

PROVIDENCE, TIME AND DESTINY

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Joseph Milne

In this lecture I invite us to reflect on providence, time and destiny. Such a reflection has to begin with the disconcerting fact that the theological and philosophical meanings of providence, time and destiny bear no relation whatsoever to our modern conception of the cosmos. That is to say, the world-notion presented to us by modern science, medicine, psychology and technology and so on is devoid of any conception of providence, time or destiny. So these three things have no meaning for the modern mind at all. Consider: when was the last time you heard the words providence or destiny mentioned by any modern scientist or any modern theory of the universe or, for that matter, by any commentator on world events? When did you last hear the word time used in the sense of meaningful time, as opposed to mere clock measurement?

So we are dealing with something that is not part of modern apprehension or current conception of reality, something that does not apply to our way of living in the world. And so it follows that almost any discussion of providence, time and destiny takes them to be abstract theories, and because they are taken to be abstract theories they are subject to disputation owing to their incompatibility with modern science and modern notions of causality. This is the case in practically all the current literature I have looked at which attempts to describe what the ancients meant by these terms. So we are confronted with the simple fact that we in the modern world have no immediate sense of providence, no sense of time and no sense of destiny. We regard other factors as determinative, theoretically and in ordinary experience. That being so, it is inevitable that they will be regarded simply as hypotheses. In one way or another this is a difficulty that I am sure all the material considered on this course brings us up against repeatedly. To put the matter simply, there is no place for astrology or divination, or for omens or prophecy, in a world without a sense of providence, time or destiny. In other words, if we accept the world-concept presented to us by modern mechanistic science, including the conceptions of human nature that

are derived from this, then we must discount the reality of providence, the meaningfulness of time and the relevance of destiny.

Given this incompatibility between the mechanistic world-concept and the reality of providence, I would like to try to lead us a little nearer to a way of apprehending the world where these may become apparent again. In order to do that I must ask you to bear with me through a number of steps on a journey of thinking. So please reserve any questions to the end of what I wish to present to you.

Why does modern man have no sense of providence, time or destiny? The simple answer to that question is that modern man has no sense of the dimension in which these exist. That is to say, modern man has no sense of cosmos, no sense of totality, and consequently no sense of the universe being underway, unfolding itself towards any end. Modern man does not conceive of himself as participating in the cosmos. The cosmos is abstracted into the mere "place" surrounding us, the incidental scenery of our lives. The universe is thought of as abstract space without any centre or overarching coherence or meaning. The cosmos, conceived as such, is so devoid of meaning that we often hear it said that our own human lives are rendered meaningless and insignificant in the vastness of space and time. Not only human life but the whole of life on earth is frequently regarded as inconsequential in the vastness of indifferent space. In the immense sea of exploding stars and black holes, what significance can my solitary human life have which leaves no trace whatsoever in this cosmos that will itself one day implode and vanish away?

We have all seen the pictures given to us by modern astronomy. Perhaps we have marvelled at them. But these are not the cosmos. No telescope takes a picture of the cosmos, just as no camera takes a picture of a human life. The cosmic sense, on the other hand, is the actual sense of being present within the unfolding creation, the sense of being a participant – just like we are now participants in a seminar. The cosmos presented to us by Darwin or by the new physics is essentially the same. These conceptions of the world do not open to us any means of communion with reality.

And yet every human being has the cosmic sense. Not only does every human being have the cosmic sense, but this sense is first, prior to any other sense. Without the cosmic sense we would have no sense of being situated at all anywhere, including being present to ourselves. Nevertheless, modern man has no feeling of acting from

the cosmic sense in the world-conception he now holds. Where, then, does modern man consider himself to dwell – not theoretically, but actually? Where is his field of life?

In asking this question we come up against a central problem. It has two sides. On the one hand there is a split between the prevalent conceptions of the world and our actual sense of being present, which is grounded in the cosmic sense. We experience one way and think another way. There is a profound rift between perception and conception. This rift is articulated in the famous Cartesian dualism, which holds that we have knowledge of our subjectivity but no direct knowledge of the world about us. We have immediate perception of selfhood, but only inferred conception of cosmos. That is the Cartesian dualism. And this conception of cosmos is continually under revision, endlessly replaced with the latest paradigm. But no matter how often the paradigms change or are refined, the essential split between perception and conception remains. There never comes a point where the conception of the universe corresponds with perception. On the contrary, the rift gets greater and greater until we finally reach the point where conception negates perception. That is to say, perception itself gets taken up into the realm of conception and is relegated to the realm of "mere subjectivity". Thus the cosmic sense itself topples into the region of private or personal subjectivity. From being an ontological sense of being continuous with the being of all beings, it is reduced to the psychological sense of individual selfhood. Thus, for modern man, the universe consists of only two realms: the objective realm and the psychological realm, maintaining in full force the Cartesian dualism. There is no continuum between these realms. Thus the sphere of meaning is shut away in the private subject, while the cosmos goes its way indifferently to anything at all.

