

Book Review

Karl Giberson, ed. *Abraham's Dice: Chance and Providence in the Monotheistic Traditions*, Oxford University Press, 2016, 376 pp., \$35.00, ISBN 978-0-19-027716-1

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Questions regarding God's providential role (or possible lack thereof) in a world that appears objectively chancy are currently the source of much interdisciplinary interest among scientists, theologians, and philosophers. Given that these questions simply will not go away on their own, Karl Giberson, professor of science and religion at Stonehill College and one of the central voices in the field, has edited this volume in order to lay the groundwork necessary for investigating how it is that God as conceived broadly by the Abrahamic monotheistic religions can exercise care over a creation that appears shot through with contingency. This task is taken up by Giberson's wide array of distinguished contributors that include Templeton prize winners and Gifford lecturers, not to mention a New York Times bestselling author and every scholar who has so far held Oxford's prestigious Andreas Idreos Chair in Science and Religion.

Throughout the book's sixteen diverse chapters any reader is likely to find something they would deem interesting. Split between four different parts, some chapters are essentially historical and provide an overview of a particular person, period, group, or tradition's positions on chance and providence. Others are more scientific in character, detailing the development of science from its Aristotelian roots and describing how views of providence adapted concomitantly.

In order to facilitate an overall understanding of the book I will give an unfortunately brief summary of each section before evaluating the volume's content.

The first part, "The Challenge of Chance," is comprised of Giberson's introduction to the volume along with a range of essays that includes a discussion of ancient Hebraic struggles with chance and providence evidenced by the books of Job and Ecclesiastes (Hecht, chp. 2), a general overview of current cosmology with particular attention dedicated to the limits of the universe's knowability (Barrow, chp. 3), a model of "divine randomness" drawn from Christian Platonism and contemporary computer science (Bradley, chp. 4), and a treatment of Paul of Tarsus' "super-providence" in contrast to the accounts of providence held by Greeks and Jews at the time (Ruden, chp. 5).

The second part, "Theological Conversations," contains overviews of the Islamic (Ruzgar, chp. 6), early Christian (Miller, chp. 7), and Calvinist (Han, chp. 9) traditions, along with chapters dedicated to Thomas Aquinas (Silva, chp. 8) and Jonathan Edwards (Crisp, chp. 10). Each chapter places its tradition or individual within their respective historical context in order to facilitate a greater apprehension of their understanding of God's providential role in the world.

The third part, "The Complications of Science," is a wide-ranging section. It begins with the Christian theological responses to the shift from a universe governed by Aristotelian teleology to the Newtonian mechanistic universe (Brooke, chp. 11). Alister McGrath then presents a biographical sketch of William Paley before discussing the conception of chance in *Natural Theology* (chp. 12). The other three

chapters in this section focus on evolution by natural selection and quantum phenomena which present a number of difficulties for those attempting to develop a coherent doctrine of providence and divine action in the world. Peter Harrison argues that the perceived incompatibility between Darwinism and Christianity is an artifactual accident resulting from the logic of design being unnecessarily separated from human history (chp. 13). Shaun Henson outlines the history and basics of quantum theory and argues that the openness of the future found therein allows God to act providentially (chp. 14). Michael Ruse closes the section by arguing that the randomness found in evolutionary theory problematizes theistic evolution if one does not also accept multiverse theory (chp. 15).

The final section, “Closing Reflection,” contains the sixteenth and final chapter. Reinhold Bernhardt gives a philosophical reflection on “the tragic” and discusses several possible theological explanations. An interpretation of the doctrine of original sin as the necessary possibility of relational disaster serves to render the tragic explainable. This is done not by giving the contingent tragedy intrinsic meaning but by appeal to a faithful realism that takes the reality of God’s spiritual presence seriously, with such presence providing the possibility to attribute meaning retrospectively to the experience of the tragic.

