

Friday, July 10, 2009

The Concept of "Chance": Right and Wrong Uses

Quite often, the only power that an apologetic argument has is the degree to which it denigrates rival positions. And even then, such power is merely vicarious, in that it sustains itself on the intellectual default of its practitioners and unwitting bystanders. The zeal to denigrate a rival position often deteriorates into the practice of speaking for one's opponents and inserting words into their mouths in an effort to discredit their position at all costs. The result of course is nothing more grandiose than a mere straw man.

The Supposed Problem

A case in point is the supposition that non-belief in the Christian god logically entails the affirmation that "chance" rules the day. In the presuppositionalist literature, the view that non-believers monolithically assume a "universe of chance" is so commonplace that adherents to this school of apologetics probably think it is incontestably true. It's not. The notion of a "universe of chance" is certainly condemnable, but not for the mystical reasons for which Christian apologists denounce it. Moreover, that the universe is governed by "chance," is not the testimony of every non-believer. Nor does logical consistency require it. One does not need to believe in any god in order to consistently avoid the notion that the universe is a "universe of chance." In fact, quite the opposite is the case.

But you wouldn't know this from reading any texts by presuppositionalists. Not only is the view that non-believers must assume a "universe of chance" widely prevalent in their writings, that non-believers allegedly assume such a universe is a fundamental aspect of their defense of Christianity through antithesis, that is: through making all alternatives to Christianity appear to be unacceptable, Christianity prevails by default. If non-Christian worldviews (especially those which reject any form of theism altogether) ultimately reduce to the affirmation of a "universe of chance," then why shouldn't a more sober-headed understanding of reality be preferred?

The Exhibits

Let's take a look at some examples and see what the presuppositionalists are saying.

Bahnsen writes:

As always, the trouble for the unbeliever is that in denying the existence of God he is asserting chance as the ultimate backdrop of the universe. (*Pushing the Antithesis*, pp. 199-200)

Is that right? If I deny the existence of the Christian god, I am at the same time "asserting chance as the ultimate backdrop of the universe"? How does this follow?

Clearly what Bahnsen assumes here is an either-or viewpoint: either one believes that the Christian god exists and created everything in the universe through its conscious actions, or "he is asserting chance as the ultimate backdrop of the universe."

It's clear that the option which Bahnsen prefers (that his god created everything in the universe through conscious actions) assumes the primacy of consciousness, for it inherently grants power to conscious actions over its objects. But the opposite of this view is the primacy of existence. Does the primacy of existence entail or logically lead to the view that "chance" is "the ultimate backdrop of the universe"? No, it does not. On the basis of the primacy of existence, the universe (properly understood as *the totality of everything which exists*) is ultimate. On the primacy of existence, there is no "backdrop" behind the universe in the first place.

So it appears we're dealing with a false alternative here, both suspiciously pointing to the primacy of consciousness metaphysics.

And for Bahnsen, "chance" is some really bad stuff:

Chance destroys the very possibility of meaning and significance, taking with it the notion of dignity. (*Pushing the Antithesis*, p. 226)

Elsewhere Bahnsen tells us that “chance” also destroys the conceptual activity of *counting*:

Counting involves an abstract concept of law, universals, or order - which contradicts the unbeliever’s view of the universe as a random or chance realm of material particulars. (*Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*, p. 42n.18)

You get the idea. “Chance” is a toxic substance which contaminates all non-believing thought. That’s what we’re supposed to believe.

Defining “Chance”

What is this thing which presuppositionalists call “chance”? Is there some sweet moment where they finally identify what they’re talking about?

There is indeed!

In his [Van Til Glossary](#), John Frame tells us that by ‘chance’ presuppositionalists apparently mean

Events that occur without cause or reason.

So now we have a definition of what they’re talking about.

A Sudden Problem?

