1

The Boundaries of the Supernatural

The concept of "nature" is an ancient and central feature of Western thinking. Whether it has exact correlates in other civilizations is a demanding and interesting question, which someone else can answer. In Western culture it has been employed in a variety of ways. Sometimes it has been used to structure large intellectual systems (natural law theory or natural religion, for example), but at all times it permeates discourse. For instance, in such a formative text for the Western intellectual tradition as St Augustine's *City of God* the word nature and its cognates occur 600 times. Obviously not each of those occurrences bears exactly the same weight and has exactly the same significance, and it is always important to be aware of the many uses to which the word can be put. C. S. Lewis dedicates fifty pages in his *Studies in Words* to the "vast semantic growths" around the word "nature" and its equivalents "*phusis*" and "*kind*".[1]

Most of the texts I discuss here are in Latin, the standard language of the educated in the Middle Ages, so it is helpful for me that *The Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources*

[1] *Studies in Words* (Cambridge, 1960), chap. 2, pp. 24–74 (quotation at p. 25).

now in progress, reached the letter "N" in 2002.[2] It gives ten primary meanings of *natura*, "nature", and eleven of *naturalis*, "natural", but, since each main meaning is subdivided into often quite distinct senses, there are in reality twenty-five meanings of nature and twenty-nine of natural. The word nature can be a synonym for something as grand as the whole physical creation but is also employed in the euphemistic phrase "answer a call of nature", whereas the meanings of "natural" range from "not artificially made" to "of illegitimate birth", from "normal" to "native". And this is only from British sources!

However, I am not going to pursue a doggedly definitional path. The value, for me, of the dichotomy "natural/supernatural" is that it leads directly to investigation of medieval debates, to conflicting views of what exists and different ideas of what an explanation consists of. This book is concerned with debates and differences in the medieval period – there will be nothing about "the medieval mind".

Some intellectual historians, like some literary scholars or anthropologists, seem to have a strong urge to search for the inner coherence of the beliefs of those they study and might talk easily of "belief *systems*". This urge is doubtless well intentioned but seems to prejudge the issue. What of our own beliefs? I would be surprised if a thorough and sincere review of my own beliefs concluded that they were consistent, coherent, and steady. Like most people, I think I hold many discordant beliefs. Their discord only becomes apparent, however, in certain circumstances – this, in the terms made familiar by the historian of science Thomas Kuhn, is when latent anomalies in our paradigms become visible and uncomfortable.[3] I look at several instances of such intellectual discomfort in the Middle Ages.

[2] Fascicule 7, prepared by D. R. Howlett (published for the British Academy by Oxford University Press).

[3] *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, 1962).

In fact the concept of "nature" leads naturally to debate, for it is usually defined *against* something. The natural can be contrasted with the artificial, that is, the man-made, with grace, that is, the God-given, with the unnatural, with human society, and so on. C. S. Lewis, in the work just mentioned, actually structures much of his discussion by asking, "What is the implied opposite to nature?"[4] Any concept that is so dyadic will generate discussion about its boundaries and its contraries.

I start my enquiry with a concrete example of the discourse of the natural and supernatural from the central Middle Ages.

Like all scriptural religions, medieval Catholic Christianity gave birth to a rich culture of textual analysis, exegesis, and commentary. The Word of God was scanned, pondered, and elucidated, and then these elucidations were themselves scanned, pondered, and elucidated. The Gloss, that is, detailed commentary, was a characteristic fruit of such a process. A telling instance is provided by the layers that built up on the biblical passage Genesis 2: 21–2 (here I give the King James version):

> And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; and the rib, which the Lord God had taken from the man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man.

Now this remarkable passage could be the starting point for any number of reflections, not least, of course, on its deep message about the secondary nature of woman. In the schools of twelfth-century Europe, however, it provoked a different chain of thought. Around the middle of that century, in Paris, the intellectual centre of Catholic Christianity, Peter Lombard composed his *Four Books of Sentences*, a work of systematic theology which was to be a standard university text for hundreds of years

[4] *Studies in Words* (as in n. 1), p. 43.

to come. This passage from Genesis stimulated in his mind not thoughts about female subordination, but an austerely philosophical question:

> When God created the world, was its character such that woman *had to be* born from man's ribs or merely such that she *could be* born in that way?[5]

