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Extra Nos but not Extraneous: Augustine's De Natura Et Gratia and Contemporary Receptions of Augustine

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For Chelsea

If man is not made for God, why is he only happy with God? If man is made for God, why is he so hostile to God?

Pascal, *Pensees*

As one cannot deny that this is a gift of God, so one must understand that there are other gifts of God for the children of that free Jerusalem which is above, our mother.

Augustine, *De Patientia*, on the courageous and noble death of a heretic.

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For Augustine's works, I have used the translations from the New City Press editions throughout, only augmenting them when needed to further clarify my argument. Biblical translations come from the English Standard Version unless they are quotations from Augustine, where I have followed the New City Press translations. Translations of the *Formula of Concord I* have taken from the Theodore Tappert edition of the *Book of Concord*.

ABBREVIATIONS

Because of the variations in translating the titles of Augustine's works, I have referred to them by means of their Latin titles with only one exception, following standard practice, in order to avoid the affectation of *Confessiones*. In the footnotes, I have used the following abbreviations for Augustine's works:

<i>civ. Dei.</i>	De civitate Dei
<i>conf.</i>	Confessiones
<i>ep.</i>	Epistulae
<i>nat. et gr.</i>	De natura et gratia
<i>pecc. mer.</i>	De peccatorum meritis et remissione et de baptism parvulorum
<i>retr.</i>	Retractationes
<i>s.</i>	Sermones (* denotes the recently discovered "Dolbeau" sermons)
<i>spir. et litt.</i>	De spiritu et littera
<i>Trin.</i>	De Trinitate

ABSTRACT

Pietsch, Thomas, D. “*Extra Nos* but not Extraneous: Augustine’s *De Natura et Gratia* and Contemporary Receptions of Augustine.” STM thesis, Concordia Seminary, 2017. 116 pp.

The relationship of nature to grace has become one of significant importance for contemporary theology. Following the turbulent debates surrounding Henri de Lubac in the twentieth century, theologians associated with Radical Orthodoxy have revived the importance of the relationship in more recent years. Whether acknowledged or not, all discussions of nature and grace owe much to Augustine, who was the first person to present a systematic discussion of the matter in his 415 anti-Pelagian treatise, *De Natura et Gratia*. But readings of Augustine have differed vastly, and have fueled debates not just around nature and grace, but also around what it means to be Augustinian. In this thesis, I review the relationship of nature to grace in the thought of Henri de Lubac, John Milbank, Michael Hanby, and others, as well as their readings of Augustine. Following this, I undertake an historical, exegetical, and theological survey of *De Natura et Gratia* and its context in the Pelagian debate. Rather than pit the exegetical against the ontological, or the historical against the systematic, I show how a faithful reading of Augustine has to pay close attention to the text while also engaging with his broader theological vision. This enables a richer appropriation of Augustine’s theology of nature and grace for today. I find that for Augustine the distinction between nature and grace must always be held strongly, and yet the two must never be ultimately played off against each other in a competitive, zero-sum game, for our corrupted nature only finds its fulfilment in the reception of external grace.

CHAPTER ONE

RECENT AUGUSTINIAN ACCOUNTS OF NATURE AND GRACE

The primary issue that animates this thesis is that of the relationship between nature and grace. All people, the just and unjust alike, receive the gift of human nature from God. But grace is that which comes on account of the death and resurrection of Christ, received through faith. Christians have long pondered the mystery of the relationship between the two, seeking to understand what it is that the grace of God does to our nature. Does grace rescue nature, or simply perfect it? Is grace opposed to nature, or complimentary to nature? Does nature seek grace, or refuse grace? If both grace and nature are God's gifts through Christ Jesus, how can we even distinguish them? Augustine has been pivotal to the development of this discussion within the church. He has often been credited with arguing that man has a natural desire for God, expressed in his celebrated phrase at the beginning of *Confessions*: "You arouse us so that praising you may bring us joy, because you have made us and drawn us to yourself, and our heart is unquiet until it rests in you."¹ It can seem as if for Augustine we are all born on a quest for fulfilment which is completed only when we find Christ. And yet twenty years after the *Confessions*, in the Pelagian controversy, Augustine wrote with greater circumspection about the natural desire for God. In his 412–413 *De Spiritu et Littera*, for example, Augustine wrote that the desire for God comes not by nature but by the Holy Spirit. Christians "receive the Holy Spirit, so that there arises in their minds a delight in and a love for that highest and immutable

¹ *Conf.*, 1.1.

good that is God, even now while they walk by faith, not yet by vision.”² J. Patout Burns has argued that Augustine’s development shows a clear rejection of his earlier confidence in the potentialities of nature.³ Others, such as Carol Harrison, have argued for much greater continuity in the young and late Augustine.⁴

This tension in Augustine’s thought on the relationship between nature and grace is a reflection of the tension within the Christian tradition itself. In a text often cited in the history of the debate, St. Paul declares that “all things were created through him [Christ] and *for* him.”⁵ According to the apostle, our created natures are fully understood only in Christ, and find their fulfilment in Christ alone, for whom we were created. It can seem as if our natures already anticipate Christ, our *telos*, before the reception of the Holy Spirit or sacramental grace. But then St. Paul in Romans attests to the limits of this approach, writing that “none is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; *no one seeks for God*,”⁶ and also to the Corinthians: “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, *nor the heart of man conceived*, what God has prepared for those who love him, God has revealed to us *through the Spirit*.”⁷ While our natures are ordered towards Christ, St. Paul stops short of clearly proclaiming a natural desire for Christ and seems to leave open the tension succinctly expressed by Pascal in the seventeenth century: “If man is not made for God, why is he only happy with God? If man is made for God, why is he so hostile to God?”⁸ Pascal

² *Spir. et litt.*, 3.5.

³ J. Patout Burns, *The Development of Augustine’s Doctrine of Operative Grace* (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1980).

⁴ See Carol Harrison, *Rethinking Augustine’s Early Theology: An Argument for Continuity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), especially 60–63.

⁵ Col. 1:16.

⁶ Rom. 3:10–11.

⁷ 1 Cor. 2:9–10.

⁸ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées and Other Writings*, ed. Anthony Levi, trans. Honor Levi (Oxford: Oxford

was writing in one of those periods of history in which the question of nature and grace was especially urgent and contested. The influence of Jansenism in Pascal's day had led to a fierce debate about the relationship between nature and grace, as well as the connected question of what it meant to be genuinely Augustinian. Did God's grace overwhelm the nature of those whom he had predestined, as the Jansenists had read Augustine to affirm, or was there also a kind of assent which our natures gave to the reception of grace, as the Jesuits argued? The condemnation of the Jansenists first by Innocent X in 1653, and then again—more definitively—by Clement XI in 1713 helped to bring an end to the public debate within French Catholicism.

In recent years, the relationship between nature and grace has again become pressing for the church. Precipitated in part by the civilizational threat of National Socialism, the French Jesuit Henri de Lubac issued a new challenge to those theologies which would separate nature and grace so much that the gospel could no longer speak meaningfully to the world of politics. According to de Lubac, it was this deficient turn in theology which had led to ecclesial complicity with National Socialism and which had insulated the world of nature from the potency of grace. De Lubac's thought has been revived in the twenty-first century, in large part by the Radical Orthodoxy movement. Radical Orthodoxy was born primarily in Cambridge Anglicanism but has since extended its influence significantly within English-speaking theology especially. The context of Radical Orthodoxy is not the Third Reich, but rather the kind of totalitarian secularism that Benedict XVI has called "the dictatorship of relativism." The relegation of grace and the church to a private realm away from the supposedly neutral secular sphere has provided context enough for a renewal of theological consideration of nature and

University Press, 2008), 8.

grace. But the dictatorship of relativism has threatened to strip the church even of its supposedly private functions, thus revealing, according to Radical Orthodoxy, the impossibility of religious neutrality for the nation-state. This context has provoked Radical Orthodoxy theologians to recover, in Lubacian fashion, an intrinsic relationship between nature and grace. As we shall see, the pre-eminent theologian of Radical Orthodoxy, John Milbank, has somewhat dangerously extended de Lubac's theological vision to an even greater synthesis between nature and grace. Of particular interest to this thesis is Milbank's claim to be doing this as an Augustinian. Indeed, Milbank originally intended for the movement to be called not Radical Orthodoxy, but Postmodern Critical Augustinianism.⁹ And one of the key texts in the Radical Orthodoxy book series has been Michael Hanby's *Augustine and Modernity*, a learned and provocative work which has challenged the very definition of what it means to be Augustinian when it comes to the relationship of nature and grace. Does Augustine anticipate a modernist, Cartesian interiority which establishes an autonomous self without reference to God and the cosmos? Or does Augustine provide the antidote to such an extrinsic relationship of nature to grace? Put another way, how can Augustine's anti-Pelagian theology of original sin be reconciled with his supposedly optimistic understanding of man's natural desire for God?

After reviewing these recent developments in chapter one, this thesis will then proceed to assess contemporary invocations of Augustine on nature and grace by holding them up to the *doctor gratiae* himself. As we shall see, contemporary Augustinian studies have taken a turn away from a strictly exegetical approach to Augustine's works, deeming this to be insufficiently attentive to his broader vision. There are merits to this approach, but it can never be done despite

⁹ See John Milbank, "Postmodern Critical Augustinianism': A Short *Summa* in Forty Two Responses to Unasked Questions," *Modern Theology* 7, no. 3 (April 1991): 225–37.

the text, or in a way that does not square with the text. Reading Augustine closely in light of broader Augustinian scholarship is thus essential for any authentic Augustinian scholarship today. This will be done in this thesis by a reading of Augustine's anti-Pelagian treatise of 415, *De Natura et Gratia*. While the relationship between nature and grace is anticipated in the Scriptures, it was Augustine who first identified and investigated the relationship in a formal way. All discussions of nature and grace are thus indebted to Augustine whether they acknowledge it or not. The theme arises throughout his writings and not only in his anti-Pelagian treatises. But it was in *De Natura et Gratia*, that Augustine most systematically and concertedly addressed the relationship. Alfred Vanneste has called *De Natura et Gratia* "le premier de l'histoire de la théologie chrétienne à confronter de façon formelle et directe les notions de nature, et de grâce."¹⁰ And as the first treatment of this theological relationship, it remains important for all future considerations and definitions, especially for those claiming to be Augustinian. Given that nature and grace has become one of the more significant contemporary theological discussions, a close reading of *De Natura et Gratia* promises to be a crucial test-case in assessing the direction of Augustinian theology and scholarship today.¹¹ Reinhard Hüter has written of the recent turn in Thomistic studies which has sought to place Thomas and his thought in its *Sitz im Leben*, paying attention to Thomas the theologian, the tradition of Dominican

¹⁰ "The first in the history of Christian theology to formally and directly address the notion of nature and grace." Alfred Vanneste, *Nature et Grâce Dans La Théologie Occidentale: Dialogue Avec H. de Lubac*, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium 127 (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 1996), 21–22. French translations are my own.

¹¹ Maarten Wisse has noted regarding recent Augustinian scholarship: "The relationship between 'nature' and 'grace' is a major issue in the theology of the twentieth century, both in the Roman Catholic and Protestant tradition." Maarten Wisse, "The First Modern Person? Twentieth-Century Theological Reception of Augustine," ed. Karla Pollmann and Otten Willemien, *The Oxford Guide to the Historical Reception of Augustine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 106, 109.

spirituality and other influences of his time, as well as his scholarly, philosophical output.¹² In a similar fashion, this thesis thus seeks to look at Augustine's *De Natura et Gratia* and the Pelagian controversy *in situ* in order to contribute more fully to the contemporary arguments over nature and grace.

Accordingly, the final chapter of this thesis will review contemporary revisionist accounts of Augustine on nature and grace in the light of *De Natura et Gratia*. It will be my contention that while Augustine conceives of the salvific grace of Jesus Christ as coming *extra nos*, this grace is never extraneous to our nature, to who we were created to be. In employing the term *extra nos* I do not intend to invoke the contrast between forensic justification and infused grace, but rather to represent how grace, for Augustine, is never inherent to our nature. Even though both nature and grace are the gifts of God, they are different gifts. However, the surprise of grace to our nature does not then render grace unneeded or extraneous to our nature. This is why Augustine could summarize *De Natura et Gratia* as a work in which he “did not defend grace in opposition to nature, but the grace by which nature is set free and ruled.”¹³

Henri de Lubac on Nature and Grace

Henri de Lubac was born in 1896 to an aristocratic family living in Cambrai, near the Belgian border. His family soon returned to the south of France, and de Lubac entered the French Society of Jesus in 1913 in Lyon while still a teenager. The turbulence of the times would significantly impact upon de Lubac's early years and it would be fourteen years before he was

¹² Reinhard Hütter, “Desiderium Naturale Visionis Dei—Est Autem Duplex Hominis Beatitudo Sive Felicitas: Some Observations about Lawrence Feingold's and John Milbank's Recent Interventions in the Debate over the Natural Desire to See God,” *Nova et Vetera, English Edition* 5, no. 1 (2007): 91.

¹³ Augustine, *Retr.*, 2.68.42.

ordained. Indeed, turbulence seemed always to follow de Lubac, despite his renowned patrician temperament. Shortly after ordination, de Lubac took up a teaching post at the Catholic University of Lyon where he was to remain for over thirty years, albeit with significant interruptions both due to the Second World War and to his eventual censure and suspension from teaching by the Jesuit order. His first book, *Catholicisme* of 1938, presented the Catholic faith as one dealing uniquely in paradox, eschewing those approaches which considered theological controversies to be simple zero-sum games, lingering only in anticipation of being fully resolved one way or the other. Of all the paradoxes in the Christian faith, the greatest of them all was that, in Fergus Kerr's words, "while the vision of God enjoyed by the blessed is a free gift, unanticipated, unmerited, never owed to them, yet the desire for it is, naturally and constitutively, in every human soul."¹⁴ *Catholicisme* thus anticipated de Lubac's engagement with the relationship of nature to grace. But it was in his 1946 *Surnaturel* that de Lubac most directly and, as it was to turn out, controversially addressed the issue.

Kerr has written that the publication of *Surnaturel* "gave rise to the most acrimonious controversy in twentieth-century Catholic theology."¹⁵ He describes the issue thus:

Since the sixteenth century..., allowing themselves to be shaped by opposition to Lutheranism, Catholic theologians made so much of the distinction between nature and grace that they lost all sense of the 'finality' of nature for grace—of the way in which the human and the natural has always already been embraced within the supernatural.¹⁶

This fear of a Lutheran, and perhaps Jansenist, dependence on the external Word and dominical grace had led neo-Scholastics to develop a theology of *natura pura*. Taking Thomas Aquinas as

¹⁴ Fergus Kerr, "Henri de Lubac," ed. Svein Rise and Staale Johannes Kristiansen, *Key Theological Thinkers: From Modern to Postmodern* (Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2013), 202–3.

¹⁵ Kerr, "Henri de Lubac," 204.

¹⁶ Kerr, "Henri de Lubac," 204.

their guide, neo-Scholastic theologians had come to argue that the purely natural ends of man could be defined without reference to supernatural grace. But in *Surnaturel* de Lubac unmasked *natura pura* as a recent, novel, invention, owing more to modernism than to Thomas, much less Augustine. De Lubac employed Augustine, as well as a revisionist reading of Thomas, to argue for the gratuity of nature and its ordering towards grace against the defining of two different ends—one natural, the other supernatural—of man. The task with Thomas was perhaps the greater and more controversial given neo-Scholasticism’s dependence on him, and the testimony of the doctor himself who had declared that “man’s happiness is twofold... One is proportionate to human nature... The other is a happiness surpassing man's nature.”¹⁷

The timing of *Surnaturel* was not accidental. In France, Marshal Pétain's Vichy regime had ruled from 1940–45, cooperating with Nazi Germany, and collaborating with Jewish deportations. The Catholic Church had largely fallen into line, giving its support to Pétain, so much so that the Catholic Church of France issued an official apology in 1997. While de Lubac had been developing the thesis of *Surnaturel* since his student days, it was mainly written during the war, with Vichy France providing an urgent context to his argument. The disastrous support for fascism among the French public and ecclesial authorities was, for de Lubac, a result of this novel theological divorce between nature and grace. The realm of nature was given an autonomy which isolated it from the influence of the gospel. The supernatural end of man was the church’s business, while the natural end of man was the state’s to affect as it pleased.¹⁸

De Lubac was quickly accused of advocating a *Nouvelle Théologie* and in 1950, under

¹⁷ Cited by Hütter, “Desiderium Naturale,” 81.

¹⁸ Hans Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie and Sacramental Ontology: A Return to Mystery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 88–89.

pressure from Rome, he was directed by the General of the Jesuits to cease teaching. De Lubac's works were removed from libraries, and in the same year Pope Pius XII's encyclical *Humani Generis* was promulgated with what was widely considered to be a rebuke of de Lubac's thesis.¹⁹ Pius XII defended the ability of human reason, "*suis naturalibus viribus*," to attain "to a true and certain knowledge of the one personal God." He openly criticized those "presumptive enough" to question the neo-Scholastic theological methodology that had flourished in recent years. These people posed a serious danger because their approach was "concealed beneath the mask of virtue." These unnamed theologians seek to "destroy the gratuity of the supernatural order, since God, they say, cannot create intellectual beings without ordering and calling them to the beatific vision."²⁰ While most people continue to read this encyclical as directed, in part, against de Lubac, it is worth noting that de Lubac himself, along with some other supporters, denied that it was directed against him.²¹ The stripping of his teaching faculties, under Roman influence, seems nevertheless to support the majority view.

After a period of intellectual and ecclesial exile, de Lubac's star began to rise in the lead up to the Second Vatican Council which he subsequently attended as a *peritus* and on which he exerted no small influence. It is generally considered that it was de Lubac's rehabilitated work which contributed to the council's pastoral constitution on the church in the world, *Gaudium et Spes*, and its explication of the single, and not double, vocation of man.²² The young, future popes Karol Wojtyła and Joseph Ratzinger both considered de Lubac to be at the forefront of a

¹⁹ See, for instance, Wisse, "The First Modern Person?," 110–11.

²⁰ Pius XII, *Humani Generis*, 2; 10–13; 26.

²¹ See Hütter, "Desiderium Naturale," 86.

²² *Gaudium et Spes*, 22.

renewal of Catholic theology which allowed de Lubac to publish more freely in his advanced years. Still, his work remained controversial, and his appointment to the house of cardinals by John Paul II only came about in 1983, when he was 87 years old.

There is significant evidence to suggest that as time went on, de Lubac became more circumspect about his original treatment of nature and grace. In his earlier years, he seems to have reacted strongly to figures like Suarez who had used Augustine to argue that grace is a gift which is superadded to nature.²³ For de Lubac, this was in direct contradiction to the Augustinian, “*Fecisti nos ad Te*,” on which many of his works can be considered a sort of commentary.²⁴ All people were made “for Christ” (Col. 1:16) and it seemed not only incorrect but dangerous to claim that our creation can be understood in any way outside of our purpose. The young de Lubac would thus write to his friend Maurice Blondel in 1932 that the problem with any theology of *natura pura* was, “how can a conscious spirit be anything other than an absolute desire for God?”²⁵

The Henri de Lubac that emerges following the reinstatement of his teaching authority is in continuity with the de Lubac of *Surnaturel*, and yet there is a greater circumspection about his teaching on nature and grace. John Milbank, who, as we shall see, tends towards a more extreme elision of nature and grace, considers the mature de Lubac to be tiptoeing around the matter in an effort to appease the church authorities.²⁶ But de Lubac’s mature thought is too cogent to give

²³ See Eugene TeSelle, “Grace,” ed. Karla Pollmann and Otten Willemien, *The Oxford Guide to the Historical Reception of Augustine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1069.

²⁴ Rudolf Voderholzer, “Henri De Lubac,” ed. Karla Pollmann and Otten Willemien, trans. David Gascoigne, *The Oxford Guide to the Historical Reception of Augustine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1332.

²⁵ Cited by John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate Concerning the Supernatural* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), viii.

²⁶ Milbank, *The Suspended Middle*, 8. See also p. 104 where Milbank refers to de Lubac’s “formal capitulation to papal authority.”

full credence to Milbank's view. This thought is expressed essentially in two works both published in 1965: *Augustinisme et Théologie Moderne*, and then a work entitled *Le Mystère du Surnaturel*. Both of these books reworked material of *Surnaturel* suggesting a softening of his 1946 bombshell.

In these works, de Lubac does not revoke his earlier criticisms of neo-Scholasticism. But he does show a greater sensitivity to the dangers of the opposite pole, the Augustinianism of Baius and Jansenius. Their misguided attempt to stress the *telos* of nature in grace had led them to treat grace as if it was owed by God to our human nature on account of the creative act.²⁷ For de Lubac, this was a fatal attempt to resolve the “fundamental paradox” of man's relationship to God which is characterized on the one hand by a natural longing for fulfillment in God; but on the other hand by a reception of this fulfillment not as a matter of justice or inevitability but as an act of sheer and unexpected grace, a tension which Augustine had understood well.²⁸ The de Lubac of 1965 could articulate a greater awareness of the dangers of resolving this tension in either direction, recognizing that a metaphysic of complete union would confuse what needed to be distinguished. And so he could write that between the Christian soul and God, “there is always a union, not absorption (whether in one sense or the other). It is, if you wish, a unification and not an identification. It involves mutual love even though all the initiative comes from God.”²⁹

In the light of what is to come in this study, it is worth quoting de Lubac a little more in

²⁷ Henri de Lubac, *Augustinianism and Modern Theology*, trans. Lancelot Sheppard (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 37–38.

²⁸ Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: Herder, 1967), 21.

²⁹ From de Lubac's 1965 essay “Mysticism and Mystery,” cited by Adam G. Cooper, *Naturally Human, Supernaturally God: Deification in Pre-Conciliar Catholicism* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2014), 158.

this regard, here on the dangers of a Platonic identification of nature with grace.

One must... be careful to correct—if not wholly to avoid—the neo-Platonist metaphors of flux, of gushing, of ‘effluence’, of emanation, of soaking into things. God is not, as one might think from some Platonist expressions also taken up by Denys, a generosity pouring himself out; it is at best inadequate to see him simply as that ‘fundamental generosity’ which must mean, for the Absolute, simply the fact of being essentially communicable; or that kind of generosity which is no more than a de-sacralized charity. Those who, in order to avoid ‘contingentist theories’ which might tend to anthropomorphism, accept rather too readily Platonist or Plotinian theories as if despairing in advance of purifying any personalist theory by the laws of analogy, are in danger of steering from Charybdis on to Scylla. No theory will dispense with the need for correction by analogy.³⁰

Just as Augustine’s “*Fecisti nos ad Te*”—which de Lubac invoked at the beginning of *Augustinianism and Modern Theology*—provided a check against treating grace as a mere superaddition to nature, so too de Lubac looked to Augustine for assistance in preventing the full elision of nature with grace. As he wrote in *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, citing Jacques Maritain:

Despite all that has been said to the contrary, we must certainly maintain that ‘St Augustine taught as clearly as possible the ontological value of the distinction between nature and grace’; ‘he clearly affirmed that distinction even for the state of innocence’. The definitely and intrinsically supernatural character of divine adoption is one of the fundamental elements in his teaching; it is expressed there so clearly, and so insistently, that we should be astonished to find that it has not always been recognized.³¹

De Lubac is often remembered for his concern that the idea of *natura pura* led to a misconception of man and a severing of grace from the supposedly privatized natural world.³² But he ought equally to be read for this wariness of those who fail to properly distinguish between nature and grace. Hans Boersma rightly notes that “we need to take seriously these anti-

³⁰ Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 306–7.

³¹ Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 26–27.

³² For example, see Tracey Rowland, *Culture and the Thomist Tradition: After Vatican II* (London: Routledge, 2003), 94.

Platonic comments... [De Lubac's] desire to safeguard both the concrete character of the love of the triune God and his freedom in creating and redeeming was unambiguous."³³ Indeed, de Lubac could, in 1965, even express openness to the idea of *natura pura* provided it was employed to safeguard the gratuity of grace.³⁴

Radical Orthodoxy

Henri de Lubac's influence has experienced a resurgence in recent years. Theologians engaging with postmodern thought have found in de Lubac an ally against modernism and dualism, especially in his criticism of the theology of *natura pura* and of the separation of nature and grace as drastically different realities. The Radical Orthodoxy movement has, in particular, been drawn to de Lubac as anticipating their own anti-modernist concerns.

