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Rahner's Supernatural Existential: What *is* It?

The problem of nature and grace, specifically, the question of man's natural desire for God, has again been attracting attention.[1] The debate has chiefly involved followers of Henri Cardinal de Lubac and divergent strands of Thomism. Karl Rahner's theory of the Supernatural Existential has drawn less attention. Further, very little causal reflection has been devoted to its foundations. I seek to offer such an analysis.

First, I lay out the perennial problematic of nature and grace and note Rahner's agreement with the critique each classical opponent registers towards the other. Second, I expound, synchronically, the Supernatural Existential as possible solution.[2] Drawn from a category of phenomenological analysis, the theory appears to escape the pitfalls of both the classical opponents. Third, I undertake causal analysis of the postulate. I contend that inductive inquiry yields no satisfying causal support for the postulate as Rahner describes it and that the deficit results precisely from phenomenological evasion of the causal question. Fourth, I sketch a qualified causal retrieval of the postulate responsible to the question.

1. The Perennial Theological Problem of Nature and Grace

The problem of the nature and grace relationship is perennial both in that it constitutes a matter of *per se* interest for speculative theology and in the manner in which it is classically tackled in scholasticism. The problem is causal. Core among the questions are these: What is the character and the formal object of man's natural desire to know God? Whence arises man's unconditional desire for supernatural union with God? Could a hypostasis

[1] Even the recent literature is vast. For the work that sparked debate, see FEINGOLD, Lawrence: *The Natural Desire to See God according to St. Thomas Aquinas and His Interpreters*. Naples, FL: Sapientia Press 2010. For more recent discussion in English, see *Modern Theology* 31 (2015).

[2] In the English literature, Karen Kilby argues for discontinuity, while David Coffey argues for continuity. See KILBY, Karen: *Karl Rahner: Theology and Philosophy*. New York: Routledge 2004. See also COFFEY, David: *The Whole Rahner on the Supernatural Existential*, in: TS 65 (2004), 95–118. Neither Kilby nor Coffey cite the following important work: RULANDS, Paul: *Menschsein unter dem An-Spruch der Gnade: Das übernatürliche Existential und der Begriff der natura pura bei Karl Rahner* (= Innsbrucker theologische Studien 55). Innsbruck: Tyrolia Verlag 2000. IDEM: *Das Übernatürliche Existential: In der Taufgnade begründeter Beginn der Gleichförmigkeit des Menschen mit Christus. Ein neuer Blick auf die Genese eines Grundaxioms Karl Rahners*, in: ZKTh 123 (2001), 237–268.

of intellectual nature, as such, reach meaningful completion without beatific union?

It is universally recognized that two norms should guide the inquiry. First, grace must be "doubly gratuitous." Second, it must be deeply meaningful. As to the first, the gratuity of grace is special. Creation itself is the first gift. Grace is doubly gratuitous because, even prescinding from sin, it is freely given to the existing creature *qua* of a rational essence.

For many scholastics, what accounts for double gratuity is the contention that created being, considered as such and in precision from sin, can be meaningful apart from grace. To be meaningful, a world must be in accord with divine wisdom.[3] The requirements in a thing such that it accord with God's wisdom can be designated *debita naturae*, things due to a nature. The debt is one that God owes to himself, not to an independently existing creature. It is a debt of intelligibility in the created order and rests upon God's freedom to create.[4]

Debita naturae can be either definitional or dynamical. Definitional *debita naturae* regard first act or essential principles: If God creates a man, he creates a rational animal. *Debita naturae* can be also dynamical. Since a created thing is ordered to its end, fruition pertains to its very intelligibility. In any wisely made order, the end of intellectual creatures should be *per se* possible of attainment. In precision from sin, the requirements for the possibility and attainment of such an end constitute dynamical *debita naturae*. A world in which the end of intellectual creatures would be *per se*, apart from sin, impossible to attain is meaningless. For these scholastics, such an absurd world is impossible since it contradicts God's wisdom. Hence, the natural end that corresponds to intellectual creatures as such is attainable and meaningful. Grace is doubly gratuitous, then, precisely because it is not a (dynamical) *debitum naturae*. I call this tradition of inquiry the "pure nature" tradition.

Henri de Lubac counters, against this tradition, that by his natural principles a man unconditionally desires a supernatural end. He adds that if such an end were permanently frustrated, concrete man would be meaningless, like the damned.[5] For Rahner, to suppose such a desire is to render grace due.[6] For Rahner as for the pure nature tradition, there must corres-

3 See THOMAS AQUINAS: *In IV Sent.*, d. 46, q. 1, a. 2, qla 1, ad 4.

4 See THOMAS AQUINAS: *ST Ia*, q. 21, art. 1, ad 3.

5 See DE LUBAC, Henri Cardinal: *The Mystery of the Supernatural*. Trans. Rosemary Sheed. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company 1998, 54–57, 203. IDEM: *Le mystère du surnaturel*, in: RSR 35 (1949), 91f. (hereafter, *Le mystère*). IDEM: *Surnaturel: Études historiques*. Paris: Aubier 1946, 459f.

6 See RAHNER, Karl: *Concerning the Relationship between Nature and Grace*, in: *Theological Investigations*, vol. 1. Trans. Cornelius Ernst. New York: Crossroad 1982, 308f. For the German, IDEM: *Über das Verhältnis von Natur und Gnade*, in: *Schriften zur Theologie*, vol. 1.

pond to human nature a meaningful end possible of attainment. Since on the above supposition the only meaningful end is supernatural, the grace necessary for its attainment is due. The consequence being contrary to faith, Rahner with the pure nature tradition holds that a natural end corresponds to human nature as such and that unconditional desire for a supernatural end cannot arise from natural principles.[7]

Does de Lubac render grace due? On the one hand, he sometimes implies as much: "How could the just and good God frustrate me, if it were not I who by my own fault turned myself away from him freely?"[8] Elsewhere, he softens this necessity by holding that God first and ultimately wills to create *deified* creatures and so produces bearers of human substance.[9] For Rahner, this latter position still renders grace due. On the other hand, de Lubac more decisively joins William of Ockham and others who, while accepting definitional *debita naturae*, reject all dynamical *debita naturae*. Accordingly, whereas God cannot make a square to be a circle, his wisdom does not require that any intellectual creatures be able to or attain fruition. This supposition allows one to hold that everything beyond a thing's substance is given with equally sheer gratuity. What is the cost? First, the supposition implies that a meaningless world is possible. Second, it does not allow one to account for the *special* gratuity of grace. De Lubac pays the price, holding that God could have refused grace even to innocent men unconditionally desirous of vision,[10] leaving them without rest.[11] On de Lubac's postulate, our very world is, even apart from sin, meaningless *except* as rescued by grace.