Oddly, however, Cornelius Van Til - the granddaddy of this school of apologetics - emphatically announces that:

About chance no manner of assertion can be made. (*The Defense of the Faith*, p. 127)

It seems that Van Til just made an assertion about something about which he says “no manner of assertion can be made.” It’s even worse for John Frame, who actually gives a definition for ‘chance’ above. If it were truly the case that “no assertion can be made” about ‘chance’, Frame’s definition would not be possible. You cannot define something about which “no assertion can be made,” for the definition itself would be an assertion about it. In fact, if what Van Til says were true, we could have no idea of what he’s talking about when he says that “no manner of assertion can be made” about something.

It seems that presuppositionalists need to get their act together. Indeed, Van Til’s stipulation about ‘chance’ is quoted in Bahnsen’s book *Pushing the Antithesis* (p. 208), with no acknowledgement of the contradictory nature of such a statement. Perhaps it just slipped by him?

Exploring the Problem as Presuppositionalism Views It

Moving on, Bahnsen tells us why “chance” is such a problem:

In a chance universe, all particular facts would be random, have no classifiable identity, bear no pre-determined order or relation, and thus be unintelligible to man’s mind. (*Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*, p. 38n.10)

If it appears that Bahnsen is mixing metaphysics here, you’re right. By setting up the problem in the manner that Bahnsen does here, he is attempting to blur a fundamental distinction by advancing a package-deal cast in an either-or struggle. “Random” here is pitted expressly against “pre-determined order,” which of course implies a ruling consciousness which does the pre-determining. The implication here is (i) either facts are arranged according to some “pre-determined order” (and therefore not “random”) and therefore have “classifiable identity” and consequently are not “unintelligible to man’s mind,” or (ii) they are “random” and “have no classifiable identity” and consequently “

unintelligible to man's mind." The resulting dichotomy seeks to compel thinkers to accept the need for a ruling consciousness which "accounts for" the "pre-determined order" allegedly necessary for facts to have identity and be intelligible as they reject the alternative which renders facts "unintelligible to man's mind."

Here is where Bahnsen is in bad need of some serious premise-checking. The question he should have been asking is whether facts are objective (i.e., exist independent of anyone's conscious intentions) or subjective (i.e., ultimately dependent on someone's conscious intentions). But this would remove the obscurity which is so vital to Bahnsen's apologetic strategy. If facts are objective, then this would mean that they are what they are (i.e., have identity) *independent of consciousness*, which would fall far short of implicating theism as the proper philosophical basis for the intelligibility of facts. To imply theism, Bahnsen needs the element which he did stipulate, namely "pre-determined order," which of course suggests a ruling consciousness which a consciousness capable of pre-determining the nature of facts and responsible for the identity which the facts actually possess. But this would entail that facts are in the final analysis subjective, i.e., ultimately dependent upon a form of consciousness.

As a result, Bahnsen is essentially package-dealing "classifiable identity" with the primacy of consciousness metaphysics. This package-deal is then pitted in a false dichotomy against a rival position, namely "a chance universe," which - given its alleged commitment to facts having "no classifiable identity" and being "unintelligible to man's mind" - is to be rejected. Bahnsen's package-deal, then, intends to prevail by default, implicating theism as the only paradigm in which facts could have "classifiable identity" and thus be "intelligible to man's mind."

But as I have pointed out elsewhere (e.g., [here](#)), identity is concurrent with the *objective* fact of existence. Even more, the law of identity necessarily implies the primacy of existence. To exist is to be something (identity), and this fact obtains *independent of consciousness*. The recognition that objects (including the facts which we discover in the world) have identity is wholly incompatible with the metaphysical basis of Bahnsen's theism, namely the primacy of consciousness. In fact, it is on the basis of Bahnsen's theism that facts would ultimately be subject to the whims of a supernatural consciousness (which is not constrained by any external limitations), and what could be more "random" than this? As Van Til pointed out:

God may at any time take one *fact* and set it into new relation to created law. That is, there is no inherent reason in the facts or laws themselves why this should not be done. It is this sort of conception of the relation of facts and laws, of the temporal one and many, imbedded as it is in the idea of God in which we profess to believe, that we need in order to make room for miracles. And miracles are at the heart of the Christian position. (*The Defense of the Faith*, p. 27)

