

The History of Astrology and the Zodiac

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Entertainment

Midnight Facts for Insomniacs

Podcast Transcript

(Note: transcript consists of episode outline)

Don't get too excited when I ask this, Duncan, but...what's your sign? Ok, so I'm going to tell you what the stars have to say about your personality, this is the essence of Duncan MacEwan as determined by arbitrary groupings of hydrogen balls millions of miles away, delivered courtesy of the professional stargazers over

at costarastrology.com. This is not your horoscope btw; websites that claim to predict the future, that's a whole different level of facepalm...like, there are 12 zodiac signs so you're telling me that apparently one-twelfth of the population is always going to be experiencing the same life-events during the same week? 9% of the world population is getting promoted today, sure. But I've always been interested in the zodiac as it relates to personality types. If you remember we did an episode on personality testing, and fundamentally astrology is just another way of categorizing people by temperament. Instead of an IMFJ or

whatever you're a fish or a goat, or if you were born in late October like me, you have the personality of a bug. Scorpios are a mess, if you didn't know. That's my ultimate takeaway from this episode, I read a lot about my personality type and wow, I need therapy. More therapy. But ultimately astrology is no different than the Myers Briggs, Enneagrams or the Big 5 personality types. So let's get to it: this is Duncan encapsulated, and it's not up for debate, the stars have spoken.

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So obviously this week's topic is astrology, and I'm going to try really, really, really hard to not be a sarcastic jerk for this entire episode. It will be tough, because this subject for me could easily turn into an hour-long eye roll. Astrology is not a science, and more importantly (and this is just undeniable fact) the foundational principles of astrology directly *conflict* with science. So it's not just that astrology doesn't qualify as a science; it is aggressively anti-

scientific. Astrology is a mystical, nonsensical mashup of two different legitimate scientific disciplines—psychology and astronomy, plus magic—and there's obviously no real connection among any of those disciplines (and one of them doesn't exist). You might as well try to determine someone's personality based on mashing together psychology with any *other* arbitrary science, like botany. "I don't think we'd could be compatible, you were born way too close to a ficus." I love the word ficus. I use it whenever I talk about plants.

Now I promise we're going to dive into the fun stuff soon: all of the zodiac symbols and constellations and the history of astrology; this won't be an entire episode of cold-water-throwing, but we do have to get a little bit of debunking out of the way because modern Astrologers try to cloak themselves in scientific jargon, they will go out of their way to load up their websites and Instagram and TikTok accounts with intricate diagrams and graphs and they will tell you that they use specific data points like the exact time of your birth to create your chart, implying that there is a mathematical foundation to their pronouncements and predictions. But Astrologers have never provided any credible explanation of the celestial forces that they claim are somehow affecting our lives. What are the mechanisms behind the influence of zodiac signs? The only legitimate, scientifically-verified forces that could possibly be

involved in this equation are gravity or electromagnetism. According to Isaac Newton, and I guess physics, the gravity that an object exerts on another object is inversely proportional to the square of its distance. The nearest star to us is Proxima Centauri, around 25 trillion miles away. Your dog has more of a gravitational effect on you than any star in the sky (other than the sun, of course). And as for electrical fields, household appliances exude more detectable electromagnetism than constellations. You might as well create intricate charts explaining how your personality at birth was influenced by a chihuahua and a toaster. Plus, the earth is not even in the same position at the same date and time every year; it actually deviates up to twenty thousand miles on each orbit, and meanwhile the universe is constantly expanding, which means that the celestial forces exerted on newborn babies would be different on the same date and time from one year to the next; no two babies would be born under the exact same cosmic conditions. The bottom line is that Astrology is nothing more than mystic occultism that was created by primitive, confused humans who believed in a geocentric universe—they were convinced that the Earth was the center of the cosmos and the sun and moon and stars revolved around *us*. (Also known as the toxic-narcissist model of the universe.) Primitive humans misunderstood the relationship of earth to the rest of the

