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Human Nature and the Limits of Plasticity: Revisiting the Debate Concerning the Supernatural

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Summary: Kathryn Tanner's recent work rehabilitates the decades-long debate concerning the supernatural, in which the church fathers feature as principal interlocutors. It is her particular *ressourcement* of Gregory of Nyssa that I want to consider and contest, especially her interpretation of his understanding of human nature as wholly apophatic, or "plastic". Tanner's self-described "apophatic" anthropology consists of a critique of naturalism, opening the way for her to posit an expansive supernaturalism that makes grace intrinsic to human nature. I offer an alternative reading of Gregory to show that a theological naturalism may obtain, namely, that human nature has integrity and autonomy of its own, even if it also may exceed its economy of finitude in pursuit of grace that is wholly other.

Keywords: Kathryn Tanner, Gregory of Nyssa, Creation, Narrative, Naturalism, Grace, Participation

Zusammenfassung: Kathryn Tanners jüngste Arbeit rehabilitiert die jahrzehntelange Debatte über das Übernatürliche, in welcher die Kirchenväter als Hauptgesprächspartner erscheinen. Es ist ihr spezielles *ressourcement* von Gregor von Nyssa, das ich betrachten und in Frage stellen möchte, insbesondere ihre Interpretation seines Verständnisses der menschlichen Natur als vollständig apophatisch oder auch „plastisch". Tanners programmatisch vertretene apophatische Anthropologie besteht aus einer Kritik des Naturalismus, die ihr den Weg öffnet, um einen expansiven Supernaturalismus zu behaupten, der Gnade als der menschlichen Natur intrinsisch annimmt. Ich biete eine alternative Interpretation von Gregor an, um zu zeigen, dass ein theologischer Naturalismus möglicherweise die Integrität und Autonomie der menschlichen Natur zu erhalten vermag, sogar wenn sie ihre Ökonomie der Endlichkeit in ihrem Streben nach Gnade des ganz Anderen überschreitet.

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I Introduction

How does human nature interrelate with what theologians call the gratuity of grace, the utterly divine and thus alien product of God's love for humanity? Substantial answers to these questions may elude us for the moment, however, Kathryn Tanner's recent exploratory exercise is fertile precisely because her definitions consist not so much of an inviolable law, but rather a point departure, one cumulative rather than deductive in nature, offered in the service of constructive theology rather than final synthesis. Her conception of "plasticity," an indirect and metaphorical way naming human nature, introduces a conceptual scheme that shows how human nature conforms to, rather than stands in competition with, the contingencies of cultural norms and its repertoire of moral narratives. While she is not alone using the vocabulary of plasticity for purposes of constructive debate, she aims to harness its metaphorical potential in a more comprehensive manner, revealing a hitherto untapped resource for systematic theology.[1] Some metaphors are simply irreducible in that they express a most basic foundation, even if it does not resolve once and for all the question it prompts. The metaphor of plasticity is foundational in that it has been endowed by Tanner with a power to articulate, at a higher level than many partial metaphors, the human condition's intrinsic capacity for change, growth and expansion.

In an attempt to overcome a static or rigid definition of human nature, I intend to pursue with Tanner the shape-shifting contours of human nature that she formulates in a series of writings, but especially in *Christ the Key* (2010), in order thereby to sketch the nature-grace distinction in finer detail, with reference specifically to Gregory of Nyssa; this may permit a *theological naturalism* to obtain, which cultivates the celebration of the purely natural anthropology that does not at the same time forbid grace. In consequence I argue the parameters of finitude are necessary should we be able to speak of human nature at all, a

1 Other theologians and philosophers of religion have alluded to plasticity. See for example Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 20, 58 and 61; Jean-Luc Marion, *Negative Certitudes*, trans. Stephen Lewis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), chapter 1, "The Undefinable, or the Face of Man;" Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic I: Truth of the World*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), p.194ff on the "plastic potency" of humanity.

theological vision of human nature rooted in the doctrine of creation that Tanner's "supernaturalism" is incapable of accommodating.[2] But the distance between my naturalism and her supernaturalism is not so great. I am not seeking out, in other words, a foundation for theological anthropology which reaches deeper into the bedrock of concepts. I am rather reconfiguring a foundation already laid by Tanner, namely, narrative plasticity, a vocabulary I will fill out momentarily.

I venture a corrective, then, that may refine what is already a fruitful metaphor. The limits of plasticity open up the prospect of a middle way that occupies intellectual terrain that moves us beyond the unyielding principle of Platonic *eidos*, but also nonetheless refuses to grant beings a capacity for infinite growth and increase, without reserve. Such a middle position sets into operation a consideration of the limits of plasticity, a position I outline in dialogue with Tanner's preferred patristic authority, Gregory of Nyssa. The Nyssen anchors the internal constitution of the self, as it unfolds in the many narratives it reflects over time, in a nuanced doctrine of participation in God. The doctrine of participation, often the object of confusion, here may be employed to reinforce the *factum* of the Creator-creature distinction: that the human capacity for change and growth, its portals to the sacred enlarged by theological narratives, does not exceed the bounds of creaturehood. To unveil this middle condition, between absolute plasticity and rigid transcendental essentialism, I contest, if only to expand in greater detail, Tanner's constructive engagement with Gregory of Nyssa. My discussion of Tanner, to make clear up front, is largely critical, but readers will notice that the care and the technical nature of my dialogue with Tanner is an indication of how appreciative I am of her overall theological concern to use "narrative frameworks" to overcome static, essentialist or Cartesian frameworks of human nature.

