

INTRODUCTION

Comparative Perspectives on Divination and Ontology

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Abstract: Many divination systems are epistemologically justified according to an explicit ontology: results are attributed to the work of an agent (gods, spirits) or to a cosmic principle (as in the Chinese concept *qi*). Analytically, we can thus distinguish between divination based on ‘agentive ontology’, which raises the possibility of deception by gods or spirits, and ‘calculatory ontology’, which understands verdicts as calculations based on fixed principles. The relationship between explicit ontology and epistemic affordance, including the circumstances under which divination is subject to ontological explanation, suggests large-scale comparative questions concerning the wider socio-political and economic correlates of agentive and calculatory systems. These are exemplified in this special issue by the divergences between divination systems in the Greco-Roman world, in Han China, and among the Nuosu.

Keywords: agency, ancient Greece and Rome, calculation, China, comparison, divination, Nuosu, ontology

Throughout history and across societies, divination techniques have been taken seriously as a means of gaining knowledge about the world. The question of what kind of knowledge that is—and how it relates to variable conceptions of the world and can be known—has been a perennial concern in anthropology. Building on recent work that analyzes the relationship between divination and ontology (Holbraad 2012; Matthews 2017; Swancutt 2012), this special issue asks new questions that combine the potential of rich ethnographic and historical case studies to generate new insights with that of large-scale comparison in order to develop cumulative explanatory frameworks. How do ontological assumptions relate to the nature of diagnosis and prediction as primary



functions of divination, and why do these assumptions vary across social and historical contexts? The ethnographic and historical record demonstrates wide variation, ranging from whether or not inaccuracy is possible within the logic of divinatory practice to skepticism and debate over the value of divination, to similarities between divinatory reasoning and other diagnostic and predictive practices. In all cases, divination raises fundamental questions concerning humans and their capacity to know the cosmos. Under what circumstances do explicit ontological claims help divination to be considered predictive or explanatory, and how do these vary through time and space? How does this relate to the perceived position of humans in relation to nature or the divine? How do the aims of diviners and their clients differ, and do such differences rest on fundamentally different assumptions?

This special issue takes steps toward establishing a framework for understanding how ontological assumptions underpin—or follow from—assertions of divination’s diagnostic and predictive power, both in practice and in discourse. A collaboration between anthropologists and classicists, this issue draws on detailed ethnographic and historical cases to develop a comparative framework concerning the relationship between ontological claims associated with divination and divinatory epistemology. In doing so, its authors address questions such as the effects of explicit ontological assumptions on the ability to doubt oracles, the degree to which divinatory methods constrain or are constrained by ontological accounts, and the reasons why divination might be attached to an ontology in the first place.

It can no longer be said that divination, as a recurrent feature of human society, has been the object of “remarkably little research” (Peek 1991c: 1). Indeed, since the publication of Philip Peek’s (1991b) edited volume *African Divination Systems*—classics such as E. E. Evans-Pritchard’s ([1937] 1976) study of Azande oracles and Victor Turner’s (1975) of Ndembu basket divination notwithstanding—anthropologists of divination have produced a steady stream of dedicated studies. Nonetheless, *African Divination Systems* still stands out for bringing together ethnographic studies from a broad range of societies and exploring them in terms of cross-cutting themes summarized by Peek (1991a) in his characterization of ‘non-normal modes of cognition’. While many, if not most, ethnographic accounts of divination contribute to broader theoretical accounts of such practices, they tend to do so in what might be called a ‘bottom-up’ fashion, generalizing from particular divination systems and perspectives to comment on the character of divination in general. This has produced valuable insights into themes as diverse as the nature of truth (Holbraad 2012; Willis and Curry 2004), time (Swancutt 2012), authority (Whyte 1991), and legitimacy (Li 2019), as well as convergences of different scholars on general themes such as the interplay of intuition or association and reflection/ratiocination (Parkin 1991; Swancutt 2006; Tedlock 2001).

