

God's Deputy: Divine Law and the Laws of Nature

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Introduction

- <http://www.challies.com>
- “Wowed by the Miraculous” 13-1-10
- “is it right for Christians to understand that there are laws of nature?”
- Laws of nature as regularities rather than inviolable laws

Theological Foundations of the Laws of Nature

- Debunking the “Conflict Myth”
 - John William Draper – *History of the Conflict between Science and Religion* (1875)
 - Andrew Dickson White – *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (1896)

Theological Foundations of the Laws of Nature

- Laws of nature as specific and precise statements providing mathematical descriptions of exceptionless regularities

Aristotelian Natural Philosophy

- Natural philosophy – things that change and exist independently of us
- Mathematics – things that do not change but have no existence independently of us
- Metaphysics – things that exist independently of us but do not change

Natural Philosophy

- Matter
- Cosmos
- Causation
- Method/Epistemology

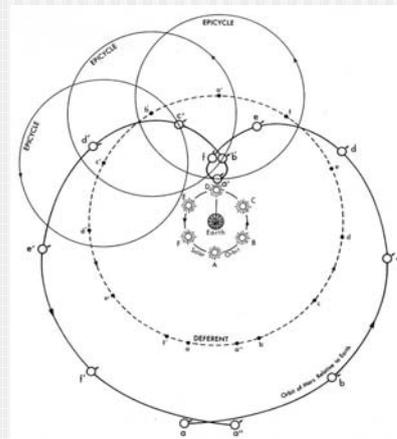
Rival Natural Philosophies

	Aristotelian	Mechanical
Matter	Earth, Water, Air, Fire, Quintessence	Corpuscles
Cosmos	Finite, Geocentric	Infinite, Heliocentric
Causation	Material, Formal, Efficient, Final	Efficient
Method	Induction/Deduction	Experiment/Mathematics

Natural Philosophy vs Astronomy



Aristotle's world system, showing the celestial spheres carrying the moon, planets, sun and stars around a stationary earth.



Mathematical Natural Philosophy

Philosophy is written in this grand book, the universe... But the book cannot be understood unless one first learns to comprehend the language... It is written in the language of mathematics.



- Galileo Galilei

Mathematical Natural Philosophy

I shall have the physicists [i.e. the natural philosophers] against me... I wish to respond briefly as follows: that God the Creator, since he is a mind, and does what he wants, is not prohibited... from having regard to things which are either immaterial or based on imagination.



- Johannes Kepler

17th-century Natural Philosophy

- Mathematical
- Mechanical

Corpuscular Natural Philosophy

- “Dead” matter requires God’s continual involvement

Corpuscular Natural Philosophy

God gave Motion to Matter... and establish'd those Rules of Motion, and that order amongst things Corporeal, which we are wont to call the Laws of Nature...

- Robert Boyle



Corpuscular Natural Philosophy

The Laws of Motion being settled and all upheld by His incessant concourse and general Providence... the Phenomena of the World thus constituted, are Physically produc'd... according to Mechanical Laws

- Robert Boyle



Corpuscular Natural Philosophy



But what do you mean by the laws of nature, or by any law? Effects are produced by power, not by laws. A law cannot execute itself. A law refers us to an agent.

- William Paley

17th-century Natural Philosophy

- Mathematical
- Mechanical
- Corpuscular
- Experimental/Empirical

Change in Natural Philosophies

Aristotelian	Mechanical
Strict disciplinary boundaries	Mathematical natural philosophy
Nature as organism	Nature as machine/mechanism
Matter with inherent vital principles	Matter as "dead" corpuscles
Uncreated nature – deduce properties from first principles	Created nature – investigate properties
Order derives from immanent properties	Order derives from externally imposed laws of nature

Walter Charleton



*The Darkness of
Atheism, Dispelled by
the Light of Nature: A
Physico-Theological
Treatise* (London,
1652)

Walter Charleton

- For most certain it is, that God never limited his free Omnipotence, by any fixt law, or bound up his own hands with the same settled Constitutions, whereby he circumscribed the definite activity and duration of his Creatures: it being the Prerogative of his Nature, to know no impossibility, but to be able to act either above, or against the statutes of his Deputy, whensoever, and upon what subject, and to what end soever he pleases.

Walter Charleton

- God hath, in times prelapsd, frequently manifested his prerogative of causing effects not only superior, but also contradictory to the ordinary and establishd Laws of Nature, his ordinary instrument, when such effects seemed either necessary, or expedient to his Providence.

Walter Charleton

- To believe him to be the Author of that mighty and difficult miracle, the Creation, and yet doubt the supremacy of his Power, by conceiving that he cannot turn Natural Agents out of their common road... must be a manifest Contradiction, and an Absurdity that stabs it self.

Ralph Cudworth

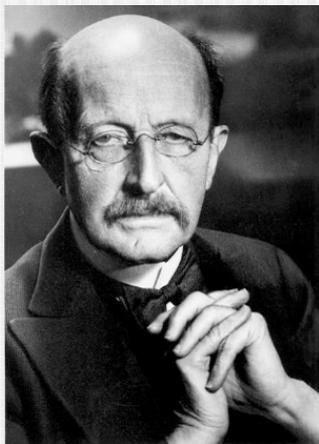
- The Cartesian hypothesis “makes God to contribute nothing more to the Fabrick of the World, than the Turning round of a Vortex or Whirlpool of Matter”



René Descartes



Science and Laws of Nature



It is perfectly conceivable that one fine day Nature should cause an unexpected event to occur which would baffle us all... In such an event, the only course open to science would be to declare itself bankrupt.

- Max Planck

Science and Laws of Nature

Laws of nature are “a permanent expression and embodiment *within the world* of the mind of God as creator.”

- Alister McGrath



Challenging the Laws of Nature

- Nancy Cartwright:
 - “God’s Order, Man’s Order and the Order of Nature” – research project at LSE
 - *How the Laws of Physics Lie* (OUP, 1983)



Challenging the Laws of Nature

- Laws are *ceteris paribus*
- Many basic laws are causal principles that do not describe totally ordered behaviour
- Laws emerge historically and so are not temporally universal
- The sources of these historically emergent laws are contingent, so the laws too are contingent

Challenging the Laws of Nature

- Laws hold only relative to models
- Laws emerge only in structured environments
- Nature is governed not by laws but by powers, capacities and tendencies
- Nature is governed merely by local necessities

Challenging the Laws of Nature

- Laws hold with varying degrees and kinds of invariance
- Laws serve primarily as tools or guides to practice
- Laws of science arise as negotiated principles

Challenging the Laws of Nature

- Laws of science look univocal and universal but have different meanings for different practitioners or in different circumstances
- The amount of information contained in the history of the universe is not sufficient to compute/produce precise laws

Keith Ward on the Laws of Nature



In a universe wherein everything that happens can be explained according to laws of physics, the hypothesis of God becomes superfluous, except as something to start the whole system going.

Hume on Miracles

A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle... is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined.



Whose Experience?

- Only people who can solve differential equations, who are capable of postulating unseen “atoms” underlying the objects we perceive with our senses, and who can devise precise laws stating idea relations between these atomic particles.

Physical and Spiritual Law

- Physical law: Dead bodies gradually decompose
- Spiritual law: All the dead will rise again
- Modified spiritual law: If humans are wholly filled with the divine Spirit, the tendency to decompose is checked.

Keith Ward on the Laws of Nature



Miracles are not totally inexplicable; they are just not explicable by known scientific laws. They are not irreproducible, but, since only God can reproduce them, they are beyond the powers of science to reproduce.

- Keith Ward

Conclusion
