

Paradox and/or supernatural existential

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Ultimately, Balthasar judges that the drama of divine and human freedom is not sufficiently guaranteed by the anticipation of grace in transcendental subjectivity.

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Dramatic perspective and transcendental perspective

The Balthasarian conception of finite freedom as a paradox leans on the Thomist delineation of *esse*. This notion of *esse* as "*similitudo divinae bonitatis*" allows us, according to Balthasar, to distinguish more radically than ever before between the finite being possessing its own act of being (fleeting, fluid, oscillating between its infinite Source and its finite end) and God as its transcendent cause, infinitely elevated above all worldly beings, truly the "Wholly Other."¹

¹Cf. *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. IV: *The Realm of Metaphysics in Antiquity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 402ff. Balthasar interprets the Thomist *esse* with Siewerth as a 'symbol of God', "*energeia*, *actus*, actual essence . . . a comprehensiveness that no concept can entirely exhaust; on the contrary, it is in relation to *esse* that every essence and every concept can be united" (402). "Thus, *esse* is *communissimum* (In *Beoth de Hebd* 2; *Subst* sep 1 8), that in which all communicate (*De Pot* 7, 2 obj 5), that which is most perfect (*Summa theologiae* I, 4, 1 ad 3) beyond all imagining—and at the same time 'innermost and most profoundly present in all things' (*intimum*,

On the historical and speculative plane, Balthasar rejects, with Przywara and Siewerth,² the anthropocentric interpretation of the Thomist *esse* conveyed by the transcendental school.³ According to Balthasar, "when they interpret the 'excessus' of which St. Thomas speaks as the dynamism of ontological affirmation, Maréchal and Rahner fail to render full justice to the texts, and in particular miss the Thomist understanding of *esse*."⁴ By them, *esse* is thematized in a more or less Kantian fashion as the "condition of possibility of finite, categorical knowledge," as the infinite horizon of the subjective dynamism of the spirit. Human subjectivity is constituted a priori by the anticipation of *esse*, which confers on it the dynamic structure of auto-transcendence towards the absolute mystery.

On the theological plane, this conception involves an interpretation of the Thomist *desiderium naturae visionis* by means of a supernatural existential. This supernatural existential comes to elevate transcendental subjectivity beyond the formal infinite horizon of the *esse ut sic*—to raise it to the desire for God as he is in himself.⁵ Rahner senses the need to add this

quod profundius omnibus inest—S. th. Ia, 8, 1). In fact, as has been said, it is the foundation of the most interior unity of every singular and particular essence" (402). "It is that which embraces all things (and cannot be exhausted by any number of natures, but on the contrary can be participated in more and more in an infinite way), yet only in the sense that it is the actualising support of natures. It only realises natures in so far as it realises itself in natures. In itself it has no subsistence but inheres in natures: *esse non est subsistens sed inhaerens* (De Pot. 7, 2, ad 7)" (402-03). The reference to Siewerth concerns: *Das Sein als Gleichnis Gottes* (Heidelberg: Kerle, 1958); *Der Thomismus als Identitätssystem* (Frankfurt: G. Schulte-Bulmke, 1961).

²Cf. Erich Przywara, *Analogia entis* (Einsiedeln, Johannesverlag, 1962), 23-28; G. Siewerth, *Das Schicksal der Metaphysik von Thomas bis Heidegger* (Einsiedeln, Johannes Verlag, 1959), esp. 227-263.

³Following Maréchal's *Le point de départ de la métaphysique* (DDB, 1922), a good number of his disciples attempted to pursue the confrontation he presented between modern thought and that of Saint Thomas. Karl Rahner is the most celebrated, but we find also J. B. Lotz, A. Marc, B. F. Lonergan, E. Coreth, etc. That is why it is justifiable to speak of "the transcendental school," even though the differences between these authors might be notable. Cf. O. Muck, *Die transzendente Methode* (Innsbruck, 1964).

⁴Balthasar, *Cordula, oder der Ernstfall* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1966), 118 [for an English translation, see *The Moment of Christian Witness* (New York: Newman Press, 1968)].

⁵Balthasar, *Theodramatik II: Die Personen des Spiels, 2: Die Personen in Christus*

supernatural element to the subject's transcendental aspiration in order to safeguard the gratuitousness of grace in relation to nature.⁶

According to Balthasar, this theory weakens the paradox of the finite spirit and threatens to undermine the drama of freedom by anticipating grace in the transcendental structure of the spirit.⁷ In order to understand Balthasar's point of view, which is expressed in a polemical fashion in *Cordula* (1966), again taken up in *Pneuma und Institution* (1974) and deepened still more in the *Theodramatik*,⁸ we must refer to the basic philosophical choices of Balthasar and Rahner, who diverge in their views of German idealism. While Balthasar strongly criticizes the fundamental positions of German idealism,⁹ Rahner believes that this philosophy of the spirit,

(Einsiedeln: Johannesverlag, 1978), 382 [an English translation is in preparation with Ignatius Press].

⁶Heribert Mühlen notes that "in his later publications, Karl Rahner gave an even clearer description of the reality of the supernatural existential conceived as from 'above,' that is to say as an ontological effect of the universal salvific will of God in man, which seizes all sin in advance in order to bring about its vindication. On this basis, man is, in an enduring manner (here we see the profound signification of the expression 'actual,' and not merely potential, grace!), the object of God's solicitude and of his offer of grace. The supernatural existential is therefore identical to the grace of justification, always *pre-given* as a transcendental condition, even if it is not always so much accepted by the freedom that it solicits" (emphasis by the author). Cf. *Bilan de la théologie au XXe siècle*, II (Paris: Casterman, 1940), 394. Reference to Rahner is *L ThK*, 2nd ed., III, 1311; *Schriften zur Theologie IV*, 226ff.; 250ff.; VIII, 359ff. (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1954-) [for English translations, see *Theological Investigations* (various publishers)]. *Sacramentum Mundi I* (Freiburg: Herder, 1967), 1248ff.

