

Renaissance Fatalism

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Abstract: This paper draws a distinction between “renaissance” fatalism and “classical” fatalism. It develops in some detail the “renaissance” fatalism perspective and relates that perspective to contemporary developments in philosophy. It also reveals the strength of renaissance fatalism against the classical criticisms of fatalism.

Fate has fallen on hard times. Rather than a pertinent topic for debate or critical reflection, fate has become a literary device used to set up plot lines or advance fantasy adventures. It appears that our materialistic culture has cast off this ancient concept in favor of a more scientific-sounding causal route to hard determinism or perfect freedom. It is brash to dismiss this concept that is as old as human civilization and has permeated all levels of human expression. One wonders whether the idea of fate has any significance in the modern world. Perhaps the answer lies in a shift away from defining fate as supernatural—neither witches with all-seeing eyes nor a malevolent puppeteer that pulls strings to determine one’s actions. There is an alternative to the “classical” idea of fate found in such works as *Oedipus Rex* and *The Appointment in Samarra*. This alternative conception can be found in Heraclitus’ assessment of fate: “Character is fate.”¹ Using this simple but compelling representation, we can look to literary works such as Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* and Lorenzo Di Valla’s *Dialogue on Free Will* to demonstrate the usefulness of Heraclitus’ characterization of fate. This idea of fate will show that its perpetrator is not the occult but instead merely an agent’s character.

“Classical” Fate

The “classical” and still evocative conception of fate is that an agent can do nothing about anything that befalls him. This conception of fate is illustrated by the

ancient Greek work of Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, and the Islamic parable of *The Appointment in Samarra* as retold by W. Somerset Maugham. In the tragedy of *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus' fate was sealed; he was certainly doomed to murder his father despite his labors to keep from doing so. Similarly, *The Appointment in Samarra* expresses how death would come for the servant regardless of his efforts.

The classic Greek tragedy *Oedipus Rex* recounts the tale of star-crossed Oedipus, who was fated to murder his father and marry his mother. In an attempt to thwart prophecy, Oedipus' father sends him to be murdered. However, the shepherd asked to carry out this gruesome task feels mercy and takes infant Oedipus to Corinth, far away from his father in Thebes. Alas, in the "classical" conception, fate cannot be fooled. Years later, Oedipus flees from Corinth after he is told that he is not his adopted father's son. He happens upon a chariot, which forces him off the road. Already emotionally turbulent from the recent revelation, Oedipus has a fit of rage and kills every man who was with the chariot. Of course, one of the men was the King of Thebes, Oedipus' biological father. Upon reaching Thebes, Oedipus encounters a Sphinx blocking the gates. Oedipus frees the Thebians from the terror of the Sphinx by solving its riddle. As a reward for saving the city, Oedipus is crowned king and unknowingly marries his mother, Queen of Thebes. Shortly thereafter, a terrible plague descends upon the city. According to the oracle, Thebes could only be saved by exiling the one who murdered the previous king. Oedipus' investigation leads him to the terrible knowledge of his deeds; he exclaims, "Apollo. Apollo. Dear Children, the god was Apollo. He brought my sick, sick fate upon me."² Oedipus' tragedy illustrates the relentless nature of the "classical" conception of fate, a force that cannot be defied.

Likewise, in the ancient Muslim conception of fate, fate will not be stopped. In the recounting of the Muslim parable, W. Somerset Maugham effectively shows the inescapable force of the fate of “classical” conception. In *The Appointment in Samarra*, Death narrates a tale of her appointment with a servant. A merchant’s servant sees Death in the market and believes she made a threatening gesture towards him. After fleeing home, he begs his master for a horse in order to escape to Samarra. The master, irritated, confronts Death at the market. Death retorts, “That was not a threatening gesture, I said, it was only a start of surprise. I was astonished to see him in Baghdad, for I had an appointment with him tonight in Samarra.”³ This eerie reply demonstrates the quintessential nature of classical fate—an inevitable force.

