Why birth charts are like tarot cards

Abstract – How can a positive experience of astrology arise from astrological effects that, according to half a century of research, seem not to exist? The answer is a process called projection, which underlies the hidden persuaders we call “finding meaning where none exists” and “consider only confirming cases”. We can see how projection works by looking at the psychological tarot of the French-Canadian psychotherapist Denise Roussel. The client deals 13 cards and interprets each one according to their personal situation. What they don’t see (or don’t want to see) is as meaningful as what they do see. The approach works extremely well. Tarot images have a huge richness, so clients can look at almost any card and find it meaningful. Examples are given that show how the same card can evoke quite different responses in different people. Conclusion: it is the client who personalises the cards and gives them meaning, not some mysterious paranormal process. In more than five hundred psychological tarots, there was not a single instance where significant meaning could not be perceived. Susan Blackmore’s tests of the tarot confirm that nothing paranormal is involved. Projection alone is sufficient to explain tarot success. The same applies to astrology. Astrological images are as evocative and ambiguous as tarot images (ambiguous both in their interpretation and in the inevitable presence of opposing images elsewhere in the birth chart). The projection process that works so well for the psychological tarot cannot help but work equally well for astrology including horary astrology. Indeed, the psychological tarot deals very well with horary-like questions (many examples are given). Of course to view an astrology reading as an exercise in projection may seem inappropriate for what can be a strong emotional experience. In a sense it hardly matters whether astrology involves truth or other levels of reality or projection or whatever, because for most clients it does its job, and that may be enough. They can proceed in whatever direction the experience suggests, confident that it was meaningful and had changed their lives. On the other hand, for people to deal with problems better, they need to learn a whole series of coping skills. So we need to ask what type of learning takes place during a chart reading, and whether the astrologer is competent to guide such learning. Self-determination is one of the more important components of well-being. Astrology should not be allowed to suggest there are mysterious forces we can tap into to achieve happiness, for that (like heroin) could be devastatingly harmful. Ten references.

Worldwide, hundreds of thousands of clients now living have had a positive experience of serious astrology. Their encounter with an astrologer was helpful. For them, astrology was true in very real and practical ways. Whatever our views of astrology, there can be no doubt that such experiences are genuine. (That the experience for some clients may be less than positive is here of no consequence.)

However, half a century of research has found no evidence for the existence of planetary gods, no evidence that astrological effect sizes are commensurate with astrological claims, no evidence that clients can tell a genuine reading from a counterfeit, and much evidence against such claims. How could a genuine experience arise from something that seems not to exist, at least not according to conventional reality?

Some astrologers, like some theologians, hold that other levels of reality exist, and that the experience of astrology involves these other levels. Astrologers tap into these levels via the birth chart and thus produce genuine truth and a genuine experience. Or so they claim.

We could of course accept their view if the existence of other levels of reality could be demonstrated. It is not enough for astrologers to point out that reality can do strange things at the quantum level, simply because we do not live at the quantum level (when were you last in two places at once?). We need to demonstrate that the wine used in the Catholic Mass, for example, would under appropriate conditions exhibit the properties of the blood of Jesus. It is as simple as that. But so far the existence of other levels of reality is an article of faith associated with a particular belief system. We can regard it as a possibility, but in the absence of evidence we have no right to assume it, and indeed we have an obligation to see how far we can manage without it.

The article Artifacts on this website shows how unaided human reasoning is subject to systematic errors we call hidden persuaders. Hidden persuaders explain how an experience-based astrology can seem to work even if (as the evidence suggests) it is actually invalid. The present article shows how the psychological process called projection underlies the hidden persuaders we call “finding meaning where none exists” and “consider only confirming cases”. It then shows how the process works using examples from the psychological tarot.

Projection and projective tests

Every experience of astrology starts with a need, spoken or unspoken, ranging from simple curiosity about astrology to resolving a personal crisis or religious doubt. And it ends with a chart interpretation. Regardless of the means of interpretation (self, computer, or astrologer), the interpretation is assessed in ways that necessarily involve the client’s needs via a process called projection.

