

Does Everything Happen for a Reason?

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No. Next question.

Do some things happen for a reason? Yes.

Is reason a good thing? Yes, our ability to reason is a necessary but not sufficient tool in the search for truth.

Let me explain.

I'm in many ways a sentimental fool. My mother died in 2009, but if she had lived, today would have been her 96th birthday. She is part of my great chain of being; if she had not existed, I would not be here today.

I have a picture of my father and mother at a house party in 1939, the weekend they met. My father is leaning against a car between two beautiful women. One is my mother and the other is her best friend Harriet. Had my father fallen for Harriet, I would not be here today.

But that is not the "reason" he fell in love with my mother. I don't believe there was a genie who whispered in his ear, "take the one on the right, and if you do, seventy-six years from now, your third son will stand up and preach a dandy sermon about the picture your friend is taking right now." My very existence is a consequence of the fact that he went for one woman instead of the other, but it is not the reason. The cause has to precede the consequence.

The saying "everything happens for a reason" often implies some sort of moral judgment, the kinds of rewards and punishments I was talking about last week as the Santa Game. For example, last August, televangelist Pat Robertson gave his opinion that a dip in the stock markets back then was a result of God's displeasure with the Obama administration's defense of abortion rights and Planned Parenthood.¹ For people of Pat's theology, the reasons things happen usually have to do with God, and if the things happening are bad, it must be because God is angry and God happens to get angry about the same sort of things Pat Robertson gets angry about. In 2010, he asserted that the earthquake which struck Haiti was a result of the fact that Haiti had made a pact with the devil in order to get their independence in 1791.²

And this kind of reasoning is well-grounded in the Hebrew Bible, where almost everything that happens, good or bad, is a result of God's pleasure or displeasure. But for most of us, a dip in the stock market or a hurricane in Haiti is a random occurrence, without moral implications at all.

And originally the saying "everything happens for a reason" was not moralistic but metaphysical, a statement about how the world works in terms of general cause and effect. It amazed me, in looking into this, that we can come close to saying who was the first person to use the phrase,

In the fifth century BCE, before Socrates and Plato, lived two philosophers named Democritus and Leucippus. Leucippus was said to be the master and Democritus the pupil, and we know a lot more about Democritus – in fact, there is some doubt as to whether Leucippus

¹<http://www.rightwingwatch.org/content/pat-robertson-market-crash-gods-punishment-abortion-rights-planned-parenthood-funding>

²https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pat_Robertson_controversies

ever lived at all. However, one saying attributed to Leucippus survives:

Ouden chroma maten ginetai, alla panta ek logos, te kai up anakes. "Nothing occurs at random (maten), but everything for a reason (*logos*) and by necessity."³ The important thing in this quote from Leucippus is not that he was possibly the first guy who said everything happens for a reason, but that the word he uses for reason is *logos*. You see, this word logos has three English translations: word, reason and plan. As the philosophers used it, it was more reason and plan. What really ran the world, what called the shots was not the will of the gods but a set of impersonal laws.

Democritus and Leucippus were the first determinists: everything that happens is caused by something else that happens. "Democritus wanted to wrest control of man's fate from arbitrary gods and make us more responsible for our actions."⁴

Determinism gives us a billiard ball universe: if you know the initial position of the balls, and how the cue ball enters that array, it will interact according to a set of rules which enable us to predict which balls will hit which, and how each will end up.

Logos, the reason or plan, governs, but there are two exceptions. One is human free will, and the other is randomness.

Free will is the basis of moral responsibility. We only punish a person who does wrong if he or she had the choice to do right. Philosophically, however, in ancient times and modern, there are strong arguments that humans do not have free will, but the choices we think we are making freely are just as determined by who we are and our history as anything else in the universe. But I've touched on this many times before. What I want to concentrate on this morning is the other escape from determinism, randomness. Leucippus said nothing happens randomly. But Leucippus lived long before we understood how random reality is.

Before the philosophers came on the scene, the ancient Greeks, like a lot of ancient peoples, thought that everything that happened was caused by the gods. The gods were notoriously irrational and had their own issues, so no one expected the world to be run by any kind of plan. Instead, most things that happened were a result of fate. Fate is a strong force in classical Greek tragedy, and in the epics of Homer.

The concept of fate is also strong in early Anglo Saxon thought, where it is called wyrd. Anglo Saxons said every man has his wyrd, which he could do nothing to escape. The word is the root of our modern word weird. The three witches at the beginning of MacBeth are the weird sisters, setting forth the destiny of the characters in the tragedy about to unfold.