Surely it must be this sort of fatalism that philosophers ridicule. Daniel Dennet in *Elbow Room* does just that. After laying out the “bogeymen” that would be considered executors of classical fate, he states that “I cannot prove that none of the bogeymen... really exist anymore than I can prove that the Devil, or Santa Claus, doesn’t exist. But I am prepared to put on a sober face and assure anyone who needs assuring that there is absolutely no evidence to suggest that any of these horrible agents exists.”⁴ Later on in his essay, Dennet dismisses fatalism as a superstitious, mystical view that need not be taken seriously.

Fate as Character

Dennet’s sober-faced assurance may be enough to discredit the “classical” conception of fate, but Heraclitus’ character-based conception is not so easily dismissed.

If character is the whole of our being and decision-making, it surely chooses for us. Thus, we are determined by our intrinsic character.

The conception of fate as character has existed since antiquity as what shapes one's ultimate ends. During the Renaissance, conjectures about fate and free will flourished in many forms. Lorenzo Di Valla's *Dialogue on Free Will* demonstrates a shift from classical fate to fate as character or "renaissance" fate.

The *Dialogue* follows the discussion of two friends, Antonio and Lorenzo, on the incommensurability between free will and God. Lorenzo recounts the Greek tale of Sextus Tarquinius, who visits Apollo in order to learn of his fate. He discovers that he is destined to be an exiled pauper killed by the angry city. Appalled by this pronouncement, Sextus protests that he had always been a good citizen and made his sacrifices to the gods. Apollo proclaims that "...I know the fates, I do not decide them; I am able to announce fortune not change her..." This announcement echoes the sentiment of classical fate: fortune stems from beyond. Sextus, furious at his fate, blames Apollo for the unfortunate events that will come to him. Apollo replies that the blame for his fate lies not in Apollo's hands for speaking it, but in Jupiter's hands for creating Sextus in such a way that he will commit the acts that will lead to his fate. Jupiter "fashioned some men hard of heart, others soft, he generated one given to evil, the other to virtue, and, further, he gave a capacity for reform and made another incorrigible. To you [Sextus], indeed, he assigned an evil soul with no resource for reform."⁵ From the statement that Sextus' fate comes not from Apollo but from Jupiter, we can understand that his fate comes from his character. This shift in blame represents a shift in how fate is implemented and understood. The change from blaming fortune to blaming Sextus

himself demonstrates the transformation of fate's control from some "other" to our own characters. Thus, things are fated through the initial creation of a person and that person's attributes. Di Valla's dialogue utilizes the renaissance conception of fate by connecting Sextus' future circumstances with his character.

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* makes the connection between fate and character more explicit. In the opening scene of the play, we encounter three witches speaking of how Macbeth shall come to them to know of his fate. While this seems like a case-closed argument for fate as the omnipotent presence we classically conceive, looking further into the play we discover it is something quite different. Macbeth's misdeeds stem not from the ominous Queen Hecate of the witches but from his own foul character.

The initial reaction of Macbeth towards his predicted kingship is "[i]f chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me, Without my stir." Macbeth's ambition makes him unable to wait for chance to crown him, and he decides to take matters into his own hands. Macbeth is well aware of what must happen for his predicted fate to become an actual event. He is ashamed that the evil comes from his own soul and reflects upon it, "Let not light see my black and deep desires."⁶ Although the witches and their allusion to fate are the impetus for Macbeth's murders, it is quite clear that Macbeth himself is responsible for the events. We follow the depth of Macbeth's desire to ascend as king; Macbeth's character leaves poor Duncan in its wake.

Renaissance fate is not restricted to the Renaissance. It is clearly expressed in Herman Melville's classic, *Moby Dick*. Capitan Ahab and his crew embark on their quest to kill the white whale. Ahab's ever increasing madness and doomed adventure are not spouted from the fates or an outside force but from Ahab himself. This is made explicit

when Ahab addresses the gods and affirms the course set by his own character: “Swerve me? ye cannot swerve, else ye swerve yourselves! man has ye there. Swerve me? The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails, whereon my soul is grooved to run.”⁷

Clearly Ahab recognizes that for his fate to change, the gods would have to change how he was made. Ahab’s fate was sealed in his being, not created for the amusement or folly of some higher power.

