

*The Lonerganian Supernatural Existential: The "Offer" of Being-in-Love-Unrestrictedly*¹

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The initial insights that led to this talk occurred while studying Karl Rahner's writings on grace and prayer. There was a while when I was becoming more and more confident that Rahner's theory of the supernatural existential was unnecessary; that he conflated a natural obediencial potency with supernatural gift; that he was making an improper argument from fittingness to necessity, and that if one really wanted to speak about universal grace, it should be in terms of social grace. And I still think social grace is the best counterargument to the thesis of this presentation, but there's also more to say about the supernatural existential.

I came to understand more about Rahner's concept of the supernatural existential than I had before—God's supernatural offer of himself to us all is constitutive of human nature as we find it to exist—the divine pull is entwined in our natural transcendental dynamism. This understanding clashed with what I had learned from Bernard Lonergan. However, as I wrote this paper, the larger, initial insights were whittled down, so that what I have to present today is a pretty modest proposal, but hopefully you will have some good insights (or at least *inverse* insights) along the way.

One major insight, which frames my thesis, is that I don't think Rahner's theory is necessary as a solution to the question of the natural desire to see God and the *nouvelle théologie* debate—I find Lonergan's explanation of an unrestricted desire to know that is an implicit but actual desire to know God's essence sufficient and satisfying.

However, this is not a zero-sum game, wherein, if Rahner's theory is not the best answer, then it must not be true at all. It is a theory to consider in its own right based on experience and even more so based on scripture, especially as an interpretation of 1 Tim 2:4—that God our Savior

¹ This paper is a longer version of a talk given on Sept. 21st at *Lonergan on the Edge 2012*, at Marquette University (Milwaukee, WI), including some additions following from helpful comments and source suggestions.

desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. Is the truth of 1 Tim 2:4 that God gives everyone at least one shot at conversion, or is it something more universal and ever-present? Rahner makes the case that, aside from mere obediential potency of pure nature—that we are naturally capable of receiving grace—the concrete, historical truth is that we are not merely in potency to grace, but in potency to further grace.²

I'll be presenting a minimalist version of supernatural existential [meaning that more could be said] which is not so much a constitutive *modification* of the concrete, historical transcendental dynamism of human being, but a universal, ever-present *operation* on human nature that causes an undertow towards holiness and a grace antecedent to conversion. As such, it's not that the supernatural existential answers the question of the relation between nature and grace while Lonergan didn't; but that Rahner's answer is more satisfying, *in addition* to Lonergan's, *if* it's true. I am locating the effect of the grace of the supernatural existential non-internally, non-structurally, as a more indirect but actual ordination towards God *in se* [as he is in himself].³

This would be a further development in the theology of grace. Just as Augustine didn't understand what Aquinas did about the theorem of the supernatural and how actual grace operates on the will,⁴ Lonergan has paved the way, by developing Aquinas's theology of grace and his own theory of our transcendental structure and operations, for properly understanding

² For this grace is a part of the existential of human existence, that is, "it is present prior to [human beings'] freedom, their self-understanding and their experience," Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: an Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Crossroad, 1978), 127, cited in David Coffey, "The Whole Rahner on the Supernatural Existential," *Theological Studies* 65 (2004), 96. Speaking of the supernatural existential unequivocally as grace is, in a way, getting ahead of things, because the status of the supernatural existential in relation to grace properly so called is not clear. In *A Rahner Reader* (ed. Gerald A. McCool [New York: Crossroad, 1981], 185), McCool's introduction to a section on the supernatural existential states, quite unequivocally, that the "'existential' is a permanent modification of the human spirit which transforms its natural dynamism into an ontological drive to the God of grace and glory," and yet that "the supernatural existential is not grace itself but only God's offer of grace." How is a modification *not* grace? David Coffey offers help here. He says that "since the existential does not of itself bring about justification, 'supernatural' cannot at this point indicate sanctifying grace itself, but rather a relationship to this grace, the exact nature of which remains to be clarified," "Supernatural Existential," 96. Rahner admitted himself that "it would be necessary to examine more closely how the supernatural existential is related to grace itself, and in what sense it is distinct from it," "Concerning the Relationship between Nature and Grace," in *Theological Investigations* 1 (Baltimore: Helicon, 1961), 316, cited in Coffey, "Supernatural Existential," 97.

