

WRIGGLING AGAINST THE STARS: FATE, FORTUNE, AND FAITH

Does life have meaning? Or are we just spinning though this vast and chaotic universe aimlessly, while wandering about on our tiny blue planet? Is anyone, or anything watching out for us? Is our destiny fixed? Are we victims of fortune? Or statistics? These questions are as old as the ages, and are just as troublesome today.

The Biblical King Solomon, renowned for his wisdom as well as for his wealth and luxurious life, was eloquent in his perplexity on the meaning of life, or as he wrote repeatedly – the meaninglessness of life.

From Ecclesiastes:

*“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher.
“Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.”*

...

*The sun rises and the sun sets,
and hurries back to where it rises.
The wind blows to the south and turns to the north;
round and round it goes, ever returning on its course.*

...

All things are wearisome, more than one can say.

And in a later passage King Solomon describes his search for meaning by living the good life and an accomplished life:

I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly – my mind still guiding me with wisdom, I wanted to see what was worthwhile for men to do under heaven during the few days of their lives.

I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees. ... I amassed silver and gold for myself. ... I acquired men and women singers, and a harem as well – the delights of the heart of man. I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me.

*I denied myself nothing my eyes desired;
I refused my heart no pleasure.
My heart took delight in all my work...
Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done
and what I had toiled to achieve,
everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind;
nothing was gained under the sun.*

Inventing gods to give life meaning

We earthly creatures seem to be at the mercy of forces beyond our control – whether we call such forces gods or the vagaries of fortune. Events that are either harmful or helpful occur in our world, and from the dawn of civilization have spawned religion in all the diverse cultures that sprang up around the globe.

People asked:

Why did the rains not come in time to save my plantings? Or, why was there too much rain?

Why did the winds and water come and destroy our homes?

Why was my baby born deformed?

Why do I not conceive a child?

Why was the young man or woman struck down by a disease while the old continued their lives?

Why are some born rich and some poor?

Why are some born to lead and others born to follow?

Since man could affect things in his world – build houses, plant fields, kill animals, it was logical to assume that someone or something – something more powerful than men – could control the rain and the drought, thunderstorms and sunshine, fertility and barrenness, the abundance or absence of animals to hunt. To give this world *meaning*, man invented gods. People devised a myriad of ways to please these gods: sacrifices and offerings of foods, animals, even of cherished children. If you really wanted to compete for a god's attention you needed to provide something of great value. Those techniques that seemed successful in pleasing the gods became a permanent feature of the religious rituals of the various cultures.

Many peoples of the world came to believe that the gods assigned roles to humans and controlled their destinies. Epictetus, the Greek Stoic philosopher, wrote:

Remember that you are an actor in a drama, of such a part as it may please the master to assign you, for a long time or for as little as he may choose. And if he will you to take the part of a poor man, or a cripple, or a ruler, or a private citizen, then may you act that part with grace! For to act well the part that is allotted us, that indeed is ours to do, but to choose it is another's.

Only supernatural explanations – gods – could make life sensible and meaningful. By recourse to gods man had an explanation for the unexplainable.

People today still turn to supernatural explanations. The best-selling book, *The Celestine Prophecy*, assures people of what they are yearning to hear: "...there are no chance encounters, no arbitrary events, no reasons for existential angst." [Wendy Kaminer, *Sleeping With Extraterrestrials*.]

Other popular spirituality books spin the same theme. They say, for example, "Angels and other supernatural beings are constantly intervening in our

lives. Angels watch over virtually every aspect of human activity." Angel experts insist: "Whatever we consider coincidence is evidence of the divine. 'There are no accidents ... Everything in life occurs as part of a spiritual plan.'" James Van Praagh writes in *Talking to Heaven*, "There is no coincidence and nothing happens by accident." Neale Donald Walsch confirms in *Conversations with God*, "Everything has a purpose. There are no ...accidents." [Wendy Kaminer, *Ibid.*]

