

6 Destiny as a Relationship and a Theory

SAMULI SCHIELKE

First Fragment: The Inevitable Hour of Death

At the end of June 2019, I travelled to Vienna, the hometown of my late wife Daniela Swarowsky. She had died in Berlin on the first morning of June after being sick with breast cancer for four and half years. I needed to sort out the furnished apartment that she had left behind in her hometown, but I ended up spending more of my time meeting her friends and family. Other friends in Vienna had recently lost close ones, too. Death was a frequent topic of discussion.

At a dinner with friends and relatives, somebody spoke about the illness and death of a close relative of hers, and then asserted that the date of death of each one of us is irrevocably fixed by the time of our birth. Others present expressed agreement with the idea. This was a gathering of a highly educated urban bourgeois, Catholic Christian to post-Christian, ethnic Austrian circle, that is, a place and people rather more associated with liberal values such as self-determination, individuality, and free choice. The same people who agreed about the pre-determined hour of our death had just spoken at length about their choices of diet, expressed care for their bodily health and longevity, and acted as if they had a choice on such matters.

But this tension did not disturb people at the dinner. In fact, I have found that entertaining both ideas at the same time is quite widespread among people like me – highly educated white people from Europe. It is not a contradiction in need for a solution, but a fluctuating, ambiguous coexistence of different understandings about life and death.

It should come as no surprise that societies in which liberal values have currency are not consistently liberal (just as it should not surprise anybody that societies where Islamic values have currency are not consistently Islamic).¹ This echoes Michael Jackson's argument (in this

volume) that it is an “illusion” to think that “forms of being correspond with forms of thought.” On a conceptual plane, liberal political theory and ethics and various Christian and Muslim theologies may seem incommensurable. And yet diet choices for a longer life and faith in the predestined hour of one’s death can easily coexist in one society, in one person’s life, and in one dinner table conversation because both make specific sense as cultivated attitudes towards living. It makes sense to take care of one’s health, the more so in a society and social class where advances in medicine and a high standard of living have made longevity a normal expectation. And it also make sense to understand death and its timing as something that is ultimately not in our hands, the more so in a world where we in spite of all advantages do not know how long we will live, what will eventually kill us, and when.

Such coexistence of different, at times conflicting values and ideas is quite unremarkable and often unproblematic. This might thus be the end of the story if it weren’t for a drama that is remarkable indeed, and that does repeatedly generate problems that humans need to deal with in one way or another.

It is the drama of acting while being acted upon that was so pointedly described by Michael Jackson in his 2005 book *Existential Anthropology*. That drama stands at the heart of many moral dilemmas in which the monotheistic God of the Bible and the Qur’an is involved.² On the one hand, the monotheist God is omnipotent and already knows what we will do and what will happen to us. On the other hand, He holds us responsible for what we do and will reward and punish us according to our choices. Sunni Muslim theology has come up with an interesting and remarkably existentialist rendering of this drama (though definitely not on the atheistic terms of Sartre’s existentialism), to which I will devote more detailed attention next. That rendering provides many people I know a compelling way to live the drama (which is not the same as solving it) – destiny.

Interlude in Place of an Introduction

Destiny is a relationship humans cultivate with superhuman actors and powers. At the same time, it is a theory of human action and its limits that may be true in an existential sense. To think about one’s condition and trajectory in terms of destiny is to recognize that humans can have power over their condition only in accordance and alliance with powerful others. What kinds of power relations, or “relationship power,” do humans and the superhuman authors of their destiny craft? What does the tension between responsibility and inevitability that destiny

thrives on teach us about the possibility of acting in the world? Much like our knowledge of our lives, my account in this essay is fragmentary. Instead of a straightforward argument that would lead from an introduction to a conclusion, I sketch four fragments (two of which are based on previous publications)³ that draw upon my own biography, my fieldwork in Egypt and engagement with Sunni Muslim theologies, comparative anthropologies of destiny, and popular cultures.

The first fragment set the scene for the very ordinary yet compelling drama of acting and being acted upon that stories of destiny tell about. In the *second* and longest *fragment* that will now follow, I engage with lived Sunni Muslim theologies of destiny and argue that the intertwining of predestination and responsibility is a useful starting point for an existential anthropology that also has an eye for political economy and accounts for ecologies of livelihood and relations of power – importantly including power relations with God. By thinking of destiny as a relationship in the *third fragment*, I follow a lead offered by Robert Orsi (2005) to think of specific relationships between “heaven and earth,” between humans and superhuman beings, rather than religion and religions (I have elaborated this thought in Schielke 2019). Relationships that humans build with God, gods, saints, and leaders are existential and political in the same instance. They are intimate relations of power that allow humans to deal with urgencies, find answers to problems that move them – and that at the same time impose upon humans certain solutions and answers rather than others. By relating destiny with the popular cultural genres of tragedy and happy endings in the *fourth fragment*, I suggest that destiny as a relationship and a theory thrives on an ambiguity that ought not to be resolved: it tells *both* about the “ethical negotiability in our relationship with life” evoked by Michael Jackson in this book, *as well* as life’s non-negotiable hard limits: things over which we have no power, consequences that we cannot reverse, and the inevitable prospect of death.

