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(1) A Critical Review of Cicero's Arguments against Divination in *De Divinatione*

This essay will critically examine Marcus Tullius Cicero's arguments against divination in his works *De Divinatione*, published in the year 44 BCE. The main scholarly work cited in this essay is taken from Nicholas Denyer, Michael Schofield, Mary Beard and Brian Krostenko, in their various works regarding Cicero's *De Divinatione*. Marcus Cicero himself was regarded as a central player in the constantly shifting politics of Rome, particularly during the crisis that led to the establishment of the Roman Empire¹. He was perhaps best known for his political influence, with the highlight of his career being his position as one of two consuls of Rome in 63 BCE². However, as the politics of the Roman Republic worsened in the 50s BCE and following Cicero's exile from Rome due to his stance against Mark Anthony, he turned to writing philosophy and rhetoric, perhaps as a way of escaping the situations he was having to deal with³. This is noted within the opening pages of his book 2, where he states that 'when, being unable to protect the republic, as had been my custom, and finding it impossible to remain inactive, I could find nothing else that I preferred to do that was worthy of my time'. He goes on to discuss that his intention in writing these books is moral education, 'for what greater or better service can I render to the commonwealth than to instruct and train the youth'.⁴

The book itself is a philosophical dialogue that takes place between two characters, Cicero and Quintus, who are brothers. Book I focuses around Quintus' arguments for divination and his reasons for his belief in divinatory practices of the time, mostly in referral to his beliefs in Stoicism, and Book II outlines Cicero's scepticisms and oppositions to these beliefs. Quintus' arguments rely largely on examples of divination at work, whilst Cicero employs the use of reason and rhetoric in an attempt to undermine his claims. There are various, sometimes conflicting, theories around whether this dialogic structure represents the literal beliefs of Cicero and his brother Quintus, or whether Cicero had just utilised this framework as a way of discussing his own arguments for and against divination. The latter is a position supported by several scholars, such as Mary Beard, due to the fact that both positions are laid out with no conclusion offered; instead, the reader is left to make up their own mind on which is the most convincing case⁵. Similarly, Schofield suggests that this writing structure was most likely utilised in order to 'exemplify academic methods of inquiry rather than academic dogma'.⁶

The first way in which the character of Cicero attempts to refute his brother's arguments as laid out in Book 1 is through undermining the principles of divination as a science. He does so through asking a series of scientific questions, such as; 'do you believe that those with the powers of divining can tell whether the sun is bigger than the earth, or whether the moon shines by that of its own light?' and 'do they understand the motions of the planets and the stars?'⁷. Cicero's aim here is to emphasise the illogiacies of divination when used in place of scientific knowledge. This idea of divination as a sort of

¹ Malcolm Schofield, *Cicero For and Against Divination* (Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies, 1986)

² Elizabeth Rawson, *Cicero: A Portrait* (Bristol Classical Press, 1975)

³ James Lloyd, *Cicero*, (*World History Encyclopedia*. Last modified January 15, 2013.)
<https://www.ancient.eu/Cicero/>.

⁴ Cicero, *On Divination (De Divinatione)*: W. A. Falconer (ed. and trs.), Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, vol. XX, 1923.

⁵ Mary Beard, *Cicero and Divination: The Formation of a Latin Discourse*, (Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies 1986), p.34

⁶ Schofield, *Cicero For and Against*, p.58

⁷ Cicero, *Div Book II*, p.381

pseudo-science is addressed by Nicholas Denyer through his discussion of the parallels between science and divination. Denyer notes that, although both the Stoics and scientific realists regard the world as a single unitary physical system, 'with nothing outside of it to prevent the course of events from unfolding in accordance with the adamantine regularities', it is important to note that the Stoic belief system regards science and divination as two entirely separate entities. In discussing this further, he references another parallel between the two in that both science and divination rely on predictions that are often found to be incorrect, but are correct more often than not to attribute it to chance. However, these observational similarities do not allude to them being the same, as both systems are employed in different contexts. For example, both are used to make predictions regarding certain imperceptible phenomena; for science, it's the likes of genes and viruses, whilst divination deals with completely different imperceptible phenomena such as gods and fate.⁸ Denyer therefore concludes that 'since divination on the Stoic account does not even pretend to be scientific, it is altogether immune from the charge of being no more than pseudo-science'.⁹

