

Article

Late Medieval Mysticism and the Analogy of Grace and Nature

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Abstract: Erich Przywara's insightful and Christological interpretation of Aquinas' maxim regarding grace and nature suggests that nature and reason ought to pass through a redemptive 'death' with respect to grace and faith. This highlights the inadmissibility of proportioning finality to nature and reason. But more can be said regarding this particular reclamation of a high scholastic view. The late medieval mystical tradition shows a relationship between grace and nature, faith and reason, which sheds further light on this project, and in particular offers a way of valorising a Christological understanding of the relationship within each pair. I propose that this occurs specifically within the mystical context when any and all finality ascribed to apophasis 'dies', resulting in an oscillation between both ontic and noetic expressions of transcendence and immanence. This includes the question of mystical claims to spiritually outgrow ecclesial contexts and specificities. I highlight this with particular reference to Meister Eckhart and Jan van Ruusbroec.

Keywords: grace and nature; faith and reason; apophatic theology; mysticism; Erich Przywara; Jan van Ruusbroec; Meister Eckhart



Citation: Wojtulewicz, Christopher M. 2022. Late Medieval Mysticism and the Analogy of Grace and Nature. *Religions* 13: 1204. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13121204>

Academic Editor: Rob Faesen

Received: 11 August 2022

Accepted: 29 November 2022

Published: 12 December 2022

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1. Introduction: The Problem of Finality

The possibility of pure nature and pure reason carries with it a commitment to finality that is problematic. Finality here refers to resting in a conclusive state that can then be said to go on to relate to grace and faith. In each case, nature and reason relate to grace and faith with its own finality, as though to some other object or thought within the natural order. This is to say that the shape of grace and faith on the view of pure nature and pure reason is that of a natural rather than a supernatural object. This is true irrespective of whether the contents of grace or faith exceeds what is intrinsic to nature or reason. On this view, pure nature and pure reason require a strict delineation from grace and faith which accounts for such a pair of relations. These relations, of necessity, embrace a kind of finality in nature and reason that is then opened out to grace and faith.

Historically, both pairings (but especially reason in relation to faith) were subjected to an apophatic discourse which sought to reject this finality by recognising the limitation of finite createdness. Language (in respect of reason) and being (in respect of nature) were recognised as limited in their ability to know or ascend to God. Anything that lay beyond either language or being could only be signalled by way of a negation. In negating or 'undoing' what was said, apophasis ensured that finite createdness was denied with respect to God, and in that denial a space was opened up for that which lies beyond finitude. That denial took place either as straightforward negation (the so-called *via negativa*) or else by way of clashing two opposing but positive statements in order to signal the breakdown of language at the upper limits of its ability to address what is infinite.

The mystical tradition following Pseudo-Dionysius is aligned with these attempts to deny what is creaturely in language or in being with respect to God. But the difficulty of finality, introduced by the concepts of pure nature and pure reason, are *reasserted in an apophatic discourse which (even inadvertently) proportions finality to the apophatic*. As poetic and evocative as the apophatic approach may be, to rest in the finality of its denials is to

perpetuate the problem which plagues pure nature and pure reason. Apophaticism thus becomes a kind of end in itself, beyond which one cannot traverse.

What possibilities are open to theological enquiry when all finality is denied to apophaticism? In other words, what happens when the denial contained in apophaticism is itself apophatically denied? Does this not simply reassert the finality of apophatic denial? Such a prospect of denying finality introduces a restless moving between the opposites of the apophatic and the cataphatic; between denials and assertions. Whilst it may cursorily seem that the mystical tradition is primarily aligned with the denial of creaturely finitude, its complex relation to the affirmation of such finitude can also be identified. The complexity is born of the fact that the return to the positive, to the cataphatic, after the denial of the apophatic, is *not to return to the same position prior to the denial*. Instead, it is a rhythmic oscillation between the poles of the apophatic and the cataphatic, between negation and affirmation, which *changes* the affirmation. It is this change that Meister Eckhart details in his 'negation of negation'. Moreover, what this change shows is that the oscillation really does deny finality, precisely because it is not simply a relation between negation and affirmation conceived as static poles. Insofar as the mystical tradition offers a way of conceptualising this denial of finality, even to the apophatic, it acts as a theological source which makes a valuable contribution to the contemporary debate on nature and grace, faith and reason.

Does it suffice, however, to suggest that finality in nature and reason is problematic because it reduces the supernatural to the shape of the natural? This question then extends to why (or whether) apophatic finality should be considered problematic. To deal with this we may say that there is also a positive reason to refuse the proportioning of finality to nature, reason, and even apophasis. This positive reason lies in positing a Christological relationship between grace and nature, faith and reason. The oscillation between the poles, which accrues to a position which rejects finality in nature and reason, is what manifests this Christological form. It is Christological because the oscillation results from a continual 'dying and rising' in nature and reason. From a philosophical perspective we may see this as the demand of an analogical approach, as opposed to either an equivocal or univocal approach. Theologically, however, this becomes a form of participation in the paschal mystery, allowing us to speak of the death of finality in nature and reason, and the rising to a transfigured or glorified nature and reason through grace and faith.

What reason is there, however, for applying such a Christological form to the relationship between nature and grace, reason and faith? Here stands another contribution of the medieval mystical tradition and its interpretation. Erich Przywara (1889–1972) suggests a reading of Aquinas' maxim concerning grace and nature, faith and reason, which offers this Christological contribution ('grace/faith does not destroy, but presupposes and perfects nature/reason'). From his analysis we may point out further instances of this dying and rising in the thought of Meister Eckhart and Jan van Ruusbroec.

Przywara's analysis in fact is a springboard for seeing the mystical tradition as a theological source of critique for proportioning finality to created reality. He asks why Thomas says grace/faith 'do not destroy' nature/reason. What does this threat of destruction, which is not carried out, mean? His analysis shows, firstly, that it cannot mean that nature/reason could be completely annihilated, but are instead left alone in their finality as pure nature/reason. Rather, Przywara suggests the meaning of Thomas' 'does not destroy' is more like (we may say) 'put to (redemptive) death'. Nature/reason are put to redemptive death in order to be raised again, and so not completely destroyed or annihilated. To make sense of Thomas' *non destruit*, on Przywara's analysis, we have to do away with any iteration of the idea that grace and faith simply choose not to annihilate nature and reason, even though they could. To leave reason/nature 'untouched' as an alternative to such annihilation, we may add, is what gives rise to the problem of finality described (that is, treating them as pure nature and pure reason).

The idea of subjecting nature/reason to a redemptive death is to suggest that the *non destruit* is rather like saying grace and faith do not 'destroy completely' (that is, annihilate)

nature and reason. This death or destruction we may see, I suggest, as the shattering of finality proportioned to nature and reason. This is easier to see in the case of reason, where the limitation and finality of concepts are apophatically exploded in relation to divine mystery. But it is not that mystery renders reason utterly incapable of probing faith's mysteries; that language has no purchase in matters of faith. Such a view would entail an equivocal relationship between reason and faith. Rather, it is to say that the redemptive dimension is the (analogical) counterpoint to the (equivocal) idea of total annihilation: the 'rising' of reason as the 'glorified' return to affirmation after the denial of apophaticism. This analogical idea of a redemptive death for nature/reason in relation to grace/faith can therefore be viewed as Christological (as participation in the paschal mystery). Following Przywara's extended treatment of the IV Lateran Council's declaration on analogy, we can look to reason or faith as both in and yet beyond the other (Przywara 2014a). This redemptive return to affirmation we may see in both Meister Eckhart and Jan van Ruusbroec, as examples from the mystical tradition. Yet it is Przywara's insightful reading of Aquinas that gives us the language we need to theologically codify this proposed relationship between nature/reason and grace/faith as found in the mystical tradition. In this way, we are able to treat the mystical tradition as a theological source for the contemporary debate surrounding the relationship between grace and nature or faith and reason. Such was the view of Hans Urs von Balthasar (see McIntosh 1996; Moser 2016).

The intention in what follows, therefore, is not to provide an overview of natural theology or the theology of grace in the thought of select medieval mystics. Instead, we follow the contemporary state of the grace-nature, faith-reason debate to proffer the kind of question which exacts from mystical sources a range of themes which otherwise lie across disparate theologies, historical contexts, and modes of expression. It is not clear, at any rate, how one could extrapolate an understanding of grace and nature from across a discrete series of mystical authors without constraining them and winnowing away their particular nuances.

Przywara's reading of Aquinas is particularly helpful for bridging the historical gap between the medieval mystics and the more contemporary debates, notwithstanding other witnesses in the interim. This is especially the case because Przywara's analysis takes seriously the Christological or analogical form of holding in tensional unity the differing claims about grace-nature and faith-reason. Instead of an equivocal view which seeks to select one option to the exclusion of another, or the univocal view which sees all options as essentially the same, the analogical view brings out the tension between competing options and inches us closer to the truth. The selected mystical theologies of Eckhart and Ruusbroec allow us to see this analogical perspective deployed.

Meister Eckhart and Jan van Ruusbroec are included for specific contributions that each make. Eckhart points to the relationship between distinction and indistinction, on the one hand, as that which ought to guide any talk of the relationship of God to the world. On the other hand, his negation of negation can be applied to the debate in two senses. Firstly, it offers justification for oscillating between the apophatic and the cataphatic. Secondly, it reframes the question of how the gratuity of grace and faith are guaranteed (the concern for which appears to be the motivation behind asserting pure nature/reason). Eckhart's own theory of grace does not represent a contribution to the contemporary discussion. Nevertheless, Eckhart's metaphysics of God and creatures can be seen to add nuances to the debate about grace and nature, faith and reason.

