

Betting on the Stars: Fate and Faith in Girolamo Cardano's Analysis of His Own Life

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Abstract. Throughout the Renaissance, the major discussion on whether humans have free will is primarily incompatible with the belief in destiny. Girolamo Cardano, the Italian polymath and astrologer, has stalled into existential crises. Through his autobiography, *The Book of My Life*, Cardano's faith in the predestined fate predicted by astrology and the desire for freedom and self-will collided, eventually leading to new ideas about the coexistence of human potential and the laws of nature. This research will examine how Cardano reconciles the tension between his deterministic belief in astrology-guided destiny and his faith in free will through *The Book of My Life*.

Keywords: Determinism, Destiny, Free Will, Astrology, Fate, Fortune, Hope, Felicity.

1. Introduction

Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt once commented: "Whoever reads this book will be bound to its protagonist until he has finished it." *The Book of My Life*, written by the Italian polymath, astrologer, and natural scientist Girolamo Cardano, reflects a man faithful to pursuing truth. He navigates through astrology, destiny, and Nature. Cardano had a difficult childhood. Often ill, and his father's harsh education weighed on him. The tension between his deterministic belief in astrological determination and his belief in free will guided his attitude toward life, finding hope in the destiny promised by celestial bodies and searching for happiness in the emptiness of life.

In 1520, against his father's wishes to study law, Cardano entered the University of Pavia to study medicine, receiving his degree in 1526. In 1531, he met his wife, Lucia Bandareni, and they had three children. During the 1530s, Cardano often attempted to join the Milan School of Internal Medicine. After countless failures, he was finally approved in 1539. Tragedy struck in 1560 when his son Giovanni Battista was executed for allegedly poisoning his wife, Brandona Cerrone. In 1570, Cardano was arrested on suspicion of spreading heresy, and the following year, he swore before the Holy Synod led by Antonio Baldinucci that he would never teach or publish again.

Suffering from all these ups and downs, Cardano wrote *The Book of My Life* in 1575 and died the following year. In this autobiography, Cardano approaches the "self" by applying his subjective will and objective astrological fate. This research will examine how Cardano reconciles the tension between his deterministic belief in astrology-guided destiny and his faith in free will through his elaborations on the roles of dreams, hopes, felicity, etc.

2. Fate and Fortune

In his autobiography, *The Book of My Life*, Girolamo Cardano's understanding of fortune rationalized his perception of fate as an irrevocable predetermination. Cardano used the words Fate and Fortune interchangeably to represent the omnipotent power of nature, which determines an event that is destined to happen and cannot be interfered with by humans: "Whenever my personal affairs have been in a state nothing short of desperate, I have been swept up on a wave of fortune." Thus, Cardano understands Fate and Fortune as overruling power that forms a reciprocal relationship in his life. In his understanding, the uncontrollability and unpredictability of fortune restrict the choices that can be made by free will. Drawing a comparison with fortune's patronage of Prince of Matelicaas, Cardano associates all the unpleasantness encountered in life with the "desertion of fortune," absolving himself of responsibility, to some extent, for his own destiny. When reflecting on his existence, Cardano



judged that his destiny was marred by myriad misfortunes: “the death-bitterest of blows—the folly, or the sterility of my children; my own impotence, my never-ending poverty, conflict, and accusations; troubles, diseases, dangers; my imprisonment, and the injustice of tolerating casualties not deserved, so many in number and so often.” Thus, Cardano approaches Fortune as a potentially malign force that diverges from his wishes, ultimately leading to the unchangeable, universal fate of “death.”

