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Anton Glüer
University of Würzburg

The *nescii fati* of the *Aeneid* and their Causal Attributions

This paper examines the causal attributions employed by characters in Vergil's Aeneid *to explain their subjective misfortunes. It will be shown that these subjective explanations often disregard fate or reveal a flawed understanding of the fata, which typically leads to negative consequences for the characters involved. The article then analyzes the strategies Vergil uses to expose the shortcomings of his characters' subjective explanations and how he characterizes them by endowing some of them with a distinctive style of attribution.*

Keywords: Vergil, Aeneid, fate, fatum, Causal Attribution, misfortune

1. Explaining one's Misfortune

A fall in front of one's doorstep inevitably raises several questions: Was it icy? Did the neighbor fail to clear the walkway? Or did I simply trip—by chance or due to inattention? Four primary motives for this everyday search for the causes of perceived events and phenomena can be identified:[1] First, we aim to understand sequences of actions; second, we seek to predict them whenever possible; and third, we mean to actively influence them. At times, we also seek to evaluate actions—that is, to assign responsibility and draw the corresponding consequences, such as praise, criticism, or even punishment. The pressure to arrive at an

[1] Following Hüttemann (2018: 5).

explanation is particularly high in the face of negative experiences and misfortune. In such cases, we search for ways to take action by adjusting our behavior or holding others accountable to prevent similar negative experiences. This article first examines how characters in ancient epics explain their misfortune and the significance of these explanations in Vergil's *Aeneid*. The paper then explores how characters who fail to understand the *fatum* correctly attribute their misfortune. The following questions are addressed: Are these attributions chosen ad hoc according to the narrative requirements of each scene, or are they consistently used to characterize the individual? Do the characters undergo a learning process toward a better understanding of fate?

Attributions of misfortune in antiquity—in everyday life[2] and in their literary portrayal—can broadly be categorized into three types: 1. divine influences; 2. impersonal forces: various concepts of fate or chance;[3] 3. human actions.[4] In this regard, scenes where characters speculate on the possible reasons for their own or others' misfortunes are particularly revealing—such as when Deiphobus meets Aeneas in the underworld (6, 531–534):

> sed te qui vivum casus, age fare vicissim,
> attulerint. pelagine venis erroribus actus

[2] See generally Harrison (2015) for the consideration of supernatural forces in everyday life; cf. Chaniotis (2023: 43–47) for accounts of miraculous healings by Asclepius, where personal transgressions were interpreted as causes of divine wrath.

[3] Attributions to chance are explicitly found only after Homer, although, according to Scodel (2018: 5), implicit cases of chance can already be identified in his works. For an introduction to the various concepts of fate and their chronological development, see Eidinow (2011).

[4] Eidinow (2011) categorizes explanations for experiences of misfortune into 'supernatural violence' and the 'ministry of misfortune,' which encompasses concepts of fate ranging from the spinning of the *Parcae* to general and individual *fortunae*. Interestingly, she omits human causation.

an monitu divum? aut quae te fortuna fatigat,
ut tristis sine sole domos, loca turbida, adires?

But come, tell in turn what chance has brought you here, alive.
Have you come here driven by your ocean-wanderings, or at
Heaven's command? Or what doom compels you to visit these
sad, sunless dwellings, this land of disorder?[5]

Deiphobus considers several possible causes, including chance (*casus*), purely human misadventures (*errores*), which are contrasted with a divine command (*monitu divum*), or *fortuna*.[6] The explanation of misfortune being due to divine intervention or human actions had been common since the Homeric epics. The key innovation in Vergil's work lies in the prominence of fate. While the attribution of misfortune to a force of fate had not played a significant role in Homer and Apollonius, it appears frequently in the *Aeneid*.[7] There is another distinguishing feature: unlike Homer, who grants fate considerably less explanatory power, Vergil introduces the *fata* at various points as the highest power, to which even the gods are subordinate.[8] In the 15 instances where misfortune is explained through reference to fate,[9] the following Latin terms are used:

[5] Translations Fairclough–Goold (1999; 2000).

