

Lonergan and Rahner on the Natural Desire to See God

Jeremy Blackwood, M.A.
Doctoral Student
Marquette University

This paper compares Karl Rahner's (1904-1984) theology of the supernatural existential with Bernard Lonergan's (1904-1984) articulation of obediential potency. There can be no doubt that Rahner made significant contributions to Catholic theology in the twentieth century, and on the nature/grace question, he did move in the direction of escaping the older *duplex ordo* way of thinking.¹ However, Lonergan had at his disposal an understanding of world order which allowed him to posit the very thing that Rahner's position would not allow – a natural human desire for a supernatural end.² He proposed

¹ The twentieth-century discussion of the issue was prompted by the conclusion to Henri de Lubac's *Surnaturel: Études historiques*, (Paris: Aubier, 1946). This conclusion is available in English translation as Document 1 (pp.368-380) of David M. Coffey, "Some Resources for Students of *La nouvelle théologie*," *Philosophy and Theology* 11, no. 2 (1999): 367-398. See also Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: Crossroad, 1998). Karl Rahner's response to de Lubac's position was "*Eine Antwort*," *Orientierung* 14 (1950): 141-145, in which he outlined his concern that de Lubac's position threatened the gratuity of grace. This article was republished, with a few minor changes, as "Concerning the Relationship between Nature and Grace," *Theological Investigations I*, trans. Cornelius Ernst, pages 297-317 (New York: Crossroad, 1982). It is here that the theorem of the 'supernatural existential' first makes its appearance.

² This position was first outlined in a treatise, *De ente supernaturali: Supplementum schematicum* (translated by Michael Shields at the Lonergan Research Institute, Toronto, 1992; *College de L'Immacule Conception*, Montreal, 1946), composed for a course on grace that Lonergan was teaching [hereafter abbreviated DES].

what he called a ‘vertical finality’ directing concrete things toward an end beyond the proportions of their nature. This notion allowed Lonergan to speak of ‘obediential potency’ in a unique way that avoided the problems of the post-Reformation theologians who, in his estimation, had failed to understand Aquinas adequately and who had thus set up the problematic as it had been taken up by Rahner and the *nouvelle théologie*.³ In his later work, even though he moved away from the earlier scholastic terminology of his earlier works, the notion of vertical finality can still be seen in Lonergan’s explication of the levels of conscious intentionality and their interrelation with one another as found in *Insight*⁴ and *Method in Theology*.⁵

Work directly comparing Rahner’s supernatural existential with Lonergan’s notion of obediential potency has for the most part not been forthcoming.⁶ Knowledge of Lonergan’s early theology of grace is largely confined to what one might call dedicated Lonergan scholars and was essentially absent from the Rahner/*nouvelle théologie*

³ Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Phenomenology and Logic: The Boston College Lectures on Mathematical Logic and Existentialism*, CWL 18, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 348-349 and 354-355.

⁴ Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, CWL 3, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992).

⁵ Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996).

⁶ The single example of which I am aware is Chapter 5 of Neil Ormerod’s *Method, Meaning, and Revelation* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2000), although his treatment falls within a larger context and is not focused on the issue.

conversation. J. Michael Stebbins' work on Lonergan's understanding of grace before 1950 was of immeasurable help in this endeavor, but despite its value, the work dismisses Rahner's supernatural existential in a rather cursory manner without the in-depth comparison being attempted here.⁷

Our examination will begin by moving through Lonergan's understanding of the nature/grace relationship. First, we will examine his early position in two parts. Initially, we will see the basic position as presented in *De ente supernaturali*; then, we will examine another early treatise of Lonergan's that shows his understanding of how his position would manifest in the concrete. Second, we will briefly present Rahner's notion of the supernatural existential, relying principally on four points he outlined in his article, "Concerning the Relationship between Nature and Grace." Finally, we will compare more directly the two thinkers' positions, revealing both a similarity and a significant difference.

1. LONERGAN'S CHRISTIAN UNIVERSE

Lonergan came to his early understanding of grace as he sought to understand St. Thomas' notion of the Christian universe,⁸ and in doing so, he worked within the framework of scholastic terminology. Still, he was critical of much of post-Reformation theology's response to the nature/grace problem, and he used a fresh interpretation of

⁷ J. Michael Stebbins, *The Divine Initiative: Grace, World-Order, and Human Freedom in the Early Writings of Bernard Lonergan* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), xviii.

⁸ J. Michael Stebbins, "Bernard Lonergan's Early Theology of Grace: A Commentary on *De Ente Supernaturali*" (Ph.D. dissertation, Boston College, 1990), abstract.

Thomist thought on the matter to outline a more nuanced and differentiated position on the issue.

