



Touching the Elephant

A Parable for Astrologers

by Wendell C. Perry

People who know little or nothing about astrology imagine that it is a single, homogeneous body of knowledge and that all astrologers are in complete agreement. We folks on the inside, of course, know better. When we take into consideration the different zodiacs and house systems, asteroids and dwarf planets, hypothetical points and Arabic parts, Vedic astrology, Hellenistic astrology, sidereal astrology, heliocentric astrology, psychological astrology, Shamanistic astrology, evolutionary astrology, and all the rest, it's a wonder that astrologers agree about anything at all.

A common explanation for all these different types of astrology is the parable of the blind men and the elephant. I'm sure you know it. A group of blind men approach an elephant, determined to learn what elephants are all about. One grabs the elephant's tail and decides that an elephant is very like a rope. One bumps up against the elephant's leg and decides that an elephant is very like a tree. Another encounters the elephant's trunk and decides that an elephant is very like a snake. Yet another man touches the elephant's tusk and decides it is very like a spear.

Of course, the moral of that story is that, although all of the blind men were wrong about what an elephant is really like, each was also correct, at least insofar as his personal perception of the elephant was concerned. I find comfort in this story, particularly when I am confronted with another astrologer touting a radical and maybe a little bit unwieldy new system of astrology. I can think of that person as having latched onto a particularly esoteric part of the elephant.

But the story of the blind men and the elephant is more than a parable to explain the diversity of astrology. In reality, it addresses a truth that is at the heart of astrology and crucial to every person who attempts to study astrology. We live in a vast cosmos, a cosmos so incomprehensibly huge that we cannot even comprehend the degree to which we cannot comprehend it. Astrology is our means of relating the consciousness that pervades this incomprehensible vastness to that spark of consciousness that imbues every human being.

Each of us who steps forward to touch the elephant that is astrology is, in reality, touching the cosmos. The fact that we are blind is unimportant. So is the fact that we each come away from the experience with a slightly different

tale to tell. What matters is the fact that we are able to touch the elephant at all. This is the act (some might even call it a heroic act) that links us and astrology to the infinite.

A Messy Business

As profound as the reasons behind our diversity might be, there can be no denying that it has created an image problem for astrology. The fact that there are so many different kinds of astrology, with so many different approaches, makes it difficult for us to answer both hardened skeptics and sincere critics with a single voice. It also hobbles any attempt to have astrology accepted, in any shape or form, as a respectable "science."

On another level, the messiness of the current scene has created a seemingly endless proliferation of information. I know there are astrologers out there who actually thrill at the prospect of learning a new technique or adding a new asteroid to their astrological tool belt. But, at some point, it becomes too much. Not only does the astrologer end up with more information than he or she can competently process, but the people the astrologer is seeking to advise are also overwhelmed.

And then there's the problem of new people coming into astrology. Back in the 1960s and '70s, when I was learning astrology, it was a fairly straightforward undertaking. Obviously, variant ideas were out there. I saw articles on sidereal astrology and even dabbled in heliocentric astrology for a short time. But these approaches existed on the fringes. Vedic astrology was largely unknown on this side of the Pacific, and there was no Project Hindsight. The people who learned about astrology during that period may have had very different ideas about the kind of astrology they were going to practice, but they were all starting out with the same basic tools.

Imagine the experience of a novice today. So many theories, so many techniques, so many different kinds of astrology! It's no wonder that we seem to see fewer young people involved in astrology today. Those who don't immediately go running for the hills are spread out among a hodgepodge of astrological tribes.

So, is this diversity a bad thing? Is it holding astrology back? Should we fear and condemn it? We could try, but it wouldn't do much good. As long as the ultimate source for our knowledge remains the infinity of universal consciousness — as long as we are individuals groping at the unknowable, blindly pawing the elephant — there are going to be differences of opinion, and to our earthbound minds, those differences are going to seem insurmountable.

