

To what extent does Virgil's Aeneas have free will?

The concept of free will has not only been widely debated among scholars but is also one, which bruits into different aspects of the Aeneid. However, the primary focus of this essay is not the relations between fate and gods or the theology of the world of the Aeneid, but rather whether Aeneas has or is able to exercise his will in that world. This issue of free will was also a problem for Virgil: he had to create an exciting story out of a destiny, which is already known and has played out. He could not portray Aeneas as an automaton merely obeying the wishes of his masters, but instead as an intricate character who has doubts, thoughts and emotions which all combine to create suspense and a dramatic scene. Hence we now come to my essay. My essay will examine the choices made by Aeneas, to what extent fate and the gods influence or force Aeneas into action if any, and consequently determining whether Aeneas is truly free. There can be three conclusions: Aeneas has no free will, Aeneas has complete free will or Aeneas has a mixture of the two. Through analyses we will arrive at a conclusion.

The concept of fate as a *dramatis persona* is ever-present throughout the epic. Fate is encountered at the beginning when Virgil writes that fate exiled Aeneas for his journey (I. 2). It is the first example of a higher power interfering in the mortal world, especially with Aeneas' own free will. He did not choose this journey. It was forced upon him. Aeneas explicitly says 'not of mine own desire do I seek Italy' (IV. 361), yet still he is forced on the path of this journey and so it seems that Aeneas 'almost always is unable to resist his own fates'¹. In the final scenes of Troy Aeneas reminisces how great it would have been to have died there and then in arms (II. 316-317). However fate thwarts him and Aeneas laments that if fate had willed it; he would have died then and there (II. 433-434). These two examples clearly show that despite how perilous a situation Aeneas put himself in (here Greeks surrounded him) fate would not allow him to die, as was his will. There is, however, a different reading of this scene, which I will pick up on in a later argument (see page 5). Fate also seems to act as a master to Aeneas. After the fall of Troy Anchises orders Aeneas 'to spread sails to fate' (III. 9). This is not dissimilar to sailors allowing their masts to be guided by winds to take them wherever the winds so wish, except here it is fate playing at the master of direction. This type of 'master' language is seen also when Aeneas meets his mother near Carthage. He describes himself and his comrades 'to have followed fate' (I. 382) similar to a foot soldier following his general to a determined location; the soldier has no choice in the matter, he simply follows orders. With this, he only knows of his destination 'Italy' and still, notwithstanding this lack of knowledge, embarks on the journey. Perhaps knowing that he has no other options because previously fate had thwarted his desire for death, forcing him to continue living and to complete its grand design.

¹ Matthaëi, L. E. (1917) 'The Fates, the Gods, and the Freedom of Man's Will in the Aeneid.' *The Classical Quarterly*, 11(01), p. 11. doi: 10.1017/s0009838800011940.

In order to achieve this compulsion, fate must have some sort of power. This power is the declaration of the future. Matthaei describes it as 'What is destined must be, and nothing can alter it.'² The evidence for this supremacy is that the gods have only the power of delay, therefore showing that, since the gods cannot change what has been decreed, it is the power of an inferior against a superior. Even Jupiter himself relinquishes power and is ready to let the fate take its course (X. 113). This sort of supremacy is in much debate and later I will discuss how one might argue that the gods are themselves more powerful (see last paragraph of this page). If we subscribe to the supremacy and omnipotence of fate then there is no place or a very small place for free will. The fates will force its conclusion no matter what occurs and no matter what Aeneas chooses. This view of fate is described elegantly 'Fortuna omnipotens et ineluctabile fatum' (VIII. 334) which further solidifies the omnipotence of fate and the uselessness of rebellion.

However, one might prove that Aeneas could indeed rebel when he says, he could be 'forgetful of fate, [and] settle in Sicilian fields' (V. 702-703). Although this could be interpreted as Aeneas choosing to follow fate and therefore having free will to do so³, Aeneas never exercises this free will. He is wholly obedient. Aeneas cannot refuse fate because he would wrong his son, Ascanius, 'whom I cheat of a Hesperian kingdom' (IV. 355). However this is not the only wrong, as he would also cheat the future generations of Rome of their glory. Therefore he cannot refuse fate because he would injure the fate of his son and the fate of the future of the city. He cannot refuse fate because of fate. Even after so much slaughter and so much death Aeneas says "I would not come, had not fate assigned me here a place and home" (XI. 112). He blames his presence and the war on the compulsion of fate. It seems like he must obey fate, he must do all that has been foreseen, even though he hates the 'horrida belli fata' (XI. 96-97); he must obey.

