

Wyrð, Causality, and Providence
A Speculative Essay

Ian McNish

Council for Social and Economic Studies

The arrival of Middle Eastern monotheism in Europe replaced a prior proto-scientific belief in causality with the teleological concept of Divine Providence, or the Will of God. Ancient Greek philosophy was supplanted by a demand that men should stop seeking to understand the nature of the causal forces at work around them, and accept these simply as the work of an all-powerful monotheistic God. A new, organized priestly class demanded that men must accept the “revealed” word of their God without question. The academy founded by Plato was ordered closed, and as Bertha Phillpotts first showed us, even among the Germanic nations the concept of *Wyrð*, which postulated an all-pervasive causal force, was replaced by the concept of Divine intervention or Providence. Europe entered the Dark Ages, and remained there until the rediscovery of the empirical character of the pagan classical scholarship made possible the Renaissance and the rise of modern science.

Key Words: Mesopotamian priesthood; Christianity; European paganism; monotheism; Greek philosophy; Germanic mythology; Anglo-Saxon literature; *Wyrð*; causality; Providence; Modern Science.

**Michael Horowitz, Oriental Monotheism,
and Organized Priesthoods**

Michael Horowitz¹ has contrasted the success of the Greeks in laying the foundations of a scientific understanding of the world with the failure of the Mesopotamians, who had indeed created an advanced civilization, but never developed an

¹ This essay was largely inspired by reflections on a study by Michael Horowitz (see footnote 2) and the more extensive research of the late Bertha Phillpotts (see footnote 4). However, neither developed their respective themes in the direction that I have followed, and their work is totally free from responsibility for any inaccuracies, fallacious interpretations, or overstatements that may have crept into the indubitably venturesome hypothesis advanced in this paper.

objective science. He attributed this to their belief in the overriding power of their gods and the priests who serve these gods. Horowitz argued that the early Mesopotamian and subsequent Semitic cultures tended to believe that humanity was created to “relieve the gods of toil” and that righteous persons should serve and obey them. This belief was rigidly sustained by a large and well-organized priestly class that exerted ultimate power over the people, but even these priests were too fearful of their gods to dare to question the workings of the world, which they attributed wholly to the will of divine beings:

A hymn to the storm god Enlil quails before the deity’s “wild, glaring eyes.” “What has he planned? What is in Enlil’s holy mind?” the anxious supplicant wonders. “What has he planned against me in his holy mind?” Apparently, Enlil may strike without cause – merely being human is sufficient provocation.²

What effect did this theology have on Babylonian scholars?

Nature was considered both sacred and potentially hostile. The Sumerians had warned that the laws of nature are like the “laws of the abyss – none can look upon them”.... From the second millennium B.C., Babylonian scribes are, to be sure, more adventurous. But even they believe the study of nature is a sacred enterprise. The truth must not be wrenched from the gods – natural facts must be gradually “revealed” according to divine pleasure.... by attempting to rationalize the universe [a man] would be courting heresy: he would be threatening the domain of the deities. This transgression would almost certainly be rebuked by priestly superiors.

By contrast, Horowitz saw Greek society as being illuminated by an aristocracy that was essentially free from domination by priests. Indeed, the Greek priests served only individual gods, whose supernatural powers were limited to specific functions and were not regarded as all-powerful beings. Consequently learning was not restricted to the priesthood, who were not organized into any dominant hierarchy. As a result, the Greek aristocrats were able to allow their curiosity to enquire into the

² This and the following four Horowitz quotations are to be found in Michael G. Horowitz, “The Scientific Dialectic of Ancient Greece and the Cultural Tradition of Indo-European Speakers” in *Journal of Indo-European Studies*, Volume 24, Numbers, 3&4, Fall/Winter 1996.

secrets of the world around them:

An energetic, creative aristocracy supplied percolating talent and the affluence and leisure to deploy it. An anarchic theology liberated Greek theoretical imagination about the natural world.

Indeed, although Horowitz does not mention it, the head of each Greek kinship unit conducted the socio-religious rituals of the kin group. All important ritual and priestly duties relating to the organization of society were conducted by the heads of families and phratries, and by kings who generally derived their authority by virtue of their descent, real or imagined, from the founder of the nation. Free from subordination to one or more all-powerful gods, and superior to the priests who served the individual nature gods, the aristocrats of Greek society were at liberty to speculate on the nature of the universe and seek explanations of what happens in it. As Horowitz says:

Greek culture offers its pioneering philosophers an encouraging social, political, theological, and linguistic environment for the development of the scientific dialectic:

Socially: It boasts an active, confident, hegemonic class of aristocrats, with a unique tradition of individual thought and behavior. This aristocracy had never in its cultural memory been intimidated by religious dogma. Indeed, it is from this class of aristocrats that Greece's first philosophers spring.

