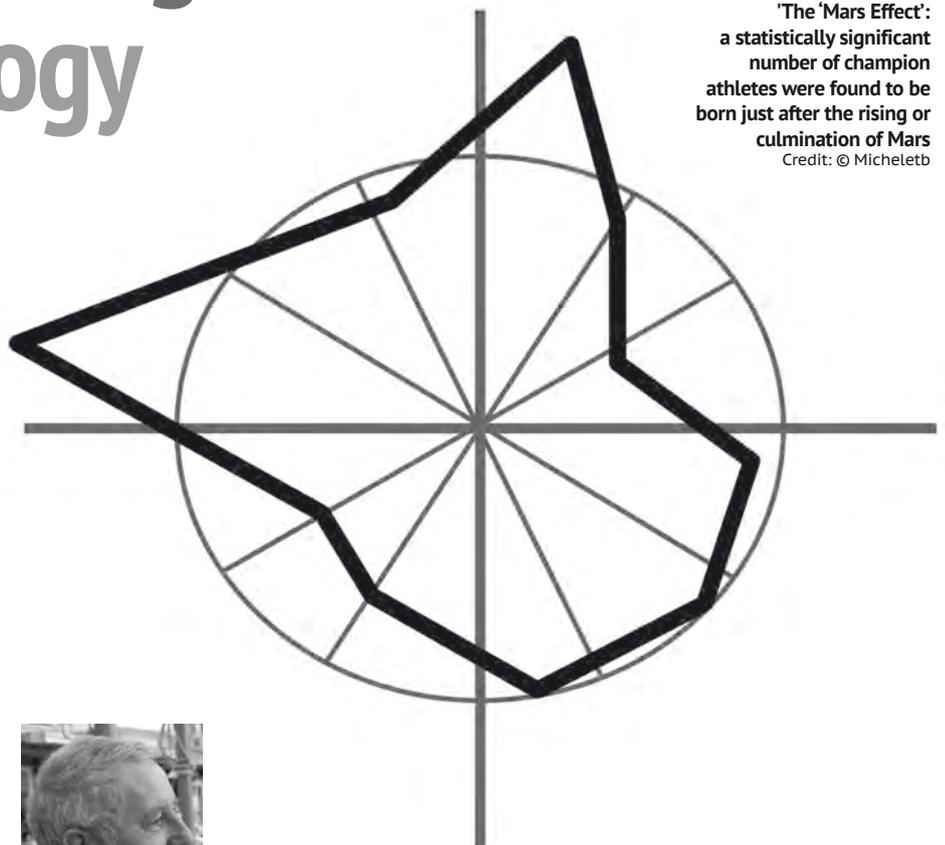


Researching astrology

In many respects all astrologers carry out research each time a chart is examined and something new is discovered that appears to extend or contradict some astrological practice. How do we explore such puzzles? Sometimes it is only during the subsequent consultation when the client offers some personal information that we make a connection not seen before. Sometimes it is when the computer's calculations are hand drawn on a chart form that this physical act reveals more than what was shown on the screen. As Wittgenstein observed of his writings: *often my hand reveals what my head had not noticed*. John Addey said much the same when speaking of his laborious plotting of phase angles in large data sets, that this imparted a sense of pattern and rhythm that might have escaped him when computer programs later offered him pages of graphs. As well as Wittgenstein, philosophers such as Nietzsche, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty have all stressed the importance of the body's 'felt sense' in the construction of what only later is turned into intellectual formulation.

Astrologers often claim that their knowledge is confirmed daily by their practice, even if they do not know how astrology might work (which is quite another matter), but it would be unwise to suggest that personal experience is always the final arbiter. As Descartes



'The Mars Effect': a statistically significant number of champion athletes were found to be born just after the rising or culmination of Mars
Credit: © Micheletb



Mike Harding compares quantitative and qualitative approaches to astrological research

observed, these can also be misleading: feeling cold on a hot day, experiencing ice as burning, seeing a straight stick bent in a glass of water, and so on. In all sorts of ways we can misunderstand our circumstances: think of those who believe that they are Jesus Christ (in my work as a psychotherapist I have met two of them, and was not convinced in either case). Thus science and statistics appear to offer a way through the warren of conflicting human experiences by suggesting that its practice might resolve our conjectures once and for all, even though positive findings tend to be subject to challenges which are not applied to other disciplines.¹ For astrologers this problem goes back at least 2,000 years.

