

The Mercy of Time

Condemnatio in continenti
and the
Preservation of Moral Plasticity

Oscar Gaitan
May 18, 2026

Table of Contents

- The Question of Composition
- The Soul: *Imago Dei* and Structural Orientation
- The Will: The Human Complement
- Soul and Spirit: The Distinction That Makes Mercy Intelligible
- The Crossing Point and the Fixity of Death
- A Proposition, Not a Conclusion
- References

Note: *The following propositions are offered as a philosophical essay, not as doctrinal pronouncement. They engage with and express deep respect for the tradition — particularly the contributions of Henri de Lubac and Karl Rahner on the relationship between nature and grace, and the distinction between soul and spirit — while proposing a framework the author acknowledges as partial, exploratory, and subject to correction.*

I. THE QUESTION OF COMPOSITION

A preliminary word on method. What follows is neither systematic theology nor confessional catechesis. It is philosophical-theological construction: an attempt to give ontological form to what the tradition has circled, named in fragments, and left without fully unified architecture. Where I draw on scripture and the Fathers, I do so as a philosopher drawing on primary evidence, not as a theologian pronouncing on its binding sense. Where I propose distinctions — particularly the distinction between soul and spirit — I present them as working concepts, not inherited doctrine. I also propose the expression *condemnatio in continenti* to denote what I will throughout call *immediate ontological fixation*: the instantaneous closure of moral plasticity that would obtain

absent temporal mediation. The reader is invited to evaluate these concepts on their philosophical merits.

What is the self? The question is ancient, but it has rarely been answered with the precision the stakes demand. To say the self is the soul is too simple. To say it is the body and brain is to dissolve the question into neuroscience. What I propose here is a composed structure: the self is constituted by the soul and the will — two distinct but inseparable principles whose interaction determines, across the arc of a temporal life, what a person finally becomes. By will I do not mean a psychological faculty but the temporal-existential principle by which the person becomes what the soul is oriented toward.

This is not a dualism in the Cartesian sense, which severs mind from body along a clean ontological cut. Nor is it a mere variation on the Thomistic composite of matter and form, though it owes much to that tradition.

The present framework insists on the will as the human and temporal complement to the soul's eternal orientation. Structural inertia — the mechanism by which the will's accumulated choices shape, groove, and ultimately fix the self's trajectory — is the operative concept that connects the two.

The central thesis, which the following sections develop, is this: *temporal existence is the merciful preservation of moral plasticity*. Everything else in this essay — the soul's mediating function, the will's inertial tendency, the angelic comparison, the fixity of death — serves that proposition.

II. THE SOUL: IMAGO DEI AND STRUCTURAL ORIENTATION

The soul is not simply the seat of personal identity. It is the site of the *imago Dei* — the image of God in the human person. This image must be understood carefully, and non-physically. God is spirit (*John 4:24*), not a soul, not a body. The human person is made in God's image not morphologically but spiritually — which means the soul carries within itself a native orientation toward its maker. This orientation is not acquired through culture or intellectual effort. It is constitutive: the soul recognizes its maker as a compass orients to north, not by decision but by constitution.

What theology calls the desire for God — what de Lubac so carefully traced as the natural desire for the supernatural — is not an imposition on nature from without but an interior gravitational pull written into what the soul is. What is often called the religious impulse may be interpreted, within this framework, as the surface expression of this deeper operative orientation: not primarily evidence to be weighed against alternatives, but a symptom to be interpreted.

The soul's unique dignity, distinct from that of the angels, consists precisely in its capacity to carry both grace and sin without being destroyed by either. An angel's rebellion is instantaneous and irrevocable — a single act, a geometric point without duration, without the possibility of return — because the angelic mode is one of immediate, non-temporal cognition and choice. I invoke the angelic mode here not as a doctrinal claim about angelic psychology but as a conceptual contrast illuminating the human condition.

This distinction may help illuminate a specifically Christian intuition about mercy. Christ's words from the cross — *"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing"* — are not merely a moral observation about ignorance, but may be read anthropologically. Human willing does not occur under conditions of total intellectual immediacy. We act through partial knowledge, distorted perception, embodied habit, emotional turbulence, and the accumulated inertia of prior choices. This does not absolve moral responsibility; ignorance is not innocence. But it does reveal something structurally decisive: human willing remains incomplete, and what remains incomplete remains revisable.

The contrast with the angelic mode becomes illuminating precisely here. If rebellion is undertaken under immediate and integral apprehension — without temporal succession, without epistemic incompleteness, without the slow unfolding through which reconsideration becomes possible — then the act bears a finality foreign to the human condition. Human sin, by contrast, belongs to creatures who do not yet know in full, and precisely for that reason remain open to return.

