QUANTUM RANDOMNESS AND UNDERDETERMINATION

JEFFREY A. BARRETT AND SIMON M. HUTTEGGER

ABSTRACT. We consider the nature of quantum randomness and how one might have empirical evidence for it. We will see why, depending on one’s computational resources, it may be impossible to determine whether a particular notion of randomness properly characterizes one’s empirical data. Indeed, we will see why even an ideal observer under ideal epistemic conditions may never have any empirical evidence whatsoever for believing that the results of one’s quantum-mechanical experiments are randomly determined. This illustrates a radical sort of empirical underdetermination faced by fundamentally stochastic theories like quantum mechanics.

1. QUANTUM RANDOMNESS

Randomness is a characteristic aspect of quantum phenomena. It is unclear, however, precisely what it might mean for the results of one’s quantum-mechanical measurements to be randomly distributed. It is also unclear how one might have empirical evidence for the randomness of one’s measurement results. Here we will use the theory of algorithmic randomness to capture standard intuitions regarding what it might mean for the results of one’s measurements to be randomly distributed. We will then see why one may never have any empirical evidence whatsoever that the results of one’s quantum-mechanical experiments are in fact randomly determined even on the assumption that one’s data is statistically uniform. This illustrates a radical sort of empirical underdetermination faced by fundamentally stochastic theories like quantum mechanics.

In some formulations of quantum mechanics the source of quantum randomness is dynamical. This is the case for the standard von Neumann-Dirac collapse theory (1955) and more recent collapse theories like Ghirardi, Rimini, and Weber (GRW) theory (1986). In other formulations quantum randomness results from the specification of special statistical boundary conditions. This is the case for some of no-collapse theories. In Bohmian mechanics (1952) quantum randomness can be thought of as resulting from the random selection of an initial particle configuration.

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relative to the initial wave function. In other no-collapse formulations quantum randomness is the result of epistemic uncertainty regarding self-location. This is the case for some many-world reconstructions of Everett’s pure wave mechanics (1957). Here we will consider quantum randomness in the context of the standard von Neumann-Dirac formulation of quantum mechanics, but these considerations are also applicable to other formulations of quantum mechanics that appeal to the notion of a random process or selection.

The standard von Neumann-Dirac collapse formulation of quantum mechanics stipulates that one’s measurement results are the result of a random dynamical process and, hence, predicts that a sequence of measurement results will be randomly distributed. We will first consider the sense in which it predicts random measurement results then consider how one might empirically test its predictions.

On the standard collapse formulation of quantum mechanics, the state of a physical system $S$ is represented by an element $|\psi\rangle_S$ of unit length in a Hilbert space $\mathcal{H}$, and a physical observable $O$ is represented by a Hermitian operator $\hat{O}$ on that space. The physical interpretation of a state is given by the eigenvalue-eigenstate link which says that a system $S$ has a determinate value for observable $O$ if and only if it is in an eigenstate of $O$. That is, $S$ has a determinate value for $O$ if and only if $\hat{O}|\psi\rangle_S = \lambda|\psi\rangle_S$, where $\hat{O}$ is the Hermitian operator corresponding to $O$, $|\psi\rangle_S$ is the vector representing the state of $S$, and the eigenvalue $\lambda$ is a real number. In this case, one would with certainty get the result $\lambda$ if one measured $O$ of $S$.

Given the eigenvalue-eigenstate link and the linear way that systems evolve when they are not measured, a particular observable will typically fail to have any determinate value at all for a given system before the system is measured. According to the standard theory, the system acquires a determinate value for the observable when it is measured. In particular, the theory predicts that when the observable is measured, the system will instantaneously and randomly jump to an eigenstate of the observable being measured with probabilities determined by its initial state. Since the final state will be an eigenstate of the measured observable, it will be one where the object system now has a determinate value for that observable. And, salient to the present discussion, that value will be randomly determined by the process that generated it.