It is worth noting in passing that Descartes himself would be appalled at this situation, for he conceived our subjective knowledge or selfhood as occurring within the knowledge of the presence of God. For Descartes, and for his immediate followers, the realm of reality was still threefold and still hierarchical, consisting of the metaphysical, the psychological and the material. And in this hierarchy the metaphysical was still primary and that upon which the psychological and material depended and was knowable. But the metaphysical realm has now vanished from modern thought and so we are left with a Cartesian dualism between subject and object which is not even Descartes'. *The metaphysical has been reduced to the*

theoretical, the conceptual, along with the objective world. Thus the cosmic sense has been omitted, which is to say the primary sense of *the being of everything* has been omitted.

With the loss of the metaphysical comes the second problem we have to confront when asking what is the field of life for modern man. We just observed that the metaphysical realm became subsumed into the theoretical, the merely conceptual. Thus the “religious”, the “divine” or the “sacred”, which includes the realm of providence, has been relegated to “subjective experience and belief”. With that collapse of the sense of divine presence into the theoretical, into the realm of subjective belief, comes the collapse of the hierarchy of being and what I term the ontological inversion. By ontological inversion I mean the attribution of what is most real to that which is last in the hierarchy of being – the material world, the realm of inert objects. Thus we end up with a terrible confusion. The material world, objective reality, is at one and the same time held to be *most real* and *unknowable in itself*. This is the case in the objective sciences and in the psychological sciences.

So where now is the realm in which perception actually sees anything for what it is in itself? It is not the metaphysical realm, obviously, and neither is it the material realm, just as obviously. Is it, then, the realm of our own personhood, our subjectivity? What do we now consider we know directly, without any mediation? The mind or the psyche? No. The same split has occurred there as with the subject/object split. Our own personhood is concealed from us in all modern thinking about the mind. That is to say, whatever we experience of ourselves is regarded by modern psychology as derived from elsewhere – from our personal history, from social conditioning, from genetic make up, from biological instincts and so on and so on. The list is endless. Our personhood, which our laws and human rights hold to be so precious, turns out to be the effects of causes and conditions outside ourselves. We are shaped by events and conditions, unconscious motives and biological processes, over which we have no say or power. Thus we arrive at the human subject who has no essence but is just another effect along with the objective world. This, more or less, is where we now stand. There is nothing for modern man that is present immediately in and of itself as itself. This is the prevailing conception of human nature, and it is this subject without an essence that underlies all the desperate talk about the individual. How can an individual who is merely the effect of conditions and the play of unconscious forces have any real

ontological status, let alone rights or moral obligations? And how can such a being have a destiny? How can a derived subject, a subject closed off from any knowledge of their own essence, lie within the care of providence? To put that more boldly, how can a being without identity participate in a providential universe?

Clearly, mechanistic cause and effect, in the forms of unconscious motives, social and cultural conditioning, parental upbringing, genetic determination and so on, has displaced providence and now stands in its place. Such a human subject, let us be quite clear, is not a subject at all in the classical sense of that word, not even in the sense of Descartes. It is a subject without being – and more, a subject without being living in a cosmos also devoid of being.

In this situation, where the cosmic sense is lost and, consequently, the human subject is also lost, and where the ontological hierarchy is inverted, all talk of providence, time and destiny is meaningless. It simply has no place. And it follows from this that any attempt to search out the motions of providence must be based upon a false notion of providence itself – for there can only be providential action for beings with essence in a universe with essence, since only essence can have the potential to unfold itself in a cosmos in which everything is bound with everything towards an ordained destiny. It follows from this that any attempt to relate providence to modern man, as we find in recent Catholic literature for example, stumbles because it tries to relate a cosmic principle to a conception of human nature that has no ground in the cosmos. To put that another way: if we are to recover the sense of providence we have first to recover the sense of being that belongs to a cosmic order. For, what can providence mean to a being who has no cosmic role? And what can providence mean in a cosmos that has no meaning, is only the play of mechanistic determinisms?

It should be clear now that if we are to approach the meaning of providence as it was once understood, we have to profoundly revise our understanding of human nature as well as our way of apprehending the world. Without such a revision providence is merely a theory or a superstition, or at best a dead doctrine.

Having arrived at this rather pessimistic position, how can we make a turn in the right direction? That is to say, how can we move towards a sense of, or some apprehension of providence? To do this it is clear that we cannot discuss providence within terms of the mechanistic world-view that now prevails. We cannot add

providence as a sweetener or comforter, so to speak, to the material and psychological determinism that prevails. Just as there is no place for omens, prophecies or the miraculous in such a world, so likewise there is no place for providence which is the realm in which these occur. How can we get out of that difficulty?