Ruusbroec's understanding of creation as essentially a relation and not a substance supplies further reason to abandon all proportioning of finality to nature and reason, casting a shadow over any claims of pure nature and pure reason. Even more importantly, however, Ruusbroec offers a way of viewing the relationship between grace and nature in the same form as that between faith and reason already described. It is clear that the idea of a redemptive death of reason is conceivable as passage through an apophatic denial of finality to a rising again in the cataphatic. It is not so clear how this analogical form would translate into the parallel relation of grace to nature. Ruusbroec offers a way

into this parallel: his use of the apophatic in conjunction with a commitment to what we might describe as ecclesial contexts and specificities (e.g., ecclesial structures, a sacramental economy, liturgy, authoritative pronouncements of doctrine or dogma). The apophatic here is shorthand for the transcending of such ecclesial contexts and specificities: the idea of *spiritually outgrowing* ecclesial structures, the sacraments, liturgy, or doctrine/dogma. Here arises a certain mystical commitment to transcendence—to overcoming the finalities accruing to ecclesial contexts and specificities, even to complete detachment from all sensate and intellectual desiring. This is the apophatic discourse converted, so to say, into the concrete context of the Christian life. Its ultimate consideration is deification: the possibility of transcending ecclesial contexts and specificities as a means of relating to God immediately rather than mediately.

Rather than abandoning ecclesial contexts and specificities as frustrated spiritual platitudes (i.e., as finalities), crucially Ruusbroec describes a return to them after apophatic denials. This has the shape of a glorified (and therefore changed) return, after passing through the redemptive ‘death’ of the apophatic. Instead of detached abandoning or spiritual outgrowth itself becoming a finality (the equivalent of apophatic finality), Ruusbroec is committed to something more like an analogical oscillation. As we will see, Ruusbroec returns anew to the ecclesial contexts and specificities *after* his apophatic move, much in the way Eckhart’s negation of negation brings us to pure affirmation.

A further word regarding Przywara’s specifically analogical approach is required. Aaron Pidel has helpfully described Przywara’s view of the historical problem of grace and nature as ‘parallax’ (Pidel 2020) that is, grace and nature are seen differently in relation to one another depending on one’s shifting perspective. The solution, in Przywara’s view, to the varied perspectives found in the twentieth-century debates is not in their amalgamation, nor in the selection of one to the exclusion of others, but in the rhythmic tension between them, following the operative principles laid down in Przywara’s *Analogia Entis*. Przywara’s leitmotif of analogy prevents his succumbing to either pole of intrinsic or extrinsic arguments for the relationship between grace and nature, and instead offers a way forward which may be summarised as a rejection of finalities. The analogical approach reveals the problem common to both intrinsic and extrinsic views. This manifests acutely in the extreme forms of the intrinsic/extrinsic viewpoints, either in the loss of distinction between grace and nature (intrinsicism) or the delineation of a pure nature and reason against supernatural grace and faith (extrinsicism). The problem common to both is a failure to reject finality, and hence the dissolution of grace-nature’s and faith-reason’s participation in the paschal mystery. In a similar way, Pidel highlights that Przywara’s assessment of the debate shows that ‘high scholasticism’ sits in a ‘stereoptic’ position between the two principal manifestations of opposing positions in the grace-nature debate: the patristic era, on the one hand, and the ‘Baianist controversy’ on the other (Pidel 2020, p. 10).

Following this, I want to suggest that the late medieval period constitutes not only a fulcrum between the intrinsic and extrinsic positions on grace and nature, but that this fertile era precipitated another mode of inquiry and elaboration which needs to be taken into account. The many faces and phases of the Christian mystical tradition cannot be reduced in such a way that one epoch is described as having precedence over another; nevertheless, the late medieval period is rightly described by Bernard McGinn as seeing the ‘flowering of mysticism’ (McGinn 1998). In the sourcing of theology in this mystical tradition we are posing a certain Newmanian question: are these flowers of the mystical tradition with or without fruit?¹

Moreover, the relationship between scholastic thought and mystical thought in this period is not one of opposition, but complementarity. This is seen especially in the (sometimes-controversial) mixing of genres—homilies becoming *quaestiones disputatae* and vice versa in Meister Eckhart, the mixing of ‘theology as found in the schools, and theology as conducted in an anchoritic cell’ in Julian of Norwich (Turner 2011, p. 11; see Wojtulewicz 2015, p. 263) or the *quaestio* that concludes Hugh of Balma’s work of mystical theology *The Roads to Zion Mourn* (Anon 1997, pp. 155–70). Mysticism, in other words, offers an expansion of the

late medieval contribution to the grace-nature/faith-reason debate, not only in terms of philosophical theology, but also in terms of method.

The mystical tradition offers a furthering of the ‘parallax view’ of this debate. The principal contribution is that this tradition affirms, reinforces, and even offers novel presentations of the Christological relationship between grace-nature and faith-reason which are in accord with Przywara’s reading of Aquinas’ famous maxim: ‘grace [/faith] does not destroy but presupposes and perfects nature [/reason]’ (Przywara 1942).

Further still, Przywara’s contribution to the debate as a whole centres around the creature’s *potentia oboedientialis* as a *negativum*: the openness of the creature to grace and faith is premised on the ‘incapacity from one’s own power’ (Przywara 2014a, p. 228). The sole meaning of this insufficiency, however, is in fact nothing other than its orientation to a *positivum*, which is both effected and known supernaturally. This, in Aquinas’ paradoxical formulation, is the ‘active potency’ of the creature (Przywara 2014a, pp. 158, 388). All finality proportioned to the insufficiency of nature and reason is mistaken, and to resist this finality is to enact the theologically necessary ‘reversal of Aristotelianism’ (Przywara 2014a, p. 229).

Eschewing finality in respect of creaturely active potency is reflected in the commitment of the mystical tradition to what we might now call the redemptive ‘death of reason’ or the ‘death of nature’. Both post-Dionysian mysticism and late medieval metaphysics witness to the dissolution of finality in respect of nature and reason. The metaphysical insight that God can only be referenced apophatically, that language necessarily has to pass through self-abnegation and death, that all finality of expression regarding God is idolatry, all receive their experiential confirmation in the lives and writings of the late medieval mystics. The proportioning to finality of nature’s insufficiency is expressed in the commitment to pure nature and pure reason. *Si comprehendis, non est deus* writes Augustine (*In Ps. LXXXV, 12*); anything else is an idolatrous resting in finite concepts, and therefore a rationalistic affirmation of reason’s finality. Pure nature is the parallel to this rationalistic affirmation, turning any *negativum* of man’s openness to grace into a pure *positivum* that neatly draws a line between the natural and the supernatural.

This strict delineation, purchased by the assertion of pure nature, does not guarantee the gratuity of grace, but, first and foremost, conceptually reduces grace to the created order. It does so in the same manner as describing God as numerically ‘one’, which is problematic,² as ‘one’ presupposes ‘one among many’ (see further discussion on this point in Wojtulewicz 2017a, pp. 133–34). This anxiously and inadvertently brings God down to the finitude of discrete numbers, intelligibly delineated one from another. This necessitates that grace is only ever a supernaturally mediating ‘other’ to nature; that is, partaking of the same natural structure, though not itself essential to nature (the security of the difference of nature to grace is thus reliant on an underlying similarity). Pure nature thus imposes on grace a symmetry where there is a necessary asymmetry; we may even say it assumes the supernatural order is formed in its own image and likeness. This is a categorical error even before we reach the question of securing the gratuity of the supernatural.

Perhaps Anselm of Canterbury’s overstretched line in the *Proslogion* stands as a sacrament of the proportioning to finality of man’s insufficiencies (i.e., pure nature). God may be *ens quo maius cogitari non potest* (resting on a finality or limit-concept of reason); but crucially, this phrase is followed, as Przywara aptly points out, with a line that explodes any finalising confines: *non solum es quo maius cogitari nequit, sed es quiddam maius quam cogitari potest* (Przywara 2014a, p. 289).

2. Przywara’s Interpretation of Aquinas

In his 1942 essay on the famous Thomistic maxim *gratia non destruit, sed supponit et perficit naturam*,³ Erich Przywara poses a poignant question: why does grace threaten nature with destruction, and what does it signify? The answer to this question invokes a Christological interpretation of the relationship between grace and nature, faith and reason, in which nature and reason are put to death by grace and faith, rather than annihilated. This

death is understood as the necessary precondition of a redemptive rising: ‘Überformung’—‘super-formation’, ‘being formed from above’ or ‘being formed into something higher’ (the theme is developed more fully in Przywara (1942); translation possibilities are here taken from the translator’s note in Przywara (2014a, p. 170, n.37)).

Following Przywara, I take the grace-nature and faith-reason pairings as co-dependent: what is true for one pairing must be true for the other. This is based on the fact that, identifying both pairs in Thomas’ thought, Przywara notes that the ‘principle has a double form: one that applies to the order of being [(grace-nature)] and one that applies to the order of consciousness [(faith-reason)]’ (Przywara 1942, p. 178. Przywara identifies the maxim in *De ver.* q. 14, a. 10, ad 9; *ST Ia*, q. 1, a. 8, ad 2; q. 2, a. 2, ad 1.). Przywara admits that the exact form of the maxim as it is used does not appear in Aquinas’ texts; but it nevertheless stands as a true reflection of his thought. Owing to this double form of the principle, in what follows I refer to each pair interchangeably, occasionally focusing on what is particularly manifest in one over the other.

