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Nature, Grace, and "the Drama of Atheist Humanism": Henri de Lubac's Account of Modernity

Steven Waldorf
University of Chicago

Against the backdrop of the totalitarian movements of National Socialism and Soviet communism, the French Jesuit theologian Henri de Lubac penned in 1944 what would become one of the twentieth century's most prominent accounts of the modern project, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*. In the work, De Lubac located the origins of such political movements in the "atheistic humanism" that predominated in modern thought, a "humanism" that, originating in the early modern period, found its purest expression in the works of Feuerbach, Marx, Comte, and Nietzsche in the nineteenth century. According to De Lubac, breaking from the great doctors of Christian antiquity and the Middle Ages, modern thinkers began to see dependency on God as an obstacle to human freedom, an obstacle that had to be overcome for man to fully realize his dignity. As he explains, at the dawn of the modern age,

> that same God in whom man had learned to see the seal of his own greatness began to seem to [man] like an antagonist, the enemy of his dignity. . . . [Man] began to think that henceforward he would forfeit his self-esteem and be unable to develop in freedom unless he broke first with the Church and then with the Transcendent Being upon whom, according to Christian tradition, he was dependent. At first assuming the aspect of a reversion to paganism, this

> urge to cut loose increased in scope and momentum in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries until, after many phases and many vicissitudes, it came to a head in the most daring and destructive form of modern atheism: absolute humanism, which claims to be the only genuine kind and inevitably regards a Christian humanism as absurd.[1]

For De Lubac, the results of atheistic humanism were catastrophic. By abolishing the image of God in man in the name of autonomy, modernity abolished the true source of man's dignity and paved the way for radically inhuman totalitarian regimes that denied the dignity of the human person.[2]

Although in *The Drama of Atheist Humanism* he did not extensively probe the historical origins of modern man's rejection of God, in subsequent works he would lay the blame at the feet of late Scholastic theologians and their putative separation of nature from grace.[3] In his 1946 work *Surnaturel: Études historiques*, De Lubac developed what would become his most famous theological thesis—namely, that man naturally desires the supernatural vision of God as his only true beatitude and that this was the perennial teaching of all the great doctors of Christianity until the sixteenth century.[4] Beginning with the Renaissance Thomistic commentator Tommaso de Vio Cajetan, this understanding of human nature as intrinsically oriented toward a supernatural perfection was lost, replaced with an anthropology of "pure nature" according to which man's nature finds its perfection in the strictly natural end of philosophical contemplation.[5] Although the Scholastics never abandoned the idea that man has an additional supernatural end entirely above the order of nature that requires grace for its attainment, according to De Lubac, their anthropology of a purely natural end for human *nature* rendered the supernatural entirely extrinsic to the order of *natura*. This development implied the autonomy of nature from the supernatural, a step that in turn opened the door to modernity's more radical declaration of man's total autonomy from God.

The De Lubacian trope of a degeneration from late Scholasticism's putative separation of nature from grace to atheistic modernity has proved highly influential and appears in the work of several of the most prominent political theologians of our time. For instance, John Milbank claims that the later Scholastic view of man as having a natural final end that is independent of his supernatural end led to an "autonomous theoretical philosophy . . . concerned with purely immanent, univocal being" and ultimately to the "primacy of indifferent facts" that characterizes the skepticism of David Hume.[6] In his work *The Suspended Middle*, moreover, he links the Scholastic theory of pure nature to modern cultural developments, writing that *natura pura* leads to a separation of morals from religious practice and "mystical self-loss" that tends to result in "joyless disciplinary programs for the maximizing of corporeal efficiency, and in the long run in nihilistic cults of individual and collective power."[7]

Similarly, David L. Schindler, writing in a specifically American context, argues that the Scholastic view of nature held by many at the time of the American founding gradually degenerated into a radical antinomy between nature and grace that underlies the contemporary cultural acceptance of abortion and euthanasia.[8] Like De Lubac, Schindler maintains that the Scholastic view of *natura*, which juxtaposes an integral, freestanding order of nature with its own end against an equally independent order of grace directed to a separate end, with no intrinsic relationship or connection between them, led over time to the view that nature is autonomous from, and even opposed to, grace. This autonomy of nature vis-à-vis grace leads to the marginalization of grace and of love from public life, and once grace and love are marginalized, the door is open to allowing categories of persons deemed "useless," such as the aged and the unborn, to be discarded.[9]

De Lubac's analysis of the origins and character of the modern project thus continues to resonate in contemporary reflection on the nature of modernity and how theologians should respond to it.[10] Given its enduring influence, an assessment of the narrative as

an account of modernity is thus timely. How persuasive is it as an account of the modern project? Do the origins of modernity really lie in late Scholastic thought? And is modernity essentially characterized by a rejection of the transcendent in the name of autonomous freedom? Answering such questions is important for any scholar interested in examining the nature of the modern project, given the prominence of De Lubac's narrative both in its own day and, through the work of his acolytes, in our own time as well.

In my evaluation of the De Lubacian account, I argue, first, that the French Jesuit does not succeed in demonstrating a necessary connection between late Scholastic thought and modern atheistic humanism. Yet, as I then show, De Lubac's earlier characterization of the modern project in *The Drama of Atheist Humanism* as a rejection of the transcendent in pursuit of autonomy has much explanatory force, since it accounts for a phenomenon that many scholars have identified as a central aspect of modernity: the loss of nature as a normative standard for human living. Finally, I conclude by considering some ways in which De Lubac's view of human nature as perfected by nothing short of a supernatural end—a claim that plays an important role in his genealogy of the modern project—can be useful in presenting a renewed *philosophical* defense of the normativity of nature.

De Lubac and the Scholastic Origins of "Atheist Humanism"

The first point to consider is whether secular modernity has its roots in later Scholastic theology, as De Lubac and those who share his historical narrative contend. But before addressing this question, it is necessary to begin with a more detailed overview of De Lubac's narrative. According to the French Jesuit, man was created by God with a natural desire for the supernatural end of the beatifying vision of the divine essence. Thus, human nature is not perfected by anything short of this vision, and as such it is man's proper end and perfection. This was the constant position of the great Christian doctors, including Augustine, Aquinas, and Scotus, until the Renaissance. Starting chiefly with Cajetan, this anthropology was replaced by one of "pure nature"—that is, the view that

human nature cannot have an end or perfection above its unaided power to attain, that it must be able to achieve complete fulfillment in a naturally attainable good (philosophical contemplation of God). Man therefore has no intrinsic desire for, and thus no intrinsic relation to, a supernatural good such as the beatific vision. He is closed in on himself, fully perfected by the beatitude he can achieve by his own powers, and the realm of nature he inhabits is thus autonomous with respect to the supernatural order.[11]

