

J'ACCUSE

As Bishop Berkeley says, the substance of the universe is a thought in the mind of God.

As Sir Arthur Eddington says, "The theory of relativity has passed in review the whole subject-matter of physics. It has unified the great laws which, by the precision of their formulation and the exactness of their application, have won the proud place in human knowledge which physical science holds today. And yet, in regard to the nature of things, this knowledge is only an empty shell — a form of symbols. It is knowledge of structural form, and not knowledge of content. All through the physical world runs that unknown content, which must surely be the stuff of our consciousness.

"Here is a hint of aspects deep within the world of physics, and yet unattainable by the methods of physics. And, moreover, we have found that, where science has progressed the farthest, the mind has but regained from nature that which the mind has put into nature. We have found a strange footprint on the shores of the unknown. We have devised profound theories, one after another, to account for its origin. At last, we have succeeded in reconstructing the creature that made the footprint. And lo! It is our own."

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In the trifling solar corner of the courthouse space
Where the energetic planets eccentrically pursue their lawful paths,
Measuring out irretrievable beats of awesome decree and decay,
The silenced sapiens (almost as many alive as dead)
Stir expectantly
And rise to honor their own entering essence —
The impartial kindly and wrathful judge —
Bound by the greatest law to dispense, as they would, their law.

An embittered dead man, essence too, stands plumbly at this Earthen noblest bar,
Displaying his rueful centuries of fruitless discovery,
Impeccable credentials,
Eager now to invoke exquisite recompense.

At his feet lies full length, dusty and wily, uncoiled and confined,
The chosen culprit.

“If it please the Court,” the dead man says,
“Insisting in death as I insisted in life on precision of proof,
I charge him” — kicking the cage —
“With an obscene act, a perversion of nature.
There was a paradisaical primordial impaction of everything —
Everything everywhere ingeniously arrayed at the seeming center of everything,
Much as it is today —
But these planets and those suns and the dissipated light and the squandered heat
Huddled there with such dense contortion that” —
And he wipes away a saline drop —
“Unparalleled Euclid, conforming his straight postulates to a glimpse of this,
Could fruitlessly have saved two thousand years.
This poison” — kicking the cage — “proximate to everything, pervaded paradise
Which, unable to endure, yielded, with a shudder reverberating still,
Vomited out the galaxies, tainted condensations,

That spiral lazily now in their places but flee still and flee forever,
Each one from each poisoned other.
And in each place” — kicking the cage —
“Futility.” He breaks off, cries and shudders.

The Judge:

Slitherer:

The Prosecutor:

“You have heard the indictment.
How do you plead?”

“Nolo contendere,
Of course.”

“A trick! A trick! “

“We must be sure.
Please state your reasons.”

“I feel guilty.”

“That’s insufficient.”

“You charge me with
misfeasance. I could beat that
rap. What I did was
nonfeasance.”

“That’s not a crime.”

“That will be entered as a
plea of not guilty.”

“Tell him not to kick me.”

“Do not intimidate the defendant.”

“Dead! The primordial body is dead and decomposed,” the dead man says.
“But listen!” And he points to the listening station at Jodrell Bank.
“I show you there the ghost — radiant, perceptible and probative;
Between which decedent substance and that undulating emanation there received
There flourished, from some feeble and improbable neural seed,
An Edenic tree, so fully nurtured by them” —
He sweepingly indicates himself, Newton, Einstein and the others —
“That its demanding roots have at last extracted
The last element’s last atom of inexplicability.
And there it stands, all knowing, and so ripely pregnant and mature
That there comes from there” —

And he kicks the cage where the rapt prisoner squirms in heat —
“The sly seductive stench of his rekindled expulsive lust.”

“Please come less vituperatively to the point —
Less viperishly, if I may put it that way.
My blind eyes see the death but not the deed and not the blame.”

“If it please the Court,
Observe the solitary footprint
Impressed where the tree plunges spacebound through the emptied Earth.
We — Archimedes and the others —
Could not conceive that a Creator would create this tree,
Would tantalize us with its enriching fruit, always some delicious morsel piece withheld,
Would breathe into our brains the hope of disenshrouding
The secret of its palpable sublime design,
And not somewhere leave a trace, an implication, a signature.”

