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Chapter 3: The Law of Natural Agents

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“The Law Which Natural Agents Have Given Them to Observe, and Their Necessary Manner of Keeping It”

Chapter 3 of Book 1 in

Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity

By Richard Hooker

1594

[Hooker, Richard. “Concerning Laws and Their Several Kinds in General.” Book 1 in *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*. In Richard Hooker, *The Works of that Learned and Judicious Divine Mr. Richard Hooker with an Account of His Life and Death by Isaac Walton*. Arranged by the Rev. John Keble MA. 7th edition revised by the Very Rev. R.W. Church and the Rev. F. Paget (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888). 3 vols. Vol. 1. The Online Library of Liberty. <http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/921>. In the public domain. Some modernized vocabulary and contructions have been substituted in the text by the Witherspoon Institute.]

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Within the footnotes, text not within brackets are Hooker’s original notes; text within single brackets is supplied by the Witherspoon Institute; text within double brackets (that is, [[]]) is supplied by the editors of the 1888 edition.

Chapter 3: The law which natural agents have given them to observe, and their necessary manner of keeping it.

[1.] I am not ignorant that by “law eternal” the learned for the most part do understand the order, not which God has eternally purposed himself in all his works to observe, [205] but rather that which with himself he has set down as expedient to be kept by all his creatures, according to the several conditions with which he has endowed them. They who thus are accustomed to speak apply the name of Law only to that rule of working which superior authority imposes; whereas we somewhat more enlarging the

sense of it term any kind of rule or canon, by which actions are framed, a law. Now that law which, as it is laid up in the bosom of God, they call *Eternal*, receives according to the different kinds of things which are subject to it different and sundry kinds of names. That part of it which orders natural agents we call usually *Nature's* law; that which Angels do clearly behold and without any swerving observe is a law *Celestial* and heavenly; the law of *Reason*, that which binds creatures reasonable in this world, and with which by reason they may most plainly perceive themselves bound; that which binds them, and is not known but by special revelation from God, *Divine* law; *Human* law, that which out of the law either of reason or of God men gathering to be probably expedient, they make it a law. All things therefore, which are as they ought to be, are conformed to *this second law eternal*; and even those things which to this eternal law are not conformable are notwithstanding in some sort ordered by *the first eternal law*. For what good or evil is there under the sun, what action correspondent or repugnant to the law which God has imposed upon his creatures, but in or upon it God does work according to the law which he himself has eternally purposed to keep; that is to say, the *first law eternal*? So that a twofold law eternal being thus made, it is not hard to conceive how they both take place in all things.[\[1\]](#)

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[2.] Wherefore to come to the law of nature: although by it we sometimes mean that manner of working which God has set for each created thing to keep; yet inasmuch as those things are termed most properly natural agents, which keep the law of their kind unwittingly, as the heavens and elements of the world, which cannot do otherwise than they do; and inasmuch as we give to intellectual natures the name of *Voluntary* agents, that so we may distinguish them from the other; expedient it will be, that we sever the law of nature observed by the one from that which the other is tied to. Touching the former, their strict keeping of one tenure, statute, and law, is spoken of by all, but has in it more than men have as yet attained to know, or perhaps ever shall attain, seeing the travail of wading herein is given of God to the sons of men, that perceiving how much the least thing in the world has in it more than the wisest are able to reach to, they may by this means learn humility. Moses, in describing the work of creation, attributes speech to God: "God said, Let there be light: let there be a firmament: let the waters under the heaven be gathered together into one place: let the earth bring forth: let there be lights in the firmament of heaven." Was only this the intent of Moses, to signify the infinite greatness of God's power by the easiness of his accomplishing such effects, without travail, pain, or labour? Surely it seems that Moses had herein besides this a further purpose, namely, first to teach that God did not work as a [207] necessary but a voluntary agent, intending beforehand and decreeing with himself that which did outwardly proceed from him: secondly, to show that God did then institute a natural law to be observed by creatures, and therefore according to the manner of laws, the institution of it is described, as being established by solemn injunction. His commanding those things to be which are, and to be in such sort as they are, to keep that tenure and course which they do, imports the establishment of nature's law. This world's first creation, and the preservation since of things created, what is it but only so far forth a manifestation by execution, what the eternal law of God is concerning things natural? And as it comes to pass in a kingdom rightly ordered, that after a law is once published, it presently takes effect far and wide, all states framing themselves to it; even so let us think it fares in the natural course of the world: since the time that God did first proclaim the edicts of his law upon it, heaven and earth have hearkened to his voice, and their labour has been to do his will: He "made a law for the rain" [Job 28:26]; He gave his "decree to the sea, that the waters should not pass his commandment" [Jer. 5:22]. Now if nature should intermit her course, and leave altogether though it were but for a while the observation of her own laws; if those principal and mother elements of the world, of which all things in this lower world are made, should lose the qualities which now they have; if the frame of that heavenly arch erected over our heads should loosen and dissolve itself; if celestial spheres should forget their wonted motions, and by irregular rotation[\[2\]](#) turn themselves any way as it might happen; if the prince of the lights of heaven, which now as a giant does run his unwearied course (Ps. 19:5), should as it were through a languishing faintness begin to stand and to rest himself; if the moon should wander from her beaten way, the times and seasons of the year blend themselves by disordered and confused mixture, the winds breathe out their last gasp, the clouds yield no rain, the earth be deprived[\[3\]](#) of heavenly influence, the fruits of the earth pine away as children at the withered breasts of their mother no longer [208] able to yield them relief: what would become of man himself, whom these things now do all

serve? See we not plainly that obedience of creatures to the law of nature is the stay of the whole world?

