

Explicating Imperfection

"All perfection in this life is accompanied by a measure of imperfection, and all our knowledge contains an element of obscurity." - Thomas A. Kempis

The idea that knowledge inherently contains obscurity directly conflicts with Robert Boyle's perception of knowledge as scientific fact. Boyle explicitly describes in his book, A Free Enquiry into the Vulgarly Received Notion of Nature, how true facts are to be determined through empiricism. Empiricism allows for the declaration of irrefutable knowledge through the use of experimentation. The success of experimentation depends upon perception through the senses and the rationality of the mind. Thus, a true fact ^{can} stand the test of observation by anyone, at any time, in any place, ~~and~~ ^{In this sense,} facts are local instances of God's greater laws of the universe. We can begin to question Boyle's ideas ^{when he asserts} that man can never know what an event actually is; the essence of some events is ^{relegated to} reserved for only God's knowledge. Boyle asserts that God created the universe with his infinite knowledge and perfection, yet Kempis states that worldly perfection is unattainable since it always comes with a bit of imperfection. The contrast raises the question: why would God, the embodiment of perfection and knowledge, create an imperfect universe? Boyle would argue that God's design for the universe was perfect, and it is ^{man's} our duty as either scientists or philosophers to unravel and comprehend God's design. In Boyle's view, the universe is a giant automaton, and each successively smaller part of the universe is a local machine. It is mankind's purpose to discover the universal laws of mechanics that govern the machines by observing their causes and effects. Seventy years after Boyle's publication, Voltaire, the famous French philosopher, published his philosophical tale, Candide. In the story, Voltaire satirizes empiricism and the mechanistic view of the world. Dr. Pangloss, one of the philosophical characters in the story, upholds Leibniz's philosophy that we live in the best of all possible worlds. If God created the universe with the tools of his perfection and wisdom, why shouldn't ^{thus} ours be the best of all possible worlds? Through ~~his~~ satirical techniques ~~the~~ ^{the} character, Dr. Pangloss, Voltaire illuminates some imperfections in mankind, and he further calls into question the mechanistic laws of the universe which Boyle staunchly supported as products of God's design. In fact, Boyle's inability to clearly delineate the relationship between man and God shows that he can not perfectly reconcile religion and empirical science. Voltaire uses the incongruities in Boyle's philosophy to portray the world as riddled with imperfections and unexplainable events.

Boyle's description of the universe as a great automaton expresses a deterministic quality in the events of the universe. Boyle asserts that the goal of natural philosophy is to accurately explicate local events governed by the greater laws of the universe. Boyle emphasizes at the end of Section I, "Though I shall here consider the world but as the great system of things corporeal, as it once really was towards the