

QUESTION 93: THE ETERNAL LAW

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By Thomas Aquinas

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THE ETERNAL LAW

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ARTICLE 1. WHETHER THE ETERNAL LAW IS A SOVEREIGN TYPE [RATIO] EXISTING IN GOD?

Objection 1. It would seem that the eternal law is not a sovereign type existing in God. For there is only one eternal law. But there are many types of things in the Divine mind; for Augustine says ([De Diversis Quaestionibus LXXXIII \[Eighty-Three Questions\]](#), Question 46) that God "made each thing according to its type." Therefore the eternal law does not seem to be a type existing in the Divine mind.

Objection 2. Further, it is essential to a law that it be promulgated by word, as stated above ([Question 90, Article 4](#)). But Word is a Personal name in God, as stated in [Part I, Question 34, Article 1](#): whereas type refers to the Essence. Therefore the eternal law is not the same as a Divine type.

Objection 3. Further, Augustine says ([De Vera Religione \[On True Religion\]](#), 30): "We see a law above our minds, which is called truth." But the law which is above our minds is the eternal law. Therefore

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truth is the eternal law. But the idea of truth is not the same as the idea of a type. Therefore the eternal law is not the same as the sovereign type.

On the contrary, Augustine says ([*De Libero Arbitrio \[On the Free Choice of the Will\]*](#), 1.6) that “the eternal law is the sovereign type, to which we must always conform.”

I answer that, just as in every artificer there pre-exists a type of the things that are made by his art, so too in every governor there must pre-exist the type of the order of those things that are to be done by those who are subject to his government. And just as the type of the things yet to be made by an art is called the art or exemplar of the products of that art, so too the type in him who governs the acts of his subjects, bears the character of a law, provided the other conditions be present which we have mentioned above ([Question 90](#)). Now God, by His wisdom, is the Creator of all things in relation to which He stands as the artificer to the products of his art, as stated in Part I, [Question 14, Article 8](#). Moreover He governs all the acts and movements that are to be found in each single creature, as was also stated in the I, 103, 5. Wherefore as the type of the Divine Wisdom, inasmuch as by It all things are created, has the character of art, exemplar or idea; so the type of Divine Wisdom, as moving all things to their due end, bears the character of law. Accordingly the eternal law is nothing else than the type of Divine Wisdom, as directing all actions and movements.

Reply to Objection 1. Augustine is speaking in that passage of the ideal types which regard the proper nature of each single thing; and consequently in them there is a certain distinction and plurality, according to their different relations to things, as stated in Part I, [Question 15, Article 2](#). But law is said to direct human acts by ordaining them to the common good, as stated above ([Question 90, Article 2](#)). And things, which are in themselves different, may be considered as one, according as they are ordained to one common thing. Wherefore the eternal law is one since it is the type of this order.

Reply to Objection 2. With regard to any sort of word, two points may be considered: viz. the word itself, and that which is expressed by the word. For the spoken word is something uttered by the mouth of man, and expresses that which is signified by the human word. The same applies to the human mental word, which is nothing else than something conceived by the mind, by which man expresses his thoughts mentally. So then in God the Word conceived by the intellect of the Father is the name of a Person: but all things that are in the Father’s knowledge, whether they refer to the Essence or to the Persons, or to the works of God, are expressed by this Word, as Augustine declares ([*De Trinitate \[On the Trinity\]*](#), 15.14). And among other things expressed by this Word, the eternal law itself is expressed thereby. Nor does it follow that the eternal law is a Personal name in God: yet it is appropriated to the Son, on account of the kinship between type and word.

Reply to Objection 3. The types of the Divine intellect do not stand in the same relation to things, as the types of the human intellect. For the human intellect is measured by things, so that a human concept is not true by reason of itself, but by reason of its being consonant with things, since “an opinion is true or false according as it answers to the reality.” But the Divine intellect is the measure of things: since each thing has so far truth in it, as it represents the Divine intellect, as was stated in Part I, [Question 16, Article 1](#). Consequently the Divine intellect is true in itself; and its type is truth itself.

ARTICLE 2. WHETHER THE ETERNAL LAW IS KNOWN TO ALL?

