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Reassessing Epictetus' Opinion of Divination

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Abstract: In recent years substantial effort has been expended by scholars to better understand the nature of the ancient interest in divination. This study will argue that the Stoic philosopher Epictetus' views of divination have been largely overlooked and mistakenly defined by his modern interpreters. While often portrayed as being opposed to the art, it is proposed that he envisages divination can be beneficially employed: namely in highlighting certain moral actions, and in motivating individuals to commence philosophical study.

Keywords: Epictetus, Divination, Oracular, Stoicism

Epictetus' Views of Divination

The widespread concord that existed between the ancient philosophical schools (excepting the Epicurean one) that through divination the course of future events could be made known to humans, has been reflected upon in modern scholarship, as well as in ancient sources.¹ Within each respective school, however, different emphases and levels of commitment to explicate the nature of divination manifest themselves. Regarding Stoic philosophy though, as Peter Struck, in his recent monograph on divination and philosophy in antiquity, comments, divination was 'a subject of abiding interest' and 'no other ancient philosophical school took the topic as seriously as they did.'² Proponents of the Stoa who are documented as displaying an interest in the art (τέχνη) include prominent individuals such as Zeno, Chrysippus, Diogenes of Babylon, Antipater

¹ At *Div* 1.3.5–6 Cicero highlights that while Xenophon and Epicurus objected to the validity of divination, the members of the Old Academy, the Peripatetics, and the Stoa accepted its legitimacy and usefulness. For a more positive account, however, of Xenophon's attitude towards divination and its potential profitable uses see Mikalson (2010), 118, and Danzig (2010), 258. For recent studies on ancient divination, consider, for instance, Mikalson (2010), 110–39, Struck (2016).

² Struck (2016), 173. On Stoicism and divination see also Hankinson (1988).

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of Tarsus, and Seneca.³ The wide agreement that was sustained in the Stoic school regarding the use and validity of divination was commented upon by ancient writers such as Cicero,⁴ and, additionally, we can note that throughout his treatise on the topic, *De Divinatione*, Cicero selects Stoic interlocutors to voice a defense of the profitable utility that it can be employed to meet.⁵

Despite the scholarly interest in ancient beliefs in divination, little attention has been devoted to consider or plot the attitude that the Stoic philosopher Epictetus (ca. 55–135 C.E.) has towards it, although a recent study by Gary Gabor profitably comments upon one section in the *Enchiridion* (and then proceeds to explore the Neoplatonist Simplicius' exposition of the passage) which we will note below. The lack of interest from scholars to appraise Epictetus' opinion of divination is somewhat perplexing for, as we shall see, it is a subject that he raises with regularity during the course of his discussions, and even a section in the *Discourses* and the *Enchiridion* are, respectively, dedicated to explore the topic.⁶ When scholars do remark upon Epictetus' stance towards divination, they almost uniformly present him as castigating its value and potential use. Consider, for instance, that in his notable monograph on Epictetus' thought, A. A. Long's only passing reference to the philosopher's opinion of divination (based upon the remarks at *Diss* I.17) is to opine that Epictetus believed: 'The divination we should practice is the study of the world's and our own natures and not recourse to omens and augury.'⁷ As we have briefly highlighted above, this conclusion would make Epictetus' position on divination strikingly discordant from those that his fellow Stoics held.

Despite the frequency of his reflections on divination, our understanding of Epictetus' position of it is impeded (and this might also account for the lack of scholarly interest that has been directed to the topic) by the fact that no extended account details the, obviously complex, boundaries that he holds should govern its utilization. Furthermore, an unhelpful habit in contemporary scholarship of highlighting one of Epictetus' scattered comments on divination and presuming that it represents the totality of his thought on the matter is evident. To address this oversight this paper will attempt to collate, and then interpret, Epictetus' disparate reflections on divination. Once achieved it will be

³ See Bobzien (1999), 144–79, Jedan (2009), 23, 29–30, Williams (2012), 312–13, 319–324, and Struck (2016), 171–214.

⁴ *Acad* 1.207.

⁵ We should also note that recent scholarship has argued the once considered skepticism that the Stoic Panaetius (185–110 C.E.) held towards divination can no longer be sustained, so see Brouwer (2012), 20–2.

⁶ *Diss* III.1.36–7, and *Ench* 18.

⁷ Long (2002), 178–9.

argued that his stance regarding the art has been regularly mischaracterised, and insights into his opinion regarding its potential benefits obscured in the writings of his modern interpreters.

