

Brieven

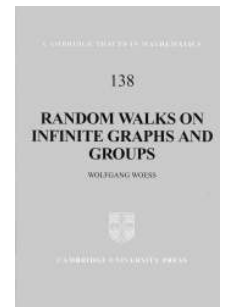
| Letters to the editor

Author's reply to a review by M. Keane

Cambridge University Press has forwarded to me a copy of the review by Prof. M. Keane, in NAW 5/4 no. 1 (2003), of my monograph *Random Walks on Infinite Graphs and Groups*, Cambridge Tracts in Mathematics 138, 2000.

The tone of the review is very unusual, if not personally offensive — not only in my own view; I also consulted several colleagues before deciding to respond.

Let me start with Prof. Keane's criticism regarding the choice of the material. As stated clearly in the preface, the topic of the book is the interplay between the behaviour of time-homogeneous Markov chains and the geometric-algebraic-combinatorial structure of the underlying state space. This is currently a rather active field of research, and I have the impression that my book has been well received by the scientific community, as one may also see from other reviews like the ones in Bull. London Math. Soc. 33 (2001) p. 243–245, Acta Sci. Math. (Szeged) 67 Vol. 1–2 (2001), or Bull. Amer. Math. Soc. 39 (2002) p. 281–285. The 'missing' topics indicated by M. Keane would correspond to a very different general theme; there are indeed very different ones among the "many of the interesting problems in this area today". (Quotation marks refer to prof. Keane's review.) Also, I do not believe that there is "too much emphasis [. . .] on the contributions of Varopoulos", since Varopoulos not only has solved a longstanding open problem (classification of finitely generated, recurrent groups) but also opened the door to a wealth of new methods — notably analytic and not probabilistic in flavour — for examining the asymptotics of transition probabilities on graphs. Regarding the "Italian school", I guess that Prof. Keane refers to myself and to close colleagues of mine — I think that it was my right to dedicate a modest part of my monograph to the achievements of those people, in particular including myself.



The most irritating piece of the review is the phrase "One clearly gets the impression that the author has 'learned through writing', as he states in the introduction." The method applied by the reviewer is to quote in such a way as to obtain the opposite of the original meaning; here, Prof. Keane seems to suggest that I did not know what I was going to write when I started to work on my book. Let me explain the true meaning of the respective phrase of mine. Most of us know a good amount of the literature in the field in which we are working (and I believe to have a rather wide overview) to the extent that we know the results and the basic ideas of many other researchers. But there is only a comparatively small portion of papers where we really went through every detail, as required for elaborating the results in such a way that they can for example be presented in a monograph. Here, I have elaborated results from at least eighty original papers in detail,

In deze rubriek reageren lezers op recent in dit blad verschenen artikelen. De redactie behoudt zich het recht voor ingezonden brieven in te korten of niet te plaatsen.

often giving shorter, different, or new proofs — this has been my own fruitful ‘learning’.

The above-mentioned allusion together with the statements that the “organization of the material seems haphazard and without a clear line” and “willy-nilly organization” are in contrast not only with the opinion of other reviewers, but also with the story how this book was prepared. First, I had published a long survey article with the same title as the book, that appeared in *Bull. London Math. Soc.* 26 (1994) p. 1–60. It was organized in a similar way as the book; each chapter is centered around one specific theme, starting with general results and then passing to specific structures. The range of topics is somewhat wider than the selection in the book; in particular, the volume by Guivarc’h, Keane and Roynette is cited there. My impression is that this survey was warmly welcomed by the scientific community; it has been cited very frequently. The letter from the editor, in accepting it for publication, started with the phrase “Thanks very much for your excellent [...] survey.” In the sequel, one of the editors of Cambridge Tracts in Mathematics suggested to me to write a book on the same topic. I submitted a detailed proposal, which was accepted by an anonymous referee. Upon completion of each single chapter, I sent the latter to various colleagues working in the field, asking for comments, criticism, suggestions, et cetera, which were taken into account in the final version.

There are of course two points of legitimate criticism in Prof. Keane’s review. One is the lack of more detailed motivation at the beginning of Chapter II, and the other is the missing citation of the influential book by Guivarc’h, Keane and Roynette, *Marches Aléatoires sur les Groupes de Lie*, Lecture Notes in Math. 624, Springer, 1977. I did of course cite the latter not only in my survey, but also in various of my research papers. It was not cited in my book basically because the latter deals exclusively with discrete structures, and none of those results on Lie groups is used. However, it certainly would have been wise to include the reference in the “Notes and Remarks” at the end of Chapter I.

Wolfgang Woess

Het pseudoniem van god

Met enige verbazing lazen wij in het decembernummer van het NAW de boekbespreking door Roger Cooke van een boek van Ronald Meester. Tot en met de een na laatste kolom is het een interessant artikel. Al zijn we geen van alle erg thuis in het vakgebied waar blijkbaar auteur en

recensent veel van afweten, we hebben toch met genoeg het eerste deel van de bespreking gelezen. Temeer omdat de discussie die in dit artikel wordt gestart van wetenschappelijk niveau is.



De woorden van de laatste kolom verbazen ons echter en als christenen en belangstellende lezers van het NAW willen we hier dan ook op reageren. Werd in het eerste deel van het artikel de christelijke lezer nog serieus uitgedaagd voor zijn geloof op te komen en zijn basis voor wetenschap bedrijven te verdedigen, in de zin die begint met “Of van het feit dat de Roomse Kerk [...]” wordt hij volledig buitenspel gezet, als zou het belachelijk zijn, ja zelfs een schurkendaad, in God te geloven en de Bijbel als richtlijn te nemen. De argumenten voor dit buitenspel gezet worden, raken naar ons idee kant noch wal. Zelf de aangehaalde tekst uit het bijbelboek Numeri lezend, begrijpen we niet wat de recensent hierover bedoelt te zeggen. De woorden tussen haakjes in de laatste alinea, “(zo wordt de evolutietheorie in creationistische kringen genoemd)”, klinken ons kinderachtig in de oren en verraden een niet geheel onbevooroordeelde houding van de recensent ten opzichte van het christendom. Bij het christendom zijn minstens zoveel mensen betrokken als bij de wetenschap en er worden daarom navenant evenveel of zelfs meer fouten gemaakt door christenen en christelijke instanties, als binnen de wetenschap. Het getuigt naar onze mening niet van een wetenschappelijke houding de christelijke gesprekspartner die fouten in de schoenen te schuiven en hem zodoende belachelijk te maken.

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