The Mind Behind the cards

Searching for the Source of Tarot Divination's Popularity through a Cognitive Analysis

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1: Introduction

From the possessed priests in ancient Greece to the prophets of Israelite religion, from the poison oracles of the Azande to the shamanic vision quests of numerous tribal cultures; humans can't seem to resist the allure of gaining divinatory insight. This practice of divination, which is the art of uncovering otherwise unobtainable knowledge, has always been deeply associated with religion. In contemporary Western societies too, many divinatory tools are used, mainly within spiritual groups such as contemporary Pagans, Wiccans or New Agers. Some of these devices are well known, such as astrology, while others remain quite obscure, like the practice of Nordic rune reading.

Tarot cards are among the most popular of these devices. The tarot deck is usually divided into the 22 trump cards, or greater arcana, which symbolize major life events and the four suits of 14 cards each, or minor arcana, symbolizing day-to-day events. These distant cousins of the standard playing cards deck, when laid down in certain patterns or meditated upon, are said to be able to give insight into matters otherwise hidden from view. Most commonly, tarot cards provide answers to questions on how to engage in a given situation, whether this is one's love life, one's career, one's spiritual path or just how to spend the day.

Figure 1.0.1: The Fool Trump Card   Figure 1.0.2: Five of Wands Suit Card

1.1: The History behind the Cards

Even though tarot divination is an immensely popular practice, the origins of the deck are unknown. Scholars, such as Michael Dummett (e.g. 1980) and more recently Helen Farley (2009), have shown that the earliest known source of tarot dates to 15th century Italy. The deck, then used solely as a

game, spread through Europe during the following 200 years. This was the formative stage in which the trump card sequence, as well as the specifics of the suits, solidified up to a certain level (ibid. 93).

The second stage happened in France during the 18th century, with tarot being repurposed as an occult tool to be used within divinatory and magic rituals. Several French occultists were responsible for this, the most important of them being Antoine Court de Gébelin: according to him, the cards were actually the remnants of the *Book of Thoth*, encoded by Egyptian priests during the fall of their empire and given to the gypsies for safekeeping. This linked tarot to the then immensely popular Egypt, through which it owes part of its success (Farley 2009, 104). It was subsequently Etteilla, pseudonym of Jean-Baptiste Alliette, who made the deck popular as divination tool (ibid. 178).

The French occultists' divinatory tarot systems made their way to Victorian England, where magical orders such as the Hermetical Order of the Golden Dawn eagerly integrated tarot into their hermetical repertoire during the end of the 19th century. After leaving the order at the beginning of the 20th century, the notorious occultist Aleister Crowley published the until-then secret tarot teachings of the Golden Dawn (1909). One year later, Arthur Edward Waite, a Golden Dawn member, decided that publishing his own deck would not violate the Golden Dawn's secrecy any longer (Farley 2009, 145) because of Crowley's book. Waite's deck, the *Rider-Waite* deck, was to become the model for almost every future deck produced (Farley 2009, 149-150).

From then on, tarot divination spread through Europe with the rise of New Age in the 20th century up until today. It was during this time that tarot became more well-known to the public through popularizing efforts from spiritual groups such as Neo-Pagans (as discussed by Luhrmann 1989 & Minkjan 2016) as well as through its place as fortune-telling device within media such as movies, books and video games.[1] The search for the 'true method' of the cards' usage, which characterized the French and English occultists' ventures, was abandoned in favor of an eclectic approach in which any symbolism and form of practice goes (Farley 2009, 151).

Contemporary usage of the deck is largely dividable into two practices: tarot spreads and meditation. Both of these conform to the label of divination as 'seeking otherwise unobtainable knowledge through ritualized use of supernatural objects or agents'. A spread is the laying of several cards in a pattern which will give the requested information based on which card lies where in the pattern. A popular spread for example, is the 3-card spread. This deals with a horizontal pattern of three cards in which the left cards signifies the past, the central card signifies the present and the right card signifies the future. Tarot meditation, on the other hand, is mostly done by taking a single (random) card and meditating on it in order to get the message that card has for the reader. Both the

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[1] See for example *Live and Let Die* novel and movie adaptation (respectively 1954; 1973), *The Waste Land* poem (1922) and *The Binding of Isaac* game (2011).

use of meditation and spreads can be accompanied by ritualistic practices such as shuffling the cards in a certain way, lighting candles, clearing the mind or reciting specific lines as cards are turned over.

It's not hard to see why nowadays, tarot should be considered one of the most widely used divinatory practices within, and even outside, spiritual groups. Due to the advantages of the Internet, artists have been able to share their decks easily, causing a massive influx of hundreds of different tarot decks (for an impression see Amazon: 'tarot deck'). Furthermore, the Internet has had another profound impact on the communicatory devices of tarot enthusiasts: there are numerous online forums about tarot, the most popular having almost five million posts and a total of around fifty thousand members (TarotForum.net); countless tarot blogs, video channels and online reading-businesses have appeared; and even international conventions get organized yearly in countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom and Austria (tarotconvention.com). Aside from that, complete courses (see for example Biddytarot: 'certification programme') are offered by associations focused mainly on tarot or esoteric education. Beside all of this are the contemporary Pagans, Wiccans and New Agers who use tarot as part of their larger spiritual lifestyle, for example during their rituals, using it perhaps not as their main spiritual tool, but still an important one nonetheless (see Luhrmann 1989 and Minkjan 2016 as examples of this).

1.2: Scholarly Research on Tarot

With tarot being such a popular divinatory tool, one would expect to find a list of extensive research on the subject, yet while there is some, the subject could do with much more. Relatively little research has been done on the subject, most of it from the perspective of history and anthropology.

On the subject of its history, tarot has been treated relatively well since Michael Dummett and several of his colleagues took an interest in it (e.g. Dummett 1980; Decker, Depaulis & Dummett 1996; Decker & Dummett 2002). These scholars were the ones who academically proved the already somewhat known idea that tarot started out as a game rather than as a divinatory practice. Since then, Helen Farley has done the most up-to-date research on the history of the cards, not only delving deeper into the theories provided by earlier research, but also adding a theory of her own: that the original decks were specifically made to illustrate an important family's history (2009, 50).

From the perspective of anthropology, tarot has gotten some attention as well. As part of larger spiritual movements such as contemporary paganism, tarot has gotten attention from both Tanya Luhrmann (1989) and Hanneke Minkjan (2016), respectively in England and the Netherlands. Luhrmann primarily studied how practices such as tarot have to be eased into by slowly reinterpreting the world (the *interpretive drift*), while Minkjan emphasized tarot and similar

divinatory tool's use as a coping tool, able to help people in times of uncertainty. But also as a phenomenon on its own, tarot has been studied by anthropologists. Karen Gregory's research, with its focus on enterprising individuals, gives a detailed oversight of the role tarot can play in people's everyday lives (2012).

From within the sociology of religion, Danny Jorgensen's dissertational fieldwork has yielded a very important set of information, as he was the first (and last) to immerse himself within the community of tarot readers in order to write a sociological overview of the occult milieu (1979). Jorgensen has provided valuable data on how professional (i.e.) tarot readings work. Douglas Cowan, too, has contributed to our knowledge of tarot. His article on divination and materiality shows the importance of the material aspects of tarot and other divination methods (2012).

The psychology of religion has also dealt with tarot somewhat, even though there has not been any research specifically focused on it. Joan Reese has used the process of tarot spread interpreting in order to look at underlying creative processes, but the emphasis is solely on creativity, neglecting any conclusions it could have made for tarot (2010). The most promising research on psychology and divination has been Olav Hammer's (2013). He emphasizes the role of general cognitive processes in strengthening the belief in divinatory practices such as tarot.

Even literature theorizing on divination in general is rather limited. It would seem that most scholars, especially anthropologists, are mostly concerned with specific cases of divination (some exceptions are Heeren & Mason 1984, who focus on the communicative aspects of divination; and Ruah-Midbar 2014, who looks at online divination, with a special interest in tarot). Even though this is also important, it leaves us with a lack of general theorizing on the matter of divination. There are, however, some who do attempt to do this from a cognitive point of view (Sørensen n.d.; Lisdorf n.d.), trying to explain, among others, why divination in itself is present in so many cultures and why certain elements seem to be recurrent in most of these cultures (e.g. randomization and ritualization).

Within all this literature on tarot, divination and spirituality, there remain several glaring gaps few have tried to solve: firstly, why do people divine using tarot cards at all? Secondly, how does tarot divination work in a personal, rather than in a professional, environment? Thirdly, why is tarot so popular in comparison to other forms of divination such as tea-leaf reading or rune reading? There is a reason why none of these questions have been resolved, nor even asked, yet: there is not enough in-depth information on how practitioners deal with, and believe in, tarot cards. Only Jorgensen (1979) has tried to systematically look into this issue. Yet even his work should be seen as an introduction into the world of tarot; one dissertation is hardly enough to deal with tarot as a whole. Furthermore, his focus on professional readings between tarot readers and their clients leaves open the question of how readers use the cards personally and therefore also why people

divine in the first place. Therefore, much more research is needed in order to truly understand tarot divination.

1.3: Research Question and Strategy

Taking the existing gaps within the literature on tarot into consideration, the overarching question of this thesis will be why tarot is so immensely popular as a divination tool. In order to look at this, the personal side of tarot divination will be considered, rather than the professional side. Much like Sørensen and Lisdorf, the point of view pursued here will be that of cognitive psychology. More specifically, the following research question will be asked: *what is so persuasive about the tarot ritual that people believe it works and keep on practicing?* The hypothesis is that the practice relies on certain beliefs and tendencies humans have due to their cognition. In order to research these, theories from the cognitive psychology, which among others focuses on such intuitions, are needed.

Of course, many other factors come into play to make tarot so popular. For example, one could look at the aesthetic value of tarot: the often beautifully created decks are excellent collectibles, many practitioners buying new ones weekly or monthly. Compare this to divination through tea-leaves reading; which objects of divination, tea-leaves, are less likely to be valued as collectibles by practitioners. Another factor could be tarot's reusability. Compared to some other forms of divination, such as numerology, tarot can be used much more often (e.g. one's date of birth does not change while the cards change every usage). The choice for a cognitive approach, rather than these or any other, has an important reason: the questions one can raise by looking at tarot from this perspective reach the core of the practice; whereas matters such as aesthetics and reusability might be important, a person has to be convinced that the practice itself is any good, either intellectually (i.e. believing that it works on basis of set beliefs) or experimentally (i.e. believing that it works through experience). As we shall see below, cognitive psychology has the tools to look at exactly these matters.

Within the cognitive sciences, the cognitive science of religion (CSR) is the most useful one with regards to the research question posed here. This is because this specific discipline within religious studies has been greatly influenced by the cognitive sciences and tries to answer important questions regarding religion which have often been ignored or deemed impossible to research by other disciplines. Among others, it deals with how religion could arise from evolutionary adaptations (e.g. self-awareness); how religion grows from certain universal tendencies into large traditions with many complicated dogma's and elaborate rituals (e.g. how the recognition of order and beauty could contribute to the doctrine of an almighty creator with an infallible design); and whether some forms of religion seem to be intuitively persuasive to humans (e.g. spirit possession, which seems to be

present in very many religious systems). For an overview of CSR's main questions and theories, see the introductory article of Ilkka Pyysiäinen (2012). It is the last matter that is our main concern this project: is tarot 'made' to be cognitively appealing and could that be a major factor contributing to its popularity?

Researching tarot's cognitive appeal is possible because the scope of the CSR as a discipline is so expansive: as human cognition is more or less universally the same, it is possible to conduct research into general religious patterns and tendencies. Because of this, one is able to identify what sort of beliefs and practices catch on and are transmitted more easily than others, and are therefore, cognitively attractive. Several scholars within the discipline have already theorized on this matter. Pascal Boyer, for example, argues that certain notions such as ghosts or gods are immensely widespread around the world because they have the perfect conditions for transmission: they are often just like humans or animals, but with a few striking distinctions (e.g. a ghost is just like a human, but free from laws of physicality and immortal), Boyer coined these minimally counterintuitive because they are intuitive enough to remember easily, but counterintuitive enough to make them special (2001).

Another theory, by Harvey Whitehouse, states that religious aspects always move towards one of three attractor points, one of which is cognitive optimality, with the other two being imagistic (i.e. high-arousal, low frequency practices in order to make these events memorable) and doctrinal (i.e. low-arousal, high frequency practices and teachings in order to internalize the rituals and doctrines). Cognitive optimal aspects such as practices and beliefs are just as with Boyer's theory simple to learn and transmit, yet compelling to remember (Whitehouse 2004, 29). Another aspect, which both Boyer and Whitehouse put emphasize on, is that cognitive optimal, or minimally counterintuitive, aspects often deal with *strategic knowledge*. For example, it is because gods and spirits know useful information, or are able to offer protection to people, that they are invoked. Deistic gods, on the other hand, play no active part in humans' lives and are therefore 'not worth the trouble' as much as active supernatural agents.

So, in order to see if tarot divination should be seen as cognitively appealing, we should start by analyzing it from the perspective of cognitive optimality and minimally counter intuitiveness. The tarot deck is an ordinary pack of cards, but with two salient differences: it is able to communicate with humans, responding to questions, *and* it has an incredible amount of strategic information, such as what one's inner feelings are and even what the future holds. This clearly makes the idea of tarot easy to remember, as well as compelling to practice and transmit; thereby making it a perfect example of a minimally counterintuitive or cognitive optimal practice. Yet there is more to it than just that.

Whereas Boyer and Whitehouse are mainly interested in seeing which ideas and practices are best fit to be described as cognitively appealing, they have yet to extensively describe how such religious aspects *maintain* their appeal. Tarot (and divination in general) has to be able to provide convincing results in order to stay relevant; attractiveness is just the first step on the road to popularity. Therefore, it is not enough to establish whether or not the idea of tarot is easy to remember and compelling to transmit, we also have to look at how tarot maintains its ascribed efficacy. In order to look at these two questions, the initial cognitive appeal and the continuation of belief and practice, several steps within the analysis are needed.

