

Why Divination?

Evolved Psychology and Strategic Interaction in the Production of Truth

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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, for example, 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.

Introduction

Worried lovers pluck the petals from a flower to find out whether they are loved in return. People consult tarot cards or tea leaves to figure out their professional situation. The proper place to build a house, the best day to celebrate a 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 and Evans-Pritchard 1970; Johnston and Struck 2005; Struck 2016). Why is that the case?

q2

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

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

2. 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, for example, dice, pebbles, bones, playing cards, etc., according to preexisting rules determines the contents of divinatory statements; (b) “inspired” divination in which an individual is supposedly possessed or otherwise influenced by another (often superhuman) agent; and (c) the observation of omens, natural phenomena produced without any human intervention, but that often require interpretation by a specialist. However, anthropologists concur that these are different types, not exclusive categories (Devisch 1985:52; Tedlock 2006:65).

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 Myhre 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 2006:313).

But the fact remains that people hold a diagnosis produced via divination, at least provisionally, as more likely to be accurate

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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 and 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 interest between individuals, so that it may be in one agent's interest to convey information that is not accurate but that might lead others to act to his or 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. 2010:369). 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 4- to 6-year-olds attend to cues of incompetence and infer that sources are unreliable (Fusaro and Harris 2008; Harris and Lane 2014), and they find arguments from reason more persuasive than arguments from authority (Castelain et al. 2016). Children also attend to what can be inferred of people's intentions, and they prefer to receive information from sources that are benevolent as well as competent, being suspicious of information from agents that have exploited others (Couillard and Woodward 1999; Liu, Vanderbilt, and Heyman 2013; Mascaro and Sperber 2009). They, for instance, have an intuitive understanding of the fact that self-descriptions can be strategic and therefore deceptive (Gee and 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 and Heyman 2007; Liu, Vanderbilt, and Heyman 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, for example, that a particular utterance is not reliable. Now, we can also engage in deliberate, explicit reasoning about sources, for example, representing that "as she said *p* yesterday and non-*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, for example, 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 or 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 consist 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 not just 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, 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, and (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 and 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 2008:82). 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 2014:1179), or, as the Bunyoro diviners put it, "this is not something I made up for myself" (Beattie 1964:48). 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, that is, 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 2016:189). In the case of inspired divination, for example, 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 Goffman called a participant’s “footing” in the conversation, his or her expected role (Goffman 1981:124–129). 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 (Goffman 1981:226). In the case of divination procedures, the person who utters a statement conveys information that he or she should not be misconstrued 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 1994:241).

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 the listener to believe it. All these are fairly straightforward inferential processes expected in (and in fact required by) conversation (Grice 1991 [1967]; Sperber and Wilson 1996). 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 speaker’s 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:

- Hypothesis 1. Ostensive detachment cues produce epistemic effects, not by providing reasons to hold a statement true, but by removing expected reasons to doubt its veracity.

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.

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 (i.e., more reliability) than other available statements about the situation at hand. What matters is that the diagnosis is not produced by the diviner himself or 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 of 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 infor-

mants other than human” (Hastings, Selbie, and Gray 1917, cited by Beattie 1964:44).

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 1978:124). 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 bystanders, 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 1976 [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—for example, 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 1994:242). 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.²

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, for example, 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

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

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 granddaughter 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 such as, “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 1990:61–78).³

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 of 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 1, that ostensive detachment produces an intuition of epistemic quality, may seem counterintuitive. 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

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 2012:89). 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.

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, on the other.

That is why hypothesis 1 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 plucks 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, for example, 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 the 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 1991:95). 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, for example, 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 [1976 (1937)]; Mendonsa [2000]; and the author's reply in 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, for example, 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 to 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 likes Marcel, and 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, that is, 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 in 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 that 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.

4. Zeitlyn mentions a rare case of diviners using the technique to ask altogether trivial questions to which they know the correct answers, 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 1993:227).

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, is 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, for example, 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 and 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, for example, 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 conditions 3 and 4. In most situations, different individuals may propose different interpretations of what is happening and 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 1995:18).

This benefit of a unique diagnosis is of course even clearer in the case of divination for decision-making, for example, 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).⁵

q5

Hypothesis 1. Conditions 1–5 lead people to favor divination.

My hypothesis is that conditions 1–5 make divination socially important in some groups.

q6

Hypothesis 2. 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 inter-

5. 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, i.e., 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 are choosing different strategies as equally bad, and equally bad for all participants, which is why different choices are equally rational.

ests—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, for example, 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 2006:319; Silva 2014:1179). In the perspective presented here, there is no positive reason why faraway diviners should be more reliable but some reason to expect local ones to be potentially biased and 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, for example, "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 the Banen in Cameroon. Among the Mambila, spider divination is highly rule governed and is 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 1993:231).

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, for example, 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, which is 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 and 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 anymore. 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, to establish that an agent that is not the speaker is controlling his or her statements (Cohen 2011).

6. 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.

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 1957:71). 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 nonfunctional, 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 toward specific results (Fortes 1966:414). Holbraad points out that many individuals in Cuba are “agnostic or half-hearted spirits” as far as Ifá oracles are concerned (Holbraad 2012:89), yet people assert that Ifá divination “does not lie” and

cannot even make mistakes (Holbraad 2009:85). 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 and 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 that ought to be true in (unspecified) optimal circumstances. Such norm-as-fact statements are quite common, for example:

Marines do not surrender.

A Scotsman never lies.

We of the Essono lineage never marry the Mevindi.

These 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 reassert 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 while people's overt statements 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 2006:11–28; 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 one to five 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, but 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, for example, 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 reinvented. 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 and therefore a recurrent theme in different cultures (Claidière and 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 and Lawson 1984; Tambiah 1990). In the case of divination, both claims would be clearly misguided. Divination can create many divisive claims and counteraccusations, 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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Comments

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It is a great pleasure to see Pascal Boyer's brilliant mind at work. He sees things in such unexpected ways that people often do not understand his work at first—and then the thing they thought they knew suddenly seems different and never looks the same again. He did that for religion and he is doing it again for thought.

The basic insight of this paper is that the core intuition that supports the remarkably widespread practice of divination is non-self-authored thought—or, to use his words, thought that is detached from its apparent generator. The psychic speaks, but what she says is not the product of her own mind. The person who pours the benge poison into the poor chicken's throat uses words to describe an outcome, but the verdict is not determined by what she herself has thought. The great rebbe Menachem Schneerson speaks, but, being dead, not in an ordinary way. His followers ask a question and get an answer by thrusting their notes arbitrarily into the pages of his correspondence. What the querent infers then is not understood to be a thought that originated in the querent's mind. This novel observation—that divination is intuitively compelling because the knowledge is de-authored (or in his words, ostensibly detached) strikes me as absolutely correct.

