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Why divination? 
Evolved psychology and strategic interaction 
in the production of truth
Pascal Boyer

Abstract

Divination is found in most human societies but there is little systematic research to explain [1] why it is persuasive, or [2] why divination is required for important collective decisions in many small-scale societies. Common features of human communication and cooperation may help address both questions. A highly recurrent feature of divination is “ostensive detachment”, a demonstration that the diviners are not the authors of the statements they utter. As a consequence, people spontaneously interpret divination as less likely than other statements to be influenced by anyone’s intentions or interests. This is enough to give divination an epistemic advantage, compared with other sources of information, answering question [1]. This advantage is all the more important in situations where a diagnosis will create differential costs and benefits, e.g., determining who is responsible for someone’s misfortune in a small-scale community. Divinatory statements provide a version of the situation that most participants are motivated to agree with, as it provides a focal point for efficient coordination, at a minimal cost for almost all participants, which would answer question [2].
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Introduction

Worried lovers pluck the petals from a flower to find out whether they are loved in return. People consult tarot card or tea leaves to figure out their professional situation. The proper place to build a house, the best day to celebrate we wedding, and the right time to go to war, are in many places ascertained by divination. Omens, oracles and divination have guided decisions and provided supposedly reliable information, in all human groups, for as long as our records exist. The notion of a procedure (e.g., throwing dice, dealing cards, throwing pebbles on the ground, giving poison to a chicken, etc.) that determines the contents of a statement and thereby makes it reliable, is an extraordinarily successful cultural invention (Curry, 2013; Douglas & Evans-Pritchard, 1970; Johnston & Struck, 2005; Struck, 2016). Why is that the case?

Historical and anthropological scholarship provide us with myriad descriptions of divination techniques, as well as the social interactions surrounding these procedures, that prompt two crucial questions about these practices:

[q1] Why use divination at all? Why do clients (or diviners) consider that these procedures provide some guarantee of truth?

[q2] Why is divination so important in some societies but not others? In many places in the world, especially in the large-scale mass-societies we are most familiar with, divination is widespread and highly varied, but also socially peripheral. By contrast, in many small-scale societies, divination is central to all sorts of crucial decisions affecting e.g., the choice of political officers, decisions to engage in warfare, or to hunt in particular places, and the appropriate way to deal with misfortune. How do we explain this contrast?
Procedures determine and guarantee statements

Historians and anthropologists generally distinguish between broad types of divination procedures, a) so-called “mechanical” divination in which the manipulation of tokens, e.g., dice, pebbles, bones, playing cards, etc., according to pre-existing rules determines the contents of divinatory statements; b) “inspired” divination in which an individual is supposedly possessed or otherwise influenced by another (often super-human) agent; and c) the observation of omens, natural phenomena produced without any human intervention, but which often require interpretation by a specialist. However, anthropologists concur that these are different types, not exclusive categories (Devisch, 1985, p. 52; Tedlock, 2006, p. 65).

The one recurrent feature in these various practices is the participants' expectation that statements produced using a particular technique are more likely than other available sources of information to contain a true description of some state of affairs. Why do people consider divination procedures a guarantee of truth?

Quite surprisingly, a large part of anthropological reflections on divination have consisted in attempts either to avoid this question or to deny its relevance. As Myrhe points out, divination is described “as a means for providing emotional reassurance, a tool for restoring and sustaining a social structure, an instrument for making decisions, building consensus, and establishing political legitimacy, or an aid for maintaining a cognitive order”, in short, as everything one could think of, except as an attempt to acquire accurate information about some matter of interest (Myhre, 2006, p. 313).

But the fact remains, that people hold a diagnosis produced via divination, at least provisionally, as more likely to be accurate than other statements about the situation at hand, and that this is the reason for performing divination at all (Holbraad, 2008, 2012; Kiernan, 1995; Myhre, 2006). Obviously, the use of divination, in each particular human group, is of course accompanied by all sorts of specific rhetorical, therapeutic, political and poetic processes. But these differ from place to place. To explain the extraordinary recurrence of divination in many different cultures, it is surely more sensible to focus on what is actually recurrent in its many manifestations, namely these:
[a] an agreed procedure determines the contents of a particular statement about a situation, and

[b] the statement is considered more likely than other comparable sources of information to be accurate, because of [a].

Evolutionary background: Truth, deception and vigilance

Trust in divination techniques, observed in the most diverse environments, may be understood better in the more general context of the mechanisms engaged in human minds to acquire information and assess its epistemic quality.

Humans more than any other kind of organisms need to gather orders of magnitude more information from their environments than even close phylogenetic cousins like the great apes (Tooby & DeVore, 1987). Most species-typical activities of humans require access to and inference from large amounts of knowledge. Most of that information is acquired by proxy, in the form of socially transmitted information.

However, there are also inevitable conflicts of interests between individuals, so that it may be in one agent’s interest to convey information that is not accurate but might lead others to act to his/her advantage. In other words, deception is possible, and in fact is both frequent and difficult to detect. Humans need to be able to assess the quality of the information received from others, as its potentially positive fitness effects are a function of its accuracy. So we should expect that natural selection made humans sensitive to differential quality in information.

Epistemic vigilance

Indeed, psychologists and linguists have documented a suite of cognitive capacities geared to maximizing the benefits from useful information and protecting the mind against deception. There is a large amount of evidence for such mechanisms of “epistemic vigilance” (Clément, 2010; Sperber et al., 2010) that allow an appreciation of the quality of sound arguments and the detection of misleading or misguided utterances. The inferences produced by these epistemic mechanisms bear not just on the contents of utterances but also on the quality of the
sources, attending to cues that suggest poor or on the contrary reliable informants. It is clear for instance that people detect inconsistencies and moderate their confidence in material provided by inconsistent sources (Mercier, 2012). But people also attend to intentions – as Sperber et al. put it, “a reliable informant must meet two conditions: she must be competent, and she must be benevolent.” (Sperber et al., 2010, p. 369). The crucial point about epistemic vigilance is that people attend to the quality of arguments and sources, primarily as a way of evaluating how the information they receive may benefit them.

