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Karl Rahner on the Relation of Nature and Grace

An analysis of Karl Rahner's position on nature and grace can illuminate one of the more important treatments of this central problem and function as a 'case study' of how Rahner works theologically – its special value as a 'case study' arising from the possibility that Rahner's ambivalent use of the idea of nature may be traceable to his method. Focussing on these two aims, the following analysis begins by examining Rahner's general position on nature and grace, then turns to investigate the apparent ambivalence in his notion of nature, and ends by commenting on possible reasons for this ambivalence. Before the analysis is begun, however, two preliminary points need to be briefly noted.

First, one should note why abnormal care and a certain tentativeness must characterize any critical analysis of Rahner. One reason is that the sheer volume of Rahner's work (close to a thousand articles and books) makes one hesitant to come to definite conclusions. Such hesitancy is particularly necessary if the conclusions are critical, for Rahner is extremely sensitive to the questions which surround any position and may, somewhere in his writings, have directly met any possible criticisms. A second reason is that his writings at times are so dense as to be almost impenetrable. Often this difficulty arises because of the subtlety of his thought or the difficulty of the problems which he analyzes; here a greater effort by the reader is called for. Sometimes, however, his explanations are simply less clear than they might be, and one is unsure of his real meaning. A third reason for hesitancy is that Rahner's thinking does change (the most striking example, perhaps, being his changed position on monogenism). Though this problem is inescapable in the interpretation of any living theologian, it is particularly acute with some Roman Catholics. In Rahner's case, for instance, some later writings (particularly those after Vatican II) seem inconsistent with parts of his earlier work, and thus compel one to choose between interpreting the earlier in terms of the later and modifying the later to fit the earlier.[1] These problems are not insurmountable, but they suggest that the critical interpreter of Rahner must move with unusual caution.

In the second place, the centrality of the idea of the supernatural in Rahner is important to note – particularly when examining his treatment of nature and grace – since his work is sometimes given a 'naturalistic' interpretation.

1. One of the clearer and more important instances of a possible shift of position is Rahner's current treatment of the 'historicity' of any reception of revelation, which, if developed in the direction apparently intended by him, might lead to conclusions at odds with some of his earlier writings. For a recent statement, cf. K. Rahner, 'The Historical Dimension in Theology,' *Theology Digest*, sesquicentennial issue (1968), 30–42.

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That interpretation is understandable, in view of the fact that the supernatural perspective is unclear in some of his writings – for instance, those philosophical writings which explicate the natural potentialities of man and those theological writings (e.g., on Christology) where a traditional doctrine, often interpreted too 'supernaturally,' is reinterpreted.[2] Furthermore, on occasion, Rahner's looseness in specifying the exact character of the supernatural referent makes it appear that he is merely speaking of a relation to a Good above lesser worldly goods.[3] But in other places he specifically attacks that kind of naturalism; moreover, his mature work on implicit Christianity makes it clear that the nature of, and man's relation to, the final object is supernatural.[4]

Indeed, for Rahner the supernatural perspective is basic; the enduring central meaning of Christianity is to call men out of this world and into the life of a personal Being above the world – to answer the question of what is necessary for entering eternal life.[5] In fact, without this supernatural perspective large parts of Rahner's theology are unintelligible – e.g., his emphasis on divinization, with the concomitant stress on the importance of the continuance of the hypostatic union in heaven; his focussing of attention on the significance of death and of its analogue, the continual dying which defines the uniqueness of Christian asceticism; his speaking of the theological virtues as the existential actualization of the *potentia obedientialis*.[6] The supernatural perspective, while not 'world-denying,' is essential to his vision.

Rahner's writings on nature and grace can be most fruitfully interpreted in

2. In interpreting Rahner, the distinction between what is naturally available to man and what comes only by revelation is extremely important. For him, revelation is continuous with natural knowledge, in that it clarifies and deepens what is potentially there, but it is different, in that it gives something undiscoverable by natural knowledge alone. His treatment of our recognition of the true nature of the *potentia obedientialis* is a good illustration of his viewpoint. The actuality (and to a certain degree the possibility) of the self-communication of the infinite to the finite creature is known only through revelation – but that revelation clarifies an inchoate sense of openness to the infinite, already given by philosophy. Cf. K. Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. IV (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1967), p. 67. (In the following notes, K. Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vols. I–V [Baltitmore: Helicon Press, 1961–67], will be cited as TI.)See also the general argument of K. Rahner, *Hearers of the Word* (Montreal: Palm Publishers, 1969). (This English translation must be used with great care.)

