

## THE WHOLE RAHNER ON THE SUPERNATURAL EXISTENTIAL

DAVID COFFEY

*[The author notes that serious discrepancies apparently exist between Rahner's initial and later formulations of his theology regarding the supernatural existential. Such a conclusion, if correct, would present a problem because Rahner's first formulation has commonly been deemed to be a corrective to a serious weakness in de Lubac's theology which underpinned the nouvelle théologie movement. In order to solve this apparent anomaly, the author proposes a more comprehensive theology of the existential by elaborating Rahner's theology of grace for its intrinsic and ecumenical value.]*

IN ORDER TO DESIGNATE the orientation of human beings to a supernatural end, that is, to salvation in the Christian sense, Karl Rahner (1904–1984), in his intervention in the *nouvelle théologie* debate in 1950, coined the expression “supernatural existential.”<sup>1</sup> As with so many of his original technical terms, he evidently presumed that its meaning would be instantly clear to his readers. Even in a work as late as *Foundations of Christian Faith* (German original 1976) he was still manifesting this presumption. There his first words of explanation are that the supernatural existential “is

DAVID COFFEY received his S.T.D. from the Catholic Institute of Sydney, Australia, in 1960. He currently holds the William J. Kelly, S.J., Chair of Systematic Theology at Marquette University. He has published widely on the theology of the Triune God and especially on the Holy Spirit. His recent publications include *The Sacrament of Reconciliation* (Liturgical, 2001) and “The ‘Unities’ of the Episcopal Office,” in *Unfailing Patience and Sound Teaching: Reflections on Episcopal Ministry in Honor of Rembert G. Weakland, O.S.B.*, ed. David A. Stosur (Liturgical, 2003). He is now re-editing a collection of his earlier articles on Pneumatology.

<sup>1</sup> Karl Rahner, “Eine Antwort,” *Orientierung* 14 (1950) 141–45. This article was republished in slightly amended form as “Über das Verhältnis von Natur und Gnade,” in *Schriften zur Theologie* 1 (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1954) 323–45, and eventually in Cornelius Ernst’s English translation, “Concerning the Relationship between Nature and Grace,” in *Theological Investigations* 1 (Baltimore: Helicon, 1961) 297–317. See my amendments to the Ernst translation in Document 3 of my article: “Some Resources for Students of *la nouvelle théologie*,” *Philosophy and Theology* 11/2 (1999) 395–98. Throughout this article I often make adjustments to the published English translations of *Theological Investigations* and elsewhere.

present in *all* human beings,” but “as an existential [*Existential*] of their concrete existence [*Dasein*].”<sup>2</sup>

Fortunately, the meaning of the expression as it occurs in this text can be gleaned from Rahner’s explanation as it unfolds. Thus, the first part of the quoted statement requires no elaboration beyond pointing out that the existential is a consequence of God’s universal saving will; the second assertion means that it is an element of the existence rather than of the essence (nature) of human beings. The first part of the statement, Rahner affirms, conflicts in no way with the truth of the second. Because it is not part of human nature, and because it has to do with salvation, the existential must be gratuitous, that is, must pertain in some way to grace. It is clear that the term “existential” is used here as a noun. Rahner goes on to say that as an existential of human beings “it is present prior to their freedom, their self-understanding and their experience.”<sup>3</sup> If it were offered *to* their freedom, that is, after its constitution, it would be something about whose acceptance a decision would need to be made, and would be *existentiell* rather than *existential*. In this sense the term is clearly adjectival. The expression “supernatural existential,” while remaining a substantive, combines the two references: it is an element of human existence rather than of the human essence, and its a priori character is asserted and stressed. Since the existential does not of itself bring about justification, “supernatural” cannot at this point indicate sanctifying grace itself, but rather a relationship to this grace, the exact nature of which remains to be clarified.

Whenever I refer in what follows to the “later” Rahner, I mean Rahner’s statements on the supernatural existential after his contribution of 1950. Never again did he address the subject with the rigor and depth of this first treatment, but he did return to it on a number of occasions, some of which, because they are recognizable from the titles of the dictionary or encyclopedia articles to which they belong, are readily found. Other treatments by Rahner occur in unexpected places and are discovered by only the most industrious or serendipitous of researchers. The few who embark on this task usually receive a shock since Rahner appears, at least in some places and at first sight, to contradict what he said in his first and most important statement. His hard won advantage over the *nouvelle théologie* seems now to be lightly cast aside. For at times, he refers to the existential as an “offer” of grace (which certainly sounds *existentiell* rather than *existential*) and sometimes, in an apparently even more compromising way, he speaks of it

<sup>2</sup> Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Crossroad, 1978) 127, with a slight adjustment to Dych’s translation (“men” becomes “human beings”). German original: *Grundkurs des Glaubens: Einführung in den Begriff des Christentums* (Freiburg: Herder, 1976) 133.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

as “grace” or “the self-communication of God” (which seems to identify it already with the grace of justification).

Whatever the ultimate verdict on this state of affairs, it is incontestable that Rahner's advantage was not as great as it might have been and perhaps should have been, for it contained weaknesses that allowed, even facilitated, the emergence of the later difficulties. One weakness that he frankly admitted at the time (though not *as* a weakness) was that “it would be necessary to examine more closely how the supernatural existential is related to grace itself, and in what sense it is distinct from it.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, when he wrote this, Rahner had no clear idea of the nature of the relationship of the existential to grace. This admission on his part reveals a more fundamental weakness: he was unable to say what the supernatural existential *was*. He could say what it did (it oriented us to God) and what it was not (it was not a constituent of human nature). Simply to call it à la Heidegger an “existential” was to leave untouched the question of its proper identity. Henri de Lubac, Rahner's opponent in the debate (though an indirect one), was placed at a disadvantage by these weaknesses. First, he could not tell the difference between what he and what Rahner was saying; second, he did not accept that Rahner's use of Heideggerian terminology in an essentially Scholastic debate was “necessary or even opportune.”<sup>5</sup> Had Rahner used Scholastic terminology, his influence on de Lubac might have been more positive and fruitful.

Having explained the relevant terminology and the nature of the problem raised by Rahner's later writings, I now state what I hope to accomplish in this present article and why I consider the exercise important. My object is to establish the thesis that, despite appearances, there is no contradiction between Rahner's late and early statements on the supernatural existential. What appear in the later writings as contradictions are in fact correct approximations of a truth whose entirety eluded him because it had not been fully thought through. It will be for the reader to judge how successfully I succeed in achieving the theory of the supernatural existential that Rahner could have produced himself. The exercise seems important because in the *ordo doctrinae* the supernatural existential is the foundation of Rahner's entire theology of grace, which is important in itself and widely appreciated ecumenically. More specifically, Rahner's theology of the existential, if it is correct, frees his Catholic theology of grace from any and all reasonable suspicion of semi-Pelagianism.

<sup>4</sup> Rahner, “Concerning the Relationship between Nature and Grace” 316.

