

UNIVERSAL UNITY

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Philosophy

Universal Unity and Rationalism

The Enlightenment was characterised by a predominant confidence in the potential to benefit from an empirical, rational understanding of the divine creation of a rational universe.¹ However, affirmation of the divine creation of a rational universe provided a basis for a revolution against the optimism in the validity of empirical investigation. In romanticism one can identify an appreciation of the apparently unique, arbitrary nature of complex interactions which characterise dynamic alterations of instantaneous circumstances and a rejection of the human potential to benefit from identification of a rational order or purpose in the universe.² It is difficult to reconcile the optimism in rational identification of universal order which characterised the rationalism of the Enlightenment with the anarchy of the interactionism that characterised romanticism, but I think modern conceptions of nature provide the potential for just such a reconciliation. Modern conceptions of the fundamental nature of the universe suggest that each and every part of the universe is an inextricable reflection of the whole and that it is possible to identify patterns of order that are present in various processes of apparent chaos. That is, in the apparent chaos of the abundant interactions which create every unique situation, it is possible to identify patterns which are common throughout the universe and so it is possible to understand the ways in which the universe evolves and to estimate the evolution of the universe so as to better understand its divine purpose and our part in it.

Rationalism in the Enlightenment

During the Enlightenment, it was commonly believed that a divine consciousness created an independent, perpetual, material universe (according to rational principles) which would self-actualise divine potentials.³ As part of the universe thus created, rationalists of the Enlightenment believed that people occupied a special place. As sentient and rational beings, with a soul which is implanted into a material universe which is intrinsically rational, people were seen as beings closely associated with the divine creator and created to influence the universe by understanding and enhancing the ways in which divine potentials are actualised.⁴ In particular, people were seen as sentient, rational beings destined to understand the divine, rational processes which determine from what they have come, what they are, and what they are destined to be.

During the Enlightenment, the universe was conceived of as a closed system of a vast amount of matter, all of which operated (on an intricate level) in much the same way as a clock. That is, it was believed that direct divine intervention concluded with the initial creation and that sentient, rational beings were created to understand their role in the rational creation and the purpose of the universe by means of identification of the nature of the material (or "cogs") which determined the apparent movement in the universe. In particular, induction of generalities from numerous observations and explanations of appearances derived from investigation of the fundamental entities of matter were

¹The attitudes and beliefs that are associated with the Enlightenment originated during the late fifteenth century as science developed and produced knowledge and practices which threatened the validity of dogmatic religious beliefs and their promotion (W. Jones, *A History of Western Philosophy*, 2nd ed, rev, vol 4, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1975, pp. 1-9). The attitudes and beliefs of the Enlightenment were substantially developed by the late eighteenth century, but today we are still considering many of the problems of the Enlightenment.

²A. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1961, pp. 288-314.

³R. Collingwood, *The Idea of Nature*, Oxford University Press, London, 1957, pp. 4-9.

⁴Lovejoy, *op cit*, pp. 183-207.

expected to provide the knowledge required to predict the evolution of the universe and to allow people to shape their place in that evolution so as to achieve a heavenly state of being.

Romanticism in the Enlightenment

In contrast to the predominant rationalism of the Enlightenment, a substantial body of thought was critical of the potential to identify order in an apparently chaotic abundance of interactions which made each entity in the universe and each circumstance of each entity unique. Rather than acknowledge the necessity for an analysis of nature as an essentially rational creation, romantics preferred to accept their place in the nature of things as perfectly created (not necessarily according to reason) such that any attempt to exceed natural capacities would fail. According to their faith in the divine creation, they perceived the excessive development of human understanding as a corruption of the divine order, as a denial of the perfection of the divine creation.⁵

Rather than emphasise that their being was closely associated with the divine creator and destined to part-take in the evolution of the universe as cerebral creators, romantics developed an affinity for the secular realm and the necessity of belonging to nature as it is and not as it may be when it is shaped according to a necessarily inadequate human understanding. Romantics professed that each individual is only a corporeal being with a strictly limited capacity to comprehend the purposes of the vast material universe of which it is a very small, but necessary, part. Romantics identified and developed human affections for the complex nature of things as they are, they professed how much better affection for the universe made a person a part of the divine creation. Romantics professed that humanity is best able to fulfil the purpose of the divine creation by absolute immersion in it each and every moment. Rather than ponder abstract (almost alienating) conceptions of order and evolution, romantics preferred an open experience of the moment-to-moment reality of the universe which is unique for each individual. Romantics professed that humanity is destined to suffer during experience of the universe and that any rational attempt to eliminate suffering is a denial that suffering and ecstasy are a necessary part of the perfect fulfilment of the potentials of the divine creation.