⁷Balthasar, *Theodramatik III: Die Handlung* (Einsiedeln: Johannesverlag, 1980), 71-72, 204 [an English translation is in preparation with Ignatius Press].

⁸*Cordula*, ch. II: The system of the alternative, 45-59; ch. III: The suspension of the decisive test, 63-102, introduced by an epigraph culled from Pascal's *Provinciales*: "What relation is there, my father, between this doctrine and that of the Gospel?"; Afterword, 117-124. See also, *Pneuma und Institution: Skizzen zur Theologie, IV* (Einsiedeln: Johannesverlag, 1974), 61-116, esp. 70-82; *Theodramatik II, 1: Der Mensch in Gott* (Einsiedeln: Johannesverlag, 1976), 180-92 [for an English translation, see *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory, II: Man in God* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990)]; *Theodramatik II, 2*, 376-88, 420ff., *Theodramatik III*, 71-74, 107, 126-217, 151-452, 190-91, 204f., 253-62, 404.

⁹The development of German idealism and its inevitable decline into atheism was passionately traced by Balthasar in a work of his youth, *Apokalypse der deutschen Seele* (Salzburg: A. Pustet, 1937-1939), in three large volumes with a total of 1500 pages.

duly reconciled with the Thomist ontology,¹⁰ can serve as a valuable instrument in the modern expression of the Catholic faith. Without entering into the depths of a philosophical debate which would of itself merit a study, we will here relate Balthasar's position on the fundamental paradox of spirit created as freedom, along with the connected questions of obediencial potency and of the supernatural existential.

Transcendental openness and obediencial potency

For Balthasar, the Thomist *esse* is not in the first place the "condition of possibility of finite, categorical knowledge," but the *mystery* of the openness of finite freedom to infinite freedom.¹¹ This mysterious openness belongs to the

¹⁰This is the original and creative step taken by Rahner in *Geist im Welt* (Innsbruck/Leipzig, 1939) [for an English translation, see *Spirit in the World*, trans. by William Dych (New York: Herder & Herder, 1968)], and *Hörer des Wortes* (Munich: Kosel-Pustet, 1941) [for an English translation, see *Hearers of the Word*, trans. by Michael Richards (New York: Herder & Herder, 1968)].

¹¹Because *esse* subsists not in itself but only in other natures, we must turn to divine freedom in order to explain the infinity of its participations, and in particular the plasticity of finite freedom as a supreme participation on the inside of ontological difference. Balthasar writes: "It is precisely here that a new kind of intimacy of God in the creature becomes clear, an intimacy which is only made possible by the distinction between God and *esse*. Allowing natures to participate in reality—God's most proper prerogative—is not to be understood as the disintegration or diminution (on the part of the creature) of God's being and unicity (which is how it is invariably seen outside the Christian tradition) and the essences of things must not appear as simply the fragmentation of reality, in a negative sense, but must be seen positively as posited and determined by God's omnipotent freedom and therefore are grounded in the unique love of God. In what we might call the "real distinction" (circumspectly, because here we are dealing with an inexplicable mystery) God contemplated his Creation with free, so to speak, stereoscopic sight, which means at the same time that God preserves for the creature this wholly new plasticity: it is precisely when the creature feels itself to be separate in being from God that it knows itself to be the most immediate object of God's love and concern; and it is precisely when its essential finitude shows it to be something quite different from God that it knows that, as a real being, it has had bestowed upon it that most extravagant gift—participation in the real being of God. Thus *esse*, as Thomas understands it, is at once both total fulness and total nothingness: fulness, because it is the most noble, the first and most proper effect of God, because 'through being [*esse*] God causes all things' and 'being [*esse*] is prior to and more interior than all other effects.' But being [*esse*] is also nothingness since it does not exist as such, 'for just as one cannot say that running runs,' but rather that 'the runner runs,' so 'one

very essence of freedom as a *given* autonomy which points back to an infinite freedom whose (possible) openness constitutes the a priori horizon of the finite spirit. According to Balthasar, at the root of the subjective dynamism of the human consciousness towards *esse* as the object of its desire, lies the finitude of the consciousness and of its act of being (*distinctio realis*). This finitude points the consciousness to the polarity and passivity of having been given to itself with an awareness oscillating between its own nothingness and transcendental plenitude.¹² With this, the ultimate horizon of given freedom appears to be the openness of divine freedom, before which the created subject finds it always already in a condition of receptivity (of letting be), even before the condition of desire.¹³ And here we see the paradoxical nobility of the human person—of the being created in Jesus Christ as a partner of God, as a possible interlocutor of a Word which he or she desires without being able to demand, anticipate, or postulate from its transcendental open-

cannot say that existence exists' (*The Glory of the Lord IV*, 403-404; reference to Thomas is to *Boeth de Hebd 2*).

See also, *Dieu et l'homme d'aujourd'hui* (Paris: Desclee de Brouwer, 1958), 107ff., 330ff [for an English translation, see *The God Question and Modern Man* (New York: Seabury, 1967)].

¹²"The real distinction between existence and essence necessarily opens our eyes to the truth that God is self-subsistent being but it also closes our eyes and forbids us to cling on to what we have seen. For quite obviously the created intellectual spirit (if it is going to be able in any sense to know reality) is situated precisely within this distinction, in that active illuminated fulness (*lumen intellectus agentis*) which at the same time remains nothingness (*intellectus possibilis*). In this distinction created spirit encounters the real whenever the real attains subsistence, i.e. in the subsistence of finite, material essences (*omnis cognitio incipit a sensu*). But these in their turn can only be object [sic.] of thought if they exist, if they participate in the reality which contains in itself all that is real, which penetrates and dominates it and, as it were, indifferently transcends it" (*The Glory of the Lord, IV*, 405). Cf. also *Theodramatik II*, 2, 422, n. 18.