Fate is Participatory

Renaissance fate flows from our character, but that character need not be the capricious choice of a divine trickster. Character is shaped by our experiences with others, whether a random encounter that generates an idea or an intimate relationship with family that shapes the ideals of how to act. It is without question that other people leave ineffaceable marks on one’s character. With this in mind, it becomes clear that our fate is not wholly executed by ourselves. Our fate is our own, but it cannot escape the influence of others any more than our character can. This is also neatly illustrated in *Macbeth*.

The influence of others on Macbeth’s fate is presented by the very nature of the witches’ suggestion of what his fate will be. From the seemingly arbitrary encounter with the Weird Sisters, we can see how strangers influence our fate. The witches’ proclamation that Macbeth shall be king is the driving force behind the events that befall Scotland. This proclamation bounces around Macbeth’s head and has bloody consequences. A stranger’s words can have an unimaginable impact on our fate as

illustrated by Macbeth's encounter with the Weird Sisters. Those we hold in high esteem are even more influential upon our fate; Lady Macbeth is a clear example of this.

Lady Macbeth's role in stoking the fires of Macbeth's ambition is apparent. From her first lines in the play, we see Lady Macbeth's plot to encourage Macbeth to treachery: "...yet I do fear thy nature; It is too full o' the milk of human kindness...Art not without ambition, but without the illness should attend it (11-12)."⁸ In act I scene VII, Lady Macbeth pushes her husband to act upon the plot to usurp Duncan. It is fair to assume that Macbeth's vile acts would never have come to be without the influence Lady Macbeth had on his character – Lady Macbeth initially acknowledges the lack of wickedness in her husband. The sway others have on one's character is an undeniable force. Our interactions, however small or large, lend themselves to pushing fate further on its course.

Shakespeare's conception of fate in *Macbeth* seems to give credence to the idea that fate is participatory. Fate can be influenced by any person or event that affects a person's character, whether it is in random encounters or intimate relationships. Macbeth's encounter with the witches shows how strangers can exert influence upon one's fate. Looking to the more intimate relationships we have with others allows us to fully appreciate the participatory nature of fate as seen in Lady Macbeth.

Contemporary Explorations of Renaissance Fate

Renaissance fate is not shackled to literature from the past; this conception is present in contemporary discourse as well. In his paper "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," Harry Frankfurt gives an account of freedom of the will that has

echoes of renaissance fate. Frankfurt makes a sharp distinction between first-order desires, which are those desires which come to us to act or not act without reflection, and second-order desires, which are those desires which make us reflect upon whether we want to obey a first order desire. To Frankfurt, one can only act freely when first order desires coincide with second-order desires: one reflects and wants a certain desire to be of one's own will. This model of freedom of will has affinities with the conception of renaissance fate. Frankfurt's decider can only choose freely if their decision reflects upon and agrees with the desires that stem from one's internal character. To Frankfurt, decisions that coincide with a person's chosen character are free decisions. To the renaissance fatalist, decisions that flow from one's character are the manifestations of fate.⁹

Fated character is formulated to perfection in the example of Frankfurt's willing addict. The willing addict is an addict who is delighted with his first-order desires to consume a drug. He reflects upon his addiction with glee; Frankfurt states that "[h]is will is outside his control, but, by his second-order desire that his desire for the drug should be effective, he has made this will his own."¹⁰ This reflection and agreement with his addiction makes the willing addict not only a person to Frankfurt but an agent exercising free will. The willing addict is thus doomed to addiction by his character that cares not for reform. This example resonates with Apollo's remarks to Sextus: "To you, indeed, he assigned an evil soul with no resource for reform."¹¹ The unwilling addict's character seals his fate. Frankfurt further discusses different categories of addicts and their capabilities for blame or praise and freedom or fetters. He finds that their addiction is not the most important factor. The crucial factor is the addict's character, which determines

whether the addict has the possibility for reform or is condemned to happily embracing addiction.