In describing the dynamical laws of the standard theory, von Neumann referred to the random nonlinear evolution of the state that occurs on measurement as Process 1. When no one is observing the system, it evolves in a deterministic, linear

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2See Barrett (1999) and (2018) for discussions.
3See Saunders, Barrett, Kent, and Wallace (2010), Wallace (2012), and Barrett (2018) for discussions.
way that he called Process 2. These two dynamical laws might be characterized as follows:

Process 1: If a *measurement* is made of the system $S$, the state of $S$ will *randomly collapse* to an eigenstate of the observable being measured (a state where the system has a determinate value of the observable being measured). If the initial state is given by $|\psi\rangle_S$ and $|\chi\rangle_S$ is an eigenstate of $O$, then the probability of $S$ collapsing to $|\chi\rangle_S$ is equal to $|\langle\psi|\chi\rangle|^2$ (the square of the magnitude of the projection of the premeasurement state onto the eigenstate).

Process 2: If no measurement is made of a physical system, it will evolve in a deterministic, linear way: if the state of $S$ is given by $|\psi(t_0)\rangle_S$ at time $t_0$, then its state at a time $t$ will be given by $\hat{U}(t_0,t_1)|\psi(t_0)\rangle_S$, where $\hat{U}$ is a unitary operator that depends on the energy properties of $S$.

Process 2 is a deterministic dynamical law that explains quantum-mechanical interference and entanglement. In contrast, Process 1 is a fundamentally stochastic dynamical law. It explains both why measurements yield determinate outcomes and why one should expect a sequence of quantum measurement results to be *randomly distributed with the standard quantum statistics*.

That the theory does not say what constitutes a *measurement* means that it is unclear precisely when each dynamical law obtains. This ambiguity is the source of the famous quantum measurement problem. For present purposes, we will simply suppose that Process 1 kicks in at some point during a measurement interaction to produce determinate measurement records that are randomly determined with the standard quantum statistics. Our concern here is not to say precisely when or why collapses occur but rather to consider what it might mean to say that one’s measurement records are randomly determined with the standard quantum statistics and how one might have empirical evidence for such a claim.

Consider an infinite series of systems $S_1, S_2, \ldots S_k, \ldots$ each in the state $1/\sqrt{2}(|\uparrow_x\rangle_{S_k} + |\downarrow_x\rangle_{S_k})$. Suppose that one measures the $x$-spin of each system in turn and records 0 for $\downarrow_x$ and 1 for $\uparrow_x$ as a string $\sigma$. Call this the *quantum coin-toss experiment*. Here

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4 See Albert (1992) and Barrett (1999) and (2018) for discussions of the quantum measurement problem and various proposed resolutions.

5 One might equivalently, according to the standard theory, alternate $x$-spin and $z$-spin measurements on a single electron and keep track of the sequence of up and down results.
Process 1 predicts that the outcome of each trial will be randomly determined with probability $1/2$ of recording 0 and probability $1/2$ of recording 1 on each trial. That is, or to say something that is at least very closely related, one expects that the outcomes to be statistically independent and unbiased.\footnote{There is an important distinction to be made between a random sequence and a sequence produced by a random process as these notions are typically used. While one would expect a random sequence from a random process, and a random sequence is empirical evidence that it was generated by a random process, it is possible for a random process to produce a nonrandom sequence. But if a process does produce a nonrandom sequence, that counts as evidence against the process being random.}

While no particular sequence of 0’s and 1’s is ruled out in the quantum coin-toss experiment, one would have very good empirical evidence against Process 1 if the ratio of 0’s and 1’s in $\sigma$ were not approximately even in the long run. If so, the dynamics would be predicting the wrong relative frequencies. But one would also have very good empirical evidence against Process 1 if the sequence of results exhibited a simple pattern like 01010101… This would not count against the dynamics predicting the right relative frequencies, but the longer a simple pattern like this persists, the better one’s empirical evidence that the measurement results are not statistically independent and hence not in fact determined by a random process at all.

If Process 1 is descriptive of the physical world, then one should expect a sequence of measurement results to exhibit all of the properties of a random sequence. One such property in the present case is that a random sequence of measurement results should be expected to have the standard quantum relative frequencies. But, as the example of an alternating sequence of zeroes and ones illustrates, having the right relative frequencies is not sufficient for the sequence of measurement results to be randomly distributed. We expect the sequence to exhibit other statistical features as well. That said, it is not immediately clear what these should be. In addition to tracking relative frequencies, one needs an explicit test of all of the features of a random sequence (whatever these may be) in order to check the empirical predictions of Process 1.

The general methodological question here concerns how one might empirically determine whether the output of a physical process is in fact random. Equipped with a test for randomness, a good Bayesian might then seek to update her degree of belief that the sequence $\sigma$ was produced by a random process by conditioning on new measurement results as one gets them. But what should it mean for the results in $\sigma$, or an initial segment of $\sigma$, to be random?

