

natural theology, argument from design, Wolfe, and other matters

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 04 Nov 1999

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Daniel Fusch — 04 Nov 1999, 23:57

Jeremy:

(snip)

"I believe you are referring to "natural theology" or the argument from design, which is the belief that since the world was created by a supernatural being, we (humans) can detect the hand of this god in nature."

I think you may have a few very different things mixed up here.

The "argument from design" is a much more modern theological supposition that argues:

- 1) A design implies the existence of a designer.
- 2) The universe conforms to an orderly and precise design.
- 3) The universe implies the existence of its designer.

Natural theology, on the other hand, is a much older and more complex ideology. As I understand it, natural theology argues, among other things, that because the world was created by a supernatural being, that being can intervene in the affairs of the world, producing miracles.

Wolfe, however, is presenting us with a third set of philosophical suppositions, quite separate from these other two. (And I don't know whether Wolfe is advocating these ideas or not--remember that Wolfe often presents us with very different views on theology from different characters at different points in the book.) The view here is that:

- 1) The rational or physical explanation of a miracle does not make the miracle less miraculous.
- 2) A sort of chicken-and-the-egg paradox: did the miracle occur because of a particular law of physics, or was that law of physics established because the miracle needed to occur? (This is the sort of paradox that Wolfe is constantly bringing up.)

The second of these points is a philosophical puzzle. The first point is simply romanticism in a nutshell. That is, natural events are wondrous and miraculous regardless of their scientific explanation.

Do you remember that chapter in "Charlotte's Web" when Dr. Dorian tells Fern's mother that everyone has been so busy debating the recent miracles that they've lost sight of the notion that the spider's web itself is a miracle? That the spider's web-spinning instinct--and indeed all instinct--is itself a miracle? In other words, knowledge of biochemistry makes instinct no less miraculous.

Anyway, I think these are the ideologies at work in that passage.

Michael Straight — 05 Nov 1999, 10:03 · follows Daniel Fusch

On Thu, 4 Nov 1999, Daniel Fusch wrote:

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Actually, Natural Theology refers to that which can be learned about God from nature, as opposed to that which has been learned about God from revelation. The term "Natural Theology" was most popular in the 18th and 19th centuries, but the distinction is rooted in Aquinas and the scholastics.

You are right that the worldview that does not clearly distinguish between the actions of God and the action of nature goes back even further. For instance, in the Hebrew scriptures the prophets frequently give God credit for natural disasters (the locust plague in Amos), and historical events (the triumph of Babylon is God's punishment against Israel). On the other hand, ancient people also recognized some distinction between a miracle and an ordinary event. The story of a virgin giving birth was no easier to believe because they knew less biology than we do.

-Rostrum