Objection 1. It would seem that the eternal law is not known to all. Because, as the Apostle [Paul] says (1 Corinthians 2:11), “the things that are of God no man knoweth, but the Spirit of God.” But the eternal law is a type existing in the Divine mind. Therefore it is unknown to all save God alone.

Objection 2. Further, as Augustine says ([*De Libero Arbitrio \[On the Free Choice of the Will\]*](#), 1.6) “the eternal law is that by which it is right that all things should be most orderly.” But all do not know how all things are most orderly. Therefore all do not know the eternal law.

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Objection 3. Further, Augustine says ([*De Vera Religione \[On True Religion\]*](#), 31) that “the eternal law is not subject to the judgment of man.” But according to Ethic. i, “any man can judge well of what he knows.” Therefore the eternal law is not known to us.

On the contrary, Augustine says ([*De Libero Arbitrio \[On the Free Choice of the Will\]*](#), 1.6) that “knowledge of the eternal law is imprinted on us.”

I answer that, A thing may be known in two ways: first, in itself; secondly, in its effect, wherein some likeness of that thing is found: thus someone not seeing the sun in its substance, may know it by its rays. So then no one can know the eternal law, as it is in itself, except the blessed who see God in His Essence. But every rational creature knows it in its reflection, greater or less. For every knowledge of truth is a kind of reflection and participation of the eternal law, which is the unchangeable truth, as Augustine says ([*De Vera Religione \[On True Religion\]*](#), 31). Now all men know the truth to a certain extent, at least as to the common principles of the natural law: and as to the others, they partake of the knowledge of truth, some more, some less; and in this respect are more or less cognizant of the eternal law.

Reply to Objection 1. We cannot know the things that are of God, as they are in themselves; but they are made known to us in their effects, according to Romans 1:20: “The invisible things of God . . . are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made.”

Reply to Objection 2. Although each one knows the eternal law according to his own capacity, in the way explained above, yet none can comprehend it: for it cannot be made perfectly known by its effects. Therefore it does not follow that anyone who knows the eternal law in the way aforesaid, knows also the whole order of things, whereby they are most orderly.

Reply to Objection 3. To judge a thing may be understood in two ways. First, as when a cognitive power judges of its proper object, according to Job 12:11: “Doth not the ear discern words, and the palate of him that eateth, the taste?” It is to this kind of judgment that the Philosopher alludes when he says that “anyone can judge well of what he knows,” by judging, namely, whether what is put forward is true. In another way we speak of a superior judging of a subordinate by a kind of practical judgment, as to whether he should be such and such or not. And thus none can judge of the eternal law.

ARTICLE 3. WHETHER EVERY LAW IS DERIVED FROM THE ETERNAL LAW?

Objection 1. It would seem that not every law is derived from the eternal law. For there is a law of the “fomes,” as stated above ([Question 91, Article 6](#)), which is not derived from that Divine law which is the eternal law, since thereunto pertains the “prudence of the flesh,” of which the Apostle [Paul] says (Romans 8:7), that “it cannot be subject to the law of God.” Therefore not every law is derived from the eternal law.

Objection 2. Further, nothing unjust can be derived from the eternal law, because, as stated above ([Article 2](#), Objection 2), “the eternal law is that, according to which it is right that all things should be most orderly.” But some laws are unjust, according to Isaiah 10:1: “Woe to them that make wicked laws.” Therefore not every law is derived from the eternal law.

Objection 3. Further, Augustine says ([*De Libero Arbitrio \[On the Free Choice of the Will\]*](#), 1.5) that “the law which is framed for ruling the people, rightly permits many things which are punished by Divine providence.” But the type of Divine providence is the eternal law, as stated above ([Article 1](#)). Therefore not even every good law is derived from the eternal law.

On the contrary, Divine Wisdom says (Proverbs 8:15): “By Me kings reign, and lawgivers decree just

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things.” But the type of Divine Wisdom is the eternal law, as stated above ([Article 1](#)). Therefore all laws proceed from the eternal law.

