

HENRI DE LUBAC ON NATURE AND GRACE: A NOTE ON SOME RECENT CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE DEBATE

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“Our natural desire for God entails a renunciation both of self-sufficiency and of demand. To want a gratuitous friendship is also to want to be surprised, and so to refuse to know in advance the actual shape of that gratuity.”

A number of recent publications have brought new life to the debate surrounding Henri de Lubac’s writings on nature and grace.¹ At issue in this seemingly “academic” question is the novelty and gratuity of Jesus Christ in relation to creation. Embedded in the question of how Christ’s novelty relates to the order of creation is a set of

¹John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate Concerning the Supernatural* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2005); Ralph McInerny, *Praeambula fidei: Thomism and the God of the Philosophers* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006); *Sumaturel: Une controverse au coeur du thomisme au XXe siècle* (Toulouse: Revue Thomiste, 2001); Lawrence Feingold, *The Natural Desire to See God According to St. Thomas Aquinas and His Interpreters* (Rome: Apollinare Studi, 2001); David Braine, “The Debate Between Henri de Lubac and His Critics,” *Nova et Vetera* 6 (2008): 543–90. For an introduction to de Lubac’s life and work that includes an overview of his publications on the theme of nature and grace, see David L. Schindler’s “Introduction” to Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural* [hereafter MS] (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1998), xi–xxxii.

further issues concerning the relationship between the Church and the world, the relationship between theology and philosophy, the ecclesial and cosmological significance of the Eucharist, and the meaning of the *universality* of Christ's saving mission. For some, de Lubac's account of these matters represents a recovery of the breadth and depth of the authentic Catholic tradition, a renewal of the vision of Christian humanism that unites patristic and high medieval thought and that informed the documents of the Second Vatican Council. For others, de Lubac's writings on nature and grace represent a "distortion of the Thomist legacy" that has "influenced for the worse a large percentage of Catholic theologians and philosophers trained since the Second World War" and "contributed to the destabilization of Catholic theology."² Because de Lubac and his interlocutors both claim to be faithfully interpreting Thomas Aquinas, much of the debate has focused on the meaning of texts in Aquinas on the *desiderium naturale visionis dei* as well as related texts on the "twofold beatitude" proper to human nature.

Since the publication of *Surnaturel* in 1946, the sharpest and most significant criticisms of de Lubac's theological anthropology have been articulated by Thomists who fear that he has compromised the gratuity of grace.³ "The great difficulty with [de Lubac's] position," observes Lawrence Feingold, "lies in showing how grace

²Romanus Cessario, "Neo-Neo-Thomism," [Review of Ralph McNerny, *Praeambula fidei: Thomism and the God of the Philosophers*] *First Things* (2007): 51. For a different account of de Lubac's role in twentieth-century Catholic theology, see Joseph Ratzinger, *Milestones: Memoirs 1927–1977* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998). In addition to noting how de Lubac "suffered so much under the narrowness of the neoscholastic regime" (142), Ratzinger recounts how his encounter with de Lubac's book *Catholicism* "gave me not only a new and deeper connection with the thought of the Fathers but also a new way of looking at theology and faith as such . . . De Lubac was leading his readers out of a narrowly individualistic and moralistic mode of faith and into the freedom of an essentially social faith, conceived and lived as a *we*—a faith that, precisely as such and according to its nature, was also hope, affecting history as a whole" (98).

³For an account of the history of the publication and early reception of *Surnaturel*, see Henri de Lubac, *Mémoire sur l'occasion de mes écrits* (Namur: Culture et Vérité, 1989) [*At the Service of the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993)]. Regarding the cultural and political background of the controversy, see Alexander Dru, "From the Action Française to the Second Vatican Council: Blondel's *La Semaine Sociale* de Bordeaux," *Downside Review* 81 (1963): 226–45; Joseph Komonchak, "Theology and Culture at Mid-century: The Example of Henri de Lubac," *Theological Studies* 51 (1990): 579–602.

and the beatific vision are not due to a nature which is destined to this end in virtue of the innate desire for it implanted in the nature itself.”⁴ In his own recent study, *The Natural Desire to See God According to St. Thomas Aquinas and His Interpreters* (Rome: Apollinare Studi, 2001) [forthcoming with Sapientia Press, 2010], Feingold presents a large-scale development of this point supported by a meticulous collation of texts and arguments from Aquinas and the commentatorial tradition. In 2007, the English-language edition of *Nova et Vetera* published several articles in support of Feingold’s thesis. Essays by Reinhard Hütter⁵ and Steven Long⁶ extend Feingold’s argument by situating his critique of de Lubac within a larger set of issues bearing on the nature and method of theology, the relationship between philosophy and theology, the doctrine of predestination, and the loss of natural teleology in modern thought.

Given the complexity of these issues, and given the impossibility of surveying the writings of each of these authors, my aim in this essay is limited to clarifying the terms of the question that continues to set de Lubac at odds with Neo-Thomists such as Feingold, Hütter, and Long. In order to do so, I will first introduce de Lubac’s account of nature and grace in relation to the theory of “pure nature” that developed in late scholasticism as a result (I will argue) of an over-extension of the principle that the “end of nature must be proportionate to nature.” In the second section I will attempt to clarify the precise point of disagreement between de Lubac and Feingold, Hütter, and Long under the heading: Is there a supernatural finality imprinted on our nature, prior to grace? In the third and concluding section, I will consider some representative arguments that have been formulated against de Lubac’s position. My aim throughout is to advance the debate by focusing attention on the Neo-Thomist axiom that the innate desire of nature must be

⁴Feingold, *Natural Desire*, 26.

⁵Reinhard Hütter, “*Desiderium Naturale Visionis Dei—Est autem duplex hominis beatitudo sive felicitas*: Some Observations about Lawrence Feingold’s and John Milbank’s Recent Interventions in the Debate over the Natural Desire to See God,” *Nova et Vetera* 5 (2007): 81–131.

⁶Steven A. Long, “On the Loss, and the Recovery, of Nature as a Theonomic Principle: Reflections on the Nature/Grace Controversy,” *Nova et Vetera* 5 (2007): 133–83.

essentially proportionate to nature's power to achieve that desire. By calling this axiom into question, de Lubac drew the Church's attention once more to the structure of the mystery of God's Revelation of himself in Christ.

1. *Preliminary remarks:
on the origins of the controversy*

Henri de Lubac's various writings on the relationship between nature and grace⁷ should be viewed in the context of the unifying concern of his life and work:

Without claiming to open up new avenues of thought, I have sought rather, without any antiquarianism, to make known some of the great common areas of Catholic tradition. I wanted to make it loved, to show its ever-present fruitfulness. Such a task called more for a reading across the centuries than for a critical application to specific points; it excluded any overly preferential attachment to one school, system, or definite age; it demanded more attention to the deep and permanent unity of the faith, to the mysterious relationship (which escapes so many specialized scholars) of all those who invoke the name of Christ, than to the multiple diversities of eras, *milieux*, personalities, and cultures. So I have never been tempted by any kind of "return to the sources" that would scorn later developments and represent the history of Christian thought as a stream of decadences; the Latins have not pushed aside the Greeks for me; nor has Saint Augustine diverted me from Saint Anselm or Saint Thomas Aquinas; nor has the latter ever seemed to me either to make the twelve centuries that preceded him useless or to condemn his disciples to a failure to see and understand fully what has followed him. . . . What I have more than once regretted in highly regarded theologians, experienced guardians, was less, as others made it out, their lack of openness to the problems and currents of

