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Original publication:

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Dana Jalobeanu, Charles. T. Wolfe (ed.): Encyclopedia of Early Modern Philosophy and the Sciences

Cham, Springer 2019

URL: https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007/978-3-319-20791-9_13-1

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Divine Providence

In: Encyclopedia of Early Modern Philosophy and the Sciences, hg. von Dana Jalobeanu, Charles. T. Wolfe, Springer, Cham 2019.

Literally translated, the Latin term *pro-videntia* means fore-seeing (*pro* = *prae* = ahead, *videre* = seeing). The Greek equivalent is *pro-noia* (fore-thought or fore-sight). But in the history of Christian thought *providence* refers not only to God's *seeing* and *knowing* but also to *ordaining* the creation and to *acting* upon and in creation. In that (traditional) understanding it expresses the belief that all things are ordered and regulated by God towards his purposes (*praedeterminatio* = fore-ordination), and the belief that God acts according to his purposes in order to care for the creation (*procuratio* = "caring for", "providing with"). Here *pro* does not have the meaning of "fore" (*prae*, in German: "vorher") but of "in favour of" (in German: "für"). So one can say, the term "providence" covers a spectrum of meanings that includes perceptive and intellectual practices (seeing, knowing), voluntary aspects (making and exerting a counsel, ordaining) and actions (preserving, caring guiding, ruling).

1. Origins of the term "providence"

The term "providence" is not of biblical origin. It stems from the Greek philosophy of nature. *Pronoia* meant the teleological ordaining of all reality by the *nous* (the cosmic reason). By means of that concept the order of nature could be explained. At first it appeared in Herodot (Herodotus 1998: III, § 108). In the philosophical school of the Stoa the meaning was extended over all reality: nature as well as history. *Pronoia* was understood as the impersonal principle or power which rules over the cosmos deterministically. Since the lives of the individuals are also under that rule *pronoia* was regarded as fate.

Except for a very few occurrences in the book Sapiaentia Salomonis (6:7; 14:3; 17:2) that term does not appear in the biblical scriptures. However, in many biblical passages God's eternal counsel, his ruling power and his caring activity are testified. In the Deuteronomistic History (the biblical books Deuteronomy to 2 Kings) God's powerful rule over history in general and over the history of the chosen people in particular is described. The Gospel of Luke talks of a divine necessity underlying the passion of Christ (expressed with the Greek term: *dei* = "it had to happen" Lk 9:22; 17:25; 21:9; 24:7; 24:44). In Acts 2:23; 4:28; 20:27 God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge or the counsel of God are mentioned. In Romans 9-11 Paul depicts a preordained history of salvation. All the passages which refer to God's acts of electing, choosing/calling, instructing, ordering, guiding, preserving, and saving can be interpreted within the framework of the concept of God's providence. The same applies to those texts which speak about God's fatherly care for every single of his "children" (Matt 6:25-34; 10:29-31). Finally, one can point at the apocalyptic accounts of the preordained sequence of the eschatological events. Those narrations, records and proclamations of the powerful will of God provided the scriptural material for the doctrine of divine providence which was established in the theology of the Church Fathers (Clement of Rome, Justin, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria and Origen) and further developed throughout the history of Christian thought.

In that formative period of Christian theology, when the biblical tradition and Greek philosophy coalesced, the subject of *pronoia* could no longer be taken as an impersonal cosmic principle but had to be understood as the personal Creator who sustained his creation by his Word (*logos*) and Spirit (*pneuma*) and who led it to its salvific consummation. Yet the Greek idea of an education (*paideia*) of the human race by God also played a significant role.

5. “Providence” before Early Modernity

The paradigm shift from Platonic to Aristotelian philosophy as the framework for theological reflection affected also the doctrine of providence. While under the influence of Platonism providence was understood as *pro-videncia* in terms of omniscience, having absolute knowledge, “seeing” the eternal truth (which relates to the Platonic vision of the ideas), under the influence of the Aristotelian way of thinking the notion of teleological ordering became dominant. Thomas Aquinas spelled out divine providence as God's pre-temporal rational foreordaining of all things (Thomas Aquinas 2012: I, q. 22, art. 1).

In the Renaissance-era Stoicism was rediscovered and the principle of necessity in nature and history newly emphasized. Astrology played an important role in academic and public discussions. Fate was regarded as the cosmic ruler. The theological conceptions of providence in the 15th century were influenced by that Neo-Stoicism but also critically opposed it.

The Protestant Reformers stressed the voluntarily concrete acts of God in nature, in history, and in the individual life of humans. The theological location (*locus*) of the doctrine of providence became shifted from the doctrine of God to the doctrine of creation and its preservation. Calvin stressed the omnipotent sovereignty of Almighty God, by which even raindrops are under his control. Yet he avoided a quasi-Stoic fatalism that would subject human acts to an impersonal and ruthless nexus of omni-causality (Calvin 2007: I/16.8). God is a gracious and caring God who sustains his creation and guides it toward the salvation that he has determined for it.

