

History and Providential Order

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Providence and Historical Order

- Is there an order to history?
 - If so, what is the nature of that order?
 - What are its principles?
 - How is that order discerned?
- This question is related to several big questions of philosophy:
 - Is there any justice in the world?
 - Does God exist?
 - Is there a providence ordering history toward some final end or goal?
- This is one of the oldest questions in philosophy, and it remains a controversial one.



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The Meaning of “Providence”

- *Providentia* — Latin: “foresight, foreknowledge”.
 - Older literature often uses it with reference to the insight of some wise person, who anticipates a possible outcome or event.
 - E.g., Sallust uses it of a popular and wise soldier who foresaw his general’s plot to kill him.
- In philosophy & theology, it often refers to the intentional and orderly operation of some transcendent cause — most commonly a Deity.
- “Providence” thus often refers to God’s direction and governing of the world.



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Neither Order nor Providence

- Some Atheists & Skeptics
- Nihilists, e.g., Nietzsche.
 - God does not exist, there is no providence, nor any after life — such teachings are designed to limit our freedom.
 - Moral categories like “good” and “evil” are not *real*, but merely statements of preference.
 - Time is not moving toward a goal. It is circular. Everything that has happened has *always* happened.
 - Any order within history is thus purely one of “art” — our imposition of order upon history.

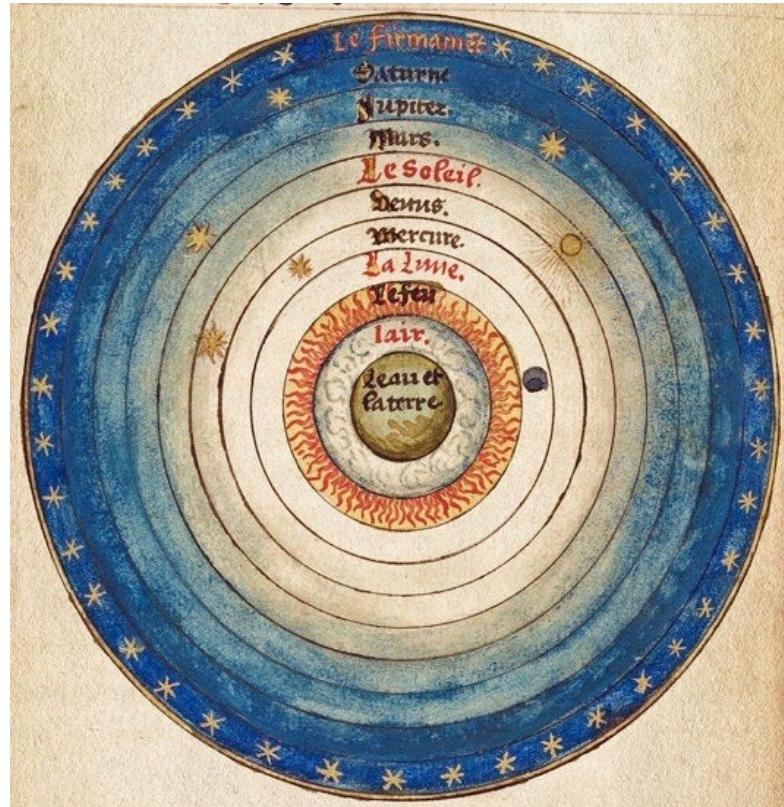


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Order without Providence

- Some Atheists
- Materialists, e.g., Deists and Epicureans.
 - Materialism — matter alone exists, and moves through the void of space. All motions in the universe are movements of *bodies*, and so reducible to physical causes.
 - Divided on the question of whether there is free will, or whether all physical causes operate by necessity.
 - Believed in the existence of the gods, but denied that the gods had any interest/agency in the world.
- Some non-theistic religious traditions, e.g., Buddhism.
 - Rely on natural law as a transcendental principle.
 - Reincarnation guarantees justice in history.



Providence without Order

- Some ancient folk religion and philosophies, e.g., Aristotelianism & Stoicism.
 - Held to the existence of the gods, and their involvement in the world.
 - Held the world to be eternal, and history to be circular and repetitive.
- Some Modern Theologies hold there is providence in the world, but history itself is not ordered to an end.
 - This may amount to a denial that there is any meaning to history that is evident to reason (as in some Dialectical and Liberal theology).
 - Or it may be a claim about the limits of God's ability to secure the future (e.g. Process and Openness Theologies).



