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Peter T. Struck

University of Pennsylvania, STRUCK@SAS.UPENN.EDU

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Abstract

Across the ancient Graeco-Roman world, divination is among the most salient ways in which the power of the divine involves itself in the human world. Of course, one could wait for a miracle, but the gods were talking to us all the time, and it would have been an utterly common occurrence for ancient observers to sense their gods' power emanating through the signs that were understood to course through the world around us. For decades, scholars have positioned these signs primarily as levers of social power. This has made the topic the province of historians and anthropologists seeking to gain a purchase on how those in control, and sometimes those from outside, harness the authority of the divine voice for their own ends. This approach has opened up rich veins of inquiry, with conversations across disciplinary boundaries and between students of different cultures and time periods.

Disciplines

Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity | Arts and Humanities | Classics | Folklore

Iamblichus on Divination

Divine Power and Human Intuition

Peter T. Struck

Across the ancient Graeco-Roman world, divination is among the most salient ways in which the power of the divine involves itself in the human world. Of course, one could wait for a miracle, but the gods were talking to us all the time, and it would have been an utterly common occurrence for ancient observers to sense their gods' power emanating through the signs that were understood to course through the world around us. For decades, scholars have positioned these signs primarily as levers of social power. This has made the topic the province of historians and anthropologists seeking to gain a purchase on how those in control, and sometimes those from outside, harness the authority of the divine voice for their own ends. This approach has opened up rich veins of inquiry, with conversations across disciplinary boundaries and between students of different cultures and time periods.

In a different way, divination was also a topic of study in antiquity, and not just among those who recorded social history. We already know from Cicero's *De divinatione* that the ancients were interested in trying to figure out how it worked. His text, put in the 'for and against' framework of academic scepticism, leaves the misimpression that the question of whether divination worked was controversial. But in fact all the large philosophical schools, except for the Epicureans, took it seriously enough to hand down fascinating ideas about it. Their investigations consistently begin with the observation that some people do indeed seem to have insights into the world that defy explanation by reference to the normal rational systems by which we know things. Faced with people who seem to know things that can't be explained the philosophers begin with the question, 'How in the world do they *do* that?' After sifting through the charlatans, they explore divination as a power or capacity, related to but distinct from our normal cognition, and the question of unravelling it is a

question of discerning where this particular power to see around corners might come from.

For one ancient school of thought, the Neoplatonists of Late Antiquity, the answer is emphatically the divine and the divine alone. Iamblichus, of the late third and early fourth century, hands down the most thorough treatment we have on the subject from his school, in book 3 of the *De mysteriis*.¹ This work is many things. For Ficino, who gave it the title by which it is still known, it was a kind of key to unravelling the secrets of the cosmos. For E. R. Dodds in his Sather lectures of 1950, it was, pungently, 'a manifesto of irrationalism'.² Whatever else it is, Iamblichus' *De mysteriis* is also a dense meditation on the question of divine power. To understand what is at stake in it, and to get a better fix on how Iamblichus configures divine power in his treatment of divination, we need first to set out a general outline of a philosophical conversation on the topic that had been going on for centuries before him.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL CONTEXT

Beginning in the classical period and for many centuries after, philosophers had developed versions of the idea that traditional divinatory methods, to the extent that they produced results beyond bluster, are attempts to harness powers that are built into the nature of things, including the nature of humans. The gods are moved to the background in these accounts, though they are not excised from the story. Plato and Aristotle both focus on dreams and both place a premium on involuntary responses of the body to outside influences. Since divinatory insight clearly does not arrive from our normal, waking modes of knowing, they imagine alternative cognitive systems, paratactic to the customary ones. In Plato's thinking, as he articulates it in the *Timaeus*, the liver functions as the crucial organ and it initiates a process of soothing and steadying the lowest, appetitive part of the soul, so that it can achieve a certain distinctive kind of insight.³ In Aristotle, predictive dreams arrive from impulses that move the sleeper's soul, and are analogous to the lower-order twitchy mode of thinking that is observable in consistently lucky people

¹ On this topic, see Addey 2007 and 2014. I take slightly differing views on the dynamics at stake in Iamblichus' work, but we are in agreement on the profound changes that Iamblichus makes in the tradition.

² Dodds 1951, 287.

³ Pl. *Ti.* 70d–72c. Archer-Hind and Taylor detect irony and a lack of seriousness in the passage, without much argumentation to support that reading. Cornford is willing to take it seriously, as are some recent scholars. See Rotondaro 1997. This passage has also recently received attention from scholars interested in Plato's account of the passions. See Steel 2001, 113; Lorenz 2009, 100–1; Moss 2012.

as well.⁴ During sleep, when the higher soul is numb, we see the lower soul at work, and even the lowest orders of the soul reach for the good, just as plants' roots find water. For both Plato and Aristotle, the divine remains a part of the story, since the world is set up in such a way that even the lowest parts of it manifest an impulse towards the good, and this impulse is attributable ultimately to the divine.