1.1. Lonergan's Use of 'Obediential Potency'

His fundamental methodological move is the rejection of what he calls an essentialism that “precludes the possibility of natural aspiration to a supernatural goal.”⁹ This essentialism conceives of natures as logically and ontologically prior to world-orders.¹⁰ World-order, then, results from the juxtaposition of finite natures and their exigences. Thus, world-order is derivative¹¹ and consists of two elements – a necessary part composed of finite natures and their exigences, and a contingent part composed of anything beyond the necessary.¹² This is the ground of the *duplex ordo* system, in which the universe is constructed “of a series of non-communicating strata” that arise from successive levels of natures and exigences.¹³ The only relation between these levels is that of non-repugnance, and such a relation constitutes ‘obediential potency’ in this essentialist *duplex ordo* view.¹⁴

⁹ Bernard J. F. Lonergan, "The Natural Desire to See God," *Collection*, CWL 4, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran, pages 84-95 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 84. See also Stebbins, *Divine Initiative*, 171.

¹⁰ Ibid. 84. See also Stebbins, *Divine Initiative*, 171.

¹¹ Stebbins, *Divine Initiative*, 171.

¹² Lonergan, “Natural Desire,” 84.

¹³ Lonergan, *Phenomenology and Logic*, 348-349.

¹⁴ Stebbins, *Divine Initiative*, 172.

In contrast, Lonergan describes his alternative as an existentialist position.¹⁵ He reverses the foregoing essentialist presuppositions; rather than world order being derivative and finite natures being primary, world order is primary and finite natures are derivative. The universe is not structured in a series of static strata, but in a series of levels that are dynamically oriented in an “upward” fashion. Thus, finite natures are subordinate to world-order, and within world-order, lower natures are subordinate to higher natures.¹⁶ This allows him to use both ‘supernatural’ and ‘obediential potency’ in a different way than the essentialists he critiques.

His use of ‘supernatural’ rests largely on his understanding of world order.¹⁷ In that understanding, there are points of discontinuity in the universe resulting from the emergence of higher intelligibilities that cannot be accounted for completely in terms of lower intelligibilities. These higher intelligibilities sublimate lower grades of being and orient them to higher ends.¹⁸ Lower grades of being are therefore that out of which higher

¹⁵ Lonergan, “Natural Desire,” 86. See also Bernard J. F. Lonergan, “Finality, Love, Marriage,” *Collection*, CWL 4, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran, pages 16-53 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), 21.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 85.

¹⁷ A full account of Lonergan’s notion of hierarchical world-order would be too lengthy and complex to deal with in this paper. Stebbins, *Divine Initiative*, 44-45 and 56-58, provides a brief explanation to which we have referred in constructing our summary account here. See also Lonergan, *Insight*, chap. 8, and “Finality, Love, Marriage,” 18-22.

¹⁸ Stebbins, *Divine Initiative*, 45. See also page 142.

grades of being are formed and they have the intrinsic possibility of being integrated into the higher.¹⁹

To illustrate: an atom is of a lower level than a molecule, because a molecule integrates atoms and orients them to an end beyond the end of atoms *as atoms* – now they have the end of a molecule. Further, molecules are likewise integrated as chemicals. Once organized as chemicals, molecules no longer have only a molecular end; they behave as a chemical. Chemicals are then integrated as organelles, with a corresponding change in ends. Organelles are integrated as cells, cells as tissues, tissues as organs, organs as systems, systems as a body. A body is then sublated by the psychic processes of living, and those psychic processes are, in turn, sublated by the processes of intelligence at work.

This is the fundamental point for understanding Lonergan's notion of 'supernatural.' That which is supernatural to a given thing is that which is beyond the natural (proportionate) capacities of that thing, and although most scholastic positions outlined the natural/supernatural relationship in terms of the supernatural transcending the capacities of the natural, Lonergan distinguished between two notions of 'supernatural': that which is finite, which he terms the 'relatively supernatural,' and that which exceeds the capacities "of *any finite substance whatsoever*, whether created or creatable," which he terms the 'absolutely supernatural.'²⁰ Thus, while a chemical is relatively supernatural to a molecule and intelligence is relatively supernatural to psychic processes, only that which transcends *any* created level of reality – namely, God – fits this second meaning of 'supernatural.'

¹⁹ Ibid. 142.

²⁰ DES:21, (emphases mine).

