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Write a critical review of Cicero's arguments against divination in *De Divinatione*

This essay seeks to critically analyse Marcus Tullius Cicero's philosophical treatise *De Divinatione*.¹ It is an ancient Latin text that challenges the value of divination in late republican Rome, and the uses and beliefs held to be significant in it for the lifestyles of the contemporary population of Rome as well as the surrounding geography. The work is part of a larger corpus of philosophical treatises written by Cicero throughout his career, and was intended by him to be read in association with his previous texts.²

Marcus Tullius Cicero lived 106-43BC, and is seen as one of the greater intellectuals of his age. He was taught from a young age philosophy and rhetoric, both in Rome and in Greece, along with his younger brother Quintus Cicero. Marcus Cicero was in active military service in his youth, and had a successful political career of which he was incredibly proud - holding the positions of Quaestor, Praetor, Consul, Proconsul and (most significantly in the context of *De Divinatione*) Augur. He was also a keen orator on law in the courtroom, gaining admirers for his wit and logic in his arguments. In his pursuit of philosophical knowledge Cicero was educated in many schools of thought, including the New Academy, Pythagorean, Socratic, Peripatetic, Epicurean and Stoic. Cicero's long standing ambition was to revolutionise Roman philosophy, creating a distinct intellectual way of reasoning from the Greek philosophy that, though he admired it, dominated the educated Roman population.^{3 4}

It is not clear precisely when *De Divinatione* was written, but we know it was approximately 45/44BC and published after the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44BC; meaning that Cicero considered, drafted and published his work in a time of public upheaval and stress.⁵ What the philosopher's intentions behind engaging with this topic were, and who it was written for, will be illuminated in the following examination of *De Divinatione*.

As the title of the work suggests, divination is the focus of Cicero's analysis. Ancient Rome was a highly religious community, not in the modern sense of the word, but so that the gods existing as a part of the cosmos was considered as truth; "religious observance in Rome consisted primarily in public or communal rituals

¹ Cicero. *De senectute, De amicitia, De divinatione*. Translated by W. A. Falconer. Loeb Classical Library 154. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923.

² Cicero, *De Divinatione*, I. iv p.231.

³ Hornblower, S. and Spawforth, A. (1998) "Cicero" in *The Oxford Companion to Classical Civilization*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York, pp. 159-167.

⁴ Cicero, *De Divinatione*, Introduction, p.215-216.

⁵ Cicero, *De Divinatione*, Introduction, p.214

and the interests of the gods were perceived to lie above all in the business of state, in political and military action”. However, intellectuals of the time began to scrutinise the relationship between humans and the divine, and whether communication between the two was possible.^{6 7 8 9} For some this was unquestionable, while others used rules of logic to break down the actions and beliefs centred around the divinationary acts used to gain knowledge of the realm of the gods - this dichotomy is present in *De Divinatione*. Split into two books, after a short establishing introduction from Cicero, Cicero’s brother Quintus initiates a debate at the author’s Tusculan Villa¹⁰ in order to establish why he believes both gods and communication with them is real; this is the subject of book one. In book two Cicero takes his turn to argue against the various proofs and anecdotes Quintus supplied, and systematically refutes what he sees as widespread “superstition”.¹¹

For a full appreciation of his arguments in *De Divinatione*, Cicero expected his audience to have read his previous philosophical work *On the Nature of Gods*. As explanation for Quintus’ broaching the debate on divination, Quintus says he has recently done just that, for which Cicero applauds him; a somewhat vain instance if we are to take Cicero seriously, but if this is tongue-in-cheek, it helps to set a personal and light hearted tone for what could otherwise be a controversial topic. The definition of divination given by Quintus (and chosen by Cicero) to tackle in this text is “the foreseeing and foretelling of events considered as happening by chance”.¹² Amongst the myriad of reasons Quintus will go on to give for the truth of divination, Cicero has him make two more clear definitions on the nature of the divine. One is that “all things happen by Fate... such knowledge is possible only to a god”.¹³ The second is a Stoic process of reasoning which can be surmised as: the gods are real and they know the truth of the universe, as the gods love mankind they would help humans by communicating to them beneficial information for the future, therefore divination is real.¹⁴ The practical side of divination is also defined into two groups of ‘art’ and ‘nature’: divination via arts is one requiring an

⁶ Beard, M. and Crawford, M., *Rome in the Late Republic: Problems and Interpretations*, Second Edition (1999). Published by: Duckworth, London; p.30.

