

When the Gods So Ordain
Thoughts on the deterministic worldview reflected in
Euripides' *Hippolytus* and Jean Racine's *Phaedra*

In the fifth century BC, Euripides was writing Greek tragedies about humanity's struggle with sin and the gods who so ordained. Twenty-one centuries later Jean Racine was expressing the same theme in France. Both playwrights had been exposed to the deterministic philosophies of their ages that presumably influenced their lives and writings. To what extent were they influenced, and what, if any, implications of the deterministic worldview are revealed in their works, particularly *Hippolytus* and *Phaedra* respectively?

"Determinism is the general philosophical thesis which states that for everything that ever happens there are conditions such that, given them, nothing else could happen" (Taylor 359). Otherwise stated, it is the belief that every event (including human action) could not have happened other than it did. Each event is **predetermined**, its bounds or limits are set (from the Latin *determinare*) beforehand. Who or what predetermines an event is a matter of one's deterministic presupposition.

A variety of deterministic theories have evolved, but they can be reduced to two types: **naturalistic** and **theistic** determinism.¹ The naturalistic determinist defines all antecedent causes in impersonal terms. Everything, including human thought and action, can be explained in a purely mechanistic way; they are predetermined by "natural" or physical causes. Newtonian mechanics with its "closed universe" gave impetus to this theory and was viewed as the *coup de grâce* [final blow] for the antithetical free will position. But with the advent of modern physics and quantum uncertainty, it was back to the drawing boards for both anti-supernaturalists and determinists alike: God, or at least "the gods," resurrected for serious consideration.

The theistic determinist defines the antecedent cause in personal terms, namely God(s) or some metaphysical force generally expressed in abstruse language. Rather than dealing with an infinite regression of antecedent causes, as the naturalist must, the theist traces all events to the predetermining mind of God, the "supernatural" or metaphysical uncaused cause. Whether or not God was "free" to predetermine the events as he did is another matter of much debate.

Set off against determinism are **indeterminism** and **self-determinism**. The former view denies any antecedent or simultaneous cause. When discussing human behavior, self-determinism is commonly referred to as **"free will"** and views each individual as the cause of his or her own actions. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to explicate these views, the free will concept is logically present as the

¹Taylor considers five such theories: ethical, logical, theological, physical, and psychological (359-370).

antithesis whenever determinism is discussed in connection with human behavior. Indeterminism, with its fundamental rejection of the law of cause and effect, is a modern concept foreign to Euripides and Racine as a third philosophical option.

What were the deterministic presuppositions of these two writers? Can it be shown that they were indeed determinists? Neither writer ever formulated (in writing) his philosophical or theological worldview in a systematic way. But, in what way are their views, or the views of their times, reflected in the works under consideration? Can it be determined what influence the thinking of their times had upon them? Although separated by over twenty centuries, both men were subjected to the winds of deterministic thought from both naturalistic and theistic perspectives.

EURIPIDES

The age of Euripides was one of infancy with regard to philosophical thought. Nevertheless, both naturalistic and theistic views were evolving. Naturalistic determinism found expression in atomistic philosophers such as Democritus (d. 370BC). Briefly stated, atomism espoused the theory that ALL was matter composed of atoms in motion which determined all events. This developed into the thinking that even man's behavior, thought, and will reduced to this monistic formula. Theistic determinism manifested itself through fatalism with *Moirai* (fate) as the inexorable determining cause of all events and human destiny. Greek mythology allocated the decisions to Zeus; in Rome it was Jupiter.

But what about Euripides? To the uncritical eye theistic determinism is set forth in *Hippolytus*. But does this represent what Euripides believed, or was he using this vehicle to communicate truths to his audience in their own idiom? Did he use the gods "as personifications of forces in human nature that are as familiar to us as they were to his original audience" (Bambrough 386)? If so, were these "forces" self-determined or mechanistically determined, if not theistically determined? Bambrough states, "It was debated, and still is debated, whether Euripides was himself an atheist or a modernistic theologian" (386).

