



University of Missouri

# ARTIFACTS

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## A Conscious Universe

Sean Donovan

**Sean Donovan is a sophomore biology major from Wildwood, Missouri. He chose to write *A Conscious Universe* out of interest in the reoccurring concept of fate and divine predestination in the works of the Middle Ages. Not being a believer in such concepts himself, he specifically wanted to explore some of the reasons that might account for their prevalence, not only in the medieval period, but in our own time period as well.**

A grand plan, guiding individual lives along a predetermined string, a string that is unable to be deviated from. It has been called many things, 'destiny', 'god's will', 'determinism', and 'fate' among them. While its names and specific parameters vary, a universal concept unites all these disparate ideas. That of a conscious, personal force that guides the workings of the universe for some purpose, no matter how incomprehensible that purpose may be. This concept has reappeared throughout human works of all time periods and regions, and the medieval Middle East and Europe are certainly no exceptions.

Why is this idea so prominent and reoccurring throughout the history of abstract human thought? And what truly distinguishes it from its supposed polar opposite, random chance? In reality, this universal idea is much more subtle than it may initially appear. As illuminated by Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, *The Song of Roland*, and Usama's *Book of Contemplation*, the conscious universe of fate is distinguished from the random universe by the effect it has on people's comfort, rather than what it actually implies. Fate's reoccurring presence throughout the works of the Middle Ages also illuminates humanity's universal feeling of comfort in a familiar, conscious force over a perceived chaotic world.

The idea of a universal guiding force to human lives is certainly not static, and several different variations of the concept have appeared just in the works of the early Middle Ages. In Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, the idea of God's unfaltering will and personal plan for an individual pervades Augustine's recollection and analysis of his life. Whenever Augustine is one the verge of considering Christianity, God chooses to keep the light from him for a time, and whenever he succumbs to his inner desires, sinking into sin, God decides to refrain from pulling him up until his time has come.

Regardless of the path his life takes, Augustine holds devoutly to his faith in a guiding hand, such as when he professes, "You my God, brought that about. 'For the steps of man are directed by the Lord,

and he chooses his way' (Ps 36: 23). How can salvation be attained excepted through your hand remaking what was once made?" (Augustine, 1991, p. 80), praising God for the guidance of his life. Augustine holds to this faith even when recalling his darkest and most sinful moments, praising God's perfect timing in determining when to lift him up and when to let him continue to falter.

However, the truly telling question is: would there ever be a time or event in his life Augustine does not attribute the conscious guiding force of God? By and large, it seems unlikely, for as the above quote implies, Augustine attributes every turn, tragic or exalting, to God's plan. Needless to say, this worldview brings immense comfort to Augustine in his later life, as revealed when he beseeches "O Lord our God, under the covering of your wings we set our hope. Protect us and bear us up. It is you who will carry us... When you are our firm support, it is form indeed. But when our support rests on our own strength, it is infirmity" (Augustine, 1991, p. 71).

Thus, Augustine relates the great comfort in the notion of a guiding power outside oneself, to which one can relinquish all fundamental control of one's life. Through Augustine's *Confessions*, one can get a glimpse of the comforting and satisfying effect that the view of a guiding force can have on a person.

The concept of a guided universe does not stop on the personal level, as revealed through the perspective of the Franks in *The Song of Roland*. Attributing a significant part of the Frank's victory to God's wishes, the poet remarks how, "The pagans turn tail, God does not want them to remain . . . The pagans flee as the Lord God wishes it" (pp. 3623-3625). The very action of entire opposing armies is attributed to God, and his personal will that directs human actions. Even more telling, however, is the value the Franks place on this view, as revealed through their portrayal of their enemies, who they condemn as "pagans." After their humiliating defeat, the "pagans," enraged, tear down the statues of their gods, cursing them for failing their army.

Truly, it seems only the human thing to do after someone betrays or fails one's people. Yet the Franks condemn such actions, as evident by these actions being attributed to their sworn enemies, the ones incessantly condemned as barbarians and heathens throughout the poem. The Franks despise and fear the notion of limited, non-omnipotent gods, for there's no true security to be found in a world where the gods themselves can fail. Thus, the Franks cast this fear on to their natural enemies, regardless of what religion they might actually be. Fearing such a worldview enough to condemn it such as they do, the Franks inadvertently reveal the immense benefit that the notion of a stable, all powerful god must have on their society.