Gods and fate

In the history of religion, explaining events purely in terms of control by supernatural forces was sometimes insufficient to explain the surprising twists and turns of fate. In the western world the gods, or God, became to be understood as a co-player with fortune. God controlled most things but left some things to fate. In the Bible the book of Proverbs tells us: "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord." The Hebrew Bible also tells us: "The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all." When the tribes of Israel were led to the promised land of Canaan, God told them to "Distribute the land by lot according to your clans. Whatever falls to them by lot will be theirs." (Numbers 33:54). So God told the tribes to take the land from the Canaanites but to distribute it according to the luck of the draw. We can presume that God was overseeing the lottery. Even in the New Testament, Peter supervised the selection of an apostle to replace the disgraced Judas by conducting a game of chance. The candidates were Joseph Barsabbas and Matthias. The apostles prayed over the matter. "Then [according to Acts 1:26] they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles." We can presume, again, that God's will was expressed by the role of the dice.

We have abundant examples of other gods manipulating fate. The powerful Greek goddess Fortuna, the manipulator of good and bad fortune, often was at odds with the goddess Justitia who held the higher moral ground. If *good* things happen to *good* people, Justice is served. When *bad* things happen to *good* people, Fortuna is served. This precedent of the female goddess, Fortuna, dealing out fateful acts may be why we still call on "Lady Luck." John Webster, an English dramatist in the 1500's wrote of this "Lady"...

Fortune's a right whore.

If she give ought, she deals it in small parcels,

That she may take away all at one swoop.

Or, as Forrest Gump said, "Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're gonna get."

Other players in Greek mythology were the Fates, three gods who give to men at birth evil and good to have. Clotho, the spinner, spun the thread of life. Lachesis, the disposer of Lots, assigned to each person his destiny. Atropos carried the "abhorred shears" and cut the thread of life at death.

Among the Hindus it was believed that the gods often cheated in the game of

controlling life – the game being too important to leave entirely to chance.

Clearly, we have inherited a world in which chance plays a role but supernatural powers have been seen also to play a role in controlling the manipulations of fate. This has given rise to great debate and speculation among the arbiters of religion. If God is all-powerful why does God allow Fortune to do bad things to good people? The human response to this question is explained in psychology and metaphysics. Possessing a peaceful certitude that someone up there is looking out for you relieves anxiety about the blows that chance deals out. We look for meaning. Ascribing a meaning to the vagaries of fate helps people cope. If one is convinced that everything happens according to some purpose, then one can adjust to the winds of fortune. And it can be more comforting to believe that you are the victim of a God who works in mysterious ways than to a senseless streak of bad luck.

I heard a mother give thanks to God that her child died rather than continue a life of suffering. And I have heard a mother give thanks that a child's life was spared even though it faces a life of suffering. God wins either way. We see God's hand guiding fate in the incoming mortar round that spares one family's child but takes another's. I heard a Christian minister tell of missing a plane that crashed after take-off. His interpretation was that the plane was fated to crash but God intervened to spare the minister. He did not comment on why the rest of the passengers were not similarly spared.

I heard an interview with the winning jockey at the Kentucky Derby this year who has been raising a child that is severely disabled. He said that God chose him to be the father of that child because God knew what great love he could give the child. His sincerity was touching. There was no mention, of course, as to why God chose to inflict the child.

Some people today think less about the intervention of supernatural beings but more about the supernatural involvement of other mysterious forces. The positive thinking movement promotes the idea that if you believe, and if you believe powerfully enough, you can change destiny. You can get that dream job, you can become wealthy, you can get rid of cancer, if you "just believe." If your wishes don't come to pass, you are not really "believing."

Evolution from faith to the calculation of fate

Human understanding of fate vs. faith, fortune vs. justice, and the role of the gods underwent a major revolution with the advent of the Enlightenment philosophies in the 18th and 19th centuries. Discoveries in the study of the new science of statistics radically changed the way we can think about fortune. Scientists discovered the phenomenon of statistical consistency and, in the world of science, Fortuna would never be the same.