On the basis of this thesis, De Lubac formulates an explanation of the historical origins of modern secular atheism. According to him, the autonomy of human nature with respect to supernatural beatitude that is the hallmark of the pure nature thesis leads to the autonomy and independence from God proclaimed by secular modernity. One of the more detailed explanations of how exactly the disjunction between nature and grace implied in the Scholastic position led to the total autonomy of man with respect to God, asserted by modern thinkers, is found in *Augustinianism and Modern Theology*, first published in 1965. There, De Lubac explains that the Scholastic doctrine of a purely natural end for man rendered the order of nature "complete, consistent, sufficient and of itself independent of any superior 'order.'"[12] However, because of its self-sufficiency and intrinsic completeness independent of grace, philosophers over time began to see the supernatural as "superfluous," and as a result they ultimately jettisoned it:

> Nature and "supernature" (the term that was increasingly used) were paired off in such a way that the second came to seem to jealous reason only a vain shadow, a sham adornment. In proportion as the one became a complete system, the other seemed to the thinker to become superfluous. Despite the apologists, man settled into "natural religion" . . . [and as a result] the supernatural was to be rejected, exiled or hunted down. In these rational speculations it was necessary that nothing should allow it, its presence or its very possibility, to be even suspected, in the way a void suggests the idea that it could be filled.[13]

Having imbibed Scholastic assumptions about the intrinsic completeness of nature and its autonomy with respect to the order of grace and gone even further by eliminating the supernatural altogether as unnecessary in favor of a "natural religion,"[14] early modern thinkers opened the door to an atheistic humanism according to which God is not simply superfluous but is in fact an obstacle to human freedom and human dignity. As De Lubac explains, the understanding of revelation as superfluous brought on by Scholastic pure nature ultimately leads man to regard himself as "a being sufficient to himself, and wishing to be so; a being who does not pray, who expects no graces, who relies on no Providence; a being who . . . stands boldly before God—if he does not actually divinize himself—in a proud and jealous determination to be happy in himself and by his own powers."[15] In other words, discarding the supernatural as superfluous ultimately leads to hostility not just toward the God of Christian revelation but to the very notion of a transcendent God as such. This is precisely the atheistic humanism De Lubac criticizes in *Drama*: a view of human existence that posits that man attains his flourishing only by asserting his freedom and independence from God, who is experienced, not as the source of human dignity, but as an obstacle to it. According to De Lubac, this view is the outcome of the later Scholastic conception of nature as perfected within the natural order, a conception that leads, first, to the rejection of supernatural grace as redundant and, ultimately, to the outright opposition between man and God articulated by thinkers such as Feuerbach, Marx, Comte, and Nietzsche.[16]

As I have suggested, as a historical narrative, this account is flawed, since it fails to demonstrate a necessary connection between Scholastic pure nature and the jettisoning of the supernatural, or even between the mere superfluity of the order of grace and atheistic humanism's opposition of man to God. With regard to the first, De Lubac does not explain how or why revelation becomes "superfluous" once one posits that human nature is perfected by an end in the natural order. Indeed, Scholastic proponents of pure nature most certainly did *not* see the order of grace as "redundant."

On the contrary, as De Lubac was surely aware, far from jettisoning it as superfluous, they considered grace essential for man's supernatural end of eternal salvation—the *unum necessarium* of human life. The elimination of the supernatural results from a *decision* to discard the notion of a supernatural end, a decision that radically separates modern thinkers from orthodox Scholastics and that in no way follows as a necessary corollary from any propositions advanced by the latter. Of course, one could maintain that by removing the requirement of grace for the perfection of human nature—that is, for the attainment of human nature's end—*natura pura* makes it possible to conceive of human nature in isolation from the order of grace in a way that is not possible in the older view. One might then reason that the fact that we *can* conceive of man as independent of grace makes it more likely that some *will* come to see man as *in fact* independent of grace—that is, to see the supernatural as truly superfluous and something to be discarded. But the fact that we *can* conceive of man without grace does not mean we *must* so conceive him; an intervening *choice* is still necessary to make the leap from the *possibility* of conceiving man as having no supernatural finality to the definitive *assertion* that he indeed has no such finality. This choice simply cannot be resolved into anything the Scholastics said as logically following therefrom. Yet, to blame the Scholastics for the elimination of the supernatural would requires showing just such a connection—a connection De Lubac does not succeed in drawing.

Even if we could establish a causal relationship between Scholastic *natura pura* and the loss of the supernatural, how would the discarding of grace as superfluous degenerate into outright *opposition* between man and the very notion of a transcendent God as such? Here again, it is difficult to establish a logical connection between these two positions. The mere fact that one does not subscribe to revelation does not ipso facto make one an adherent of atheist humanism; the loss of the supernatural, in other words, does not necessitate the choice to reject the transcendent as such in favor of complete human autonomy. On the contrary, if we look at the history of human thought, other alternatives present

themselves. For instance, even if we do not accept the order of supernatural grace, is it not still logically possible to acknowledge the natural moral order—an order that has a divine source? There are certainly examples of this position to be found in the history of philosophy, from Plato and Aristotle in antiquity to Averroës in the Middle Ages to Leo Strauss in modern times. Is there any logical inconsistency between their lack of adherence to Christian revelation and their view that there exists a moral order not of human construction to which man is bound to conform such that, in not assenting to revelation, they would be forced to reject the objective moral order as a threat to human freedom? I do not believe so, and the lack of a necessary connection between the mere absence of the supernatural and the outright opposition of man to the divine order of things is a significant lacuna in De Lubac's historical genealogy of atheistic humanism that diminishes its explanatory force.[17]

The Drama of Atheist Humanism and the Loss of Nature in Modernity

Although De Lubac's historical genealogy of modernity in later works faces difficulties, his characterization of the modern project in *The Drama of Atheist Humanism* as a rejection of the transcendent in favor of human autonomy remains valuable, even if that rejection is not ultimately traceable to Scholastic theology. Indeed, De Lubac's account in *Drama* helps to explain what many scholars have noted is a key element of the modern project—namely, the rejection of *nature*, of an understanding of man's being as given from without and not constituted by human subjectivity. On precisely this point, moreover, De Lubac's analysis of modernity in *Drama* converges with that of other scholars, both critics of modernity such as Étienne Gilson, Eric Voegelin,[18] and thinkers influenced by Leo Strauss, as well as proponents of the modern project such as Robert Pippin. To see the explanatory value of De Lubac's view, let us consider modernity's rejection of nature as it has been described by some of its keenest observers.

Understanding the modern project's abolition of nature requires that we first consider it in contrast to the view it rejects.

As thinkers such as Gilson and Voegelin observe, the tradition of Scholastic and ancient philosophy that modernity repudiates begins from the realization that things *are*, which is concomitant with the realization that things are *what* they are.[19] In other words, beings are given, they are "there," and we know them as such; we discover, and do not make, their existence and their essence. As Voegelin explains, man's primordial experience is of "a field of existents [i.e., things that *are*] of which he is a part," and in this primordial experience, man "discovers himself as not being the maker of this field of existents or any part of it. Existence acquires its poignant meaning through the experience of not being self-generated but having its origin outside itself."[20] This realization of being as given, rather than caused by the subject, is the starting point of philosophy for ancient thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle as well as for Christian doctors such as Augustine and Aquinas.

