BEYOND ORACULAR AMBIGUITY

Divination, Lies, and Ontology in Early Greek Literature

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Abstract: In studies of ancient Greek divination, oracles are often claimed to pronounce ambiguous but true statements within an intricately ordered cosmos. There exist, however, several problematic exceptions. In Book 2 of the *Iliad*, Zeus deliberately deceives Agamemnon through a prophetic dream; Hesiod's Muses speak truths or lies depending on their mood; and Apollo's utterances can harm as easily as help. The possibility of divine deceit forces us to reconsider the ontological assumptions within which early Greek divination was understood to operate. Adopting Philippe Descola's concept of 'analogism', I argue that rather than a means of reading the cosmos, early Greek divination resembles more an act of diplomacy, an attempt to establish successful communication with supernatural beings within an always potentially fragmented world.

Keywords: agents, ambiguity, analogism, deception, Greek divination, infallibility, oracles

In the remote mountains off the northern coast of the Gulf of Corinth lies Greece's most renowned oracular center, the Delphic Oracle. The precise mechanism of the oracle remains debated. Ancient and modern reports often describe how the virgin Pythia inhaled vapors from a chasm and uttered incomprehensible cries, which priests rushed to transcribe into neat hexameter verse. Others argue that a clearheaded Pythia delivered these articulate responses herself (Johnston 2008: 33–76; Stoneman 2011: 38). While scholars continue to debate how the oracle worked, there is a widespread consensus regarding the infallible nature of the source and the idea that the gods cannot tell lies (Bonnechere 2010: 147; Naerebout and Beerden 2013: 141; Stoneman 2011: 222). These sentiments are as applicable to the modern world as they are to the ancient one. Martin Holbraad (2012: 216), for example, argues that for *babalawo* diviners in

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Cuba "the very notion of an oracular error is an oxymoron," and Maurice Bloch (2013: 51–52) discusses belief in the infallibility of oracles as a near universal in divination.

Through a survey of oracular lies in early Greek divination, this article will suggest that, rather than a universal feature of divination, infallibility is a contingent idea closely associated with specific styles of divination and ontological assumptions. In particular, I will argue that infallibility is a phenomenon associated with 'calculatory' methods of divination. As William Matthews explores in the introduction to this special issue, calculative methods can be conceived of as "a calculation-like procedure based on constant principles." While calculative methods are found across the world, they are not universal. I will illustrate this point through a study of divine agency in early Greek divination between the eighth and fifth centuries BCE. In early Greece, almost all forms of divination—from oracular centers such as Delphi to bird signs—depended not on calculatory methods but on the agency and active intervention of the gods. Although practitioners of what we refer to in this issue as agentive-based methods of divination may also emphasize the superhuman knowledge of oracular predictions, I argue that agentive pronouncements can present very different interpretive challenges from their calculative counterparts. Supernatural agents, be they spirits (see Swancutt, this issue), ancestors, or gods, may have access to greater knowledge than humans. They may also possess the ability to impart this knowledge to humans. However, agents by definition have wills and can withhold information, refuse consultation, and, in theory at least, lie.

After having surveyed the evidence for deceitful oracles in early Greece, I will argue not only that the possibility of oracular deceit marks a key distinction between agentive and calculative methods of divination, but that this difference is also related to distinct ontological understandings. Calculative methods are more commonly associated with what Matthews (2017: 267) describes as homological ontologies, which he defines, in a revision of Philippe Descola's terminology, as modes "of identification predicated on continuity of both physicalities and interiorities." In homological ontologies, I argue that divination often takes the form of developing sophisticated techniques for reading an intricately ordered and comprehensible cosmos, and error can be attributed only to the diviner and never to the source itself. Although similar homological assumptions and calculatory styles of divination can be detected among some Greek philosophers, such as the Stoics, they existed as part of a long-running debate on how divination operated and how the world itself worked. In contrast to later philosophical views, I argue that agentive divination in early Greece can be better understood as a ritual practice emerging from what Descola (2013) refers to as 'analogical ontologies'. Such ontologies, as will be discussed, are based on an original plurality of heterogeneous entities distinguished by their physicalities and interiorities. I describe how divination in an early Greek context is more

akin to an act of diplomacy, rather than an act of reading the cosmos. It is an effort to impose order upon a potentially fragmented cosmos and to establish communication with supernatural beings who may help, harm, or deceive. I end by reflecting on how analogist styles of divination reflect these ontological assumptions and argue that instead of focusing on sophisticated techniques for reading cosmic signs, early Greek divination specialists developed strategies for improving the relationships between source, seer, and consultant.