In all of Epictetus' deliberations on divination, his confidence in its ability to render the course of future events known is evident. As we shall see, the records of his discussions present us with a catalogue of the numerous channels where he believes such foreknowledge might be gleaned, e. g., bird displays, incubations, dreams, oracles, and sacrificial inspection. More often, however, he is concerned to ensure that his students will form correct opinions regarding the appropriate use of divination. For instance, he reminds them that if they encounter a raven whose croaking can disclose the course of future events to them, they should remain aware that it is only an intermediary for god, who is the true source of the revelation,⁸ and elsewhere he cautions them that it can be a sign of cowardice (δειλία) if a person constantly (συνεχῆς) seeks divination.⁹

Some of Epictetus' attempts to reorient his students' opinions on divination, however, have been interpreted by scholars as tendering a broad critique of the practice, and that he is of the conclusion that divination is devoid of any benefit that makes it worthy of pursuit. So, in one passage, and after noting that the writings of Chrysippus are only a vehicle for gaining knowledge of nature, he proceeds to similarly argue:

Nor do we need a diviner [or sacrificer – θύτης] on his own account, but because we think that through him we will be able to understand future events, and the signs sent by the gods; nor do we need the entrails of the victims on their own account, but because it is through them that the signs are sent; neither is it the raven or the crow that we admire, but the god who sends his signs through them ... These things, says the diviner, I find in the victims. These are the signs that you have been sent. If you wish it, you are free. If you wish it, you will have no one to blame, no one to accuse. Everything will be in accordance with your own mind, and equally, with the mind of god. It is for this prophecy that I go to the diviner and the philosopher, not to admire the man on account of his interpretation, but to admire the interpretations itself.¹⁰

⁸ *Diss* III.1.36–7.

⁹ *Diss* II.7.9.

¹⁰ *Diss* I.17.18–19, 28–9: μὴ φέρε οὖν πρὸς τὸν μάντιν ὄρεξιν ἢ ἔκκλισιν μηδὲ τρέμων αὐτῶ πρόσει, ἀλλὰ διεγνωκῶς, ὅτι πᾶν τὸ ἀποβησόμενον ἀδιάφορον καὶ οὐδὲν πρὸς σέ, ὅποιον δ' ἂν ᾖ, ἔσται αὐτῶ χρήσασθαι καλῶς καὶ τοῦτο οὐθεὶς κωλύσει. θαρρῶν οὖν ὡς ἐπὶ συμβούλους ἔρχου τοὺς θεοὺς: καὶ λοιπόν, ὅταν τί σοι συμβουλευθῆ, μέμνησο τίνας συμβούλους παρέλαβες καὶ ἰ τίνων παρακούσεις ἀπειθήσας. ἔρχου δὲ ἐπὶ τὸ μαντεύεσθαι, καθάπερ ἤξιου Σωκράτης, ἐφ' ᾧ ἂν ἢ πᾶσα σκέψις τὴν ἀναφορὰν εἰς τὴν ἔκβασιν ἔχει καὶ οὔτε ἐκ λόγου οὔτε ἐκ τέχνης τινὸς ἄλλης ἀφορμαὶ δίδονται πρὸς τὸ συνιδεῖν τὸ προκείμενον: Please note, unless otherwise stated all translations of Epictetus are based upon Gill and Hard (1995).

It is to this passage that almost all readers of modern scholarship are directed when consideration of Epictetus' stance towards divination is raised, and which, therefore, inevitably colours their understanding of his conception of its worth. The interpretation that greets them is that by asserting we do not need the diviner (§18–19, οὐ δὲ γὰρ τοῦ θύτου δι' αὐτόν) as they do not produce the divination but merely channel it, and by depicting the diviner as voicing the results of Stoic philosophy (§28–9), Epictetus is contending that any use the practice once held has been obviated by philosophy. Indeed, modern interpreters of Epictetus argue, only the rather remarkable occurrence of divination being used to voice foundational teachings of Stoicism would, in Epictetus' view, render its service to be of value for his students. Such conclusions have been offered since at least Xenakis' 1969 study on Epictetus' thought,¹¹ and is a viewpoint that is well-articulated by Maria Colish's later reflection that Epictetus 'rejects' divination because: 'it is unnecessary in the light of man's possession of reason, which enables him to judge what to do without recourse to external pointers.'¹² Furthermore, Robert Dobbin states on this passage that Epictetus believes:

philosophy helps render divination otiose ... By equating his seer with a philosopher in [Diss I.17.]29, E[pi]ctetus implies as much. This ideal seer fulfils his duty by transmitting the message for mankind ascribed to Zeus at [Diss] 1. 10–13 ... The Stoic — or better, Epictetan — seer is paradoxical because he would end up putting himself out of business.¹³

