

## **“CHANCE AND THE EXISTENCE OF GOD”**

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### **Report of address to Reading Churches Men’s Group, Saturday 16 May 2015**

Scientists, when seeking evidence for the existence of God, are not as sceptical as we might be led to believe. And, it would appear, it is physicists who are the least sceptical of all. According to Oxford University Professor of Physics Paul Ewart, the difference between his discipline, on one hand, and biologists and chemists, on the other, is that physicists KNOW they don’t have the answer!

It is not easy to tackle the role “chance” plays in relation to God’s existence without raising the intellectual bar several notches up. Yet, during his address to the Reading Churches Men’s Group on 16 May, Professor Ewart addressed the challenge with deftness, clarity and humour.

He began by outlining the conventional notion of an all-powerful determinist God who controls everything in life - even down to the roll of a dice. Under this concept, nothing could then ever happen by chance. However, according to both atheistic evolutionists and advocates of “Intelligent Design”, if chance were real - and not an illusion - it would be incompatible with the idea of God. A Creator God, they maintain, would leave nothing to chance. The evidence from evolution, arising from random mutations acted on by natural selection with no apparent goal or direction, would argue instead for God’s non-existence.

Yet, as Paul explained, we need to look at Scripture - as well as at the ways the chance events we encounter in life are actually categorised. The Bible in some places, he said, clearly recognised the reality of chance – that “the swift, ...the strong, ... the wise ... and the intelligent” are not guaranteed success but “time and chance happen to them all.” (Ecclesiastes 9:11). He also quoted the story of Gideon’s fleece - where God was asked to reverse the sign in order to rule out its happening by chance. Equally, the book of Genesis showed that God had used chance - in the form of chaos, and represented by “the deep” and “the waters,” out of which he brought order - in the act of Creation.

Chance could be categorised in three types, all of which share the property of being unpredictable.

First, there are problems that are unpredictable because we do not know enough about what determines the outcome. The result of a General Election, for example.

Second, and also deterministic, are problems where we do not know the initial conditions with sufficient precision. When small errors become magnified, the result is unpredictable – as with chaos theory or weather forecasting.

Thirdly, there could be pure chance such as in Quantum Theory where, perhaps, not even God can predict the outcome.

Paul showed how, although the equations of Quantum Theory gave deterministic predictions, these could sometimes be destroyed by the effects of random or chance interactions. “These,” says Paul, “set nature free from the iron grip of determinism,” and provide both a creative function and a specific purpose within God’s creation - allowing us the freedom to think and act rationally.

One of the most difficult problems concerning God’s existence is the presence of suffering... particularly why it is so randomly and indiscriminately apportioned.

Paul argues that we need to approach this from the assumption that Chance, Free Will and the Laws of Nature are all equally real. Consider then, he said, the situation where God only visited suffering on bad people, and that he had to intervene to stop one person harming another. Such a situation - where we could by our free will force God to act predictably - would mean that God was no longer in effective control. Making things unpredictable by being subject to chance protects God’s sovereignty, and prevents us being able to predict what He must do.

Yet, how can God be in control if not even He can predict a “pure chance” event? Again, Paul sees no anomaly here. He believes God can allow the world - with all its accidental events, disasters and sufferings - to make random moves, and yet still bring about His will by adapting his actions to deal with whatever happens. This, Paul says, provides us with a far grander, wiser, more powerful and wonderful God than the one of classical theology who has only one plan.

The world then, Paul concluded, is not totally determined. There is a delicate balance between chaos and order – just the right amount of order to make life possible, and just the right amount of chance to make it free. Chance, then, should not be seen as a robust argument for atheism. Instead, it might be seen as the sign of a personal God creating free men and women to experience a relationship based on faith. Not being controlled like puppets dancing on a string.

The uncertainty and unpredictability of life drives us to commit in faith, says Paul. In an utterly deterministic world, faith would be meaningless, and love could not be experienced. As we experience life’s ups and downs, we find God a nearby presence in all times – good and bad. Coping with the random challenges of life helps us to develop a personal relationship with a personal God - to mature and ultimately to grow into His likeness.”

### **References and further reading**

Richard Dawkins: “The Blind Watchmaker” and “The God Delusion”

William Dembski: “The Design Inference: eliminating chance through small probabilities”

Jacques Monod: “Chance and Necessity”

The Bible: Judges 6:36-40, and Ecclesiastes 9:11

John Calvin: Writings (*Commentaries*, "Providence and Human Action," 265)

Albert Einstein: *The World as I see it*.

William James: Writings

**Chris Carter – 11 June 2015**