Not only does fate compel Aeneas, but gods too. It could be argued that the conference of book X was an assertion of Jupiter's absolute power.⁴ Jupiter declares that 'the kingship of Jupiter will be the same for all: the fates will find a way' (X. 112-13). Similar to fate, if we subscribe to this theory then there is no place for free will in an 'universe ruled by an autocrat'⁵. An example of this compulsion is seen in Aeneas' departure from Carthage. A significant portion of Book IV is spent on Mercury's speech to Aeneas⁶ (lines 196-278) on Jupiter's command signifying its importance to the journey and to Aeneas. After the order was given there is no indecision from Aeneas. Immediately Aeneas wants to flee.

² Matthaei, 1917

³ Camps, W. A. (1969) *Introduction to Virgil's 'Aeneid'*. London: London, Oxford U.P., 1969. Pp 23)

⁴ Braund, S. M. (2006) *The Cambridge Companion to Virgil*. Edited by Charles Martindale. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (Virtual Publishing).
Feeney, D. C. C. (1991) *The Gods in Epic: Poets and Critics of the Classical Tradition (Clarendon Paperbacks)*. New York: Oxford University Press, USA. Pp. 139-140

⁵ Braund, 2006, pp. 210-214.

⁶ Feeney, 1991, pp. 174.

The lines (279-280) attribute themselves to describe Aeneas' fear. He is 'struck dumb' and is 'aghast at the sight'. It is due to Aeneas' fear of Jupiter's power that he willingly obeys and smothers his feelings for Dido (IV. 332) and subordinates his feelings to the will of the gods and fate.⁷ This command is reinforced by another visit from Mercury (560-570) telling him to 'break off delay' (569). Again Aeneas has the same reaction 'scared by the sudden vision' (571). It is Aeneas' fear of autocratic Jupiter's power that forces his flight and the double visitation is evidence of Jupiter wielding his power to force Aeneas on his journey. A flimsy rebuttal would be that Aeneas chooses to flee after hearing the 'divine command' but even with this Aeneas acts under duress; Aeneas acts under fear of retribution from Jupiter. And it can be agreed that acting under duress is not free will, but compulsion. Jupiter also makes a promise of intervention to Venus. Jupiter reassures her that the Trojans' fates have not changed (I. 257-8) and reveals what will happen when Aeneas reaches Italy. This could be Jupiter promising to ensure this will happen; meaning he will force Aeneas and the Trojans to finish the journey disregarding any difficulties or emotions. Jupiter is so certain of this future that he continues to speak about "Caesar", indicating that he knows Aeneas will complete the mission, and after many generations, Caesar will be born. Jupiter here has no regard for Aeneas' own wants or desires; he simply assumes Aeneas will do as commanded. Hence stripping away his free will.

It is not only Jupiter who orders Aeneas but also Venus. When Venus meets Aeneas near Carthage she gives him a speech. However, rather than a motherly speech, it is imperative and detached from familial emotions. Venus uses imperatives such as "perge" (I. 389&401) and "derige" (I. 401). Although this could be motherly advice, it is unlikely because after speaking she flees away from her son (I. 406); clearly not the actions of a devoted mother. Since it is not advice, the imperatives signify that it is a command from a superior to an inferior and at once Aeneas obeys. This has similarities to the departure from Carthage: a divinity gives an order and Aeneas obeys. Therefore it can be concluded that these orders breach Aeneas' own free will, because he cannot resist the orders of a divinity, with the motive for such orders being to ensure the safety of her (Venus) chosen people.

Although it may seem that Aeneas has no free will, arguments can be made to the contrary. Even if one subscribes to the omnipotence of fate or Jupiter, I will now argue that neither are actually omnipotent and nor can they control Aeneas. Matthaëi picks up on the idea that in some cases fate is contradictory and personal fate can change.⁸ An example is Latinus. He says 'by living he has worsened his own fate' (XI. 160). The statement implies that fate can be changed because how can someone's fate worsen without change. Originally his fate was good, but then by living too long his happiness has turned to grief as a result of Pallas' death, something an omnipotent fate should have factored into account when allotting someone's fate and judging it to be good or bad. Matthaëi

⁷ G. E. Duckworth (1956) *Fate and Free Will in Vergil's "Aeneid"*. The Classical Journal Vol. 51, No. 8, pp. 357.

