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Natura Pura:
A Concept for the New Evangelization

ABSTRACT

This article explores the concept of *Natura Pura*. It addresses its aspects both from the point of Scholastic thought as seen especially in the thinking of Thomas Aquinas. It also addresses the metaphysical question in relation to the thought of Aquinas and Henri de Lubac.

KEYWORDS

new evangelization, Supernatural, human nature, *natura pura*, Thomas Aquinas, Henri de Lubac.

For in me, *a real and personal human being, in my concrete nature – that nature I have in common with all real men*, to judge by what faith teaches me, and regardless of what is or is not revealed to me either by reflective analysis or by reasoning – the desire to see God cannot be permanently frustrated without an essential suffering.¹

So writes Henri de Lubac in his 1965 work *The Mystery of the Supernatural*. This argument is key to his epochal jeremiad against the established understanding of the relationship between the natural and the supernatural. The scholastic tradition depended upon a concept of *natura pura* to elucidate the completely gratuitous nature of God's grace to man. De Lubac spent a lifetime fighting against this theory claiming that such a concept was totally unhelpful because such a pure nature has never existed. In fact, as seen in the quote above, he insists that human nature cannot be understood in abstraction from its supernatural finality. As he says: "God's call is constitutive."² This, de Lubac argues, is the teaching of Saint Thomas Aquinas, and the tradition of *natura pura* is that of the baroque scholastics, especially Cajetan, whom Gilson – writing to de Lubac – called the *corruptorium Thomae*.³

Yet, is this true? Is man, as he exists historically, only able to be understood as having a supernatural finality? Does such a thing as "*natura pura*" have any coherence, or is it just a chimera of the decadent centuries after the Council of Trent? Studying Saint Thomas' texts concerning the various historical states of nature, I hope to show that de Lubac's reading of Aquinas is a bit too simple. Human nature – I argue – can be, and by Aquinas is, understood in abstraction from the call to supernatural beatitude, and in fact such a "pure" concept of nature is actually necessary for theological knowledge of the first Adam, the second Adam, and all those who come in between.

Human nature exists only in the concrete and it has a history. The historicity of man is a modern concept,⁴ however it is a reality that Aquinas understood. Jean-Pierre Torrell has written a magisterial

¹ H. de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, New York 1967, p. 69–70.

² H. de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, p. 70.

³ E. Gilson, *Letters of Etienne Gilson to Henri de Lubac*, San Francisco 1988, p. 24.

⁴ B. Lonergan, *The Transition from a Classicist Worldview to Historical-Mindedness*, in: *A Second Collection*, London 1974, p. 1–9.

article⁵ on Aquinas' teaching on the various historical states of human nature. We will treat four different existential states: Adam before the fall, man after the fall, the God-man, Jesus Christ, and redeemed man.

Saint Thomas teaches that man was created in grace.⁶ This truth of faith⁷ was much controverted in the 12th and 13th centuries. Such greats as Albert and Bonaventure held the opposing position. They believed that man was first created in a purely natural state and only consequently was he elevated to a supernatural level.⁸ However, Thomas espouses the opposite position from the very beginning of his career.⁹ He insists that man was created in a state of innocence or original justice that included the gifts of both nature and grace. He analyzes at length in what such a state consisted. In the *Compendium Theologiae* he says, "Man in his creation was shaped by God in such a way that his body was absolutely subject to his soul, the lower powers willingly subject to reason, and reason itself subject to God...of these three things, the last was the cause of the other two."¹⁰ The supernatural gift of sanctifying grace in man was the cause of the perfect ordering of his nature. In a sense, this original state of man is "natural"¹¹ to him since it was God's intention for man to exist in supernatural relation with Him.

However, while Saint Thomas believes that man was created in grace, he does not exclude the possibility that it could have been otherwise. He states explicitly, following a common tradition, that man (and angels) could have been created *in pura naturalia*.¹² *Pura naturalia* is used by Aquinas to define that which man could do with only the goods of nature as opposed to his capabilities with the *gratuita*, the goods of grace.¹³ This notion is not the same as that of *natura pura*,

⁵ J. P. Torrell, *Nature and Grace in Thomas Aquinas*, in: S. T. Bonino (ed.) *Supernatural: A Controversy at the Heart of Twentieth-Century Thomistic Thought*, Ave Maria 2009, p. 155–188.