Second Fragment: Did God Bring Down the Regime?

My first encounter with the Sunni Muslim theology of destiny took place almost thirty years ago, sometime in early December 1991. I was hitchhiking across Tunisia on a trip that would later inspire me to start studying Arabic and eventually to become an anthropologist. But I had no idea of that then. I was nineteen and enjoyed the first-world privilege of aimless travel for leisure and discovery. One day, I arrived in a village in central Tunisia, the name of which I no longer remember, and met two men of my age. They invited me to a drink in the car repair

workshop of a friend of theirs. They brought beer and I had whisky in my backpack. Soon we were drunk. Before I realized, we were seated in an old half-broken car and were driving out of the village. My hosts had decided to take a joyride. The driver was so drunk that he had to stop the car to get out and vomit, while I loudly protested and demanded that somebody else should drive and that we should return to the village immediately. The others were not worried. “He’s a good driver,” they told me. When I continued protesting, one of them argued that as a Muslim, he has faith that the hour of our death is predestined by God, and we cannot change it. I found the claim badly out of place: “But your religion also forbids alcohol! Don’t talk to me about Islam when we’re all drunk.” We did return safely to the village. The predestined hour had not yet come. I felt that I had been smarter than them, but in hindsight I feel rather embarrassed about the confident ignorance of my younger self.

Many years later I understood that destiny is religious in a rather different way than prayers, rituals, prohibitions, and ethical aims are. There was nothing strange at all about my hosts trusting in God while drinking and driving. Yes, most Muslims I know would agree that drinking is *haram*, prohibited. Yes, drinking and driving certainly is reckless and dangerous. And yes, this did not in any way lessen the anticipation that the hour of our death is indeed predetermined by God.

Luca Nevola (2015), who has written about ideas of destiny and choice in northern Yemen, argues that ethical and normative aspects of religious life are, in the terminology of Clifford Geertz (1973), “models for”: they tell us how people ideally should be, and they may be considered as true also when nobody lives by them – or more likely, when many people live by them in a partial fashion (something I have written about in Schielke 2015). Destiny, in contrast, says Nevola, is a “model of,” a theory of how the universe works for the faithful and the infidels, the righteous and the wrongdoers alike.

In Egypt, where I have spent many years of fieldwork, destiny is the most accessible theory to account for the uncertainty about the outcomes of an action. Various Christian and Islamic theories of destiny are current in Egypt, but for my purposes, I focus on one very influential Islamic theory. Sunni Muslim theologies of destiny (*qadar*; Shia Muslim theologies have a different take, see Nevola 2018) are grounded in the numerous Qur’anic assertions about God’s omnipotence, all things in the universe happening through God’s will and foresight, irrevocably written (*maktub*) by God at the beginning of time. At a first glance, destiny might seem to be not a theory of action at all, since it might be understood as attributing all power to God and none to humans.

However, the more specific vocabulary of destiny, the way people employ the notion in their lives, and the way it has been developed by Muslim theologians all tell a different story.

To start with, destiny has different aspects. There are absolute aspects, such as *qada'*, or "fate," the written hour of one's death, which one can neither know nor change. There are more pragmatic aspects like *nasib*, or "fortune," which one cannot plan but can and should make do with (*yitsarrafa*) in order to make the best of it. More important, people I know speak about destiny but at the same time consider themselves and one another to be responsible agents who can and should be advised, helped, hindered, thanked, or blamed. Knowing that one's date of death is irrevocably written does not hinder one from searching out all possible medical and spiritual aid in the case of illness, for example. God willing, it may help. Knowing that God alone knows whether one's search for success and fortune is successful does not prevent one from searching – on the contrary, it can motivate one to search for success, to be prepared for surprises, and to pray for God's help while doing so (Gaibazzi 2015).

In principle, everything that happens is destiny written by God. But in practice people I know do not apply destiny consistently as a general rule but rather in a more specific manner and with a specific intention. It can mean praying that the will of God is on the side of one's plans. It can mean searching for one's fortune while acknowledging that God alone knows whether and where one will find it. It can mean taking risks, including reckless ones such as drinking and driving. It can mean encouraging people to accept a life of poverty and oppression as the will of God. It can mean insisting on a struggle for a better world because God has promised that it will be victorious.

The way destiny is used in everyday speech, it emerges as one of the two key elements of a partly explicit, partly implicit theory of action and consequences in which the notions of freedom (or human power) and destiny (or divine power) can be drawn upon for different uses and situations. Freedom is not the same as agency in this context; rather freedom and destiny are both parts of a wider notion of what for the lack of a better term can be called agency, in the sense of having the power to make a difference. Destiny implies that such power is God's, but it may be embodied and exerted by humans.⁴ Destiny, therefore, does not exclude freedom. To speak of freedom, choice, responsibility, and human power is to say that decisions must be made, things changed, action taken. To speak about destiny, fortune, and the will of God is to say that greater powers are at play, that after one has done what one can, the further course of things is beyond one's power, or

that contentedness with one's share is the proper attitude to cultivate. However, the evocation of destiny usually also involves taking action, often phrased with the word *yitsarrafa*, "to make the best out of one's circumstances."

