

The Nature of Divination*

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Introduction

What is divination? In the broadest terms, if we consider oracle systems such as the Yi Jing (sometimes written “I Ching”) or the Tarot, it is the use of chance events to access one or more images from the oracle. Those images are taken to be directly related to the problem or question that is troubling the person. Further, they are interpreted in such a way as to shed light on the question being asked. In the Tarot, the mechanism of chance is the shuffling of the cards. In the Yi Jing, the mechanism is traditionally either the fall of coins or the division of a set of yarrow stalks into random bundles.

The use of a chance procedure to consult the oracle sidesteps the rational mind and takes conscious choice out of the equation. Traditionally, it would be described as allowing a spiritual agent to manifest. Today, we might describe it as allowing the unconscious archetypes or sub-personalities to express themselves. In this brief paper I shall put forward a simple theoretical framework in which the process of divination can be described. This framework is drawn from the metaphysics encoded in one of the most successful divination tools, the Chinese *Book of Change*, the Yi Jing.

It was not until Richard Wilhelm published his seminal German version in 1924 that the book started to be understood in the West. Wilhelm’s translation was not the first into a European language, but it was done under the supervision of a traditional Chinese scholar, who had taken Wilhelm as his student. Further, the work received a great boost from the psychologist Carl Jung. Jung was involved with the Yi Jing even before Wilhelm, seeing in it a way to connect to the deep layers of the unconscious mind. In Wilhelm’s translation Jung finally found a usable version of the text. Jung’s work has been continued into the present day, with the publication of the Eranos edition of the Book of Change, translated by Rudolf Ritsema and Stephen Karcher. This shows how the oracular aspect of the book can be a powerful psychological tool that fosters a connection to the creative energies that shape life.

The Yi Jing functions in two modes. Firstly, it is a practical oracle, a tool for divination. However, it is also a work of philosophy, a source and repository of wisdom. I shall consider its philosophical aspects first, then its role in divination. Finally, I shall suggest that the metaphysical assumptions in the Yi Jing inform the process of divination and thus, these two modes are not really separate.

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Metaphysics

The traditional metaphysics described in the Yi Jing gives a vital description of the world view of the people who developed the book. This view can help us understand the process of divination.

In the Yi Jing, the universe is seen as divided into two primary domains; these are called *heaven* and *earth*. Heaven, according to Wilhelm [p281], is “the upper world of light, which, though incorporeal, firmly regulates and determines everything that happens”. This is contrasted with earth, which is “the lower, dark world, corporeal, and dependent in its movements upon the phenomena of heaven”. Thus, earth is the manifest, material world whilst heaven, shaping events, is the realm of pattern. In between heaven and earth, and arising out of their interaction, is a third domain, that of *man*. So, in the Yi Jing, humanity sits on the interface between the spiritual and the material realms; we connect these two domains, which otherwise would be separate.

In modern terminology, we might say that heaven corresponds with Bohm’s idea of the *implicate order* in physics. This is the deep, underlying layer of reality which “unfolds” to give expression to the *explicate order*, which is the manifest world as we perceive it. Events that happen in the world, happen because of the patterns in the implicate order. Thus, physical causality in this world, the explicate order, becomes a secondary phenomenon, subordinate to the unfolding activity of the implicate order. This bears a striking similarity to the relation between heaven and earth in the Yi Jing. Finally, to continue with the mapping, between the implicate and the explicate orders, *consciousness* arises; somehow able to apprehend the activity of the unfolding implicate order through psychologically significant events, it offers a possible explanation of that key notion of synchronicity.

From another perspective again, I want to suggest that we can consider heaven as the realm of our *ideals*. It contains those patterns, whether positive or negative, that shape our goals and drive our behaviour. Then, earth becomes the realm of actual *circumstance*, the manifest situations that we encounter in our daily lives. In between our ideals and our circumstances, shaped and influenced by both of them, and shaping and influencing them in turn, lies our *attitude*.

Divination

When consulting the Yi Jing, once the chance procedure is complete, the result is a six lined figure known as a hexagram. Each hexagram has a name and a number of associated texts. For example, the hexagram shown in Figure 1, is called “Infiltrating” by Ritsema and Karcher [p567]. One of the elemental images associated with the figure is of an old tree growing slowly but steadily on top of a mountain. They characterize its energy as “... gradually achieving a goal ... advancing through diffuse but steady penetration...”. The detailed meaning of the symbol would need to be interpreted relative to a particular question in order to relate the general images to the specific circumstances. This is the role of the mediator or interpreter in a divination, making the meaning of the symbols explicit to the person asking the question. When used in this way, the Yi Jing becomes a powerful tool for personal development. For an example of the consultation process



Figure 1: 53,
Infiltrating

and a write-up of a complete interpretation, please see the *CONSULT* section of my web site at <http://www.yijing.co.uk>.