In psychology projection is a defense mechanism where we blame others for our unacceptable feelings and actions (it wasn’t me who did it, it was Satan), which in an extreme form results in paranoia. It has led to projective tests where we have to respond to vague but neutral pictures or incomplete sentences. The assumption is that we project our private feelings and needs onto the accommodating vagueness and reveal them in our responses. If asked what we see in these inkblots and we see only violence then we might be judged antisocial and in need of treatment. However, what we project may not reflect our enduring personality but our artistic skills or the film we saw last night. The assumption is open to doubt.

Projective tests were once many and varied, and tens of thousands of studies have been made to assess their performance. Two of the most frequently used were the Rorschach Test (inkblots made by spilling ink on paper and folding in half, introduced in 1921), and the Thematic Apperception Test or TAT (vague pictures, introduced in 1938). But those tens of thousands of studies have shown that projective tests have such poor validity and reliability (both typically around 0.5) that today they are generally seen as not worth bothering with (ironically even 0.3 is well beyond what astrologers can achieve with astrology, see Index.

Left: An inkblot similar to a Rorschach inkblot. What do you see in it? A monster with big hands or two bulls fighting or something else? Right. One of the TAT pictures. What is happening? To answer, you make up a story that describes the situation and how the people in it are feeling. In each case the stimulus is vague and neutral, so our responses are held to reflect the private needs and feelings that we project on to it.

About the Rorschach, for example, even in 1964 Jensen could say “the 40 years of massive effort which has been lavished on the Rorschach technique [over 3000 published studies by 1964] has proven unfruitful, at least as far as the development of a useful psychological test is concerned. [Therefore] … it seems not unreasonable to recommend that the Rorschach be altogether abandoned in clinical practice, and that students of clinical psychology not be required to waste their time learning the technique”
that the cards have this power is a crucial persuader by the projection process that experiencing (p.238).

identifies

For example, one of Roussel’s clients sees the six of sticks, which shows astrology is simply this: It is the subject who almost anyone can look at the cards and were chosen for the failure problem (this modern will add to the personal quality already present in playing cards) to be evocative. Roussel much prefers the Hurley pack. The client shuffles the pack while thinking of the problem (this stimulates the concentration) and then lays out 13 cards face down in a diamond pattern in the order shown below (p.242).

Interestingly, the 13 positions are named in astrological (mostly planetary) terms as shown by the glyphs. Roussel says this is because “The astrological language is descriptive of observable behaviour. Contrary to psychiatric and psychoanalytic language, it describes personality in a way that does not make clients feel guilty or pathological. This language, in its simplicity and suggestive capacity, covers each and every person” (p.244).

Once the cards are laid out, Roussel tells the client to turn over #1 and “describe it. Say everything that comes to you. By establishing links with your life, we will finally discover... [insert the words shown below]”. The client then proceeds to #2, and so on, until all cards have been turned and responded to.

We will finally discover...
1 [Sun] your most important concerns.
2 [Moon] something as important as in #1 but more hidden.
3 [Earth] your position re #1 and #2. Do you fight, flee, or what?
4 [Jupiter] what is beneficial and positive for you.
5 [Saturn] what is difficult for you, what you must learn to face.
6 [Venus] what for you is a source of love and beauty.
7 [Mars] what makes you aggressive and want to act.
8 [Mercury] your mind’s advice, the solution to your problem.
9 [Neptune] your probable future already in your programming.
10 [Uranus] changes to counter or realise the future seen in #9.
11 [Vesta] factors whose absence led to your problem.
12 [Pluto] your future beyond that seen in #9.
13 [New Ascendant] forces that will dominate your next cycle.

In other words, the client interprets each card according to a particular astrology-based perspective on their personal situation, much as they might do in a birth chart reading. As in a birth chart, the images act as a focus and the creator of new viewpoints. Under the guiding hand of the therapist, the clients see themselves and their problems in a new way. What they don’t see can be as meaningful as what they do see. It is here that the psychological tarot provides a useful lesson for astrology.