3. Astrology and Deterministic view

Cardano’s belief in celestial influences through astrology is the foundation of his view on personal destiny. There are two ways that Cardano associates astrology with his life: 1. The humorous properties of stars—heat and moisture— influence the disposition and nature of human behavior; 2. Inevitable fate—death, for example— can be explained through astrological deduction. When reflecting on his shortcomings, Cardano judges himself: “Timid of spirit, I am cold of heart, warm of brain, and given to never-ending meditation.” Having stated that “all things were essentially cold,” Cardano thus juxtaposed his “disposition midway between the cold and the...intense and instinctive desire to prophesy” with the classification humor properties. Cardano adapted the four properties of humor to study himself—knowing his own temperaments and nature— through reading celestial bodies. Cardano sought insights on his personality from the planets and stars: “Mars was casting an evil influence on each luminary because of the incompatibility of their positions, and its aspect was square to the moon. Therefore I could easily have been a monster, except for the fact that the place of the preceding conjunction had been 29 in Virgo, over which Mercury is the ruler.” In addition to the application of humor theory, Cardano substantiated his misfortunes predestined by the celestial order: “I recognize that God is the dispenser of all my afflictions which, though they may have seemed oppressive at the time, I doubt not were very good in the great order of the universe.” Acknowledging that there’s a reason behind everything, Cardano bends in the inevitability of life by bringing the concept of death as the ultimate ending of all creatures. Death, as Cardano suggested, is the insurmountable truth he saw through the stars: “There were stars which threatened, from every aspect, my death, which all declared would be before my forty-fifth year—all vain findings, for I live, and I am in my seventy-fifth year! It is not the fallibility of the art; it is the inexperience of the artificer. He believed that astrology is essentially an unshakable truth, a knowledge of proof; only by observing and following can one understand higher-level things. This idea is consistent with the determinism notion of passive intellect, that is, as knowledge of astrology is being continuously applied by Cardano. As Cardano further discussed the immortality of life and intellect, he argues that “no part of us grows old—not the life principle, if its medium and its motive force have permanence; therefore, astrology will be transformed into the object of its perception, the order of universe. Having said that, Cardano’s knowledge of astrology affected his perception of fate and destiny.

4. Dream, the Emptiness of Life

Complementary to the astrological approach, dreams entrenched Cardano’s notion of fate, that his action is determined by the external force of the will which ultimately leads to his futile perception of life. In Cardano's writings, dreams are often the carrier of divine indication rather than personal will. As Cardano interprets the purpose for the privacy of dream revelations: “For the genius could warn me openly, through a dream, or through a manifestation even more evident, but the mysterious warning perhaps was more powerfully indicative of divine protection, as were those even more startling warnings which came to pass: fears, hindrances, premonitions, and ominous sounds in fearful moments. But the mystic element is necessary so that we may recognize the hand of God and be taught not to forbid its working.” By inflicting “fear” through the dream, the power of the oracle is manipulative, and the word “protection” limits Cardano's control inside his cognitive consciousness. What counterbalanced divine intervention is the desire generated by Cardano's hope, but it loses its balance with the irresistible force of the oracle and slides into nothingness; as Cardano orients his way through life, he realized that: “Nature had failed me, that my desire had been left ungranted,” and, “all mortal things are futile and praise of them is altogether empty. Cardano interprets his

disappointment with his fate as a futility caused by the deterministic life. Such a search for self-agency and the desire to change or strive for essential, material facts are meaningless and cannot be retained. Faced with an unsatisfactory life experience, Cardano felt meaningless to complain: “Frankness is, moreover, the simpler course in as much as my personal affairs are not as highly esteemed as men commonly value their own interests- vain, empty affairs like those great clouds seen in the wake of the sunset which is meaningless and soon pass away.” Fame, interpreted from this perspective, is a nihilistic concept that cannot allow Cardano to find a sense of accomplishment or a destination. Delving deeper into his futile resentment, the reason for Cardano’s emptiness is that the broken hope—for fame in oneself—was achieved to his expectations neither in real life nor in the dream. Emotional impact and disillusionment thus echoed back to Cardano’s sense of abandonment, “bereft by fortune”. However, in the void created by dreams, Cardano still found a chance for subjective insights. When dreams reflect the destined future, they also implant desire: “After a few years I was inspired by a dream to a hope of attaining this second way of life-the way of fame.” While Cardano's dreams reinforced his belief in an externally imposed destiny, they also planted seeds of hope and desire that fueled his sense of agency and bridged the deterministic aspects of dreams with his pursuit of personal autonomy.

