A Short Grammar of Providence
Judith Wolfe
University of St Andrews

I am grateful to Paul and David for allowing me to provide a further counterpoint to this polyphonic history of providence. It is a book that only Fergusson could have composed, showing and sharing his immense generosity of mind, which greets and engages ideas wherever it finds them, and especially among the great 18th- and 19th-century Scotsmen, who are treated almost like family. The book is a historical overview over past understandings of providence, both remembered and widely forgotten, issuing in a new account of the doctrine that Fergusson variously calls 'chastened' and 'polyphonic'. As we will see, the tension between images of extravagance and restraint here is not accidental, but indicative of his project.[1]

The two main emphases of Fergusson's constructive account are *distribution* and *description*. Fergusson argues for providence as a *distributed* doctrine. Interpreted at its most basic as 'the actions and permissions of God', providence is to be found in irreducibly different modes and registers in the creation, preservation, redemption and completion of the world: 'Advent is not Lent, Christmas is not Good Friday, Easter is not Pentecost, and Harvest is not Ascension. Yet each displays some aspect of God's providence towards the world'.[2] This also means it is not merely or primarily the work of the Father (as in most traditional accounts), or even that of the Son (as in Barth's account), but also and equally the work of the Spirit. This emphasis on the Spirit is one of Fergusson's key contributions to the constructive debate, enabling him to present divine providence not so much as pro-vision or fore-ordination, but as God's responsive, improvisational action around, within, with and for us.

Fergusson also argues for a *descriptive* account of providence. This is partly a consequence of his understanding of the providential role of the Spirit. If God as Spirit dynamically responds to human action, rather than prescriptively guiding it, then our own doctrine of providence needs to be descriptive rather than normative; in other words, it needs to seek to *find* God's work in the world as we encounter it, without over-confident claims that it must take a particular form or follow a particular pattern. Fergusson's account is 'polyphonic', in other words, not only in incorporating many different theological voices, but also in seeing providence itself as 'polyphonic'. Providence, for him, is irreducible to a single mode or 'voice' of divine action, although its *cantus firmus* is, unwaveringly, divine love.

The intellectual ambition of Fergusson's constructive contribution to the doctrine of providence bursts its textual scope, which extends to little more than ten percent of the book. This presents challenges of interpretation: there are, for example, underlying assumptions about process theology at work in his account which would have to be made more explicit before they could be properly engaged. Matthew Levering's contribution to this symposium discusses some such implicit claims.

---

[1] A version of this paper was presented in the 'Book Panel Session*: The Providence of God: A Polyphonic Approach* (Cambridge University Press, 2018) by David Fergusson', on Nov 23, 2019 in San Diego, CA.
[2] David Fergusson, *The Providence of God*, 298.

The question I would like to pursue in the remainder of this response concerns not claims but criteria: How do we discern the hand of providence, and distinguish it, as Sarah Coakley has put it, from 'our own prophetic burdens'?[3] Fergusson's account equips us to reject over-confident claims to be in possession of providential master narratives; but if we are nevertheless to believe in providence – and if, rather than relying on a doctrinal blueprint for where to look and how to comport ourselves in relation to it, we are to rely on our ability to *discern* such providence –, then it is imperative to describe the criteria for such discernment.

One preparatory step within this task is a conceptual analysis of the extremely rich historical material provided by Fergusson, with the aim of identifying not so much the changing sources or claims of theologies of providence, but rather the variety of functions that 'providence' has fulfilled in people's thought and lives. What I am proposing is a post-Wittgensteinian 'grammar' of the language games that people play with 'providence'. Such an analysis will allow us, among other things, to begin to delineate the *existential needs* typically fulfilled by appeals to providence. Only by understanding these needs, and the ways they are addressed by language games involving 'providence', can we determine where and how those needs are most properly met, with or without reference to divine action.

In the many historical sketches contained in Fergusson's book, 'providence' appears in three main senses: providence as the vigilant punishment of evil and reward for good; providence as God's vision or pro-vision of the course of world history; providence as the provision or supply of special guidance and protection. Each sense has a range of historical manifestations. Crucially for my purposes, these manifestations include some modern variants that are not clearly religious at all, and may therefore serve as 'control groups' for distinctly theological claims. In other words, they enable a critical specification of the difference that belief in divine agency makes in claims of their sort. I will focus here on such modern manifestations.