I would place these observations into what one might call an ecology of thought: a study of the common human intuitions about thought and the way thoughts are interpreted differently in different worlds. (We might also talk about this as an "anthropology of mind.") Developmental psychologists show us

that as a child grows, that child gradually changes her intuitions about how her thought works.

The classic experiment is the False Belief task, which younger children “fail” and older children “pass.” A child looks at a doll house. The researcher makes one doll (often called Sally) place an object in a drawer and then leave the room, after which another doll (often called Ann) moves that object to another hiding place. Then the researcher asks the child this question: When Sally returns to the room, where will she think the toy is hidden? Younger children point to the second hiding place because that is where the toy actually is. The standard interpretation of this behavior is that the younger child presumes that all people know what the child knows—what the child takes to be true about the world. Older children understand that the doll Sally does not know that the toy has been moved, and so they point to the first hiding place.

But the False Belief task is only one of the many shifts humans experience as they age. Young children learn that people can say one thing and mean another (they can be sarcastic or ironic), that they can hide what they think, that it can be rude and wrong to say out loud or even wonder about what someone else may be intending, and so forth. They learn that wishing does not affect the world and that thoughts are private and entirely their own.

What the anthropologist can see is that humans still have conflicting intuitions about the nature of their thoughts. Consider wishing, or what we might call “mental causation.” We know that as children age, they become increasingly persuaded that wishing will not change the world. Yet all of the most secular among us has had moments in which we behaved as though we felt that wishing could indeed change the world. (Just consider the last presidential election.)

I think that Boyer is building an argument that religion, magic, and our experience of the supernatural in general are built out of the way our social world supports these conflicting intuitions. This is, in a sense, an old idea in anthropology, but when Tylor and his cohort set out to explain how specific intuitions undergirded religion and magic, they did so in clunky, psychologically naive ways. Boyer is anything but naïve. His model of the way religious concepts are transmitted is based on a sophisticated understanding of the way that humans draw inferences in general. What I find exciting about this current work is that it sets out to identify thought features that are associated with culturally specific ideas.

Boyer’s observations capture something deep about the way specific cultural idioms are associated with the way people make judgments about the experience of thought. Humans do not in fact always experience thoughts as generated by themselves. This is true of people with psychosis, of course; one of the symptoms of psychosis is that thoughts not one’s own have been placed in one’s head. But it is also true of healthy humans. Paul McCartney, for instance, is said to have wondered whether he had heard the song “Yesterday” on the radio, because when he woke up one morning the tune was running through his mind. In other words, he interpreted the new song

as not his own. Thoughts that we experience as spontaneous are more likely not to feel like ours. And that experience can be cultivated. When I spent time with evangelical Christians who sought to hear God speak, they identified thoughts that were spontaneous (and that had some other characteristics, like being the kinds of things they thought God would say) as more likely to come from God and not themselves. The more they sought to experience these kinds of thoughts, the more they thought they did. Boyer is arguing that this general condition of some thought—their non-authorship—is associated with effective divination. Again, I think this is not only correct but important. It is time that anthropologists turn their attention back to thought, and the human intuitions about thinking are given cultural meaning. I suspect we will find—as Boyer has been pointing out—that they lie at the heart of religion.

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Divination as Polling

In this insightful article, Boyer provides a novel and convincing explanation for the cultural prevalence of divination practices and for the form they most often take. Crucial to his argument is ostensive detachment: the fact that divinatory statements are nearly never attributed to an actual human agent. Boyer argues that ostensive detachment removes the strongest reason people have, in such situations, of doubting a statement: that the individual making the statement is self-interested. I would like to offer a minor amendment to Boyer’s theory that I believe might help solve two remaining puzzles.

The first puzzle is that people believe divinatory statements at all. Boyer argues convincingly that the removal of cues to self-interest through ostensive detachment makes divinatory statements more convincing than other potential statements. However, I am not sure that this would be enough to make the statements convincing at all. Work on epistemic vigilance suggests that people need positive reasons to accept a statement rather than merely the absence of reasons to reject it (Mercier 2020; Sperber et al. 2010). A statement might be more convincing than others and yet still not be convincing enough to warrant grounding a decision (let alone an important one).

The second puzzle is that it seems ostensive detachment is far from being maximized in most cultures. In many societies, an individual delivers the statements. Even if the statements are supposed to have been authored by a supernatural agent, and if the practitioner enters an unusual state (trance), the practitioner still retains actual control over the statements. By contrast, other procedures appear more objective—such as heads or tails, or the various procedures that rely on objects

and transparent rules for interpreting them. Why isn't this latter type of procedure dominant?

A potential solution to both puzzles is that most divinatory statements reflect the preexisting beliefs of the stakeholders—the relevant community members, with their beliefs potentially weighed by their power. After all, it would be odd if divinatory statements could influence an important decision in a direction no one likes.

If it is true that divinatory statements tend to be endorsements of a popular position, this explains why people appear to accept them: they have no reason to exert strong vigilance since they already agree. Those who might have disagreed with the statement can see that most others agree with it and believe the majority (or a powerful minority), or at least know better than to voice their disagreement.

When deciding whether to accept a statement, people reject by default, in the absence of positive cues that they should do otherwise. By contrast, when deciding whether to utter a statement they believe to be true, people judge the statement to be suitable by default, and look for reasons why it might be rejected (Mercier 2020). As Boyer points out, ostensive detachment removes the most salient cues for why a statement might be rejected, making it suitable for all to utter.

Seeing divinatory statements as endorsements of a popular opinion also solves the second puzzle. A truly random procedure would only provide outcomes convergent with popular opinion half the time (at best). By contrast, a skilled practitioner can tell which way the wind is blowing. Indeed, we can surmise that the practitioners who are rejected by the community are rejected precisely because their statements failed to capture popular opinion.

As Boyer mentions, a common anthropological perspective on divination is that members of a culture learn from their elders that divination is an epistemically reliable practice. This leads them to accept specific divinatory statements produced by such a practice. In the present view of divination as (informal) polling, the causality between beliefs in specific divinatory statements and beliefs in a divinatory practice in general is reversed. Most divinatory statements would fit with people's intuitions, and this would then lend credence to the practice. Divination as informal polling thus appears to be much more consistent with work on epistemic vigilance, which suggests that people are not generally credulous (Mercier 2017, 2020). Instead of credulously accepting that a seemingly random practice can produce epistemically sound statements and accepting these statements in turn, people would be carefully evaluating the statements and only lending credence to the practice when it produces statements deemed true or useful (even if only as justifications for anticipated decisions).

