Michael Baius (1513–89) and the Debate on ‘Pure Nature’: Grace and Moral Agency in Sixteenth-Century Scholasticism

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Recent, if belated, interest among historians of philosophy in early modern ethics has served to uncover and clarify several features of the moral thought of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The cumulative effect of such study has been to ameliorate our current understanding of the genealogy of modern ideas about autonomy,1 and our knowledge of the varied ancient and medieval sources which early modern thinkers used or rejected in their deliberations about the scope and point of morals.2 Yet despite a developing appreciation of these previously ignored aspects of the history of philosophy, many elements of early modern moral thought are still unfamiliar to students of the subject or else are wholly ignored by contemporary scholars.

One area to suffer from general neglect is the subject of divine grace and the moral status of human beings after the fall.3 Believed by many historians of philosophy to be of ‘mere theological interest’, these topics rarely feature in treatments of early modern philosophy and ethics.4 To

2 For the best available surveys in any modern language see Kraye (1988) and (1998).
4 The subject of grace, though ignored by historians of philosophy, has received a great deal of attention from historians of theology, especially among Roman Catholic writers of the second part of the twentieth century. Chief among these was Henri de Lubac S.J. (1896–1991), whose influential historical study (1946), reprinted in two volumes (1965a) and (1965b), sought to recast then contemporary theological thinking about grace and nature. For a recent assessment of this work, and especially its historical theses on which so many of Lubac’s positive theological proposals might be said to rest, see Bonino (2001a). For other historical surveys of medieval and early modern ideas about grace and nature see DTC (1899–1953), VI, cols. 1554–1686; Vanneste (1996); and Lettieri (1999).
anyone with even the slightest understanding of the history of the period this omission may appear perverse. For in the earnest yet fractious religious culture of sixteenth and seventeenth-century Europe, different yet competing ideas about divine grace and opinions about the pre- and post-lapsarian condition of humankind served to condition several accounts of moral agency, practical reasoning and virtue. It is not difficult to understand why this should have been the case. According to the central doctrines of orthodox Christian theology—even as that teaching was understood by early modern thinkers on both sides of a newly established confessional divide—all men and women are born into the state of original sin by virtue of being descendants of the first human beings, Adam and Eve. When Adam and Eve rebelled against God through the sin of pride (*superbia*) and were cast out of the earthly paradise, they no longer enjoyed the benefits of their original created state, endowments which included free will, the virtues, as well as all the requisite powers of theoretical and practical reasoning.

From the very earliest of times, Christian thinkers appreciated that the loss of such God-given gifts must clearly affect any conceptual description of human nature. What was, they asked, the extent of human freedom after the fall? Could sinful human beings become virtuous by their own efforts, or were they utterly dependent upon the grace of God? What, indeed, was the nature of such grace? What were the cognitive effects of original sin? And, what was the extent of the powers of practical reasoning in fallen humanity? From St Paul to Augustine of Hippo, and on to the scholastics of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and late Middle Ages, Christian thinkers in the West debated these questions on the basis of an understanding of the essential characteristics of fallen humanity, arrived at different answers and formulated views about the human person and the limits of practical reasoning. This continued in the early modern period, especially in the second half of the sixteenth century, when the immediate stimulus of the events of the Reformation and the call for renewal in the Roman Catholic Church—a request heeded by the Council of Trent (1543–1563),

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5 These theories are fully discussed in Stone (forthcoming).


7 The full repercussions of humanity’s fall from grace are spelt out by Augustine in his many writings on the Creation and Fall. See, in particular, *De Genesi ad litteram*; *De Genesi ad litteram liber imperfectus*; and *De Genesi adversus Manichaeos*. On these works see Pelland (1972).

8 Romans 1–3.


10 See Auer (1942–51); and Vanneste (1996), pp. 49–106.