

Towards a Definition of Destiny

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January, 1994

INTRODUCTION

The word destiny is as fascinating as the concept it entails. We associate the vagueness of the future with it and roughly understand it to signify some sort of predetermined certainty in the always uncertain forward projection of the present.

It is the object of this brief paper to outline the general development of the Western notion of destiny and to delve into its significance regarding history in general and the development of the nation-state in particular.

Due to lack of space and economy of time we will not cover in depth the Near and Far Eastern concepts of destiny nor the understanding of it that non-Christian, non-Western culture may have.

PRIMARY DEFINITION

As a starting point for this essay we will establish the definition of destiny as the set of probabilities and the fulfillment of potentialities of any given living reality. I will seek to substantiate this definition with the information and the analysis provided below.

An assimilation of this definition hinges on the understanding of the different perspectives on time, fate, history, divinity, and human nature that have accumulated in the Western cultural experience.

ANCIENT AND PAGAN UNDERSTANDING OF DESTINY

The denizens of the ancient civilizations of Sumer, Nineveh (Assyrian) and Egypt believed themselves subjects of the will of the gods, defenseless before their wrath and never quite capable of satisfying divine demands. The Sumerians believed themselves to be literal slaves of the gods, whose lot was to work and serve the fierce divinities in whatever capacity their birth had allotted for them. (1) This belief was most probably influenced by the unpredictable flooding of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, between which their civilization flourished. (2)

The Assyrians believed themselves surrounded by spirits and other supernatural creatures, who ceaselessly employed men in their ethereal conflicts. Believing themselves the prey of these supernatural beings, the Assyrians themselves preyed on other tribes in their area. (3)

The Egyptians, somewhat more refined and complex in their beliefs, nonetheless also considered themselves subjects of an undying, divine force known as Pharaoh, who led the Egyptian people through the mortal bodies of different kings. It should be pointed out, however, that Egyptian religious beliefs became far more profound as time went on.

Their development of the idea of maat, or an undying force that manifested itself in all living beings¹ was certainly a major influence in the development of religious and philosophical ideas in the Western world.

[Maat was the goddess of truth “the wife of Thoth...daughter of Ra” “the fundamental idea of the word is straight, and from the Egyptian texts it is clear what maat meant right, time, truth, real, genuine, upright, righteous, just, steadfast, unalterable, etc.] Wallis Budge, E.A. The Book of the Dead. Dover Publications reproduction of 1895 book. NY, NY.

¹ This definition looks more like the Hindu concept of Atman

[Divine forces were outside not inside the Egyptians other than Pharaohs]

GREEK AND ROMAN UNDERSTANDING OF DESTINY

A profound questioning about the nature and the reason of existence does not appear in recorded civilization until the advent of the Achean culture on the Greek Peninsula. The ancient pagan cultures of Egypt and Mesopotamia accepted man's lot as that which he had been born into, and attempted to appease the terrifying power of nature with their religious rituals.

The Greeks, however, residents of city states like Athens, Miletus, and Thebes were apparently the first to ask themselves the why of existence. Although the different pre-Socratic philosophers such as Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes delved into the essential "stuff" of the universe, pre-Socratic thinking was characterized by a common belief: "They all thought of the universe as constructed by some underlying power or force, which (in building the universe, set its pattern so that the parts functioned with complete inevitableness. Man, as part of this universe, was governed by this inevitableness." (4)

This "inevitableness" is precisely what is understood as "fate" by the ancient Greek philosophers. (5)

[Fate for the Ancient Greek philosophers]

Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, however, affirmed, each in their own way, man's free will. Socrates believed that knowledge was the supreme good to which men strive and achievement of which resulted in the elevation of living. Plato, for his part, asserted man's ability to live justly and wisely. (6) It is Aristotle perhaps, who came up with the most interesting definition.