The Stoics speak much more fulsomely on the topic, which they also see to be embedded in the discussion of the natural world of physics, under a divine hue. With some analogy to Plato and Aristotle, they develop a different kind of deeply corporealized idea of where divinatory insight comes from. In their case the pertinent body is not the human observer, but the cosmos as a whole, understood to be the body of a single creature, which has god as its soul. They see divine signs as flowing along the currents of sympathy that connect its various parts. The divine signs fire in the cosmic body, just as symptoms appear in a patient, and they present readable indications for a prognosis. As is not emphasized enough in conversations about Stoic sympathy, the term itself is a physiological one, speaking of 'co-sensation' or a *pathos* that is felt simultaneously in different regions of an organism.⁵

If we step back and look at these philosophers' ideas as a whole, we see the strongest theme running through them is that divinatory insight is a kind of epiphenomenon of physiology, manifesting some kind of a divine hand. The theories focus on the receptivity of bodies to transmit and process the signal, while pointing to a divine aspect to provide the current that makes the messages work. This question, the mix of the corporeal and divine dimensions of how we know through divination, is precisely what is at stake in Iamblichus' *De mysteriis*, book 3. But given the more charged atmosphere created by Late Antique thinkers, who are centrally wrestling with the relationship of the physical and divine worlds, through questions about immanence and transcendence, the traditional questions around divination run into a more polarized world of ideas.

The *De mysteriis* is Iamblichus' defence of a range of rites that he and his followers knew as the programme of theurgy. He writes it as a polemical answer to objections that Porphyry, his fellow intellectual heir to Plotinus, raises in the *Letter to Anebo*. The nature of these rites is not well understood.⁶

⁴ Arist. *Div. Somn.* At only two Bekker pages, the text is the shortest in Aristotle's genuine corpus, and has been much ignored. But it has received recent helpful attention in Philip J. Van Der Eijk's masterful translation and commentary, see Van Der Eijk 2009. See also Gallop 1996.

⁵ Much has been done on the concept, since Karl Reinhardt's work on Posidonius, *Kosmos und Sympathie*. Recently, see the whole collection in Schliesser 2015, and, on the Stoics in particular, the article of René Brouwer, 'Stoic Sympathy' (pp. 15–35), which has helped set the investigation on the question in good order. See also Hankinson 1988; Laurand 2005; Holmes 2013.

⁶ Hans Lewy began modern work on the subject in his *Chaldaean Oracles and Theurgy*, revised and expanded by Michel Tardieu in 1978. See also Sheppard 1982; Johnston 1990; Shaw

Porphyry called them magic, a characterization Dodds endorsed, but Iamblichus emphatically denied that, and spoke of them as a ritual supplement to the general Neoplatonic programme of soteriological contemplative philosophy.⁷ For adherents to Neoplatonism, of course any embrace of ritual and the material world in which it is embedded, risks a problem. Plato had set out the terms, with his view that the things in the world around us are fallen imitations of divine realities. This means that any appeal to the material as a mode of access to the divine will face an impediment, a fact made blisteringly clear in Porphyry's polemic. Porphyry makes strenuous arguments against the theurgic rituals precisely on the grounds that they employ matter. As Irini-Fotini Viltanioti shows in this volume (see Chapter 3), to gather a full picture of Porphyry's views, such critique needs to be squared with his work explicating the use of statues in philosophical assent. Her work reminds us that traditional views about chronological moves away from attachment to statues are unconvincing. Porphyry's direct target is Iamblichus' specific programme, but the argument is so wide-ranging that it amounts to a broadside against any kind of ritual action at all—any of it will rest on a turn to the physical world and so should be avoided. Prominently coming in for criticism from Porphyry is any kind of divinatory rite. In his critique, Porphyry preserves what I have characterized as the general outlook that traditional *mantikê* operated via bodily processes. He characterizes the kind of knowing in which diviners are engaged as one derived from humans' physical natures, which now rest at an opposite pole from what is truly divine.⁸

Iamblichus' answer is fascinating and consequential. First, it has much more in common with Porphyry's views than it is typically taken to have. Like Porphyry, Iamblichus follows earlier philosophical ideas of divination by characterizing the knowledge coming from *traditional* divinatory practices as being centred on functionalities built into the body. Further, he agrees with Porphyry in departing from the tradition by claiming that because of the appeal to the material, the divine power is compromised in such practices. This carries forward the line of thinking on immanence and transcendence in Viltanioti from this volume. Both are asserted. But both the ontological status and the causal power dissipates when the divine is present at the level of the material. The traditional, physically based practices, he says, are at the very lowest end of the continuum, and are an extension of the mundane, human abilities to make predictions about affairs in the material world, in which,

1995. In recent years interest in the topic has ebbed, though work on later Neoplatonists continues. See, for example, Chlup 2012 and the recent edition of Porphyry's *Letter to Anebo* by Henri Dominique Saffrey and Alain-Philippe Segonds. Todd Krulak's chapter in this volume is the most helpful recent advance on the topic of theurgy (see Chapter 5).