In turn, the realization that things *are* and that they are *what* they are (the realization of the givenness of things) naturally raises the question of why they *are* (why is there something rather than nothing?) and why they are what they are (why is this something what it is, and not something else?).[21] In other words, it raises the question of the cause of their existence and essence. In apprehending the being of things we thus apprehend their contingency, that they do not explain their own being and that they have a cause that accounts for the fact that they are and for their essence or nature.[22] This apprehension arouses desire to know the cause of these beings; and philosophy, as many ancients and medievals understood it, is precisely the loving quest to know the causes of things all the way to the first and ultimate cause.[23] In other words, it is the quest for wisdom, knowledge of the ground of the whole and of all beings in relation to this ground.

Moreover, from this primordial apprehension of the being of things follow the principles of ethics. In grasping the essence and existence of things, we realize that it is good for them to be what they are and that their good therefore consists in fully realizing their being, essence, and nature.[24] As Josef Pieper writes, summarizing the ontological foundation of ethics, "Reality is the basis of

the good . . . that is good which corresponds to 'the thing'; the good is that which is in accord with objective reality."[25] In the case of man, this means that his proper good is to live in accordance with his essence or nature, with what he really *is*.

Much of modern thought departs from this picture of man and the world. Central to the modern project—particularly, as Stanley Rosen has observed,[26] the phase that begins with Kant—is precisely the loss of being, and hence of man's good, as something given. This is the ultimate import of Kant's "Copernican revolution," of his epistemic claim that the categories of the mind actively constitute the world of experience, constructing what counts as nature, substance, or being. *What is* is no longer given but is, rather, the product of an act of making underneath which is nothing but the activity of an experiencing subject.[27] This latter position, as we shall see, unites many of the heirs to the Kantian tradition in later German philosophy, for whom being is constituted by human subjectivity or consciousness and has no grounding or cause outside subjectivity—a position that eliminates any cause of man's being that is outside himself. Since man's essence or nature is thus not something given but something made, it is not "available" as the basis of how we are to live; it ceases to be normative for us.[28]

At first glance, this seems to be a problem chiefly of the epistemic order that secondarily entails claims about ethics and politics. However, numerous observers of modern idealism have argued that underneath the theoretical edifice are certain practical or moral commitments, commitments that in fact motivate the construction of these systems. Gilson was one such observer, concluding his theoretical refutation of idealism in *Methodical Realism* with the striking assertion that "the cause of idealism is not of idealist stamp; it does not even have anything to do with the theory of knowledge—it belongs to the moral order."[29] Stanley Rosen has given a particularly compelling account of what these commitments are in the case of idealist thinkers such as Kant and Hegel as well as their contemporary heirs—an account that has much in common with that of De Lubac. Specifically, as with the French Jesuit, for Rosen the commitment in question is

a commitment to realizing freedom understood as autonomy, as self-creation that does not allow man to be determined by anything that he has not willed or legislated for himself, anything that is merely given.[30]

Explaining the origins of idealism in practical commitments, Rosen notes that the starting point of Kantian epistemology is not the question "how does cognition really work?" but rather "what understanding of cognition must we posit if we want to vindicate man's autonomous, self-legislating freedom while preserving necessity in the empirical sciences?" Kant's answer is transcendental philosophy. As Rosen observes:

> Kant argues that *if we wish* to explain both causal necessity in nature and moral freedom [understood as autonomy], a fundamental shift in our comprehensive intellectual perspective is required. Instead of allowing the intellect to conform to an ostensibly independent nature, *we require* that nature conform to the intellect. . . . *Acceptance of the need* for [this] Copernican revolution [in order to vindicate autonomy] brings with it the hypothesis of the transcendental ego, or a set of logical conditions by which a thinking and sensing being such as ourselves both constitutes the world of nature in space-time and leaves "room" for the possibility of moral freedom.[31]

In other words, transcendental philosophy does not aim to tell us how cognition really works—what it really is in itself—but only what we ought to posit about cognition if we want to make man morally autonomous. Specifically, autonomy requires a view of reason that makes the givenness of being, substance, or nature impossible. Autonomy requires that the will not be determined in any way from without, which is precisely what being or nature, which prescribes our good, does. Being or nature must, therefore, be rendered a construction of consciousness or subjectivity if an agent is to be an autonomous self-legislator, since then it no longer determines the agent. Therefore, one must posit that nature is

nothing but the imposition of the categories of the mind on sense data—which is precisely what Kant does in his *Critique of Pure Reason*.[32]

Thus understood, transcendental philosophy does not correspond, or even *aim* to correspond, to the reality of how cognition works but rather aims to *make* reality, being, and nature what it must be if man is to be autonomous. It is in this sense, Rosen thinks, that transcendental idealism directly anticipates Hegelian, Nietzschean, and "postmodern" thought: all are theoretical artifices or "interpretations of being" constructed to realize a prior commitment of the will to human autonomy.[33] Moreover, in all these cases, this commitment of the will is ultimately groundless or, in Rosen's terminology, "arbitrary." This is more visible in Nietzsche and many of the postmoderns, who explicitly view reason as an instrument of domination or the will to power; but Rosen suggests that it is also the case with Kant. In the Kantian system, any attempted rational justification of the will act that creates the transcendental ego would literally be question-begging, since it would use the product of the original will act (transcendental reason) to justify the will act's validity.[34] Thus, the volitional act that creates transcendental philosophy is ultimately "arbitrary" in the sense of being ungrounded.[35]

De Lubac's analysis of the modern project in *Drama* converges with that of scholars such as Rosen and Gilson who argue that modernity is characterized by a rejection of a given human nature and its grounding in the experiencing subject.[36] As we have observed, the French Jesuit sees in the atheistic humanism of certain modern thinkers a rejection of God precisely so as to realize autonomous human freedom. Yet, as he recognizes, the demands of autonomous freedom require not just the abolition of the Christian God but also the rejection of an objective order of being that would prescribe for man how he should live—in other words, the rejection of human nature as something given. Quoting Nietzsche, he writes that for an atheist humanism that seeks the realization of complete autonomy, there can be "no more

contemplation of the real in order to discover its essence, no more submission to any object whatsoever." Indeed, there must be an "'[a]ggressive rejection of a law of being, of an extrahuman order, of a coherent universe', of an ontological harmony prior to the *I will* of man."[37] This is because an objective order of being or a given human nature that is outside of human subjectivity would determine man's will, prescribing what is good or evil for man and how he ought to live. Yet, if man's will is determined by external criteria of good and evil, then man is not truly free or autonomous—that is, man is not totally self-determining. Hence, the very notion of a given human nature must, like the Christian God with his moral law, be eliminated to make room for autonomous self-definition. Modernity thus involves, for De Lubac, not just an atheism in respect of the God of revelation but also a metaphysical atheism that aims to eliminate the order of being as something given from without.