Other scholars such as Gerald Downing,¹⁴ and A. A. Long, (whose comments we noted at the beginning of this study), have continued to present Epictetus' opinion of divination in this manner, and have done so by appealing to this text. Yet in probing this interpretation, we must note that Epictetus' portrayal does not offer any explicit appraisal of the possible uses of divination, and certainly nowhere does he posit its redundancy. The conclusion that the scholars listed above have reached is an inferred one, and risks, I believe, over-extending Epictetus' comments to bear upon issues on the worth of the practice that he does not necessarily seek to address. Merely placing Stoic tenets in the mouth of a diviner *does not* exclude the possibility that he might elsewhere depict the custom as fulfilling a profitable role. Neither does his statement regarding diviners only being the vehicle, and not source, of divination imply that he considers their role to be superfluous, any more than he would view

¹¹ Xenakis (1969), 54.

¹² Colish (1984), 33.

¹³ Dobbin (1998), 167.

¹⁴ Downing (1992), 42.

Chrysippus' writings in such a manner because they merely disclose, and do not originate the intricacies of nature (φύσις).¹⁵ But for us to be able to ascertain whether this is the case or not, the careful collation and interpretation of Epictetus' other remarks on divination have to be undertaken - a task that we will attempt to achieve here.

The second passage where we can start to refine our understanding of Epictetus' opinion on divination records him arguing:

because we consult diviners when there is no occasion for us to do so, many of us fail to carry out many appropriate actions. For what can the diviner see besides death, or danger, or sickness, or, in general, things of that kind. If it becomes necessary, then, to risk my life for a friend, or if it is appropriate for me even to die for him, what occasion have I to consult a diviner? Have I not the diviner within me, who has told me the true nature of good and evil, and has expounded the signs that indicate both? What further need have I, then, of the entrails of victims or the flight of birds? Can I bear with a diviner when he says, "This is expedient for you?" For does he know what is expedient for me? Does he know what good is? Has he learned the signs that indicate good and evil as he has learned the signs in the entrails? ... What should we do, then? We should come to them without desire or aversion, just as a traveller asks somebody he meets which of two roads to take, without having any particular desire to travel on the right- hand road rather than the left; for he does not wish to travel on one of them in particular, but on the one that will lead him to where he wants to go.¹⁶

This passage might seem to support the conclusions of the scholars we noted above by providing an explicit critique from Epictetus on divination, as well as supplying the reasons for the hostility they conclude he directs towards it. Diviners are, after all, depicted as being ignorant (§4–7), and divination a practice that is sought after because of an erroneous concern for externals (§2–3). Philosophy, meanwhile, is presented as being a reliable internal diviner of god's will that can accurately pilot its adherents throughout life (§3–4). Significantly though, alongside the above criticism that Epictetus raises against divination are interspaced comments where he intimates that there *are* suitable

¹⁵ See *Diss* I.17.15–18. On Epictetus commending his writings see *Diss* II.6.8, IV.9.6.

