

PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SCIENCE:

LAUDAN AND THE OVERTON DECISION

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INTRODUCTION

In his essay “Science at the Bar – Causes for Concern”, Larry Laudan argues that the decision in the McLean v. Arkansas case made by Judge Overton may have been right, but was made for the wrong reasons. Laudan considers the victory over the Creationists as “hollow, for it was achieved only at the expense of perpetuating and canonizing a false stereotype of what science really is and how it works” (Ruse 355).

This essay will explain some of his arguments for this claim and then comment on and criticize Laudan’s opinion.

LAUDAN ON THE DECISION

In his decision, Judge Overton relies on arguments presented by the Evolutionist party that try to distinguish Creationism from accepted sciences like physics, chemistry, and biology (including evolutionary theory) by showing that Creation science fails according to certain principles and characteristics that are inseparable from science (Ruse 318).

Laudan points out that these arguments fall into two categories: one concerned with ways to prove or disprove a theory, the other one describing the explanatory ability

and thus the fecundity of a hypothesis. Laudan comes to the conclusion that these criteria are not precise and do not necessarily differentiate Creationism from a science; on the contrary, the use of them even deprives the Evolutionist's side of the most effective arguments against Creationism being taught in schools (Ruse 351).

The supporters of the Evolutionist cause state that a theory has to be falsifiable to be scientific, and then assert that Creationist theories are dogmatic and thus not falsifiable. Laudan, however, observes that Creationists make various claims that can be tested and have already proven to be false, providing the fossil records as just one example. He therefore argues that the Evolutionists and Judge Overton should not have tried to mark Creation science as unscientific; they should have confronted the claims with evidence gained from actual experiments and concluded that it was weak science, because the claims were false (Ruse 352).

According to Laudan, it is easy to see that Creationists will soon exploit these weak standards for science and, apparently with the approval of the scientific community, declare Creation science a true science (Ruse 354).

When discussing the second category, Laudan finds the formulation in the Overton decision rather vague; however, he concludes the Opinion tries to establish the claim that "it is inappropriate and unscientific to postulate the existence of any process or fact which cannot be explained in terms of some known scientific laws" (Ruse 353). Since the Creationists themselves say the Noachian flood is supernatural, Judge Overton does not have to prove this himself. The decision still attempts to do so but fails to demonstrate how exactly to show that such an event cannot be explained by natural laws. Laudan finds this "simply outrageous" (Ruse 354) and sees this part of the Opinion to be

contradictory to the first category, since the claim that scientific laws could not have governed the Noachian flood seems dogmatic and not falsifiable as well.

CONCLUSION

When considering Laudan's claim, I have to agree with him on some parts of his argumentation. If one sets weak standards for science that make it impossible to distinguish weak sciences from actual ones, it might be better to acknowledge the scientific nature of the claims that Creationists make. This approach would enable Evolutionists to refute Creation science by using natural laws and observations. Therefore, Laudan considers the discussion whether Creation science actually is a science or not to be unnecessary. In his opinion, the fact that many of its claims can simply be disproved, like the young age of the Earth, gives reasons enough not to teach it in schools.

The reply put forth by Michael Ruse, however, also seems to have a sound basis: Teaching a weak science is not unconstitutional. While it may be theoretically unnecessary to clearly show that Creation science is not a science, in order to keep it out of classrooms it definitely is crucial to declare it non-scientific.

I generally agree with Laudan's view that observations point towards Creation science being false; in the practical world, however, this approach may be too idealistic. Using Ruse's approach might not be absolutely correct, but the end justifies the means.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ruse, Michael, ed. *But is it Science?: The Philosophical Question in The Creation Evolution Controversy*. New York: Prometheus Books, 1996.