
Divination and Human Nature: A Cognitive History of Intuition in Classical Antiquity by Peter T. Struck

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Essentially, the author's argument in this book is that insight gained through divinatory means in the ancient world was not only recognized as genuine knowledge by ancient philosophers in their attempts to account for it, but was also in fact a real form of knowledge, equivalent to what modern English speakers would call intuition.

Following an introduction that sets the relevant terms and provides a very brief history of the concept of intuition [22–33], Struck devotes the four chapters that follow to an examination of key passages from texts of four major Greek philosophers (or schools of philosophy) who attempt to describe or explain cognitive aspects of divination—namely, Plato, Aristotle, Posidonius and the Stoics, and the Neoplatonists Iamblichus and Porphyry. The book's conclusion offers a sketch of how the author's understanding of ancient divination can serve to elucidate non-philosophical texts, especially the concluding scenes of the *Odyssey*, which center on the allegedly intuitive process whereby Penelope comes to recognize her disguised husband and the divine signs that Homer depicts as accompanying that process.

This thoroughly readable, thought-provoking study is admirable for the author's willingness to take ancient divination and intuition seriously as authentic ways of knowing, or, as Struck puts it axiomatically, '*Our ability to know exceeds our capacity to understand that ability*' [15; emphasis in original]. Struck's readings of individual philosophical texts and terminology and his elaborations on the relevant divinatory contexts prove difficult to fault.

A key problem lies in Struck's eagerness to affix the label 'intuition' to the cognitive processes involved in divination as he has described them. The study, in fact, would have been just as valuable without his assigning a key role to intuition—if, say, he had opted instead for the phrase 'divinatory

insight' to characterize the relevant forms of cognition. The discussion below hopefully will suffice to justify this criticism.

Aside from the brief historical survey of intuition offered in the introduction, Struck's study offers little exploration into modern understandings—scientific or otherwise—and examples of intuition. He takes it for granted that intuition is real, that the reader knows generally what it is, and that it is a socially acceptable way to characterize 'surplus knowledge'—that is,

the quantum of knowledge that does not arrive via the discursive thought processes of which we are aware, and over which we have self-conscious control. [15]

Again, the idea here is that divination formed the main cultural mechanism by which the Greeks and Romans tried to understand, regulate, and use such knowledge.

Despite the absence of a detailed account of intuition, Struck does characterize the phenomenon loosely throughout the book as follows:

When we find ourselves in the position of knowing things, but we cannot develop a clear account of how we know them. [15, 16]

Knowing without self-conscious inference. [20–21]

Being able to see around corners, or see through things, in ways that defy appeal to the customary modes of our intellects. [24]

[Knowing things] all in a flash, without recourse to sequential reasoning and inference. [26–27]

Hunches, gut-feelings, right twitches, automatic and reflexive intellectual activities [29–32].

[Ways of knowing that are] other than self-conscious, goal-directed, inferential chains of thought. [31]

Momentary, non-discursive apprehension of things by processes that fall outside our self-conscious control. [33]

[Knowledge marked especially for being] nondiscursive...[that] arrives unexpectedly or involuntarily, and stretches beyond our ability to account for it. [42]

[The] strange abilities of some people to gain incremental knowledge of things via instinctual, nondiscursive insights, extracted from the natural world. [246]

Just knowing something quotidian or mundane without really thinking about it. [247]

Uncanny and unexplained insight regarding proper courses of action in the proximate future. [250]

[An] ancillary form of cognition that takes place outside our self-conscious, purposive thinking. [251]

[Divination as understood in Greece:] exactly the way a person would talk about moments of knowing that creep in and then crystallize, the kind of knowing still familiar to us, and not at all reducible either to superstition or social trickery and gamesmanship. [262]

This last statement is remarkably unequivocal. Struck is saying that the cognitive aspects involved in ancient divination were nothing other than the phenomenon that we call intuition. It is this claim that the present review seeks to refute. But first, it will be useful to paraphrase and elaborate Struck's characterization of intuition.

Intuition, then, on these terms, can be described as an involuntary prescient feeling that occurs immediately, thus requiring no time to ponder, analyze, or understand. The subject can neither control nor account for the relevant insight. Consequently, it should be noted that knowledge gained *via* intuition will not involve an intermediary or a specific identifiable source. It is accessed directly by the subject. Nor will the intuitive subject be able to offer a reason, justification, or proof for his or her belief. If asked, 'How on earth did you know that?' the subject, unable to provide a specific answer, instead would respond along the lines of 'I have no clue. I just knew it'. Let's call this the 'non-accountability criterion' for intuition.