³ Coffey says that "[Rahner] solved the dilemma [of how to formulate the supernatural finality given to us] by having the existential as the 'remote' and grace as the 'proximate' ordination (though these are my terms, not his)," "Supernatural Existential," 114. This is helpful and something like the proposal of this presentation.

⁴ See Bernard Lonergan, *Grace and Freedom: Operative Grace in the Thought of St Thomas Aquinas*, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan [CWBL] 1, eds. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), chapter four, at 66f.

how grace might operate on our natural transcendentalty everywhere, all the time—but he didn't get so far as acknowledging or articulating any "offer of being-in-love unrestrictedly as grace." Was this necessarily because he didn't think there was such a thing? He says that "being-in-love *has it antecedents*."⁵ The question for us is whether one of those antecedents is a universal ever-present grace, and how best to understand it.

Let us begin with a central critique of Rahner's concept, that the supernatural existential, in giving grace to everyone all the time, makes it seem like there's nothing at stake. J.B. Metz, Rahner's student, said that "Rahner 'wins the race without even running it,' by avoiding the difficulties raised in the issue of historical mediation [of grace]."⁶ But this critique is only cogent if one has a univocal understanding of grace. If one follows Aquinas, who held that grace is one in essence and multiple in effect—there is healing, goodwill, action, perseverance, and glory (ST I-II, q. 111, art. 3). *Gratia gratis data*, or free grace, is a specific example of a grace given that is not purposed to save any unsaved recipient.

Perhaps there is some unspoken assumption we still have, betraying our not-yet-uprooted naive realism, such that, despite knowing the fact that grace is multiple in effect, the fact that the supernatural existential is universal and always present means that all that grace must add up to conversion at some point. A hundred pennies equals a dollar, after all. We should listen to Rahner's point that "just because grace is *free and unmerited* this does not mean that it is rare."⁷

One critique I fully support is the rejection of Rahner's transcendental deduction that is so central to his explanation of the supernatural existential. He says that the universal ever-present offer of grace is a condition of the possibility of its acceptance. There are indeed preconditions for Rom 5:5, like *consciousness*, but a prevenient grace, a grace that comes before, is not strictly necessary for the love that floods our hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. Aquinas explicitly responds to this point when he asks in *Prima Secundae* of the *Summa Theologiae* "whether the justification of the ungodly is achieved instantaneously or gradually" (q. 113, art. 7). Additionally, Lonergan in *Grace and Freedom* is perfectly to the point: "it cannot be advanced that a faculty has to be elevated to receive a supernatural act, for then, *a pari*, the

⁵ Bernard Lonergan, "Faith and Beliefs," *Philosophical and Theological Papers: 1965-1980*, CWBL 17 (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2004), 38. Emphasis added.

⁶ Neil Ormerod, *Creation, Grace, and Redemption* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007), 121.

⁷ Karl Rahner, "Nature and Grace," in *Nature and Grace: Dilemmas in the Modern Church*, trans. Dinah Wharton (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1964), 133.

faculty would have to be elevated to receive the supernatural elevation, and an infinite regress would result."⁸

Furthermore, I take issue with the language of offer and acceptance. If there is a supernatural existential, I don't think it's an offer like a sales offer, where the product is always on the table and it's on me to sign for it. Such a thought seems to forget Augustine's critique of Pelagius. Augustine says that telling someone to use their will to fix the problem of sin doesn't work when the will is the thing that is broken. How can anyone change their fundamental stance vis-à-vis God from a "no" to a "yes" when the will is too wounded to do so, and it is precisely the healing of the will that constitutes the conversion that one is supposed to will oneself into.

The language of offer and acceptance is directly connected to Rahner's theology of uncreated grace and his metaphysics of formal causality; only time does not permit further comment on these subjects specifically.⁹

Now, as I am suggesting a theory that is not identical to Rahner's, my main focus is not interpretation, but so as to defend myself against the objection that I am totally reading my own

⁸ Lonergan, *Grace and Freedom*, 26, fn. 17.