cosmos, which makes it a little bit tough to believe that they could understand the relationship of the stars to a single human life. The Babylonians, ancient Greeks, ancient Egyptians...none of them had any concept of elliptical orbits or gravity or the speed of light or the sheer distances between planets and stars. And keep in mind that star charts are based on the time and date that you were born, but birth is no longer a purely natural phenomenon. Maybe as a baby you were running late and medical professionals decided to speed up the process by inducing labor, or you might've been born by cesarean section, so apparently according to astrologers a doctor is ultimately responsible for crafting your personality by determining the moment of your birth. When you think about this for more than a couple seconds, it all just falls apart. Like, here's something to chew on, so to speak. Approximately 250 humans are born every minute, which means that hundreds of children were born at the same moment as Jeffrey Dahmer, yet none of *them* developed his unique snacking habits. I personally know twins who have completely different personalities, but would have almost the exact same astrological charts. So given all of astrology's obvious flaws, why would anyone believe that our destiny is written in the stars? Well, for one thing, astrology is attractive because it enforces order on the universe, it creates predictability out of what can seem to be chaos.

And it elevates our insignificant lives to the level of cosmic phenomena...it's incredibly comforting and also outrageously self-centered to believe that a bunch of balls of hydrogen and chunks of rock that are whipping through the heavens, going about their celestial business millions of miles from earth, completely unaware of your existence, somehow determined your particular personality and also predict your future. Charles Mackay in his 1869 *Memoirs of Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*, writes, "How flattering to the pride of man to think that the stars in their courses watch over him, and typify, by their movements and aspects, the joys or the sorrows that await him! He...fondly imagines that eternal worlds were chiefly created to prognosticate his fate."

At the same time, I find it interesting that—somewhat paradoxically—these believers in astrology who imagine that they are inextricably connected to the heavens are also essentially surrendering their agency and even their own individuality. Because even though you were born at the same moment as billions of ants and rabbits and frogs and hundreds of other people, you aren't destined to be the same as any of them, you're unique because of your DNA—the chemical recipe inherited from your parents—and your personality is likewise shaped by your diverse life experiences; you're not a tool of the universe with no free will, you're a special version of you because your

personality is determined by the proven science of genetics and the circumstances of your life, by nature and nurture. So both science and simple logic tell us that astrology doesn't hold water. But look, the stories in the Bible also conflict with science, and there's obviously no point in recording an entire episode in which we lecture listeners about the unlikelihood of virgin births and ladies spontaneously morphing into salt. We're not going to spend any more time on the debunking, because if you're a person who chooses to believe the earth is 6,000 years old or that your girlfriend dumped you because mercury is in retrograde, two dudes on a podcast aren't going to change your mind.

