

INTRODUCTION: NATURE IN THEOLOGY



The Fall–Winter 2019 issue of *Communio* is dedicated to the theme “Nature in Theology.” From patristic era debates about the hypostatic union of God and man in Christ, through the medieval reception of Aristotle, to post-Reformation controversies on grace and freedom, the idea of nature has been central to Catholic thought down the ages. As the proper terminus of God’s creative act, nature marks and safeguards the indissoluble goodness of God’s first gift within the mystery of redemption. Grace truly perfects nature, but what grace perfects it first *presupposes*. In recent centuries, however, the meaning of nature has been widely questioned, abandoned, and (if not revised beyond recognition) forgotten both by theologians and the culture at large. The authors included here recount how this loss of the idea of nature took place, defend the perennial relevance of this fundamental principle for Christian reflection, and propose ways of rediscovering and reaffirming its primacy today.

In “The Descent of Man: On Evolution and the Devolution of Nature, History, and Truth,” **Michael Hanby** discusses how Darwinian theory’s collapse of ontological perfection into historical process undermines the intellect’s proper capacity to grasp natural wholes. Once we can no longer speak meaningfully of an intrinsic end for the sake of which a given thing exists, we can no longer speak meaningfully of things at all, let alone of a mind that can know them. “The negation of transcendence in the conflation of being and history, the ‘de-Platonization’ of nature that reaches the apex of its authority in Darwinian evo-

lution, effected a corresponding transformation of what thinking now means, indeed in what we think there even is to think about.” In order for science to operate at all, Hanby points out, it must continually borrow from the very metaphysics it purports to jettison.

In “Physics without *Physis*: On Form and Teleology in Modern Science,” **Simon Oliver** examines how mechanistic physics loses a coherent vision of the cosmos by its attempt to conceive nature exclusively in terms of the principle of matter. This reductive understanding results in an account of bodies as simply external or even opposed to one another, so that causality is reimagined as a necessarily violent impingement of one thing upon the next. “Mechanistic cosmology did not abandon final causes altogether, but construed teleology in entirely extrinsic terms as derived from the inscrutable will of God.” Taking recourse to David Bohm’s reflections on quantum theory, Oliver suggests that contemporary physics is poised to retrieve Aristotelian principles through a new recognition that all natural entities interdependently pursue a common purpose, and, in so doing, express in action the unified fabric of being in which they share together.

Lesley Rice, in “‘Biology Worthy of Life’: On the Work of Steven Talbott,” presents this philosopher of science’s efforts to recover a nonfragmentary approach to organisms. Inspired by a Goethean appreciation of forms, Talbott focuses on the living growth, behaviors, and interactions through which the organism expresses and realizes its nature. Rice elucidates how this end entails a reevaluation of the biologist’s methods of observing and studying other creatures: “To yield genuine fruit, the conversation between knower and known must itself be a gracious, receptive encounter, whose ethical dimensions are honored long before any question of ‘applications’ comes into play.”

“Creation is a unique gift, among other reasons, because it is a gift that makes giving of gifts among human creatures possible.” **Matthew Philipp Whelan** ponders how this generosity that pervasively orders creation bears on man’s mission of stewardship of the environment in “‘To Till It and Keep It’: Catholic Social Doctrine and Agroecology.” Drawing broadly on Catholic social teaching and the ontology in which it is rooted, Whelan unfolds the responsive, mimetic, and grateful character of agri-

cultural practices that best conserve and foster the land's fruitfulness. He also brings to light thereby the systematic denial of any ecosystem's intelligible wholeness that is implied in modern industrialism's habits of use.

In "'The Sparkling of the Holy Ghost': The Metaphysics of Nature and Grace in Dante's *Paradiso*," **Mary Taylor** reflects on how Dante portrays finite beauty at its most glorious precisely where it is most fully saturated by the presence of divine love. "Dante," Taylor observes, "was able to hold in dynamic equilibrium the realm of grace that called forth the corresponding natural image *and* the translucent beauty and actuality of the natural objects that raised his heart to God." The bond between nature and grace is personalized in *Paradiso* through the many figures the pilgrim encounters in the poem, above all in Beatrice, whose smile concretely encapsulates the generosity that belongs to created being as the likeness of God's tripersonal goodness.

