
Mid-Twentieth-Century Debates about Nature and Grace

The relationship between nature and grace was arguably the most-debated topic in Catholic theology in the early to middle twentieth century, a period that is now largely seen as culminating in the change in ecclesial and theological atmosphere surrounding the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). These midcentury debates are the inevitable historical and theological backdrop for any contemporary study of nature and grace. This chapter thus explores the development of Catholic thought on nature and grace beginning with the work of Maurice Blondel against the backdrop of the Modernist controversy, continuing with the contributions of Pierre Rousselot, and concluding with the related but distinct positions taken by Henri de Lubac and Karl Rahner. These explorations will serve as historical and theoretical foundations for the discussion of grace as gift, as well as its relationship to the political, in further chapters.

Context of the Debates

Debates about the relationship between nature and grace, including the question of to whom grace is available, were key to the development of twentieth-century Catholic theology. This section analyzes the backdrop of these debates in three parts. First, it analyzes Maurice Blondel's philosophy in *L'Action*, facilitated by his status as a layman during the Catholic Modernism controversy, presaged positions later positions taken by de Lubac and others. Second, it gives an overview of the Neo-Thomistic approach that dominated Catholic philosophical and theological schools in between Leo XIII's encyclical *Aeterni Patris* and the Second Vatican Council. Third, it discusses Pierre Rousselot's *The Eyes of Faith* and the controversy this work engendered, becoming like Blondel's a key influence on later thinkers.

Setting the Scene: Maurice Blondel and the Modernist Controversy

In 1946, the French Dominican theologian Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange published an essay entitled "Nouvelle Théologie ou va t'elle?" (Where Is the New Theology Leading Us?). The answer: "It returns to Modernism."¹ This "new theology," the French movement known variously by friends and foes as *ressourcement* and *la nouvelle théologie*, was composed of a variety of historical, biblical, and systematic theologians who inspired the rage of conservatives such as Garrigou-Lagrange on numerous fronts. They attempted to get around the established neo-Thomism by returning to patristic authors (e.g., Jean Daniélou); they engaged in critical scholarship on Thomas Aquinas himself (e.g., Marie-Dominique Chenu and others at the school of Le Saulchoir); and most provocatively of all, they challenged the structure of neo-Thomism at its very foundation, namely, the theology of nature and grace.² This last accomplishment, the most direct inspiration

1. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, "La nouvelle théologie où va-t-elle?" *Ang* 23 (1946): 126–45.

2. For a useful contemporary introduction to this movement in its various forms, see Jürgen Mettepenningen, *Nouvelle Théologie-New Theology: Inheritor of Modernism, Precursor of Vatican II* (London: Continuum, 2010).

behind Garrigou-Lagrange's essay, was the project of French Jesuit Henri de Lubac, whose massively influential *Surnaturel* had appeared several years earlier. In order, however, to see why Garrigou-Lagrange and others reacted so harshly to this "new theology," it is necessary to return to the Modernist controversy that is the deeper context for his remarks.

The Modernist controversy, referred to today in scholarly terms as "Catholic Modernism," was a theological tempest within Catholicism during the first decade of the twentieth century.³ At first glance, its major issues were matters of biblical criticism and historical theology, notably in the works of Alfred Loisy and George Tyrrell, both of whose works were condemned directly through ecclesiastical censure and ultimately excommunication. Yet also caught up in the Modernist controversy and spared of its harshest penalties, largely due to his status as a layman, was the enigmatic French philosopher Maurice Blondel, whose dissertation *Action* had proposed a "method of immanence" as a way of seeking truth and ultimately transcendence. This concept, at least in its terminology, resonated strongly with the condemnation of the idea of "vital immanence" in Pius X's anti-Modernist encyclical *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*.⁴ Some apologists for the *nouvelle théologie* seek to distance it from the Modernist controversy precisely by clinging to Blondel as an orthodox figure,⁵ but he was viewed as a dangerous figure in his time precisely due to the threat of "immanentism" that he seemed to pose, the logic being that seeking to

3. Marvin O'Connell's *Critics on Trial* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1994) provides a thorough and readable history of this controversy.

