

# Divination, Enchantment and Platonism

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I would like to start by asking, what is divination? In so doing, I am not assuming that it is possible to separate cleanly description and the described, and thus to avoid the contingencies of a particular perspective. I am also aware that any such answer will involve a high degree of generalisation. Nonetheless, it seems a worthwhile question to ask – as well as perfectly fair, since such contingencies cannot be avoided – of an activity that is nigh-well a human universal, and to suggest, however tentatively and summarily, an answer. That answer will necessarily consist of what Weber called an ‘ideal type’, or Wittgenstein, ‘family resemblances’, and it is my methodological assumption (which seems plausible, at least) that a ‘purer’, more distinct and therefore more interesting and useful set will be possible if we concentrate on divination in times when and places where it was or is openly practised (recognisably, at least) *qua* divination. Then, if those characteristics can be established, we can go on to ask: what kind of conditions are more, and what less, favourable to such a creature? That is the question I then intend to ask in relation to Platonism and Neoplatonism, before finally considering whether Iamblichus’s theurgy constitutes a special case or contradiction to the answer to my second question.

## On Divination

In this paper there is no room to cite direct evidence and still be able to do much else, so I will be obliged to summarise it. In so doing I am drawing on historical sources and anthropological evidence as well as, albeit indirectly, mythography.<sup>1</sup> The characteristics which emerge from such a consideration of, let us say, aboriginal or indigenous divination, are that, briefly, it is:

**Pluralist.** In ‘the West’, at least, there is a rough historical progression from divination in a context of animism – an effectively unlimited number of spirits – through polytheism, with a large but limited pantheon, to monotheism. Since it is easy enough to perceive a gradual decline and impoverishment in divinatory practices (qualitatively, quantitatively and terms of their ideological, social and political centrality) accompanying that progression, I infer that in order to flourish – as distinct from merely survive – divination ideally requires a fully spiritual nature, or natural spirituality, for which animism (shorn, of course, of its original pejorative and teleological assumptions) remains the best short description.<sup>2</sup>

Even classical oracles such as that at Delphi – relatively decadent, so to speak, in relation to aboriginal divination – were, as James Davidson writes, “the product of a pluralistic, not just undespotic but anti-despotic culture.... And that pluralism, a cosmic pluralism, a political pluralism, a geopolitical pluralism...is manifest in every word of every line of every (pagan) oracle ever uttered.”<sup>3</sup>

**Local.** What Sean Kane writes about myth also applies to such divination: “Wisdom about nature, that wisdom heard and told in animated pattern, that pattern

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<sup>1</sup> Respectively: as discussed in Willis and Curry 2004; especially Peek 1991 and Tedlock 2001; and Kane 1998.

<sup>2</sup> See Bird-David 1999, Viveiros de Castro 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Davidson 2004: 18.

rendered in such a way as to preserve a place whole and sacred, safe from human meddling: these are the concepts with which to begin an exploration of myth. Of these, the notion of the sanctity of place is vital. It anchors the other concepts...<sup>4</sup>

Overwhelmingly, the spirits just mentioned were spirits of particular natural places: what Willis calls “ecological spirits”.<sup>5</sup> Equally, those places were, in the experience of the diviners as well as more generally in the culture, inseparable from their spirits. (Note too the important point that pluralism and localism each entail each other.)

**Sensuous.** As David Abram points out, if “each place has its own mind, its own personality, its own intelligence”, then “Intelligence is no longer ours alone but is a property of the earth; we are in it, of it, immersed in its depths.”<sup>6</sup> The result is a radical immanence which, being effectively inexhaustible, leaves nothing (so to speak) for transcendence to do. In such a world, as Ronald Hepburn puts it, “There is no wholly-other paradise from which we are excluded; the only transcendence that can be real to us is an ‘immanent’ one.”<sup>7</sup>

The same point can be approached in the inseparability, which grows stronger as one follows the roots of divinatory practices back in time, of the spirits at the other end of the divinatory dialogue and the Earth. This is true both of the importance of place – as James Davidson remarks, “‘divination location’ [manteion] is one of the words often translated as ‘oracle’”<sup>8</sup> – and of the means by which the gods conveyed their messages. It was certainly not unusual that at classical Greece’s most ancient oracle-site, Dodona, the god “communicated through the rustling of the oak leaves and the converse of the doves living in the great tree”.<sup>9</sup> This is also perceptible in the mythic antecedents of divination and oracles, especially the pre-Olympian deities of Hermes and Metis. The latter was the chthonic goddess by whom Zeus fathered Athena, the patron of Odysseus. And divination, I have suggested elsewhere,<sup>10</sup> partakes of the same mode, namely:

**Metic**, that is, the mode of being (living, acting, thinking, etc.) characterised as ‘cunning wisdom’, in contrast, for example, to both Platonic *episteme* (abstract truth) and Aristotelian *phronesis* (practical skill). To conceive of divination as indicative rather than performative, observations rather than interventions, detached rather than fully participatory – this can only lead to gross misunderstanding.<sup>11</sup>

In ‘Western’ culture Odysseus and Penelope are exemplars of *metis*.<sup>12</sup> To quote Detienne and Vernant, *metic* divination entails a “future where nothing is fixed in advance, in which those consulting the gods must know how to time their questions opportunely, accepting or rejecting the oracle and even turning into their own advantage an answer given by the god in favor of their adversary.”<sup>13</sup> (Hence the French aphorism, “Aide-toi, le ciel t’aidera.” This is perhaps closer to the original sense of “God helps those who help themselves”, before it degenerated into cynicism.)<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Kane 1998: 50.

<sup>5</sup> Willis 1999: 191.

<sup>6</sup> Abram 1996: 182, 262.

<sup>7</sup> Hepburn 1991: 182.

<sup>8</sup> Davidson 2004.

<sup>9</sup> Wood 2003: 28.

<sup>10</sup> See Willis and Curry 2004: 105.

<sup>11</sup> See Willis and Curry 2004, ch. 5; de Boeke and Devische 1994; and Davidson 2004: 15.

<sup>12</sup> See Raphals 1992, and Willis and Curry 2004: 104-6, 121-2.

<sup>13</sup> Vernant and Detienne 1978, quoted in Wood 2004: 159.

<sup>14</sup> See the instance recounted approvingly by Machiavelli in *The Discourses*, I.14.

Fate in such a world is a far cry from the fixed and irrevocable end stipulated by the classical Greek and Christian traditions, with its constant temptation of a fixed and therefore predictable future. Rather, it is ongoing, constantly being recreated and negotiated, and is never complete for any individual until the moment of death.<sup>15</sup> This is a position for which ‘free will’ is simply not an issue; however unwise, it is always possible to reject the advice of the gods or fates. By the same token, it is also more realistic: there is no pretence that the will is ever perfectly free, that is, unaffected by our human desires on the one hand and cosmic circumstances on the other. It recognises that for us to be without desires is either more, or less, than human, and it refuses to legislate *a priori* on what counts as a ‘legitimate’ desire (e.g., to return to the One) whereby some other set (e.g., sexual) becomes inadmissible (unless redescribed, however implausibly, as a version of the former).

### **Enchantment**

Now in all these respects, divination seems an excellent instance of what Max Weber described as ‘enchantment’, or “the unity of the primitive image of the world, in which everything was concrete magic” – *both* ‘material’ *and* ‘spiritual’, in Platonic-Christian-Cartesian terms – which has subsequently “tended to split into rational cognition and mastery of nature, on the one hand, and into ‘mystic’ experiences, on the other.”<sup>16</sup> Philip Peek asks, “How can we reconcile divination’s ‘mystical’ process with its immensely practical results?”<sup>17</sup> But that is an anachronistic question to ask regarding divination which should arguably be turned on its head and returned: ‘How can we account for the fact that ‘concrete magic’ seems (for so many, and/or so deeply) like an oxymoron?’

Weber also referred to “the fate of our times as (quoting Schiller) “the disenchantment of the world”, resulting from a “process of rationalisation and intellectualisation...which we have been undergoing for thousands of years...” It is just such a process, rendered sufficiently durable and widespread through institutionalisation, etc., that disenchantments. And its *sine qua non* is not “an increased and general knowledge of the conditions under which one lives” but “the knowledge or belief that if one but wished one *could* learn it at any time. Hence, it means that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation.”<sup>18</sup> Just as concrete magic is necessarily plural – the ‘concrete’ here is decidedly not modern scientific matter or quantity, but precisely the sensuous particularities that the seventeenth-century scientific revolution banished as ‘secondary’ epiphenomena – disenchanting belief requires a master principle by which, and in relation to which, all things can be ordered. That principle must necessarily be both universal (without exceptions anywhere, which would threaten its singularity) and single (without any rival and therefore potentially incommensurable principles, which would threaten its universality).

