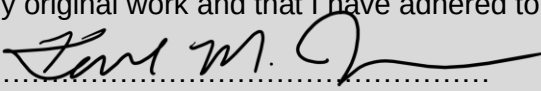


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A Critical Review of Plutarch's arguments for divination in *De Defectu Oraculorum (On the Obsolescence of Oracles)*

This essay offers a critical review and analysis of Plutarch's *De defectu oraculorum (On the Obsolescence of Oracles)*,¹ in which the author investigates the decline and abandonment of Greek sites traditionally associated with oracular divination. In this work, Plutarch employs the dialogue form, using various characters through which to explore explanations for the decline. The discussion is wide-ranging, exploring the origins, nature, and mechanisms of divination. This critical review examines the author's arguments concerning the nature of oracular divination, as expressed through the perspectives of various characters within the dialogue. The essay examines how Plutarch navigates philosophical and theological positions within the text in relation to his first-century Platonic framework and his reverence for ancestral religious rituals and traditions. Attention is given to Plutarch's association with the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, the setting of the dialogue and the site of the most renowned oracle in the ancient Greek world. Additionally, the dialogue form is considered to assess how it serves the work's broader argument on the nature of oracular divination. Given the range of broadly related topics covered in the dialogue, this essay focuses on arguments specifically related to explanations for the decline of traditional oracular sites in Greece, and the literary role of the character Cleombrotus in the discussion of the role of *daimons* in divination.

Plutarch, the author

Although the author does not present himself as a character in the dialogue, aspects of his biography are essential for contextualizing and evaluating the arguments presented in the text. Plutarch was born in the Boeotian region of central Greece c. 50 CE and spent most of his life there until his death in c. 120. Educated in Athens, his writings reflect a strong foundation in the Platonic tradition of his time (Middle Platonism), which had come to incorporate popular elements of Aristotelian and Stoic thought. A prolific writer, his wide-ranging *oeuvre*, much of which survives, includes biographical works and moral treatises, including works on ethics, history, natural science, and theology. Of significance for this critical review is Plutarch's service as a priest at the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, which provided him first-hand knowledge of the ritual practices surrounding the famed oracle. As a socially well-connected and celebrated philosophical writer honoured with Delphic, Athenian, and Roman citizenship, Plutarch likely served as its unofficial diplomat, representing the historically significant temple and its famed oracle, and may have also held political office related to Delphi.² Thus, the concerns he explores in *De defectu oraculorum* can be understood as more than mere philosophical inquiry but closely tied to a religious sanctuary to which he had dedicated a significant portion of his life, reputation, and social identity.

The dialogue form

De defectu oraculorum is one of three interrelated 'Pythian dialogues' set at Delphi and investigating questions related to the temple's oracle.³ In the fourth century BCE, Plato established the dialogue as an ideal literary form for philosophical inquiry, moving away from the pre-Socratic practice of writing in verse. However, while the dialogue form lends itself to

¹ Plutarch, *The Obsolescence of Oracles*, in *Moralia, Volume V*, trans. by Frank Cole Babbitt (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936), pp. 350–501.

² Philip A. Stadter, *Plutarch and His Roman Readers* (Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 70–71.

³ Frederick E. Brenk, *In Mist Apparelled: Religious Themes in Plutarch's Moralia and Lives*, Mnemosyne: Supplementum, 48 (Lugduni Batavorum: E.J. Brill, 1977), p. 86.

philosophical exploration, generally, it does not provide as direct a means of explanation as a treatise. Written in the voices of different characters, the dialogue can simultaneously reveal and conceal. These 'literary masks' present challenges to interpreting dialogic philosophical works. When historical figures are introduced as participants within the fictive dialogue, it cannot be assumed that the depictions and stated positions reflect their historical views rather than a literary construct. Similarly, while Plutarch may convey his thoughts through the dialogue's interlocutors, the characters present a range of philosophical and religious perspectives, not all of which appear intended to convey equal weight, significance, or legitimacy.⁴ Since Plutarch's own stance is never explicitly stated in the dialogue, measured speculation is warranted.