⁷ Johnston. S, “Introduction: Divining Divination” in Johnston. S, and Struck. P, *Mantikē: Studies in Ancient Divination* (Eds) Johnston. S, and Struck. P. (2005). Published by Brill, Leiden, Boston, pp. 1-25, (p.7).

⁸ Beard and Crawford, *Rome in the Late Republic*, p.39.

⁹ Cicero, *De Divinatione*, I. i-iv. p.223-231.

¹⁰ Ibid, I. vi. p.233.

¹¹ Ibid, II. lxxii p.537.

¹² Ibid, I. v, p.233.

¹³ Cicero, *De Divinatione*, I. lvi, p.361.

¹⁴ Cicero, *De Divinatione*, I. xxxviii, p.315.

individual to interpret signs, while divination via nature involves the gods speaking directly to an individual, such as prophetic dreams.¹⁵

A final important statement Cicero has Quintus make is this:

“There is, I assure you,” said he, “nothing new or original in my views; for those which I adopt are not only very old, but they are endorsed by the consent of all peoples and nations”.¹⁶

With this Cicero has clearly mapped out the key arguments he must dispute to make his case, and by defining Quintus’ beliefs as universal, thwarting his reasoning means that Cicero has the final word on the subject.

De Divinatione is written in the dialogue format, wherein two figures discuss a concept, one in favour and one against. This dialogue genre is a useful one in philosophical writings as it gives the opportunity to express a large number of stances on a subject and debate them individually. Having more than one character also aids in helping to separate the sides of a debate and address popular beliefs and questions not held by the author themselves. When having two characters speak in a dialogue, however, it is important to remember that both of the people in the text are written by the same author. In *De Divinatione* Cicero is responsible for supporting the acts of divination as ‘Quintus’ as much as he is for the enthusiastically opposed character of ‘Cicero’. This circumstance is significant on two points. One, as Schofield remarks in his analysis: “Argument in *utramque partem* has not much point unless there really is something to be said on both sides”¹⁷; Cicero recognised evidence which supported the existence of divination and there was enough evidence available that the summation of it in book one feels haphazard in its attempt to cite it all. Two, the haphazard writing style of book one may have been an intentional technique by Cicero in order to undermine the sense of reason behind their use, especially as compared to the style the author adopts in book two wherein arguments are arranged and organised. Cicero the character even criticises his brother’s choice of sources when it is the author’s choice to include these in the first place. But his choice of words in criticising this becomes a short lesson on philosophy, encouraging the use of “arguments and

¹⁵ Cicero, *De Divinatione*, I. vi, p.235.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Schofield, M., “Cicero for and against Divination” in *The Journal of Roman Studies* Vol.76, (1986). Published by: Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies, pp.47-65. (p.56).

reason to show that all your propositions [are] true”.¹⁸ A method he goes on to employ himself throughout book two.

As mentioned above, there is a casualness to the dialogue that gives a light-hearted feel at times; as Graf describes it: “the smiling connivance of the augur Marcus”.¹⁹ The choice of tone can have a significant impact on the effect the text has on others - a point Cicero would have been well aware of in his successes as an orator. And so it is interesting that the philosopher made this tonal choice in his arguments against divination. Possible reasons for this could be that Cicero’s “personal scepticism” on divination was enough so that he saw fit to use humour to mock the practise in tone and reason. Another reason could be that, in disputing what still remained a popular belief, he wanted his audience to adopt his attitude when reading his work and to take the same tone in regard to the author’s words, a “depersonalizing, distancing device”.²⁰ Schofield makes an interesting argument in saying that Cicero enjoyed practising different writing styles in his philosophical works - is it perhaps that Cicero did not choose a writing style to discuss divination, rather he chose to discuss divination so that he could enjoy experimenting in a new way of writing philosophy?²¹

