

Fate

INTRODUCTION

FATE—sometimes personified, sometimes abstractly conceived—is the antagonist of freedom in the drama of human life and history. So at least it seems to the poets of antiquity. In many of the Greek tragedies, fate sets the stage. Some curse must be fulfilled. A doom impends and is inexorable. But the actors on the stage are far from puppets. Within the framework of the inevitable the tragic hero works out his own destiny, making the choices from which his personal catastrophe ensues. Oedipus, doomed to kill his father and marry his mother, is not fated to inquire into his past and to discover the sins which, when he sees, he wills to see no more. The curse on the house of Atreus does not require Agamemnon to bring Cassandra back from Troy or to step on the purple carpet. The furies which pursue Orestes he has himself awakened by murdering his mother, Clytemnestra, a deed not fated but freely undertaken to avenge his father's death.

The idea of cheating fate—which Oedipus attempts by leaving his place of birth—is an actual practice among the primitive tribes described by Frazer in *The Golden Bough*. "Imitative magic is called in to annul an evil omen by accomplishing it in mimicry. The effect is to circumvent destiny by substituting a mock calamity for a real one. In Madagascar . . . every man's fortune is determined by the day or hour of his birth, and if that happens to be an unlucky one his fate is sealed, unless the mischief can be extracted, as the phrase goes, by means of a substitute."

The ancients did not doubt that men could choose and, through choice, exercise some control over the disposition of their lives. Tacitus, for example, while admitting that "most men . . . cannot part with the belief that each

person's future is fixed from his very birth," claims that "the wisest of the ancients . . . leave us the capacity of choosing our life." At the same time he recognizes an order of events beyond man's power to control, although he finds no agreement regarding its cause—whether it depends "on wandering stars" or "primary elements, and on a combination of natural causes." For his own part, Tacitus declares, "I suspend my judgment" on the question "whether it is fate and unchangeable necessity or chance which governs the revolutions of human affairs." In so doing, he grants the possibility that not everything which lies beyond man's control is fated. Some of the things which happen without man's willing them may happen by chance or fortune.

It is sometimes supposed that "fate" and "fortune" are synonyms, or that one has a tragic and the other a happy connotation. It is as if fortune were always good and fate always malevolent. But either may be good or evil from the point of view of man's desires. Although fate and fortune are hardly the same, there is some reason for associating them. Each imposes a limitation on man's freedom. A man cannot compel fortune to smile upon him any more than he can avoid his fate. Though alike in this respect, fate and fortune are also opposed to one another. Fate represents the inexorable march of events. There is no room for fortune unless some things are exempt from necessity. Only that which can happen by chance is in the lap of fortune.

It would seem that fate stands to fortune as the necessary to the contingent. If everything were necessitated, fate alone would reign. Contingency would be excluded from nature. Chance or the fortuitous in the order

of nature and freedom in human life would be reduced to illusions men cherish only through ignorance of the inevitable.

In a sense fortune is the ally of freedom in the struggle against fate. Good fortune seems to aid and abet human desires. But even misfortune signifies the element of chance which is more congenial than fate, if not more amenable, to man's conceit that he can freely plan his life.

THE TERMS *necessity* and *contingency* cannot be substituted for *fate* and *fortune* without loss of significance. As the chapter on NECESSITY AND CONTINGENCY indicates, they are terms in the philosophical analysis of the order of nature and causality. They may have, but they need not have, theological implications. Necessity and contingency can be explained without any reference to the supernatural, as is evident from the discussion of these matters in the chapter on CHANCE. But fate and fortune, in their origin at least, are theological terms.

In ancient poetry and mythology, both inevitability and chance were personified as deities or supernatural forces. There were the goddess of Fortune and the three Fates, as well as their three evil sisters or counterparts, the Furies. The Latin word from which "fate" comes means an oracle, and so signifies what is divinely ordained. What happens by fate is *fated*—something destined and decreed in the councils of the gods on Olympus; or it may be the decision of Zeus, to whose rule all the other divinities are subject; or, as we shall see presently, it may be a supernatural destiny which even Zeus cannot set aside.

