

NATURAL AND SUPERNATURAL¹

THE EDITOR

THE point of a paper on the natural and the supernatural in a conference concerned with 'Science and Sanctity' is to try to show the danger of separating the two apparent worlds of nature which the scientist studies and gets to know and supernature which is apprehended by the saint. The only effective way of avoiding this danger is to realize the closely knit unity of the whole universe under God in which nature is perfected by supernature; we must therefore be concerned not only with the danger but with the perfection of unity in the divine scheme.

But first to consider the dangers; the very word *Super-natural* seems to suggest an almost spatial separation between the world of nature and the world above nature. We think of nature as all that we can experience here on earth with the help of our senses, the movement of the earth and the sun, the movement too of neutron and electron, the solid mountain and unstable and forever gadding man. We can get to know the nature of things if we observe them closely and discover how they work. Then *above* all this, we are told, is a 'super' world which we cannot perceive, the world of the Trinity, of angels and grace in the soul of man. In order, perhaps, to draw these two dissimilar worlds together we are told that grace builds on nature, and we are left with the image of a foundation and a superstructure, of two layers like the butter on the bread. We almost begin to trace the high-water level of nature above which is to be found the unreached wall of grace. Is that level the horizon with the heavens above and the earth beneath, or is it the ordinary natural man with the superman, the saint, towering above him, working miracles and being wafted to the treetop by elevations in prayer? It makes little difference, the image has wrought in our minds the conception of two worlds of entirely different kinds of beings, the one above the other. A man once approached the writer to discover the secret of raising oneself *up* to God in prayer, pointing excitedly to the ceiling of the parlour and refusing to be comforted by the suggestion that God

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was also under his feet and in the depths of his own being: *Sursum corda* was to be taken literally or one was damned. That is the sort of conception the literal-minded modern man may desire from the picture of grace building on nature or of the saint climbing a ladder to perfection, or indeed from the very word *super-nature* itself.

We must remember, of course, that the image is a perfectly legitimate one, when properly used. Not only did our Lord 'ascend' into heaven by an outward sign which left the apostles gazing wonderingly into the vault of heaven; he also went up mountains to pray, took his disciples on to a high mountain for his transfiguration, and was tempted from the heights by the devil. Calvary itself is always represented as a mount, and Abraham took his son for sacrifice to a spot above the world. It is a constant symbol in all primitive religions, as witness the frequent temptation of the Israelites to join their pagan neighbours in their rites on the high places. It is possible that the twentieth-century conquest of the heavens by flying machines could enter into the heritage of this ancient and instinctive symbol. But the difficulty lies in the cult of the machine and the material which keeps man tied to the physical universe, empties the symbol of its significance and turns everything into a natural universe with an exclusive literal meaning for everything. To ascend means only to go up physically, like the helicopter and the escalator. The supernatural is somehow and somewhere *above* all this physical universe.

We do not as yet attempt to define what we mean by 'nature', which can stand for so many things. It is important first to try to detect the background to modern man's apprehension of the supernatural life, rather than to analyse the precise, theological content of the distinction between nature and grace. We must of course maintain the distinction with great firmness. But the images and metaphors that clothe it may have contributed to separate the one arm from the other. The average Christian does not organize his life according to theological principles consciously worked out with the help of a scholastic training. Rather he feels his way by means of a series of metaphors and analogies which have a habit of leading him astray. When he hears the word 'nature' he may easily visualize the whole of earthly creation which is summed up in the popular phrase 'Mother Nature'. Or he may think of nature-worship or of the pantheist immersed in

the immanence of God in hills and trees. He may perhaps think of an individual characteristic, as when he says of Mr Jones that he is naturally or by nature a liar or a thief. All these images tend to belong to a world apart from that of the true religion where God is worshipped in his Trinity and gives his divine gifts through sacraments and prayer.

For the reformers of the sixteenth century it seems that the whole of this lower world had become separated from the higher to such a degree that it became utterly corrupt and almost non-existent. For man at least the natural law was an evil law, and so no law at all. The laws of nature were limited to the manner in which the sub-human world existed, the way in which apples fell on the heads of men or the sun rose at a different hour each morning. All that realm was a mechanical one proceeding presumably from a mechanically minded God who had little to do with the Saviour or the Redemption. It may have been from this utter separation of the two worlds and the mechanical interest in the working of non-rational life and inanimate creation that the modern habit grew of keeping the world of science from the world of religion, for even if its immediate cause is that of the widespread materialism of the nineteenth century we might trace the rise of that materialism to an earlier divorce of the two worlds. It applies now, however, not merely to the sub-human level of creation but also to the working of the so-called 'unaided reason', in which the mind is also considered as working on a purely natural level, a manner of working which also inclines towards mathematics and mechanics the more it is treated as a logic machine. Whatever the history of this mode of viewing the world may be, it seems clear that for a large number of scientists and philosophers too there is a realm in which science and philosophy operate without any reference to or influence from the supernatural. The Christian will confine his supernatural life to matters concerning the soul which he cannot perceive and the spiritual teaching of the Church, all of which he accepts on faith as coming down to him from above. He tends to develop an almost schizophrenic life in which he moves rapidly from the one world to the other. The Church with the sacraments enshrines some elements of the celestial life snatched from the heavens; the laboratory or library become the impregnable fortresses of the 'purely natural'.

