

NATURA PURA, THE INVENTION OF THE ANTI-CHRIST: A WEEK WITH NO SABBATH¹

• **Conor Cunningham** •

“The allegation of the Anti-Christ—the assertion that the Christ is just Jesus and that Jesus is just a man, that he is not Jesus Christ—is not only the liar’s greatest deceit, but also philosophically untenable.”

—Michel Henry

*The dripping blood our only drink
The bloody flesh our only food:
In spite of which we like to think
That we are sound, substantial flesh and blood—
Again, in spite of that, we call this Friday good.*

—T. S. Eliot, *East Coker*

In this very short paper, I will not be able to negotiate the texts of St. Thomas in terms of the debate surrounding *natura pura*. What I will offer, however, is a very brief intervention into the debate highlighting some of the main issues. I will do so mostly by appealing to a counterfactual thought exercise, in which we imagine actual habitants of a world of pure nature, wherein they are intelligent but have no supernatural telos. As a result of this

¹I would like to thank Adrian Walker and Aaron Riches for reading an earlier draft of this paper. And I would also like to thank Professor David L. Schindler for the invitation to speak at the John Paul II Institute in Washington, D.C. The many excellent conversations had at the event were tonic to the soul—Steve A. Long, Reinhard Hütter, Mike Hanby, Adrian Walker, Schindler Sr., and Schindler Jr. spring to mind.

experiment, a consequence we feel argued for is that Christ must be the only true metaphysics of creation, and to that end, we will mention, again very briefly, the catastrophe that is ontological naturalism, which we think is a progeny of *natura pura*.

2. *The Anti-Christ?*

If Karl Barth was wrong to think that the *analogia entis* was the invention of the Anti-Christ, which he of course was, are we wrong to suggest that it is not the analogy of being that undermines theology, but rather the idea of a pure nature? Now, not for one moment do we mean to argue that Robert Bellarmine is the Anti-Christ (nor more recently Steven A. Long!).² His efforts to counter the errors of Michael Baius were both necessary and laudable. But if the hypothetical idea of a pure nature is allowed to become real, so to speak, if it is allowed to materialize, or even if the hypothesis is conferred too much importance then we do indeed participate in the lie of the Anti-Christ: that there could be such a thing as a man without the Christ. Put differently, we only are as humans in being sons in the Son. In short, if there were such a thing as pure nature, there would be nothing at all, for only the abyss would obtain (and not even that).³ And the strife we see in today's culture should in fact be understood as nothing else than the great cosmic drama of the battle to return existence to the only thing it owns, namely, the *nihilo* from which it came. Lastly, the idea of pure nature is an ontological re-enactment of the Fall—we shall explain this below. There is a perennial temptation that haunts all thought, a temptation that is dangerous for most discourse, but terminal for theology, namely, to parse existence in terms of dualisms: transcendence/immanence; natural/supernatural; sacred/profane; philosophy/theology, and so on. If theologians fall into this temptation they risk being guilty of what we might call *anonymous atheism*, to corrupt a phrase of Karl Rahner's, for this was indeed Adam's temptation, and this is the legacy bequeathed by him to us—again, more about which

²See Long's rigorous book, *Natura Pura* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010).

³True nihilism is not even the abyss, as that in a sense still carries a sense of something: *the* abyss.

below. And never is such atheism more evident than in how we understand creation and the Incarnation, indeed in how we understand Christ (see below).

In the West, we are used to the sophomore question “do you believe in God?” but such a question is no longer tenable. Why not? Quite simply, the idea of nature, the idea of the purely natural is a fiction, and this is revealed, for example, in the default position of our intellectual culture, namely, ontological naturalism, which is itself a true progeny of *natura pura*, itself a child of an over-excited application of *potentia Dei absoluta* (it being analogous to a veritable *Kama Sutra* for abstract, intellectual innovations, it permits us to endlessly speculate how many possible, purely natural worlds could dance on so many possible heads of a pin). We cannot ask if people believe in God, nor if this or that experience is divine or religious, thus presuming there can be an experience that is not divine, just as we have presumed in asking the question about belief in God, that people make sense outside God, and moreover, and even more tellingly, that language makes sense outside theology. Let me spoil the ending, it does not. In short, in the absence of theology there is no such thing as language, at least as we usually understand it; in addition, there is no such thing as a person, thus there is no such thing as belief, any belief; and lastly, there is no such thing as life. As one Nobel-winning biologist put it: “Biology no longer studies life.”⁴ And as a philosopher of science tells us: “[I]f we ask the question when did human life begin? The Answer is never.”⁵ Paul Churchland presents the predicament well: “Could it turn out that no one has ever believed anything?”⁶ And why would he ask that? Well, as Thomas Metzinger, another philosopher of mind, tells us, “No such thing as selves exist in the world: Nobody ever was or had a self.”⁷ Lastly, as another philosopher admits, in light of such

⁴François Jacob, *The Logic of Life: A History of Heredity*, trans. Betty Spillman (New York: Pantheon, 1973), 299.