Divination as an Infallible System of Belief

Most ancient Greeks had no doubt that their gods could accurately predict past, present, and future events. Indeed, the literary, historical, and philosophical texts are filled with success stories. In one of Greece's most famous oracle narratives, Chaerephon asks Apollo whether there is anyone wiser than his friend Socrates. The oracle responds that there is not. When told of this response, Socrates is initially puzzled. Yet, being Socrates, he makes it his life's mission to test the validity of the oracle by cross-questioning the supposedly wise citizens of Athens. After incurring the ire of the city, Socrates finally concludes that the oracle was correct: he is indeed the wisest of the Greeks. Not because he knows anything special but because, unlike the supposed wise men of Athens, at the very least he knows that he knows nothing (Plato, *Apology* 20c–23c).[1]

Whether historically accurate or not, Plato's description of Socrates's encounter with the god neatly encapsulates many orthodoxies surrounding the theorization of divination in ancient Greece by both modern and some ancient thinkers. Above all else, it emphasizes that although oracles are often riddling, they are always true. As Socrates puts it in the same dialogue, "the god cannot lie, it would not be right of him" (*Ap.* 21a). Socrates's insistence on divine honesty was developed in more detail in Plato's theoretical discussions of divination. In the *Republic* (382e), for example, divine honesty is axiomatic. Plato argues: "God is altogether simple and true in deed and word, and neither changes himself nor deceives others by visions or words or the sending of signs." The honesty of the gods was taken for granted not only by Plato; it remained at the heart of the elaborate theories of divination developed by later philosophers such as the Stoics and Neoplatonists (Addey 2016: 11; Edmonds 2019: 197; Johnston 2008: 5; Simonetti, this issue).

Indeed, with the exception of the occasional skeptic and some Christian critiques of divination (e.g., Eusebius, *Demonstratio Evangelica* Book 5), almost every extensive Greek discussion of divination describes it as part of a harmonious cosmological system presided over by honest gods. Given this ancient stamp of approval, it is hardly surprising that a similar understanding of divination has been widely adopted by modern scholars and applied liberally not

only to the later philosophic evidence, but to the institution as a whole. Frederick Naerebout and Kim Beerden (2013: 141), for example, stress that "the gods do not lie; they cannot lie. But you can be blind." Pierre Bonnechere (2010: 147) argues that "the Greeks could not consider their gods liars … Human error was the only possible explanation from the moment that belief in divination became fixed in Greek patterns of thought." Richard Stoneman (2011: 222) notes that "failure never disproves the system. You may doubt the message, but never the god." Although the positions of these authors differ in certain details, they all agree that the honesty of the gods is beyond reproach.[2]

Classicists are far from alone in their emphasis on the unfailing truth of oracles. In addition to the ancient evidence to support their position, they frequently draw on an abundance of ethnographic parallels, all of which emphasize the unfailing accuracy of the oracular source (Bloch 2013: 51; Boyer 2020). In what is easily the most influential anthropological work on divination among classical scholars, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*, E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1937) describes in detail the unfailing accuracy of the Zande oracle. On the surface, the Greek and the Zande institutions appear quite different. Rather than addressing questions to a god, the Zande oracle works by feeding poison to a chicken. Whether the chicken lives or dies indicates a positive or negative response. This procedure, as the Azande are well aware, is not without its problems. The poison may have been administered incorrectly, or the participants may have committed some fault that disrupted the procedure (ibid.: 330). In short, doubt pervades every step of the consultation. Nonetheless, Evans-Pritchard insists that doubt never leads to questioning the oracle itself. The poison oracle, as Mary Douglas (1980: 50) puts it, is "a delicate piece of technology," and like gravity it simply works. Indeed, Evans-Pritchard (1937: 320) contends that oracles "have always existed and have always worked as they work now because such is their nature."

Although Evans-Pritchard's work has not gone without criticism, his emphasis on the infallibility of oracles remains an important source of inspiration for theorists of divination (Flower 2008; Holbraad 2016; Stoneman 2011; Vernant 1974). For example, referencing Evans-Pritchard, Michael Flower (2008: 107) argues that oracular truth was the unshakable foundation that gave Greek divination its "eminently coherent and logical" character, and because of this, the consultant could always "appeal to a whole range of secondary elaborations of belief that explained the apparent failure" (ibid.: 107–108). Yet if classicists are drawing on Evans-Pritchard's work to make sense of the Greek gods, it is of note that the British anthropologist found himself in very different situation. As Evans-Pritchard (1937: 320) explains: "Given a mind, the Zande oracle is not much more difficult to understand than the Delphic Oracle. But they do not personify it. For, though it would seem to us that they must regard the oracles as personal beings, since they address them directly; in fact the question appears

absurd when framed in the Zande tongue." In other words, for Evans-Pritchard, understanding oracles operated by gods, or indeed any agents, is easy. Making sense of a poisoned chicken, on the other hand, requires the better part of a 500-page monograph. Although Evans-Pritchard clearly distinguishes between agentive systems and the mechanical oracle of the Azande, he unfortunately does not elaborate on the theoretical consequences of this distinction. While we may never know Evans-Pritchard's exact thoughts on the matter, when it comes to making sense of divination, there is at least one good reason to think that chickens cannot so easily replace gods. A technical divination procedure—be it the poison oracle or six-line prediction in China (Matthews, this issue)—may offer infallible readings, yet it cannot lie any more than a calculator. Contrariwise, even if agents offer predictions as infallible, their predictions are of a very different nature. Whether they reveal or hide the truth is always a matter of choice.