Zürich: Benziger Verlag 1962, 323–345. Rahner is responding to Émile Delaye, who shared de Lubac's notion of a natural, unconditional desire for the supernatural.

7 See RAHNER: *Relationship*, TI 1, 305–310. See also RAHNER, Karl: *Hearer of the Word*. Trans. Joseph Donceel. New York: Continuum 1994, 151. IDEM: *Nature and Grace*, in: *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4. Trans. Kevin Smyth. Baltimore: Helicon Press 1966, 184–186. IDEM: *On the Theology of the Incarnation*, in TI 4, 110. IDEM: *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*. Trans. William V. Dych. New York: Crossroad 1990, 197. For the German, IDEM: *Grundkurs des Glaubens: Einführung in den Begriff des Christentums*. Freiburg: Herder 1976, 197.

8 DE LUBAC, Henri Cardinal: *Le mystère du surnaturel*. Paris: Éditions du Cerf 2000, 80 (hereafter, *Le mystère du surnaturel*). See also IDEM: *Le mystère*, 91.

9 See DE LUBAC: *Surnaturel*, 467, 469, and 486–488. See also IDEM: *Le mystère*, 117, and IDEM: *Mystery*, 25, 55, and 207. On this approach, see FIGURA, Michael: *Der Anruf der Gnade: Über die Beziehung des Menschen zu Gott nach Henri de Lubac* (= Sammlung Horizonte 13). Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag 1979, 318–19, 323–27, 364–66, and 373f.

10 DE LUBAC: *Mystery*, 236f. See also DE LUBAC, Henri Cardinal: *Augustinisme et théologie moderne* (= Théologie 63). Paris : Aubier 1965, 12, 47, and 233. IDEM: *Surnaturel*, 487–489, and IDEM: *Mystery*, 84–86 and 130.

11 DE LUBAC: *Mystery*, 204. For study of presuppositions leading de Lubac to this impasse, see LONG, Steven A.: *Natura pura: On the Recovery of Nature in the Doctrine of Grace*. New York: Fordham University Press 2010, 10–51. For sustained critical reflection on de Lubac, see MALLOY, Christopher J.: *De Lubac on Natural Desire: Difficulties and Antitheses*, in: NV (Eng.) 9 (2011), 567–624.

The second norm of the problematic is that grace is deeply relevant. In this regard, Rahner sides with de Lubac and rejects the pure nature tradition. For Rahner, this tradition presents existing man as having an intrinsic ordination only to a natural end, thus making the call to grace extrinsic. For Rahner, even actual graces cannot secure the intrinsic ordination to vision that alone suffices to account for the pain of the damned.[12]

So, Rahner agrees with the dialectical critiques of each classical side of the debate. With the Lubacians, he affirms the relevance of grace, rejecting the notion that ordination to a supernatural finality occurs through created actual graces or, much worse, through an extrinsic divine decree. With the pure nature tradition, he agrees that it is not on account of his essence that man unconditionally desires supernatural finality and that there corresponds to human nature as such a meaningful, attainable natural end. How to satisfy both norms of the problematic?

2. The Theory of the Supernatural Existential: Rahner's Solution

For Rahner, the ordination to and the resultant unconditional desire for supernatural finality arise from the Supernatural Existential. An explanation of this answer requires preliminary background.

2.1 Background

Rahner stresses that grace can be experienced.[13] He thus laments the view he perceived to be common in his day: "In the average (if not unanimous) view grace in itself remains absolutely beyond consciousness."[14] Of what interest, Rahner asks, can be something not experienced? Rahner thus defends not only grace's deep relevance but also its palpability.

This stress on grace as experienced is sifted, with noteworthy results, through his transcendental method and its findings. Rahner contends that our experience involves a grasping of sensible objects *as* finite. He undertakes transcendental analyses of how this can be. Rahner's anthropological findings can be recapitulated as follows. Man is a being of historically grounded self-transcendence who comes at particular things *as* transcending them. He situates each individual thing, judging it to be an individual *of* some kind. Recognizing the quiddity of the thing as universal, not restricted to the particular, he transcends the individual. Further, he judges that this kind of thing is not that kind, distinguishing the kinds reciprocally and with reference to something common to both. In the entire process, he also distinguishes himself from the things he knows. The condi-

[12] Rahner: *Relationship*, TI 1, 312, n. 1.

[13] See especially Rahner: *Nature and Grace*, TI 4, 165–169.

[14] Rahner: *Relationship*, TI 1, 298.

tion for the possibility of these intellective judgments is man's transcending dynamism towards "the absolute range of all knowable objects as such."[15] Implicitly in every act of judgment, man transcends all categorical kinds and reaches towards what is truly transcendent, not confined in a region of being. Man implicitly recognizes that every object he encounters falls within the field of "being as such." Hence, man has a vector towards "being as such." This vector is a "pre-apprehension of being"; it is the condition for the possibility of man's dealing with particulars as he does. Man can grasp the finite as finite because he transcends it in the aforesaid manner, differentiating it from the whither of this vector of transcendence. Ultimately, man even differentiates "being as such" from its Author.