So, how well do Struck's chief examples of divinatory intuition follow this characterization? First, generally speaking, it should be noted that while knowledge gained by divination may not be the result of self-conscious, purposeful reasoning, it does result, however, from self-conscious, purposeful attempts to arrive at such knowledge *via* divinatory practice. In other words, the *mantis* sets out and expects to attain divinatory knowledge, say, by reading entrails or following flights of birds. This is not the case with intuition, which involves no such purposeful process culminating in specific knowledge and is itself characterized as involuntary and unexpected. One does not simply initiate or go in search of intuitive knowledge as one does divinatory insight.

One specific example that Struck discusses from Plato's works also falls prey to the general criticism just stated. Plato, he argues, metaphorically depicts the apprehension of the highest truths—i.e., the forms—as divinatory insight, as opposed to sequential inferences from observations of the unstable material world around us [55–67]. Again, the knowledge involved here can be nothing other than the end result of a highly-qualified intellectual's voluntary process of learning and intentional quest for higher truths. Plato never suggests that such insight can just happen to anyone at any time without prior educational preparation of the required sort.

Another divinatory sort of event in Plato's works that fails to qualify as intuition, contrary to Struck, is Socrates' special 'divine sign', which appears unexpectedly to prevent him from doing something wrong [68–71]. Struck, comparing Socrates' sign to a 'twitch' or 'involuntary movement', allows that 'Socrates casts his divine sign as a form of knowing that just arrives to him, which is not *explainable*, and...nevertheless turns out to be accurate' [69; emphasis added].

Here the problem is not the unexpectedness of the insight that Socrates gains through the sign, which will be granted as in alignment with intuition, but the fact that a sign is involved in the first place. In other words, Socrates identifies his sign as a source of knowledge separate from himself—an intermediary and reason for why he adopts one course of action rather than another. If asked, 'Socrates, why do you refuse to defend yourself at your trial?' he would have to (and did) respond, 'Because my divine sign warned me not to do so'. Contrary to Struck's claim, Socrates' course of action is *explainable* precisely in terms of this sign and, for this reason, is markedly unlike intuition.

A similar criticism can be raised against Struck's characterization of recollection in the *Meno* as an instance of intuition [64–65]. True, recollection there is unexpected and non-discursive just like intuitive insight; but it fails the non-accountability criterion of intuition because subjects who know something that they remember to be true must also know *how* they know that thing—namely, because they had learned it once before.

Finally, Struck also neglects to notice that Plato's description of divination in Timaeus' account of the construction of the human body also fails the non-accountability criterion [73, 80–84]. The appetitive soul, located in the belly and having viewed images that the rational soul had sent from the head to the liver (itself, described as a sort of screen or mirror), would find itself not

in the position of *just knowing* how best to behave, but rather of knowing how it should behave precisely *on the grounds* that it had witnessed certain images appearing upon the liver suggestive of the relevant course of action. In other words, if asked, the appetitive soul would say, 'I know it's best not to drink tonight because the liver showed me some scary images that convinced me not to do so'.

Again, intuitive people do not attempt to justify their beliefs in terms of visions or messages (however clear) transmitted to them from some distinct source *via* some intermediary. Sure, visionaries and prophets claim to know what they do on the grounds of having seen images, presumably on some medium or another, but intuitive people do not—they just know what they know. The point can be raised also against Struck's claim that, due to the inscrutability of divinatory signs, 'the reading of livers on the battlefield is closer to a gut-check...than to a calculation' [18]. Still, this is not close enough to intuition, which does not require the use of media such as livers, birds, atmospheric events, and other such signs.

Failure to meet the non-accountability criterion also explains why the examples of divinatory insight that Struck discusses as proceeding through dreams and oracles do not qualify as intuition. For instance, in the case of Aristotle on prescient dreams, it is true, as Struck notes, that we lack self-conscious control over our dream states [110]. But this is not enough to qualify them as intuition, as no one who knows that something will happen to them in the future because they dreamed it can honestly say that they do not know why they believe that thing will happen to them.

Similarly, in his discussion of the Neoplatonists and their turn from a notion of divination concerned with mundane, practical matters to one that reveals deep, underlying ontological and theological truths about the universe [217], Struck considers as predecessors Cicero's *Dream of Scipio* and Vergil's account of Aeneas' underworld journey in book 6 of the *Aeneid*. Struck argues that both

articulate an otherworldly journey specifically as enabled by divination, that allows the main figures to gather knowledge on a massive scope, about the deep structure of the cosmos, eschatology, the general fate of souls, and universal human history. [219–220]

Once again it should be noted that both dream-visions and oracular pronouncements or directives serve as the subjects' reason for forming their

respective beliefs and acting on them. The insight gained through them does not, therefore, qualify as immediate apprehension. In fact, even Struck describes the Sibyl in Vergil's account as 'critical intermediary' of the enlightenment Aeneas attains [220]. The moment a subject identifies a legitimate reason for an insight—say, in the form of some oracular message, however hazily or clearly delivered—at that moment, the insight cannot be intuitive and becomes something else, in this case, knowledge through inspired authority. The authority itself may have gained its knowledge *via* intuition, but the subject forming the belief on the basis of the oracle's message certainly did not.