As an example, it was discovered that in England at that time that the number of deaths by suicide was remarkably consistent from year to year. Now each suicide is unique in its causes, and nobody commits suicide twice, so the statisticians are counting completely separate instances, each with its own

unique circumstances. Yet the number of suicides remains statistically constant at a given place and time. A less morbid example is that researchers found that about the same number of letters ended up in the Paris dead letter office every year. Each letter had a different history, but the number remained remarkably constant. With the discovery of the bell-shaped curve we can expect with confidence that within a given population X% will be highly intelligent, X% at the other end of the curve will be “intellectually challenged,” and the rest will fall in the larger middle. We can predict approximately how many people will contract a certain rare disease in a given year and place – but not who specifically will be dealt the losing hand. We can predict about how many people will die in automobile accidents in a given year in a given place. But each accident is unique and we can not predict who will die. From this statistical concept we get the common expression – “his number came up.” To some, this is more comforting than the idea that God rolled the dice. To others, less so.

A vivid example to me is the accident a couple of years ago when a barge struck the supports of an Interstate Highway bridge across the Missouri (?) River. A young army officer, a graduate of West Point was driving from the west coast to the east coast on a change of assignment. After days of driving, just at that moment when he was on that fated bridge, the barge struck, brought the bridge down, and he – with many others – was killed. That was probably the only time in his life he would cross that particular bridge. The odds that he was destined to die at that place and time were miniscule. But many would simply recognize that fate made him a “statistic.” I think of the roulette wheel, clicking by, number after number, as it slows and the ball falls into a number slot. Whose number will it be?

The passion to control fate – “Wriggling against the stars”

I think everyone contemplates the contradictions of fate and faith in one way or another. Who, in a dire situation, has not prayed that they would be the one to be spared; that if lightning is going to hit someone, that it hit someone else; that if X% of babies are going to be born with a deformity – that it be someone else’s baby, not mine. We long for control. This longing for control has led people into different directions.

For some, there is renewed interest in obtaining supernatural help. I receive periodic messages from some of my cousins to join with them in seeking supernatural intervention so that a member of the family will be spared. There are numerous groups, both religious and those that are nominally spiritual but not religious, that are centered on programs for healing, for bringing about life changes, and for bringing happiness through control of fate.

For others control is sought through science, medicine, or social policy. Birth control and reproductive intervention confront fate and change the number of souls that will be born – or not be born. Perhaps fate, or God, gave one or both of the parents organs not suited for reproduction but science can change what fate had dealt. Perhaps fate provided a face that is considered too far from

the norm. Plastic surgery can change what fate dealt. Perhaps fate left an individual with an inability to do work. Social policy has been used to provide the necessities of life by a redistribution of wealth from those who fate blessed more abundantly.

The passion to control fate is a positive force in the world. We have seen in times past the consequences for a society which merely accepts fate. Progress would never occur if some did not think that things could be better, that diseases could be cured, that societies could be uplifted, that things could be made safer. Acceptance of the status quo – or not interfering with God’s plan – led to the continued servitude and poverty in western cultures until our forefathers, particularly here in what became the United States, decided that we need not live by the old rules.

E. M. Forster inspired the title for my sermon. He wrote: “Failure or success seem to have been allotted to men by their stars. But they retain the power of wriggling, of fighting with their star or against it, and in the whole universe the only really interesting movement is this wriggle.”

At the same time, some see the dangers of trying too hard to control destiny. Life is chance. It is a statistical improbability that our beautiful blue planet with its lush life even exists in this chaotic and indifferent universe. We should marvel at the blessings of fate. Chance creates variety. The biological reality of sexual reproduction has insured the continuation of the species because it ensures variation without end. No two individuals are the same. How would we like living in a world in which all were perfect individuals, cloned from the same perfect individual. Remember the horrors of Aldous Huxley’s “Brave New World” where reproduction was completely controlled and everyone was “perfect,” perfectly suited for his or her assigned role in a controlled world.

Contingency provides diversity, interest, surprise, adventure. Fate provides a world where we deal with one thing after another, always something new. Dealing with fate gives meaning to the meaningless world that King Solomon spoke of. In a recent essay [in *Daedalus*] Professor Lorraine Daston wrote:

Many events can throw the best-laid plans into disarray: a move, an illness, a love affair, a death, and above all, the birth and care of a child, that great randomizer of human affairs. Some contingencies may end in sorrow, others in joy, but almost all result in the discovery of something not known and not felt before.

Or, as in the philosophy given us by Doris Day in the wonderful old movie and the hit song: *Que sera, sera; what will be, will be.*

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