

Are We Bound By Fate?
Avoiding “the Slings and Arrows of Outrageous Fortune”¹

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*“As to the evils which Destiny involves,
Judge them what they are; endure them all and strive,
As much as thou art able, to modify the traits.
The Gods, to the most cruel, have not exposed the sage.”*²
- The Twelfth Golden Verse of Pythagoras

Nicholas Roerich, the renowned artist, explorer, philosopher, and mystic, was also an avid mountain climber. He writes in his book *Heart of Asia*, a thrilling account of Roerich’s 1925 Himalayan Expedition, “[i]t is easier to climb a rocky slope than a smooth one. The rocks provide steps on which one can find the force to move upward. And so it is in life.”³

Roerich’s words also ring true regarding the role of fate, free will and destiny in our lives. Before climbing a mountain, one maps out a course from the base to the summit. In charting that course, one generally avoids all known obstacles and plots a route following the path of least resistance. Doing so gives one confidence that one can control one’s ascent up the slopes.

However, one is sure to encounter unexpected and unavoidable obstacles on that course. Perhaps an avalanche has blocked one’s planned path of approach. Perhaps one encounters a yawning crevasse or an expansive boulder field for which one’s map did not account. Conditions on the mountain may also change suddenly. The winds may whip up a winter storm, or fog may render one’s visibility near zero. Therefore, one must be prepared to adapt to changing circumstances, and make improvised choices in the moment during one’s trek.

Similarly, there are unavoidable obstacles in our lives, which we must surmount to achieve our goals. We must apply our free-will to overcome those obstacles or to navigate between them. This conception of the relationship between free will and fate is also reflected in the work of the influential 18th Century philosopher, poet, composer, and mystic Antoine Fabre d’Olivet.

Antoine Fabre d'Olivet: A Brief Biography

Antoine Fabre d'Olivet was born in 1767 in Ganges, a small town in the southern French region of the Languedoc, an area familiar to those who have studied the Cathars, and their legendary struggle against the Inquisition. During his youth, Fabre d'Olivet traveled to Paris and throughout Germany, learning Latin, Greek, English, and German.

After the French Revolution, Fabre d'Olivet took an office job at the French War Ministry, which allowed him time to work on his own projects. He married Marie Warin in 1805, and the couple had three children, a boy and two girls, before legally separating in 1823. Fabre d'Olivet also made a name for himself as a poet and musical composer.

In 1813, Fabre d'Olivet published his translation of *The Golden Verses of Pythagoras*, rendering the verses into unrhymed French hexameters⁴. Fabre d'Olivet also used his annotations to the verses to define his spiritual philosophy, which was based on the three powers of Destiny, Will, and Providence, discussed herein.

Fabre d'Olivet composed five plays during his final years, all but one of which are lost. He died under mysterious circumstances “at the foot of his altar”⁵ on March 25, 1825, initiating rumors of suicide and even murder.⁶ While relatively obscure in his own time, Fabre d'Olivet's work would influence some of the great French esotericists of the 19th Century including Dr. Gerard Encausse (“Papus”), Eliphas Levi, Alexandre Saint-Yves d'Alveydre, and Rene Guenon.

An Introduction to The Power of the Will, The Necessity of Destiny & The Law of Providence

According to Fabre d'Olivet, Pythagoras identified two motives for human action: the “power of the will”, and the “necessity of Destiny.”⁷ Those two motives are, in turn, subject to the fundamental law of Providence from which they also emanate.⁸ Thus, the power of the Will is free, and is exercised on things to do in the future, such as when one makes a choice between two alternatives. Destiny, on the other hand, is constrained, and is exercised on things already done in the past, hence its necessity.

Therefore, humanity is situated between the opposite polarities of Will and Destiny. Mediating those two forces is the fundamental law of Providence, which Fabre d'Olivet defines as the highest of the three powers. Thus, one can conceptualize this triad as a triangle with Will and Destiny as its two base angles, and Providence at its apex. That apex of Providence can then

be pulled toward one polarity or the other depending on the dynamic tension between Will and Destiny at work in one's life at any given moment.

