

Addendum on the Grace–Nature Distinction

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Abstract

In a previous article the author noted the role of Lonergan’s four-point hypothesis in unpacking the order of grace in the grace–nature distinction. Here he demonstrates how the hypothesis can be used to resolve classical tensions within the grace–nature debate, arguing that any genuine resolution to those tensions must evoke something like Lonergan’s four-point hypothesis. This parallels Rahner’s observation that only a trinitarian God can be a self-communicating God.

Keywords

grace–nature debate, Bernard Lonergan, Karl Rahner, trinitarian relations

In a recent article, “The Grace–Nature Distinction and the Construction of Systematic Theology,” I argued for the continued relevance of the distinction and for the significance of two developments in Lonergan’s thought: the scale of values as an unpacking of the relatively compact notion of human nature, and the four-point hypothesis as an unpacking of the notion of grace/supernatural through its identification of four created participations in the divine nature.¹ Among the helpful comments of the referees for that article was the question of how the four-point

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1. Neil Ormerod, “The Grace–Nature Distinction and the Construction of Systematic Theology,” *Theological Studies* 75 (2014) 515–36. I would like to thank my colleague Christiaan Jacobs-Vandegeer for his helpful comments on the first draft of this article.

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hypothesis contributed to the grace–nature distinction itself. In my revision of the original article I added further material on the ways the various levels of the scale of values sublated lower levels within higher levels and referred to Lonergan’s comments on conceptualism as blocking the way to a proper solution to the problem of the grace–nature distinction. In my own thinking, however, the significance of the four-point hypothesis in relation to the distinction was not clear. But further reflection on Robert Doran’s recent writings on the Trinity helped me develop the issue so as to formulate a more positive account of the grace–nature distinction in light of Lonergan’s hypothesis. This present note attempts to express this formulation. In doing so I hope to shed light on a position developed by Karl Rahner, that only a trinitarian God can be a self-communicating God.²

In my previous article I drew attention to the paradox or tension present in the development of the grace–nature distinction. Lonergan argues that we have a natural orientation to meaning, truth, and goodness, whose ultimate fulfilment can be found only in intimate union with Godself. In that case grace cannot add a new end to human living beyond what is already present in that natural desire because there is nothing beyond God that could fulfil us.³ However, if we accept that there is a natural desire for, or orientation to, God we may alternately:

- Posit an additional supernatural desire with a corresponding supernatural end, leading to two distinct ends, one natural, the other supernatural (extrinsicism). However, in doing so it is no longer clear that we are saved *as human beings*, since the positing of a different higher end implies a substantial change in human nature. Nor is it clear that grace completes and perfects nature.
- Claim that the end is attainable through the efforts of human nature alone (Pelagianism), a position officially condemned by the church.
- Come to the conclusion that human nature of itself is unable to attain the end to which it is ordained, implying that “nature is frustrated.”⁴

Much of the energy of Lonergan’s argument in holding to a natural desire with a supernatural fulfilment is directed toward blunting the force of this third alternative by distinguishing between horizontal and vertical finalities and noting the upward dynamism toward higher integrations already present within the created order.⁵ Dissatisfied with

2. Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (New York: Crossroad, 1997) 99–101.

3. Bernard J. F. Lonergan, “The Natural Desire to See God,” in *Collection*, 2nd ed., rev. and augm., ed. Frederick E. Crowe, S.J., and Robert M. Doran, S.J. (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1988) 81–91.

4. There is a Scholastic adage, *nihil in natura frustra* (nothing in nature is in vain), used by some to claim that if we have a natural desire to see God, God would owe us the beatific vision. See Brian Himes, “Lonergan’s Position on the Natural Desire to See God and Aquinas’s Metaphysical Theology of Creation and Participation,” *Heythrop Journal* 54 (2013) 767–83, at 769.

5. Himes, *ibid.*, deals with the issues of horizontal and vertical finality most fulsomely.

these tensions, some theologians (Henri de Lubac and John Milbank, for example) move in the direction of supernaturalizing our natural orientation, running the risk of forcing God's hand by making grace a necessary constituent of human existence.⁶ It would seem that this position was rejected by Pius XII in *Humani generis*.⁷

As an alternative to the above and as a way to attempt to resolve these tensions, I would propose the following formulation: *grace (and the supernatural generally) does not establish a new end to human nature, but it does establish a new relation to that end*.⁸ Viewed in that light, the four-point hypothesis is not extrinsic to the grace–nature debate but provides a comprehensive resolution to it. The rest of this note attempts to justify this formulation and claim.