Carlo Lancellotti, in "Augusto Del Noce on Marx's Abolition of Human Nature," attends to how our culture's dominant conception of freedom as unformed self-determination is undergirded by its rejection of the classical view that reason is ordered toward God-like contemplation. On Del Noce's telling, Marxism, with its rigorous insistence that divine and finite freedom cannot coexist, fulfills the Enlightenment project by attempting to remove from reason all reference beyond finite things and events. "Thus, in Marx, rationality is no longer the capacity to perceive universal truths but becomes entirely instrumental, one of many tools that man uses to create a human world." Del Noce holds that, despite the apparent failure of its political vision in the West, Marxism's de-divinized and thus denatured view of the person has succeeded in framing the narrow aspirations of our bourgeois society.

In "Fluidity: Man, the Triune God, and the Eucharistic Christ," **Angela Franks** confronts the contemporary view of nature, gender, and the body as plastic rather than fixed realities. While clarifying how this "liquid" paradigm dangerously opposes indispensable metaphysical truths, Franks argues that this undue rejection nevertheless challenges us to account for a certain dynamism at the ground of substance. This is expressed most radically in each creature's relation to the God by whom it is given to itself and toward whom it responds in all that it

does. The mission of the Word made flesh shows forth how this legitimately fluid dimension of finite being is itself a reflection of life shared among the divine persons in God. “Jesus’ being-in-motion indicates how our ontological status as creatures in motion from and to God is fulfilled when it is incorporated into his state as one-sent by the Father.”

Margaret H. McCarthy, in “The Emperor’s (New) New Clothes: The Logic of the New ‘Gender Ideology,’” scrutinizes the veiled nihilism at play in the rethinking of gender as a matter of self-identification. In offering an account of its genesis, McCarthy demonstrates that this attempt to eliminate the givenness of sexual difference rests on a denial of the created person’s origin in and ordination toward relations of love. “[W]hat the sexual process makes more visible is the deeper and positive logic of finitude: that we exist by virtue of and for the sake of a community, a unity of two.” Such an embrace of one’s natural finitude as fruitful can only flow from acknowledging that God’s causal power is perfectly generous, hence liberating.

In collaboration with the international editions of *Communio*, we also present a pair of essays on the subtheme “Greek Drama and Christian Faith,” one in *Retrieving the Tradition* and the other by **Paolo Prosperi** entitled “*Pathei Mathos*: Rereading Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*.” In this piece, Prosperi interprets the Greek playwright’s great cycle of tragedies in light of the mystery of salvation in Christ. Arguing that Aeschylus holds an exalted view of Zeus that bears resemblances to the theology found in the Old Testament prophets, Prosperi shows that the dramatic tension in the trial of Orestes is a matter of theodicy. This vindication of the divine order must pass, moreover, through the hero’s guiltless suffering for inherited evil through which he is purified and made wise. “[F]or Aeschylus, the greatest fruit of suffering is this: awareness that existence *has meaning* and, nevertheless, it is a meaning that man can only hope to grasp by opening himself to the word that the divinity is free to speak or not speak, and that he can only await with open hands.” In this way, Orestes serves as a distant figure of the Crucified, whose loving self-surrender, in expiating sin, bears utmost witness to the Father’s goodness.

In *Retrieving the Tradition* we first reprint a classic essay by Henry B. Veatch introduced by **David S. Crawford**. Crawford shows that the problem Veatch identifies is bound up with a crisis

of confidence in reason's ability to understand the being of the world, a crisis given emblematic expression in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. In "Natural Law and the 'Is'-'Ought' Question: Queries to Finnis and Grisez," **Henry B. Veatch** questions how the natural law could be defended by someone who, like the self-professed Thomist John Finnis, accepts the terms of Hume's so-called "naturalistic fallacy." "The dilemma is simply this: either figure out a way to get from facts to norms, or just give up trying to be a natural law philosopher altogether." In response, Veatch argues both that we cannot understand principles of good action except on the basis of what man is, and that human nature itself entails the responsibility for the person to become who he is, or to realize his nature in well-ordered deeds.

Finally, on the subtheme "Greek Drama and Christian Faith," we include **Thomas Pruffer's** essay, "Providence and Imitation: Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and Aristotle's *Poetics*," as our second entry in *Retrieving the Tradition*. Reflecting on the relation between art and nature, Pruffer explains that the work of art, exemplified by tragic drama, represents the shape of human action by removing the contingencies that make up so much of actual life. The effect of this, however, is not a distortion of nature, but a faithful illumination of the order that is expressed in events but obscured save to the contemplative eye. Ultimately, the form displayed in the play's dramatic action reflects divine wisdom's providential authority. "The gods 'mind' human affairs: human affairs have the look of being looked at by the look of the gods." □

—The Editors