G. F. Moore seems to lean to the latter when he says we should not "assume that Euripides was so completely sophisticated that he did not himself feel the beauty and power of the faith in which he was brought up" (487). And after a brief mention of Euripides's exposure to the mystic cults—which inspired him to write the *Bacchae*—in his later years, Moore asks, "Did Euripides, weary of a lifelong rationalism which had nothing to give to the religious soul but reasonable doubts, really surrender himself to enthusiasm?" (489). In other words, maybe the *Bacchae* represented "a recantation, the work of an atheist repenting in old age, as death closed in upon him" (Grube 470). But Moore suggests

too much. No atheist was ever brought up in an atheistic vacuum. Nor is there any evidence the *Bacchae* was consciously Euripides's last will and testament.

His contemporaries charged Euripides with atheism—or at least encouraging it. But he was never formally charged with heresy, as some of his contemporaries had been for verbalizing similar thoughts. Anaxagoras, Protagoras, and Socrates are examples. However, the crime of atheism usually involved denial of the Greek Pantheon *per se* and not necessarily a denial of any metaphysical reality.

Euripides was a student of such thinkers as Anaxagoras, Protagoras, Gorgias, and Prodicus. Yet it does not appear from his plays that he had committed to any one of their systems of thought. Anaxagoras planted dualistic thinking in the Greek mind by introducing the principle of "Nous" (Reason, Mind) to a mechanistic material world. "Nous," the Universal Intelligence that arranged the universe in rational order, was an intangible being. Yet whether Anaxagoras had reached the concept of the incorporeal is debatable. Socrates, with regrets, thought not. Copleston attests to the abstruseness of Anaxagoras's thought (1:69–71). Thus, the causative role of the "Nous" is unclear. Yet Anaxagoras must be considered among determinists because of his mechanistic worldview.

The latter three thinkers were sophists who, as epistemological skeptics, logically ended in agnosticism. As nearly as I can determine, they believed in the free will of man (Horne 23), which seems to follow from their adherence to subjective relativism.

Therefore, we cannot, with any degree of certainty, ascertain the amount of influence Euripides's contemporaries had on him. When any of his characters give expression to a belief system, we can only surmise that he was aware of that system and not that he necessarily endorsed it.

The narrower question of Euripidean determinism is answered in the same way. There is a deterministic element in *Hippolytus*. But is it theistic (as portrayed) or naturalistic (the gods as symbolic representations of mechanistic forces)? Another possible interpretation is Conacher's who says "the gods are used to symbolize the destructive power of passion and of the emotions" (22). Thus, man's "fate" is predetermined by the choices he makes which are governed by his own desires; he becomes a "victim" of his own will. This is self-determinism. The question then becomes, can we control our own passions?

RACINE

By the seventeenth century AD the historical obscurity of philosophical thought had essentially disappeared. In the twenty centuries between Euripides and Racine the schools of free will and determinism had developed and one's allegiance to either is more easily determined.

Although each theory was not without inconsistencies or logical difficulties, an individual's alignment with one of any number of philosophical and religious sects would expose his sympathies. Such was the case of Racine, who was a Jansenist.

Jansenism was a radical Augustinian movement within the Roman Catholic Church during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The group took its name from Cornelius Otto Jansen (d. 1638), a Roman Catholic bishop. He sought to reshape Roman Catholic thinking through the writings of Augustine and thereby defeat Protestant Reformationism on its own ground. Jansenists also stood opposed to much of the theology of the Catholic Counter-Reformation, and in particular the Probabilism and Pelagianism of the Jesuits.

Probabilism was the view that justification for a course of action could be found in what was "probably" right even though the action seemed contrary to what was right. "Probable" was not a statistical matter, but rather that which reason and wise counsel (opinions of theologians) might dictate. For example, a priest might engage in heterosexual fornication to dispel rumors of homosexual behavior. A more recent—and disconcerting—example would be lying to a Gestapo agent to protect a Jew hiding in one's home. This tendency toward moral relativism and laxity was countered by the moral rigorism of the Jansenists.

