

THE THEORY OF THE SUPERNATURAL

A CRITIQUE OF P. DE LA TAILLE

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Theologians are everywhere actively interested in De la Taille's theory of the supernatural, an exposé of which appeared recently in these pages.¹ The theory is admittedly difficult, and will bear further exposition and analysis. With the simple purpose, then, of aiding in its understanding and evaluation, I wish to contribute some clarifications. They center about one point, namely, the created disposition and the relation it bears to the uncreated act in the teaching of De la Taille. Is this disposition in no sense a modification that is antecedent to the union with the act, but always concomitant with, or even subsequent to, the union?

ONTOLOGICAL PRIORITY OF THE CREATED DISPOSITION

Father Donnelly claims that I misinterpret De la Taille when I speak as if I understood "the infused adaptation, disposition, or mutation to precede the union between the created potency and the uncreated act"; this, he claims, would quite evidently "destroy all immediacy in the union. De la Taille insists times out of number that the mutation is consequent upon, or better, concomitant with, the union; that it is the union itself; that in no wise is it an antecedent condition of the union between created potency and Uncreated Act."²

Twice again Father Donnelly insists that in *no* sense does the disposition precede the union with the act: "Finally, it is absolutely essential that we continually bear in mind that this infused disposition, or adaptation, does *in no wise* precede the union";³ "For this modification, as actuation, looks to, and is caused by, the Act; and, as such, it can in no sense be an antecedent modification by means of which the Word would unite the humanity to Himself."⁴

These words are clear and admit of no misunderstanding: *in no sense* does the disposition precede the union. Yet later in the same article Father Donnelly has this to say:

"Of course, the presence of God by operation is necessary that the presence of God by communication may be had. But efficient causality does not adequately explain the supernatural order.

¹M. J. Donnelly, S.J., "The Theory of R. P. Maurice de la Taille, S.J., on the Hypostatic Union," *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES*, II (1941), 510-526.

²*Ibid.*, p. 514, note 8. Cf. "A New Concept of Grace and the Supernatural," *Ecclesiastical Review*, LXXXVIII (1938), 401-413.

³*Op. cit.*, p. 516.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 518.

"Hence, in the Hypostatic Union we may say that God's presence by operation *precedes*, according to a priority of reason, His presence by communication. His presence by operation is common to the whole Trinity. His presence by substantial communication of His Being is proper to the Word alone. Through God's presence by operation the human nature is elevated by the infused *disposition* to a level where it bears the necessary proportion of potency to the Uncreated Act which substantially actuates it. By God's presence by communication the potency is *united* with the Act as the terminus of the Hypostatic Union."⁵

Here we have a precedence of the disposition, efficiently caused by the Blessed Trinity, over the union with the Word in the hypostatic union. The Trinity operates and causes the disposition; then the Word, the uncreated act, by a communication of Himself, unites Himself to the human nature already disposed for the union. There is an assertion of a precedence here which it is difficult to reconcile with the preceding statements that the disposition *in no wise* precedes the union. Father Donnelly tells us that God's presence by operation has a priority of reason over His presence by communication. It is also true that a disposition has by its nature an ontological priority over that for which it disposes. Without this priority a disposition has no meaning.

There is no question about the fact that De la Taille excludes any temporal priority of the created disposition over the union between the created potency and the uncreated act. In excluding temporal priority, however, does he also exclude this ontological priority that necessarily belongs to every disposition? Clearly, no. He could not and at the same time remain true to his own reason as well as to the teaching of St. Thomas.

Created actuation by the uncreated act, according to De la Taille, is verified in the case of union with God through sanctifying grace and through the *lumen gloriae*, and in the hypostatic union. In each of these cases the actuation is a "disposition immédiate à l'Acte, et par conséquent non pas antécédent, mais introduite par l'Acte lui-même. . . ."⁶ This can only mean that there is no temporal priority of the disposition over union with the act, but it does not exclude the above-mentioned priority of the efficient causality of the Blessed Trinity making the human nature of Christ disposed for union with the Word in the hypostatic union, making the created intellect disposed for union with the uncreated intelligible form (and for the resulting intellectual operation) in the *lumen gloriae*, and making the soul disposed for the union with the Holy Spirit through the possession of sanctifying grace.