### **On Platonism**

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<sup>15</sup> See Stone 1989.

<sup>16</sup> Weber 1991: 282.

<sup>17</sup> Peek 1991a: 203.

<sup>18</sup> Weber 1991: 155, 138-9.

By now, of course, we have already arrived in (whatever else it may also be) a post-Homeric and specifically Pythagorean-Platonic world. What, then, is the fate of divination in such a world? First, let me try to characterise that world in the same way as I have aboriginal/ indigenous divination. The contrast, which I don't believe I have overdrawn, could hardly be striking. Platonism is:

**Monist.** This should hardly need defending, since without 'the One', and the unity it supplies, Platonism is unimaginable. Yet it may tempt some to argue that it reconciles monism and pluralism. Such an argument would be mistaken or meretricious. The points I have just made concerning the monist-universalist basis of disenchantment applies fully to Platonism, which, indeed, is the best candidate for the foundational instance of that very idea. Plurality is only tolerated as long as its entities do not conflict, or only apparently conflict, with the One – hence the disingenuous nostrum of "unity in diversity". A real pluralism – one whose elements are potentially incommensurable and therefore agonistic, and which includes monism as one principle or view among many (the one that says there *is* only one) – was and is as intolerable to Platonists as for their Christian heirs, notably Pauline and Augustinian, and their modern scientific heirs in turn. (The last's fear and loathing of pluralism did not appear *ex nihilo*!)

To make the same point by way of contrast, here is an observation by William James:

...the only way to escape from the paradoxes and perplexities that a consistently thought-out monistic universe suffers from... – the mystery of the 'fall' namely, of reality lapsing into appearance, truth into error, perfection into imperfection; of evil, in short... – the only way of escape, I say, from all this is to be frankly pluralistic and assume that the superhuman consciousness, however vast it may be, has itself an external environment, and consequently is finite.<sup>19</sup>

But this is surely something to which no self-respecting Platonist could ever agree.

**Universalist** – in the respect, and for the reason, just given. But this attribute is also evident in the supreme ontological Plato placed on *logos*, as opposed to *mūthos*, and the corresponding epistemological value he gave to *epistēmē*, as opposed to *doxa*. By implication, of course, he identified myth with mere vulgar opinion. (His enmity towards poets, and Homer in particular, was part of the same point of view.)<sup>20</sup> And I would add that the materialist universalism of modern science is simply a reversal – and as such, a variation – of Platonic universal spirit. Neither version is a radical contrary or alternative to the other.

**Abstract**, in a double sense. One follows on from the hypostasis of *epistēmē* as abstract universal knowledge, or 'truth', itself almost certainly inspired by Pythagoras's abstract mystical mathematics. Aristotle felt obliged to supplement this uncompromising category with *phronēsis*, or nontransferable practical skills, but even the latter fails to accommodate what is an unassimilable mode for Platonism, except as error or evil: namely, *mētis*, or cunning wisdom.<sup>21</sup> In a Platonic world there is no room for real negotiation with gods or fate because there is ultimately nothing to negotiate; in C.S. Lewis's insider's aphorism, "There seems to be no plan because it is all plan." Of course, Plan requires a unity, a whole which happens to be known to a privileged elite (who typically complain about this terrible responsibility – a kind of metaphysical 'white man's burden' – but nonetheless never voluntarily give it up);

<sup>19</sup> James 1977:140.

<sup>20</sup> On *logos* vs. *mūthos*, see *Gorgias* 523A. On poets and Homer, see *Republic* 378D and 382D.

<sup>21</sup> See Detienne and Vernant 1978, Raphals 1992.

and their version, naturally, then requires inculcating and policing. That is why Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, in relation to political theory, concluded that “there is no radical and plural democracy without renouncing the discourse of the universal, and its implicit assumption of a privileged point of access to ‘the truth’, which can only be reached by a limited number of subjects.”<sup>22</sup>

Now the only kind of freedom universalism permits is that smug and crypto-authoritarian formula, ‘the recognition of necessity’ – pre-determined ‘necessity’, that is, knowledge of the precise nature of which is the privilege of the same spiritual elite. (Hegel, who gave this idea a modern lease of life by identifying that elite with the state, springs unavoidably to mind; so too, therefore, does Marx’s materialist [in]version.) Once again, a bracing contrast is on offer, this time from Isaiah Berlin: “The fundamental sense of freedom is freedom from chains, from imprisonment... The rest is extension of this sense, or else metaphor.”<sup>23</sup> Divinatory freedom is not, of course, absolute; otherwise, at this opposite extreme to Plan, there would once again be no need for negotiation. So it is limited, but on that very account – unlike Platonic freedom – real.