What man so structured can encounter as objects, what can be for him objects of focal awareness or of determinate consciousness, are finite or categorical things. Since "being as such" transcends the particulars that instantiate it, "being as such" cannot be encountered. Instead, "being as such" is as *horizon* of the self-transcending vector that is man's way of being-in-the-world. Man targets finite things against the backdrop of the horizon, the "whither" of his self-transcending movement. Hence, man's movement towards the horizon is not a movement by which the horizon becomes object.[16] Naming the whither *esse* in his monumental *Spirit in the World*, Rahner writes, "Thus *esse* is first of all just the expression of the scope of the preapprehension itself, an object of the second order. Neither is it, therefore, the object of a metaphysical 'intuition.'"[17]

Since God transcends being as its Author, neither is the movement towards God as object. So, one does not encounter the face of God as focal object of awareness. Rather, within one's targeting anything that can be targeted, one can become co-aware (not focally aware) that one targets this finite thing on one's self-transcending *way* towards Him whom one cannot grasp. Thomas Sheehan explains: "It cannot be emphasized enough that the knowledge these words [God as 'co-known'] refer to remains kinetic and dynamic, anticipatory and interrogative. They do not denote an objective thematic knowing and affirmation but a non-objective, unthematic awareness which always remains *in via*." God is object only transcendentally, as the *whither* that one can indicate not by ostentation but by the gathering insight *that* one always transcends the particular about which one has focal awareness. God's being *whither* is discerned by recognition of man's *whithering* movement, his going beyond any particular precisely in

[15] RAHNER: *Hearer*, 47. See also RAHNER, Karl: *Spirit in the World*. Trans. William Dych. New York: Continuum 1994, 154.

[16] See RAHNER: *Spirit*, 178f.

[17] RAHNER: *Spirit*, 179.

engaging it.[18] Conversely, man's focal interest regards finite, sensible objects, since the power of transcendence is precisely the condition *for* focal awareness.[19] So, whereas Rahner stresses grace as experienced, he insists that God cannot be experienced *as* an object.[20] At times, Rahner describes the experience of God as "unconscious," in distinction from the "conscious" experience of categorical objects.[21]

The foregoing is a description of embodied spirit as such; hence it is materially a description of a natural dynamism. God, however, wishes to "come close" to created spirits so as not to remain the distant horizon. God invites created spirits to supernatural fruition. For Rahner, the distant goal becomes the very *principle* of man's self-transcendence; human action becomes charged with the near presence of the goal of acting.[22] Rahner occasionally describes the goal as thereby becoming the "object" of man's acting.[23] More frequently, however, he denies that God ever becomes an object of focal awareness. In fact, the mature Rahner even interprets God as "object" (in light of the supernatural dynamism) in a manner that renders God the (supernatural) *principle* of human activity: "Basically and originally man does not encounter this supernatural constitution as an object. The supernatural constitution of man's transcendentality due to God's offer of self-communication is a modality of his original and unthematic subjectivity."[24]

Sheehan infers, I think rightly, that Rahner's fundamental analysis applies even to the afterlife: "Against all closet Platonism, we are to understand that 'the present state of life' is the only state."[25] Sheehan presses the Heideggerian implication: "Metaphysics [...] is the systematic destruction

[18] SHEEHAN, Thomas: *Karl Rahner: The Philosophical Foundations*. Athens, OH: The Ohio University Press 1987, 221.

[19] SHEEHAN: *Rahner*, 208.

[20] RAHNER, Karl: *Atheism and Implicit Christianity*, in: *Theological Investigations*, vol. 9. Trans. Graham Harrison. New York: Herder and Herder 1972, 159. See also IDEM: *Foundations*, 44–65, and IDEM: *The Experience of God Today*, in: *Theological Investigations*, vol. 11. Trans. David Bourke. New York: The Seabury Press 1974, 153 and 156.

[21] See RAHNER: *Experience of God Today*, TI 11, 152 and 164. See also RAHNER, Karl: *Experience of Self and Experience of God*, in: *Theological Investigations*, vol. 13. Trans. David Bourke. New York: The Seabury Press 1975, 123f. See also RAHNER, Karl: *Observations on the Problem of the 'Anonymous Christian,'* in: *Theological Investigations*, vol. 14. Trans. David Bourke. New York: The Seabury Press 1976, 290.

[22] See, for instance, RAHNER: *Problem of the 'Anonymous Christian,'* TI 14, 280–294.

[23] See RAHNER: *Foundations*, 119f.; *Grundkurs*, 126.

[24] RAHNER: *Foundations*, 129; see also IBID.: 119 and 120. For the Christological application, see RAHNER, Karl: *Dogmatic Reflections on the Knowledge and Self-Consciousness of Christ*, in: *Theological Investigations*, vol. 5. Trans. Karl-H. Kruger. New York: The Seabury Press 1966, 205–210. For the German, see IDEM: *Dogmatische Erwägungen über das Wissen und Selbstbewusstsein Christi*, in: *Schriften zur Theologie*, vol. 5. Zürich: Benzinger Verlag Einsiedeln 1962, 222–245.

[25] SHEEHAN: *Rahner*, 184.

of all systems that would freeze movement and pacify desire, even those which promise perfect *stasis* in a vision of God."[26] On the other hand, Rahner suggests passingly that the point about God as object regards pilgrim man.[27] Still, even with respect to the supernatural dynamism, the terms "horizon" and "whither" are not to be considered as presenting the term of that transcendence as *object* for intuition.[28] This background and these crucial qualifications noted, we turn to Rahner's theory.

2.2 *The Theory of the Supernatural Existential*

Rahner holds that God approaches existing man (1) in an utterly gratuitous manner that yet (2) addresses human depths. Rahner postulates the Supernatural Existential as accounting for both of these aspects or norms of the problematic. Now, what is an existential?

The category is drawn from a Heideggerian appreciation of human existence. Man, or *Dasein*, exists in the present towards a future from out of a past. Man is thrown into his place and projects himself forward as he utilizes surrounding items to cope with life. Phenomenological analysis discloses various abiding structural features, antecedent to particular acts of consciousness, of this ex-istence.[29] These features are not simply conditions for making intelligible the "manifold" of sense intuition. Nor does Heidegger see them as *a priori* conditions in a subjectivist sense. They are conditions or features of that kind of projecting, from the now out of a past, that constitutes man's ex-isting. An "existential" is *not* an Aristotelian category and thus does not address causal issues such as nature and property; it is disclosed through phenomenological analysis.[30] That said, Rahner sometimes describes existentials in ways that merge with classical metaphysical analysis.[31] At other times, he describes them in terms of Kantian *a priori* conditions.[32]

[26] SHEEHAN: *Rahner*, 192.

[27] See RAHNER: *Foundations*, 130.