St. Thomas expressly teaches that "dispositio prior est eo ad quod dis-

⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 521-522 (italics mine).

⁶"Actuation créé par Acte Incréé," *Recherches de Science Religieuse*, XVIII (1928), 255.

ponit."⁷ From the point of view of efficient and final causality the Holy Spirit is prior to His effects, but, evidently, the disposition which He first causes efficiently is in turn prior from the point of view of dispositive, material causality to the presence of Him with whom it is preparing the soul to be united. Here are the words of St. Thomas:

"Ordo aliquorum secundum naturam potest dupliciter considerari. Aut ex parte recipientis vel materiae; et sic dispositio est prior quam id ad quod disponit: et sic per prius recipimus dona Spiritus Sancti quam ipsum Spiritum, quia per ipsa dona recepta Spiritui Sancto assimilamur. Aut ex parte agentis et finis; et sic quod propinquius erit fini et agenti, dicitur esse prius: et ita per prius recipimus Spiritum Sanctum quam dona ejus. . . . Et hoc est simpliciter esse prius."⁸

A disposition that is an *ens quo* (such as sanctifying grace and the *lumen gloriae*) and not an *ens quod* does not destroy the immediacy of the union. St. Thomas tells us this when he says: ". . . per gratiam efficimur ipsi Deo conjuncti, et non mediante aliqua creatura."⁹ When grace is brought into being in the soul, there is a presence (and therefore a union) of the efficient cause of this disposition (the Blessed Trinity) with the soul. This union is ontologically (not temporally) prior to the union with the Holy Spirit. Sanctifying grace prepares the soul for an *immediate* union with this ineffable Guest.

There is first (ontologically) the union and presence by operation, and then (again ontologically) the presence and union by communication. The first is a union with the Trinity as the efficient cause of the disposition: this union or presence is demanded by the fact that God's operation *is* His essence. Once the created nature or faculty is suitably disposed, it is ready (again, not by a temporal but by an ontological priority) for an immediate union with the uncreated act, the divine essence, or the Person of the Word.

Father Donnelly tells us that this modification or disposition is introduced into the human nature by the Word, that it is *caused* by the act which is the Word Himself, and that it constitutes the hypostatic union in its fullness.¹⁰ This requires examination.

In the hypostatic union it is not exactly the Word as such but the Trinity that causes the disposition, so that it is the Trinity that is present by this causal operation. The Word is indeed present in this operation, but only as one of the Trinity. This union by operation is not the hypostatic union, for the human nature of Christ was not hypostatically united to the Trinity.

⁷*In I Sent.*, d. 14, q. 2, a. 1, quaest. 2.

⁸*Ibid.*, sol. 2. This order is considered *secundum naturam*, that is, ontologically.

⁹*In I Sent.*, d. 14, q. 3.

¹⁰"The Theory, etc." THEOLOGICAL STUDIES, II (1941), 518. For the sake of accuracy De la Taille says "introduced," not "caused," by the act: *op. cit.*, p. 255.

St. Thomas tells us: "Principium actus assumptis est virtus divina; terminus autem est persona. Virtus autem divina communiter et indifferenter se habet ad omnes personas."¹¹ There is certainly a priority of the principle of an act over its term. It is this priority we find in the divine nature *causing* the disposition, over the Word, the uncreated act, *terminating* the disposed human nature. The uncreated act does not efficiently cause or introduce the disposition: this is the function of the divine nature of the Trinity. It is the function of the act as such, the Word, to communicate itself, that is, to *terminate*, the disposed created nature.

This priority of union with the Trinity as causing the disposition, over union by communication of the uncreated act to the nature or potency already disposed, is found also in sanctifying grace, which *is* itself the disposition or created actuation, and in the *lumen gloriae*, which again *is* the disposition and actuation. In the hypostatic union we may call it the adaptation, the mutation, the elevation or the traction of the human nature by the Trinity, that makes it disposed for termination by the Word.

