

On Destiny

by Voltaire

OF all the books of the Occident which have come down to us, the most ancient is Homer; it is there that one finds the customs of profane antiquity, of the gross heroes, of the gross gods, made in the image of men; but it is there that among the reveries and inconsequences, one finds too the seeds of philosophy, and above all the idea of the destiny which is master of the gods, as the gods are masters of the world.

When the magnanimous Hector wishes absolutely to fight the magnanimous Achilles, and with this object starts fleeing with all his might, and three times makes the circuit of the city before fighting, in order to have more vigour; when Homer compares fleet-of-foot Achilles, who pursues him, to a man who sleeps; when Madame Dacier goes into ecstasies of admiration over the art and mighty sense of this passage, then Jupiter wants to save great Hector who has made so many sacrifices to him, and he consults the fates; he weighs the destinies of Hector and Achilles in the balance (*Iliad*, liv. xxii.): he finds that the Trojan must absolutely be killed by the Greek; he cannot oppose it; and from this moment, Apollo, Hector's guardian genius, is forced to abandon him. It is not that Homer is not often prodigal, and particularly in this place, of quite contrary ideas, following the privilege of antiquity; but he is the first in whom one finds the notion of destiny. This notion, therefore, was very much in vogue in his time.

The Pharisees, among the Jewish people, did not adopt destiny until several centuries later; for these Pharisees themselves, who were the first literates among the Jews, were very new fangled. In Alexandria they mixed a part of the dogmas of the Stoics with the old Jewish ideas. St. Jerome claims even that their sect is not much anterior to the Christian era.

The philosophers never had need either of Homer or the Pharisees to persuade themselves that everything happens through immutable laws, that everything is arranged, that everything is a necessary effect. This is how they argued.

Either the world exists by its own nature, by its physical laws, or a supreme being has formed it according to his supreme laws: in both cases, these laws are immutable; in both cases everything is necessary; heavy bodies tend towards the centre of the earth, without being able to tend to pause in the air. Pear-trees can never bear pineapples. A spaniel's instinct cannot be an ostrich's instinct; everything is arranged, in gear, limited.

Man can have only a certain number of teeth, hair and ideas; there comes a time when he necessarily loses his teeth, hair and ideas.

It would be a contradiction that what was yesterday was not, that what is today is not; it is also a contradiction that what must be cannot be.

If you could disturb the destiny of a fly, there would be no reason that could stop your making the destiny of all the other flies, of all the other animals, of all men, of all nature; you would find yourself in the end more powerful than God.

Imbeciles say, "My doctor has extricated my aunt from a mortal malady; he has made my aunt live ten years longer than she ought to have lived." Others who affect knowledge, say: "The prudent man makes his own destiny."

But often the prudent, far from making their destinies, succumb to them; it is destiny which makes them prudent.

Profound students of politics affirm that, if Cromwell, Ludlow, Ireton and a dozen other parliamentarians had been assassinated a week before Charles I.'s head was cut off, this king might have lived longer and died in his bed; they are right; they can add further that if the whole of England had been swallowed up in the sea, this monarch would not have perished on a scaffold near Whitehall; but things were arranged so that Charles had to have his neck severed.

Cardinal d'Ossat was doubtless more prudent than a madman in Bedlam; but is it not clear that the organs of d'Ossat the sage were made otherwise than those of the scatter-brain? just as a fox's organs are different from a stork's and a lark's.

Your doctor saved your aunt; but assuredly he did not in that contradict nature's order; he followed it. It is clear that your aunt could not stop herself being born in such and such town, that she could not stop herself having a certain malady at a particular time, that the doctor could not be elsewhere than in the town where he was, that your aunt had to call him, that he had to prescribe for her the drugs which cured her, or which one thinks cured her, when nature was the only doctor.

A peasant thinks that it has hailed on his field by chance; but the philosopher knows that there is no chance, and that it was impossible, in the constitution of this world, for it not to hail on that day in that place.

There are persons who, frightened by this truth, admit half of it, as debtors who offer half to their creditors, and ask respite for the rest. "There are," they say, "some events which are necessary, and others which are not." It would be very comic that one part of the world was arranged, and that the other were not; that a part of what happens had to happen, and that another part of what happens did not have to happen. If one looks closely at it, one sees that the doctrine contrary to that of destiny is absurd; but there are many people destined to reason badly, others not to reason at all, others to persecute those who reason.

Some say to you: "Do not believe in fatalism; for then everything appearing inevitable, you will work at nothing, you will wallow in indifference, you will love neither riches, nor honours, nor glory; you will not want to acquire anything, you will believe yourself

without merit as without power; no talent will be cultivated, everything will perish through apathy."

Be not afraid, gentlemen, we shall ever have passions and prejudices, since it is our destiny to be subjected to prejudices and passions: we shall know that it no more depends on us to have much merit and great talent, than to have a good head of hair and beautiful hands: we shall be convinced that we must not be vain about anything, and yet we shall always have vanity.

I necessarily have the passion for writing this, and you have the passion for condemning me; both of us are equally fools, equally the toys of destiny. Your nature is to do harm, mine is to love truth, and to make it public in spite of you.

The owl, which feeds on mice in its ruins, said to the nightingale: "Finish singing under your beautiful shady trees, come into my hole, that I may eat you"; and the nightingale answered: "I was born to sing here, and to laugh at you."

You ask me what will become of liberty? I do not understand you. I do not know what this liberty is of which you speak; so long have you been disputing about its nature, that assuredly you are not acquainted with it.