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Providential Order

- Stoicism & the Abrahamic Faiths took the view that there is both order and providence in history.
- Stoicism identified God with the world, and held all events of history to be determined by fate. Providence thus acts by a *necessity of nature*, so that all events of history are *equally* intended by God.
- Abrahamic religions hold God to be the Creator, who is independent from and sovereign over the world. God does not act by *necessity*, but is *free* in his actions.



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Providential Order

- The principle of providence is God's eternal wisdom & will:
 - “He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: ‘What have you done?’” — Dan. 4:34-35 (NIV)
- Providence gives order to history, and b/c God is *sovereign*, his purposes are not frustrated.
- But b/c God is *free*, his purposes cannot simply be identified w/ or read off of the events of history.
- Unlike Buddhism & Platonism which argue divine justice is administered by the natural processes of the world, the Psalms are filled with songs of the persecuted proclaiming their innocence, and prayers for justice.



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Discerning Divine Providence

- “Is” does not imply “ought”. The fact that something has transpired does not mean it was *intended* by God. Divine providence must be *discerned*.
- The intentions of providence are known fully only to God, but it can be *partially* known to us through:
 - Natural Theology — discerned by reason in the observation of the natural world.
 - Revelation — Scripture, as a medium of divine teaching, reveals the nature and purposes of God’s providence.
- Theologians distinguish between different works of providence: Sustenance, Concurrence, Government.

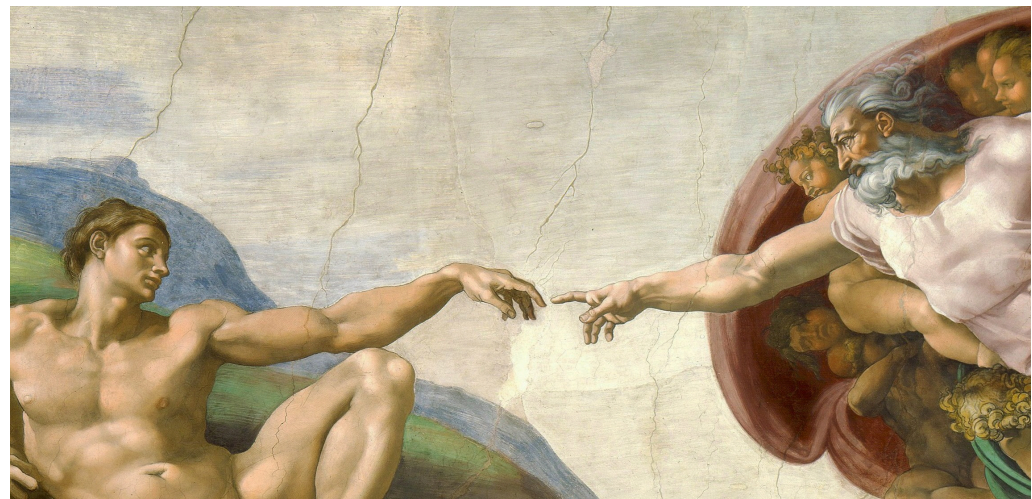


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Sustenance: Providence & Creation

