

Articles and musing on the concept of **Fate** for the ancient Greeks

Notes taken from lecture given at the University of Western Georgia:

For those raised under monotheistic religions or cultures, the Greek gods and their relation to humanity may seem alien. Whereas the Hebrews blamed humanity for bringing disorder to God's harmoniously ordered universe, the **Greeks conceived their gods as an expression of the disorder of the world and its uncontrollable forces**. To the Greeks, morality is a human invention; and though Zeus is the most powerful of their gods, even he can be resisted by his fellow Olympians and must bow to the mysterious power of **fate**.

Taken from a yahoo answers post:

The Ancient Greeks, according to how you look at it (there are at least two facets to it), believed you cannot escape your fate. Point #1: Everyone goes to the underworld and wishes for the rest of eternity that they were alive. (See The Odyssey by Homer [shades] for more explanation).

The biggest piece of evidence comes from the Fates. They were known as Moirae in Greek.

Even the gods feared the Moirae. Zeus also was subject to their power, the Pythian priestess at Delphi once admitted:

When they were three, the three Moirae were:

Clotho– "spinner") spun the thread of life from her distaff onto her spindle.

Lachesis– "allotter" or drawer of lots) measured the thread of life allotted to each person with her measuring rod.

Atropos– "inexorable" or "inevitable", literally "unturning", [7] sometimes called Aisa) was the cutter of the thread of life. She chose the manner of each person's death; and when their time was come, she cut their life-thread with "her abhorred shears". [8] Her Roman equivalent was Morta ('Death').

As you can see from Atropos, she chose the manner of each person's death. So, **SOME** Ancient Greeks believed there was no escaping fate.

However, the timeline of Ancient Greece is much longer than this. To stay pretty Athenian... Socrates is a good example of someone who might've debated the Fates. He saw and spoke to daemon (spirits), and if so, this is evidence that he may not have taken as a given what this story of the Fates said.

Self-determination of one's own fate would be a debatable concept under the Socratic method.

As with many things in philosophy, there is no clear-cut answer to this question. Some Ancient Greeks (mostly the lower, less-educated, common people) would've believed fervently in the Olympian religion, and thus regarded the Fates as quite real. So, the gods determined their fates.

The break-through philosophers and sophists of the time probably did not ascribe to this mentality. To compare and contrast how each (of the many) did ascribe or did not ascribe to this thought is beyond me. I just can tell you this... some did (commoners) and some did not (the famous philosophers and sophists).

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From Spark Notes based on *Mythology* by Edith Hamilton:

The Dominance of Fate

Fate was of great concern to the Greeks, and its workings resonate through many of their myths and texts. We see countless characters who go to great lengths in attempts to alter fate, even if they know such an aim to be futile. The inability of any mortal or immortal to change prescribed outcomes stems from the three Fates: sisters Clotho, who spins the thread of life; Lachesis, who assigns each person's destiny; and Atropos, who carries the scissors to snip the thread of life at its end. These three divinities pervade all the stories of Greek myth, whether they be stories of gods, goddesses, demigods, heroes, or mortals and regardless of the exploits recounted. Nothing can be done to alter or prolong the destiny of one's life, regardless of the number of preparations or precautions taken. This inflexibility applies just as much to Zeus as to the lowliest mortal, as we see in Zeus's hounding of Prometheus to divulge the name of the woman who will bear the offspring that one day will kill him.

Though this lesson is somewhat consoling—the way of the world cannot be bent to match the whims of those in authority—it is also very disturbing. The prospect of free will seems rather remote, and even acts of great valor and bravery seem completely useless. The myths provide an interesting counterpoint to this uselessness, however. In virtually all the stories in which a character does everything in his power to block a negative fate, and yet falls prey to it, we see that his efforts to subvert fate typically provide exactly the circumstances required for the prescribed fate to arise. In other words, the resisting characters themselves provide the path to fate's fulfillment.

A perfect example is the king of Thebes, who has learned that his son, Oedipus, will one day kill him. The king takes steps to ensure Oedipus's death but ends up ensuring only that he and Oedipus fail to recognize each other when they meet on the road many years later. This lack of recognition enables a dispute in which Oedipus slays his father without thinking twice. It is the king's exercise of free will, then, that ironically binds him even more surely to the thread of destiny. This mysterious, inexplicable twinning between will and fate is visible in many the stories and philosophical treatises of the Greeks.

Bloodshed Begets Bloodshed

Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, Sophocles' *Oedipus* trilogy, Euripides' plays, and Homer's two great epics all demonstrate the irreparable persistence of bloodshed within Greek mythology that leads to death upon death. The royal house of Atreus is most marked in this regard: the house's ancestor, Tantalus, inexplicably cooks up his child and serves him to the gods, offending the deities and cursing the entire house with the spilling of its blood from generation to generation. We see the curse manifest when Atreus himself kills his brother's son and serves him up—an act of vengeance for wrong-doing done to him. Atreus's son, Agamemnon, then sacrifices his own daughter, Iphigenia, as he has been told it will procure good sailing winds for the Greeks to start off to Troy. Rather, this deed leads his wife, Clytemnestra, to kill him on his first night home, with support from his cousin Aegisthus, who is in turn avenging Atreus's crimes. Last but not least, Orestes, the son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, comes back to kill his mother and Aegisthus.

