

KANT & FATE

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ABSTRACT: Immanuel Kant mentions fate (Schicksal) in several places. Peter Thielke offers the only sustained interpretation of what Kant meant by fate. According to Thielke, fate is a “usurpatory concept” that takes the place of causality but fails to do its job. There are problems with this interpretation, relative to Kant’s philosophy and to the ordinary concept of fate. It is not clear why we only find a usurpation of causality and not the other concepts of the categories, or how a usurpation of an a priori concept could occur. Thielke’s interpretation does not explain the way in which fate attributions are only made about events that have significance for human action or well-being, or fate’s teleological aspect. I outline the textual evidence that, for Kant, fate usurps providence, a postulate of practical reason, and then show how this interpretation preserves the strengths but avoids the weaknesses of its competitor.

KEYWORDS: Destiny; Fate; Immanuel Kant; Philosophy of religion; Providence

INTRODUCTION

Some conception of “fate” is found in most world-cultures; in classical antiquity (Eidinow 2011), in Islam (Elliot 2016), in China (Confucius 2003, 56, 6.10), in Hinduism (Johnson 2009), and in the traditional religions of West Africa (Fortes 2018), to name a few. Despite its ubiquity, fate is a concept that seems unamenable to rational interrogation. As Abraham Tucker put it, fate is:

... an obscure idea of an irresistible force, a something we cannot explain nor account for its existence, which we call a Fatality, which perpetually hangs over second causes, constraining their motions, or like an adamant wall, confining them within their appointed course... an undefinable influence, residing neither in body, nor soul, nor substance, but an abstract force or activity, hovering as it were in the air. (Tucker 1990, 209, 212)

Nevertheless, in the past, many philosophers tried to fit some conception of fate into their philosophical systems. The Stoic Chrysippus identified fate with the world-soul (Bobzein 1998, 48–49). For the Platonist Pseudo-Plutarch, fate is that through which the demiurge and the daimons administer ethical reward and punishment (Plutarch 1959, 325). For the Aristotelian Alexander of Aphrodisias, a person's fate is the product of their particular nature (Aphrodisias 1983, 47). For Boethius and Thomas Aquinas fate is divine providence considered as working through secondary causes (Aquinas 1947, ST I Q116; Boethius 2008, 131). Arthur Schopenhauer speculates that fate is some outworking of the Will (Schopenhauer 1974). The few modern philosophers who discuss fate say that it is a subjective narrative that we apply to our lives, rather than a metaphysical reality (Solomon 2003; Gelven 1992; May 1981).

Immanuel Kant denied that there is such a thing as fate (*Schicksal*, sometimes translated as destiny). Nevertheless, he thought it an interesting enough concept to have made the denial and to have briefly discussed the concept in several places. My purpose in this paper is to give an interpretation of what Kant says about fate. In doing so, I engage with the most sustained interpretation offered in the secondary literature, made by Peter Thielke (Thielke 2006) (some interpretation in the same vein as Thielke is offered by (Watkins 2001, 71–75). According to Thielke's interpretation, fate is a "usurpation" of causality, but on my interpretation it is a "usurpation" of providence. I begin by presenting Thielke's interpretation. I then outline its strengths and weaknesses. I then present my interpretation and show that it shares the strengths of Thielke's interpretation but avoids its weaknesses. I then answer two potential criticisms of my interpretation. Although this essay of a scholarly character, offering an interpretation of Kant, it is also part of an exploration of whether there is any good philosophical basis for believing in fate.

THIELKE'S INTERPRETATION OF KANT ON FATE

In the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant explains that the application of some concepts to experience is justified *a priori* (such as causality). The application of some other concepts to experience is justified *a posteriori* "because we always have experience ready at hand to prove their objective reality" (Kant 1998, 220, B117) (such as banana, geode, teapot). However, we find that:

... there are also concepts that have been usurped, such as fortune and fate, which circulate with almost universal indulgence, but that are occasionally called upon to establish their claim by the question *quid juris*, and then there is not a little embarrassment about their deduction because one can adduce no clear legal ground for an entitlement to their use either from experience or from reason. (Kant 1998, 220, B117)

So, unlike causality, the application of fate to experience is not justified *a priori* and, unlike banana, its application to experience is not justified *a posteriori*; we do not experience fate in the way that we experience bananas. Kant's conclusion seems to be that applying the concept of fate to experience is not justified at all; this is how Thielke interprets him.