I answer that, As stated above (Question 90, [Articles 1 and 2](#)), the law denotes a kind of plan directing acts towards an end. Now wherever there are movers ordained to one another, the power of the second mover must needs be derived from the power of the first mover; since the second mover does not move except in so far as it is moved by the first. Wherefore we observe the same in all those who govern, so that the plan of government is derived by secondary governors from the governor in chief; thus the plan of what is to be done in a state flows from the king’s command to his inferior administrators: and again in things of art the plan of whatever is to be done by art flows from the chief craftsman to the under-crafts-men, who work with their hands. Since then the eternal law is the plan of government in the Chief Governor, all the plans of government in the inferior governors must be derived from the eternal law. But these plans of inferior governors are all other laws besides the eternal law. Therefore all laws, in so far as they partake of right reason, are derived from the eternal law. Hence Augustine says (*De Libero Arbitrio [On the Free Choice of the Will]*, 1.6) that “in temporal law there is nothing just and lawful, but what man has drawn from the eternal law.”

Reply to Objection 1. The “fomes” has the nature of law in man, in so far as it is a punishment resulting from Divine justice; and in this respect it is evident that it is derived from the eternal law. But in so far as it denotes a proneness to sin, it is contrary to the Divine law, and has not the nature of law, as stated above ([Question 91, Article 6](#)).

Reply to Objection 2. Human law has the nature of law in so far as it partakes of right reason; and it is clear that, in this respect, it is derived from the eternal law. But in so far as it deviates from reason, it is called an unjust law, and has the nature, not of law but of violence. Nevertheless even an unjust law, in so far as it retains some appearance of law, though being framed by one who is in power, is derived from the eternal law; since all power is from the Lord God, according to Romans 13:1.

Reply to Objection 3. Human law is said to permit certain things, not as approving them, but as being unable to direct them. And many things are directed by the Divine law, which human law is unable to direct, because more things are subject to a higher than to a lower cause. Hence the very fact that human law does not meddle with matters it cannot direct, comes under the ordination of the eternal law. It would be different, were human law to sanction what the eternal law condemns. Consequently it does not follow that human law is not derived from the eternal law, but that it is not on a perfect equality with it.

ARTICLE 4. WHETHER NECESSARY AND ETERNAL THINGS ARE SUBJECT TO THE ETERNAL LAW?

Objection 1. It would seem that necessary and eternal things are subject to the eternal law. For whatever is reasonable is subject to reason. But the Divine will is reasonable, for it is just. Therefore it is subject to (the Divine) reason. But the eternal law is the Divine reason. Therefore God’s will is subject to the eternal law. But God’s will is eternal. Therefore eternal and necessary things are subject to the eternal law.

Objection 2. Further, whatever is subject to the King, is subject to the King’s law. Now the Son, according to 1 Corinthians 15:28-29, “shall be subject . . . to God and the Father . . . when He shall have delivered up the Kingdom to Him.” Therefore the Son, Who is eternal, is subject to the eternal law.

Objection 3. Further, the eternal law is Divine providence as a type. But many necessary things are subject to Divine providence: for instance, the stability of incorporeal substances and of the heavenly bodies. Therefore even necessary things are subject to the eternal law.

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On the contrary, Things that are necessary cannot be otherwise, and consequently need no restraining. But laws are imposed on men, in order to restrain them from evil, as explained above ([Question 92, Article 2](#)). Therefore necessary things are not subject to the eternal law.

I answer that, As stated above ([Article 1](#)), the eternal law is the type of the Divine government. Consequently whatever is subject to the Divine government, is subject to the eternal law: while if anything is not subject to the Divine government, neither is it subject to the eternal law. The application of this distinction may be gathered by looking around us. For those things are subject to human government, which can be done by man; but what pertains to the nature of man is not subject to human government; for instance, that he should have a soul, hands, or feet.

Accordingly all that is in things created by God, whether it be contingent or necessary, is subject to the eternal law: while things pertaining to the Divine Nature or Essence are not subject to the eternal law, but are the eternal law itself.

Reply to Objection 1. We may speak of God's will in two ways. First, as to the will itself: and thus, since God's will is His very Essence, it is subject neither to the Divine government, nor to the eternal law, but is the same thing as the eternal law. Secondly, we may speak of God's will, as to the things themselves that God wills about creatures; which things are subject to the eternal law, in so far as they are planned by Divine Wisdom. In reference to these things God's will is said to be reasonable [*rationalis*]: though regarded in itself it should rather be called their type [*ratio*].

Reply to Objection 2. God the Son was not made by God, but was naturally born of God. Consequently He is not subject to Divine providence or to the eternal law: but rather is Himself the eternal law by a kind of appropriation, as Augustine explains ([De Vera Religione \[On True Religion\]](#), 31). But He is said to be subject to the Father by reason of His human nature, in respect of which also the Father is said to be greater than He.