It is Lonergan's next move, however, that truly goes beyond the limitations of post-Reformation thought. He proposes that within a universe conceived of as a series of levels with the lower being for the sake of the higher, the higher somehow must be the end of the lower. Therefore, one has in the lower levels a finality oriented toward and proportionate to, not those lower levels, but a higher level. Lonergan terms this a 'vertical finality.'²¹

Most scholastics readily admit two kinds of finality.²² The first is absolute finality, which is the orientation of all things to God as the one self-sufficient good; the second is horizontal finality, which arises out of the restrictions placed on a thing's tendency toward the absolute end by its own essence. But Lonergan observes that within world-order there is a third kind of finality constituted by "a vertical dynamism and tendency, an upthrust from lower to higher levels of appetite and process."²³ This vertical finality resides in a concrete plurality and develops within the realm of statistical law, such that it is "not of the abstract *per se* but of the concrete *per accidens*."²⁴

This reference to the concrete is precisely why vertical finality is a notion that has developed later than absolute and horizontal finality. While absolute and horizontal finality are much more readily seen through metaphysics alone, it is only with the advent of modern science that vertical finality is easily seen. It has become clear that "just as the real object tends to God as real motive and real term, just as the essence of the real object

²¹ Stebbins, "Bernard Lonergan's Early Theology of Grace," 349.

²² The following analysis is found in Lonergan, "Finality, Love, Marriage," 18-22.

²³ *Ibid.* 18.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 22.

limits the mode of appetite and of process, so a concrete plurality of essences has an upthrust from lower to higher levels.”²⁵ In other words, there is no difference, insofar as each finality is real and intrinsic, between an individual nature’s horizontal finality directed toward a proportionate end and the vertical finality directed toward a transcendent end found in a plurality of those natures: the latter is seen any time a set of lower entities evolves into a higher entity.²⁶ In fact, the notion of vertical finality enables metaphysics to explain the development modern science detects in real, concrete things as they move from lower to higher levels of being because such finality is “the very possibility of development, of novelty, of synthesis, of higher grades of being.”²⁷ The end of such development is more excellent than the end of horizontal finality because “from the very concept of hierarchy the higher is the more excellent.”²⁸ Yet, although it arises out of a concrete plurality, still vertical finality does arise out of what the thing is, and so it is certainly essential, though to a lesser degree than horizontal finality. Likewise, although it is less excellent than vertical finality, still the excellence of horizontal finality is only *relatively* less than that of vertical finality, because all finality is a limited mode of orientation to the ultimate good that is God, and so the difference between a lower and a higher excellence is always relative. The term ‘supernatural,’ then, denotes that more excellent end to which something has a vertical finality.

²⁵ Lonergan, “Finality, Love, Marriage,” 21.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 21-22.

²⁷ Stebbins, “Bernard Lonergan's Early Theology of Grace,” 289.

²⁸ Lonergan, “Finality, Love, Marriage,” 23.

In the case of human beings, this means that we are destined to two formally distinct finalities – a horizontal finality found in each of our individual natures directing us toward a natural, proportionate end, and a vertical finality found in a concrete plurality of humankind directing us toward a supernatural, transcendent end. While the former is the more essential proportionate grasp of God through knowledge of being, the latter is the more excellent grasp of God in Trinity through the gift of the beatific vision.

Yet it remains to explain how it is that we are able to receive that gift, and so we are now in a position to move on to the second of our terms to consider – ‘obediential potency.’ Lonergan outlines four types of vertical finality.²⁹ The first three are in the realm of the relatively supernatural; they involve the finality of finite activities or entities toward higher finite activities or entities. The fourth type of vertical finality, however, involves the absolutely supernatural. This is ‘obediential potency,’ and it denotes the sort of potency that enables the reception, by a finite entity, of the self-communication of the divine essence.³⁰

This potency is explained through Lonergan’s differentiation of specific types of potencies. In his scholastic language, a ‘potency’ is simply “an orientation or order towards act.”³¹ If the orientation or order is toward the production of an act, the potency is considered to be an ‘active’ potency. If the orientation is toward the reception of an act, the potency is a ‘passive’ potency.³² The latter can be the orientation “of first act towards

²⁹ Ibid. 20-21.

³⁰ DES:57.

³¹ Stebbins, *Divine Initiative*, 144.

³² Ibid.

receiving second act,” in which case it is known as an ‘accidental’ passive potency, or it can be the orientation “toward the reception of first act,” and then this potency is known as an ‘essential’ passive potency.³³ Such essential passive potency can be either a ‘natural’ potency, in which case it “possesses neither form nor habit but none the less can be reduced to information by a created agent,” or an ‘obediential’ potency, “which possesses neither form nor habit and cannot be moved to information by any created agent.”³⁴

De ente supernaturali offers one further differentiation. In that treatise, Lonergan proposes that any given potency can be understood as either proximate or remote. A proximate potency is “virtually of the same proportion as the first act to which it is ordered,” while a remote potency “is not of the same proportion, either formally or virtually, as the act to which it is ordered.”³⁵ This means that a proximate potency, the potency of something virtually proportionate to the reception of the higher-level reality, does not require further determinations for its actuation, but a remote potency does require such further determinations for its actuation, and the degree to which such

³³ DES:58.