Seven characters participate in the conversation regarding the decline of the oracles and their nature. These include two enigmatic travellers, Demetrius and Cleombrotus; Plutarch's teacher, Ammonius; the historian, Philip; Didymus Planetiades, the Cynic; Plutarch's student, Heracleon; and Lamprias, Plutarch's brother, who serves as both the lead interlocutor and the dialogue's narrator. Except for Didymus Planetiades, all of the characters in the dialogue share a belief in a transcendent provident divine being. Didymus, the Cynic, who stands apart in his view of the gods as vindictive spirits, is the first to exit the discussion, departing just four chapters into the work.⁵ Thus, the remainder of the investigation of the nature and decline of the oracles unfolds within a shared conviction in the power of a provident deity,⁶ making the dialogue as much a theological inquiry as a philosophical one. Presuppositions about the interplay between the natural and the supernatural is assumed throughout, shaping the boundaries of the discussion.⁷ Within this framework, the dialogue negotiates a balance between naturalistic and divine causes.

Throughout the discussion, a relationship between the physical and metaphysical is taken for granted. The dialogue is guided by the character of Lamprias in the direction of finding a balance between naturalistic and divine explanations. The account of an ever-burning lamp at the Egyptian shrine of Ammon, introduced at the beginning of the dialogue by the traveller Demetrius, and the theories it elicits from the other interlocutors,⁸ foreshadow a central aspect of Lamprias' methodological approach, first seeking explanation in physical causes and natural phenomena, where appropriate, and not drawing significant conclusions from insignificant proofs.⁹ As the dialogue progresses, dogmatic philosophical and theological positions emerge, establishing a framework which must be respected by the methodological exploration.

Decline and abandonment of the Greek oracles

Before Plutarch, other writers shared concerns about the decline of the Greek oracles, including that of Delphi.¹⁰ A generation earlier, the Greek geographer Strabo observed the decline, noting, "I wish to add only this: Among the ancients both divination in general and oracles

⁴ Brenk, *In Mist Apparelled*, p. 85.

⁵ Plutarch, *The Obsolescence of Oracles*, p. 371 (*De defectu oraculorum* 413D).

⁶ Ibid. pp. 396-97 (*De def.* 418D).

⁷ Éliane Stoffel, 'La divination dans Les Vies Romaines de Plutarque: le point de vue d'un philosophe', *Cahiers Du Centre Gustave Glotz*, 16 (2005), p. 306.

⁸ Plutarch, *Obsolescence*, pp. 352-61 (*De def.* 410B-411D).

⁹ Elsa Giovanna Simonetti, *A Perfect Medium? Oracular Divination in the Thought of Plutarch* (Leuven: University Press, 2017), p. 72.

¹⁰ Gene L. Green, "'As for Prophecies, They Will Come to an End': 2 Peter, Paul and Plutarch on 'The Obsolescence of Oracles'", *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 23 (2001), p. 115.

were held in greater honour, but now great neglect of them prevails.”¹¹ A century before Plutarch, Cicero questioned the diminishment of the Pythian oracle, asking, “Why are Delphic oracles... not uttered at the present time and have not been for a long time? And why are they regarded with the utmost contempt?”¹² Thus, perceived concerns about the decline of the Greek oracles expressed in *De defectu Oraculorum* appear well-known and widespread.

The question of the oracles’ decline is not addressed in a single, discrete section of the text. Instead, it unfolds through a series of interconnected arguments and explanations introduced, debated, discarded, modified, or reconciled within discussions on the nature of divination, the role of *pneuma* and *daimones*, and cosmological speculation. Tracing these arguments across the dialogue’s many tangents present one of the challenges of engaging with the text. The first explanation for the decline or abandonment of oracles is proposed by the Cynic Didymus, who argues that human wickedness has caused the providential divine to withdraw from the traditional sites of divination, while oracles like Delphi that still operate are diminished due to the poor quality of inquiries presented there.¹³ His attribution of the decline to human behaviour, and his challenge to divine providence by suggesting that the transcendent gods would revoke their gift of divination and abandon humankind, leads to his departure from the dialogue. Nonetheless, while Didymus challenges the concept of the providential divine, his explanation for the decline of the oracles is rooted in a theological perspective.

Ultimately, Didymus serves as a foil to introduce one of the conversation’s underlying theological positions, a ‘correct’ belief in a transcendent and providential deity. In refuting Didymus’ position, Heracleon and Ammonius argue in defence of divine providence, as attributing the destruction of the oracles to anything other than the divine would also call into question their creation by the gods.¹⁴ Thus, from the outset, the investigation into the decline of oracles is constrained by a theological commitment to the transcendent divine and divination as a sacred gift of providence to humanity. Although Ammonius takes a firm stance on the importance of proper respect for the gods, his analysis of the story of the lamp at the shrine of Ammon shows that his character does not automatically default to a divine cause. Instead, he is open to naturalistic explanations where they are appropriate, provided they remain within the bounds of his foundational theological and philosophical conceptions.¹⁵ The need to maintain ‘correct’ balance between naturalistic causes and theological principles becomes evident as the investigation progresses.

