

Chapter 1

Introduction

Patrick Curry

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Divination is ubiquitous throughout human history and societies. Reflecting that fact, these papers are correspondingly singular and diverse. They range in period from ancient Greece to contemporary Britain, and in place from Africa to Siberia. In terms of academic disciplines, too, we find anthropology, classical history and philosophy – sometimes within the same paper. And such diversity is not only unavoidable but arguably a positive virtue when the subject is so multifaceted (not to say polymorphously perverse).

It would be one-sided, however, to stop with that impression; for there are significant underlying connections, if no complete unity. Let me try briefly to identify those threads. Barbara Tedlock synthesises the history of dream-oracles, the anthropological ethnography of divination and recent breakthroughs in biophysical medicine to demonstrate the continuing coexistence of an ‘integrative’ divinatory mode with ordinary consciousness. She also breaks valuable new ground in the complex epistemology of that mode.

Philip Peek examines another rich new vein of this subject-matter, namely twinning between African diviners and spirit others as well as their clients. An instance of the human (natural and cultural) phenomenon of twins, these diviners have developed it in ways which both draw upon and contribute to a cosmology of many worlds and forces. As one comes to expect with divination, it is one with resonances both very old and very new.

Laura Grillo’s essay introduces an autoethnographic memoir of African divination in which she turns the ineliminability of a personal dimension from a problem into an invaluable way to explore the subject more deeply. Again, insofar as all scholarship necessarily includes such a dimension, there are lessons here for us all.

Juha Pentikainen conducts a valuable overview of Northern European shamanism, a way of life to which divination was and, insofar as it survives, is still central. Given the history of this region, his work of recovery and recording is poignantly ethico-political, but it also has fascinating implications for human consciousness. Despite the considerable differences between ‘their’ lives and ‘ours’, the shamans’ divinatory cosmos is by no means unrecognisable.

Stuart Harrop, in another exciting new departure, situates divination in relation to natural and human ecology. Human ecological practices have consequences for nonhuman nature of which we are, perforce, becoming constantly more aware. Those that Harrop considers, which include divination as an integral part, have archaic roots; but to dismiss them on that account would be to lose vital lessons which increase our own chances of survival. One of modernity’s most dangerous blind-spots is its instinctive contempt for ‘superstition’.

My own paper attempts to negotiate the untenable extremes of both ‘established materialism’ and ‘romantic supernaturalism’ by locating (somewhat ambitiously) the

human *modus vivendi* as a middle way which partakes of both matter and spirit/mind but is reducible to neither.¹ Sharpening that understanding, I identify Merleau-Ponty's concept of embodiment as 'chiasmic' with Ricoeur's concept of metaphor as 'tensive'. Divination then becomes a special but characteristically human enterprise, one with implications I begin to explore.

Geoffrey Cornelius gives us that rarity, a relevant new concept. Using the still-seminal ethnography of Evans-Pritchard and theorising of Lévy-Bruhl, together with his own phenomenological experiments, he brings out the unsettling implications of the chicanery, properly understood, for both a reductionistic dismissal and a naïve acceptance of divination. (Within the academy, of course, the former – usually sociological and/or psychological – is much more common.)

Evan Heimlich makes a strikingly original case for mantology, the cultural study of divination, as a new integrated academic discipline. It is one that is as comprehensive and cross-disciplinary as the phenomenon of divination itself. He comprehensively undermines the view of divination as a primitive, atavistic behavioural relic, pointing to its vital presence in the most modern activities in a way which is an indication of its potential riches as a field of study, and demonstrating the kind of theoretical sophistication which will be needed to realise that potential.

Dorian Gieseler Greenbaum considers classical Greek astrology in a new light – as a stochastic divinatory art – which relates it integrally with the ancient practice of medicine (something she establishes in considerable detail) as well as navigation and rhetoric. One significant implication is that insofar as challenges remain today which cannot dispense with personal judgement and experience, attempts to meet them require just the same kind of non-algorithmic strategies. On the same basis it could also be argued that divination, as such a strategy, remains as relevant as ever.

Angela Voss courageously explores the parallels, from tantalising to striking, between Michael Newton's 'Life between Lives', a therapy/cosmology which could be described as 'New Age' but is in any case certainly new, and the initiatory and divinatory rituals of the ancient world. Once again, we encounter the apparent paradox of an unmistakably 'other' mode of perception and consciousness which nonetheless remains unmistakably present and active in the modern world.