³⁴ Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *De sanctissima Trinitate: Supplementum quoddam* (Gregorian University, Rome, 1955), 104.

³⁵ DES:60. To illustrate this distinction, Lonergan says that “a body that is duly disposed for receiving a spiritual soul is not formally of the same proportion as that soul, for there is nothing spiritual about it; but it is virtually of the same proportion, that is, considering it as a cause, since the functional purpose (*finis operis*) of a properly disposed body is to receive a soul.”

determinations are needed depends on “the difference between the proportion of a given first act and the proportion of the essential passive potency in question.”³⁶

Lonergan’s argument here seeks to differentiate the different capacities of things in terms of different types of potency. The distinction between active and passive potency is the distinction between the ability to act and the ability to be acted upon. The distinction between accidental and essential potency is a distinction between, on the one hand, receiving an act that makes something what it is, and on the other hand, receiving an act that is secondary to what that thing is, such as the distinction between a woman receiving the formal quality of “human being” versus her receiving the formal quality of “university professor.” The distinction between natural and obediential potency rests on the created or uncreated status of the agent needed to bring the potency to actuality. Finally, the distinction between proximate and remote potency regards the ontological proximity of the potential to the actual; the closer the potency is to the actuality, the less any further concrete events must occur in order for the potency to be actualized.

Condensing this complex language, we can say that obediential potency is for Lonergan a remote potency that is an essential passive potency. In other words, our capacity for the reception of God’s self-communication is a potency for the reception of first act that requires further determinations before it can be actuated. This potency, further, is a species of vertical finality because the act for which it is a potency is an act beyond the proportionate level of human activity, and finally because it is a potency that can only be actuated by an infinite agent, it is of the fourth type of vertical finality –

³⁶ Stebbins, *Divine Initiative*, 146.

obediential potency. Thus for Lonergan, obediential potency is a capacity to be constituted as what one is by an uncreated agent, given certain concrete events.

1.2. The Realization of the Obediential Potency in Social Form

In one portion of his treatise *De Deo Trino*, Lonergan examines the concrete manifestation of grace, which concerns us precisely insofar as it illumines the vision Lonergan had of the actuation of the obediential potency in a concrete plurality of human beings.³⁷ To begin the discussion, he tells us that “St. Thomas interprets [the] indwelling, gift, possessing, and enjoying [illustrated in Scripture] in accord with the fact that through the grace that renders us pleasing God is in the just as the known in the knower and the beloved in the lover.”³⁸

To examine the presence of the known in the knower and the beloved in the lover, an extended discussion on presence then follows.³⁹ First, Lonergan says, presence would seem to mean spatial proximity. But stones are not said to be present to one another, and so there must be something more to presence. Second, that more “would seem to be a certain psychic adaptation resulting from spatial proximity,” but then spatial proximity

³⁷ Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *The Triune God: Systematics*, CWL 12, ed. Robert M. Doran, Daniel Monsour, and Michael Shields (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), ch. 6.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 353-5. He cites 1Jn. 4:8, 13, 16; Gal. 4:6; Jn. 14:15-17, 20-21, 23; 15:4-5, 9; 17:21-23, 26; Rom. 7:17-18, 20; 8:8-11, 14-17; 1Cor. 2:16-17; 6:15-20; 13; 2Cor. 5:14-21; and 2Tim. 1:13-14.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 355-7.

becomes only a condition for presence, not presence itself.⁴⁰ Third, because humans have “the utmost freedom of imagination” and we can bring to mind the past, the future, or other things that are not spatially proximate to us, and we can experience the “psychic adaptation” of presence when we do so, we must admit a differentiation of two types of presence in human beings – one having to do with spatial proximity and the other having to do with the freedom of humans intentionally to imitate spatial proximity.⁴¹ Fourth, human beings are persons because “they have an intellectual nature and operate in accord with it,” and in terms of the operations proper to that intellectual nature (and thus to human personhood) “that which is known is in the knower with an intentional existence, and what is loved is joined and united to the lover” in the same manner; this “in” is an instance of presence (it can result in “psychic adaptation”) and the presence in these two operations (knowing and loving) “can be called personal presence” because these operations are proper to persons.⁴² Finally, because we only truly know a person through a succession of many such presence-bearing acts, and in performing such a succession of acts we develop a habit, then “it is a habit that provides the foundation of that knowledge by which a person who is truly known is in the knower,”⁴³ and the same is true of love.