Creation as Relation

The first step in this process rests on a particular conception of creation as a relation to the Creator. In undertaking this process I draw on the classical theistic framework expounded by Bernard Lonergan in *Insight*.⁹

The existence of any creature is not self-explanatory, that is, the creature does not contain within itself sufficient grounds for its own existence. In this sense the creature is a contingent reality, not in the sense that its existence is “by chance,” but that it is not necessary. If there is to be an explanation for that existence, it must arise from

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6. The extent to which Henri de Lubac required God to grant the beatific vision to rational creatures is disputed. While de Lubac seems to have formally accepted the ruling of *Humani generis*, John Milbank argues that de Lubac, in his unpublished writings, continued to maintain the position that God could not deny the beatific vision to rational creatures. See John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate concerning the Supernatural* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005). For an excellent account of the debates raised by *la nouvelle théologie*, see Stephen Duffy, *The Graced Horizon: Nature and Grace in Modern Catholic Thought* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1992).
 7. “Others destroy the gratuity of the supernatural order, since God, they say, cannot create intellectual beings without ordering and calling them to the beatific vision” (Pius XII, *Humani generis* no. 26, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xii/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_12081950_humani-generis_en.html). All URLs cited herein were accessed September 17, 2014.
 8. Lonergan defines finality as follows: “By ‘finality’ I would name not the end itself but relation to the end” (“Mission and the Spirit,” in *A Third Collection: Papers by Bernard J. F. Lonergan*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe [New York: Paulist, 1985] 23–34, at 24). He also provides three succinct accounts of absolute, horizontal, and vertical finalities. See also the discussion on finality in Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1997) 210, where Lonergan discusses the presence of the beloved in the lover in terms of finality.
 9. Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1992). For a defense of the continuing viability of classical theism in the light of the findings of modern science, see Neil Ormerod and Cynthia S. W. Crysedale, *Creator God, Evolving World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013).

something apart from the creature. Classically this explanation is ultimately to be found in God's efficient, exemplary, and final causality.¹⁰ The creature exists through the divine will (efficient), it is modelled on the divine existence (exemplary), and it is ordered to the divine goodness (final) within an ordered creation where each part contributes to the total ordination of creation to God. Lonergan refers to this final causality as "the ground of [creation's] value, and the ultimate objective of all finalistic striving."¹¹ Through efficient causality God makes the creature exist; through exemplary causality that existence reflects the divine intelligence through the creature's intelligible relationships to the rest of the created order; and through final causality there is a dynamism in that created order toward its end in God. These observations give some philosophical framing to the Christian belief in *creatio ex nihilo*.

More fully, God as efficient cause establishes a relationship between God as Creator and the creature, which is real on the side of the creature and logical on the side of God; that is, it adds nothing to God but something to the creature, namely, its very existence. This is the meaning of Lonergan's technical term "contingent predication." Contingent, created realities may be predicated of God without implying change in Godself:

Every contingent predication concerning God also is an extrinsic denomination. In other words, God is intrinsically the same whether or not he understands, affirms, wills, causes this or that universe to be. If he does not, then God exists and nothing else exists. If he does, God exists and the universe in question exists; the two existences suffice for the truth of the judgments that God understands, affirms, wills, effects the universe; for God is unlimited in perfection, and what is unlimited in perfection must understand, affirm, will, effect whatever else is.¹²

While this type of formulation has been subjected to various criticisms, mostly from process theologians and others engaged in the science–religion debate, any alternative to it seems to implicate God in time, and hence space and matter, which seems a high price to pay.¹³ As exemplary cause, God establishes the nature of the creature, not in

10. See Lonergan, *Insight* 674–80.

11. Most contemporary literature would, of course, refer to this finalistic striving as evolution. However, evolution is a biological explanation that has been stretched beyond its original context to embrace everything from suns and galaxies to societies and cultures. These nonbiological realities do not mutate or engage in natural selection. On the other hand, Lonergan's notion of emergent probability as a general metaphysical idea subsumes biological evolution within its more general framework.