Platonism is also abstract in the sense of non- or rather anti-sensuous. The Earth’s “wild and multiplicitous otherness”<sup>24</sup> is merely a threatening chaos that must be transformed and redeemed. In Plato’s *Phaedo*, “Socrates tells Simmias that humanity lives in the ‘hollows of the earth,’ the ‘dregs of the starry aether, unable or unwilling to emerge to the... ‘true heaven and the true light and the true earth’”.<sup>25</sup> As for what is, in primary experience, the actual Earth, Socrates dismisses it in a single flippant remark: “You must forgive me, dear friend. I’m a lover of learning, and trees and open country won’t teach me anything, whereas men in the town do.”<sup>26</sup> It need hardly be added that for Plato, humans are above ‘the animals’, i.e., “their betters in kind”. For one thing, according to the *Timaeus*, without the descent of *human* souls into bodies the universe would remain incomplete. The contrast of this childish self-serving nostrum with the maturity and realism of the aboriginal realisation that human beings are entirely dispensable for the Earth, whereas the opposite is clearly not the case, is striking; but the main point here is the Platonic contempt for – grounded in, it seems, fear of – the embodied, embedded and perspectival life that characterises divination.

**Hierarchical.** This attribute is already contained in the value-laden ordering of Plato’s axiological topography, according to which ‘higher’ is more spiritual and good, and ‘lower’ more material and bad. This is in obvious contrast (probably deliberate) to the Homeric world, in which, like the aboriginal, one might encounter a god, a spirit, an animal or a human being in a context of egalitarianism which not only did not rule out any kind of encounter, in advance, as illegitimate, but also did not entirely rule out members of one class being, or becoming, another. (The echo of shamanism here is obvious.) As Roberto Calasso notes, such a refusal “precludes any idea of a ladder of being, on which, through a series of purificatory acts, one might ascend toward the divine, or alternatively the divine might descend in an oderly fashion toward man. This idea...forms the point of departure for every form of Platonism...”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Laclau and Mouffe 1985:191-2.

<sup>23</sup> Berlin 1969: lvi.

<sup>24</sup> Abram 1996: 10.

<sup>25</sup> Shaw 1995: 224-25.

<sup>26</sup> *Phaedo* 109c and 232d respectively.

<sup>27</sup> Calasso 1993: 275.

This is a point which, conjoined with abstraction, Abram addresses with his usual acuity:

If we speak of matter as essentially inanimate, or inert, we establish the need for a graded hierarchy of beings: stones have no agency or experience whatsoever; plants have a bit more life, with a rudimentary degree of sensitivity; ‘lower’ animals are more sentient, yet still stuck in their instincts; ‘higher’ animals are more aware; while humans alone are really awake and intelligent. In this manner we continually isolate human awareness above, and apart from, the sensuous world. If, however, we assume that matter is animate (or ‘self-organizing’) from the start, then hierarchies vanish, and we are left with a diversely differentiated field of animate beings, each of which has its gifts relative to the others. And we find ourselves not above, but in the very midst of this living web, our own sentience part and parcel of the sensuous landscape...<sup>28</sup>

In concluding this section, I should add that there is another dimension to this subject which no consideration of it as a whole can afford to neglect, but which I only have room to mention. It is no secret that Platonic idealism is saturated with value-laden dualisms – spirit/ matter, reason/ body, human/ nature, etc. – that are thoroughly gendered.<sup>29</sup>

In this context, however, I would like to stress the contrast between the ‘concrete magic’ of divination and the disenchanting meta-rationalism and realism<sup>30</sup> of Platonism, for which we might borrow the words of Horkheimer and Adorno, describing its illegitimate child, the Enlightenment: “its ideal is the system from which all and everything follows.”<sup>31</sup> Notwithstanding its spirituality – indeed, in its very acceptance of a firm distinction between what is ‘concrete’ and what is ‘magic’ – Platonism places itself as the enemy of enchantment. And that should alert us that in its attempt “to uphold the ‘old ways’ of traditional religions by reinterpreting them according to a cosmological and arithmetic schema”,<sup>32</sup> such Platonic “reinterpretation” was far from innocent of its own very different agenda.