“Aristotle held that the supreme end of man was the realization of that which is highest and best in him as a human being, his reason.” (7) “So, the essence of a thing is the thing itself in its truest sense. But we may so ask, in what does a thing’s true being consist? Aristotle’s answer is that it is the form that is the fundamental being of a thing and is the cause of its being what it is. This is because it is only when a thing has realized its proper form that it becomes what is really is.” (8)

[Form. Philos. The intrinsic nature of something; essence (Funk & Wagnals standard desk dictionary V.I. p.251, 1984)]

Therefore, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle believed that man has a true, unique, inherent, and fundamental nature or mission, which he must strive to achieve in order to be truly what he is. Man, therefore, has a unique end or destiny, that he must strive to achieve even against fate, or the machinations of the world around him.

ZOROASTRIAN, JUDAIC, AND CHRISTIAN NOTIONS OF DESTINY

It is important to point out here that the early peoples and civilizations that we have reviewed above did not possess the same sense of linear history that our civilization does. It is even arguable whether they possessed a sense of history at all.

As Spengler argues in the Introduction to the first volume of “Decline of the West,” the notion of history has changed over the ages. “But the Classical culture possessed no memory, no organ of history in this special sense. The memory of the Classical man – so to call it, though it is somewhat arbitrary to apply to alien souls a notion derived from our own—is somewhat different, since past and future, as arraying perspectives in the working consciousness, are absent and the “pure Present,” which so often roused Goethe’s admiration in every product of the

Classical life and sculpture particularly, fills that life with an intensity that to us is perfectly unknown.” (9)

Spengler adds a few pages later that: “The scheme ‘ancient-medieval-modern’ in its first form was a creation of the Magian world-sense. It first appeared in the Persian and Jewish religions, after Cyrus received an apocalyptic sense in the teachings of the Book of Daniel on the four world-eras, and was developed into a world-history in the post-Christian religions of the East, notably the Gnostic systems.” (10)

And verily, the idea of a world-history, or the study of human events as leading to or with the perspective of a final, common end or destiny for man (telos), is based on the teleological teachings of the Zoroastrian (Persian), Judaic and Christian religions.

The Zoroastrian religion, which flourished among the elite of the Persian Empire, held that two powerful entities or gods held sway over the universe. One was Ahura Mazda, god of light and good, and the other Ahriman, god of evil and darkness. (11) The Zoroastrians were the first to establish a moral basis for life and a conception of good and evil. Their religion held that at the end of time Ahura Mazda and Ahriman would face each other in one great battle to determine the victory of either good or evil. All of man’s actions had to be carried out in furtherance of one of these established causes: good (light/fire) or darkness (darkness/night).

The Jewish religion was perhaps the first to develop the linear, teleological perspective of history and destiny that our civilization has. For the Old Testament is that: the story of the people of Israel, of their covenant with God and their fulfillment of that divine plan, how they both satisfy and fail it, and how there will come a point in time (a telos or end or destiny) when a messiah (one sent by God) will fulfill the promise and begin a new stage in that relationship. The

story of the people of Israel is how they either live up to that divine plan or how they abandon it, but the destiny continues to exist, whether they forget it or not.

The Christian perspective is in some ways a synthesis of the Zoroastrian and Judaic notions. Christians believe in an all-mighty God of good whose Word became flesh to free man from sin. This messiah (Christ) will come back at some point in time (Book of Revelations) when the forces of good and evil will struggle, although evil is already condemned to defeat. It is our choice to either accept the way of the Christ or to deny it. Herein lies our free will and the hope of our salvation.

At this point in time the sides are clearly drawn up in the debate over destiny and fate. The pre-Socratic Greek thinkers and even some interpreters of Zoroastrian, Judaic, and Christian notions will argue that man is bound up in an “inevitable universe,” one where free will is but an illusion and where man’s lost is drawn up by some invisible, unintelligible mechanism that condemns him to an existence over which he has no control.

On the other hand Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Zoroaster, the Hebrew prophets and Jesus himself seem to stress man’s ability to choose between right and wrong, to determine his (or hers, lest we be accused of a sexist bias) conduct.

