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Covid 19 pandemic and the question of divine providence in a digitalized age

Пандемия COVID-19 и вопрос о Божественном Провидении в эпоху цифровых технологий

This paper attempts to bring the traditional theodicy on the question of evil and the Divine Providence, to its logical conclusion, in such a way that a believer is challenged to totally accept the implication of his or her faith in God. To have faith is to completely surrender to Divine Providence. It is to completely surrender ones free will to the rational conclusions or consequences of faith in the Divine Providence. Hence, this paper is for those who are perplexed due to the Pandemic. Especially for Christians whose faith in God is perplexed because of their existential experience of the COVID 19 pandemic as evil. The existential reality of dread and misery caused by this pandemic is globally and more subjectively experienced due to the digitalization of this age. This shows how disastrously powerful the digitalization of our world can be in the proliferation of dread, misery and hopelessness.

В этой статье предпринята попытка довести традиционную теодицею по вопросу о зле и Божественном Провидении до логического завершения таким образом, чтобы верующий мог полностью осознать значение своей веры в Бога. Иметь веру — значит полностью отдаться Божественному Провидению. Это значит полностью подчинить свою свободную волю рациональным выводам или последствиям веры в Божественное Провидение. Следовательно, эта статья предназначена для тех, кто озадачен пандемией. Особенно для христиан, чья вера в Бога поставлена в тупик из-за их экзистенциального опыта пандемии COVID-19 как зла. Экзистенциальная реальность страха и страданий, вызванных этой пандемией, ощущается глобально и более субъективно в связи с цифровизацией этого века. Это показывает, насколько катастрофически мощной может быть цифровизация нашего мира в условиях распространения страха, страданий и безнадежности.

Introduction

No doubt, one of the prevalent terms in the mouths of people since the year 2020 has been “COVID 19”. The digital devices which are conveniently at our disposal today, have helped to dissimilate the deadliness of this pandemic, thereby intensifying in many, the fear of pain, death and the sense of evil in general. The havoc caused by the COVID 19 pandemic cuts across every facet and vicissitudes of our human existence. It has not only terribly affected human relationships and global economies, but it has also affected the physical and concrete relationship between believers and God, even more so, it has once again raised the question of the Divine Providence of God. Everyone, believers and non-believers, are waiting on the Scientists for a solution. Clerics of different religions have been challenged to pray down God’s power and stop the pandemic. This work is neither a medical nor a sociological investigation on the COVID 19 pandemic, but it is a philosophical investigation on the question of Divine Providence in the face of the COVID 19 pandemic. Thus, the work shall be executed as follows: 1. Exposition on COVID 19 in a Digitalized Age and the Question of Evil. 2. A Philosophical Paranormal on Divine Providence. 3. An Evaluation of COVID 19 and the Question of Providence in Digitalized Age and Conclusion.

COVID 19 in a Digitalized Age and the Question of Evil

The history of the human race has experienced many events that have been considered to be evil. For example, the killing of about six million Jews during Nazism, is unanimously considered to be evil. The death of about fifty million people during the 1918 influenza virus, otherwise called “the Spanish Flu”, brought pain and suffering to many that raised in many the problem of evil. The horror of these events in respect to global experience, is nowhere compare to the global experience of the COVID 19 pandemic that is presently ravaging the lives of many all over nations in the world today. This paper claims that, the global experience of the dread of the present pandemic compare to those of the events of the past, is not in the deadly nature of it *per se*, but rather it is in the digitalized nature of our age. Our digitalized age has the potency to rapidly and efficiently proliferate information. If COVID 19 is considered evil, due to the power of digitali-

zation today, the evilness of it comes very close to almost everyone. Even children as little as five years old, have COVID 19 as part of their vocabulary and grasped as its signification a kind of evil, something to be dreaded of. They know the reason that they could not go to school and to the playground to be with their friends is because of the Pandemic. And this makes them feel bad. Simply put, our digitalized age has the potency to make the experience of sufferings and pains, if you like ubiquitous. Thus, for anyone who considers sufferings and pains evil, then, digitalization is making evil ubiquitous. Before interrogating whether COVID 19 Pandemic is an evil, the question of evil shall be interrogated first.

