

Lucius Mestrius Plutarchus

On Fate

Translated by R Brown¹

From *Plutarch's Morals*. Translated from the Greek by Several Hands. Corrected and revised by William W. Goodwin with an Introduction by Ralph Waldo Emerson. (1st ed. 1684-1694, London, 5 Vols.) Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1878 (based on the 5th ed. of 1718); Vol. V, pp. 293-308.



Haywain triptych (1485-1490) Hieronymus Bosch, El Escorial

¹ "This little Treatise is so pitiously torne, maimed, and dismembred thorowout, that a man may sooner divine and guess thereat (as I have done) than translate it. I beseech the readers therefore, to hold me excused, in case I neither please my selfe, nor content them, in that which I have written." — Holland.



Train of thought

- Fate is either (1) an energy, a law, an act or (2) a substance, the soul of the world.
- Though comprehending infinite, it is itself finite, for law is in its nature finite.
- Every thing moves in a circle; all beings and all actions that now exist will come around again: we shall again do what we are now doing, and in the same manner.
- Fate, the Divine Law, the Law of Nature, determines all things.
- It determines both conditionally and universally.
- What relation has Fate to Divine Providence? what to fortune? what to human ability? what to contingent events?
- As the civil law comprehends and relates to many things which are not lawful, so it is with Fate.
- The words possible and contingent defined; also power, necessity, &c.
- Of causes: some are causes per se, others are causes by accident.
- Fortune is a cause by accident.
- Fortune is not the same thing as Chance, though Chance comprehends Fortune.
- Fortune relates to men only; Chance includes things animate and inanimate.
- Divine Providence. (1) the will of the Supreme Deity; (2) the will of the subordinate deities; (3) the will of the Daemons.
- Of the Providence of the Supreme God.
- Of the Providence of the inferior gods.
- Of the Providence of the Daemons.



I will endeavor, my dearest Piso, to send you my opinion concerning Fate, written with all the clearness and compendiousness I am capable of; since you, who are not ignorant how cautious I am of writing, have thought fit to make it the subject of your request.

1 You are first then to know that this word Fate is spoken and understood two manner of ways; the one as it is an energy, the other as it is a substance. First therefore, as it is an action, Plato² has under a type described it, saying thus in his dialogue entitled Phaedrus:

“And this is a sanction of Adrastea (or an inevitable ordinance), that whatever soul being an attendant on God,” &c.

And in his treatise called Timaeus:

“The laws which God in the nature of the universe has established for immortal souls.”

And in his book of a Commonweal he calls Fate

“the speech of the virgin Lachesis, who is the daughter of Necessity.”

By which sentences he not tragically but theologically shows us what his sentiments are in this matter. Now if any one, translating the fore-cited passages, would have them expressed in more familiar terms, the description in Phaedrus may be thus explained: That Fate is a divine sentence, intransgressible because its cause cannot be divested or hindered. And according to what he has said in his Timaeus, it is a law ensuing on the nature of the universe, according to which all things that are done are transacted. For this does Lachesis effect, who is indeed the daughter of Necessity, — as we have both already related, and shall yet better understand by that which will be said in the progress of our discourse. Thus you see what Fate is, when it is taken for an action.

2 But as it is a substance, it seems to be the universal soul of the world, and admits of a threefold distribution; the first destiny being that which errs not; the second, that which is thought to err; and the third that which, being under the heaven, is conversant about the earth. Of these, the highest is called Clotho, the next Atropos, and the lowest, Lachesis; who, receiving the celestial influences and efficacies of her sisters, transmits and fastens them to the terrestrial things which are under her government. Thus have we declared briefly what is to be said of Fate, taken as a substance; what it is, what are its parts, after what manner it is, how it is ordained, and how it stands, both in respect to itself and to us. But as to the particularities of these things, there is another fable in his Commonweal, by which they are in some measure covertly insinuated, and we ourselves have, in the best manner we can, endeavored to explain them to you.

² See Plato, *Phaedrus*, p. 248c; *Timaeus*, p. 41e; *Republic*, X. p. 617d.