As an alternative explanation, Ammonius attributes the decline of the oracles to the diminishing population of Greece, asserting that the provident gods give what is appropriate and necessary, neither more nor less.¹⁶ In this way, Ammonius maintains that intervention of the gods is responsible for the disappearance of oracular sites but relates it to the naturalistic cause of population decline. Lamprias reacts uncomfortably to the proposition of assigning responsibility to the transcendent gods,¹⁷ a point he returns to later in the dialogue. Introducing another

¹¹ Strabo, *The Geography of Strabo*, 8: Book XVII, General Index, trans. by Horace L. Jones, The Loeb classical Library, 267, Repr (London: Heinemann, 2001), p. 113 (Geo. 17.1.43).

¹² Marcus Tullius Cicero, *On Old Age, On Friendship, On Divination*, trans. by William Amistead Falconer, Cicero, 20, [Repr. der Ausg.] 1923 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Pr, 2007), p. 503 (*De. div.* 2.57.117).

¹³ Plutarch, *Obsolescence*, pp. 366-69 (*De def.* 413A-B).

¹⁴ Ibid. pp. 368-73 (*De def.* 413C-F).

¹⁵ Dominique Jaillard, ‘Plutarque et La Divination: La Piété d’un Prêtre Philosophe’, *Revue de l’histoire Des Religions*, 224 (2007), p. 158, 160-61.

¹⁶ Plutarch, *Obsolescence*, pp. 370-73 (*De def.* 413E-414A).

¹⁷ Ibid. pp. 374-77 (*De def.* 414D-E).

metaphysical explanation, Cleombrotus introduces the role of *daimones* ('demigods' in the Babbitt translation), suggesting that they serve as intermediaries in divination between the transcendent gods and humans. He asserts that the departure or death of these supernatural entities is the cause of the interruption of oracular activity.¹⁸ This initiates an extended discussion on the nature and role of *daimones*, which makes up a significant portion of the dialogue, aspects of which are examined later in this essay.

Lamprias eventually returns to a naturalistic explanation, proposing that the 'exhalations' (*pneuma*) rising from the earth, which influence the diviner and induce a state conducive to the oracular process, are material and perishable, leading to the eventual silencing of the oracles.¹⁹ However, as he did earlier, Ammonius bristles at Lamprias' naturalistic explanation, recognizing that attributing the oracles to the natural process of earthly exhalations introduces the possibility of chance or accident rather than divine intention, while also rendering meaningless the sacrifices and other rituals dedicated to the gods and associated with the Delphic rites. Once again, he insists that the gods must play a role in the oracles and that their function cannot be reduced merely to the effects of the exhalations.²⁰ Lamprias upholds the participation of the immortal provident gods while acknowledging that their material works are ultimately perishable, completing the thought left open earlier in the dialogue.²¹ In this explanation for the mechanism of oracular divination, the gods use the means of nature to communicate with humans.²²

In its conclusion, the dialogue considers the "dual causation" of both natural and supernatural explanations for the nature of oracular divination and the decline and abandonment of its Greek sites. However, the fictive dialogue is constructed to strategically introduce positions and propositions, which are then discarded, affirmed, or modified. While this structure permits naturalistic explanations, it does so only within a dogmatic theological framework. Moreover, certain avenues of inquiry are glossed over or entirely omitted. For example, considering the setting of the dialogue is a still-functioning oracular site, and the participants as seeking an answer to a question, it seems odd that a proposal to ask the Delphic oracle is never put forward. Obviously, for the conversant characters, the decline of the Greek oracles is more significant than the mundane questions presented at Delphi, which they lament early in the dialogue.²³ However, the narrator may indirectly address the reason for this omission at the beginning of the text, in the story of Epimenides of Phaestus. When he inquires at Delphi about the truth of its location at the centre of the earth, he receives the ambiguous response: "... it is known to the gods, but hidden from mortals."²⁴ This account, included in the dialogue's introduction, suggests that questioning the oracle about its nature is inappropriate, contributing to the philosophical and theological framework of the investigation.

Another potential cause for the decline not explored is the place of the Delphic oracle within the Roman state. As a Delphic priest and a writer of history, Plutarch would have been deeply invested in the historical significance of the oracle, reinforcing his conviction in its divine powers. Writing in the late first or early second century CE, Plutarch would have also been well-aware of the fluctuating nature of Roman patronage of the Temple of Apollo and may have even been involved in efforts to maintain favourable relations with the emperor and the imperial

¹⁸ Plutarch, *Obsolescence*, pp. 396-97 (*De def.* 418C-D).