Jansenistic determinism, which logically included the doctrine of man's total depravity and his utter dependence upon God for the accomplishment of ANY right action, stood off against Pelagianism's free will doctrine. Ironically, this rigid form of determinism and rigorism has led some—and not without justification—to counter-charge that Jansenistic "rigorism led to lukewarmness and laxity...and thus increased the immorality already growing very strong before Jansenism" (Lortz 433). A deterministic worldview could lead to amorality. If every action is predetermined, how could the individual be held responsible for moral decisions? Also, if one is predestined to either Heaven or Hell, one's actions in this life will not matter anyway. This is certainly not what the Jansenists taught, but it is a logical extension of theistic determinism. The naturalistic determinist is not burdened with this problem because, for him, morality is relative to begin with.

Jansenists were Catholic Calvinists. They taught that since the fall of Adam, man is totally depraved, incapable of choosing the good. Every action, whether "good" or otherwise, is predetermined by man's corrupt nature. Ostensibly, this is "will," but it is not truly "free"; it is enslaved to sin. It is free only in that it chooses to do the evil it must do. God's irresistible grace (of necessity it is irresistible; man cannot choose the good) steps in to determine certain men's wills, directing them to the good (i.e., God). This is **double predestination**, God having predestined some men to Heaven and others to Hell before the foundation of the

world. Therefore, those chosen to receive grace must of necessity do so, and they do so "willingly." Jansenius, with verbal gymnastics, denied he taught Calvinism (Gonzalez 214). Blaise Pascal, Jansenism's preeminent spokesman, quotes Augustine accordingly:

...our actions are ours in respect of the free will which produces them; but that they are also of God, in respect of His grace which enables our free will to produce them...God enables us to do what is pleasing in His sight, by making us will to do even what we might have been unwilling to do (157).

Copleston refers to Pierre Bayle (d 1706), the French determinist (Protestant turned Catholic turned Protestant), who rightly concluded that there was no fundamental difference between the determinism of Catholic Thomists, Catholic Jansenists, and Protestant Calvinists (6:6).

The center of Jansenistic teaching was in the Cistercian convent of Port Royal des Champs, near Versailles. Another house was built in Paris. Racine's association with Port-Royal went back to his early childhood (ca. 1649, ten years old) when he lived in the convent with his grandmother and was educated there. He continued his relationship with the Port-Royal Jansenists in Paris until a temporary break with the sect in 1666 over the issue of his connection with the literary world (Knapp 14-15, 24-25, 4849). Clark states "his experiences there left...an impress on his mind and character which neither the world nor his art could efface" (24). In 1677, following the last of his "secular" plays, *Phaedra*, "Racine became reconciled with the Jansenists and their way became his" (Knapp 189). He returned "after a life of considerable worldliness, to the strictest forms of Jansenist Catholicism" (Clark 52). He wrote two more plays--*Esther* and *Athaliah*—which were Biblically based; these won Jansenist approval (Knapp 219). Racine died in the Jansenist fold.

How much of Racine's Jansenist background is reflected in his plays is a matter of debate. Vossler refers to Port-Royal as "Racine's spiritual family, his real paternal home. That is why his work is so closely tied to Port-Royal in tone and spirit" (109). Philip Yarrow is not willing to go so far: "The diversity of Racine's portrayal of human nature is a good reason for doubting whether his plays are, as has so often been asserted, imbued with Jansenism" (102). He offers his reasons for doubt. First, there is difficulty in defining Jansenists' views. Second, there is uncertainty as to whether the Port-Royal teachers "inculcated their theological views in their students." Third, Racine "always denied he was a Jansenist." In the fourth place, other views, as well as Jansenism, may have influenced the general pessimism reflected in his plays. Finally, it is difficult detecting Jansenism in his tragedies, *Phaedra* in particular (102).

Yarrow's arguments have their difficulties. First, the fundamental teachings of the Jansenists are not that hard to define. Yarrow does so

himself (24). Second, it is difficult to believe that a sect which faced so much opposition and persecution from established "orthodoxy" and which existed primarily as an opposing force to that which it deemed as a worldly force within the Catholic church (viz., the Probabilism and Pelagianism of the Jesuits) would NOT inculcate their theological views in their pupils. Third, Yarrow offers no evidence that Racine denied he was a Jansenist. Goldman states, "we shall see that on the literary and ideological plane the only really thorough-going Jansenists were Pascal and Racine" (18). Yarrow's fourth argument is really no argument. His fifth argument has some validity, but not without debate. In *The Hidden God* Lucien Goldman affirms and elucidates what he calls "the extremist position" of Jansenism, "such as it is expressed in *Phèdre* and in [Pascal's] *Pensées*" (55). Goldman's book is essentially a thesis on the relationship between Jansenism and the works of Racine and Pascal.