⁷ *Myst.* III 25.

⁸ This view is evident throughout the relatively short *Letter to Anebo*. For a text, translation, and commentary, see Saffrey and Segonds.

while the divine is present, it is only a trace. The result carries forward a theme in several contributions to this volume: Iamblichus' ideas on divine power and the place of matter reveal often overlooked similarities with those of Plotinus and Porphyry. The three share a commitment to the idea that divine power is so magnificent that it is still present to matter, as opposed to gnostic views. They also share the idea that recalcitrant matter introduces much noise into the attempt to extract knowledge from it, and that divine power is present more purely in the higher-order, immaterial hypostases. Inferential work with the material world, including divination as traditionally understood, will yield only murky and tentative knowledge.

However, departing from Porphyry (as well as the rest of the philosophers before him), Iamblichus calls a more powerful kind of insight, attributable solely to divine power, a new and surpassing form of *mantikê*.⁹ This is a novelty and upends a long tradition of philosophical thinking that had seen in *mantikê* a mode of human knowing that worked, albeit through brute corporeal nature, under a very diffuse divine inflection.

One can draw two main conclusions from Iamblichus' treatment. First, he helps us fill in our picture of an increasing polarity between the human and the divine realms during Late Antiquity. The utter transcendence of the divinity was increasingly becoming the first premise for understanding just about anything. For the Neoplatonists there was a concurrent insistence on immanence, against Gnostic views. A practice such as divination, built on the idea of actionable links between matter and divine, was bound to get reconfigured when the links between the mundane and divine worlds come under such careful scrutiny. This adds further evidence in support of the nuancing of one standard view in the scholarship on Neoplatonism. Taking this evidence on divination into account we cannot easily maintain that Iamblichus was somehow more ready to embrace matter than his predecessors. He surely is keener than Plotinus to discover how rituals could be still useful, though he is no more quick to think matter itself has any particular insight to offer. In fact, at least in the case of divination, he seems more reluctant than Porphyry is in his work on statues. This case, added to the earlier chapters, shows the variety of strategies the Neoplatonists take to work out their positions, which start from an insistence on both immanence and transcendence. Secondly, and less obvious, this impulse to propose a purely divine form of divination results in a noteworthy development at the other pole. By tucking away true divination in a realm that belongs solely to the gods, Iamblichus leaves behind a

⁹ Porphyry comes to a view congruent but not identical in his *On Abstinence* II 51-2. He sees knowledge from traditional divinatory techniques as compromised by imbrication in the material, and contrasts it with philosophy. Iamblichus, in a characteristic move more amenable to traditional religious forms, keeps the designation *mantikê*, and speaks of this second kind of knowing, removed from the material, as 'true' or 'divine' divination (see section 'Divine and Non-divine Divination').

whole tradition of thinking on a certain kind of human cognition, embedded in physiology, that we see in the earlier philosophers. This now gets reconfigured. With the *divine* power functionally removed, it is now a specifically *human* power to know things in oblique ways. Neoplatonic thinking on divine power has sharpened the categories. When Iamblichus moves the divine out of the background of traditional *mantikê*, where earlier philosophers mostly found a place for it, and says it is crowded out by the material dimensions of such signs, what remains now gets a name. He creates a new, de-divinized realm of lower-order human cognitive power under a notion akin to what modern observers would call intuition, a category that is in fact absent from the Greek philosophical taxonomies of human powers of thinking up to this point—there will be more to say on this in closing. But first, a closer look at how Iamblichus positions true divination as a power belonging solely to the gods.

DIVINE AND NON-DIVINE DIVINATION IN THE *DE MYSTERIIS*

Iamblichus begins his treatment of divination, which occupies book 3 of the *De mysteriis*, by ruling out just about every previous idea for where divine signs come from. He tells us that ‘the origin and governing principle of divination’ (τὴν ἀρχὴν τῆς μαντικῆς)¹⁰

neither originates from bodies, nor from bodily affections, nor from any nature, nor from powers that have to do with nature, nor from human disposition, nor from the conditions that have to do with a human disposition, but neither is it from any acquired external technical practice, performed for some part of the human way of life.¹¹

In place of this series of ideas, Iamblichus proposes that divination works solely because it is a divine gift:

Rather, all of its supreme power belongs to the gods, and is bestowed by the gods...All the rest is subordinate, instrumental to the gift of foreknowledge sent down by the gods: everything that concerns our soul, our body, everything that is

¹⁰ Translations based on Clarke’s, Dillon’s, and Hershbell’s translation, the first modern scholarly English translation. The translators include helpful introductions and notes. I have relied on their text, which is based on Des Places’ edition in the Belles Lettres series.

