

## ON THE NATURAL DESIRE OF SEEING GOD

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### THE LOSS OF THE NATURAL DESIRE OF GOD

**I**n our secular society the idea of a natural desire of seeing God appears highly problematic. Yet until the fourteenth century most Christian, Jewish, and Muslim philosophers, as well as several ancient ones, accepted the existence of such a desire. Why has what once appeared so obvious, become so questionable?

#### *The Idea of God*

As long as philosophy formed an integral unity with theology, as it did during the early and the high Middle Ages, thinkers would have found it hard to conceive of nature without a transcendent orientation. Not before the rediscovery of the works of Aristotle in the twelfth and thirteenth century did philosophy begin to loosen its link with theology. In order to harmonize theology with Aristotle's newly accepted philosophy, Christian thinkers were forced to grant philosophy a formal independence. For that purpose they subordinated the finite end of Aristotle's *Ethics* to the Christian's ultimate end. The synthesis remained fragile, because a philosophical concept as basic as that of human nature

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remained also directly attached to the Christian's ultimate end. Which definition should prevail: the theological or the philosophical?

Modern philosophy rejected this *intrinsic* dependence of philosophy upon theology. How could philosophy remain subordinate to what, in its modern definition, falls outside its field of knowledge? Even the idea of God, the alleged source of a natural desire, originates *not* in philosophy, but in what believers refer to as a "revelation" of some sort, or at least in a mode of consciousness that is practical and worshipful rather than critical and rational. Philosophy encounters it as a *given*, not of its own making, which rightly or wrongly determines its own indeterminate notion of transcendence. A philosophy, then, that wants to be totally autonomous, that is, relying exclusively on the immediate intuitions and conclusions of reason, the moderns concluded, rules out any desire of seeing God as God is in himself, as falling entirely outside its field. Descartes considered such a full autonomy a necessary principle if philosophy was to be reliable at all. Instead of accepting a theological idea of God, philosophy attempted to establish its own, by means of arguments attained by independent reason. At most, it might attempt to find some rational parallels with theological beliefs. Thus it grounded the idea of creation upon the ancient philosophical category of efficient causality, which had proven its effectiveness in the scientific interpretation of the world.

### *A Different Causality*

This notion of causality became the second cause of the idea of a natural desire of God losing much of its meaning. Problematic hereby was not the notion of causality as such. Ever since Plato, philosophers had interpreted the dependence of things on a transcendent first principle in causal terms. In Plato's thought, the phenomenal order rests on the foundation of ideal forms. This dependence of changing appearances on an unchangeable reality contains in essence what Aristotelians were later to call a *formal causality*. The cosmogonic myth of Plato's *Timaeus* misled many to regard the dependence of finite things on a transcendent foundation as having been *effectively caused* by that foundation. All too readily did they interpret the myth as if it referred to an instrumental *making*

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of the cosmos. In fact, Plato had used the myth of the Demiurge only to explain which metaphysical principles were needed for the constitution of a rational cosmos. Neither Plato nor Aristotle mentioned a “creation” of the world as Jews and Christians understood it: the ancient cosmos had no beginning, it was everlasting, even as the gods. In identifying the Hebrew idea of creation with instrumental action, Christian philosophers, following Philo, may have prepared a dangerous legacy.

They may have considered their interpretation confirmed by the fact that, for Aristotle, the causal relation between the First Mover and the lower spheres unquestionably implied an “efficient” causality. However, Aristotle did not restrict the relation with a supreme divine principle to be exclusively one of efficient causality. In *De anima* he describes the active principle of the human intellect as being itself divine. To become active the intellect requires the impulse of a principle that is uninterruptedly cognizant and such a principle, he claims, must itself be divine. Indeed, once freed from the passivity of the body the soul itself will become divine. Moreover, in the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle even claims that the highest mode of existence is the contemplative one—and that mode surpasses the merely human level. “Such a life would be too high for man; for it is not insofar as he is man that he will live so, but insofar as something divine is present in him; and by so much as this is superior to our composite nature is its activity superior to that which is for the theologian, no more than the exercise of a moral virtue. If reason is divine, then, in comparison with man, the life according to it is divine in comparison with human life.”<sup>1</sup> Obviously, this surpasses the extrinsic relation of efficient causality typical of modern thought.