1.4: Structure of the Thesis

In order to investigate the source of tarot's cognitive appeal and its retention, three main questions will be used to structure the analysis: (1) How do meanings come to exist and how do readers choose between them? (2) What happens when a reading is obscure, falsified or otherwise 'incorrect' or indecipherable? (3) Which cognitive aspects make the belief in supernatural tarot cards possible? All these matters have a direct influence on the perceived efficacy and the cognitive intuitiveness of tarot divination. Therefore, the analysis will use cognitive theories to explore these questions in order to see just why tarot is, and why it stays, so appealing. The chapters are structured in order to give an answer to all of these questions as follows:

Firstly, chapter two will deal with an overview of the practice of tarot divination. As I hope to have made clear, this is an area that has yet to be researched thoroughly. It seems that scholars are reluctant to take up the matter of tarot more than just as part of either a larger community such as contemporary Pagans or as an example within a larger theoretical framework. First of all, there needs to be put more effort into an anthropology of tarot. The work done so far only provides us with the bare bones of the practice. In order to seriously think through what tarot means to the practitioners on the one hand and what it can teach us about divination rituals and religion in general on the other, a full analysis is needed. Therefore, chapter two will deal with exactly such an analysis, even if it is a preliminary one. The sources for this descriptive chapter are: earlier research; and online research comprising of tarot forums and blogs. Especially the online resources will be extremely important in giving an insiders' look into the practice in a relatively effortless way. Even after chapter two, many examples will be used in order to support the various arguments and assumptions made in the analysis. Most of these references will be taken from the popular Tarotforum.net.[2] It is by no means a replacement for fieldwork, but it is the perfect place to start as honest conversations reveal practitioners' thoughts and practices. Furthermore, in order not to

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[2] Any reference to tarotforum will start with TF, while blogs will be referenced using other acronyms (e.g. Littleredtarot will be LRT). See chapter 8.2 for a complete list.

complicate things unnecessarily, discussions of specific tarot cards will always use the Rider Waite deck, mentioned above, as it is the most famous, widely accepted and influential deck in the field, which has set the tone for almost all future decks' imagery and meanings.

Then, in chapter three, the first of the three main questions will be taken up: how do meanings come to exist and how do readers choose between them? As shall become clear, tarot readers have multiple ways to ascribe a large number of meanings to the cards, making the receiving of messages not only possible, but the rule rather than the exception. The mind works in tandem with cultural and personal experience to color the meanings of cards, giving them an ever wider set of meanings able to be applied to the situation at hand. It is then up to the readers to choose between all of these options. But how do the readers do this without attributing the agency of the divination to themselves rather than to the cards? Using cognitive theories on how we ascribe agency as well as meaning and applying these to the ritual will help us answering this question. This chapter is related to the matter of cognitive optimality in two ways: on the one hand, the analysis of the ritual elements of tarot helps to understand the initial appeal of tarot. On the other hand, the analysis of how readers choose cards while ascribing agency to the ritual rather than to themselves sheds light on how the initial appeal is maintained by our way of thinking.

Then, in chapter four, the second of the three main questions answered: what happens when a reading is obscure, falsified or otherwise 'incorrect' or indecipherable? Even though meaning is often found, every tarot reader will have to deal with disappointments from time to time (see for an insider discussion on, TF: 'dud readings?'). The veterans, however, often disregard the idea that this is because of the randomness of pulling cards; they have other ways to deal with the disconnection between questions, answers and events. These are not only based in certain beliefs, but also in cognition. Olav Hammer argues for this latter aspect when he mentions how different cognitive biases will steer an established reader towards the idea that tarot (or divination or healing) still works even in light of the current 'failure'. To give a small idea of these biases, one would be that humans tend to remember the more memorable events while forgetting more mundane ones (2013, 219). For tarot readers then, it will be easier to recall their successes than to remember their failures. Cognitive theories will therefore help to answer how tarot's counterintuitive advices and insights are 'protected' from suspicions of being mere chance and interpretation. Therefore, such justifications help immensely in protecting the initial appeal (i.e. cognitive optimality) of tarot from disenchantment.

Lastly, chapter five will deal with the third of the main questions: which cognitive aspects make belief in supernatural tarot cards possible? Generally, as discussed in chapter three, the agency is said to lie with the cards. They are the ones with the intention to provide answers and are often even ascribed personalities (see for example, TF: 'Decks that won't work with you'). But there are

various other perspectives that circulate within the tarot community as well. Some, for example, take a psychological approach, arguing that they themselves are the ones to provide meaning behind the cards. Yet, as we shall see, even those with such beliefs often *act* according to the 'core belief' of tarot; that the cards are the intentional agents. Their habits and experiences seem to clash with their perspectives on how tarot works. Chapter five will therefore explore why such a notion of intentional cards is so persuasive, even to those who reject the idea. The cognitive theory of *theory of mind* will show that the ritual of tarot seems to promote such an ascription of intentional agency in a way that is hard to reject. This will help us understand even further the initial as well as the continuing cognitive attractiveness tarot divination has.

At the end of the analysis, chapter six will tie the findings together into a model of tarot divination. This model will help explain how the various elements of chapters three, four and five *work together* to make tarot divination as a whole cognitively appealing, both initially and continuously. I argue that it is exactly the integration of these various elements that make tarot so attractive. Then, the model will be used during chapter seven to look at how the findings of the analysis can help to further other research within the study of religion. The idea of *sustained cognitive appeal* will be proposed to supplement Boyer and Whitehouse's theories of which religious notions and practices become widespread and which do not. Lastly, this chapter will also propose which areas of tarot, and divination in general, require further research.

The current project, with its theory-centered approach, runs the risk of speculating unfoundedly by using few primary sources. Because of this, I try to draw on as much generally accepted information on tarot as possible, as well as using direct quotes from insiders. Yet Because of a lack of scholarly literature on tarot, any sort generalization on the practice should be considered tentative. Even so, there are various reasons to take this risk. First of all, the primary sources used are hard to measure in terms of their representativeness, but still all seem to agree on recurring themes. It will be up to future in-depth anthropological research to judge how correct the generalizations made here are, but they are at least representative for a part of the tarot community and a good place to start. Secondly, the current research asks questions and uses data in a novel combination not done before. Because of this, this thesis should be seen as explorative one, paving the way with theories and models for later research to build on. In this sense, it is better to be too bold than to be too cautious. With that said, let us move onto the analysis proper.

2: Tarot Divination in Practice

The word tarot usually conjures dark, smoky images of gypsy ladies in their wagons, dealing ominous looking cards and predicting dangers lurking around every corner or fateful encounters with soon-to-be-partners. The reality of most tarot readings is quite different from this romanticized notion, popularized by, among others, T.S. Eliot's Madame Sosostris in his *The Waste Land* (1922) and Ian Fleming's Solitaire in his novel *Live and Let Die* (1954). Yet despite this fact, there is almost no literature to be found that extensively looks at the practice of tarot divination. Jorgensen's dissertation (1979) is the only academic source that comes close to providing such information. Unfortunately, not only is it quite dated, it also focusses mainly on professional tarot interactions, in which a client pays a practitioner for a reading. This leaves out the largest and perhaps most important part of tarot divination: the (free) informal readings for oneself or friends and family. Most readers don't do professional readings, and many who do, can't do it often; there are only a few readers capable of paying their bills completely by divining, although many certainly would love to (for some examples on this, see Gregory 2012). Therefore, this chapter will deal with information on which questions are asked of the cards and how the cards are consulted. Not only is this needed in order to start a proper analysis, it is also a beginning in filling the present information gap surrounding tarot.

2.1: Consulting the Cards – Which Information is Requested?

One of the biggest differences between common preconceptions on tarot and the real practice is the sort of information asked. For the information that fits the aforementioned stereotype often includes very specific/true predictions on matters such as danger and love. Eliot and Fleming have both provided good examples of the former:

> Here, said she, Is your card, the drowned Phoenician Sailor … Fear death by water.
> (T.S. Eliot 1922, lines 46-55)

> A man comes. He travels quickly. He has purpose. He comes over water. He travels with others. He will oppose. He brings violence and destruction.
> (Fleming 1954; quoted in Broccoli, Saltzman & Hamilton 1973)

In *The Waste Land*, Madame Sosostris is a cryptic mystic handling out puzzling predictions, herself not even believing in her clairvoyance. Solitaire, on the other hand, gives very specific predictions of James Bond's movement, purpose and future actions. Both are, whatever their differences, dealing

with matters of seemingly great importance: both give warnings of dangers to come, which make for interesting narrative devices.

Generally speaking, tarot readings don't work like this at all, even though the topics of inquiry are partly the same. Readings deal with matters such as love, wealth, education, stress, work, spiritual development and family matters. Yet the aim of the readings greatly exceeds that of simple information gathering. To most tarot readers, the future is not set in stone, so any answer from the cards is tentative, making them not all that attractive for plain fortune telling (as explained quite accurately and representatively in BT: 'Does the Tarot Really Tell the Future?'). To these people, the cards are tools to help them see things they would otherwise have missed; gaining insights they would not have had without the cards. For example, instead of asking *when* one would meet one's future partner, most tarot enthusiasts would find it far more useful to ask questions such as if they are ready for a relationship in the first place, or how to avoid making the same mistakes as in previous relationships (again, a good representation can be found on BT: 'What NOT To Ask The Tarot'). Of course, this does not stop readers from asking the predictive kind of questions anyway, but they are not seen as the most important ones; after a job interview, for example, it would not be weird to ask the cards how it went, even though the question on how to prepare for the interview in the first place was far more useful to the reader.

Tarot divination, then, should mainly be seen as a form of empowerment. It gives the practitioner a way to gain information on which to act. In this sense, asking whether one will become financially more stable soon is of course less useful than trying to figure out *how* to become financially stable. This is consistent with the 'strategic information' mentioned by Boyer and Whitehouse in their cognitive optimality theories (see chapter 1.3), and it is generally true for divination, as mentioned by both Lisdorf (n.d.) and Sørensen (n.d.) in their articles; see for a specific example of an advisory preference Kim Beerden's analysis of ancient Greek oracles (2004, 26-27). So the main use of tarot divination (and divination in general), according to most readers, would be self-improvement, whether on the area of spirituality, love, wealth or something else entirely.

There is more to be said on which information is asked of the cards than just this. It is possible to make a categorization based on two distinctions. The first of these is the difference between whether the information asked can be based on the knowledge of the reader or not. Most frequently, the former would involve questions on self-improvement, on how to most effectively study for example; the reader knows their own shortcomings and therefore might gain new insights or even an epiphany, but this is not based on unknown information. Therefore, we might call this *introspective* information. The latter, then, would be *extrospective* information. This usually covers questions outside the scope of knowledge of the reader, for example which character traits of the reader annoys a direct supervisor or love interest the most, in order to work on that.

The second division is between information about what has come to be and information about what has yet to come. One could choose to ask what has caused the hostilities between oneself and a relative, or one could, for example, ask whether or not it will be resolved in the near future. The former could be called *diagnostic* information while the latter could be seen as *prognostic* information.[3] The table below shows the four categories of information tarot cards can provide, these categories will be used throughout the thesis:

	Diagnostic	Prognostic
Introspective	Information about one's own thoughts and actions during the past or present.	Information about one's own thoughts and actions in the future.
Extrospective	Information about other persons or events during the past or present.	Information about other persons or events in the future.

Such a categorization is partly only analytical, after all, many tarot readings deal with multiple or even all of these categories. Yet, there are certain advantages of having such a categorization over not having it. Some readers, for example, would state to only believe that the cards can answer diagnostic-introspective questions, something which will be explored more in chapter 5.2.

2.2: Dealing the Cards

As mentioned in the introduction, there are two main ways of tarot divination: meditation and the use of spreads. Even though the focus of this thesis will be on the latter, some information is needed on both. Just as the information categorization of above, it should be noted that a complete distinction between meditation and spreads is not possible as the two are often intertwined.

I would argue that it is in the informal and personal setting of tarot divination (i.e. non-paid readings) that the biggest differences with the stereotype as mentioned above lie. Because what the latter and professional tarot readings have in common is that results are expected to be accurate as well as fast and they often include some form of prognosis. Furthermore, professional readers have to prove that they are authentic, and in this try to bring across a message that will be taken as true (see Jorgensen 195-227). Informal readings on the other hand, especially when readings are done for the readers themselves, require no such results because there is no 'side of the bargain' to hold up to. As we shall see, this can lead to a whole different series of actions than what paid specialists would do (and what popular culture likes to represent).

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[3] The terms diagnostic and prognostic are borrowed from Sørensen (n.d.).

The difference between a full-fledged tarot spread and meditation is that the former comprises of any number between two to 78 cards (with usually the range being between three and ten), while the latter is mostly done with a single tarot card. During meditation one could choose to take a card at random and then meditate on it and its meanings. Many readers do this on a daily basis in order to 'get to know' a particular tarot deck or just as a way to get a message for the day. Another possibility is choosing the card on which to meditate. In her article on tarot entrepreneurship, Karen Gregory interviews a woman who does exactly this:

> To "tap into" this energy, Sara removes the card from the deck and places it on the windowsill above her bathtub. As she bathes and relaxes, she meditates on the card, visualizing the sun [trump card] and "allowing the light to fill her body." In doing so, Sara feels she becomes one with the card and synced to the sun "within her own self." The cards are like a battery for Sara, something she can use to recharge herself. (2012, 273)

Even though Sara creates such "ritual spaces" (ibid.), it is of course possible to do it more or less elaborately in order to suit the needs of the reader. The main issue is that the card does something to the reader, whether that is energizing as in this example or teaching them a valuable lesson. The ultimate goal is to constructively work on the self.

Tarot spreads could be seen as more complicated, as they deal with multiple cards each with their own various meanings. They can differ radically from each other. One of the most famous spreads, for example, is the Celtic Cross spread as described by Arthur Waite. This spread counts no less than eleven cards (with variations of nine and ten) and pays attention to the past, present and future as well as to personal as well as outside influences (Waite 1911, 299-305); one could therefore say that it deals with all the categories of information listed above at once. Below is a schematic overview of the pattern with the associated meaning of each card based on their position. Next to it is a same overview of the earlier mentioned three-card spread signifying past, present and future.
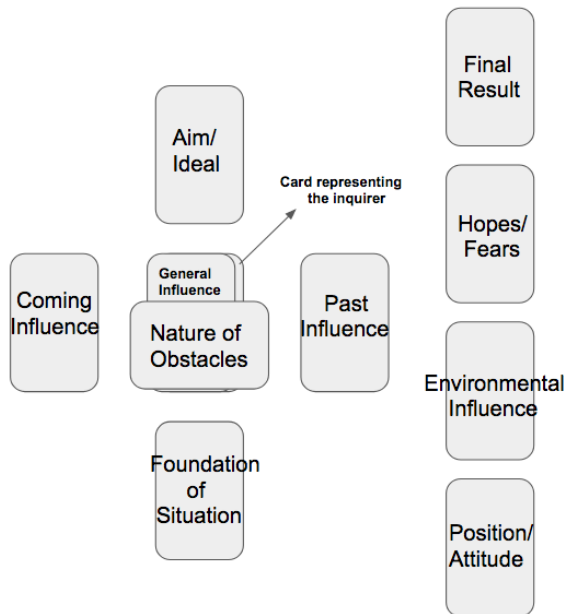
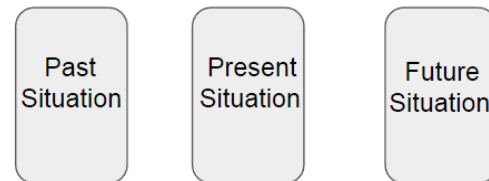Figure 2.2.1: Schematic Overview of the Celtic Cross Spread   Figure 2.2.2: Schematic Overview of a Three-Card Spread

The differences between the two make it clear that a reader can make it as complicated as they wish. It is for example not unheard of that readers collaborate on making a spread using all 78 cards of the deck (even though it is quite rare, but see for a discussion, TF: 'Full Deck Spread?'). Then there is the ritualization around the spread or meditation. Shuffling the deck is often done in a special way, such as thinking of the question at hand during the act, followed by cutting the cards three times. Then there are those, especially within the contemporary Pagan milieu, who ritually cleanse their decks, some doing so in the moonlight for example (see BT: 'How to Clear and Cleanse Your Tarot Cards' for various ways). Others are content with setting up some music, lighting a candle or incense, or laying out several other spiritual items such as specific minerals. Again, it is entirely up to the reader to find a way that works for them (see for a discussion on this, TF: 'Reading Rituals').