The third objection we grant, because it deals with those necessary things that are created.

Reply to Objection 4. As the Philosopher [Aristotle] says ([Metaphysics](#), 5.6), some necessary things have a cause of their necessity: and thus they derive from something else the fact that they cannot be otherwise. And this is in itself a most effective restraint; for whatever is restrained, is said to be restrained in so far as it cannot do otherwise than it is allowed to.

ARTICLE 5. WHETHER NATURAL CONTINGENTS ARE SUBJECT TO THE ETERNAL LAW?

Objection 1. It would seem that natural contingents are not subject to the eternal law. Because promulgation is essential to law, as stated above ([Question 90, Article 4](#)). But a law cannot be promulgated except to rational creatures, to whom it is possible to make an announcement. Therefore none but rational creatures are subject to the eternal law; and consequently natural contingents are not.

Objection 2. Further, "Whatever obeys reason partakes somewhat of reason," as stated in [Aristotle's] [Nicomachean Ethics](#), 1.13. But the eternal law, is the supreme type, as stated above ([Article 1](#)). Since then natural contingents do not partake of reason in any way, but are altogether void of reason, it seems that they are not subject to the eternal law.

Objection 3. Further, the eternal law is most efficient. But in natural contingents defects occur. Therefore they are not subject to the eternal law.

On the contrary, It is written (Proverbs 8:29): "When He compassed the sea with its bounds, and set a law to the waters, that they should not pass their limits."

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I answer that, We must speak otherwise of the law of man, than of the eternal law which is the law of God. For the law of man extends only to rational creatures subject to man. The reason of this is because law directs the actions of those that are subject to the government of someone: wherefore, properly speaking, none imposes a law on his own actions. Now whatever is done regarding the use of irrational things subject to man, is done by the act of man himself moving those things, for these irrational creatures do not move themselves, but are moved by others, as stated above ([Question 1, Article 2](#)). Consequently man cannot impose laws on irrational beings, however much they may be subject to him. But he can impose laws on rational beings subject to him, in so far as by his command or pronouncement of any kind, he imprints on their minds a rule which is a principle of action.

Now just as man, by such pronouncement, impresses a kind of inward principle of action on the man that is subject to him, so God imprints on the whole of nature the principles of its proper actions. And so, in this way, God is said to command the whole of nature, according to Psalm 148:6: "He hath made a decree, and it shall not pass away." And thus all actions and movements of the whole of nature are subject to the eternal law. Consequently irrational creatures are subject to the eternal law, through being moved by Divine providence; but not, as rational creatures are, through understanding the Divine commandment.

Reply to Objection 1. The impression of an inward active principle is to natural things, what the promulgation of law is to men: because law, by being promulgated, imprints on man a directive principle of human actions, as stated above.

Reply to Objection 2. Irrational creatures neither partake of nor are obedient to human reason: whereas they do partake of the Divine Reason by obeying it; because the power of Divine Reason extends over more things than human reason does. And as the members of the human body are moved at the command of reason, and yet do not partake of reason, since they have no apprehension subordinate to reason; so too irrational creatures are moved by God, without, on that account, being rational.

Reply to Objection 3. Although the defects which occur in natural things are outside the order of particular causes, they are not outside the order of universal causes, especially of the First Cause, i.e. God, from Whose providence nothing can escape, as stated in the Part I, [Question 22, Article 2](#). And since the eternal law is the type of Divine providence, as stated above ([Article 1](#)), hence the defects of natural things are subject to the eternal law.

ARTICLE 6. WHETHER ALL HUMAN AFFAIRS ARE SUBJECT TO THE ETERNAL LAW?

Objection 1. It would seem that not all human affairs are subject to the eternal law. For the Apostle [Paul] says (Galatians 5:18): "If you are led by the spirit you are not under the law." But the righteous who are the sons of God by adoption, are led by the spirit of God, according to Romans 8:14: "Whosoever are led by the spirit of God, they are the sons of God." Therefore not all men are under the eternal law.