Furthermore, De Lubac sees in this modern rejection of transcendence, not the conclusion of a dispassionate philosophical investigation into the truth of things, but rather a *choice*, a *decision* to break from the earlier view of human dignity as rooted in man's relation to the divine that precedes and explains the theoretical artifices erected to justify the abolition of God and of nature. As he explains, atheist humanism is not

> the simple answer to a speculative problem and certainly not a purely negative solution: as if the understanding, having, on the attainment of maturity, set itself to "reconsider" the problem of God, had at last been obliged to see that its efforts could lead to nothing or even that they were leading to an end that was the opposite of what they had long believed. The phenomenon that has dominated the history of the mind during the last few centuries seems both more profound and more arbitrary. It is not the intelligence alone that is involved. . . . Modern humanism, then, is built upon resentment and *begins with a choice*.[38]

The philosophical systems that purport to show the unavailability of the transcendent and of the objective order of being are—and indeed must be—constructs that issue from an underlying commitment of the will to realize complete human autonomy. It is this will, this practical project, that leads to modern thinkers' theoretical claims concerning the absurdity of the notion of God or of an order of being or nature outside human subjectivity—not vice versa.

De Lubac's *Drama of Atheist Humanism* is thus of considerable importance for understanding the nature of modernity. Not confining himself to claims about the abolition of Christianity, he also shows how an atheist humanism committed to the idea of autonomy must lead to the abolition of the very concept of a given, determinate human nature. Moreover, he demonstrates that such a rejection originates not in philosophical discovery but in a *choice* and that the philosophical claims are themselves the outcome of this decision. De Lubac is thus able to explain what many scholars have identified as an essential aspect of the modern project: the loss of the notion of a fixed human nature. Indeed, as we can see, his explanation substantially converges with that of thinkers such as Rosen, Gilson, and Voegelin, deepening their analysis and extending it to additional thinkers such as Feuerbach and Comte, whom they do not emphasize in their respective narratives.[39]

De Lubac's Understanding of Nature: A Response to the Challenges of Modernity

De Lubac's analysis of the modern project raises the question of how to address the challenges this project poses. In other words, how are we to respond to modernity's prioritization of autonomous freedom, a prioritization that in his view has had deleterious consequences? De Lubac does not leave us without an answer. In *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, he argues that the solution to the problems raised by modern thought is a recovery of man understood as bearing the *imago Dei*. Such a recovery, he maintains, will bring with it a recovery of being—and hence of nature—as given independently of human subjectivity. As he writes, when we rediscover man as created in the image of God, realizing that his dignity

lies in his openness to the transcendent, we simultaneously rediscover the "sense of being, this conception of a stable truth and this confidence in eternal values, which snatches us . . . from a pure subjectivity."[40] Yet, De Lubac does not think that philosophy is sufficient to bring about this recovery. He writes that the "most profound and most certain philosophy would be practically powerless" to recapture an understanding of man as *imago Dei* and with it an objective order of being and that instead we must "make appeal to our *faith* in the creation of man in the image of God" in order to effect a recovery.[41] In other words, philosophy alone will not avail; practically speaking, only a return to Christian faith will allow us to recover a right understanding of man's relation to God, of true human dignity, and even of nature as objectively given.

Nevertheless, even if we grant De Lubac's claim concerning the practical difficulties of recovering the transcendent without revelation and grace—difficulties that presumably arise, in his view, from the tendency to reject the truth about God, which is a consequence of original sin, a rejection that can extend even to truths about God knowable by unaided reason—this does not mean that philosophy has nothing to say on the matter. On the contrary, philosophy can be quite helpful for a recovery of nature, since it furnishes the resources necessary to respond to some of modernity's most deep-seated reservations about the concept of a given human nature. More specifically, it is De Lubac's own anthropology of natural desire—his view that man's natural desire for beatitude is satisfied by no created good but only by the vision of God—that is able to respond to these reservations. To see why this is so, let us make two observations. First, although De Lubac's anthropology might at first seem theological, it is in fact *philosophical*, since unaided reason can prove that given the nature of the intellect, no created or naturally attainable good can quench our natural desire for happiness and thus constitute the complete perfection of our nature—as we see in the writings of Aquinas.[42] Thus, to urge the De Lubacian or Thomistic view of nature as perfected by no temporal good as a solution to modern objections to the concept of a given nature is ultimately to urge a *philosophical* solution to these objections.[43]

Second, we must recall that modernity's critique of the givenness of man's nature, though it involves certain theoretical claims about epistemology, arises from an underlying practical commitment to substitute nature with autonomy as the source of human dignity. Thus, a contemporary defense of nature will require not just refutating the theoretical claims at issue—a defense that has been made by Gilson and Pieper,[44] among others—but also addressing the reservations about the concept of a given human nature that make autonomous freedom more attractive to contemporary thinkers. My contention is that the philosophical thesis concerning nature's perfection in a good that is above the unaided power of nature to attain advanced by De Lubac, Aquinas, and others is uniquely well positioned to respond to these reservations—indeed, much more so than *natura pura*.

Now, there are undoubtedly many reservations about the concept of nature among those who substitute it with autonomous freedom—perhaps as many as there are thinkers who reject nature in favor of autonomy[45]—but among contemporary philosophers, one important reservation is the view that a determinate nature, unlike autonomous freedom, compromises human distinctiveness. A prominent philosopher who has articulated this objection is the French existentialist Maurice Merleau-Ponty.[46] In a 1945 article defending Sartre against Catholic critics, he writes that Catholics reject Sartre's understanding of freedom because it is incompatible with the view that man's nature is oriented toward a determinate perfection. They are committed to maintaining an order of natures that by realizing their perfections give glory to God, which is not possible in Sartre's conception of freedom.[47] But, Merleau-Ponty states, this reduces man to a mere "thing" that exists, just like any other "thing" (such as a plant), merely to realize its form.[48] This is a type of reductionism, Merleau-Ponty suggests, that does not do justice to the human condition, to what makes man unique, more than just a "thing" among other "things." It is clearly something that renders the notion of a given human nature unpersuasive to the French philosopher and in need of replacement by the concept of freedom—a concept that definitively separates man from the realm of mere "things."

In responding to a reservation such as Merleau-Ponty's, a view of nature as finding its proper perfection in a purely natural end (*natura pura*) is particularly unhelpful. The pure nature thesis comes much closer to Merleau-Ponty's characterization than does the alternative view, formulated by De Lubac and others, in which human nature finds its fulfillment only in an end that is *above* nature's power to attain. While it is certainly the case that Scholastic theorists of pure nature regard man as higher than plant life inasmuch as the former is rational and the latter merely vegetative, it remains the case for these theorists that the end of human nature, of man as man, does not transcend the natural order, just as the plant's end also remains enclosed within the order of nature. Although it would be an exaggeration to say that this position *entirely* reduces man to the level of a mere thing such as a plant, by making human finality analogous to the finality of the plant insofar as both are realized in strictly natural goods, it does not capture the singular uniqueness of the human being as open to an end that transcends nature. As such, it is vulnerable to a critique such as that of Merleau-Ponty.