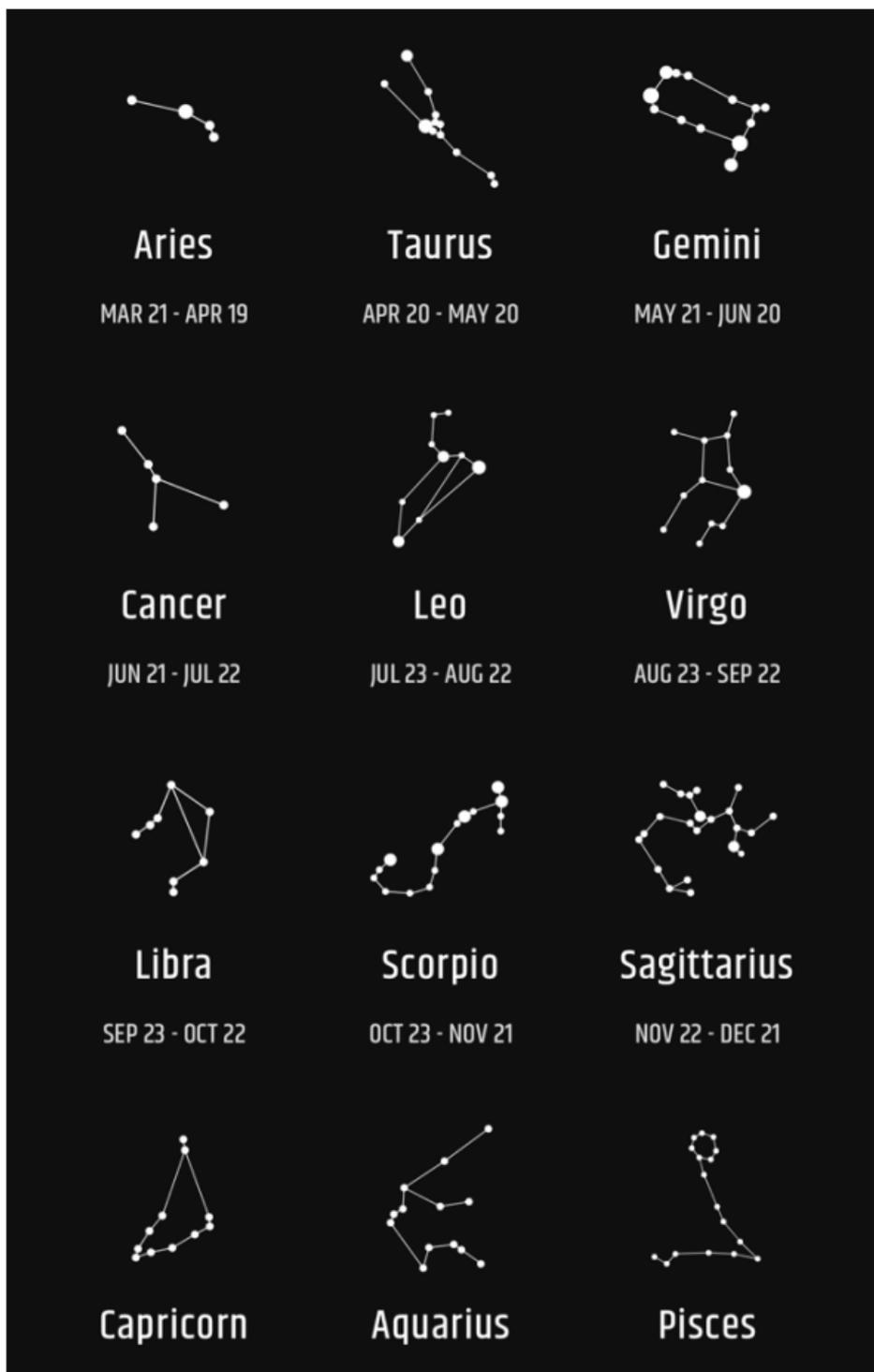
And as it turns out, plenty of people *do* believe. According to a poll by the General Social Survey, fully a third of Americans believe that astrology is "very or sort of scientific." Nothing screams credible science more than a discipline that exists somewhere in the vague area between "very" and "sorta." How can something even be "sort of" scientific? That's like something being sort of illegal. It either is or it isn't. If you're sick and you go to a doctor, what you really want to hear is "I'd say all of the available treatment options are sort of scientific." It's like, are you even a qualified medical professional? "I'd say I'm somewhere between very and sort of qualified?" You're gonna die.

So I'll end this extremely long intro by saying that from this moment forward I'm going to try to use this episode as an opportunity to learn rather than mock, I actually find ancient mysticism fascinating and that's exactly what astrology is: it's the occult gone mainstream.

One thing I was surprised to realize is that there was initially a reasonable and defensible basis for the belief that celestial bodies have a physical effect on the terrestrial realm. I guess I just hadn't really thought about it.

Obviously the sun provides life-giving energy, and ancient civilizations were also aware of the lunar effects on tides, and they tracked how the movement of constellations corresponded with the changing seasons and temperatures on the planet, so it wasn't complete lunacy to believe that objects in the sky could have a tangible impact on the earth. Astrology extends back at least 3000 years to Mesopotamia and the Babylonians. They noticed that the same groups of stars would appear in the same place in the night sky around the same time every year. It's pretty easy to figure out why this was noticeable. At the time there wasn't a lot to do at night except stare at the sky, and with zero electric lights and zero smog, just imagine how blazingly bright the stars would have been on a clear night by the Tigris river. Humans most likely began mapping the sky after they associated celestial bodies with natural phenomena: There's snow

on the ground again, and that same group of stars is in the sky...now it's 100 degrees out, and wouldn't you know it, that other group of stars is always visible when my balls are sweating. Every time I collapse in a drunken heap during the fall festival, it seems like I'm staring up at the same three stars and suddenly they look a lot like a couple of hot twin ladies. Side note, you *had* to be high. Have you seen the actual constellations, the shapes that are formed by groups of stars and supposedly represent all 12 animal signs? They are feeble.