There is a clue in Aquinas. He connects providence with the virtue of prudence, and he connects prudence with conscience. This surely is interesting. It may even strike us as odd. It is odd because it shows us a most interesting thing. Namely that, along with the loss of the cosmic sense we have also lost the meaning of the words prudence and conscience. Prudence means “to see correctly” and conscience means to “act from right knowledge”. Clearly, there can be no right action without right perception. Thus, putting the matter very briefly, there is no conscience without prudence, and an act of conscience is an act performed from correct participation in reality. Seeing, knowing and action are thus all brought together. There is no time now to dwell on the full implications of this convergence of sight, knowledge and act, but I will simply suggest in passing that it runs totally counter to the Cartesian dualism. To “see” prudently means to grasp the world as it really is. From that, and only from that, springs the call to act – to perform an action necessary to and consonant with reality, that is, an act of conscience. Conscience does not mean feelings of guilt, it means acting in accordance with reality. Conscience is the provenance of all human action without exception. This is the classical understanding of conscience.

Now, I do not want to elaborate on these notions because we will end up thinking about them as mere doctrines, and that will not lead where I wish us to go. So let me ask this question: what manner of thinking does virtue and conscience belong to? Well, obviously they belong to a manner of thinking in which thought, perception and action are responsible to the world. If I am to act rightly towards another human being, or towards the cosmos, then such an action must relate to that other human being *as the being they actually are* or the cosmos *as it actually is*. It is no good saying it is enough that it seems right for me personally. That is merely using the world as a reference to my own selfhood. It is a kind of solipsism – and it is worth noting that the modern notion of conscience is largely solipsistic. One thinks of Camus’ *Outsider* for example, in which the hero’s actions are wholly self-referential or autistic and where the world and all the people around him have no meaning in themselves. He has inverted conscience. Conscience is acting true to

reality. *To be true to oneself at the expense of the universe is the opposite of prudence and conscience.* What mode of thinking deals with existence in this way? It is the narrative mode of thinking. That is to say, the mode of thinking that grasps unfolding events that have meaningful consequences within the totality of reality.

We are thinking of story – or what the Greeks called myth. Or, we are thinking of how we grasp reality as drama. An essential feature of real story or drama is that what the characters do, and what moves them to do what they do, connects them to a whole world or cosmos. The destiny of the individual and the world are bound together in story or drama. The more strongly this connection is made between character and cosmos, the more truly a story is a story. I am thinking of Homer, Sophocles or Shakespeare, for example. And we could add Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*. It is important that we are thinking of full-blown drama, where the destiny of all things is involved. It is also important that we take non-allegorical narrative, such as Shakespeare or Tolkien, otherwise we are liable to dislocate them from their cosmic setting to the psychological, thus displacing them into the Cartesian dualism and negating the way they work.

When we enter the world of real story, as in a play of Shakespeare, we enter the whole cosmos in which the story unfolds. This cosmos is not mere setting. On the contrary, the cosmos is that which both places the characters in their situations and makes demands upon them to act. The roots of action in story are not, as many believe, human motives or desires. They are the decisions made in the light of the demands of the cosmos into which the characters are thrown. Thus story begins always in a world already underway. A story in which desires were simply and directly accomplished would not be a story. Story always is shaped by conflict, and it is our concern for the resolution of conflict that engages us in story. Take the obvious example of *Hamlet*. The question for him is what action will he take in the light of what the Ghost tells him about Claudius. That much is readily seen by everyone. But what is not so readily seen is that this question is not whether he will kill Claudius or not, which is how it is commonly interpreted, but whether he will restore Denmark or not. That question is far deeper, and it involves the question “Can Claudius be redeemed or not?” This play does not open with Hamlet’s encounter with the Ghost, but with preparations against the fall of Denmark to Fortinbrass, with darkness and confusion about the fate of Denmark,

with the threat of the breaking of the settlement made long ago between King Fortinbrass and King Hamlet. As always in Shakespeare, the source of evil is always ancient, hidden in the depths of the past, and when that evil stirs it is marked by signs and portents, by strange stars and restlessness in nature.

We make a dreadful mistake if we take all these cosmic motions as personifications or allegories of the psychologies of the characters. To interpret the cosmos of Shakespeare's plays as representations of the interior states of the characters is to miss the cosmic dimension that Shakespeare shows us is the arena of human action. We have to remember that concern for character and motive is a modern concern – a post-Cartesian concern. The cosmos is greater than the psyche. This is a bold assertion and I cannot elaborate it here. All I can do is suggest you study the ways in which the plays of Shakespeare were understood prior to Freud and Bradley – for example by Coleridge. If we reduce the cosmos to an allegory of the psyche we read Shakespeare without the cosmic sense, and in this play we miss the underlying story of the destiny of Denmark. Hamlet's struggle is not between action or no action, as is so often said, but rather it is a protest that he was born to have to remedy the fate that has befallen Denmark. Nor does Hamlet delay, as is famously thought. He protests against his destiny, against a task thrown upon him by the cosmos, by the star he is born under. Examine each of his soliloquies and you will see this is what Hamlet's conflict is about. And the play ends with him failing to undertake that task, and Denmark falls to Fortinbrass. That is why it is a tragedy.

