



Book Review

Ulrich Lehner, *Kants Vorsehungskonzept auf dem Hintergrund der deutschen Schulphilosophie und -theologie* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), pp. 532 + ix, \$139.

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe witnessed a fierce ideological struggle between competing pictures of history. The first picture has natural and human history foreknown and guided by supernatural Wisdom; the second depicts history as either pushed “from behind” by the natural laws, or “from within” by the goal-directedness of organisms, ecosystems, social relations, or Reason itself.

The second sort of picture ultimately prevailed in many intellectual circles: by the turn of the nineteenth century, the role of an intelligent deity intervening on behalf of specific ends in nature and history had been usurped (in many minds) by the assemblage of laws, powers, mechanisms, social forces, and reasons that can be referenced in modern scientific explanation. Religious people, as well as religious philosophers and theologians, did not stop talking about divine providence during this period, but for many God’s work in history became, as Ulrich Lehner puts it, merely “a natural – or semi-deistic – principle of progress” (27).

A full narrative of this episode in intellectual history would involve an immense cast of characters from across the European Enlightenment. Jonathan Israel has recently told a significant part of that story in a magisterial (and massive) trilogy.¹ As the title of the first book – *Radical Enlightenment* – suggests, a central theme of Israel’s narrative is the debate between (a) proponents of “radical,” anti-providentialist thought (paradigmatically: Spinoza), (b) more “moderate” deists and theists who retained a belief in divine ordination but preferred naturalistic modes of explanation, and (c) traditional Calvinists and enthusiasts who saw God as both concurring in all lawful events and engaging in occasional miraculous interventions.

Lehner’s very welcome book takes up where Israel leaves off (indeed, it was published, perhaps not coincidentally, in a Brill series that is co-edited by Professor Israel). *KantsVorsehungskonzept* enriches our understanding of the trans-European debates by focusing specifically on Kant’s views about providence as they were influenced and informed by the pre-Kantian German Enlightenment.

¹) Jonathan Israel, *The Radical Enlightenment* (New York, Oxford, 2001); *Enlightenment Contested* (New York: Oxford, 2006); *Democratic Enlightenment* (New York: Oxford, 2011).

Because Kant, together with Lessing and Herder, is one of the first self-conscious “philosophers of history,” readers of this journal will have a special interest in understanding how Kant’s views developed and how they fed into the influential *Geschichtsphilosophie* of the later Idealists. Lehner’s focus on the doctrine of providence (*Vorsehung*) thus allows the book not only to break new ground, but also to serve as a nice complement to earlier works on Kant’s philosophy of history by Düsing, Despland, Yovel, and Kleingeld.² His central thesis is that Kant starts out sympathetic to traditional Lutheran Christianity but also inclined for both scientific and theological reasons to adopt a moderate conception of providence. Later on, according to Lehner, Kant’s sympathy for anything like interventionist miracles or even mere concurrence gives way to a fully non-interventionist, conservationist, broadly deistic position.

Kants Vorsehungskonzept exhibits the kind of comprehensiveness that one associates with German dissertations: typically the author decides on a topic, begins his or her investigation with the pre-Socratics, and ends with Kant, Hegel, or possibly Nietzsche. Lehner’s book has that same scope (and, sure enough, the foreword makes it clear that the book is a descendent of Lehner’s dissertation at the University of Regensburg). As a result, before getting to Kant’s mature conception of divine providence, we encounter 300 pages of stage-setting: a historical/conceptual introduction to the very idea of providence, a chapter on the role it plays in modern philosophy and theology, a survey of the theories offered by 17th and 18th century German philosophers, a survey of the theories offered by 17th and 18th century German theologians, and, finally, a survey of Kant’s own pre-critical theory. Included in the roughly 200 pages that follow are chapters on the critical Kant’s theoretical and religious philosophy, on his later teleology (found, in particular, in the second part of the third *Critique*), on his anthropology, and on his philosophy of history. Then, with an eye to readers (or doctoral examiners!) who are unable or unwilling to make it all the way through the main text, Lehner concludes with a very substantial summary of the book as a whole.

Fans of concision are likely to be put off, at first glance, by the sheer length and density of this book. The apprehension will subside, however, when they realize that *Kants Vorsehungskonzept* is chronologically structured, neatly divided into sections and sub-sections in the way just described, and mercifully replete with partial summaries and recapitulations along the way, including the very substantive one at the end. Those who might be interested in the topic of providence and the German Enlightenment’s treatment of it but have no time to read 500-plus

² Michael Despland, *Kant on History and Religion* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1973); Klaus Düsing, *Die Teleologie in Kants Weltbegriff* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1968); Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Kant and the Philosophy of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979).

pages can simply look at Lehner's introductory overview, the chapter summaries, and then the overarching summary at the end. Those with more specific interests in, say, the views of pre-Kantian figures such as J.F.W. Jerusalem (1709–1789), C.A. Crusius (1712–1775), or J.F. Stapfer (1708–1775) can turn directly to the relevant chapters and read them as stand-alone pieces. Similarly, those interested in Kant's pre-critical views about these matters – in the "Optimism" fragment (1753–5) or *Universal Natural History* (1755), for instance – will find the relevant chapters comprehensible and informative, even without reading their predecessors. In this way, Lehner's work is both wonderfully encyclopedic in scope, and able to function as a kind of encyclopedia. The lengthy footnotes and bibliography provide an excellent overview of other recent and contemporaneous writings on the topic.³ And throughout, Lehner's meticulous scholarship uncovers numerous interesting tidbits, such as the fact that Kant's ongoing claims on behalf of the "interests" and "needs" of reason as grounding legitimate, if somehow not existentially committing, affirmations are almost certainly inspired by *System of Healthy Reason* by Johann Basedow, a little-known theologian from the mid-1700's.