Both sides draw up interesting questions: First of all, how can any rational person deny man’s constant need to decide, to create, to change his present? However, what meaning can any of this creation or independent decision-making have when the Tigris and the Euphrates can overflow and destroy our villagers and crops, or a volcano can erupt causing a flood that will destroy Minoan civilization, or Andrew can ravage Dade County or an earthquake can rip

through Los Angeles? How can there be destiny when everything is so...well, uncertain? But then again, how can there NOT be meaning to our lives?

[The meaning of life (we meet here)]

Before we move on, let's not forget the Stoics. Chronologically they come in at some point in time between the last books of the Old Testament and the coming of Christ. The Stoics did not resolve this issue in their philosophy but rather, incorporated it wholeheartedly into their belief system. Stoic metaphysics was determinist, or fate-bound, but their morality was not.

“In their ethics the Stoics teach that man may determine for himself whether or not he will obey the moral law, whether or not he will follow reason and seek to realize the supreme good. Man may give himself to his passions and become their slave, or he may escape from his passions and rise to a moral life above them. As he conquers his passions he becomes free. This, for the Stoic, is true freedom.” (12)

For the Stoics the measure of men lay in how they faced their fate, or the “inevitableness” of the material universe which they inhabit.

RESOLVING THE CONFLICT

If there is an answer to this dilemma, it lays in the study and understanding of history. Why? Simply put because if there is no free will, no freedom of choice, if man is devoid of the ability to better his life, to fulfill a higher ideal or destiny or potentiality, then the record of his collective, social history would be devoid of meaning, aimless, and hollow. However, if by looking back we can find the patterns of accumulated reason in man's social experience, then man as a whole, in his most obvious, abstract truth, is endowed with meaning.

[I don't have a problem with free will]

The idea of finding man's collective truth in his accumulated social experience over time (Universal History) is relatively new.

[Searching for collective truth?]

In fact, it could not begin unless the arguments presented above had taken place. Both Plato and Aristotle took steps in this direction.

“Despite the fact that the Western philosophical and historical tradition started in Greece, the writers of Greek antiquity never undertook such a project [the writing of a Universal History]. Plato in the Republic spoke about a certain natural cycle of regimes, while Aristotle's Politics discussed the causes of revolution and how one type of regime led to another.” (13)

Aristotle once again laid the groundwork for the notion of Universal History. “He held that man is by nature a social animal and, as such, can realize his truest self only in society and among his kind.” (14)

The consequence of his formulation was a perception that man could only fulfill his highest potentiality or end or destiny, in society. Since man is a social animal and since the social self of man develops not only in the present but as an accumulation of the past and as a projection towards the future, man's truest self can only be achieved through historical action.

The dilemma of destiny versus faith is present in both Plato and Aristotle, for “...he believed that the cycle of regimes was embedded in a larger natural cycle, whereby cataclysms like floods would periodically eliminate not only existing human societies, but all memory of them as well, forcing men to start the historical process over again from the beginning.” (15)

MEDIEVAL MUSINGS ON DESTINY

Medieval Christian thinkers, imbued with the teleology of their faith and determined to reconcile it with the Classical thinking that attracted them, dealt head on with the problem of a Universal History.

“While there were Greek and Roman efforts to write histories of the known world, it was Christianity that first introduced the concept of the equality of all men in the sight of God, and thereby conceived of a shared destiny for all the peoples of the world. A Christian historian such as Saint Augustine had no interest in the particular histories of the Greeks or the Jews as such; what mattered was the redemption of man as man, an event that would constitute the working out of God’s will on earth. All nations were but branches of a more general humanity, whose fate could be understood in terms of God’s plan for mankind. Christianity moreover, introduced the concept of a history that was finite in time, beginning with God’s creation of man and ending with his final salvation.”(16)

The medieval notion of destiny can perhaps best be understood if we look at one of its central institutions: the quest. Whether it be Paracelsus searching with his alchemy for the philosophical stone of the Knights of the Round Table or the Knights Templar searching for the Holy Grail, the quest is analogous to man’s search for destiny. Ultimately what matters is not the attainment of a linear, material goal (the physical artifact that can magically achieve salvation for he who finds it, the equally magical substance that turn any metal into gold) that man achieves before death surprises him, but rather the greater truths that the effort itself reveals, the fulfillment of a higher ideal of humanity (the knight who achieves an understanding of courage

and humility becoming a better human being, the alchemist who discovers a love for research and experimentation becoming an honest seeker of truth).

