

Choices

The choices we make will always have consequences, and not always consequences we foresee. I shall remind you of a story you have all heard before. It is the story of a young man who, though of royal blood, was a lowly shepherd, and of the fateful choice he made. I shall give you, for good measure, sketches of stories of what might have happened had the young man made different choices, and finally leave you with a thought to ponder.

The young man was Paris, also known as Alexander, one of the many sons of King Priam of Troy. It had been prophesied that this son would bring ruin upon Troy, so Priam had given the child to his chief herdsman, Agelaüs, to take away and kill. But Agelaüs had not had the heart to do this and simply took the child to Mt Ida, south-east of the city, and exposed him there, where miraculously he survived and grew up as a shepherd.

It was to this young man that Zeus, not wanting to offend any goddess, gave the Golden Apple to be awarded to the most beautiful among them. Three claimed the title: Hera, Athene and Aphrodite. We know that he chose Aphrodite, not because she was the most beautiful but because he was tempted by her bribe that Helen, the most beautiful of mortal women, would renounce her husband, King Menelaüs of Sparta, and elope with him. The foolish young man, no doubt inflamed with lust after inspecting three naked goddesses, chose Aphrodite and her bribe, without thinking of the consequences: the implacable hatred of Hera and Athene and, of course, of Menelaüs, which resulted in ten years of war, the slaughter of many and the destruction of Troy.

But what would have happened if Paris had made a different choice? What would have been the consequence of his choosing Hera? Her bribe had been to make Paris, or Alexander, lord of all Asia and the richest man in the world. Suppose it had been avarice and not lust that had moved Paris. Undoubtedly Hera would have honored the promise. But how could he have become lord of Asia while his father ruled Lydia and Phrygia, unless he overthrew his father and became lord of all his own brothers (or had them killed)? He would thus have still fulfilled the prophecy that Troy would be destroyed. Then he would have swept over Asia, as his namesake Alexander did a millennium later, reaching India and beyond. Yes, he would surely have amassed great treasure in the process and become the richest man in the world.

But instead of enduring the hatred of Hera and Athene, he would now have endured the hatred of Athene and Aphrodite, the goddesses of war and of love: a formidable combination. Surely his Asian Empire would have alarmed the Greeks in Europe and the Egyptians in Africa? Sooner or later they, with the aid of Athene, would have combined with malcontents within Paris' Asian Empire and risen against him.

And do not forget Aphrodite. She would surely have worked her wiles and made him fall in love with a femme fatale who would betray him to his enemies just as Delilah betrayed Samson to the Philistines.

So should he perhaps have chosen Athene? She promised that he would be victorious in all his battles and that she would grant him such wisdom that he would become the wisest man in the world. It would seem that this would have been the most prudent bribe to have chosen. He would have had no need to overthrow Troy or, indeed, any other city in order that Athene's promise be

fulfilled. But if anyone did declare war on him, he would be victorious; and as the wisest person in the world, he would surely have known how to form alliances and avoid war as much as possible. With such wisdom he would have known how to amass enough wealth to be comfortable and contented. Surely Athene was the prudent choice?

But we must not forget Hera and Aphrodite. Hera, the great Queen of Olympus, was known to be vengeful against those who crossed her. She would certainly have been working to stir up discontent among Paris' enemies. For all his wisdom, Paris would certainly have had to put to the test Athene's promise of his always being victorious. But at what price would some of those victories be paid? Had it not been prophesied that he would bring destruction upon Troy? We may imagine that Priam, moved by Hera, refused to acknowledge Paris as the baby whom Agelaüs had taken to have killed so many years ago. Certainly Priam's other sons, of whom there were very many, would have plotted against him. Yes, Paris would undoubtedly have been victorious, but Troy would have fallen. Would not one who was always victorious and who was endowed with great wisdom have become a great ruler like Solomon in Israel half a millennium later?

Would not Aphrodite have seen to it that, like Solomon, he amassed wives through political treaties and through desire, as well as many concubines. The scriptures say that Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines. It was these wives and concubines who caused Solomon to fall from wisdom, offend his God and ensure that his kingdom did not survive his death. Although Paris would have been victorious always in war, Hera would have seen to it that the many wives and concubines Aphrodite brought his way would weaken him and bring about the downfall of his kingdom. He would not have died happily.

There was another choice he could have made, I think. He could have chosen to refuse all bribes and remain uncorrupted. He could have chosen to cut the apple into thirds and award one third to each goddess. But, you will ask, "Had it not been prophesied that he would bring ruin on Troy?" That was his fate; he could not escape it.

That theme, indeed, occurs constantly in Greek literature. We think of Oedipus who, like Paris, had been exposed on a mountain to die in order that a prophecy would not be fulfilled; yet he lived to slay his father and marry his mother. In all the ancient tragic plays you will find this theme of fate which the hero cannot avoid. So did Paris really have any choice at all? Would he really have been permitted by fate to have chosen Hera or Athene, or chosen to have divided the apple? Was it in fact fated that he would choose Aphrodite and that the Trojan war with all its death and destruction would inevitably follow?

Can you, dear listeners, ever make a choice? Are you not already programmed by your genetic make-up, by your DNA, and by your past and current environments and experiences? If you are, then your choices are illusory. If this is true, then all events in the world are the result of previous events – not choices and consequences, but only consequences. The future is already fixed, is predetermined and, indeed, pre-exists. Hence H.G. Well's time-traveler can go forward into the future – indeed to the last days of this earth. Did not Newton show the universe is mechanistic and determined according to fixed laws? If this is true, I no more chose to give you this offering than you each chose to give yours. We had no choice because we were fated to do so.

But did not Einstein change this naïve determinism with his Theory of Relativity? Indeed, he did, though the general public have not yet caught up with

it. Also the quantum-mechanical unpredictability that was found in the sub-atomic world during the last century must surely make us reassess the 19th century's so-called "certainties." Free will is possible - not absolute free will, of course, since things like DNA and environment must affect us - but the advances in science of the last century give us cause to believe the future is not pre-existent and has not been pre-determined; the future is one of possibilities and subject to the unpredictability that we find in quantum mechanics. Or so I believe.

If this is so, then I have freely chosen to share these thoughts with you and you have freely chosen what to share with us; and Paris, if he had existed in our world and not in the world of myth, could have chosen to award the apple to Hera or Athene, or to divide it into three.

So I ask you to choose, dear listeners, whether I or the determinists are