



Philip Freneau

(1752-1832)

On the Uniformity and Perfection of Nature (1815)

On one fix'd point all nature moves,
Nor deviates from the track she loves;
Her system, drawn from reason's source,
She scorns to change her wonted course.

Could she descend from that great plan
To work unusual things for man,
To suit the insect of an hour --
This would betray a want of power.

Unsettled in its first design
And erring, when it did combine
The parts that form the vast machine,
The figures sketch'd on nature's scene.

Perfections of the great first cause
Submit to no contracted laws,
But all-sufficient, all-supreme,
Include no trivial views in them.

Who looks through nature with an eye
That would the scheme of heaven descry,
Observes her constant, still the same,
In all her laws, through all her frame.

No imperfection can be found
In all that is, above, around,
All, nature made, in reason's sight
Is order all, and *all is right*.

ANALYSIS

Compare the last lines of the first Epistle of Alexander Pope's "Essay on Man" (1732):

All Nature is but Art, unknown to thee;
All Chance, Direction, which thou canst not see;
All Discord, Harmony, not understood;
All partial Evil, universal Good:
And, spite of Pride, in erring Reason's spite,
One truth is clear, *Whatever is, is right*.

More simply than Pope had done in Britain years before, Freneau defines the deism that prevailed among some Founding Fathers--including Jefferson--and other educated people during the Enlightenment of the 18th century, called the Age of Reason. The deists felt liberated from organized religion and free to be absolutely rational, as exemplified by Thomas Paine in *The Age of Reason Part I* (1797). After 1720 Calvinism waned in New England and the national culture expanded to include more regions, New York and Virginia in particular, leading up to the Revolution in 1776. During the 18th century optimistic faith in Reason and progress largely displaced the gloomy ideology of Calvinism.

Deism is traced from *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695) by John Locke. Influenced by the physics of Sir Isaac Newton, deists believed in a mechanical universe analogous to a watch—"the vast machine." God is the maker, "the great first cause" and "reason's source." Like the Calvinists, the deists saw God as the almighty creator of All. Calvinists believed in predestination, whereas deists believed nature is predestined by "all her laws" but that humans have free will through Reason. The Calvinist God was ever present, whereas the deist deity had departed after creation and was leaving us alone. Calvinists saw the world as fallen like humanity, whereas deists saw the world as perfect like God. Calvinists thought humans were totally depraved, whereas deists saw each human as "the insect of an hour" yet Godlike insofar as he exercises his Reason--perhaps even perfectible. Advocating deism at length in *The Age of Reason*, Paine displays (much like Freud later in *The Future of an Illusion* and many Postmodernist atheists since), the limitations of pure Reason: a dissociated vertical consciousness out of touch with the spiritual dimension of humanity. Deism had already been subjected to decisive criticism by David Hume in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1776) and by Immanuel Kant in *Religion Within the Limits of Mere Reason* (1793).

"On the Uniformity and Perfection of Nature" exhibits all 16 of the Neoclassical aesthetic values: such as clarity, decorum, proportion and "order"--affirmed in the last line as a characteristic of the universe designed by God. The faculty of Reason subsumes the values of logic and intellect and is the supreme psychological authority, as conscience was later to the Victorians. The uniformity of natural laws—"constant, still the same, / In all her laws, through all her frame"--is seen as evidence that the universe is rationally ordered by a prime mover: "On one fix'd point all nature moves." The sense of order is conveyed also by the conventional form of the poem and by its traditional scientific metaphor of the universe as a vast machine. The measured rhythms and rhyming convey the values of accuracy, symmetry, balance, harmony and grace. The declarative tone makes the couplets resound with the authority of a rational God.

Michael Hollister (2015)