[Is the fulfillment in the search?]

It is during the Renaissance that this idea of history as the battleground for the fulfillment of man's destiny in a world that may represent obstacles and contradictions finally took a firm hold. As the fifteenth century Florentine architect Leon Battista Alberti expressed it, "Men can do all things if they will." (17)

"The metaphor comparing human history to the life of a single man, and the idea that modern man, building on the accomplishments of the ancients, lived in the "old age of mankind," was suggested by several writers in this period, including Pascal." (18)

DESTINY AND NATIONHOOD

The full development of the idea of a united destiny for the human community comes with the advent of the nation-states. The unity of different communities, although bonded by perhaps a common language, tradition or geography, could no longer be simply imposed from above by all-powerful sovereigns, as in the empires of Cyrus and Alexander. The Christian and Renaissance ideas of human equality and dignity had penetrated too deeply in the collective consciousness for it to be otherwise.

Therefore, the first nation-state to truly constitute itself on the European mainland, the Spanish, cements the unity of slightly different peoples and regions on a common ideal, a common destiny, rather than subjugation for the sake of subjugation to the power and authority of a central ruler.

Fernando and Isabel and their successors, Charles V and Phillip II, held that Spain's destiny, the reason for its existence, was the defense and propagation of the Catholic faith. The Spanish were united and distinguished by this common duty. The nation in this way differed from other political states that had preceded it for this reason: the unity of territory, language, and geography was founded on an overriding unity of purpose or destiny.

It was this explosive notion that sparked the final defeat of the Moslems on the Iberian Peninsula, the discovery and conquest of America, the reformation of Catholicism, and the establishment of the largest land mass empire since Rome on the European mainland. For whereas previous monarchs had called on their men to battle and hardship based on the identification with one sovereign or one ruling family, the Catholic monarchs called on their legions to sacrifice themselves for the furtherance of a common, universal goal: the defense and propagation of a universal faith. In this mission, men of different walks of life felt themselves truly fulfilled, felt their personal and collective destinies intertwined and their lives therefore gained a measure of transcendence.

It is from this historical period that Renan's maxim that: "Tener glorias comunes en el pasado, una voluntad común en el presente; haber hecho juntos grandes cosas, querer hacer otras más; he aquí las condiciones esenciales para ser un pueblo...En el pasado, una herencia de glorias y remordimientos; en el porvenir, un mismo programa que realizar...La existencia de una nación es un plebiscito cotidiano," has its root. (19)

The achievement of nationhood constitutes the fulfillment of man's social self precisely because the different potentialities with which he is born, culture, space, time, memory etc. are harmonized by a higher working of his intellect and sensibility. The definition of a common ideal

and a common project binds men in their common humanity. The application of the imagination to the social reality is therefore a crowning achievement in man's evolution toward a higher state of being.

As Ortega y Gasset affirms: "No hay creación estatal si la mente de ciertos pueblos no es capaz de abandonar la estructura tradicional de una forma de convivencia y, además, de imaginar otra nunca sida. Por eso es auténtica creación. El Estado comienza por ser una obra de imaginación absoluta. La imaginación es el poder liberador que el hombre tiene. Un pueblo es capaz de Estado en la medida en que sepa imaginar. De aquí que todos los pueblos hayan tenido un límite en su evolución estatal, precisamente el límite impuesto por la Naturaleza a su fantasía." (20)

SCIENCE VERSUS FATE

Until now we have seen how man's notion of his own possibilities has evolved throughout history. From the very ancient civilizations that believed themselves the subjects of the gods or natural forces that controlled their lives, to the Greek thinkers who aspired to understand the mechanics of the universe and believed man to be part of the "inevitable" machinery of things, to Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle who believed that man indeed was capable of molding his own life, of living up to a higher ideal, which was nonetheless contrasted against the inevitable workings of an uncontrollable mother nature (or, in the Greek view, the whims of the gods).

