



School of Childhood and Education Sciences

MA in Myth, Cosmology and the Sacred

Divinatory and Oracular Traditions

Response to Cicero's *On Divination* **A Plutarchan Dialogue**

Answering the question:

Frame a response to Cicero *De Divinatione* in the light of contemporary debate.

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Notes on Citation

When citing classical texts I have adopted the following abbreviations:

On Divination by Cicero: *Div.*

On the E at Delphi by Plutarch: *De E.*

On the Obsolescence of Oracles by Plutarch: *De Defectu.*

On the Oracle of the Pythia by Plutarch: *De Pythia.*

I have not used text breaks in long citations on purpose. The reason for this is that I have attempted to include the citations naturally in the discourse, so they would seem to be part of the normal dialogue. A text break seemed to be more disruptive in such a case than its absence.

Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to sketch an answer to Cicero's critique of divination in his book *On Divination* using mainly arguments from the philosophy of Plutarch and contemporary scholarship. When investigating for this essay I realised that most my sources were written in dialogue and decided that the most interesting way to answer to Cicero was in a dialogue inspired by Plutarch's style. Thus, I created a small dialogue with three characters: Cicero, Plutarch and myself. I have tried to faithfully reproduce Cicero's and Plutarch's views in their characters, while adding some interesting points from my own thought and contemporary scholarship through mine.

Cicero's critique is thorough and ruthless, showing a methodic deconstruction of divination. As a practitioner of divination, it is a rather interesting challenge to find an answer to his philosophical positions. Unfortunately it would not be possible to address every single argument for questions of space, so I will focus on those that I believe are most important and can be addressed by Plutarchan philosophy.

Dialogue

Simão: Let us start this symposium by giving the word to Marcus, this most illustrious Roman that has so thoroughly discussed divination and the causes why it cannot be true!

Cicero: Dear Simão and dear Plutarch, thank you for inviting me for this most enjoyable meal. I will give you my argument and enjoy the delicious food but we shall not forget the libations to the gods, due before all meals, especially of such importance. Now that we have done it, I want to expose the paradox I believe lies at the heart of divination: If we assume that there is such thing as chance not even the gods could know the future, however if there is fate, then nothing is changeable and divination would be a useless pursuit. (Cicero, *Div*, 2.25)

Simão: Dear Cicero, you yourself must know that reality is more complex than that. We do not need to admit that everything is either the result of chance or fate. There can be causes in the world that lead to certain events and that are not discernible by humans. If we concede to divine providence, since the gods are good and we are as their property (Plato, *Phaedo*, 62b), it is not impossible to make a case for divination. In your book you ask why we should listen to a soothsayer in matters of war and not a general, (Ibid. 2.12) but would you believe that, despite his prowess in matters of war, the general could know as much as Mars himself? Do you think not that some causes might be more complex than a human can discern? Even today mathematicians have not solved every mathematical mystery, but would you not say that the gods have this knowledge? As you yourself say: “ things (...) happen now by chance now in the usual course of nature...”, (Ibid., 2.55) would not the gods be better suited than any person to answer to the things resulting from the usual course of nature that are still mysterious to us?

But even if we assume that everything is ruled by fate, Cornelius discusses Chrysippus’ concept of “conditional oracle, where the outcome of the oracle depends on our response to the oracle. Directly related is the possibility that the taking of an oracle itself alters the course of events, and that the gods both intend this and foresee it to be so” (2009, p.170), maintaining both the possibility of fate and divination coexisting.

Plutarch: Furthermore, we must remember that divination does not necessarily imply a knowledge of the future, although you choose to define it as so. (Cicero, *Div*, 1.1) “As Plato said, when an oracle was given to the Greeks that they should double the altar in Delos (...) the God did not order the doing of that very thing, but commanded the Greeks to apply themselves to geometry”. (Plutarch, *De E*, 6) Divination, as well as knowing the future, may be a way of the gods to bring about divine providence and teach humans what they still do not know. While it was not the soothsayer directly teaching geometry, it was because of their words that wise men dedicated themselves to it and learned new things.