2 I favour a particular understanding of theological naturalism; for the sake of brevity and of delimiting my proposal, I do not count "horizontal materialism" or "pantheistic immanence" among candidates for theological naturalism. Theological naturalism, as I understand it, reflects a sensibility that at once affirms the integrity of human nature as such and acknowledges divine transcendence as the ground of meaning and fullness. In Christian ethics, "theological humanism" has become a promising way of reframing the debate concerning the supernatural. I am sympathetic to his "third way" or "middle condition" between the opposing poles of naturalism and supernaturalism (or overhumanization and hypertheism) that William Schweiker considers. See especially, Schweiker, *Dust that Breathes: Christian Faith and the New Humanisms* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

II Tanner's Supernaturalism: Nature, Grace and Narrative

Narrative paradigms of the self are now commonplace in many disciplines as diverse as philosophy, psychology, anthropology, political theory, literary studies, medicine and theology. There is widespread agreement that to be human is to live by stories, narratives, symbolic schemes and myths, and we have been telling these kinds of metanarratives about life in the human community for millennia. So fundamental is narrativity to life in the world that one could plausibly argue it summons forth a basic property of human nature.

Conceiving of one's life as bound up with the kind of story one tells about oneself means that a richly narrative outlook is essential to a textured, well-lived life. Some recently have exploited the vocabulary of "plasticity" to articulate the potential for transformation under the direction and precepts of any given narrative scheme. In order to transcend the prevailing metaphysical imperative to subordinate the "becoming" of life to the static "form" of substance ontology, proponents of narrative schemes aspire to reinvigorate the logic of differentiation, change and growth, not to imply that life has no order, but rather to highlight its potentiality for expansion and contraction. The outcome is as much metaphysical as it is existential: the liberation of the self from the (oppressive) inviolability of substance ontology or, equally unpalatable, the (arid) post-Cartesian metaphysics of an abstract, self-contained cogito. Even cognitive science has grown anti-Cartesian in tenor. It has established that the vocabulary of neuro-plasticity or synaptic-plasticity accurately describes the brains capacity for growth, change and repair. Indeed, plasticity is cognitive science's "dominant motif."[3] While cognitive science does not feature explicitly in the following pages, its dominant motif nevertheless brings to light how various disciplines are employing the vocabulary of plasticity as means of describing the inner dynamism of human nature.

To amplify the language of plasticity for a moment, one may invoke the structural metaphor of a "stretch continuum;" personal identity expands as it truly becomes and inhabits the narrative content it assimilates. Plasticity, in this narrative framework, involves what Tanner names a "susceptibility to being shaped or moulded by outside influences generally."[4] Humans in particular

3 For more on this see Catherine Malabou, *What should We Do with Our Brain?* trans. Sebastian Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p.5ff.

4 Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 41. All subsequent citations will be given parenthetically throughout the remainder of the paper.

manifest "an exaggerated capacity" for adaptability to changing contexts and narratives (p.41). Stories and moral schemes invite humans to be formed and enlarged by discursive and imaginative content. As a species, humans are moral vessels, who exist by way of dilation and contraction, in the direction of this or that story; hence each vessel submits to the pressures and dictates of the available narratives on offer and the scope for individual variation they afford appears limitless. Should you, for example, display a despicable moral character, then it follows that you are filled with, and endlessly conform to, evil contents. If your shape reflects the goods of divine charity and mercy, then it equally follows that you participate in the endless and expansive increase of divine grace, a life dispositive of the biblical narrative of redemption. Whatever direction you elect to take, your nature receives its shape from the narrative contents it manages to incorporate from its proximate narratival context.

This narrative anthropology sustains the study of the supernatural in Tanner's *Christ the Key*.[5] Tanner designates the governing theological motif by which human nature is made plastic: the hermeneutic of creation. A comprehensive theological narrative shapes her understanding of the human person, a logic of love and grace originating not only in creation, but one that implicates the larger biblical narrative, spanning from fall and redemption up to consummation, achieved and wrought in the person and work of Christ.

In the early chapters of Genesis, according to Tanner, humans were created as good and participated "strongly" in its divine Creator. Humans, in other words, began as creatures designed to "inhale" and "draw in" the grace of God. The Garden of Eden, in other words, consists of an "oxygen rich" (Tanner's metaphor) environment, saturated with divine light. Humans are not divine, but they have been created by God as an *imago Dei,* a plastic vessel crafted for growth Godward. Human nature remains "plastic" inasmuch as it can stretch into that which is not human, namely, the divine gift of grace, which remains wholly foreign in its divinity to human nature.

It is crucial to pause to note that God is not simply other than the human in a spatial sense, but rather wholly other in kind. As Ian McFarland notes, the "distance" between the Creator and creature in classical theology is that "God simply *is* 'to be,' other creatures can be said 'to be' only as God grants them existence,"[6]

5 Tanner writes, humans "are like soft wax that a vast variety of seals might indent to their image; they are the mirror of whatever it is upon which they gaze. They take their identities from the uses to which they put themselves, like vessels that gain their character from whatever they are made to carry." *Christ the Key,* p.44.

6 Ian McFarland, *From Nothing: A Theology of Creation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014), p.60.

which Tanner, too, supports using similar metaphysical language (p.8). Given this radical distance, it is only by grace that any particular human vessel can be permitted to image or reflect God. Tanner writes, "Divinity is an ingredient of our nature through external impartation and not because it is what human nature essentially is. The divine power within us, which gives us wisdom, justice, and eternal life, is just not what our own essential nature is; our human nature is properly itself, indeed, only in virtue of a contrast with it" (p.65).