“And so you reconstructed the footprint’s creature
And found him to be Slitherer?”

“If it please the Court, yes, and if it please the Court, no.
We reconstructed the creature, but the footprint is yours.”

“A contemptuous outrage! Release Slitherer forthwith!”

“One moment please, if it please the Court.
I will at the logical place and time
Connect the slimy slinker to his horrendous crime.
Consider first the statute, the law, the second law, of thermodynamics.
“Whosoever,” the dead man starts to read,
But seeing an impatient judicial gesture, he interrupts and says,
“I remind myself that Your Honor, though a layman, knows the law.”

The impartial kindly and wrathful judge pridefully chuckles.
“Yes, indeed, I know the law, and I am specially partial to that law.
Show me one unrequited erg, though you sunder it infinitely,
Produce here” — swinging his arm in universal arc —

“One poor unpaid foot-pound,
Stand it though you will on some enormous denominator,
And I will decree payment, I promise you, precise and prompt.
Yes, indeed, I know that law.”

He leans back chuckling appreciatively until,
Seeing the prosecutor’s haughty smirk,
He leans forward and adds in aspiring confraternal tones,
“Of course I promise nothing on matters quantum.”

“I then place in your Solomonic care this irrefutable exhibit.”
The dead man hands the Judge a book, The Complete History of Science,
And slickly mimics the wistful confraternal tones.

“Your Honor, already thoroughly knowing Chapters 1,2,...(n-1), n,
Will observe now Chapter (n+1),
From whose fresh graphic pages my most vital fluid drips,
Vampirishly sucked by pointed time, that far-thrusting abscissa,
Over which there soars in steep asymptotic ascent
The cumulative curve of foolish footprint study,
The whole expressed in unrequited ergs and unpaid foot-pounds, both,
Not adiabatic, lacking but this Court’s decree,
All of which Your Honor undoubtedly knows so well.

The Judge coughs. “Yes.
Yes, indeed.”

“If it will please the Court,
If the Court feels it will serve those less well informed,
I will restate and simplify the argument.”

“That would be good.”

The dead man, his skin-bare face held fast, twists his torso to the thoughtless throng.
“In the beginning,” he says, “God thought a prodigious thought
To which, seeing it was good, He gave substance.
He turned to another thought, and seeing that turning was good,
He gave motion to substance.
He deemed this good, and He contrived a rule according to which

The creatures which would evolve
Might admire His works, which they did,
But he saw that He had erred, for they discerned His rule
And encroached perilously on His secrets.”

“That’s very clear.
Explain the footprint to them now.”

“God, dismayed, grew angry, but, being just,
He would not deprive them or revoke.
He thereupon thought another thought, and, finding this more potent substance yet,
He moved Himself hence, leaving His footprint,
Which they saw, to which, thinking it His, they gave body.
But they could give it their body only,
Which is to say
That this Honorable Court left that honorable footprint.”

“And now, for them and me,
Connect Slitherer to this.”

The dead man untwists his torso and holds aloft the courthouse scales.
He lays his dead life on one pan and the cage on the other.
“Who now must pay that I arrive obsolescent
At this logical place and time?
(1) Assume primordial paradise. (2) Call it ‘ylem.’ (3) Send Eden in for ylem.
(4) Observe the expulsion. (5) Neglect all factors save the serpent.
(6) Send Darwin in for Genesis. (7) Slitherer’s our man!
Q.E.D.!”

The dead man’s cold constituents dance about,
Clanking a clamorous bony applause.
“I promised precision of proof,” the dead man jubilantly shouts.
In excited excess admiration he climbs a crucifix,
From which he hangs by one arm and calls from this crow’s nest vantage,
“The view’s the same! The view’s the same!
You, Judge, you promised recompense.
Decree now your judicial curse.”

“You prod me.” The Judge discards his robes.
“Is this what you want? Shall I hurl this?”
His charged arm aims a thunderbolt at the cage.
“This retribution, its assassin electrons eagerly awaiting, the ancients devised,
Primitively believing their righteous rabbis and their Levitican code
That they could justly gouge the sin from errant evil eyes.
If this be precision, I owe it at your call.”