Even when journeying to a different region, among people following a different religion, this preference certainly doesn't change. Usama's philosophy on God's will, however, is very different from the preceding views, and is not the warmly personal guidance that was present in *Confessions*. In *The Book of Contemplations*, Usama paints a picture of God's will, which he calls fate, as something that is fundamentally unpredictable, inexplicable, and completely unchangeable. Through this lens of fate, Usama observes, and attempts to justify the myriad inexplicable events and bizarre coincidences that he has observed and experienced throughout his life.

Why should one man survive a spear thrust through the chest while another man dies from a needle prick? Fate. How could a man survive hundreds of horrendous battles only to die, unexpectedly, in his

sleep? Fate, the incomprehensible working of God's written law, the law that no one can ultimately escape. Also unlike Augustine, Usama never portrays this will of God as a personal or preferential will, but a pre-written will, equally incomprehensible for everyone. For instance, when a man removed from a battle, yet struck on the arm by an arrow, dies later in his house, Usama insists, "This had all happened to him simply because his time had come" (Mundiqh, p. 59), attributing all to God's incomprehensible will. Essentially, this view is justified by the real, chaotic nature of the world and society that Usama was born into. Just as Usama lives in an utterly unstable world of constant political conflict, warfare, and death, he formulates a worldview that explains and provides a cosmic justification for this chaos. Regardless of how bizarre the occasion, Usama rarely fails to conclude without proclaiming, "Exalted thus is God, who accomplishes his will how he wills it!" (Mundiqh, p. 81), consistently attributing a plan to what he witnesses. Yet, never does Usama let this concept affect his faith in a personal and omnipotent god. In fact, rather than letting his view on the erroneous events of the world define his worldview, he adapts them to fit his already existing view of a conscious force governing the universe. The chaotic world then becomes a little more comforting and welcome, as all events are the result of a plan, no matter how incomprehensible that plan may be.

In all of these works, no matter how different the ideas of fate are, they are always absolute, and nothing that happens will or could ever be against fate, for it is impossible to go against fate. Thus, everything that happens is because of fate, and everything that happens conforms perfectly to God's will, no matter how unusual or unexpected it may seem. Augustine never questions whether his life could have turned out a different way, and the Franks in *The Song of Roland* never question the fall of either army as the "pagans" do. In *The Book of Contemplation*, fate is certainly never questioned, as fate is simply defined by the events of the world. So the world turns out the way it will turn out, after all, it was God's will. Yet if the world just turns out the way the world turns out, this is essentially, by definition, the same concept as indifferent chance. Yet this view is never taken, and the events of the world always remain attributed to a personal, even if vaguely personal, will.

Because this viewpoint is never taken, it becomes clear that the proper language and frame of mind is much more important in the medieval society than the logical reality of the matter. The tendency to anthropomorphize the workings of the universe, through the proper word choice and mind set, becomes the accepted, and only accepted, trend. After all, it tends to be much more comforting to view the workings of the world in a familiar, personal light, especially one that implies some sort of underlying order to the chaos, no matter how subtle and indistinguishable that order is. While certainly not unique to this time period, the effectiveness of this comfort can be seen very easily in the time of the Middle Ages. Amid the incessant political turmoil, warfare, and lack of unified political structure, it becomes only natural for people to turn to a philosophy and worldview that provides a satisfying assurance that there is an underlying form to it all. Whether in the personal guiding hand of an individual as in *Confessions*, or the preference to one army over another in *The Song of Roland*, this form is manifest and obvious. However, it is in *The Book of Contemplation* where one can get a glimpse of what this form actually looks like when any preference to an individual or group is stripped away, and what it looks like is a lot like chance. Thus, it becomes not the actual nature of the form that is essential, but the existence, in principle, of that form.

While it is understandable that a world and society would turn to a personally comforting concept such as fate in the face of such conflict and disorder, it is reasonable to conclude that fate is just that, a comforting concept. The argument between determinism and free will has raged through human history even into the present day, but the two concepts have proven too abstract for any definitive conclusion. Because of this, our lives remain unaffected by the argument, and thus the true difference between fate and free will lies trapped within the realm of abstract thought, as it always will. For while the word 'fate' can evoke great comfort in one who believes in and accepts it, it is, at its basic level, a word defined only by the value we place on it. Thus, it seems, as it frequently does, that it is our perspective on a word, and the subtle, satisfying ideas we associate with that word, which truly form its significance and the role it plays in our world.

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