Cicero: In that case, the God could have inspired the oracle to teach geometry directly, instead of using such a farfetched strategy. “If we had the right to know (...), it should have been stated to us clearly” (*De Div*, 2.55)

Simão: We must consider that there might be value in people learning from themselves, even if propelled by the God.

Plutarch: And “[w]e believe that he supplied the principle of motion” (Plutarch, *De Pythia*, 7) but the oracle is still only a human. “God only presents the visions, and kindles in the soul a light to discover future events” (Ibid.) and other important information. This is a process of transmission in which the diviner cannot go beyond their own abilities as human beings. A diviner who does not know enough about geometry could not transmit the teachings of the God. Note that “if the oracles were to be set down in writing, not verbally to be pronounced, surely we should not find fault with the hand, taking it to be Apollo's, because the letters were not so fairly written as in the epistles of kings”. (Ibid.)

Cicero: But if that is true, the soothsayer, even if inspired by Mars, will know less than the general. We should still call the expert on the subject and not the soothsayer. (*Cicero, Div*, 2.9)

Plutarch: The soothsayers will not be able to transmit knowledge that is beyond their personal ability, but they will be able to transmit some divine knowledge. This means that the soothsayers may not be able to tell the general what formation to use, because they are not educated in the art of war, but they may be inspired to tell if a moment is propitious, or if the god finds the fight is just. Do not forget that the word “if” used when questioning an oracle “may be read as an optative force no less than an interrogative.” (Plutarch, *De E*, 6) “By interrogative is meant 'if-this-happens-then-what?' An example of the optative is a statement of desire (...) “If-only-I-could”.” (Cornelius, 2009, pp. 200-201) Even in English, this most exquisite language we are using, the word “ask” seems to have an ambiguity of meaning of the same kind. When we

“ask” the god are we merely asking a question, or are we asking the favor of that god? As you see Cicero, we must be careful because divination seems to be an illusive matter, even in terms of definition.

Simão: It is also worth remembering the words of Ursula K. LeGuin, that most admirable novelist, in her book *The Left Hand of Darkness*. When the Handdarata, a sect that practices divination, are asked why they practice it, one of the priests answers “To exhibit the perfect uselessness of knowing the answer to the wrong question”. (LeGuin, 2000, 26%). As you see, it is not enough to frame the question in terms of fate and chance, because not only would foretelling be possible despite your paradox, we can also argue that divination has more purposes than foretelling. I would suggest that a better definition for divination is “communication with a spirit-like intelligence of reality, unnamed or named, whether as God or gods, spirit or spirits, or the ancestors;” (Cornelius, 2009, p.3).

Cicero: Even if I accept those arguments it is hard to understand how the science of omen reading can have any value when “we see some nations interpreting entrails in one way and some in another; hence there is no uniformity of practice.” (Cicero, *Div*, 2.28). How come that what constitutes a good omen for one nation, can constitute a terrible omen for another?

Simão: This is a very strong argument but let us not believe it is impossible to counter. We are now discussing what your brother Quintus calls “artificial divination” (Cicero, *Div*, 1.33) which includes any divination mediated by some kind of art. In your treaty you inspect this kind of divination as if its power resided in the method, but you fail to consider the possibility the the method is a means to achieve a certain state of divine inspiration. The modern scholar of divination Cornelius discusses in his book *The Moment of Astrology* the meaning of the opening words of the *Centiloquy* by Ptolemy: *a te et a scientia*. He shows how the Astrologer William Lilly used these words to justify some predictions that did not follow the conventional rules of Astrology (Cornelius, 2003, p.318) and suggests that this aphorism takes to “the heart of the debate about the nature of Astrology” (Ibid., p.319) and therefore, I would say, “artificial

divination” in general. Later on he says, following Ficino, that “the inspiration of our Astrology is *dos animae*, a gift of the soul” (Ibid., p.324) since it comes from a certain Faculty implanted in the soul, that is both human and divine, and precedes all of our other faculties. In this light the actual technique of reading entrails or Astrology becomes a the human convention that allows us to tap into and access this knowledge that already is within our soul. This is the point he makes in chapter 14 of his book when he says “The rules of Astrology are in some way like the rules of chess; they are cultural creations that cannot be found anywhere in nature and they exist in the domain of human significance.” (Ibid, p. 289) But you would not argue that a game of chess has no results, despite being culturally defined?

