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THE PROBLEM OF THE *DESIDERIUM NATURALE* IN THE THOMISTIC TRADITION

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The theory of the *desiderium naturale* in St. Thomas Aquinas has raised some of the most difficult questions in the history of Roman Catholic thought. At issue is whether a natural desire to see the divine essence can be reconciled with the necessarily supernatural and gratuitous manner of this desire's fulfillment. The 16th century Dominican, Cardinal Cajetan strove to mollify the problem by proposing a *duplex ordo* in which the hypothetical state of pure nature would have its own natural end distinct from man's supernatural end. This ostensible solution to the issue was regnant until the broad ranging criticisms of the *Nouvelle Theologie* in the 20th century (represented especially by Henri De Lubac). The theologies of grace, which emerged after this critique—most notably that of Karl Rahner—sought to remedy the Neoscholastic *separation* of nature and grace by an equally problematic *integration* of the two orders. We propose that the dangers inherent in both the extrinsecism of Cajetan and the immanentism of Rahner can be addressed by turning to alternative interpretations of the *desiderium naturale* (in particular that of Domingo Bañez), which do greater justice to the harmony and integrity of the orders of nature and grace.

St. Thomas Aquinas taught that there exists within the human person a natural desire to see God. Given the historical importance of the Thomistic system, the questions raised by this doctrine have proved to be among the most significant and enduring in the history of Roman Catholic thought. In spite of its apparently esoteric character, the issue bears upon the very end of human existence, the nature of human knowledge and the soul, the relation between philosophy and theology,

and between nature and grace. Indeed, this very question, I will argue, has conditioned many of the great debates and paradigm shifts in Catholic theology from the 16th century to Vatican II.

What is the problem of the natural desire or *desiderium naturale*? Fundamentally it is the paradox of a natural desire for a supernatural end. The problem therefore arises from a certain tension within the Thomistic synthesis. On the one hand, Aquinas aims to show along Aristotelian lines that beatitude is found in the possession of a self-sufficient good which fulfills and perfects the inclinations immanent within human nature itself. On the other hand, he wishes to maintain the doctrine affirmed in sacred scripture that salvation is God's free and unmerited gift made efficacious through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

For Aquinas to integrate the two positions he had to show that on the one hand, the vision of the Divine essence to which man is ordained corresponds to an immanent human desire, and, on the other hand, that the fulfillment of this desire wholly transcends the natural power of man to attain. Aquinas does this by casting the vision of God as the fulfillment of the intellect's orientation to quiddity or essences. By nature the intellect desires to know things according to their essence (their whatness) and is not satisfied merely to know their existence (their thatness). Since, according to his natural theology, it is possible for man by natural reason to know of the existence of the First Cause, if it did not arrive at knowledge of the essence of the First Cause there would remain in the intellect a natural desire to know the essence of the First cause. But says Aquinas such quiddiative knowledge of God transcends the natural power of the human intellect.

The central question then becomes whether the concept of the intellectual desire to see God exerts a *claim* upon the Divine beneficence. Since in this schema the Beatific Vision corresponds to a natural ordination, would not God be required to offer the possibility of the Beatific vision to man or else thwart the legitimate claims of human nature? Indeed one of Aquinas's arguments for the possibility of the beatific vision is precisely that since man has a natural desire for it, it must be able to be fulfilled—"if the intellect of the rational creature could not reach so far as to the first cause of things, the natural desire would remain void. Hence it must be granted that the blessed see the essence of God."[1]

[1] *Summa Theologica* I, q. 12, art. 2; the translation used was that of the Dominican Fathers from 1911, reprinted by Christian Classics (Westminster, Maryland) in 1981.

Does this mean that the Beatific Vision is in a sense *owed* to man in justice? And if so can it be said to be wholly gratuitous as the Christian tradition has always maintained? It is a question that has long troubled Roman Catholic theologians through the centuries.