12. Lonergan, *Insight* 684. A significant formulation of contingent predication can be found in Augustine's *De Trinitate* 5.16.17. It was also a major theme in Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Grace and Freedom: Operative Grace in the Thought of St. Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2000) and, of course, finds a more complete expression in *Insight*.

13. On one such debate, see Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Does God Play Dice? Divine Providence and Chance," *Theological Studies* 57 (1996) 3–18; Joseph A. Bracken, "Response to Elizabeth Johnson's 'Does God Play Dice?'," *Theological Studies* 57 (1996) 720–30; and David Burrell, "Does Process Theology Rest on a Mistake?," *Theological Studies* 43

isolation from any possible world order but as a concrete intelligible, whose intelligibility is found in its relationship to everything else in this existing world order. Lonergan insists that things exist only in relation to the intelligible world order in which they occur. In this sense the whole has priority over its constituent parts: "I affirm that world order is prior to finite natures."¹⁴ As final cause, God imbues the universe with value, dynamically ordering the one existing world order toward its proper end in God:

So it is that every tendency and force, every movement and change, every desire and striving is designed to bring about the order of the universe in the manner in which in fact they contribute to it; and since the order of the universe itself has been shown to be because of the perfection and excellence of the primary being and good, so all that is for the order of the universe is headed ultimately to the perfection and excellence that is its primary source and ground.¹⁵

In the particular existent that is a human being, the existence of a human being arises from God as efficient cause. The concrete human nature that a person has exists in an intelligible relationship to the rest of creation as a product of billions of years of cosmic emergent probability, including millions of years of biological evolution. Further, that process is not merely intelligible; it is purposefully oriented to its end in God. In a human being, that finality is evident in a dynamic orientation to meaning, truth, and goodness that tends to God as most profoundly knowable and ultimately lovable. The intentional reach of this orientation is unrestricted, as revealed in the unrestricted reach of human questioning.¹⁶ Still, the attainment of its goal of meaning, truth, and goodness remains incremental and piecemeal through individual acts of understanding, judgment, and decision. This created contingent reality (the natural desire to know), which is constitutive of humans as rational beings, is created by God's efficient causality as a created participation in the uncreated light of divine intelligence (exemplary cause). Moreover, it orders us intelligently, reasonably, and responsibly to God as an object to be known and loved, reflecting the nature of God as final cause. This relation to God the Creator as final cause constitutes us as human beings.

Grace as Relation through the Four-Point Hypothesis

The commonly accepted teaching among the Scholastics in the first part of the 20th century in relation to the theology of grace is that created grace was prior to and the condition for the possibility of uncreated grace. Both Lonergan and Rahner rejected

(1982) 125–35. My own position can be found in Neil Ormerod, "Chance and Necessity, Providence and God," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 70 (2005) 263–78; and Ormerod and Crysedale, *Creator God, Evolving World*.

14. Lonergan, "The Natural Desire to See God" 85.

15. Lonergan, *Insight* 688.

16. Lonergan, "The Natural Desire to See God" 81; *Insight* 394.

this ordering, though both found different solutions to the problem of reversing the order. One of the constraints both faced at the time was the teaching propounded by Pius XII in *Mystici Corporis Christi*:

But let all agree uncompromisingly on this, if they would not err from truth and from the orthodox teaching of the Church: to reject every kind of mystic union by which the faithful of Christ should in any way pass beyond the sphere of creatures and wrongly enter the divine, were it only to the extent of appropriating to themselves as their own but one single attribute of the eternal Godhead. And, moreover, let all hold this as certain truth, that all these activities are common to the most Blessed Trinity, insofar as they have God as supreme efficient cause.¹⁷

This teaching appeared to exclude a possibly trinitarian account of the supernatural order and restrict theologians to an appeal to efficient causality in providing an account of the supernatural. While Rahner attempts to finesse this stricture through an appeal to quasiformal causality, an analogy based on formal causation, Lonergan chose a different path. Writing in his 1947/1948 course on grace, Lonergan added, “This statement [by Pius XII] perhaps leaves a certain latitude when God is not considered as an efficient principle but as a constitutive principle.”¹⁸

