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ORACULAR AMBIGUITY AS A MEDIATION TRIPLE

Χο. τίνας πρὸς ἀνδρὸς τοῦτ' ἄχος πορσύνεται;
Κα. ἢ κάρτα (μακ)ρὰν παρεκόπης χρησμῶν ἐμῶν.
Χο. τοῦ γὰρ τελοῦντος οὐ ξυνῆκα μηχανήν.
Κα. καὶ μὴν ἄγαν γ' Ἑλλήν' ἐπίσταμαι φάτιν.
Χο. καὶ γὰρ τὰ πυθόκραντα, δυσμαθῆ δ' ὅμως.

Chorus: *What man is he that contrived this wickedness?*

Cassandra: *Surely you must have missed the meaning of my prophecies.*

Chorus: *Aye, since I do not understand the scheme of him who is to do the deed.*

Cassandra: *And yet too well I know the speech of Hellas.*

Chorus: *So too do the Pythian oracles; yet they are hard to understand.*

Aeschylus. *Agamemnon*¹

Introduction: Making Sense of Oracular Ambiguity

In Lucian's satire *Zeus Rants*, Momus, a minor deity, challenges Apollo's endorsement of clear and intelligible speech by attacking the quality of his own prophecies: 'You were right, Apollo, in praising people who speak clearly, even though you yourself do not do it at all, for in your oracles you are ambiguous and riddling (λοῦξος ὢν καὶ γριφώδης) and you unconcernedly toss most of them into the debatable ground (ἐς τὸ μεταίχμιον) so that your hearers need another Apollo to interpret them.'² The point of Lucian's satire is that Apollo deliberately uses ambiguity to conceal the emptiness of his prophecies and to avoid being proven wrong.³ Lucian was hardly unique in his criticism. As early as the fifth century BC, oracular ambiguity had become something of a trademark of oracular divination and as such the subject of comic and tragic treatment.⁴

Modern scholars have largely shared Lucian's perspective concerning deliberate oracular ambiguity, albeit in a less satirical and tongue-in-cheek manner.⁵ Scholarly interest was for a long time driven by the question of the authenticity of the responses. The obscurity of the divine response was frequently taken as an indicator that a given oracle and its narrative context were either genuine or not genuine. Some scholars believed in what Roland Crahay has termed the *obscurité diplomatique* of the oracle, a deliberate use of unintelligible language to make the oracles fit whatever happened.⁶ Thus, oracular ambiguity was taken as a feature of oracles that were really spoken at Delphi. Parke and Wormell, for example, argue for an obscure oracle delivered to the Spartans (Hdt. 1.66.2): 'Happily for the Pythia her metaphorical language could lend itself to other interpretations, and when the current opinion was that the gods expressed their meaning darkly, a devious construction could plausibly be put on the prophecy after the event.'⁷ In his standard work on the Delphic oracles, Joseph Fontenrose turned Parke and Wormell's point upside down by considering ambiguity chiefly as an indicator for responses being not authentic.⁸

Recent scholarship on Delphi and its oracles, however, has taken a cultural and linguistic turn and moved beyond the paradigm of authenticity. Lisa Maurizio, for example, has suggested that we revise our notions concerning the authenticity of the Delphic responses.⁹ Rather than asking whether a particular oracle was really spoken at Delphi, or a later forgery or an entirely fictional response she argues that every oracle that has come down to us is genuine, insofar as it represents a '*bona fide* member of the Delphic tradition'.¹⁰ The ancients believed oracles to be authentic utterances of the priestess Pythia, even when these responses were never actually spoken at Delphi. Accounts of

¹ A. A. 1251-1255. Transl. Smyth 1999.

² Lucian *JTr* 28. Transl. Harmon 1999.

³ Lucian's Apollo finally comes up with an empty and puffed up oracle (see Lucian *JTr* 31).

⁴ On ambiguity typically associated with oracular divination see for example Th. 5.103, A. A. 1255. See also Plutarch's discussion of peoples' suspicion of deliberate oracular ambiguity in *Moralia* 407 A-B. On the proverbial nature of oracular ambiguity and on parodies exploiting this feature of oracular divination see Stanford 1972, 115-128.

⁵ While metaphor, ambiguity and obscurity problematise the link between language and reality in different ways I will, within the framework of this argument, refer to these tropes summarily as oracular ambiguity.

⁶ Crahay himself does not regard oracular obscurity to be necessarily a sign of an oracle's being authentic (see Crahay 1956, 50). See also Morgan 1990, 156-157.

⁷ Parke & Wormell 1956, vol. I, 94. See also vol. II, XXVI-VIII.