Signs of the times

In one of his many attacks on what he termed the 'Chaldean' art of astrology, Cicero asked if "all those who died at Thermopylae were born under the same star". This view is often pressed into the service of scientific refutations, for it is unlikely that even a small group of those slain at the same time and place are likely to share the same sign. While astrologers are all too familiar with the manner in which such canards are used to discredit astrology, it is not so easy to refute Cicero's legacy if, at some level, astrologers make claims for 'sameness' that ignore the manner in which human qualities have been differently valued over time by different cultures. Nothing

makes this clearer than the various zodiacal conceptions of Babylonian, Hindu, Chinese and Mayan astrological systems which inevitably reflect the concerns from which they emerged and are embedded within the language and beliefs of their inception. A culture that sacrificed the *winner*s of a ball game, as did the Aztecs, saw Venus bestowing the rewards of victory in a very different way from the Romans.

Despite astrology's assertion that the movement of the outer planets through the signs marks significant shifts in human consciousness – as do their transits to the individual nativity – these thoughts are not always considered by researchers. History tells us that we have much in common with our earliest ancestors: we love, hate, feel pain, pleasure, jealousy, shame, fear, sexual desire and so on; but how we make sense of these sensations, and the importance we place on them, and thus categorise them as subjects for research, is infinitely malleable. Socrates heard voices. He called these his daimons, and accepted their guidance. Today he would be termed schizophrenic and offered

medication. Little wonder that the Gauquelins' attempt to find a common factor within many thousands diagnosed as psychotic came to naught. While it is clear that both the date and latitude of birth are significant factors, there is no clear understanding as to what is meant by schizophrenia, any more than what it is to be an alcoholic – another large group that resists a common signifier, though other research has achieved some positive results. Similarly, the famous 'suicide study' carried out in America using accurate times of birth and death and drawing on dozens of different techniques, failed to "find any factor in the birth chart that was significantly related to suicide".² Accepting that people kill themselves in many ways and for many reasons may explain this, but would we consider researching those who died naturally for a 'non-suicide' signifier? When considering a research project it is often useful to turn our questions around.

The Gauquelins' most successful work rests on more solid ground. As with the Champion Athletes, and those in other fields, the strongest effect is with those who have demonstrated eminence in their

profession. While Mars has much to do with war and competition, the 'Mars effect' in sport does not show in the charts of non-champions. However, the Gauquelins' research did not start out like this. Michel and Françoise began by examining many of astrology's claims for signs, aspects, transits at death, and much else, and found little supporting evidence. It was only when they moved towards a more phenomenological approach that they struck gold. Instead of seeking proof for an explicit claim, they asked a

Synchronicity as a theory is, in the technical sense, vacuous. Nothing follows from it and nothing about it is testable

different question: is there *anything* that champion athletes might have in common? Indeed there was. Mars tended to occupy certain key sectors that related to the Ascendant and the Midheaven, which in the charts of the Military went against chance by some five million to one. Similarly, many groups of eminent people had an appropriate planet in the same key sectors. John Addey's own research later demonstrated the prevalence of other significant harmonics within the various data sets.

While this is well and good for astrology as a whole, how does this impact on the work of the jobbing astrologer? It certainly challenges the traditional 12th-house placement by suggesting that success rather than 'self-undoing' might accompany a planet located therein, but it equally has to be said that such large-scale research might contribute little to the understanding of a specific nativity, where many other factors need addressing. This is true of all large-scale research where generalized findings may have no relevance in a specific case. John Addey used the image

Jung's theory of synchronicity: meaningful coincidence, but technically untestable





Quantitative research: Do stonemasons have strong Mars-Saturn aspects?

of iron filings as a metaphor for such results. Place a magnet under a sheet of paper and scatter filings on it. A pattern will emerge even if many of the fragments lie where they will. It can't be denied, but neither can it offer a specific answer. But researchers want more than this, and here two main options present themselves.

Quantitative research

There are essentially two ways in which *quantitative* research can be pursued – that is, research using large numbers of charts with the aim of establishing statistical correlations. The first is to test a specific question, such as *'do stonemasons have strong Mars-Saturn aspects?'* as might befit someone who chips away at stone; the second is to use the same data and see whether there is any aspect that goes against chance when compared to a random control group, this being a more phenomenological approach. However, both approaches challenge the astrologer's assumptions of significant aspects. Do we go beyond the conventional to include a harmonic analysis of each pair of planets in the charts, do we look at their midpoints, the rulers of the signs in which each planet is situated, and so on? In terms of aspects, Kollerstrom and O'Neill's research into

moments of invention revealed the importance of quintile and septile aspects, some ranging between 1000:1 to 2000:1 against chance³ – yet despite this, how many astrologers use these aspects, and other work by Addey, Harvey and Hamblin, in their work?

