

The Ascendant

ANY PLANET'S POSITION on the horizon (i.e., near the Ascendant) can be considered to indicate an unusual prominence of that planet's qualities and energies in the life of a person born at that moment. (This is also reflected in the way transits to the Ascendant are felt to be especially strong.) Since most astrology is geocentric and thus assigns importance to various celestial factors according to their appearance as observed from earth, one might expect that such a trend (drawn from astrological observation) should be evident in one's direct perception of the astronomical phenomenon itself. And indeed, this is so; for any planet on the horizon is seen to be magnified. Imagine a full harvest moon, glowing orange and gold just above the horizon. It looks huge, easily twice its normal diameter. Many people ascribe this apparent increase in size (which is also observed with the Sun, planets, and constellations when near the horizon) to atmospheric distortion; but, while smog, dust, and other atmospheric components give the harvest moon its golden hue, they don't magnify the image. Nor is the Moon closer when it is on the horizon, although it appears that way. (In fact, it is closest to the observer when it is directly overhead!) The surprising truth is that the increase in size is a perceptual effect, solely "in the eye of the beholder." If you photograph and measure the Moon both on the horizon and overhead, the diameters are identical; the image size hasn't

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changed at all. This phenomenon is therefore considered by scientists to be a "mere optical illusion." However, since in geocentric astrology the way things appear to us on earth (e.g., the retrograde motion of planets) is regarded as crucially important, we should see this phenomenon as symbolic of the fact that any planet near the horizon is especially prominent in our lives since its "influence" is thereby magnified.

As an example of the significance of a planet near the Ascendant, let us take the case of a man whose Sun is in Capricorn, Moon is in Virgo, and whose Ascendant is Cancer. If one were to judge his overall temperament from those three factors alone, it would be apparent that he would probably be a rather conservative sort of person: cautious, self-protective, security conscious, and perhaps even a bit skeptical of anything not rooted in cultural or familial traditions. However, if this man also has Uranus conjunct the Ascendant (whether on the 12th or the 1st house side), we begin to see

an entirely new dimension of his personality. For, in spite of all the natal factors pointing toward security and traditionalism, the Uranian vibration is likely to indicate a powerful streak of experimentalism, unorthodoxy, and openness to the new and different. Rather than being a stick-in-the-mud sort of person filled with fears and self-doubt, he may well exemplify progressive thinking and even revolutionary inclinations on some level. In fact, this man could never be satisfied with a Capricornian sort of lifestyle in which the primary emphasis was upon duty and personal limitation, for he would need to not only think about but also to act out his constant urge toward variety of experience and freedom of self-expression.

As another example, suppose a woman has an Aquarius Sun, a Sagittarius Moon, and even Leo rising. This is a powerful combination of positive exuberant energies which we might expect to be expressed dynamically in a particularly overt manner. But if this woman has Pluto conjunct the Ascendant, she would most likely express herself in a manner reminiscent of those with Scorpio rising: secretive, moody, reflective, and self-repressive. Or to state this more precisely, there might be a strong fear of allowing herself to express the kind of spontaneity that her other chart factors symbolize. In this example, the presence of Pluto near the Ascendant magnifies the Plutonian quality far more than would be the case with Pluto in other areas of the chart.

The Ascendant shows a way in which we are acutely sensitive and aware, and this is another explanation of why a transit to the Ascendant is felt to be so powerful; for it affects us in the area of our lives and in the dimension of our energy field that is most sensitive. In fact, some astrologers have said that the Ascendant shows the point where the spirit enters the body at the moment of the first breath. I do not know if this is true, but my experience in the healing arts (especially with Polarity Therapy) leads me to believe that the part of the body associated with the rising sign indicates where you are dynamically connected to your subtler bodies (or subtler energy fields) and hence where there is an intruding of powerful energies.

We might mention here some of the meanings of

the Ascendant:

A. The Ascendant represents the image of the personality that is seen by others. This does not mean that this image is an accurate portrayal of one's total self, but it does show something which other people often notice as a first impression. The Ascendant image may, in fact, reveal personal qualities which are distinctly at variance with one's more inward orientations.

B. The Ascendant represents the way in which you actively merge with life in the outer world when your energy is flowing spontaneously. Hence, it reveals a general approach to life which in older astrological treatises has been called the "temperament."

C. The Ascendant symbolizes an important aspect of your personal destiny in the sense that you simply must live and express yourself in that way in order to feel free and whole.

D. The Ascendant (especially according to its element: fire, water, air, or earth) reveals the quality of energy flow directly vitalizing the physical body and thus whether there is marked conductivity (air or fire) or strong resistance (water or earth) to the spontaneous flow of the vital energies. This correlation explains why transits to the Ascendant so strongly affect your vitality, appearance, and general state of health.