After the fall (the postlapsarian epoch), Tanner develops her discourse of creation with the vocabulary of "weak participation," attentive to the ontological grammar of creation (pp.30–32). That is, Tanner suggests that creatures only "weakly" participate in God, due to the change in landscape effected by sin, after the Fall. My participation as a finite creature, after the Fall, remains weak because the environment has changed from one rich in the presence of God to one depleted of "spiritual oxygen," so to speak. The human soul adapts to its new, sinful environment over time, and thus, the soul becomes accustomed to its sinful environs. If one eats a poor diet, Tanner reminds her readers, one becomes so disposed to that diet that the body fundamentally adapts to that poor diet. Body chemistry can even change. In similar fashion, the soul adapts to its sinful environment so much so that it becomes "stiffened" by its oxygen depleted environment (p.70). Tanner argues that the return to an oxygen rich environment requires a kind of death, analogous to a painful "disarticulation" of our true nature from what we have become habituated to (p. 69).

How does this occur if the divine perfection of God's pure "to be" is foreign to my economy of contingency and finitude? Real change on my part as a creature, Tanner contends, happens on the grounds that my soul "becomes attached" in a strong fashion to the person of Christ, who is the source of the oxygen rich atmosphere I desperately need; this, of course, may occur only properly by way of grace entering into my economy of finitude, which is accomplished by the Incarnation, whereby the human and divine natures are unified in the single person of Christ. According to Tanner's conception of "strong participation," then, the grace of Christ expressed in the hypostatic union extracts human nature out from its sin-infested post-lapsarian environment and places it once more in the salubrious environment of divine light.

The precondition for this change in environment, what one may justly name the soul's pre-lapsarian narrative content, is the hypostatic union. Tanner is emphatic about this Christological stage of her theological narrative: "The humanity of Christ has the Spirit in the way the Word has the Spirit. And what the humanity of Christ has is transferred to us in virtue of the connection by nature we have with him, in virtue of our shared humanity. Through a natural connection with his humanity, other human beings enjoy something like the natural

connection, then, between Word and Spirit that Christ enjoys" (p.73). What consequences does this narrative, rooted in creation and Incarnation, have for the debate concerning supernatural?

Whereas Catholic theology since Thomas up to Henri de Lubac and Karl Rahner have privileged a *nature-based* desire for the supernatural,[7] Tanner alters the debate fundamentally on this score, recasting desire for God in a Protestant light. She replaces that *nature-based* paradigm with a *grace-based* desire for the vision of God (p.126). The merits of the vocabulary of radical plasticity are on full display at this juncture of Tanner's argument. Because Gregory of Nyssa says we are "whatever [we] wish to be, [we] becomes that very thing" (p.45), it follows for Tanner that we cannot help but consume and thus imitate sinful life-narratives, for the oxygen rich context of Christ may displace sin only properly once grace elevates nature out of that toxic environment.

I am fully at home with whatever my environment is. Remember, for Tanner, I become "hardened" by sin, because I have adapted to its ill-effects. I cannot, in turn, leap out of this environment once I become "one" with it. Indeed, sin induces a spiritual death. I do not, even in the depths of my nature, desire to see God at all, since God does not figure in the narrative of sin I espouse, for "human life therefore seems utterly wrecked apart from the actual gift of grace" (p.109). Grace alone alters the environment. The only way I can imagine another narrative is by way of miracle, that is, the grace of God intervening in my life.

How am I, in the eyes of Tanner, elevated into an environment of grace and life? Even though I am designed or "created" by the divine craftsman to live by, and truly grow into, the oxygen-rich environment of grace of the spirit of God, I cannot of myself desire that change in environment, not least accomplish the mobility necessary for the change. The only option available for Tanner is grace. Unqualified in its unilateral power, grace intervenes to the degree it makes us yield to its logic: "Our desire for God therefore never gets us anywhere on our own steam – even to proximate ends on the way to God – apart from the gift of God's own presence pulling us along the chain" (p.128). Tanner states in no uncertain terms that I am literally "pulled along the chain" by grace, and therefore, toward grace, which amounts to a *grace-based* account offered in contradistinction to the traditionally Catholic emphasis on a natural desire that is fulfilled and completed by grace.

7 An excellent outline of this position, though distinct from de Lubac, is Rahner's programmatic essay, "Nature and Grace," trans. Kevin Smyth, in *Theological Investigations, vol. 4* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), pp.165–88.

Tanner's critique of the *nature-based* desire for grace is multi-levelled. First of all, she thinks that since in no way do I naturally desire grace, it necessarily follows that I cannot "anticipate" or "expect" grace to fulfil my longing for it. Otherwise, my natural desire would surely obligate God to grant me the gift of grace, voiding in the process its status as a gratuitous gift (pp.119–23). It does not matter if the desire is positive and conscious in the form of a "natural light" (*naturali illustration*) as in Thomas[8] or if the desire emerges in the medium of an unconscious weak volition or non-repugnance to grace (the *potentia obedientialis*) that Rahner proposes,[9] or if the desire is manifest as a negative or "lack," like the feeling of starvation, as de Lubac requires,[10] the "gratuity problem" remains on the table. Another problem, according to Tanner, that plagues *nature-based* paradigms is that they trade on the assumption that there must be a kind of self-contained structure by which human nature operates properly, a performative dimension of nature that wholly draws from its own resources. This is the "underlying difficulty" for Tanner: namely, that a natural desire for the beatific vision (or for grace, for God, etc.) assumes a self-generated character of desire for God (pp.123–24). This makes possible the much maligned design of "pure nature," with the result that grace can only enter into relationship with nature as an extrinsic factor, founding the two-tier picture of the nature versus grace distinction that reigned for so long after Cajetan (and which de Lubac famously challenged in *La surnatural*). This Catholic option represents an unfortunate naturalism (according to Tanner) that concentrates on "the creature's own powers and capacities, inclinations and tendencies, and what they demand of themselves" (p.125), a position displaced by a supernaturalism Tanner invokes. In the supernaturalist framework, we can only have inclinations and tendencies oriented to God by way of grace, in which "desire for God arises from what we have that is not our nature – the divinity in which we participate" (p.127). But what problems does this opposition between natuaralism and supernaturalism raise?

