see the effects of drugs on people we have textbooks which would have new editions every few years to show new findings and remove findings that have been proven false. The main textbook of astrology is still Ptolemy's Tetrabiblos which was written in 200 AD. In Thagard's article ' Why astrology is a pseudoscience' Thagard also proclaims that astrology is uncritical and unprogressive because it never tries to solve unsolved problems like what happens in natural disasters where people with many difference charts, star signs, houses all die in the same way².

Looking for mysteries

While astrology does not appear to be deal with mysteries of human experience such as UFOs, there are many mysteries associated with something that is supposed to be scientific. If one were to look up the chemical reaction between hydrogen and oxygen, one would find the same answer from any knowledgeable chemist. If one were to ask 10 different astrologers for their horoscope, one would find many different readings which opens the questions as to which reading is the correct reading.

For example a collaboration of studies show that in a group of 559 astrologers when 5- 30 of them are asked to agree or disagree with a given reading of 762 different birth charts, most of them can't even agree that each chart means the same thing.

Appeals to Myths

Astrology does not actually appeal to myths, instead a quick browse of the Journal of Astrology website would show that it does appeal to old readings that have come true⁶, namely those made to estimate political outcomes and lives and deaths. However, absent on the site are indication of the numbers or examples of death predictions that have not come true.

The grab-bag approach to evidence

Astrology does appear to favour large amounts of evidence in that astrologers refer to how many readings in the past have come true (disregarding those that haven't) and this method is helped along through the popularity of daily horoscopes in our newspapers whereby every horoscope can most likely correspond to every person. In fact the collaboration of 54 studies that have tested astrologers by giving them charts and telling them to match their owners showed that the average rate of success was the same as if you or I randomly matched them.

Irrefutable Hypotheses

While astrology is not irrefutable there are many ways and loopholes which allow it to never reach that point. For example, if a reading is wrong a) the person taking the reading could be deluding themselves and really are what the reading says b) the astrologer could have read it wrong c) The person lied about their location of birth and time d) this particular astrologer made it up but the next may make a true reading. The list of possible causes for already vague readings to be wrong that doesn't disprove astrology in any way can go on and on as there is no possible 'control' to be tested (i. e. someone who isn't under the influence of the stars). It is because of the ease

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at which these wrong hypothesis can be explained and are explained that causes Popper to claim that astrology is irrational and Kuhn to claim it to be astrology's downfall when it comes to being a science as it means their results will never lead to any sort of further research or progression^{2, 7}.

Argument from spurious similarity

A mark of pseudoscience is that the pseudoscientific has a base of principles which are already part of legitimate science. Astrology definitely has a basis in astronomy however there was once a time where astronomy was based on astrology and the star charts and movements of planets used in astrology would coincide with those used in astronomy.

Explanation by scenario

Astrology uses its own laws to explain different readings and conclusions. For example ' Uranus is likely a cooling planet due to its modern rulership of Saturn's traditional sign Aquarius '. These rules and laws most likely originated from original scientific observations of the ecliptic rotations of the planets when it was believed that everything revolved around the earth (seeing as the moon and the sun were classified as planets) and then further built upon with various theories from the Gods they are named after, for example Jupiter is the chief of the gods and thus can rule over other gods.

Research of Exegesis

Astrologers are selective in their use of scientific research, they do not as many pseudo scientists do, which is to simply take science as statements instead of looking for the reasoning and facts beneath but they do not take into account all scientific research either. For example Michel Gauquelin in

an experiment found that there is a greater than chance association of people who are born under Saturn's rising or zenith to be scientists and that example may be used by astrologers as a scientific experiment that supports astrology. However, experiments looking at horoscopes of twins born in the same location and at the same time with drastically different futures lay hidden beneath the carpet.

Refusal to revise in light of criticism

This mark of pseudoscience is something that relates greatly to astrology. Because the Earth is not perfectly spherical, the axis of the earth tilts back and forth in a 26000 year cycles and due to this, the quadrants the constellations occupy in the sky no longer befit with that of when astrology charts were created thousands of years ago. This is called precession and is a problem that astrologers are yet to answer especially since they continue to make predictions as if the constellations still occupy the same part of the sky they use to.

Furthermore with the invention of modern day hospitals and caesarean births that causes the time of birth to be different by many hours and sometimes preserves a baby that would have otherwise died, there presents lots of problems with something that is calculated from one's birth time.

Apart from fore filling many of the marks of pseudoscience D. and M. Radner have listed, astrology is a topic that has been criticized by many philosophers. Diesing pointed out that astrologers do not collaborate with other scientists like many of the sciences do⁸, Feyerabend compared it to medieval astronomy whereby it had interesting ideas but they weren't

developed through any kind of proper research in order to understand how it worked⁹. Grey in a summarization points out that astrology has a lack of controls and has ill defined concepts that can't be refined and are hard to test¹⁰. Most of these philosophers seem to agree that while science is continuously being challenged by anomalies, new theories and results which allow it to progress; astronomy tends to reject these occurrences and thus becomes stagnant.

Criticism for astrology does not only stop here even as far back as 44 BC there existed documented criticism against astrology and example of this would be the critique written by Marcus Tullius Cicero who was a Roman statesman. One of his best points was that people do not expect children's personality or behaviours to be affected by the weather conditions in which they are born and these conditions obviously have by far more effects on a person than dim lights which shine in the sky. He continues that even if children born in the month of December were in some way to be similar how would one know it is not because they were born in cold weather as opposed to the sun rising while a constellation is in the sky¹¹? This was a very valid point at the time when it was written and thinking along the same lines creates a variety of problems which would be difficult for an astrologist to answer such as why doesn't the amount and gender of people in the immediate vicinity of the baby being born affect the baby's personality instead of the stars.

Conclusion

While it is clear that astrology is a pseudoscience as described by many famous philosophers like Thagard, Kuhn and Feyerabend, I propose that

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astronomy ought to be classified as something that is not science as opposed to fake science. Because astrology was the origins of astronomy and thus is somewhat intimately connected with science and yet so obviously not scientific, there has been much debate as to its status. However, I would like to point out that it is the scientists who are concerned with the accuracy and effectiveness of the tests conducted on astrology and that, astrologists, while being dismissive of all negative results and findings are really more concerned with the satisfaction of those that seek their wisdom. Rather, astronomy is really more like a religion where people have faith in things that cannot be seen and is rather successful at making people feel connected to society. It provides a way for us to describe ourselves and realize qualities in ourselves and generally there are fairly little negative impacts in believing in something like astrology (apart from maybe an unhappy boy who you don't want to date because he's Aquarius).

Even better, while it affords the same degree of actual use as a placebo, tests for the accuracy of astrology show as much or as little result as tests for the effectiveness of prayers and instead of having to pay weekly to fund the Church, all you have to do is get your chart made once and from then on, are able to blame the stars for your failings. As Leahey and Leahey said, astrology provides a means for pursuit of happiness and is in a way like a cheap method of psychology where you can discover yourself while letting the stars take the blame for any bad attributes you have and yet be comforted at the same time since there is no God to judge you at the end.