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Always Get a Second Augury

Boyer's intriguing theory of divination practices states that recourse to divination is likely when a group needs to settle an issue with one single verdict, implying that divination practices are particularly apt at yielding such verdicts. This, I argue, may be true but cannot simply be assumed. Preventing divination practices from producing multiple, contradictory verdicts requires solving nontrivial coordination problems. Specific cultural inventions like extispicy could be analyzed as partial solutions to that problem.

In this excellent proposal for a general theory of divination, Boyer lists five conditions that explain its appeal. The first four are straightforward: people use divination on inscrutable issues whose important consequences affect more than one or a few individuals, when the issue's sensitive nature makes it highly risky for any one person to adjudicate it. The last condition seems less evidently relevant: divination is favored when "there is a general benefit to having a unique diagnosis." "Divination procedures," Boyer claims, "produce a unique diagnosis." He cites Kiernan (1995) to back the claim that a "diviner's pronouncement expresses and fixes the authorized version of what must have really happened."

Certainly, diviners often manage to do exactly that. They settle an issue in a way that their audience considers (at least publicly) authoritative and final. But how do they achieve this? Consensual adhesion to a single diagnosis is not an outcome we can take for granted. Yet it is key to divination's capacity to adjudicate sensitive issues. A theory of divination that simply assumes it cannot be complete. Nothing, after all, prevents divination procedures (as defined by Boyer) from producing multiple diagnoses. "Always ask a second diagnosis" is a prudent habit for a patient. Why not get a second augury?

Divination tools are everywhere, and many of them are cheap. From tea leaves to birds' flight to burnt bones, nearly anything has been or can be used for divination. Most techniques (though not all of them; see below) are cheap enough to be reused many times, yielding multiple diagnoses ad libitum.

Divination techniques, or their outcomes, are easy to criticize. Many oracular practices yield an output that is essentially random. This virtually guarantees that for any divination technique one might think of, failed or nonsensical predictions will readily come to mind. Indeed, skepticism is common, as Boyer notes.

Consensus over one single diagnosis may benefit a group, but not every individual inside of it. Two categories of persons may stand to gain from questioning a divination procedure. The first group contains people for whom the decision has adverse consequences. In the second group we find individuals who have a stake in the status quo that a decision (any decision)

would break. (Imagine, e.g., a regent ruler whose successor must be designed by diviners.)

All in all, these elements make dissensus over divination easy and, for some, appealing. Opponents of the consensus may choose to criticize divination at any level: one particular verdict might be tainted, but it could also be that the whole procedure is invalid. Another option is to produce other oracles that provide contradictory answers. Last, one may directly corrupt a ritual specialist. These ways of “cheating” divination are of course not perfect. They may not suffice to get others to believe one’s favorite answer. Yet they can undermine trust in a specific diagnosis, muddying the waters thoroughly enough to preserve the status quo.

How can this be avoided? I do not deny that many societies managed to design and maintain divination practices capable of commanding a broad consensus. The worry is that we do not seem to know how they achieve this; nor can we tell why some societies will fail at this task when others succeed. The problem will not be solved here, but I sketch two candidate explanations below.

Prior coordination. The easiest way to make sure that a divination procedure will yield one and only one authoritative verdict is simply to obtain from every participant a prior commitment not to question the oracle’s verdict, whatever it may be. Since participants are under a veil of ignorance, and most are more likely than not to benefit from the outcome, the incentive to commit is substantial. Still, we should not assume this coordination problem to always be solved. As we saw, there may be individuals, or entire groups, who stand to lose a lot from any status quo-breaking decision. These are likely to be outnumbered by the majority, but on the other hand, the stakes may be much higher for the minority than they are for the majority, leading to a collective action problem that can paralyze coordination (Olson 1965).

Making divination rituals materially or symbolically costly. One solution to this coordination problem can be built directly into divination rituals. Ritual specialists may spread the belief that their preferred and most reliable techniques may be tainted if repeatedly used. Mesopotamian extispicy is a case in point (Koch 2010). It was materially costly to perform (requiring the sacrifice of an animal) and symbolically costly, as a diviner was only “allowed” a total of three guesses for each question (asking more was thought to invite divine wrath). Ritual specialists also promoted extispicy as the only legitimate divination technique on certain important issues. These features of extispicy might explain its success and subsequent spread in the ancient world. Their impact, however, depended on the ritual specialists’ capacity to secure a monopoly over divination—another coordination problem.

Boyer’s exciting theoretical proposal makes precise, testable predictions regarding the nature and spread of divination techniques. Yet other interesting predictions may come up if we consider the coordination around a single authoritative diagnosis not as an intrinsic feature of divination practices but as a challenge to be overcome.

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Why People Rarely Divine by Flipping Coins

By asking how divination triggers psychological mechanisms for evaluating reliability, Boyer has developed a promising approach for explaining the form and ubiquity of these practices. He has convincingly shown that people trust procedures more when diviners appear less likely to cloud interpretations—that is, when they are “ostensively detached”—and that this detachment shapes the form of divination practices everywhere. Nevertheless, focusing on ostensive detachment distracts from the many other (and in some instances, more important) mechanisms by which divination promotes apparent reliability.

To appreciate the failure of ostensive detachment to alone explain divination, consider flipping a coin. According to Boyer’s account, flipping a coin should be the ideal divinatory technique. Someone who wants to learn whether a nasty neighbor bewitched them should visit a coin-flipping oracle. The oracle should state, “Heads—your nasty neighbor bewitched you; tails—they didn’t.” They should flip the coin and display for the paranoid protagonist the outcome: “The coin has spoken.”

This scenario epitomizes ostensive detachment. There is no clear opportunity for misdirection, no mysterious rune whose interpretation the oracle might misrepresent and through which they could indulge their own interests. Boyer says that divination becomes 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.” A transparent coin flip satisfies these conditions.

I know of no examples of coin-flipping divination. People flip coins to randomize and choose fair solutions, such as to determine which team should have the favorable starting position in a football game. But it is harder to locate examples of people flipping coins to obtain inscrutable information (see Taiwanese *poe* divination and the coin method of consulting the *I Ching* for close, but much more complicated, divination practices; Chen 1972; Jordan 1982).

If coin flipping is so rare, then what are common divination methods? In the absence of a more systematic study, I tallied up the frequency of several practices in the electronic Human Relations Area Files (eHRAF) World Cultures database, which comprises ethnographic documentation for 315 societies. I restricted my searches to ethnographic passages manually annotated for “Revelation and Divination” (OCM code 787). The results, which should be treated as suggestive and preliminary, appear in table 1.