⁷Henri de Lubac's major publication, *Summum. Études historiques* [1946], edited and introduced by Michel Sales (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1991) has not been translated into English. In a preface to the 1991 edition, Michel Sales provides a helpful schema of the genetic relations between *Summum*, the articles "Duplex hominis beatitudo" (1948) [see the English translation in the present volume, *Communio* 35, no. 4 (Winter 2008): 598–611] and "Le mystère du surnaturel" (1949), the two books *Augustinisme et théologie moderne* (1965) and *Le mystère du surnaturel* (1965), and finally *Petite catéchèse sur Nature et Grâce* (1980).

contemporary thought than their lack of a truly traditional mind (the two things are, moreover, connected).⁸

De Lubac's recovery of the ancient and common teaching that human beings were created for communion with God in Jesus Christ, and that consequently there is a natural desire for the vision of God, both presupposed and confirmed "the permanent unity of faith" with regard to its teaching about man's last end. In the opening lines of his *Confessions*, Augustine offers an unsurpassable summary of this teaching: "*fecisti nos ad te et inquietum est cor nostrum donec requiescat in te*" (You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they rest in you). In a different era, and using different language, Maximus the Confessor confirms this common teaching that human nature is made for communion with God in grace: "For what is more desirable to God's precious ones than to be divinized . . . Hence the state that comes from contemplating God and enjoying the gladness it gives is rightly called pleasure, rapture, and joy. It is called pleasure because the term means *that for which we naturally strive* . . . For God's precious ones are persuaded that in truth human nature is given no loftier goal."⁹ In the high medieval period Thomas Aquinas bears witness to this unbroken tradition when he teaches that "the beatitude of any rational creature whatsoever consists in seeing God by his essence,"¹⁰ and that "one has not attained to one's last end until the natural desire is at rest. Therefore the knowledge of any intelligible object is not enough for man's happiness, which is his last end, unless he know God also, which knowledge terminates his natural desire, as his last end. Therefore this very knowledge of God is man's last end."¹¹ In our time, Pope John Paul II has confirmed this truth anew by situating

⁸de Lubac, *At the Service of the Church*, 143–45.

⁹Maximus the Confessor, *Ambiguum* 7. In *Ad Thalassium*, 60, Maximus uncovers the christological center of this natural striving for divinization: "The Logos . . . when he became man manifested the innermost depth of the Father's goodness while also displaying in himself the very goal for which his creatures manifestly received the beginning of their existence."

¹⁰*In IV Sent*, d. 49, q. 2, a. 7: "Beatitudo autem cujuslibet rationalis creaturae consistit in visione dei per essentiam."

¹¹SCG III, c. 50.

the natural desire for supernatural beatitude at the core of the moral life:

For the young man [in Matthew 19], the question is not so much about rules to be followed, but about the full meaning of life. This is in fact the aspiration at the heart of every human decision and action, the quiet searching and interior prompting which sets freedom in motion. This question is ultimately an appeal to the absolute Good which attracts us and beckons us; it is the echo of a call from God who is the origin and goal of man's life. Precisely in this perspective the Second Vatican Council called for a renewal of moral theology, so that its teaching would display the lofty vocation which the faithful have received in Christ, the only response fully capable of satisfying the desire of the human heart. (*Veritatis splendor*, 7)¹²

It goes without saying that all of the authors cited above—including de Lubac—recognize a “twofold gift” from God and thus an abiding distinction between nature and grace. “What we have received in order to be is one thing,” observes Augustine, “what we received in order to be holy is another.”¹³ In much the same vein, Henri de Lubac speaks of “the first gift of creation and the second, wholly distinct, wholly super-eminent gift—the ontological call to deification which will make of man, if he responds to it, a ‘new creature.’”¹⁴ Human beings are by nature powerless to attain their ultimate end apart from God's gracious bestowal of a new gift of deifying grace. Reinhard Hütter offers a helpful summary of the distinction in unity that obtains between the gift of nature and the gift of grace:

the second gift is to be differentiated from the first gift in that (1)
the second gift necessarily presupposes the first gift (not in the

¹²The same teaching is expressed in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 27: “The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself.” “The Beatitudes respond to the natural desire for happiness. This desire is of divine origin: God has placed it in the human heart in order to draw man to the One who alone can fulfill it” (1718).

¹³Augustine, *De Trinitate*, V, 15. Cf., Letter 140, *Ad Honoratum*, ch. 4, n. 10, “we were indeed something before being sons of God, and we received the divine favor to become what we were not.”

¹⁴MS, 76.

chronological order, but in the logical as well as ontological orders) while the second gift is not necessarily entailed by the first; (2) the second gift brings the first gift, in the case of the human being, to a gratuitous, ultimate supernatural perfection and fulfillment.¹⁵

On these two points, there is basic agreement between de Lubac and his Neo-Thomist critics. The question that continues to be disputed concerns the relationship between these two gifts in the concrete order—more technically, the debate concerns the status of what Thomas Aquinas calls the “natural desire for the vision of God.”¹⁶ According to the interpretation of de Lubac, in the existing providential order, God has created human beings with a natural desire for a beatitude that as a matter of fact can only be attained through the “second gift” of deifying grace. The desire for beatitude that God has inscribed in nature is a sign that the first gift *is made for* the second gift. By the same token, the natural desire for the vision of God ensures that the grace bestowed in and through Jesus Christ represents a surpassing but genuine *fulfillment* of human nature. For de Lubac the paradox and nobility of human existence is seen in human nature’s having been created for an ultimate end that is radically beyond human nature. In the words of Aquinas, “even though by his nature man is inclined (*inclinatur*) to his ultimate end, he cannot reach it by nature but only by grace, and this owing to the loftiness of that end.”¹⁷ Thus “beatific vision and knowledge are to some extent above the nature of the rational soul, inasmuch as it cannot reach them of its own strength; but in another way they are in accordance with its nature, inasmuch as it is capable of them by nature, having been made to the likeness of God.”¹⁸ Created in the image of

¹⁵Hütter, “*Desiderium Naturale*,” 103.

¹⁶References to the “*desiderium naturale visionis dei*” abound in Thomas’s writings. Of particular importance are the texts where Thomas introduces the natural desire in the context of an argument which establishes that man can see the essence of God. Cf. ST I, q. 12, a. 1; I-II, q. 3, a. 8; SCG III, c. 25, c. 48–54; *Comp. theol.*, I, c. 104. In reading these texts, it is helpful to recall that the gratuity of the supernatural was not a disputed question for thirteenth-century theologians. The relevant issue was whether or not it was *possible* for created intellects to see the essence of God.

¹⁷*In Boethius de Trinitate*, q. 6, a. 4 ad 5.

¹⁸ST III, q. 9, a. 2 ad 3.

God, human beings are by nature *capax Dei*; this capacity is not yet grace, but defines our nature itself as a non-anticipating readiness for God's gracious and unmerited self-communication in Christ.

Beginning with Denys the Carthusian (d. 1471) the idea that human nature desires an ultimate end that is beyond human nature's innate ability to obtain came into conflict with an axiom (derived from a certain reading of Aristotle) that "natural desire cannot extend beyond natural capacity."¹⁹ This axiom was the key premise in Denys's argument against the teaching of Thomas Aquinas that human beings have a natural desire for the vision of God. Some forty years later, the Dominican theologian Cajetan (1469–1534) accepted the same premise that Denys had articulated, but instead of arguing against Aquinas, he offered a novel interpretation of the latter's teaching on the natural desire. When St. Thomas writes that there is a natural desire to see God, Cajetan reasons, he is speaking as a theologian who presupposes the effects of grace on nature. In other words, accepting the principle that "*naturale desiderium non se extendit ultra naturae facultatem*"²⁰ (natural desire does not extend beyond the capacity of nature), Cajetan is forced to reinterpret Thomas's oft repeated assertion that there is a natural desire for the vision of God to be true only insofar as grace has elevated the desire and finality of nature.