5. Free Will

While the forces of the stars perceived the deterministic outcome of life, Cardano’s desire to find existential value reflects his free will focus on the process. Cardano accentuates the importance of his choice, that, “Guided by the foregoing philosophy, therefore, I determined upon a course of life for myself, not such as I would have, but such as I could. Nor did I choose perhaps exactly what I should, but what I deemed would be better.” Looking into the future but acting subjectively in the present, Cardano created a variable, controllable destiny through his own will. Jumping out of the box of a fixed future, Cardano’s notion of “duty” affords an abundant space of choice for personal will and design. Through writing, Cardano reinvented his purpose of living: “To the duties of life I am exceptionally faithful, and particularly in the writing of my books, to such an extent that even though the most attractive opportunities have been offered, I have not abandoned my undertaking, but continued to adhere to my original purpose.” Being accountable for oneself is finally fed back to him as a sense of accomplishment, so Cardano's behavior has meaning and what he does has value. If recognizing one’s duty holds one accountable to Cardano’s self-fulfillment, being conscious of what one has in command could purposefully prompt one’s flexibility to achieve his duty. Claiming as one approach to happiness Cardano thinks: “choosing two or three from the number which are of a kind to claim our ardent affection and desire, so that we may possess them with the least possible disadvantage both for the purposes for which they were set apart and for other purposes as well.” Free will is thus to live according to one’s own account of interest and pleasure. Delving deeper into the latter, Cardano frequently brings up the self-governed code of conduct. Realizing that one had no control to foresee the outcome of pursuing fame, Cardano's efforts demonstrate a voluntaristic will: “I have lived my life as best I might...and even if any hope I have for fame should fail me, my ambition is worthy of praise, in as much as longing for renown is but natural.” Cardano’s material desire synthesized the reason for his endeavor to detach himself from preordained destiny and strive to create new chances for his honor. Pleasure, on the other hand, sets up subjective morality to maximize pragmatic enjoyment. “To the end that a certain continuity of aim might be gained,” Cardano structured a moral code for his action, though “partly out of necessity, partly tempted by pleasure, I continued to transgress daily, even while I was deliberating upon how best to live my life.” Therefore, creating a sense of joy in life without a clear purpose becomes the most obvious, opportunistic approach rather than letting nature take its course. Cardano’s free will is the reshuffling of purpose, duty, and moral standards of living from serving Nature to serving himself. Cardano’s sense of self-recognition and the pursuit of worldly desires define his existential faith, which is the basis of his resistance against insurmountable destiny.

6. Hope

Juxtaposing Cardano's search for purpose in the intrinsic and tangible purpose of living, free will reconciles his disillusionment and sense of futility in life. When Cardano accepted the destiny of his birth and saw the evil in his nature, his faith and desire did not give up on hope. Through his definition, "evil is but a lack of good, and good is of itself a virtue which is within our power to possess, or rather which is indispensable." Virtuous behaviors were regarded as voluntary resistance that is under the control of humans. When Cardano discussed the source of his status on volition, he suggests that "In general, all things which a hard necessity controls are variable; yet an impulse of the mind governs each man." Meditation, for example, is an impulse that can be sustained over a long time to achieve goodness without falling into evil. These impulses, however, are transient, and exclusive yet virtuous. Cardano believes that the intrinsic hope and extrinsic virtue that originate from human beings become the driving force of free will. The long-term practice of resisting evil thus regenerates the meaning of life through such thought replacement. When discussing the meaning of life, Cardano uses happiness as an example: "And in all this emptiness there is sometimes some infinitesimal and fleeting good." Cardano thus adopted a transcendentalist hope—accentuating that humans are the ones in the rule of themselves—to re-establish sovereignty in making choices and be responsible for his actions. Returning to his introduction to evil, Cardano recognized the chance of subjective influence in the face of objectively unchangeable fate: "What, then, is evil in the midst of so great an array of blessings and such a store of wisdom, that the universe abounds in hope!" Hope is thus the inherent active intellect of Cardano that constantly modifies the passive intellect of his Astrological knowledge. As hope could be reapplied to reconcile Cardano's sense of vanity, he justifies that: "since all things are insignificant and vain, whatever indeed concerns our remaining activities depends thereafter upon even the most fleeting circumstances." Cardano's purpose of free will therefore associates his perception of fate with his thinking of time; if there is no metaphysical difference in the present, past, and future in eternity, then the result cannot deprive people of their existence. The eternal result of the world, that is, death, is a truth and will not change on its own; it is meaningless to strive to change its outcome, but it is meaningful to enjoy the present and the imminent future.

