

Does ‘Scientifically Random’ Entail ‘Not Guided by God’?

It is widely held that a process that is scientifically deemed a randomness-involving process, cannot be a process that can be used by God to attain His purposes. Proponents of this view include Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins, as well as numerous lesser known self-styled atheists. In this I distinguish various different notions of ‘randomness’ (or ‘chance’), some of which have their home in scientific theorizing (for example in evolutionary biology, and in quantum mechanics). I next argue that none of these notions is such that if something is random in any of these senses, this entails that that thing is not created, orchestrated or sustained by God.

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I. Plantinga’s Claim

Alvin Plantinga has argued that there is no real conflict between the theory of evolution, properly understood, and Christian belief, properly understood. More specifically, he has argued that there is no real conflict between propositions [A] and [B]:

[A] God intended to create creatures of a certain kind—rational creatures with a moral sense and the capacity to know and love him—and then acted in such a way as to accomplish this intention.

[B] The diversity of life has come to be by way of natural selection winnowing random genetic mutation. (Plantinga tags this claim “Darwinism”)

Plantinga furthermore argued that there is a real conflict between propositions [A] and [C],

[C] The process of evolution is unguided—no personal agent, not even God, has guided, directed, orchestrated, or shaped it. (“naturalistic origins thesis”)

Whereas [B] is part of the scientific theory of evolution, Plantinga has argued that [C] is not; [C] is a philosophical gloss or add-on to that theory. Let us call this *Plantinga’s Claim*.

Are [A] and [B] compatible? It is widely felt that they are not. One reason adduced for their incompatibility has to do with randomness. [A], it is said, entails a certain proposition X, the denial of which is entailed by [B]. [A] entails that the creatures of a certain sort do not result from a process that involves randomness or chance, whereas [B] entails that they *do* result from such a process. Hence [A] and [B] are thought to be incompatible.

II. Three responses

1. Dennis Alexander: this argument is flawed due to not properly distinguishing between various senses of ‘this is a chance event’: (i) it is predictable in principle but not in practice, but also in the sense in which events at the quantum level are chance events, viz. that (ii) it is an event that cannot even in principle be predicted. Finally an event can be a chance event in the sense that (iii) it has “no real rhyme, reason, or intentionality”.

Worry: if only chance in senses (i) and (ii) are relevant to evolution, this means that certain events, perhaps those leading up to mutations, are *in principle* unpredictable, so also unpredictable for God, which raises the question whether it is even so much as possible for God to ‘use’ chance events as instruments to attain the goal of creating creatures of a certain kind.

2. Peter van Inwagen: “...mutations do not occur in response to changes in the environmental perils or opportunities that confront individuals or species. There is – Darwinians insist- simply no correlation whatsoever between the ‘usefulness’ to a particular species of a possible mutation and the likelihood that it will occur.”
3. Plantinga: “When it is said that a mutation or variation is random, the statement simply means that there is no correlation between the production of new genotypes and the adaptational needs of an organism in a given environment”. “There is no *physical mechanism* (either inside organisms or outside of them) that detects which mutations would be beneficial and causes those mutations to occur.” (Sober)

Plantinga: “A mutations’ being random in this sense is clearly compatible with its being caused by God.” This is Plantinga’s argument for the compatibility of [A] and [B]. Elliott Sober concurs: “Theistic evolution is a logically consistent position.” His point is that “evolutionary theory is neutral on one question about naturalism—the question of whether a supernatural deity exists.” A theist who adopts [B], Sober says furthermore, could avail herself of the distinction between proximate and ultimate causation—a distinction that suggests itself when one considers questions like why sunflowers turn to the sun. One could answer by citing certain mechanisms inside sunflowers (the proximate causes), but also by reference to natural selection (the ultimate cause). There is no conflict between these levels of explanation. The theist, Sober suggests, could add “a still more distal level of divine causation. God can direct the evolutionary process in an ultimate sense, though mutations are undirected in a proximate sense. Biology says nothing about the former and theism says nothing about the latter.”

Plantinga’s Claim= [C] is not a part of the scientific theory of evolution

What is it for a proposition to be a “part of” a scientific theory? If we think of a theory T as a set S of propositions $\{P_1, P_2, P_{n-1}, P_n\}$, then we can say that P_i is “part of” T if P_i is an element of S. The “part of” relation is not a “presuppositional relation”, nor a relation of entailment.

How do experts argue for [C]? Although Dawkins claims to argue that the evidence of evolution reveals a universe without design, what he in fact argues is “that it is not astronomically improbable that the living world was produced by unguided evolution and hence without design.” But, an argument of the form “p is not astronomically improbable, therefore p” is unprepossessing. You can’t conclude from “It is not astronomically improbable that the Phoenix Suns will beat the Chicago Bulls” that the Phoenix Suns will beat the Chicago Bulls.

Suggested Readings:

- Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Rene van Woudenberg, “Both Random and Guided”, *Ratio* 2015.