The history of thought, in a way has presented the question of Evil and the question of Providence, as a kind of bed-fellow. That is to say, the discussion of one calls to mind the problem of the other. It is as if to say, there is both a metaphysical and logical connection between Evil and Providence. Metaphysical, because it seems that if God exists then the existence of evil must be necessarily explained; and logical, because it seems that a proposition that asserts God's existence necessarily entails a proposition that denies Evil. But are God and Evil opposed as contradictories? Are they even opposed as contraries? Or opposed as relatives? Are God and Evil both necessary beings?

What is Evil? Can one ask the question: what is Evil? Is the question: "what is Evil?" meaningful? Both the Platonic and the Aristotelian philosophical traditions from, Plato himself, through Plotinus and Augustine of Hippo and from Aristotle himself through Avicenna, Maimonides and the Christian Scholastics, such as Aquinas, in their Theodicy or Natural Theology, contend that Evil is a Privation; the Negation of the Good [3; 5; 8, pp. 266–279]. If privation is a working definition of Evil, the question becomes, what does Privation mean? According to Aristotle privation is not deprivation. Though, it is opposed to possession, but privation and possession are not opposed as relatives, for there are no intermediaries between both and neither are they opposed as contraries (see, Categories 10, 25–35; 12b, 1–25). He asserts that "privation is the denial of a predicate to a determinate genus" (Metaphysics BK 4, 19–20). This implies, as will be demonstrated below that privation is a logical entity having no ontological existence.

Aristotle maintains that being (*ens*), that is to say, the possibility to be, is possible in one mode or another: as substance, as accident (or attributes) and as Privation (see, Physics BK 1, Metaphysics BK 4, 2). For

Aristotle (Metaphysics BK 5, 23–25), “substance has two senses, (a) the ultimate substratum, which is no longer predicated of anything else, and (b) that which is a “this” and separable—and of this nature is the shape or form of each thing.” This is to say substance are either subjects or forms. Following Aquinas’s metaphysics of being on the ontological distinction between *ens*, *esse* and *quod est*, which is rooted in Avicenna’s metaphysics of being as necessary and possible beings (BK 1, Ch. 6), as a means of modifying Aristotle’s metaphysics of being, it should be said that while substance and accident are *esse*, privation is not. Therefore, though privation as *ens* is a being that can possibly exist in the mind, it does not have real existence (*esse*), that is, it does not have an ontological existence as “this thing”. Thus, privation does not have a quiddity, that is to say an essence or form; one cannot ask the quidditative question: *quod est?* (what is it?). It means strictly speaking, ontologically one cannot ask the question: “What is evil?” Since, evil is neither *ens*, *esse*, nor the answer in respect to *esse*, to the question, *quod est?*

Then, if Evil is privation, and a privation does not have an essence (or form), it means, evil is formless, and therefore, evil is not a substance. To argue that “evil in essence is privation” [5], is to say that privation is the form of evil, which would be absurd since evil is not a substance nor privation a form. This is because, following Aristotle’s metaphysics, all substances (*hupostasis*) necessarily have a form (*ontos*). But, could Evil be said to be an Accident? Accidents do not and cannot exist independent of a substance, though a substance can exist independent of accidents (God as pure form, does not have accidents both as potentiality in respect of reception of existence as in Angels, or as possessing matter in respect to corporeal existents). Therefore the so called “accidental evil” are mere words, it has no real existence. Hence, evil is neither an accident nor is it a privation, since it is not a substance nor could it be said in relation to a substance (*hupostasis*) as attributes. Therefore, to say that Evil is privation, is to say that Evil does not have real existence, but only has possible existence in the human mind.