III Overcoming Supernaturalism

Problems with her account, in my view, metaphysical and theological, arise exactly on this front. Her invocation of "plasticity," while serving the purpose of a

8 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica,* trans. by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1948), Part 2/1, Question 109, article 1.

9 Rahner, "Nature and Grace," pp.167–78, and p.186.

10 Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural,* trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: Herder and Herder, 1976), p.41, p.269, and p.301.

corrective to substance ontology or to rigid naturalisms that focus solely on self-generated capacities, arguably produces an exaggerated supernaturalism that, in my view, eliminates all reference to naturalism as such. A "plastic" nature, involving dialectic between the subjectivity of the person and the many narrative contents on offer, consists of a rich and valuable point of departure for theologians who may bring theology and narrative into constructive dialogue. But Tanner's particular theological conjugation of plasticity undermines this task, because her *supernaturalism* amounts to the evacuation of the inner being of human nature. Upon closer reading of Tanner's work, one may plausibly insist that she depicts human nature as bereft of any nature whatsoever. From this divestiture follows a call to eradicate subjectivity. If I have no nature, I am endlessly released from myself, which means I do not possess myself as a particular self. I am no longer, in this "nature-less" framework, able to wield my agency as a subjective seat of noetic and affective powers poised for embodied action, because I remain "plastic" clay in the potter's hand.[11] As a kind of "post-script" to grace, the plasticity of nature, conceived by Tanner, in itself remains at the mercy of external pressures. Plasticity so premised lays the groundwork for what I call not simply anti-naturalism, but more properly, supernaturalism: this framework makes nature a "vacuole" or "placeholder" for grace.[12]

Does supernaturalism require Tanner's radical kind of critique of human nature? Henri de Lubac, the fiercest critic of pure nature, will ask those persuaded by his work, "to be on his guard not to fall into the delusion of a 'supernaturalism' which would make him neglect his truly human tasks…"[13] Even as critical a posture as he assumed in setting himself against pure nature, the *cause célèbre* of which is his widely-read *La surnatural*, de Lubac is conscious of the temptation of supernaturalism: namely, the temptation to take flight from the goodness proper to the human condition as realm of truly human tasks. Tanner cultivates a kind of classical Protestant pessimism, verging toward a Jansenism or Manicheanism. More than a century and a half ago, Matthias Scheeben notes how this Jansenist tendency to claim that the substance of human nature *in se* is impoverished in

11 See the explicit abandonment of the category of "nature" in her essay, Tanner, "Grace without Nature," in *Without Nature? A New Condition for Theology*, ed. David Albertson and Cabell King (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 363–77. See also her "Theological Anthropology," in *The Vocation of Anglican Theology*, ed. Ralph McMichael (London: SCM Press, 2014), 111–52.

12 The grammar of "vacuole" I borrow from Steven A. Long's interesting but highly polemical *Natura Pura: On the Recovery of Nature in the Doctrine of Grace* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), p.52ff.

13 Henri de Lubac, *Brief Catechesis on Nature and Grace*, trans. Richard Arnandez (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1984), p.100.

whole or part reflects a larger trend, which he names a "new Manicheanism."[14] I concur, and I think this low view of human nature informs Tanner's mischaracterization of pure nature, even while I refrain from concluding that her proposal illustrates a new Manicheanism.

Supernaturalism, her guiding frame of reference, expresses dissatisfaction with the spiritual consequences of naturalism at every level. What is at stake here is the natural capacity for God each of us have been created with, the soul's inner telos that no postlapsarian state can eliminate or wreck, and "unalterable form" as Gregory of Nyssa names it, a topic to which I presently turn.

IV Human Nature's Unalterable Element: Gregory of Nyssa

Supernatural plasticity, interpreted by Tanner, decides that the human condition has no fixed shape, which means it can, and does, assume the shape of whatever story it tells about itself. Like soft-wax vessels, humans gain "their character from their contents," in that they "take on new identities according to the uses to which they put themselves." Late modern narratives abound: fancy cars and conspicuous consumption, sexual identity, respect of peers and so forth. Each consists of a narrative I can enact; I can change narratives at any time, which is possible insofar as I lack definition.[15] Even St. Paul could be interpreted as having approached this kind of anthropology, when he famously wrote, "One thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead" (Phil 3.13), opening up the endless pursuit of transcending one's past. There are many episodes within the long narrative of one's life, as if one's sense of self, because it is wholly plastic, could break from all past narratives and move forward with another style of personal identity. The chief function of radical plasticity is complete negation of all antecedent forms, which suggests that no fixed or normative "here," or "subjective seat of action," can endow human nature with a kataphatic foundation.

I am, however, startled by Tanner's supernaturalism, its imbalanced apophatic anthropology, to the degree it yields to the logic of endless multiplicity,

14 Matthias Scheeben, *Nature and Grace,* trans. Cyril Vollert (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009), p.51.

15 Tanner, "Grace without Nature," in *Without Nature? A New Condition for Theology*, p.365.

allowing for the deferral or unfolding of the self into a series of narratives from no one particular subjective origin or moral point of departure.

Gregory of Nyssa, in his well-known treatises on anthropology, *De Hominis Opificio* and *De Anima et Resurrectione*, appears upon a cursory reading to confirm apophatic plasticity.[16] The concept is, indeed, operative: for example, he writes that human nature is such that "whatever it may wish to be [it] becomes that very thing."[17] This stresses the importance of plasticity, which operates in conjunction with the subject's surrounding flux, an environment pregnant with possible narratives, be they moral, sexual, economic, existential, intellectual or interpersonal pursuits. Hence "human nature may be like a mirror" in that it becomes what it reflects.[18] We continue with St. Gregory: "the soul … attaches itself to [something] and blends with it by means of the movement and activity of love, fashioning itself according to that which it is continually finding and grasping."[19] Among the many insights developed by Gregory, these appear without question to substantiate the claim that human nature subverts any notion of a "stable nature," that is, that it retains its shape and form only by shape-shifting, yielding to the plasticity of narrativity.