Neither for St. Thomas, inspired as he was by Aristotelian and Neo-Platonic thought, did the act of creation consist exclusively, or even primarily, in efficient causality, but rather in an internal, “quasi-formal” one. Repeatedly Aquinas insists on the immanent presence of the creative cause, in the acting as well as in the every being of the creature. In the *Summa Theologiae* he writes: “God is the cause of action not only by giving the form which is the principle of action (...). And since the form of a thing is within the thing, and all the more as it approaches nearer to the First and Universal Cause, and because in all things God himself is

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *Ethics*, 1177b.

properly the cause of universal being which is inmost in all things, it follows that in all things God works inwardly," that is, not extrinsically as an efficient cause does.<sup>2</sup> And in his *Commentary on St. John's Gospel*: "God who operates by conveying being, operates in all things in the most intimate way."<sup>3</sup> Createdness for Aquinas consists in the first place in God's immanent presence in the creature's *being* and acting

### *A Different Concept of Nature*

This immanent concept of divine causality, the only possible basis, I think, for a natural desire of God, became jeopardized when modern thought began to conceive the notion of nature independently of this transcendent presence. Earlier Christian thought knew only one *finis ultimus*, that was both natural *and* gratuitously given, namely the vision of God. It never conceived of nature as isolated from its more-than-natural foundation and orientation. A natural desire of God can exist only if the mind itself is in some respect connatural with the divine, since such a desire presupposes an intimate acquaintance with God. It assumes, as Augustine wrote, that the mind has already found God. Nature cannot desire that with which it is totally unacquainted.

For St. Thomas and other medieval thinkers, the term "supernatural" does not refer to a separate *reality*, but to a quality of strictly divine actions, forces, events, by means of which God allows humans to attain their end in nature as well as in grace.<sup>4</sup> His philosophy establishes the *possibility* of a natural desire of God. Does he also recognize its reality? In the *Summa contra Gentiles*, Aquinas treats the theme from two different, yet related points of view. On the one hand, he posits that each being seeks to realize the full potential of its nature<sup>5</sup>. But truth and goodness are perfections that a spiritual being naturally desires, even though its limited capacity prohibits either from ever fully attaining them. The desire

<sup>2</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, 105, 5c.

<sup>3</sup> Aquinas, *Commentary*, Ch. 1; I, 5.

<sup>4</sup> See Dupré, *Passage*, 167-89.

<sup>5</sup> Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, III, 25.

(*appetitus*), then, is natural, even though its complete realization lies beyond the potential of human nature. In the same article, St. Thomas claims that all creatures seek the kind of similitude with the Creator that corresponds to their nature. For intellectual creatures, their natural ideal consists in acquiring the highest knowledge. That, according to Aquinas, means knowing things in their ultimate principle, that is, in God's own being. The same applies for the ideal of moral goodness.

An intellectual dynamism, then, moves human knowledge toward a knowledge of God. "*Intelligere deum est finis omnis intellectualis substantiae.*"<sup>6</sup> In his excellent analysis of this question in St. Thomas, Georges Cottier, O.P. writes, "[t]he natural desire has its source in the metaphysical nature of the intellect: its object is *being* in its full extent. However much a knowledge that attains the first being only through inferior analogates may fall short of this idea; by nature it spontaneously moves toward the perfect knowledge of the cause of being."<sup>7</sup> It is this very desire that propels the dynamism of thinking and knowing. Beyond each limited good or object of knowledge the mind implicitly pursues an unlimited one. St. Thomas assumes that a natural desire cannot remain unfulfilled, even though the human mind is incapable of satisfying it by its own force. Still, the mind cannot *demand* the satisfaction of a desire the fulfillment of which lies entirely beyond its capacity. The desire for seeing God, then, may be called "natural" only to the extent that it seeks its fulfillment in general, not in a theologically specific way.

