



The Concept of Fate in Homer's Epic - An Interdisciplinary Perspective

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Abstract. The concept of fate is one of the important themes extensively explored in ancient Greek mythology, as well as literary works such as tragedies. Its profound philosophical ideas have had a far-reaching impact and influence on subsequent humanities. Beyond a literary perspective, this paper explores the concept of fate in ancient Greece from etymology, history, religion, and philosophy, providing a comparative analysis. It uncovers various dimensions of the concept, emphasizing its unassailable nature. Human free will is manifested in how individuals accept their preordained destiny. The concept of fate, with its enigmatic nature, inspires reverence for the unknown and the metaphysical. Given concerns about excessive rationalization in modern society, revisiting the concept of ancient Greek fate offers a beneficial response.

Keywords: Ancient Greece, Homer's Epic, Fate, Mystery

1 Introduction

Ancient Greek mythology and tragedy, with their rich content and profound symbolism, continue to have a profound influence on Western humanities today. Among the important themes explored in these literary works, the concept of fate holds a significant place. The ancient Greeks' contemplation of this abstract concept goes beyond its impact on individuals; it elevates it to a supreme status, governing all realms, even the divine. It signifies a cross-temporal and cross-cultural reverence shared by humanity for primal beliefs, as well as an unwavering pursuit of one's existence. Even though that era has long passed, the philosophical ideas surrounding the concept of fate continue to inspire contemporary humanists, leading to diverse discussions and insights.

In China, specialized research on ancient Greek fate started relatively late, with substantial research activities emerging only in the past two to three decades. However, during this time, there has been a growing interest, leading to the publication of over a hundred research papers and dozens of monographs on the topic. In the past five years, academic research in this area has shown a noticeable increase in momentum. These studies can be broadly categorized into the following five aspects: textual analysis of specific mythological stories, epics, and tragedies related to ancient Greek fate; discussions of how fate is manifested and altered in specific literary works; brief analyses of

the concept of fate itself; comparative studies of ancient Greek fate and its influence on subsequent literary works; and historical evolution studies regarding changes in ancient Greek fate. The majority of research findings focus on the first two aspects, particularly on classic works such as the "Homer's Epic," "Oedipus Rex," and the representative works of the three major tragic poets, indicating that research in this field is still in its introductory stage. In contrast, Western academia, influenced by its cultural traditions, has conducted research over a more extended period and has produced a greater number of comprehensive monographs, presenting deeper insights with a more sustained academic perspective. Unlike the Chinese academic approach, Western scholars place greater emphasis on the third aspect mentioned above, namely, interpreting and extending the concept of fate from various interdisciplinary perspectives, including specific texts, history, religion, and philosophy. For instance, Jean-Pierre Vernant focuses on distinguishing between humans and gods in a religious context, emphasizing that immortality is an insurmountable boundary between them.^[1] Gaspar Griffin delves into the aesthetic aspect of life-and-death choices in the "Iliad," attributing the epic's theme to the hero's acceptance of the fate of death.^[2] Bernard-Henri Lévy examines fate and determinism from a philosophical perspective, highlighting a precarious contradiction: believing only in fate leads to skepticism, while belief in gods makes determinism untenable, suggesting the need to reconcile the two selectively^[3]. As for research on the other four aspects, it is relatively scarce, with recent discussions yielding fragmented results, rather than forming comprehensive systems, similar to the analysis of the concept of fate.

It is evident that, while current scholarship on the content of ancient Greek fate is relatively comprehensive, and there is some exploration from the perspective of philosophical trends and historical changes, notable deficiencies still exist. Firstly, a considerable portion of the research remains confined to simple textual analysis and traditional literary criticism, often lacking deeper insights into the core concept of "fate." Some papers even simplistically assert a direct connection between later Greek fate and the Enlightenment idea of "man controlling his own destiny," which downplays the uniqueness of ancient Greek fate. Handling the evolution of Western fate philosophy in such a simplistic manner is inadequate^[4]. Secondly, most studies that analyze this issue from a literary perspective are limited to comparative analyses of Greek fate tragedy with classical tragedies from their own culture or solely focus on the analysis of individual well-known literary works such as "Thunderstorm" or "Hamlet," ignoring the broader historical and profound influence of Greek fate tragedy on the so-called "local culture" – the historical and extensive influence within the entire Western humanities sphere. Thirdly, research focusing on the philosophical aspects of fate analysis mainly incorporates philosophical theories that are contemporary or, at most, extend to the era of humanism. There is a lack of engagement with the post-modern Western philosophical trends.