An exploration of theological responses to the Thomistic *desiderium naturale* leads us then to distinguish two major periods of reflection. The first phase is the commentator tradition of the 16th century, the most distinguished representative is Cardinal Cajetan of Spain. Born in Spain in 1469 under the name Jaime de Vio, Cajetan was appointed master-general of the Dominican order in 1507 and took part of most in most the central ecclesiastical events of his day. He commissioned the first monks to evangelize the newly discovered Americas, took a prominent place in the events of the fifth Lateran council defending Papal claims against concilliarism, engaged in theological disputation with Martin Luther at the dawn of the reformation controversy, and was commissioned with the task of studying the annulment request of King Henry VIII of England.

Cajetan was an ardent Thomist, and by pushing for the replacement of Peter Lombard's sentences with Aquinas's *Summa Theologica* in doctrinal formation he may be said to have inaugurated the post-medieval Baroque period of Catholic theology. He was also among the most significant commentators on the *Summa Theologica*.

For Cajetan a natural desire to see God can exist only once we presuppose the knowledge of our supernatural vocation through revelation. Considered in isolation from the supernatural order, a natural desire can exist only for something obtainable by natural powers. As he writes in his commentary on the first part:

> The rational creature can be considered in two ways, either absolutely, or as ordained to happiness. If the rational creature is considered absolutely, then the natural desire is that for which is within the scope of the natural faculty, and thus I concede that there is no natural desire of seeing God as he is in himself. But if the rational creature is considered in the second sense, then it naturally desires to see God because it has knowledge of certain effects, namely those of grace and glory.[2]

In essence Cajetan resolves the problem of gratuity by doing away with the *desiderium naturale* properly speaking. To the extent such a desire exists it is a posteriori to revelation. Since there is no intrinsic desire

[2] Cajetan, *Comm. In Iam, (Q12)*, quoted in R. Garrigou-Lagrange: *The One God*, London: Herder Books, 1946 : 328.

to see God belonging to human nature as such, there is no theological problem of gratuity since nature cannot exact from God what it does not desire. Cajetan proposes instead a hypothetical state of nature that in the absence of supernatural grace or the knowledge of revelation would have its own proper end obtainable by natural powers—i.e. the natural contemplation of God. Since Cajetan's schema envisions nature as a self-contained, autonomous system with its own end we have here the idea of the *duplex ordo*, an order of grace with a supernatural end, and an order of nature with a natural end. In the concrete order the supernatural end subsumes the natural end since God has positively ordained man to a supernatural vocation. Thus in the concrete, actual order Cajetan would not speak of two modes of beatitude which we must choose between. However for Cajetan the hypothetical state of pure nature is a necessary postulate to safeguard the gratuity of the Beatific Vision.

Cajetan's solution to the problem of gratuity attained broad support. It comprised the foundation of the post-Tridentine theology of desire and remained regnant as the Neoscholastic school, which survived well into the 20th century for example in the thought of Fr. Garrigou-Lagrange. It was not until the mid-20th century that the Neoscholastic system and its *duplex ordo* came under attack from the so called *Nouvelle Theologie* of which Cardinal De Lubac is perhaps the most distinguished representative. In works such as *Surrnatural* and *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, De Lubac's distinctive viewpoint on nature and grace became clear.

The focal point of the critique of the *duplex ordo* is that it radically *separates* the order of grace from the order of nature so that the two orders are fundamentally extrinsic to each other. De Lubac's principle concern was to safeguard the notion of man's ordination to God as the fulfillment of the intrinsic quality of our spiritual being as such, in opposition to Cajetan's view that the desire for God is conditioned upon the supervention of grace. Is this not really a case of a supervening grace imposing its end on nature conceived as alien to it? For De Lubac the central focus of his theology is that man has an intrinsic dynamism toward God. There is a human nature ordered to a supernatural end, but no distinct natural end. In the *Mystery of the Supernatural*, De Lubac argues that Cajetan by making the supernatural order completely extrinsic to the natural order has constructed an autonomous nature fundamentally unrelated to the order of grace. De Lubac even argues that Cajetan's view has a certain kinship with the enlightenment

anthropology going so far as to argue that the pure nature of the 16th century paved the way for the naturalistic rationalism of the 17th and 18th century. He says of the Neoscholastics that

