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On the Laws of Nature

John Henry addresses the issue of the emergence of “laws of nature” into the natural philosophy discourse. The first half of his article *Metaphysics and the Origins of Modern Science: Descartes and the Importance of Laws of Nature* explores the historiography of the phrase and the idea. He first dispels a few common misconceptions about the terms. These include Edgar Zilsel’s belief that Descartes origination of the phrase due to political developments such as an absolute monarchy, capitalism, and increased production and political involvement by artisans and craftsmen; Francis Oakley’s views that the idea was continuous with earlier medieval discussions of the nature of God’s laws; and Jane Ruby’s postulation that it did begin in the middle ages, but as Euclidian and other mathematical descriptors.

The latter half of the essay works to expound on Amos Funkenstein’s idea that the secularization of theology led to Descartes’ understanding of the laws of nature. Henry backs up Funkenstein’s thesis with numerous correspondences between Descartes and Mersenne dealing with Descartes’s ideas of motion and movement. Following the ideas Henry reveals that rather than a full scale rejection of earlier interpretations, his work, based on that of Funkenstein, pulls all three together and builds a firmer basis for Descartes’ creation of laws of nature from earlier medieval ideas of God’s immutability and Euclidian axioms. Henry is emphatic that Descartes creates the phrase in the 17th century.

The idea the laws of nature were more than just explanations of the regular natural occurrences is paramount to the discussion of the History and Philosophy of Science. In the 17th century Descartes overturns Aristotelian dogma, which allows for a more holistic approach to observing and studying nature. Cartesian ideas of movement and the laws of nature that governed it allowed for new ideas to blossom based on the same pre-Cartesian observations.

Descartes' work on metaphysics that allowed natural philosophy to treat God separate from phenomena paved the way for not only his studies, but that of his contemporaries and natural philosophers that came after him. This separation allowed many deeply devout and intelligent men to pursue the study of natural philosophy and to continue to advance what could be called scientific enquiry without falling into any heretical traps. Understanding the birth of Cartesian metaphysics is the cornerstone of understanding early modern science history, natural philosophy, and the development of scientific thought.