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Divination as polling

Comment on Boyer's *Why divination? Evolved psychology and strategic interaction in the production of truth*

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In this insightful article, Boyer provides a novel and convincing explanation for the cultural prevalence of divination practices, and for the form they most often take. Crucial to his argument is ostensive detachment: the fact that divinatory statements are nearly never attributed to an actual human agent. Boyer argues that ostensive detachment removes the strongest reason people have, in such situations, of doubting a statement: that the individual making the statement is self-interested. I would like to offer a minor amendment to Boyer's theory, that I believe might help solve two remaining puzzles.

The first puzzle is that people believe divinatory statements at all. Boyer argues convincingly that the removal of cues to self-interest through ostensive detachment makes divinatory statements more convincing than other potential statements. However, I am not sure that this would be enough to make the statements convincing at all. Work on epistemic vigilance suggests that people need positive reasons to accept a statement, rather than merely the absence of reasons to reject it (Mercier, in press; Sperber et al., 2010). A statement might be more convincing than others, and yet still not be convincing enough to warrant grounding a decision (let alone an important one).

The second puzzle is that it seems ostensive detachment is far from being maximized in most cultures. In many societies, an individual delivers the statements. Even if the statements are

supposed to have been authored by a supernatural agent, and if the practitioner enters an unusual state (trance), the practitioner still retains actual control over the statements. By contrast, other procedures appear more objective—such as heads or tails, or the various procedures that rely on objects and transparent rules for interpreting them. Why isn't this latter type of procedure dominant?

A potential solution to both puzzles is that most divinatory statements reflect the pre-existing beliefs of the stakeholders—the relevant community members, with their beliefs potentially weighed by their power. After all, it would be odd if divinatory statements could influence an important decision in a direction no one likes.

If it is true that divinatory statements tend to be endorsements of a popular position, this explains why people appear to accept them: they have no reason to exert strong vigilance, since they already agree. Those who might have disagreed with the statement can see that most others agree with it, and believe the majority (or a powerful minority), or at least know better than to voice their disagreement.

When deciding whether to accept a statement, people reject by default, in the absence of positive cues that they should do otherwise. By contrast, when deciding whether to utter a statement they believe to be true, people judge the statement to be suitable by default, and look for reasons why it might be rejected (Mercier, in press). As Boyed points out, ostensive detachment removes the most salient cues for why a statement might be rejected, making it suitable for all to utter.

Seeing divinatory statements as endorsements of a popular opinion also solves the second puzzle. A truly random procedure would only provide outcomes convergent with popular opinion half the time (at best). By contrast, a skilled practitioner can tell which way the wind is blowing. Indeed, we can surmise that the practitioners who are rejected by the community are rejected precisely because their statements failed to capture popular opinion.

As Boyed mentions, a common anthropological perspective on divination is that members of a culture learn from their elders that divination is an epistemically reliable practice. This leads them to accept specific divinatory statements produced by such a practice. In the present view of divination as (informal) polling, the causality between beliefs in specific divinatory statements, and beliefs in a divinatory practice in general, is reversed. Most divinatory statements would fit with people's intuitions, and this would then lend credence to the practice. Divination as informal polling thus appears to be much more consistent with work on epistemic vigilance, which suggests that people are not generally credulous (Mercier, in press, 2017). Instead of credulously accepting that a seemingly random practice can produce epistemically sound statements, and accepting these statements in turn, people would be carefully evaluating the statements, and only lending credence to the practice when it produces statements deemed true or useful (even if only as justifications for anticipated decisions).

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