Most of the time, people I know refer to freedom and destiny separately, shifting seamlessly between one and the other, depending on what they want to emphasize. But occasionally, they take the time to sit down and debate how exactly the two come together. (Such conversations that I have been invited to join have been a key site of learning for me, much more in fact than interviews could ever be, providing a productive intersection of fieldwork-based anthropology and theoretical reflection by non-experts.)⁵ Sometimes they do so in situations where the moral tension between one's own powers and greater powers becomes too troubling to overlook, and one has to reflect about their relation in more detail. Sometimes they also do so because of the pleasure involved in an intricate theological and philosophical debate. And sometimes they address the relationship of destiny and freedom with a political intention.

In the summer of 2011, when freedom was the talk of the day in Egypt, Safwat Hegazy, a leading figure in the Muslim Brotherhood, coined the slogan "God alone brought down the system." According to Hegazy, Egyptians went to the streets to protest not out of their own accord but by the power of God. The rhetorical intention of this slogan was that if the revolution was the will of God, then Egypt's political future must be Islamic (it was explained to me in exactly this way by an Islamist sympathizer at a demonstration on Tahrir Square in the autumn of 2011). Shady, an active supporter of continuing revolution from a village in the northern Nile Delta, socialist by conviction and a firm opponent of Islamist movements, unsurprisingly did not agree with Safwat Hegazy. But he could not simply ignore his claim, because he, too, believed that the revolution was the will of God. But he had a different theory.

Shady and I met in a café in Alexandria on 10 October 2011, one day after the massacre at Maspero during which the Egyptian army killed almost thirty mainly Christian protesters and then blamed them for attacking the army. Shady and I were in a gloomy mood, and Shady explained to me that, in his view, the revolution had failed, nothing good was to be expected from either the army or the Islamists, and the liberal and leftist revolutionary current was not able to contest the power of religious political discourse. Only when he started reminiscing about the first days of the revolution did his tone change. No matter how bleak the situation appeared to us then, those first days had been the happiest

moments of his life. He started to reminisce about some narrow escapes from death, injury, and arrest:

I lived, and for me the fact that I lived means that I'm not done, that I have a mission [*risala*] to complete. The protests on January 25 began with a shared sentiment of us all being so upset that we were ready to die. When we decided to go to protest on the Twenty-fifth, each of us felt that we were alone. But we became hundreds, then thousands. After feeling powerless and alone, we felt a sense of power in the moment when we were able to do something together. The Muslim Brothers claim that God moved the revolutionaries in spite of themselves [*ghasban 'anhum*]. But that's not true. We did it ourselves, with the will of God [*bi-mashi'at Allah*]. From my religious belief, I believe that everything that happens to me is written. What happens to me is destiny determined by God. But it doesn't mean that I'm not free. It's like in the script of a film. When you watch a film, you don't think that the characters just do what is written in the script: you see them acting in freedom, making choices, turning left or right. God is the director, but the characters act their roles in freedom. I don't know what my destiny is. I fulfil it without knowing what it will be.

Shady did not invent this theory himself. It is a theory with a remarkable history that goes back to debates among early scholars of Islam about whether humans are capable of choice (*mukhayyar*) or are predestined (*musayyar*). The canonical sources of Islam do not offer a univocal answer. The Qur'an explicitly and repeatedly states that everything happens by the will of God, and God alone makes people believers and infidels. The Qur'an also explicitly and repeatedly addresses believers and infidels alike as agents who can make up their minds, decide and act accordingly, and are held accountable for their deeds. This coexistence of two contrary claims by God Himself about divine and human agency has invited different interpretations among Muslim specialists and non-specialists alike. The best-remembered (although in the end not victorious) party in this debate was the intellectual movement of the Mu'tazila (from the second to fourth century after Hijra), who favoured a rationalist approach, argued that predestination contradicts moral responsibility and divine justice, and came to the conclusion that humans were free and not predestined (Vasalou 2008). The Mu'tazila continue to inspire intellectuals who search for alternative formulations of an Islamic faith. But a different theory eventually became the standard view of freedom and destiny. It is associated with Imam Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari (d. 324 AH/CE 936) the founding figure of the Ash'arite school of theology, which marked a departure from the rationalist tendencies

of earlier centuries (Griffel 2009, 124–8). According to al-Ash'ari, humans acquire (*kasb* is the theological concept) the deeds which God has created for them:

Some have said: The meaning that the Creator creates is that the action took place with infinitely pre-existent power-to-act (*qudra qadima*), and only the Creator acts with infinitely pre-existent power-to-act. And the meaning of acquisition (*kasb*) is that the action takes place through a temporarily actualised power-to-act (*qudra muhdatha*). For who accomplishes an act with infinitely pre-existent power-to-act is a Creator-agent, and who accomplishes an act with temporarily actualised power is an acquirer (*muktasib*); and this is said by the people of truth. (al-Ash'ari 1980, 538–9)

In other words, humans are *both* capable of choice and predestined. We fulfil our written destiny in freedom. From a philosophical and logical point of view, it could be argued that while the Mu'tazilite theory is sound, the Ash'arite theory is unsound because it does not solve the paradox of reward and punishment in a world where one could not have acted otherwise. And yet the logical contradiction of the Ash'arite theory should not make us overlook its existential truth.

