

IS THE UNIVERSE (LIKE) AN ARTEFACT?

The design argument for the existence of a designer, a planner, a God, regularly deploys the model of the universe as an artefact. A noteworthy part of the universe, from plants and planets on through naturally evolved systems, contrasts with artefacts. If the whole arrangement is an artefact, then, firstly 'artefact' has been much stretched, to lose both its normal contrasts, place, etc., and its contexts, e.g. of external tools applied by external living creatures, and secondly, the relevant features are extremely well hidden. In the face of elaboration of these points the artefact claim is eroded or weakened to: the universe is like an artefact, it's as if it were an artefact, etc. And by 'like' is usually meant, like in having a maker.

There are some curious features about Wilkinson's argument in his 'The universe is artefact'. The usual moves to the artefact model are premised on the intelligibility of the universe (thus e.g. Meynell). But Wilkinson concentrates on the limits to human knowledge and the apparent extent to which the universe is not intelligible to us and may never be. Wilkinson however is not arguing for design in the universe, but for a kind of idealism: nature as the product of the human mind! The traditional case for design in the universe is strangely subverted into an argument for idealism. It is our artefact, not God's. Everything intended by 'artefact' tells against this: but redefinition is one order of the day in philosophical argument.

Consider first ^{Wilkinson's} ~~his~~ four arguments, none decisive, but all with ^{some} ~~one~~ appeal, to Limits to knowledge, human limits that is. 1. Levels of detail. There are severe practical limits to ascertaining the very small. Size and cost of equipment, etc. And larger limits also, such as spaceship earth, men's lifetimes, etc. (One experiment-careers).

2. Variety (and number) of forces. How many "super-weak", "super-strong" forces? The issue of completeness is serious here (as with Kant's philosophy). As with forces, so with objects, laws, etc.

NB. (1) Ignorance of an (undiscovered) moderating or compensating force could lead us into major error about features of world, e.g. into postulating granularity of space and time.

(2) Classification of forces in sort of periodic table, and then deeper explanation.

3. Limits to human conception? Macro-objects of our dimensions can have no conceptions of very small (micro seconds) or very large. No?? The argument involves a slide from 'no real personal experience' to 'no imagination of' to 'no conception of'. Argues for limits to conception in both time and space. Goes on to suggest limits to description using everyday household language, but

the argument is bad: it depends on standard (Copenhagen) quantum theory. Ideas that limits of conception tied to limits of language.

4. Human nature and its essential prejudice: limits to what we are prepared to accept or understand. Set of prejudices, etc., e.g. prejudices in favour of numbers (in a fuzzy world). Our constitution prevents understanding of world.

Wilkinson's further argument is that in view of limits we humans cannot but resort to value - 'in reaching his judgements as to how the natural world is constructed, man cannot ultimately do more than say 'this makes me feel good' this is how it has to be' (p.96). Value imposition, like Leslie? 'This is how it has to be', 'should be'. 'We know that whether or not we can get at quarks [whether quarks exist] we shall continue to talk about them and discuss their anatomy and domestic economy' (p.97). Nature is going to be what the mind makes it (p.98): No, here is the same confusion of [our] theory with the thing theorised that pervades idealistic approaches.

Wilkinson also wants to proceed (as above and especially from orthodox quantum theory) to reject any theme of the closure of nature to mind. He contends (p.80) that objectivity - looking at nature from outside - dissolves to be replaced by something involving man essentially. The natural world depends on man for its definition: hence the universe as an artefact. But this is in no way established. The argument depends on the fallacy of equating nature with the theory of nature again. And it makes the erroneous assumption that the only criteria for theory selection are at bottom those of value or feeling.

A question Wilkinson suggests, but sets aside (in the too-hard basket) is:

How it is that we manage to understand the universe, or so much of it? Very different responses quickly suggest themselves, like: We don't; or, So far as we do it's mostly good luck. Historically rather different answers were favoured, e.g. the universe is natural, the world is intelligible. Since it's intelligible, sufficiently intelligent creatures can come to understand it. The intelligibility theme is not lacking for exponents. Here, in summary, is how Meynell argues for and applies it:

'A. If the world were not intelligible, it would not be that we can in principle come to know. But the world is that which we can in principle come to know.
Therefore the world is intelligible.

B. If there were not something analogous to human intelligence in the constitution of the world, the world would not be intelligible.

Therefore there is something analogous to human intelligence in the constitution of the world (68).

The first premiss of B is flat out false, but present concern is with A. The minor premiss of A is false, by virtue of limitation arguments such as those of Wilkinson and elsewhere (e.g. Routley). And the major premiss, though it can take an analytical shape is a distortion. For instance, the world may be sufficiently intelligible for us to come to understand what we do of it without being completely intelligible.

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