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The Future of Creation Order
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Introduction: order and the concept of law of nature

People of all times have experienced the world of nature as expressing an overwhelming beauty, coherence and order. In the great monotheistic traditions this beauty, coherence and order have been related to the will or nature of a Creator, with images derived from the world of art, manufacturing and agriculture. For a long time, philosophers had few problems with these images of order and of a divine Creator. Natural philosophy transformed these lay conceptions into metaphysical concepts like Demiurg, first Mover, highest Being, and Origin. This highest Being was also the origin of ‘natural law’, which was reflected in the social and moral order of the world.

Things changed with the application of mathematical methods to issues that previously were dealt with in natural philosophy. The metaphysical order of natural philosophy became the object of scientific inquiry. Speculation was replaced by mathematics and mechanics, with the metaphor of the clock as most eloquent expression of the newly gained insight into the way the world was ruled (Harrison 1998).

The concept of ‘law of nature’ emerged in this period. It not only reflected confidence in humanity’s capacity to unravel the mysteries of the universe, it also reinforced trust in God as the One who wills and maintains these laws (Harrison 2008). The Deist interpretation of the universe combined both: it maintained belief in God as monarch of the world and it fostered trust in science as a way to read the book of nature.

Today, scientists are inclined to ignore the theological background of the notion of law of nature. With the decay of the Deist universe it was not only the notion of a superior divine intelligence that fell into disrepute. This decay also heralded the beginning of a deep and longstanding confusion about the status of laws of nature. For one thing, this concept not only denoted the way things are but also how they must be. The gradual disappearance of a Creator who is willing these laws, weakened the support for the idea that laws of nature are ‘willed’ and, therefore, hold with necessity (Clayton 2008). This is the background of the dispute between the so-called ‘regularity’ and ‘necessity’ view of laws of nature (Armstrong 1983).

Evolutionary theory added new elements to the debate. It mimicked developments in physics by replacing natural history, just like physics had replaced natural philosophy. The first edition of Darwin’s *Origin of Species* draws an analogy between the law of gravity for the physical world and the law of development for the organic world. However, the ‘laws’ of evolutionary biology were soon to be seen as deeply historical, challenging thereby not only the theistic but also deterministic view of laws of nature. Once again, laws became regularities, but now holding for certain periods of time.

Reformational philosophy

Ever since the emergence 75 years ago of the branch of Christian philosophy that has come to be called ‘reformational’ (or ‘neo-calvinistic’), the concepts of order and law (principle, structure) have been at the heart of this philosophy. One way to characterise this tradition is as a philosophy of creation order.

Among the central concerns of the tradition has been a longstanding debate over the nature of law: its origin, its status as 'boundary' between God and creation, its validity, its relationship to history and human agency. Firmly rejecting both scholastic metaphysics and Deism, reformational philosophers have maintained the notion of law as 'holding' for reality, thereby preserving a variant of the 'necessity' view. However, questions have arisen about the nature of such law: can the philosophical concept of law be equated with the concept of law in physics and biology? More recently, the issue has been raised as to whether laws of nature have always existed or rather 'emerge' in the process of disclosure of reality. There have been discussions on the universality of laws, on their possible change, and on the difference between law and the 'law-side' of reality. Developments in the life sciences have challenged the distinction between creation and temporal becoming, a distinction that has contributed to the acceptance of evolutionary theory by some of the major figures in the movement.

Enlightening as these discussions have been, it is also widely acknowledged that they need further critical development. Some critics of reformational philosophy, for example, still tend to interpret its view of law and of order as a variant of Deism, Platonism or Aristotelianism. Others have reproached it for offering fundamentally static, essentialist and/or monarchian conceptions of order. Theologians have questioned the implicit assumption that it would be possible to gain access to creation order independent of the cross and the church. How cogent and compelling have reformational theories of law and order been, if, 75 years on, they are still confronted with criticisms such as these?