¹⁹Denys, *De puritate et felicitate animae*, a. 56, *Opera omnia*, vol. 40, 431b; cited in Feingold, *Natural Desire*, 167.

²⁰Cajetan, *In Iam*, q. 12, a. 1, n. 10. Regarding the presence of this axiom in Aquinas, de Lubac writes: "St. Thomas, it should be noticed, was well aware of the principle which, starting with Cajetan, was to enjoy a brilliant career in modern scholasticism. In certain sections it even happened that he made use of it; he did so to establish the necessity of the infused virtue of charity, which causes us to love God as he should be loved. In other words, he knew perfectly well that our 'natural desire' by itself is by no means efficacious, and that in no way is it enough to lead us to our end . . . he had recourse to it again—fundamentally in the same sense—in the case of an objective desire, due to love of friendship [*In III Sent.* d. 27, q. 2, a. 2]. But he did not turn it into a universal principle. He refused to apply it mechanically to the case of the created spirit in relation with its last end. If it was quoted to him in this context, he rejected the deceptive analogy as unworthy: 'Irrational creatures are not ordered to an end higher than is proportionate to their own natural ability. And so there is no comparison' [*ST I-II*, q. 91, a. 4 ad 3]" (*Augustinianism and Modern Theology* [hereafter AMT] [New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2000], 171–72).

Robert Spaemann summarizes the development that followed in the wake of Cajetan's acceptance of the axiom that the desire of human nature must be proportionate to nature:

All of the Thomists of the sixteenth century cite Aristotle in this context: "If nature had given the heavenly bodies the inclination to linear motion, she would also have given them the means for it." [*De Caelo*, II, 290a] . . . the thought of a "*desiderium naturale*," which points *in nature beyond nature*, would, according to the theologians of the sixteenth century, make salvation a right, and grace would cease to be a gift. The consequence of this was that one superimposed a hypothetical purely natural destiny of man, a "*finis naturalis*," onto the actual destiny given in salvation history; and thus the fateful construction of a "*natura pura*" came into being. God, so the theory goes, could have created man also "*in puris naturalibus*." The destiny of salvation is purely accidental in relation to human nature. The ordering of nature to this destiny consists solely in the so-called "*potentia oboedientialis*," a passive capacity to be taken up into this new destiny by divine omnipotence. . . . The system of "*natura pura*" then became dominant in the disputation with Baius in Catholic theology. For the sake of the gratuity of grace, the theologians made the autonomy of nature a postulate, in relation to which grace has the character of a "*superadditum*."²¹

There are two aspects to Spaemann's analysis that illuminate the ongoing controversy surrounding de Lubac's writings on nature and grace. The first point concerns the new understanding of nature that emerged in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as a result of an over-extension of the principle that the final end of nature must be proportionate to nature. Applied to the question of man's ultimate end, this new understanding of nature was at odds with the teaching of both Augustine and Aquinas, for whom the desire of human nature for an ultimate end beyond nature was a sign of God's liberality²² and the nobility of intellectual natures. "The nature that can attain perfect good," Thomas writes, "although it needs help from

²¹Robert Spaemann, *Philosophische Essays* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1983), 26–27.

²²Cf. *De Veritate*, q. 14, a. 10 ad 2: "In the very beginning of creation, human nature was ordained to beatitude, not as to an end proper to man by reason of his nature, but given him solely by divine liberality. Therefore, there is no need for the principles of nature to have sufficient power to achieve that end without the aid of special gifts with which God in His generosity supplements them."

without in order to attain it, is of more noble condition than a nature which cannot attain perfect good, but attains some imperfect good, although it need no help from without in order to attain it.”²³

The second point that Spaemann makes is that the idea of a strict proportionality between nature and its final end had profound implications for the gratuity of grace. Obviously, if nature can attain its final end by virtue of its own abilities, then the supposition that the final end of nature is supernatural beatitude would mean that grace is no longer a free gift. Nature would have a claim on grace. Given the dilemma that follows from this premise, it is understandable that scholastic theologians began to appeal to a hypothetical order of “pure nature” to safeguard the absolute gratuity of the supernatural. Within a hypothetical realm of “pure nature,” the final end of human nature would be a natural beatitude proportionate to nature’s abilities.

Now, it is important to note that this hypothetical order of “pure nature” can fulfill its role of safeguarding the gratuity of the supernatural only if the essential character of human nature entails a constitutive ordination to a *purely natural (final) end*.²⁴ In other words, for proponents of “pure nature,” when we turn from the hypothetical realm to the existing providential order in which human beings are destined for supernatural beatitude, the innate *natural desire* and the *natural beatitude* it aspires to are strictly identical to what would obtain in the hypothetical realm of “pure nature.” The only difference is that in the existing providential order human beings are in fact offered a supernatural beatitude that infinitely exceeds natural beatitude.

De Lubac acknowledges the service that the idea of “pure nature” rendered to Catholic theology, especially in the wake of the errors of Baius and Jansenius. At the same time, relying on the idea

²³ST I-II, q. 5, a. 5 ad 2. Spaemann calls attention to another passage where Thomas draws support from Aristotle to justify this paradox of nature needing help from without to attain its final end: “That which we are able to do only with divine assistance is not absolutely impossible for us according to the philosopher’s observation in the *Nicomachean Ethics*: that which we are able to do through friends we can in a certain way do on our own” (ST I-II, q. 109, a. 4 ad 2).

²⁴Feingold, *Natural Desire*, 621: “It is true that the assertion of the possibility of a state of pure nature only serves to defend the gratuitousness of grace if one assumes that a given intellectual nature—human or angelic—is the same, whether or not it has been ordered to a supernatural end.”

of “pure nature” to safeguard the gratuity of grace carried in its wake a number of unintended and unfortunate consequences. According to de Lubac, the system of “pure nature” prepared the soil for contemporary secularism insofar as it precluded the idea that the mystery of Jesus Christ reveals the original purpose and meaning of creation itself—reveals, we might say, the nature of nature. In order to see how this is so, it is helpful to consider a typical example of the theology of “pure nature” that prevailed in the early part of the twentieth century. In an article on “Heaven” written for the *Catholic Encyclopedia* that was published between 1907 and 1914, Joseph Hontheim offers the following account of the “supernatural” character of beatitude:

it is clear that there is a twofold beatitude: the natural and the supernatural. As we have seen, man is by nature entitled to beatitude, provided he does not forfeit it by his own fault. We have also seen that beatitude is eternal and that it consists in the possession of God, for creatures cannot truly satisfy man. Again, as we have shown, the soul is to possess God by knowledge and love. But the knowledge to which man is entitled by nature is not an immediate vision, but an analogous perception of God in the mirror of creation, still a very perfect knowledge which really satisfies the heart. Hence the beatitude to which alone we have a natural claim consists in that perfect analogous knowledge and in the love corresponding to that knowledge. This natural beatitude is the lowest kind of felicity which God, in His goodness and wisdom, can grant to sinless man. But, instead of an analogous knowledge of His Essence He may grant to the blessed a direct intuition which includes all the excellence of natural beatitude and surpasses it beyond measure. It is this higher kind of beatitude that it has pleased God to grant us. And by granting it He not merely satisfies our natural desire for happiness but He satisfies it in superabundance.²⁵

²⁵J. Hontheim, “Heaven,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 7 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910). In AMT, 145–213 and MS, 37–52, de Lubac has gathered an abundance of similar texts regarding the perfection of “natural beatitude” and the possibility of a “natural possession of God.” For example, Victor Cathrein, “De naturali hominis beatitudine,” *Gregorianum* 11 (1930): 402 [cited in de Lubac, “*Duplex hominis beatitudo*,” 600, fn. 5] writes: “That blessedness which is the ultimate end of the state of pure nature must perfectly satisfy the natural appetite of man, otherwise it is not the ultimate end of nature.” Although more carefully qualified, Steven Long’s account of “natural beatitude” in his article “On the Possibility of a Purely Natural End for Man,” *The Thomist* 64 (2000): 211–37,