Aries Looks like...a line. A Line that is maybe slightly curved, but basically it's what you would get if you told a three-year-old to draw a straight line. Capricorn is a triangle. That's it. A

sloppy, slightly misshapen triangle. You have to possess an incredible imagination or some very powerful hallucinogens to decide that these shapes in any way resemble animals. I will post this on the discord. Anyway, so mapping the stars started as observational science, and at first it was relatively legit. Observing correlations among phenomena makes sense, but of course the problem is when you confuse correlation with causation. Like, "That group of stars that we always see during the winter is *causing* the snow," or "I've noticed that a couple of guys I really hate were born in December, maybe all guys born in December are jerks." That's when there's a problem. But at first, studying the constellations was very helpful for navigation, anticipating seasons, etc. In fact, to inhabitants of the ancient world, astronomy and astrology were synonymous. Even pioneering astronomers Johannes Kepler, Tycho Brahe, and Galileo were astrologers as well, no doubt in part because they earned much of their income with astrological charts. Not a lot of money in making celestial observations, you also have to provide dating advice.

But not everyone in the renaissance or even the ancient world was on board with astrology. Roman orator and intellectual **Favorinus of Arelate** "argued that it was absurd to imagine that stars and planets would affect human bodies in the same way as they affect the tides, and equally absurd that small motions in the

heavens cause large changes in people's fates." And of course all of the people to whom he explained this theory were like, nah. Magic is real. Greek Philosopher Sextus Empiricus even wrote an entire treatise titled "Against the Astronomers," which as you might have guessed from the title, was a nuanced, objective, open-minded examination of the pluses and minuses of astrological principals. No, it was a hit-job, and in retrospect he's looking a lot less salty and a lot more rational.

Every major civilization has developed some version of astrology in the past and even integrated it into their governmental decision-making to various degrees. For instance, in Mesoamerica, "On the fifth day after the birth of a boy, the Mayan astrologer-priests would cast his horoscope to see what his profession was to be: soldier, priest, civil servant or sacrificial victim." That was considered a profession? It had better pay really damn well, and also in advance. I have so many questions. There were only four professions for men, and you had a 25% chance of being sacrificed as a baby? There were no shoe makers or popcorn sellers or whatever? Just priests and soldiers and bureaucrats? So you were either the guy deciding who was going to be killed, the guy doing the killing, or the guy documenting all of the killings. It was a murder-based economy. We're going to have to explore this more in a future episode.

So you probably know that astrology has always been hugely popular in China, endorsed by Confucius and various royal dynasties. Astrology in China is inextricably linked to philosophy, and includes concepts that haven't been absorbed into the western version, such as the 12 earthly branches, the 10 celestial systems etc. Those are likewise all for future episodes...we're going to focus on the more familiar—to us—western astrology, so let's do that, let's talk about the 12 signs of the western zodiac and how it all supposedly fits together. Here's a quick explanation from a NASA blog that achieved infamy in astrological circles for reasons that we will discuss later.

"Imagine a straight line drawn from Earth through the sun and out into space way beyond our solar system where the stars are. Then, picture Earth following its orbit around the sun. This imaginary line would rotate, pointing to different stars throughout one complete trip around the sun – or, one year. All the stars that lie close to the imaginary flat disk swept out by this imaginary line are said to be in the zodiac. The constellations in the zodiac are simply the constellations that this imaginary straight line points to in its year-long journey."

