

It's All in the Cards: Fortuity and Phenomenology in the Art of Tarot

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Abstract

In this paper, I explore the relationship between fortuity and phenomenology in the art of tarot through an autoethnographic analysis. Drawing from contemporary discussions in sociocultural anthropology, I apply my personal experience to further examine my own biases on practices of the occult and how they might instead be applicable in everyday life. In doing so, I argue for the potential integration of such rituals and how scientific methodology need not be separate from the occult. By partaking in a tarot card reading, I came to see how participatory consciousness during the ritual provided me with a newfound clarity and insight in a time of uncertainty and how that has appealed to a larger demographic.

Introduction

As early as the 15th century in Northern Italy, the art of tarot reading has been used as a text-based divination medium for fortune telling and the occult (Drury 24). From the wheel of fortune to the suit of cups, the cards possess the ability to foretell to its questioner anything they may want to know about career aspirations, matters of the heart, best courses of action, or even their creative intuitions. Each card is instilled with meaning, readers drawing from practices such as astrology, numerology, and the Kabbalah to inform their readings (24-25). Participants often assert a number of rationalizations for its validity. For the purpose of this cursory autoethnographic essay, I will partake in a tarot reading to examine the phenomenological issues that arise in me as a doubtful querent during the ritual process. By focusing on the interactions between myself and the reader, I analyze the sources of my skepticism of tarot as an effective method of divination.

Reading Tarot

Tarot decks consist of 78 cards. They are sorted in two categories, the major and the minor arcana. The major arcana consists of the 22 cards, often associated with the visual semiotics of tarot. The minor arcana is made up of 56 cards of four suits: cups, swords, wands, and pentacles (Drury 24). When reading tarot there is no preferred deck to use nor one universal approach to reading. The art of tarot is a “symbolic language based on esoteric themes” (24). Every reading is different; similarly, every reader and the methodologies they choose to implement within their practice is different. The unique process of shuffling the deck, picking out the cards, and the geometry with which they are laid out offers unique perspectives.

The reader, a close friend of mine, recently took up tarot as a method of self-care. For her, the cards and their images help provide insight into her thoughts and feelings, as a way of

seeking them out. Going into the reading, I had to acknowledge that I was not a believer in the powers of divination. For my reading, my friend had decided to employ the two-card reading method to reflect both past and future. While she had experimented with different spreads before, she found it to be the most effective in her own readings. With such numbers, I found it difficult to detach likelihood and felt inclined to ascribe probability to the cards. The math is simple: if two cards are drawn from a deck from a given two-card reading in which the order of their having been flipped matters, then there are 6006 possible combinations.

Going over what I knew to be true of tarot in my mind, I struggled to see its sensibility. Partaking in it felt like undermining my own reliable sense of introspection. How could a deck of cards accurately resolve my personal quandaries? It was an unnerving idea, displacing my understanding of my emotions and thoughts beyond my rationale. In his book, *The Myth of Disenchantment*, Storm challenges traditional definitions of modernity and contradicts the distinction made between disenchantment and secularization, proposing that “reason does not eliminate “superstition” but piggybacks upon it; that mechanism often produces vitalism” (3). Although there may be scientific and statistical explanations for the successes of tarot, the purpose of this brief autoethnography is not to discredit the art of tarot, but rather to gain a better understanding of how it instead offers “prompts for self-reflection, which lead to present clarity that may guide future actions” (Cervantes 115).

The Reading

With their own deck of Rider-Waite tarot, the reader and I decided to conduct a simple reading. The spread was divided into three readings between six cards: two were selected to forecast my academic success, two reflected my career prospects, and two addressed the disposition of my relationships. Using a method of “charging the cards,” a way of tuning the tarot to the impulses of the questioner, she shuffled the deck a number of times while focusing their attention to my queries. She did this until the cards no longer dissolved back into the deck.