By contrast, the De Lubacian view of nature envisages a finality that is not a *natural* finality at all. Indeed, it is an end that is of incomparably higher dignity than any purely natural finality ever could be, an end that does not remain enclosed within the natural order, as is the case with other beings. The De Lubacian understanding of nature as having an end that can be attained only supernaturally thus draws a much sharper distinction between man and other "things of nature." In so doing, it responds to modern concerns about the implications of the concept of a determinate, fixed nature for human distinctiveness in a way that its alternative—a view of nature as having a purely natural end—cannot, for it shows that contrary to Merleau-Ponty's criticism, the notion of a given human nature need not entail a finality that is even remotely analogous to that of other beings and hence need not reduce man in any way to their level.

A second reservation contemporary thinkers have about the notion of a given human nature to which the De Lubacian

understanding is uniquely responsive is about the consistency of nature with lived human experience, and particularly with our experience of a lack of fulfillment in the present life. As Denis Bradley has observed, modern thought, and particularly those recent currents most preoccupied with vindicating autonomous freedom (such as existentialism), exhibits a keen awareness of the "endlessness" of human striving and the incompleteness of human existence—in other words, of the fact that we experience in the world no "natural felicity" in which we find complete repose and satisfaction.[49] Indeed, these thinkers regard the very notion of such a felicity as artificial and unpersuasive; yet the concept of a given human nature is often thought to entail precisely this understanding of happiness, for which reason it is substituted with a conception of man that is not weighed down by the baggage of an artificial temporal felicity. Now, the theory of *natura pura* according to which nature finds its perfection, and hence the repose of its natural desire, in a naturally attainable end does indeed entail precisely this understanding of happiness.[50] Thus, by yoking the concept of nature to that of a perfectly satisfying natural felicity, *natura pura* cannot help but remain incredible to modern thought, a theory that is inconsistent with our lived experience of not finding complete fulfillment in any good attainable in this life.[51] Defending the idea of nature in terms of *natura pura* will, therefore, inevitably be unpersuasive to many contemporary thinkers.

The De Lubacian view, however, shows that the concept of nature need not be joined to that of a purely natural felicity. The upshot of maintaining that nature finds its full perfection in nothing less than the vision of the essence of the first cause—an end that would require supernatural assistance to attain—is precisely that no good short of this end will satisfy human nature. That is to say, no good attainable in this life—not even moral virtue or philosophical contemplation—will bring man complete repose or quiet the restlessness of his soul in its search for happiness. Such an understanding of nature is thus uniquely well positioned to respond to the objection that the very notion of a given human nature is inconsistent with our lived experience of the incompletion of

human striving and of the lack of complete fulfillment in the present life, for it is a conception of human nature as both given *and* unfulfilled by temporal goods.

In the final analysis, then, De Lubac's understanding of the imperfection of man's nature short of the supernatural beatific vision—an understanding that he shares with many of the greatest thinkers of late antiquity and the Middle Ages and that constitutes the pièce de résistance of his theological project—is an effective answer to some of the most significant modern reservations about the concept of a determinate human nature. Although reservations such as nature's supposed potential to compromise human distinctiveness and its alleged implication of an artificial felicity attainable in the present life may not be the only objections to the concept of nature, they are clearly important to many contemporary theorists. If, therefore, the idea of nature is to be made persuasive in our contemporary intellectual climate, it will likely have to be nature such as De Lubac and the perennial theological tradition conceive it.

Notes

1. Henri de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, trans. Anne Englund Nash (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 23–24. See also De Lubac, *Drama*, 426–27: "[I]t seems to [modern man] that this reality as image [of God], as reflection, far from giving him an inner fullness, an ontological density, a spiritual freedom, which scientific and social relativism had alienated, constitutes, quite the contrary, the mark of a servitude—of the essential servitude that maintains all the others. It seems to him that everything that he recognizes in God he steals from himself. God, he concludes, must in the end die in order for man to live. Here we touch on the profound evil of our time: on that rebellion against God which was the temptation of all centuries but which in our own takes the most radical and least disguised forms. Because for the first time this collective persuasion has risen, powerful as a tidal wave, that the hour of man has finally sounded, the hour of the finite being who is self-sufficient in his immanence and his finitude and who, in his immanence and his finitude, takes over all the prerogatives of God."

2. De Lubac, *Drama*, 25.

3. Already in his earlier work *Catholicisme*, De Lubac had suggested that a loss of the right understanding of the relation of nature to the supernatural contributed to the rise of secularism, but as we will see it was in later texts that he more extensively developed his thesis of a degeneration from late Scholastic pure nature to atheistic humanism. See Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Mankind*, trans. Lancelot C. Sheppard and Sister Elizabeth Englund, OCD (San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1988), 313–14.
4. De Lubac's position was highly controversial in his own day and continues to be debated in contemporary scholarship. Its critics contend that it is exegetically inaccurate and tends to compromise the gratuity of divine grace. Proponents of De Lubac's basic thesis concerning man's natural desire for the vision of God include Étienne Gilson, Anton Pegis, and more recently Denis Bradley. Among contemporary scholars, Lawrence Feingold has written the most comprehensive critique of the De Lubacian view, a critique leveled by prominent earlier Thomists such as Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange. See Étienne Gilson, "Sur le problématique thomiste de la vision béatifique," *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge* 39 (1964): 67–88; Gilson, *Letters of Étienne Gilson to Henri de Lubac*, trans. Mary Emily Hamilton (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 80–83; Anton Pegis, "Nature and Spirit: Some Reflections on the Problem of the End of Man," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 23 (1949): 71–79; Anton Pegis, *St. Thomas and Philosophy* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1964), 75–78; Denis Bradley, *Aquinas on the Twofold Human Good: Reason and Human Happiness in Aquinas's Moral Science* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1997); and Lawrence Feingold, *The Natural Desire to See God according to St. Thomas Aquinas and His Interpreters*, 2nd ed. (Naples, FL: Sapientia Press, 2010), 295–428. A detailed history of the controversy and the key works of historical participants in it can be found in Feingold, *Natural Desire*, xxv–xxxvii. The debate has continued since Feingold, with numerous thinkers seeking a middle way between his position and that of De Lubac. Notable recent responses to Feingold include Jacob Wood, *To Stir a Restless Heart: Thomas Aquinas and Henri de Lubac on Nature, Grace, and the Desire for God* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2019); Andrew Dean Swafford, *Nature and Grace: A New Approach to Thomistic Ressourcement* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014); Reinhard Hütter, *Dust Bound for Heaven: Explorations in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2012); and Nicholas J.

Healy, "Henri de Lubac on Nature and Grace: A Note on Some Recent Contributions to the Debate" *Communio* 35 (2008): 535–64.