Vigilance appears very early in cognitive development – a growing body of evidence suggests that children use sophisticated implicit principles to evaluate statements and sources (Clément, 2010). Children can and do use implicit principles to infer that some source is reliable (e.g., because the speaker has direct experience of the subject) and that an argument is plausible (e.g., because it is congruent to prior beliefs). Even four to six year-olds attend to cues of incompetence and infer that sources are unreliable (Fusaro & Harris, 2008; Harris & Lane, 2014), and they find arguments from reason more persuasive than arguments from authority (Castelain, Bernard, Van der Henst, & Mercier, 2016). Children also attend to what can be inferred of people’s intentions, and prefer to receive information from sources that are benevolent as well as competent, being suspicious of information from agents that have exploited others (Couillard & Woodward, 1999; Liu, Vanderbilt, & Heyman, 2013; Mascaro & Sperber, 2009). They for instance have an intuitive understanding of the fact that self-descriptions can be strategic and therefore deceptive (Gee & Heyman, 2007).

These findings illustrate two aspects of epistemic cognition that are of great importance in understanding the effects of divination:

[a] Human minds automatically process the possibility that people’s interests are involved in communication. The search for possible intentions behind an utterance is a spontaneous reaction to communication from others.

[b] Minds also spontaneously invest more resources in figuring out these possible intentions, when the consequences of believing a particular utterance are greater. Even young children have the intuition that, when the topic matters and has consequences for the speaker’s
interests (e.g., in people’s self-descriptions), then the speakers’ intentions (in this case, gaining prestige) govern the contents of utterances (Gee & Heyman, 2007; Liu et al., 2013).

*Epistemic intuitions and their reflective interpretation*

The evaluation of utterances, especially their evaluation as more or less reliable, is largely a matter of implicit principles. That is to say, the computations are not deliberate, and they for the most part occur outside conscious awareness. What we are aware of are the results of these computations, in the form of intuitions, e.g., that that a particular utterance is not reliable. Now we can also engage in deliberate, explicit reasoning about sources, e.g., representing that “as she said $p$ yesterday and $\neg p$ today, she’s not reliable” or “it would be to his advantage if I agreed with him that $p$, that’s why I am not convinced”. Typically, we engage in such reflective deliberations as a way to explicate, justify or otherwise comment on our own intuitions.

So, one may have definite epistemic intuitions, e.g., that a particular statement is probably false, or on the contrary that a source is more reliable than another, without necessarily entertaining an explicit, conscious explanation of why one has that intuition. One may also entertain reflective representations about one’s intuitions, in this case, explanations of why one finds a particular statement suspicious or a particular source reliable. These explicit, reflective representations are conjectural interpretations, and often rationalizations of one’s intuitions. We must not assume that they accurately describe the cause of our intuitions, the mechanisms that produced them.

This, naturally, applies to the cognitive processes that make divination persuasive. That is, we should expect that some of the processes involved consists in automatic, largely unconscious inferences, and that conscious, deliberate reflections (e.g., “divination is true because…”) consist in post-hoc interpretations and justifications of prior intuitions.
The rhetoric of divination: Ostensive detachment as argument

Obviously, the central question about divination is, Why is it seen as a guarantee of truth? which in the present context should mean, What cognitive processes produce an intuition of higher reliability, when statements are produced or influenced by such procedures?

A false start: People believe divination because they believe in divination

One tempting answer might be, quite simply, that people believe that divination produces true statements. In that view, people acquire from others a generic belief, that the (locally sanctioned) divination procedures do indeed result in guaranteed statements. They then apply this general principle, deductively, to specific instances of divination, in what amounts to a categorical syllogism: Divination statements are true, This statement was produced by divination, Therefore this statement is true. Although this may seem quite plausible, there are several reasons to cast doubt on this deductive account.

First, most ethnographic reports suggest that people, far from endorsing all statements produced by divination, often entertain doubts about specific diagnoses, or are suspicious of the qualifications of particular diviners – a point that is discussed in more detail below. So, to the extent that some people consider divination in general to be reliable, that belief fails to produce the inferences one would expect, if the deductive model was accurate.

Second, from a more general perspective, culturally widespread beliefs (e.g., that divination produces truths) are just not downloaded from one mind to another. Indeed, the evidence for epistemic vigilance mentioned above suggests that the construction of beliefs requires complex inferences on the part of a listener. It is quite difficult to create beliefs in other minds, especially when the truth of the statements carries consequences for the listener – people’s gullibility is in such contexts very limited, as decades of experimental psychological research demonstrate (see an extensive discussion in Mercier, 2017). So people are unlikely to entertain a belief that “divination produces truth”, for no other reason than the fact that others in their group express that belief.

All this suggests that, inasmuch as people believe in the general reliability of their divination procedures, that belief should be considered not as a starting point, but as the
outcome of epistemic evaluation. That is to say, various pieces of information may contribute to an individual’s intuition that a statement is probably true, and is more likely to be true because it was produced through divination. These pieces of information include [a] possible statements from other individuals about the general properties of divination, [b] their statements about the specific case at hand, [c] other information about the situation being described through divination.

Since trust in a divination technique is constructed by the individual, on the basis of available information, we must consider what information is used – and crucially, how it is provided by the divination procedures.

Ostensive detachment

Evaluating statements in epistemic terms, in terms of how likely it is that they provide accurate information, requires that we attend to properties of the utterances (e.g., their plausibility, consistency, etc.) and properties of the sources (e.g., competence, benevolence, etc.). In many contexts, people who produce statements facilitate the work of the listener by providing cues regarding the reliability of their own utterances – what are commonly called arguments (Mercier & Sperber, 2017). As divination includes statements that participants consider (provisionally) truthful, and often concern important matters, one would expect that they also come accompanied with cues of validity.

One such cue is particularly important, as it is present in many otherwise very different forms of divination. As part of the procedure, it is made clear that the person who utters a divinatory statement (the diviner in most cases) should not be considered the source of that diagnosis, the person responsible for its contents. As Lisdorf puts it, “the operator is in general seen as competent enough to perform the technique, but not himself in possession of the wanted information” (Lisdorf, 2008, p. 82). There are many ways of conveying this assumption. People will say for instance that it is the cards that reveal what is going on, that the dice have talked, that the divination has spoken, etc. Zambian diviners and clients concur that “the diviners do not speak for themselves during divination” (Silva, 2014, p. 1179), or, as the Bunyoro diviners put it, “this is not something I made up for myself” (Beattie, 1964, p.
In places where a trapped spider’s erratic walk under a pot produces a diagnosis, people say that it is the spider itself that is “speaking” – clearly to imply that the statement does not come from the operator, the diviner (Zeitlyn, 1993).