In any case, the notion of fate implies a supernatural will, even as destiny implies predestination by an intelligence able not only to plan the future but also to carry out that plan. The inevitability of fate and destiny is thus distinguished from that of merely natural necessity which determines the future only insofar as it may be the inevitable consequence of causes working naturally.

But the ancients do not seem to be fatalists in the extreme sense of the term. To the extent that men can propitiate the gods or provoke divine jealousy and anger, the attitudes and

deeds of men seem to be a determining factor in the actions of the gods. To the extent that the gods align themselves on opposite sides of a human conflict (as in *The Iliad*), or oppose each other (as in *The Odyssey*), it may be thought that what happens on earth merely reflects the shifting balance of power among the gods.

But human planning and willing do not seem to be excluded by the divine will and plan which are forged out of the quarrels of the gods. On the contrary, polytheism seems to make fortune itself contingent on the outcome of the Olympian conflict, and so permits men a certain latitude of self-determination. Men can struggle against the gods precisely because the gods may be with them as well as against them.

The ultimate power of Zeus to decide the issue may, however, place the accent on fate rather than on freedom. This is certainly so if Zeus is not the master of even his own fate, much less the omnipotent ruler among the gods or the arbiter of human destiny. In *Prometheus Bound*, the Chorus asks, "Who then is the steersman of necessity?" Prometheus answers, "The triple-formed Fates and the remembering Furies." The Chorus then asks, "Is Zeus weaker than these?" To which Prometheus replies, "Yes, for he, too, cannot escape what is fated." When they ask what this doom is, Prometheus tells them to inquire no more, for they verge on mysteries. Later Zeus himself sends Hermes to wrest from Prometheus the secret of what has been ordained for him by "all consummating Fate" or "Fate's resistless law." Prometheus refuses, saying that "me he shall not bend by all this to tell him who is fated to drive him from his tyranny."

The question Aeschylus leaves unanswered is whether Zeus would be able to escape his doom if he could foresee what Fate holds in store for him. The suggestion seems to be that without omniscience the omnipotence of Zeus cannot break the chains of Fate.

IN THE TRADITION of Judeo-Christian theology the problem of fate is in part verbal and in part real. The verbal aspect of the problem

concerns the meaning of the word "fate" in relation to the divine will, providence, and predestination. With the verbal matter settled, there remains the real problem of God's will and human freedom. The strictly monotheistic conception of an omnipotent and omniscient God deepens the mystery and makes it more difficult than the problem of fate and freedom in pagan thought.

If anyone "calls the will or the power of God itself by the name of fate," Augustine says, "let him keep his opinion, but correct his language . . . For when men hear that word, according to the ordinary use of language, they simply understand by it the virtue of that particular position of the stars which may exist at the time when anyone is born or conceived, which some separate altogether from the will of God, whilst others affirm that this also is dependent on that will. But those who are of the opinion that, apart from the will of God, the stars determine what we shall do, or what good things we shall possess, or what evils we shall suffer, must be refused a hearing by all, not only by those who hold the true religion, but by those who wish to be the worshippers of any gods whatsoever, even false gods. For what does this opinion really amount to but this, that no god whatsoever is to be worshipped or prayed to?"

Since the word "fate" has been used for those things which are determined apart from the will of God or man, Augustine thinks it would be better for Christians not to use it, but to substitute "providence" or "predestination" when they wish to refer to what God wills. Aquinas, however, retains the word "fate" but restricts its meaning to the "ordering . . . of mediate causes" by which God wills "the production of certain effects."

According to the definition given by Boethius which Aquinas quotes, "Fate is a disposition inherent to changeable things, by which providence connects each one with its proper order." Thus fate is not identified with providence but made subordinate to it. The distinction, Aquinas explains, depends on the way we consider "the ordering of effects" by God. "As being in God Himself . . . the ordering of the effects is called Providence." But "as

being in the mediate causes ordered by God," it is called fate. While admitting that "the divine power or will can be called fate, as being the cause of fate," he declares that "essentially fate is the very disposition or *series*, i.e., order, of second causes."

