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## Plato and Divination

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### Abstract

Plato uses the idea of divinatory knowledge as a metaphorical descriptor for a variety of kinds of daytime, waking knowing. What unites these examples is that they all include discussion of a kind of knowing that cannot account for itself, and that is tentative, imagistic and non-discursive. These metaphorical uses can further be illuminated by his more detailed discussion of divinatory knowledge itself in *Timeaus*.

### Disciplines

Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity | Arts and Humanities | Classical Literature and Philology | Classics | Folklore

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## Plato and Divination

**Abstract:** Plato uses the idea of divinatory knowledge as a metaphorical descriptor for a variety of kinds of daytime, waking knowing. What unites these examples is that they all include discussion of a kind of knowing that cannot account for itself, and that is tentative, imagistic and non-discursive. These metaphorical uses can further be illuminated by his more detailed discussion of divinatory knowledge itself in *Timeaus*.

Divination is an utterly common practice across the whole of the ancient world—so common in fact that it rivals sacrifice for the position of the fundamental religious act in antiquity. Scholars have yet to take account of this.<sup>1</sup> It also commonly attracted the attention of philosophers. Given the structure of Cicero's *De divinatione*, one might think the topic was positioned as if it were a question of skepticism. But the *De divinatione* is an example of a specific academic philosophical form, situated in the Late Republic, that places any topic it considers between arguments for and against it. Most treatments don't answer to this logic, and instead focus their commentary on divination as a form of knowing. Unlike the better-known evidence, deriving from historians and poets, which focuses on the arrival and interpretation of particular divine signs, managed in specific social and political contexts, these thinkers focus on the premises of the whole enterprise. They develop ideas about how it is that diviners seem to be able to know things that are not knowable by any obvious means. They begin with some version of the question: How in the world do they *do* that? It is typically considered a stretch of more usual modes of thinking, but not a rupture of them.

The approach of the philosophers does not quite fit among the ways contemporary scholars typically approach the topic. We currently have rich and well-developed treatments of divination in two venues. In its social historical dimension, it is seen as a way to do politics; and in the history of magic, it is classified as a form of the occult. The philosophical accounts run orthogonal to these discussions and suggest that another history of divination is also possible to tell, one that sees it not so much as a mechanism of social manipulation or as an example of exotic superstition, but rather as belonging to the history of a certain kind of cognitive capacity. Somehow, it seems to produce a knowledge that does not arrive exactly like our "normal," waking version does, but is more like a peripheral vision, a lucky guess, or a chance insight. The philosophers treat it as something akin to what in a contempo-

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<sup>1</sup> Though its importance has long been recognized. See, recently, the papers on "divination et décision" in *Cahiers du Centre Gustave Glotz* 16 (2005), 213–319.

rary context is usually referred to as an intuition. The treatment of Plato provides a case in point.

In his most vivid narrative of his hero's life story, Plato has Socrates center his biography on an act of divination. The *Apology* shows a man driven by a disquieting pronouncement from the Delphic oracle, and devoting his life to solving its riddle. Pleading his own defense before an Athenian jury, Socrates presents a highly wrought speech, rich in mythological allusions. He compares himself to Achilles (28c) and likens his life's work to a Herculean labor (22a),<sup>2</sup> but a more subtle and also more powerful point of reference is another figure whose life was as profoundly shaped by the oracle as he argues his own was, the Theban hero Oedipus.<sup>3</sup> But while Oedipus spends his days trying to disprove the oracle, in an archetypal act of intellectual hubris, Plato reverses the main point of the traditional tale, making his story one of intellectual humility, dramatizing his hero's epistemological caution through counterpoint. Socrates makes out his own life to be a kind of propitiation for the general sin of overconfidence in the ability to know (21b-d, 23b-c), the offence for which Oedipus could well stand.

The dramas of the two figures resonate in specific similarities and inversions. Like Oedipus, Socrates arrives as a foreigner (ξενός 17d) in the land of the courtroom. Both men have given over their lives to solving oracular riddles (αἰνίγματα 21b, 27a, 27d) in order to benefit their cities. Socrates understands his wisdom to consist in a profoundly human recognition of limitation (20d) and he begins from the premise of trying to find out how the oracle was correct (21b), whereas Oedipus expresses aspirations to trump even the god's ability to know, and his life's mission has been to prove wrong the oracle that he would sleep with his mother and kill his father. (OT 971–72) Both are denied wealth and political power by the Delphic oracle, but Oedipus is made hateful to his countrymen by misunderstanding it, Socrates is made so by his understanding it (24a), which prompts his vigorous, public cross-examination of the powerful. Even in its staging, the *Apology* resembles the *Oedipus Tyrannus*. In both works, the central character stands in front of a body of citizens who are making judgments (the dicasts resembling the chorus) and defends against accusers from his central position (Socrates' accusers answering to Oedipus' Creon, Teiresias, and the messengers). Socrates atones for Oedipus' failing by his own change of attitude, but further he supplants failure with success. While Oedipus cannot entirely solve his crucial Delphic riddle, Socrates can. Speaking to the Delphic maxim to "know yourself," Socrates' life is a lesson grounded in a particular kind of self-knowledge. It is a riddle in itself, slyly revelatory of a profound truth: divine

<sup>2</sup> For this reading of νόμος here, see Silvia Montiglio, *Wandering in Ancient Greek Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 152–53.

<sup>3</sup> A reading in this general direction but to a different purpose was forwarded by Jacob Howland, "Plato's *Apology* as Tragedy," *The Review of Politics* 70 (2008), 519–46; Montiglio has made an interesting account of the similarity, specifically with regard to wandering, but the theme, to my mind critical, has as far as I can tell gone otherwise unnoticed.

signs reveal to the human inquirer that true wisdom lies in a self-understanding of limitation.

Xenophon's version of the story differs in interesting ways. The courtroom drama is also driven by an oracle, but Xenophon has the oracle claiming that no man is freer, more just, nor more temperate than Socrates (Xen. *Apol.* 14). Socrates then advocates on his own behalf, arguing for all the ways in which he indeed has more freedom, justice, and temperance than anyone else, in a way that could sound boastful to an unfriendly ear. In juxtaposition with this version, Plato's is all the more striking. He has made a deliberate choice to cast Socrates' life as a drama about epistemology, and by using divination as a fulcrum, he indicates to us its power as a cultural form that speaks to the human capacity to know.

