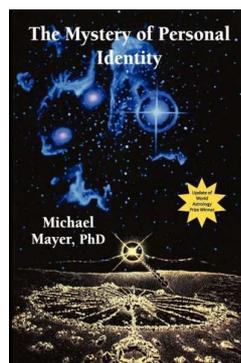




THE Astrological Journal



The Mystery of Personal Identity

By Michael Mayer

www.bodymindhealing.com

drmichael@bodymindhealing.com

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A review by **Diana McMahon Collis** for the
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Every so often a book comes along that crosses boundaries and brings an array of ideas together in a unique way. *The Mystery of Personal Identity* is one of those books. Author Michael Mayer has managed to relate the ancient beliefs and practices of a number of pre-modern cultures to the modern approaches of psychology, by focusing on the timeless, astro-poetic language of astrology. In so doing, he has produced a publication that is relevant both for psychotherapists and astrologers. This second edition is an update on the 1983 original, which was based on Mayer's doctoral dissertation *A Holistic Perspective on Meaning and Identity: Astrology as a Language of Personality in Psychotherapy*, which won the Astrological Association prize of 'most valuable contribution to astrology' in 1979.

Readers may be familiar with other books by Mayer as he has worked extensively on integrating psychology with ancient sacred wisdom traditions. In this volume you can read about Native American practices alongside information about Buddhist and Hindu traditions, alchemy, Christian biblical stories, Gnosticism, Hebrew Kabbalah, European folk tales, African Fulanis, ancient Akkadia – the list goes on. The author is extremely well read in mythology, religion and spiritual cultural practices and brings this knowledge fully to bear on the subject of names and naming. He has also given pioneering assistance to psychotherapists to work with patients in a way that focuses on health rather than on pathology. Mayer asserts that astrology is one methodology that can carry this forward.

Because this is a book that draws on linguistics, personality systems, identity systems and symbology, it is not strictly an astrology text book. And whilst it does focus on the possibility of the chart as a mandala, it is foremost a theory book; there are fewer charts than astrologers might expect to see. However, there is an entire case history with a psychotherapeutic client, including her chart, plus a couple of less lengthy case histories. These give insight into how astrology can be used within a psychotherapeutic setting and make for fascinating reading. To be clear, this isn't really a book about techniques – it is a book that puts forward ideas and possible practices. It also debates and documents positions on astrology and how people gain meaning about themselves and their lives, including how they might "find themselves" or recognise their true essence in the chart. There are some nice personal touches, specific to this new edition. These include how, as a

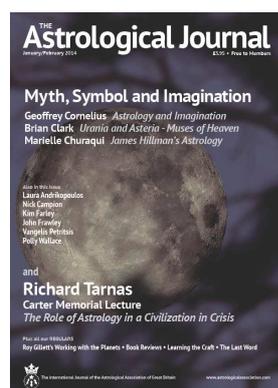
law student, the author received a personal reading at a health fayre – one which he dismissed at the time, yet the astrologer had predicted that he would be among those making a major contribution to the birth of the Aquarian revolution! Perhaps most importantly, Mayer's presentation of astrology as a non-deterministic healing art has encouraged other people to take it up, people who might otherwise have been put off by the old 'fated' emphasis of the past. He nonetheless hints, in the Afterword, that his own position has been equally controversial in its own way, which is also interesting to read about.

At the centre of the book is the idea that it is not the destination or result that matters in life; it is the journey or process that provides meaning and this can be applied to the process of engagement with astrology too. The idea is that it is not the answer to someone's question that should be our main focus, but rather it is their search for meaning among life's events that finally brings satisfaction to the questing soul. In this approach Mayer differentiates between symbols and correspondence (which he views as more of a Jungian concept). In other words, we can either use astrological symbols as a transformative language or we can allude to the idea of a relationship between symbol and life situation or personality trait; but these are not one and the same thing. Mayer even goes so far as to say, "It is equally problematic to proclaim that there is a correspondence between heaven and earth (the literalistic fallacy) or to say that there is not a correspondence (the sceptical fallacy). Both viewpoints stop the imagination from opening ourselves to 'Wonder'...". Clearly, this is a book that is going to make us think!

Whilst this is a second edition, most of the updated material appears in the Foreword and Afterword sections; and it is worth noting that the intervening body of work originates from a late 70s/early 80s perspective. Other astrological writers who have focused on a Jungian approach may well have sympathies, but others have not seen Jung's attitude in exactly the same way or may have added further developments (e.g. Maggie Hyde in *Jung and Astrology*). Either way, readers familiar with the work of James Hillman, a mytho-poetic approach, phenomenology and transpersonal and humanistic astrology, are all likely to feel in familiar territory in this updated edition. The book is an important part of astrology's cultural history, because it helps to show how approaches in psychological astrology have developed, as well as where there have been differences of opinion between modern astrologers. Dane Rudhyar's work, in particular, has been a major inspiration to the author.

Where Mayer moves the book into a decidedly current vein is in the Afterword section, where he catches up on events and reflections since the first edition was published. This is particularly helpful because it includes definitions of metaphysical approaches, such as the Hermeneutic path, a look at the relevance of Sabian symbols, explorations of themes such as the undeniable existence of some synchronicity between astrological events and life events – plus the value and magic associated with the process of engaging with symbols. It is also fair to say that the book is not a light read; it takes some time and focus to grapple with its concepts and terms.

As many astrologers will know, adopting any kind of firm 'position' within astrology can be difficult, because being a Mercurial and Uranian practice it is by nature potentially controversial and divisive. I therefore had some admiration for the author's honesty when facing the challenge of being in an unpopular position among some other astrologers. You may or may not agree with all he has to say in this updated volume, but it will almost certainly make for interesting reading. I particularly liked the focus on connecting the individual from the purely personal to the universal through engagement with astrology, potentially bringing a greater sense of purpose.



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Editor: Carole Taylor

journal@astrologicalassociation.com