Following this line of thought, Evil is thus said, to be an absence of a good that ought to be present. When there is the absence of the experience of what we as humans consider to be good, we call the consequent experience evil. This explains why evil is also said to be the negation of the Good. But does this mean there is a logical existence of evil? Is evil the contradictory of good or the contrary of good? The contradictory of good

is not-good. But is “not-good” equivalent to “evil”? “not-good” cannot be the equivalent of “evil” since the contradictory of evil is not-evil. Hence, “not-good” and “not-evil” are not equivalent, since nothing can be affirmed or denied as evil since it is not a substance. Evil as bad, and good could be said to be contraries but not contradictory. To this effect, it could be said that evil has only a logical reality but does not have an ontological reality. On the contrary, Ockham [10, pp. 131–132], arguing logically as a nominalist, maintains that privation exists as “something”. He contends, “privations, being intelligible, are something, because they are either concepts of the mind or words or things outside the mind; for it seems that “blind” and “blindness” signify absolutely the same and can stand for the same.” This position is contrary to Aristotle’s position that being blind is not blindness (see, *Categories* 10). For as Aristotle (*Categories* 10), argues “blindness is a particular privation but being blind is being deprived, not a privation. Moreover, if blindness were the same as being blind both would be predicated of the same thing. Though a man is called blind a man is certainly not called blindness.” Thus, it is *non-sequitur* for Ockham to dismiss the notion of “objects in the mind”, or “thought-objects” (*esse objectiva*). His contention goes thus: “there are no such thought-objects (*esse objectiva*); they neither are nor can be real beings. Nor is there another little world made up of thought-objects. But whatever is not a thing is absolutely nothing, as St Augustine says in the first book of his *De doctrina Christiana*” Ockham [10, p. 131].

In the above discussion, it is demonstrated that Evil can be metaphysically discussed without a direct reference to Divine Providence. Which means that the question of evil does not necessarily imply the question of Divine Providence. However, the notion of evil has always raised the question of free will in the human person, and which consequently raises the question of Divine Providence. Evil raises the question of free will in the human person, because free will is necessary implied in morality. There is morality because the human person is free and rational. For free will implies rationality. Hence, for many philosophers on the question of Providence, it is considered necessary to deal with or to justify evil, especially moral evil in human experiences. This justification appears more pertinent among believing philosophers and thinkers, who consider it a duty to justify the divine judgement that goes with moral actions of human persons as revealed in their sacred texts and doctrines. Thus, while they have no much problems to affirm and demonstrate the existence of Divine Providence

as regards natural events, they appear to epistemologically brackets Divine Providence in respect to moral actions. Notwithstanding, that in many revealed religions the abandonment of one's free will to Divine Providence is considered an essential factor in their spirituality. This implies that in the spirituality of these religions, one is challenged to take the notion of Divine Providence to its final conclusion, and accept the implications of the belief in Divine Providence.

For instance, Moses Maimonides [8, p. 266] maintains, "it must be admitted as a fact that it cannot be said of God that He directly creates evil, or He has the direct intention to produce evil; this is impossible. His works are all perfectly good." While he considers the creation of evil as an impossible act of God, he concedes the existence of evil as a non-existence; a negative character of matter that cannot be acted upon. Hence evil works, for him are not the true works of God, since evil is not an existence [8, p. 266]. Earlier than Maimonides, Plotinus had also argued that evil is a lack of goodness, a non-existence, which is a character of matter (See, Plotinus, *On Providence I*, 3.2.5, 1–30). Augustine [1] affirms the mutual existence of foreknowledge (otherwise called Providence) and free will, against Cicero who posits the affirmation of foreknowledge as a necessary denial of free will; foreknowledge and freewill as contradictories, and by so doing denying foreknowledge in God and the affirmation of freewill in the human person. Cicero argues, that "if there is free will, all things do not happen according to fate; if all things do not happen according to fate, there is not a certain order of causes; and if there is not a certain order of causes, neither is there a certain order of things foreknown by God, -for things cannot come to pass except they are preceded by efficient causes"[1]. This makes the notion of the causality and foreknowledge of God fundamental in the understanding of Divine Providence. In respect to God's causality, Ockham [10, p. 128], distinguishes two senses of the term "cause" into: immediate cause and mediate cause, and claims that God is both the immediate and mediate cause of all things. Hence, agreeing with Augustine that God is the efficient cause of all things.

Following the discourse on evil above, what we be the answer to the question: Is the COVID 19 pandemic (an) Evil? This question thus, entails the questions: Is the COVID 19 pandemic a privation? Is the COVID 19 pandemic a negation of merely a good? Or is the COVID 19 Pandemic the Negation of the Good (God)? These questions shall be addressed in the third section of the work.

