

**‘ROTTEN WITH PERFECTION’<sup>1</sup>**  
**A Brief Response to “Providence, Time and Destiny”**

**Patrick Curry**

*World is crazier and more of it than we think,  
Incorrigibly plural.*

(Louis MacNeice)

The questions raised in the above-mentioned paper by Joseph Milne go to the heart of the issues concerning divination and cosmology, especially in contemporary culture, and that is no mean gift. I will suggest, however, that the answers it sets out are fundamentally flawed. Let me therefore first note some of its other excellent points: for example, the connection between providence, prudence and conscience; the analysis of modern Western alienation; and the brilliant use, and understanding, of Shakespeare’s plays.

The paper’s principal goal, however, is to illuminate (and give us a sense of) providence, time and destiny. To do so, it is first necessary, as Milne rightly sees, to see through, at least to some extent, the contemporary mindset of rationalism and materialism; only then can we begin to understand the three subjects of its title. But this is also where the trouble starts, for the positive meanings it then supplies are not the radical or foundational alternatives to the modern *weltanschauung* that is suggested. They are actually problematic in a way that merges seamlessly with their modern (mis)apprehension, and indeed has been integral to the latter as it developed.

What is this flaw? It emerges clearly in the following passages (among others):

- “[a] sense of **the universe**...unfolding itself towards any *end*.” (2)
- “...only essence can have the potential to unfold itself in a cosmos in which **everything** is bound with everything *towards an ordained destiny*.” (4)
- “Providence...is what guides **all** things *to their ultimate end*.” (10)

I have added two kinds of emphases to bring out two related aspects of the argument. As the words in bold show, what the paper discusses is meant to include all meaningful phenomena, no matter what, where or when, without exception; in other words, it is absolutely (and the word is appropriate) universal and, since these phenomena are thereby all contained and related, monist. And as the words italicised show, their – or rather, its – ‘end’, goal, point or meaning, in all important or relevant essentials, already exists; their>its relationship with that ‘end’ is therefore teleological (ie. ‘pulling’ it into being in accord with its particular nature).

We can add one further characteristic of ‘providence’, namely that it is hierarchical. This is evident in the assertion of a hierarchy of being: metaphysical or spiritual, psychological and physical; and since the “ontological inversion” is described as the attribution of “what is most real” to the last category (3), we may infer that it is meant to be true of the first.

So providence, in Milne’s analysis, is universal, monist, teleological and hierarchical. But is such an understanding a radical (lit. ‘return to the root’) corrective to the modern view? No. These are all hallmarks of an understanding of fate which is not so very far removed from, or out of sympathy with, modernity. True, the latter has secularised the former; but the essential mode has remained the same as its theistic

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Burke

predecessor. Scientism has replaced God with 'truth' and revelation with reason, but the former is just as unbendingly universalist, and the latter as uncompromisingly monist; its set of universal 'laws' may be physical, but they tolerate no more exceptions. It is also equally teleological, supposedly closing in ever more accurately on the truth, or 'reality' (via the central new ritual, 'scientific method') and hierarchical: the order of reality is first physical, then psychological, and last metaphysical. True, as Milne writes, this is inverted; but like all inversions, it preserves the basic principle of hierarchy, and that is much more important than which way it runs. And these structural similarities are far from surprising; they run in the family, and monotheism was scientism's first and best mentor.

The providence in Milne's paper is also already profoundly at variance with, and a significant departure from, the kind of fate or destiny that the theistic and then scientific worldviews tried to replace. That understanding and the practices of divination it supported can be characterised as irreducibly (and that is important) pluralist, perspectival or 'relativist' and contingent. I cannot rehearse the material of Stone, Cornelius and myself here, among others,<sup>2</sup> but destiny and divination in such circumstances (inner and outer) were integral parts of an ongoing process, a "negotiation", not to realise a pre-ordained goal, but one in which the very goals were worked out. By the same token, there were certainly ends, but no overarching End; becoming, yes, but no teleological (let alone eschatological) becoming. There were as many perspectives as there were embodied and embedded subjects, but no Grand Perspective in relation to which they could be compared. And the *sine qua non* of a truly enchanted world – "mystery and a plurality of spirits"<sup>3</sup> – meant that while hierarchies existed, they were multiple and local, not a single universal one. These constitute the actual opposite pole or contrary of the modern condition, in relation to which a theistic providence is a sort of half-way house. Thus the latter still permits some participation, but it only has any meaning in relation to its 'end'; variety, but only insofar as it can be subsumed under the cosmic or eschatological end; and so on. True, 'providence' remains spiritual; but in all essentials, the "Machine of Destiny"<sup>4</sup> is already in operation. The process of the disenchantment of the world so brilliantly delineated by Max Weber had already well begun with 'God', whose unity and universality was precisely what supplied the necessary basis for holding that since everything could thereby be compared and evaluated, "one can, in principle, master all things by calculation."<sup>5</sup> The contrary view, which I am advocating, understands being as something which doesn't need a Giver, or "giving"; indeed, as that which *cannot* be "given" (9). (To be added to "Rotten with Perfection", p.2, para.3 from the top, after "...cannot be 'given' (9).")

I would add that it is highly questionable, both substantively and strategically, to assign the lowest kind or 'level' of reality to the material world, and characterise it as "the realm of inert objects" (3). Substantively, it seems to me that the so-called 'material' world, properly understood, is also 'spiritual', along with the reverse. It doesn't need meaning or agency to be graciously conferred (or withheld) by a 'higher'

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<sup>2</sup> Alby Stone, *Fate and Destiny in North European Paganism* (1989), Geoffrey Cornelius, *The Moment of Astrology* (1994), Patrick Curry (forthcoming).