To understand more clearly the nature of the constraints faced, we can consider them in terms of the three types of causality considered above:

- The teaching of Pius XII constrained any account of the supernatural to the use of the category of efficient cause. Anything else would seem to compromise the divine transcendence and blur the distinction between Creator and creature.
- In terms of exemplary cause, grace could not produce a substantial change in human nature, because this would mean that we are not saved *as human beings*, but as some other type of being. Hence, for example, the Scholastic insistence that grace is an accident and that grace completes and perfects nature rather than replaces or destroys it.
- In terms of final cause, because human beings have a natural orientation to God as knowable and loveable and the intentional reach of that orientation is unrestricted, the supernatural cannot add a new end beyond what is already given naturally but must be a new mode of attainment of that goal.

It is easy enough to understand the history of the debates around grace and nature raised by *la nouvelle théologie* as various attempts to push up against these restraints. Rahner’s use of the category of quasiformal causality pushes up against the first; the neo-Scholastics’ two-storey account of grace pushes up against the second; while de

17. Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis Christi* no. 78, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xii/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_29061943_mystici-corporis-christi_en.html.

18. Quoted in Robert M. Doran, *The Trinity in History: A Theology of the Divine Missions*, vol. 1, *Missions and Processions* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2012) 26.

Lubac pushes up against the third by seeking to make the natural orientation actually supernatural. Lonergan, on the other hand, works within each constraint to come up with an alternate account that accommodates all three.

Working backward to some extent, Lonergan's solution to the grace–nature distinction is to posit *the supernatural not as a new end (final cause) but as a new (created) relation to that end*. That is, it provides us with a new way of relating to God as final cause. This new relation creates an accidental modification (exemplary cause) within the human being who remains substantially human. These new contingent realities in the human being are brought about by God as efficient cause, common to all three Persons of the Trinity as required by the teaching of Pius XII.

The first question, then, is how we might conceive of such new relations to our end. One solution would be to posit the mediation of a higher-order creature, angelic in nature, who makes the divine reality more accessible to our limited human capabilities. Lonergan might refer to this type of mediation as a relatively supernatural account of the grace–nature distinction.¹⁹ Such a relation would be supernatural for us but may simply be natural for the mediating reality. While such options are probably not popular among contemporary theologians, it is clear that such possibilities were taken quite seriously in the worldview of the New Testament. Equally clear, however, is the New Testament's insistence that this is not the type of offer being made through the saving mission of Jesus and the sending of the Spirit.

The second option, then, is to establish a relation with the divine itself, through which we have a (created) participation in the divine life. But if this relation is not to be simply another instance of the Creator–creature relationship, and if it actually attains God in Godself, it would seem that this can come about only if there are internal relations within the Godhead itself. If there are no internal relations, then it would be difficult to see how any supposed supernatural relation that attains God in Godself would not simply be an instance of a Creator–creature relation for some more exalted creature than a human being and so would not truly attain God.²⁰ The new relations, which I call supernatural, would then be created participations in the divine life through a participation in these internal relations. This would provide an absolutely supernatural account of the grace–nature distinction.

If this line of reasoning is correct, then it implies that a solution to tensions that arise in relation to the grace–nature distinction—a solution that operates within the constraints spelled out above and is faithful to the New Testament witness that only an absolutely supernatural option is adequate—can occur only if God is internally related. While this solution does not establish the precise nature of internal relatedness in God, the evidence of the New Testament again makes a trinitarian solution the most viable option on the table. *This solution, then, implies a remarkable nexus between trinitarian theology and*

19. See Lonergan, *Insight* 718–25, where he discusses the natural, relatively supernatural, and absolutely supernatural solutions to the problem of evil.

20. There is a difficulty here in arguing for necessity strictly so-called because one would not want to put a priori limits on what God can and cannot do, but the argument is more a matter of “fittingness.”

the grace–nature distinction. Only a trinitarian God can enter into supernatural relations with creatures that attain God as God truly is, while maintaining the creaturely status of the creature. What Lonergan’s four-point hypothesis does is spell out how the four trinitarian relationships—paternity, filiation, active and passive spirations—may then be correlated with four distinct created participations in the divine nature: the secondary act of existence of the incarnation, the light of glory, sanctifying grace, and the habit of charity. The four-point hypothesis is then not simply an unpacking of the order of the supernatural, as I argued in my previous article. Rather, it provides a resolution to the tensions present in the exposition of the grace–nature distinction.

