

FATE AND FREEDOM AS VIEWED BY HOMER

BY ARTHUR L. KEITH

YOUTH is not concerned with problems of fate and free will. Freedom is naively assumed as the natural condition of life. But as the individual or the world grows old the recognition comes that the human will is not entirely free but is somehow involved in the bonds of necessity. The mild philosophy of a Vergil may temper the sternness of fate by assigning to it a beneficent purpose closely related to the national fortunes of Rome. Christian teleology may identify destiny with the righteousness of God. The pendulum of philosophical and sociological thought swings now toward the rigidity of fate's decrees, now toward the sufficiency of man's endeavor. The individual's behavior is largely controlled by his conception of fate and personal responsibility. An irrepressible Irish orphan is caught in a Minnesota blizzard and suffers the loss of both hands and feet. But he educates himself, teaches school, marries, acquires a competent fortune, wins the confidence of his fellow-citizens, is elected speaker of his state legislature, and is known as a successful man. Without insisting upon himself as an example, he frequently asserts that there is no such thing as fate, that man's will is free and indomitable. On the other hand, America's leading criminologist declares that we are all bound hand and foot in the chains of heredity and environment. The necessary corollary of such a doctrine is that society should be lenient toward the misdoings of unfortunate man. The foundations of personal responsibility are undermined and society in many aspects is completely altered if such a view prevails.

Youth has its freshness and wholesomeness. We no longer say that Homer represents a youthful civilization. He knew of cities

that had risen and fallen. We are sometimes surprised at the maturity of his reflections. But as compared with recorded history Homer is youthful and offers, as youth always does to age, many valuable lessons and suggestions. He was not in the least concerned in fate and free will as academic questions. His chief interest was to produce a good story and whatever views he held consciously or subconsciously on such matters appear only in an incidental way. We shall not find consistency among the various allusions though tendencies may be observed. Heredity and environment in the modern technical application were wholly unknown to him. A hereditary doom may afford a strange fascination for an Aeschylean tragedy. It has no place in Homer's story. Brooding over a hereditary taint or defect belongs not to youth but to a more sophisticated age. In this respect we may pronounce Homer more wholesome than his successors. Environment we have always with us. A warrior surrounded by several foemen with drawn spears may be deeply conscious of the particular environment of the occasion but the term with its implications of fatality is foreign to Homer.

However, Homer admitted the limitations upon the human will and the consciousness of these limitations hangs like a cloud upon the horizon of all his thought. And if at the same time he represented the will as free, the inconsistency did not trouble him. The most obvious restriction upon the will of man arose from the intervention of the gods. Homer's world was a curious mixture of human and divine characters. Man's desires frequently ran counter to the will of some god. Man must curb his desires recognizing that "one can not, howsoever valiant he be, thwart the purpose of Zeus who is mightier far". This intervention of the gods penetrates into every phase of life, war, games, councils, voyages. Two Achaean chieftains quarrel and "the will of Zeus was accomplished". Teucer would have gained the prize in archery but Apollo begrudged him the honor and turned the arrow aside from its mark. Menelaus had won the victory in a fair fight but Aphrodite rescued the intended victim from the final stroke. When a favorite is to be protected Homer might feel some justification in the act of the god but often the intervention appears capricious, not to say malicious. Zeus and Hera barter city against city and Zeus allows even Troy to fall though he admits that it had been

most righteous. He sends a baleful dream to Agamemnon in order to arouse high hopes in his breast which he intends to dash low. No wonder that the Homeric hero calls his god perverse and cruel. Homer had for every adverse circumstance an easy explanation. Some god was responsible. The king and the chief warrior of the Achaeans have quarreled. "Who then of the gods brought the twain together in strife?" The opposing forces had struck a truce and all would have been well but Athena persuaded Pandarus to shoot an arrow at Menelaus and the war was renewed.

The intervention of the gods knows no bounds. They even thrust themselves into the thoughts and motives of man. The dream sent to Agamemnon is one method of driving the mind of man. Hera put it into Achilles's heart to save the Achaeans from the plague. Pandarus's impulse to break the truce was inspired by Athena, though he is called a fool for yielding. The blindness of Helen's soul was placed there apparently not of her own volition but because Aphrodite willed it so. And the quarrel itself, the theme of the Iliad, was not of man's seeking. Agamemnon says: "I am not to blame, but Zeus and Fate and Erinys that walks in darkness, who laid fierce madness on my soul that day in the assembly when I took from Achilles his prize. But what could I do? For it is God who accomplishes all things. Eldest daughter of Zeus is Atë, who drives all mad, baneful creature that she is. Her feet are light, she walks not upon the ground but over the heads of men she goes, overthrowing men, entangling them one after another". This, one of the few allegories in Homer, represents the all-pervasive power of the mysterious, unseen force that reads ruin to men. "Whom the gods destroy they first drive mad." We may exclaim with Agamemnon: "What can one do?" If even one's thought and will are not his own, is there any hope of salvation for man? Can there be real achievement and victory, if Achilles, for instance, is a bold warrior only because the gods have made him so, if a god perversely determines the issues of battle, and if the disposal of all things lies irrevocably on the knees of the gods?