We can recast this basic description of divination in the light of the metaphysics discussed above. Firstly, we have an oracle, the Yi Jing. This is a systematic encoding of the fundamental energies that are active in the universe. The claim is that all possible circumstances are represented, in terms of abstract images, within the symbols. This represents the implicate order, it contains all possible ideals that we, as humans, might embody. Secondly, we have a problem, an issue with some aspect of our current situation that our normal problem solving strategies cannot handle effectively. This problem, which in turn gives rise to the specific question being brought to the oracle, represents the explicate order, and arises directly from the circumstances in which we find ourselves. Finally, there is the person asking the question of the oracle. This is consciousness, the attitude that arises from the interaction of the circumstance and the ideal. Clearly, different dynamics around the interaction of the person's driving patterns and their actual circumstances, will tend to create distinct attitudes within the person.

Process

So, involved in the consultation, we have 1) the circumstances that have given rise to the question, 2) the person asking the question, and 3) the Book of Change itself. In addition we also optionally have 4) an interpreter or mediator who knows the book intimately. How do these elements, the entities involved in a divination, relate to each other? What channels connect everything together?

It should be noted that, if the person with the question understands how to operate the oracle effectively, then (2) and (4) may be the same person. In the case where the questioner is not familiar with the techniques, then the role of the interpreter is to mediate between the questioner and the book. In that case, they will create an appropriate space for the consultation, guide the questioner in the operation of the chance procedure, and then interpret the resulting images, helping to connect them to the questioner's specific circumstances. This process works most effectively when the questioner understands and internalises the images given by the book, when they are open to letting those images trigger a response in themselves, and when they are prepared to look at what is triggered and work with it. The mediator cannot tell them "the answer", they can only create a space that is conducive to the process and help them to reach for an appropriate understanding themselves.

Figure 2 shows a graphical representation of the entities involved in a reading. Essentially, the role of the mediator is to facilitate the elements marked in italics. What of the other elements in the divination? The circumstances are to be taken as is; although subsequent actions by the questioner may change them, we have to deal with things as they are manifest now. Similarly, the oracle itself is not subject to alteration. The symbolic representation of the Book of Change is, paradoxically, a constant in all consultations. So, what is left as the prime variable in a divination is the attitude of the person. This is what we work with in divination, the conscious appreciation of the situation, the images from the oracle, and an understanding of their relationship.

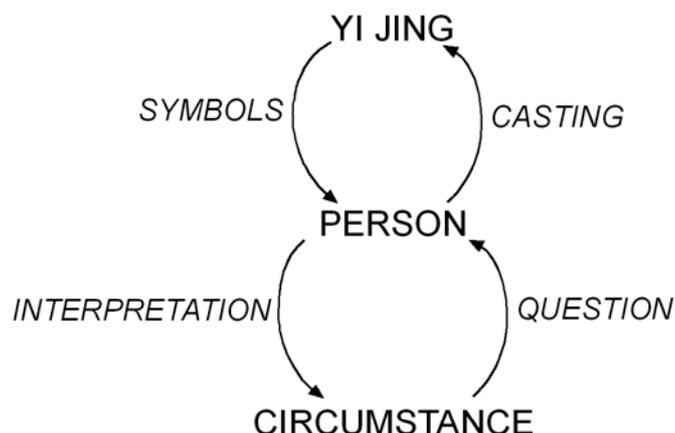


Figure 2: The Entities in a Consultation

Conclusion

Of course, it should be understood that, ultimately, the entities involved in a divination are not really separate. They are all part of a larger pattern being generated by the implicate order. The person asking the question, the book itself, and even the interpreter, are all embedded in the very situation that is raising the question. In fact, this is the deeper purpose of divination. More than answering the specific question, its aim is to answer the underlying meta-question. For, behind any specific problem or question that is brought to the Yi Jing, lies a common concern. That is, how can we live in harmony with the forces that act on us. We might say that the aim of working with the Book of Change is to bring us into a better understanding of our relationship to the broader implicate picture.

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