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The Biblical Worldview And Laws Of Nature

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Memory, Meaning & Faith

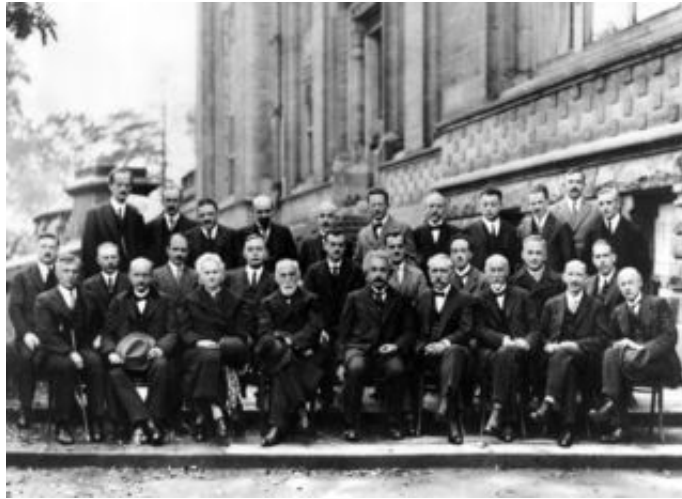
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March 31, 2010

The Biblical Worldview And Laws Of Nature



“The idea of a world governed by laws of nature was the result of a new view of the relation of God to the world in which God is more directly involved in the operations of nature. Its early modern proponents argued this to be a more ‘Christian’ view of nature than the [Aristotelian worldview](#) that it replaced. These laws are mathematical because God was conceptualized as the divine mathematician. The necessary character of these laws was seen to arise out of the fact that God’s will is immutable, and hence the laws that he willed into effect are unchangeable.”

“The subsequent history of the notion of the laws of nature, it must be said, has conspired to conceal the theological origins of the idea. . . . It must be recognized that the notion of laws of nature, however much it may have rested on theological convictions, inevitably led to a desacralization of the natural world. Not only were intrinsic powers and qualities banished from the world, but the rigid necessity of the new laws of nature meant that with the passage of time lawfulness came to be regarded simply as an unremarkable feature of the world itself, and one needing no further explanation. Ironically, the very constancy of divine action served to make God increasingly irrelevant as an explanatory mechanism.”

Peter Harrison, “The Development of the Concept of the Laws of Nature,” in *Creation: Law and Probability*, 13-36 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 28.

Questions

Are there exceptions to the laws of nature? Do the laws describe natural causes or do they describe regularities in nature? Are there laws of human nature and laws of divine nature?


If nature creates its laws, who or what creates nature? If the laws create nature, who or what creates the laws? Does God work miracles? How are miracles related to the laws of nature?

Was it a completely biblical worldview which influenced the laws of nature proposed by the Christian founders of modern science? Should Christians allow the biblical worldview to influence their view of science?

Posted by [Martin Hanna](#) on March 31, 2010 in [Historical Theology](#), [Quotable](#), [Science and Theology](#) | [Permalink](#)

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Dr. Hanna, you're good at asking questions! I'm clearly not as good at answering them, but it did stimulate my thinking.

Laws denote design which means designer; there is a mind behind nature, something greater than nature. In my opinion, God is the Creator of nature and its laws. I wonder about this issue of if miracles are violation of the laws on nature... Is healing the body a violation of the natural laws if God is the cause instead of penicillin? Hmm. I'm thinking this over. My thought is that miracles are not in fact violations of the laws of nature (especially if we understand the laws of nature to be the laws of their creator).

Posted by: [Kessia Reyne](#) | [March 31, 2010 at 08:59 AM](#)

It has often struck me that scientists do not generally recognize the deep theological implications of their invocation of "laws of nature." It is a faith statement about the world and the way that it operates that is inherently unprovable, and was originally adopted based on theological commitments, as the statement above shows.

The question about "exceptions" is an interesting one. There cannot be an exception within the natural world of law-based cause and effect, or they would not be laws, they would merely be likelihoods.

