ON THE COMPATIBILITY OF THE RANDOMNESS AND PROVIDENCE THESES

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Abstract:

Compatibilist arguments are important in fields such as philosophy of religion, philosophy of science and metaphysics because they determine whether seemingly conflicting claims can coexist both logically and metaphysically. While there are different arguments on compatibilism, this paper focuses on the compatibility between the Randomness Thesis (RT), which holds that evolution proceeds through natural selection acting on random genetic mutations, and the Providence Thesis (PT), which claims that God intentionally brought humans into existence. In relation to this, the existing compatibilist arguments often rely heavily on presuppositions and conditional statements, where the truth of the premises is assumed rather than demonstrated (e.g., "If God exists, then certain conditions follow"). While such arguments can be logically consistent, they are frequently modally weak because logical consistency alone is insufficient to establish that the compatibility of the Randomness and Providence Theses is necessary across possible worlds. For this reason, the objective of this paper is to introduce three levels of compatibility that can be used to assess the strength of compatibilist arguments: (1) Minimal Compatibility (MC), which requires only logical consistency — or the absence of logical contradiction; (2) Adequate Compatibility (AC), which requires logical consistency and metaphysical truth in the actual world, though not necessarily in all possible worlds; and (3) Strong Compatibility (SC), which demands both logical consistency and modal robustness. With alethic modal logic as an evaluative framework, I shall distinguish between mere logical possibility and modal necessity across possible worlds. Following this, I will argue that the current compatibilist arguments, as well as future attempts to reconcile the RT and PT, are likely to achieve only Minimal Compatibility since they lack sufficient evidence to establish metaphysical truth for AC and the modal robustness required for SC.

Keywords: compatibilism, randomness, providence

Introduction

Compatibilist arguments are important in areas such as philosophy of religion, philosophy of science and metaphysics because they determine whether seemingly conflicting claims can coexist both logically and metaphysically. While there are different arguments on compatibilism, this paper focuses on the compatibility between the Randomness Thesis (RT), which holds that evolution proceeds through natural selection acting on random genetic mutations, and the Providence Thesis (PT), which claims that God intentionally brought humans into existence.

A common assumption is that by simply citing one, the other is automatically negated — that affirming Charles Darwin's evolutionary theory implies a rejection of divine guidance or vice versa. This paper aims to challenge that assumption by showing that the two theses are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and that they should be framed within a both-and framework, instead of an either-or dichotomy.

In relation to this, the existing compatibilist arguments often rely heavily on presuppositions and conditional statements, where the truth of the premises is assumed rather than demonstrated (e.g., "If God exists, then certain conditions follow"). While such arguments can be logically consistent, they are frequently modally weak[1] because logical consistency alone is insufficient to establish that the compatibility of the Randomness and Providence Theses is necessary across possible worlds.

For this reason, the primary objective of this paper is to introduce three levels of compatibility that can be used to assess the strength of compatibilist arguments: (1) Minimal Compatibility (MC), which requires only logical consistency — or the absence of logical contradiction; (2) Adequate Compatibility (AC), which requires logical consistency and

[1] Modally weak, that is, to assert that an event is possible or to guarantee possibility, but not necessity.

metaphysical truth in the actual world, though not necessarily in all possible worlds; and (3) Strong Compatibility (SC), which demands both logical consistency and modal robustness.

With alethic modal logic as an evaluative framework, I shall distinguish between mere logical possibility and modal necessity across possible worlds. Following this, I will argue that the current compatibilist arguments, as well as future attempts to reconcile the RT and PT, are likely to achieve only Minimal Compatibility since they lack sufficient evidence to establish metaphysical truth for AC and the modal robustness required for SC.

Randomness and Providence Theses

Alvin Plantinga provided five theses behind the evolutionary process,[2] (1) Ancient earth thesis: the earth is around 4.5 billion years old. (2) The progress thesis: life has progressed from simple unicellular life to more complex organisms. (3) Descent with modification thesis: the diversity of living things arose due to the small and subtle way that offspring differ from their immediate ancestors. (4) Common ancestry thesis: life originated at one place on earth and all subsequent life descended from it. (5) Darwinian mechanism: the primary mechanism that drives the process of descent with modification is natural selection which operates on random genetic mutation.