3 But we now once again turn our discourse to Fate, as it is an energy. For concerning this it is that there are so many natural, moral, and logical questions. Having therefore already in some sort sufficiently defined what it is, we are now in the next place to say something of its quality, although it may to many seem absurd. I say then that Fate, though comprehending as it were in a circle the infinity of all those things which are and have been from infinite times and shall be to infinite ages, is not in itself infinite, but determinate and finite; for neither law, reason, nor any other divine thing can be infinite. And this you will the better understand, if you consider the total revolution and the whole time in which the revolutions of the eight circles (that is, of the eight spheres of the fixed stars, sun, moon, and five planets), having (as Timaeus³ says) finished their course, return to one and the same point, being measured by the circle of the Same, which goes always after one manner. For in this order, which is finite and determinate, shall all things (which, as well in heaven as in earth, consist by necessity from above) be reduced to the same situation, and restored again to their first beginning. Wherefore the habitude of heaven alone, being thus ordained in all things, as well in regard of itself as of the earth and all terrestrial matters, shall again (after long revolutions) one day return; and those things that in order follow after, and being linked together in a continuity are maintained in their course, shall be present, every one of them by necessity bringing what is its own. But for the better clearing of this matter, let us understand that whatever is in us or about us is not wrought by the course of the heavens and heavenly influences, as being entirely the efficient cause both of my writing what I now write, and of your doing also what you at present do, and in the same manner as you do it. Hereafter then, when the same cause shall return, we shall do the same things we now do, and in the same manner, and shall again become the same men; and so it will be with all others. And that which follows after shall also happen by the following cause; and in brief, all things that shall happen in the whole and in every one of these universal revolutions shall again become the same. By this it appears (as we have said before) that Fate, being in some sort infinite, is nevertheless determinate and finite; and it may be also in some sort seen and comprehended, as we have farther said, that it is as it were a circle. For as a motion of a circle is a circle, and the time that measures it is also a circle; so the order of things which are done and happen in a circle may be justly esteemed and called a circle.

4 This therefore, though there should be nothing else, almost shows us what sort of thing Fate is; but not particularly or in every respect. What kind of thing then is it in its own form? It is, as far as one can compare it, like to the civil or politic law. For first it commands the most part of things at least, if not all, conditionally; and then it comprises (as far as is possible for it) all things that belong to the public in general; and the better to make you understand both the one and the other, we must specify them by an example. The civil law speaks and ordains in general of a valiant man, and also of a deserter and a coward; and in the same manner of others. Now this is not to make the law speak of this or that man in particular, but principally to propose such things as are universal or general, and consequently such as fall under them. For we may very well say, that it is legal to reward this man for having de-

³ Plato, *Tim.* p. 39d.



meant himself valiantly, and to punish that man for flying from his colors; because the law has virtually — though not in express terms and particularly yet in such general ones as they are comprehended under, — so determined of them. As the law (if I may so speak) of physicians and masters of corporal exercises potentially comprehends particular and special things within the general; so the law of Nature, determining first and principally general matters, secondarily and consequently determines such as are particular. Thus, general things being decreed by Fate, particular and individual things may also in some sort be said to be so, because they are so by consequence with the general. But perhaps some one of those who more accurately examine and more subtly search into these things may say, on the contrary, that particular and individual things precede the composition of general things, and that the general exist only for the particular, since that for which another thing is always goes before that which is for it. Nevertheless, this is not the proper place to treat of this difficulty, but it is to be remitted to another. However, that Fate comprehends not all things clearly and expressly, but only such as are universal and general, let it pass for resolved on at present, as well for what we have already said a little before, as for what we shall say hereafter. For that which is finite and determinate, agreeing properly with divine Providence, is seen more in universal and general things than in particular; such therefore is the divine law, and also the civil; but infinity consists in particulars and individuals.

After this we are to declare what this term “conditionally” means; for it is to be thought that Fate is also some such thing. That then is said to be conditionally, which is supposed to exist not of itself or absolutely, but as really dependent upon and joined to another; which signifies a suit and consequence.

