

Fate, Foresight, and Free-will

by

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No event can be thought of as taking place apart from a logically antecedent and actually imminent possibility of its taking place; and in this sense, every new individual is the forthcoming of an antenatal potentiality, which dies as a potentiality in the first place at the creature's first conception and thereafter throughout life as the various aspects of this potentiality are reduced to act, in accordance with a partly conscious and partly unconscious will that ever seeks to realize itself. We can express the same in other words by saying that the individual comes into the world to accomplish certain ends or purposes peculiar to itself. Birth is an opportunity.

The field of procedure from potentiality to act is that of the individual's liberty: the "free-will" of the theologian is, in accordance with the parable of the talents, a freedom to make use of or to neglect the opportunity to become what one can become under the circumstances into which one is born; these "circumstances" of the born being consisting of its own soul-and-body and the rest of its environment, or world, defined as a specific ensemble of possibilities.

The liberty of the individual is evidently not unlimited; he cannot accomplish the impossible, i.e., what is impossible for him, though it might be a possible in some other "world" as above defined. Notably, he cannot have been born otherwise than as he was actually born, or possessed of other possibilities than those which he is naturally (by nativity) endowed; he cannot realize ambitions for the realization of which there exists no provision in his own nature; he is himself, and no one else. Certain specific and partly unique possibilities are open to him, and certain other possibilities, usually vastly more numerous, are closed to him; he cannot, as a finite being, be at the same time a man in London and a lion in Africa. These possibilities and impossibilities which are those of and predetermined by his own nature and cannot be thought of as having been arbitrarily imposed upon him, but only as the definition of his own nature, represent what we call the individual's fate or destiny; whatever happens to the individual being merely the reduction of a given possibility to act when the occasion presents itself, while whatever does not happen was not really a possibility, but only ignorantly conceived to have been so.

Freedom of individual will is then the freedom to do what the individual can do, or to refrain from doing it. Whatever one actually does under given circumstances is what one wills to do

under those circumstances: to be forced to act or suffer against one's will is not a coercion of the will, but of its implements, and only in appearance a coercion of the individual himself to the extent that he identifies "himself" with his implements. Furthermore, the destiny of the individual, what he will do of himself under given circumstances, is not altogether obscure to him, but rather manifest to the extent that he really knows himself and understands his own nature. It is note-worthy that this measure of foresight (providence) by no means interferes with his sense of liberty; one merely thinks of the future decision as a present to resolve. There is in fact a coincidence of foresight and freewill. In the same way, but to the limited extent that one can really know another's essence, one can foresee its peculiar destiny; which foresight in no way governs that creature's conduct. And finally, if we assume an omniscient providence in God, who from his position at the center of the wheel inevitably views the past and future *now*, which "now" will be the same tomorrow as it was yesterday, this in no way interferes with the freedom of any creature in its own sphere. As Dante expresses it, "Contingency...is all depicted in the eternal aspect; though it takes not its necessity therefrom" (*Paradiso*, XVI 37 f.). Our difficulties here arise only because we think of providence as a foresight in the temporal sense, as if one saw today what must happen tomorrow. Far from being a foresight in this temporal sense, divine providence is a vision always contemporary with the event. To think of God as looking forward to a future or backwards to a past event is as meaningless as it would be to ask what was He doing "before" he made the world.

Not that it is by any means impossible to shrink from a foreseen destiny. Destiny is for those who have eaten of the Tree, and this includes both that "fraction" (*pada, amsa*) of the Spirit that enters into all born beings, and seems to suffer with them, and these created things themselves, in so far as they identify "themselves" with the body-and-soul. Destiny is necessarily a passion of good and evil; it is as such that it presents itself to us as something that we could either welcome or avoid, at the same time we cannot refuse it, without becoming other than we are. This acceptance we explain to ourselves in terms of ambition, courage, altruism, or resignation as the case may be. In any case, it is one's own nature that compels us to pursue a destiny of which we are forewarned, however fatal the result expected. The futility of warnings is a characteristic theme of heroic literature; not that the warnings are discredited, but that the hero's honor requires him to continue as he has begun; or because at the critical moment the warning is forgotten. We call the man "fey".

A poignant example of shrinking from and yet accepting a foreseen destiny can be cited in the "hesitation" of a Messiah. It is thus that in *Rgveda* 10:51, Agni fears his destiny as sacrificial priest and cosmic charioteer, and must be persuaded; thus, the Buddha, "apprehensive of injury", is overpersuaded by Brahma (S.I. 138 and D. II. 33); and thus that Jesus prays "Father...take away this cup from me; yet not as I will, but as Thou wilt" (*Mark* 14:36), and "Father, save me from this hour; but for this cause came I unto this hour" (*John* 12:27).

Desire must not be confused with regret. Desire presupposes a possibility which is either actually such, or imagined to be such. We cannot desire the impossible, but only regret the impossibility. Regret may be felt for what has happened, but this is not a desire that it had not happened; it is a regret that it “had to happen” as it did; for nothing happens unless by necessity. If there is one doctrine that science and theology are perfectly agreed upon, it is that the course of events is causally determined: as St. Thomas says, “If God governed alone (and not also by means of mediate causes) the world would be deprived of the perfection of causality... All things (appertaining to the chain of fate)... are done by God by means of second causes” (*Summa*. I. 103. 7, ad 2, and 116. 4, ad 1). The *Śvetāsvatara Upaniṣad* (I. 1-3) distinguishes in a similar manner Brahman, Spirit of God, the One, as over-standing* cause, from his Power or Means-of-operation (*śakti=māyā*, etc.), known as such to contemplatives, but “considered” (*cintyam*) as a plurality of “causal combinations of time, etc., with the passible spirit” (*kāranāni kālātmayuktāni*), which latter, “because it is not a combination of the series, time, etc.” is not the master of its own fate, so long as it remains oblivious of its own identity with the transcendental Spirit. In the same way again, Śankarācarya explains that Brahman does not operate arbitrarily, but in accordance with the varying properties inherent in the characters of things as they are themselves, which things owe their being to Brahman, but are individually responsible for their modalities of being. This is, of course, the traditionally orthodox view; as Plotinus expresses it (VI. 4.3) “all is offered, but the recipient is able to take only so much,” and Boehme “as is the harmony, viz. the life’s form, in each thing, so is also the sound of the eternal voice therein; in the holy, holy, in the perverse, perverse...therefore no creature can blame its creator, as if he made it evil” (*Sig. Rerum* XVI. 6, 7 and *Forty Questions* VIII. 14).

* *Yah...adhitisthati*, in verse 3. Both meanings are implied, viz. “He overrules” and “He takes his stand upon.” The corresponding object is *adhithānam*; as in *Rgveda*, X. 81. 2. where the question is asked “What is his standing ground?” (*kim...adhithānam*) and in *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* VIII. 12. 1. where the “standing ground” (*adhithānam*) of “the immortal incorporeal Spirit” is the mortal body (*śarīra*) that is in the power of Death, “standing ground” being thus synonymous with “field” (*kṣetra*) in the *Bhagavad Gītā* XIII. 2, where again it is the “body” that is thus referred to.