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THE CHOICE

This Bulletin is excerpted and adapted from the transcript of a Poethical Reading that took place via Skype in March 2017, solely between the authors. Below, they explain the evolution of their collaborative process.

We developed Poethical Reading as a practice to help answer questions concerning politics and ethics. Poethical Reading uses a combination of already-existing and newly-invented healing techniques, including astrology, philosophy, palm reading, herbal healing, fake therapy, political therapy, Reiki, and tarot reading.* Initially we used these tools to run multiple readings of our own political questions, until we started reading, publicly and privately, for others.

A session of Poethical Reading is instigated by a political issue brought forward by one of the participants and lasts approximately one hour. Using all the aforementioned tools, we work together with the participants to expose various aspects of the question or problem, to consider it in all its complexity. We call this work "Imaging."

The most immediate and urgent question for us is: HOW TO IMAGE AN ETHICS WITH/OUT THE SUBJECT?

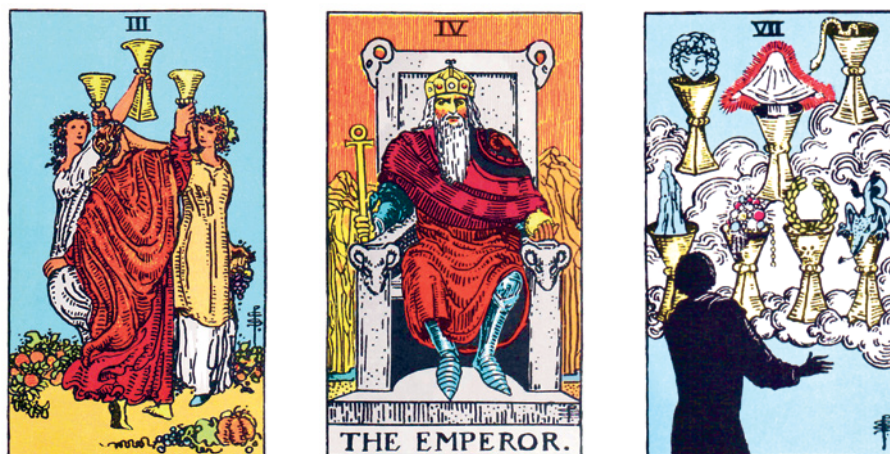
Our practice questions the centrality of the modern subject in our existence and thinking. Both in philosophy and in language, the position of the subject in the very structure of a sentence introduces a separation between the subject and the world, the I and the Other. So, when we ask a question that starts with a subject — that is, a fixed point separate from the question — everything else is rendered an object, which is already an ethical failure. It is precisely this structure that we would rather not take for granted.

Imaging de-centers the subject through multiple readings, foreclosing presumed distinctions between subjects and objects. When a Poethical Reading takes place, the various expressions that include the cards, stars, bodies, gestures, silences, sounds, and words, assemble and form a composition. They image the question while simultaneously imaging our apprehension of it in the world, and of the world in it.

* Tarot is a card game of narrative interpretation. Most historians agree that it emerged in Europe in the mid-1400s. The deck consists of 78 cards, divided into the Major Arcana (22), including archetypal figures surrounded by significant and significantly ambiguous signs and prompts, and the Minor Arcana (56), consisting of Cups, Wands, Pentacles, and Swords.

Cover: From a pack of tarot cards designed by Niki de Saint Phalle.

DENISE: So, here's the spread. In the first position, the Virtual, we have the Three of Cups; in the second, the Actual, we have The Emperor; and in the third, the Unfolding, we have the Seven of Cups. Ok... how do we read it?



VALENTINA: We could read the Virtual as that which is not readily apparent — although it's happening at the same time as that which we readily perceive, as imaged here by The Emperor.

D: So, the Three of Cups — the celebration and the sharing that it signifies — is always present regardless of what comes to pass; and which in this case is The Emperor, the individualized figuring of power.