Przywara calls pure nature and pure reason ‘a pre-theological or atheological nature and reason’. Przywara argues that this view, which is found in the debates between Bañezianism and Jansenism, cannot be read back into Aquinas’ thought (Przywara 1942, p. 182). Przywara is clear, however, that there are other senses one can derive from Aquinas’ approach to grace and faith.

There are, for Przywara, three themes that emerge from considering Thomas’ maxim, which essentially span the history of Thomist interpretation. In the first instance, Thomas seems to dissolve the contents of revelation and the ‘mysteries of the world of grace’ into the ‘categories of nature’ (Przywara 1942, p. 180). This is displayed, he argues, when (for example) Thomas asks ‘whether the essence of grace is a substance or an accident?’ (Przywara 1942, p. 180). This results in grace and faith descending into incomplete nature and reason in order to perfect them, and so grace and faith ‘merge completely into and perish in a pure rationality’ (Przywara 1942, p. 181). In this sense, grace and faith do not destroy nature and reason, but by dissolving into and perfecting them, the difference of grace and faith from the created order is itself destroyed.

The second sense one derives from Thomas is that grace and faith do not destroy (that is, annihilate) nature and reason as tainted by original sin. Instead, they are ‘redeemed’ by grace and faith (Przywara 1942, p. 182). The third sense is that in nature and reason, grace and faith become ‘the created manifestation of trinitarian life in the mystery of Christ’—a ‘new living form of nature and reason’, which occurs because nature and reason, as tainted by original sin, pass through death in order to be ‘transfigured’ (Przywara 1942, p. 183).

Where does Thomas actually sit relative to these three differing interpretations? Unsurprisingly, Przywara does not see the matter in terms of selecting one to the exclusion of the others. Surprisingly, however, he points to Thomas’ use of Pseudo-Dionysius’ hierarchies as a thread that unites all three—Thomas ‘uses [Pseudo-Dionysius’] mystical theology for his basic categories as much as he uses Aristotelian thought’ (Przywara 1942, p. 185). Thus the structure of the ‘self-sufficiency of an Aristotelian “natural universe”’ is, as Przywara put it earlier in the *Analogia Entis*, exchanged for ‘the “sacral universe” of the Areopagite’ (Przywara 2014a, p. 294).

Notwithstanding the denial of the Bañezian-Jansenist interpretation, Przywara thinks Aquinas does seem to advocate for some form of pure nature and pure rationality. And yet nature and rationality are the ‘the new heaven and the new earth’ (Przywara 1942, p. 184). This comes about because Przywara sees Thomas’ ‘*ordo universi*’ as participating in the divine hierarchy, as in Pseudo-Dionysius—that order of being in Thomas’ thought that runs ‘in an almost linear sequence of steps’ from the tiniest and lowest of material creation up to the being of God (Przywara 1942, p. 180). This is essentially what constitutes the ‘parallax view’ in Przywara’s reading of Thomas: nature and reason are *seemingly* pure nature and pure reason, on the one hand, and yet are the redeemed and perfected re-creation of the ‘new heaven and new earth’, on the other.

What emerges from this picture of the relationship between grace and faith with nature and reason is a definitively Christological form: grace and faith do not destroy nature and reason in the sense of annihilating them, but in a certain sense puts both to death as a means of participation in the Cross in order to affect their redemption. What results has the *form* of pure nature and pure reason (this follows from being *causae secundae*), but this is only because they now participate in the ‘new heaven and new earth’, ‘transfigured’ by the saving work of Christ, not because they are somehow ‘pre-theological or atheological’ constructs that go on to relate to grace and nature. Resultantly, Przywara’s interpretation of Aquinas brings us to the central question of participation in the God Who is truly the indistinct Other to creation.

Przywara does not add much flesh to the bones of his reading of Aquinas. Therefore, I want to suggest that his Christological interpretation of Thomas can be identified in the mystical tradition, by viewing the redemptive ‘death’ of nature/reason as a passing through apophatic denial in order to return anew to cataphatic affirmation. Specifically, I want to suggest that this is seen in the metaphysical thought of Eckhart’s divine indistinction and ‘negation of negation’, and in Ruusbroec’s return to ecclesial contexts and specificities. In both ways finality in nature and reason is denied, resulting in an oscillation which enlivens both the apophatic and the ecclesial contexts and specificities by preventing either from becoming a static, idolatrous pole.

3. Analogy Precludes Finality in Nature and Reason

The Christological form of the relationship between grace-nature and faith-reason explodes all attempts to proportion finality to nature and reason. The realisation is already present in Pseudo-Dionysius’s *The Divine Names*, a seminal text for later medieval mystical developments, where he concedes the resistance of the supernatural. This resistance is, we may suggest, the bedrock of a discontent with any arguments in favour of *natura pura*. So beyond the power of the intellect, the supernatural cannot be categorically amalgamated with nature in any sense whatever. In other words, grace cannot become another category of nature; an equipollence with nature which is determined only by the fact that, as *super*, grace is distinct from what belongs to the essence of this or that nature (on this view see especially Scheeben 1954, pp. 25–32).

In fact, Matthias Scheeben (1835–1888) expresses this clearly when he states that what is ‘[c]ontradictorily opposed to the natural is not, strictly speaking, the supernatural, but the non-natural, that is, that which does not pertain to nature, or does not proceed from nature or correspond to it’ (Scheeben 1954, p. 25). On one extreme view, grace becomes non-natural rather than supernatural (an equivocal position). On the other extreme end, grace is a category of nature, distinguished from it only by being ‘higher’ and not present in what constitutes the essence of that nature, and so necessarily exceeding it. Grace and nature are not, in this second view, contradictorily opposed; rather, they are distinguished (grace is present to nature as exceeding what is metaphysically essential to nature). But the categorical problem persists, in that the mysterious otherness of divine grace is effaced in favour of an intelligible natural form.

Distinction here is perhaps not enough. Grace is supernatural in the sense of ‘above’ and ‘beyond’ nature, not only in terms of exceeding what is metaphysically essential to created natures (to take Scheeben’s extrinsic view), but also in terms of being uncontainable by the structural confines of a created nature. Grace cannot, thereby, be that which completes whatever is lacking in nature; it cannot enter and fill the gaps of nature without structurally becoming nature itself. It is for this reason that the beatific vision cannot mean seeing through some capacity which is superadded to nature, but, as Przywara puts it, by seeing ‘God through God’ (Przywara 2014a, p. 290). This is not to suggest that grace is so distinct from nature that they relate equivocally; rather, it is to suggest that something like an *indistinction* between grace and nature is closer to the truth. This is why Meister Eckhart’s discussion of God as indistinct to the world will prove important.

The matter is further witnessed to in the difficulty of differentiating what is grace, and what is strictly nature in man; what is strictly natural reason, and what is supernatural faith. When Aquinas asks whether grace is a substance or an accident, is it not the case that he has dissolved the distinction such that grace can be conceived in terms corresponding to the structure of nature? Scheeben describes this issue with differentiation as ‘an extremely difficult problem’ which requires us admit that ‘the excessively sharp scalpel must be shunned’; and, quoting John Martinez de Ripalda (1594–1648), ‘I do not wish to press any farther, as otherwise I shall draw blood’ (Scheeben 1954, p. 43). This means that there is no sharp line that can mark the end of one and the beginning of the other, and to this Przywara testifies by the fact that he ‘rejects a nature *separated* from the supernatural *in fact*, in other words, not a nature *distinguished* from the supernatural *in thought*’ (Pidel 2020, p. 19).

Now, this is not to say that grace is the same as nature, or faith the same as reason. This would in fact be a different means to the same end as the *natura pura* argument: the naturalising of the supernatural. Instead, as the mystical tradition abundantly shows, to be maximally ‘present to’ is not the same as ‘identity with’. Identity is foreclosed by the infinite difference between the finite and the infinite, between the creature and God. But neither is this an equivocal metaphysics by a different name. Similarity, where it is found, is only the vehicle of seeing a greater dissimilarity, as is confirmed by the declaration of the IV Lateran Council against Joachim of Fiore (Denzinger 2012, p. 269, n. 807: ‘For between Creator and creature no similitude can be expressed without implying a greater dissimilitude’). There cannot be identity, or mixing, or amalgamation, with the One Who is Himself beyond all number and delineation. Distinction belongs, as Eckhart would say, to the *hoc et hoc* of the creature.

In this respect, the equivocal and the univocal positions are in possession of the same error. If grace is indistinguishable from nature—that is, univocal with it—then the supernatural is become naturalised, from one view, or nature is become wholly supernatural, from another. And if grace is really distinguishable from nature—that is, equivocal to it—then the delineation of difference, on which the distinguishing is premised, is to naturalise the supernatural: it makes grace the ‘other thing’, or faith ‘another thought’. The distinguishing of grace and nature, faith and reason, on the mystical view of the relation between Creator and creature, must also account for the indistinct nature of God. This is why Aquinas’ analogical position—which thwarts the errors of the univocal and equivocal positions—entails, as Przywara shows, that nature and reason appear ‘pure’ (as *causae secundae*) and yet are ‘transfigured’ by grace and faith putting both to redemptive ‘death’.