In many cases of so-called mechanical divination, this exclusion of the specialist as author of the statements is achieved through randomizing techniques, i.e., procedures that in principle cannot be controlled by the diviner. For instance, seeds or leaves are dropped in water, some of which sink and others float. The diviner throws pebbles to the ground, but cannot control where each of them will fall. Exposure to fire creates cracks in bones, but no-one can predict which directions the cracks will follow. The specialist throws dice, or shuffles tarot cards, or empties a bag of small tokens on a table – processes that, from the standpoint of clients and other participants, cannot be controlled, and therefore produce what McGraw in his description of Maya divination calls the “suppression of intention” (McGraw, 2016, p. 189). In the case of inspired divination, e.g., through possession by a spirit or deity, this suppression of the actual diviner or medium as the origin of the message, is achieved by different cues like the use of a very special, “unnatural” voice, or the use of a different lexicon or language.

In other words, an important feature of divination procedures is that they provide a very special and unusual description of the diviner’s own role in producing utterances, what Goffmann called a participant’s “footing” in the conversation, his or her expected role (Goffmann 1981, pp. 124-29). The notion of “speaker” is often too vague for a fine-grained description of conversational dynamics, because the term includes both the actual producer of utterances, and the “author”, that is, the agent who is supposedly in charge of deciding what is said (Goffmann 1981, p. 226). In the case of divination procedures, the person who utters a statement conveys information that he or she should not be mis-construed as the author.

This aspect of divination can be called *ostensive detachment*, as it consists in producing observable cues, directed to clients and other participants, from which they can infer that the diviner is not involved in producing the statement. This “evacuation of the diviner”, as Zempléni points out, surely must be taken into account if we want to make sense of the weight of divinatory statements (Zempléni, 1994, p. 241).
What makes divination salient: Pragmatics of detachment

Understanding the effects of ostensive detachment requires that we consider it against the background of pragmatic inferences in ordinary conversations.

*Blocking automatic inferences*

Understanding utterances consists, for a listener, in producing inferences on the basis of cues provided by a speaker. The fact that a speaker utters a declarative statement \( p \) triggers in a listener several default inferences. For instance,

1. Speaker utters “Oriane likes you”

has this effect by default:

2. Listener represents that Speaker intends that Listener believe that Oriane likes Listener

which, absent any other available information, also triggers the automatic causal inference:

3. Listener represents that Speaker’s intentions as described in [2] caused [1]

That is to say, the Speaker said “Oriane likes you” because he wanted Listener to believe it. All these are fairly straightforward inferential processes expected in (and in fact required by) conversation (Grice, 1991[1967]; Sperber & Wilson, 1995). A default starting point for a representation of the speaker’s meaning is the assumption that their utterance is a consequence of their communicative intentions.¹

Now the introduction of a procedure that ostensibly determines the content of an utterance blocks some of these inferences. Consider, as a toy example, a procedure whereby Speaker ostensibly flips a coin, having stated that heads will mean that “Oriane likes Listener” and tails that “she dislikes Listener”. In this case,

1. Speaker utters “Oriane likes you”

warrants two possible inferences:

4. Listener represents that Speaker may have no intention to make Listener believe that Oriane likes Listener

5. Listener represents that Speaker may have no prior belief that Oriane likes Listener as well as the associated causal inference:
[6] Listener infers that Speaker’s intentions (whatever they are) are not what caused [1]

In other words, to the extent that the listener represents the speakers intentions (or beliefs)
about the state of affairs, she also represents, in this particular case, that these intentions are
not involved in the processes that made the speaker produce his specific statement about that
state of affairs.

Ostensive detachment is a privative argument

This detailed, perhaps cumbersome description of pragmatic inferences is necessary to
describe the potential epistemic effects of divination. In particular, it makes it possible to
formulate more clearly our main hypothesis concerning the use of detachment cues:

[h1] Ostensive detachment cues produce epistemic effects, not by providing reasons to
hold a statement true, but by removing expected reasons to doubt its veracity.

Ostensive detachment is not by itself an intuitive criterion of truth for our spontaneous
pragmatic inferences. The fact that the speaker’s beliefs were not involved in determining the
content of an utterance, is compatible with the utterance being entirely true, entirely false, or
anything in between. So why are procedures with ostensive detachment associated with a
guarantee of truth?

The hypothesis proposed here is that, in many circumstances, people expect that statements
about a particular state of affairs are influenced by the speakers' intentions, and that these
intentions may be distinct from simply expressing a truth. As we described above, this
expectation is common even in everyday conversation, and it makes sense given that our
minds evolved in situations of intense communication, with the ever-present risk of deception.

The hypothesis presented here, then, is that the removal of expected doubts provides
divination statements with a relatively higher epistemic status (that is, more reliability) than
other available statements about the situation at hand. What matters is that the diagnosis is
not produced by the diviner him/herself, which makes it more reliable than ordinary
statements, by virtue of being less unreliable.
This implies that (all else being equal) the perceived credibility of divination statements should be a direct function of the perceived reality of detachment. For instance, a statement read off the patterns of tea-leaves is all the more convincing, if the diviner states what patterns will mean in advance, and if it seems difficult to see how one could influence those patterns, how one could get the leaves to go this way or that. Flipping a coin is a powerful detachment cue in most contexts, as most people have no representation, how the coin’s movement could be influenced. Note, again, that this effect does not require that people have a representation, that the coin cannot be influenced by the thrower. All that matters, here, is that they have no available representation that it can be influenced.

Divination as reported speech: possible but not required

*Reported speech: divination described as influenced by remote agents…*

The claim that divination only provides privative epistemic cues – it suggests the absence of a reason to disbelieve, rather than provide a reason to believe – stands in contrast to some common anthropological descriptions and interpretations of the practice. In particular, the present model contradicts the widespread view, that clients trust divination statements because they construe those statements as produced by a speaker other than the diviner, by the gods, ancestors, spirits or other forms of superhuman agents. This interpretation of divination is so entrenched that in some classical sources it was mentioned as the essential feature of divination, defined as “the endeavor to obtain information about things future or otherwise removed from ordinary perception, by consulting informants other than human” (Hastings, Selby, & Gray, 1917) cited by (Beattie, 1964, p. 44).