¹³It seems to us that at the base of the Balthasarian conception there is an acute sense of creatureliness, which never loses sight of the "surprising" presence of given being, with the result conceived at the level of freedom as a letting-be and a radical openness. This metaphysics of the creature contains an a priori openness to inter-subjectivity, while the transcendental perspective on desire—being a tributary of a philosophy of identity between being and consciousness—cannot give us the key that opens up the ascending logic of desire. Cf., *Pneuma und Institution*, 60-62.

ness. The human person is freedom in quest of Freedom.¹⁴ According to Balthasar, the Thomist paradox of *esse* and the corresponding interpretation of finite freedom as the *desiderium naturale visionis* does not imply that there is a supernatural element in the finite spirit's natural aspiration to the openness of divine freedom:

Beginning only with his experience of himself, man can know that if he would like to know God in his intimate life, this can only happen through God's free Revelation. It is precisely here that we encounter the ultimate paradox of man, which was most clearly perceived and formulated by Thomas Aquinas and which was brought back to light by Henri de Lubac (in *Surnaturel*, 1946). Just as man is referred to the free openness of another man in order to be himself, so too, we can simply say, he (he, that is, who is directed and oriented towards the absolutes of the True and the Good) is also referred to the free openness of God, without being able to postulate it on his own. This paradox precedes all discussion on the subject of the "supernatural existential," even if and whatever may be the truth of the fact that nature was created in view of the Supernatural, in view of the incarnation of God; even if and whatever may be the truth of the fact that the paradox of nature finds its ultimate explication only owing to the supernatural order (to which there can thus also belong something like a "supernatural existential"). But the paradox remains inscribed in the original fact of the consciousness of self, insofar as consciousness knows itself at the same time as *given*, and, through this, as an image. This is why de Lubac rightly emphasizes that in the natural *desiderium visionis*, in the aspiration to know God *as he is in himself*, there is no need to have any supernatural element; this can (and should) be affirmed wholly independently of the fact that God has for all time already made something of his intimacy known, and desires to make men capable of understanding it.¹⁵

Here we retrieve and complete the problematic of the nature-grace relation. The question that now presents itself is no longer that of the gratuitousness of the supernatural in relation to a nature oriented towards it, but rather the prior question of the essence of finite freedom and of its intrinsic relation to divine freedom. What is the nature of this relation? Is it a question of a relation essential or accidental, absolute or conditional? What is the significance of the *desiderium naturale visionis*? Does finite freedom desire the openness of divine free-

¹⁴Balthasar, *Dans l'engagement de Dieu*, 72 [for an English translation, see *Engagement with God* (London: SPCK, 1975)].

¹⁵*Theodramatik III*, 130.

dom a priori (by essence), or a posteriori, i.e., as a consequence of the prior openness of this freedom (the supernatural existential)?

We note in the passage cited above that Balthasar does not entirely reject the idea of the supernatural existential, but firmly maintains the natural and prior paradox of finite freedom as *desiderium naturale visionis*:¹⁶ created freedom as such bears, in the a priori experience of its own contingency, the mark of the Giver of being and, with the desire, the intrinsic orientation towards the openness of his infinite freedom. *But no more*, underlines the author, for the possibility of realizing this desire completely escapes the proper capacity of spiritual creatures.¹⁷ This paradox results not only from the fact that God alone can take the initiative of such a gift but also from the fact that finite freedom, in spite of its potential for desire, has within it no capacity of its own to establish a "personal" relation with God. Its condition as creature situates it at a distance much too great (*analogia entis*) for there to be between it and God a common base that would permit a personal dialogue between them.¹⁸

¹⁶Commenting on de Lubac's perspective as a valid alternative to counter-balance the Rahnerian interpretation of the supernatural existential, Balthasar writes: "The impossibility of the fulfillment [*Unerfüllbarkeit*] (of desire) is at the same time the seal and mark of the personal God in the created spiritual nature, who is his "image and resemblance." As a spirit relating to itself, the finite creature is essentially a momentum towards and a pursuit of the Absolute, of the Archetype; it knows from its own freedom that God cannot come to its encounter except in utter freedom. It is thus that in the reflection of the image [*Nachbildes*] on itself, the personality of the Archetype is given—which renders the "supernatural existential" superfluous, even if only a light coming from God can carry this implicit reflection into full awareness. But this seal of God in the spiritual nature is impressed on it only because the nature was created in the first place with a view to God's supernatural vision, the *desiderium naturale*, with a view to the *visio* (which is inaccessible to the finite nature but liberally granted). This all-inclusive grace effects no less than an elevation of nature, in order to render it capable of efficaciously pursuing its ultimate end—an elevation which no doubt extends to all times from the historical center of the Christological event" (*Theodramatik II*, 2, 283).

¹⁷Balthasar, *Theodramatik III*, 151.

¹⁸This problematic is developed in the fundamenatal article "L'Accès à Dieu," where the author analyses the dialogical relation between the mother and her child. The discontinuity of natures between God and man does not eliminate a certain continuity which rests in the fact that man is called to

Here we must make a choice concerning the nature of obediential potency as the creature's receptivity to the call of grace. The creature's openness to the infinite by the mediation of *esse* does not abolish the ontological difference which God alone can cross; for only God can address to his creature a Word which gives him at the same time the potency to listen and to respond:

But it is precisely this potency of being called (as is the case between human subjects) that man does not at all possess in the face of the divine call. If he is in spite of everything capable of perceiving and responding to the call of God—a call which issues from no natural created order, but from the depths of the eternal and the Absolute—then this capacity must be conferred on him at the same time as the call; only the divine word of grace confers on him the grace of response. We can in this case speak of *obediential potency*, but we must remain conscious that the transnatural potency to which we refer in the word *potentia* is absolutely not the creature's own potency (if so, the potency would be a form of natural potency), but rather a potency belonging solely to the Creator. The power of God is so great that his creature will obey him even when it finds in its own being neither the disposition, nor the tendency, nor the possibility for such obedience.¹⁹

It is understood, Balthasar adds, that "obediential potency assumes the *potentia naturalis passiva* to the extent that the created spirit must exist in order for God to be able to manifest in it the marvels of his grace," but it is unnecessary to submit to the confusion of recent theology, which understands obediential potency "as a disposition of the natural subject."²⁰ The author here directs his words to Rahner, from whom he had already distanced himself in 1945 with his criticism of *Hörer des Wortes*, where "obediential potency is put in the hands of

consciousness by the love of the mother who mediates the call of divine love: "As a member of a chain of generations and as the spiritual child of spiritual parents, man is in every case a being called, for whom the fact of being a spirit and the fact of responding coincide. For the smile of the mother is the first word that reaches the infant and which he understands with all his being: by the language of love, he is initiated into the mystery of language in general; . . . For man, vis à vis God, it is absolutely essential that he be always already a being called, with whom a *You* communicates and who responds to that communication" (from "L'Accès à Dieu," *Mysterium Salutis V* (French ed.), 47-48; (emphasis added).