⁵Michael T. Ghiselin, *Metaphysics and the Origin of Species* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997), 1.

⁶Quoted in Lynne Rudder Baker, “Cognitive Suicide,” in *Contents of Thought*, ed. Robert H. Grimm and Daniel Davy Merrill (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1988), 1.

⁷Thomas Metzinger, *Being No One: The Self-Model Theory of Subjectivity* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003), 1.

naturalism the Twin Towers never fell, and people never died, for the simple reason that there are no such entities as towers or people—especially the latter.⁸ This is pure nature—a nature purified of anything at all—this is not just ethnic cleansing, but ontological cleansing (no doubt the weapon of choice was Ockham’s razor, which has a great deal to answer for).

The second point to be made, one already touched upon, is that naturalism is itself a product of bad theology. In a manner reminiscent of Descartes’ division of reality into mind and extended matter, a division that arguably accommodates the eradication of the former, and the veneration of the latter, religious people have bought into the idea that faith is “supernatural.” And here the atheist is in complete agreement, religion is indeed something extra, extra-special even, the supernatural is therefore over and above the purely natural, but for them, in the name of economy, again Ockham’s razor, we can just ignore it, setting it adrift, to the point where it becomes irrelevant. Though the above is not at all the intention or motives for those who speak of *natura pura*, which, as said, is a good idea, as far as it goes, but dangers do lurk.

Borrowing a strategy from analytic philosophy, let’s for the moment permit the hypothetical idea of an intelligent creature created by God but who possesses a purely natural telos (a Rahnerian “remainder concept”—*ein Restbegriff*—if you will). Imagine such a creature, what would it look like, or, more to the point, what would it think like? Beyond the self-limiting horizon of its purely philosophical rigor, it imagines the unimaginable: that the intelligent could in fact *know* that God was *the Creator*, that he created the world *ex nihilo* (a hunch it has always had but feared to articulate out of fidelity to its own pure philosophy, which could only “prove” *that* the world is and not that it was created). Then it has a “eureka” moment: a counterfactual idea pops into its head, the hypothetical idea that this creator God could have created an intelligent creature with a natural desire for the supernatural; this idea is duly named *supernatura pura*. This intelligent creature with a purely natural end begins to unpack this idea, doing so by imagining a different version of itself. The cosmos in which this creature resides looks like this. God creates existence *ex nihilo*, a first gift, if you will, and his most

⁸See Lynne Rudder Baker, *The Metaphysics of Everyday Life: An Essay in Practical Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

prized creature is called man, who is made in the image and toward the likeness of God. But man transgresses, turning against their creator, and the first man to do so is called Adam. But God being pure love offers a second gift, that of redemption. God becomes incarnate—God joins creation to himself, that is, he assumes flesh—doing so as the second Adam. This Adam is killed by man, but then he is resurrected from the dead, and in so doing saves mankind from sin. In such a world the purely natural creature reasons thus: “Creation is not a true change, in other words, creation does not take place in objective reality, but only in the imagination of man, or from the side of the creature.”⁹ This must therefore be what scholastics call a mixed relation: creation is real for the creature, but only logical for the Creator, for the very simple reason that the Creator is simple and, therefore, unchanging. But how then do we distinguish or posit a difference between Creator and creature, if, that is, creation is not a real change? Now, appealing to the principle of *distinguishing to unite* will not, it seems, do in this world of creation *ex nihilo*. Instead, in this world union *differentiates*. And this is never more so when it comes to God becoming incarnate. Let us believe for the moment that the incarnate God had two natures, one divine the other natural, but that these do not mix, even though they are undivided (and that God incarnate has but one *esse*). This is what we might call *communicatio idiomatum*. The idea is that we can speak of God suffering. He did, after all, die. Put differently, God died and he did so as a human, and so on. But this world is not a “*supernatura pura*” because God does not die in his nature but through his humanity. The whole thing about *communicatio idiomatum*, if you give it an ontological meaning, is that nothing ever happens “purely” in Christ, but rather always in “synergy.”