So you're imagining the earth orbiting the sun with that straight line extending from its center, inscribing a circle as the earth moves in its orbit, and now let's take that imaginary

circle and divide it into 12 slices roughly corresponding to the twelve months of the year, so each slice of sky represents a single zodiac sign. Now typically when someone tells you their sign they're referring to what's called a "sun sign." The idea is that on the day you were born, that particular constellation was in the sky. For instance, on the day I was born, if you drew a straight line from the earth through the sun to the opposite side of the heavens, supposedly Scorpio was in the sky at that moment. Which means that you can't actually see your particular constellation in the sky every year on your birthday, because we can't see the stars on the other side of the sun during the day. So it's counterintuitive.

The signs are also grouped into further categories, the elements. So if you are an Aries, Leo, or Sagittarius you are a fire sign, and some of your associated personality traits are enthusiasm, decisive action, leadership and adaptability.

Or you might be an Earth sign, which would mean you are a Taurus, Virgo, or Capricorn. Earth signs are supposedly practical and grounded.

Or you could be a water sign, either a Cancer, Pisces, or—like me, a Scorpio—characterized by genius-level intelligence and extreme sexual potency. Additionally, scorpions are known to possess an almost hypnotic level of charisma and excellent credit,

usually in the 800s. You should always feel comfortable loaning a scorpio money or investing in one of their various schemes, I mean entrepreneurial endeavors. No, actually—and this is true—some of the defining characteristics of water signs are emotional sensitivity and compassion. Not my strong suits but OK.

Finally you might be an Air sign, these are Gemini, libra, and—like you—Aquarius. Air signs are considered to be petty and judgmental; they make terrible friends and are often shunned by polite society. No, they are often intellectually-oriented, and very logical. Congratulations. I'm a sensitive pussy, and you are a rational human. Great.

As if things weren't complicated enough, each element is also either a fixed, cardinal, or mutable sign. The cardinal signs are Aries, Libra, Capricorn, and Cancer. The fixed signs are Taurus, Scorpio, Leo, and Aquarius. Lastly, the mutable signs are Gemini, Sagittarius, Virgo, and Pisces. There's a lot to chew on here but basically you might say that the cardinal signs are leaders—type A personalities, fixed signs are steady and reliable and often stubborn, mutable signs are more flexible, adaptable, and often impressionable. So as a Scorpio I am a fixed water sign. Sounds like I'm neutered. I'm also a feminine sign, which makes sense I guess; the signs are split by

gender; the masculine signs are air and fire, while the water and earth signs are feminine. So I'm a fixed feminine water sign, and as an Aquarius you are a fixed masculine air sign. We're both fixed, so I don't feel too bad. We're eunuchs, is the bottom line.

So let's get even further into the weeds on this stuff: As we've mentioned, to craft an accurate astrological chart an astrologer will need at minimum three pieces of data: your time, date, of and place of birth. Time of birth is especially important to astrologers because,

from [astrology.com](https://www.astrology.com) "it marks the precise moment that you gained consciousness." Which...nope.

Objectively not true. You are no more or less conscious at your time of birth than you were two seconds before exiting the birth canal, but whatever. Anyway, the birth time—or as one site nauseatingly referred to it: your "angel number"—supposedly determines a person's so-called rising sign. "The rising sign, also known as the ascendant, relates to the zodiac sign that rises on the eastern horizon at the time of our birth. The ascendant ... makes up the foundation of an individual's personality." The other vital elements are the sun and moon. The sun sign—which is what most of us call your "sign"—represents the self, while the moon sign reflects your inner self.

So even though you're an Aquarius, you could have a Capricorn rising and

your moon in Virgo, so maybe your personality skews toward Capricorn while your inner self tends to show Virgo characteristics. I don't know whether that's true; I didn't do your chart, I'm winging it, but you get the idea.

Additionally, there are planets associated with each particular sign. And of course the planets represent different...things, I guess. Not traits... just, basically...nouns? Like self, love, money, rebellion. Mars is passion, Jupiter is luck, Saturn is karma, Pluto is power. Mars and Pluto are the planets that rule Scorpio, so I'm ruled by passion and power. Basically... BDSM. That's probably why I don't kink shame.

You as an Aquarius are ruled by Uranus. That is true, and makes me happy. You are also ruled by Saturn, jointly, but that was less funny and scatological so I didn't mention it; Uranus and Saturn represent rebellion and karma respectively. So you will rebel, and you will be punished. That actually tracks, considering your employment history.