The cosmos in Shakespeare, far from being a mere setting in which characters act, is divided into three distinct realms. These may be loosely described as the realm of Grace, the realm of Justice and the realm of Fate. The first of these, the realm of Grace, is the realm of Providence. The last, the realm of Fate, is the realm into which the world falls when it departs from the power of providence. The middle realm, Justice, is a mediate realm between the two in which neither providence rules nor fate, but which must move in either direction. The world may be governed by any of these three powers, and the actions of Shakespeare's characters are determined by which power they elect to act according to. The comedies close with the establishment of the rule of Grace or Providence, while the tragedies end with the death of the protagonist who elected the path of Fate. The realm of Justice is an intermediary realm which must, in the

nature of things, either be transformed into the realm of Grace or decline into the realm of Fate. The cosmos is not static in Shakespeare. On the contrary, it is underway, in motion, and precisely because of this it places humanity in the situation in which a choice must be made ultimately between Providence or Fate. That is the human dilemma as Shakespeare presents it to us. What befalls his characters is not determined by their motives or desires, but by the cosmic powers they elect to align themselves with. Their motives and desires follow on from this election. The desires of man are determined not by their will, but by their orientation to the cosmos and the decision they make in their essence as to which realm they will orient their being towards.

My point in presenting this rough sketch of the principles of Shakespeare's dramas is to illustrate that our narrative sense, our sense of belonging to a cosmos in which unfolding events have shape and significance beyond our subjectivity, is, so to speak, one way of apprehending reality in such a manner that providence is at play and actually engages us. The simple desire we have that good should triumph over evil while beholding story is a taste of aligning our will with providence. This is absolutely natural and is common to children as well as adults. In fact, children more readily "go with" the dramatic sense than adults do because they do not suffer from a division between perception and conception of the world as we adults do. Children still have the cosmic sense – until education induces a world-view that conflicts with it.

It is worth pointing out at this point that the cosmic sense is ontologically first according to ancient thought. It is easy to suppose that we only gain a conception of the universe in maturity, but actually that is not so. We may reflect upon the cosmic sense in maturity, but we do not gain it then. It is given, just as being is given in our origination. As Aquinas says "the first thought is being". Likewise, Cusanus says we first know infinity and later the finite, for the finite is known to be finite only in the light of a pre-knowledge of infinity. In other words, metaphysical knowledge is primary knowledge, and thus the ground of all other knowledge. The sense of All is the first sense.

The realm of providence belongs to this metaphysical realm. Even our fumbling attempts to grasp providence in an age in which it has no recognition are informed by the knowledge that we are trying to grasp a universal power, a power that governs the unfolding events of the cosmos. Just as we immediately grasp narrative in a

story and easily engage with that mode of apprehension, so likewise the sense of providence is grasped immediately – or else not grasped at all. Just as the autistic person cannot recognise the autonomy of another human being, so our age cannot grasp the motions of providence. But in our case it is because we hold a conception of the universe which disengages us from the universe. And, just as in Shakespeare, this disengagement with the cosmos is directly manifest in the world about us – in our farming methods and industrial pollution and so on. There is something rotten in the state of Western civilization. Whether we recognise it or not, our manner of orientating towards the world produces lawful consequences in the world, and these consequences either bind us to Fate or transform us through Grace into full participants in the cosmic story.

Now, I am sure that one of the difficulties that has been concerning you in all this is the question of determinism. If I am advocating providence, am I not in fact advocating determinism under another name? This is an important question and the literature of the Middle Ages is very much preoccupied with it, but under the name of predestination.

One of the things that philosophers and theologians have been concerned to do is distinguish determinism from providence. And there has been great confusion here. This is a major problem for astrology, as I am sure has become clear on this course already. So now it is time to say what providence is. Please note this definition carefully. Providence is the power that guides the cosmos to freedom. Let me repeat that. Providence is the power that guides the cosmos to freedom. It is likewise the call that every human being experiences towards full actualisation of their potential in communion with the cosmos. The human desire to “wholly be” is the call of providence. Providence is therefore the power which overcomes Fate, determinism and entropy.

The difficulty here is that providence is usually thought of in terms of Fate or determinism. When Plotinus says that the stars are not causes he is making precisely this distinction. The heavens do not cause things. The realm of causality – in the sense we moderns think of it – is the realm of determinism. The stars indicate the way things stand and thus offer us the possibility of decision in reference to action. The real question we have as human beings is: Is this the auspicious moment to make a decision in orienting myself towards the future. Or, is this action I have in mind consonant with the design of the universe. Or, is this action in the direction of freedom

and new being, or in the direction of fate and the diminishment of being. “To be, or not to be” is indeed the great question. The step towards being is the step away from determinism and towards providence. It is important to understand that the Christian doctrine of divine providence was elaborated to overcome the Greek notion of Fate – that is, fate understood as blind determinism.

