

# Fate

*"But if there be irresistible dictation, this dictation understands itself. If we must accept Fate, we are not less compelled to affirm liberty, the significance of the individual, the grandeur of duty, the power of character."*

*"History is the action and reaction of these two, - Nature and Thought; - two boys pushing each other on the curb-stone of the pavement. Everything is pusher or pushed: and matter and mind are in perpetual tilt and balance, so. Whilst the man is weak, the earth takes him up. He plants his brain and affections. By and by he will take up the earth, and have his gardens and vineyards in the beautiful order and productiveness of his thought. Every solid in the universe is ready to become fluid on the approach of the mind, and the power to flux it is the measure of the mind."*

*"A breath of will blows eternally through the universe of souls in the direction of the Right and Necessary."*

## In a nutshell

The case for us being simply products of fate is strong, yet paradoxically it is only in accepting it that we can realize our creative power.

## In a similar vein

Henri Bergson *Creative Evolution* (p 56)  
 Sam Harris *Free Will* (p 114)  
 Baruch Spinoza *Ethics* (p 286)

# Ralph Waldo Emerson

When not quite 40, the great American transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote "Self-Reliance." This acclaimed essay became symbolic of the ethic of American individualism, but it was more complex than generally appreciated. Though he promoted personal responsibility and the duty always to be oneself in the face of social conformity, Emerson's deeper message was that the wish to succeed is not about exerting our will against the world, but in fact working with the grain of the universe.

Almost 20 years later, his essay "Fate" was an attempt to solve this issue of how much we are the result of our own efforts, or the product of unseen forces. It is still a superb meditation on this basic philosophical question.

## The case for fate

Emerson begins by admitting that the "irresistible dictation" of life is true: fate is real. And yet, he also affirms the "significance of the individual" and the "power of character" as real forces. How does one reconcile these apparent opposites?

At a personal level, most of us feel that our individuality strikes a balance with the world, that we somehow bridge a gap between necessity and liberty, and that though there be "irresistible dictation, this dictation understands itself." Our lives are essentially the working out of our wills within the spirit and limitations of the age in which we live. "The riddle of the age," Emerson says, "has for each a private solution."

Emerson admits the perception of superficiality in the outlook of the typical American, noting that great nations have not been "boasters and buffoons, but perceivers of the terror of life, and have manned themselves to face it." He mentions the Spartans who happily ran to their deaths in battle, and Turkish, Arab, and Persian peoples who did the same, easily accepting their "preordained fate." Even the old Calvinists, he notes, had a similar dignity, according to which their individuality meant little against the "weight of the

Universe." Emerson implies that it is hubris to believe that our little selves can have any real effect, when, as Chaucer put it, destiny is the "minister-general" that actually decides the course of war and peace, hate and love.

What is more, Emerson writes, nature is not sentimental, "will not mind drowning a man or woman," and will swallow a whole ship "like a grain of dust." Races of animals feed on each other, volcanoes explode, a change in the seabed swamps a town, cholera overcomes a city. Will "providence" save us from any of these things? Even if providence exists, it moves on tracks indiscernible to us and is not a force on which we can count at a personal level; it is pure vanity, he says, to "dress up that terrific benefactor in a clean shirt and white neckcloth of a student in divinity."

Nature is not only no sentimentalist, its forms are tyrannical. Just as a bird's existence is determined by the shape and length of its bill and the extent of its feathers, so humans' gender, race, climate, and talents mold their possibilities: "Every spirit makes its house; but afterwards the house confines the spirit." Our DNA and family heritage create our destiny:

*"Men are what their mothers made them. You may as well ask a loom which weaves huckaback, why it does not make cashmere, as expect poetry from this engineer, or a chemical discovery from that jobber. Ask the digger in the ditch to explain Newton's laws: the fine organs of his brain have been pinched by overwork and squalid poverty from father to son, for a hundred years ... So he has but one future, and that is already predetermined in his lobes ... All the privilege and all the legislation of the world cannot meddle or help to make a poet or a prince of him."*

Emerson was well versed in Eastern spiritual literature, particularly the concepts of karma, reincarnation, and the "wheel of life," which all point to nature and the circumstances of our present lives being largely the result of actions and experiences in previous incarnations. Yet in the Western tradition he finds support for this outlook, noting German philosopher Friedrich Schelling's remark that "there is in every man a certain feeling, that he has been what he is from all eternity, and by no means became such in time." Everyone is "party to his present estate." If this is true, what gives us the temerity to see ourselves as blank slates?

Looking back over scientific history, it often seems inevitable that a certain discovery emerged at a particular time. We like to ascribe inventions and insights to an individual, but usually there were two, three, or four people who came to the same conclusions simultaneously. The truth is that progress

is impersonal and has its own momentum. Particular people are interchangeable "vehicles," and to think otherwise provokes laughter from the gods.

The weight of fate will, however, seem different to different people. A brutish person, Emerson suggests, will find themselves hemmed in on all sides by an equally brutal destiny, whereas a finer person will seem to experience finer checks on their actions. Yet while our limitations, or our fate, become less heavy the purer our soul, "the ring of necessity is always perched at the top."