3. For example, Rahner will accept as 'supernatural' an act in which one takes up a negative or positive position towards the totality of reality. Cf. TI, IV, 180.

4. Cf. TI, III, 76–8; K. Rahner, 'Atheism and Implicit Christianity,' *Theology Digest*, sesquicentennial issue (1968), 43–56.

5. Cf. TI, III, 285; I, 17.

6. Cf. TI, III, 44; IV, 131f., 202, 237; III, 50ff., 77ff. Rahner has said that the very heart of Christian existence is the supernatural deifying union of grace with the triune God through the mediator Jesus Christ; cf. the 'Freiburg Letter' (an unpublished memorandum prepared for Cardinal Innitzer), quoted by H. Vorgrimler, *Karl Rahner* (Glen Rock, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1965), pp. 38f. It follows that more than the mere teaching of Christ or the juridical forgiveness of sins through his accumulated merit is needed; there must be an actual assumption of human nature. On the hypostatic union as the indispensable symbol of God's relation to the world, cf. TI, IV, 221–53 (especially p. 244).

Rahner's discussion of the Ignatian discernment of spirits also stresses man's supernatural end. He explicitly declares that what we have to do with is not just a discernment

the context in which they arose, because that context forms the matrix for his ideas. Furthermore, his work on this problem, when seen in its context, illustrates his general method. For Rahner works here with two opposed theoretical positions in mind; he attempts to synthesize, and thus to modify, two extreme treatments of the problem of nature and grace. This procedure mirrors his normal approach, which is to establish the poles of a question – the apparently contradictory ideas necessary for a solution – and then to attempt to synthesize them. At best this approach leads to a real, creative resolution of the poles; at worst nothing more arises than a statement of the two apparently contradictory ideas needed to solve a problem.[7] But in any case the full scope of a problem is clarified, because Rahner's procedure articulates the problem's full complexity and depth; even if one disagrees with his solution, one remains indebted to his clarification of the various elements necessary for any true resolution. Indeed, one might even argue – perhaps particularly in regard to the question of nature and grace – that his writings often represent not so much a definite position as a way of approaching a problem which keeps all the necessary factors both in focus and in some kind of relation to each other.

Briefly (and therefore unfairly) the two positions which Rahner faces may be characterized as follows. The option on one side is to see all grace, including that represented by the creation, as a single 'entity' based on Christ. The intellectual creature has no integral, mediate ends, because his very created being is directed toward a supernatural end. Two major problems arise here: whether grace can be gratuitious, because God seems to owe fulfilment to the creature which was created desiring it; and whether the notion of nature is left with any meaning. In the other view, nature and grace are seen as distinct entities, the former arising from creation, and the latter from the supernatural action of God upon the creature. Perhaps the major problem here is that, within the framework of this distinction, one can too easily suggest that grace does not really penetrate nature. We then have what Rahner calls a two-storey idea of the relation of nature and grace, with each element seen as a complete, self-sufficient entity, the latter resting on the former as one storey of a house rests on another.[8] For ease of reference, and without pejorative intent, I shall refer to this view as an extrinsic concept, and to that previously sketched as an intrinsic concept of grace.

It is not easy to identify the actual proponents of each view, especially when they are stated so simplistically, but some indications may be helpful.

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of the heart's impulses on the basis of some general moral condition, but rather a way of ascertaining the freely willed purpose of a transcendent God in a concrete situation. Cf. TI, III, 287; K. Rahner, *The Dynamic Element in the Church* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1964), pp. 156–70.

7. Rahner's procedure appears at its best in his work on Christ as metaphysical Son of God and mediator, and on the present and future character of eschatology. It is seen at its worst in K. Rahner, 'Theology and the Magisterium after the Council,' *Theology Digest*, sesquicentennial issue (1968), 4–16, where Rahner himself admits that he may give the impression of an inconsistent oscillation because he desires to maintain both free inquiry and an authoritative teaching body.

8. Cf. TI, I, 199ff.; IV, 116ff.

The extrinsic view, in its lowest form, is well-established in the theology of the manuals (what Rahner calls textbook theology). It appears in a more sophisticated form in the thought of the neo-Thomist Garrigou-Lagrange. The intrinsic view has been identified with the *nouvelle théologie* movement – particularly with de Lubac and those influenced by him – and with some of the Catholic theologians, such as Küng, who have studied the writings of Karl Barth. These indications must be treated with caution, particularly in the case of the 'intrinsicists'; de Lubac, for instance, has always denied that his position led to anything like the conclusion which I have indicated.[9] However, granted the inexactitude of my brief descriptions, these are the two views which Rahner faces and between which he tries to mediate.