5. De Lubac identifies Denis the Carthusian as having held the pure nature thesis before Cajetan but maintains that Cajetan was likely unfamiliar with Denis's writings and that it was through Cajetan, not Denis, that pure nature became the dominant paradigm in modern Scholastic theology. Henri de Lubac, *Augustinianism and Modern Theology*, trans. Lancelot Sheppard (New York: Herder & Herder, 2000), 163–83.
6. John Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order: The Representation of Being and the Representation of the People* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 27–28.
7. John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate concerning the Supernatural* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 29–30. For further description of the role of De Lubac's narrative in the broader Radical Orthodoxy movement inaugurated by Milbank, see Bernard Mulcahy, O.P., *Aquinas's Notion of Pure Nature and the Christian Integralism of Henri de Lubac: Not Everything Is Grace* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011), 180–83.
8. David L. Schindler, "Christological Aesthetics and *Evangelium vitae*: Toward a Definition of Liberalism," *Communio* 22 (1995): 200–201, 206–11. See also David L. Schindler, "Introduction: Grace and the Form of Nature and Culture," in *Catholicism and Secularization in America*, ed. David L. Schindler (Notre Dame, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1990), 10–25.
9. Schindler, "Christological Aesthetics," 208–11: "If, in eighteenth-century America, the abstraction of reason (truth) from love and nature from grace was conceived more often in terms of a juxtaposition, today it is conceived more often in terms of outright opposition. . . . The point is that a reason and nature in relation to which love and grace have been conceived as extrinsic [i.e., for Schindler, the Scholastic view of nature] will likely, over time, learn to get along just fine *without* love and grace. Reason and nature will increasingly learn to assert their *autonomy* in the face of the relations given in the orders of love and grace. Love and grace will come to be marginalized as arbitrary matters best kept private (that is, and not relevant for the public *order* of society). My suggestion is that this has now come to pass: the marginalization of love coincident with the mechanizing of order has come to expression not surprisingly in the case of the unborn and the terminally ill: that is, those who, as 'useless,' hence as 'objects' devoid of subjectivity, hence as mere 'things,' become the most obvious candidates for coercion and 'instrumentalization' by disordered ('un-truthed') subjects."

10. Beyond Milbank and Schindler, the narrative can also be found in the work of Tracey Rowland. See Tracey Rowland, *Culture and the Thomist Tradition: After Vatican II* (London: Routledge, 2003), 94.
11. For De Lubac's most fully developed exposition of this thesis, see Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (London: G. Chapman, 1967); and De Lubac, *Augustinianism*, passim.
12. De Lubac, *Augustinianism*, 262.
13. De Lubac, *Augustinianism*, 264.
14. De Lubac makes the same argument in *Athéisme et sens de l'homme*. See Henri de Lubac, *Athéisme et sens de l'homme: une double requête de* Gaudium et spes (Paris: Cerf, 1968), 99–101.
15. De Lubac, *Mystery*, 60–61. Reiterating this point elsewhere, the French Jesuit writes, "[W]as not the relative autonomy which [pure nature] granted to nature, as it defined it, a temptation to independence [from God]? Did it not encourage in this way the 'secularization' let loose at the Renaissance?" See De Lubac, *Augustinianism*, 233.
16. According to De Lubac, the pure nature theory was politically problematic even when deployed by neo-Scholastic contemporaries who were not themselves atheists. Specifically, by affirming a self-sufficient end attainable in the natural order through political action (virtue), an end available to Christians and non-Christians alike, the pure nature theory justified Catholic neo-Scholastic support of political movements, such as Action Française and the Vichy government, that professed to share these goals but were antithetical to other aspects of Catholic teaching. See Bryan C. Hollon, *Everything Is Sacred: Spiritual Exegesis in the Political Theology of Henri de Lubac* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009), 85–86.
17. De Lubac's contemporary disciples face similar difficulties in defending a downward slide from Scholasticism to modern secularism. Returning to an example noted above, David L. Schindler claims that the Scholastic view of nature renders love and grace extrinsic to nature, and that "over time, [nature] learn[s] to get along just fine *without* love and grace." But he does not explain *why*, once the order of nature is understood as intrinsically complete (that is, as perfected by a naturally attainable end and happiness), nature would learn to "get along just fine" without grace. Nor does he convincingly show how a nature that lacks grace necessarily degenerates into an *opposition* between nature and grace. As we have seen, these lacunae are quite similar to those that appear in De Lubac's account. See Schindler, "Christological Aesthetics," 210.

18. Voegelin famously expressed reservations about the concept of nature in an essay contained in *Anamnesis*. However, this should not be taken as evidence that he did not believe modernity was characterized by a loss of nature in the sense of a loss of the understanding of man's being as grounded in a transcendent source and not self-caused. Voegelin's objection is rather to the technical metaphysical description of nature in terms of form and matter, which he believed had the potential to obscure a more primordial understanding of nature, wherein nature refers precisely to the experience of the givenness of man's being and the awareness of man's "coming to be" from the transcendent ground of being. Indeed, much of modern thought, he maintained, lost contact with this fundamental experience of being. Since we are primarily examining modernity's loss of nature in the specific sense of a loss of the understanding of man's being as not caused by human subjectivity, it is appropriate here to classify Voegelin as a critical observer of the rejection of nature in modernity. See Eric Voegelin, "What Is Nature?," in *Anamnesis*, trans. Gerhart Niemayer (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990), 71–88.
19. "Therefore the starting point of [the philosopher's] reflections has to be being, which in effect is for us the beginning of knowledge: *res sunt*." Étienne Gilson, *Methodical Realism: A Handbook for Beginning Realists* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), 87.
20. Eric Voegelin, "On Debate and Existence," *Intercollegiate Review* 3 (1967): 149.
21. Voegelin, "On Debate and Existence," 147.
22. In Voegelin's explanation, immediately disclosed in our primordial, pre-analytical experience of existents, that is, in our realization that things *are*, is the concomitant realization that "[t]o be not the origin and end of itself is generically the nature of existent things." Voegelin, "On Debate and Existence," 150. See also Voegelin, "What Is Nature?," 86.
23. "In the experiences of love for the world-transcendent origin of being, in *philia* toward the *sophon* (the wise), in *eros* toward the *agathon* (the good) and the *kalon* (the beautiful), man became philosopher." Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, trans. William J. Fitzpatrick, in *Modernity without Restraint* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 259.
24. This is the ultimate import of the Thomistic doctrine that "being" and "good" are convertible. As Thomas explains, "Every being, as being, is good. For all being, as being, has actuality and is in some way perfect;

since every act implies some sort of perfection; and perfection implies desirability and goodness. . . . Hence it follows that every being as such is good." Inasmuch as a thing *is*, it *is actual*—that is, it is in the act of existing as some thing with a determinate form, essence, or nature. It therefore has a determinate degree of perfection and desirability, which is the formal *ratio* of "good." To be good is thus to have existence and form or essence, from which it follows that the more fully a thing realizes its essence or nature (which it does through its proper operations), the more "goodness" and perfection it has. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, vol. 1, 2nd ed. (London: Burnes Oates & Washbourne, 1920), I, Q. 5, a. 3; and Étienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. L. K. Shook, C.S.B. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 97–100.