The founding text of Radical Orthodoxy, John Milbank's 1990 *Theology and Social Theory*, famously begins with the statement: "Once, there was no 'secular'."³⁵ Milbank then goes on to explicate the thesis at the heart of Radical Orthodoxy, namely that the purely secular is a fiction when it is understood as some sort of neutral space in which religious forces have no hold. Just as the theologians of Radical Orthodoxy have sought to refute the idea of the purely secular over and against the sacred in the political sphere, so too in the realm of anthropology they have sought to reject the idea of the purely natural, denying that man can in any meaningful way be understood, or even exist, without reference to grace. The context of the movement is instructive here, arising as it has at a time not just of decline but fall for European churches.

³³ Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie*, 90.

³⁴ Lubac, *Augustinianism and Modern Theology*, 15. Nevertheless, *natura pura* was still generally disapproved of by de Lubac, implying as it did to him a denial of innate, natural desire. See Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie*, 95.

³⁵ John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 9.

What once stood at the heart of the lives of all Europeans has been cleared away to make room for a purportedly rational, neutral public square. Just as importantly for Radical Orthodoxy, given its intensely academic focus, it has arisen at a time when theology is given little attention outside its own circles, and when theology departments at universities are at best consigned to the margins of public discourse. It does not require much skill to detect a level of accordant frustration and stridency, particularly in Milbank's tone, whom Reinhard Hütter has complained is often callously dismissive of opponents.³⁶

The influences of Radical Orthodoxy are diverse. Perhaps its key inheritance is the metaphysical achievement of Thomas and the *analogia entis* in contrast to the univocity of being most prominently espoused by Duns Scotus and, later, Suarez. According to Radical Orthodoxy, this Scotist, flattened ontology has tended to win the day in modernity, leaving no room for participation in the transcendent. Instead, we have been left with a kind of self-sufficient immanence, only related to God as like an Aristotelian accident. Radical Orthodoxy theologians sometimes describe this mistaken metaphysic as a two-storeyed universe with the realms of nature and grace, or Creator and creation, existing independently of each other. Their relationship is not one of mutual participation, but ultimately one of competition. To change the metaphor slightly, it is as if modernity conceived of God and creatures as beings on the same plane, whereby ceding authority to one would challenge the authority of the other. One of the more important texts for our thesis, about which we will have more to say shortly, is John Milbank's 2005 *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate Concerning the Supernatural*. In an illustrative passage there, Milbank explains the kind of irresolvable problem

³⁶ Hütter, "Desiderium Naturale," 88–89.

that this competitive, Scotist ontology leaves us with: “namely, how does the pure nature receive the gift—of its own volition or by the gift as standing over against its natural ungivenness? The first solution is Pelagian; the second, in Lutheran fashion, sees grace as overriding our freedom.”³⁷ Putting to one side Milbank’s mischaracterization of Lutheran theology, Milbank’s point is that if nature and grace meet on this competitive plane, nature’s victory would be Pelagian and grace’s victory would be “Lutheran”—whereby grace is “no more a gift than is a brick wall we might inadvertently run into.”³⁸ But in the Radical Orthodoxy invocation of Aquinas’ *analogia entis*, both of these approaches get it wrong because they begin with a false, Manichaeic-like separation of God from creation, of grace from *natura pura*.³⁹ Put in other words, how can we meaningfully talk of God giving a gift to an entity without understanding that the entity itself is a gift of God? This is why Milbank can say that,

[T]he divine gift ... is a gift to no-one, but rather establishes creatures as themselves gifts, the divine gift passes across no neutral abyss, no interval of uncertainty during which one waits, with bated breath, to see if the destiny of a gift will be realised.⁴⁰

Thus this separation is not only false, but ultimately nonsensical. For any attempt to define man without reference to the giftedness of his very being, nor his divine *telos*, ends up doing violence to reason. Milbank put it this way in his 1999 contribution to the collection of essays entitled *Radical Orthodoxy*:

[I]f the truth of nature lies in its supernatural ordination, then reason is true only to the degree that it seeks or prophesies the theoretical *and* practical acknowledgement

³⁷ Milbank, *The Suspended Middle*, 45.

³⁸ Milbank, *The Suspended Middle*, 46.

³⁹ Connor Cunningham, a prominent Radical Orthodoxy scholar, has even suggested—echoing, and reversing, Karl Barth’s formula regarding the *analogia entis*—that the idea of pure nature is the invention of the Anti-Christ because it cuts humanity off from God. See Connor Cunningham, “Natura Pura, The Invention Of The Anti-Christ: A Week With No Sabbath,” *Communio* 37, no. 2 (2010): 244.

⁴⁰ John Milbank, “Can a Gift Be Given? Prolegomena to a Future Trinitarian Metaphysic,” *Modern Theology* 11, no. 1 (January 1995): 135.

of this ordination which, thanks to the fall, is made possible again only through divine incarnation.⁴¹

Theology which neglects this ordination of nature thus even ends up being “nihilistic” because it denies the ordered-ness of the cosmos according to God’s creative gift.⁴²

But beyond Aquinas and his warring children stands Augustine as a pre-eminent influence for the movement which, as we have noted, was originally called ‘Postmodern Critical Augustinianism.’ Milbank finds in Augustine a necessary rejection of the competitive plane, providing instead a “Christian infinitization of the absolute.” This in turn provides a “Christian theological ontology” in which all of nature and creation exists solely by God’s sustaining grace and has no meaning or even existence in itself. In Augustine then, theology can learn again to relinquish things like “notions of presence, of substance, the priority of idea over copy and cause over effect, of a subject with a rational essence, and of Being as ‘mirrored’ by this rational essence” and instead to insist on others such as “transcendence, participation, analogy, hierarchy, teleology.”⁴³ All of these terms become laden with a specific meaning in Radical Orthodoxy, but Milbank expressed the animating idea in his fifteenth thesis of his programmatic 1991 essay:

One way to try to secure peace is to draw boundaries around ‘the same’, and to exclude ‘the other’; to promote some practices and disallow alternatives. Most polities, and most religions, characteristically do this. But the Church has misunderstood itself when it does likewise ... Christianity should not draw boundaries.⁴⁴

While now is not the time to explore the problems that Milbank opens himself up to, passages

⁴¹ John Milbank, “Knowledge: The Theological Critique of Philosophy in Hamann and Jacobi,” in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, ed. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward (London: Routledge, 1999), 24.

⁴² John Milbank, “Intensities,” *Modern Theology* 15, no. 4 (October 1999): 445.

⁴³ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 295–96.

⁴⁴ Milbank, “Postmodern Critical Augustinianism,” 229.

like this hardly make it surprising that he has been charged with panentheism.⁴⁵

The Suspended Middle

Milbank directly engages the theology of de Lubac on nature and grace in *The Suspended Middle*, to which we shall now turn. He sees himself as appreciatively appropriating de Lubac while also extending his thought to those places where he was pointing, but which he did not necessarily explicate. But, crucially, this depends upon reading de Lubac's mature thought as compromised by "concessions to the Church hierarchy" following *Humani Generis*, and not as the authentic concerns of one grown more circumspect to his earlier reactions against *natura pura*.⁴⁶ This interpretation allows Milbank to build on the early de Lubac's critique of the dualistic divide of nature and grace without incorporating his later checks.

When Milbank thus looks at de Lubac's stress on the paradoxical nature of man's relationship to God, his reading begins to look more panentheist than de Lubac:

For de Lubac, the enigma ran equally in two opposite directions. On the one hand, the extra-ordinary, the supernatural, which is always manifest within the Creation, is present at the heart of the ordinary: it is "precisely the real"—or "the real in its precision"—as [film director Robert] Bresson put it. On the other hand, the ordinary and given always at its heart points beyond itself and in its spiritual nature aspires upwards to the highest. Grace is always kenotic; the natural is always elevated but not destroyed. Yet by a symmetrical paradox the 'more' that is demanded by nature can only be received from God as a gift.⁴⁷

Milbank's use of the word "always" here brings a totalizing quality not as obviously present in de Lubac. It should be remembered here that de Lubac did *not* consider *Humani Generis*—which had denounced those who say, in a rather totalizing fashion, that God "cannot create intellectual

⁴⁵ Amene Mir, "A Panentheist Reading of John Milbank," *Modern Theology* 28, no. 3 (July 2012): 526–60.

⁴⁶ Milbank, *The Suspended Middle*, 37.

⁴⁷ Milbank, *The Suspended Middle*, 5–6.

beings without ordering and calling them to the beatific vision”—to be directed against his work. De Lubac’s later work suggests that he wanted to clarify why he felt *Humani Generis* did not directly address his thought. But Milbank interprets *Humani Generis* to be accurately summarizing and criticizing de Lubac, albeit while being completely wrong in its judgment.

This reading requires Milbank to read the 1965 treatises of de Lubac as being unduly written “in deference to *Humani Generis*.”⁴⁸ And so Milbank takes his departure from de Lubac, when de Lubac says in *The Mystery of the Supernatural* that the longing of the soul is “born of a lack” and does not involve any participation in God, “even initially or distantly.”⁴⁹ Milbank’s participationist ontology leads him to read around de Lubac here. So too when de Lubac claims that while man is left after the fall still with the *imago Dei*, he nevertheless is lacking the participation in God that only grace can give. For Milbank, de Lubac is here departing from Augustine, whom Milbank invokes to support his participationist ontology: “For Augustine himself, by contrast [to de Lubac], the *imago Dei* that always remains involves some degree of participation in the Godhead, if not the participation of grace, and it is destined to rise, by grace, into a *similitudo* of God.”⁵⁰ Indeed, for Milbank, Augustine is the model theologian when it comes to refusing any place to notions like *natura pura*.⁵¹ But because de Lubac was “seeking to square his views with *Humani Generis*,” de Lubac missed the opportunity to develop his theology in a participationist direction, and instead “reduces the natural desire for the supernatural to a negative lack and denies that it in any way positively anticipates the

⁴⁸ Milbank, *The Suspended Middle*, 36.

⁴⁹ Milbank, *The Suspended Middle*, 36–37.

⁵⁰ Milbank, *The Suspended Middle*, 37.

⁵¹ Milbank, *The Suspended Middle*, 97.

supernatural end.”⁵² And so Milbank takes the opportunity to fill what was lacking, so to speak, in de Lubac:

Cosmos requires the government of spirit; spirit is destined to be engraced; therefore in one sense every creature is already for and by grace. After all, how *could charis* be a less original or plenitudinous gift than *esse*?⁵³

Milbank takes de Lubac away from a salvific focus, to a kind of cosmological, neo-Platonist perspective—the very perspective that de Lubac himself had warned against. As Milbank puts it in another work, “Christological and atonement doctrines... [are] theoretically secondary to definitions of the character of the new universal community or Church.”⁵⁴

In this complex but important conversation Augustine is thus controversially enlisted to help re-Platonize theology and to supersede the centrality of Christ Jesus as mediator between God and man. In seeking to move beyond the univocity of being, Milbank sees the only options for modern theology as either going the way of the French, who tend to supernaturalize the natural, or the way of the Germans, who tend to naturalize the supernatural.⁵⁵ There are no other options for Milbank, because every other option imposes a boundary. And in that choice, Milbank sides with the “French.”

Augustine and Modernity

Michael Hanby, a former student of Milbank, has written the most systematic treatment of Augustine from a Radical Orthodoxy perspective. While Milbank tends to deal in allusions to Augustine and Augustinianism that can be difficult to assess, Hanby provides a reading of

⁵² Milbank, *The Suspended Middle*, 66.

⁵³ Milbank, *The Suspended Middle*, 100.

⁵⁴ John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1997), 148.

⁵⁵ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 207.

Augustine that can more readily be evaluated. Nevertheless, Hanby can tend towards the opaque. At the beginning of his 2003 *Augustine and Modernity*—a title which echoes de Lubac’s *Augustinianism and Modern Theology*—he anticipates a number of criticisms people may have of his work:

There is something here to dissatisfy nearly everyone. Theologians will likely think this book too philosophical; philosophers will likely think the reverse. Historians may well complain that it is insufficiently historical and all might find it insufficiently exegetical.⁵⁶

This lack of a “historical” and “exegetical” treatment of Augustine can indeed be problematic. In a critique of Hanby’s book which we shall look at later on, Maarten Wisse stated: “Not only does Hanby not practice historical and exegetical analysis, he would not even be able to do it, as it contradicts Radical Orthodoxy’s ontology.”⁵⁷ In response, Hanby suggested that Wisse was missing the point, as *Augustine and Modernity* sought not to deny the importance of historical and exegetical analysis, but rather to ask whether contemporary Augustinian studies held to ontological presuppositions which prevented it from adequate historical analyses.⁵⁸ In some ways, the thrust of this present thesis is to hold up Radical Orthodoxy’s Augustine to the exegetical light which it is at risk of ignoring.

But that is not to say that Hanby’s work is evasive. His goal in *Augustine and Modernity* is to show that the two are not friends, and that Augustine actually provides us with a critique of modernity, Radical Orthodoxy-style.⁵⁹ This stands at odds with a good deal of Augustinian

⁵⁶ Michael Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity*, Radical Orthodoxy (London: Routledge, 2003), 3.

⁵⁷ Maarten Wisse, “Was Augustine a Barthian? Radical Orthodoxy’s Reading of De Trinitate,” *Ars Disputandi* 7, no. 1 (2007): 43. Note that, following the requested conventions of *Ars Disputandi*, all references are to paragraph, rather than page numbers.

⁵⁸ Michael Hanby, “A Response to Brachtendorf and Wisse,” *Ars Disputandi* 7 (2007): 12.

⁵⁹ See Wisse, “The First Modern Person?,” 106.

interpretation in the last two centuries. The case for Augustine as the first modern man has been made by thinkers as diverse as Adolf von Harnack and Charles Taylor. The former tended to celebrate this thesis, while Taylor has recently lamented it—that Augustine’s focus on the interior self inaugurated a transition to a modern, subjective self which Descartes later explicated. For Taylor, “Augustine shifts the focus from the field of objects known to the activity itself of knowing; God is to be found here.”⁶⁰ The Yale theologian Robert Calhoun was another who presented a proto-Cartesian Augustine, in a relatively even-handed fashion:

In several works, early and late, Augustine offers the self as a first instance of what can be certainly known. If I find myself able to raise questions as the skeptics do about the possibility of having knowledge of objective reality, I find that in raising the question I am tacitly affirming my own existence as the questioner, the doubter... Si fallor sum [If I am deceived, I am]—he put it into a little aphorism.⁶¹

One major contemporary critic of this Augustine, whom Hanby raises as an interlocutor, is Eric Alliez. Alliez, in a rather bold fashion, sees this Augustinian definition of the self without reference to God as ultimately pointing towards nihilism. In Hanby’s paraphrase of Alliez’s position, “the Christian and particularly Augustinian conception of the relationship between Creator and creature actually produces its mirror opposite and subordinates the Creator, and everything else, to the creature.”⁶² To quote Alliez directly,

[T]he divine economy henceforth implies a principle of dissociation, a specific break between what is beyond and what is here below, which, far from fulfilling itself in a negative logic with regard to the terrestrial city, in the end favors the autonomy of the temporal.⁶³

⁶⁰ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 130.

⁶¹ Robert L. Calhoun, *Scripture, Creed, Theology: Lectures on the History of Christian Doctrine in the First Centuries*, ed. George Lindbeck (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 356.

⁶² Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity*, 19.

⁶³ Eric Alliez, *Capital Times: Tales from the Conquest of Time*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbele (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 83. Cited by Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity*, 19. Alfred Vanneste made a similar point in his comment that de Lubac should have treated Augustine as the originator of

When all theological reflection is filtered through the self, as Augustine is charged with advocating, then all theology, and God himself, is subordinated to the self. From here it is a short step to the modernist form of atheism in which the self is the only certain thing in a world of doubt. Hanby refers to this as a “Niebuhrian” economy of separation which, as we have seen with Milbank, is a *bête noir* of Radical Orthodoxy, and crucially important for all discussions of the relationship between nature and grace.

Hanby comes to the defense of Augustine by arguing that far from envisioning an economy of separation, Augustine established an “economy of beauty” in which all things are made intelligible together, in the one economy, and not in separate orders. In this regard, Hanby praises Taylor for intuiting this direction in Augustine: “Taylor rightly notes that Augustinian interiority, constituted in a relationship to God more intimately related to the self than itself, is in a sense radically *exterior*.”⁶⁴ But while Taylor does not develop this further, Hanby sees this exteriority as a key to establishing Augustine as anti-modern. According to Hanby, Augustine envisioned a kind of subjectivity which was fundamentally ordered towards objectivity. This can be seen in the *Confessions* where Augustine declares that God is “*interior intimo meo*”—“more inward than my most inward part”, or “closer to me than myself.”⁶⁵ Augustine’s introspection thus actually moves him not to the knowledge of his self, but to the love and knowledge of God, encompassing a paradox whereby subjectivity leads to objectivity and indeed is necessary for objectivity, as it is only through self-knowledge that one can be led outward to the true

nature-grace dualism rather than enlisting his help in overcoming it. See Daniel A. Rober, *Recognizing the Gift: Toward a Renewed Theology of Nature and Grace* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2016), xxi.

⁶⁴ Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity*, 8–9.

⁶⁵ Conf. 3.6.11.

knowledge of God.⁶⁶ This cannot, however, be understood to mean that Augustine advocated a panentheistic, God-within, glorification of nature. As obvious a point as that may seem to be, it has eluded Charles T. Mathewes who writes concerning Augustine's *interior intimo meo*:

The human fault lies in attempting to deny our nature; to be fully (and properly) natural beings would be to return to a state of grace. Like the knowing subject, the acting subject finds its place in the world and before God because it finds the world and God at its heart.⁶⁷

Such a perspective actually falls into the very danger that Alliez warned about, whereby God is subjected to the self on a pious-sounding road to nihilism.

Hanby's reading of Augustinian exteriority has recently been supported by the work of the Notre Dame Augustinian scholar John Cavadini. Cavadini has persuasively shown that for all the modern talk of Augustine and the self, there is no equivalent in Latin for the English word "self." While Augustine does refer to things like the *interior homo*, the common translation "inner self" suggests a non-sensory interior place instead of a full-blooded and full-bodied man.⁶⁸ The effect of translations like these is to suggest a stable, independent subject which can be defined without reference to God. Cavadini rightly suggests something very different is going on in Augustine:

In fact, the closer one examines the imagery which Augustine uses to express the content of self-awareness, the more one becomes convinced that he does not use it to describe a stable reality called "the self" that becomes more and more clearly visible the purer one's interior vision becomes, but rather something that defies reification. The content of self-awareness, for those truly self-aware, is much more disturbing and mysterious, more exciting and hopeful, more treacherous and full of risk.⁶⁹

Indeed if there could possibly be something like "the self" in Augustine, it would actually best

⁶⁶ Charles T Mathewes, "Augustinian Anthropology: Interior Intimo Meo," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 27, no. 2 (1999): 195.

⁶⁷ Mathewes, "Augustinian Anthropology," 208.

⁶⁸ John C. Cavadini, "The Darkest Enigma: Reconsidering the Self in Augustine's Thought," *Augustinian Studies* 38, no. 1 (2007): 121.

⁶⁹ Cavadini, "The Darkest Enigma," 123.

denote the prideful soul which vainly attempts to assert its independence from God.⁷⁰ In a similar fashion, Rowan Williams writes of Augustine's anthropology in the *Confessions*: “The abandonment shown in humility, falling down upon the prostrate Christ, the dead Christ, is of a piece with the abandonment that is central to the whole enterprise of the *Confessions*, that is, the repudiation of the ‘finished’ self.”⁷¹ While Cavadini’s study came out some years after *Augustine and Modernity*, it is nevertheless anticipated by Hanby who sees that the Cartesian genealogy actually stretches back to the Stoics, who also influenced Pelagius. For Hanby, then, the Pelagian controversy can yield important fruit, because it embodies the clash between a proto-Cartesian, Pelagian economy of separation and an Augustinian economy of participation, providing a way to clarify the relationship between nature and grace.

Hanby writes that despite its prominence in the Christian theological tradition, it is not immediately clear “just why the Pelagian controversy was controversial. ... [B]oth ancient and modern readers alike have tended to abstract Augustine's doctrine of grace from its intellectual and ontological context to treat it merely as a function of the anti-Pelagian polemics.”⁷² We here can see a part of Hanby’s rationale for not being sufficiently “exegetical.” Concern merely with the polemics of controversy can, according to Hanby, obscure the deeper ontological issues at play. And so Hanby is critical of the approach of J. Patout Burns, one of the more thorough scholars of Augustine’s doctrine of grace. In a critique that bears witness to wider trends in Augustinian studies, Hanby criticizes Burns’ “genetic” approach for not addressing what is latent

⁷⁰ Cavadini, “The Darkest Enigma,” 127. See, for example, *In Johannis Evangelium Tractatus* 124.5.1, in which Augustine writes that “no one has anything of himself except deceit and sin.”

⁷¹ Rowan Williams, *On Augustine* (New York: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2016), 13. See also his comments on page 15 in which he highlights how Augustine models the spiritual virtue of becoming questionable to oneself.

⁷² Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity*, 72.

in Augustine's mind, favouring simply "textual output," and even then failing to consider the non-Pelagian texts.⁷³ This somewhat needless attack is representative of a similarly needless divide in contemporary Augustine scholarship which this thesis hopes to overcome. Some of the most compelling, recent studies of Augustine have abandoned the methodology of close reading in favour of attending to the Augustinian vision in a broader sense.⁷⁴ To take one of the more striking examples, the most recent biography of Augustine, which Rowan Williams has said is "capable of doing for a new generation a great deal of what Peter Brown's epochal biography did half a century ago,"⁷⁵ is Miles Hollingworth's *Saint Augustine of Hippo: An Intellectual Biography*. For all of Hollingworth's ingenuity and insight, he is more focussed on his own subjective meditations on the sweep of Augustinian thought in dialogue with the history of philosophy and theology than he is with an exegetical, chronological approach to his subject. Thus worthy and even exciting new treatments of Augustine, such as Hanby's, are played off against the previous generation's careful and deliberate scholarship, such as Burns'. And while the breadth of vision of this new trend is fascinating and perhaps does reveal the lower horizons of some Augustinian scholarship, the need to attend to the text of Augustine cannot be surpassed. The structure of this thesis is an attempt to bring these two types of Augustinian studies into conversation with one another.

Nevertheless, Hanby tends to pit the polemical and historical context against his own

⁷³ Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity*, 210 n. 7.

⁷⁴ E.g. Williams, *On Augustine*. See also Matthew Levering, *The Theology of Augustine: An Introductory Guide to His Most Important Works* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013). Levering, while seeking to introduce Augustine through his works, nevertheless treats those works less in a contextual, historical, and chronological fashion, and more in a philosophical and theological way, often even at the expense of the former. This is a very different kind of introduction to Henry Chadwick's from a previous generation.

⁷⁵ See Rowan Williams' endorsement on the back cover of Miles Hollingworth, *Saint Augustine of Hippo: An Intellectual Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

ontological context. To correct this tendency towards the former among Augustinian scholarship, Hanby singles out Augustine's *De Trinitate* as crucial for discerning Augustine's ontological vision.

The failure of much of modern scholarship to avail itself of this text is indicative of its failure to come to grips with the ontological stakes of the question—a fact which suggests in turn a great ontological distance between most contemporary scholars and Augustine.⁷⁶

His reading of *De Trinitate* leads Hanby to a participatory ontology which he sees as providing a way past the debates among scholars around the question “*whether* grace or nature.” According to this zero-sum game, to emphasize nature is Pelagian, while to emphasize grace in an Augustinian fashion is to diminish what is natural and human. As an example, Hanby quotes disapprovingly Rebecca Harden Weaver. “The *subordination* of the human will and action to grace calls into question the degree to which human actions are genuinely human.”⁷⁷ But this is to make a fundamental error, attempting to understand the Pelagian controversy within an economy of separation. Any ontological vision which conceives of *natura pura* and extrinsic grace as separate realities has already, according to Hanby, ceded the victory to Pelagianism, no matter which reality comes out on top. Simply to conceive of a human nature somehow “outside” of the Triune God is to be already Pelagian. Despite his occasionally dismissive tone (albeit nothing compared to Milbank) this is a significant and provocative thesis, because it leads Hanby to conclude that much of what has been concluded among scholars as the Augustinian achievement in the Pelagian controversy—namely, the triumph of grace over nature—is “a form of Augustinianism which is actually Pelagian.”⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity*, 72.