¹¹ *Myst.* III 1, 14–20: οὔτε ἀπὸ σωμάτων ἐστὶν ὀρωμένη οὔτε ἀπὸ τῶν περὶ τοῖς σώμασι παθημάτων, οὔτε ἀπὸ φύσεώς τινος καὶ τῶν περὶ τὴν φύσιν δυνάμεων, οὔτε ἀπὸ τῆς ἀνθρωπίνης παρασκευῆς ἢ τῶν περὶ αὐτὴν ἕξεων, ἀλλ’ οὐδ’ ἀπὸ τέχνης τινὸς ἕξωθεν ἐπικτήτου περὶ τι μέρος τῶν ἐν τῷ βίῳ διαπραγματευομένων.

inherent in the nature of the universe, and in the particular constitution of each thing.¹²

The negativity in the rhetoric, apparent from this beginning, is the most striking aspect of Iamblichus' ideas on *mantikê*. His discussion is prominently one of limits. Those who have looked to explain divine signs by our bodily natures, by invisible currents in the physical cosmos, by local terrain or atmosphere, by the characters and dispositions of different organisms, or by the natural qualities of the cosmos itself have been misguided. From this starting point, Iamblichus moves on to do something his predecessors had never done. He makes two broad categories in divination, and draws a distinct line between 'true' or 'divine' or 'authentic' *mantikê*, as opposed to the lesser forms of sign-reading, in which he includes most all the traditional forms, that are embedded in the material world. While the material kinds might be explicable using the various theories prior schools and thinkers had proposed, the most intelligible thing one can say about 'true' divine signs is that they come from the gods. This is closer to Homer's notion of how signs work than to any intervening thinker. In levering out legitimate vs. illegitimate forms of divinatory insight, Iamblichus makes use of a vocabulary that is new to the ancient discussion, his notion of 'true divination' or 'divine divination'.^{13,14} These categories have an overall effect of making one suspicious of 'divination' without any qualifier. They come up nearly always in contrast with the non-divine kind that is enmeshed in the material world.

Iamblichus organizes his treatment around genres of divinatory practice, and goes through each category claiming that there is a truly divine form and a merely human form. He begins by looking at divination that has to do with direct and internal inspiration—dreams, divine possession, and oracles—and later looks at that which reads signs in the external world—like birds, entrails, and all the rest. He starts with dreams, the mode of divination that attracted the most robust commentary from ancient philosophers generally. He distinguishes true and divine dreams from a class he calls human dreams (*ἀνθρώπινοι ὄνειροι*). The latter are sometimes able to tell true things about the future, but are sometimes inaccurate.¹⁵ By contrast, divine dreams do not even come during sleep, but the stage between sleep and waking when the intellect is just becoming active. This claim steps over a long-standing tradition of explanation, coming

¹² *Myst.* III 1, 20–7: τὸ δὲ πᾶν κύρος αὐτῆς ἀνήκει εἰς τοὺς θεοὺς καὶ ἀπὸ τῶν θεῶν ἐνδίδοται.... τὰ δ' ἄλλα πάντα ὡς ὄργανα ὑπόκειται τῇ ἐκ θεῶν καταπεπομένη τῆς προγνώσεως δόσει, ὅσα τε περὶ τὴν ψυχὴν ἡμῶν ἐστὶ καὶ τὸ σῶμα καὶ ὅσα ἐν τῇ φύσει τοῦ παντὸς ἢ ταῖς ἰδίαις ἐκάστων φύσεσιν ἐνυπάρχει.

¹³ *Myst.* III 3, 25; III 8, 3; III 26, 23; III 27, 2.

¹⁴ *Myst.* III 4, 2; III 10, 2; III 17, 51; III 27, 6, 9; 12; 37; 45; 56; III 31, 41; 58; IX 3, 33; IX 5, 19; X 4, 1; X 5, 2; X 8, 2.

¹⁵ *Myst.* III 2, 9–11: ἂ τότε μὲν ἐστὶν ἀληθῆ τότε δὲ ψευδῆ, καὶ ἐπὶ τινῶν μὲν τυγχάνει τοῦ ὄντος, ἐπὶ δὲ τῶν πολλῶν ἀποτυγχάνει.

from Plato and Aristotle. It began from the premise that, since dreaming was seen to happen when the higher-order cognitive systems are not active, it is evidence of a lower part of the mind at work. But Iamblichus wants to highlight divine divination as coming not from any lower-order, or more somatically engaged part of the mind, but rather from the highest, divinely inflected part. For him it is the result of a direct union of the highest mind with the first divine principles. So he in fact needs to claim that the upper soul is not dormant while these divine dreams happen. He explicitly says that divine dreams have nothing to do with sleep: 'Remove, then, from divine dreams in which divination especially occurs, "sleep" in any way whatsoever.'¹⁶ So he inserts a proposal that they occur on the precipice between sleep and waking.

