THE NATURAL DESIRE TO SEE GOD

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31) My purpose is clarification. I am concerned with the concept and the affirmation of a natural desire to see God, and I shall indicate some of its presuppositions and implications. While it is my opinion that the position to be presented is that of St. Thomas Aquinas, still that historical issue lies outside my terms of reference. [1]

The desires of human intellect are manifested in questions; and all questions reduce to the pair, an sit and quid sit.[2] But to put these questions is natural: it supposes no acquired habit, as does playing the violin; it supposes no gift of divine grace, as do faith and charity. Hence, since the questions are natural, the desire they manifest must also be natural. There exists, then a desire that is natural to intellect, that arises from the mere fact that we possess intellects, that is defined by the basic questions, an sit and quid sit.

Next, the question, quid sit, expresses a desire to understand, to know the cause, and especially to know the formal cause.[3] When we ask why light refracts, we ask for an explanation of refraction. When we obtain that explanation, we are able to assign the nature and cause of refraction. Then and only then are we able to state what refraction is. Until then, we can do no more that assign a nominal definition which tells, not what refraction is, but what we mean by the name, refraction.

Thirdly, natural fulfilment of the natural desire to understand is of two kinds, proper and analogical. Proper fulfilment is by the reception
32) in intellect of an intelligible form or species proportionate to the object that is understood. Analogical fulfilment is by the reception in intellect of some lesser form or species that bears some resemblance to the object to be understood and so yields some understanding of it; the same species, however, also differs from the object to be understood and so must be complemented by the corrections of a via affirmationis, negationis, et eminentiae as in natural theology, or in the mathematical procedure of taking the limit.

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[1] For a general history, see V. Doucet, O.F.M., "De naturali seu innato supernaturalis beatitudinis desiderio iuxta theologos a saeculo XIIIo usque ad XXum," Antonianum IV (1929), 167-208. On Aquinas, see W.R. O'Connor, The Eternal Quest, New York, 1947.

[2] St. Thomas, In II Post. Anal., lect 1.

[3] See my article, Theological Studies VII /1946/, 360ff.

Fourthly, the limited understanding of the mysteries of faith, attained through the connection of the mysteries and the analogy of the mymysteries with nature, is a further instance of analogical fulfilment. However, this fulfilment is not simply natural, for it presupposes revelation and faith. Similiarly, the desire that is fulfilled is not simply natural, for the theologiam needs grace to know of the existence of the Blessed Trinity though he needs no furhther grace to ask what the Blessed Trinity is.

Fifthly, analogical fulfilment is fulfilment only in an improper sense. It does not satisfy our intellects. It goes part of the way but not the whole way. It answers some questions but raises others. Fulfilment by analogy is a matter of decreasing returns, for the further one pushes the issue, the clearer it becomes that there is much we do not know. On the other hand, proper fulfilment really satisfies; but it can be had naturally only with respect to material things; for we can understand directly and properly only what first we can imagine, and so the proportionate object of our intellects in this life is said to be the quidditas rei materialis.

Sixthly, besides their proportionate object, our intellects also have their adequate object, namely, the transcendeantal, ens. Because the proper fulfilment naturally attainable is limited by the proportionate object, it might seem that the proper fulfilment naturally desired is lim-
33 ited in the same fashion. The facts are otherwise. We are not content to ask quid sit solely with regard to material things, and we are not content with merely analogical knowledge of immaterial things. We keep on asking why and we desist ultimately not because we do not desire but because we recognize our impotence to satisfy our desire. Even the Kantian, who denies to speculative intellect any knowledge of God, none the less appeals to some transcendental illusion to account for our desire. The fact seems to be thatm just as the natural desire expressed by the question, an sit, has its range fixed by the adequate object of intellect, so also the natural desire expressed by the question, quid sit, has an equal range. Since, then, acts are specified by their objects, and the object of natural desire is the transcendental ens, we may say that the desire of our intellects is natural in origin and transcendental in its object.