Given the mentioned issues, this paper will emphasize the analysis of the concept of fate itself and its integration with subsequent philosophical ideas. It aims to address the shortcomings of previous research, rectify conceptual deficiencies, and offer a more profound examination of the topic. This paper will be based on the text of "Homer's

Epic" and explore the concept of fate from various angles, including etymology, history, religious history, and more. It will provide a brief analysis of the concept and differentiate it from the notions of fate discussed in humanism and the Enlightenment. Additionally, it will incorporate modern Western religious philosophical ideas about awe, demonstrating the enduring influence and undeniable value of ancient Greek fate in contemporary society.

2 The Concept of Greek Fate from Etymological, Literary, and Historical Perspectives

From the perspective of contemporary Western languages, the term "fate" originates from the Latin word "fatum," meaning "that which has been spoken." This can be extended to imply a sense of divine oracle. In addition to its original meaning of "predestined" or "foretold," the related terms "fatal" and its variations like "fatality" have evolved to include connotations of "lethal" or "destructive." These connotations are often used to describe calamities such as plagues and natural disasters, which have imbued the originally neutral term "fate" with a tragic undertone. The attitude toward fate reflected in these linguistic shifts is similar to the ancient Greek concept^[5].

In ancient Greek, the term for fate, "moira," originally meant "portion" or "share," indicating that fate is preordained and unalterable, independent of human will. Moreover, as the Greek language belongs to the Indo-European language family and has its roots in Proto-Indo-European, the word "moira" can be traced back to the Proto-Indo-European root "mor-." Many words derived from this root are associated with mortals, death, and similar themes, thereby linking fate to human existence, especially tragic and destructive outcomes. The etymological perspective appears to depict ancient Greek views on fate in a rather bleak manner. Fate is seen as predestined, unchangeable, and likely to lead to tragic consequences, with human free will seemingly overshadowed by the metaphysical power of oracles. However, in the eyes of Greek historians, while the will of fate is not to be ignored, human actions play a significant role. They even assert that human will can allow individuals to transcend the dictates of fate, laying the groundwork for the emergence of humanistic ideas. For instance, Herodotus introduced the concept of opportunity and chance, granting individuals the agency to act according to their own will, in opposition to the determinism of divine fate. Thucydides, in his account of the Peloponnesian War, emphasized the significance of "contingency," asserting that unexpected events frequently occur and that this perspective significantly affects people's understanding of events that have already happened, those which are seemingly "predestined," thus altering the course of events. He argued that human actions fundamentally stem from self-interest rather than being solely subject to the dictates of fate^[6].

Nevertheless, the notion that "doom or death ordained is irreversible" remains an unwavering rule in literary creations. For instance, in the "Iliad," the demigod hero Achilles, despite facing numerous challenges and demonstrating extraordinary valor in battle, could not escape the preordained destiny of an early death. It is stated, "For your fate is to die early, and thus to suffer more than other men; and I brought you forth in

our halls, and I who brought you forth, and whom in my child-bearing agony I brought forth, when I had borne you in a month, you will not see much longer."^[7] In later Greek tragic works, such as Aeschylus' "Oresteia," even if Orestes had compelling reasons and justification for matricide as an act of vengeance against his mother, his crime of killing his kin still subjected him to the relentless pursuit and judgment of the Furies, personifications of fate. The tragic concept of fate is not only conveyed through oracles or character dialogues but also in the very names of the characters. Names predate the existence and actions of characters and often covertly dictate or foretell their behavior. For example, the name of the Trojan prince Paris means "the bringer of disaster." His elopement with Helen led to the prolonged and destructive Trojan War. Odysseus's name, meaning "wrathful," is attributed to his anger when he arrived in a land teeming with people, resulting in him blinding the one-eyed son of Poseidon, the sea god^[8]. He faced the angry repercussions of the god when he finally returned to his homeland. Furthermore, when he confronted a group of nobles who had forced his wife to consider remarriage, he ruthlessly slaughtered them in anger, as recounted in "The Odyssey." Thus, anger accompanies him throughout the epic^[5].