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 476-79 (*De def.* 433F-434C).

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 482-85 (*De def.* 435A-C).

²¹ Ibid., pp. 474-377 (*De def.* 414-D).

²² Stoffel, 'La divination,' pp. 309.

²³ Plutarch, *Obsolescence*, pp. 369-69 (*De def.* 413B).

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 350-51 (*De def.* 409E).

household. While the Romans expressed a certain reverence for the antiquity and traditions of the Delphic oracle, as evidenced by gestures such as Augustus' wife Livia dedication of the temple's enigmatic golden "E" and Domitian's restoration of the sanctuary in the mid-80s, relations were more strained under Nero.²⁵ As Stadler observes, following Sulla's dictatorship, Roman leaders faced no significant international crises that might have prompted consultation of the Pythian oracle.²⁶ Moreover, Roman divinatory practices may have been preferred for addressing internal crises of the late Republic and early Empire, further diminishing Delphi's role in state affairs.²⁷

In contrast to its prominent role in earlier centuries, Delphi's apparent absence from international affairs under Roman rule likely contributed to its decline in reputation. Perhaps due to contemporary political considerations and sensitivities, the dialogue does not investigate the impact of Roman control on the decline of the Pythian oracle and the other divinatory sites in Greece. Ultimately, *De defectu oraculorum* presents a carefully framed discussion on the decline of Greek oracles, respecting theological commitment to divine providence while engaging with naturalistic explanations. The constructed dialogue allows for a limited level of inquiry but does so within its dogmatic theological, philosophical, and, perhaps, political boundaries.

Cleombrotus and the Daimones

While the text never questions the belief in a providential deity, it does wrestle with the problem of how the transcendent gods communicate with humans. Much of the dialogue is devoted to examining the nature and role of *daimones*. The discussion and speculation surrounding *daimones* serve to develop an aetiology of their nature and exegesis of their function, positioning them as the unbound souls that act as intermediaries in the oracular process.²⁸ At a literary level, the topic of *daimones* illustrates how the constructed fictive dialogue strategically affirms or challenges the credibility of its interlocutors in their investigation of the nature of oracular divination, best illustrated in the character of Cleombrotus.

In the work's opening, the narrator recounts how Cleombrotus and his fellow traveller, Demetrius, journeyed from opposite ends of the earth and met at Delphi. This story has obvious parallels to, and is told in the immediate proximity of, the myth of eagles or swans flying from opposite directions towards the earth's centre, likewise meeting at Delphi.²⁹ The parallel between the two stories lends a mythical air to Cleombrotus and Demetrius, perhaps signalling that the reader should be sceptical. This impression is immediately reinforced by Cleombrotus' recounting of the story of the lamp at the shrine of Ammon.³⁰ This framing establishes a character pattern in which Cleombrotus is portrayed as failing to consider naturalistic causes, instead drawing from the myths and stories collected during his travels.

Cleombrotus, depicted as a collector of tales and traditions, introduces the topic of *daimones* by musing about their origins, questioning whether they stem from the cult of Zoroaster, Orpheus of the Thracians, the Egyptians, or the Phrygians.³¹ Later in the narrative, Cleombrotus recounts the story of a 'holy man' he encountered near the Persian Gulf.³² The

²⁵ Julia Kindt, *Revisiting Delphi: Religion and Storytelling in Ancient Greece*, Cambridge Classical Studies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 170.

²⁶ Stadler, *Plutarch and His Roman Readers*, pp. 95-96.

²⁷ Stoffel, 'La divination,' pp. 312, 315, 319.

²⁸ Simonetti, *A Perfect Medium*, p. 70.

²⁹ Plutarch, *Obsolescence*, pp. 350-53 (*De def.* 409E-410B).

³⁰ Simonetti, *A Perfect Medium*, p. 72.

³¹ Ibid. pp. 379-79 (*De def.* 415A).