From an existential point of view, the contradiction at the heart of Ash'arite theology is a productive one because it describes what it means to act out of one's own accord in a world that is not of one's own making and in which one does not have the power to determine the premises and consequences of one's actions. From the worshipper's point of view, it therefore allows one to evoke the power of God in two different capacities at the same time. This was very pronounced in an interview Mukhtar Saad Shehata and I conducted in the autumn of 2011 with Hajja Z., a woman in her late fifties from a village in the northern Nile Delta. The topic of the interview was the recent revolution, which she had wholeheartedly supported. Her sympathies were with Islamist movements, but she also had misgivings about them, and she was angry about the many blatant injustices she was perceiving. She concluded her speech in a preaching tone:

Z: So if I had the means to go to that square, or if it were close to me, or if somebody could take me there, I would have joined them, because I believe that our sublime and exalted Lord *does not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves*.⁶ So if I [unclear]; what happens is that we escape from God's predestined decree to God's predestined decree (*min qada' illah li-qada' illah*) [meaning that an attempt to escape one's

destiny eventually results in the realization of one's destiny]. If I'm inside the house, it will also hit me. But I do something I can meet God with, that I can say to Him: I did, oh Lord. All I did was praying (*bad'i*) to Him, I was standing in front of them [meaning the demonstrators she saw on television]; changing and switching channels on television.

...

Mukhtar: Last word, Hajja. How do you see tomorrow?

Z: Tomorrow will be good, God willing (*in sha' Allah*), with the commandment of God (*bi-amr illah*) because He commands. Our sublime and exalted Lord, the hearts of the people are pure. You say: Oh Lord! It will not make you shy, Mukhtar. Our sublime and exalted Lord will not let anyone go to waste. ... I say to our Lord: Oh Lord, let everyone find their conscience and know that they stand in front of a Generous Lord, [the pitch of her voice increases and she raises her hand for emphasis] and they will be alone in the grave, and they will be questioned! There will be a day when they stand alone in isolation and darkness; nobody will stand by them, and no money and nothing else will work. And nobody will get more than is written (*maktub*) for them.

Hajja Z. did not try to elaborate how exactly predestination and responsibility go together. Instead, she evoked God as a constitutive third party of relations among humans in both capacities: as the Creator and the Protector who gives people only what He has written for them and protects them from being lost; and as the Judge and the Witness (all these are among the ninety-nine canonical names of God) who expects people to change themselves first and who will hold people accountable for their choices and judge them accordingly. Furthermore, her focus on justice, responsibility, and destiny reminds us that addressing God is usually not about establishing coherence (which it might be if she had tried to formulate a correct doctrinal understanding of what is and what is not justice, or how exactly responsibility and predestination come together), but about getting to the point, and firmly so.

In an earlier version of this fragment published in my book *Egypt in the Future Tense* (Schielke 2015, 220–3), I went on to propose that the Ash'arite theology of the power to act could also be made work without God; it can be formulated as a theory of acts and consequences, where every act is part of an immense chain of acts and consequences that may be called destiny. One does not have to believe that an omnipotent God has written our destiny for us to consider Ash'ari's proposition a useful existential theory of human action. In a materialistic reading of al-Ash'ari's theistic theory, destiny would be simply the sum of all consequences. We "acquire" the "temporarily actualised power to act"

(to follow al-Ash'ari's terminology) while the reality from which our acts arise (and to which they contribute) is not our own creation.

But that would go against the grain of Hajja Z.'s point. The Ash'arite theology of the power to act is not about consequences; it is about God and humans. What makes it attractive is that God wants and plans it to happen, and yet He gives humans the freedom and responsibility to do it themselves, according to His plan. Egyptians who spoke to me about destiny were not just reflecting about inevitable consequences, but about God having written their life with a purpose and intention in His masterpiece. It is a masterpiece with some inevitable tragic turns but eventually, it shall have a happy end if you play well the role which God has written for you.

Predestination and responsibility are equally compelling ways to act and to judge the actions of oneself and others. Al-Ash'ari's theology of human and divine power to act is a complex intellectual justification for what Hajja Z. did in more straightforward terms: claiming both at once. Few people try to consistently think about the link between the two, however, because to do so is seldom helpful and potentially unsettling.