<sup>3</sup> Alkis Kontos, "The World Disenchanted, and the Return of Gods and Demons", in Asher Horowitz and Terry Maley (Eds.), *The Barbarism of Reason: Max Weber and the Twilight of Enlightenment* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994) 223-47: 232.

<sup>4</sup> G. Cornelius, op.cit.

<sup>5</sup> *From Max Weber* (1991) 139.

power or principle. “The world is its own magic.”<sup>6</sup> And strategically, what a grievous concession has here *already* been made to modern materialism, which is only too pleased to treat the ‘merely’ material world as inert, i.e. dead, and therefore manipulable at will. Yet the problem is not even the logocentric transcendentalism, patronising at best and manifestly destructive at worst, of reserving full reality, life and meaning for the top ‘level’; it is that doing so assumes and perpetuates the very divide between ‘material’ and ‘spiritual’ that underwrites the modern constitution which Milne’s paper deplores. It is not so much Cartesianism *avant la lettre* as the source and warrant of Descartes’s mad idea. Whichever side is valued matters much less than whether the split itself is upheld or not.<sup>7</sup>

It is also worth noting that the logic of monist universalism (whether spiritual or secular) is inherently authoritarian. As Laclau & Mouffe note, “This point is decisive: there is no radical and plural democracy without renouncing the discourse of the universal, and its implicit assumption of a privileged point of access to ‘the truth’, which can only be reached by a limited number of subjects.”<sup>8</sup> Why is such an assumption implicit? Because since the truth is one – ie. *only* one – its various versions must all be checked and authorised, usually via the credentials of its bearers. This, of course, is just how Truth produces heretics, apostates and infidels.

Now Milne is at pains to disassociate ‘providence’ from determinism by identifying the latter solely with its modern scientific version. But the latter is just that: a mechanistic version of a more comprehensive idea. And no number of qualifications (‘potential’, ‘unrealised’, etc.) can change the fact that in this case, the “ultimate end” has already been specified, and destiny already “ordained”. Nor does his assertion that “Providence is the power that guides the cosmos to freedom” (8) help. There are two points here. First, look carefully at that (repeated) formulation: “guides” is quite meaningless unless there already exists a goal. Furthermore it must operate in a teleological relationship in order to guide. This is determinism by any other name. So “Destiny is in our hands” (9) – but that destiny has already been decided, and quite without our say. The same applies to our ‘freedom’ to do what we will with our Being, which God has already given us (9).

It also follows that the “freedom” being referred to is a highly constrained – or rather, to be exact, unfree – kind. We are apparently only free in relation to our ordained goal; free, that is, to accord with it or to resist or even deny it, but not free to do anything that has no relationship with it at all, or indeed, to be anything other than it. I would suggest that the freedom to walk as one will while chained, no matter how lengthy or beautiful the chain, is not worthy of the name. In this I concur with Isaiah Berlin: “The fundamental sense of freedom is freedom from chains, from imprisonment... The rest is extension of this sense, or else metaphor.”<sup>9</sup>

Anticipating a possible response, I would like to emphasise that the alternative view I am putting forth is not, or certainly not only, a modern one – and therefore necessarily a misunderstanding of ‘providence’. It is a very old one indeed. I believe it nonetheless still lives, and is recoverable; and that it offers a much more hopeful alternative to the dead-end of modernity that of ‘providence’.

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<sup>6</sup> Shunryu Suzuki, *Roshi*

<sup>7</sup> See David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*

<sup>8</sup> Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985): 191-2.

<sup>9</sup> *Four Essays on Liberty*, lvi.

P.S. It is also quite true that stories (aka narrative, myth, etc.) are lodestars for living. But, perhaps for that very reason, nor do they have – or *need* – an end in the sense suggested (i.e., a single and final one which supplies meaning to the whole). Sam asks, “Don’t the great tales never end?” to which Frodo replies, “No, they never end as tales... But the people in them come, and go when their part’s ended.” (Bk.4, ch.8)

P.P.S. Modern exemplars of pluralism include Paul Feyerabend, Michel Foucault, Max Weber and John Stuart Mill among others. These were strongly influenced by Nietzsche and, earlier, Machiavelli; the latter, in turn, was very much in the tradition of classical pagan philosophy. The best contemporary philosophical expositions are *Contingencies of Value* and *Belief and Resistance* by Barbara Herrnstein Smith. The quotation below is by another recent exponent, Isaiah Berlin (from *Four Essays on Liberty*, lv-lvi). Notwithstanding his own particular approach and concerns (which is true, naturally, of each of these authors), it is valuable as an encapsulation or starting-point:

“The notion that there must exist final objective answers to normative questions, truths that can be demonstrated or directly intuited, that it is in principle possible to discover a harmonious pattern in which all values are reconciled, and that it is towards this unique goal that we must make; that we can uncover some single central principle that shapes this vision, a principle which, once found, will govern our lives – this ancient and almost universal belief...seems to me invalid, and at times to have led (and still to lead) to absurdities in theory and barbarous consequences in practice.”

(But I also like Patrick Barlow [from *All the World's a Globe*] on major world religions: “All of them says basically the same thing: ‘you are not here for why you think you are, you’re here for another reason that we are not at liberty to tell you yet.’”)