If we take this as an invitation to have another look at how divination appears in Plato's corpus, we find that the topic comes up more frequently than one might expect. He finds it useful in developing his arguments and illustrating points of his philosophical program. His tone is sometimes ironic and playful, sometimes quite sincerely engaged, sometimes mocking, sometimes serious, and almost never exclusively one of these. Divination functions in Plato's work quite similarly to way another deeply traditional authoritative discourse functions: that is, poetry. It provides a foil for comparison—usually as a point of contrast rather than a topic unto itself. Both discourses also carry a background of authority that Plato is keen to co-opt. While his discussions of poetry are somewhat more frequent than those of divination, the much more dramatic imbalance between modern scholars' abundant attention to Plato's poetics, and the comparative dearth of consideration of his ideas on divination doubtless reflects modern concerns more than an aspect of Plato's work itself. The topic is woven rather deeply, after all, into the fabric of prominent dialogues, in addition to the *Apology*, like the *Phaedrus*, *Phaedo*, and *Symposium*, and shorter references to it are frequent in other works as well. This larger picture has mostly escaped us.<sup>4</sup> The references Plato makes to divination in such texts form a useful background for understanding his direct commentary on it in the *Timaeus*. Sections of that work are his most concentrated remarks on the topic, functioning in a way parallel to how he treats poetry in the *Ion* or books 3 and 10 of the *Republic*, and they yield insight into how he thinks divination might work. But to prepare a context for understanding the ideas of the *Timaeus* we first gain insight from some broader observations on how Plato uses divination as a model for a certain way of knowing in the rest of the corpus.

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<sup>4</sup> Kathryn Morgan's fascinating treatment of the *Phaedo*, along the lines articulated here, has helped remedy this, "The Voice of Authority: Divination and Plato's *Phaedo*," *Classical Quarterly* 60 (2010): 53–88.

## Divination as a Way of Knowing: Pretense, Intuition, and Uncanny Insight

In one important group of texts, he uses the language of divination to mark a kind of knowledge that seems mostly to hang back, taking refuge in the privilege of silence that its social prestige allows<sup>5</sup>. What joins these texts is how he positions divinatory knowledge with respect to the need to explain itself: mostly, it just does not seem to bother. As Kathryn Morgan has recently shown, the structure of the *Phaedo* is a case in point.<sup>6</sup> Socrates takes up the traditional hope to derive knowledge from a divine and infallible authority and subtly argues that we should transpose that aspiration onto a drive to pursue the dictates of logical argument. Divination is here one among an array of divine discourses—including magical incantations, ritual formulas, mystic doctrines, esoteric philosophical commandments, and the language of the mysteries—that stand in contrast with philosophical elenchus. The latter operates by doubt and is constantly forced to account for itself, while divine discourse trades in surety, and does not deign to give its reasons.<sup>7</sup> Such a theme also plays a role in the logic of the *Apology* with which we began.

In another, larger group of texts, that present his most trenchant comments on divination, Plato places a slightly different cast on this issue. In contrast to moments where divination does not give an account of itself because it does not *have* to, in this other grouping of evidence, divination does not account for itself because it is not *able* to. In these instances, Plato makes no reference to the idea that social authority is taken as a license to stand aloof from elenchus, but rather to a desire to express the odd, curious, sometimes absurd, and sometimes wondrous sense of a chance insight whose source is difficult to discern. Just as in the former group of texts, so also in these following examples, Plato's tone varies from irony to empathy and everywhere in between. After these momentary insights arrive, whether in the mind of Socrates or one of his interlocutors, they are typically then shown to submit to the trial of philosophical elenchus, a test which they may pass or fail (and which those playing the role of diviner in the examples from the previous group of texts typically assumed did not apply to them). In Plato's corpus, these flashes of insight draw the bulk of his discussions of divination.

At several points he brings forward divinatory language to describe cases of insight that obviously fail that elenchic test, often in an ironic and teasing way. He makes fun of a few figures that suppose themselves to have extravagant kinds of knowing that it would not be possible for anyone to explain. Socrates teases Euthyphro's pose as a font of wisdom this way. (*Euthyphro* 3e) In the *Meno*, after Anytus expresses his strong dislike of the Sophists, and then claims that he has never

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<sup>5</sup> *Crat.* 383b-84a; *Theaet.* 142c, 179a; *Rep.* 349a.

<sup>6</sup> See Morgan.

<sup>7</sup> Marcel Detienne has written elegantly on this unipolar approach to discourse, in *Masters of Truth* (New York: Zone Books, 1996), 62–85.

had any contact with them, Socrates wonders how he knows he dislikes something with which he has had no experience. He answers his own question with a mocking comment: “Well, perhaps you are a *mantis*, Anytus, since indeed I would wonder how else you know about these things, drawing from what you yourself are saying” (Μάντις εἶ ἴσως, ὃ Ἄνυτε· ἐπεὶ ὅπως γε ἄλλως οἶσθα τούτων πέρι, ἐξ ὧν αὐτὸς λέγεις θαυμάζοιμ’ ἄν, 92c). A similar tone appears in the *Lysis* (216d) and *Cratylus*, (396d-e, 428c, cf. 411b). In each case the joke works around the claim that divinatory knowing is by definition that which you get without knowing how you got it.

More important, there are a group of texts where the inability to give an account of one’s knowledge is attributed not to a grandiose overreaching on the part of the knower, but out of an epistemological humility in the face of the profundity of the thing known. In these cases something seems to be true, but it is so weighty that it would be difficult to understand how we got our minds around it. The first case involves the virtues. He often treats temperance as a principal virtue. He twice uses notions of divination to describe how one might get a sense of this. In the *Charmides*, one of Socrates’ premises in a larger argument is that temperance (σωφροσύνη) is something good. Rather than saying he knows this for sure, or trying to develop a proof that this is so, he says he “divines” it (μαντεύομαι). The verb is here a metaphorical shorthand for just “knowing” something or sensing it, in the absence of rigorous logical proof. In the *Republic*, we find a more elaborated example over the same territory. Socrates senses a similarity between temperance and harmony. First he just simply notices a likeness between the two. More than the other great values, temperance “resembles a certain proportion and harmony” (συμφωνία τινὶ καὶ ἀρμονία προσέοικεν μᾶλλον ἢ τὰ πρότερον, 430e). He then looks into the resemblance that caught his eye, and after adducing several reasons that justify the claim says: “Do you see, then, I said, that we divined reasonably just now that temperance resembles a sort of harmony?” (ὁρᾶς οὖν, ἦν δ’ ἐγώ, ὅτι ἐπιεικῶς ἐμαντευόμεθα ἄρτι ὡς ἀρμονία τινὶ ἢ σωφροσύνη ὁμοίωται; 431e). Here “divining” describes an intuitive sense of likeness between two ideas. Something of the sort seems to be behind Glaucon’s short intervention after Socrates describes with pungent concision the decay of souls fixated on material truths and pleasures. “Socrates, Glaucon said, you are utterly oracular in describing the life of the many!” (παντελῶς, ἔφη ὁ Γλαῦκων, τὸν τῶν πολλῶν, ὃ Σώκρατες, χρησιμωδεῖς βίον, 586b). Rather than give a rigorous proof of such a decay, Socrates strings together moving, long-form speeches that seem to flow one from to the next. Also in this category we find the famous image in the *Symposium*, where Aristophanes speaks of humans as having been split in two, and their erotic desire as a search for their other halves. When two tallies actually meet, their desire for one another is profound: an urge or a impulse, which is “impossible for them to articulate, but which they are able to divine and to understand hints of” (ὃ οὐ δύναται εἰπεῖν, ἀλλὰ μαντεύεται ὃ βούλεται, καὶ αἰνίττεται, 192d). As we saw in the *Apology*, the verb αἰνίττεται is also characteristic of divination.