Fustel de Coulanges, European Paganism, and Causality

Absent the Oriental tendency to portray Divine beings as all-powerful despots, pagan Europeans in general appear early to have concluded that the universe was governed by a web of causality. They recognized gods who were endowed with supernatural powers, and they had priests who served these gods – but these gods did not create the universe, and were themselves but a part of it. The French nineteenth century scholar Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges early demonstrated that the true religiosity of ancient Greece, Rome, and the Celtic and Germanic nations, was centered on the religion of the family, clan, phratry, gens, and tribe.³ The moral ties and rituals

³ See Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges and J. Jamieson, *Family, Kin and City-State*, Scott-Townsend Publishers, Washington D.C. for a full exposition of the familial nature of Greek and Roman religion, which centered on the concept of

that truly bound pre-Christian European communities together were based on kinship. A man owed his foremost duty to his kinfolk – and not only to his living kinsmen but also to those who had gone before him and given life to him, and to his descendants who would come after him. Men were powerless before the causal forces that determined the events taking place around them and thereby shaped their destiny, but a proud and courageous man could win fame for himself and honor for his descendants by striving courageously against the slings and arrows of misfortune. A man could not avoid his destiny – because he was caught up in the vast nexus of causality that permeated the Universe, a force that moved irresistibly from the past, through the present, and onwards into the future.

Causality in the form of The Three Fates

The fundamental concept of causality, as the all-powerful force shaping the workings of the Universe, was deeply rooted in the culture of ancient Greece and Rome. The three Fates or Moirae of the Greeks were believed to weave the web of causality: Clotho, with her spindle, spinning the causal threads that vitalized the world and all that was in it; Lachesis, pointing with her staff to a globe; and Atropos, with her sundial, and scissors. Ready to cut the causal thread of life. The Romans knew these same Fates as the Parcae. And similarly, the Germanic people recognized these three sisters who controlled causality as the Norns, calling them Urthr, Verdandi and Skuld, names which might quite well be parsed as *Was*, *Is* and *Will be*.

Even as late as Shakespeare, Englishmen still remembered three weird sisters, albeit in Christian garb, as elderly, immortal witches, who knew the secrets of Fate and could foretell the future.

In brief, European paganism to either a greater or a lesser extent sensed the reality of causality as the moving force behind all natural phenomena. Their gods were immortal and possessed superhuman powers, but they did not create the Universe and were themselves only one aspect of it. Beyond the ties that bound society together there was a metaphysical aspect to the religiosity of pre-Christian Europe that reflected a fascination with nature and a conscious sensitivity of the pulse of the

kinship, with the gods being almost incidental to the religious bond that held family, tribe and state together.

Universe, untrammled by any fear of an all-powerful monotheistic god. The less sophisticated made pre-scientific attempts to manipulate causality by the pre-scientific means that we call magic, but the more sophisticated applied Aristotelean logic to the task of uncovering the causal forces that vitalized nature, and by so doing laid the foundations for modern science. While the Babylonian, Assyrian and Egyptian priesthood slavishly served their gods, fearing to question their motives and desiring only to placate their anger and carry out their wishes, the myths of ancient European paganism tell of heroes challenging the gods to reveal whatever information they possessed concerning the secrets of the Universe, of searching for the golden apple of wisdom, and even the more primitive Germanic myths tell of Odin giving an eye in his search for knowledge.

Martha Phillpotts and *Wyrd*

A reading of the works of Dame Martha Phillpotts, a pioneer authority on Anglo-Saxon and early Germanic culture, provides insight into the pagan European concept of an impersonal causality, and supports Horowitz's explanation of why true science emerged in Europe rather than in the earlier civilizations of the Middle East. The Germanic-speaking peoples of Northern Europe, like the Greeks and Romans, also lived free from any fear of a single all-powerful god, and Phillpotts shows us how the Germanic peoples intuitively shared in the same proto-scientific appreciation of causality that we find in more developed form amongst the Greek and Roman intelligentsia. In Northern Europe this causal force was identified as *Wyrd*, and as such it played a major role in Germanic culture. *Wyrd* as a word is the abstract form of the Germanic verb *weorthan*, "to come to be" thus meaning "that which happens."⁴

As she declares:⁵

There must be something more in Anglo-Saxon paganism than

⁴ It may even be possible to suggest that in Germanic myth even the gods appear to have been subject to the overpowering force of *Wyrd*, in so far as they were destined to die fighting against the forces of evil and darkness in the final battle of Ragnarok.

