

Liberty by Necessity: an Examination of Fate and Free Will in Homer and Boethius

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Fate and freedom: can they coexist? Is there a divine reasoning behind the occurrences in the universe, and if so, are all occurrences predetermined? Such questions have plagued philosophers for more than two thousand years. Some philosophers deny the existence of human freedom and leave everything in the hands of God or fate; some philosophers argue that everything is random; and some philosophers insist there is room for human freedom under the general guidance of a divine hand. They generally rely on complex, rigorous systems, with logical consistency and existential evidence. These systems, however, are not airtight, and the question of fate and free will is left unresolved.

Systematic philosophers are not the only ones to grapple with the concept of fate. It is also a poetic and literary concept. Poets and writers are fascinated by a strange incongruence in human existence: humans seem free to make choices and control their own destiny, but there are always instances in life that remain above human volition. The poets and writers recognize this as one of the mysteries of the human condition: is freedom an illusion and the course of life determined by an outside force? If so, is that outside force unconscious, or is it intelligent? If intelligent, is it benign? In poetry and literature, unlike in philosophy, these questions do not need to be resolved.

This paper examines the approach to fate and free will by both a philosopher, Boethius, and a poet, Homer, in their respective works *The*

Consolation of Philosophy and *The Iliad*. Both writers develop sophisticated systems of fate, though Boethius as a philosopher presents a more internally consistent system, while Homer as a poet presents a more open system that depends on the perspectives of the poem's characters. In *The Consolation*, Boethius explains that God controls the entire universe through his divine reason or Providence, which unfolding in time is labeled Fate. Inanimate objects and irrational beings are ruled by Fate, but human beings, gifted with reason, have the free will to escape the rule of Fate and instead become aligned with the mind of God; they are responsible for the morality of their behavior. In *The Iliad*, the god Zeus makes large-scale plans that unfold in somewhat loose ways; there are also larger-scale plans outside of his decision-making sphere that he tries to bring about, and individual fates of humans that are inflexible and set in stone. Despite these certainties, humans have freedom to act within them and thus gain glory or shame depending on their actions. Both authors insist that there is room for human freedom within the scope of Fate, and this inclusion raises problems that defeat their systems.

Divine plan

Both Boethius and Homer acknowledge that God or the gods have a plan for the world and for human beings, but they disagree on the scope of this plan. According to Boethius, God's plan for the world is eternal and all-encompassing, while Homer's Zeus creates a plan specifically for Achilles, not for the whole world, not preexistent, and influenced by the prayers of humans.

According to Boethius, God's plan is called Providence, the divine reason of God (104). This divine reason is above everything, unmoved by any external force or intelligence (Chadwick 234); in turn, it is the first cause and mover of everything else (Marenbon 118-119). Providence is the non-extended plan, but when it unfolds within the confines of time and space it is called Fate (Boethius 104). Fate is bound to and operates under Providence, but human volition is free from the laws and burdens of Fate while remaining under Providence. Indeed, the closer one's mind aligns with the mind of God, the freer one becomes from Fate (Chadwick 242). Providence is inherently good and just, specifically just to humans, who are the focus of Providence. Events that occur in time often seem unjust or evil, but these things will always result in something ultimately good (Marenbon 119). Personified Philosophy says, "All fortune whether pleasant or averse is meant either to reward or discipline the good or to punish or correct the bad" (Boethius 111). So all that befalls humans, good or bad, is meant to edify their souls and bring them closer to the mind of God—to Providence—even if this ultimate end cannot be understood by human minds.

Homer, too, conceives of a divine plan for human beings. Zeus, the king of the gods, has a measure of control over events that will take place, and his decrees are not revocable, nor can anyone stand in their way. Prior to the Trojan War, Zeus decreed that the Greeks would take Troy in the tenth year of the war (Homer 103). He agrees to glorify Achilles after Thetis beseeches him, bowing his head to signify this decree—and once he has done this, the decree cannot be reversed (95). Later on in the story, Zeus develops his plan for Achilles: Hector

will wreak havoc on the Achaeans, Achilles' friend Patroclus will go out in response and die at Hector's hand, and then Achilles will be roused to action and gain his glory (247).

Clearly, Zeus's plan is smaller and less abstract than Boethius's Providence. While Providence is an eternal idea, not bound by time, Zeus makes up his plan as he goes along. First he agrees to glorify Achilles, and later he makes a specific plan for Achilles' glorification. This plan concerns only Achilles and those around him in the war, unlike Providence, which governs the entire history of the universe. Finally, Zeus's plan is influenced by humans, as when Thetis begs Zeus to glorify her human son Achilles (Lesky 175), but Providence precedes humans—it brings them to their best ends and does not merely operate at the mercy of their whims. Despite all these differences, both Homer and Boethius agree that the high God's plan, once established, cannot be shaken or steered off course.