The acknowledgement that a creaturely conception of nature necessarily involves a commitment to some form of pure nature is the recognition of a frustrated creaturely finitude in reason. The apophatic takes over at this point, knowing that such an assertion is only how it is from the creature’s perspective; a perspective that must be constantly loosed from the grip of finality as the god of wood or gold falls from the hand of the converted idolater. It becomes a *necessary exercise of reason* to explode the finality ascribed to this nature *in order to guarantee the gratuity of grace*. In other words, the gratuity of grace is not guaranteed by pure nature, except as a result of an etiolated conception of divine justice and gift. What could restrict the gift-giver more than stating in one’s premises that grace has to fit the form of pure nature? The receiving of the gift would be restricted by an unconscious statement of resistance on the part of the creature: the unstated assertion that I will only accept a gift of a particular contour, colour, and kind. The mystical tradition firmly places the resistance on the other side of the knotty equation: I receive the gift in pure reception only when I place no restriction on the gift-giver, signalled by my inability to know what it is, precisely how it is given, or even He Who gives it. This is the essence of the creature’s *negativum*: the true meaning and significance of the *potentia oboedientialis* is that grace is ‘beyond nature’ in a way that is not ‘against nature’ (as in Scheeben’s distinction between ‘non-natural’ and ‘supernatural’). This is because, as Przywara says, ‘everything creaturely is more profoundly subject to the Creator than it is related—one thing to another—to itself’ (Przywara 2014a, p. 228). Here we see that

the subjection of the creature to God exceeds created relationality, which is an expression of the categorical difference between a creaturely conception of relation (what is termed ‘distinction’ by Eckhart) and the immanent presence of the transcendent God to the creature (what is termed ‘indistinction’ by Eckhart). This is also summarised by Przywara, in both Augustinian and Thomistic terms, as ‘transcendentality’—that presence of God to which the creature responds prior to ‘all reflective perception of God, and all reflective striving towards God’ (Przywara 1935, pp. 121–23).

If, for Przywara, the distinction between grace and nature is not untrue but rather a ‘lifeless abstraction’ (Przywara 2014d, p. 373) then we may say that the two principal fears of the extrinsic position are here ill-founded: on the one hand that ‘the relative integrity and philosophical intelligibility of nature (and the real distinction between nature and grace) are jeopardised or abandoned’; and on the other hand, the concern over ‘failing to respect the gratuity of the supernatural order’ (White 2013, pp. 543, 557). The argument for the integrity and intelligibility of nature, and the condition on which the gratuity of the supernatural rests, are not guaranteed by a commitment to a real distinction between grace and pure nature. In fact, to argue in favour of ‘pure nature’ and ‘pure reason’ is to capitulate to a view which is an ‘inversion of (though one intrinsically corresponding to) the curse of the Enlightenment and of rationalism: the abstract theopanism of purely conceptual “nature in itself” and “reason in itself”.’ (Przywara 2014d, p. 374).

The only *real* distinction, we may say, is between supernatural grace and the nothingness out of which God creates. On this basis, to the fear of doing away with the integrity of created nature, one may counter in fact that pure nature and pure reason do away with the gratuity of creation: assuming, thereby, that the corollary of the gratuity of grace is creation as something ‘owed’ by God in justice, such that grace is seen to be the gift given over and above what is already owed. Only in the context of this distinction does the anxiety of diminishing the gratuity of grace arise. But the counter-perspective sees instead in this ‘owing’ in justice an effacement of the gratuity of creation itself—the freedom of God to create *ex nihilo*—and so the truncating of the concept of ‘gratuity’. And this truncation returns us to the naturalising tendency at the heart of the extrinsic point of view: not only is grace reduced to an object of satisfaction delivered ‘gratuitously’ by God, ‘gratuity’ itself is viewed according to the order of nature, in which it exists as the opposite of obligation or indebtedness. God, however, can only be understood as beyond all indebtedness, and so the particular concern for the gratuity of grace and faith introduces a reductionism which naturalises grace and faith in a way quite different to the hitherto usual concern for naturalising the supernatural or supernaturalising the natural.

Similarly, the fear of erasing the integrity and intelligibility of nature is nothing other than a self-imposed fear, which occurs when nature is conceptually shone through the lens of creaturely categories and self-knowledge. But self-knowledge is itself relational and gifted by God, as is known by the fact that the gratuity of a loving God Who creates *ex nihilo* is itself a supernatural gift. The fear of losing the integrity and intelligibility of nature is to be dismissed as without real foundation. It arises from the enclosure imposed by an exclusively Aristotelian universal order which has yet to be theologically synthesised, in fact in the manner already achieved by Aquinas, with the sacral order of Pseudo-Dionysius (Przywara 2014a, pp. 270–71).

4. Obediential Potency Is Positive and Negative

As was stated, for Przywara the *potentia oboedientialis* is not a *negativum* only. It is also, following Aquinas, a ‘directedness towards . . .’, a ‘readiness . . .’, and shows itself ‘in the mode of receptive capacity’ (Przywara 2014a, p. 228). So it is not enough, on Przywara’s reading of Thomas, for the *potentia oboedientialis* to be a *negativum*; it has the face of a *positivum* also. Again following the Angelic Doctor, Przywara points out that it is an ‘insufficiency from one’s own ground’, and so the ‘positive display of an orientation towards the supernatural’ is premised on a negative ‘incapacity from one’s own power’ (Przywara 2014a, p. 228). The fruitfulness of the positive aspect is a ‘free gift from above’; it is ‘the

nothing of “powerlessness” being summoned to “service”. (Przywara 2014a, p. 229). Here the mystical commitment to divine proximity becomes the guarantee, not of fusion with God, but of creaturely independence: ‘God’s maximal proximity to the creaturely is the maximal liberation of the creaturely unto active, free self-movement [. . .] this immediacy leads to the creature’s greatest possible independence—even to the creature having the property of being “self-caused” [. . . and] the possibility of saying No to God’ (Przywara 2014a, p. 230). This question of proximity and freedom, as well as creaturely independence and gratuity, receive a vigorous expression in the thought of Eckhart, as we will see later.

This necessary relationship between the negative and positive aspects of the *potentia oboedientialis*, which is normally associated with nature rather than reason, is then transferred into the noetic (reason) when Przywara says, again following Aquinas, that our knowing that we do not know God in Himself is a ‘knowledge by negation’, turning the negative into a positive. This is seen in God’s ‘not withholding himself from a formal figure of thought’, on the one hand, and yet there is ‘an evasion of every formal figure in the above-and-beyond’, on the other (drawing on *De Pot.* q. 7, a. 5, ad 13) (Przywara 2014a, p. 290). In other words, one positive thing that reason grasps about God is the fact that God is not knowable. This mirrors the ‘positive display of orientation towards the supernatural’ in nature, which is premised on a negative ‘incapacity from one’s own power’, as stated above. The fullness of knowing and seeing God in the beatific vision—the final test-case on which grace-nature and faith-reason arguments focus their attention—is only ever a deeper knowledge of the incomprehensibility of God. There is a ‘natural restless longing’, but both this inclination towards the beatific vision, and knowing it to be the goal, is ‘itself the work of supernatural grace’, and leads to this incomprehension (Przywara 2014a, p. 291).

The interpretation of Aquinas’ maxim regarding grace and nature in Przywara’s later article, considered above, is found here in the *Analogia Entis* when he argues that the immediacy of God to the creature’s nature, intellect, and will is so profound, as the ‘primordial ground of all being’, that this itself becomes the analogical condition of the creature’s independence and freedom (Przywara 2014a, pp. 292–93). This is not, as indeed is clearly the case also in Scheeben, an identification of God with the creature’s essence; rather, the recognition of a ‘most immediate operation even and precisely within the free spiritual essence of the creature’ (Przywara 2014a, p. 293). This independence of the creature is what displays the redemptive effect of grace and faith on nature and reason, as the ‘sacral universe’ which is transfigured by the supernatural such that there is a constant oscillation between the one action of God in the creature (God as ‘*Allwirksamkeit*’ as opposed to ‘*Alleinwirksamkeit*’) (Przywara 2014a, p. 295, n. 453.) and the creature as the one who brings ‘*capax*’, ‘*habilitas*’, ‘*naturaliter inclinetur*’ and ‘*desiderium naturale*’ to God (Przywara 2014a, p. 292).

The fact that the mystical tradition moves often to a final form, whereby God exclusively works in the soul’s complete passivity, suggests that the mystical tradition takes to the *potentia oboedientialis* in the shape of the pure *negativum*. It is surely God who transforms this *negativum* into a *positivum*. But is there room here for the reality of the creature cooperating in *any* sense other than in the reduction of those things which distract from the *negativum* of passivity? There may be here a certain question of mystical hyperbole; but insofar as the tradition witnesses to the soul’s ultimate passivity towards God in a way that diminishes or erases any *positivum* with respect to creaturely potency, then we witness a repetition of the theology of grace found in the Greek Fathers, as opposed to the ‘active potency’ of Aquinas (which is a consummate theological portrait of the negative and positive dimensions of the *potentia oboedientialis*) (Przywara 2014a, p. 388). This is true, above all, in Meister Eckhart, for whom every creaturely expression of real cooperation is an expression of *hoc et hoc*: the very thing that is to be (as we may express it) ‘put to death’ by God’s act. This shows Eckhart as a clear forerunner of a particular Reformed theology which sees the creature as a moral nothing (if not, in this sense, a reclamation of the Platonic ontological nothingness of creatures) (see Betz 2014, pp. 50–52).