¹⁹Balthasar, *L'Accès à Dieu*, 48.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 49.

man . . . in such a way that the philosophical 'Vorgriff' threatens to become an "Übergriff" in theology."²¹

Obediential potency designates in philosophy a recognized and integral availability (relativity), ontic and noetic, of the creature towards the *principium et finis*. But it does not designate the (theological) anticipation of the (potential) Word and of the (real) silence of God. The creature does not hear a silence of God, unless it is with the "supernatural" ears of faith (or of unbelief) before the God of grace (or of anger). If we do not maintain this limit, the critique of Barth on the "point of anchorage" (*Anknüpfungspunkte*) can be justified."²²

The *analogia* of being (*maior dissimilitudo*) forbids the creature to pretend to possess a capacity suited to hear the Word of God before receiving the grace of this Word. The creature certainly possesses an unlimited openness and a dialogical character that makes it desire an opening into divine freedom, but the actuation and fulfillment of this fundamental receptivity depends integrally on grace.

3. Supernatural existential?

What is there then of the supernatural existential in Balthasar's vision? If finite freedom is capable of understanding on its own that there exists infinite freedom at its source and at its term; if, moreover, it is not capable of postulating the openness of this infinite freedom, nor of perceiving its voice or its silence through natural desire, how can we understand the relation of reciprocal immanence which is established between the finite and the infinite, despite the abyss that separates them? "How then is the community of love between God and man possible, that which in spite of the difference of the persons involved has the strength of community without being subsumed in an identity of natures (as the community between mother and child)?"²³

²¹Balthasar, "Analogie und Natur: Zur Klärung der theologischen Prinzipienlehre Karl Barths," in *Divus Thomas* (Fribourg 23, 1945). The critique of Rahner can be found in n. 1, pp. 42-44. Cf. also, *Karl Barth: Darstellung und Deutung seiner Theologie* (Einsiedeln: Johannesverlag, 1976), 179f. [an English translation is in preparation with Communio Books, in cooperation with Ignatius Press].

²²*Ibid.*, 43-44.

²³Balthasar, "L'Accès à Dieu," 38.

It is here that the notion of the supernatural existential reappears, but transferred to the side of God, i.e., as a *calling* which comes to arouse in nature, open but powerless, not a desire which is already there, but a capacity to listen and freely respond to the personal invitation:

In order for this ordering (to the supernatural) to realize itself completely, we need, beyond the creature's position, the free openness of God, which stems solely from himself. It produces itself—and here lies, according to the Bible, the ultimate meaning of a creation "expelled" (*hinaussetzenden*). Thus, something must be accorded to finite freedom: *the essential fact of being called by an infinite freedom, the call to open oneself for one's own part to the revelation of divine intimacy. A call so essential that it bespeaks more than the "inference" of the archetype from the image and remains irrefutable; so essential that finite freedom opens or closes itself to it, as to the mark of a branding iron inscribed on its structure. We can designate it as "supernatural existential" (since it persists even in the refusal of grace) but we cannot increase its content more than this: it is beyond any natural "ordering" (Invitation, 24).*²⁴

The divergence between Balthasar and Rahner on the subject of obediential potency extends to the level of the supernatural existential. In line with an obediential potency that is equally immanent and anticipatory, Rahner conceives of the existential as a moment constitutive of transcendental subjectivity (though not participating in its "essence"), anticipating grace not only formally but also materially.²⁵ Man is the event of divine auto-communication.²⁶ The event of grace and human auto-transcendence, under the pressure of a philosophy of identity, tend to converge to the maximum.²⁷ This is particularly noticeable at the level of the Christology which

²⁴*Theodramatik III*, 151-52. Emphasis by the author.

²⁵Rahner, *Sacramentum Mundi*, 1298-99 (Existenzial); 454-455 (Gnade).

²⁶Karl Rahner, *Grundkurs des Glaubens* (Freiburg: Herder, 1976), 132-39 [for an English translation, see *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Seabury, 1978)].

²⁷In Leo Zimny, *Erich Przywara, Sein Schriftum (1912-1962)* (Einsiedeln, Johannesverlag, 1962). In the introduction to this bibliography, Balthasar situates Przywara's thought with respect to that of Blondel and Maréchal and mentions anew that the Maréchal perspective (taken by Rahner) is threatened by ontologism; there is in addition a danger "for the will of the thinker himself, of naturalizing the supernatural (to the extent that the *visio beatifica* is the fulfillment of the fundamental desire of nature)" (p. 14). Cf. also *Phénoménologie de la vérité* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1952), 245.