⁷⁷ Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity*, 72.

⁷⁸ Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity*, 210 n. 4.

As Hanby has put it in a more recent chapter, Augustine in the Pelagian debate “is adamant against parceling out discrete divine and human contributions to the good human act.”⁷⁹ The point of the Pelagian controversy was not, then, a triumph of grace over nature, but rather a:

cosmological triumph. Implicitly it vindicated and instituted nature as the gratuitous creation of the transcendent God against the machinations of the *pyr teknikon*, the self-crafting fire of stoicism, for which any interaction between human and divine must be a “tensional” interchange between immanent forces.⁸⁰

And at the heart of this triumph stands the incarnation and the hypostatic union which has resulted in a reconfiguring of “cosmology as creation, creation as soteriology, soteriology as aesthetics and aesthetics as doxology.”⁸¹ Like much of the Radical Orthodoxy project, then, the incarnation is looked to as carrying salvific weight in its uniting of the natural and the supernatural in the one person Jesus Christ in whom salvation is fully revealed. The incarnation is a cosmological event which brings about the redemption of the whole natural order in the body of Christ. And so Hanby can say that Christ’s manifestation “already implies participation in Augustine.”⁸² Faith is given very little attention in Radical Orthodoxy, and Hanby points to the reasons why. “The distinction between manifestation and apprehension within Augustine's aesthetic soteriology is an artificial one.” Creation is reformed “within the unity of Christ's body.”⁸³ The incarnation brought about an “aesthetic soteriology” whose ramifications are cosmological. Salvation is the restoration of the aesthetic order and harmony of creation manifest to us through “participation in the unity of Christ’s humanity and divinity” rather than a kind of

⁷⁹ Michael Hanby, “Augustine on Human Being,” in *The T&T Clark Companion to Augustine and Modern Theology*, ed. C. C. Pecknold and Tarmo Toom (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 25.

⁸⁰ Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity*, 2.

⁸¹ Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity*, 27.

⁸² Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity*, 46.

⁸³ Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity*, 47.

personal faith.⁸⁴ The salvific body of Christ is then not so much a discreet entity to be apprehended by the autonomous believer, but rather the embodied restoration of creation.

While it can be too simplistic to claim that some theologies emphasize the incarnation over the crucifixion, or vice versa, it is nevertheless inescapable that the incarnation in Radical Orthodoxy is of central focus. It facilitates a theology of the cosmological restoration of all creation in Christ. This is not to say that Hanby's Augustine is a universalist. He writes that Augustine see that "all are members incorporate in the bodies of either of the two Adams, citizens of either of the two cities characterized by their respective objects of worship and subject to either of the two mediators."⁸⁵ But it is the hypostatic union, and not the blood of the crucified Christ, which is the most decisive event for the salvation of creation. For example, when Hanby refers to Augustine's *De Natura et Gratia*—the treatise that will be at the heart of our next chapter—and his concern that nature construed in Pelagian terms "renders the cross of Christ void," Hanby expands this to say that nullifying the cross "will somehow nullify creation's participation in the divine love and, conversely, that a rupture in participation will rupture Christ's mediation." He goes on: "Indeed it is not too strong to say, with proper qualifications, that soteriology is for Augustine simply the fulfillment and intensification of creation."⁸⁶

Thus Hanby can refer to "Augustine's elision of creation and sanctification into a single economy" and can seek to understand not just *gratia* but also *natura* in a Christological way, affirming St Paul's proclamation that "all things were created through him [Christ] and *for*

⁸⁴ Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity*, 55.

⁸⁵ Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity*, 67.

⁸⁶ Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity*, 75.

him.”⁸⁷ Nature is not “ours”, not an autonomous self-enclosed *res*, but rather it is God’s in Christ Jesus. In support of this reading, Hanby appeals in part to de Lubac, although not in such a comprehensive way as Milbank. He notes how de Lubac provides historical support for this reading of the Pelagian controversy:

Interestingly, in telling contrast to the Protestant attempt to recruit anti-Pelagian Augustine to underscore the difference between nature and grace, de Lubac cites a tradition of criticism of pre-Thomist Augustinianism, dating back to Albert Magnus, alleging Augustine's *failure* to distinguish significantly between nature and grace, the very division he is often thought to have instituted.⁸⁸

But like Milbank, he sees his project as furthering what de Lubac had pointed to but not developed. “Even Henri de Lubac, who recognized so clearly that Pelagianism is really about the natural and its supernatural consummation, does not sufficiently elaborate this point.”⁸⁹ While Milbank’s *The Suspended Middle* was written two years after *Augustine and Modernity*, Hanby offers a reading of de Lubac consistent with his teacher Milbank’s preferencing of the earlier de Lubac and seeing the later de Lubac as kowtowing to the authorities.

Whether Hanby focusses on ontological issues to illuminate Augustine or despite him is the important question here. Radical Orthodoxy tends to see ontological issues as lying behind all controversies and errors, and Hanby is no exception. Maarten Wisse, whose criticisms of Hanby we shall attend to later, has summarized Radical Orthodoxy’s approach:

The target of Radical Orthodoxy's reception of Augustine is what they call Western nihilism, the idea of a technological world of self-constituting objects with no uniting vision, no dependence on God, and the Cartesian subject as the master of the universe. The Augustine received in an attempt to overcome this nihilism is a rather Platonic Augustine, in which the world is united in its ontological participation in God. Everything that is, is ‘gift’, taking up Augustine’s admission of this title of the

⁸⁷ Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity*, 75.

⁸⁸ Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity*, 212 n. 26. Hanby is referring to Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 19–21.

⁸⁹ Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity*, 213 n. 27.

Holy Spirit (Hanby). Likewise, Augustine's order of love, which in Radical Orthodoxy takes the shape of an erotic desire for the other, plays a major role, as it marks all reality as a mutual giving rather than self-subsistence (Milbank).⁹⁰

Was the Pelagian controversy essentially a clash of metaphysics? While we are postponing analysis to the final chapter, Sigridur Gudmarsdottir is one reviewer who is wary of Hanby's dependence on *De Trinitate* as a lens through which to read everything else. "I suspect Hanby's method of synthesizing *De Trinitate*, and interpreting all other works of Augustine in the light of this synthesis, is an oversimplifying of the rich complexity of Augustine's thought."⁹¹ Hanby's can seem to be an unsatisfyingly myopic reading which looks past Augustine's insistence upon the absolute ontological difference between God and the world. And yet, as we shall see, his further clarifications in a 2007 colloquium reveal Hanby to be a much more nuanced reader than Milbank and, in a similar way to de Lubac, keen to acknowledge that the distinction between nature and grace is essential to any cogent understanding of Augustine. This issue, along with that of the zero-sum game between nature and grace, the economy of participation, a cosmological rather than personal soteriological focus, and of the incarnation as decisive for salvation, will be a part of the mix as we look at Augustine himself.

⁹⁰ Wisse, "The First Modern Person?," 114.

⁹¹ Sigridur Gudmarsdottir, "Augustine and Modernity," *Augustinian Studies* 35, no. 2 (2004): 329.

CHAPTER TWO

AUGUSTINE'S *DE NATURA ET GRATIA*

We now look to Augustine to assess his approach to nature and grace in light of the aforementioned discussion. That need not, and must not, require vainly and anachronistically attempting to read contemporary concerns back into Augustine. We will look at Augustine on his own terms, but nevertheless with an ear attuned to his discussion of the problems Henri de Lubac, and Radical Orthodoxy, have raised. The final chapter will then bring these voices together.

The goal of this approach is to use *De Natura et Gratia* as a case study for reading and assessing Radical Orthodoxy's Augustinianism and Michael Hanby's approach to the Pelagian controversy in particular. As we have noted, Hanby has been critical of J. Patout Burns' "genetic" approach to Augustine which focuses narrowly on Augustine's "textual output" rather than on the broader systematic nature of his thought.¹ Others, like Charles T. Mathewes, have made similar statements.² While there is much to be said for attending to Augustine's theological ontology, any Augustinianism worth its weight must deal with, and to some extent be measured by, the "textual output" in a comprehensive way. The 415 anti-Pelagian treatise *De Natura et Gratia* is, as Alfred Vanneste has said, "*le premier de l'histoire de la théologie chrétienne à confronter de façon formelle et directe les notions de nature, et de grâce.*"³ And as the first

¹ Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity*, 210 n.7.

² "A proper appreciation of Augustinian anthropology offers benefits ... beyond the merely exegetical." Mathewes, "Augustinian Anthropology," 195.

³ "the first in the history of Christian theology to formally and directly address the notion of nature and

treatment of this theological relationship, it remains important for all future considerations and definitions, especially for those claiming to be Augustinian. In this treatise, Augustine also dealt with many of the relevant aspects of the debate, including a particular focus on the inability of man to reach for salvation in Christ. Other early anti-Pelagian treatises such as *De Spiritu et Littera* and *De Peccatorum Meritis et Remissione*, while relevant, do not have the same importance for this study.⁴ So while we will have opportunity to refer to them, it is *De Natura et Gratia*, in response to Pelagius' *De Natura*, that will be front and center in reading Augustine's understanding of the relationship between nature and grace.

Robert F. Evans has noted that it was *De Natura et Gratia* which marked the point at which the Pelagian controversy became a controversy.⁵ Previously, Augustine had dealt more considerately with Pelagius and while he still refrained from naming Pelagius in *De Natura et Gratia* ("for fear that he would be offended and become more difficult to heal"⁶), his denunciatory tone indicates a shift in intensity.⁷ Peter Brown has suggested that Augustine did not mention Pelagius by name in *De Natura et Gratia* out of a reticence to offend Pelagius' influential patrons, however the desire to persuade Pelagius without turning him off seems more plausible.⁸ Not only did Augustine mention this as the cause in Letter 186, but also in a treatise

grace." Vanneste, *Nature et Grâce*, 21–22.

⁴ Nevertheless it should be noted that in *Retr.* 11.63 Augustine writes that he considers *De Spiritu et Littera* to be his most fundamental critique of Pelagius.

⁵ Robert F. Evans, *Pelagius: Inquiries and Reappraisals* (New York: Seabury, 1968), 70.

⁶ Ep. 186.1. In the text of *De Natura et Gratia* itself, Augustine somewhat sympathetically attributes his unnamed opponent's opinions to a "burning zeal" (*zelo ardentissimo*) against those who lazily attributed their sin to nature and not will. *Nat. et gr.* 1.1.

⁷ This tone coexists with Augustine nevertheless attempting to show his areas of agreement with Pelagius. See Lydia Wegener, Mathijs Lamberigts, and David Lambert, "De Natura et Gratia," in *The Oxford Guide to the Historical Reception of Augustine*, ed. Karla Pollmann and Otten Willemien, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 350. Note also Augustine's calling Pelagius, "*O frater.*" *Nat. et gr.* 20.22.

⁸ Peter Brown, *Religion and Society in the Age of Saint Augustine* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 217; cf.

of the following year, *De Gestis Pelagii*. There he writes that he did not mention the author of *De Natura* by name, “judging that he would succeed better if, by safeguarding their friendship, he dealt tactfully with the honour of the man for whose writings he no longer had to have consideration.”⁹ This approach has further been confirmed by one of the Divjak letters, recently re-discovered. In Letter 19*, Augustine wrote to Jerome in 416 regarding Pelagius, “I would wish to correct him as a friend, something I still desire, I confess, and I do not doubt that your Holiness also wishes it.”¹⁰ But that does not qualify the seriousness of the matter for Augustine. According to Augustine in his Letter 186 to Paulinus of Nola, it was upon reading *De Natura* that he came to see that Pelagius’ teachings were “hostile and contrary to the grace of God.” In that letter Augustine also wrote that *De Natura* “tries to convince us of views that wipe out from the hearts of the faithful a belief in the grace of God that has been given to the human race through the one mediator between God and human beings, the man Jesus Christ.” Augustine continues, in words that are not irrelevant to the contemporary Augustinian accounts we have looked at:

That book of his contains and asserts many times and amply the same thing that he also states in a certain letter sent to Your Reverence in which he says that he should not be thought to defend free choice without the grace of God, since he says that the ability to will and to act, without which we can neither will nor do anything good, was implanted in us by the creator. In that way Pelagius’ teaching would have us understand that the grace of God is something common to pagans and Christians, to the good and the bad, and to believers and unbelievers.¹¹

Stuart Squires, “Augustine’s Changing Thought on Sinlessness,” *Augustinianum* 54, no. 2 (2014): 454. See also Carol Harrison, *Augustine: Christian Truth and Fractured Humanity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 107.

⁹ *De Gestis Pelagii* 47.

¹⁰ Ep. 19*.3.

¹¹ Ep. 186.1.

This teaching would “empty of meaning the Lord’s coming,” and Augustine then quotes his version of Galatians 2:21: “If righteousness comes through nature, then Christ has died in vain.”¹² Nature and grace are thus contrasted, showing how crucial *De Natura et Gratia* is in seeking to understand what it actually was in Pelagius to which Augustine objected. The importance of *De Natura et Gratia*, Augustine’s response to *De Natura*, is further evidenced by its being sent by the African bishops to Rome in 416 as part of a letter to the pope, Augustine’s sending it also to John of Jerusalem,¹³ and Augustine’s own consideration of it as being of importance to the whole debate.¹⁴

One more word can be said on this approach. Augustine’s anti-Pelagian treatises tend to be dealt with together, as a whole. This has merit in tracking the progress of the debate, Augustine’s emerging thinking, and also giving attention to their polemical context. But there is also a place for the kind of close reading that some of Augustine’s other works attract. Studies of *De Natura et Gratia* only appear within broader studies of the Pelagian controversy, and no study of *De Natura et Gratia* has been done in the light of recent, revisionist readings of Augustine.

The Context of *De Natura et Gratia*

There are interesting parallels between the context of *De Natura et Gratia* and our contemporary context which has seen the issue of nature and grace rise again. While Augustine was writing following the dawning of Constantinianism, it was also at a time when the Roman Empire was coming to an end and when civic virtues were being eroded. Then, as now,

¹² Ep. 186.2. It should be noted here that Augustine’s *Vetus Latina* translation gave him *natura* in the place of the Greek *nomos*.

¹³ Ep. 179.2.

¹⁴ Ep. 169.4.13. See Wegener, Lamberigts, and Lambert, “De Natura et Gratia,” 351.

Christians were trying to overcome a naturalistic, humanist autonomy that sought to define the human without reference to God. This was not just in Stoic Rome but also in Christian North Africa. For Augustine's flock, Christ was often the god for the next world, but *this* world was controlled by different means, including amulets, astrologers, soothsayers.¹⁵ And they were also, as now, dealing with a temptation to separate the domain of grace from contemporary political concerns. Consideration of some of the major contextual influences will then be essential for reading *De Natura et Gratia* and discussing its relevance for today.

The Donatist Controversy

The major controversies of Augustine's life, against the Manichaeans, the Donatists, and the Pelagians, followed upon each other's heels in a relatively orderly fashion. The controversy directly preceding the Pelagian debates was Augustine against the North African Donatists, which occupied him during the first decade of the fifth century. While there was not a lot of chronological overlap between the controversies, the thematic overlap is not irrelevant.

The Donatist claim, it will be remembered, was that only the pure could celebrate the sacraments. All those Christians who had been compromised during persecutions had immediately disqualified themselves from valid celebrations of the sacraments, even if they had subsequently repented. The ongoing significance of the issue was ensured by the logic that all those priests and bishops who were ordained by a compromised bishop were thus themselves unable to validly celebrate the sacraments. Augustine, in his response to this rigor, did affirm the Donatist claim that only the pure could celebrate the sacraments, but asserted that it was God through Christ Jesus, who made his people pure, through the ministrations of flawed bishops.

¹⁵ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*, Revised edition (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 326–27.

Christ was our mediator in this regard and not the bishops.¹⁶ In Burns' words, "Christ is the guarantor of the efficacy of the sacrament."¹⁷ In ways that would anticipate his argument against the Pelagians, Augustine rejected a dependence on the adequacy of human nature. Purity, merit and validity were not generated from within but were bestowed, and continually bestowed at that. Just because a *traditor* had betrayed Christ and His church, did not mean that they could not later receive forgiveness for their sins. To suggest anything otherwise would deprive Christ of the position as sole savior, making his blood superfluous, as Augustine would proclaim repeatedly in the Pelagian controversy.¹⁸

In an era of state persecution, the Donatists also stressed the complete otherness of Christian faith. They tended to look favorably upon Orthodox Jewish relations to the Torah as a law which set them apart from the rest of the world. In the Donatist version of the *Acts* of the martyrs, for instance, one would read things like: "I care for nothing but the law of God."¹⁹ They had a strong sense of ritual separation and, it is interesting to note, they cherished episcopal succession as a visible instantiation of the Church's purity and exclusivist community.²⁰ If the church was a pure community, set apart from the world, then its members likewise had to be pure, or else forsake the Christian community for that of the world. Augustine, by contrast, partly under the influence of Neo-Platonic ways of thought, saw the world and the church more in a state of becoming, in which all things depended upon God through Christ Jesus. As Peter Brown has put it, "the rites of the church were undeniably "holy," because of the objective holiness of a

¹⁶ Burns, *Operative Grace*, 58.

¹⁷ Burns, *Operative Grace*, 66.

¹⁸ See Burns, *Operative Grace*, 59.

¹⁹ Brown, *Augustine*, 213.

²⁰ Brown, *Augustine*, 215.

church which “participated” in Christ.”²¹ In this way, Augustine could distinguish between the absolute holiness of Christ, and the participatory, derived, and “becoming” holiness of the members of the Christian church. While Burns perhaps makes Augustine sound too proto-Lutheran by saying that “the saints are both sinners and free of sin,” nevertheless Augustine was under no illusion about the reality of sin in the Christian life and, in his own words, says that Christians “are both righteous and yet not without sin.”²² The church, then, is an *ecclesia permixta*, a mixed church without full perfection, but nevertheless participating in Christ’s holiness even while remaining sinners. In Robert Markus’ phrase, this anti-Donatist and subsequently anti-Pelagian theology of Augustine was a sustained “defense of Christian mediocrity,” a proclamation that the simple people of the church were still Christians. It was a theology forged, in part, through Augustine’s pastoral experiences as bishop of Hippo.²³

Burns has also shown the relevance of Augustine’s doctrine of justification in the Donatist controversy for his developing theology of grace. In his analysis of the development of Augustine’s view of operative grace, Burns distinguishes between “congruous vocation”—in which God affects his control over the human will by environmental means which work to persuade and change—and the kind of direct, inner intervention by which God changes wills.²⁴ Burns’ contention is that while Augustine came to believe in “congruous vocation” earlier, with his 396 *Ad Simplicianum*, the more direct functioning operative grace only appeared in Augustine from around 418 onwards. For Burns, then, Augustine’s advocacy of coercive force at

²¹ Brown, *Augustine*, 217. Eg. Ep. 261.2.

²² Burns, *Operative Grace*, 69. Augustine, *Nat. et gr.*, 38.45.

²³ Robert A. Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 45–62.

²⁴ Burns, *Operative Grace*, 75.

the end of the Donatist controversy was a significant development. His advocacy of coercion showed that persuasion and congruous vocation was no longer all that mattered. God can frighten in order to draw to Christ:

The justification of coercion helped move Augustine to a notion of liberty which is the fruit of grace rather than its foundation, a freedom which is not the permanent and inalienable possession of human nature.²⁵

This will become of some significance in the Pelagian controversy. Freedom is not a given part of who we are, as Pelagius would argue, but rather the fruit of bestowed grace. The will, for Augustine, is no longer an even scale which God directs by providing external, persuasive weights which tend it to certain directions. Rather, it begins to look like a broken scale, tilted away from Christ and enslaved to sin, needing not just persuasion but even violence to bring it freedom.²⁶ The inner influence of direct grace would appear later, too. Thus, Burns says, “the differences between Augustine’s early and later theories of nature and grace cannot simply be attributed to the challenge posed by the diametrically opposed doctrines of the Manichees and the Pelagians.”²⁷ The contexts did change, but so did Augustine’s understanding.

One of the ramifications of the Donatist controversy’s direct influence on Augustine’s anti-Pelagian theology was that those parts of the church outside North Africa who had not experienced the Donatist controversy found it harder to understand the charges against Pelagius. Donatism had attuned Augustine and other Africans to the dangers of Pelagianism, but it was a

²⁵ Burns, *Operative Grace*, 77.

²⁶ Burns, *Operative Grace*, 80. By means of an aside, Hans Boersma has written of John Milbank’s development in this area. While Milbank had initially disavowed violence of all sorts, he has come to see it as a necessity, admitting to Stanley Hauerwas: “You can tell that I have had children since I wrote *Theology and Social Theory*.” Boersma sees this as a positive step towards Milbank understanding what he has called “our animality, embodiment and finitude.” See Hans Boersma, “Being Reconciled: Atonement as the Ecclesio-Christological Practice of Forgiveness in John Milbank,” in *Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition: Creation, Covenant, and Participation*, ed. James K. A. Smith and James Olthuis (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 199.

²⁷ Burns, *Operative Grace*, 86.

concern lost to other parts of the Christian world. As Burns writes: “The doctrine of nature and grace developed during the Pelagian controversy was easily assimilated only by the Africans, who shared Cyprian’s heritage and the struggle against the Donatists.”²⁸ There is, then, a geo-political context that must be considered.

The Sack of Rome and the Genealogy of Controversy

On August 24, 410 Alaric the Goth entered Rome with an army. Twice in the past two years the Goths had laid siege to Rome, crippling the city albeit without overtaking it completely. That was achieved in August 410 when the Goths finally sacked Rome and created innumerable Roman refugees across the empire. The Roman aristocracy had already begun emigrating *en masse* from 408 onwards as Alaric began laying siege to Rome. By 410 the emigration had exploded, and it was this direct impact which led Roman Pelagians to leave their own shores and begin to cause controversy in North Africa. But even more significantly, Peter Brown has suggested that the threat of the barbarian invasions may itself have helped to inspire Pelagius and his followers’ commitment to a kind of Stoic, old way of life.²⁹ As he writes in his classic biography of Augustine, “no matter how self-consciously Christian the Pelagian movement had been, it rested firmly on a bed rock of the old ethical ideals of paganism, especially on Stoicism.”³⁰

Pelagius himself was born in Britain, but then travelled in the East, only returning to the West in order to settle in Rome around the year 400 when he would have been around fifty years

²⁸ Burns, *Operative Grace*, 87–88.

²⁹ Brown, *Augustine*, 352.

³⁰ Brown, *Augustine*, 369. In a chapter which Brown added for the revised edition in the year 2000, he added: “It is still widely believed that the victory of Augustine’s notion of grace over Pelagius’ notion of freedom (with its roots in classical, Stoic thought) signaled the end of the ancient world in Western Europe.” Brown, *Augustine*, 497.

old. Henry Chadwick suggested that his travel east formed in Pelagius a more positive approach to nature which perhaps appealed to aristocratic Romans who were attracted to Christianity but also feared the loss of Stoic virtues.³¹ Indeed Pelagius' first two works, *De Natura* and *De Libero Arbitrio* were both composed in the back-and-forth of a controversy with Jerome, with whom he may have had contact while travelling in the East, concerning the possibility of sinlessness as well as the state of marriage.³² Vanneste has described the former work, *De Natura*, as essentially “*une tentative pour christianiser l'idée grecque—et surtout stoïcienne—de nature.*”³³ Pelagius would have been shocked by the apparent licentiousness of the average Roman Christian, and instead appealed to a quasi-monastic spiritual practice which coincided with Roman Stoicism. And so Pelagius found himself something of a spiritual advisor to Rome's Christian elite, and began to write commentaries on Paul's letters from this Stoic-Christian theological perspective. It is possible, however, to assign too much responsibility to Pelagius. According to the contemporary Marius Mercator it was Rufinus of Syria who first sowed “Pelagian” seed in Rome by corrupting Pelagius. Bonner writes that apart from his treatises and some boldness,

[Pelagius] displays few positive qualities and was certainly not the leader of the Pelagians once the battle began. His disciple, Caelestius, is a more impressive personality, the most effective man of action which the movement produced, but we have far too little material from his pen to evaluate him adequately.³⁴

This is why recent scholarship has become much warier of referring to “Pelagians,” noting that there were a number of differing thinkers surrounding Pelagius—or whom Pelagius himself

³¹ Henry Chadwick, *Augustine, Past Masters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 109.