[3.] Notwithstanding[,] with nature it comes sometimes to pass as with art. Let Phidias[4] have rude and obstinate stuff to carve, though his art do that it should, his work will lack that beauty which otherwise in fitter matter it might have had. He that strikes an instrument with skill may cause notwithstanding a very unpleasant sound, if the string on which he strikes chance to be incapable of harmony. In the matter of which things natural consist, that of Theophrastus takes place, Πολὺ τὸ οὐχ ὑπακοῦον οὐδὲ δεχόμενον τὸ εὔ. “Much of it is oftentimes such as will by no means yield to receive that impression which would be best and most perfect.”[5] Which defect in the matter of things natural, they who gave themselves to the contemplation of nature among the heathen observed often: but the true original cause of it, divine malediction, laid for the sin of man upon these creatures which God had made for the use of man, this being an article of that saving truth which God has revealed to his Church, was above the reach of their merely natural [209] capacity and understanding. But however these swervings are now and then incident to the course of nature, nevertheless so constantly the laws of nature are by natural agents observed, that no man denies that those things which nature works are wrought, either always or for the most part, after one and the same manner.[6]

[4.] If here it be demanded what that is which keeps nature in obedience to her own law, we must have recourse to that higher law of which we have already spoken, and because all other laws do depend on it, from thence we must borrow so much as shall be necessary for brief resolution in this point. Although we are not of opinion therefore, as some are, that nature in working has before her certain exemplary drafts or patterns, which subsisting in the bosom of the Highest, and being thence discovered, she fixes her eye upon them, as travellers by sea upon the pole-star of the world, and that according to them she guides her hand to work by imitation: although we rather embrace the oracle of Hippocrates, that “each thing both in small and in great fulfills the task which destiny has set down;” and concerning the manner of executing and fulfilling the same, “what they do they know not, yet is it in show and appearance as though they did know what they do; and the truth is they do not discern the things which they look on:” nevertheless, inasmuch as the works of nature are no less exact, than if she did both behold and study how to express some absolute shape or mirror always present before her; yea, such her dexterity and skill appears, that no intellectual creature in the world could by [mental] capacity do that which nature does without [mental] capacity and knowledge; it cannot be that nature has not some director of infinite knowledge to guide her in all her ways. Who [is] the guide of nature, but only the God of nature? “In him we live, move, and are” (Acts 17:28). Those things which nature is said to do, are by divine art performed, [210] using nature as an instrument; nor is there any such art or knowledge divine in nature herself working, but in the Guide of nature’s work.

Whereas therefore natural things which are not in the number of voluntary agents, (for of such only we now speak, and of no other,) do so necessarily observe their certain laws, that as long as they keep those forms[7] which give them their being, they cannot possibly be apt or inclinable to do otherwise than they do; seeing the kinds of their operations are both constantly and exactly fashioned[8] according to the several ends for which they serve, they themselves in the meanwhile, though doing that which is fit, yet knowing neither what they do, nor why: it follows that all which they do in this sort proceeds originally from some such agent, as knows, appoints, holds up, and even actually fashions the same.

The manner of this divine efficiency, being far above us, we are no more able to conceive by our reason than unreasonable creatures by their sense are able to apprehend after what manner we dispose and order the course of our affairs. Only thus much is discerned, that the natural generation and process of all things receives order of proceeding from the settled stability of divine understanding. This appoints to them their kinds of working; the disposition of which in the purity of God’s own knowledge and will is rightly termed by the name of Providence. The same being referred to the things themselves here disposed by it, was wont by the ancient to be called natural Destiny. That law, the performance of which we behold in natural things, is as it were a prototypical[9] or an original draft written in the bosom of God himself; whose Spirit when he executes the same uses every particular nature, every mere natural

agent, only as an instrument created at the beginning, and ever since the beginning used, to work his own will and pleasure with. Nature therefore is nothing else but God's instrument:^[10] in the course of which [pseudo-]Dionysius [the Areopagite] perceiving [211] some sudden disturbance is said to have cried out, "Aut Deus naturæ patitur, aut mundi machina dissolvitur:" "either God does suffer impediment, and is by a greater than himself hindered; or if that be impossible, then has he determined to make a present dissolution of the world; the execution of that law beginning now to stand still, without which the world cannot stand."

