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Book review

Michael Gelven, *Why me? A Philosophical Inquiry into Fate.* DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1991. x + 199 pages. $22.00.

Michael Gelven, well-known Heidegger commentator, is the author of six books and numerous articles on topics in existential philosophy. In this recent study, he focuses his analytical skills, lucid writing style, and existentialist approach on the philosophically rich concept of fate. At least since the Classical Age, tragedians and philosophers alike have struggled to determine for what purpose individuals are seemingly randomly selected to endure undeserved suffering or undeserved happiness. Gelven does not treat the question "Why me?" as a demand for an *explanation.* Indeed, he would view such an approach as a flight from fate, an attempt to explain it *away.* Rather, he thinks the "Why me?" question *really* asks "How am I to *think* about myself as a fated being?"

Central to Gelven's analysis (Chapters Two through Five) are the "Four Figures" who serve as character types for illustrating four different aspects of fate. He examines the Gambler to elucidate fate as chance; our worth cannot be limited to our success. The Historian illustrates fate as the destiny of a people; our collective lives are intelligible only as stories. The Birthday Celebrant reveals fate as personal fortune; we are beings to whom bestowals are essential to who we are. Finally, the Tragedian illuminates fate not as predictability but rather as inevitability.

His discussion of these "Four Figures" is the strongest, most interesting, and most original part of the book. Gelven proceeds to draw from a wide range of literary and cultural sources to make his case that, although we cannot strictly *understand* fate causally or *justify* it morally, we can nevertheless *illuminate* it as a face of truth, i.e., a truth about who we are. His thesis that fate is an "inescapable" face of truth is offered as a profound insight. The still greater revelations provided by illuminating fate, according to Gelven, are that *truth must matter* and that truth is *arresting.* For him, there can be no truth unless there is the possibility of affirming that beyond which there is no appeal; the noble endurance of the cruelties of chance, destiny, and fortune is beyond appeal, and that is what fate is.

In Chapter Seven Gelven presents his existentialist conception of "fate as abandonment." According to this conception, we are to think of fate as revealing the (*a*?) truth about our existence: we are profoundly alienated from and abandoned by the world. This is because we are fundamentally in tension between what we rightfully *deserve* as free moral agents and what we are bestowed as fated beings who are born with a *given* inheritance. We receive both blessings and blows in life that we do *not* earn, choose, or deserve.

Gelven next criticizes "The Three Justifications" of fate: what he calls the "Bambi fallacy" of nature as well as stoicism and theodicy. He describes the "Bambi fallacy" as the idea that the individual deer is entirely replaceable from nature's point of view since nature respects only whole species. Gelven labels this a fallacy because it reduces fate to nothing other

than the principle of indifference to individuals. He finds this unacceptable since it eliminates the full-blown concept of fate by replacing it with the deflated concept of bad luck. At bottom Gelven rejects the "Bambi fallacy" of nature along with stoicism and theodicy as *justifications* of fate; the very *meaning* of fate, for him, is inconsistent with its being justified.

Chapter Nine offers four conclusions about fate: (1) I matter because my friends and family care about me; (2) I matter because of my responsible, free acts; (3) I matter because of my inheritance; (4) I matter because of my fate. But now the argument weakens. Claim (3) is simply not self-evident. Why would the fact of being born American, male, white, left-handed, inheriting certain physical qualities, values and traditions matter *absolutely* as Gelven insists? He claims this form of mattering yields no justification but only illumination, yet his grounds for this thesis are lacking. For if it is my sheer *uniqueness* that distinguishes me as mattering absolutely, then not only does every *who* matter absolutely as Gelven contends, but non-persons like the unlucky impala devoured by the hungry leopard which he discusses *also* matter absolutely as *whats* due to *their* uniqueness. Thus Gelven fails adequately to show why only humans matter absolutely.

In Chapters Ten through Twelve Gelven argues for the premise presupposed in (3) and (4), namely that truth matters. He contends that to say "truth matters" does not require a subjective opinion of one who cares. Moreover, he concludes that his inquiry has revealed "the particular truth about how we are to think of our existence, namely, as fundamentally tensed between control [*controller*?] and victim" and follows this up with the grand claim that "the worth of this truth is beyond all else and hence transcends all lesser concerns" (p. 132).

As is evident above, toward the end of the book Gelven's generally lucid writing fluctuates from sound observations like "relativism and subjectivism are simply inimical to *truth*" (p. 180) to obscure assertions like "life is the enemy of existence" (p. 187). Nevertheless, he completes his inquiry with the plausible judgment that fate is decisively and significantly linked to truth. His intriguing ultimate conclusion is that we can affirm, accept, and acknowledge fate, submitting to its allure and its inevitability for the "radiant" reason that "we matter because truth matters" (p. 199).