¹⁶ *Diss* II.7.1–5,10. διὰ τὸ ἀκαίρως μαντεύεσθαι πολλοὶ καθήκοντα πολλὰ παραλείπομεν. τί γὰρ ὁ μάντις δύναται πλέον ἰδεῖν θανάτου ἢ κινδύνου ἢ νόσου ἢ ὄλως τῶν τοιούτων; ἂν οὖν δεῖ κινδυνεύσαι ὑπὲρ τοῦ φίλου, ἂν δὲ καὶ ἀποθανεῖν ὑπὲρ αὐτοῦ ἢ καθήκη, ποῦ μοι καιρὸς ἔτι μαντεύεσθαι; οὐκ ἔχω τὸν μάντιν ἔσω τὸν εἰρηκότα μοι τὴν οὐσίαν τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ καὶ τοῦ κακοῦ, τὸν ἐξηγημένον τὰ σημεῖα ἀμφοτέρων; τί οὖν ἔτι χρεῖαν ἔχω τῶν σπλάγχνων ἢ τῶν οἰωνῶν; ἀλλ' ἀνέχομαι λέγοντος ἐκείνου 'συμφέρι σοι;' τί γὰρ ἐστι συμφέρον οἶδεν; τί ἐστιν ἀγαθὸν οἶδεν; μεμάθηκεν ὥσπερ τὰ σημεῖα τῶν σπλάγχνων οὕτως σημεῖα τίνα ἀγαθῶν καὶ κακῶν; ... τί οὖν; δεῖ δίχα ὀρέξεως ἔρχεσθαι καὶ ἐκκλίσεως, ὡς ὁ ὀδοιπὸρος πυνθάνεται παρὰ τοῦ ἀπαντήσαντος, ποτέραν τῶν ὁδῶν φέρει, οὐκ ἔχων ὄρεξιν πρὸς τὸ τὴν δεξιὰν μᾶλλον φέρειν ἢ τὴν ἀριστεράν; οὐ γὰρ τούτων τινὰ ἀπελθεῖν θέλει, ἀλλὰ τὴν φέρουσαν.

occasions where divination can be employed, and, indeed, that he anticipates his students might have cause to seek its assistance. At the start of this critique, Epictetus argues that the danger from the art arises when people consult diviners improperly (ἀκαίρως). This is an important qualification, for it clarifies that Epictetus' proceeding critique is not being directed to pierce the practice itself, but is rather delimited to focus upon a specific, though certainly popular, *misapplication* of it. Furthermore, his critique of divination as placing a false value on externals (§10) is not appended with the conclusion that the art is therefore void of any use and should be evaded, but rather that *when* we go we should avoid bringing mistaken conceptions to it.

Even the title of this chapter, 'How we are to use divination' (πῶς μαντευτέον) surely evinces that he believes there is a beneficial purpose to which divination can be employed. Epictetus, then, is patently not launching an assault on divination, but is seeking to remove the false and troublesome assumptions that often accompany its use. To clarify if, and how, he believes divination might be profitably used we shall have to continue in our task of searching through the record of his thought.

Epictetus' Positive Views of Divination

What beneficial role(s) might Epictetus conceive divination fulfils? The first text, I suggest, that can help us to better comprehend the horizons of his thought on this matter reads:

do not, therefore, bring either desire or aversion with you to the diviner, and do not approach him with trembling, but after first being clear in your mind that every outcome is indifferent and nothing to you and that, whatever its nature may be, it will be in your power to make good use of it, and this no one can hinder. So go with confidence to the gods, as your counsellors, and afterwards, when some counsel has been granted to you, remember whom you have taken as your counsellors, and whom you will be disregarding if you disobey. Resort to divination, as Socrates thought right, in cases of which the whole inquiry turns upon the outcome, and in which no opportunities are afforded by reason, or any other art, to discover what lies before one.¹⁷

¹⁷ *Ench* 32: μὴ φέρε οὖν πρὸς τὸν μάντιν ὄρεξιν ἢ ἔκκλισιν μηδὲ τρέμων αὐτῷ πρόσει, ἀλλὰ διεγνωκῶς, ὅτι πᾶν τὸ ἀποβησόμενον ἀδιάφορον καὶ οὐδὲν πρὸς σέ, ὅποισιν δ' ἂν ᾗ, ἔσται αὐτῷ χρῆσασθαι καλῶς καὶ τοῦτο οὐθεὶς κωλύσει. θαρρῶν οὖν ὡς ἐπὶ συμβούλους ἔρχου τοὺς θεοὺς: καὶ λοιπόν, ὅταν τί σοι συμβουλευθῇ, μέμνησο τίνας.

Here, Epictetus provides a more expansive account which confirms his anticipation that, once they are fortified with the appropriate perception of the true worth of externals, his students can constructively utilize the mantic. Of further interest for us, though, is that he continues to detail the reasons *why* his students might find divination to be beneficial. In apparent imitation of Socrates, Epictetus advises that they should seek divination when the right course of action they should take entirely depends upon knowing the outcome of an event that is otherwise unpredictable.¹⁸ Once informed about the course that fate (or εἰμαρμένη — a key Stoic belief¹⁹) has set, Epictetus believes they should be able to deduce how they can align their assent and future actions with nature's purposes. Divination, as Gary Gabor has also noted,²⁰ is therefore viewed by Epictetus as being a potential aid in elucidating moral actions. This runs directly contrary to the statement that Luke Timothy Johnson makes regarding this passage that: 'he [Epictetus] does not question that divination can reveal circumstances, but he insists that whatever the circumstances, the philosopher already knows how to exercise his moral purpose.'²¹ Although it firmly meshes with the prevailing scholarly colouring of Epictetus' views on divination, as we have just seen Johnson's interpretation actually inverts the meaning of his remarks; namely that there *are* occasions when reason on its own cannot suffice to guide people in how they should act, but that the services of divination can be employed to resolve, or at least temper, this limitation.