Agents and Divination in Greece

Unlike divination among the Azande, one of the most enduring aspects of Greek divination is that it was based on the intervention of divine agents. Key examples of agentive divination occurred at major oracular centers such as Delphi and Dodona. These, however, were far from the most common procedures of divination. Indeed, although the Oracle at Delphi was the most prestigious institution in the ancient Greek world, its actual consultation may have been limited to as few as nine days a year and reserved for an elite audience (Bowden 2005: 17). For this reason, ordinary Greeks adopted a variety of divination techniques, including dreams, the reading of sacrificial entrails, bird signs, and even the rolling of dice (Graf 2005; Raphals 2013: 147–161). Clearly, some of these methods were more directly agentive than others, and since Plato it has been common to invoke a distinction between technical versus natural or inspired methods of divination (Johnston 2008: 9). Technical—sometimes referred to as mechanical—methods involve "the manipulation of tokens, for example, dice, pebbles, bones, playing cards, etc., according to preexisting rules" to determine "the contents of divinatory statements" (Boyer 2020: 100). Inspired methods, on the other hand, require a more direct engagement between an individual and a non-human agent.

While technical and inspired methods may seem to approximate in some respects the calculative and agentive methods developed in this issue, the similarity is often more complex in practice. As I will soon discuss, divination methods are often adapted and reassessed according to more encompassing ontological assumptions. This can lead to situations where inspired methods can be interpreted according to calculative systems, or technical procedures are used to elicit the will of the gods. It is important to stress that in early Greece

the majority of divination techniques, be they inspired or technical, were understood to entail the direct participation of a particular god (Edmonds 2019: 202). Even something as seemingly random as rolling a knucklebone (a Greek die) involved the presence of the god who guided the hand of the thrower (Stoneman 2011: 139).[3] In other words, no matter whether methods of divination were technical or natural, Greek divination has to be understood as an agentive system. Yet despite this, agency in divination, what Sarah Iles Johnston (2015: 481) calls "the problem of the gods," has received very little attention, and frequently scholars attempt to make sense of divination by reducing divine agency through the elimination of deceit as much as possible.

The downplaying of divine deception in discussions of ancient Greek divination may be attributed to a reliance on anthropological comparative studies, a bias in the sources toward successful oracle stories, and influential discussions on divination by ancient Greek philosophers. Indeed, as noted above, long before lies in divination were considered to be an "oxymoron" (Holbraad 2012: 216), Greek intellectuals moderated the presence of arbitrarily willed divinities in favor of abstract gods integrated within larger cosmic totalities. The sixth-century philosopher Xenophanes (DK 21 B12), for example, was particularly acerbic in his view of the Homeric gods, noting that

> Homer and Hesiod have attributed to the gods all things
> that are blameworthy and disgraceful for men:
> stealing, committing adultery, deceiving each other.
> (trans. Graham 2010: 109)

Xenophanes (DK 21 B 23) replaced these capricious beings with a new omniscient being, "greatest among gods and men, not at all like mortals in body nor in thought." Later philosophers such as Plato and the Stoics followed suit and adapted Xenophanes's theology to fit their speculations on divination. As the Stoics realized, if the gods are honest, their status as agents largely ceases to be a problem. In place of capricious agents, the gods become cogs within an ordered and harmonious cosmos, often based on claims of *sympatheia* or the idea that everything in the cosmos is connected through macrocosm/microcosm relationships. Within this intricate web, the potentially problematic volition of divine agents is in many respects eliminated, and the diviner is able to read this cosmic language and accurately predict past, present, and future events (Johnston 2015: 485; Simonetti this issue). Even in rare cases where the gods appear to lie, it is not dishonest gods but unfavorable atmospheric conditions that are to blame (Porphyry, *Philosophy from Oracles* 341F; Addey 2016: 104).

Although these philosophers offer Greek perspectives that deserve to be taken seriously, we should be careful to interpret these texts within the historical and polemical contexts in which they were written (Puett 2002: 23). Indeed,

Plato's views on divination and the honesty of the gods emerged precisely as part of a theologically and ontologically driven attack against earlier writers who assumed the very opposite. As Peter Ahrensdorf (2014: 59) puts it, the gods in early literature "are capricious, unreliable, and fundamentally indifferent beings," possessing wills and volitions not only at odds with humanity, but often with each other (*Iliad* 20.54–76). The often volatile personalities of the Olympians are, of course, well known, and their penchant for lies and deceit has been the subject of entire monographs (see, e.g., Pratt 1993). Surprisingly, however, when it comes to interpreting divination, we encounter a puzzling reluctance to acknowledge these traits. Hera may deceive Zeus in Olympus (*Il.* 14.153–351), but in the context of oracular statements, "the Greeks could not consider their gods liars" (Bonnechere 2010: 147).

Sidestepping the problematic character of the gods, divination studies often quickly proceed to list success stories that emphasize ambiguous but accurate results. This is understandable. After all, ambiguous oracles were a favorite theme of historians and tragedians alike. They were not, however, exhaustive, and many other examples point in very different directions. In some cases, oracles involve no hint of ambiguity, and the gods simply speak the truth with crystalline clarity (Herodotus 1.47; Ellis 2020; Fontenrose 1978: 236). In other cases, the gods do not predict the future so much as grant their approval for a particular undertaking (Thucydides 3.92–3). And at times they simply lie. It is precisely these instances that problematize the theoretical frameworks of later Greek philosophers and require us to reconsider the ontological foundations in which early Greek divination took place. First, however, it will be useful to survey the evidence for divine deception in early Greece.