If all human spiritual activity already implies a transcendent goal, it establishes some initial, natural union with this goal, even though its full attainment exceeds the capacities of human nature. Desire in some way anticipates an attainment even of a goal that never ceases to surpass human powers. To the extent that the person remains conscious of the dynamism that drives this desire, he or she already in some measure partakes in its fulfillment. If I understand this correctly, for Bonaventure, Aquinas, and Scotus, philosophy and theology become reunited in a mystical bond. They interpreted the natural desire for an ever greater

<sup>6</sup> Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, II, 25; cf. also III, 52.

<sup>7</sup> Cottier, "Désir naturel", 695-96.

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cognition and an ever greater goodness as being driven by a more than natural dynamism. The natural desire for God thus became intrinsically transformed into a "supernatural one" of divine origin. Perhaps the same holds for artists pursuing the perfect formal expression of an idea, although they know it to lie beyond their reach. Yet while striving for its realization, they may become conscious of the supernatural impulse of their desire.

The nominalist theology of the later Middle Ages rejected the paradoxical idea of a natural desire of a supernatural gift. If, as Occam claimed, God can save the unrepentant sinner and reject the saint, God's decisions are unrelated to our expectations and the desire for God disappears altogether or must have grown in an already divinely sanctified nature. Indeed, nominalist theology split nature from the supernatural, as if it was a separate realm of reality. The empirical methods of the new science of nature grew out of the need to find another source of knowledge than the previous, now rejected arguments about how things *ought to be* in a divinely created nature. Those arguments had ceased to be persuasive because of the unpredictability of the nominalist God. Henceforth scientists had to rely on empirical observation and on the support of their mathematical skills.

There were exceptions. Nicholas of Cusa, whose life spans the entire fifteenth century, reunited what nominalist thinkers had divided, yet did so on the basis of an entirely new synthesis of philosophy and theology. He attempted to show how the human self, as *imago Dei*, naturally participates in the divine qualities of being both infinitely great and infinitely small. As such it feels naturally attracted by the divine prototype, which it mirrors. Indeed, all intellectual and all moral acts are driven by the mind's natural desire of its origin. The desire to know is a desire to know oneself and to know oneself requires to know one's divine prototype. If I am not mistaken, here even the distinction between the natural and the supernatural begins to lose all meaning. In *De filiatione Dei* Nicholas describes the road of knowledge as headed toward a mystical union with God.

Indeed, all search for understanding, according to Cusanus, is motivated by an implicit desire to comprehend God, and particular objects are no more than "symbolic signs of the true".<sup>8</sup> No knowledge is ever intrinsically secular. Human

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<sup>8</sup> Nicholas of Cusa, "On Being a Son of God," II, 61.

nature can be fully understood only as a dynamic tendency toward *theiosis*. “God, who is in all things, shines forth in mind when mind, as a living image of God, turns to its own Exemplar and assimilates itself thereto with all its effort...”<sup>9</sup> In *De sapientia* he argues that God’s eternal wisdom attracts us by granting the mind a foretaste (*praegustatio*) of what she can achieve and thereby arouses a marvelous desire for her. Since this wisdom constitutes the very life of spiritual understanding, she incites us to seek the source of this life. Without that foretaste the mind would not seek its source. It might not even know that it had received it, if indeed it had done so. The mind is moved to it as to its own life.<sup>10</sup> While seeking its own unity (the norm by which it measures all things) the mind finds it in that principle in which all things are one.<sup>11</sup> In its search for unity and self-identity the mind expresses a fundamental desire for *unification with God*, in whom it knows *itself*. Only in the mystery of God’s being does the mind grasp its unity and its distinctness. In the mirror of God does the mind recognize itself.<sup>12</sup> The drive toward unification in God propels the entire progress of thought. The intellect reaches its destination only when it becomes divinized.