It is also worthwhile to highlight that in the above section Epictetus is articulating a seemingly widely held Stoic position. That divination and knowledge of the future can aid people in making ethical choices was a stance that was advocated by members of the school from Chrysippus to Marcus Aurelius.²² Furthermore, we can note that an argument Cicero's Stoic interlocutor in his *On Divination* is portrayed as making in the art's defense is that: 'nor is it of no advantage to us to know what will come to pass for we will be more careful if we

18 For Socrates and divination see *Mem* 1.1.6–9, and the discussion in Gabor (2014), 331–2.

19 As Struck (2016), 196, notes, informing the Stoics' on regarding divination was their understanding that: "Since nothing happens outside of the divine architecture of interlocking causes, nothing happens that is casually undetermined from what came before. This means that knowledge of the state of affairs at one time allows for projections about what the state of affairs will be at a future time."

See further his remarks at Struck (2016), pp.177–80, 195, and also *De Nat* 2.58, *Ep* 65.2, *De Div* 1.110, 127, *Diog Laert* 7.142–3. On Stoicism and their understanding of fate and determinism see Bobzien (1999).

20 See especially his comments in this regard at Gabor (2014), 329, 333.

21 Johnson (2009), 74.

22 E. g., Chrysippus *apud Div* 2. 63, 166, Seneca *Nat Quest* 38.4, and *M Aur Med* 9.27.

know' (*neque nostra nihil interest scire ea, quae eventura sunt erimus enim cautiores si sciemus*),²³ i. e., through divination the philosopher can be afforded the advantage of having time to consider how they should respond to forthcoming events.

Continuing to verify that divination can aid the philosopher in informing their actions, Epictetus elsewhere comments:

Thus the philosophers are right to say that if a wise and good man had foreknowledge of events, he would work to assist nature even when it comes to sickness and death and mutilation, being aware that these things are allotted in accordance with the ordering of the universe, and that the whole is more sovereign than the part, and the city than the citizen.²⁴

From this passage we can see that Epictetus believes knowledge of the future can assist people to work with (συνεργέω) the order (διάταξις) of nature, even if its desire is to lead them through bodily suffering (a conviction that Marcus Aurelius will also relay several decades later²⁵). Another relevant passage in this regard emerges when Epictetus chastises his students for their apparent laxity in applying philosophical truths to their lives, and then asks them

Who of us ever slept in a temple to learn (μάντιν) the manner in which he should act? I say, who? Give me a single man, that I may see what I have long sought, a man who is truly noble and gifted; whether he be young or old, give me one such man.²⁶

23 *Div* 1.82. On this passage, Flower (2009), 106, observes: “The chief difference between Xenophon and Chrysippus seems to be the latter’s assumption that the gods are concerned for all mortals. By contrast, Xenophon ... that they support their favorite among mortals but that this support is fickle.” However, on Xenophon’s opinion that divination can show the care of the gods for humanity, see Mikalson (2010), 118.

24 *Diss* II.10.5: διὰ τοῦτο καλῶς λέγουσιν οἱ φιλόσοφοι ὅτι εἰ προήδει ὁ καλὸς καὶ ἀγαθὸς τὰ ἐσόμμενα, συνήργει ἂν καὶ τῷ νοσεῖν καὶ τῷ ἀποθνήσκειν καὶ τῷ πηροῦσθαι, αἰσθανόμενός γε, ὅτι ἀπὸ τῆς τῶν ὄλων διατάξεως τοῦτο ἀπονέμεται, κυριώτερον δὲ τὸ ὅλον τοῦ μέρους καὶ ἡ πόλις τοῦ πολίτου. It should be noted, though, that Epictetus later states, *Diss* II.10.6: “But since we cannot know beforehand what will happen, it is our duty to hold fast to things that are naturally more suited to be chosen, because that is what we are born to”, (νῦν δ’ ὅτι οὐ προγιγνώσκομεν, καθήκει τῶν πρὸς ἐκλογὴν εὐφυστέρων ἔχουσαι, ὅτι καὶ πρὸς τοῦτο γεγόναμεν). This seems to be a statement on humanity’s general inability to know the course of future events. Epictetus’ frequent remarks on the accuracy of divination elsewhere seem to preclude concluding otherwise.