For some years, Shady was among those few. Around 2011, Shady was taking up the issue of destiny frequently and with various people. He had a political reason to do so. He insisted that we should be consistent about the unity of destiny and freedom: The revolution was the will of God, but so was the Mubarak regime. If we thank God for the fact that somebody is a Muslim, we should also thank God for the fact that somebody is a Christian or an atheist. We are taught to accept poverty and oppression as God-given destiny, but when we struggle to change those things, we do so with the will of God. Underlying Shady's insistence on consistency regarding destiny was, not surprisingly, a revolutionary politics of freedom – a politics that, according to Shady, was a mission, a destiny written for him.

Eventually, Shady's strive for consistency inspired him to think altogether differently about the relationship between humans and God. When I met him in Cairo in 2019, he was no longer interested in the topic of destiny. Years after the successful consolidation of a new military regime in Egypt, there was not much to say about revolution either. He had other worries. He was a successful graduate student of management in a public university now, but his progress was slowed down by a chronic and life-threatening illness that required regular and arduous treatment. Many people find in illness an urgent cause to engage with God and the afterworld, but Shady had done the opposite. "My paradise is here," he said, taking distance from dreams of migration to metaphorical paradises abroad as well as from the promise of Paradise

in life after death. We took a walk through an old quarter spotted with numerous Muslim pilgrimage sites where I had conducted my PhD fieldwork in the early 2000s. I was happy to see those places again after years of absence, but he was quite uninterested in the Islamic history of Egypt. He found Pharaonic history more authentic and inspiring. In a matter-of-fact tone he described the monotheist God as “a human artefact” and moved on to other topics of discussion.

Third Fragment: Was the Moment Structured That Way?

It is possible to imagine a destiny that is not a relationship but instead a deterministic causal chain that writes itself without intervention by powerful others. Kurt Vonnegut ([1969] 1979) did so in his novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* about the firebombing of Dresden, which he witnessed as a young prisoner of war. The protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, travels in time between World War II, a postwar American present, and a near future. At one occasion, aliens from Tralfamadore abduct him. Tralfamadoreans do not experience time the way humans do. They know past, present, and future at once, and yet they feel no anxiety or futility about knowing, for example, that the entire universe will eventually be destroyed by one of their scientific experiments:

“If you know this,” said Billy, “isn’t there some way you can prevent it? Can’t you keep the pilot from pressing the button?”

“He has always pressed it, and he always will. We always let him and we always will let him. The moment is structured that way.” (Vonnegut [1969] 1979, 80)

The paradoxically comforting determinism of the novel does not, however, prevent Vonnegut (who appears as himself, the author, in the novel) from giving some very direct moral advice as if it were possible to choose:

I have told my sons that they are not under any circumstances to take part in massacres, and that the news of massacres of enemies is not to fill them with satisfaction or glee. I have also told them not to work for companies which make massacre machinery, and to express contempt for people who think we need machinery like that. (Vonnegut [1969] 1979, 20)

Destiny tells us to accept that the course of important events is decided independently of what we want or choose. It also tells us that we need to act to make it happen, to inhabit that which will happen,

and perhaps to manipulate or change it to our advantage. This “malleable fixity” (Menin and Elliot 2018) has made destiny an extraordinarily helpful idea for humans to find their way in a life that they live but do not own. But one rarely encounters people who express faith in a blind, meaningless destiny in the fashion of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Humans around the world trust in God or gods, search for clues about their fate in divinatory techniques, and have faith in destiny-like historical forces such as progress, class struggle, or the market. Sometimes they insist that our own choices matter. The Tralfamadorians’ recognition that “the moment is structured that way” is fundamentally less satisfying as an answer although I personally find it more likely to be true.

For most humans around the globe, destiny is not about a deterministic universe blindly stumbling along its inevitable path. It is about doing one’s best in a relationship with greater powers.

This is evident in the articles of a recent collection of essays on ethnographies of destiny (Menin and Elliot 2018). In a contribution to the collection, Luca Nevola (2018) listens to Yemenis as they reflect about unfulfilled life plans. Destiny emerges as a “dialectical relationship between God’s will and human intentional action.” In the theological language of Zaydi Shiism, *qadar* (defined as potentiality)⁷ and *nasib* (defined as destiny in hindsight) provide both a language of choice and a way to rationalize unhappy consequences. This characteristic dialectic gives destiny a political (or perhaps antipolitical) edge, which is even more explicit in Daniel Guinness’s (2018) article in the same collection on Fijian rugby players and their aspirations. Three different destinies with different sources of power – ethnonationalist, professional, Christian – are at play there. For the rugby players, destiny in this constellation is not about limits of human power but, on the contrary, empowerment through alliance with divine power: “I can do anything through Christ who strengthens me” (Phillipians 4:13). But only few players become professionals. In her article on diviners and their clients in Taiwan, Stéphanie Homola (2018) sketches a non-monotheistic predestination where some knowledge and negotiation of one’s fate is possible, even imperative. Such knowledge is comparably less accessible in monotheistic traditions. These three articles reveal an interesting contrast between the partially knowable and impersonal destiny of birth-hour signs and other non-monotheistic powers on the one hand, and the unknowable and personal destiny of the monotheist God on the other. The first type of destiny is a structure made of superhuman but comparably impersonal forces that humans may try to discover and manipulate in the best possible way. The latter kind of destiny involves a more personal relationship (often including a promise) that

calls humans to submit to and trust an omnipotent, benevolent God. This is not a dualist alternative, of course: the traditions featured in the three articles all involve personal, intentional relationships as well as techniques to predict, facilitate, and perhaps also change fate. But they do so each with their own emphasis.