<sup>5</sup> See Henri de Lubac, *At the Service of the Church: Henri de Lubac Reflects on the Circumstances That Occasioned His Writings*, trans. Anne Elizabeth Englund (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1993) 62 n. 5. French original: *Mémoire sur l'occasion de mes écrits*, 2nd ed. (Namur: Culture et Vérité, 1992; original ed. 1989) 63 n. 5.

I begin with a summary of Rahner's position on the supernatural existential in his first published essay. I then continue with a presentation of his position in his later writings. An integration of these positions is then offered by a precise Scholastic theory of the existential and its relationship to grace. In my conclusion, I consider the contemporary relevance of the whole question.

### RAHNER'S FIRST ARTICLE ON THE SUPERNATURAL EXISTENTIAL

Here I do not give a full account of Rahner's first essay on the supernatural existential.<sup>6</sup> Instead, I am content to extract what is relevant to my present study. In his first essay Rahner was responding to an article by "D,"<sup>7</sup> an anonymous writer who defended de Lubac against the severe criticism he incurred over the theology of grace presented in his book *Surnaturel*.<sup>8</sup> To explain his position D had provided a systematic presentation of what he understood de Lubac's theology to be, for which Rahner was grateful since it made it easier for him as a systematician to come to grips with it.<sup>9</sup> The central point of this theology was that all human beings have by nature a spiritual orientation to the one true God revealed in Jesus Christ. The single element of this to which Rahner took exception was the phrase "by nature." That all human beings are oriented to the God of revelation, far from being in dispute, was affirmed by Rahner with a zeal equal to that of de Lubac and his confreres. All parties were united in their opposition to the *duplex ordo* characteristic of neo-Scholasticism of the day, according to which in human beings the natural and the supernatural orders coexisted as separate "layers" (with the supernatural imposed on the natural). That theology, designed to protect the transcendence of God, had produced the unintended effect of rendering the Christian religion and all that belonged to it, namely: divine revelation, grace, the Church, God, as irrelevant to human beings as they went about their lives in the world.

<sup>6</sup> For publication details see n. 1. For a summary of the article, see Daniel T. Pekarske, *Abstracts of Karl Rahner's Theological Investigations 1–23* (Milwaukee: Marquette University, 2002) 27–28.

<sup>7</sup> D's article, "Ein Weg zur Bestimmung des Verhältnisses von Natur und Gnade," was published in *Orientierung* 14 (1950) 138–41. See my translation, under the title "A Way toward the Determination of the Relation of Nature and Grace," in Document 2 of "Some Resources for Students of *la nouvelle théologie*," *Philosophy and Theology* 11/2 (1999) 381–94. See also my identification of D as the French Jesuit Émile Delaye in Document 4 of the same article (399–402).

<sup>8</sup> De Lubac, *Surnaturel: Études historiques* (Paris: Aubier, 1946). See also the revised edition published in Paris by Desclée de Brouwer, 1991, with a preface by Michel Sales.

<sup>9</sup> See Rahner, "Concerning the Relationship between Nature and Grace" 303 n. 2, and 304 n. 3. See also the opening paragraph of Document 4 of my "Some Resources for Students" 399.

The stakes were high, not only between the *duplex ordo* theologians on the one hand and the *nouvelle théologie* supporters on the other, but between D/de Lubac and Rahner. In the first instance, the issue was the relevance of Christianity. In the second, the issue was the no less crucial question of the absolute gratuity of grace. The first issue was triumphantly decided in favor of de Lubac and colleagues (including Rahner) by the Second Vatican Council in its Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*. The second, in which Rahner took the opposite view to de Lubac (via D), remains controversial to this day. Pius XII thought he had settled the matter with his statement in the encyclical *Humani generis* that “others corrupt the ‘gratuity’ of the supernatural order, since they hold that God could not create beings endowed with intellect without ordering and calling them to the beatific vision.”<sup>10</sup> But de Lubac denied that this rebuke was intended for him,<sup>11</sup> and so the dispute continued.

A suitable point of departure for presenting Rahner’s case against D is found in the following words from his first article on the supernatural existential: “If God gives creation and above all man a supernatural end and this end is first *in intentione*, then the world and man *is* by that very fact always and everywhere inwardly other in structure than he would be if he did not have this end, and hence other as well before he has reached this end partially (the grace which justifies) or wholly (the beatific vision).”<sup>12</sup> First, we may disregard what Rahner says here about the world, not that it lacks importance, but because it is not strictly relevant to the present inquiry. In any case, the structure of this sentence of Rahner reveals that for him too it is of secondary importance in this context.<sup>13</sup> Secondly, Rahner here affirms the common ground between himself and D, namely that all human beings have as their concrete end the true God revealed in Jesus Christ. This God is expressed not in objective terms as I have just done, but in subjective terms, where the “subject” is the human person ordered to God by sanctifying grace (hereafter referred to simply as “grace”). This ordination is already a partial possession of the end and the beginning of

<sup>10</sup> My translation. The Latin reads: “Alii autem ‘gratuitatem’ ordinis supernaturalis corrumpunt, cum autumment Deum entia intellectu praedita condere non posse, quin eadem ad beatificam visionem ordinet et vocet” (DS 3891, and the original in *AAS* 42 [1950] 561–78, at 570).

<sup>11</sup> See de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: Crossroad, 1998) 50, 80. French original: *Le mystère du surnaturel* (Paris: Aubier, 1965).

<sup>12</sup> Rahner, “Über das Verhältnis von Natur und Gnade” 328–29 (“Concerning the Relationship between Nature and Grace” 302–3).

<sup>13</sup> I refer to the fact that immediately after speaking of “the world and man” he invokes the pronoun “he” rather than “they.”

the process culminating in its total possession, the beatific vision.<sup>14</sup> I continue to express this concept of God in objective terms. A theologically satisfactory way of doing this is to say “God as God is in himself,” which for the sake of brevity and inclusive language, I abbreviate to “God in self.” Also, pertaining to the common ground, is the Scholastic principle that the end is first *in intentione*, meaning that the end determines everything else about the being under consideration. Thirdly, Rahner goes on to say that human beings with this end are other than they would be if they did not have this end. One needs to go beyond the sentence just quoted to discover the reason for this. But we should notice that Rahner abstains from speculation about the “natural” end that the human person has or would have if the supernatural end were not bestowed. Perhaps the reason for this is that he did not want to get caught up in the seemingly needless and controversial question of what the natural end of human beings is or would be. Here it suffices for him simply to affirm that such an end exists. This too is a subject to which we must return. At this point, fourthly, it suffices to note that Rahner assumes the perduring identity of the human person in both these scenarios. In fact, “I” have a supernatural end, but if God had not given “me” this end, “I” would still exist, but then with a purely natural end. Rahner’s point about perduring identity had been denied by de Lubac, who had written: “In another universe another being than I, possessing a nature analogous to mine, would have had this more humble destiny [namely, a natural end].”<sup>15</sup> But Rahner’s point here is important because perduring identity is essential for the gratuity of the beatific vision (and grace). The beatific vision is for me gratuitous only if I could have not had it as my end.