Cicero: No, but I would not say that it reveals the truth.

Simão: But you would certainly concede that it might be a useful skill for a general to acquire in order to practice strategic thinking. The same way chess can work as a metaphor for war, divinatory methods may work as metaphors for divine will. Its very structure allows the player to access certain functions of their brain just like a divinatory method may allow a diviner to access a repressed ability.

Cicero: But if the gods are all good and want us to know these things, why would they repress that ability and in the next moment give that same knowledge through such illusive signs? (*De Div*, 2.55)¹

Plutarch: The soul has always had those powers, however “when they were mixed with bodies, some of them [became] inapparent and hid, and others weak and obscure, like those who see through a thick mist or move in water” (Plutarch, *Defectu* 39). The power exists in the soul but by virtue of its embodiment it has become latent, it was never taken away.

¹ This point is more or less adapted from *Div* 2.55 to fit the argument of the repressed ability of the soul, however, it seems in accordance to Cicero’s general critique, especially regarding dreams.

Cicero: But even if the relationship is metaphorical, there has to be some connection between the technique and the world (Cicero, *Div*, 2.33), otherwise there would be no point in learning this or that technique.

Simão: The connection between the technique and the world is not as fundamental as you may believe. Just because a soothsayer sees in a certain event an omen for a certain result, this does not imply a causal or even a literal connection between symbol and event. Cornelius describes the concept of “unique case of interpretation” as fundamental to the divinatory relationship. “This is the participatory, context-determined and non-replicable instance of divination.” (Cornelius, 2009, p.47) meaning that the mediating role of the diviner between symbol and event is absolutely fundamental, and without it divination cannot occur.

Voss argues that divination may be regarded as a kind of divine revelation (Voss, 2010), which means that the gods and the diviner are the interlocutors of the divinatory dialogue, the omen being the language. The relationship between omen and event is merely symbolic, the same way that the relationship between the word “apple” and apples themselves is symbolic. You would not attempt to disprove the value of a sentence about apples because the word to describe them changes from language to language. Nor would you say that the faculty of language is useless simply because the attribution of certain sounds to meaning is mostly arbitrary (Saussure, 1964, p. 67-68). What is important to understand is that like many other human systems, divination may be both culturally constructed (different omen reading techniques) and a true gift of the soul (knowledge resulting from divination).

Cicero: What then do you make of portents? Events that many claim to be unique but that many times are quite trivial and that are certainly explainable through reason because “whatever comes into existence, of whatever kind, must needs find its cause in nature; and hence, even though it may be contrary to experience, it cannot be contrary to nature.” (Cicero, *Div*, 2.60) There is no such thing as an impossibility happening in order to reveal a divine sign.

Plutarch: The possibility or impossibility of the portent is quite irrelevant for its divinatory power. I have discussed this when I reported the ram portent in the life of Pericles (Plutarch, *Pericles*, 6). A natural philosopher may be able to thoroughly explain the cause of a natural phenomenon, and a diviner may see in it a divine message and “there [is] nothing, in my opinion, to prevent both of them, the naturalist and the seer, from being in the right of the matter; the one correctly divined the cause, the other the object or purpose.” (Ibid., 6.3)

The same may be said of the centuries old discussion about the inspiration of the Pythia. Some will say she achieves her states solely through the inhalation of fumes, and some say it is solely through divine inspiration. “ So that both of these are defective in their methods, because they omit, through ignorance or design, the one the efficient, the others the material cause.” (Plutarch, *Defectu*, 48) But “we do not deprive divination either of God or of reason; seeing we allow it for its subject the soul of man, and for its instrument an enthusiastic exhalation.” (Ibid.)