Paul Devereux briefly examines the remarkable survival of archaic necromantic divination as a 'folk belief' which has endured into modernity, partly thanks to the counter-modern revival of interest in pre-modern practices and ideas to which his own work has contributed.

Finally, Anthony Thorley, Chantal Allison, Petra Stapp and John Wadsworth ground the more specialised phenomenon of specialised or professional 'practitioner divination' in the more general, not to say universal, human experience of 'essential divination' – itself arguably rooted in the natural world of which we are necessarily a part. They then explore the considerable methodological import of this view.

¹ These terms are Gregory Bateson's, from Gregory and Mary Catherine Bateson, *Angels Fear: An Investigation into the Nature and Meaning of the Sacred* (London: Rider, 1987), p. 64.

Divination and the Academy

Bruno Latour has famously pointed out that in fact – that is, in lived practice – ‘we have never been modern’.² Yet it is also undeniable that wherever and whenever historians may locate its beginnings, modernity is a defensible general term for both a sensibility and (more controversially) a period a core characteristic of which, to quote Leszek Kolakowski, ‘is summed up, of course, in the Weberian *Entzauberung* – disenchantment – or in any similar word roughly covering the same phenomenon.’³ Another equally apt description might be the apparent triumph of *logos* over *mythos* with ‘the myth of mythlessness’.⁴ The implication returns us to Latour’s point, however; the real triumph is one of official ideological practice over personal quotidian practice, with the schizoid fracturing of experience that that implies.

What is the relevance of this process, both ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’, to divination studies or (in Evan Heimlich’s excellent term) mantology? There are two crucial considerations. One is that, broadly but undeniably, divination was left firmly stranded on the wrong side of the metaphysical, intellectual and social tracks. Now it would be possible to examine this phenomenon as an instance of the larger debate over the complex relationship between ‘magic’ and ‘modernity’.⁵ In my view, however, that would be misleading. For one thing, although there are certainly connections, divination cannot seamlessly be accommodated to the category of magic. For another, we should try to retain its distinctiveness at the same time as recognising its multiplicity and ubiquity.

The other consideration is that relatedly but more specifically, the formation of the modern academy is deeply implicated in that of modernity in ways which have had powerful effects, not just on the methods and concepts which dominate academic life but on its values too. In conjunction with the first, this development has resulted in the established ascendancy of an assumption that divination is not really a worthy or fit subject of study and, as a corollary, if it is studied the appropriate way to do so is to treat it as a failed version of something else: usually religion (itself always in danger of receiving the same sort of treatment in turn) or science (proto-, pseudo- or simply ineffective). In anthropology, where divination can be difficult to avoid, the latter variant as a strategy of control and domestication is still very active as evolutionary cognitivism, both social and neurophysiological. Keeping the discussion in the plane of epistemology and therefore solely questions of belief, representation and so on, is very convenient, especially when combined with social functionalism or a functionalist structuralism. It simultaneously invokes the assumed authority of evolutionary theory; allows the observer-theorist to distance him- or herself from the subject-matter and its

² *We Have Never Been Modern*, transl. Catherine Porter (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993).

³ *Modernity on Endless Trial* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 7. See also Roy Willis and Patrick Curry, *Astrology, Science and Culture* (Oxford: Berg Books, 2004), ch. 4.

⁴ Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, quoted in Laurence Coupe, *Myth*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 12. For another excellent discussion see Sean Kane, *Wisdom of the Mythtellers*, 2nd edn (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1998), as well as Mary Midgley, *Science as Salvation: A Modern Myth and its Meaning* (London: Routledge, 1992) and *The Myths We Live By* (London: Routledge, 2003).

⁵ Of recent literature see (in anthropology) Birgit Meyer and Peter Pels (eds), *Magic and Modernity: Interfaces of Revelation and Concealment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003) and (in history) Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

human subjects, and then to inform them what they are ‘really’ doing. You believe; we know. That effectively prevents the discussion from moving onto ground that reflexively includes, and therefore could radically question, *all* parties: in other words, practice (of which theory is a part: not the reverse) and ontology (of which epistemology is a part: not the reverse). To put it another way, disagreements here are not ‘in opinions but in form of life’.⁶ If you really want to understand a divinatory form of life, you will have to open up to it in a way that ‘allow[s] the material to touch the observer *as truth for the observer*’.⁷

The assumption about divination I have just described, alterately reductive and patronising, could well be thought of as a *mentalité*: a durable (because largely unconscious) attitude held with considerable emotional animus frequently combined with almost complete ignorance. If I may be permitted a personal anecdote, in my own department at the time of writing (one principally comprised of philosophers certainly no less than usually intelligent and no more than usually benighted), I was once semi-publicly interrogated at some length on my research. This culminated in the palpably outraged question, ‘Do you *practise* divination?’ However unintentionally, this question in its context constitutes a valuable datum, so let us examine it a bit more closely.

