

Tarot and Astrology

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What might the two most famous oracles of Western civilization have in common? Do they have the same origins, or are they at least related? Many who pursued these questions arrived at just as many – and often contradicting – results. How similar are these two systems really? Actually, what becomes apparent first are the big differences.

We know a lot about astrology's origins, but close to nothing about the roots of tarot. Astrology unquestionably hails from a five thousand year long, respectable history. Once humans started to settle down and cultivate their land, they needed a calendar that would indicate periods suitable for sowing and harvesting and that could serve to calculate religious holidays. The movements in the sky proved to be an ideal basis. The sun's sacred positions, the longest and the shortest day and the two equinoxes, had already been known for a long time. They made people think of structuring the year according to four seasons, each of which has a beginning, a main phase and a transition phase to the next season. It therefore seemed only logical to divide each of these phases into three parts so that, in the end, one could break the year down into twelve parts – which we now know as the phases of the zodiac. When people started to notice that the planets wander through the different zodiacal phases relevant to agricultural issues, the idea arose that their movement might also be significant for other important decisions. This is how astrology was born. Throughout its long history, it gradually developed into a whole system of interpreting the world based on the idea that it describes in a unique way the meaningful interaction between man and the cosmos. For thousands of years, it was above all the elite of humanity that dealt with this „queen of the sciences“.

All this can not be said about tarot, unless we want to take up one of the various legends which place tarot's origins in Morocco, Egypt, India or Atlantis. As they would have it, the cards constitute an old, venerated book of wisdom which was handed down in secret circles for thousands of years until it became known to a wider public in the 15th century, without that the true nature of the tarot was understood in those days. Of course, speculations about a millennium old origin can never be totally debunked. However, all the available facts point to the conclusion that the tarot is a product of the Renaissance. The oldest and most well known cards, which agree with today's tarot in structure and quality, are called the *Visconti-Sforza Tarot*. They were painted around 1428 for the Milanese duke Filippo Maria Visconti.



However, in the 15th century, the word tarot was not yet known. The cards were simply called „I Trionfi“ or „The Game of the Trumps“ because the trumps were exactly the new thing about them. The trump cards had been invented and added to the „normal playing cards“. The Italian word Tarrochi did not come up until 1505 – without leaving a hint whatsoever to its origins or meaning. It seems to have been a pure means of entertainment until 1781, when the French erudite Antoine Court de Gébelin intuitively connected the symbolism of the cards to an old Egyptian book of wisdom. From then on, people started to lay the cards and read them. Therefore, the history of tarot as we know it is less than 300 years old. In contrast to the „queen of the sciences“, the cards were never held in high esteem. They were rather dismissed as a game played on the streets – if not the work of the devil himself.

However, there is another reason for the fact that tarot and astrology differ widely in reputation. Astrology is calculable. Astrologers in the days of the Roman Empire were even called mathematicians because mathematics and astrology are so closely related. And things that are calculable make us feel safe and secure. A horoscope that was calculated correctly is a kind of „still“ of a given moment of the sky taken from the human standpoint. Its accuracy is not even contended by astronomy though astronomers and astrologers can hold very different opinions regarding the significance of these correctly calculated constellations. What everyone can agree on is that astrology’s statements are based on indubitably sound calculations.

In contrast, the card oracle yields statements on the basis of coincidental constellations. Many people have difficulties in accepting this, especially those who perceive coincidence as pure nonsense, as something absurd, silly, or arbitrary. Into the bargain, you can theoretically lay the cards over and over again to answer the same question – thereby yielding new answers each time, which, of course, will differ and maybe even contradict each other. Therefore, a lot of people think that the logically calculated horoscope rests on a more solid foundation. However, what people who criticize tarot often overlook is the fact that the

basis of astrological calculations, for example the date and time of birth, is usually also a „coincidental moment“, and could just as well have been earlier or later.

To capture the difference between the two methods, we could compare them with the two great natural sources of light in the sky, the sun and the moon. In this analogy, the calculable method of astrology would be comparable to the sun, which moves in its orbit in a regular and foreseeable way. In contrast, tarot possesses more lunar qualities, seeing as how the movements of the moon are far more irregular. Sometimes it is waxing, sometimes waning, sometimes full, then empty again, sometimes its light is so strong that it almost turns night into day, sometimes it does not show up at all for several nights. Moreover, it always rises at a different place and time, and it sometimes even shines during the day. Tarot seems just as moody and unpredictable as the moon. But who has dealt a bit more intensely with its lunar nature and has gotten to know the cards' visual language a little better, knows how they can spark off intuition – and how remarkably clear their statements can actually be.