25 See *M Aur Med* 4.33–4, and also the useful comments on its meaning in Gill (2013), 136.

26 *Diss* II.16.17: τίς ἡμῶν τούτου ἕνεκα μάντιν παρέλαβεν; τίς ἡμῶν οὐκ ἐνεκομήθη ὑπὲρ ἐνεργείας; τίς; ἕνα μοι δότε, ἴνα ἴδω τοῦτον, ὃν ἐκ πολλοῦ χρόνου ζητῶ, τὸν ταῖς ἀληθείαις εὐγενῆ καὶ εὐφυᾶ: εἴτε νέον εἴτε πρεσβύτερον, δότε.

Here Epictetus references two methods of divination, visiting a diviner, and sleeping inside of a temple. While the first technique is one of the most recognizable components of ancient divination, the attempt to induce revelation from the gods while sleeping, especially while inside a temple, is perhaps a less familiar convention to us. This practice, nevertheless, is referenced by numerous ancient philosophers,²⁷ including — significantly for our purposes — several Stoic thinkers such as Chrysippus, Antipater of Tarsus, and Posidonius.²⁸ It is unlikely though, I suggest, that Epictetus is intending to recommend that his students should regularly supplement their studies with varied attempts to receive mantic insight. His intention, instead, appears to be to highlight the lengths that he believes his students should be prepared to go to so they can discern what the correct actions they should pursue are. Nevertheless, in his efforts to confront his students' lack of resolve to appropriately reform their lives, Epictetus has been prompted to disclose information regarding his perception of divination, and has, once more, done so with an approving tone.

There are several sections in the *Discourses* where an additional — and, so far largely, ignored — function that Epictetus holds divination can fulfil is apparent: that of revealing kernel philosophical truths to humanity and directing individuals to lead a life that is dedicated to philosophical study and exposition.

In the first text for our consideration (*Diss* III.1), Epictetus is depicted as being approached by a young student of rhetoric who is seeking advice from the philosopher on how he might live virtuously. It becomes clear, however, (§10–14) that Epictetus judges the young man lacks the disposition and understanding that he needs before he can benefit from the instruction that he has requested. Although Epictetus considers ceasing this likely futile conversation, he nevertheless deliberates: '[but] if you should at some future time lay this charge [of silence] against me, what defence could I make?'²⁹ He compares this situation with those that faced Apollo and Socrates:

You may as well ask, why is he Apollo, and why does he deliver oracles, why has he placed himself in such a post as a prophet and fountain of truth, for the inhabitants of the

27 E. g., consider the helpful catalogue of such references at Bar-Kochva (2010), 387 n.94 and 388 n.95, and especially Cicero *Div* 1.96. On Socrates' confidence in divination occurring through dreams see *Phd* 60e2 and 61a8–b1. On these passages, Mikalson (2010), 121, comments: "for Socrates such a dream was god-sent, gave instructions, and needed to be interpreted and obeyed." Consider also his comments at (2010), 120–4, on the understanding across ancient philosophical traditions that divination can be received through dreams.

28 See *Div* I.39, 63, 129. See also the discussion in Bar-Kochva (2010), 388.

29 *Diss* III.1.16: τοῦτό μοι ὕστερον ἂν ἐγκαλῆς, τί ἔξω ἀπολογίασθαί.

whole civilized world to resort to? Why is “Know Thyself” inscribed on the front of his temple, even if nobody heeds it. Did Socrates persuade all who came to him, to take proper care of themselves? Not one in a thousand.³⁰

After reflecting upon their examples, Epictetus resolves to continue to outline key philosophical tenets to the young man. Of significance for our concerns is that while Socrates’ role in confronting society with philosophy is well known, Epictetus’ description of Apollo as serving a similar function, but by giving prophecies/oracles (χρησιμωδέω) that are directed to the whole civilized world, and that are then disseminated in inscriptions and maxims, is perhaps less so. We should again note, however, that such an understanding is common place in the ancient perception of divination.³¹