Logos, an impersonal reason or plan, was a philosophical innovation, an improvement on the early idea of fate. Plato held that reason or logos was the most important attribute of God, and individuals could get a glimpse of it because each of us had the seed of reason, *spermatikos logos*, in our own minds.

Platonism is thoroughly imbued in the mystical prologue to St. John's gospel, which reads "in the beginning was the logos, and the logos was with God and the logos was God." The conventional English translation of logos in this famous passage is "word," but I think the author was also referring to the full Platonic concept of plan or reason as well as word.

Logos as the plan of life is different from fate. Fate is a roll of the dice that has occurred long before, rather like predestination in Calvinism. You can't escape it, you can't know it, you

³Wikipedia, "Free Will in Antiquity"

⁴Id.

can't understand it. Logos, at least in principle is knowable. Logos is the reason for which everything happens.

And the Christian tradition is that God knows it all. Jesus says that God knows the fall of every sparrow, as well as the numberless hairs on your head. Now, that is a nice poetic thing for Jesus to say, but it is pretty challenging to think about. Just in the last decade, we have cameras and recording devices that keep track of a lot of visual reality, and already we are running out of storage space. If God keeps track of not only all that is happening now but all that has ever happened everywhere in the 15 billion years the universe has been in existence, and all that will happen until the universe runs down, where does God store this information? Is there a galaxy somewhere devoted to server farms?

You see, the religious and philosophical ideas of the ancients, these ideas about who's minding the store, who's making things happen, had to change once science gave us new insights. The idea that God knows everything had to break down with the atom. The Greeks had postulated that there was a unit of matter which was so small it was indivisible. With the advent of modern science, this ancient idea of atoms got revived and turned out to be true.

In 1827 a botanist named Robert Brown was looking through a microscope at particles inside of cavities within pollen grains in water. He could see these particles in motion, but was not able to detect what was making them move. The particle were the tiniest things he could see, but he theorized that things even tinier were impacting on these particles and making them move, what came to be called Brownian motion. Subsequent physics showed that indeed, molecules in a gas or liquid will exhibit random motion and impact on large particles in unpredictable ways. And molecules are made up of atoms.

So our billiard table just got many incredibly tiny balls. You could not even in theory show how they were going to move, for the motion is purely random. Leucippus claimed that there is no such thing as randomness; science shows us that randomness is all there is at the lowest end of the size scale.

And what scientists developed to describe this was a theory not of where each particle is but the probabilities that any given particle was anywhere. The name of this field became statistical mechanics, a way to mathematically describe processes that did not have a logos, did not have a reason or plan. Or maybe it is more accurate to say that randomness *was* their logos.

And now we have quantum mechanics, a level below atoms, which is weirder still and more random. In short, science has shown us that randomness is a very important part of the makeup of reality, in a way the Leucippus, back in the fifth century B.C.E., could not have seen.

Randomness is rampant in biology, where it is a factor both in genetics and in evolution. Both of these systems have deterministic rules by which they operate, but both have a strong element of chance as well.

What we have seen since the rise of modern science is a breakdown in the old billiard ball logos, the old system by which the world is a function of a plan in the mind of God. This breakdown paved the way in the twentieth century for existentialism.

Existentialism takes for granted that neither life nor the world has any inherent meaning, and it is up to us to make meaning of it. Life is inherently absurd for Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Camus, Sartre, Beckett. Our own Gene Pickett, former President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, described in his sermon a couple of months ago how he felt a kinship with the existentialist hero Sisyphus, perpetually rolling the stone up the hill only to have it roll back again.

In an existentialist world, whatever reasons there are for things happening are reasons we bring to the world, not reasons which are inherently there.

When I was in divinity school, my colleague Ken Sawyer was my preaching professor and I had a chance on my sabbatical last year to hear Ken preach a great sermon on randomness, which he was kind enough to send me a copy this week to help me with this sermon. Ken quotes Einstein's famous saying that God does not play dice with the universe, and remarked that however brilliant Einstein was as a physicist, he was not so good as a theologian. He continues:

"God, or the cosmic code, or however you describe the ultimate nature of reality, does not decree deterministic outcomes, any more than God intercedes to tinker with the fundamental laws of creation. God or life or what you will only provides that the laws of probability will tend to prevail. Perverse in the short run but powerful and persistent, randomness will out. The universe is ordered that way."