Lying Gods in Early Greek Literature

The majority of examples of divine lies (*pseudea*) in this article are taken from early Greek literary texts between the eighth and fifth centuries BCE.[4] In comparison with technical divination texts in China and Mesopotamia, literature may seem like a problematic site for understanding popular attitudes to divination.[5] However, for the Greeks the poetry of Homer was far more than an aesthetic masterpiece. As Ahrensdorf (2014: 27) puts it: "Homer's poems occupied a place among the Greeks comparable to that occupied by the Hebrew scriptures among the Hebrews. We may go so far as to say without too much exaggeration that Homer's poems, and especially his *Iliad*, were the Bible of the ancient Greeks." The poetry of Homer was learned by heart in schools, and even philosophers felt the need to criticize or align their different views with this near divine author. Like many religious texts, the interpretation of Homeric poetry is made all the more difficult by the often complex and contradictory attitudes

it displays. At times divination and diviners are praised (*Odyssey* 11.90–153), while at others they are treated with a great deal of scorn and sarcasm. The Trojan prince Hector in the *Iliad* (12.244), for example, shows little respect for bird signs: "Bird-signs! Fight for your country—that is the best, the only omen!" (trans. Fagles 1991). Although bird signs were understood in agentive terms, as signs of the gods, Hector's skepticism concerning this form of divination is not unusual, nor is it particularly problematic for theorizing divination. Doubts concerning the interpretations of oracles, particular divination techniques, and mortal diviners were commonplace, both in Greek thought (Hom. *Od.* 16.194–5; Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 477–8; Euripides, *Ion* 1536–7; *Iphigenia in Tauris* 570) and in the world at large. However, Homeric heroes occasionally do something that Evans-Pritchard argues the Azande cannot even comprehend: they question the source itself. A minor example occurs in Book 2 of the *Iliad* (2.349–50) when Nestor casually raises doubts as to whether Zeus's promise delivered through a lightning flash "is a lie or not." Although the remark is made in passing, it should be stressed that Nestor is not offering what Evans-Pritchard calls a secondary elaboration. He is not questioning the mortal diviner or arguing for an error in the procedure. Instead, he is challenging the divine source itself. He is sure that Zeus sent the lightning bolt and that mortals have correctly interpreted its meaning. What is in question is whether Zeus is telling the truth.[6] Although Zeus proves to be honest in this case, Nestor's doubts are hardly unfounded. Indeed, shortly prior to his speech (*Il.* 2.1–84), Homer describes in great detail how Zeus sent a destructive dream to deceive Agamemnon who had unjustly slighted Achilles by taking his war prize, the maiden Briseis. Zeus, under pressure from the other gods, sends a prophetic dream falsely encouraging Agamemnon to attack the Trojans. The results are disastrous. This episode is one of the earliest and longest descriptions of how divination works in the *Iliad*. An oracular message is sent by a god to a mortal. The oracle is then interpreted by Agamemnon and later by his advisers, who correctly discern the meaning that the god intended. In short, the process of divination was a complete success. Unfortunately, the message of the god was false (Johnston 2015: 481; Lloyd-Jones 1971: 61; Sissa and Detiennne 2000: 107).[7]

Dreams are, it might be pointed out, a potentially problematic source for divination in Greek literature (*Od.* 19.560). However, in this instance the volatile nature of dream divination is of little consequence as there is no doubt whether or not the dream is a legitimate oracle. Agamemnon's dream presents a rare behind-the-scenes view of how divination works and a glimpse into the very mind of Zeus. No amount of mental gymnastics can ignore the fact that the god is entirely open about his intention to deceive. As Giulia Sissa and Marcel Detienne (2000: 107) memorably put it: "Zeus is a lying god. Deliberately and cynically, he devises a false message to mislead the thoughtless Agamemnon." Indeed, not content with a single lie, Zeus soon deceives Agamemnon for a

second time by accepting his sacrifice with no intention of fulfilling his wishes (*Il.* 2.419–20). Given the clarity of these instances of deceit, it is difficult to disagree with Homer's cynical assessment that Agamemnon was a fool for trusting Zeus (*Il.* 2.35–40; Ahrensdorf 2014: 42).

Zeus was an important source of divination with major oracular centers in Dodona and in Siwa in Egypt. All oracular power ultimately depended on his authority (Aesch. *Eumenides* 17–19, 616–18; *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* 533–538). Yet despite his prestige and central place in the divinatory hierarchy, the mantic art was always more closely associated with the god Apollo. Apollo's accuracy was at times astounding, and in Croesus's famous test of the oracles he describes in minute detail the unusual activities of the Lydian king (Herodotus 1.47). Apollo, unlike Zeus, was also a god famed for his honesty. As the Theban poet Pindar (*Pythian* 3.29–30) puts it, Apollo "does not touch lies."[8] Yet despite this reputation, Apollo's hands are not entirely clean. As Auguste Bouché-Leclercq (1880: 122) notes in his influential study of Greek divination, Apollo may often reveal, yet the god "reserved the right to lie or give harmful advice, if he saw fit." For example, when the citizens of Cyme consult his oracle in Didyma regarding the removal of suppliants from a temple, Apollo tells them to remove the suppliants at once. Not because it was the right thing to do, but so that the Cymeans "would be quickly destroyed" for even asking such a question (Herodotus 1.159, 1.66.1–3; Ellis 2020). Although Apollo does not technically lie in this example, the episode certainly indicates a cruel streak in a god not only known for ambiguous statements but referred to by the title "crooked" (*Loxias*).