Balthasar severely criticizes. In the framework of continuing evolution which dominates Rahner's speculation, Christ appears as the unsurpassable "case" of a general anthropological structure which always already contains the anticipation of the auto-communication of the Word. Hence the idea of Christology as an excessive anthropology or of anthropology as a deficient Christology.²⁸

Countering this tendency towards identity, Balthasar reaffirms the paradox of the finite spirit as an *image* of God called to *resemblance* and denounces all bids for an anticipation of this resemblance due to divine freedom—a denunciation based on the very dynamism of the image:

The fact that finite freedom is called beyond itself by a call and an offer of infinite freedom—is called to participate in the life of this freedom—remains a mystery. This is so because the creature, even though it is touched at its most intimate depths, has no capability (not

²⁸Balthasar critiques Rahner's christological model in an excursus on his soteriology where he reproaches him for reducing the *pro nobis* of Christ to a *pro nobis* of God, i.e., to an unsurpassable and irreversible manifestation of God's mercy: "Rahner's continual attacks against a contracted (crypto-) monophysite view of the man-God, which presents him as a God in human clothing and thus in fact as a mythological figure, allows us to guess in advance that an extremely Antiochene accent will be imposed—which will lead to the ideological limit that in the man-Jesus' total abandon to God and in God's total gift of himself ("unique and unsurpassable") in Christ's regard, an "encounter" takes place, a kind of identity is produced: "This reality of Jesus as a consent to and welcoming of divine auto-communication . . . is truly unsurpassable . . . thus it must be said: it is not only posed by God, but is God himself" (*Grundkurs*, 202). But this is so only if we always take into account on the one hand the paradox that the creature becomes more autonomous with its increasing independence (*Grundkurs*, 86f.; G. 224; I, 182; cf. I, 190; the very being of Jesus as his absolute abandon to the word; IV, 151; VIII, 215; IX, 211) (all of which sheds light on the very being of Jesus before God), and on the other hand, that this (hypostatic) union is the unsurpassable case (why, properly speaking, unsurpassable?) of that unity by which the human transcendence towards the divine and the communication of God (in the always-already concrete order of grace) simply coincide: "the goal [*Woraufhin*] transcending the transcendence (of man) and its object . . . coincide in such a fashion that the two things . . . and their distinction surpass themselves in a more original and fundamental unity which is not conceptually differentiable" (*Grundkurs*, 125). Faced with this affirmation, isn't Rahner's axiom that anthropology is a deficient Christology too weak? Isn't there here a formal identity? And from this starting point isn't it also still more intelligible why the "*pro nobis*" can be purely affirmed of God (and only *katachrestikos* of Christ)?" (*Theodramatik III*, 260).

even a solely speculative one) to transform this offer into a constitutive part of its finitude. The attempt to do this, however, is characteristic of all gnosis. Such an attempt neglects the difference between the insurmountable non-divinity of the created "image" and its determination by participation in the divine archetype ("resemblance"), and makes of the ensemble a process surmountable by the finite being and his thought.²⁹

In the face of this gnostic temptation—already latent in Joachim of Fiore and fully manifest in German idealism—Balthasar unyieldingly recalls, with Przywara and Sieverth, the formula of the Fourth Lateran Council: "*inter creatorem et creaturam non potest similitudo notari quin inter eos maior sit dissimilitudo notanda*" (D. S. 806). It is this fundamental principle of the *analogia entis*, or in Christian terms, of the creatureliness of the finite spirit, which in the final analysis forms the basis for Balthasar's accent on the supernatural existential as a transcendental calling, as well as for his critique of Rahner's conception.³⁰ By rejecting the formal-material anticipation of grace in transcendental subjectivity he seeks to safeguard the distinction and, therefore, the drama of finite and infinite freedom, which seems to him to be seriously threatened by the transcendental perspective.³¹

In effect, by insisting on the event of divine auto-communication as the constitutive moment of human auto-transcendence, one ultimately tends to confuse nature and grace and ends up by reducing the confrontation of the two freedoms in concrete history to a process always already decided in advance by the universal and salvific will of God.³² In

²⁹Theodramatik III, 354; 439; Theodramatik II, 2, 443.

³⁰At the heart of the debate, the *analogia entis* and the system of identity meet face to face. Cf. *Cordula*, Implications of the system, 52-54; 65-66; Theodramatik II, 1, 243; Theodramatik III, 107, 355.

³¹Theodramatik III, 71; Theodramatik II, 2, 420.

³²Theodramatik III, 71-72: "The merciful aid [Zuwendung] of God—in Jesus Christ and already in the election of Israel—to the lost world: this arch-dramatic act of the gracious God becomes the undramatic and static conception of a God who is, as with Plato and Plotinus and later with Spinoza and in the *Aufklärung*, the "sun of the Good," eternally shining. In a corresponding way, the image of man is not therefore primarily defined by the aporia [bannende] of finitude, in which something of the absolute should be realized, but by an abandon of self resigned to the unfathomable mystery of one's being and of all being; by an attitude of death that submerges all one's finite actions: the variegated stoicism of Christianity.

Rahner's conception, everything is played out on the level of an immediate contact of autonomous subjectivity with the sacred Mystery which gives itself a priori; this results in an inability to see clearly how the "categorical" (even Christian) experience and its secondary causes even have a role to play at all.³³

On the basis of the supernatural existential conceived as a justification always already offered and experienced transcendently, moral existence in general is promoted to the dignity of anonymous Christianity and the non-Christian religions are qualified as "Christologies in search" (*Suchenden Christologien*).³⁴ According to Balthasar, this entire perspective risks dissolving the Christian specificity of God's intervention in history within a general religion of humanity which relativizes all concrete historical expressions.³⁵ In particular, the appreciation of non-Christian religions seems to him overly optimistic, and not sufficiently aware of the ambiguity of all human religion as a tendency towards salvation, but at the same time an attempt at self-justification that bars the road to Christ. The positive momentum towards salvation and the tacit or explicit rejection of the solution embodied in Jesus Christ are telescoped together in Rahner's unique "*Vorgriff*."³⁶ In a certain way, everything is already in place even before the Savior and the Church come concretely onto the scene. Grace hovers transcendently over historical events. But doesn't this anticipation pose the danger that the active auto-transcendence of man will burst in on the domain proper to divine freedom alone? Or in the reverse, that the universal and salvific will of God, conceived as always already victorious a priori to man's possible

³³Rahner, *Grundkurs*, 88-96; Balthasar, *Cordula*, 87; Theodramatik II, 2, 380; Theodramatik III, 254-47, 404.

³⁴Rahner, *Grundkurs*, 288ff., 310f. Discussion in Balthasar, *Theodramatik II*, 2, 376-384: the question of mediation; and 384-388: approach and conversion. Balthasar emphasizes with de Lubac that Christian specificity cannot be reduced to making explicit that which is implicit in the transcendental experience of all men. Consequently, the appearance of Jesus Christ does not merely bring a missing element; it brings a totality that demands renunciation and conversion in order to integrate anterior fragments into the catholic plenitude (*Theodramatik II*, 2, 387-88, 420-21). Reference to Henri de Lubac is to *Le fondement théologique des missions* (Paris: Seuil, 1946).