It is very important to observe that what is received into and by the created potency is not the uncreated act but the created actuation. The uncreated act cannot be received by or into any potency, as Father Donnelly well notes: "In pure actuation, the act is not received into . . . the potency: it merely terminates the potency which it actuates";¹² "God . . . will not be received into . . . our created intellect."¹³ It is "the actuation" that is "received into the created potency"¹⁴; "the created intellect must receive into it a created disposition."¹⁵ Clearly, then, the communication of the act does not mean its reception into the potency. Only the created actuation, the disposition, is received.

Yet we are told on p. 514 that the disposition (he is speaking particularly of the *lumen gloriae*) "is but the communication to, or the reception of the act into, the potency." Is there not a confusing here of the act with the actuation, and vice versa? What we say of the actuation cannot be transferred to the act. The one is finite and created; the other is infinite and uncreated. There is a reception of the actuation, but *no* reception of the act. Communication in this case does not and cannot mean reception.

The disposition is efficiently caused by the Trinity. It is received into and by the potency. Simultaneously there occurs a communication on the part of the uncreated act of itself, which means that the disposed created nature or potency is now terminated by it and so is in union with it. Ontologically, however, there is a priority of the disposition, caused by the

¹¹*Summa Theol.*, I q. 3 a. 5.

¹²*Op. cit.*, p. 513. Again to be accurate, De la Taille denies dependence, not reception, of the act by the potency: "il y aura réception de l'Acte dans la puissance" (*op. cit.*, p. 254).

¹³*Op. cit.*, p. 513.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 514.

Trinity, together with the union with the Trinity that is involved in this operation, over the union by communication of the act, which means the termination of the disposed potency by the act. This is all I had in mind when I wrote of the infused disposition preceding the union between the created potency and the uncreated act.¹⁶

THE THOUGHT OF DE LA TAILLE

Is this ontological priority of the disposition over the union by communication a misinterpretation of De la Taille? I do not believe that it is. On the contrary, I believe it is a point admitted by both De la Taille and Father Donnelly, but which neither of them has perhaps sufficiently stressed. However, the point at issue now is not what *we* may think of the priority of the disposition but what De la Taille actually taught. Here are some of the texts upon which I base my conclusion that in his teaching there is this ontological priority of the disposition over the union itself with the uncreated act.

Quoting St. Thomas (3 *Contra Gentiles*, 53) De la Taille says:

“Rien ne peut recevoir une forme supérieure, *qu'a condition* d'être haussé à la capacité qu'il faut pour cette forme par une disposition. . . . Or l'essence divine est une forme supérieure à toute intelligence créée. Donc pour que l'essence divine devienne espèce intelligible d'une intelligence créée . . . il est indispensable que l'intelligence créée soit élevée à ce [niveau] par une disposition d'un ordre transcendant. . . .

“De plus, soient deux termes qui n'étaient pas unis d'abord, et qui *ensuite* s'unissent: cela ne peut faire que *moyennant* une mutation soit de l'un et de l'autre, soit au moins de l'un des deux. . . . Or. il est impossible à l'essence divine d'être mue. . . . Id faut donc que cette *union commence par une mutation* de l'intelligence créé.”¹⁷

This mutation, which is a necessary condition in order that the union with the *espèce intelligible* (the divine essence, in the case of the *lumen gloriae*) may begin, is the disposition that is ontologically prior to the union, although it is simultaneous with the beginning of the union. De la Taille rules out temporal precedence of the disposition over both the union with the act and the operation that flows from the union. Speaking of the *lumen gloriae* he refers to it as: “Cette disposition et à l'Acte et à l'opération, qui est *en même temps* la mutation de la puissance, l'union entre la puissance et l'Acte, tout cela, c'est la lumière de gloire. . . .”¹⁸

¹⁶What I said can be summed up in this sentence: “Hence, the presence of God by operation, causing this adaptation, is necessarily presupposed to His presence by communication, but it is in the presence by communication that the supernatural essentially consists” (*Eccl. Rev.*, LXXXVIII [1938], 410-411.)

¹⁷“Actuation, etc.,” pp. 255-256 (italics mine.)

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 257 (italics mine).