### The case for personal power

Having put the strongest argument for the weight of fate, Emerson suddenly changes tack. Fate, he begins to say, is itself subject to limitation. For there is another force that moves the world, which he calls "power." If fate is "natural history," power is its nemesis, and humankind is not "ignominious baggage" but a "stupendous antagonism" that throws a spanner into the works of an apparently determined history.

Part of fate, Emerson says, is human freedom, and "So far as man thinks, he is free." To dwell on fate is not wholesome, and among the weak and lazy it becomes easy to blame everything on it. The right way to see fate is to invoke its natural might without lessening our own liberty to act. It can inspire us to steadfastness when otherwise we might be blown about by the winds of emotion or circumstance:

*"A man ought to compare advantageously with a river, an oak, or a mountain. He shall have not less the flow, the expansion, and the resistance of these."*

As others believe in fate as a force for harm, we should see it as a force for good, knowing ourselves to be "guarded by the cherubim of destiny." Having spoken at length of the unexpected wrath of nature, Emerson suggests that we can "confront fate with fate," for "if the Universe have these savage accidents, our atoms are as savage in resistance." Moreover, we have a creative power that frees us, so that we become not a cog in the machine, but a participant in the universe's unfolding, having epiphanies as to how it operates and yet still finding niches to fill with our own originality. For as we expand to knowledge of the unity of things, it is natural that our value to the world increases; we can state "what is" as much as what seems to be written in the book of fate:

*"Thought dissolves the material universe, by carrying the mind up into a sphere where all is spirit."*

Emerson further observes, "Always one man more than another represents the will of Divine Providence to the period." And with that perception of truth "is joined the desire that it shall prevail." Though the power of nature is significant, a fire-up human will is awesome, potentially galvanizing whole nations or sparking new religions. The hero acts in a way that seems quite oblivious to fate, not even considering that the world could be otherwise.

When you look closely, Emerson suggests, fate is simply causes that we have not completely explained. After all, death from typhoid seemed like "the whim of God" until someone worked out that correct drainage helped to eliminate it; it was the same with scurvy, which killed countless sailors before we realized that it could be stopped by a store of lime juice. Great land masses were intractable until rail tracks were laid. Human ingenuity frequently makes a mockery of seemingly all-powerful "fate."

#### Emerson's conclusion

At the end of his essay, Emerson comes back to the relationship between people and events. He suggests that "the soul contains the event that shall befall it, for the event is only the actualization of its thoughts ... The event is the print of your form. It fits you like your skin." He goes on to say:

*"A man's fortunes are the fruit of his character ... his growth is declared in his ambition, his companions, and his performance. He looks like a piece of luck, but is a piece of causation."*

He likens history to two boys pushing at each other on the pavement. Human beings are either pushed or pushing. One who is weak is pushed by circumstances, while the wise and strong see that apparently immovable objects can be moved, that we can stamp our thoughts on the world. He asks:

*"What is the city in which we sit here, but an aggregate of incongruous materials, which have obeyed the will of some man? The granite was reluctant, but his hands were stronger, and it came."*

#### Final comments

What is the relationship between Emerson's earlier essay, "Self-reliance," and "Fate"? It would be tempting to say that the later work reflects a wiser Emerson who was more attuned to the power of nature and circumstance in people's lives. It is almost as if he is challenging himself to believe his earlier, more forthright essay on the power of the individual.

Yet while it is true that "Self-Reliance" has the certainty of a younger man and "Fate" is more nuanced, the later essay in fact affirms Emerson's basic position on the relationship between person and universe. In the very last part, he talks of something called the "Beautiful Necessity," the greater intelligence or "law of life" that seems to move the universe. This force drives nature and is beyond words. It is neither impersonal nor personal. The wise person sees that there is nothing left to chance, "no contingencies" – everything turns out how it was meant to. But having noted this apparent determinism, and just when one thinks Emerson has finally sided with fate, he says that this beautiful necessity (nature, God, law, intelligence) "solicits the pure in heart to draw on all its omnipotence."

This, finally, is the opening we are given. Although the law of life is unstoppable and has its own reasons, at the same time it wants us to work with it. In doing so we may lose our little selves, but in the process become attuned to something infinitely larger and more powerful. We cease to be simply a subject, and are a powerful co-creator in the world's unfolding.

#### Ralph Waldo Emerson

Born in 1803 in Boston, Emerson was one of eight children; his father died just before he was 8. He enrolled at Harvard University at age 14, graduating four years later. After some time as a schoolteacher, he attended divinity college at Harvard, became a Unitarian pastor, and married, but his wife Ellen died of tuberculosis. After resigning his post because of theological disputes, he traveled to Europe and met Thomas Carlyle, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and William Wordsworth.

Returning to America in 1835, Emerson settled in Concord and married again, to Lydia Jackson, who bore him five children. In 1836 he published *Nature*, which set out transcendentalist principles; his transcendentalist friends included Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Amos Bronson Alcott, and Elizabeth Peabody. In the following two years Emerson delivered controversial addresses at Harvard, the first on American intellectual independence from Europe, the second pleading for independence of belief above all creeds and churches.

In 1841 and 1844, two series of essays were published, including *Self-Reliance*, *Spiritual Laws*, *The Over-Soul*, *Compensation and Experience*, and, in the decade 1850–60, *Representative Men*, *English Traits*, and *The Conduct of Life*. Emerson died in 1882.