The “otherness” that Rahner asserts of human persons with a supernatural end would not be so radical as to precipitate a total change of identity if they were deprived of it. Nevertheless, fifthly, it is an otherness “in structure.” This makes it sound ontological, and indeed Rahner has already said as much a few lines earlier, where he calls the supernatural existential “an interior ontological constituent of [the human person’s]

<sup>14</sup> It is not necessary that the process be concluded in the beatific vision, for it can be aborted by the human person through sin. It comes to its proper completion only if this person perseveres in a life of righteousness.

<sup>15</sup> De Lubac, “Le mystère du surnaturel,” *Recherches de science religieuse* 36 (1949) 80–121, at 94. Stephen Duffy finds “ambiguity” in de Lubac’s approach here, because later in the same article (104) de Lubac wrote: “After as before, we shall be able to continue to say that, had God so willed, he would have been able not to give us being, and that this being which he has given us, he would have been able not at all to call to see him” (Duffy, *The Graced Horizon: Nature and Grace in Modern Catholic Thought* [Collegeville: Liturgical, 1992] 80).

concrete quiddity *terminative*.”<sup>16</sup> So the existential is ontological, but not a substance. Does this mean that it is an accident? Léopold Malevez certainly thought so.<sup>17</sup> But then we are led to ask what sort of accident it might be—not an easy question to answer. That constitutes another matter to which we must return. Faithful to Rahner’s intention, the translator has used the word “quiddity” (*Wesen*) in conjunction with “concrete” to designate the actual human person with a supernatural end. This is to indicate a distinction from “nature” (*Natur*) which would designate the same person without the supernatural end but with a purely natural end, in other words, a concrete instance of “pure nature.” The word *terminative* is Latin, an adverb meaning “terminatively.” In other words, in Rahner’s understanding the existential is a definitive determinant of a concrete human nature.

To this point we have been able to summarize a large part of Rahner’s first article on the supernatural existential by “unpacking” a single sentence from it. But to complete the task we now need to range beyond it. Three points remain to be made. Firstly, for Rahner the bestowal of the existential takes place at the initial moment of the human person’s existence, in other words at the moment of his or her creation. This follows from the fact that God never had any other intention for human beings than their destination to divine friendship. Hence Rahner states with emphasis that the human person must have this destination “*always*.”<sup>18</sup> It is not as though pure nature existed first in its own right and was then determined. Rather, creation and determination take place together, though creation belongs to the level of nature, and determination in some way to the level of grace. Nor is the existential simply added to nature; it transforms nature in its coming into being. And the transformation will remain forever, unaltered by anything the person may or may not do subsequently.

Secondly, it would be a misinterpretation of Rahner to read him as positing “nature” (as defined above) as merely hypothetical. For him it is an actually existing reality, though it exists never by itself but always as taken up into the “quiddity” (again as defined above). This explains why for him “nature” is a “remainder,”<sup>19</sup> or a “remainder concept” (*Restbegriff*),<sup>20</sup> in other words, that which remains when everything pertaining to the supernatural is subtracted.

Thirdly, the necessity of the theology of the existential flows from the gratuity of grace. To put this another way, without a theology of the exis-

<sup>16</sup> Rahner, “Concerning the Relationship between Nature and Grace” 302.

<sup>17</sup> See Léopold Malevez, “La gratuité du surnaturel,” *Nouvelle revue théologique* 75 (1953) 561–86, at 579, and 673–89, at 685.

<sup>18</sup> Rahner, “Concerning the Relationship between Nature and Grace” 312.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 302.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 313.



tential, grace would lose its essential quality of gratuity. This is how Rahner expressed it:

In this more recent view [of the *nouvelle théologie*], this ordination to the beatific vision on the one hand was considered an inner, inamissible constituent of human nature, and on the other hand was so conceived that the withholding of the goal of this ordination was considered incompatible with the wisdom and goodness of God. And in this sense [the ordination] was declared unconditional [*unbedingt*] (provided the creature did not fail to reach its goal through its own fault). In our view, with these presuppositions grace and the beatific vision can no longer be called unowed [gratuitous].<sup>21</sup>

To clarify this quotation one needs to explain what “unconditional” means in this context. With the *nouvelle théologie*, Rahner shared the conviction that every human being has “an unconditional desire for God.” Two things need to be explained about this expression. First, this desire is essentially an unconscious yearning which becomes conscious only upon the preaching of the gospel. And secondly, it is unconditional (or absolute) in the sense that God in self has already constituted himself the end of every human being. There are no conditions remaining to be met—by God—before human beings actually have God in self as their ultimate end. Hence their desire for God is “unconditional.” If God had not yet so given himself, then any desire a human might have for God in self would be only “conditional,” and would remain such unless God fulfilled the outstanding condition by thus giving himself. (All agreed that the situation of a human with only a conditional desire had never occurred and never would.) The precise point of difference between Rahner and the *nouvelle théologie* was that while the latter regarded the unconditional desire as belonging to human nature as such, Rahner maintained that it was already a gift of grace and hence was supernatural. For him the unconditional desire was the immediate consequence of the supernatural existential and hence shared its supernatural character. As the quotation shows, the *nouvelle théologie*, by not unambiguously declaring the unconditional desire supernatural, had unwittingly compromised the gratuity of grace. For 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 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.

To conclude my first section of this article, I offer brief comments on two further elements of Rahner’s article. The first is his scant mention of a

<sup>21</sup> Rahner, “Über das Verhältnis von Natur und Gnade” 330; “Concerning the Relationship between Nature and Grace” 304.



“natural” end for human beings; the second is the tantalizing clue he provides to his later position on the supernatural existential when he says that possession of the existential entails exposure to “the permanent dynamism of grace.”<sup>22</sup> I have already drawn attention to Rahner’s reticence on the subject of a natural end for human beings. He refers to it only twice in the article, and then obliquely. The first reference is found in his brief account of the “average textbook” theology of grace, the *duplex ordo* theology then current.<sup>23</sup> In this theology, he says, “supernatural grace . . . can only be the superstructure lying beyond the range of experience imposed upon a human ‘nature’ which even in the present economy turns in its own orbit (though with a relationship peculiar to itself to the God of creation).”<sup>24</sup> To say that human nature turns in its own orbit is another way of saying that underlying its supernatural end, which is God in self, it has and retains an as yet unspecified natural end. And the vague reference to the God of creation suggests that this natural end might be God thus conceived.

The distinction between God in self and the God of creation should not be dismissed out of hand. The suggestion being made was not that there were two gods, but that there were two different aspects under which the one true God might be encountered: a lower aspect under which he was known, whether by reason alone or through revelation, simply as creator of the world, and a higher aspect under which through revelation he became known in his inner being and life, the first giving access to his unity, the second to his Trinity. We need to bear in mind that Rahner’s statements here occur in his account of a position he is criticizing. It is therefore not clear what he thought of the suggestion that the natural end of human beings might be the God of creation. I return to this idea in the third section of my article. What *is* clear is that he rejected the central idea of the *duplex ordo* theology, namely, that a twofold human end gives rise to two entirely separate though juxtaposed human orders, one natural and the other supernatural.