The position Lucretius takes seems to be exactly opposite to that of Augustine and Aquinas. Lucretius condemns the fatalism of those who believe that the gods control the order of nature and who therefore attribute whatever befalls them to divine ordination. For him, "nature has no tyrants over her,/ But always acts of her own will; she has/No part of any godhead whatsoever." He tries to teach men that everything happens according to the laws of nature, *other than which there is no fate*. The decrees of fate lie in the laws by which "a new motion always has to come/ Out of an old one, by fixed law." If man by his free will can "cause new moves which break/ The laws of fate," in order that cause does not follow cause, it is because in the atoms of his makeup "there has to be some other cause for motion," which Lucretius believes to be the "ever-so-slight atomic swerve/At no fixed time, at no fixed place whatever."

Nevertheless, according to Augustine, Lucretius is a fatalist who disbelieves in providence, *other than which there is no fate*. Each of them uses the word "fate," the one to deny, the other to affirm, the power of God.

But even if a Christian avoids the superstitions of astrology, or some similar belief in a natural necessity which does not depend on God, he may still commit the sin of fatalism which follows from the denial of man's free will. Understanding fate as identical with providence, the Christian is a fatalist if, in the belief that every human act is foreordained by God, he resigns himself to his fate, making no moral effort and taking no moral responsibility for his soul's welfare. To do that is to argue like Chaucer's Troilus:

"Since all that comes, comes by necessity,
Thus to be lost is but my destiny.
And certainly, I know it well," he cried,
"That, in His foresight, Providence Divine
Forever has seen me losing my Criseyde,
(Since God sees everything) and things combine
As He disposes them in His design

According to their merits, and their station
Is as it shall be, by predestination."

Troilus sees no way of avoiding the conclusion
that free choice is an illusion.

THE CHRISTIAN THEOLOGIANS, including Calvin as well as Augustine and Aquinas, recognize the difficulty of reconciling providence and free will. The truth must lie somewhere between two heresies. If it is heresy to deny God's omnipotence and omniscience, then nothing remains outside the all-encompassing scope of divine providence, nothing happens contrary to the divine will, no future contingency is or can be unforeseen by God. If, on the other hand, to deny that man sins freely means that God must be responsible for the evil that man does, then it is a heresy to deny free will, for that imputes evil to God.

This is the problem with which Milton deals in *Paradise Lost*, announcing that he will try "to justify the ways of God to man." In a conversation in heaven, the Father tells the Son that though He knows Adam will disobey his rule, Adam remains quite free to sin or not to sin, and the fault is his own, just as the rebellious angels acted on their own free will. The angels, God says,

So were created, nor can justly accuse
Thir maker, or thir making, or thir Fate;
As if Predestination over-rul'd
Thir will, dispos'd by absolute Decree
Or high foreknowledge; they themselves decreed
Thir own revolt, not I: if I foreknew,
Foreknowledge had no influence on their fault,
Which had no less prov'd certain unforeknown.
So without least impulse or shadow of Fate,
Or aught by me immutable foreseen,
They trespass, Authors to themselves in all,
Both what they judge and what they choose; for so
I formed them free, and free they must remain,
Till they enthrall themselves: I else must change
Thir nature, and revoke the high Decree
Unchangeable, Eternal, which ordain'd
Thir freedom, they themselves ordain'd their fall.

A solution of the problem is sometimes developed from the distinction between God's foreknowledge and God's foreordination. God foreordained the freedom of man, but only foreknew his fall; man ordained that himself. Strictly speaking, however, the word "foreknowledge" would seem to carry a false

connotation, since nothing is future to God. Everything that has ever happened or ever will is simultaneously together in the eternal present of the divine vision.

