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THE BASICS: WHAT ARE PRIMARY DIRECTIONS?

The technique known today as primary directions is one of the most ancient and renowned methods of astrological forecasting. It is also, as I hope to show in this book, one of the most powerful. From classical antiquity throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance, and even into the twentieth century, all the great names of western astrology have worked with primary directions.¹ It was the predictive technique of Dorotheus and Ptolemy, of Māshā'allāh and Abū Ma'shar, of Regiomontanus and Placidus, of Morin de Villefranche and William Lilly. To understand the traditional astrologers, we must understand primary directions.

The primary motion

The word *primary* refers not only to the pre-eminence of the technique, but to the *primary motion* on which it is based. This is simply the daily rotation of the earth around its axis, appearing to us as the rotation of the sky – complete with planets, stars, and the signs of the zodiac – around our place of observation.² In approximately 24 hours not only the Sun, but every planet and zodiacal degree will rise in the east, culminate in the south (for an observer in the northern hemisphere), set in the west, and finally travel unseen across its lowest point in the north (the anti-culmination below the horizon) to the place where it will rise again.

A planet or point in the zodiac rising at the eastern horizon is said to be conjunct the ascendant. When culminating, it is similarly conjunct the midheaven or *medium caeli* (MC); when setting, conjunct the descendant; and when anti-culminating, conjunct the lower midheaven or *imum caeli* (IC). These four points or *angles* mark the cusps of the 1st, 10th, 7th and 4th houses, respectively, in all quadrant house systems. On its way between two angles, a planet or point will of course conjunct the intermediate house cusps as well; and it may also pass over places in the sky which minutes or hours earlier were occupied by other planets. We shall explore the mechanics of this more fully in Chapters 3 and 4.

Primary directions rest on this basic premise: that the actual motion of the heavens in the hours following birth, bringing the planets and other points to significant places in the natal chart, shows the unfolding of events in years to come; and that *each degree of such motion corresponds to approximately one year of life*.

As the earth turns on its axis, seemingly making the heavens turn around our vantage point, it completes a full circle of 360° in just under 24 hours, or 1440 minutes. One degree of primary motion therefore equals about 4 minutes of clock time ($1440/360 = 4$). This 1° motion is symbolically equated with with one year, so that every hour after birth covers 15 years of life events. The directions formed to the natal chart within six hours of birth will then correspond to a full 90 years of life; and if a planet were to rise exactly two hours after a person's birth, we could expect whatever the planet signifies in the chart to manifest around 30 years of age in a way that affects the native's life, health, body and temperament (signified by the ascendant).

Interpreting primary directions

Like all predictive techniques, primary directions presuppose an understanding of the natal or radix (literally 'root') chart. The reading of the birth chart, which tells us the *What*, therefore precedes the timing of events, the *When*, just as a physician's diagnosis must precede his prognosis. The radix shows us the potential experiences of an entire lifetime all at once, often with confusing results as we see gain and loss, triumphs and setbacks jumbled together. We use directions and other predictive techniques to sort these influences into an ordered series of discrete events.

Because what is not promised in the radix cannot take place at any time, similar directions in dissimilar charts do not produce identical results. Nevertheless, an astrological 'family resemblance' may be found in all directions involving the same planet. This is because a planet always acts according to its own nature. The nature of a planet is the constant element in its effects, by which Mars signifies heat, conflict, suddenness or violence; and Venus, love, beauty, pleasure, or indulgence. The changing elements are the planet's relation to the houses of the chart (by location and rulership), which determines the areas of life it will affect; its dignities or debilities, which determine the quality and

quantity of the results; and its relations with other planets (by conjunction and aspect), which determine both.³

To illustrate the points made so far, let us look at two natal charts where the Moon is about to rise.⁴ In the first chart, the Moon is ruler of the 10th in the 1st, and as such promises success in career matters (unless afflicted, which it is not).