> They are just as ready to give a precise form to their concept of a purely natural economy [...] in that economy as they present it, all of man's moral life would depend almost exclusively on his own innate powers [...] does it not lead us to suppose a being similar to that present in the rationalist philosophers both ancient and modern [...] sufficient unto himself, a being who expects no graces, who relies on no providence.[3]

While De Lubac seldom critiques St. Thomas directly (as opposed to his neo-scholastic commentators) ultimately De Lubac believes that the conceptual virus of extrinsecism was contracted when the Aristotelian concept of nature was incorporated into Christian theology. Cajetan's concept of pure nature only becomes possible when the Aristotelian nature—a self-contained category—was imported. If the Aristotelian concept of nature is for De Lubac the main source of the problem, the remedy is to recover the Patristic concept of nature, which he contrasts with the self-sufficient nature of Aristotle. The result of this *Resourcement* is significant for this discussion. For De Lubac the basic principle of Patristic anthropology is the concept of man as the image of God. For De Lubac Spirit and Cosmos are distinct entities, and since man is an embodied spirit belong to both realms there are conflicting tendencies within him. One tendency resulting from his embodied and created nature is cosmocentric and remains contained within the world. The other tendency resulting from the divine image has a dynamism to transcend the cosmos. Since spirit is fundamentally distinct from any other created nature it cannot be satisfied with the self-enclosed realm of nature but desires transcendence through union with God. The mistake of Aristotelianism is to treat man as a part of the natural cosmos and thus possessing an end proportionate to his own natural powers—an immanent fulfillment. This for De Lubac ignores the way in which man as a created spirit possesses a dynamism to self-transcendence. While man's spiritual nature has a restless dynamism for God, created spirit does not belong to the spiritual order as understood by the scholastics. This fact for De Lubac is ultimately sufficient to guarantee the gratuity of the Vision. As he writes:

[3] H. De Lubac: *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, New York: Crossroad Herder, 1998: 46–47.

> The fact that the nature of a spiritual being as it actually exists is not conceived as an order destined to close in finally upon itself, but in a sense open to an inevitably supernatural end, does not mean that it has in itself even the smallest positively supernatural element [...] thus this fact does not mean that God is in the smallest degree bound.[4]

The thought of Henri De Lubac represents a decisive turning point in the theological study of the problem of nature and grace. Though often violently attacked in his own time, his project seems in the historical sense to have dealt a lethal blow to Cajetan's Neoscholastic system and the *ordo duplex*. By and large most Catholic theologians have followed his line of trajectory in striving to avoid the extrinsecism of Cajetan and his Neoscholastic followers In exposing the limitations of Cajetan however, De Lubac restored the *desiderium naturale* as a desire for God intrinsic to human nature as such. Yet by restoring—this time with a patristic cadence, the *desiderium naturale*—De Lubac re-awakened the old problem of safeguarding the gratuity of the vision, which Cajetan's system had meant to banish.

In responding to the challenge, the dominant solution of contemporary theologians stands in sharp contrast to that adopted by their baroque predecessors. While Cajetan endeavored to safeguard the gratuity of the beatific vision by radically *separating* the order of nature and grace, contemporary theology proposes to resolve the question by radically *integrating* the two orders. The tendency is shown in where nature is treated as always and already in a supernaturally elevated condition. The foremost representative of the tendency to view nature as radically graced is of course Karl Rahner, one of the foremost catholic theologians of the 20th century, and considered to be one of the chief influences on the thought of Vatican II.