Rahner’s second reference to a natural end occurs late in the article where he speaks of the “openness” of the human spirit for the supernatural existential.<sup>25</sup> This openness, he says, must be conceived as “not unconditional,” that is, as conditional. Thus, “pure” human nature, that is, with the existential bracketed out (though in *fact* it is always present), can “confidently”<sup>26</sup> be identified as “the unlimited dynamism of the spirit” of which D had spoken, that is, the spirit’s unlimited, and hence unconditional drive

<sup>22</sup> Rahner, “Concerning the Relationship between Nature and Grace” 301.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 298–300. The expression “average textbook conception” occurs on 298.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 299. <sup>25</sup> Ibid. 315.

<sup>26</sup> Perhaps a better way of translating Rahner’s *ruhig* in this context than Ernst’s word “unhesitatingly.”

toward the totality of being, in a word, self-transcendence toward being as such. Here, then, the end of pure nature is implicitly asserted to be the totality of being. But this totality cannot include God in self, for the simple reason that for Rahner a natural human desire for God thus conceived could only be conditional. Concretely, then, what is this end? Once again Rahner passes up the opportunity of expressing an opinion on this matter.

Finally (and this is the second of the two comments which I earlier undertook to make), Rahner's claim that the existential entails that we are exposed to "the permanent dynamism of grace,"<sup>27</sup> is surprising in that no reason is provided as to why this should be so. In section three I argue that Rahner's claim is de facto correct, and that the fact that he was able to make it here can mean only that, without being able to articulate it, he must have operated from the outset with some sort of intuition of an intrinsic connection between the existential and grace. It was not, therefore, something appearing for the first time in his later writings on the basis of a fundamental change of position.

#### RAHNER'S LATER WRITINGS ON THE SUPERNATURAL EXISTENTIAL

In his later writings Rahner says nothing that directly contradicts the position of his first article on the supernatural existential. The question arises, therefore, whether he contradicts it indirectly, that is to say, whether he wrote anything incompatible with it. My present study contends that he did not. Corroboration of this thesis is found in the fact that in the later writings he repeats the findings of the first article, which would be inexplicable on any other hypothesis.

In his article "Nature and Grace" in volume 4 of the *Schriften* (German 1960, English 1964)<sup>28</sup> Rahner distinguishes the "formal object of the natural spirit" and "the formal object of the supernaturally elevated spirit."<sup>29</sup> First he defines the term "formal object" as "the *a priori* horizon given in consciousness, under which, in grasping the individual *a posteriori* object, everything is known that is grasped as an object strictly speaking."<sup>30</sup> The natural formal object of the spirit is then declared to be "transcendence towards being in general, the natural openness for being as a whole,"<sup>31</sup> while its supernatural counterpart is "supernatural transcendence of the spirit, opened and borne by grace."<sup>32</sup> In the German it is clear that "opened

<sup>27</sup> See n. 22.

<sup>28</sup> Rahner, "Nature and Grace," in *Theological Investigations* 4.165–88. The original "Natur und Gnade," in *Schriften zur Theologie* 4.209–36.

<sup>29</sup> Rahner, "Nature and Grace" 178–79.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 178.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* Here I have amended Smyth's translation, "supernatural transcendence, the openness of the soul informed by grace."

and borne by grace” qualifies “transcendence,” not “spirit.”<sup>33</sup> Rahner then asserts that precisely this transcendence “is always present in every human being who has reached the age of moral reason.”<sup>34</sup> This means that it is not only the grace of justification that he is concerned with here, but the supernatural existential. In that case, then, what does Rahner mean by saying that supernatural transcendence is “opened and borne by grace”? The answer must lie in his personalistic understanding of grace and the priority he awards such grace over all forms of created grace: “Grace is God himself, the communication in which he gives himself to humans as the divinizing factor which he is himself.”<sup>35</sup> In other words, grace in this sense produces the existential as its first and inalienable effect, and later, on the basis of the human being’s free assent of faith, justification as its second effect. Rahner also emphasizes the dynamic character of this grace, by calling it the “offer” of grace and declaring it to be continuous and permanent rather than “intermittent.”<sup>36</sup> He goes on to say that the two formal objects are “not opposed to each other like two things that lie side by side, so that they must be either kept separate or confused.”<sup>37</sup> This observation is helpful, but it calls for a positive statement about their relationship, a statement, however, that is not forthcoming.

In the same volume of the *Schriften*, in his article “Questions of Controversial Theology on Justification,” Rahner speaks twice of the supernatural existential (English 200, 215–18; German 249–50, 267–71). The first statement is a repetition of material already seen. The second is an attempt to clarify the relation between the existential and grace properly so called.<sup>38</sup> Its essential point is that if grace as such is the self-communication of God (inclusive of the created grace of justification), then the existential is a partial realization of grace. Rahner says this in three ways. First, the existential is a lower “degree” (*Stufe*, “level”) of grace. Second, since the existential is “entitatively” natural (in that it is a modification of created human being as such), it is only “modally” supernatural, whereas grace

<sup>33</sup> The German reads: “die übernatürliche, von der Gnade eröffnete und getragene Transzendenz des Geistes.”

<sup>34</sup> Rahner, “Nature and Grace” 180.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* 177.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* 180.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* 183.

<sup>38</sup> Here the Smyth translation rather obfuscates matters. For example, in the German text (268), English (215), Rahner three times uses the word *Gefälle* (literally, a “drop” or a “decline”), and each time in the sense of a distinction between something “higher” and something “lower” in the same order (in this case that of grace). This choice of word corresponds exactly to his intentions. Smyth translates it by a different word each time, namely “discrepancy,” “split,” and “inclination.” He translates *Gnadenhaftigkeit* as “gratuitousness of grace,” whereas it means simply “graciousness” (German [268], English [216]). In this context he might just as well have translated it “grace.”

itself (being the self-communication of God), is “entitatively” supernatural. And third, the existential is the “deficient mode” of grace. These are important statements.

In his entry on “Existential, Supernatural” in the *Kleines Theologisches Wörterbuch* from 1961 (English 1965), Rahner restates much of what is contained in his original article.<sup>39</sup> He then speaks of the existential as “added [*sic*] indeed to [the human being’s] nature by grace.”<sup>40</sup> In this case as in some others, the German original avoids confrontation through its careful choice of words, speaking of the existential as added to nature, not by “grace” (*Gnade*) but “graciously” (*gnadenhaft*). The distinction intimated here became explicit in Max Seckler’s characterization of the existential as “gnadenhaft, ohne ‘die’ Gnade zu sein,”<sup>41</sup> which we may translate as “gracious, without actually being grace,” but Seckler frankly acknowledged that it was difficult “to characterize this existential more precisely.”<sup>42</sup>

In the paragraph numbered (3) of his entry on “Grace” in the same work,<sup>43</sup> Rahner is concerned with the reception of grace and hence with its recipient, the “addressee” of God’s offer. The latter is declared to be “human nature” and not directly the human person as such, not, therefore, a concrete human nature already elevated by the existential as one might expect. Rahner is not being inconsistent here. He is thinking personalistically, but is coupling the existential with God in God’s self-communication through grace rather than with the human being, recipient of grace. Though he is not saying so explicitly, he must be envisioning the existential as the *beginning* of the self-communication of God. Otherwise he would not have been able to call the addressee a “nature” in the sense of “pure nature” as he does here. (That this is the sense in which he uses the word is clear from the cross reference he gives, namely, to the entry on “nature and grace.”) Once again Rahner is saying that “nature” in this sense, which is that of a *Restbegriff*, is an actual reality and not a merely hypothetical one. This, however, does not mean that he sees it as existing in its own right.