⁶ *ST I*.95.1.

⁷ Council of Trent, Sessio V, DZ 1511.

⁸ Torrell, "Nature and Grace", 158 quoting Bonaventure, In II Sent, d. 29, a. 2, q. 2.

⁹ Cf. In II Sent, d. 29, q. 1 a. 2. Cited by Torrell, "Nature and Grace", 160–1.

¹⁰ *Compendium Theologiae* I,186. Cited by Torrell, "Nature and Grace", 163–4.

¹¹ This is in fact the third "bonum naturae" that Aquinas believes Adam possessed. He treats this when speaking about the effect of original sin on man's nature in *ST I*.II.85.1. "Bonum natura potest tripliciter dici..."

¹² Cf. Torrell, "Nature and Grace", 168–169 for the relevant citations.

¹³ This distinction comes up in Aquinas' questions about whether or not man could love God above all things with a purely natural love. Thomas Osborne has written

which will develop in the 16th century, but it does serve a somewhat similar purpose, namely, to draw out “a concept of nature that has its autonomy in relation to grace.”¹⁴

Aquinas also distinguishes in this state of innocence what he calls “integral nature.”¹⁵ As Torrell defines it, integral nature, “designates the state of Adam before the fall, hence in possession of the privileges with which God endowed him at the moment of his creation, *but abstracting from sanctifying grace*.”¹⁶ This integral nature is set against *natura corrupta*, which is the concept that Thomas uses when speaking of man’s state after the fall. *Natura integra* (including the perfect ordering of the lower appetites to the higher) as it was in Adam before his sin enabled him to “do the good connatural to him.”¹⁷ This includes all the goods of the acquired virtues – including, for example, right relationship to God established by the virtue of religion.¹⁸ Adam’s integral nature has as its end that which Aquinas defines as *connatural and proportionate*.¹⁹ Thomas in so doing is affirming the autonomy and integrity of the natural order, an order, which is always already ordered to God (or as one author calls it “theonomic”), if not yet supernatural. The nature of Adam as a spiritual being has a certain ontological density with coherent ends and powers, which, even when elevated by sanctifying grace in the state of innocence, remain truly natural. Man’s natural love of God is included within the greater supernatural love for the Trinity, yet this natural love is still truly and fully a natural reality – the fulfillment of man’s proportionate or connatural end. Adam, in willing his supernatural end, was also willing his natural end as well. The lower is taken up into the higher, not negated.

After the primordial sin, however, man’s status changes. He no longer possesses the gifts of his original innocence. Rather, he loses the gifts of both grace and nature. He loses sanctifying grace, and with it the harmony that existed between the soul and body and between the lower faculties and the higher. He exists in the state of *natura corrupta*.²⁰

definitive study of this highly controverted question, see his *Love of Self and Love of God in Thirteenth Century Ethics*, Notre Dame 2005.

¹⁴ Torrell, “Nature and Grace”, 169.

¹⁵ Again see Torrell, “Nature and Grace”, 170–172 for the texts.

¹⁶ Torrell, “Nature and Grace”, 171.

¹⁷ *ST I.II.109.3*.

¹⁸ *ST I.II.109.2*.

¹⁹ These are basically the goods of the natural law laid out in *ST I.II.94.2*.

²⁰ Torrell, “Nature and Grace”, 172–179.