The Nyssen's apophatic anthropology provides a serviceable entrée into the debate concerning the supernatural precisely because it appears to accomplish a complete suspension of the fixed definitions of human nature associated with "pure nature" and the closure of naturalism that ostensibly emerges from that anthropology.[20] But is naturalism *per se* necessarily closed or hegemonic in its pursuit of a fixed point of reference? If not, is a theological naturalism possible? I will argue for such a position, and to do so I elect to invoke the fundamental

16 Tanner is not alone in attributing this radically plastic anthropology to Gregory of Nyssa. See Jean Daniélou, *L'Être et le Temps chez Grégoire de Nysse* (Leiden: Brill, 1970); David Bentley Hart, "The Mirror of the Infinite: Gregory of Nyssa on the *Vestigia Trinitatis*," *Modern Theology* 18 no.4 (2002): 541–61; My aim here is to reimagine St. Gregory as a subtler advocate of plasticity, and theological anthropology broadly conceived.

17 Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 45. Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and Resurrection," in trans. William Moore and Henry Austin Wilson, in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (eds.), in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. V, Second Series, CCEL (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), p.852. The remainder of page numbers that cite Gregory of Nyssa's *Soul and Resurrection* and *On the Making of Man* will come from this particular volume.

18 All references will be made to the Greek text as well, in Patrologia Graeca, hereafter as *PG*, vol.44 and vol.46, or *De Hominis Opificio* and *De Anima et Resurrectione* respectively.

19 Gregory of Nyssa, "Soul and Resurrection," p.838, in Tanner, *Christ the Key*, p.46.

20 In the long-standing debate concerning the supernatural, Tanner would be echoing here Henri de Lubac and his heirs argue, who argue that secularism and a "closed" naturalism is a cultural consequence of pure nature. See for example, de Lubac, *The Drama of an Atheist Humanism*, trans. Edith Riley and Anne Englund Nash, et. al. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995).

calculus between good (being) and evil (privation of being) in Gregory of Nyssa, as well as the fundamental capacity of human nature to seek the good, independent of any consideration of the narrative of the fall and the sin that disfigures that desire. How does participation in the good enable Gregory to stand outside the opposition of virtue and vice, of good and evil, that is presumed within Tanner's narrative theology?

A closer reading of such passages in Gregory in point of fact shows the possibility of theological naturalism, one informed by a kataphatic logic, but one not exclusive of a strong apophatic qualification. There is, following my reading of the Nyssen, a positive structure to who I am as I naturally am. A kataphatic motif is visible not only in the above works but also in his philosophically rich *Homilies on the Song of Songs*. Obvious though it may be, St. Gregory inherited the Platonic legacy of an anthropological dualism, between an immaterial soul and a material body. But locating the "real" aspect of the human condition in a timeless soul unencumbered from bodily frailty and sexual difference finds little to no support in St. Gregory. As Susan Wessel contends, St. Gregory was "dualist of his own making, and did not subscribe easily to an unreconstructed Platonism." In fact, the Nyssen often employed the medical literature of his day to understand more fully the ontological unity of soul and body, so that the soul, invested fully in the body, interacted with a corporeal body that did not limit its capacities, but "somehow fulfilled them."[21] Because he holds to plasticity, his kataphatic emphasis on a minimal fixed identity does not duplicate the Platonic emphasis on a pure essence that governs personal identity from above. Why kind of plasticity, then, does St. Gregory propose?

I adduce first the text that indicates that the soul, whatever it wishes to be, becomes that very thing, which appears to grant lexical support to the notion that human nature is wholly plastic, a "shape shifter." If that statement is contextualized in light of the larger metanarrative of creation, redemption and resurrection in Gregory's treatise *De Anima et Resurrectione*, a type of "fixed" orientation, or transcendental condition, basic to all humanity emerges: human nature's bodily subjectivity bears within it an intrinsic grammar to move toward goodness.

As it "issues on the stage of life in the manner which is pleasing to its Creator," Gregory writes that human nature bears testimony to its good Creator. The dignity of human nature, expressed in the theological language of creation and resurrection, opens up the ontological structure of the self: my origin of myself as this particular self is ordered by a basic goodness. For "vice is not prior

21 Susan Wessel, "The Reception of Greek Science in Greogory of Nyssa's *Do hominis opificio*," *Vigilae Christianae* 63 no.1 (2009): 24–46. Quotes are on p.25 and p.26 respectively.

in time to the act of beginning to live, and that our nature did not thence derive its source, but that the all-disposing wisdom of God was the Cause of it: in short, that the soul issues on the stage of life in the manner which is pleasing to its Creator."[22] Only free will can corrupt what is an originally good nature. Only "after" (not before) can the soul assume its freedom to choose "whatever it wishes to be." Even then, Gregory punctuates throughout the narrative, the soul's capacity for the eternal always surpasses its capacity for evil. I cannot plunge myself, forever, into endless depths of evil, because evil does not have endless depths. I am not inclined to assign to Tanner the belief in a Manicheanism, that is, the doctrine of evil as an eternal substance; certainly I would imagine Tanner to follow strictly in the footsteps of Nyssen's contention that evil is and always will be a *privatio boni*, however, she fails to retain or exploit the full meaning of evil as *privatio* when she employs the vocabulary of plasticity, which advances a scenario whose liberation of human nature from rigid substance ontology goes too far: contraction and dilation in Tanner have no marked moral or theological limits.