³² Harrison, *Augustine*, 101.

³³ “An attempt to Christianize the Greek—and especially Stoic—concept of nature.” Vanneste, *Nature et Grâce*, 22.

³⁴ Gerald Bonner, “Pelagianism and Augustine,” *Augustinian Studies* 23 (1992): 35.

surrounded—who were not necessarily characterized by uniformity. In describing this circle, Carol Harrison has written of Pelagius’ Roman milieu as being “an extremely conservative elite of affluent, influential, lay aristocrats who self-consciously strove to set themselves apart by enthusiastic ascetic renunciation and observance of a strict moral code.”³⁵ The continuity with the Donatist tradition is not difficult to see in Harrison’s description, although we should also add that the cohort around Pelagius were urbane. They tended to see themselves as representing cultured, cosmopolitan scholarship in contrast to the more rustic Augustine, who continued to use the outdated *Vetus Latina* instead of the fresh translations of Jerome.³⁶ This brought with it a level of intellectual persuasiveness.³⁷ But Brown is also right to see essentially Stoic roots to this Roman movement. The “good man” of pagan Rome had become the “good Christian,” something Augustine would point out at the beginning of *De Natura et Gratia*.³⁸ Pelagius and his followers saw themselves as participants in a divine economy of merit and desert, held in the paradigms of Roman society rather than necessarily bringing fresh insights from the Scriptures.³⁹

Alaric and his invading Goths were Arian Christians, whose deviation from the orthodox faith made their victory all the more painful for orthodox Christians in the empire. But the full significance of the sacking of Rome lay in the significance of Rome for the empire. Brown

³⁵ Harrison, *Augustine*, 102. Augustine’s Ep. 130 (412) to Proba, and *De bono viduitatis* (414) to Juliana were both written to noble ladies affected by Pelagian ideas. And Augustine also preached against this elite approach to the faith. In S. 169.15.18, for instance, he spoke in support of the average Christian: “Better a cripple limping along to God, than the swiftest runner off course; yet cripple, be not proud; the runner may repent, return, and pass you on the way.”

³⁶ Charles T. Mathewes, “The Career of the Pelagian Controversy: Introductory Essay,” *Augustinian Studies* 33, no. 2 (2002): 205. Although, note that Mathewes mentions Elaine Pagels as one modern scholar who has overdone the painting of the controversy as one between “enlightened *literati*” and “uptight provincial ignoramus.” See Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* (New York: Random House, 1988).

³⁷ See Ep. 186.5.13.

³⁸ Brown, *Augustine*, 347.

³⁹ Mathewes, “The Career of the Pelagian Controversy,” 210.

writes how for pagans Rome had come to be seen as a sort of “pagan Vatican”—a fortified place in which the old religion would survive, even if ravished in other places. Rome safeguarded the peace of the gods for the whole empire. And this had taken on Christian significance too. The remains of Peter and Paul in Rome had led to Christian mythic collusion with the pagan significance of Rome.⁴⁰ And so the rise of Pelagius must also be seen in this context of preservation of the Roman way of life, even if in a Christianized form.

Pelagius had been teaching and writing in Rome for years without attracting too much attention. But with the sacking of Rome and the subsequent emigration, Pelagius and his followers were forced to engage Christians beyond their own walls. One of these members of the Pelagian circle, Caelestius, landed with Pelagius in North Africa in 411. Pelagius landed in Hippo, but he never met Augustine, and soon travelled on to Palestine while Caelestius made his way to Carthage. Caelestius was something of the *enfant terrible* of the movement and the initial provoker of controversy.⁴¹ He approached Aurelius, the bishop of Carthage, and asked to be ordained. Not only did Aurelius deny his request, he accused him of heresy and condemned him, as Caelestius refused to renounce some condemned propositions.⁴² The Carthaginian jurist Marcellinus was called upon to judge Caelestius and his teaching, and it is at this point that Augustine was first drawn in to the controversy, albeit with Caelestius and not Pelagius. It would take years for him to engage Pelagius directly. Marcellinus wrote to Augustine for assistance, and Augustine responded with the first two books of *De Peccatorum Meritis* to which a third book was then added. Caelestius was duly condemned in Carthage in 411 for four errors: that

⁴⁰ Brown, *Augustine*, 287.

⁴¹ Brown, *Augustine*, 343.

⁴² See Michael R. Rackett, “What’s Wrong with Pelagianism?: Augustine and Jerome on the Dangers of Pelagius and His Followers,” *Augustinian Studies* 33, no. 2 (2002): 224.

Adam had to die, that Adam's sin injured him alone, that infants are born in a pre-lapsarian state, and that "Adam by his death [or by his sin] does not subject the whole human race to death; [because] Christ by His Resurrection does not give new life to the entire human race."⁴³ When Marcellinus further pressed Augustine on the issue of the necessity of grace, Augustine responded again with *De Spiritu et Littera*, which is the first time that he referred to the Pelagians as *inimici gratiae Dei*.⁴⁴

Pelagius himself continued to write from Palestine. In 413 he wrote a long letter to an aristocratic Roman woman Demetrias following her decision to become a nun. This letter was "a calculated and widely-publicized declaration of his message: "since perfection is possible for man, it is obligatory."⁴⁵ His teaching did not immediately raise the ire of Eastern bishops, and it took a Westerner to lead the charge against Pelagius in Palestine. Paul Orosius was a Spanish priest who had been drawn to Hippo after reading Augustine. Augustine used him as a messenger, sending him to Jerome in the summer of 415 (not yet with a copy of *De Natura et Gratia* which he told Jerome was "under way"⁴⁶). Orosius arrived in Bethlehem "full of anti-Pelagian zeal" as Bonner puts it.⁴⁷ His enthusiasm led first to the Synod of Jerusalem and later to a gathering of Eastern bishops at the 415 Synod of Diospolis to consider the case against Pelagius. They forced Pelagius to retract the proposition that "on the day of judgment there will be no mercy for the wicked and sinners, but they will be burned in everlasting fires."⁴⁸ But

⁴³ See Eugene Portalié, *A Guide to the Thought of St. Augustine*, trans. Ralph J. Bastian (Chicago: Regnery, 1960), 184. The parenthetical additions are those of Portalié which he makes for the sake of sense.

⁴⁴ *Spiritu et Littera* 35.63.

⁴⁵ Brown, *Augustine*, 342.

⁴⁶ See Serge Lancel, *Saint Augustine*, trans. Antonia Nevill (London: SCM, 2002), 333.

⁴⁷ Bonner, "Pelagianism and Augustine," 43.

⁴⁸ Portalié, *Augustine*, 188.

Pelagius compromised well, distancing himself from Caelestius, and agreeing that no one had lived a perfectly sinless life, even though maintaining it was theoretically possible by a mixture of human labor and God's grace.⁴⁹ While the Eastern bishops were satisfied, the Africans were not. In 416 the African bishops sent a letter to Pope Innocent asking for Pelagius' condemnation.⁵⁰ Despite Pelagius' referring to God's grace, the African bishops called him and his followers *inimici gratiae*,

a charge which had a good deal of plausibility; it was very difficult to find confession of grace in Pelagian writing in any form other than grace of creation, illumination, and remission of sins in baptism, since their denial of any transmission of Original Sin postulated a self-sufficiency in man's created nature.⁵¹

While Pope Innocent agreed with the African bishops against Pelagius, his successor Zosimus, under the influence of Caelestius, considered Pelagius' teaching to be unobjectionable. And so the Africans appealed to the Emperor Honorius and the Imperial Court, who took charge with a declaration from Ravenna that condemned both Pelagius and Caelestius in 417. Zosimus duly conformed, and condemned them both in a letter that was sent throughout the East.⁵² In 418 the Council of Carthage met, attended by over 200 African bishops. They passed nine canons against Pelagianism, including condemning even the theoretical possibility of sinlessness, something that Augustine himself had expressed support for.⁵³ While the controversy continued with Julian of Eclanum and in the so-called semi-Pelagian controversy, the condemnation of Pelagius was complete by 418.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Harrison, *Augustine*, 107–8. See also Augustine's *Gest. Pel.* 6.16.

⁵⁰ See Augustine's Ep. 176, which may have been written by Augustine or by another African bishop.

⁵¹ Bonner, "Pelagianism and Augustine," 45.

⁵² TeSelle, "Grace," 1064.

⁵³ See *Nat. et gr.*, 60.70.

⁵⁴ Harrison, *Augustine*, 107–8.

Just how many “Pelagians” were there? Augustine seemed to suggest that they were numerous in Africa, however the evidence is not overwhelming.⁵⁵ Gerald Bonner notes that little is really heard of the circle around Pelagius after the condemnation of Caelestius in 411, much less after the condemnation of both Caelestius and Pelagius in 417. While the controversy continued throughout the 420s with Augustine and Julian of Eclanum’s fierce exchanges, there is no evidence to suggest that “Pelagianism” was a mass movement anywhere near the size of Arianism or Donatism.⁵⁶ When Pope Innocent I was asked in 416 whether there were any Pelagians in Rome, he responded that he did not know.⁵⁷ In his companion essay, Bonner suggests that Pelagianism “has been exaggerated by Church historians” in part due to its purported theological importance.⁵⁸ He even attributes this partly to Luther, as he quotes Luther saying that the Pelagians “made a man of Augustine” who would otherwise have been “a very dry and thin teacher.”⁵⁹

The Writing of *De Natura et Gratia*

Because *De Natura et Gratia* was written in 415, it was traditionally assumed that *De Natura* was written in the years directly preceding Augustine’s response, say around 413. Recent scholarship has, however, argued for an earlier date, around 405–406 when Pelagius would still have been in Rome.⁶⁰ But it would have been much closer to 415 before Augustine ever heard of

⁵⁵ See Ep. 175.4.

⁵⁶ Bonner, “Pelagianism and Augustine,” 36.

⁵⁷ Bonner, “Pelagianism and Augustine,” 39.

⁵⁸ Gerald Bonner, “Augustine and Pelagianism,” *Augustinian Studies* 24 (1993): 27.

⁵⁹ Bonner, “Augustine and Pelagianism,” 44, n. 7. See *Tischreden* WE IV, 56 and V, 414–15.

⁶⁰ Y. M. Duval, “La Date Du De Natura de Pélage: Les Premières Étapes de La Controverse Sur La Nature de La Grâce,” *Revue Des Études Augustiniennes* 36 (1990): 283. See also Squires, “Sinlessness,” 453. And also Wegener, Lamberigts, and Lambert, “De Natura et Gratia,” 350.

this work. It was brought to his attention by two of Pelagius' former pupils, Timasius and James, who wrote to Augustine requesting his comments on *De Natura* which they attached to their letter. This may have been in 413, but Serge Lancel thinks that it could have been at the end of 414.⁶¹

In looking at the place of *De Natura* within the context of Pelagius' works, Robert F. Evans has noted that there is one significant feature of *De Natura* which is not present in Pelagius' commentaries on Paul. Evans writes that Pelagius had sensed himself under pressure to acknowledge the role of grace in the Christian life, and so attributed the capacity to avoid sin in part to the gift of grace which was implanted in man by the Creator.⁶² While the recent revision of the date of *De Natura* would temper the notion that Pelagius was under any pressure at the time of writing, it is noteworthy for our study that *De Natura* stands as Pelagius' most developed treatment of grace.⁶³ Evans also thinks that *De Natura* marks a significant turning point because in it Pelagius employs Catholic orthodox thinkers to support his case. As we shall see, he looked for support for his case not just in Hilary, Ambrose, Chrysostom and Jerome, but even in Augustine himself.⁶⁴

De Natura et Gratia was probably finished in 415. When the African bishops appealed to Pope Innocent against the exoneration of Pelagius at the Synod of Diospolis, they attached a copy of Augustine's treatise along with an annotated copy of *De Natura*.⁶⁵ Augustine himself

⁶¹ Lancel, *Saint Augustine*, 333. See also Squires, "Sinlessness," 453.

⁶² Evans, *Pelagius*, 84. See *Nat. et gr.* 53.59.

⁶³ While Pelagius may not have been under the same amount of pressure in 406 as he was to be in 416, the parts of *De Natura* which Augustine quotes in *De Natura et Gratia* do show that Pelagius was anticipating objections and seemed accustomed to being attacked for his teaching. See *Nat. et gr.*, 10.11.

⁶⁴ Evans, *Pelagius*, 85.

⁶⁵ See Ep. 177.

also sent a copy to John of Jerusalem, who played an important role in the treatment of Pelagius in the East.⁶⁶ We also know from one of Augustine's letters that he considered *De Natura et Gratia* to be important to the debate and worth copying.⁶⁷

***De Natura et Gratia* Examined**

1.1–6.6 Summary of Controversy

Augustine begins with some general remarks concerning what he takes to be Pelagius' basic approach and error. He agrees with Pelagius that men ought not to blame their sins upon human nature. But Pelagius is "far too incensed at this evil"⁶⁸ and so, in St. Paul's words, he sides with those "who have zeal for God, but not in accord with knowledge. For, not knowing the righteousness of God and wanting to establish their own, they were not subject to the righteousness of God."⁶⁹ Pelagius' is an overcorrection. In desiring men to take responsibility for their sins, he also seeks for men to take responsibility for their own righteousness rather than to find it *in adiutorio gratiae Christi*. For Augustine, the law produces a fear which is only useful to lead us, *velut paedagogi*, to grace. If not, then there is no need to become a Christian. Hanby has written that here Augustine rehabilitates the law, "now elided into Christ himself and the doxological economy manifest in him."⁷⁰ But Augustine seems more interested in contrasting the law with Christ, quoting—the first of many times in this treatise—Gal. 2:21: "For if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ has died in vain." Augustine then quotes *De*

⁶⁶ See Ep. 179.2.

⁶⁷ See Ep. 169.4.13.

⁶⁸ *Nimis exarsit adversus hanc pestilentiam.*

⁶⁹ Rom. 10.2–3; *Nat. et gr.*, 1.1.

⁷⁰ Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity*, 80.

Natura at some length, where Pelagius ponders the fate of those who are yet to hear the word.

What is human nature to do but believe in the God who made heaven and earth, the God whom it naturally perceives as its maker, and, by living correctly, fulfills his will, though it has not received any instruction in the faith concerning the suffering and resurrection of Christ?⁷¹

Augustine repeats that if this were the case, Christ's death would be in vain. If Christ's death is not to be in vain, human nature can only be redeemed *per fidem et sacramentum sanguinis Christi*.⁷² Interestingly, it is Pelagius who here stresses a natural desire for God which is even redemptive, and Augustine who is more concerned with faith and the blood of Christ. As we shall discuss shortly, Augustine denies that salvation can come by a kind of cosmological participation in the Creator, even if one has led an exemplary life and never had the opportunity to hear of Christ.⁷³ A few years earlier in *De Spiritu et Littera* he had written that it is only by the Holy Ghost that we can love God and participate in God.⁷⁴ This is because while human nature *per se* is not to be blamed for sin, that does not make it pure.⁷⁵ Augustine employs a medical analogy by declaring that human nature *sana non est* and needs a *medico*. Importantly, human nature continues to receive goods such as *vita, sensibus, mente* from God, but due to original sin, *ex originali peccato*, it has a defect, *vitium*, and is sick.⁷⁶ Our natures are deserving of a

⁷¹ *Nat. et gr.*, 2.2.

⁷² *Nat. et gr.*, 2.2. Further on, Augustine writes that Pelagius' zeal should be "that the cross of Christ not be done away with." *Nat. et gr.*, 7.7.

⁷³ See Burns, *Operative Grace*, 97–99. Brown also comments on this section: "The Pelagians, with their optimistic views on human nature, seemed to Augustine to blur the distinction between the Catholic church and the good pagans; but they did so only in order to establish an icy puritanism as the sole law of the Christian community." Brown, *Augustine*, 351.

⁷⁴ *Spir. et litt.*, 3.5.

⁷⁵ Augustine also goes on to say that "the image of God has not been removed from the human soul by the stain of earthly loves to such a point that not even the faintest outlines of it remain. Hence, the soul can be correctly said to observe or know some elements of the law even amid the godlessness of its life." *Spir. et litt.*, 48.28. This is Augustine attempting to come to terms with Rom. 2:14–15 while rejecting Pelagian self-sufficiency.

⁷⁶ *Nat. et gr.*, 3.3. Later on, Augustine refers to *natura humana vitiosa*. *Nat. et gr.*, 40.47.

punishment which is completely just. Grace, then, is not merited, *sed gratis datur*, and those who do not receive grace receive a punishment that is fully deserved because they are not free from sin. God's justice would thus be blameless even if he condemned everyone.⁷⁷ Pelagius' contrary position may "have the semblance of cleverness" but it is a "wordy wisdom that does away with the cross of Christ" and denies the scriptures.⁷⁸ As Hanby has identified, there is a Stoicism in the Pelagian position which ultimately points to a nihilistic definition of man without reference to God. Augustine refers to this as a mistaken, Pelagian notion that we are "self-sufficient for righteousness."⁷⁹

7.7–18.20 Sinlessness and Grace

Having spoken broadly of what is at stake, Augustine then begins to work through *De Natura* in a more systematic fashion. He introduces the possibility of sinlessness in this life, a point which Pelagius and Augustine shared agreement on. Augustine, expanding upon Pelagius, distinguishes between what the Lord is able to do, and what he wills to do—something of an anticipation of the medieval distinction between *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata*. As we have noted, Augustine was open to the theoretical possibility of sinlessness in this life, until the 418 Council of Carthage declared this position anathema.⁸⁰ His openness was a result of his emphasis on the power of God's grace, which could be employed according to whatever his sovereignty and freedom willed.⁸¹ Brown writes of a spirit in Augustine's writings according to

⁷⁷ *Nat. et gr.*, 5.5.

⁷⁸ *Nat. et gr.*, 6.6.

⁷⁹ *sibi ipsam ad iustitiam. Nat. et gr.*, 6.6.

⁸⁰ See, for example, the probably contemporaneous *De Perfectione Iustitiae Hominis*, 21.44, cited by Bonner, "Pelagianism and Augustine," 42.

⁸¹ Burns thinks that Pelagius "did not so much deny Augustine's analyses of the role of providence, Christ, the church, the sacraments, and the charity of the Holy Spirit as simply fail to appreciate their implications for the

which most things were possible by God's grace. In contrast to some of the more memorable passages in the *Confessions*, Augustine never dramatized "the combat of chastity."⁸² But in harmony with the first half of his celebrated prayer from the *Confessions*, he had full confidence that God could give what he commanded.

But Augustine detects in Pelagius a different spirit. To illustrate this, Augustine raises Pelagius' position that Adam's sin is not contracted through birth, but rather *propter imitationem* of Adam's sin. For Pelagius, an original sin that is infectious by birth could not bring any guilt upon men because they did not have the possibility of being anything else. While Augustine was willing, at this stage, to allow for the possibility of God's grace to so overwhelm a person that they lived without sin, Pelagius did not so stress the grace of God, causing Augustine to suspect that he located this possibility in the ability of human nature, thus doing away with the cross of Christ.⁸³ Augustine then quotes from *De Natura*, where Pelagius expresses a certain agnosticism concerning the means by which the possibility of sinlessness may be brought about: "Whether it is by grace or by a help or by mercy or whatever it is by which a human being can be without sin, whoever admits the reality also admits the means to it as well."⁸⁴ Augustine writes that upon reading this he was "suddenly flooded with joy" because it appeared that Pelagius was not denying the importance of the grace of God. But as he read on, he began to have "suspicions,"

understanding of divine sovereignty and human autonomy. Burns, *Operative Grace*, 95.

⁸² Brown, *Augustine*, 511. See the Dolbeau s. 15*.5.6.

⁸³ *Nat. et gr.*, 9.10. Stuart Squires has recently written that the Pelagian controversy was essentially about sinlessness and how we can free ourselves from sin. There is no doubt that this is a key aspect to the debate, but Squires' case depends on an unwarranted exclusivity. He writes: "The standard view of the Pelagian controversy as centrally concerned with the nature of grace, while other issues of theological anthropology and soteriology (such as baptism, free will, and predestination) have orbited around this preoccupation, is largely dismissed today." Squires, "Sinlessness," 447. Curiously, he cites as his support for this claim a little known 1956 study. In contrast, the renowned scholar of the Pelagian controversy, Robert F. Evans, has asserted that grace was indeed "the real issue" at play. Evans, *Pelagius*, 7.

⁸⁴ *Nat. et gr.*, 10.11

because all of the analogies that Pelagius used concerned the power of nature such as a man arguing, a bird flying, and a rabbit running.

He seems, in any case, to have mentioned things that nature can do, for these members, namely, the tongue, wings, and feet, were created for natures of this sort. He has not said the sort of things that we want to be understood in the case of the grace without which a human being cannot be justified, where there is a question of healing, not of creating natures. Already uneasy for this reason, I began to read the rest, and I found that my suspicions were not mistaken.⁸⁵

For Augustine, sinlessness, and thus freedom, is not something inherently a part of human nature but is rather the goal of the process of Christ's gracious healing.⁸⁶ That which Pelagius assumed a human being had from the start on account of his nature, Augustine proclaimed Christ was bringing about within us as we make progress by his grace.⁸⁷

It is important to note here that Pelagius did not deny the reality of grace, and seemed tired of people assuming he did.⁸⁸ Augustine seems to be aware of this, and refrains from calling Pelagius *inimicus gratiae* even though he previously had, albeit without naming him, in *De Spiritu et Littera*.⁸⁹ But what did he mean by grace? As his anthropological and zoological analogies show, Pelagius did not always stress a meaningful distinction between nature and grace. Both are at work in leading men and creatures to their natural ends.⁹⁰ He does not always explicitly mention grace, because he does not consider it to be entirely separate from nature, even while he does not deny its reality. Thus Augustine and Pelagius agree that human efforts to

⁸⁵ *Nat. et gr.*, 11.12.

⁸⁶ See *Spir. et litt.*, 30.52.

⁸⁷ *Nat. et gr.*, 12.13. See also *Nat. et gr.*, 58.68.

⁸⁸ See *Nat. et gr.*, 10.11.

⁸⁹ *Spir. et litt.*, 35.63.

⁹⁰ Robert Calhoun has written that "Pelagian grace is a natural endowment." Calhoun, *Scripture, Creed, Theology*, 376. Likewise, Lenka Karfíková has written, perhaps a little too simply, that for Pelagius, "human nature itself is grace." Lenka Karfíková, *Grace and the Will According to Augustine* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 188.

avoid sin remain futile without the support of divine grace, but they both mean different things by grace. Wegener, Lamberigts, and Lambert have recently written, in their summary of *De*

Natura et Gratia:

Augustine acknowledges that Pelagius does not deny the human dependence on divine grace. But he severely criticizes his opponent for equating grace with the natural capacities of human nature instead of recognizing its character as an undeserved gift granted by God.⁹¹

But that is perhaps not as clear as it could be. Something can be both a part of the natural capacities of human nature as well as an undeserved gift granted by God. Indeed, Pelagius could affirm both with respect to grace. And, it is important to note, he did not completely elide grace into nature. Even though Jerome could condemn Pelagian “grace” as being no more than free will with God’s law as a guide,⁹² Pelagius does also speak of grace as the forgiveness which comes through Jesus Christ, especially in baptism.⁹³ Indeed for Pelagius, baptismal grace seemed to bring a dramatic fresh start in contrast to Augustine’s insistence that the old man still endured.⁹⁴ But this is a key to seeing their differences. For Augustine, grace was something to be continually received as the Christian lived their life in participation with Christ, something we shall explore further. In the faith which apprehends grace, “wrong actions are both forgiven and, by the help of grace, avoided.”⁹⁵ Pelagius’ theology of grace was much more indebted to the Stoical vision whereby we operate in something of a closed circle, with baptism being a somewhat uncharacteristic intrusion of forgiveness, and the avoidance of sin being our

⁹¹ Wegener, Lamberigts, and Lambert, “De Natura et Gratia,” 350.