Yet, man in his fallen state does not cease to be a human, his nature is not totally corrupted or destroyed. He retains a real human nature, though a wounded one. Thomas outlines in what this *natura vulnerata* consists. He says, regarding the threefold good of nature found in Adam, that “the first good of nature is not taken away nor diminished through sin. The third good of nature is totally destroyed by the sin of the first parents. But the middle good of nature, which is the natural inclination to virtue, is diminished through sin.”²¹ Man in fallen nature lacks sanctifying grace, and he has a weakened inclination to the good but he retains the “principles of which nature is constituted, and the properties that flow from them, such as the powers of the soul, and so forth.”²² As Torrell explains it: “What belongs to man’s specific nature was not diminished: he could not lose his substantial parts, nor the capability of his mind to seek the truth, nor his freedom of choice.”²³ Yet, the operations of these principles are diminished and so man suffers from the wounds of sin: ignorance in the intellect, malice in the will, and concupiscence and weakness in the passions.²⁴ These wounds affecting the operation of the powers of human nature make it impossible for man in the state of *natura corrupta* to achieve even his proportionate natural end that is inscribed into his natural inclinations,²⁵ let alone his supernatural end that (prior to the infusion of sanctifying grace) exists only extrinsically through God’s call.²⁶ This is the state of man in original sin. This is the initial, existential state of all (excepting Our Lord and Our Lady) the children of Adam – men and women suffering from the wounds of sin.

Jesus Christ came to free humanity from the bonds of sin. He came to empower man, existing in *natura corrupta*, to achieve the fullness of his nature, and to return him to the divine friendship that Adam and Eve enjoyed in the beginning. Jesus was a man, with a human nature like ours. But was the nature assumed by the Divine Logos *natura humana integra*, *natura humana corrupta*, or something else? Aquinas holds that Christ assumed a human nature with all of its proper parts:

²¹ *ST I.II.85.1.*

²² *ST I.II.85.1.*

²³ Torrell, “Nature and Grace”, 174.

²⁴ *ST I.II.85.3.*

²⁵ *ST I.II.109.4.*

²⁶ *Cf. ST I.II.62.1.*

a body and a soul with all of its faculties and inclinations.²⁷ The human nature of Christ was perfect in every way that was fitting for his mission as the Redeemer. This means he had the fullness of grace and of the virtues (though not faith) and his passions were perfectly subjected to his reason.²⁸ He also took on various defects, namely those that are “to be found amongst all men in common, by reason of the sin of our first parent, as death, hunger, thirst, and the like.”²⁹ However, he did not take on those aspects of our corrupted nature, which are incompatible with the perfection of knowledge and grace like “ignorance, a proneness towards evil, and a difficulty in well-doing.”³⁰ Thus, the human nature of the God-man is neither an integral nature, because he suffers from defects which Adam did not know in the beginning, nor is it a corrupt nature, because it enjoyed freedom from the wounds of sin, namely, ignorance, malice, and concupiscence. *Natura humana* is, thus, seen to exist in a unique third state in the person of Jesus Christ. He, as perfect man, is able to reveal again to man both his true dignity and also give him the power to attain to it.

It is to the man redeemed by Christ, that we now turn as we examine the fourth and last existential state of human nature. All men come into this world in a state of corrupt nature.³¹ As we saw above, man in this state is incapable of reaching even his natural good due to the wounds of nature.³² Nevertheless, his nature has retained its original goodness. His faculties, while wounded in operation, are still radically oriented to the true and the good. It is to man in this state that Christ’s grace is addressed. This grace flowing from Christ the head³³ to all men is offered to both heal man and to elevate him.³⁴ In the justified human person grace acts to reorder his nature. He becomes able to order his whole life to God as his final end, and to love him above all things through charity. Yet, even when he has oriented his life to God there remain in him the effects of original sin. The life

²⁷ Cf. *ST* III.5.

²⁸ *ST* III.7, 14, 15.

²⁹ *ST* III.14.4.

³⁰ *ST* III.14.4

³¹ Romans 3:23: *omnes enim peccaverunt et egent gloriam Dei.*

³² Cf. Torrell’s treatment of what fallen man can achieve without grace in “Nature and Grace”, 180–182.

³³ *ST* III.8

³⁴ *ST* I.II.109.1–2.

of grace naturally develops in such a way that the effects of original sin diminish, however, they never completely disappear.³⁵ The life of grace initiated at baptism has its end in glory. In glory human nature is freed from all the wounds and defects from which it suffers while in this life. In heaven man lives a life of perfect beatitude in which both his proportionate and connatural good and his supernatural good are completely fulfilled. God is truly all in all.

