

**From the World Wisdom online library:
www.worldwisdom.com/public/library/default.aspx**

Chance

by

Lord Northbourne

Studies in Comparative Religion, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Winter, 1972) © World Wisdom, Inc.
www.studiesincomparativereligion.com

ROULETTE is the type of games of chance. It depends on the fact that the behaviour of the ball is unpredictable because the factors that cause the ball to fall into one slot and not into another are not ascertainable under the conditions of the game. Or so we have been taught; and so most of us have believed, not only as concerns roulette, but also as concerns all other occasions on which we seem to have no alternative but to attribute occurrences to chance. We have believed that there is a reason for everything; in other words, that the law of causality is inexorable, although we often cannot trace the course of the chain of causation.

There are however scientists and mathematicians who maintain that the law of causality is not applicable to certain events occurring in the domain of sub-atomic physics. Those events are believed to be invariably accompanied by a factor of uncertainty, in such a way that they cannot be described simultaneously in terms of both the position and the velocity of the entities involved. It is therefore impossible to establish causal relationships between these events, or between them and other events; they are therefore considered to be exempt from the law of causality in which most of us believe, so that they can properly be said to occur for no reason whatever. The same scientists believe that these events play a fundamental part in the constitution and behaviour of matter, and they regard matter as the fundamental reality underlying all the phenomena of the physical universe, and the physical universe in turn as representing reality itself in its entirety, all other realities being contained in it and subsidiary to it. From this position it is but a step to a declaration that the ruling principle of the universe is chance, and not a principle of strict causality. There are then no longer any certainties, but only probabilities, and any so-called law of causality becomes no more than a description of the large-scale effects of the operation of statistical probabilities of a very high order, so high that in practice they amount to certainties. Thus our daily lives are not noticeably affected in the short term, but our philosophy, in so far as it takes a metaphysical or religious turn, is profoundly affected, and our philosophy cannot but react on our lives in the long term, surely even if imperceptibly.

Public interest in these matters, such as it is, has recently been centred mainly on the application of what may be called a "principle of non-causality" to the appearance of life on this earth, which is the main theme of a book entitled *Chance and Necessity* by

Professor Jacques Monod. This centring of interest is perhaps natural, for we regard ourselves as very important, and it may account in part for the phenomenal success of the book; but that success is also attributable to the fact that the confusions of the present day, philosophical, religious and social, have made the public eager to grasp at anything that may seem to offer a new way of looking at things. However that may be, no special application to life or to anything else affects the essential implications of any questioning of the principle of universal causality. If anything, life or anything else, is without a cause, the very foundations of thought and of belief as they have existed hitherto are called in question.

If we know anything at all, we know that there are things, events, phenomena, and that we ourselves are among them. We see that all are inter-connected, closely or remotely, in such a way that they can be envisaged as the single whole we call the universe. We infer, not only that all inter-relationships are what they are by virtue of the universality of a chain of causation, but also that the coherence of the universe implies some kind of comprehensive or prime cause. It is now suggested, not only that the chain of causation is in some sense an illusory or at least a secondary phenomenon, but also that the attribution of the coherence of the universe to any kind of prime cause is unnecessary and even misleading, since in reality chance lies at the root of all things.

It is difficult to see how any such contention can be reconciled with the claim that scientific knowledge is built up by a strictly rational process of observation and deduction. Any such process necessitates a strict adherence to causality; the principle of causality is the only thing that can hold the scientific or any other body of knowledge together. How can a science that claims to be strictly coherent and rational deny the applicability of the principle of causality in the very domain which it regards as principal with respect to all other domains? Thought, including that of the scientists, is consequential, and consequentiality is causal. One might ask: at what point in the development of phenomena from their allegedly fortuitous beginnings does the causality on which science is built up become operative? It certainly seems to be operative in our unspecialised experience, and the scientists behave as if it were so in their more specialised domain. One could also suggest that, since the methods of statistical analysis by which probabilities are assessed demand that the data dealt with should be arranged in a random manner, that is, by chance and not systematically, the conclusions reached in the present case are a result of the methods by which they are sought. In other words: in order to deal with a multitude of events by the methods of statistical analysis, it is necessary that those events should appear to be without cause, and that is just what the sub-atomic events in question are postulated to be.