## Astrology

I have argued elsewhere, in some detail, that astrology not only originated as astromancy, or astral divination, but retains the essential characteristics of divination.<sup>33</sup> However (and this is one of the things that makes astrology so interesting), it also bears the marks of precisely the millenia-long process of rationalisation to which Weber referred. In that process, astrology has struck some historic bargains: most importantly with Aristotelian natural philosophy, initially (and still influentially) through Ptolemy, and later as renegotiated for theological purposes by Aquinas. (More recent instances include Theosophy and Jungian psychology.)

In view of the discussion so far, however, there is no longer any good reason to suspend the same view of Neoplatonic astrology. Let me state it plainly:

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<sup>28</sup> Abram 2004.

<sup>29</sup> For a discussion see Plumwood 2002, after Keller 1985.

<sup>30</sup> A spiritual realism, of course; so realism not in the sense of opposing idealism but of opposing relativism (or rather, perspectivism).

<sup>31</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno 1994:7.

<sup>32</sup> Shaw 1995: 239.

<sup>33</sup> Willis and Curry 2004; and see Cornelius 2003.

Neoplatonic astrology was an agreement between unequal discourses of the same order as the one with Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos*: a compromise between a dominant one whose mode entails disenchantment and a subaltern one whose *modus vivendi* is enchantment. At best, this arrangement, like the others, may well have enabled astrological divination to survive in an increasingly hostile milieu (part of which hostility was precisely the ascendancy of Platonic ideas); but if so, it was again at the cost of a significant degree of disguise and a corresponding risk of inauthenticity. Given that the divinatory mode is marked by *metis*, localism, pluralism – insofar as it is biologically embodied, socially embedded and ecologically or naturally (but not naturalistically) perspectival – and Platonism is constituted by almost their exact contraries, how could it be otherwise? And don't forget that Aristotle was very much Plato's pupil. He rejected eternal Ideal Forms but kept unifying principles – that is, system – only underlying ones and tendentially material, instead of overarching and spiritual.

Furthermore, just as generations of astrologers have striven to train, domesticate and indeed (in the case of horary, astrology at its most obviously divinatory) suppress the “wild and multiplicitous otherness” of their art in accord with Ptolemaic principles,<sup>34</sup> so too they have long been seduced by Plato and his heirs into abandoning Earthly truths for cosmic Truth. Indeed, it is my belief (although I won't ask anyone else to share it, since my more general thesis doesn't depend on the veracity of this extreme version) that ultimately, Platonism has been a disaster not only for divination and oracles, including astrology *qua* divination, but for our understanding of them.

### Neoplatonism

Does what I have said about Platonism also apply to Neoplatonism? A simple way to answer this question would be to accept at face value Neoplatonists' own claim to share the fundamental beliefs of their tradition's founder. In any case, however, the answer must surely be affirmative. Notwithstanding the qualifications appropriate for their individual contributions, the philosophies of Plotinus, Porphyry and Proclus can also be fairly characterised as monist, universalist, abstract and hierarchical.

Given that these philosophers were pagan, the extent is sometimes overlooked to which they shared with Christianity (itself, of course, heavily influenced by Plato) a commitment to the same programme of disenchantment. This is a point that emerges clearly from a recent discussion by Ronald Hutton, who points out that “By the end of the fourth century some pagans could treat monotheism as an obvious feature of their creed...” Plotinian monotheism (according to which emanation from the One “represented a separation, regrettable in itself, and the goal of intelligent beings ought therefore to be reunion with the One”) was advanced by Porphyry, “who edited and propagated it as a rival *system* to Christianity, capable of *rationalising* the whole of pagan culture.... It may thus be seen that at the end of antiquity Neoplatonism provided a means of reconciling polytheism with monotheism” – an offer, so to speak, that couldn't be refused – “and of *rationalising* all the pre-Christian religions of the classical ancient world into a *single system*”.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> See Curry 1992.

<sup>35</sup> Hutton 2003: 88, 91, 92; my emphases – although they are hardly needed to adduce the Weberian consequences of such an ambition.

