

On the connection between Fate, Drama, and Meaning
or
The “Weirdom” of the Weird Sisters

This essay is to a certain extent based on a public presentation given at the East-West Center in Honolulu on February 14th, 1984. The combination of the presentation’s subtitle and the fact that it was given on Valentine’s Day was bound to give rise to some witty comments, and sure enough a reporter at the Honolulu Advertiser newspaper wrote in his column something to the effect that anyone who was depressed because they didn’t have a sweetheart to lavish their attentions upon could always go up to the East-West Center and hear a talk on “The ‘Weirdom’ of the Weird Sisters”...!

Introduction

Somewhat less well-known than the Weird Sisters themselves is the fact that the word “weird” (and weirdness...) is derived from an Old English word meaning, precisely, Fate or Destiny, and if we consider the connotations of the word—strange, unnatural, supernatural, eerie, “impossible” and so on, we can begin to see right away what the problem is all about, namely, what is so weird about fate, actually? Or, even more to the point, what is “weirdom”??!!

It would seem to be not so much a question of who or what power appoints or pre-determines the course of events, or even of if events are pre-determined at all, rather it is a question of how would such a power, if it existed, know how to do it? The problem seems to stem from the pre-

supposition that the power in question would have to “calculate” ahead of time every little juncture in the course of events down to the last detail, amidst all the multitude of chance events and often in direct contradiction with man's own will. Our first somewhat resigned reaction—given the depth and breadth of the problem—is that fate is best interpreted as “whatever happens”, and actually this intuition is not without merit!

It is interesting to observe that the standard definitions of fate in the dictionary are prima facie mutually exclusive and contradictory: some state that fate has to do with chance, while others state that it has to do with necessity, and it is also interesting to note that both the alternative sophisticated positions outlined below do attempt, implicitly at least, to address this problem. On the one hand, one can be of the opinion that fate has to do with series of events where we feel that certain things were “meant to happen” or “had to be” despite the fact that other alternatives were possible and were indeed even more likely (I say “indeed” because the concept of chance must mean that in the ultimate analysis all outcomes are equally likely), and that these things are “fateful” because of this. One can also be of Arthur Schopenhauer’s opinion as expressed in what Thomas Mann rightly calls “Schopenhauer’s great essay”¹, entitled “Transcendent speculation on the apparent deliberateness in the fate of the individual”: “...Nothing is absolutely accidental; on the contrary, everything occurs of necessity, and even the simultaneity itself of that which is not causally related, and therefore that which we call chance, is necessary since what is now simultaneous was as such already decided by causes in its remotest past.”² What this means with

¹ Thomas Mann, Essays by Thomas Mann, Vintage Books, New York, 1957 (in his essay on Schopenhauer)

² Arthur Schopenhauer, Parerga and Paralipomena, Vol. 1, translation (German to English): E.F.J. Payne, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974: p.216

respect to fate is, in his words, the following: “That which in an event is natural and can shown through causality to be necessary, by no means disposes of the ominous element therein; and in the same way the ominous element does not dispose of the other...but precisely from the fact that the chain of causes and effects, with the strict necessity and eternal pre-destination peculiar to it, has established that this event should occur just now, does the event acquire an ominous character.”³

Two very important and inter-related questions that follow from a perusal of the positions outlined above are: what is it to start out with that makes us feel that something was “meant to be” (in the first position), or that there is something special about a certain event “as such” or a certain point in time “just now” (in the second position)?—and I would like to say right away that one certainly cannot brush aside all intuitions to this effect as being some kind of illusion.

Part 1: Fate and Drama

In my opinion, what we have to do to get any further is to radically revise our entire conception of events and series of events, and it seems to me that this is precisely what the above-mentioned “theory” of fate as “whatever happens” is getting at, but somehow doesn’t have the strength of conviction to follow up on!

Essentially, one should conceive of the basic kind of entity in nature as not being an event (as usually imagined) but rather a “twist and turn”, which as will certainly be observed is very reminiscent of wave, and here I would like to stress that it is at least as important to observe that the

³ Schopenhauer, 1974, p.221

former is more fundamental than and prior to the latter. This “twist and turn”-entity could be designated a dramatic movement.⁴ Now according to Webster’s English Dictionary, drama is, among other things, “a series of real events invested with a dramatic unity and interest”: the question is what existential status this dramatic unity has, and I would claim that it is very high, so high that it cannot be maintained that the series “adds up” or in any way combines (even in parallel with other series or some other complex way) to produce the unity. Instead, one has to maintain that the unity is somehow there first and is thereafter fulfilled, the point to be stressed being that this is certainly not a process of “pouring in content” (a sure sign of bad art!), but rather of expansion outwards to the limits of what is possible whereby the dramatic movement is resolved into a set of parts interconnected in a rarefied and subtle way. This expansion involves the “working out of possibilities”, which is essentially an inevitable falling away of all that which can’t survive to the resolved/expanded state, and according to the present thesis this is the true meaning of fulfillment, as in “the fulfillment of destiny.”