Aside from the interference of the gods, death also cuts athwart the purpose of man. Whether on the battlefields of Troy or in the dangers of the sea or in the peaceful pursuits of one's own country, death is never far away. Long before his encounter with Achilles, Hector knew his doom was at hand. Over all the valiant

endeavors of the Trojans, like a dark cloud, hangs the certain knowledge that the way is drawing nigh on which sacred Troy will fall and Priam and his folk. Achilles's life lies under the same ominous cloud. Even in the moment of victory he recognizes that death and stern fate are waiting for him, that there will come a morn or evening or noontide when someone shall take away his life in battle, smiting him with spear or with arrow from his bow. The paths of glory lead but to the grave. Agamemnon's triumph ends in his own death. On the field of battle death is present in many forms and often the passing of some brave soul forces a pathetic cry from the poet. Death is not dissociated from the gods. It is their instrument for putting out of the way one who obstructs their purposes. So when Hector sees his doom approaching he realizes it is so because the gods have summoned him to die. Death is involved with fate, Moira, with the gods, but also with the acts of men. Patroclus says: "Dire fate and Leto's son have slain me, and of men Euphorbus, and you also (Hector)". The expression, "the fate of the gods", seems to indicate that the poet regarded fate or death as under subjection to the gods. Yet we find even Zeus shedding drops of blood and helpless to interfere when he sees that his dearest son, Sarpedon, is about to die. The poet had not thought his way out to a consistent solution. Fate is frequently treated as synonymous with death. "Dark death and forceful fate came over his eyes". Less often fate is conceived as a resistless principle operating in all the affairs of life. One must "suffer whatever destiny and the stern spinning women spun for him with their yarn at his birth, when his mother first bore him". Zeus and Fate, Moira, and Erinys are coequals in bringing madness to Agamemnon's soul. We can make a threefold distinction here, which may have been partly apparent to Homer, and regard Fate as the mechanical principle, Zeus as the intelligence applying the principle, and Erinys as the punishment personified, whenever the principle is violated. But Homer generally ignores such distinctions. Ate, containing implications of sin and ruin, is closely involved with Zeus for she is his eldest daughter. Fate, as Moira, represents the due amount. To each man the gods have given his portion. The gods themselves including Zeus have been assigned their respective shares and lots. As such, fate is an impersonal principle. Violation of this principle is fraught with disaster for gods and men

alike. Evidently, Homer had not clearly conceived the limitations and interrelations of gods and fate. But one thing was clear and that was the certainty and irrevocableness of fate. In one of Homer's occasional moods of reflection he makes Achilles say: "You may get you cattle and fat sheep, tripods may be had for the price and tawny-headed horses; but the life-breath of a man when once it has passed the barrier of his teeth can never be entreated to return nor can it ever be taken again".

With man's will restricted on every side by the interference of the gods and the certainty of death, his place might seem to be that of a mechanical toy. Suicide might seem to be the only escape but suicide is almost unknown to Homer. The universal interest in Homer could be based upon no such conception of man's enthrallment. Homer is the first messenger of freedom in history. The instances are many that show man in the partial or complete exercise of his faculties. The restriction is already half cleared away when man and god make the act a partnership affair. Athena and Hera if they wish will give Achilles strength, but his part is to restrain the proud spirit in his breast, for a well-tempered soul is best. It is not a juggling of words to say that Achilles is free to second the motion of the gods. A god may capriciously rescue a favorite from what seems certain death, but more often the man's endeavor to fight and to achieve is supported by the god. Menelaus is free to arm himself for battle against Hector, though the issue of victory rest with the gods. Hector admits that Athena gave him the glory but he first did his part by fighting. The purpose of Zeus in subduing Ajax needed reinforcement from the Trojans who were casting their spears at him. One's thoughts are not wholly bound. Athena reminds Telemachus that he himself in his own heart will be master of some thoughts while others the god will suggest. So it is equally possible that his journey to Pylus may have been on his own initiative or inspired by some god. This represents a definite step in the direction of freedom of thought and will. It is the same idea that holds man responsible for his evil doings. Apollo caused the strife between Agamemnon and Achilles but the poet at once informs us that it was because Agamemnon had committed the impiety of dishonoring a priest. The suitors were overthrown not only by the gods but also through their own wanton deeds. Elpenor's unlucky accident was due not only to some divinity but

to wine out of measure. There is no need of multiplying examples.