Iamblichus makes a similar kind of bifurcated mapping of both divination by frenzy and by oracles. He starts off this way: 'In this area also, I want to make clear the characteristic signs of those who are truly possessed by the gods.'¹⁷ Once again, his main point is to articulate the signs of true possession, so that it may be distinguished from the lower-order forms of frenzy that emerge from natural states, such as melancholy (III 8) and passion (III 8), or are produced by agitating music or dancing (III 9). Truly inspired people are wholly in the possession of the god and are impervious to bodily pleasure and pains. They feel no effect from fire, from being stuck through with a spit, or even being struck on the back with an axe (III 4, 21–36)—they feel nothing bodily because they are wholly beyond their bodies. In the case of true divination by inspired trance, those who are moved by the divine become its instruments and are wholly subordinate to it. Some bodily agitations may be visible, but these are only incidental to the state of true possession. In contrast, those under the influence of a merely bodily frenzy mainly show just these kinds of bodily disturbances. Further, they manipulate the divinities to whom they appeal, and what they learn is compromised:

But those who perform conjuring of spirits in an unclear way, without these blessed visions, grope, as it were, in darkness, and know nothing of what they do, except for some very small signs which appear in the body of the frenzied one, and some other signs that show themselves clearly; but they are ignorant of the whole of divine inspiration, which is hidden in obscurity.¹⁸

¹⁶ *Myst.* III 3: *Ἄνελε οὖν ἐκ τῶν θείων ὄνειρων, ἐν οἷς δὴ καὶ μάλιστα ἐστι τὸ μαντικόν, τὸ καθεύδειν ὄπωσοῦν.*

¹⁷ *Myst.* III 4, 7–9: *Βούλομαι δὴ καὶ ἐν τούτοις τὰ τεκμήρια τῶν ὀρθῶς κατεχομένων ὑπὸ τῶν θεῶν παραδείξαι.*

¹⁸ *Myst.* III 6, 10–16: *Οἱ δ' ἄνευ τῶν μακαρίων τούτων θεαμάτων ἀφανῶς ποιούμενοι τὰς ἀγωγὰς τῶν πνευμάτων ὡσπερ ἐν σκότῳ ἀφάσσοισι καὶ οὐδὲν ἴσασιν ὧν ποιούσι, πλὴν πάνυ μικρῶν τῶν διὰ τοῦ σώματος φαινομένων σημείων τοῦ ἐνθουσιῶντος καὶ τῶν ἄλλων τῶν ἐναργῶς ὄρωμένων, τὰ ὅλα τῆς θείας ἐπιπνοίας ἐν ἀφανεί κεκρυμμένα ἀγνοοῦντες.*

These inferior forms of possession yield only a few obscure signs, and some clear ones. Iamblichus then goes on to discuss and dismiss many prior theories of divine possession, including any idea that possession is connected with places, or particular atmospheres, or that it is an effect of agitation of the soul (III 10). Each of these denials rules out a traditional set of explanations for how the large temple-based oracles operated. He closes the consideration of oracles this way:

For such a power [divination by oracles], if inseparable from the nature of places and of bodies subject to it, or if it advances according to a motion limited by quantity, cannot know beforehand things everywhere and always in the same manner. But if separate and free from places and times measured by quantity (since it is superior to things that come to be in time and occupy a place) it is equally present with beings wherever they are, and is always simultaneously present to those that are born in time, and embraces in one the truth of the universals because of its own separate and superior existence.¹⁹

So, just as in the case of dreams, there is a split in the classes of foresight around frenzy and oracles. There are some powers into which one can tap that are residual in the material world. But true divination exists as a purely divine power, on a higher plane and is removed from the material world.

And so one would not rightly suppose divine possession to belong to the soul nor any of its powers, nor to intellect nor any of its powers or activities, nor to bodily weakness or its absence. Nor would one reasonably suppose that it would occur in this way, for being transported by a god is neither a human accomplishment, nor does it base its power in human parts (of the body) or activities. But, on the one hand, these are otherwise subordinate, and the god uses them as instruments; on the other hand, the entire activity of divination comes to its fulfilment through the god acting by himself, purely detached from other things, without the soul or body moving in any way. Hence, the divinations being done rightly, as I say, really and truly happen. But when the soul takes the initiative, or is disturbed during the divination, or the body interrupts and perverts the divine harmony, the divinations become turbulent and false, and the possession is no longer true nor genuinely divine.²⁰