Of those paragraphs with information about revelation and divination, only one contained the search terms *coin** and *flip**—and rather than discussing coin flipping, it described possession. Meanwhile, searches targeting *haruspicy* (deciphering entrails),

Table 1. The frequency of several divination practices in the eHRAF World Cultures database

Search criteria in eHRAF World Cultures	Number of paragraphs	Number of cultures	World regions
coin* AND flip*	1	1	Africa
entrail* AND examin*	38	19	Africa, Asia, Europe, South America
augury* AND bird*	69	16	Africa, Asia, Middle America and the Caribbean, Middle East, North America, South America
possess* AND divin*	539	125	Africa, Asia, Europe, Middle America and the Caribbean, Middle East, North America, Oceania, South America

Note. eHRAF = electronic Human Relations Area Files. All searches were restricted to paragraphs tagged for "Revelation and Divination."

augury (deciphering bird behavior), and possession yielded orders of magnitude more paragraphs.

The widespread nature of these practices challenges Boyer's claim of the centrality of ostensive detachment. Unlike interpreting a coin flip, reading innards or bird behavior is subject to greater distortion. Specialists who decipher guts and behavior likely enjoy considerable leeway in translating the source into useful information (see fig. 1).

The frequency of augury and haruspicy indicates that ostensive detachment by itself fails to explain divination; instead, it is one of several mechanisms by which divination procedures create reliable-seeming results. Other likely mechanisms include the following:

1. *Exploiting unexplained events in the natural world.* Humans are predisposed to expect that (a) events in the world, especially salient or important ones, have simple explanations, and (b) those explanations are relevant to them (Banerjee and Bloom 2014; Gray and Wegner 2010; van Prooijen and van Dijk 2014). People seem to think, for instance, that an eagle that zigs instead of zags does so for a reason that they should care about. A specialist can exploit this bias, connecting a client's concerns (e.g., whether warfare will come) to events that seem to transcend randomness.

2. *Exploiting beliefs about supernatural agents.* As Boyer points out, people everywhere believe that supernatural agents have information people lack. A procedure should then become more reliable-seeming if it apparently channels those agents' knowledge.

Boyer argues against this second mechanism. He notes that people often use divination without discussing invisible agents and concludes that "the involvement of superhuman agents is not necessary for people to trust divination practices." But again, different divination practices can use different devices to build reliability. Some divination practices seem to derive their credulity from claiming communication with the supernatural, such as when a medium becomes possessed by a spirit and the channeled spirit is asked about the upcoming harvest (e.g., Blacker 1975). Others, in contrast, such as market forecasting, clearly do not involve communing with supernatural agents (Johnson 2018).

Mechanisms 1 and 2 both raise the question of why a person should believe the specialist. One answer is ostensive detachment: a diviner can show a client that they have little influence over how a phenomenon is interpreted or how the spirits' messages are communicated. A specialist might also appear to transform or have special expertise:



Figure 1. Haruspicy (divination using animal entrails) in two societies. A, A Mentawai shaman (Indonesia) reads the intestines of a sacrificed chicken (photo credit: Manvir Singh). B, Nyangatom elders (Ethiopia) read the intestines of a goat for information about conflict with the Turkana (photo credit: Luke Glowacki).

3. *Apparent transformation.* A specialist can use performances to apparently become an entity distinct from normal humans, capable of accessing special knowledge (Singh 2018). The specialist might convince a client that they can channel a supernatural figure (e.g., in the case of possession [Lewis 2003]) or that they can commune with them (e.g., in the case of soul journey shamanism; Eliade 1964). This mechanism is most relevant when people believe that inscrutable information can be procured from supernatural agents (mechanism 2).

4. *Expertise.* A specialist might convince clients they have special knowledge. For instance, they might appear versed in esoteric texts or familiar with complicated computational methods that allow them to predict financial markets.

Given these mechanisms, then why is flipping coins rare? One hypothesis is that the outcome of a coin flip, in contrast to the flight of birds or the shape of intestines, seems less significant, less likely to reflect some underlying important event to which diviners can connect clients' concerns. Regardless of whether this accurately captures why coin flipping is rare, my broader point has been that a focus on ostensive detachment, while insightful, downplays the many other mechanisms involved in enhancing reliability. Divination practices are methods of procuring otherwise unattainable information, and the devices they use to create compelling conclusions are manifold.

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Why Not Divination? Less Bad Than . . .

Focusing primarily on mechanical divination, Pascal Boyer proposes to explain divination's attraction. The central claim is that divination has an intuitive epistemic advantage due to ostensive detachment. The problematic usages of "epistemic advantage" and "ostensive detachment" render the content and import of this claim somewhat inaccurate, though. Focusing likewise on mechanical divination, I discuss this issue with the aim of contributing to Boyer's thought-provoking model.

A client (*C*) consults a diviner to obtain information to address a problem (*IP*). The procedure to produce *IP* may involve the manipulation of objects (pebbles, spiders, etc.) or not, as when the procedure is purely inspirational (possession) or simply observational (interpretation of omens). It may involve mutually manifest interpretive rules or not, as when the rules are opaque to *C*. Mechanical divination is a procedure with object manipulation and mutually manifest rules. I distinguish the author or ultimate source of *IP* (*S*) from the operator of the procedure (*O*).

Boyer uses "ostensive detachment" concerning *O*'s control over the content of *IP* (operator control aspect), *O*'s interests

in biasing *IP* (epistemic vigilance aspect), and *O*'s verbal communication of *IP* to *C* (verbal communication aspect). However, the discussion concerning the verbal communication aspect seems misguided, and anyhow, only the operator control and epistemic vigilance aspects relate to the central claim.

Suppose *C*'s wife is ill. *C* suspects his mother is bewitching his wife and consults *O* to find out if his mother is the culprit. The procedure involves poisoning a fowl. The mutually manifest rule is this: if fowl dies, mother is witch; if fowl lives, mother is not witch. Against *C*, *O* administers the poison. *C* and *O* see that the fowl dies (therefore, *IP* = mother is witch). *O* utters "your mother is the witch."

Apparently, *C* spontaneously infers the informative and communicative intentions related to *O*'s utterance (Sperber and Wilson 1996). However, Boyer claims that because *C* does not take *O* to be the author of *IP* ($O \neq S$), the following default inference is blocked: *O* intends *C* to believe that his mother is the witch. This seems doubly misleading. There is not a default tendency to interpret *O*'s utterance as a straightforward assertion: the interpretation is always context relative. In this type of context, *C* spontaneously understands *O* as reporting the *IP* transmitted by *S* qua the procedure itself, qua a personified element of the procedure (among the Azande, *O* would ask, "*Poison oracle*, is *C*'s mother bewitching *C*'s wife?"), or qua a supernatural agent controlling the procedure.⁷ Moreover, one should not assume that *C* always understands *O* as distancing himself from the *IP* reported. Often, *C* understands *O* as endorsing *IP*, which admits the aforementioned inference.