⁸ Matthaëi, 1917

paraphrases this by “fate is what life ought to be contrasted with what life is”.⁹ Additionally, there is an idea of fate changing into a new fate. Aeneas himself complains that he is being called from one fate to another (III. 494). If fate is omnipotent and fixed, how can it change without other fates being destroyed? Therefore since fate may contradict itself it can be seen that it may be erratic and disorderly. And since fate seems to be contradictory, disorderly and subject to change, then there must some sort of free will in order to bring about these possibilities. However there is a problem with this argument. For both, Aeneas and Latinus, it could simply be a lack of knowledge of their fate instead of fate being fundamentally disorderly and contradictory. It could be that Latinus simply did not know what was going to happen and just assumed fate had allotted him a happy life. Similarly for Aeneas, that instead of his fate changing or turning into a new fate, the fall of Troy and his journey were all allotted and planned. Thus the issue is that Aeneas had not the sight or knowledge of the bigger picture and his whole life. Therefore, it is not a fault of fate but a fault of man.

An argument could be made that Jupiter would want to bring about the conclusion safely and simply. Reasons for this could include not wanting to upset Venus with potential harm to Aeneas, wanting to ensure Rome is founded with little damage to other communities and not wishing to upset other gods, particularly Juno. However I will not dwell on this, as it is not the focus of this essay. Assuming that Jupiter would want Aeneas’ journey to be completed safely and quickly, and if Jupiter is omnipotent and knowledgeable about future events, then why does Aeneas use guesswork? Why is he hindered? Why is he delayed? And why does he err? “If Italy were the Promised Land why not enter into the inheritance at once?”¹⁰ If Aeneas is an agent of destiny and Jupiter surely he should act confidently and assuredly. If Jupiter or fate were all knowing, why would any of Aeneas’ actions need overseeing and correcting at the time of occurrence, as presumably the actions and future of Aeneas would have been engineered to prevent mistakes? Rather than acting as an omnipotent being, Jupiter and other gods interfere to push Aeneas along the path but their actions are more short-term corrective.¹¹ An example is the sojourn at Carthage. Faltering at Carthage almost thwarted the entire mission and so surely it would have been better not to stop there at all. There is another problem. If Jupiter knew the stop was going to happen why are the arrangements made at the last minute¹² in such a distasteful and haphazard manner: Cupid forcing Dido to fall in love with Aeneas and eventually causing Dido to commit suicide, ensuring enmity between Rome and Carthage, consequently leading to future wars and cataclysms. Surely there must have been an easier route to Italy rather than through Carthage or a better way to convince Dido to accommodate the Trojans.

⁹ Matthaei, 1917

¹⁰ Tracy, H. L. (1964) ‘Fata Deum and the Action of the Aeneid’, *Greece and Rome*, 11(02), pp. 188-195. doi: 10.1017/s0017383500014248.

¹¹ Tracy, 1964

¹² Tracy, 1964

Jupiter also contradicts himself and proves inefficient. He predicts a war in Italy (I. 263) yet seems so irritated when the war actually occurs in Book X, that he blames the other gods for the incident. He then calls a council to sort out the problem, which he had foreseen and yet did not have the organisation to resolve. Jupiter's management of situations and direction of Aeneas is so poor, inefficient and erratic that it cannot be the product of the king of the gods, but purely a response to Aeneas' actions and errors on the path to Italy. Accordingly Aeneas must have had free will to act in such a manner, making his own choices and mistakes. If Jupiter foresaw what Aeneas would do, he would surely adjust the situations to bring about the conclusion safely and simply.

Although there is potential for complete free will, Aeneas never acts like a completely free man. He is bound to his journey. Aeneas says 'not of mine own desire do I seek Italy' (IV. 361). Therefore if he does not want to settle in Italy he should not but "fate assigned [him] here a place and a home" (XI. 112). These would be the actions of a completely free man, yet because he is bound to his journey he cannot be considered as free. Thus we see him bound to his journey and to his journey alone. The corrective actions, made by the gods, force and guide him to finish the journey. He is ordered by Jupiter to leave Carthage and find his way to Italy. In Book VIII he is commanded by Tiberinus to make an ally of Evander so that the Trojans may have the military might to win the war and finish the journey. Venus convinces Vulcan to make Aeneas 'divine arms' (XII. 739) so that he may beat Turnus in the duel and win Lavinia, consequently finishing his journey.

If Aeneas is purely bound to his mission and free will is permissible; in which actions is he free and not free? Where is that boundary? What is the nature of that mixture of compulsion and free will?

Previously, I argued that when fate refused Aeneas' death in Troy it was proof of fate hindering and completely quashing Aeneas' free will. But that may not be the case. Aeneas was forbidden his death but that restriction was only so he could live and complete the mission. If absolute compulsion were in effect Aeneas would not have been able to enter into a suicidal battle. However, Aeneas had the freedom to do so. He was prevented from dying because the compulsion was used on the weapons 'thereby the man's action [is] not forbidden, but frustrated'¹³.

