

Book Symposium

The Natural Desire to See God According to St. Thomas Aquinas and His Interpreters

by Lawrence Feingold
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Steering Clear of Charybdis: Some Directions for Avoiding “Grace Extrinsicism” in Aquinas

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IN HIS masterful, very clearly written study on the Thomistic doctrine of the natural desire to see God, Lawrence Feingold offers us a wealth of textual evidence and conceptual analyses, covering the entire history of the interpretation of Aquinas's view on the relation between nature and grace, ranging from Aquinas himself to Henri de Lubac. One of its major achievements, I think, is that it revives the somewhat dormant debate over nature and grace. The heart of this debate has always been to find the right balance between, on the one hand, the axiom that “grace perfects nature,” which suggests some intrinsic connection between nature and grace, and, on the other hand, the gratuity and novelty of grace. In the past decades the scale tipped in the direction of the first alternative, that is, grace perfecting nature, but Feingold's work adds more weight to the other side. Or to put it negatively: The debate has been about avoiding the Charybdis of “grace extrinsicism” and the Scylla of naturalizing grace (or supernaturalizing nature). Feingold warns us rightly that the course has been too much in the direction of Scylla.

In this essay I shall first give a brief sketch—which also reflects my personal experiences as a student—of the basic sentiments evident in

theological anthropology since the 1960s. Next I will summarize the core of Feingold's position. Finally I will make suggestions as to how Aquinas's theology may help to avoid falling prey to Charybdis.

The Nature–Grace Debate Since the 1970s

Feingold's study raises very serious questions about some deeply felt convictions in mainstream (late-) modern theological anthropology. For me and many of my colleagues, who received their training in theology during the 1970s and 1980s, the topic of nature versus grace was no longer the issue it had been in the previous decades (and centuries). De Lubac's sharp criticisms on Cajetan's merely obediential potency for grace and on Suárez's construct of a "state of pure nature" (*status naturae purae*), his own alternative view that our very being is created for union with God, and its modified version of Karl Rahner's "supernatural existential," were already so deeply ingrained in the mind of our professors, that as students we could only shake our heads at those sixteenth-century debates and the rearguard actions fought by old-fashioned neo-Thomists. Had not the *nouvelle théologie*, Rahner, Edward Schillebeeckx, and many others shown that the theology of Thomas Aquinas had been distorted from Cajetan onward? In fact, Cajetan bashing had become more or less something de rigueur, whether it concerned his classification of analogy, his metaphysical interpretation of *analogia entis*, or his insistence on a merely obediential potency for grace. Furthermore, the view of de Lubac and Rahner that each human being actually longs to see God, offered a more fruitful basis for interreligious dialogue and, allegedly, it influenced the fathers of the Second Vatican Council.¹ Also with the Second Vatican Council, the salvation history perspective had become dominant, and this did not foster a climate favorable for speculative theology about possible worlds in which possible rational beings were not called by God; neither did existentialist philosophy with its profound criticism of an essentialist conception of human being, implied by the very notion of "the human nature." The same went for social constructivism (in whatever form), which so prevailed in the social sciences (for example, the nature vs. nurture debate) that it made us theology students even more reluctant to talk—or even think—about something like human nature or human essence. And last, but certainly not least, many Roman Catholic theologians—at least in Germany and in the Netherlands—were impressed by the dialectical theology of Karl Barth, who scorned any consideration of

¹ Cf. Ilaria Morali, *La Salvezza dei non cristiani. L'influsso di Henri de Lubac sulla dottrina del Vaticano II* (Bologna: Editrice Missionaria Italiana, 1999).

humanity apart from the salvific works and person of Christ and labeled such considerations as idolatry.

Against the background of all these developments, the only possibility for a truly theological anthropology seemed to be a reflection on concrete human existence in its historical relation of salvation to God. This allegedly was the formal object of theological anthropology—if not of theology tout court. When the relation to God was left out, theology had as little to say about human beings or human nature as it has to say about the periodic system of the elements: It would be none of its business. In consequence, any speculation about a “pure nature” was considered beyond the scope and competence of theology.