## Iamblichus: A Special Case

Gregory Shaw's magisterial *Theurgy and the Soul* (1995)<sup>36</sup> permits its reader to draw two conclusions that are, perhaps appropriately, paradoxical if not actually contradictory. One is that Neoplatonism, including that of Iamblichus, is indeed thoroughly Platonic – not only in the fundamental respects I have identified, nor in speaking, relatedly, of “the soul purified from the body”, but also in revealing details. For example, Iamblichus apparently held that “it is the purity of the receiving soul – not the geographical place – that allows for divine possessions”; in the same vein, Proclus wrote of “those true mysteries in which souls separated from terrestrial places are initiated”.<sup>37</sup> This is a fundamental departure from aboriginal divinatory geophany, and it can also be found in the theurgic Chaldean Oracles, where Fragment 90 warns that “from the hollows of the earth leap chthonian dogs (i.e., daimons), who never show a true sign to a mortal”.<sup>38</sup> (Are these the same benighted hollows denigrated by Socrates? If so, what is it about hollows – a particularly feminine and therefore treacherous kind of place, perhaps?)

The other conclusion, however, is that Iamblichus's theurgy stands in a distinctive, even radical relationship to the rest of Platonism and Neoplatonism. As such, it might escape the burden of my thesis, so it is that possibility I would now like to examine.

It is not for me to judge whether Iamblichus's theurgy was a radical return to what Plato intended or a divergence from that. In either case, it cannot be denied that the former's thorough-going emphasis on ritual and embodiment is a great deal closer in spirit to divination, especially considered as enchantment, than intellectual or ‘theological’ Platonism. (This seems so obvious, and space so limited, that I do not think it requires elaboration.) So to that considerable extent, I grant Iamblichus's exceptionalism in relation to my argument so far.

However, the stubborn fact remains that, however innovatively, he was working with and from within a discourse that was, as we have seen, *already* seriously skewed against the divinatory grain. So his “attempt to bring traditional pagan practices in line with Platonic and Pythagorean teachings” cannot entirely avoid the hostile (disenchanting) implications of monism, hierarchy, souls that need ‘purification’ from the body – which includes, not surprisingly but nonetheless tellingly, distrust of sexuality<sup>39</sup> – and, again in Shaw's words, “classes [which] are graded and proceed from the more material and overt forms of ritual practices/persons to the more spiritual and interior.”<sup>40</sup> That last is perhaps the problem in a nutshell, although there is also an unanswered question behind the soteriology that is the justification for theurgy: why does the cosmos, and the soul, *need* purification, transformation or salvation through theurgy?<sup>41</sup> We may well ask why the Earth, which is the source and sustainer of all life as she is lived, requires any such thing. Indeed, the point is not so much that the Earth is actually a Good as that it is anterior, being both literally and metaphorically the ground of its possibility, to the very distinction between good or saved and evil or damned. So it seems to me that Iamblichan theurgy

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<sup>36</sup> See also his fascinating recent paper of 2003.

<sup>37</sup> Shaw 1995: 45, 7.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Shaw 1995:41.

<sup>39</sup> See Hutton 2003: 134.

<sup>40</sup> Shaw 1995:17, 203, n.14.

<sup>41</sup> Shaw 1995: 124.

cannot be said to escape the charges I have brought against the Platonism that, after all, he claimed to be restoring.

However, again – and I am sorry about the twists and turns in the argument, but they are unavoidable (and perhaps even appropriate, give the complexity of Iamblichus’s own position) – he himself provides a crucial meta-qualification for that conclusion; for what I have been criticising is, of course, his theology (‘god talk’), whereas he insisted that what is more important is theurgy (‘god work’). So Iamblichus has, so to speak, the last laugh, and all the more so since my own thesis places primary value on divinatory practice, while criticising Neo/Platonic theology (including that of Iamblichus himself) for making it more difficult!

However (for the third and last time), by the same token – that is, Iamblichus’s own – we are not obliged to accept that his own theology, or more broadly and neutrally, his theory of theurgy, including divination, is necessarily the best available account. Given the paucity of rival accounts, especially modern ones, both qualitatively and quantitatively, it would be understandable to do so. That it is subtle and rich is beyond any doubt, and I am on record as arguing that we have much to learn from it.<sup>42</sup> But we cannot afford to be uncritical, nor to shirk the intellectual responsibility of attempting to arrive at our own understanding. So I would like to conclude with an example of where I think Iamblichus’s position needs qualification lest it mislead.

### **Divination as Faculty**

Here are two more-or-less contemporary stories centred on divination. The first is Karen Blixen’s account of an incident in mid-May 1931, a week after her lover Denys Finch-Hatton had died in a flying accident. It took place at her beloved coffee farm in the highlands of Kenya which she was being forced, by bankruptcy, to leave.