5. The Redemptive ‘Death’ of Apophasis

As Christological, the relationship between grace and nature partakes of the mystery of the Incarnation and the Cross. Is not the ‘resistancy’ (see Przywara 2014b) of these mysteries the condition of denying all finality to our openness to God? Pseudo-Dionysius gives us the perfect expression of our apophatic bafflement—that what is ‘the most evident idea in theology’ is, impossibly, ‘entirely mysterious’:

The most evident idea in theology, namely, the sacred incarnation of Jesus for our sakes, is something which cannot be enclosed in words or grasped by any mind, not even by the leaders among the first ranks of the angels. That he undertook to be a man is, for us, entirely mysterious. We have no way of understanding how, in a fashion at variance with nature, he was formed from a virgin’s blood. We do not understand how with dry feet and with his body’s solid weight he walked on the unstable surface of the water. And we do not understand whatever else has to do with the supernatural nature of Jesus. (*The Divine Names* II, 9 (648A), Pseudo-Dionysius 1987, p. 65)

It is from this apophatic premise that Przywara’s ‘parallax’ view shows itself to be the only adequate solution. Because the relationship between grace-nature and faith-reason is Christological in form, it is necessarily subject to that same ‘back-and-forth’ that characterises the correct creaturely response to mystery. This is reinforced by the view that ‘even the knowledge of the existence of such a supernatural goal is grace’ (Przywara 2014a, p. 291. Here Przywara quotes Aquinas, *De Ver.*, q. 24, a. 15, corp.). In other words, our knowledge about the grace-nature, faith-reason relations must follow a theological (that is, Christological) form.

Where the medieval mystical contribution must be translated to the contemporary concerns of this debate, a further denial of finality stands out. The apophatic impasse would itself become an appropriation of the supernatural by way of a finality in reason, if it mistakenly attributed divine mystery to the apophatic conclusion. The ‘rhythm’ of analogy gets at this point: resting in any conclusive position is the forerunner of a univocal or equivocal error. So it becomes necessary *to subject any apophatic finality to its own denial*, and so begin the rhythm by which the issue is correctly viewed. The letting go even of the apophatic as final is what leads the soul towards and not away from (what Pidel calls) the ‘ecclesially approved theological traditions’ (Pidel 2020, p. 1). This, as Przywara aptly points out in another context, is in fact an *ethical* disposition, because (for example in Newman) conscience sees to it that ‘all self-sufficiency of the *ego* is thereby fundamentally eradicated by unreserved self-surrender [. . .] Newman’s system decisively opens up to consciousness the world outside itself’ (Przywara 1957, pp. 283–84). In other words, ‘conscience is an “anticipation” of the authority of God in an authoritative Church’ (Przywara 2019) precisely because it challenges the individual theologian’s self-assurance:

[H]e is a Catholic theologian to the extent that he not put his theology or the theology of his school on a level with the Church, but be able, in awe and reverence, to see the tensive fullness [*Spannungsfülle*] of ways beyond his own “one” way. (Przywara, “Neue Theologie,” in *Ringgen der Gegenwart*, 669–725, here 714–715, as cited and translated in Pidel 2020, pp. 21–22)

We may style the return of the apophatic upon itself as *Spannungsfülle*; the same ethical predisposition to ‘transcend through oneself’ (Przywara 2019) as delivered by conscience, which in refusing finality, oscillates between itself and ‘the “ever greater Church” beyond the fullness of the theological schools and orientations’ (Przywara, ‘Neue Theologie’, 715, as cited and translated in Pidel 2020, p. 22). And so in adopting analogy as the rhythmic ‘existing and living instantiation’ of truth, we see:

the explicit form of the distance of the church’s discretion [. . . Among the possible theologies] this “rhythm,” however, is a posture of distance from these theologies themselves [. . . analogy thus constituting] the *inner form of any theology whatsoever*. (Przywara 2014d, pp. 375–76)

This is the necessarily finality-resisting dynamic of analogy regarding grace and nature; and so we may say, the opposition between the poles of an extrinsic view dependent on *natura pura*, and an apophatic explosion of finality that denies it. And so all apophatic discourse about God and the supernatural, in seeking to overcome the confines of creaturely finitude, must see in this the 'death' of reason as the prelude to a return to doctrinal exposition (which then constitutes the redemptive rising of reason). This process is not static, because it demands that the theologian see, in the proper manner of analogy, that divine truth is found 'in-and-beyond' doctrinal presentations of truth (to use Przywara's omnipresent phrase '*in-über*').

If nature and reason are subject to a kind of redemptive death rather than annihilating destruction at the hands of grace and faith, in what does this 'death' consist? Przywara does not take this up in any detail; however, he does identify the question in relation to philosophy in his 1941 essay 'Philosophy as a Problem'. There, all absolutizing in philosophy is seen to be the 'native tendency to fall into the death of "pure concepts" and into the hell of "pure critique" [. . .] since it suffers an ever new fall into these "original sins" and through them dies into an ever new redemption' (Przywara 2014c, p. 404). So just as the interpretation of doctrinal formulae in terms of 'pure concepts' introduces absolutizing finality, so too apophasis can produce 'pure' transcendent conceptions as a kind of absolute finality of its own (by denying the finality of positive statements about God). Where an apophatic intervention in terms of knowledge of God is concerned, therefore, the question arises as to whether it falls into an absolutism (i.e., a finality or stasis) from which it needs to be redeemed. In other words, does it not just repeat the same problem found in the argument for pure nature and pure reason, but under the guise of a pronounced commitment to divine transcendence?

Although this paints a picture from the perspective of reason and faith, we know that this is only one aspect of Aquinas' 'double principle'. So how does this understanding of the 'death of reason' translate into the 'death of nature'? In a sense, it is whatever constitutes the thoroughgoing anti-Pelagian interpretation of the nature-grace relationship. And this we may allude to in the mystical commitment to God 'taking over' the mystic at a stage of mystical abandonment (as discussed briefly below). But we may say more: we may push this question in the direction of the more familiar tension between the mystical exposition of the spiritual life, and the doctrinal presentation of truth in the Church. In other words, the mystic may be said to achieve this analogical oscillation between competing finalities precisely in submitting to authoritative ecclesial pronouncements, even if their position is not, strictly speaking, erroneous and contrary to doctrinal formulae. This, in a sense, brings the whole debate about grace-nature and faith-reason into the concrete circumstances of the mystic's lived reality. The struggle for ecclesial recognition, on this view, becomes *part of the redemptive 'death' of nature and reason within the mystic's life*.

Instead of an historical analysis of this particular point, which would at any rate exceed our remit, I want to suggest that we may see at least the noetic expression of this point in the peculiarly Christological union of the three dimensions that have arisen in consideration of apophasis. The apophatic trajectory involves, we may say, (i) the commitment to the transcending of all concepts (noetic), (ii) transcending creaturely finitude as in mystical doctrines of deification (ontic) and, quite possibly, we may add iii) the transcending of all ecclesial contexts and specificities (i.e., the spiritual outgrowth of ecclesial structures, a sacramental economy, liturgy, authoritative doctrinal pronouncements or dogma). But it is perhaps better to express these according to the binary of the noetic and the ontic in the following way: (i) transcending all concepts, including authoritative doctrinal pronouncements or dogma (noetic/faith-reason); and (ii) transcending creaturely finitude, which involves some form of mystical doctrine of deification, and transcending ecclesial structures, sacraments, and liturgy (ontic/grace-nature).

6. Mysticism versus an Authoritative Church?

The import of this question receives one expression in the context of mystical theology as the tension between individual mystical experience and the role of the Church. The concern that nature and reason must be preserved in their integrity, and grace and faith preserved in their gratuity, may lead to the conclusion that, in their absence (formulated, however, according to strict criteria), the relationship between the natural and the supernatural is so diffuse that the supernatural is sacramentalised to the point of disappearance. As such, the supernatural becomes so eminently accessible that any prescribed forms of participation in grace (prayer, the sacraments, the Church) can, under the conditions of mystical spiritual maturity, be abandoned.

There are plenty of historical examples of this kind of tension, not least with Eckhart (and the concerns of the 1329 bull *In agro dominico*) and Jan van Ruusbroec. Yet, against any such reading of Ruusbroec, Faesen and Arblaster ably show that in *The Twelve Beguines* Ruusbroec ‘demonstrate[s] that the heart of mystical theology is by no means opposed to the faith of the Church’ (Arblaster and Faesen 2013, p. 23). Eckhart, on the other hand, like Marguerite Porete,⁴ seems to advocate for the abandonment of hierarchy and structure, not as a rebellious act, but as a detached spiritual outgrowing of them; his tract *On the Noble Man*, by stage three, is particularly notable in that it involves the soul’s progression from her ‘mother’, as God takes over the actions of the soul (see Vinzent 2011, pp. 120–65), wherein we find the motive-seed of the view in succeeding centuries that God is *Alleinwirksamkeit* (Przywara 2014a, pp. 292–95). Yet even these advocates for an immediacy between the divine and the human must be subject to nuance based on their historical and conceptual contexts (for example, Eckhart’s eucharistic theology—see Roesner 2017) to say nothing of counterstatements from their own texts and the necessary selection or synthesis behoving the reader that this implies.

If the completion of the Christological form of the grace-nature and faith-reason relations involves allowing the apophatic to undergo redemptive ‘death’ (resulting in both a return to doctrinal formulation or ecclesial contexts, and a transfiguration of the formulation as an anticipation of ‘the new heaven and new earth’) then this particular tension between the mystic and the Church is especially important. But aside from historical questions concerning the reception of mystical figures either in their lifetimes or subsequently, there is a question as to whether this tension can be seen in the texts of the mystics themselves. On this point we turn to two mystics who may be said to advance the consideration relative to the themes we have already covered: Meister Eckhart and Jan van Ruusbroec.