[28] SHEEHAN: *Rahner*, 218. See also RAHNER: *Spirit*, 393–400. George Vass finds Rahner contradicting himself. See VASS, George: *The Mystery of Man and the Foundations of a Theological System*, vol. 2, *Understanding Karl Rahner*. London: Sheed & Ward 1985, 109.

[29] See RAHNER, Karl: *The Concept of Existential Philosophy in Heidegger*, in: Philosophy Today 13 (1969), 131–134.

[30] See, for example, RAHNER: *Foundations*, 126–133.

[31] God wants to make himself a "constitutive principle of the created existent," RAHNER: *Foundations*, 120. God makes his love an "intrinsic principle" of the living (Vollzug) of human existence, prior to freedom, RAHNER: *Foundations*, 123; *Grundkurs*, 129. God's offer of himself is a "characteristic (Eigentümlichkeit)" of transcendence, having the features of all the "elements (Momente)" in man's transcendental structure, RAHNER: *Foundations*, 129; *Grundkurs*, 135. It is also described as follows: a "modification (Modifikation) of transcendence," RAHNER: *Foundations*, 129; *Grundkurs*, 135. It is "the innermost *entelecheia* and dynamism of the world," RAHNER: *Problem of the 'Anonymous Christian,'* TI 14, 288. These passages des-

The "Supernatural Existential" is arguably Rahner's most significant use of the notion. For Rahner, as a result of God's free decision to approach man, human existence is charged with a "Supernatural Existential." Steady and enduring, the Supernatural Existential stands in contrast to the punctual and intermittent character of actual graces.[33] Rahner comes to describe the existential as God's self-communication, or grace itself, but *in the mode of offer*. The phrase "in the mode of offer" (1) distinguishes the existential from what is grace entitatively, (2) indicates that the existential lies antecedent to free acts, and (3) indicates that the existential is addressed to freedom. As Rulands puts it, the Supernatural Existential is "objective justification."[34]

Points (2) and (3) being uncontroversial, a brief word about (1) is in order. On the one hand, Rahner distinguishes the Supernatural Existential from sanctifying grace. On the other hand, for Rahner *the existential* exists in various modes: in everyone in the mode at least of offer, in the justified in the mode of acceptance, and in the unjustified in the mode of rejection.[35] In this respect, the existential merges with Rahner's concept of God's self-communication, which he describes as obtaining in the mode at least of offer antecedent to freedom and again, in those who have the use of freedom, in the "twofold modality" of acceptance or rejection.[36] If we follow the scholarship, we will be most precise in considering the existential to be constituted as an *offer*, as the permanent modification of human nature that renders man absolutely oriented *to* grace and vision and thus unconditionally desirous there*of*.[37]

Crucially, the theory is presented in service of meeting the rigors of both norms. First, it meets the norm of relevance. As an existential, it is an abiding structural feature of human existence; moreover, it is man's "deepest" or "inmost" existential.[38] Man's "essence" just is to be a self-tran-

cribe the existential and/or grace as a power or its act. If grace itself is describable in ontic terms, the less lofty existential ought to be so as well.

32 It is "[...] an ultimate and radicalizing modification of that very transcendentality of ours [...]," RAHNER: *Foundations*, 132. It is "an element in man's transcendental constitution (Verfaßtheit)," IBID.: 129; *Grundkurs*, 135. See also note 40.

33 See, for instance, RAHNER: *Relationship*, TI 1, 311f. Rahner pivots to his mature conception in RAHNER, Karl: *The Theological Concept of* Concupiscentia, in TI 1, 377. Rahner's critique of the tradition's appeal to actual graces is more incisive in IDEM: *Nature and Grace*, TI 4, 179–181, and in IDEM: *Experience of Transcendence from the Standpoint of Christian Dogmatics*, in: *Theological Investigations*, vol. 18. Trans. Edward Quinn. New York: Crossroad 1983, 181.

34 See RULANDS: *Menschsein*, 250–259.

35 Sometimes Rahner's expressions suggest an incorporation of grace into the existential itself. See RAHNER: *Foundations*, 128; *Grundkurs*, 134.

36 RAHNER: *Foundations*, 118.

37 See COFFEY: *Rahner*, 102.

38 See RAHNER: *Foundations*, 123f.

scending subject whose whither is God.[39] So, if God wishes not simply to be the horizon only asymptotically approached but to communicate himself, then man's power of self-transcendence is borne by that very goal the attainment of which is its ultimate possibility (*potentia obedientialis*). There thus emerges in every subject, an absolute albeit transcendental desire for beatific union with God. So, as existential, the Supernatural Existential is inmost in man, making failure to attain vision a tragedy.

On the other hand, Rahner retains the gratuity of grace precisely *insofar* as he sustains the phenomenological (here, Heideggerian) reading of "existential." The Supernatural Existential constitutes neither human nature nor any of its properties. It does not pertain to Aristotelian categories but is reflectively discernable only through phenomenological analysis undertaken in Christian faith. Hence, insofar as he maintains the Heideggerian analysis, Rahner avoids the pitfalls of the available alternative answers to the question whether the (unconditional) desire for supernatural union with God arises from natural principles or not.

In all simplicity, the phenomenological category allows Rahner to meet the requirements of both criteria. If man exists under a Supernatural Existential, grace is indeed most meaningful and inmost. Also, since this feature and the consequent unrestricted desire for vision arise not from natural principles but because of God's gracious will, the theory does not threaten to make grace a *debitum naturae*.

Some charge that the assertion that God's offer of grace constitutes an abiding existential, or in Kantian fashion an *a priori* determination of human subjectivity,[40] renders grace part of man's essence or else due. In response, Rahner repeatedly stresses that the existential occurs supernaturally; it depends upon God's gracious designs *for the man who exists*.[41] Rahner underlines this point delicately with his notion of human nature as a "remainder concept." On the one hand, there is the human essence as such (Natur); on the other hand, there is concrete man's being (Wesen).[42] However, the human essence (Natur) has never existed in a state of purity from sin and grace; concretely, it is always touched by the Supernatural Existential. Hence, neat empirical analysis of experience cannot be guaranteed to disclose human nature as such. Nevertheless, a real distinction abides.[43] Human nature is what remains after supernatural grace and the supernatural existential are subtracted. This remainder is not a *merely*

39 See RAHNER: *Foundations*, 129f.

40 See VASS: *Mystery*, 71–78.

41 See RAHNER: *Foundations*, 127.

42 RAHNER: *Relationship*, TI 1, 312f; see also RAHNER: *Atheism*, TI 9, 146.

43 See RAHNER: *Relationship*, TI 1, 312–315; *Schriften* 1, 339–342.

hypothetical construct; rather, it functionally helps Rahner identify the gratuity of grace in the present order.[44]

We have seen some of the crucial achievements attributed to the postulate. It would be desirable to reflect on Rahner's – and others' – notions of the Christological mediation and pneumatological character of grace. Constraints of length require that these be deferred for another occasion. I turn now to the causal inquiry.