Later thinkers in the Platonic tradition, including Ficino, Malebranche, Berkeley, Rosmini, and, to some extent, such non-Platonists as Newman and Maine de Biran, continued to conceive of the intellect as moved by an implicit desire of God, while modern Scholastics continued to separated nature from the supernatural as if it were a wholly distinct domain of being. This led to the controversies about the existence of a *desiderium naturale*. A summary and defense of their efforts appears in Lawrence Feingold’s massive study.<sup>13</sup> According to Feingold, the recent attempts by Henri de Lubac and his followers to restore Aquinas’s alleged position, while ignoring the work of the commentators during half a millennium, rest on a mistaken principle. Feingold’s study starts with a careful analysis of Aquinas’s texts, followed by a lengthy analysis of the commentaries written by Scotus, Dennis the Carthusian, Caietanus, and Suárez.

<sup>9</sup> Nicholas of Cusa, “Idiotae de mente,” VII, 106.

<sup>10</sup> Nicholas of Cusa, “Idiotae de sapientia,” I, 10.

<sup>11</sup> Nicholas of Cusa, “Idiotae de mente,” IX, 123.

<sup>12</sup> Dupré, “Mystical Theology,” 105-17.

<sup>13</sup> Feingold, *The Natural Desire of God*.

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Most of the commentators posit that a natural desire may be aroused (*elicited*) by some *knowledge* of God's existence. Others call the desire an innate, unconditional *appetite*. A great deal of disagreement divides the commentators concerning the nature of the vision of God, which is the object of the "natural desire." Some advocate that an innate natural desire is formally directed at a *vision* of God as God is in Himself. This rules out the existence of a state of "pure nature" detached from man's supernatural destiny in grace. Such has been the position of de Lubac, von Balthasar, and John Milbank. Others, of whom Sylvester of Ferrara comes perhaps closest to Aquinas, argue that even an innate desire can be no more than a desire to know the ultimate causes and essences of reality. Such a desire stems from an appetite for extending knowledge beyond its natural limits. The position assumes a state of pure nature at the root of man's (purely) natural desire of God.<sup>14</sup> The alleged foundational desire of *seeing* God consists in the desire of an intellect that cannot be satisfied before resting in the infinite, but in a manner totally proportionate to its nature.

Most of the Scholastic commentaries, whatever their internal differences, end up with a duality of two states and two natures. This duality is less obvious in the position of Dennis the Carthusian, a follower of Ruusbroec's mystical theology, who may also have been influenced by Nicholas of Cusa, whom he accompanied during Cusa's inspection travel through the Netherlands. Aquinas's position remains ambiguous however we attempt to interpret it.

## SIGNS OF THE RESTORATION OF THE IDEA OF A NATURAL DESIRE

### *The Readmission of Transcendence as a Legitimate Philosophical Category*

The main reason why the idea of a natural desire has disappeared from modern philosophy is the narrowing of the field. Philosophy has come to define itself as reflection on reality as it presents itself to our immediate observation or calculation. The idea of transcendence has thereby been withdrawn to a dark

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<sup>14</sup> I have profited greatly from Aaron Riches' intelligent analysis of Feingold's work. I have to take sole responsibility for the simplifications of this report.

territory to which philosophy claims to have no access. Recently, however, it appears that it may be regaining its former place in modern thought and with it, the legitimacy of the idea of a natural desire. Several philosophers have accepted that no philosophical discourse about reality can succeed without a discussion of what defines its limits and hence what surpasses them. Heidegger strongly asserted that philosophy's main task consists in exploring the transcendent horizon of the known. He even compared the philosophical attitude with the mystical one, articulated by Eckhart.<sup>15</sup> In Jaspers' philosophy also, the notion of *Transzendenz* occupies a central position. Existence, for him, must be defined through the relation to what transcends it. From a very different, cosmological position, Bergson argued that the evolutionary process of the real requires a *divine* impulse. Contrary to Heidegger and Jaspers, he conveys to this transcendence a traditionally religious sense.