“And this is the sanction of Adrastea (or an inevitable ordinance), that whatever soul, being an attendant on God, shall see any thing of truth, shall till another revolution be exempt from punishment; and if it is always able to do the same, it shall never suffer any damage.”⁴

This is said both conditionally and also universally. Now that Fate is some such thing is clearly manifest, as well from its substance as from its name. For it is called *εμπαρμένη* as being *επιρομένη*, that is, dependent and linked; and it is a sanction or law, because things are therein ordained and disposed consequentially, as is usual in civil government.

5 We ought in the next place to consider and treat of mutual relation and affection; that is, what reference and respect Fate has to divine Providence, what to Fortune, what also to “that which is in our power,” what to contingent and other such like things; and furthermore we are to determine, how far and in what it is true or false that all things happen and are done by and according to Fate. For if the meaning is, that all things are comprehended and contained in Fate, it must be granted that this proposition is true; and if any would farther have it so understood, that all things which are done amongst men, on earth, and in heaven are placed in Fate, let this also pass as granted for the present. But if (as the expression seems rather to imply)

⁴ This is the whole passage from Plato’s *Phaedrus*, p. 248c, of which part is quoted in § 1. (G.)



the “being done according to Fate” signifies not all things, but only that which is an immediate consequent of Fate, then it must not be said that all things happen and are done by and according to Fate, though all things are so according to Fate as to be comprised in it. For all things that the law comprehends and of which it speaks are not legal or according to law; for it comprehends treason, it treats of the cowardly running away from one’s colors in time of battle, of adultery, and many other such like things, of which it cannot be said that any one of them is lawful. Neither indeed can I affirm of the performing a valorous act in war, the killing of a tyrant, or the doing any other virtuous deed, that it is legal; because that only is proper to be called legal, which is commanded by the law. Now if the law commands these things, how can they avoid being rebels against the law and transgressors of it, who neither perform valiant feats of arms, kill tyrants, nor do any other such remarkable acts of virtue? And if they are transgressors of the law, why is it not just they should be punished? But if this is not reasonable, it must then be also confessed that these things are not legal or according to law; but that legal and according to law is only that which is particularly prescribed and expressly commanded by the law, in any action whatsoever. In like manner, those things only are fatal and according to Fate, which are the consequences of causes preceding in the divine disposition. So that Fate indeed comprehends all things which are done; yet many of those things that are comprehended in it, and almost all that precede, should not (to speak properly) be pronounced to be fatal or according to Fate.

6 These things being so, we are next in order to show, how “that which is in our power” (or free will), Fortune, possible, contingent, and other like things which are placed among the antecedent causes, can consist with Fate, and Fate with them; for Fate, as it seems, comprehends all things, and yet all these things will not happen by necessity, but every one of them according to the principle of its nature. Now the nature of the possible is to presubstist, as the genus, and to go before the contingent; and the contingent, as the matter and subject, is to be presupposed to free will; and our free will ought as a master to make use of the contingent; and Fortune comes in by the side of free will, through the property of the contingent of inclining to either part. Now you will more easily apprehend what has been said, if you shall consider that every thing which is generated, and the generation itself, is not done without a generative faculty or power, and the power is not without a substance. As for example, neither the generation of man, nor that which is generated, is without a power; but this power is about man, and man himself is the substance. Now the power or faculty is between the substance, which is the powerful, and the generation and the thing generated, which are both possibles. There being then these three things, the power, the powerful, and the possible; before the power can exist, the powerful must of necessity be presupposed as its subject, and the power must also necessarily subsist before the possible. By this deduction then may in some measure be understood what is meant by possible; which may be grossly defined as “that which power is able to produce”; or yet more exactly, if to this same there be added, “provided there be nothing from without to hinder or obstruct it.” Now of possible things there are some which can never be hindered, as are those in heaven, to wit, the rising and setting of the stars, and the like to these; but others may indeed be hindered, as are the most part of human things, and many also of those which are done in the air. The first, as