⁸ See Fontenrose 1978, 236-8. See also Fontenrose 1983, Delcourt 1981, 97, Bruit Zaidman & Schmitt Pantel 1992, 124.

⁹ Maurizio 1997.

¹⁰ Maurizio 1997, 317.

oracle consultations, according to Maurizio, can thus teach us something about the worldview and outlook of the very culture that generated and received such stories.¹¹

This shift in paradigm has opened a new perspective on oracular ambiguity, which is no longer driven by the paradigm of authenticity.¹² Instead, classical scholars now evaluate the conceptual significance of oracular ambiguity in its own right. Carol Dougherty, for example, has investigated the role of oracular poetics in the historiography of the Greek colonial movement, focusing in particular on the role of the ambiguous oracle in colonial narratives.¹³ Giovanni Manetti, in turn, has explored oracular ambiguity as part of a more general semiotics of ancient thought and literature.¹⁴

Following in the footsteps of such works, this contribution considers the larger conceptual significance of oracular ambiguity, that trade-mark of oracular divination, and suggests that it serves as a mediation triple.¹⁵ Oracular ambiguity forms an important part of the wider religious discourse exploring the human place in the world by mediating in three different dimensions: ontologically, between the human and divine spheres; epistemologically, between human knowledge and ignorance, and, temporally, between past, present, and future.

Oracular Ambiguity as Ontological Mediation

In one of his Pythian dialogues, *The E at Delphi*, Plutarch, who was himself a priest at Delphi, explores the meaning of an ominous E, which was visible within the inner sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi.¹⁶ The Greek name for this letter, EI, is itself ambiguous, allowing divergent readings which are discussed throughout the dialogue. After different interpretations have been refuted, Plutarch's teacher, the peripatetic philosopher Ammonius, finally suggests that EI means 'you are'. This, he argues, is the proper way to address Apollo since only a god exists in a fundamental, permanent and self-sufficient sense:

'...God is ... and He exists for no fixed time, but for the everlasting ages which are immovable, timeless, and undeviating, in which there is no earlier nor later, no future, nor past, no older nor younger; but He, being One, has with only one 'Now' completely filled 'For ever'; and only when Being is after His pattern is it in reality Being, not having been nor about to be, nor has it had a beginning nor is it destined to come to an end.'¹⁷

In contrast to this eternal and permanent existence of the divine everything in the mortal sphere has no real existence as it is caught up in a constant cycle of growth and decay: 'The fact is that we really have no part nor parcel in Being, but everything of a mortal nature is at some stage between coming into existence and passing away, and presents only a dim and uncertain semblance and appearance of itself.'¹⁸

What Plutarch, a follower of the second sophistic movement, cast in the language of philosophy, refers to a larger conceptual difference between the human and divine spheres in Greek thought and literature. Beyond the specific intellectual discourse of the philosophers, the Greeks constructed and highlighted the distinction between the human and divine spheres by attaching further, qualifying dichotomies along the same axis.¹⁹ The gods were omniscient because they held a vantage point from which they could oversee the past, the present and the future. They were immortal and outside time. Mortals, by contrast, had a more limited perspective. They had no knowledge of future events and only a very limited understanding of the past. Even their interpretation of the present was prone to error and misinterpretation.

Consulting an oracle and communicating with the gods constitute attempts to overcome the limited perspective of the human condition and participate in the transcendence of the gods. Mortals seek

¹¹ See Maurizio 1993, 138, Maurizio 1997, 322-323.

¹² See for example Bowden 2005, 49-51 who rightly stresses that to assume oracular ambiguity to be deliberate would deprive stories featuring human misinterpretation of ambiguous oracles of their deeper reflective significance.

¹³ Dougherty 1992. See also Dougherty 1993.

¹⁴ Manetti 1993, in particular 14-35, see also Vernant 1974.

¹⁵ Ambiguous oracles feature widely in different genres of Greek literature, reaching from historiography, to Greek tragedy, Aristophanic comedy and beyond. Some oracles were proper riddles before they were associated with the Delphic oracle (see Schultz 1909, 65-81, Parke & Wormell 1956, vol. II, XXXVI-VIII, Fontenrose 1978, 79-83, Dougherty 1992).

¹⁶ Plu. *Moralia* 384D-394C.

¹⁷ Plu. *Moralia* 393A-B. Here and below transl. Babbitt 1999.

¹⁸ Plu. *Moralia* 392A-B.

