

Metaphysics // Fall 2017

Handout 4

Origins of life: White

Remark 1. We only focus on §§1–8 of the article.

THREE KINDS OF PEBBLE ARRANGEMENT. Imitating Paley’s procedure, suppose we find pebbles arranged on the road in no particular order (Pattern 1, Figure 1). That is, *we* cannot identify any interesting pattern in the arrangement. One thing we say about this is that the arrangement was highly improbable. There could have been very many other ways to arrange the pebbles. So the fact that they ended up in exactly this shape *is* improbable. And yet, despite that, we are content to say that the arrangement was chancy. Thus: chance coexists with high improbability.

Question 2. Where else did we see the last claim?

Suppose we find pebbles arranged in such a way that the larger ones are further from the shoreline (Pattern 2, Figure 2). Then we do have a reason to think that some special explanation is needed, that there is more than mere chance is involved. We are likely to cite a physical law in that explanation.

Suppose, finally, we find pebbles arranged as a smiley face (Pattern 3, Figure 3). Again, more than a chance is involved, and this time physical laws alone cannot be responsible for the arrangement. A purposeful action will be cited in the explanation—e.g., a child drawing her parent’s face.



Figure 1: Random pebbles



Figure 2: Pebbles in order



Figure 3: Pebbles as a smiley face

CHANCE AND NECESSITY. There are different ways in which ‘chance’ is used. Here we mean not the sense of ‘non-deterministic’, or ‘essentially probabilistic’. Rather, it is the sense sometimes associated with ‘contingency’:

Definition 3. An event E is *chancy* if a small variation in the conditions preceding E would lead to E' significantly different from E .

Suppose the speed of the car or its weight were different. Then the pebble arrangement in Pattern 1 would have been significantly different from the actual one. By contrast, if the waves were a bit stronger, or the child finished her drawing a bit earlier, the arrangements in Patterns 2 and 3 would not have differed much from the actual ones.

Remark 4. We need to be clearer on the meaning of ‘different’ here, since what we mean by ‘difference’ seems to be very sensitive to context.

THE ORIGINS OF LIFE RESEARCH. The resistance to the idea that life has come about by chance should be interpreted by using the above notion of chance. In the first place, the majority view in the origins of life research is that a small variation in the values of fundamental physical constants would have resulted in an unstable universe unsuitable for development and sustainability of life. Secondly, the complexity of molecular systems convinces us that chance is a very poor explanation of the emergence of a self-replicating system.

WHEN THE CHANCE HYPOTHESIS IS IN TROUBLE. White adopts a Bayesian approach. Our question: what kind of evidence would disconfirm the chance hypothesis C ? Generally, when this evidence is less likely to occur on the assumption of C than on the assumption of $\sim C$. In symbols:

$$P(C | S) < P(C) \Rightarrow P(S | C) < P(S | \sim C). \quad (T1)$$

Remark 5. Follows from Bayes' theorem. Hint: unpack $P(E)$ in the formulation we gave in Handout 3.

How to evaluate $P(S | \sim C)$? To reject C is to maintain that the process was biased in some way. So we can envisage different ways for the process to be biased. Since we will eventually consider only two ways, we write: $\sim C = \{B_1, B_2\}$. Then:

$$P(S | \sim C) = P(S | B_1)P(B_1) + P(S | B_2)P(B_2). \quad (T2)$$

Question 6. How to derive the formula above?

White's proposal is to partition $\sim C$ into two kinds of biases, intentional and non-intentional. Letting $B_1 = B_I, B_2 = B_N$, we write:

$$P(C | S) < P(C) \Rightarrow [P(S | B_I) > P(S | C) \text{ or } P(S | B_N) > P(S | C)]. \quad (T3)$$

Remark 7. Ignore the derivation of this formula.

There is a simple application of (T3) to the pebble scenarios. In the Pattern 1, the arrangement is improbable, but it is no more or less improbable than any other arrangement. In fact we might even say that, given the absence of any pattern, $P(S | B_N) < P(S | C)$ and $P(S | B_I) > P(S | C)$. Hence the disjunction fails, $P(C | S) \geq P(C)$, and C is at least not disconfirmed.

In the Pattern 2 the arrangement has it that $P(S | B_N) > P(S | C)$, and thus $P(C | S) < P(C)$. Hence C is disconfirmed.

In the Pattern 3 the arrangement has it that $P(S | B_I) > P(S | C)$, and thus $P(C | S) < P(C)$. Hence C is again disconfirmed.

PREFERENCE PROBLEM. Here is what I consider to be the most striking argument in this paper. In order to count *anything* as evidence for the existence of an intelligent designer we must make assumptions about what that designer wanted to accomplish—we need to assume our knowledge of his *preferences*. And that is why when we observe the smiley face, we judge it to be a result of a design: we assume that the agent was interested in creating smiley faces, sending a message to the potential observer about his presence, and so forth. Yet, in the case of a mighty intelligent designer (MID) responsible for the creation of life, or of the universe as a whole, these assumptions no longer hold. Thus the presence of life is no more probable on the assumption of the existence of such a designer than it is on the assumption of chance. 463

Remark 8. This idea was at the heart of Sober's criticism of the Panda's Thumb argument.

Now one might retort that, while we are ignorant of his specific preferences, we can still say that MID favoured life and thus ensured that the relevant conditions should obtain. 464

The response to this (sly) retort is that the very same argument can be made whatever the initial conditions of the universe are. That is, however the universe turned out, we would always be able to disconfirm C !

White further illustrates this claim by the analogy with lottery winning. While my win confirms, to a small degree, that the lottery was rigged for me, it does not confirm that the lottery was rigged. This is a somewhat surprising application of a well-known result that:

$$[P(S_1 | S_2) > P(S_1) \text{ and } S_1 \models S_3] \not\Rightarrow [P(S_3 | S_2) > P(S_3)].$$

But now, White objects to this reasoning as follows. If the Preference problem is taken seriously, then *no* evidence can possibly count in favour of C_I . Even if we observed a string of words 'Made by God' imprinted (somehow!) on each hydrogen molecule, or even if 'Hallelujah' were heard from the skies, we would still have to refuse to accept these observation as evidence for God's existence. For them to be taken *as* messages, we have to assume that they are *intended as* messages. And this assumption is denied to us, since it entails an assumption about the intentions of the designer.

PREFERENCE PROBLEM AND NON-INTENTIONAL BIAS. While the Preference problem can be rebutted in the case of C_I , it is devastating, White argues, in the case of C_N . The hypothesis of non-intentional bias is the idea that, because some values of physical constants are favourable to life, there are more fundamental laws of nature determining these constants. We can suppose that the most fundamental laws of nature constrain physical constants to *some* narrow range of values. But it does not follow that the laws constrain the constants to a *particular* range of values. The fact that certain values are favourable to life makes them no more likely to be ‘selected’ by impersonal laws. There is no reason to think that life-favouring laws are preferred by impersonal laws. Indeed, there is more reason to suspect that *intentional* bias would make the range of constants favourable to life more likely.

In the lottery analogy, given the outcome of the lottery, there is reason to suspect that the lottery favours *just one* winner. But this is no proof that the lottery favours one *particular* winner, i.e. a winner endowed with certain specific properties.

To sum up, it is unintelligible why impersonal laws of nature would favour the creation of life, the condition where we have beauty, complexity, and so forth.

Question 9. What does White claim to have accomplished? What does he claim he has not accomplished?

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