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### **Destiny as a relationship**

AFTERWORD to the special section ANTHROPOLOGIES OF DESTINY:  
ACTION, TEMPORALITY, FREEDOM

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Abstract:

*This afterword takes a closer look at relationships of power involved in destiny, taking inspiration from questions and answers offered in this special section on anthropologies of destiny. Destiny offers a theory of human action according to which humans can have power over their condition only in accordance and alliance with very powerful or omnipotent superhuman beings or processes, such as the monotheist God, polytheistic pantheons, heaven, planets, but also history, progress, or markets. Who are they? Do they need to be intentional? What kinds of power relations, or "relationship power," do humans and the superhuman authors of their destiny craft? I return to the opening question of the special section—What does it mean to live a life that has already been written?—and suggest that destiny as an intimate relationships of power is meaningful in the sense that it provides practical, moral answers to the question why.*

Keywords: predestination, power, relationality, morality, God, divination, Tralfamadore

### **Was the situation just structured that way?**

It is possible to imagine a destiny that is not a relationship but instead a deterministic causal chain that writes itself without intervention by powerful others. Kurt Vonnegut ([1969] 1979) did so in his novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* about the firebombing of Dresden, which he witnessed as a young prisoner of war. The protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, travels in time between World War II, a postwar American present, and a near future. At one occasion, aliens from Tralfamadore abduct him. Tralfamadoreans do not experience time the way humans do. They know past, present, and future at once, and yet they feel no anxiety or futility about knowing, for example, that the entire universe will eventually be

destroyed by one of their scientific experiments:

"If you know this," said Billy, "isn't there some way you can prevent it? Can't you keep the pilot from pressing the button?"

"He has always pressed it, and he always will. We always let him and we always will let him. The moment is structured that way." (Vonnegut [1969] 1979: 80)

The paradoxically comforting determinism of the novel does not, however, prevent Vonnegut (who appears as himself, the author, in the novel) from giving some very direct moral advice as if it were possible to choose:

I have told my sons that they are not under any circumstances to take part in massacres, and that the news of massacres of enemies is not to fill them with satisfaction or glee. I have also told them not to work for companies which make massacre machinery, and to express contempt for people who think we need machinery like that. (Vonnegut [1969] 1979: 20)

Destiny tells us to accept that the course of important events is decided independently of what we want or choose. It also tells us that we need to act to make it happen, to inhabit that which will happen, and perhaps to manipulate or change it to our advantage. This "malleable fixity" (Elliot and Menin, this issue) has made destiny an extraordinarily helpful idea for humans to find their way in a life that they live but do not own. But one rarely encounters people who express faith in a blind, meaningless destiny in the fashion of *Slaughterhouse-*  
[p. 344]

*Five*. Humans around the world trust in God or gods, search for clues about their fate in divinatory techniques, and have faith in destiny-like historical forces such as progress, class struggle, or the market. Sometimes they insist that our own choices matter. The Tralfamadorians' recognition that "the moment is structured that way" is fundamentally less satisfying as an answer.

In the articles of this collection, destiny is therefore not about a deterministic universe blindly stumbling along its inevitable path. It is about doing one's best in a relationship with greater powers.

## **Superhuman protagonists**

Luca Nevola reflects with Yemenis as they reflect about unfulfilled life plans. Destiny emerges as a "dialectical relationship between God's will and human intentional action." Qadar (potentiality) and nasib (destiny in hindsight) provide both a language of choice and a way to rationalize unhappy consequences. This characteristic dialectic gives destiny a political (or perhaps antipolitical) edge, more explicit in Daniel Guinness's article on Fijian rugby players and their aspirations. Three different destinies with different sources of power—ethnonationalist, professional, Christian—are at play here. For the rugby players, destiny in this constellation is not about limits of human power but, on the contrary, empowerment through alliance with divine power: "I can do anything through Christ who strengthens me" (Phillipians 4:13). But only few players become professionals.

Working on diviners and their clients in Taiwan, Stéphanie Homola sketches a nonmonotheistic predestination where some knowledge and negotiation of one's fate is possible, even imperative. Such knowledge is comparably less accessible in monotheistic traditions. The three articles reveal an interesting contrast between the partially knowable and impersonal destiny of birth-hour signs and other nonmonotheistic powers on the one hand, and the unknowable and personal destiny of the monotheist God on the other. The first type of destiny is a structure made of superhuman but comparably impersonal forces that humans may try to discover and manipulate in the best possible way. The latter kind of destiny involves a more personal relationship (often including a promise) that calls humans to submit to, and trust, an omnipotent, benevolent God. This is not a dualist alternative, of course: the traditions featured in the three articles all involve personal, intentional relationships as well as techniques to predict, facilitate, and perhaps also change fate. But they do so each with their own emphasis.

## **Relational and relationship power**

In her work on Northern Irish Pentecostals, Hilary Foye (2015) uses Bruno Latour's idea of human and nonhuman "hybrid networks" to understand the relation between humans and God. With Latour, humans are not particularly special or unique, and all kinds of beings embody agentic power in complex networks. Latour

points out that this also brings back into social scientific analysis "the crossed-out God" (Latour 1993: 142).