³⁵Balthasar, *Neue Klarstellungen*, 44-51 [for an English translation, see *New Elucidations*, trans. by M. T. Skerry (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986)]; *Pneuma und Institution*, 70; Theodramatik II, 2, 380.

³⁶Theodramatik III, 204.

refusal, will in practice exclude the possibility for a definitive refusal?"³⁷

Ultimately, Balthasar judges that the drama of divine and human freedom is not sufficiently guaranteed by this anticipation of grace in transcendental subjectivity. The solution to the human enigma is always already given and prevents the development of its aporetic character as image, i.e., as a condition essentially unfulfilled and unfulfillable from below, because of its creation in view of an inaccessible resemblance liberally granted by God in history. This is why Balthasar seeks a point of departure other than transcendental dynamism to express the concrete dialectic of divine and human freedom within the insurpassable framework of the *analogia entis*. This new point of departure is the intersubjectivity³⁸ which belongs to the concrete structure of God's image and which allows for the integration of historical mediations into the immediate relation between finite and infinite freedom.

Let us summarize this sketch of the debate over the supernatural existential with a brief synthesis. Rahner conceives of the supernatural existential as an a priori situation of objective justification in which human freedom makes use of its own motion of auto-transcendence. This existential conditions natural desire and so penetrates it a priori that the distinction between nature and grace tends to resolve itself into identity. For his part, Balthasar conceives of it as a transcendental calling which comes to encounter the spiritual creature's paradoxical desire in order to raise it to an effective "personal" exchange with the trinitarian God. The calling of the "being-I" and the calling of grace are distinguished one from the other but the former is posed essentially in view of the latter.

For Rahner, man *has* a supernatural vocation

³⁷Ibid., 262: "Rahner's soteriology (like all attempts which do not take the *sacrum commercium* seriously) lacks a decisive dramatic moment; this can be seen also in the fact that the 'anger' of God is always surpassed by his will towards salvation, which is always already above all the non-human in God (in the direction of apocatastasis)." Balthasar is referring to Rahner in *Grundkurs*, 108-09, 292, 425; I, 212.

³⁸Cf. Balthasar, *Theodramatik I: Prolegomena* (Einsiedeln: Johannesverlag, 1973), 587-603 [for an English translation, see *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory I: Prolegomena* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988); *Theodramatik II*, 1, 356ff.; *Theodramatik II*, 2, 420f.; and "Bewegung zu Gott," in *Mysterium Salutis II* (Einsiedeln/Cologne: Benziger, 1967), 15-43.

whose content is always already inserted within a natural dynamism which could have on its own a sufficient meaning. For Balthasar, man *is* essentially a *being called* whose paradoxical freedom has no ultimate horizon other than the unforeseeable openness of divine freedom in Christ. With the one, the image basks always already in the resemblance offered a priori whereas with the other the image cannot resolve its enigma a priori except by the light of the historical Christ, the unforeseeable archetype of its resemblance.

Ultimately, in spite of their very clear opposition on several points, these two perspectives remain nonetheless complementary,³⁹ with that of Balthasar bringing to that of Rahner an undeniable and deepening corrective.

Excursus: A new horizon of the freely given gift

1. *Jesus Christ, concrete measure of the gift*

In the light of what we have written, we can begin to see how what we may call Balthasar's Christocentrism has allowed for the opening of a new horizon of gratuitousness—of the freely given gift—by concretizing the abstract problematic of the relation between nature and grace. To appreciate fully the fruitfulness of this new horizon, with its reversal of perspective, we must call on the Balthasarian conception of the Christological *analogia entis* as the concrete standard of measure of the relations between God and man. "Christ is the only concrete and common measure between God and man, between grace and nature, between faith and reason."⁴⁰

We will not repeat here what we have said elsewhere about this Christological measure, which takes on, in the descending movement of God towards his creature, the ascending movement of the creature towards God.⁴¹ Suffice it to

³⁹For greater confrontation, see M. Lochbrunner, *Analogia Caritatis: Darstellung und Deutung der Theologie Hans Urs von Balthasars* (Freiburger theol. Studien, Herder, 1981), 113-33, and R. Vignolo, Hans Urs von Balthasar: *Estetica e Singolarità* (Milan: Fede e Cultura, 1982) 81-111.

⁴⁰Balthasar, *Verbum Caro: Skizzen zur Theologie I* (Einsiedeln: Johannesverlag, 1960), 174 [for an English translation, see *The Word Made Flesh* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989); Karl Barth, 395.

⁴¹Cf. also, Karl Barth, 298f.

recall that Jesus Christ's archetypical obedience—the summit of the creature's attitude before God—is based on the mission of the eternal Son, who thus comes to express the inner-trinitarian life and to bring about the reconciliation of the world with God.

As an abstract expression of God's relation of likeness within ultimate difference to his creature, the *analogia entis* finds in Jesus Christ, obedient in the Holy Spirit, its concrete and insurpassable expression as Covenant and Exchange: in a word, as Love.⁴² The *Deus semper maior* is concretely revealed in the extreme exigency of love, to which this man voluntarily submits himself, burdened with the sin of all and abandoned by God on the Cross. Georges de Schrijver has shown that in the Balthasarian conception of the *analogia entis*, "the contribution of the man who responds (and corresponds) helps to constitute the Revelation of God in himself."⁴³ From formal and static, the analogy becomes in Jesus Christ dynamic and existential.⁴⁴ In him, the metaphysical analogy is condensed and culminates in the "mystical" analogy, which embodies the maximum human potential for correspondence to the personal and inconceivable openness of the God of grace. And the Holy Spirit holds the key to this analogy in performing a *mutual*