⁵ This and the subsequent quotes from Bertha Phillpotts are taken from her essay "*Wyrd and Providence in Anglo-Saxon Thought*," in *Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association*, XII, (1928 for 1927).

the worship of Woden and Thunor, more than the sanctions of loyalty to a chief, the recognition of *Wyrd* as an impersonal and unapproachable force...

If we can descry the shadowy outline of this earlier, unformulated philosophy, it must be through the medium of the stories and memories of the Heroic Age. The Anglo-Saxons shared in that epic period as freely as any other of the Nordic peoples, and it seems safe to assume that the ideas that lie behind it were also common property.

But she also reveals how Christianity, rooted as it was in an Oriental belief in one or more all-powerful divinities, suppressed the roots of scientific thought in Europe, and substituted the "Will of God" for the more logical pagan concept of impersonal causality.

The Triumph of Christian Monotheism

The Oriental belief in the supreme power of Divinity as described by Horowitz, also inspired the later monotheistic doctrines of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. These three religions accepted no other explanation for natural events than the will of a divine Creator – except on occasion that it was found convenient to hypothecate an anti-God or Devil to explain such unpleasant events as the priests did not choose to attribute to their God.

As a missionary religion that sought to convert all peoples to acknowledge the one true God, Christianity developed subtle techniques to promote conversion, and Christian concepts, generally antithetical to European paganism, eventually replaced even the more deeply-rooted of the pagan concepts. Christian churches were commonly erected on the site of places held holy by pagan myth and tradition; Marriage, which in pagan Europe was a function of kinship, in the eyes of Christianity was not just a compact between two people and their kinfolk, but involved a third party, the Christian God – thus enabling Christianity to breach the walls of the kindred, which lay at the heart of paganism. Christian converts must not question the word of God as revealed by his prophets, for to seek any explanation of the working of the universe other than that contained in His Revealed Word was to do the bidding of the devil. The Christian God was a jealous God, whose ways were at times mystifying, inexplicable, and "wondrous." Christianity had

no room for those who asked questions when natural events mystified them, for God was omnipotent, all-powerful, and all that took place was Divine Providence.

Christianity, some of whose roots through John the Baptist reach into the egalitarian communalism of the Essenes, arose as a heresy among the Hebrews at a time when they lived under the domination of Rome, whose legions had stormed Masada and destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem. It offered comfort to those who suffered by alleging that their suffering and enforced humility would bring them rewards in the afterlife, while the pride of the Roman ruling clans – the *gens* or gentiles – would bring with it only misery after death.

Christianity became an organized force in Europe when Saul, whose original mission was to suppress the influence of mystery religions and similar heresies among diaspora Hebrew communities, perceived that the Christian heresy was spreading rapidly not only among diaspora Hebrews but among the vast underclass on whose labor the Roman Empire depended. Perceiving its revolutionary egalitarian ideals, a perceptive, enlightened Saul chose to convert to this heresy, and changing his name from Saul to Paul became the prime founder of the Christian Church. As an organized religion this egalitarian Oriental heresy became a powerful revolutionary force which, in the opinion of the historian Gibbon, was a prime contributor to the collapse of the Roman Empire. Christianity helped revenge the fall of Jerusalem.

Providence Supplants *Wyrd*

Just as Christianity, with its emphasis on faith and the unquestioning belief in miracles as acts of God, eventually suppressed the early science of the pagan Greek philosophers and set back scientific innovation in Roman Italy until the advent of the Renaissance, so also it sought to suppress any proto-scientific appreciation of causality among the Germanic peoples who were eventually to emerge as the prime pioneers of modern science. The concept of *Wyrd* as a mechanical causal force was replaced by the idea of Fate as Providence – as the inexplicable Will of God, the wisdom of whose acts should be accepted by his devotees with unquestioning Faith. Christianity had no room for *Wyrd*, since God could more easily work miracles. It is true that *Wyrd* retained such power in the German mind for generations after the advent of Christianity that

missionary priests initially sought to conflate pagan *Wyrd* with the Christian concept of Providence, but in the course of time they eventually ensured that it survived only in a distorted and degenerate form as “weird,” with all the fearful and ungodly connotations that are associated with “weird” to this day.

