

Biblical Contours of Flourishing

Marc Cortez

November 2017

*This paper was produced in the Opus Vocation Scholars program,
now known as CFI Scholars.*

***This material, written by Marc Cortez, is not to be circulated, shared, or published in any form,
hard copy or electronic, without express permission from the author.***



Wheaton Center for
Faith & Innovation

In theology today, it has become increasingly common to emphasize that Jesus alone is the true human, the one who comes not only to complete God’s creational purposes for humanity, but the one in whom alone we see the full truth of what it means to be human. In other words, the meaning of humanity is inherently christological, and humanity has never had any other *telos* than the eschatological consummation revealed and inaugurated in and through Jesus Christ. Consequently, this christological finality is *intrinsic* to the definition of humanity. Even if humanity had not fallen into sin, God would still have brought humanity to this state of eschatological consummation in some way, and it is *only* from this perspective that we see what it means to be human.¹

This differs considerably from the approach adopted by those who affirm a certain understanding of the nature/grace relationship for understanding the human person. According to this view, we need to distinguish between what humanity is in creation (*nature*) and what humanity becomes through supernatural divine action (*grace*). The first tells us what humanity is *essentially*—that which is necessary to be human rather than some other kind of creature—while the latter reveals the *elevation* of humanity through grace. This approach still affirms that God’s purposes for humanity have always included this supernatural elevation, but it maintains that this is *extrinsic* to the definition of humanity since it is something that God gives to humans as a work of grace in addition to the grace of creation.² Unless we make a clear distinction between what humanity is by nature and what humanity becomes by grace, these theologians contend that we will inevitably confuse these two orders of existence with the tragic consequence that we undermine the gratuity of grace, the intelligibility of human nature, and the viability of public discourse about what it means to be human. Consequently, these thinkers contend that the nature/grace framework (NGF) is essential for efforts to discuss human flourishing in the world today.

¹ Whether this means that the incarnation itself would have happened irrespective of the Fall is a question we will take up in the next chapter.

² Feingold objects to the label “extrinsicism” because it suggests a view in which there is no “real continuity or affinity between our nature and its supernatural destiny” (Lawrence Feingold, *The Natural Desire to See God According to St. Thomas and His Interpreters*, 2nd ed. [Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press, 2004], 339). I am using the label instead to denote any view denying that our “supernatural” finality in Christ is fundamental to the definition of humanity.

My intention here is not to try and offer a definitive resolution to the dispute between these two positions. Instead, in light of the broader focus of this session on the question of human flourishing, I want to highlight some of the important theological issues that surround the attempt to use NGF as a basis for talking about human flourishing today, as well as some of the key concerns that have been raised about such an approach. In other words, my primary hope is to fuel a good discussion about human flourishing by throwing some theological wood onto the fire.

The Nature of Natural Flourishing

The extrinsic view begins with a fundamental distinction between *nature* and *grace*. According to Edward Oakes, *nature* typically denotes “what is essential to something’s identity.”³ To have a human *nature* is to have whatever it is that is essential for being human rather than some other kind of creature. *Grace*, on the other hand, refers to something that “is *not* essential, that is, what is *gratuitous*, to the entity in question but comes to it as something extra, unexpected, or not required for a nature to be a nature.”⁴ We should notice here that this distinction does not require us to think that *nature* exists independently of God. Since nothing exists apart from God’s work in creating and preserving the universe, *nature* must fundamentally be viewed as a gift as well. Yet once God brings something into existence, it has a certain set of properties essential for it being the kind of thing that it is, which includes a certain set of powers that allows it to accomplish ends appropriate to those powers. That is its nature. Grace involves anything that goes beyond these essential characteristics.

A second distinction involves the difference between *nature* and *supernature*. Theologians often reserve the *nature/grace* distinction for things directly related to the salvation of fallen human persons. The *nature/supernature* distinction, on the other hand, utilizes the same essential/nonessential distinction for the purpose of describing the elevation of humanity to its supernatural finality.⁵ Consequently, this distinction draws on the idea that

³ Edward T. Oakes, *A Theology of Grace in Six Controversies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1–2.