Next, Lonergan goes on to establish that such knowing and loving cannot but be social for human beings. He notes that persons, interpersonal relations, habits of knowing

⁴⁰ Ibid. 355.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid. 355-6.

⁴³ Ibid. 356.

and feeling, interpersonal coordination, and recurring instances of particular goods are all interrelated.⁴⁴ It is the good of order that maintains an intelligible relation among these elements, and the strength of their interrelation is the strength of the order thereby achieved:

But since these are the same elements that constitute personal presence, it must be said that the degree of perfection by which the good of order is achieved is the same as that by which personal presence is achieved, and similarly, that the degree of perfection by which personal presence is achieved is the same as that by which the good of order is achieved [such that] there is [a type of] personal presence whereby persons, pursuing a common good of order, are in one another as the known in the knower and the beloved in the lover.⁴⁵

The interrelation of these elements, then, dictates that the knowledge and love with which we are concerned cannot but be deeply involved with community.

This analysis, however, is as it were from the human “side.” Lonergan therefore moves on to examine the matter beginning with God. First, “God is in himself as the known in the knower and the beloved in the lover.”⁴⁶ This is because the word of God, being a mental word, is formally the same as that which is known, in this case Godself. And because in God to be is to understand, God’s formal reality is God’s material reality; therefore, it is God that is in God in the way a known is in the knower, and the word of

⁴⁴ Ibid. 356-7.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 357.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

this knowing (the Word) is God because it bears not only a formal but also a material identity to God. The same general principle and method of reasoning applies to love, such that Lonergan can say, similarly, that the Holy Spirit must be God.

For Lonergan, this Trinitarian analogy carries with it implications concerning the Divine Persons in the very community of the Trinity itself. “Those whose being and understanding and knowing and loving are one and the same and are indeed that which they themselves are, are in one another in the most perfect way.”⁴⁷ But it carries farther, to include not just the Triune Godhead but all of creation. Lonergan points out that all things are known and loved by God, and are thus in God, “not, of course, in the consubstantiality of the divine nature, but according to intentional existence and the quasi-identification of those in love.”⁴⁸ Within creation, however, there are beings whom “he foreknew [and] predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters” [Rom. 8:29] and those beings who are known and loved in this special way are also seen to be present in God in a special way as the known in the knower and the beloved in the lover. Therefore in a special way they are in the divine Word in which God the Father utters himself and all other things; and in a special way they are in the divine proceeding Love in which God the Father and God the Son love both themselves and all other things as well.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Ibid. 358.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 358-9.

Second, regarding Christ, Lonergan provides a host of biblical references to show that knowing him and loving him are linked to one another and to his knowing and loving us,⁵⁰ and Lonergan concludes this point by quoting 2Cor. 5:14-17, including the passage (vv.15-17),

and he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them. From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

With this in mind, Lonergan reaffirms that Christ and those he knows must live in one another as the known in the knower and the beloved in the lover, and he adds the point that the indwelling is the cause of a change of point of view, such that “we regard no one from a human point of view.”⁵¹

Third, Christ did not teach his own doctrine or do his own will, but he taught the doctrine of the Father and did the Father’s will; likewise, “Christ does not unite the members of his body with himself without uniting them with God the Father.”⁵² Another

⁵⁰ Lonergan cites Mt. 7:23; Jn. 10:14; 12:32; 15:9, 13; Ga. 2:19-20; Ep. 3:16-19 in *ibid.*, 359-60.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 360.

⁵² *Ibid.*

list of citations is provided,⁵³ and Lonergan concludes from this material that “the divine persons themselves and the blessed in heaven and the just on this earth are in one another as those who are known are in those who know them and those who are loved are in those who love them.”⁵⁴ But he cautions that there is a distinction within the various kinds of indwelling observed here: “the divine persons are in one another through consubstantiality; the just are in God and in one another by way of intentional existence and the quasi-identification of love.”⁵⁵ Even with this distinction, however, Christ provides a qualification, for “we are in the Word, however, as known and loved through both his divine and his human nature; and the Word is in us in order that in knowing and loving a visible human being we may arrive at knowing and loving God, who dwells in unapproachable light.”⁵⁶ Through this encounter with a human being, then, “we are led...to that higher knowledge and love in which we no longer know Christ from a human point of view [recall the reference to 2Cor. 5:16 above], but our inner word of the divine Word is spoken in us intelligently according to the emanation of truth, and our love of divine Love is spirated according to the emanation of holiness.”⁵⁷ Thus, through Christ the community constituted by the Divine Persons, the members of which are the just, is able to move from a purely intentional presence in one another and in the Trinity

⁵³ 1Jn. 4:10, 19; 2Cor. 5:19; Jn. 14:9, 15-17, 21; 16:27; 17:21, 23, 26; Mt. 25:31-46 in *ibid.*, 360-1.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 361.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 361-2.

toward a more substantial indwelling, one that is necessarily an indwelling and interrelationship of community.