On the Christian position, then, which Bahnsen is seeking to validate, facts *must* be subordinate to conscious intentions. In other words, some form of consciousness must hold *metaphysical primacy* over the facts in order for them to be under such control. This is the subjective theory of facts: the facts are what they are only because some conscious subject has determined (or "pre-determined") them to be what they are. And given the immense leeway which Van Til claims on behalf of his god's sovereignty over facts, any fact which you or I may be regarding could be changed ("set into new relation to created law") at any moment. Certainly Van Til & co. do not think their god needs our prior approval, or to provide us with advance notification, in order to set any fact "into new relation to created law." So from man's perspective, the facts couldn't be anything other than utterly random, for they are subject to divine whim. And we know that this is whim because "there are no limitations on [the Christian god's] knowledge, power, or presence" (John Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God*, p. 101), and the laws of logic are not "principles outside of God to which He must measure up" (Bahnsen, *Pushing the Antithesis*, p. 210). And even to the extent that this god supposedly "observes the laws of logic," it is "not because there are laws 'above' him to which he must conform, but because he is by nature a logical person" (Frame, *Op. cit.*, p. 158). But even here we find the disclaimer that this refers to "God's own logic, which may not be identical to any humanly devised logical system" (*Ibid.*). So even though this god "observes the laws of logic," it could be an altogether different type of "logic" than what you and I might have in mind; it's "God's own logic." Which can only mean: all bets are off. Divine whim is the ultimate governing factor in determining ("pre-determining") what the facts and their "relation to created law" may happen to be. As Psalms 115:3 confirms: "our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases."

So ironically, where Bahnsen carries on as if he were concerned about preserving facts from "randomness" and having "no classifiable identity," the metaphysical position to which he wants to associate facts relegates them to precisely this by making them subject to a supernatural consciousness which "does whatever He pleases."

So the solution to the “problem” which apparently worries Bahnsen, is adherence to the primacy of existence metaphysics. This entails the axioms of existence, identity and consciousness in their proper relationship. Since existence exists independent of consciousness, and to exist is to be something specific (i.e., to have identity), facts are what they are independent of consciousness. This means they have identity, this means they are not “unintelligible to man’s mind.” Moreover, this does not entail that facts are “random” or the product of “chance” or that we live in “a chance universe.” More on this will be brought out below.

It is through such gimmicks as those we’ve seen above (package-deals, false dichotomies, etc.) that presuppositional apologists insinuate that the assumption of what they call a “chance universe” is a corollary of rejecting the view that the universe was created and is ruled by a supernatural consciousness. Reject the Christian god, and you’re stuck with “a chance universe.” Apparently we are to think this consequence results automatically, as Van Til explains:

In every non-Christian concept of reality brute facts or chance plays a basic role. This is so because any one who does not hold to God’s counsel as being man’s ultimate environment has no alternative but to assume or assert that chance is ultimate. Chance is simply the metaphysical correlative of the idea of the autonomous man. (*The Defense of the Faith*, p. 140)

By “autonomous man” Van Til essentially has in mind any human being (male or female) who has not surrendered his mind to the dictates of Christian god-belief. So even though “chance” is something about which “no manner of assertion can be made,” it’s clear that Van Til conceives of “chance” as a “metaphysical correlative” of the non-believer’s mindset. Apparently this means some kind of ontological corollary to non-belief in the Christian god in which “chance” is some kind of power, force or elemental phenomenon responsible for the existence and nature of the universe. The important point to note here is that, for Van Til (and apparently for other presuppositionalists cited as well), “chance” is *metaphysical*. And if we consider John Frame’s definition (“events that occur without cause or reason”), “chance” seems to be understood by these writers as some kind of metaphysical alternative to causality. This will become relevant in my criticism below.