Given that ostensive detachment (“It is not me who says this…”) is so frequent in divination procedures, this interpretation would suggest that clients treat the statements as a special case of reported speech, not “the situation is this…”, but “[others state that] the situation is this…”. In this common interpretation of trust in divination, one assumes that:

[a] the clients believe that the ancestors (or other such agents, gods, spirits, etc.) know the underlying facts (e.g., witchcraft) behind an observable situation (e.g., illness).
[b] clients also believe that by using divination procedures, diviners allow these superhuman agents to determine the contents of the statements, and finally
[c] clients conclude that these statements are therefore reliable.

There is of course some apparent support for this view, notably in the fact that people in some places actually do state that the ancestors make the pebbles move, or the gods make the dice come up in a particular pattern. Kuranko diviners for instance describe themselves as transmitters of messages from ancestors (Jackson, 1978, p. 124). But is it valid as a general explanation of divination?

…But divination works fine without the hidden agents

This common interpretation of the cognitive effects of divination is fraught with difficulties, the most important one is that it provides no explanation for the very frequent situation in which people trust divination, yet do not entertain any belief that ancestors or gods or other superhuman agents are responsible for the divinatory statements. That is clearly the case for many forms of divination in modern societies, where people for instance trust clairvoyants, have their future read in the palm of their hands, or consult tarot cards, without ever representing that any superhuman agents are involved in these processes. Indeed, a large number of people in such societies do not even think of superhuman agents as being involved in their lives at all, yet they trust divination procedures.

Note that this is also the case, at least for some clients and by-standers, in the small-scale tribal communities described in classical ethnography. There may be people among the Zande who think that the ancestors talk through divination, but Evans-Pritchard’s text suggests that most of them seem content with the simpler view that the oracles themselves reveal the truth (Evans-Pritchard, 1937). Among the Fang as among the Mambila, people will say that the spider reveals what is going on (Mallart Guimerà, 1981; Zeitlyn, 1993). Other individuals may conclude that the spider is relaying messages from ancestors, but no-one seems to need this additional assumption, in order to judge divination statements more reliable than other available information.
Indeed, the blunt statement that divination “speaks”, without any reference to superhuman agents that speak though it, is common in many forms of “mute” divination in many classical civilizations. Ancient Chinese divination used the patterns of cracks on burned tortoise shells to formulate diagnoses and predictions, without mention of agents talking through these patterns. Mesopotamian omens relate exceptional circumstances, e.g., the birth of monstrous animals, to subsequent events like droughts or floods (Bottéro, 1974; Loewe, 1981). In both civilizations and in many other cultures, people interpreted such signs as portents without assuming that they consisted in communication from superhuman agents.

So the involvement of superhuman agents is not necessary for people to trust divination procedures. As Zempléni puts it, “the reference to [superhuman agents] matters much less than the demonstration of a human speaker’s withdrawal” (Zempléni, 1994, p. 242). In the standard interpretation of divination, this is inexplicable.

A more realistic interpretation: Intuitions with (optional) reflective explanations

In the present model by contrast, there is nothing necessary in the involvement of external agents. The hypothesis is that people attend to the detachment cues provided by diviners, and infer that a particular speaker's intentions are not involved in producing the statement. That produces a relative epistemic difference between such statements and those obtained from other sources.

So we must distinguish between two kinds of mental representations potentially activated in the context of divination procedures:

[1] Participants entertain some intuitive representation that the divination statement is more reliable than other possible sources of information about a particular state of affairs. This representation is intuitive, that is, entertained without an explanation or reasoning of why it occurred or why it is valid.

[2] As a second step, it is possible that people also entertain deliberate, reflective representations of the reasons why they have this intuition that divination statements are reliable. That is, people may also be in a situation in which they attempt to justify or explain that specific intuition, to others (e.g., in answer to the question, “Why do you trust this
divination statement?”) or to themselves. This implies reflective, that is, deliberate and explicit reasoning.  

This reflective explanation may take different forms, depending on prior representations that happen to be common in one's cultural environment.

One way to explain one's own intuitions is to associate divination with representations of agents with exceptional cognitive powers. Ancestors or gods or spirits are commonly described as, e.g., seeing what ordinary humans cannot see or forecasting what ordinary humans are uncertain about, especially on matters relevant to social interaction (Boyer, 2000). So representations of such agents may be activated, as involved in producing utterances about inscrutable states of affairs. That produces the situation in which divination is interpreted for instance as ancestors (or gods) talking through the procedure.

That is clearly not the only possible reflective interpretation. People may also consider that the situations themselves cause the diagnosis. That is, they may interpret the divinatory statements as an index of the underlying reality. In that view, what the diviners are suggesting to clients is the possibility of a direct connection between the situation to be diagnosed, on the one hand, and the statements about that situation, the diagnosis, on the other. That is, the very fact that the grandfather is engaging in witchcraft against his grand-daughter causes the pebbles in the divination séance to turn up the way they do, just like fire reliably causes smoke. This kind of indexical link is often implied in diviners’ or clients’ discourse about diagnosis – for instance, stating counterfactuals that suggest a causal link, e.g., “the cards could not possibly have said x if it was not the case that x”, a counterfactual that suggests a causal link, although it does not entail it (Boyer, 1990, pp. 61-78).

A third, and perhaps most frequent pattern, is that people simply do not represent the reasons for the divination's epistemic status at all. That is to say, they have the intuition that statements produced through the divination procedure are more reliable than other sources, but do not reflect on the question, why they have that intuition. This is indeed the most common effect of intuitive representations. We entertain them but do not reflect on their origin.
Why would detachment have a positive epistemic effect?

Hypothesis [h1], that ostensive detachment produces an intuition of epistemic quality, may seem unintuitive. In most contexts of conversation, people trust a speaker’s statement about matters they cannot directly investigate, as a function of a) the speaker’s perceived competence, as well as b) the fact that the speaker would suffer costs if his or her statements were false – at a minimum, one would be seen as unreliable source. But ostensive detachment seems to remove both criteria, as it excludes the diviner’s competence as well as his or her responsibility.

However, under specific conditions, ostensive detachment may have positive effects. The important point here is that in any actual situation, epistemic evaluations are relative, not absolute. In other words, what happens in people’s minds is not that they compare the actual statements produced (in this case, the divination statements) to statements that could be produced under ideal conditions. What they can do, as the ethnographic evidence suggests, is compare available potential statements about some state of affairs, that is, the divination statements on the one hand, and what can be obtained from other sources, in the situation concerned.