What I’m getting at, obviously, is that there is a powerful affinity between drama and fate, but the first thing we imagine is that this can’t be, primarily because we uncritically assume that with fate the outcome is relentlessly given, whereas with drama the outcome is completely open, precisely. This assumption, however, is mistaken: when we find ourselves thinking that the dramatic lies in a completely uncertain outcome we have to force ourselves to “think big”: the uncertainty (which is there to be sure) is dramatic precisely because we sense the existence of larger forces which cause the configuration of events to be “charged”, and that the whole configuration with its twists and turns is actually a mere “twist” in some higher set of twists and turns, in other words some

⁴ See appendix

higher dramatic movement. The dramatic lies precisely in the fact that we sense that this higher movement will prevail or be fulfilled, somewhere or at some point, no matter what happens on the more limited levels, and/or whether the latter are fulfilled or not. In other words, the higher the drama--and the more there is at stake!--the less it is the work of the play of chance and the fact that things “have come to this” indicates that something of major importance has in some sense been “decided” over our heads in some larger time-frame, and furthermore that the moment of truth is getting closer and closer.

I believe it was the physicist John Wheeler who said that “time is nature’s way of making sure that everything doesn’t happen at once”—and it’s the wittiest, pithiest and truest definition of time that I’ve ever seen! According to the view being presented here, time is the way dramatic movements are “spread out” as twists and turns, which does not, precisely, mean that dramatic movements are spread out in time, rather the whole effect of time arises from the differentiation of the two states of dramatic movements (dramatic movements proper and twists and turns). This is something a lot stronger than that time is the expression of the relationship between cause and effect. It seems to me that it is imperative to try and answer the question “What is going on in nature?”, and according to the view here it is the “working out of possibilities”, independently on various levels and over relatively larger time-frames the higher the level.

It might be still be argued that a series of events in time can “become” dramatic precisely because there is a natural suspense associated with them taking place in time, but this way of thinking, apart from missing the point of what drama is, is only compatible with the naive view, mentioned in the introduction, that “every little juncture in the course of

events would have to be calculated ahead of time” for things to work out in a “fateful” way...

Part 2: Fate and the subjective or private

In a nutshell, one could say that a life is a work of art and fate refers to that part of the art which we didn't create, but the common notion that fate has something to do with passivity is exactly wrong: it is always the strong personality of any drama that has anything to do with fate. What I mean by a “strong personality” is anyone who accomplishes something, something which has to be (obviously) both hard and non-trivial and also constitute a whole.

In contradistinction to the above is the standard formula “character is fate”, which as used should presumably be taken to mean that especially in difficult or dramatic situations one tends to fall back on one's “basic nature” when it comes to making decisions which are crucial to the outcome of the situation. Now this might be compatible with the “naïve view”, indeed it seems to constitute the naive position on the relationship between character and fate, but then by using the same arguments one could wonder how circumstances could come to be ordered in such a way as to place just that “character” in such a position to start out with—not to mention the more complex situations where the decisions in question seem to lead to an even more difficult set of circumstances that seems to have conspired with the first...

In a very fine article in the Swedish newspaper Svenska Dagbladet⁵, Gustav von Platen (formerly Editor-in-Chief of the paper, among other

⁵ 28 June 1995

things) starts out by saying that he “believes in fate” and goes on to argue against the idea that “fate is our own creation, there is nothing outside of us, man makes his own fate”. He says that the idea is “worthy of respect...nonetheless it is plain wrong”. He furthermore describes the eyebrow-raising coincidences surrounding the death of a good friend and says: “The play of chance, or an irony of fate?—I don’t know, but certainly not a confirmation of the thesis ‘Fate is our own creation, there is nothing outside of us, man makes his own fate’. There are other, more powerful forces”.

Having mentioned eyebrow-raising coincidences, a few more words are in order, especially since such coincidences are often experienced as being meaningful in a very subjective and private way. Everybody knows Carl Jung’s “synchronicity” principle relating to the question of “meaningful coincidence”; He says that synchronicity “formulates a point of view that is the exact opposite of causality. Since the latter is only a statistical truth and not absolute, it is a kind of working hypothesis on how events evolve out of one another, whereas synchronicity interprets the coincidence of events in time as space as something more than mere chance, namely a peculiar interdependence of objective objects amongst themselves as well as with the subjective (psychic) states of the observer or observers”⁶ Elsewhere he says that “we must conclude that apart from the connection between cause and effect there is another factor that is active in nature which expresses itself as the arrangement of events and which appears to us as meaning...what the factor which appears to us as ‘meaning’ may be in itself we have no way of knowing”⁷.

