

Tarot: A Table-Top Art Gallery of the Soul

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Tarot cards are a rich and fascinating artform. They are also an excellent tool for inquiry. I show why tarot has value, regardless of the user's beliefs about magic. And I explain how novice or skeptical tarot users can appreciate (and create) that value by focusing on the card's images, rather than consulting texts or expert guides. This is because, on a naturalistic conception, tarot's zetetic value – that is, its value to inquiry – stems from its artistic properties.

A Brief History: The Five Tarot Waves

So, what is tarot? Tarot began as Italian playing cards. Much like the familiar 'French-suited' playing cards, they were used for a variety of games. These games did not have occult associations. In the 18th century, mystics began using the cards for supranatural divination. These mystics claimed the cards had mysterious origins and divinatory powers. The cards became widely available in the 1960s, and 'new age' hippies enjoyed their mystic associations. In the 1980s, others began to use tarot cards for therapeutic introspection. In this fourth tarot wave, people used the cards to better understand themselves and their social circumstances; many tarot-therapy proponents distanced themselves from tarot's occult or supernatural associations.

Tarot is having a resurgence, especially amongst young, LGBT, Black, and socially marginalised people. In this current wave, people use tarot in their creative, community-building, or self-empowerment projects. When contemporary users see tarot as having surprising or paranormal properties, often it is not foretelling the future, but instead revealing 'hidden truths', such as *recherché* insights about one's self, human character, social structures, philosophical values, or the meaning of life.

How Can Tarot Work?

A standard tarot deck contains 78 cards. Each card is a visual artwork with corresponding meanings. In the influential Rider-Waite-Smith edition, for example, the Emperor represents 'stability, power, aid, protection, a great person, conviction, and reason'.

The cards depict life's central decisions, emotions, events, and relationships. Even if you ignore the booklet, these themes are hard to miss. The cards display journeys, labours, foods, poverty, abundance, family, community, religious authority, joy, isolation, and similar. Characters look at you, or over you, or downwards, or turn away. They appear

variously scornful, pitying, sympathetic, or paranoid. Crucially, these countenances are ambiguous, and the images have layers of interpretative depth and cultural allusion.

In standard tarot practice, a user asks a lead question and then draws one or more cards to help them contemplate that question. What is a good tarot question? Inquiries that can be illuminated by introspection and creative attention work well. Question about one’s emotions, like ‘Why do I want Jill to phone me?’ are usually more suitable than, for example, straightforward predictive questions like ‘Will Jill phone me?’ Cards can be arrayed in a ‘spread’, where the positions have assigned significance. Here are ideas for two-card spreads:

Card A	Card B	Card A	Card B
		What do I want?	What is blocking me?
		What is my strength?	What is my weakness?
		Let it go	Let it grow
		What should I do?	What should I stop doing?

Three-card spreads include, for example, past | present | future and environment | obstacle | outcome. An internet search for ‘tarot card spreads’ shows more ideas.

Tarot instruction manuals often advise novices to start with one-card draws, rather than multi-card spreads, because they are simpler. And, lacking confidence, novices might rely on assigned meanings from books or websites, or the interpretations of experts, rather than drawing on their own interpretations of the images. In what follows, I suggest that both habits can prevent novices from apprehending the true zetetic value of tarot.

I argue that, firstly, in contrast to typical advice, novice, skeptical, or naturalistic users are likely to benefit from multi-card spreads. And, secondly, skeptical or naturalistically-minded querents may well uncover more zetetic value in the images – and one’s reactions to them – rather than conventionalised written meanings or expert opinions.

The Artworks: What Do *You* See?

One can think of tarot cards as a conveniently-sized, table-top art gallery of the soul. Or, at least, of the human condition. The artworks cut to the core of human nature, values, and aims;
the images can focus our attention and spark creative contemplation on significant choices, emotions, and relationships.

On a naturalistic – no spooky stuff – conception, tarot’s zetetic power resides in what the user notices and how they interpret it. Their reactions to the images reveal what that

person is currently thinking and feeling, and how their thoughts are shaped around ideas like power, ambition, abandonment, authority, new beginnings, and so on. Engaging with the cards—that is, the cognitive effort itself—and not which specific cards are pulled, underwrites the activity's value.¹

This explains why responding to the pictures, rather than the conventionalised meanings, can be more valuable to naturalistically-inclined or skeptical users. Suppose you draw the Emperor. Firstly, that the Emperor conventionally represents stability and 'a great person' is probably less indicative of your thoughts or circumstances than the fact that you perceive him as, for example, uneasy or cold-hearted. Your interpretation might indicate that you see power as tenuous or powerful people as callous.