Modern Conceptions of Nature

Recent developments in the investigation of the fundamental properties of the universe (i.e., atomic physics) suggest that each part of the universe is an inextricable part of the whole which in many ways embodies characteristics which are prevalent in the universe.⁶ In particular, quantum mechanics postulates that there are no isolated, indivisible entities of matter which necessarily exist eternally. Rather, each aspect of the universe consists of energetic space-time oscillations which are inextricably connected with the whole of the universe such that as any aspect of the universe is transformed there is a necessary transformation of the whole. That is, the universe is a connected whole in which each part is a reflection of the whole, it cannot be understood as a simple machine in which simple parts contribute distinct characteristics to the whole, it is a complex whole in which energetic aspects are at any instant both contributing to the characteristics of the whole and having their characteristics affected by the whole of which they are an inextricable part. Furthermore, the interconnections of the universe are so complex that it is not possible to locate any parts of the whole with any certainty unless one has a simultaneous comprehension of the whole; that is, without an eternal, omnipresent comprehension of the universe it is only possible to calculate a probability of the presence or absence of a part at a particular time.

⁵For example, see J. Rousseau, *First and Second Discourses*, R. Masters trans., St. Martins Press, New York, 1964.

⁶For details, see F. Capra, *The Turning Point*, pp. 63–89.

Mathematicians have recently conceived of the universe as consisting of repetitive patterns which are related to the apparent chaos of incredibly complicated structures and processes. In fractal geometry, it is possible to identify simple relationships between entities which produce incredibly complicated structures when the relationships between the entities are infinitely multiplied (e.g., the Mandelbrot set). Furthermore, many such structures resemble natural phenomena such as mountain ranges, coastlines, and the fronds of ferns. Moreover, recent estimations of the propensity for matter to assume various patterns of interaction suggest that there are some consistent coefficients (called strange attractants) which describe the ways in which dynamic interactions (e.g., various amounts of water dripping from a tap) tend to assume various degrees of complexity. That is, strange attractants are adequate descriptors of a variety of tendencies in which the complexity of interactions increase or decrease. The potential to identify simple relationships in complex structures and processes suggests that the complex interactions of the universe are adequately described by simple, abstract principles.

The consequence of these modern insights is that human understanding of the universe is necessarily restricted because people are a part of the whole in which their characteristics contribute to and are shaped by the whole. In other words, there appears to be no way of obtaining an understanding of the universe which is independent of human experience and the necessary or perceived role of humanity in the universe. However, this doesn't mean that an objective understanding of the universe is not possible, for human existence is a part of a material reality and not a mere cognitive illusion. Thus, modern insights suggest that simple, abstract principles describe a diversity of apparently chaotic but objective experiences, if not in exquisite detail at least such that a simple, rational understanding of the tendencies of evolution may enhance human adaptation.

Conclusion

The conclusion that may be proposed is this; that the rationalism of the Enlightenment and the romantic criticism of that rationalism both make significant contributions to our understanding of the universe and our place in it. Firstly, modern insights suggest that the naive simplicity of the rationalist's conceptions of the universe are not valid but that empirical investigation and rational insights can provide simple principles which describe general patterns present in the apparent chaos of the universe. Secondly, modern insights suggest that these patterns are prevalent in the universe because the universe is an intricately connected entity in which each aspect is impossible to locate with certainty due to the necessary limitations of human understanding; so the romantic faith in the perfection of the divine creation and the necessary limitations of human understanding are very important contributions to human understanding.⁷ Thus, human understanding of the universe as a rational entity is possible and to some extent reliable but, at this point, it is wise to acknowledge the limitations of human understanding and the proper fulfilment of divine potentials via the development of human affections for the nature of the universe of which we are but a small, important part.

Bibliography

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⁷I shall assume here that the universe is a divine creation perfectly designed to actualise divine potentials, for this assumption is not of central importance to this essay. One may assume that the universe is a divine creation (rational or otherwise) and still argue about the valid utility of human reason.

Lovejoy, A. O., *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1961.

Rousseau, J., *First and Second Discourses*, R. Masters trans., St. Martins Press, New York, 1964.