A Philosophical Paranormal on Divine Providence

Though Plato and Aristotle raised and discuss the question of evil, both did not construct an elaborate nor a systematic discourse on the question of Divine Providence. Plato's idealistic metaphysics and philosophical anthropology naturally makes the question of evil, especially in respect to human suffering, as not very necessary in itself, but only necessary as a means to liberating the human soul. Aristotle in maintaining that God, as Pure Form, does not know particulars or individual things excludes human affairs in the world. For him providence is possible only in the celestial realms, in the keeping of the eternal motion of the heavens. This means that for Aristotle individual events happening in the world are not part of or within God's Providence (see, Aristotle Physics). Since, Plato and Aristotle are reflecting on Evil and providence from the standpoint of metaphysics or physics and to an extent, philosophical anthropology, they appear not to take the question of Divine Providence seriously.

But the contrary is seen in Stoicism. The question on Providence is very profound in the philosophy of the Stoics. In fact, it could be said that the Stoics were the first to construct an elaborate and a systematic philosophy on the question of Providence in Western Philosophy (see [9]; The Discourses of Epictetus ch.vi, xiv, xvi, xvii). Afterwards, the Platonic philosophers such as Plotinus and Augustine, wrote profusely on the question of the Divine Providence, was because they felt obliged to respond to the Stoics thought on Fate and Providence. Why is the question of Fate and/or Providence a necessary construct in Stoicism? It is because the doctrine of Determinism is central in Stoicism. Since for the Stoics, everything including the human person is made up of Atoms, and the entire cosmos is a kind of body to the Divine Fire (Logos, Reason), every event in the cosmos is determined as a necessary extension of the Logos. Therefore, there is nothing as Free Will; no will, only Fate exists. The necessary implication of this position in Stoicism is to deny the existence of Divine Providence. But the Stoics who consider philosophy as basically Ethics, were faced with the challenge to explain ethical actions and ethical judgments as good and evil, and to explain why some people do good while others do evil. It is in the effort to reconcile the doctrine of Cosmic Necessity and Ethical judgments in human beings, that provoked the discourse on Divine Providence.

Plotinus in his work (known as the Ennead), generously discussed the questions of Fate and the Divine Providence. In the discussion of Fate in

Plotinus, one must take note of the differences between the cosmology and the philosophical anthropology of the Stoics and that of Plotinus. In respect to Fate, the question: is any action “up to us”? is very crucial. That is to say, is the human person responsible for his or her actions? Besides the involuntary impulses in the human nature, Plotinus contrary to the Stoics maintains that since human persons possess rationality, there are actions that are “up to us” (see, Plotinus, *On Fate*, 3.1.9, 1–15). Hence, Plotinus goes further in explaining the causes of human actions. He sustains: “everything is presaged and comes about through causes, but that these are twofold: some are caused by the soul, others by causes in the world around us” (Plotinus, *On Fate*, 3.1.10, 1–9). So, while Plotinus does not completely deny causes to human actions external to individual persons, he affirms that there are causes to human actions that arise from the individual souls. Plotinus has no problem using the term Fate to signify them the external causes (see, Plotinus, *On Fate*, 3.1.10, 9), but Plotinus rather prefers the term Providence than Fate in signifying the “external cause” to human actions. This implies that Plotinus considers the notion of Fate and Providence as not having completely the same signification. Augustine also holds the same position. For Augustine, as long as Fate means the attribution of the causes of celestial events and the cause of all that is, to the will and power of God must high, because he is Omniscience and Omnipotent, he has no problem. [1]. But not in the astrological notion of Fate, as “meaning thereby the position of the stars at the time of each one’s conception or birth, is an unmeaning word, for astrology itself is a delusion [1]. When the notion of Fate to signify the activities of the universe as the causes of the knowledge, will and government of God, it has the same signification as (Divine) Providence. But when Fate signifies the astrological determination of human affairs by the actions of the celestial bodies, then it does not signify Divine Providence. For Providence to exist, there must be the existence of the Divine over and above the universe. This existence of the Divine as an “other” from the universe is very important in the distinction between Providence and Fate. Plotinus submits: “Providence must certainly not exist in such a way that we are of no account. And if providence was everything and there was nothing but providence, providence, too, would not exist. For what would it still have to provide for? Only the divine would, then, exist. And this is what living by the law of providence means, actually doing what its law dictates” (*On Providence I*, 3.2.9, 1–10).

