

FATALISM

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Fatalism is the belief that the future is fixed and that there is nothing we can do about it. It implies that our wills are causally inefficacious.

The Fates of Mythology

The belief in fatalism, like many others, has its roots in the quasi-religious mythologies of ancient peoples many of whom personified the notion of fate. Thus Greek mythology supposed that three Fates, daughters of the goddess of Necessity, had control of our lives from beginning to end and that it was therefore impossible for us to do anything contrary to what they had prescribed for us. We may think we are in control of our own destinies. But we are mistaken. Both Homer's *Odysseus* and Aeschelus's *Prometheus Unbound*, depict mortals as puppets of the gods.

Fate and Predestination in Monotheistic Religions

Belief in the Fates has it a correlate in each of the three main monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

In all three the concept of fate or destiny mutates into the theological doctrine of Predestination--the doctrine that there is a Book of Life in which are written the names of those whom God has selected for salvation or damnation. As St. Paul took pains to point out, a person's ultimate future is already determined by the "grace" of God not by anything we can do of ourselves.

This form of fatalism is often linked to the doctrine of God's foreknowledge. The God of theism is supposed to be omniscient (all-knowing) as well as omnipotent (all-powerful) and omnibenevolent (wholly good). By virtue of his omniscience, it has been argued, God knows our futures right down to the finest detail. Hence, it is concluded, we can't do anything other than he already knows we are going to do. The details of our daily lives, as well as our ultimate destiny, are already set (if not in stone, then in God's mind). Much theological debate has raged over which doctrine takes logical precedence: Foreknowledge or Predestination? Is God's foreknowledge of our futures a consequence of his having predetermined them? Or is it the other way round?

Such sayings as "Thy will be done"--whether the word "thy" is taken to refer to the Jewish Yaweh, the Christian God, or the Muslim Allah-- incorporate the fatalistic suggestion that nothing can be done that is contrary to God's will. Don't struggle against it; just submit.

Commonplace sources of fatalistic belief

Belief in fatalism can have much humbler sources: sources in such commonplace observations as "It wasn't in my stars", "It wasn't meant to be", "I guess his number was up", or "What will be will be". Persons mouthing such sayings may have some astrological, religious or metaphysical doctrine in mind. But they need not. They may utter them without even pausing to ponder what, if anything, they mean. Thus can the inanities of ordinary language lend support to vague and unexamined philosophical doctrine.

Philosophical sources of the doctrine of fatalism

Serious philosophers, too, can be led to flirt with fatalism by reflecting on matters of language and logic.

Aristotle was a case in point. In *On Interpretation*, Aristotle puzzled over the application of logical principles to statements about the future. His example was "There will be a sea-fight tomorrow". Clearly, he reasoned, this statement must--by his own Law of Excluded Middle--be either true or false. Suppose it to be true. Then, it seems, there is nothing and no-one that can bring it about that the sea-battle will *not* occur. Otherwise the statement would not have been true. Suppose the statement to be false. Then, it seems, we can conclude that there is nothing and no-one who can bring it about that the battle *will* occur. Otherwise the statement would not have been false. It seems, then, that logic itself dictates that the future, whatever it holds in prospect for us, is fixed and occurs of necessity. No-one, on this analysis, can do anything to make the future be other than it is going to be.

Some thinkers have concluded that logic does indeed provide a sound basis for believing fatalism true. Others have thought to escape from fatalism by finding a path between the alternatives of statements being either true or false. Statements about the future, some have said, are neither determinately true nor determinately false. So-called three-valued logics have been devised accordingly. Still others have claimed that there is a fallacy involved. They have argued that from the truth of a statement about the future--that such and such an event will occur--all that follows is that it *will* indeed occur, not that it "must" occur. Likewise for the case where such a statement is false: all that follows is that the event *will not* occur, not that it "cannot" occur. There's no hint of fatalism in either case.

Determinism distinguished from Fatalism

It is sometimes supposed that the doctrine of Determinism--in the form of a belief in the causal interconnectedness of all events, from past to present and thence to the future--also has fatalistic implications. But this has got to be wrong. A determinist can well believe that just as our present actions are the effects of past events, so our present actions have their own effects and so can play a role in determining future events. That is to say, a causal determinist can consistently say that our wills are causally efficacious, at least some of the time. Since fatalism denies that our choices can have any effect

on what the future is to be, a fatalist cannot consistently say this. Hence determinism does not imply fatalism.