With the Stoics, Struck notes that their view of determinism affords a predictive role not only to exceptional physical events around us but also to dreams and oracles [189]. Posidonius thus considered both types of divine sign as legitimate and reliable—the latter traditionally viewed as belonging to 'natural' divination, while the former was seen as part of 'technical' divination, which proceeds by observation, sign-interpretation, and inferential logic [16].

The key here is that Posidonius viewed both sorts of divination as non-discursive attempts to predict outcomes that have causes that lie outside our knowledge. They are, Struck argues, 'an extension of our cognition into a realm that is otherwise beyond us', and thus line up 'without remainder' with his definition of divination and surplus knowledge [200]. One should note, however, that while cognitive experiences extending 'into a realm otherwise beyond us' describe one aspect of intuition, alone they are hardly enough to qualify as such.

Iamblichus, too, Struck argues, is willing to consider traditional forms of foresight from external signs (both natural and artificial) as equivalent in reliability to those produced *via* scientific observations of nature. Unlike Posidonius, however, Iamblichus considers those forms to be inferior to what he regards as 'true' divination, which involves direct contact with the divine, amounting to no more than conjecture and guesswork [216–217, 236–237, 242–243]. Suffice it to say, a deprecating view of the reliability of traditional forms of divination does nothing to bring these forms closer to the notion of intuition.

In his concluding discussion of the end of the *Odyssey*, Struck seeks to establish the presence of an 'enigmatic knowingness on Penelope's part', adding that her hunches about the beggar's identity are 'externalized' through her reported observations of divinatory events [260]. Here Struck assembles an impressive list of the relevant divine signs and their significance for Pene-

lope's suspicions: e.g., flights of birds, an oracle, a sneeze, dreams, thunder. None of these, however, is necessary for intuitive insight to occur; their presence, in fact, even precludes Penelope's cognitive state of recognition from qualifying as such. Intuitions do not rely on externalizations.

A case in point. Struck responds to the scene in which the suitors ignore Theoclymenus' 'visceral vision' of them all dying as follows: 'By the terms of this study, this would be an expression equivalent to calling out a lack of intuitive insight among them' [261]. But this cannot be right. Theoclymenus' own vision may qualify as intuition, but refusing to believe an intuitive authority does not qualify the doubter himself as unintuitive.

Struck concludes:

The idea that divination is an expression of a kind of knowing that we would call intuition helps us better understand the richness of Homer's work in the closing books of the *Odyssey*. [261–262]

The present reviewer respectfully disagrees. But to reiterate: this is not to deny that Struck's discussions are useful and relevant as detailed, contextual readings of ancient philosophical attempts to understand the sort of cognition involved in divination. It is only to say that the effort to label that form of cognition as something sufficiently different from it, and perhaps even foreign to the relevant contexts, seems forced and unnecessary.

In sum, consider the following scenario. Suppose that my friend Freddie and I go to a restaurant and that I suddenly get a bad idea about the fish, thus warning Freddie not to order it, but he orders and eats it anyway and then gets sick. Upon being asked how I knew that the fish was bad, I might respond, 'Ha! Joke's on you...I put something in it', or 'I saw the chef poison it', or 'I tried the fish here last week and got sick', or 'It didn't look the right sort of color and texture'. In the first three responses, I know exactly how I knew that the fish would be bad based on direct experience. In the fourth, I used my inferential abilities to reason, discursively, about the quality of the fish. None of this, of course, qualifies as intuitive insight.

Moreover, let us say that I were to respond, 'Well, Freddie, I had a strange dream last night in which the human race was annihilated by a master race of plague-bearing fish-creatures', or 'Well, Freddie, I admit last night I consulted a psychic who, in some bizarre trance, kept murmuring "Beware the fish, beware the fish, beware the fish"', or 'Well, Freddie, last night in

a drunken stupor I unexpectedly saw the image of a fish appear on my bathroom wall right before I got sick'. In none of these cases would it be reasonable for Freddie to reply, 'Wow, how intuitive of you!' Sure, he might respond, 'How prescient of your dreams!' or 'How intuitive of your psychic!' or 'So you saw a fish appear on your wall last night, did you?' But it would not be normal in such contexts for Freddie to compliment my own capacity for intuition. The only response that would legitimately elicit such praise would be, 'I don't know how I knew the fish would be bad, Freddie. I just did.'