Personal readings, exactly because there is no pressure, can take a long time. Meditating during a bath could easily take up hours for example. Many readers prefer to leave their spreads out for a day or so, in order for the message to sink in. Others draw the spread into a so-called journal, or make a picture of it to mull it over later (see for example AS: 'Fool's Journey'). As shall become apparent in chapter four, such free usage of time brings distinct advantages with it with regards to the perceived efficacy of the reading.

2.3: A Tarot Spread in Action

In order to sum this all up in an illustrative way as well as explain how answers are found within the cards, a sample question will be asked. The question is: 'will I find an adequate job after finishing my studies?' In itself, the question seems to be prognostic-extrospective, yet the answer might very well

be more than a yes or no, the cards are always more complicated than that, perhaps also giving hints at what needs to be done. The following step would be to choose a spread to use. For our answer the three-card spread will do quite nicely. After doing any relevant personal rituals, as well as shuffling the deck, three cards are drawn revealing a pattern out of the roughly 456 thousand unique possibilities. The following is one such possibility:

Figure 2.3.1: Three-card spread consisting of the Five of Cups, Strength and the Nine of Cups

This is where the interpretation begins. The Five of Cups signifies the past, while Strength signifies the present and the Nine of Cups signifies the future. Looking solely at the meanings Waite has given to these cards (but see chapter four on all the possibilities), one could interpret this as follows: the Five of Cups represents loss, relating to the reader's uncertainty as well as their possible mindset regarding the situation. This however, should be seen as quickly fading as Strength, with its self-explanatory title, takes over: meaning the reader should take matters into their own hands and focus on the issues at hand. *If this is done correctly*, a bright future awaits them in the form of the Nine of Cups, which means victory or success.

This interpretation is typical, if simplified, of tarot readings as it deals with could-be's rather than definite answers. The future looks bright, but it has to be earned in the present by moving beyond the past. Even though the original question was a prognostic one, the first two cards actually deal with diagnostic-introspective insights. For many readers, there would be more to this reading than just a binary question; they would see it as giving a reader the 'strength' to carry on and work for a happy end rather than waiting some sort of pre-destined outcome.

One should not forget that many factors are left out of consideration because of the scope of this research. A first example would be that major arcana cards are often seen as more important than minor arcana ones. For this spread, that would put the emphasis even more on having the strength to get what is wanted. Then there are cards that come out reversed, due to the shuffling.

These often have different meanings, making readings even more complicated. Lastly, there are the numerological, Kabbalistic and astrological meanings attached to cards, which give even more complicated ways of interpreting different cards and spreads. Not every tarot reader would agree on or use all of these methods, but it is useful to know that they exist.

3: Searching for the Right Interpretation

> A stately figure, seated, having rich vestments and royal aspect, as of a daughter of heaven and earth. Her diadem is of twelve stars, gathered in a cluster. The symbol of Venus is on the shield which rests near her. A field of corn is ripening in front of her, and beyond there is a fall of water. The sceptre which she bears is surmounted by the globe of this world. She is the inferior Garden of Eden, the Earthly Paradise, all that is symbolized by the visible house of man. She is not *Regina coeli*, but she is still *refugium peccatorum*, the fruitful mother of thousands. (Waite 1911, 80-81)

Figure 3.0.1: The Empress Trump Card

This is the description as given by Arthur Edward Waite of the third card of the major arcana – the Empress. It is apparent that he saw the figure as mainly symbolizing fertility, calling her "the fruitful mother of thousands". The divinatory meanings attached to the trump card by Waite partly support this: "Fruitfulness, action, initiative, length of days; the unknown, clandestine; also difficulty, doubt, ignorance" (ibid, 80). Yet readers, in dealing with the Empress, have come up with their own meanings. These range from the card signifying a feminist (TF: omnilashed) to hinting at a person's desire for a "pre-feminist traditional female" (TF: SekhemNefer) and from an advice to open up and experience more of life (TF: Pipistrelle) to the advice that one should take care to love, yet not to smother (TF: moon shadow).

The main question this chapter deals with is: How do meanings come to exist and how do readers choose between them? Even though this question is crucial to understanding how tarot works and what it means to the practitioners, there is virtually no scholarly literature on this aspect of tarot divination. By answering it I hope to provide important insight into the practice of tarot divination on the one hand, and a better idea of why tarot sustains its initial cognitive appeal on the other.

3.1: Tarot Meanings – Fixed or Endless?

It would be an honest mistake to assume that, if one wanted the interpretation of a particular tarot card, the informational booklet often provided with the deck is the univocal solution. Meaning making within tarot divination seems to be a much more multifaceted process. An interpretation can

be derived from either (i) the imagery of the card; (ii) its title; (iii) the meanings given by the booklet of the deck; (iv) personal experience; or (v) insights from others. This does not mean, however, that the possibilities are endless, even though they are quite numerous. Let us take another look at the Empress in order to see how these various aspects can make for different interpretations.

To start with the imagery of the card: the pregnant woman, the Venus symbol on her shield, the ripening corn and the stream of water are all symbols of fertility. This gives the reader a clue to what the card might mean for them. It is for this reason that fertility and related concepts (e.g. creativity, motherly love) are the most prevalent interpretations of this card, being nearly always mentioned when discussing its meaning. Then there is the name, the Empress, further strengthened by the scepter and pose of the woman. This makes it possible to also interpret the card as symbolizing (female) autonomy or power. Furthermore, the standard meanings give yet another set of possible meanings, adding several negative ones such as "difficulty, doubt, ignorance" (Waite 1911, 80) which would be hard to derive from the imagery and name alone.

The above three factors could be considered somewhat fixed; the imagery and the name have culturally shared assumptions, while a deck's explanation is simply what the author has written down. Personal experience, however, can vary from one person to the next. A feminist, for example, might take offence at the traditional values that are ascribed to the Empress, making her the stereotypical stay-at-home mom rather than an empowered individual. Another person might have come to associate the Empress with their own homosexuality through earlier tarot experiences where this card signified their sexual orientation. Lastly, readers often learn different perspectives by discussing amongst themselves or reading books and blogs on tarot, making it possible for these personal interpretations to spread.

As we have noted, the different views on the Empress are inspired by various aspects of the card. These different parts act as affordances, giving certain standard meanings on which readers can build with their beliefs and experiences. In the case of the Empress, the afforded base concepts could be described as 'fertility' due to the imagery, 'feminine power' due to the name, and the standard keywords provided by Waite. Once all these different aspects are put into a schematic overview, it is easy to understand where the widely varying and sometimes contradictory views on a card come from:
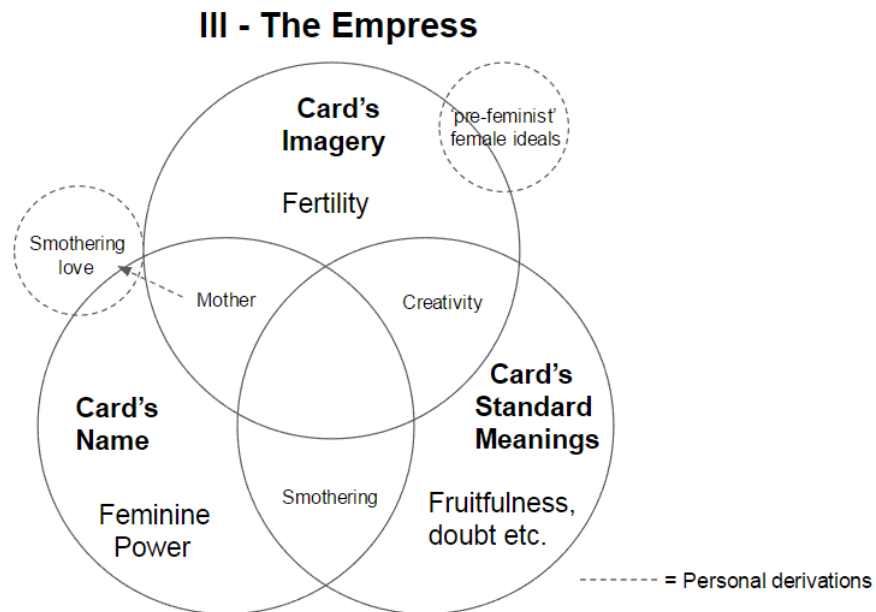
III - The Empress

Figure 3.1.1: The Empress' Interpretations

As figure 3.1.1 displays, certain aspects of the cards give *base meanings* which are usually the first to be identified with the card (the circles). Combinations of such base imagery might lead to other aspects, *derived meanings*, in the case of the empress to 'mother' as combination of fertility and feminine power (areas of overlapping circles). Then there are the individual interpretations which might are based on a certain worldview or prior experience, but even these are most often anchored to an already existing meaning. Because of this, it is possible for the Empress to convey feminine power to a certain individual, while another might see her as a symbol of old fashioned values due to their personal engagement in feminism for example. The center of the figure, not named here, is where a portion of all main and derived meanings come together to form what could be called the *proto-meaning* of a card. That is, it is the embodiment of a rather small set of interpretations that tarot reader seems to associate superficially to a card (i.e. outside of readings and discussions). This aspect will prove to be of importance to the second part of this chapter. Of course, such a schematic overview could be made of any tarot card. Yet the figure might look somewhat differently depending on which. Further research into the various meanings and interpretations of cards might shed light on how different cards are from each other. Furthermore, it might show that the favored method of interpreting is correlated with the personality of the reader (e.g. visual person might rather look at the imagery than the title or standard meanings).

To summarize, it is through tarot's archetypal images and names, laden with cultural notions and filled in with personal ideas and experiences that the cards get their many meanings. Tarot readers can be quite creative with thinking of new meanings for the same cards. And this creativity is already

present when they cards are interpreted isolated from the practice of divination; it is during a spread that things get even more complicated.

3.1.1: Tarot Spreads – Complicating Interpretations Further

As if a single card doesn't have enough possible interpretations, tarot readers often employ complete spreads comprising a multitude of different cards. As mentioned before, there is a spread for practically everything (for an impression, see Pinterest: 'Tarot spreads'), and the placement of cards add another layer of meaning to them as their location is key. Take the classical Celtic Cross spread for example, as described in chapter two. The figure below displays the complete spread, again with the purpose of each card's position.
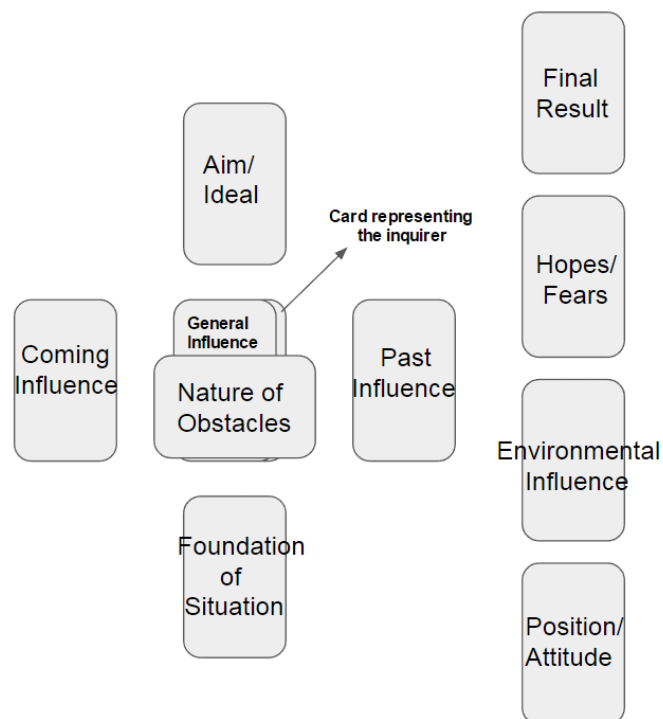

Figure 3.1.4: The Celtic Cross Spread Again

A question one could ask with a spread like this could be: 'how can I best continue my studies?' If the Empress trump card came up in such a setting, it could mean any number of things depending of the position it takes within the spread. As the nature of the obstacles it could be interpreted with the standard meaning of difficulty and doubt, signifying that it won't be easy. As an environmental influence, however, it could stand for one's mother, or anyone with a caring attitude and supporting role towards the reader. The Empress might also stand for fruitfulness or the 'conception' of new ideas, either as a coming influence, ideal, hope or final result. Depending on the reader, the card could also very well represent themselves or something else altogether. It gets even

more complicated when other cards are involved; take for example the Empress as past influence with Death (a card generally standing for beginnings, ends and transitions) as coming influence. In this, the Empress could stand for the smothering or 'barrenness' of one's creativity, which will soon end and make place for a new (positive) beginning represented by the Death trump card.

In a sense, spreads restrict cards to certain meanings, as each position has a fixed significance, such as 'aim of the querent', ruling out almost any negative associations a card could have (as aims are seldom negative). But as the example of the Empress illustrated, it also opens up many possibilities one probably would not have thought of otherwise. Just as with the imagery, title and standard meanings of individual cards, then, a spread seems to paradoxically restrict the number of possible interpretations on the one hand, while affording new possibilities on the other.

This chapter started out by asking two questions. The first of these, how cards get their meanings, has been discussed by looking at (1) the various properties of the cards themselves; (2) the influence of individual readers and the community; (3) and the spread it is used in. There is certainly a lot of interpreting to go around, even discouraging some of the readers in the process. Absynthe, as one of these, has come to a realization about the number of possible interpretations and what this means to them personally:

> Absynthe:
> After spending 10yrs + with a deck and seeing the results of readings for myself and others I think I've come to this conclusion about tarot.
>
> The possible combination of interpretations from any given set of cards is so huge that potentially any spread could mean anything. Sometimes you'll intuitively hit a right note and other times not at all. It doesn't actually have any benefit or accuracy beyond any other kind of analysis and possibly your intuition without tarot would have greater accuracy. (TF: Absynthe)

Yet as we have come to see, even though many different meanings are possible, there seem to be core sets of interpretations on which others lean. Even so, Absynthe raises a fair point, leading us to the second question of this chapter: if so many different meanings do exist, how do tarot readers know which one is *correct*? The assumption underneath this question is that there is an interpretation in need of discovering: the right meaning the cards try to show. Because of this, one might also consider asking why readers don't share Absynthe's perspective in acknowledging that perhaps they are reading meaning *into* the cards, instead of the cards communicating a message *outwards*.

