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Randomness By Design

William A. Dembski

"Anyone who considers arithmetical methods of producing random digits is, of course, in a state of sin." John von Neumann's famous dictum points an accusing finger at all who set their ordered minds to engender disorder. Much as in times past thieves, pimps, and actors carried on their profession with an uneasy conscience, so in this day scientists who devise random number generators suffer pangs of guilt. George Marsaglia, perhaps the preeminent worker in the field, quips when he asks his colleagues, "Who among us has not sinned?" Marsaglia's work at the Supercomputer Computations Research Institute at Florida State University is well-known. Inasmuch as Marsaglia's design and testing of random number generators depends on computation, and inasmuch as computation is fundamentally arithmetical, Marsaglia is by von Neumann's own account a sinner. Working as he does on a supercomputer, Marsaglia is in fact a gross sinner. This he freely admits. Writing of the best random number generators he is aware of, Marsaglia states, "they are the result of arithmetic methods and those using them must, as all sinners must, face Redemption [*sic*] Day. But perhaps with better understanding we can postpone it."

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Despite the danger of being branded a heretic, I want to argue that randomness entails no moral deficiency. I will even advocate that random number generators be constructed with reckless abandonthough a reckless abandon that is well thought out. Randomness, properly to be randomness, must leave nothing to chance. It must look like chance, like a child of the primeval chaos. But underneath a keen intelligence must be manipulating and calculating, taking advantage of this and that expedient so as systematically to concoct confusion. I am reminded of the photo-journalists in Vietnam who rearranged scenes of carnage simply to enhance the sense of indiscriminate violence. Here, of course, there was a moral fault, but not with randomness per se. Suffice it to say, randomness, to be randomness, must be designed.

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