In a similar argument, Cicero goes on to argue the point that those who practice divination are far less equipped to make assumptions about the world than those who are specialists in their fields, making statements numerous statements such as: '...when people are sick, we do not summon a prophet or a seer, but we call in a physician'¹⁰. Cicero disregards the need for divination based on these ideas of specific expertise: 'do not the senses, musicology, astronomy, geometry, philosophy, statecraft and the like between them cover everything?'¹¹. This, however, ignores the fact that some things are not covered by any casual laws that we know of - there exists areas in which foreknowledge would be desirable but in which scientific knowledge is not available. Denyer argues that Cicero's logic here does not stand because 'the very fields in which divination operates are designed for which we have no science'¹². Therefore, Cicero's argument that divination being wrongly used in a scientific context can be seen as somewhat irrelevant to Quintus' Stoic stance, especially as it was never his claim that divination be used in the place of experts.

Marcus continues his rebuttal in his discussion of ideas surrounding the concepts of chance and fate, particularly in response to Quintus' ideas about divination being a 'foreknowledge of chance'¹³. Cicero expresses the idea that events which have no known cause, or are inherently random, would have to be exempt from even God himself knowing what is going to happen. For if God knew what was to happen, then his knowing can be seen to quite simply contradict the idea of 'chance', thus revealing a flaw in Quintus' argument.¹⁴ However, whilst this argument does perhaps undermine the idea of chance in the context put forth by Cicero, it does not necessarily undermine the Stoic ideas behind Quintus' claims. This is due to the Stoic's determinist view that the future of this world is already decided; implying that although unexpected events are thought to be fortuitous, as Denyer points out; being under the control of

⁸ Nicholas Denyer, *The Case Against Divination: An Examination of Cicero's De Divinatione* (Cambridge University Press, 1985) p.1

⁹ Denyer, *The Case Against*, p.2

¹⁰ Cicero, *Div Book II*, p.381

¹¹ Cicero, *Div Book II*, p.383

¹² Denyer, *The Case Against*, p.3

¹³ Cicero, *Div Book II*, p.387

¹⁴ Cicero, *Div Book II*, p.391

an all-powerful fate, they are not actually any more fortuitous than those things that we can predict from knowledge of their cause¹⁵. Potential flaws in Cicero's argument begin to show when we consider this concept from a human perspective. This is because, although an event may be fully determined by its own specific causes from the metaphysical perspective, humans are not aware of their fate in any given situation and are consequently still technically subject to chance in that they may not know the outcome¹⁶. Therefore, it can be argued that the Stoic concept of chance that Quintus is referring to withstands the attacks made by Cicero in that it exists within different boundaries which Cicero has failed to address.

In further discussing the concept of fate and its proposed inconsistencies with divination, Cicero argues the position that having knowledge of our future serves no useful purpose: 'For if all things happen by Fate, it does us no good to be warned to be on our guard, since that which is to happen, will happen regardless of what we do'¹⁷. However, this is a relatively weak argument that has been criticised by several scholars from the viewpoint that foreknowledge can, of course, be of use to humans. For example, as put forward by Denyer, it is useful in the sense that 'if people know what is in store they can use that knowledge to plan their actions accordingly, to take advantage of good fortune or mitigate the effects of bad.'¹⁸ This simple idea is one not addressed by Cicero in his considerations.

In book 1, Quintus divides the types of divination into natural; 'that what the soul has seized, from a source outside of itself' and artificial, which consists of 'conjecture and long observation'¹⁹. The first that Cicero tackles is artificial divination, specifically that of augury, entrails, portents and omens. One of his most notable arguments within this discussion is that of the logicacy of the meanings of such signs. He asks, 'how did the soothsayers manage to agree among themselves what part of the entrails were favourable?'²⁰ and goes on to discuss the unlikelihood of a natural quality that entrails may possess in order to indicate the future. Further to this, he questions the consistency of divinatory signs across different times and cultures; 'so we regard signs on the left as best - greeks and barbarians, those on the right...What a conflict this is!'²¹, arguing that this surely diminishes the credibility of such practices. Cicero's arguments here appear very logical on the surface, but as both Schofield and Denyer point out, this idea that such signs are arbitrary and inconsistent rests for the most part on an *ignoratio elenchi*.²² Cicero's claims have been criticised based on the idea that a truly omniscient God *would* communicate with humans through arbitrary signs, as an all-knowing God would, of course, communicate with their recipient through specific means that are perceptible to those who are meant to receive them. Therefore, as Schofield sums up; 'the arbitrariness of signs is no obstacle to their serving as reasonable instruments of communication, nor is it reasonable to demand that they should not be arbitrary'.²³ Cicero makes similar arguments in terms of illogicacies and inconsistencies against Quintus' views on natural divination, mostly ridiculing the idea of 'frenzy' in which most divine messages are said to be