A layman is liable to be told that, since he cannot grasp the subtleties of atomic physics, he is not entitled to criticize its findings. That is true as it stands; nevertheless, a scientist lays himself open to criticism as soon as he bases a philosophy on those findings and presents it to the public. When that philosophy questions an older one based on considerations of a very different kind, a layman is fully entitled to compare the two and to ask himself how far the claim of the atomic physicist to have penetrated to the foundations of existence is justified.

What the physicists have discovered is precisely this: the more closely one tries to isolate and to examine as such the material on which the ordering of the universe is as it

were imposed, the more nebulous, chaotic, disordered, or causeless does that material appear to be. This discovery (if that is the right word for something that has hitherto been axiomatic) has misled many people, including scientists and philosophers, into supposing that the universe as a whole is fundamentally chaotic, and that the appearance of an order of which life is the most complex development is attributable to fortuitous combinations of events that are in themselves fortuitous. All that the physicists can rightly be said to have demonstrated is that the principle of order does not reside in the material aspect of things. That idea lacks novelty, to say the least of it; it is indeed an essential part of all religious and traditional conceptions concerning the origin of the universe. If this last interpretation of the observations and calculations of sub-atomic physicists could be accepted by them, religion and science would be reconciled at least to that extent. It is however very difficult for modern science to accept this interpretation because, although it is always looking for fundamental causes, it insists that their reality must be verifiable by observation and deduction. Religion and tradition insist on the contrary that the fundamental cause of all things is necessarily inaccessible to observation. Some scientists and philosophers would admit this, but they seem to be reluctant to accept all the consequences of doing so. One of those consequences is that the fundamental cause, being necessarily operative in all domains and at all times, is inescapable; it dominates everything and is therefore of supreme relevance in all possible circumstances; if there be any means whereby man can conform himself to its manner of operation, he neglects those means at his peril.

Means to that end are offered by the great religions and traditions. They differ widely in form as between one religion and another, but neither those differences, nor any question concerning the relative superiority or inferiority of any particular religion, are relevant to the present discussion. The word "Principle", written with a capital P, will therefore be used hereafter to designate the fundamental cause of all things as envisaged in religion and tradition, regardless of whether, or in what manner, that Principle is "personalised" or "divinised" in any particular case. This may seem to involve the oversimplification of a complex and variable situation; it is justified by the fact that the question at issue is one of universal application and of extreme simplicity. The question is: Principle or no Principle? In religious terms this becomes: "God or chance"? Whichever answer we choose, the potentiality of all phenomena, sub-atomic or otherwise, must be present in it.

The unity of the universe is a phenomenon, the fact that the universe is a "cosmos", an order and not a "chaos". So is the fact that this order comprises, not only the nebulae and the stars, the mountains and the seas, but also something called "life", which although known to us only in its terrestrial form, seems to be in a sense an ultimate in possibilities, since it includes, at least in its human manifestation, not only certain powers of control, but also a power of comprehension whereby the entire universe can be as it were assembled and looked at either analytically or synthetically, as if by a being situated outside it. If the existence of a comprehending humanity must be accounted for, so must its other qualities: for instance, its aspirations towards beauty, goodness, love and holiness (if it be admitted that anything so undefinable as holiness is a reality), and even the liability of humanity to the distortion and betrayal of those aspirations. It could perhaps be argued that the potentiality of anything whatsoever is present in chance, so why not that of man and his qualities? The answer is that they are integral parts of an

ordered whole, whereas chance is by definition an absence of order; therefore an ordered whole cannot arise by chance alone.