Inevitable, but divinely willed

Both Boethius and Homer make room for events in time that are not directly imposed by the divine being, but are destined to happen—they are not freely willed. According to Boethius, these events are the unfolding of Fate according to the law of causation. To Homer, there are two types of destined events that are not willed by the gods: large-scale destinies that supersede the will of Zeus, and individual deaths of warriors that cannot be overruled by the gods. The two disagree on the gods' relationship to the inevitable: Boethius believes that God is the ultimate cause of all events but does not unfold them in

time, while Homer maintains that the gods' plans are distinct from fate, yet the gods work to make sure that fate unfolds correctly.

According to Boethius, nothing happens that is not ultimately part of God's plan. But God's plan, when unfolding in time as Fate, leaves room for secondary causation—one event causes another event to happen, while the ultimate cause of these events is God. God is not the immediate cause of these events, because he does not operate in time but sees all things as present—hence the term *Providence*, meaning “looking forth”, as opposed to *foreknowledge* (Boethius 132-133). Nonetheless, these events have causes—in some sense, they are inevitable. Boethius makes a great effort, however, to explain that causation does not imply necessity. It would seem that everything that happens is necessary and inevitable—predetermined—if everything is ruled by causation. But Boethius redefines the term “necessary.” To him, something is necessary if and only if it is in its nature to exist in such a way—if it has always been that way and always will be. It is *not* necessary if it is caused to be in a certain state at a certain *time*. Everything is subject to causation, true, but causation is simply the realization of one possible event—other things *could* happen, but *do not* happen. Just because they *do not* happen does not imply that they *could not* have happened, and therefore what happens is not *necessary* (135). These events are *contingent*: God knows what will happen, and he is the ultimate cause of what will happen, but certainly something else *could have* happened (Marenbon 40-41).

But if God knows what will happen with these contingent events, are they not therefore necessary events? Again, Boethius appeals to God's eternal state to answer this question. If a contingent event is unfolding in the present, it is necessary insofar as it must be taking place at this very moment, but this necessity is not imposed upon it. It was caused to happen but it could have been caused to happen differently—what happened was not necessary. In the same way God views time. All time is eternally present to him, and in the same way that humans do not impose necessity on something when observing it, God does not impose necessity on future events (Boethius 125). Overall, Boethius sees Fate in inanimate nature as ultimately caused by God but separated by degrees of causation, and inevitable but not constrained by absolute necessity.

Homer also sees necessary occurrences separate from the gods' willed intentions. These operate in large-scale destinies and in the individual deaths of humans ("Fate"). The gods can steer the events of humans' lives, glorifying or humiliating them, but they cannot alter how and when a man will die, and they cannot derail the ultimate course of humanity. Instead, they work to make sure that the destiny of humanity is carried out and not violated. Zeus recognizes a sense of ultimate destiny, pertaining to the larger course of humanity, apart from the plans he makes for Achilles and the other humans. Zeus does not feel constrained by it, but works to fulfill it (Solomon 444): he relies on scales to tell him who is destined to win a particular battle (Homer 233-234), and he dispatches the gods to stop Achilles from destroying Troy before it is fated to fall (504). This obeisance to fate is also evident in Poseidon, another god: he sees

that the line of Dardanus is destined to survive the destruction of Troy through Aeneas, so he rescues the hero from death at the hands of Achilles (513). The gods do not control destiny, and they do not try to contradict it; instead, they keep the humans from violating it.

Inevitable Fate above Zeus's will is also evident in the deaths of the heroes. Homeric "Fate" refers to the lifespan of the individual, whose ultimate end is unavoidable; even the gods cannot stop it (Vivante, *The Iliad: Action as Poetry* 92). It also refers to the inevitable end that all mortals face, as well as the inescapable time and manner in which each individual will die (Solomon 449-450). The gods know that each hero has a specific death waiting for him, as the next few examples demonstrate. Achilles' goddess mother Thetis knows that he is doomed to die young at Troy, but all she can do is lament; his death cannot be avoided (Homer 91). Zeus considers saving his son Sarpedon when the Trojan warrior is about to face Patroclus, but Hera stops him, recognizing that Sarpedon must die (427); later, Zeus contemplates rescuing Hector from Achilles, but Athena reminds him Hector was doomed long ago (547). The gods foresee individuals' deaths, and do not stand in Fate's way.