Examining Rahner's criticism of both views can lead to an understanding of his own view, particularly since his positive statements often arise directly out of attempts to meet criticisms directed toward opposing theories. Rahner's criticism of the intrinsic view is twofold. First, he insists that some notion of pure nature is necessary to protect the gratuitousness of grace. Secondly, he believes that a significant distinction can be made between two kinds of grace in Christ: that of creation – free will, for example – and that of God's self-communication – for instance, the gifts of the Holy Spirit.[10] With respect to the latter point, Rahner explains the need of seeing grace as God's communication of himself rather than just as a created state of being; the distinction between efficient and quasi-formal causality is said to be the same as the distinction between nature and grace.[11]

His criticism of the extrinsic view is more detailed and more conspicuous in his writings, because he considers (or at any rate considered) it both far more dangerous and more prevalent among theologians. Rahner feels that the extrinsic view has two basic sources which he discusses fully.

The first source is the neo-scholastic concept of grace as something of which man is unaware, because it is beyond consciousness. Supernatural actions seem to the agent to be no different from natural actions, since the entitative elevation which makes them supernatural cannot be known.[12] Rahner admits, of course, that the object of an entitatively supernatural action cannot be given as one object among others, clearly seen with, and distinguishable from, its context.

9. Interestingly enough, when Rahner wrote the article on nature and grace which appears in TI, I, he had read only a single article by de Lubac; more important, he had identified de Lubac with 'D.' Cf. H. de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1966), p. 139, n. 36.

10. Cf. TI, IV, 177, 216.

11. Cf. TI, IV, 175; I, 329ff.

12. Cf. TI, IV, 166, 179 (where the extrinsic notion of grace is opposed to the scriptural idea that the gift of the Spirit brings changes of which we are conscious – e.g., new comforts and insights, and the ability to love.) Rahner's analysis of the differences and similarities between 'ontic' and moral holiness (unknown ontological growth and moral holiness) is also important; cf. TI, III, 3–23. Significantly, Rahner's concern arises in part because of the pastoral implications of the question; he feels that, if men believe that there is no changed consciousness, no imprint of grace, they tend to live out their lives in the natural sphere.

But the supernatural object is 'known,' or more precisely forms other knowable objects, by giving the context for all knowing; it forms the mental horizon in which other objects are seen, because it is the light in which they are perceived. The object is incompletely known, because it cannot be adequately spelled out in propositions or be apprehended by the mind as clearly as natural objects. But one is conscious of it as the horizon within which one sees or values other objects. The ramifications of this complex idea extend beyond the boundaries of the present investigation. But what is important for our purposes is Rahner's contention that grace is intimately known, since it is not so much beyond, as that which forms, consciousness.[13]

The second source of the extrinsic view is the conventional theological idea of pure nature, which embodies an abstract construction of the elements necessary for a definable human nature and a specification of the end proportionate to man's purely natural capacity. Such a definition of pure nature, once achieved, can supposedly both demonstrate the gratuity of grace and make possible an exact specification of grace. The gratuity of grace is demonstrated, because the definition of the pure nature of man includes a kind of natural integrity which demands nothing beyond itself. Grace can be specified, because the attributes of pure nature can be contrasted with those of grace; that is to say, the natural attributes of the 'graced' man can be subtracted in order to discover the spiritual ones. In arguing against this idea of pure nature Rahner stresses two points. The first consideration is that the elements belonging respectively to nature and to grace are not specifiable in the given historical situation of man. The history of nature and the history of grace are too closely intermingled for us to differentiate certain aspects of human activity as springing specifically from pure nature. Pure nature is not a given with which one can experiment, or which one can define and distinguish. Rahner asks, for example, how one could say whether the resurrection of the body is an indication of man's natural destiny or not.[14] Or, to use another example, how could one tell whether Christ's walking on water was an expression of his perfected

13. The idea of horizon plays a major role in 'transcendental' theology in general, and in Rahner's thought in particular. Brief and fairly clear treatments will be found in TI, IV, 36–77, and in *Hearers of the Word*; readers with both time and courage may consult K. Rahner, *Spirit in the World* (Montreal: Palm Publishers, 1968). For a concrete application of the idea, cf. TI, V, 193–219 (especially pp. 200, 209f.), on the consciousness of Christ.