⁴²"Thus, he must already be obedient even as God, and his human obedience unto death must be the epiphany of a divine—that is, a trinitarian—obedience. In the Son of Man there appears not God alone; necessarily, there also appears the inner-trinitarian event of his procession; there appears the triune God, who, as God, can command absolutely and obey absolutely and, as the Spirit of love, can be the unity of both" (*The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. I: *Seeing the Form* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983], 479). On the Christological *analogia entis*, see *Théologie de l'Histoire*, 86, n. 1 [for an English translation, see *A Theology of History* (New York/London: Sheed and Ward, 1963)]; *La Gloire et la Croix: Apparition* (Paris: Aubier, 1965), 276f. [for an English translation, see *The Glory of the Lord*, I]; *Theodramatik II*, 2, 202ff. Cf. also G. Marchesi, *La Christologia di Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Rome: Università Gregoriana Editrice, 1977) 56-97 and Georges de Schrijver, "Die Analogia Entis in der Theologie Hans Urs von Balthasars: Eine genetisch-historische Studie," in *Bijdragen*, 38 (1977): 241-81.

⁴³Georges de Schrijver, "Die Analogia Entis," 249; and he adds: "It is only on the basis of a correct understanding of man's relation of response to God—and this is finally the meaning of the analogy of being—that we gain an insight into the mystery that God himself in his Trinitarian being becomes immanent in the world: in and through man's accompanying action" (*ibid.*, 249).

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 251f.

action, for it is the Holy Spirit who joins man and God together in the dramatic mode of soteriological kenosis.⁴⁵ The difference seen in Jesus's willing abandon to Hell thus evolves to express the greatest difference of all in terms of a mutual inner-trinitarian abandon—an abandon which certifies and fulfills itself as divine when the Spirit of love proceeds to resurrect Jesus from among the dead. This is why Jesus is the normative *concrete universal*⁴⁶ for all times and all places, for in him are recapitulated all situations and from him proceeds the Spirit who transfigures and utilizes his humanity, and does this even to the point of disseminating the Eucharist and of thus accomplishing on earth an effusion of trinitarian love.

2. Nature at the service of grace

Starting from this Christocentric perspective, which is enriched by a pneumatological vision, Balthasar can both absorb and reach beyond the traditional axiom of the theology of grace: grace does not destroy nature, but perfects it and brings it to fulfillment. This axiom reveals by its very formulation a perspective of ascent, which places the emphasis in the nature-grace relation on the nature in quest of fulfillment. But things proceed differently when we consider this relation from the starting-point of Christ, for, from that moment, the emphasis shifts—the perspective is inverted—and nature, even while being perfected, is perceived as advancing *in the service of grace*.

There is no common measure between nature and grace, reason and faith; only the order grounded in the person of Christ: nature as the expression and servant of the supernatural. In this service it will not be found wanting.⁴⁷

⁴⁵Balthasar, *Pneuma und Institution*, 264; *Theodramatik II*, 2: 167-75.

⁴⁶"The life of Christ, as was said, is the "world of ideas" for the whole of history. He himself is the Idea made concrete, personal, historical: *universale concretum et personale* (*A Theology of History*, 89).

⁴⁷Balthasar, *The Word Made Flesh*, 168; Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Christlicher Stand* (Einseideln: Johannesverlag, 1977), 171f. [for an English translation, see *The Christian State of Life* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1983)].

In one of his most remarkable essays, "*Merkmale des Christlichen*,"⁴⁸ Balthasar elaborates on the change of atmosphere and the shift of horizon that result from serious consideration of the Christological norm. He emphasizes that the ascending tendency of nature is fulfilled on all sides by being absorbed in the service of God's descending love.

His humanity is the expression and instrument of the divinity, and by no means is the divinity the expression and instrument of the humanity. In every respect, the humanity is fulfilled in that it sees itself, with all its upward stirrings, brought into the service of God's revelation, into the downward movement of his grace and love.⁴⁹

In Christ, nature is carried to its fulfillment by becoming the receptacle and the expression of the divine. The free gift that is given it and which calls it to the service of God does not eliminate its own effort and dynamism; on the contrary, the gift propels nature to develop all its possibilities, but calls on it finally to transcend itself because it is open "not only to its own possibilities but also to those of God."⁵⁰ In becoming the expression and instrument of the life of God, nature is lifted well beyond its own aspirations and capacities. It is elevated, ennobled by the grace which makes use of it in all freedom, for the accomplishment of its own ends. "It cannot be said that nature is diminished by being held to serve as a vessel for the divine. What act of the human will could be more sublime than that of divine love? What could be more sublime for the human understanding than to elicit the act of divine faith?"⁵¹

Conscious of the richness of this Christocentric perspective, Balthasar wanted to show its fruitfulness in light of his theological aesthetics, whose fundamental structure rests on the Christological *analogia entis*—an analogy which confers on the human being an incomparable nobility and beauty as an expression of the divine. By applying the pneumatological method, the author of *The Glory of the Lord* demonstrated the "aesthetic"⁵² superiority of Christianity, which rests precisely

⁴⁸*Verbum Caro* 172-94: "Merkmale des Christlichen."

⁴⁹*The Word Made Flesh*, 162-63.

⁵⁰*Verbum Caro.*, 193; Balthasar, *De l'integration* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1969), 281 [for an English translation, see *Man in History* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1967)].

⁵¹*The Word Made Flesh*, 178.

⁵²Balthasar takes care, in the long introduction to his first volume (*The Glory*

in the glorious unveiling of the trinitarian God and his use of the man Jesus to express himself personally and to reconcile himself with the world. Jesus Christ is the Covenant in person, in whom there shines with an incomparable light the absolute love which justifies the world by drawing it into its own infinite reciprocity. This supreme justification is brought by Christ to resolve the enigma of the existence of a world "aside" the absolute; before it, all the possible outlines of human thought in philosophy and religion must bow.