V: Yes, and so when we ask, “How to image an ethics with/out the subject?” the image we get of this ethics is The Emperor — an individualized power, a figure of authority and decision-making. But the spread tells us that the Emperor is reliant upon, or even an actualization of, the Virtual, which is the Three of Cups, representing celebration and emotional connection.

D: And what about the Seven of Cups? Is that card mediating between the Actual and the Virtual? Or is the Seven of Cups what life becomes when the Three of Cups is manifested as The Emperor?

V: The Seven of Cups conveys confusion. The figure looks at all those floating cups and doesn't know what to do. If we take this to be the

unfolding of the question, a portrayal of what life will become with such an ethics, life would feel rather vague and confusing! It's funny, because here we've asked about an ethics potentially without a subject, but then we've gotten The Emperor, a guy sitting on a throne: the quintessential subject!

D: [Laughs.] I know!

V: What might The Emperor represent, in this case? He is someone or something that has power and makes decisions, but in such a way as to make actual the virtual celebration, cooperation, and connection of the Three of Cups.

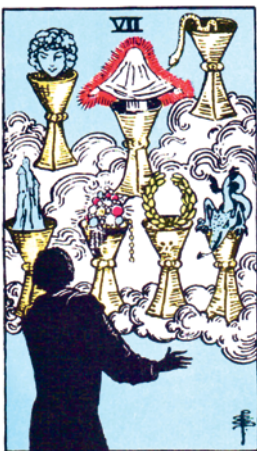
D: So...

V: What could this uncertainty mean? Look at the Seven of Cups [referring to the ghostly figure in the central cup]. The man seems quite scared of whatever this thing is.

D: Yes, the Seven of Cups reveals great uncertainty. Now, the figure who theoretically accounts for this confusion is surely the KING of Cups, right? He's also a figure of power, albeit one who doesn't decide much, because he's floating in water.

V: Mmm, I don't know... Could we think of uncertainty, or at least the sort of uncertainty suggested here by the Seven of Cups, as a response to the "how" of our question — that is, as a modality?

D: Yes, we can. The thing is, all the sevens in the deck are about challenges, which also means they're about decisions, right? The sevens indicate that you need to make a decision, but they're challenging because either you're not sure whether you've done the work all the way, as in the Seven of Pentacles; you're not sure of what's unknown, as in the Seven of Cups; or you're not sure whether it's a good thing to get away with things, as in the Seven of Swords. So, yes, a state of uncertainty could certainly be a modality, a way of existing. That makes sense. If there remains the need for a decision-making entity in this ethics with/ out a subject, then it will have to deal with the confusion brought on by the virtual Three of Cups.



V: Mmm.

D: But there's also the acknowledgment that, with each decision, the six other options will not disappear, you see? When you make a decision, everything—the good, the bad, and the unknown—still remains.

V: A decision does not dissipate all the other possibilities.

D: Yes, exactly. So, then, it suggests that a decision's not really a determination, since "determination" implies that choosing one path or position eliminates the others.

V: It's a way of making decisions that holds onto uncertainty, making room for the fact that the decision-maker might be wrong. It's a breed of decision-making that's more like betting than determining.

D: [Nodding] You live in that moment. You don't know whether it's good or not, and so you have to become comfortable with being unsure. I like that. Finally, the Seven of Cups is in the Unfolding position, i.e. what happens when there is "connection and togetherness" in decision-making. Okay, so now what? [Laughter]



The Emperor intervenes

EMPEROR: What do you mean? If I'm removed from the center—if I'm to be comfortable with uncertainty and make decisions without certainty—what is my power, exactly? I'm all about power, remember: decisiveness and certitude. What is it that I'm supposed to do if I cannot decide with certainty?

D: In terms of ethical decisions, you'll have to live with the possibility that any decision you make carries everything along with it; and that you cannot delimit what is right or wrong, good or bad.

V: Every decision you make is unsettled and unsettling.

EMPEROR: No, everything is under my command! I decide what can exist or must cease to exist, what is the right thing, what is not ...