Despite Pindar's insistence to the contrary, Apollo also at times actively deceives. In a fragment from a lost tragedy of Aeschylus, the goddess Thetis recounts how Apollo lied to her regarding the death of her son, Achilles. Thetis mourns:

> And I believed that Phoebus' [i.e., Apollo's] mouth divine,
> Filled with the breath of prophecy, could not lie.
> But he himself, the singer, himself who sat
> At meat with us, himself who promised all,
> Is now himself the slayer of my son.
> (Aesch. Frag. 350; Pl. *Republic* 2.383b; trans. Shorey 1969: 197–199)

Without the context of the tragedy, it remains unclear whether Apollo really uttered a lie or if his ambiguous language simply misled Thetis (Clarke 2019: 180). However, at the very least a goddess considers it plausible that he did so (Hadjicosti 2006), and Plato cites the passage with this understanding. While this example remains unclear, there is no doubt that Apollo could lie, and in Euripides's *Ion* the god tells a white lie to help bring peace to a dysfunctional family (Meltzer 2006: 147n3). Yet perhaps the clearest statement of Apollo's

ambiguous nature is found in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* (541–549), where the god is entirely open about his propensity for harming and lying:

> As for human beings, I shall harm one
> and help another, greatly bewildering
> the unenviable tribes of the human race.
> Yet some shall profit from my oracular voice.
> Those who come guided by the cry
> and the flights of prophetic birds,
> these people shall be blessed by my voice.
> I shall not deceive them.
> But those who trust in birds
> that just twitter vainly
> and want to question my oracles against my will,
> in order to know more than the ever-living gods,
> these people, I say, will come on a wasted journey,
> Even so I shall accept their gifts.
> (trans. Cashford 2003: 83)

It is important not to gloss over the full consequences of a passage in which the god openly admits that he will deceive and harm some mortals who consult his oracle. Although it might be argued that Apollo harms only those who have first misinterpreted the flight of birds, this hardly absolves his behavior. Indeed, if Apollo were displeased with his consultants, he could have refused to speak (Naiden 2013: 156). In this case, however, Greece's most honest god accepts the sacrificial offering and lies anyway (Pratt 1993: 61–62; Scheinberg 1979: 11). In these respects, the passage is comparable to Zeus's deception of Agamemnon, and from the mortal's perspective, the act of divination would appear entirely successful. All the stages of divination—sacrifice, consultation, response—seem to work perfectly. Yet despite the apparent success of the procedure, the oracle will never come to pass. The source has lied.

While it is not possible to survey all the examples of deceitful Greek oracles in this article, it is appropriate to end this section with one of the most puzzling statements of divine dishonesty in early Greek literature—the evocation of the Muses in Hesiod's *Theogony.* Although Hesiod's poem is not strictly speaking an instance of divination, the Greeks considered divinely inspired poetry and prophecy to be closely related practices. Hesiod's description of the Muses, who can reveal the past, present, and future, clearly evokes the language of divination (*Theogony* 31–2; Hom. *Il.* 1.69–70). The Muses' knowledge, however, comes with a catch. As they ambiguously phrase it:

> Field-dwelling shepherds, ignoble disgraces, mere bellies: we know how to say many false things similar to genuine ones, but we know, when we wish, how to proclaim true things. (*Theog*. 26–8; trans. Most 2006: 5)

This is one of the most remarkable statements of early Greek theology. The Muses in entirely straightforward language admit that divine revelation is always potentially deceptive, not because of any mortal failure but because the gods themselves lie. Like many passages that challenge the honesty of the gods, this text has received polarized interpretations and a few tortuous attempts to save the Muses from open deceit. Some scholars argue that Hesiod indeed presents an ambiguous attitude toward divine truth and revelation (Tor 2017: 61–97), while others doubt whether the poet could really undermine the authority of his own words (Koning 2010: 201). We do not need to take sides in this argument. Hesiod likely wants his audience to accept the truth of his poem and implies that it is the other poets who have been misled. However, as Shaul Tor (2017: 61–97) convincingly argues, this strategy in itself creates room for epistemic doubt. The gods may be able to tell the truth, and I may be fairly certain that they have revealed it to me. Yet if gods can both lie and reveal, can I ever really know?