In “History of the World and Salvation History,” in volume 5 of the *Schriften* (German 1962, English 1966),<sup>44</sup> Rahner has two pages (German

<sup>39</sup> Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, *Kleines Theologisches Wörterbuch* (Freiburg: Herder, 1961) 107. English translation: *Theological Dictionary*, ed. Cornelius Ernst, trans. Richard Strachan (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965) 161.

<sup>40</sup> Rahner, *Theological Dictionary* 161.

<sup>41</sup> Max Seckler, *Instinkt und Glaubenswille nach Thomas von Aquin* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald, 1961) 213.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* 214.

<sup>43</sup> See Rahner, *Theological Dictionary* 163.

<sup>44</sup> Rahner, “Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschichte,” in *Schriften zur Theologie*

121–23; English, 103–4;) in which he says some puzzling things about the supernatural existential and grace. The topic addressed in these pages is the possibility of saving faith for non-Christians. For our purposes it is not necessary to summarize the argument of this passage beyond noting that the supernatural existential figures prominently in it, and in terms now familiar to us.

The problem is that the existential is not mentioned explicitly, though the context reveals that the reference is to the existential, at least sometimes. Take, for example, the very first sentence of the passage, “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.” As we have noted, the universal effect of this divine purpose is the existential. In other places in the passage, Rahner uses the term “grace” in its proper sense. So, for example, in the second sentence: “Everyone is offered salvation, which means that everyone, in so far as he does not close himself to this offer by his own free and grave guilt, is offered divine grace—and is offered it again and again (even when he is guilty).”<sup>45</sup> Here the decisive factor is the manifestly *existentiell* nature of the offer and the response. In still other places, even though the term “grace” is not used, it is clear that grace in the full sense is the reality intended. Sometimes it is difficult to tell whether Rahner is speaking of the existential, or of grace, or of both.<sup>46</sup>

More clarity emerges in the third sentence, in which a distinction is made. Of the two realities distinguished, the second is clearly grace, grace at the moment of justification grasped from the human perspective as “the acceptance of the self-communication of God in grace and glory.”<sup>47</sup> Thus we are enabled to identify the first reality, the “existential situation to which belongs the obligation of striving towards a supernatural goal of direct union with the absolute God in a direct vision,” as the supernatural existential bestowed at creation. Assumed is a proposition we have already established, namely, that the existential implies the permanent *existentiell*

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5.115–35; “History of the World and Salvation-History,” in *Theological Investigations* 5.97–114.

<sup>45</sup> The English translator has ended the sentence at this point, though in the original it continues to include what in the translation is the third sentence. But this does not change anything from our point of view.

<sup>46</sup> On the middle of page 104 the word “grace” appears in single quotation marks, which might lead the reader to think that the reference is to the existential rather than grace. It should therefore be noted that in the German the corresponding word *Gnade* does not bear these or any other distinguishing marks.

<sup>47</sup> My literal translation of the German. The English translation has “accepting God’s self-communication in grace and in glory.” The mention of glory here could be seen as problematic. Do we accept glory in the act of justification? Strictly speaking, we do not, but I think that what Rahner meant is that justification is the pledge of future glory.

offer of grace, and this because it (the existential) is the *beginning* of the self-communication of God in grace.

The step forward that Rahner has taken here is that he has identified *two* "ordinations" to the beatific vision, the second of which, namely, the "genuine subjective possibility of reaching this goal," or justifying grace, one can call the *proximate* ordination. The first, the "existential situation" referred to above, that is, the supernatural existential, can therefore be described as the *remote* ordination to this goal,<sup>48</sup> particularly as it is envisioned as the beginning of grace.

In *Sacramentum Mundi*, Rahner makes several statements on the supernatural existential, all but the last of which can be omitted, since they cover familiar ground.<sup>49</sup> The last statement is found in the article "Ziel des Menschen" (Goal of Man) (German, [1969] 4.1432; English, in the article "Order" 4.301, section d). One sentence in the German is rendered in the English text as five separate sentences. In the interests of exactness and authentic emphasis I give a literal translation of this long German sentence, adding punctuation where necessary:

Here already we must emphasize that the "supernatural" goal of man, freely established by God, also has this character of transcendental necessity, because it is always implanted in the being of every man, through the self-communication of God in grace, on account of the universal saving will of God, in advance of all free decision (see "existential, supernatural"), and so it exists in man either in the mode of acceptance (see "faith," "love") or refusal (see "sin"), but it can never become just a command from the outside and, through the indifference of freedom, a matter of no consequence to him, falling outside his movement toward his goal.

This statement represents an explicit advance in Rahner's thought that

<sup>48</sup> Rahner was anticipated in the theology of the supernatural existential by Edmond Brisbois, S.J., of Louvain, who, however, used Scholastic and not Heideggerian terminology. Rahner acknowledges Brisbois in n. 1 of "Concerning the Relationship between Nature and Grace" (298). See Brisbois, "Le désir de voir Dieu et la métaphysique du vouloir selon Saint Thomas," in *Nouvelle revue théologique* 63 (1936) 978–89, 1089–113. In this article Brisbois called the existential an "ordination éloignée" (1105) to the human being's "fin dernière surnaturelle" (1104). Here is his operative sentence, in my own translation: "The vocation of man to his supernatural perfection, therefore, physically modifies human nature to order it already in a certain manner, before all free cooperation on its part, to this new destiny: a remote ordination, doubtless, for there is no question here of sanctifying grace, or of an act of faith, or even of habitual faith, but of this previous subjective disposition which must render all these possible, and which is the need, the exigence, of the last absolute good, expressed by a first, indeliberate act of willing" (1104–5).

<sup>49</sup> *Sacramentum Mundi: Theologisches Lexikon für die Praxis*, 4 vols. (Freiburg: Herder, 1967–1969). English translation: *Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopedia of Theology*, 6 vols. (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968–1970).

had probably long been implicit. He speaks of the supernatural existential implanted at the creation of each human being. But he is no longer concerned with the moment of creation. He is now considering this person in his or her adult life. Because the existential assures the permanent and continuous offer of grace, this person has already made, perhaps “anonymously,” a decision about God. Hence for this person the existential now exists either in the mode of free acceptance, that is, faith and grace, or in the mode of free rejection through sin. This freedom of choice, however, is exercised only within the “transcendental” necessity of having to make a decision one way or the other. The process begins with the universal saving will of God. This produces in each person the supernatural existential, which is the *beginning* of God’s self-communication in grace. God then awaits our free decision of faith, which is at the same time the product of the permanent offer of grace and our own authentic act. This beginning of grace is fulfilled, partially in the grace of justification, and ultimately in the beatific vision.