You might also have heard talk of "houses" in astrology. When you receive a birth chart, known as a natal chart, it will generally include a graph that lists the 12 so-called houses which represent different aspects of your life, and you'll be able to find out which planets are in each of those particular houses. The first house is

the house of self, the second is the house of possessions, the third is the house of communication, fourth is family and home, etc. The 8th house is a good one, that's the house of sex. House of sex, is that a whore house? I think that was the fourth house that the little pigs made...there was the house of straw, the house of brick, the house of sex. It didn't stop the wolf but it distracted him. So the planet that resides in each of your houses helps you understand how your personality relates to that particular subject. For instance, the first house, house of self, according to astrology.com indicates: "Who are you? What will you become? How do you realize your best self? The First House speaks to the realization of one's ultimate potential."

So if you want to know who you are and what you will become, get a natal chart and take a look at your first house. For instance I had a chart done, and Saturn is in my 8th house...so in my sex house is karma...hmm. I hope that means I'll get all the sex that I deserve. That's probably none. I used up my sex quota.

Anyway this is why each chart gets so in-depth and elaborate, because there are tons of different layers and traits and modifiers for each sign based on your specific birth scenario. So I had my chart done and I'm not just a Scorpio, I am a Scorpio with Sagittarius rising, and my moon is in Leo. Except not really...stay tuned.

I mentioned I didn't do a chart for you, so I don't know your specifics, but I'm guessing your eighth house, sex, is also in Uranus.

So I promised we were done with skepticism in this episode, but I can't resist a final debunking. I mentioned a notorious blog. NASA caused an uproar among astrology enthusiasts in 2016 when the organization pointed out that I'm not actually a Scorpio. Well, not just me. "according to the Babylonians' own ancient stories, there were 13 constellations in the zodiac. So they picked one, Ophiuchus (off-YOU-cuss), to leave out. Even then, some of the chosen 12 didn't fit neatly into their assigned slice of the pie and crossed over into the next one. The constellations are different sizes and shapes, so the sun spends different lengths of time lined up with each one. The line from Earth through the sun points to Virgo for 45 days, but it points to Scorpius for only 7 days. To make a tidy match with their 12-month calendar, the Babylonians ignored the fact that the sun actually moves through 13 constellations, not 12. Then they assigned each of those 12 constellations equal amounts of time." Time magazine explains the bottom line: "Anyone born between November 29 and December 17 would no longer be a Scorpio or a Sagittarius, but an Ophiuchus. Scorpio's window would be cut to just seven days and the entire astrology chart would shift, meaning some Pisces and Leos and Libras would

have different star signs." So it doesn't affect *you*, Mr. Aquatic air sign, but everything we just learned about *me* is objectively a bunch of horseshit. I mean all of it is, but whatever. I only care about me.

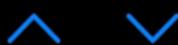
We're not quite done. I have to admit all of this was kind of fun for me to research, this is one of those subjects I never would've looked into without the insomniacs. And I enjoyed it, it was actually fun for me and Jodi to read about our supposed traits and compatibilities, we got some good laughs and some of it seemed really accurate while some of it was just bonkers...this stuff can be super interesting and entertaining if you don't take it too seriously. And hey, maybe you can even get something useful out of it, but the problem is that certain people take it too far.

Historically, there are numerous world leaders who have made consequential decisions based on astrology. Nancy Reagan, wife of President Ronald Reagan, famously kept an astrologist on staff named Joan Quigley, and it was a giant scandal in 1988 when the word got out. According to Quigley's memoir, she determined the scheduling of everything from important meetings to Reagan's State of the Union addresses based on astrological charts. And that's when this stuff becomes a problem. Not when you're deciding whether you might be compatible with your tinder date, but when important decisions with global consequences are being

made based on pseudoscience, when the stakes rise to the level of international politics and the rationales for decisions are based on ancient mystical silliness. "Mars is in the sex house, looks like we're going to have to bomb Canada." Mercury is in retrograde...I feel like I should explain that one.

And that's all I've got.

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