The question can also be looked at in this way: how comes it that there is anything at all? Chance must have something to work with: one cannot play roulette without a ball. There is an axiom: "*Ex nihilo nihil fit*"—"nothing can come out of nothing". That axiom is self-evident and irrefutable for the simple reason that there is no such thing as nothing. The entities involved in the sub-atomic events that are considered to be causeless are not nothing, that is to say, they have some validity—if they have not it is a waste of time to speak of them—and as such they did not come out of nothing. Their existence precedes their behaviour; their behaviour, even if it were causeless, would not justify an attribution of causelessness to their existence. But their behaviour has also some reality—and again, if it has not, it is a waste of time to speak of it—it too therefore did not come out of nothing; in other words, there must be a reason for it.

The great, the only worthwhile search of humanity, the search that has never been wholly abandoned, is a search for a principle that will provide a foundation for a logical system of thought which can avoid either going round and round in circles or coming to a dead end. Reason cannot operate *in vacuo*; it too cannot be founded on nothing; it demands a stable principle, not a pseudo-principle like chance which is the very type and model of instability, otherwise it must crumble and give way to unreason. That indeed is very much what seems to be happening; if so, it is perhaps not surprising that conduct as well as thought is becoming more and more "un-principled" in the full sense of that old-fashioned but meaningful word.

Acceptance of the religious and traditional view of the origin of the universe and of man, with all its emphasis on the mystery of the transcendence of the Principle, carries with it consequences that are many and far-reaching. One of those consequences is that we must utterly deny causelessness in respect of anything whatsoever, while accepting that we can never hope to grasp fully the nature of the prime cause of all things, nor to analyse exhaustively the manner of its operation. We must reject chance absolutely, but in return we must acknowledge a Principle which must for ever be outside the range of our limited powers of observation and deduction, and we must embrace it with all our hearts and souls and minds and strength. We must acknowledge in thought, word and deed that the fear of the Lord, and not any effort, however intense, to bring ideas into conformity with ascertained fact, is the beginning of wisdom. Any such acknowledgment is necessarily an act of faith. Faith can arise from a vision that penetrates beyond the confines of this world, and then it can be impregnable without the aid of argument, nevertheless argument can sometimes be a useful support to it. If there is a reason for everything, there must be a reason for faith, even though that reason can never be reduced to a formula, since in the last analysis it is not other than the nature of the Principle itself. It may however not be out of place to try to suggest a few relevant considerations.

The simple question is: "is there a reason for everything or is there not". If the answer is "no", the only sensible conclusion is "let us then eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die". If the answer is "yes", a further question inevitably follows: "how much can we know of the nature of that reason". To this last question, religion and tradition offer an answer which is inevitably limited in one way or another, but is realistic in terms of the limitations of human nature. The all-embracing Principle that brought the universe into

order out of chaos, and maintains that order through the operation of a strict law of causality alone is limitless.

Order, whether of the universe as a whole or of anything else, presupposes something that can be called "direction" or "tendency", or, by analogy with human nature, "purpose". The traditional view, although it is expressed in so many different ways, always envisages this tendency or purpose as springing from and leading towards something that can be called, in an absolute sense, "good". The world is a manifestation of the pure and infinite goodness of the Principle, but, not being the Principle, the world is not pure goodness, but is tainted with that negation of goodness we call "evil". The world came from the Principle and must return to it; that return implies a reintegration in which evil can have no place. Man shares the imperfection of the world, but, as the ultimate development in the manifestation of the Principle, he becomes as it were the instrument through which the reintegration is brought about: His whole duty therefore, and his whole advantage, consist first in learning what goodness really is, and then in pursuing it with his whole heart. An imperfect terrestrial humanity does not always see clearly where its advantage really lies; for that reason its aspiration in this life is nearly always towards a relative good, often towards a highly relative or even an illusory good; nevertheless the goal is always there, however dimly it may be seen and however feebly it may be sought, and it is in the last analysis nothing less than an absolute good, the ineffable goodness of the Principle itself. That goodness is reflected in the world and in man, especially in the great traditional human virtues. Surely therefore the practice of those virtues, much more than any accumulation of information or cultivation of mental agility and ingenuity, is what is needed to bring humanity into conformity with the principial order; virtues such as humility, perseverance, patience, generosity, simplicity and dignity? And above all these stands the undefinable quality of holiness, the possibility of which alone justifies the supremacy of man over other creatures. To seek these things, rather than the apparent advantages that can be procured by the exercise of ingenuity represents the only realistic aim, since failure to conform ourselves, in so far as our individuality and circumstances permit, to the principial order cannot but involve us in penalties proportionate to our divergence from that order. Such, in summary form, is the traditional view, and acceptance of it is anything but a mere wishful optimism. Nevertheless, when we, not being wholly good, diverge beyond a certain point from the principial order, the Principle itself, being wholly good, intervenes directly and restores order by a new self-revelation. Meanwhile, since there is in reality no order other than the principial, our divergences from it lead first to confusion and ultimately to chaos.