However, Plotinus rebukes any complete denial of providence. He holds, the affirmation of every event in the cosmic to chance as foolhardy. He admonishes: “Handing over the substantiality and constitution of this universe to spontaneity or to chance is irrational and is indicative of a man who uses neither the intellect nor the faculty of sense-perception that he possesses” (Plotinus, *On Providence I*, 3.2.1, 1–25). Nevertheless, Plotinus acknowledges the problematic that goes with the affirmation of Providence. Which is, that “some things do not turn out properly” as a result of which some people like the stoics completely deny providence and others like the Gnostics believe the universe is the handiwork of an evil Demiurge (See, *On Providence I*, 3.2.1, 1–25). Plotinus denies the position that the universe came into being in a particular time. The logical conclusion of the universe coming to be in time, according to him is, a “kind of providence as we said occurs in the case of particulars, a sort of divine foreseeing and calculative reasoning as to how this universe would be and how it might be as good as possible” (Plotinus, *On Providence I*, 3.2.1, 1–25). He rather holds that the universe has always existed and will always exist. Therefore for him the “universal providence consists in the existence of the universe in accordance with Intellect and that Intellect is prior to it, not being prior in time but because its existence depends on Intellect and Intellect is prior by nature and is its cause” (Plotinus, *On Providence I*, 3.2.1, 1–25). The Intellect which is for him an archetypal model of the universe, through which the universe came to be.

To this effect, Plotinus maintains as regards the events that occur in the universe, one should comprehend them from the perspective of the whole, not in parts (See, Plotinus, *On Providence I*, 3.2.3, 10–20). He further argues that, we conceive disorder because order exists; lawlessness because law exists, irrationality because reason exists (See, Plotinus, *On Providence I*, 3.2.4, 26–37).

There had been the effort to reduce as acts of Providence only those actions that are good. While acts that are considered evil to be either acts of human free will or consequences of necessity in matter or corporality. (See, Plotinus, *On Providence II*, 3.3.5, 15–40; [8, pp. 286–290]). This effort to reduce only good acts and acts of nature to Divine Providence could be seen in the five theories concerning Divine Providence highlighted by Moses Maimonides:

The Theory of Epicurus: “There is no Providence at all for anything in the Universe; all parts of the Universe, the heavens and what they

contain, owe their origin to accident and chance; there exists no being that rules and governs them or provides for them. This is the theory of Epicurus, who assumes also that the Universe consists of atoms, that these have combined by chance, and have received their various forms by mere accident” [8, p. 282].

The theory of Aristotle: “Whilst one part of the Universe owes its existence to Providence, and is under the control of a ruler and governor, another part is abandoned and left to chance” [8, p. 282]. He sums Aristotle’s view on Providence thus: “In short, the opinion of Aristotle is this: Everything is the result of management which is constant, which does not come to an end and does not change any of its properties....All these are the result of management, i.e., in a close relation to Divine Providence.” [8, p. 283].

The theory of Mohammedan Ashariyah: “This theory is the reverse of the second. According to this theory, there is nothing in the whole Universe, neither a class nor an individual being, that is due to chance; everything is the result of will, intention, and rule. It is a matter of course that he who rules must know [that which is under his control]. The Ashariyah were therefore compelled to assume that motion and rest of living beings are predestined, and that it is not in the power of man to do a certain thing or to leave it undone” [8, p. 283].

The theory of Mu’tazila: “Man has free will; it is therefore intelligible that the Law contains commands and prohibitions, with announcements of reward and punishment. All acts of God are due to wisdom; no injustice is found in Him, and He does not afflict the good. The Mu’tazila profess this theory, although they do not believe in man’s absolute free will. They hold also that God takes notice of the falling of leaf and the destruction of the ant, and that His Providence extends over all things” [8, p. 284].