3.2: Choosing the Right Interpretation

How does a reader choose the right interpretation from all the different meanings available to them? That question might at first glance not look too difficult and hardly in need of further investigation: a reader chooses an interpretation from the various afforded options that fits the situation, thus resulting in a rather limited pool of possible meanings. Picture a young man in a tough relationship, asking the cards what the right move for him would be. Surely the Death card he pulls will sooner mean the end of the relationship (and perhaps the beginning of a better time) to him than the actual death of a person. In a similar way, a woman asking the cards if she will become pregnant in the foreseeable future would sooner interpret the Empress as a fertility card than as signifying creativity. The key word in this question, however, is '*right*'. As said before, this implies that the real agency lies with the cards rather than with the person. The reader is more or less seen as the investigator, out to find the true meaning of the cards. Yet if every one of the 78 cards has several distinct meanings, should readers not get the sense that they themselves are the ones *making* the meaning rather than uncovering it?

Here I will argue how the practice of tarot divination seems to accommodate the idea that the agency lies with the cards rather than with the reader quite nicely. Even though arguments will partly be borrowed from others (Sørensen n.d., Lisdorf n.d. & Cowan 2012), the practice of tarot specifically has not been approached yet. As I will show, it might be that tarot's sustained cognitive appeal stems partly from its accommodation of so many meanings, while convincing its readers of its own agency rather than theirs. Human cognition plays an important part in this process, and without using cognitive theories, it is hard to understand what exactly happens during a reader's interpretation of the cards.

3.2.1: A Lack of Control – The Deck Chooses the Cards

The whole practice of tarot divination revolves around the principle of randomness; after all, if the reader could choose their own cards, there wouldn't be much to divine left. In this act of randomness, the reader has no choice but to surrender their intentionality, for there is no way to influence which cards will be drawn. Several authors have noted the importance of this non-intentionality to (New Age) divinatory practices. Jesper Sørensen and Anders Lisdorf, in their articles on cognition and divination state the importance of non-intentionality for divination in general (Sørensen n.d.; Lisdorf n.d.), as research has shown that gamblers in such situations tend to ascribe agency easier to other agents such as 'fate' or 'the game' (Wohl & Enzle 2002; Wood & Clapham 2005). Furthermore, research done by Jennifer Whitson and Adam Galinsky shows that loss of control also promotes the finding of non-existent patterns (i.e. illusory correlations bias, see chapter

4.1), making it more likely in the case of tarot that a reader finds a relevant message in the cards (2008). Explicit loss of agency, then, seems to promote the search for another agent, in the case of tarot either the deck itself, fate, or at least other agents controlling the cards, as well as promoting the finding of messages within the cards.

Douglas Cowan, from a slightly different perspective, comes to a comparable observation. He mentions, specifically using tarot as example, how having the cards on the table during a spread instills a sense of objectivity; after all, the reader had no control over the drawing, so the agency can't lie with them (2012). Therefore, laying the cards during a divination leads to both a sense of a personal loss of agency, making it possible to seek it elsewhere, as well as a feeling of a growing objectivity of the reader. These assumptions set the stage for a creative process in which a reader can choose between the different meanings available to a card as *they themselves* see fit. Yet even this would not be enough if the reader was consciously aware of the fact that they were choosing rather than uncovering. We will now turn to why this might not the case.

3.2.2: Tarot Cards as Idealized Cognitive Models

To an experienced tarot reader, the various meanings of a certain card come quite intuitively. In order for an outsider to understand how this works, a comparable example from everyday life might be illuminating: what is a mother? Most people in the West would be pretty confident in thinking that they know what a mother is. But is a mother of a child the one who birthed them? Should we look for the provider of the genetic material, or perhaps for the person who nurtured the child? Is the legal female guardian the mother, or should it be the wife of the child's father? All of these conform in a certain sense to the concept of mother, yet they are sometimes quite different in their meanings.

George Lakoff used this as an example in order to illustrate his *idealized cognitive models* (ICM) theory (1987). These models, as the name implies, conform to our view of reality rather than map it objectively. According to Lakoff, 'mother' should be seen as a cluster model, which is comprised of many submodels, such as the birth model (i.e. the person who births a child is the mother) or the nurturance model (i.e. the female person who raises the person is the mother). When we speak of a mother, we might refer to the cluster model, but we also might refer to a submodel of it instead (ibid. 79-81). Compare for example the following sentences:

> 'I was adopted, so I never really knew who my *real mother* was',
> 'She might have given birth to me, but my *real mother* is the woman who raised me'.

The first one used the birth model while the latter used the nurturance model, yet both are completely understandable to most people without having to reflectively think about the different nuances of the concept of mother.

I propose to look at the knowledge experienced tarot readers have about their cards in much the same way. Just as the mother cluster model has some sort of prototype (i.e. a combination of the birth mother, care giver, genetic provider, wife of the father and the legal guardian), the ICM of a tarot card has a prototypical meaning, the earlier mentioned 'proto-meaning'. The cluster model of the Empress might therefore conjure up different meanings in different situations to a reader without them even reflectively noticing that they are using the card in a different way at all; they are all different sides of the same Empress after all. Making a few adjustments to figure 3.1.1 helps to illustrate this view of the Empress as ICM:

III - The Empress
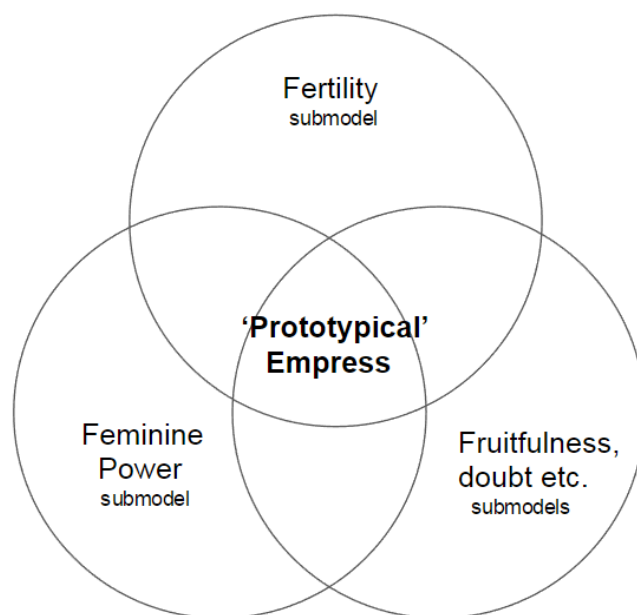### Idealized Cognitive (cluster) Model

Figure 3.2.1: The Empress' Idealized Cognitive Model

A reader *thinking* of a tarot card would most likely conjure up thoughts that fall within the prototypical space of figure 3.2.1, which is relatively small and precise. Yet when actually *using* the card within a reading, they could make use of any submodel of the cluster. In this way, the 'illusion' of a rather fixed meaning is created while in reality, the pool of meanings is quite extensive. Combine this with the heightened sense of objectivity and outward agency the practice brings with it through its use of randomness, and suddenly it doesn't seem as strange anymore that a reader feels they are *discovering* the right meaning instead of *making* one for the current situation. After all, it is no

different from how we use submodels of everyday words such as power, mother or freedom in order to effortlessly shift meanings.

This chapter started out with the main question: 'How do meanings come to exist and how do readers choose between them?' The former part was answered by looking at how the rich imagery of tarot cards, together with their titles, pre-conceived meanings and personal interpretations come together to make certain base-meanings and derivative meanings. The latter part seems to come forth from the mind's tendency to ascribe neutrality to oneself and agency to an outside source because of the randomness of tarot, while ICM's of the cards make it easy to switch meanings without 'noticing' it. This leads to a powerful combination of having many possible interpretations at one's disposal without them hurting the reader's confidence in the objectivity of the divination. This greatly helps tarot in maintaining the initial cognitive appeal it has, as described in chapter 1.3, because it makes it possible for readers to consistently gain notable and strategic divinatory insights. Furthermore, the quite simple aesthetics of the cards combined with their ease of use (though difficult to master) help in the initial cognitive appeal as well, as this makes the ritual easy to remember.

Next to a great amount of possibilities and a high degree of leniency, tarot's method of interpreting might have another benefit. As the images, titles and meanings of the tarot cards are rich in inferential potency, yet do not force a certain interpretation, they could be considered cognitively optimal' in the sense that they guide the creative process by constraining it just the perfect amount (see Joyce 2009, 8-16 on how constraints can improve the creative process). That the Rider-Waite deck remains, after a century, the most popular might have to do with this balance, as its symbolism is particularly universal (at least in the Western world) and might therefore be even more optimal in this sense than most other decks.

Without a cognitive analysis of the different meanings and how the readers deal with them, it would be impossible to understand how the process of tarot spread interpretation works. But there is still much to be gained from additional research on the topics that were covered in this chapter. Firstly, an experimental study might prove useful in understanding just how ICM's and tarot cards work together to produce a subtle network of meanings. Secondly, additional research could help us to understand if tarot is indeed cognitively optimal when it comes to creativity constraints, and especially whether this is deck related. Yet for now, our attention will shift to what happens when a reading, despite all of the possibilities, still seems to go wrong.

4: Justifications – How the Cards are Always Right

After a reading is done, a reader should have a reinforced sense that they are ready to continue their daily lives. After all, the cards have provided the insights they were looking for. Introspective questions might have provided useful clues about themselves while extrospective and prognostic questions made it possible to expect certain things or even influence them. Yet this is not the whole story. Extrospective and prognostic information, for example, can very well turn out to be wrong, for instance when a prediction about a future event turned out to be completely wrong or a friend hated the gift the cards told the reader to get them. Even introspective readings (as well as any other reading) can at the moment of divination already look like they just don't make sense, despite of all the possible interpretations the cards have.

The current chapter will take up these matters by trying to answer the second main question: what happens when a reading is obscure, falsified or otherwise 'incorrect' or indecipherable? Of special interest are readings that seem to be incomprehensible; readings that predict specific events; and any reading that just seems to have gone completely wrong. As we shall see, tarot readers have many justifications for why readings turned out the way they did, even if it was not what the readers themselves expected. Cognitive biases seem to play an important role in supporting these justifications, as Olav Hammer hinted at in his article on divination and CSR (2013). Besides him, no other scholar seems to have dealt with the post-reading aspect of tarot, even though this is a crucial part of the practice: after all, if expectations are not met sufficiently, readers would lose their interest in tarot, making it an extremely important matter for the sustained cognitive appeal of tarot.

4.1: Expecting Results – Congruence Bias

As has been discussed in chapter two and chapter three, the standard procedure of a tarot reading is: (1) the asking of a question; (2) the drawing of the cards; (3) and interpreting the cards through their symbolism and other meanings. Yet how would that turn out when the card drawn for a certain question does not give a clear answer at all? What would a reader do if the 'normal procedure' as described in chapter three does not help? That is exactly the problem Gloria Jean faced when they repeatedly drew a Page of Wands while looking for their lost car keys:

> Gloria Jean:
>
> The readings meant pretty much nothing as I stared at them, and I did three readings… **nothing came to mind**. But then I took note that in every reading the page of wands had shown up.

Now when a card's traditional meaning tells you nothing, I had read that you should just look at the picture and ignore the traditional meaning. On that page of wands (my former deck) [4] there was a lot of darkness and a candle. Since the card had shown up three time out of three I knew that was the card with the answer, **but I got nothing**. I got frustrated and just decided to give up and I grabbed all of the cards and started putting them back and while doing that the page of wands flipped out of the deck.

Four out of four. That did it. That was my card. I studied it carefully. It's dark, and there is a candle. That is what stood out to me. My car keys were in a dark place .... where I kept ... candles?

Then I remembered a drawer next to my computer where I kept candles because one night the lights had gone out so I put candles and matches in there. I went to that drawer, and low and behold, there were my car keys. (TF: Gloria Jean, my emphasis]

Yet to this tarot reader, there seemed to be a solution after all. Instead of associating the card with its general meanings, which would not fit Gloria Jean's inquiry at all, they interpreted the card through the literal imagery on the card, and induced that the real meaning was to be found there.

There are, of course, other ways of interpreting 'weird' results as well. Euripedes is another case in point of how interpretation might take additional effort. In their case, it took a few days for the 'real' meaning to reveal itself through an internet search conducted by the reader:

Euripides:
A few days ago I drew a perplexing card. Like I just *couldn't* see it's relevance. … the 'standard' meanings just didn't seem to fit at all.

So I put it away. I picked up the deck again today and thought, you know, I should think about this card. So I looked for the artwork, because an aspect of it was resonating with me, and found a webpage that talked about the character of that specific card and its 'shadow meaning' - and just slightly diverged in aspect such that I had a 'penny drop' moment of understanding. And so it went from being a 'wtf is this card even' to 'this is deep', in terms of a really important insight into my own behaviour.

And really, this was not the sort of 'seeing what I want to see' reading but an 'opening the Johari window' moment, what would normally perhaps be a difficult observation to hear, or to make sense of, but which is really a 'why have I never recognized this before' shift. (TF: Euripedes)

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[4] The deck that was used remains unspecified, but is definitely not the Rider Waite deck.

Euripedes, just like Gloria Jean, sought an interpretation outside of the usual spectrum of meanings associated with the cards drawn. It even took this reader several days in order to truly understand what the cards were trying to say to them. Where such an extended search for the right interpretation would seem to be proof of tarot's inability to divine anything to a sceptic, the experience seems to perhaps have been all the more extraordinary to Euripedes exactly because of the buildup.