⁹² See Bonner, “Pelagianism and Augustine,” 42.

⁹³ E.g. *Nat. et gr.*, 18.20. For a discussion, see Evans, *Pelagius*, 16.

⁹⁴ Brown, *Augustine*, 372–3.

⁹⁵ *Nat. et gr.*, 12.13.

responsibility. Augustine acknowledges that Pelagius does not deny that we should ask for pardon, but he does note that Pelagius never counsels that one should pray for help so as not to sin.⁹⁶ While we here need to note that John Milbank especially does share with Pelagius an approach to nature and grace marked by elision, Radical Orthodoxy seeks to elevate nature as God's underserved and gracious gift in which we are continually participating, whereas Pelagius sought to domesticate grace as a deposit given to an autonomous humanity. In Eugene Portalié's words: "The foundation of the Pelagian system, then, is the absolute independence of human liberty in relationship to God and its unlimited power for good as well as for evil," something which has its origins in Stoicism. He goes on:

According to Pelagius, man owes existence and freedom of choice (which he calls the possibility of good) to God the Creator. This is the only gift of God and, since it is gratuitous, Pelagius calls it a grace, playing on the words. Any further influence of God on freedom of choice would destroy it.⁹⁷

The fulfilment of this vision could be seen in Julian of Eclanum who proclaimed: "The freedom of the will is that by which man is freed from God," something which von Harnack rightly said was essentially atheistic in structure as God becomes a spectator and not a participant.⁹⁸

Augustine invokes this participatory nature of grace by raising the topic of prayer. That the church prays with the Psalmist, "Guide my journeys according to your word, and let not sinfulness dominate me," means that the Lord does not leave us up to our own resources and that his grace does in part help us avoid sin.⁹⁹ Responding to Pelagius' discussion of the book of James, Augustine writes that James is actually showing that left to ourselves, we have no hope

⁹⁶ *Nat. et gr.*, 18.20.

⁹⁷ Portalié, *Augustine*, 186. See also Mathewes, "The Career of the Pelagian Controversy," 207.

⁹⁸ Cited by Portalié, *Augustine*, 186–87. See Augustine, *Opus Imp.* I, 78.

⁹⁹ *Nat. et gr.*, 13.14. Augustine is citing Ps. 119:133.

against sin. James teaches that “the human tongue is so great an evil that it cannot be tamed by any human being, though even wild animals are tamed by humans.” The goal is not despair or resignation, but that “we would beg the help of divine grace.”¹⁰⁰ Augustine had raised this at the beginning of his treatise, namely that the law leads us to cling to God’s grace for help. Pelagian self-sufficiency, in which the law provides us with information regarding the proper conduct of our lives, leaves no room for prayer. As Augustine asks, “is someone going to oppose this prayer in order to avoid harm to free choice, because it is sufficient unto itself by its natural ability to observe all the commandments pertaining to righteousness?”¹⁰¹

We can here see the validity of the Radical Orthodoxy concern that modernity has fostered a kind of Pelagian delusion of self-sufficiency. Augustine is well aware of the ramifications of Pelagian grace cutting off God and man from continual relationship with each other. This represents something of a development in Augustine. Burns notes that the newly converted Augustine believed in a certain amount of autonomy. His asceticism was of a piece with a kind of spiritual autonomy, free from bodily concerns, whereby he had the freedom to orient his mind towards darkness or light. Burns cites from the *Cassiciacum* dialogues in which Augustine had written things like: “The soul relies on its own natural resources and that assistance which God provides through human society,” and then also, “The work of divine Wisdom and Love neither supplement nor substitute for human action.”¹⁰² But Burns helpfully shows how the early Manichaean debates had made him circumspect about human freedom and self-sufficiency. The Manichaeans dwelt in a universe which was too voluntarist. And so, Burns writes, Augustine’s

¹⁰⁰ *Nat. et gr.*, 15.16.

¹⁰¹ *Nat. et gr.*, 16.17.

¹⁰² Burns, *Operative Grace*, 19–21.

“prior assertions of human autonomy were muted. The discussion of conversion shifted from the human quest for God to the divine approach to humanity in Christ.”¹⁰³ Burns later adds, “The spiritual universalism of his Italian dialogues was finally shattered on the rock of Paul’s epistles.”¹⁰⁴ But even in the *Confessions*, Burns argues, Augustine presents God’s operative grace as controlling decisions through external influences, what Burns calls “congruous vocation,” while keeping the essential freedom of the human spirit inviolate.¹⁰⁵ There here comes a point at which Burns comes close to overstating his case regarding the *Confessions*, given that Augustine there acknowledges that God “is more inward than my most inward part”, or “closer to me than myself” (*interior intimo meo*), showing that Augustine’s anthropology is already explicitly anti-autonomous.¹⁰⁶

By the time of *De Natura et Gratia*, however, Augustine had moved fully towards a conception of ongoing dependence on God for all things. One of the verses he cites the most during the Pelagian controversy is 1 Cor. 4:7: “For who has set you apart? But what do you have that you have not received?”¹⁰⁷ De Lubac, and Radical Orthodoxy following him, are on

¹⁰³ Burns, *Operative Grace*, 22.

¹⁰⁴ Burns, *Operative Grace*, 30. Burns includes a good discussion on the importance of Augustine’s 396 *Ad Simplicianum* as a watershed moment in his developing theology of grace, without nevertheless being Augustine’s final word. Gerald Bonner is even stronger in saying that the whole of Augustine’s theology of grace and predestination was in place in *Ad Simplicianum*. Gerald Bonner, *Freedom and Necessity: St Augustine’s Teaching on Divine Power and Human Freedom* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 45.

¹⁰⁵ Burns, *Operative Grace*, 37. Burns thus shows how the *Confessions* open with “the human spirit’s natural desire for God and its dependence upon the preaching of the gospel in Jesus Christ in fulfilling that desire.” Augustine’s theology in the *Confessions* acknowledges that our desires have been distorted by pride, curiosity and libido, but that “the revelation of moral truth brings a recognition of the good and provokes a decision to live as one should. The frustration of this purpose by custom and libido breaks a person’s pride and prepares him for the offer of divine assistance which is made in the preaching of the gospel of Christ.” But this divine assistance is essentially external, via “environmental graces” in which “the Holy Spirit strengthens a person in a free decision which he has already made.” Burns, *Operative Grace*, 45, 50.

¹⁰⁶ *Conf.*, 3.6.11.

¹⁰⁷ This is also developed in *De Civitate Dei* on which Augustine had begun work at the time of the *De Natura et Gratia*. In Brown’s words, there Augustine shows that “an omnipotent denial of dependence characterizes

Augustinian ground when they stress the giftedness of all of life against a modernist, Pelagian, self-sufficiency from God. In Rowan Williams' approximation of Augustine's thought: "I do not know myself; but God knows me. God's knowledge of me is available not as a picture I can grasp or as a piece of information, but in the form of trust in God's love—faith, in other words. Such trust is grounded in and enabled by the history of Christ."¹⁰⁸

19.21–32.36 Original Sin and Participation

Augustine then introduces Pelagius' counter-argument. Sin is either a substance, or it is something without any substance which only refers to an act of wrongdoing. Rejecting the former, Pelagius concludes that something which lacks substance cannot weaken or change human nature. Thus our nature remains free from injury.¹⁰⁹ Augustine responds again with his appeal to Scripture and prayer, bringing Pelagius' argument into debate with the Scripture. Would it be wrong, Augustine asks, to pray with the Psalmist "heal my soul, for I have sinned against you," or to agree with the Lord that "it is not those who are in good health who need a physician, but those who are sick"? Taking up again this medical analogy, Augustine probes further: "What is there to heal, if nothing is wounded, nothing injured, nothing weakened and harmed?"¹¹⁰ This rhetorical pattern is common for Augustine, to first attend to the text of Scripture, and then to address the logic of the argument. Yes, he says, Pelagius is right to see that sin is not a substance. But, to take the case of food, not eating is also not a substance and yet if someone abstains from food, "the substance of the body wastes away" and it even begins to

the attitude of the earthly city." Brown, *Augustine*, 326.

¹⁰⁸ Williams, *On Augustine*, 14.

¹⁰⁹ *Nat. et gr.*, 19.21. See also 20.22.

¹¹⁰ *Nat. et gr.*, 19.21.

reject food. Augustine then applies the analogy in an interesting way.

So too, sin is not a substance, but God is a substance and the highest substance and the only true food of a rational creature. Listen to what the creature says, because it has withdrawn from this food by disobedience and is unable to take, by reason of weakness, what it ought to have enjoyed, *My heart has been beaten and dried out like hay, because I have forgotten to eat my bread* (Ps. 102:5).¹¹¹

The food the rational creature needs is God. By rejecting this “substance,” man not only is in need of forgiveness, but also in need of healing, because he has lost his appetite for God, for the very thing that he needs. This “lack” of God is not a substance, and yet it damages the substance of man and distorts it. Augustine goes on to quote from Romans, according to which God punished some by handing

them over to the desires of their heart, to impurity ... For their women exchanged natural intercourse for that which is against nature. Likewise, the men too abandoned natural relations with women and burned with desire for one another, men committing perversities upon men. They received in themselves the mutual recompense of their error, as they deserved (Rom. 1:24–27).

For Augustine then, sin, which is a lack of the substance of God, has led to a damaged nature, wrongly oriented and with diminished strength. If we continue without the substance of God, if God leaves us to the desires of our heart, we will not be left to what is natural, or even to a neutral decision, but rather to what is unnatural. Moreover, we bear the culpability for this damaged tendency towards the unnatural, for the recompense of error is deserved. The punishment of sin is thus not only external, but intrinsic to the damage which sin does to us.¹¹²

This definition of sin thus continues Augustine’s stress on the need for ongoing participation in God. Sin has left us as discordant creatures who need concord.¹¹³ We have

¹¹¹ *Nat. et gr.*, 20.22.

¹¹² *Nat. et gr.*, 22.24.

¹¹³ See Augustine’s S. 155.2, cited by Brown, *Augustine*, 368.

already mentioned John Cavadini's article, "The Darkest Enigma," in which he sees that there exists no such thing as a stable, independent "self" for Augustine.¹¹⁴ If anything, we can see here that that is a more Pelagian position, whereby nature cannot be touched by sin because it is lacking substance. The lack of God for Augustine, however, has damaged us. Fleshing out his analogy of hunger, he writes:

If one completely abstains from food, the substance of the body wastes away; it is destroyed by an imbalance in health, is drained of strength, and is weakened and broken by exhaustion to the point that, even if one somehow continues to live, he can scarcely be enticed back to food, though by abstaining from it his health was injured.¹¹⁵

This is a condition that needs external help, so distorted have we become due to the rejection of God. Pelagius, Augustine writes, thinks that because it was our wills which led us to wrongdoing, it is our wills that now can set us on the right path. As if the remedy for a bad choice is a good choice. But sin has led to the death of the soul, which can only lead to more sin, and it "necessarily produces dead works until the grace of Christ brings it back to life."¹¹⁶ We can even see in Augustine that our participation in God is not simply despite our sin, but, in a mysterious way, through our sin and suffering. Radical Orthodoxy stresses our continual participation in God as the source of all being in whom we continually receive our being. But Augustine also sees our need for God not just in terms of existence, but in terms of healing from sin. Peter Burnell has said that for Augustine our participation with God almost depends on sin to

¹¹⁴ See Cavadini, "The Darkest Enigma," 121–23.

¹¹⁵ *Nat. et gr.*, 20.22. As seen earlier, Burns thinks that Augustine moves from treating God's operative grace only as a matter of "congruous vocation" to in 418 seeing grace as impacting the soul directly. But here in 415 we can already see Augustine affirming that external factors, such as being enticed back to God, are not sufficient in themselves.

¹¹⁶ *Nat. et gr.*, 23.25.

counter our natural pride and make us aware of our dependence on God.¹¹⁷ Without fully understanding the woundedness of our nature, we are prone to an imagined self-sufficiency, which brings a theodical aspect to Augustine's thought. Burns puts it this way:

Augustine explained that God allows Christians to continue experiencing their weakness and dependence on the divine assistance in order to prevent a resurgence of the pride and self-reliance which caused the original fall of humanity. A lesser grace is given so that a greater sin may be forestalled.¹¹⁸

We are participatory according to our status as created beings, but Augustine's stress in *De Natura et Gratia* is our need also for God according to that part of us which is wounded by sin. That our being comes from God is undeniable, but as we have seen, Augustine is keen to show up the great distinction between Christians and good pagans.¹¹⁹ For example, in one of his sermons, Augustine says: "Even if I do not consent to it, there is still in me both something dead and something alive. Surely you cannot deny that this dead part of you belongs to you?"¹²⁰ That which is alive corresponds to all human beings, but Augustine the bishop stresses a participation that restores that which is dead. And so in *De Natura et Gratia*, he continues by showing that there are evils which, by the mercy of God, lead to good. Again, Augustine does this by appealing to Scripture and prayer:

Did the psalmist suffer something good when he said, *You turned your face away from me, and I became confused* (Ps 30:8)? Certainly not! And yet this confusion was in some sense a remedy against his pride. He had, after all, said in his prosperity, *I will never be shaken* (Ps 30:7) and attributed to himself what he had from the Lord.

¹¹⁷ Peter Burnell, *The Augustinian Person* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 91–92.

¹¹⁸ J. Patout Burns, "Grace," ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald, *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 397. See also Burns, *Operative Grace*, 113.

¹¹⁹ See *Nat. et gr.*, 2.2.

¹²⁰ S. 154.14

For what did he have that he had not received? Hence, he had to be shown the source of what he had so that he might receive in humility what he had lost through pride.¹²¹

Augustine rejects the position that God gives evil that grace may abound. But he also recognizes that we come to the humility which acknowledges our true dependence on God through sin and suffering. A little further on, Augustine writes of God's redemptive use of suffering:

[God] certainly acts with the aim of healing everything, but he acts according to his own judgment and does not take from the sick person the prescription for the cure. He undoubtedly wanted to make that man the strongest of apostles to whom he said, *Virtue is made perfect in weakness* (2 Cor 12:9), and despite his frequent prayers, he did not remove from him the thorn in the flesh.¹²²

Simply acknowledging our dependence on God for our being is not enough, for even the pagans can do that. There is also then a kind of participation in God which is not with respect to being, but has to do with our weakness and need for redemption through Christ. As he says later on in this treatise, every day we pray that our Father would forgive us our sins, as we forgive others. And by means of our supplications, "pardon immediately wipes away the sins we repeatedly commit out of ignorance or weakness."¹²³ But it is through our sins that we are led to daily repentance and humility before God. As Augustine put it in one of his sermons: "When I say to you that without the help of God you do nothing, I mean nothing good, for you have the freedom of choice to act evilly without the help of God."¹²⁴ Augustine would not dispute that even acting evilly entails the "help" of God with respect to existence. But beyond being, we can be cut off

¹²¹ *Nat. et gr.*, 24.27.

¹²² *Nat. et gr.*, 27.31.

¹²³ *Nat. et gr.*, 35.41.

¹²⁴ S. 156.11.12. Thus Portalié seems to be under the neo-scholastic cloud that so troubled de Lubac when he says regarding Augustine: "From the fact that freedom of choice has no efficacy in the order of salvation the conclusion cannot be drawn that it can only commit sin, for the natural virtues fall within its power." Portalié, *Augustine*, 195.

from participation in God. Augustine is here wishing clearly to distinguish between doing nothing with respect to being, and doing nothing with respect to what pleases God, between an order of creation and an order of redemption. This is crucial to understanding how Augustine conceives of participation, and it is a distinction that is not always evident in Radical Orthodoxy. In a more recent, parallel, example, W. Bachmann criticized Emil Brunner for ignoring “the communion with the Creator which has already been given to the sinner.” Brunner's Augustinian response is instructive: “But how can man be seen as sinner if he is not created by God! *Communion* with the Creator has been forfeited by sin. It has become life ‘under the wrath of God.’ ”¹²⁵ For Brunner, everyone exists only in relation to God, but that relation, or even participation, can be negative or positive. “Indeed, sin itself is a relation to God: that of rebellion against the Creator, unbelief, ingratitude, apostasy.”¹²⁶

As Augustine moves in this direction in *De Natura et Gratia*, the medical analogies which he has predominantly employed begin to be stretched, for sin’s sickness extends to deceiving ourselves that “I will never be shaken.” In paraphrasing Romans 7:23 Augustine mentions that the law of sin leads to our members actually resisting, *repugnat*, the law of the mind.¹²⁷ When Augustine then returns to the medical analogy, the patient never asks to be healed, but rather it is the Physician who is always the actor.¹²⁸ These concerns lead Augustine to then take up Pelagius’ claim that all sins are sins of pride. Pelagius is led to this claim because he assumes that the will is a neutral actor, and that man can either decide to do what accords with God’s law, or what he

¹²⁵ Emil Brunner, *Revelation and Reason: The Christian Doctrine of Faith and Knowledge*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1946), 49, n.1.

¹²⁶ Brunner, *Revelation and Reason*, 51.

¹²⁷ *Nat. et gr.*, 25.28.

¹²⁸ See *Nat. et gr.*, 26.29.

himself would prefer to do. Every sin is, in a sense, explicitly and consciously directed against God.¹²⁹ Augustine, of all people, cannot disagree that pride is an inescapable scourge which afflicts us all.¹³⁰ Yet he ultimately refutes Pelagius' claim that all sin is pride in an effort to show that we are not equally predisposed to God and sin, but that we are oriented towards sin and to the deception that we are well. Because we are damaged by sin, we "are in poor shape and commit many sins either out of weakness or out of blindness,"¹³¹ "and often by persons weeping and groaning."¹³² Augustine is led to this by his theological anthropology, but there is also here something of Augustine's "defense of Christian mediocrity."¹³³ Interestingly, though, Augustine also wants to qualify this orientation towards sin. Following a catalogue of biblical supplications for mercy, salvation, truth, and support, he writes:

[W]e do not take away the choice of the will, but we proclaim the grace of God. Who benefits from all these things, unless they are willing? But they must be willing with humility and not raise themselves up with pride over the powers of the will, as if it alone were sufficient for the perfection of righteousness.¹³⁴

This stands in contrast with the early Luther of the "Heidelberg Disputations" for whom desire is not merely in need of re-orienting but destruction. "The remedy for curing desire does not lie in

¹²⁹ See *Nat. et gr.* 50.58–51.59, and also Pelagius' letter, *Ad Dem.*, 9.

¹³⁰ See *Nat. et gr.*, 32.36.

¹³¹ *Nat. et gr.*, 30.34.

¹³² *Nat. et gr.*, 29.33.

¹³³ Brown understands this when he writes: "Like many reformers, the Pelagians placed the terrifying weight of complete freedom on the individual: he was responsible for his every action; every sin, therefore, could only be a deliberate act of contempt for God...Paradoxically, therefore, it is Augustine, with his harsh emphasis on baptism as the only way to salvation, who appears as the advocate of moral tolerance: for within the exclusive fold of the Catholic church he could find room for a whole spectrum of human failings" Brown, *Augustine*, 350–51.

¹³⁴ *Nat. et gr.*, 32.36. While Augustine does not here neglect desire and the will, Mathewes is far from the Augustinian mark and, one suspects, unwittingly self-revealing when he writes: "What Augustine teaches is that we must trust both the world and our desires—that we must, in fact, trust the world *through* and *in* our desires." Mathewes, "Augustinian Anthropology," 211. He then draws an unnecessarily stark choice, writing that for Augustine "grace is not a *superadditum* to nature, but rather an integral part of the natural order." Mathewes, "Augustinian Anthropology," 215. Here we have come the full circle back to Pelagianism. We shall have more to say on this in the next chapter.

satisfying it, but in extinguishing it. In other words, he who wishes to become wise does not seek wisdom by progressing toward it but becomes a fool by retrogressing into seeking folly.”¹³⁵

Indeed in his “Preface to the Latin Writings” Luther called the failure to see that the law kills sinners and establishes something new altogether, the “Augustinian imperfection.”¹³⁶ As Brown puts it, “The wisdom of God, for the old Augustine, bruised human reason.”¹³⁷ But it never obliterated it. Michael Hanby has been right to emphasize that Augustine did not treat nature and grace, or human desire and grace, as a simple zero-sum game.¹³⁸ When he looked back on *De Natura et Gratia* in his writing of the *Retractiones*, he described it as a work in which he “did not defend grace in opposition to nature, but the grace by which nature is set free and ruled.”¹³⁹

33.37–60.70 Faith and the Particularity of Grace

Returning to the topic of sinlessness, Augustine agrees with Pelagius that sinlessness is not the same as being “on a par with God.” Augustine takes the opportunity to affirm the distinction between the creature and the Creator, adding that he is “not convinced” that we will be “changed into the divine substance and become exactly what he is.”¹⁴⁰ Just as Augustine wants to hold up this distinction, so too he moves on to the distinction between the orders of creation and

¹³⁵ AE 31:54.

¹³⁶ AE 34:337.

¹³⁷ Brown, *Augustine*, 401.

¹³⁸ Burns is thus imprecise when he says that for Augustine in the Pelagian controversy, “in order to establish the inadequacy of nature, he moved to the gratuity of grace.” Burns, *Operative Grace*, 123.

¹³⁹ Augustine, *Retr.*, 2.68.42.

¹⁴⁰ *Nat. et gr.*, 33.37. See also *Nat. et gr.*, 2.24.38: “But just as the lowly condition by which he [Jesus Christ] came down to us is not in every respect equal to the lowly condition in which he found us here, so too the loftier condition in which we rise up to him will not be equal to the loftier condition in which we shall find him there. For we were made children of God by his grace; he was always the Son of God by nature. Having at some point turned back to God, we will cling to him, though unequal to God; never having turned away, he remains equal to God. We partake of eternal life; he is eternal life.”

redemption. Pelagius, Augustine writes, “thinks that he is pleading God’s case in defending nature.” But “in declaring this same nature healthy, he rejects the mercy of the physician... Hence, we should not praise the creator so that we are forced to say, indeed so that we are found guilty of saying, that the savior is unnecessary (*superfluum*).”¹⁴¹ Thus the righteous people of the Scriptures were not without sin. When we praise them, we ought not to imagine that their natures were perfect, or that they did not daily repent of their sins. Augustine notably says of Mary that “on account of the honor due to the Lord,” he does not want to discuss whether or not her nature was without sin.¹⁴² But his main point here is to stress that righteousness does not mean free from sin, with an uncorrupted nature, but rather the opposite. It is the righteous who speak the truth about themselves, and who “wage a daily and constant battle”¹⁴³ against sinful desire, and so are forgiven their sins and granted freedom in Christ. As Burns puts it, “freedom in good is the consequence of the presence of God’s Spirit, not a natural property of any created being; servitude in evil follows inevitably from the exercise of free choice in the absence of grace.”¹⁴⁴

For Pelagius, sinlessness was possible not because of the power of intervening grace, but because of the strength of nature. The will, for Pelagius, was a neutral power, capable through its natural ability of choosing the right way to live, even if Christ had assisted in teaching it the right path. But if this is the case, Augustine repeats, then Christ has died in vain. If Christ was just a teacher, then his death was meaningless. But if indeed our righteousness was not capable of effecting salvation, then Christ’s death becomes intelligible as saving our “corrupt human

¹⁴¹ *Nat. et gr.*, 34.39.

¹⁴² *Nat. et gr.*, 36.42. Cf. *Nat. et gr.*, 2.24.38: “Therefore, he [Jesus Christ] alone, having become man, while remaining God, never had any sin and did not assume sinful flesh, though he assumed flesh from the sinful flesh of his mother. Whatever of the flesh he took from her, he either cleansed it to assume it or cleansed it by assuming.”