¹⁹ For a case-study see Kindt 2007.

true knowledge and insight by making use of the superior vantage point of the divine. In this conception of the human and divine spheres it is highly significant that the ambiguity of the oracular language occurs exactly at the point where the two spheres come into contact. Ambiguity constitutes an important distinction between divine language and human language. The difference is highlighted by the fact that divine language frequently cannot be directly understood. The ambiguity of the divine sign enables communication between the two spheres while keeping them distinct and separate. As Manetti puts it: 'if divination were to carry out [its] prophetic function completely and thereby eliminate the gap separating human knowledge from divine, the result would ... be the effective elimination of what distinguishes human individuals from gods.'²⁰ To maintain the distinction between the two spheres the gods must not reveal their knowledge directly and completely.

The obscure language of the oracle takes up the fundamental ontological difference between the two spheres and translates this difference into its own linguistic signs. Whenever ambiguous language is used, the gods do not only communicate their knowledge to the mortals who seek their advice. Together with the particular information sought, the ambiguous divine message also communicates the ontological difference between both spheres. To turn a blind eye to oracular ambiguity by treating it as straightforward language (a notorious human mistake in accounts of oracle consultations) is to misunderstand what separates the gods from human beings.²¹

The ambiguous language of the oracle thus first and foremost mediates ontologically between the human and divine spheres. Oracular ambiguity gives humanity the opportunity to draw upon divine transcendence without, however, collapsing the fundamental distinction on which oracular divination is based: the ontological difference between the human and the divine spheres.

Oracular Ambiguity as Epistemological Mediation

The ontological difference between the two spheres supports another dimension in which oracular ambiguity mediates: between human knowledge and ignorance. Because the gods are considered to be omniscient, mortals consult oracles or engage in other forms of divination to move from a state of ignorance to a state of knowledge. The consultation of an oracle is driven by the tension between question and answer, between ignorance and insight. The delivery of an ambiguous response, however, further extends this situation. As Giovanni Manetti has rightly pointed out concerning the challenge provided by oracular ambiguity, 'The gods do not grant humanity a complete revelation, but neither do they completely deny humanity knowledge; rather, by means of the oracular sign, the gods provide a base for inference on which humanity must work to reach a conclusion.'²² Oracular obscurity thus responds to questions from mortals by confronting the inquirers with a new question: will they understand the meaning of the oracular response?

Parmeniscus, a wealthy man of noble descent from Metapontum, consulted the Delphic oracle because he had lost the ability to laugh. He received the response, *Εἶρη μ' ἀμφὶ γέλωτός, ἀμείλιχε, μείλιχίσι; / Δώσει σοι μήτηρ οἴκοι, τὴν ἔξοχα τίε.*— 'Thou, unrelenting one, askest me concerning relenting laughter; the Mother will give it to thee at home; her shalt thou honor exceedingly.'²³ When Parmeniscus failed to regain his capacity to laugh upon his return to his fatherland, he assumed that the oracle had deceived him. A little later, he chanced to travel to Delos where he visited all the island's wonders. Finally, he entered the temple of Leto, assuming that the statue of the goddess would be worth seeing. When he found that the statue was nothing but an unsightly piece of wood he suddenly burst into laughter. Thus, Leto, Apollo's mother, had cured him from his condition. And Parmeniscus, in turn, revered her greatly.

At the heart of this and other, similar accounts is the surprising twist by which the oracle's meaning is finally revealed. What seems to have one meaning turns out to refer to an entirely different situation in the end. This surprise refers to a larger conceptual significance between linguistic signs and their meaning, and between reality and representation. Ambiguity springs from the fact that there are more things in the world than there are words to describe them and the same words may be

²⁰ Manetti 1993, 18.

²¹ See Kindt 2006.

²² Manetti 1993, 18.

²³ Semus 396.10 J = FGrH IV. 493 = Ath. 14.614 A, (PW 129 = FR Q185), transl. Gulick 1959.

used to label and to refer to different objects. Ambiguity thus plays with the limits of description and perception. The playful approach towards different readings of one and the same word or sentence thereby represents and recalls the complexity and the variety of phenomena in the world.

Ambiguous oracles play with notions of the known, the unknown, and the things we only think we know. Ambiguous responses connect the familiar with the unfamiliar and new and reveal the very principles of human exploration and learning thereby. Human cognition always builds on pre-existing knowledge and connects the new with the old. This point is particularly emphasised in responses, which make their central message dependent on a certain condition that has to be fulfilled. Hegesistratus of Ephesus once enquired at Delphi about a place to settle after having murdered a kinsman. The oracle responded: 'Where you shall see rustics dancing, garlanded with olive-branches.'²⁴ The oracle here connects the familiar image of rustic rural life with the experience of finding a new place to settle. The insecurity springing from the need to find a new place to live is transformed into the problem of recognising how the familiar applies to the unfamiliar (what the well-known image of the rustics represents in a new and unfamiliar environment).²⁵ In Hegesistratus' case the oracle was fulfilled when he saw dancing farmers garlanded with olive-leaves.²⁶

Ambiguous oracles provide an opportunity for mortals to rethink the premises on which their own interpretations and the knowledge derived from them are based. People who consider the complexity of phenomena in the world mirrored in the complexity of the oracular language are successful. Those, in contrast, who think too narrowly and see only what they want to see will fail. Oracular ambiguity thus mediates epistemologically between human knowledge and ignorance. It encourages reflection on the cognitive processes by which humanity 'makes sense' of their surroundings.