Nor did this tendency stop with sharing the responsibility between men and gods. Upon his own initiative and unaided by the gods man was sometimes regarded as preferring evil or righteous deeds. Athena rebukes Odysseus at a moment of timidity by reminding him that it was through his counsel that Troy was captured. Through their own blind folly Odysseus's companions perished for they ate the cattle of Helios. There is a complete divorce of responsibility between gods and men in Nestor's reminder to Agamemnon that if he shall try a certain device, "then you will know whether it is through the divine will that you can not sack the city or because of the cowardice of men and their ignorance of war". And then to the assembled gods Zeus exclaims: "Ah me, how now do mortals blame the gods! For from us they say it is that evil comes, but they even of themselves through their own folly have woes beyond that which is fated". Zeus goes on to illustrate his point by showing that Aegisthus in spite of special warning from himself had transcended fate in marrying Clytemnestra and slaying Agamemnon. It is difficult to see how the proponents of the substantial freedom of the will could find a more satisfactory example than this. Fate is not entirely eliminated. Man's will must still make adjustments. And as for the part of the gods, they should not be regarded as obstructionists only, but as trying to assist man in the better way. Even when they have set themselves against mankind their purpose may still be changed. "With burnt offerings and reverent vows, with libation and with sacrifice, men entreat them and turn them from their purpose, when anyone has transgressed or erred. For Prayers are daughters of mighty Zeus, halt and wrinkled and with eyes askance, and they take good heed to follow in the steps of Ate. And Ate is strong and swift of foot, therefore she far outruns all Prayers and she goes before them over all the earth making men to fall, but they follow and heal the harm". We have already observed that Ate was the daughter of Zeus. It is a significant and wholesome qualification of this relationship to find that Prayers are also his daughters.

Counsel, volition, purpose, and persuasion imply freedom of will and those faculties are constantly exercised by Homeric characters and in fact determine the general tone of the story. "He formed this cunning plan in his heart"; "he spake what the heart

within his breast bade him speak"; "this seemed to him on deliberation to be the better plan"; "let us consider how these things shall be, if the mind will yet accomplish aught"; "and from there also by my bravery and counsel and wit we escaped"; "why do you urge me on eager as I am already for the fray?" Instances such as these may be found on every page of Homer. The large number of purpose clauses is not without its significance. Likewise, the presentation of two courses to man, either one of which he may take, suggests liberty. Achilles pondered whether he should draw his sword and slay Agamemnon or should stay his anger. The Achaeans ponder whether to remain and fight or to return across the sea. This would be absurd unless they were free to do one or the other as they willed. Achilles had the choice of two courses, a long life without glory or a short and glorious life. Achilles was the hero and the example of the youth. Clearly, Homer means to say that one may choose between right and wrong, between a life of glory and one of ignominy. In like manner that other type of manhood, Odysseus, might have remained in the land of the lotus eaters but chose instead his own rugged island, Ithaca.

The opposition of the gods and the threat of death hover on the horizon but they throw in relief man's own endeavor. It is too much to say that Homer introduced these obstacles merely to enhance the glory of man's achievement. They are actually present and can not be explained away. Someone has well said that the Homeric hero knew that he was under the spell of fate but played as if he were free. But the play was pursued so eagerly and seriously that it becomes the all-important thing. It is truly an impressive sight to watch Homer's heroes play the game of life, acting as if they were free while all the time the certainty of doom impends. It is man's feeling exactly, though ascribed to a god, when Homer makes Zeus say: "Ah woe is me, since it is fated that my best loved son, Sarpedon, must die. But my heart is divided in thought whether I shall save him from this grievous battle or whether I shall subdue him at the hands of Patroclus". If the matter is already decreed by fate, why consider other courses? Perhaps the attitude is nowhere else so well exemplified as in the words which Hector speaks when he sees that the gods have betrayed him: "Now is my doom at hand; at last I will not die tamely or ingloriously but as I die I will achieve some great deed for even

later generations to learn." The same idea is expressed by Achilles: "I, even I, well know this, that it is my fate to perish here far from my father and mother; but for all that I will not cease until I have given the Trojans their fill of battle".

We have spoken of inconsistency in Homer's dealing with fate and personal responsibility. No attempt will be made to explain it away for it is the unexplainable. But it is to Homer's credit that he achieved a consistency of another sort in representing so vividly the pursuit of the quest, the playing of the game, that all obstacles become of second importance. The human will creates its own environment, achieves real ends of distinction, and amid the conflicting gods finds a new God in the glory of living. To such an attitude Homer's never-failing attractiveness is due. He has the eternal message of reality. He is a constant source of incentive to man for endeavor. In a generation surfeited with theories, grown weary in its pursuit of pleasure, cloyed with the refinements of a machine civilization, Homer's clear note sounds across the ages a message unequalled for inspiration and wholesomeness.