7. Meister Eckhart on Indistinction and Negation

Eckhart’s approach to grace highlights a number of challenges but also possibilities (see McGinn 2001, pp. 127–31). Whilst accepting the *gratia gratis data* and *gratia gratum faciens* distinction, Eckhart believes the latter does not transform nature. Even though grace ‘breathes into and elevates nature’,⁵ this must be understood as *gratia gratis data* and not *gratia gratum faciens*. Saving grace (*gratia gratum faciens*) is only received in the intellect (as divine wisdom), and this is because the intellect is higher than nature.⁶ Saving grace is not, first and foremost, an activity; but it is in the essence of the creature—it is concerned with the creature’s being.⁷ Eckhart therefore does not permit the action of saving grace on created nature, but only on the uncreated faculty of the intellect. It is only acceptable that something supernatural (grace) be received by what is super-natural (intellect as above nature). Yet it is also Eckhart’s view that all that God works in creation is grace.⁸ Grace and nature must be in some sense incompatible on this view, for grace has to be mediated by the intellect, and the intellect is the site of man’s return to God. What is more, grace is perhaps the most specific point in all of Eckhart’s thought: that is, saving grace is only ever given to *particular persons*, not to nature as such. Grace, he says, is only given to the ‘supposit of nature’, to this particular ‘person’, and ‘not to nature’, for nature remains ‘naked and

forsaken'.⁹ This stands in apposition to Eckhart's emphasis on Christ taking on human nature but not human personhood.¹⁰

This perspective can be read as a straightforward Christianisation of Platonism, insofar as it presupposes the priority of the intellect over created nature, the latter having questionable ontological (and perhaps moral) status. A key conceptual difference, however, is the specificity with which saving grace is advocated for. Reiner Schürmann's interpretation has, as a distinguishing feature, the Marian understanding of grace in Eckhart's thought. If Mary is in possession of the 'fullness of grace', then it is impossible to imagine that this has no corporate effect on 'all the members of the body of Christ' (Schürmann 2001, p. 150). In other words, if it were only found in her, then 'it would be imperfect' because it would bind the gift of grace to time and space; however, its corporate nature—the fact that it is shared by all members—means it 'establishes man beyond time, in the eternal now' (Schürmann 2001, p. 151). Most significant in Eckhart's treatment of grace, therefore, is not his greater concern for primary grace over saving grace; but that the latter, when combined with Schürmann's insightful comments, display a tension between the general and the particular in Eckhart's thought. It is really as though, in a reverse constellation of his entire metaphysics, saving grace operates according to a principle of the *particular* as the source and goal of its action.

Although Eckhart's view of grace is problematic from the perspectives we have already considered, there is a sense in which his doctrine of unity with God is premised on a kind of rejection of finality. In his consideration of Paul's letting 'God go for God's sake' he seems to handle the issue of the gift of grace according to a radically conceived sense of detachment. The process whereby the individual becomes like God is not only in the dispossession of all gifts, but in the detachment even from God Himself:

Now Saint Paul let God go for God's sake; he let go all that he could take from God and let go everything that God could give him, and all that he could receive from God. As he let that go, he let go of God for God's sake, and there God stayed with him, where God is Himself beingness, neither having received Himself nor having gained Himself, instead in one beingness which God is in Himself. He never gave anything to God, and never received anything from God; it is a one and pure oneness. Here the person is a true person [. . .] there is something in the soul that is so familiar to God that it is one and not united. (Homily 90 [Quint 12], In nativitate beate Marie virginis, die 8 septembris. 'Qui audit me' (Eccli. 24:30–1), in Eckhart (2020, p. 361). In the critical edition, *Deutsche Werke* [DW] I 196, 7–197, 9.)

What sense might we make of this passage? The condition of unity with God appears to be the dispossession even of God as the final end of the human being. This effectively does away with the concern for creaturely integrity and the securing of the gratuity of grace, such that neither condition in fact matters when it comes to the creature's relationship to God; the very thing that makes the creature like God is the release he or she has from all possession, all gift, and all conditions of integrity in nature. He continues in the same sermon:

He is free and has gone out of himself, and must be free of everything which he is to receive. If my eye is to perceive colour, it must be free of any colour. If I see the colour blue or white, the sight of my eye which sees the colour, this that sees, is the same as that which is seen with the eye. The eye in which I see God is the same eye in which God sees me; my eye and the eye of God are one eye and one sight and one knowing and one loving. (Homily 90 [Quint 12], n. 11, in Eckhart (2020, p. 365). From DW I 201 1–8.)

The individual who is able to enter this state of dispossession achieves indistinction from God. It is precisely this subject of indistinction which is decisive for Eckhart. As mentioned before, number (that is, multiplicity) is contrary to God's nature, and so God must be seen as beyond all number, even when He is considered 'one'.¹¹ Substitute the

word ‘existence’ for ‘God’, Eckhart says, and we see why it makes sense to say God is indistinct: for all things that are, whatever the manner of their existence, are said to be indistinct from existence.¹²

This view of indistinction, by which Eckhart understands all creatures have universal access to God, is paired with another view for which he is well-known. The sense of ‘one’ by which we understand God as indistinct from creation is not a negative term, but a positive one by means of the ‘negation of negation’.¹³ This, Eckhart says, is the only form of negation that exists in God. In other words, there is no negation in God (negation itself is negated) and therefore He is pure affirmation, pure *positivum*. Now in saying this, Eckhart has returned us to the very thing he previously abandoned with respect to our consideration of grace and nature: the negation of negation is the real guarantor of *gratuity*. This is because God cannot *deny* anything to His creatures, for there is no negation in Him (save the negation of negation itself).¹⁴ This reframes the question of both the impossibility of distinction (of the kind granted by ‘pure nature’), and the guarantee of gratuity (for it is *in virtue of the indistinction* that what is given by God is given freely). These two points may be taken as contributions to the contemporary debate on grace-nature and faith-reason, despite the difficulties of Eckhart’s specific view of grace and nature. Moreover, even in their marked and arguably hyperbolic form, Eckhart’s views partake of a reflexive negation that exists in parallel with the Christologically formed sense of redemptive ‘death’.

Regarding the broader implications of Eckhart’s theology, however, we may say that it witnesses to the most pronounced kind of transcendence possible: (i) transcending all concepts, including authoritative doctrinal pronouncements or dogma (noetic/faith-reason); and (ii) transcending creaturely finitude, which involves some form of mystical doctrine of deification, and transcending ecclesial structures, sacraments, and liturgy (ontic/grace-nature).

On the specific question of relating to ecclesial contexts and specificities, Bernard McGinn summarises well the sense in which Eckhart’s commitment to negation and dispossession results in (what we might call) an appropriation of apophatic finality:

Eckhart’s theology of mysticism appears as anomalous [in the late medieval mystical tradition], if not actually subversive. On the surface at least, there is little ecclesiology or sacramentology in Eckhart [. . .] Eckhart’s uncompromising insistence on the inner appropriation of the saving mysteries had little room for preaching on the sacraments and other forms of devout practice. (McGinn 2001, p. 130)

8. Ruusbroec on Nature as Relation

Little could set the natural inclination towards God in a more mystical register than this comment which occurs early in Ruusbroec’s *The Spiritual Espousals*:

Moreover, a person has a natural and fundamental inclination toward God through the spark of the soul [*die vonke der zielen*] and through the higher reason, which always desires what is good and hates what is evil. (*The Spiritual Espousals*, Book One, Part One, B. in van Ruusbroec 1985, p. 45)

It would be foolhardy to attempt a straightforward comparison between the metaphysical concept of the *potentia oboedientialis* of Thomas with *die vonke der zielen* of Ruusbroec. Yet, this represents the fact that *The Spiritual Espousals* display for us a particular series of conceptual and methodological insights which may be authentically treated as theological source material with implications for the contemporary grace-nature and faith-reason debate. Although much more could be said besides this, it is worth considering a sample strand of Ruusbroec’s thought from *The Spiritual Espousals* to make the point and develop the connection with the contemporary debate as we have hitherto set it out. In this particular quote at least, we are able to perceive *in nuce* the challenge of bridging the mystical theology of the late medieval period with the contemporary theologically inflected metaphysics of the current debate.

Key to Ruusbroec's understanding of human nature is the fact that we are not substances, but a relation (van Nieuwenhove 2003, p. 119). This important insight shows at what level the grace-nature and faith-reason discussion must be questioned. Like the apophatic considerations earlier, this is another reminder that the mystical tradition, here instantiated in Ruusbroec's thought, changes the way we consider the relationship between grace and nature, faith and reason.

When God is understood not to be an object or subject among the objects and subjects of the world—that is, as uncreated—the ability to distinguish between God and human beings becomes impossible (van Nieuwenhove 2003, p. 119). This is not to say that God and the soul are one and the same, and therefore cannot be distinguished; rather, it is to say that the only proper way to conceive of God's relation to the world is to understand (again in an apophatic manner) that God is infinitely present to the created order, and yet is also infinitely transcendent to it.

To distinguish between God and creation, even understood only as a mental exercise of distinction, is to introduce to the relationship a set of considerations whereby God is presupposed to be an object or subject in the world, albeit of a very different kind to the rest of the world. Even without drawing God down to the level of the creature as a conscious thought (that is, one can still hold to the distinction whilst denying that God is a part of the world) this distinction relies on a denial of God's absolute transcendence and difference to the world. In other words, the very act of comparison required and delivered by talk of similarity and difference already compromises the nature of God as understood by the mystical and metaphysical tradition. Though there is nothing controversial about this understanding of God, it remains to be absorbed into the debate on grace and nature.