⁵ Kenneth Oakes, “The Question of Nature and Grace in Karl Barth: Humanity as Creature and as Covenant-Partner,” *Modern Theology* 23, no. 4 (2007): 598.

even in creation there were some ends humans could achieve through the utilization of their natural capacities (e.g. natural happiness) and others that required an additional gift of grace (e.g. beatific vision). No matter how well they utilize their natural capacities, humans cannot accomplish supernatural ends through natural means. Consequently, their natural state needs to be elevated to the supernatural state through an additional gift of grace to achieve that which is God's ultimate intention for humanity.

Both of these distinctions lead directly to the idea of a "pure nature" (*natura pura*), which is the idea of humanity apart from this elevating grace. Although it is possible to understand the *natura pura* as being the state of Adam and Eve in the Garden, people commonly affirm that God created *and* elevated humanity at the moment of creation. However, even if there was never a time when Adam and Eve existed apart from this elevated state, it remains possible to think about what it means to be human apart from the additional gift of grace. Indeed, on this account it is *necessary* to have some concept of their natural state if we are going to understand the supernatural state as truly gratuitous. Otherwise we would collapse nature into grace and begin to think of the supernatural end as something humans can accomplish through the exercise of their natural capacities alone. Consequently, the *natura pura* "is a theoretical construct, but it is nonetheless an important one to make."⁶

A more contentious question arises when we consider whether humanity still has a distinct, natural *telos* even now. According to some of Thomas' interpreters, the answer is yes.⁷ When Adam and Eve fell, losing the grace necessary for their supernatural *telos*, they remained human, thus retaining the natural properties and capacities essential to being human. Those capacities became disordered by the Fall so that humanity was no longer able to use them rightly, but these capacities remain essential to being human, and they provide humans with natural ends that can still be pursued to some extent even now.

With all of these pieces in place, we can begin to appreciate why NGF would be seen as valuable for thinking about human flourishing today.⁸ If it is the case that even after the Fall

⁶ Neil Ormerod, "The Grace-Nature Distinction and the Construction of a Systematic Theology," *Theological Studies* 75, no. 3 (2014): 520.

⁷ E.g. Feingold, *The Natural Desire to See God*.

⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I-II, q. 109, a. 2.

humans retain a set of natural capacities and powers, and if it is also the case that these capacities and powers are naturally ordered toward proper ends that can be at least partially achieved even now, then this can serve as a starting point for reflecting on what it would mean theologically to say that we are pursuing the flourishing of all human persons, including those outside the Church, even if we continue to maintain that the true *telos* of all human persons is only found in Christ as a gift of grace. Similarly, if these are truly *natural* powers and capacities, they should be fully available to analysis from non-theological perspectives. Consequently, it is both legitimate and necessary for Christian thinkers to engage in meaningful interdisciplinary, and even interreligious, dialog about the project of human flourishing, based on the conviction that each of these disparate perspectives may have some insight into human flourishing viewed from this natural perspective.

Common Worries about NGF

Protestant theologians have long registered concerns about this approach based on worries about what they perceived to be an incipient Pelagianism and an underdeveloped doctrine of sin. The Pelagian worry stems from the idea that human persons have a legitimate *telos* that can be pursued purely through the right exercise of their natural capacities. This worry was exacerbated by the fact that many Protestants understood NGF to entail an actual period of time in which humans existed in this natural state (i.e. the initial condition of Adam and Eve in the Garden). As we have already seen, though, this argument only requires, and typically maintains, that the *natura pura* is a hypothetical abstraction, something logically entailed by the claim that our true *telos* is a gift of grace. Consequently, it is not the case that the *natura pura* argument entails some form of Pelagianism.

