



Camel Chews Miracle Tree

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<https://peacefulscience.org/articles/camel-chews-miracle-tree/>



In Dr Swamidass' fable of the 100 year old tree, truth is not in dispute – God *actually* created what I will call “Miraculous Tree.” That makes the scientist flat wrong about its age, though perhaps justified in his error, *given the conceptual limitations of science*. Let's explore that before talking about God's motives.

One conceptual limitation of science is that it excludes consideration of “God's motives,” which occupy the excluded category of “final causation”, the end(s) for which an event occurs.¹ Final causation muddled mediaeval science because it meant speculating on God's intentions, so it was excluded as intractable, or (in naturalistic materialism) non-existent.² Most importantly, “science does not do final causes” – keep that firmly in mind.³

Generally, however, science restricts itself to efficient causes (cause and effect) and material causes (what things are made of), making deductions and predictions from the patterns it finds. Thus trees are made of wood, have rings, etc. Our scientist sees that Miracle Tree consists of usual materials, and has what he might loosely call the “form” of a normal tree, so deduces a chain of efficient causes going back a century. This is exactly how science works.

But he has forgotten that a tree's “form” includes its *whole* nature, not just its present configuration – it springs from seed, acquires rings annually, etc. So although Miracle Tree *appears* like a tree, its true form is entirely different (appearing from nowhere last week). His science has been outdated by a new phenomenon, the tree-without-a-history. In some other world, *all* trees might be like Miracle Tree: spontaneous generation would be the “natural” cause, and growing for 100 years the anomaly.

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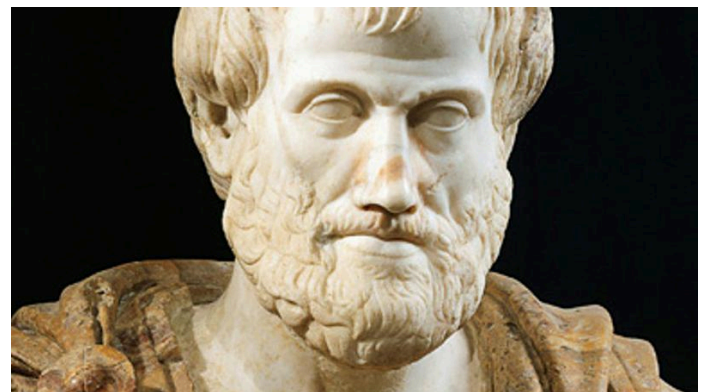
1. This has roots in the four Aristotelian types of causation, rejected by early modern science, but helpful in this conversation. Feser, Edward, *Aquinas*, Oxford: One World 2009, p.17-23.
2. It is still unconsciously retained in ideas like “function”, and less coherently in phrases like “evolutionary strategy.”
3. Also excluded was “formal cause”, the “substantial form” that determines something's properties. For example, the notion that a “Form” was deemed superfluous, and the results of natural laws acting on inert atoms became simply the sum of atoms in motion. Yet form too hides in “universals” like “tree” – our scientist assumed it in pronouncing on the one-off Miracle Tree.

Why did God create Miracle Tree (its final cause)? *Scientifically*, the question is meaningless, because finality is excluded from science. It is equally unscientific to claim *lack of purpose* for it or any tree. A scientist suggesting that God is hiding is doing pseudo-theology. Which brings us to the real theologian in the tale.

He infallibly knows the nature of Miracle Tree. But theologians, unlike mystics or prophets, have no more direct access to the mind of God than scientists. Their proper job (from a Reformed perspective) is to interpret revealed Scripture. Our theologian's certainty must be because the Miracle Tree is incontrovertibly mentioned as “*that Tree which is to come in the last days*,” in the (fictional) Letter to the Ephiscans 23:8.

The point is that God has not hidden the truth, but revealed it long ago to all who can read. The scientist is as capable as the theologian of consulting Ephiscans, and would see why science's assumptions excluded the truth in this case. Perhaps he could then remedy his methodological final-cause deficit, by reading what the tree is *for*. It would be hubristic to assume that God was hiding his work from dendrologists when the world possesses Ephiscans.