The content of the idea of mysterious horizon is extremely difficult to state, since Rahner's fervent concern to safeguard the mystery of God leaves it almost without even analogical content (though perhaps that comment shows my own secret 'conceptualism'). Three interesting and quite concrete applications of the notion are: (a) the analysis of the Ignatian idea of divine consolations as discernible as coming without cause – i.e., without object (cf. Rahner, *The Dynamic Element in the Church*, pp. 129–42); (b) the treatment of eschatological assertions as arising from the new horizon seen in Christ (cf. TI, IV, 323, 347); (c) the analysis of the object of the theological virtues as giving meaning to the acceptance of the evangelical counsels and the event of death (cf. TI, III, 47–86, 207–49). TI, IV, 178–80, deals with this idea specifically in the context of nature and grace.

14. Cf. TI, IV, 183ff.

human nature, with its Adamic control over the natural world, or of his elevated human nature, or of his unique being? Rahner takes very seriously the Thomistic epistemology, which sees knowledge as arising from sense-experience; for that reason he cannot allow for the kind of abstraction implied in the conventional concept of pure nature.[15]

Rahner's second consideration has to do with the problem of adequately defining man; here his criticism reflects his own central ideas on the relation of nature and grace. Because this consideration stems from his idea of man (thus mirroring the consciously anthropological, rather than cosmological, basis of his approach), it may be helpful to sketch out the various levels of human activity or 'being' according to Rahner. There are three basic spheres: the material-corporeal; that of 'spirit'; and that of 'son of God' – the character and interaction of the last two being most important for our purposes.[16] 'Spirit' is generally defined as the ability to be open to more than a limited number of objects – in other words, having a transcendental orientation – and the corollary of that notion, namely, the ability to possess oneself in self-reflection and freedom. The perfection of this ability is an integral good, even if, for instance, it may mean relating oneself only to the silence of God.[17] The bridge between the sphere of 'spirit' and the supernatural sphere of 'son of God' is the *potentia obedientialis* – a potentiality to receive the self-communication of God, which, however, as obediential, does not demand that self-communication. The supernatural sphere proper begins with the 'supernatural existential,' the unexacted real receptivity given to man by God before justification.[18] The completion of the supernatural sphere comes with the actual reception of God in sanctifying grace.

Given even this sketchy outline, Rahner's main point becomes clear: it is impossible to define the nature of man adequately, since the act of definition implies limitation, whereas man's very nature is to surpass limitation.[19] This truth is already perceptible on the level of spirit; it becomes more obvious in the *potentia obedientialis*; and it is clearly seen in the supernatural existential. For the latter is the resonance created in man by the pre-justification call of grace, a call which actually forms man in the present. Man's nature is more than merely open to a supernatural end, because through the supernatural

15. Cf. TI, I, 301. A point made tangentially by Rahner, but centrally by de Lubac – that grace might be gratuitous to pure nature without being gratuitous to nature in its present mixed state – is relevant here; cf. de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, pp. 71–7.

16. Rahner realizes, however, that the material-corporeal sphere informs and is formed by the two higher spheres; indeed, some of his most interesting thinking has been done in this area. See, for example, his discussions of concupiscence (TI, I, 347–82) and of personal and sacramental piety (TI, II, 109–34). Cf. also TI, IV, 221–53; K. Rahner, *Mission and Grace*, vol. II (London: Sheed and Ward, 1963), pp. 69–71.

17. See the general argument of Rahner, *Hearers of the Word* (cf. especially p. 92). To my mind the question of how the silence of God can be called a fulfilment of the yearning of men remains to be answered.

18. This formula is close to one of Rahner's definitions of actual grace – i.e., the ability to perform salutary acts before justification and to accept justifying, sanctifying grace.