³² Ibid. pp. 408-11 (*De def.* 421A-C).

fantastical, exoticized tale, inserted into a conversation about the role of *daimones* in divination, includes his self-disclosed admission that he paid “large sums” for information about the holy man’s whereabouts. These details highlight Cleombrotus’ tendency for fantastical explanations at the expense of analytical judgment, reinforcing cautious scepticism in evaluating the analytical skills of the character.³³ Among Cleombrotus’ propositions regarding *daimones* is the claim that they are responsible for the obsolescence of the oracles, having either abandoned the divinatory sites or possibly died.³⁴ The first part of this proposition is rejected, as it would place the oracles under the control of the *daimones* rather than the gods, while the second part initiates a discussion of whether *daimons* are mortal or immortal.³⁵ Cleombrotus also posits that *daimons* are “midway between gods and men,”³⁶ a position rejected by Ammonius and Lamprias, who assert that the *daimons* are souls unencumbered by the flesh, which otherwise acts as a barrier to accessing information about future events.³⁷ This forms a key tenet of the understanding of oracular divination, in which states such as sleep, near death, and the effects of the exhalations temporarily allow a human of the proper temperament to glimpse future events or outcomes, an ability innately present in the soul but limited by the fleshly body.

Nonetheless, it is Cleombrotus who makes the influential assertion that, although the oracles are divinely inspired, it is the *daimons*, in their role as servants of the gods, who act as guardians of the sacred mystery of divination.³⁸ This assertion seemingly causes Lamprias to revise his theory of the role of exhalations in oracular divination, initially presented as a naturalistic explanation with no mention or apparent need for supernatural intermediaries. However, perhaps to maintain a clear boundary between the realms of the creator and the created or out of respect for ancestral traditions, he ultimately concedes, allowing that the *daimons* regulate the *pneuma*.³⁹ This inclusion of *daimonic* participation represents a significant shift from Lamprias’ earlier naturalistic explanation of the *pneuma* exhalations.⁴⁰ By doing so, the weight of the key natural material aspect of the *pneuma* is reduced in the final balance of divine and natural causes in a dual causality.⁴¹

The character of Cleombrotus has a significant literary role in the text’s exploration of the nature and role of *daimones*, and the tension between natural and supernatural explanations. Cleombrotus, with his tendency toward fantastical stories and a certain lack of scepticism, serves as a commentary on the tension between myth and reason in understanding supernatural phenomena. His aetiological explanations may be of historical interest if we accept that they reflect common or alternative beliefs about *daimones*, although the dialogue’s debates suggest there was no widespread consensus on their nature or role in divination. Cleombrotus’ introduction of the *daimones* as intermediaries is ultimately taken up to maintain the theological dogmatic belief in the distance between the worshipped deities and humanity. However, many of Cleombrotus’ initial propositions about the nature and role of *daimones* are rejected, including his attributing the abandonment of the oracles to their departure or death. Ultimately, the

³³ Stephan Schröder, ‘Plutarch on Oracles and Divine Inspiration’, in *On the Daimonion of Socrates*, ed. by Heinz-Günther Nesselrath (Mohr Siebeck GmbH & Co. KG, 2010), p. 158; Simonetti, *A Perfect Medium*, p. 74.

³⁴ Plutarch, *Obsolescence*, pp. 396-97 (*De def.* 418D).

³⁵ Ibid. pp. 398-99 (*De def.* 418F-419A).

³⁶ Ibid. pp. 378-79 (*De def.* 415A).

³⁷ Ibid. pp. 462-69 (*De def.* 431B-432C).

³⁸ Ibid. pp. 396-97 (*De def.* 417A-B).

³⁹ Ibid. pp. 492-93 (*De def.* 436F-437A).

⁴⁰ Ibid. pp. 472-79 (*De def.* 433C-434B).

⁴¹ Schröder, ‘Plutarch on Oracles and Divine Inspiration’, p. 157.

dialogue is resolved in a dual causality model, acknowledging divine and natural factors in the oracular process. However, the late integration of *daimons* somewhat diminishes the weight of the natural exhalations.

Conclusion

In *De defectu oraculorum*, Plutarch presents a wide-ranging exploration of the nature and decline of Greek oracular traditions, investigating divine and naturalistic explanations within a philosophical and theological framework. Leveraging the fictive dialogue form, he strategically introduces and discards various propositions, upholding a conviction in the divine providence of the transcendent gods while allowing for speculation on natural causes and the role of *daimones* in oracular divination. While the text does not explicitly address certain historical and political factors, such as the influence of imperial Rome on Delphi's status, it does reflect a thoughtful exploration and commitment to its philosophical and theological dogmatic positions.

A.I. Acknowledgement

I acknowledge the use of Grammarly (<https://www.grammarly.com>) on 16 March 2025 to check my work for readability, grammar, and syntax. I confirm that I have not presented any A.I.-generated text as my own work. I confirm I have copies of my drafts, notes, and other resources I used before and after the use of A.I. tools which I may be asked to provide in evidence.

Additionally, I acknowledge the use of Google Translate (<https://translate.google.com>) to facilitate machine translation of non-English texts used as secondary sources for this essay.

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