In light of the foregoing, Lonergan can make his major proposal:

[T]he state or situation of grace refers to many distinct subjects together.

Thus to constitute the state of grace there are required (1) the Father who loves, (2) the Son because of whom the Father loves, (3) the Holy Spirit by whom the Father loves and gives, and (4) the just, whom, because of the Son, the Father loves by the Holy Spirit, and to whom the Father gives by the Holy Spirit, and who consequently are endowed with sanctifying grace, whence flow the virtues and gifts, and who are thereby just and upright and ready to receive and elicit acts ordered towards eternal life.⁵⁸

He further maintains that it is “*in accordance with this state* [that] the divine persons and the just are in one another as those who are known are in those who know them and those who are loved are in those who love them.”⁵⁹ Thus, the actuation of the obediential potency for God, which is the indwelling with which Lonergan is concerned in this treatise, is necessarily a communal reality, involving not the individual as such, but (to return to our earlier terminology) a concrete plurality.

1.3. Summary

In Lonergan’s writings we find a solution to the nature/grace problematic that has been worked out in scholastic terminology but with a renewed interpretation and understanding of Thomist thought. This new way of looking at the Thomist position

⁵⁸ Ibid. 365.

⁵⁹ Ibid. Emphases mine.

allowed Lonergan not only to reply to the discussion, but to go beyond it, transcend its framework, and establish a more nuanced and differentiated position.

By utilizing a notion of vertical finality to articulate obediential potency, Lonergan reworked the notions of finality and exigence that were operative in the ongoing debate. He could then posit a natural desire for a supernatural end without threatening the gratuity of that end. Further, because that natural desire involved a vertical finality, it was consequently in community that Lonergan envisioned the fulfillment of that natural desire occurring.

RAHNER'S SUPERNATURAL EXISTENTIAL

Rahner's theory of the supernatural existential tends to hold currency today on this issue; most theologians hold to an understanding of this problematic and its solution that is essentially grounded in Rahner's position, whether or not they are explicitly aware of that fact. For any other understanding of the nature/grace question to bear fruit in the discourse of the larger theological community, it must deal with Rahner's theory.

Because of the broader acceptance and knowledge of Rahner's position, we need not spend quite so much time on it as we did on Lonergan's understanding of the issue. I present here a brief account of Rahner's notion of the supernatural existential as summarized in four points he provided in his brief article, "Concerning the Relationship between Nature and Grace," followed by my own summary clarification of Rahner's theory.

First, human beings ought to have the capacity to receive the love that God is. There must be a real, always-present potency in human beings for the reception of the

divine Self; this is “the central and abiding existential of man as he really is.”⁶⁰ Second, the reception of this divine Self must be the reception of a gift; therefore the capacity of the human being for the reception of the love that God is must be due not to our human-being-ness (nature), but to the gift of God. Our “abiding existential,” then, must be supernatural.⁶¹ Third, it is through the reception of this love in the Holy Spirit and through the gospel that we are able to determine just what it is in us that is of us and what it is that is of this “supernatural existential.” That which is of us is just that which is left over after the supernatural existential is subtracted. *This* “‘nature’ in the theological sense” is that which is distinguished from the supernatural existential.⁶² Fourth, nature must of itself and as human nature be open to the supernatural existential. There must be more than mere non-repugnance; there must be a real yet conditioned ordering toward the supernatural existential. This ordering can be identified as the dynamism of the human spirit, but one must be careful not to identify this dynamism as it is *ordered* to the supernatural existential with the dynamism *experienced* in our quiddity because the supernatural existential is an ever-present aspect of our quiddity as we experience it.⁶³

There are two fundamental points to be grasped concerning the supernatural existential. First, it is not of our nature. This is the ‘supernatural’ element of the term. Whatever the supernatural existential is, it is not a result of human nature as such; it must be a gift of God. Second, it pertains not to our essence, not to our human nature as such,

⁶⁰ Rahner, “Concerning the Relationship,” 311.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* 312-313.

⁶² *Ibid.* 313-315.

⁶³ *Ibid.* 315-316.

but to our existence or quiddity. This is the ‘existential’ element of the term. It involves the concrete *de facto* situation of every human being’s existence in this real concrete world, and not the essence of what we are as such.