The other worry has to do with the idea that our natural powers and capacities remain even after the Fall and that we can still exercise those natural powers in pursuit of human flourishing. Protestant thinkers have routinely heard this as indicating that these natural powers were essentially unaffected by the Fall. From their perspective, NGF makes it sound as though the essential substratum of human nature is largely unaffected by anything that happens at the level of grace/sin. Grace is merely something “added” to an already complete

human nature, so it suffers no real loss when grace is removed after the Fall. We retain all of our natural powers and can use them effectively to pursue human flourishing. However, contemporary advocates of this approach have clarified that this is a mistake. Although human nature retains all of its natural powers, as it must if it is to remain distinctively human, that does not mean that human nature is unaffected by these various transitions.⁹ Suppose, for example, that I exposed my daughter to the glories of coffee for the first time. In her natural state, she had never been exposed to coffee, so her natural desires could be adequately fulfilled in other ways. Now that she has been elevated to the higher state of coffee-lover, however, she will remain unfulfilled and unsatisfied by anything else (e.g. Kool Aid). She still has all of the same essential powers and capacities, but they have now been oriented toward a higher desire. Now suppose in addition that I decide to rescind her coffee drinking privileges for some reason, maybe because she kept taking my coffee with her to school and leaving me with an empty pot every morning. She has now lost the higher-order state that she had received as a gift from her gracious father, and she still retains all of the natural powers and capacities she had before her coffee elevation. Yet those powers and capacities are now ordered toward a higher end such that they can no longer be satisfied with lower pursuits. Her essential nature remains, but it does not remain unaffected. According to NGF advocates, the same holds for their view. Although they affirm that we retain our natural powers and their corresponding ends despite the Fall, they deny that this requires us to think that these powers have been unaffected by the corrupting influence of sin.

In addition to these two classic objections, we should also be aware that more recent criticisms of NGF have come from a variety of theological traditions. Although quite a number of Catholic theologians have registered their concerns, Henri de Lubac's arguments have been the most influential.¹⁰ According to de Lubac, the extrinsic approach fails to appreciate that the

⁹ As Steven A. Long explains, "The attempt to argue that, if nature and grace are distinct, no natural harm should therefore ensue upon the loss of grace, is an argument that implicitly fails to accept the causal efficacy of grace. Once ordered in and by grace at creation, thereafter human nature will be vain and frustrated apart from the supernatural end (*Natura Pura: On the Recovery of Nature in the Doctrine of Grace*, Moral Philosophy and Moral Theology [New York: Fordham University Press, 2010], 24).

¹⁰ Henri de Lubac, *Surnaturel* (Paris: Aubier, 1946). See also the further clarification and expansion in Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967); Henri de Lubac, *Augustinianism and Modern Theology*, trans. G. Chapman London (London: G. Chapman, 1969). Since much

biblical authors clearly portray Jesus as the one in whom we find the true meaning of humanity. For de Lubac, this is particularly prominent in the NT emphasis on Jesus as the true *imago Dei*. Consequently, the extrinsic approach results in a view of humanity “cut off from his transcendent finality,”¹¹ rather than recognizing that the supernatural *telos* of humanity “is inscribed upon my very being.”¹² The extrinsic view, on the other hand, not only undermines a right understanding of the human person, but of creation itself. As Healy summarizes, the extrinsic view “precluded the idea that the mystery of Jesus Christ reveals the original purpose and meaning of creation itself—reveals, we might say, the nature of nature.”¹³

De Lubac and others have also argued that a theological understanding of the human person should begin with the concrete realities that exist in the world that God actually created. And in *this* world, the only kind of humanity that we have is one that has always been called to its ultimate *telos* in Christ. The extrinsic approach, on the other hand, requires us to take an abstraction—what humans would be apart from grace—and make that the starting point for understanding what it means to be human. De Lubac argues instead that humanity has only a single, supernatural *telos*. Although we do have “natural” capacities and desires, they are themselves oriented toward this supernatural *telos* such that there can be no true happiness or fulfillment for humanity apart from eschatological consummation. Consequently, since even prelapsarian humanity was oriented toward eschatological consummation and had an innate desire for this finality, de Lubac cannot countenance any suggestion that God could have left Adam and Eve in that state without offering them the grace necessary for their only true *telos*. Rather than envisioning a state of natural bliss, de Lubac argues that only suffering would have resulted in such a situation since it would leave humanity with a desire—indeed their deepest desire—that would never be fulfilled.¹⁴ He also rejects the possibility of a

of the debate involved the proper interpretation of Thomas Aquinas among Roman Catholic theologians (see esp. Feingold, *The Natural Desire to See God*), it could easily be dismissed by Protestant thinkers as a largely intramural discussion. Nonetheless, we have already seen the discussion involves more fundamental questions about what it means to be human.

