

QUESTION 116

Fate

Next we have to consider fate, which is attributed to certain bodies (question 116). On this topic there are four questions: (1) Is there such a thing as fate? (2) What does it exist in? (3) Is it unchangeable? (4) Are all things subject to fate?

Article 1

Is there such a thing as fate?

It seems that there is no such thing as fate (*fatum nihil sit*):

Objection 1: In his homily for the Epiphany Gregory says, “It is far from the hearts of the faithful to claim that there is such a thing as fate.”

Objection 2: What is brought about by fate is not unprovided for, since, as Augustine puts it in *De Civitate Dei* 5, “We see that ‘fate’ (*fatum*) comes from ‘utter’ (*dictum a fando*), i.e., from ‘speak’”—so that those things are said to occur by fate which have been ‘spoken beforehand’ by someone’s decree (*a aliquo determinante*). But things that are provided for are neither fortuitous nor accidental (*non sunt fortuita neque casualia*). Therefore, if things are brought about by fate, then chance and fortune are excluded from things.

But contrary to this: What does not exist is not defined. But in *De Consolatione Philosophiae* 4 Boethius defines fate as follows: “Fate is a disposition which inheres in movable things and through which providence connects all things to their orderings.” Therefore, there is such a thing as fate.

I respond: Among lower entities, some things seem to occur by fortune or chance (*provenire a fortuna vel casu*). However, it sometimes happens that what occurs by fortune or chance (*est fortuitum vel casuale*) insofar as it is related to lower causes is nonetheless found to be intended *per se* insofar as it is related to some higher cause. For instance, if two servants of the same master are sent by him to the same place, without either knowing about the other, then the meeting of the two servants is (a) a chance occurrence (*casualis*) insofar as it is related to the servants themselves, since it occurs outside the intention of either of them, but is (b) intended *per se* and not a chance occurrence insofar as it is related to their master, who preordained the meeting.

Thus, as regards occurrences here below that happen by chance or fortune in this way, there were those who did not want to trace them back to any higher cause. And these thinkers denied that there is such a thing as fate or providence, as Augustine reports about Tully in *De Civitate Dei* 5.

This opinion is contrary to what was said above (q. 22, a. 2) about providence.

On the other hand, there were some who wanted to trace everything that happens by fortune or chance among lower things—whether in natural matters or in human affairs—back to a higher cause, viz., to the celestial bodies. According to them, fate is nothing other than “the disposition of the stars under which each one is conceived or born.”

But this position cannot stand, and for two reasons.

First, with respect to human affairs. It has already been shown (q. 115, a. 4) that human acts are not subject to the action of the celestial bodies, except incidentally and indirectly (*nisi per accidens et indirecte*). But since a fatalistic cause (*causa fatalis*) regulates (*habet ordinationem super*) what is brought about by fate, it has to be a direct and *per se* cause of what is brought about.

Second, with respect to everything that is brought about incidentally (*omnia quae per accidens aguntur*). For it was explained above (q. 115, a. 6) that what exists *per accidens* is not properly speaking

either a being or a unity (*non est proprie ens neque unum*). But every one of a nature's actions is terminated in something that has unity (*terminatur ad aliquid unum*). Hence, it is impossible for something that exists *per accidens* to be a *per se* effect of any natural active principle. Therefore, no nature can bring it about *per se* that someone who intends to dig a grave should find a treasure. Now it is obvious that a celestial body acts in the manner of a natural principle, and so its effects in this world are natural. Therefore, it is impossible for an active power belonging to a celestial body to be a cause of those things that are done incidentally, whether by chance or by fortune.

Therefore, one should reply that things that are effected incidentally in this world, whether in natural matters or in human affairs, are traced back to that preordaining cause which is divine providence. For nothing prevents what is incidental from being taken as a unity by some intellect or other; otherwise, an intellect would be unable to form the proposition, 'The one who was digging a grave found a treasure'. And just as an intellect can *apprehend* this, so too it can *effect* it—as, for instance, if someone who knew where the treasure was buried were to prompt a simple person who did not know this to dig a grave in that place. And so nothing prevents things that occur incidentally here below (*hic per accidens aguntur*), i.e., by fortune or chance, from being traced back to an ordering cause that acts through an intellect—and, principally, through the divine intellect. For as was established above (q. 105, a. 4), only God is able to affect the will. As a result, the ordering of human acts, the principle of which is the will, should be attributed only to God.