From this, we may infer that — despite the concerns of some Christian evangelicals or fundamentalists who accept a literal interpretation of the creation account in the first two chapters of Genesis — the first four theses are not necessarily in conflict with the theory that evolution is divinely guided. The philosophical tension arises primarily from the fifth thesis.

[2] Alvin Plantinga. Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism (2011): 8-9.

The introduction of the Darwinian mechanism initially challenged the idea that humans came into existence as a result of intentional divine guidance. This tension gives rise to the apparent conflict between the Randomness Thesis (RT) and Providence Thesis (PT).

RT refers to the random nature of evolution due to the Darwinian mechanism whereas PT claims that God intentionally brought humans into existence.[3] Most people are inclined to believe that the Darwinian mechanism undermines PT. This is because if the mutations occur randomly and without regard to the needs or future developments of a species, then the evolutionary process may appear unlikely to have been directed toward a predetermined outcome.

Thus, it may appear that the randomness of mutation contradicts PT because the evolutionary process cannot be entirely undirected and divinely guided simultaneously without generating a logical tension.

However, it is important to clarify what is meant by "random" in this context. As explained by Elliott Sober, mutations are "random" in the sense that no physical mechanism selects them based on their beneficial effects.[4] This suggests that the probability of these mutations is determined solely by physical conditions rather than the adaptability of the mutation.

Therefore, mutations that would be beneficial to an organism are not more likely to occur than mutations that are neutral or harmful, which is why the process is described as random. However, the presence of physical and biochemical determinants suggests that the Darwinian mechanism is not random in an absolute sense. These constraints indicate that evolutionary

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[3] Michael Bergmann, "Could Darwinian Natural Selection Be Divinely Guided?" *Think* 24, no. 70 (2025): 9, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175625000144.
[4] Elliott Sober, "Evolution without Naturalism," *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion* 3 (2011): 187–221, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199603213.003.001.

outcomes are shaped by underlying causal factors rather than occurring in a completely undirected manner. In this sense, it becomes possible that the Randomness Thesis (RT) and the Providence Thesis (PT) may be compatible.

Survey of Compatibilist Arguments

In his article, "Could Darwinian Natural Selection Be Divinely Guided?" Michael Bergmann used three different theories to argue that one of the two theses is not disproved by simply citing the other.[5]

The first one is (1) Theistic Hidden Variable view (THV) which merges deterministic and indeterministic causation. This view argues that — although the universe appears to be indeterministic due to the possibility of multiple results for every event — everything from the Big Bang to human evolution was already a guaranteed outcome. However, we are simply unable to comprehensively understand how this process occurs because there is an unidentified hidden variable behind it. Bergmann argues that God and his omnipotent abilities could very well be the hidden variable that causes all things and all mutations to be as they are. Thus, in a deterministic universe, it is guaranteed that some specific mutation will occur, however, the outcome remains unpredictable. This view aligns with both RT and PT, and proves that it is possible for the two to be compatible.

The next theory is the (2) Divine Collapse Causation view. This takes a theological approach to a process in quantum mechanics called the Quantum Collapse or the Wave Function Collapse. In this process, quantum particles move from being in many different states (superposition) to a singular state. The Ghirardi-Rimini-Weber (GRW) perspective says that all

[5] Bergmann, "Could Darwinian Natural Selection Be Divinely Guided?", 11-15.

of these collapses are caused by nothing.[6] Bergmann reasons it could very well be caused by God. He argues that since the patterns for spontaneous collapses influencing gene mutation are the same in the DCC universe as in an atheistic indeterministic universe, the mutation remains random in every sense in which science can claim randomness.[7] Thus, science cannot rule out the possibility that God caused these collapses. If God prompts these collapses in such a way that the overall probabilistic distribution still matches what science predicts, then this, Bergmann attests, depicts another way in which the Providence Thesis and the Randomness Thesis could be compatible.