¹¹ Lubac, *Augustinianism and Modern Theology*, 75.

¹² Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 55.

¹³ Nicholas J. Healy, “Henri de Lubac on Nature and Grace: A Note on Some Recent Contributions to the Debate,” *Communio* 35 (2008): 545.

¹⁴ Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 69–70.

hypothetical universe in which humanity exists without a supernatural *telos* at all, contending that such creatures would not be *human*.¹⁵ For de Lubac, we cannot define humanity in abstraction from the supernatural *telos* to which God has actually called us. Consequently, no matter how similar some other creatures might be in this hypothetical scenario, they would not count as human.

As an example of a contemporary Protestant critic, we can turn to Kathryn Tanner.¹⁶ In addition to some of the concerns mentioned above, Tanner argues that the entire discussion is based on the Aristotelian conception that natures must have finalities that are proportionate to their powers. So, in this context, if humans have natural desires, they must correspond to finalities that are achievable by the powers of the human nature. Consequently, if we think that the desire for a supernatural finality like the beatific vision is intrinsic to human nature, we imply either some kind of Pelagianism or we undermine the gratuity of grace. To avoid these unacceptable implications, we have to posit a natural state that is not intrinsically ordered toward a supernatural finality. Yet Tanner contends that the mistake is in assuming this Aristotelian framework in the first place. Tanner instead offers a participationist ontology of the human person in which the human desire for God does not arise from human nature at all, regardless of whether that nature is viewed as being in a state of nature or of grace. Desire for God is always produced by God's presence to us in and through the Spirit. Ultimately, she argues that the nature/grace debate has locked itself into irresolvable difficulties by orientating the discussion around a faulty conception of humanity and its relationship to God's grace.

A similar concern arises from Eastern Orthodox perspectives on the discussion. With their highly sacramental understanding of the universe in general and human nature in particular, Orthodox theologians tend to avoid making *any* strong distinction between "nature" and "supernature." As Vladimir Lossky notes, the Eastern tradition, "knows nothing of pure

¹⁵ Ibid., 54.

¹⁶ Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010). For another particularly influential argument, see John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Renewed Split in Modern Catholic Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2014).

nature to which grace is added as a supernatural gift. For it, there is no actual or ‘normal’ state, since grace is implied in the act of creation itself.”¹⁷

We could easily add more voices and concerns here. But these suffice to help us see why theologians from various traditions—Protestant, Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox—have reservations about the legitimacy of NGF and, consequently, its viability as a basis for talking about human flourishing today. However, we also need to keep in mind some of the more important worries about the intrinsic approach. Two in particular warrant close consideration.

On Divine Obligations

The first concern is that understanding the human person as intrinsically ordered toward a supernatural *telos* such that grace is intrinsic to the meaning of humanity undermines the gratuity of grace. If humans are intrinsically oriented toward eschatological consummation, it begins to sound as though God would somehow be obligated to provide this *telos* for humanity. The only alternative seems to be imagining that God could create humans for the sole purpose of eschatological consummation and then withhold from them the grace necessary to achieve that *telos*. This would result in a humanity perpetually frustrated by its inability to fulfill its own finality, and it seems unfitting for a good and gracious God to leave his own creatures without even the possibility of attaining the *telos* for which he himself created them. God thus seems to have an obligation to his creatures (*debitum naturae*), one that he established by instilling in them a *telos* they cannot achieve through the exercise of their natural capacities. Yet if God is obligated to provide eschatological consummation, it no longer appears to be grace since people commonly maintain that grace cannot be obligated.