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The Danger of Arrogance and Hubris (defined as pride or arrogance)

In many myths, mortals who display arrogance and hubris end up learning, in quite brutal ways, the folly of this overexertion of ego. The Greek concept of hubris refers to the overweening pride of humans who hold themselves up as equals to the gods. Hubris is one of the worst traits one can exhibit in the world of ancient Greece and invariably brings the worst kind of destruction.

The story of Niobe is a prime example of the danger of arrogance. Niobe has the audacity to compare herself to Leto, the mother of Artemis and Apollo, thus elevating herself and her children to the level of the divine. Insulted, the two gods strike all of Niobe's children dead and turn her into a rock that perpetually weeps. Indeed, any type of hubris or arrogance, no matter the circumstance, is an attitude that no god will leave unpunished.

Reward for Goodness and Retribution for Evil

The Greeks and Romans incorporated aspects of their ethical codes in their myths. In a sense, these stories are manuals of morality, providing models for correct conduct with examples of which behaviors are rewarded and which are punished. The idea of these myths as moral guides is not unlike the Judeo-Christian morality tales in the Bible. However, while the God of the Bible is an infallible moral authority, the gods who judge good and evil in classical myth harbor their own flaws. They have favorites and enemies, often for vain reasons—Hera's jealousy, for example, predisposes her against several entirely innocent women—and are capable of switching sides or abandoning their favorites for no clear reason, as Apollo does to Hector just as Hector faces Achilles in combat. Aside from their prejudices, of course, the gods are poor moral judges because they frequently act immorally themselves, philandering, raping, lying, and callously using innocent mortals as pawns.

Fate in Ancient Greek mythology

"A man can surely do what he wills to do, but he cannot determine what we wills" *Schopenhauer*.

Fate is an interesting concept in Ancient Greek religion. In a universe where gods expressed so many flaws and sometimes unsavory characteristics the Judeo-Christian concept of an 'omnipotent' deity is out of the question. In fact the ruling gods before Zeus, Kronos and Uranous, were even prophesied their own deaths but in the end were unable to do anything about it. Even the gods themselves could not escape their destinies, and from this point the concept of 'Moirai' was devised. Greek philosophy was largely an attempt to apply logic and order to the universe and the idea of Moirai fits in nicely with the ancient Greek belief system; In the Homeric poems Moirai represents a power over life and death, in some cases can be seen as more powerful than the gods themselves. "Fate is not a god, because otherwise the will of the god would be predestinated". Thus, Moirai represents the personification of a power acting in parallel with the gods in Homer.

Whilst researching this topic I came across an interesting article by J.V.Morrison called 'Kerostasia, The Dictates of Fate and the will of Zeus in the Iliad'. Morrison sites a passage towards the end of the Iliad in the opening to his article. In this passage Achilles is chasing Hector around the Trojan walls, on the forth time round Zeus performs this action:

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"Then father Zeus balanced his golden scale, and in them he set two fateful portions of woeful death, one for Achilles and one for Hector, breaker of horses. Balancing it in the middle, Zeus raised it high, and the fated day of Hector sank down: it went toward the house of Hades, and the god Apollo left him"(p.274)

Below I have included a red-figure vase painting of Achilles fighting Hector. Achilles on the left looms over Hector who is almost falling backwards. Heroes were usually depicted naked and often with disproportionately large thighs showing their physical prowess.



Achilles and Hector

Many scholars claim the balancing of the golden scales as evidence for Zeus as god of fate, but I think this passage portrays Zeus as a witness and agent of fate rather than a dictator or instigator of fate. In the measuring of the hero's fates (*kerostasia*, literally meaning 'the weighing of an individual's death') it is clear that Zeus has not dictated them himself. Instead Zeus must enact the fate which is already set in motion, in this case Hector's demise (or *ker*, 'individual doom').

It remains unclear in Homer's *Iliad* whether the ancient Greeks believed in a determinists' [fatalistic](#) universe, or whether they have a degree of free will but only their eventual fates are predefined. In both cases however Fate plays a key role, dictating events if not directly then in an overarching eventual manner.

M. Nilsson (1967) *Die Geschichte der Griechische Religion. Vol. 1.* C.F Beck Verlag. Munchen

J.V Morrison (1997) *Kerostasia, The Dictates of Fate, and the Will of Zeus in the Iliad. Arethusa, Vol. 30* pp.276-296. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Homer. *The Iliad*