A lesson for astrology

Unlike astrology, where the birth chart is clearly personal, tarot cards are clearly impersonal – a point easily demonstrated by their failure to show the same pattern when dealt twice. But the cards seem personal because the tarot symbols are not arbitrary. They were chosen for the responses they evoke, and over the centuries they have gained a huge richness and depth. Consequently almost anyone can look at the cards and find in them a reflection of their own situation. The same with a birth chart. The lesson for astrology is simply this: It is the subject who personalises the otherwise impersonal images and gives them meaning.

For example, one of Roussel’s clients sees the six of sticks, which shows a girl standing under an arch of flowers (below left). He identifies with the girl, turns the arch into a tunnel, and sees himself as emerging from a tunnel of difficulties that he was experiencing (p.238). But to the objective eye there is nothing in the card to suggest such a situation. The client has been persuaded by the projection process that the cards know his situation and can help him improve it. (In a divinatory tarot his belief that the cards have this power is a crucial factor, and comes from his trust in the reader and from the centuries-old tradition of the

(Jensen 1964:75). For the record, Jensen’s conclusion had no immediate effect, at least not in North America. Thus twelve years later Liebert and Spieigler (1978:153) noted that, despite the poor validity and reliability of projective techniques, they continue to be popular among clinicians, for which “the simplest [explanation] can be summarised in one word: Tradition! [their emphasis]. Projective techniques have the longest history and have received the most attention of all personality assessment instruments. It is difficult to discard such a huge investment of time and effort”. It could be astrologers speaking.

The tarot

Tarot cards, and a game requiring them, were invented in 15th century Italy. It was originally used for play only, and was not used as a divinatory device until the late 18th century. There are 78 cards. The images on the cards are held to represent the total energies of the universe, to offer opportunities for spiritual development, and when properly approached to open doors into the hidden reaches of the soul. The cards are read in rituals of shuffling and laying out in various patterns where each position has a particular significance. Hundreds of tarot packs have been designed and published, many with disagreements over symbolism and procedures. Esoteric descendants grow increasingly eccentric and tendentious. Some cards undergo radical revisions, each prompting another explanatory book. Like astrology, the tarot has newsletters, seminars, and readings available by telephone. (From Decker 1996 and Guiley 1991).

The psychological tarot

In her 1983 book Le Tarot Psychologique: Miroir de Soi (The Psychological Tarot: Mirror of Oneself), the Canadian psychotherapist Dr Denise Roussel describes her use of tarot cards in what is essentially a projective technique. Her book is full of pictures of tarot cards and meanings, ways of setting them out to maximise symbolic content, and examples of what clients saw in them during counselling sessions.

Roussel calls her approach the psychological tarot as opposed to the divinatory tarot. She uses the cards as a counselling tool to help clients express their problems and then find solutions. She stresses that her approach is based on the projections of the client, not the clairvoyance of the reader (p.148), and is

Resolutely psychological, it breaks with the fortune-telling tradition based on clairvoyance. Nevertheless it keeps its best characteristics, where the tarot images are used to illuminate the serious problems for which the client is making a consultation. However the counselling and decisions come from the consultant, supported by the procedures laid down in this guidebook. ... Approached as a psychological tool, the tarot will shed its connections with the Shaman and Gypsy ... In this way technical skill will add to the personal quality already present in this resource (p.12).

Certain tarot packs such as the popular Tarot de Marseille are not suitable because their minor arcana are too monotonous (like modern playing cards) to be evocative. Roussel much prefers the Hurley pack. The client shuffles the pack while thinking of the problem (this stimulates the concentration) and then lays out 13 cards face down in a diamond pattern in the order shown below (p.242).
the students knew average rank according to chance their own interpretation should show an average rank then ranked the ten about in Blackmore's first experiment she got each of ten students from her Tarot cards work normally or paranormally chance would predict, and the controls are all good enough, hey presto, people to judge the readings were. There were methods then how was I to assess the outcome to decide whether it was successful All these had to remain or I felt it wouldn't of doing a operation of tarot cards. Her approach has much that is impressed me. Something interesting was the tarot for eight years has been explored by the parapsychologist Susan Blackmore (1986:61-70). At the time of her explorations she had been reading the tarot for eight years and had the reputation of being an excellent tarot reader. "And time and time again the cards obviously worked" (p.61). So she set out to test the operation of tarot cards. Her approach has much that is relevant to testing astrology so it is worth quoting in full:

This view is confirmed by looking at Roussel's cards with the most responses taken from actual consultations, namely the ten of sticks (5 responses) and the five of sticks (4 responses), see above middle and right. The responses reported by Roussel are as follows:

In the 10 of Sticks (above, middle)
Suzanne, 35, sees chains everywhere; she must not be a slave to her love life (p.216). Maurice, 55, sees Joan of Arc. It is him that burns and makes sacrifices (p.235). Solange, 26, sees risks to her vulnerability, needs to learn martial arts (p.286). Laurent, estranged from Josie, would like to return her chained body to freedom (p.290). Celine sees someone alone, bound, not speaking. Evokes images of her past (p.296).

In the 5 of Sticks (above, right) Maurice, 55, sees his employers who ridicule him in front of others. He is despairing (p.234). Christian, 19, sees himself crushed by the opinions of others. He tries but it hurts (p.249). Nicole sees collaboration by others as a problem. She may have to start again (p.302). Raymond sees 4 people seeking something, the 5th (him) thinks of a better way (p.314)

The above examples show how the same card can evoke quite different responses. So it is the subject who personalises the cards and gives them meaning. In other words the whole exercise rests on projection. And projection is a potent process. Thus Roussel comments "After having made more than five hundred psychological tarots, I do not remember a single occasion where a significant and strong bond could not be established between the image presented and the put question" (p.249). Much the same could be said of astrology (and graphology, palmistry, phrenology, tea leaves, etc). Projection certainly works!

Try this for yourself
Although a great diversity of situations can be readily linked to a single image, the reverse process (deciding which image best fits a given situation) is much more difficult. You can try this for yourself. The figure below shows nine rows of tarot images that, according to Roussel, are the best fit to nine TAT themes (pp.116-117). Can you tell which row is which theme?

The nine TAT themes are basic human needs, namely the need to: Achieve and surpass others. Avoid pain and suffering. Be friendly or aloof. Be helpful and protective. Be independent and autonomous. Be organised and in control. Comprehend and understand. Defend and justify self. Seek pleasure and show off. Which numbered row above best fits each of the nine TAT themes? The answers according to Roussel are given after the references.

What about paranormal influences?
Contrary to the above psychological process, tarot readers generally insist that some paranormal process is involved. This view has been explored by the parapsychologist Susan Blackmore (1986:61-70). At the time of her explorations she had been reading the tarot for eight years and had the reputation of being an excellent tarot reader. "And time and time again the cards had impressed me. Something interesting was obviously going on. ... the Tarot obviously worked" (p.61). So she set out to test the operation of tarot cards. Her approach has much that is relevant to testing astrology so it is worth quoting in full:

There were many things to control for. In a normal Tarot reading the querent, who has come for the readings, sits right in front of the reader and responds to the things the reader says. Obviously the reader can tell immediately the sex, age, and general appearance of the querent and can get a good idea of what kind of person it is. Then she can use all the feedback given. By unconsciously watching the subtle responses to suggestions and any vague comments, the reader can guide her reading toward the right answers. This isn't to say that these processes necessarily play a large role in Tarot readings, only that if you want to find the paranormal element, you have to rule them out. This would mean that the reader and querent had to be separated from each other. On the other hand, that was beginning to destroy the whole feel of doing a Tarot reading. What about the intimate sitting round the table, the ritual shuffling and cutting of the deck, and the slow and thoughtful laying out of the cards? All these had to remain or I felt it wouldn't be a fair test.

Then how was I to assess the outcome to decide whether it was successful or not? Obviously I had to develop some method for statistically evaluating how successful the readings were. There were methods available for doing this. For example, one can get ratings from subjects on how good they think readings are. You can use other people to judge how accurate they are, and you can use the ratings in calculations based on what would be expected by chance. If the scores come out better than chance would predict, and the controls are all good enough, hey presto, you might have psi. I put all this together and concocted a simple experiment to test whether the Tarot cards work normally or paranormally (pp.62-63).