The author believes that the emergence of these distinctly different perspectives can be attributed to the differences between literary and historical research. Historians need to focus more on and be grounded in actual historical events. For areas where evidence is temporarily unavailable, reasonable assumptions about the occurrence of objective historical facts are required to maximize the restoration of so-called "original facts" that are independent and unchanging. History is composed of human activities, and actual reality differs significantly from literary reality. Whether in the "Iliad" or in numerous Greek tragedies, these literary works inevitably generalize, abstract, adapt, and even deliberately incorporate mystical and extraordinary elements into historical events, creating spectacular effects. The depiction of individuals powerless before oracles is not equivalent to what transpires in real history.

In contrast, literary studies emphasize interpretation. According to Aristotle's "Poetics," the duty of poets is not to describe events that have already happened but to describe events that could happen based on the principles of likelihood or necessity^[9]. In this view, tragedy is a form of mimesis: poets reveal universal truths through the imitation of human actions, eliciting fear and pity and exemplifying human virtues through intense emotional experiences. This approach distinguishes between the necessary and the contingent: necessity pertains to the divine and is a highly condensed metaphysical concept, while contingency relates to earthly matters and human actions. Necessity is immovable and unchangeable, while contingency is linked to human will and deeds. Though the historical perspective reminds us not to unquestioningly follow the dictates of fate and not to obliterate human will and the value of human action, it should not be entirely accepted, completely dismissing the influence of metaphysical oracles, as this would be a misinterpretation and deviation from the ancient Greek concept of fate.

In the "Iliad," although Achilles cannot escape his fate of death, he does have a choice. He can return home, live a peaceful life, and grow old, or he can go to Troy to fight for honor, but at the cost of dying in a foreign land. He says, "My mother, the silver-footed Thetis, told me that there are two fates that lead me to the end of death. If I stay here and fight outside the walls of Troy, I will lose the chance to return home,

but my name will be immortal. If I return home, to the beloved land of my fathers, I will lose the glory of my name, but my life will be long."^[8] At this level, it becomes apparent that the seemingly unchangeable portion merely pertains to the tragic or fatal outcome. The process of reaching that outcome leaves humans with the choice of how to act. While the fate of death is irreplaceable, people can choose glory and honor, or they can opt for a mundane and unremarkable existence. The value of free will and the shining courage of humanity is evident in how they face the choices presented by fate.

This positive attitude toward confronting fate, as depicted in the "Homer's Epic," undoubtedly had an impact on later Greek tragedies. For instance, in Sophocles' "Oedipus the King," when Oedipus learns of the prophecy that he will kill his father and marry his mother, he takes proactive measures to leave his homeland to prevent the unfortunate events from occurring. When he realizes that he has still committed the heinous crime of incest, he blinds himself and goes into self-imposed exile, serving as a warning for future generations. Even though he remains deeply ensnared in the web of fate, his unyielding transcendence of human nature shines through. German scholar Yasibers stated in "The Transcendence of Tragedy": "Even if resistance to the hopeless struggle against gods and fate is resisted until death, it is an act of transcendence: it is a movement toward the inner inherent nature of humans."^[10]

3 The Concept of Greek Fate from a Religious Studies Perspective

Religious studies scholars offer a more religious-focused viewpoint on the issue of fate. As the concept of fate is one of the fundamental themes in the study of civilizations worldwide, researchers compare the ideas about fate in major world religions to illuminate the specific characteristics of Greek beliefs regarding fate. Mircea Eliade, in his monumental work "A History of Religious Ideas," meticulously examines the birth, development, core beliefs, and rituals of various world religions to provide insight into the nature of Greek fate. He conducts a cross-comparison, choosing to examine the primitive beliefs of Mesopotamia, which were in closer temporal proximity to Greek religion.

