

FIRST PART, QUESTION 116

On Fate (In Four Articles)

We come now to the consideration of fate. Under this head there are four points of inquiry:

- (1) Is there such a thing as fate?
- (2) Where is it?
- (3) Is it unchangeable?
- (4) Are all things subject to fate?

Whether there be such a thing as fate?

Ia q. 116 a. 1

Objection 1. It would seem that fate is nothing. For Gregory says in a homily for the Epiphany (Hom. x in Evang.): “Far be it from the hearts of the faithful to think that fate is anything real.”

Objection 2. Further, what happens by fate is not unforeseen, for as Augustine says (De Civ. Dei v, 4), “fate is understood to be derived from the verb ‘fari’ which means to speak”; as though things were said to happen by fate, which are “fore-spoken” by one who decrees them to happen. Now what is foreseen is neither lucky nor chance-like. If therefore things happen by fate, there will be neither luck nor chance in the world.

On the contrary, What does not exist cannot be defined. But Boethius (De Consol. iv) defines fate thus: “Fate is a disposition inherent to changeable things, by which Providence connects each one with its proper order.”

I answer that, In this world some things seem to happen by luck or chance. Now it happens sometimes that something is lucky or chance-like as compared to inferior causes, which, if compared to some higher cause, is directly intended. For instance, if two servants are sent by their master to the same place; the meeting of the two servants in regard to themselves is by chance; but as compared to the master, who had ordered it, it is directly intended.

So there were some who refused to refer to a higher cause such events which by luck or chance take place here below. These denied the existence of fate and Providence, as Augustine relates of Tully (De Civ. Dei v, 9). And this is contrary to what we have said above about Providence (q. 22, a. 2).

On the other hand, some have considered that everything that takes place here below by luck or by chance, whether in natural things or in human affairs, is to be reduced to a superior cause, namely, the heavenly bodies. According to these fate is nothing else than “a disposition of the stars under which each one is begotten or born”*. But this will not hold. First, as to human affairs: because we have proved above (q. 115, a. 4) that human actions are not subject to the action of heavenly bodies, save accidentally and indirectly. Now the cause of fate, since it has the ordering of things that happen by fate,

must of necessity be directly and of itself the cause of what takes place. Secondly, as to all things that happen accidentally: for it has been said (q. 115, a. 6) that what is accidental, is properly speaking neither a being, nor a unity. But every action of nature terminates in some one thing. Wherefore it is impossible for that which is accidental to be the proper effect of an active natural principle. No natural cause can therefore have for its proper effect that a man intending to dig a grace finds a treasure. Now it is manifest that a heavenly body acts after the manner of a natural principle: wherefore its effects in this world are natural. It is therefore impossible that any active power of a heavenly body be the cause of what happens by accident here below, whether by luck or by chance.

We must therefore say that what happens here by accident, both in natural things and in human affairs, is reduced to a preordaining cause, which is Divine Providence. For nothing hinders that which happens by accident being considered as one by an intellect: otherwise the intellect could not form this proposition: “The digger of a grave found a treasure.” And just as an intellect can apprehend this so can it effect it; for instance, someone who knows a place where a treasure is hidden, might instigate a rustic, ignorant of this, to dig a grave there. Consequently, nothing hinders what happens here by accident, by luck or by chance, being reduced to some ordering cause which acts by the intellect, especially the Divine intellect. For God alone can change the will, as shown above (q. 105, a. 4). Consequently the ordering of human actions, the principle of which is the will, must be ascribed to God alone.

So therefore inasmuch as all that happens here below is subject to Divine Providence, as being preordained, and as it were “fore-spoken,” we can admit the existence of fate: although the holy doctors avoided the use of this word, on account of those who twisted its application to a certain force in the position of the stars. Hence Augustine says (De Civ. Dei v, 1): “If anyone ascribes human affairs to fate, meaning thereby the will or power of God, let him keep to his opinion, but hold his tongue.” For this reason Gregory denies the existence of fate: wherefore the first objection’s solution is

* Cf. St. Augustine De Civ. Dei v, 1,8,9

manifest.

Reply to Objection 2. Nothing hinders certain things happening by luck or by chance, if compared to

their proximate causes: but not if compared to Divine Providence, whereby “nothing happens at random in the world,” as Augustine says (QQ. 83, qu. 24).

Whether fate is in created things?

Ia q. 116 a. 2

Objection 1. It would seem that fate is not in created things. For Augustine says (De Civ. Dei v, 1) that the “Divine will or power is called fate.” But the Divine will or power is not in creatures, but in God. Therefore fate is not in creatures but in God.

Objection 2. Further, fate is compared to things that happen by fate, as their cause; as the very use of the word proves. But the universal cause that of itself effects what takes place by accident here below, is God alone, as stated above (a. 1). Therefore fate is in God, and not in creatures.

Objection 3. Further, if fate is in creatures, it is either a substance or an accident: and whichever it is it must be multiplied according to the number of creatures. Since, therefore, fate seems to be one thing only, it seems that fate is not in creatures, but in God.

On the contrary, Boethius says (De Consol. iv): “Fate is a disposition inherent to changeable things.”