In the seventh place, the question, quid sit Deus, expresses a desire that arieses naturally as soon as one knows the existence of God. This is but a corollary of the twofold affirmation that the desire to understand is natural and transcendental. Moreover, analogical knowledge of God does not satisfy this desire completely: not only is this clear a posteriori from the fact that natural theology and Trinitariam theory are not completly satisfying byt only what we have to take because we cannot do better; it is also evident a priori since analogical knowledge is not only knowledge of similiarity but of differeneces as well, and so of the limitations inevitably resulting from the differences. Hence, it is only proper knowledge of God that fully can meet the question, quid sit Deus. but proper knowledge is an act of understanding in virtue of a form proportionate to the object; hence proper knowledge of God must be in virtue of an infinite form, in virtue of God Himself; such knowledge is beyond the natural

34) proportion of any possible finite substance and so is strictly supernatural; it is what Aquinas called "videre Deum per essentiam" and is identical with the act commonly named the beatific vision.

Eighthly, this conclusion is theological. It can be thought only because one has the faith, knows the fact of the beatific vision, and so must accept its possibility. A philosopher operating solely in the light of natural reason could not conceive that we might understand God properly; for understanding God properly is somehow being God; and somehow being God is somehow being infinite. How could a creature be conceived to receive the ipsum intelligere that is identical with ipsum esse? Theologians speak of a quasi-reception of a quasi-formal cause; but their speech does not elucidate the mystery; it merely provides an orderly expression for their faith; such systematized faith is not philosphy. The best that natural reason can attain is the discovery of the paradox that the desire to understand arises naturally, that its object is the transcendental, ens, and that the proper fulfilment that naturally is attainable is restricted to the proportionate object of finite intellect.

Such, then, is the thesis. There exists a natural desire to understand. Its range is set by the adequate object of intellect. Its proper fulfilment is obtained by the reception of a form proportionate to the object understood. This natural desire extends to understanding God. In that case its fulfilment is the beatific vision. Still, only the theologian can affirm a natural desire to see God; a philosopher has to be content with paradox.

The thesis rests on two presuppositions. On the objective side it involves the rejection of a static essentialism that precludes the possibility of natural aspiration to a supernatural goal. On the subjective side it involves the rejection of a closed conceptualism that precludes the possibility of philosophy being confronted with paradoxes which theo-
35) can resolve. Since debate on the natural desire to see God is basically debate upon these two presuppositions, something must be said about them. Though what I can say will be very inadequate, still it will serve to indicate fundamental lines of cleavage.

The static and essentialist view conceives finite natures as prior to world-orders. God knows all things in his own essence; but first of all he sees there the possibility of finite natures, of men and horses and cows and dogs and cats; only secondly and derivatively does he see possible world-orders, for a possible world-order is a possible combination of finite natures, and even God has to have the idea of what he combines before he can have the idea of the combination. Further, since finite natures are prior to world-orders, since they are the ultimate element into which all else must be reduced, it follows that there are two parts to a world-order, namely, a necessary part which meets the exigences of finite natures, and a contingent part that may or may not be present for it embraces God's free gifts over and above the exigences of nature. Finally, corresponding to this split in world-order, there is the distinction between philosophy and theology: philosophy deals with the necessary part by the light of natural reason; theology deals with the contingent part; the former is properly a science; the latter is basically a catalogue or revelaed truths though, by means of philosophy, the theologian can deduce the consequences of revelation.