In an even more profound mode, Plato uses divinatory language to talk about how to approach knowledge of the Good, a transcendent principle, whose ontologi-

cal status, let alone its epistemological one, is difficult to discern. Just after the parable of the cave in *Republic* 7, he returns to the question of the educational scheme for the guardians, now understood in terms of the cave's larger implications for our understanding of where the real truth lies. He arrives at the insight that the guardians should pursue studies that turn the mind away from the world of material things, generation and decay, and becoming, and toward the immaterial, unchanging world of being. At the start of the process that reaches this position, Plato begins wondering about their proper studies and then interrupts himself to mention in mid-sentence that some thought has just occurred to him:

What, then, Glaucon, would be the learning that would draw a soul away from the world of becoming and toward the world of being? This thing just now enters my mind as I am talking...

τί ἂν οὖν εἴη, ὃ Γλαύκων, μάθημα ψυχῆς ὀλκὸν ἀπὸ τοῦ γιγνομένου ἐπὶ τὸ ὄν; τόδε δ' ἐννοῶ λέγων ἄμα... (521d)

He lays out several premises, pointing to the idea that abstract pursuits like mathematics are the most conducive to turning our minds toward the immaterial and so are the best primary studies in the guardians' curriculum.<sup>8</sup> As he moves the conversation forward to test this idea, Plato describes, using the language of prophetic insight, the thought that had just arrived to him at 521d:<sup>9</sup>

I will try, I said, to show what seems right to me at least. Now, either concur or dissent, as a co-observer alongside me, to what I distinguish to be or not to be conducive to the sort of things we're talking about, in order that we might see also this more clearly, whether the matter is as I divine it to be.

ἐγὼ πειράσσομαι, ἦν δ' ἐγώ, τό γ' ἐμοὶ δοκοῦν δηλώσαι. ἃ γὰρ διαίρουμαι παρ' ἑμαυτῷ ἀγωγὰ τε εἶναι οἱ λέγομεν καὶ μή, συνθεατῆς γενόμενος σύμφαθι ἢ ἄπειπε, ἵνα καὶ τοῦτο σαφέστερον ἴδωμεν εἰ ἔστιν οἷον μαντεύομαι. (523a)

He then goes on to submit that intuition to dialectical scrutiny, after the flash of insight is described with divination language. In closing off the discussion of which arts the guardians are to pursue, Socrates starts to look for commonalities among them, so we can draw larger lessons, and he returns again to divinatory language. Facing such difficult questions, Glaucon “divines” such a thing would be a mammoth task, and Socrates then pivots the discussion to the power of dialectic as an overarching method of study (531d). Socrates next wonders about the right time for introducing it. He uses a complex thought experiment, and again speaks of “divining”

<sup>8</sup> This sense is also enacted in the *Meno* in the choice of geometry as a the subject for eliciting knowledge from the slave boy.

<sup>9</sup> Similarly, at *Philebus* 20b, Plato speaks of the happenstance arrival of an idea in divinatory terms: “I imagine some god has recalled to my mind something that will help us,” and “I remember a theory that I heard long ago, perhaps I dreamed it....”

this difficult answer.<sup>10</sup> Such language is repeated serially (538a4, 538a7, 538a9, 538b9) in a kind of closing punctuation mark on the discussion of what kind of education best guides a person to the Good, the crowning moment of the larger plan for the *Republic's* ideal city. What remains, in books 8–10, will consider the different types of regimes and the kinds of souls associated with them.

The divinatory language in this section of the *Republic*, summarizing consideration of the Good, is an elaboration on an earlier moment, which introduces the topic of our direct, intuitive knowledge of the Good. In book 6, in the discussion leading up to the image of the divided line, Socrates talks about the Good in moving terms:

That which every soul pursues and on account of which does everything it does [the Good], it divines to be something, although it is at a loss and incapable of grasping sufficiently what in the world it is, nor is it able to feel a steady confidence about it, of the sort which it has concerning other things; and on account of this, even if it got some help from other things, it misses the mark.

ὁ δὲ διώκει μὲν ἅπαντα ψυχὴ καὶ τούτου ἔνεκα πάντα πράττει, ἀπομαντευομένη τι εἶναι, ἀπορούσα δὲ καὶ οὐκ ἔχουσα λαβεῖν ἰκανῶς τί ποτ' ἐστὶν οὐδὲ πίστει χρῆσασθαι μονίμῳ οἴᾳ καὶ περὶ τᾶλλα, διὰ τοῦτο δὲ ἀποτυγχάνει καὶ τῶν ἄλλων εἴ τι ὄφελος ἦν... (505e)

Plato then says that proper guardians will need to know how the just and noble relate to the Good, as a whole, or they will not be good guardians. “I divine that no one will be [a good guardian] until he knows these things sufficiently.” His interlocutor tells him that he has “divined well” (μαντεύομαι δὲ μηδένα αὐτὰ πρότερον γνώσεσθαι ἰκανῶς, καλῶς γάρ, ἔφη, μαντεύη, 506a). With similar language, at the close of the *Philebus* and after a long consideration of the different kinds of pleasures a person might feel, Socrates recapitulates what they have learned from the dialogue. He here endorses some mixture of measured pleasures and reason for a thriving life. A perfect balance will set a person on the way to the highest goal in life, which is, he says,

to try to learn in this way what on earth is the Good, both in a human being and in the cosmos, and what in the world one should divine the form of the Good to be.

ἐν ταύτῃ μαθεῖν περᾶσθαι τί ποτε ἔν τ' ἀνθρώπῳ καὶ τῷ παντὶ πέφυκεν ἀγαθὸν καὶ τίνα ἰδέαν αὐτὴν εἶναι ποτε μαντευτέον (64a).

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**10** He considers the current state of affairs, in which sophists, who have little investment in the way things truly are (according to Socrates) teach dialectic to young people, who then take on a callous disregard for the truth of things and value only manipulation. In trying to figure out when would be a more appropriate time to teach dialectic, he says that in the current situation, he “divines” that people who learn dialectic too young are like young people who are raised in families with abundant wealth, and are then convinced by flatterers that they have been adopted. This knowledge causes them to turn on their families, and graft onto the flatterer. This is the case with those who study dialectic at a young age with sophists. They tell their students that their parental values of temperance, justice, beauty, etc., are not their true parents, but are only shams, and the children attach themselves to the flatterers.

