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Divination and Human Nature [Review]

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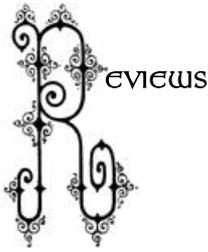


Divination and Human Nature [Review]

Abstract

Additional Keywords

divination, intuition, Plato, Aristotle, Stoics, Cicero, Iamblichus, Penelope



DIVINATION AND HUMAN NATURE: A COGNITIVE HISTORY OF INTUITION IN CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY. Peter T. Struck Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016. x, 288 p. ISBN 9780691169392. \$45.00.

ONE OF THE ADVANTAGES OF THE INTERNET is that readers might be able to witness, even after the fact, the development of an author's ideas over time. In this case, Peter Struck has been thinking about this subject for years. In 2013, Struck delivered the Arthur O. Lovejoy Lecture on this subject; two years later he shared the basic ideas in a TED talk applying the ancient ideas to modern notions of intuition. For this reviewer, these earlier results of Struck's research and thinking on the topic aided immensely in approaching this book.

The book is a study of intuition as ancient philosophical schools conceived of it. The question Struck and the philosophers ask is how a person can know something outside discursive reasoning. The "hunch" or "gut feeling" or other ways of reading the signs intuitively that lead to some kind of knowledge is a vitally important query especially to those who have delved into epistemology and rhetoric. Such "divination" is as much a part of the ancient world and as mundane as wine and olives. Interestingly, even those considered by subsequent ages as the apex of human reason treat this type of divination and intuition seriously rather than reject it as superstition and the like. Even Plato's Socrates after all cites the oracular pronouncements of the Delphic priestess.

In part, Struck's book continues in a tradition begun by E.R. Dodd almost seventy years ago with the lectures that became his book *The Greeks and the Irrational*. Struck, however, points out that the resultant dichotomy of Greek reason vs. unreason (or irrational) is something of a false dichotomy since from our point of view the "rational" is imbued with this divination and practicing various types of divination must perforce use reason. The author then sets his limits: he is not interested in the magician and especially not in the various diviners in the agora or itinerant travelers claiming to read the signs and that type are often criticized, even in the ancient world, practitioner of the craft of

divination. Rather he is interested in other types of intuitive knowledge, specifically how the philosophers thought about intuition as a way to knowledge.

Struck strikes out in a different direction than his academic predecessors on this subject. Previous studies on divination have examined its role in the political sphere, and how it is a political tool often used to convince others of a course of action. The other, and seemingly opposite, approach is to examine divination as a part of magical practices and the occult. This book by contrast wants to examine philosophical literature on the topic, a hitherto seldom consulted set of sources on divination's relation to reason.

This is laid out in Struck's important introduction. What follows is four chapters, each considering an ancient philosopher. The second chapter and first thinker under consideration is Plato. Struck focuses on the verb *manteuomai* which is usually defined as "presage, surmise by presentiment," but also refers to consultation of oracles. Struck examines Plato's works showing that this philosopher uses the term to refer to what we call intuition, a kind of knowing without reasoning. This "knowing in a flash" as Struck describes it would therefore not include the "technical" types of divination such as reading entrails, portents, and signs. Plato in the *Phaedrus*, for example, talks about the typology of madness; in the discussion at *Phaedrus* 249 the discussion has turned to the philosopher who is inspired and so has a kind of knowledge not arrived at through reasoning whom, because they do not know the philosopher is inspired, the crowd considers to be mad. As an aside, one can only think of the "antics" of Diogenes of Sinope no longer as antics but as inspired actions (sleeping in a ceramic jar in the agora, carrying a lit lamp in broad daylight looking for an honest man and the like) that his contemporaries at best considered mad.

The *Timaeus* is singled out for particular attention. Here Plato discusses the "upper" and "lower" parts of the soul. The upper soul resides in the head and involves reason; the lower soul resides in the liver and involves appetite. The lower soul may have knowledge but only when the upper soul sleeps. Then the lower soul is able to sense or divine (*manteuomai*) knowledge. From there Struck examines the dialogue's discussion of non-discursive knowledge arrived at in sickness, in dreams, or in possession by a *daimon*. Divinatory dreams are images that are reflected on the surface of the liver; the whole purpose and placement of the liver in the body is to be receptive to divination as stated in *Timaeus* 71e.

This discussion of the *Timaeus* and dreams easily moves into the next chapter that chiefly considers Aristotle's treatise *Divination in Sleep* (*Περὶ τῆς καθ' ὕπνον μαντικῆς*; *De Divinatio per Somnum* in Latin). This is the longest chapter in the book covering some eighty pages. Aristotle, as is well known, is a

more systematic thinker than Plato and seeks to explain the causes of divination in the sense of knowing and prescience arrived at non-discursively. Struck argues that Aristotle is not attempting to debunk dreams and divination in this treatise. Rather, the thinker is considering whether such dreams have a natural or a *daimonic* cause; it is the *daimonic* mode through which the divine works in the world. Like Plato, the experience of these dreams occurs in the lower soul, the nutritive soul in Aristotle's terms. Aristotle concludes that these two types of knowing, discursive reason and intuition, are mutually exclusive. In order to receive the latter, one must be "empty-headed," which certainly relates to Plato's discussion of the upper soul needing to be asleep.