As far as the two oracles are concerned, their differing solar and lunar qualities, of course, also have an influence on their reputation. It comes as no surprise that calculable astrology was taught at the universities and the royal courts (solar principle) and by men (♁). In contrast, the art of reading the cards was seen as a woman's (♃) domain and associated with the wandering folk (both lunar principles), both groups of which were ostracized way into modern times.

Some traces of these images are still noticeable up to this very day. Often astrologers and „tarotists“ still do not get along very well. A lot of astrologers look down on the card readers – who sometimes do not really like the astrologers as they might seem conceited and over-rational. It also seems appropriate that there is no real professional term comparable to that of „astrologer“. „Tarotist“ or „tarotologer“ sounds constructed and artificial; while on the other hand, „card reader“ sounds disparaging.

There is also a big difference between people who are interested in tarot or astrology when it comes to the expectations they have when they seek advice. People who ask for astrological advice – at least in the western world – usually want to understand problems in a deeper way; they want to work on themselves and assume personal responsibility. People who decide to have a tarot session often rather expect something like fortune-telling, maybe even a few magical tricks that might do away with their problems quickly and painlessly.

Whatever differences there might be, the two oracles are based on the same conviction: they both, in their own way, interpret the quality of a given moment. Astrology analyses the quality

of a certain time and place in the sky; the tarot specialist interprets the symbolic message in a certain constellation yielded coincidentally through the specific quality of a given moment. In this sense, both oracles are esoteric because they look for the reality behind the reality. They work on the level of externally perceivable things (stars, cards) – and interpret the hidden meaning behind those things.

The first systematic approach that was made to find the equivalences between astrological principles and the tarot cards goes back to Jean-Baptiste Pitois (1811-1877), a French historian and journalist who was known under the pseudonym Paul Christian. Not only did he make the connection between astrology and tarot, but we also have him to thank for coining the term *arcanum/arcana* (*Lat.*, secrets) for the 22 cards which had up until then simply been called trump-cards. In his book *Histoire de la Magie*, published in 1870, he also describes the tarot cards as images and stages on an initiation path. But Christian's astrological ordering was only the beginning. It was followed by a lot of original and, above all, contradicting systems.

Wherein lies the problem in the attempt to connect tarot and astrology? To answer this question we might take a look at the situation of the time in which people like Christian were active. In the second half of the 19th century, science was especially strongly dominated by the belief that, along with the disappearance of the last undiscovered areas in the world, man would soon be able to grasp everything about the world and reality. William Lord Kelvin, one of the most important physicists of those days, is said to have advised students to refrain from studying physics since, in his opinion, everything had already been found out apart from some minor details, and the little that was left would have been dealt with by the time the students would have finished their training anyhow. Even in 1908, the head of the London patent office proposed to shut down the patent office because, according to him, all the essential things had already been invented.

Nature apparently likes to make things collapse just when man thinks he is about to grasp it all. It often lies in the detail which is easily overlooked, but which can produce a complete turnover at the decisive moment. The generation between Einstein's theory of relativity (1905) and Heisenberg's uncertainty principle (1925), for example, witnessed one of the most revolutionary phases the scientific worldview ever had to go through. During that time, similar things happened in other fields as well, such as art or religion.

This zeitgeist also influenced people interested in esoteric questions. While many scientists were looking for a kind of ur-alphabet and original language which could be seen as a basis for all current alphabets and languages, the occultists – as esoteric people called themselves

back in those days – were trying to find the „missing link“. They were looking for the link which would enable them to connect all different esoteric systems convincingly. By doing so, they expected to get insight on the ultimate secrets, a grasp of the world formula that lays the foundation for all reality.

And this is where tarot comes in again – for it was this formula that the magician Éliphas Lévi (1810-1875), one of the leading occultists of his time, thought he had found in the card oracle. To him, the cards were the missing link between magic and the Cabbala. So he created the tables of correspondence between the 22 cards of Major Arcana, the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet and the Sefirot tree, the central symbol of the Cabbala. Other personalities from the world of tarot such as Paul Christian, Oswald Wirth and Papus used Lévi's work as a basis to refine and extend his attempts.