The scientific explanation of a portent or of a divinatory event is in and of itself not enough to disprove their divinatory value. You argue that if a soothsayer selects a cow to kill and claims that a certain color of the entrails or a certain organ that is missing means victory, this could be “plausible only on the assumption that the entrails of all cattle changed to the same colour and condition at the same time”. (Cicero, *Div*, 2.30) There may be many reasons for the entrails to appear as they do. It may be the result of a malformation, it may be that the diviner did not see the entrails correctly or any other such explanation, but that is irrelevant. The symbol, even if due to a false perception of the diviner, marks “the individual covenant granted to theoros² in the unique factual worldly situation from which the enquirer has enquired.” (Cornelius, 2009, p. 203)

It is clear then that the physical cause that leads to the omen does affect the value of the omen. The important relationship is the covenant established between the god and the theoros. In this case, your anxiety that the “insistence on the truth of soothsaying” will “utterly overthrow physiology” (Cicero, *Div*, 2.37) is neatly accounted for, since divination and soothsaying exist on two different ontological levels.

² According to Cornelius (2009, ch.4) theoros is the one who receives the omen and needs to morally integrate it in their actions.

It is interesting to examine your example of the mice that gnaw a shield. You ask “But are we simple and thoughtless enough to think it a portent for mice to gnaw something, when gnawing is their one business in life?” (Ibid. 2.59) But this portent is defined by much more than the gnawing of mice. The gnawing of mice appears in a specific political context, in a specific place with the presence of a specific interpreter of omens³. The portent comes to be because of the interplay of all these variables. The god uses the symbol (mice gnawing something) to send a message (the outcome of a political problem) to a diviner. Without the diviner to interpret the portent it becomes useless, like a book in a nation of illiterates. The same way that letters may appear in different contexts to mean different things, this portent does not mean that a rat gnawing always has the same divinatory meaning.

You yourself, in a kind of cosmic irony, perform an act of divination in that same section. You say mockingly that “by the same token, the fact that, at my house, mice recently gnawed my Plato's *Republic* should fill me with alarm for the Roman republic” (Cicero, *Div*, 2.59) but your book was first published one year after the assassination of Caesar, (Cicero, 1923, p. 214)⁴ the event that would set the circumstances for the eventual fall of the Roman Republic and edification of Augustus’ role as emperor. (Florus, *Epitome*, 34) In interpreting the omen mockingly, you had a revelatory moment about the situation of the government in your own country.

Simão: It is particularly important to understand the interpretation that both a rational, scientific explanation and a divinatory one may co-exist because some scholars seem to completely miss this point. In his book about Plutarch’s philosophy, Frederick Brenk says about the ram portent that it “is true that (...) Plutarch is willing to grant Lampon [the diviner] his day as well as to praise Anaxagoras who offered a scientific explanation, but the passage still reveals a reluctance to treat such prodigies as important.” (1977, p.191) It is hard to find this reluctance anywhere other than in Brenk himself, because in several points of Plutarch’s work we find this double interpretation.⁵ It seems to be hard for some scholars to hold these two interpretations at

³ Cornelius would define this role as Hermeios (2009, ch.4).

⁴ I used the date here because this information is in the introduction to the book.

⁵ In Plutarch’s last intervention there are two examples, the Pericles case that Brenk discusses and a passage from *De Defectu*.

the same time, but Angela Voss takes a radically different approach. She claims that “central to the cultivation of wisdom is the development of a mode of perception that is neither purely spiritual nor purely rational, but both simultaneously” and that it is very important not to underplay the spiritual side because “when the symbolic image becomes alienated from its spiritual underpinnings, it is forced to find justification within a literal paradigm which can only disparage its claim to any kind of ‘truth’ beyond mere subjectivity.” (Voss, 2010, p.2) Divination can be justified if we allow the tension between spirit and matter to play out. In this way, portents or omens present no real risk to the known sciences, because they are at radically different ontological levels. It becomes irrelevant to think of physiology when analysing entrails, just as it would be irrelevant to trace a bird’s biography to discover what led it to fly in a specific manner when showing a portent. The physical manifestation works more as a catalyst for divination and even a misinterpretation of the physical sign can lead to interesting divinatory results.