Attempts to generate ‘top-down’ typologies and explanatory frameworks have been fewer (although not entirely absent) in anthropology, but more common in historical studies. These include David Zeitlyn’s comparisons of diagnosis and prediction in Mambila and Zande divination and economic forecasting (2012), and of text-based divination systems (2001); Lisa Raphals’s (2013) extended comparison of ancient Greek and Chinese divination (see also Lloyd 1999); Kim Beerden’s (2013) study of Greek, Roman, and Neo-Assyrian divination; Peter Struck’s (2016) analysis of classical philosophical approaches to divination; William Matthews’s (forthcoming) distinction between ‘generative’ and ‘reductive’ divination; and Pascal Boyer’s (2020) explanation of divinatory authority in terms of ‘ostensive detachment’. Such perspectives illustrate the value of broader comparative analysis of the ethnographic and historical record based on cumulative data.

The contributions to the present issue draw on such perspectives to address ‘ontology’ as a conception of the fundamental categories of beings. Instead of a methodological approach to the concept, similar to that formulated by Holbraad and Pedersen (2017), ontology in this collection is seen as an object of ethnographic and historical inquiry, to be located in explicit statements about types of beings, such as the Roman-era reflections on humanity and the divine described by Elsa Simonetti (this issue), and practices that invoke their existence, for example, the evidence for spirits found during Nuosu divination as recounted by Katherine Swancutt (this issue). While this is not a strict philosophical definition, it is in line with recent discussions of the term in social anthropology, particularly those approaches focusing on what Holbraad and Pedersen (2017: 55–65) describe as ‘deep ontology’, which is distinct from their own methodological approach. Exemplified by the work of Michael Scott and Philippe Descola, such an approach tends to focus on discerning an implicit account or set of principles of ‘being’ from a range of social practices, including kinship, cosmology, selfhood, and so on. Scott (2007), for example, draws on principles of lineage organization among the Arosi of Solomon Islands to argue that they approach the world from the perspective of ‘poly-ontology’—of many distinct origins of being alongside one another. Meanwhile, Descola (2013) presents a classification of all societies according to their ‘mode of identification’, a fundamental ‘schema’ by which people order the world based on the relationship between the physical body and the subjective self, and the extent to which this is perceived as shared by other beings. Such approaches often draw heavily on explicit beliefs or mythic accounts while attempting to make sense of a range of cultural practices—as does notably the work of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2007) on Amerindian ‘perspectivism’—but stand out for their emphasis on ontology as an underlying or *implicit* means of ordering perception and experience.¹

Our perspective differs from this in its emphasis on the *explicit* categories of being invoked in divination and the effects of such explicit conceptualization.

Sharing the focus on the fundamental kinds of being considered to exist, but concentrating on the level of explicit explanation rather than hypothetical implicit distinctions, are other approaches more closely in line with ours in this issue. Influenced by anthropological debates and applying these to historical contexts, these include Olaf Almqvist's (2018) examination of human-divine discontinuity in early Greek theogonies, Michael Puett's (2002) discussion of assumptions about the relationship between the human and the divine in early Chinese political and philosophical discourse, and Geoffrey Lloyd's (2012: 59) comparisons of ontologies as "accounts of what there is" in Greece, China, and the wider ethnographic and historical record. These scholars all deal with explicit accounts of types of beings concerned with the explanation of specific phenomena, such as the relationship between humans and gods.

Considering ontology in terms of the fundamental kinds of things that are considered to exist, as explicitly identified in divinatory practice, leaves ample room for debate and refinement on the part of the individual contributors to this special issue (and those who may take the subject up). This is particularly so with regard to the scale on which ontologies should be compared. In this issue, Elsa Simonetti emphasizes ontologies as the explicit perspectives of individual thinkers engaging with divination as an epistemological problem, while Olaf Almqvist and Katherine Swancutt focus on shared understandings of what exists to situate divination in relation to wider cultural contexts, while remaining alive to the differences that exist within societies and between divinatory situations. Other approaches focus on the explicit concepts mobilized in divination systems: Stéphanie Homola explores the relationship between ontology and epistemology, while William Matthews examines the effects of ontological conceptions on the persuasiveness of divination. In their commentaries, David Zeitlyn and Stephan Feuchtwang critically address the common threads between these arguments. Both emphasize the importance of paying attention to how ontologies are transmitted, respectively offering a cultural epidemiology-inspired critique and a conception of divinatory 'stocks of images' as civilizational chains of transmission.

