

On the Loss, and the Recovery, of Nature as a Theonomic Principle: Reflections on the Nature/Grace Controversy*

STEVEN A. LONG

Ave Maria University

Naples, Florida

Introduction

DR. LAWRENCE FEINGOLD is to be thanked for the comprehensive, instructive, and irenic character of his work *The Natural Desire to See God According to St. Thomas Aquinas and His Interpreters*.¹ The doctrinal and historical intricacy, the sympathy, indeed, the sheer largeness of intent of this book, merits extensive consideration. Hence insofar as mastery of a teaching implies critical command of the contrary case, the publishing of this book marks a potent challenge for those who assume—on the warrant of de Lubac’s claim—that most of St. Thomas’s commentators have preferred “Renaissance corruptions” to the genuine teaching of Aquinas. Considering this claim in detail, this volume establishes both systematically and exegetically that the case is otherwise. *The Natural*

* In what follows I have liberally availed myself of the Corpus Thomisticum, S. *Thomae de Aquino opera omnia*, made available online by the University of Navarre (www.unav.es/filosofia/alarcon/amicis/ctopera.html#OM), although rarely I have preferred to use either the Ottawa edition of the *Summa theologiae*, or a different edition (as indicated). Also, I would like, from the start of this essay, to enter a demurrer to the view that to criticize de Lubac’s controversial thesis regarding nature and grace is by that fact alone to traduce his considerable merits as a lover and servant of the Church. One would have thought that no one would be inclined to question these. Nor should criticism of his approach to the nature/grace issue imply derogation of the contemplative profundity of his wider body of work. The neuralgia of past disputes need not be our own whereas the light one may find in them should be. Yet, all this being said, there is much at stake doctrinally in this issue, which is the reason why its reconsideration is exigent.

¹ Lawrence Feingold, *The Natural Desire to See God According to St. Thomas Aquinas and His Interpreters* (Rome: Apollinare Studi, 2001).

Desire to See God According to St. Thomas Aquinas and His Interpreters merits careful attention for this historical, exegetic, and doctrinal contribution, as also for helping a generation of theologians and philosophers to appreciate the importance of this controversy and the profundity of the Thomistic commentatorial tradition.

Likewise, this essay is penned with one eye focused on John Milbank's recent work *The Suspended Middle*.² This work—which rightly discerns the profundity of the questions pursued by de Lubac and the importance of their implications for theology—nonetheless fails to discern the larger stage on which the loss of nature as a theonomic principle has been played, and the distortive results it has both in prejudicing the nature/grace question, and for theology as a whole. As the third section of this present essay is devoted to articulating, the relative and limited integrity of nature within the actual teaching of St. Thomas has been the casualty of a deific view of freedom. This view of freedom was bound to separate God from the natural world of human action, and equally bound to suggest efforts at retrieval by dissolving nature into supernature and contradicting Thomas's clear teaching that there is a proximate natural end inferior to the supernatural end.³

² John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005).

³ To be quite clear, Milbank argues (*The Suspended Middle*, 63) that “[i]ndeed, it can now be seen that the *Surnaturel* of 1946 was almost as important an event of cultural revision as *Being and Time* or the *Philosophical Investigations*.” With this judgment one may wholly concur, save that one might think it even more important than these. Yet, his explanation of how this is so fails. In the ensuing lines he writes: “For it revealed that the space of modern philosophy and culture was paradoxically created by a dubious scholastic theology, which reinvigorated the primitive pagan ontological assumption that ‘capacity’ or ‘power’ rather than ‘desire’ will disclose reality to us.” But, to the contrary, the space of modern philosophy and culture have been created by erroneous notions of will in Scotus and ensuing philosophers, and most critically and foundationally by Molina, whose implicit removal of will and human agency from Divine Providence evacuated the scholastic theology of its profound theocentricity, and destroyed natural order as theonomic. To these innovative errors commentators such as Cajetan stood opposed. Radicalizing created will to hotwire it to the Trinity is hardly the way beyond this impasse, but is understandably inspired by what happens to natural order—including the order of volition—once it is no longer seen as participating by efficient causality the ordering wisdom of God. What is lost to the metaphysical dependence of creature to Creator must then be regained by the triumph of the will—a nature whose theocentricity has been denied, must then be dissolved into supernature to regain it. But however tempting such a solution may be, it is not Thomistic, and even more vitally, it is not true. In short, Milbank has identified the wrong “dubious scholastic theology.” The “pure nature” of the possibility that man might have been created “in puris naturalibus” as Thomas puts it (*Quod. I, q. 4, a. 3, resp.*) is wholly

In this essay, it is my intent to contribute to the project of facilitating a renewed appreciation of St. Thomas's profound teaching—explored so rigorously by the commentators—on the character of the relation between the natural and the supernatural. I shall try to achieve three things. First, this essay will survey the general speculative dimensions of the controversy about the character of the natural desire for God, so closely related to the question of the natural end; second, it will explore in particular the contours of what I take to be the common error of de Lubac and Gilson respecting the obediential potency for grace and glory; third, it will argue that despite what I shall argue to be its doctrinal deficiency, that de Lubac's account of the natural desire for God is rooted in a genuinely profound theological need to overcome the loss of natural order as a theonomic principle. I will conclude by observing the protean implications of these issues for the effort to understand, and to transcend, an invertebrate post-modern theological pluralism that itself presupposes the loss of natural order as a theonomic principle.

While the first objective of this essay speaks for itself, the second and third considerations require a preliminary gloss. St. Thomas's clear and classical teaching is that human nature is defined in its species in relation to the natural and proximate end as distinct from the supernatural beatific end. Further, he teaches that man possesses a purely passive *obediential potency* for grace—a potency that exists only in relation to the active agency of God—a teaching that explicates how supernatural acts are simultaneously our own yet enacted only through the grace of God. Yet a unilateral stress upon certain aspects of St. Thomas's teaching about the natural desire for God led de Lubac to deny the existence of a proportionate natural end as opposed to the supernatural *finis ultimus*. And both de Lubac and Gilson⁴ came to think of obediential potency as a mere

theocentric and in no way compatible with “a debased autonomous humanism.” A better candidate for meriting this dubious distinction is found in those who separate the will from Divine Providence and their voluntarist progenitors. The metaphysics of the total dependence in being and act of the *ens creatum* cannot be rejected in part, without gradually rejecting the whole teaching of St. Thomas. Regarding Thomas's affirmation of the proximate natural end as definitive of species and distinct from the supernatural end, see *ST I*, q. 75, a. 7, ad 1; and *Quaestiones de Anima*, a. 7, ad 10, the second quoted in detail in note 5 below.

⁴ For example, see Henri de Lubac, *Surnaturel Étude historiques* (Paris: Aubier, 1946); idem, *Augustinisme et théologie moderne* (Paris: Aubier, 1965), 242–51; idem, *Le Mystère du surnaturel* (Paris: Aubier, 1965), 87–88, 142, 179–89 (noteworthy for its criticism of the Dominican commentator tradition). Along similar lines, note also J. Laporta, *La destinée de la nature humaine selon Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1965). Laporta devotes an appendix to arguing that St. Thomas does not use the

generic susceptibility to miracle, denying the distinct, specific sense of obediential potency as applied by St. Thomas Aquinas to the relation of nature to grace. The motivating reason for these departures from the teaching of St. Thomas appears to repose in a wider theological concern springing from the loss of nature as a theonomic principle and from a creative yet defective strategy for recovery of this loss. This wider concern is of course not irrelevant to the present situation of theology (and of philosophy as well).

Before turning to these points, however, a rather extensive word is owed to the general consideration of the nature/grace problematic, and simultaneously to the synthesis of St. Thomas's actual texts, inclusive of those which, given the profundity of de Lubac's influence, it has become customary to pass over in silence. Only after this extensive general treatment will the focus narrow, first, to address the decisive loss for theological anthropology of the classical conception of obediential potency; and, second, to consider the defective theological problematic faced by de Lubac—a problematic for whose loss of nature as a theonomic principle a “natural desire” for supernatural beatitude could seem to be—while yet not being—a sufficient cure.

At the start of this essay, I beg the privilege of an author to request that those for whom the first two sections of this argument may be uncongenial consider the wider treatment of the third section before assessing its success or failure. For only the third section of the essay offers an interpretation of the strategic derailment of theology—rooted in the loss of natural order as a theonomic principle—to which de Lubac's nature/grace thesis constituted a creative but flawed response. *Because this loss persists through much contemporary thought, it becomes all the more vital to correct it at its root rather than merely to extemporize responses to effects that occur further on in the chain of implications.*

Dimensions of the Controversy

The distinction between *nature* and *grace* is a foundational distinction for Christian life. This distinction is helpfully approached through the interpretative schools that, prior to *la nouvelle théologie*, successfully articulated and indeed safeguarded this vital distinction. The doctrinal analysis of this

language of obediential potency in his account of the supernatural destiny of man (133–46). See also Gilson's letter to Henri de Lubac, dated June 20, 1965, in which he indicates complete unawareness of the very idea of *specific* obediential potency, saying of obediential potency that “strictly speaking, it is applicable only to miracles.” Etienne Gilson, *Letters of Etienne Gilson to Henri de Lubac* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 81.

distinction is rich with implications both for the contemplative and the practical life, and indeed systematically *inflects* theology such that a wrong emphasis on this question will generally lead to the symbiotic evils on the one hand of fideism, and on the other, of rationalism: twin aberrations. Yet weighty theological considerations motivated great scholars and lovers of the Church such as Henri de Lubac to read St. Thomas's texts with an exclusory eye, neglecting texts which clearly rendered his own account problematic. These considerations remain with us today—all the more so inasmuch as the texts overlooked by de Lubac, and the antecedent commentatorial tradition, are little known.

It helps to put to rest the exegetic difficulty. It is without doubt true that there is a problem in the very texts of Aquinas, and a problem which seemingly does not allow much room for maneuver with respect to its solution: because the doctrinal points which constitute the elements of the problem—one is almost tempted to say “constitute the contradiction”—are starkly and clearly stated in St. Thomas's text. Yet the realization that there are indeed *two* sets of texts, one of which was not merely an interposed corruption, itself marks a decisive advance toward correct interpretation of Thomas's teaching.

So, there are two sets of texts. On the one hand, we have St. Thomas's arguments that to know God is the end of every intelligent substance (*Summa contra Gentiles* III, 25); that there is indeed a natural desire for God (*ScG* III, 25; and *Summa theologiae* I–II, q. 3, a. 8); and that no natural desire may be in vain (*ST* I, q. 75, a. 6; *Compendium* 104). On the other hand, we have his clear affirmation that human and angelic nature are distinguished based upon their differing natural and proximate ends whereas their supernatural beatific end is the same (*ST* I, q. 75, a. 7, ad 1; *Quaestiones de anima*, a. 7, ad 10: “Those beings whose proximate and natural end is one and the same are one in species. However, eternal beatitude is a final and supernatural end.”);⁵ further, that “in the very beginning of creation human nature was ordained to beatitude, not as to an end proper to man by reason of his

⁵ *Quaestiones de Anima*, a. 7, ad 10: “Ad decimum dicendum quod ea quorum unus est finis proximus et naturalis, sunt unum secundum speciem. Beatitude autem aeterna est finis ultimus et supernaturalis.” So much for the claim that the natural end—whence the human species is derived—is one and the same with the supernatural end. Obviously there cannot be at once two ultimate finalities, but God need not have elevated man to the supernatural *finis ultimus*, but could have ordered man exclusively to his natural end whence the species of human nature is derived (see note 7 below). In the present order, this natural end is retained while the entire order of nature is causally further ordered in grace to supernatural beatitude.

nature, but given him solely by divine liberality";⁶ that man could have been created in a state of pure nature lacking any supernatural aid of grace;⁷ and that had man been created by God in such a state, that the absence of the beatific vision would not have been a punishment, because there is a difference between "necessarily not to have" and "not necessarily to have," and that it is the *second* of these that would apply had man been created outside of sanctifying grace (*De malo*, q. 5, a. 1, ad 15). Regarding this last, if the natural desire for God were formally a desire for supernaturally beatific vision, it would follow that to be perpetually deprived of this end proper to nature would be a punishment. Yet St. Thomas teaches exactly the contrary.⁸ Finally, among this second set of texts, one finds that St. Thomas clearly argues in *Summa theologiae* I, question 62, article 2, that only grace can direct the movement of the will toward beatitude:

⁶ *Quaestiones Disputatae de Veritate*, q. 14, a. 10, ad 2: "Ad secundum dicendum, quod ab ipsa prima institutione natura humana est ordinata in finem beatitudinis, non quasi in finem debitum homini secundum naturam eius, sed ex sola divina liberalitate. Et ideo non oportet quod principia naturae sufficiant ad finem illum consequendum, nisi fuerint adiuta donis superadditis ex divina liberalitate."

⁷ *Quod*. I, q. 4, a. 3, resp.: "But because it was possible for God to have made man in a state of pure nature, it is useful to consider how far natural love could be extended" ("Sed quia possibile fuit Deo ut hominem faceret in puris naturalibus, utile est considerare ad quantum se dilectio naturalis extendere posit"). Note that this refers to the state of nature, while nature is present in any case, and natural order is impressed upon man even when he is further ordered in and by grace from the first moment of his creation: Something which de Lubac thought not possible. Cf. ch. 4 of *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), where de Lubac writes of natural order that "To convince me that I might really have had this humbler destiny—humbler, but note also less onerous—you need only show it to me, even momentarily, as something really imprinted upon me, in my nature as it is. Most people would agree that this is precisely what is, by hypothesis, impossible." But it is possible: What is impossible in this given order of Providence is for the natural order to be in a *state* wherein it is not either fallen from grace or elevated within it. But ends proportionate to human nature still are recognizably distinct from ends proportionate only to God.

⁸ This last point from *De malo*, q. 5, a. 1, ad 15, is arresting: "Man endowed with only natural powers would be without the divine vision if he were to die in this state, but nevertheless the debt of not having it would not be applicable to him. For it is one thing not to be bound to have, which does not have the nature of punishment but of defect only, and it is another thing to be bound not to have, which does have the nature of punishment" ("Ad decimumquintum dicendum, quod homo in solis naturalibus constitutus careret quidem visione divina, si sic decederet; sed tamen non competeret ei debitum non habendi. Aliud est enim non debere habere, quod non habet rationem poenae, sed defectus tantum; et aliud debere non habere, quod habet rationem poenae").

The angels needed grace to turn toward God insofar as He is the object of beatitude. For as was explained above [q. 60, a. 2], the will's natural movement is the source [principium] of all the things we will. But the will's natural inclination is toward what is naturally fitting for it. And so if something is beyond its nature, then the will cannot be moved toward it without the assistance of some other principle that lies beyond its nature [ab aliquo alio principio supernaturali]. For instance, it is clear that fire has a natural inclination to produce heat and to generate fire; however, it lies beyond fire's natural power to generate flesh, and so fire does not have an inclination toward generating flesh except insofar as it is moved as an instrument by the nutritive soul. Now it was shown above, in the discussion of our knowledge of God [q. 12, a. 4], that to see God through his essence—which is what the ultimate beatitude of a rational creature consists in—lies beyond the nature of any created intellect. Hence, no rational creature can have a movement of will that is ordered to this sort of beatitude unless he is moved by a supernatural agent; this is what we call the assistance of grace. And so one has to claim that an angel could not have turned with his will toward this sort of beatitude except through the assistance of grace.⁹

The second set of texts hedges about, and delimits, the possible signification of the first set, and vice versa. That is, on the supposition that we do not wish to suppose St. Thomas's texts to exhibit raw incoherence, then we need to read these texts in relation one to another.