The limit of evil, and thus the limit of plasticity, is clearly articulated in *Homilies on the Song of Songs,* in which the soul's essence belongs under the form of the plenitude of Being. The formation of the creature, its origin, is bound at once with its destiny, that of the good. More radically put, St. Gregory indicates that the creature's beginning and end coincide, culminating in the eschatological telos of creation: "For when at the beginning the created order came into existence by God's power, it was the case for each of these that its start and its full actualization were achieved together without any interval [ἀδιαστάτως], since for all that were brought from nonexistence to existence their perfection coincided with their beginning." Though the human race, continues Gregory, advances by way of increments toward perfection, it does so knowing that it once was perfect (prelapsarian), and even now, participates in that perfection (postlapsarian). Participation formulates the underlying logic of the biblical narrative, whereby creation and consummation mutually illuminate and condition one another: "In the case of the first creation, then, the final state appeared simultaneously with the beginning, and the race took the starting point of its existence."[23]

22 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and Resurrection," p.852.

23 Gregory of Nyssa, *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Song of Songs,* trans. Richard A. Norris Jr. (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), p.487. This is an interlinear Greek-English translation. Concerning participation, I quote a well-known, paradigmatic text from *Life of Moses,* "As, therefore, [God] draws human nature to participation in itself, it always surpasses that which participates in it to the same degree, in conformity with its superabundance of goodness. For the soul is always becoming better than itself on account of its participation in the transcendent. It does not stop growing, but the Good that is participated remains in unaltered degree as it is, since

Gregory avoids the Gnostic discourse on evil, in which evil has no end, in which evil is a source of nutrition (and growth) that is necessary to licence *radical* plasticity. In contrast, Gregory tells the story of ontological goodness, so that human nature assimilates the narrative of evil in a properly Christian framework only to a degree. The "good" in which I participate by nature serves the purpose of an unimpeachable constraint, a structurally fixed parameter, installed in my constitution from the beginning, whereby the totality of natural beings are shown to inhabit not evil, but the good, which is not a cultural fabrication or invention but an inbuilt feature of the human condition. Evil, on the other hand, does not properly exist: "There is no origin of evil except the negation of the existent…"[24] Or, "Some think evil controls the creation of all beings. Or that we have some tendency to evil. Or that our constitution has evil as its source."[25] Gregory presumes already to understand the nature of the difference between good and evil that participation brings into view, for "the soul is like God, bearing within itself some resemblances to its prototype, the soul is attracted to the kindred deity."[26] He later adds that such an understanding of creation intends the "Universal form which God stamped upon us."[27] In similar fashion, in *De Hominis Opificio,* the Cappadocian Father also considers the limits of plasticity in light of the fixed orientation to the good, which belongs to human nature as such. While not denying the temporality and finitude, and thus, changeability of human nature, Gregory highlights nevertheless that "there lies in each of us an unimpeachable "form", or a "a stable and unalterable element" (τὸ μόνιμόν τε καὶ ὡσαύτως ἔχον) in our composition.[28]

An illuminating organic metaphor extended by Gregory into theological terrain, ever the theological naturalist, is that of soil. Because of the "broadness of human nature [πλατύτητα τῆς ἀνθρωπίνης φύσεως]," each soul "spreads out" like arable soil. I am tilled into any number of textures and topographies. The adjective πλατύτητα (broad) represents the act of broadening, or more precisely, the "diffuse," "open" and "wide" character of soil, each indicative of the structural expansiveness of the soul. I can, like soil, adapt to my environment, to the

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the being that ever more and more participates in it discovers that it is always surpassed to the same extent." Gregory of **Nyssa**, *Life of Moses,* trans. Abraham J. **Malherbe** and Everett **Ferguson** (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), p.60.

24 Gregory of **Nyssa**, "On the Soul and Resurrection," p.838.

25 Gregory of **Nyssa**, "On the Soul and Resurrection," p.850.

26 Gregory of **Nyssa**, "On the Soul and Resurrection," p.839.

27 Gregory of **Nyssa**, "On the Soul and Resurrection," p.871.

28 Gregory of **Nyssa**, "On the Making of Man," ch.27, sec.5, p.780. For the Greek, *De Hominis Opificio, PG,* 44: p.227.

many narratival forms that govern the shape of my life. I am subject to the expansion of thought and pathos, of virtue and vice, for I consist of "unlimited thoughts, interests and forms of knowledge."[29] I am soil, a ground that can be tilled and worked over. While my soul may undergo dry spells, I can always be tilled and watered and "made visibly good," to become thereby a rich and fertile ground.[30] I am not, in other words, "dead" or "wrecked by sin" (Tanner); rather I lay fallow, and perhaps I am parched, until I am tilled, watered and cultivated by the Holy Spirit.

Gregory, furthermore, treats the question of plasticity in light of the truth of universal resurrection. Human nature, the design of a good God, remains forever inclined toward the good, its Cause. But what happens upon death? After death, what happens to the soul as it undergoes separation from the body, and what does the bond between soul and body say about the structure, form and orientation of human nature?

Should I perish at sea, Gregory observes, my body may become food for fish or plants, as well as new material for the sea floor. Death disperses the elements of my nature into the dust of the earth, does it not? If I am so dispersed, what, then, happens to my body on the final day, the resurrection? Should my soul attract those original atoms of the body just as they are, then the soul needs to "know" its nature, its body, rather than a duplication. Gregory insists that my original constitution will resurrect if it is in fact me who resurrects. If a similar structure of atoms, a doppelganger, is "fetched" in the resurrection, then it logically follows that such a "process will cease to be a resurrection and will be merely the creation of a new man. But if the same man is to return into himself, he must be the same entirely, and regain his original formation in every single atom of his elements."[31] Should we grant Gregory's crude literalism for a moment, how does this resurrection occur? What invariable structure of human nature makes a genuine resurrection conceivable?