3. Causal Assessment

The critical causal question is simple: What *is* the Supernatural Existential? What accounts for its obtaining? Of course, causal inquiry about a Heideggerian solution may be anathema from a Heideggerian perspective. Is the causal question unreasonable? I contend it is legitimate and crucial.

First, anyone remotely appreciative of scholastic theology would find the question reasonable and decisive for theological science. Second, that the Lubacians trace the origin of the desire for the supernatural to nature attests to their conviction that a causal account can be given. So, Lubacians and scholastics share the causal interest. Third, by distinguishing the existential from "nature" (Natur) in the technical sense, Rahner has one foot in the causal game, even though, on the other hand, he evades the game insofar as he culls the category "existential" from phenomenological analysis. Fourth, Rahner describes the "existential" in ontic terms. For example, he calls it "an interior ontological constituent of his concrete quiddity (Wesens)" in the precise context of denying that it is part of "nature (Natur)".[45] Although counter to the phenomenological viewpoint, such substance connoting locutions are noteworthy and suggest the ineluctability of causal inquiry.[46] Fifth, Rahner describes grace itself by recourse to the concept of formal causality, in distinction from efficient causality.[47] He admits that ontic categories can be used to express the reality of divine love.[48] Hence, he also wittingly enters the causal game in a matter quite relevant to the Supernatural Existential.

Does the Supernatural Existential admit of a causal account? An inductive inquiry is in order. First, is God the existential or its proximate causal root? He can be neither. The Supernatural Existential is doubly con-

44 The point is made as late as Rahner: *Foundations*, 123. See also Coffey: *Rahner*, 99–102, 106, and 111–113.

45 Rahner: *Relationship*, TI 1, 302; *Schriften* 1, 328.

46 See the citations in note 31. On this, see Kilby: *Karl Rahner: Theology*, 56. See also Malavez, Léopold: *La gratuité du surnaturel*, in: NRTh 75 (1953), 684–686; and Coffey: *Rahner*, 110.

47 See, for example, Rahner: *Foundations*, 121.

48 See Rahner: *Nature and Grace*, TI 4, 177f.

tingent, since it need not be, even if *contingent* man is created. God, however, is necessary. If not God, the existential must be some created reality.

Is the existential or its causal root the created hypostasis? If the existential were a human hypostasis, it would no longer be even modally supernatural. Rahner would fall into a Lubacian understanding.[49] Nor can one created hypostasis be an existential for another, because no finite hypostasis can constitute the very dynamism or ordination of another hypostasis to God. If it were, the orientation would certainly be extrinsic to the subject so oriented.

If it is neither uncreated substance, nor created hypostasis, is the existential an essential principle, integral part, or faculty of human nature? Impossible. If it were any of these, it would not be even modally supernatural.

Lastly, is the existential some superadded created accident? An affirmative answer seems tempting.[50] On the other hand, what accident will do? Obviously, as a spiritual reality, the existential could not properly be quantity, position, where, or when. If it were possession, where, or when it would be extrinsic. If the existential or its proximate causal root were in the category of action, then (1) the perfection brought about or the existential would exist not in the human subject but in something else and (2) the human subject would be the source thereof. (The reason is that action names act, in a patient, as from an agent.) To the contrary, Rahner postulates the existential as inmost in the subject and as not from nature. Further, "action" connotes the way to being, not being. Were the existential an "action," there would not be what is to be, a binding ordination to beatific union.

Is the existential the very relation of man to God? If so, what grounds the relation? If the foundation were the existing human essence (Natur), the relation would be nothing other than the dependence on the creator that is called "createdness." Hence, it would be natural, not supernatural. On what, then, could the existential as relation, anterior to freedom, be founded? We still search for some actualization or elevation of the human subject.

Is the existential in the category of passion, as contradistinguished from action? Unlike the category action, that of passion would appropriately imply that man *qua* human is not source but beneficiary of the existential. On the other hand, the question is begged. Beneficiary of what? If passion names act in a subject as from another, what act is received? Further, insofar as "passion" connotes the way to being, the binding ordination would not yet exist.

Finally, could the existential be in the genus quality? If so, because it is supposed to be permanent and abiding, it would be as a habit, whether

49 See DE LUBAC: *Surnaturel*, 483.

50 See notes 31 and 46.

operative or qualifying the essence or both. The following reasons, however, tell against its being a supernatural habit. First, every supernatural habit is a grace, but Rahner when precise presents the existential not as grace itself but as in the mode of offer. Second, a supernatural habit qualifying not merely the intellectual power but either the whole spiritual essence or the will itself would seem to be *sanctifying* grace. Conflation of the existential with sanctifying grace poses grave difficulties. The existential is posited as universally present, but both mortal sin and original sin exclude the presence of sanctifying grace.[51] Hence, if the existential were sanctifying grace, (1) it would be impossible for infants to be conceived in original sin, and (2) mortal sin would be impossible. At this juncture we note that, unfortunately contradicting his claim that the existential is in the mode of offer, Rahner sometimes implies that it is *de facto* sanctifying *unless* thwarted by a mortal sin.[52] If the existential were already as such forgiving grace *unless* mortal sin intervenes, then, baptism of an infant incapable of actual sin could not be what the Church's faith proclaims it is, namely, the very event through which sanctifying grace and forgiveness of original sin is communicated.[53] At best, such baptism could be a categorically embodied expression – viz., real symbolical *sign* – of forgiveness already received. Rahner at times suggests as much.[54] Does not his Copernican revolution in sacramental theory imply as much? When precise, however, he rejects the reading of the existential as a habit qualifying the will or essence. Third, could the existential consist in a new habitual orientation of the intellect? If so, what would the new orientation be? A new formal object, God as beatifying end? If so, the existential would look like the habit of faith. Does Rahner want to hold this?[55] However, on this supposition how could anyone conceivably be even a transcendental atheist? Fourth, if the existential itself were either sanctifying grace or the virtue of faith, would human nature itself have any orientation *to* the existential, which has come to be conceived as grace? Would not the binding ordination of nature to the existential, or rather to grace, be just human nature itself? But this is de Lubac's thesis.