Homer and Boethius both show that things happen according to Fate in this world beyond human volition and distinct from divine mandate, but they disagree on the gods' involvement in the unfolding of this Fate. Homer's gods are omniscient but not omnipotent; they know the destiny of Troy or the ultimate deaths of individual warriors, but cannot stop them or alter them. Instead, they act as servants to Fate, preventing humans from making Fate go awry. They are

heavily involved in the unfolding of Fate, even if they do not will it. Boethius's God, on the other hand, is omniscient *and* omnipotent, but separated from the unfolding of Fate by the dimension of time. In God's eyes, he causes all events to unfold under Providence, but in the human dimension of time, God does not actively unfold events. Thus, Homer's gods cannot change Fate but make sure it is carried out, and Boethius's God rules over Fate but does not render events in time necessary; they unfold according to his law of causation.

Human agency

Both Boethius and Homer make efforts to preserve human free will and responsibility in their systems of fate. Boethius explains that humans still have free will because they are rational beings and their minds are not controlled by the laws of inanimate nature, while also referring to his argument that foreknown events in time are not necessary, despite God's all-encompassing Providence. This is important to him because it absolves God of the behaviors of evil men and deletes complacency or resignation—humans must choose to live morally. Human free will in Homer is found in the phenomenon of double causation, wherein a god intervenes in a human's actions, but the human is still left responsible for what occurs. In both cases, the insistence on human agency and denial of necessity renders the previously developed concepts of Fate weak.

Boethius believes that humans have free will because they are rational beings. If a being has reason it has the ability to make decisions, and this decision-making is what distinguishes rational beings from non-rational beings (Boethius 119). Non-rational beings are controlled by the laws of physics—they

cannot decide what to do, but rather operate under the causality of Fate. But minds are free from these material laws and can make choices (Marenbon 123). They can either choose to become more like the mind of God, freeing themselves from Fate, or they can turn from the mind of God and instead become subject to the materialistic controls of Fate (Boethius 105). This idea of free will seems problematic if Providence controls everything and if God is omniscient. However, as stated before, Boethius does not see God's omniscience rendering all occurrences necessary. According to his explanation of contingency, Boethius argues that humans have choices with regard to what will happen. God knows what is going to happen, but humans still have to make a choice to make it happen. Boethius also cites another argument to negate the idea that human agency is enslaved to necessity. He believes that things can only be known within the capacity of the knower: the thing itself is not known (126). This is known as the *Iamblichus Principle* (Sharples 216). He uses this idea to argue that not only is God's knowledge in a non-temporal dimension, but fundamentally of a different nature than human knowledge. Humans presuppose that God sees things way they do, and by human logic, Providence and omniscience would render human free will impossible; but God sees beyond this quandary. In God's eternally-present dimension, things are bound to happen according to his plan, but on the human and temporal level, man can clearly see that he has free choice. In this system humans are compelled to choose to live rightly, as Philosophy says on the last lines of *The Consolation*: "A great

necessity is laid upon you...to be good, since you live in the sight of a judge who sees all things” (Boethius 137).

Homer presents a similar idea of human agency, although not as philosophically dense. Zeus’s plans and the unfolding of Fate do not remove human responsibility. Homer’s story is about humans infused with divine qualities, the choices they make, and the glory or shame they receive. Were the gods given all credit or blame for the occurrences, the humanity of the epic would be gone. Within Homeric epic, the gods should not be seen as controlling humans or removing their will, but enhancing human characteristics; the gods work through humans and even dictate the outcome, but the humans are clearly the agents of action (Lesky 179-180). This phenomenon is *double causation*: on the divine level, the god intervenes and brings about an end, but on a lower level, the humans perform it and are not left free of praise or blame. Zeus makes large-scale decrees, but does not remove the human ability to make individual decisions; for example, Zeus declares Hector to be doomed but Hector decides on his own whether to fight Achilles (Lesky 173). The humans themselves are aware of divine influence, but do not blame everything on the gods; they assume personal responsibility, such as when Helen recognizes that Aphrodite has bewitched her but calls herself a “bitch” anyway for her role in the Trojan War (Lesky 195). The gods enhance or diminish human abilities, and often dictate the outcome of an event, but the humans themselves make the decisions during the event and are left with the corresponding praise or blame.