While Gelven exhibits a certain intellectual flair and offers many keen insights, his attitude toward scholarship is at best ironic. By disregarding footnotes *altogether*, his often cogent philosophical reasoning is undermined since he thereby ironically, even if quite intentionally, neglects to acknowledge his own philosophical inheritance. Since he intends this work to elucidate "how to think about what these things [the seeming randomness of chance events, etc.] can possibly mean to the sophisticated or at least modern mind" (pp. 10–11), he certainly ought adequately to address other *sophisticated* philosophical treatments of fate, freedom, and the other kindred concepts he discusses.

His inadequacy in this regard is most conspicuous in his criticism of "stoicism." He attacks the stoic presupposition that "our moral worth consists in our triumph over our baser instincts" (p. 140). For the actual Stoics, however, one must have mastery over oneself, over one's impulses, in order to have mental freedom. This freedom is attainable only after thorough-going, rigorous training of one's judgments, choices, and desires.

Gelvin finds what he takes to be the stoic conception of nobility shallow: "Is nobility *merely* the triumph over the baser instincts; or is a profound awe toward truth the deeper meaning to nobility? And can truth be honored if the achievement of moral worth depends on an indifference to who we are?" (p. 141; his emphasis). Genuine Stoicism, as found in authors like Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius, is far from indifferent to who we are. Rather, the Stoics simply have a fundamentally different conception of human nature than Gelven has.

For the Stoics, the good is living consistently in accordance with nature. For human beings this means specifically living in accordance with *reason.* Reason informs us that all "externals" like the health of our bodies, money, material possessions, career, reputation, and other people are, by their nature, neither essentially nor completely under our control. On the other hand, our choices, decisions, judgments, and valuations are, by *their* nature, "up to us" and *completely* under our control. Consequently, the Stoics reason that if we concentrate on keeping our "internals" in accord with reason, then we can ensure the healthy, natural, and happy condition of our true self – the faculty of judgment which forms our choices, refusals, impulses, aversions, and desires. Epictetus calls this self the *prohairesis.* Since the natural, healthy state of the *prohairesis* is the one in harmony with reason and the rationally governed occurrences of the cosmos as a whole, it is within our power to accept external events, cope with them virtuously, and make the best use of them we can, always remembering their contingent nature. Thus nobility for the Stoics lies in valuing one's moral integrity and mental (prohairetic) freedom above all externals and striving to perfect one's character by maintaining the rationality of one's judgments about the world and about what happens to us.

Thus the Stoic insight is that one can freely love and delight in others without either subjecting oneself to the illusion that they will always be around, or enslaving oneself to them by allowing oneself to be manipulated by them. One can make proper use of wealth and possessions without enslaving oneself to them by harboring irrational expectations about them, like, for example, wanting to possess them forever. One can live rationally and serenely by not making one's happiness and well-being dependent upon externals which one *knows* are necessarily beyond one's control, fragile, and always susceptible to loss. Thus the realm of fate, the realm of externals, is exclusively the world external to one's *prohairesis.* The Stoics hold that one is vulnerable to fate only in so far as one foolishly invests one's desires in controlling externals instead of concerning oneself with developing and maintaining one's reason and virtue. That is, for the Stoics one *makes* oneself vulnerable to fate by making irrational judgments which produce irrational desires. An event, say the loss of one's job or the death of one's child, can either be viewed from the Stoic perspective, as an opportunity to exercise one's fortitude, patience, and courage, or it can be viewed from the unStoic perspective, with resentment, cursing it as an undeserved hardship and misfortune thus *making* it a tragedy by judging it so.

Thus Gelven misunderstands Stoicism when he describes the stoic's attitude toward "chance misfortunes" as one of "indifference, sometimes amounting to disdain" (p. 140). Instead of grappling with the genuine Stoic account of fate, Gelven takes as his target a very loose, contemporary,

layperson's (mis)understanding of the Stoicism of Zeno, Chrysippus, Seneca, Epictetus et al. He chooses a Shakespearean character, Brutus' wife Portia in *Julius Caesar*, as the object of his study instead of a real *Stoic philosopher*. This portrayal is merely a caricature of the ancient philosophy. So although his inquiry is delightfully gripping and worthy of serious attention, his scholarly deficiency disappoints the academic reader, and impairs Gelven's attempt to establish his own existentialist account of fate.

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