Declaring “pure nature” not to belong to the subject matter of theology was also the remedy against what Maurice Blondel labeled an “extrinsicist” view of grace, or what we as students referred to as “Suárez’s cream cake.” It is the well-known picture of nature and grace as two tiers, one on top of the other, without an intrinsic connection between the two. Human nature is complete in itself, and it might very well do without grace, that is, without a personal relation to God. Without the cream of grace, it would be a little dry and less tasty, but the cake of nature is not really affected by the cream topping. However, from a religious, and hence also from a theological perspective, such a view was completely unacceptable. It alienated grace and faith from our personal, concrete, everyday life and from the larger reality of society and the world by promoting a flight into a distinct spiritual realm. It domesticated and isolated theology, confining it to the little, sheltered niche of the supernatural, fully disconnected from the humanities and sciences. The only way out from this imprisonment and trivialization of theology seemed to be to reclaim a specifically theological interpretation of human nature, such as offered by de Lubac or Rahner. That is, to reclaim an approach of the human being as actually created by God and destined for participating in the inner life of the Triune God. Faith teaches that God made us for the supernatural end of the beatific vision. He intended our existence to be perfected by sharing his own divine life. If the supernatural is to be our perfection, the perfection of us human beings, then it seems to be obvious that our humanity must be constituted in such a way that it somehow “fits” this destination: There must be some kind of coherence or continuity between “our nature” and “God’s grace,” otherwise we could not be intrinsically perfected by it. Precisely such an internal affinity seems to be denied by assuming a merely obediential potency for grace or by accepting the possibility of a state of pure nature having its own natural destination and beatitude and not in need of any further perfection. The conclusion looked inevitable. The

classical interpretation of the Thomistic commentators had to be abandoned: it created fatal problems and offered no way out.

Feingold: The Classical Thomistic Position

Contrary to the general impression sketched above, it becomes clear from Feingold's study that it was precisely for internal theological reasons that Cajetan applied the notion of the *potentia oboedientialis* to the reception of grace and that Suárez developed his theory of the *status naturae purae*.

Both Cajetan and Suárez were trying to further explicate and spell out the consequences of what Aquinas had said about the natural desire to see God but had not really elaborated in unambiguous terms. It would take me too far to summarize the whole of Feingold's presentation, but the key question in interpreting Aquinas's texts on the natural desire to see God is this: Granted, Aquinas speaks about an elicited and conditional natural desire of the human will to see God, but does that desire also correspond with an innate and absolute desire of human nature for this supernatural vision of God? The classical interpretation is that human will has a natural desire to see the divine essence, but that this desire is only a consequence of three other things.

First, it originates from the underlying innate orientation the will has toward the perfection, not only of itself, but also of all other human powers and of the human being as a whole. Just as heavy objects are pulled down to the earth by the force of gravity, the will has an innate tendency (also called *pondus naturae*) to its goal, that is, beatitude in general, and, on top of that, also to the natural perfections of other human powers: to knowledge, as the perfection of the intellect, to health as the perfection of the body, and so on. Having an innate tendency as such is not yet something proper or peculiar to the human will (though the goal itself is specific to the will). The *pondus naturae* the will has is an instance of the general Aristotelian–Thomistic principle that each nature or natural power has its goal; in other words, the innate tendency is just the way in which the will exemplifies the *appetitus naturalis*, the universal teleological structure of “nature” in general. It is situated on a potential, pre-intentional, and preconscious level; it is an orientation that does not change and is always there, as long as the will as a natural power exists (whether it is in act or not).

However—and this is the second presupposition to the natural desire for the beatific vision—when we consider the will not only as “a nature,” but precisely as “will,” that is, as *appetitus intellectualis*, we move to the level of actuality, of knowledge, and of intentionality. For peculiar to the will

as *appetitus intellectualis* is its own mode of actually striving toward its goal; it strives to something that has been understood or apprehended by the intellect as a good, and has been presented as such to the will. These acts of the will in response to what the intellect presents as a good are called “elicited” acts.