While the pagans had accepted death as the end of life, and represented Hel, the realm of the dead, as an empty nothingness, Christianity offered converts the Justice of God. Each man would be dealt with as his acts deserved in the eyes of the Church. Heaven was to be God’s reward for those who submitted to the Church’s wishes, but those who rejected the rule of the Church awaited an alternative fate, admission to Hel[1]– now no longer an empty nothingness, but a place of eternal torment. Since these rewards and punishments were to be realized only after death, no living person could ascertain whether they were real, and a man on his deathbed was easily tempted to bequeath a portion of his wealth to the clergy in return for their promise to pray that he should go to paradise, rather than to eternal torture in the Christian version of Hel[1].

As Phillpotts writes:

These ideas of Heaven, Hell, and the justice of God, are the three ideas connected with the new faith which we find clearly indicated in *Beowulf*, and they were no doubt specially characteristic of the first few generations after the conversion.

Clearly mere misfortune, mere defeat, was easier to understand in the light of the new knowledge. The victim could be compensated in the next life for his sufferings in this one, though that resistance to the uttermost, that defiance of Fate, so much admired in the heathen times, was now very liable to become mere impiety.

Plato's academy, which had survived for centuries after his death, was eventually closed by order of the Christian emperor of Byzantium because in seeking to understand causal events it challenged the doctrine of divine Providence. Similarly in Northern Europe, under Christian influence *Wyrd* acquired a new and evil meaning, “weird,” and those who sought to explore the secrets of causality were portrayed as being aligned with the forces of evil. Some therefore argue that it was not paganism that brought the Dark Ages to Europe, for it was a monotheistic Oriental religion that suppressed the roots of scientific thought.

While pagan Europe had encouraged enquiry into the workings of nature, the Christian church suppressed classical teachings and long resisted the revival of science by persecuting those who questioned whether natural forces rather than Providence determined human history, and whether the “revealed” word of God was indeed the true explanation for the mysteries of Life and the Universe.

Appendix:

Wyrd, Fate and the Value of Fame

What we know as the Heroic Age in pagan Europe was an expression of the dignity of men who met their fate – as determined by *Wyrd*, the irresistible causal forces that shaped all events – bravely and without flinching. The heroes sensed that they could not resist the causal forces that determined all movement in the universe, but they also intuitively realized that the prestige and social status of their kinsmen and heirs would be enhanced by the fame that they would earn by their conduct. As Bertha Phillpotts expresses it:

About the references to Fame in Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian poetry there is a warmth and a passion which ought to warn us against regarding it as the meed of mere physical prowess. It is an assertion that there is something greater than Fate: the strength of will and the courage of human beings, and the memory which could preserve their deeds. Fame and human character: these were the two things against which Fate could not prevail. 'Wealth perishes, kinsfolk perish, one's very self perishes', says the Northern Havamal, 'but fame dies never for him who gets it worthily.'

Only the descendants of the Germanic hero benefit from the bravery with which he meets his fated end. As Byrthwold declares in the Battle of Maldon:

Soul shall be the more stalwart, heart the higher,

Courage the greater, the more our might diminisheth.

No thought of retreat or shameful escape here, only of the pride, dignity and the courage with which men of iron go to their death – and thereby increased the prestige of their kinfolk and lineal descendants. While the Christian belief in

Providence, in the Will of God, encouraged humility, passivity, and submission, the pagan was expected to confront *Wyrd* with courage and dignity.

To the pagan European, just as to his Christian descendants, life was short. Bertha Phillpotts points to the legendary simile of the sparrow, whereby the life of man is likened to that of a bird that flits into the thegn's hall where men are feasting, only to quickly exit through another opening in the roof. In contrast to the pagan philosophy which accepted the brevity of the life, and sought eternal life through the survival of their descendants, Christianity promised something very unnatural – eternal afterlife in a perfect heaven for those who obeyed its dictates. It is true that in the Odinist tradition, Germanic warriors were also offered a highly militant form of “pie in the sky” – eternal combat and feasting as members of Odin's Einheriar or warband in Valhalla – but this appears to have been a recent innovation in Northern mythology, and was certainly quite atypical. As Bertha Phillpotts asserts:

For the Northern peoples there was no reward in a future life, since the doctrine of Valhalla never seems to have made much headway against the far older beliefs that the dead man lived on in his grave-mound or led a shadowy existence in Hell. So, as the Anglo-Saxon gnomic verse says : *Dom bio selast* ‘Fame is the best of all.’ This attitude to life deserves, I think, the name of a philosophy and it is none the less a coherent philosophy for being unformulated. It depends equally on the conception of Fate and on the conception of Fame. Neither can be taken away without shattering the web of thought.