Christianity imbued men with an ideal of universal equality and with a purposeful end to man's affairs, therefore setting the stage for the development of a universal history that can make man's moral, intellectual and material growth. This Christian ideal is further reinforced by the

Renaissance notion that man “can achieve all that he wills.” The appearance of the nation-states, starting off with the Spanish, is the irrefutable fulfillment of this drive to channel man’s social and individual energies toward a common end, capable of granting lasting meaning to both.

But as Ortega y Gasset states in the quotation above, **“De aquí que todos los pueblos hayan tenido un límite en su evolución estatal, precisamente el límite impuesto por la Naturaleza a su fantasía,”** nature itself limits the development of the nation-state. This geographic reality or determinism is the fate of the nation...or that which is beyond the grasp of its collective historical will and against which the historical will must struggle to fulfill its potentiality. However, in the measure that man proves capable of understanding and eventually harnessing the power of nature, it is seen that it is within his possibility to override his fate.

The development of natural science is crucial to man’s understanding of his power and destiny.

“The method that we associate with Galileo, Bacon, and Descartes assumed the possibility of a knowledge and therefore a mastery of nature, which was in turn subject to a set of coherent and universal laws. Knowledge of these laws was not only accessible to man as man, but was cumulative, such that successive generations could be spared the efforts and mistakes of earlier ones. Thus the modern notion of progress had its origins in the success of modern natural science, and allowed Francis Bacon to assert the superiority of modernity to antiquity on the basis of inventions like the compass, printing press and gunpowder.” (21)

A POLITICAL FAITH

The American and French Revolutions were the political result of this current of faith in man’s destiny. The principles of freedom, equality, and fraternity were the epitome of the ideal

of a destiny born out of free will. Revolutionaries in the Thirteen Colonies and France fervently believed that man could become the master of his own fate. That equality and freedom would give man the incentive to create and continuously pass on knowledge, forging a better world with the passing of each generation, while fraternity would harmonize individual free wills into a happy social whole.

Thinkers such as Kant and Hegel assimilated this firm belief into their philosophical systems. “And as Kant postulated, there was an end point to the process of history, which is the realization of freedom here on earth... ‘The History of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of Freedom.’” (22)

“For Hegel, the embodiment of human freedom was the modern constitutional state, or again, what we have called liberal democracy. The Universal History of mankind was nothing other than man’s progressive rise to full rationality, and to a self-conscious awareness of how that rationality expresses itself in liberal self-government.” (23)

The nineteenth century can therefore be said to constitute, from the point of view of humanist philosophy and political aspiration, an orgy of faith in man and his ability to consistently build a better life.

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The twentieth century has shaken man’s faith in his own destiny. The two world wars and the nuclear age have witnessed science put at the service of inhumanity and the rise of totalitarian states which have ideologically disputed the principle of free will that inspired the democratic revolutions of America and France.

Trench warfare, the use of chemical weapons, the concentration camps, the atomic bombs, germ warfare, etc. have all been examples of the use of science to increase nature's violence against man, rather than to improve man's environment. Pollution, global warming and other environmental problems have also borne witness to the difficulty that man finds in totally subduing nature without dangerous long-term effects.

Upon discovering that man's fate is not so easily mastered, many thinkers have despaired. The existentialists, for example, questioned whether there was a transcendent human destiny at all and affirmed that each man is a world unto himself and must therefore bear upon his shoulders the need to forge a personal purpose out of the purposefulness of existence.

Other philosophies of the twentieth century, such as Nazism and Marxism-Leninism have also discarded free will, placing their faith in the inevitability of the ultra-human forces, whether it be genetics and the rising of a superior race in the case of Nazism or the inexorable development of the laws of history in the case of Marxism.