For his part, Rahner opposes the conception of the existential as superadded accident. He rejects the idea that "the supernatural 'elevation' of a spiritual creature is added extrinsically and accidentally to the essence (äußerlich und zufällig zum Wesen) and the structure of a spiritual subject

51 See DS 1511–1515 and 1544.

52 See RAHNER: *Problem of the 'Anonymous Christian,'* TI 14, 286. See also RAHNER, Karl: *The One Christ and the Universality of Salvation*, in: *Theological Investigations*, vol. 16. Trans. David Morland. London: Darton, Longman & Todd 1979, 200.

53 See DS 1514–1515 and 1529. See also CCC, pars. 1250, 1257, and 1263.

54 See RAHNER, Karl: *Baptism and the Renewal of Baptism*, in: *Theological Investigations*, vol. 23. Trans. Joseph Donceel and Hugh M. Riley. New York: Crossroad 1992, 197–201.

55 Rahner inclines somewhat in this direction in RAHNER: *Foundations*, 116–137.

of unlimited transcendence."[56] This is a rejection of a caricature—grace as extrinsically (arbitrarily?) added to man's *Wesen*. The rhetoric casts its shadow even over the notion of grace as accident added to and profoundly transformative of human *Natur*. Moreover, when Rahner reaches for ontic categories, he describes the existential not as an accident *superadded* to human nature but as an element of human subjectivity itself: "[The existential is] what is inmost and most authentic in him, the centre and root of what he is absolutely."[57] It is "the central and abiding existential of man as he really is." It is "precisely what man *is*."[58] It is "the innermost constitutive element of man."[59] "What is most intrinsic [Innerste] to man is God's self-communication at least as an offer."[60] It is difficult not to read such claims either as a slippage of the existential into the Kantian *a priori* structures of subjectivity or as reductively Lubacian or as both.

As sympathetic reader David Coffey recognizes, Rahner leaves "untouched the question of its [the existential's] proper identity." Coffey, however, attempts to offer a scholastic account of the existential in aid of completing Rahner's project.[61] He argues that the existential is in the order of material causality in relation to grace itself, which is in the order of formal causality.[62] The suggestion is relevant for a treatment of Rahner's theory of grace as the self-communication of God to man in quasi-formal causality. With respect to this task, Coffey's suggestion is of interest.[63] However, relating the existential to grace in this way does not account for the *quiddity* of the existential itself.

So, the decisive question returns: What *is* the Supernatural Existential or its proximate causal root? Inductive study shows that, as elaborated by Rahner, it is neither God, nor created hypostasis, nor essential part or principle, nor accident. The postulate thus lacks any causal footing whereby to take hold of a man. It is a name without substance and thus cannot constitute a solution to the perennial problem.

Further, its apparent success in avoiding the pitfalls of either side, whether real or alleged, depends precisely on avoidance of the causal question. This methodological evasion ingredient to the postulated existential silences the very question. Under the illusory cover of this silence, the existential appears to resolve the difficulty without violating either norm of the inquiry. However, the problem *is* causal, and as such

56 RAHNER: *Foundations*, 123; *Grundkurs*, 129.

57 RAHNER: *Relationship*, TI 1, 311.

58 RAHNER: *Relationship*, TI 1, 302.

59 RAHNER: *Foundations*, 116; *Grundkurs*, 122.

60 RAHNER: *Foundations*, 124; *Grundkurs*, 130.

61 COFFEY: *Rahner*, 97.

62 See COFFEY: *Rahner*, 114–116.

63 Further study of Rahner's notion of grace with reference to this essay's inquiry is called for. Constraints of space prevent such study here.

sustains the explanatory power of proposed solutions. To silence the question is to leave the answer jobless. To answer the question "What is it?" one must have recourse either to nature or to grace, either to a Lubacian or to a pure nature conception. If the proposal remains in the order simply of phenomenologically existential theology, it fails to satisfy man's basic thirst for intelligibility.

4. Causal Retrieval of the Supernatural Existential?

4.1 Retrieval

While Rahner's postulate leaves the causal question unresolved, it need not be entirely jettisoned. Perhaps, the nexus of factors that (theologically) phenomenological analysis, albeit with qualifications, indicates in holistic fashion a causal account grounds in explanatory fashion. The suggestion can be unpacked.

(1) Most Christians agree that human nature is capable of unfathomable elevation to deifying union with God. The reason is that its form is subsistent and its highest faculty, intellectual. Through his intellect, a man is capable of becoming, intentionally, whatever *is*. If "potency" indicates a capacity for some perfection, "obediential" qualifies that the "potency exists only in relation to the active agency of God."[64] Because of his omnipotence, God can effect anything not intrinsically contradictory. Now, generic obediential potency indicates merely that some perfection Q is not intrinsically opposed to some nature R, so that Q's realization in R is possible. In this case, beatific union with God is not intrinsically opposed to human nature. Hence, man has generic obediential potency for beatific vision. The point is true but inadequate.