The theory of Human Perfect Free Will: “The theory of man’s perfectly free will is one of the fundamental principles of the Law of our Teacher Moses, and of those who follow the Law. According to this principle man does what is in his power to do, by his nature, his choice, and his will; and his action is not due to any faculty created for the purpose. All species of irrational animals likewise move by their own free will. This is the Will of God; that is to say, it is due to the eternal divine will that all living beings should move freely, and that man should have power to act according to his will or choice within the limits of his ca-

capacity. Against this principle we hear, thank God, no opposition on the part of our nation. Another fundamental principle taught by the Law of Moses is this: Wrong cannot be ascribed to God in any way whatever; all evils and afflictions as well as all kinds of happiness of man, whether they concern one individual person or a community, are distributed according to justice; they are the result of strict judgment that admits no wrong whatever” [8, p. 285].

Maimonides having highlighted the above five theories of providence maintained by different schools of thoughts, seems to be sympathetic only to Aristotle’s theory of providence. With slight modification to the Aristotle’s theory of providence, Maimonides posits his own theory. His position according to him which is not based on demonstrative proof but on the spirit of the Hebrew scriptures, is: “in the lower or sublunar portion of the Universe Divine Providence does not extend to the individual members of species except in the case of mankind.” What it means is that Maimonides agrees in greater extent with Aristotle’s theory, only with the exception that only the human persons in the sublunar world enjoins Divine Providence. The actions of every individual members of other species below the heavens are due to chance (*per accidens*) as maintained by Aristotle” [8, p. 286]. His argument is based on the principle that providence is connected with the intellect—the action of Divine Providence is proportional to the endowment of intellect. Thus, Providence can only proceed from the being that is perfect and intelligence *per se*, which is God. And since among the sublunar creatures only human beings possess intellect, therefore only the human persons can be connected to the Divine Providence. With this synthesis, Maimonides is convinced that he has reconciled the Aristotle’s theory of Providence based on his Physics and the teaching of the Hebrew Scriptures, by including the human persons to the notion of Aristotle’s theory of Providence [8, pp. 288–289].

Aquinas maintains that God is the end of all things and by His Providence everything is governed and ruled. Therefore, God is the Chief manager and supreme controller of the universe. This, he argued, is based on the causality of God as the prime agent of all causes and the final end of all beings. (see, *Summa Contra Gentiles* (SCG) BK III, Ch. LXIV). He maintains that “since God is the universal cause of all beings, in whatever region being can be found there must be the divine presence” (SCG BK III, Ch. LVIII). However, he denies that God is the agency of all corporeal

causes, thus he maintains that there are inferior causes. He argues that “If then created things have no actions of their own productive of effects, it follows that the nature of a created thing can never be known by its effect; and thus there is withdrawn from us all investigation of natural sciences, in which demonstrations are given principally through the effect” (SCG BK III, Ch. LVIX). However, he submits that the corporeal causes or the inferior agents depends upon the power of the superior agent, that is, the First and Final Cause, God (see, SCG BK III, Ch. LXX).

On the problematic of whether the existence of evil is consistent with Divine Providence, Aquinas, asserts “it is no part of divine providence wholly to exclude from creation the capability of falling away from good. But upon this capability evil ensues: for what is capable of falling away, sometimes does fall away; and the mere lack of good is evil” (SCG BK III, Ch. LXXI). He further argues as if to maintain that evil is a necessity for good or virtues, thus, “if then evil were wholly excluded from the universe by divine providence, the number of good things would be proportionally diminished: which ought not to be, because good is more vigorous in goodness than evil in badness” (SCG BK III, Ch. LXXI). Arguing that the good of the whole is more important than the good of the part, or put different that the evil of the part should be seen from the general good of the whole, he sustains, “But if evil were removed from certain portions of the universe, much perfection would be lost to the universe, the beauty of which consists in the orderly blending of things good and evil, while evil things have their origin in the breaking down of good things, and still from them good things again take their rise by the providence of the ruler, as an interval of silence makes music sweet” (SCG BK III, Ch. LXXI). Simply put, Aquinas’ argument is that evil is necessary in order to know, desire and appreciate the good. Following this line of thought, today, Aquinas would argue that the isolations and lockdowns caused by the COVID 19 Pandemic, are an evil that should make us appreciate the good of human relations and interactions.