In more reflective mood, I might have replied by asking whether an historian of art, say, or a philosopher of science would be asked an equivalent question (and in an equivalent way); the obvious negative answer should suffice to show the special treatment reserved for divination. For the question as posed cannot be answered without damage; indeed, that is its very point. Either ‘no’ or ‘yes’ only confirms that divination is some special practice requiring special treatment: quarantine, say, followed by decontamination. Furthermore, a ‘no’, if true, means that the scholar is – perhaps as a consequence – willing to cut her- or himself off from a resource which could have a crucial bearing on her or his scholarship; whereas a ‘yes’ serves to identify the scholar as a patent irrationalist. (In the event, feeling that I may as well be hung for a sheep as for a lamb, I simply answered, ‘Yes, of course!’ An astonished silence ensued before the subject was changed.)

I have written extensively elsewhere – critically and, I hope, constructively – on this phenomenon, particularly with reference to astrology as the most durable, widespread and complex form of Western divination.⁸ Obviously, it is part of a very long process, at least in historical terms, in which (to quote the eminent philosopher and historian of science Isabelle Stengers) ‘objectivity itself has a polemical origin, an origin that cannot be dissociated from the overwhelming concern of silencing storytellers, quacks, popular customs and creeds, knowledge without credential. They are

⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), passage 241.

⁷ Geoffrey Cornelius, ‘Verity and the Question of Primary and Secondary Scholarship in Astrology’, in Nicholas Campion, Patrick Curry and Michael York (eds), *Astrology and the Academy* (Bristol: Cinnabar Books, 2004): pp. 103-113, p. 108; emphasis in original.

⁸ ‘Astrology on Trial, and its Historians: Reflections on the Historiography of “Superstition”’, *Culture and Cosmos* 4/2 (2000): pp. 47-56; ‘The Historiography of Astrology: A Diagnosis and a Prescription’, in K. von Stuckrad, G. Oestmann and D. Rutkin (eds), *Horoscopes and Public Spheres* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2005), pp. 261-274; ‘Introduction’, Angela Voss and Patrick Curry (eds.), *Seeing with Different Eyes: Essays on Astrology and Divination* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2008), pp. ix-xiv. See also Alison Bird, ‘Astrology in Education: An Ethnography’, D.Phil. thesis, University of Sussex (2006) and Garry Phillipson, ‘Astrology: A Context for Heresy’, Ph.D. thesis in progress, University of Wales at Lampeter.

witnesses for the fact that our history is also that of a process of eradication.’ And now, to a significant extent, the academy itself has fallen victim to the same process:

the multifaceted machine called technoscience is in the process of redefining our own worlds in terms that makes them available for its comparative operations. The relative passivity of the academic world, lending itself to ranking systems of evaluation and productivity comparison which reshape it in a radical manner, is sufficient to demonstrate how easy it is to have people, [even those] who are not naïve or impressed or overpowered, to submit to questions that are not only irrelevant but, as such, sound the death-knell of what matters for them.⁹

That point takes us beyond what can be directly addressed here, however. What I want to bring out is simply what emerges from the papers of this collection: that divination is a very particular kind of human practice with ancient roots that go very deep, yet it is also still very much at work and at play in the contemporary world. It is at once genuinely exotic and common. The challenge to the academy, then, is to recognise and transcend its own formative blind-spot by addressing and seriously attempting to theorise it. Anything less would entail betrayal of one of the academy’s most fundamental ideals: *Homo sum; humani nil a me alienum puto*. And in the category of ‘less’ I include any attempts, no matter how ingenious, to accommodate divination without any significant changes in what ‘we’ already ‘know’. Describing and adjusting conditions of native error (regardless of who the natives are) simply will not do. As A.N. Whitehead remarked, ‘Philosophy destroys its usefulness when it indulges in brilliant feats of explaining away.’¹⁰