Oracular Ambiguity as Temporal Mediation

Hyllus asked the Delphic oracle how the Heraclids could return to the Peloponnese. He received the answer that they should wait for the third harvest (*ὁ δὲ θεὸς ἔφησε περιμείναντας τὸν τρίτον καρπὸν κατέρχεσθαι*)²⁷ However, Apollo did not mean three years (the time it takes to grow three generations of crops), as Hyllus interpreted the oracle, but *three generations of human offspring*. Nero was told by the Pythia that he should beware of the seventy-third year.²⁸ As he was nowhere near 73 years old, he concluded that there was no immediate reason to worry. Before long, however, he was murdered by Galba, aged 73 at the time. In these accounts, oracular ambiguity draws the attention to the co-existing plurality of times.

But even beyond accounts which address time in an immediate fashion, oracles and their interpretation encourage reflection on time. The epistemological difference between human knowledge and ignorance informs a third dimension in which oracular ambiguity mediates, namely between past, present, and future as different dimensions of time. This is because ambiguous oracles delay the moment in which knowledge is derived from the gods. The revelation of the oracle's meaning is postponed from the present to an unspecified moment of the future.

Cleomenes of Sparta, for example, received an oracle at Delphi promising him that he would take Argos.²⁹ During an armed confrontation between the two armies, some Argives fled into a little grove. Only when Cleomenes' order to set the grove on fire was already carried out did he learn that the grove belonged to the hero Argos and realise that he had already taken Argos.³⁰ Oracular ambiguity mediates temporally by encouraging humanity to find connections between past, present and future. At the same time, however, ambiguous oracles warn humanity not to confuse two fundamental temporal categories of human interpretation: experience and expectation. For what is true more generally for all hermeneutical operations also applies to interpreting Apollo's ambiguous oracles: human interpretation necessarily relies on past experience. Past experiences in the form of already existing knowledge guide us in making sense of unknown

²⁴ Pythocl. 4.488 M = Plu. *Moralia* 315 F, (PW 412 = FR Q25), Transl. Babbitt 1999.

²⁵ See Dougherty 1992, 35.

²⁶ Plu. *Moralia* 316 A.

²⁷ Apollod. *Bibliotheca* 2.8.2, (PW 288 = FR L61).

²⁸ Suet. *Nero* 40.3, (PW 461 = FR Q251).

²⁹ Hdt. 6.76.1, (PW 86 = FR Q136).

³⁰ Hdt. 6.76.1-80.

signs. The only Argos Cleomenes knew was the city he wished to take until he heard of the hero of the same name. It is into this gap between expectations based on experience and future contingencies which do not match these expectations, that many like Cleomenes, too confident about the meaning of Apollo's ambiguous words, fall.

Conclusion

The significance of oracular ambiguity is not that of an *obscurité diplomatique*. The way in which the oracle is finally fulfilled is frequently too far-fetched to be deliberately taken into account at the point in time when the oracular answer was allegedly delivered at Delphi. Oracular obscurity does not have the potential to refer to every possible outcome of a situation as some ancient and modern critics of the oracle have assumed. Only certain precise conditions satisfy the ambiguous, metaphorical, or vague oracle; at most there are a very small number of alternative readings allowed by the obscure oracle.³¹

Looking at oracular ambiguity from the point of view of its conceptual significance in Greek thought and literature, however, reveals its place in the more general discourse that is Greek religion. In its capacity to mediate in different dimensions, oracular ambiguity is an important aspect of a reflective discourse on the world and the human place within it. Its threefold mediation helps to situate human agency within a continuous spectrum between different poles that define the human condition: the opposition between the human and divine spheres, between human knowledge and ignorance, and, finally, between past, present and future. As a mode of reflection, the ambiguous divine language thus maintains an ambiguous position itself and mediates between the ontological, epistemological and temporal dimensions of Greek religious discourse.

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³¹ See for example Thucydides' account of two versions of an obscure oracle that circulated in Athens at the time of the plague in 430 BC (Th. 2.54). Here the oracular obscurity allows two readings depending on whether one favours *loimos* or *limos*.