Aquinas said, as Plato had said before him, that all things tend towards their own perfection, which is the good. This perfection towards which every being is by nature inclined is not only the good and perfection of that particular being, but the good and the perfection of the entire creation. Thus, for a being to fully actualise itself, to unfold its potential, is at the same time the action of becoming wholly a part of the cosmic design, for the actualisation of a being is simultaneously its participation on the cosmic whole. And the corollary of this is that the being that does not actualise itself simultaneously fails in its participation in the cosmic whole. To put that in other terms, the actualisation of full selfhood is the alignment of particular being with cosmic being. This is the region of providence and destiny.

Thus it follows that we cannot grasp the realm of providence if we confine ourselves to concern for our own particular destiny separately from the cosmos.

Providence is the power that guides the cosmos to freedom. If we bear this definition of providence in mind we see immediately why the great philosophers, such as Plotinus, and Christian theologians, such as Augustine or Aquinas, have been concerned to dissociate providence from any form of fatalism or determinism. And I suspect this is the real root of the Churches conflict with astrology and its suspicion of any kind of theurgy. There is, let us face the fact, the hope among many people that the cosmos is caring for them and will bring them to their destiny mechanically. But this kind of hope is, so to speak, a naïve sense of providence. It is no good hoping that another power will do one’s being for one. One cannot be obliged to be free and self-fulfilling. One’s destiny is what one must take up oneself. If that destiny is in fact freedom, then obviously it must be one’s own task. It is at this point that the burden of existence comes home to us. Our destiny is in our own hands. This is what frightens so many. It is the angst or anxiety that the existential philosophers speak of. God gives us our being, and nature gives us our powers and faculties, but what we do with what has been given is a matter for us to decide and for which we are wholly responsible, indeed

answerable or accountable for in the face of God. And what we decide is our story, our narrative. It is at this point that the great questions of free will and destiny arise, but not before. Providence has ordered our being and the cosmos to set us on the path to freedom, and the first step is the decision to walk that path towards freedom, and that very first step is itself an act of freedom. Thus it is said in the Hindu tradition that as soon as one takes a step on the path to liberation all the gods hasten to assist and tend. That is providence. Providence means, literally, “seeing beforehand” and providing all that is needed. It also means knowing ahead. Our word “vision” comes from the same root, meaning “to know”, from the Sanskrit “vidya”, meaning knowledge. But the knowing here spoken of, with reference to providence, is not knowing the destined outcome but knowing the potential that awaits to be actualised. Providence is the inclination in every being to actualise itself out of its own power and the ordering of the cosmos so that that inclination may be fulfilled.

One of the questions that is most often raised in relation to providence is the problem of evil, or what in theology is called theodicy. It is asked: “If God is infinitely good, and if all created things are oriented toward the good, why is there evil in the creation?” Now we have to answer this question in conformity with the real nature of providence and not confuse it with determinism. The question about evil is only posed as an argument against providence if the nature of providence is not yet properly grasped. We said, providence is the power that guides all things to freedom. Freedom is, theologically speaking, synonymous with full actuality. But freedom, we also said, is not deterministic. Indeed, we observed earlier that providence is the power that overcomes determinism and entropy. From the point of view, then, of providence, evil is that which is contrary to providence – that is to say, evil is the denial, the negation or destruction of the potential that providence seeks to guide or draw to fulfilment. Here, however, we need to make a distinction between moral evil and natural catastrophes, such as disease or earthquakes and the like. Two things need to be borne in mind here. First, that the cosmos is in process of becoming. That is to say, there is an eschatological dimension to providence, an ultimate destiny of the creation. Providence, we must remember, is what guides all things to their ultimate end. This includes the actualisation of the cosmos. Now, whatever is in process of becoming, of development towards perfection, is liable towards fault or mischance.

This is a property of every kind of action as a coming into existence. For example, in preparing this lecture I make typing mistakes and have to correct them. This is evil – evil in the sense of imperfection until the task is finished. If there were no process, no becoming, no movement from one condition to another, no transformation, then there could be no error, no mistakes, no mischances, since everything would be fixed for eternity. We have to remember that every process, from the point of view of providence, is a movement from potential to actuality, and that actuality is the good attained out of the good that is possible. The good is not attained before that but exists only in potential, as an awaited destiny. This is the realm of natural evil. It is important that we understand evil this way in reference to providence. Evil is not a power. When evil is thought of as a power there is no apprehension of providence.

What, then, of moral evil? Once again we have to understand this in reference to all we have said of providence. Providence is the power that guides all things to mutual freedom. In reference to the end or object of providence, moral evil is the decision to oppose providence, that is, to oppose the inclination of all things to their perfection in freedom. Evil is the denial of potential. If there were no ability to oppose providence, then there would be no freedom of will to elect perfection in freedom. In other words, moral evil is a possibility because free choice to elect the good is a possibility, not an obligation. If there were no possibility to oppose providence as an act of will, then there would be no free will, no conscience and no responsibility. Moral evil, then, belongs only to the human realm and must not be projected onto nature or onto God. Providence grants to man the power to follow his destiny or to deny it. If that were not so, then our actions would not be our own. So the question of evil comes inevitably with the freedom providence grants to mankind. If there were not the possibility of choice between assent or dissent to the end of all things, then providence would not be providence but determinism. So we have to be very careful when considering theodicy. When it is said that God cannot be all-good because there is evil in the world, the person who says that is expecting providence to be determinism. But the good to which determinism would take all things would not be freedom. So the problem of moral evil arises through the freedom to elect, the freedom of human decision. Thus those who would have all possibility of evil removed from the creation are really, though

unwittingly, demanding that free will be removed – yet they are exercising their free will in making such a demand.