In *Grundkurs des Glaubens* (1976, 132–39; English, *Foundations of Christian Faith* 1978, 126–33), Rahner makes his last and most comprehensive statement on the supernatural existential, reprising his previous writings on the subject as well as developing them further. The statement can be summarized under the following five headings.

First, Rahner characterizes the existential as the self-communication of God “present in *every* person at least in the mode of an offer.”<sup>50</sup> This presupposes that the existential is the first effect of the self-communication of God, is present in all because it flows, prior to freedom, from the universal saving will, and implies—and contains—the continuous offer of grace, that is, of what remains to be conferred of the self-communication of God. Secondly, the next effect of the self-communication of God, if it is to take place at all, will involve the assent of the will, that is, the decision of faith, which is not just a human work but the work of grace as well. Rahner’s second point is that: “In this sense everyone, really and radically *every* person must be understood as the event of the supernatural self-communication of God, although not in the sense that every person necessarily accepts in freedom God’s self-communication to man.”<sup>51</sup> Thirdly, Rahner expands his previous statement that the existential exists in the mode of either acceptance or refusal, to cover the period in the subject’s life before the dawn of freedom, where the offer of grace exists in the mode of an offer not yet accepted or rejected. Thus he speaks of three, not just two possible modes in which the existential can exist.<sup>52</sup> Fourthly, the prior gift of the existential is that which enables the remainder of the self-

<sup>50</sup> Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* 127.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* 127–28.

<sup>52</sup> See *ibid.* 128.



communication of God, bestowed in justification, to continue to be the self-communication of God and not be reduced to a purely human reality, in other words to remain supernatural and gratuitous. The beginning of the self-communication of God must already be present in every person for the complete self-communication of God to him or her to be possible. In Rahner's words, "In order to be able to accept God without reducing him, as it were, in this acceptance to our finiteness, this acceptance must be borne by God himself."<sup>53</sup> And, fifthly, the personal transformation of the human being by the existential is that which enables its acceptance or refusal to be at the same time human, our own, and therefore free. In Rahner's words: "and conversely: without prejudice to its gratuity, God's self-communication must be present in every person as the condition which makes its personal acceptance possible."<sup>54</sup>

In summary form, one can now set down why and to what extent Rahner, over time, changed his position on the supernatural existential. And one can say unhesitatingly that the only major change that occurred was one of context and perspective. I touch first on context. When he was dealing with the *nouvelle théologie*, Rahner concentrated, as did his opponents, on the creation of the human person, because the central question then under dispute was whether the orientation of this person to their supernatural end, God in self, was natural or supernatural, and it was agreed on both sides that this orientation existed not only prior to the exercise of freedom but "always." Rahner held that, as "God in self," the end required in the human person a supernatural elevation, which was not, however, that of sanctifying grace, though it implied its permanent and continuous offer. This elevation he termed "the supernatural existential." Later, the context of discussion shifted away from creation to the moment of *existentiell* decision about God (even if known only "anonymously"), because now human freedom came into play. This meant that henceforth the existential could exist only in the form of either acceptance (faith, grace of justification) or refusal (sin).

Now I touch on perspective. Right from the start, Rahner had held for a priority of uncreated grace, the self-communication of God, over all forms of created grace<sup>55</sup> (which would include the existential). The reason for which this insight did not emerge in the *nouvelle théologie* debate was that he was forced by his opponents to adopt the Scholastic perspective of created grace, both because this was their natural inclination, and because

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> The original publication date of his groundbreaking article, "Some Implications of the Scholastic Concept of Uncreated Grace" in which this idea was presented for the first time, was 1939 (see *Schriften* 1.7; *Theological Investigations* 1.319–46).

the discussion centered on the powers of created human nature. With these constraints removed, Rahner was able to refer to the existential as simply "grace" or "the self-communication of God," though he was clear that it was a "deficient mode" of grace properly so called, a "beginning" (my term) of grace.

### A MORE COMPREHENSIVE THEORY OF THE SUPERNATURAL EXISTENTIAL

The aim of my final section is to fill in as far as possible the gaps left by Rahner in his theology of the supernatural existential. The more comprehensive theory thus acquired will accommodate both his earlier and later statements on the subject. This theory cannot be attributed to Rahner himself but is implicit in his thought.

The minimal attention Rahner gave to the question of a natural end for human beings is a defect that calls for remedy in his theology, particularly as he held the existence of such an end to be actual and not merely hypothetical. How could he hope to understand the relationship of the existential to grace properly so called if he lacked a clear idea of what the existential itself *was*? And how could he know what the existential was if he lacked a precise theological knowledge of the natural end which it transformed? This is a *theological* question, and therefore the natural end has to be known theologically, that is, on the basis of revelation. But in this context Rahner was satisfied with philosophical knowledge. The answer he gave, namely, that the natural end was "being as a whole" toward which the finite spirit transcended by nature, is a purely philosophical statement, reflecting the thought of Maréchal.<sup>56</sup> While there is no reason to question it as far as it goes, it does not go far enough.

Rahner attributed to the *duplex ordo* theology the view that the natural human end was "the God of creation" or "God as creator." This was probably a correct historical judgment on his part. But I have already argued against a summary dismissal of this conception. I now wish to show that there is no necessary conclusion to a *duplex ordo* theology from the concept of God as creator as distinct from God in self. Indisputably each of these concepts is revealed and each represents a distinct aspect of God. But they could just as easily give rise to a single order in which the supernatural penetrated and permeated the natural as to a twofold order in which they

<sup>56</sup> See Joseph Maréchal, *Le point de départ de la métaphysique: Cahier V*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1949) 305–15. A good part of this excerpt is reproduced in English by Joseph Donceel in his *A Maréchal Reader* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970) 149–53.

were juxtaposed. And the first of these alternatives I hold to be the case.<sup>57</sup> The key here is the recognition that we are not dealing with two totally different ends, but with the one end, God, conceived under two aspects, the one higher and the other lower as explained earlier in my article.

Rahner's concept of human "nature" as a *Restbegriff* implies a natural ultimate end that is contained in some way within the supernatural ultimate end, and is not merely a natural end subordinated to a primary (ultimate), supernatural end and therefore secondary. This requirement safeguards both the integrity of human nature and the gratuity of the supernatural end. Unfortunately, Rahner offers no help in explaining how this state of affairs might be brought about. However, a contemporary of his, Walter Brugger, writing from a predominantly philosophical perspective, suggested that the integrity of human nature and the gratuity of the supernatural end could be integrated by way of a Hegelian "sublation" (*Aufhebung*). Brugger wrote: "Human nature provides the raw material for the natural ultimate end, but in the case of the creation does not determine whether it is in its proper form or only as sublated in the supernatural end that it is the actual human end."<sup>58</sup> This is a brilliant suggestion. It is surprising that Rahner, who was not averse to using the language of sublation in other circumstances, did not think of it himself.

