

A Brief Response to Patrick Curry's Critique

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I would like to observe first of all that my paper "Providence, Time & Destiny" was written in response to a request to give some idea of the ancient understanding of these themes, and to that extent it is an impartial historical account.

I contrasted that ancient view with the modern materialist one in order to show the differences between the world-views so that the ancient one should be more clearly understood. What emerged was, so far as I was able, a fair representation of the ancient understanding.

Curry's critique does not deny the accuracy of my exposition. He is critiquing the ancient view itself. It is the ancient Greek and Medieval Christian understanding of providence he rejects. That is entirely another matter than the concerns of my paper. Nevertheless, in his rejection of it he has misunderstood various aspects of that ancient understanding, even though he claims he has not. These are principally, the nature of freedom, the teleology of providence and hierarchy.

I stated repeatedly that the aim of providence and the destiny of all things was freedom. Curry argues that if it is a conferred freedom, a freedom divinely granted, then it is not really freedom at all. This, according to the ancient understanding, disregards the fact that all beings are part of a larger design and that, in reference to that larger design, no being is autonomous or self-generated. Freedom in this sense means more than "freedom from", it means freedom *in relation to* all that is. It means freedom to respond to the true nature of things, not freedom from the nature of things. This I tried to illustrate with Shakespeare. In so far as I can grasp it, Curry's notion of freedom is limited to personal autonomy. But the question of freedom goes far deeper than this. The individual being could have complete personal autonomy only in a world of its own over which it had total command. This is the type of freedom conceived in modern individualism. The real question of freedom is not simply a matter of personal autonomy, it is concerned with how freedom may be possible in the given world order. Thus for the ancients it is the sense of *lack of freedom* that prompts the question of freedom in the first place, and by lack of freedom it is understood that all beings or creatures are placed in a cosmic order which puts demands upon them. All creatures are dependent upon one another, and no creature can change its nature. Therefore the question of freedom only arises within the context of the determinism of the world each being finds itself in. Freedom involves a negotiation with things the individual being has no power over. That is precisely why men seek guidance, either divine or human, when decisions are called for. The world confronts us with dilemmas and compels us to make decisions or undertake actions. Freedom does not mean freedom from these dilemmas or compulsions, it means the

freedom to decide which path to take when so confronted, freedom to meet the demands of existence with integrity. There can be no such thing as freedom to act as if the world was different to what it is, or as if it could be shaped according to our will.

This is where providence, in the ancient view, has its place for man. Providence is an aid that comes from outside the individual and draws all things towards the universal good. It remedies injustice where injustice has been done, heals hurt that has been suffered, aids the good that is sought. It makes right conduct auspicious. Providence assures that the possibility of freedom is never destroyed. Providence guards and protects the potential of all beings from being diminished. Providence lies precisely *between* the demands reality makes upon us, leaving our choice of action open to our free decision. In this situation a “wrong” decision is one that surrenders freedom – a frequent theme of Shakespeare’s tragedies. Freedom is not a simple matter. It may even be experienced as a burden, as in *Richard II*, or by Ivan’s story of the Inquisitor in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Freedom means being answerable to reality, responsible.

Thus to equate the ancient understanding of providence with determinism, as Curry does, is to misunderstand its nature entirely. It is to confuse it with Fate, which I contrasted it with. Freedom is a choice between things, and that choice includes the freedom to lose freedom. To consider freedom without the question of decision and responsibility is not yet to approach the question.

Curry also rejects any teleology of things. He claims that any kind of teleology chains or enslaves. This again is to misunderstand the ancient notion of the nature of teleology. The telos of things is to seek their full actualisation. Thus Aristotle says that every being seeks its own good, its full growth, and it follows from this, within the cosmic order, that the good of each being is in harmony with the good of every being. Thus the telos of every being is not confined simply to itself, as its own private or autonomous good, but its good in relation to all other things, that is, the mutual good of everything and, by extension, to the Absolute Good Itself. For the ancients the world is not conceived as an anarchy of competing private ends, but rather as a mutual harmony of all ends. Thus the nature of each being is related to the nature of every being. When any being fails in its end, it fails in relation to all other beings to. That is why, in the Christian sense, redemption is for all beings (not just human beings).