In the quoted text, Kant says that fortune and fate are concepts that have been usurped.¹ This is hard to understand, as it invites the question of what they have been usurped by and implies that they had some rightful place *ex ante* to being usurped. Thielke makes the easier to understand translation that fate is a "usurpatory concept" (Thielke 2006, 438). Kant does not explain elsewhere what it means for a concept to have been usurped or for it to be usurpatory, and the secondary literature on his use of the term is scant (Pippin 1982, 104, 117).

Thielke's interpretation is that fate is a usurpatory concept in the sense that it takes the place of causality but cannot perform the task of causality. Fate "compete(s) with causal explanations to account for the phenomena of the world" (Thielke 2006, 249). I quote some of the passages that Thielke uses to support his interpretation, in which Kant contrasts fate with causality and emphasizes that it is "blind." Later in the first *Critique* we find:

Everything that happens is hypothetically necessary; that is a principle that subjects alteration in the world to a law, i.e., a rule of necessary existence, without which not even nature itself would obtain. Hence... the proposition 'No necessity in nature is blind, but is rather conditioned, consequently comprehensible necessity' (*non datur fatum*). [There is no fate] (Kant 1998,

¹ The original German is "Es gibt indessen auch usurpierte Begriffe, wie etwa Glück, Schicksal" (Kant 1956, 126, B117). This is "usurped (usurpierte) concepts" rather than "usurpatory (usurpatorisch) concepts." Norman Kemp Smith translates "usurpatory concepts" (Kant 1929, 120). Werner Pluhar translates "concepts that we usurp" (Kant 1996a, 142). Max Muller and Marcus Weigelt translate "concepts that we have usurped" (Kant 2007, 112)

329/330, B280)

Again, we find in the lecture notes of *Metaphysik LI* that:

Blind means when one oneself cannot see; but also that through which one cannot see. Blind necessity is thus that by means of which we can see nothing with the understanding. Blind necessity is destiny; blind accident is chance. Both are absurdities contrary to reason... one thereby thinks of events that do not at all happen according to laws of the understanding and of reason. If I assume a blind accident, something contingent absolutely and in every regard, then it is an exception to all laws and all grounds. If I assume a blind necessity, without an original necessity determined by a cause, then this necessity is a breach against the laws of the understanding and of reason. Thereby all right to judge is taken from us. Thus both give no explanatory ground of events and serve only as a cushion for ignorance and deprive the understanding of all use. (Kant 1997b, 23, 28:199-200)

So, whereas causality sees conditional necessities in the world, accident sees spontaneous unnecessitated events, and fate sees unconditional necessities. Accident denies that there is an explanation to be offered for events, whereas fate offers an opaque explanation for events. To say that some event happened due to fate is to say that the event had to happen, not just given the occurrence of factors X and Y, but unconditionally. To say that an event is fated is to say that if one cause had not brought the event about then another one would have, that one way or another it had to happen.

Thielke suggests that fate is not blind in the sense that it cannot be applied to anything in experience. Rather, fate is blind in the sense that it suffers from the opposite problem; its “extension is overflowing with instances... [it does] not suitably discriminate between empirical contents” (Thielke 2006, 448). We can use the conditional necessities seen by causality to offer a prediction, *ex ante*, of what event will happen and, *ex post*, we can offer explanations of why an event happened, how it could have failed to happen, and so forth. When we apply the concept of fate to experience it gives us no *ex ante* tools of prediction and no *ex post* explanation of how an event happened, only the judgment that whatever happened was bound to happen. This means that any and every event (a man is hit by a falling piano, a man avoids being hit by a falling piano) can be attributed to fate: “for any object of experience or sensory content, I can take it to be governed or determined by fate” (Thielke 2006, 455). In this sense, fate is an

“illegitimate or uninformative explanatory devices applied to the world of possible experience” (Thielke 2006, 447). Thielke notes that this makes fate different than concepts that have no application to experience at all, which cannot be encountered in experience, such as God (Thielke 2006, 445).