⁶ Carl G. Jung, Psychology and the East, trans. E.F.J. Hull; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973; p.192

⁷ Carl G. Jung, Synchronicity, trans. E.F.J. Hull; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973: pp.12-14

The fact of the matter is, however, that “meaning” is derived from the intuition, usually in some rare moment of insight, of some massive and centrally important—yet hitherto unnoticed—thing having always been. This thing we discover as having always been isn’t, as might be naively imagined, the “meaning” of the particular events on our level, in the sense of what these events were supposedly leading up to, rather it is some higher-level dramatic movement itself which is being revealed; in connection with what was said at the end of the introduction, that “one certainly cannot brush aside all intuitions” to the effect that there was “something special with this particular event just now”, if there is some event in our lives which we really think is of central importance, it isn’t an illusion, as a matter of fact it’s probably part of the outline of some higher dramatic movement—it’s the notion that other less important events “added up” or in some way combined to create it which is the illusion...

An extremely important parallel here is that the validity and power of the (greatest) art, music, and literature arises, among other things, from the fact that they simulate the “emergence no matter what of that which always was”, precisely. In a great work, the thing that corresponds to the dramatic movement (which “always was”) is a single creative flash⁸ or specific instance of artistic, musical or literary intelligence that creates the range of possibilities for the work in question. It seems to me furthermore that the special power of music derives from its particularly direct manner of enacting the above-mentioned simulation.

Mozart is famously known to have said that he oftentimes heard the notes of a piece he was imagining “all together at once...” and on the face of it this might seem to contradict what was said above about “a single

⁸ or at least a very small number of flashes

musical flash”; there is, however, no contradiction unless one interprets the statement using some pre-conceived notion that inspiration consists in suddenly realizing the higher unity of a certain arrangement of notes after these had somehow arranged themselves, or been subconsciously arranged, or whatever: the real point is that every now and then one needs a breakthrough, however arrived at: a “winner”, an inspiration which doesn’t just explore by association but which opens up and enables a new range (or sub-range) of possibilities. In other words, one needs to imagine a dramatic movement, and it makes it easier for us to visualize what this means in the big picture if we consider the close approximation that “A dramatic movement is to a musical work as musical style is to a dramatic movement” (“musical style” meaning the immediately recognizable, and inimitable and unforgettable, individuality of every truly great composer). The supposed contradiction is therefore an illusion—in fact Mozart’s statement supports the above thesis by indirectly demonstrating the existence of dramatic movements/unities—it’s just that Mozart’s flashes of genius were worked out in such a flash that we can hardly tell the difference...⁹

⁹ See appendix

Rounding Off

Two very common “objections” to any and all discussion of fate are 1) that all intuitions that there is something interesting or great underlying the course of events—and here and throughout I am only talking about natural explanations!!—are of necessity “subjective constructions” and therefore of no value and 2) that they furthermore are null and void because we will never be able to compare with what “could have been”, had the outcome of the course of events been different. Both of these objections are missing the point completely, in my opinion, and it would be appropriate to round off with a general meditation on the whole subject, in the form of the following profound and stirring passage from Schopenhauer:

“Against this point of view it may always be objected that the systematic connection we think we perceive in the events of our lives is nothing more than a subconscious product of our ordering and schematizing imagination... that we bring into systematic connection things that have been scattered by the blindest chance...but it may also be supposed that what in the highest and truest sense of the word is right for us and beneficial cannot really be what was only planned but never carried into effect and which therefore has never obtained any other existence than the one in our thoughts—Ariosto’s ‘vani disegni, che non han’mai loco’ (vain plans that never have reality)—whose frustration by chance we would then have to regret for the rest of our lives. Rather it is that which is really stamped in the great image of reality”.¹⁰

¹⁰ Schopenhauer, 1974; pp206-207

APPENDIX

Note 4

Dramatic movement has connotations of essence, vastness, enabling potential: curiously, this gives the acronym EVENT, a “super event” not to be confused with the superseded “event”! The spirit of “dramatic movement” can be captured in this image: if the Andromeda galaxy were much closer, filling half the night sky (and with the spiral arms facing us), its rotation, though gigantic, would still be imperceptible...

Note 9

Here we get to an issue where misconceptions abound: certain things are of course easier for a genius, but overall the genius doesn't have “an easier time of it” than normal people, on the contrary: not only is the absolute difficulty of the achievements aimed at correspondingly greater—this is obvious—but even the relative difficulty, since a genius puts his whole soul into those achievements in a way which very few normal people do, or have to do...