Rahner makes a similar claim in his work on the Trinity. Drawing on the language of divine self-communication, he argues that a God who seeks to communicate Godself to human beings in history, as a true and genuine self-communication, can do so only on the basis of a self-communication within the divine life itself. In his justification for the movement from the economic to the immanent Trinity, Rahner argues that

the differentiation of the self-communication of God in history (of truth) and spirit (of love) must belong to God “in himself,” or otherwise this difference, which undoubtedly exists, would do away with God’s self-communication. For these modalities and their differentiation either are in God himself . . . or they exist only in us, they belong only to the realm of creatures as effects of the divine creative activity.²¹

Rahner is therefore arguing that only a trinitarian God can engage in a genuine *self-communication*. Lonergan extends Rahner’s argument beyond the divine *self-communication* of the three Persons with their corresponding processions and missions to the more general notion of created *participations* in the divine nature built on the four trinitarian relations.²²

The second question is how these new relations, created participations in the trinitarian relationships, are manifest in human beings. Just as the Creator–creature relation is manifest in human beings as a conscious, unrestricted desire for meaning, truth, and goodness, so too these created participations will involve modifications within human consciousness. The supernatural is conscious, but not necessarily known as such.²³ While we have no direct experience (in this life) of the modification attendant upon the light of glory, or access to Jesus’ consciousness, we can ask about the modifications attendant upon sanctifying grace and the habit of charity. Attention to the precise nature of such a modification is as difficult and demanding as attention to the natural orientation to meaning, truth, and goodness. Lonergan refers to the experience of grace in the

21. Rahner, *Trinity* 99–100.

22. The shift here from the language of communication to that of participation is significant. Even for Lonergan there remain only two communications corresponding to the two missions, but the language of participation frees up one’s imagination enough to encompass other possibilities.

23. Again this significant point is made by Rahner. See his “Reflections on the Experience of Grace,” in *The Theology of the Spiritual Life*, Theological Investigations 3 (New York: Crossroads, 1982) 86–90.

following terms: "Ordinarily the experience of the mystery of love and awe is not objectified. It remains within subjectivity as a vector, an undertow, a fateful call to a dreaded holiness."²⁴ He repeatedly alludes to the text of Romans 5:5: "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us" (RSV). Christiaan Jacobs-Vandegeer has attempted a more metaphysical approach prior to taking up a more interior perspective.²⁵ Doran has provided a more nuanced account of this question concerning the phenomenology of both sanctifying grace and the habit of charity.²⁶ My intention is not to pursue this discussion here, but merely to indicate its ongoing nature.

Conclusion

As a theological educator I have long held that the topic of grace and nature is the most difficult one to address coherently in the classroom. It requires a higher degree of conceptual sophistication than any other topic I have taught, if one wishes to move beyond merely descriptive accounts to explanatory systems. I would far prefer to induct students into the ineffable mystery of the Trinity. I am grateful, then, to the question raised by an anonymous referee of my earlier article for pushing my investigation further to see how the issue of grace and nature is in fact intimately connected with Christian doctrine on the Trinity. In responding to that question I would argue that *grace (and the supernatural generally) does not establish a new end to human nature, but it does establish a new relation to that end*. Further, in light of this position, *only a trinitarian God can enter into a supernatural relation with creatures that attains God as God truly is while maintaining their creaturely status*.

Author biography

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24. Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972) 113.

25. Christiaan Jacobs-Vandegeer, "Sanctifying Grace in a 'Methodical Theology,'" *Theological Studies* 68 (2007) 52–76.

26. Doran, *Missions and Processions* 1. I also prescind here from the position developed both by Doran and myself in relation to other possible participations in the divine nature, through the supernatural virtues of faith and hope. See Neil Ormerod, "The Metaphysics of Holiness: Created Participation in the Divine Nature," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 79 (2014) 68–82.