This is clear, for example, with texts such as that of the *Summa theologiae* I–II, question 3, article 8, which addresses the question “Whether man's happiness consists in the vision of the divine essence?” In this article St. Thomas affirms that man naturally desires to know the essence of any cause once he knows it to be, and that only knowing the essence of God can bring to rest the natural desire of the intellect to know the

⁹ ST I, q. 62, a. 2: “Dicendum quod angeli indiguerunt gratia ad hoc quod converterentur in Deum, prout est obiectum beatitudinis. Sicut enim superius dictum est, naturalis motus voluntatis est principium omnium eorum quae volumus. Naturalis autem inclinatio voluntatis est ad id quod est conveniens secundum naturam. Et ideo si aliquid sit supra naturam, voluntas in id ferri non potest, nisi ab aliquo alio supernaturali principio adiuta. Sicut patet quod ignis habet naturalem inclinationem ad calefaciendum et ad generandum ignem, sed geerare carnem est supra naturalem virtutem ignis, unde ignis ad hoc nullam inclinationem habet, nisi secundum quod movetur ut instrumentum ab anima nutritiva. Ostensum est autem supra, cum de Dei cognitione ageretur, quod videre Deum per essentiam, in quo ultima beatitudo rationalis creaturae consistit, est supra naturam cuiuslibet intellectus creati. Unde nulla creatura rationalis potest habere motum voluntatis ordinatum ad illam beatitudinem, nisi nota a supernaturali agente. Et hoc dicimus auxilium gratiae. Et ideo dicendum est quod angelus in illam beatitudinem voluntate converti non potuit, nisi per auxilium gratiae.”

essence of the cause of finite things. So, he affirms with respect to perfect happiness that it can be brought about only by the vision of God.

One observes, however, that the desire in question is *elicited* (it is compared with desiring to know the cause of an eclipse, which clearly presupposes prior knowledge). Note also that the question concerns that in which, *simpliciter* and absolutely speaking, *perfect happiness* consists. There is no reference to whether this is possible, or not possible, although St. Thomas seems to be writing with the theological assurance of its possibility (a possibility that as Feingold reminds us¹⁰ St. Thomas elsewhere identifies as flowing from divine faith, as in *Summa contra Gentiles* III, question 153: “Fides autem, quae causatur ex gratia, declarat possibilem esse unionem hominis ad Deum secundum perfectam fruitionem, in qua beatitudo consistit”). Nor does St. Thomas deploy here any argument regarding the impossibility of natural desire being in vain.¹¹ He seeks only to determine what constitutes perfect happiness. Likewise, whether there is a lesser felicity proportioned to human nature as such he does not here address, and certainly does not here deny. Since St. Thomas does affirm it elsewhere, for example in *contradistinguishing* human and angelic *natural*

¹⁰ See pp. 102–6 of *Natural Desire* for Feingold’s helpful early treatment of this article, in particular p. 104.

¹¹ Of course, elsewhere there is seemingly such argument: for example, *ST* I, q. 12, a. 1; or *ScG*, III, 51, which last argues that “Since it is impossible that a natural desire be frustrated, which would happen if we could not arrive at the understanding of the divine substance that all minds naturally desire, it is therefore necessary to affirm that it is possible to see the divine substance by way of the intelligence.” But apart from all other interpretative issues—which here abound—one must point out that even were this taken in the strongest and most *prima facie* sense, and as unlimited by other *ad extra* textual considerations, it would indicate only the *possibility* of such a vision, and is indeed perfectly compatible with considering the natural desire, as such, both to be a *velleity* and to be radically disproportionate to the divine essence as such in precision from grace. Such a reading is perfectly in accord with Cajetan’s proposition that this teaching is offered *from the vantage point* of the theologian: For only through Revelation do we know that through the active agency of God the beatific vision is *proximately*-possible for the believer (and one might think this is also true even of the *purely abstract possibility* or mere “thinkability” of seeing God, again on the grounds that St. Thomas writes in *ScG*, III, 51, as a theologian—but even if this were not true there would remain an enormously important distinction between proximate possibility and mere abstract possibility). It is of course a further question whether the steep gradient between mere abstract possibility and what is, with divine aid, proximate obediential potency mirrors the distinction between simple logical or conceptual possibility and *real* possibility. But in any case, only Revelation seems to assure the possibility of the divine vision in the second sense of proximate possibility, such that the natural desire becomes unconditional.

ends (every end has the nature of the good—so one is speaking of some measure of felicity) as opposed to the unity of the supernatural *finis ultimus*; or in distinguishing imperfect from perfect felicity (*ST* I–II, q. 5, a. 5), it is clearly not a text establishing that seeing God is the properly *natural* end of man. Indeed, in the *Summa theologiae* I–II, question 5, article 5, ad 3, St. Thomas insists that the species of the imperfect operation subject to man's *natural* power is distinct from the species of the perfect operation which is man's happiness (“Imperfecta autem operatio, quae subiacet naturali hominis potestati, non est eiusdem speciei cum operatione illa perfecta quae est hominis beatitudo, cum operationis species dependeat ex obiecto”).

Thus, while there is more to be said about this text, the *Summa theologiae* I–II, question 3, article 8, establishes precisely what it set out to establish: that *perfect* beatitude for man can be found only in the vision of God. Manifestly, reading such texts within their precisely delimited reference, and refusing to extend them beyond, requires a knowledge of the text, an understanding of the reasoning of St. Thomas, and an intellectual asceticism that refuses to lose sight of the whole for the sake of exuberance with the part.

De Lubac's argument stresses the first set of texts, and more or less passes by the second (save when generically suggesting that these and other sources of Thomist reservation regarding his thesis are Renaissance corruptions concocted by Cajetan). I do not recollect de Lubac anywhere commenting extensively upon the second set of texts—in particular either with regard to the teaching of Aquinas that the absence of beatific vision for man in a state of pure nature would not constitute a punishment or in relation to St. Thomas's clear teaching that human nature is defined by its natural and proximate end, *which he says is distinct* from the supernatural *finis ultimus*. The error of the historian who treats speculative propositions from without, thus failing theoretically to reconcile component parts of the doctrine to which they belong, forms part of this story, as does also the unfortunate mistrust of the *scientia* required to distill the meaning of these texts. That the pedagogic and heuristic limits of the scholastic project to which he was exposed may accidentally have contributed to kindling such mistrust in a mind as cultured and learned as de Lubac's constitutes a tragedy within the twentieth-century history of Thomism. Yet, the omission to which this mistrust led is, with the distance of time, difficult to deny.¹²

¹² Those who argue on the force of numerous other speculative assertions of St. Thomas that he cannot have meant what the face value of some propositions may suggest are gently—and sometimes not so gently—mocked by de Lubac, as witness his commentary on Gilson's letters. In this and other respects the *Letters of Etienne Gilson to Henri de Lubac* proves a helpful source, as de Lubac's notes establish that at

The rediscovery of the needed *scientia* is a necessity for contemplating the distinctions in Thomas's texts and articulated by the commentators to enable a felicitous contemplation of the Gospel. As an illustration one notes the distinction between the mode of being and the mode of realization of a divinely caused effect—as visible for example, in the distinction between raising a body from the dead (restoring its natural life) by miracle, and achieving an effect whose being is intrinsically supernatural (for example, supernatural charity, the *lumen gloria*, the Incarnation of Christ). Perhaps equally helpful is the realization that the putative Renaissance corruptions¹³

the end of his career his position, despite varied refinements, had not fundamentally changed. Owing perhaps to overriding issues of perspective, Thomas's fully theological use of the doctrine of specific obediential potency is never fully engaged by the great churchman. Yet this coincides with a proliferate citation of authors to assert that on this point, as de Lubac quotes Canon Balthazar from the 1928 *Criterion* 4:473: "One asks oneself how Cajetan had the nerve to propose his exegesis, and why it was, in point of fact, taken seriously for such a long time" (110), or as he cites Francisco Tolet, that Cajetan's reading of obediential potency in relation to grace and nature "destruit testum" (103). But, St. Thomas himself directly denies that man's nature is actually in itself ordered to beatific vision (and surely it should not be averred that natural desire for supernatural beatitude is other than a "natural ordering"—natural desire is a sign of natural order). Quoth St. Thomas (*Quaestiones Disputatae de Veritate*, q. 14, a. 10, ad 2): "In the very beginning of creation, human nature was ordained to beatitude, not as to an end proper to man by reason of his nature, but given him solely by divine liberality. Therefore, there is no need for the principles of nature to have sufficient power to achieve that end without the aid of special gifts with which God in his generosity supplements them." Further, Thomas expressly affirms a natural and proximate end distinct from the supernatural end that distinguishes man from the angel even though both are called to supernatural beatitude (cf. *Quaestiones de Anima*, a. 7, ad 10): "Those beings whose proximate and natural end is one and the same are one in species. However, eternal beatitude is a final and supernatural end." This point is of special pertinence for those critics who suppose that only lower, physical beings possess a natural end, for here Thomas is clearly distinguishing any angelic species from the human species by their different natural ends, which are distinct from supernatural beatitude. Add to this Thomas's teaching that man might have been created without any supernatural aid—in short, with nothing but nature and the natural order to the natural end (*Quaestiones quodlibetales* I, q. 4, a. 3, resp.: "it was possible for God to make man with purely natural endowments")—and the theological difficulties caused by such speculative omission in the historical insight of the scholars of *la nouvelle théologie* becomes conspicuous.

¹³ De Lubac notes (Gilson, *Letters*, 31, note 4) about Cajetan, citing his earlier work for emphasis, that "There is no doubt that the 'commentator' assigned another orientation to his master's work." Cf. H. de Lubac, *Augustinism et théologie moderne* (Paris: Aubier, 1965). Further (Gilson, *Letters*, 101, note 3) while de Lubac notes his own efforts to soften Gilson's description of Cajetan's work as "corruptorium Thomae," he nonetheless takes great pains to relay several other charges of this sort

interposed by allegedly rationalizing scholastic interpreters exist within the very texts of St. Thomas himself—something that the astute critic may be disinclined to perceive as evidence for time travel. After all, if human nature has its species in relation to its *natural* end, which is distinct from the supernatural end, then this teaching of Thomas alone destroys the proposition that for Thomas supernatural beatific vision is the *natural* end (and this formulation that beatific vision is the natural end by contrast occurs nowhere in Thomas's text: Yes, *God* is the natural end, but God as First Cause of these effects, not God precisely as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit).

Likewise, if supernatural beatitude were the natural end of man, then to be perpetually deprived of it by God would necessarily constitute a punishment: While according to Thomas (and in a different way also according to de Lubac, who with all believers admitted the gratuity of grace and of the call to beatitude—it is the compatibility of this belief with his thesis that poses the difficulty), were man to die in the hypothetical state of pure nature and so not attain to the beatific vision, the inaccessibility of this vision would not be a punishment. Failure to attend to such texts naturally inclines one to read the first set of texts about natural desire for God as

in the lines that follow, for example, from Soto (whose Scotistic treatment of the will in terms of *pondus naturae* is famed, but noting that would hardly have dignified Soto's quoted remark about Cajetan's account that "Haec glossa destruit textam, est tortuosa"). In general, the identification of Cajetan as imposing a "modern" reading of St. Thomas's texts that is somehow distant from its original sense would carry more conviction if the *actual texts of St. Thomas* that seem to contradict the idea of supernatural beatitude as natural end had been cited and critically engaged. No historical scruples here, however: For is not (as Gilson, for example, tended to express it) a historian always and necessarily the better philosopher? Insofar as a priori this is held necessarily to be so, the commentators—whose emphasis is principally scientific and systematic as was their master's—come to be instinctually distrusted. Yet Henri de Lubac knew he was arguing for an account, and in this respect—although fully capable of waxing poetic about the superiority of the historical *habitus*—seems never to have assumed the on-again/off-again pose of superior and dominating indifference to speculative contradiction within theology achieved by Gilson. Granted that the element of mystery must prevail in theology, contradiction is contradiction—something that when Gilson wished to note he would note, and when he did not, he would cast aspersions of "fanaticism." Cf. Gilson (Gilson, *Letters*, 40): "[I]t's perfectly all right to cling to another system as long as you don't use your pet theology to oppose Saint Thomas's. They all do it. And they themselves, no less than certain people who call themselves Thomists, are fanatics, too." But perhaps such figures, whether Thomist or not, consider certain divergences amongst teachings to be of greater speculative weight than did Gilson—hardly a ground for the aspersion of fanaticism. A gifted and profound historian and reader of St. Thomas, his own particular combination of *habitus* could veil from his sight the validity of other combinations of the same.

straightforward and unproblematic, whereas in Thomas they exist within a wider philosophic and theological context necessary to their interpretation: A context of *scientia* that requires actual mastery of a body of natural distinctions. Hence those whose theology rests exclusively within a broadly theistic, historicized, cultural hermeneutic will tend to lack the metaphysical entry capital to commence interpretation of Aquinas on these points, and so tend to make scant sense of the controversy that so divided de Lubac from the consensus of the Thomistic commentatorial tradition.

The truth is that any full regard for the complexity of St. Thomas's teaching would suggest at the very least a certain reluctance to import into the first set of texts conclusions, which are incompatible with many unimpeachably clear and unquestionable formulations of Thomas elsewhere. For instance, the teaching that to know God is the end of every intelligent substance, apart from St. Thomas's wider teaching might be read as suggesting that man lacks a proportionate natural finality (something Thomas expressly denies), and so in the absence of other texts might seem to suggest that the beatific finality is indeed properly speaking the *natural* end of man. The difference between an ontologically imperfect end proportionate to nature, and the perfect beatific end achieved solely through divine aid, requires advertence not alone to more texts, but to distinct aspects of the real.

Yet as regards texts, even if one ignores the second set of texts, what should one make of those such as the following from the *Summa contra Gentiles*, III, chapter 25, titled "That to Know God Is the End of Every Intellectual Substance" (rather a different title than "intrinsically supernatural beatitude is the end of every intelligent substance" one should note): "Thus however slight may be the knowledge of God to which the intellect can attain, this will be the intellect's last end, rather than a perfect knowledge of lower intelligibles." What function does the "however slight" play, save to accommodate the manifest difference between a natural end *perfect in its order with all the ensuing natural limits*, and the supernatural end, which is *absolutely ontologically perfect and transcendent of all natural limit*? Natural understanding of God—if taken seriously and straightforwardly—is necessarily limited with respect to God because conditioned by finite evidence. Yet this natural desire and natural understanding constitutes a purely passive obediential potency, which under the active agency of God renders man capable of the supernatural vision of God.

Nonetheless the first set of texts emphasized by de Lubac raises genuine problems of prime importance. Without doubt the question of natural desire is profound. What is the natural desire for God, and what is its object? Is this desire equivalently a *natural* desire for *supernatural beat-*

itude? And how could the natural desire for God *not* target supernatural beatitude—for is not the object of supernatural beatitude God in his essence, and is not the natural desire for God a desire to know God in his essence? That this desire reaches God only as cause of finite nature and under a formality infinitely inferior to supernatural beatitude—attaining God as a function of the natural desire to know the essence of any cause once it is known to exist, rather than as specified directly by the inner being of God¹⁴—requires insight into the requisites of natural teleology.