Of course this kind of language is not appropriate if one considers the matter from the perspective of God. It makes no sense to say that God as creator exists as sublated in God in self, for there is only one God, not two. But from the human and theological perspective of end it is fully appropriate to say that the natural ultimate end of human beings is sublated in their supernatural ultimate end, for this means that the former is preserved in its integrity (and not abolished), but that it *and* human nature with it

<sup>57</sup> The idea of the creator God as the natural human end was first proposed by Sylvester of Ferrara (1474–1528), author of the classical commentary on Aquinas's *Summa contra gentiles*. Sylvester may have laid himself open to objection by claiming that the natural human end was the "vision" of God as creator (or, in his words, as "first cause") rather than just the creator God, because the additional concept of vision provokes the question, what would correspond naturally to the *lumen gloriae* (the pursuit of which could lead to endless and fruitless arguments)? De Lubac capitalized on this weakness in his summary dismissal of Sylvester in *The Mystery of the Supernatural* 46.

<sup>58</sup> Walter Brugger, "Das Ziel des Menschen und das Verlangen nach der Gottesschau," *Scholastik* 25 (1950) 535–48, at 544–45 (my translation). The German reads: "Die Natur des Menschen gibt daher zwar das Maß ab für das natürliche Vollendungsziel, entscheidet aber nicht darüber, ob dieses im Falle der Schöpfung auch in seiner eigenen Gestalt oder nur als im übernatürlichen Ziel aufgehoben das aktuelle Ziel des Menschen sei." Brugger was taking Rahner's position into account in making this proposal, for he went on to refer to Rahner's response to D in *Orientierung* (545 n.).

exists, but only as taken up (assumed, subsumed) into the higher end. The very unicity of God is what guarantees the legitimacy of this approach, and at the same time ensures, against de Lubac, the perduring identity of the human person. For one is not dealing with two totally different ultimate ends that would predicate two totally different beings. One is dealing with the one end, now grasped and possessed under a lower aspect, and now under a higher.<sup>59</sup> This allows for the ontological elevation of a created spirit that retains its identity throughout. (Of course, in expressing the matter thus I am not suggesting that human nature ever actually existed with a purely natural end.)

Thus one can answer D, who held that the “unlimited dynamism in every created spirit” required, by virtue of nature, its inclination toward, its unconditional desire for God in self.<sup>60</sup> For by what right would a created spirit aspire naturally to God in self? That to which it aspires naturally is God as creator, an unlimited (infinite) object in himself and the totality of being. By nature human beings can only aspire to what they can know by nature, and, according to Vatican I, this is God only as “source and end of all things” (*rerum omnium principium et finis*),<sup>61</sup> not God in self. For God in self represents a realm beyond natural knowledge. As God in self, the trinitarian God of grace, God can be known only by revelation; in order to accept revelation as true one must have faith; in order to have faith one must have grace, at least in some sense. Now these principles must apply not only on the conscious level, but on the unconscious level as well. The desire of the created spirit for God in self was recognized on both sides to be both unconscious and unconditional, but in a true nonbeliever this desire, if it existed purely by virtue of nature, could only be conditional, since revelation would be lacking. But a person coming to conscious faith recognizes that their faith corresponds to an *unconditional*, unconscious desire they have always had. They should therefore also recognize that their unconscious desire was itself a gift of grace, that is, as we say, a result of the supernatural existential and not simply an endowment of nature.

What precisely is meant in this context by “ontological elevation”? De Lubac, following both Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure, had insisted that only sanctifying grace “ordered” a human being to God in self, for only it established between them the proportion that enabled the human being actually to attain God in both this life and the next.<sup>62</sup> Consistently, de Lubac maintained of human nature that prior to the bestowal of grace, and without prejudice to the unconditional desire for God, there was no ordi-

<sup>59</sup> This point is also made by Malevez, “La gratuité du surnaturel” 684.

<sup>60</sup> See D, “A Way” 382–83.

<sup>61</sup> See Vatican I, Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Filius* (DS 3004).

<sup>62</sup> De Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural* 85–86.

nation to God in self, indeed “no slightest element of the supernatural in it.”<sup>63</sup> “Being given finality,” he observed, “is not the same as actually possessing (or failing to attain) the end.”<sup>64</sup>

There is much truth in this view, and Rahner was sympathetic to it, but, as has been noted, he also insisted that the supernatural existential was already in some sense an ordination to God in self, an elevation. He solved the dilemma by having the existential as the “remote” and grace as the “proximate” ordination (though these are my terms, not his). But if the existential does not of itself bring about justification, in what sense can it be even a remote ordination to the supernatural end? Rahner could speak of the supernatural end bestowing on concrete human nature an “otherness of structure,” for it now had a different end from that which it otherwise would have had (and this is all that I mean when I call it a transformation). But how could it be “ontological” without being reduced entirely to the level of nature? Malevez believed he had solved this difficulty by calling it an accident. But if the existential is an accident, it certainly is not a habit. First, there is nothing in Scripture that is analogous to “sharing in the divine life,” to justify this move. Secondly, the existential would coincide with sanctifying grace. Perhaps, inasmuch as it is a passive “restructuring” by God, a case might be made for classifying it as a “passion.” But this would not suffice to make it a work of efficient, let alone quasi-formal, causality. I argue in what follows that it is a work of “material” causality. The existential is ontological in the sense that it is real.

The final question, namely, the precise relation of the supernatural existential to grace, now needs to be addressed. In dealing with this question, one can put to work once again certain Scholastic notions that Rahner had used already in his exposition of the theology of grace. For him the paradigmatic form of grace was uncreated grace, the divine indwelling, the self-communication of God.<sup>65</sup> It was this that passed over into the beatific vision. This self-communication he explained in terms of formal causality, which in this case (and in the case of the Incarnation) he called “quasi-formal” causality, in order to safeguard the transcendence of God. With Aquinas, he regarded (created) sanctifying grace as a work of efficient causality. But he considered these two forms of grace to be intrinsically related, and therefore as necessarily given together. In their combination

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. 95–96.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. 96 n. 96. The French reads, “Autre est la finalité reçue, autre la fin possédée (ou manquée)” (*Le mystère du surnaturel* [Paris: Aubier, 1965] 128 n. 2). De Lubac’s choice of the word “possess” (*posséder*) here is unfortunate, because it is ambiguous: there is one sense in which it expresses the truth, but another in which it misleads.

<sup>65</sup> See Rahner, “Some Implications of the Scholastic Concept of Uncreated Grace” (see above n. 55).

they constitute simply “grace,” grace properly so called.<sup>66</sup> Understanding efficient causality as the “deficient mode” of formal causality, he grasped sanctifying grace as, at the same time, the condition and the effect of God’s self-communication in grace.<sup>67</sup> As already shown, Rahner understood the supernatural existential as the “deficient mode” of grace. I have established that it is a work neither of quasi-formal nor of efficient causality. I have suggested that it is a work of material causality. I now explain what I mean by this and how it coheres with Rahner’s thought.

