

The Institutes, 535 CE Emperor Justinian

Book I. Of Persons

I. Justice and Law.

JUSTICE is the constant and perpetual wish to render every one his due.

1. Jurisprudence is the knowledge of things divine and human; the science of the just and the unjust.
2. Having explained these general terms, we think we shall commence our exposition of the law of the Roman people most advantageously, if we pursue at first a plain and easy path, and then proceed to explain particular details with the utmost care and exactness. For, if at the outset we overload the mind of the student, while yet new to the subject and unable to bear much, with a multitude and variety of topics, one of two things will happen---we shall either cause him wholly to abandon his studies, or, after great toil, and often after great distrust to himself (the most frequent stumbling block in the way of youth), we shall at last conduct him to the point, to which, if he had been led by an easier road, he might, without great labor, and without any distrust of his own powers, have been sooner conducted.
3. The maxims of law are these: to live honestly, to hurt no one, to give every one his due.
4. The study of law is divided into two branches; that of public and that of private law. Public law regards the government of the Roman empire; private law, the interest of the individuals. We are now to treat of the latter, which is composed of three elements, and consists of precepts belonging to the natural law, to the law of nations, and to the civil law.

II. Natural, Common, and Civil Law.

The law of nature is that law which nature teaches to all animals. For this law does not belong exclusively to the human race, but belongs to all animals, whether of the earth, the air, or the water. Hence comes the union of the male and female, which we term matrimony; hence the procreation and bringing up of children. We see, indeed, that all the other animals besides men are considered as having knowledge of this law.

1. Civil law is thus distinguished from the law of nations. Every community governed by laws and customs uses partly its own law, partly laws common to all mankind. The law which a people makes for its own government belongs exclusively to that state and is called the civil law, as being the law of the particular state. But the law which natural reason appoints for all mankind obtains equally among all nations, because all nations make use of it. The people of Rome, then,

are governed partly by their own laws, and partly by the laws which are common to all mankind. We will take notice of this distinction as occasion may arise.

2. Civil law takes its name from the state which it governs, as, for instance, from Athens; for it would be very proper to speak of the laws of Solon or Draco as the civil law of Athens. And thus the law which the Roman people make use of is called the civil law of the Romans, or that of the Quirites; for the Romans are called Quirites from Quirinum. But whenever we speak of civil law, without adding the name of any state, we mean our own law; just as the Greeks, when "the poet" is spoken of without any name being expressed, mean the great Homer, and we Romans mean Virgil.

The law of the nations is common to all mankind, for nations have established certain laws, as occasion and the necessities of human life required. Wars arose, and in their train followed captivity and then slavery, which is contrary to the law of nature; for by that law all men are originally born free. Further, by the law of nations almost all contracts were at first introduced, as, for instance, buying and selling, letting and hiring, partnership, deposits, loans returnable in kind, and very many others.

3. Our law is written and unwritten, just as among the Greeks some of their laws were written and others were not written. The written part consists of *leges (lex)*, *plebiscita*, *senatusconsulta*, *constitutiones* of emperors, *edicta* of magistrates, and *responsa* of jurists [*i.e.*, jurists].

4. A *lex* is that which was enacted by the Roman people on its being proposed by a senatorian magistrate, as a consul. A *plebiscitum* is that which was enacted by the plebs on its being proposed by a plebeian magistrate, as a tribune. The plebs differ from the people as a species from its genus, for all the citizens, including patricians and senators, are comprehended in the *populi* (people); but the plebs only included citizens [who were] not patricians or senators. *Plebiscita*, after the Hortensian law had been passed, began to have the same force as *leges*.

5. A *senatusconsultum* is that which the senate commands or appoints: for, when the Roman people was so increased that it was difficult to assemble it together to pass laws, it seemed right that the senate should be consulted in place of the people.

6. That which seems good to the emperor has also the force of law; for the people, by the *Lex Regia*, which is passed to confer on him his power, make over to him their whole power and authority. Therefore whatever the emperor ordains by *rescript*, or decides in adjudging a cause, or lays down by edict, is unquestionably law; and it is these enactments of the emperor that are called *constitutiones*. Of these, some are personal, and are not to be drawn into precedent, such not being the intention of the emperor. Supposing the emperor has granted a favor to any man on account of his merit, or inflicted some punishment, or granted some extraordinary relief, the application of these acts does not extend beyond the particular individual. But the other *constitutiones*, being general, are undoubtedly binding on all.

7. The edicts of the praetors are also of great authority. These edicts are called the *ius honorarium*, because those who bear honors [*i.e.*, offices] in the state, that is, the magistrates,

have given them their sanction. The curule aediles also used to publish an edict relative to certain subjects, which edict also became a part of the *ius honorarium*.

8. The answers of the *jurisprudenti* are the decisions and opinions of persons who were authorized to determine the law. For anciently it was provided that there should be persons to interpret publicly the law, who were permitted by the emperor to give answers on questions of law. They were called *jurisconsulti*; and the authority of their decision and opinions, when they were all unanimous, was such, that the judge could not, according to the constitutiones, refuse to be guided by their answers.

9. The unwritten law is that which usage has established; for ancient customs, being sanctioned by the consent of those who adopt them, are like laws.

10. The civil law is not improperly divided into two kinds, for the division seems to have had its origin in the customs of the two states, Athens and Lacedaemon. For in these states it used to be the case, that the Lacedaemonians rather committed to memory what they observed as law, while the Athenians rather observed as law what they had consigned to writing, and included in the body of their laws.

11. The laws of nature, which all nations observe alike, being established by a divine providence, remain ever fixed and immutable. But the laws which every state has enacted, undergo frequent changes, either by the tacit consent of the people, or by a new law being subsequently passed.

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