25. Josef Pieper, *Reality and the Good*, trans. Stella Lange, in *Living the Truth* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 112.
26. Stanley Rosen, *Hermeneutics as Politics*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 3–49.
27. Robert Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem: On the Dissatisfactions of European High Culture*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999), 53–55.
28. Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem*, 35. See also Robert Pippin, "The Unavailability of the Ordinary: Strauss on the Philosophical Fate of Modernity," *Political Theory* 31 (2003): 354; Robert Pippin, "The Modern World of Leo Strauss," *Political Theory* 20 (1992): 457–58.
29. Gilson, *Methodical Realism*, 99. Eric Voegelin also argued, in works such as *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, that many modern thinkers' philosophical systems that purported to deny the possibility of ontology or nature as given (particularly those of Marx, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger) were constructs erected to make possible certain practical projects. See Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, 261–77.
30. Rosen, *Hermeneutics*, 8-9. Aspects of this account can also be found in the work of Robert Pippin. See Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem*, 12–14, 55.
31. Rosen, *Hermeneutics*, 24–25. Emphasis added.
32. Rosen observes that the character of the Kantian transcendental system as a theoretical construct whose express purpose is to make possible autonomous freedom is not only clear from Kant's own starting point but

is also revealed in the system's specific details, such as his treatment of the origin of the concept of freedom or spontaneity. The transcendental ego, Kant argues, possesses two faculties, *Verstand* (understanding) and *Vernunft* (reason). *Verstand* creates the world of experience, spontaneously imposing the categories on sense data to organize the world and create objects of scientific knowledge. To claim that *Verstand* acts spontaneously to constitute a world presupposes the concept of spontaneity or freedom. But because the objects with which *Verstand* presents us via the imposition of the categories on sense data are experienced as necessary (which allows for the possibility of necessary causal relations in physics), the concept of spontaneity cannot come from *Verstand* itself. Yet, to formulate the hypothesis of a faculty that spontaneously acts to constitute a world of experience obviously requires that we have the concept of spontaneity. So where does this concept come from? Kant asserts that we must simply *posit* that the concept of spontaneity is generated by *Vernunft*, and this allows us to maintain the initial hypothesis that *Verstand* spontaneously organizes the world of experience. Yet, there is no way to prove that *Vernunft* does in fact generate this concept. We cannot verify it through experience, since there cannot be any experience outside the activity of *Verstand*, which, as we have seen, is unable to generate such a concept. We simply *posit* that *Vernunft* creates the concept in order to sustain the initial hypothesis that the world of experience is organized by *Verstand.* As Rosen says, "Kant does not 'know' in advance, by an inspection of human experience, that *Vernunft* has this spontaneous creativity. Exactly like a theoretical physicist (or Cartesian mathematician), he *constructs* theoretical entities [i.e., *Vernunft* and the concept of spontaneity] that serve his purpose." In other words, the theoretical linchpin of the transcendental system, the concept of spontaneity, is posited simply to keep the system going. It is an act of will to sustain the hypothesis of transcendental philosophy, which, as we have seen from consideration of Kant's starting point of reconciling necessity with freedom, is ultimately a will to realize morally autonomous freedom. For this account, see Rosen, *Hermeneutics*, 3–5, 22–26. For the Kantian texts, see Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1929), B74–B75, B93, B561, B573–B586; respectively, pp. 92–93, 105, 465, 471–79. Cited in Rosen, *Hermeneutics*, 25.

33. Rosen, *Hermeneutics*, 4–10, 24–26. As he explains, inasmuch as the Kantian system does not purport to tell us what cognition really is in itself, but rather to constructively "interpret" being and nature as Kant

himself thinks it must be interpreted if man is to be free, it sets up a "line of development from Kant to Nietzsche, whose principal doctrine is well formulated by Jean Granier as follows: 'Being [*l'Etre*] is always and necessarily Being interpreted [*l'Etre interprété*].'" See Rosen, *Hermeneutics*, 24, for the quotation.

34. "[F]reedom is not further justifiable . . . the result is a paradox. The primacy of spontaneity [autonomous freedom] makes reason . . . unreasonable because arbitrary. This is the basis for the subsequent view that reason is an artifact of history, in other words, the reverse of the eighteenth-century view that history is an artifact of reason. We thus come directly to the late-modern view, made dominant by Nietzsche and today accepted among postmodernist thinkers without any prominent exception: to reason is to interpret, because reason is itself an interpretation." As such, Rosen maintains, the only justification of transcendental philosophy is ultimately rhetorical, and he argues that Kant effects this rhetorical justification of the transcendental project in *What Is Enlightenment?* See Rosen, *Hermeneutics*, 5, 27–32.
35. On the Gilsonian view as well, modern idealism is the product of a prior commitment of the will. As Gilson explains, things *are*, and we know that they are. Every time we make a judgment of the form A is B, which we do daily in the ordinary course of our lives, we presume—and thus implicitly affirm our awareness of—the givenness of being and validate the gnoseological truth that being is the first thing in the intellect and the principle of our intellectual operations. As Gilson observes, all people, including idealists, thus think like realists in their everyday affairs and conversations: "The first step on the realist path is to recognize that one has always been a realist; the second is to recognize that, however hard one tries to think differently, one will never manage to; the third is to realize that those who claim they think differently, think as realists as soon as they forget to act a part." In other words, the realization that things *are* and thus have determinate natures is the natural starting point of human thought. Hence, the idealist's claim that things *are* only to the extent and in the way that they meet the methodological criteria for knowledge that he himself sets down presupposes a choice to set aside the knowledge of reality already naturally in the intellect in order to adopt a philosophical starting point from within thought and make reality conform to thought. As a choice, it is an act of will and thus, as Gilson concludes, belongs ultimately to the moral order. See Gilson, *Methodical Realism*, 93.

36. Many of these scholars, moreover, also recognize the important political implications of the modern rejection of nature and the view of freedom as self-determining subjectivity. For example, as Pippin observes, for Hegel one never determines oneself simply as a person or as an agent, "but always as a member of an historical ethical institution, as a family member, or participant in civil society, or citizen, and . . . it is only in terms of such concrete institutions [that self-determination can be realized]." In other words, freedom as self-determination will require certain social and political institutions as a condition of its possibility and will be able to be finally achieved only within those institutions. As Pippin remarks elsewhere, once man is understood as a free, self-determining will, "a nonalienated form of self-realization will involve securing the conditions under which I can genuinely exercise such agency, wherein my deeds reflect what *I* determine. The politics of perfection [of our nature, e.g., through the acquisition of virtue] has become the politics of self-determination." See Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem*, 71; Pippin, "The Modern World of Leo Strauss," 461.
37. De Lubac, *Drama*, 62–63.
38. De Lubac, *Drama*, 24–25. Emphasis added.
39. That said, it does not converge with their analysis on every point. For instance, although not denying that Kant's philosophical system is a construct that eliminates the concept of a given human nature or even a metaphysics of God in order to make man an autonomous self-legislator, De Lubac hesitates to include the German philosopher among the "atheist humanists" by full right, since Kant attempts to "regain by faith what he had perforce allowed to elude reason"—namely, the notion of God (something for which Nietzsche reproaches him). Thus, the French Jesuit, though agreeing with Rosen that the loss of nature is a central aspect of modernity that is explicable in terms of a commitment to autonomous freedom, would admit a greater distinction between Kant and later philosophers than Rosen seems to allow. See De Lubac, *Drama*, 160.
40. De Lubac, *Drama*, 426.
41. De Lubac, *Drama*, 426. Emphasis added.
42. In *Summa theologiae* I–II, Q. 3, a. 1–8, Thomas systematically rules out various candidates for human happiness—the perfection of human nature and the terminus of its desire—and concludes in article 8 that only the beatific vision can constitute man's beatitude. This is because,