HIPPOLYTUS AND PHAEDRA

An examination of *Hippolytus* and *Phaedra* from a perspective of determinism should not be undertaken apart from a conscious awareness of several uncertainties: the exact nature of what each playwright believed, if they purposed to use these vehicles as expressions of their personal views, which character(s) (if any) represented these views, and if their worldview (especially determinism) could adequately be expressed through this medium. Determinism has always encountered the difficulty of expression in any medium, let alone the human moral tragedy. Some consider the juxtaposition of morality and determinism oxymoronic. The introduction of ONE act of morality, which necessarily presupposes free will, undermines the theory of determinism. This is true for both the theistic and naturalistic varieties. Realizing this, most determinists have "softened" their view to allow for free will within an overall context of determinism. But such a modification surrenders determinism to free will. Both *Hippolytus* and *Phaedra*, regardless of underlying presuppositions, expose sympathy for free will. The existential encounters the characters have with one another, themselves, and the gods are either real—thereby betraying determinism—or illusory. If the characters are symbolic representations of "real" life and they are living an illusion on the world stage of a mechanistic universe, then all of life is meaningless. But something gnaws at the human psyche saying this just is not so, and no one lives as if it is. If it is so, there is no way anyone could know. Determinism demands an epistemological agnosticism.

In the prologue of *Hippolytus* the goddess Aphrodite reveals her plans to avenge Hippolytus's rejection of her through his stepmother, Phaedra:

But for his sins against me, I will this very day take vengeance on Hippolytus; for long ago I cleared the ground of many obstacles [made plans]...Phaedra, his father's noble wife, caught sight of him, and by my designs she found her heart was seized with wild desire (11.14–20).²

The stage is set for the unfolding of the drama; the players are unaware of the plan predetermined in heaven. On either side of the stage are statues of the two opposing goddesses, Aphrodite and Artemis. They symbolize conflicting and controlling forces between which the players appear as pawns in the divine battle.

Hippolytus's "sins against" Aphrodite imply he could have done otherwise. "Sin" is a logically meaningless term if determinism is true. Likewise, for the gods to find "pleasure at the honour men pay them" (1.6) is ludicrous if men do not do so willfully (through self-determination). The seizing of Phaedra's heart by Aphrodite's "designs" need not be determinism in the traditional sense. It could be a manifestation of the power the gods (or forces of life, for the naturalist) have over men. Yahweh "hardened Pharaoh's heart" (Ex 9:12), but not before Pharaoh hardened his own heart (Ex 8:15, 32). Yahweh had the power to implement his designs and the foreknowledge to know when to implement them without violating man's free will (Ex 4:21).

Whether or not Phaedra could have rejected Aphrodite's designs is not the point. Hippolytus did. This would not be problematic for the Greek mind, which was unconcerned about the morality of their gods. The challenge to Yahweh's fairness or morality (as in the case with Pharaoh) arises only if one denies that Yahweh's predetermination follows his foreknowledge. If foreknowledge precedes, predetermination can be based upon self-determined decisions of men. In a deterministic world, morality is deprived of any practical significance. In a self-determined world, morality is not only practically significant, but it helps explicate the predetermining actions of an omniscient and omnipotent God, as in the Judeo-Christian context. But in the context of the Greek Pantheon, there is no need to explain the seeming contradiction between the "sin" of man and the "designs" of the gods.

Phaedra recognizes her incestuous love as her own sin (1.323), but her Nurse can declare, "the chaste have wicked passions, 'gainst their will maybe, but still they have" (1.357). Likewise, the Chorus—which has access to the mystery of heaven—describes Phaedra's heart as "cruelly afflicted by Aphrodite with unholy love" (11.754–755). Phaedra is Aphrodite's victim.