[6] The term *fortuna* remains deliberately ambiguous: it is often employed to explain fortunate or unfortunate turns of events, though without the metaphysical qualification of *fata* as a universal principle—see Eigler (2007: 47). At times, it appears explicitly personified (e.g., in 11, 43 as envious fortune), at others, it does not. Combinations with other notions of fate are shown below, with the combination of gods + *fortuna* also appearing (e.g., 12, 676sqq.). In the cited example, *fortuna* is best understood as the listed potential causes + x.

[7] Overall, they still account for only about 20% of attributions in the context of misfortune, compared to approximately 10% each in Homer and Apollonius.

[8] The scholarly debate on whether and to what extent Jupiter can be identified with the *fatum* is too extensive to be presented here. For an overview with further references, see Casali (2023: 392–398).

[9] The passages were identified through a close-reading approach, defining misfortune

1. *fatum* / *fata*[10] (6x); 2. *Fortuna* / *fortuna*[11] (4x); 3. *fata* + *fortuna*[12] (2x); 4. *sors*[13] (1x); 5. *fata* + *deus* + *fortuna*[14] (1x); 6. *fata* + *sors*[15] (1x). Although the *fata* are guaranteed to us as the ultimate authority, neither the attributions referring to *fata* / *fatum* can be unconditionally classified as accurate, nor are the combinations with *fortuna* and *sors* (2.–4., 6.) necessarily misjudgments on the part of the speakers. Thus, Dido, introduced as *fati nescia* (1, 299), laments the misfortunes of Aeneas (*heu, quibus ille* / *iactatus fatis*, 4, 13–14), and Jupiter, when he declares his impartiality in the battle in Book 10, speaks of the individual *fortuna* of each fighter (10, 104–113). Therefore, individual interpretations of each character and their attributions are necessary in order to understand the relationship between the concept of fate in these attributions and Jupiter's *fata*. As a matter of principle, the narrator's statement following the death of Pallas, which foreshadows the end of the work, applies (10, 501–505):

> nescia mens hominum fati sortisque futurae
> et servare modum rebus sublata secundis!
> Turno tempus erit magno cum optaverit emptum
> intactum Pallanta, et cum spolia ista diemque
> oderit.
>
> O mind of man, knowing not fate or coming doom or
> how to keep bounds when uplifted with favouring

in a broad sense as an emotionally negative state triggered by an event, such as in cases of injury, death, fear, or longing.

[10] 2, 738–740 (Aeneas); 4, 13–14 (Dido); 6, 511–512 (Deiphobus); 7, 594 (Latinus); 11, 96–98 (Aeneas); 12, 149–150 (Iuno).

[11] 2, 79–80 (Sinon); 4, 433–434 (Dido); 11, 42–44 (Aeneas); 11, 108–109 (Aeneas).

[12] 1, 238–241 (Venus); 5, 709–710 (Nautes).

[13] 11, 164–166 (Euander).

[14] 12, 676–677 (Turnus).

[15] 2, 554–557 (Aeneas).

> fortune! To Turnus shall come the hour when for a great
> price he will long to have bought an unscathed Pallas,
> and when he will abhor those spoils and that day.

Before examining the attributions with which individual *nescii fati* explain their misfortune, the question of whether a human can break free from the misery described in the quote needs addressing. Much has been written about the difficult learning process that even Aeneas must undergo.[16] The causal attributions listed above suggest three possible relations between the speaking characters and the 'great' *fata* of the proem. First, the character may use *fata* more generally, meaning 'death' or 'doom'.[17] This usage is closer to the Homeric μοῖρα than to the concept of fate in the *Aeneid* and is therefore an interesting intertextual reference.[18] The relevant passages are likely to appear oversimplified to readers who have been prepared for the 'great' *fata* since the opening verses of the work, and can thus be understood as part of Vergil's *aemulatio* towards Homer. Second, in their attributions, characters tend to hold mistaken views regarding the *fata* or blend them with other concepts so that these attributions are also marked as misguided.[19] The third and final possibility must be placed in quotation marks, as it is unclear whether it is ever fully achieved by anyone other than Jupiter: the 'correct understanding' of the *fata*. As shown below, if attained, this understanding comes late and often tragically. A rare exception is the admonition of the old advisor Nautes after the burning of the ships in Book 5: *nate dea, quo fata trahunt retrahuntque sequamur* (5, 709). The fact that the insight