4. "However, this *Agnosticism* is only the negative part of the system of the Modernist: the positive side of it consists in what they call *vital immanence*. This is how they advance from one to the other. Religion, whether natural or supernatural, must, like every other fact, admit of some explanation. But when Natural theology has been destroyed, the road to revelation closed through the rejection of the arguments of credibility, and all external revelation absolutely denied, it is clear that this explanation will be sought in vain outside man himself. It must, therefore, be looked for in man; and since religion is a form of life, the explanation must certainly be found in the life of man. Hence the principle of *religious immanence* is formulated." Pius X, *Pascendi Dominici Gregis: Encyclical of Pope Pius X on the Doctrines of the Modernists* (Rome, September 8, 1907), par. 7, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_x/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-x_enc_19070908_pascendi-dominici-gregis_en.html.

5. This is the approach of Hans Boersma in *Nouvelle Théologie and Sacramental Ontology: A Return to Mystery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). Boersma conducts a highly selective reading of both the Modernist controversy and *La Nouvelle Théologie*.

find grace in and through nature, as he proposed, would eliminate the need for the supernatural, and thus religion, entirely.

Action is a strikingly original philosophical work that hardly reads like a dissertation; most notably, it builds a new philosophical project from the ground up, around the concept of action. In some ways it could be said to anticipate future developments in phenomenology such as the transcendental *epoché* of Edmund Husserl. Toward the end, however, Blondel begins to venture into theological territory, and he does so precisely by way of exploring the issue of nature and grace.

Blondel spends much of *Action* building up a new philosophy on the basis of action as its central concept, but he eventually turns to a discussion of what he calls the “one thing necessary.”⁶ This concept “is found at the beginning and at the end of all the avenues man can enter; at the outcome of science and of the mind’s curiosity. . . . Nothing of what is known, possessed, done, is sufficient unto itself or is annihilated.”⁷ What this one thing necessary ultimately implies is that “the entire order of nature is inevitably a guaranty of what surpasses it.”⁸ For Blondel, then, the striving to go beyond human capacities and limitations is central to human nature, and this very striving serves as a demonstration that there is something to strive for.

Indeed, Blondel argues that this very striving serves as a renewal of the teleological proof for God’s existence, since “it shows that the wisdom of things is not in things, that the wisdom of man is not in man.”⁹ Blondel continues this line of argument by explicitly linking it to God, such that “the idea of God . . . is the inevitable complement of human action.”¹⁰ For Blondel, then, it is built into human nature to want to know God and to seek this out as one’s highest priority—an idea that would become known as *intrinsicism* for its opposition to the idea that the desire for God is *extrinsic* to human nature. Human action

6. Maurice Blondel, *Action*, trans. Oliva Blanchette (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 314.

7. *Ibid.*, 317.

8. *Ibid.*, 318.

9. *Ibid.*, 320.

10. *Ibid.*, 326.

and human knowledge are thus pathways to God, and this is their true source of meaning and significance.

Blondel continues this line of argument by claiming that “it is not outside of man, but within him, that we must look for the secret judgment of eternity.”¹¹ Thus, the action putting human beings on this course to God comes from within, from human capacities, not from something superadded. The argument develops further with the idea that “Action cannot stay enclosed in the natural order. It is not entirely within it. And yet it cannot, of itself, surpass it.”¹² The paradoxical implication, then, is that human nature is destined to go beyond itself and has the capacity to do so from within, yet cannot use this capacity independently.

Blondel’s argument has brought the reader to the limits of the human capacities for reason. At this point, he claims, there is a need for submission of the intellect and will, because “the idea of the infinite . . . must become living in us; it must be willed and practiced there, act and reign there; in a way supplant us.”¹³ This requires detachment, but it also requires a commitment to action, such that one must always be in action while simultaneously understanding that this action is for something beyond the present place and time.¹⁴

“Absolutely impossible and absolutely necessary for man, that is properly the notion of the supernatural.”¹⁵ Here, then, toward the conclusion of *Action*, Blondel finally raises the theological question that has crept increasingly to the fore in the course of the book. By a roundabout philosophical route, Blondel has proposed a concept of the supernatural that arises intrinsically out of human desires. As Blondel himself would admit, the implications of this conception were vast for contemporary Catholic philosophy, theology, and practice.