Cornelius discusses this when talking about astrologers who claim that after erecting the astrological chart wrongly were still able to perform their role as diviners. (2003, p. 230-231) And we can find other authors who claim that the tension or coexistence of different modes of thought is very profitable for human knowledge, even in contexts other than divination. Ian McGilchrist, a philosopher of mind, explores in the book *The Master and His Emissary* the lateralization of brain function as a metaphor for the dominion of overly rationalistic modes of thought (left brain) over more open and holistic approaches (right brain). For him “those who wish to take our two principal pieces apart and to sequester one from the other are wrong. We must on the contrary couple and join them closely together.” (McGilchrist, 2012, p.312) Much like Plutarch, McGilchrist seems to be arguing that having two different approaches (two different brain sides) to the same subject is not in itself a bad thing, that cognitive dissonance might be something to welcome under certain circumstances. If, like Voss advises, we do not fall into a literalist trap, then the sciences are in no danger whatsoever because of the acceptance of divination.

I wish now to argue one last point, because it is getting late and we have heard many interesting things tonight. There is something in your book, Cicero, that is not completely

accounted for. Your brother Quintus tells you that one single instance of divination is enough to establish its existence, (Cicero, *Div*, 1.71) but you choose to focus on proving it is impossible theoretically. I understand why you do this, but if we can successfully argue that, like Cornelius says, divination is by its very nature a “unique case” type of event, then your discussion becomes much more open to criticism. As Cornelius says, “he [Cicero] is arguing from the theoretical impossibility of divination and is close to letting his argument be trumped by the actual experience of an authoritative and thoughtful witness.” (2009, p.183)

The heart of this question lies at your general approach to evidence, and you may claim that no one is authoritative or thoughtful enough to function as a witness to divination, but I would like to discuss a case that you left unconvincingly explained in your book. Quintus relates that during your banishment you had a dream and “[i]n it you seemed to be wandering sadly about in solitary places when Gaius Marius (...) asked you why you were sad, and you replied that you had been driven from your country by violence. He then bade you be of good cheer, took you by the right hand, and delivered you (...) to his memorial temple, saying that there you should find safety. Sallustius thereupon, as he relates, cried out, 'a speedy and a glorious return awaits you.' (...) Immediately thereafter (...) you heard that it was in Marius' temple that the glorious decree of the Senate for your recall had been enacted...”. (Cicero, *Div*, 1.59)

You dismiss this dream, to which you are yourself witness, by asking if “do you suppose that there ever would have been any old woman crazy enough to believe in dreams, if by some lucky accident or chance they had not come true sometimes?” (Ibid., 2.141). I was rather disappointed by this because it makes the unique case unprovable by your standards. That is, if it is true that divination works only within very specific boundaries specific to each case, it becomes impossible to prove it works at all because of this remark. However, you cannot say that it is a logical impossibility for divination to work on an unique case basis. More interesting yet is that it seems impossible for you to meaningfully deconstruct the event, so striking in its divinatory power. It is hard to imagine that by simple luck you would have a dream that not only signified that your banishment would be revoked, as well as the building in which it would happen.

But now it is getting late, so I thank you very much for this most pleasant discussion.

Conclusion

It would not have been possible to discuss every argument advanced by Cicero, so I have tried to focus on those that seemed more general and stronger. I did not use exclusively Plutarchan philosophy because it would have made the dialogue quite hard to write, so I used contemporary scholarship and my character to attempt and direct the dialogue. I realised in the process of this essay that the dialogue format, although freer and more creative, can be rather daunting. Nevertheless I believe I was able to show that many of Cicero's arguments do not take into account certain (Neo)Platonic principles that can counter them. Plutarch's philosophy is fascinating and by virtue of his use of dialogues it is not always easy to decide what is actually his opinion and what is not. But that is the pleasure of the dialectic experience that I hope to have been able to convey here.

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