Book Learnin'

People learning about astrology today do have one advantage: It's never been easier to find information about astrology than it is right now. There is a proliferation of books that promise to teach the rank beginner everything he or she needs to know about the mystery of stars. There's *Astrology for Dummies*, *The Pocket Idiot's Guide to Horoscopes*, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Astrology*, and so on. (I'm not sure who decided that astrology needed more idiots.) These books rarely fulfill their promise of being "complete," but they certainly serve to give the student

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enough information to move on to more advanced texts.

Many years ago, bookstores that sold advanced texts and organizations that offered real classes in astrology were only located in a few large cities. Today, thanks to the Internet, even the most arcane text is merely a mouse-click away. Likewise, there are astrologers who offer online courses in astrology and online workshops. It is also possible to find universities that offer astrology-related classes and degrees.

But are all these books and educational opportunities a viable substitute for actually touching the elephant? Is being able to recite the meanings of the signs and houses the same thing as having a visceral contact with the mystery of human consciousness?

Obviously, the answer to this question is a resounding *no*. However, people who touch the elephant sometimes come away from the experience with ideas and perceptions that are quite different from what they find in their textbooks. Does that invalidate what they've read? How do students go back to their teacher, who is convinced that astrology is very like a snake, with the news that they've just backed into something hard and pointy, like a spear?

Another important question is whether or not the authors of these books and the astrologers giving the classes and workshops have themselves played the role of the blind man. We would like to think that anyone who is practicing astrology, either as a counselor or as a researcher, would have had this kind of deep experience with its inner workings — but can we really be sure? There seem to be plenty of preachers and priests who ply their trade without displaying much in the way of godliness. Astrologers who get their name on the cover of a book or have a

Web site — are all of these people who have truly touched the elephant?

How Do We Know?

This raises the biggest question of them all: How do you know if you've touched the elephant? One good measure may be the amount of dust on your textbooks. When you find yourself looking at a horoscope and knowing exactly what to say, not because you've memorized the text so completely, but because what you are saying is coming out of your own understanding, your own experience, and your own heart — when you experience this kind of certainty — you might be able to claim some contact with the elephant.

On the other hand, it is often when we doubt ourselves as astrologers that we really make contact with astrology's mysteries. When you stare at a chart that makes no sense to you, check and recheck your data and your calculations, and even drag out those dusty textbooks to no avail, that may be the time when you are ready to touch the elephant. It is often these moments of doubt that send us groping into the dark until, like those blessed blind men, we encounter a truth that will bring everything into focus.

No matter how you approach it, the experience of touching the astrological elephant is exhilarating. In fact, sometime it's *too* exhilarating. Many astrologers are so taken with their experience with the long, squirmy thing that was very like a snake or the big round thing that was very like the trunk of a tree that they forget their blindness and the doubt with which they began their search. They presume that their chance encounter with the enormity of existence has given them the whole truth and that the perceptions of all those other blind men don't matter.

Obviously, there are problems with this point of view. First of all, considering the scale of the mystery with which we are dealing, the idea that anyone could come up with a complete set of answers seems highly implausible. Moreover, once you've decided that you know everything there is to know about the elephant, you are not likely to go back and cop another feel. Personally, I would be very sad if I thought that I would never get another opportunity

to stumble blindly into the backside of that glorious beast.

For other people, of course, the experience of touching the elephant is humbling. After all, it's the experience of laying a hand on a truth much greater than ourselves, so much so that our paltry notions about reality are made insignificant. In some cases, it can be so humbling that the individual gives up on astrology altogether and takes up a more respectable course of study, like Tarot cards or library science. But I think that, in the face of such vastness, we have to be driven by our curiosity. Yes, it may be presumptuous to assume that the answers to our questions can be found by groping around in the dark, but we humans, at both our best and our worst, are presumptuous creatures.