Suppose you see the Emperor as uneasy. You might more readily notice the armour underneath his robes. Upon a throne, armour is unusual. This can spur further thoughts: Does he feel threatened by close associates or endangered by an outsider army? A person's salience patterns can be revealing. The user can ask themselves what their thought patterns indicate: Insecurity about their own social status, for example, or distrust of friends? Another reader might not perceive the Emperor as uneasy; perhaps they see hierarchy as unassailable, and see themselves only as a supplicant, not the Emperor.



Secondly, assigned conventional meanings vary by deck. This means they can feel arbitrary, rather than meaningful. This sense of arbitrariness can be an obstacle to investing cognitive attention. But that creative attention generates zetetic value. And so the impediment—thinking the activity isn't valuable—can inhibit the user from *generating* the activity's value. One's responses to the images, by contrast, is not arbitrary. The Emperor's face is ambiguous. If you see the Emperor as insecure, vulnerable, paternal, unquestionable, cold-hearted, kind, or passive, for example, then that response

¹ Gardiner (forthcoming) explains the epistemic powers of tarot, including especially the zetetic values of creative attention, question-asking, conversation, self-understanding, and flicking between interpretative perspectives.

is manifestly a fact about you and your current mental state. It provides something to reflect on.

In the (over-simplified) ‘Cliff Notes’ version of the history of philosophy, the Medieval ‘schoolmen’ scrutinised ancient texts. The Enlightenment arose because thinkers deferred less to textual sources and instead considered topics afresh. Roughly speaking, I suggest that skeptics open-mindedly experiment with a similarly non-doctrinal approach to tarot.

Why multi-card draws? Creative, percipient inquiry is typically fuelled by the inquirer being interested or invested. (Just ask a high school teacher.) But if a novice draws only one card, they might feel prematurely stumped and thus discouraged. Drawing multiple cards generates more avenues for creative thought. The user can see connections between cards, compare-and-contrast, build a narrative, or spot the differences. In some conditions—such as seeing two side-by-side images—minds cannot help but get to work. On a naturalistic conception of the cognitive value of tarot, that work—not whichever cards were pulled—generates the value.

In a nutshell, valuing the activity helps create the value. It allows people to think carefully about the cards, which spurs cognitive associations.² And, on a naturalistic view, the resulting insights *are* the value of tarot.

A Wealth of Interpretative Lenses

Tarot’s literary and visual suggestiveness allows users to dig deeply into salient associations. Salience is person-specific. Pollack (1980: 148-9) writes,

Because the [cards show] vivid scenes the formulas or commentaries belonging to each card serve only as starting points. We can ponder the pictures themselves, and how they combine with the pictures around them. In a way the pictures and each person’s imagination (and experience) act as a partnership. [...]

In many cases, of course, the pictures are very simple and directly related to the meanings they were meant to illustrate. The Four of Pentacles, for example, shows the image of a miser, someone ‘cleaving’ to the ‘surety of possessions’. But is it coincidence or plan that these four pentacles cover the crown of the head, the heart and throat, and the soles of the feet, thereby leading to deeper interpretations than simple greed?

Pollack, who is well-versed in spiritual ideas, alludes to the coins seeming to occlude chakras. To people who think about chakra flow, this visual is powerful. An artist instead might be struck by the monotony of grey dominating the image or the vast negative space

² Gardiner (2022: §2; forthcoming) describes how attention—merely thinking about something—is epistemically valuable and engenders further epistemic values like understanding.

above the protagonist. Another user might dwell on how distant the protagonist is from the city, that he faces away from community, or that the coins limit his mobility.



IV of Pentacles

With mental acuity, one can flick between interpretative lenses to grasp associations from theology, literature, healing arts, animal husbandry, classical mythology, or 15th-Century Italian society. One can connect themes to contemporary psychological, social, or political theories or personal experiences. Or one can simply see what one sees.

What one 'sees' stems from a generative interplay between the card's visual array, its conventional meanings (if known), and the user's background knowledge, assumptions, values, mood, circumstances, and the questions posed. Tarot readings often occur in dialogue with another person. Conversation and the interlocutor's perspective also fuels thought. Tarot hones the skills of switching between interpretative frameworks. Users can then apply these skills outside of tarot.