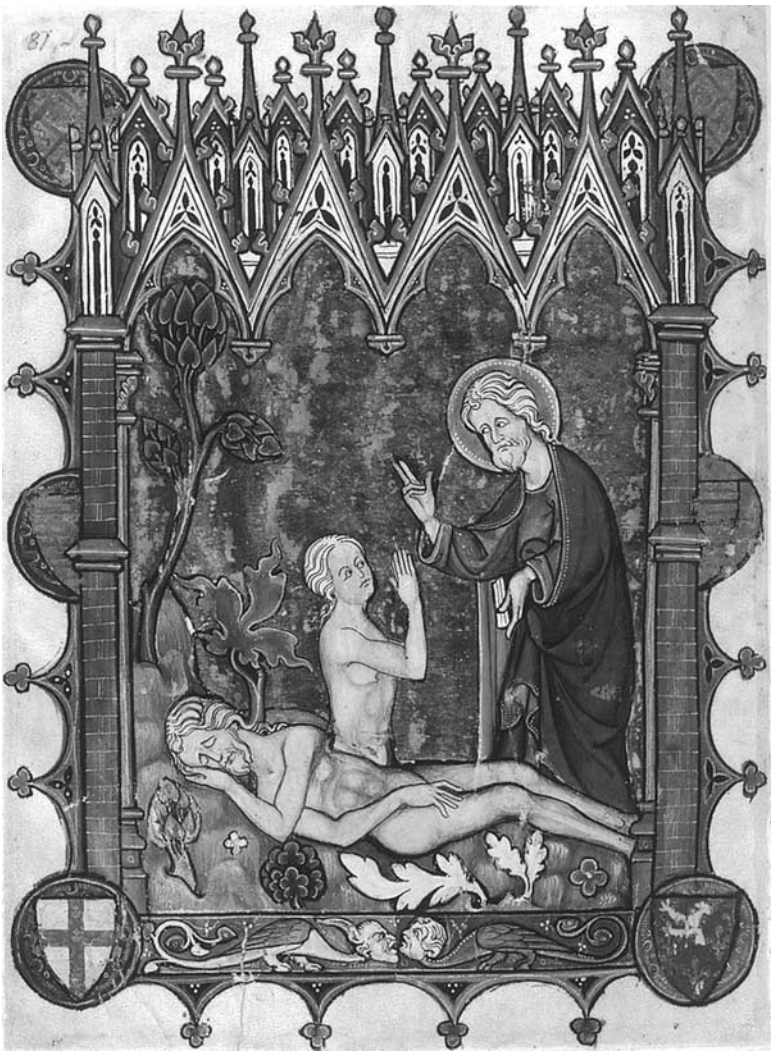
The ancient Middle Eastern legend of Adam and Eve, dealing with the creation of man and the creation of woman, had thus stirred the mind of this twelfth-century academic to address the profound question of necessity and contingency. It is a classic Scholastic *quaestio*: "quaeritur an . . . an" – "it is asked whether A or B". "What kind of universe do we live in?" was his question. "Is everything laid down immutably, or are there undetermined potentialities?"

It is a big question, but Peter Lombard did his best to give an answer. And, for a Scholastically trained theologian of the time, the first task was obviously to distinguish different senses:

> The causes of all things are in God; but the causes of some things are in God and in creatures, the causes of some things in God alone.[6]

[5] Sed quaeritur an ratio quam Deus primis operibus concreavit id haberet, ut secundum ipsam ex viri latere feminam fieri necesse foret, an hoc tantum ut fieri posset: Peter Lombard, *Sententiae in IV libris distinctae* 2. 18. 5, ed. Collegium S. Bonaventurae (3rd ed., 2 vols., *Spicilegium Bonaventurianum* 4–5, Grottaferrata, 1971–81) 1, p. 418; Peter Lombard's whole discussion here is deeply dependent on that of Augustine, *De genesi ad litteram* 9. 17–18, ed. J. Zycha (Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 28, 1894), pp. 290–3 (*Patrologia latina* 34: 405–8).

[6] Omnium igitur rerum causae in Deo sunt; sed quarundam causae et in Deo sunt et in creaturis, quarundam vero causae in Deo tantum sunt: *Sententiae* (as in previous note) 2. 18. 6, p. 419.



1. CREATION OF EVE. Psalter-Hours of Yolande de Soissons, Amiens, France, between 1280 and 1299. The creation of Eve from Adam's rib as described in Genesis 2 had stimulated philosophical and theological discussion since patristic times. In the twelfth century, Peter Lombard took up the theme in his *Four Books of Sentences*, which was to become the standard theology text-book of the Latin West. Peter asked, "When God created the world, was its character such that woman *had to be* born from man's ribs or merely such that she *could be* born in that way?" This, in turn, led him to a theory of nature and miracle. (The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. MS M.729, fol. 293v.)

