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2019

Review of Lisa Sideris, _Consecrating Science_

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/mary_jane_rubenstein/51/

In the beginning, there was nothing. Nothing, that is, except the laws of physics operating on a quantum vacuum, whose random fluctuations one dayless day produced a mad rush of energy that gradually cooled into particles, atoms, stars, and planets. Eventually, in the suburbs of an ordinary spiral galaxy, nowhere in particular, one planet eventually developed water, amoebas, grasses, gophers, and eventually the most complex species ever to emerge. Homo sapiens: the crown of creation, the knower of the journey that brought him here, the being in and as whom the universe becomes conscious. “We are,” Carl Sagan taught us in the original Cosmos series, “a way for the universe to know itself.”

This “Universe Story” or “Epic of Evolution” is the critical focus of Lisa Sideris’s fine new book, Consecrating Science: Wonder, Knowledge, and the Natural World. As Sideris demonstrates, this 13.8 billion-year-old cosmic narrative has become, in the hands of a prominent subset of the science-and-religion crowd, “a sacred story, a common creation myth for the world and for all people” (2). From thinkers as wide-ranging as Teilhard de Chardin, E. O. Wilson, and Richard Dawkins to naturalists like Brian Swimme, Loyal Rue, Ursula Goodenough, John Grim, and Mary Evelyn Tucker, The Universe Story becomes a myth we can believe in, packed with all the truth of science and all the power of religion. For its proponents, the story effectively enacts the scientific consummation of religion, whose outmoded, culturally specific myths must give way to the one history we all allegedly share. United by their common place in the Epic of Evolution, humanity can overcome our petty differences and live in harmony with our earthly—even cosmic—home.

The trick, then, is to get our fellow humans to sign onto this story: to teach them to appreciate the delicate intricacy of atomic, cellular, and galactic structures; the dazzling harmony of solar systems; and above all, the astonishing human product of this long cosmic journey. And as Sideris demonstrates, the
inculcative mechanism for this universal scientific mythos turns out to be wonder. If we can just convince the people to be amazed, the thinking goes, then they will turn their allegiances from religion to science and from sectarianism to globalism. As Sideris puts it, “A awe at the unfolding story of the universe…will confer a shared sense of belonging and obligation [to] the natural world” (2). The book, then, orbits elliptically around two critical foci: the Epic of Evolution and the affect of wonder. Ultimately, Sideris’s conceptual analysis of the latter enables her to expose the ethical limits of the former.

The argument, in short, is that proponents of the Universe Story have got their wonder wrong. Rather than encouraging an appreciation for the mysterious world we inhabit and compose, the “new cosmologists” attempt to impose amazement at the stuff they already understand. Theirs is a “wonder” at the known rather than the unknown, at the capacities of science rather than the productions of nature and, as such, can only truly be attained by human beings with advanced degrees in the natural sciences. “An option that remains open to the nonscientist,” Sideris continues, “is to wonder at the scientist who understands (and can properly wonder at) things beyond the reach of the layperson” (75). Just as St. Augustine berated the astronomers of his day for directing to themselves the admiratio they ought to direct to God, Sideris accuses the new cosmologists of usurping the wonder we all ought to direct to nature. Under such a regime, she argues, nature is eclipsed by the human capacity to understand it, until “the scientist becomes the final object of reverie” (44).

Sideris’s concern with such “purified scientific wonder” (147) seems four-fold. First, she doubts its basic effectiveness: “A as anyone who has raised a child can attest,” she cautions, “people seldom feel gratitude simply because they are instructed that they should, in light of certain facts about their existence” (98). Second, she worries about such wonder’s elitism, not only because it is only fully available to the (over)educated, but also because the overeducated often seem to be faking it, covering up the “truth” of meaninglessness with a strategic drumming-up of populist wonder “in order to keep anomic, despair, and social chaos at bay” (100). Third, Sideris accuses this sort of wonder of trivializing and infantilizing “religion,” which is to say any myth other than its own. And finally, she argues throughout the book that this form of mythopoeic wonder is fundamentally anthropocentric, directed as it is toward the existence, operation, and products of the human mind rather than the existence, operation, and products of “nature itself” (7).