As suggested earlier, our intuitions concerning what it means for a sequence of results to be randomly distributed are closely tied to our intuitions concerning what it means for those results to be statistically independent. The judgment that
the sequence 01010101... does not appear to be random goes hand-in-hand with the judgment that the measurement results that constitute it do not appear to be statistically independent. In this sense, a test for statistical independence is a test for a corresponding variety of randomness and the other way around. If Process 1 is in fact descriptive of the physical world, then one should expect the results of the quantum coin-toss experiment to be both random and statistically independent in some appropriately strong sense.

Von Neumann’s physical intuition was that the sequence $\sigma$ should be expected to be random and its elements statistically independent because it is determined by a dynamical process that produces arbitrary events. Specifically, he understood Process 1 to postulate a “willkürliche Veränderung”—an arbitrary or capricious change in the physical state. Because the sequence of measurement results is arbitrary, one expects it to be patternless and not special in any specifiable sense. The arbitrary results of this process were, for von Neumann, what made the standard quantum probabilities the most precise empirical predictions possible. And, inasmuch as the outcomes are arbitrary, the sequence $\sigma$ should be typical. That is, it should be a sequence that one can think of as having been arbitrarily selected from a set of measure one subset of all possible sequences in Lebesgue measure. This ties directly to statistical independence. If the measurement results are independent, then one should also expect the sequence to be typical in Lebesgue measure.

Finally, concerning von Neumann’s commitment to state completeness and the completeness of the dynamics, since the standard probabilistic predictions of quantum mechanics are the most precise predictions possible, one should expect there to be no fair betting strategy that would allow one to do better in predicting the sequence $\sigma$ than simply predicting each result with the standard quantum probabilities—here each with probability 1/2.

2. ALGORITHMIC RANDOMNESS

In order to test the empirical predictions of the standard theory, then, we want to test $\sigma$ for being patternless in a way that satisfies our statistically-independent, unpredictable, no-betting-strategy intuitions. In short, we want to ensure that the sequence exhibits no specifiable regularity.

In this spirit, one might take a sequence to be patternless, and hence random, when there is no algorithm significantly shorter than the sequence that produces

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7Events $A$ and $B$ are statistically independent if and only if $P(A) = P(A|B)$. The issue here is how one tests whether of not this condition is satisfied by the dynamical process that produced one’s results given those results.

8A fair betting strategy is a plan to bet for or against outcomes at each stage so that one does not expect to win or loose at the next stage. If one were to adopt an unfair betting strategy, one could of course expect to win arbitrarily large amounts of money.
it. While this is a step in the right direction, it is not quite what we want. An immediate problem is that an infinite sequence might be incompressible but still contain long, recurring subsequences that exhibit regular patterns. In the case, the sequence as a whole does not satisfy our intuitions regarding what it is to be random.

Consider an infinite sequence that consists of one thousand 1’s followed by one thousand 0’s followed by one thousand random 0’s and 1’s, then repeats this three-block pattern forever. Because of the random blocks, such an infinite sequence may be incompressible in the sense of not being representable by a finite-length algorithm, but the full sequence is clearly not random. This is reflected by the fact that there is a simple betting strategy that would lead to unbounded wealth in the long run (e.g. predict 1 a thousand times then 0 a thousand times then whatever one wants a thousand times and repeat). The upshot is that this very simple notion of algorithmic randomness is too weak to support the intuition that there should be no pattern or betting strategy that allows one to predict better than chance. But we are on the right track.

There are a number of more subtle notions of algorithmic randomness that do support our patternless, statistically-independent, unpredictable, no-betting-strategy intuitions. We will consider two here: Martin-Löf randomness and Schnorr randomness. Each of these satisfies the basic intuition that a random sequence should be patternless in a way that makes it effectively unpredictable and, in a strong sense, does not allow for a successful betting strategy.