To clarify the first category, those things whose causes "are in God and in creatures", Peter Lombard employed St Augustine's concept of "seminal natures" or "seminal reasons":

> God has implanted "seminal natures" in things, according to which things come forth from other things, from this seed such a grain, from this tree such a fruit, etc. . . . they were implanted into things by God at the initial creation. And just as creatures are mutable, so too these causes can be altered; the cause which is in the immutable God, however, cannot be changed.[7]

The causes that are in God and creatures are therefore both primordial, in that they were implanted by God at the creation, and mutable, like all creatures. In contrast, the causes that are in God alone are immutable. Peter Lombard has thus moved from the Genesis verses to a theory that causes are of two different kinds (and in the Western tradition ontology, the science of being, often assumes that a key distinction is different kinds of cause). According to Peter Lombard, following Augustine, God had implanted the seminal causes in things – a horse will give birth to a horse, an apple tree bears apples – but had reserved certain things to himself alone. He believes this distinction can be expressed in the language of the natural:

> Whatever happens according to the seminal cause is said to happen naturally (*naturaliter*), for in this way the course of nature becomes known to men. Other things are beyond nature (*praeter naturam*), since their causes are in God alone.[8]

[7] . . . inseruit Deus seminales rationes rebus, secundum quas alia ex aliis proveniunt, ut de hoc semine tale granum, de hac arbore talis fructus, et huiusmodi. . . . in prima rerum conditione rebus a Deo insitae sunt. Et sicut creaturae mutabiles sunt, ita et hae causae mutari possunt; quae autem in immutabili Deo causa est, non mutari potest: ibid. 2. 18. 5, p. 419.

[8] Et illa quidem quae secundum causam seminalem fiunt, dicuntur naturaliter fieri, quia ita cursus naturae hominibus innotuit; alia vero praeter naturam, quorum causae tantum sunt in Deo: ibid. 2. 18. 6, p. 419.

Here is a central dualism: the natural and what is beyond nature. As we shall see, at the time Peter Lombard was writing, in the mid-twelfth century, the word "supernatural" was scarcely known, let alone widespread, but, if it had been, he would surely have employed it to label these "things beyond nature".

Hence we see, in this influential Parisian theologian, a clear division of those things in the universe: some are natural, follow their seminal reason, are part of the course of nature known to man; others are beyond nature, and their cause is in God alone.

In subsequent centuries, the style of thinking that Peter Lombard embodied, with its careful distinctions of sense, analytical ingenuity, and the constant impulse towards abstraction, all, of course, on a bedrock of Scripture, became the dominant mode in the universities that arose in France, Italy, and elsewhere in the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries. That style is termed by historians "Scholasticism," and its most familiar representative is Thomas Aquinas. By his time, a standard rung in the theologian's ladder was the composition of a commentary on Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, and Aquinas dutifully fulfilled this requirement. His *Commentary on the Sentences*, written around 1255, naturally included discussion of the passage I have just been talking about, that is, Lombard's exposition of Genesis 2: 21–2, the creation of Eve from Adam's rib.

Aquinas was stimulated by his predecessor's analysis into outlining his own definition and classification of miracles. A miracle, he writes, is something "wonderful in itself" which he defines as follows:

> Something is "wonderful in itself" when its cause is absolutely hidden, when there is a power in the thing, which, if it followed its true nature, would produce a different result. Of this kind are the things caused directly by God's power (the most unknown cause)

> in a way different from that exhibited by the order of natural causes. . . .[9]

So, like Peter Lombard, Aquinas is looking for definitions in terms of type of cause: some things are caused by "the most unknown cause", God's direct power, others are part of "the order of natural causes". The concept of the miraculous thus depends on the concept of the natural, and this interdependence is even more explicit in Aquinas's categorization of miracles. According to him, they fall into three categories: "above nature", "beyond nature", and "against nature". It would be a digression to explore this further here, but it is worth stressing that, for Aquinas, what determines his classification of miracles is their relationship to nature, a relationship which he couches in a semi-metaphorical language of location – above, beyond, against.

Christian definitions of miracle have tended to revolve around three central conceptions: miracles can be characterized by their causation, by the sense of wonder they arouse, or by their function as signs. Some thinkers take a strong stance on one of these