The human soul, by contrast, exists in time. It can fall and return. It can be stained and cleansed. It holds the person's moral history open, in tension, until death closes it.

III. THE WILL: THE HUMAN COMPLEMENT

If the soul is the human person's eternal principle — knowing its maker, capable of grace, carrying the image — the will is its temporal complement. The will is what makes a person human in the full existential sense: capable of genuine choice, capable of genuine failure, capable of love that is not programmed.

What distinguishes the human creature from the angelic mode is not the presence or absence of will as such — tradition grants angels their own form of willing — but the *temporal extension* of human willing. The human will does not act in a single, total, irrevocable moment. It acts iteratively, across duration, accumulating a moral history that remains revisable until death forecloses it. That iterative temporality is not a deficiency. It is the constitutive condition of genuine moral becoming.

The will does not operate in a vacuum. It is shaped by, and in turn shapes, the habitual structures of embodied cognition — the grooved patterns that repeated acts deposit in the person's way of perceiving, desiring, and responding. This is close to the *hexis* of Aristotelian habituation, but the present framework adds what Aristotle did not fully develop: structural inertia. Inertia is the accumulated residue of prior choices presenting itself to the will as the default grammar of decision. This inertia is not determinism but tendency — a momentum of prior choices that leans on the will without annihilating its freedom. The will does not, over time, choose wrongly in dramatic, fully conscious acts. It finds itself already inclined, already mid-motion, already committed before the moment of reflection arrives.

This is the gravity of the temporal: not a dramatic fall but a gradual redirection of the compass. The lighthouse is still visible. The soul still orients toward it. But the inertia of the hull resists the turn.

Within the Christian symbolic framework, the *Pater Noster* may be read as a formal acknowledgment of this drift. When Jesus commands his disciples to pray — and commands is the right word; he is bold here — he signals that the will, left to its own accumulated gravity, tends toward capture. "Lead us not into temptation" is the soul reasserting its orientation against inertia's pull. Prayer, on this account, is not sentiment. It is resistance to ontological drift.

IV. SOUL AND SPIRIT: THE DISTINCTION THAT MAKES MERCY INTELLIGIBLE

Here I must introduce a distinction I propose as a working philosophical concept — one the tradition has approached in fragments (Paul's tripartite anthropology in *1 Thessalonians 5:23*, the patristic differentiation of *pneuma* from *psyche*) but has not unified into a single architectural account. I do not present this as doctrine. I present it as a concept that, if it holds, renders several otherwise disparate theological intuitions coherent under one structure.

The mediating function attributed to the soul becomes conceptually clearer if soul and spirit are treated as distinguishable poles within the person. If they were identical, that function would be self-referential: the soul would be simultaneously the mediating barrier *and* the dimension the barrier protects — which is incoherent within this framework. The soul is the temporal, grace-and-sin-carrying principle *operative through* the arc of a life; the spirit is the dimension of the person that the soul's operation is *for* — ordered toward final consummation. They are not two substances but two functional poles of one personal being, distinguishable by their relation to time.

The soul is the person's temporal mediating principle — the grace-permeable, sin-bearing pole through which moral life is lived in time. The spirit is the dimension of the person disclosed when temporal mediation ends: what Christ commends in his final words, "*Father, into your hands I commend my spirit*" (*Luke 23:46*). The soul does not become the spirit; it holds, mediates, and at death the spirit stands in relation to what the soul's accumulated state — marked by grace or burdened by sin — has prepared it to receive.

The soul functions, through temporal life, as a double mediating barrier. First, it prevents *condemnatio in continenti* — immediate fixation: the instantaneous, irrevocable crystallization of the creature's moral orientation that would occur if the spirit encountered the absolute absent temporal mediation. This is not a matter of divine punishment. It is a formal consequence: without the plastic medium of time — without the crossing point, the possibility of return, the reorientation grace makes available — the creature's orientation would lock permanently into its present state, as the angelic orientation fixes in its singular act. The soul's temporal, grace-permeable, morally burden-bearing pole, nature is what keeps fixation deferred and time open.

But the soul also prevents the beatific vision during temporal life — and here the second dimension of its mediating function becomes clear. The issue is not that God destroys or overwhelms the sinful. Classical theology is unambiguous that God sustains all being, including the damaged and the resistant. The issue is the creature's own unreadiness: the spirit, in its sin-weighted state, is not yet disposed for unmediated consummation. The soul is therefore a necessary opacity — not a defect, not a punishment, but the condition that makes temporal succession, and with it genuine moral freedom, possible at all.