We can see that this presupposition of distinction is at the heart of the grace-nature debate. To presuppose a pure nature, to which grace is then given, is already to capitulate to a distinction wholly alien to God's nature. It presupposes, in other words, the absolutization of the *causae secundae*, such that they are self-sufficient unities to the exclusion of any Augustinian grounding of God's immanence to the creature. Such an exclusion is a direct consequence of the reduction of God to the categories of the world; the very thing that this position attempts to negate. This view holds that God is an 'other' in the sense of a creature, to whom one relates as pure nature.

The relational nature of Ruusbroec's understanding of the human person has resonances with William of St Thierry, and contrasts the position of Peter Abelard, who defines the human person as 'essentially an isolated "self" that only engages in relationships to a secondary degree' (Faesen 2022, p. 9). What is at stake in this difference of approach to the human person? One crucial aspect is that insofar as the human person is understood relationally—as a relationship with a true 'other'—we move away from anything like *natura pura*. Despite questions of how persons are delineated from one another, the relational nature of human existence requires a delimiting of the person that abandons the finality proper to a pure nature.

If one looks to the kind of union Ruusbroec envisions for the creature who has entered into God, and at his mystical doctrine of God, one finds a striking parallel to the metaphysically delineated passivity and activity of human nature—the locus of all talk about the *potentia oboedientialis*. God is given both 'apophatic denominations' ('supersubstantial darkness', 'eternal stillness') and a 'positive name': 'essential love (*weselijke minne*)' (McGinn 2014, p. 136). This 'essential love', into which the creature enters, is itself characterised by the 'higher fusion' of active 'love' (*minne*) and passive 'enjoyment' (*ghebruken*) (McGinn 2014, p. 136).

Between the active and the interior (as shown by the first two books of *The Spiritual Espousals*) we find the image of an upturned tree (*The Spiritual Espousals*, Book One, Part Four, D. in van Ruusbroec 1985, p. 70). The higher the soul climbs this tree, the more it reaches the roots, which marks the beginning of the interior life. Now, the interior life in Ruusbroec, as in Meister Eckhart, is concerned with being free of images, but also being free of attachments. In a way this maps the difference between reason (noetic) and nature (ontic).

Apophysis viewed in this light concerns the transcendence of images or concepts; and so the apophatic correlate in nature is the transcendence of creaturely attachments. At this point, we have not reached out beyond a common mystical trope into what is distinctive to Ruusbroec. But at least this distinction helps inform the manner in which we see nature and reason as correlates.

The interior life of the creature is determined by an action of God from the inside out. Here Ruusbroec internalises the inverted image we see in the tree at the end of Book One of *The Spiritual Espousals*. From this perspective, the relationship to grace is not one of a 'pure nature' into which God then pours grace from without; rather, following the Augustinian understanding of participation in God from one's innermost being, God works from within towards the outside (in good works):

This grace flows from within, not from without, for God is more interior to us than we are to ourselves, and his interior urging and working within us, whether done naturally or supernaturally, is nearer and more intimate to us than are our own works. (*The Spiritual Espousals*, Book Two, Part One, C. in [van Ruusbroec 1985](#), p. 75)

Contrary to any interior resting that this most intimate participation may suggest, the soul is directed outward. Every manner in which Christ comes to the soul results in a 'going out of ourselves', with Christ commanding 'Go out through your exercises and your whole life in accordance with the way in which my grace and gifts impel you' (*The Spiritual Espousals*, Book Two, Part Two, praeam. [van Ruusbroec 1985](#), p. 77). This recapitulates Przywara's statement regarding the *potentia oboedientialis*: that 'the nothing of "powerlessness" [is] being summoned to "service".' ([Przywara 2014a](#), p. 229). And this is true because the gift of grace is not seen *only* as something that supernaturally mediates between the soul and God, but is always the gift of Himself too: 'Christ comes to us and enters within us with intermediary and without intermediary (that is, with his gifts and above all gifts)' (*The Spiritual Espousals*, Book Two, Part Four, A. in [van Ruusbroec 1985](#), p. 119). The soul's turning to God mirrors this entry of Christ, with and without intermediary, 'that is, with our virtues and above all virtues' ([van Ruusbroec 1985](#), p. 119).

Here we see the analogical form in two senses. On the one hand, what is interior leads to what is exterior; each 'within' is a going 'beyond'. On the other hand, both Christ and the soul move according to the 'in' of an intermediary, and the 'beyond' of a 'without intermediary'. Therefore, the gift of grace is *Christ Himself as intermediary*; that is, grace is always a gift that is 'in-and-beyond' (*in-über*) the creature, both immanent to the creature's ground as *Allwirksamkeit* ('God becomes the master of a person's entire will') (*The Spiritual Espousals*, Book One, Part Three, A. in [van Ruusbroec 1985](#), p. 57) and yet beyond the creature. The fact that the creature is also 'in-and-beyond' God only serves to highlight the mutually relational natures of God and the creature, and the fact that all participation in God is already Christological (that is, analogical).

From this perspective, Ruusbroec's view of the creature cannot be seen as a static entity, but only one of dynamic rhythm. Moreover, the organisation of *The Spiritual Espousals* itself becomes instructive of Ruusbroec's view of grace. Despite these later themes in the work concerning immanence and transcendence, interiority and exteriority, mediacy and immediacy, the work opens with a consideration of the role of prevenient and sanctifying grace which is wholly recognisable outside of the specific context of the mystical tradition. Yet, as Ruusbroec descends ever more deeply into spiritual anthropology, his register shifts in the direction of this Christological or analogical form described. Although one may juxtapose these as a means of drawing out a kind of 'methodological apophysis', in which Ruusbroec undoes the more familiar and straightforward theological insights of Book One so as to affect an appreciation of mystery, in fact the apophatic is the final note of the first book, and so acts as a turning point in his thought rather than its conclusion. As such, Ruusbroec's anthropology may be better characterised as the kind of Pseudo-Dionysian theological 'spiral', in which repeated return is made to a point of origin or departure, but

on increasing or decreasing levels—a point Denys Turner applies to Julian of Norwich (Turner 2011, p. 4; see also Wojtulewicz 2017b, p. 173).

This spiralling, which could be said to stand for the rhythmic oscillation which takes neither the ecclesial contexts and specificities nor the apophatic as final, is seen in Ruusbroec's appeal to both aspects within the *one* exposition of spiritual anthropology. On the one hand, the normative ecclesial form of the spiritual life is clearly assented to:

[F]or when a person receives any of the sacraments with a humble heart and without placing an obstacle in the way of the sacrament's effects, then he receives new gifts and an increase of grace because of his humility and because of the mysterious working of Christ in the sacraments. (*The Spiritual Espousals*, Book One, Part Two, B. in van Ruusbroec 1985, p. 52)

On the other hand, such a means of grace is received in tension with the abandonment of all possible noetic finalities:

Here comes Jesus, who sees this person and speaks to him in the light of glory, saying that according to his divinity he is infinite, incomprehensible, inaccessible, and fathomless, transcending all created light and every finite concept. (*The Spiritual Espousals*, Book One, Part Four, D. in van Ruusbroec 1985, p. 70)

This is an insight with which Ruusbroec transitions from Book One (active life) to Book Two (interior life), which is to say, that the apophatic moment for the creature is not accorded a status of finality, only the closure of one aspect of the creature's life which then goes on to relate to other aspects (or, we might say, an instance in the rhythmic relationality of the person in Ruusbroec's view).

9. Conclusions

Przywara's reading of Aquinas on grace and nature, faith and reason, strengthens the use of mysticism as a theological source in contemporary debates. This is because across the various interpretations of Aquinas, Przywara sees the analogical (Christological) relationship within these two pairings of grace-nature and faith-reason. Specifically, the idea that nature and reason must pass through a redemptive 'death' is the most significant sense of the '*non destruit*' of the Thomistic maxim: nature and reason are both insufficient unto themselves, and are 'transfigured' by an ascetic or mortifying process which we considered as the 'death of nature' and the 'death of reason'. As the question of grace and nature, faith and reason, is so foundational, the idea of redemptive 'death' can be explored across multiple planes both noetic and ontic; but characteristic across all such planes is the eschewing of finality in nature and reason. The result of this is the rhythmic oscillation of analogy by which we may characterise the Christological relationship of the pairs.

The apophatic tradition presents itself immediately as aligned with the ascetic or mortifying trajectory because of its commitment to denial, and is found both in the metaphysical and the mystical traditions. The denials involved in apophaticism take place, perhaps first and foremost, noetically (in reason). Therefore, the apophatic tradition seeks to demonstrate and emphasise the *conceptual* frustration required when considering God. This does not mean the simple denial of positive statements, but the denial of their *finality* by means of clashing opposing statements. The effect of this clashing is the breaking open of language to the transcendent. But the commitment to eschewing finality requires, in fact, that even the denials of apophaticism be released. This necessitates a 'return' to the plane of both cataphatic affirmations and ecclesial contexts and specificities. To deny, via apophaticism, the finality of positive concepts is only one form of finality; this must be matched by the denial of finality in apophasis in order to conform to the rhythmic, Christologically inflected redemptive 'death' of reason.