Thirdly, elicited acts can occur in two ways. The elicited act may regard the desired object as a good just in and by itself, taken in isolation or abstractly. Technical Thomistic terminology for this kind of elicited act is abundant: It is called the “antecedent will” or, somewhat confusingly, “will as nature” (*voluntas ut natura*; not to be identified with the *pondus naturae* of the will), *velleitas*, “conditional,” “inefficacious,” “imperfect,” or “incomplete willing”. This means that if something is presented to the will as good by itself in all respects, then necessarily the will wills it, but as yet only “conditionally”. Next, the elicited act may also desire the object as it concretely exists in reality, that is, by taking into account what my intellect knows about the object’s relation to other goods, all its relevant circumstances, and its feasibility. This is the full-blown act of the will, called “consequent will” or “will as reason” (*voluntas ut ratio*), “unconditional,” “efficacious,” “perfect,” or “complete willing”.

Now, we may desire something by our antecedent will without desiring it by our consequent will. This can happen for several reasons. Something may be understood as a good in itself and in itself be desired, but in a concrete, given situation may be forsaken for a greater good. For example, when I am sick, I may give up the good of carnal pleasure, which in itself I desire, and take a bitter medicine for I think my physical health to be a greater good. Martyrs may even forsake the good of life for the greater good of testifying to the faith. Likewise, I may wish for something that in itself is desirable, but when my intellect reasons that it is not feasible, I shall not desire it fully and pursue it. I can think of how desirable it would be to fly like a bird, or to know intuitively like an angel, but as these things cannot actually be realized (neither by myself, nor by someone else on my behalf), they will remain merely as a dream wish (*velleitas*).

The classical interpretation of Aquinas’s teaching, that a human being has a natural desire for the supernatural end of seeing God, is that this desire is neither an innate appetite (*pondus naturae*), nor a perfect, unconditional elicited act, but only an imperfect, conditional elicited act. The argument goes like this. Our intellect can present to the will the vision of God as a desirable good. The act of apprehending the beatific vision as a good and of presenting it as such to the will is the result of the intellect’s natural tendency for its own perfection. By its very nature, the intellect aims at knowledge of essences and causes. Having reasonably established

the existence of a First Cause from observed effects by way of some kind of proof of God's existence, the intellect can conclude that knowing the essence of this First Cause (which is the beatific vision) is a good, even that it is the highest good imaginable. And the intellect can propose this absolutely perfect good to the will. Next, by its very nature, the will cannot not desire the perfect good of seeing God: Upon the proposal of the beatific vision by the intellect, the will necessarily and naturally has an elicited act of desiring it. But the human intellect also knows that essential knowledge of God is not feasible or attainable by humans. Seeing God is beyond what can be realized by any creature—even the angels. Therefore, we shall not have a perfect, unconditional desire for the supernatural end: The condition that the end can be realized by natural powers is not fulfilled. This means that the desire itself for this end remains at the level of *velleitas*, of a mere dream wish that does not really affect our actual striving or our efforts. In other words: the beatific vision is not a goal that is proportionate to our nature, and therefore our natural desire for it remains imperfect.

The crucial point of the classical Thomistic reading is that the natural desire to see God does not belong to the pre-intentional “innate appetite” (*pondus naturae*). The latter position is the one taken by Duns Scotus, Domingo de Soto, and Henri de Lubac, among others. As Feingold points out, there is some textual evidence in the writings of Aquinas for this position, but it is not convincing. However, apart from the question of what is the correct interpretation of Aquinas's texts, there is a more pressing theological problem for the view that we have an innate appetite for the beatific vision. It runs the risk of falling prey to Scylla: how to account for the gratuity and for the novelty of grace—not only with regard to the means of realizing the end, but also with regard to desiring the very end, *telos*, itself. If we have a positive orientation or unconditional desire toward the supernatural end by our very nature, then grace seems to be a *debitum naturae*, something that belongs and is due to our nature: Grace is no longer a completely gratuitous gift from God. At the same time, grace seems to be merely a kind of prolongation or continuation of our own nature, with which we are so familiar: Grace is no longer something novel and unprecedented.