This is relational power not so much as in Michel Foucault's bio-power, but more as in contemporary English vernacular use of "relationships" as intimate bonds. Such bonds also link "heaven and earth," Robert Orsi suggests (2005). This kind of "relationship power" is effective by means of intimate, emotional bonds of friendship, enmity, love, fear, trust, help, guidance, and importantly, gratefulness.⁸

A power to which one can be grateful – this is crucial for the relationships humans build with the One God, gods of polytheist pantheons, saints, heroes, and leaders. But are clients of divinatory experts grateful to the stars, the spirits, or the divination sticks when they receive good advice that helps them make the right decision? Not in the same way, it seems. Different relationships of power are at play, and they make for different experiences of destiny.

The experience and narratives of destiny are evidently not limited to monotheist moral lives and dilemmas, although the monotheist relationship of power does add a heightened dramatic tension, further foregrounded by the Islamic focus of this essay. I suggest that destiny and destiny-like stories are a widespread and helpful theory that allows humans in different contexts and traditions to address the condition of acting and being acted upon. Their ontologies, conceptual languages, and ethical aims may be incommensurable; however, moments of incommensurability are already part and parcel of every ontological stance and ethical life I know of. Incommensurability is a common and practical complication; dealing with it is a major part of what anthropologists call ethics (Lambek 2015). It regularly results in problematic translations and ambiguous commitments, but it is not a fundamental obstacle to understanding and communication.

Destiny is an existential concept par excellence, a prime case of the productive tension between "being an actor and being acted upon" evoked by Michael Jackson (2005, 182). The issue of destiny usually arises in relation to urgent, compelling, or dangerous matters: livelihood and the risk of losing it; love and marriage; aspiration, success, and failure; health and illness; life and death. Contrary to twentieth century polemics against "fatalism," destiny in its different varieties is very much about risk-taking, initiative, and serendipity (D'Angelo 2015; Gaibazzi 2015; Hsu and Hwang 2016). This is not to deny that destiny also involves submission and waiting, but submission can be

hard work that requires commitment and skill (Mahmood 2005), and waiting can be an active practice that requires energy and effort (Jeffrey 2010). Destiny is a religious concept in the widest sense of living in a meaningful world structured by greater powers which one needs to reckon with, which one may trust, which one can appeal to and search alliance with, and to which one may perhaps also be grateful. Specific experiences of destiny stand in traditions of moral and metaphysical reasoning which offer compelling ways to understand and deal with the urgencies humans face.

At the same time, those urgencies are structured by historically specific political economies and inter-human power relations. Destiny is also a relationship humans have with each other by mediation of nonhuman and superhuman powers. It empowers some humans over others. Experts specialized in reading signs of destiny profit from their skill – and yet, as Homola (2018) shows, this does not make them immune to failure and hardship. The politics of God and the Heavens often lean to the right: they encourage us to strive for improvement and success while accepting hierarchies and defeats as inevitable. Destiny is not always on the side of established hierarchies, and sometimes socialist revolutionaries find God on their side (like Shady did in the previous fragment). But destiny teaches us that free choice and individual autonomy are fictions – useful, inspirational fictions perhaps, but fictions all the same. And more often than not, destiny tells us that this is how it should be, that those who have power are destined to have it.

Radical, revolutionary movements in the past two centuries have often vehemently denied that such privileges are predestined. They have insisted that men are not naturally or by God's decree superior to women, that kings do not have a divine mandate to rule, that humans of European origin are not endowed with a civilizing mission to colonize the world, and that social hierarchies are neither necessary nor morally right. The attack on human inequality has occasionally involved an attack on the very idea of divine power (e.g., Bakunin [1882] 1907). But there is a twist to the story. These radical movements have often come up with destiny-like narratives of their own: Marxist socialists have come up with the inevitable progress of historical dialectics. Modernists from left and right have come up with the idea of an inevitable economic and scientific progress and (in liberal and social-democrat versions) human emancipation. Religious radicals have resorted to the power of God to counter human injustice (e.g., Qutb [1964] 1978). When such radical movements seize power, these new destinies become the metaphysical and moral foundations of new productive inequalities. The communist party tells workers what their true collective will must

be and sends dissenters to concentration camps. Only those who are able to take destiny into their own hands in neoliberal markets are entitled to a good life in emancipation and comfort. Those who claim to overcome human rule for the sake of the rule of God become the new human rulers over others, in the name of God.