Human nature, "remains after dissolution in those very atoms in which she first grew up, and, like a guardian placed over private property, does not abandon them when they are mingled with their kindred atoms."[32] Human nature, one might argue, "comes to anchor" in the union of soul and body, so that the resurrection proceeds in two stages: first, the soul is diffuse among its bodily element because it is a form or imprint (τύπος); second it gathers them together, and recombines them into their original arrangement, because the soul "suffers

29 Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, p.125

30 For fig tree references see, Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, p.169 and p.199.

31 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and Resurrection," p.830–31.

32 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and Resurrection," p.831.

no exhaustion in keeping up with the whole number of [the atoms] when they stream back into the universe, but remains with them, no matter in what direction or in what fashion nature may arrange them."[33] The soul, by force of its union with the body, does not need a "teacher" to inform it which material atoms belong to its particular and unique union. The soul naturally or intuitively knows its material constitution, even after the death of the body.

Any given human person owes his ontological shape to the unique concourse of atoms, and it exhibits "in a form peculiarly his own a marked distinction from his kind." When the body "goes to pieces" the soul possesses an exact knowledge of its former union, which means, then, that at any time the original form can be "derived even from its fragments." The soul, in other words, always "remembers her own as it was when compact in bodily form, and after dissolution she never makes any mistake about it, led by marks still clinging to the remains."[34] This kind of knowledge is analogous to the kind displayed by the sheep who simply "know" their shepherd's voice. Think of the infant who simply knows and "feels" her mother by sheer intuition, independent of language, discursive thought or even consciousness. All the more intimate is the knowledge the soul has of its own body.

While Gregory does not aspire to sanction a stable and fixed definition of human nature, he permits us to make the resurrection a centre of gravity of personal identity. The soul over time knows its union with the body with precision, for the purpose of enjoying a real resurrection of the body. Human nature does not suspend time or transcend the ravages of the flux or horizon of the world, but it does not submit to radical plasticity of the sort that would force adaptability to take priority over continuity of the bond of soul and body expressed in the horizon of time. The integrity of the union of soul and body, of human nature, is manifest as an ontological form, unalterable and oriented always to the good, just so far as its form remains independent of context or narrative.[35]

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33 Gregory of **Nyssa**, "On the Soul and Resurrection," See fn.1728 on p.780 for the Greek.

34 Gregory of **Nyssa**, "On the Soul and Resurrection," p.832.

35 See a critique of narrative-plasticity based on transcendental grounds from a strictly phenomenological perspective, Dan **Zahavi**, "Self and Other: The Limits of Narrative Understanding," in *Narrative and Understanding Persons*, ed. D.D. **Hutto** (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp.179–211. From a theological perspective, see Paul **Griffiths**, "The Limits of Narrative Theology," in *Faith and Narrative,* ed. Keith **Yandell** (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp.217–36. Also, I am sympathetic to the account of the transcendental self as it is expressed in Robert **Spaemann**, *Persons: The Difference between Something and Someone,* trans. Oliver **O'Donovan** (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2006), Ch.11,"Independence of Context."

The narrative of sin and evil, for this reason, does not win the day. Sin does not irreparably distort my naturally good "form." Sin never may exceed or extinguish the basic inner constitution of goodness to which nature is fixed by way of participation, a point Tanner raises but does not fully develop. Admittedly, my soul can wander away, in the direction of sin, unhindered by any exterior intervention. God does not stop my performance of sin, for free will chooses its course. In my self-narrative, I am not relinquished of all form. Rather, I am attached to Being, for I testify to my cause, from whom all beings emanate. I receive according to St. Gregory, "my constitution from God." So I may proceed down the path of evil and reach its "extreme limit." Perhaps I am the kind of person, and we all know such figures exist, that always constructs my personal identity with the aptitude for viciousness. Gregory's theological naturalism sets limits to this moral dilemma. While we may accommodate wickedness, each of us remains fundamentally linked to, and at home with, goodness. "Wickedness, however, is not so strong as to prevail over the power of good." Gregory continues in this vein, "it is absolutely certain that the Divine counsel possesses immutability, while the changeableness of our nature does not remain settled even in evil."[36]

The "length" or reach of evil, even the most extreme kind, finds a halting point, according the Nyssen. Human nature "of necessity turns its motion towards good: for evil does not extend to infinity, but is comprehended by necessary limits." The "moving character of our nature," Gregory acknowledges, rests on a positive construal of that nature, its kataphatic structure. In the movement of human nature, sin exhausts its power, it is "bounded by necessary limits."[37] The dialectic between good and evil resolves itself in a final victory, whereby every course moves "at the last once more back towards good."[38] The capacity of goodness, in contradistinction to evil, is endless, precisely because it participates in the endless Good that is God, "For where there is no place for evil, there is no limit set to the good."[39] Or to use St. Paul's idea of a "stretch continuum" (Phil 3:13), and the Greek participle ἐπεκτεινόμενος in particular, the motion by which the soul strains heavenward, "is always becoming better than itself on account of its participation in the transcendent. It does not stop growing… being led by the Word through the ascents of virtue up to the heights, just as if she were climbing stairs."[40] This alternative reading of Gregory challenges the theological implica-

36 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Making of Man," ch.21 , sec. 1, p.764.
37 Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, 21, 3, p.764.
38 Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man* 21, 2, p.764.
39 Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, pp.171.

tions of *radical* plasticity, as if I were at any point in my life-story unhinged from my participation in the good.