Likewise, when we speak of “natural” desire for God, what is the sense of “natural”? Do we mean to refer to the *voluntas ut natura* or to what is the naturally befitting object of the will as such, and so to claim that the hidden reality of God is the *natural befitting object* of the will? Is the will as nature (*voluntas ut natura*) and in precision from grace naturally proportioned to the hidden substance of God—is it expressly and explicitly a deific faculty ordered apart from grace to the intrinsically supernatural vision of God? Or is the befitting natural object of the will not instead good in general, the universal good? The natural inclination clearly is for Thomas that toward which the thing naturally tends, which involves action and movement. Surely Thomas teaches that “the natural *movement* of the will is the principle of all things that we will. But the will’s natural inclination is directed towards what is in keeping with its nature” (*ST I*, q. 62, a. 2, emphasis added). Hence the will cannot be moved toward something beyond its nature such as supernatural beatitude without

¹⁴ See the *Summa contra Gentiles* III, 25, wherein St. Thomas expressly refers to the natural desire for God as a desire to know the cause of whatever one sees, and to know the cause of any effect including the cause of the effect of universal being. Clearly both these are elicited desires and both formally a function of the natural desire to know causes rather than of a desire whose formal object is supernatural beatitude as such. Further, to desire God as cause of universal being is to desire God under an infinitely lesser denomination than as he is in himself intrinsically independent of finite being: as though one were to desire to know God as “First Cause of goldfish.” That this natural desire may be elevated within the graced desire for essentially supernatural beatitude does not establish its *formal identity* with graced desire for God. Further, that contemplation of God is definitive of man’s natural end does not equate with this contemplation of God occurring through free and gratuitous supernatural Revelation. There is an intrinsic disproportion between a desire sparked by God’s own direct self-revelation in Christ, and a desire sparked by finite nature to know the Cause of this nature—as there is a formal difference between merely wanting to meet the man in the raincoat, and wanting to meet the same man in the raincoat because he is Einstein and has invited you to discuss physics with him. Materially the object is the same, but the formal specification of the desire is quite different. Clearly, also, the second includes the first, the greater includes the lesser, but not the other way around.

extrinsic supernatural assistance—about which last he states that “this is what we call the assistance of grace” (*ST* I, q. 62, a. 2). If the natural desire of the will in the sense of *voluntas ut natura* is not ordered to supernatural beatitude, must it not then be the case that the natural desire for God is a desire *elicited* by prior knowledge of the existence of God?¹⁵

Cajetan’s “hypothesis” of pure nature is often scorned as suggesting a “layer cake” of nature and grace. Yet his famed commentatorial treatment seems to suggest that the natural desire for God is *modalized* by the state in which nature exists, so that this desire would be found in one way had God not created man from the beginning within the privileged life of sanctifying grace, and is found in another in the context of man’s creation in the state of grace and of the data of supernatural Revelation. Conjoinedly, the scholastic consensus *quo ante*—that the natural desire for God is of itself an inefficacious desire within the ambit of the general desire for knowledge of being, and is a conditional desire save in relation to the promises of Revelation—seems enhanced in a remarkably subtle way by Cajetan’s contextualizing of natural order within the life of grace.¹⁶

¹⁵ It should be added that a similar analysis pertains to the intellect as nature, or in other words to the issue of what the befitting object of the intellect is. For this is the true *in general*, and perhaps more particularly the truth of quiddity in corporeal matter that is the proper object of the intellect of man as a composite knower, rather than specifically the divine truth. As we have seen, there is a proximate natural end from which the species is derived, and this proximate natural end clearly is not the inner reality of God—the human intellect is not simply and of itself proportionate to the infinitely transcendent God, but to the true in general.

¹⁶ Of course, Cajetan did not hold that the hypothetical *state* of pure nature had ever existed, knowing full well St. Thomas’s teaching that man is created in sanctifying grace. This does not mean that *nature* never existed, but that it never existed outside an order of Providence in which it was causally further ordered by grace: that is, from the very beginning nature is called to a higher destiny than the natural end whence the species is derived. The Fall of Man is indeed a sign of this further ordering, because man does not rebound to the order of pure nature, but rather nature is wounded: having been causally further ordered, its motion toward the purpose of that ordering cannot be stopped without harm. Of course, it also is true that the idea of defining the doctrine of the Incarnation without the conception of pure nature is impossible: What is it that would be assumed? This is of course too simple an observation for those who paint with broad strokes, but broad strokes often fail to depict intricate scenes. It is also inconsistent with the cottage industry of Cajetan-vilification, which devolves from a failure to consider all the pertinent texts in Aquinas, much less to entertain the idea that Cajetan was (as is manifest) a brilliant and subtle reader of St. Thomas: perhaps not always correct, but rather more positively engaged with the doctrine (and the implications of the doctrine) of St. Thomas than suggested by de Lubac in *Augustinianism and Modern Theology* and elsewhere.

The following points articulate St. Thomas's teaching regarding the natural desire for God:

- The arc of natural desire for God (viewed in itself and apart from grace and Revelation) is specified by natural knowledge, and so cannot formally reach to the essence of God as such howsoever much it reaches it materially.¹⁷

¹⁷ Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Super Sent.*, lib. 3, dist. 23, q. 1 a. 4, qc 3 co., a passage of whose full extent I was reminded by Christopher Malloy of the University of Dallas, and about which I have also profited from the erudition of Prof. John Boyle, of the University of St. Thomas: "To the third question it must be said that in all things which act for an end there must be an inclination to the end, a certain 'inchoation' of the end, otherwise, they would never do something for an end. But the end towards which the divine generosity has ordained and predestined man, namely, the fruition of himself [of God], is in every way elevated above the faculty of created nature, for "neither has the eye seen, nor the ear heard, nor has there arisen in the heart of man what things God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor 2:9). Therefore, by his natural powers alone, man does not have a sufficient inclination to this end, and thus it is necessary that something be super-added to man through which he would have the inclination to that end, as by his natural powers he does have an inclination to the end that is connatural to him. And those things that are superadded are called the theological virtues for three reasons. First, as to the object: For, since that end to which we are ordained is God himself, the inclination that is prerequisite [to this end] consists in an operation that regards God himself. Second, as to the cause: For as that end is ordained for us by God not by our nature, so the inclination to the end is worked in us solely by God; thus it is that these virtues are called theological, as though created in us by God alone. Third, as to knowledge: "The inclination to this end is not able to be known by natural reason but rather by divine revelation; therefore, the virtues are called theological since by the divine word they are manifest to us, for the philosophers knew nothing of them."—"Ad tertiam quaestionem dicendum, quod in omnibus quae agunt propter finem oportet esse inclinationem ad finem, et quamdam inchoationem finis: alias nunquam operarentur propter finem. Finis autem ad quem divina largitas hominem ordinavit vel praedestinavit, scilicet fruitio sui ipsius, est omnino supra facultatem naturae creatae elevatus: quia nec oculus vidit, nec auris audivit, nec in cor hominis ascendit, quae praeparavit deus diligentibus se, ut dicitur 1 corinth., 2, 9. Unde per naturalia tantum homo non habet sufficienter inclinationem ad illum finem; et ideo oportet quod superaddatur homini aliquid per quod habeat inclinationem in finem illum, sicut per naturalia habet inclinationem in finem sibi connaturalem: et ista superaddita dicuntur virtutes theologicae ex tribus. Primo quantum ad objectum: quia cum finis ad quem ordinati sumus, sit ipse deus, inclinatio quae praeequitur, consistit in operatione quae est circa ipsum deum. Secundo quantum ad causam: quia sicut ille finis est a deo nobis ordinatus non per naturam nostram, ita inclinationem in finem operatur in nobis solus deus: et sic dicuntur virtutes theologicae, quasi a solo deo in nobis creatae. Tertio quantum ad cognitionem, inclinatio in finem non

- The natural desire for God is a desire consequent on the natural ordination of intellect to being, a desire to know the essence of a cause once that cause is known to exist.
- This desire is *elicited* by the acquired knowledge that God is, rather than being equivalent to the *voluntas ut natura* (or for that matter the *intellectus ut natura*)—because what the will naturally desires as its befitting object is the good in general and not specifically the essence of God (howsoever much it be true that God is the subsisting universal good).¹⁸

potest per naturalem rationem cognosci, sed per revelationem divinam: et ideo dicuntur theologicae, quia divino sermone sunt nobis manifestatae: unde philosophi nihil de eis cognoverunt.”

¹⁸ This is of course one of the most longstanding confusions affecting the entire question of the natural desire for God. Thomas writes of the will as nature or *voluntas ut natura* that “each power desires by the natural appetite that object which is suitable to itself” (ST I, q. 80, a. 1, ad 3: “Unde unaquaeque appetit obiectum sibi conveniens naturali appetitu”). This is distinguished from animal appetite and likened to “sight for seeing or sound for hearing” (“utpote visio ad videndum et auditio ad audiendum”). But what is suitable to the will by its nature in this sense is intelligible good in general. It must be noted that what the nature is ordered toward and suitable for simply by its nature is that from which Thomas maintains the creature derives its *species*. But in this sense human nature is not defined by its capacity to be uplifted by God’s grace to supernatural beatific vision—which is shared also by the innumerable species of angels—but by what St. Thomas calls the proximate and natural end, the end that might have been the end *simpliciter* had God created man in a state of pure nature and not gratuitously ordered man to the beatific vision. To say that *by nature* the human will directly aspires to the hidden life of God is to define it as the divine will alone may be defined. All creation is ordered to God as End, but *through the medium* of the proportionate natural end for each creature, which is nothing other than a mode of being like unto God. In the human case, of course, this is constituted by the most exalted contemplation of God within the ambit of natural capacity. But, as Thomas points out, the beatific vision exceeds every purely natural capacity whether of man or angel (cf. ScG III, ch. 52), exceeding all natural capacity to know. Since the desire for God is specified by natural knowledge of God (for the will is—cf. *Quaestiones quadlibetales, quodlibet* VI, q. 2, a. 2—nothing other than *inclinatio sequens formam intellectam*), it follows that natural desire for God does not truly know what it desires, whereas graced desire (even while man yet is remote from the beatific vision) is rooted in the reality of God itself (and hence one can know more of God by grace than by nature, even in this life). One notes the words of Jacques Maritain from his work *Approaches to God*, trans. Peter O’Reilly (New York: Harper, 1954), 109–10: “But this desire to know the *First Cause through its essence* is a desire which does not know what it asks, like the sons of Zebedee when they asked to sit on the right and on the left of the Son of Man. ‘Ye know not what ye ask,’ Jesus replied to them. For to know the First Cause in its essence, or without the intermediary of any other thing, is to know the First Cause otherwise than as First Cause; it is to know it by ceasing to attain it by the very means by which we attain it, by ceasing to

- The natural desire for God is not of itself efficacious. That is, we have no natural capacity to know the essence of the First Cause quidditatively. Although we do indeed naturally move toward contemplation of God as First Cause, this motion cannot reach the divine essence. Indeed, this desire is thoroughly conditioned by the finite evidence whence it arises, such that it is not proportioned to God, but rather is proportioned to the intellectual desire to understand the world in general which gives rise to it.¹⁹ But to desire to know God in himself under the ratio of “cause of the world” is somewhat like the desire to know Einstein under the ratio of “man wearing a raincoat.” As “man wearing a raincoat” is an accidental denomination vis-à-vis Einstein, so to desire God as cause of the world is strictly speaking not truly to desire *God*, who is infinitely more than cause of the world. Indeed, for God to be cause of the world signifies something in the world, whereas God infinitely transcends the world. Whether the hypothetical but immutable divine will should will the universe to be, or not, does not alter the infinite goodness of God. Creation is an utterly free and gratuitous act of divine generosity.
- There are diverse ways in which this natural desire for God can exist. For example, the natural desire would exist in one way had man never been assisted with supernatural aid;²⁰ it exists in another way

exercise the very act which bears us up to it.” See also p. 112: “It is necessary that there be in man an “obediential potency” which, answering to the divine omnipotence, renders him apt to receive a life which surpasses infinitely the capacities of his nature.” This “neo”-Thomist earned the adverse adjective by conforming to the actual teaching of St. Thomas—a paradox he savored.

¹⁹ Some authors have supposed that, had God created man in a state of pure nature, the separated soul would have enjoyed a knowledge of the universe both comprehensive in itself and reflective of all that can be known through the universe of God as in a mirror, by way of infused divine species. But St. Thomas is silent about such reflections inasmuch as his focus is upon the actual providential synthesis—wherein grace moves us to the infinitely higher goal of personal union with God transcending all created species—rather than upon the mere hypothesis of pure nature.

²⁰ Within this zone of the purely natural, the natural desire to know God as Cause of finite being, as this knowledge principally defines purely natural felicity, is to be distinguished from the natural quasi-velleity to know God as he would be known through himself *were this to be attainable*. For the former is proportionate to nature and naturally attainable, whereas that which the latter confusedly seeks is disproportionate to any finite nature and attainable only insofar as God elevates us to a share in divine life: It knows not what it asks, and naturally speaking amounts simply to a desire for more and higher knowledge were this possible (while yet still being conceived on the pattern of a knowing infinitely lesser than

in the actual order of Providence wherein man is created in sanctifying grace and where the real possibility of the beatific vision is divinely revealed. Where Revelation makes the real possibility of beatific vision known, this renders the otherwise conditional desire to know God to become unconditional. Apart from Revelation the desire would be conditional—"were it possible" one would will it. Just as one might wish to live forever, or never to make a mistake—both logically but seemingly not really possible—so one would wish to know the essence of the First Cause, save that in this case one genuinely would not know what one is wishing for. After Revelation, the desire becomes unconditional. Once God reveals himself and his gift of divine life, the natural desire thus elevated and supernaturalized in grace inclines toward it absolutely by inclining toward the infinitely higher end of union with the Uncreated Persons of the Holy Trinity. For the object of the natural desire for God under the *ratio* of "Cause of these effects" is incorporated within the graced desire of God *as God*. This idea of the modalization of the natural desire according to the states in which it may be found contextualizes it in relation to grace. Because St. Thomas's focus is upon the given providential synthesis, his principal treatment of the natural desire is a treatment that takes it up as it actually is to be found in this present order, and not merely as it would be found in the hypothetical state of pure nature (although the phrase from *ScG* III, q. 25—"however slight may be the knowledge of God to which the intellect can attain this will be the intellect's last end"—seems a nod of the head to the state of the natural desire *apart from* Revelation, since it expressly considers a state in which the last end of the intellect is the wisdom about God as First Cause which does not reach the divine essence: "however slight").

- Finally, specific obediential potency is not a mere susceptibility to miracle but represents what a nature is capable of *with the assistance of the active power of God*. Hence while it remains true that grace is an extrinsic principle vis-à-vis human nature—human nature *is not* grace, nor is it law, which is why St. Thomas in the prologue to his treatise on law in the *Summa theologiae* identifies grace and law as *extrinsic* principles—nonetheless, grace does work within human nature as such whose rational character makes it with divine assistance to be elevable to supernatural life, action, and merit. Grace thus elevates human nature and works within it, enabling the Christian to perform genuinely supernaturalized acts meritorious of beatitude.