DIFFICULTIES WITH THIELKE’S INTERPRETATION

Thielke’s interpretation of Kant has much to recommend it. For one thing, the claim that fate is a usurpation of an *a priori* concept neatly explains its cross-cultural use, which we might not expect to find if it were the usurpation of some empirical concept. For another thing, it does seem to be the case that explaining an event by saying that it was fated is a very theoretically vicious way of explaining it; such an explanation does not seem to give novel predictions or allow for further theoretical elaboration, nor does it seem falsifiable. However, Thielke’s interpretation of Kant is subject to some difficulties.

(i) Why do we apparently only find a usurpation of causality? Why not also usurpations of the other concepts whose application to experience is justified *a priori* according to Kant, such as substance and community? It is hard to think of a concept that could be described as a usurpation of the concept of substance or the concept of community – taking their place but not performing their function, nor does Kant mention usurpations of these concepts.

(ii) Why would a usurpation of causality arise? The notion that the *a priori* concepts that we apply to experience are under the threat of competition seems to run counter to the “necessity and strict universality” (Kant 1998, 137, B4) that Kant claims for the application of these concepts to experience.

Thielke suggests that, though fate competes with causal explanation, yet because fate is not a good competitor it tends to only fill in the gaps where causal explanations have not yet been offered – “Fate achieves a foothold when causal relations begin to fade and recede from view” (Thielke 2006, 449). On this view, our invocations of fate should be “inversely proportional to the specificity and clarity of the causal account one can provide for various phenomena” (Thielke 2006, 450). This suggestion does not handle the difficulty. In cases where causal explanation is as yet lacking, why would we not instead be content to rest assured that there is some causal explanation or other to be offered? It seems there are many cases concerning which we are content to do this, rather than being

inclined to invoke fate. How the platypus evolved or why tellurium is a rare element on Venus are topics on which few people have the causal explanations at their fingertips, but are also unlikely to be the object of fate attributions. The term “usurpatory” does not seem apt for a concept that cannot in fact successfully compete with or overthrow the rightful concept.

Further, an extensive psychological literature on fate attributions calls into question the claim that fate competes with causality. In that literature we find that people regularly make “conjunctive attributions.” That is, they attribute an event to both fate and to some readily understood natural cause at the same time (Lupfer, Brock, and Depaola 1992; Lupfer, Tolliver, and Jackson 1996; Weeks and Lupfer 2000). Fate, along with concepts like luck, karma, God, Satan, is treated as the “distal cause” and natural causes are treated as the “proximal cause” (the former focusing more on the “why” and the latter focusing more on the details of “how”). For example, the person who smokes in their 20s and ends up contracting lung cancer in their 60s may attribute this to both fate and to the fact that smoking causes cancer. So, among its ordinary users, the concept of fate does not function as a substitute for natural causal explanations – for ordinary users, the two are different explanatory schema but not competing explanatory schema.

(iii) Although it seems right to say that fate attributions are blind in the sense that they do not suggest specific causal explanations for given events, it seems wrong to say that fate is blind in the sense of being applied indiscriminately to all events. Although one can form the philosophical view that every event is determined by fate, as philosophers like Chrysippus did, fate attributions are typically made only in response to events that are significant for human action and well-being in some way; natural disasters (Oral et al. 2015, 31), political upheavals (Rashwan and Jenkins 2017), and major personal life events (Banerjee and Bloom 2014, 287–93).

(iv) If this is the entirety of Kant’s account of fate, then it seems to miss the teleological quality of fate. Events attributed to fate are said to “happen for a reason” (even if an entirely unknown reason). This is an aspect of the concept of fate noted in modern empirical studies (Banerjee and Bloom 2014; Burrus and Roese 2006), and is integral to every historical conception of fate of which I am aware – e.g. on its Hindu conception fate (*daiva*) “shapes and blocks the results of human actions, and does so in order to work out a universal plan” (Johnson 2009),

or as Marcus Aurelius puts it “whatever befalls any one, is appointed as conducive to the purposes of fate” (Aurelius 2008, 60, 5.8)

So, Thielke’s interpretation of Kant on fate has some difficulties, both relative to Kant’s philosophy and relative to the ordinary concept of fate. Thielke seems to want to avoid difficulties (iii-iv) by gesturing at a distinction between “the invocation of fate or fortune as what we might call causal explanations, as when someone might say... that it was simply a matter of fate that muddy conditions prevented the French knights from being effective at the Battle of Agincourt” and a mere “literary sense of fate” (Thielke 2006, 441). I do not think that there is a distinction to be drawn here. It is not clear that there is a concept that can properly be called “fate” if we take out the elements of human significance and teleology. Indeed, Thielke’s own example of the “non-literary” sense of fate invokes the humanly-significant in the case of the mud at Agincourt. That a field was muddy is not fateful unless it made some difference to human action and well-being.