When Tralfamadorians abducted Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, his first question was “Why me?” They explained to him that this is a typically Earthling question and unanswerable: “There is no why” (Vonnegut [1969] 1979, 56). Earthlings, however, do seem to prefer stories that tell them why. And this is what destiny as a narrative form does. It tells that there is a why. This is not simply the why of cause and effect. It is a why concerning the moral of the story, a moral and temporal why that calls for practical answers about how the past turned out the way it did, and what I should do now and in the future.

I will become a successful professional rugby player because my tradition, my genes, and my faith have elected me to be one, and in order to make that election true I have to train and pray hard (Guinness 2018). There was no *nasib* to realize my marriage plans, so I ought to look for another bride (Nevola 2018). My projects failed because I kept trying something that was not my fate: I should pay closer attention to the eight signs of my birth hour and avoid such disappointments again (Homola 2018). This moral quality of destiny (moral both in the sense of cultivation of what one understands to be good and right in a relationship, and in the sense of the moral to a story that makes it meaningful and helpful) is intimately linked with the way destiny works as “relationship power” between human and superhuman actors. Without the latter, there would be no moral to the story; the moment would simply be structured that way.

Greater powers to which we can relate, with whom we can communicate and create a relationship, are meaningful because they offer moral and practical guidance in a way that a blind deterministic destiny would not. In the face of overwhelming circumstances, destiny provides helpful allies or generous masters. As a moral relationship of power, destiny turns chance encounters into divine gifts and times of hardship into second chances. Equally, it also turns privilege into entitlement and force into legitimate authority.

Fourth Fragment: On Tragedy and Happy Endings

Destiny as a story that we tell of our lives thrives on contradictions and conflicts between hope and despair, responsibility and necessity, power

and powerlessness. But while conflict is essential for drama, its characters and conventions do not stay the same.

A remarkable feature of Hollywood movies is the overwhelming dominance of happy endings. They proliferate also in other cinematic traditions, be it in Bollywood, Egyptian or other. This stands in a remarkable contrast to the historically widespread genre of tragedy. A happy ending – if well-written – is unlikely and against the odds of a story, yet possible and plausible. It follows after a near disaster, an almost final breakup, a difficult and dangerous confrontation. It might be read as the popular cinematic equivalent of liberal choice. In a world of Hollywood-style happy endings everything is possible as long as you take the right actions and say the right words at the right moment.

The Adjustment Bureau (Nolfi 2011), for example, is a safely entertaining Hollywood movie that takes up destiny explicitly and gives it a Hollywood twist: the hero and the heroine defy destiny (which is administered by a bureaucratic crew of angels), and God sympathizes with their exercise of free will so much that He changes His plan and lets them have it their way. Happy ending!

Tragedy claims the opposite. The path of King Oedipus leads him towards the fulfilment of the prophecy that his parents wanted to avoid. Majnun's love for Layla, whom he was not meant to marry, results in madness and death. Macbeth's thirst for power drives him inevitably into his downfall. In tragedy humans challenge destiny, and destiny wins.

Perhaps happy endings of the Hollywood kind have become more popular in the wake of economic growth and ideas of individual fulfilment. If that has happened, the shift has been one of emphasis rather than substance. For happy endings were around long before liberal and progressive ideals of individual fulfilment. Happy endings are an established part of Islamic traditions and classical Arabic prose (Al-Tanukhi 1978). In the *Arabian Nights* they proliferate, often miraculous and unlikely, usually with the help of spirits and the supreme power of God. Abrahamic faiths promise happy endings of reunion and reward in a better life after death. They explicitly deny the possibility of tragedy as an ultimate outcome of eschatological history (al-Azm 1969, 74–5). Also among people in Egypt I know, the anticipation of destiny is more often than not accompanied by a fundamentally optimistic anticipation that everything will turn all right, or as the Qur'an says: "Surely with hardship comes ease" (94:5; see also Al-Tanukhi 1978, 59–60).

In life, tragedy is available in abundance. The only way to not lose those we love is to either love nobody or to die before them. Throughout most of human history, material well-being has been precarious at best

for most, and a privilege bought with force and violence for the lucky few. The increasing wealth and freedom that many human inhabitants of the Earth today enjoy are based on accelerated growth – a tragic historical process if there ever has been one because it can impossibly continue for long, and will inevitably reach its limits with catastrophic consequences (Barnosky et al. 2012).

All religious traditions (in the widest sense) I know of promise ways to find ease in hardship. Some – not all – religious traditions also promise an ultimate happy ending in paradise in face of the tragic quality of life. That promise is very present and compelling in Egypt among Muslims and Christians alike. It structures life so deeply and intimately that most Egyptians I know find it hard to imagine how somebody would do the right thing and abstain from evil without the prospect of divine reward and punishment in the afterworld. Some fewer people I know ask heretical questions about the nature of evil. If God is omnipotent and Good, why is He committed to sending so many of His creatures to hellfire? Do we perhaps need Satan as a lead character in a meaningful drama of good and evil more urgently than we might want to acknowledge (al-Azm 1969, 55–87; Essakouti 2018)? And yet good and evil, hardship and ease, happy and tragic outcomes seem easier to deal with when we are not too consistent about them, and instead follow the lead of their constitutive, productive contradiction.