However, because the pairings of grace-nature and faith-reason are themselves related as the double form of the Thomistic maxim, what is true in reason (the noetic) must follow in nature (the ontic). Therefore, if we may conceive of the 'death' of reason in terms of necessary apophatic denials of finality, so too we must conceive of the 'death' of nature

in terms of frustrations of finality. Principally this takes the form of rejecting the idea of pure nature and pure reason. But Przywara's metaphysical account develops further the reasons for not proportioning finality to nature (and therefore reason), showing how the *potentia oboedientialis* is the locus of an oscillating rhythm between negativity (the creature's insufficiency) and positivity (the work of God in the creature, calling to service, but to which the creature brings a natural desire and longing). The oscillation is the operation of analogy as understood in his *Analogia Entis*.

To this metaphysical picture, we may effectively add the forms in which the redemptive 'death', drawn from the Thomistic maxim, may be applied in the context of mystical theology. There is already the extensive use of apophatic discourse in medieval mystical theology. However, in applying the fruitful strand of the contemporary debate (i.e., Przywara's reading of Aquinas) to the mystical tradition, what emerges is a series of new possibilities in the study of mysticism, and in the use of mysticism as a theological source for contemporary debate.

One particular aspect of interest is the denial of self as the precondition for deification (which is both ontic and noetic), which applies the principle of redemptive 'death' to nature and reason. But it is also the case that the question of the mystic's relation to ecclesial contexts and specificities, despite historical exploration, has not really received its *theological* denouement. Ecclesial contexts and specificities is essentially a commitment to immanence, and includes noetic and ontic forms, namely, authoritative pronouncements, the sacramental economy, ecclesial structures, and even questions of visible belonging. The apophatic stands for the commitment to transcendence, and despite scholastic and ecclesial appropriation of the apophatic, there remains the tension with a mystical appropriation of the apophatic to the point of transcending the ecclesial contexts and specificities.

The question that therefore arises, as a result of the grace-nature/faith-reason discussion, is whether there is a similarly Christological form of relation between the pole of ecclesial contexts and specificities, on the one hand, and the pole of the apophatic, on the other. The question of transcending ecclesial contexts as a means of denying finality and embracing redemptive 'death' receives its most pronounced expression in Eckhart's discussion of Paul's letting go of God for the sake of God. Certainly this requires more theological elaboration. However, what remains even less explored is the application of redemptive 'death' to the apophatic pole: the question of proportioning finality to the apophatic. Insofar as this is the case, what needs to be brought into view are the ways in which mystical theology eschews finality even on this apophatic plane.

Meister Eckhart's theology of grace is heavily indebted to a Platonic structure, and is not perhaps the best place to turn as a theological source for the contemporary debate on grace-nature and faith-reason. Yet the line of questioning that opens up from Przywara's reading of Aquinas allows us to source in Eckhart two aspects which witness to an analogical conception of grace and nature, faith and reason.

The first is the relationship between 'distinction' and 'indistinction'. Insofar as God is understood to be 'indistinct' from the world, we find the dissolving of all finalities in nature and reason which lead to a reduction of God to created categories. Thus the supernatural is not understood as 'other' to creation in a way that implicitly or explicitly requires that otherness to be viewed according to finite categories. As indistinct, God is maximally present to the world, but not in a way that requires us to think of God as 'one among many'. The finality of the apophatic is here internally abandoned, because such indistinction does not require God to be transcendent in a way which establishes an equivocal and unbridgeable relationship between God and the world. Rather, again in a Christological form, the maximal immanence of God to the world is established by His transcendence and not in spite of it.

The second is Eckhart's understanding of the 'negation of negation' in God. This establishes precisely the Christological form of redemptive 'death' because it perfectly expresses the commitment to eschewing finalities in nature and reason. If apophaticism can be said to deliver negation, the negation of negation can be said to deliver the oscillating

rhythm of analogy. Moreover, negating all negation in God establishes not only the aforementioned immanence of indistinction, it also answers the theological concern over the gratuity of grace. Such gratuity carries with it the possibility of reintroducing the need for finality in nature and reason (as pure nature and pure reason, which may then be given grace and faith freely and gratuitously). But in negating all negation in God, Eckhart establishes divine gratuity without any appeal to the created order; God does not *withhold* anything (a negation), where ‘not-withholding’ is another way of expressing the ‘negation of negation’.

Jan van Ruusbroec’s relational understanding of the creature offers another possibility for contemporary theological discussion. From a consideration of *The Spiritual Espousals* alone one may see the Christological rhythm between God and the soul as it expresses both the ‘in’ of analogy, but crucially, also the ‘beyond’ of analogy which eschews finality. But Ruusbroec is also a theological source for another reason. Between the activity of Book One and the interiority of Book Two, one finds the suspension of apophatic finality at the turning point between the books. This means the apophatic is only ever the prelude to something else. Here also we see the display of various planes in the relationship between God and the soul because Ruusbroec begins by introducing the subject of grace and its formulation in ecclesial contexts and specificities. But even by Book Two, any finality proportioned to such a view is dissolved in the description of the interior life and questions of immediacy of relation to God. I suggest that this shows a ‘spiralling’ (to use the image Turner derives from Pseudo-Dionysius to describe Julian of Norwich’s theology). Spiralling encapsulates the Christologically inflected redemptive ‘death’: Ruusbroec does not transcend ecclesial contexts and specificities by way of abandonment (the equivalent of understanding ‘*destruit*’ in the Thomistic maxim as an annihilation), but in a certain sense *returns* to them by way of a deepening or heightening. The precise nature of this transcending position requires more theological discussion. But we may say at least that this returning is expressive of nature and reason as transfigured into the ‘new heaven and new earth’: passing through the death of all absolutizing finalities whenever they are encountered in polar opposites. In this sense, we see the methodological contribution of the mystical tradition to the contemporary debate.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Acknowledgments: The author is grateful to Fr Philip Cleevely Cong. Orat. for his comments on an earlier draft of this paper, and to both reviewers for their comments and suggestions.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

¹ See John Henry Newman’s 1833 poem ‘Flowers without Fruit’ in (Newman 1903, p. 169).

² See for example *Sermo XI/2*, n. 118: ‘Deus autem ab omni numero proprie eximitur. Est enim unus sine unitate, trius sine trinitate, sicut bonus sine qualitate etc.’ in Meister Eckhart, *Die lateinischen Werke*, IV 112, 5–6. Henceforth the Latin works are referred to as LW. See also *Expositio libri Sapientiae [In Sap.]* n. 116, LW II 453, 3: ‘Hinc est quod deum dicimus esse unum contra numerum [. . .]’.

³ Translations of this article are my own, unless otherwise stated.

⁴ ‘The soul neither desires nor dislikes poverty, nor tribulation, nor holy mass, nor sermon, nor fasting, nor prayer [. . .]’, Marguerite Porete, *Miroir* 9, Kurt Ruh, ‘Le Miroir des simples âmes’ der Margeruite Porete (1977), 1984, 223, as cited and translated in (Vinzent 2011, p. 71).

⁵ Meister Eckhart, *Expositio libri Exodii [In Exod.]* n. 13, LW II 19, 2–3: ‘Gratia enim inspirat et allevat naturam’ (Eckhart 1964–1994).

⁶ Meister Eckhart, *In Sap.* n. 273, LW II 603, 10–604, 1: ‘Sic ergo gratia supernaturalis in solo cadit intellectu, ut intellectus est super naturam.’

- 7 Meister Eckhart, *In Sap.* n. 273, LW II 603, 305: ‘Hinc est quod gratia non principiat proprie opus, sed esse respicit et ad intra, sicut ipsa essentia, ut essentia, solum esse respicit.’
- 8 Meister Eckhart, *In Sap.* n. 272, LW II 602, 1–3: ‘Primum est quod omne, quod operatur deus in creatura, gratia est et gratis datur.’
- 9 Meister Eckhart, *Liber parabolarum Genesis [In Gen. II]*, n. 145, LW I/1 614, 4–5: ‘Quia tamen gratia ista respicit et datur homini particulari, supposito naturae, personae, non autem naturae, propter hoc natura manet nuda et derelicta, qualis est natura destituta neque restituta statui suae institutionis’.
- 10 Meister Eckhart, *Expositio sancti evangelii secundum Iohannem [In Ioh.]*, n. 289, LW III 241, 5–6: ‘Secundo notandum quod deus verbum assumpsit naturam, non personam hominis’.
- 11 Meister Eckhart, *In Sap.* n. 144, LW II 482, 4–5: ‘Omnia enim distincta sunt duo vel plura, indistincta vero omnia sunt unum’.
- 12 Meister Eckhart, *In Sap.* n. 145, LW II 483, 4–5: ‘Quod clarissimum est, si loco dei accipiamus esse. Deus enim esse. Constat autem quod esse est indistinctum ab omni quod est, et quod nihil est nec esse potest distinctum et separatum ab esse’.
- 13 Meister Eckhart, *In Sap.* n. 147, LW II 485, 5–7: ‘Sciendum igitur ad praesens quod li unum primo est voce quidem negativum, sed re ipsa affirmativum. Item est negatio negationis, quae est purissima affirmatio et plenitudo termini affirmati.’
- 14 Meister Eckhart, *In Exod.* n. 74, LW II 78, 4–8: ‘Iterum etiam nihil negare potest, secundum illud: ‘operatur omnia in omnibus’, 1 Cor. 12. ‘In omnibus’ inquit, quia nulli negat; ‘omnia’ ait, quia nihil negat. Sicut ergo ipsi esse nihil negatum est, sic et ipsum esse nulli se negat—‘se ipsum negare non potest’—et nihil negat. Gratis accipit, gratis dat.’

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