The current debate in the sciences

In addition to what has been said about the theological roots of, and the ambivalences surrounding, the notion of law of nature, there are at least three major scientific developments that have helped shape the current debate on the nature of law and of (creation) order and especially its application to man and on society: evolutionary theory, postmodern and constructivist social theory, and philosophy. Although in the remainder of this paper, and in the conference, much emphasis will be put on the anthropological, social, and moral dimensions of creation order, it is good to keep in mind that the very idea of law itself cannot be seen apart from its theological reminiscences.

Evolutionary theory has exerted an enormous influence on the way we conceive ourselves and the world. If the living world must be seen as the product of accident and chance, then order can at best be the product of a process of development, but never its presupposition. Order, in other words, is neither pre-given nor unchangeable. If the evolutionary account of order is true, then it appears that not only the living world but more specifically the existence of the human race itself is utterly contingent. Evolutionary theory has eroded the distinctness of humankind and the intuition that we are 'at home in the universe'.

The *social sciences* have contributed via other routes to the demise of order and lawfulness. Here, historicism and postmodernism have been especially influential and dominant. They propound the view that order is constructed and should be seen as the product of human interaction and interpretation. Society, therefore, will inevitably be 'plural'. This plurality initially denoted a factual condition but gradually evolved into a directive norm, 'pluralism'. On such a view there can be no universally valid rules and norms. Such rules and norms are simply reports of particular standpoints, whether personal or shared with the like-minded, but never a reflection of a moral order transcending human subjectivity.

Philosophy, finally, has also been of critical importance in the dramatic change of perceptions of order in our time. Philosophy was the birthplace of historicism and postmodernism. Together with

Marxism, Nietzschean perspectivism, existentialism, and critical theory, these traditions were responsible for the downfall of the classical philosophical conception of order. It were philosophers who drew subversive conclusions from the life sciences and who announced the fundamental contingency of human existence.

Today's shifting climate may be bringing us to the verge of a significant reorientation. Even the discipline of economics – probably the most persistently modernist among the social sciences – is in disarray after the near-catastrophic financial crisis of 2008. Standard models of economic equilibrium have been falsified in an unprecedented way. The need is felt for fundamental reflection on the presuppositions of economic order. It seems we have been confronted with boundaries that cannot be violated without damaging repercussions – not least in the possibly irreversible destruction of a sustainable natural environment

Signs of a reorientation are also noticeable in other areas. Cultural anthropologists are looking for models that go beyond standard constructivist approaches. Social and political scientists are seeking for concepts that may deepen or even replace the usual language of a limitless pluralism. Even the discipline of public administration shows renewed interest in notions like reasonableness and fairness. Psychiatrists are trying to find a way beyond the uneasy dichotomy between naturalist (biomedical) and constructivist approaches to disease. In short, there are signs that scholars in at least some fields are trying to reinvent order and lawfulness.

Christian philosophical responses

Christian philosophers have in different ways responded to the downfall of order. *Hermeneutically* oriented Christian philosophers have mainly concentrated on the issue of pluralism and have argued for a position that draws a distinction between plurality and pluralism. Recognition of plurality does not imply a relativistic idea of (moral) order, they have suggested. The issue of relativism itself needs to be scrutinized because it seems to presuppose one or another form of absolute and/or objective truth. Charles Taylor has developed an approach to plurality by relating it to the even more fundamental notion of 'recognition'.

Christian philosophers inspired by *Anglo-American* (analytical) philosophy have concentrated on logic, language and the ontology of possible worlds. Their conceptual armory has helped lay bare foundationalist tendencies in both naturalist and (creative) antirealist accounts. As a response to both naturalism and creative antirealism, Alvin Plantinga has developed the idea of 'proper function' – with the idea of (divine) design in the background. Nicholas Wolterstorff (1995; 2006) has cleared the ground for a philosophical understanding of the claim that God speaks and, recently, for a theistic concept of justice and human rights (albeit one set against a notion of 'justice as right order'). All this work has been enormously important in preserving philosophical ground for notions such as law, design and intrinsic quality. However, much work still needs to be done in relating this philosophical work to discussions in the life sciences and in the social sciences.