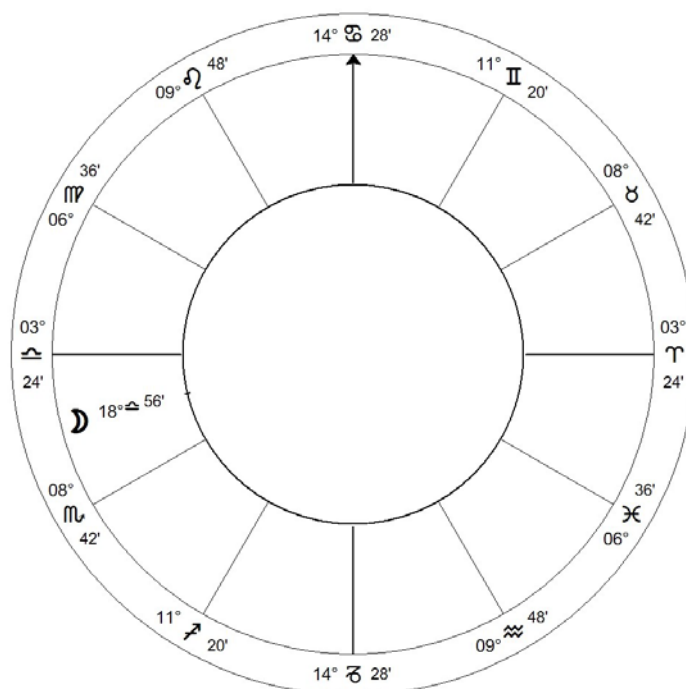


Fig. 1: male native, details withheld.

Approximately 1h 57m, or 117 minutes, after the person's birth, the Moon rose over the eastern horizon. This corresponds to an event around 29.25 years of age, as every 4 minutes represent the rising of one degree ($117/4 = 29.25$). At the age of 29y 6m, the native gained an attractive academic position.

In the second chart, the Moon rules the 8th house, signifying suffering and misfortune. It also afflicts the ruler of the 7th house (marriage and love affairs) with a square aspect. The Moon rose over the horizon 1h 33m, or 93 minutes, after birth, corresponding to an event around 23.25 years of age. At 23y 6m, the native was plunged into a severe depression as a love relationship of six years' standing came to an end. (It is pertinent to note that when a planet is directed to the ascendant, its opposition is

necessarily directed to the descendant, or 7th house cusp, at the same time. Directions of aspects will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5.)

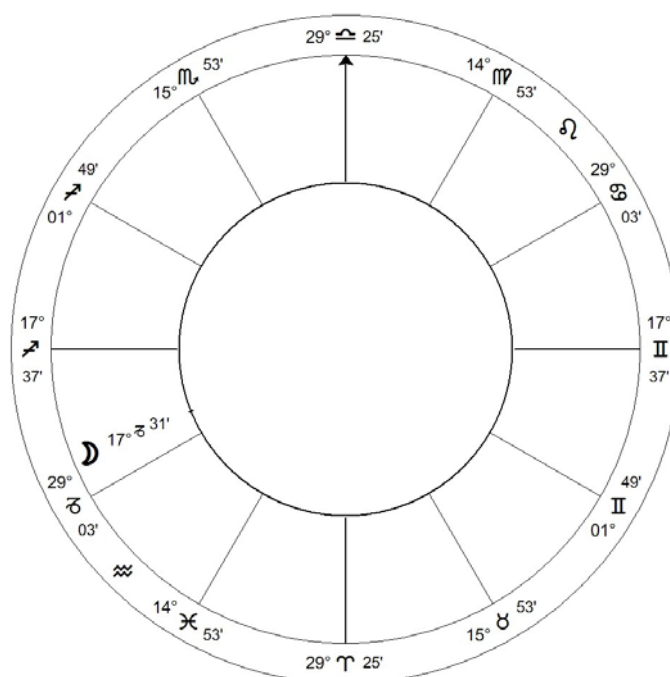


Fig. 2: male native, details withheld.

These two charts also illustrate the difference between degrees of ecliptical longitude (the ‘zodiac degrees’ shown in charts, with which students of astrology are most familiar) and degrees in the rotation of the earth (technically known as degrees of *right ascension*). In Fig. 1, the Moon’s longitude is less than 16° removed from that of the ascendant; yet the earth had turned 29° around its axis before the Moon rose. In Fig. 2, the Moon is about 30° distant from the ascendant in the zodiac, but rose when the earth had turned only 23°. The reasons for this variation will be discussed in Chapter 3. For now, it will suffice to say that the rising times of the zodiacal signs differ, and that these differences become more marked the further one travels from the equator.

Significator and promissor

In both charts just discussed, the Moon is moving towards the horizon, which, as a great circle surrounding the place of observation, always remains fixed. This is the case in every primary direction: there is always one moving point and one which remains fixed.⁵ Since

the Middle Ages, astrologers have used the terms *promissor* (or, less correctly, *promittor*) and *significator* to differentiate between these two elements of a direction. Unfortunately, not all writers have employed these terms in the same way.