The final obscurity only disappears when God unveils in Jesus Christ his inmost heart—his trinitarian love—which lifts him above all formulas tending to include him with the world, *but also justifies the world's existence in taking it into the eternal dialogue of love*. Just as this is an a priori intuition which outside of being can contain only nothingness, so too this is an a priori "intuition" for which we can conceive of no possible parallel beyond this justification of being. There exists no other equally profound justification, which does not undermine the essence of God or of the world (the *analogia entis*), and which, without allowing for any logical deduction, opens the entire cosmos to the unfathomable freedom of love.⁵³

But as the relation of man with God does not exhaust itself in the categories of expression, illustration, and glory, the aesthetic analogy exceeds its own limits and moves in the direction of a dramatic analogy, in which God's Covenant with his creatures is translated into the categories of action, mission, and communion.⁵⁴ The *analogia entis* thus touches upon the summit of the "actuality" and "signification"

of the Lord, I), to specify the direction of his steps. It is a question of elaborating not an aesthetic theology but a theological aesthetics: "By this we mean a theology which does not primarily work with the extra-theological categories of a worldly philosophical aesthetics (above all poetry), but which develops its theory of beauty from the data of revelation itself with genuinely theological methods" (117). "If this is so, then theological aesthetics must properly be developed in two phases, which are: 1. *The theory of vision* (or fundamental theology): 'aesthetics' in the Kantian sense as a theory about the perception of the form of God's self-revelation. 2. *The theory of rapture* (dogmatic theology): 'aesthetics' as a theory about the incarnation of God's glory and the consequent elevation of man to participate in that glory" (125).

⁵³*La Gloire et la Croix: Nouvelle Alliance* (Paris: Aubier, 1975), 16; emphasis added [for an English translation, see *The Glory of the Lord, VII: Theology: The New Covenant* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989)].

⁵⁴Cf. *Theodramatik I*, 15-22; the drama between aesthetics and logic.

of this Covenant, for as Jesus Christ is given over for us, trinitarian love reaches out and dramatically integrates the fallen creature in the very movement of its exchange of love. Here, as we have seen, the meaning of human existence receives its ultimate and un hoped for determination from the fact that it is absorbed and engaged in the service of God's engagement with the world, and thus in the service of the trinitarian exchange *in Christo*.

3. Giving God to God in history

From all of this rises a new panorama of gratuitousness which confers an incomparable meaning on human existence. For grace as an analogous participation in divine nature signifies more than a vertical passage towards a transcendent absolute to which one obscurely aspires; grace does not merely signify an undeserved fulfillment of the spiritual creature in line with its transcendental potential. Grace certainly signifies the elevation and healing of nature, but it signifies especially, at its deepest level, God's embrace of historical humanity and its transfiguration through an engagement at the service of trinitarian love, *ad extra et ad intra*. This unfathomable love seeks not only to quench the thirst of its creature. It seeks to put its own thirst into the creature, to fill it with its own life of exchange by engaging it in its own kenotic movement—and so humanely to absorb the vicissitudes of history in its own divine drama.⁵⁵ Here appears an analogy with the *sequela Christi* which opens an infinite diversity into a landscape of gratuitousness. Could the creature dream of a higher vocation and a more sublime gift than to give God to God at the heart of the concrete history which unfolds in Christ? Balthasar's insistence on the Eucharist and on Christian joy in the midst of trial is justified on the basis of nothing other than this unfathomable gift.⁵⁶

As we conclude this line of thought, which evokes the fruitfulness of a Christocentric and trinitarian perspective for a deeper understanding of the gratuitousness of grace, it

⁵⁵The fourth and fifth volumes of the *Theodramatik*, *Die Handlung* (*Theodramatik III*) and *Das Endspiel* (*Theodramatik IV*) (Einsiedeln: Johannesverlag, 1980 and 1983) brought to this point certain complements.

⁵⁶*Verbum Caro*, 172-94; *La Gloire et la Croix: Apparition*, 204-17; *La Gloire et la Croix: Nouvelle Alliance*, 461-67; *Dans l'engagement de Dieu*, 49-59, etc.

seems we have been justified in speaking of a new horizon of gratuitousness. The inversion of perspective in the much embattled question of the relation between nature and grace, supplemented by the Balthasarian conception of the Christological *analogia entis*, leads to the discovery of a deeper level of signification for the meaning of human existence.

In the light of pneumatology, human existence is found to be situated between God and God with a historico-eschatological mission,⁵⁷ a mission whose ultimate meaning is the praise and service of trinitarian glory.

The measure of gratuitousness can no longer be seen to begin with man and his *cor inquietum*, to which one assigns a final goal that exceeds his natural aspirations. The measure of gratuitousness rests in God, who calls man to become a "person in Christ"⁵⁸ by forgetting the narrowness of his "desire" to put himself at the service of inner-divine love—a love that is always dramatically exchanging itself in history.

Conclusion: Towards a dramatic anthropology

Now that the ultimate horizon of reference for determining the meaning of existence is thematized, it is possible, in following Balthasar, to pose more radically the question of the human person. Not only what the human person is and what is his or her ultimate destiny, but Who is the human person? and even Who am I? from the point of view of Revelation.

The coordinates of which we can make use—trinitarian horizon, *analogia entis*, archetypical image of obedience-mission—announce from this moment a dramatic anthropology. Involved in this dramatic anthropology is a vision of the human person admitted even here on Earth into divine intimacy, and this to the point of actively participating in God's engagement for the world, and of sharing in the trinitarian exchange which is mysteriously accomplished in history.

⁵⁷Cf. the conclusion of *La Gloire et la Croix: Nouvelle Alliance*, 421-71, on Christian existence as an eschatological existence.

⁵⁸Subtitle of *Theodramatik II*, 2: "Die Personen in Christus," [The Persons in Christ] indicating the clearly theological perspective which characterizes the Balthasarian approach to the person.

The anthropology of the *imago Dei* as freedom called to fulfill itself in assimilation with the freedom of the sacrificial lamb should allow us to deepen the "*analogia caritatis*"⁵⁹ which lies at the heart of Christian existence.—*Translated by Susan Clements* □

⁵⁹Lochbrunner, *Analogia Caritatis*: "The *Analogia Caritatis* has as a 'substructure' the breakthrough wrought by de Lubac in the determination of the relations between nature and grace, person and grace" (312).