AN ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATION: PROVIDENCE

An entirely different interpretation of how Kant understood fate is suggested by Kant’s statements about providence (*Providentia*, *Providenz*, *Vorsehung*). The secondary literature on Kant’s view of providence is brief and focused largely on providence’s role in world-history (Kleingeld 2001).

Famously, Kant argues that freedom, immortality, and God, are postulates of practical reason. Although we are unable to provide theoretical proofs of these things, we are entitled to believe in them because doing makes sense of morality. I suggest that Kant’s moral argument for belief in God, as expressed in the *Critique of Practical Reason* and the *Critique of Judgment*, is specifically an argument for God *qua* exerciser of providence. So, a brief rehearsal of those arguments is in order.

In the second *Critique* Kant argues that “happiness distributed in exact proportion to morality (as the worth of a person and his worthiness to be happy) constitutes the highest good” (Kant 2015, 90, 5:111). Practical reason directs us to promote the highest good. So, by ought implies can, the highest good must be possible. Yet, common experience leads us to believe that nature does not preserve a proportion between happiness and worthiness to be happy. The moral agent also cannot preserve such a proportion, though he strives to do so. Kant

concludes:

Accordingly, the existence of a cause of all nature, distinct from nature, which contains the ground of this connection, namely of the exact correspondence of happiness with morality, is also postulated. (Kant 2015, 101, 5:125)

We must believe in a being that completes our efforts to achieve the highest good – who is omniscient and omnipotent and so can “cognize my conduct... in order to bestow results appropriate to it” (Kant 2015, 112, 5:140). Kant’s argument is not that the “wise author presiding over nature” (Kant 2015, 116, 5:145) does nothing at all within nature to bring this about, instead entirely delaying the promotion of the highest good to a future life. Rather, we are to believe in “the exact harmony of the realm of nature with the realm of morals” (Kant 2015, 116, 5:145).

Kant’s moral argument for the existence of God in the third *Critique* emphasizes the highest good as something not just pursued by rational agents who find themselves set in an indifferent nature. Rather, we are to believe that the highest good is the end of nature itself. The existence of rational agents who are happy and are worthy of happiness is an end-in-itself that serves to anchor the other ends that are apparent in nature:

... the human being is the final end of creation; for without him the chain of ends subordinated to one another would not be completely grounded” (Kant 2002, 302, 5:435).

Accordingly, we arrive at the belief in “a wise being ruling the world according to moral laws” (Kant 2002, 322, 5:457), “subjecting the whole of nature to its sole aim” (Kant 2002, 312, 5:447). Again, the image conveyed is not that the providential achievement of the highest good is entirely punted into a future life – we are to believe that nature is ordered towards its achievement. As Kant puts it in *Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion*:

... this doctrine [the moral approach to theology] brings the realm of nature into exact harmony with the realm of ends! It is precisely through it, indeed, that we infer that the whole order of nature is arranged in accordance with God’s ends and agrees with them! (Kant 1996c, 442, 28:1116)

BELIEF IN A JUST WORLD

My interpretation is that Kant is endorsing what psychologists call “belief in a just world,” or in “immanent justice.” In colloquial terms: “you reap what you sow,” “everybody gets what’s coming to them,” “what goes around comes around.” The belief in a just world is the belief that the events of our lives are conducive to the purposes of justice. In its most influential psychological theorization, the idea is that we tend to formulate an implicit “personal contract” with God or with the world. So long as we do not behave too immorally, we feel that we can count on our lives not going too badly for us (Lerner 1975, 6–8). Or, as Kant says, “if we do not make ourselves unworthy of happiness, by violating our duty, we can also hope to share in happiness” (Kant 1996g, 595, 6:482). This belief allows people to “go about their daily lives with a sense of trust, hope, and confidence in their future” (Lerner 1980, 14). Empirical findings show that lack of belief in a just world correlates with “greater anxiety, depressive symptoms, neuroticism, defensive coping, and lower levels of optimism” (Lench and Chang 2007, 133). Both children and adults have been shown experimentally to behave in pro-social and moral ways in order to secure a desired outcome that is entirely causally unrelated to their behavior, “as if they can encourage fate’s favor by doing good deeds” (Converse, Risen, and Carter 2012, 923; Banerjee and Bloom 2017). Though Kant would surely disapprove of the motivations involved, these findings suggest that belief in a just world does in fact help support conformity to moral rules. This “cognitive bias” is cross-cultural (Furnham 1993).

