Lloyd, Genevieve, *Providence Lost*, Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2008, pp. 369, $US31.00 (cloth).

‘Providence’ originates from the term ‘provide’. Providence has come to be associated with the idea that God provides for humanity, but the more fundamental meaning of the term, as this work makes clear, has to do simply with an encompassing order in the light of which human misfortune and suffering are reconfigured and, thereby, made more bearable. *Providence Lost* is a study of the concept of providence in western philosophy, from its early appearance in ancient Greece to its disappearance in late modernity. It is both a marvellous and a frustrating work that combines a wide-ranging history of ideas with a stirring thesis about conceptual loss.

The thesis, set out in the introduction and in the concluding chapter of the book, is that the disappearance of the concept of providence from our working philosophical vocabulary—a loss Lloyd sees as first visible in the writings of Hegel—encourages the fantasy that ‘the borders between the controllable and the necessary are indefinitely shiftable’ [307]. The fantasy is that total control over our lives is within our reach, that human will and ingenuity can overcome all, even death. To the extent that we think this way, Lloyd believes, we are bound to engage in ‘inappropriate efforts of will’ and to assume what are ultimately inhumane attitudes towards agency and responsibility. As an example, she cites *The Year of Magical Thinking*, in which Joan Didion reports experiencing the death of her husband from natural causes not as an encounter with necessity but as a failure that could have been avoided if only someone had tried harder, known more, done better. Lloyd believes the remedy for this anxious and debilitating condition lies in the ‘the ideal of shaping a life in accordance with necessity’ and that a knowledge of the history of philosophy can help us to articulate such an ideal for our own times.

The eight chapters that form the body of the book aim to provide the requisite history of ideas. At the core of this history, forming Chapters 5 and 6, are divergent conceptions of human freedom developed by Descartes and Spinoza, the former linking freedom to free will and the latter finding it in the embrace of what cannot be helped (much as Spinoza accepted his own banishment from the Jewish religion at age 23). The conclusion Lloyd draws from these chapters is that we have inherited a corrupt version of Descartes’s conception of freedom and are altogether blind to Spinoza’s conception precisely because we have lost a working conception of providence. In her development of these chapters, she stresses that, notwithstanding real differences, both thinkers recognized that (at least) some difficulties in life cannot be avoided and in that sense represent a form of necessity to which one must accommodate oneself if one is to have the best life possible. This recognition of providence served for Descartes as a check on what can be expected of human willpower and in this way lent an emotional viability to his practical philosophy that Lloyd finds absent from much of our own thinking.
Chapters 1 to 4 trace elements of both the Cartesian and Spinozistic conceptions of freedom in the accounts of providence that preceded them, beginning with Euripides, concluding with Augustine, and covering a great deal of ancient philosophy in between. Of special prominence in this historical tour are the Stoics (Chapters 2 and 3), who prefigured Spinoza’s account by identifying providence with a necessary order, and Augustine (Chapter 4), who prefigured Descartes’s account by identifying it with divine will. Chapters 7 and 8 continue this history through the eighteenth century, beginning with Leibniz’s treatment of providence as the exercise of divine will checked by infinite wisdom and concluding with Kant’s incorporation of providence into the idea of progress. Voltaire, Hume and Rousseau are also discussed.

I found two aspects of this immensely rich and erudite work frustrating. First, the amount of ground covered in the historical chapters is so vast that the treatment given to various thinkers is often too cursory to be satisfying to the specialist or illuminating to the non-specialist. I found the exposition of crucial technical terms such as Stoic ‘appropriation’ or ‘impulse’, for instance, too quick to elucidate the Stoic ideal that Lloyd celebrates and succeeds in making look attractive (so that one very much wants the elucidation that is missing). There is a cluttered feel to many of these chapters, as if she felt obliged to cover too many figures (in addition to those mentioned, Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, Machiavelli, Boethius, and the Neoplatonists). Though there is much to be said for this kind of historical compass, I felt I was in the hands of a very astute reader who too readily sacrificed depth to breadth. Less would have been more.

The crowdedness of these chapters contributed to the second disappointment, which is that the historical chapters do not always mesh neatly with one another or with the thesis they are intended to establish. Some passages from these chapters first saw publication in self-standing pieces, and at times this shows. This difficulty is most salient in the crucial chapter on Descartes.