It is not unfair to ask the author of this passage the following question: If human beings can attain (are, in fact, “entitled” to attain), without the gift of grace, a natural “possession of God” which “really satisfies the heart,” why should anyone bother with a more excellent beatitude? The most obvious problem with the system of “pure nature” typified in the passage above is that it severs all real links between the desire of the human heart and the Christian mystery. But it is equally important to note that the system of “pure nature” also undermines the deepest truth of nature itself—the truth that nature is created *ex nihilo*, and that it bears within itself and expresses the liberality and generosity of the Creator.²⁶

at 233, approximates the passage cited above from the *Catholic Encyclopedia*. Long writes: “natural beatitude does not satisfy the desire for beatitude of which man is naturally capable with divine aid; yet this capability, while rooted partially in human nature, is only actually realizable under the causality of grace, such that man himself would be positively ignorant of this capability as such in the absence of supernatural revelation. Ergo: natural felicity or imperfect beatitude would indeed constitute true ends within a different economy of providence, proportionately perfecting those aspects of the human person whose perfection is naturally knowable (in precision from grace), and which are due to nature.” Responding to one author who quotes Augustine in support of the modern idea of a “natural beatitude” that “quells the appetite,” de Lubac wryly comments: “When St. Augustine uttered his famous declaration ‘You have made us for yourself, O God . . .,’ he never anticipated that one day in the twentieth century this would be taken in a purely natural sense. When St. Thomas Aquinas said ‘Grace perfects nature,’ he did not foresee that what he said about the completion or perfecting of nature would be retained, while the grace which effects that completion would be left aside” (MS, 38).

²⁶Cf. Kenneth Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1982). In a reflection on the immortality of the human soul in *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 154–55, Joseph Ratzinger shows how Thomas’s “theology of creation” entails a “complete transformation of Aristotelianism.” Ratzinger writes: “Being referred to God, to truth himself, is not, for man, some optional pleasurable diversion for the intellect. . . relationship to God can be seen to express the core of his very essence . . . it constitutes what is deepest in man’s being. . . [this relation] is not a product of human achievement. It is given to man; man depends for it on Another. But it is given to man to be his very own possession. That is what is meant by creation, and what Thomas means when he says that immortality belongs to man by nature. The constant background here is Thomas’ theology of creation: nature is only possible by virtue of a communication of the Creator’s, yet such communication both establishes the creature in its own right and makes it a genuine participator in the being of the One communicated.”

Proponents of “pure nature” tend to ignore the implications of Aquinas’s teaching that nature’s capacity to be an inner principle of motion and rest itself depends upon God’s bestowal of *esse*, which, as Thomas says, “actualizes all things . . . even forms.”²⁷ The natural desire to see God is interwoven with our innate capacity to attain *esse* (in this life by a process of metaphysical *separatio*). But just as created essence has no prior claim to God’s bestowal of *esse*—since it does not exist prior to that bestowal—the natural desire to see God, which is rooted in and expresses our essence as intellectual creatures, does not constitute a “demand” or an “anticipation” of grace. On the contrary, it is a receptive readiness rooted in the fact of having already been given the gift of *esse* absolutely gratis.

De Lubac cites approvingly the words of Marie-Joseph Le Guillou, which in turn are inspired by Aquinas: “Respect for natural values in their own structure is the best measure of our respect for the supernatural in its absolute originality.”²⁸ For de Lubac the best way to respect the integrity of nature in its own structure as well as the absolute originality of grace is to deepen the logic of gift that informs both creation and redemption in their distinction and unity. There is no need to foreshorten or water down the profound teaching of Augustine and Aquinas on the natural desire for beatific vision. What is desired by nature is precisely beyond the reach of what nature can attain by its own powers. In other words, the deepest desire of nature is precisely the renunciation of anything like a claim or a demand in the first place; it is a holding-oneself-in-readiness so that God may be God. De Lubac’s point is simply that God creates intellectual nature with this innate readiness so that he may elevate it graciously to the elect vessel of his self-communication in Christ.

At a certain point in the *Summa*, Thomas considers the following objection:

It would seem that man can attain beatitude by his natural powers. For nature does not fail in necessary things. But nothing is so necessary to man as that by which he attains the last end.

²⁷ST I, q. 4, a. 1 ad 3.

²⁸M.-J. Le Guillou, “Surnaturel,” *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* (1950): 226–43, at 238; cited in MS, 23.

Therefore this is not lacking to human nature. Therefore man can attain beatitude by his natural powers.

Aquinas's response is instructive:

Neither did [nature] fail man in things necessary, although it gave him not the wherewithal to attain beatitude, since this it could not do. But it did give him free will, with which he can turn to God, that He may make him beatified. "For what we do by means of our friends, is done, in a sense, by ourselves" [*Ethic.*, vi, 13].²⁹

"When the end is beyond the capacity of the agent striving to attain it," Aquinas argues, "it is looked for from another's bestowing."³⁰ Interpreting this insight of Aquinas in light of what we just said about receptivity, we might say that our natural desire for God entails a renunciation both of self-sufficiency and of demand. Or, put positively, it is a yearning to have happiness only in the context of a friendship that is gratuitous. It goes without saying that it is only in retrospect—from the point of view of grace given—that we can know that God's love in Christ is the superabundant fulfillment of this secret wish of the human heart. Blessed ignorance: To want a gratuitous friendship is also to want to be surprised, and so to refuse to know in advance the actual shape of that gratuity, should it actually occur.

2. *Is there a supernatural finality imprinted on our nature, prior to grace?*

In order to clarify the disputed question it is helpful to revisit a passage (part of which was cited above) from Reinhard Hütter on the "twofold gift" of nature and grace:

For Aquinas, as for all Christian theology, everything that is, is God's gift (*creatio ex nihilo*). However, there is—in the present order of providence as coinciding with the economy of salvation—a second gift. Because God is the giver of both gifts and because the second (sanctifying grace) has to come by way of

²⁹ST I-II, q. 5, a 5 ad 1.

³⁰ST I, q. 62, a. 4: "quando finis excedit virtutem operantis propter finem, unde expectatur finis ex dono alteriu."

the first (being), there indeed cannot obtain an essential heterogeneity between them in respect of their origin. At the same time, however, what we might arguably call the *donum primum* and the *donum ultimum* do not simply represent two aspects of the self-same gift. . . . the second gift is to be differentiated from the first gift in that (1) the second gift necessarily presupposes the first gift (not in the chronological order, but in the logical as well as ontological orders) while the second gift is not necessarily entailed by the first; (2) the second gift brings the first gift, in the case of the human being, to a gratuitous, ultimate supernatural perfection and fulfillment; (3) the second gift discloses in the case of the rational creature—by initially ordering the first gift, created human nature, to the supernatural end and secondly perfecting it—the intrinsic ontological openness of the first for the second gift as well as the former’s surpassing fittingness for such a supernatural perfection; and (4) the second gift is all of this without canceling out the connatural, proportionate end that comes with the prior gift, created human nature.³¹

As suggested earlier, de Lubac agrees wholeheartedly with Hütter’s first and second theses. And, although this remains to be shown, I think that de Lubac also agrees with Hütter’s fourth thesis in a qualified sense. The key question concerns the third thesis which claims that the gift of grace “initially order[s] the first gift, created human nature, to the supernatural end.” Leaving to one side an ambiguity latent in the term *orders*,³² Hütter’s third thesis suggests

³¹Hütter, “*Desiderium Naturale*,” 102–03.