Confusion is apparent in all domains today. Periods of confusion have occurred before, but never on such a world-wide scale. The present is a time when the separation of the world from its Principle is tending towards a maximum, and current philosophies reflect the tendencies of the period and at the same time reinforce them. Hence an increasing separativity in all domains, conspicuously in the separation of man from Nature and of man from man; towards the rejection of traditional principles and the substitution for them of pseudo-principles, such as the modern one of an open-mindedness or a so-called "freedom of thought", closely related to the experimental approach characteristic of modern sciences which legitimises anything and everything and multiplies conflict of opinion; towards the rejection of the conception of hierarchy as a chain linking all things to the highest, and the substitution of an egalitarianism which

considers the individual in isolation and thereby accentuates his isolation; towards a priority of quantitative economic and financial considerations over all others, leading with the aid of modern science, to the mechanisation and industrialisation of normal human activities, polluting the environment and progressively dehumanising normal human relationships; and simultaneously, in science itself, to a predominance of atomistic interpretations of the constitution and functioning of the world of Nature, of which that under discussion is an extreme example.

All these tendencies lead first to the confusion and ultimately to a sort of inversion of the principal or divine or natural order (the three epithets are here more or less equivalent); that order is hierarchical in structure, and by it all domains, human and non-human, are normally unified. This disorder is reflected in contemporary thought, in which, however ably presented it may be, the hierarchical ordering of all things terrestrial is confused, until at last it is inverted, and realities of the lowest rank are accorded the status of principles, as is precisely the case with the nebulous realities dealt with in sub-atomic physics. A comparable case is that of the tenebrous and chaotic realities to which so much attention is paid in modern psychology, and especially in psycho-analysis. The effects of this inversion of priorities are dissolving and must in the end be disastrous; they include the atom bomb, with all its psychological side-effects, as well as the disruption of society by subversive influences in the fields of politics, morality and the arts.

If this is a fairly true picture of the reverse side of the coin, at least as it appears today, the picture of the obverse is very different, for it is one of the ultimate goodness of all things. The Principle as such is total and unchanging goodness and beauty. Its self-revelation in the universe cannot but be complete; it must therefore comprise all possibilities compatible with the conditions that characterise the universe, possibilities not only of unity, but also of diversity. Diversity implies a qualitative differentiation of which some manifestations are superior and some inferior, the inferior possibilities being those that conform least closely to the principal order; their life is therefore short, and their dissolution makes way for a restoration—or "re-revelation"—of order. All apparent irreconcilables, such as order and chaos, life and death, good and evil, pleasure and pain, love and hate, time and eternity, multiplicity and unity, and even a God who appears to be changeable, sometimes gentle and sometimes stern, all are implicit in the mystery of the self-revelation of the Principle in the universe; they are therefore essentially good, and even their apparently disorderly aspects are necessary elements in that goodness. In all this chance plays no part, save that of a temporary delusion arising from the inescapable limitations of human understanding.