Here, several cognitive biases may help to understand the readers' excitement in face of their belated interpretations. These are the *congruence bias,* the *illusory correlations* bias and the *confirmation bias*. Hammer already hinted at some of these biases' explanatory power in the case of many New Age practices (2013). The congruence bias states that to our mind, it is more intuitive to try and confirm a hypothesis or belief than it is to try to falsify them (Baron 2008, 171-175), or more specifically, it is more intuitive to directly test a hypothesis than it is to indirectly test it; so if the hypothesis is 'Tarot works', it is more intuitive to look for cases in which tarot actually did work than it is to show that there is a lack of cases where tarot did not work. Another factor aiding the search for a confirmation is the confirmation bias; which states that the human mind is susceptible to look for proof in favor of one's own beliefs (ibid. 203: here called the *myside* bias). Lastly, the illusory correlations bias makes humans see patterns and correlations everywhere, even where there are none (Baron 2008, 193). That these biases are quite powerful is not hard to see. For example, Peter Wason tested the congruence bias by letting subjects figure out the rule behind a sequence of the numbers 2, 4 and 6 by making thee-number sequences themselves, which were confirmed or not by the experimenter (1960). Almost all subjects theorized the rule to be 'ascending by 2', making test sequences such as 3, 5, 7 and 100, 102, 104. Practically no one thought of deliberately asking another possibility (e.g. 3, 6, 9) in order to negatively test their +2 theory (the actual rule was 'ascending numbers' in general). Due to the congruence bias, they were too busy to directly test their hypothesis to think of in-directly testing it.

All of the above biases come together when a tarot reader doesn't find the supposed message the cards have for them immediately. Due to their congruence and confirmation biases, they would go on to search for alternative meanings (such as Euripedes did), or appeal to unorthodox symbols on the cards (such as Gloria Jean did), aided in the process by the illusory correlations bias. Without these tendencies, readers would not keep finding meaningful patterns, especially those using unusual interpretations, or halt their search sooner altogether.

Now we shall turn our attention to prognostic readings which only came to be interpreted 'correctly' after the prognosis came to fruition.

4.2: Finding Results – Post Hoc Justifications

Several years ago we had a friend who kept pulling the Three of Swords card and we just couldn't understand why. Six months later she died of cancer. It was only then that we understood the reason for the recurring card.[5]
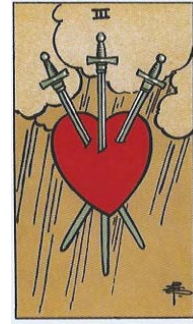
Figure 4.2.1: Three of Swords Suit Card

The Three of Swords suit card is generally seen as one of the most negative tarot cards in the deck and – looking at the imagery of the card – it is not hard to understand why. The above anecdote translates this feeling into a tragic story of the loss of a friend. It is quite easy to imagine how the speaker came to associate the death of their friend with the mystery of this card's persistence several months earlier. To them, the tarot had predicted the event; they just didn't see it at the time. The tragedy had made them think back on their past readings. This too, happens quite often, such as with gregory in his reading, in which a detail of seemingly little importance turned out to predict an important event:

gregory:

I have never forgotten mentioning - at the end of a reading, in passing - that one eye on one character in a card looked a bit odd.

My sitter said yeah maybe.... and is now blind in that eye. O.O

But the reading was "about" something else entirely. Sometimes we are so wrapped up in the issues we are wrapped up in (!) that we don't see there are other messages that could help, and could take out minds off those issues in such a way as to defuse them. (TF: gregory)

This story shows how sometimes readers come to 'realize' that the true meaning of readings long after the actual reading was done. Sometimes, such as here, the real prognosis did not even match the topic of inquiry back when the reading took place. Yet instead of lamenting their inability to see the truth at the time of the reading, tarot readers seem to marvel at the accuracy of the tarot cards, especially because they themselves couldn't see the real meaning. With experiences such as these, it is no wonder that readers feel their beliefs in tarot validated.

Yet it merits taking a deeper look at what lies behind this justification as well. Because for every extraordinary experience a tarot reader has, they should also have faced results that even the

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[5]Paraphrase of an anecdote told by a speaker during a symposium on divination methods. Retold with permission.

flow of time could not seem to justify. Here again, several cognitive biases work together in order to make interpretations comparable to those above not only seem plausible, but also obvious. Next to the already discussed illusory correlations, congruence and confirmation biases, *memory limitations* also play a role here (also already explored superficially by Hammer: 2013).

Interpreting tarot is hard enough as it is, as the cards have a hard time giving straight answers. Yet prognostic information is even harder, as distilling a frame of time for the prediction to come true seems to be impossible (or at least not done often). This makes falsifying predictions even harder than it already is with the congruence, confirmation and illusory correlations biases at play. So when a predicted financial blow does not arrive in the current week, it might still happen next week.

Even further strengthening this justification are the readers' memory limitations. As time moves on and the above mentioned biases have withheld falsification, a reader might forget about it altogether; especially when they frequently consult the advice of the cards. Then, when an event occurs which does resemble a forgotten prognostic reading, the predictions are easily remembered and confirmed. The unfortunate predictions that are never realized, however, are often damned to obscurity permanently; A mentioning of an 'odd eye' would probably never have been remembered had gregory's sitter not gone blind in an eye, just as the mystery of the Three of Swords would have remained a mystery if the one drawing them had lived on.

The power of such post hoc justifications seems to reside in the chronological location of the reader. While chapter 4.1 dealt with reinterpretations during or shortly after the reading, here we have different situations in which the sign is only recognized as related to the event *after* the event has taken place. The difference in chronology is captured in figure 4.2.2:
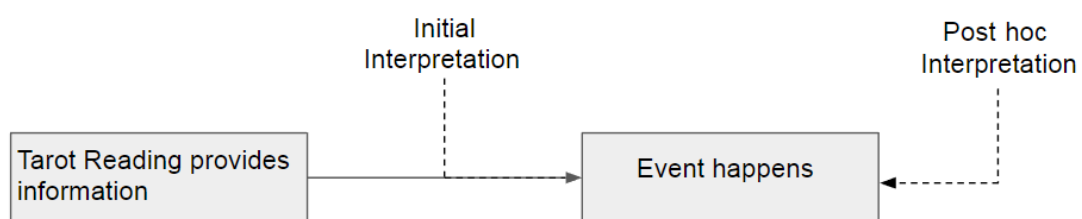

Figure 4.2.2: Chronology of Post Hoc Interpretations

So because post hoc interpretations are made after the event, the prediction that is recognized *has already come to pass* and as such is always correct. Ordinary interpretations missing this hindsight are susceptible to mistakes, which then have to be either justified or forgotten. Furthermore, post hoc interpretations can credit an earlier reading with a prognostic message even though the question asked at the time did not ask for any prediction. Therefore, our illusory correlations bias is given a free pass to lay links between wildly varying events and readings: gregory's eye story is once again a

good example, because it was not about eyesight at all, yet got linked to the loss of an eye due to the metonymic relation between the two.

4.3: Noise on the Line – When There is no Message to be Found

Up until now, we have dealt with examples of 'hidden' messages which were either found through non-conventional methods (4.1) or, often in the case of prognostic questions, after an event has taken place (4.2). The assumption has been that the cards always have an answer, yet is this so? Trogon, in a thread about 'dud readings', mentions several reasons why readings might seem incomprehensible:

> Trogon:
>
> 1) As already mentioned, revisiting a question too often or too soon may result in the cards trying to tell you "you already asked that, work on the answer I already gave you!". Give it some time and contemplate the original reading some more.
>
> …
>
> 6) Most rare for me has been that a deck just won't work for me. This has only happened with one deck - I just couldn't read with it. This was unfortunate as it was a gift and I loved the art. I ended up selling the deck and the person who bought it was thrilled to have it and was getting great readings. (TF: Trogon)

According to Trogon, and these views are quite widely shared (see for example TF: 'Dud readings?'), tarot readings can be 'jammed' in a way by several factors, making it impossible to get a meaningful answer out of the cards. Next to repetition of questions and specific decks not working for specific people, another good example would be a question impossible to be answered; on which Farzon has the following to say:

> Farzon:
>
> If it's most probably simply rubbish, well, just forget it. I see this happen mostly for general readings about weekends where sometimes nothing really important will happen. (TF: Farzon)

The question asked is what will happen during the weekend. Logically, the cards would have difficulty answering that when virtually nothing is bound to happen in the first place. But there are even more possibilities, for example, a certain deck can just not work well with a reader; the reader has done too many readings and should rest; that certain decks work better with certain kinds of questions; or even that a deck has become jealous of another tarot deck.

Except for a disconnection between a person and a deck (which can happen because the deck doesn't like the person for example, or is yet to be 'tamed'), all of these justifications place the fault at the reader rather than at the deck. This means that any tarot reading that ends in such a justification rather than information regarding the question or situation should be seen as completed. This not only justifies a reading gone wrong, it effectively protects the aura of efficacy surrounding the ritual from harm, as a reading has not failed because of the tarot cards' lack of power. Were it the case that the cards could truly be wrong, there would be no way to tell when that was the case and when the reader was at fault, thereby greatly reducing tarot divination's continuing appeal.

4.4: Concluding Remarks - The Tarot Justifications Flowchart

Chapter three has shown the 'normal' routine for tarot readings, presupposing that everything goes right and an answer is found. Figure 4.4.1 shows how this translates into a flowchart:
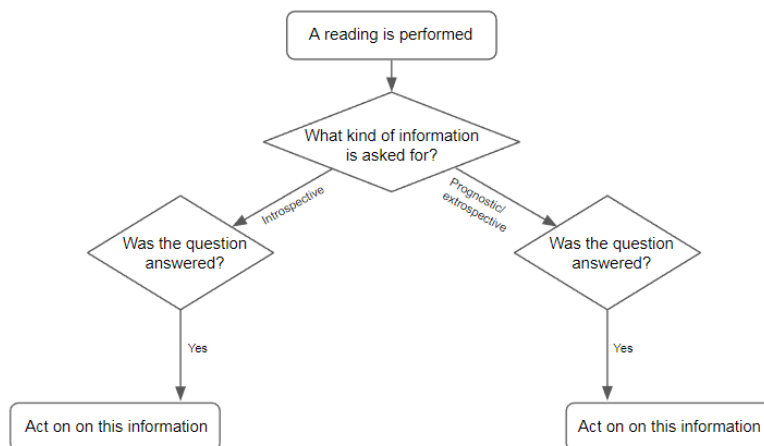

Figure 4.4.1: Simple Tarot Flowchart

The option are rather limited and as long as everything goes right, the reader will get an answer either way, the only difference is based on the type of question asked. Yet during this chapter, several justification strategies have been discussed. Implementing these changes into the flowchart gives the following diagram:
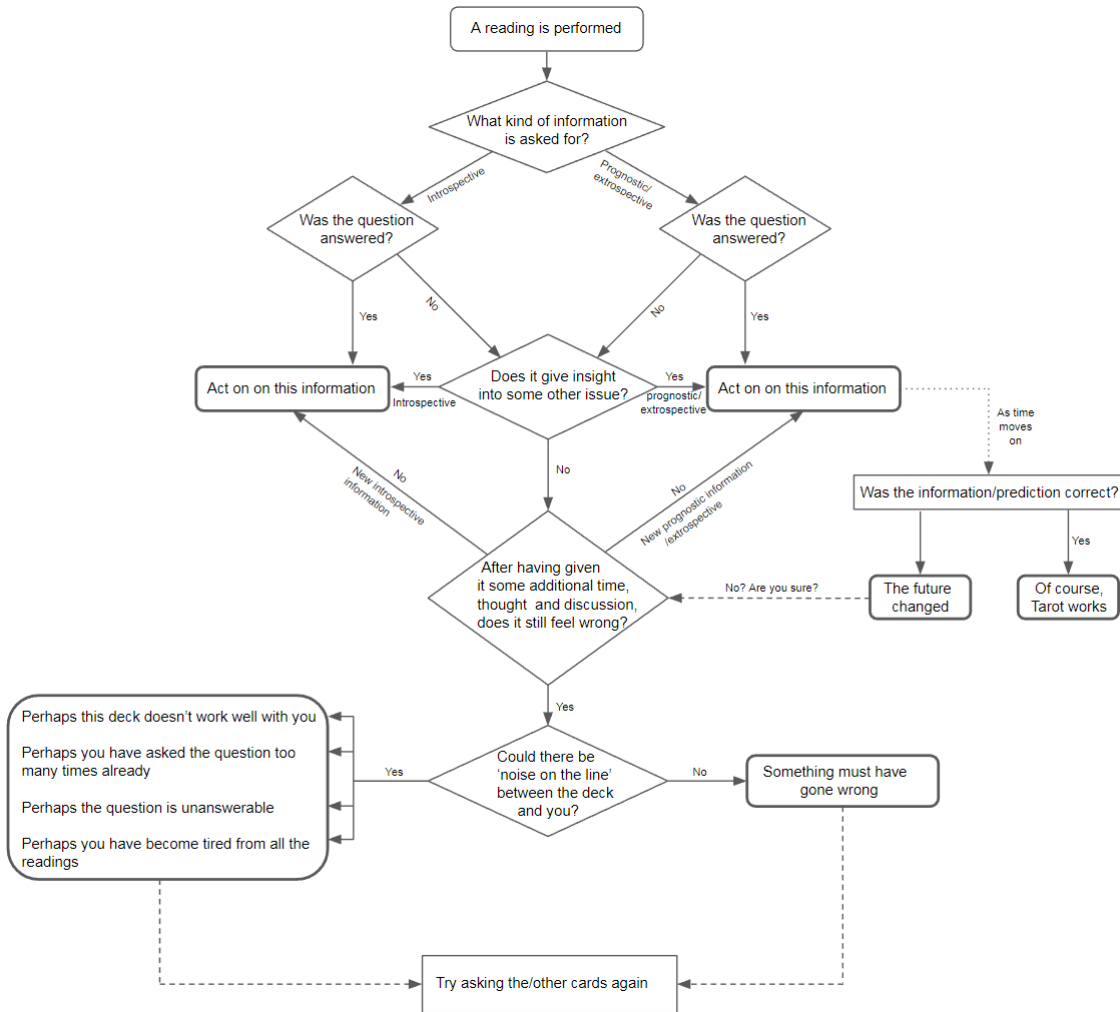
Figure 4.4.2: Complex Tarot Flowchart

Looking closely at all the possibilities of figure 4.4.2, it becomes apparent that the there is only one option for (the 'Something must have gone wrong' box near the bottom) while the options for a success are quite extensive (every other stadium-shaped box). As can be seen, not only relevant information and correct predictions are regarded as successes, but also several justifications such as a changed future and the various justifications mentioned in chapter 4.3 because any reading that does not leave a reader questioning the efficacy of the ritual should be considered a successful reading with our main question (i.e. how do failures get justified?) in mind.

Following the chart gives one a good understanding why even when spreads don't seem to work out immediately, they almost always get resolved anyway. This gives tarot divination an incredibly tight-knit safety net which might account for its popularity compared to other forms of divination (for example, faulty astrological predictions are perhaps only justifiable by blaming the calculations, nor can one simply ask the stars again in the way tarot cards can be consulted time and again).