In other words, Ken concludes,

"As opposed to those who say there are no such things as accidents or mere coincidence, I believe accidents and mere coincidence abound. I could be wrong, of course, but I find that the world is wondrously random, a goodly source of fascination, tragedy, and fun, with implications for the making of faith."

Now let me turn to another colleague, one who passed on to that great pulpit in the sky after a long and public struggle with cancer. As Forrest Church knew he was dying, he preached the experience in an extraordinary sermon which was later expanded into a book about love and death.⁵

Just think about probabilities in a world run by randomness. While many people in Forrest Church's position may think the premature shortening of his life is a raw deal, Church emphasizes how amazing it is that he or any of us has life at all:

"There's a theological point here, with which I'll close. 'What did I do to deserve this?' we ask when things turn against us, forgetting that we did nothing to deserve being placed in the way of trouble and joy in the first place. The odds against each one of us being here this morning to pose such a question are so mind-staggering that they cannot be computed....

Your parents had to couple at precisely the right moment for the one possible sperm to fertilize the one possible egg that would result in your conception. Right then, the odds were still a million to one against your being the answer to the question your biological parents were consciously or unconsciously posing. And that's just the beginning of the miracle. The same unlikely happenstance must repeat itself throughout the generations. Going back ten generations, this miracle must repeat itself one thousand times— one million two hundred fifty thousand times going back only twenty generations."

My friends, our very existence here is most improbable. Forrest Church calls it a miracle. But it is not a one-in-a kind miracle, like making the sun go backwards. It is an everyday miracle, for every day people do make babies, every day new humans come into the world.

We live and die in randomness, and we live despite overwhelming odds against our getting here at all.

⁵<http://www.allSoulsnyc2.org/publications/sermons/fcsersmons/GA-2008-Love-and-Death.pdf>

Yet some part of us will still think everything happens for a reason, and indeed many things do happen for a reason. Some who believe in God will say that almost anything which happens is due to God's will, like Pat Robertson. But even those who don't believe in God will believe in giant conspiracies. Some people believe that Bill Clinton put Donald Trump up to running for President. In the last Presidential campaign, there was a feeling that the Koch brothers were pulling all the strings. And perhaps some of these grand conspiracy theories have a grain of truth in them.

Take what happened to me last Sunday afternoon: I was just mulling this sermon topic over when I picked up the New York Times Book Review and casually flipped open a page and my eye fell upon the words "The Conspiratorial Brain: we are hard-wired to believe that nothing happens by accident."

Was this a mere coincidence or was there some guiding fate? It couldn't be a buried memory, because, before I sat down last Sunday afternoon, I had never opened that particular issue of the book review.

The article turned out to be a review of a book by psychologist Rob Brotherton called *Suspicious Minds: Why We Believe Conspiracy Theories*. The thesis of the book is that belief in conspiracy, reading intention into the pattern of what happens in the world, is not restricted to nutjobs on the fringes. We all do it, because we're hard-wired to do it. A couple of quotes from the review:

"For example, psychologists have discovered that we possess an "intentionality bias," which tricks us into assuming every incidental event that happens in the world is the result of someone's intention. A "proportionality bias" convinces us that momentous events must have equally momentous causes, which is why some people vainly shake a die harder when they want to roll a large number as if it were a fairground strength tester. We are all predisposed to see patterns in coincidental events."

And my favorite sentence:

"Paradoxically, the illusion of an evil, all powerful conspiracy guiding events can be more comforting than the reality that humans are rarely in control."

Now, I'm not saying that the search for meaning in events is bad. What's bad is the *compulsion* to find meaning and our blindness to the role that randomness, or pure chance, plays.

Now I am glad that my mother and father got together and that I came into existence as a consequence. But my existence was not a cause of them getting together, and I don't think it was prefigured in any way, except in my general genetic inheritance.

It is *not* true that for *everything* that happens there is a reason. For some things, there are reasons, but randomness, chance, coincidence play an important role. But it *is* true that, as Ecclesiastes and Pete Seeger tell us, for everything there is a *season*. Frank will now sing about that as we turn, turn, turn to the morning offering.

Amen

Readings Does Everything Happen For a Reason?

Luke 12 (NRSV)

6 Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten in God's sight. 7

But even the hairs of your head are all counted. Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

22 He said to his disciples, "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. 23 For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. 24 Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! 25 And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? 26 If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? 27 Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. 28 But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you — you of little faith!