During his ascent through Paradise, Dante, wishing to learn about his immediate future, asks his ancestor Cacciaguida to foretell his fortune, for he, "gazing upon the Point to which all times are present," can see "contingent things before they exist in themselves." Cacciaguida prefaces his prediction of Dante's exile from Florence by telling him that the contingency of material things "is all depicted in the Eternal Vision. Yet thence it takes not necessity, any more than from the eyes in which it is mirrored does a ship which is going down the stream." The difference between time and eternity is conceived as permitting the temporal future to be contingent even though God knows its content with certitude.

But, it may still be asked, does not God's knowledge imply the absolute predestination of future events by providence, since what God knows with certitude cannot happen otherwise than as He knows it? In a discussion of divine grace and man's free will, Dr. Johnson remarks, "I can judge with great probability how a man will act in any case, without his being restrained by my judging. God may have this probability increased to certainty." To which Boswell replies that "when it is increased to *certainty*, freedom ceases, because that cannot be certainly foreknown, which is not certain at the time; but if it be certain at the time, it is a contradiction to maintain that there can be afterwards any contingency dependent upon the exercise of will or anything else."

Against such difficulties Aquinas insists that divine providence is compatible, not only with natural necessity, but also with contingency in nature and free will in human acts. Providence, he writes, "has prepared for some things necessary causes so that they happen of necessity; for others contingent causes, that they may happen by contingency." Human liberty does not imply that the will's acts are not caused by God who, being the first cause, "moves causes both natural and voluntary. Just as by moving natural causes, He does not prevent their acts

being natural, so by moving voluntary causes, He does not deprive their actions of being voluntary." God causes man to choose freely and freely to execute his choice.

THE UNCOMPROMISING conception of fate is that which leaves no place for chance or freedom anywhere in the universe, neither in the acts of God, nor in the order of nature, nor in the course of history. The doctrine of absolute determinism, whether in theology, science, or history, is thus fatalism unqualified.

The ancient historians are not fatalists in this sense. Herodotus, for example, finds much that can be explained by the contingencies of fortune or by the choices of men. The crucial decision, for example, in the defense of Athens is presented as an act of man's choice. Upon receiving the prophecy that "safe shall the wooden wall continue for thee and thy children," the Athenians exercise their freedom by disagreeing about its meaning. "Certain of the old men," Herodotus writes, "were of the opinion that the god meant to tell them the citadel would escape; for this was anciently defended by a palisade . . . Others maintained that the fleet was what the god pointed at; and their advice was that nothing should be thought of except the ships." The eloquence of Themistocles carried the latter view. To stress its importance, the historian observes that "the saving of Greece" lay in the decision that led Athens to "become a maritime power."

In presenting a comparable decision by the Persians, Herodotus seems to be contrasting their fatalism with the freedom of the Greeks. At first Xerxes accepts the council of Artabanus not to go to war against the Greeks. But after a series of visions, which appear to both the king and his councillor, that decision is reversed, for, according to the dream, the war "is fated to happen."

The conception of fate and freedom in *The Aeneid* seems closer to the Greek than to the Persian view. Even though the consummation of history, which will come with the founding of the Roman empire, is projected as a divinely appointed destiny, the hero who brings that great event to pass acts as if he were free to accept or evade his responsibilities.

The Christian understanding of historical destiny in terms of providence permits—more than that, requires—men to exercise free choice at every turn. "The cause of the greatness of the Roman empire," writes Augustine, "is neither fortuitous nor fatal, according to the judgment or opinion of those who call those things *fortuitous* which either have no causes or such causes as do not proceed from some intelligible order, and those things *fatal* which happen independently of the will of God and man, by the necessity of a certain *order* . . . Human kingdoms are established by divine providence." The fatalism which Augustine here condemns involves independence not only of the will of God, but of man's will also.

It is only in modern times, with Hegel and Marx, that necessity reigns supreme in the philosophy of history. Hegel spurns the notion that history is "a superficial play of casual, so-called 'merely human' strivings and passions." He also condemns those who "speak of Providence and the plan of Providence" in a way that is "empty" of ideas since "for them the plan of Providence is inscrutable and incomprehensible." For Hegel, history is "the necessary development, out of the concept of the mind's freedom alone." But this development and this freedom are entirely matters of necessity as far as individuals and their works are concerned. "They are all the time the unconscious tools and organs of the world mind at work within them."