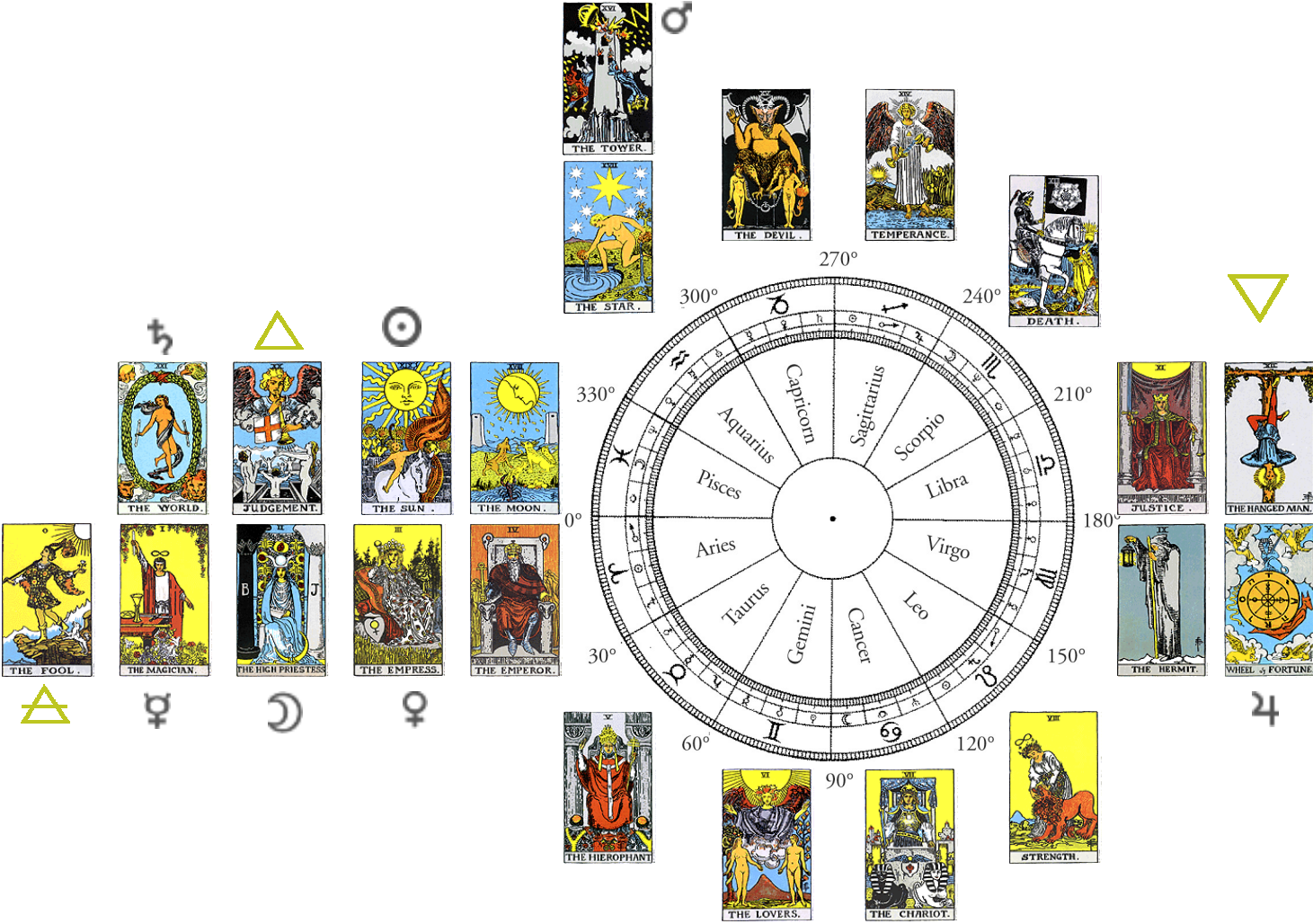
At the end of the 19th century, the spiritual centre of tarot moved from Paris to London. The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn that was founded in 1888 developed an extensive and sophisticated system of magical theories in its 12 years of existence. Within this system, the tarot played a key role. While it started out with Lévi's works, they were soon turned into something different which led to an entirely new system. Here, too, the aforementioned zeitgeist was palpable in as far as the famous and renowned members of the Order were absolutely convinced they held an exclusive piece of secret wisdom in their hands. The access to this wisdom was accordingly restricted to the small circle of the order's members. Though strictly guarded, the secret of the tables of correspondences was ultimately published by one of the members, Aleister Crowley, to the shock and dismay of the order. In the end, he created a division within the order and led to its collapse.