being done by necessity, are called necessary; the others, which may fall one way or other, are called contingent; and they may both thus be described. The necessary possible is that whose contrary is impossible; and the contingent possible is that whose contrary is also possible. For that the sun should set is a thing both necessary and possible, forasmuch as it is contrary to this that the sun should not set, which is impossible; but that, when the sun is set, there should be rain or not rain, both the one and the other is possible and contingent. And then again of things contingent, some happen oftener, others rarely and not so often, others fall out equally or indifferently, as well the one way as the other, even as it happens. Now it is manifest that those are contrary to one another, — to wit, those which fall out oftener and those which happen but seldom, — and they both for the most part depend on Nature; but that which happens equally, as much one way as another, depends on our selves. For that under the Dog it should be either hot or cold, the one oftener, the other seldom, are both things subject to Nature; but to walk and not to walk, and all such things of which both the one and the other are submitted to the free will of man, are said to be in us and our election; but rather more generally to be in us. For there are two sorts of this “being in our power”; the one of which proceeds from some sudden passion and motion of the mind, as from anger or pleasure; the other from the discourse and judgment of reason, which may properly be said to be in our election. And some reason there is to believe that this possible and contingent is the same thing with that which is said to be in us and according to our free will, although differently named. For in respect to the future, it is styled possible and contingent; and in respect of the present, it is named “in our power” and “in our free will.” So that these things may thus be defined: The contingent is that which is itself — as well as its contrary — possible; and “that which is in our power” is one part of the contingent, to wit, that which now takes place according to our will. Thus have we in a manner declared, that the possible in the order of Nature precedes the contingent, and that the contingent subsists before free will; as also what each of them is, whence they are so named, and what are the qualities adjoined or appertaining to them.

7 It now remains, that we treat of Fortune and casual adventure, and whatever else is to be considered with them. It is therefore certain that Fortune is a cause. Now of causes, some are causes by themselves, and others by accident. Thus for example, the proper cause by itself of an house or a ship is the art of the mason, the carpenter, or the shipwright; but causes by accident are music, geometry, and whatever else may happen to be joined with the art of building houses or ships, in respect either of the body, the soul, or any exterior thing. Whence it appears, that the cause by itself must needs be determinate and one; but the causes by accident are never one and the same, but infinite and undetermined. For many — nay, infinite — accidents, wholly different one from the other, may be in one and the same subject. Now the cause by accident, when it is found in a thing which not merely is done for some end but has in it free will and election, is then called Fortune; as is the finding a treasure while one is digging a hole to plant a tree, or the doing or suffering some extraordinary thing whilst one is flying, following, or otherwise walking, or only turning about, provided it be not for the sake of that which happens, but for some other intention. Hence it is, that some of the ancients have declared Fortune to be a cause unknown,



that cannot be foreseen by the human reason. But according to the Platonics, who have approached yet nearer to the true reason of it, it is thus defined: Fortune is a cause by accident, in those things which are done for some end, and which are of our election. And afterwards they add, that it is unforeseen and unknown to the human reason; although that which is rare and strange appears also by the same means to be in this kind of cause by accident. But what this is, if it is not sufficiently evidenced by the oppositions and disputations made against it, will at least most clearly be seen by what is written in Plato's *Phaedo*, where you will find these words:

PHAED. Have you not heard how and in what manner the judgment passed?

ECH. Yes indeed; for there came one and told us of it. At which we wondered very much that the judgment having been given long before, it seems that he died a great while after. And what, *Phaedo*, might be the cause of it?

PHAED. It was a fortune which happened to him, Echecrates. For it chanced that, the day before the judgment, the stern of the galley which the Athenians send every year to the isle of Delos was crowned.⁵

In which discourse it is to be observed, that the expression *happened to him* is not simply to be understood by *was done* or *came to pass*, but it much rather regards what befell him through the concurrence of many causes together, one being done with regard to another. For the priest crowned the ship and adorned it with garlands for another end and intention, and not for the sake of Socrates; and the judges also had for some other cause condemned him. But the event was strange, and of such a nature that it might seem to have been effected by the providence of some human creature, or rather of some superior powers. And so much may suffice to show with what Fortune must of necessity subsist, and that there must be first some subject of such things as are in our free will: its effect is, moreover, like itself called Fortune.