Similarly, when Aeneas and his companions start to settle in Crete (III. 132), plagues and a drought follow. And Jupiter denies Aeneas these lands (III. 171). All this occurs because Aeneas made a decision that threatened the outcome of the journey. Therefore, as expected, Jupiter and other gods stepped in to forbid Aeneas to settle there. This shows that Aeneas cannot settle wherever he wishes; he must settle in the promised land of Italy, he has no freedom in this regard. Aeneas is told to settle in Italy (III. 166) but not where in Italy he is supposed to settle nor what route to take there. Therefore, from this, we can see that Aeneas has the freedom to choose the route to Italy and potentially where in Italy he is

¹³ Matthaei, 1917

meant to make landfall. This is why Jupiter and Venus had to make such haphazard arrangements in Carthage: they did not know where Aeneas would rest and pick up supplies. Hence, if knowledge of the future was not available Aeneas had the freedom to sail and break where he wished, but only if it was actually a break and not an arrival.

In other aspects Aeneas is also free. In the annual commemoration of the death of Anchises in Sicily Aeneas has the freedom to proclaim victors (V. 245). He directs the expedition and decides where to stop (I. in Carthage, III in Crete). He leads the expedition and makes all the decisions that fall upon a leader: uplifting speeches, allocation of food etc. Aeneas is free to choose all these things. But these things have a trivial and short term feel. These decisions are all mundane and normal things for any leader. There is nothing unique or special about these tasks for a hero chosen by the gods and fate. In essence, he is a normal leader who concerns himself with the usual affairs of a campaign; trivial when compared with the destiny and fate of millions centuries later. The only unique and special part of the mission: his journey to Italy is not in his control; it is being overseen by the gods and decreed by fate.

Aeneas is also free to make introductory speeches when visiting people and other nations. He can conduct himself as he pleases, as long as the mission is not endangered. Aeneas, in Carthage, steps out the shroud of Venus, makes the introductory speeches and asks for hospitality. Similarly in Latium he does the same. These things are not trivial matters; the decision whether the host agrees to accommodate the Trojans could bring success or failure to the mission. However, Aeneas makes the introductions and each time succeeds in gaining guest-rights. This must imply a certain amount of trust in Aeneas from the gods to not act incorrectly. But, in both Carthage and Latium the ground-works for the diplomatic successes were made by the gods. Cupid forces Dido to fall in love; a prophecy is sent to Latinus concerning a 'foreigner', in this case Aeneas. Therefore, Aeneas has complete free will in making the introductions, but the success is not his alone. Whether or not being able to claim the success infringes free will is subjective; on the one hand Aeneas is not allowed the freedom to fail, but why would he want to fail in this regard? Surely it is always better to succeed? Nevertheless, having been forbidden to fail, Aeneas' free will is still infringed. Yet that is what is expected. If failure could jeopardise the whole mission then, from what we have seen, the gods are expected to intervene in order to ensure Aeneas' success.

These are not the only scenarios when Aeneas acts freely and makes decision with no higher involvement. During his rampage in Book X, Aeneas slaughters many and even when supplicated he refuses to give mercy to Magus. No god intervenes in these decisions. Aeneas is acting out of pure unbridled rage. During this slaughter Aeneas is described as 'ardens' (X. 514), which has an emphatic position at the beginning of the line. This rage is also his alone. No god has stoked the fires of Aeneas' rage, he is completely free to act as he wishes and as his mind sees fit. This is not the only time where Aeneas' fury takes control. When Turnus asks for mercy Aeneas is 'ablaze with fury and terrible in his wrath' (XII. 946-7). Again through these emotions Aeneas acts as he sees fit.

Again no god interferes in these actions as since Aeneas has already won the duel, with Turnus having surrendered, he has finished his journey. It does not matter whether Aeneas kills Turnus or not as Lavinia is his (XII. 937). As such there is no need for interference because no act needs to be corrected. It could be said that this is the only action where no god is watching and judging, waiting to correct Aeneas. From this we can clearly see the boundary between what Aeneas can or cannot do. In agreement with the previous passage he cannot act in such a way that would endanger the fate of the mission. The lack of involvement from higher powers in such a potentially important act proves that Aeneas can exercise his free will only when the success of the mission is not at stake.

Such is Virgil's solution. Fate is seen as brooding over the whole mission, although not directly involved, forcing the destiny of Aeneas and Rome with some uncertainty so as to create tension. The gods are poor directors and inefficient problem solvers and their actions are corrective. Thus this all leads to Aeneas having the will to influence events in the purely short term. Aeneas is given clear freedom in the decisions of a leader and in the wrath of an avenger. Yet Aeneas has little choice in his destiny; he is bound by the will of fate and also by the fate of future generations. All this Virgil weaves into his epic to make a moving story and not merely a history detailing Aeneas' actions on his way to start a race prophesised to rule the world.

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