Now, I am more than ready to grant that it is rather difficult to hold the foregoing view and yet defend the existence of a natural desire to see God. But I fail to see any solid reason for supposing that Plato's ideas are in the divine mind pretty much as the animals were in Noah's ark. At any rate I would affirm that world-order is prior to finite natures, that God sees in his essence, first of all, ther series of all possible
36) world-orders each of which is complete down to its least historical detail, that only consequently inasmush as he knows world-orders does God know their component parts such as his free gifts, finite natures, their properties, exigences, and so on. Coherently with this position I would say that the finite nature is the derivative possibility, that it is what it is because of the world-order and that the world-order is what it is, not at all because of finite natures, but because of divine wisdom and goodness. Thus, the world-order is an intelligible unity mirroring forth the glory of God. Because of this intelligible unity lower natures are subordinate to higher natures, not merely extrinsically, but also intrinsically, as appears in chemical composition and in biological evolution. Again, because of this intelligible unity finite natures are sacrificed for the greater perfection of the whole; thus, there are extinct species, and the toleration of many physical evils. Finally, the intelligible unity of the existing world-order may be known in three ways, imperfectly by philosophy, less imperfectly by theology, but satisfactorily only as a result of the beatific vision.

Complementary to the rejection of static essentialism, the rejection of a closed conceptualism is presupposed by the affirmation of a natural desire to see God. What is a closed conceptualism? Well, conclusions result from principles. In turn, principles result from their component terms. But whence come the terms? The conceptualist view is that they are had by an unconscious process of abstraction from sensible data. It follows that all science is a matter of comparing terms, discovering necessary nexus, and setting to work the cerebral logic-machine to grind out all possible conclusions. It is the dort of science for which a symbolic logic is an essential tool. Moreover, it is the sort of science that is closed to real development: objectively there either exists or does not exist a necessary nexus between any two terms; on the subjective side either one
37) sees what is there to be seen or else one is intellectually blind and had best give up trying. It will be observed that static essentialism and closed conceptualism are very similiar: The essentialist posits the idea of finite natures in the divine mind; they are whatever they happen to be and all else is to be explained in terms of them; with a similiar basic arbitrariness the conceptualist posits ideas in the human mind; he affirms that they are there by an unconscious process of abstraction over which we have no control; our conscious activity is limited to seeing which terms are conjoined by an objective, necessary nexus and thence to deducing the implications that are there to be deduced.

Alternative to a closed conceptualism, there is an open intellectualism . Again, conclusions result from principles, and principles results from their compoment terms. But the terms are expressions of acts of understanding. The selection of certain terms as basic, the elucidation of their precise meaning and import, the validation of such choice and determination

are all the work of wisdom;[4] and wisdom is the cumulative product of a long series of acts of understanding. Hence it is that the nexus between terms is not at all evident to a person who understands nothing, more or less evident to a person who has attained some greater or less degree of understanding, but perfectly evident only to a person who understands perfectly. Hence it is that there exists a natural desire to understand, the development of understanding, and the consequent development of science, philosophy, and theology. Hence it is that any finite wisdom must expect paradox; only perfect wisdom can understand and order everything satisfactorily. Finally, no matter how stout-hearted a conceptualist may be, one cannot as a philosopher escape paradox in the existing world-order; one may deny the possibility of a natural desire to see God; but one cannot deny that man by nature can demonstrate the precepts of the natural moral law, and one cannot affirm that without grace man can long observe the precepts of the natural moral law.

38) Such in the briefest outline are the intellectualist, dynamic, existential presuppositions of the affirmation of a natural desire to see God. Let us now consider specific objections.

Must not a desire and its fulfilment have the same object? If so, how can the desire be natural and the fulfilment supernatural. If not, how can the fulfilment be fulfilment of the desire?

The desire and its fulfilment must have the same material object. But a desire to understand cannot have the same formal object as the fulfilling act of understanding. A desire to understand is specified by what ~~as-yet~~ we already know. The fulfilling act is specified by what as yet we do not know. Thus, the object of the natural desire is transcendental; but the object of the fulfilling vision is supernatural.

St. Thomas does not speak of a natural desire for the beatific vision, as Fr. O'Connor testifies.