In the course of history, the doctrine of divine providence was systematized. The Protestant scholasticism, the so called Lutheran and Calvinist Orthodoxy of the 16th to the 18th centuries adopted the scholastic distinctions relative to providence and elaborated them further. The most important distinctions are (a) those between three forms of providential action: sustaining (*conservatio*), concurrence, that means taking care of, supporting (*concursum*), and ruling/guiding (*gubernatio*). The idea behind that distinction is that God is not like a shipbuilder, who once being done with his job, leaves the ship behind, letting it sail all alone by itself in the sea, but he rather sustains the ship in its existence, provides strong winds for it to sail and directs it to a certain destination. Another distinction (b) is the one which is between the general, special and very special providence. According to Johann F. König (König 2006: §§ 246-286) the general providence (*providentia generalis / universalis*) refers to all things, i.e. to creation as whole (nature and history), the special providence (*providentia specialis / particularis*) to all humans, irrespectively of their relation to God, and the very special providence (*providentia specialissima / singularis*) to the believers. A third distinction (c) that between the ordinary and extraordinary providence. *Providentia ordinaria* is executed in accordance with the regular order of nature and history, God acts by means of those processes. For example, God uses the medical treatment as a means to heal a person. *Providentia extraordinaria*, however, works miraculously and immediate (*immediatus* = without means), i.e. without using natural causes. Those distinctions form a kind of “grammar” of the doctrine of providence.

6. “Providence” in Early Modernity

In the early modern period (17/18th century) reflections on divine providence were spelled out with regard to the domains of nature, history and to human existence.

(a) With the rise of the natural sciences the ontological, teleological and symbolical understanding of reality, which regarded it as an hierarchical order of being (according to a Platonic understanding) or an organism

in which all entities develop according to their inherent qualities to certain goals (according to an Aristotelian understanding) or as the symbolic realization of God's creative power (according to an Augustinian understanding) became replaced by a mechanistic paradigm. The cosmos was regarded as a functional nexus of causes and effects which is perfectly constructed ("machina mundi"). There is no need for an external intervention. If there were such need that would indicate a lack of perfection of the cosmic machine. The famous clocks in the cathedrals of Strasbourg, Münster or Prague were taken as illustrations of that mechanical paradigm.

The shift of paradigm deeply affected the understanding of divine providence. It became difficult to understand it as an immediate, spontaneous and contingent divine intervention into cosmic processes, for example into weather activities. Also technical inventions had an effect of the way God's providential action was conceptualized. The scientific explanation of thunder and lightning and the invention of the lightning arrester for example made it difficult to regard a lightning as an act of God which expresses the wrath of God. In the frame of that more or less de-sacralized notion of natural processes divine action could no longer be considered as voluntarily involved in physical causality. If physical causes provide sufficient evidence for the explanation of natural events, divine action does not need to become applied to it or is even ruled out by the self-sufficiency of the physical systems. Especially the notion of *specific* divine action (understood as single acts of God in nature and history) became problematic while the notion of *general* providence (in terms of preserving and empowering the creation) could be adapted to the concept of the cosmos as a perfectly constructed masterpiece.

A basic principle of the mechanistic paradigm is that natural events are determined by a regularity which is based on laws of nature. That principle allows neither for randomness nor for a contingent supernatural intervention. Providence therefore needed to be understood on the one hand as "wise" installation of the laws of nature and on the other hand as influencing natural processes to develop to certain goals in accordance with those laws.

Natural theologies tried to explain the functionality of organisms and bio-systems in terms of a divine teleological order, installed and activated by a supreme intelligence. Especially Physico-theologians like John Ray (1627-1705), Johann Albert Fabricius (1668-1736) or William Derham (1657-1735) took their starting point in the study of plants and animals in order to interpret their beauty and functionality as a manifestation of God's glory and wisdom. In an appendix to the 2nd ed. of his *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (1713) Isaac Newton stated: "This most elegant system of the sun, planets, and comets could not have arisen without the design and dominion of an intelligent and powerful being." (Newton, 2004: 90). That led to William Paley's "argument of design" (Paley 1890/1805) and from there to the contemporary discussions on "intelligent design".

Philosophers like Baruch de Spinoza (1632-1677) and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716) opposed to that view. According to Spinoza God is the *immanent* cause of processes, but does not exert an external causality. The absolute substance of God which is the essence of all entities works in them from within. God moves the cosmos like the soul moves the body. Providence is identical with the order of nature, activated by God, in order to preserve the cosmos. But Spinoza didn't assume any voluntary teleological activity of God. Providence was not spelled out in terms of history.

In his correspondence with Samuel Clarke Leibniz argued against the position held by Newton. He stated that there is no need for constantly divine interventions into the cosmic processes in order to keep his design adjusted. He declared the cosmos to be a "pre-established harmony" (Leibniz 1952: III, § 416). God has created "the best of all possible worlds" (Leibniz 1991, 53-55) which is in a perpetual motion. The universe consists of individual substances (*monads*) which are synchronized and programmed to interact in a

predetermined way. God was regarded as the programmer. That philosophical concept of providence is closer to the Greek understanding of *pronoia* than to the biblical belief in the reign of God.