Now, this second Adam, who comes bearing a second gift, as mentioned already, that of redemption, being God, indeed being God’s Son, he must have existed from eternity, indeed He must be the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world, the first fruit of creation, the absolute before. This being the case, there seems to be something strange afoot in this hypothetical world. In short, there appears to be reversed primogeniture, for the last is first, just as the youngest inherits, not the oldest, or the youngest is privileged over

⁹See *Comp. Theol.*, 99; and SCG II, c.18, n. 952.

the older, for even though the younger appears later in the temporal order, in the order of eternity it is first. “It was not the old Adam who was the model for the new, but the new Adam for the old The Savior *first and alone* showed to us the true human being.”¹⁰ Thus in this world of *supernatura pura*, God incarnate recapitulates (*Anakephalaios*) humankind and history, but in so doing, man and history become what they truly are, which is to say, there is no *before* to this Christ. Accordingly, *God reveals man to himself*, not the other way round, as must be in the world of *natura pura*. Indeed, in the world of *supernatura pura* it might be thought that God is the only pure nature, just as the eternal Son is the only *natural* son, whilst man is so only by adoption, just as man only exists by adoption, that is, by participation (*methexis*) in God who is *ipsum esse* (or *actus purus*). In other words, God’s essence and existence coincide, while man’s and all creatures’ essence does not include existence; they are, therefore, contingent.

But this means that in contrast to the world of *natura pura*, if anything is an addition, if anything is extra, it is the first gift, that of creation. Put differently, the reason for creation, its final cause, which must be the cause of causes (*causa causarum*), is to be united with its Creator, for only then does true difference obtain.¹¹ This ultimate union, and thus ultimate difference is of course the *beatific vision*—there man knows God’s essence, but does not comprehend it; there creation is finalized for, as said, ultimate, unthinkable difference is realized, which is the *telos* of existence itself, its very reason. Here, then, *grace presumes nature*, but at the same time it *proposes nature*. This being the case, when grace saves nature it is not destroyed but perfected, and for that to be possible nature and grace are united, yet in so being are differentiated—the union accommodates the language of perfection, whilst the difference allows the change. Likewise, the event of this God incarnate is utter rupture; and it is, therefore, pure newness; it must be. But if newness is thought in almost spatial terms, if, that is, this newness is absolute, then no relation can obtain, for newness understood this way is new to the point of being irrelevant, foreign or alien, unnatural even. Put it this way: if, metaphorically speaking, the “Old Testament”

¹⁰Nicholas Cabasilas, *The Life in Christ*, trans. C. J. de Catanzaro (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1974), 6.12 (emphasis added).

¹¹See *ST I*, q. 5, a. 2 ad 1.

cannot recognize the “New Testament,” if, that is, it does not anticipate and in a sense desire the message of the New Testament, or if nature does not recognize or recollect (*anamnesis*) grace, then they are immiscible. When God becomes incarnate there is real becoming (and also fittingness, *conventia*), something happens, but it does not happen to God, because God is unchanging. No, instead, something happens to creation—creation is taken up into the life of the eternal God. In short, deification is hominization. Consequently, “the glory of God is man fully alive, and the life of man is the vision of God.”¹²

Another speculation about the world that has creatures who have a natural desire for the supernatural, is that the people there have something called a Sabbath, in other words, a holy day, one not extrinsic to the “profane” week, but rather intrinsic—its very possibility. Speculating thus, that following six days of creation God rests, this is the Sabbath, but this is not meant to signal that God is tired, of course not. The point is to indicate that creation is a personal, deliberate act, more of a work of art than a forced production or emanation from some impersonal power. For these people the Sabbath is, therefore, the very meaning of creation, for creation is meant to have rest; it is to repose within divine purpose, a purpose that is free of necessity, but is instead a matter of utter generosity. And the subsequent keeping of the Sabbath means that humankind was freed from the whim of superstition, and the *agon* of the vicious cycles of both seasons and times (usually expressed in terms of deities) because all such seasons were subjugated. For no matter what time of year it was, winter or summer, the Sabbath ruled the week and subordinated the powers of the world and every utilitarian logic to what we could describe as the sheer play of a child. These strange people are, therefore, a species of the Sabbath.