Belief in a just world leads people to interpret the bad things that happen to good people as somehow morally beneficial for them – that they “made the victim a better person” (Lerner 1980, 20), and the good things that happen to bad people as somehow not beneficial for them. Given the crudest conception of justice, the belief in a just world is the belief in a 1:1 correlation between a person’s ethical behaviour and whether bad things befall them. More nuanced conceptions of justice need not imply such a correlation, though need not deny any correlation. The general point of the belief in the just world is that, in our lives here, the good is being cultivated through the difficulties and setbacks we suffer, through the ease and luxury we enjoy, through our careers and relationships, through events remarkable and quotidian. These events function as punishment and reward, but also as opportunity for repentance and as object lesson, justifying and setting us in order if we allow them to, rather than all of it

being arbitrary and to no purpose.

INCONCEIVABLE THROUGH THEORETICAL REASON

It is hard to believe in a just world, given how many cases there are in which it seems that happiness and worthiness to be happy are wildly disproportioned, and given the apparent indifference of natural forces to our good or bad moral condition. As Kant puts it:

Our reason finds it impossible for it to conceive, in the mere course of nature, a connection so exactly proportioned and so thoroughly purposive between events occurring in the world in accordance with such different laws [the law of nature and the moral law], although, as with everything else in nature that is purposive, it nevertheless cannot prove the impossibility of it. (Kant 2015, 116, 5:145)

By analogy, viewing ourselves as a part of nature subject to causality, we find it impossible to conceive how it is that we are free (Kant 2015, 42, 5:49). Nevertheless, we must believe that we are free on moral grounds (Kant 2015, 77, 5:94). Likewise, we must believe that through nature God is in fact bringing about a proportion between happiness and worthiness to be happy. Since the reason for believing in providence is entirely practical, we are not able to explain in theoretical terms how providence happens, we cannot situate the belief in some larger theoretical framework. In this way Kant's remarks about our belief that we are free also apply to the belief in providence:

... that there is such a causality is only postulated by the moral law and for the sake of it. It is the same with the remaining ideas, the possibility of which no human understanding will ever fathom. (Kant 2015, 107, 5:133)

As Kant puts it in *The End of All Things*:

However incredulous one may be, one must... believe in a practical way in a concurrence of divine wisdom with the course of nature, unless one would rather just give up one's final end. (Kant 1996f, 229, 8:337)

COMPATIBLE WITH THEORETICAL REASON

Although we lack theoretical reason to believe that in the realm of nature happiness and worthiness to be happy are led by providence to the right proportion, it is a postulate of morality that is not strictly contradicted by

theoretical reason – again, in this way it is akin to freedom and immortality. For Kant, both worthiness to be happy and happiness are understood in terms of difficult-or-impossible to observe mental states (the motives of actions and our “wish and will” respectively (Kant 2015, 100, 5:125; 104, 5:129)). This means that there is in fact a gap in our theoretical knowledge in which this practical postulate may operate.

APPLIED TO EXPERIENCE

Kant suggests that the moral belief in God, and so in his providence, is not just an abstract philosophical commitment, but a concept through which we are to look at our everyday life experiences and at particular phenomena:

Consider a person at those moments in which his mind is disposed to moral sensation. If, surrounded by a beautiful nature, he finds himself in peaceful and cheerful enjoyment of his existence, he feels a need to be thankful to someone for it. Or if, on another occasion, he finds himself in the same state of mind under the press of duties which he can and will satisfy only through voluntary sacrifice, he feels a need to have done something that was commanded and to have obeyed an overlord. (Kant 2002, 311, 5:445)

In this way, the belief in providence is like the belief in freedom – an immediate aspect of our self-consciousness, and something that shapes our daily experiences, rather than an abstract philosophical commitment reached by inference (Kant 2015, 28, 5:31).