Looking once more at the memory limitations humans tend to have, combined with the possibility of post hoc interpretations, the flowchart could also be used in order to show how big the chance is that a specific tarot divination gets remembered instead of forgotten, depending on where they end in the diagram:
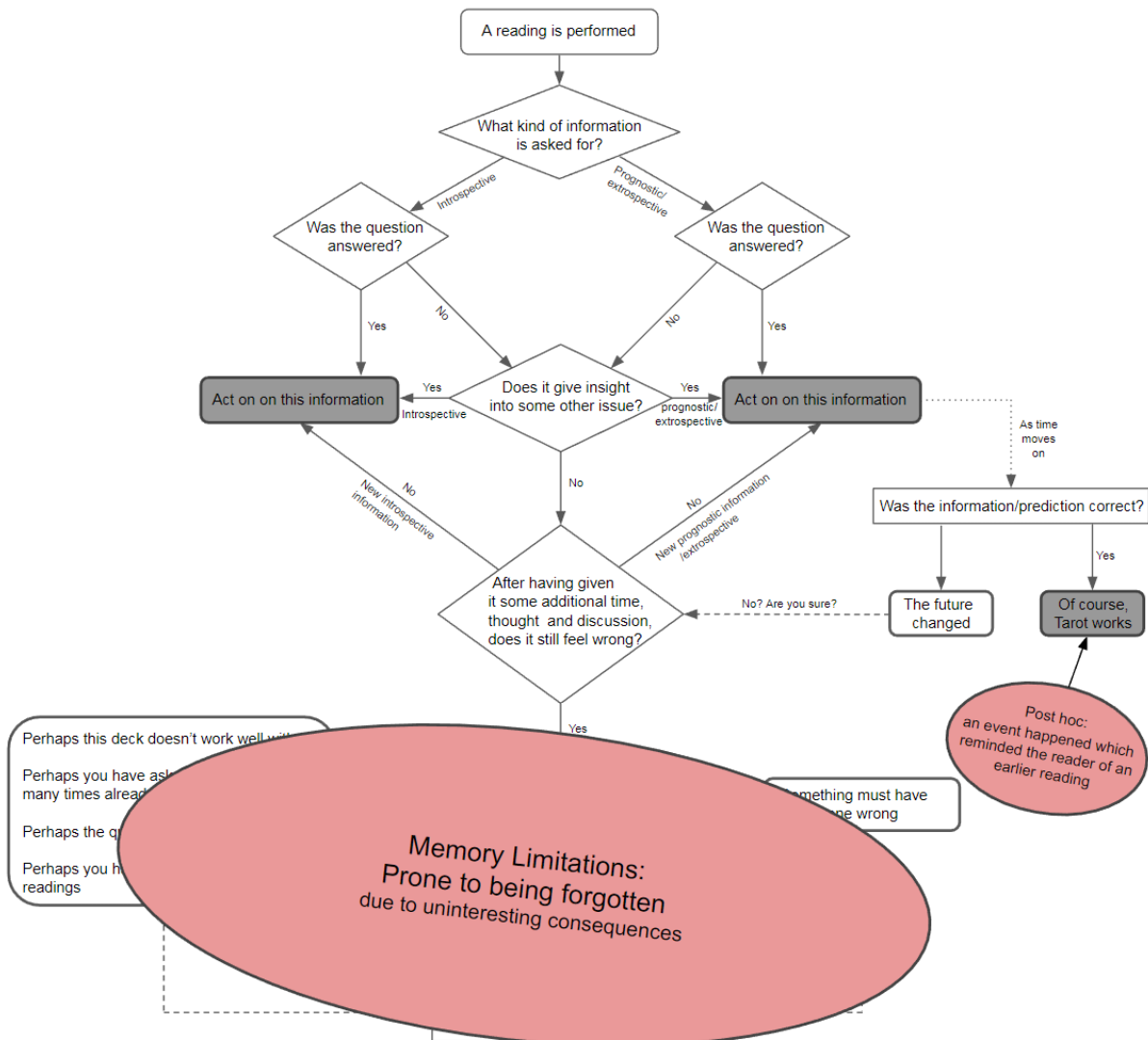

Figure 4.4.3: Memory Salience Flowchart

Figure 4.4.3 shows what has already been discussed before; that successful readings are more likely to be remembered by their readers than 'failed' ones because they are just not as salient.[6] A hypothesis of mine is that there is another variable that determines the likelihood of a divination being remembered: the length of the path that it took to reach a definite positive answer. That is because many steps defy the standard readings' short path, thereby setting themselves apart. Next

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[6] Here, the justifications earlier mentioned as successes are not seen as such, because from the point of view of the reader, the information wanted is not received, even though the efficacy of the practice as a whole is protected.

to that, such prolonged procedures seem to have failed at first, only for the reader to be baffled later on by the tarot's superior knowledge in relation to their own short-sightedness.

This chapter has been a first attempt at mapping the various justifications tarot readers have at their disposal, as well as the reasoning behind them. The safety net the justifications of this chapter form are an important aspect in the sustained cognitive appeal of tarot, after all, they maintain the aura of efficacy of the practice during trying readings. We will now take an in-depth look at an important cognitive process which makes tarot initially appealing and which has a profound effect on the practice as a whole.

5: How can Cards Communicate Information?

Having discussed how meaning is found, whether immediately, after some effort or even after a long time, it is time to take a step back. Because there is fundamental matter that deserves attention as the whole practice of tarot divination rests upon it. The following question by katyanne helps to introduce this issue:

> katyanne:
> I have **a deck that told me** in no uncertain terms that it wouldn't work with me. It was more like "screw you" when I asked it if we were compatible. What should I do with such a deck? (TF: katyanne, my emphasis)

Throughout the analysis, the belief in tarot as a communicatory tool has been taken for granted: that tarot divination is about decks of cards communicating hidden information with people. Furthermore, these decks not only seem to have intentions, but sometimes also get complete personalities ascribed to them. That people believe in such cards has become quite clear, but we have yet to stop and ask ourselves 'why?' Which cognitive aspects make the belief in supernatural tarot cards possible?

This might seem trivial as the popularity of tarot clearly points out that this seems to be not all that weird after all. Yet once again, I believe that if we understand how it comes that people are able to (quite easily) believe in the idea of tarot divination, we gain a more complete sense of the practice as a whole and especially on how tarot should be considered cognitively optimal. It might for example help us understand some of the process dealt with in chapter three and four more thoroughly. Sadly, as one has come to expect of tarot literature, this is yet to be studied extensively. Luckily, divination and other 'popular religion' practices such as healing or the complete concept of 'superstition' *have* been looked at, giving us literature to build on. The first matter of inquiry is how

cards get intentions and personalities ascribed to them, building on what has already been discussed during chapter three.

5.1: Ascribing Agency – Ascribing Personality

Summing up the findings of chapter three: the randomness of tarot divination seems to promote a sense of non-intentionality on the part of the readers. This makes them prone, due to cognitive tendencies, to ascribing intentionality in something else. Because tarot cards are the only other factor during a spread, the cards seem to be the ones that have to intentionally act.

There is more to it than just that, however. Jesper Sørensen argues in his article that another reason for the ascription of intentionality could be because of the format of the ritual: a question is asked, which then gets answered by, in our case, the tarot cards. This form of communication clearly requires two intentional agents, one asking questions and another providing answers (Sørensen n.d.). As patterns are found within spreads conforming to the question asked or a relevant situation, due to our illusory correlations bias, the feeling that an answer has been given, and therefore the feeling that there is another agent present increases even more.

And, of course, as soon as people suspect that there is an intentional agent active, they will try to understand what exactly its motivations and intentions are. This tendency to ascribe intentions and emotions to other beings is (almost) exclusively unique to humans. Scholars have coined this ability *Theory of Mind* (ToM), as it makes it possible for us to 'theorize' about what others are thinking. Yet our ToM is indiscriminate and also ascribes these intentions and emotions to animal, plants, and even objects (Bering 2011, 34-37). This is the reason readers are able to think tarot cards had intentions in the first place. Furthermore, as our ToM rests on the fundamental principle of 'others are capable of thinking in the same way as I do', every creature or object that get intentions ascribed to them, also get other human-like traits, such as emotions and memory as an extra. This makes it possible to think that dogs can feel shame; cats see themselves as superior to humans; or that tarot cards have personalities.

It would seem, then, that ToM, together with the non-intentionality and communicative aspects of tarot divination make it possible and quite intuitive for readers to see their cards as intentional agents. Then, ToM goes on to add other human traits to the cards as well, because 'if it acts as we do, it thinks like we think too'. When such a line of reasoning is established, certain justifications mentioned in chapter four (e.g. this deck doesn't like me; the cards wanted to show me something more important) become possible as well. Besides, as soon as we believe that the cards are intentionally communicating messages to us, we will try harder and longer to discover these messages, thereby strengthening the congruence and illusory correlations biases.

5.2: All Roads lead to Rome – But How?

> Trogon:
>
> Sometimes the deck gets tired. **I know this isn't really possible**, but it feels that way sometimes.
> As others have mentioned, it can definitely be beneficial to try a different deck for a while. I
> usually carry 4 to 6 decks with me to work for study or for reading. (TF: Trogon, my emphasis)

Trogon, together with many other tarot practitioners, seems to experience a tension between two
different belief sets. On the one hand, they experience that sometimes, the cards just don't seem to
work for a while, therefore inferring (following the steps above) that the deck must be tired. Yet,
intellectually speaking, they don't believe that this is possible, as the cards are inanimate objects.
This tension seems to be between what one feels is possible and what one believes is possible.

As mentioned briefly in the introduction, there are different groups of people believing in the
efficacy of tarot in different ways. Up until now, we have only dealt with what could be called the
'core belief': that tarot cards are intentional agents providing answers to questions through patterns
in the cards. Yet next to this core belief, there are various rationalizations people use when talking
about tarot. According to Markus Davidsen, the core of a religion (elemental religion in his terms)
consists of practices that assume the existence of supernatural beings; the assumptions beneath
such practices; and the experiences people have through these practices (2015, 220). Reflective
rationalizations, on the other hand, make theories out of this elemental religion. Such reflections are
able to justify their practices and beliefs to themselves or to others (ibid. 221-222).

In the case of tarot, such rationalizations often come in the form of a psychologization of the
practice.[7] There are two main groups to be discerned that rationalize tarot in this manner: the
Jungians and the Freudians. They both believe that the real agent in the process is the reader, with
the cards only fulfilling an assisting role. The former believe that the cards should be seen as external
tools to produce coincidences which then could be interpreted meaningfully. These meaningful
coincidences are called 'synchronicity', after Jung's term. The Freudians believe that using the tarot is
a way to let their unconscious rather than their conscious shed its light on a certain issue, resulting in
answers otherwise obscured from their view. Both these groups would argue, logically, that tarot can
only be used for introspective information, as the reader has no way of knowing anything about the
future or certain external events. Take for example these statements on how tarot works:

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[7] Other rationalizations, which don't collide with the core belief, are a confirmation of the idea that the cards
indeed are the active agents, or that there are supernatural agents behind the cards, such as fairies or angels
(see for example Doreen Virtue tarot cards as example of angelic agency).

Freudian perspective:

There is so much of our being that relate to symbols. We use symbols in our dreams, telling us about ourselves, we see things in our lives, every day, which we may look at as symbolic of our lives. The tarot gives us a rather organized and controlled symbolic tool with which to help clients **guide themselves into their own inner worlds**, that they might have had trouble accessing before. (Q: Lisa Larson, my emphasis)

Jungian persective:

Tarot is one of many available systems of divination. The 78 cards offer a symbolic language. The reader 'uploads' a 'programme' by learning the meanings and associations of the cards. In a reading, the reader draws cards blindly and at random, and **uses the imagery on the cards as a prompt**, to share what they feel about a given person, situation or question. (Q: Katie-Ellen Hazeldine, my emphasis)

Yet, despite all of these rationalizations, many readers who favor a psychological explanation of tarot still seem to 'revert' back to the core belief that the cards have intentions when they are reading or when they talk about their experiences. Trogon is a case in point, as they rationally admit that tired decks are impossible, while still carrying additional decks with them to counter this tiredness.

Such changes of opinion in 'rationalists' as soon as they are actually acting on *experience* rather than talking about *reflective beliefs*, can be interpreted quite easily now. In Davidsen's terms: the practice of tarot, as well as the experiences it brings with it, seem to assume supernatural cards. After all, as we have seen during the analysis, the notion that the cards are intentional agents with personalities is a highly integrated part of tarot divination; the non-intentionality and communicative aspects of the ritual promote such a view, supported by our ToM. Furthermore, as one is bound to find extraordinary experiences (e.g. post hoc justifications or a certain deck that 'suddenly stops working'), supernatural cards just seem to feel true. Rationalized beliefs involving the unconscious or synchronicity just don't fit into the whole of tarot divination as fluidly as intentional cards do.

5.3: Intentional Cards – More than a Cognitive Foundation

The reason that the core belief of tarot is more persuasive than the psychological reflections is precisely because intentional cards lie at the *core* of the practice and the experiences one has with the tarot. Consequently, ToM, as described in chapter 5.1, is not just another cognitive process that supports the belief in tarot divination, it is the cornerstone of the practice. Remember that the whole process of finding a message within the cards, whether one beliefs it is a message *from* the cards or not, depends on placing oneself in a communicative frame: the cards in a spread give an *answer* to a

question raised. Without our tendency to ascribe intentions to other beings and objects, readers would have a hard time to find a coherent message in a set of cards as placing oneself within the perspective of the cards (or for Freudians, our unconscious: 'what is my mind trying to tell me?') is unavoidable. And because ToM is so essential in the process of finding meaning, it is all the more tempting to ascribe the cards intentions, especially because the reader has a sense of non-intentionality due to the ritual.

This brings us back to the issue of cognitive optimality. The reliance of the practice on a fundamental process of human cognition, ToM, makes it feel initially very intuitive. After all, the processes tarot divination uses are those that humans use on a daily basis. Rationalizations involving psychological terms, on the other hand, rely on difficult concepts and theories which the human mind has to learn reflectively. This means that to the human mind, the idea that the cards produce a message as a response to a question is easier to grasp than, for example, that the cards give the reader an external tool in order to make them reflect more on their own inner flaws and desires. Therefore, it seems that tarot's use of ToM is crucial in making it initially cognitively appealing.

Concluding, by taking a closer look at the cognitive foundations of the belief in tarot, especially on the part of how cards come to be seen as intentional agents, it has been possible to theorize why a certain belief (the core belief) is more popular than any of its competitors (the rationalizations). Furthermore, it has helped us understand how several aspects of tarot divination, such as the cards having personalities, reinforce other aspects of the practice, such as providing justifications and bolstering expectations (which in turn increase the chance of future readings). These reinforcements promote a sustained cognitive appeal by maintaining the aura of efficacy around tarot divination.

Up until now, it has been quite fruitful to look at different core parts of tarot: (1) ascribing meanings to cards and choosing meanings during spreads; (2) justifying unclear readings and remembering our greatest successes; and (3) the intuitive assumptions underlying the core practice. Yet now the time has come to make a synthesis of all the information gathered.