To older authors, a *significator* (sometimes also known as *moderator*) is a planet, angle or other chart point signifying a certain area of life, and considered the more passive element of a direction. Following Ptolemy, many classical authors have made use of only five significators, sometimes known as the ‘hylegiacal points’ (cf. Chapters 2 and 9): the ascendant, midheaven, Sun, Moon, and Part (or Lot) of Fortune. It was believed that all major events in life could be predicted from primary directions to these points. Not all astrologers agreed, however: ‘Alī ibn Abī r-Rijāl, Jean-Baptiste Morin and William Lilly, to mention only a few, claimed all seven planets as significators.⁶ Lilly’s list is worth quoting here:

First, the *Horoscope*, or Ascendant, we direct in every Nativity, for that it signifieth the Life and Body of man, his Complexion, the Affections and Manners of his Body and Minde [...]

Secondly, we direct the ☽, in regard she signifies the Complexion of the Body, and its Intentions, the Natives Journeys, Peregrinations, his Matrimony, the state of his Wife, Women and neer Kinsfolkes.

Thirdly, the Directions of the ☼ are made especially, concerning the Native’s good or bad health, his Honour or Preferment publick or private, the favour of great Persons, the state of his Father, and his Estimation.

Fourthly, *medium-cæli* we direct for Honour, Offices in the Common-wealth, the friendship of Nobility, Kings and Magistrates, for the Magistery, Trade or Profession of the Native, for his Mother.

Fifthly, ☿ being directed to the good or evill aspects of the *Fortunes* or *Infortunes* shewes the encrease or diminution of Riches [...]

Sixtly, you may direct ♄ to signifie your Ancestors, Inheritances, Buildings, Possessions, the Fruits of the earth; so also, Fears, Jealousies, Mistrusts, &c. according as ♄ is well or ill affected.

Seventhly, we direct ♀ for Glory, Renown, Riches, Children, Religion, Sobriety, &c.

Eightly, ♂ is directed for Animosity, Victory, War, Law-suits, and he shewes the estate of Brethren.

Ninthly, ♀ is directed for Matrimony, Love, Pleasure, rich Ornaments, Maids, Women, &c.

Tenthly, we direct ☿ for the Wit, Understanding, Trade, Industry, Negotiations, Journeys, our lesser Brethren, for Schollership, History, &c.

The Planets do signifie these things properly of themselves in Directions, in what Nativity soever they be, or in what part of Heaven; but accidentally, they have signification according to the nature of the Houses they are in, and are Lords of; by considering whereof, you shall finde the true intention of what is signified by the Direction.⁷

The *promissor*, on the other hand, is regarded as the active element, determining the nature of the event. The traditional promissors are mainly the seven planets and their aspects; some authors include the fixed stars in this group.⁸ Typically, but not always (see below), the significator is either a fixed circle such as the horizon or meridian, or else *considered* as fixed in its natal position in the sky, while the promissor is carried towards it by the primary motion. Thus, in our examples, the fixed circle of the horizon or ascendant is the significator, while the moving Moon is the promissor.

In this context, however, it is important to be aware of a possible source of confusion. As the clockwise primary motion causes the signs of the zodiac to pass over the fixed place of the significator, that place appears to move anti-clockwise, that is, forwards through the signs. Classical authors, envisioning directions *from this point of view of the significator*, speak of directing a significator to a promissor (for example, ‘the ascendant directed to the Moon’), although it is clear from their examples that they are in fact observing the promissor (the Moon) being carried by the movement of the celestial sphere towards a fixed significator (the horizon or ascendant).⁹

Direct and converse

In the context of determining longevity (discussed in Chapter 9), Ptolemy distinguished between two types of directions. In the first type, a promissor is borne towards the significator with the primary motion from east to west as described above. As already noted, the zodiacal signs are carried clockwise across the significator, producing the impression that the significator is moving forward through the zodiac. Ptolemy therefore called this motion ‘into the following signs’; later generations of astrologers referred to it as *right* or *direct motion*.

In the second type of direction, it is the significator which is carried clockwise towards a promissor with the same primary motion from east to west. As the significator may now be said to move backwards through the zodiac in order to reach a point in an earlier sign or degree, Ptolemy called this motion ‘into the preceding signs’. Later authors knew it as *converse motion*.