He carries forward the metaphor shortly after (66b) when speaking of the qualities that will help a human being achieve the right mixture of different kinds of pleasure and reason in order to achieve a vision of the Good. Since the Good is not something of which we can have some simple cognition, divinatory language seems to Plato an appropriate way of describing our access to it. It will be oblique, not straightforward, more an intuition, like the spotting of a likeness, than a rational discursive calculus that moves from premises to conclusions.

These examples from *Republic* and *Philebus* set out the possibility that Plato means divination to stand particularly for a way of knowing transcendent entities. But this is a specious conclusion, since, with equal facility, Socrates relates divination to knowledge of precisely the opposite end on his ontological scale. In his discussion on the allegory of the cave in book 7 of the *Republic*, the most powerful description of the material world in the whole corpus, he calls all human attempts to draw conclusions about the shadowy world of material things a form of “divining” (516d). Other points in the *Republic* and *Meno*, when read together, help clarify what he means by this. The first dialogue includes a rich description of what knowledge we are capable of having when it comes to material things, and the second adds the language of divination to talk about it. In the *Republic*, he develops his image of the divided line and speaks of the world of matter as being too unstable to be truly known. It is only apprehensible by opinion, and the best we can do is to have *true* opinion of it, which he defines as a kind of knowledge that happens to be right but is incapable of explaining itself (508d, 510a). This already appears to match the general description of divinatory knowing emerging from the wider collection evidence, and so it is no surprise that *Meno* makes the connection explicit. In considering the case of successful statesmen, he suggests that since they are unable to teach their skills to others (which we know because great famous past statesmen were unable to do so) their ability to thrive as statesmen must not be based on knowledge. This leads him to a consider right opinion:

Then if it isn't knowledge, the thing left is right opinion; by using this thing statesmen guide their cities, and they are no different with respect to their knowledge than oracles and *manteis*. For these men also in an inspired state say many true things, and yet they know nothing of what they're saying.

οὐκοῦν εἰ μὴ ἐπιστήμη, εὐδοξία δὴ τὸ λοιπὸν γίγνεται: ἢ οἱ πολιτικοὶ ἄνδρες χράμενοι τὰς πόλεις ὀρθοῦσιν, οὐδὲν διαφερόντως ἔχοντες πρὸς τὸ φρονεῖν ἢ οἱ χρησμοῦδοί τε καὶ οἱ θεομάντις: καὶ γὰρ οὗτοι ἐνθουσιώσαντες λέγουσιν μὲν ἀληθῆ καὶ πολλὰ, ἴσασι δὲ οὐδὲν ὧν λέγουσιν (99b-d) <sup>11</sup>

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**11** Another apposite text here is surely *Statesman* 309c: “I claim that really true and assured opinion about beauty, justice, goodness and their opposites is divine, when it arises in men’s souls, and it arises in a godlike race.” (Τὴν τῶν καλῶν καὶ δικαίων περὶ καὶ ἀγαθῶν καὶ τῶν τούτοις ἐναντίων ὄντων οὕσαν ἀληθῆ δόξαν μετὰ βεβαιώσεως, ὁπόταν ἐν [ταῖς] ψυχαῖς ἐγγίγνηται, θεῖαν φημί ἐν δαιμονίῳ γίνεσθαι γένει.)

He elaborates, “Then, Meno, are we right to call these men divine, whoever, although he has no sense, succeeds in doing and speaking many great things? (οὐκοῦν, ὦ Μένων, ἄξιον τούτους θεῖους καλεῖν τοὺς ἄνδρας, οἵτινες νοῦν μὴ ἔχοντες πολλὰ καὶ μεγάλα κατορθοῦσιν ὧν πράττουσι καὶ λέγουσι;).

Both *Republic* and *Meno* illustrate strong doubt about whether secure knowledge in this world is possible at all. When dealing with material things we are, functionally, in the same position as the diviner, who may know things in the way of having opinions that happen to be true, but is unable to give an account, to give reasons and explanations, in the way that secure knowledge (*epistêmê*) always can. Both these texts help us clarify Plato’s criterion for using divinatory language when he does. It could not be, in fact, out of a sense of the transcendence of the object of knowledge. The examples directed toward the material world show instead that the point is that such knowledge would be incapable of being discursively explained. All this evidence taken together clarifies what the most salient characteristic of divinatory knowing is when Plato uses it as a point of reference in the corpus. Whether he uses the language of divination to characterize the highest kind of knowing to which we could dare to aspire (*Rep.* 523a, 505e-506a; *Phil.* 64a) or the lowest kind (*Rep.* 516d; *Meno* 99b-d), Plato uses it with the same purpose—it is meant to be an emblem for knowing something that turns out to be true without being able to account for how you know it.

## Mechanisms of Divinatory Knowing: Plato’s *Timaeus*

In addition to the many references to divination, taken as emblematic of a means of knowing that can’t explain itself, we have a few hints of how divination proper might work.<sup>12</sup> Most of this thinking is done in the *Timaeus*, but there some useful points to begin with in other dialogues. In the *Apology*, Socrates speaks of the different classes of reputedly wise people, whom he interrogates in his exploration of the oracle. He gets to the poets and finds they are unable to understand what they themselves have written any better than anyone else. This leads him to a conclusion:

So in turn I recognized this also concerning the poets in short order, that they did not compose what they did compose by wisdom, but by a certain natural disposition and enthusiasm, just like the diviners and the givers of oracles: For these also say many fine things, but they know nothing of what they are talking about.

ἔγνω οὖν αὐτὸ καὶ περὶ τῶν ποιητῶν ἐν ὀλίγῳ τούτο, ὅτι οὐ σοφίᾳ ποιοῖεν ἃ ποιοῖεν, ἀλλὰ φύσει τινὶ καὶ ἐνθουσιάζοντες ὥσπερ οἱ θεομάντεις καὶ οἱ χρησμοδοί: καὶ γὰρ οὗτοι λέγουσι μὲν πολλὰ καὶ καλά, ἴσασιν δὲ οὐδὲν ὧν λέγουσι (22b-c).

<sup>12</sup> The two questions are actually quite separate from one another. The account he gives in what follows means to make suggestive sense of how knowledge might be generated in divination. What we have seen so far, on the other hand, makes reference to such knowledge as an analogy.