After this betrayal, it, of course, did not make sense to guard the secret any longer. And in 1909, Arthur Edward Waite published a tarot deck – which has become the most famous deck in the world, known as the Rider-Waite Tarot. One of the most important changes Waite made in comparison to all the decks that had been previously issued was the renumbering of the two cards STRENGTH and JUSTICE. He never explained what had made him take this step, but it obviously had to do with a „rectification“ based on the correlation to astrological concepts.

However convincing or not these correspondences may be, according to the Golden Dawn (as one calls the Order for short), the first three cards of the Major Arcana, THE MAGICIAN, THE HIGH PRIESTESS and THE EMPRESS, stand for Mercury, the moon and Venus. The next cards were correlated to the zodiacal signs as follows: THE EMPEROR = Aries, THE HIGH

PRIEST = Taurus, THE LOVERS = Gemini, THE CHARIOT = Cancer. According to the original order of the tarot cards, the eighth card, which is JUSTICE, would follow here. But as it does not correspond to the eighth zodiacal sign Leo very well, the eleventh card, STRENGTH – which even portrays the taming of a lion – was substituted into its place. This is the reason for the renumbering of these cards, i.e. for exchanging the two cards in the sequence of the Major Arcana.

The card which follows, THE HERMIT, corresponds to Virgo; and while THE WHEEL OF FORTUNE is associated with the planet Jupiter, JUSTICE, in its new position, 11, now belongs together with the zodiacal sign Libra. From this point on, the sequence becomes somewhat diffuse. THE HANGED MAN does not fit into the general structure, but simply belongs to the element of water; DEATH is associated with Scorpio, TEMPERANCE with Sagittarius, and Capricorn with the DEVIL. As THE TOWER matches the belligerent god Mars, the zodiacal signs are not taken up again until we come to THE STAR – which embodies the principle of Aquarius. The MOON belongs to Pisces, and THE SUN is, of course, associated with the sun. JUDGEMENT stands for the element of fire and THE WORLD for Saturn.



Even if you do not go into the cards' symbolism too thoroughly, you might wonder about some of the equivalences. This ordering was, nevertheless, not only guarded as secret knowledge by the Golden Dawn, they raised it to the status of dogma.

There is a simple reason why the „correct attribution“ is a rather problematic issue. Of course, all of the tarot cards can basically be translated into – and described within – a system of astrological symbolism. The problem is that it does not work out when we try to combine the 22 cards of the Major Arcana too concretely with the 10 planets and the 12 zodiacal signs. There is, for example, no card in the Major Arcana that would really fit the principle of Gemini or Virgo. On the other hand, there are quite a few cards that might match up well with the sun. For example, The MAGICIAN, who stands for a solar conscience; THE EMPEROR, who embodies the sun in the sense of a king; the SUN card itself; even THE WORLD, as it symbolizes self-realization – which, according to astrology, is a subject closely related to the sun.

While the following table shows the most well-known systems of equivalences, it also makes clear how widely they differ from one another: one does not find one single card that is associated with the same principle in the different systems. In the far right-hand column you will find the equivalences that fit best to our understanding of astrology today – that is, if it makes sense at all to try to correlate the cards of the Major Arcana to the 10 planets and the 12 zodiacal signs.