Martin-Löf and Schnorr randomness fit into a hierarchy of algorithmic ways of understanding what it might mean for a sequence to be random. The core notions of algorithmic randomness from less to more restrictive are type-1 weak random, computationally random, Schnorr random, Martin-Löf random, and type-2 weak random. The notions of Schnorr random and Martin-Löf random are roughly in the middle of this spectrum and hence, one might argue, neither too strong nor too weak all things considered. For many purposes Martin-Löf randomness provides a particularly natural notion of randomness, but Schnorr randomness also has its conceptual virtues.⁹

A notion of randomness can be given in terms of a set of tests that a random sequence will pass. A Martin-Löf test is a sequence \( \{U_n\}_{n \in \omega} \) of uniformly \( \Sigma^0_1 \) classes such that \( \mu(U_n) \leq 2^{-n} \) for all \( n \), where \( \mu \) is the unbiased Lebesgue measure over the sequences. Being uniformly \( \Sigma^0_1 \) means that there is a single constructive specification of the sequence of classes. A constructive specification is one that

can be represented by a ordinary algorithm. Let $2^\omega$ be the set of all $\omega$-length sequences (infinite-length sequences indexed by $\omega$). A class $C \subset 2^\omega$ is Martin-Löf null if there is a Martin-Löf test $\{U_n\}_{n \in \omega}$ such that $C \subseteq \bigcap_n U_n$. A sequence $S \in 2^\omega$ is Martin-Löf random if and only if $\{S\}$ is not Martin-Löf null. A sequence $S$ is Martin-Löf random if and only if it passes every Martin-Löf test. That is, it is not contained in the (measure-zero) intersection of any constructive (uniformly $\Sigma^0_1$) null cover $\bigcap_n U_n$.

The idea here is that each sequence $\{U_n\}_{n \in \omega}$ of uniformly $\Sigma^0_1$ classes corresponds to a precisely specifiable way that a sequence of measurement results might be special and thus an associated statistical test of randomness. A sequence passes the test if it is not special in the specified sense. A sequence of results is Martin-Löf random then if (1) it is not special in any way that can be effectively described and hence (2) it passes every effective statistical test for being random. This is arguably precisely what one should want for a sequence to be considered random.

Martin-Löf randomness also supports the intuition that a random sequence should be patternless in the sense of being both incompressible and unpredictable. An infinite sequence is Martin-Löf random if and only if there is a constant $c$ such that all finite initial segments are $c$-incompressible (not representable by an algorithm that is $c$ shorter than the initial segment) by a prefix-free machine (a universal Turing machine that is self-delimiting and hence can read its input in one direction without knowing what, if anything, comes next). And a sequence is Martin-Löf random if and only if no constructive martingale succeeds on it (if there is no betting algorithm that generates unbounded wealth). Since measure one of infinite-length sequences are Martin-Löf random (in the unbiased Lebesgue measure over the set of such sequences), it also supports the intuition that random sequences are not special in a measure-theoretic sense.

The notion of a sequence being Schnorr random is closely related. A Schnorr test is a Martin-Löf test where the measures $\mu(U_n)$ are themselves uniformly computable (there is a single algorithm that computes each of these measures). A class $C \subset 2^\omega$ is Schnorr null if there is a Schnorr test $\{U_n\}_{n \in \omega}$ such that $C \subseteq \bigcap_n U_n$. And a sequence $S \in 2^\omega$ is Schnorr random if and only if $\{S\}$ is not Schnorr null. Because the measures on the test classes $\mu(U_n)$ are uniformly computable, the statistical tests here might be thought of as being more concretely specifiable than in the case of Martin-Löf randomness. Indeed, one can suppose that the measures of the test classes here are given by $\mu(U_n) = 2^{-n}$ without loss of generality.

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10 $\Sigma^0_1$ sets are semi-computable open sets in the following sense. Every $\Sigma^0_1$ is the union of a countable set of cylinder sets, the clopens of Cantor space. By taking an increasing sequence of finite unions of clopens, we can approximate each $\Sigma^0_1$ set by computable objects from below.

11 Constructive here means computably approximable from below.
The notion of Schnorr randomness, like that of Martin-Löf randomness, captures the intuition that a random sequence should be patternless in the sense of being both incompressible and unpredictable in a strong sense. An infinite sequence is Schnorr random if and only if there is a constant $c$ such that all finite initial segments are $c$-incompressible by a computable measure machine (a prefix-free Turing machine with a domain of computable measure).\(^{12}\) If a sequence is Schnorr random, then no computable martingale $h$-succeeds on it (there is no computable betting strategy that generates wealth over time that is bounded from below by an unbounded, nondecreasing function $h$).\(^{13}\) And, like Martin-Löf random sequences, Schnorr random sequences are not special—measure one of infinite-length sequences are Schnorr random.