¹⁹ *Myst.* III 12, 3–14: *Ἀχώριστος μὲν γὰρ οὖσα τῆς φύσεως τῶν τόπων καὶ τῶν ὑποκειμένων αὐτῇ σωμάτων ἢ τοιαύτη δύναμις, ἢ προϊούσα κατὰ κίνησιν τὴν ἀφοριζομένην ἀριθμῶ, οὐ δύναται τὰ πανταχοῦ καὶ ἀεὶ προγιγνώσκειν ὡσαύτως· ἀφεμένη δ' ἀπόλυτος τῶν τόπων καὶ τῶν διαμετρημένων τοῖς ἀριθμοῖς χρόνων (ἅτε δὴ κρείττων οὖσα τῶν γιγνομένων κατὰ χρόνον καὶ τῶν ὑπὸ τόπου κατεχομένων) τοῖς πανταχοῦ οὖσιν ἐξ ἴσου πάρεστι, καὶ τοῖς κατὰ χρόνον φρομένοις πάντοτε ἅμα σύνεστιν, ἐν ἐνὶ τε συνείληφε τῶν ὅλων τὴν ἀλήθειαν διὰ τὴν χωριστὴν ἑαυτῆς καὶ ὑπερέχουσαν οὐσίαν.*

²⁰ *Myst.* III 7, 15–31: *ψυχῆς μὲν οὖν καὶ τινος τῶν ἐν αὐτῇ δυνάμεων, ἢ νοῦ καὶ τινος τῶν ἐν αὐτῷ δυνάμεων ἢ ἐνεργειῶν, ἢ σωματικῆς ἀσθενείας ἢ ἄνευ ταύτης οὐκ ἂν τις ὑπολάβοι δικαίως τὸν ἐνθουσιασμόν εἶναι. οὔτε γὰρ ἀνθρώπινόν ἐστι τὸ τῆς θεοφορίας ἔργον, οὔτε ἀνθρωπίνους μορίους ἢ ἐνεργήμασι τὸ πᾶν ἔχει κύρος· ἀλλὰ ταῦτα μὲν ἄλλως ὑπόκειται, καὶ χρῆται αὐτοῖς ὁ θεὸς ὡς ὀργάνοις· τὸ δὲ πᾶν ἔργον τῆς μαντείας δι' αὐτοῦ πληροῦ, καὶ ἀμιγῶς ἀπὸ τῶν ἄλλων ἀφεμένους οὔτε*

Given this general current, in which Iamblichus argues against materialist-based theories of divine signs, there is an entire class of divinatory activity that one would anticipate would not fare too well—and indeed it does not. There is a long-standing distinction within the discourse on divination between those forms that are the result of an internal divine position of the soul, such as we have already addressed, and those that are the result of a technical skill, an expertise at reading signs that appear in the material world.²¹ Iamblichus takes a rather dismissive view of the whole of these forms of divination.

He makes a summary statement at the opening of chapter 15 of book 3, which he opens with this assertion: 'Come, then, let us turn to the mode of divination, accomplished by human technical skill, which partakes largely of guessing and supposition.'²² He discusses the signs in entrails, birds, and astrology as a part of the natural world, which the gods produced either via nature or via the demons that oversee it. Certain occurrences will consistently precede others and so will function as signs from which we can make inferences. But as was the case with 'human dreams' or frenzies produced by agents other than the divine, these forms of information are embedded in the natural world and so are unreliable. The natural world and demons stand in intermediary position, and so make possible a less reliable form of divination, for those who deign to investigate the material world. It contrasts unfavourably with the true divination that comes directly from the divine.

During the extended discussion on these techniques, as he considers the principles by which the forms of predictive thinking embedded in the natural world operate, Iamblichus forwards a negative evaluation of sympathy, which had, since the Stoics, been a first line of explanation for divinatory signs of all kinds. After considering the proposition that different kinds of physical affections produce divinatory insight, he rules these out as causes of true or divine mantic knowledge.

But even if they are to the greatest degree subject to the influence of sympathy, I do not see in what way they will know anything true about the future. For foreknowledge and predicting what is going to happen is not the province of a power exerting sympathetic influence or of something enmeshed in matter and held fast in a specific place and body, but, on the contrary it is characteristic of a power that is freed from all these.²³

ψυχῆς κινουμένης οὐδ' ὀτιοῦν οὔτε σώματος ἐνεργεῖ καθ' αὐτόν. Ὅθεν δὴ καὶ ἀψευδῶς γίνονται τὰ μαντεῖα τὰ οὕτως ὡς λέγω κατορθούμενα. Ἐπειδὴ δ' ἡ ψυχὴ προκατάρχη ἢ μεταξὺ κινήται, ἢ τὸ σῶμα τι παρεμπιπτή καὶ τὴν θείαν ἁρμονίαν ἐπιταράττει, θορυβώδη γίνονται καὶ ψευδῆ τὰ μαντεῖα, καὶ ὁ ἐνθουσιασμός οὐκέτι ἀληθῆς ὑπάρχει οὐδὲ γνησίως θεῖος.