COMPARISON

It should be clear from what has been said above that world-order is an integral aspect of Lonergan’s solution. However, there is certainly a world-order component to Rahner’s position, as well. Because “it is part of the Catholic statement of faith that the supernatural saving purpose of God extends to all human beings in all ages and places in history,”⁶⁴ the existential must be “continuous and permanent rather than ‘intermittent’”⁶⁵ and thus the supernatural existential is the situation of the concrete order of things in which we are destined for direct union with God. Every person in every place and time is then the locus of God’s self-communication and that self-communication must be present always to everyone as the condition of possibility for its own acceptance.⁶⁶

There is significant similarity on the individual level, as well. For Lonergan, the potency for God, though described as either ‘natural’ or ‘obediential,’ is ontologically always natural, precisely because the potency in either case is a potency *of human nature*

⁶⁴ Karl Rahner, “History of the World and Salvation-History,” *Theological Investigations V*, trans. Karl-H. Kruger, pages 97-114 (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 97.

⁶⁵ David M. Coffey, “The Whole Rahner on the Supernatural Existential,” *Theological Studies* 65, no.1 (2004): 105. See also Karl Rahner, “Nature and Grace,” *Theological Investigations IV*, trans. Kevin Smyth, pages 165-188 (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 180.

⁶⁶ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Crossroad, 2004), 127-129.

and its distinction as natural or obediential is *only* extrinsic. ‘Natural’ in this distinction refers only to the relation between the proportion of the actuating agent and that of the nature with the potency, not to the fact that the potency is *of human nature*, as if it were to be distinguished from obediential potency in the sense that the latter is *not* of human nature. Insofar as the distinction between the two potencies is extrinsic, they are *both* of human nature; insofar as the difference between them is of the *per se*, they are two really distinct potencies, one of which is ordered to a proportionate end, the other of which is ordered to a transcendent end, one of which is actuated by a finite agent, the other of which is actuated by an infinite agent.⁶⁷

Similarly, the Rahnerian position contends that, while “modally supernatural,” the supernatural existential is “entitatively natural.”⁶⁸ The end of Rahner’s “pure nature” is to be distinguished formally from the end of the supernatural existential while the desire for both ends belongs to the nature (even if it is not *of* the nature), just as the natural and obediential potencies of Lonergan’s system are distinguished formally while the desire for each of them belongs to the nature.

These similarities, however, exist in counterpoint to the differences between Lonergan and Rahner on this issue. In the Rahnerian understanding, an unconditional desire for an end that requires grace constitutes a threat to the gratuity of that grace, as noted by Fr. David Coffey:

If God assigns an end to everyone he creates, and the ‘desire’ of this end belongs to the nature of the person in question, God owes to that person

⁶⁷ DES:69.

⁶⁸ Coffey, “The Whole Rahner,” 116.

the possibility of attaining the assigned end either from the unaided resources of his or her nature or, in the case of the beatific vision, with the help of grace, which would mean that both grace and the beatific vision would lose their essentially gratuitous character.⁶⁹

Based on this reasoning, the Rahnerian position disallows the possibility of a natural desire for God *uti in se est*, if by that phrase one intends or includes God as Trinity. But the structure of this understanding of natures and ends is involved in the very essentialist notions criticized by Lonergan. While de Lubac's understanding of nature and grace naturalized the supernatural end of the desire, Rahner's theory raised human nature beyond its proportionate capacities.⁷⁰ Both of these moves are necessitated by the same fundamental error – that all desires and ends must be horizontally related. There is no room in either theologian's position for an existentialist understanding of the universe in which vertical finality allows a given nature to have a transcendent end, an end that is *supernatural*. When that sort of finality is admitted, one allows for the obediential potency Lonergan asserts. This sort of potency, moreover, is protected from exigence,

⁶⁹ Coffey, "The Whole Rahner." 102.

⁷⁰ With regard to Rahner, see "Concerning the Relationship," 312-313. With regard to de Lubac, it is worth noting a comment made in Doran, "Lonergan and Balthasar," 73, to the effect that Lonergan's position "is in fundamental harmony with Henri de Lubac's position in *The Mystery of the Supernatural*." I would disagree with Fr. Doran and propose, as I have here, that Lonergan's grasp of vertical finality allowed him a better solution to the problem. See Stebbins, "Bernard Lonergan's Early Theology of Grace," 294-296 and also Lonergan, *Phenomenology and Logic*, 355.

and thus from threatening the gratuity of grace, because it requires further determinations for its actuation. To assert the opposite would be akin to asserting that organic chemicals have an exigence for the reception of a rational soul. While organic chemicals have a vertical finality for the reception of a rational soul, that vertical finality requires further determination and thus there is no exigence.⁷¹