¹⁴³ *Nat. et gr.*, 38.45.

¹⁴⁴ Burns, *Operative Grace*, 119.

nature.”¹⁴⁵ Sinlessness, for Augustine, was a possibility only by the grace of God, and not according to our nature.¹⁴⁶ Augustine is here revealing a chasm that we have already seen between his and Pelagius’ thought—namely, whether salvation was an internal or an external power. Against Pelagius’ assertion of human autonomy and the will’s inalienable capacity to do good or evil, Augustine did not stress a sheer passivity that denied the will any role. But he did stress its dependence on external things, and the way in which human activity was limited. The internal power of sight is useless, for example, without the external provision of light. We may have the natural capacity to hear, and yet we hear many things “against our will.”¹⁴⁷ Extending this reality, Augustine argues that love and concupiscence likewise come from outside of our will, from the Holy Spirit and Adam respectively. As Burns puts it, “In their origin each lies beyond human control. In their functioning, each effectively directs human operation. The Pelagians rejected his analysis of both.”¹⁴⁸ This Augustinian relationship between receptivity complementing internal appropriation can be seen in the *Formula of Concord*. The confessors there state that Luther’s understanding that the will behaves “altogether passively” refers to the initial movement whereby the Holy Spirit converts us.

But after the Holy Spirit has performed and accomplished this and the will of man has been changed and renewed solely by God’s power and activity, man’s new will

¹⁴⁵ *Nat. et gr.*, 40.47. It is worth noting that the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* quotes this section of *De Natura et Gratia* at some length. It is especially concerned with Augustine’s criticism of those who think nature and free will could lead to a holy life, accusing them of rendering his death useless. Ap IV 29–30. The *Apology* again refers to this passage regarding free will. See Ap XVIII 69.

¹⁴⁶ See *Nat. et gr.*, 44.51: “Even if I agree that there have been or are such [sinless] human beings, I still in no sense maintain that there have been or are such human beings unless they have been justified by the grace of God through Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom 7:25), and him crucified (1 Cor 2:3).”

¹⁴⁷ *Nat. et gr.*, 47.55.

¹⁴⁸ Burns, *Operative Grace*, 117.

becomes an instrument and means of God the Holy Spirit, so that man not only lays hold on grace but also cooperates with the Holy Spirit in the works that follow.¹⁴⁹

This summary is helpful in understanding how it is that Augustine can later say in *De Natura et Gratia* that our hearts are being made pure “by our efforts, labor, prayers, and pleas that by his grace we are being brought through Jesus Christ, our Lord, to that perfection in which we can see God with a pure heart.”¹⁵⁰ The work of grace in us heals our broken wills so that we might be engaged in ongoing participation in God’s grace. God’s grace thus comes from outside of us, *extra nos*, and is solely active in the initial movement, and yet it also takes hold of something real within us. Because the will is not neutrally disposed towards God, on the one hand, and evil, on the other, as Pelagius would have it, it needs to be prepared by God and engaged by God—“grace heals the will by which we freely love righteousness.”¹⁵¹ In a later work, Augustine would say that no one believes in God unwillingly, but this is not the result of the natural powers of the will, but rather because the unwilling are made willing by God.¹⁵² Thus for Augustine it is not that we necessarily lack the power to resist sin, but rather the will. And so God’s salvific, external grace, does not destroy us, but changes us, “because God does not produce our salvation in us as if we were mindless rocks or beings in whose nature he did not create reason and will.”¹⁵³ God’s grace is not extraneous to his created beings. As St. Paul wrote in words which Augustine quotes in *De Spiritu et Littera*, “For it is God who produces in you both the willing

¹⁴⁹ FC Ep., II

¹⁵⁰ *Nat. et gr.*, 65.78.

¹⁵¹ *Spir. et litt.*, 30.52. This is why in the *Confessions*, Augustine would refer to the “marvelous and secret ways” which Providence used to convert him. Portalié, *Augustine*, 204. See also *De praed. sanct.*, 5.10.

¹⁵² *C. Ep. Pel.* 1.19.37.

¹⁵³ *Nat. et gr.*, 2.5.6. In the same treatise, Augustine writes: “But it is due to God’s grace helping the human will that we come to know what is hidden and find pleasing what was not attractive.” 2.17.26.

and the action in accord with good will.”¹⁵⁴

To put it another way as Augustine once did in a sermon, and to highlight an important distinction for our discussion of Radical Orthodoxy: *qui creavit te sine te, non salvabit te sine te*.¹⁵⁵ God’s act of creation and his act of saving are different realities, even if they are both gifts of the one God. Milbank and Hanby are right to stress the latter, but they are wrong to ignore, or at least sideline, the former distinction. This is a theme which Augustine now addresses in *De Natura et Gratia*. Pelagius does not plead God’s cause when he defends nature. Rather God is served “better when one acknowledges both the creator and the savior than when one destroys the help of the savior by defending the creature, as if it were healthy and at full strength.”¹⁵⁶ Hanby, in an effort to highlight the giftedness of all creation, has referred to “Augustine’s elision of creation and sanctification into a single economy.”¹⁵⁷ There is of course, a continuity between these orders. Hanby expresses this by approvingly quoting Gerhart Ladner who said that for Augustine “only the saint truly *is*.” That is, creation already anticipates and finds its fulfillment in redemption. The saint “can become herself by becoming God’s.”¹⁵⁸ And yet Hanby does not do justice to the importance Augustine stresses on distinguishing between creation and redemption, a distinction made stark by original sin, even if our substance is not identified with sin. Jaroslav Pelikan has correctly written that for Augustine, “creation was an act of sheer grace,”¹⁵⁹ but that

¹⁵⁴ *Spir. et litt.*, 2.2, referring to Phil. 2:13.

¹⁵⁵ S. 169.13. TeSelle incorrectly reads Augustine as saying that “the God who created humans without them can also save them without them,” apparently missing Augustine’s “*non*.” See TeSelle, “Grace,” 1068.

¹⁵⁶ *Nat. et gr.*, 42.49.

¹⁵⁷ Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity*, 75.

¹⁵⁸ Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity*, 68. Hanby also writes that “it is not too strong to say, with proper qualifications, that soteriology is for Augustine simply the fulfillment and intensification of creation.” Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity*, 75. See also Burns who writes of “Augustine’s identification of good with being and evil with a tendency to non-being.” Burns, *Operative Grace*, 109.

¹⁵⁹ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine, Vol. 1: The*

is not necessarily the same as saying that nature and grace are a part of a single economy. In the context of the anti-Pelagian controversy, Augustine is more reluctant to speak about creation as a grace, even while fully acknowledging its being a gift of God.¹⁶⁰ Thus he continues by saying that human nature needs grace “not that it may be created, but that it may be restored.”¹⁶¹ As he had clearly stated in *De Trinitate*, “What we have received in order to be is one thing, what we received in order to be holy is another.”¹⁶² The first does not involve us, but the latter does, through faith. Indeed it is Radical Orthodoxy’s lack of any meaningful discussion of faith which reveals its lack of a meaningful distinction between creation and redemption. As Augustine goes on to say, it is faith which heals us, “faith in the mediator between God and human beings, the man Jesus Christ, faith in his blood, faith in his cross, faith in his death and resurrection.”¹⁶³ Hanby, by contrast, claims that for Augustine distinctions between nature and grace, or creation and redemption, are ultimately mistaken.

First, the understanding of these distinctions as marking different “moments” in the divine life is ruled out by God’s immutability, and is rather made intelligible by the fact that the activity of the effect *qua* effect is displayed precisely in its activity. Second, the differences in kind are rendered suspect by the ultimate convertibility of *esse* and *beatus* within the *magis* and *minus esse* distinction. The recognition of some sort of specific distinction between the discrete “acts” of creation and sanctification, or between nature and grace, is only possible from the vantage afforded by a

Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 295.

¹⁶⁰ For example, in *De Praedestinatione Sanctorum*, Augustine writes: “Granted, then, there is a grace ascribed to nature by which we are rational animals and are set apart from the other animals. Granted, then, there is also a grace ascribed to nature by which among human beings the handsome are set apart from the ugly and the talented are set apart from the slow, and any other differences of this sort... That nature, therefore, in which we were given the possibility of having faith, does not set one human being apart from another. *But faith itself sets a believer apart from one who does not believe.*” *De praed. sanct.*, 5.10.

¹⁶¹ *Nat. et gr.*, 53.62.

¹⁶² *Trin.*, 5.15.

¹⁶³ *Nat. et gr.*, 44.51.

perspective which privileges a bare and naked *esse*, or a Cartesian infinite, over the categories of good, beautiful and true.¹⁶⁴

Augustine is happy to attribute virtues even among non-Christians as being “the gift of God.”¹⁶⁵

So Hanby is right to see that Augustine opposes any sense of human autonomy, divorced from God, even among non-Christians.¹⁶⁶ But faith nevertheless brings about a gift which is different from the gift of being and the gifts of character to pagans. It is a gift with which we are fully involved in so far as we already exist. And so Augustine’s interest is in the grace that restores, not the grace that creates or gives virtue to the faithless.¹⁶⁷ Portalié writes:

Augustine distinguished quite explicitly the two orders of grace: the grace of the natural virtues (a simple gift of internal providence which prepares efficacious motives for the will) and the grace for salutary and supernatural acts which is given with the first preludes of faith. The latter is the grace of children (*gratia filiorum*); the former is the grace for all—even strangers (*fili concubinarum*), Augustine adds, can receive it. Speaking of death courageously suffered by a heretic, he says that it is a gift of God, but far different from the gifts reserved for Christians: “As one cannot deny that this is a gift of God, so one must understand that there are other gifts of God for the children of that free Jerusalem which is above, our mother.”¹⁶⁸

The role of faith, for Augustine, thus demarcates the line between God’s different gifts of creation and redemption. While Paul says that “the righteousness of one led to the justification of life for all human beings,” Augustine nevertheless stresses that this does not mean that “all [do]

¹⁶⁴ Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity*, 211 n. 13.

¹⁶⁵ See Ep. 144.2.

¹⁶⁶ Even in the *Confessions*, Augustine had been happy to characterize the Christian life as one of complete dependence, like a baby. See *Conf.*, 4.1.1. Interestingly, Pelagius was, in contrast, somewhat contemptuous of babies. In his letter to Demetrias he considers “sons of God” to be entirely separate and autonomous, released from the constrictions of the *pater familias* to go out into the world as mature, free individuals. See *Epistola ad Demetriadem*, 17, cited by Brown, *Augustine*, 352–53. A little while on, Brown also adds: “The Pelagian man was essentially a separate individual: the man of Augustine is always about to be engulfed in vast, mysterious solidarities.” Brown, *Augustine*, 367.

¹⁶⁷ “*gratia ergo dei, non qua instituitur, sed qua restituitur.*” *Nat. et gr.*, 53.62.

¹⁶⁸ Portalié, *Augustine*, 196. He is referring to *De Patientia*, 27.25.

believe in him” but just that no one can be justified “without believing in him.”¹⁶⁹ Just as there is a distinction between creation and redemption, so too there is a difference between the ways in which we participate in these different orders. Radical Orthodoxy, and others, have been correct to show that receptivity is a part of human existence and that all beings are continually dependent upon God, who is Being, for their existence. But this participation is not faith, which is something not all are given. Augustine is thus keen to uphold a relationship between grace and faith which Radical Orthodoxy fails to notice. For Augustine, the exclusivity of this divine gift serves to distinguish grace from nature. In a later anti-Pelagian treatise, *De Gratia et Libero Arbitrio*, Augustine blames the Pelagians for daring to say “that grace is the nature by which we were created” rather than “the grace which comes through faith in Jesus Christ. For it is certain that we have this nature in common even with sinners and non-believers, but the grace through faith in Jesus Christ belongs only to those who have this faith. For not all have faith.”¹⁷⁰ In the treatise under our consideration, Augustine likewise identifies within Pelagianism a tendency to elide nature and grace. Pelagius attempts to refute accusations that he ignores grace by saying that “whatever lies in the necessity of nature undoubtedly pertains to the author of nature, namely, God,” and so thus cannot exist apart from “grace.”¹⁷¹

We shall consider in the next chapter to what degree this is similar to Hanby’s and Radical Orthodoxy’s referring to “Augustine’s elision of creation and sanctification into a single

¹⁶⁹ *Nat. et gr.*, 41.48.

¹⁷⁰ *De gratia et lib arb.*, 13.25. In another anti-Pelagian treatise, *De praed. sanct.*, Augustine expands: “For, though to be able to have faith belongs to our nature, does it also belong to our nature to have faith? *For not all have faith* (2 Thes 3:2), though all are able to have faith. But the Apostle did not say, But what can you have that you have not received the ability to have? Rather, he said, *But what do you have that you have not received?* Hence, to be able to have faith, just as to be able to love, belongs to the nature of human beings, but to have faith, just as to have love, belongs to the grace of the faithful.” *De praed. sanct.*, 5.10.

¹⁷¹ *Nat. et gr.*, 51.59. Augustine is quoting directly from Pelagius’ *De Natura*.

economy.”¹⁷² But for our present purposes, it must be said that one of Augustine’s issues with this is that nature does not discriminate, whereas salvific grace does. Pelagius’ theology thus begins to look like an attempt to reconcile God’s love with the scandal of particularity, resolving the question by rationalizing the distribution of grace to all people via their created nature. Pelagius had famously objected to Augustine’s prayer in the *Confessions*: “Give what you command, and command what you will.” Brown writes that this was because “it seemed to blur, by personal acts of favouritism, the incorruptible majesty of God the Lawgiver.”¹⁷³ Augustine recognizes this, and challenges Pelagius to reconcile such universality with the validity of baptism. If human nature is so graced unto salvation, “Are those who are not yet baptized not included in human nature?”¹⁷⁴ Of course they are, but Pelagius is reluctant to say that they lack grace or ability. For all of Augustine’s theology of participation, he definitely considers non-Christians to be living without grace. Portalié is right to say that it is at least semi-Pelagian to say that all men receive “an equal measure of graces.”¹⁷⁵ Augustine affirmed this in one of his letters: “We know it is not given to all men... We know that those who do not receive grace are passed over by a just judgment of God.”¹⁷⁶

As Augustine had stressed earlier, the righteous ones are not without sin, but are those who rather confess that to say they were without sin would be a lie. Baptism, Augustine now goes on to say, does not remove from us the opposition of the flesh, but it does bring the Holy Spirit’s

¹⁷² Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity*, 75.

¹⁷³ Brown, *Augustine*, 343.

¹⁷⁴ *Nat. et gr.*, 52.60.

¹⁷⁵ Portalié, *Augustine*, 214.

¹⁷⁶ Ep. 217.5.16, cited by Portalié, *Augustine*, 228.

forgiveness and the ongoing strength to resist sin.¹⁷⁷ The very existence of baptism challenges optimistic views of creation and reveals that indeed our natures are not healthy and that we are in need of a grace which is different from that of creation. Brown can thus state that “The nature of baptism provided the great watershed separating the two men.”¹⁷⁸ Augustine continues:

If we get these people to grant that those who have not yet been baptized should implore the help of the grace of the savior, this is no small victory against that false defense of nature and the power of free choice, on the grounds that they are self-sufficient (*sibi sufficientis*). After all, he was not self-sufficient who said, *Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?* Or are we to say that one has full freedom while still begging to be set free?¹⁷⁹

Augustine thus brings God’s grace to the concrete reality of baptism in the name of God and the reception of the Holy Spirit. It is the reception of the Holy Spirit which brings a person not to fear, but to love God and his commands.¹⁸⁰ Burns is correct to point out that we can see here Augustine moving away from a generic natural desire for God. That would have supported the Pelagian cause by suggesting that within our nature there was an attraction to the goodness of God. There is also then a Pelagian danger in Milbank’s assertion that nature has an intrinsic desire for grace which is not only experienced as a lack, but even as an anticipation of grace. Lest Christ’s death be in vain, grace must always be unexpected and disorienting. Outside of the Pelagian controversy, Augustine did understand humanity to be created in the *imago* and ordered towards the *similitudo* of God.¹⁸¹ But that must be squared with Augustine’s insistence here that

¹⁷⁷ *Nat. et gr.*, 55.65.

¹⁷⁸ Brown, *Augustine*, 372–73.

¹⁷⁹ *Nat. et gr.*, 55.66.

¹⁸⁰ See *Nat. et gr.*, 57.67.

¹⁸¹ See Robert A. Markus, “‘Imago’ and ‘Similitudo’ in Augustine,” *Revue Des Études Augustiniennes* 10 (1964): 125–43.

it was the Holy Spirit that moved a person to love God.¹⁸² And only this working of the Holy Spirit created within the baptized Christian what Burns has called “an orientation to personal beatitude.”¹⁸³ This points to another reality at play in this debate.

The Pelagian position, while emphasizing personal responsibility for salvation, emphasized a cosmological view of God and was less enamored with a view of God that dealt discriminately and directly in personal particularities. In all debates about nature and grace, there is a tendency to abstraction, whereby grace becomes a metaphysical category rather than a gift of the Holy Spirit. Throughout *De Natura et Gratia* and indeed the entire Pelagian controversy, Augustine shows his concern not so much with the ubiquitous, cosmological grace of creation, but with the soteriological and particular grace of personal redemption through faith in the incarnate, crucified and resurrected Christ.¹⁸⁴ Burns has rightly drawn attention to this aspect of the controversy, and sees that in Augustine continually referring matters back to the crucified Christ, he is warning against cosmology replacing a soteriology mediated through Christ.¹⁸⁵ This is important, because the Augustinianism of Hanby draws in large measure from *De Trinitate*, which is concerned with ontological and metaphysical realities, and tends to read the Pelagian controversy through this lens. Hanby has written that Augustine's cosmology is “an aesthetic soteriology”¹⁸⁶ and considers Augustine's victory over Pelagius not as a triumph of grace over

¹⁸² Burns, *Operative Grace*, 112. See also Burns, *Operative Grace*, 125.

¹⁸³ Burns, *Operative Grace*, 111 n. 117.

¹⁸⁴ *Nat. et gr.*, 44.51. Colin Gunton has levelled the critique that “Augustine, by losing the mediatorship of the Word, at once distances God from the creation and flattens out the distinction between the persons of the Trinity.” Colin Gunton, “Augustine, the Trinity, and the Theological Crisis of the West,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 43, no. 1 (1990): 33–4. But if Jesus Christ is the Word made flesh, then it is Augustine who is continually wanting to emphasize the mediatorship of Jesus Christ in the Pelagian controversy.

¹⁸⁵ Burns, *Operative Grace*, 96–97.

¹⁸⁶ Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity*, 27. Hanby goes on to say that Augustine's ontology of the hypostatic union results in a reconfiguring of “cosmology as creation, creation as soteriology, soteriology as aesthetics and

nature, but rather, as we have already had occasion to note, as a

cosmological triumph. Implicitly it vindicated and instituted nature as the gratuitous creation of the transcendent God against the machinations of the *pyr teknikon*, the self-crafting fire of stoicism, for which any interaction between human and divine must be a “tensional” interchange between immanent forces.¹⁸⁷

As we have seen in this treatise, however, Pelagius was all too willing to see nature as the gratuitous creation of the transcendent God. But more to the point, Augustine moved throughout his career from a concern with cosmology towards soteriology.¹⁸⁸ For example, in one of the recently re-discovered Dolbeau sermons, most likely delivered in 408 or 409, Augustine acknowledged “the obvious signs of order to be perceived in heaven and earth” which attest to God’s care for human beings. But this was an argument that the pagans largely shared in too. For the Christian, “the surest possible indication” of God’s care was not the order of the cosmos but the incarnation, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. “It is not only, therefore, the fact that God has a care for human affairs, but how much he cares, which we are given the surest possible proof of by the manifest reality of Christ’s birth, by the patient endurance of his death, by the power of his resurrection.” The creation and direction of the cosmos only reveals God’s providence, whereas it is in the God-man Jesus Christ that the love of God is revealed.¹⁸⁹ The order of creation was evidence of the Creator, but it was the humiliation of Christ which revealed the more important reality of God’s love for humankind. As Peter Brown has put it, “the *cosmos* was largely stripped of religious meaning for Augustine because the centre of gravity of his thought had shifted elsewhere. He was concerned with a more urgent matter—how might God

aesthetics as doxology.” Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity*, 27.

¹⁸⁷ Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity*, 2.

¹⁸⁸ Burns plausibly thinks that “Augustine’s shift from a cosmological to an historical religious perspective was evident in his commentaries on St. Paul.” Burns, *Operative Grace*, 96.

¹⁸⁹ *Augustine*, S. 29*.11.

reach out to save humankind.”¹⁹⁰ And as we have seen Augustine argue in *De Natura et Gratia*, there is no salvation by belief in the creator, even if one has had no opportunity to hear of Christ.¹⁹¹ Brown elaborates on this Augustinian perspective:

Augustine would never look up at the stars and gaze at the world around him with the shudder of religious awe that fell upon Plotinus, when he exclaimed “pas de ho khôros hieros”: “All the place is holy.”... Augustine pointedly refused to share in this enthusiasm. He viewed the Platonic notion of a World Soul, a majestic *anima mundi* that gave life and vividness to the entire realm of nature, as an uninteresting and basically unnecessary speculation: if such an entity existed at all, all that mattered was that it should not be worshipped instead of God. That was all that needed to be said on the matter.¹⁹²

This is not to say, as we have already noted, that Augustine was a proto-Cartesian. Man is not isolated or autonomous for Augustine. His is not so much an inward turn as a soteriological, personal turn from a kind of Plotinian cosmological theology. But it is a turn nevertheless, and one that does not shy away from the scandal of the particularity of God’s grace in Christ Jesus.

61.71–68.82 Catalogue of Testimonies

In the final section of this treatise, Augustine runs through some of the arguments that Pelagius had drawn in his own support from other Christian writers. As we have noted earlier, Evans thinks that this marks a turning point in the debate because Pelagius is no longer keeping

¹⁹⁰ Brown, *Augustine*, 505.

¹⁹¹ *Nat. et gr.*, 2.2.

¹⁹² Brown, *Augustine*, 504. Indeed, in the *Retractiones*, Augustine distances himself from any notion of an *anima mundi* and considers the question unimportant. Interestingly, this is in the context of his revision of *De Musica*, a more cosmologically oriented treatise which Radical Orthodoxy has relied on for its reading of Augustine. See also the following by H. I. Marrou who writes wistfully of Augustine’s decisive turn away from the cosmos: Augustine’s focus on God and the soul “leaves no room for a *Peri Kosmou*, for a philosophy of Nature and the world. How different from the Greek Fathers, brought up on the comprehensiveness of Stoicism, who love to dwell on the splendour of the created world in order to draw from it a hymn of praise to its Creator. Compared with them, Saint Augustine certainly appears more narrow-minded. He is obviously blind to this cosmic aspect of salvation, so strongly emphasized by St. Paul.” Henri Irénée Marrou, *St. Augustine and His Influence Through the Ages*, trans. P. J. Hepburne-Scott, Men of Wisdom (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957), 72–73.

to himself but drawing some pillars of the faith into his theology, including Augustine.¹⁹³ Nevertheless Augustine seems to be disparaging of the importance of this when he notes that Pelagius is looking for support “not from the canonical scriptures but from some writings of Catholic commentators.”¹⁹⁴ Augustine comes to the defense of the orthodox writers Pelagius had employed, and takes the opportunity to reiterate some of the key points of the treatise, while also taking some delight in pointing out those parts of the full quotations which Pelagius had skipped over, such as when Ambrose added, “Nor was the Church spotless from the beginning—this is impossible for human nature.”¹⁹⁵ Then to Pelagius’ invocation of John of Constantinople on sin not being a substance, Augustine can only agree, while reiterating the centrality of the distinction between creation and redemption:

But our question is not about human nature as it is found in this life; our question is rather about God’s grace by which it is healed through Christ the physician, whom it would not need if it were healthy. And yet this man defends nature as if it were healthy and as if the choice of the will were self-sufficient for being able not to sin.¹⁹⁶

As Augustine continues, the centrality of the means of grace is highlighted. He is repeatedly happy to affirm statements about men becoming like God, having a pure heart, and being sons of God, so long as it is clear that this is done by the grace of Jesus Christ the mediator, and by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.¹⁹⁷ This too is the case when he comes to his own work, *De Libero Arbitrio*, from which Pelagius had quoted. Pelagius had quoted that section where Augustine says that if the will cannot avoid evil, then it does not sin, “for who sins in a matter

¹⁹³ Evans, *Pelagius*, 85.