Lastly, he states that God could be involved in evolution through (3) Scientifically Undetectable Miracles view (SUM). He proposes that both THV and DCC would be proven false if determinacy is proven false, thus God could be working in other ways we would never be able to clearly identify.[8] Bergmann continuously argues that the difference between nothing causing something and God causing something in principle is the same and both unknowable, because God could be tinkering in such a way that matches all of the probabilistic patterns we know about. In SUM, God tinkers with evolution, not regularly, but only on various occasions to ensure the eventual existence of human beings. This corresponds with both the Randomness and Providence Theses, as science will never, in principle, detect that God was behind certain events or genetic mutations.[9]

From this, we can see that Bergmann's arguments are well-presented due to their logical consistency. He was able to systematically link his premises to his conclusions, and demonstrate

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[6] Giancarlo Ghirardi, Alberto Rimini, and Tullio Weber, "Unified dynamics for Microscopic and Macroscopic Systems", *Physical Review D* 34, no. 2 (1986): 470–491, https://doi.org/10.1103/PhysRevD.34.470.
[7] Bergmann, "Could Darwinian Natural Selection Be Divinely Guided?", 11-12.
[8] Ibid, 14-15.
[9] Ibid, 15.

the compatibility of RT and PT through his careful analysis of the three theories. However, his arguments are not without limitations.

To prove that the two theses are compatible, Bergmann presupposed the existence of God — if God exists, then q. He used conditional reasoning and operated within logic. Therefore, even when Bergmann attempts to reconcile metaphysical and theological theses, we cannot directly attack the metaphysical or theological presuppositions that his compatibilist arguments are built upon since they were used simply as instrumental assumptions. Because of this, his arguments seem immune to criticism and require only a minimal burden of proof. For instance, he may accept determinism or even the proposition that God exists without bearing the obligation to provide conclusive evidence for them. Hence, Bergmann's use of presupposition secures the logical possibility of his compatibilist arguments.

However, while his use of presuppositions may seem persuasive, they can also be the reason why it fails. This is because his argumentation only guarantees logical possibility and not modal necessity — rendering it modally fragile when its truth is evaluated across a range of possible worlds. For this reason, Bergmann's strategy risks being overly insulated because it depends heavily on untested premises and hypothetical scenarios; even if it works well within its narrow framework, it might not hold up when applied outside of it.

In this case, the compatibility of RT and PT remains but only in a minimal sense. Although logical consistency is enough to establish possibility, it is not enough to establish metaphysical truth. Therefore, it is possible that PT and RT are compatible, but not necessary.

Levels of Compatibility

Although compatibility is established only in terms of possibility, the existing compatibilist theories — particularly the three accounts presented by Michael Bergmann — demonstrate that RT and PT are at least logically compatible. However, logical possibility does not guarantee metaphysical truth or necessity. In the same sense, the absence of necessity does not in itself negate compatibility.

Thus, in this article, I will use alethic modal logic operating in System S5[10] to introduce three levels of compatibility to assess the strength and soundness of compatibilist arguments:

(1) Minimal compatibility (MC) only requires an argument to be logically consistent in the actual world — that is, to have no logical contradiction. Furthermore, whether it is logically consistent in other possible worlds is irrelevant to this type. This also means that the argument may be built upon presuppositions and hypothetical scenarios which do not necessarily have to be true in the actual or any possible world — they can be used simply as instrumental assumptions — just like what Bergmann did with his arguments.

In THV, if God exists, then God might be the hidden variable that is not accessible to scientific observation. In DCC, if God exists, then God might be the one that is causing all the spontaneous collapses. And lastly, in SUM, if God exists, then God might as well be the invisible tinker that is causing the undetectable miracles.

Therefore, MC is a type of compatibility that may rely heavily on untested premises whose truth is not yet guaranteed since its only prerequisite is logical consistency. For this reason, MC is the weakest level of compatibility because its only aim is to establish that it is

[10] System S5 is used in this article because it provides the strongest framework for interpreting metaphysical necessity and possibility compared to other systems used in modal logic. By treating all possible worlds as mutually accessible, S5 provides a clear distinction between possibility and necessity, which is essential for evaluating the modal strength of compatibilist arguments.

logically possible for RT and PT to be compatible. However, it remains an important level of distinction because it refutes the assumption that RT and PT are mutually exclusive — it helps in proving that the two can coexist without resulting in a contradiction.

To formalize the primary claim of MC, let p be the proposition that RT and PT are compatible:

$$\Diamond p$$

This notation reads as: "it is possible for the Randomness Thesis and Providence Thesis to be compatible (p)," where p is logically coherent but may not be realized in any actual or metaphysically possible world. Therefore, MC only asserts possibility.