In Blackmore's first experiment she got each of ten students from her parapsychology class to shuffle the cards while thinking about themselves and then to cut them three times with the left hand. An assistant noted the order of the first ten cards and gave the orders without identification to Blackmore, who laid out the corresponding cards and typed up an interpretation. Each student then ranked the ten interpretations in order of accuracy where 1 = best and 10 = worst.

According to chance their own interpretation should show an average rank of 5.5, but if the cards were working paranormally the average rank would be less than this. In fact the average rank was 4 and was statistically significant, but there was a problem -- the students knew each other, so if a reading happened to fit one of them very well, the rest would automatically know it wasn't
Nothing paranormal in the tarot

In due course Blackmore conducted two more experiments in which this problem was avoided. In both cases the results were at chance level. That is, the subjects were unable to pick their own reading from the others. Despite the excellence of Blackmore's design and the excellence of her tarot readings, there was no evidence that tarot readings had a paranormal component.

Furthermore, the ability of Roussel's clients to see what they want to see, or sometimes don't want to see, shows that we have no need to look beyond projection to explain the outcome of tarot readings, impressive though they can appear (which of course had led Blackmore to believe that something paranormal was happening).

Neher (1990) reports an experiment similar to Blackmore's in which subjects were unable to identify their own tarot readings with better than chance accuracy, and concludes "there is no adequate evidence in support of paranormal processes in [tarot] readings ... However, this does not mean that readings are worthless; ... viewed as tools for the projection and understanding of the content of our own unconscious, readings can be very useful".

Evans (1987:207) comments that Roussel's psychological tarot "is an impressive demonstration, on the one hand, of the mind's ability to objectivize its situation by externalizing it, and on the other, of the need the mind has to distance itself from its preoccupations, expressing them in this way as a preliminary to understanding and then accepting or resolving them. Projection is yet another example of a process which, though it can take a negative form [as in paranoia] can also serve as a positive and practical function: at critical times in a person's life, it can be an effective way of helping him to tackle the situation".

Of course projection underlies not just the psychological tarot but also the divinatory tarot and any other system of fortune-telling. For example Dobkin (1969) notes that the naipes, a card-based fortune-telling system used in Peru and much of Latin America, is essentially a projective technique. It provides "a series of neutral stimuli whose symbols and meanings are shared by both the healer and his patient within a world laden with misfortune ... and magical import". Dobkin shows that at least three misfortune cars will appear 90% of the time in a typical reading, so "the deck is loaded not in the direction of good fortune but rather to highlight stress and conflict", so it is ideal for dealing with problems. Furthermore "The aura of omnipotence the healer is able to maintain ... [contributes] to success in healing."

Astrology as a tarot reading

The psychological tarot rests on its evocative but ambiguous images that match almost any situation (Roussel p.140). The setting should be quiet, comfortable and relaxed, perhaps with candles or flowers. "Prevent intrusions. Protect your door by putting a small sign outside do not disturb. Disconnect the telephone, especially at the time of an elaborate tarot" (p.151). The aim is not to tell fortunes but to help clients express their problems and to solve them without necessarily proposing solutions. The reader's job is to help the client through the reading process, to establish links between each card and the client's problem (or the put question), and thus lead the client to propose his own solution. In short, "We have opposed the rules of conduct of a fortune-teller. A psychological tarot puts the client in charge, where understanding the problem leads to its solution" (p.342).

All of which applies equally to an astrology reading. In a birth chart the astrological images are evocative and ambiguous (ambiguous, that is, either in their interpretation or in the inevitable presence of opposing images elsewhere in the chart). The aim is not to tell fortunes but to help clients solve their own problems. And the projection process that works so well for the psychological tarot cannot help but work equally well for astrology including horary astrology and the divinatory tarot and any other system of fortune-telling.

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Liissette, 35, will I escape the prison of my hangups? Fernand, musician, why is my musical expression so difficult? Claire, wanting to join a political movement, what is best for me? Louis, ready to make a $0.25m investment, what will the outcome be? Jeanne, writer, changing her career, how will it emerge? Jean, my wife is suicidal, is there anything I can do? Solange, 32, a divorcee, should I choose solitude or a new change? Roger, out of control, how can I stop? Andre, 20, hesitating to wed, do I love Suzanne? Guy, overwhelmed by three major events at once, how to survive?

