

The Value of Divination

An essay examining the various theories underlying the practice of divination, and the nature of its value to the aspirant.

by

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DIVINATION, according to American Heritage, is “the art or act of foretelling future events or revealing occult knowledge by means of augury or an alleged supernatural agency.” Almost all current and ancient systems of magick stress the importance of divination, and rightly so. This essay will examine the theories on which divination does — or is purported to — operate, and discuss the value that it has for the practitioner. We will restrict our discussion to those forms of divination in which the symbols are manipulated by the magician (such as the tarot, the I Ching, and geomancy) as opposed to those in which the magician is purely passive in the production of the symbols (such as necromancy, astrology and augury).

In terms of “foretelling future events,” the various operational theories of divination can be classed into three broad categories:

1. An agency — either external or internal to the magician — with both a knowledge of the divinatory system being used and a knowledge of *future* events, is able to influence the movements of the magician into manipulating the symbols so as to produce — according to the rules of the art — a symbolic representation of those *future* events;
2. An agency — either external or internal to the magician — with both a knowledge of the divinatory system being used and a knowledge of *present* events or the hidden causes behind them, is able to influence the movements of the magician into manipulating the symbols so as to produce — according to the rules of the art — a symbolic representation of those *present* events or causes, and the magician is then able to infer future outcomes from this knowledge; and
3. The layout of the symbols is based purely on *chance*, and is unrelated to either present or future events.

The theory of the agency with a knowledge of future events is the most “traditional.” As Crowley writes in *Magick in Theory and Practice*:

The theory of any process of divination may be stated in a few simple terms.

- We postulate the existence of intelligences, either with-in or without the diviner, of which he is not immediately conscious. (It does not matter to the theory whether the communicating spirit so-called is an objective entity or a concealed portion of the diviner’s mind.) We assume that such intelligences are able to reply correctly — within limits — to the questions asked.
- We postulate that it is possible to construct a compendium of hieroglyphs sufficiently elastic in meaning to include every possible idea, and that one or more of these may always be taken to represent any idea. We assume that any of these hieroglyphics will be understood by the intelligences with whom we wish to communicate in the same sense as it is by ourselves. We have therefore a sort of language. One may compare it to a “lingua franca” which is perhaps defective in expressing fine shades of meaning, and so is unsuitable for literature, but which yet serves for the conduct of daily affairs in places where many tongues are spoken. Hindustani is an example of this. But better still is the analogy between the conventional signs and symbols employed by mathematicians, who can thus convey their ideas perfectly without speaking a word of each other’s languages.
- We postulate that the intelligences whom we wish to consult are willing, or may be compelled, to answer us truthfully.

The theory of the external agency with knowledge of future events is fraught with the most insuperable difficulties, most of which should be familiar. Firstly, of course, there is no reliable evidence whatsoever for the existence of the type of entity which is being postulated. The world is full of stories of gods, angels, goblins, fairies, gnomes and spirits, yet never has any convincing evidence of their existence been found. Whilst we cannot state with confidence that they do *not* exist,

we may consider their existence to be so unlikely as to make placing any weight or reliance on their supposed communications exceedingly unwise.

Secondly, even if we allow for the possibility of the existence of such entities, there is equally no evidence for *any* entity possessing the knowledge that they are purported to possess. Indeed, the possession of a knowledge of future events which is anything other than an educated guess or projection would fly in the face of the foundation of modern physics. Whilst there is no *a priori* reason to doubt the existence of entities with non-coporeal brain structures, there certainly are reasons to doubt that they would possess the kinds of impossible knowledge and abilities that this theory imbues them with. Mankind today possesses a knowledge of the universe which may have been considered impossible even a few hundred years ago, let alone a few thousand, but this has not enabled him to lay aside the laws of physics, and we may justifiably assume that any other entities, no matter how much more advanced, will be subject to the same restrictions.

The theory of the internal agency with these powers is subject to the exact same difficulties. We know that man possesses far more capabilities that he commonly exercises, but to suppose the ability to foretell the future with precision is one of these capabilities is reaching beyond the bounds of probability. Were man to be in possession of such an ability, one would consider it likely that at least one individual throughout the history of humanity would have learned how to reliably harness it, but we have no reason to suppose that this has ever happened.

We may appear justified then in discounting the existence of any agency, external or internal, with the precise knowledge of future events that our first group of theories presupposes. The uncertainty principle notwithstanding, however, we do know that the universe does operate in a more or less regular manner, and that detailed knowledge of these processes together with a detailed knowledge of *present* circumstances enables one to make predictions of future events with varying degrees of reliability depending on the situation at hand. For instance, the position of Jupiter with relation to the earth six months from now, the time of tomorrow's sunrise, and the time of the next solar eclipse can be calculated with an extremely high degree of accuracy by anyone familiar with the basic principles of astronomy and a knowledge of the current situation. Similarly, we can predict that in one thousand throws of the die, the number six will be visible of the topmost face approximately 167 times, and that the more throws we perform, the more reliable our prediction will become.