[9] Admirabile autem in se est id cuius causa simpliciter occulta est, ita etiam quod in re est aliqua virtus secundum rei veritatem per quam aliter debeat contingere. Hujusmodi autem sunt quae immediate a virtute divina causantur, quae est causa occultissima, alio modo quam se habeat ordo causarum naturalium: *Super Sententiis*, lib. 2 d. 18 q. 1 a. 3 co., Thomas Aquinas, *Opera omnia*, ed. Roberto Busa (7 vols., Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, 1980) 1, pp. 176–7. Aquinas has a succinct discussion of miracles in *Summa contra Gentiles* 3. 98–107, ibid. 2, pp. 92–5. Discussions of Aquinas' theory of miracle are often from a denominational viewpoint: Aloïs Van Hove, *La Doctrine du miracle chez saint Thomas et son accord avec les principes de la recherche scientifique* (Wetteren, 1927); Gilles Berceville, "L'Étonnante alliance: évangile et miracles selon saint Thomas d'Aquin", *Revue Thomiste* 103 (2003), pp. 5–74 (esp. pp. 19–29); François Pouliot, *La Doctrine du miracle chez Thomas d'Aquin: Deus in omnibus intime operatur* (Paris, 2005).

ideas, whereas others attempt to integrate them.[10] In general terms, the medieval Latin West inherited from Augustine a stress on the wonderfulness of miracles. They are God's work and amazing. But then again, all God's works are amazing. As Augustine put it, "the world itself is a miracle greater and more excellent than all the things that fill it".[11] It is a style of thinking that might inspire reverential awe but was unlikely to generate clear conceptual categorization of the type in which Scholastic theologians dealt. For thinkers in that tradition, such as Peter Lombard and Thomas Aquinas, the heart of a definition of miracle lay in the way that it was distinct from "the order of natural causes". Hence Scholastic theorists of miracle, in stressing the primary importance of different orders of causation, created a sharper line between miracle and nature than that inherited from the patristic tradition.[12]

In the thirteenth century, as the theologians elaborated and pondered their definitions of miracle, there arose a new and very practical need that stimulated thinking about the distinction between the supernatural and the natural. This was the canonization process. Although the cult of the saints had been part of Christianity from early in its history, the precise, legally defined

[10] There are some relevant general considerations in John A. Hardon, "The Concept of Miracle from St. Augustine to Modern Apologetics", *Theological Studies* 15 (1954), pp. 229–57; Richard Swinburne, *The Concept of Miracle* (London, 1970); Benedicta Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind: Theory, Record and Event 1000–1215* (Aldershot and Philadelphia, 1982), chapter 1; André Vauchez, *Saints, prophètes et visionnaires: le pouvoir surnaturel au Moyen Âge* (Paris, 1999), pp. 39–55.

[11] cum sit omnibus quibus plenus est procul dubio maius et excellentius etiam ipse mundus miraculum: *De civitate dei* 21. 7, ed. B. Dombart and A. Kalb (2 vols., *Corpus Christianorum, series latina* 47–8, 1955), vol. 48, p. 768.

[12] There are some brief but pertinent observations on this contrast in Lorraine Daston, "Marvelous Facts and Miraculous Evidence in Early Modern Europe", *Critical Inquiry* 18 (1991), pp. 93–124, at pp. 95–9.

procedure that characterized papal canonization was a novelty devised around the year 1200. One of the new features of this procedure was the interrogatory. This was a set of questions, drawn up at the beginning of a canonization process, designed to channel the flood of testimony that such occasions provoked on the virtues and miracles of the candidate for sanctity.[13]

As one would expect, the existence of a fixed questionnaire guided what the witnesses in a canonization process might say. Here are some of the questions listed in the interrogatory for the canonization process of Thomas de Cantilupe, bishop of Hereford, a process which took place in 1307: witnesses were to be asked "if his miracles were above or contrary to nature"; "what words were used by those who requested that these miracles be performed"; and "if in the operation of these miracles herbs or stones were applied or any other natural or medicinal things".[14] Clearly the papal commissioners in charge of the inquest were aiming at setting certain dichotomies before those they cross-examined and those dichotomies would push witnesses to express themselves in the language of the natural and its opposites.

Some indicative examples of how this worked in practice may be cited from another canonization process, that of cardinal Peter

[13] The first canonization process in which such an interrogatory was used was that of St Dominic in 1233; a standard formulary for inquiring about miracles had already been devised in the preceding year: André Vauchez, *Sainthood in the Late Middle Ages* (Eng. tr., Cambridge, 1997), pp. 48–50.

[14] si dicta miracula fuerunt supra vel contra naturam . . . quibus verbis utebantur illi qui petebant dicta miracula fieri . . . si in operatione dictorum miraculorum apposite herbe vel lapides vel alique alie res naturales vel medicinales: *Inquisitio de fide, vita et moribus, fama et miraculis . . . Thome de Cantilupo*, MS Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. Lat. 4015, fol. 4v. For further discussion, see R. Bartlett, *The Hanged Man: A Story of Miracle, Memory and Colonization in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, 2004), esp. pp. 13–14, 23–4, and 110–11.