Christian thinkers, such as Blondel, Maréchal, and Rahner, have equated this transcendent horizon with God. Still, they hesitate to embrace the traditional idea of a philosophical *desire for seeing God*. They were all aware of the fact that transcendence allows other than religious interpretations. Is an equation of transcendence with God still philosophically justified? If philosophy must a priori be detached from any link with the religious experience, the answer is obviously negative. Philosophy, however, ought to reflect on the entire range of experience, not merely on the processes of reason, but also on the experience of faith, of which a desire for God is constitutive. Once the idea of transcendence has been restored as a legitimate, indeed, essential part of philosophy, the question of a natural desire of an infinite ideal, constantly pursued, yet never attained, in all spiritual activity re-emerges.

### *The Natural Desire Revived*

Indeed, Max Scheler argued that such a desire lies at the ground of the very affirmation of God's existence. "Only a real being with the essential character of divinity can be the cause of man's religious propensity that is the propensity to

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<sup>15</sup> See Heidegger, *Gelassenheit*.

execute in a real sense acts of that class whose acts, though finite experiences cannot fulfill them, nevertheless demand fulfillment."<sup>16</sup> Note, Scheler does not pretend that God exists because the desire for God has to be *satisfied*, but the very *existence* of the desire presupposes a transcendent reality. Without God's existence, the religious aspirations of humankind would be self-contradictory. Even this modified form of Scheler's argument, in my opinion, goes too far. The fact that the mind's intellectual dynamism surpasses the immediate object of knowledge and desire, does not necessarily lead to any conclusion about the *nature* of this transcendence. The equation of the transcendent with a monotheist idea of God does not follow from an argument, but takes place *within* the act of faith. Karl Rahner is more cautious in establishing the religious nature of the idea of transcendence. For him, all knowledge presupposes a "pre-apprehension" (*Vorgriff*) of *absolute being*. "The pre-apprehension of this *being* is not an a priori knowledge of an object, but the a priori horizon against which the perception of a sensuous [or any other] object ex-posteriori appears. It constitutes the very condition for an a posteriori appearance."<sup>17</sup> The idea of infinite *being* that functions as the horizon against which we know all beings, cannot but be transcendent. To the objection that a purely negative concept of the infinite would suffice for that function, Rahner responds that the *priority* of the infinite horizon with respect to the cognition of the finite requires that the horizon *actually* exists. Already Descartes had responded in a similar way to the objections leveled against the thesis of the primacy of the infinite with respect to the finite he had advanced in his Third Meditation. The background of an *existing* infinity is a necessary condition for the mind to recognize the finite as finite.

The question remains whether the necessity of an infinite horizon requires the infinite being to exist *independently* of finite beings, as the traditional idea of God implies. In itself the idea of *being* is neither finite nor infinite: it is indefinite. To posit that an infinite reality can exist independently of the finite is a religious *assumption*, not a philosophical conclusion. Logically a pantheistic or a panentheistic answer would be equally possible. Yet, the metaphor of a

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<sup>16</sup> Scheler, *On the Eternal in Man*, 261.

<sup>17</sup> Rahner, *Hörer des Wortes*, 176.

