

On Providence

Any possible world necessarily involves a multiplicity of individuals, each making its own free decisions. And the idea of a multiplicity of individuals each making its own free decisions necessarily implies at least an element of chance in what comes to pass.

Nor can it be otherwise simply because one of the many individuals involved is rightly said to be God, in the sense of the one universal individual whose power as compared with the greatest conceivable is absolutely unsurpassable, i.e., such that not only no other individual but not even this individual itself could possibly surpass it. If individual *x* freely decides to do *a*, while individual *y* freely decides to do *b*, the result of their decisions, if both are effective, is the occurrence of *ab*, which, however, simply occurs, having been freely decided as such by neither *x* nor *y*. And this remains true even if *x* or *y* is the universal individual God, or if God is yet a third individual *z*, whose free decision to do *c* is distinct from both *x*'s and *y*'s—unless, of course, "free decision" is merely verbal because it refers to nothing of the kind in its application either to God as the universal individual or to one of the other particular individuals.

In other words, divine providence cannot eliminate the element of chance except by eliminating the free decisions of the many individuals other than God that any possible world also involves. The only conception of providence that would exclude every element of chance would also exclude all other decision-making individuals, which means, simply, all individuals period—a non-decision-making individual being a contradiction in terms. But, then, providence, absurdly, would be without any world of other individuals, which is to say, creatures, to provide for.

What, then, can providence do if it cannot simply eliminate the element of chance? It can limit the scope of chance by so ordering the world of other particular individuals, or creatures, that the risks of their freedom, and so also of chance, are fewer than its opportunities. Otherwise put: the providence of God is God's own freely deciding

in such a way that the ratio of opportunity to risk from the free decisions of the creatures is optimized—in the sense that the opportunities of good resulting from their decisions are greater than the risks of evil.

As for justifying the ways of providence, it is properly accomplished, not by futilely attempting to show that such evils as occur are really goods in disguise, but rather by showing that and why the same multiplicity of free decisions that makes any evils that occur possible or probable is equally necessary to making any goods that occur possible or probable.

7 July 2008 (after reading Charles M. Wood, *The Question of Providence*)