Rahner recognized that of the four Aristotelian causes the final cause was the noblest and highest, because being “first in intention,” it determines all else about the being in question.<sup>68</sup> Not itself working directly on the being, it organizes, governs, and operates through the other three causes. In grace properly so called, the final cause, God in self, is identical with the quasi-formal cause and the efficient cause. In other words, God, intending himself as the ultimate end of human beings, creates them and communicates himself to them accordingly. The material cause alone of the causes is not God; it is the creature in its receptivity to God in self, that is, as disposed by God to receive his self-communication. For Rahner material causality operates in conjunction with quasi-formal causality only when it is question of the “last” disposition, namely, sanctifying grace, which is produced by efficient causality, and hence not in the case of the existential. If there exists some disposition *previous* to sanctifying grace, it must be attributed to material causality, that is, to the final cause acting through the material cause alone. In this circumstance it would be premature to speak of quasi-formal causality, because the form, still busy disposing the subject, has not yet been received by it *as* a form. Rather, the subject is simply “restructured” (Rahner’s word), given its “first” (as distinct from its “last”) disposition to receive the form of God in self.

This disposition is the supernatural existential. And it can now be recognized to fulfill both the positive and the negative requirements of material causality. Such “obediential” restructuring is a possibility for the

<sup>66</sup> Rahner expressed the matter thus: “Because created grace as *dispositio ultima* can only exist along with the actual formal causality of the form for which it is the *dispositio*, it is correct to say: If created grace is given, so too necessarily by that very fact uncreated grace, and hence the whole grace of justification, is communicated to man” (ibid. 341).

<sup>67</sup> See Rahner, “Selbstmitteilung Gottes,” in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, 2nd ed., 9.627a; also “God’s Self-Communication,” in *Sacramentum Mundi* (English) 5.353b – 355b.

<sup>68</sup> William C. Shepherd appeals to the category of final causality in the context of the existential, but links it with quasi-formal causality, a position against which I argue above (Shepherd, *Man’s Condition: God and the World Process* [New York: Herder and Herder, 1969] 169–70). This criticism notwithstanding, however, Shepherd’s work is remarkable and deserves to be more widely known.

subject because it is ordered by nature already to the same one, true God, though only through the humbler relation of creature to creator. An inexact and limited, but hopefully helpful, analogy might be the adjustment an employee would undergo if made an offer of personal friendship by his or her employer. The status of employee bestows no automatic right of friendship with the employer, though an employee is at least situated as a possible candidate for such a friendship. The offer of friendship, if made at all, is completely gratuitous. But the employee to whom such an offer has in fact been made is, even before it is accepted, different “ontologically” from the way he or she was previously, and different again from the way he or she will be when the offer is finally accepted. In this analogy the status of employee corresponds to “nature,” the offer of friendship corresponds to the existential, and actual friendship corresponds to grace. The insight thus gained illuminates Rahner’s description of the existential (when the offer has been made) as a “deficient mode” of grace (when the offer has been accepted). The existential is “entitatively” natural (the employee simply as such) and “modally” supernatural (an employee to whom an offer has been made and who, though not yet a friend, is poised to become one): the restructuring takes place on the level of nature, but the mode of possession of the end is supernatural (gratuitous).

It remains to be explained why in the matter of grace there are two ordinations, two dispositions, to the ultimate end, and not just one as in the case of other beings. The reason is that, in all material creation, human beings alone, as spiritual and therefore free, attain their end by God’s plan not inexorably like other beings, but through the exercise of their freedom. And therefore God imparts their ultimate end in two stages, in the first as an existential, prior to freedom, and in the second through their free cooperation, that is, through justification by faith and perseverance in the life of grace.

## CONCLUSION

Between Rahner’s first and later writings on the theology of the supernatural existential there took place a significant change of perspective and context. When dealing with the *nouvelle théologie*, he had to concentrate on the moment of the creation of the human being and the difference that the gratuitous self-gift of God as ultimate end makes to a human nature that would otherwise have a purely natural end. Thus he inserted himself into a neo-Scholastic debate characterized by the assumption of the primacy of created grace, departing from its rules only in resorting finally to Heideggerian terminology. However apt the latter might have been to express his thought, and however satisfactory his solution of the immediate problem, this move did not free him—as he seemed to think—from the



obligation to think through the issue in Scholastic terms, a way better calculated to convince his contemporaries. Later, with the controversy behind him, he reverted to his long-held conviction of the primacy of uncreated grace and the interpersonal nature of the God-human relation, and he brought this change of perspective to bear on his theology of the existential. At the same time, he changed his context of reflection from creation to decision, that is, to the choice that all must make between faith and unbelief. The Scholastic key to the relation of the existential to grace, a key Rahner never discovered himself, is an extension of his thought on the quasi-formal and efficient causes to include the final and material causes. In Scholastic terms, the three subordinate causes are intrinsically related to each other and to the final cause in an ascending order, with the last named as the constant, if indirect, operator throughout. In the matter of grace a successful application of this scheme presupposes the deployment of two further concepts absent from Rahner's thought on this question: the creator God as the natural ultimate end of humans, and the Hegelian device of sublation. The result will be an integrated theory of the supernatural existential as a work of material causality.

The theology of the existential contains in germ the whole of Rahner's theology of grace, and therefore assumes an importance that has not yet been sufficiently recognized. While it is the humblest, the existential is nevertheless an authentic instance of the self-communication of God, which is the very essence of grace. It stops in its tracks any suggestion of Pelagianism or semi-Pelagianism, because it is unquestionably an "existential," prior to all human freedom. At the same time, as a "restructuring" of all human nature to its end, it is a transformation of the human and of human experience, without of itself providing the "platform" from which a life shared with God is launched but entailing an assurance of the grace by which this may be done. Its importance for current reflection on the relation of Christianity to the world religions is immense.

In this article I have not tried to resurrect Scholastic theology for today. I have merely attempted, for the special case of the supernatural existential, to formulate a Scholastic argument that Rahner could have devised, with better effect against D/de Lubac, because for them—and perhaps for us too—a Scholastic argument would have given his theology a consistency and plausibility it lacked. Like other original positions he was developing at the time, notably his general theology of grace, his emphasis on the supernatural existential could be reexpressed later in personalistic (and non-causal) terms, retaining, however, its reference to Scholasticism for the sake of clarity and intelligibility. My article does not attempt to reformulate the theology of the supernatural existential in trinitarian terms, for the simple reason that this was never a concern of Rahner's, at least not in a systematic way. But it needs to be done because the existential belongs

ineluctably to the theology of grace, which is, or should be, trinitarian from start to finish. I have provided some hints to this effect in an earlier article, but more is needed.<sup>69</sup> I hope, in the not too distant future, to have the opportunity of remedying this defect.

<sup>69</sup> See my “The Spirit of Christ as Entelechy,” *Philosophy and Theology* 13 (2001) 363–98, at 393. To produce an article on the trinitarian structure of the existential would also allow me to revise what was less than felicitous in this earlier exercise.