19. Cf. TI, IV, 106.

existential it is actually subject to the salvific will of God. Not only is man by his very nature directed to a supernatural consummation; he is, in fact, already modified by the supernatural. There is a universally given, objective, ontological modification of man – an addition by grace to human nature. The meaning and goal of creation, then, is the relation to Christ, the orientation to the eternal. (Indeed, that is the key meaning for us of Adam's original justice.) The orientation of man to, and preforming of man by, God is not merely something extra added to man's real being; rather it is what makes man what he is, what differentiates him from lower beings, which might, Rahner suggests, be said to have pure natures in a more literal sense.[20] It follows that nature, when defined in a theological sense, is a remainder concept (*Restbegriff*) – that is, what is left over after one sees man's *potentia obedientialis* and supernatural existential. Nature is what remains after one has spoken of the faculty which receives and develops the self-communication of God; it is everything which does not arise from and within the direct personal encounter with God.[21]

Rahner defines his own position in this way against the extrinsic idea of pure nature. But he also stresses the need of maintaining some idea of pure nature – thus distinguishing his own theory from the intrinsic view. For him, the idea of pure nature is a necessary and objectively justified concept, in so far as it is essential to maintaining a consciousness of the unexactedness, the gratuitousness, of grace. The idea of pure nature serves an important function in our thinking about grace, because it supplies a background against which we can see grace as freely given. It makes it clear that the transcendence of man, his spirit, is intelligible even if God never fulfils it; thus it provides the other side of the picture of man's inner orientation to God. Indeed, Rahner even says that only the idea of pure nature enables one to stress the difference between a being ordered to grace and one so oriented that his being is meaningless without a supernatural fulfilment.[22] Obviously, then, Rahner wishes to maintain some notion of nature – and of pure nature, at that – because it helps one to understand the relation between nature and grace. Though he stresses the shortcomings of the extrinsic idea of grace, he is also aware of the problems involved in any total rejection of it.

Rahner's analysis of the problem is cogent, and he maps out its territory in a way which highlights those aspects of the terrain that must be given special

20. Cf. TI, I, 302; IV, 168. The function of the supernatural existential in Rahner's analysis is clear, particularly with respect to the question of the gratuity of grace (though we may feel it is merely an abstract construct created to fill a gap). But certain questions remain: (a) Is the problem simply shifted from the area of nature and grace to that of nature and a reality which is neither natural nor supernatural, but rather a medium between the two? (b) Can a sinner be called and formed by God, and yet in some sense remain a sinner? (c) Can grace be anything but extrinsic until it is actualized through acceptance? For a further analysis of the problem, cf. E. Schillebeeckx, 'L'instinct de la foi selon saint Thomas d'Aquin,' *RevScPhilTheol*, 48 (1964), 396–400.

21. Cf. TI, I, 313f.; III, 79, 289.

22. Cf. TI, III, 314f.; IV, 185; I, 302ff.

consideration. Particularly notable is his desire to balance the two sides of the nature-grace question. Keeping in view this general question of balance, we may now discuss the adequacy of Rahner's idea of nature. My thesis is that Rahner's notion of nature and natural activity is ambivalent at best and inadequate at worst.

Questioning its adequacy requires, of course, some statement of the criteria on which the questions are based. I have two in mind: one external to Rahner's argument, the other internal. My first criterion is the 'traditional' idea of nature and natural activity, as expressed by, say, St Thomas. My second criterion is the idea of nature which Rahner himself seems to want to uphold in the abstract; it is, I suggest, the violation of this criterion that leads to his ambivalence. In using the first criterion, I do not intend to deify 'tradition' by establishing it as the norm against which all must be measured. It will, however, be argued that the 'tradition' contains a fuller and more cogent notion of natural activity than does Rahner's theory.[23] The second criterion is tied to the first, in so far as Rahner, at least at certain times, seems to want to maintain traditional language about nature. His apparent reason is that the traditional language furnishes a fruitful model – indeed, one which is necessary if he is to uphold his full distinction between nature and grace. The question, then, is whether the distinction that Rahner wishes to sustain is vitiated by his limited idea of nature and natural activity. The problem is further complicated because, although normally Rahner's idea of nature falls short of the traditional notion, at times he echoes that notion and apparently wants to uphold it.

The simplest way to begin is to examine some passages in Rahner's writings where something like a traditional idea of natural activity is upheld. I have already mentioned the fact that Rahner stresses the two discernible levels of being in Christ – nature and supernature, creation and covenant. This would be a significant starting-point, if it were not evident that, in this context, the distinction between the entitatively and modally supernatural arises only from the question of the gratuity of grace.[24] Therefore, it is at least arguable that this distinction is really an analogue of that pointed to by the notion of pure nature, and is thus a concept serving a different function in relation to a series of different questions.

At other points, however, Rahner speaks of nature as the permanent structure of a being, which is both the principle of, and antecedent to, its behaviour

23. In thus using the word 'tradition' I intend neither to deny that there are many traditions in Christianity nor to affirm that a particular tradition is without question the best of all. Similarly, my later use of the word 'classical' is meant as an historical reference rather than a value judgment.