To demonstrate the irrelevance of the verbal communication aspect to divination's intuitive epistemic advantage, it suffices to notice that *O* may have not uttered "Your mother is the witch" (*IP* was shown by the fowl's death) and that, in many divination cases, $C = O$. In reality, the operator control and epistemic vigilance aspects alone elucidate the central claim. *C*'s decision to use the divination procedure was driven by cues that the procedure precludes *O* to control the content of *IP*, which implies that *O*'s interests could not influence *IP*, which in turn calibrated the computations of *C*'s epistemic vigilance mechanisms (Sperber et al. 2010), delivering an intuitive advantage to the procedure: the removal of potential deception fostered the intuition that the procedure would produce true *IP*. The computations were relative in that the intuitive advantage was an advantage in contrast to other sources of *IP* deemed more prone to deception (e.g., *C*'s father, who is always on the side of *C*'s mother). Now, since the divination session did not disconfirm cues, implication, and intuition, *C* accepts *IP*, asserts *IP* to other people, and directly accuses his mother.

Boyer uses "epistemic advantage" in a literal sense, as above, and in another sense, as in this passage about the advantage of utilizing divination to make a hunting decision: "epistemically

7. Divination involves minimally counterintuitive aspects (Boyer 2001) related to *S*'s transmission of information that make it salient and memorable, but this is another issue.

better in the sense of being less bad.” This other sense is only loosely connected to epistemic badness (lack of truth). Moreover, using “epistemic” in this sense implies that epistemic vigilance mechanisms are always the main force behind divination’s attraction, contrary to what the hunting example itself indicates. Boyer does propose that coordination mechanisms also may be important but appears to assume that when these play a role, they are a supplement. Actually, more than two types of psychological mechanisms may deliver the intuition that it is advantageous to use divination, and with different forces.

Suppose Cs do not know where to go hunting. They have exactly the same interest (big game) and know they need to hunt together to be successful. But nobody wants to propose a direction since they do not want to put their neck on the line: if one’s recommendation is followed and no game is found, one may be blamed and have one’s reputation stained. They use divination to settle the direction (*O* is one of the Cs). Here, divination’s intuitive advantage does not come mainly from epistemic vigilance mechanisms (no conflict of interests is at stake), but from coordination mechanisms (Duguid et al. 2014) and reputation management mechanisms (Barclay 2016). Suppose Cs are the dwellers of a village handling a murder case, but with limited evidence. They fear the retaliation that may come if they incriminate the suspect, the impending revenge from the victim’s family, and the conflict escalation that will surely ensue. They use divination to establish the murderer. Here, the intuitive advantage relates to mechanisms attuned to the risk of retaliation and conflict escalation (McCullough, Kurzban, and Tabak 2013).

Divination’s intuitive advantage in these examples is not mainly epistemic (about the procedure’s *IP*’s truth). It con-

cerns benefits from using the procedure that are independent of *IP*’s perceived truth value, including benefits unconnected to coordination, strictly speaking (e.g., protecting one’s reputation). Moreover, when divination’s intuitive advantage is mainly epistemic, it may not come exclusively from epistemic vigilance mechanisms. In the bewitching example, *C* decided to use divination also because he did not want to accuse his mother unfairly—she might be innocent. In other words, the intuitive epistemic advantage was reinforced by procedural fairness mechanisms requiring unbiased evidence to attribute culpability (Bøggild and Petersen 2016).

Briefly, distinct types of mechanisms deliver distinct types of intuitive advantages, although verbal comprehension mechanisms are not part of the picture. These intuitive advantages inform the character of public endorsements of divination’s epistemic related qualities. Figure 2 explicates this final point while tying my discussion.

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Boyer’s Social-Cognitive Theory of Divination among the Azande

The target article offers a convincing example of cultural attraction theory at work for a classical anthropological subject, one of the best examples since Bloch and Sperber’s treatment of the mother’s brother controversy (2002). Boyer’s explanatory model makes testable predictions about divination, which

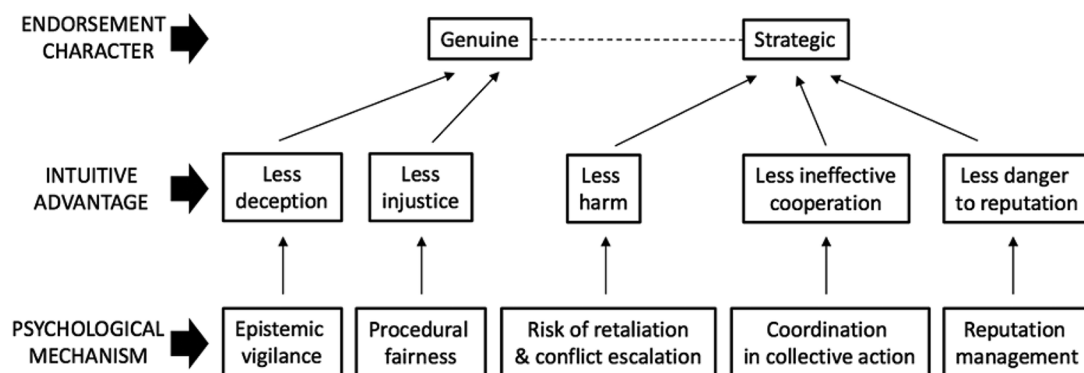


Figure 2. One may need information to address a specific problem. Depending on the nature of the problem, different psychological mechanisms may be activated, delivering an intuition that it is advantageous (less bad) to use a divination procedure in contrast to alternative procedures, including other divination procedures, or a lack of alternatives. Some intuitive advantages (like the two on the left) relate to the epistemic quality (i.e., the truth) of the information produced by the procedure. Other intuitive advantages (like the remaining ones) relate to benefits from using the procedure that are independent of the epistemic quality of the information produced. Endorsements of the information produced (or of the procedure’s truth reliability) have a genuine character when based on the former type of intuition, and a strategic character when based on the latter type. Since different psychological mechanisms may be activated (and with different strengths) in the same individual or across individuals, individual or collective endorsements may have a mixed character (and with one main character). The fact that collective endorsements of divination can have a mixed, albeit mainly strategic, character may shed light on the fact that these endorsements sometimes appear to express some sort of collective self-deception.

I will analyze using one of the most detailed anthropological accounts of divination—Evans-Pritchard's ethnography of Azande oracles (1976 [1937]).

Boyer argues that evolved mental inclinations to avoid deception and misinformation explain why divination outcomes are intuitively appealing given their detachment from human intentionality. A derived hypothesis is that a higher ostensive detachment of the divination leads to increased trust in its veracity. We can compare three types of Azande oracles used to detect witchcraft: the rubbing-board oracle, witch doctor seances, and the poison oracle. The amount of detachment between operators and oracle indeed correlates with the perceived accuracy of divination.