The convergence of both Dominican and Jesuit commentatorial authors—Sylvester of Ferrara, Cajetan, Báñez, John of St. Thomas, Suárez—around themes such as these within St. Thomas’s work is all the more remarkable for having fallen off the map of a generation of theologians. Of course, these commentators do not all agree (and some would dissent from certain of the elements above): *yet, for none of them is the natural desire for God a desire for intrinsically supernatural beatitude.*²¹ This is an arresting theological consensus, whose density and ascetic rigor contrasts markedly with the loss of awareness of texts, contexts, and doctrinal implications that has come to dominate accounts of the relations of nature and grace, or—for that matter—of theology and philosophy.

Correct doctrine with respect to the relation of grace to nature is of the greatest strategic import for theology, by reason of the theological synthesis it sustains. By contrast, a teaching that renders human nature to be a vacuole or pure nought lacking proportionate created integrity and unknowable apart from the beatific vision seems to make the doctrine of Nicea to be unintelligible. For *what* is assumed in the Word is defined in precision from the datum of its assumption. One does not say, “The Person of the Word assumed the nature that is defined by its being assumed by the Person of the Word”—for that would render hypostatic union a necessary function of finite human nature. The idea that the natural end of man—the end from which human nature derives its species—is that divine good directly known and loved by God alone seems to imply that man is naturally deific. But the connatural and direct knowledge and love of God is verified in God alone, howsoever much it is the case that all creation is indirectly ordered to God as End.²²

that of beatific vision). The status of this confused, conditional, elicited desire clearly changes when elevated in grace and ordered to the supernatural beatific vision that revelation instructs us to be proximately attainable with divine aid.

²¹ For the map of this convergence, as of the differences among these commentators, we now have no better compendium than Feingold’s book. Whereas he stresses the central and formative contributions to the tradition of Sylvester of Ferrara, and of Suárez, the emphasis above, stressing Cajetan’s contribution, is my own. While there are other readings of Cajetan, it seems to me that the one which most keeps the intelligible sense of his account is that which I suggest above.

²² Cf. *ScG* III, 17, whose title is “That All Things Are Directed to One End, Which Is God.” One notes that this reasoning is based upon the order of agents toward God as the Supreme and Common good of the universe, and naturally pertains to “all things” for “there can be nothing that has not its being from Him” (*Omnia autem entia sunt huiusmodi: nam, sicut in secundo probatur, nihil esse potest quod ab ipso non habeat esse. Omnia igitur ordinantur in Deum sicut in finem*).

What defines human nature, as St. Thomas Aquinas expressly and everywhere affirms, is the proximate and natural end rather than the supernatural end.²³ Hence, for example, these words of Fr. Brian Shanley regarding the *text* of Aquinas are simply false: "It needs to be emphasized at the outset that Aquinas holds that man has one and only one end or *telos*: the beatific vision of God. There are not two human ends, one natural and the other supernatural, as was thought in older, erroneous versions of two-tiered Thomism."²⁴ If he had written that for Thomas there is but one *finis ultimus*, which is beatific vision, or that there are not two "coequal" ends, this would be true. But while there is only one *finis ultimus*, which is supernatural, this does not rule out an end proportionate to nature that is further ordered in grace to the ultimate supernatural finality. Already we have cited, above, the words of St. Thomas: "Those beings whose proximate and natural end is one and the same are one in species. However, eternal beatitude is a final and supernatural end."²⁵ Clearly, then, for St. Thomas there is a proximate and natural end, definitory of the species, *which is distinct from and inferior to* the final end of supernatural beatitude.

Further, nature is the *preamble* to grace and not merely its postscript. Yet lacking natural finality distinct from supernatural beatitude, nature does indeed become merely a placeholder for grace, as though the manifestation of what man is capable of with divine grace did not presuppose nature; or, as though in order to be theocentric, nature must already be ordered to supernatural beatitude apart from grace. Speech about nature *anticipating* grace is utterly vain in a context within which the order of nature is not distinguished from the order of grace. Since powers are distinguished by acts, and acts by objects, and objects by ends, to distinguish the two orders is to acknowledge that the natural end is distinct from, and less perfect than, the supernatural end.

Nor is this to free nature from God, because natural order is theonomic, the impress of the ordering wisdom of God. Indeed, natural law obligates man to receive whatsoever God deigns to reveal. Further, man's creation in sanctifying grace *orders* nature to a higher end—it is *causally efficacious*—such that sin itself does not put man into a state of "pure nature" but rather does harm to nature (not, of course, substantially, but accidentally, in lessening

²³ *Quaestiones de Anima*, a. 7, ad 10.

²⁴ See p. 555 of Fr. Brian Shanley's "Pagan Virtue," *The Thomist* 63 (1999): 553–77.

²⁵ Again, see *Quaestiones de Anima*, a. 7, ad 10, quoted in full in note 3 above, or *ST* I, q. 75, a. 7, ad 1, with respect to human nature being defined by the proximate and natural end as distinct from the supernatural end. Human nature is not defined by a non-existent natural end, albeit the natural end is not, from the very creation of man in grace, man's final end.

the strength of the motion toward the end). Just as a man who climbs up the Empire State Building and then jumps loses something more than the height he had attained (namely, his life), so nature as concretely further ordered in grace is profoundly harmed when grace is lost (although, again, accidentally, in regard to the vigor of its motion to the end, and not essentially: Fallen man is yet *human*) precisely because it has itself been ordered through grace toward the more exalted beatific end. But the very idea of the supernatural is not the idea of a merely natural completion.

The attempt to argue that if nature and grace are distinct that therefore no natural harm should ensue upon the loss of grace is an argument that implicitly fails to accept the causal efficacy of grace. Once ordered in and by grace at creation, thereafter human nature will be vain and frustrated apart from the supernatural end. That is, human nature, as created in sanctifying grace, is as such remotely ordered to the supernatural end by this fact—the very reason why St. Thomas, in the *Summa theologiae* I–II, question 89, article 6, will argue that the first morally significant act of a boy who has not been baptized is either damnific or salvific (because, implicitly, he either seeks the due good as such—which requires grace—or does not, which is damnific).²⁶ That the two orders are distinct hardly voids the causal efficacy of grace. Nor is the causal efficacy of grace transmutative of species, because the natural end remains in its integrity as further ordered to the supernatural end—just as knowledge of and desire for God merely as cause of finite creation is in grace ordered to knowledge of and desire for God as he is in himself. Further, human nature is such that with divine aid it is capable of supernatural beatitude—the nature itself need not be transmuted, but rather only aided and elevated by the active agency of God. While Scotus implies that the appetite for supernatural beatitude is in substance natural, Aquinas pronouncedly and clearly denies this proposition.²⁷

²⁶ *ST* I–II, q. 89, a. 6: “Now the first thing that occurs to a man to think about then, is to deliberate about himself. And if he then direct himself to the due end, he will, by means of grace, receive the remission of original sin: whereas if he does not then direct himself to the due end, and as far as he is capable of discretion at that particular age, he will sin mortally, for through not doing that which is in his power to do.”

²⁷ Note the teaching of Scotus on this matter (*Ordinatio* I [Vatican ed.], distinction 3, 113–14; III, 70–71) arguing that if grace were to elevate the human intellect beyond its natural capacity this would mutate the intellect, whereas in his view an accidental quality can perfect the capacity of an already existing power but not change its nature. Thomas by contrast (*ScG*, III, 53–54) holds that the divine elevation and emendation of the ontological limits of the human intellect *via the lumen gloriae* does indeed transcend the natural use of the intellect, rendering it capable of an

With St. Thomas one may hold that the way in which the higher creation of man and angel is *naturally* ordered to God as End is infinitely lesser than the way in which supernatural grace, elevating and redirecting nature and enabling it to participate in the very love of God, orders the creature to God as End. The ontological *reditus* incorporates a natural element (and its epistemic requisites) within the life of grace. Human and angelic nature are indeed ordered to God in precision from grace, but along an infinitely lower trajectory than that of supernatural grace, so that only with divine aid may these natures be elevated within the higher arc that passes into the very mystery of God himself. Further, the natural is not an arena of autonomy from God: All created being and action derive from God as First Cause.

Thus what frequently is presented as unhistorical novelty is paradoxically the teaching not only of Aquinas but of the consensus of the Catholic theological tradition. This is not merely a historically curious vindication of great commentators become obscure, but a rediscovery of the genuine synthesis of St. Thomas: a synthesis wherein the natural mode of participation in eternal law is transcended by the nobler participation of the eternal law in supernatural grace. That the *teloi* of these participations are distinct, are materially but not formally the same—God as principle of created nature as opposed to God revealed in himself (for there is infinitely more in God than merely being “principle of created nature,” just as there is more in Einstein than being a “man wearing a raincoat”)—is essential to the integrity of St. Thomas’s teaching.

Likewise, that the natural desire for God represents an obediential potency whereby the active agency of God may elevate man to achieve distinctive supernatural friendship indicates that the lower participation of the eternal law is presupposed to the higher. Nonexistent natures obviously are not elevated by grace, and a nature lacking a proportionate end would be a nature lacking any actual natural tendency whatsoever: for actual motion is only known in relation to the end to which it tends.

Now, every orthodox Catholic—as de Lubac insisted—considers that nature has no claim on grace (as de Lubac put it, “in my view, which is that of every Catholic, any idea of a claim of created nature in relation to the supernatural should be absolutely excluded”)²⁸ and that man cannot really

intrinsically supernatural act while not altering or annulling its nature. That is, nature is elevated to a supernatural capacity by a supernatural grace.

²⁸ Henri de Lubac, *Augustinianism and Modern Theology* (Paris: Aubier, 1965), at the close of the first chapter regarding Baius.

move toward supernatural beatitude without grace. It follows that since man cannot under any circumstances move toward supernatural beatitude without grace that no purely natural motion toward such an end apart from grace and Revelation is possible. This is true quite apart from sin: Even had man been created without the supernatural aid of grace and had done no evil, he still would not be able to actually move toward intrinsically supernatural beatitude inasmuch as this infinitely transcends finite nature²⁹ (which is not to deny that man naturally would have been able to move asymptotically toward God as causal principle of created nature).

But in the absence of natural motion (howsoever accidentally impeded) toward X, X is not said to be the natural end. One recollects the words of *Summa theologiae* I, question 62, article 2: “But the will’s natural inclination is toward what is naturally fitting for it. And so if something is beyond its nature, then the will cannot be moved toward it without the assistance of some other principle that lies beyond its nature [ab aliquo alio principio supernaturali].” Just as reading Shakespeare does not finalize the motion of the Tulip because the Tulip naturally exhibits no actual tendency or motion toward reading Shakespeare, and the Tulip is defined not by reading Shakespeare but by the end toward which it actually moves; so human nature is defined in relation to the end proportionate to that nature and toward which it actually moves as from its natural inclination. As he puts it in *Summa contra Gentiles* IIIb, question 150:

Also. Everything is directed to a suitable end in proportion to its form: since different species have different ends. Now, the end whereto man is directed by the assistance of divine grace is above human nature. Therefore man needs, over and above, a supernatural form and perfection, so as to be suitably directed to that same end.

Besides. It behooves man to reach his last end by means of his own actions. Now, everything acts in proportion to its form. Therefore, in order that man may be brought to his last end by means of his own

²⁹ It must be remembered, however, that man is created in sanctifying grace, and that natural law itself dictates that whatever God reveals be received and obeyed. What is proper to nature as such is not simply tantamount to what remains within this order of Providence when grace is lost. But the very idea of the supernatural is not the idea of a merely natural completion. The attempt to argue that if nature and grace are distinct therefore no natural harm should ensue upon the loss of grace is an argument that implicitly fails to accept the efficacy of grace in further ordering nature. But that the two orders are distinct hardly voids the causal efficacy of grace.

actions, he needs to receive an additional form, whereby his actions may be rendered effective in meriting his last end.³⁰

There is simply no doubt that this is Thomas's teaching.³¹

*Perhaps the understanding of the natural desire for and motion toward God as distinct from the graced desire for and motion toward God has lapsed so very much precisely because theologians no longer consider themselves in need of understanding natural motion and natural teleology.*³² Yet if ever there were a question that

³⁰ ScG IIIb, ch. 150, nn. 5 and 6: "Amplius. Unumquodque ordinatur in finem sibi convenientem secundum rationem suae formae: diversarum enim specierum diversi sunt fines. Sed finis in quem homo dirigitur per auxilium divinae gratiae, est supra naturam humanam. Ergo oportet quod homini superaddatur aliqua supernaturalis forma et perfectio, per quam convenienter ordinetur in finem praedictum.

Item. Oportet quod homo ad ultimum finem per proprias operationes perveniat. Unumquodque autem operatur secundum propriam formam. Oportet igitur, ad hoc quod homo perducatur in ultimum finem per proprias operationes, quod superaddatur ei aliqua forma, ex qua eius operationes efficaciam aliquam accipiant promerendi ultimum finem."

³¹ Note, again, *Quaestiones de Anima*, a. 7, ad 10; and ST I, q. 62, a. 2.

³² Indeed, this may be widened to include understanding of the whole ontology of nature, and of the distinct discipline of metaphysics. Hence one finds many authors today advancing the old, and radically erroneous, view according to which there are strictly speaking no "demonstrations" of the existence of God. This unfortunate inversion of Thomas's teaching—in truth a hoary old misreading and stock answer perpetually recycled by fideist authors—is unfortunately resuscitated in the work of Milbank and Pickstock (cf. John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas* [London: Routledge, 2001], 28: "'demonstrations' of God's existence can only be meant to offer weakly probable modes of argument and very attenuated 'showings'"). One may agree that the "showing" is attenuated (one does not demonstrate the existence of God in the manner that one demonstrates one's battle scar) without implying that the demonstration is only "weakly probable"—an expression contrary to Thomas's teaching regarding the nature of demonstration. Of course, Thomas holds not only that the truth of the proposition that "God is" is demonstrable: He also holds (*Scriptum on the Sentences*, II, dist. 1, q. 1, a. 2) that the truth of *creation* is demonstrable: "I answer that not only does faith hold that there is creation but reason also demonstrates it." The present author has heard it said more than once by theologians that natural theology "makes atheism possible"—as though, if only we pretend that the existence of God is self-evident to everyone, we can avoid the need to contemplate the evidence of creation's dependence upon its transfinite Cause. One supposes in the same way that the principle of non-contradiction makes falsity possible—but one trusts that the fact that truth may be contradicted hardly constitutes sufficient reason for abandoning truth. The degree of unaffected innocence of the knowledge of natural ontology and metaphysics among contemporary theologians is perhaps rivaled only by the singular remotion of many contemporary analytic philosophers from the theoretic

requires *natural teleology*—of the sort that Thomas develops with exquisite philosophic care—surely it is the question of the natural desire for God.

Further, there is no reductionist aspect to this consideration. It is because human nature in its spiritual character is such as to be able to be further aided by God to enjoy divine friendship—further aided to know God not merely as principle of nature but as he is in himself—that human nature is said to manifest an obediential potency for grace and glory in relation to the active agency of God. This is indeed not a natural potency, but a purely passive potency of a given nature in relation to the active agency of God. The obediential potency enables the creature to receive from God an actuation radically disproportionate to its unassisted nature and natural potencies. Here again the truth is manifest that only those who discern the profundity of the gift of created nature see how far grace and Revelation transcend it: *Far from naturalism, it is the exaltation of the supernatural order that follows from these considerations.*

These reflections, while dispensing in principle with the conundrums of a created nature putatively hotwired into supernatural beatitude, imply and indeed invite a complementary project. That *complementary project* consists in seeing how it is that the theological intention of de Lubac might most fittingly have been fulfilled not by the hypothesis of a creature whose natural desire is deific, but by the very notion of *obediential potency* itself. Further, this complementary project needs to *explain* the historical and doctrinal elements that remotely but really condition the theological stage, leaving Henri de Lubac and others such as LaPorta with only the narrowest apparent interpretative margins for *safeguarding and developing a certain legitimate Christian intention* which that antecedent theological problem-situation seemed to endanger. This complementary consideration constitutes a veritable Rosetta stone in deciphering the intelligible causes and narrative of postmodern, pluralist theological fragmentation: the loss of the sacramentality of the Word, the evisceration of anthropology and moral theology, and the dangerous proliferation of historicist fideisms and ideologized rationalist modes of thought.