This power is my essence.

D: I see.

EMPEROR: If all the options I had not chosen were to continue to exist, they would sustain their own power. That's why the question is about my personal power, not merely about a role I play. In my definition, choosing *obliterates* unchosen possibilities: their existence, their value, their effect, and their affect.

V: Are you sure? Does their ongoing existence necessarily mean you simply have less power, or could the situation rather mean changing your understanding of power as such?

The Emperor returns to silence

D: The emperor assumes that he knows what power is, i.e. precisely HIS power, along the lines of "the buck stops here." Terminal power. He determines.

V: Yeah, this is precisely the power of the subject: "This is how I recognize myself as The Emperor: I can kill."

D: "I'm the Law."

V: He says, "You: yes. You: no." And if he says, "You, no," then you cease to exist — even virtually, right?

D: Okay, so we just eliminate the emperor!

V: [Laughs] Yeah!

D: The emperor has no clothes. The emperor is dead.

The 3 of Cups addresses The Emperor

3 OF CUPS [all at once]: We exist as difference, IN difference, represented by our colors. We come together without becoming



the same. Existence doesn't require certainty, much less the obliteration of other possibilities. What you say about decisions feels like ...

E: Exclusion?

3 OF CUPS: No, more like impoverishment — a loss of this beautiful multiplicity!

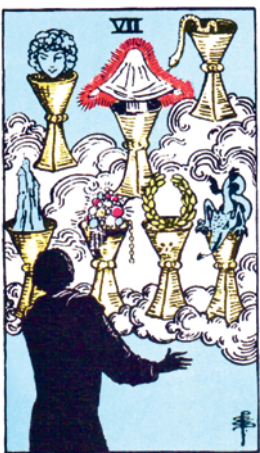
The cards return to silence

V: I like what the Three of Cups says about coming together without becoming the same, without loss, without impoverishment ...

D: Without violence, without killing other possibilities ...

V: Integrated but not assimilated, always maintaining the possibility of imagining something else...

D: Yes, it's a different kind of power — the power to create things, to make things possible, which is quite different from the power to make things only in a certain way, and which always requires more than one to become actual.



The 7 of Cups intervenes

7 OF CUPS: [confused] Wait! How can you say uncertainty is a good thing? Look at me! If what the Three of Cups says is true, how can we make things happen in the world? How can we move on together if we can't decide what is what?

D: Why do we need to decide? Actually, YOU never do!

7 OF CUPS: It's not that I don't WANT to decide, Denise. It's that I don't think there SHOULD be a decision. I don't want to lose. I don't want to let go of anything.

V: If the Seven of Cups is the Unfolding card in this spread, it means that these other forms of power, this other ethics we are imaging, also produce

a kind of fear or paralysis. We must take this into account, because this different conception of power implies a different conception of the world.

D [shuffling the cards again]: Yes, but that's not present here. These cards aren't really talking to each other the way they should. Maybe we need some help.



Denise draws a card

D: The Devil! [laughs] What are YOU doing here!?

The Devil speaks

DEVIL: I come calling after the guilt and shame provoked by activating an unclothed power.

D: I read you as an indication that the Seven of Cups wants to maintain The Emperor's fixed position on power because it fears its own irresolution.

V: Or perhaps The Devil is a reminder that when you live with uncertainty, you must attend to the possible evil, or harm, implied by your moves. At the very least, you must become aware of it. When a subject like The Emperor operates on an over-simplified narrative of good and evil, he's trying to push the real evil out of sight, towards the periphery.

D: Yes, in attempting to constrain and eliminate evil, the subject may itself become evil.

DEVIL: Ladies, I am the problem with the Seven of Cups' fear of making decisions, which is to inhabit the position of power enabled by the decision to live with possibilities instead of resolving them.

V: So we should image an ethics that is able to deal with that specific kind of power — "the power to live with choices" — and not shy away from it ...

D: In all its manifestations.

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