So, then, we can posit fate to the extent that all the things that occur here below are subject to divine providence, in the sense that they are preordained and, as it were, spoken beforehand by providence—even though the holy doctors refrain from using the name 'fate' because of those people who refer this name to a power associated with the position of the constellations. Hence, in *De Civitate Dei* 5 Augustine says, "If someone attributes human affairs to fate by reason of the fact that the name 'fate' refers the very will or power of God, then let him hold on to his position but correct his language." And this is likewise the sense in which Gregory denies that there is such a thing fate.

Reply to objection 1: This makes it clear how to reply to the first objection.

Reply to objection 2: Nothing prevents certain things from occurring by fortune or chance in relation to their proximate causes, and yet not in relation to divine providence. This is the sense in which "nothing in the world occurs randomly (*temere*)," as Augustine puts it in *83 Quaestiones*.

Article 2

Does fate exist in created things?

It seems that fate does not exist in created things:

Objection 1: In *De Civitate Dei* 5 Augustine says, "It is the very will or power of God that is signified by the name 'fate'." But God's will and power exist not in creatures but in God. Therefore, fate exists in God and not in created things.

Objection 2: As the very mode of speech indicates, fate is related as a cause to the things that occur by fate. But as was explained above (a. 1), God alone is a universal *per se* cause of those things that occur *per accidens* here below. Therefore, fate exists in God and not in created things.

Objection 3: If fate exists in creatures, then it is either a substance or an accident. And whichever of these answers is given, fate would have to be multiplied in accord with the number of creatures. Therefore, since fate seems to be just a single thing, it seems that fate exists in God and not in creatures.

But contrary to this: In *De Consolatione Philosophiae* 4 Boethius says, "Fate is a disposition

inhering in changeable things.”

I respond: As is clear from what was said above (q. 103, a. 6), divine providence executes its effects through mediating causes. Therefore, there are two ways to think about the ordering of the effects.

First, insofar as this ordering exists in God Himself. So considered, the very ordering of the effects is itself called *providence*.

However, insofar as the ordering in question is thought about in the mediating causes that are ordered by God to produce certain effects, this ordering has the nature of *fate*.

This is how Boethius puts it in *De Consolatione Philosophiae* 4: “Fate is executed by powers (*spiritibus*) that serve divine providence—whether the soul, or the whole of obedient nature, or the celestial movements of the stars, or angelic power, or the shrewdness of the demons; the course of fate (*series fatalis*) is woven from some or all of these”—each of which have been explained individually in what has been said above (q. 104, a. 2 and q. 110, a. 1 and qq. 113-114).

So, then, it is clear that fate exists in created causes themselves to the extent that they are ordered by God to produce effects.

Reply to objection 1: The very ordering of secondary causes, which Augustine calls “the series of causes (*series causarum*),” has the nature of fate only insofar as it depends on God. And so God’s power or will can be called ‘fate’ as regards its cause (*causaliter*). However, as regards its essence (*essentialiter*), fate is the very arrangement or series, i.e., ordering, of secondary causes (*ipsa dispositio seu series, idest ordo, causarum secundarum*).

Reply to objection 2: Fate has the nature of a cause to the extent that the nature of a cause is had by the secondary causes whose ordering is called fate.

Reply to objection 3: Fate is called a disposition (*dispositio*) not in the sense of a disposition that is in the genus *quality*, but rather insofar as ‘disposition’ designates an ordering; and this is a relation and not a substance. To be sure, if this ordering is thought of in relation to its principle, then it is a single thing, and in this sense it is called ‘fate’ in the singular (*sic dicitur unum fatum*). However, if it is thought of in relation to its effects, or in relation to the mediating causes themselves, then it is multiplied; and it is in this sense that the poet says, “Your fates are drawing you forth (*te tua fata trahunt*).”

Article 3

Is fate unchangeable?

It seems that fate is not unchangeable (*non immobile*):

Objection 1: In *De Consolatione Philosophiae* 4 Boethius says, “In the way that reasoning is related to the intellect as to that which gives rise to it, and in the way that time is related to eternity and a circle to its middle point, so is the changeable course of fate related to simple and stable providence.”