[16] See below n. 21–23.
[17] Cf. Pötscher (1977: 22–95) for a detailed account of the semantics of the concept of *fatum*, although I cannot agree with some of his interpretations derived from it, see below n. 36.
[18] For this aspect of Homer's μοῖρα, see Adkins (1960: 17); also cf. Scodel (2017: 68), Eidinow (2011: 30–41).
[19] Cf. the attributions of Turnus and Venus discussed below.

necessary for this simple Stoically colored[20] attribution is not commonplace is made clear earlier, with the narrator's note that Nautes, as the only one instructed by Tritonia Pallas, is particularly qualified in matters of divine will and *fatum* (5, 704–707).

2. The *nescii fati* and their Causal Attributions

The previous considerations suggest that the potential for humans to comprehend fate is even more restricted than previously acknowledged in scholarly discourse. Aeneas' learning curve during his journey has been widely discussed since the influential Richard Heinze, who read the hero as a Stoic *proficiens*. Michael Erler identified Epicurean elements in Aeneas, thus offering a convincing explanation for the work's conclusion, which is problematic from a Stoic perspective. Most recently, contributions to the Stoic interpretation have been published by Graham Zanker.[21] However, the limits of the process of understanding have been pointed out—Aeneas requires numerous divine signs and human advisors, but he still does not progress consistently. Book 6 of the *Aeneid* has been described as a 'Höllenfahrt ohne Folgen',[22] and it has been argued that Aeneas immediately forgets the knowledge he acquires upon leaving the underworld.[23] Since the early 20th century Dido's and Turnus' contrasting relationship in their engagement with fate has been highlighted. Both are said to fail in their goals because these obstruct the

[20] The analogy of fate with a dog tied to a cart is known from early Stoicism. The dog can either submit to its fate and run along or be dragged along. See Zanker (2016: 584) for more on this.

[21] Heinze ([8]1995: 291–297); Erler (2020); Zanker (2016; 2019; 2023).

[22] Holzberg (2006: 167).

[23] I would like to thank Prof. Dr. Ibolya Tar for an interesting conversation about this aspect at the Sapiens Ubique Civis Conference 2024. See Baier (2014: 67); in contrast to older contributions that are difficult to uphold, which suggest that Aeneas, after the prophecy in Book 6, is certain of his mission and has no further doubts: Duckworth (1956: 357), Büchner (1976: 283).

fulfillment of the *fata*. However, Dido does so as *fati nescia*, without understanding fate, while Turnus acts with knowledge of the *fata*.[24] Books 4 and 12 of the *Aeneid* have been read as tragedies of Dido and Turnus, respectively, based on these ideas.[25] It is appealing to see Turnus, much like Eteocles in Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*, as a tragic hero who, fully aware of the inevitability of his downfall, continues on his chosen path. Based on the forces and individuals Turnus holds responsible for the arrival of the Aeneads and his eventual demise, it remains to be examined whether this relationship with the *fata* can be sustained.

To properly assess Turnus' attributions, we must consider Pallas, who is closely connected with Turnus, and not only through the ending of the work. When he sees his Arcadians fleeing from the Latins, he calls them to battle with the following words (10, 375–376):

> numina nulla premunt, mortali urgemur ab hoste
> mortales; totidem nobis animaeque manusque.
>
> No gods press upon us; by mortal foes are we mortals
> driven; we have as many lives, as many hands as they.