In the world of *natura pura*, however, the idea of a Sabbath seems somewhat impossible. Why? For the simple reason that it seemed a little arbitrary in such a world, and in a sense unthinkable, just as creation *ex nihilo* is. Yes, a God, a First Cause may or may not have started the whole thing off, no one could be sure, and even if there were a First Cause that did not necessarily elicit any pious response. A contributing factor to the problem was that the world of *natura pura* utilized what was termed a *praeambula fidei*, as they did

¹²Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 4, 20, 7.

in the hypothetical world of *supernatura pura*, the difference being that it was very difficult, if not intractable to move from reason to faith, at least without appearing arbitrary, once again. The point being that reason can lead almost anywhere, or put differently, a legion of conclusions and views, some even contradictory, were reasonable in a formal sense (from antinomies to *aporia*, not to mention paradoxes). By contrast, in the world of *supernatura pura* there is, as said, *praeambula fidei*, but also in a sense a *praeambula ratio* insofar as the very phenomenon of rationality itself elicited a certain phenomenological response, namely wonder—that nature could be trusted, that such a thing was possible, that indeed there was such a thing as a world, something only arising from a prior belief in God. In this way, reason, and its offspring such as science, rested on faith, or, better, faith and reason were not separate, just as philosophy and theology were not, but rather they acted in a concerted, distended act of gnoseological engagement. Faith and reason make each other possible, just as the supernatural makes the natural possible: “The term *supernatural* does not refer to a new order of being added to nature but to the means for attaining the one final end for which the power of nature alone does not suffice.”¹³ The fact that it does not suffice signals a natural call or desire for that which lies beyond, and for that very reason such a call is in some way indigenous: “*The ultimate purpose of a rational creature exceeds the capacity of its own nature.*”¹⁴ Indeed, man is in this world a sort of microcosm, uniting in himself all that which is below him and offering it to that which is above him. Nature and grace form a union analogous to a seamless robe, which was not to be ripped asunder and sold off.

Now think of an enemy corrupting the world of *supernatura pura*, not just at its beginning, the transgression of the first Adam, but later, and this baddy is named the Anti-Christ. This figure comes to the people of that world and tells them not only that this supposed “God incarnate” is not the true savior, and thus not really God but merely man, but also that this God did not reveal man to man, for man has his autonomy. Consequently, creation is to be thought of as being real on its own, that is, rather than a mixed relation there is a real relation between Creator and creature. After all, for something to be saved it has to be real, it has to possess its own density, even if

¹³Louis Dupré, *Passage to Modernity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 171.

¹⁴Thomas Aquinas, *Comp. Theol.* I.143, n. 82.

pious platitudes are paid to a First Cause, the God of something called theism. The men of this world then take it upon themselves to investigate existence as if it were self-sufficient, or purely natural, but in so doing, something strange or at least counter-intuitive happens—the things of nature begin to disappear—the solidity that so graced this hypothetical world evaporates: color, free will, minds, people, truth, and ethics. This creation begins to return to the one thing it owned, the *nihilo* whence it came, and in so doing, a diabolic double of that world's God is set up—for in being nothing creation gains its own version of simplicity, thus emulating its maker. Here then in the world of *supernatura pura*, if you took away the supernatural you were left not with the natural but the unnatural.¹⁵

Importantly, surely in a world of *natura pura* one is only able to imagine that God came down and assumed human nature (*homo assumptus*), that is, he adopted human nature, which of course was really different from the divine, just as nature was really different from grace, or absolutely different. If God, therefore, did withdraw his assumption of human nature, a human person would remain (this God-Man had more than one *esse*). In addition, the first Adam was just that, the indigenous inhabitant of the world of *natura pura*, and he was made in the image of God, for how could they be made in the image of the second Adam, which would be nonsensical in such a serial world. Now in the world of *natura pura*, there had been a veritable revolution in terms of knowledge. Rather surprisingly, in this world people were able to abort unborn babies at will (caring more about polar bears, which were a protected species unlike human babies), and end the life of the elderly, efficiently and painlessly, of course. And even more odd, to say the least, the very existence of humans was now doubted by the most learned. Now of course there had been something called natural law, but the only problem was that only one tribe among many actually believed in it.

The most important point to be gleaned from the above exercise in imagination is that if we are to speak of pure nature in any real sense, then only God deserves that appellation, for as said already, God is existence itself, and Christ is the Natural Son from all eternity. Recall the words of T. S. Eliot—"Our only blood, our only body." Similarly, Henry argues that there are no real births in Christianity, for there is only one Father, and this being the case all

¹⁵G. K. Chesterton, *Heretics* (London: Bodley Head, 1905), 99.

births are virgin, just as all existence is adoption (and this recalls creation *ex nihilo*). Ludwig Feuerbach once wrote that man is what he eats, but of course, the problem is that all that man eats is dead. Yet there is one exception to this, an exception that embraces all else, doing so as its beginning and end, the food of Christ himself, which is the very reason for creation. “Verily I say unto you, unless you eat the flesh of the son of Man, and drink his blood, you have *no life* in you.” No life, not just natural life, and no supernatural life, but no life at all. And as Augustine says, “You will not change me into you, as you do with the food of your body. Instead you will be changed into me.”