On the other hand the good Christian who sets out to secure the eternal reward without much respect for or interest in the sublunary world will tend to despise the natural or condemn it to some Limbo which is entirely cut off from the loving heart of the God of redemption and grace. An example may help to reveal this attitude. In a discussion arising from a paper dealing with psychology and religion the writer was informed by two learned theologians that according to common Catholic teaching the 'good pagan' who died without baptism after attaining to the use of his reason was committed to Limbo together with the unbaptized infants. They admitted that on occasion God might elect a man here and there and bestow on him the gift of grace which would effectively bring him within the supernatural sphere; but the vast majority of the infidels who live honestly up to their lights never reached above the world of nature and were therefore destined as a reward for their natural goodness to attain to a natural heaven which goes as a rule by the name of Limbo. It should be said that this does not appear to be in any way part of the official teaching of the Church, and as stated it seemed not only to make God into some sort of pure will functioning without respect to the things it had made and without the supreme guidance of mind, but it also created a whole world of men moving about untouched by the supernatural in any form. It indicated a sort of 'state of nature' in which thousands of men may live their lives inculpably separated from the Kingdom of God. The man assured of the faith and the life of Christ could thus look down on millions of men creeping uncertainly about in the world below, while occasionally and unpredictably a hand from heaven would descend and draw one here and another there up into the Christian realm, nestling rather precariously among the clouds of a typical English day.

Another example of this separation of the two worlds may be seen in the general attitude of the Catholic towards the sacraments. These are, he knows, vehicles of grace, they open the door to the heavenly regions. Consequently of themselves, simply as signs, they may be to him of no importance. The things of nature are mysteriously used by God to convey his supernatural life—bread and oil, water and wine, human gestures and human words. But there is no reason in their view why God should have chosen these particular instruments. The outward sign is an unimportant detail

belonging to the realm of nature. Water might well have been ignored if our Lord had decided to use a door which would open and shut so that the neophyte could walk through it as a sign of his initiation; or perhaps in modern times a beam of light from some electric lamp might have been quite as good. But the attitude is revealed not in the invention of possible alternatives to the signs for the sacraments—that would indicate at least some interest in the sign itself. Rather the tendency has grown of despising the external signs, reducing them to their bare minimum as to what is required for validity and concentrating all attention on the *ex opere operato* effect of what is done—the grace given. Looking at the little white wafer it seems purely accidental that this baked paste of flour and water should have to be used for the Eucharist. God's infinite power in the realms of the supernatural could have changed any substance he chose into the Body of Christ. That he fixed on bread is no more explicable than that he should fix upon an individual 'good pagan' here and there and bestow on him the gift of sanctifying grace. So the perfunctory and mechanical manner in which we so often perform our liturgical and sacramental rites is to some extent at least due to this separation of the natural from the supernatural.

As we have said, the difficulty of keeping the natural and the supernatural together arises partly at least from the images we use in talking about them. If we were to speak more consistently of grace perfecting nature instead of building on it, we might avoid the danger of separating them. For thus we are given a conception of some being which retains its identity and unity while receiving further qualities which make it more itself, more complete, more integral. Grace and the supernatural are not beings floating about in some ethereal world like the flying saucers or space ships descending here and there on the earth's surface. Nor yet can it be considered as a ray of light, if light is in any way an existing substance. The natural is perfected in an entirely new manner, in a manner which is beyond its own acquiring, but it is still the natural which is perfected.

But what nature are we talking about? Is this simply applicable to individual human natures selected by God for this special type of perfection? If we continue to think of this isolated activity of the supernatural in the world we should still retain something of this sense of separation between the two worlds. Perhaps it would

be more suitable to begin by viewing the whole universe from the divine angle, a unified view in which everything that is created forms a single whole from the first Lucifer to the last atom. When St Thomas speaks of the single universe it seems unnecessary to limit this to the material creation, since everything outside the inner activity of the Blessed Trinity proceeds from the single will of God. In this sense everything that is, participating as it does in the being of God, is the Kingdom of God. The only thing that is outside the Kingdom is the darkness of non-being—evil and sin. In so far as the material creation came in some way under the influence of the devil and darkness, it fell outside that divine realm and in this sense it was groaning and travailing as a whole waiting for the redemption. But it was therefore lacking a perfection which we may say was in some sense due to it or rather that God owed it to himself to give it that perfection, for if it had all that was necessary according to its nature it would surely be content and satisfied. I do not mean to obliterate the distinction between the natural and the supernatural by positing some kind of active potency for the realms of grace, a potency which would in fact destroy the meaning of grace. But once we have accepted a creation in which grace has played a central part, then we are bound to consider everything in the light of that fact.