This is quite correct. A desire for the beatific vision is a supernatural act of hope of of charity. The natural desire is to know what God is. That natural desire neither includes nor excludes the Blessed Trinity. It supposes knowledge that God is. It asks to know what God is. It ask it, no matter what God may prove to be, and so it is fulfilled only by an act that is identical with the beatific vision.

If there is a natural desire to see God, there cannot be a beatitude natural to man; for beatitude implies the fulfilment of all natural desire.

On the essentialist position, this is invalid. On the opposed position one answers that perfect beatitude satisfies all desire because it fulfills all potentiality; but such fulfilment involves the pure act, that is God, and so it can be natural to no one except God. The beatitude
39) natural and proportionate to a finite nature is imperfect. It excludes all sorrow, all regret, all wishing that things were otherwise. But it does not exclude the acknowledged existence of paradox that seems an inevitable consequence of finite nature and finite wisdom.

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[4] Sum.Theol., I-II, q. 66, a. 5, ad 4m.

What about the axiom: nihil in natura frustra?

If nature is taken as world-order, the principle is certainly valid, for there is no possible world-order that is not in accord with divine wisdom and divine goodness, and whatever is in accord with that wisdom and goodness is not in vain. However, since divine wisdom and goodness are beyond the competence of our judgement, it does not follow that we can account for everything either in the existing world-order or in other possible world-orders.

On the other hand, if nature is taken as simply some particular finite nature, the axiom is not to be admitted without qualification; for parts are subordinate to the whole, and particular natrues are subordinate to the divine plan which is realized in world-order. Hence there are extinct species; there are the physical evils of the world; and such things can be accounted for only by appealing to the common good of world-order. Finally, such qualification is hardly contrary to Aristotle's intention, for Aristotle defended his view of human well-being by urging us to reject the popular opinion that men should think in human terms and mortals in terms of mortality.[5]

Is a state of pure nature, a world-order in which no one receives grace, a concrete possibility?

This is a distinct and very large question; no more than an indication of an answer can be offered; and that perhaps will be effected most expeditiously by considering the validity of various types or argument.

40) First, all things are possible to God, on condition that no internal contradiction is involved. But a world-order without grace does not involve an internal contradiction. Therefore a world-order without grace is possible to God and so concretely possible. The major premise is common doctrine and certainly the position of St.Thomas. The minor premise stands until the contrary is demonstrated, for the onus of proof lies on anyone who would limit divine omnipotence.

Clearly this argument is valid. Further, since possible world-orders are a topic that lies beyond our range of understanding, it is not likely that convincing proof of contradiction can be produced. Hence the argument seems to be not only valid but also definitive.

Still it might be objected that a world-order without a religion is an absurdity, that a world-order without grace would be a world-order without religion, and so a world-order without grace would be an absurdity. The major will be admitted and the minor proved as follows. Religion is a personal relationship between man and God; a personal relationship with God regards God, not as man may conceive God naturally, but as God is in Himself; hence religion is necessarily supernatural.

In reply one may grant that it is extremely difficult for us to conceive positively, concretely, and convincingly just what religion would be like were it not supernatural; for in the existing world-order true religion is supernatural; data on merely natural religion are doubtful; and without data we cannot understand properly. However, this limitation on our knowledge cuts both ways; if it precludes a convincing account of religion without grace, it equally precludes a convincing refutation of the possibility of religion without grace. In particular, the argument

[5] Aristotle, Ethica Nicom., X,7, 1177b 31ff.

just advanced seems fallacious; merely natural religion would not be so intimately personal as is supernatural religion; but it does not follow that it would not be a personal relationship. To treat with God as He is
41) known by us naturally is to treat with the real God and not with some fiction. In somewhat similar fashion other objections against the possibility of world-order without grace can be met.

However, there are other arguments in favor of the concrete possibility of a world-order without grace. The one most commonly adduced may be put as follows. A concrete possibility is constituted by a finite nature and the satisfaction of its exigences. But grace does not pertain to any finite substance or to any of tis exigences. Therefore, a concrete possibility is constituted by a finite nature without grace.