²References from *Hippolytus* taken from E. P. Coleridge's trans. in *The Complete Greek Drama, Vol. 1*. W. J. Oates and E. O'Neill, Jr. eds. New York: Random House, 1938.

Hippolytus unashamedly confesses his outright rejection of Aphrodite: "I greet her from afar, preserving still my chastity . . . No god, whose worship craves the night, hath charms for me [I have no love for]" (11.102, 106). He sees no sin in rejecting the goddess. As the curtain falls on his life as a judgment for his "sins" against Aphrodite, he recognizes his inevitable subjection to the gods and the worthlessness of his good works:

Great Zeus, dost thou see this? Me thy reverent worshipper, me who left all men behind in purity, plunged thus into yawning Hades 'neath the earth, reft of life; in vain the toils I have endured through my piety towards mankind (11.358–361).

It is left for Artemis to reveal the divine plan of the drama to the players. Hippolytus's father, who has engineered his son's destruction is informed of his wife's duplicity:

...she was cruelly stung with a passion for thy son by that goddess whom all we, that joy in virgin purity, detest...by no fault of hers she fell...she wrote a lying letter, destroying by guile thy son, but yet persuading thee (11.1303–1310).

This mixture of "by no fault of hers" and "by guile" is typical of deterministic confusion. The disposition of guile must be illusory for determinism to work. "Guile" disassociated from free moral decision and personal responsibility is feckless chatter.

Theseus himself was guilty for having "slain [his] son most impiously" (1.1277). Yet he is rescued from his "awful deed" by divine pardon, "for it was Cypris [Aphrodite] that would have it so [i.e., willed this all to happen]" (11.1324–1325). Because of his "ignorance" he is absolved (11.1328–1329). Again, the ideas of "pardon" and "absolution" are inconsonant with deterministic presuppositions.

As for Hippolytus, it was his "noble soul" that destroyed him (1.1371). When he is enlightened as to Aphrodite's role in his demise (1.1401), he confesses man's subjection to the power of the gods: "O that the race of men could bring a curse upon the gods!" (1.1415).

Artemis states the thesis of Euripides's *Hippolytus*: "men may well commit an error when gods put it in their way" (1.1428). Vellacott's translation does less to soften the deterministic element: "men may well sin, When the gods so ordain" (70). Are the gods responsible for sin? Then human guilt, impiety, and free will are existential illusions. Man is the victim of a cruel cosmic hoax. Is man responsible for sin? Then determinism is a theoretical illusion. The gods are the scapegoats of a deluded terrestrial fantasy.

to bow the knee at the altar of her desires. "Fate intervened . . . Venus fastened on her helpless prey" (1.3.328, 333). She hates her sin, her life. Death alone offers deliverance (1.3.334–336).

Scenes four and five of this same act reveal the supposed death of her husband, Theseus. This invites hidden justification for her sin and the opportunity to legitimately carry out her desires. Phaedra is now willing to soil her hands.

A confession spiced with self-condemnation and self-justification is the means through which she reveals her love to Hippolytus:

I love; but do not think that I condone it,
Or think it innocent; nor that I ever
With base complaisance added to the poison
Of my mad passion. Hapless victim of
Celestial vengeance. I abhor myself
More than you can. The gods are witnesses—
Those gods who kindled in my breast the flame
Fatal to all my blood, whose cruel boast
Was to seduce a weak and mortal heart (2.5.329–337).

Her love is something that is out of her control; she is the helpless victim of the gods. In a grandstand play to "expiate" this sin of her weak, seduced heart she pleads for Hippolytus to kill her. He will not, she tries and is (conveniently) stopped by her nurse (2.5.360–369). Hippolytus characteristically flees.

Against Oenone's (her nurse) advice, Phaedra plunges into an unbridled pursuit of Hippolytus's heart: "All your counsels now [a]re out of season. Serve my passion, Oenone, [a]nd not my reason" (3.1.62–64). The breach between passion and reason, sin and righteousness widens. She prays to Venus for Hippolytus's love. But Theseus lives! She's back to prayer, again for death. Yet another plot, now to frame Hippolytus. The best defense is a good offense! (3.3).

