

Can God Really Act in Our World and in Our Lives?



WILLIAM STOEGER

What does God do? If the answer is nothing, why should we believe in God at all?

From what science tells us it seems that everything that happens can be explained by the processes, regularities, and interrelationships described by physics, chemistry, and biology. There are no gaps in these laws of nature where God can tinker. Nature looks after itself. If this is true, then God is without a job—assuming there is a God in the first place.

But is it true? Leaving aside for the moment our scientific observations, our deeper experiences appear to indicate that as human persons we can make a difference; we have the freedom to live our lives how we wish. We do not feel that the way the world is fashioned prevents us from deciding to act in a manner of our own choosing. We exercise choice in the way we interact with other things and other people. There is enough play in the workings of nature to allow us to understand it, harness it for our purposes, and choose from among different alternatives.

Now, if that is the case for us mere humans, is it so unreasonable to expect that God could do the same?

Second, we need to recognize the limitations of science. We find that there are powerful experiences in our lives—of love, of wholeness, of truth and beauty, of meaning and value, of ultimate importance—experiences that take us beyond where science stops. These personal and community experiences somehow lead us to a belief that there is a God involved in our world and in our lives.

That is all very well, but is there any reason to trust such inclinations? A more careful and critical look at the sciences helps us resolve this dilemma. We can believe in God and in God's action in the world and in

our lives—in history—and at the same time maintain what the sciences reveal.

The important point to recognize is that the sciences put to one side many of the important aspects of reality in order to understand certain basic processes, relationships, and structures in nature. The resulting knowledge about these underlying features of the world is very powerful—but also incomplete and provisional. There is, and always will be, a lot that we do not know, even about those things upon which science focuses its attention—gravity, matter, life, the human brain. The world, to say nothing of ourselves, is much more intricate and mysterious than the methods of science can unravel.

Science leaves out of its consideration any discussion of the *origin* of those laws and regularities—why they exist at all, or what meaning or significance they might have.

And what of questions to do with personal significance and value, of “the spirit,” and of what may lie beyond death? These are also outside the limits of physics, chemistry, biology, and even psychology.

In light of the limits of science and the full range of our rich human experience, we can easily conceive of God acting in our world, in the world wonderfully described by the sciences. God acts not in supposed gaps in the laws of nature, but rather in and through the laws themselves. They are expressions of God’s creative activity in nature. In some way God fashioned them to be what they are—what science discovers them to be. Then God uses them—including laws of chance, such as those involved in evolution by natural selection—in fashioning all that he creates. Or rather, God sustains creation in its automatic operation, letting it explore all its possibilities and become fully what it can be.

Finally, the many things that the sciences leave out of consideration, or cannot adequately describe, indicate that the laws of nature described by physics, chemistry, biology, and so on, are only a small, though significant, part of all the laws—the regularities, relationships, and processes—that actually function in the world. There are laws that are important for existence, for order, for persons in their interactions with each other, with nature, and, most important, with the perceived ground of meaning and value. These laws are just as important as those discovered by the sciences, and yet they are beyond what the sciences themselves can illuminate.

In summary, God acts through all the laws, including those which are beyond the competency of the sciences to explore. God acts through the laws of nature which all things obey—gravity, electromagnetism, chemical bonding, natural selection—to create and sustain all things in existence. These are by and large well, though imperfectly, described by the sciences.

But God also acts in a special way toward persons—in a personal way—through other persons, through special events and experiences, through communal life and in revelation. These involve laws of an order and depth which are outside the present and perhaps even the future limits of the sciences. But if we as persons act toward creation and toward one another in a similar way, is it so surprising that God should be able to do that also?



William Stoeger, S.J., is an astrophysicist-cosmologist at the Vatican Observatory, Castel Gandolfo, Italy, and at Tuscon, Arizona, and Associate Professor of Astronomy at the University of Arizona. He is the editor of the Philosophy in Science series.