This supposed bond between “autonomous man” and “a chance universe” apparently has quite a pedigree. Van Til traces this fatal association back to the myth of Adam:

When Adam, for all men, refused to take God’s prediction of punishment for disobedience seriously, he virtually said that the facts and laws of the universe are not under God’s control but operate by virtue of Chance. This is the ultimate and utter irrationalism. (*The Defense of the Faith*, 1st ed., p. 237; quoted in Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*, p. 392)

Again we find that presuppositionalism’s denigration of non-Christian worldviews trades on a false dichotomy: either the universe was created by a conscious being and everything which takes place within it is ruled by a conscious being’s intentions (cf. “God’s thoughts make the world what it is and determine what happens” - Greg Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*, p. 243), or it is a product of “chance” and every “event” which takes place within it “occur[s] without cause or reason.” We find this false dichotomy affirmed over and over, in one manner or another, perhaps on the hope that readers will accept it as true uncritically.

The reason why these are the only options considered, is that by limiting the alternative to these two options the apologist can give his preferred position the appearance of having the intellectual advantage. Again, the tactic here is to camouflage the Christian position as the more sensible while describing the only alternative considered in so denigrating a manner that no one would want to be associated with it. Persuasion, not proof, seems to be the goal behind such measures. As validation of this analysis, we only need to recognize that, if Christianity really did have an intellectual advantage, such arbitrary dichotomies would not be needed. And so far, we’re told that these are the only two alternatives available. I’ve seen no argument which limits our options to the two alternatives considered by Bahnsen & co., and as my above analysis demonstrated, the presuppositionalists’ preferred alternative lands them right back into the randomness which they feign to despise.

But the charade continues. For instance, as “marks of the natural man in his attitude toward the interpretation of the facts (events) of the world,” Van Til listed the following:

The facts of man’s environment are not created or controlled by the providence of God. They are *brute* facts, uninterpreted and ultimately irrational. The universe is a *Chance* controlled universe. (*The Protestant Doctrine of Scripture*, quoted in Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*, p.310)

Again, we see only two alternatives in play here: either the universe was created by the Christian god and “the facts of man’s environment” are “controlled by the providence of God,” or “the universe is a *Chance* controlled universe.” Note again that “chance” here is used to denote some otherwise unidentified metaphysical phenomenon which somehow has the power to “control” the universe. The alternative to theism described here is apparently intended to give the reader the impression of an unstoppable chaotic force behind a wall of knobs, switches and dials randomly generating events around the universe and frantically manipulating the objects within it. Van Til must have imagined that this is what non-Christians believe about the universe.

But the presumption of the primacy of consciousness underlying the Christian alternative which presuppositionalism wholeheartedly endorses is not hard to spot. Observe the following statement by Bahnsen, in which the same false dichotomy is being reiterated:

In the non-Christian outlook, the space-time universe exists and is intelligible apart from God; whatever happens is random, and facts are not preinterpreted, related, or controlled by a personal mind. (*Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*, p. 313)

It is true that the universe is intelligible, and if it’s the case that the presuppositionalist’s god does not exist to make it so, then the presuppositionalist needs to get over it. However, it does not follow from the fact that the Christian god is an irrational fantasy that “whatever happens is random.” Nor do facts need to be “preinterpreted, related, or controlled by a personal mind” in order to be causal as opposed to “random” (or “chance-controlled,” which denies causality). The universe is the sum total of all that exists, and it is a fact that it exists. As such, it would commit the [fallacy of the stolen concept](#) to affirm that the universe is a product of something prior to it. To suppose that the universe is a product of something prior to it, is to affirm the existence of this something prior, but since the concept ‘universe’ includes *everything* which exists, one would essentially be affirming the existence of something which exists outside the sum total of everything which exists. This is the case even if one wants to assert, as Christians do, the existence of some “personal mind” prior to the universe, a consciousness which allegedly *created* the universe and which “*controls whatsoever comes to pass*” (Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 160; italics added). It is in this way that affirming the existence of the Christian god also commits the fallacy of the stolen concept, since this is the fundamental error of any position which ultimately rests on the primacy of consciousness metaphysics.