The dead man canvasses his cringing constituents and looks up, his bare bones
blushing.

“We have learned much since ancient times,” he says.
“The law prohibits perfect penalty: even parity is dead.”

The Judge lowers the lightning and, donning new robes, says,
“Then join in just adjudication.
With your converging computations, you seize straying light;
You compel it to beam;
You hide its secret refractive amplitudes in distractive virtual images;
You pretend that it is straight;
You are like a lens, collating your proofs,
Bringing them masquerading to a point.
Don’t you remember that I saw you once,
Working swiftly within some wasting stadium’s western stands,
Furtively inserting statistical graphite rods into unsuspecting fundamental uncertainty?
But those 100,000 Asiatic dead” — pointing to rows of reserved seats —
“Prove one thing only: there’s no precision.”

The dead man shuffles.
“That’s true,” he says. “You have made that point.”

The Judge smiles and studies the footprint.
“I wonder, when Pope Pius died — any one of them —
Did he in that poised moment see the creature?”
He reads for a while, silently, from the statute.
“The second law is clear.
Even precision-stripped, your proof stands,
A powerful display of impotent penetration,

For which futile effort someone somewhere must truly pay.
This guileful prisoner, flaunting his guilt in pretended feeling,
Though saved from this” — he points to the lightning —
“Must full bear the cost of this” — he points to The Complete History of Science.
“I so declare.”

The Judge sees haughty smirks from Brandeis and others, and he quickly adds,
“The memory of man runneth not to the contrary.”

The cold constituents mildly applaud.

“Decree now your judicious curse,” the dead man says.

“Help me fit it.

This coursing cosmos starts impenetrably at ylem,

The galaxies fleeing.

What healing haven will they reach?”

The dead man puts a drop of ink into a glass of water.

“It’s a simple matter of entropy: Eden is gone forever.

Every prodigal Golden Gate Bridge, every improvident Grand Canyon,

Emissively squandering their discrete dwindling photons,

Gasping and ruing too late their misspent lives,

Will sink in absolute degradation to dreaded zero,

Their noiseless fall rippling silently in galactic stillness.

When that feeble echo exhausts its energy in morbid poison spasm,

Time, like Zeno’s arrow, will stop, frozen to the instant.

The cold cosmos, an unkept motionless monument,

Will cling paralytically to that unalterable, dead, inexorable moment.”

“But what about this?” The Judge disinters a box and flings it open.

He tenderly removes the dead man’s mother’s swollen womb.

He slashes and strips away the red, throbbing, raw, rich walls.

“See this adventurer, put ashore here stealthily at night,

Cohabiting with the natives, disseminating his wild meaning.

See him organizing alien cells, fomenting divisive involution,

Banding dead hordes with bold bonds of breathing hydrocarbon,

A genetic cadre, defiantly making the inorganic exponentially organic,

Recruiting not just here” — touching the womb —

“Nor here” — touching the world —
“But in a million billion warm and protoplasmic places.”

The dead man slips his slide rule thoughtfully.
“Hmm,” he says. “We could perhaps calculate a rate.
We could estimate a date of a moment of inflection,
A moment Elijah could herald,
A moment in which He who only thinks all this,
Tiring of entropic games, their mere decay,
Might enliven His bored reflection
With organic introspection.”

The cold constituents babble excitedly
And converge at the corner where Univac-Univac,
Anticipating their designs, whirrs already.

Now the Judge hears a wailing from the cavernous prison.
A demented voice is crying, “The Golden Gate Bridge does not exist.
Don’t you guys get it? The Grand Canyon is a shadow.”
Seeing that the cold constituents are oblivious, the Judge says,
“I should have told them — it might help —
That there is now more truth, more beauty, more good
Than when poor old Plato thought and strode.”

Slitherer, cowering in his cage, constricts himself within his camped confines.
Marking a passage in his book,
The Judge eyes him and says aloud,
“Shakespeare is right. The quality of mercy is not strain’d.
Perhaps Slitherer regrets his nonfeasance.”
He turns to him and sighs.

“Slitherer,” he says. “I sentence you.”
His words are hardly audible over the hubbub at Univac-Univac.
“Slitherer, I sentence you to find the uneaten fruit of that confounding tree
And thereby your redemption.”