A man trying to discover a hidden state of facts would first perform himself a private divination using a rubbing-board oracle to select between different possible scenarios. But Evans-Pritchard observes that it is quite easy to manipulate the contraption toward a desirable result and that interested operators often influence results either consciously or unconsciously (1976 [1937]:114, 153). Given the likely my-side bias of the rubbing-board oracle and its incomplete detachment from human intentionality, this is the least trusted form of divination, and more serious decisions require more trusted oracles.

Higher veracity is associated with third-party divination where clients call on witch doctors to perform a seance to discover the source of misfortune. Usually these performers do not have a vested interest in the outcome of divination, but that is not always the case. Witch doctors may be seen as unreliable, as in the case of a witch doctor who included a personal enemy among those singled out for suspicion, something the other witch doctors immediately perceived as self-serving slander (1976 [1937]:79). Divination by witch doctors is deemed more accurate than the rubbing-board oracle, but its results are still provisional and liable to errors given the less-than-perfect detachment between divination outcomes and the intentionality of performers.

The most trusted form of divination (1976 [1937]:39) is the poison oracle, whose ostensive detachment surpasses the first-person-operated rubbing-board and the third-party witch doctors. A fowl is given poison, and its death or survival indexes the underlying but hidden state of facts. Significantly, this last type of divination displays an intensive preoccupation with randomizing causal mechanisms, from testing the poison's strength to counterbalancing mutually opposed questions. (One may observe an uncanny similarity with scientific methodology of validity and reliability of surveys or experiments.) Since the poison oracle leaves as little as possible to human intervention, the epistemic vigilance of clients and observers has the least reasons to doubt the veracity of the nonhuman divination.

My second observation starts from the socially selective use of Azande divination (1976 [1937]:46ff). Briefly put, Azande aristocrats are never (and influential commoners rarely) accused, and women cannot use oracles against men. Evans-Pritchard argues that commoners accuse their peers because "a man quarrels with and is jealous of his social equals" (46) and

has few interactions with a prince. However, this cannot explain why aristocrats do use divination against suspected commoners and why women cannot suspect men in close social proximity, while men can and do often accuse women of witchcraft or infidelity. Thinking along the model proposed by Boyer can offer a better interpretation of why Azande do not employ divination when certain conditions do not obtain. Taken together, Boyer's conditions 3–5 are only satisfied when aristocrats or commoners test commoners and men test men or women, but not when commoners or women suspect aristocrats, respectively, women.

Evans-Pritchard writes that "princes, however jealous of each other they may be, always maintain class solidarity in opposition to their subjects and do not allow commoners to bring contempt upon any of their relatives" (1976 [1937]:86). "Although Azande will tell one privately that they believe some members of the noble class may be witches, they seldom consult the oracles about them so that they are not accused of witchcraft" (9). This suggests that people have private beliefs about princes' witchcraft, but divination cannot be used to make a public claim about aristocrats since the costs of accusing a prince are very high (condition 4) if the accusation creates third-party costs (condition 3) for the prince's patrilineal lineage, which projects a greater power than a commoner's lineage (condition 5).

The same rationale applies for gender asymmetry. Given the patrilineal structure of the Azande, a woman lives with her husband's lineage but does not belong to it. Accusing a man would implicate his lineage directly, while she could only rely on weaker coalitional support derived from her husband's relatives. However, "women are generally bewitched only by members of their own sex" (1976 [1937]:8) and can use private oracles, but they do not have recourse to socially significant divination.

As Boyer insightfully observes, Azande divination is employed not merely because people believe it works but because it is intuitive for certain contexts (but not others) given the costs and benefits of an epistemically detached decision. Azande social organization with its social hierarchies and balances of power between lineages and genders makes divination culturally salient as a coordination point for identifying witches between those backed by coalitions of similar or lower strength, but never up. A fascinating possibility is that, given their structural advantage in terms of coalitional support, the use of divination as an intuitive and apparently nonhuman detection of misfortune by Azande aristocrats and men is a socially legitimate means to further their dominion over commoners and, respectively, women, who cannot accuse them back. Boyer's insights provide social-cognitive mechanisms of consensus making to exploring such a hypothesis.

The hierarchy of trust between different oracles among the Azande and their socially selective deployment support Boyer's model. Divination appears intuitively associated with conspicuous detachment of judgments from human intentionality given epistemic vigilance against deception or misinformation,

and with the stable equilibrium of coordination points given the social costs of decision-making.

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Less Bad

The strength of this paper is the deliberate weakness of the argument. Boyer seeks to establish a minimalist explanation for the wide distribution of divinatory practices across both space and time. There is power in its very weakness: it becomes a provocation for other accounts, for if a minimal explanation can account for many features of divination, then why do we need any more powerful theories?

I share many of the central concerns with Boyer, who has been particularly courageous in attempting to answer the big questions head-on. He raises the issue of how “trust in a divination technique is . . . provided by the divination procedures.” Like Boyer I worry about the circularity of evoking beliefs as justifications. Mambila clients and diviners point to the regular testing as providing the basis for trusting the results: by answering accurately test questions such as “Am I here alone?” (usually when not alone) or “Will I eat food tonight?” diviners can eliminate lying spiders and have inductive justification for trusting those that have passed the tests.

The key to the paper is this: “Ostensive detachment cues produce epistemic effects, not by providing reasons to hold a statement true, but by removing expected reasons to doubt its veracity.” This links to a substantial literature in sociolinguistics that would be helpful: not only Levinson’s (1988:170) elaboration of Erving Goffman on footings but also Heritage’s recent work “Epistemics in Action” (2012).

Although he concentrates on mechanical divination (a distinction that goes back at least as far as Cicero) the argument holds of “inspired” divination: when diviners are possessed by spirits they may be speaking (giving voice or uttering) but they are not the epistemic source of the utterances (Levinson [1988:171] discusses transmission chains). When, for example, “talking in tongues” (or similar), then another person may be required to interpret what has been said. That interpreter can be suspected of manipulating the translation. In the case of possessed diviners who speak intelligibly, the only way to express doubt is to doubt whether they are really possessed: they may be faking after all. The pattern of such doubts is vividly conveyed in David Lan’s ethnography of rival prophets in the context of the war for Zimbabwean independence. This also has parallels with Holbraad’s work on Cuban divination where the results are unquestionably true for real diviners. The worry always is about possible impostors.