This complementary project, to which I should now like to turn, pursues not only a deeper awareness of the context that molded de Lubac's creativity in the directions in which it flowed—largely positive, but in this significant point regarding nature and grace, deeply problematic—but also seeks a strategic viewpoint for understanding the problem situation

canon of two millennia of Catholic philosophy for the sake of the theoretic canon of the past seventy-five years. Interesting years, it is true: but perhaps not quite that interesting? In any case, it is within such circumstances that fideist and rationalist impulses may begin to run amuck.

of theology, and the impediments and challenges to Catholic thought, at the start of the new millenium. For the contrapositions that defined the horizon of theology for de Lubac and called forth his teaching have not been corrected as he hoped. These contrapositions persist today in structuring theological contemplation apart from the requisites of Catholic doctrine and culture. To these points I shall now turn. First I will address the misconstrual of St. Thomas's doctrine of obediential potency by de Lubac and Gilson, and their consequent loss of the idea of specific obediential potency as thematized in St. Thomas's account of nature and grace.³³ Then I will try to identify the critical deprivations within the theological situation as he inherited it that tempted so profound a Catholic intelligence to the solution he adopted in *Surnaturel*.

The Immediate and Proximate Context: Error Regarding Obediential Potency

The immediate context for assessing de Lubac's thought about nature and grace is of course that of the loss to theological anthropology represented by the misconstrual and rejection of the classical conception of specific obediential potency. Insofar as de Lubac refers to obediential potency, he seems to depict it chiefly as susceptibility to miracle, and as in any case not pertinent to the fundamental question of the relation of nature to grace. This is a view, of course, largely associated with the Franciscan school. It demarcates a common if erroneous judgment, which has been shared by such notable Thomistic figures in the twentieth century as Etienne Gilson (in his later work), for whom obediential potency in relation to grace was tantamount to the idea of a mere extrinsic and miraculous *transmutation* of nature. As noted above, de Lubac did not significantly advert to the texts that militate against his reading of the natural desire and obediential potency, and tended more and more to attribute opposition to his account

³³ It must be noted that de Lubac's orthodoxy, profound love for the Church, and desire to resolve the impasse suggested by the horizon defining his vision, all make his treatment of this issue a more favorable place to confront the distortion of the understanding of the relation of nature to grace than that of others. For example, one thinks of authors such as Rahner, whose conclusion is in this respect nonetheless quite close to de Lubac's in excoriating the antecedent consensus (as he once put it, the purpose of his work was to make "scholasticism" to be impossible in the future). But for Rahner this required invention of an overgeneric and unclear conception of a "supernatural existential" to replace the intelligible principles of nature and grace, whereas de Lubac aims to retain these principles as properly foundational.

merely to “fanatical Suarezians and intransigent Thomists.”³⁴ He was inclined to conflate insistence upon the distinction between the end proportionate to nature and the supernatural *finis ultimus* with a naive naturalism, as these remarks indicate:

The great traditional texts on man’s destiny and blessedness were to be systematically refuted in favor of a natural plan that distorts them. They were to be understood from this point on as nothing but affirmations of purely natural philosophy. The “perfection” of human nature to which these very texts apply . . . was itself going to be, in the same way, a fully natural perfection; pure philosophy was supposed to furnish the concept of natural perfection, etc.

This concern lest the idea of “natural perfection” enter Christian thought is paradoxical, inasmuch as human nature in its integrity is precisely a perfection, and one without which the mystery of the Incarnation is impossible. Further, how would God himself distinguish nature and supernature were it not the case that between the divine nature and the nature of the created person there are naturally diverse ends? A natural end is that toward which a being naturally tends as to the perfection proportionate to it and from which its species is distinguished:³⁵ And

³⁴ Gilson, *Letters*, 102, note 3 (carried on from p. 101). An interesting conjunction, which should have served as a warning: How could *all* the interpreters of St. Thomas on this point be *completely* in error? Of course, such is not impossible. But it is not a likely supposition, nor is it reasonable to discard generations of theological and philosophic work on the force of such a supposition. Both Thomists and Suarezians read the Angelic Doctor as holding for obediential potency as pertaining to the relation of nature to grace. Their in-house disputation about the sense of “obediential potency” cannot obscure the datum that, at bottom, each views it as a passive potency of a very particular sort, the sort involving a specific range of actuation to which a nature is amenable solely through the active agency of an extrinsic cause. Today, many persons who have read neither Thomas, nor Thomistic commentators, nor Suárez, nor Suarezians, are equally convinced that all are incorrect on this point, and also are convinced that the scholastics were ahistorical. But *sed contra*: It seems that they were correct, and that however ahistorical their work, at least they did not judge authors without first reading them.

³⁵ One directs the attention once more to *Quaestiones de Anima*, a. 7, ad 10, which is of course duplicated in *ST I*, q. 75, a. 7, ad 1, and elsewhere. Bluntly: There is precisely no doubt in Thomas’s text that what defines human nature is precisely the *natural end as distinct from the supernaturally beatific end*. Recollect the text from *De Anima*: “Those beings whose proximate and natural end is one and the same are one in species. However, eternal beatitude is a final and supernatural end.” This—absolutely in itself—would be sufficient to destroy the thesis of *Surnaturel* and *Augustinianism and Modern Theology* with respect to the actual teaching of Aquinas. It is also enough to indicate that Cajetan did not invent this teaching.

clearly this definition does not describe the supernatural beatific vision (for only the divine nature is defined by intrinsically supernatural and deific felicity—even in beatitude, the creature’s knowledge does not *comprehend* God but rather is *measured* by God). *It follows that the philosophic definition of “end” was to be surmounted with a different conception, for which the only justification was its putative efficacy in saving the Christian intellect from the danger of naturalism.* But it is precisely in relation to the end proportionate to human nature that the supernatural end comes properly into view: The Triune God who moves us to himself in beatific vision is not merely the maraschino cherry on a purely natural sundae.³⁶ Why should specific obediential potency be equated with mere miraculous transmutation? In one of his letters Gilson well articulates the position he came to share with de Lubac:

Yet in fairness, the animating quest was perhaps less to engage St. Thomas’s teaching than to achieve a symbiosis of certain aspects of the teaching of the Angelic Doctor—perhaps “corrected” of certain of its actual traits—with non-scientific conceptions of theology. This suggests a parallel between de Lubac and Heidegger. As Heidegger identifies the font of metaphysics and ontology as *scientia* in the work of Aristotle, and accuses this Aristotelian understanding of science with being the origin of the positivist and reductionist spirit regarding being; so de Lubac seems to consider the ideal of *scientia* assimilated by St. Thomas to theological purpose, as naturalist and intrinsically prone to rationalist desiccation and the flight from mystery. Of course, de Lubac separates out from Thomas’s work elements that he prefers, a speculative reconstruction that loses what Thomas says about nature and natural end. Yet one may argue that genuine mystery does not entail the evisceration of the natural, and that obediential potency does not, for Thomas, reduce to its most generic meaning of mere susceptibility to miracle. If Thomas’s teaching offers a hermeneutical principle for the reading of the Fathers, this suggests the presence in his work of a supervening excellence. Ironically, the genius of de Lubac—his profound gift for appreciating the Fathers in their own terms—may partially account for his misdoubts regarding basic elements of St. Thomas’s stress on theology as science.

³⁶ It should not be forgotten that the position of Henri de Lubac bears some comparison to that of Scotus insofar as the capacity for beatific vision is a *natural capacity* aided by grace, as opposed to being what it is for Aquinas: a strictly supernatural capacity that requires the supernatural strengthening of the *lumen gloriae* to render the human creature even *capable* of receiving the supernatural vision of God. Hence it transpires that while the concern is avoiding Aristotelian “naturalism” that this concern seems likely to give way precisely to a species of naturalism that Aquinas directly and unwaveringly opposed through his texts and for all his life: that naturalism that would claim that there is a strictly *natural desire and natural capacity* for supernatural beatific vision that requires merely extrinsic supernatural aid for its accomplishment, rather than seeing that the desire and capacity for supernatural beatific vision is as such itself an effect of supernatural grace.

I don't think either of us has ever found a set of terms adequate to define the Thomist position, and that's quite to be expected, since he himself could not find one either. In fact, his terminology is somewhat loose, because he never throws away an expression if it is possible to justify it *in some sense*. Potentiality subject to obedience is an instructive example of what I'm talking about. He came upon the term ready-made; *strictly speaking, it is applicable only to miracles, where nothing in matter either prepares for, expects, or makes the phenomenon possible* [emphasis added]; in general (your excellent quotes on page 244), all nature is in a state of potentiality subject to obedience to whatever it may please God to do with it, provided that this is not, in itself, contradictory or impossible.³⁷

Henri de Lubac of course thought the same:

In the order of finality itself, so as to avoid any confusion between the supernatural gift and the mere fulfillment a nature receives from some natural agent, we may join some of the moderns—without in any way departing from the spirit of the past—in specifying that the “passive potentiality” which characterizes human nature in relation to that supernatural gift can be called “specific obediential power”—“*potentia obedientialis specifica hominis*”—or “passive obediential power.” But it remains quite clear, from the explanations he has given us, that for St. Thomas particularly, the simple idea of *potentia obedientialis* conceived not “to express the condition in which God's gift places us of being able to become children of God,” but to account for the possibility of miracle, is not adequate as a definition of the relationship of human nature to the supernatural. It does not lay sufficient stress on the “absolutely special case of spirit.”³⁸

Of course, it is true that obediential potency conceived as mere susceptibility to miracle is insufficient with respect to the fittingness of human nature to receive the divine aid (human nature is such that it may be uplifted by grace to the supernatural knowledge and love of God, whereas irrational natures cannot, insofar as irrational, be so aided). Yet it is clear that the common view of de Lubac and Gilson that for Thomas “obediential potency” refers only to the generic susceptibility to divine miracle falls short of Thomas's text: Only the well-merited reputation of Gilson with respect to other aspects of Thomas's synthesis, and the incredible depth of de Lubac's knowledge and love of the Church Fathers, could impart some semblance of life to it. In fact, de Lubac's above-cited reasoning should

³⁷ Gilson, *Letters*, 81–82.

³⁸ Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), 184–85.

have led him to the realization that “obediential potency” was not to be confined to the case of mere generic transmutability. This discovery—to which he is so close in the above-cited text—would necessarily have realigned his account of nature and grace with the commentatorial consensus. For in what would the obediential potency for grace and glory consist, if not in the rational character and in the natural desire for God as distinct from this same desire as supernaturally elevated within the graced desire for beatific vision?

In fact, the most conspicuous “modern” defender of the view that Thomas’s notion of obediential potency is not confined to mere transmutability but also extends to “specific obediential power” is Suárez. Compare de Lubac’s contrary view with the express teaching of St. Thomas—the very words to which Gilson supposed the historically inclined were more sensitively disposed than the mere philosophers with their “superficial” and “scholastic” preoccupations (critics of Gilson, too, were waved off by de Lubac as symptomatic of “superficial philosophizing endemic to the Church from the beginning but which has infested Scholasticism since the thirteenth century”).³⁹ St. Thomas writes:

When a passive subject is by nature constituted to receive various perfections from diversely ordered agents, the diversity and order of the passive powers in the patient will correspond to the diversity and order of the active powers in the agents, for an active power will correspond to each passive potency. For example, water or earth have some potency whereby they are naturally apt to be changed by fire; and another potency whereby they are naturally apt to be changed by a heavenly body; and still another, whereby they are naturally apt to be moved or changed by God. Just as from water or from earth something can be made by the power of a heavenly body which cannot be made by the power of fire; so, from the same elements something can be formed by the power of a supernatural agent which no natural agent can produce. For this reason we say that in the whole of creation there is a certain obediential potency whereby every creature obeys God by receiving into itself whatsoever God wills.⁴⁰

³⁹ Gilson, *Letters*, 110–11, note 10.

⁴⁰ *De Virtutibus*, q. 1, a. 10, ad 13: “Ad decimumtertium dicendum, quod quando aliquod passivum natum est consequi diversas perfectiones a diversis agentibus ordinatis, secundum differentiam et ordinem potentiarum activarum in agentibus, est differentia et ordo potentiarum passivarum in passivo; quia potentiae passivae respondet potentia activa: sicut patet quod aqua vel terra habet aliquam potentiam secundum quam nata est moveri ab igne; et aliam secundum quam nata est moveri a corpore caelesti; et ulterius aliam secundum quam nata est moveri a Deo. Sicut enim ex aqua vel terra potest aliquid fieri virtute corporis caelestis, quod non potest fieri virtute ignis; ita ex eis potest aliquid fieri virtute supernaturalis agentis quod non potest fieri virtute alicuius naturalis agentis; et secundum hoc

Here one observes St. Thomas affirming that a diverse range of actualization corresponds to the purely passive potency of each nature in relation to a distinct, active agency—including the active agency of God. Hence human nature may be aided by God to act in a fashion that a stone may not be aided. *This is the very notion of specific obediential potency*—whatever terminology be used to articulate it—and clearly it is neither a Renaissance corruption nor “modern” (unless the middle ages are “modern”). Moreover, this passage manifests that St. Thomas’s well-articulated conception of obediential potency is decidedly not reducible merely to a susceptibility to miraculous transmutation. Susceptibility to miraculous transmutation (as water may be changed to wine by divine agency) may, however, perhaps be described as the most generic and lowest sense of obediential potency: the floor, rather than the ceiling, of the concept. But the specific sense of obediential potency with regard to grace is an aptness of human nature—an aptness that exists only in relation to the active power of God and is simply speaking disproportionate to finite nature—whereby, with divine aid, man may be elevated to supernatural life and to agency meritorious of Heaven.

Hence man may be elevated to the higher life of grace and divine friendship, because the spiritual nature is such that with divine aid it may be so uplifted, whereas a rock cannot be uplifted to acts of supernatural knowledge and love precisely because it lacks rational nature. If a rock were uplifted to the divine friendship in knowledge and love of God, it would by that fact cease to be a rock (although there is a wide sense of “love” in which we may say that all creation loves God: But here we are speaking specifically of love as it pertains to rational will).

Just as earth and water have diverse passive potencies in relation to different active agencies, so human nature possesses a passive potency for that which can only be achieved in it through the active agency of God. *It is this conception of obediential potency that expounds acts of infused virtue as truly acts of the human agent, without thereby implying that human nature can perform supernaturalized acts apart from divine aid.* Indeed, properly understood, this doctrine of obediential potency involves the realization that human nature is *itself* elevated and perfected by God, while the perfection is in substance supernatural and human nature is not even *capable* of this perfection save in relation to God.

