

# Valuing the Irrational

Why are horoscopes so popular?

**Jofish Kaye** explores what people want, other than the truth.

Horoscopes and related forms of astrology are incredibly popular—perhaps the most popular means of “predicting” the future in the world. In its 2004 Science and Engineering Indicators report, the National Science Foundation bemoans the fact that 28 percent of Americans believe in astrology and 18 percent are “not sure”; 15 percent read their horoscopes every day or “quite often” and 30 percent “just occasionally.” A smaller study of students in

England suggests that 70 percent read their horoscopes “regularly,” while a recent ban in China on horoscope delivery by text message reveals the scale at which it affected mobile-phone operations there.

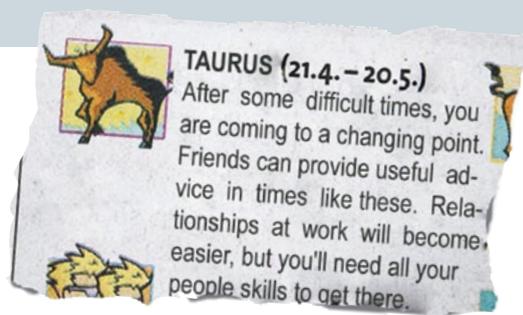
So why are horoscopes so popular? There seems to be an awful lot of people who find that horoscopes have some kind of value. Are these people just ignorant fools, as skeptics suggest, or is there something else going on here?

## Personal Validation

One approach to understanding the appeal of horoscopes is social psychology. In 1949, B.R. Forer conducted personality tests on his undergraduate psychology class, and the next week he gave each student the ‘results’ of his or her personality test, consisting of a list of the same statements for each student (*below*). The students—each under the impression that the list was personalized for him or her—rated the list as being 85 percent true or somewhat true about themselves.

### YOUR PERSONAL TEST RESULTS

You have a great need for other people to like and admire you.  
 You have a tendency to be critical of yourself.  
 You have a great deal of unused capacity which you have not turned to your advantage.  
 While you have some personality weaknesses, you are generally able to compensate for them.  
 Your sexual adjustment has presented problems for you.  
 Disciplined and controlled on the outside, you tend to be worrisome and insecure on the inside.  
 At times, you have serious doubts as to whether you made the right decision or have done the right thing.  
 You prefer a certain amount of change and variety, and become dissatisfied when hemmed in by restrictions and limitations.  
 You pride yourself on being an independent thinker and do not accept others' opinions without satisfactory proof.  
 You have found it unwise to be too frank in revealing yourself to others.  
 At times, you are extroverted, affable, sociable, while at other times you are introverted, wary and reserved.  
 Some of your aspirations tend to be pretty unrealistic.  
 Security is one of your major goals in life.



What these statements have in common with horoscopes is that they are, in fact, generally true. Have a look at our sample horoscope (*above*): There's little for anyone to disagree with there. But one of the important things about horoscopes is that they feel like they contain a personal message for you. Anyone reading a horoscope column skims down to his own zodiac sign, or perhaps one of someone he knows. Nobody—even those of us who don't believe horoscopes have any basis in fact—just reads the first one on the list, despite the fact that the advice is general and interchangeable.

One of the factors that influenced Forer's students was knowledge that they had taken a personality test the week before. Similar factors apply to horoscopes: It turns out that the more information that we believe went into informing the choice of statements, the more we believe them. One study found that given a similar set of general statements and asked to rate the degree to which those statements fit them on a scale of 1 (very poor) to 5 (excellent), subjects rated them on average 3.24 if told the statements were generally true; 3.76 if they were based on the subject's year and month of birth; and 4.38 if based on year, month, and day of birth. So by starting with a zodiac sign and thereby narrowing the statement down to more or less a twelfth of the population, there's already a way in which horoscopes feel personalized, and therefore true.