¹⁹⁴ *Nat. et gr.*, 61.71.

¹⁹⁵ *Nat. et gr.*, 63.75.

¹⁹⁶ *Nat. et gr.*, 64.76.

¹⁹⁷ See *Nat. et gr.*, 64.77–66.79.

that can in no way be avoided?” In his response, Augustine seems to adjust his prior statement, stating that whatever challenges the will faces, they can be resisted, for “we would not demand” that the Father would lead us not into temptation “if we believed that we could not resist.” Then returning to his theme, he says that “sin can be avoided, but it is avoided with the help of him who cannot be deceived.”¹⁹⁸ Providing a fuller quote from his work, Augustine affirms that he did exhort people to live good lives, but he also “did not destroy the grace of God without which human nature cannot be enlightened and healed, once it has been plunged into darkness and injured.” He then writes, “The whole dispute with these people turns on this point: that we do not render meaningless the grace of God, which is found in Christ Jesus, our Lord, by a misguided defense of nature.”¹⁹⁹ Burns understandably says that it is thus grace, and not sinlessness, that Augustine sees as being at the heart of the Pelagian controversy.²⁰⁰ And yet, given that Pelagius affirmed a doctrine of grace, it is the nature of this grace as something in which we continually participate and by which we are being redeemed that Augustine specifically wants to stress.

In completing our analysis of *De Natura et Gratia*, we can note that Augustine in his final words shows an abiding concern for the “mediocre Christian.” His teaching, he hopes, will help those Christians who are experiencing difficulty in their Christian lives to “persist in asking the Lord with faith-filled and persevering prayers and with eager works of mercy.” He writes that he is not so concerned about the erratic journey of healing and righteousness, but more that this can only come about “by the grace of God through Jesus Christ, our Lord.”²⁰¹

¹⁹⁸ *Nat. et gr.*, 67.80.

¹⁹⁹ *Nat. et gr.*, 67.81.

²⁰⁰ Burns, “Grace,” 391.

²⁰¹ *Nat. et gr.*, 68.82. See Brown, *Augustine*, 351.

CHAPTER THREE

EXTRA NOS BUT NOT EXTRANEUS

In the year 2000, a new edition of Peter Brown's classic biography of Augustine was released, with two new chapters by the author. In reflecting on the state of current Augustinian studies, Brown wrote that "we want Augustine to talk to us now about sexuality and marriage, not about grace and the Church."¹ In the light of contemporary discussions on Augustinian grace this seems to have been a premature judgment. In this chapter we will look at how the reading of *De Natura et Gratia* brings concrete implications for discussions on nature and grace that wish to be Augustinian today. Of course, a reading of just one treatise cannot hope to give the full Augustinian picture of nature and grace. And yet it can help to identify the parameters of Augustine's approach, and the proposals which he explicitly rejects. In particular, we will discuss how boundaries are important for Augustine in the Pelagian controversy, and yet he never actually opposes nature to grace, seeking rather to affirm a continuity between the gifts of God. The grace of God in Jesus Christ always comes *extra nos*, but is never extraneous to who we are. For Augustine then, redemptive grace is different from the gift of creation. But it also corresponds to our created nature in a way that prevents it from being, as Milbank put it, "no more a gift than is a brick wall we might inadvertently run into."²

¹ Brown, *Augustine*, 500.

² Milbank, *The Suspended Middle*, 46.

Participation

Some contemporary approaches to nature and grace have considered Augustine's contribution to the debate relatively unimportant. Steven A. Long and Lawrence Feingold have both recently written solid contributions to the theology of nature and grace, but have discussed the matter in largely Thomistic terms.³ This has prompted David Grummett recently, and rightly, to ask, "Why has the notion that, for de Lubac, Augustine was less important than Thomas so easily found acceptance?"⁴ This thesis can be situated within the attempt to redress this imbalance.

Some Augustinian scholarship had already been moving in the direction which Radical Orthodoxy has moved. Peter Burnell, for example, has written in his *The Augustinian Person* that for Augustine "though the inability to sin is a strictly divine attribute, human nature is nevertheless incomplete until completed by it. The divine gifts constitute human nature's perfection and are not mere superadditions to it."⁵ But there are others who have sought to engage, and criticize Radical Orthodoxy for the way in which it reads Augustine. These criticisms will be useful for us in opening up the issue of what it means to be faithfully Augustinian today.

In 2007 the journal *Ars Disputandi* ran a colloquium on Hanby's *Augustine and Modernity* in which Johannes Brachtendorf and Maarten Wisse wrote pieces somewhat appreciative, and

³ Steven A. Long, *Natura Pura: On the Recovery of Nature in the Doctrine of Grace* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010). Lawrence Feingold, *The Natural Desire to See God according to St. Thomas and His Interpreters* (Ave Maria, FL: The Catholic University of America Press, 2004).

⁴ David Grummett, "De Lubac, Grace, and the Pure Nature Debate," *Modern Theology* 31, no. 1 (January 2015): 125.

⁵ Burnell, *The Augustinian Person*, 89.

yet largely critical of Hanby's reading of Augustine.⁶ Brachtendorf was especially forthright in his critique.

The reader gets the impression that Hanby developed his thought construction independently of Augustine and mined Augustine secondarily for particular statements that he could use for his purposes. Hardly a central element in Hanby's project truly stems from Augustine; much even contradicts the thought of the bishop.⁷

Brachtendorf's concern is that Hanby sees everything in metaphysical terms, neglecting Augustine himself. We noted at the outside that Hanby's lack of exegetical treatment was problematic, and does leave him open to this kind of critique. His concern to read all of Augustine through *De Trinitate*, or at least his own reading of *De Trinitate*, is too ambitious to stand without proper attention to Augustine's texts. But Brachtendorf's somewhat visceral response also vindicates the merits of Hanby's challenge to Augustinian studies, for he is far from being as unfaithful to Augustine as Brachtendorf makes him out to be. But Brachtendorf does point out some areas where Hanby is lacking.

Whereas Augustine thinks of sanctification as a concrete, historical event—a call issued in history beckoning the human who has turned away from God, Hanby casts sanctification as a metaphysical datum that has always already determined the being of humans.⁸

This criticism is not, as we have seen, altogether unwarranted. In *De Natura et Gratia*, Augustine showed his concern for matters of soteriology, and less for questions of the nature of being and creation. To ignore this aspect of Augustine, or to subsume it into ontological concerns, misses Augustine's stress on the biblical language of healing through the blood of Christ crucified.

⁶ Brachtendorf and Wisse both seem to be a part of German-Dutch school of Augustinian thought, indebted more to the Protestant tradition, and centred around Tübingen and Leuven. E.g. see Maarten Wisse, Lieven Boeve, and Mathijs Lamberigts, eds., *Augustine and Postmodern Thought: A New Alliance Against Modernity?*, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium, CCXIX (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 2009).

⁷ Johannes Brachtendorf, "Orthodoxy without Augustine: A Response to Michael Hanby's Augustine and Modernity," *Ars Disputandi* 6, no. 1 (2006): 3.

⁸ Brachtendorf, "Orthodoxy without Augustine," 12.

Brachtendorf complains that by eliding nature and grace into a single economy, there is no “outside” of the economy between the Father and the Son.⁹

The Tübingen scholar Maarten Wisse offers a more nuanced, critical approach. He agrees with Hanby’s rejection of the supposedly proto-Cartesian Augustine, denying a place for reading Augustine as espousing a kind of autonomous consciousness. However, Wisse finds Hanby’s language of “being in God” less helpful than his own suggested phrase, “being in relation with God.” This is because the former underplays the ontological distinction between creature and Creator. Indeed, Wisse has been committed to rejecting any kind of participationist ontology with respect to Augustine, and has written a monograph in part rejecting Radical Orthodoxy’s reading of Augustine called *Trinitarian Theology Beyond Participation: Augustine’s De Trinitate and Contemporary Theology*.¹⁰ While affirming the need to read Augustine systematically, Wisse nevertheless seeks to develop a systematic Augustinianism in “almost the opposite form” to Hanby.¹¹ Wisse stresses that while Augustine does see all being as participating in God in some way, nevertheless there is still the possibility for Augustine of existing “outside Christ,” in direct contrast to Radical Orthodoxy.¹² This is because the logic of creation is not identical to the logic of God, and creation through the Word is different from recreation in Christ. Wisse understands that his critique would thus bring a “death blow” to Radical Orthodoxy, because it would reject

⁹ Brachtendorf, “Orthodoxy without Augustine,” 9.

¹⁰ Maarten Wisse, *Trinitarian Theology Beyond Participation: Augustine’s De Trinitate and Contemporary Theology* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2011). See also Maarten Wisse, “Pro Salute Nostra Reparanda: Radical Orthodoxy’s Christology of Manifestation versus Augustine’s Moral Christology,” in *Augustine and Postmodern Thought: A New Alliance Against Modernity?*, ed. Maarten Wisse, Lieven Boeve, and Mathijs Lamberigts, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium, CCXIX (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 2009), 71–99.

¹¹ Wisse, “Was Augustine a Barthian?,” 4.

¹² Wisse, “Was Augustine a Barthian?,” 18.

the central Radical Orthodoxy critique of nihilism by denying that all reality is grace.¹³ Wisse has developed this critique in another recent article, dissecting Radical Orthodoxy's genealogy. For Wisse, the *Nouvelle Theologie* received Augustine's theology through an "incarnational ontological framework, which made it more compatible with a natural theology and a Thomistic notion of analogy," focusing especially on those aspects of Augustine's thought which "tend towards the idea that the world bears traces of God's being and exists by participating in the divine." Regarding de Lubac, Wisse writes that "one can hardly say that he receives Augustine on his own terms."¹⁴ Instead, de Lubac uses Augustine to criticize the scholastic neo-Thomism of the early twentieth century and its separation of nature and supernature.¹⁵ But Wisse's criticism has sustaining weight because he largely agrees with Radical Orthodoxy's critique of the impoverishment which Kantian metaphysics has had on modern theology. The irony of de Lubac being accused of modernism by neo-scholastics and Pius XII is not lost on him:

The neo-Thomists attempted to respond to modernity through a Kantian reinterpretation of a separation between nature and grace, sticking to an anti-Kantian emphasis on the tenability of Aquinas's five ways, thus proving the existence of God apart from grace. They combined this form of natural theology with a strong stress on the necessity of revelation and the mediatory role of the Church, which was the reason they rejected forms of 'Ontologism', in which one would have access to God without the salvific role of the Church.

De Lubac, however, saw a strong form of modernism in this approach, as it made the world and all we know strictly secular, dependent only on our secular reason and independent of any need for grace. For de Lubac, the separation of the natural and supernatural was in severe contradiction with the tradition, Augustine, all the early Christian writers, and also the medieval tradition. There is nothing that God created that was not in itself already—think of Christ's role as mediator in creation—grace. Salvific grace through the Church is the restoration of nature, it cannot merely be an

¹³ Wisse, "Was Augustine a Barthian?," 18.

¹⁴ See also Bernard Mulcahy, who judges de Lubac's scholarship to be sometimes flawed, tending to be "more broad than deep." Bernard Mulcahy, *Aquinas's Notion of Pure Nature and the Christian Integralism of Henry de Lubac* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011), 147–48.

¹⁵ Wisse, "The First Modern Person?," 110–11.

accidental addition to it. If something like ‘pure nature’ exists, then the typically modern world with all its individualism and secularism is true, and the world as such has no need for God. Then a world without God—de Lubac’s French world after the revolution—is the real world.¹⁶

As we have noted in the first chapter, however, the late de Lubac was not blind to the dangers of participationist ontology which elided nature into grace. He approvingly cited Jacques Maritain’s statement that “St Augustine taught as clearly as possible the ontological value of the distinction between nature and grace.”¹⁷ He recognized the Charybdis of the economy of separation, as well as the Scylla of Platonist participation.¹⁸ Rudolf Voderholzer puts it this way:

Both Augustinism and neo-scholasticism misjudge the paradoxical structure of human nature. The Augustinians, with their identification of nature with grace, cannot preserve the freedom of grace, while the adherents of the doctrine of *natura pura*, with their separation of nature and grace, lose sight of the way human nature refers back to God. De Lubac advocates not separating the two but making a distinction between them: yet to distinguish in order to relate one to the other.¹⁹

Our study has shown that it is Radical Orthodoxy, and Milbank in particular, which takes de Lubac “further”, by attempting to resolve what de Lubac wished to maintain as a paradox, a development to which Wisse does not do full justice. Wisse also tends to paint Hanby with a Milbankian brush, something which we shall see is not completely justified. But his critique of participationist ontology is nevertheless compelling.

In this aspect of Milbank’s Platonizing thought, there is a danger of almost returning full circle to Pelagianism by affirming that the grace of God through Christ Jesus is already with us, on account of our participation in God. Of course, for Pelagius, grace tended to be a gift completely given in creation to an autonomous humanity, whereas for Radical Orthodoxy grace

¹⁶ Wisse, “The First Modern Person?” 111.

¹⁷ Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 26–7.

¹⁸ Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 306–7.

¹⁹ Voderholzer, “Henri De Lubac,” 1332.

is a participatory gift, continually given and received. But nevertheless, both Pelagianism and Radical Orthodoxy are in danger of sharing a rejection of any discrimination on God's behalf. Neither consider it possible to exist outside of God's grace, even if grace is defined radically differently. In contrast, Augustine considers the exclusivity of grace to be crucial. In a letter against the semi-Pelagians, Augustine includes this rule of faith: "This gratuity is proved by the distribution of grace: God does not give it to all, but to those whom He wills."²⁰ Wisse's preferred term of "being in relation to God" thus allows for the Augustinian possibility of that relationship being a negative one, even if it does flirt with acknowledging a modernist autonomy. As Emil Brunner was to say in one the more recent flare-ups of the nature and grace controversy, "sin itself is a relation to God: that of rebellion against the Creator, unbelief, ingratitude, apostasy."²¹

To speak of man is to speak of God. Not that man is "divine"; but man is man because he always stands in relation to God, either negatively or positively, and this relation to God, in the negative or positive sense, is the key to the understanding of man and the kernel of his being. Revelation is not something that is added to man's being; it is there even when it is denied, rejected, and ignored."²²

Wisse himself stands in this tradition and cites Brunner approvingly. While Brunner had agreed with Karl Barth's critique of a natural theology in which we can come to God independent of revelation, he nevertheless argued for a "point of contact" (*Anknüpfungspunkt*) in human nature. In Wisse's summary of Brunner, "human beings have a natural sensitivity to revelation because they have been created by God, and, therefore, always stand before God, even and precisely when they deny this through sin."²³ But Brunner goes even further than this, seeking to

²⁰ Ep. 217.5.16. See Portalié, *Augustine*, 191.

²¹ Brunner, *Revelation and Reason*, 51.

²² Brunner, *Revelation and Reason*, 54.

²³ Wisse, "The First Modern Person?" 109.

acknowledge that grace or revelation is not completely extraneous to who we are. In a section called “Man and Revelation” of his *Revelation and Reason*, he writes:

If revelation is really encounter, then we cannot understand it without knowing something of him to whom it is made. If revelation is God’s self-communication to man, then it is of decisive importance to know the man to whom God communicates Himself.

... This obvious point must be stressed, because a false interpretation of the *sola gratia*, and the fear of Pelagian doctrine or of “synergism,” has led some theologians to confuse the absolute receptivity of man in the revelation with an objective passivity from which all human activity, as such, could be entirely eliminated.²⁴

Brunner is thus seeking to carve out room for seeing grace and revelation as actually taking hold of something in man, and not being as unwelcome as a brick wall we might inadvertently run into, while also seeking to affirm its exteriority and its discriminating exclusivity. In this line of thinking, it is uncontroversial to say that all things are related to God. But it is equally uncontroversial to say that all things are not thereby justified, made holy, or received into the kingdom of God. But in the vision of theologians like Brunner and Wisse, relation to God is essentially established with respect to grace. Whether it is positive or negative, relation is never the same as participation because it is not with respect to nature. Radical Orthodoxy can tend to the opposite pole, whereby it is essentially with respect to our created and graced nature that our participation with God comes about. Thus the Radical Orthodoxy theologians John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward write the following:

The central theological framework of radical orthodoxy is ‘participation’ as developed by Plato and reworked in Christianity, because any alternative configuration perforce reserves a territory independent of God. The latter can lead only to nihilism (though in different guises). Participation, however, refuses any reserve of created territory, while allowing finite things their own integrity.²⁵

²⁴ Brunner, *Revelation and Reason*, 48.

²⁵ John Milbank, Graham Ward, and Catherine Pickstock, “Introduction—Suspending the Material: The Turn of Radical Orthodoxy,” in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, ed. John Milbank, Graham Ward, and Catherine

While Radical Orthodoxy has looked to Augustine for this, Reinhard Hütter offers a compelling challenge to this. In a characteristically authoritative article, he argues that John Milbank and Henri de Lubac are best understood to be standing in an Origenist and Nyssan tradition, despite their appeals to Augustine. The doctor of grace, rather, belongs to a different historical tradition which sees the desire for God as needing to be elicited and which has stronger ontological resources against universalism.²⁶ Rowan Williams is another theologian who, while a friend of Radical Orthodoxy, also sees Augustine as representing that tradition which recognizes the danger of seeing our nature as continuous with God's grace, in that we neglect our right stance of repentance and incapacity and treat God "as the fantasized completion of the self."²⁷ Repentance—which goes further than thanksgiving or praise—is a necessary part of any redemptive relationship with God, for it establishes the *extra nos* nature of the grace of Christ Jesus.

[For Augustine,] instead of climbing up to Heaven to find the eternal Word, you have to grasp that the eternal Word has come down from Heaven to find you. And this happens when you see yourself not as a boldly questing intellectual mystic, but as a sick person in desperate need of healing, someone whose reality cannot be completed

Pickstock (London: Routledge, 1999), 3.

²⁶ Hütter, "Desiderium Naturale," 83–85, 92. As we have seen, this is evidenced in *De Natura et Gratia*, but it is clearly stated in *De Spiritu et Littera*. There Augustine comments on the Pelagian understanding that "God both created man with the free choice of the will, and by commandments, teaches him, Himself, how man ought to live". He goes on. "We, however, on our side affirm that the human will is so divinely aided in being made just, that (beyond man's being created with a free will and beyond the teaching by which he is instructed how he ought to live) he receives the Holy Ghost, by whom there is formed in his mind a delight in, and a love of, that supreme and unchangeable good which is God even now while he is still "walking by faith and not by sight" in order that by this gift to him of the earnest, as it were, of the free gift, he may conceive an ardent desire to inhere in his maker, and may burn to enter upon the participation in that true light, that it may go well with him from Him to whom he owes his existence. *Spir. et litt.*, 3.5. J. Patout Burns has made a similar point in contrasting Augustine with Origen and Gregory of Nyssa as representing two different patristic traditions regarding the economy of salvation. See J. Patout Burns, "The Economy of Salvation: Two Patristic Traditions," *Theological Studies* 37, no. 4 (December 1976): 598–619.

²⁷ Williams, *On Augustine*, 9.

by their own work and attainments but only by a relationship offered completely from outside.²⁸

This repentant posture was something that Augustine had already come to stress in the Donatist controversy, that purity was not earned but received. And his invocation of the Psalms and prayer in *De Natura et Gratia*, along with a stress on the sickness and disordering of the will, shows his continual fixation with this humility in the redemptive order before God. The practice of repentance thus opens up a way of looking at participation in God but without the universalist overtones of participationist ontology, and as a participation in God wrought in the realm of redemption and not just creation. As Williams put it in a different context regarding Augustine, “without accepting our radical difference from God, we cannot be united with God.” Union with God for Augustine thus “never ceases to be the union of finite with infinite; it never becomes an identity of substance.”²⁹ Charles Mathewes has written that Augustine’s anti-Pelagian theology “was not a pessimistic centering insight into the vanity of human endeavour, but a joyous celebration of the sovereignty of God's grace.”³⁰ But that is to oppose what must be held together. Only in repentance can the sovereignty of God’s grace be celebrated. Only in repentance, acknowledging as it does the possibility of existing outside of God’s grace, or in a relationship of judgment, can a relationship of receptivity and joy in Christ take hold.³¹

Observing Boundaries

Hans Boersma has been another critic of Radical Orthodoxy’s reading of Augustine, along

²⁸ Williams, *On Augustine*, 132.

²⁹ Williams, *On Augustine*, 58.

³⁰ Mathewes, “The Career of the Pelagian Controversy,” 203.

³¹ See Augustine in the *Confessions* who describes God not only as “deeper than my inmost being” but also “high above my highest peak”. *Conf.* 3.6.11.

somewhat similar lines as Wisse's critique of its participationist ontology. In a perceptive article, he finds that despite some similarities, Radical Orthodoxy, as revealed in the writings of Milbank and Ward especially, and Augustine are "fundamentally at odds" with one another. While Boersma agrees that Augustine is not modern, he also stresses that neither is he postmodern, but rather premodern. So while Augustine does see created reality as participating in a cosmic order, that order "has borders that are defined and maintained by God." Reinhard Hütter has made a similar criticism:

Where everything is grace all the way down in one and the same way, albeit of infinitely differing intensity, everything that has been brought into being, must have its end in God, by necessary ontological entailment. While undoubtedly a grandiose speculative vision, it, however, is neither the teaching of the Scriptures nor of the Church.³²

Our reading of *De Natura et Gratia* confirms Boersma's and Hütter's assessment here, and reveals Milbank's project to be perhaps postmodern and critical, but not Augustinian. As we have seen, at the center of Augustine's argument is the distinction between God the creator and God the savior, as is his desire to attribute different work to these different actions of the one God.³³ The problem of a participationist ontology for Boersma is that there are no boundaries or meaningful distinctions. Radical Orthodoxy works instead "with a postmodern understanding of reality as human construct—its "ontology of peace"—in which boundaries and identities are at the very least always in flux (perhaps even nonexistent) and always dependent on human powers of persuasion."³⁴ This approach can be seen, Boersma argues, in the fruit of Radical Orthodoxy's "antinomian moral theology, particularly in its inability to give guidance in terms of sexual

³² Hütter, "Desiderium Naturale," 131.

³³ See, for example, *Nat. et gr.*, 42.49.

³⁴ Hans Boersma, "On the Rejection of Boundaries: Radical Orthodoxy's Appropriation of St. Augustine," *Pro Ecclesia* 15, no. 4 (September 2006): 419.

ethics and in its hesitancy to acknowledge the legitimacy of the use of force in defense of valuable temporal ends.”³⁵ It is not surprising that in a different article from a year earlier, Boersma raises real questions as to the possibility of any Reformed dialogue with Radical Orthodoxy at all, given Milbank’s tenuous articulation of truth as merely that which is persuasive and also his general disregard of the Reformation and its heirs.³⁶ In his more programmatic 2006 article, he continues,

This participatory ontology amounts to a radical denial of any kind of immanentism in which the created order and human reason take on independence vis-à-vis the Trinitarian life of God. Creation and human reason are only real insofar as they participate in the divine life.³⁷

He goes on:

Milbank even ends up with a denial of the Creator/creature distinction: He bases the obliteration of boundaries in the Incarnation, that is to say, in the violation of the “boundary between created and creator, immanence and transcendence, humanity and God.”³⁸

It should be noted here that in the work from which Boersma is citing, Milbank does further on say that God did obliterate the Creator/creature division, “however, in doing so, he also preserved [the division].”³⁹ Indeed, whether Radical Orthodoxy is in danger of a Monophysite Christology remains something of an open question. Eliding nature and grace does not necessarily correspond to eliding, or failing to distinguish between, the two natures of Christ.⁴⁰

³⁵ Boersma, “Rejection of Boundaries,” 419–20. See also Boersma, “Rejection of Boundaries,” 442 for his critique of Milbank’s justification of gay sex.

³⁶ Boersma, “Being Reconciled,” 183–84.