Divination is again a claim of knowing that can't account for itself. And further the skill that makes a diviner a diviner, and also a poet a poet, is something in their natural constitution (φύσει τινι). It is not a power of the intellect, but a disposition. *Philebus* elaborates. A discussion on pleasures in that dialogue circles around to the objections of some unnamed natural scientists who claim that pleasures do not exist at all.<sup>13</sup> This strikes Socrates as a wrong, but not uninteresting, position. He says that they are onto something without quite knowing it. The scientists' objection grows out of a certain innate quality in their natures which causes them, entirely rightly, to be suspicious of what benefit pleasure could provide. He recommends that:

...we put them [the scientists] to use, just like certain seers, who divine not by an art but by a certain resistant streak in their natures, not ignoble, which belongs to those who very much hate the power of pleasure and consider it nothing salutary, so that even the very attractiveness of it they consider to be trickery and not pleasure.

ὥσπερ μάντεσι προσχρησθαί τισι, μαντευομένοις οὐ τέχνῃ ἀλλὰ τινι δυσχερεῖα φύσεως οὐκ ἀγενοῦς λίαν μεμισηκότων τὴν τῆς ἡδονῆς δύναμιν καὶ νενομικῶτων οὐδὲν ὑγιές, ὥστε καὶ αὐτὸ τοῦτο αὐτῆς τὸ ἐπαγωγὸν γοήτευμα, οὐχ ἡδονήν, εἶναι. (44c)

Plato compares this particular part of the knowledge the scientists have to that of inspired diviners because it arrives by instinct—a certain innate quality in their natures causes them to reach a plausible conclusion. Like the successful statesmen (who appear later in this same dialogue) or the poets who seem to just arrive at their knowledge, these people's natures cause them to land on an opinion that turns out to be true.

Plato's fascinating anatomical discussion of human nature in the *Timaeus* is undeniably strange. Among its many intriguing accounts is his view of the liver as a screen for images of rational thought that are meant to frighten the appetitive soul into submission, and, at the same time, as a receptacle for divinatory images. But this section of the text, coming as it does at a pivotal inflection point of the dialogue, has provoked a more bemused kind of puzzlement than perhaps it should.<sup>14</sup> As has

<sup>13</sup> On the possible identity of these people, see Dorothea Frede, "Introductory Essay," in Plato *Philebus*, translated, with introduction and notes by Dorothea Frede (Indianapolis: Hackforth, 1993), p. 1 – lii.

<sup>14</sup> Archer-Hind speaks of "The keen irony pervading the whole of this very curious and interesting passage is too evident to escape notice." *The Timaeus of Plato*, ed. R. D. Archer-Hind (London: MacMillan and Co., 1888), 266. Taylor characterizes the discussion of the liver as "a very curious, and obviously far from wholly serious, speculation," A. E. Taylor, *A Commentary on Plato's Timaeus* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1928), 506. J. E. Raven states that "The effect of much of it is bizarre rather than illuminating," *Plato's Thought in the Making: A study of the Development of his Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 238. More recently, Carlos Steel also detects "irony" and claims that the treatment of the liver, spleen, and lungs is "comical." "The Moral Purpose of the Human Body: A Reading of *Timaeus* 69–72," *Phronesis* 46.2 (May, 2001): 113. Cornford is more willing to take the discussion seriously. *Plato's Cosmology: The Timaeus of Plato Translated with a Running Commentary* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., 1937), 288–89. The claim of irony and

been shown in work by the Italian scholar Serafina Rotondaro, it articulates a complex set of ideas that touch on important components of Platonic epistemology and psychology.<sup>15</sup> The topic of divination comes up as Plato is turning his attention from the physical world and toward the human being, and away from the human soul and toward the human body. It serves as a pivot between many large themes in the dialogue. Its introduction is marked by a break in the rhetorical flow more pronounced than any other in the work. Having just come to a pause in his long discussion of the causes behind the creation of the cosmos and human sensation of it, he tells us that, it is time to revert to the beginning of the discussion, in order to “try now to set an end to our story, a fitting crown to what has come before it” (τελευτήν ἤδη κεφαλὴν τε τῷ μύθῳ περὶ ὧμεθα ἀρμόττουσαν ἐπιθεῖναι τοῖς πρόσθεν, 69b). He then gives an overall summary of everything that has gone before as a lead in to a discussion of the placement of the soul inside the human body.

At this point, we begin to witness, in close detail, the lower gods in action. The demiurge is directly responsible for creating only divine things. He makes the heavenly bodies, stars and planets. He arranges the large pieces of the cosmos, and gives it a soul and the power of reason. He also creates a set of divinities to whom he turns over the task of creating the mortal realm. He makes up another batch of the divine soul he used to animate the whole cosmos and hands it over to the lower gods, directing them to use it in their most important task: the fashioning of humans. A consideration of the soul, which is here in accord with the more famous tri-partite presentation in the *Republic*, guides the entrance into the topic of the body. The creators fashion the head as a home for the human being’s “divine part,” or the immortal soul handed over to them by the eternal god. In an attempt to protect this part as much as possible from the riotous sensations that vie for sway over the rest of the body, the head is attached only via the thin “isthmus” of the neck (69e). The minion gods then fabricate the lower, mortal soul, which the eternal god directed them to make, and house it in the trunk. This lower soul has two pieces. The courageous part is placed in the upper chest cavity and is especially associated with the heart, which the creators “placed in the guard house” (εἰς τὴν δορυφορικὴν οἴκησιν κατέστησαν 70b). When the governing reason of the head determines that high spirits are needed, it sends a message to this region, which then rouses the rest of the body to action (70b). The heart spreads the message that courage and spiritedness are needed, pumping it quickly through the whole body. The lungs conversely aid in cooling the passion when the upper part of the soul sends the message that the threat has passed.

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lack of seriousness is in each case presented as an observation, typically unaccompanied by argumentation, after which various forms of narrower appreciation of compelling aspects of the passage are considered.

15 See Serafina Rotondaro, “Il PATHOS della ragione e i sogni,” in *Interpreting the Timaeus – Critias: Proceedings of the IV Symposium Platonicum* (St. Augustin, Germany: Academia Verlag, 1997), 275–80.

The lower part of the mortal soul is housed in the lower trunk, below the midriff. It governs the appetites, which drive people to meet the needs of their bodily natures. It is also, interestingly, the seat of divination. This part of the soul has a sinister cast. The creators had to “bind this one down there like a wild beast” (κατέδησαν δὴ τὸ τοιοῦτον ἐνταῦθα ὡς θρέμμα ἄγριον 70e). Its desires threaten to overrun reason and take control of people. As a safeguard against this, the gods created the organ of the liver, and here begins a single period that runs some twenty-four lines of OCT text. It contains manifold ideas, which repay close consideration. The minion gods were aware that this part of the soul would not listen to reason, and that even if it got hold through the faculty of sensation (to which it does have access) of some part of reason, it would not heed it (71a). The language to which it responds is made up of εἶδωλα “phantoms” and φαντάσματα “visions,” a term whose common usages include the description of dream visions, and the phantom images, third from the truth, by which poetry works. These phantoms and visions are said to ψυχαγωγῆσαν the lower soul—that is, they “attract” but more particularly “beguile” or even “bewitch” it. This happens “night and day,” Plato says, broadening the context, already opened up with φαντάσματα for understanding this part of the soul to be engaged in dreams.