Human nature exists only in individuals and historically it has passed through various states. Yet, as we have seen in the preceding analysis of these historic states there remain some constants that endure throughout. Adam, Moses, Jesus and Henri de Lubac – they all existed in somewhat different historical states, yet they are all men. What is it that allows us to meaningfully speak of them as all individual beings of the human species? What is human nature at its most basic?

Aquinas, as we saw above, offers a very helpful indication when speaking about the repercussions of original sin. He delineates that which constitutes human nature, which remains even after sin. He mentions the “principles of which nature is constituted, and the properties that flow from them, such as the powers of the soul, and so forth.”³⁶ With this text as a starting point we can lay out more clearly what exactly these constitutive principles and their properties are.³⁷ Man is a rational animal.³⁸ He has a soul and a body. His soul possesses various powers: vegetative, sensitive, appetitive, locomotive, and intellective.³⁹ These powers are distinguished by their acts, and their acts by their objects, and their objects by their ends.⁴⁰ A power with a more universal end is higher than one with a lower end.⁴¹ Thus, in man, his highest powers, and therefore those, which are

³⁵ *ST* III.69.3

³⁶ *ST* I.II.85.1

³⁷ Aquinas lays out an extensive overview of the nature of man, his body, soul, and faculties in the Treatise *de Homine*, *ST* I.75–83.

³⁸ *ST* I.75

³⁹ *ST* I.78.1.

⁴⁰ *ST* I.77.3

⁴¹ *ST* I.77.3 ad 4: *Ad quartum dicendum quod potentia superior per se respicit universaliorem rationem objecti quam potentia interior, quia quanto potentia est superior, tanto ad plura se extendit.*

most defining for him, are those that have *ens universale* as their end.⁴² Saint Thomas teaches that the intellect (and by extension the rational appetite, or the will) is the most specifying principle in man.⁴³ As he says in the book II of the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, “It [the possible intellect] is the most noble and the most formal thing in him. Hence, man derives his specific nature from it.”⁴⁴ It is his activity of intellection that sets him apart from the rest of animals and thus provides for his specific difference.

Man’s intellectual power is his highest and most dignified part of his nature and thus man’s perfection consists in the perfection of this power.⁴⁵ The nature of the intellect is such that it is ordered to universal being, and as the classic axiom says, *est quodammodo omnia*. Thus, the intellect has a natural desire⁴⁶ to know the fullness of truth. But, here it seems like the discourse about man has to become supernatural since the fullness of the truth is only attainable in a vision of God who is the subsisting First Truth. Aquinas does insist that man’s *beatitudo ultimo* is the vision of God’s essence through the *lumen gloriae*.⁴⁷ But he also insists that man has a natural proportionate end that is the contemplation of God as the first cause. This natural end is referenced many times by the Aquinate, as Steven Long and Lawrence Feingold⁴⁸ have shown. In particular, it is interesting to note that Aquinas speaks about this natural end as essential to distinguishing the human soul from angels. In the seventh of the *Quaestiones Disputate de Anima*, the objector had argued: “That which is of the same is seen to be of the same species, for each is ordered to the end by its form, which is the principle of the species. But the end of an angel and of a soul is the same, that is eternal beatitude...therefore an angel and a soul are of the same species.”⁴⁹ Aquinas responds briefly, yet importantly, saying: “Those beings whose

⁴² ST I.78.1.

⁴³ ST I.76.1

⁴⁴ SCG II.60.4

⁴⁵ ST I.II.3.2.

⁴⁶ Cf. L. Feingold, *The Natural Desire to See God According to St. Thomas and His Interpreters*, Ave Maria 2010, where he lays out at length, in all its analogicity, what *appetitus naturalis* means for Aquinas.

⁴⁷ ST I.12; SCG III.48–54.

⁴⁸ L. Feingold, *The Natural Desire to See God*; S. Long, *Natura Pura*, New York 2010.

