



## The Prime Directive of Divination Practice

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Divination is a Stoic tradition and is one of the most ancient forms of spiritual practice. Merriam-Webster defines divination as “the art or practice that seeks to foresee or foretell future events or discover hidden knowledge usually by the interpretation of omens or by the aid of supernatural powers.”

Zeno, the founder of our school, considered divination to be a legitimate activity “because there is forethought in the divine government of the world.”<sup>1</sup> And, according to Diogenes Laertius, “[Zeno] consulted the Oracle [of Delphi] to know what he should do to attain the best life, and that the god's response was that he should take on the complexion of the dead.”<sup>2</sup>

Chrysippus used divination in a *modus tollens* argument of logic to “prove” the existence of fate.<sup>3</sup> Here's that argument:

- If it were not the case that all things are encompassed by fate, then the prophecies of diviners would not be true.
- But the prophecies of diviners are true,
- Therefore, all things are encompassed by fate.<sup>4</sup>

According to Professor Joseph Gould, this argument was attacked as circular by the Epicurean Diogenianus, but Gould disagrees in that Chrysippus' belief in divination was not based upon a belief in fate but upon its success in practice.<sup>5</sup>

According to Elsa Simonetti, a Postdoctoral Fellow at Katholieke Universiteit Leuven. Belgium, the Stoics believed in an “ontological-epistemological co-implication<sup>6</sup> between the existence of divination and that of caring, provident deities, who help us find our way by means of symbols that indicate the

1 Gould, Joseph B., *The Philosophy of Chrysippus* (SUNY, 1970), p. 33

2 D.L. Trans., R. D. Hicks (Harvard, 1991) Volume II, Book VII, *Zeno*, Chapter 1.2

3 Gould, Joseph B., *The Philosophy of Chrysippus* (SUNY, 1970), p. 144

4 Ibid.,

5 Ibid., p. 145

6 An ontological-epistemological co-implication refers to the concept that a person's understanding of what exists (ontology) is inseparable from, and intimately intertwined with, their understanding of how we can know that reality (epistemology).

future distributed throughout the cosmos.”<sup>7</sup> Professor Simonetti further states that “Epictetus’s view of divination [was] a sort of psychological consolation....by giving a sense of meaning and reassurance [that] helps us to cope with the evils and tragedies of existence.”<sup>8</sup>

CONCLUSION: We continue the Stoic tradition when we practice divination as a belief in a caring, providential deity who speaks to us in symbolic language to bring comfort and advice when we experience difficulties in our life. But we must never forget that reason trumps all divination practice. Even when the language of divination is ineffable, it is the rational faculty that brings order out of chaos when it is firmly held within our grasp.

### THE PRIME DIRECTIVE: REASON

1. Avoid Divination Dependency: Don't just run to divination practice for every trivial matter. Before seeking an answer “from the divine,” attempt to resolve it with reason. If reason has given the answer. Trust it. Take comfort in knowing that reason is the Logos within.
2. Due diligence: know the method, practice, and qualifications of the diviner. Charlatans abound. The most honest diviner is a Stoic philosopher. Why not do your own work? Be the diviner. That is what we are teaching at the College of Posidonius.
3. Uncertain answers: If the answer received from divination is overly vague or not answering your question at all, repeat it or seek another form of practice. If it still fails, it may mean that you are meant to solve it on your own. Or, as the Gautama the Buddha said, the answers to some questions are inexpressible.<sup>9</sup>
4. Unwelcome answers: If you are unhappy with the answer to your question, was it an answer that disagrees with what you believe? Then see the matter calmly as befitting a Stoic philosopher, and remember that you have a right to believe what is most reasonable to your mind.<sup>10</sup> Divination reveals and advises; it does not command.

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7 Simonetti, Elsa Giovanna, *Post-Hellenic Perspectives on Divination, the Individual, and the Cosmos*, p. 89

8 Ibid., p. 89

9 For example, the first of the Buddha's four inexpressibles (the Quadrilemma) simply states that we don't know “Whether the world is eternal or not, or both, or neither.”

10 James, William, “The Will to Believe,” An Address to the Philosophical Clubs of Yale and Brown Universities. Published in the *New World*, June, 1896.