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Chapter 18

The first three kinds of Fate briefly explained: a definition or description of them all. The Stoics slightly and briefly expressed.

"Now what I call Astronomical Fate is the view that links and firmly binds all actions and events to the power of the constellations and the placement of the stars. The Chaldeans and the astrologers were its first authors, and among philosophers its foundation and underwriter is the sublime Mercury, who, subtly and not altogether vainly distinguishing among PROVIDENCE, Necessity, and Fate, says,

Providence is the perfect and absolute reason of the heavenly God, in which there are two related faculties, necessity and fate. Fate is the subject and minister of Providence, and at the same time of necessity, but the stars serve fate itself. Now no one can flee the power of fate or guard himself from the force and influence of the stars. These indeed are the missiles and armor of fate, by whose authority they set in motion and complete all things in nature and among men.\footnote{Corpus Hermeticum, vol. 3, frag. 12. See above, n. 64.}

In this same ship of fools today (the shame of the name Christian) is generally the mob of astrologers.\footnote{In the editions before 1599, Lipsius had written that the "ship of fools" was populated "not only by all the astrologers, but also (oh shame!) by many theologians." The ship of fools is a reference to the familiar late medieval and early Renaissance tradition of satire.}
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"Natural Fate, I call, the order of natural causes which (unless they are hindered) by their own nature produce the same, certain effect. Aristotle was of this party, if Alexander of Aphrodisias, his by no means untrustworthy interpreter, may be trusted. Likewise Theophrastus, who plainly writes, 'Fate is the nature of each thing.' According to their thought, that a man begets a man results from Fate; that he dies from internal causes without external force results from Fate. Conversely, that a man begets a serpent or a monster is outside of Fate; likewise, that he is slain by the sword or by fire. It is not a terribly misunderstood view, because it does not even rise to the power of Fate; indeed, who fails to avoid a fall if he doesn’t climb? In matters of divinity, Aristotle is almost everywhere like this—I make exception for the short treatise Of the World, which seems to me all golden, of another, more heavenly atmosphere. Besides, I read this in a Greek writer, that Aristotle maintained ‘that Fate was not a cause, but a certain mode of a cause happening in those things that necessity had ordained’. Is this the mind of a philosopher, who seriously dares to count Fortune and Chance among causes, but not Fate?

"But I am done with this. I come now to my Stoics (I shall not conceal my esteem and affection for this sect), who are the authors of Violent Fate. This I define, along with Seneca, as the necessity of all things and actions that no force can break, or along with Chrysippus as a spiritual power governing this universe by order. These definitions do not depart too far from the sound and true, if you will interpret them discreetly and moderately. As neither perhaps does their whole way of thinking, if the thumbs-down of all the common people had not long since condemned it. They ascribe to the Stoics two blasphemies, that they make God subject to the chariots of fate, and likewise our inner actions and our will; and I would not too confidently clear their of either fault. For it is in their own writings, few of which remain, where you may draw these things out; it is also where you find something things. Seneca, hardly a weak prop in their gallery, really seems to rush into the first of these errors in a book where it is least appropriate, On Providence.

The same necessity also binds the gods; its unalterable course carries the human
irreducibilis humana ac divina pariter cursus vehit. Ille ipse omnium conditionis ac rector scripsit quidem Fata, sed sequitur. Semper parens, semper iussit. Et indissolubilis illa cathena nexusque causarum, quo omnia & omnes ligant, vim facere non obscure videtur Arbitrio humano.


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and divine along equally. He himself, creator and ruler of all things, wrote down the Fates, but still he obeys them. He always obeys; he commanded but once. And that unbreakable chain and knot of causes, in which they bind everything and everyone, seems evidently to wreak violence upon the human will.