So just as we rightfully begin with the fact that existence exists as an irreducible primary, we begin with the existence of the universe by extension.

Whether one holds to the primacy of existence (the *objective* view of reality) or the primacy of consciousness (the *subjective* view of reality), has a dramatic impact on his understanding of the nature of facts (for further discussion on the nature of facts, see my [Rival Philosophies of Fact](#)). On the basis of the primacy of existence, the facts do not conform to anyone’s conscious intentions. Wishing, emoting, evading, fantasizing and pouting will not alter them. On the basis of the primacy of consciousness, however, facts do ultimately conform to someone’s consciousness, and consequently can be altered by the [wishing](#), [imagining](#), [pleasure](#) and [mood swings](#) of the ruling consciousness. It is because Christianity rests on the primacy of consciousness that its adherents cannot consistently reject the view that wishing makes it so.

Failing to grasp this distinction, however, Van Til taught his students that non-Christians, by virtue of their non-Christian conception of the world, “assume the idea of brute fact in metaphysics” (*The Defense of the Faith*, p.147). Here we have another connotation-rich description which is supposed to make readers suspicious of non-Christian philosophies before examining them. Bahnsen explains “the idea of brute fact in metaphysics” as:

the view that there is no plan or purpose for events, and that the facts have no necessary relationship to each other and require no interpretive context to be known and understood; everything happens randomly, “by chance.” (*Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*, p. 268n.20)

Here we see again another package-deal being foisted on us by means of yet another false dichotomy. By “the view that there is no plan or purpose for events,” Bahnsen does not allow for the distinction between the metaphysically given and the man-made. There are in fact some events which are the result of human initiation (such the production of an automobile in a factory) which are undeniably purposeful and executed according to a plan. On the other hand, there are events which are clearly not the result of human initiation, such as the sprouting of a weed on some abandoned patch of land. To say that there is “planning” behind this is nonsensical, but according to Bahnsen’s worldview there is a supernatural consciousness worthy of worship which busies itself planning such things.

But where Bahnsen errs is in supposing that the view that the sprouting of a weed in an abandoned patch of land is not the result of planning logically entails the view that such events happen causelessly (since he says it “happens... ‘by chance’,” and “chance” as we saw above denotes “events which occur without cause or reason”). Yes, there is a cause for the weed’s sprouting; it did not sprout “by chance” if “by chance” essentially means “without cause.” The either-or of Bahnsen’s false dichotomy here essentially states that either everything happens according to some cosmic plan, or it happens without any cause whatsoever. I see no reason whatsoever to accept such a view, and good reasons to reject it (since activity like a weed sprouting out of the ground definitely has a cause even if it is not “planned” by some supervising mind).

Now it should be clear that it is utterly misrepresentative for presuppositional apologetics to characterize non-Christian worldviews as necessarily assuming or unable to consistently avoid a “universe of chance” as Bahnsen & co. describe it here. Given Frame’s definition of “chance,” a “universe of chance” would be a universe in which the “events that occur” within it “occur without cause or reason.” While there may be non-Christians here or there who might affirm something as bizarre as this, I can’t say I’ve ever encountered any myself, and I know for a fact that Objectivism neither teaches this nor affirm positions which inevitably lead to this view. Moreover, in the case of those occasional non-theists who are quoted affirming that things in the universe happened “by chance” (Bahnsen quotes a few examples on pp. 206-207 of *Pushing the Antithesis*), I suspect that if you asked them for clarification, they would not deny causation in the activities they speak about. At any rate, I see no reason why one would need to, or why denying Christianity entails denying causality or adopting the “chance universe” view which Bahnsen has described so vividly for us.