There is a reason for the existence of this world and of everything in it. That reason is both one and many, and it is one before it is many, otherwise the world would not be a coherent whole. Its unity comprises the possibility of diversity, but pure diversity cannot even be imagined, since it would imply a total absence of comparability or relationship between its parts. The diversity of the universe is a coherent diversity; it is as it were a deployment in time and space of the principal unity; that diversity is temporal and changeable, unity is not; therefore to unify the universe must return. Meanwhile the universe manifests a strict internal causality wherein every event has its immediate cause and every event is in its turn the immediate cause of other events, so that every event is both a consequence and a cause. No break in the internal chain of causality is possible,

since that chain is no more than a reflection of the unity of the Principle considered as supreme cause. Therefore if pure chance could be the ultimate reason for anything whatever, that thing would be completely detached from the universe and would consequently be wholly beyond our ken; the supposedly causeless events under discussion cannot therefore in reality be causeless.

We are apt to think that we cannot really understand these matters unless we can bring the Principle itself within the range of the comprehension of our limited, changeable and perishable mental powers. We can however only diminish our conception of the Principle by attempting to do so, for the majesty of the Principle is such that we would be instantly annihilated if we could come into its unveiled presence. Since nothing can be contrary to the principial ordering of the universe, our very existence proves that it is necessary that we should be as we are, with all our limitations, for a time; the Principle therefore veils its full majesty from us, and reveals itself to us in a manner suited to the nature which it has itself conferred on us. How could things be otherwise? The religion that springs from that revelation constitutes for us the way of return to the Principle, and there is no other way. In religion the temporal and the eternal meet. The temporal element alone is liable to change; it is liable moreover to forget its own subordinate situation and to allow the principial aspect of divinity to slip into the background in order that it may the more strongly assert its own contingent and human nature. The contingent and human element in religion is far from being unimportant, but it is dissolving if it is allowed to obscure the principial and universal element. If God is absolute, infinite, eternal, the beginning and the end, our dependence is in fact total whatever we may think, and our conscious submission must therefore also be total. But we insist on behaving as if we were independent beings, as if anything we think or say or do could possibly have nothing to do with God. In doing so we are in effect trying to break the chain of causality that joins us to the supreme Cause; needless to say, we are unable to do anything of the kind; but at least we ought not to be surprised if confusion results from our attempts at the impossible.

The question is this: do we owe our existence to something immeasurably greater than ourselves, a changeless and infinite goodness, beauty, majesty and power, rigorous in its mercy and merciful in its rigour, infinitely remote yet infinitely near, mysterious and all-comprehending, beside which the best that we can know or imagine fades to insignificance? If we accept this view, we must accept it in its severe as well as in its gentle implications, and we must accept it wholly, for the Absolute knows no compromise. And then grandeur, beauty, love and holiness become realities, and not mere accidents of our psychological constitution; for they are more real than we are, and our striving towards them is the measure of our worth and the shaper of our ultimate destiny. Or do we on the other hand owe our existence to something that is less than ourselves because it is a product of our own observation and cerebration, namely, to the coexistence of an indefinite multiplicity of events in themselves both trivial and fortuitous, but occasionally forming accidental combinations, more or less ordered, of which the life we know is but a curious and exceptional example? The choice is ours; but if we feel that we must choose the latter, then nothing is great, nothing is wonderful, nothing is even good except in a highly contingent and provisional sense, nothing has any ultimate significance whatever, and we are no more than the beneficiaries or the victims, as the case may be, of something comparable in kind, if not in scale, to a run of good or

bad luck in a game of roulette.

(Original editorial inclusions that followed the essay:)

It is ironic that of all countries in Europe, France was the only one that could have had a revolution—not because she groaned under the lash of tyranny, but, on the contrary, because she tolerated and even invited every conceivable dissension and heresy. Restlessness, a passion for novelty and the pursuit of excitement were everywhere in the air. They were the fruits of idleness and leisure, not of poverty.

Stanley Loomis. *Paris in the Terror.*