That observation has only gained force as the pressure increases to explain everything ‘scientifically’ in a way, and to an extent, that can only be scientific, not to say imperialistic. It is vitally important that this programme – alternately seductive and coercive, and far from disinterestedly well-funded – be resisted. Its imperialism and vacuity alike have been repeatedly exposed (not least by Midgley and Stengers, already mentioned, but also immortally by Paul Feyerabend) but as any ‘relativist’ worth her salt knows, that in itself settles nothing. But for any prospect of success, it must be resisted intelligently. It is imperative to heed the warning of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro not to engage in ‘a simple-minded ontology of mind *versus* matter’ by simply counter-asserting the importance or autonomy of the former. I cannot sufficiently emphasise that attempting to contest the reduction of ‘representation to reality (cognitivism, sociobiology, evolutionary psychology)’ by urging the reduction of ‘reality to representation (culturalism, relativism, textualism)’ is a fool’s errand. In uncritically accepting the fundamental assumptions of the debate itself, such a move covertly legitimises its opponent, and encourages the whole tedious and fruitless ‘tug-of-war’ to continue.¹¹ Rather what is needed is a radical re-theorising of body, mind and world in ways that contextualise and (so to speak) provincialise all three, that reveal their contingency and their constitutive, not merely external, interrelations. (And may I add

⁹ From ‘Comparison as a Matter of Concern’, a paper given at the University of Copenhagen on 3.9.09 and forthcoming in *Common Knowledge*.

¹⁰ A.N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, edited by David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1979 [1929]), p. 17.

¹¹ ‘Exchanging Perspectives. The Transformation of Objects into Subjects in Amerindian Cosmologies’, *Common Knowledge* 10:3 (2004): 463-84, p. 484. Quite independently, David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), p. 67 sounds exactly the same warning.

that the observation Viveiros de Castro appends to his warning – that ‘Even phenomenology ... may be a surrender to epistemology’ – is also true, but my own paper seeks to show that it need not, and should not, be so.)

In contrast to brilliant feats of explaining away, any such serious theorisation of divination will require some fundamental revisions of what ‘we know’, for reasons and in respects that have been powerfully set out by Martin Holbraad.¹² Indeed, the *sine qua non* of accepting and working reflexively with ontology – which includes taking divination seriously in its own right – is only the beginning; what follows is the hard work of revising our inappropriate starting concepts accordingly. (In this context, the potential advantages of the observer/theorist also being a practitioner are obvious.)

Promising Paths

In the work presented here, we can already see some of the ways such a project might proceed. At least three related paths, all with paradigm-shifting implications, suggest themselves. One is a post-rationalist concept of truth, no longer universalist and epistemological but rather variously describable as participatory (in the way initiated in anthropology by the brave late work of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl),¹³ reflexively performative (rather than descriptive or propositional), pragmatic (in the sense pioneered by William James),¹⁴ pluralist (also sometimes termed ‘relativism’, although not to be confused with the ‘straw herring’ of vulgar relativism),¹⁵ and perspectival (especially as developed, through his work with Amerindian culture, by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro).¹⁶ In the present collection, see the contributions of Cornelius, Heimlich and Holbraad for more on this issue.

The second promising path is a post-Cartesian view of bodies no longer as basically inanimate and interchangeable stuff, no matter how complex, but instead as living agents possessed of intelligences, far exceeding our conscious awareness, some of which can be developed by some individuals in very sophisticated ways. Maurice Merleau-Ponty is unmistakably the philosopher who opened our eyes (those who want to see, at least) in this respect. There is a critical point of contact at work here with perspectivism, inasmuch as the body – conceived as ‘an assemblage of affects or ways

¹² ‘Definitive Evidence, from Cuban Gods’, chapter 7 in Matthew Engelke (ed.), *The Objects of Evidence: Anthropological Approaches to the Production of Knowledge* (Malden and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 89-104; ‘Ontography and Alterity: Defining Anthropological Truth’, *Social Analysis* 53/2 (2009): 80-93.

¹³ See the discussion in Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), ch. 5. Lévy-Bruhl’s late work has been inexcusably ignored and derided.

¹⁴ See Harvey Cormier, *The Truth is What Works: William James, Pragmatism, and the Seed of Death* (Latham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001). Academic philosophy has paid for its marginalisation of philosophers such as James, Michael Polanyi and Stephen Toulmin by abandoning nearly all of the ground where nearly all people live nearly all of their lives.