Father Donnelly admits with de la Taille a precedence of the disposition over the operation that follows the union with the act. Yet De la Taille asserts that the *lumen gloriae* as a disposition plays a double role: it acts as a disposition to the uncreated intelligible form (the divine essence) as well as to the operation that succeeds: "Ce double rôle de disposition à la forme intelligible incréée et de disposition à l'opération intellectuelle correspondante. . . ." ¹⁹ Now I ask: if this disposition is ontologically prior to the operation that follows the union of the created intellect with divine intelligible form, why should it lose its nature as a disposition and cease to be prior (ontologically) to the uncreated intelligible form itself? It plays the same role in both cases: not temporal priority necessarily but certainly ontological.

A subject that receives is prior, in the sense of prerequisite, to the perfection that it receives. The natural potency is prior to the actuation, the disposition, that it receives. When it is disposed, it is also ontologically prior to the higher, uncreated act which it does not receive but to which it is united terminally. The last disposition, which prepares the subject either to receive a created perfection or to be terminally united with the uncreated act, is always on the side of the potency, or the matter, and as such it must precede the act or form at least ontologically. When De la Taille says: "Par ailleurs toute disposition ultime à l'Acte, étant introduite par l'Acte lui-même sur lequel elle s'ajuste, se trouve indissolublement liée à lui dans la puissance qu'il actue," ²⁰ we must be careful about that "étant introduite par l'Acte lui-même." In the three cases of which he is speaking the efficient action of "introducing" the disposition is always an action of the divine nature that precedes, at least ontologically, the union of the suitably disposed created nature with the uncreated act. A last disposition may be simultaneously present with the act for which it disposes, but as a disposition it must precede by nature that act or perfection with which it begins to establish a union. "La présence de Dieu par opération est essentiellement pré-supposée à la présence de Dieu par communication." ²¹

In the article from which the above quotations have been taken, De la Taille speaks of the three actuations or dispositions which are to be found in sanctifying grace, in the *lumen gloriae* and in the hypostatic union. In a later article he deals more at length with the difficult subject of the created grace of the union. Here, too, he speaks of the created disposition or mutation caused efficiently by the Trinity in the human nature of Christ as ontologically prior to the relation of union with the Word and serving as the foundation of that union: "Il faut donc que le terme proprement et immédiatement visé par l'activité causale de la Trinité soit autre chose que

¹⁹*Ibid.*, note 1.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 263.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 264.

de la relation. Il faut que ce soit une mutation, d'où la relation prenne naissance."²²

This mutation can be called the (hypostatic) union; but if it is, it is not in the formal sense of a relation but only in the sense of a passive actuation of the humanity which is the foundation of the union taken in the formal sense:

"Ma thèse est qu'il y a un perfectionnement substantiel de la nature humaine, une mutation, *qui fonde la relation dite d'union*, et qui déjà peut s'appeler union, non pas dans le sens formellement relatif, mais dans le sens d'une actuation passive de l'humanité par l'Être incréé du Verbe auquel elle est conjointe comme la puissance à l'acte."²³

"Cette passion corrélatrice à l'action unissante de la Trinité, c'est l'union passive: précisément, ce que j'affirme moi-même comme le *fondement* de la relation."²⁴

"Cette passion, que s'identifie la mutation, est donc, comme elle, le fondement de la relation. . . . Cette mutation, qui est une passion, saint Thomas nous l'a décrite aussi comme une "traction" de la nature humaine vers le Verbe."²⁵

This mutation in the humanity of Christ is not the relation that formally constitutes the hypostatic union, but something *antecedent* to it, and necessarily so, since it is the foundation of the latter union: "C'est une passion, c'est une union [that is, a union in the sense of a passive actuation of the human nature], c'est une traction, c'est une mutation réelle, qui n'est pas la relation, ni chose conséquente à la relation, mais *antécédente*, vu qu'elle la fonde."²⁶

What is the *cause* of this mutation, this passive actuation, this traction of the human nature? It is not the Word as such, but the Blessed Trinity: "La cause efficiente, ce n'est pas le Verbe, plus spécialement que le Père ou le Saint-Esprit; c'est toute la Trinité; c'est Dieu, en raison de l'unité de sa nature, et non pas en raison des propriétés personnelles. . . . Et si au lieu de langage rigoureusement théologique on préférerait une appropriation, il faudrait répondre: La cause efficiente est le Saint-Esprit. . . ."²⁷

However, every actuation by the uncreated act bears two relations to the divinity. There is not only the relation of effect to cause; there is also the relation of actuation to act, which must not be confused with the former. Here we see clearly the priority *secundum naturam* of the production of the mutation or disposition by the efficient cause, the Blessed Trinity, over the union of the elevated potency with the act as the term of this union:

²²"Entretien amical d'Eudoxe et de Palamède," *Revue Apologétique*, XLVIII (1929), 15. De la Taille speaks through Palamède.