(2) Being intellectual, human nature is in *specific* obediential potency for this union. Specific obediential potency indicates an obediential capacity that only a certain nature has, precisely because of its particular fitness for the perfection. Non-intellectual creatures are stuck in the here and now; they cannot appreciate anything *as* being or true, *as* resemblance of God. By contrast, open to the true and the good as such, the intellectual creature can be raised even to immediate union with God. Hence, intellectual nature is in *specific* obediential potency for grace. Because the obediential potency is specific, its actualization constitutes its genuine perfection, not a randomly actualized possibility. The actualization of a *spiritual* power, moreover, constitutes a truly *human* act.[65]

Operations, man in second act, dynamically exhibit the specific obediential potency. By natural principles, a man can desire – arguably, in two

64 Long: *Natura pura*, 11.

65 See Thomas Aquinas: *De virt.*, q. 1, art. 10, ad 13.

ways – to know God. First, a man can have an elicited desire for knowledge of God after argumentatively discovering his existence. The formal object of this desire is God as cause of finite being. The desire is unconditional with respect to that knowledge of which reason is sufficient principle. With respect to strictly quidditative knowledge of God, the desire is conditional, else man *qua* man would be essentially frustrated, meaningless without grace. Second, perhaps every finite intellect has a non-elicited desire for some knowledge of Absolute Being and Truth, a dynamic *élan* of spirit towards its Maker. Whether such a desire would be simply the *relation* of intellect to its adequate object or an actual movement antecedent to free choice is a difficult matter. At any rate, the qualifications noted with regard to the elicited desire would, *mutatis mutandis*, have to obtain, else man *qua* man would be meaningless without grace. In sum, human nature *as such* is theonomous and theocentric and thus, capable of divinization.[66]

Now, those endowed with the theological virtue of charity love God formally as Covenantal Friend, as the Holy Trinity of Supreme Love. They love God as God loves himself. Since friends wish to live together and share their goods, such pilgrims desire beatific union with God, precisely because they love God for his own sake. This desire for union is unconditional. As a fruit of theological virtues, this desire is clearly the result of grace and is entitatively supernatural, a further actualization of human nature.

Rahner's concern returns: Does unconditional desire for beatific union obtain solely in the justified? Is there any other "attunement" of man for beatific union besides sanctifying grace and specific obediential potency? Causal analysis offers further resources for an account in its appreciation of actual graces and the modalization of human nature.

(3) In the real world, God works in many and sundry ways through actual graces to awaken men to himself. Causal analysis divides grace into actual and habitual. Whereas habitual grace is an abiding gift, actual grace is momentary, punctual. Actual grace is the grace of a particular *act*, such as a good thought or decision. Actual graces are as countless instruments in God's hands whereby he inspires thoughts and illuminates the darkness, softens the heart's hardness and inspires love. Through these means, God himself reaches into the depths of the human person and alters his life. Here, we consider God's punctuated, variegated, *personal* invitation of the sinner. Life is not lived in a state of pure nature or simply fallen nature but under God's meticulous calling. Whereas the graces of this call are metaphysically distinct from man's substance, they are deeply woven into the fabric of his lived life. Therefore, the graces of God's call alter the way that life is lived. One experiences them really, albeit indirectly.

[66] See LONG: *Natura Pura*, 10–51, and MALLOY: *De Lubac*, 611–620.

(4) Moreover, under the stimulus of these graces and in the concrete providential order inclusive of supernatural revelation, the human person's very nature is modalized. This modalization affects the natural desire to know the First Cause.[67] Thus modalized in the freely acting agent, this desire becomes unconditional. Here, we find causal footing for a certain stability of orientation to vision so prized by Rahner.

4.2 Responding to an Objection

Of course, Rahner and also de Lubac object that appeal to actual graces constitutes an "extrinsic" solution. The reply is as follows. (1) If actual graces are extrinsic to human nature, Rahner's Supernatural Existential is similarly extrinsic. If, however, the postulated existential can constitute a crucial actualization of human nature, so can the set of countless actual graces and the consequent modalization of human nature. (2) The "natural desire for beatific union" either is or is not an absolute desire emanating from the principles of human nature. Insofar as de Lubac contends it is, he renders grace due or pays the price of (a) asserting that our world is *per se*, apart from sin, meaningless except as rescued by grace and (b) abolishing the specific gratuity of grace. When de Lubac contends that the desire itself results from grace, his position either merges with Rahner's and begs for an account or it coincides with the classical analysis. (3) Indeed, actual graces truly *are* actualizations of a man. Through them, God *does* awaken hunger for beatific union. De Lubac and Rahner search round for the source of the hunger and contend that only if concrete man essentially is this hunger can he hunger. Not so. God awakens an absolute hunger for beatific union (formal object) with him on the basis of the very nature by which human persons already bear his image and as such search for him as First Cause. If man hungers to know God, sanctifying grace is relevant. In short, sanctifying grace is relevant because of the calling, and the calling is relevant because it is actual and taps into the horizon of wonder in which man *qua* man dwells.

The upshot for lived life? As a man moves forward from out of his past, he does so under the abiding yet manifold, variegated care of God who calls. God approaches him in a manner causally anterior to any response. Alert man finds himself thrown into a situation in which his nature is modalized towards the vision of God. If the category "existential" names in holistic fashion how any free actor exists in this situation, anterior to all free acts to come, then each free actor exists under a Supernatural Existential.

[67] See LONG: *Natura pura*, 19–21.

4.3 Remaining Concerns

Certain qualifications and criticisms remain. (1) Causal analysis seems to require the precise qualification that the existential obtains for the "free actor." Actual grace either is a spiritual (intellectual or volitional) *act* or is bestowed precisely with a view to such acts. Since those without the use of free will do not have intellectual or volitional acts, actual graces cannot intelligibly be ascribed to them. Now, the Church believes with certainty that baptized infants who have never had the use of free will are infused with sanctifying graces, but these are *habitual*. The Church has no such faith with regard to non-baptized infants. So, Rahner's assertion of the universal presence of the Supernatural Existential is but a theological postulate. It also lacks causal support for non-baptized infants. Even on the assumption that non-baptized deceased infants are actually saved, it is not necessary to postulate the universal presence of the existential. The only necessary condition for the assumption is that, *should* such infants be saved, sanctifying grace must have been communicated before death. Whether or not there is such communication may be debated. Now, whereas the causal approach I am suggesting allows for the theory of *limbus puerorum*, neither Rahner's nor de Lubac's accounts do. Bereft of this theory, Rahner is pressured to conceive of the existential as *de facto* sanctifying, despite the grave difficulties this poses. Moreover, the Second Vatican Council declares that the means by which God communicates grace to non-Christian free actors are known to him, implying that we do not know them.[68] If he communicates grace to non-baptized infants, *a fortiori* must the means be known only to God. The postulated universally present existential, however, would be a means known to us.[69]

(2) The unvariegated, monolithic character of the existential diverges from human experience. Almost every believer will attest that there are particular moments in life in which God acts in distinct, discrete ways, mindful of seasons and situations. God's engagement is personal and punctuated – cut to the measure. The early Rahner seemed to accept this viewpoint,[70] but he came to resist it because, he thought, it makes grace extrinsic and its offer arbitrary. As I have argued, the charge of extrinsicism is unwarranted. Further, the suggestion does not portray God as arbitrary but indicates the *personal* ways of divine providence. A constant and monolithic existential displaces personal providence with quasi neoplatonic emanation.[71] *A fortiori*, the translation of the existential into Kantian *a priori* structures of subjectivity runs afoul the experience of human poverty

[68] See *Gaudium et spes*, art. 22.