This broad approach to ontology in terms of explicit principles helps avoid the problems of inferring 'deep' mechanisms that somehow guide general perception, including how evidence for such mechanisms could be derived ethnographically or historically, particularly given that the nature of human cognition makes their existence unlikely (Matthews 2021). It also distinguishes ontology from cosmology. While explicit cosmological theories undoubtedly require and elaborate explicit ontological foundations, cosmologies also become institutionalized through practices and social structures. This means that individuals can engage in cosmological practices without maintaining a systematic, explicit cosmological perspective, by virtue of social participation. The same can be said of ideology, with the addition that it, unlike cosmology,

need not be premised on a comprehensive account of what exists. Ontology, in contrast, is necessarily a product of individual reflection on the basic nature of being and beings. It does not make sense, therefore, to describe a practice as ‘ontological’ unless it is explicitly understood as such by its practitioners—which would mean that they subjectively understand their actions to be premised on ontological principles (see Matthews, this issue).

Why Ask This Question?

What does an analytic focus on ontology do for scholarship on divination, and for anthropology and classics more generally? In light of the above discussion, while we might understand certain divination practices undertaken by certain individuals as explicable in part by subjective ontological understandings, we should pay as much attention to ontology as a phenomenon that itself requires explanation. Empirically, the link between divination and ontology is interesting precisely because plenty of ethnographic and historical examples exist of divinatory practices that are not accompanied by any kind of ontological elaboration as to why they might yield information about the world, even if they do rely on ‘stocks of images’ (Feuchtwang, this issue), raising the question of why such elaborations *do* arise in other cases. It may be noted that this is a question of explicit epistemology, but when we find such explanations, they are invariably couched in ontological terms in the sense that types of beings, whether agents or natural forces, are held to communicate or provide access to information via divination. Notably, this is distinct from identifying categories of being that are *referred to* by divination systems, such as specific outcomes indicating particular persons, psychological states, and so on. All divination systems do this to a greater or lesser degree, and as such require individuals to mentally represent specific beings. Yet this is true of a huge range of social practices and does not necessitate (although it may involve) an explicit, let alone comprehensive, ontological account. Certain divination practices, though, do rely on epistemological accounts, including methodological justifications rooted in explicit ontologies. These involve well-defined conceptions of the role of specific kinds of beings in providing certain kinds of information through specific media during divination.

Taking examples from the articles in this issue, such beings might be gods in ancient Greece and Rome, spirits among the Nuosu, or Heaven (*tian*) and the energy-substance *qi* in China. Other classic examples would include the *oricha* divinities in Ifá divination (Holbraad 2012), royal ancestors in Shang oracle-bone divination (Keightley 1988), or the planets in Western astrology (Willis and Curry 2004). These stand in contrast to other forms of divination, including Zande poison oracles (Evans-Pritchard [1937] 1976) and Mambila spider divination (Zeitlyn 2020, this issue), or even for that matter tarot cards or Carl

Jung's reading of the *Yijing*. While relying on 'stocks of images' and thus drawing links with various ontological categories in their interpretation, such forms of divination are considered by practitioners simply to 'work' without recourse to any further explanatory theory of why they do. That is, while they may refer to ontological categories as objects of inquiry, they do not draw on any explicit ontological accounts as a basis for their divinatory epistemology.

It bears emphasis that divination involves a dialogue or 'conversation' (Zeitlyn 2001) between diviner and client (and beyond). In this sense, divinatory verdicts involve some form of collaboration, but they also involve divergent perspectives, aims, and knowledge bases. It is thus possible, for example, for one, all, or no party of the divinatory dialogue to view the process in ontological terms regardless of the practice itself, even if certain methods tend strongly toward being associated with ontological elaboration. It should be borne in mind as well that references to divinatory ontology (whether regarding methods, as here, or wider referents) necessarily generalize from a broad range of representations entertained by and among individuals in different contexts (a point returned to by Zeitlyn in his commentary).