It is worth adding to this, which may seem a bland answer to the question of moral evil, that with freedom of will there is the possibility of consciously hating and wishing to destroy the good. Such hate, on such a scale, may be very rare, yet it is a possibility. Nevertheless, if it is possible to freely love the good, then it is also possible to freely hate the good. Shakespeare presents us with this in several plays, but perhaps especially in Richard III.

But then I sigh, and with a piece of scripture
Tell them that God bids us do good for evil;
And thus I clothe my naked villainy
With odd old ends, stol'n forth of Holy Writ,
And seem a saint when most I play the devil.

As we observed before, Shakespeare's characters make a decision to follow good or evil, and they make their decision either way knowingly. That is what makes them good or evil. They are responsible. Moral evil is responsible evil, just as moral good is responsible good. If we remove the element of responsibility we have neither good nor evil. It is possible to hate and spit upon truth. This is not a question of motive but of elected orientation of being. We are not here speaking of neurosis, but of free will. Likewise, those who hold that God is not infinitely good and attribute evil to Him have a diminished, mechanistic notion of the good, but also a false notion of evil. Moral evil is hatred of the good. The good cannot hate itself. If it did it would not be the good. Love of the good or hatred of the good are actual relations with the good. Having said this, it must be remembered that either love or hate depend upon the real existence of the good. The reference of love or hate is only ever the good, hence in either case we are dealing with an orientation towards the good alone. Evil, since it is not a principle, is not a reference point of itself. Strictly speaking, then, moral evil as intent is a deformation of love.

Providence, then, must not be thought of as a determinism which prevents moral evil. Providence is precisely the opposite of determinism. It is the gift to every being to elect its own path and manner of being, even to deny its being, as Shakespeare shows us.

Providence belongs, then, with the understanding of evil as the negation of the good, the doctrine of *privatio boni* as it is usually

called. It is interesting to observe in this regard that the word "Satan" literally means "negation of being" if traced back to its roots. If there were not the possibility of the negation of the good, then there could not be providence as the power that guides to freedom. And if freedom were not the natural end of human potential, then there would neither be conscience nor the necessity of prudence as the power to determine what is real from what is unreal.

In the light of these reflections we come to the question of time. Why did I call this lecture Providence, Time and Destiny? The answer is that these three belong together and are three aspects of one thing. Earlier we spoke of the sense of cosmos being displaced by the modern idea of space. We suggested that the present notions of the universe were conceptual and were not the universe we actually dwell in. The same has happened to our modern understanding of time, which is now just clock time, just the passing of time. There is, however, real time – if I may put it that way. To gain a sense of this we may return to the narrative sense, the sense of story. Narrative time is time with a shape, a shape in which a destiny unfolds and comes to a resolution. It is time in which all that comes to pass is coherent and connected by meaning. Once again, Shakespeare understands this aspect of providence, for you will observe in his plays everything has its proper time, its auspicious moment in which the strands of events all converge. Music has this property too, as does poetry. When Hamlet describes the plight of Denmark and the dilemma this throws him into he says "Time is out of joint". Likewise, when Macbeth murders Duncan nature is thrown into chaos, night overtakes the day, and the seasons are disrupted. When we hear these lines we have an immediate apprehension of their meaning and feel the disturbance of them. Time has a special place in this play. Macbeth's first encounter with the Weird Sisters speaks of "the seeds of time". Weird itself is, of course, destiny, but in this play *false destiny*, tempting Macbeth to take up a destiny that is not his own. At the end of the play the theme of time returns, but now time void of meaning:

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
Creeps in the petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death.

Thus for Macbeth, who seized a false destiny and in so doing denied his own, time is nothing but the weary, meaningless path to death. So completely is he engulfed in meaningless time that he now conceives it as universal. He has lost the knowledge of providential time. That, precisely, is his fall and tragedy.

Our modern way of thinking of time is that events take place in time, and we imagine that time as neutral, merely a measure of the distance between events but as disconnected from them. But this abstraction of time is not our actual sense of time. It is not the same at all as the time we know when something special has happened, or when something intrudes upon time and shakes it. We speak of certain events being “timely” or “in the nick of time”, or, on the other hand “at a bad time”. This sense of time is the narrative sense of time, the kind of time when event and meaning converge. Likewise, there is the kind of time in which a community dwells, as in times of commemoration, of ritual, of celebration. There is auspicious time and inauspicious time, a time to wait or a time to act.