On a naturalistic interpretation, Tarot cards bear a resemblance to Rorschach tests. But tarot images offer layers of deliberate allusion; the activity fosters contemplation rather than ending at the initial perception, and tarot use aims to improve how one thinks, not merely test it. The cognitive, zetetic, and aesthetic values of tarot thus outdistance Rorschach tests.



VIII of Pentacles

The cards' interpretative abundance invites a constructive playing with ideas. A person attuned to the language of images might perceive significant contrast in the expanse above the heads in the VIII and IV of Pentacles, for example. In the former, the negative space is compositionally 'needed' for the vertical stack of coins. In the latter, the negative space isn't compositionally 'required'. Its barren expanse signifies something else. With skill, one can discern layers of meaning, association, and suggestion in tarot's images. Tarot fosters the epistemic skills of interpreting pictures. It also cultivates dexterity with allegories, analogies, narratives, patterns and cultural references. But what an individual sees depends on their emotions and circumstances. Tarot is thus a fecund arena for the epistemology of pictures.

The Aesthetic Value of Being Stumped

If one is wholly stumped by the images, familiarity with the basic structural correspondences can help. There are four suits. Pentacles (coins) represent financial and bodily matters, for example, whilst cups represent emotions and relationships. The numbered cards within each suit create a structure. Aces represent beginnings, twos represent coming together, threes represent community, and so on. The face cards also have a basic structural meaning. Knights correspond to action and social responsibility, whilst Pages – a relatively junior position – represent exploration and study. These basic structural correspondences provide inspiration without deference to full textual or expert interpretations.

But even with such help, one might still be stumped. And that is okay. Indeed, it is good. Another way that novices can benefit from contemplating tarot's images, rather than consulting texts or experts, resides in the aesthetic value of sitting calmly with a mental blank in response to a picture.

When I look at historically significant twentieth-century artworks, my mind is ablaze. I enjoy a satisfying array of thoughts, reactions, and associations. When I look at a Lichenstein, by contrast, I feel a cognitive silence. My thoughts are tamped down; I don't have much to think. I'm inexplicably stumped. This contrast – between my reaction to

other art and to Lichenstein— gives rise to an epistemic emotion; a sense that I should have thoughts or emotions, but I don't.

Epistemic emotions include puzzlement, surprise, resonance, curiosity, boredom, and intellectual frustration or disappointment. They are emotional responses to epistemic features of evidence, questions, and reasoning. Suppose someone asks you whether you have two nipples, for example. You might feel *irked* that they asked such a personal question, and *confused* about why they asked such as an odd question. The latter is an epistemic emotion.

What is this 'calmly stumped' emotion? My Lichenstein-blanking isn't unpleasant confusion, like struggling to understand trigonometry. I don't feel aggrieved, as though the artwork is at fault for not producing more cognitive associations in me, the viewer. It is a gentle sense that I am probably overlooking something, or missing out, but that is okay.

I experienced it when I looked at the IV of Wands recently: A cognitive stumping where I expected cognitive flow. I suspect that embarking on a non-doctrinal, free-thinking, iconoclastic tarot practice is a bounteous resource for experiencing that epistemic emotion. And that itself is a lovely opportunity.

Behold, The Goblet Fish: When Words Run Out, Pictures Help Us See

Vocabulary is limited. Sometimes pictures help us identify, apprehend, or name something that we don't yet have a word for. Consider the Page of Cups. At first look, one might think 'A fish in a goblet. That is weird. The fish does not belong.' It seems incongruous. In one sense, of course, that is true. But, on closer inspection, the Page is by the sea. Circling his head, his headpiece resembles waves. Perhaps, then, there is affinity, not discord, between the thoughts swirling around his head and the fish he sees in his cup. The fish is not so out of place.



The card's image helps us generate new ideas. We do not, as far as I know, have a term for something that initially seems unfitting, but actually befits one's ideas or mental context perfectly. In the absence of a different term, let's call it a 'Goblet Fish'.

Now, suppose the user goes about her life. She comes across something that initially seems unfitting, but, upon reflection, actually befits her current mental state. Empowered by her tarot reading, she has developed a conceptual resource and, accordingly, can label the world she encounters differently. Behold, the Goblet Fish has arrived. She can spot a Goblet Fish in the wild. The cards seem to have foretold the future: Tarot presented a goblet fish, and then she encountered one. But instead engaging playfully with the images helped her acquire something else of zetetic importance: A new conceptual resource, with which to see life more clearly. The cards didn't portend the goblet fish. They helped her spot it.

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