This workman, whose servitor nature is, being in truth but only one, the heathens imagining to be more, gave him in the sky the name of Jupiter, in the air the name of Juno, in the water the name of Neptune, in the earth the name of Vesta and sometimes of Ceres, the name of Apollo in the sun, in the moon the name of Diana, the name of Æolus and divers other in the winds; and to conclude, even so many guides of nature they dreamed of, as they saw there were kinds of natural things in the world. These they honoured, as having power to work or cease accordingly as men deserved of them. But to us there is one only Guide of all agents natural, and he both the Creator and the Worker of all in all, alone to be blessed, adored and honoured by all forever.

[5.] That which hitherto has been spoken concerns natural agents considered in themselves. But we must further remember also, (which thing to touch in a word shall suffice,) that as in this respect they have their law, which law directs them in the means by which they tend to their own perfection: so likewise another law there is, which touches them as they are sociable parts united into one body; a law which binds them each to serve another's good, and all to prefer the good of the whole before whatever their own particular; as we plainly see they do, when natural things in that regard forget their ordinary natural wont; that which is heavy mounting sometime upwards of [212] its own accord, and forsaking the centre of the earth which to itself is most natural, even as if it did hear itself commanded to let go the good it privately wishes, and to relieve the present distress of nature in common.

^[1] "Id omne, quod in rebus creatis fit, est materia legis æternæ." Th. I. 1, 2. q. 93, art. 4, 5, 6.. "Nullo modo aliquid legibus summi Creatoris ordinationique subtrahitur, a quo pax universitatis administrator." August. de Civit. Dei, lib. xix. cap. 12. Immo et peccatum, quatenus a Deo juste permittitur, cadit in legem æternam. Etiam legi æternæ subjicitur peccatum, quatenus voluntaria legis transgressio pœnale quoddam incommodum animæ inserit, juxta illud Augustini, "Jussisti Domine, et sic est, ut pœna sua sibi sit omnis animus inordinatus." Confess. lib. i. cap. 12. Nec male scholastici, "Quemadmodum," inquirunt, videmus res naturales contingentes, hoc ipso quod a fine particulari suo atque adeo a lege æterna exorbitant, in eandem legem æternam incidere, quatenus consequuntur alium finem a lege etiam æterna ipsis in casu particulari constitutum; sic verisimile est homines, etiam cum peccant et desciscunt a lege æterna ut præcipiente, reincidere in ordinem æternæ legis ut punientis." ["Every thing that comes to be among created things is the matter of the eternal law" Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, Q. 93, Arts. 4–6. "In no way is anything outside [the rule of] the laws and ordinance of the most high Creator, by whom the peace of the universe is administered," Augustine, *City of God*, Book 19, chapter 12. Indeed, even sin, insofar as it is justly permitted by God, falls under the eternal law. Sin is also subject to the eternal law, insofar as the voluntary transgression of the law brings a certain disagreeable penalty upon the soul, following the saying of Augustine, "You have commanded, Lord, and so it is, that every disordered soul be its own punishment for itself." *Confessions*, Book 1, Chapter 12. Nor do the scholastics wrongly say, "For instance, we see that contingent things in nature, by the very fact that they deviate from their particular end—and to that extent [deviate] from the eternal law—fall into the same eternal law, insofar as they obtain another end established for them by the eternal law in their particular fall/case. The truth is that men, even when they sin and revolt against the eternal law as a teacher, fall again under the order of the eternal law as a punisher."]

^[2] [Hooker: volubility]

^[3] [Hooker: defeated]

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Published on Natural Law, Natural Rights, and American Constitutionalism (<https://nlhrac.org>)

[4] [5th-century-BC Greek sculptor, to whom the sculpture of the Parthenon is attributed.]

[5] Theophrastus, *On [the] Metaphysics*.

[6] Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, Book 1, Chapter 39.

[7] Form in other creatures is a thing proportionable to the soul in living creatures. Sensible it is not, nor otherwise discernible than only by effects. According to the diversity of inward forms, things of the world are distinguished into their kinds.

[8] [Hooker: framed]

[9] [Hooker: authentic]

[10] Vide Thom. in Compend. Theol. cap. 3: "Omne quod movetur ab aliquo est quasi instrumentum quoddam primi moventis. Ridiculum est autem, etiam apud indoctos, ponere, instrumentum moveri non ab aliquo principali agente." [See Thomas [Aquinas] in the *Compendium of Theology*, chapter 3: "Every thing that is moved by something is like an instrument of the first mover. It is laughable, even among the unlearned, to posit that an instrument is not moved by some principal agent."]

Original Author Sort: Hooker, Richard

Publication Date: 11594.03

Topic: [Classical & Medieval Sources of Natural Law](#)

Subtopic: [Richard Hooker](#)

Publication Date Range: 1594

Source URL: <https://nlhrac.org/node/265>