

Friedrich Christian Lesser, *Testaceo-theologia, or Fundamental Proof of the Existence and the Most Perfect Characteristics of a Divine Being* (1744)

Abstract

In the Early Modern period, science and religion did not exist in opposition but rather enjoyed a productive relationship. Lutheran theologians, in particular, understood the study of nature as a type of worship, as a way of understanding the divine creation. The study of nature was also understood as reading the “Book of Nature.” So-called physico-theology looked for divine explanations for natural phenomena. For example, fossils in mountains were understood as a result of the flood.

In the introduction to his *Testaceo-theologia*, Lutheran theologian Friedrich Christian Lesser (1692–1754) justifies the study of small and common natural specimens, which were hitherto regarded as unworthy of scientific study. As he points out, many people, even scholars, took a dismissive approach toward small and common beings, such as snails as crustaceans. According to Lesser, however, even the smallest being was a divine miracle deserving of careful study.

Source

Introduction

On Testaceo-theologia

§.1. When the Holy Scripture states something remarkable about spiritual things, it usually proclaims: He who has ears to hear, let him hear. A reasonable Christian, when he beholds the open theater of the world and its manifold creatures according to their various admirable characteristics may well justifiably proclaim: He who has eyes to see, let him see! For reasonable people have an obligation to observe with great attentiveness the creatures that God’s wisdom—as evidence of its omnipotence, wisdom, and goodness—presents to them, because His wisdom did not bring them to light so that people should close their eyes to them. Rather, just as a stage is opened so that the spectators can see what happens on it, great God has placed the creatures on earth and told the light to go forth from the darkness so that they stand revealed to human eyes and are appreciated by those eyes. Although people are obligated to carefully observe even God’s lowliest creatures, most people with seeing eyes are so blind that they not only pass over—with a condemnable lack of attentiveness—the creatures that appear before their eyes daily and which seem to them either lowly or useless, but, when they are shown them, look with such insensitivity and indifference that not even the slightest admiration for those creatures is aroused in them. It is astonishing that so many people do not even properly observe the creatures of the world, in which one can and should see the deepest knowledge, the manifold wisdom, and the unlimited omnipotence of God, as in a mirror. They live in the world and yet are strangers there, just as if they were outside the world and had not yet seen anything in it. They are like travelers who travel through a beautiful city at night but afterwards cannot say what it looked like. And it is for this reason that most people do not regard shellfish, such as snails and crustaceans, as deserving even the slightest study but rather contemptuously consider them to be useless castings of the earth and water, or playthings of irrational children.

[....]

§.7. Nevertheless, there are very many people who heedlessly pass by many creatures for the reasons cited and do not even dignify them with a glance, to say nothing of contemplation. And so it goes with the shellfish or snails as well. This indifference would have been forgivable among the ignorant rabble, partly because many live in countries that are far away from the ocean and therefore have no opportunity to see the many kinds of shellfish (although they could devote more careful study to various land and freshwater snails when they came across them), partly because they consider these animals lower than other land and water animals. If only people who consider themselves more intelligent than others did not, in their conceit, regard those people who study these animals more closely as base on account of their very nature and seek to ridicule them. It has happened more than once that alleged scholars, after seeing these and other natural creatures in my small cabinet of curiosities, have wondered why I preserved such things?[1] However, these individuals do not think that the vilest little animal is to be regarded as a natural marvel (if I may say so), and that it is endowed with such characteristics and artistic parts that only an infinite power and wisdom could have created. The smallest snail, which is barely as big as the head of a pin or a grain of barley, is so incomparably created, with such delicate, artistic and regular parts that neither the greatest monarch with all his dicta and orders can accomplish anything similar, nor can the most skillful artist imitate it in every detail.[2] Great God has placed each and every creature, consequently even snails, before reasonable people as a mirror and witness to his infinite power and inscrutable wisdom for reasonable observation. No other creatures can assess the works of the Creator. The sun lights the earth with its golden rays, but it knows nothing about it. The animals grow and live, but they do not think about where their life and breath come from. A lion does not know its strength, a nightingale does not know its voice, a beautiful butterfly does not know its beauty, and a feeding caterpillar does not know what gives it its nourishment. Therefore, the human being, on whom God has bestowed reason, should properly use that reason to observe all God's creatures in praise of the creator.

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NOTES

[1] Once a person, who was otherwise not unintelligent, asked me what kind of nonsense I was collecting. But I gave him this answer: As great God considered it worthwhile to create these things, which the person gave such an inappropriate name, I, too, consider them worthy of being collected by intelligent people who recognize the master in the work. A more sensible judgment in this matter is made by the worthy Jul[ius] Bernh[ard] von Rohr when he says in his *Phyto-Theologia*, p. 263 (where he speaks of Mr. [René Antoine Ferchault de] Reaumur, Mr. [Johann Leonhard] Frisch, and me): The efforts of these men, which some ignorant people do not appreciate (they even look at such men as though they were in front of playthings or a group of idle people) are not only to be recognized with appropriate thanks but are also to be seen as evidence of God's foresight, which is to be honored insofar as it inspired men who have the desire and aptitude for such efforts and who teach their fellow men many useful truths.

[2] Skilled artists often produce admirable artistic pieces on a small scale. One can read about such examples in Johann Jacob Baier, *Sciagraphia museisui*, p. 25; in William Derham, *Physico-Theology*, L.VIII. C. 4. p.m. [?] 922; in Caspar Friedrich Neickel, *Museographia*, Part II, p. 184. However, if artistic and natural things that are small are viewed through a good magnifying glass, a very great difference between the two is evident. The former seem smooth to the naked eye, but if they are viewed with a magnifying glass, they are, in contrast to small natural creations, twisted and bumpy, whereas the natural ones are smooth. The former have an external appearance like the thing they are supposed to represent but they lack the inner structure of the

limbs and the parts that the latter possess. The former have no movement or only a certain movement so that they always only move in one way, while the latter (if they are not lifeless) have random movement that they can change at will in many ways, depending on the objective of their necessary use.

Source: Friedrich Christian Lesser, *Testaceo-theologia, oder, Gründlicher Beweis des Daseyns und der vollkommensten Eigenschaften eines göttlichen Wesens aus natürlicher und geistlicher Betrachtung der Schnecken und Muscheln zur gebührender Verherrlichung des grossen Gottes und Beförderung des ihm schuldigen Dienstes ausgefertigt*. Leipzig, 1744, pp. 1–10.

Translation: Kathleen Dell'Orto

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