Rethinking the Ontology of Early Greek Divination

The presence or absence of oracular infallibility can present a window on both the theological and ontological assumptions of a particular system of divination. As we have seen with the Stoics, for example, the rejection of divine deceit went hand in hand with an emphasis on an ordered monistic cosmos united by *sympatheia* (Johnston 2008: 5). What resulted was a method of divination that appears less as an art of communicating with agentive gods than "a science that discovers the universal chain of causes that determines everything in the world" (Man 2019: 155). The emphasis on a predetermined chain of cause and effect within an ordered monistic cosmos can be usefully compared with Matthews's discussions of divination within homological ontologies. Homologism, a reconceptualization of Descola's category 'totemism', is asserted by Matthews (2017: 267) to be "a mode of identification predicated on continuity of both physicalities and interiorities." Drawing on his fieldwork in contemporary China, Matthews argues that within homological contexts divination can appear as an "operation of reduction" where "all the subjective intricacies of the human situation in question are thus reduced to functions of cosmic laws operating in universally fixed ways" (ibid.: 274). As Matthews explores in his article in this issue, the logical and deductive character of this mode of divination can "help to make divinatory verdicts (and systems) more persuasive." Similarly, the logical and even scientific character of Stoic divination may explain why some modern scholars have adapted the Stoic philosophical views to make sense of Greek divination in both early and late periods (see, e.g., Ulanowski 2020: 105). However, while the Stoics clearly present a Greek view, the

existence of deceitful oracles in early Greek poetry warns against any simple application of Stoic theories to earlier material. Indeed, the very possibility of divine deceit not only points toward major theological differences between the early poets and the later Stoics, but is also indicative of competing ontological and cosmological assumptions.

Geoffrey Lloyd (1975: 205) has stressed that "there is no such thing as *the* cosmological model, *the* cosmological theory, of the Greeks." Nor is there one theory of divination (Simonetti, this issue). Instead, we are presented with a dizzying multiplicity of worlds waxing, waning, and competing over the centuries. The Stoics and Platonists wonder at the unity and harmony of the world, the Atomists at its plurality and chaos. Although Homer and Hesiod were not philosophers, the early poets are equally divergent in their theological and ontological assumptions. This has important repercussions on how divination is understood. In their poems, not only is the honesty of the gods open to doubt, but the very idea that the world is an ordered totality is absent. Lloyd (2000: 21) notes that "before the first philosophical cosmologies in the 6th century B.C.E., it is doubtful whether we would be correct in speaking of any *unified* concept of the world as such at all. The idea that the cosmos, or world order, is such a unity only becomes explicit for the first time with the philosophers."

That the early Greeks lacked a conception of the world as an ordered totality is not to say that they lived in perpetual chaos. Rather, the early poets envisioned their environment as a fragile assemblage of ontologically distinct beings including gods, humans, and animals (Lloyd 2011: 829; Vernant 1980). At times, these beings existed within a tentative agreement, at others they were openly hostile. The ontological mode that best captures this diversity of beings and their connections is what Philippe Descola has described as 'analogism'.[9] In Descola's (2013: 201) definition, analogism is "a mode of identification that divides up the whole collection of existing beings into a multiplicity of essences, forms, and substances separated by small distinctions and sometimes arranged on a graduated scale so that it becomes possible to recompose the system of initial contrasts into a dense network of analogies that link together the intrinsic properties of the entities that are distinguished in it."

It may be noted that aspects of Descola's definition of analogism may seem equally relevant to homologism. In particular, both analogist and homologist ontologies make use of comparisons that intricately knit the diverse beings and properties of the world into more complex assemblages. Yet, despite surface similarities, salient ontological differences exist between the two models (Matthews 2017: 274). Homological ontologies, as mentioned, are monistic and based on assumptions of continuity of physicality and interiority. Analogist ontologies, on the other hand, are based on an assumed discontinuity between a plurality of ontologically distinct beings. In ideal circumstances, both homologist and analogist ontologies can result in highly organized frameworks that

closely resemble each other. However, whereas in homological ontologies this complex organization is something intrinsic to the cosmos itself, for analogists it is something imposed upon a bedrock of underlying chaos (Almqvist 2020: 192).[10] As Descola (2013: 202) describes it for analogists, "the ordinary state of the world is one of difference infinitely multiplied, while resemblance is the hoped-for means of making that world intelligible and bearable." How these underlying ontological differences result in very different styles of divination is a topic I will now explore.

Divination within an Analogist World

Divination is often discussed as an art of reading the world. Johnston (2008: 133) states that for Mesopotamian diviners, the cosmos "was understood to be an encoded text, waiting to be deciphered by those who had acquired and preserved the knowledge by which to do so." Although such assumptions may be widespread, they are more characteristic of homological than analogist ontologies. Indeed, if the cosmos is a kind of text, we might expect to see an obsession with increasingly sophisticated divination techniques and detailed historical records of natural events and predicative correspondences. Raphals (2013: 383) suggests that in Mesopotamia and China we see just this, but in her comparison of Greek and Chinese divination, she notes that "writing was not central to Greek divination" (ibid.: 164). This is not to deny any emphasis on records and the development of sophisticated techniques. On the contrary, oracles were at times recorded, and the art of divination often contained elements of skill, expert divinatory knowledge, and observations of natural events such as lightning and the flight of birds. However, for the early Greeks these events were understood not as signs to be decoded but as direct messages from the gods whose precise meaning was always subject to interpretation and debate (*Il.* 12.200; *Od*. 2.181–2; Raphals 2013: 174).

