

[1973. In *Baker's Dictionary of Christian Ethics*. Carl F.H. Henry, ed. Washington D.C.: Canon Press.]

**FATE.** See also *Astrology; Destiny; Eschatology and Ethics; Providence*. Fate and fatalism, so far as written records go seem to begin with the Greek myth that Clotho spins the thread of life, Lachesis measures its length, and Atropos cuts it off. Apparently only the date of one's death is fated. Moslems today sometimes hold such a view, as did a number of soldiers in the World Wars, who talked about one's number being on the fatal shell, while no other shell could hurt them.

Stoicism held the more consistent view that all events are determined by the divine providence that permeates all nature. The stoics defended this view, first, by an appeal to the law of natural causation. No motion can occur without a cause. An event is always explained *because*; the cause produces or necessitates its effect. In the second place the Stoics defended fatalism by an appeal to logic. Every proposition must be either true or false. Events described by true propositions in the past tense cannot be altered. All people admit that some statements in the future tense describe the inevitable; e.g., Caesar will die. But consistency requires one to say that the statement, "Caesar will die by the hand of a friend," if true, is also inevitable. A false proposition in the future tense states an impossibility. Therefore the future is as unchangeable as the past.

The objection was raised, and still is popularly raised today, that if every event is inevitable, there is no need to do anything. If a general is fated to win a battle or a student is fated to flunk, neither need exert himself, for the one will win anyway and the other will fail anyway. No, not any way, replied the Stoics. The general is fated to win by exerting himself. He wins only in this way; and the exertion is as much fated as the victory.

So too Christ was foreordained to die, but not just any way; for Pontius Pilate, the Jews, and Judas were gathered together to do what God had predetermined to be done (Acts 4:28).

Augustine, as he grew older, paid more and more attention to predestination; but earlier he replied to the popular, astrological fatalism that says the stars determine our careers. This is false because two men, even twins, born under the same astrological

signs, often have extremely different careers. Conversely men born under different stars sometimes live very similar lives.

Augustine also notices those who reserve the name for natural causation and the will of God. Cicero objected to this Stoicism and denied divine foreknowledge. But, says Augustine,

their opinion is more tolerable, that ascribe fate to the stars, than his that rejects all foreknowledge... Nor let us fear that we do not perform all our actions by our own will, because He, whose foreknowledge cannot err, knew before that we should do thus or thus... Our very wills are in that order of causes, which God knows so surely... so that he that keeps a knowledge of the causes of all things, cannot leave men's will out of that knowledge.

Since the Reformation the term "*fatalism*" has been relegated to popular superficialities, and the important problems are discussed under the secular rubrics of Scientific Law and Mechanism, or the Scriptural doctrines of Foreknowledge, Predestination, and Providence. Augustus Toplady insisted on philosophical necessity; William Cunningham, less successfully, argued that the Scripture neither requires nor forbids this view. The Arminians, abandoning the Reformed faith in 1620, deny that God foreordains whatsoever comes to pass.

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