Thus, it is far more reasonable to imagine the existence of entities far more advanced than us who, possessed with a far more advanced knowledge of both the workings of the universe and its current circumstances, will be able to predict future events with at least a far greater degree of precision than we are, without having to ascribe to them any kinds of supernatural power. Indeed, our own history is full of examples of this kind. Until the development of probability theory, humanity was unable to make any kind of detailed future predictions. The Romans used to play dice games with elongated dice, the narrow faces being far less likely to “come up” than the wider faces, yet the payouts bore no numerical relationships to this asymmetry in likelihood. Going further back, the ancient Greeks believed that knowledge was something to be derived from logic rather than experimentation and observation, and considered that “random” events were beyond any sort of quantification whatsoever, which naturally made a systematic and scientific approach to predicting future events somewhat difficult. Indeed, there is an argument to be made that it was the development of probability theory from the sixteenth century onwards that was primarily responsible for liberating mankind from a subservience to fate and destiny, primarily responsible for providing mankind with the ability to bring future events in fields as diverse as engineering, agriculture and economics within the realms of calculation, allowing him to wrest a degree of knowledge and control over his own future and the future of his society from Fate or the Gods, which is of no mean service.

Just as we are far better at predicting the future now than were our ancestors of five hundred years ago, so we may reasonably suspect that entities far more advanced than us may be equipped to make a far more reliable prediction of the future than us simply by possession of a better understanding of the *present*. Of course, such a theory has severe problems of its own. Firstly, we have to imagine that such entities, impossibly more advanced than we are, are interested in spending their time communicating with us lesser mortals on — and to be on constant call for — questions such as the fate of Aunt Maud’s favourite pet cat. There is no more reason to suppose this to be true than there is to suppose that we would be prepared to answer divinatory questions put to us by cows, all the while concealing from them the fact that we are really planning to eat their flesh, and to turn their skin into shoes and coats, especially when we often refuse to answer such questions put to us even by our own children.

Secondly, the sheer mechanics of the process of divination require us to ascribe to these entities supernatural powers of no lesser degree

of unlikelihood than the ability to precisely foretell the future. For instance, if we consider a tarot divination, we must consider the entity in question to have:

- A full knowledge of the symbolism used therein, in particular in how it relates to the lives of men, which may be wholly removed from their own lives;
- A full knowledge of the current positions of the cards in the deck; and
- The ability to influence the manual operations of the diviner in order to ensure that he shuffles the deck in the exact way required to bring the necessary cards to the top of the deck, in the correct order.

Not only that, but unless we are to presuppose in the complete absence of evidence that one form of divination is favoured by such entities, then we must ascribe to them similar powers to manipulate the yarrow stalks or coins of the I Ching, the drawing of the marks of geomancy, the flightpaths of birds, and the writhings of the necromantic victim. We must also assume that these extremely unlikely and inconvenient methods are the level best means of communication that such beings can think of. If these entities are able to manipulate the manual operations of the diviner to such a level as to make the tarot divination meaningful, then we may suppose that they may just as easily cause those hands to simply write out the answers to his questions in plain language, without the need for all this unnecessary silliness. Occasionally arguments are put forth that these higher beings have evolved far beyond such a base concept as language, and now can communicate with each other and with us purely through symbol, although how this knowledge is supposed to have been discovered is never made clear, and we are forced to conclude that such ideas are merely apologies or excuses, presented as a justification for an irrational belief.

Similarly, if we are to ascribe this ability to an internal agency, then that internal agency must be able to perform such physical operations *as well have* the kind of advanced and conscious knowledge of the universe and its operations that is preventing us from answering our questions ourselves, which is extraordinarily unlikely.

There is another theory which is extremely attractive, particularly to many in the “new age” movement, which Carl Jung describes in his foreword to Wilhelm’s translation of the *I Ching* (emphasis mine):

Now the sixty-four hexagrams of the *I Ching* are the instruments by which the meaning of sixty-four different yet typical situations can be determined. These interpretations are equivalent to causal explanations. Causal connection is statistically necessary and can therefore be subjected to experiment. Inasmuch as situations are unique and cannot be repeated, experimenting with synchronicity seems to be impossible under ordinary conditions. In the *I Ching*, the only criterion of the validity of synchronicity is in the observer's opinion that the text of the hexagram amounts to a true rendering of his psychic condition. **It is assumed that the fall of the coins or the result of the division of the bundle of yarrow stalks is what it necessarily must be in a given "situation," inasmuch as anything happening in that moment belongs to it as an indispensable part of the picture. If a handful of matches is thrown to the floor, they form the pattern characteristic of that moment. But such an obvious truth as this reveals its meaningful nature only if it is possible to read the pattern and to verify its interpretation,** partly by the observer's knowledge of the subjective and objective situation, partly by the character of subsequent events. It is obviously not a procedure that appeals to a critical mind used to experimental verification of facts or to factual evidence.