Important for what follows, Martin-Löf random (MLR) infinite-length sequences are a proper subset of Schnorr random (SR) sequences. Since MLR sequences and SR sequences are both measure-one sets, their intersection is also measure one. And the set of sequences that are $SR$ but not $MLR$ is measure zero in the unbiased Lebesgue measure over the set of infinite-length sequences. Sequences that are SR but not MLR are measure-theoretically very special.

3. THE EFFECTIVE INDETERMINACY OF RANDOMNESS AND INDEPENDENCE

Given how they support the relevant intuitions, both Martin-Löf random and Schnorr random provide plausible standards for quantum randomness. Indeed, inasmuch as random sequences are not special, one would expect the sequence $\sigma$ of quantum-mechanical results produced by Process 1 to be both Martin-Löf random and Schnorr random. But here one encounters a number of epistemic problems.

Consider the following proposition concerning whether one can know whether a sequence is Martin-Löf random or Schnorr random.

**Proposition 3.1** (Walsh). Suppose that $C \subseteq 2^\mathbb{N}$ is a non-empty class such that either (i) $C$ contains no computable members, or (ii) $C \neq 2^\mathbb{N}$ and $C$ is a tailset, i.e. if $X$ is in $C$ and $Y$ differs from $X$ by at most finitely many bits, then $Y$ is in $C$. Then there is no algorithm $e$ such that for all $X \subseteq \mathbb{N}$ one has $\varphi^X_e(0) = 1$ iff $X \in C$, where $\varphi^X_e$ denotes the $e$th computable function with oracle $X$.\(^{14}\)

**Proof.** Suppose not, with witness $e$. Since $C$ is a non-empty class, choose $X$ in $C$. Then $\varphi^X_e(0) = 1$. Then there is $s$ such that $\varphi^{X,s}_e(0) = 1$, that is, the computation

\(^{12}\)See Downey and Hirschfeldt (2010, 277) for further details on such machines.

\(^{13}\)See Downey and Hirschfeldt (2010, 271) for further details regarding the martingale properties of Schnorr random sequences.

\(^{14}\)See Soare (2016) for a detailed explanation of the notation. The proof of this proposition below follows closely from the definitions of the relevant notions. See, for example, Soare (2016, 190) and Shen et al. (2017, 81).
converges in $< s$ steps looking at $< s$ bits of the oracle tape. (This is the so-called use principle).

Let $\sigma = X \upharpoonright s$.

Suppose that (i) is satisfied. Consider $Y = \sigma \upharpoonright \emptyset$, i.e. $\sigma$ followed by all zero’s. This is computable and we also have that $\varphi^Y_{c,s}(0) = 1$ and hence $Y \in C$, contradicting our hypothesis that $C$ contains no computable members.

Suppose that (ii) is satisfied. Then for any $Y \in [\sigma]$, that is, any $Y$ which begins with $\sigma$, we have $Y \in C$. But every element of $2^\omega$ differs by an element of $[\sigma]$ by only finitely much, and since $C$ is a tailset, we then have $C = 2^\omega$. □

Notions of algorithmic randomness typically satisfy both conditions (i) and (ii). In particular, both Martin-L"of and Schnorr randomness satisfy these two conditions. The upshot is that there is no effective procedure to tell whether a sequence $\sigma$ is Martin-L"of random or Schnorr random. This means that if one is restricted to Turing-strength computations, one can never know whether one’s empirical evidence is in fact random in either of these two senses. But the epistemic situation is significantly worse than this might suggest.

The following proposition is concerned with the question of whether one can distinguish between sequences that are Schnorr random but not Martin-L"of random and sequences that are Martin L"of random.

**Proposition 3.2** (Walsh). There is no algorithm $e$ such that for all $X \subseteq \mathbb{N}$, if one has that if $X$ is Schnorr random, then $\varphi^X_e(0) = 1$ iff $X$ is Martin-L"of random.

**Proof.** Choose Martin-L"of random $X$. Then as above, $\varphi^X_{c,s}(0) = 1$ for some $s$, and again set $\sigma = X \upharpoonright s$. Choose $Y$ which is Schnorr random but not Martin-L"of random and let $Z = \sigma \upharpoonright Y$. Then since the Schnorr randoms and the Martin-L"of randoms are tail sets, one has that $Z$ is Schnorr random but not Martin-L"of random. But we also have that $\varphi^Z_c(0) = 1$ since $Z \in [\sigma]$. □

The upshot is that there is no effective procedure that would tell whether a particular sequence is Martin L"of random or Schnorr random but not Martin-L"of random.