All this could not be, I thought, just a coincidence of circumstances, what people call a run of bad luck, but there must be some central principle within it. If I could find it, it would save me. If I looked in the right place, I reflected, the coherence of things might become clear to me. I must, I thought, get up and look for a sign.

Many people think it an unreasonable thing, to be looking for a sign. This is because of the fact that it takes a particular state of mind to be able to do so, and not many people have ever found themselves in such a state. If in this mood, you ask for a sign, the answer cannot fail you; it follows as the natural consequence of the demand...

Blixen went out of her house, and very soon a big white cockerel strutted up to her. Suddenly he stopped, as from the other direction appeared a little grey chameleon. The latter, frightened “but at the same time very brave,” opened his mouth and shot out his long tongue at the cock. But the latter struck with his beak and plucked out the chameleon’s tongue.

The whole meeting between the two had taken ten seconds. Now I chased off Fathima’s cock, took up a big stone and killed the Chameleon, for he could not live without his tongue...

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<sup>42</sup> In Willis and Curry 2004:117.

I was so frightened by what I had seen, - for it had been a gruesome and formidable thing in a miniature format, - that I went away and sat down on the stone seat by the house. I sat there for a long time, and...dared not look up, such a dangerous place did the world seem to me.

Very slowly, in the course of the next few days, it came upon me that I had had the most spiritual answer possible to my call.... The powers to which I had cried had stood on my dignity more than I had done myself, and what other answer could they then give? This was clearly not the hour for coddling, and they had chosen to connive at my invocation of it.<sup>43</sup>

I would only add a couple of remarks. Despite being more-or-less contemporary, this incident was in keeping with the most ancient characteristics of divination of which we know. Place was not arbitrary but the primary locus of Blixen's concern; the gods Blixen invoked spoke through animals (of that place); and they did so perfectly in accord with Heraclitus's dictum, "The divine one whose oracle is in Delphi speaks neither directly nor obscurely, but rather gives a sign".<sup>44</sup> (And what did the sign with which the gods answered Blixen's request signify? It seems to me it was this: 'In this matter we are helpless. We cannot tell you anything to help you or save you.')<sup>45</sup>

Blixen left Africa in August, and never returned.

The second story is by Val Plumwood, an ecofeminist writer and philosopher, who was canoeing in February 1985 in the Kakaku wetlands in Northern Territory, where crocodiles are common.

Nothing stirred along the riverbank, but a great tumble of escarpment cliffs up on the other side of the river caught my attention. One especially striking rock formation – a single large rock balanced precariously on a smaller one – held my gaze. As I looked, my whispering sense of unease turned into a shout of danger. The strange formation put me sharply in mind of two things: the indigenous Gagadgu owners of Kakadu, whose advice about coming here I had not sought, and of the precariousness of my own life, of human lives. As a solitary specimen of a major prey species of the saltwater crocodile, I was standing in one of the most dangerous places on the face of the earth.

Plumwood set off back in her canoe, but (to condense drastically a breathtaking account) she was almost immediately attacked by a large crocodile, who took her in his jaws down into the water in a death-roll not once but three times. Extraordinarily, and despite severe injury, she managed to pull herself up the muddy riverbank, and was lucky enough to be found by a ranger in time to survive. Looking back, she concluded that

I learned many personal lessons from the event, one of which was...to be more open to the sorts of messages and warnings I had ignored on that particular day. As on the day itself, so even more to me now a decade later, the *telos* of these events lies in the strange rock formation, which symbolized so well the lessons about the vulnerability of humankind I had to learn.... Let us

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<sup>43</sup> Blixen 1970:369-70.

<sup>44</sup> Geldard 2000:161.