Both Homer and Boethius make room for human agency by appealing to the distinction between the realm of the divine and the realm of humans. The Iamblichus Principle and double causation present the same idea: on the divine level, yes, humans are to some extent pawns of divine will, but this does not remove human responsibility or choice on the human level. In Boethius's case, humans assume that God's all-encompassing plan deletes human decision because they do not understand the way God knows the world; their knowledge is limited to the temporal realm. Nonetheless, in this temporal realm humans still have to make decisions; God's Providence can in no way negate human rationality. Homer's idea is slightly different: things are caused *both* by divine will and by human action. Different beings are responsible for the same willed events, but these beings are in different dimensions. Both authors preserve human agency by acknowledging the fundamental distinction between the divine mind and the human mind.

Can Human Freedom and Fate Coexist?

In their efforts to preserve human agency, Boethius and Homer face an issue: can humans, through free choice, dislodge the ultimate plan/destiny of the world? This is problematic for Boethius because his system claims that there is nothing outside God's Providence. This problem is evident in Homer when the gods step in to stop humans from violating Fate. Is it possible for the overarching plan or destiny of the world to fail, and if it is possible but does not occur, what accounts for this?

Boethius's system is built on a contradiction. He claims that Providence arranges "what is best for the individual" (Chadwick 243). Yet, at the same time, he insists on human freedom within this system. If humans are free, it would seem they have the option of violating the arrangements of Providence. Yet, Providence is always operating to bring about good and determine what is best for the individual. How, then, does God direct humans toward what is best for them if human volition is free? Do humans always choose the path that fits with the plans of Providence, thereby making everything a fortunate roll of the dice? Or do humans reject God's plan and render Providence ineffectual? Do humans, when they turn away from the divine mind and instead become ensnared in the clutches of Fate, find themselves in another God-controlled mechanism, Providence, and thus without freedom after all? For even if God does not directly control events in contingent events unfolding in Fate due to his eternality, he is still their ultimate cause and is omniscient; the freedom of contingency is not truly free. If Providence does not take away human volition, then the realization of Providence is left unaccounted for.

Homer's system also leaves room for a quandary because of agency. Is Fate truly inevitable, or can it be overturned if the gods do not follow it? At several points in the *Iliad*, gods ponder not following Fate. Zeus asks the gods if he should suspend the deaths of Sarpedon and Hector, even though they are doomed, as if he has a choice to overrule this Fate. It is only at the counsel of Hera and Athena that he decides not to intervene—Athena tells him that he can do as he pleases but "none of the deathless gods will praise you" (Homer 547).

It also appears that humans themselves can defeat the cruel hand of Fate. Achilles is capable of defeating Troy before it is fated to fall, and of destroying Aeneas before he is fated to die. Only because the gods decide to intervene is Achilles stopped. Thus, Fate is only a powerful and inevitable force insofar as the gods decide to uphold it. So why do they uphold it, and why should they disallow humans from altering it? Homer, like Boethius, has left the realization of Fate unaccounted for—Fate does happen, and the gods are responsible for making sure it happens, but there is no explanation as to *why* it has to happen.

Conclusion

The Consolation of Philosophy by Boethius and *The Iliad* by Homer suggest that the world is governed largely by divine decrees, that there is some room for an extra-divine force called Fate, and that humans have the freedom to choose within the bounds of these forces. Homer's divine decrees are the plans that Zeus creates within time, while Boethius creates the concept of Providence, the eternal reason of God that always brings about ultimate good. Boethius sees Fate as underneath Providence, but should be understood by humans as a non-divine force which operates under the binding laws of physics, while Homer sees this entity as separate from Zeus, possibly above him, ruling the destiny of mankind and declaring the irrevocable deaths of men.

Both authors understand the need for freedom within their systems—for Boethius, man must understand he has freedom so he can act responsibly and with moral urgency, and for Homer, man must be free so that the choices of heroes can be legitimately judged honorable or dishonorable. Boethius believes

humans are free because they are rational and operate in time, meaning that free choice and contingency are inevitable, while Homer sees humans as free because they operate on a different plane than the gods—though the gods enhance human behavior, they do not revoke human responsibility. This last inclusion topples both systems—Boethius leaves the door open for the defeat or failure of powerful Providence, while Homer renders Fate revocable. The ambiguity and incongruence of Homer’s system is deliberate, as he is a poet—it does not detract from his work or his goals. But Boethius sets out to make a deliberate doctrine of Providence, and his unconvincing attempt to account for human freedom shakes the foundation of his entire theory. As Boethius and Homer show in their works, Fate and freedom cannot easily coexist.

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