Objection 2. Further, the Apostle [Paul] says (Romans 8:7): "The prudence [Vulgate: 'wisdom'] of the flesh is an enemy to God: for it is not subject to the law of God." But many are those in whom the prudence of the flesh dominates. Therefore all men are not subject to the eternal law which is the law of God.

Objection 3. Further, Augustine says ([De Libero Arbitrio \[On the Free Choice of the Will\]](#), 1.6) that "the eternal law is that by which the wicked deserve misery, the good, a life of blessedness." But those who are already blessed, and those who are already lost, are not in the state of merit. Therefore they are not under the eternal law.

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On the contrary, Augustine says ([De Civitate Dei \[The City of God\]](#), 19.12): “Nothing evades the laws of the most high Creator and Governor, for by Him the peace of the universe is administered.”

I answer that, There are two ways in which a thing is subject to the eternal law, as explained above ([Article 5](#)): first, by partaking of the eternal law by way of knowledge; secondly, by way of action and passion, i.e. by partaking of the eternal law by way of an inward motive principle: and in this second way, irrational creatures are subject to the eternal law, as stated above ([Article 5](#)). But since the rational nature, together with that which it has in common with all creatures, has something proper to itself inasmuch as it is rational, consequently it is subject to the eternal law in both ways; because while each rational creature has some knowledge of the eternal law, as stated above ([Article 2](#)), it also has a natural inclination to that which is in harmony with the eternal law; for “we are naturally adapted to the recipients of virtue” (Aristotle, [Nicomachean Ethics](#), 2.1).

Both ways, however, are imperfect, and to a certain extent destroyed, in the wicked; because in them the natural inclination to virtue is corrupted by vicious habits, and, moreover, the natural knowledge of good is darkened by passions and habits of sin. But in the good both ways are found more perfect: because in them, besides the natural knowledge of good, there is the added knowledge of faith and wisdom; and again, besides the natural inclination to good, there is the added motive of grace and virtue.

Accordingly, the good are perfectly subject to the eternal law, as always acting according to it: whereas the wicked are subject to the eternal law, imperfectly as to their actions, indeed, since both their knowledge of good, and their inclination thereto, are imperfect; but this imperfection on the part of action is supplied on the part of passion, in so far as they suffer what the eternal law decrees concerning them, according as they fail to act in harmony with that law. Hence Augustine says ([De Libero Arbitrio \[On the Free Choice of the Will\]](#), 1.15): “I esteem that the righteous act according to the eternal law; and ([De Catechizandis Rudibus \[On Catechizing the Uninstructed\]](#), 18): Out of the just misery of the souls which deserted Him, God knew how to furnish the inferior parts of His creation with most suitable laws.”

Reply to Objection 1. This saying of the Apostle [Paul] may be understood in two ways. First, so that a man is said to be under the law, through being pinned down thereby, against his will, as by a load. Hence, on the same passage a gloss says that “he is under the law, who refrains from evil deeds, through fear of punishment threatened by the law, and not from love of virtue.” In this way the spiritual man is not under the law, because he fulfils the law willingly, through charity which is poured into his heart by the Holy Ghost. Secondly, it can be understood as meaning that the works of a man, who is led by the Holy Ghost, are the works of the Holy Ghost rather than his own. Therefore, since the Holy Ghost is not under the law, as neither is the Son, as stated above (Question 4, Reply 2); it follows that such works, in so far as they are of the Holy Ghost, are not under the law. The Apostle [Paul] witnesses to this when he says (2 Corinthians 3:17): “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.”

Reply to Objection 2. The prudence of the flesh cannot be subject to the law of God as regards action; since it inclines to actions contrary to the Divine law: yet it is subject to the law of God, as regards passion; since it deserves to suffer punishment according to the law of Divine justice. Nevertheless in no man does the prudence of the flesh dominate so far as to destroy the whole good of his nature: and consequently there remains in man the inclination to act in accordance with the eternal law. For we have seen above (Part I-II, [Question 85, Article 2](#)) that sin does not destroy entirely the good of nature.

Reply to Objection 3. A thing is maintained in the end and moved towards the end by one and the same cause: thus gravity which makes a heavy body rest in the lower place is also the cause of its being moved thither. We therefore reply that as it is according to the eternal law that some deserve happiness, others unhappiness, so is it by the eternal law that some are maintained in a happy state, others in an unhappy state. Accordingly both the blessed and the damned are under the eternal law.

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