

Hope and Chance

Austin Hoffman, *The Ambrose School*



NFL games are sometimes decided by an overtime coin toss. Powerball by six arbitrary numbers. The study of history discloses other examples of chance events shaping outcomes. Croesus was almost killed because of an ambiguous prophecy, but then he was saved by a sudden rain-shower. The Chinese invasion of Taiwan in 1949 was thwarted by snails. Because the canals the Chinese soldiers trained in happened to be filled with a microbe-carrying snail, their forces were unable to conquer the island before the U.S. and allies arrived. Much of our lives are governed by seemingly random fortune, which is why we sometimes have occasion to complain about the injustice of fortune. Why do the morally corrupt enjoy prosperity, health, and fame while the righteous labor in obscurity and poverty? It would seem the random allocation of gifts denies the possibility of a benevolent governor of the world.

The seeming conflict between free will and providence, chance and fate has been a perennial philosophical problem. Pagans as well as Christians have wrestled with the question of how God can know all things, yet our choices remain free. Or, if God governs the world, why do the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer? It seems this can only be attributed to random fortune rather than a benevolent helmsman. Many in history thus attempt to solve the question by either denying man's will or God's providence. Others, such as Boethius, reconcile these two as friends.

When Boethius addresses the subject of chance and providence, he structures the world in two tiers: there is the world and its natural causes and then

there is God's direct oversight and governance. The two work hand-in-hand, with fate subservient to providence. What we may call fortune or fate is merely the complex interrelationship of secondary causes—the natures and wills of various entities in the world. Stones fall, rivers flow, men seek their own ends. Of course, God created all things, so He is also the author of their natures.

Boethius writes,

The generation of all things, the whole progress of things subject to change and whatever moves in any way, receive their causes, their due order, and their form from the unchanging mind of God. In the high citadel of its oneness, the mind of God has set up a plan for the multitude of events. When this plan is thought of as in the purity of God's understanding, it is called Providence, and when it is thought of with reference to all things, whose motion and order it controls, it is called by the name the ancients gave it, Fate. (IV.m6)¹

Further, Boethius explains that whenever something occurs which we cannot fully explain or know, we may assign it to chance, although if we were omniscient we would plainly see the causes. If I find one hundred dollars in a garbage dump, I find it by chance. Yet someone dropped the bill, some circumstances caused it to be forgotten or driven to the spot where I found it, and I was led by various desires and circumstances to arrive at a time where the bill might be found. It is only from my

1. Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Trans. V. E. Watts (London: The Folio Society, 1998), 141.



limited perspective that this can be attributed to chance.

We may complain that fortune seems random, causing the good to suffer and the wicked to prosper, but this is because we cannot see the simple and higher order behind them. We see a chaotic and ever changing web, while God beholds the unfolding of His plan in its simplicity. Our happiness and contentment depend on living within our boundaries as creatures—we can't know all things or all causes. Virgil may claim, "Happy is he who is able to know the causes of things,"² but he is assuming a closed philosophical system accessible to the human mind.

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The Roman philosophers believed that the world was governed by fixed natural laws and that these were discoverable in their entirety. Further, if one was able to gain insight into the order of reality, he could arrange events and circumstances to guarantee a utopian outcome. This was the classical political project: by governing in accordance with nature, politics could solve the corruption in the human soul. By applying the right principles, we get the right results. Much like discovering a mathematical formula, if we follow the steps we arrive inexorably at the conclusion.

Yet both Christianity and Boethius reject this model of the universe, for we are not capable of discovering all of the complex relationships of secondary causes. Boethius confesses the world is ruled by God, but the exact means He uses to administer His providence are inscrutable to us. There is a gap or shroud through which we cannot peer. When we boast that we can see God's perfect plan or understand His purposes, we fall into pride and self-deception. Boethius should lead us to the humble confession that we don't know why something has happened and that we don't know what will be the outcome of our efforts.

Although goals for graduates, course objectives, or learning outcomes are all good things — we should plan — we must also embrace the impossibility of knowing the future in any absolute sense. There are too many causes in the world for us to boast a 100% success rate. Sow the seed. Await the harvest. But you do not know whether a drought will strike or whether seeds you did not plant will suddenly bear fruit. Sometimes your well-planned lesson should be discarded in the first five minutes; occasionally the detour is more profitable than the main road.

But this is merely living life under the sun. Ecclesiastes also reminds us that life is ultimately out of our control.

"I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me, and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun, because sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone

2. Virgil, *Georgics*, II.490.

3. English Standard Version Bible



who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity.” (2:18-23)³

This goes for class-time lessons as well as the chance meetings in the hallway. It touches the serendipitous harmony when an unplanned illustration or discussion bears immediate and visible fruit as well as the unexpected interjection from a junior higher that makes accomplishing anything impossible for the next five minutes. There is a destructive entropy in the fallen world that should not shock us. This is a common theme of ancient writers, yet often forgotten today to our vexation. There are crooked things that cannot be made straight (Ecclesiastes 1:15). Painfully, there are students who cannot be helped despite our best efforts. This is life under the sun.

Some would see this as fatalism and giving in to hopelessness; for the Christian, it is not. As Tolkien comments on *Beowulf*, “man, each man and all men, and all their works shall die. A theme no Christian need despise.”⁴ Boethius and Ecclesiastes testify that although the world under the sun is out of our control and seems random, there is a God beyond the sun who controls all things. This is a faith that liberates. We do not need to guarantee outcomes. We ought not take three hours to meticulously plan for a one hour lesson; instead, we might spend more time laboring with faith in the God who orders all things. Leithart writes, “The impossibility of controlling the world in any

absolute sense is the foundation of his joy, rather than something that robs him of joy. He can say that because although he cannot control everything, there’s a God beyond the sun who does.”⁵

Although life is vapor, there is an eschatological hope in the God who makes all things right. Yet in the meantime, parents should remember the potential vapidness of laying up wealth for their children. Wealth can be lost or squandered. Likewise, education is not a golden ticket to a prosperous life. The world is unpredictable. Teachers should release their idealistic visions of engaging and lively discussions with students and embrace the repetitive nature of discipline. Teaching often feels like “shepherding the wind.” The student may be reminded that their own failures or shortcomings are not the end of the story. They are a product of sin and the brokenness of the world—sometimes tests are just unfair. We can acknowledge the impossibility of controlling the world without giving in to fear. It should free us to know that our labor does not guarantee an outcome, nor is it in vain.

Sharpen the sword and fight where the battle is fiercest. It may end in glorious ruin and death, but that is all the better. This is the attitude that motivates the charge of the Rohirrim or infuses Reepicheep, whose mind “was full of forlorn hopes, death-or-glory charges, and last stands.”⁶ If this mortal life is a slow death by living, let it blaze with vigor instead of simpering like a damp wick. Plan, build, fight, enjoy. Be ready to lose it all and start again. And when we fall for the last time and the cloud of vapor is finally torn, we will rise in that kingdom of the Sun and know it was not wasted.

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4. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Monster and the Critics and Other Essays* (Hammersmith: Harper Collins Publishers, 2006), 23.

5. Tony Reinke. Twitter Post. October 26, 2018, 1:31 PM. <https://twitter.com/TonyReinke/status/1055919810691956736>.

6. C.S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (London: The Folio Society, 1996), 69.