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transcendent horizon appropriately introduces the metaphysical question: What conditions the finite? The monotheistic answer that identifies the unconditioned conditioner with God, though not the only possible one, imposes itself to the philosopher's attention by having long been accepted in the West as well as in all monotheist cultures. Maurice Blondel therefore called it "a necessary hypothesis", that is, a religious interpretation of transcendence, which the philosopher is not allowed to ignore and whose consistency he is bound to investigate, even if it does not a priori exclude other alternatives. To one who insists on a religiously *neutral* proof, that is, a purely logical argument that neglects the *given* nature of the religious experience, the monotheist answer is not likely to find acceptance as the only, or even the most satisfactory one. However, to one who is *personally* acquainted with the religious experience, the religious interpretation will be compelling.

### *Explicit and Implicit Natural Desire of God*

What does the preceding imply concerning the justification of the natural desire of God as God is in Himself? If one maintains a strict separation between a supernatural sphere and a pure nature, such a desire seems hard to justify, even for a believer living in a thoroughly secular environment. However, that separation itself rests on the false presumption that the notion of nature can be conceived independently of any intrinsic relation to a transcendent horizon, or of any information attained within the experienced relation to that horizon. To be sure, the philosopher may make a formal and always provisional abstraction from the *nature* of that horizon, as Aquinas did when he accepted most of Aristotle's ethics and metaphysics without even raising the question whether his idea of God agreed with, or differed from, Aristotle's. When in later centuries, however, this merely *formal* abstraction developed into a *real* separation between two domains, it led to a closed concept of nature in which the question of a desire for God could not even arise. With few exceptions, modern thought has drawn the conclusions from this separation. For the secular philosopher the term *supernatural* lost its meaning because of the unproven character of the claims attached to it. Theology, on its side, has of late given up the strict separation of

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nature and grace as if they were two distinct realms of being, of which each one pursues a different end.

The situation, then, has drastically changed in the last decades. Metaphysics is once again actively engaged in an analysis of the *transcendent horizon* of being. If philosophy allows itself to be enlightened by a reflection upon the religious experience (as it did before it severed its ties with theology) and thereby admits the possibility of giving a positive, religious content to its own idea of transcendence, then, in my judgment, it reinstates the philosophical legitimacy of the mind's natural orientation (both in being and in acting) toward a transcendent terminus. Nor is the interest of investigating this horizon limited to believers: the question of God is, as the secular thinker Edmund Husserl affirmed, the most significant one in philosophy.

Two positions, however, do not seem to follow from the restoration by Henri de Lubac and his followers of this new formulation of the *desiderium naturale visionis Dei*. First, that all humans experience an *explicit* desire for God, such as some medieval philosophers appear to have implied. Many of our contemporaries would not know what to make of a desire for what remains totally alien to them. Even religious men and women living in non-monotheist cultures might find the idea of a single or a personal God genuinely puzzling. At the time when the concept of a natural desire of God was formulated, the West recognized monotheism as the only philosophically legitimate form of transcendence. These conditions have ceased to exist. Equally vanished, however, is the modern rationalist obstacle against the idea of the desire of God, implied by the philosophical dogma that what cannot be strictly proven by reason or experience deserves no place in philosophy. Nothing entitles philosophy to restrict its investigation to what can be established by scientific truth or logical argument. Philosophy had ceased to be the science of "reason alone", as understood in the various forms of rationalism of the last three centuries (the most recent of which was positivism). It now consists primarily in a rational *reflection upon experience*—from whatever sources the experience may draw its content. Phenomenological and linguistic analysis, as well as the radical empiricism of American philosophy, resist, at least in principle, any dogmatic a priori about the content of experience: they analyze it as it actually occurs, and in so doing prepare the way for a more comprehensive metaphysical reflection. In

the new philosophical constellation the mind's religious desire finds its place in the intellect's natural search for the nature of transcendence, and so would be implicit in human activity toward the *true* and *good as such*. No rational *a priori* prevents this search and this impulse to be specified by the idea of God, as presented in monotheist religion. Yet already St. Thomas cautioned that the object of the desire was much less defined than later Scholastics formulated it. It was, he claimed, a desire for a *beatitudo in communi*—a general idea of beatitude.

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