For Pallas, mortals are fighting a mortal enemy. The divine realm is ignored, and Pallas gives no thought to fate. Indeed, Jupiter declares his impartiality in 10, 104–113, but what about the *fata*? These, according to the supreme god's statement, would find their way (*fata viam invenient*, 10, 113). Pallas' naive disregard for supernatural forces ensures that the *fata* he failed to consider find a way that leads, through his own death, to the death of Turnus, thereby removing the last obstacle to the transfer

[24] For example, Matthaei (1917: 20), Schenk (1984: 43). However, Pascal (1990: 267) and Baier (2014: 61), among others, deny him knowledge of the *fata*.
[25] For Dido: Wlosok (1990); for Turnus: Rieks (2005).

of the Penates to Latium. Turnus' response to Drances' accusations that he is responsible for the conflict with the Trojans (11, 442–444), can be related to this scene:

> solum Aeneas vocat? et vocet oro;
> nec Drances potius, sive est haec ira deorum,
> morte luat, sive est virtus et gloria, tollat.
>
> Aeneas alone challenges me, you say. I pray that he does
> challenge me, and that it is not Drances rather than I
> who appeases the gods by his death, if they are angry, or
> wins glory for his courage, if that is the prize here.

Turnus here proves very pragmatic. For him, there are two possibilities: Either the gods are angry and demand the downfall of the Latins—in which case victory is impossible anyway, or it is a matter of *virtus* and *gloria* on a purely human level—in which case there is a chance of victory in single combat. In any case, it is worth attempting the fight. Once again, the reference to Homer is noteworthy: In the *Aeneid*, *ira deorum* 'is not a developed explanatory motif' and clearly points to Homer.[26] Here, too, it appears that a typical Homeric attribution does not go far enough and ignores an essential aspect of the events. By neglecting fate in his assessment of the possible forces involved, Turnus exemplifies the *nescia mens hominum fati* (10, 501). The possibility considered by Turnus—namely, that perhaps only *virtus* and *gloria* are at play, without divine influence—echoes the misjudgment of Pallas. Once again, the lack of insight into the *fata* ensures they choose a particular path: Turnus engages in the fight against Aeneas because he sees at least a chance of

[26] Cf. Horsfall (2003: ad V. 443).

victory.[27] Turnus, alongside Aeneas, is one of the few characters in the *Aeneid* who attempts to explain misfortune frequently enough for us to approach the two opening questions of this paper through his attributions: Does Vergil employ a particular, consistent attributional style[28] to characterize his figures?; and aside from Aeneas, do other *proficientes* learn to better understand the *fata*? The six passages in which Turnus explains misfortune show congruity: In four cases, he attributes the cause to Jupiter or the gods in general (9, 128–130; 10, 668–669; 12, 646–647; 12, 894–895), consistent with the *ira deorum* considered in his response to Drances (11, 444). This perspective does not change even at the end of the work when he retorts to the advancing Aeneas: *non me tua fervida terrent / dicta, ferox; di me terrent et Iuppiter hostis* (12, 894–895). Here, too, there is a reference to Homer, whose Hector rightly complains of being deceived by Athena and of the absence of support from the other gods when he faces Achilles alone (*Il*. 22, 297–305).[29] In Vergil, however, this attribution is mistaken:[30] Jupiter, as the administrator of fate, has no enemies; the *fata* demand Turnus' death because he opposes their goal. The view that Turnus knowingly defies the *fata* cannot be maintained. Turnus remains, until the end, *nescius fati*.[31]

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[27] I thus follow the possibilities for the exercise of free will in the *Aeneid*, as noted, for example, by Binder (2019: 169sq.).

[28] In social psychology, the term attributional style refers to the 'tendency to offer similar sorts of explanations for different events' Buchanan–Seligman (1995: 1).

[29] See Tarrant (2012: ad V. 894–895).

[30] Surprisingly, these verses have often been read as a tragically late but accurate realization on the part of Turnus: see Duckworth (1956: 361), Wilson (1979: 371), von Albrecht (2006: 180).

[31] As mentioned in n. 24, there have been various scholarly opinions on this issue; the difficulty lies in the not always clearly distinguished nuances between the different concepts of fate and knowledge: Turnus, like all of Latium, receives knowledge of the oracle's prophecy from Latinus (7, 81–106). However, these prophecies cannot simply be equated with the complex *fata* and their variable *viae*. Moreover, if one considers the difficult learning process of Aeneas in comparison, it can hardly be assumed that a single piece of information, not even directly addressed to Turnus, could suffice for an accurate understanding of fate.