In order to make clear what is at stake here, consider two ways of understanding what it might mean for the sequence of results $\sigma$ in the quantum coin-toss experiment to be randomly determined dynamically.

*Martin-L"of dynamics:* When a measurement is made of system $S_k$, its state instantaneously jumps to an eigenstate of the observable being measured in such a way that the sequence of results $\sigma$ should be expected almost always to be MLR.
**Schnorr dynamics:** When a measurement is made of system $S_k$, its state instantaneously jumps to an eigenstate of the observable being measured in such a way that the sequence of results $\sigma$ should be expected almost always to be $SR$.

Given proposition 3.2, there is a sense in which these two dynamical laws are effectively indistinguishable, but the Martin-Löf dynamics is in fact more restrictive from a god’s-eye-view than the Schnorr dynamics. This difference would only be detectable by a computationally strong observer, one who could carry out computations that go beyond what can be accomplished by an ordinary Turing machine. But such an observer might find herself with very strong empirical evidence for accepting the Schnorr dynamics over the Martin-Löf dynamics.

Suppose that one somehow knew that the sequence of results $\sigma$ was $SR$ but not $MLR$. Since one would expect $\sigma$ to be both $SR$ and $MLR$ on the Martin-Löf dynamics, this would count as very strong evidence in favor of the Schnorr dynamics over the Martin-Löf dynamics. This is precisely analogous the argument that getting something from the measure zero set of sequences that can be represented by finite algorithms would provide strong empirical evidence that the actual physical dynamics was not random at all.

That said, if the Schnorr dynamics were in fact descriptive of the world, while such a sequence of results is possible, one would never expect a sequence that was $SR$ but not $MLR$. Rather, one would fully expect $\sigma$ to be both $MLR$ and $SR$ on both the Martin-Löf dynamics and the Schnorr dynamics. Inasmuch the two laws yield precisely the same expectations, there is good reason to take them to be empirically equivalent even after one concedes that it is logically possible for an observer to have evidence in favor of one over the other and a computationally strong observer to recognize the difference.

But to see why this does not settle the matter, consider the following ad hoc law.

**Ad hoc dynamics:** When a measurement is made of the system $S_k$, its state instantaneously jumps to an eigenstate of the observable being measured in such a way that the sequence of results $\sigma$ should be expected almost always to be $SR$ but not $MLR$.

Since one should expect this dynamics to produce a sequence of measurement outcomes that is Schnorr random, one should expect it to produce a sequence that appears to be perfectly random in the Schnorr sense of not exhibiting any effectively specifiable or discernible pattern. Among other things, this means that one
should expect all initial segments of the sequence of measurement results to appear to be completely arbitrary and patternless in every algorithmically specifiable sense. But inasmuch as one should expect the full sequence to be SR but not MLR, one should expect that it will be selected from a measure-zero set of infinite-length sequences. So while this dynamics produces sequences whose initial segments will always appear to be entirely patternless and unpredictable and will pass all effective statistical tests for being random, a sequence chosen from a measure zero set is in a straightforward sense very special and, hence, is not at all randomly determined. While the sequence of measurement results will appear to be randomly determined on the ad hoc dynamics, it isn’t.

Similarly, while one should expect results produced by the ad hoc dynamics to appear to be statistically independent, they aren’t. If the results were in fact statistically independent, then the sequence should be expected to be arbitrarily chosen from the measure-one set of all possible infinite-length sequences, not from the measure-zero set of sequences that are SR but not MLR. Hence, the sequence of results produced by the ad hoc dynamics is not random in the sense of in fact being statistically independent.\(^\text{15}\)

The epistemic situation here leads to a strong variety of empirical underdetermination. Since there is no effective procedure that would distinguish between a sequence that is both SR and MLR from one that is SR but not MLR, the ad hoc dynamics is empirically equivalent to the Martin-Löf dynamics given standard computational resources. But inasmuch as one should expect the Martin-Löf dynamics to be empirically indistinguishable from Process 1, the ad hoc dynamics is empirically equivalent to Process 1 if one is restricted to standard computational resources. Indeed, it is empirically equivalent to any standard criterion of randomness that assigns Lebesgue measure-one to the set of random sequences. The upshot is that if the sequence of quantum results \(\sigma\) are in fact random in any standard sense, then there is no effective way to rule out the ad hoc dynamics regardless of how much empirical evidence one has.