As Boyer (2020) has argued, no such elaboration of how divination works is necessary for people to find it convincing as a source of information under the right circumstances, primarily because the practice removes obstacles to doubt by producing statements that do not appear to come from the diviner, and thus do not appear to be potentially subject to manipulation. An obvious focus of comparative study is therefore why some forms of divination do involve such elaboration, and whether it is retrospectively attached to an existing, non-ontological practice or stems logically from prior beliefs about the world. This problem can be investigated on a range of scales, from the level of individual justification, to interaction between, and differing conceptions on the part of, diviners and clients, to community-wide inquiries, to long-term historical and political processes.

We can consider the broader end of this spectrum, that of long-term historical processes, through the example of one of the most enduring forms of divination—the *Yijing* (*I Ching*, or *Book of Changes*), which consists of 64 six-line diagrams (hexagrams) and commentaries on their interpretation. Its use in early China suggests both retrospective elaboration and new predictive affordances granted by changing ontological assumptions. The divination text has a history of use as such since at least the late ninth century BCE (Rutt [1996] 2002: 30–33), but did not begin to attain any cosmological significance until the third century BCE (Smith 2008: 7). From this point onward, cosmological explanations were increasingly integrated with the existing six-line hexagrams and their terse interpretive statements. By the time the *Yijing* had become part of the official ideological canon of the Han state in 136 BCE, the hexagrams had transformed from polyvalent symbols to tightly defined indices of specific

cosmic conditions (Matthews 2016). This process was closely associated with the development of a ‘correlative cosmology’ of *yin*, *yang*, and *qi* (Nylan 2010) in the last few centuries BCE, and ultimately the adoption of this cosmology became the metaphysical justification for the imperial unification of the Chinese warring states. In the case of the *Yijing*, then, an existing divination system became subject to ontological elaboration according to correlative cosmology. This cosmology, described in further detail by Matthews and Homola in this issue, posits an explicit ontological framework in which all beings are composed of *qi* operating according to constant principles. This logically allows the possibility of finding causal indices of cosmic phenomena, thus in turn affecting the nature of divinatory practice and what it is imagined to do.

Yet while in China use of the *Yijing* tended to shift toward an explicit ontology and indexical form of prediction, the text’s reception in the West—heavily influenced by Richard Wilhelm’s translation (Baynes 2003) and Jung’s (1989) interpretation—has tended to focus on polyvalent symbolism as a means to ‘self-knowledge’, in Jung’s words. In comparative perspective, we might ask what social and historical factors help explain this difference in the association of divination with ontological assumptions. We might similarly ask why a shift to indexical interpretation occurred in China at all when, in a similar time frame and comparable manner, the expansion and consolidation of the Roman Empire was accompanied by state reliance on divination understood as a form of divine communication—particularly given the existence of a range of existing techniques, agentive and calculatory, in both contexts. In other words, why did different ontological accounts become associated with divination, and why did some of those accounts become more prevalent in different contexts? How did this relate to the role of communicative technologies?

The emergence of calculatory techniques in China occurred in the context of long-term association of divination with writing, contrasting with a focus on oral oracular pronouncements in Greece, which did not apparently foster the same degree of elaboration of fixed indexical systems (Raphals 2013: 383).² Comparisons such as this illustrate the potential of investigating the causal relations between divination and ontology beyond the specific field of divination scholarship, and the potential for fine-grained classicist and anthropological analysis to inform debates on social processes at much larger scales. The changing relationship between divination and ontology in the case of the *Yijing*—considered diachronically and in synchronic comparison with the role of divination in other polities—raises further questions about the relationship between ontological frameworks and changing political structures. This speaks directly to wider questions of the role of ideology in state formation and consolidation, that is, how political elites and state structures draw on, adapt, and are transformed by existing systems of belief and practice, and how ideology and practice are contested by different groups within and beyond the political elite.

Such large-scale questions rely on an understanding of practice and belief on the level of individuals and their immediate social networks. While the contributions to this special issue concentrate on this scale, whether they concern narratives of lying gods, the reflections of individual philosophers, villagers concerned with alleviating illness, coincidences of birth, or the disdain of roadside diviners for alternative methods, they all open windows onto wider socio-political contexts. Day-to-day interactions, shifting responses to life circumstances, and extended reflections involved in divinatory practice contribute in aggregate to the kind of large-scale changes just described.