⁹ The problem is not the emphasis on uncreated grace itself, for, Lonergan, too, emphasizes uncreated grace that is God's gift of himself—God being the only uncreated—as opposed to God changing something in us that allows us to reach him, in some way. Matt Petillo states that "in *The Triune God: Systematics*, Lonergan's position regarding created and uncreated grace harmonizes with the position of Karl Rahner," "The 'Experience of Grace' in the Theologies of Karl Rahner and Bernard Lonergan," diss. (Boston College, 2009), 120. Robert Doran says in "Lonergan and Balthasar: Methodical Considerations," (*Theological Studies* 58 [1997]), p. 74, fn. 34, commenting on Karl Rahner's "Some Implications of the Scholastic Concept of Uncreated Grace," (in *Theological Investigations* 1, trans. Cornelius Ernst [Baltimore: Helicon, 1961], 319-46) that "[t]he merit of this seminal study is its insistence on the priority of uncreated over created grace. The problem lies in the notion of quasi-formal causality. Rahner interprets the ontology of God's indwelling as continuous with Aquinas's ontology of the beatific vision; Lonergan does not." I interpret this to mean that grace does not always have to be a continuous intensity of personal communication to be grace (as it is in the beatific vision). According to Petillo "Lonergan thinks about the relationship between God and the sanctified person not in terms of formal but efficient causality"; Petillo then quotes the student notes of Lonergan's 1947-48 *De Gratia* course: "The uncreated gift...is constituted by God alone, and by it God stands to the state of the justified person not only as an efficient principle but also as a constitutive principle; but this constitutive principle is present in the just not as an inherent form but as the term of a relation," "The 'Experience of Grace,'" 127, fn. 205. Petillo paraphrases Rahner's retort, saying that "if entry into supernatural life results not from a divine self-communication that *informs* created grace but from an accidental change effected by a decision originating in a God who remains remote from the creature, then one can misconstrue the relationship between the life of grace and glory, the result of which will be an oversight of a personalist soteriology (interpersonal union and mutual indwelling of human and divine persons)," "The 'Experience of Grace,'" 120. But grace is not *only* an "inner entitative principle" (Rahner, "Some Implications...Uncreated Grace," 326, cited in Petillo, "The 'Experience of Grace,'" 120). In any case, for this presentation, the main point to take away from this aside is that it is the *acceptance* of the offer of divine self-communication that is the start of personal communication of God, properly speaking, not the offer itself, even though it is operative. This certainly raises the question that if the supernatural existential is not the start of personal communication, why must it be understood as uncreated grace? A distinction needs to be made between personal communication of uncreated grace informing created grace and the "communication" between any created thing and God insofar as God applies all created things to their activities by his universal instrumentality.

theory into Rahner, I'll turn to a few Rahner scholars. Karen Kilby says that "much that is at least strongly suggestive of the supernatural existential of the *Foundations* is already present in Rahner's writings well *before* his intervention in the debate surrounding the *nouvelle théologie*," and that "...in 1942 the idea of the supernatural existential is already present, in germ at least (the term itself is used in 'Priestly existence' [... this] means that the supernatural existential ought not be presented, as it so often is, as an idea originating in the nature/grace debate."¹⁰ Robert Masson adds to this by paraphrasing and quoting Philip Endean: "Rahner's most creative theological insights developed when he was 'a young man, in isolated academic and seminary settings."¹¹

Kilby also cites Tuomo Mannermaa, who holds that even before *Hearers of the Word*, "Rahner was already, at the time of delivering the lectures on which *Hearers of the Word* are based, in possession of an early version of the notion of transcendental revelation. As evidence of this he points to a sermon given during the same period." She says that "Mannermaa may be right about this, but if he is then one must conclude from the evidence of *Hearers of the Word* itself... that Rahner had not conceptually caught up with his own insights in this area."¹²

Considering the minimalist theory of the supernatural of this essay, I would extend this last thought to Rahner's later, stronger articulations of the supernatural existential, that his conceptualization had not yet caught up with his insights.¹³ But my main point here is that the insight of the supernatural existential was not occasioned by the *nouvelle théologie* debate, and that it is not simply the case that if one can critique the method and the actual form of the argument, then one can throw it away, especially if there is evidence that the insight didn't come from an inference related to a specific problem (the solution to which is found elsewhere), but from Scripture or experience.¹⁴

¹⁰ Karen Kilby, *Karl Rahner: Theology and Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 58; 141, n. 26.