Arising as it does in the midst of scientistic denigrations of “religious” narcissism, such anthropocentrism might be seen as merely ironic and unreflective were it not for the role such a metaphysic continues to play in the face of escalating ecological disaster. Considering the scope and severity of anthropogenic climate change, it is perplexing at best and revolting at worst to find a cadre of scholars so committed to lauding “humanity” as the biotic culmination and technological savior of creation. Indeed, insofar as it reinscribes the specifically white
and wealthy dominion that has caused the crisis in the first place, Sideris worries that “the new cosmology is easily co-opted as an ideal companion myth for Anthropocene boosters” (144).

As an alternative to such instrumentalized, instrumentalizing “wonder,” Sideris offers the affective naturalism of Loren Eiseley, Annie Dillard, and especially Rachel Carson, whose wonder responds to lived experience rather than calculation, mystery rather than mastery, the that of things rather than their how, nature rather than the knowledge thereof, and the more-than-human rather than the scientist. For Sideris, moreover, Carson’s willingness to admit and even admire that which eludes her provides a model of an ethic of humility and respect as distinct from the “arrogant” showmanship of the new cosmologists (189). Like Carson, however, Sideris is committed to the natural sciences even as she exposes their auto-idolatrous tendencies. Ultimately, then, she appeals to what she calls a “‘compatibilist’ account of wonder,” which would persist and even grow in the course of scientific analysis while remaining focused on the natural world rather than its bipedal autocrats and their dazzling noetic achievements (172–73).

The argument of Consecrating Science is clearly articulated, carefully organized, and impeccably substantiated. Sideris’s analysis is consistently generous, nuanced, level-headed, and good-humored. Perhaps most impressively, the book integrates religious studies, science studies, ethics, and critical naturalism into a methodology that somehow remains coherent even in its multivalence. It is, I hope, a testimony to the rigor and importance of the work that it has opened, for this reader at least, some unanswered questions and unfulfilled desires.

The first concerns the concept of “nature,” which scholars like Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour, and Timothy Morton have exposed in differing ways as the product of the culture that projects it qua “natural.” Although one can certainly appreciate the distinction between wondering at the Large Hadron Collider and wondering at a ladybug on a leaf, Sideris never quite explains the distinction she continually makes between “science” and “nature.” Nor does she explain whether her appeal to the latter amounts to a rejection of the rejection of “nature,” a strategic use of the term, or an attempt to reconfigure it.

Regardless of the conceptual status of “nature,” however, the reader is left asking why the new cosmologists jettison it the way they do. What is it that motivates them so continually to relegate forests and oceans and even galaxies to their own knowledge about them? What, apart from an irresistible narcissistic lure, accounts for this steady preference for the knower over the known? My sense is that it might have something to do with the perennial feminization and (dark) racialization of the earth and “her” non-human inhabitants, alongside the hyper-masculinization and depigmentation (via the purportedly neutral categories of reason, experiment, and observation) of “science.” If this is the case, then some eco-feminist, Afro-pessimist, and new materialist analysis might have helped diagnose the problem Sideris seeks to remedy, and point toward new possibilities.
In this last vein, although Sideris offers what she calls an “appropriate” form of wonder as an antidote to its “degraded” cousins, she does not offer alternative stories to the Epic of Evolution. The reader is left suspicious about the new cosmologists’ effort to unite the world under one myth, but unsure of what exactly is wrong with such oneness, and bereft of other ideas. “Isn’t the Epic of Evolution true?” a critic might ask. “Doesn’t it include all people on earth? Are you saying we should all reject the big bang and take up infinite turtles, instead?” At this point, the sympathetic reader is left longing for a socio-cultural analysis of the Western-scientific processes that have produced the 13.8 billion-year-old saga in the first place, of their neocolonial effort to displace all “non-scientific” cosmologies, of their barely-secular recapitulation of missionary monotheism, and finally, of alternative ontologies—in particular, those that call for narrative multiplicity rather than singularity. Might the ecologically minded scholars, practitioners, and popularizers of “big science”—if not the new cosmologists themselves—find helpful alternatives to such Euro-androcentric universalism in the cross-species “kinship” of Donna Haraway, the religio-political “resonance” of William Connolly, the material-discursive “entanglement” of Karen Barad, or the intercultural “perspectivism” of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro? Although their subjects and methodologies differ wildly, each of these scholars argues that the only possible (intra-) agents of ecopolitical transformation would be multiplicities rather than unities, symbioses rather than singularities. An ecotheory of turtles and giants and big and small bangs; of shamans, supercolliders, and sacraments; of everything we have got for the sake of everything we have got left—that sort of mess might be worth the wondering.

doi:10.1093/jaarel/lfz016

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