Crowley illustrates the deterministic theory of classical physics in an extract from his diaries quoted in Chapter 9 of *Magick in Theory and Practice*:

If I strike a billiard-ball and it moves, both my will and its motion are due to causes long antecedent to the act. I may consider both my Work and its reaction as twin effects of the eternal Universe. The moved arm and ball are parts of a state of the Cosmos which resulted necessarily from its momentarily previous state, and so, back for ever. Thus, my Magical Work is only one of the cause-effects necessarily concomitant with the case-effects which set the ball in motion. I may therefore regard the act of striking as a cause-effect of my original Will to move the ball, though necessarily previous to its motion.

In the same way, the theory illustrated by Jung postulates that the

“chance” layout of the tarot cards, or the turns of the coins of the I Ching, are “due to causes long antecedent to the act,” and are part of “a state of the Cosmos which resulted necessarily from its momentarily previous state, and so, back for ever.” Since it — along with all other current conditions — result *necessarily* from the momentarily previous state, then we can suppose that it is *characteristic* of that present moment, and that an examination of the chance layout of the tarot cards, for instance, can therefore yield information on the current state of the universe that could not be obtained through simple direct apprehension.

This theory is, as we have noted, extremely attractive to people who wish to believe in the power of divination, whilst preferring to avoid the more overtly ridiculous assumptions, such as the objective existence of impossibly powerful non-corporeal beings or hidden abilities. However, it does involve some equally difficult assumptions. If the chance layout of the tarot cards is characteristic of the moment, then we can write down a sentence on a piece of paper and that is *equally* characteristic of the moment, *regardless of whether we write consciously or not*. There is therefore no reason to suppose that the chance layout of the tarot cards yields insight into the moment in any better way than does the act of us consciously choosing to write a sentence such as “I will shortly become exceedingly rich!” and therefore no more reliable or useful. The theory is therefore just as unsatisfactory its more obviously difficult cousins.

It appears, then, as if all the theories of divination which involve the arrangement of the symbols having any kind of significant explanatory power over either current or future events are fatally flawed in one way or another, and that we should therefore reject them. However, our analysis has been entirely theoretical up until this point. We may consider that, theoretical considerations notwithstanding, there is a surefire way to find out if the arrangements of the symbols have this kind of explanatory power, regardless of from whence we imagine it to arise, and that is to test it. The normal questions of divination, involving as they tend to do events in our lives which are complex, interconnected, and subject to interpretation, are difficult to assess in this manner. If a divination indicates riches, for instance, it will usually be possible in the following six months to identify *some* event which could be said to fulfill the prophecy. Of course, by obtaining more specific answers (such as the stipulation that the riches arise from some kind of mineral discovery, for instance) we can alleviate some of these difficulties, but we can always question the skill of the diviner. However, it should be possible to obtain from divination answers to

questions such as “is the ball in box one, two or three?” and test it far more rigorously. It can, will, and often has been argued, of course, that the governing spirits will not debase themselves so far as to be tested in this manner, which would explain any inconclusive results, but this argument — founded as it is on pure speculation about entities of which the proponent has no knowledge — is just a little too convenient for the scientific mind to accept. Naturally, no such testing of divination has ever yielded conclusive evidence in its favour, so we may consider these theories of divination to be highly suspect on both theoretical *and* empirical grounds.

This leaves us with only one alternative — to accept that the layout of the divinatory symbols is, in fact, random, and bears no meaningful relationship to either current or future events, and has no explanatory powers over either of them. This would appear to debunk the practice of divination entirely, but this is only true if we suppose that divination has no other valid purpose, which turns out not to be the case.

As we have mentioned, the ability to both understand the present and to make reliable predictions of the future depend upon a knowledge of the processes at work, and a knowledge of the current conditions upon which those processes operate. It follows that this ability will be hampered by the diviner’s lack of knowledge on these things. One very significant impediment to the diviner’s ability in this respect arises from a tendency towards *personal bias*. To take an extreme example, the man suffering from paranoia *knows* that everyone and everything is out to get him, and interprets all of his perceptions in this manner. On a more mundane level, one person may fail an exam and his psychological makeup may lead him to conclude that he is therefore a total duffer in that subject area, and that he always will be. A person of different character experiencing identical circumstances may alternatively conclude that he merely requires more practice before he will become the master of the subject. Clearly these interpretations may be expected to have a significant effect on both future events themselves, and on future interpretations, since both will have some tendency towards self-fulfillment.