ASTROLOGICAL EQUIVALENCES OF THE MAJOR ARCANA										
TAROT CARD	ASTROLOGICAL EQUIVALENT									
	PAUL CHRISTIAN	ELY STAR	ETIELLA	OSWALD WIRTH	PAPUS	GOLDEN DAWN CASE/CROWLEY	DALI TAROT	ANSATA TAROT ¹	JUNGAN TAROT ²	CONVINCING SUGGESTION
Fool	♈	-	♈	-	-	♈	♈	♈	♈	♈
Magician	♈	♈	♈	♈	♈	♈	♈	♈	♈	♈
High Priestess	♁	♁	♁	-	♁	♁	♁	♁	♁	♁
Empress	♁	-	♁	-	♁	♁	♁	♁	♁	♁
Emperor	♁	♁	♁	♁	♁	♁	♁	♁	♁	♁
Hierophant	♁/♁	♁	♁	♁	♁	♁	♁	♁	♁	♁
Lovers	♁/♁	♁/♁	♁	♁	♁	♁	♁	♁	♁	♁
Chariot	♁/♁	♁/♁	♁	-	♁	♁	♁	♁	♁	♁
Justice	♁/♁	♁/♁	♁	♁		♁	♁	♁	♁	♁

¹ Tarot cards that were published by Paul Struck in 1981 with a comment by Bernd A. Mertz.

² Tarot cards published by Robert Wang in 1988.

Hermit	4/♁	4/♁	♁	-	♁	♏	♁	♁	♏	♁
Wheel of Fortune	♃/♏	♃/♏	♏	♁	♏	4	♁	♁	4	♃
Strength	♂	♂	♂	♁	♂	♁	♁	♁	♁	♁
Hanged Man	♃/♁	♃/♁	♁	-	♁	♁	♁	♁	♁	♁
Death	♁	-	-	-	-	♁	♃	♁	♁	♁
Temperance	♃/♁	♃/♁	♁	-	♁	♂	-	-	♂	♁
Devil	♃/♂	♃/♂	♂	-	♂	♁	♂	♂	♁	E
Tower	4/♁	4/♁	♁	♁	♁	♂	♁	♁	♂	♂
Star	♃	♃	♃	♁	♃	♁	♁	♁	♁	♁
Moon	♃/♁	♃/♁	♁	♁	♁	♁	♁	♁	♁	♁
Sun	4/♁	4/♁	♁	♁	♁	♁	♁	♁	♁	♁
Judgement	♃	♃	♃	-	♃	♁	♁	♁	♁	♁
World	♁	♁	-	-	-	♃	♁	♁	♃	♁

What now? Firstly, it might be helpful to keep in mind that in the last century, the tarot cards have been freed from the narrow constraints of dogma quite a bit. That goes for the visual design of new decks, the widely differing and more liberal systems of interpreting the cards, the handling of the cards, and their widespread popularity – far beyond the small circles of insiders, or „initiated“, of old. With this in mind, we should not be dogmatic when it comes to ordering systems and equivalences. And, as mentioned earlier, feel free to just forget about them if they do not seem convincing.

You might want to try out which system of equivalences „works out“ best for you. There is an interesting method the American tarot expert Paul Foster Case developed to find three individual cards:

1. The card that represents a central problem in our life is found by adding together the numerical value of our star sign and the ascendant. Take a look at the two signs in the figure below and add together their values. If the total is greater than 21, you further derives the sum of the digits. The tarot card from the Major Arcana of this numerical equivalent symbolizes the problem in question.
2. After we have defined the problem, the next step is to find a solution to the problem. This is indicated by the card equivalent to the difference between our star sign and our ascendant – simply subtract the lower value from the higher one.
3. Additional help to understanding the solution is derived out of the difference between the card in step one and step two.

Equivalence that seems plausible by current standards		
Sign/Planet	Number	Tarot card
Aries	7	Chariot
Taurus	3	Empress

Gemini	19	Sun
Cancer	18	Moon
Leo	11	Strength
Virgo	8	Justice
Libra	14	Temperance
Scorpio	13	Death
Sagittarius	5	Hierophant
Capricorn	9	Hermit
Aquarius	17	Star
Pisces	20	Judgement
Sun	21	World
Moon	2	High Priestess
Mercury	1	Magician
Venus	6	Lovers
Mars	16	Tower
Jupiter	4	The Emperor
Saturn	10	Wheel of Fortune
Uranus	0	Fool
Neptune	12	Hanged Man
Pluto	15	Devil