I do believe that miracles are exceptions, in the sense that a result is produced that would not have occurred had the laws been left to operate without special intervention by God. God does not violate the laws, but I believe that he can suspend, or perhaps even reverse, their operation to accomplished some benevolent purpose.

I think it is unsafe to say that a miracle is not an exception to nature because God does it. This is to make God a part of nature, and we believe that God is beyond nature. Very interesting.

Posted by: [Nicholas Miller](#) | [March 31, 2010 at 12:28 PM](#)

Thanks Keisha and Nick.

Whether one views miracles as violations of laws depends on how one defines miracles and laws. I propose that God when works through miracles he does not need to cease working through the laws of nature.

Does God have to suspend the function of penicillin in order to work a miracle to heal a bacterial infection in the body of someone who has been treated with penicillin? It seems to me that penicillin does not suspend the laws of nature when it naturally defeats a bacterial infection. Why then does God have to suspend laws in order to do what penicillin does?

It is important to emphasize that God is beyond the laws of nature and that some miracles are exceptions to the laws of nature in that they are not accomplished by these laws. I also agree that God can suspend or reverse the expected effect of the operation of a law without violating the law itself.

If I lift an axe head from the bottom of a river, I do not violate the operations of any laws. But I do reverse or suspend the expected effect of the operations of some laws of nature. These laws make it unexpected that an axe head would rise from the bottom of a river.

If I can raise an axe head without violating the operations of the laws of nature, surely God can. And he did! (See 2 Kings 6:1-7).

Let me be clear. I am not proposing that God cannot violate the operation of a law. He created the laws and he can abolish them. What I am proposing is that God is able to work miracles within the nature he created without violating the laws of nature which he also created.

Posted by: [Martin Hanna](#) | [April 01, 2010 at 01:01 PM](#)

This reminds me of a recent discussion on Laws vs Exceptions that the MA/PhD students had in Christian social ethics with Dr. Kis this past Wednesday. Most of my colleagues felt that exceptions even if allowed, should always be perceived as extraordinary exceptions and not be made into a complementary law- i.e. feticide to save the mother's life does not prove abortion is righteous, only sinfully necessary.

However, on thinking later, I think this boundary starts to break down in relation to God's actions. For divine law and justice is absolute (as He is) and forgiveness is an exception to justice (it pardons the transgressor). But with God, forgiveness is not a rare exception but so frequent an event, so pervasive and attitude and so aligned with His innate nature and will that forgiveness is itself also a divine law.

So, is God a paradox? Is His actions in the legal realm- justice and forgiveness, and in the natural realm- natural law and miracles truly

paradoxical or are human constructs putting up a tension that isn't there?

may I propose? Perhaps forgiveness (or the forgiving compassion) is the underlying foundation from which justice springs, and miracles the underlying foundation from which natural law is created. So God is not making new exceptions in doing either action, but allowing us to see through the veneer of surface consistency to a deeper truth about reality. Behind the prescriptive laws lies an empathetic being. Behind the rigid regularity of natural law, absolute autonomy with integrity.

Creation and Redemption fits that.

Posted by: arlyn | [April 09, 2010 at 09:56 AM](#)

This discussion appears to be hinged upon the idea of law. What is law? I would postulate that law exists only when human consciousness arises. It came into existence when humanity presumptuously chose to know for itself the truth that is God. In the creation all of the creation existed in complete dependence on God. When humanity was successfully lured to "know" good and evil they usurped the coordinating will of God over the creation and placed it under their control. So indeed they were like gods. Yet this deception revealed the entire responsibility that now God has placed upon humanity, the role of sustainer.

When God cast Adam and Eve out of Eden it was not a punishment, it was the consummation of their choice. God was the sustainer coordinator of all life and now man assumed that role. The Tree of Life was God's means by which to sustain man but now man chose to sustain himself.

Now if man chose to know good and evil he is now the judge of good and evil. In this role of judge he must discern for himself the application of behavior within the parametric knowledge of good and evil. He must develop law.