Cutting Both Ways

Christians often say that, if the universe was not created by a supernatural being (preferably by the one which they worship), then it exists “by chance,” as a “random” fluke, and that it is therefore “irrational.” Not only does this kind of claim misappropriate the concept of rationality (the concept ‘rationality’ applies to actions, including thought, chosen by a consciousness capable of conceptual thought, not to sticks and stones, water droplets or asteroid belts), it can safely be said that if it is valid for the Christian to speak for the non-Christian’s position in this manner, there’s no reason why the non-Christian cannot do likewise. “God is uncaused and eternally self-existent,” explains Bahnsen. “There is nothing prior to God accounting for His origin and existence” (*Pushing the Antithesis*, p. 60). Like the non-Christian, the Christian too begins with something that was not created by a supernatural (or any other) being. So just as the non-Christian is said essentially to hold that the universe exists “by chance” and is thus “irrational,” so too must the Christian believe that his god exists “by chance” and is thus “irrational.”

And it wouldn’t stop there. The “chance-boundedness” of theism turns up all over the place. For instance, when Christians say that their god is “rational,” it must be “just by chance” that it’s rational; when Christians say that the laws of logic “reflect” the nature of the Christian god, it must be “just by chance” that they do this; when they say that the Christian god chose to save them from their sins, it must be “just by chance” that the Christian god chose to do this. And so on.

A Two-fold Correction

All of these characterizations of non-Christian positions err in two significant ways:

- 1) They treat the concept ‘chance’ as if it were a metaphysical concept (it’s not, ‘chance’ is an *epistemological* concept), and
- 2) They suppress the fact that one is not committed to denying the causality of events simply because he rejects either Christian god-belief or the metaphysical subjectivism at the basis of the Christian religion.

Let’s examine these two points in detail.

First, it is important to notice how presuppositionalists are using the concept ‘chance’ in their characterizations of non-Christian worldviews. As Van Til makes it clear above, he is using “chance” to refer to some *metaphysical*

phenomenon, as if it were a type of force, energy, or substance controlling the universe and the activity which takes place within it. I know of no such phenomenon which somehow causes events to happen “without cause” (as Frame’s definition requires). Rather, ‘chance’ is an *epistemological* concept which is used to indicate a probability assessment, or that the series of causes leading up to an action or set of actions is unknown or only partially known. Both of these are epistemological concerns, not metaphysical forces acting “behind the scenes” cancelling out the law of causality.

Say for instance, that I was walking along a sidewalk one day and “by chance” a twenty dollar bill happened to be blowing across my path just as I came upon it. (This actually happened to me in 2004.) Had the bank note blown by 15 seconds earlier or five seconds later, I probably would not have seen it. I might say that this happened “by chance” because I am personally unaware of where the twenty came from, how long it was rolling around on the street, what snags it might have encountered prior to being blown into my range of vision, etc. But surely I am not denying the fact that certain causes culminated in my encounter with it. By saying that I came upon the bill “by chance,” I am not invoking some metaphysical alternative to causality, such that Frame’s definition and the presuppositionalists’ characterizations could at all be said to apply. Nor does saying that this one event happened “by chance” suggest that we live in “a chance universe” in which all “events... occur without cause or reason.” In no way am I denying the law of causality by referring to this incident as a “chance” occasion.

This leads to the second point. It is important also to notice that disbelief in the Christian god or other supernatural being which allegedly created the universe and “controls whatsoever comes to pass” (Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 160), does not in any way commit a person to the belief that the universe is “controlled by chance,” that “events... occur without cause,” etc. The law of causality is the law of identity applied to action. Since to exist is to be something specific, action - since it also exists - also has identity. The concept of causality is based on the recognition that an entity’s actions necessarily depend on the nature of the entity performing them. There’s no need to suppose that a god is needed to be responsible for this arrangement, for the same law would necessarily apply to any god proposed to exist. The proof for this is the fact that such proposals by their nature assume the very relationship which the law of causality identifies between the god it proposes and the actions it allegedly performed to make the objects we perceive act as they do. Theistic proposals ignore this, thus committing themselves to a series of [stolen concepts](#). Causality has its basis in existence, which is both metaphysically and conceptually irreducible. There is no “other side” to existence. There is no “transcending” existence. The only alternative which human beings have to existence is what they can [imagine](#), and the imaginary is not real.