As I turned one card over, my academic success became personified by the Hermit: an old man bearing a staff in one hand and in the other, a lantern illuminating a six-pointed star against the backdrop of a mountain range. Subsequently, the World: a woman floating above the Earth with a staff in each hand, surrounded by the four living creatures (i.e. a man, an eagle, an ox, and a lion). When I flipped two more cards for my career prospects, the Moon rose from the deck: a night scene, depicting a wolf and a dog howling as a lobster emerges from the water. Then, the King of Wands, reversed: a king, seated upright in his throne, draped with a cape. Finally, the deck offered two more cards for my relationships, the Magician: a man, standing before a table and a flowery setting with a lit candle in his hands. Then, the Ace of Cups: a hand emerging from the clouds bearing a cup as if to offer a drink.

My friend chuckled as she looked at the cards side by side, impressed by how direct the tarot can be in its symbolism. The Hermit, with its image of an old man standing atop a mountain, hit right at the heart of my conjectures about my decision to pursue a degree in English instead of neuroscience. My decision, as the cards suggested, arose from introspection, a time of soul searching. Beside the World, these accomplishments represent change from one

place to another, they impart both the end and the beginning of the journey. The Moon, casting its light, spoke to revelations of how I want to steer my career towards environmental law. Placed next to the reversed King of Wands, it revealed my qualms of law as a convenient way to make money. The Magician, representing a need to reconnect, clarified my readiness to pursue romantic relationships again. Alongside the Ace of Cups, an outpouring of emotions, the card symbolized my attitudes and my intuitive inner voice.

Discussion

Throughout the reading, what shocked me the most was my gradual openness to the suggestions that cards had made. Any initial doubts I had casted upon the validity of the cards prior to the session had subsided by the time I walked away from the table. By positing the constraints of probability with the flexibility of tarot as a method for divination, I had come to embrace tarot, as Greenwood puts it aptly, as “a conceptual space in which all knowledge, including magic, have their existence... express[ing] a language of relationship that incorporates different forms of knowing” (Greenwood 147).

When considering the nature of tarot readings, it is tempting to undermine their authenticity by drawing attention to the need for the questioner to assess their own results, the cards at hand. However, to do so would be dismissive of tarot’s proposals for mystery and wonder, of its ability “to summarize discord and... resolve conflict or restore harmony” (Zeitlyn 229). The art of tarot serves as a stepping stone between pondering a problem and acting to resolve it. It is a means of clarifying thought, of answering abstruse questions. As soon as I was able to isolate the need to rationalize everything that was going on, I was able to see the ritual as “similarly vague yet evocative” (Zeitlyn 229).

In recent years, the growing popularity of tarot on social media platforms like TikTok is a fascinating example of the world’s documented return to the occult from “the loss of wonder... de-animation... [and] the progressive rationalization of superstition” (Storm 6). With the uncertainties made prevalent during the COVID-19 pandemic, people from all around the world slowly turned to tarot as a form of healing, and even as a possible alternative to therapy (Cervantes 116). The prevalent use of tarot as a way to alleviate stress during the pandemic demonstrated how divinatory practices and rituals may be effective as widespread practice. It was an idea I had initially rejected prior to my own participation; yet the potential for magical consciousness exemplifies the need for tarot and other supernatural practices to be considered. As Susan Greenwood puts it, “Science, like any other human activity, must be understood within its context, and we must question our own assumptions” (146).

Conclusion

The art of tarot yields the power to allow individuals to look within the intrinsic self against the constraints of an extrinsic reality. It provides the opportunity to look beyond a certain set of circumstances or a given situation. Tarot offers instead a dynamic order in which the self-conscious is continually in the process of reflecting then acting, answering questions that would otherwise seem unanswerable. If we choose to detach the art of tarot, along with other

magical and supernatural practices, from whether or not it conforms to the standards of statistical probability akin to the conceptualization of science, it offers new possibilities for amalgamating previously separate traditions of knowledge. For instance, a new, more open attitude within Western clinical psychology could inspire positive innovations to how therapy is conducted. In terms of magical consciousness, tarot readings, for example, could encourage introspection, and “provide an avenue to bring subconscious issues to the fore, in order for the querent to be able to face them” (Cervantes 116). In writing this autoethnographic essay, I have come to approach the art of tarot with a sense of openness, and see that the experience of magic is conterminous with science within the greater canon of knowledge, as “not only, but also” configurations of everyday practice (Greenwood 145).

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