Here there is a straightforward sense in which one can have no empirical evidence whatsoever that one’s sequence is in fact randomly determined or genuinely independent. In order to see why, compare what it would be to have empirical evidence regarding the relative frequencies of one’s results against what it would be to have empirical evidence regarding the randomness or independence of one’s results.

\(^{15}\)If one were to repeat the full quantum coin-toss experiment and keep getting sequences in the gap between SR and MLR, then from a god’s-eye-view one would have evidence for a very subtle sort of global statistical dependence—a sort that one could not concretely characterize by effective means.
A good Bayesian inquirer might have empirical evidence either for or against quantum mechanics predicting the right relative frequencies by conditioning on the evidence presented in each initial segment $\sigma_k$ of $\sigma$ on the assumption that the sequence exhibits an appropriate sort of statistical uniformity. But there is no way at all to distinguish between the initial segments of sequences that are both SR and MLR and those that are SR but not MLR. This is because $c$-incompressible on a prefix-free machine (the condition for being MLR) is precisely the same thing as $c$-incompressible on a computable measure machine (the condition for being SR) for any finite initial segment of the sequence. Sequences that are both SR and MLR and those that are SR but not MLR will both always appear to be completely random, patternless, statistically independent, and unpredictable.

Because the conditions are identical for all finite initial segments, no background assumption of uniformity for the full sequence will help a Bayesian inquirer to distinguish between sequences that are both SR and MLR (and hence genuinely random) and those that are SR but not MLR and hence not what one would expect from a random process. The point here is not that the inquirer will never know with certainty whether the sequence was randomly determined. Rather, even with a background assumption that the string is overall statistically uniform, looking at finite initial segments here provides no evidence whatsoever that the sequence was in fact randomly determined.

Put another way, while the examination of initial segments might provide a Bayesian inquirer with compelling evidence that a given sequence is or is not simply patterned in a concrete specified way (as in the case of the alternating pattern exhibited by the sequence 01010101…), a sequence that is SR but not MLR is patterned in a way that cannot be detected by examining initial segments. A sequence generated by the ad hoc dynamics should be expected to exhibit a pattern shared by measure-zero of the possible infinite-length sequences. It is a very special sort of sequence. But the fact that it is very special is not detectable from finite initial segments.

4. EPISTEMIC MORALS

We have shown how to describe an ad hoc measure-zero set of sequences (those that are SR but not MLR) where each will always appear to be patternless and will be empirically indistinguishable from a standard measure-one notion of randomness like Martin-Löf random given computable resources. If nature were always to produce sequences drawn from this set, the quantum world would not be random, but one could never know this by effective means. Indeed, as we have seen, one can have no empirical evidence whatsoever for accepting the standard random dynamics if one allows for the possibility of something like the ad hoc dynamics obtaining.
This leaves us with a radical sort of empirical underdetermination. If one is limited to computable resources, there is simply no empirical content to insisting that quantum-mechanical results are genuinely random, arbitrary, independent, and/or patternless. While one might endeavor to argue that we have good reason to suppose that they are randomly determined on grounds of dynamical simplicity or naturalness, one can have no direct empirical evidence for so believing.

The empirical underdetermination here results from computational limits and not from any lack of empirical evidence. Even with the complete set of empirical evidence, full Turing computational power, and the assumption that one’s data is statistically uniform, one can have no empirical justification whatsoever for believing that the results of one’s quantum-mechanical experiments are arbitrarily, independently, or randomly determined.


Department of Logic and Philosophy of Science, 5100 Social Science Plaza, University of California, Irvine, Irvine, CA 92697-5100, U.S.A.
E-mail address: j.barrett@uci.edu
URL: http://faculty.sites.uci.edu/jeffreybarrett/

Department of Logic and Philosophy of Science, 5100 Social Science Plaza, University of California, Irvine, Irvine, CA 92697-5100, U.S.A.
E-mail address: shuttegg@uci.edu
URL: http://faculty.sites.uci.edu/shuttegg/