²¹ For more details, see Wardle 2006, 126.

²² *Myst.* III 15, 1–3: *Φέρε δὴ οὖν ἐπὶ τὸν διὰ τέχνης ἀνθρωπίνης ἐπιτελούμενον τρόπον μετέλωμεν, ὅστις στοχασμοῦ καὶ οἰήσεως πλείονος εἴληφε.*

²³ *Myst.* III 22, 40–6: *Εἰ δὲ δὴ ὅτι μάλιστα καὶ οὕτως εἰσι συμπαθεῖς, οὐχ ὁρῶ τίνα τρόπον εἰσονται τι περὶ τοῦ μέλλοντος ἀληθές. Οὐ γὰρ συμπαθοῦς δυνάμεως οὐδ' ἐνύλου καὶ κατεχομένης*

When Iamblichus evaluates sympathy as a power, active only on the level of the material, he is actually in keeping with Stoic views, which hold fast to a materialist view of the cosmos. It is just that he is committed to the idea that true divination must rely on a divine that is now imagined to exist wholly immaterially and entirely transcendent above the natural world.

It is also worth noting here that when Iamblichus anchors true divination to divine power, and separates it from the powers of the material world, he makes less prominent a difficulty that theorists of it typically face. As crops up in Cicero's *De divinatione*, theories of divination eventually run into the problem of separating the kinds of predictions it makes from the kinds of predictions natural scientists make.²⁴ The more the theorist makes technical divination comprehensible, in other words via explanations that appeal to terrain, or animal behaviours, or physical dispositions, the more difficult it becomes to mark out a distinct kind of inference that is specifically divinatory. If, in the natural world, certain events just tend to precede others, prediction based on such signs makes one look a lot like a natural scientist of some sort, rather than a diviner.

For Iamblichus, the problem becomes moot. He is all too happy to stipulate that forms of divination based on observing external signs are in fact on an equal footing with the observational natural sciences generally. Both of these are inferior forms of prediction, based on connections in the physical world, and they both contrast with true divinely based foreknowledge. The collection of traditional techniques that are used to observe nature, he says:

calculates the future from probabilities and estimates by certain signs, and these are not always trustworthy, nor, in like manner, do they have what is signified properly connected with that of which the signs are evidence. But divine foreknowledge of future events is directed by a firm knowledge, and an unshakeable assurance deriving from the causes, an indissoluble comprehension connecting all things to all.²⁵

Divination based on the material world, then, is functionally coextensive with the physical sciences. Neither of these modes yields very good insight, only conjecture and guesswork.

This negative characterization of the lower form of divinatory knowledge is also, interestingly, similar to a nascent attitude among Christian thinkers—Origen and Augustine, for example—who look at a host of traditional pagan

ἐν τινὶ τόπῳ καὶ σώματι τὸ προγιγνώσκειν τε καὶ προμηνύειν τὸ μέλλον, ἀλλὰ τούναντίον τῆς ἀπὸ πάντων τούτων ἀπολελυμένης.

²⁴ See Cic. *Div.* 2, 34, 1, 112; 1, 13–14.

²⁵ *Myst.* III 26, 37–43: ἐξ εἰκότων γὰρ ἀναλογίζεται τὸ μέλλον καὶ σημείοις τισὶ τεκμηριούται καὶ τούτοις οὐκ αἰεὶ πιστοῖς οὐδ' ὡσαύτως συνηρημένον ἔχουσι τὸ δηλούμενον, οὐπὲρ ἔστι τὰ σημεία δείγματα. Τῆς δὲ θείας προνοίας τῶν ἐσομένων βέβαιος ἡ εἶδησις προηγείται, καὶ ἀπὸ τῶν αἰτίων ἀμετάπτωτος ἡ πίστωσις, συνηρημένη τε πάντων πρὸς ἅπαντα ἀδιαλύτως κατάληψις....

mantic practices and characterize them as unsure, tentative groping through material prognostication.²⁶ In each case, physicalist explanations, setting the power of divinatory insight into the domains of human or animal physiology, of local characteristics of terrain or atmosphere, or of physical sympathies between things or places, are eschewed in favour of a model of prophetic encounter that is wholly a divine power and activity, in which the human being is a mere conduit. In the case of the Christians and Iamblichus, the theological structure is similar; it is just the *theos* that is different.