¹⁵ Denyer, *The Case Against*, p.4

¹⁶ Andree Hahmann, *The Stoic Definition of Chance* (Mathesis Publications, 2019) p.175

¹⁷ Cicero, *Div Book II*, p.393

¹⁸ Denyer, *The Case Against*, p.2

¹⁹ Cicero, *Div Book II*, p.401

²⁰ Cicero, *Div Book II*, p.403

²¹ Cicero, *Div Book II*, p.465

²² Schofield, *Cicero For and Against*, p.62

²³ Schofield, *Cicero For and Against*, p.63

received ‘from a soul set free’²⁴. He argues that it is illogical to put frenzy above reason and that the idea of receiving divine messages in dreams is far less logical than receiving them when one is conscious, as ‘appearances seen when we are awake are much more distinct and trustworthy than those in dreams’²⁵. This leads him to come to the conclusion that any kind of divine visitation within dreams would not be in keeping with the dignity of Gods, as ‘if dreams are unnoticed and disregarded, either God is ignorant of that fact, or he does a vain thing in conveying information by means of dreams; but neither supposition accords with the nature of a god’²⁶. Although valid points, the way in which Cicero discusses dreams here is again seemingly removed from the original arguments put forward by Quintus. This is addressed by Krostenko through his analysis of this quote from book 2, in which Cicero questions what makes more sense:

“...is it that the immortal gods, who are of surpassing excellence in all things, constantly flit about, and when they find someone snoring, throw at him dark and twisted visions, which he carries in the morning to a dream-expert to unravel? Or does nature bring it to pass that the ever-active soul sees in sleep phantoms of what it saw when the body was awake?”²⁷

Krostenko firstly criticises this argument in that this dichotomous question is rhetorical rather than philosophical. He points out that the first half of the question does not represent the original claims made by Quintus fairly and nor does it prove in any way the theoretical inability of the gods to act in the way described. In this way, it can be seen that Cicero’s refutation of divinatory dreams is flawed due to its misrepresentation of the original claims and its dependence only on the sensibility that gods must act in a particular way.²⁸

In considering the fact that it is widely speculated that these are not Marcus Cicero’s own views, it is important to consider this work in a slightly different context than that of a simple debate. Cicero does well in both books to employ the use of both experience and reason in order to facilitate an in depth discussion, especially when the reader considers the fact that this dialogic structure may have been intended to exemplify academic methods of inquiry during this time. In this way, it is a successful feat in both experiential argument and rationalist thought. However, in considering *De Divinatione* in the context of this particular critical review, a conclusion is easily made regarding the strongest argument. To conclude; although Cicero does well to undermine basic principles of divination through his skeptic arguments, it is true that he does so based on his own definitions of certain concepts, thus often not addressing Quintus’ original claims. For example, attacking divination as a science when there has been no claims made of this on the Stoic account. In this way, although Cicero’s logical arguments are strong in their own right, there is a running theme of *ignoratio elenchi* throughout Book II, largely due to such dependencies on certain assumptions regarding the nature of Gods. Based on these outlined flaws, it is appropriate to conclude that Cicero fails to prove that divination, on the account put forward by Quintus, does not exist.

²⁴ Cicero, *Div Book II*, p.485

²⁵ Cicero, *Div Book II*, p.513

²⁶ Cicero, *Div Book II*, p.513

²⁷ Cicero, *Div Book II*, p.517

²⁸ Brian Krostenko, *Beyond (Dis)belief, Rhetorical and Religious Form in Cicero’s De Divinatione* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000) p.357

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