The design-argument became also criticized by David Hume (1711-1776). In his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779) he questioned the analogy between a human-made artefact and the alleged God-made design of the universe. In the 19th century the design-argument came even more under pressure by Charles Darwin's (1809-1882) theory of an autopoietic evolution which ruled out not only divine interventions but also a predetermined design established by God. In his *Autobiography* he stated: "There seems to be no more design in the variability of organic beings and in the action of natural selection than in the course which the wind blows" (Darwin 1959: 87).

In theology the shift of paradigm in understanding the reality in general and the natural processes in particular could also led to tensions with the traditional doctrine of divine providence, especially in regard to miracles of nature. Such miracles were considered as paramount examples of singular mighty acts of God. Not only Hume but already Spinoza criticized the notion of miracles of nature which overrule the laws of nature (Spinoza, 2017, ch. 6). That tension led to theological debates in which not the least the hermeneutics of the Biblical texts was at stake.

The German theologian Johann Friedrich König (1619-1664) taught that God's activity in the world is not to be depicted as a series of personal acts but as an influence. God „gently influences" (*suaviter influit*) the actions of the creatures by an „inflowing" (an *influxus*) of his operative presence. That presence accommodates to the condition of each creature and occasion so that there is no competition between God's activity and human action. It is God's spiritual power that generates that *influxus*. The creatures do not act together with God's action. They perform their free actions within a spiritual field of force that nonetheless has an influence on them. God's activity is intrinsically involved in human action, it does not go side by side with it. There is not a relation of cooperation between them, but of participation in the divine life (König, 2006).

(b) In regard to the domain of *history*, some philosophical and theological approaches were developed which interpreted the flow of events as ordered by a rational (divine) dynamics or by rational intentions of God. In *The Education of the Human Race* (Lessing 2005), Gotthold E. Lessing (1729-1781) took up the ancient concept of God as a teacher who leads humanity to the realm of the spirit. In, and moreover after the Enlightenment, divine providence got connected with the notion of progress and with an optimistic understanding of that progress as a development towards humanization. The most prominent approach to a philosophical "theology" of history was presented by Georg W. F. Hegel (1770-1831). Against what he took to be a short-sighted belief in God's watching over and guiding individuals and their works, he interpreted history as the self-realization of the divine cosmic reason, which – with an "absolute cunning" (Hegel 1929: 420) – directs the flow of history to the point where the divine spirit comes to a full self-understanding. Absolute necessity rules the process and progress of history.

That view was challenged by historical events which were obviously chaotic, meaningless and purely destructive. The Enlightenment-evoked optimism was already shaken by the earthquake of Lisbon in 1755. Hegel's view was questioned by historical turbulences like revolutions in the 19th century, but also by a positivistic, non-teleological interpretation of history as it became dominant in the second half of the 19th century.

(c) The domain of the *human existence* was the major field, where the belief in divine providence has the most prominent place: In the early modern period especially in Pietism divine providence was regarded as God's personal guidance of every singular life, leading it to a certain goal according to the predetermined purpose of God. While the notion of special divine action in reference to the domains of nature and history became questionable, in the domain of the human existence it remained dominant: God or Jesus was

believed to arrange the flow of life of the individual believer so that every occurrence in his/her life could be seen as a meaningful part of a meaningful whole, even if that meaning seems to be hidden. The believers looked for signs of and hints to God's providential guidance in their lives. That existential approach to divine providence can be traced back to Augustin's *Confessions* (Augustin 2006) and pursued to the modern piety-movements, especially the Pentecostal and charismatic movements. Believing in a personal caring ruler of the individual life and the universal history stands over against the idea that life and history are subject to sheer chance or to blind fate or to natural necessities in a mechanistic world.

7. Systematic reflection

The understanding of divine providence in terms of divine action faces at least the following three difficulties: (a) the problem of anthropomorphism: Can the concept of "action" as an intentional changing (or preventing the change) of specific states of affairs by a personal bodily agent be applied to God as a disembodied transcendent agent? (b) The problem of transcendence and immanence: If God acts in the world how can he/she be distinguished from creaturely actors and causes? Can one avoid locating God's activity on the same level where the human agency and the natural causality are also placed, as to circumvent the conflict between them? (c) The problem of theodicy: If God is assumed to perform single mighty acts, why did and does he/she not use this power to prevent physical or even moral evil, like a Tsunami or human-made hells? Is it intelligible to believe that God intervenes in some situations, but not in others? Does this not entail that he/she acts arbitrarily?

To oppose this criticism, from the scholastic theology throughout early modernity to the present discussions on divine providence the position was held that God's agency is not to be depicted as a direct intervention but needs to be seen as an enactment of the created agents, not as an external cooperation with them but as an internal empowering and directing. It works as an ongoing influence, not as a physical intervention. And therefore that power does not have the power to prevent all evil. Divine action could and can be understood as God's operative presence in the power of his spirit (Bernhardt 1999). According to that model, God "acts" by „inspiration”.

8. Cross-References

Chance, Determinism, Fate, Natural Theology, Theodicy, Laws of Nature, Miracles.

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