6: A Cognitive Model of Tarot

What makes tarot divination so cognitively appealing? This question was at the heart of the whole analysis. Some tentative answers have been given already, such as mentioning tarot's multiple meanings without this damaging its perceived neutrality, or its safety net when it comes to fuzzy or falsified readings. Yet in order to truly understand the power of tarot's persuasiveness, all of these processes have to be seen in relation to one another, as it is the *feedback loops* within the practice of tarot which make it seem efficacious. Once again, a model will be given to illustrate this.

First of all, the practice of tarot divination will be divided into three main building blocks. The first of these is 'ritual', which consists of what happens during the spread. The second building block is 'interpretations', which deals with what happened after the ritual, both when a satisfactory answer was found immediately and when the ritual yielded unclear or wrong results. Finally, there is the 'human cognition' building block, which contains all cognitive aspects which have been discussed throughout chapters three, four and five. Figure 6.0.1 below shows this stage:
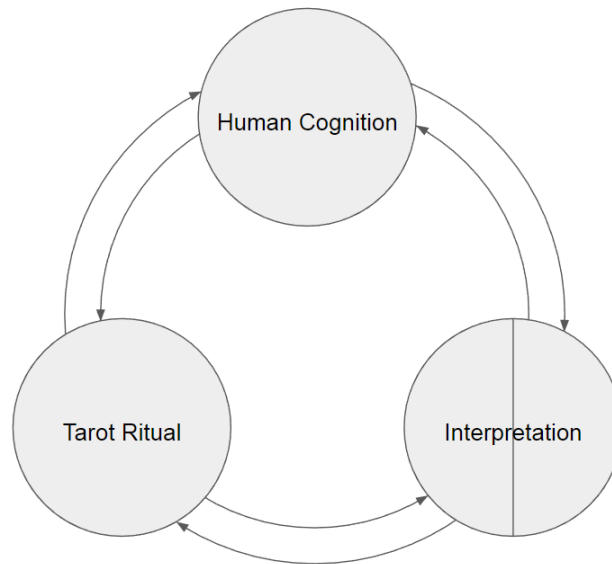

Figure 6.0.1: The Building Blocks of Tarot Divination

The next stage would be to fill in these blocks with the appropriate characteristics. Tarot ritual consists of its randomness, which as we have seen in chapter three leads to a feeling of non-intentionality on the part of the reader. Next to that, it has the many meanings available to the different tarot cards. Human cognition will be filled with the various biases discussed in the chapters as well as the idealized cognitive models and theory of mind. Lastly, interpretation's components will be the way readers interpret their readings, both instant successes as well as the various reasons behind a 'failed' reading, condensed to 'I did something wrong' (e.g. asked the wrong question or interpreted wrongly), 'The cards decided to tell something different' (e.g. they don't like me or they found another matter more important) and 'the cards were right after all' (i.e. post hoc justifications). This makes it possible to start looking at the connections between the different parts. Figure 6.0.2 illustrates this stage:
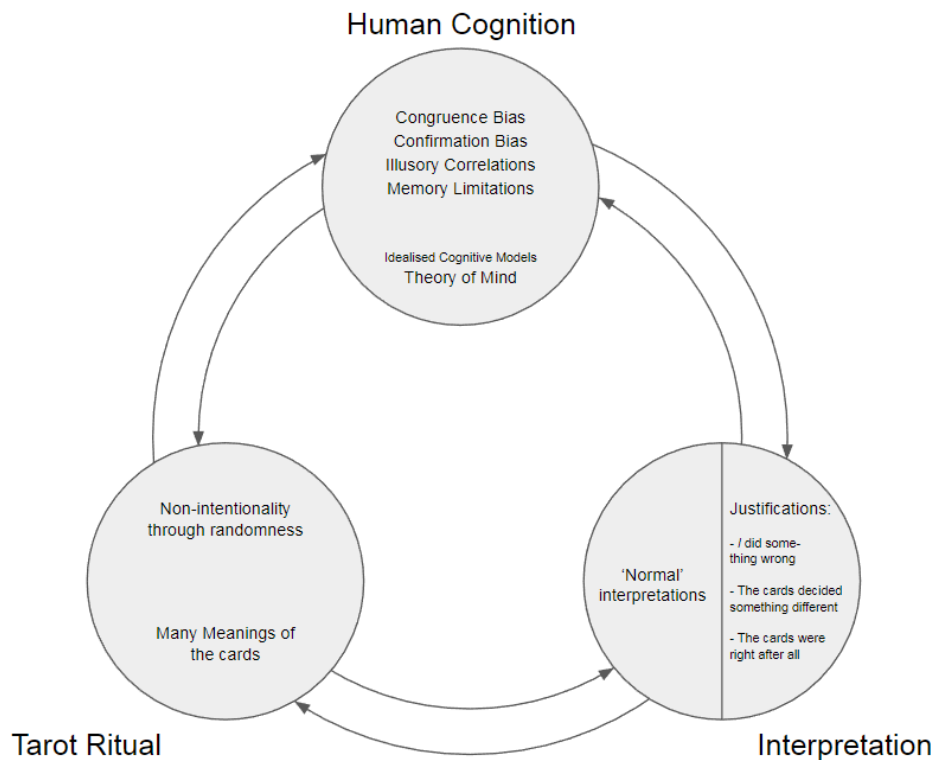
Figure 6.0.2: The Elements of Tarot Divination

Starting with the relations between tarot ritual and human cognition, two important notions arise from several aspects of these building blocks. The idea that the agency of the ritual lies with the cards rather than with the reader is the first of these. As has been theorized in chapter three, this is because of the non-intentionality the randomness of the tarot ritual brings with it. This idea stays believable through the many meanings available to tarot cards and spreads, making it look like a spread always contains a message, which in itself is safeguarded by idealized cognitive models, who 'supress' the reflective knowledge that there is an incredible amount of possible reflections. The second idea is that the cards have intentions and personalities, which is formed from the previous idea that it is the cards who produce messages, as well as our theory of mind: specific answers to questions and non-intentionality on the reader's part promote the ascription of communicative agency, and therefore (due to ToM) personality, to the cards. This idea, in turn, makes the idea that the cards have messages instead of the readers, more believable (i.e. if the cards have intentions and personalities and it doesn't look like *I* have a say in the ritual, it is probably them who do), thereby making a feedback loop.

Next to the creation of new notions, tarot ritual and human cognition strengthen each other as well. The idealized cognitive models and theory of mind of the latter helps the former's notion that the reader has indeed no intentionality. Without this, there would be a much weaker basis for the ascription of agency towards the cards rather than to oneself, as the reader would both be aware

of the multiple readings and the inanimate state of the deck. The other way around, all the possible meanings of tarot cards strengthen the congruence and illusory correlations biases greatly by increasing the pool of options per interpretation, while the non-intentionality of the ritual strengthens the illusory correlations bias as well (Whitson & Galinsky 2008). All of the above interactions between human cognition and tarot ritual can be found in figure 6.0.3, shown below:
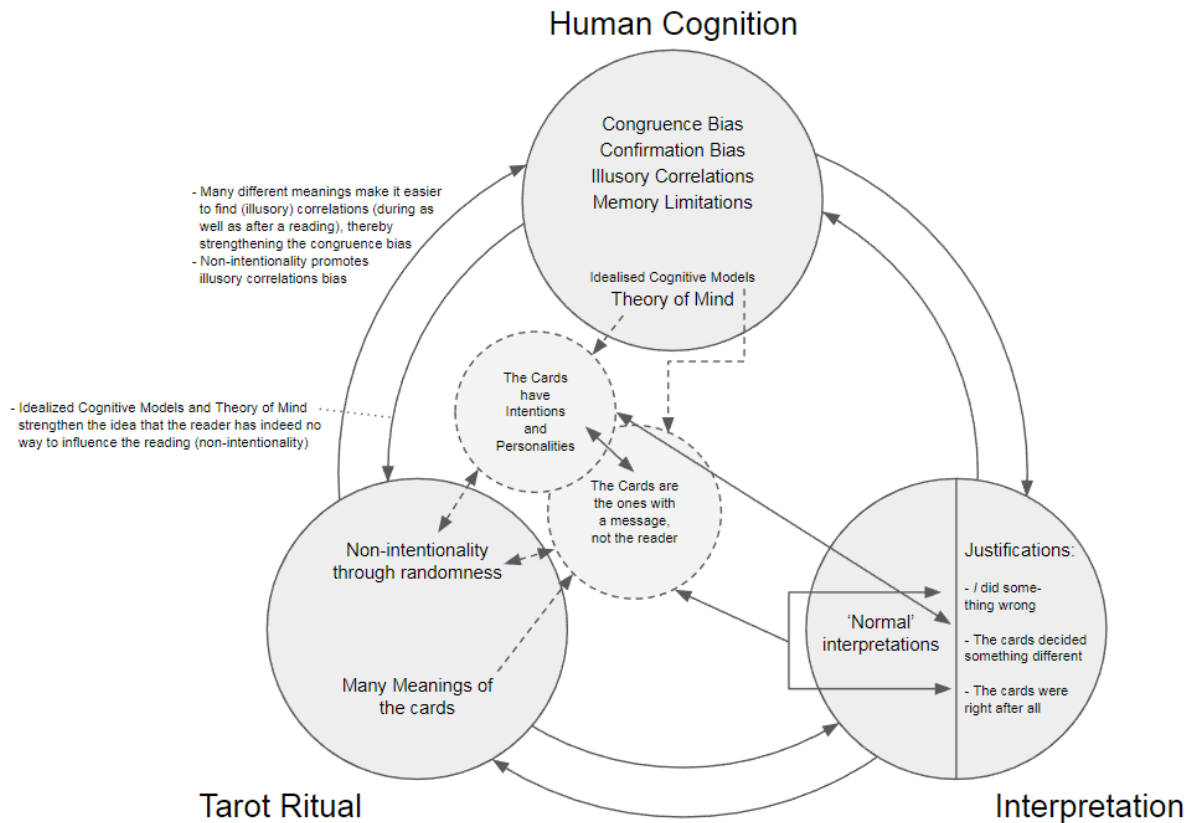

Figure 6.0.3: Tarot Model with the Interactions between Ritual and Cognition. Continuous lines are part of feedback loops, dotted lines represent a role in the creation of a certain belief or notion.

Next, the relations between human cognition and interpretation will be looked at. As discussed in chapter four, various cognitive biases played an important role in sewing tarot's 'safety net'. Firstly, the congruence and confirmation biases both lead readers to look for, and expect, a confirmation of a reading rather than a falsification (the former because direct testing is more intuitive than indirect testing, the latter because one's beliefs influence one's expectations). Because of this, readings are often found to have come true later on after all, or to have been pointing to another matter altogether. Memory limitations strengthen the former of these by forgetting 'failed readings', only to recall those that can be interpreted as a success retrospectively, while the illusory correlations bias helps in finding this success as well as the other matters the cards might have spoken of. Furthermore, the ideas that cards have intentions and personalities and that they are the ones with agency make most of the justifications possible in the first place (e.g. a deck needs a

personality to decide what is important or who not to work with). But also during 'normal' interpretations, human cognition plays a strengthening role: The congruence and illusory correlations biases of the latter help the reader choose and apply certain meanings of the cards drawn to make a coherent story. Without these biases, readers would have a harder time finding out what certain cards should mean in certain spreads and if they, contrary to the congruence bias, would try to falsify that there was a coherent story to be found at all, it would certainly result in readers feeling they fail more than they succeed in divining at all.

Each successful interpretation, on their part, strengthens the belief in the efficacy of tarot divination, thereby strengthening the confirmation bias as well. Next to that, several justifications and interpretation in general also support the, to outsiders and some readers, rather odd ideas that the cards have intentions, personalities and are in control. Thereby once again effectively creating several feedback loops, as can be seen in figure 6.0.4:
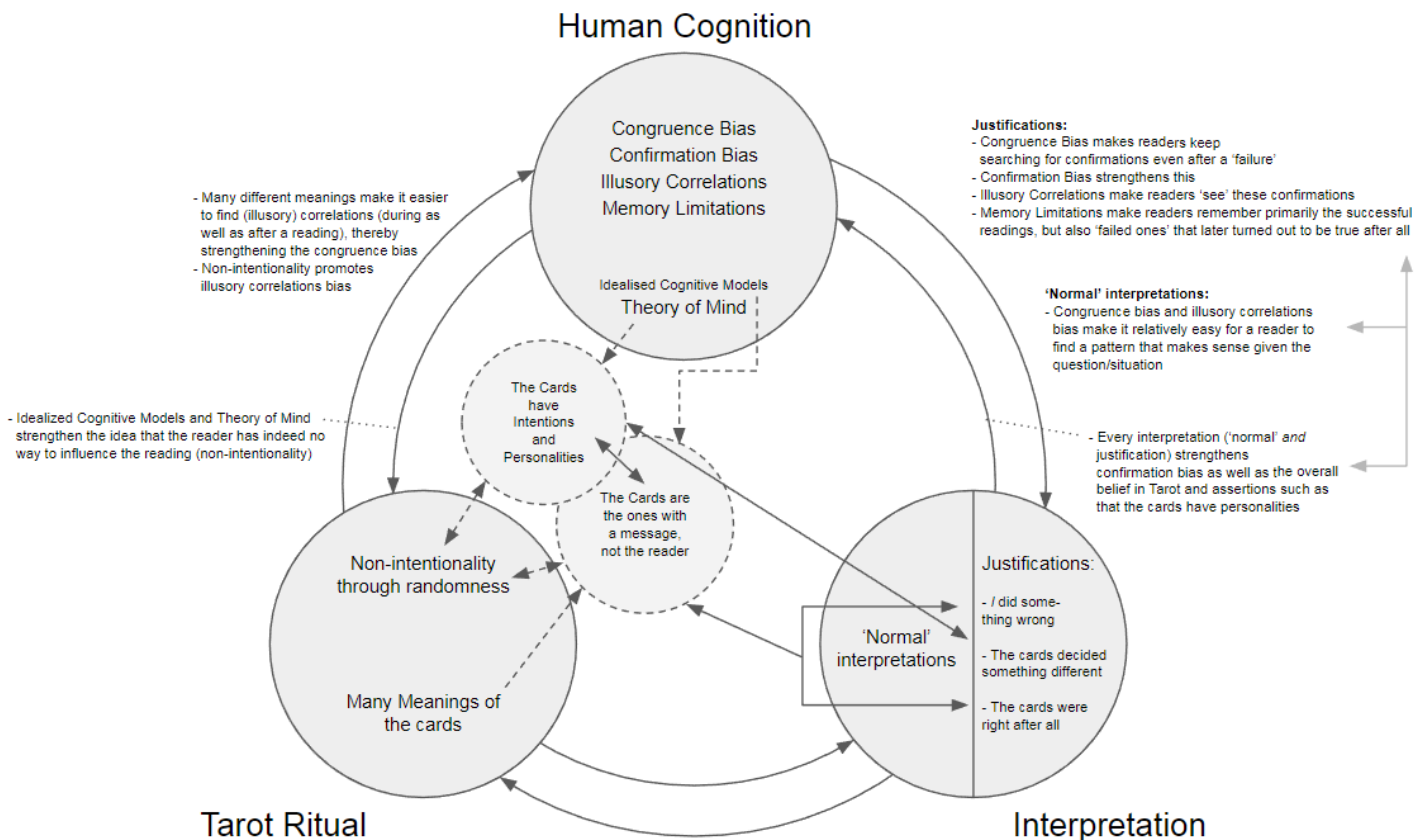

Figure 6.0.4: Tarot Model including Interactions between Justification and Cognition

What rests now is only to describe the final interactions, those between interpretation and the tarot ritual. Once again, the many meanings available to the various cards are an asset rather than a liability. In this case, they help the reader to easily find a correct interpretation as well as justify any 'failure', by making it very possible that they chose the wrong interpretation of the card,

or that the card only looked to be representing a certain situation while it actually spoke of a different matter altogether (e.g. Death didn't signify the end of a relationship, as was asked, but rather the beginning of a new career, of which the cards 'actually' spoke).