¹¹ Masson, "Rahner's Metaphoric Logic," 393, quoting Philip Endean, "Has Rahnerian Theology a Future?" 287.

¹² Kilby, *Karl Rahner*, 142, n. 29

¹³ Coffey admits something of this. In his article "The Whole Rahner on the Supernatural Existential," he attempts to "formulate a Scholastic argument that Rahner could have devised," which for his contemporaries in the *nouvelle théologie*—and perhaps for us too—"would have given his theology a consistency and plausibility it lacked," 117. Coffey's interpretation is in terms of material causality: "God, intending himself as the ultimate end of human beings, creates them and communicates himself to them accordingly. The material cause alone of the causes is not God; it is the creature in its receptivity to God in self, that is, as disposed by God to receive his self-communication...If there exists some disposition *previous* to sanctifying grace, it must be attributed to material causality, that is, to the final cause acting through the material cause alone...the subject is simply 'restructured' (Rahner's word), given its 'first' (as distinct from its 'last') disposition to receive the form of God in self. This disposition is the supernatural existential" (115). This warrants further study.

¹⁴ In referring to Kilby's work in *Karl Rahner: Theology and Philosophy*, I do not necessarily mean to approve of her non-foundationalist approach. See Robert Masson's article, "Interpreting Rahner's Metaphoric Logic,"

Despite my critiques, I do think Rahner was on to something. In his essay "Concerning the Relationship Between Nature and Grace," Rahner asks a good question: "How am I to know that everything I in fact encounter in my existential experience of myself (the ultimate yearning, the most profound inner dispersion, the radical experience of the universally human tragedy of concupiscence and death) does in fact fall within the realm of my 'nature', and would also exist, exist in just this form, if there were no vocation to supernatural communion with God?...There is no way of providing a justification for this tacit presupposition starting from man, nor is it really proved by any theological argument."¹⁵

At this point, one might wish that Lonergan took a stance directly on the supernatural existential that would put an end to any speculation about what he thought. In fact, he did, only it's not very clear what he meant. In Lonergan's essay entitled "Philosophy and the Religious Phenomenon," he says that "what in a philosophic context I have named being in love in an unrestricted manner, in a theological context could be paralleled with Karl Rahner's supernatural existential."¹⁶ In Fred Crowe's editorial notes in the *Method* journal symposium on the latter essay: he says that this is the only place he know of where Lonergan mentions the supernatural existential in print.¹⁷ Matt Petillo admits that "there is some similarity" between the two terms,

Theological Studies 71 (2010), 380-409, for a good and important critique of Kilby's framing of the issue: "Reinterpreting Rahner as a foundationalist, semifoundational, or nonfoundationalist [which Kilby does] distorts his position" (393). Masson goes on to say that "Rahner's appeal to the transcendental is not aimed at establishing an entirely independent philosophical foundation for God-talk but rather at reconfiguring how we think and talk about God in the first place" (400). Although I critique Rahner's transcendental deduction, I do not accept Kilby's critique of Rahner's transcendental argument (that one cannot claim to know the conditions of possibility for a thing unless one thinks through all possible explanations; see Masson, "Rahner's Metaphoric Logic," 384). I also disagree with her implication that historical revelation is not necessary if transcendental revelation is already given. Beyond Masson's critique (384), I can add that, the grace of Christ is not irrelevant in addition to the Spirit's work before the Incarnation, for, based on the fact that the proper object of the intellect is the essence of material things, an addition of a objective correlate (e.g. Christ) to the subjective effect and experience of grace improves the latter's effect (not to say that subjective and objective, transcendental and historical are commensurate terms, of course).