The belief that the maxim ‘know thyself’ (γνώθι σαυτόν), which was famously inscribed on the temple at Delphi, was either given by Apollo (as Epictetus suggests in this passage), or was crafted by one or all of the seven sages, is attested across the philosophical schools,³² as is the understanding that it commends an enterprise that should be pursued through philosophical deliberation.³³ Epictetus, however, intimates an awareness that only a slight uptake of its appeal for self-reflection will ever likely occur. Several classical authors though attribute the disclosing of this aphorism as having prompted various individuals to commence their philosophical vocations. For example, Plutarch succinctly comments: ‘how many philosophic inquiries (ζητήσεις) have they [i. e., its words] set on foot, and what a horde of discourses (λόγοι) has sprung up from each, as from a seed!’³⁴ This is an ability that Epictetus elsewhere references:

30 *Diss* III.1.18–19: διὰ τί δὲ Ἀπόλλων ἐστίν; διὰ τί δὲ χρησιμωδεῖ; διὰ τί δ’ εἰς ταύτην τὴν χώραν ἑαυτὸν κατατέταχεν, ὥστε μάντις εἶναι καὶ πηγὴ τῆς ἀληθείας καὶ πρὸς αὐτὸν ἔρχεσθαι τοὺς ἐκ τῆς οἰκουμένης; διὰ τί δὲ προέγραπται τὸ γνῶθι σαυτόν μηδενὸς αὐτὸ νοοῦντος; Σωκράτης πάντας ἐπειθε τοὺς προσόχτας ἐπιμελεῖσθαι ἑαυτῶν; οὐδὲ τὸ χιλιστόν μέρος. *On Epictetus’ comments* here see also Sevenster (1966), 252, and Lipsey (2001), 247.

31 On the Stoics believing that divination can come through oracles, dreams, and prophecies see *Acad.* 2.107, and the discussion in Struck (2016), 174. Mikalson (2010), 119, notes: “the Delphic Oracle and some other forms of divination [had a] surprisingly respect place” in the philosophic tradition; see also his discussion on Apollo and divination in Hellenistic philosophy at (2010), 131–8. In his study on the Delphi oracles, Fontenrose (1978), 314, meanwhile, observes: “the usual philosopher’s legend” that “the philosopher received his first impulse to philosophy from the Delphic Oracle.” For broader studies on Apollo and divination see Gigon (1946), Busine (2005), and Graf (2009), 43–64.

32 Lipsey (2001), 230–1. See also Plato *Prt* 343a, 343b.

33 E. g., see Plato *Phaed* 229e, *Phlb* 48c, Xenophon *Mem* 4.2.24, *Cyr* 7.2.20, Dio *Or* 72.12. On the history of the saying, and particularly the citation of it in the Platonic tradition, see Tortzen (2002).

34 *De E* 2 trans. Babbitt (1936), 205. See also the discussion in Lipsey (2001), 230–1 and Sellars (2003), 38 n.23.

Is, then, the Delphic admonition, “Know thyself”, superfluous? — “surely not”, the man replies. — If one told the singer in a chorus to know himself, would he not attend to the order by paying regard to his partners in the chorus and taking care to sing in harmony with them?— “Yes.” — and likewise with a soldier or a sailor.³⁵

Far from being, as the question at the start of this dialectical exchange rhetorically poses, superfluous (παρέλκω), cognizance of this oracle's injunction is used by Epictetus to try to prompt a layman to understand the need he has to examine his life and actions, and to seek the guidance that philosophy can offer in this regard.³⁶ We can observe that in the philosophical tradition, oracular pronouncements are associated with having inaugurated the careers of philosophers such as Socrates,³⁷ Diogenes of Sinope,³⁸ Zeno,³⁹ and Dio of Prusa.⁴⁰ Importantly for our purposes, I suggest, Epictetus appears to reference this phenomenon when, while expanding upon the qualifications that are required of philosophical teachers, he comments:

it may well be that not even wisdom is a sufficient qualification for the care of the young; one should also have a particular predisposition, by Zeus, and aptitude for this, and the right bodily build, and, above all, the recommendation from god that one should occupy this office, as he recommended to Socrates that he should undertake that of cross-examining people, and to Diogenes that of rebuking people in kingly tones, and to Zeno that of instructing people and establishing doctrines.⁴¹