On the other hand, successful justifications can add to the possible meanings of the cards, perhaps a new interpretation a reader had never thought of before could turn into one of their go-to interpretations for that certain card. Next to that, justifications which stress that the cards were right all along stress the non-intentional part of the ritual, that the cards rather than the reader are in control and that they are right even when the reader is wrong. When added to the model, a full picture of the analysis done in the chapters three through five, including implications spoken of in the present chapter, emerges. The final result can be seen in figure 6.0.5:
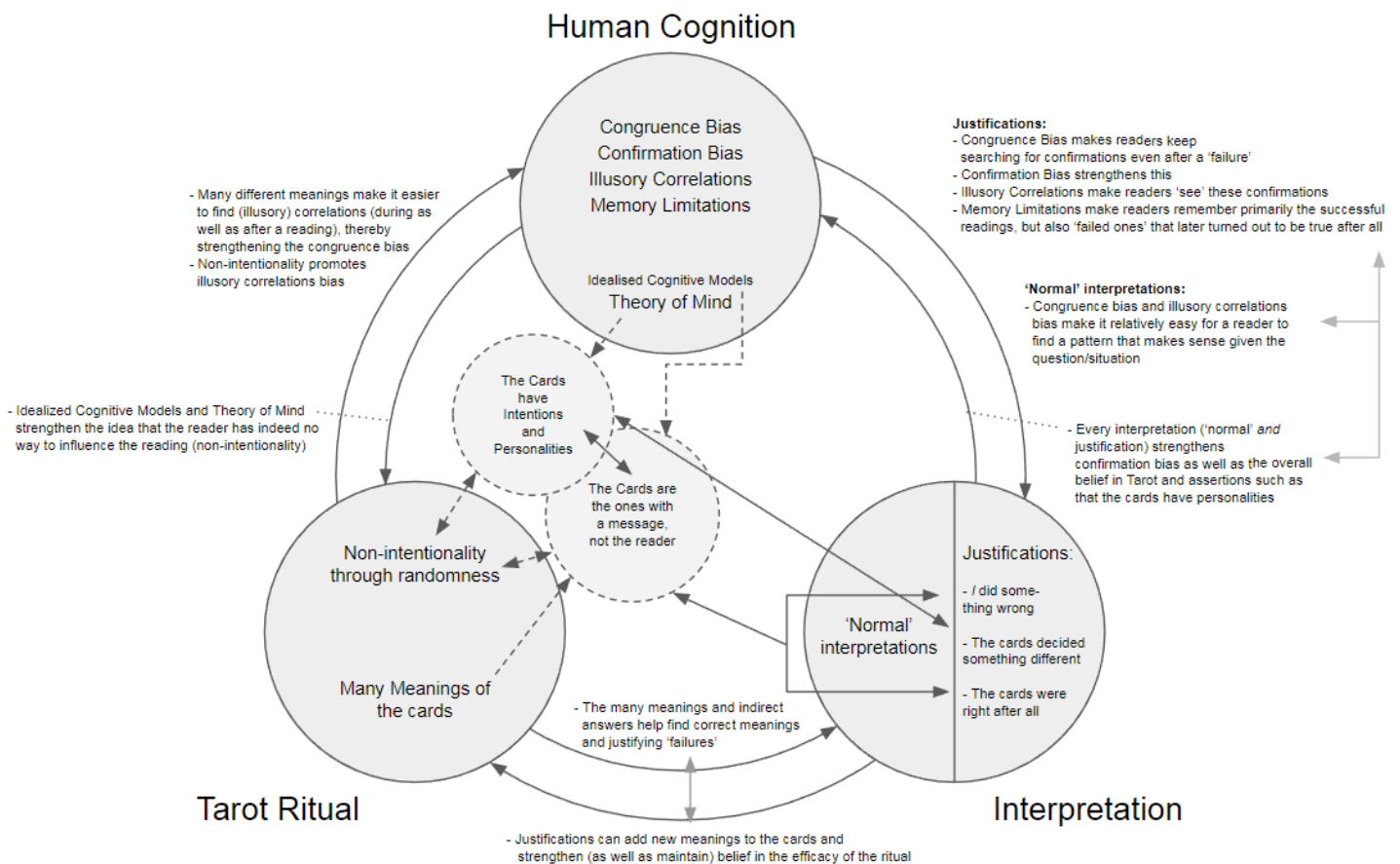

Figure 6.0.5: The Final Tarot Model

This final model, however, is more than the sum of its parts. Whereas the analysis chapters dealt with a single building block and the above commentary on relations between two blocks at a time, the whole picture is complete now. This makes it possible to see just how pervasive feedback loops are to tarot divination as a whole. For example, not only does tarot ritual directly strengthen human cognition by increasing the effect of the congruence bias, this also indirectly strengthens

certain justifications (which in turn can strengthen the ritual). Successes of any kind can in this way turn into a snowball effect, supporting multiple parts of tarot in- and/or directly. *This* is the real strength of tarot and the source of its incredible cognitive attraction, both initial as well as continued.

By now I hope to have made clear what the advantages of a cognitive approach towards tarot divination are. Without theories such as idealized cognitive models, cognitive biases and theory of mind, we could have had a fair understanding of what a tarot ritual consists of, which cards have which meanings and what justifications are used. But it would have been nigh impossible to understand what goes on beneath this surface of practices and beliefs. We could not have understood why certain justifications seem to make so much sense to the insider, or how seemingly endless meanings, recognized as such during reflections and discussions, are not seen as problematic during the ritual of divination itself. On the other hand, the theories used would not have made much sense without a more detailed knowledge of what tarot readers actually do, than is usually available within the academic works of scholars of religion.

Yet there is even more to be learned from the analysis and subsequent model made above. The model as seen above has the explanatory power to go beyond tarot as a specific case. We will now, in the final chapter, shift our attention to what the present analysis and model can teach us about divination and religion in general.

7: What the Cards Can Teach Us

Much has been uncovered on the workings of tarot divination. The three main questions, which dealt with how meanings got created and chosen, how 'failures' got justified and which cognitive processes made the belief in supernatural tarot cards possible, have all been discussed. Their answers came together to answer the research question: what is so persuasive about the tarot ritual that people believe it works and keep on practicing? But just as different theories were needed in order to come to the conclusions of chapter six, so too can this thesis help in shedding light on other fields of inquiry within the study of religion. Firstly, the implications for the theoretical frame of *cognitive optimality*, as discussed in chapter 1.3, will be investigated.

7.1: Sustained Cognitive Appeal

At the beginning of this thesis, the question was raised whether or not tarot could be considered cognitively optimal, or at least cognitively appealing. This question was resolved rather quickly, even before the analysis begun, and was only resumed somewhat in chapter three and five. Tarot's inclusion into this category was done this swiftly because Boyer and Whitehouse's criteria on what a

'contagious' religious concept has to have were quite easily matched with the practice of tarot: it is an easy and intuitive practice to remember, yet it deals with strategic information and several salient counterintuitive aspects. But as was noted back in the introductory chapter, such an *initial* cognitive appeal is not enough for a divinatory practice such as tarot to become popular. That is because divination, at its core, is a result-driven process; no one would continue to practice tarot if it couldn't satisfy their need for information. Throughout the analysis chapters, we have encountered the various ways in which the initial appeal of tarot has been protected from harm. Therefore, I propose to add a term to the cognitive optimality theory: *sustained cognitive appeal*.

Regarding the name of the term, I replace *optimality* with *appeal*, because the former implies a spectrum which I find hard to measure (i.e. if something is considered cognitively optimal, it should be technically impossible to become more optimal, yet this is almost unprovable). Furthermore, Whereas *initial cognitive appeal*, the idea as used by Whitehouse and Boyer (by the latter in the form of minimally counterintuitive concepts), states that a religious concept or practice has to be attention grabbing and easy as well as attractive to remember, *sustained cognitive appeal* has to do with the retention of such an initial appeal. Lastly, as has become apparent during the analysis, cognitive processes such as ToM, various biases and ICM's play a continuing role in the maintenance of the appeal of tarot, and presumably other divination techniques as well, justifying the *cognitive* part of the term.

Sustaining the appeal of a given religious concept is just as integral to its survival as the initial appeal. This is not limited to divination, or even to result-driven practices such as healing or possession.[8] Useless supernatural agents, for example, who play no role in the lives of humans, have a much smaller survival chance than active agents, whether beneficent or maleficent. In the case of tarot, readers have to continuously receive (apparent) useful knowledge, with failures being justified, in order to sustain its appeal. For healing practices, to name another example, it would be (a feeling of) medical relief.

Therefore, I propose to combine the research into initial cognitive appeal with this new concept of sustained cognitive appeal, in order to truly understand why several practices and notions have a cognitive advantage in their popularity over others. Because the present research has focussed on a divination technique, I will constrain myself to giving a few ideas on how this could be done. The model of chapter six, in a simplified form, could be used to look at other forms of divination too, see figure 7.1.1 below:

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[8]This hypothesis is largely limited to 'lived religion', or the elemental religion of Markus Davidsen. Theologies are perfectly able to maintain cryptic and sprawling inventories of gods and complicated rituals for example. Yet these would not mean as much to the common adherent as their elemental practices and beliefs, which seem to do better when they have a possible impact on one's worldview. Even the most complicated purity laws, for example, serve the *purpose* of keeping their adherents ritually pure.
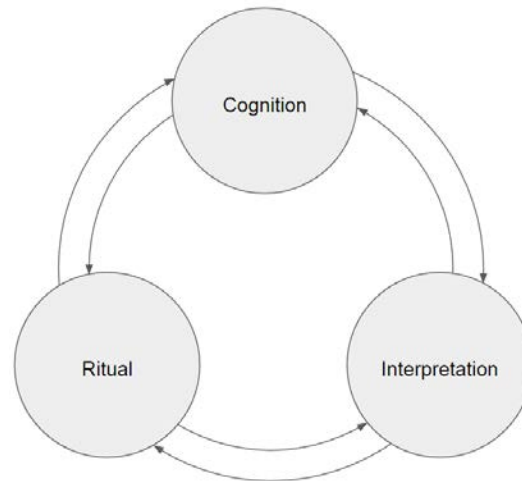
Figure 7.1.1: A Model for Divinatory Techniques

Just as with tarot, there would have to be looked into how cognitive aspects, the ritual and meaning-making as well as justifications (together interpretation) work together to make feedback loops that keep a practitioners within the logic of the divination practice. Both the individual and the combined strength of the building blocks need to be looked at. For example, does the reading of a hand leave enough room for justifications, and do these justifications make sense in the larger picture of things?

A proper model for different sorts of religious notions and practices might make a rudimentary comparison, at least a first attempt at this, possible. If done correctly, more light could be shed on how cognitive appeal gets sustained by a cooperation between the ritual or idea at hand and various cognitive principles. More research on sustained cognitive appeal in general is highly recommended, as it could help us better understand what religion is about and how it works, especially with regards to the elemental form of religion; the practice involving supernatural agents, combined with its underlying assumptions and the experiences it brings with it (Davidsen 2015, 220).

7.2: Recommendations for Future Research

The surface of tarot has barely been scratched. Even though I hope to have deepened the scratch, much more research will be necessary in order to comprehensively understand the practice of tarot and divination in general. A thorough ethnographic study of several tarot communities, both online and offline, should be the number one priority, because solid information is needed for any theory to build on. Of special interest could be the relation between professional and personal tarot reading.

Another area that should be looked into is how a reader starts with the practice and gradually moves on to become a specialist. I believe that Luhrmann's *interpretive drift* theory could

play a role. This theory states that as a person begins with a new practice, such as tarot or magic (e.g. Wicca), many things are not yet known and results are tediously low. Yet, as the practitioner keeps learning, they start to reinterpret the world and their results in light of the practice; coincidences turn into results and failures into subtle successes (Luhrmann 1979, 307-323). Interestingly enough, Luhrmann believed the interpretive drift to have cognitive processes driving it, yet she never went into these as her field of expertise is anthropology and the scope of her research did not allow it. Up until now, as far as I am aware, no one has explicitly looked into the cognitive foundation of Luhrmann's theory. Yet, just as her theory might help into seeing the gradual change of beginner to expert, so might the model of chapter six help to clarify some of the cognitive foundations of the interpretative drift. Basically, I believe that the strengthening of the various feedback loops of figure 6.0.5 is what Luhrmann understood as the interpretive drift.

Of course, more research should also be done into the theory of sustained cognitive appeal. It could be interesting to see if the model of figure 7.1.1 could be used successfully for other divinatory practices as well. Either way, in order to truly study religion from a cognitive point of view, it is not enough to look at just the initial appeal of practices and ideas, as explanations for the sustainment of such notions are needed too.

Hopefully, this thesis has done its part to constructively help all of these future research directions.

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8.3: Illustrations

Of all the figures presented in this thesis, including the cover-illustration, all have been made or captured by the author. The tarot card illustrations visible on the following figures are originally created by Pamela Colman Smith under instructions of Arthur Edward Waite and are copyrighted by the Estate of A. E. Waite:

- Cover page illustration

- Figure 1.0.1: The Fool Trump Card

- Figure 1.0.2: Five of Wands Suits Card

- Figure 2.3.1: Three-card spread consisting of the Five of Cups, Strength and the Nine of Cups

- Figure 3.0.1: The Empress Trump Card

- Figure 4.2.1: Three of Swords suit card

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