Neo-Thomistic philosophers have made significant advances in reformulating classical notions of law, substance and natural order. Moreland & Rae (2000), for instance, have argued for a substantialist account of human nature and for a concept of the person that is firmly rooted in a substance-view of the soul. They see both contemporary philosophy of mind (especially the approach known as 'non-eliminative physicalism'), and postmodern philosophy, as threats to the classical Christian doctrine of humanity, and argue for the continuing importance of the idea of natural law. This argument is echoed in the recent encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* which urges that truly compassionate responses to human need must remain rooted in stable moral truth.

Christian thinkers in the tradition of *Radical Orthodoxy* take distance from modern notions of order, conceived as absolute, rational and universal order. John Milbank, for instance, argues for an

approach that does not focus on an independent creation order as point of departure for ethics and political theory, but rather calls for a 'counter-ontology' and a 'counter-ethics' that is narratively constructed by the church, as an 'altera civitas', based on her specific experience of 'participation' in divine, creative love. Yet such a counter-ontology would, they propose, help us discern again the deeper intentions of classical Christian notions of metaphysical order, which have been obscured in Christian capitulations to modernity.

Christian thinkers inclined toward *process philosophy* and/or *chaos theory* have also distanced themselves from classical concepts of natural law and creation order, and tended to a view in which God is seen as creative counterpart in the process of the development of creation from its inception. According to Ian Barbour (1997) we should give up the monarchical view of an almighty God who rules the world through unchangeable laws. We must instead be open to a *panentheist* view in which God participates in reality. This participation should be 'located' in the openness and indefiniteness of creation, in the receptive side of both the living and the non-living worlds. In this approach, order is temporal and, therefore, inevitably in constant change.

Finally Christian philosophers in the tradition of *Reformational Philosophy*, have been ready to give up the idea that biological species are rooted in an originally given creation order, yet without distancing themselves from the idea of creation order as such. They have not been unanimous, however, in the way they characterise the laws by which such order is constituted. Are laws best understood as philosophical concepts referring to the 'boundary' between God and creation, as knowable structures like physical laws, or as terms referring to the theological notion of divine providence? And how should the notion of order be conceptualized? In terms of dynamic principles that are waiting for (various forms of) disclosure? Or, as a fixed, pre-given order? With respect to societal and moral order, reformational philosophers have often proposed that there exists a knowable framework of 'structural principles' or 'normative structures' for social institutions. However, there is a wide variety of interpretations of these principles and structures, both with respect to their nature and with respect to the range of their possible implementations (or 'positivations').

Conclusion

To summarize - the impetus for the theme of this conference comes from two sides: on the one hand, rapid developments in the sciences, social sciences and philosophy, and on the other hand the challenge presented by the wide diversity of views in Christian philosophical circles. Both evolutionary theory and social philosophy challenge the idea of the pre-giveness of norms, laws, and structures. They suggest that there are no such norms, laws, and structures and that what we know under this heading are products of either the process of natural selection or human construction and subjective interpretation. Christian philosophers have responded to the collapse of order in a wide variety of ways. There are strands of Christian philosophy that still argue for the idea of pre-given, if not fixed, world order. Other representatives, however, see this idea of stable creation order and/or natural law as redundant and in need of a thorough rethinking. The challenge for this conference is to find an answer to the question whether there is room, still, for a distinction between something like ontological affirmation of pre-given norms, while also acknowledging the particularity and 'locatedness' of our access to those norms and/or our articulation of those norms.

The Association for Reformational Philosophy has chosen to place at the centre of its 75th anniversary celebrations the hosting of an ecumenical, interdisciplinary and international symposium, making possible an in-depth dialogue among several traditions on the concepts of order and lawfulness. Key ideas in this dialogue will be order, law, structure, principle, system, necessity, chance, change and emergence. These will be explored through plenary lectures and responses and concurrent workshops on diverse aspects of the theme. The goal of the symposium is

to delve deeper into the current health of the philosophical concept of (creation) order, and so to assess its future trajectories and prospects.

Prior to the symposium a series of more specialized seminars will be held in which distinctively reformational approaches to order will be investigated. Participants in the symposium are warmly invited to attend these as well.

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