⁴⁹ *Questiones Disputatae de Anima*, 7, 10: *Quorum est idem finis uidetur esse eadem species, nam unumquodque ordinatur ad finem per suam formam, que est principium specie.*

same proximate and natural end is one and the same are one according to species. However, beatitude of eternal life is the ultimate and supernatural end. Therefore the reason does not follow.”⁵⁰ If eternal beatitude were the natural end of man, then man would be indistinguishable from angels. However, man’s natural end as a rational *animal* is the contemplation of the first cause as known through nature.⁵¹ Thus for man (and angels) there are two ends: one, which is proportioned to his nature and its powers, and another to which he is called by God and to which he is able to attain only by some supernatural help from God.⁵² God is always man’s end. His nature, like all of creation is inherently theonomic in that it bears the impress of the eternal law.⁵³ The difference between the two ends is not that one is divine and transcendent and the other human and mundane, rather it is that both attain to God, but under different formalities – one natural and the other supernatural.

Human nature, the composite of a rational soul and a body, thus has a coherency to it. It has its own natural powers and corresponding natural end. Yet, this does not make man a being closed in on himself. He is inherently open to all being, and even more, his faculties, because they are spiritual, are uniquely open to being raised to a transcendent and supernatural end. This inherent openness to being elevated to a supernatural end is called a specific obediential potency. It is not a mere non-repugnance, as de Lubac feared, rather it is an essential aspect of the nature of the human spirit. As M.J. le Guillou put it, “Spirit is, by its structure, raised above itself, there is in it a call to an exit from the self, a call to realize itself in a transcendental term. Therefore, it aims for that which is beyond its connatural end,

Set angeli et anime est idem finis, scilicet beatitudo eterna... ergo angelus et anima sunt eiusdem specie. (My translation).

⁵⁰ Quaestiones de anima, 7, ad 10: *Ad decimum dicendum quod ea quorum est unus finis proximus et naturalis sunt unum secundum speciem. Beatitudo autem uite eterne est finis ultimus et supernaturalis. Vnde ratio non sequitur.* (My translation). Long notes that neither this text nor its cognate, ST I.75.7 ad 1, is cited in the entire corpus of de Lubac, Cf. *Natura Pura*, 242–3.

⁵¹ A well developed treatment of in what this natural end would consist is found in the little known work by Joseph Buckley, *Man’s Last End*, St. Louis 1949. Jacques Maritain called this a type of *felicity in motion*. Cf. *An Introduction to the Basic Problems of Moral Philosophy*, New York 1990, III.

⁵² Cf. ST I.62.2, and ST I.II.62.3, SCG III.150.5–6.

⁵³ Cf. S. Long, *Natura Pura*, esp. Chapter 1: “On the Loss, and the Recovery of Nature as a Theonomic Principle: Reflections on the Nature/Grace controversy”, 10–51.

but that does not signify that the human spirit loses its own proper consistence.”⁵⁴ The inherent structure of human nature is such that man’s faculties and his natural end are fit, if God so desires, to be taken up into the properly divine, the transcendent. This is what Aquinas means when he affirms that man is *capax Dei*.⁵⁵ He has a unique openness to be elevated to a destiny beyond what he could ever naturally ask or imagine (Cf. Ephesians 3:20). This potency is purely passive on man’s end and can only be activated by God’s power, yet it is “founded upon something positive: namely, upon the intellective and volitional powers of man, which are intrinsically spiritual powers manifesting the ontological profundity of human nature.”⁵⁶

At this point, we can return to the quote from Aquinas with which we began this section. He writes in question 85, article 1, of the *Prima Secundae* that after the fall there remained in man the “principles of which nature is constituted, and the properties that flow from them, such as the powers of the soul, and so forth.” These principles are the rational soul and the body, and from them flow the manifold powers with their respective teleologies. From these principles is constituted what we can call most basically *natura humana*. This species of being is found to be the common unifying reality in all the existential states that we saw above. We could even say that this *natura humana* is in a certain sense *natura pura* – nature without reference to grace or sin – just nature, pure and simple. These principles and powers remain the same throughout the various states of historical realization in which man has existed. What changed was the manner in which these powers were able to operate. At times they worked perfectly as in pre-lapsarian man, or in Christ. Other times they were hindered by the intrinsic wounds of nature caused by original sin. Yet, at all times the principles and powers remain the same, ordering man to the authentic human good. This unity of principles and powers with proportionate ends is what we call human nature at all times and in all situations.