One prominent aspect of the Mesopotamian worldview, as exemplified in the "Epic of Gilgamesh," is its notion of fate. It suggests that while humans may, through heroic and brave deeds, attempt to challenge their fate and achieve immortality, the prospect of transcending the inevitable death is exceedingly dim. Even mighty warriors like Enkidu could fall prey to the wrath of the gods, leading to their demise. Even heroes like Gilgamesh, who discovered the herb of eternal youth, could inadvertently lose it on their journey home. The faint glimmer of hope ultimately underscores an underlying sense of despair in the Mesopotamian worldview. In Eliade's view, the concept of fate in Mesopotamian civilization is quite grim. He states, "Man is born to die; he is created to serve the gods."^[11] In this view, the inescapability of death leaves humanity in a state of confusion and futility regarding its own existence. While the concept of "inescapable fate" and the dominion of the divine will over the gods are evident in Mesopotamian mythology, this limitation is somewhat downplayed in the interactions between gods

and humanity. The direct impact of divine will rather than fate significantly influences human beings in their dealings with the gods. This underscores the gods' indifference to human affairs, and humans' inability to assert justice before the gods deepens the sense of futility in human existence.

This tragic and futile aspect is equally evident in Greek mythology. Death is predetermined at birth, and human life is fleeting, characterized by suffering and melancholy. Eliade observes that "the best fortune for a man is not to be born, or to die as soon as possible after birth."^[11] However, in contrast to Mesopotamian mythology, Greek religion portrays a more temperate relationship between humans and gods and places a greater emphasis on reverence for metaphysical fate. In Greek religion, the concept of fate is embodied in the form of "justice." The gods uphold the highest standards of justice and bestow it upon humans. The actions of the gods aim to preserve this justice rather than capriciously interfere with human affairs. Simultaneously, human free will and action are depicted as the pursuit of "excellence." People strive to transcend the limitations imposed by fate, but excessive ambition can lead to pride and arrogance, ultimately bringing about tragic consequences. For instance, in the "Iliad," Arachne boasts that she can defy death, only to incur the wrath of Poseidon and meet her doom. In Eliade's view, although the inevitability of death remains immutable, human wisdom, and actions allow them to live "nobly and completely in the present."^[11]

While fate may be inescapable, human actions are no longer devoid of meaning. The movement of human free will is not just to please the gods but to strive toward an excellence that is unattainable but still aspirational. In Eliade's perspective, "The gods compel man to acknowledge his limitations, and man can recognize perfection, thereby understanding the sacredness of the human condition."^[11] The inevitable, ordained rules of fate are combined with the dignity of human beings, embracing the divine in the human experience.

4 The Philosophical Perspective on the Greek Concept of Fate

Eliade points out that human suffering, as a result of divine punishment, often arises from individuals being misled by their own ambitions, leading to a state of madness that obscures their understanding of fate. In other words, aside from the predetermined destiny of death, a crucial factor in the genesis of tragic fate lies in human pride, which causes a lack of reverence and awe for the laws of fate. From this perspective, the Greek concept of fate teaches not "heaven must destroy mankind" or "man can conquer fate," but rather "man must revere fate." Delving into the issues of the sacred and reverence from the phenomenology of religion perspective, Rudolf Otto's work, "The Idea of the Holy," is especially relevant.

Before introducing the concept of reverence, Otto first dissects the related concept of "mysterium." He notes that "mysterium" refers conceptually to that which is hidden, secret, beyond the comprehension of ordinary concepts; it is supernatural and other-worldly^[12]. In other words, the mysterious, or "mysterium," must exist beyond the grasp of human understanding, something entirely different from humanity. If humans could control even a part of it, the magical allure of the mysterious would dissipate, and its

status as an idol would crumble. In the context of Christian culture, Otto suggests that the "mysterium" can be seen as God or the chosen prophets and faithful of God. In this perspective, the title "augustus" is not to be conferred upon any created being, not even emperors. It signifies an attempt to elevate an ordinary human being to a status akin to an idol with a category that solely applies to the "mysterium."^[12] In Greek culture, this enigmatic and entirely incomprehensible realm can only be the supreme realm of fate.