Here an interesting paradox emerges. Obviously, some limits have to be drawn, or even the analysis of a hundred charts would result in several thousand pages of print outs – assuming some kind person

Astrologers often claim that their knowledge is confirmed daily by their practice, even if they do not know how astrology might work

wrote a program to cover every option. So we must start with a careful consideration of the factors we wish to explore, and make a clear list of our assumptions. If we are interested in planetary aspects, which obviates the endless problem of signs (which zodiac, which sign and house rulerships, etc.), then we need also to be clear about what constitutes an aspect,

and far more importantly, how sure we are that the charts we want to use are genuinely representative of the quality we seek to investigate.

Lumping people together under the heading of the profession they are currently practising (unless they have achieved the sort of incontrovertible eminence that the Gauquelins used in their most successful samples) is fraught with problems. Even Suitbert Ertel, who with Ken Irving produced what is surely the definitive account of the Mars Effect,⁴ fell foul of this when he asked astrologers to determine the difference between charts of politicians and painters. Would we expect to find Nelson Mandela in the same group as Hitler and Stalin? Should abstract expressionists be placed in the same category as Vermeer, and what of those who painted only romantic seascapes; should they wake up in the same bed as those specializing in highly detailed portraiture? Unsurprisingly, there was a null effect.⁵ Despite the obvious problems of categorising groups, the AA's Correlation, some 30 years old, and Françoise Gauquelin's *Astro-Psychological Problems* (published from 1982 to 1998) have many impressive examples demanding further work.

Asking the right question

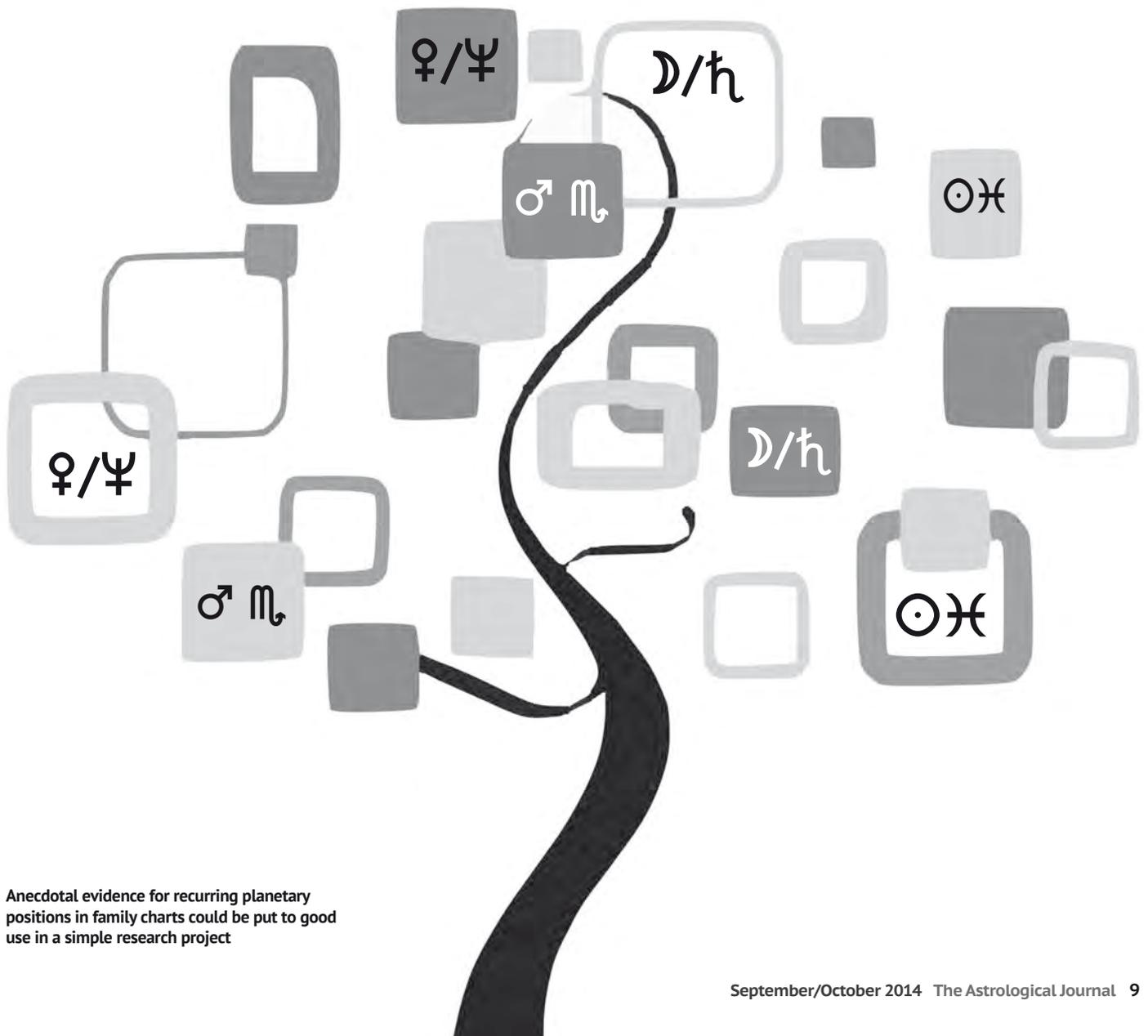
Heidegger observed that "Every question is a seeking. Every seeking takes its direction beforehand from what is sought".⁶ Thus our questions are initially always ahead of ourselves, and draw on some implicit understanding, a 'felt sense' of things that still awaits clear formulation. Here it is important to be really clear about the relevance of the question and the homogeneity of the group under investigation. Much of Wittgenstein's thought addresses such conundrums, and stresses how our questions and assumptions often encapsulate our confusions, as Cicero demonstrated. However, if one thinks more carefully about how the sample is selected there is much that can be discovered. The samples do not need to be large, and you may well find that they are already on your computer.