There are a few occasions where the writing obscures some important insights: for example, when discussing hunting decisions he says “divinatory decisions are nobody’s decisions.” I think he means, rather, that “no individual is held responsible for the decisions of divination.” This resembles far more the situation in corporations, for example, running care homes found guilty of corporate manslaughter but in which no one can be found to be convicted of neglect. The notion of “accountability” can play an important role here, ranging from conversation analysis to legal process. Accountability means different things in different contexts. From conversation analysis we get the sense of accountability as relating to what needs an explanation (as opposed to what goes without saying) and what a satisfactory explanation consists of: What factors can be invoked? So we might ask, What are the acceptable accounts of why a divination result has gone wrong? Is it a person deceiving, a spirit speaking elliptically, or a procedure not being followed? At the other end of the spectrum we have questions of who might be held legally accountable for the actions (or inactions) of a business. As Boyer points out, “trustworthiness” has a positive and a negative aspect, and sometimes not having grounds to mistrust may suffice rather than there being any positive reasons for trusting.

Reply

Divination as an Attractor in Cultural Evolution

These excellent commentaries, for which I am very grateful, suggest agreement on the important points: (a) that the extraordinary cross-cultural success of divination procedures requires an explanation and (b) that the general explanation for this cultural phenomenon certainly lies in equally general properties of mental function and communication. The commentaries also point to some ambiguities and infelicities in the original formulation—an opportunity to clarify the main points of the cognitive attraction model.

A Cultural Attractor: Detachment Plus Strategic Interactions

The model proposed combined two observations:

1. Humans discovered and periodically reinvent a variety of divination procedures, that is, ways to generate a statement about a situation, without having any individual held as the author of that statement—what we can call ostensive detachment.
2. These procedures can be used in a great variety of situations, from the most trivial to the most momentous. Divination is considered most appropriate, and therefore

people will most likely agree that it should be used in situations where conditions c1–c5 obtain:

- c1. The underlying facts are inscrutable, and consequential to both c2 clients and c3 third parties;
- c4. There are perceived costs in making specific statements about the underlying facts;
- c5. There is a perceived benefit to having a unique diagnosis rather than a diversity of interpretations for the situation at hand.

The combination of these features 1 and 2 constitutes a cultural attractor, a particular combination of mental and public representations that is more likely than others to occur in the same form, in otherwise different times and places—and also more likely to be periodically rediscovered, or corrected by cultural transmission toward the most common variant (Claidière and Sperber 2007). As Tanya Luhrmann observes, this is by no means the only cultural invention that plays upon a dissociation between the individual who emits a statement (or indeed a thought) and the author or owner. Some religious traditions require that people reinterpret their own thoughts as Godsent (Luhrmann 2012). Also, as David Zeitlyn observes, complex gimmicks can be used in corporate life to allow corporation executives to set in motion particular courses of action without being identified as responsible for them.

In contrast to these examples, the divination attractor is very specific. It consists in the combination of two sets of representations, (a) ostensive detachment and (b) its use in situations with a highly particular value for the perceived costs and benefits of statements. The two properties are clearly connected, as Radu Umbres illustrates, using material from Evans-Pritchard's classic study of Zande divination (Evans-Pritchard 1976 [1937]). As Umbres remarks, Zande people use three distinct kinds of divination with increasingly convincing detachment cues, using more "detached" ones when the social stakes are higher. Also, commoners among the Zande are not allowed to use the most "detached" forms of divination against politically powerful aristocrats because ostensive detachment produces authoritative statements, possibly against powerful individuals.

Divination requires some "gimmick" that demonstrates detachment. This is a necessary condition for the cultural success of divination procedures, the feature that makes them different from other possible forms of discourse about a given situation, but it should not be construed as sufficient condition, as Manvir Singh points out. That ostensive detachment is required does not entail that having mere ostensive detachment, in the absence of any other cues, would make divination diagnoses compelling. As Singh illustrates with evidence from the eHRAF database, we find few or no examples of divination rituals consisting in just flipping a coin (or whatever the cultural equivalent would be). Indeed, coin-flipping divination would go against condition 5, that people perceive the need for a unique diagnosis; bare random procedures of this kind would make it possible to generate multiple diagnoses, a point raised by Olivier Morin in his commentary.

Authority Is Not Persuasion

A model of divination should address two questions:

- Q1. Why are divination procedures a cultural attractor? That is, why are they recurrent, with substantial similarities, in different times and places?
- Q2. What makes specific divinatory diagnoses compelling? That is, given a particular situation and diagnosis in a particular place, would people treat the diagnosis as valuable information? What are the general features, if any, of this process?

The answers to these two questions should remain separate, lest we confuse authority and persuasion. As Olivier Morin puts it, "consensual adhesion to a single diagnosis is not an outcome we can take for granted." But the formulation is ambiguous. By consensual adhesion, we could mean (a) the fact that most people state that the diagnosis is accurate, should be trusted, should be considered the basis for further action, etc., or we could mean (b) the fact that people, in fact, consider the statement true. The model proposed here makes clear predictions about *a*, not *b*. It predicts that the various participants have an interest in using a divination procedure and stating that the diagnosis produced is a valid description of the underlying facts. When divination delivers the diagnosis, "It is your deceased father who is trying to make you sick," that statement may or may not persuade people around the patient. All the model says is that they have an advantage in behaving as if it did. But this leaves open the possibility that they are left unconvinced.

Indeed, many anthropologists have pointed to this discrepancy between public and private attitudes to divination statements. I mentioned Holbraad's observation to that effect (Holbraad 2012:89), but there are many other examples. In such cases, people may intuitively grasp the advantages of a consensus statement and the costs of expressing doubts about it, without representing the statement as accurate.

As Hugo Mercier and Paulo Sousa rightly emphasize, ostensive detachment does not by itself create belief. Ostensive detachment may trigger the representation that the divinatory diagnosis is not tainted by possible personal interests and therefore cannot be dismissed as easily as various other individuals' statements. But that does not by itself make people judge the diagnosis true. That is to say, in the terms of Paulo Sousa's chart, we can have strategic acceptance without genuine endorsement of divination statements. My immoderate use of the term "epistemic advantage" is at fault here, as Sousa observes.

Olivier Morin points to another problem having to do with the apparent consensus around divination statements. Given that different participants may have interest in defending different diagnoses, why do communities manage to coordinate (most often) on a single diagnosis produced by single technique? Why not offer alternatives, the equivalent of "second opinions"? Morin suggests that the cost of procedures or a prior commitment to accept the divination diagnosis may be

the relevant factors. Indeed, both are observed. First, especially when the outcomes of divination are momentous, divination is carried out when it is clear that everyone agrees to accept the diagnosis before starting the procedure. In a similar way, politicians in a democracy (are supposed to) accept the legitimacy of elections before knowing their outcome. Second, people do seem to prefer manipulations that are too expensive to reiterate at whim. To take an example from Manvir Singh's illustrations, the requirement to produce large animals' entrails by itself sets a limit to excessive duplication of procedures and therefore eliminates the danger of multiple diagnoses. So it may be the case that condition c5, that people intuitively assess the benefits of a single diagnosis, makes cumbersome or expensive procedures seem more compelling.