Even when someone exclaims, “What are the chances of that happening?!” he’s essentially talking about *probability*, which properly belongs in the province of epistemology. (Here I recommend Peikoff’s discussion of the concepts of possibility and probability in his book *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, pp. 175-179.) Probability is not some mystical force controlling reality behind the scenes.

In one of his lectures on science, Binswanger points out how we often give probabilities value-laden significance which is not inherent in the probabilities considered in and of themselves. There’s nothing wrong with this per se, but it can skew our understanding of the relevant facts if it is not recognized. To illustrate this, Binswanger uses the example of an ordinary deck of cards. Give the deck a thorough shuffling, and then draw four cards off the top. Suppose you immediately draw four aces. You’d probably say something like “What are the chances of that happening?!” Had you drawn the seven of clubs, the three of hearts, the ten of diamonds and the nine of spades, you’d probably not see anything significant about this. But in fact the odds of drawing this hand are the same as drawing all four aces. That’s because every card in the deck is just as unique as the next. There’s only one seven of clubs just as there’s only one ace of spades. The reason why we place more significance on the hand with four aces is because this has significant value in actual play, such as in a hand of poker.

This is just one of the reasons why we need not be so impressed by claims of statistical improbabilities in regard to naturally recurring phenomena so delightfully quoted by theistic apologists, such as in the case of the emergence or development of life on earth. Even if apologists successfully resist the temptation to inflate their statistical calculations to make natural phenomena seem all the more improbable, why should their statistics impress us? Something’s got to happen, and improbable things happen all the time, such as drawing four unique cards from a shuffled deck, meeting one’s future spouse for the first time, or handling a five dollar bill with a specific serial number.

In my wallet I have a five dollar bill with the serial number FD83499689A. Of all the millions upon millions of five dollar bills which have circulated (according to the [US Department of the Treasury FAQs](#), “the Bureau of Engraving and Printing (BEP) produced approximately 38 million notes a day” in fiscal year 2007, “with a face value of approximately

\$750 million”), what are the chances that *this one* should one day find its way into my hands? I’d suppose the probability is astronomically small, but yet it happened all the same. And yet my worldview in no way requires that this particular five dollar bill wound up in my hands “without cause.”

Say that on the spur of the moment, I decide to take a road trip. As I drive across the country from my native California, I take a left at Albuquerque, and after a few twists and turns and rolls of the dice I find myself in a city I’ve never visited before, Pittsburg, Pennsylvania. As I make my way into this city I decide that I want to stop and get out and walk around a bit. So I look for a place to park my car. Eventually I find a large public parking structure with six or eight floors, drive in and meander through the structure’s bosom until I find a vacant spot. I carefully ease my 2003 Ford Focus into the spot and turn off the engine. Then I think to myself, “what were the chances that sometime in my life I would one day end up parking my car in this particular parking spot?” Astronomical, right? Of all the thousands of parking spots in Pittsburg, PA, it’s already a statistical improbability. But given the context that I had no prior intention of going to Pittsburg in the first place, that I could have gone to any other city, or could have decided not to take a road trip in the first place, this very well might not have happened at all. Given this overall context, which includes my own choices and actions, it seems so improbable that I should one day park my car in this one specific parking spot in Pittsburg, PA, that one might suppose that it’s not possible at all. But in fact it happened. And it is completely natural, wholly consistent with “naturalistic” presuppositions, and in no way an affront to the law of causality. No laws of nature have been defied, and the outcome in fact does have a causal basis.

Does any of this require that I throw up my hands in despair and suppose that an invisible magic being is responsible for it all? No, not at all. At no point in any of this is the primacy of existence brought into question or doubt. Consequently, the moral of the story is that presuppositionalism’s tendentious usage of “chance” is nothing more than a big bluff, one which ironically backfires on itself.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: ["Chance"](#), [Concepts](#), [Facts](#), [Presuppositional Gimmickry](#)

posted by Bahnsen Burner at [8:00 AM](#)

6 Comments:

[Dan Doel](#) said...