Some might be inclined to reject this argument simply on the basis of a conviction that God cannot ever be *obligated* to his creatures. Even if God created humanity with an intrinsic orientation toward eschatological consummation, we might maintain that this does not mean he now owes it to his creatures to provide what is necessary for achieving that end. If he does, that is simply a gift of grace that goes beyond the gift of creation. Imagine, for example, that I

¹⁷ Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1976), 101.

create a robot for the sole purpose of carving pumpkins, and I instill into the robot all of the capacities necessary for carrying out *that* purpose and no other. Then, when the robot is ready, I decide not to provide any pumpkins, depriving the robot of the gracious gift necessary for it to carry out its purpose. Would this create some kind of injustice? It is difficult to see why it would. People might wonder why I would waste my time building the robot if I had no intention of allowing it to carry out its intended function, but there is no good reason to think that I am somehow obligated to do so. Even if I eventually discard the robot because it is not carrying out its pumpkin-carving purpose, this is still well within my rights as the robot's creator.

Although I think it is probably right to argue that God cannot be obligated to his creatures simply in virtue of having created them, the reference to God's goodness earlier suggests that there is another form of the obligation argument that may be more difficult to address. Maybe the relevant obligation is something that obtains between God and his own nature and purposes. If God created humans for a particular *telos*, it would seem to be part of his own plan that they (or at least some of them) achieve this *telos*. While this might not create an obligation between God and the *creature*, we might argue that God is obligated to *himself*—i.e. to carry out his own plans. The only alternative would seem to be the possibility that God could abandon his own purposes, which would open the door to all kinds of worries about God's faithfulness and reliability. Yet if God is in any way obligated to provide the supernatural *telos*, even if the obligation is to himself, we still seem to have the problem that the supernatural *telos* of the human person is no longer a gift of grace but the demand that comes from obligation.

Alternatively, the intrinsic approach could concede the point and affirm that grace can in fact be obligated in some sense. Instead, we might argue that it is at least conceivable for something to be both obligated and grace-based at the same time.¹⁸ Although this might seem like an impossible contradiction, Oakes rightly points out that the same paradox accompanies

¹⁸ De Lubac does this by describing the relationship between nature and grace as "singular and paradoxical" (Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 133). Yet Jenson raises a legitimate concern here. "Moreover, to deal with the fundamental relation of nature and supernature, de Lubac finally takes refuge in 'paradox', always a danger sign" (Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 2.67). Unless we want to avoid the suspicion that we are affirming nonsense, we need to provide at least some reason for thinking that the contradiction is only apparent.

any expression of love, which lies at the heart of grace: “For if love is the essence of grace, then something peculiar enters the picture here: we all *need* love, but love is not love if it has been coerced out of the supposed lover....What is the value of love if it is not freely given? Thus the paradox: we need love but cannot demand it. Love is love precisely because it is a gift freely—that is gratuitously—given.”¹⁹

It may be, however, that we can find an easier resolution in the covenantal idea that God can graciously obligate himself to perform some action. All God’s covenants find their basis in grace since there is nothing that could obligate God to enter into those covenantal arrangements in the first place. Having done so, however, God takes to himself the obligation to carry out the terms of the covenant. Consequently, there is a sense in which we can say that God is obligated to provide the blessings of the covenant in response to the people’s faithfulness. At the same time, though, we must also say that the blessings are an expression of grace since the covenant itself is grounded in grace. If we follow this path, we end up affirming that the obligation to provide the grace necessary for humanity’s supernatural *telos* arose as part of the same eternal act in which God determined to create humanity for that *telos*. As Robert Jenson points out, the obligation worry only arises if we grant that the natural state of humanity has a logical priority over the supernatural state.²⁰ If we maintain instead that the act of creation just is the ordination to eschatological consummation, then we leave no conceptual space for any kind of *debitum naturam* and, consequently, for the gratuity argument itself.