It is interesting to note that Rahner sometimes criticizes the scholastic tradition for looking too much to lower orders of being for its idea of nature. De Lubac, however (cf. *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, pp. 133–45), has shown quite clearly that such a charge applies only to modern scholasticism. Thus Rahner's comment raises questions about his own relation to the traditional sources on the notion of nature.

24. Cf. TI, IV, 217. It is also noteworthy that nature is specified only by the general attribute of free will.

– natural moral law then being presented as the sum of the obligations flowing from this objective structure of man. Morality will then be described as the free personal acceptance of one's own pre-established nature. This position serves as a basis for Rahner's objection to the theory of situation ethics, which holds that there are no binding universal norms applicable to the concrete. These general ideas are reinforced in other contexts, where conscience is spoken of as giving universal norms, and it is explicitly stated that there is a structure of human nature which brings suffering if violated; nature is then evidently defined both as a norm setting boundaries and as the constitution of the basic forces for human realization.[25] As these formulations appear close to the traditional definitions, Rahner seems to uphold, at least in certain texts, a traditional idea of nature.

But he does not, I think, adequately develop the idea, however strongly he may maintain it in the abstract and recognize it as having a necessary place in the general scheme of nature and grace. This critical assertion can perhaps best be assessed by examining Rahner's usage of the idea of nature or natural activity in working through a problem – particularly a case where natural virtues are set against supernatural or 'graced' virtues. We may well turn, then, to a consideration of his ideas on the primacy of love over the other virtues.[26] Interestingly enough, Rahner explicitly rejects the position (or apparent position) of Fénelon and the Quietists. He admits – indeed, insists on – the existence of virtues other than love; there are values besides love belonging to the realm of the moral. But a basic question still remains about the adequacy of Rahner's concrete understanding of the status of these virtues – namely, are they really anything more than sequential steps in that history of self-realization which is love?

The problem, then, is whether Rahner has grasped, or at any rate expressed, the character of distinct 'integral' virtues short of love, virtues representing 'integral,' if not perfectly realized, goods which are more than just

25. Cf. TI, V, 441; II, 79; IV, 170; II, 274, 279, 217–35. See also the pertinent definitions in K. Rahner-H. Vorgrimler, *A Theological Dictionary* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965). Other meanings of 'nature' found in Rahner's writings include the admittedly untheological notion of nature as substantial fact (cf. TI, I, 314) and the Heideggerian idea of nature as defined in opposition to person ('nature' being what precedes the freedom of the person as the condition of its possibility, and 'person' standing for the free making of the self from nature).

A particularly interesting, if brief, analysis of the concept of nature is found in K. Rahner, 'Experiment: Man,' *Theology Digest*, sesquicentennial issue (1968), 57–65 (cf. especially pp. 62–4). While affirming the basic validity of the concept, Rahner also highlights its complexity by raising numerous significant questions – e.g.: How does man's 'self-creating ability' relate to the idea? How can 'nature' be known, given the historical limitations of human knowing?

26. Rahner deals with this topic in various contexts; perhaps the single most important treatment may be found in the article, 'The Commandment of Love in Relation to the other Commandments' (TI, V, 439–60). The likelihood that this article is aimed at the casuistic judgments on individual moral accomplishments which have characterized much Catholic moralizing may help to explain its tone.

temporary sequential steps toward a final perfection.[27] Put in Rahner's own terms, the question is whether he really apprehends some sort of concrete difference between the grace of creation and supernatural elevating grace. Even if we admit that both graces 'aim' at Christ, and that prevenient grace in its actual and medicinal senses is necessary, we may still ask whether Rahner expresses the difference which he wants to maintain between nature and grace, between natural and supernatural activity. If not, he weakens the position which he apparently wants to uphold against those who desire to see a single grace informing all. My judgment tends to be negative, because I question whether Rahner has fully grasped (or at any rate expressed) the classical idea of natural virtue. This suggestion can be tested in terms of two examples from his discussion of the primacy of love over the other virtues.