Objection 2: As the Philosopher says in *Topics* 2, “When we are changed, that which exists in us is changed.” But as Boethius says, fate is “a disposition that inheres in changeable things.” Therefore, fate is changeable.

Objection 3: If fate is unchangeable, then the things subject to fate happen unchangeably and by necessity. But the things that are attributed to fate seem especially to be contingent. Therefore, there will be nothing contingent among things, but instead everything will happen by necessity.

But contrary to this: Boethius says, “Fate is an unchangeable disposition.”

I respond: There are two ways to think about the arrangement of secondary causes that we call

fate: (a) with respect to the causes themselves that are arranged or ordered in the way in question, and (b) in relation to the first principle by whom they are ordered, viz., God.

Hence, some have claimed that the series or arrangement of causes is necessary in its own right (*secundum se*), with the result that everything would happen by necessity by reason of the fact that each effect has a cause and that once the cause is posited, the effect has to be posited.

But this is clearly false in light of what was said above (q. 115, a. 6).

Others have claimed to the contrary that fate is changeable even insofar as it depends on God's providence. Thus, as Gregory of Nyssa reports, the Egyptians claimed that fate could be changed by certain sacrifices.

But this was ruled out above (q. 23, a. 8) because it conflicts with the unchangeableness of God's providence.

And so one should reply that if we are considering the secondary causes, then fate is changeable, whereas to the extent that it is subject to God's providence, it has unchangeability—not, to be sure, an unchangeability of absolute necessity, but rather an unchangeability of conditional necessity, insofar as we claim that the conditional 'If God foreknew that this will occur, then it will occur' is true or necessary. Hence, after Boethius had claimed that the progression of fate is changeable, a few lines later he added, "To the extent that the progression proceeds from the sources of unchangeable providence, it must itself likewise be immutable."

Reply to objection 1 and objection 2 and objection 3: The replies to the objections are clear from what has been said.

Article 4

Are all things subject to fate?

It seems that all things are subject to fate:

Objection 1: In *De Consolatione Philosophiae* 4 Boethius says, "The progression of fate moves the heavens and the stars, moderates the elements in themselves with respect to one another and forms them by alternating transmutations. This same fate renews all things that are born and that perish by similar progressions of offspring and seeds. It constrains the acts and fortunes of men with an indissoluble chain of causes." Therefore, there seem to be no exceptions to what is contained under the progression of fate.

Objection 2: In *De Civitate Dei* 5 Augustine says, "There is such a thing as fate, insofar as it is referred back to God's will and power." But as Augustine says in *De Trinitate* 3, God's will is a cause of all things that come to be." Therefore, all things are subject to fate.

Objection 3: According to Boethius, fate is a disposition that inheres in changeable things. But as has been explained (q. 9, a. 2), all creatures are mutable and God alone is truly immutable. Therefore, fate exists in all creatures.

But contrary to this: In *De Consolatione Philosophiae* 4 Boethius says, "Some things that are situated under providence lie beyond the progression of fate."

I respond: As was explained above (a. 2), fate is the ordering of secondary causes toward divinely foreseen effects. Therefore, whatever is subject to secondary causes is likewise subject to fate. On the other hand, anything that is done directly by God—e.g., the creation of things, the glorification of spiritual substances, and other things of this sort—is not subject to fate, since it is not subject to secondary causes. And this is what Boethius says, viz., that "those things that are close to the primary

divinity are stably fixed and exceed the order of changeable fate.” From this it is likewise clear that “the further a thing is from the First Mind, the greater the ties by which it is implicated with fate,” since it is more subject to the necessity of the secondary causes.

Reply to objection 1: All the things mentioned in the objection are done by God through the mediation of secondary causes, and so they are contained under the progression of fate. But as has been explained, it is not the case that the same line of reasoning applies to all other things.

Reply to objection 2: Fate is traced back to God’s power and will as its first principle. Hence, as has been explained, it does not have to be the case that whatever is subject to God’s will or power is subject to fate.

Reply to objection 3: Even though all creatures are in some sense mutable, some of them do not proceed from mutable created causes and so, as has been explained, they are not subject to fate.