In looking at twelve of Freud's immediate relatives, five shared his Moon in Gemini, which a standard binomial calculation gives odds against chance at over 9000:1. Of course, this might be an anomaly, unless other family groups confirmed similar tendencies. However, major discoveries have resulted from small samples and considered questions. John Bowlby demonstrated that the loss or separation of a parent in childhood correlated with later depression in the adult, findings that radically changed one of Freud's key theories. Many of Bowlby's samples were small, and went against chance by factors as low as 10:1, which is not much in a small set. Jean Piaget

Socrates heard voices. He called these his daimons, and accepted their guidance. Today he would be termed schizophrenic and offered medication

similarly demonstrated how a child's ability to make sense of the world went through specific age-related stages. Again, he used small samples with low statistical

outcomes. But both repeated their research dozens of times with different groups, and while each individual test scored low in probability, the overall results, much like the iron filings, confirmed a clear message that could not be denied. Astrologers have much anecdotal evidence for recurring planetary positions in family charts, and this could be put to good use within a relatively simple research project. A hundred or so different groups of family members that demonstrated persistent Sun or Moon positions could make for a very interesting research project, and staying with the Lights obviates the considerable statistical issues that arise



Anecdotal evidence for recurring planetary positions in family charts could be put to good use in a simple research project

when having to factor planetary retrogradation over long periods of time. We would not have to say why any persistent effect exists, for this is again another matter, which science often misunderstands. A frequent argument against astrology is that no causal theory can be proposed. But when scientists search for a cause, they tend to ignore the fact that causality is not a law which nature obeys, but the form of words in which science states its propositions about nature, and all too often is a shadow cast onto the very phenomena it seeks to investigate. Such a view also overlooks the fact that many major scientific discoveries emerged as a result of observations for which there was initially no explanation – apples falling from trees would be one pertinent example – though Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* offers a more thorough discussion of such matters. The idea that the scientific view is paramount is essentially a religious one. The scientific method may be supreme when it comes to investigating many areas of the physical world, but any claim that its perspective is, a priori, the final arbiter in all matters is to echo the language of the medieval Church. There are other ways of exploring the complexity of human experience that do not rely on statistics.