Like Cajetan, Rahner is sensitive to the problem of the safeguarding the gratuity of man' supernatural end in light of the *desiderium naturale*.

Cajetan's system sought to silence the disquieting problems in Aquinas's original formulation of the *desiderium naturale*, while Rahner had to contend with the resurgence of the question under the aegis of the *Nouvelle Theologie*. Rahner clearly finds De Lubac's effort to resolve the problem of gratuity through a reconceptualization of nature unconvincing.

> The paradox of a natural desire for the supernatural is conceivable and necessary if by desire is understood an "openness" to the supernatural [...] but a desire which is natural and at the same time, even if only objectively, attracts grace to itself [...] is a desire which demands grace, because

[4] *Ibid.*: 31.

> precisely otherwise it would be meaningless. But this is incompatible with the unexactedness of grace.[5]

The question of "exactedness" here is precisely the question of whether beatitude is something which God owes to human nature. Like Cajetan—and apparently unlike De Lubac—Rahner is unable to conceive of a strictly natural desire for God which would not exact from God the Beatific Vision. Thus like Cajetan, Rahner's theology ultimately endeavors to eliminate the *desideerium naturale* in the proper sense.

But in spite of their common concerns Rahner adopts a diametrically opposed strategy for safeguarding the gratuity of the Beatific Vision. Rahner argues that because in the concrete order there is no simple archeology through which the pure nature can be recovered because concrete human existence is always suffused in the concrete by the supernatural.

> One does not know whether in the very act of asking the question, contingently but unavoidably for us a supernatural element may not have been at work in the questioner which could never in actual fact be bracketed off, and so would prevent one from laying hold purely of man's natural essence in the concept.[6]

For Rahner the concrete ordination of man to a supernatural end would impact the intrinsic nature of man such that a recovery of the state of pure nature would be impossible. Like De Lubac whose critique has deeply informed his work, Rahner is anxious to avoid the pitfall of conceiving the relation of nature and grace in an extrinsic manner.

> The ontological presuppositions of this extrinsecism are quite problematic. One in particular is quite unintelligible, though it is tacitly assumed, to the effect that where grace has not yet laid hold of the man who has awakened to freedom by justifying him, his binding ordination to a supernatural end can only consist in a divine decree external to him.[7]

Rahner thus hopes to safeguard the gratuity of the supernatural order without reverting to the extrinsecism of Cajetan. In his effort to safeguard the unexacted nature of the Beatific Vision proposes to account for the *intrinsic* dynamism of man for beatitude. He is not prepared

[5] K. Rahner: *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 1., New York: Seabury Press, 1974: 309–310.

[6] *Ibid.*: 301–302.

[7] *Idem.*

however to accept the radical re-conceptualization of nature offered by the *Nouvelle Theologie*. It is here that Rahner offers his concept of the supernatural existential—that human nature as such is always in a condition of being supernaturally elevated:

> Antecedently to justification by grace received sacramentally or extrasacramentally he (man) is already redeemed and absolutely obliged to attend to his supernatural end. This situation is not a mere external one [. . .] but is a real modification of man added to his nature by God's grace and therefore supernatural but never lacking in the real order.[8]

Clearly in one respect conceiving of man as a supernatural existential "resolves" the matter, but by a literal *deus ex machina*. If the desire for the Beatific vision is itself supernatural then the issue of any claim upon God is dissolved. But if the order of nature cannot be delineated from the order of grace we may legitimately ask whether the integrity of the concept of nature has been so gravely compromised that the category itself has become superfluous. It seems also then that grace has become ontologically reconfigured as immanent to the human with all the potential problems that this may produce.

Rahner's theology is in a certain sense the offshoot of De Lubac's trajectory. De Lubac drew attention to the problems that arise from rendering the orders of nature and grace radically extrinsic to each other. Rahner moves to correct this through a radical "intrinsecism" that tends to conflate the two orders. In so doing we may wonder whether Rahner has on this point fled from the Scylla of radical extrinsecism to the Charybdis of a hyper-intrinsecism.