Turnus, like Dido, draws much of his tragedy from the fact that his actions are influenced by the goddess Juno. The nuances of this interplay between individual will and divine influence will not be investigated here.[32] Of particular interest for our purposes is the manner in which the attributions of the goddesses Venus and Juno, who actively attempt to intervene in the course of the plot, relate to the *fata*. There are five attributions of misfortune by Venus, with the goddess attributing responsibility to other gods three times (1, 250–252; 1, 667–669; 2, 601–603). The accusations are primarily directed against Juno and the passive Jupiter. In one instance, Venus considers the Latins' attack on a purely human level (8, 385–386). Only once, in her concerned inquiry to Jupiter in the first book of the *Aeneid*, does she link the *fata* to the misfortune of her own people (1, 238–241):

> hoc equidem occasum Troiae tristisque ruinas
> solabar fatis contraria fata rependens;
> nunc eadem fortuna viros tot casibus actos
> insequitur.
>
> That promise, indeed, was my comfort for Troy's fall and sad
> overthrow, when I weighed fate against the fates opposed.
> Now, though tried by so many disasters, the same fortune dogs them.

Markus Schauer argued that, in addition to the 'great' *fatum*, there is an individual *fatum* for each person, comparable to a letter of safe conduct, which can be prematurely withdrawn by divine or human action, which

[32] In general, since Dodds (1970), a dual motivation or overdetermination of human actions has been assumed. For the issue in Vergil, see Duckworth (1956: 358), Feeney (1991: 175sq.).

is why, for example, Dido dies *nec fato merita* (4, 696).[33] This concept of fate, which closely resembles the fluctuating *fortuna* mentioned in 1, 241, could be used to understand Venus' statement as reflecting the contrasting turns in the individual fates of the Aeneads. However, I believe her use of the concept of *fatum* represents a misunderstanding on the part of the goddess, through which she, too, is introduced as *nescia fati*. The fact that Venus' relationship to the plans of fate differs from Jupiter's is evident in the fact that she has to ask him for information. Moreover, her attribution suggests the idea of fragmented, puzzle-like pieces of the *fata* that can be weighed against each other. The notion that the *fata* leading to the fall of Troy might differ from those aimed at the settlement of the Trojan refugees in Latium fundamentally contradicts Vergil's teleological adaptation of the Aeneas myth. The happy ending for the Aeneads would then merely be a form of compensation for the 'old' *fata* and the fall of Troy. An intriguing comparison can again be made with the *Iliad*, where Thetis, the mother of the central hero, appeals to the highest god and, according to the rules of reciprocity, demands something in return for her son's offense: the temporary superiority of the Trojan opponents.[34] Again, Vergil provides his readers with the necessary background knowledge to question the attributions made by his characters, relying on their literary awareness. However, this questioning is left to the reader: at no point is the nature of the *fata* discussed so explicitly that a character or the narrator would explicitly reject a character's attribution.

The general portrayal of Juno as an emotional goddess driven by *ira* and *odium* is consistent with the finding that she rarely offers explanations, which require a certain degree of rationality, for the events that take place against her will. Instead, she is characterized by emotional

[33] Schauer (2007: 114).
[34] *Il*. 1, 503–510. See Graziosi–Haubold (2005: 100) for further discussion. For Homer's 'reciprocal ethics' in general, cf. Gill (2011).

