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Religion and the Paranormal

The Arbitrary Universe

This excerpt is from the text "The Miraculous," which was written by R. F. Holland and drawn from the *American Philosophical Quarterly.* This excerpt, which is essay prompt number six, ultimately questions the validity of our prescribed laws of nature, and compares these laws to our judicial system. Humanity is all too quick to place the world in our own carefully constructed categories. Society is constructed in a very specific way, so we assume that nature must be as well. We see the natural world as an objective place in space and time, meant to be analyzed and understood. In actuality, the nature of the outside world is purely subjective and based upon our sensory organs, therefore making the laws of nature invalid because they are based upon experiences that are transient and highly limited. The universe, and our experiences in it, may follow trends but are not always predictable.

Science is a principle foundation of our modern society. We use it to extend our senses beyond what is seen on the surface; we now understand that all that we see with the naked eye is composed of molecules. Specific macromolecules make up organic matter, such as proteins and nucleic acids, which are the basis of life itself. But what is life? From a biological standpoint, it appears that the purpose of life is to recreate and repackage as much DNA as quickly and efficiently as possible. Organisms are merely vessels for their DNA, and the goal of life is to reproduce and pass down genetic code, and to continue existence indefinitely at the molecular level. This is not a particularly quixotic view of life, and most people prefer to think that there is something more. Many prefer to think that they have a purpose other than reproduction, which is

important in a society that revolves around sexuality, but is also seen as a crude act that should be kept private. So humanity established science, which is ultimately exploration and categorization of the natural world. There has been science ever since there was agriculture. When humans discovered that we could purposely plant seeds to grow food, we were implementing science.

It wasn't just good enough to discover and explore, humans had the need to categorize. Often, mythology and theology took the place of science when explaining the phenomena of the natural world. We could never accept that our experiences occurred at random; the idea of chaos was repulsive and frightening. The "wild" was seen as a threat. What we seem to forget is that the natural world is not the "wild" factor, it is we that are the deviants. Humans, with our false sense of superiority, manipulated the elements in a way that no other animal ever has. We have even, in our arrogance, decided that we understand the cosmos and what regulates it. The prompt mentions the breaking of natural law, meaning that one has to decide what constitutes as breaking the laws of nature.

One of the less esoteric examples of breaking natural law would be the concept of the grotesque, which is very relevant in mundane matters, since we encounter the grotesque every day, in many shapes and forms. The grotesque is often classified as something that we encounter that seems out of place or disturbing. It is important to remember that what is considered grotesque is completely mutable. "As our perceptions of the physical world change—as the world itself is changed by technology, pollution, wars, and urbanization—some things which had appeared as distortions are now perceived as commonplace or seen to obey other, previously unknown laws" (Harpham 463). Take for example, old age as seen in humans. Before modern medicine and technology, the average life span was closer to thirty years rather than eighty.

Octogenarians were probably quite startling to encounter, possibly even considered grotesque in a way, with all the physical ailments that accompany the aging process. This extreme age would be seen as breaking the natural law, an oddity of its own kind. In our society, of course, the elderly are commonplace. One can see that the grotesque does not break the laws of nature because the concept itself is based on transient perceptions that change alongside society. It is based upon no substantial natural law, although to us, the grotesque is seen as a perversion of nature, especially when considering deformation of the human body.

The human body itself, along with the body of every other organism, is far more abstract than we realize, even arbitrary. It is driven to a perpetual plethora of subtly asymmetrical and unique shapes, forced by a need for surface area, vascularization, and characteristics required for successful reproduction and survival. We have our form based upon proteins that are coded for specifically by our DNA, which has been shaped by natural selection since the beginning of our species. There are arbitrary factors, such as mutation and epigenetics. Though many mutations are neutral and don't necessarily have an effect on our physiology, there are some that are either positive or negative. Reproduction and the passing down of DNA may seem to be a constant, a natural law in itself, but the fact is that there is never a completely predictable outcome. There will always be outliers, even in selective breeding. The offspring may follow a certain trend, as determined by statistics that analyze the "behavior" of genetics, but there are many ways in which an unpredictable outcome may come about. Take for example, Down syndrome. This genetic mishap occurs as a random event during cell division in early fetal development. Some of the somatic cells, instead of having two copies of chromosome 21, will have three copies of that chromosome, which causes physical and mental differences during that person's development. The extra chromosome occurs purely by chance, with no known behavioral or environmental

factor that triggers or represses its occurrence (“What is Down Syndrome?”). Once again, the laws of nature are shown to be less solid and sedentary than one would think.

Another violation of natural law would be the miracle. This has positive connotations, in contrast to the negative connotations of the grotesque. Both concepts are on opposite extremes, and both catch our attention because they are out of the ordinary. When something is grotesque to us, it seems wrong on a primal level. When an event is miraculous, it seems to have transcended coincidence and taken place most likely because of an outside force. Miracles do not follow the trend of our mundane lives, but from the scientific and nontheistic point of view, they have no driving force. They are purely evidence of the random nature of the universe, but to suppose that they are caused by a higher power because of karma or the will of any god is completely anthropocentric and therefore, arrogant.