Through case studies like these, we are able to ask wider contextual questions. Is there something common to classical Greece and the Roman Empire and contemporary Han and Nuosu societies that makes specific connections between divination and ontology more likely? What are the broader social correlates of divinatory ontology, and how do differences between these cases differ depending on wider social conditions? We might ask, for example, whether certain forms of ontological elaboration, such as divine communication versus cosmic index, are more or less favored for inquiring about different kinds of problems, or indeed whether different ontological frameworks tend to push clients toward certain inquiries and diviners toward certain diagnoses. This in turn invites attention to how the challenges clients face causally connect to questions of political structure, kin relations, prevailing moral norms, and/or economic circumstances. Such themes are explored in the articles in this issue, which coalesce around concepts of agency and calculation in divination.

Agentive and Calculatory Ontologies in Divination

The contributions to this issue cross-connect by identifying two tendencies in divinatory ontologies, which we label ‘agentive ontology’ and ‘calculatory ontology’. These refer, respectively, to divination considered as a form of communication by agents such as gods or spirits, or as a calculation-like procedure based on constant principles. This comparative framework facilitates the kinds of questions concerning social correlates of different divination systems discussed above and explored on a case-by-case basis in the individual articles in this issue. The distinction hinges on the question of fallibility and deception as capacities attributed to the oracle itself, rather than to the diviner (to whom they are relevant in any divination system). Agentive systems present the logical possibility of false results, because agents, having the capacity to make their own decisions, may be afforded the capacity to deceive. Here ‘agency’ is to be understood precisely in terms of the capacity to exercise free will, rather than in terms of causal impact or possession of personhood. Thus, divinatory failure can be attributed to the divine agent as well as to the diviner. In contrast, the

logics of calculatory systems by definition cannot produce false results, meaning that deception and fallibility are the preserve of the diviner. In this matter, the classical examples draw on divination systems that tend toward agentive ontologies and the Chinese examples on calculatory ones.³ Meanwhile, the Nuosu described by Swancutt draw on both kinds—bubbles in eggs provide diviners with calculatory indices, but their interpretation relies on the assistance of agentive spirits—illustrating that the distinction is one of tendencies rather than mutually exclusive categories. The affordances that agentive and calculatory ontology provide for divinatory interpretation should therefore be taken as compatible with one another, or even capable of transforming each other. This is shown vividly by Simonetti's discussion of various second-century CE Greek philosophical approaches to divination, which wrestle with the tension of at once conceiving the gods as agents but the cosmos as deterministic.

The framework of agency and calculation diverges from the ubiquitous distinction between mechanical and inspired forms, famously drawn by Cicero (1923: 235–237) in his *De Divinatione* and remarked on by scholars of divination ever since (Boyer 1990; Zeitlyn 1990). That distinction is one of methods—whether a result is arrived at through manipulation of some randomizing device or occurs via specific mental states such as visions or possession. Agency and calculation refer instead to forms of ontology attached to divination; thus, forms of divination not subject to ontological elaboration would not form part of this framework. While it is difficult to imagine inspired divination practices that do not involve ontological elaboration (e.g., possession necessitates an explicit conception of spirits), it is logically possible that such practices could draw on a calculatory ontology, for instance, through the interpretation of visions according to fixed symbolic or indexical referents.⁴ Likewise, a mechanical system of divination need not be calculatory. Many Greek and Roman forms of divination, such as those involving observation of birds, weather, or entrails, attributed their results⁵ to divine communication (Almqvist, this issue; Raphals 2013: 382). This framework should therefore be seen as complementing that between mechanical and inspired methods.