¹⁵ Rahner says elsewhere that "this supernatural *a priori* in our spiritual existence, even though it can only be clearly brought to light and turned into objective knowledge through interpretation by revelation coming from without, nevertheless manifests itself in a thousand ways as a secret entelechy of individual and collective life, which would not happen if it were not at work," "Nature and Grace," 134. This is a good quotation, however, I think it is going too far to say that pure nature can *only* be discerned through revelation. Even if an argument can be made that grace is somehow mixed in with our transcendent, dynamic vector, this does not militate against identifying cognitional structure as Lonergan does. The four levels of intentional cognitive and affective operations (experience, understanding, judgment, feeling, and decision) and the concomitant transcendental precepts ("be attentive," "be intelligent," "be reasonable," "be responsible") belong to pure nature.

¹⁶ Bernard Lonergan, "Philosophy and the Religious Phenomenon," in *Philosophical and Theological Papers: 1965-1980*, 402.

¹⁷ Bernard Lonergan, "Philosophy and the Religious Phenomenon," ed. Frederick E. Crowe, *Method: Journal of Lonergan Studies* 12 (1994), 145, n. f. Available online http://www.lonerganresource.com/pdf/journals/Method_Vol_12_No_2.pdf (accessed October 2012).

but "the comparison is not overwhelmingly clear"; however, he then seems to equate supernatural existential and being-in-love unrestrictedly.¹⁸ The fluidity of Rahner's reference to the offer and the acceptance of God's self-communication opens up this interpretation, but I don't see how this can be so, because unlike the supernatural existential, Lonergan does not hold that all people, all the time are unrestrictedly in love! Unless Lonergan was mistaken, he must have meant that the supernatural existential *as the accepted* offer of the self-communication of God is parallel to being-in-love unrestrictedly.¹⁹

I think the fact of Augustinian restlessness provides the proper starting point for a theory. Turning to Lonergan and his balanced usage of the marginal theorem of the possibility of a state of pure nature, Lonergan writes:

“[P]erfect beatitude satisfies all desire...the beatitude natural and proportionate to a finite nature is imperfect. It excludes all sorrow, all regret, all wishing that things were otherwise, but it does not exclude the acknowledged existence of paradox that seems an inevitable consequence of finite nature and finite wisdom.”²⁰

When Augustine said "our hearts are restless until they rest in you, oh Lord," I doubt what he meant was: "I have imperfect beatitude, yet I desire perfect rest, Lord, if you'd be so kind—but I'm quite fine if you refuse."

This sounds silly. So was Augustine's restlessness merely the result of his sin, then? It's tough to say. One line that might help is found in one of Lonergan's essays called "Faith and belief," in *Philosophical and Theological Papers: 1965-1980*,²¹ where Lonergan refers to the

¹⁸ "What in Lonergan corresponds to entry into supernatural life is not for Rahner an event that *occurs to a person* but rather, is a state (supernatural existential) that is always already an element in the constitution of the person's concrete *quiddity*...For Rahner then, one is, in some sense, born into religious conversion," "The 'Experience of Grace,'" 121-30.

¹⁹ Coffey states that "the existential does not of itself bring about justification," "Supernatural Existential," 96. Again, Rahner is not easy to interpret on this issue. He says that when someone "experiences himself in the most various ways as the subject of unlimited transcendence, as the event of God's absolute and radical self-communication...God's self-communication [as accepted] is an ultimate and radicalizing modification of that very transcendental of ours by which we are subjects," *Foundations*, 132. My addition in the brackets of the latter quote is certainly (merely) an interpretation, however, if "the *loss* of such a sanctifying self-communication assumes the character of something which *should not be*," (ibid., 113), then sanctifying self-communication cannot be a part of the supernatural existential as offer, which can't be lost.

²⁰ Bernard Lonergan, "The Natural Desire to See God," in *Collection*, CWBL 4, eds. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 87.