²³*Ibid.*, p. 23 (italics mine).

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 15 (italics mine).

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 20.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 24 (italics mine).

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 133.

“La cause efficiente produit: l’acte [incr  ] se donne, se communique,   une puissance qui *re oit* l’acte, et va se trouver unie   l’acte. Et ainsi l’actuation de la puissance par l’acte ne regarde pas l’acte comme une cause efficiente, mais comme le terme d’une union. . . .”²⁸

The efficient cause, the Trinity, first (not temporally) produces the disposition, the mutation, the elevation, in the created potency (the soul, the intellect, or the human nature of Christ). Then the act (the Word, in the hypostatic union) gives itself, communicates itself, to the finite potency that is now disposed to *receive* (*sic*) it. In receiving the act the potency finds itself united to it, but it must, as a necessary condition, be made disposed for this reception. Is not this what De la Taille has already said: “La pr sence de Dieu par op ration est essentiellement pr suppos e   la pr sence de Dieu par communication”?²⁹

Here, I believe, we are at the root of a great deal of the obscurity that envelopes this matter. There is a certain ambiguity in De la Taille himself when he speaks of the *introduction* of the disposition by the act, when he speaks of the *reception* of the act, and when he speaks of the *union* of the act with the potency. He tells us, for instance, that the infused adaptation, mutation, or disposition of the intellect, by which a proportion is established between the finite, created potency (the created intellect) and the infinite and uncreated act (the divine essence *qua* intelligible), is a “disposition immediately connected with the act and, as a consequence, not antecedent to, but introduced by the act itself. . . .”³⁰ There is ambiguity in the use of the term *introduced*, for it can mean efficient causality (and then it refers to the Trinity or to the divine nature) or it can mean the quasi-formal causality that is to be found in the communication of the act *as such* to the potency already efficiently disposed by the Trinity to be terminated by it.

This is most clearly seen in the case of the hypostatic union. The efficient cause of the mutation, the traction, of the human nature is not the Word as such, any more than it is the Father or the Holy Spirit as such. It is the Trinity, the divine nature, that causes and introduces this mutation, this disposition, this traction of the human nature up to (as it were) the Person of the Word. The Word in turn *terminates* the nature that the Trinity *adapts* for termination. The Word, the uncreated act, introduces the disposition only in the sense that it is one with the divine nature which, by its operation, *causes* the disposition; and “la pr sence de Dieu par op ration est essentiellement pr suppos e   la pr sence de Dieu par communication.”

This ambiguity lurks in the title of De la Taille’s article, “Actuation Cr  e par Acte Incr  .” Actuation—does this mean that the uncreated act *as such* efficiently causes the created actuation? We are given this impression, but this is not the case. The act of which De la Taille is speaking in all three

²⁸*Ibid.* (italics mine.)

²⁹“Actuation, etc.,” p. 264.

³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 255.

cases does not properly or formally introduce or cause anything: it *terminates*. This is what he means when he says that it communicates or unites itself to a nature or potency that is divinely disposed for such a termination. The ambiguity is not removed until he distinguishes between the efficient causality of the Trinity and the quasi-formal causality of the uncreated act as such, and we see the ontological priority of the former (as causing the disposition) over the latter (as terminating the disposed nature).

The same ambiguity, I believe, is to be found when he speaks of the created potency *receiving* the uncreated act, instead of (more accurately) receiving the created actuation.³¹ What Father Donnelly says is correct: "In pure actuation [that is, as opposed to information], the act is not received into . . . the potency: it merely terminates the potency which it actuates." De la Taille, however, says exactly the opposite. Now, the question arises: May we say that the uncreated act is received into or by any potency? We may, of course, say with St. Thomas that by grace and the infused gifts "*recipimus Spiritum Sanctum*." This statement does not commit us to any precise explanation as to *how* we receive Him, nor is it equivalent to saying that the infinite act is received in or by a finite potency.