De Lubac and Rahner try to meet these problems either by stating that we naturally desire the supernatural vision precisely as a gift (de Lubac) or by introducing a kind of constant, but not natural, freely bestowed attraction toward the supernatural good (the “supernatural existential” of Rahner). Feingold argues that neither solution is satisfying.² It seems to

² Cf. Lawrence Feingold, *The Natural Desire to See God According to St. Thomas Aquinas and His Interpreters* (Rome: Apollinare Studi, 2001), 618–20, on de Lubac and note 311 on pp. 623–24 on Rahner.

me that his criticism of de Lubac is convincing, but that his discussion of Rahner is too succinct to make a well-balanced assessment of the Rahnerian position.³ However, it would be beyond the scope of this essay, which focuses in particular on Thomas Aquinas, to give a detailed account and interpretation of Rahner's texts.

Avoiding Grace Extrinsicism in Aquinas

In order to avoid the Charybdis of "grace extrinsicism," de Lubac and Rahner want to redefine the distinction between nature and grace.⁴ But for both the result seems to be that the very distinction tends to be blurred or to disappear. Joel Garver characterizes the two positions "roughly and schematically" as follows: "[W]hile Rahner's thought tends to naturalize the supernatural, de Lubac tends to supernaturalize the natural."⁵ One might then draw the conclusion that in avoiding "grace extrinsicism" we will find ourselves confessing "tout est grâce" (or "tout est nature") or with accepting the radical consequence of abandoning the very expressions and concepts of "nature" and "grace" altogether in theological anthropology. After all, the distinction as such is not found in Holy Scripture (unlike, for example, the distinction "law" and "grace"), and one could argue that it is given only within a specific, historically conditioned, philosophical context, namely, of an Aristotelian–Thomistic substance metaphysics. However, I think that each of these two "ways out" is too easy and that discriminating between the concepts of nature and grace remains a very valuable means for expressing fundamental data of faith concerning the relation of us, human beings, to God.

³ Feingold characterizes Rahner's notoriously vague "supernatural existential" as a *disposition* (with or without quotation marks, like Rahner himself who speaks of *Anlage*) on 624, note 311. However, Stephen Duffy, following William Shepherd, interprets it not as a disposition for the offer of grace but as the enduring offer itself of justifying grace: Stephen Duffy, *The Grace Horizon: Nature and Grace in Modern Catholic Thought* (Collegeville, MN: Health Policy Advisory Center, 1992), 206–18. But on this interpretation the question is how the offer of grace can become something human prior to and independent from its actually being accepted by the human person.

⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar and Max Seckler are two other influential theologians who proposed similar redefinitions of the distinction between nature and grace. Edward Schillebeeckx has an excellent critical review of Seckler's *Instinkt und Glaubenswille nach Thomas von Aquin*, in "Het niet-begrijpelijke kenmoment in de geloofsdaad," pt. III, ch. 3 of *Openbaring en theologie* (Bilthoven: H. Nelissen, 1964), 233–61. As far as I know, this text of Schillebeeckx has never been translated.

⁵ Joel Garver, "Rahner and de Lubac on Nature and Grace," www.joelgarver.com/writ/theo/naturegrace.htm.

Leaving aside the easy ways out, there are several possible strategies. One could continue criticizing the opposite position: the classical Thomist warning de Lubac and Rahner that they are heading for Scylla, and vice versa the Rahnerian telling the Thomist that she is falling into the clutches of Charybdis. But instead of criticizing the other party, I think it will be more fruitful to listen to their warnings. So we could try to show that the Rahnerian position (maybe in a modified form) is both coherent and keeps a clear distinction between nature and grace. Or one should try to argue that the Thomistic position—in its classical interpretation—does not necessarily entail an extrinsic conception of grace. The latter is the course I will take here by presenting some basic lines of thought from Aquinas that could help us to steer away from Charybdis, that is, from grace extrinsicism.