So is there a better solution to the problem of the *desiderium naturale* and gratuity then that offered by either neoscholasticism or Rahner? We have seen that the reaction of the *Nouvelle Theologie* was to a was to a specific baroque interpretation of the *desiderium naturale* of St. Thomas namely that of Cajetan. A certain theological deformation in Cajetan's system led in an overreaction in the contemporary period and equally problematic formulations. But if the conflation of nature and grace in Rahner is a reaction to the extrinsecism of Cajetan, what if Cajetan's model is itself a flawed appropriation of the thought of St. Thomas himself? Recall that Cajetan asserted that the *desiderium naturale* required knowledge of the Beatific Vision through revelation. In itself a natural desire can exist only for something obtainable by the natural powers.

[8] K. Rahner & H. Vorgrimler (eds.): *Dictionary of Theology*, New York: Crossroad, 1985. Cf. the entry under 'Supernatural Existential'.

However well Cajetan's solution safeguards the gratuity of the vision, it is highly questionable whether he validly interprets Aquinas himself. Aquinas roots the *desiderium* in the sense of wonder that arises from *any* effect man considers—i.e., on the inherent tendencies of the intellect considering created effects. Nowhere does he root the desire as Cajetan says in the consideration of grace and glory. Secondly, Aquinas argues here for the possibility of the beatific vision based on the natural desire to know God according to his essence. But if Cajetan were correct the natural desire would only emerge after the consideration of the beatific vision as a revealed truth. Aquinas would then be involved in a tautology.

Even within the Baroque tradition, Cajetan's understanding of this point did not go uncontested. We have for example the opinion of Cajetan's fellow Spaniard and Dominican Domingo Bañez the spiritual director of St. Teresa of Avila and one of the main participants in a famous 16th century controversy with the Jesuit Luis Molina on free will and grace. Bañez roots the desire wholly and fully within the natural order. The desire is elicited from a consideration a created effects, since it pertains to the intrinsic structure of the created intellect to seek after the essence of things. This desire however is only conditional—it desires to know God according to His essence if it is possible. Finally this desire is without grace inefficacious since nothing in the order of nature can bring it to fulfillment. Since the desire is conditional and inefficacious Bañez does not see this desire as exerting any claims upon God.

> Man can have a natural appetite, that is elicited by one's natural powers, which is a certain conditional and inefficacious desire of seeing God [. . .] I have said *conditional* because by his natural powers man cannot be certain that such a good is possible. Thus man can desire and wish never to die, if this were possible. But although such a condition is not explicitly conceived by the mind, yet it is implicitly contained in the object, which is represented as good, and not as possible.[9]

There is no operative potency within the created intellect to cognize the divine essence. It is only possible through an ontological modification of the created intellect by which it is united to the divine essence. Bañez's approach seems to be better grounded in the text of *Summa Theologica*.

It may therefore be possible to avoid the theological difficulties of either Cajetan or Rahner by recovering the Thomistic doctrine itself.

[9] D. Bañez, *Com in Iam, q. 12, a. 1*, quoted in Garrigou-Lagrange (1946 : 330).

What if the modern dialectical reaction to Neoscholasticism was in fact a reaction to a pseudo-problem arising from Cajetan's erroneous hermeneutics? In that case, the most fruitful way to break out of the dialectic is to return to the source. In this task Bañez is a great help since he defends the gratuity of the vision along starkly different lines then Cajetan. For Bañez, while the desire originates in the order of nature, it is only fulfilled in the order of grace. Grace thus makes efficacious what in nature is inefficacious, and makes actual what in nature is merely possible. The two orders preserve their integrity and harmony. Such a view not only avoids the theological problems associated with the systems of Cajetan and Rahner, it also appears to cohere with he thought of St. Thomas himself.