It is, however, a different matter when, in speaking of the hypostatic union, we say that the Word, the uncreated act, is *received* into the finite, created human nature of Christ. Billot formally denies this. He says that the divine act of existence of the Person of the Word actuates the human nature without being received in it, and it is this that precisely constitutes the mystery of the hypostatic union: ". . . non assequimur quo pacto actus existentiae possit actuare aliquam naturam *citra receptionem in illa*."³²

There is, finally, an ambiguity in De la Taille's use of the term *union*. He refers to the *lumen gloriae* as a disposition that "constitutes the fact of the union in all its newness."³³ In what sense does a disposition constitute a union? The expression is vague until, in speaking of the hypostatic union, he makes the distinction between union in the formally relative sense, which is the actual termination of the potency by the act, and union in the sense of a passive mutation or disposition in the human nature of Christ, which is the foundation of the relation called union in the former, formal, sense. Now we see that union in the passive sense—which is the disposition, mutation or traction of the human nature—is not a union with the Word as such, but with the Trinity. In this case, therefore, it is not formally the hypostatic union. Furthermore, union in the passive sense is not consequent upon the union in the formally relative sense, but antecedent to it ontologically as its foundation.

³¹*Ibid.*, p. 254: "Il y aura réception de l'Acte dans la puissance"; p. 255: "Disposition . . . introduite par l'Acte lui-même, dont . . . elle n'est que . . . la réception dans la puissance"; "Entretien, etc.," p. 133: "l'Acte se donne, se communique, à une puissance qui reçoit l'Acte."

³²*De Verbo Incarnato* (Rome, 1927), p. 144.

³³"Actuation, etc.," p. 256.

This precedence of the disposition as such over union with the act is contained in the following statement:

“. . . la puissance par rapport à l'Acte ne sera pas naturelle, mais obédientielle; et pour que s'établisse entre elle et lui la correspondance ou proportion voulue, elle aura besoin d'une adaptation divinement infuse; adaptation substantielle, s'il s'agit de l'ordre à l'être, comme dans l'union hypostatique; adaptation ou disposition habituelle, s'il s'agit de l'ordre à l'intelligible, comme dans la vision béatifique.”⁸⁴

When he goes on to speak of this disposition as “introduite par L'Acte,” he must mean, in the light of all that we have seen and according to his own subsequent explanation, that it is divinely infused by the Trinity or by the divine nature as a preliminary requisite in the ontological order and as a necessary condition for terminal union with the act as such.

CONCLUSION

Reduced to its simplest form this interpretation of de la Taille's views on created actuation by the uncreated act is the following:

1) The Blessed Trinity efficiently causes a disposition in a finite nature or potency. This involves a union of the created nature with the divine nature operating in it.

2) This disposition is called either sanctifying grace, or the *lumen gloriae*, or the traction and elevation of the human nature of Christ in the hypostatic union. The uncreated act (for example, the Word) does not introduce or cause this disposition, except as one with the Trinity or the divine nature.

3) When the created nature is suitably disposed by the Trinity, it can now be terminated by the uncreated act, either the divine nature in the mysteries of grace and glory, or the Person of the Word in the mystery of the Incarnation. The act communicates itself to the potency, and is united to it, by a quasi-formal causality. There is no reception of the act into or by the potency: the created actuation is received, the act merely terminates.

4) There is an ontological priority of the disposition over the terminal union of the potency with the uncreated act. There is no temporal priority of the efficient causality of the Trinity causing and introducing this disposition over the terminal union of the disposed potency with the uncreated act. It all takes place *en même temps*.

If this interpretation is correct, there is a certain inconsistency in speaking of the disposition as being introduced or caused by the act as such, so that it is not antecedent to but consequent upon, or concomitant with, the act. There is also an inconsistency in speaking of the uncreated act as being received into the finite potency, as well as a certain ambiguity in speaking of the disposition as constituting the hypostatic union.

⁸⁴“Actuation etc.,” p. 263.