³⁷ Boersma, “Rejection of Boundaries,” 420.

³⁸ Boersma, “Rejection of Boundaries,” 422. Boersma is quoting John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon*, Radical Orthodoxy (London: Routledge, 2003), 197.

³⁹ Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 203.

⁴⁰ For example, both nature and grace are God’s gift and so are not analogous to the two natures of Christ. Nevertheless, the Nicene teaching that Christ took on human nature does seem to require that such a nature be comprehensible in some way “outside” God. The complaint that asserting such a nature leads to a Pelagianism

And the “elision” of which Radical Orthodoxy speaks, at least in Hanby, is not so much an obliteration as an ordering. Thus Hanby writes that a “proper Augustinian response to the divine voice is not a flight from the temporal, but a proper referral of the temporal to its eternal origin and end.”⁴¹ Milbank’s qualification about preserving the division appears to be an attempt to acknowledge the necessary distinctions within Scriptural theology. But Boersma rightly argues that the overarching framework of Radical Orthodoxy works against such boundaries. Picking up Hütter’s analysis, we could say that its Origenist tradition brings with it a universalism that is hard to escape. Thus Boersma goes on to note that the result of the eradication of boundaries can be seen in Graham Ward’s claim that “from Augustine I take the insight that we need to suspend judgment concerning other faiths.”⁴² This nonsensical statement again shows how in seeking to oppose Pelagian autonomy with all of its might, Radical Orthodoxy can fall into a kind of Pelagian non-discriminatory anthropology in which all are already, and equally, graced by means of the gift of creation. As Pelagius put it in *De Natura*,

What is human nature to do but believe in the God who made heaven and earth, the God whom it naturally perceives as its maker, and, by living correctly, fulfills his will, though it has not received any instruction in the faith concerning the suffering and resurrection of Christ?⁴³

It is not hard to hear, in opposition to Ward and the universalism of Radical Orthodoxy,

because it asserts a meaningful and powerful independence from God cannot ultimately be sustained. At least, not for Augustine. On the matter of Christology, it’s interesting to note that Cyril of Alexandria treated Pelagianism and Nestorianism as the same “in that both ascribe man’s salvation to his own action, since for Nestorius Christ is not the Son of God born of Mary but a man who was by his own choice united to the eternal Son of God (hence Bishop Gore’s famous *mot* that “the Nestorian Christ is the fitting savior of the Pelagian man”).” Bonner, “Pelagianism and Augustine,” 47.

⁴¹ Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity*, 58.

⁴² Graham Ward, *Cities of God*, Radical Orthodoxy (London: Routledge, 2001), 257.

⁴³ *Nat. et gr.*, 2.2. Further on, Augustine writes that Pelagius’ zeal should be “that the cross of Christ not be done away with.” *Nat. et gr.*, 7.7.

Augustine's cry in *De Natura et Gratia* that this would render the cross of Christ void.⁴⁴

In looking at the dangers of Radical Orthodoxy going full-circle on Pelagianism, there is another aspect that we might note. As we saw in *De Natura et Gratia* Augustine had intuited that Pelagius' treatment of nature seemed to allow no distinction between the baptized elect and those not baptized. If all of human nature has been graced, what is the point of baptism? Because Pelagius spoke so positively of human nature, Augustine could ask: "Are those who are not yet baptized not included in human nature?"⁴⁵ Pelagius had a hard time dealing with baptism, because his theological vision tended to deal in more universal categories. We can see this in the errors for which Caelestius was condemned in Carthage in 411. As we have noted, the condemned articles were: 1. Adam had to die; 2. Adam's sin injured him alone; 3. Infants are born in pre-Fall state; 4. "Adam by his death [or by his sin] does not subject the whole human race to death; [because] Christ by His Resurrection does not give new life to the entire human race."⁴⁶ Regarding this fourth point, Pelagian theology inferred that the sinfulness of the world was evidence that the resurrection had not brought new life to all, and so also then the sin of Adam could not have stained all. If Adam's sin has affected the entire human race, as Augustine

⁴⁴ Andrew Swafford has written of this tendency in a recent book on nature and grace: "[I]n its extreme form, intrinsicism correlates nature and grace *so* closely that it *identifies* nature and grace as one and the same—with the result that the order of grace ultimately becomes something that 'bubbles' from within human nature. ... If we were to follow this intrinsicist train of thought, it would ultimately imply that the grace of Christ is not substantially different from that of non-Christian religions, in which case the newness or uniqueness of Christ is thereby diminished." Andrew Dean Swafford, *Nature and Grace: A New Approach to Thomistic Ressourcement* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014), 7. He also goes on to call for an "independent intelligibility of the natural order," a point complementary to Boersma's desire to defend an ontology with boundaries. Swafford, *Nature and Grace*, 9. Peter Leithart has reacted to Swafford with: "Well, No. Sure, intrinsicists will say that nature (created existence) is a gift, and in that sense "grace." But intrinsicists also believe in Christ, and therefore in "new creation," which blasts in from outside and doesn't bubble up from within. Intrinsicism does *not* equate old and new, Adam and Christ, creation and resurrection." Peter J. Leithart, "Nature and Grace," *First Things*, July 18, 2014, <https://www.firstthings.com/blogs/leithart/2014/07/nature-and-grace>. But Leithart does not have a monopoly on the definition of intrinsicism, as Ward's supposedly Augustinian universalism shows.

⁴⁵ *Nat. et gr.*, 52.60.

⁴⁶ Portalié, *Augustine*, 184. The insertions are those of Portalié which he makes for the sake of sense.

had claimed, why has not the redemption of Christ therefore redeemed all of humanity? Is Augustine saying that the power of Adam was greater than that of Christ? That sin's power is stronger and more pervasive than Christ's? Thus as Bonner has written, the "Pelagians" "had no characteristic theology, other than a denial of any transmission of Original Sin."⁴⁷ Faced with the dilemma of Adam's universality and Christ's limited influence, they resolved the tension by limiting both. Milbank is keenly aware of this dilemma too, and yet resolves it in the opposite, but nevertheless mirrored, way to the Pelagians. That is, rather than treat Adam's sin and Christ's resurrection as limited, Milbank treats both as cosmically present so that Christ's resurrection claims everyone, as all were created through Him and for Him. As Milbank put it: "After all, how *could charis* be a less original or plenitudinous gift than *esse*?"⁴⁸ But we can remember that Augustine in *De Natura et Gratia*, in seeing sin as a lack which distorts our will, considers grace to be something resisted by the natural man, who has lost his appetite for fulfillment in a completely different way to how God brings us into being from nothing.⁴⁹ A key text here is 1 Cor. 15:21-2: *For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.* But the following verse is instructive also: *But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.* In the context of the cosmic, objective victory of Christ, St. Paul nevertheless sets a boundary regarding those who belong to Christ. The scandal of particularity must establish an ontology of boundaries which Radical Orthodoxy has rejected and thus remains skewed. As we have noted, Hanby thinks that distinguishing God's actions threatens his divine

⁴⁷ Bonner, "Pelagianism and Augustine," 39.

⁴⁸ Milbank, *The Suspended Middle*, 100.

⁴⁹ See *Nat. et gr.*, 20.22.

immutability.⁵⁰ He has also noted that he regards the question of predestination “as at best a secondary concern.”⁵¹ But that is in danger of siding with the Pelagians, against Augustine, whom Boersma is right to argue held to an ontology of participation with boundaries. We need only recall the two cities of *De civitate Dei*—according to which there are “no more than two kinds of groups of human beings, which we call two cities, according to the special usage of our Scriptures,”—and the stress on faith in the Pelagian controversy—“faith itself sets a believer apart from one who does not believe”—to see how important boundaries were for his theology.⁵²

Regarding this participationist ontology of Radical Orthodoxy, Boersma is happier than Wisse to describe Augustine as subscribing to a participatory ontology, and one that is not only with reference to grace (whether the relation be positive or negative) but also with respect to creation. But he draws the interesting point that for Augustine, we do not so much emanate from God in a Platonic fashion, but rather come into being from nothing, *creatio ex nihilo*. He cites Augustine from *De civitate Dei*: “The things he made are good because they were made by him, but they are subject to change because they were made not out of his being but out of nothing.”⁵³ This twofold character supports reading Augustine as observing a strong ontological distinction between the creature and the Creator. And just because all creation is a gift of God does not necessarily entail that creation and grace are the same gift.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity*, 211 n. 13.

⁵¹ Hanby, “A Response,” 16.

⁵² *Civ. Dei.*, 14.1.12–18. *De praed. sanct.* 5.10.

⁵³ *Civ. Dei.*, 12.1. In this vein, Boersma has also noted, rightly, that de Lubac’s thought does not necessarily lend itself to the Radical Orthodoxy project. De Lubac’s critiques of Platonism “make it difficult to look to de Lubac as a resource for the recovery of a more sacramental ontology that relies in part on the Platonic tradition.” Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie*, 90.

⁵⁴ Hütter brings out this criticism of Milbank also: “Milbank, in his Bulgakovian radicalization of de Lubac and by entailment of Aquinas argues that the two gifts, the second in a unique way perfecting the first, are to be seen in a continuum, a seamless dynamic of varying intensity, reflecting a fundamental ontological élan drawing the

In his fascinating reply to Brachtendorf and Wisse as part of the *Ars Disputandi* colloquium, Hanby acknowledged that in *Augustine and Modernity* he may have opened himself up to the charge that because creation is grace it is sufficient unto itself for salvation. Indeed his whole response implicitly distances himself from Milbank, and seems to be a clearer expression of Hanby's settled and considered opinions rather than those in *Augustine and Modernity* which were written under the supervision of Milbank. While not disputing that creation is grace, Hanby now adds that it is not "the remedial grace necessary to draw humanity to God from its fallen state." Hanby affirms instead that creatures are "inherently and naturally ordered from the outset to what only God can finally give them, that they are made to receive God as gift."⁵⁵ While Hanby nevertheless states that *Augustine and Modernity* stands as his "final thoughts" on the matter, his reaction piece does show a definite move away from Milbank's participationist ontology, something which is by no means obvious in *Augustine and Modernity*.⁵⁶ Hanby does observe boundaries here in a way that he was less explicit about in *Augustine and Modernity*. He states that the saved human being receives God as a gift, acknowledging that there is the possibility of an intelligible existence prior to the gift of salvation. This does differentiate him from Milbank (although Hanby does not acknowledge it), for whom, as we can recall "Christianity should not draw boundaries,"⁵⁷ and:

the divine gift ... is a gift to no-one, but rather establishes creatures as themselves gifts, the divine gift passes across no neutral abyss, no interval of uncertainty during which one waits, with bated breath, to see if the destiny of a gift will be realised.⁵⁸

entire cosmos through humanity to beatitude." Hütter, "Desiderium Naturale," 110.

⁵⁵ Hanby, "A Response," 6–7.

⁵⁶ Hanby, "A Response," 1.

⁵⁷ Milbank, "Postmodern Critical Augustinianism," 229.

⁵⁸ Milbank, "Can a Gift Be Given?" 135.

Now, in 2007, Hanby writes of the “significant differences between those writing under the auspices of this [Radical Orthodoxy book] series.”⁵⁹ And while Hanby does not explicitly concede any ground, he shows an approach much closer to Boersma and, as our study has shown, Augustine. He explains, for instance, that by eliding nature and grace into a single economy, he did not mean to collapse the distinction between them, but rather to affirm with Augustine in *De Natura et Gratia* that God’s justice is consistent, whether in saving or damning.⁶⁰

The question, then, is not whether there is a difference between God and the world, whether nature has a legitimate freedom or autonomy, or even whether the world in its freedom, autonomy, and being not-God has the capacity to remain indifferent or resistant to divine solicitations. Of course it does; it would be blindness to claim otherwise, and in fact, I never do. Rather the question—for my critics and, I argue, for Augustine against the Pelagians—is whether it is this indifference and this capacity for resistance that *constitutes* the world in its very worldliness, whether the ‘legitimate autonomy’ of the world consists in this indifference and resistance, or rather whether the world and its autonomy find their fulfillment in relation to God because this fulfillment answers to their original, intrinsic constitution as creatures.⁶¹

In this clarifying passage, Hanby both acknowledges the essential importance of boundaries, while also drawing attention to what he still sees in Brachtendorf and Wisse as “evidence of the deep modern anachronisms infecting much of the contemporary treatment of Augustine.”⁶² Exploring this disagreement will take us to the final section of this thesis.

Is Nature and Grace a Zero-Sum Game?

Hanby’s response to Brachtendorf and Wisse shows a desire both to uphold boundaries and

⁵⁹ Hanby, “A Response,” 9.

⁶⁰ *Nat. et gr.*, 5.5.

⁶¹ Hanby, “A Response,” 19. Despite what Hanby says, this does seem to be a move away from passages in *Augustine and Modernity* like when he claims the Incarnation reconfigured “cosmology as creation, creation as soteriology, soteriology as aesthetics and aesthetics as doxology.” Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity*, 27.

⁶² Hanby, “A Response,” 1.

deny universalism and yet nevertheless preserve a participationist ontology in which creatures are still ordered towards God, and in which God and humanity do not stand in competition with each other. That Wisse and Brachtendorf do not see this is, for Hanby, the “fundamental disagreement,” and leads to them (along with much contemporary Augustinian scholarship) projecting a modernist metaphysic back on to Augustine in a way that diminishes his thought.⁶³

Hanby thus agrees with Wisse that Augustine rightly insists upon “the absolute ontological difference between God and the world,” but also then wants to add, contra Wisse, that:

throughout the Pelagian controversy [Augustine] insists that every human act which can finally be called ‘good’ is at once the work of the creature *and* the Creator, that there is no moment at which the human contribution to this act can be held in a state of reserve as its own private possession, separate from the gift of grace.⁶⁴

Or, to frame it in different terms, Hanby wants to establish ontological principles for Augustine which are neither Stoic or Pelagian on the one hand, in which nature and operative grace exist in competition and man’s nature is defined by his isolation from God making grace a violent intrusion, but neither Origenist or Platonic on the other hand, in which ontological boundaries are collapsed into emanation and which is ultimately universalistic. Hanby’s response is so important to his whole project because he here clearly, and rightly, rejects Milbank’s boundary-less Christianity, while also, rightly, sticking to his earlier guns in challenging some of contemporary Augustinian studies’ modernist, zero-sum game approach to God and man, or nature and grace. In doing this, Hanby employs the Incarnational analogy:

For there is a deep analogy between the question of how an act can be at once divine and human without compromising the difference between God and the world and the question of how the Son can become incarnate without sacrificing genuine divinity or humanity, even if there remains an infinite difference between Christ our Head and us, his Body—a difference I adamantly affirm. Or put differently, if one can offer a

⁶³ Hanby, “A Response,” 14.

⁶⁴ Hanby, “A Response,” 15.

coherent account of how the Son could become incarnate without violating either his divinity or humanity, one can offer a coherent account of how the graced act could be at once God's and mine, and more finally and fully the latter for being the former.⁶⁵

With reference to our own study of Augustine's *De Natura et Gratia*, Hanby here offers a compelling vision for understanding the logic behind Augustine's anti-Pelagian concerns. As we noted, Augustine was concerned to prevent nature and grace from being seen to exist only in competition, as a zero-sum game.

[W]e do not take away the choice of the will, but we proclaim the grace of God. Who benefits from all these things, unless they are willing? But they must be willing with humility and not raise themselves up with pride over the powers of the will, as if it alone were sufficient for the perfection of righteousness.⁶⁶

As we have seen, Augustine would come to summarize *De Natura et Gratia* in the *Retractiones* as a work in which he “did not defend grace in opposition to nature, but the grace by which nature is set free and ruled.”⁶⁷ Indeed within Augustine's thought there are indications that both Pelagianism and Platonism suffer from a similar disease. The Pelagians make nature grace, and the Platonists make grace natural.⁶⁸ This is the choice that John Milbank had posed, identifying the former with German theology, and the latter with his favored French theology.⁶⁹ But Hanby points to a more helpful way:

It is this dissimilarity [between God and the world], this ontological discontinuity, the fact that God is not really but freely and contingently related to the world that makes it possible to think of both the incarnation, and by analogy, a doctrine of grace that at once constitutes, perfects, and completes nature in its very naturality while remaining entirely distinct and gratuitous. Were I now to argue this independently of Augustine, I would take recourse to the Thomist distinction between the *esse ipsum subsistens* of

⁶⁵ Hanby, “A Response,” 16.

⁶⁶ *Nat. et gr.*, 32.36.

⁶⁷ Augustine, *Retr.*, 2.68.42. Vanneste is wrong when he suggests that in *De Natura et Gratia* nature and grace are “*deux réalités opposées, voire en quelque sorte ennemies* (two opposite realities, even somewhat hostile).” Vanneste, *Nature et Grâce*, 41.

⁶⁸ See, for example, Augustine, *De Gratia et Libero Arbitrio*, 25.

⁶⁹ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 207.

God himself and the *esse creatum non subsistens* of the world to account for how we might think of the world as being at once possessed of its own being while being nonetheless intrinsically constituted in relation to God and dependent for its fulfillment as world on the gift of grace. And it is on this basis that I would contend, perhaps more strongly than I did in the book, for a genuine sense of creaturely, human—and by extension, philosophical—‘autonomy’, founded not in a fictional independence from God, but rather precisely in its embrace of its need for and dependence upon God.⁷⁰

Hanby’s response thus rehabilitates his project with valuable corrections against the Milbankian extremes, while also denying, along with Augustine, that the relationship of nature to grace is a zero-sum game. While Pelagius had assumed man is naturally free, for Augustine it was God’s grace which made our wills cling to God and so find freedom.⁷¹ Nature was, without grace, directed away from God, even opposed to him, and enslaved to sin.⁷² The grace of Christ Jesus, won on the cross, is in no way within us. And yet, it does lead to our freedom, even to the fullness of our being, strengthening and activating our nature, without replacing it. Grace never threatens our deepest nature, or compromises our freedom but rather enables it. Because the two do not exist in competition, the gift of grace can be fully undeserved, unmerited and unexpected, while also being more welcome than a brick wall which we might inadvertently run into. Grace is *extra nos*, but not extraneous to our natures which are set free by grace when we receive it through faith. The victory of Augustine over Pelagius, then, was not necessarily a victory of

⁷⁰ Hanby, “A Response,” 17.

⁷¹ See *Nat. et gr.*, 12.13. Portalié seems to be on to a good thing when he writes: “[I]n the Pelagian struggle Augustine perceived immediately the danger of compromising freedom of the will by exalting the role of grace; he wished at all costs to avert this peril while avoiding the opposite pitfalls.” Portalié, *Augustine*, 197. But he then goes on to fall into the trap of a relationship of competition. Beholden to his own neo-Scholastic theology of merit, he argues that Augustine joined the Pelagians in proclaiming that without the power of choice “there is no responsibility, no merit, no demerit.” Sure, original sin may have tainted the will, but “it remains master of it choice.” Portalié, *Augustine*, 197.

⁷² Burns thinks that this opposition of the will to God’s grace only intensified in Augustine throughout the Pelagian controversy, culminating in a change in 418 in which he considered man to be in resistance to God without grace. See Burns, *Operative Grace*, 142.

grace over nature, nor a full elision of the two.⁷³ Nor was it just about grace, *per se*, given that Pelagius could affirm that it is by grace that we are forgiven by Jesus Christ, especially in baptism.⁷⁴ In this sense Hanby is indeed right to see that it was not just grace, but the ontological foundation of God's economy of creation and grace which was at the heart of the controversy. We earlier noted one paradox of Augustine's anthropology, namely, of subjectivity leading to objectivity. Here there is another paradox which de Lubac too affirmed, namely that freedom is not intrinsic to our nature but is received as, by grace, it submits to God. This allows us to read Augustine intelligibly, in contrast to the confusion Gerald Bonner has when he writes of "two distinct theologies" in Augustine which he reads as opposing each other. The first is that of participation in God's life, the other of pessimism regarding the human condition to perform anything at all.⁷⁵ But a proper understanding of nature and grace not only harmonizes these two supposedly distinct theologies, but brings them into an essential relationship with each other.

Recalling the work of Henri de Lubac with which this study began, we can see Hanby as

⁷³ Reinhard Hütter also identifies this third way of approaching the Christian life in which boundaries are neither collapsed into an "exclusive agency," but nor heightened into a "competitive agency." He instead speaks of "transcendent agency" concerning which he writes: "According to this account, God's causality is genuinely transcendent: there can in principle never be a competitive relationship between divine and human causality. Rather, divine, creative causality, that is, providence and predestination, operates also by way of free human causality. Because the whole matrix of secondary causality (including the genuine contingency of free human causality) relates instrumentally to the divine transcendent cause, human causality is infallibly directed by divine providence. Moreover, and more importantly, God as the ultimate good, acting by way of final causality, can draw the creature infallibly to himself without diminishing, curbing, or destroying the human being's free will. What is most significant about this third construal of divine and human causality is that it allows for a profound and constant impact of the Holy Spirit upon the Christian life without undercutting a coherent account of human agency. The human being remains the agent of all genuine theological acts, while the dispositions for these acts are the created effects of the Holy Spirit's agency. With the exception of the beginning of faith—the *initium fidei*, where the human being is moved and not moving—humans remain free agents in all respects of the Christian life, according to the order of secondary causality, while the Holy Spirit remains the divine transcendental cause of the Christian life." Reinhard Hütter, "The Christian Life," in *Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. Kathryn Tanner, John Webster, and Iain Torrance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 294.

⁷⁴ E.g. *Nat. et gr.*, 18.20. For a discussion, see Evans, *Pelagius*, 16.

⁷⁵ Bonner, *Freedom and Necessity*, 114.

sharing in a similar pattern—reacting strongly against the modernist dualisms in Augustinian studies as well as more generally in political and religious life, only to see later on more clearly the dangers of the postmodern collapsing of distinctions and boundaries. Hanby’s stress in 2007 on the importance of dissimilarity and ontological discontinuity in Augustine mirrors de Lubac’s own mature rejection of both ‘contingentist theories’ and Platonist theories. It is worth re-quoting de Lubac here, citing Jacques Maritain:

Despite all that has been said to the contrary, we must certainly maintain that ‘St Augustine taught as clearly as possible the ontological value of the distinction between nature and grace’; ‘he clearly affirmed that distinction even for the state of innocence’. The definitely and intrinsically supernatural character of divine adoption is one of the fundamental elements in his teaching; it is expressed there so clearly, and so insistently, that we should be astonished to find that it has not always been recognized.⁷⁶

In light of passages like this, it is hard to imagine de Lubac approving of Milbank as the interpreter of his Augustinian thought. A faithful reading of de Lubac will remember him not only as the one who challenged the idea of *natura pura* but also as one who rejected the collapsing of distinctions between nature and grace, especially if attributed to Augustine. Does Augustine simply stand as a wax nose in these debates, able to lend the authority of the “Augustinian” tag in whichever way someone wishes to coopt him? It is hard to deny that the contested space of what is genuinely Augustinian sometimes tends to reflect the theological and confessional commitments of its challengers. Approaches to Augustine which sideline the “exegetical” will only perpetuate this error. But that is not to say that the Augustinian “exegetes” always get him right. As Hanby has convincingly shown, in order to understand Augustine on nature and grace, one must give full attention to the broader ontological visions of Augustine and

⁷⁶ Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 26–27.

Pelagius.

Against Milbank and other Platonic sympathizers, Augustine is clear in *De Natura et Gratia* that faulty attempts to defend God's creation as fully graced end up rejecting the cross and the mercy of the physician. "Hence, we should not praise the creator so that we are forced to say, indeed so that we are found guilty of saying, that the savior is unnecessary (*superfluum*)."⁷⁷ The savior is always necessary because our redemption can only come by a grace that is *extra nos*, and different from the created gift. But against those who would see Augustine as positing a natural autonomy that is fully intelligible without reference to grace, a *natura pura*, Augustine in *De Natura et Gratia* also bears witness to a non-competitive relationship between nature and grace. In this relationship, nature is set free by grace. In its lack caused by sin, nature reveals grace to be not extraneous or superfluous but its fulfilment.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ *Nat. et gr.*, 34.39.

⁷⁸ Augustine, *Retr.*, 2.68.42.

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