Much of Struck's analysis in this chapter is concerned with mapping out how divination as a way of knowing fits into Aristotle's cosmic teleology and the discussion of causes. In the latter part of this discussion, Struck turns to another of Aristotle's works, *Eudemian Ethics*, and the discussion there on why certain people have consistent good fortune. Nature is *daimonic*. Luck, intuition, and the like are natural impulses manipulated by the divine through causal changes in the natural world. When, for example, a dream does not align with actual events, Aristotle believes that this is because somewhere in the causal chain something interrupted the chain of cause and effect or a different effect was something not originally foreseen. So, the dream was a possible outcome rather than a determined outcome. Aristotle sees consistent good fortune and this type of intuition/divination (divinely inspired intuition) as a natural process, but a natural process affected by the divine.

The next chapter deals with Posidonius and the Stoics. In this chapter there is a necessary shift in semantics in discussing divination. The Stoics understood divination and discussed it with reference to what Plato and Aristotle differentiated: the "technical" interpretation of signs, portents, and the like as well as the dreams, notions, hunches and so on. For the Stoics, these seem to be the same category. The focus of this chapter is Cicero's *De Divinatione*, in particular book 1.118-32 that contains an examination of the arguments attributed there to Posidonius of Rhodes, whose works sadly come to us only in fragments and quotations by other authors.

The Stoic universe is permeated with the divine *pneuma*, breath or spirit. In this model then, everything is in some way touched by the divine; further, each and every "thing" in the universe may affect another. This latter phenomenon is called *sympatheia*, "co-feeling." Inklings and *Mythlore* readers will recognize this notion in Charles Williams's novels. The *pneuma* constitutes the "world-soul" and contains not only the present but also the causes of future events and modes of being. Cause and effect occur in mostly predictable patterns. These patterns are discernible and readable by the technical diviners. But the individual soul also may know these patterns when it is free from the

demands of daily life and is able then to have direct concourse with the *pneuma*. This latter is what in the previous chapters has been referred to as divination and intuition. But for the Stoics the technical diviner, reader of signs, portents, entrails, and the like, is just as valid a perception of the *pneuma* and the chain of causes and their effects as divining intuition.

Like the previous philosophers, the Stoics posit that the waking soul is incapable of such communion with the world-soul. Sleep is the state during which this state of union may occur. The Stoics as is well known posit a holistic cosmos, almost a living being in itself. Divination then in this view is simply perceiving the larger picture rather than the smaller conditions of each individual part.

Between the Stoics and the Neoplatonists a great deal happened in intellectual history. The Neoplatonists, rising in the third century CE, reacted rather negatively to two groups that were reading Plato carefully, Gnostics and Christians. While all three share some fundamental ideas, they nonetheless reacted against one another. In particular both Christians and Neoplatonists reacted against the Gnostics, particularly the Sethians. At base, the disagreements here were the nature of the material and its relationship to the soul seeking the divine.

Regrettably, since the Neoplatonists reject some essential notions that Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics hold in common, at least some summary of this transition should have been included in the book. Instead, Struck begins with Iamblichus without contextualization. Two important factors separate the Neoplatonist Iamblichus from the others discussed in the book. First, Neoplatonists reject the physical world as important in reaching the divine, divination and intuition and knowledge. Second, the Neoplatonists are not in any way concerned with the narrow results of divination/intuition. That is to say, in previous thought intuition and divination dealt chiefly with mundane issues such as whether it was auspicious to engage in a business deal, if that family was good to marry into, or other day to day affairs. For Iamblichus, divination is a method by which one discerns the structure of the cosmos. He rejects the idea that the body must be asleep in order for divination and intuition of the type discussed may occur. In fact, the rational part must be active rather than at rest; for Iamblichus it is only through the operation of the reason that humans ascend to the divine. Further, for this thinker only that ascent may be called divination. Iamblichus in fact applies a new term to this, *epibole*, that Struck translates as intuition.

In the conclusion, Struck strikes a different note by examining the divination of Penelope in *The Odyssey*. Penelope wrestles with whether or not the stranger in her house is her missing husband. Struck argues that the frequent

signs in Books 19 and 20 and how they are read are non-discursive knowledge and arise without the interference of the rational mind.

This is a fascinating book and an important contribution to the history of intuition in the ancient world, since Struck takes a significantly different set of texts and assumptions than previous studies of divination/intuition. There are some sections where it seems Struck is stretching definitions to some degree; decontextualizing subsequent schools of thought such as the Stoics and Neoplatonists whose understandings of divination and its purposes differed from Plato and Aristotle also seems to me somewhat problematic, at least for the non-specialist. Nonetheless, these criticisms are rather minor in comparison to the majority of the text which does not cease to hold the interest.

—Larry Swain

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TAROT OF THE FUTURE: RAISING SPIRITUAL CONSCIOUSNESS. Arthur Rosengarten. Paragon House, 2018. 326 pp. with notes, bibliography, index, and b/w and color illus. ISBN 9781557789334 (paperback) \$24.95; Kindle version available.

Wisdom, with its sense of continuity, repetition, precedent, and prudence, is the highest form of the ordinary functioning level of society. The revolution is far in the past; it is part of tradition now, and without the fifth stage of prophecy the culture reflected in the Old Testament would have nothing unique about it. For prophecy is the individualizing of the revolutionary impulse, as wisdom is the individualizing of the law, and is geared to the future as wisdom is to the past.

—Northrop Frye, *The Great Code* 125