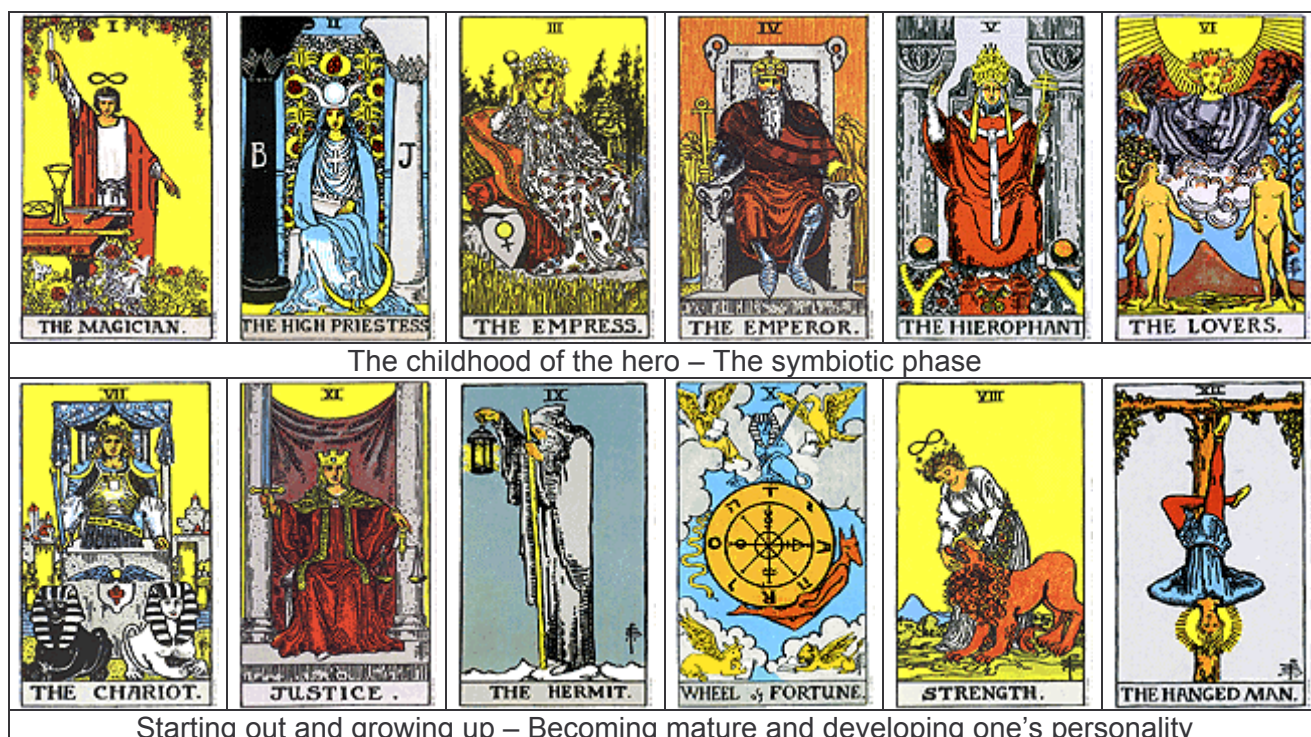
This three-step system can be elucidated by application to a prominent person. George W. Bush is a Cancer (=18) and his ascendant is Leo (=11). His „problem card“ is therefore STRENGTH, calculated by adding 18 and 11= 29, and then (as the sum is greater than 21) further deriving the sum of the digits: 2+9 = 11. The card STRENGTH usually stands for the harmony between the civilized human being and his animal nature which can be subconsciously aggressive. In this case, the solution for the problem (step 2) is found by subtracting 11 from 18 = 7, THE CHARIOT. This card, among others, indicates that we have to bring together diverging forces (the two sphinxes) if we want to develop and get ahead. The intermediate, or link, (step 3) between these two tendencies can be seen in the THE EMPEROR, which is arrived at by subtracting 7 (CHARIOT) from 11 (STRENGTH) = 4. THE EMPEROR (4) is a card that asks us to become more realistic and to work patiently on a solution.