³²De Lubac explains: “though the being who desires to see God is certainly ‘capable of this blessed cognition’ [ST III, q. 9, a. 2], it does not follow that his nature is of itself ‘efficacious to seeing God.’ The desire itself is by no means a ‘perfect appetite.’ It does not constitute as yet even the slightest positive ‘ordering’ to the supernatural. Again, it is sanctifying grace, with its train of theological virtues, which must order the subject to his last end; at least, it alone can order him ‘sufficiently’ or ‘perfectly,’ or ‘directly.’ This grace is a certain ‘form,’ a certain ‘supernatural perfection’ which must be ‘added over and above human nature’ in order that man ‘may be ordered appropriately to his end’ [SCG III, c. 150] . . . disposition, proportion, ‘sufficient’ inclination, ‘immediate’ ordering, or ordering ‘in due fashion,’ inchoativeness, raising up . . . : all these words, unlike ‘receptive potency’ [*potentia receptiva*], ‘capacity’ [*capacitas*], ‘ability’ [*habilitas*], or ‘aptitude’ [*aptitudo*], are generally used to designate a kind of reality which belongs not to the order or finality of nature, but in varying degrees, at varying stages, and from varying perspectives, to the supernatural order: the order of grace, free will and merit, the order of the theological virtues, and finally, the order of glory and of vision” (MS, 85–88).

that (post-lapsarian) human beings are created simply with a natural final end and that we first receive a new supernatural final end concomitant with the gift of grace. In the words of Feingold, “the natural desire to see God spoken of by St. Thomas cannot be understood to indicate the underlying finality of rational nature itself, because for St. Thomas, we are not ordered to the vision of God by virtue of our nature, but by virtue of grace.”³³

In contrast to this position, de Lubac holds that when Thomas says that “the beatitude of any rational creature whatsoever consists in seeing God by his essence”³⁴ and that “our intellect was made for the purpose of seeing God,”³⁵ he is referring to a finality that is inscribed in nature itself from the first moment of creation. De Lubac’s position, then, is aptly summed up by the phrase “natural desire for the supernatural”—provided that one acknowledges that the desire is truly natural³⁶ and that the ultimate end is truly supernatural, which means that the ultimate end of nature is both unattainable and hidden from us without a new gift of grace that fittingly and efficaciously “orders” the desire of nature.³⁷ “Here we can agree with Cajetan,” de Lubac writes, “‘this end is hidden from us because it is the supernatural end of our soul’ . . . but for us, unlike Cajetan, it is not the absence of any desire that is the reason for ignorance: rather it is the depth of our desire.”³⁸

We can further pinpoint the disputed question by noting key points of agreement between de Lubac, on the one hand, and

³³Feingold, *Natural Desire*, 193–94.

³⁴*In IV Sent.*, d. 49, q. 2, a. 7.

³⁵*De Veritate*, q. 10, a. 11 ad 7: “intellectus noster quamvis sit factus ad videndum deum.”

³⁶“The fact that the nature of spiritual being, as it actually exists, is not conceived as an order destined to close in finally upon itself, but in a sense open to an inevitably supernatural end, does not mean that it already has in itself, or as part of its basis, the smallest supernatural element” (MS, 31). “The desire itself . . . does not constitute as yet even the slightest positive ‘ordering’ to the supernatural” (MS, 85).

³⁷Among other texts, de Lubac refers to ST I-II, q. 114, a. 2: “eternal life is a good exceeding the proportion of created nature, since it exceeds its knowledge and desire.” “This is the first reason,” de Lubac comments, “why we need divine revelation and divine grace . . . the natural desire for the vision of God . . . is not the same as an elicited desire” (MS, 220).

³⁸MS, 217.

Feingold, Hütter, and Long on the other hand. Both sides are committed to upholding an abiding distinction between nature and grace. Both sides acknowledge that the beatitude proper to human nature is “twofold,” natural and supernatural. De Lubac, of course, stresses the incompleteness or penultimate character of “natural felicity,” whereas his interlocutors (Long in particular) emphasize that the “natural end” is truly a final end in its own order, though it is not, they acknowledge, a perfect end. Finally, both sides agree that the supreme ultimate end of human nature—the only end that fully perfects and fulfills human nature in every respect—is the vision of God.³⁹

The difference between de Lubac and his critics is that de Lubac anchors the duality of ends (imperfect “natural beatitude” and supernatural beatitude) in human nature itself as created in the image of God. In this sense, human nature itself has only one *final* end—communion with God through beatific vision. De Lubac does not mean that the final end of beatific vision follows, as it were, simply from the principles of nature. Rather, God has freely inscribed in nature itself, prior to grace, a finality and a desire that goes beyond nature. For Feingold, Hütter, and Long, it makes no sense to say that human nature in precision from grace is created with a supernatural end. “It is ultimately contradictory,” Feingold claims, “to suppose that our nature itself—without the addition of a supernatural principle—could be intrinsically determined by a supernatural finality, or have a supernatural finality inscribed upon it.”⁴⁰ Although nature may be “open” to receiving a higher end, this higher supernatural end is first given with the second gift of deifying grace. The underlying premise is that the final end of nature must be proportionate to nature.

The difference between the two positions sketched above leads to two different readings of the encyclical *Humani generis* (1950). Pius XII writes: “Others destroy the gratuity of the supernatural order, since God, they say, cannot create intellectual beings

³⁹Hütter, “*Desiderium Naturale*,” 107, writes: “the first gift [human nature] . . . has been created for and is intrinsically open to the reception of the second gift.” Long concurs: “there is indeed no doubt that for Thomas the end of man is . . . that of the supernatural vision of God” (“On the Possibility of a Purely Natural End for Man,” 220).

⁴⁰Feingold, *Natural Desire*, 526.

without ordering and calling them to the beatific vision” (*Humani generis*, 26). De Lubac accepts this teaching as true and as essentially consonant with his writings on the supernatural both prior to and posterior to the promulgation of *Humani generis*.⁴¹ At the same time, de Lubac does not think that this teaching in itself is sufficient to secure the gratuity of the supernatural. Why? *Humani generis* refers to a hypothetical order wherein intellectual beings are *not* ordered and called to perfect beatitude. However, in the world that God has actually created, “[t]he desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself.”⁴² For de Lubac, the teaching of *Humani generis* helps us to see that it would have been possible for God to create intellectual natures other than they would need to be to play their destined role in a providential economy ordered to deification.

Feingold, Hütter, and Long interpret the teaching of *Humani generis* in a different sense. For them, nature itself and the innate desire of nature are strictly identical in the hypothetical and in the concrete order wherein human beings are destined for supernatural beatitude.⁴³ This is the burden of Feingold and Hütter distinguishing between the “essential finality” of nature and the “actual finality” that grace effects. The “addition” of an actual finality of beatific vision makes no difference to the “essential finality” of nature.

⁴¹Here I disagree with John Milbank, whose insightful book *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate Concerning the Supernatural* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2005), is marred by a psychologizing account of de Lubac as “traumatized” and “provoked . . . [to] severe theoretical incoherence” (8) by *Humani generis*. Here is de Lubac’s own description of the encyclical: “It seems to me to be like many other ecclesiastical documents, unilateral: that is almost the law of the genre; but I have read nothing in it, doctrinally, that affects me. The only passage where I recognize an implicit reference to me is a phrase bearing on the question of the supernatural; now it is rather curious to note that this phrase, intending to recall the true doctrine on this subject, reproduces exactly what I said about it two years earlier in an article in *Recherches de science religieuse*” [*At the Service of the Church*, 71]. Elsewhere, de Lubac notes that *Humani generis* was “very different from what some had anticipated: it even caused in them some disappointment. . . it is not by chance that it avoids any mention of the famous ‘pure nature’ that a number of highly placed theologians were accusing me of misunderstanding and which they wanted to have canonized” (*Entretiens autour de Vatican II*, 13–14; cited in *Theology in History* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996], 281).