This line of argumentation seems very similar to the common Christian objection that 'without my god, life has no purpose/meaning.' Which of course is an objection that's true enough if you're determined to find the purpose of your existence in the same way a hammer might. It's just that the presuppositionalist has dialed the thinking up to 11.

It feels like a position you'd arrive at by equivocation. First you say, "without god, events are up to chance, in that they're not dictated by some divine overlord; they just happen with no conscious plan." And then you switch in the definition of "chance" meaning the world would be completely unintelligible and have no discernible causality. Except the presuppositionalist has removed the equivocatory reasoning, and simply presents you with the dichotomy that results.

[July 11, 2009 12:17 AM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Dan,

Thanks for your comment. You've made some very well stated points.

In connection with your first statement, I've recently written on [Theistic Misuse of the Concepts of Meaning, Value and Purpose](#).

Regards,
Dawson

[July 11, 2009 6:58 AM](#)

[madmax](#) said...

Dawson,

I just caught up with all your new posts. Great stuff.

I'm glad you addressed the "randomness" argument made by religious apologists. Its a very popular argument used by not only religious apologists but by religious Conservatives. They assert that only god can ground "purpose" and therefore only god can ground morality. Thus, a moral socio-political order must have a divine source which could never be provided by "Godless secularists."

This also connects in with the religious Right's condemnation of Charles Darwin. They view "Darwinian Evolution" as destroying morality because if Darwin is right everything must be random including morality. Also, if mankind evolved "randomly" and could have evolved differently if different external factors were present, then man wasn't made in god's image; and that must be wrong because it contradicts Christian dogma which must be true because it was revealed to man via divine inspiration yada, yada, yada. So the secularism = randomness = destruction of morality = downfall of Western Civilization is a *major* line of argumentation by the Religious / theocratic Right. Its basically their core anti-secular argument. So I'm glad to see you rip it to shreds.

Madmax

[July 14, 2009 7:54 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Hi Madmax,

Right - the "chance universe" characterization energizes many avenues of criticism against non-believing positions, even in the area of science, especially in the case of discoveries whose implications are damaging to religious dogma. It is fundamentally a straw man in that the assumption that all non-Christian worldviews ultimately boil down to "randomness" or a "chance universe" is totally misrepresentative. As I noted in my blog, apologists do attempt to support this characterization with quotes from various thinkers (e.g., B. Russell, J. Huxley, W. Gilberti, M. Chown, et al.). But where they err is in supposing these individuals speak for the wider population. They don't. Ironically, they effectually assume that non-believers are monolithic in their views, even though non-believers do not claim that their positions are inspired by an omniscient deity.

Little by little, I am developing a one-stop resource which calls such assumptions into question. If you encounter a theist who tries to pull these gimmicks on you, you're invited to link them to the appropriate entry on my blog. They haven't checked their premises, but here's a source that does check them.

Of course, if you encounter other assertions or arguments that I have not covered, please let me know. I'd be happy to take a look at them as time allows.

Regards,
Dawson

[July 15, 2009 8:57 AM](#)

[yao](#) said...

for all the impressive arguments presented here, i wonder what good they will be when we die.

To me it's simple, i could argue that there is no god till the cows come home and it would make no difference to me when i die because there is no god.

but what if there really is a God?
what then?

[July 15, 2009 10:13 AM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Hi Yao,

Thanks for your comment.

In regard to the sentiment you express in your questions, what difference will it make to you when you die if there is a god? After all, you'll still be dead.

But then again, what if there really is a Blarko? What then?

Your questions take death a precondition for something mattering to someone. But I would dispute this. We can only value things when we are alive, and life - which is necessarily biological - is the precondition of valuing anything to begin with. Even if one wants to imagine that there is a god, this does not change the fact that he needs values in order to live. The issue at this point is whether he wants to live, or not. If his worldview enshrines death as its ultimate standard, do you think this is going to promote life as a standard of value?

I don't.

Regards,
Dawson

[July 15, 2009 10:47 AM](#)

[Post a Comment](#)