Accordingly, the past is born in the future, necessity reigns in the past, and Providence reigns in the present. Thus, nothing happens by chance. Rather events are caused by the fundamental laws that our human Will either follows or disobeys. The agreement between Will and Providence constitutes the good, and corruption is generated from their opposition.

The Necessity of Destiny

Destiny belongs to Nature, according to Fabre D'Olivet's interpretation of Pythagoras. The most inferior of the three powers, Destiny is the Force of Nature and its laws, which correspond to powerful energies that are continually acting in the material world.⁹ Destiny is a world of fatality governed by the laws of nature without thought. In other words, Destiny is a blind force, corresponding to the human faculty of action without contemplation. Thus, the more we stray from alignment with Natural Law, the more we subject ourselves to Destiny's blind force.

But what constitutes a transgression of Natural Law? For the purposes of this discourse, we may define such a transgression as an action that violates the Golden Rule, which the Great Master Yeshua, Jesus the Christ, extolled in his Sermon on the Mount:

“In all things, therefore, do unto others as you would have them do unto you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.” (*Matthew 7:12*).

While Destiny's force may be harsh, it can often be one of our best teachers because suffering is a necessary condition for our spiritual growth and evolution. As the poet John Keats observed, “Do you not see how necessary a world of pains and troubles is to school an intelligence and make it a soul?”¹⁰

By enduring suffering, we learn to make better decisions that are more in alignment with Natural Law. Although, it should be noted that suffering is not a benefit in itself. If it were, why did Christ devote so much of his ministry to healing the sick, thereby alleviating their suffering?

The Power of Will

Fabre d'Olivet identifies Will as the second force of the universe, which gives humans the ability to free themselves from the fetters of Destiny. Will is manifested by applying our independence, freedom, and individual liberty. Will corresponds to the faculty of the Word. Will in humanity is as powerful as Destiny. Thus, applying the Power of Will can lead us to mastery

of life, and give us access to Providence. Perhaps that is the origin of the phrase, “we make our own luck”. Or as we learn in the Holy Bible, “for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.” (*Galatians 6:7*). Science also recognizes this principle under our Worthy Frater Sir Isaac Newton’s Third Law of Motion, “for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.” This principle is as valid on the spiritual plane as it is on the physical, as the Law of Providence demonstrates.

Therefore, our Will is a powerful tool with which to shape our lives. We can use our Will like a flashlight to cut through the darkness of ignorance and vice to align ourselves more closely with Natural Law. By applying our will to wallow in vice and ignorance, however, we subject ourselves to Destiny’s blind force, creating negative outcomes in our lives. Conversely, we create more positive outcomes in our lives by applying our Will in a virtuous way to benefit humanity and venerate God by doing good works, thereby aligning ourselves more closely with Divine Providence.

The Fundamental Law of Providence

Providence constitutes the highest of the three forces, according to Fabre d’Olivet, and corresponds to the living law emanated from Divinity. Thus, all natural laws emanate from Providence, and all causes draw their origin from it. Providence’s mode of action is time, and it corresponds to the faculty of thought.

Therefore, Providence constitutes the invisible bond between humans and universal events, which impact the population. In other words, when we apply our free will in accordance with natural law for the benefit of humanity, we align ourselves with Divine Providence. Thus, we help generate these positive outcomes for ourselves when we render assistance to someone in need, when we let a fellow driver merge onto the freeway, or when we smile at our neighbor while taking a walk, to list just a few simple examples.

Alternatively, when we apply our free will in a way that is detrimental to humanity, by engaging in selfish or violent actions, which oppose Natural Law, we subject ourselves to Destiny’s slings and arrows. For Fabre d’Olivet, this dynamic manifests on both a personal and collective level, meaning that individuals, institutions, and nations are all subject to the powers of Destiny, Will, and Providence.¹¹

In this way, Providence “dispenses good and evil to each according to his merit and his anterior actions”.¹² Thus, one has only oneself to blame for one’s own suffering, which is “an

inevitable consequence of his past mistakes.”¹³ Interestingly, Fabre d’Olivet contends that Pythagoras “admitted many successive existences”, and stated that “the greater part of men lose, in returning to life, the remembrance of these past experiences”¹⁴. Thus, the present and the future “are only the expression of the past which has been at work in anterior times.”¹⁵