As we can see in *De Divinatione*, Cicero’s utilisation of his brother Quintus as an opposing figure enables him to challenge what would have been widely held beliefs in an organised way, while also emulating the practice of philosophical debates held in the courtroom and amongst philosophers. The technique of argument/counter-argument is one taught by the Academy, and one which Cicero seems to have chosen for his methodological approach in this work.²² The arrangement of Cicero’s counterarguments is so that the ‘art’ and ‘nature’ type divinations are separated and discussed in two sections. After spending some time refuting Quintus’ examples of divination via ‘art’ (including soothsayers, haruspicy, ceraunoscopy, cleromancy, astrology and augury), Quintus, the champion of divination, is allowed to speak again and at this point he already seems swayed by Cicero - saying that by his “own reasoning” he found the aforementioned practises “superstitious”.²³ Here we see the teachings of Cicero’s philosophical method taking centre place. Overall, the reason these practises seem to be set aside by the brothers is that, in a time where science was becoming a

¹⁸ Cicero, *De Divinatione*, II. xi, p.401.

¹⁹ Graf, F, “Rolling the Dice for an Answer” in Johnston, S, and Struck, P, *Mantikê: Studies in Ancient Divination* (Eds) Johnston, S, and Struck, P. (2005). Published by Brill, Leiden, Boston, pp. 51-94, (p.51).

²⁰ Beard, M., *Cicero and Divination: The Formation of a Latin Discourse* in *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 1986, Vol. 76 (1986). Published by: Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies, pp. 33-46, (p.33, 43).

²¹ Schofield, M., “Cicero for and against Divination”, p.47, 50-51.

²² *Ibid*, P.47-48.

²³ Cicero, *De Divinatione*, II. xlviii, p.483.

wider practice, these divinationary activities were too easily compared in a negative light to provable instances of cause and effect. Quintus had initially tried to defend 'art' divination by saying "I am content with my knowledge that it does, although I may not know why"²⁴; to which Cicero retorts: "As if I would grant either that divination accomplished anything, or that it was permissible for a philosopher not to ask why anything happened!"²⁵ Cicero shows this line of questioning in many instances in his arguments, citing examples where science can explain purportedly supernatural phenomena.²⁶ Where he has no scientific explanation, he again instructs how to use arguments of reason to conflate the simple acceptance of events: "It would have been more in keeping with your role as a philosopher to consider, first, the nature of divination generally, second, its origin, and third, its consistency".²⁷

Another aspect of Cicero's discrediting of activities grouped under 'art' divination is that they can be used by any member of the public, if not by their own skills, then bought from 'tradesmen'. As Quintus concludes at the end of book one: "I do not recognize ... those who prophesy for money... I approve of divination which is not trivial and is free from falsehood and trickery."²⁸

Divination concerned with private issues of individuals, such as those classified by 'arts' and used by the wider population, is not considered respectable like state sanctioned augury, which "was pastoral and not city-bred, nor was it 'invented to gull the ignorant,' but received by trustworthy men".²⁹ The role of official augur, of which Cicero had the title, was for the benefit of the whole populace - and this purpose is the reason why Cicero continues to respect the "augural practices, discipline, religious rites and laws, as well as the authority of the augural college", despite not believing in the process. These were traditional duties from the beginning of Rome, a city founded by the augurs Romulus and Remus.³⁰

As Cicero moves on to debate 'natural' divination he relies more on logical thinking as the practice has moved from the physical to a more spiritual act, with 'frenzy' and dream divination closely connected to the nature of the soul.³¹ Cicero's most common themes of rebuttal are deductive reasoning, his view on the true behaviour of gods, attacks on individuals' intelligence, and the ideal qualities

²⁴Cicero, *De Divinatione*, I. ix, p.241.

²⁵ Ibid, II. xx, p.423.

²⁶ Ibid, II, xix, xxvi, xlii-xlvi, p.419, 435, 471-479.

²⁷ Ibid, II. xxxviii, p.461.

²⁸ Ibid, I. lviii, p.369.

²⁹ Ibid, I. xlviii, p.339.

