
Darwin and the Mechanical Philosophy: Likening Nature to Artifice

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Abstract

Session: "Charles Darwin and the Scientific Revolution (Andrew Inkpen, Richard G. Delisle, Richard A. Richards, Ron Amundson)" Many scholars of the early modern period explain the rise of modern science, and in particular the rise of experimentalism, during the scientific revolution as intimately tied to the collapse of an ancient distinction between nature and artifice. Pre-modern natural philosophy, it is claimed, was the study of nature on its own terms or in its due course. The innovation of modern science was to study nature, as Francis Bacon put it, "constrained, moulded, translated, and made as it were new by art and the hand of man." This innovation, however, presupposed a new understanding of nature itself: nature as artifice, as like a highly wrought machine. For instance, in order for his experimental apparatus, the air-pump, to say anything about nature, Robert Boyle had to argue that what happened in the air-pump's chamber could stand for what happened in nature. This may seem like a fairly uncontroversial inference to us now but it was the product of years of debate about how we learn about the natural world and what it-nature-is like. The question was, can artifice stand for nature? Boyle's answer was yes. Interestingly, as with the scientific revolution, the Darwinian revolution has involved a significant amount of discussion pertinent to the relation between artifice and nature; especially, for example, with regards to the relation between domestication-or artificial selection-and natural selection. In this paper I explore the ways in which nature and artifice are likened in these two revolutions.

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