To regulate the lower soul, the gods settle the liver there, parallel to the placement of the heart and lungs within the spirited part. The liver, which is dense, smooth, and shiny (as well as being both bitter and sweet) functions as a kind of screen or mirror on which the highest part of the soul, contained in the head, can issue a corrective display. The correctives arrive from above in the form of “discursive thoughts” (διανοήματα) which the liver’s surface translates into the language that the lower soul understands. It receives impressions (τύποι) from above and mirrors back phantom images (εἶδωλα).<sup>16</sup> The lower soul works only by understanding likenesses and similarities. These displays take two forms, frightening and soothing, which correlate with the liver’s bitterness and sweetness respectively. The frightening class is an attempt to scare the beastly soul into submission. The power from above uses the liver’s bitterness (a harshness to which the lower part of the soul is akin) to make it contract and wrinkle and turn bilious colors. It also contorts the liver’s shape:

And with respect to the lobe and receptacle<sup>17</sup> and the gates,<sup>18</sup> by bending down the first from its correct position and shriveling it up, and by clogging shut the other two, it produces pain and nausea.

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**16** There are larger issues at work here, having to do with the way perception in general works in the *Timaeus*. For a fascinating treatment of how the pathway from sensory organs to the liver to the upper soul produces Plato’s explanation of sound and music, see Andrew Barker, “Timaeus on Music and the Liver,” in M. R. Wright, ed., *Reason and Necessity: Essays on Timaeus* (Classical Press of Wales, 2001) 85–99.

**17** Gall bladder, see Euripides *Electra* 828.

**18** Portal vein.

λοβὸν δὲ καὶ δοχὰς πύλας τε τὸ μὲν ἐξ ὀρθοῦ κατακάμπτουσα καὶ συσπῶσα, τὰ δὲ ἐμφράττουσα συγκλείουσα τε, λύπας καὶ ἄσας παρέχοι (71c).

Although he has not yet mentioned divination, this part of his discussion is deeply and slyly engaged with it. As we know from Euripides (c. 485–406 BCE), the language of lobes, receptacles, and gates is distinctive of the science of liver-reading, where the disposition of these elements, along with the livers' color, texture, and overall appearance, manifest the divine will.<sup>19</sup> When Plato uses it here, he seems to be giving an alternative explanation for the traditional misfigurations of livers, on which hepatoscopic diviners had built an entire science, borrowing from the cultures of the Near East. Rather than thinking of them as marks produced by a god, Plato is telling an alternative story in which they are actually the physical manifestation of a physiological process, as the reasoning part of the soul manipulates the liver in order to shock the lower soul and make it listen to reason. This appears at first to be a fascinating bit of naturalization. Such a reading receives support from a vivid statement he makes near the close of his treatment. Plato says that when the individual creature is alive this organ holds signs that are rather clear (τὸ τοιοῦτον σημεῖα ἐναργέστερα ἔχει 72b), but when stripped of life it becomes blind and the omens it presents are too obscure to indicate anything clearly (τὰ μαντεῖα ἀμυδρότερα ἔσχεν τοῦ τι σαφὲς σημαίνειν 72b). On closer inspection, though, it can't quite be that. The kind of process he describes could only work in a creature equipped with a higher order soul to misfigure the liver in the first place, and the only creature with that equipment is a human being. So unless Plato means to suggest divination by human livers (something highly unlikely and not attested elsewhere) his links to hepatoscopy here are artful provocations, perhaps meant to suggest an underlying physio-psychological basis for a divinatory technique, but only by way of analogy.

In addition to these frightening images, the liver can also make a display of gentleness, and it is during this process that divination explicitly enters the picture. When the liver produces calmness and serenity, the hunger-driven part of the soul spends its time during the night performing divination through dreams, Plato says.

And when, in turn, a certain inspiration from discursive reasoning paints opposite images of gentleness, and provides a respite from the bitterness, because it refuses to move or to touch what is naturally opposite to it, and by using the sweetness innate throughout the liver, and by setting all parts of it into alignment, making them level and autonomous, it makes the part of the soul settled around the liver propitious and bright. And it makes that part of the soul pass the night temperately, experiencing divination during sleep, since it has no share of reason and purposive intelligence.

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<sup>19</sup> *El.* 826–29. – The connection with Euripides is noted by both Taylor and Archer-Hind. For more on early Greek hepatoscopy, see Walter Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 46–53.

καὶ ὅτ' αὖ τάναντία φαντάσματα ἀποζωγραφοῖ πρῶτητός τις ἐκ διανοίας ἐπίπνοια, τῆς μὲν πικρότητος ἡσυχίαν παρέχουσα τῷ μήτε κινεῖν μήτε προσάπτεσθαι τῆς ἐναντίας ἑαυτῇ φύσεως ἐθέλειν, γλυκύτητι δὲ τῇ κατ' ἐκεῖνο συμφύτῳ πρὸς αὐτὸ χρωμένῃ καὶ πάντα ὀρθὰ καὶ λεία αὐτοῦ καὶ ἐλεύθερα ἀπευθύνουσα, ἴλεων τε καὶ εὐήμερον ποιῶ τὴν περὶ τὸ ἦπαρ ψυχῆς μοῖραν κατωκισμένην, ἔν τε τῇ νυκτὶ διαγωγὴν ἔχουσαν μετρίαν, μαντεία χρωμένῃ καθ' ὕπνον, ἐπειδὴ λόγου καὶ φρονήσεως οὐ μετεῖχε (71c-d).

Plato's language is very suggestive in this section. His term for inspiration here, ἐπίπνοια, is not ambiguous. It commonly means a precisely divine inspiration (e.g. Aesch. *Supp.* 17) and it exclusively means this in the seven other times it appears in Plato's corpus.<sup>20</sup> The images cause the lower soul to become propitious (ἴλεων) and bright. The word choice here draws again from the register of good omens, as ἴλεως is commonly used to refer to the beneficent aspect of a divinity. But one could also suggest that Plato's larger point is to overwrite traditional ideas about divination by the cognitive processes he spells out. The suggestion that harsh images in the liver are somehow tied with liver divination is a start down this path. And by Plato's description of the soothing images here, one could suggest that what has been thought of as a divinatory process actually consists of our reasoning part, producing gentle images for our lower part. This view has a certain consistency with his overall picture of the soul. The upper soul is after all the divine part in us, the only part that is constructed by the demiurge himself, as opposed to his minions. He even calls the concatenation of marrow that forms the organ of the brain, seat of the rational soul, "the ploughland to contain the divine seed" (73b). Imagining the rational soul to be the sender of images that get understood to be divine signs makes for an interesting, attenuated kind of connection between dream images and the divine. But this would require that one elide the distinction between the soothing activity and divination. And the next section of the *Timaeus* rules this out.