"Real, genuine Stoics, however, never professed these ideas unambiguously; or if they did, it was such a lapse as occurs in the heat of writing or arguing—as such much a matter of words, as you will discover, than of sense or content. Even Chrysippus, who first corrupted and enfeebled that manly school with a thorny subtlety of questioning, according to Aulus Gellius, explains and clears them of having diminished liberty. And our Seneca did not subject God to Fate (his understanding was sounder than that), but in a certain way of speaking, God to God. Now those among the Stoics who came closest to truth sometimes identified Fate with Providence itself, sometimes with God. And so when Zeno would have defined it as 'a power moving behind the same matter in the same way', he added, 'it would not make no difference to have called it Providence or even nature.' And Chrysippus from the same point of view says in another place that Fate is 'the eternal reason of Providence'. Then there is the Stoic Panaceus: 'He said that God himself is Fate.' Clearly Seneca is thinking along the same lines:

As often as you will wish, you may accost this author of things and natures in a different way. You fittingly will say, Jove, the best and greatest, and Thunderer and Sustainer. He is called this last not, as the historians have handed down, because after receiving a prayer, he steadied a fleeting Roman army; but because everything stands by his blessing is he the Sustainer and Establisher. If you will say this is the same as Fate, you will not lie. Since Fate is nothing else but the interwoven succession of causes, he is the first cause of everything, from which the others hang.

This last sentence is so reverently stated that malice itself cannot accuse it.

87 Seneca, On Providence 5.8.
88 Aulus Gellius, Attic Nights 7.2.6–10.
89 Stoicorum Vetrernum Fragmenta 1.44.35 (Zenonis fragmenta B,1.6.176).
90 Stobaeus, Elegaei 1.5.15, Ioannis Stobaei Anthologiae, ed. Wachsmuth, 1: 79.
91 I have been unable to locate the source of this quotation.
92 Seneca. Of Benefits 4.7.1. N.B. the ascription "optimus maximus" to Jupiter and
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"And on this issue that great writer addressing a great king did not depart from the Stoics:

In my assessment, however, Necessity ought not to be called anything other than God, as a stable nature, and likewise Fate itself, which links together all things and proceeds freely and unhesitated.93

Even if there is something imprudent in these words, there is nothing irreverent; and among fair-minded critics they are not far from our true understanding of Fate. In all seriousness I grant this testimony to the tribe of the Stoics: that no school has done more to preserve the majesty and Providence of God, that no other has done more to draw men to what is spiritual and eternal. And even if they have stumbled in the course of this fateful race, I believe it resulted from a laudable and worthy eagerness of calling blind mortals back from the blind goddess. Of course I mean Fortune: they not only vigorously hissed her authority out of their midst, but even her name."

Chapter 19

An Explanation of the fourth or True version of Fate. A brief discussion of the name itself. That definition more finely honed and shown to differ from Providence.

"But I have said enough about the attitude of the ancients, or their dissension. Why should I too curiously and subtly sift through 'the mysteries of hell'?94 I have enough to occupy me now with setting forth and clarifying true Fate. I here define it as the eternal decree of Providence, which can no more be taken away from things than Providence itself. And let no one quibble with me about the term, since I confidently maintain that there is none in the Latin language more appropriate to this thing itself. Have the ancients abused it? Let us see it, and having summoned the word from the prison of the Stoics, let us place it in a better light. Fatum most certainly comes from fari ["to utter"], and properly means

93 Pseudo-Aristotle, On the World 401b. What is rendered "as a stable nature" is a close approximation of Lipsius' Latin rendering of the quotation, but the original Greek is more nearly, "as the unchanging ground of being."

94 Lipsius' marginal note reads, "Our Desiderius [Erasmus] has badly turned and badly selected this adage." See Erasmus, Adagia 1839, in Opera, vol. 2.4 (1987), 240. Erasmus renders the Greek adage as Qui sunt apud inferos ternones, and maintains that it "ridicules those who track down secret, obscure matters with a certain curious diligence." Lipsius renders it Thesimus quae in erro. I cannot see why Erasmus' interpretation does not work in Lipsius's context. See also E.L. A. Leutsch and E.G. Schneider, eds., Corpus Persicae Graecae (1839), pp. 685–686.