²¹ Lonergan, "Faith and Belief," 20.

fact that "being-in-love is religious...it is experienced in many ways. It can be the quiet undertow of one's living that reveals itself only in a deep but obscure conviction that one cannot get out of trying to be holy." This does not sound like the effect of grace that is being unrestrictedly in love! It sounds like the effect of grace that is a supernatural existential, something that could be understood as a constitutive gift of all people, an undertow towards holiness, which perhaps Lonergan conflates with his own notion of being-in-love unrestrictedly. To compare the latter quotation with a similar line from Rahner, Rahner says that "the flame of the impulse to forget oneself, to devote oneself to the higher, burns always somewhere on the altar of the heart of every human being."²²

If this quiet undertow is the best version of the supernatural existential (or at least one that can be built upon), what then, as an operative effect of grace, does the supernatural existential operate on—that is to say, what aspect of pure human nature? A proper interpretation of Rahner's stronger concept of the supernatural existential (from *Foundations*) is that it is our desire that is modified—our concrete historical transcendental dynamism, which is made manifest through endless questions and the exercise of our freedom, is never found without an added or increased vector towards Holy Mystery. Lonergan says that our core desire—holistically described by Fred Lawrence as the "infinite human desire to know and be in affective union with the universe"²³—is natural. No grace would be necessary for humans in a state of pure nature to wonder about infinity and everything in the world; Lonergan holds that there would be natural religion, too, without grace, only we don't know what that would look like.²⁴

I don't think a supernatural existential that is a *modification* of our transcendental dynamism is more intelligible than one that, instead of modifying the drive, *alters the effect* or the feeling of fulfillment of any (purely) natural happiness.²⁵ Such a universal operation by God on humans, which, while not being a "gift of pain," is a sort of restlessness or distraction within

²² Karl Rahner, *The Need and the Blessing of Prayer*, ed. Bruce W. Gillette (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1997), 32.

²³ Fred Lawrence, "Core Humanity and God as Conversational," presentation at Catholic Theological Society of America session. Date unknown.

²⁴ Lonergan, "The Natural Desire to See God," 88.

²⁵ If the operative effect of the supernatural existential enters into our transcendental orientation as a factor that increases the vector, I don't know how to conceive it. Lonergan describes the pure desire to know in *Insight* as something (the notion of being) outside consciousness pulling one onward (*Insight: a Study of Human Understanding*, CWBL 3, eds. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran [Toronto: University of Toronto, 1992], 372-3), and perhaps grace is mixed up with that. But, in terms of a theory of universal grace, such a postulation concerning grace and desire needs to be balanced by social grace, for socio-cultural factors have an effect on individual and groups desires.

whatever imperfect natural rest we do attain, which we could call an undertow to holiness; the whisper of God. Such an operation on God's part would not lead to an entitatively supernatural act,²⁶ as is the case when we love out of the divine love that's been poured into our hearts, but this would be God working through or with "pure" human nature to orient humans to a supernatural end.

How is this an offer of being-in-love unrestrictedly? I don't think it can be described as an offer at all, but rather as a universal, ever-present *operation* on human nature that causes an undertow towards holiness and a grace antecedent to conversion. Why would God do such a thing if such an antecedent grace isn't necessary for conversion? This effect of grace would create a certain matrix of intelligibility so that once there occurred a consolation without a known cause, the cause won't be so unknown; that as we make the decision to dam up or flow with the river whose font is the procession of the Holy Spirit,²⁷ we might have the aid of being able to reason from the effects of grace to the First Cause of all, seeing the trail of his handiwork as did St. Augustine. Although such a supernatural existential would not be an offer that is always already on the table, it would be a tool that God could use to help us to "stay in love," to anticipate my good friend, Nick.²⁸

²⁶ Coffey agrees: "The existential is 'entitatively' natural...and 'modally' supernatural...the restructuring takes place on the level of nature, but the mode of possession of the end is supernatural (gratuitous)," "Supernatural Existential," 116.

²⁷ Thanks to Fred Lawrence for the images that inspired this phrasing.

²⁸ This phrase is from Nick DiSalvatore, whose presentation, " Staying in Love with God: Resolving an Ambiguity Concerning Grace as Cooperative," followed mine at *Lonergan on the Edge* 2012.