The issue that most immediately arises out of an intrinsic concept of nature and grace is that of apologetics. For neo-Thomism, the

11. *Ibid.*, 340.

12. *Ibid.*, 345.

13. *Ibid.*, 349.

14. *Ibid.*, 355.

15. *Ibid.*, 357.

dominant and approved theological system at the time, apologetics was a theological discipline that existed to demonstrate through created things and reason the existence of God and other truths that were, of course, more fundamentally known by faith. This apologetics, indeed, was a central part of the two-level system of philosophical and theological training that was essential to grasping this system. Blondel's method called for a rather different kind of apologetics.

Blondel takes up this issue of apologetics in his 1896 *Letter on Apologetics*. Here, he begins by setting up the stakes: "It is not sufficient to establish separately the *possibility* and the *reality*—it is necessary to show the *necessity* for us of adhering to this reality of the supernatural."¹⁶ The former is exactly what extrinsicist apologetics claimed to accomplish, the latter what Blondel's new method sets out to explain.

Blondel argues that "nothing is Christian and Catholic unless it is *supernatural*," which he goes on to explain means "strictly supernatural, that is to say, beyond the power of man to discover for himself and yet imposed on his thought and on his will."¹⁷ Once again, Blondel is focused on the paradoxical nature of the supernatural. Paradox comes to the fore again when he analyzes the issues of immanence and transcendence, claiming that, "the very notion of immanence is realized in our consciousness only by the effective presence of the notion of the transcendent."¹⁸ Blondel's own method, known as the "method of immanence," then, is geared precisely to the adequation of immanent appearances and the transcendent realities that they point toward.¹⁹

Blondel's basic opening out to the supernatural, then, consists of two portions: the desire for the supernatural explicated in *Action* and the intrinsicist apologetics laid out in the *Letter*. The former part constitutes a significant departure from Catholic philosophies of the

16. Maurice Blondel, *The Letter on Apologetics and History and Dogma*, trans. Alexander Dru and Illyd Trethrowan (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 134.

17. *Ibid.*, 152.

18. *Ibid.*, 158.

19. *Ibid.*, 157.

time inasmuch as it avoids Thomism (neo- or otherwise) or any other traditional underpinning in favor of a new and distinctive philosophical system. The latter, meanwhile, compounds this departure by reaching significantly different conclusions than does neo-Thomism. It can be easily seen why this “method of immanence,” if fully implemented in theology (which Blondel did not presume or have the stature as a layman to do), would be thought of as dangerous to the neo-Thomistic status quo.

Due to his lack of personal condemnation by the anti-Modernist purges under Pius X, and due to his influence on the later “orthodox” movements that I will further analyze, it is easy to see Blondel retrospectively as a very “safe” figure. Yet his philosophical moves were daring at the time and were certainly grouped into the Modernist controversy in idea if not in name, due to Blondel’s lay status. Essentially, Blondel laid out very clearly what the issues were in the contemporary Catholic scene surrounding philosophy and theology, and also surrounding nature and grace, and proposed a way forward. Though Blondel lived for a long time after the Modernist controversy, it would be left to others to navigate this way.

The implications of Blondel’s project were not only on the philosophical and theological level, however. Blondel himself engaged in the promotion of social action, and Peter Bernardi has detailed the connections between Blondel’s philosophy of action and his sociopolitical perspective. Bernardi focuses specifically on the *Semaines sociales* (social weeks), a series of informal summer courses that sought to inculcate Catholic social teaching in the minds of clergy and laypeople, including students, professionals, and workers.²⁰ Blondel penned a series of essays aimed at defending the *Semaines sociales* against those who saw them as “Modernist”—notably conservatives who favored the approach of *Action Française*.