¹⁵ Barbara Herrnstein Smith’s term; see her excellent *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press), 1988, and *Belief and Resistance: Dynamics of Contemporary Intellectual Controversy* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1997). See also Latour, *Modern*.

¹⁶ A good starting-point is his ‘Exchanging Perspectives’, *Common Knowledge* 10/ 3 (2004): pp. 463-484.

of being that constitute a *habitus*’ – is the site of perspectives.¹⁷ Other anthropologists have also moved in this direction. James Fernandez, for example, remarks that ‘the best diviners are ones who are exceptionally well tuned in to the primary processes where so many of our problems lie.’¹⁸ And Filip de Boeck and René Devisch – who concur that divination does not mimic or model a world (*pace* Victor Turner) but ‘rather makes a world’ – also observe that it ‘constitutes a space in which cognitive structures are transformed and new *relations* are generated in and between the human body (senses, emotions), the social body and the cosmos.’ Accordingly, they argue, ‘the cognitive, meaning-centered level in Turner’s analysis needs to be balanced by a more praxiological dimension, in which the emphasis is put on agency, enforcement and worldmaking rather than on structure and social engineering Attention should be devoted to divination as act rather than fact.’¹⁹ For more on this rich construal of embodiment in this volume, see the contributions of Tedlock, Greenbaum and Curry.²⁰

The third way forward is a post-secular recognition and admission of the spiritual or ‘metanatural’, albeit also in a rigorously non-dualistic sense, as another active participant in determining what happens. Divination may indeed be ‘an utterly human art’,²¹ but if that statement is intended to mean that necessarily only humans are involved, it falls foul of the critique already developed by ignoring or reinterpreting (anachronistically and/or ethnocentrically) the avowals of diviners themselves, highly consistent across both cultures and historical periods, that working with more-than-human spirits is absolutely integral to divination, such that the divinatory outcome is as much a product of their agency as that of the diviner. The non-reality of spirits, like the quasi-machine reality of non-human animals and the reservation of subjectivity for humans alone, is not carved in ontological stone, after all; it is merely the latest, strangest and most dangerous outcome of ‘the ancient anthropological matrix, the one we have never abandoned’.²² (And yes, ‘we’ includes we putative moderns too.) For good reason, reflections on this subject can be found throughout the present book.²³

These three perspectives – truth, body and spirit – are intimately linked, both substantively and by their mutual distortion under what Latour calls the modern constitution. In their present forms, they are crying out for radical revision, and divination offers just the kind of Archimedean point that is needed for such an

¹⁷ Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, unpublished MS., ‘Cosmological Perspectivism in Amazonia and Elsewhere’, four lectures delivered 17 February – 10 March 1998 at the Dept. of Social Anthropology, Cambridge, p. 37.

¹⁸ James W. Fernandez, ‘Afterword’, in Philip M. Peek (ed.), *African Divination Systems: Ways of Knowing* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1991): pp. 213-221, p. 220.

¹⁹ Filip de Boeck & Rene Devisch, ‘Ndembu, Luunda and Yaka Divination Compared: From Representation and Social Engineering to Embodiment and Worldmaking’, *Journal pour Religion African* 24/2 (1994): pp. 98-133;

http://www.era.anthropology.ac.uk/Era_Resources/Era/Divination/boeck.html (accessed 7.10.04); emphasis in the original. Cf. Barbara Tedlock, ‘Sacred Connections between Self, Other and the World: The Emergence of Integrative Medicine’, in Curry and Voss, *Seeing*, pp. 311-327.

²⁰ See also Barbara Tedlock’s pioneering *The Woman in the Shaman’s Body: Reclaiming the Feminine in Religion and Medicine* (New York: Bantam Books, 2005).

²¹ Sarah Iles Johnston, ‘Introduction: Divining Divination’, in Sarah Iles Johnston and Peter T. Struck (eds), *Mantikê: Studies in Ancient Divination* (Leiden: Brill, 2005): pp. 1-28, pp. 10-11.

²² Latour, *Modern*, p. 107.

²³ See the recent doctoral thesis from the University of Kent by Geoffrey Cornelius, ‘Field of Omens: the Hermeneutics of Inductive Divination’ and another in progress there by James Brockbank, ‘The Responsive Cosmos: an Inquiry into the Theoretical Foundations of Astrology’.

enterprise. It is my belief that these papers make a signal contribution to taking up that challenge, beginning to address it, and inviting all interested parties – whether inside or outside the academy – to join the conversation.

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