For Marx, history seems likewise to have the same necessity. He deals with individuals, he writes in the preface to *Capital*, "only in so far as they are the personifications of economic categories, embodiments of particular class-relations and class-interests. My standpoint," he says, is one from which "the evolution of the economic formation of society is viewed as a process of natural history," and within which the individual cannot be "responsible for relations whose creature he socially remains, however much he may subjectively raise himself above them." Here it is a question only "of these laws themselves, of these tendencies working with iron necessity towards inevitable results."

According to the historical determinism of Hegel and Marx, which is further considered in the chapter on HISTORY, men play a part which is already written for them in the scroll of history. Human liberty apparently depends on man's knowledge of and acquiescence in the unfolding necessities.

HISTORICAL DETERMINISM is merely a part of the doctrine of a causal necessity which governs all things. Causality seems to be understood by moderns like Spinoza, Hume, and Freud as excluding the possibility of chance or free will. Among the ancients, Plotinus alone seems to go as far as Spinoza in affirming the universal reign of natural necessity. What Spinoza says of God or Nature, Plotinus says of the All-One, namely, that for the first principle which is the cause of everything else, freedom consists in being *causa sui*, or cause of itself—self-determined rather than determined by external causes.

"God does not act from freedom of the will," Spinoza writes. Yet "God alone is a free cause, for God alone exists . . . and acts from the necessity of his own nature." As for everything else in the universe, Spinoza maintains that "there is nothing contingent, but all things are determined from the necessity of the divine nature to exist and act in a certain manner." This applies to man, who, according to Spinoza, does "everything by the will of God alone."

From quite different premises, Hume seems to reach much the same conclusion concerning chance and liberty. "Chance," he writes, "when strictly examined, is a mere negative word, and means not any real power which has anywhere a being in nature." But he also thinks that liberty, "when opposed to necessity, not to constraint, is the same thing with chance."

Hume embraces the consequences of such a position. "If voluntary action be subjected to the same laws of necessity with the operations of matter, there is a continued chain of necessary causes, pre-ordained and pre-determined, reaching from the original cause of all to every single volition of every human creature. No contingency anywhere in the universe; no indifferency; no liberty."

When confronted with the objection that it then becomes impossible "to explain distinctly, how the Deity can be the mediate cause of all the actions of men, without being the author of sin and moral turpitude," Hume replies that "these are mysteries, which natural and unassisted reason is very unfit to handle . . . To defend absolute decrees, and yet free the Deity from being the author of sin, has been found hitherto to exceed all the power of philosophy."

Unlike Spinoza and Hume, Freud does not deal with the theological implications or presuppositions of determinism. For him, determinism is an essential postulate of science and even to some extent a scientifically discoverable fact. The "deeply rooted belief in psychic freedom and choice," he writes, is "quite unscientific, and it must give ground before the claims of a determinism which governs even mental life." He thinks it can be shown on the basis of clinical experience that every psychic association "will be strictly determined by important inner attitudes of mind, which are unknown to us at the moment when they operate, just as much unknown as are the disturbing tendencies which cause errors, and those tendencies which bring about so-called 'chance' actions."

The fatalism of what is often called "scientific determinism" is that of blind necessity. It not only eliminates liberty and chance but also purpose and the operation of final causes. Every future event, in nature, history, or human behavior, is completely predetermined by efficient causes—predetermined, but not predestined, for there is no guiding intelligence at work, no purpose to be fulfilled. "The system of *fatality*, of which Spinoza is the accredited author," Kant writes, is one which "eliminates all *trace of design*, and leaves the original ground of the things of nature divested of all intelligence."

Whether such complete fatalism is the only doctrine compatible with the principles and findings of natural science has been questioned by philosophers like William James. It is certainly not the only doctrine compatible with the view that nothing happens without a cause. As the chapters on CHANCE and WILL

show, ancient and medieval thinkers who affirm contingency in nature or freedom in hu-

man acts do so without denying the universal reign of causation.