With a few possible exceptions (Hesiod, *Works and Days* 765–828), observations of the natural world did not develop into the systematic records we see in China and the Near East (Raphals 2013: 137, 146–167). This lack may in part be attributed to the absence of a "scribal culture " (Johnston 2008: 133) or Greece's "oral orientation" (Raphals 2013: 383). However, we should not discount the fact that detailed records were largely eschewed as a direct result of their ontological assumptions. Indeed, the very idea of compiling detailed records is arguably one that emerges from the homological assumption that the cosmos can be read in the first place. For analogists, this was not a given: the world was not something to be read, but something to be made. This central assumption expressed itself in early poetic cosmologies (e.g., Hesiod, *Theogony*), which focus on the inherent instability of the early cosmos and Zeus's

efforts to impose order (Almqvist 2020). As described by Puett (2012: 124) in a related context, far from celebrating an existing harmony, rituals in such societies are designed to communicate with a divine realm that is "consistently seen as inherently dangerous and capricious, in need of dramatic transformation." Because of this, analogist divination—far from exploiting "a pre-given cosmos of harmony" (ibid.: 126)—is better described as an act of diplomacy, an attempt to create the conditions that allow for successful communication to take place.

Instead of calculatory techniques geared toward reading the cosmos, early Greek diviners focused on developing strategies for improving the possibility of successful communication with potentially volatile agents. A key example can be found in their emphasis on buttressing the fragile relationship between source, seer, and consultant (Johnston 2008: 132–134). While these three spheres are of pivotal importance in all societies where divination is practiced, in analogist Greece they are the object of special attention. Source was perhaps the most important element in this triad. Although divination could occur anywhere, not all methods, sites, and gods were equally valued. In general, inspired prophecy at oracular centers was more highly valued than technical methods such as bird divination (Plato, *Phaedrus* 244a–b; Johnston 2008: 34; Raphals 2013: 62). Oracle sites too had their differences, and as the Lydian king's famous test of the oracles shows (Herodotus 1.46–8), the divinatory powers of certain places and their resident deities varied greatly. Whereas Apollo's oracle in Delphi was internationally renowned, the bee oracle associated with the god Hermes appears to have offered very little satisfaction (*Hymn to Hermes* 550–560; Tor 2017: 77). Among divination experts we see a similar stress on personal relationships over technical expertise. Flower (2008) argues that the early Greek seers' authority was chiefly dependent not upon wide reading or technical expertise, but upon their personal charisma and connection to prestigious mantic lineages. An association with mantic families such as the Melampodidae, Iamidae, Clytiadae, and Telliadae guaranteed their close ties to the gods and their "innate capacity for divination" (ibid.: 38).

Alongside choosing the right god and the most prestigious seer, the status and piety of consultants was also an important factor in successful divination, and in literary accounts the most accurate divinations were those spontaneously given to kings or demi-gods. For example, the deceptive dream sent by Zeus to Agamemnon was all the more convincing precisely because of the status of the Greek king. As Nestor (*Il.* 2.80–3) explains:

> Friends, lords of the Argives, my captains!
> If any other Achaean had told us of this dream
> we'd call it false and turn our backs upon it.
> But look, the man who saw it has every claim
> to be the best, the bravest Achaean we can field
> (trans. Fagles 1991: 102).

Rather than focusing on the technical aspect of divination, Nestor stresses the importance of status and moral character in assessing the credibility of a given oracle, and he was far from alone in this belief. Indeed, even for some of the later Greeks it was common sense that pious Greeks with good, standing ties to the gods were more likely to receive honest oracles than the impious. As the orator Lycurgus (*Leocrates* 93) frankly states: "It would be terrible, if the same signs would be shown to both the pious and the impious" (see also Xenephon, *De equitum magistro* 9.8–9; *Cyropaedia* 7.2.17–18). Yet status and piety are no guarantee, and the fact that even Agamemnon, the bearer of a royal scepter passed from gods to men (*Il.* 2.101–5), is not immune to deception underlines the always tentative nature of early Greek divination.

In summary, although technical ability and learning certainly played a role in early Greek divination, they were of secondary importance to the art of diplomacy and the benign disposition of a potentially deceptive god. The agentive orientation of early Greek divination was, in turn, closely associated with Greece's underlying ontological assumptions. In the early Greek cosmos, far from an intrinsically ordered whole, gods and humans co-existed and communicated within a fragile harmony, a world always in the making. For this reason, a form of divination developed that, rather than reading a pre-given harmony presided over by unfailingly honest gods, focused primarily on an act of creating the best possible relationship between consultant and god. It was an art of selecting the best possible site of divination, of choosing the best possible seer, and of being the best possible you. And even within these ideal circumstances, uncertainty always remained.