First we have to keep in mind that for Aquinas “human nature” is a double abstraction. It is not only a universal concept, abstracted from concretely existent, individual human beings, but it also abstracts from the actual history of salvation of this world, in which all humans are gratuitously called by God to share in his life—a call that may or may not be answered. Every human being stands in a relation of grace—or its opposite, the broken relation of (original) sin—to God, and we cannot be in a neutral position toward God’s call to the supernatural end. A state of pure nature (*status naturae purae*) does not exist in reality.⁶ This does not mean that the notion of a pure nature would not concern the existent human beings in this concrete economy of salvation and would only apply to hypothetical intelligent beings in some possible but not actualized world, as de Lubac stated.⁷ The concept of a pure nature remains very useful and maybe even indispensable for articulating the gratuity of the gift of grace we have received, but it remains a concept that is abstracted from the ontologically prior concrete human being in the state of grace or of sin. Both de Lubac and Rahner are correct in insisting that we should start our theological reflection with the concrete human beings in this actual history of salvation.

The ontological priority of the graced (or sinful) human being in historical reality is mirrored by the intentional priority in the divine mind of our supernatural end. Talking about the “order of divine decrees” is a tricky business, but at least we should not think of God first deciding to create intelligent beings and next ordering them to the supernatural end.

⁶ Apart maybe from the souls in limbo, but I shall not go into this.

⁷ Cf. Feingold, *Natural Desire*, 393–95, 620–25.

Sharing his own inner life is what God intends first and foremost.⁸ Intelligent beings, both humans and angels, are only and uniquely created for this supernatural beatitude. Free, intelligent beings having their own nature and natural powers are so to say a necessary condition of possibility for God to share his life. In this sense the order of Quesnel's infamous statement should rather be reversed: *natura est sequela glorificationis*.⁹ Because God wants to elevate free creatures to participate in the uncreated life of the Three Persons, He "has to" endow them with their own nature. It is logically impossible for God to create intelligent beings that by nature would share the divine life. Then God would create gods, and God is by definition unique and uncreated. Only the divine Persons share the divine life by their own nature.

Keeping in mind the priority of grace, the first important question is how to describe or characterize theologically the nature of intelligent creatures without invoking directly the category of grace. For that would blur, if not annul, the very distinction between nature and grace. Aquinas describes nature, in particular the substantial form, as what constitutes something in its own being. According to that form, each nature has its natural potencies (both active and passive) and corresponding natural desires or goals. In the case of human beings, the distinctive natural powers are the rational intellect and will; while the corresponding goals that fulfill these powers are their formal objects: truth, in which reason comes to rest, and the good, which puts an end to the striving of the will. Knowing truth and loving the good is what fulfills human nature and what makes a person happy.

Equally important is the question of how to describe grace, but this can only be done with reference to nature. For if we do not relate grace directly to nature, we shall keep a clear distinction between nature and grace, but we shall push it too far into a separation of the two, that is, into grace extrinsicism. Apart from this theological motive, there is also a metaphysical reason why a definition of grace implies a relation to nature. Sanctification is not a creation *de novo*; it is a transformation of an existing subject. It is a change, a movement, not on the level of the natural, substantial form of the subject (*generatio*), but on level of the accidents (*alteratio*).¹⁰

⁸ This is associated with the Pseudo-Dionysian axiom "bonum est diffusivum sui," cf. *In III Sent.* d. 24, q. 1, a. 3, qc. 1, ad 2.

⁹ Cf. Quesnel's proposition, condemned in the constitution *Unigenitus* of September 1713, Denz. no. 2435: "Gratia Adami est sequela creationis et erat debita naturae sanae et integrae."

¹⁰ Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I–II, q. 110, a. 2.

It is therefore misleading to speak about “supernature,” for there is only the “supernatural” as a qualification of a subsisting nature.¹¹

In what way do grace and the consequent theological virtues change or qualify human nature? According to Thomas, grace and the theological virtues make us participate directly in the divine life. In the *Summa theologiae* I–II, question 110, article 4, he states:

For through his intellective potency, the human being participates in divine knowledge by the virtue of faith; and according to the potency of his will, [he participates in] divine love by the virtue of charity; likewise through the nature of the soul, [he participates] according to a certain similitude in the divine nature by a certain regeneration or recreation.¹²

Aquinas is somewhat reluctant to speak of a direct participation in the divine nature through grace, and he prefers more cautious formulations about a participation “according to a certain similitude in the divine nature” or a participation “in a certain similitude of the divine being”.¹³ It is likely he wants to avoid the suggestions of a substantial change and of an essential deification of creatures—even when they are sanctified. But with regard to the supernatural virtues of faith and of charity, Aquinas is more straightforward. In his view, it is rather by operating, namely, by knowing and loving God supernaturally, than by being, that we reach God himself directly.¹⁴ The (formal) object of faith is God as the Highest or First Truth (*veritas prima*), while charity regards God as the Highest Good (*summum bonum*).¹⁵ And it is in knowing and loving the divine essence that human beings find the perfect happiness.