He nevertheless, contends that though all things are subject to divine providence, evil and deficiency happens as a result of secondary causes or agents in which there are defects (see, SCG BK III, Ch. LXXI). Hence, he sustains that divine providence does not exclude all evil from creation; divine providence and evil are not opposed as contradictory. Therefore, unlike Aristotle, he maintains that divine providence includes the contingent events or effects that happen in the sublunar or terrestrial realm of the

universe (see, *Summa Contra Gentiles* BK III, Ch. LXXII). In particular reference to the human person, he argues that divine providence is not inconsistent with freedom of the will. Divine providence acts in such a way that the beings act according to their modes; the perfection of beings is in acting according to their nature. He avers, “The last end of every creature is to attain to a likeness to God: therefore it would be contrary to providence to withdraw from a creature that whereby it attains the divine likeness. But a voluntary agent attains the divine likeness by acting freely, as it has been shown that there is free will in God” (*SCG* BK III, Ch. LXXIII).

From the exposition of the notion of providence by the above thinkers, one could agree with the Islamic Philosopher, Avicenna’s position on what constitutes providence. Avicenna [5, pp. 15–20], maintains that “providence consists in the First’s knowing in Himself [the mode] of existence of the order of the good in His being, in Himself, a cause of goodness and perfection in terms of what is possible, and in His being satisfied [with the order of the good].” This means, providence implies there is an intelligence behind the government or management of all that is, who knows, wills, causes and preserves in its Essence all or most of the things that happens in the universe. All the religious thinkers exposed above, Augustine, Maimonides, Aquinas, and even Avicenna, all believes that providence covers all created beings. They however maintain that providence is not contradictory to evil, that is, the existence of divine providence does not exclude or is not inconsistent with the existence of evil. They all share in the understanding of evil as having the following senses: evil as deficiency, evil as negation of the good and evil as privation. More so, they maintain that God is not the cause of evil in any of the senses mentioned above, the cause of evil is within the sublunar sphere of the universe, for God is goodness *per se*. (See, [5]; [8, pp. 266–279]; [3]; *SCG*, BK III, Ch. II–XV).

This paper has argued that evil in whatever sense, has no ontological existence, it only has a logical existence in human minds. The religious scholars highlighted above, think it is important to argue for the co-existence of divine providence and evil, but this paper does not consider it to be important. Since, evil as a being does not exist, only divine providence exist. Thus, everything that happens is within divine providence because only the good can happen. Evil is neither a necessary nor a possible being; as long as divine providence is concerned what is necessary is good and what is possible is good, because God is Being, and Being is Good. Virtually all religions, takes as their sublime teaching, that the highest realm of

spirituality is to surrender one's life and one's being to God; to see and accept everything as the will of God. The will of God must always be good, therefore for everything to be seen and accepted as the will of God, it means everything ought to be seen as good not evil. Therefore, the challenge is to train oneself to understand the logical conclusion of the belief in divine providence and to transform one's mind to live the life of divine providence.

An Evaluation of COVID 19 and the Question of Providence in a Digitalized Age

Since the beginning of the year 2020 to date, the COVID 19 pandemic has no doubt provoked once more two of the perennial problems in philosophy: the question of the existence of evil and the question of Divine Providence. The havoc caused by the COVID 19 pandemic globally, cuts across every facet and vicissitudes of our human existence. It has terribly affected human relationships and global economies. It has more so, affected the personal relationship between some believers and God. On the other hand, it has caused the renewal of faith in some lapsed believers and provoked faith in God in some non-believers. Using the biblical words, the COVID 19 pandemic has become a "sign of contradiction" in the world. Questions such as the following abounds everywhere among believers of all faiths: Why did God allow this deadly pandemic to occur? Why would God allow millions of people infected and millions of people, and still counting, to die? Why would God allow His Churches, Mosques, Temples, Synagogues and other places of worship to be emptied of worshippers? And now, everyone, believers and non-believers, are waiting for the Scientists to release vaccines. Clerics of different religions have been challenged to pray down God's power and stop the Pandemic.