The first example has to do with Rahner's juxtaposing of love and the actualization of virtue. His thesis is that love acts to fulfil the total commitment of the whole person, whereas natural virtue calls only for certain concrete achievements whose realization can be easily proved and checked. Unlike natural virtue, love cannot be performed or negotiated, for it never just 'is,' but rather is always only 'on the way.' That is to say, its essential character is manifested in the admission that one is without the love one ought to have. Since love has an open-ended relation both to God and to its own realization which differentiates it from natural virtues, a real distinction, in terms of deficiency and potential completion, can be drawn between the two.[28]

Unquestionably there is much truth in this assertion; Rahner is pointing to a significant aspect of love. Love is of a different order from other virtues; its formal object is not merely one among and like others; furthermore, love underlies, directs, and forms all virtues in a unique way. Moreover, this general perspective provides a model which both discloses grace's penetration of the natural and provides a flexible, realistic image of moral and religious growth. The model can, for instance, explain how the experience of genuine personal love has a meaning which it would not have if it were not constituted as a way of actualizing the love of God. This explanation in turn generates a truer sense of the possible holiness of activity in the world, by giving a different meaning to the traditional idea of the ascent to perfection; the reference and existential depth of the act now define its perfection. With this model ordinary actions (such as the patience of a mother) can, given a certain reference and depth, be examples of the highest kind of supernatural activity.[29]

Problems remain, however, despite the potentialities of the scheme. For Rahner's distinction, based on the contrast between limited and unlimited obligation, reflects an inadequate idea of the classical notion of virtue. The

27. Perhaps it should be remarked that to speak thus of 'integral' virtues is not to restate an idea of pure nature, to deny that man's final end is supernatural, or to devalue prevenient and medicinal grace. That is to say, in this context 'integral' does not mean 'entire' and 'complete in itself' – unless these terms themselves are taken as modified by the ideas just discussed.

28. Cf. TI, V, 451ff.

29. Cf. Rahner, *Mission and Grace*, vol. II, pp. 66, 79; TI, III, 129ff.; II, 225.

natural virtues, as classically understood, are far from exhausted by the idea of particular concrete achievements. They do not deal with single measurable aspects of man, thus leaving love alone to refer to the unmeasured realization of man. Instead, the reference of a virtue is always to the whole – to the good man. For example, it is impossible to have one virtue without the others; the just man requires insight into his obligations to others (prudence), readiness in overcoming difficulties in realizing just relations (fortitude), control of the desire to forego just action and seek more immediate objects of pleasure (temperance). Moreover, the state of virtue cannot be realized in a static way, since its reference is to the developing, acting man. The virtues are distinct, as related to different objects and as perfections of different potentialities, but they are one and 'open' as directed to the fulfilment of the whole man.

Indeed, even in the case of justice – where the 'right' is an objective, measurable criterion concerning single, well-defined acts, regardless of intention – Rahner's point is hardly applicable. For the aim of justice is the realization of the just man; the right signifies only the lowest form of justice. Even justice is an open-ended commitment, both because it is related to personal actualization, and because it is always tested and refined by new situations. Justice then represents a form of measurelessness, of unlimited obligation. Obviously charity, the perfection of justice, represents a still higher form of obligation and measurelessness, but to recognize that does not require us to demean justice itself. Therefore Rahner's basic distinction, though a necessary one, must be made in a way that better expresses the scope of natural virtue. For if the scope of such virtue is adequately represented, both continuity and discontinuity, the interpenetration of, and difference between, nature and grace, can be shown; otherwise, we are left with a false dichotomy which empties nature of its real character and value.

My second example (closely related to the first) concerns Rahner's actual analysis of the character of virtues without love. This serves to illustrate my general suggestion, because Rahner's description bears little resemblance to the matured virtues of the classical tradition. For example, it is said that truthfulness without love may be merely a self-assured arrogance which believes itself to be above considerateness to others. Justice without love is described as a mere balance within a world of objective goods, an attitude which lacks the real respect for men that is given by love.[30] But these attitudes do not resemble the highest level of natural virtue; they would, on classical terms, be judged inadequate even without the criterion of love. Truthfulness which was not qualified by a prudential understanding of circumstance and a due respect for others would not be a virtue at all in the classical sense. It would be judged lacking solely because it failed to recognize such basic natural facts as mediating circumstances and obligations to others; no criterion of love would be needed. A similar point can be made concerning justice, since its very basis is respect for others. The primordial natural sense of the obligations

30. Cf. TI, V, 440. In this passage Rahner is apparently overstating a point, in order to pose a dilemma; however, the portrayal of natural virtues is obviously inadequate.

owed to other men, simply because they exist as men, defines the very notion of justice. Obviously the ideas of creation and charity clarify and perfect justice by setting the value of persons in a new perspective. Nevertheless, justice is a more integral virtue than Rahner's depiction suggests; to appreciate that point is to see justice more exactly both in its difference from, and in its perfection in, charity. That is to say, to recognize the integrity of natural virtue is to make possible the formulation of both a real distinction and a continuing relation between natural and supernatural activity, and therefore between nature and grace. On the other hand, if natural activity is presented in a limited way, the distinction between nature and grace is falsely drawn and their continuity is destroyed; in effect there is only value (charitable actions) and lack of value (uncharitable actions).