What is important for the agency/calculation framework is not how the result is practically derived but how its derivation is reflectively explained, that is, the ontological foundations of divinatory epistemology rather than the categories (ontological or not) referenced by divinatory results. For example, both the six lines method of *Yijing* divination (Matthews, this issue) and the eight signs method discussed by Homola (this issue) involve interpreting results according to a wide range of categories, some of which are ontological in the sense of deriving from the fundamental structure of the cosmos (such as forms of *qi* and their correlates), and some of which are not (individual people, specific places, etc.). However, it is not these categories, ontological or not, that give the *practice* a calculatory ontology.⁶ Instead, it is the broader conception

of a cosmos composed entirely of *qi* behaving according to constant laws that provides the ontological foundations for six lines prediction's epistemology. Client circumstances are knowable because, deriving from constant principles of *qi* and its transformation through time and space, they are ontologically continuous with the coins used in divination, which necessarily fall in a way that reflects current cosmic conditions at a specific moment. Observing *qi* configurations via the coins, with reference to their principles of transformation, allows diagnosis and prediction. Likewise, for agentive forms of divination like the Greek and Roman forms discussed by Almqvist and Simonetti in this issue, what is crucial is not whether gods are referenced by divinatory results, but the fact that the accuracy (or deceptiveness) of those results is justified on the basis of the communication of knowledge directly accessible to gods but not humans, based on their belonging to distinct ontological realms.

Of course, the degree to which such ontological assumptions are shared among and between diviners and clients varies. In his commentary in this issue, Zeitlyn accordingly cautions against the idea that ontology is something that divination, or a particular divination system, 'has'. As he points out, properly speaking, ontological assumptions are located on the level of the individual, which may be more or less shared with others—a position similarly taken, although in more cognitive terms, by Matthews. This is directly relevant to the key comparative question of historical change via cultural transmission to which Feuchtwang attends in this issue, in line with recent work on civilizations as chains allowing for the transmission of ideas and practices (Feuchtwang and Rowlands 2019). While individuals will vary in their own understandings of divinatory ontology, such chains of transmission mean that techniques in the present are necessarily influenced by the ontological explanations of past diviners and clients. Even if a present client of six lines or eight signs prediction does not subscribe to a *qi*-based ontology her/himself, the characteristics of those systems have nonetheless been historically transmitted based on, and reinforced by, such assumptions. Indeed, a key question for future comparative work is that of the degree to which broader distributions of ontological assumptions, such as religions, science, and political cosmologies, promote agentive or calculatory explanations for divination and variation within those explanations—and whether histories of such explanations favor more or less the transmission of inspired or mechanical methods. The contributions to this special issue provide a solid empirical basis for such comparisons.

The Contributions

The articles begin with Swancutt's analysis of vivid ethnographic material from work with Nuosu diviners in Southwest China. Taking up the use of chickens

and eggs in Nuosu divination as an idiom for the mutual causal relationship between divinatory procedure and diviners' ontological assumptions, Swancutt opens the discussion by complicating the divide between agentive and calculatory ontologies, as Nuosu divination involves a concurrent combination of both. For example, bubbles that appear in cracked open eggs and patterns in chicken bones provide microcosmic indices of clients' illnesses, information about which is understood as being transmitted to the egg or chicken via bodily contact with the client. The bubbles in the egg often indicate the location of malign ghosts or spirits, located with the assistance of helper spirits as they are apt to attempt to conceal themselves. That is, while helper spirits are reliable, and the divinatory result is understood as reflecting the causes of illness via a calculatory explanation in which certain bubbles indicate certain causes, agency in the form of potential concealment of results, or clouding the diviners' insight, exists on the part of the malign ghosts or spirits. Ontologically, this rests not simply on a division between humans and spirits, but also on a division between good and malign spirit beings with different potentials to deceive.

Almqvist's examination of classical Greek views of divination takes us to the deceptive agency not of spirits, but of the gods themselves. His article focuses on a key intellectual problem posed by agentive divination: the fact that the existence of the gods as autonomous intentional agents relies on their capacity—at least in theory—to deceive mortals. Here we see how the broader cosmology of classical Greek religion directly affected the perception of divination. The Greek gods had wills of their own, and their power lay in their access to greater knowledge than that of mortals and their agency over whether or not to pass on that knowledge through divination. The outcomes of even mundane mechanical divination procedures were understood as being guided by the will of the gods, and even the supremely trustworthy god Apollo was described as having the ability, and on one occasion the inclination, to intentionally deceive through the oracle. Almqvist demonstrates that this hinges on the conception of gods and mortal humans as ontologically distinct. Drawing on Descola's (2013) conception of analogism, he argues that this precluded direct mortal access to divine knowledge, in contrast to the ontological continuity between inquirers and oracles found in homological Chinese divination systems, in which common cosmological principles facilitate direct knowledge of the subject of inquiry.