A tension remains, however. Latour's vision is an animist one, which may work well with planets, horoscopes, birth-hour signs, and divination sticks. Monotheism and animism, in contrast, don't make good bedfellows. Latour proposes a "parliament of things" (1993: 142-45). But the God of the Bible and the Qur'an is an absolutist autocrat who doesn't share power with republican institutions.

James Laidlaw (2013: 185) has pointed out that Latour's actors in network lack one crucial part of what makes something or someone an actor: the expectation of moral responsibility. And yet, at least some of Latour's nonhumans are commonly treated by humans as responsible actors in Laidlaw's sense. Humans do not generally try to verify whether they are dealing with an intentional being unless they have a specific reason to do so. Instead, intention and responsibility seem to be the taken-for-granted default assumption. This can be a compelling and sensible way to act with nonhumans too. It is what animism is all about. It is how leftists often speak of capitalism. It is how social scientists treat concepts and abstractions like *neoliberalism*, *the state*, or *the secular*.

Of all nonhumans, divine beings are among the most explicitly intentional—and the most powerful. The monotheist God of Bible and Qur'an, in particular, builds strong moral and emotional relations with humans. This is relational power not so much as in Michel Foucault's biopower, but more as in contemporary English vernacular use of "relationships" as intimate bonds. Such bonds also link "heaven and earth," Robert Orsi suggests (2005). This kind of "relationship power" is effective by means of intimate, emotional bonds of friend-

[p. 345]

ship, enmity, love, fear, trust, help, guidance, and importantly, gratefulness.

A power to which one can be grateful—this is crucial for the relationships humans build with the One God, gods of polytheist pantheons, saints, heroes, and leaders. Are clients of divinatory experts grateful to the stars, the spirits, or the divination sticks when they receive good advice that helps them make the right decision? Less so, it seems. Different relationships of power are at play, and they make for different experiences of destiny.

## **Human power and empowerment**

Destiny is also a relationship humans have with each other by mediation of nonhuman and superhuman powers. It empowers some humans over others. Experts specialized in reading signs of destiny profit from their skill—and yet, as Homola shows, this does not make them immune to failure and hardship. The politics of God and Heavens often lean to the right: they encourage us to strive for improvement and success while accepting hierarchies and defeats as inevitable. Destiny is not always on the side of established hierarchies, and sometimes socialist revolutionaries find God on their side (Schielke 2015: 222-23). But destiny teaches us that free choice and individual autonomy are fictions—useful, inspirational fictions perhaps, but fictions all the same. Destiny, also, more often than not tells us that this is how it should be, that those who have power are destined to have it.

Radical, revolutionary movements in the past two centuries have often vehemently denied that such privileges are predestined. They have insisted that men are not naturally or by God's decree superior to women, that kings do not have a divine mandate to rule, that humans of European origin are not endowed with a civilizing mission to colonize the world, and that social hierarchies are neither necessary nor morally right. The attack on human inequality has occasionally involved an attack on the very idea of divine power. But there is a twist to the story. These radical movements have often come up with destiny-like narratives of their own: Marxist socialists have come up with the inevitable progress of historical dialectics. Modernists from left and right have come up with the idea of an inevitable economic and scientific progress and (in liberal and social-democrat versions) human emancipation. Religious radicals have resorted to the power of God to counter human injustice. When such radical movements seize power, these new destinies become the metaphysical and moral foundations of new productive inequalities. The communist party tells workers what their true collective will must be, and sends dissenters to concentration camps. Only those who are able to take destiny into their own hands in neoliberal markets are entitled to a good life in emancipation and comfort. Those who claim to overcome human rule for the sake of the rule of God become the new human rulers over others, in the name of God.

## **The moral of the story**

When Tralfamadorians abducted Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, his first question was "Why me?" They explained to him that this is a typically Earthling question, and unanswerable: "There is no why" (Vonnegut [1969] 1979: 56). Earthlings, however, do seem to prefer stories that tell them why. And this is what destiny as a narrative form does. It tells that there is a why. This is not simply the why of cause and effect. It is a why concerning the moral of the story, a moral and temporal why that calls for practical answers about how the past turned out the way it did, and what I should do now and in the future.

I will become a successful professional rugby player, because my tradition, my genes, and my faith have elected me to be one, and in order to make that election true I have to train and pray hard. There was no *nasib* to realize my marriage plans, so I ought to look for another bride. My projects failed because I kept trying something that was not my fate: I should pay closer attention to the eight signs of my birth hour, and avoid such disappointments again. This moral quality of destiny (moral both in the sense of cultivation of what one understands to be good and right in a relationship, and in the sense of the moral to a story that makes it meaningful and helpful) is intimately linked with the way destiny works as "relationship power" between human and superhuman actors. Without the latter, there would be no moral to the story; the moment would simply be structured that way.

One answer to what it means to live a predestined life is, thus, already contained in the question: greater powers to which we can relate, with whom we can communicate and create a relationship, are meaningful because

[p. 346]

they offer moral and practical guidance in a way that a blind deterministic destiny would not. In the face of overwhelming circumstances, destiny provides helpful allies or generous masters. As a moral relationship of power, destiny turns chance encounters into divine gifts, and times of hardship into second chances. Equally, it also turns privilege into entitlement, and force into legitimate authority.

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