But chance or casual adventure is of a larger extent than Fortune; which it comprehends, and also several other things which may of their own nature happen sometimes one way, sometimes another. And this, as it appears by the derivation of its name, which is in Greek *αυτόματου*, *chance*, is that which happens of itself, when that which is ordinary happens not, but another thing in its place; such as cold in the dog-days seems to be; for it is sometimes then cold. . . . Once for all, as "that which is in our power" is a part of the contingent, so Fortune is a part of chance or casual adventure; and both the two events are conjoined and dependent on the one and the other, to wit, chance on contingent, and Fortune on "that which is in our power," — and yet not on all, but on what is in our election, as we have already said. Wherefore chance is common to things inanimate, as well as to those which are animated; whereas Fortune is proper to man only, who has his actions voluntary. And an argument of this is, that to be fortunate and to be happy are thought to be one and the same thing. Now happiness is a certain well-doing, and well-doing is proper only to man, and to him perfect.

⁵ Plato, *Phaedo*, p. 58a.



- 8 These then are the things which are comprised in Fate, to wit, contingent, possible, election, “that which is in our power,” Fortune, chance, and their adjuncts, as are the things signified by the words *perhaps* and *peradventure*; all which indeed are contained in Fate, yet none of them is fatal. It now remains, that we discourse of divine Providence, and show how it comprehends even Fate itself.
- 9 The supreme therefore and first Providence is the understanding or (if you had rather) the will of the first and sovereign God, doing good to every thing that is in the world, by which all divine things have universally and throughout been most excellently and most wisely ordained and disposed. The second Providence is that of the second Gods, who go through the heaven, by which temporal and mortal things are orderly and regularly generated, and which pertains to the continuation and preservation of every kind. The third may probably be called the Providence and procuration of the Daemons, which, being placed on the earth, are the guardians and overseers of human actions. This threefold Providence therefore being seen, of which the first and supreme is chiefly and principally so named, we shall not be afraid to say, although we may in this seem to contradict the sentiments of some philosophers, that all things are done by Fate and by Providence, but not also by Nature. But some are done according to Providence, — these according to one, those according to another, — and some according to Fate; and Fate is altogether according to Providence, while Providence is in no wise according to Fate. But let this discourse be understood of the first and supreme Providence. Now that which is done according to another, whatever it is, is always posterior to that according to which it is done; as that which is according to the law is after the law, and that which is according to Nature is after Nature, so that which is according to Fate is after Fate, and must consequently be more new and modern. Wherefore supreme Providence is the most ancient of all things, except him whose will or understanding it is, to wit, the sovereign author, maker, and father of all things. “Let us therefore,” says Timaeus,

“discourse for what cause the Creator made and framed this machine of the universe. He was good, and in him that is good there can never be imprinted or engendered any envy against any thing. Being therefore wholly free from this, he desired that all things should, as far as it is possible, resemble himself. He therefore, who admits this to have been chiefly the principal original of the generation and creation of the world, as it has been delivered to us by wise men, receives that which is most right. For God, who desired that all things should be good, and nothing, as far as possibly might be, evil, taking thus all that was visible, — restless as it was, and moving rashly and confusedly, — reduced it from disorder to order, esteeming the one to be altogether better than the other. For it neither was nor is convenient for him who is in all perfection good, to make any thing that should not be very excellent and beautiful.”⁶

This, therefore, and all that follows, even to his disputation concerning human souls, is to be understood of the first Providence, which in the beginning constituted all things. Afterwards he speaks thus:

⁶ Plato, *Timaeus*, p. 29d.



“Having framed the universe, he ordained souls equal in number to the stars, and distributed to each of them one; and having set them, as it were, in a chariot, showed the nature of the universe, and appointed them the laws of Fate.”⁷

Who then will not believe, that by these words he expressly and manifestly declares Fate to be, as it were, a foundation and political constitution of laws, fitted for the souls of men? Of which he afterwards renders the cause.