Bernardi illustrates Blondel’s critique of conservative French politics and its restorationist agenda regarding church and state, precisely on

20. Peter Bernardi, *Maurice Blondel, Social Catholicism, and Action Française* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 9.

the grounds of its theology of nature and grace. Blondel's opponents tended to hold an institutional view of the church that argued for the necessity of the confessional state to guarantee proper order. Modernity and secularity were the enemies, to be opposed fiercely lest they overcome the church just as fiercely. At the same time, as Bernardi argues, "What Blondel's philosophy of action and the methods of the *Semaines sociales* shared in common was an openness to engage with modern secular philosophical and social movements instead of rejecting them outright as the Catholic traditionalists did."²¹ This controversy, obscure as it may seem, is important to keep in mind, as it would be mirrored in further such debates, most notably in the life and work of Henri de Lubac.

Blondel had an odd career as a kind of philosophical loner, never quite at home in the secular philosophical academy and never venturing fully into theology.²² His philosophy, however, did have an influence in the theological academy, specifically among the Jesuits and more specifically at the seminary of Fourvière. Much of this influence within the Jesuits came through Auguste Valensin, a seminary professor who entered the Society of Jesus in 1890 on Blondel's advice.²³ Blondel's work also influenced that of Pierre Rousselot (about which more will be said) and, through Valensin and the works of Rousselot as well as through a personal correspondence, Henri de Lubac. Rather than the esoteric figure he seemed, then, Blondel would become the somewhat indirect (though he did correspond with many of these figures) forefather of a theological revolution.²⁴

21. *Ibid.*, 257.

22. Oliva Blanchette's *Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010) provides an excellent introduction to Blondel's whole life, focusing more than most in English on his post-1920 works.

23. Henri de Lubac discusses this story in his tribute, "Auguste Valensin," in *Theological Fragments*, trans. Rebecca Howell Balinski (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989), 408: "When the question of a religious vocation arose, it was in Maurice Blondel that Valensin found his guide."

24. Étienne Fouilloux details the story of what he calls the "Jesuites blondéliens" in *Une Église en quête de liberté* (Paris: Desclee de Brouwer, 1998), 174-81.

The Neo-Thomistic Context: *Aeterni Patris* to Vatican II

To understand what made Blondel's work, and indeed the other work that will be explored throughout this chapter, controversial, one must understand the nature of the neo-Thomistic synthesis on nature and grace and what it was attempting to achieve. Neo-Thomism generally refers to the nineteenth-century revival of the teachings of Saint Thomas Aquinas, and especially of the tradition of commentary on the teachings of Thomas, in response to the philosophical and theological pluralism that had developed within Catholic theology during the later Enlightenment.²⁵ Many of the neo-Thomists came from Thomas's own Dominican order, and for these Thomists, as Gerald McCool puts it, "Thomism, in essence, was what the great Thomistic Commentators"—figures such as John Capreolus (1380–1444), Thomas de Vio Cajetan (1469–1534), and John of Saint Thomas (1589–1644)—"had said it was."²⁶

Neo-Thomism erected and perpetuated a systematic scheme that arranged philosophy, theology, and the relation between the two. Natural reason, meaning philosophy, has ends of its own, and its purpose is to make a place for faith, the "natural order of things upon which is erected the supernatural order."²⁷ Nature here is thus equated with *natura pura* (pure nature), seen as a logical necessity in order for the gift of grace to be properly gratuitous. Thus, reason prepares a place for faith by attaining the *preambula fidei*, which essentially consists of metaphysics and the rational proof of the existence of God.²⁸ Faith itself, which is totally supernatural, thus builds on these works of reason.

Neo-Thomism received a significant boost in influence during the

25. Gerald McCool has chronicled this story in *Nineteenth-Century Scholasticism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1977); *From Unity to Pluralism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1989); and *The Neo-Thomists* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1994).

26. McCool, *The Neo-Thomists*, 71.

27. Matthias Joseph Scheeben, "Faith and Reason," in *Romance and the Rock*, ed. Joseph Fitzner, trans. Cyrill Vollert, SJ (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 330.

28. Ralph McInerny explores precisely this issue from a Neo-Thomist perspective in *Praeambula Fidei: Thomism and the God of the Philosophers* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2006).