First of all, from the positive point of view, the end for which everything was and is created may be summed up in the glory of God. We are in the habit of considering this to be a natural activity which terminates in the external effulgence of the Creator as distinct from the inner life of the Trinity. Yet the whole of Creation attains this perfection through the intellectual beings at its head—men and angels—and primarily through the Word made flesh. That glory has a relation to the first Adam created in grace and to the Second who summed up the worship of the entire world in his act upon the Cross. In theory the life of plants glorifies God in a natural manner by continuing to exist according to the pattern originated by God. But in fact the plant attains its perfection through man's mind and through the use man makes of the plant in his daily life and in his Eucharist. The divine body of Christ was made up, I suppose, of millions of molecules and cells. But they did not each supply an independent, natural worship of the Father. Together in the unity of his human nature they contributed to the supreme and supernatural act of praise. The

mystic of nature who waxes sentimental about the glory of the daffodil as contributing to the wonderful world of the God of Nature is therefore missing the point because he can see no further than his nose.

Negatively, too, the whole universe must be considered in fact in relation to the fallen nature of man. If we say that by sin what God has made has been in some way disrupted or atomized, we are saying that in some way too the individual units have ceased to be their proper selves. They have ceased to exist in union with the rest as they were originally made, and they have ceased to offer the full worship through man. They now worship not *purely* naturally, but to a certain extent unnaturally and in that sense they cease to worship altogether.

And this is equally true of individual men, in whom grace and the supernatural is strictly and fully to be sought in the material universe. Since the possibility of man's having been created in a state of pure nature was not in fact realized, as we are taught by revelation, there never has been anything *purely* natural in his being or in his action. Before the Fall he participated in the divine life by the gift of God so that his person was qualified or perfected by grace and his actions were gracious actions. After the Fall his nature was impaired so that he could not be perfectly natural nor act perfectly naturally. We do not mean to deny that there are such things, for instance, as acquired virtues, nor to suggest that everything a man does outside the gracious assistance of the divine life of the Trinity is evil. But in fact his acquired virtues do not now function perfectly without the assistance of grace. He only loves his neighbour truly when that love is fulfilled by the divine love of charity, which is a gift of God. He is not truly patient under adversity unless his patience is also infused by God through a share in the patience of the Crucified.

This may be stated in another way by referring to the single, unalterable will of God which created man and under him the whole universe in relation to the Incarnation and Redemption. Man is in fact made in the image not only of God but of the Son of God. The whole universe—and modern investigations seem to reveal more clearly than ever the interdependence of every element of creation so that it is in fact a whole rather than a conglomeration of units—the whole universe is gathered into one by the redeeming act of the Head of Creation—'And I if I be lifted

up shall draw all things to me.' God has never changed his mind; sin has not forced him to adopt other tactics. This means that the whole of nature is formed according to a supernatural pattern—or, in other words, there is nothing in existence which does not bear some relation to this divine life and which speaks not only of itself but also of the redemption. God does not create the pebble and the peach, the electron and the eagle, with different unrelated acts of his will; he formed all these individual creatures in the Word, and in the Word who was made flesh. A mouse killed by an owl to feed its young is no mere incident in a nature red in tooth and claw; but speaks also of the death of that Word made flesh to feed all mankind. . . .

But the picture is already too full for one canvas. These general hints on the supernatural approach to the whole of reality may serve simply to prevent the reader from adding a layer of grace upon the natural world he has discovered for himself and to begin to discover how grace is indeed capable of perfecting all that he perceives, drawing it through Christ to God.



THE CONQUEST OF FEAR

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THERE are some people who are said not to know what fear is. If there are any such, which is doubtful, they are generally to be found among those who do not think or have no imagination. Their very lack of fear often brings them into inescapable danger, and then they are surprised that they are not ready for death. It has been said that everyone is afraid; only the brave confess it.

There are certainly some people who are so timid in their disposition, or nervous in their temperament, that they are constantly tortured by fear. They are afraid of almost everything; they are afraid when they need not be; indeed they are afraid of things that do not even exist. Some are in such a state of fear, yet cannot tell precisely what it is that they are afraid of; it is fear they are afraid of, and of what they know not.