I answer that, As is clear from what has been stated above (q. 22, a. 3; q. 103, a. 6), Divine Providence produces effects through mediate causes. We can therefore consider the ordering of the effects in two ways. Firstly, as being in God Himself: and thus the ordering of the effects is called Providence. But if we consider this ordering as being in the mediate causes ordered by God to the production of certain effects, thus it has the nature of fate. This is what Boethius says (De Consol. iv): “Fate is worked out when Divine Providence is served

by certain spirits; whether by the soul, or by all nature itself which obeys Him, whether by the heavenly movements of the stars, whether by the angelic power, or by the ingenuity of the demons, whether by some of these, or by all, the chain of fate is forged.” Of each of these things we have spoken above (a. 1; q. 104, a. 2; q. 110, a. 1; q. 113; q. 114). It is therefore manifest that fate is in the created causes themselves, as ordered by God to the production of their effects.

Reply to Objection 1. The ordering itself of second causes, which Augustine (De Civ. Dei v, 8) calls the “series of causes,” has not the nature of fate, except as dependent on God. Wherefore the Divine power or will can be called fate, as being the cause of fate. But essentially fate is the very disposition or “series,” i.e. order, of second causes.

Reply to Objection 2. Fate has the nature of a cause, just as much as the second causes themselves, the ordering of which is called fate.

Reply to Objection 3. Fate is called a disposition, not that disposition which is a species of quality, but in the sense in which it signifies order, which is not a substance, but a relation. And if this order be considered in relation to its principle, it is one; and thus fate is one. But if it be considered in relation to its effects, or to the mediate causes, this fate is multiple. In this sense the poet wrote: “Thy fate draws thee.”

Whether fate is unchangeable?

Ia q. 116 a. 3

Objection 1. It seems that fate is not unchangeable. For Boethius says (De Consol. iv): “As reasoning is to the intellect, as the begotten is to that which is, as time to eternity, as the circle to its centre; so is the fickle chain of fate to the unwavering simplicity of Providence.”

Objection 2. Further, the Philosopher says (Topic. ii, 7): “If we be moved, what is in us is moved.” But fate is a “disposition inherent to changeable things,” as Boethius says (De Consol. iv). Therefore fate is changeable.

Objection 3. Further, if fate is unchangeable, what is subject to fate happens unchangeably and of necessity. But things ascribed to fate seem principally to be contingencies. Therefore there would be no contingencies in the world, but all things would happen of necessity.

On the contrary, Boethius says (De Consol. iv) that fate is an unchangeable disposition.

I answer that, The disposition of second causes

which we call fate, can be considered in two ways: firstly, in regard to the second causes, which are thus disposed or ordered; secondly, in regard to the first principle, namely, God, by Whom they are ordered. Some, therefore, have held that the series itself or dispositions of causes is in itself necessary, so that all things would happen of necessity; for this reason that each effect has a cause, and given a cause the effect must follow of necessity. But this is false, as proved above (q. 115, a. 6).

Others, on the other hand, held that fate is changeable, even as dependent on Divine Providence. Wherefore the Egyptians said that fate could be changed by certain sacrifices, as Gregory of Nyssa says (Nemesius, De Homine). This too has been disproved above for the reason that it is repugnant to Divine Providence.

We must therefore say that fate, considered in regard to second causes, is changeable; but as subject to Divine Providence, it derives a certain unchangeableness, not of absolute but of conditional necessity. In this sense we say that this conditional is true and necessary: “If

God foreknew that this would happen, it will happen.” Wherefore Boethius, having said that the chain of fate is fickle, shortly afterwards adds—“which, since it is de-

rived from an unchangeable Providence must also itself be unchangeable.”

From this the answers to the objections are clear.

Whether all things are subject to fate?

Ia q. 116 a. 4

Objection 1. It seems that all things are subject to fate. For Boethius says (De Consol. iv): “The chain of fate moves the heaven and the stars, tempers the elements to one another, and models them by a reciprocal transformation. By fate all things that are born into the world and perish are renewed in a uniform progression of offspring and seed.” Nothing therefore seems to be excluded from the domain of fate.

Objection 2. Further, Augustine says (De Civ. Dei v, 1) that fate is something real, as referred to the Divine will and power. But the Divine will is cause of all things that happen, as Augustine says (De Trin. iii, 1 seqq.). Therefore all things are subject to fate.

Objection 3. Further, Boethius says (De Consol. iv) that fate “is a disposition inherent to changeable things.” But all creatures are changeable, and God alone is truly unchangeable, as stated above (q. 9, a. 2). Therefore fate is in all things.

On the contrary, Boethius says (De Consol. iv) that “some things subject to Providence are above the ordering of fate.”

I answer that, As stated above (a. 2), fate is the ordering of second causes to effects foreseen by God. Whatever, therefore, is subject to second causes, is sub-

ject also to fate. But whatever is done immediately by God, since it is not subject to second causes, neither is it subject to fate; such are creation, the glorification of spiritual substances, and the like. And this is what Boethius says (De Consol. iv): viz. that “those things which are nigh to God have a state of immobility, and exceed the changeable order of fate.” Hence it is clear that “the further a thing is from the First Mind, the more it is involved in the chain of fate”; since so much the more it is bound up with second causes.

Reply to Objection 1. All the things mentioned in this passage are done by God by means of second causes; for this reason they are contained in the order of fate. But it is not the same with everything else, as stated above.

Reply to Objection 2. Fate is to be referred to the Divine will and power, as to its first principle. Consequently it does not follow that whatever is subject to the Divine will or power, is subject also to fate, as already stated.

Reply to Objection 3. Although all creatures are in some way changeable, yet some of them do not proceed from changeable created causes. And these, therefore, are not subject to fate, as stated above.