A similar idea of fate appears in a surprising place – Jean-Paul Sartre’s play *No Exit*. The chilling account of hell in *No Exit* brings the character of the occupants of this particular hell under a microscope. The three lodgers in this room all look for their torturers at first, but, as the play progresses, they come to understand that each occupant provides torture for another. Each person recounts character failings that led to eternal punishment. One of the occupants, Inez, decides to take up the cause of saving another occupant, Estelle. The third, Garcin, warns Inez that this action is what the creators of hell had in mind for her punishment. When Inez shuns the warning, her words echo renaissance fatalism: “Do I look like that sort of person who lets go? I know what’s coming to me. I’m going to burn, and it’s to last forever. Yes, I *know* everything. But do you think I’ll let go? ... A trap! Don’t I know it, and that I’m in a trap myself, up to the neck, and there’s nothing to be done about it? And if it suits their book, so much the better!”¹² Inez’s recognition that she is the sort of person who can do nothing else but play into the book shows the resonance of renaissance fatalism even in an unlikely place.

Though an account of freedom and *No Exit* look as if they would be poor support to show the strength of fate, the ideas expressed in Frankfurt’s essay and Sartre’s *No Exit* have renaissance fate overtones. Frankfurt’s account of free will demonstrates that the influence of character upon how decisions are made and what they lead to is alive and well. Sartre’s portrayal of Inez as resigned to her fate is reminiscent of the line of Captain Ahab. Perhaps the invoking of renaissance fate as a doctrine will remain out of style but its influence upon the discussion of free choice is undeniable.

Could Have Done Otherwise

The concept of “could have done otherwise” is a central issue in the free will debate. Are there really possible alternative possibilities? The view of renaissance fatalism on this topic is akin to Martin Luther’s famous quote: “Here I stand, I can do no other.”¹³ Renaissance fatalism comes to this point is by stepping back and looking at the larger narrative of one’s life. The sum of all that has happened and all forces shaping character eliminates any chance of a person doing otherwise. To the renaissance fatalist, it is meaningless to say that one had a real alternative possibility because, like Captain Ahab, we are laid upon iron rails and grooved to run our course.

Conclusion

What renaissance fate offers us is a compelling version of fate that leaves necessity in our actions from the necessity of who we are. This kind of fatalism gets us away from Cicero’s idea of fate: “If it is fated for you to recover from this illness, you will recover whether you call in a doctor or do not.”¹⁴ Instead, we are allowed what Shakespeare eloquently expressed in *Julius Caesar*: “Men at some time are masters of their fates: The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, But in ourselves that we are underlings...”¹⁵ We become the able executors of our fate and are fate’s main actors. There will always be forces outside our control, but if we are puppets, we are also puppeteers. We become empowered by fate rather than oppressed. Perhaps the death of classical fatalism in our modern world is a forgone conclusion, but one cannot argue that a person’s character is not inextricably linked to what one chooses and the outcomes attained. Determinism has the advantage of seeming to be more scientific, while a

libertarian position has the advantage of infinite freedom. However, renaissance fatalism places the importance on who the person is and how their ultimate goals manifest themselves. With every action and every decision we move toward our fated ends, whether we, like Macbeth, know what will be or are blind to our destiny.

Notes

1. Heraclitus, *On the Universe*, trans. W.H.S. Jones, (New York: William Heinemann Ltd, 1931), 68.
2. R.D. Dawe, ed., *Oedipus Rex*. (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 133.
3. Maugham, W. Somerset, "The Appointment in Samarra," *Kansas State University* (2002): <http://www.kstate.edu/english/baker/english320/Maugham-AS.htm> (accessed November 15, 2008).
4. Daniel C. Dennet, *Elbow Room: The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting* (Boston: The MIT Press, 1984), 10.
5. Lorenzo Di Valla, "Dialogue on Free Will," in *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, ed. Ernst Cassirer, Paul Oskar Kristeller, and John Herman Randall, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), 162-179.
6. William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2003).
7. Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2003), 208.
8. William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2003).
9. Harry G. Frankfurt, "Freedom of the will and the concept of a person," *Journal of Philosophy* 68 (1971): 5-20.
10. Harry G. Frankfurt, "Freedom of the will and the concept of a person," *Journal of Philosophy* 68 (1971):20.
11. Lorenzo Di Valla, "Dialogue on Free Will," in *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, ed. Ernst Cassirer, Paul Oskar Kristeller, and John Herman Randall, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), 173.

12. Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit and Three other Plays* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), 31.
13. Hillerbrand, Hans J. "Martin Luther: Diet of Worms," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2007.
14. Cicero, *On Fate* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1942), 225.
15. William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, ed. Lawrence Mason (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 9.

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