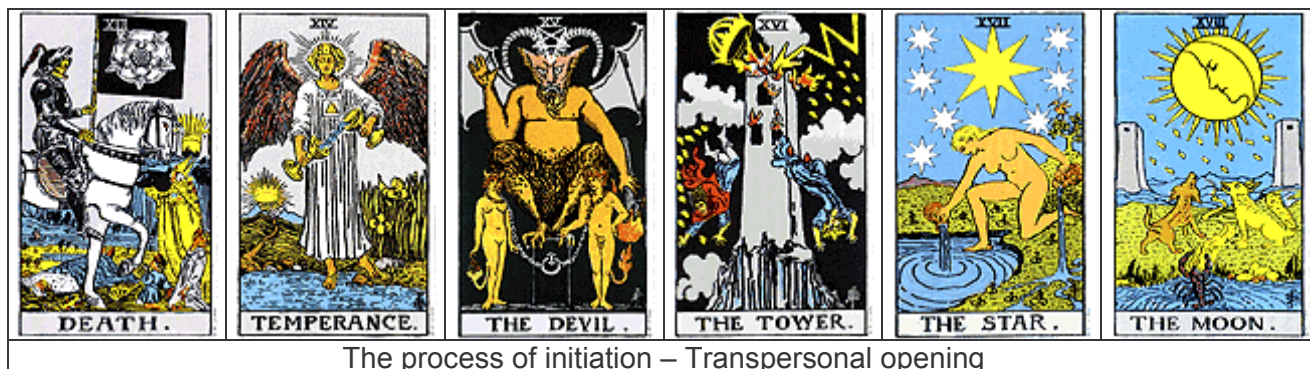
Attributions of the Golden Dawn		
Sign/Planet	Number	Tarot card
Aries	4	Emperor
Taurus	5	Hierophant
Gemini	6	Lovers
Cancer	7	Chariot
Leo	8	Strength
Virgo	9	Hermit
Libra	11	Justice
Scorpio	13	Death
Sagittarius	14	Temperance
Capricorn	15	Devil
Aquarius	17	Star
Pisces	18	Moon

Sun	19	Sun
Moon	2	High Priestess
Mercury	1	Magician
Venus	3	Empress
Mars	16	Tower
Jupiter	6	Wheel of Fortune
Saturn	21	World

If we now apply the Golden Dawn equivalences (see above) with all else being equal, i.e. George W. Bush's birth sign as Cancer (7) and ascendant Leo (8), the „problem card“ equals 15, or THE DEVIL. In this system, the solution could be found in the difference between 8 and 7=1, which is the MAGICIAN. The mediating card (step 3) is found by subtracting 1 (MAGICIAN) from 15 (DEVIL) = 14 (TEMPERANCE), which indicates the right mixture. When we look at how Bush demonizes certain countries by saying they belong to an „Axis of Evil“ the problem card seems rather plausible. The solution would be to deal with tasks and problems in an active way (MAGICIAN), but to always keep in mind the importance of the right measure; this right measure can be seen in the right mixture between black and white, light and shadow. In this case, both systems of defining the equivalences obviously lead to statements that make sense. Of course, you can also try out how other attributions from the figure above work out for you.

However, the really fruitful connection between astrology and tarot lies on a different level. Both tools complete each other as advisors for our life journey:





The Major Arcana's 22 cards are a very good tool in symbolically elucidating the human journey of life. They do so in a similar and related way to many myths and fairy tales that depict the story of someone who starts out to complete the great work of self-realization. The three parts of the journey – 1. Maturation , 2. Individual self-realization, 3. Initiation – are illustrated with the help of six cards each. In astrology, these three phases can be attributed to Saturn, who divides our life into these three parts on his journey around a 29-year orbit. While the orbits of the other slow moving planets also provide us with important findings about our single life phases, the tarot cards visualize the issues and topics of the phases in a more directly graspable way for us.

Where astrology and tarot complement each other best is in practice: with astrology giving a picture of the whole and tarot a section in detail. A glance at the horoscope allows us to see the fundamental things, while the cards give answers to rather specific questions. When it comes to career questions, the horoscope tells a lot about skills, interests and talents, about fields that are suitable for self-realization, and about one's calling. Yet, the practical question whether to accept the job offer from company A or B can be answered much more comprehensibly and directly by a card laying than by astrology – unless you are a master in horary astrology.

The same goes for relationship and love. Here, the horoscope points out important topics such as the self-image, the searching image, the „inner relationship“, harmony and tension. But it is tarot cards which can provide us with faster, more understandable answers when it comes to questions as: What is the right step towards solving a conflict? Should I try at all, or rather overcome this detrimental structure step by step? etc. In this fruitful interaction, the horoscope gives us a picture of the landscape of our soul and points out general directions; the tarot again and again proves to be a good friend and companion along the way.