The Intelligibility of Human Nature

The second key concern, and the one more directly related to the question of human flourishing, arises from whether the intrinsic approach undermines the intelligibility of human nature and, consequently, the extent to which humanity and human flourishing can in any way

¹⁹ Oakes, *A Theology of Grace in Six Controversies*, 3.

²⁰ Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 2.68. Lossky argues for something similar from the Eastern tradition, “knows nothing of pure nature to which grace is added as a supernatural gift. For it, there is no actual or ‘normal’ state, since grace is implied in the act of creation itself” (Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* [Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1976], 101).

be approached from non-theological perspectives.²¹ Criticizing Hans Urs von Balthasar in particular, Steven Long argues that the intrinsic approach robs nature of having any “significant ontological density and intelligibility in its own right.”²² In other words, by arguing that humanity is intrinsically oriented toward its supernatural *telos*, this view seems to deny that we can understand what it means to be human in any way apart from some kind of theological perspective. According to Long, the logic of Nicaea depends on our ability to discern that the Son became human, which requires that we know at least something of what it means to be human *before* the incarnation. “To hold that human nature is not intelligible in its species in distinction from grace is to make the Nicene doctrine the doctrine that, in Christ, God assumes a ‘who knows what?’”²³

Suppose, for example, that I build a pergola in my backyard. That pergola would have certain properties that correspond to “natural” purposes like providing shade, adding beauty, and showing off my barely-existent carpentry skills. Each of those is fully available to analysis from anyone who walks through the backyard. Yet none of them reveals the true *telos* of the pergola: the pleasure of my wife. I guarantee that the *only* reason I would spend time building a pergola in the backyard is as a gift for my wife, so you can only understand the true meaning of the pergola from this perspective. Nonetheless, it remains a *pergola*, which is a concept that is abstractly intelligible in its own right irrespective of this higher teleology. That is how we recognize it as a pergola. Additionally, I could discuss the pergola with someone who is an expert in pergola construction, and I would certainly have much to learn from such an expert even if he knew nothing of the pergola’s higher *telos*. So the pergola remains abstractly intelligible in its *natura pura* even if its true meaning is only seen in light of its higher *telos*.

Even if this is true, however, it is not clear that we need an extrinsic view to make this argument work. For the charge to stick, an intrinsic account would have to maintain that human persons cannot be understood *in any way* from natural perspectives. Yet such a conclusion is unwarranted. The intrinsic approach does not need to reject the idea that humans have powers

²¹ Long, *Natura Pura*, 2010; Bernard Mulcahy, *Aquinas’s Notion of Pure Nature and the Christian Integralism of Henri de Lubac: Not Everything Is Grace* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011).

²² Long, *Natura Pura*, 2010, 53.

²³ *Ibid.*, 74.

and capacities that can be understood from non-theological perspectives, at least to an extent. It only requires that we view those “natural” realities as always already ordered toward humanity’s ultimate *telos* in Christ.²⁴ For example, sight is a natural capacity of the human person, something that can certainly be studied from non-theological perspectives.

More importantly, though, the intrinsic view does challenge the presupposition that even these so-called “natural” properties of the human person can be understood fully in abstraction from the supernatural *telos*. Return again to the pergola analogy. Once someone knows the true *telos* of the pergola, she begins to see even the “natural” properties of the pergola differently, understanding why I designed it to shade certain areas of the garden and not others (the places where she likes to sit), and why it’s probably not the most attractive pergola in the world (a gift from my own, unskilled hands). Properties of the pergola that seem available to analysis from a purely “natural” perspective turn out to be dependent on the higher *telos* in ways that are not immediately obvious. Keith Johnson argues that a similar dynamic is at work in the theology of Karl Barth. Barth likewise affirms that the relationship between nature and grace “can be known only retrospectively in the light of knowledge of the saving work of Jesus Christ on the cross.”²⁵ This retrospective movement allows for nature to be “abstractly intelligible” to a degree, but it insists that everything we think we know about humanity must be reinterpreted in light of the supernatural *telos* we see in Jesus.