That is why hypothesis [h1] only obtains in a situation in which access to information about the actual state of affairs is very limited, and in practice comprises a) divination sources and b) possibly tainted, and therefore clearly unreliable sources. Consider for instance the lover who pluck petals to find out whether her feelings are reciprocated. In the present interpretation, such a procedure may seem (ever so slightly) persuasive to the lover who has no other source of information than her intuitions. As soon as the lover can have a better source, e.g., by reading the beloved’s private diary, she will probably ditch the petals as a way of guessing the other party’s feelings. The epistemic value of divination is relative, and may trigger positive epistemic effects only to the extent that other sources are worse.

In this interpretation, then, the use of divination procedures only has a relative argumentative value. That is, people have an intuition that a statement produced by the procedure may be of high epistemic quality, only because they can represent that statements produced by other means would be of lower quality. An implication of this argument would
be that divination procedures will seem all the more appropriate, [a] if the presence of such obstacles is highly salient in the minds of potential clients, and [b] if the matter at hand makes the presence of such obstacles particularly costly. These factors may be crucial in understanding why divination is in some social contexts central to decision-making.

Why makes divination important: Costs and coordination

As mentioned in introduction, divination is practiced in most human societies, and in some of them is of great social and political importance. In places where divination is officially sanctioned, where it is considered a legitimate way of acquiring guaranteed information, the procedures are generally used only for important matters. As Meyer points out, Lobi people never ask questions from divination “out of pure intellectual curiosity or just because [they] do not understand a certain phenomenon” (Meyer, 1991, p. 95). From the literature, we know that the procedures are used mostly to provide information about salient cases of misfortune (illness, accidents, broken marriages, death, bad crops, etc.), and to help in decision-making, e.g., to determine where to build a new house, whether to clear a particular field, where to go hunting, whether to marry a particular individual, and so forth – see lists of such situations in (Evans-Pritchard, 1937; Mendonsa, 2000; Zeitlyn, 2012).

But the fact that a question is “important” is of course a very vague description, that does not by itself entail that a procedure should be followed to generate statements about the state of affairs. So there must be more specific features of situations, such that divination may appear compelling to many people in a group.

Relevant parameters of communication

To get a more precise description of what makes these situations “important”, we can consider in abstract terms the possible values of different parameters concerning the situation, statements about it, and their consequences.
Parameter 1. Are the underlying facts easily discovered?

Information about some states of affairs (e.g., whether someone is sick, whether a hunting expedition was successful) is easily acquired at a low cost. By contrast, some states of affairs are extremely difficult to ascertain, either because the matter is inherently inscrutable (e.g., who used witchcraft to attack the diseased person?) or because it lies in the future, e.g., Will our camp prevail in combat? Will this hunting expedition be successful?

Parameter 2. Do the underlying facts matter to the parties involved?

There are of course many situations of social interaction for which the underlying facts do not matter. For instance, I might tell you that the cab driver smiled at you because she was happy, or because she likes people of your ethnicity. You will probably not expend resources trying to establish which is the correct explanation. But in many social situations the opposite is true. Knowing what really happened, what others really want, what they really know, knowing who did what and when, may be of crucial importance.

Parameter 3. Do the underlying facts matter to third parties?

Third parties are people besides A who makes a statement and B, the object of the description. After someone states that Oriane likes Marcel, the social world includes a) those third parties to whom the true state of affairs is indifferent, and b) those for whom the underlying facts do carry potential costs and benefits, e.g., Basin who is married to Oriane, Albertine who was planning to marry Marcel, and so forth.

Parameter 4. Is talk cheap or consequential for the speaker?

Talk is cheap when it does not carry consequences for the speaker. For instance, saying that “Oriane definitely likes Marcel” carries no cost if you can plausibly deny you ever said it, or if you say it strangers who do not know either Oriane or Marcel. By contrast, if you make that statement, and it turns out that Basin (to reprise the example) divorces Oriane as a consequence, you may be on the hook for having broken their marriage. That was expensive talk.
Parameter 5. Is there a benefit in agreement?

In some forms of social interaction, there is an advantage for all parties to agree on a similar representation of a situation. Half of their social world think that Oriane like Marcel, the other half do not believe it. That seems to have no effect on much of their social interaction. By contrast, a string quartet will perform much better if they agree on which piece of music they are supposed to play. A hunting expedition is efficient only if participants coordinate their behaviors.

Special values of communication parameters

Each of these parameters can take different values in different situations of social interaction. I will argue that a particular combination of conditions, i.e., values of these parameters, creates a situation in which many people may find divination compelling.

[Condition 1] The underlying facts are inscrutable.

People generally use divination when other ways of finding out the underlying facts are out of reach. There is no easy way of knowing whether or not your mother-in-law used witchcraft against you, whether tomorrow’s battle will be a massacre, whether there is game on the other side of the hills, etc. This is so obvious that the point is rarely made is description of divination. When people have some other way to find out the underlying facts, they do not use divination.\(^4\)

[Condition 2] The underlying facts are consequential.

This too is obvious, and for that reason rarely mentioned. People may use divination to decide where to go hunting. In their view, there are underlying facts as to the relative value of different hunting grounds, which impact the future benefits from the endeavor. People consult oracles to decide whether to build a house or clear a field in a particular location, because they assume that the underlying favorable or unfavorable qualities of the place will carry costs and benefits.
[Condition 3] Underlying facts have third-party cost-benefit implications.

Consider for instance cases of misfortune, in places where it is commonly explained by witchcraft. When a particular individual is identified as the probable witch, that person, or their household or lineage, are required to perform specific rituals, offer reparation, build a shrine, etc. In some places people may be executed for alleged participation in witchcraft, but even in less dramatic cases the costs can be very high. Retribution in most small-scale societies takes a civil rather than penal form – that is, people identified as responsible for other agents’ misfortune will have to pay, in resources or in labor. There are also potential reputational costs, as being involved (however unwittingly) in witchcraft may impact people’s apparent reliability or trustworthiness, or simply suggest to others that interacting with them is risky.

[Condition 4] There are costs in making statements about the underlying facts

This is crucial in small-scale communities, as many anthropologists have noted. Expressing the opinion, e.g., that a particular individual is involved in witchcraft, or even that a specific unfortunate occurrence is due to witchcraft, may be risky. For instance, relatives of the accused individual may rally against the accuser, or third-parties may think that the accuser is trying to deflect attention from her own involvement. That is why, in most small-scale communities, such accusations are typically made public only after many private conversations, during which people gauge each other’s opinions and potential strategic alignment (Douglas & Evans-Pritchard, 1970). In some cases, the consequences are so dire, that the only people who make statements about witchcraft are the parties directly involved – victim and “unwitcher” (Favret-Saada, 1980).