However, thinkers such as Bergson, Ortega y Gasset, Heidegger, to a certain extent Camus, Jacques Maritain, Victor Frankl and others, have defended the ideal of a better humanity, achievable not through any inevitable movement of history, but rather through the continuous harnessing of man's creative energies.

Overall it can be said that in terms of the development of Western thought, the latter half of the twentieth century has been one in which pessimism has predominated. Brought on perhaps by the brutal assault to the senses of totalitarianism, by the ever-present danger of nuclear war or by the growing threat of grave and irreparable ecological damage to the world.

The fall of the Berlin Wall as symbolic of the breakdown of the Soviet bloc and its totalitarian doctrine, the growing entry of China into the world of free market economics and the increase of liberal democratic regimes around the world has started to stem this tide of pessimism. The philosophical thought emerging from the Eastern European dissident movement, where a thinking minority had to struggle against all obstacles to preserve its humanity in times of tyranny, has also contributed greatly to this newly rising faith in man's spiritual possibility and moral potentiality.

Thinkers such as Czech President Vaclav Havel seek a certainty to life that lies in a person's ability to live up to a higher ideal, to distinguish between right and wrong, truth and falsehood, and live according to this conviction. The future will not improve out of inertia, but rather through our own individual actions, through our reverence for the transcendent importance of right.

The inexorable movement of history cannot be trusted to produce a better future out of a predetermined dialectical outcome, this is the very fallacy of Marxist thought that these thinkers reject.

THE DILEMMA

What then, is destiny?

The set of possibilities and the fulfillment of potentialities of any given living reality.

Fine. What does this mean?

Simple.

Ortega y Gasset says:

“Pero el destino—lo que vitalmente se tiene que ser o no se tiene que ser —no se discute, sino que se acepta o no. Si lo aceptamos, somos auténticos; si no lo aceptamos, somos la

negación, la falsificación de nosotros mismos. El destino no consiste en aquello que tenemos ganas de hacer; más bien se reconoce y muestra su claro, riguroso perfil en la conciencia de tener que hacer lo que no tenemos ganas.” (24)

Jacques Maritain said something as to the effect that “Humanity is always perfectible, but never perfect.”

Throughout history man has shown himself capable of imagining a better form of life, of distinguishing a higher ideal of humanity, and has struggled in pursuit of it. This then is man’s collective destiny, to achieve a higher state of humanity that will in turn facilitate an even higher ideal and so on and so on. What is man’s personal destiny? To identify the ideal of humanity of his time, his age, his territory, his culture, and his religion (his possibilities: that into which he is born and has no control over) and fuse them with what he perceives to be the permanent ideal of humanity. He must harness these two into a living reality. This is his potentiality.

Well, then what is fate?

Fate consists of those circumstances and realities over which man has no control. Nature, for one. We cannot choose our nation’s geographic limitations of resources.

And in the human sense, in a universe of free will, we cannot control the actions of the multitude of humans that inhabit the planet with us. I can be run over by a drunk driver as I walk to work or mugged by a crack addict as I leave a movie theater. I may be born into a starving country where theft is almost literally thrust on me in order to survive and yet still condemn this sorry state of affairs and dream of a better future.

Fate are the conditions amidst which our destiny must be found and fulfilled. Fate can only limit our ambition (that is to say, our material striving), but never our destiny (our spiritual longing), for destiny is precisely an ideal, an intangible substance which passes from one generation to the next. Sudden death should not diminish a person's humanity if they have attempted to use every second of the time allotted to them in pursuit of their destiny. In so doing, they have fulfilled this ideal for part of it lies in the very search for it. Destiny reveals itself to us only to have us understand and imagine it further. It is not wonder then that the Scriptures warn us to live day by day, for death shall come like a thief in the night.

Ultimately, we are left with the proverbial glass with water either half-full or half-empty.

The glass and the water are our fate.

Our destiny lies in what we do with it.