Qualitative research

This approach focuses on individual experience. Rather than seeking a common response to a single question within a large group (such as *'do 500 stonemasons have a predominant Mars-Saturn aspect?'*) it seeks to explore the lived experience of those born with a strong Mars-Saturn aspect by asking a range of questions that are aimed at understanding how the pattern might be emblematic of a variety of experiences and events. Astrologers already use this approach when offering case studies of famous individuals, of which there is no shortage, many of which are illuminating. But here we tend to focus on what concerns us, and the point we are trying

to make in order to confirm a view we already hold. What if we treated the 'Mars-Saturn question' differently? A typical qualitative project would select a small group – five or six people born with

It was only when the Gauquelins moved towards a more phenomenological approach that they struck gold

that aspect – ideally a very close conjunction, as this removes the necessity of considering the consequence of different phases. The natives would be asked a range of questions aimed at eliciting their experiences in different areas of life. Typically it would involve their work, their relationships, attitudes towards authority, the values they hold, the view they have of themselves, the books and films that appeal to them, and so on. The taped interviews would then be transcribed and coded according to specific criteria aimed at drawing out common themes and statements. While this is certainly time-consuming, and might result in an analysis of some 15,000 words, it would not involve statistics, for the focus would be on the lived experience of the participants. This sort of research is routinely conducted by students of

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psychology and psychotherapy interviewing a small cohort whose circumstances or past experiences match specific research criteria. Innumerable examples could be given of findings which later inform the way in which therapists work with clients presenting with specific histories. The qualitative approach has much to offer, and those involved in the training of astrologers, or in wider research at MA level, might consider offering grants for such projects to be undertaken, as can RGCSA (see below) and the Urania Trust.

While many hundreds of astrological articles have been printed aimed at demonstrating one astrological effect or another, the results have been somewhat mixed. Indeed, astrological research is matched only by that carried out by psychologists. Here dozens of journals have published thousands of projects, many funded in ways astrologers can only dream of, with similarly conflicting results. Medical research is another area in which diametrically opposite results can be 'proved'. In all of this, one thing can be said for certain: the lives we lead are endlessly complex. If the 'one size fits all' approach favoured by conventional research proves anything, it proves its limitations with every contradictory report. However, some scientists are prepared to address this shift in findings with a concept that has an uncanny resemblance to astrology, which intriguingly, they name Cosmic Habituation.

Cosmic Habituation

The journal *Nature*, traditionally an arch-defender of science, published an article⁷ describing the puzzling history of medical findings that were at first convincingly replicated, but which as time went by began to lose significance. Once, those who were given certain drugs at the onset of psychosis reported real benefit. Today, those experiencing similar symptoms, and being given the same medication for the first time, did not respond in the same way as those treated identically at earlier times. Thus has emerged the remarkable

idea that the cosmos is changing in some inexplicable manner, and that research findings are in some way time-dependant. This would appear to echo the astrological model, which claims that all is in flux, and while essential human concerns contain much similarity, how they are expressed in the everyday shifts within its unique language, which like all languages, does not stay still. This may be a factor in explaining some contrary research findings, but often the problem devolves to arguments over methodology. Those planning a research project can get help from RGCSA at www.astrology-research.net/

All research is complicated, and particularly so for astrology. Not only is there considerable prejudice to be faced,⁸ but the task of combining celestial mechanics with psychological variables is also culturally dependant – am I ‘direct and honest’ or ‘rude and insulting’?

The idea that the scientific view is paramount is essentially a religious one

Despite the real difficulties of grouping occupations or character traits, much has been achieved, and it would probably take as much space as this article just to list them. And so we go on, often led by an unexpected thought that occurs when we notice some common factor in a group of charts that had previously passed us by. The work of Addey et al is just one of the ways in which astrology can be explored. I am sure many more await us.

Endnotes

1 See *Science & Psychic Phenomena – The Fall of the House of Skeptics* by Chris Carter. While this book touches only briefly on astrological research, its strength lies in its very detailed,

and very readable, accounts of research into non-conventional experiences, which reveal the extreme lengths to which orthodox scientists go to disprove positive findings in areas that worry them. My review of this book can be found in the forthcoming issue of *Correlation*.

2 *Recent Advances in Natal Astrology*, by Dean and Mather, published by the Astrological Association, London 1977, pp.558-560.

3 *The Eureka Effect*, by Nick Kollerstrom and Mike O'Neill, published by the Urania Trust, 1996.

4 *The Tenacious Mars Effect*, by Ertel & Irving, published by the Urania Trust 1996.

5 For an account of this research, see *Correlation* Vols 17:1 and 18:1.

6 Heidegger. M., *Being and Time*. State University of New York Press, 1996, p.5.

7 *Nature*, 2011, p.437.

8 See ‘*Prejudice in Astrological Research*’, a *Correlation* article now at <http://cura.free.fr/xv/11mikhar.html>



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