outbursts, such as in 7, 286–322, where she lists her actions and complains about their ineffectiveness. In her opening remarks, Juno speaks of the *fata*, using the term *contraria fata* in a manner similar to Venus, but not referring to the fluctuating fate of the same group of people. Instead, she refers to the opposing *fata* of the Aeneads and the Latins (*heu stirpem invisam et fatis contraria nostris / fata Phrygum*, 7, 293–294).[35] This passage aligns with Venus' mistaken attribution. Here, too, the Homeric concept of reciprocity is evoked: Juno asserts her claims based on her position and is outraged that these are not being fulfilled. She recognizes the actions she can take (*at trahere atque moras tantis licet addere rebus, / at licet amborum populos exscindere regum*, 7, 315–316) but fails to see that her actions will ultimately lead to the death of her favored Turnus. As with Pallas and Turnus himself, Juno shows a misjudgment that leads to an undesirable outcome as a result of the conflict with the *fata*. Finally, Juno must admit to Turnus' sister Juturna that her influence has been exhausted (12, 147–150):

> qua visa est Fortuna pati Parcaeque sinebant
> cedere res Latio, Turnum et tua moenia texi;
> nunc iuvenem imparibus video concurrere fatis,
> Parcarumque dies et vis inimica propinquat.
>
> Where Fortune seemed to permit, and the Fates suffered Latium's state to prosper, I shielded Turnus and your city. Now I see the prince confront unequal destiny; the day of doom, and the enemy's stroke, draws nigh.

[35] Here too, the *contraria fata* reveal a peculiar conception of fate: Heinze (⁸1995: 293, n. 3) correctly interpreted Juno's *fata nostra* as her own will. In this case, for her, the *fata Phrygum* would simply be the will of Jupiter, rendering the entire teleological structure of the *Aeneid* meaningless.

The combination of the concepts of *Fortuna*, the *Parcae*, and *fata* is generally unproblematic for evaluating the attribution. However, Juno explicitly admits that only now does she perceive the form the *fata* will take for Turnus (*nunc* [...] *video*, 12, 149), even though it was clear to her in her angry speech in Book 7 that Aeneas' ultimate success was inevitable. In legal terms, this inconsistency might be described as negligence. Her realization comes late and is further mitigated by the fact that she immediately urges Juturna to do whatever she can for her brother (12, 157–159). Although Juno sees no hope, she is compelled to act. Her final abandonment of her anger (*adnuit his Iuno et mentem laetata retorsit*, 12, 841) is not the result of insight but occurs when she is assured of the preservation of the Latin name, and thus the quid pro quo pattern has been satisfied (12, 830–840).

3. Conclusion

In his *Aeneid*, Vergil places significantly more emphasis on illustrating the challenges faced by humans and gods in attaining a proper understanding of fate than on explaining the true nature of the *fata*. Statements made by characters regarding fate should not always be interpreted as objective definitions of the concept; rather, they should be considered subjective assessments that often fall short of the 'truth'.[36] The causal attributions analyzed here serve to characterize the figures, some of whom develop distinct attributional styles. For most characters, either no learning process can be observed (Turnus) or progress is difficult,

[36] Some interpretations support this result, for example, the emphasis on the subjective narrative perspective of Aeneas in *Aen.* 2 by Erler (2012: 133–136), who points out that Servius had already argued with references to knowledge gaps of characters. In contrast, scholars such as Pötscher (1977: 63) referring to our Venus attribution in 1,238–241, or Feeney (1992: 145), use subjective character statements to support their claim of a strong influence of Jupiter on the shaping of the *fata*.

relying on the support of advisors or Jupiter himself and only occurring after significant setbacks (e.g., Aeneas, Juno).[37] In their causal explanations, the many *nescii fati* often resort to forces perceived as more obvious: humans, gods, *fortuna*, etc. In the rarer instances where attributions are made to the *fata*, the underlying concepts can often be traced to older epic traditions (e.g., the Homeric μοῖρα) or interpretations that fail to align with Jupiter's *fata*. The proem and Jupiter's prophecy in the first book provide the reader with basic knowledge of the *Aeneid*'s concept of fate. Drawing on this knowledge and their literary background, readers can recognize certain subjective attributions as mistaken.

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[37] A concept familiar from Herodotus and Greek tragedy: Cf. for Herodotus Shapiro (1994), for the Aeschylean *pathei mathos* (*Ag.* 177) Sommerstein (2010: 178–188). On the relationship between suffering and the fulfillment of fate in the *Aeneid*, cf. Heil (2001: 257).

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