This condition obtains in decision-making by divination as well, e.g., deciding where to go hunting. Whoever recommends a particular course of action may be held responsible for the damage incurred if the decision was the wrong one. There is also a potential reputational cost here, as recommending what turns out to be the wrong decision, is an index of incompetence.
[Condition 5] **There is a general benefit to having a unique diagnosis.**

In some situations, it is advantageous for many individuals if there is not just a diagnosis of the underlying facts, with their implications in costs and benefits, but also a unique diagnosis. This is because of features [3] and [4]. In most situations, different individuals may propose different interpretations of what is happening, what underlying facts explain the observed situation. But as each such interpretation would imply costs for some other person, it is always possible that a coalition of that persons’ allies may form against the person who proposed it. This would predict that no-one ever makes statements about such situations. But that would be costly too. For example, in groups where misfortune is by default explained in terms of agents, the fact that no diagnosis is proposed implies that everyone carries some cost, as everyone is potentially involved. By contrast, divination procedures produce a unique diagnosis. As Kiernan puts it, a “diviner’s pronouncement expresses and fixes the authorized version of what must have really happened” (Kiernan, 1995, p. 18).

This benefit of a unique diagnosis is of course even clearer in the case of divination for decision-making, e.g., to go hunting East or West. One of the hunting grounds may turn out to be better, but it is crucial that all members of the hunting party go to the same place. In this case, the participants are engaged in what game-theory describes as a coordination game, a form of interaction in which several courses of action may be available, and it matters less, which is taken, than the fact that all take the same (consider e.g., choosing which side of the road to drive on).\

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**Hypothesis: Conditions [1-5] lead people to favor divination**

My hypothesis is that conditions [1-5] make divination socially important in some groups:

- When conditions [1-5] obtain, most members of a group are likely a) to prefer a divination-produced diagnosis to other available sources, and b) to prefer that other members of the group also entertain preference a).

Why is that the case? Consider a simple, prototypical case of illness, that most people in a community expect to be caused by some witchcraft, with the consequence that the individual
identified as the witch must perform specific rituals and pay a fine. In such a situation, because of conditions [2-3], who is identified as the witch obviously matters to each single individual. However, this is also a situation in which all statements might be interpreted as motivated by the speaker's own interests – that is what condition [4] expresses. As described above, a straightforward ordinary statement like “She dislikes you” is likely to trigger an automatic search for motives, because of our epistemic vigilance systems. This applies a fortiori to statements about momentous matters, e.g., who is responsible for some individual’s misfortune. Different people may have different interpretations of who is responsible and what should be done. In principle, all these interpretations are equally plausible.

Now given the alternative, between a collection of opinions, that is, statements that one can interpret as influenced by the speakers' self-serving motives, and a form of statement that is ostensibly detached from anyone's intentions or even beliefs, the latter should appear intuitively preferable. Again, to explain this we do not need to assume that people have prior beliefs in the way divination works, or consider that it is inspired by agents with omniscience. All that is needed to produce the epistemic effect of divination is that all other available sources of diagnoses about the situation appear intuitively less reliable. That is probably why in many societies people travel a long distance to consult a diviner with no connections to their own social environment (Myhre, 2006, p. 319; Silva, 2014, p. 1179). In the perspective presented here, there is no positive reason why far-away diviners should be more reliable, but some reason to expect local ones to be potentially biased, therefore less reliable.

The same interpretation applies, in a more straightforward manner, in cases of decision-making about inscrutable matters, typically based on future contingents, e.g., “we will win the battle if we attack tonight” or “the hunt will be successful if we go West”. In such cases, condition [4] obtains because people who recommend a particular course of action are naturally considered (at least partly) responsible for the outcome. They can therefore have a clear intuition that a recommendation that ostensibly comes from no-one in particular, is preferable to anyone's recommendation.

The connection between ostensive detachment and the social impact of divination is nicely illustrated by Zeitlyn's comparison of highly similar divination procedures among the
Mambila and Banen in Cameroon. Among the Mambila, spider divination is highly rule-governed, and clearly seen by participants as excluding the diviner’s intentions. The Banen by contrast use spider divination in a much looser form, as there is a long delay between question and divinatory answer, and the interpretation is more open-ended (Dugast, 1960). In other words, the cues of ostensive detachment are much less salient and compelling among the Banen. As Zeitlyn points out, this difference in techniques may explain why divinatory diagnoses are used in traditional courts among the Mambila, but not among the Banen (Zeitlyn, 1993, p. 231).

Implications of a strategic model

*Different epistemic value of different procedures*

The model proposed here describes social interaction around mechanical divination. As mentioned before, there are also more “inspired” practices, e.g., when diagnoses are produced by a person in a trance. And people use ordeals and the observation of natural omens to obtain information about inscrutable states of affairs. These different types of divination may also include the kind of strategic interaction described here.

Consider ordeals for instance. In many societies in history and across the world, an accused party can be exonerated if they accept to drink a poison (or engage in some equally dangerous behavior) and survive the ordeal. Those who die in the process are pronounced guilty, and so are the ones who refuse the ordeal or flee before it can be enforced. To outsiders, the practice may seem to violate the crucial goal, to produce a satisfactory correlation between guilt and punishment. However, as the economists Leeson and Coyne argue in their description of poison ordeals in Liberia, the efficiency of ordeals should be estimated, not against an ideal discovery process unconstrained by information costs, but against actually available alternatives. Ordeals produce ostensibly impartial diagnoses at a low cost, especially if compared to a corrupt, expensive and inefficient state judicial system, as in the Liberian case (Leeson & Coyne, 2012). Also, given that accused parties often prefer to avoid the ordeal and flee, such procedures provide the extra advantage that they rid the community of an individual
that most people did not trust any more. So it is clear that ordeals may be culturally successful when they provide a diagnosis that is credibly not related to any party's interests and intentions. But ordeals may be less convincing than other forms of divination, because the procedure is all vulnerable to manipulation.6

In the case of inspired divination and possession, there may be similar difficulties. The diagnoses produced are held as guaranteed statements, only to the extent that participants (clients and third parties) consider possession as a detachment cue, that is, they expect that the possessed person is genuinely incapable of controlling what he or she is saying. But the expectation may be more or less certain. In some places, most possession is seen with suspicion, while elsewhere most participants accept that the actual person is effectively controlled by another agent. Indeed, participants' intuitions about this may vary from time to time within a single session. For example, in her description of possession in an Afro-Brazilian healing community in Belém, Emma Cohen provides details of the many subtle cues people use, moment by moment, to infer detached authorship, that is, establish that an agent that is not the speaker is controlling his or her statements (Cohen, 2011).