The clarity of the concept of "mysterium" leads to the examination of "reverence." Otto begins by distinguishing religious "reverence" from the general sense of "fear" or "dread." The former arises from perceiving the ineffable "mysterium," while the latter represents a common, almost instinctual, natural physiological reaction. Otto then goes on to explain the specific factors contributing to reverence. The heart of reverence emanates from the expression of divinity, particularly manifested as "awe," signifying divine retribution and punishment on the moral plane. This retribution holds a completely non-natural and mysterious nature. The majesty of God or the creator is absolutely irresistible, and the act of creation establishes authority, making those who transcend the created order the sole complete existence. Otto states, "Mysticism accords the 'wholly other' the highest esteem, regarding it as the most perfect and absolute manifestation through being. In comparison, the finite self can even realize, 'I am zero, and you are everything.'"^[12]

This mechanism is quite similar to the Greek concept of fate: it dictates an unfortunate and inevitable outcome, causing individuals to perceive the futility of life and their own insignificance in the face of fate, leading to a profound exploration and reverence of this concept. Otto argues that "mysticism arises from fear, a sensation of an almighty, invincible force. Later, it transforms into a desire to unite with this force." He emphasizes that the cultivation of this sense of awe is not meant to terrify humanity into paralysis, like a wild animal fearing fire, but rather to guide people into a clearer, more genuine understanding of their own existence in the world, preventing them from falling into the opposite extreme of human-centered thinking.

It is important to note that Otto, a Christian philosopher, bases his analysis on the cultural background of Christian Hebrew culture, which differs significantly from the Greek concept of fate. The primary distinction lies in the monotheistic nature of Christianity, where God possesses distinct moral attributes. In Christian belief, fate, or the ultimate purpose that God intends to fulfill, is embodied in God's judgment and guidance of humanity. Christian theology introduced the concept of "original sin," suggesting that human beings universally possess moral flaws, and these widespread individual desires lead to human actions that deviate from the will and laws of God, resulting in various specific sins. In contrast to "condemnation," God places a higher emphasis on "redemption." Through pious faith, obedience, and adherence to the asceticism and guidance prescribed by God, humans can restore their righteousness, goodness, and mercy, achieving salvation and transcendence. Consequently, the rational aspect of the Christian concept of fate is more prominent than the irrational component. Its moral guidance is clear and well-defined. In Greek mythology, gods and humans share similar characteristics, desires, and behaviors, and these deities can be understood by humans.

They are not perfect moral idols; rather, fate, whether for gods or humans, is uncontrollable and unfathomable. Even great heroes do not have a definite moral compass. The distinct enigmatic nature underscores a strong irrational element.

Despite the shift towards Christian culture replacing ancient Greek civilization in terms of cultural heritage and historical development, the concept of fate did not disappear. Even within Hebrew culture, where the concept of fate is not emphasized or elaborated, Christianity's God still possesses a mysterious and divine ultimate purpose to fulfill. Therefore, Otto's analysis, based on Christian culture, can be partially applied to the understanding of the Greek concept of fate and serve as an innovative approach and theoretical complement.

According to Otto, religion inherently contains vast irrational, transcendent, entirely different elements, which are the essence of religion. However, to make religion acceptable to human beings, there must be rational elements like revelations and oracles that can be understood by humanity. A balance between reason and irrationality must be struck. If rationality expands without restraint, as criticized by Heidegger in "The Age of the World Picture," humanity's excessive knowledge of the world can lead to an overemphasis on pragmatism, undermining the irrational part^[13]. The overzealous application of current scientific theories to explain all aspects of the world can hinder the advancement of scientific and technological progress. Branding all folk beliefs as feudal superstitions can be detrimental to human identity and cultural achievements.

Charles Taylor, from a sociological perspective, has explored the ancient phenomenon of "enchantment" and the modern phenomenon of "disenchantment,"^[14] pointing out that the disenchantment of the modern society has led to the breakdown of order, the ambiguity of human self-identity, and the inner "disquiet."^[15] To counter this excessive disenchantment, reclaiming the spirit of the "enchantment" era is one way. Revisiting the thoughts related to the Greek concept of fate, emphasizing humanity's smallness and emphasizing reverence for the unfathomable, can serve as a valuable tool for addressing the challenges of contemporary society.

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