If a key intellectual problem for agentive divination is deception arising from ontological discontinuity between the divine and human realms, then for calculatory divination the difficulty is repetition as a result of continuity. Homola takes this up in her analysis of ontological and epistemological categories in Han Chinese 'eight signs' (*bazi*) horoscopy. In this calculatory system, the time of a client's birth, understood in terms of the cosmic forces of Heaven (*tian*) and the Five Phases (*wuxing*), is taken to determine the broad arc of his/her fate. However, by relying on an understanding of divinatory results reflecting

inherent cosmic principles following fixed temporal cycles of 60 years, eight signs horoscopy presents the problem of different individuals being born at the same time with the same fate. This, of course, is not borne out by experience, and has presented a problem for diviners resulting in centuries of exegesis. Rather than being understood as distinct ontological categories, groupings of people based on shared fate are instead understood as occupying statistical clusters, the eight signs system being a necessarily simplified description of temporal cycles that should be understood in conjunction with each individual's unique environmental circumstances. As Homola shows, divination thus takes the form of calculations that render the vast number of possible horoscopes comprehensible to humans, relying on configurations determined by the ontology of the cosmos.

Moving on from the intellectual problems that divinatory ontology poses for practitioners, Simonetti examines the problems that it poses for theorists—whether first- and second-century CE Greek thinkers grappling with ontology as a branch of philosophy or contemporary anthropologists and classicists, many of whose own theories of divination are comprehensively anticipated in these earlier works. Indeed, Simonetti's close analysis of the writings of Epictetus, Maximus of Tyre, and Dio Chrysostom reveals their own consideration of many of the analytical problems covered in this issue, from the reconciliation of notions of predictability with cosmology to the role of divine—and human—agency. While all three figures saw divination very much as a philosophical 'problem' with closely intertwined ontological and epistemological implications related to uncertainty, they approached it in different ways. Dio Chrysostom emphasized the difficulty of knowing the divine as a consequence of ontological separation, and Epictetus, like Feuchtwang in this issue, emphasized the role of divination as an exercise in pattern recognition. Maximus of Tyre, meanwhile, took the possibility of divination almost as undermining the ontological division between gods and mortals. In his writings the role of the gods becomes one of offering advice on the likely consequences of a given course of action rather than one of prognostication.

Indeed, on this Maximus of Tyre may have found common ground with Master Tao, the practitioner of six lines prediction introduced in Matthews's article. A Han Chinese practice cognate with eight signs horoscopy, but one that places greater emphasis on the role of *qi* as a fundamental energy-substance, six lines prediction calculates configurations of cosmic forces to provide advice on auspicious times and places for action. Matthews focuses on the role of explanatory ontology in making divinatory techniques cognitively persuasive. The calculatory assumptions underlying six lines prediction's historical development are manifest in the complex correlative system used in its interpretation. This produces highly specific results following fixed rules, meaning that not only the procedural result (from throwing coins), but also the interpretation appears to

be outside the control of the diviner and is thus intuitively convincing, regardless of whether the client or diviner actually believes in the calculatory ontology itself. Meanwhile, reflective consideration of structural parallels between the ontological assumptions of *qi* cosmology and physics allows diviners to make a persuasive case that their practice is scientific. This is particularly significant in the political context of the People's Republic of China, where divination is condemned as superstition.

However, not everyone finds ontology persuasive. Zeitlyn's commentary provides a spirited critique of recent anthropological approaches associated with the 'ontological turn', presenting instead a call to focus on the messy reality of divinatory consultation and the contingency of conceptions attached to it. In particular, he cautions against the association of any singular ontology with a particular divination system. If we can talk of ontologies as conceptions of what exists, Zeitlyn argues, then it is as a shorthand for understandings broadly shared by participants in a given divinatory community, which is better understood in epidemiological terms (Sperber 1996). Even then, however, it cannot be unproblematically supposed that the use of a divination system and implicit adherence to its explanations translate into belief in a certain order of beings in the world. In fact, Zeitlyn's emphasis on the tension between what people say and what they do (to which it might be added, what they reflectively imagine they think and how they make spontaneous judgments and decisions) is key to providing an understanding of ontology conducive to the kind of cumulative and empirically driven comparative theory to which this special issue aspires. The utility of ontology lies in acknowledging that, far from being a totalizing explanation pertaining to the level of extrapolation that has led anthropologists to become so wary of words like 'culture', it must be understood as one of very many individualized and contingent responses to social life. Ontological assumptions might be more or less shared with others but are mobilized at certain times and in certain contexts to deal with, or as a reaction to, variable circumstances (rather appropriately for the subject of divination).

