

Fatalism in Systematic Aspect and Fatalism in its Functional Context

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“My mind’s made up, don’t confuse me with facts.” I don’t remember who originally said so, but it was with such a feeling that I sat down to sketch out this contribution. I had better confess that to me Fatalism and its problems are subjects not one day older than the present symposium. I have come here like a traveller arriving in a new and exciting country. I can be blamed, therefore, for not contenting myself with listening to what others with years of experience in these studies have to say. But I ask my audience to bear in mind that I am in the same privileged situation as that of the traveller finding himself in a position that enables him to look at matters with a freshness altogether different from the views taken by those who have been living in the country for a long period.

Fatalism thought out in its ultimate consequences, I think, must be the view that a man’s life in the minutest detail has been fixed in a pre-ordained course. This would mean that whatever I do it will be but the bends and curves of my unalterable track. In this perspective, apparent alternatives to Fate have been entirely eliminated. If I pray to my God and have my wish, this religious act can, on close reflection, be viewed only as a link in a pre-destined plan. If I impose my will by magic, I can afterwards wonder whether this was a link in the pre-ordained plan that by this act I was to change my course. Indeed it may be part of my destiny that the opportunity should be given me of imagining myself the architect of my own fortune. By this intellectual experiment I only want to show how Fate, when equated with a man’s life, can be raised to an infinite number of powers—as illustrated in the well-known story of the philosopher who began to wonder whether he were awake or dreaming himself awake.

If it is going to be useful for us in the analysis of religion to concern ourselves with Fatalism, the concept must be so defined as to make it possible to set up alternatives. I would suggest, therefore, that we consider Fatalism phenomenologically as a category of interpretations of reality having the common feature of explaining the course of a man's life as dependent on determinators inaccessible to outside influence. As soon as Fate is said to be alterable we have therefore no longer to do with pure Fatalism. Inaccessibility to outside influence as a criterion has an advantage over the often heard criterion of impersonality. It does not rule out the possibility of Divinities of Fate. Typical fatalistic religion can be placed in this category in so far as the religious behaviour is not aimed at altering the divine will, only at making Fate endurable. We can call this *first category* of interpretations the *fatalistic* category.

Another category of interpretations of reality is constituted by those *religious* ideas which will explain human life as dependent on determinators accessible to outside influence.

A *third category* comprises the *magic* concepts which have the feature in common that they set up man as determinant of his own destiny and those of other persons. That I have an influence on the lives of others means conversely that other people have an influence on mine; and therefore patterns of ideas connected with witches, sorcerers and witchdoctors form an important sector of this category.

Finally, a *fourth category* is formed by those interpretations of reality that can be called the positivistic or "*rational*" interpretations. This category excludes the three first categories in that the concept of determination in the transcendent meaning implied in the foregoing is denied. In the positivistic category we operate on one hand with empirical regularity, and on the other hand with chance, or, in the terms of common sense philosophy, man is here in his experience of reality oscillating between the two poles of knowledge, experience and uncertainty.

Theoretically, the 'transcendent' categories 1-3 exclude one another. Category 1, that of Fatalism, and 2, the religious category, both exclude the third category, the magical interpretations, in that they both operate with forces that are independent of man. Categories 1 and 2 exclude each other, still speaking theoretically, in that the forces cannot at the same time be accessible and inaccessible to outside influence.

So much for systematics. Turning to the religio-historical and folkloristic material put before the participants in this symposium two things will strike us. For one thing, there are very few of the fatalistic complexes of which we have heard that can be referred to Fatalism as delimited by me. But this is only an illustration of the fact that a good many of the features which we are inclined to ascribe to Fatalism typologically, when handled firmly, must be considered as conglomerations of fatalistic and religious, magical, and 'rational' elements.

Secondly, examples have been put before us proving that the fact of living in an environment characterized by typical Fatalism does not exclude complexes of ideas of the three other categories from playing an important role side by side with them, in spite of all (theoretical) contradictions. In this connection I can contribute an example of how fatalistic, religious, magical, and rational ideas can thrive in apparently perfect harmony within one and the same person.

One of my informants in Denmark has an idea about the 'Book of Life' where everything is written down and determined. At the same time he is a diligent church-goer. But in addition he goes every year to a 'wise' woman in order rid himself of a magic spell; he has also on one occasion buried seven sorts of wood and earth from a churchyard in the concrete under his stable door, in order to prevent a neighbour from intruding to bewitch his animals. In other matters my informant acts quite rationally in his daily work, and is, for instance, not afraid of beginning a new thing on a Monday.

The co-existence of so contradictory interpretations of reality is incomprehensible when the material is viewed in a static aspect. But if we see it in action and apply a functional approach, the problems will solve themselves. For one thing we shall see that the contradictory systems are often applied to quite different fields, and for another, it becomes evident that man's response to the vicissitudes of life is more often one of action than of reflection. The last sentence is a free quotation from E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford 1937), in which he aims some critical remarks, on grounds of principle, at those anthropologists who try to over-systematize the beliefs of the primitive African. "The Zande", he says, "actualize these beliefs rather than intellectualize them, and their tenets are expressed in socially controlled behaviour rather than in doctrines."

(p. 82 sq.). In my experience these words are valid far beyond Africa. They apply, so to say, to all persons who have not had some form of intellectual training.

I think it would be fertile for the study of Fatalism to devote itself to analyses of situations with a view to ascertaining in which situations Fatalism is *used*. It would be very interesting then to examine whether the typical situations of Fatalism are not such as exclude the application of religious, magical, or rational behaviour. I should think that by this procedure pure Fatalism would prove in the majority of cases to be applied retrospectively. It is true of much of the material that has been put before this symposium in the form of examples fetched from the higher religions and popular beliefs, from drama, legends, and proverbs. All things considered when man is in situations where all attempts to find a solution (through prayer, magic, or rational cunning) have failed, he has only one thing left: to resign himself and put up with his destiny.