Had they but seen, Gilson and de Lubac would have realized that St. Thomas and his commentators were, in their exposition of obediential potency, describing the contours of the very mystery that they themselves

dicimus, quod in tota creatura est quaedam obedientialis potentia, prout tota creatura obedit Deo ad suscipiendum in se quidquid Deus voluerit.”

sought to understand. For man's nature is not transmuted but elevated, and so must first be *elevable* by divine grace: the very meaning of specific obediential potency as opposed to generic obediential potency. Here again one discerns the need not alone for historical erudition, but for scientific penetration of natural distinctions—a cautionary tale for those for whom theology and philosophy have become mere ancillary functions of historical erudition.

It is also this conception of obediential potency that most profoundly answers to the language of Vatican II with regard to God “revealing man to himself” (*Gaudium et Spes*, note 22). For the higher capacities of man aided by grace are not knowable apart from the gift of grace, yet it is these capacities to which man is called: Human nature is created in sanctifying grace, and the order of nature is efficaciously further ordered in grace (and so if man sins he rebounds, not into a purely natural order, but into an order of nature as accidentally wounded). As I have elsewhere attempted to express this point:

The similitude of the stained-glass window illumined by the sun's rays well bespeaks the character of the doctrine of obediential potency as applied to the relation of nature and grace. The stained-glass window, were it cognizant, could not “know what it was missing” were it never to irradiate its bright colors under the influence of the sun. It would be a window, still, and function as part of the structure—though it would, in a given respect, not be fulfilled. It would be what it is, not fail to be part of the whole structure of which it would form an integral part, nor lack its own participation in the good of the whole as a specific perfection. Yet its nature stands properly revealed only under the extrinsic causality of the sun's illumination: seeing it so illumined, we know what stained glass truly is for.⁴¹

Yet, were one to adopt the more generic conception of obediential potency as its exclusive sense, missing the more specific sense of obediential potency as revealed in passages such as that of St. Thomas from *De Virtutibus* above, then it would be necessary to reject obediential potency and to deem it wholly inapplicable to man's elevation in grace and achievement of supernatural beatitude. For just as water transmuted to wine is no longer water, so if obediential potency “in the strict sense” is taken to refer only to miraculous transmutation of nature, it follows that fulfillment of the obediential potency for supernatural life is the transmutation and loss of human nature. Thus would it follow that no human person would be redeemed (for to be redeemed would then mean to lose human nature).

⁴¹ “On the Possibility of a Purely Natural End for Man,” *The Thomist* 64 (2000): 236.

This would indeed be an extrinsic and odd conception of grace as destructive of human nature rather than uplifting and redeeming it.

Given such a reading of “obediential potency” it follows as a matter of course that one must reject the application of obediential potency to the nature/grace relation. De Lubac and Gilson must be given credit—as manifesting integrity of theological intention—for opposing this sort of monstrosity. They were right that the specter of a generic obediential potency, as though grace came to man not only extrinsically but through supernatural *transmutation* (like the changing of water to wine), needed to yield to a sense that God’s first creation of human nature made it such as *with divine aid* to be able to attain to supernatural life and action. Yet these latter words properly describe the conception of specific obediential potency as Thomas applies it to the relation of nature to grace: the very idea that they failed to acknowledge.

A good theological intention is not enough: Because everything moves to its end according to its form, the formal account must be adequate. On this score de Lubac and Gilson’s reading of obediential potency appears not only exegetically but theologically erroneous. It is after all St. Thomas Aquinas who writes of supernatural beatitude that “[t]here is another good of man that exceeds the proportion of human nature because the natural powers are not sufficient for attaining, or thinking, or desiring it.”⁴² If natural powers are of themselves insufficient for *desiring* the supernatural good that exceeds the proportion of human nature, might not this mean that the natural desire for God is in itself a desire specified not by uncreated nature—which is literally unknowable apart from Revelation—but by that created nature in relation to whose existential dependence the reality of God is discovered? A natural desire for God not *qua* God but *qua* Cause of finite being, whereas there is infinitely more in God than being the cause of finite being?

A rock cannot know and love God without ceasing to be a rock—it cannot even be “helped” to know and love because it lacks any such faculties that might so be helped.⁴³ By contrast while a human person cannot know and love God in direct vision and embrace without supernatural aid, with such aid the human person may partake in intrinsically supernatural divine friendship: and this is the specific notion of obediential potency as applied to the relation of grace to nature. It is a wholly passive potency that yet presupposes as its subject some determinate nature that

⁴² *De Veritate*, q. 14, a. 2.

⁴³ Perhaps there is some way in which the nature of a rock can be distinctively aided by God to radiate glory—but it surely cannot achieve knowledge without an intellectual power, nor love in a proper spiritual sense without the rational power of will.

is such that when aided by the active agency of God it may achieve a certain specific range of actuation. It is because of man's essentially spiritual nature that he has an obediential potency to the supernatural life.

Thomas even uses the language of a "twofold capacity"—one of nature simply, and one of nature "according to the order of divine power"—to explain the incarnation, "the grace of union which is the greatest grace."⁴⁴ Clearly then, the overgeneric and extrinsicist account of obediential potency—which reduces it to the lowest instance of mere capacity for natural transmutation and does not acknowledge specific obediential potency—misses something essential. The fear of extrinsicism harbored by Gilson and de Lubac indifferently targeted both a legitimate object of aversion (the proposition that nothing in man is truly elevated and perfected by grace, so that grace would become a vermiform appendage) and an illegitimate object of aversion (the proposition that supernatural beatitude cannot as such be targeted by a purely natural desire). This fear obstructed their reading of St. Thomas's text. Yet, since virtually all commentators of St. Thomas's work preceding them did acknowledge the specific sense of obediential potency applicable to the nature/grace question, it seems that other factors should be discerned as moving them to this undifferentiated preoccupation with the avoidance of extrinsicism (whereas it is not grace as *extrinsic* principle—for that is what grace *is*, since grace *is not* nature—but grace as *transmutative* principle, that constitutes a deformation of Christian teaching). Clearly, the decisive points were not missed from any ordinary nescience nor from bad will, but rather from a *diverted attention* preoccupied with profound and necessary theological purpose. It is to the nature of this diversion and that purpose that we now turn.

⁴⁴ *ST* III, q. 1, a. 3, ad 3: "A double capability may be remarked in human nature: one, in respect of the order of natural power, and this is always fulfilled by God, Who apportions to each according to its natural capability; the other in respect to the order of the Divine power, which all creatures implicitly obey; and the capability we speak of pertains to this. But God does not fulfill all such capabilities, otherwise God could do only what He has done in creatures, and this is false, as stated above (I, q. 105, a. 6). But there is no reason why human nature should not have been raised to something greater after sin. For God allows evils to happen in order to bring a greater good therefrom; hence it is written (Rm 5:20): 'Where sin abounded, grace did more abound.' Hence, too, in the blessing of the Paschal candle, we say: 'O happy fault, that merited such and so great a Redeemer!' " While the specific phrase "obediential potency" is not used here, clearly the general idea is congruent with that articulated in *De Virtutibus*, cf. note 34 above, which undeniably expresses the conception of specific obediential potency. The idea is that of a potency in relation to the divine power "which all creatures implicitly obey"—what is this, but obediential potency?

Behind It All: The Loss of Natural Order as a Theonomic Principle

It is clear that de Lubac's reading of Aquinas with respect to obediential potency is erroneous, and that indeed time has only deepened and intensified the consequent divorce of theological formation and method from natural truth (although Pope John Paul II's *Fides et Ratio* stands in marked contradiction to this tendency). But likewise it is clear that de Lubac—a great scholar and lover of the Church, blessed with a subtle and powerful intellect—misprised this teaching neither from any common nescience nor from malice. Rather, the need to safeguard a profound theological intention in an inhospitable intellectual climate seemed to point toward the argument that the object of the natural desire for God must be intrinsically supernatural beatific vision. The nature of this animating intention requires greater consideration.

No theologian worthy of the name should fail to affirm the theocentric character of reality as such. Yet, from the Enlightenment period on, the view that nature constitutes a separate jurisdiction from divine authority and governance—one utterly separable from the theistic account, and only dubiously related to the truth of the Gospels—gained in influence and prestige. The Enlightenment spawned secular theories of progress, and a reductive naturalism that happily banished the very knowledge of God from the realm of natural truth to one of (at best) a shadowy noumenal existence. Indeed, this tendency is discernibly present today in the insistence of many philosophers and commentators on science that the realm of physical causes must be considered to be “causally closed” and so putatively impermeable to any immaterial cause whatsoever, including God.

Kant, Hume, Comte, and in the twentieth century the movements of scientism and positivism, all tended to reduce natural knowledge in such a way as to minimize or seemingly render impossible the project of metaphysical *scientia* and knowledge of God. Ethics, too, was to be confined within the realm of a secular and non-metaphysical reason alone. Even when theories maintained speculative trajectory or theistic nomenclature, too often the trajectory was immanentist or the terms merely placeholders within doctrines remote from theism and more distant still from traditional Christianity. In this light, one thinks, of course, of Hegel.

To make matters worse, however, within Catholic life itself, there had been a gradual but nonetheless crucial disengagement of Catholic theology from the metaphysical realism of St. Thomas Aquinas. The history of this unfortunate and retrograde motion together with the tracing of its speculative influence remains to be written. But it is here that we need

pause to recollect the role of Molina in this story. For it is manifest that beginning with Molina's teaching in the sixteenth century it became acceptable to view free human action as standing outside of divine governance and causality; and this idea is incompatible with the understanding of nature as a theonomic principle. This tendency has only intensified and grown, such that it is frequently the case that when a theologian speaks of "freedom" it is assumed that the proper definition of a cause as contingent or necessary is a function of that cause's relation to God. That is, it is assumed that to be free a cause must possess liberty of indifference with respect to divine causality. Yet it is the teaching of St. Thomas that no created cause possesses a liberty of indifference with respect to divine causality, and that a cause is denominated as contingent rather than necessary solely owing to its proportion to the contingency of its terrestrial effects. *In short, created liberty is not defined in relation to God, but in relation to the nature of the proximate cause.* Thus Thomas writes in *De malo*:

And therefore necessity and contingency in things are distinguished not in relation to the divine will, which is a universal cause, but in relation to created causes which the divine will has ordered proportionately to the effects, namely in such a way that the causes of necessary effects are unchangeable, and of contingent effects changeable.⁴⁵

St. Thomas further articulates the dependence of the created human will on God when he writes:

It should be said that when it is said that God left man to himself, this does not mean to exclude man from Divine Providence, but merely that he has not a prefixed operating power determined to one as with natural things; because they are only acted upon as though directed by another towards an end—for they do not act of themselves, directing

⁴⁵ *De malo*, q. 16, a. 7, ad 15 (Leonine ed.): "Et hoc quidem quantum ad scientiam patet ex his que supra dicta sunt: sic enim se habet diuina scientia ad futura contingentia sicut se habet oculus noster ad contingentia aue in presenti sunt, ut dictum est; unde sicut certissime uidemus Sortem sedere dumsedet, nec tamen proper hoc sit simpliciter necessarium, ita etiam ex hoc quod Deus uidet omnia que eueniunt in se ipsis, non tollitur contingentia rerum. Ex parte autem uoluntatis considerandum est quod uoluntas diuina est uniuersaliter causa entis et uniuersaliter omnium que consequuntur <ipsum>, unde et necessitatis et contingentie; ipsa autem est supra ordinem necessarij et contingentis sicut est supra totum esse creatum. Et ideo necessitas et contingentia in rebus distinguitur non per habitudinem ad uoluntatem diuinam que est causa communis, set per comparisonem ad causas creatas, quas proportionaliter diuina uoluntas ad effectus ordinauit, ut scilicet necessariorum effectuum sint cause intransmutabiles, contingentium autem trnasmutabiles."

themselves towards an end, as do rational creatures through free choice whereby these take counsel and make choices. Hence it is significantly said: In the hand of his own counsel. But because the same act of free choice is reduced to God as to a cause, it is necessary that whatsoever happens from the exercise of free choice be subject to Divine Providence. For the providence of man is contained under the providence of God, as a particular cause under a universal cause.⁴⁶

And, even more clearly: “When anything moves itself, this does not exclude its being moved by another, from which it has even this that it moves itself. Thus it is not repugnant to liberty that God is the cause of the free act of the will.”⁴⁷

Whereas Molina strove with all his power to do justice to freedom and Providence—falling as it were by accident into the error whereby freedom is defined with respect to God rather than with respect to its finite and contingent effects—it is without doubt true today that the libertarian account of freedom as an absolute capacity outside of the governance of the omnipotent God is prevalent even among believers. Whereas Thomas held that no terrestrial finite good could coerce the will, so that the rational will is free,⁴⁸ it is common today to suppose that the creature must somehow also be able to stand outside the divine causality for it to be free. Yet this view treats the divine causality like that of a creature, neglecting the dependence of all created reality in being and action upon God.

⁴⁶ *ST* I, q. 22, a. 2, ad 4 (Ottawa ed.): “Dicendum quod in hoc quod dicitur Deum hominem sibi reliquisse, non excluditur homo a divina providentia; sed ostenditur quod non praefigitur ei virtus operativa determinata ad unum, sicut rebus naturalibus; quae aguntur tantum, quasi ab altero directae in finem, non autem seipsa agunt, quasi se dirigentia in finem, ut creaturae rationales per liberum arbitrium, quo consiliantur et eligunt. Unde signanter dicit: “In manu consilii sui.” Sed quia ipse actus liberi arbitrii reducitur in Deum sicut in causam, necesse est ut ea quae ex libero arbitrio fiunt, divinae providentiae subdantur; providentia enim hominis continetur sub providentia Dei, sicut causa particularis sub causa universalis.”

⁴⁷ *De malo*, q. 3, a. 2, ad 4 (Leonine ed.): “Similiter cum aliquid mouet se ipsum, non excluditur quin ab alio moueatur a quo habet hoc ipsum quo se ipsum mouet. Et sic non repugnat libertati quod Deus est causa actus liberi arbitrii.”

⁴⁸ St. Thomas teaches that the object of the will as a rational appetite is the universal good, the good in general. Since every finite good is a limited good, no finite good is universally good or good in every respect (were it so, it would not be a finite or *limited* good). It follows that no finite good may coerce the will. Even at the very moment of choice, the intellect presents the finite good to the will as finite, as limited and hence not universally good—as, in some respect, really not good, even if it be not the respect pertinent to our moral fulfillment. Thus, even at the moment of choice, the rational will retains a dominating indifference with respect to any finite good. Cf. *ST* I, q. 82, a. 2, ad 2.

The formulation of Molina has sadly outlived the profound Christian context of his work, which limited the ill effect of this formulation and prevented its worst implications from being drawn. It is certainly true as Molina writes in the *Concordia*, “that the will is free only when, all requirements being retained, the will could indeed act otherwise”⁴⁹—*provided we refer solely to terrestrial requirements*. But if we include the hypothetical but immutable divine will as a requirement, then this proposition is impossible. For, owing to the divine simplicity, it is not God who changes but rather only the world: If God ordains from all eternity that the creature shall freely (in the sense of not coerced by any terrestrial good) choose X, and the creature is moved freely to choose X, what changes is not God but the creature.

The creature is really related to, and dependent upon, God, but not vice versa. Between God efficaciously willing a created effect and God *not* efficaciously willing some created effect, the sole difference is that the efficaciously willed effect actually *is*. Thus one cannot retain the requirement that God cause the creature freely to act while the creature is not caused freely to act *because this is a contradiction in terms*.