As for the second Providence, he thus in a manner explains it, saying:

“Having prescribed them all these laws, to the end that, if there should afterwards happen any fault, he might be exempt from being the cause of any of their evil, he dispersed some of them upon the earth, some into the moon, and some into the other instruments of time. And after this dispersion, he gave in charge to the young Gods the making of human bodies, and the making up and adding whatever was wanting and deficient in human souls; and after they had perfected whatever is adherent and consequent to this, they should rule and govern, in the best manner they possibly could, this mortal creature, so far as it should not be the cause of its own evils.”⁸

For by these words, “that he might be exempt from being the cause of any of their evil,” he most clearly signifies the cause of Fate; and the order and office of the young Gods manifests the second Providence; and it seems also in some sort to have touched a little upon the third, if he therefore established laws and ordinances that he might be exempt from being the cause of any of their evil. For God, who is free from all evil, has no need of laws or Fate; but every one of these petty Gods, drawn on by the providence of him who has engendered them, performs what belongs to his office. Now that this is true and agreeable to the opinion of Plato, these words of the lawgiver, spoken by him in his Book of Laws, seems to me to give sufficient testimony:

“If there were any man so sufficient by Nature, being by divine Fortune happily engendered and born, that he could comprehend this, he would have no need of laws to command him. For there is not any law or ordinance more worthy and powerful than knowledge; nor is it fitting that Mind, provided it be truly and really free by Nature, should be a subject or slave to any one, but it ought to command all.”⁹

10 I therefore do for mine own part thus understand and interpret this sentence of Plato. There being a threefold Providence, the first, as having engendered Fate, does in some sort comprehend it; the second, having been engendered with Fate, is with it totally comprehended and embraced by the first; the third, as having been engendered after Fate, is comprehended by it in the same manner as are free will and Fortune, as we have already said.

⁷ Plato, *Timaeus*, p. 41d.

⁸ Plato, *Timaeus*, p. 42d.

⁹ Plato, *Laws*, IX. p. 875c.



“For they whom the assistance of a Daemon’s power does aid in their intercourse with me”

says Socrates, declaring to Theages what is the almost inevitable ordinance of Adrastea

“are those whom you also mean; for they grow and come forward with speed.”¹⁰

In which words, what he says of a Daemon’s aiding some is to be ascribed to the third Providence, and the growing and coming forward with speed, to Fate. In brief, it is not obscure or doubtful but that this also is a kind of Fate. And perhaps it may be found much more probable that the second Providence is also comprehended under Fate, and indeed all things that are done; since Fate, as a substance, has been rightly divided by us into three parts, and the fable of the chain comprehends the revolutions of the heavens in the number and rank of those things which happen conditionally. But concerning these things I will not much contend, to wit, whether they should be called conditional, or rather conjoined with Fate, the precedent cause and commander of Fate being also fatal.

11 Our opinion then, to speak compendiously, is such. But the contrary sentiment does not only include all things in Fate, but affirms them all to be done by and according to Fate. It accords indeed in all things to the other (the Stoic) doctrine; and that which accords to it, ‘tis clear, is the same thing with it. In this discourse therefore we have first spoken of the contingent; secondly, of “that which is in our power”; thirdly, of Fortune and chance, and whatever depends on them; fourthly, of praise, blame, and whatever depends on them; the fifth and last of all may be said to be prayers to the Gods, with their services and ceremonies.

For the rest, as to those which are called idle and reaping arguments, and that which is named the argument against destiny, they are indeed but vain subtleties and captious sophisms, according to this discourse. But according to the contrary opinion, the first and principal conclusion seems to be, that there is nothing done without a cause, but that all things depend upon antecedent causes; the second, that the world is governed by Nature, and that it conspires, consents, and is compatible with itself; the third seems rather to be testimonies, — of which the first is divination, approved by all sorts of people, as being truly in God; the second is the equanimity and patience of wise men, who take mildly and bear patiently whatever befalls, as happening by divine ordinance and as it ought; the third is the speech so common and usual in every one’s mouth, to wit, that every proposition is true or false. Thus have we contracted this discourse into a small number of short articles, that we might in few words comprehend the whole matter of Fate; into which a scrutiny ought to be made, and the reasons of both opinions to be weighed with a most exact balance. But we shall hereafter come to discuss particulars.

¹⁰ Plato, *Theages*, p. 129e.

