

Providence, Fate and the human will

Does Providence exist or has the whole of reality arisen through blind chance? This is one of the most important questions we can ask – the answer we arrive at will frame our lives and our aspirations, and cause us to act in certain ways and not other ways. The word providence (much like its Greek equivalent *pronoia*) means 'fore-thought' or 'before thought' and so the concept implies that something is causing the universe to behave according to intelligence or according to something that is causally before intelligence. Because so many in the contemporary world are locked into a fight between two simplistic worldviews it is difficult to approach the question of providence without being waylaid by the assumptions of the conflicting sides – those who affirm that there is a personal God planning the course of things according to a very human – even childish – set of rules; or those who affirm that everything is running to the chance collisions of particles of matter, with no purpose and no paradigm, and that what we imagine to be stable laws are merely the convenient projections of the human mind. In the ancient world these two views had their proponents, but the Platonic tradition considered neither to be philosophically sound and offered a more complex and subtle worldview. This is an attempt to introduce the traditions concepts.

In broad outline in the tradition, the workings of the universe are seen as, firstly, the outflowing of goodness from the eternal nature of the Gods (and this rules all things); and, secondly, the sequences of causes and effects in time, Fate if you like, some of which are obvious and can be seen by thoughtful human beings, and some of which are so complex as to be more or less untraceable. It is clear that Fate, thus considered, acts as a secondary governor *for things which are in time*. Somewhere in this structure is the human being – a rather amphibious creature with links to both eternity and time.

Plato has the characters in his *Laws* explore the question using terms which we should read with care: most especially the preliminary arguments that rest on the matter of Gods. Now these 'Gods' should not be mistaken for the squabbling and amoral super-beings of Greek myth unless we are going to treat the myths in an educated way as being highly symbolic of almost unthinkable principles. The tenth book of the *Laws* claims that we should affirm three important things concerning the Gods: that they exist; that they take care of all things; that they are unaffected by the actions of human beings (so that, for example, they cannot be bribed by prayers and sacrifices). The discussion in the *Laws* then moves on to frame an answer to an imagined young man who questions the existence and workings of Providence:

reading 1
Laws 903b

We should persuade the young man, that he who takes care of the whole has constituted all things with a view to the safety and virtue of the whole, every part of which, as much as possible, suffers and acts in a manner proper to its nature; that over each of these parts rulers are placed, who always cause that which is smallest in every action and passion to receive its ultimate distribution; among which parts, O miserable creature, thou art one, and which, though *diminutive in the extreme*, continually directs its views to *the All*. But you are ignorant that every generated particular nature subsists for the sake of the whole, that the universe may enjoy a blessed life, and not for your sake, but that you subsist for the

sake of the universe. For every physician, and every craftsman, effects all things for the sake of the whole, and regards that which is best in common; fashioning a part for the sake of the whole, and not the whole for the sake of a part. You, however, are indignant, in consequence of not knowing how that which is best with respect to yourself happens both to the universe and yourself, according to the power of your common origin. But since a soul which is connected at different times with different bodies undergoes all-various changes, either through itself, or through some other soul, nothing else remains to be done by the *dice-player*¹ than to transfer manners when they become better, into a better place, but, when they become worse, into a worse place, according to the proper condition of each, that they may obtain appropriate rewards.

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The Gods represent those powers which hold within themselves a vision of "the good" and "the beautiful" – a vision only possible to things which act as the highest kind of cause. The lowest kind of cause is merely mechanical and material, and in the *Timaeus* the creation of the physical universe is described as taking place when intelligent causes combined with these mechanical ones (those that come under what Plato calls "necessity"):

"For, the generation of the world being mingled, it was produced from the composition of intellect and necessity. But intellect ruling over necessity persuaded it to lead the most part of generated natures to that which is best; and hence necessity being vanquished by wise persuasion, from these two as principles the world arose." *Timaeus*, 48a

Going back to the passage from the *Laws* can we see that there are three (or possible four) different things which are shaping the course of events:

- The Gods – that is to say the intelligence of the highest causes;
- The individual soul and its choices;
- The working of the dice-player – the complex and largely hidden causes of the material world, seemingly without thought – in other words the seemingly random sequence generated by what we call fate.
- (A possible "other soul", making its choices – that is, I think, the fact that every individual is part of a weave of many souls, so that what we will and do is in some way affected by the choice and actions of others. An alternative interpretation of this phrase is that alongside the rational soul which is the individual "choosing self" we are attached, while in a body, to an animal non-rational soul, which animates the body at a level usually below the control of the rational soul – the heart beats, the liver purifies, the lungs exchanges oxygen, etc without our direction. Further, the more emotional impulses – anger and desire – arise from the animal nature and are only with difficulty guided and integrated with our rational choices. Our embodied life is therefore affected by this "other soul.")