given that the object of the intellect is "what a thing is" (i.e., essence or quiddity), we naturally desire to know the essences of the causes of observed effects. Thus, knowing that God exists and is the cause of the universe (which is possible to unaided reason), we naturally desire to know God's essence, given the nature and object of our intellect. But we cannot be happy if something remains for us to desire, and hence we will not be happy—our natural desire will not be satisfied—until we know the essence of God. Hence the beatific vision, which is beyond our unaided powers to attain (*Summa theologiae* I–II, Q. 5, a. 5), is man's happiness and the perfection of his nature. Aquinas's argument for this conclusion is strictly philosophical; none of its premises requires revealed knowledge, and all are intelligible to reason alone. Hence, to advance a view of nature as perfected by no naturally attainable good, indeed, by no good short of the supernatural vision of God, as a solution to modern objections against nature is to advance a *philosophical* solution to these objections. For further detail on Aquinas's view, see Bradley, *Aquinas*, 424–534. De Lubac shares Aquinas's basic thesis concerning the imperfection of human nature short of the attainment of the beatific vision, and thus I refer to it in this article as the De Lubacian or Thomistic view of nature and of natural desire—though it is true that, in certain points of detail, De Lubac's reading of Aquinas is not entirely accurate (e.g., he too closely identifies Thomas's position with that of Scotus, according to which there is not just a natural *desire* for the vision of the divine essence but also a natural *potency* for it).

43. Now, asserting that human nature's ultimate end is supernatural reintroduces the problem, mentioned earlier, of the absurdity of a nature incapable of attaining its end by its own endowments, a problem that to adherents of the pure nature thesis seems to compel God to bestow the beatific vision in order to vindicate the rational integrity of nature. Since nature must be able to attain its end, then does not nature *require* the grace needed to attain the beatific vision if it is not to be frustrated or in vain—a philosophical impossibility? Does not grace thus become *natural* to man, something nature itself must be able to provide in order to attain its proper end? Solutions to this problem have been proposed that do not require recourse to a theory of *natura pura*. For instance, based on *Summa theologiae* I–II, Q. 5, a. 5, ad. 1, Anton Pegis claims that Thomas effectively redefines what it means for nature to be absurd or in vain in a way that does not compel supernatural grace. Nature is not absurd or in vain simply because it does not give us *all the endowments that are necessary* for the attainment of the beatific vision, as the objection

assumes; it would be absurd or vain only if it did not give us *all the endowments that it could* give us toward the attainment of this vision. Inasmuch as nature has given us the power of free will whereby we are capable of *accepting* the supernatural grace necessary to attain the vision of God, it has indeed given us all it can toward the realization of our final end and hence is not absurd. Even if God never granted us the grace necessary to achieve the beatific vision, nature would *still* not be absurd, since it would have given us all that it could toward the attainment of this vision (i.e., the capability of *receiving* grace). Thus, vindicating the rational integrity or nonabsurdity of nature does not require naturalizing grace. Among Scholastic commentators on Aquinas, the Spanish Jesuit Gregory of Valencia (1549–1603) seems to have maintained this interpretation. See Gregory of Valencia, *Commentarii theologici*, Disp. I, Q. 5, punct. 5, T. II, col. 105b–c; Pegis, "Nature and Spirit," 71–79; Pegis, *St. Thomas and Philosophy*, 75–78.

44. See Gilson, *Methodical Realism*, passim; Pieper, *Reality and the Good*, 115–37.
45. De Lubac was aware of this and does not attribute every instance of a rejection of a given order of being to Promethean resentment. See De Lubac, *Drama*, 25.
46. For a discussion of the shared Parisian intellectual milieu of both De Lubac and Merleau-Ponty, see Jon Kirwan, *An Avant-garde Theological Generation: The "Nouvelle Théologie" and the French Crisis of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 135–55, 204–51.
47. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "La querelle de l'existentialisme," *Les Temps Modernes* 1 (1945): 348–49.
48. Merleau-Ponty, "La querelle," 349.
49. Bradley, *Aquinas*, 532–33.
50. Francisco Suárez, one of the most important Scholastic theorists of pure nature, aptly characterizes the understanding of natural felicity implied by the pure nature view as a naturally attainable good that fully satisfies man's desire and brings him perfect repose, leaving no room for an Augustinian "restless heart." As Suárez remarks, because our nature finds its happiness in a strictly natural rather than supernatural good, the "prudent" man will be "content with his natural lot" and not allow his soul to be "restless" or "disquieted" by the fact that he cannot attain an end that transcends his nature. The Suarezian hypothesis of perfect repose and satisfaction in a natural beatitude attainable in the present life is precisely what many contemporary thinkers find unconvincing about the concept of nature. See Francisco Suárez, *De fine ultimo*

hominis, Disp. XVI, sec. ult., 7, in *Opera Omnia*, vol. 4 (Paris: Vivès, 1856–1878), 156.

51. In their view of natural felicity as discordant with human experience, postmodern thinkers are fundamentally in agreement with classical theology and philosophy. Augustinian thought, for instance, is directly opposed to such a view, for as Augustine famously remarks in the *Confessions*, our hearts are restless until they rest in God; in other words, no naturally attainable good can ever bring human nature complete repose. But it is not only Christian Augustinians who experience the world in this way. It is a foundational element of the philosophic experience as well. As evidence, we need only recall Aristotle's statement in Book I of the *Ethics* that human beings, whose scant knowledge of the highest things is always admixed with much error and who are ineradicably subject to the vicissitudes of fortune and ultimately to death, attain happiness only as "men," a dim reflection of the perfect and self-sufficient good identified as happiness *tout court* earlier in Book I. Commenting on this theme in Aristotle, Voegelin observes that in the Aristotelian philosophical experience, man's being is unfulfilled in this world and subject to "dissatisfaction with a state experienced as imperfect, of apprehension of a perfection that is not of this world but is the privilege of the gods, of possible fulfillment in a state beyond the world." Not only, then, is the view of a purely natural felicity antithetical to postmodern philosophy but it is also foreign to pre-modern thought as well. See Voegelin, "On Debate and Existence," 146; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W. D. Ross, rev. J. O. Urmson, in *Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, vol. 2, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1:7 (1097b9–1098a19) and 1:10 (1101a14–20).