Phaedra discovers that Hippolytus *is* in love, but with another. She is coming undone, plummeting even deeper into sin as she contemplates the murder of her rival. Her sins make her hair stand on end; they "have overflowed the measure." She breathes "the stench of incest and deceit." Her "murderous hands, all apt for vengeance, burn to plunge in innocent blood!" (4.6.287–291). Appropriately, she has a vision of her judgment in Hell (4.6.292–310). Is this the justified consequence of her self-determined sins or the predetermined destiny from a cruel god? Others live under god's protection and grace. Has she been denied his grace only to find his wrath?

As self-inflicted death approaches, Phaedra confesses to her husband to clear the name of the now dead Hippolytus: "The heavens

[p]ut in my breast that fatal spark—the rest [w]as undertaken by the vile Oenone...Relying on my utter weakness" (5.7.319–324).

Was Phaedra a villain or a victim? Did "the stench of incest" emanate from her heart or from heaven? Was her heavenward blame-shifting a psychological safeguard against the unpalatability of her own self-determined thoughts and actions or a literary expression of Racine's theological determinism?

If it could be demonstrated that both Euripides and Racine were committed determinists in theory, it remains that either were so in practice. Such is true for all determinists. No rationalist ever lived his life in an *a priori* vacuum of first principles; no empiricist ever lived his life in an *a posteriori* vacuum of sense experience. The determinist cannot deny the empirical reality of the experience of his sin. The self-determinist cannot deny the rational reality of a first principle superimposed over the world of his existential experience. Man will sin, God will ordain.

Outline

Thesis sentence: If a deterministic presupposition underlies the tragedies *Hippolytus* by Euripides and *Phaedra* by Jean Racine, both works serve to demonstrate that such a worldview is unlivable.

- I. Determinism is a worldview which states that every event (including human action) is predetermined and therefore could not have happened other than it did.
 - A. There are two basic types of determinism.
 - 1 Naturalistic determinism defines predetermining causes in mechanistic terms.
 - 2 Theistic determinism defines predetermining causes in metaphysical terms.
 - B. There are two basic opposing views to determinism.
 - 1 Indeterminism denies that there are any causes for events.
 - 2 Self-determinism (with particular reference to human action) teaches that the individual has "free will" and is the cause of his own action.
- II. Determinism was a worldview prevalent in the ages of Euripides and Jean Racine.
 - A. Determinism in the age of Euripides was not clearly defined.
 - 1 It is debated whether Euripides was an atheist or a modern theologian.
 - 2 Euripides was a student of both deterministic and "free will" thinkers.
 - 3 There is a deterministic element in *Hippolytus*.
 - B. Determinism in the age of Racine was more clearly defined.

- 1 Jansenism was a deterministic movement within the Roman Catholic church standing off against Jesuit "Probabilism" and "Pelagianism."
 - 2 Jansenism was essentially "Calvinistic Catholicism."
 - 3 Racine was raised and educated in the Port-Royal convent, which was the center of Jansenism.
 - 4 There is a debate as to the amount of influence Jansenism had on Racine and his plays, but the evidence favors that he was a thoroughgoing Jansenist.
- III. Determinism is reflected in both *Hippolytus* and *Phaedra*, but both works also reveal sympathy for self-determinism.
- A. In *Hippolytus* the confusion of predetermination and "sin" is intensified as Euripides allows the audience to look into heaven.
 - 1 Hippolytus's "sins against" Aphrodite undermine the deterministic presupposition.
 - 2 Phaedra's sins are existentially real to her, but other characters assign the blame to the gods.
 - 3 The goddess Artemis reveals the divine origin of this tragedy to the players, but adds to the confusion by recognizing their "sin" while referring to the predetermined plan of the gods.
 - B. In *Phaedra* the confusion of predetermination and "sin" is personified as Racine allows the audience to look into the mind of Phaedra.
 1. She is overcome by her sin, yet she blames the gods for her desires.
 2. She feels a sense of helplessness and hopelessness in light of the inevitability of her sin.
 3. When given the right opportunity, she abandons herself to her desires.
 4. When her passions are frustrated, she is consumed by sinful measures to defend herself.
 5. In the ultimate expression of her sin, she takes her life while still assigning responsibility to the gods.

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