³⁰ Ibid, II. xxxiii, p.451

³¹ Ibid, II. xlv, p.485.

of a philosopher. Of particular contention for Cicero is the concept of consistency in 'natural' divination: he questions how the power of the Delphic oracle could have faded over time if it were truly divine;³² he wonders why it is that medical skills can be imparted by dreams and not other abilities;³³ and Cicero asks for clarification on how to know if a dream is true or false.³⁴ This focus on consistency is what Cicero uses to break down Quintus' statements on the divine established above in this review. Cicero challenges Quintus' claim that divination is the foretelling of things happening by chance, if, as Quintus also claims, all things happen by fate; he insists his brother "must change [his] definition of divination".³⁵ In regards to the Stoic reasoning 'there are gods, and therefore divination exists', it is not solely Cicero's exception to inconsistency that troubles him, but the clash of the Academic school against the Stoic. The Stoics are shown to make many assumptions about gods and the universe ("Then they make another assumption : 'But there are gods.' Even that is not conceded by everybody"³⁶), whereas followers of the New Academy practised scepticism of "firm convictions".³⁷ Cicero's intentions in *De Divinatione* seem to encourage others to subscribe to Academic reasoning.

Despite the insistence upon scientific-like reasoning and the eradication of superstitious thoughts, Cicero maintains a definite idea of the existence of the divine. He sees the gods as beings of logic and dignity, not that far off from the way Cicero sees it fit for a philosopher to behave. As Cicero brings *De Divinatione* to a close, he takes a moment to assure his audience that the "celestial order and the beauty of the universe compel" him to believe in the gods.³⁸ Just as there is order in the universe, Cicero expects gods to behave similarly without nonsensical actions; if the gods wanted to aid men by sending a message they would do so when they were awake and with no chance for confusion.³⁹

Cicero mocks the intelligence of several people in this work. It features both in his lighthearted tone and in his enjoyment of contrasting philosophical schools of thought. Cicero takes particular interest in the degradation of Stoic philosophy, of which Quintus is written to be in favour of.⁴⁰ Repeatedly, Cicero draws a critical eye towards Stoic reasoning, an interesting decision when it is shown that in

³²Cicero, *De Divinatione*, II. lvii, p.503.

³³ Ibid, II. lix, p.509.

³⁴ Ibid, II. lxxi, p.535.

³⁵ Ibid, II. vii, p.391.

³⁶ Ibid, II. li, p.489-491.

³⁷ Schofield, M., "Cicero for and against Divination", p.47.

³⁸ Cicero, *De Divinatione*, II. lxxii, p.537.

³⁹ Ibid, II. lxi, II. lxxv, p.513, 521.

⁴⁰ Cicero, *De Divinatione*, II. I, II. lxxiii, II. lxxi, p.489, 517, 535.

previous works he has been more susceptible to their views. Is his attack of stoicism in this work a true change of heart, or merely an exercise in debate? Beard argues that it is a development in Cicero's philosophical reasoning as he saw himself as a member of the Academy school, where opinions are not set in stone but free to be challenged. This is supported by the author's insistence "to affirm nothing and question everything".^{41 42}

The consistent references in his analysis of 'art' and 'nature' divination to the usefulness of philosophy in everyday life highlights Cicero's preoccupation with philosophical reasoning, perhaps even over the subject of divination itself. We can see this reflected too in Cicero's choice of sources and his intended audience for *De Divinatione*. Many of the sources Cicero draws upon for his arguments are other educated men, both greek and roman; he is not afraid to challenge the views of those he describes as being close friends or highly respected individuals. Despite (and perhaps *because* of) Cicero's respect for the philosophic teachings of Plato and Pythagoras, Cicero comically singles out their beliefs on dream divination, saying "no statement is too absurd for some philosophers to make".⁴³ Cicero holds "controversy" with his friend Cratippus' reasoning to argue for one mode of divination against others, though ensures to keep animosity from his tone when discussing his "intimate friend", named by Quintus as a "peer of the greatest of the Peripatetics".⁴⁴

The character of Quintus in the work is a significant choice. As Beard says, Cicero could have chosen anyone for his debate, and in previous works the author has chosen two characters of unequal status.⁴⁵ In *De Divinatione*, Cicero has purposefully chosen someone of equal education and status to discuss this subject. Quintus gives a respectable face to divination, having held the political positions of aedile, praetor, governor and legatus, and also been devoted to writing and learning.⁴⁶ Having a respectable figure on the side of divination allows Cicero's dialogue to feel more like a debate rather than a condemnation of popular beliefs, and having a peer as a rival pushes him to perfect his philosophical reasoning in order to have the best argument.⁴⁷ The setting of *De Divinatione* is also a significant choice - Cicero's Tusculan villa, 10 miles from Rome, housed a great

⁴¹ Beard, M., *Cicero and Divination*, p.35.