MANTIKĒ AND INTUITION

So Iamblichus makes a definitive separation of divine divination from insight that can be gained from the material world. The result for the divine is an insistence on its transcendence. The other end of the pole is also worth some attention in closing. When Iamblichus separates out true or divine divination, he leaves behind the lower kind—and at the same time, he leaves behind the rich and complex ways by which Greeks had understood the strange abilities of some people to know things via subterranean, instinctual, non-discursive insights, embedded in the natural world, which was the way earlier thinkers had construed the question of how divination might work. Further, since these do not involve the divine, according to Iamblichus, it no longer makes sense to talk about them using the term *mantikē*. So he needs to find a new term. Here's an example, of one of the moments where he zeroes in on describing it:

If then these things we are talking about are true, we should not, if we receive a certain intuition from nature (*τινα ἐκ φύσεως ἐπιβολήν*) regarding the way things are or an apprehension of the future (*τοῦ μέλλοντος ἐπαφήν*), judge this as divinatory foreknowledge; rather while it has a similarity to divination, except that this latter lacks nothing of certainty and truth, intuition chances upon the truth for the most part, but not always, and gains understanding in the case of some things but not in the case of all.²⁷

When Iamblichus makes use of *epibolē* and *epaphē*, it is a bit of a stretch. And here is precisely what is interesting. The Greek language does not, in fact, have

²⁶ For Augustine, the main sources are short sections of *On Christian Doctrine* (2, 23–4) and *City of God* (mainly 9, 21–3) and a short work, *On Divination by Demons*. Pagan divinatory practices offer limited knowledge, only of the material world, and are governed by demons, whereas true divine foreknowledge is secure and oriented toward the immaterial, and god. For Origen, see *Against Celsus* 7, 3, and esp. 4, 88–92.

²⁷ *Myst.* III 26, 28–34: *Εἰ δὴ ταῦτα ἀληθῆ λέγομεν, οὐ δεῖ, εἴ τινα ἐκ φύσεως ἐπιβολὴν εἰς τὰ ὄντα παρειλήφαμεν ἢ τοῦ μέλλοντος ἐπαφήν, ἐγκρίνειν ταύτην ὡς μαντικὴν πρόγνωσιν· ἀλλ' ὁμοία μὲν ἐστὶ μαντικῆ, πλὴν οὐδὲν αὐτῆ βεβαιότητος ἢ ἀληθείας ἀπολείπεται, τὸ δ' ὡς ἐπὶ τὸ πολὺ τυγχάνον οὐκ αἶε δὲ καὶ ἐπὶ τιμῶν μὲν οὐχὶ δ' ἐπὶ πάντων αἰρούσα.*

a well-established category for naming this kind of thing prior to Iamblichus. Within abstract philosophy there had been occasional appeal to something like a direct apprehension without reason, but in prior thinkers this discussion was limited to questions of fundamental epistemology, and spoke of direct apprehension of the world's basic realities. Aristotle discusses this under the category of *nous*. The terms *epibolê* and *epaphê* sometimes were used in such contexts, along with others.²⁸ But prior to Iamblichus's text, the Greeks did not have a way of talking about just knowing something quotidian or mundane without really thinking about it. In other words, they did not have an obvious word for the phenomenon that in contemporary English is set within the domain of the term 'intuition'. As has long been appreciated, Greek has a rich and broad array of terms for cognitive processes. There are words for reason (*νοῦς*), calculation (*συλλογισμός*), discursive reasoning (*διάνοια*), rationality (*λόγος*), opinion (*δόξα*), belief (*πίστις*), wisdom (*σοφία*), practical wisdom (*φρόνησις*), and scientific knowledge (*ἐπιστήμη*), among others. But there is no good fit within the standard typology of these cognition terms for what the English term 'intuition' typically means.²⁹

CONCLUSION

A closer look at Iamblichus' work, then, not only reveals his particular reshaping of the powers of the divine in new and more remote ways, it also brings into sharper focus that, prior to this, the idea that we might know something in the uncanny way we talk about when English speakers talk about intuition was left without a designation. This is strange, since this experience is as likely as any to be a universal experience of human cognition. People do with some regularity find themselves in the position of knowing things without knowing how they know them. Since presumably Greeks must have had such experiences, this leads to the question of how the Greeks talked about them. Considering the earlier tradition of thinking to which Iamblichus reacts, and the novelty of his way of imagining a non-divine form of such knowledge, we are led to the suggestion that such things as we call intuition had been talked about under the large and robust Greek cultural form of divination.

²⁸ For *epibolê*, see Epicur. *Ep. ad Hdt.* (in D.L. 10, 38) and Plot. IV 4, 1; for *epaphê*, see Epicur. Fr. 250 and Plot. VI 7, 36 (all citations in LSJ). Compare Aristotle's use of *νοῦς* at *APo* 100b and *EN* 6, 6, 1141 a and 6, 8, 1142 a.

²⁹ Even words for surmising such as *ὑπονοέω* or *ἐπεικάζω* point to a *stretch* of our inferences into speculative grounds, not to insight that arrives *without* reason.

Divine Powers in Late Antiquity

Edited by
ANNA MARMODORO
AND IRINI-FOTINI VILTANIOTI

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