Indeed, Feuchtwang pays particular attention to the capacity of the 'stocks of images' integral to any divination system to provoke any number of subjective associations for its participants. While divination may be accompanied by ontological explanations and refer to kinds of being, Zeitlyn converges with Feuchtwang's argument that divination itself is not primarily concerned with ontology—that is, ontological categorization is not the practice's objective. Instead, divination is concerned with identifying the formation of a particular moment or place—the pattern recognition of Epictetus discussed by Simonetti, or the statistical approximation of fate in eight signs horoscopy described by Homola. Ontological considerations instead emerge in understandings of this moment or place and the process of its derivation, as part of the subjective 'worlds' of divination's participants. And these in turn, Feuchtwang argues,

collectively contribute to traditions of divination and the broader transmission of civilizational traditions through history.

Taken together, the contributions to this issue combine detailed examinations of specific divinatory practices with broader reflections on the transmission of ideas and the relationship between thought and action. They demonstrate the possibility of bringing together the ethnographically and historically particular to create an empirical record that can serve as a basis for generating comparative categories and shedding light on the wider social and historical correlates of techniques and ideas. They illustrate distinct properties of agentive and calculatory forms of divination and their effects on how divinatory claims are understood, and refine the concept of ontology so that it can be consistently and realistically applied across social contexts as a contingent phenomenon of individual reflection and engagement in transmissions of practices, rather than as a straightforwardly generalizable fixed framework for perceiving the world.

Moreover, together they highlight the value of bringing together perspectives from anthropology and classics, or history more generally. Much is to be gained by asking anthropological questions from a temporal distance at which we can start to see the causes and results of long-term social processes, combined with the richness offered by humanistic study, in the case of the past, and the present-focused detail of real-time individual behavior and interaction afforded by ethnography. At the same time, the examination of historical sources, inherently much more limited than what is observable to the anthropologist, has the potential to inspire more cautious and therefore more rigorous consideration of what can be reasonably concluded from ethnography. The absence of observable practice can—or should—make it that much harder to spontaneously infer the often far too coherent frameworks of underlying cultural logics that can characterize more zealous anthropological projects, including those that assign underlying ontologies to societies. Sometimes this may require narrowing our focus, or even reining in our interpretive ambitions, but our theories will be the better for it.

Finally, it is difficult to see how the cumulative theoretical understanding of social practices can progress beyond a certain point without crossing disciplinary barriers. The contributors to this special issue, whether from anthropology or from classics, converge on a view that comparison is possible; that divination and ontology, subject to critical consideration, are fertile grounds for it; and that cumulative empirical research holds the promise not only of refining concepts but also of generating productive explanatory frameworks. Such work may not eliminate uncertainties, but it does begin to recognize patterns and regularities to the point that a framework can be established so that we might begin to formulate explanations.

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Notes

1. Such approaches have been criticized for their reliance on anthropologists' own extrapolations of underlying ontological principles (Boyer 2010; Matthews 2021, this issue).
2. Raphals describes these interpretive indices as 'signs'.
3. In her comparative study of divination in early China and ancient Greece, Lisa Raphals (2013) similarly notes a general early Chinese emphasis on systematic cosmology, while ancient Greeks emphasized the role of the gods.
4. Whether such systems exist in practice is a matter for large-scale comparison, as discussed above.
5. Indeed, it makes sense that the distinction between agentive and calculative ontologies would apply similarly to observed omens such as those described by Caroline Humphrey (1976).
6. As mentioned above, all divination methods necessarily refer to categories in the world, ontological or not, and as such this provides little meaningful basis for comparison.

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