It is also this same involvement with essentialism that asks for a clarification of the phrase Lonergan uses to designate the object of our natural desire – “God *uti in se est*” – insofar as a distinction is demanded between God as creator and God as Trinity. Already in the phrasing of the question, we find an either/or option – *either* God as creator *or* God as Trinity. There is no option within such an understanding that would allow for Lonergan’s notion of one end with two formally distinct ways of being reached, one of which is a sublation of the other. However, when vertical finality is admitted in addition to horizontal finality, one allows for the Lonerganian reply that we have one natural desire fulfilled in a twofold manner: knowledge of God as Creator corresponding to our natural potency, and knowledge of God as Trinity corresponding to our obediencial potency. ‘God as Creator’ and ‘God in God’s full Trinitarian life’ are not two materially different objects of knowledge; they are two modally or formally distinct ways of knowing *one* material object⁷² in which one of the formally distinct objects sublates the other. Further, each formal way of knowing the one material object reaches its own sort of ‘rest.’ The ‘rest’ achieved in the knowledge of God as Creator involves only the

⁷¹ Stebbins, *Divine Initiative*, 154. Exigence with respect to natural and obediencial remote essential passive potencies is discussed in DES:60-61.

⁷² See Stebbins, *Divine Initiative*, 340, note 33 to page 156.

cessation of the effort to achieve another end and is thus imperfect, while the ‘rest’ reached in knowledge of God in Trinity involves participation in the intrinsic immobility of God and is thus perfect. Lonergan in fact maintains that “the Thomist distinction is between *beatitudo perfecta* and *imperfecta*” as opposed to the distinction between *beatitudo naturalis* and *supernaturalis* that developed later and became so emphasized in the post-Reformation framework in which both de Lubac and Rahner worked.⁷³

Contrary to that framework, for Lonergan, although natural fulfillment is imperfect relative to supernatural fulfillment, human nature does not require supernatural fulfillment for its natural perfection: natural knowledge of God is a proportionate fulfillment of the natural desire and all that is required by a nature is a proportionate fulfillment of its end.⁷⁴ This way of conceiving the solution to the issue maintains a useful distinction. First, this is precisely why the condemnation of *Humani Generis* does not apply to Lonergan’s position: God could have created a world order without grace in which the obediencial potency is not actuated, thus creating us just as we are but without concretely destining us for the beatific vision. Second, the proportionality of natural fulfillment to our natural desire is precisely why Lonergan’s position is not subject to the Rahnerian critique that natural fulfillment could be made into “a half unhappiness.”⁷⁵ A natural fulfillment, precisely because it is a real fulfillment of what is required, would thus not be any sort of half unfulfillment.⁷⁶ We have only one material end – God as God

⁷³ DES:74. See also Lonergan, *Phenomenology and Logic*, 354.

⁷⁴ DES:74. See also Stebbins, *Divine Initiative*, 157 and DES:78.

⁷⁵ Rahner, “Concerning the Relationship,” 303.

⁷⁶ This, it would seem, is the force of Rahner’s concern with “a half unhappiness.”

really and completely is. But that end is reached in two formally distinct ways, both of which are fulfillments of our one natural desire, the one act proportionate and more essential, the other act disproportionate and more excellent.

CONCLUSION

It is precisely Lonergan's emphasis on the priority of world-order and the consequent importance of the concrete for his thought that allows his position on the nature-grace question to be such a complete response to the issue. Quite simply, it is not in being *less* existential that Lonergan's solution finds its way to affirming a natural desire for God; rather, it is in being *more* existential. Vertical finality resides in a concrete plurality and is of the *per accidens*. It belongs to matter-of-fact existential reality, but with his emphasis on the priority of world-order, Lonergan makes an allowance for the ultimately intelligible nature of the existential, and thus for him the existential does have an ontological import. Therefore, in the case of humankind's potency for the absolutely supernatural, it not only includes, but even arises from, this existential reality, and thus the actuation of that potency is a function of the concrete interaction of elements that is history. There is a relation between Rahner's emphasis on concrete quiddity and history and the position of Lonergan as outlined above insofar as, for the latter, history is the realm within which the "further determinations" of the potency occur, and so the theological study of history is, part, a study of the accrual of the "further determinations" necessary for the actuation of the potency.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ A similar point is made, though not in these words, by Ormerod, *Method, Meaning, and Revelation*, 181-182.

The similarities between the position of Rahner and that of Lonergan are striking, and they have at their core a likeness resulting from the existential emphasis of each of these thinkers. Fundamentally, although Rahner's insights on the topic ran deep and he did seek to move in the direction of an existential answer to the question, as a matter of fact he was unable to overcome completely the framework that so dominated the post-Reformation system of the *duplex ordo*, and that limitation prevented him from fully overcoming the essentialist, horizontally-fixated notion of natures. He was thus prevented from being able to make the statement that Lonergan was able to make: Human beings have a natural desire for a supernatural end, God as God is in Godself.