(2) Adequate Compatibility (AC) requires a higher degree of compatibility in comparison to MC. In this type, not only does an argument need to be logically consistent, its premises must also be true in the actual world — but not necessarily in other metaphysically possible worlds.

Most, if not all, of the existing arguments on compatibility already presupposes the existence of God, and since this proves to be an unobservable phenomena, no argument has yet to reach an adequate level of compatibility. This is because while logic allows the use of presuppositions to guarantee the validity of an argument, the same cannot be said with establishing metaphysical truth. To establish that it is the case that RT and PT are compatible — logically and metaphysically — in the actual world, it is essential to prove that the premises used in the construction of the argument are true.

Therefore, this means that AC is stricter than MC but is still moderately lenient since it only requires contingency — not necessity. Nevertheless, it is still strict enough that no compatibilist argument has yet to prove that it is adequately compatible.

To illustrate the primary claim of AC, let “p” be the proposition that RT and PT are compatible, “$_{w0}$” be the actual world and “$_{w}$” be other possible worlds:

$$p_{w0} \wedge \Diamond \neg p_{w}$$

This notation reads as: “p is the case (logically and metaphysically) in the actual world, but it is possible for p to not be the case in other possible worlds.” It is important to understand that this level of compatibility relies solely on the contingent features of the actual world. Thus, in other possible worlds with different nomological structures (e.g., different laws of nature), this may not be the case. Therefore, AC asserts that p is the case but only in the actual world.

(3) Strong Compatibility (SC) is the strictest of all the levels of compatibility. If the first two distinctions only required possibility and contingency, SC requires necessity for it to be modally robust. This means that a compatibilist argument must hold true (logically and metaphysically) across all possible worlds.

If no compatibilist argument has yet to prove its modal strength to reach at least an adequate level of compatibility, then, surely, no argument has yet to reach SC. This is because we are limited to the actual world and are bound by epistemic limitations that hinders us from accessing other possible worlds. However, our epistemic limitations does not negate the fact that some other possible worlds might exist. Thus, this level that requires the modal strength to hold true across all possible worlds is proposed.

Therefore, SC, as the highest level, must work both theoretically and metaphysically — not contingently, but necessarily.

To illustrate the primary claim of SC, let “p” be the proposition that RT and PT are compatible:

$$\Box p$$

This notation simply reads as: “it is necessary that p (RT and PT are compatible) is the case.” This means that in every possible world — even with different nomological structures — RT and PT must be necessarily compatible. Therefore, unlike MC and AC which only posits possibility and contingency, SC asserts necessity.

Conclusion

In the end, we can see that the current compatibilist arguments presented by Bergmann have only achieved a minimal degree of compatibility. This is because they relied heavily on hypothetical scenarios and presuppositions, especially when involving unobservable phenomena, such as the existence or activity of God. While this type of reasoning can be used to show that there are no formal contradictions between the Randomness Thesis and the Providence Thesis, it does not really guarantee the truth of the premises that are used. Nevertheless, the fact that the two theses are not necessarily mutually exclusive remains.

In addition, the strongest conclusion that compatibilist arguments can establish is the logical possibility of compatibility between the Randomness and Providence Theses — not necessity. While some scholars aim only to assert metaphysical truth in the actual world rather than necessity, it remains difficult to do so if the only basis is logical consistency. Achieving Adequate Compatibility would require demonstrating that the premises used in the construction of the argument are not simply hypothetical, but are metaphysically true in the actual world. Reaching Strong Compatibility would impose an even greater burden of proof, since the compatibility between the two theses must hold necessarily across all possible worlds in order to establish modal robustness.

One may argue that Strong Compatibility appears to be unattainable due to our limited epistemic capacities and our lack of access to other possible worlds. However, the inaccessibility of these possible worlds is not a negation to the fact that it is possible that they exist. Additionally, since the compatibility of the Randomness and Providence Theses is concerned with a fundamental truth (i.e., the existence of God), it requires an examination that is as rigorous as possible and a maximal burden of proof to establish its that the metaphysical truth that it will establish is concrete and strong enough.

Therefore, current and future attempts at reconciling the two theses appear to be limited to achieving Minimal Compatibility. Since we are confined by our epistemic limitations, we lack the sufficient evidence to establish the metaphysical truth required for Adequate Compatibility, as well as the modal robustness required for Strong Compatibility.

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