What would be of immense value to the aspirant to self-knowledge is an ability to interpret events in a more-or-less objective light, in a way free from personal bias and outside of his established subjective thought patterns. Unaided, this can naturally be incredibly difficult to do, because he will inevitably tend to think in the way that he tends to think. The value of divination is that it provides the aspirant with a definite set of symbols, all of which have relatively objective meanings, that can be used as the basis of an interpretation of fu-

ture events. Since these symbols are definite and relatively objective, this interpretation will not derive from the aspirant's own tendencies, although naturally it may be coloured by them. Even if the interpretation turns out to be invalid, this process effectively forces the diviner to "think outside the box," to consider alternative interpretations that may otherwise never have occurred to him.

At the very least, this practice may enable him to obtain a more rounded view of the current situation than he may otherwise have been able to obtain, and this may cause him to make a more measured and appropriate decision even if he ultimately rejects the interpretation that the divination has given him. Further, as he continues in this practice, he will become increasingly able to think independently, and the effects of his personal bias may lessen over time. There is no subject about which is more difficult to think impartially than one's own being, but repeated practice may rightfully be assumed to lessen this difficulty. If the aspirant's objective is indeed to "know himself," then such a practice will naturally be critical to his development.

For instance, the result of an I Ching divination consists of one of sixty-four possible hexagrams, with variable *changing lines* which result in a movement to one of the remaining sixty-three hexagrams, or to no movement at all. There are therefore 4,096 possible combinations, all 4,096 of which can be used to view a particular situation in a different and distinct light. Even if the aspirant eschews divination as a method of foretelling the future, but obtains a different one of these combinations each day by which to interpret his day's experiences, then he will relatively rapidly develop the ability to interpret his experiences from an arbitrary and unfamiliar standpoint. By so doing, and by comparing to the interpretation he may otherwise have arrived at unaided, he is likely to gain great insight into the way his own mind works, which will expand the degree to which he understands that mind enormously, and may enable him to start observing the tricks his mind plays on him as they arise, giving him the ability to divert them and do a much better job of maintaining an objective view. This ability will be of immense value to him in his quest for self-knowledge.

Thus we can see that the true value of divination is not in its ability to foretell the future at all, but in the fruits of its practice, in the symmetrical expansion of awareness¹ that enriches the aspirant's understanding of himself and his environment enormously, and, ironically, also enables him to predict future events with far greater reliability

¹See my essay *The Method of Love* for an in-depth analysis of this concept.

than he was previously able to do. One can only build self-knowledge by seeking out the unfamiliar, and observing one's own reactions, and the practice of divination is a simple and effective way to achieve this.

The effectiveness of this practice is enhanced if the population of symbols themselves is possessed of what we may term "wisdom." If we presume, for instance, that each of the sixty-four hexagrams of the I Ching represents some fundamental state or change of state, and that together the set of sixty-four comprises a *complete* set of such states or changes in state, then the study of the symbols and their relationships to each other can be assumed by itself to lead to a significant enhancement of insight, providing as it will an exposure to concepts and their relationships that the aspirant may otherwise not be exposed to in his daily life, or at least, may not apprehend. In the same way as a study of physics enables one to apprehend the forces at work in nature, so a study of a complete set of symbols of life may equally enable the aspirant to apprehend the forces at work in his own life and in the lives of others, and may leave him far better equipped to successfully navigate that life. Regular and prolonged practice in divination, requiring as that practice does the consideration of the meanings of multiple symbols in varying relationships to one another, may be the most effective way of conducting this study, since it forces him not only to consider specific combinations of symbols in a degree of detail which he would not obtain from simply reading a book about them, but also to consider those combinations in the direct context of his own experiences, which will bring them to life and enhance his understanding of them greatly. Even if the population of symbols itself is not "complete" or "perfect," we can hardly suspect such a study to be of anything other than the greatest benefit. What is more, these benefits will be of far greater value to him than the benefits of divination under the "traditional" theories, which even in their most advantageous functions will serve little more than to guide him towards things that he doesn't really want anyway.

Therefore, the true value of divination exists not in its purported fortune-telling properties at all, and we can safely discard that which offends our good sense and still be left with a tool of enormous potential and benefit; indeed, by rejecting the spurious explanations of the supernatural and apprehending its true value, we may indeed be far more greatly inclined to indulge in the practice in the first place, and hence far more likely to reap the benefits which persistent and regular application can accrue.

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