The Molinist account unwittingly carries the implication that the domain of human action is outside Divine Providence insofar as outside divine causality. Thomas makes the connection quite patent in the *Summa theologiae* I–II, question 91, article 2, teaching that

since all things subject to Divine Providence are ruled and measured by the eternal law, as was stated above (I–II, a. 90, q. 1); it is evident that all things partake somewhat of the eternal law, in so far as, namely, from its being imprinted on them, they derive their respective inclinations to their proper acts and ends.

The implication here is not that there is some recondite class of things which are not subject to Divine Providence while still being ruled and measured by eternal law. Rather, if the human will is not subject to Divine Providence, then it is not ruled and measured by the eternal law. As Thomas teaches, providence extends so far as power:⁵⁰ he will cannot be subject to Divine Providence if it lies outside divine causality. Hence, if we affirm a theonomic conception of natural law, we need also to affirm that the human will is autonomous neither in being nor in action, but is moved to its act from without, yet in such a manner that this motion is truly its own motion: which is to say that the very motion that

⁴⁹ Cf. *Molina's Concordia*, q. 14, a. 13, disp. II.

⁵⁰ See *ST* I, q. 22, a. 2.

is received by the will from God is that whereby it moves itself in free self-determination. Like existence itself, the positive substance of my action is most my own, yet also most a gift.

In Molina the emphasis is upon *scientia media* or middle knowledge—the doctrine that God knows all the varied circumstances in the light of which the creature will act or not act—a teaching that some critics speak of as a determinism of circumstance.⁵¹ For why should circumstances alter how one would be inclined to act unless they exercise some causality, a causality seemingly denied to God by the Molinist account. Why then should what is denied to God be attributed to finite circumstances? But it is in any case not this aspect of his teaching that has prevailed.

What is arresting about the Molinist account is not the emphasis on circumstance, which is but an ineffective brake placed on the turning of the wheel, but the logic of the turning of the wheel itself, in the direction of separating human agency from divine causality. And indeed, this is the effect that Molinism seems concretely to have had—not to move people to accept *scientia media*, which seems fraught with contradiction, but to move toward the rejection of the subjection of human agency to divine causality. Apart from the question of Molina's full theological position, his negative treatment of the dependence of human freedom on divine causality seems in historical terms to be one large stride in the direction of undifferentiated libertarianism of a sort that implies that the created will is a being *a se*.

What thus ensues in the common imagination as well as in ensuing academic interpretations is an immense and insupportable freedom—as though the finite creature were characterized by a divine aseity of will. A separate jurisdiction of human liberty is thus created that is literally beyond divine governance, so that it becomes difficult to imagine what difference even divine Revelation could make to the situation—for why should a will whose act is *a se* to require or seek aid of any kind? If its act is *a se*, it follows that its being is *a se* (*operatio sequitur esse*). And a being *a se* is intrinsically independent of every other being—the very logic whereby God is affirmed to be intrinsically independent of any created cause.⁵²

⁵¹ In the twentieth century, one thinks of the extensive criticism offered by Norbert del Prado, *De Gratia et Libero Arbitrio*, 3 vols. (Friburgi Helvetiorum: *Ex Typis Consociationis Sancti Pauli*, 1907) and Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *God: His Existence and His Nature*, 2 vols., trans. Dom Bede Rose (St. Louis: Herder, 1934).

⁵² The idea that the separation of freedom from providential government could be accepted without its implications being harvested has proven deficient. Granted that the idea of the directive authority of natural law is chiefly cognitive, still for such directive authority to be even potentially effective it is a necessary condition that the finite agent be *susceptible of direction*. But if the finite agent's will is

Hence intra-Catholic meditations on freedom as well as philosophic tendencies rooted in the Enlightenment each carved out a dominion for natural human agency as absolutely independent of God. The convergent effect is that of secular and intra-Catholic tendencies of thought each of which tend toward making the natural realm—and particularly the natural realm of human agency—an utterly separate jurisdiction sealed off from Providence. In this light, the continued insistence upon the nature/grace distinction could seem to be an insistence upon maintaining an artificial and destructive divorce between God and the world, and *a fortiori* between God and the human world. Within such a world, natural law, far from being what it was for St. Thomas—namely, nothing other than the rational participation of the *eternal law*—becomes instead the demarcation of a realm *outside the governance of the eternal law*. Natural law becomes, as it were, the “stalking horse” of secularism and naturalist reductionism. A more complete inversion of the character of the doctrine of the natural law cannot be imagined—indeed a transvaluation of all values.

Even more arresting is that these two complementary motions retreating from the theonomic character of nature and natural order end by insisting on similar judgments. The advocate of absolute autonomy for the rational creature must deny the subjection of man’s will to divine causality and Providence—ruling out the “interference” of God with a will either supposed to be purely in act or else mysteriously able to move itself from potency to act without first receiving this motion from God. Likewise, the contemporary physicalist or materialist advocate of “causal closure” amongst physical causes must deny the subjection of any physical agency whatsoever to the higher causality of God. Hence the physicalist or materialist also must rule out the “interference” of God with the natural world and with the nature of human agency. In one case the motive is the preservation of absolute freedom; in the other case, the motive is the preservation of causal closure (and, for some authors, absolute necessity)

not only independent vis-à-vis all merely terrestrial causality but stands outside of divine causality as well, then it follows that the finite agent’s willing is a *se* and so not susceptible to governance by any extrinsic agent. Thus we end with the temper tantrum construed as a metaphysical principle, with an incapacity on the part of the modern and postmodern to receive directive governance in the moral, social, and political orders, and with a fixed strategic resistance of governance with respect to the supernatural life itself. This shows itself not merely in antinomian glosses on natural law (for example, one notes Bernard Häring and Josef Fuchs), but in the supposition that the Church must, herself, accommodate the absolute requisites of ecclesial communion to the *a priori* supremacy of pluralism and autonomy: an insistence in reason impossible yet socially widespread and hardly unknown even within the Church.

amongst exclusively physical causes. One may well note that it seems that for Kant both of these motivations simultaneously hold sway—the categories of phenomenal necessitation just as much as the nature of human freedom require the denial of any knowable providential government of world and will. But in either case, the effect is the same: the banishing of God from the natural world and especially from the natural world of human agency.⁵³

What was to be Henri de Lubac's response to the distinction of nature from grace as it functioned within the anomalous context of the exile of God from the natural world and from the nature of human agency? Reading the de Lubac of *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, it becomes perfectly clear that he was well acquainted with antitheism and the banishing of God from history through the unreasoning exaltation of matter, or will, or reason. He was also intimately aware of the dilemma of human freedom in a world that, like a mausoleum, enclosed its inhabitants in a lofty and impenetrable solitude or, alternately, offered release solely through alienating extroversion. To a Christian man of such profound vision and cultural sensitivity as well as historical awareness, it cannot have been other than ravishingly tempting utterly to contradict the naturalist reduction with one working in a different and Christian direction, asserting a natural desire for intrinsically supernatural beatitude. The dynamism of man, himself, would be taken not only as pointed ad Deo but as aspirationally projected within the Triune life of God Himself.⁵⁴ Neither positivism nor

⁵³ It is also possibly pertinent that Molina strongly influenced the thought of many of his brethren within the Society of Jesus, which historically has been associated with some measure of support for the Molinist account. It may not be wholly accidental that the effort to reinstate the theonomic character of nature by supernaturalizing the natural *telos* should derive from a gifted and creative theologian formed within this order and sensitive to the onset of naturalism.

⁵⁴ Of course, de Lubac would have denied that the natural desire for God—which he took to be a desire for supernatural beatitude—had any psychological corollary whatsoever. Nonetheless, if to aspire is to seek to attain a goal, then quite literally de Lubac's position must countenance that the *voluntas ut natura* aspires to supernatural beatitude whether this has a psychological correlate or not. It is this position itself that, the Thomist will discern, defines the created nature as deific by skipping over the proximate and natural end altogether. Of course, there is also the question whether it makes sense that so profound a metaphysical orientation as de Lubac claimed for the will can be intelligible in the absence of any psychological correlate—especially inasmuch as movement of the will is depicted as follows by St. Thomas (*Quaestiones Quodlibetales*, quodlibet VI, q. 2, a. 2): “motus voluntatis est inclinatio sequens formam intellectam.” That is, it is impossible that there be any natural volition that is not first specified by intellect, and this natural specification is necessarily infinitely less than that which specifies the intellect

scientism nor any of the other “isms” seeking to confine man within the terrestrial cage and to reduce the human mystery to a problem of naturalist flow-dynamics would gain any purchase over this starting point for the Christian apologetic, for this apologetic would be nothing other than the answer to the question “What is man?”

In the face of such crushing cultural, ideological, and philosophic adversity, the distinctions contemplated and honed within baroque scholasticism—that Revelation reveals man to himself with respect to his deeper destiny in grace, but not *primarily* or properly with respect to human nature as such (of which one has connatural awareness and potential *natural wisdom*) but rather *medicinally*—could hardly seem decisive. Against the antitheists—Marx, Nietzsche, and the rest—de Lubac would rely upon *teleology*. Almost alone amidst contemporaries for whom teleology defined nothing, de Lubac would overstress teleology, making of the *finis ultimus* of intrinsically supernatural beatific vision the very natural end of man, and denying that human nature is placed in its species—as Aquinas expressly asserts that it is—*by its natural and proportionate end as distinct from the supernatural beatific end*.⁵⁵

The convergent implication of secular and Molinist thought seems indeed to be the loss of nature and natural order as *theonomic principles*, and the loss of *natural law* as nothing else than a participation of eternal law. *Once this theonomic character of natural order and natural law are lost, then sustaining the distinction of nature and grace simply formalizes the boundaries consequent upon the loss of God.* One may say safely, from this repose of distance in time, that de Lubac was correct in seeking the answer in teleology, and correct again in seeking an answer that would once more establish the theonomic character of natural order. While he was incor-

in beatific vision. It follows that all *natural* willing is only distributively rather than simultaneously universal, and that likewise all natural willing is specified by created realities. God ineluctably is then to be known and desired as “Cause of finite effects”; and while for St. Thomas “each power desires by the natural appetite that object which is suitable to itself” (ST I, q. 80, a. 1, ad 3), what is suitable to the will is the intelligible good in general. The universal good is the *aspect* under which the will desires whatever it seeks, but it is no more to be identified with the universal subsistent Good in God than the befitting adequate object of the intellect as universal being is to be confused with the being of God: as though the metaphysician seeking to study being qua being were, by that fact and in precision from grace, naturally seeking the beatific vision.

⁵⁵ Once again, one notes texts such as *Quaestiones de anima*, a. 7, ad 10; and ST I, q. 75, a. 7, ad 1, remembering such texts of de Lubac, for example, as the fourth chapter of *The Mystery of the Supernatural* (see note 7 above).

rect in supposing that natural teleology in itself could be shoehorned into or equated with a supernatural trajectory, it was precisely his instinct that the theonomic character of nature needed to be preserved that led him to attempt this defense in a manner that unwittingly falsifies nature itself. This turning of nature into a vacuole fit only for supernatural beatitude even apart from grace and Revelation paradoxically completed the ontological evacuation of nature to which de Lubac was in part responding. Perhaps this is the clearest theological instance of “destroying the village in order to save it”—but it still does not constitute a sufficient answer to the negation of the theonomic character of natural law and, more widely, of natural order. It also manifests a lack of that radical providentialist trust in the specifically natural that demarcates the theological vision of St. Thomas from those who are prone to assume that the natural in its own right must be a zone without the divine governance and so needing to be as theologically minimized as possible. That is, it manifests despair in seeking to reach the theonomic character of natural order by draining the natural of its own distinctive finality and intelligibility. It is not the first time that a physician unintentionally has communicated the plague he nobly sought to resist.

The persistent refusal to see the limited but dignified fashion in which not only all creation, but man specifically, is naturally ordered to God, is explicable only within a context wherein it has already been decided as an initial postulate that sublunary natural order has no efficacy or essential role within theological method. But all of creation is ordered *ad Deo*, and man naturally desires God as *Cause and Principle of finite nature*—a natural desire that is not by its essence formally a desire for supernatural beatific vision. Rather it is a real but limited created dynamism toward God as Cause of finite being, reflective of that spiritual dignity in man that constitutes a potency of obedience for what God may bring forth through his grace. Nonetheless, if one’s project is to cut short the very possibility of rationalist misconstrual of nature as a separate and absolutely autonomous jurisdiction; if one is wary of the distinct character of the natural within the theological synthesis; and if one stands historically downstream from the abandonment of St. Thomas’s doctrine of providence, then the hotwiring of nature to grace becomes all too alluring. That a correct judgment of the relation of nature to God is required by theology itself—such that error here is liable thoroughly and in multifarious ways to denature theology—may quickly appear of secondary importance by comparison with safeguarding the pertinence of Revelation in an increasingly naturalist world. It is ironic that the very medicine actually required for this latter purpose—the purpose of safeguarding the

pertinence of Revelation from the irrelevance to which naturalism would consign it—is itself principally a function of the truth regarding the relation of nature and grace.

One grants that at the moment of the composition of *Surnaturel*, it must have seemed—for contingent yet pressing reasons—unlikely that Thomism would prove up to the challenge posed by the cultural confluence of Catholic and secular tendencies promoting the autonomy of nature and of human agency from God. In fact, insofar as elements of Thomas's synthesis persisted in riding the waves long after the strategic rejections of divine providential governance of human agency and of theistic metaphysics had occurred, these might appear as of merely residual importance. Worse, the distinction of nature and grace might then be construed simply as formalizing the evacuation of God from creation: a wall of demarcation excluding God from the world.

But the evisceration of the richness of created human nature guarantees an eviscerated theology. A small error in the beginning is a large one in the end. And the loss of the theonomic character of natural order and law *in its own right* and not merely by *analogy of attribution with supernatural order* is an error of decisive importance. Far from natural truth constituting a metaphysical Berlin Wall keeping man in, and God out, of man's world, such truth is by its own character essentially ordered toward God. *By its own character*, that is, as *naturally* ordered toward God with all the limits this suggests—that is, nature is essentially ordered toward God, but is not *of itself* ordered toward supernatural beatitude. It is against these natural limits that the sublimity of the supernatural becomes manifest. The grandeur of man's supernatural calling reveals the higher end and acts of which human nature is capable with the assistance of grace, revealing these loftiest capacities and perfections of man so aided to himself.

Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor is wrong in picturing human natural desire as essentially antagonistic to God in Christ, albeit this famous literary image is compelling as a depiction of *sinful* nature. But distinct from supernatural charity is natural love, and Thomas rightly affirms that man *by natural love* loves God above himself insofar as natural love—with which man is created—is not perverse:

The good we receive from God is twofold, the good of nature, and the good of grace. Now the fellowship of natural goods bestowed on us by God is the foundation of natural love, in virtue of which not only man, so long as his nature remains unimpaired, loves God above all things and more than himself, but also every single creature, each in its own way, that is either by an intellectual, or by a rational, or by an animal,

or at least by a natural love, as stones do, for instance, and other things bereft of knowledge, because each part naturally loves the common good of the whole more than its own particular good. This is evidenced by its operation, since the principal inclination of each part is towards common action conducive to the good of the whole. It may also be seen in civic virtues whereby sometimes the citizens suffer damage even to their own property and persons for the sake of the common good. Wherefore much more is this realized with regard to the friendship of charity which is based on the fellowship of the gifts of grace.⁵⁶

Natural love is not perverse, it prefers God to self, and it is essentially inferior to supernatural charity. To cite St. Thomas again to this effect, he writes:

Accordingly, since God is the universal good, and under this good both man and angel and all creatures are comprised because every creature in regard to its entire being naturally belongs to God, it follows that from natural love angel and man alike love God before themselves and with greater love. Otherwise, if either of them loved self more than God, it would follow that natural love would be perverse, and that it would not be perfected but destroyed by charity.⁵⁷

Elsewhere St. Thomas makes clear that the restoration of natural love after sin requires grace:

in the state of integral nature man did not need the gift of grace added to his natural endowments in order to love God above all things naturally, although he needed God's help moving him to it; but in the state

⁵⁶ *ST II-II*, q. 26, a. 3: "Respondeo dicendum quod a Deo duplex bonum accipere possumus, scilicet bonum naturae, et bonum gratiae. Super communicatione autem bonorum naturalium nobis a Deo facta fundatur amor naturalis, quo non solum homo in suae integritate naturae super omnia diligit Deum et plus quam seipsum, sed etiam quaelibet creatura suo modo, idest vel intellectuali vel rationali vel animali, vel saltem naturali amore, sicut lapides et alia quae cognitione carent, quia unaquaeque pars naturaliter plus amat commune bonum totius quam particulare bonum proprium. Quod manifestatur ex opere, quaelibet enim pars habet inclinationem principalem ad actionem communem utilitati totius. Apparet etiam hoc in politicis virtutibus, secundum quas cives pro bono communi et dispendia propriarum rerum et personarum interdum sustinent. Unde multo magis hoc verificatur in amicitia caritatis, quae fundatur super communicatione donorum gratiae."

⁵⁷ *ST I*, q. 60, a. 5: "Quia igitur bonum universale est ipse Deus, et sub hoc bono continetur etiam Angelus et homo et omnis creatura, quia omnis creatura naturaliter, secundum id quod est, Dei est; sequitur quod naturali dilectione etiam Angelus et homo plus et principalius diligit Deum quam seipsum. Alioquin, si naturaliter plus seipsum diligeret quam Deum, sequeretur quod naturalis dilectio esset perversa; et quod non perficeretur per caritatem, sed destrueretur."

of corrupted nature, man needs, even for this, the help of grace healing his nature.⁵⁸

Yet the significant point here is that sin itself is defined as deprivation vis-à-vis the theonomic role of nature, and that restoration of the *natural* love is only part—and the *lesser part*—of the effect of the redemption. Indeed, paradoxically, the attainment of the natural end will require medicinal grace, but not because it is itself supernatural, but because nature is itself further ordered in grace from its creation and is thus harmed by the loss of grace. For the restoration of natural integrity and rectitude forms part of a loftier motion that rises past the merely natural proximate end to the *finis ultimus* of supernatural beatitude. And thus—*because to desire, know, and love God as principle of all being is something quite different than to desire, know, and love God as object of supernatural beatitude*—Thomas writes that: “[I]t must therefore be said that to love God as the principle of all being pertains to natural love, but to love God as the object of beatitude pertains to the gratuitous love in which merit consists.”⁵⁹

Conclusion: The Protean Implications

If our aim is countering the loss of the normativity of nature as a theonomic principle, the first impulse of de Lubac—the prime resort to teleology—is condign, but this resort must be to genuinely *natural teleology* as conditioning our reception of Revelation. For this natural conditioning, like the preparation of Israel by the prophets, is part of the divine economy itself and not something alien or extrinsic to the divine governance. Yet this in itself will not avail for so long as the realm of nature—and especially the realm of human agency—is supposed to be a separate jurisdiction immunized and utterly independent from providential government. For the loss of natural order as a theonomic concept that transpires upon the subtraction of human agency from divine order is an irreplaceable loss. Consequently, the greatest need of contemporary thought is to rediscover the theonomic character of natural law, and more extendedly of natural order as such—which will require a vigorous return to meta-

⁵⁸ *ST* I–II, q. 109, a. 3: “Et ideo dicendum est quod homo in statu naturae integrae non indigebat dono gratiae superadditae naturalibus bonis ad diligendum Deum naturaliter super omnia; licet indigeret auxilio Dei ad hoc eum moventis. Sed in statu naturae corruptae indiget homo etiam ad hoc auxilio gratiae naturam sanantis.”

⁵⁹ *Quod*. I, q. 4, a. 3, ad 1: “Ad primum ergo dicendum, quod diligere Deum prout est principium totius esse, ad naturalem dilectionem pertinet; sed diligere Deum prout est obiectum beatitudinis, est gratuita dilectionis, in qua meritum consistit.”

physics, natural theology, and ontology of nature. The natural character of—and need for—metaphysics as sapiential science is thus exhibited.

Such a project is in all frankness a great and perhaps overmastering challenge for an age in which philosophers have preponderantly retreated to logical and linguistic preoccupations remote from nature, whilst many theologians drift in historicist or textual currents seemingly permanently outside the orbit of reference to natural order or, alternately, dwell within intricate dialectical fictions. The perhaps unintended radicalization of de Lubac's position itself by prominent and distinguished theological minds;⁶⁰

⁶⁰ One notes the work of David Schindler, who has at least on occasion suggested that nature is objectively undefinable apart from grace. This is rather a different proposition than to say that medicinal grace is needed—owing to the Fall—in order to attain the proximate natural end that is indeed naturally knowable, or even than the proposition that medicinal grace may be needed by some to cognize that which is nonetheless objectively defined in precision from grace. Cf. David Schindler, "Christology, Public Theology, and Thomism: de Lubac, Balthasar, and Murray," in *The Future of Thomism*, ed. Deal W. Hudson and Dennis W. Moran (Notre Dame, IN: American Maritain Association, 1992), 253–54, note 9. Yet one also notes this author's arguments stressing the metaphysical principle of form with respect to the dangers of reductionism in genetic engineering, in which he strongly affirms the proportionate natural principles without that objective reference to revelation that one would think necessary were it true that nature is indefinable apart from grace. See his "A Response to the Joint Statement 'Production of Pluripotent Stem Cells by Oocyte Assisted Reprogramming,'" *Communio* 32 (2005). With respect to the radicalization of de Lubac's position, one also thinks of theologians in the East. For example, see the work of John D. Zizioulas, whose bibliography includes two books and some sixty articles published in a variety of languages. His main publication, *L'Etre ecclésial* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1981), is a collection of six previously published articles; the English edition, *Being as Communion* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985), is somewhat modified to include later materials. Zizioulas now serves as an Orthodox bishop. In his theology, being and history outside of Christ are so unintelligible that philosophy as a purely rational investigation seems capable of holding little of worth for the Christian believer. Paul McPartlan wrote a thesis, *The Eucharist Makes the Church: Henri de Lubac and John Zizioulas in Dialogue* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), comparing Zizioulas's theology of the Church with that of Henri de Lubac, noting a certain degree of convergence. Zizioulas argues that Latin theology as manifest in the teaching of popes, councils, and bishops, fails to appreciate the radically relational and existential character of creation renewed in Christ, causing consequent deformations with respect to participation in the Eucharist and understanding of the mystery of the Church. The similarity of such reasoning with the radical view that the creature is a subsistent relation—something properly predicable of the Divine Persons of the Trinity alone, but which certain eminent scholars assert with respect to the created human person—is doctrinally remarkable. See, for example, the work of W. Norris Clarke, *Person and Being* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1993),

the widespread despair of natural truth regarding God, the soul, and the moral life, proceeding from the distinct sources of nihilism, fideism, and rationalism; the substitution of ungrounded and relativized dialectics, historicist reflections, textualism, or logicism for metaphysics, natural teleology, and ontology of nature; and the danger (to which the Church has responded in *Dominus Iesus*) that the relativized dialectical context may go so far as to infect the concrete affirmation of the mysteries of faith itself; the radical miscasting of the doctrine of natural law outside of its proper theistic context; and the more or less ideologized movements resulting from the vacuum of teaching: All this constitutes an enormous welter of danger and confusion.

It is tempting to outline the most conspicuous errors and challenges—proceeding from the evacuation of natural norms within theology—within each of the component disciplines of theology and philosophy itself, as well as within the more general life of the Church and of society. Such an undertaking would constitute a project to itself, and doubtless one worthy of the effort in detailing the disorientations consequent on the theological retreat from nature. Such a list might include: a causal role in engendering fideist, rationalist, and nihilist impulses; excessive autonomism in ethics (and, implicitly, in philosophic anthropology); the divorce of the practical from the speculative to which it is naturally wedded (for naturally speaking, all knowing has a speculative component, with practical knowing adding only a relation to action and so a distinct end);⁶¹ the loss of unified teleology and of the material continuity of natural proximate end with the supernatural end (God as principle and cause of nature as distinct from

as alike his essay “Person, Being, and St. Thomas” in *Communio* 19 (1992); and Kenneth Schmitz, “The First Principle of Personal Becoming,” *Review of Metaphysics* 47 (1994), together with my criticism, Steven Long, “Personal Receptivity and Act: A Thomistic Critique,” *The Thomist* 61 (1997); and his answer “Created Receptivity,” 339–72, published with my brief “Reply,” 373–76, alongside in *The Thomist* 61 (1997).

⁶¹ One notes the following illustrative lines about this from *De Veritate*, q. 2, a. 8, which also track Aquinas’s more forthright definitions of the speculative and practical elsewhere—but the formulation here is arresting: “But the knowledge that an artist has about something that can be made is of two kinds: speculative and practical. He has speculative or theoretical knowledge when he knows the intimate nature of a work but does not have the intention of applying the principles to the production of the work. His knowledge is practical, properly speaking, when by his intention he ordains the principles of the work to operation as an end. In this way, as Avicenna says, medicine is divided into theoretical and practical. *It is clear that the practical knowledge of an artist follows his speculative knowledge, since it is made practical by applying the speculative to a work. But when the practical is absent, the speculative remains.*” [Emphasis added.]

God as revealing himself in supernatural beatitude); the denial that God is necessary to the doctrine of natural law; a certain desacramentalization of nature; the epistemic radicalization of de Lubac's position represented by the claim that nature is utterly unknowable in precision from Revelation;⁶² and the kindred claim that the treatise *De Deo uno* is not presupposed by and necessary to the treatise *De Deo trino*.

This last thesis—that the treatise on the One God is not presupposed by and necessary to the treatise on the Triune God—is embraced by many genuinely Catholic scholars. Nonetheless it truly represents theology walking off into thin air: as though the Revelation of God in Christ does not invite and presuppose a natural doctrine of God as a condition for the intelligibility of the truth that Christ is God. When we affirm that Christ is God and man, the obvious question is, *Quid sit Deus?* The effort either to resituate this query, or—at the worst—to suppress it, seems not to be a *theological* effort, albeit it might be construed as *theoplastic*: yet another sign of the loss of nature as a normative principle *within* theology. That no theologian would wish to *stop* with natural theology, or to lose the sense of its continuity with the mysteries of faith within the providential synthesis of Revelation and grace, is perfectly reasonable. But that one should wish to subtract the natural ordering of creation to God from the inception of theology, or to treat the doctrine of God this implies as though it were not methodically presupposed by and necessary to revealed theology, indicates misalignment in one's understanding of nature and grace, and perhaps also with respect to the humble epistemic roots of man's contact with the real. The first creation is presupposed by and taken up within the contemplation of the new creation in grace: It is not a separate dead residue from which revealed theology can happily detach itself without losing both divine and human nature. To use a hallowed but valid formula (*De Veritate* II, q. 14, a. 9, ad 8): "grace presupposes nature."

One might also include in the list of consequences of the loss of natural order as a theonomic principle the loss of regard for principled conformity to the moral teaching of the Church as necessary for ecclesial communion and participation in the sacramental life of the Church. For the moral law dissociate from eternal law is construed as a zone of absolute personal autonomy, and nature so dissociate no longer yields connatural certitudes but merely more or less provisional "points of view." Here the evacuation of nature and the dissociation of natural from eternal law keep pace, *pari passu*, yielding a conclusion so antinomian as to leave nothing standing of the Catholic sense of the moral life. Even the most crass and

⁶² Cf. note 60 above.

destructive type of autonomy often is defended as compatible with communion with the Church (witness those for whom no degree of dissent—even regarding the wrongful homicide of millions of innocent unborn children—is sufficient to warrant exclusion from the sacraments). Yet the supernatural unity of the Church is not the unity of mere well-wishing and social fellowship, it is a supernatural society, participation in whose source and summit—the eucharistic sacrifice—presupposes conformity to the teaching of the Church and places one within an order of governance (and that not merely canonic, but substantive). Indifference to the Church's doctrine of faith and morals displayed by persons and groups who then elevate and honor contingent issues of social prudence and party politics to the same level argues both a grotesque lack of assimilation to the supernatural life in Christ and a serious confusion between natural social assimilation to a secular group and abandonment to God and his Church.

Yet doubtless the path to transcend these doctrinal difficulties and errors, so as to achieve an organic development of Catholic life and doctrine, is illumined by the instruction of papal encyclicals such as Pope John Paul II's *Fides et Ratio* and *Veritatis Splendor*. This same path is also highlighted by works of retrieving scholarship such as Dr. Feingold has given us in *The Natural Desire to See God According to St. Thomas Aquinas and His Interpreters*. It is profoundly highlighted in the work of de Lubac himself, the whole purpose of whose controversial account of nature and grace was to affirm the theonomic character of natural order albeit at the cost of a certain confusedly volatile conflation of supernatural and natural dynamisms. The judgment that this path is erroneous because it denies the distinct manner in which created natural order is theonomic does nothing whatsoever to negate the ineluctability of the prior judgment: the judgment that the theonomic character of natural order needs strongly and effectively to be reaffirmed. In this sense, the most important element of the teleology of de Lubac's own account truly is achieved (to be sure, in a radically distinct way) in the doctrine of St. Thomas Aquinas and of the Thomistic commentatorial tradition that de Lubac critically misapprehended.

It is of course true that the medicinal grace that restores natural integrity also to some degree enables the assent of faith to compensate for the absence of the knowledge of natural truths. Yet clearly what may be known in service to theological contemplation, ought to be known. The tendencies that elsewhere may be expected to hold sway and fill the vacuum in the realm of thought, culture, and sensibility are either unhelpful or positively harmful to the task of explicating and promoting Christian life.

It is perhaps the final salute that a Thomist owes to the efforts of de Lubac on this score to see to it that the chief effect of emending his error about the natural desire for God is not merely to throw us back to the *status quo ante*. For that *status quo ante* already was deeply marred and impaired by the grievous attrition of the tradition's emphasis upon *nature as a normative principle in theology*—a *theonomic* principle—and the consequent harboring *in germinus* of the praxeological obsessions and autonomist tendencies that became the chief divagations of the postconciliar era. Rather—if truth is holographic—the task is to see to it that the shards of right reason are reunited within a rich and realistic metaphysic translucent to the further ordering of grace and Revelation, and at the service of *sacra doctrina*. Such a treatment—clarifying the manner in which human nature with divine aid may achieve supernatural friendship and beatific fruition, and bringing all creation into the service and under the dominion of Christ—is a fitting response to an error whose doubtless genuine and profound theological motivation it more truly fathoms and fulfills.

N.V