⁴²*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 27.

⁴³See note 24 above.

Before considering various objections to de Lubac's interpretation of Thomas Aquinas in the following section, it is important to stress two points.

First of all, de Lubac's natural desire for the supernatural is not grace; it is not the supernatural effect of the actual call to the beatific vision. It is, rather, the natural infrastructure placed by God in intellectual nature for the sake of realizing his plan to bestow the call to supernatural happiness in a second "moment" that is logically and ontologically distinct with respect to the act of creating intellectual nature in the first place. Clearly, this need not—and does not—mean that we by nature know about, or can realize, God's gracious call to eternal life with him. Our remarks about the receptive structure of the *desiderium naturale* suggest just the opposite. Only surprise fulfills.

Secondly, one of the repeated charges against de Lubac seems to rest on a basic misreading of his writings on nature and grace. According to Ralph McInerny, "[t]he rejection of an end proportionate to human nature separates de Lubac more decisively from St. Thomas than anything else, doubtless because this rejection is at the basis of his thought In de Lubac's account man no longer has a natural end."⁴⁴ Steven Long echoes McInerny in claiming that "a unilateral stress upon certain aspects of St. Thomas's teaching about the natural desire for God led de Lubac to deny the existence of a proportionate natural end as opposed to the supernatural *finis ultimus*."⁴⁵ This accusation rests on an ambiguity in the term "end." What de Lubac rejects and denies is the idea that "natural beatitude" or the "natural end" is the final end of human nature. He is well aware that St. Thomas often speaks of twofold happiness proper to human nature: there is a "natural happiness" that is proportionate to human nature and an "ultimate beatitude" that exceeds nature's abilities. De Lubac accepts this duality as unproblematic, provided that the imperfect and penultimate character of "natural happiness" is affirmed. For example, de Lubac often cites *Summa theologiae* I-II, q. 62, a. 1:

man's happiness is twofold, as was also stated above (I-II, q. 5, a. 5). One is proportionate to human nature, a happiness, to wit,

⁴⁴McInerny, *Praeambula fidei*, 85.

⁴⁵Long, "Reflections on the Nature/Grace Controversy," 135.

which man can obtain by means of his natural principles. The other is a happiness surpassing man's nature, and which man can obtain by the power of God alone, by a kind of participation of the Godhead, about which it is written (2 Pt 1:4) that by Christ we are made "partakers of the Divine nature." And because such happiness surpasses the capacity of human nature, man's natural principles which enable him to act well according to his capacity, do not suffice to direct man to this same happiness.

A similar distinction is set forth in *Summa theologiae* I, q. 62, a. 1; I-II, q. 3, aa. 3–5; q. 5, a. 5; *De Veritate*, q. 14, a. 2; a. 10; *In Boet. de Trinitate*, q. 6, a. 4; and *Summa contra Gentiles* I, c. 5; III, 48; III, 63. Reviewing these texts de Lubac comments:

the first of these two "beatitudes," which is "proportionate to our nature," is not a transcendent beatitude, a final or definitive end of the created spirit in a hypothetical world of "pure nature." Rather, it is an imperfect "beatitude," terrestrial and temporal, immanent to the world itself.⁴⁶

[W]e discover a remarkable continuity of doctrine on our subject [the twofold beatitude of man]—a continuity that stretches from St. Thomas's earliest work to his final writings. These texts reciprocally comment on one another. . . . Each time we hear of a beatitude "formulated" by the Philosophers . . . we can conclude that the text refers to the condition of this world. This beatitude is consistently contrasted with that of the "future life" or of the "homeland," or to what we await "after death." At times, to emphasize its imperfection, St. Thomas insists that it is necessarily mixed, unstable, and transitory. But he can also identify a sort of continuity between the contemplation of the truth the wise man engages in here below and its consummation in the "beyond" This does not keep him from maintaining that no beatitude, however great, that does not entail eternity and stability, can be called true; for him, only "eternal beatitude" is true beatitude (*beatitudo vera*), beatitude itself (*beatitudo per essentiam*), and beatitude *tout court*. . . . In a word, the first is immanent—at once worldly or temporal and acquired according to internal principles; the second is transcendent—at once heavenly and received according to divine grace. Beatitude is twofold: the first is "natural," and the second is "supernatural."⁴⁷

⁴⁶de Lubac, "*Duplex hominis beatitudo*," 603.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 609ff.

Returning to the accusation that de Lubac “rejects the natural end”—if this is taken to mean that de Lubac rejects the idea of a “natural beatitude” proportionate to our nature, it is a demonstrably false accusation. “Beatitude,” de Lubac writes, “is twofold: the first is ‘natural,’ and the second is ‘supernatural.’”⁴⁸ If, on the contrary, the accusation is that de Lubac rejects the idea that “natural beatitude” is the *final* end of human nature, then the accusation rests on a decidedly un-Thomistic assumption that either (a) it is possible to be supremely happy within the confines of this world or (b) human nature is not made for, and does not desire, supreme happiness. The only real question is whether, as de Lubac holds, both of the “finalities” (imperfect “natural beatitude” and supernatural beatitude) are inscribed in nature itself from the first moment of creation, or whether, as Feingold claims, “our supernatural finality is ‘imprinted on our being’ first by sanctifying grace” because grace is “‘supper-added’ in the sense of giving us giving us a ‘new finality.’”⁴⁹ Let us briefly review three objections against de Lubac’s teaching on this point.

3. Three objections to de Lubac’s interpretation of Thomas Aquinas

In his recent article in *Nova et Vetera*, Steven Long suggests that the attempt to answer the disputed question sketched above on the basis of texts in Aquinas encounters the following exegetical difficulty:

It is without doubt true that there is a problem in the very texts of Aquinas, and a problem which seemingly does not allow much room for manoeuvre with respect to its solution: because the doctrinal points which constitute the elements of the problem—one is almost tempted to say “constitute the contradiction”—are starkly and clearly stated in St. Thomas’s text. Yet the realization that there are indeed two sets of texts, one of which was not merely an interposed corruption, itself marks a decisive advance toward correct interpretation of Thomas’s teaching. So, there are two sets of texts. On the one hand, we have St. Thomas’s arguments that to know God is the

⁴⁸Ibid., 612.

⁴⁹Feingold, *Natural Desire*, 529–30.

end of every intelligent substance (SCG III, 25); that there is indeed a natural desire for God (SCG III, 25; and ST I–II, q. 3, a. 8); and that no natural desire may be in vain (ST I, q. 75, a. 6; *Compendium*, 104). On the other hand, we have his clear affirmation that human and angelic natures are distinguished based upon their differing natural and proximate ends whereas their supernatural beatific end is the same (ST I, q. 75, a. 7 ad 1) . . . that man could have been created in a state of pure nature lacking any supernatural aid of grace [*De Veritate*, q. 14, a. 10; *De Malo*, q. 5, a. 1] . . . Finally, among this second set of texts, one finds that St. Thomas clearly argues in *Summa theologiae* I, question 62, article 2, that only grace can direct the movement of the will toward beatitude.⁵⁰

In the face of this difficulty, the only solution is to “read these texts in relation to one another.” The failure of de Lubac, Long tells us, stems from the fact that he “read St. Thomas’s texts with an exclusory eye, neglecting texts which clearly rendered his own account problematic.”⁵¹ Thus, in terms of the “two sets of texts” mentioned above, “[d]e Lubac’s argument stresses the first set of texts, and more or less passes by the second (save when generically suggesting that these and other sources of the Thomist reservation regarding his thesis are Renaissance corruptions concocted by Cajetan).”⁵² This is a strange accusation, resting—as it must—on a very partial or “exclusory” reading of de Lubac. Not only does one find in de Lubac extensive citations with commentary on the relevant texts in Aquinas that refer to “natural beatitude,”⁵³ as well as texts that refer to the possible creation of man “in puribus naturalibus,”⁵⁴ as well as texts that describe grace as a new form “which must be ‘added over and above human nature’ in order that man ‘may be appropriately ordered to his end,’”⁵⁵ but one can also find the very texts that Long accuses de Lubac of excluding. For example, *De Veritate*, q. 14, a. 10 ad 2 is cited and discussed in

⁵⁰Long, “Reflections on the Nature/Grace Controversy,” 137–38.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 137.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 141.