*Divination helps decision-making, but does not make it better*

The anthropologist O.M. Moore argued that divination for collective endeavors could optimize decision-making. The argument was inspired by the procedures used by foragers like the Naskapi of Labrador, who use the patterns of cracks on burnt bones to decide where to go hunting, in the absence of reliable information about the distribution of game in different places (Moore, 1957). According to Moore, the fact that decisions are effectively randomized by divination, as no-one can control the patterns, makes for better decisions than people's preferences that might be influenced by past successes (Moore, 1957, p. 71). Moore speculated that this could be a functional feature of divination, as random decision-making may in many domains constitute an optimal strategy. Against this, other anthropologists provided evidence that divination, when it is used for such decisions, rarely constitutes the only factor, and that, when it is used, it does not really result in better hunting expeditions (Vollweiler, 1983).
But, if divination is non-functional, why use it at all? The present description of the strategic environment (conditions [1-5]) may provide the answer. Moore’s intuition was certainly right, that the effective randomization of decisions is crucial here, and that it is crucial because it excludes various people’s preferences. But the point is not that chance procedures result in better decisions on average. A more parsimonious explanation is that a) divinatory decisions are nobody’s decisions, and that b) that fact in itself is intuitively perceived as advantageous. Hunters face decision under uncertainty (condition [1]), there are potential costs to making the wrong decision (condition [2]), but they may bear the responsibility for poor returns if they advocate what turns out to be the wrong decision (condition [4]). In these circumstances, people would intuitively perceive that a hunting decision that is not their (or anyone else’s) responsibility does not carry these potential costs, and therefore is epistemically better in the sense of being less bad.

*Private doubts combine with public certainty about divination*

We often find in ethnographic reports that divination is described officially, explicitly, as guaranteed truth – yet people, as mentioned above, do not in practice seem to follow the deductive implications of such pronouncements. They frequently accept that a particular diviner may turn out to be incompetent or a fraud, or that the procedure may sometimes be defective. As Meyer Fortes pointed out, the very fact that divination procedures are mechanical may lead people to maintain a critical attitude towards specific results (Fortes, 1966, p. 414). Holbraad points out that many individuals in Cuba are “agnostic or half-hearted spirits” as far as Ifá oracles are concerned (Holbraad, 2012, p. 89), yet people assert that Ifá divination “does not lie” and cannot even make mistakes (Holbraad, 2009, p. 85). In a similar way, Kuranko people (Sierra Leone) do register prediction failures, seen as evidence for particular diviners’ incompetence, while they describe the technique as infallible (Jackson, 1978). This contrast between general certainty and specific doubts was often mentioned in the rationality debates, as it seemed to suggest that people held incompatible beliefs (Hollis & Lukes, 1982; Wilson, 1970).
However, the discrepancy between people’s assertion that divination never errs, and their acknowledgment of specific failures, suggests that we should not mistake statements like “divination is always accurate” for the direct expression of propositional beliefs. It is probably most parsimonious to interpret such statements as the expression of a norm, a description of a state of affairs which ought to be true in (unspecified) optimal circumstances. Such norm-as-fact statements are quite common, e.g.:

“Marines do not surrender”
“A Scotsman never lies”
“We of the Essono lineage never marry the Mevindi”

which are all expressed as factual generalizations, but obviously express a desirable norm rather than a general observation. Those who make such statements know all too well that some Marines have surrendered, that many a Scotsman has lied, and that supposedly excluded marriages did occur. Indeed, it is against the background of such reality that people feel the need to re-assert the norm by rhetorically presenting it as a fact.

People may be motivated to present their trust in divination as stronger than it actually is, as the observation of a fact, because of the strategic interaction described here. We should expect that in many situations where divination carries important social consequences (because conditions [1-5] apply), there would emerge a pattern, whereby doubts remain private, whilst people’s overt statement maintain that the procedures are reliable. That is because of the costs and benefits of coordination described above. If conditions [1-5] obtain, once a divination statement is produced, there is a general benefit (as well as, in most cases, an avoided cost) for most third-parties in accepting that the underlying state of affairs is accurately described by the divinatory diagnosis. It follows that in most cases there is also a benefit in making this acceptance public. For the coordination effects to be present, it is necessary, not just that most third parties accept the diagnosis, but also that most of them know that most others accepted it – a standard requirement for any coordination norm (Bicchieri, 2006, pp. 11-28; Lewis, 1969).

A public statement, to the effect that a particular diagnosis is valid, implies for those who hear it that the diagnosis was valid because it was produced by divination, in other words that
divination is a reliable way of producing guaranteed information. So third parties’ motivation to take divination diagnoses as agreed and have other third parties do the same, would result in everyone apparently accepting that divination cannot err.

*What makes divination unimportant*

If this strategic model is valid, then divination should appear less compelling, when any of the [1-5] required elements listed above are absent or weakened. Obviously, if there was no situation of uncertainty (condition [1]) there would be no reason for divination. But social life always presents people with such situations in which we must make a choice under uncertainty (condition [1]), and it matters which choice we make (condition [2]).

The other parameters, notably [3] and [4], may vary a lot between different times and places, and take on very different values in many modern mass-societies as compared to small communities. Modern technology, welfare systems, a relaxation of kinship ties, and many other features of modern societies reduce the extent to which the choice of a particular interpretation of someone’s misfortune will affect third-parties (condition [3]). This in turn affects parameter [4], the extent to which there may be costs in recommending this or that course of action. Large-scale communication in mass-societies has that consequence, that people are very often in situations in which they may recommend some course of action, without being held responsible for what happens when their recommendations are taken as a guide for action.