<sup>45</sup> As such, I suggest this is a limiting case to Cornelius's 2003 argument – which I hold to be *generally* correct – that "destiny is negotiable"; cf. Stone's concordant 1989.

hope that it does not take a similar near-death experience to instruct our culture in the wisdom of the balanced rock.<sup>46</sup>

Now both these incidents – one involving a bidden omen, the other unbidden – involved people who had (so far as I know) neither studied or trained in divinatory ritual. Encouraged by such accounts, I would venture to assert that divination is a *natural human faculty*, however unevenly distributed, which will appear spontaneously in the right circumstances. *A fortiori*, of course, it can potentially be encouraged and developed. More to the point, however, Weber’s thousands of years of rationalisation (much of it Platonic) have failed to entirely suppress it, although not failed entirely.<sup>47</sup>

Of course, the ideal conditions for divination surely remain an indigenous/aboriginal animistic society which includes shamans or their equivalents – a society of the very kind that is disappearing, or being disappeared, everywhere in the contemporary world. If the wellspring of divination is a fundamentally human and ultimately animal faculty, however, then it might well find and/or create new forms which allow it to happen. But such new forms will ‘necessarily’ be a re-creation, resembling the old ones in crucial respects. For that reason, their chief enemy will remain (in Bernard Williams’s apt phrase) the two-and-a-half-millenia-old “rationalistic conception of rationality”<sup>48</sup> and its institutionalised forms, among which Platonism, both overt and indirect, is so conspicuous.

The same point applies to the intellectual and academic apprehension of divination. Calling time on universalist monism, and recognising (with Wittgenstein, for example) that theory not only tends to follow practice but *is itself* a practice, will not only assist, however indirectly, such new forms to come about, assuming we wish such a thing; it will make it easier to recognise and better theorise them. (And it may well be that ecological imperatives and their cultural corollaries, of the kind noted by Plumwood,<sup>49</sup> will impel us in the same direction.)

### **Naturalising Theurgy?**

Let me conclude by returning briefly to theurgy by asking what the implications are for it, and vice-versa, of Blixen’s and Plumwood’s experiences. Shaw notes that Iamblichus “made a rigorous distinction between theurgic divination... and the varieties of human divination... True divination was not a natural gift, ‘but a certain divine good which is pre-established as more ancient than our nature’... which Iamblichus maintained came to the soul from outside...”<sup>50</sup> Well, these messages certainly came from outside, although in divination, of course, nature is not the pure Cartesian ‘outside’ that we have been trained to perceive, but equally an ‘inside’ (subject, agent). But we might question whether such a sharp distinction is tenable between “a natural gift” on the one hand and “a divine good which is...more ancient than our nature”; these do not necessarily seem to be mutually exclusive. (There is also the distinct possibility that our nature is, or at least has aspects, which are more ancient than what we commonly take our nature to be.)

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<sup>46</sup> Plumwood 1999: 77-78, 91.

<sup>47</sup> For a highly relevant and in some ways parallel account, see Hanegraaff 2003. My observation also points to yet another way in which Latour was right that *We Have Never Been Modern* (2003).

<sup>48</sup> Williams 1985:18.

<sup>49</sup> Discussed in detail in Plumwood 2002.

<sup>50</sup> Shaw 1995: 122.

Platonists, old and new, might argue that such a natural faculty is atavistic. (I am thinking of Rudolf Steiner and Ken Wilbur, for example.) But that assertion is only made possible by the kind of teleological and evolutionary meta-theory which, on account of its pernicious monism and universalism, I have already urged be abandoned. As James rightly asked, “Why should we envelope our many with the ‘one’ that brings so much poison in its train?”<sup>51</sup>

Iamblichus further distinguished true divination from “inductive techniques aimed at making predictions or diagnosing illnesses, and...from the natural prescience of animals to predict earthquakes or rain.... This was divination of a second order and fell short of divine stability and truth. Most significantly, it did not transform the soul.”<sup>52</sup> This leaves the stories just recounted essentially untouched; neither of them involved predicting the future. (Plumwood’s danger was already present – in retrospect, it seems probable that she had already been targeted by the as-yet-unseen crocodile – and Blixen’s plight was already well underway.) But did their divinations transform the soul?

This point was fundamental for Iamblichus: that the criterion for true divination was divinization. Again, we must again question it. For if we bracket the Platonic hypostasis of spirit and the spiritual, and recognise their inseparability in lived life and practice – theurgically, one might well say – from chthonic matter, in a relative unity that is both subject *and* object, with neither privileged *a priori*,<sup>53</sup> then I suggest that the experiences reported by Blixen and Plumwood do indeed qualify as transformative. (Whatever else they might be, they were not trivial – unless you think life itself is trivial.)

At any rate, I offer these reflections and stories as an example of the kind of theoretical work we still need to do if we are to do anything like justice to the subject.

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<sup>51</sup> James 1977: 141.

<sup>52</sup> Shaw 1995: 233.

<sup>53</sup> See Abram 1996: 91.

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