⁵³Cf. “La béatitude naturelle selon saint Thomas” in *Summaeurel*, 449–65; “Duplex hominis beatitudo;” AMT, 185–203; MS, 198–206.

⁵⁴AMT, 214–24; *Summaeurel*, 142f.

⁵⁵MS, 75–100; 216–21; *Brief Catechesis*, 41–47.

“*Duplex hominis beatitudo*,” *Summa theologiae* I, q. 62, a. 2 is cited at length and commented upon in *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 87; *De Malo*, q. 5, a. 1 is cited and interpreted in *Surnaturel*, 143–44, 450f.

There is, however, a more interesting question to ask regarding de Lubac’s interpretation of Thomas Aquinas. Although it is beyond the scope of this essay, it would be instructive to compare de Lubac’s reading of Aquinas with that of Lawrence Feingold. De Lubac interprets Thomas as an authoritative witness to a tradition that precedes him. This is the reason why de Lubac is constantly citing earlier voices in the tradition—Irenaeus, Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, Maximus the Confessor, Bernard of Clairvaux, Anselm—precisely in order to shed light on the teaching of Thomas Aquinas. And this is the reason why de Lubac’s writings on nature and grace are saturated with references to Scripture. Feingold, on the contrary, simply begins with Aquinas and then microscopically traces the tradition of commentary on Aquinas’s writings. In other words, Feingold takes Aquinas as constituting a tradition. “What makes Feingold so provocative,” Hütter observes, “is that the form of his discourse—in stark contrast to de Lubac’s way of reading the commentators—is shaped not by a historical hermeneutic but by reconstructing and thus entering their own way of conducting a speculative theological enquiry, a mimetic exercise reconstructing and thus continuing the commentator’s discursive mimesis of Aquinas.”⁵⁶ It is clear that Feingold imitates a certain tradition of commentary on Aquinas. It is less clear that Aquinas intended to constitute such a tradition of commentary. In continuity with the tradition that preceded him, he understood the task of theology to begin and end with the interpretation of Scripture within the Catholic tradition. As noted earlier, de Lubac’s understanding of theology precludes “any overly preferential attachment to one school, system, or definite age,” focusing instead on “the deep and permanent unity of the faith, the mysterious relationship . . . of all those who invoke the name of Christ.”⁵⁷ The crucial point is that de Lubac’s hermeneutic allows for a more adequate interpretation of an ecclesial author such as Thomas Aquinas who did not intend to

⁵⁶Hütter, “*Desiderium Naturale*,” 92.

⁵⁷de Lubac, *At the Service of the Church*, 143.

constitute a tradition, but to write as a Catholic theologian within the tradition.

A second objection to de Lubac's position is based on Aquinas's teaching that human and angelic natures are distinguished on the basis of differing natural and proximate ends. If human beings naturally desired the beatific vision, the objection runs, there would be no grounds for differentiating humans from angels. Long summarizes the argument as follows:

if human nature has its species in relation to its natural end, which is distinct from the supernatural end, then this teaching of Thomas alone destroys the proposition that for Thomas supernatural beatific vision is the natural end (and this formulation that beatific vision is the natural end by contrast occurs nowhere in Thomas's text . . .).⁵⁸

Long returns to this argument at several junctures in his essay, emphasizing again its destructive power:

Recollect the text from *De Anima* [a. 7 ad 10]: "Those beings whose proximate and natural end is one and the same are one in species. However, eternal beatitude is a final and supernatural end." This—absolutely in itself—would be sufficient to destroy the thesis of *Supernaturel* and *Augustinianism and Modern Theology* with respect to the actual teaching of Aquinas.⁵⁹

In response it should be noted that Long's formulation "beatific vision is the natural end" is also foreign to de Lubac. De Lubac's clear and constant teaching is that the ultimate end of human nature is *supernatural* beatitude. Likewise, as was shown above, de Lubac does not deny that there is a 'natural beatitude' proportionate to nature. Yes, man has a different *penultimate* end from that of the angels, since "the proper object of the human intellect, which is united to a body, is a quiddity or nature existing in corporeal matter."⁶⁰ But this does not at all compromise the truth that the *final* end of human nature is the vision of God. Secondly, Long would surely hold that all intellectual natures are ordered to know and love

⁵⁸Long, "Reflections on the Nature/Grace Controversy," 143.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 159.

⁶⁰ST I, q. 84, a. 7.

God, even apart from grace. Why, then, does this not abolish the specific differences between one intellectual nature and the next? Put another way, even on the level of the knowledge and love of God proportionate to nature, men and angels all have a natural ordination to knowing and loving God; what distinguishes them at the level of species is that this ordination is directed to different *degrees* of that knowing and loving. This suggests a third point: This hierarchy of degrees of natural participation in knowing and loving God is reflected also in supernatural beatitude. As Thomas explains, all created intellects are naturally able to receive the *lumen gloriae*, insofar as they are all intellects; this does not interfere with there being different grades of intellectuality, grades sufficient to differentiate one intellectual nature from another:

For we have proved that this light cannot be connatural to any creature, but surpasses every created nature in its power. Now that which is done by a supernatural power, is not hindered by any diversity of nature, since the divine power is infinite; so that in the miraculous healing of a sick man, it matters not whether he ail much or little. Consequently the difference of degrees in the intellectual nature does not prevent the lowest in that nature from being raised by the aforesaid light to that vision. Again. The highest intellect in the order of nature is infinitely distant from God in perfection and goodness: whereas its distance from the lowest intellect is finite: for there cannot be an infinite distance between one finite thing and another. Consequently the distance between the lowest created intellect and the highest, is as nothing in comparison with the distance between the highest created intellect and God. . . . It makes no difference therefore what intellect be raised by the aforesaid light to the vision of God, whether it be of the highest, or of the lowest, or of a middle degree. Besides. It was proved above that every intellect desires naturally to see the divine substance. Now the natural desire cannot be void. Therefore every created intellect can arrive at the vision of the divine substance, the lowliness of its nature being no obstacle.⁶¹

Notice in particular how Thomas affirms specific differences precisely in the context of stressing that *every intellect desires naturally to see the divine substance*.

⁶¹SCG III, c. 57.

A third objection to de Lubac has been formulated with particular clarity by Lawrence Feingold:

For St. Thomas, the possession of a certain form determines a relation to a given natural end that is called for by that form. . . [cf. SCG III, c. 150] From this he concludes that a new supernatural form—grace—must be “super-added” to human nature so that it can be ordered to an end that is “above human nature” . . . This clearly implies that human nature in itself without grace is not naturally or essentially ordered (and cannot be fittingly ordered) to an end that is above human nature.⁶²

If this new form which determines us to a supernatural end is above our nature, then this supernatural finality cannot be said to be “imprinted in our nature itself.” Nor can the finality that is generated by this supernatural form be considered to be an “essential finality.” It is ultimately contradictory to suppose that our nature itself—without the addition of a supernatural principle—could be intrinsically determined by a supernatural finality, or have a supernatural finality inscribed upon it, or have an “essential finality” that is supernatural. If this were the case, our nature itself would be in some sense supernatural.⁶³

There are two points to make in response to this objection. First, the idea that the *final* end of nature is determined by its form is simply another way of asserting that the final end of nature must be essentially proportionate to nature, or that nature can attain its final end by its own abilities.⁶⁴ Aquinas explicitly and repeatedly rejects this principle as applicable to the question of the final end of human nature: “Even though by his nature man is inclined to his ultimate end he cannot reach it by nature but only by grace, and this owing to the loftiness of that end.”⁶⁵ The same teaching is repeated in *Summa theologiae* I-II, q. 5, a. 5, where the second objection reads: “Since man is more noble than irrational creatures, it seems that he must be better equipped than they. But irrational creatures can attain

⁶²Feingold, *Natural Desire*, 521.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 526.