So, perhaps it is best if we are a little unsure about our experience of touching the elephant. After all, we can't count on finding validation from our fellow gropers. They will more than likely have come away with perceptions different from our own. Nor can we point to a certificate or a diploma that verifies our accomplishment. All we have is the experience and the changes that experience has brought to the way we do astrology.

So, Give Us an Example

In my book, *Saturn Cycles: Mapping Changes in Your Life*, I followed

the cycle of Saturn across the cardinal points of the horoscope (Ascendant, Imum Coeli [IC], Descendant, Midheaven) through the lives of 24 people. The results I expected, based on what I had read in various texts, were as follows:

When Saturn crossed the Ascendant, there would be changes involving the self. When Saturn crossed the IC, there would be changes involving the home. When Saturn crossed the Descendant, there would be changes involving partnership and marriage. And when Saturn crossed the Midheaven, there would be changes involving the career.

What I actually found when I did the research, however, was much messier. Some people had changes in their relationship status when Saturn crossed the Descendant, but some didn't. Almost none of my celebrity examples saw changes involving their home during Saturn's transit of their IC, and so on! I had to adjust my expectations, and by making those adjustments, I learned a lot more about the cycle of Saturn.

In other words, I went to the elephant expecting to find something very like a rope and ran smack dab into something very like a wall.

Searching for the Truth

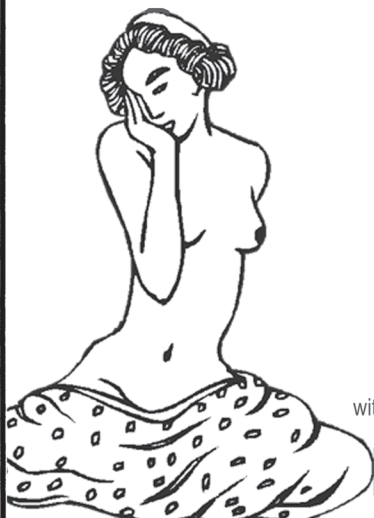
So, in this sea of varying perceptions, can we point to anything in astrology and call it objective truth? That is

a tricky question. Certainly, if we were to poll a thousand Western, tropical astrologers and ask them to list their most reliable techniques, there would be a considerable area of overlap, but that area of overlap would become much smaller if we extended our poll to include Western sidereal astrologers or Vedic astrologers.

Still, within each system of astrology, there does exist an assemblage of truths, gleaned from ancient sources and verified by generations of practitioners, which do "work" in the real world. The fact that not all of these truths are relevant to other systems has more to do with the culture out of which those systems evolved than the quality of the techniques.

In fact, the variance between the different systems of astrology can be seen as one of its strengths. When we are dealing with a truth as large as the consciousness of the universe, we have to accept that there will be a variety of ways to get to it. And the fact that those different routes don't often intersect is hardly surprising. That they intersect at all should be taken as miraculous concurrence, and of course, all the different systems of astrology from all the different cultures and the different times do agree on one important detail: that changes in the planets and stars are reflected by changes in human consciousness.

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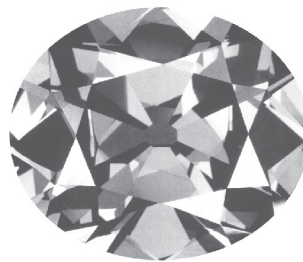
There is a growing movement among various astrological organizations to create more coherence in the field of astrology through education and by imposing ethics and certification standards. These efforts are to be applauded. Even if they can't completely curtail the unruly state of astrology, they do promise to cure some of the laissez-faire messiness of its practice.

But these efforts do raise some important questions: Can we really standardize a practice that has at its center so vast and incomprehensible a mystery? Could a standardized astrology replace the personal experience of touching the elephant? What happens to those astrologers who come away from their contact with this mystery with techniques and beliefs that don't mesh with the standards?