PROVIDENCE AND FATE

When we apply the concept of providence to experience we are not using an empirical concept, since “we do not actually observe ends in nature” (Kant 2002, 270, 5:399). Nor are we applying to experience an *a priori* concept of theoretical reason. Rather, we are applying to experience a “subjective but nevertheless unconditional rational necessity,” a “postulate of pure practical reason” (Kant 2015, 9, 5:12). My suggestion is that for Kant fate is a “usurpation” of providence in the sense that it takes the place of providence but cannot perform its function of being a support to morality.

How does such a usurpation arise? As a model, consider Kant’s discussion of physical teleology and moral teleology in the third *Critique*. There, we find that physical teleology cannot prove the existence of an omnibenevolent and

omnipotent God. The data it provides, being empirical and finite, may be able to prove an architect of nature but not a perfect being. Again, the data it provides about the moral character of that architect is at best mixed:

The ancients should not be blamed so severely for having conceived of their gods very diversely... since they found the good and evil in this world. (Kant 2002, 305, 5:439)

Such an approach provides us with “nothing more than a demonology, which is not capable of any determinate concept” (Kant 2002, 311, 5:444). Instead, Kant suggests that we should begin with the concept of God given to us by his moral argument, the God who ensures the due proportion between happiness and worthiness to be happy, and then apply that concept to nature. This yields the overall idea of the highest good as the final end of creation (Kant 2002, 311, 5:445), and to seeing particular arrangements in nature as providentially ordered toward this end (Kant 2006b, 86, 8:361)

In a transcendental illusion, we push concepts that properly apply only within experience beyond the bounds of experience. In a usurpation, I suggest, we use the materials that we find in experience to fabricate a substitute for a concept that originates from beyond the bounds of experience (that is, the moral postulates). So, we end up with strange and unsatisfactory approximations: gods and demons rather than God, ghosts and ectoplasm rather than the soul, immortality as a garden of earthly delights, fate rather than providence.

Relying on the materials of experience will mean that we will have little or no idea of what God’s purpose for the world is. Whereas from the moral concept of providence we get the idea that God’s purpose is to promote the highest good, from the empirical concept of fate we would struggle to infer what the purpose was. Seeing some good people end up badly-off and seeing some bad people end up well-off, seeing all the varied scenes that life presents, it would be unclear what the plan being pursued was, not just in the details but in the broadest outline.

There are several pieces of textual evidence that suggest this contrast between providence and fate. In *Toward Perpetual Peace*, Kant notes of world-history that:

If understood to be the compelling force of a cause whose laws of operation are unknown to us, this plan is called Fate. But if... it is understood as the underlying wisdom of a higher cause which is directed toward the objective final end of the human species and which predetermines this course of

events in the world, this plan is called Providence. (Kant 2006b, 85, 8:361)

Here, fate is presented as inscrutable, as some plan that we cannot understand by looking at the events of history, until we use the postulates of practical reason to transform fate into providence by viewing the events of history through the moral concept of God. In his *Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion* Kant notes the arbitrariness and amorality of fate, which jars with the reward that we expect providence to assign to a person worthy of happiness:

... we cannot deny that at times even the most righteous human being would seem to be a ball in the hands of fate. (Kant 1996c, 414, 28:1081)

A similar contrast is found in *Conjectural History of the Human Race*, in which fate again breaks the link between happiness and worthiness to be happy that providence ensures:

... the following is of the greatest importance: *to be content with providence* (even though it has laid such a toilsome path for us in our earthly world), in part so that one can still take heart in the face of such labors, and in part in order to not, by placing the blame on fate, lose sight of our own fault. (Kant 2006a, 34, 8:121) [original italics]

Again, in the lecture notes of J.G Herder, he notes that:

The great mutability of things, and the storms of my passions, can best be comforted by the thought that I am placed in the world, and placed there by supreme goodness...in this way, then, *religion* alone may be completely reassuring. For even a naturally good and moral man must always tremble before *blind fate*" (Kant 1997a, 12, 27:25) [original italics]

ADVANTAGES OF INTERPRETING FATE AS PROVIDENCE USURPED

I now show that the interpretation that fate is a usurpation of providence captures what is plausible about Thielke's interpretation but avoids issues (i-iv).