The miraculous and the grotesque both seem to break the laws of nature but do not based on their subjective qualities, as well as the subjective nature of the law itself—in other words, what constitutes “normalcy”. Another relevant human construct would be that of the mystical experience. The realm of the mystics is diverse and sprawling. Often, the concept of mysticism is associated with religious branches such as the Kabbalah and Sufism. These branches are seen as esoteric by outsiders, but have much meaning to those partaking in the practice. From the scientific point of view they are like any other religion practice: coping mechanisms that seek meaning in a chaotic universe. These experiences may follow a general trend, especially inside of a culture where there are similar mindsets, but they are unpredictable in their own way. These cases, once again, are far too varying and subjective to constitute any sort of natural law about mystical experiences. These kinds of experiences seem to be contained to their own cultures, especially since the practitioners each connect with the god of their own personal belief, or

experience the non-self and transcendence that is related to other religions, such as Buddhism. Though mystical experiences have a deep level of meaning on an individual level, and possibly include different levels of consciousness, this matter cannot be seen from an objective point of view because there is no way to see into another person's mind. And, often enough, the one who has these experiences admits that they are, ultimately, ineffable. There is no way to truly convey the experience to the outsider, and therefore, it is difficult to analyze scientifically. Institutionalized science has not necessarily debunked the mystical experience, but neither has it provided any evidence that would give these experiences credibility beyond the individual level, where it has personal and spiritual meaning. "From a modern experimentally oriented point of view, unfortunately, the state of evidence directly pertinent to these claims is still unsatisfactory" (Kelly et al. 527).

As humans, we build the world around us based on our experiences, which are incredibly limited on an individual level, and even on a collective level. It can be argued that all humans experience the same world differently, but ultimately, there are forces we are not aware of. Consider the flatworm existing in the mud, before organisms had developed advanced sensory organs. This worm has no way of perceiving the world around it the way we can, but that expansive world is still there. In this way, there could be vast qualities of the universe that we can't perceive because we do not have the capacity to do so. We are limited like the worm, only we are different because we see the worm and determine that it is less aware, supposedly less spiritual than we are, and decide that we do indeed understand how the universe works. And perhaps we do, relative to these organisms with less of a consciousness. But we are still limited to our own sensory organs. We still do not understand dark matter or dark energy, which composes 95% of our universe ("Dark Energy, Dark Matter"). We are good at developing

technology that improves upon our senses, but we can't create new senses. We can make a telescope that sees into the outer reaches of space but it's impossible for us to develop a new type of sense beyond sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell. We can't even begin to picture what that would look or feel like. There are many people who claim to think in the abstract, who believe that there are chemicals that we can synthesize that will expand our consciousness. Take for example lysergic acid diethylamide, commonly known as LSD or acid. This is a powerful mood altering drug, and it has been used for anything from recreation to spiritual exploration to less ethical purposes such as those in the illegal but well known CIA program of the 1970s, Project MK Ultra. Despite its multiple uses, this drug did not help the CIA discover the ultimate mind control drug, and according to the recreational users I have spoken to, the so-called revelations encountered during these experiences are less than satisfactory. They are not credible, they only seem revolutionary at the time of their conception because of the potency of the drug. Our minds bend completely to these chemicals. After all, our brains are organs that function via electro-chemical signals. Anything, in theory, could be induced. This brings to light two critical questions in particular: Can anything, theoretically, be induced in the human brain using synthetic means? If the laws of nature do not apply because they are transient and therefore invalid as laws, what will the future look like when they change?

These are questions that must be examined with an open mind. We already know that psychosis and disconnection with reality can be induced using mind altering drugs. People have claimed to have had transcendental experiences while using these drugs. And if we imagine that natural laws as we know it do not apply, how would the world that we currently experience in such a limited way appear to us then? If people can accept that the universe is arbitrary and expanding, this question could have a role in the development of religion and the paranormal in

the contemporary American imagination. This would be an America that sees the universe in a different light, perhaps even transforming the religious landscape—even erasing it. If everything is random, without a directing force, that would obliterate the possibility of any kind of god, or at least one that cared about human activity. Secular beliefs would take hold on a global level, not just in America. As for the paranormal, it doesn't much have a place in an arbitrary universe either. If there is no "normal" because of subjectivity, nothing can occur outside of said normality. The possibility of no religion and no mysticism paints a bleak picture of America, where the mundane aspect of our lives would seem unbearable. Perhaps it's better after all to retain our coping mechanisms.

These laws of nature, these frail human constructs, are credible in our eyes because they seem to be repeatable. This precision is the basis of scientific inquiry. But we must consider the fact that we are existing in a very, very brief stretch of time; that is, if one believes that time is linear. We may be able to reproduce the same result again and again, but that is only in this brief second of human progress. The universe is old, and we are young. It's constantly changing and burgeoning. So-called laws that hold true now may not later. It seems that the only true constant we have is the certainty of transience. Everything is changing at any given point in time, though that change may be too slow, miniscule, or massive for our senses to register. Dark matter and dark energy, composing almost our entire universe, has yet to be understood, and it may never be if we continue to live unsustainably. What we can be sure of is that there is a massive amount of matter and information that we do not have access to as humans. Like the primitive worm, we have no true comprehension of reality, and only a short amount of time in a universe that leans toward entropy.

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