These apprehensions of time, which are very natural to us, belong to what we may term “ontological time” as opposed to clock time. All these are part of the time order of providence, either in the sense of being harmonious with providential time or dissonant with it or in crisis with it. There is much talk these days of people being short of time and ever in haste. That marks a dissonance with providential time, a kind of time we cannot abide in but hasten through. That kind of time is, if we may put it this way, very distant from eschatological time – that is, the sacred time of the creation.

There is another important kind of time, which I will call cultural time. This is the time in which we find ourselves when we are conscious of the movements of our culture over hundreds of years. Many people have little sense of cultural time at all and regard a mere decade as a long time. But cultural time is nothing to do with length of time. Yet there is a time in which we can apprehend the whole movement of western civilisation from the early Greeks to the present day as a coherent unfolding event and our dwelling place in time. This is time with a shape, a shape in which the destiny of a civilisation unfolds in its diverse aspects, in which it falls into darkness and comes back renewed with life again. This is the time in which real art dwells, for example, where the artist is conscious of speaking in the same discourse as all the art that has passed before. When that sense of cultural time is lost the arts become fragmented and inarticulate. Cultural time is the time of community, communal

time, not the time of the individual. As Nietzsche observed, the arts thrive only when there is a common style, that is to say, a community of discourse, a shared artistic language. Thus when art becomes merely the expression of the private individual, it is no longer culture and is no longer in cultural time. This too is part of providential time, the time in which tradition functions, such as our English tradition of common law, time in which customs are “time honoured” and sanctified. No doubt there is a time of the human race too, and a time of the stars and of the immortal gods.

I think we can all recognise these different orders of time in which we dwell and in which our own individual lives are situated and unfold within. They each apprehend existence in different ways and place us in the world in different ways, yet all concurrently. A very good modern example of these modes of time running concurrently and interwoven is Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, where we might speak of “epic time”. Yet all these modes of time are intelligible to us because we have an innate knowledge of eternity, as Plato, Plotinus, Aquinas and Cusanus all observed. Eternity is the time in which every finite mode of time is placed or stands out from, just as infinity is the mode of space in which forms are placed or stand out from. This “placing” or “standing out from” is what the word existence means. Time and form are particularised eternity. Thus Plotinus observes that time is eternity in motion.

I hope we can begin to sense with these few remarks how providence, time and destiny all belong together and that we cannot really comprehend them rightly if we conceive of them separately. If we have no sense of the destiny of things, then providence is not even in question for us. Likewise, if we have no sense of time as the arc in which potential unfolds then destiny is not in question for us. With one or two notable exceptions, we may say that the prevailing way in which the natural sciences grasp reality is devoid of all three. This presents a difficulty for us only if we expect these ways of doing science to answer the questions of providence, time and destiny. The present public fascination with genetics and the new physics and so on is powered by the sense of providence, time and destiny, yet these sciences do not connect us with providence, time and destiny. They are, on the contrary, modes of representative knowledge that reinforce our alienation from the cosmos, fascinating though they may be.

This observation brings us all the way back to the cosmic sense. The cosmic sense is a participatory mode of knowing reality. It

is knowledge through communion with the cosmos. It would be more precise to say it is knowledge which comes forth from a communion with the cosmos which is already there, for we are, by the very nature of things, already part of the whole of reality before we even reflect on the fact. It is where we stand whether we know it or not. Thus to know providence, to sense destiny and to apprehend the arc of time are natural modes of knowledge, modes of knowledge already there, and therefore not inferential modes of knowledge. Here lies a fundamental difference between the knowledge which arises through the cosmic sense and scientific knowledge. Scientific knowledge is inferential knowledge, as opposed to participatory knowledge. We may infer *from* participatory knowledge, as when we reflect upon its ramifications, but not *to* it. This is why the two types of knowing cannot argue with each other. It is a terrible mistake to try and relate providential knowledge with scientific knowledge. Participatory knowledge is destroyed if we attempt to subsume it into objective knowledge or subjective knowledge. Perhaps we get a glimpse of the difference when we consider the present ethical dilemmas that arise with factory farming and genetic cloning. The ethical dimension belongs to “conscience”, which is part of the cosmic sense as we observed at the outset. There cannot be a meeting of objective knowledge and conscience as a technique. There is no technique of conscience. Conscience is a human act integral to participation. The sad attempts of rationalist philosophy to make ethics deductive bear testimony to the incongruity of the two modes of thought. An act of conscience arises only out of communion with the world. Unless there is communion with the world, then no matter of conscience is at stake. Likewise, what we call “bad conscience” arises through the knowledge of a false relation to the world. It is the sense that we blasphemed against reality and truth, against providence. At the extreme, when we speak of people “without conscience” we mean the atrophy of the cosmic sense. Such people have put themselves outside providence. In Shakespeare this always leads to meaninglessness and finally to destruction, as we witness in *Macbeth*.