To say this plainly: *the soul is the mercy that makes time possible*. It holds the spirit in suspension between ontological closure and premature glorification long enough for the will to do what only the will can do — choose, repeatedly, across a life, in the presence of grace offered at each crossing point.

V. THE CROSSING POINT AND THE FIXITY OF DEATH

In an earlier essay I proposed that the self does not become toward death, as in Heidegger's horizon, but *at each intersection* — each crossing point where grace is available and the will responds or refuses. Becoming is not deferred. Every moral moment is fully real and fully formative. The self is always already being constituted, not waiting to be.

But if becoming happens at each crossing point during life, death is the moment when the crossings stop. What had been a process crystallizes. Soul and will become fixed in their final configuration — not arbitrarily, not by divine fiat, but as the natural consequence of the accumulated inertia the will built across a lifetime. The soul, which had been permeable and dynamic, closes into a final state. Fixation, deferred through the whole of temporal life by the soul's mediating function, becomes permanent.

This is why the comparison to the angel becomes architecturally apt at the limit — though not during life. At death the human person achieves something analogous to the angel's single irrevocable act, except it was not one act but a lifetime of acts now sealed into one resultant state. The Last Things — heaven, purgatory, hell — are not sentences pronounced from outside. They are the ontological names for the final states of that sealed configuration.

Heaven is the state in which the soul's accumulated grace has rendered it transparent: nothing left to obstruct the spirit's consummation in God. Hell is the state of *terminal fixation*: the will has so thoroughly identified with its own grooves that the soul has hardened permanently into opacity — the spirit sealed from God not by external punishment but by the irreversible weight of what it chose, across time, to become. Purgatory, understood through this framework, would be the condition in which fixation has occurred but residual inertia remains to be resolved — an application of the same mechanism, not a separate theological claim.

VI. A PROPOSITION, NOT A CONCLUSION

I am aware that the distinctions proposed here — particularly the soul's double mediating function, and the concept of immediate fixation as the condition that temporal existence defers — go beyond what the tradition has explicitly formulated. Rahner's careful phenomenology of the soul's transcendence, and de Lubac's insistence on the natural desire for the supernatural as the soul's deepest orientation, provide the ground on which I stand. But the architecture I am proposing is my own, and I offer it precisely as a proposition: an attempt to give philosophical form to what the tradition has circled without quite mapping.

What I am most confident of is this: the human condition is one of knowing the lighthouse and still drifting — not from ignorance but from the weight of the temporal. The soul knows its maker. The will keeps steering into the storm. Grace is the counter-force available at each crossing. And the soul, in its mercy-given opacity, holds everything in suspension long enough for the crossing to be possible at all.

That suspension is not weakness. It is the structure of freedom. And freedom, however costly, is what distinguishes the human creature from every other: the only being who can say yes or no to the God whose image it already carries.

REFERENCES

Primary Sources

The Holy Bible. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha*. 5th ed. Edited by Michael D. Coogan. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.

Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologiae*. Translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1981. (*Especially Prima Pars*, qq. 50–64; qq. 75–90.)

Augustine of Hippo. *The Trinity (De Trinitate)*. Translated by Edmund Hill, O.P. Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1991.

Theological Sources

de Lubac, Henri. *The Mystery of the Supernatural*. Translated by Rosemary Sheed. New York: Herder and Herder, 1967.

de Lubac, Henri. *Surnaturel: Études historiques*. Paris: Aubier, 1946.

Rahner, Karl. *Spirit in the World (Geist in Welt)*. Translated by William Dych. New York: Herder and Herder, 1968.

Rahner, Karl. *Foundations of Christian Faith*. Translated by William Dych. New York: Crossroad, 1978.

Rahner, Karl. “The Theology of Death.” In *On the Theology of Death*. Translated by Charles H. Henkey. New York: Herder and Herder, 1961.

Ratzinger, Joseph (Benedict XVI). *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*. Translated by Michael Waldstein. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988.

Gregory of Nyssa. *On the Soul and the Resurrection*. Translated by Catharine P. Roth. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1993.

Philosophical Sources

Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by Terence Irwin. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1999.

Aristotle. *De Anima (On the Soul)*. Translated by Christopher Shields. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2016.

Boethius. *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Translated by Victor Watts. London: Penguin Classics, 1999.

Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time (Sein und Zeit)*. Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. New York: Harper & Row, 1962.