If projection alone can deal with such questions, there is clearly no reason to invoke paranormal explanations for horary astrology such as those advanced by Curry and Willis (1999), whose book is reviewed on this website under Book Reviews.

Conclusion

According to the evidence against astrological claims and against other levels of reality, the participants in a chart reading are the victims of something pretending to be something it isn't. And the most likely source of this illusion is projection. Projection is involved in any experience of astrology whether or not the client's interpretation of this experience is correct. Furthermore, projection requires no support from worldviews or belief systems or other levels of reality and is thus the simplest explanation.

To view an astrology reading as an exercise in projection may seem to many people inappropriate for what can be a strong emotional experience. It is easy to forget that, for clients, the reading can be of profound importance. In a sense it hardly matters whether it involves truth or other levels of reality or projection or whatever, because for most clients it does its job, and that may be enough. They can proceed in whatever direction the experience suggests, confident that it was meaningful and had changed their lives.

On the other hand, for people to deal with problems better, they need to learn a whole series of coping skills. So we need to ask what type of learning takes place during a chart reading, and whether the astrologer is competent to guide such learning. Therapy is not an experience which helps people feel better, gives them more insight, or calms them down. It is a process which attempts to show people how to gain more personal responsibility for their thoughts and actions. It teaches them to take risks and to accept that life has no certainties. Self-determination is one of the more important components of well-being. Astrology should not be allowed to suggest there are mysterious forces we can tap into to achieve happiness, for that (like heroin) could be devastatingly harmful.

The many ways in which an astrologer can manipulate a reading and unknowingly help the projection process are vividly described by Jacques Halbronn in his article Astrolger meets Client: Tricks of the Trade on this website under Daily Life. "Your client needs to feel special. Once his confidence has been obtained by your general attitude, astrology can gradually grow blurred, leaving you
to focus on the feedback. Soon you and your client will be closely joined in a dialogue, and astrology can mostly be ignored except as a convenient means of changing the subject."

References


Roussel D (1983). *Le Tarot Psychologique: Miroir de Soi*. Un essai de psychologie appliquée. Editions de Mortagne, Boucherville PQ 1983, 372 pp, no index, reprinted in 1990. Includes a brief history of the tarot illustrated by cards from more than fifteen tarot packs. My thanks to Axel Harvey of Montreal PQ for tracking down this otherwise hard-to-find book (it was in the bookstore around the corner from his office) and then graciously declining to accept payment. That was in July 1990.

Which row best fits which TAT theme?
The answers according to Roussel are:

2. Achieve and surpass others.

7. Avoid pain and suffering.

4. Be friendly or aloof.

5. Be helpful and protective.

1. Be independent and autonomous.

8. Be organised and in control.

9. Comprehend and understand.


3. Seek pleasure and show off.

Most people get only two or three hits.

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Your Birth Tarot Chart holds valuable insights into yourself that are supportive of your personal growth and inner journey. That Tarot software also allows you to get a portrait of others like you wish to have for any of your important relationships. It comes with 4 options: inner quest, transforming energy, best ally and inner enemy. You will be able to see which Tarot cards are attached to your name and date of birth. This tool is like a key that opens a treasure chest named "YOU". Assuming that you are searching for direction or inspiration, the information you're about to get could be just what you need. It will cost you between $12 to $27 depending on the chosen options. [money back no questions asked guarantee]. Tarot is the study of different elements of life, death, and the cosmos interacting with each other to foretell the future and gain insight from your past. A tarot deck is made up of 78 cards but each reading is done with an arrangement of those cards. The two most commonly used are the Three Fates and the Celtic Cross. The Three Fates requires the reader to place three cards out on the table, while the Celtic Cross requires ten. Minor Arcana are much like regular playing cards and come in suits with cards from one to ten and four face cards with the page, knight, queen and king. Major Arcana are unique, stand-alone cards. The most commonly known Major Arcana are the Devil, Strength, Temperance, the Hanged Man, the Fool and Death.