So was God the keeper of the law or was the mind of God reality which is not by the discernment of man but by the reality and absolute expression of God? If God practices law then that would mean that God would have to choose whether to obey a law or not. God does not have the dilemma of choosing good or evil, life or death. He is good, He is life. Therefore God does not operate under law, law is the construct of man in order to design a rule of behavior that will sustain life.

So what about the rest of creation? The rest of creation now too suffers under the consequences of man's actions. Now no longer sustained by God directly the creation experiences entropy. If not for its robust design by a creator who before the foundation of the world designed the means by which the creation could find the truth that He is the source of life then all life would have no hope and all would be lost. What now has the creation become but antagonistic not only to God but to itself and in the end will devour itself. Although we may find the creator's hand in the marvelous design of the creation we also see all too clearly the creation in the losing struggle to sustain it.

So are miracles exceptions to natural law? I would say that miracles are moments that reveal the truth of God, that He is the sustainer of life. When the divine comes into contact with His creation, what was dead or dying comes to life. We call it an exception because it does not fit our law or our capability to sustain. But a miracle is that which exhibits the original creation that even for an instance in time reveals the glory of the cross, Christ expressing His connection and trust in the Father by reciting the first line of the 22nd Psalm.

In relation to science the law is just as limited as man's ability to sustain itself. Science is founded on laws created by man. Like mathematical axioms they are based on human presupposition not divine ordination. If science or any other discipline is founded on human axiom it is flawed from the beginning. Yet again I find that the mind of man is incapable of discerning law which is his lot to make. Only by the Mind of Christ can anything be known and now only enigmatically. If it is His work being manifest in our lives then is it by law, or is it by Grace?

Posted by: David de la Vega | [April 09, 2010 at 08:07 PM](#)

I like your phrase, "law exists only when human consciousness arises". Law is a human construct, an incomplete model of what is real.

"It came into existence when humanity presumptuously chose to know for itself the truth that is God." Why do you pose this sentence in a slightly negative tone? EGW seems to indicate that God desired his creatures to know him and spent precious time every evening with them, telling them about himself and the origins of sin that started in heaven. Did you mean that man was presumptuous in the method undertaken to obtain this knowledge, the sinful method of eating the forbidden fruit as a shortcut suggested by the snake?

Will you also explain how the miracle of the shriveled or dead fig tree that Jesus cursed fits into your paradigm? It goes against the general trend of "what was dead or dying comes to life".

Thanks for your thoughts on this.

Posted by: arlyn drew | [April 16, 2010 at 11:31 PM](#)

Thanks for your questions for clarification Arlyn. Your second conclusion is more what I meant. Humanity chose to know the truth by human means. All the while the truth, which is life, is God. Humanity presumed to be able to know truth as if it is something to be grasped and define through the knowledge of good and evil. Our inability to sustain our lives eternally exposes our innate inability to know the truth that is God. The Gospel is the revelation that the truth is God, revealed in Christ, and that not through us but in Him we have life . . . just as it was in the beginning.

As far as the fig tree, it was a physical analogue to the gospel. Without abiding in God (the source of life) there is only death. The fig tree, while it was alive though not bearing fruit, was like us when we abide apart from God, barren and spiritually dead. Christ, in shriveling the fig tree, revealed its true condition . . . dead. In the presence of God reality is revealed. If the reality is death then death it is. If it is alive then alive it is. "Just as it is written, 'I have made you a father of many nations', who according to what he experienced trusted God who makes alive the dead and who calls that which is not existing as existing. Romans 4:17. When the light shines upon what is apart from God, then what may be living becomes dead because it is revealed just as it is. When God reveals the truth of the creature that abides in Him then the life that abides in the creature, the life of God is revealed and it is alive. We are offered gold refined in the fire, the testimony of Jesus which reveals to us the true and only source of life . . . trust in God not ourselves.

Posted by: David de la Vega | [April 17, 2010 at 11:22 PM](#)

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