As we have seen, every system of astrology has a bedrock of information, a set of proven techniques and truths that every practitioner should probably be expected to know. Advocates of these certification standards might say that testing one's competence in these matters is justified. They might also say that learning certain standard practices and ideas does not preclude later experimentation nor stymie new discoveries. Such an education actually provides the intellectual preparation necessary to make such discoveries. After all, most of the great abstract painters first learned how to draw things like trees and flowers. That didn't stop them from dribbling paint on a canvas later on in their careers.

In general, I agree with these arguments and, as I said, support the certification process. But I still have nagging doubts. It would be a great loss if we were ever to create a bland, homogeneous, standardized astrology — not just because of all the variant ideas and techniques that would have to be muscled out of the way, but because by standardizing astrology we might be subverting astrology's most important mission.

Some might think that our greatest mission as astrologers is to help people. Though this is certainly a worthy enterprise, it is not what I see as our ultimate duty. Astrologers, along with artists and poets and explorers in every field, stand at the outermost edge of human knowledge with



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our dirty little noses pressed against the unexplained. This is often an uncomfortable place to be. We are ridiculed by those with firmer footing on the commonplace, and we are often plagued by our own doubts, but we have to maintain our precarious position. We have to keep reaching out into the darkness, into the unknowable, hoping and praying that at some point in our blind search, our fingertips will brush against the truth.

This is the mission that we cannot forget, as we attempt to neaten up the astrological community. Some standardization is necessary, but we must be mindful that astrology is the doorway to the ultimate mystery. Such a doorway is bound to be a chaotic and messy place, no matter how assiduous our housekeeping.

Conclusion

A few weeks ago, I heard a lecture given by a friend of mine, a fellow who has been involved in astrology even longer than I have and has lectured all across the country. In the course of his talk, my friend expounded several ideas and observations that were new to me. All of these ideas were worthy of serious thought, and after some of that serious thought, I decided that I didn't agree with any of them.

You might conclude from this confession that I found this lecture disappointing, but on the contrary, I was thrilled by my friend's presentation. I was thrilled because I knew that he was someone who had touched the elephant. How did I know? Like I said, there were no certification letters after his name to tell me that he'd had this experience. But I knew, and knowing this made any disagreement I might have had with him superfluous. When we recognize our blindness, when we own the furtive nature of our contact with the infinite, we don't question the variance between our perceptions and those of another searcher. It's enough to share the experience and to know that the elephant is still out there to touch.

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Wendell C. Perry is a writer and artist living in Kentucky. He and his wife, Linda, are the co-authors of *The Mars Venus Affair*. Wendell is also the author of *Saturn Cycles: Mapping Changes in Your Life*, released in 2009. Both books were published by Llewellyn Worldwide. Wendell's Web site is GoodGollyAstrology.com. He can be reached at Wendell@goodgollyastrology.com



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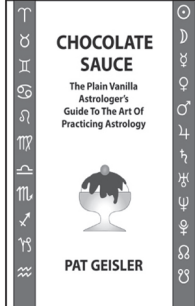
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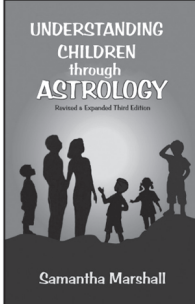
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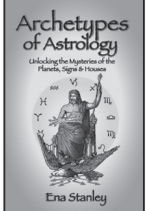
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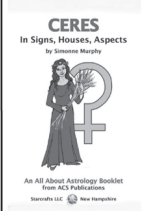
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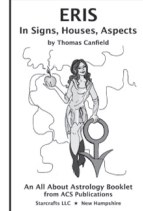
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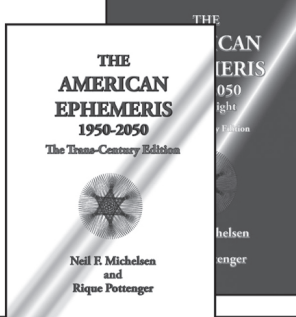
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