A general evaluation of the book’s contents should begin with its diversity problem, which is acknowledged by Giberson in the first essay. Besides the scarcity of female authors, the volume has an obvious slant towards Christianity. While it is true that most of the work in the discipline of science and religion is done from a Christian perspective, or is at least done with Christianity being the only possible substitute for the word “religion” in such work, it is surprising that so little of the volume is dedicated to the other monotheistic religions. For instance, while many chapters are dedicated to a particular tradition or thinker within Christianity, only one chapter is dedicated to the *entirety* of the Islamic faith. This makes Mustafa Ruzgar’s attempt to outline the complex history of Islamic thought on providence and chance all the more valiant, but unfortunately it leaves one wanting much more depth than can possibly be provided by a single chapter.

The problem of evil always lurks in the background of discussions of divine providence and rightly so, as

instances of apparently unnecessary suffering are hard to square with theistic providence while being easily explained by the hypothesis that our universe is indifferent towards us. Some of the authors provide short discussions of the problem, which is understandable given that a more detailed examination would be tangential to their main theses. The book would have benefited greatly by including an essay (perhaps authored by a philosopher) specifically regarding providence’s (in)compatibility with evil in light of recent scientific developments. Bernhardt’s essay partially fulfills this need by arguing that tragic events, conflicts, and failures can be rendered meaningful retrospectively by God’s operative presence. His concerns, however, are more pastoral and theological than philosophical in character, and he does not appeal to current science to justify any of his conclusions. Oliver Crisp also feels the tug of the problem of evil, providing an interesting and charitable argument that Jonathan Edwards’ occasionalism need not necessarily imply that God is responsible for evil, although he fails to mention that such a compatibilist position is nearly universally rejected by contemporary theistic philosophers who tend to think that free will in a libertarian sense is a necessary, though certainly not sufficient, condition for a solution to the problem of evil broadly conceived.

Despite these concerns, the selected authors exhibit a deep awareness of the historical development of the doctrine of providence in relation to differing accounts of chance and necessity found in the past, continuing through the scientific revolution, and ending with contemporary scientific challenges. By placing their historical, scientific, philosophical, and theological investigations within this developing history they have ensured that the reader will come away with a thorough understanding of the topics they collectively address, even if the subject matter of their respective contributions overlaps with others.

Given the number of chapters and the breadth of their subject matter, I will limit more specific evaluation to three of the contributions, beginning with Peter Harrison’s thought-provoking essay “Evolution, Providence, and the Problem of Chance.” He argues that two theological expectations had formed regarding providence before Darwin. First, God’s care over *history* was “invisible” so to speak, with history’s purpose being discernible only by the eyes of faith. Second, and in stark contrast, the purpose of things in the *natural world* were obvious to anyone who cared

to investigate. When Darwin showed that the natural world was just as historical, dynamic, and apparently stochastic as human history this brought about a crisis regarding the compatibility of providence and chance, despite the fact that the first expectation seemed to dictate that God's providence over apparently chance events was unproblematic from the standpoint of faith.

Harrison goes on to affirm, "the plausibility of certain philosophical positions is not a function of whether they are sound or valid but, rather, depends upon the historical context in which they are articulated" (279). Thus, resolving the apparent incompatibility between providence and chance in the natural world with a fideistic stance was not a live option according to Harrison, despite the fact that such a solution was relatively uncontroversial in the context of human history.

I will let the reader decide whether this claim is plausible. But a weaker interpretation of Harrison's claim is certainly correct: that the historical background limits what we are likely to find feasible, especially within the disciplines of theology and philosophy. Thus Harrison's historical analysis forces us not only to reconsider how an account of providence is affected by the historical circumstances in which it is developed, but also brings a sense of humility to this daunting theological project.