⁶⁴Feingold, *Natural Desire*, 636: “This position is based on the axiom that innate appetite, since it derives directly from the natural form possessed, is always directed to an object *proportionate* to the nature of the creature.”

⁶⁵In *Boethius de Trinitate*, q. 6, a. 4 ad 5; see also ST I-II, q. 91, a. 4 ad 3; q. 109, a. 4 ad 2; *De Veritate*, q. 8, a. 3 ad 12; q. 24 a. 10 ad 1; and *De Malo*, q. 5, a. 1.

their end by their natural powers. Much more therefore can man attain beatitude by his natural powers.” Aquinas responds:

The nature that can attain perfect good, although it needs help from without in order to attain it, is of more noble condition than a nature which cannot attain perfect good, but attains some imperfect good, although it need no help from without in order to attain it And therefore the rational creature, which can attain the perfect good of beatitude, but needs the divine assistance for the purpose, is more perfect than the irrational creature, which is not capable of attaining this good, but attains some imperfect good by its natural powers.

The text that Feingold appeals to (SCG III, c. 150) provides an account of the divine assistance that fittingly and efficaciously orders human nature to supernatural beatitude by means of the additional form of grace. It does not support Feingold’s assertion that the super-added form of grace gives nature a new final end.

This leads to the second point. How can there be a natural desire for the beatific vision that is not an illegitimate “movement toward” an end that can only be approached through the new gift of grace? When the end of nature is beyond nature’s ability, “it is looked for,” Aquinas argues, “from another’s bestowing” (*expectatur . . . ex dono alterius*).⁶⁶ If human nature desires a final end that exceeds nature, then the form of nature’s desire is receptivity—a receptive desire for the surprising and surpassing gift of friendship and assistance from another. This is supremely fitting for a nature whose very existence is from another. “What have you that you did not receive?” (1 Cor 4:7). These words from St. Paul, which resound like a refrain throughout Augustine’s writings, provide a hidden key to the structure of authentic human desire in relation to the novelty of grace. The disproportion between human nature’s desire and its power to fulfill it is a kind of created infrastructure that opens nature from within to receive and participate in the new and unimagined gift of deification. This does not mean, however, that grace arrives at the point where nature breaks down. Rather, it means that grace presupposes, activates, and fulfills a receptivity (which involves giving and receiving) that represents human nature at its highest pitch. The archetype of nature’s active receptivity is the fiat of Mary,

⁶⁶ST I, q. 62, a. 4.

which “was decisive, on the human level, for the accomplishment of the divine mystery” (*Redemptoris Mater*, 13).

Conclusion

For de Lubac, there is a *penultimate* end, proportionate to our natural capabilities, albeit “imperfect beatitude,” and one *final* end, which is *supernatural*. In the present providential economy, God places in created intellectual nature a *natural* basis for his call to that end, the issuing of which constitutes a second, ontologically/logically distinct “moment.” At the heart of created nature there is a kind of receptive readiness, which we could call a “specific obediential potency,” except that it is not merely a passive non-repugnance, even though it is not a Rahnerian *Vorgriff*. The way to resolve the apparent contradiction is to think more deeply about the structure of nature in light of the twofold mystery of the gift of creation and the filial existence of the Son. Both mysteries converge on the idea of receptivity and gratitude. Without claiming to have settled a difficult question, de Lubac has contributed to the renewal of theology by showing us why the older tradition, especially Thomas Aquinas, was right to resist in advance the modern idea that runs like a guiding thread from Cajetan through contemporary Neo-Thomism, that the final end of nature and the innate desire of nature must be essentially proportionate to nature.

A point that has been implicit in the foregoing account of de Lubac’s doctrine concerning the penultimate end of man is that the “imperfection” of this *finis penultima* does not rob it of a certain relative perfection in its own order. Although it would take us too far afield, I think it could be shown that de Lubac’s teaching, rightly understood, actually requires the affirmation of such a relative perfection or consistency. In this sense, Lubacians have good grounds for making common cause with Neo-Thomists in defense of a robust concept of nature, of natural law, and of an action theory grounded in a hylemorphic account of the constitution of the moral object. The real difference between Lubacians and Neo-Thomists, then, need not concern the existence of a natural end relatively consistent in its own order. Nevertheless, there would still remain a real difference concerning the force of the adverb “relatively.” In light of the previous discussion, I would like to propose that the perfection or consistency of the natural end in its own order—and,

indeed, this very “order” itself—is indeed relative, or relationally constituted, from top to bottom. *In other words, the very (relative) closure of nature in its own order is itself a deeper, pervasive openness to God; the autonomy of nature is creaturely dependence on the Creator.* This openness and dependence is, of course, first of all a feature of creatureliness and so is not immediately a matter of grace. Nevertheless, its role in constituting the relative perfection of nature in its own order (and the entire natural order itself) helps us understand how this very perfection can be a disponibility, an active readiness for God—one whose innate character is fully revealed precisely when this readiness is “mobilized” in the Son’s assumption of human nature from the “Yes” of his immaculate Mother. The real bone of contention, then, between Lubacians and Neo-Thomists is not whether or not there is a relative integrity to nature, but whether or not (at least in the present economy) nature itself is best understood in light of Mary’s immaculate divine motherhood and the filial existence of the Son. Our “Yes” or “No” to this question pertains not only to theology, but lays bare the philosophical presuppositions about the nature of nature—and the relevance to it of creation as gift—that we bring to the debate about nature and grace.

The question of nature and grace is as profound and mysterious as Christian Revelation itself. Human nature is created for, and desires from its inmost depths, an ultimate end that exceeds nature’s desire. Who could have imagined or desired the condescension of God’s love in Christ? The Logos has come down and assumed human nature without confusion or separation. From the christological controversies of the early Church through the recurring conflict with different forms of Gnosticism, Catholic theology has safeguarded the concept of nature as essential to the mystery of the Incarnation of the Son and the Redemption of creation. Christ became like us in all things but sin, accepting the limits of an embodied human nature. The Incarnation of the Son, which presupposes a human nature that is distinct from the divine nature, represents the supreme affirmation of the goodness of creation. Christ reveals the full truth of human nature by revealing the mystery of the Father’s love. To say that Christ reveals the full truth of nature is to say more than that Christ “presupposes” nature—although this remains true. In assuming a human nature into his Person and going to the end in love, Christ “established himself as the innermost depth of the Father’s goodness while also displaying in himself the very goal for which his creatures manifestly received

the beginning of their existence.”⁶⁷ In other words, Christ reveals the nature of nature as receptive readiness for a surpassing gift. By including a human nature within his Person and mission, Christ reveals the deepest truth of nature’s desire and nature’s capacity to mediate God’s love. The eternal gratitude of the Son is revealed in and through the distinctly human and creaturely gratitude of Jesus Christ. Here we see human nature in its fullness and distinct integrity as received from God and offered back to God. □

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⁶⁷Maximus the Confessor, *Ad Thalassium*, 60.