Conclusion

In this article I have illustrated that in early Greece there was no such thing as an infallible oracle, and that the reasons for this are ontological. I have argued that early Greek divination did not take place within an inherently ordered and constant cosmos characteristic of homological ontologies. Rather, divination emerged from a potentially fractured relationship characteristic of analogical ontologies. Oracles were understood to be the messengers of the gods, ontologically distinct beings and agents who could reveal or conceal, depending on their whim. This is not, of course, to say that the Greeks considered their gods to be pathological liars and divination a futile exercise. On the contrary, divination was expected to work, and the gods were expected to tell the truth. And in many cases they did. They were, however, in no way compelled to do so, and at times the gods exercised their divine prerogative to lie, harm, and mislead mortal consultants. It is precisely in these instances of oracular deceit that the differences between analogical and homological modes of divination

become most apparent. In fact, as early as the sixth century BCE the topic of whether the gods can or cannot lie became a potent site for ontological debate. Philosophers such as Xenophanes and Plato began to redefine both the honesty of the gods and the nature of the cosmos. These two concepts often went hand in hand, and as the gods were increasingly integrated into more encompassing cosmic frameworks, their ability to deceive was correspondingly diminished. What resulted was a shift in both ontological and theological assumptions that underlay the practice of divination—a shift from an analogical world characterized by interaction with volatile divine agents to a homological world characterized by order and compulsively honest deities.

Although I have not been able to fully discuss the subtleties of this debate in the ancient world, the introduction of new philosophical understandings of the world and its supernatural inhabitants should not be mistaken as a wholesale rejection of earlier analogist assumptions. Indeed, rather than overwriting earlier understandings, as Puett (2002) has described in early China, these ideas entered into an increasingly lively debate on the nature of the cosmos and how humans and gods interact therein. While there is no denying the influence that philosophers exerted on divination in classical and Hellenistic Greece, we should equally not underestimate the continuing influence of poets like Homer and Hesiod. In fact, some of the clearest formulations of divination within an analogist framework come from later sources. The historian and philosopher Xenophon, for example, presents a clear demonstration of the continuing importance of these influences:

> the eternal gods, know all things, both what has been and what is and what shall come to pass as a result of each present or past event; and if men consult them, they reveal to those to whom they are propitious what they ought to do and what they ought not to do. But if they are not willing to give counsel to everybody, that is not surprising; for they are under no compulsion to care for any one unless they will. (*Cyr.* 1.6.46; trans. Miller 1914: 129)

Although the fourth-century BCE author was writing a good deal later than Homer and Hesiod, his views on divination remain part of the same basic theology (Flower 2008: 106). Like Hesiod and Homer, Xenophon takes it for granted that the gods know past, present, and future events and can impart this information to those they are well disposed toward. However, much like Hesiod's Muses, Xenophon insists that the gods "are under no compulsion to care for any one *unless they will*."[11]

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Notes

1. For information on classical abbreviations used in this article, see https://oxfordre.com/classics/page/ocdabbreviations/abbreviations. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own.
2. Johnston (2015: 481) raises, without discussing in detail, what she calls "the problem of the gods themselves." Thomas Harrison (2000: 136) briefly argues that for Herodotus, oracles from the gods can be "deceptive." An important contribution to this debate is also made by Lisa Raphals (2013, 2019), who repeatedly discusses the capriciousness of Greek gods and divination systems but does not explore whether this leads to lying. Anthony Ellis (2020) has also recently pointed out the complexity of the gods, deceit, and divination in the *Histories* of Herodotus.
3. While the understanding of how divination works has shifted throughout Greek history, in the archaic and classical periods, technical procedures never achieved the systematization that was sought after in societies such as China and Mesopotamia and generally involved more subjective interpretations from authoritative seers (Beerden 2013: 103–105, 224–249).
4. Some scholars have at times attempted to distance the early poets from modern understandings of truth and falsity. Kathryn Morgan (2000: 22), for example, argues that "scientific criteria of confirmation or refutation were not applied, for they did not yet exist." However, Shaul Tor (2017: 65) has

convincingly demonstrated that in early Greek literature "the term *pseudos* and its cognates standardly signify that an account of a present, past or future state-of-affairs is false."

5. Although I will touch on only a few examples from historical texts, it should be noted that authors such as Herodotus and Xenophon complicate but by no means contradict the understanding of divination found in early Greek literature.
6. Geoffrey Kirk (1985: 152) argues that Nestor's remark is merely rhetorical and used to emphasize that Zeus has not lied. However, even as rhetoric the statement indicates that lying was accepted as a real possibility.
7. This clear case of divine deception is not isolated. In the *Histories* Herodotus records how Xerxes was misled by a handsome apparition (7.12; see Harrison 2000: 136). Artemidorus, in his *Interpretation of Dreams*, records at least two examples where Sarapis deceives mortals (5.26, 5.94). Artemidorus (4.71) is defensive on this issue, yet he acknowledges that many Greeks considered deception to be common.
8. Louise Pratt (1993: 61) argues that "this does not mean that Apollo would never wish to deceive, but that he is not deceived by others and therefore never speaks in error."
9. For a detailed discussion of early Greece and analogism, see Almqvist (2020).
10. My discussion of analogism draws on Scott's (2007: 12–17) and Valeri's (2001: 293) descriptions of poly-ontologies. For further analysis on how poly-ontologies and analogism overlap, see Almqvist (2020).
11. On the verb 'to will' (*ethélo*) and the nature of 'divine caprice', see Tor (2017: 83–86).

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