It is perhaps worth remarking here that modern performances of Shakespeare, in their attempts to be “relevant” to our age, generally omit the scenes that are explicitly about providence. Act III scene iii in *Macbeth* is an example of this, and this long scene is almost always omitted. Yet it is the key to the whole play, for it is where providence is called upon and the whole action of the play

reverses, and the central theme of the play is reversal. “Fair is foul, and foul is fair.” The reason this scene is omitted is because the modern audience follows the drama as if it were a psychological drama and not a cosmic drama. That is to say, they assume that the drama springs from psychological motives rather than cosmological laws. Thus the centre of gravity of the play is lost. The same happens in performances of *Hamlet* when the scenes about Fortinbras are omitted. Thus the plays are reduced from the cosmic to the merely personal and their universal dimension – their essence, the pivot about which all the action turns – is missed. Yet these omissions illustrate very well how the prevailing world-view is steeped in the Cartesian subject-object split in which there is no relation between the inner life of man and the cosmos. However, we only have to look on the title page of almost any Shakespeare play and see that the first of the character personae is the one who occupies the position of mediator of providence, rather than the one who we regard as the main protagonist.

Nevertheless, it is this cosmic dimension of Shakespeare’s plays that makes them so powerful, whether we consciously apprehend that dimension or not. Shakespeare holds up a mirror to nature – that is, to the cosmos – so that we may see the real ground of human action, which is not psychological motive or desire, but the mode of orientation of being towards the entirety of reality, and the lawful consequences of the decisions taken in these orientations. And the orientation of the human being to reality is, in essence, an orientation towards and response to providence, the power that calls forth and challenges every human being to take up or deny their destiny. Thus the kernel of human action is decision, not motive, and because it is decision and not motive life presents itself as dilemma, as a conflict between opposing directions. At the level of decision human nature is disclosed to itself, is in its own ground, and related to the cosmos. The crisis of decision is always a crisis of *how to act in relation to*. Self and world are both at stake. This level is ontologically prior to any social conditions or psychological tendencies. One has to act or decide in relation to these factors along with all others. My desires and motives are not causes but the matters I have to act in relation to. In reference to decision psychological factors belong with external factors insofar as they are what decision must decide about. For Shakespeare, the individual psychology is external and peripheral, incidental, conditional, while the real seat of action is essential and belongs to self and world at once. Nothing could be

further from Shakespeare's understanding of human nature than the modern idea that events shape our psychological makeup, that events are causes, or that we are conditioned by society. They are no more causes than the stars are causes, as Plotinus argues. Such a view denies human freedom. This notion that events are causes has been lifted from the deterministic sciences and projected into the human person, thus making selfhood an object alongside material objects. Let me state this boldly: *the modern notion of mechanistic causality is one of the principle concepts that conceals providence, time and destiny.* So all-pervading is this manner of thinking that most of the material that I researched from modern sources for this lecture equated providence with causality. The only difference from the way science speaks of it was that the term "God" replaced the term "matter". Quite contrary to all this, for Shakespeare what determines our destiny is how we meet the events and circumstances that befall us and which befall humanity generally. Thus what shapes events and the destiny of Shakespeare's characters is the way they interpret existence and the response they make to the challenges it makes upon them. It is their response that is the real human dimension of drama, and always their responses are made in the full light of conscious decision. Once a decision is made and a response undertaken, these now become causes and unravel destinies. An act of conscience is never an effect. These responses never follow deterministically. There is no "fatal flaw" in the tragic heroes characters as Bradley famously said. Here, precisely, is the realm of prudence, the capacity to interpret events and respond to them with conscience – or against conscience. It is the human essence that is touched by providence. The substance of human nature is that which relates to the cosmos and to providence, and that substance is manifest in the actions towards the cosmos.

Providence, then, is what holds together Theos, Cosmos and Anthropos. It is the principle of relationship between all things, giving them their existence, their time and their call to ultimate destiny. It is therefore the fabric of events and the meaning of events as conceived in the mind of God. Hence providence is essentially a religious term and belongs to a sacred apprehension of the cosmos. It is epiphanic – eternity entering time and sanctifying it.

Let me close with one final observation. I have stressed throughout this talk the need to relate providence to the cosmic sense. It was necessary to do this because it has no place or meaning in the ordinary or secular ways of seeing the world. It belongs to those moments only when we sense our participation in the cosmic

unfolding of time and destiny. It is clear, I hope, from this that the understanding of providence calls for a quite different way of apprehending the world than prevails in this age of technology. But also – and this is my final point – it calls for a totally different way of apprehending human nature than the prevailing mechanistic notions of human nature which generally pervade every branch of learning from genetics, medicine, psychology, sociology and religious anthropology. The human being we conceive in our age is a being dwelling outside providence, time and destiny, a being alien from their own ground and dwelling in a cosmic desert where the stars no longer have meaning and the gods are invisible. Thus whatever we touch turns to ashes. It is indeed a bleak conception of human nature. But it is only a conception, an imposition, and, I suggest, every one of us knows in our hearts that it is false. Nevertheless, it is a part of the edifice that this course on cosmology and divination is continuously up against. We cannot simply step into this other mode of existence without understanding the mode of existence that rules our time in which all is effect and nothing essence.

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