
WHAT FATALISM IS

By B.B. Warfield¹

This is a sad state of mind that people fall into sometimes, in which they do not know the difference between God and Fate. One of the most astonishing illustrations of it in all history is, no doubt, that afforded by our Cumberland Presbyterian brethren, who for a hundred years, now, have been vigorously declaring that the Westminster Confession teaches “fatalism.” What they mean is that the Westminster Confession of Faith teaches that it is God who determines all that shall happen in his universe; that God has not—to use a fine phrase of Dr. Charles Hodge’s—“given it either to necessity, or to chance, or to the caprice of man, or to the malice of Satan, to control the sequence of events and all their issues, but has kept the reins of government in his own hands.” This, they say, is Fate: because (so they say) it involves “an inevitable necessity” in the falling out of events. And this doctrine of “fatality,” they say—or at least, their historian, Dr. B. W. McDonnold says for them—is “the one supreme difficulty which it has never been possible to reconcile,” and which still “stands an insuperable obstacle to a reunion” between them and “the mother church.” “Whether the hard places in the Westminster Confession be justly called fatality or not,” he adds, “they are too hard for us.”

Now, is it not remarkable that men with hearts on fire with love to God should not know him from Fate? Of course, the reason is not far to seek. Like other men, and like the singer in the sweet hymn that begins, “I was a wandering sheep,” they have a natural objection to being “controlled.” They wish to be the architects of their own fortunes, the determiners of their own destinies; though why they should fancy they could do that better for themselves than God can be trusted to do it for them, it puzzles one to understand. And their confusion is fostered further by a faulty way they have of conceiving how God works. They fancy he works only by “general law.” “Divine influence,” they call it (rather than “him”): and they conceive this “divine influence” as a diffused force, present through the whole universe and playing on all alike, just like gravity, or light, or heat. What happens to the individual, therefore, is determined, not by the “divine influence” which plays alike on all, but by something in himself which makes him respond more or less to the “divine influence” common to all. If we conceive God’s modes of operation, thus, under the analogy of a natural force, no wonder if we cannot tell him from Fate. For Fate is just Natural Force; and if Natural Force should thus govern all things that would be Fatalism.

The conception is, we see, in essence the same as that of the old Greeks. “To the Stoic, in fact,” says Dr. Bigg, “God was Natural Law, and his other name was Destiny. Thus we read in the famous hymn of Cleanthes: ‘Lead us, O Zeus, and Thou too, O destiny, whithersoever ye have appointed for us to go. For I will follow without hesitation. And if I refuse I shall become evil, but

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I shall follow all the same.’ Man is himself a part of the great world-force, carried along in its all-embracing sweep, like the water-beetle in a torrent. He may struggle, or he may let himself go; but the result is the same, except that in the latter case, he embraces his doom, and so is at peace.” When a man thus identifies God with mere natural law, he may obtain resignation, but he cannot attain religion. And the resignation attained may conceal beneath it the intensest bitterness of spirit. We all remember that terrible epigram of Palladas: “If caring avails anything, why, certainly, take good care; but if care is taken for you by a God, what’s the use of your taking care? It’s all the same whether you care or care not; the God takes care only for this—that you shall have cares enough.” That is the outcome of fatalism—of confounding God with Natural Law.

What, now, is the real difference between this Fatalism and the Predestination taught, say, in our Confession? “Predestination and Fatalism,” says Schopenhauer, “do not differ in the main. They differ only in this, that with predestination the external determination of human action proceeds from a rational Being, and with fatalism from an irrational one. But in either case the result is the same.” That is to say, they differ precisely as a person differs from a machine. And yet Schopenhauer can represent this as not a radical difference! Professor William James knows better; and in his lectures on “The Varieties of Religious Experience” enlarges on the difference. It is illustrated, he says, by the difference between the chill remark of Marcus Aurelius: “If the gods care not for me or my children, there is a reason for it”; and the passionate cry of Job, “Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him!” Nor is the difference solely in emotional mood. It is precisely the difference that stretches between materialism and religion. There is, therefore, no heresy so great, no heresy that so utterly tears religion up by the roots, as the heresy that thinks of God under the analogy of natural force and forgets that he is a person.

There is a story of a little Dutch boy, which embodies very fairly the difference between God and Fate. This little boy’s home was on a dyke in Holland, near a great wind-mill, whose long arms swept so close to the ground as to endanger those who carelessly strayed under them. But he was very fond of playing precisely under this mill. His anxious parents had forbidden him to go near it; and, when his stubborn will did not give way, had sought to frighten him away from it by arousing his imagination to the terror of being struck by the arms and carried up into the air to have life beaten out of him by their ceaseless strokes. One day, heedless of their warning, he strayed again under the dangerous arms, and was soon absorbed in his play there forgetful of everything but his present pleasures. Perhaps, he was half conscious of a breeze springing up; and somewhere in the depth of his soul, he may have been obscurely aware of the danger with which he had been threatened. At any rate, suddenly, as he played, he was violently smitten from behind, and found himself swung all at once, with his head downward, up into the air; and then the blows came, swift and hard! O what a sinking of the heart! O what a horror of great darkness! It had come then! And he was gone! In his terrified writhing, he twisted himself about, and looking up, saw not the immeasurable expanse of the brazen heavens above him, but his father’s face. At once, he realized, with a great revulsion, that he was not caught in the mill, but was only receiving the threatened punishment of his disobedience. He melted into tears, not of pain, but of relief and joy. In that moment, he understood the difference between falling into the grinding power of a machine and into the loving hands of a father.

That is the difference between Fate and Predestination. And all the language of men cannot tell the immensity of the difference.