¹¹ The expression “supernature” seems to have been introduced in the nineteenth century. Cf. Michael Figura, *Der Anruf der Gnade. Über die Beziehung des Menschen zu Gott nach Henri de Lubac* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verl, 1979), 13, note 1.

¹² “Sicut enim per potentiam intellectivam homo participat cognitionem divinam per virtutem fidei; et secundum potentiam voluntatis amorem divinum, per virtutem caritatis; ita etiam per naturam animae participat, secundum quandam similitudinem, naturam divinam, per quandam regenerationem sive recreationem.”

¹³ *ST* III, q. 62 a. 2: “gratia, secundum se considerata, perficit essentiam animae, inquantum participat quandam similitudinem divini esse.”

¹⁴ Cf. *In II Sent.* d. 1, q. 2, a. 2, ad 4: “Creatura autem intellectualis non attingit ad eam secundum suum esse ut ipsa sit summum bonum, sed secundum operationem intelligendo et amando eam.” Cf. also *Summa contra Gentiles* II, c. 46, no. 3; *ST* I, q. 8, a. 3; and q. 43, a. 3.

¹⁵ *In III Sent.*, d. 26, q. 2, a. 3, qc. 1, ad 1: “Ad primum ergo dicendum, quod idem secundum rem est objectum omnium virtutum theologiarum, sed differt secundum rationem: quia inquantum est primum verum, est objectum fidei; inquantum est summum bonum, est objectum caritatis.” See *ST* II–II, q. 1, a. 1, for *veritas prima* as the formal object of faith.

In comparing the Thomistic description of nature with the one of grace, we find that the same words occur: being, happiness, truth and the good. However, what I would like to suggest is that, in accordance with a basic feature of Thomistic theology, these terms should not be interpreted univocally.

Speaking about “perfect” happiness, “first” truth, and “highest” good might suggest that there is only a quantitative difference with happiness, truth, and good, or that perfect happiness, first truth, and the highest good are but instances or exemplifications of happiness, truth, and good in general. But that is not the case. Our natural life and desire for truth, goodness, and happiness do not by themselves include a participation in the divine life and a desire for the First Truth, the Highest Good, and perfect happiness. But, on the other hand, neither do they contradict the very possibility of these supernatural perfections. Or in other words: Human nature insofar as it is a rational nature has an intentional directedness toward the transcendentals of truth and goodness, but the transcendentals are not to be understood univocally and they do not include God as the First Truth and Highest Good—yet they do not exclude God and the supernatural perfections either.

The human spirit has a kind of natural openness or “natural aptitude” for knowing and loving God supernaturally. This is what being *imago Dei* means, according to Thomas.¹⁶ Thomas never speaks of a *potentia oboedientialis* for grace, but only of a natural *capacitas*, *aptitudo*, *habilitas*, and the like.¹⁷ However, Thomas does not identify this *capacitas* with any natural (active or corresponding passive) human potency. An interesting illustration of Thomas’s view that the *capacitas Dei* is not a natural human potency can be found in his discussion whether men are more “image of God” than women. Recently, Klaus Krämer has argued that while in his earlier works Thomas locates the *imago Dei* in the rational potency of the human soul with the consequence that men are more an image of God than women—because naturally man’s reasoning power exceeds that of woman—he abandons this idea in his mature works. Endorsing a more

¹⁶ *ST* I, q. 93, a. 4. Cf. also *ST* III, q. 9, a. 2, ad 3.