35 *Fr 1*: μή τι οὖν καὶ τὸ ἐν Δελφοῖς παράγγελμα παρέλκον ἐστὶ, τὸ Γνώθι σαυτόν; — τοῦτο δὲ μὲν οὐ, φησί. — τίς οὖν ἡ δύναμις αὐτοῦ; εἰ χορευτῆ τις παρήγγελλε τὸ γνῶναι ἑαυτόν, οὐκοῦν ἂν τῆ προστάξει προσεῖχε τῷ ἐπιστραφεῖναι καὶ τῶν συγχορευτῶν καὶ τῆς πρὸς αὐτοὺς συμφωνίας; — φησίν. — εἰ δὲ ναύτη;

36 Dio portrays the Cynic Diogenes arguing in similar language: “Have you ever heard of the inscription at Delphi: ‘Know thyself?’ ‘I have.’ ‘Is it not plain that the god gives this command to all, in the belief that they do not know themselves?’ ”, trans. Cohoon (1932). See also *Or 4.57*.

37 Xenophon *Ap 14*, Plato *Ap 22a6–8*. On the pivotal nature of this divine calling for Socrates' conception of his role as a philosopher see Doyle (2012). Bowden (2005), 82, also comments: “the fact that two disciples of Socrates include this story at the heart of their account of Socrates' defence suggests that Delphic approval of Socrates as something valued by his followers. Both Plato and Xenophon see Delphi as important in their works.”

38 *Diog Laert 6.20*.

39 Philo Prob 160, and *Diog Laert 7.2*.

40 *Or 13.9*.

41 *Diss III.21.18–19*: οὐδὲ σοφὸν εἶναι τυχὸν ἔξαρκεῖ πρὸς τὸ ἐπιμεληθῆναι νέων: δεῖ δὲ καὶ προχειρότητα τινα εἶναι καὶ ἐπιτηδειότητα πρὸς τοῦτο, νῆ τὸν Δία, καὶ σῶμα ποιὸν καὶ πρὸ πάντων τὸν θεὸν συμβουλευεῖν ταύτην τὴν χώραν κατασχεῖν, ὡς Σωκράτει συνεβούλευεν τὴν ἐλεγκτικὴν χώραν ἔχειν, ὡς Διογένηι τὴν βασιλικὴν καὶ ἐπιπληκτικὴν, ὡς Ζήνωνι τὴν διδασκαλικὴν καὶ δογματικὴν.

As we have just seen, the three philosophers that Epictetus mentions (Socrates, Diogenes and Zeno) all had the commencement of their philosophical careers credited by some classical authors as being

motivated by the pronouncements of oracles. Epictetus almost certainly has this in mind when he remarks that they had been ‘recommended’ (συμβουλεύω) by god to take up their positions: a qualification that he labors was quite separate from the skills and/or circumstances that otherwise commended them for their roles.⁴² We might suppose, though, that it is unlikely that Epictetus expects every philosopher’s career should be validated by such an explicit confirmation of their calling; rather it is evident from elsewhere that he holds philosophy’s candidates should manifest sufficient aptitude for undergoing training, as well as an implacable and naturally invested compulsion to live under philosophy’s supervision.⁴³ In some instances, and in-line with broader ancient opinion, he apparently though holds that this confirmation can be obtained through divination.

Conclusion

As we have seen, Epictetus’ opinion of divination has been a largely neglected topic in scholarship. The privileging of a single passage, *Diss* I.17, and the misinterpreting of its argument and purpose, has led to him being frequently portrayed as an opponent of the art.

In this study, however, we have argued that Epictetus’ perception of divination aligns with broader ancient, as well as Stoic, thought, which is confident in its validity, and (providing it is not misapplied to serve spurious ends) capacity to be profitably utilized, and that he expands our knowledge regarding the numerous benefits ancient philosophers could believe the sciences can bring. In particular, we have seen it repeatedly evidenced that Epictetus believes divination can be used to deduce ethical actions when foreknowledge of certain events is required, and, additionally, to have had a role in prompting several leading figures to assume their philosophical calling. In this regard oracular forms of divination (as opposed to augury) appear to be highlighted by Epictetus as being of particular use. It is hoped that future scholarship on Epictetus will recognize and, when appropriate, integrate his views of divination into their

⁴² On this consider also Schofield (2007), 76. On the importance of Epictetus’ understanding that people are assigned different roles by god/nature, see the recent article by Johnson (2012).

⁴³ So see *Diss* III.6.9–10.

account of his thought. Moreover, it is hoped that scholarship on ancient divination will start to include this important philosophical thinker's opinions within their discussions.

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