The book is like an encyclopedia in another way, too. Given the scope of his project, Lehner is forced to move quickly over complex issues that continue to generate controversy in the literature and would ideally receive more substantive treatment than they do here. Often there is simply a brief overview of an argument or position with a few quotations or references, and not much by way of interpretive, critical discussion.⁴ Needless to say, however, the doctrine of providence has extremely complex metaphysical and epistemological aspects and ramifications.

On the metaphysical side, a full-fledged theory has to provide an account of what an act of providence consists in, of how it relates to divine creation, conservation, concurrence, and miracles, and of the implications it has for divine and human freedom. On the epistemological side there are issues regarding the nature of God's knowledge, the nature of our knowledge of God's providential operations, and the nature of the attitudes we can rationally take towards the claim that God is working in history for good purposes. Finally, there is the related question of

³) Curiously, however, the book lacks a topical index – something which would have increased its navigability even further.

⁴) A related, minor issue: because Lehner goes through each of Kant's works in chronological order, his account can sometimes seem a bit repetitive. Thus, for example, the doctrine of grace as it relates to the doctrine of providence is discussed first as it is found in the lectures on religion, then in the *Religion* itself, and finally in *Conflict of the Faculties* (see pp. 333–377). In each case, Lehner cites the relevant passages and ideas, but because the view doesn't change much over the course of the critical period there is a somewhat mechanical feel here. This too may push in the direction of using the book more as a reference work than as a through-read monograph.

what role, if any, the doctrine of providence plays in the (rational) religious life. Again, Lehner touches on nearly all of these issues as they are considered by the various figures he is exploring, and in this way provides a helpful survey of the main options and movements. But that same comprehensive impulse sometimes leaves him unable to do justice to the deep philosophical difficulties that various positions involve – not because he isn't aware of them, presumably, but again because he had more sweeping, encyclopedic aims for the book.

One of the topics that could have profited from further exploration has to do with how Kant's account of providence connects to his prominent claims, especially in the critical period, about the rationality of religious hope (*Hoffnung*). Such hope, for Kant, is typically directed towards a proposition about an individual rather than corporate salvation: God is at work somehow in bringing individuals to moral conversion (cf. 326). In *Religion* and various related lectures, Kant provides an account of individual salvific grace that many commentators have taken to be ultimately incoherent; others think that the "conundrums" here can be resolved through careful textual and philosophical footwork.⁵ Lehner is clearly aware of these debates, and of the existence of various "synergistic" interpretations according to which divine grace and individual moral effort work together to overcome radical evil. But he simply dismisses them without detailed discussion and concludes that Kant's mature picture is one of flat resistance to traditional doctrines of interventionist grace in favor of a kind of semi-Pelagianism (345).

A closer look at *Religion*, however, reveals that Kant never explicitly rules out what he calls the "theoretical possibility" of miracles in the empirical realm (see *Religion* 6:85ff), though there are serious questions about how to square this with the Second Analogy. He also repeatedly suggests that special divine intervention and our own, undetermined free acts could be metaphysically compatible, without undermining the status of those acts as free (e.g. 6:191). The latter point is a source of one of the central conundrums, for it is hard to see how freedom would *not* be undermined if God were also specially involved. Lehner's response, again, is deflationary: he claims simply that the synergistic picture is "wholly rejected" (354n) and that in the end Kant thinks that the object of hope is ultimately our own unconstrained ability to will the moral law (354, 361ff). My sense, however, is that this is somewhat more controversial than he lets on.

⁵ See for example George di Giovanni, *Freedom and Religion in Kant and His Immediate Successors: The Vocation of Humankind, 1774–1800* (New York: Cambridge, 2005) xvi–376; Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Conundrums in Kant's Rational Religion," in P. Rossi and M. Wreen (eds.), *Kant's Philosophy of Religion Reconsidered* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 40–53; Gordon Michalson, *Fallen Freedom: Kant on Radical Evil and Moral Regeneration* (New York: Cambridge, 1990); Jacqueline Mariña, "Kant on Grace: a reply to his critics," *Religious Studies* 33 (1997): 379–400.

Kants Vorkehrungskonzept is a very expensive book (shame on Brill!), so unfortunately it won't be widely disseminated. Its availability in academic libraries, however, is still a very welcome development given recent interest in pre-Kantian philosophy and theology⁶ and given the latter's immense and under-recognized influence on Kant and other major canonical figures. Ulrich Lehner has written an encyclopedic, learned, and provocative piece that will serve as a worthy basis for future research and discussion.

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⁶ See Eric Watkins, *Kant's Metaphysics of Causality* (New York: Cambridge, 2005); Andrew Chignell and Derk Pereboom, "Kant's Theory of Causation and its Eighteenth Century German Background," *Philosophical Review* 119, 4 (October 2010): 565–591.