The existential reality of the dread and misery caused by this pandemic is globally and more subjectively experienced due to the digitalization of this age. This shows how disastrously powerful the digitalization of our world could be in the proliferation of dread, misery and hopelessness. The daily news of the statistical situation of the horror of the Pandemic has not only increased depression in many but has caused havoc to the psychological wellbeing of many. Two digital technology professional, Eric Schmidt and Jared Cohen (2013, 3), describes the potency of the present digital age

thus: “The internet is among the few things humans have built that they don’t truly understand...It is at once intangible and in a constant state of mutation, growing larger and more complex with each passing second. It is a source for tremendous good and potentially dreadful evil, and we’re only just beginning to witness its impact on the world stage.” In the negative perspective, they saw the internet as a “potentially dreadful evil”. This paper claims that what is more dreadful is the power of the internet to proliferate evil in such a manner that evil is given an ontological nature and appears to have real existence. The digital age has made more people across all age brackets to perceive the world as evil, rather than good. It has increased fear and distrust in many, due to a worldview that is predominantly given as evil. The COVID 19 pandemic is the first pandemic since the advent of the digital Age. The digital age helped to spread information about the pandemic, but on the other hand, it makes a greater number people to perceive the pandemic as the greatest evil ever.

This paper, thus, is for those who are perplexed due to the Pandemic. Especially for Christians whose faith in God is perplexed because of their existential experience of the COVID 19 pandemic as evil. This paper does not intend to end in the manner of the traditional theodicy of Natural Theology. It rather attempts to bring the traditional theodicy on the question of evil and the Divine Providence, to its logical conclusion, in such a way that a believer is challenged to totally accept the implication of his or her faith. To have faith is to completely surrender to Divine Providence. To completely surrender what? It is to completely surrender ones free will to the rational conclusions or consequences of faith in the Divine Providence. It is thus to have and live out the spirituality of Divine Providence. To surrender to the Divine Providence is not to surrender to Fate. For the difference between Divine Providence and Fate has been made clear above. Just to emphasize, to surrender to Fate as it is with the Stoics, is to surrender to the laws of the universe. But, to surrender to Divine Providence, is to surrender to God who is over and beyond the universe and its laws.

From the above investigations on the questions of evil and Divine Providence, an effort has been made to take the traditional philosophical answers to these questions to their logical conclusion. The logical conclusion of the conception of evil as privation implies that evil does not have an ontological existence but could have a logical existence. This means that what we conceive as if are only thought-objects in the mind. Since God does not comprehend logically, thus, He has no need for thought-objects

for cognition, it means evil does not exist in God. For God's cognition is by his essence, of which He knows all things. What God knows through his essence, he causes through His divine will, which is also his essence. And what God wills in and through His essence, he governs through His essence. These three divine acts of knowing, willing and governing, that take place in and through the essence of God, are what essentially constitute the question of Divine Providence. The question of Divine Providence, thus, simply is the question that deals with whether God knows, wills and governs all, certain or no event or thing in the universe. And this paper has argued that if there is Divine Providence, then God necessarily knows, wills and governs all events or things in the world.

This paper maintains that the COVID 19 pandemic is not an Evil. The COVID 19 pandemic could be said to be a privation, which means it has no ontological existence but merely a logical existence as argued above. The COVID 19 pandemic as what is experienced to be bad to health and a threat to human life could be conceived as a negation of a good. However, the COVID 19 pandemic is not the negation of Divine Providence nor the Good (God). The COVID 19 pandemic rather is or within Divine Providence.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has argued that COVID 19, though within a year has immediately caused the death of more than two million people and affected the livelihood of millions of people, however, it is within the Divine Providence and it is non-evil. If COVID 19 is the immediate cause, then God will be the mediate cause. God is the mediate cause because only God knows and governs the universe. There is neither contraries nor contradictories in God, thus the question of evil as the negation or privation of the good does not exist in God, since contraries or contradictories of the good does not exist in God, the Good *per se*. COVID 19, thus, should be seen as a tiny contingent event within the necessary whole plan of God.

This work is neither a medical or sociological investigation on the COVID 19 Pandemic, thus, it does not deny the medical or sociological nature and problematic of the pandemic. It is rather a philosophical investigation on the question of Divine Providence in the face of the Pandemic COVID 19, by which the medical and other scientific solutions to the pandemic are themselves events of Divine providence.

KeyWords: COVID-19, Digitalization, Divine Providence, Evil, Philosophy.

Ключевые слова: COVID-19, цифровизация, Божественное Провидение, зло, философия.

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