Now, two brief points. First, the way many of us approach the question of *natura pura*, especially in terms of the Incarnation, does indeed try to turn Christ into us rather than us into him (indeed all heresies along with less desirable Christologies seem always to arise from an allergy to paradox, instead taking refuge in the neat abstractions of the imaginable). We have already noted the fear that if there is not some sort of autonomous human nature, then how can Christ become human, but this is a case of the ontic tail wagging the ontological dog. After all, as we know it is man that is made in or to the image of God, and not the other way around. Moreover, as Irenaeus (to name but one) argues, we don’t even know what man being made in the image of God means until the Incarnation—for Christ is the perfect image of God, and thus we are made in Christ’s image, and Christ is the God-Man: the paradox of the Incarnation reveals the paradox of humans.

The second point is how do we eat flesh, for according to Aquinas, following Aristotle, if something is separated from a body, say a hand, it is no longer in truth a hand, but merely matter arranged in an accidental fashion. Likewise if flesh is removed from a body, so to speak, it becomes meat, and thus is no longer flesh, and is dead, and so we are back with Feuerbach. Consequently, in receiving the flesh of Christ we must receive a living being *in toto*. Moreover, that means that one person cannot receive another extrinsically, as it were, otherwise death would result for one of them and the *aporia* would return. Thus in receiving Christ’s flesh and blood we do not in truth receive something extra, something supernatural. No, rather we receive the truth of ourselves, and this is the sacrament in ordinary. Revelation expresses the paradox of the Eucharist and thus of man in clear terms, “Behold I stand at the gate, and knock. If any man shall hear my voice, and open to me the

door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him and he with me” (Rev 3:20). Here once more union differentiates. To repeat, in consuming we are consumed, but to the point that we are all the more real, for he who consumes us, sups with us. There can only be one life, and life is God. And if we think that life is indeed not a person then we will repeat the logic of Adam. When we speak of the Fall, we at times picture some sort of event, as mentioned above, that is, Adam accepted the apple. But more importantly, the idea of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, the idea that it could exist, that there could be such gnosis, or knowledge outside of God as a person, is the very idea of the Fall. In other words, the idea of such gnosis, of an abstract knowledge is an effort to try and get behind God, to find an outside to creation, that is, to remove the *ex nihilo*. Such knowledge would be a sort of *tertium quid* between God and man, and if only man could learn it then he could be equal to God. But of course if that were the case, the God with whom he was now equal would be no God at all. Moreover, we are told that there are two trees in the center of the garden, which of course is a physical impossibility, the point being that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and that of eternal life is revealed to be the wooden cross of Christ, upon which a first-century Palestinian Jew hung, languishing outside the city walls amongst the refuse, and this Jew was the God-Man, the true and first human.

And when we begin our understanding of nature through Christ, which for the theologian can be the only starting point, otherwise we join Adam in his transgression, we realize that the entire debate surrounding grace and nature has been wrongheaded, to say the least. In Christ, the natural is not transformed into the supernatural, just as sacraments are not magic pills, religious ones at that, no, rather it is the transformation of the old into the new; more, it is the revelation of the new in the old, the old was always meant for the new. This is why the shepherd of Hermes speaks of the Church as an old woman. Only through the Incarnation and Passion are “good” and “evil” truly known, for as we know already, there God suffered in the Incarnate Son and therefore, Christ alone is Adam. Christ is the “mystery hidden throughout the ages” (Col 1:26). And as said already, he is the “The Lamb slain before the foundations of the world” (Rev 13:8). Thus Christ is the true treasure, the treasure in the clay jars of scripture (2 Cor 4:7). The Old Testament (read nature or creation) makes sense only in light of

the New Testament (read grace or redemption). Therefore, once again, the only nature that is pure is that of Christ, but as he is our beginning and end, this purity is offered to us, being so as our natural end. So, to conclude, a counterfactual such as *natura pura* is fine, if a leash is kept securely on its importance, and, to be honest, it is a much better one than that offered by Romanus Cessario, wherein he imagines that one eminent Jesuit (Henri de Lubac) and a hundred thousand *Communio* readers *could* be wrong on the question of man's natural desire for God.¹⁶ □

CONOR CUNNINGHAM is assistant director of the Centre of Theology and Philosophy at the University of Nottingham.

¹⁶See Romanus Cessario, O.P., "Cardinal Cajetan and His Critics," *Nova et Vetera* 3, no. 1 (2005): 115.