Rahner, in failing to express the full integrity of concrete natural fulfilment, weakens the balance of the position which he apparently wants to uphold. That is to say, because Rahner's idea of nature and the natural virtues (at least as expressed in certain passages) is incomplete, the delicate balance of his abstract position on nature and grace is disturbed. If this criticism is just, we should explore the reasons for the inadequacy or ambivalence of his presentation. There are, I think, four possible reasons to be considered.

The first and most obvious of these is Rahner's general approach to the problem. Because most of his writing is directed against extrinsic theologies of nature and grace, he stresses the primacy and pervasive character of grace, and the consequent difficulties which we face in defining nature. This polemic against extrinsic theologies does not lead to the development of a full idea of nature – as distinguished from an indication of the functional role of the notion of pure nature – even though Rahner's thought seems to admit, or even to call for, such a development. In the process of overcoming an extrinsic theory, then, the idea of nature tends to be either played down or left undeveloped. A second reason (closely related to the first) is the simple fact that a man can write on only so many topics; inevitably, he writes first and most completely on subjects which he considers most important and interesting. Rahner may feel that an analysis of nature and natural activity is neither very interesting nor very significant. He almost certainly believes that an emphasis on nature tends to lead people away from the real essence of Christianity: grace and the loving relation to God and neighbour. (If Rahner does think this, his judgment can, of course, be questioned. A full examination of natural virtue may be necessary both for a complete ethical system and for an adequate idea of the relation of nature and grace.)

Thirdly (and this is an admittedly controversial point), it is arguable that Rahner shares that 'anti-Greek' bias which is common to many contemporary theologians. A charge like this is difficult to document and sustain – particularly if one agrees that some 'Greek' ideas do not fit well with Christianity. At the very least, however, it does seem fair to say that Rahner's remarkable erudition and insight do not extend to the Greeks (the pagan Greeks, not the

church fathers) as strikingly as to other areas. This point has already been made in relation to the idea of virtue; it may be added that in other areas Rahner accepts rather uncritically some of the prevailing and questionable ideas about the nature of Greek thought.[31] If Rahner's attitude to nature is formed by some degenerate modern versions of that idea, rather than by its more integral classical expression, that fact is of considerable importance for our assessment of his work.

Finally (while this is less an explanation than a minimizing of Rahner's apparent ambivalence on the question of nature), it may be argued that he has no real desire to uphold a traditional idea of nature. That is to say, the traditional formulations in his writings can be disregarded, because the originality and genius of his position lie elsewhere. The traditional-sounding formulae are either undigested aspects of his thinking or attempts to maintain a relation with the language of the community in order to facilitate communication. This kind of interpretation of Rahner's writings is certainly possible; we often find him using a variety of terminologies, whose mutual relations are not always evident. Furthermore, Rahner's feeling for the community is such that he might (at least at one period in his career) have felt the need to relate his ideas to a terminology which could not really contain them.

Nevertheless, other considerations militate against this interpretation. In the first place Rahner's attitude to, and understanding of, the Catholic theological tradition would seem to exclude any insincere or mindless echoing of its notions. (That he might, however, have not fully thought through the implications of certain ideas remains possible.) Secondly (and this bears more on the substance of Rahner's theory), if we adopt the explanation just suggested, it seems to follow that Rahner holds to the intrinsic view of nature and grace. That is to say, he holds, in accordance with that view, that any attempt to give content to the idea of nature is bound to collapse into a two-storey, extrinsic model of nature and supernature. He would then differ from the intrinsic view only in holding that pure nature has a functional role as a concept necessary to a correct imaging of grace. But Rahner apparently wishes to mediate between the intrinsic and extrinsic views, in order to uphold something like the traditional distinction between nature and grace. If that is the case, however, a fuller explication of nature and the natural virtues would enable him to uphold that balance more cogently.

31. A good example of this tendency may be found in both the form and the tone of Rahner's argument in TI, 1, 79–148.