The first main sense of providence is God's vigilant reward of good and reprisal of evil acts. Along with others of his time, the early eighteenth-century English philosopher and priest Samuel Clarke speaks of providence largely as expressing itself in punishment for evil and reward for good.[4] This approach has biblical roots in the Wisdom literature, and continues themes of divine authority that are shared by earlier accounts of providence. However, Clarke offers a distinctively modern inflection of this theme: The emphasis is not so much on reward and punishment as expressions of divine authority and power, than as evidence of the validity of a moral system. The Enlightenment de-emphasis of the reliability of revelation had left accounts of morality in need of new grounds or guarantees. Clarke's account of providence functions much like the Indian concept of 'karma', ascribing quasi-causal power to good or bad intent. Rather than (as was more common in pre-modernity) trying to discern God's will and favour by 'reading the signs' of divine action in the world, it interprets experiences of reward and reprisal as validations of ethical systems that are constructible and discernible independently of divine revelation. Both traditional and modern variants of this sense of 'providence', I propose, address an existential human need for confidence concerning what is right and wrong.

---

[3] [Provide source, or info on where Coakley made this statement]

[4] David Fergusson, *The Providence of God*, 116ff.

The second sense of providence is God's peremptory vision of the overall shape of the world or course of world history. This understanding takes various forms, among which Fergusson emphasises Leibniz's claim that our world is the best possible world on the two-pronged principle of simplicity and variety. One implication of such a view is that everything in the world is more or less instrumental in the service of an overall design. Humans must ultimately find their happiness in their contribution (whether free or forced) to the whole; they *conform* to providence.

There are several distinctly modern, even specifically post-theistic, versions of such an account of providence. For example, popular (though not scientific) accounts of evolution often make it function as a form of providence, providing overriding principles to which all things conform, and so also guaranteeing a particular quasi-moral system (whether an aristocratic one of fitness or a social one of cooperation). One of the human needs that this kind of appeal to providence seeks to address is the need to live in a narrative or a meaningful whole, and to have a role to play therein.

The third sense of providence is the provision of special guidance and protection. On this view, providence is aimed, in one way or another, at individual felicity. In other words, providence conforms to *us*: what providence means is determined by what happiness means. One of the human needs that this kind of appeal to providence seeks to address is the need for one's happiness to count.

About each of these types of providence, we can further ask whether it is understood as being directed towards an end or concerned with the here and now. In the first sense detailed above, providence is not usually ordered towards a more distant goal or end: providence instructs, exhorts and punishes in the here and now. The second and third senses, on the other hand, can take either end-directed or present-directed forms. Providence may be focused on the present, conforming the world to particular principles in the here and now (as in Leibniz); or it may be seen as working towards the subject's happiness in the here and now, or as end-directed. In the latter case, the realization of an overall shape, or the achievement of felicity, is seen as the *end* of God's providential action. Here, providence intersects closely with eschatology, and prompts the questions: To what extent can we discern the working of providence by the end towards which it leads? And to that extent, can we tell what is providential ahead of the end?

One of the outcomes of a 'grammatical' investigation such as I have proposed is to avoid accounts of providence that spuriously assuage human needs by foreclosing the actual end of providence as Christianity envisions it. This is encapsulated in General Löwenhielm's speech near the end of *Babette's Feast*:

> We tremble before making our choice in life, and after having made it again tremble in fear of having chosen wrong. But the moment comes when our eyes are opened, and we see and realise that grace is infinite. Grace, my friends, demands nothing from us but that we shall await it with confidence and acknowledge it in gratitude. Grace, brothers, makes no conditions and singles out none of us in particular, grace takes us all to its bosom and proclaims general amnesty. See! that which we have chosen is given us, and that which we have refused is, also and at the same time, granted us. Ay,

> that which we have rejected is poured upon us abundantly. For mercy and truth have met together, and righteousness and bliss have kissed one another!

If this is the end that God's providence has in store for us, then it is not conceivable as attainable within our current conditions. Christian belief does not deny our desires for confidence, for knowing the story in which we live, for knowing our happiness to matter. But neither does it allow us to foreclose their fulfilment by insisting on a providence that realizes them here and now, because such supposed fulfilment would always be inadequate to the Christian promise. This is where the doctrines of providence and eschatology flow together; and I would be keen to discuss that confluence further with my Reformed colleague.