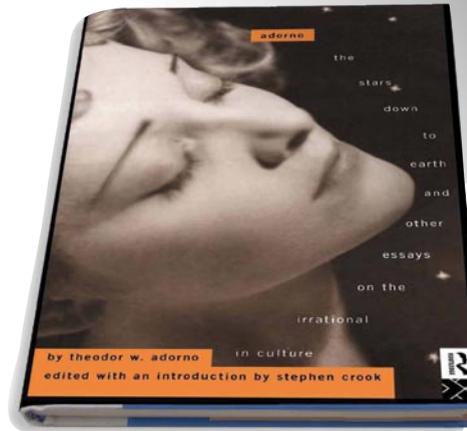
## Irrationality's Worth

But that doesn't explain why people find horoscopes useful or bother to read them. Frankfurt School theorist Theodor Adorno made an attempt in a 1953 paper, "The Stars Down to Earth," which stemmed from his reading of the *Los Angeles Times* horoscope column. He posited that horoscopes are pseudo-individualized simply by using the vocative tense: "Display that keen mind of yours." "Follow up on your intuition." Horoscopes, further, are written for the "vice-presidential" reader: The language is tooled to make the reader feel important via a sense that people count on him for leadership and yet he is still subject to the whims of higher management. Similarly, Adorno points out that horoscopes are "bi-phasic": that is, horoscopes address the problem of dealing with the (invariably) contradictory requirements of life by distributing them throughout the day. Thus the advice, "You must work hard in the morning, but you'll be able to cut loose tonight!"

Adorno's most useful observation concerns the relative value of horoscopes. We enjoy a multitude of sources of rational advice, so that if one has a rational problem to solve—such as figuring out how long to steam artichokes—then there are sources of information to address that problem, and it's possible to make a rational decision based on all the facts. But what happens when a problem has enormous levels of complexity and choice, and it's not possible to know all the facts? There's usually a significant irrational component, such as what's involved in how to decide which graduate school to attend, what car to buy, whom to date. It's for these problems that horoscopes can prove useful: as a rich source of irrational advice.

This would be all fine, except there's a casually implicit causality, a pseudo-rationality, in horoscope columns: the astrological component. Astrology implies a cause-and-effect relationship between the position of the planet relative to the stars and advice on day-to-day problems. It's this relationship that annoys our skeptic so much, and that has been the topic of a large number of rather tedious articles damning horoscopes, all of which quite miss the point. It seems entirely reasonable to postulate that there's no rational

connect between the positions of celestial bodies and day-to-day decision making; horoscopes are indeed a poor way to make rational decisions. But as individuals in a complex world, we have a large number of irrational decisions to make every day—from what to wear in the morning, to what to eat at night. Therein lies the value of horoscopes. For a lot of people, using them is more fun than flipping coins or rolling dice. 🖐️



THE STARS DOWN TO EARTH 85

By far the most important feature of the addressee is his socio-economic status. The image presented in this area may be called, with some exaggeration, that of the vice-president. The people spoken to are pictured as holding a superior place in life which forces them, as mentioned before, to make decisions all the time. Much depends on them, on their reasonableness, their ability to make up their minds. It is carefully avoided to represent them in so many words as impotent or unimportant small men. One may think of the well-known technique of magazines such as *Fortune* which are written to give the impression that each of their pre-sumably very numerous readers were a big shot in some major corporation. The vicarious gratification thus provided, the strong appeal exercised by the transference of the none-too-successful vice-president upon the non-vice-president, is never obvious. Yet – and this is why the column addresses vice-presidents rather than presidents – the reality situation is never lost sight of. Whereas the illusion of importance and autonomy is superficially kept intact, the fact is not forgotten that these much desired assets are really not being fully enjoyed by the addressee. He is therefore presented as someone who although fairly high himself in the business hierarchy has essentially to depend on others who are even higher. Since this may be the situation even of some real vice-presidents, the feeling of humiliation is somewhat attenuated at the same time. Advice can be proffered that betrays the underlying without revealing that he

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