Lastly, Curry rejects hierarchy. That is to say, he rejects not my view of hierarchy, but the Platonic and Christian view of hierarchy as such, and along with that Platonic and Christian “monism”.

We need to be clear that “hierarchy” means “divine principle”. It means that there is a divine principle in all things. It is a sister word to *hierophany*. The modern notion of hierarchy as a sequence of authorities tyrannously dominating lower orders is a distortion of this word’s proper meaning. In the ancient view the gods are hierarchies, divine presences.

These gods were understood as aspects or manifestations of the one theos from which they originated. It is therefore rather inaccurate to contrast “polytheism” with “monotheism” in the ancient world. I know of no ancient text, Greek or Roman, which does not represent the gods as created by a preceding absolute deity or primordial matter. The same may be said of Hinduism. The so-called “polytheistic” religions, as distinct from the “monotheistic” religions, are an invention of modern classification, convenient but also misleading. Even Plotinus, who is perhaps the most monistic of all ancient philosophers, frequently acknowledges the gods.

On this point Curry is entitled to hold his own views. He is free to reject Platonism and Christianity. The object of my paper was to elucidate the ancient view, even if only in brief outline. It was not my object to judge it or defend it. Nevertheless, I do believe that the paper offered insights which contrast with our limited modern cosmology and show us something we have lost. In particular, I believe that the major difficulty with astrology or divination being acceptable in our times lies in the shift of world-view. It fits in with neither flat materialism nor subjective relativism, the dominant views characteristic of our time. Astrology assumes a providential connection between our individual lives and a greater cosmic order full of meaning and intelligence.

I find it difficult to see how Curry’s notion of freedom, as private, self-generated autonomy, has any place for divination or astrology. Such freedom has no need of external consultation since it is by definition self-sufficient. I also find it difficult to understand why Curry praises my remarks on Shakespeare, which I use to illustrate my central concern, when Shakespeare stands so clearly within Renaissance Christian Platonism. And further, it is curious that he quotes Tolkien in his defence when Tolkien has expressly said his *Lord of the Rings* is essentially a Christian work. It is also strange that he quotes Isaiah Berlin who’s wholesale rejection of any ordering principle cannot be reconciled with any practice of divination or understanding of providence. In essence, it is the first false view to be discarded in Plato’s *Republic*. Such a view would be untenable for Iamblichus, one of the principle and most venerated exponents in the ancient world of theurgy and divination.

Curry gives us no ancient authority in support of his position. He simply claims his view is not just a modern one, but “very old indeed”. If that is so, then why does he rely on the exponents of modern relativism, who themselves do not claim ancient authority, for his arguments against my paper?

There is finally the question of perception. Curry rejects Platonism and Christianity as if they were merely theoretic beliefs, as Berlin also does. That kind of stance begins with the unquestioned assumption that Platonism and Christianity do not speak from perception. That falsifies what the sources say. When Plotinus speaks of the contemplation of the One he speaks of a vision, not a doctrine or theory. And so likewise does

Iamblichus when he speaks of the practice of theurgy. This move to represent the ancient view as mere theory or belief avoids confronting it on its own terms. It commences from a misrepresentation and does not even justify such a move. It is exactly the same move that the opponents of astrology make. It demands a reply in terms that divination cannot, by its very nature, make.

The ancients call us to *see* providence working in all things and to observe a cosmic order and harmony beneath the apparent arbitrariness of things. The question we are left with is, can we see what they saw?

To decide in advance that they speak falsely is really no reply at all. And if “truth” is nothing else than what each of us happens to think or believe, then nothing is at stake in any discourse about the truth or falsehood of what the ancients said. That is to say, if truth is not a universal referent, as opposed to a subjective attitude, then disputation about what is true or false has no ground or meaning.

It seems to me that Curry’s challenge to my paper wants it both ways. On the one hand he denies any absolute, while on the other hand he calls upon the authority of the truth-claims of those he quotes in support of his position. In this odd way he is relying on an absolute truth-claim for his relativism. But perhaps the greatest weakness of his challenge is that he offers no alternative elucidations of the meaning of providence, time or destiny. That is the main reason why a debate with his position cannot really be conducted. He fiercely rejects, without giving any substantial grounds for that rejection, but offers no alternative.

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