7. Felicity

Guided by hope, Cardano elaborates on how concepts of fate and will exercise passive and active hope to help him achieve happiness. Passive happiness applies to the deterministic perception of order, that everything happens and passes naturally. An overarching force manipulates Cardano's fortune that he relies on to seek temporal felicity. When he starts by describing happiness, Cardano initially terms the care-free situation as "a mortal in the seats of the high gods as it were, or better said, in the realms of bliss." If Cardano wants to accept gifts from God to achieve happiness, his autonomy would be suppressed as he bends devoutly for this gift that is not under his control. Yet this happiness can be withdrawn according to physical or emotional tumults, that "happiness in any given period of time is merely comparative in relation to the whole"; when Cardano's son is executed for poisoning his wife, for instance, he wrote that misfortune has altered the circumstances of his life and even imposed additional suffering. To possess is one thing; to possess what is best is another thing; while to hold unchallenged right to what one has is the perfection of possession. Therefore, Cardano converts to active hope, by using the inner desire to claim the best thing that generates happiness: "To possess is one thing; to possess what is best is another thing; while to hold the unchallenged right to what one has is the perfection of possession." This concept is based on Cardano's deterministic view of life: although the power that guides the life and destiny of the human soul is immortal, the final outcome of human beings will still deprive human beings of their existence. Therefore, seeking transient and mortal happiness is Cardano's means of proving himself "a pleasant existence in so far as our human nature permits." Through astrology, Cardano saw the empty essence of Life, but his subjective desire changed the way he took part in living his fate: "Let us live, therefore, cheerfully, although there be no lasting joy in mortal things, whose substance is evanescent, inane, and vacuous." Therefore,

Cardano's pursuit of happiness refuses to live in the fixed possibilities for the future, transforms the dominance of hope into its own power, and shapes more possibilities for the future.

8. Conclusion

In Cardano's *The Book of My Life*, fortune and fate, astrological and deterministic views projected the immortal rule of the world; dream revealed the insurmountable distance and emptiness between fantasy and determined reality; hope guides him to find the faith to navigate the destined emptiness of life, achieving felicity through possessing sense of purpose and self-consistency. Cardano reconciled all concepts that are interconnected such that analyzed his life. He lives a mortal life in an immortal world, such that his free will could only be perceived as a trivial butterfly flapping in eternity, unable to create a tornado since there's no air flowing unbound by the law of nature. Through astrology, Cardano perceived the insurmountable rule of nature that explained his past and determined his future and that his control over himself was immeasurable. Though fate is inevitable, destiny can be learned and what was learned can be adapted. The choices he makes through free will subtly affect his future possibilities. Cardano realizes that the origin of moral nature is in one's innate qualities, choice becomes important because it can change a person, not just his path from past to future. Oriented to live in the present, theoretical knowledge and perceptions from *The Book of My Life* converge to a unified purpose: Γνῶθι σαυτόν, "Know thyself," and know the truth.

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