(iv) Providence is teleological. With the concept of fate we retain the idea of an event happening for a purpose. Yet, without the moral concept of God, we either end up with strange guesses about what that purpose might be, or no idea at all. Again, without the moral concept of God it will be unclear how we are to engage with that purpose. Consequent to both of these problems, we find in most cultures that the belief in fate is accompanied by a host of apotropaic and divinatory rituals (Lawson 1992; Sangren 2012).

(iii) Providence promotes the highest good. So, things like the location of atoms in the Oort cloud or the descent of the platypus are peripheral to providence, whereas political crises and car crashes and the like are central. Fate attributions are not made indiscriminately because providence attributions are not made indiscriminately, but only about things that are significant for human well-being and human action, elements of the highest good.

(ii) Providence is not an explanatory schema that is in competition with causal explanation; as a postulate of practical reason it is beyond, but not contradictory to, our theoretical understanding of how various events are caused. Though it provides a way of seeing events that happen in the world, it is not an attempt to causally explain them. So, the vexing question of how an *a priori* concept like causation could be usurped is avoided. By contrast, usurpations arise with the same ease that transcendental illusions do, as concepts of the practical domain and concepts of the theoretical domain become confused in our ordinary thought and wander outside their bounds.

Understanding fate as the usurpation of providence still provides an account of why the concept of fate bears an uneasy relation to causal-efficient explanation. As a teleological explanation, fate is about answering a different question than causal-efficient explanations (a “why” rather than a “how”). Fate is a usurpation of a concept that is not theoretical in the first place. Consequently, we should expect to find that fate lacks a theoretical contextualization. In this it is like providence; “the standpoint of providence [which] is situated beyond all human wisdom” (Kant 1996, 300, 7:84), its workings “invisible to us” (Kant 1979, 169, 7:94). For another thing, since fate is a usurpation, it does not even provide the useful way of seeing events that Kant claims for providence, as a teleological judgment – it will not provide a way of looking at history as progressive or at the natural world as a unity (Kant 2002, 14, 20:210; 300, 5:433; 321, 5:457).

(i) we avoid the need to explain why the other *a priori* concepts of theoretical reason are not also usurped, because in fact none of them have been. Rather, a practical postulate has been usurped. Nevertheless, we remain able to explain the widespread use of the concept of fate – like the gods of polytheism or like William Paley’s crafter-God it is an attempt to clothe in materials drawn from experience a postulate of practical reason. Providence, and so fate, is an idea that suggests itself to people in all places and times (Kant 2002, 322, 5:458).

OBJECTIONS ANSWERED

“Hold on. What about those passages that Thielke cited, where it seems like Kant is understanding fate in terms of its contrast with causal explanation?”

On my interpretation, it certainly remains the case the fate bears a contrast to causal explanation that helps us understand fate, but this is not to say that it is a concept that should be defined essentially in terms of that contrast. The key here is to continue the passage cited earlier from *Metaphysik L1*:

Opposed to both, chance as well as destiny, are nature and freedom. These are the two explanatory grounds of the understanding which are opposed to blind accident. Destiny is a blind necessity. If I oppose this blind necessity, then I derive the event from freedom. But if it is a necessity, then I derive it either from the absolute necessity, from the highest cause, or from hypothetical necessity, that is, from grounds of nature. – But the necessity of nature alone cannot be the explanatory ground of everything; the first ground of origination must happen through freedom, because nothing but freedom can furnish a ground of origination. (Kant 1997b, 24, 28:200)

This is a difficult passage. My reading is that the proper contrast of fate (destiny) is with freedom. If I want to know whether some event was an absolute necessity (fated, destined) or not, then I cannot really find this out by examining the conditional necessities of nature. These conditional necessities only tell me about what had to happen given certain initial conditions, but not about whether the initial conditions had to be that way. To know whether any event was an absolute necessity, then, we must appeal beyond nature, beyond the chain of conditional necessities. But, as Kant explains in his *Third Antinomy*, when we appeal beyond nature, the only concept of its beginning that our understanding gives us is freedom, “the absolute spontaneity of an action” which is ultimately “required to make comprehensible an origin of the world” (Kant 1998, 486, B476). So, fate is to be essentially understood as the denial of freedom. Although it involves a denial of the conditional character of the necessities of nature, it involves this denial only because it denies the freedom that stands at its beginning, and so makes those conditional necessities into absolute necessities. Fate is the idea of a personal God who freely chooses to create, reduced into an impersonal generative force. Given the connections that Kant draws between freedom and

consciousness of the moral law (Kant 2015, 4, 5:5), we should then expect fate to be morally arbitrary, unlike providence.