[69] Rahner responds in RAHNER: *Atheism*, TI 9, 147–152.

[70] See RULANDS: *Übernatürliches Existential*, 243–249.

[71] Rahner resists the implication. See RAHNER: *Foundations*, 123f.

and the need for saving help from above mediated through causally efficacious sacraments.

(3) Anthropologically, the constant and monolithic character of the existential implies that each person is radically equally able to come to God.[72] What, then, accounts for people coming to justification at different times and to different degrees? Logically following Rahner's initiative, Karen Kilby suggests that free will is such a factor.[73] Although free will certainly is a factor, it cannot bear all the weight of differentiation except at the risk of Pelagianism. Perhaps sensing that leaving the matter to free will is insufficient, Rahner at one point relegates the explanation to "other terrestrial circumstances (subject of course to God's supernatural providence)."[74] Rahner seems reticent to attribute variegation of effects to the direct causal action of God. This reticence resembles the neoplatonic conviction that because God is immutable, variegation in his effects cannot be due to him immediately. By contrast, is it not the Church's conviction that the determination of differentiated participations of grace is due first of all to the will of the Holy Spirit?[75]

(4) Rahner's existential also conduces to the condemned thesis that human acts that are neither sinful nor salutary are impossible. Rahner writes, "*If* in every moral act he takes a positive or negative attitude to the *totality* of his *de facto* existence (a supposition whose reality we need not examine here): *then* we must say: every morally good act of man is, in the actual order of salvation, also in fact a supernaturally salutary act."[76] As I see it, the apodosis chafes against the explicit condemnations of Baius's opinion that there can be no acts that are neither meritorious nor sins, neither acts of a sanctified man nor mortal sins.[77] Further, it chafes against Trent's teaching regarding adult preparation for justification. A preparatory act either is or is not already salutary. Since such acts precede justification, they are not salutary. On Rahner's thesis, then, they are not morally good acts. But every human act that is not morally good is sinful.[78] Suddenly, preparation for justification becomes sinful.

Rahner has two possible defenses. He can dispute the problematic character of the apodosis, and he can concede that his supposition (the protasis) may be in error. As to the first, he might argue that his apodosis is not directly condemned since the Church condemns only the opinion that

72 See RAHNER: *One Christ*, TI 16, 204.

73 See KILBY, Karen: *Karl Rahner: A Brief Introduction*. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company 2007, 26.

74 RAHNER: *Concupiscentia*, TI 1, 377.

75 See 1 Cor 12 and DS 1529.

76 RAHNER: *Nature and Grace*, TI 4, 180.

77 See the condemnations of Baius (DS 1927, 1928, 1937, 1938, etc.).

78 Rahner once agreed that some acts can be merely naturally good, that is, neither salutary nor sinful. See RULANDS: *Menschsein*, 197–200.

such acts are not possible, not the opinion that they are not actual. Surely, however, adult preparation is a reality in the present order. Surely, even ardent sinners commit non-sinful acts without *eo ipso* being justified.

As to the second, Rahner's own elaboration of the Supernatural Existential makes the protasis inevitable. The perennial theology contended that some acts are naturally, but not supernaturally, good because the principle of human action is the free will, ordered to the good in universal. Despite sin, a man can act from this principle in such a way as neither to embrace nor to reject his supernatural end but simply to target a natural good in an ordered way. For Rahner, the Supernatural Existential colors everything, constituting a new "formal object" of action.[79] On the transcendental level, therefore, every human act takes place with respect to this formal object. Hence, for Rahner, every human act must be either an acceptance or a rejection of God's self-communication. Consequently, Rahner cannot fathom the concrete possibility of naturally good but non-salutary acts.[80] Note that here we encounter slippage from Heideggerian existential to Kantian *a priori*.

There is, however, a more *existential* reading of the human situation. Beatific union with God is possible. Man as such is in specific obediential potency for it. In sundry and diverse ways, God, intending to deify, draws a man to himself through actual graces and the modalization of nature.

Conclusion

Though an apparently brilliant solution to a perennial question, Rahner's Supernatural Existential lacks the confirmation of a causal account. The postulate seems to be a theory in name only. Its purported viability *as* alternative to the classical opponents rests on phenomenological evasion of causal foundations, on a silencing of the causal question that sustains the explanatory power of proposed solutions. These criticisms notwithstanding, perhaps the upshot of what a causal account proposes is phenomenologically describable, with due qualifications, as an "existential." Remarkably, causally grounded retrieval of the postulate is consonant with the pure nature tradition. To endorse this grounding, one must abandon the evasion of causal commitments and embrace that tradition.

79 See Rahner: *Nature and Grace*, TI 4, 178–188, and idem: *Atheism*, TI 9, 162f.
80 See Rulands: *Menschsein*, 265f.

Abstract

How to balance the gratuity and dear relevance of grace is a perennial difficulty. Drawing on phenomenological analysis, Rahner postulates a Supernatural Existential in part to avoid pitfalls, real or alleged, of the "pure nature" tradition and the "natural desire for the supernatural" tradition. Are there causal grounds for the postulate? Inductive analysis suggests there are not. Indeed, the postulate's viability as an alternative rests on an evasion of the causal question that grounds its power as answer. So, it seems a solution in name only. Notwithstanding, the postulate might be qualifiedly retrieved by causal commitments similar to those of the pure nature tradition Rahner rejected.