For Plato, as we can see from the *Timaeus*, the higher causes – the intelligent ones – have dominion over the lower ones who are "vanquished by wise persuasion." We might note

¹ The *dice-player* is that element of reality which appears to us to be mere chance, simply because of the complexity of the material world – in modern terms the "butterfly effect" as understood by chaos theory.

that in the description of the creation of the manifested universe in the same dialogue the creator God (called the Demiurge and identified by Proclus as Zeus) is called good as is the paradigm upon which the universe is based – in other words the providential signature is *goodness*.

Plotinus (3rd century CE) picks this up "creation through goodness" in his treatise on Providence, imagining in the passage what the soul of the universe might say if questioned:

reading 2
Ennead
3.2.3

". . . for it [the harmony of intellect and necessity] produced a whole, all beautiful and self-sufficient and friends with itself and with its parts, both the more important and the lesser, which are all equally well adapted to it. So he who blamed the whole because of the parts would be quite unreasonable in his blame; one must consider the parts in relation to the whole, to see if they are harmonious and in concord with it; and when one considers the whole one must not look at a few little parts. This is not blaming the universe but taking some of its parts separately, as if one were to take a hair of a whole living being, or a toe, and neglect the whole man, a wonderful sight to see; or, really, to ignore the rest of living beings and pick out the meanest; or to pass over the whole race, say, of men and bring forward [the buffoon] Thersites. Since, then, what has come into being is the whole universe, if you contemplate this, you might hear it say, "A god made me, and I came from him perfect above all living things, and complete in myself and self-sufficient, lacking nothing, because all things are in me, plants and animals and the nature of all things that have come into being, . . . Everything in me seeks after the Good, but each attains it in proportion to its own power; for the whole heaven depends on it, and the whole of my soul, and the gods in my parts, and all animals and plants and whatever there is in me (if there is anything) which is thought to be without life."

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Proclus (5th century CE) is especially keen to show the relationship of Providence to Necessity (or Fate) the first ruling over all things, the latter ruling over temporal things, and subservient to Providence:

reading 3
Proclus on
Providence
13

It is not difficult for you to understand what providence is, which we call the 'source of goods'. If you define it first as a divine cause, you will be right. For from where else than from god can come what is good for all things? Hence, as Plato says, 'for good things, we must invoke no other cause than god'. Next you have to admit that, since it presides over both the intelligible and the sensible realm, it is superior to fate. For events that fall under fate also fall under providence: they have their interconnection from fate, but their orientation to the good comes from providence. Thus, the connection will have the good as its end and providence will order fate. On the other hand, things that fall under providence do not all need fate as well; for intelligible beings transcend fate. Where indeed could fate be in the incorporeal things, if it introduces together with connection both time and corporeal movement? It was in view of this situation, I believe, that Plato too said that 'the constitution of this world is a mixture of intellect and necessity, whereby intellect rules over necessity'. Plato calls 'necessity' the moving cause of the bodies, which he calls 'fate' in other texts, and he allows bodies that are moved by it to be necessitated by it. And rightly so, for every body is necessitated to do what it does and to undergo what it undergoes, to

heat or to be heated, to cool or to be cooled. There is no choice in bodies. Hence you might say that necessity and the absence of choice is a characteristic of bodies, but not something better than bodies. . . Thus Plato set necessity to preside over the coming to be of bodies, and hence also over their passing away. But he removed intellect from it, ordering it to rule over necessity. If, then, providence is superior even to intellect, it is evident that it rules over intellect and over all those things subject to necessity, and that necessity rules only over the things subject to it. Thus, everything that is of an intellectual nature falls only under providence, whereas everything that exists in a corporeal way, falls also under necessity.

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And what of evil and Providence? Here are the translators Jan Opsomer and Carlos Steel explaining the section of Proclus treatise on Evil which deals with the apparent conflict between the existence of Providence and evil in the soul:

reading 4
*Proclus on
Evil*
(summary)

Concerning evil and providence, we are confronted with a dilemma. if providence governs the universe, it looks like we have to deny the existence of evil. If evil exists, it seems that not everything comes from providence. But a perspective may be found wherein evil is integrated with the providential order. For, as has been said already, there is no absolute evil unmixed with the good. Because of its participation in the good, evil can be included in the works of Providence, not as an evil, but insofar as it is good.