“Hold on. What about the immortality of the soul – isn’t the idea that God will achieve the proportion between happiness and worthiness to be happy in a future life?”

Kant’s argument for the immortality of the soul in the second *Critique* concerns our worthiness to be happy. A being worthy of unsurpassable happiness, beatitude, is a being whose will is in complete conformity with the moral law, a holy being. Complete conformity with the moral law is “a perfection of which no rational being of the sensible world is capable at any moment of his existence” (Kant 2015, 99, 5:122). Kant is not quite clear as to why this is so. On one interpretation, it is because as beings in the sensible world our wills remain subject to determination by things other than the moral law (Tizzard 2019, 9). Another interpretation is that this is because we are temporal beings whose wills remain changeable (in contrast to “the eternal being to whom the temporal condition is nothing” (Kant 2015, 99, 5:123)). In either event, Kant concludes that we must believe in “an endless progress toward that complete conformity” (Kant 2015, 99, 5:122) in order for the moral part of the highest good to be possible.

So, although we may be both more worthy of happiness in the afterlife and more happy in the afterlife, Kant does not claim that the happiness we will enjoy in an afterlife is given to us in order to correct some disproportion of these things here in nature. Kant does not present such a claim in his other discussions of immortality, but rather emphasizes how immortality affords the prospect of continued moral improvement, with happiness as its accompaniment (Kant 1996e, 110, 6:69; 223, 8:329). Some passages in the first *Critique* are taken in the secondary literature (Pasternack and Fugate 2021) to support the idea that Kant sees the postulation of an afterlife as a corrective to a disproportion between happiness and worthiness to be happy in this life, but if we attend carefully to the text we can see that this is not the only, or best, reading:

Leibniz called the world, insofar as in it one attends only to rational beings and their interconnection in accordance with moral laws under the rule of the highest good, the **realm of grace**, and distinguished it from the **realm of nature**, where, to be sure, rational beings stand under moral laws but

cannot expect any successes for their conduct except in accordance with the course of nature in our sensible world. Thus to regard ourselves as in the realm of grace, where every happiness awaits us as long as we do not ourselves limit our share of it through the unworthiness to be happy, is a practically necessary idea of reason. (Kant 1998, 680–81, B840) [original bolding]

One reading is that in this life there is a disproportion between happiness and worthiness to be happy, and so we must believe on moral grounds that this will be corrected in a future life. My reading is that, on the basis of theoretical reason, regarding ourselves as beings of the realm of nature, we have no reason to think that there is a proportion between happiness and worthiness to be happy in this life. Insofar as we are using theoretical reason, we should find nature to be entirely indifferent to the highest good. But, as a matter of practical reason, we should “regard ourselves as in the realm of grace” – *not* that we are to regard ourselves as outside the realm of grace and that in some future life will be admitted to it, but that we are in it now; “we have passed from death to life, because we love each other” (1 John 3:14). The highest good is being achieved in this life, even though its achievement will continue and deepen in an afterlife.

It is relevant to note here that, like most early-modern philosophers, Leibniz, from whom Kant borrows these terms, believed in immanent justice (Strickland 2016). So, it seems plausible that Kant would want to put this belief on a moral footing as he does with other religious ideas, rather than completely deny it. Again, to the extent that the postulates of practical reason are supposed to prevent us from becoming discouraged with the moral enterprise, or to prevent us from viewing the moral enterprise as hopeless, it makes sense that they would concern this life.

CONCLUSION

Understanding fate to be the usurpation of providence has some advantages over understanding fate to be a usurpation of causality. It seems that the reverse does not hold. Kant’s approving remarks about the Stoic view of fate, from *History of natural theology according to Meiners’s historia doctrinae de uno vero Deo*, suggests that he understood the concept of fate as related to providence rather than causality:

[I]f one blames them [the Stoics] for asserting a necessity of things in the

world and its alternations, then one does them an injustice; for they distinguished fate carefully from necessity, and understood by it nothing but the divine government and provision (Kant 1996b, 450, 28:1126).

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