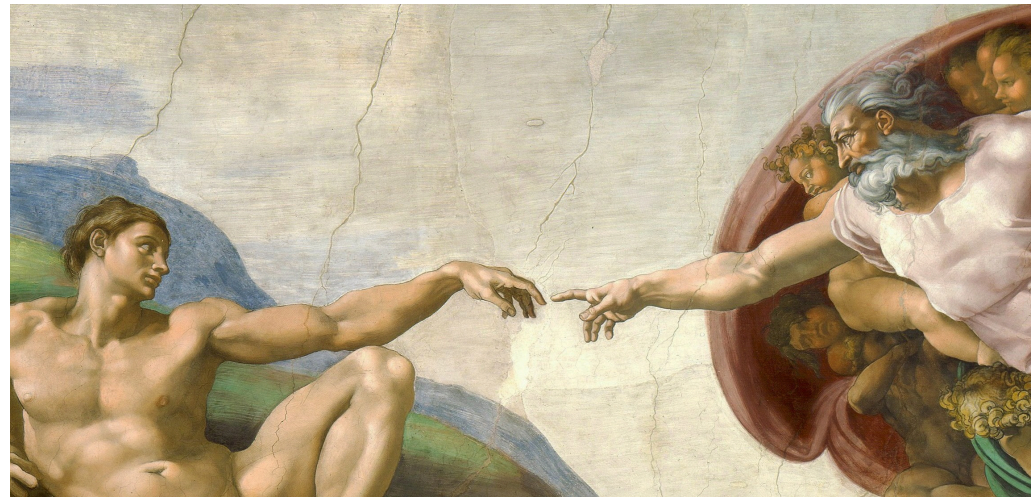
- If all things are created *ex nihilo* — “out of nothing” — then they dependent for their existence upon God. Scripture attributes to God a work of sustaining the created world:
 - “[A]ll things have been created through him and for him . . . and in him all things hold together.” (Col. 1:16-17)
 - “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.” (Heb. 1:3; NIV)
- God’s sustaining work holds creatures in being by a communication of his power.



Sustenance: Providence & Creation

- John Owen:

- “[T]here is continually, every moment, an emanation of power from God unto every creature, the greatest, the least, the meanest, to preserve them in their being and order.” (Comm. 2:5-9, *Ep. Hebrews*, 20:348).
- W/o this work, all creation would become “a slothful heap”, sinking back into “that primitive nothing (of which cask it always smells so strongly)” (Comm. 1:3, *Ep. Hebrews*, 20:105-107).



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Concurrence: Providence & Human Agency

- Providence also supports creatures to act regularly according to their natures. This is called “concurrence” because God “concur[s]” or “cooperates” with creaturely agency.
- Biblical narrative frequently asserts that some creaturely act is directed by the will of God, e.g., Peter says those who crucified Jesus did so in accordance w/ God’s purpose.
 - “This man was handed over to you by God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.”
— Acts 2:23 (NIV)



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Concurrence: Providence & Human Agency

- It also asserts the definiteness of human responsibility, calling us to cultivate lives of virtue (2 Peter 1:5-6), and teaching that God will judge the world in justice.
 - “For he will repay according to each one’s deeds: to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honour and immortality, he will give eternal life; while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury.” — Rom. 2:6-7 (NRSV)
- The Bible doesn’t have a developed theory of how these relate, so theologians must speculate on to reconcile them.



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Concurrence: Providence & Human Agency

- Some theologians argue for a kind of determinism, where God is held to be the ultimate *cause* all free human behaviours.
 - Tends to presume a fairly univocal account of God's agency.
 - Involves a mechanical view of human action.
 - Makes God the author of moral evil.
- Others maintain a libertarian notion of human freedom, e.g., that creatures act without dependence on divine concurrence.
 - Assumes that the creature's action is autonomous.
 - Involves a competitive account of divine and human agency.
 - Compromises God's omniscience & omnipotence.



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Concurrence: Providence & Human Agency

- Many theologians occupy a middle ground, arguing that providence does not *compete* with free creaturely acts.
- God's concurrence is *necessary* for free creatures to move themselves. And creatures are most free when moved by God.
- This allows theologians to distinguish an asymmetry in God's providence between morally good and morally evil acts.
- God is the *cause* of morally good acts, but only *permits* morally evil acts.



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Government: Providence & Order

- Scripture often speaks of God as a King or a Ruler: “Dominion belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations.” (Ps. 22:28)
- This analogy has often been taken to mean that God bears responsibility for the “common good” of the universe.
- Aquinas uses Aristotle’s analogy, arguing that just as the order of an army exists for the sake of its general, so the order of the universe exists for the sake of its Creator (*ST* Ia, q. 103, a. 2).
- In that sense, the orders of providence are directed toward creation’s participation in God.



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Government: Providence & Order

- Works of Nature:
 - Ordering the whole of creation in wisdom, goodness, and beauty.
 - The giving of law to moral creatures as instruction in freedom & fellowship with God.
 - Upholding justice through judgment.
- Works of Grace:
 - Granting the covenant for the formation of a people & the forgiveness of sins.
 - Renewal of creaturely life by grace.
 - Institutions of right worship.



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