There was no divine deception – the scientist himself removed both formal and final causation from his methodology, blinding him to the possibility of unique forms involving novel efficient causes, and rendering the very question “Why would God do this?” unscientific.



Aristotle (384–322 BC) was a Greek philosopher of foundation importance to western thought.

Four causes refers to an influential principle in Aristotelian thought whereby explanations of change or movement are classified into four fundamental types of answer to the question “why?” (caption quoted from Wikipedia). This is the framework Garvey uses to explain the purpose and limits of science.

God, as the theologian knew, was upfront about making Miracle Tree a special case.

Another potential error is that our scientist may mis-state the problem as one “created” tree opposed to all other trees with “natural causes”. But the theologian will point out the Christian teaching that *all* trees are created, albeit only Miracle Tree was created by miraculous means.

Even if tree growth demonstrates an unbroken causal chain, God’s *purposes* for them remain beyond science. Some are obvious, and *almost* scientific. Trees exist to survive and reproduce. This is the limited “teleology” that Asa Gray attributed to natural selection, to Darwin’s joy.⁴

But trees are also purposed to serve ecosystems and the biosphere, vital elements of Creation. They provide habitats, food, etc. Their forms – the densities of their rings, their growth cycle, their reproduction – contribute to these roles. So their structure is not just an artefact of the efficient causes that formed them, which biology studies, but enables all the roles willed by God, even beyond the biological: Alfred Wallace argued that the diverse properties of woods⁵ constitute divine provision for mankind – a theological judgement, of course.

Considered providentially, the Old Testament Palm of Deborah was created (naturally) for particular purposes, like the miraculous shrub that sprung up overnight to shelter Jonah. One particular tree is immortal because Jesus cursed it as barren; another is forever remembered by children as the hiding place of Zacchaeus (Judges 4:5; Jonah 4:6; Mark 11:20-21; Luke 19:4).

4. Gilson, Étienne, *from Aristotle to Darwin and Back Again*, San Francisco, Ignatius 1984, p.99.

5. Wallace, Alfred Russel, *the World of Life*, London, Chapman & Hall 1910, p.325ff.

References

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four_causes

<http://www.potiphar.jongarvey.co.uk>

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So creation is as fundamental to ordinary trees as to Miracle Trees. And it’s no secret, being advertised throughout the Bible, and instinctively grasped by everyone not taught to think a-teleologically. *The reason for this universal but limited self-advertisement, Scripture says, is to prepare people for the self-revelation of God in Christ, the Logos of a Creation manifestly pointing to divinity* (Jn. 1:1-12; Col. 1:15-20; Heb. 1:1-3: cf. Rom 1.20; Acts 14:15-18; Ps. 19.1-4 & 7-11; Ps.29 (with Rom. 10.17-18).

All this applies to human evolution. Efficient causes are a mere fraction of how God creates. Science could only give part of the story. Infinitely more consists of formal and final causation – outside science – even at the genomic level. “Functional” genes represent superficial “Asa Gray” teleology. But though parts of the genome may appear functionally useless, and its changes stochastic, this may conceal many final causes: perhaps material for future evolution, benefits for other species, limitation of the excessive spread of the species, and who knows what. Least likely is “to keep God hidden from scientists.”

We are asked to explore God’s final purposes for the 100 Year Old Tree. No such tree exists, so no such purpose exists. But if it did, science would be blind to God’s intent simply because this *is* a final purpose. The theologian might (from the fictional Ephiscans 23:8) know its *function*, as a portent perhaps, but would have no idea why God made it so like a normal tree. Neither scientist nor theologian – nor even philosopher – can say why God might create mankind through near-neutral mutations or junk DNA rather than in some other way.

For that – the inner counsel of the triune God who transcends his creation in every way – is where the true mystery and hiddenness of God lies. The *existence* of God as Creator is, by contrast, an open secret.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four_causes#Final_explanation

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four_causes#Efficient_explanation

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four_causes#Material_explanation

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asa_Gray

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