Clearly this argument is not only valid but also ~~peremptrou~~ peremptory on the essentialist supposition that finite natures are prior to world-order. Indeed this argument is simply a statement of the essential_ist view which splits world-order into two parts, one of which is necessary and the other contingent; just as one can unhook the trailer and drive off in the motorcar, so one can drop the supernatural out of the existing world-order and have a possible world-order left.

However, precisely because this argument is connected so closely with essentialist assumptions, it is received with marked frigidity by those who reject those assumptions. To them it seems that a concrete possibility is constituted by the concrete and not by that splendid pair of abstractions, finite nature and the satisfactions of its exigences. More pertinently, concrete possibility is constituted by a world-order complete down to its least historical detail. Concrete possibility is not constituted but only participated by finite natures, by their exigences, and by the satisfaction of their exigences. Because certain parts of an undetermined and indeed unmentioned whole do not necessarily include grace, it does not follow that there must be cases in which the whole does not include grace. Further assumptions must be introduced, e.g., that the parts in question determine the whole, that finite natures are prior to and de-
42) termine world-order. On that assumption the argument becomes valid; but of course, it is precisely the assumption that is denied. Need I add that it is denied not by nominalists but by those who agree with Aquinas that the ordo universi[6] is a whole and that the whole is prior to its parts.

In addition to the argument from the gratuity of grace, there sometimes is advanced an argument from the special liberality of God in bestowing grace. Were there not a possible world-order without grace, God would be free not twice but only once; he would be free to create, but if he created then he would have to give grace. But God is perfectly free not once but twice; he is free to create; and then he is free either to give grace or not to give it. Therefore a world-order without grace is concretely possible.

The agrgument of formally valid but its suppositions are open to question. In one act of the will there seems to me to be no more than one freedom of exercise and one freedom of specification. Further, the number of divine acts of will seems to me to be quite independent of possibility or impossibility of world-orders without grace, and directly to depend

upon the number of objects that are willed. Hence there will be only one act of the will, one freedom of exercise, and one freedom of specification if, as God knows all existing things by knowing one concrete world-order, so also God wills all existing things inasmuch as he wills one concrete world-order. What I fail to see is any contradiction in affirming both that God wills the existing concrete order by a single act and that God could will another world-order in which there was no grace. Hence I suspect that this argument is simply an anthropomorphic attempt to state what Aquinas puts exactly by his distinction between ex simplici voluntate and etiam ex alia causa.[7]

To conclude, I believe that a world-order without grace is a concrete possibility. But I suggest that this possibility is not a central doctrine but merely a marginal theorem. It is a central doctrine if it can be demonstrated from the gratuity of grace and from the liberality of God in bestowing grace; the suppositions, usually concealed, of such demonstrations seem to me to be highly questionable. On the other hand, the possibility of a world-order without grace is a marginal theorem if its truth is on the same footing as the truth of any other possibility, namely, it contains no internal contradiction. In confirmation of this position may be adduced the fact that, since Aquinas never explicitly mentioned the possibility of a state of pure nature, it can hardly be maintained with plausibility that Renaissance theologians discovered a central Thomist doctrine. What is plausible is that they discovered a marginal theorem which, in virtue of suppositions not entertained by Aquinas in my opinion, they magnified into a central doctrine. Finally, at the present time, it seems to me that the real issue does not lie in the possibility of a world-order without grace; the real issue, the one momentous in its consequences, lies between the essentialist and conceptualist tendency and , on the other hand, the existential and intellectualist tendency.

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6 See R.Linhardt, Die Sozialprinzipien des hl. Thomas von Aquin, § 10: Die Universumidee, Freiburg im Greisgau, 1932, pp.67-80.

7 Sum.Theol., I, q.19, a.5, ad 3m.

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