For her thesis, Lloyd needs to show how the (in her view, widespread) denial of a place for the uncontrollable in human life originates in a selective appropriation of Descartes’s conception of freedom, one that embraces his emphasis on free will while overlooking the limits he set to it. One expects, then, to find both elements of this account treated in the chapter on Descartes, but this is not what happens, or not clearly enough. Rather, Lloyd shows how Descartes’s correspondence with the astute Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia forced refinements in his conception of freedom that culminate in the account he sets out in The Passions of the Soul. The chapter is keyed to this mature conception, according to which the proper exercise of the will takes into account an order of things which exceeds the reach of the will, akin to the experience of love where, on Descartes’s account, one sees oneself as part of a larger whole and is moved by this association. This makes for an engaging discussion, but it leaves uncertain just what Descartes’s emphasis on free will consists in on the earlier (pre-Elisabeth) or later (post-Elisabeth) account. This point is vital to Lloyd’s thesis, which claims that this emphasis is all that survived. It also makes it disconcerting when Descartes is identified with an extremely voluntaristic approach in the subsequent chapter on Spinoza.

If these defects keep the work from delivering an altogether persuasive argument for its assessment of our condition, they do not keep it from being seriously rewarding. Lloyd is a suggestive and perceptive reader of the texts she discusses and the book provides something of a model for how to give due attention to the literary form of the philosophical works one is reading. She convincingly makes the case throughout that we cannot appreciate the various roles that the concept of providence has played in our civilization without grasping the emotional resonance
of its various conceptions. Providence is, after all, a concept that aims to help make people at home in the world in the face of all that is frightening and difficult in human life. A philosophically robust conception of providence (as opposed to a strictly theological one) is supposed to provide one with a deep form of consolation that is rationally grounded. It is supposed, in other words, to engage intellect and emotion at once. Lloyd is wonderfully sensitive to the various writing strategies philosophers have deployed to elicit this complete form of engagement in their audience. By the same token, she is refreshingly at home reading literary texts as pieces of philosophy. It is no accident that this work begins and ends with an engaging discussion of Euripides, a playwright. The affective dimensions of reason and the demands this makes upon the literary form of practical philosophy is a critical and stimulating sub-theme of the book.

Sometimes this sub-theme overshadows the more explicit theme, as when her discussion of Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* has more to say about how to read the work than about the idea of providence. More often, however, her development of the sub-theme works to good overall effect. In her discussion of Augustine, Leibniz and Kant, for instance, she makes an interesting case for the idea that the arguments these philosophers advance to defend their respective notions of providence knowingly depend upon the presence of certain kinds of affective receptivity in the reader. The latter two appeal to a sense of ‘fittingness’ or symmetry akin to what is required to appreciate a painting or a piece of music while, as Lloyd sees it, Augustine’s argument unabashedly relies upon a prior faith in the goodness of God. In her words, we should see Augustine as writing ‘out of the full depth of his experience as part of a community that gives form to his thought, while at the same time he contributes to the formation of that community’ [145]. A contemporary reader might find these thinkers’ arguments disappointing on precisely that account; Lloyd’s accomplishment is to have made tangible the idea that we won’t fully grasp their conceptions of providence if we think they were trying to convince any rational observer (however insensible) through their arguments for it. One interesting implication of this is that if, as Lloyd suggests, we would do well to revive the idea of providence or something functionally equivalent, we would be foolish to look for knockdown arguments. That’s not how the idea has ever been worked, if Lloyd is correct, and only a narrow view of reason—and philosophy—would make us think otherwise.

I have not said anything about whether her readings in the history of philosophy are correct because that is best left to those who specialize in these many figures. There is one conspicuous inaccuracy on page 261, however, when she attributes what are famously the doctrines of the ancient Sceptics (the pursuit of tranquillity through suspension of judgment achieved by counterposing appearances) to the ancient Stoics.

In addition to footnotes, which are limited to indicating source materials, there is a separate section on ‘further reading’ which provides guidance, chapter by chapter, to a great range of material that bears on Lloyd’s subject (fittingly, this includes works in history and imaginative literature as well as secondary literature and other works by philosophers). The ‘further reading’ section also rounds out some of her discussions in the main text and supplies historical details that are enriching and unobtrusive.

While my complaints about this book are serious, it undoubtedly deserves to be read by anyone with an interest in its far-reaching themes.

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