Therefore, “the fatal Necessity” of Destiny, “of which man unceasingly complains” was created by himself through the application of his will.¹⁶ Accordingly, our road through life “becomes more smooth or laborious” based on the virtues or vices in which we engage. Thus, Fabre d’Olivet’s Pythagorean Doctrine seems to echo the intrinsically linked concepts of karma and reincarnation found in Eastern Spirituality.¹⁷

Fabre d’Olivet’s Analogy of the Acorn

Fabre d’Olivet illustrates his doctrine regarding destiny, will and providence by applying those forces to an acorn; a small, delicate seed which has the potential to evolve into a tall and mighty oak tree. An acorn contains the life force giving it the power to produce an oak with a precise shape possessing roots, a trunk, branches, and leaves. The vital life force inscribed in that acorn is an expression of the universal life force that infuses all things. That universal life force is Providence. Thus, Providence manifests itself every time favorable conditions are met. Therefore, the resulting oak tree is the manifestation of the principle specific to it, or its Destiny.

However, humanity can decide the acorn’s future. We can plant it, nurture it, and help it grow to manifest its destiny. Or we can crush the acorn under our heel. Either choice turns our Will into action. Thus, our Will can act on Destiny but not on Providence because the action of crushing the acorn has no consequence on the universal life force that infused it. That universal life force will simply manifest in another form, another acorn, another tree.

Therefore, we see that Destiny, as opposed to Providence, needs specific conditions to exist while Providence does not need anything to be. Thus, we can say that to merely exist is the hallmark of Destiny, while to *be* is the hallmark of Providence.

Conclusion

Worthy Fraters, our ascent up the mountain of life will be less arduous and more satisfying if we live in accordance with Natural Law. We can accomplish this work by curating our thoughts, words, and actions so as to spread light, joy, and brotherly love in the world. By so doing, we avail ourselves of Divine Providence’s blessings. Once those blessings are bestowed

upon us, we may see a path through the obstacles impeding our ascent that previously remained hidden. The winds may suddenly subside, the fog may lift, and the sun may light that path for us.

However, if we stray from the path of light, Destiny's blind force will always be there to guide us back to the path of virtue. Thus, suffering "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune"¹⁸ may also be seen as a blessing, rather than a punishment, because surmounting the myriad obstacles we encounter on our path makes us stronger, and teaches us to adhere more closely to Natural Law. As that intrepid explorer, artist, mountain climber, and mystic Nicholas Roerich declared, "blessed be the obstacles—through them we grow."¹⁹

Works Cited

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⁴ Godwin, Jocelyn. (2006). *Fabre d'Olivet (1767-1825)*. Stanford Libraries. <https://exhibits.stanford.edu/super-e/feature/fabre-d-olivet-1767-1825>.

⁵ Fabre d'Olivet. *The Golden Verses of Pythagoras*. *Ibid* at p. vii.

⁶ Godwin, Jocelyn. *Fabre d'Olivet (1767-1825)*. *Ibid*.

⁷ Fabre d'Olivet. *The Golden Verses of Pythagoras*. *Ibid* at p. 167.

⁸ *Ibid*.

⁹ *Ibid*.

¹⁰ Keats, John. (1958). *The Letters of John Keats, 1814-1821*. Edited by Hyder Edward Rollins. Harvard University Press, pgs. 100-104.

¹¹ Godwin, Jocelyn. *Fabre d'Olivet (1767-1825)*. *Ibid*.

¹² Fabre d'Olivet. *The Golden Verses of Pythagoras*. *Ibid* at p. 170.

¹³ *Ibid*.

¹⁴ *Ibid*.

¹⁵ *Ibid*.

¹⁶ *Ibid*.

¹⁷ Godwin, Jocelyn. *Fabre d'Olivet (1767-1825)*. *Ibid*.

¹⁸ Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. *Ibid*.

¹⁹ Roerich, Nicholas. *Heart of Asia*. *Ibid*. at p. 5.