As an illustration of the contrast, consider the change observed by Favret-Saada in her studies of the French Bocage. Her fieldwork in the 1970s documented people’s motivation to explain recurrent misfortune as witchcraft, typically as the machinations of jealous neighbors. Various divination procedures were used to identify the culprit. Crucially, the “announcer” who revealed to some individual that he had been attacked, and identified the witch, was by that very fact involved in fighting the aggressor, and committed to attack him with the same magical weapons supposedly used against the victim (Favret-Saada, 1980). That is, in the domain of witchcraft one could not be a disinterested witness, one had to choose one’s camp. Twenty years later, this dynamic was largely gone, mostly as a result of urban migration, as
people were not stuck with the same neighbors anymore. One could still interpret one’s misfortune as a spell cast by some aggressive outsider, and consult a soothsayer to make sense of the situation (Favret-Saada, 2015). But people did not hold the expectation anymore, that anyone who makes a statement about the situation was therefore implicated in that very situation. In other words, third parties could now offer diagnoses of witchcraft without bearing responsibility for what would happen if people believed them.

Another major factor that varies between societies is condition [5], concerning the potential benefits of having a focal point for decision-making. In a small-scale community, the way a certain case of illness is handled carries potential costs and benefits for most third-parties. In the same way, the decisions people make about which way to go hunting are fraught with possible consequences for most people. So there is a benefit in having a specific diagnosis about the situation, as long as all agree (at least overtly) that that is the right diagnosis, and all agree to act on the basis of that diagnosis.

But in mass-societies, that is much less the case. That is, there are almost no costs or benefits associated with handling a specific case of misfortune, beyond the immediate family or friends of the patient. To that extent, a procedure that provides a focal point is just not necessary, and therefore may appear less compelling. Adding to this effect, obviously, is the fact that modern societies also provide some extremely convincing diagnoses, e.g., on the basis of biomedical medicine, that can be used as focal points in reactions to misfortune. These diagnoses are authoritative (most people agree that they carry greater guarantees of truth than ordinary opinion) and therefore provide the focal points for coordination, without the need for additional procedures.

**Good gimmicks in cultural evolution**

Divination is found in the most diverse cultures and as far back as historical records can document. Divination procedures are successfully transmitted from generation to generation, passed on from one community to another, and periodically re-invented. In other words, they constitute a cultural attractor, a specific position in conceptual space, that is more likely than others to be occupied by actual behaviors and representations, therefore a recurrent theme in
different cultures (Claidière & Sperber, 2007; Sperber, 2006). Why is that the case? Why is divination culturally successful?

Two main mechanisms contribute to the cultural success of divination procedures. First, our epistemic vigilance systems automatically assume that people’s interests influence many of their statements, especially when the stakes are high. A procedure that removes people’s control over their statements, produces an intuition that those statements are less unreliable than ordinary ones. Second, in many circumstances, particularly in small-scale groups, people intuitively represent the benefits of reaching focal points for coordination, either an agreed version of what some underlying facts are, or an agreed version of what should be done next. Both of these factors make it likely that people will carry on making use of divination procedures, if they are available, and that they will use the ones that have been used previously, as they seem to generate the desired public agreement.

This model should not be taken to suggest that divination is “functional” in the sense of classical anthropological functionalism. For a behavior or an institution to be functional in that sense and for the model to be a functionalist one, we would have to assume a) that the use of divination provides some social benefit and b) that this particular benefit is what makes the practice persistent (McCauley & Lawson, 1984; Tambiah, 1990). In the case of divination, both claims would be clearly misguided. Divination can create many divisive claims, counter-accusations, etc., that disrupt social cohesion, as well as contribute to group unity in other cases. Providing a focal point for coordination may or may not result in actual coordination, and that coordination may or may not be advantageous.

More important, even when the practice may sometimes have positive results, that is clearly not the reason why it is sustained. People use divination, not because of real or expected social benefits, but because it seems intuitively clear, in a specific situation, that they need guaranteed statements about a state of affairs, and that a procedure does (perhaps) provide such guarantee. Not much more is needed for the practice to become culturally widespread.
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References


NOTES

1 These assumptions and inferences are of course defeasible – that is, they are held as provisionally valid, until additional information completes, expands or contradicts them. For instance, given an additional fact:

[8] Listener represents that Speaker is a devious manipulator there may be a different set of consequences from the utterance, for instance:

[1] Speaker utters “Oriane likes you”

[2] Listener represents that Speaker intends that Listener believe that Oriane likes Listener

[9] Listener represents that Speaker does not believe that Oriane likes Listener.

2 For a more precise description of the intuitive/reflective distention, and its connection to various “dual-process” models of cognition, see (Mercier & Sperber, 2009; Sperber, 1997).

3 Holbraad comments that this causal inference would not be sufficient. Specifically, he argues that the interpretation of diagnosis as caused by the situation “motivates not the proposition that divinatory verdicts need to be taken as indices, but only the tautology that, were the verdicts to be so taken, they would be assumed to be true” (Holbraad, 2012, p. 89). But this seems to misunderstand the cognitive processes involved, which are not tautological, and the present formulation may help dissipate the misunderstanding. The claim is that ostensive detachment cues create an intuition of statement veracity (or rather, higher probability of it being true than other sources), which being intuitive does not carry an explanation of why one has that intuition. One possible explanatory interpretation of
that intuition, on the part of people who may be motivated to explain their own intuitions, is in causal terms, describing the diagnosis as possibly caused by the situation.

Zeitlyn mentions a rare case of diviners using the technique to ask altogether trivial questions to which they know the correct answer, e.g., “Did I have dinner today?”. But they do this only to test the divination procedure, to make sure that the session is going to deliver reliable statements about important and inscrutable matters (Zeitlyn, 1993, p. 227).

In more precise terms, the simplest form of a coordination game is one in which the players have a choice of two strategies a and b, and the payoffs are similarly high for both players if both choose a or both choose b, and similarly low if they choose different strategies (a, b or b, a). This results in multiple Nash equilibria (for pure strategies, that is, either always choosing a or always choosing b). The situation described here (hunters deciding where to go) is of course more complex in some ways, as more parties are involved and there is uncertainty about the payoffs. But the situation is also simpler than pure coordination games, because hunters represent all outcomes of cases where players choosing different strategies, as equally bad, and equally bad for all participants, which is why different choices are equally rational.

There is no clear evidence that the poison prepared for a specific session can actually kill – so third parties may suspect that the poison has been specially doctored to make sure that it will either kill or spare the accused party. Similarly, a decision to flee rather than face trial may index either guilt, or the accused party's belief that the legal process is biased and the conclusion foregone.