¹⁷ However, other thirteenth-century theologians, including Albert the Great and the authors of the *Summa Halensis*, used the expression *potentia oboedientialis* or *potentia oboedientiae* in relation to grace: cf. Feingold, *Natural Desire*, 214–15. In the twentieth century the distinction between a “generic” and a “specific” *potentia oboedientialis* was introduced: *ibid.*, 216–20. “Generic” *potentia oboedientialis* concerns miracles like changing stones into bread, where stones lose their substantial form. The “specific” *potentia oboedientialis* of intelligent creatures for grace does not imply a loss of their substantial form.

radical, Augustinian view on grace, Thomas identifies the *imago Dei* no longer with an active (or corresponding passive) natural potency, but with the mere natural openness or aptitude for grace; as a consequence man is no longer more *imago Dei* than woman, although Aquinas does hold on to the Aristotelian idea that by nature men reason better than women.¹⁸

It may be clear then that in Aquinas's theological language "happiness"—"perfect happiness," "truth"—"First Truth," "good"—"Highest Good" are not to be considered as cases of univocal use of identical terms. But neither are the terms used purely equivocally. It is more in accordance with Aquinas's general theological framework to interpret them as terms that are used analogically. Like "wisdom" is said analogically of God and of creatures, so "truth" is called analogically the object of our intellect in its natural state ("truth in general") and of our intellect in the state of grace, that is, of faith, whose object is the First Truth. The same goes for "good," used analogically for both the object of natural human will ("good in general") and the object of our supernaturally perfected will, charity, whose object is the Highest Good. The same interpretation applies to the relation between our natural desire for happiness in general and our supernatural desire for perfect happiness.¹⁹

It is beyond the scope of this paper to elaborate on Aquinas's theory of the analogy of divine names.²⁰ Taken together with Pseudo-Dionysius's threefold way of knowing God, namely, through affirmation, negation, and eminence, Aquinas's view on and his use of analogy in theology permit a balanced usage of both positive and negative theological language, which reflects our understanding of the incomprehensible mystery of God—an understanding that is grounded in a similarity of creatures with God that entails an even greater dissimilarity. God is truly wise, but he is not wise in

¹⁸ Cf. Klaus Krämer, *Imago Trinitatis. Die Gottebenbildlichkeit des Menschen in der Theologie des Thomas von Aquin* (Freiburg: Herder, 2000), 305–8.

¹⁹ For "being" it may be more complicated. As noted above Aquinas seems reluctant to correlate the being we have through our natural form with the being we have through grace ("through a certain similitude") in exactly the same way he correlates truth as object of our intellect in its natural state and the first truth as object of faith.

²⁰ An excellent study of analogy in Aquinas is Gregory Rocca, *Speaking the Incomprehensible God: Thomas Aquinas on the Interplay Between Positive and Negative Theology* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2004). The similarity or continuation between nature and grace that includes an even greater dissimilarity or discontinuation is to be seen along the same lines as Sokolowski's "Christian distinction" between Creator and creature: Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason: Foundations of Christian Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982).

the way of a creature. God's wisdom differs not just in degree, but in mode. In creatures wisdom is only an accident, not a subsistent reality, and, moreover, wisdom in creatures is really distinct from other perfections like power or love. God's wisdom, on the other hand, is identical with his being and with all the divine perfections. He is wise *supereminenter*, in a way we cannot express or understand. What I am suggesting is that the supernatural realities of the "First Truth," "Highest Good," and "perfect happiness" constitute real modes of truth, goodness, and happiness, but modes that we can no longer comprehend.

Interpreting the relation between nature and grace with the help of the doctrine of the analogy of divine names offers a way to allow for a certain similarity, continuation, or intrinsic relation between nature and supernatural grace, while at the same time maintaining a radical dissimilarity and discontinuity between the two. Grace perfects our nature, our natural desire for truth and goodness, but in a way we could never have imagined. Grace transforms our natural life into a participation in the divine life, our desire for truth into a desire for the First Truth, our desire for the good into desire for the Highest Good, our desire for happiness into the desire for perfect happiness. That is a radical transformation, a regeneration, a recreation into "what no eye has seen and no ear has heard." N-V