To say that god is cause of all things is not equal to saying that he is the only cause of all things. For intellect, soul and nature, too, are causes for the things posterior to each of them. That is why some forms of evil may come to existence from these causes without affecting the universal providence of the gods.

How, then, is there an admixture of good in the evils stemming from the soul? The evils of the soul are twofold: some are internal to the soul, as, for instance, wrong choices that affect the soul alone; others are exterior, e.g. actions in which the soul manifests its anger and desire. All those evils may have good effects.

Thus evil actions may happen for the rightful punishment of others. This action is good both for the person undergoing it and for the agent, if she/he performs it not for his/her own motives (revenge), but in accordance with the universal order. Through the performance of evil actions, people also make the evil that is concealed in their soul visible, which may contribute to their healing, as is shown in the case of remorse. Just as doctors open ulcers and so make evident the inward cause of the disease, so Providence hands souls over to shameful actions and passions in order that they be freed from their pain and start a better life.

Even internal passions may have a providential effect. For if the soul chooses the inferior, it will be dragged down towards baseness: it always gets what is deserved. Thus even a bad choice has something good, but it brings the soul to a form of life that is in accordance with its choice.

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Finally, is there room for what we call human free will (usually called "that which is in our power" in the ancient texts)? Is the whole of reality merely a gigantic machine grinding its

way through events driven by Providence and Fate? Interestingly Proclus' treatise on Providence is addressed to an old friend of his, Theodorus the mechanic, so that the modernist tendency to view the world as a watch-like mechanism is very much addressed by the treatise. Here is a small passage which takes the question by the horns:

reading 5
Proclus on
Providence

Listen to what Plato exclaims in the *Laws*: 'God governs all human affairs, and together with god fortune and the decisive moment (kairos); yet a more amenable factor should come as third after these, skill. For at the decisive moment of a tempest the navigator's skill also makes some contribution, as does the art of medicine to restoring health, and, in general, politics in the case of practical actions. Therefore, even if we succeed, we must attribute responsibility to the decisive moment of fate and to god, in order that what happens may have three causes. The first is that which makes it good, the second that which makes it fixed into a single conformity with the universe, the third is the purely human factor. For every human deed is a part of the universe, but not vice versa. For also the other living beings, which are parts of the universe, must both act and suffer. And every part of this cosmic system and drama has the good as its end. No part is relinquished without ordination; rather, it is woven together for the well-being of the universe. However, the reverse does not hold: not everything that obtains the good is co-ordinated with the cosmic governance. There is also a life above the world, namely the life of the gods and that of the souls that dance above fate and follow providence.

Where, then, must we situate in this context that which depends on us, when what happens is connected with the periodic revolution of the world, or again, when it comes about due to that cause alone? Where else, then, shall we say, but in our own interior choices and impulses? We ourselves are masters only of these, whereas we share control over external events with many other causes, which are more powerful. This is because what happens outside ourselves must take place as a part of the universe in order for it to happen at all. It happens when the universe joins in assenting to it and collaborates with it, so that the universe may act upon itself, acting with a part of itself on another and undergoing influence from another part. And for these reasons, in regard to events, we praise some people and blame others, as if they were masters of these events through their choice. And however we may qualify the events that take place, we do not say that the universe has this [moral] character, but the person who acts. This is because the [moral] quality in what happens did not come from the world, but from the life of the acting person. He is co-ordinated with the universe because of the universe and he is in turn of such and such quality because he is a part . . .

Therefore, one must not refer all events only to the order in the universe, as we neither attribute them all to our impulses, nor again deprive the soul of the power of choice, since it has its very being precisely in this, in choosing, avoiding this, running after that, even though, as regards events, our choice is not master of the universe. For one must require of every cause only as much as it is capable of. However, the faculty that depends on us is not only a capacity for acting but also a capacity of choice, choosing to act <either> on itself or together with other factors. And it is because of its choice that we say that it makes failures and acts rightly, since even if the result is good, but the agent acts on the basis of an evil choice, we say that the action is bad. For, what is good in what is done is due to a [favourable] external factor, but what is bad is due to the choice of the agent. Thus it is evident to all that we are masters of our actions to the extent that they are deliberately chosen.