⁵⁴ M. J. Le Guillou, *Surnaturel*, Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques 34 (1950), p. 240. *L'esprit est par structure soulevé au delà de lui-même, il y a en lui un appel à une sortie de soi, un appel à se réaliser dans un terme transcendantal. Il vise donc toujours au delà de ce qui est sa fin connaturelle, mais cela ne signifie nullement que l'esprit humain perde tout consistence propre.* (My translation).

⁵⁵ *ST* III. 9,2, ad 3.

⁵⁶ S. Long, *On the Possibility of a Purely Natural End for Man*, *The Thomist* 64 (2000), p. 218.

Such a concept is necessary for a coherent explanation of how it is that Adam, Christ, and you are related. Unless there is a concept of nature with a density of its own there is simply no way to explain how it is that the fall, or the incarnation, or the infusion of sanctifying grace does not cause a substantial change. If it were true that we could not consider human nature in the abstract, then when Adam sinned he would have no longer remained a man, and when one is baptized he would change into something of a different species from what he was before.

Denying such a concept of “pure” nature leads one into the fallacy of “concrete nature.”⁵⁷ This fallacy is one, which de Lubac (and von Balthasar) fall into when they, distaining abstraction, insist that their concrete existing nature knows only *one* end, and that supernatural.⁵⁸ This insistence that *in concreto* there exists a nature defined only in relation to grace and sin is both not true, and not helpful. Nature as it exists in all human beings alive today does suffer from the effects of original sin, and in all of them God’s grace is some how at work – either habitually or actually – but this does not negate the fact that every man and woman share a common nature, and thus belong to the same species, which has a real coherence and density in terms of both principles and ends. As Le Guillou says so well: “Pure nature is not a nature that would be totally strange to us, as it seems P. de Lubac thinks: it designates in our world the proper structure of the created spirit.”⁵⁹

Without a robust *philosophical* concept of human nature the Christian faith falls into incoherence. How can one explain the Nicene Creed, which claims that the second person of the Holy Trinity took on human nature in Jesus Christ, if such a thing as “human nature” does not really exist?⁶⁰ Without a coherent account of natural human ends and purposes discoverable to reason, how can we speak reasonably in the public square about what sort of behaviors do or do not perfect human nature? Simply put, we need *natura pura* to carry out the New

⁵⁷ Cf. S. Long, *Natura Pura*, p. 83–91.

⁵⁸ Cf. the quotes provided by S. Long, *Natura Pura*, p. 84.

⁵⁹ Le M. J. Guillou, *Surnaturel*, p. 242. *La nature pure n'est pas une nature qui nous serait totalement étrangère, comme semble le penser le P. de Lubac: elle désigne dans notre monde la structure propre de l'esprit créé.* (My translation).

⁶⁰ Cf. S. Long, *Natura Pura*, p. 86–87.

Evangelization, the work of preaching and teaching the truth, both natural and revealed, about God and man.⁶¹

Henri de Lubac sought for the whole of his career to build up and renew the Catholic theology by a return to the sources, especially the fathers and the scriptures. He was certainly a true *vir ecclesiasticus*. Nevertheless, his work on the supernatural was flawed by a lack of philosophical precision and a bias against scholasticism. The distinctions and concepts of scholastic philosophy and theology, while at times needing to be purified of an over reaching rationalism, are the authentic fruit of centuries of theological prayer and study. They are a treasure that we are invited to share in and pass on in each generation. Thanks to the work of many thinkers a part of this tradition, the helpful concept of *natura pura*, has seen a revival. Hopefully, this rediscovery is the harbinger of a flowering of a robust metaphysical and sapiential theology, faithful to all the sources of the tradition – the scriptures, the fathers, and *the scholastics, both medieval and baroque* – in the years to come.

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⁶¹ Cf. T. J. White, *The "Pure Nature" of Christology: Human Nature and Gaudium et Spes* 22, *Nova et Vetera* 8 (2010), p. 283–322.

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