E. The connection between the Ascendant and the physical body is also evident in another way—the fact that the body constitutes your most immediate physical environment. When we are born, our physical body and, to some extent, that of the mother comprise our entire environment; and, although we forget it in later years as we become more identified with the body, our physical vehicle always remains an essential part of our environment. Hence, we see why the Ascendant so often has been correlated with the quality of the early environment, for any contact with the outer world is filtered through the attunement of the Ascendant. The body (and thus the Ascendant) brings the environment into existence for us, and the Ascendant therefore colors how we see our total environment and our attitude toward the outer world in later life.

F. The Ascendant represents a dimension of

one's nature which some have correlated with the ego. Although one cannot make a direct correspondence between the Ascendant and the ego, it can be stated that the Ascendant represents an important dimension of the ego. When one is threatened, one tends either to retreat from the form of expression shown by the Ascendant to the more secure personality center symbolized by the Sun or to further emphasize the Ascendant's qualities in order to assert one's individuality and ensure one's survival. Since the Ascendant in a natural chart correlates with the sign Aries, the Ascendant is always indicative of a way of expressing one's individuality and thus, in a sense, one's ego. However, this is not to be regarded as a negative quality unless perhaps one is overly compulsive about it.

G. The "transcendent" dimension of the Ascendant mentioned earlier can be seen in the way the Ascendant shows how we merge with life purely and spontaneously; it is a way of living and being which is beyond "understanding." Much more than the Ascendant, the Sun sign indicates how we "understand" and assimilate experience. The Ascendant rather reveals the way we feel ourselves to be uniquely ourselves, the highest point of spontaneous conscious attunement and action.

This last reference to the transcendent quality of the Ascendant may at first seem a bit far fetched or unclear, so it is worth explaining this idea in more detail. The Ascendant marks the point of separation between the 12th house (things beyond conscious control) and the 1st house (forces we can consciously use). Hence, any planet on the Ascendant (either natively or by transit or progression) indicates that one is becoming aware of that function, energy, or universal law with great

immediacy. The Jungian psychologist Patrick Harding further explains this point:

...[W]e find the Ascendant taking up a position exactly, if the timing is really accurate, between life in the womb and life in the world outside it.

It thus shows us the exact position of the timeless zone between the two. It would seem, therefore, that the timeless point may, and almost certainly does play some part in the stamping of the qualities of the rising sign upon the psyche of the child.

If we take the Ascendant as the exact mid-point between the unconscious womb world and the conscious outer world, it would then seem logical that when these are in balance or in a state of timelessness, the trinitarian principle operates and the third member of the psyche, "The Collective Unconscious," comes into play. Within the collective unconscious there exist the Great Archetypes and there is some evidence to show that these are twelve in number and that they correspond to the symbolic images allocated to the signs of the zodiac....It seems natural then, that as the child passes through the timeless zone at the

moment of birth, the active archetype of that period claims it for its own and impresses its qualities upon it.

Because a planet is a much more concentrated focus of energy than is a sign, it should be pointed out here that the ascending sign alone should not be considered apart from those planets which modify, energize, or color the mode of self-expression shown by the Ascendant and the entire 1st house. There are basically two types of such planets: 1) any planet in the 1st house (which includes not only planets beneath the horizon in the traditional 1st house area—except for those within 6° to 8° of the 2nd house cusp—but also planets situated in the traditional 12th house area, within even 10° of the Ascendant); and 2) the ruling planet (or



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planets) of the Ascendant.

The ruling planet of the Ascendant is treated separately in the next section [*Rays*, May/June 2002] since a full understanding of its importance calls for some depth of explanation. However, we can rather briefly examine the significance of a planet situated in the natal 1st house. The first thing to emphasize is that a 1st house planet can overshadow the vibrations symbolized by the Ascendant, at least in obvious ways. The qualities represented by the ascending sign are still there and operating, but the presence of a planet in the first house (especially if it is close to the Ascendant) indicates a mode of expression which is particularly forceful.

There is an especially strong contrast in cases where the 1st house planet is in a sign that is different from the ascending sign. For example, a person with Leo rising will inevitably manifest certain Leo characteristics; but the presence of a Virgo planet in the 1st house may provide enough Virgo emphasis to prompt other people to guess that the

person has Virgo rising.

Those whose charts contain a 1st house planet in a sign that differs from the rising sign are characterized by having a more complex overall approach to life than other people. In those cases where the 1st house planet is in the ascending sign, there is a double emphasis on the qualities and energies of that sign, although the specific mode of energy release will greatly depend upon which planet is so situated. For example, if one has Saturn in Aries in the first house and also Aries rising, the expression of the Aries energy is shown to be deeply important to the individual and something which he or she may work at with great effort. However, although the Aries qualities and urges will be strong in that person, the Saturn placement indicates that the actual release of the Aries energy may be something less than spontaneous and may in fact be somewhat inhibited. In some instances, such a person may even appear to be more of a Capricorn rising type of person than an Aries rising type. (Continued) □

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