In both cases, the astronomical motion of the celestial sphere from east to west is the same; but from the point of view of the significator, one direction is formed forwards along the zodiac, the other backwards. This distinction is related to the Hellenistic concept of aspects, where an aspect formed against the direction of the zodiacal signs (a dexter aspect) was known as *aktinobolia* (ἄκτινοβολία) or ‘casting of rays’ and perceived of as more powerful than one formed in the opposite direction (a sinister aspect). *At no time was the celestial sphere imagined to move backwards, carrying planets from west to east.*

The terms *direct* and *converse* retained the same meanings until the latter part of the 19th century, after which time they were radically altered (cf. Chapter 8). Directions in direct motion were the general norm, converse directions being used mainly for retrograde planets, so-called Arabic Parts, and certain longevity calculations. The two former conventions are of unknown origin, but present in medieval texts; the latter derives from Ptolemy (see Chapter 9).¹⁰ In my own experience, I have found converse directions equally valid for all planets, whether retrograde or not.

SUMMARY

- ❖ Primary directions have been a major predictive technique of ‘western’ astrology for more than 1,500 years.
- ❖ The technique is based on the rotation of the earth around its axis (the *primary motion*), bringing planets and other chart points to new positions in the sky.
- ❖ Each degree of rotation, taking approximately 4 minutes of clock time, corresponds to one year of life.
- ❖ Every direction has two elements, one considered more passive as determining the area of life concerned (the *significator*) and the other considered more active as determining the nature of the event (the *promissor*).
- ❖ The promissor (generally a planet, aspect, or fixed star) being carried by the east-to-west primary motion to the natal place of the significator (generally a planet or angle) constitutes a *direct* or *right direction*. The significator being carried by the same motion to the place of the promissor constitutes a *converse direction*.
- ❖ The correct interpretation of a direction rests on the understanding of each planet’s nature and signification in the natal chart, including its house position, rulership, dignities, and aspects.

¹ The term ‘western’ for a tradition largely upheld and developed by the Persians and Arabs has been rightly questioned. Indeed, the tradition as a whole is western only in relation to its easternmost cousin, the Indian tradition; nor have the two developed in isolation from one another. Primary directions, however, do not seem to have passed into India along with other parts of Hellenistic astrological teachings during the first two centuries of the common era.

² This daily motion is called ‘primary’ because it was perceived by earlier astronomers as the rotation of the outermost sphere surrounding the earth, known as the *primum mobile* ‘first movable’.

³ Some authors have tended to emphasize planetary nature at the expense of house rulership and position. For instance, Kühr 1936:348: ‘Further it is advisable particularly to consider the nature of the promissors strongly in the interpretation. Nature not seldom proves superior to [house] determinations in directions and *under no circumstances proves false!*’ My own experience, using a different zodiac and house system (see the Preface), has been that a planet’s accidental determinations are as reliable as its nature.

⁴ Several example charts used in this book are anonymous, but all have well-documented birth times.

⁵ The two possible exceptions would be directions to intermediate house cusps in certain house systems (cf. the discussion in Chapter 4) and Placidian ‘rapt parallels’ (cf. Chapter 8).

⁶ See Abenragel 1551:161 (Haly Abenragel being the common Latinized form of ar-Rijāl, an 11th century author). Morin used the seven planets along with all twelve house cusps as significators, stating that Johann Schöner (15th – 16th century) had been of the same opinion; see Holden 1994:8.

⁷ Lilly 1659:653 f. A note in the margin reads: ‘*It’s not usual to direct but the former five.*’

⁸ See, for instance, Lilly 1659:665 ff (drawing on medieval sources).

⁹ In the 11th century, al-Bīrūnī noted the same problem: ‘It can be imagined from their terminology and their work that the progression [i.e., direction] is directed from the preceding (body) and ends at the following (body), but this is not the case. Its (real) meaning is contradictory to that idea: it is the arrival of the following (body), by the primary motion (of the universe) to the place of the preceding (body).’ (11th treatise of the *Masudic Canon*, unpublished translation by J. P. Hogendijk; additions in square brackets mine.)

¹⁰ Ar-Rijāl writes of these conventions (Abenragel 1551:158): ‘Note that the direction (*athazir*) of the hyleg and planets is according to the order of the signs, commencing from the beginning of the sign and proceeding to its end, except among the Parts and retrograde planets, the direction of which is against the order of the signs: for it begins from the end of the signs and goes towards their beginning. The opinion of Ptolemy and his followers is that whenever the hyleg should be in the eighth house or the ninth, its direction is similarly against the order of the signs: which other sages do not allow, but direct it in the direct mode.’ (Ptolemy does not in fact allow the hyleg to occupy the 8th house; see Chapter 9.)