Plato's discussion continues for another full page, and there he makes clear that he sees divination as something quite distinct from the psychological dynamics he has just set out. Just after the 24-line sentence, Plato advances a new set of thoughts, in which he tells us that divination was granted to the lower part of our soul as a compensation to it. The minion gods who make our mortal natures recalled that the demiurge ordered them "to make the mortal kind as good as they possibly could" (τὸ θνητὸν ἐπέστελλεν γένος ὡς ἄριστον εἰς δύναμιν ποιεῖν 71d-e). This is a powerful guiding principle in the creation of the cosmos, on which more in a moment. Following this command, Plato says, "they rectified the vile part in us by establishing divination there, so that it might in some degree lay hold of the truth" (οὕτω δὲ κατορθοῦντες καὶ τὸ φαῦλον ἡμῶν, ἵνα ἀληθείας πῆ προσάπτοιτο, κατέστησαν ἐν τούτῳ τὸ μαντεῖον). He continues by making clear that divinatory signs arrive in a way that has

<sup>20</sup> It is the term Plato uses of mantic inspiration from Apollo (μαντικὴ μὲν ἐπίπνοια Ἀπόλλωνος) at *Phaedrus* 265b; at *Crat.* 399a for Euthyphro's inspiration; and in the *Symp.* 181c, of inspiration from Eros. See also τὴν θεῖαν ἐπίπνοια *Rep.* 499c; ἐπίπνοια θεῶν *Laws* 738c; θεῖα τὴν ἐπίπνοια *Laws* 747e; τὴν ἐπίπνοια θεῶν *Laws* 811c.

nothing to do with the upper soul. He claims that no one has divinatory visions when in his right mind (ἔννοος), but only when his φρονήσις is fettered by sleep, disease, or some divine mania. Reason has *something* to do with this process, as we have already seen, in a preparatory calming action that makes the lower soul receptive. And later, he also adds another intervention point for reason, after the arrival of the divinatory images. While no one in their right minds *has* divinatory visions, he says, it's also true that no one who is *not* in his or her right mind is able to *understand* divinatory visions. The intellect re-enters the picture after the mania and the reception of images has passed. It pulls the visions out of memory and discerns (διαφρέω) by means of rational calculation (λογισμός) what the vision means and for whom.

This further testimony makes it clear that Plato imagines divination to be its own process, separate from the internal, directive relationship whereby the upper soul guides the lower soul, through berating or soothing, using the liver as medium. Otherwise, it would make no sense for him to say that divination takes place when the upper soul is fettered. If it is fettered it could not be the agent sending images. Instead, Plato imagines two distinct processes. First, discursive reason flashes images on the liver to regulate the lower soul. When those thoughts are gentle and calming, they help facilitate a second process in which the lower soul passes the night temperately and is receptive to divinatory images.

One would have liked him to be a bit more specific about precisely where the divinatory images come from. But there is a clue, a telling one that helps us understand the second process better. It lies in the language that he uses to describe the calming of the lower soul, in the text already examined above. When Plato tells us that when the upper soul soothes the lower soul, it does so “by setting all parts of it into alignment, making them level and autonomous, it makes the part of the soul settled around the liver propitious and bright” (πάντα ὀρθὰ καὶ λεία αὐτοῦ καὶ ἐλεύθερα ἀπευθύνουσα, ἰλεών τε καὶ εὐήμερον ποιοῖ τὴν περὶ τὸ ἦπαρ ψυχῆς μοῖραν κατωκισμένην [71b]). The verb that Plato uses to describe the process of preparing the lower soul is an odd one for him—rare in his corpus and one that he develops a liking for only in the later dialogues. What the upper soul does to the lower soul is that it aligns it—ἀπευθύνω. The clue comes in an apposite usage of an equally rare cognate term that helps us pin down what he means to say here. This part of the investigation begins with a look at rational intelligence in the *Timaeus*. Briefly, it is related to spinning.

The soul is constructed of two nested circular bands each spinning in the same circumference, but each with its own axis. One spins in a way perpendicular to the axis of the soul and detects sameness; the other spins slightly oblique to the perpendicular and it is able to detect difference. Plato models this structure self-consciously on the structure of the cosmos, where the orbit of the planets through the ecliptic is slightly oblique to the circulation of the fixed stars around the celestial horizon. Like invisible gyroscopes these spinning motions orient people and allow them to make judgments about what is around them. But this is an end state of intelligence that is reached only after a human being reaches maturity. From birth until the onset of

adulthood the human (Plato assumes male) soul isn't quite spinning right yet, and this makes it subject to great perturbing flows—exacerbated by the youth's strong need for food to produce growth—and so the soul moves chaotically, not having yet settled into its orbits. He connects this ontogenetic process with a corresponding phylogenetic stage, which is vividly expressed. When the minion gods are creating humans, and for the first time begin to place souls inside bodies, it is a rather frightening process:

The souls, then, being thus bound in a great river neither mastered it nor were mastered, but with violence they rolled along and were rolled along themselves, so that the whole of the living creature was moved, but in such a random way that its progress was disorderly and irrational.

αἱ δ' εἰς ποταμὸν ἐνδεθεῖσαι πολλὸν οὐτ' ἐκράτουν οὐτ' ἐκρατοῦντο, βίᾳ δὲ ἐφέροντο καὶ ἔφερον, ὥστε τὸ μὲν ὄλον κινεῖσθαι ζῶον, ἀτάκτως μὴν ὅπῃ τύχοι προΐεναί καὶ ἀλόγως (43a-b).

He goes on to compare this early stage to being like a man who is upside down and unable to see anything for what it really is. He claims this tumultuous stage to be the advent of the perceptions, as the soul is battered and pummeled by coursing exterior movements. He describes it as flooding in and streaming out and producing collisions and riotous movements within the embodied soul. The connection between this early stage soul and the irrational soul is obvious, even down to the link with the hunger-drive.

But this early stage does not last forever, thank goodness, neither for the proto-humans the minions created, nor for each of us individually. Eventually, as we reach maturity, the inflow and outflow subside, and the soul is calmed and can develop its rational capacities by achieving the state of spinning, in alignment with the spheres of the cosmos:

But when the stream of increase and nutriment enters in less volume, and the revolutions calm down and proceed on their own path, becoming more stable as time proceeds, then at length, as the circles move each according to its natural track, their revolutions are aligned and they designate sameness and difference correctly, and thereby they render their possessor intelligent.