Harrison's point is unintentionally defended by John Hedley Brooke in the latter's chapter "Divine Providence in the Clockwork Universe." In this essay, Brooke begins by summarizing the synthesis between Christian theology and Aristotelian natural philosophy that entangled belief in providence with belief in final causes. The scientific revolution then displaced humanity from the center of the universe, made the existence of other forms of intelligent life plausible, signaled the return of atomism, and excised final causes. In these ways the new mechanistic world stood opposed to providence as conceived by the Thomistic synthesis, and the malleability of the doctrine of providence was thereby severely tested.

The doctrine survived, however. Brooke documents how providence in a general sense was easily conjoined with the clockwork universe, with special providence also finding a home, albeit with some difficulty. But the clockwork/machine metaphor left creation open to interpretation that resulted not only in defenses of

divine intervention within the natural order, but also varieties of deism.

This ambivalence of the mechanical universe is wonderfully brought out by Brooke's discussion of the disagreements between Newton and Leibniz. For Newton the universe was the result of divine free choice, not chance, and its natural workings could be interrupted from time to time. Armed with his principle of sufficient reason Leibniz disagreed, for God *must* have created the best possible universe with no intervention required. Their ensuing disagreements over this and a variety of other matters provide a microcosm of the continuing historical dialectic between science and religion. As Brooke states, "in the construction of new syntheses there was much more involved than the unidirectional impact of science on religion. Philosophical and theological ideas could influence the way the science was interpreted and, in some cases, even shape its content. Competing understandings of providence could eventuate in competing systems of natural philosophy" (228).

The last piece I would like to accent is Michael Ruse's essay "Darwinian Evolution and a Providential God: The Human Problem," which focuses on the plausibility of theistic evolution and is written with his characteristic wit and charity towards religion that those who are familiar with his work have come to expect. He argues that the production of human-like beings by natural selection renders God's providential creation of such beings problematic. If we say that God could have guided the necessary mutations to bring us about, then we have solved one problem of providence only by substituting it for another one that renders it inexplicable why God allows or produces harmful mutations that lead to Huntington's chorea and other horrendous afflictions. Further, according to Ruse, we cannot appeal to evolutionary arms races, convergent evolution, or other factors in order to make the eventual existence of human-like organisms likely. But Ruse wants to give the defender of providence a way out: postulation of a potentially infinite number of universes guarantees the eventual arrival of human-like beings and solves the theological conundrum.

The structure of Ruse's argument is clear and represents a well-known problem: if Christianity is true, then the fact that human-like beings exist is necessary in some sense, for God wanted them to exist. Taking

providence seriously requires that we are not the result of chance. But apparently God, if such a being exists, created us by natural selection, which seems to entail the contrary. A solution to this problem will show that our existence is guaranteed without dropping natural selection or other well-confirmed scientific theories, and a speculative multiverse hypothesis is the best we have.

Regarding whether God could interact with natural selection, Ruse unfortunately only considers two accounts: current “Intelligent Design” theory and Robert John Russell’s “Non-Interventionist Objective Divine Action.” Russell’s position in particular has become a well-known potential solution to worries about God’s providence in light of current science. On such a view, God can exert influence in the world on the indeterministic quantum level. But such accounts that look for a causal joint through which God can operate providentially are not the only accounts available. Kenotic, Neo-Thomistic, panentheistic, and process accounts of divine action and providence are competitors with Russell’s view and are neither obviously ruled out by scientific considerations nor open to objections regarding deleterious mutations. Ruse’s argument would fare better if it had given some attention to these other positions that are becoming increasingly prevalent within contemporary theology, but it is understandable that they are left out of the discussion as such views differently modify classical theism’s account of God’s attributes and are grounded on sometimes radically diverging metaphysics.

Abraham’s Dice will be of particular benefit to those who are new to the topics addressed therein. It is to be commended for its interdisciplinary appeal that brings history, theology, philosophy, and science to bear on a series of questions that both scholars and the general public will find interesting. Further, it shows that the discipline of science and religion is, and hopefully will continue to be, a vibrant field of study.