Destiny does not teach us to simply anticipate either tragedy or happy endings. Instead, it teaches us to structure our anticipation and hope along the dialectic tension between tragedy and happy endings, whereby either way has its good, inevitable moral of the story, and one may always turn out to be just the prequel to the other. The preliminary tragedy of death will be followed by the happy ending of paradise, say those with faith in God (and by saying so they express the trust that they are followers of the right faith because followers of other faiths will be deprived of that happy ending). The preliminary happy ending of progressive societal accomplishments will be followed by the tragedy of extinction, my friends versed in ecology will say (and at the same time, they fight to safeguard or advance some those progressive accomplishments).

Daniela was a Buddhist. She anticipated to be reincarnated as a new person in this same world, which is a story with less binary drama than is provided by Christian and Islamic eschatologies of salvation and damnation. In the teaching she followed, the principle of karma, the inevitable consequences of our freely chosen actions that follow us in our lives and from one reincarnation to the other, is connected with the

promise of a gradual liberation from the dialectic of attachment and loss. During her final years, Daniela was keen to read Theravada Buddhist texts that teach us to calmly accept the inevitable decay of our bodies and to free ourselves from our attachment to them. Those readings strengthened her courage to face the situation as it was, to embrace life while knowing that there probably was little time left. She was not concerned with what comes after death. What appealed to her more was the Buddhist teaching to overcome attachment; yet at the same time, she was very attached to life and good things in it. She didn't go by the book, and she was not trying to.

After all, doing things by the book is not the point of either destiny or karma. Or it is a book we can never read. Instead, we can take destiny, karma, and others of their kind seriously as what they are: relationships and theories that do not tell a consistent truth but rather provide us a dramatic tension through which we may live our lives. That is also my personal view of that tension. I think that death came too early for Daniela, that she should have, could have lived longer. I also think that the moment was structured that way, that we did what we could with our temporarily actualized power to act; while a happy ending to our story was not available, it was as good as it could be. Both thoughts are true of me.

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NOTES

- 1 I have dwelt on this theme in more detail in Schielke (2015).
- 2 Speaking of the monotheist God as the shared subject of worship in all Abrahamic traditions, I do not claim that He has a single reified set of characteristics. Rather, various (and mutually contested) ways to worship Him share important structuring tensions that compel worshippers to position themselves in one way or another; the tension between Divine omnipotency and omniscience on the one hand, and human choice and responsibility, on the other, is an especially prominent and productive one. Different positionings towards this tension have found their intellectual expressions, for example, in Arminian and Calvinist theologies of human freedom and divine

- predestination, respectively, and in different configurations of the human and divine power to act among Sunni Muslims. The latter I discuss below.
- 3 The second fragment is a revised version of a passage of my book *Egypt in the Future Tense* (Schielke 2015, 220–3), except for the interview with Hajja Z. which is a shortened version of a passage published in my essay “The Power of God” (Schielke 2019, 7–8), and the opening story about the car ride Tunisia in 1991, which is previously unpublished. The third fragment is a revised and expanded version of my afterword (Schielke 2018) to the special section “Anthropologies of Destiny” (Menin and Elliot 2018). The first and fourth fragments are new.
 - 4 The assumption of causal efficacy from the social scientist’s point of view of human acts (“agency”) as measured against a larger “structure” is not part of this theory. That assumption has been criticized by Laidlaw (2013, 185) whose fundamental misgivings about the concept of agency I share. The vernacular theory of human and divine power is not about acting against structure, and it leaves open the question who possesses the power of efficacy.
 - 5 Existential anthropology has proven itself to be quite good at such conversations, taking as its guideline that “any interpretive synthesis one presents is the product of dialogue” (Jackson 1998, 5) while not being too heavily loaded by a discursive tunnel vision. Although Jackson’s original sketch of existential anthropology of religion was rather opposed to the reliance on theological concepts, researchers inspired by the project (e.g., Premawardhana 2020; Seeman 2018) have engaged intensively with theologies as potentially good and true ways to understand the world *and* live in it.
 - 6 This is a citation from the Qur’an, 13:11: “*inna llaha la yughayyiru bi-qawmin hatta yughayyiru ma bi-anfusihim.*”
 - 7 The same word *qadar* has different uses in competing Muslim traditions, meaning divine predestination in the Sunni context, and potentiality that is up to human choice in Zaydi Shiism.
 - 8 I have written more about the theme of relationship power and the triadic relationship between humans and God in Schielke (2019); I borrowed the notion of triadic relationship from Emanuel Schaeublin (2016).

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