This provides resources as well for responding to Steven Long’s worries about the incarnation. No one denies that we can know at least some things about humanity independently of knowing humanity’s supernatural *telos*. That would be absurd since it would mean that non-Christians have no concept of what it means to be human. D. Stephen Long thus acknowledges, “Certainly we cannot make sense of the incarnation if we cannot distinguish between the nature of a human being and that of a donkey.”²⁶ Yet he goes on to note that Nicaea did not simply adopt pre-conceived ideas about humanity and then apply them to the humanity we see in Jesus. Instead, they allowed their understanding of humanity to be

²⁴ See esp. Healy, “Henri de Lubac on Nature and Grace.”

²⁵ Keith L. Johnson, “When Nature Presupposes Grace: A Response to Thomas Joseph White, O.P.,” *Pro Ecclesia* 20, no. 3 (2011): 280.

²⁶ D Stephen Long, “Natura Pura: On the Recovery of Nature in the Doctrine of Grace,” *Modern Theology* 27, no. 4 (2011): 697.

reshaped and transformed by this climactically new revelation of what it means to be human. “[T]he revelation was not only of “vere Deus,” but also “vere homo.”

Resourcing Conversations about Human Flourishing

As I said at the beginning, the goal of this paper was not to offer a definition resolution of the nature/grace debate, or even to present a decisive argument in favor of the intrinsic approach, though I am sure it is clear where my sympathies lie. My goal instead was to offer some resources for our discussion about human flourishing by addressing a particular approach to understanding the nature/grace relationship, one that has grown increasingly influential in recent years and that has the potential to shape conversations about human flourishing.

Nonetheless, I’d like to conclude with just a few thoughts about the specific implications this discussion has for thinking about human flourishing. Let me begin with the observation that a discussion such as this is likely to have implications beyond what we can immediately see. I think most would agree that our vision of the human person necessarily impacts our vision of what it means to flourish as a human person. Consequently, any discussion that presses this deeply into the theological resources Christianity has for talking about what it means to be *human* will inevitably shape discourse about human flourishing even if we cannot immediately anticipate the ways in which it will do so.

Pressing into the discussion a bit further, I can appreciate why many find the nature/grace distinction conducive to discussions about human flourishing, particularly those that take place in the public sphere. It makes sense at an intuitive level that since all humans are *human*, we should be able to find common ground at the level of the “natural” to pursue such conversations. However, if such discussions are funded by a theologically problematic notion of what it means to be human, should we not be concerned about the kinds of flourishing they will inevitably produce? Indeed, since everyone involved in this discussion agrees that true human flourishing can only happen where people are properly oriented toward their eschatological *telos* in Christ through the power of the Spirit, should we not be somewhat reticent about using a concept such as “flourishing” to describe any state of human existence outside this sphere? That does not mean, of course, that there cannot be any progress or

betterment of human life outside the Church, but it does suggest that we be mindful about the ways in which the language of human flourishing may be received in ways that go beyond what we intend.

Finally, if it were the case that a christological definition of the human person completely undermined the possibility of public discourse about human flourishing, this might provide some warrant for challenging this approach. However, as I have suggested above, that hardly seems to be the case. Those committed to the intrinsic view will need to maintain that no aspect of human existence can be properly understood outside of a theological perspective. Consequently, they will not be able to enter public conversations about even the most mundane anthropological realities (e.g. eating, sitting in traffic, or whether it's okay to talk on your cell phone in quiet coffee shops) as though everyone at the table has an equally valid perspective on what it means to be human and how these issues relate to the production of greater human flourishing. That does not mean, of course, that we need to maintain that these non-theological perspectives have nothing of consequence to offer. Indeed, most of the data we have about human existence comes from non-theological sources. But the intrinsic approach does require that all such information will need to be re-evaluated and re-interpreted in light of what we know about the christological essence of what it means to be human. There is no such thing as a "natural" human person, or even a "natural" aspect of the human person if humanity itself is always already defined in terms of its gracious relationship to God in Christ through the Spirit.