ὅταν δὲ τὸ τῆς αὐξίης καὶ τροφῆς ἔλαττον ἐπίη ρεῦμα, πάλιν δὲ αἱ περίοδοι λαμβανόμενα γαλήνης τὴν ἑαυτῶν ὁδὸν ἴωσι καὶ καθιστῶνται μᾶλλον ἐπιόντος τοῦ χρόνου, τότε ἤδη πρὸς τὸ κατὰ φύσιν ἰόντων σχῆμα ἐκάστων τῶν κύκλων αἱ περιφοραὶ κατευθυνόμεναί, τό τε θάτερον καὶ τὸ ταῦτόν προσαγορεύουσαι κατ' ὀρθόν, ἔμφορα τὸν ἔχοντα αὐτὰς γιγνόμενον ἀποτελοῦσιν (44b).

We can observe a perfect congruence between the process of calming and alignment that leads to the advent of rationality in a maturing adult and the calming and alignment by which the upper soul shapes the lower soul in preparation for divination. Just as the immature soul must get aligned (κατευθυνόμενας) with the motions of the heavens before it can partake of reason and become ἔμφορα, so too the lower soul occasionally becomes aligned (ἀπευθύνω)—and it is on these occasions that it too can, apparently, partake of reason.

In a closing remark on the subject as a whole, just before he goes off to describe the gall bladder and the other organs, Plato tells us that “The nature of the liver then is on account of these kinds of things, and it is naturally in the place which we have said, for the sake of divination” (ἡ μὲν οὖν φύσις ἥπατος διὰ ταῦτα τοιαύτη τε καὶ ἐν τόπῳ ᾧ λέγομεν πέφυκε, χάριν μαντικῆς [*Tim.* 72b]). The liver as an organ functions purposively, *for the sake of* producing divination for us. But on the evidence explored here, there are actually two different ends the liver seems to fulfill. It has a physio-psychological role of regulating the lower soul, and the more abstruse one of being the organ of divination. There is a seeming redundancy in the purposes of the liver here—a physiological process on the one hand and a cognitive one on the other. This kind of redundancy is actually a deep-running and powerful feature of the dialogue’s structure.

When analyzing a phenomenon, Plato typically looks for two kinds of causes at play, in an adumbration of Aristotle’s more developed, and well-known, four-fold treatment of causes.<sup>21</sup> First of all, there is a set of causes for things in the world that derives from necessity. These are the causes that derive from the characteristics and qualities of the material used to construct things. They provide physical level explanation for why things are the way they are. Plato uses the term of “ancillary causes,” more literally co-causes, for these (συναίτιον 46c7, 46d1, 76d6). Secondly, there is the divine cause, which tells us not how some process unfolds because of the material characteristics of the things that exist, but rather why the divine creator bothered to make that thing or process in the first place. It is here that the primary, final, or divine causes are located, and these press always toward the goal that what exists in this world should be good—remembering the demiurge’s injunction to make this world as good as possible. His discussion of sight, is a famous example often adduced to illustrate this. He reasons for a long time over the optics of light and how vision works via the nature of the materials involved, but closes by considering the final cause of sight, or the reason that god shaped the physical world in such a way as to make sight emerge. The reason is so that we, by looking up at the sun, the moon, and the stars, would contemplate the universe, develop the habit of inquiry into the ways of the cosmos, and from there develop philosophy. So the “for the sake of which” of sight turns out to be philosophy.

From this perspective what seem to be the multiple stories Plato tells about the liver can be understood to be entirely compatible. The first, in which the reasoning part of the soul produces phantoms on the liver to regulate the appetites, explains

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21 On this topic, see Carlo Natali, “Le cause del *Timeo* et la teoria delle Quattro cause,” in *Interpreting the Timaeus* (above n. 14), 207–13. The main causes are the intelligent cause, that enacts the plan of the eternal god, and the necessary cause, which derives from the material out of which the world is made. (47e-48a; cf. summary statement at 68e-69a) He also adds to this the wandering causes in the orbit of the Nurse or receptacle, which cause like to congregate with like. (48a) For further discussion and context, see Dana R. Miller *The Third Kind in Plato’s Timaeus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2003), 66–71.

the process on the level of mere physicality, and provides an account of the ancillary or co-causes embedded in the material world. But his discussion of divination gives us the primary cause for these qualities and characteristics of the liver—the “for the sake of which”—the divine set the whole system up this way. This would answer to the primary, final cause to make what is created in this world as good as possible. It explains how divination serves the lower soul as a compensation. It remediates the vile part of us by giving it at least this mediated access to reason. Divination, then, is the final good of our appetites.<sup>22</sup> To put it another way, it is not that divination is overwritten by the psycho-physiological architecture, it is underwritten by it.

It is important not to overplay how Plato would view the usefulness of this knowledge. Within Plato’s epistemological scheme it is about as far down the ladder of reliability as one can get. Here a certain especially hypothetical version the idea of likeness, anchored in Plato via the notion of the *eidolon*, governs the account. The lower soul is incapable of listening to *logoi* and so it must be cajoled, soothed, forced, or beaten down by the language of images, or more particularly of phantoms. Plato consistently uses the terms *eidola* and *phantasmata* to describe the images that speak to the lower soul—whether from reason or via divination. These are terms he uses to label not first order images (*eikones*) but rather images of images. And here we get back to the kind of analysis Plato makes of poetry. Both discourses are at a third remove from the truth, and neither should be relied on to grant us secure knowledge. Perhaps this explains why seers are placed fifth in Plato’s scale of incarnations listed at *Phaedrus* 248d, just below a gymnast, but in fact above poets, artists, and craftsmen.

Finally, this observation also helps us reflect back on the larger set of testimonies above, in which Plato uses the idea of divinatory knowledge as a metaphorical descriptor for a variety of kinds of daytime, waking knowing. We saw above that what united these examples was that they all included discussion of a kind of knowing that cannot account for itself. He nowhere claims that people are gaining these insights (whether a dislike of Sophists, a recognition of the resemblance between temperance and harmony, a spotting of one’s soul mate or a scintilla of light from the highest Good itself) via their irrational souls, or via the liver as an intervening organ. Rather these kinds of waking visions seem to him like divination, because they are tentative, imagistic, non-discursive, and unable to give an account for themselves. In the contexts where divination is a useful comparison, he consistently refers to our having access only to images and impressions of things, rather than to the thing itself.

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<sup>22</sup> This point has been made in a fascinating study by Anne Freire Ashbaugh, *Plato’s Theory of Explanation: A Study of the Cosmological Account in the Timaeus* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), 79.