Morin is quite right that the question, How do people reach this strategically optimal point, of having only one diagnosis? is an empirical one that would require more fine-grained descriptions, for instance, of the adoption of particular techniques in a particular community and of the resistance to change in divination techniques. That kind of study is certainly desirable. But one should not overstate the difficulty of coordinating on a single diagnosis. Certainly, different individuals in a group may have different interests, so that it may seem to them that a "second opinion," hopefully closer to their preferences, would be a good thing. However, this has to be balanced against the strategic cost of producing such an alternative diagnosis. Consider, for instance, the case of divination explaining misfortune by witchcraft on the part of some individual in the village. True, that particular individual's relatives may prefer another diagnosis because they will have to offer reparations to the victim. However, that cost may be intuitively perceived as smaller than the cost of decreasing the overall level of cooperation in the village, cooperation that will probably benefit those same individuals most of the time. To reprise the election example, politicians will (in a functioning democracy) accept a defeat at the polls rather than call for violence against the elected government because they perceive the expected benefits of a future win as greater than those of an insurgency.

Adding Persuasion to Authority

The ostensive detachment model predicts adhesion but not persuasion. As Hugo Mercier points out, persuasion dynamics show that people believe *p* if you give them reasons for *p* (Mercier and Sperber 2017). Having reasons to reject other possible statements does not by itself add to the credence attached to *p* (unless of course the rejected statement is *non-p*, which is not the case here). In divination about misfortune, participants may be confronted to a situation where all nondivination statements are tainted by self-interest. But discounting these other statements would not by itself make the divination-backed ones more persuasive.

This being accepted, public acceptance of a divination statement is of course all the more likely, if it corresponds to many people's actual beliefs about the situation at hand. That is the

substance of Hugo Mercier's proposal that divination in many cases amounts to a form of "polling." That is certainly true in many cases. We know from the anthropological record that diviners are not entirely naive as to the situation at stake, that they sometimes engage in some surreptitious "nudging," for example, in the precise form of the diagnosis. Even more important, the way questions are formulated strongly suggests the relevant answer in many cases. Some excellent ethnographic studies describe the many rhetorical tricks used by skilled diviners to steer clients toward particular formulations of the questions, which by itself should contribute a lot to the plausibility of the answers provided. As Mercier puts it, "a skilled practitioner can tell which way the wind is blowing."

However, we also have evidence that when people represent the possibility of such knowledge, they tend to reject the procedure. That is, for instance, why clients go far away from their own village to seek a diviner rather than use the local specialist, as mentioned in the article. The point is that the local specialist is suspected of knowing the way the wind is blowing, which undermines the credibility of divination. For the same reason, diviners the world over take pains to demonstrate that their beliefs and intentions are not involved in the procedure, even though they sometimes are.

So it would seem that divination statements are all the more compelling if people actually believe them, while maintaining the (partly illusory) intuition that no one's beliefs were involved in producing them. This combination of ostensive detachment and additional credentials is a very general feature, aptly illustrated by the case of the Orthodox Jewish Lubavitcher who, as Tanya Luhrmann observes, create authoritative statements about particular cases by randomly (ostensive detachment) picking pages in the celebrated writings (credential) of the late, revered Rabbi Schneerson. That is also why diviners and their clients may be motivated to link the procedure to the intervention of superhuman agents, gods, spirits, etc. in places where people already assume that gods or spirits possess crucial strategic information about the world (Boyer 2000).

However, as I mentioned in the original article, these local factors that enhance the credibility of diagnoses are probably not what makes divination a cultural attractor. In other words, we should not confuse questions Q1 and Q2 mentioned above. Divination procedures are recurrent, with similar features, in otherwise very different cultural environments. But those similar features do not include a general bias toward producing statements that agree with people's prior beliefs. They often do, but they may not. For a similar reason, we should not think that superhuman agents have to be involved, lending further credit to divination statements. They sometimes are, and sometimes not, as we see from the many cases of "mute" divination in ancient civilizations or modern divination without gods or spirits.

If all this is correct, locally successful divination traditions, those that have the greatest social impact, may often occupy a sweet spot, so to speak, between the opposite constraints of detachment (that ostensibly disconnects statements from any individual's particular agenda) and persuasion (that requires

some connection between the statement and most participants' agenda). This compromise between requirements would be among the local factors that make a tradition compelling. But in this case and more generally, we should not confuse such local factors with the general cognitive features that turn a set of representations into a cultural attractor, ensuring its recurrence in different times and places (Morin 2016:155–156).

Further Questions

How can we test and refine the model? Manvir Singh is right to suggest that our hypotheses about recurrent phenomena should be tested against the available comparative evidence from such sources as eHRAF. However, one should not overestimate the expected yield from such sources. My own forays into the database suggest that the traits that most matter for our inquiry, in particular detailed descriptions of the strategic interactions involved, are missing from most monographs, as their authors generally focus on the general properties, the principles of each divination tradition. Another route is to test the various cognitive components of the model, concerning in particular (a) the intuitive processes whereby people represent possible strategic interpretations of others' statements (i.e., What's in it for them if this diagnosis is true?), (b) the participants' representations of ostensive detachment (Do they actually expect the operator to have no or little influence on the statements?), and (c) the costs and benefits of authoritative statements about the matter at hand. We can only infer answers to those questions from the anthropological record, so we need the empirical evidence as well.

I described the use of ostensive detachment devices in the service of specific coordination effects, as a cognitive attractor. As Radu Umbres points out, the term only implies that, given the psychological makeup characteristic of our species, we should expect devices of this kind to recur in situations of that kind because divinatory traditions are better transmitted than other combinations of cultural material and are more likely to be reinvented, when they are not already present.

We should not mistake that claim, for the all too tempting and misguided notion that cognitive attractors are attractors because of the benefits—cognitive, emotional, social, or otherwise—that they provide. This functionalist interpretation of recurrent cultural phenomena is extremely difficult to avoid (it is perhaps a cognitive attractor too). Divination procedures are extremely widespread and extremely persistent because some cognitive processes make them appear appropriate and their statements compelling. That is orthogonal to the question of whether those combinations of procedures and statements are in some ways “better” than possible alternatives. They may or may not be so. They are not always better in terms of epistemic quality—as David Zeitlyn reminds us, divination is typically justified in a circular manner, a point that does not seem to bother people too much (Zeitlyn 1988:13). In the same way, divination allows people to find a convenient coordination point in situations where a choice is required but there is a cost

in being responsible for choosing. All sorts of epistemic and social benefits (or losses) may be procured by the use of divination—but what makes such procedures attractive to human minds depends on other factors having to do with the way human minds construe the strategic use of information.

—Pascal Boyer

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