⁴² Cicero, *De Divinatione*, II. iii, p.379.

⁴³ Ibid, II. lviii, p.505.

⁴⁴ Ibid, II. lii-liii, I. iii; p.491-495, p.229.

⁴⁵ Beard, M., *Cicero and Divination*, p.44-45

⁴⁶ Cicero, *De Divinatione*, Introduction, p.215.

⁴⁷ Schofield, M., "Cicero for and against Divination", p.61.

library of Grecian philosophical works⁴⁸, and the brothers settle outside here as Cicero, in his personal “Lyceum”, begins his arguments at the beginning of book 2.⁴⁹ It is a fitting backdrop to launch his own philosophical reasoning, with the old philosophy behind them as Cicero steers the way to new Roman philosophical thinking. All this considered, it is not a surprise to know that the intended audience for *De Divinatione* was other “literate” men, educated enough to respect the art of the debate, rather than the “masses” who could take offence to the ridicule. The privacy of the two brothers discussing such matters in a private home reflects this intention.⁵⁰

Cicero's conclusion explains that his “chief aim” behind writing *De Divinatione* was to tear “superstition up by the roots”. Goar makes a reasonable supposition that this concern was likely limited to the upper and middle classes, as Cicero felt that it was politically beneficial for the common populace to be directed by the divinations of the state augur. This may be why Cicero stresses that it is wise to preserve traditional religious rites and ceremonies, and that “the destruction of superstition does not mean the destruction of religion”.^{51 52 53} Cicero saw it as his duty to serve the commonwealth, if not by politics then through philosophy, which rested “on the distinction between good and evil” and made man “virtuous and strong”; his studies have brought him to the conclusion that the ideal philosopher follows the Academic and Socratic method of inquiry which encourages investigation “without asserting any authority of its own” opinion.^{54 55} Essentially then, for Cicero’s peers, the author’s conclusion on his debate of divination is that there is no conclusion to divination - only an open mind.

As for *De Divinatione*’s arguments against divination being judged by modern scholars, Cicero’s dialogue may have been too convincing, with a common perception being that Cicero was an absolute sceptic of divination.⁵⁶ However, statements made by Cicero in this work on avoiding conclusions,⁵⁷ and in previous

⁴⁸ Beard and Crawford, *Rome in the Late Republic*, p.22

⁴⁹ Cicero, *De Divinatione*, II. iii, p.377.

⁵⁰ Goar, R., *The Purpose of De Divinatione* in Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association, Vol. 99 (1968). Published by: Johns Hopkins University, pp. 241-248, (p.246, 248).

⁵¹ Cicero, *De Divinatione*, II. lxxii, p.537.

⁵² Goar, R., *The Purpose of De Divinatione*, p.248

⁵³ Grottanelli, C., “Sorte unica pro casibus pluribus enotata: Literary Texts and Lot Inscriptions as Sources for Ancient Kleromancy” in Johnston. S, and Struck. P, *Mantikê: Studies in Ancient Divination* (Eds) Johnston. S, and Struck. P. (2005). Published by Brill, Leiden, Boston, pp. 129-144, (p.138).

⁵⁴ Cicero, *De Divinatione*, II. i, p.371-373.

⁵⁵ Ibid, II. lxxii, p.539.

⁵⁶ Beard, M., *Cicero and Divination*, p.34

⁵⁷ Cicero, *De Divinatione*, II. iii, II. lxxii, p.379, 539.

works where he eschews revealing personal opinions,⁵⁸ support the idea that Cicero made his arguments from a passion for philosophical debate. The roots of Cicero's challenge against divination is shown to lie in the augur's earnest ambition to educate others and aid the city of Rome through his love of orating and philosophy.

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⁵⁸ Cicero, *De Natura Deorum. Academics*. Translated by H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library (vol. 268) Published by: Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933, (I. v, p.13).

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