The logic of Gregory's hermeneutic of creation and participation discloses a theological anthropology that involves an internal link between constancy and contingency, eternity and temporal intervals: I am an autonomous creature with an integrity and structure all my own, even while I naturally seek to transcend the finite limits of my structure in pursuit of grace, and I contend theology must celebrate this kind of expansive finitude, that is, a theological naturalism.[41] Some level of self-creation, by which one creates oneself by drawing on a repertoire of one's own creative capacities, finds justification in the doctrine of creation. This in consequence highlights the limits of plasticity inasmuch as I cannot expand beyond the basic point of reference to the good to which I am ineluctably oriented, from creation to consummation. Autonomy and self-creation should not become in this framework of creation, as one commentator observes, a "bogey-man for theological anthropology."[42] Theological naturalism therefore remains "open" to something more, to a dimension of transcendence that is extrinsic to nature, but not opposed to nature.

Think of a house as a metaphor for the expansive structural possibilities of theological naturalism.[43] Human nature, analogously understood, is manifest as a defined structure, with clear limits and with a firm foundation, a set of walls, furniture inside and a roof. Any well-designed house, to exploit the metaphor further, includes natural light as well as many entry points. There is a garage door too. There are many windows and perhaps a skylight or two. Some houses are a majority glass or, even, constructed entirely out of glass material. Think of the skyscraper that boasts vast glass windows. The windows and doors, then, let in light and warmth from the outside, while maintaining at every moment absolute

40 Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Song of Songs,* p.171; other references to the metaphor of "stretching forward" based on Philippians 3:13–14, see pp.43, 187, 307.

41 I do not make claims of "pure" autonomy, but consider a virtue what some theologians may call "relative" autonomy. Karl Barth hints at the theological foundation, rooted in creation, of relative autonomy, but ultimately leaves it undeveloped. See his suggestive remarks in *Church Dogmatics, III/3, The Creator and His Creature,* trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960), pp.42–44 and 86–7.

42 See Oswald Bayer, "Self-Creation? On the Dignity of Human Beings," *Modern Theology* 20 no.2 (2004): 275–90, especially p.276.

43 Fiona Ellis employs the term "expansive naturalism" as a theological corrective to closed or restrictive naturalisms, in order to make room for the supernatural within the natural world. She conducts her study in fruitful dialogue with analytic philosophy, especially John McDowell. Her work merits further attention, even if the details of her argument lay outside the scope of the present essay. See her *God, Value and Nature* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University press, 2014).

structural integrity. It proves that the stability of closure can coexist with porous borders. In this imagined way, the creature does not stand in opposition to the Creator, even while they remain wholly distinct. God's pure "to be" sustains me, even if my own sphere of contingent being is my own, set off, but not abstracted out from, the transcendent grace of God (the sunrays). My nature, as a creature inextricably bound to finitude, belongs to the sphere of nature, but I can expand infinitely once elevated by grace. As the light pours in, there is no limit to the brightness I may enjoy as a result. My moral and spiritual increase knows nothing of the empirical limits of the structural building itself. The house does not increase square footage upon its encounter with the light, but it does invite and receive illumination without reserve, once the morning light dawns.

Hence grace is extrinsic on my model, but the distinction between nature and grace does not prohibit the streaming in of grace from the outside, which warms and illumines the house from without: grace elevates, illuminates and completes, but does not destroy, nature. That is, expressed theologically, God grants humanity a relative autonomy or relative freedom, which could point the way to a theological naturalism that promotes the full dignity of finitude, even after the Fall. Grace, to go further, both "leaves nature intact" and simultaneously draws nature Godward, without involving the logic of "rupture" or "continuity" between nature and grace.[44]

V Conclusion

Nature and grace do not lie in opposition or stand in conflict; and yet, I have insisted they remain dissimilar, alien to each other, distinct, and this absolutely so. I have tried to show how this is the case with Gregory of Nyssa and hinted at constructive possibilities latent in his doctrine of theological naturalism. Pure nature, if understood as wholly closed, leads to what Tanner depicts as the "closure" of naturalism, a domain empowered wholly from within its own self-

44 Tanner contrasts the creature's natural state with the supernatural state of strong participation in the starkest way possible, which results in a "rupture" between nature and grace: "Because grace is not primarily building in any positive sense on creation, on what it is as much as on what it is not, the transition between nature and grace is nothing like a continuous process of incremental improvement from good to better. It has more the disjunctive character of the either-or between sin and grace typical of Protestantism. The move from nature to grace – for example, from being rational to knowing well by way of the divine light – is a discontinuous, radical leap between qualitatively different conditions, between a condition of abject need apart from that light to a state of incredible plenty with it." Tanner, *Christ the Key*, p.61.

positing horizon. Tanner's corrective involves a binary opposition, what I have discussed using the vocabulary of supernaturalism, a radical form of plasticity that displaces nature with grace. The accomplishment of my desire to see God is due entirely to grace, according to Tanner, because my nature, riddled with the narrative of sin, can imagine no other possible narrative. This latter Manichean-like option is the one I would say Tanner's radicalization of "plasticity" tends toward, insofar as she self-consciously adopts a so-called Protestant framework of sin. What is at stake is not so much a Protestant or Catholic doctrine of nature, but one informed by the doctrine of creation (i.e., creation as good). I am a Protestant, but I do not see anything in that tradition that necessitates the scenario in which human nature is "wrecked without grace" and thus void of its own inner logic and goals to be fulfilled on its own terms. I think the constructive possibilities lie somewhere between naturalism and supernaturalism, and the Nyssen has opened up fresh possibilities to articulate this middle condition. The limits of plasticity exist precisely in this space between, because theology must unconditionally hold fast to the simple proposition that every being has a nature which as such is good under all circumstances and narratives (even after hereditary sin), and preserves its active powers and its capacity for spiritual growth even after the reception or infusion of grace.