

nation of others, nor just a matter of saving souls!

- 1 Theology is 'principaliter de Dec' but also it concerns everything 'secundum quod referentur ad Deum' (I, q. 1 a. 3 ad 1). The isotopy of the 'unitas scientiae' is not destroyed by this. See also I. q. 1 a.7: 'secundum ordinem ad Deum'. The identity of the pertinency, of the objectum formale quo.

## Rahner Retrospective

### III Transcendence or Finitude

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Karl Rahner's *Foundations of Christian Faith*, published in 1978, which is no doubt a masterpiece, nevertheless relies fundamentally on a very controversial picture of man as the being who transcends his finitude just by recognizing it – and this transcendence is something pretty substantial even if difficult to put a finger on. It enables Rahner to make the idea of God intelligible and even quite obvious and natural. The speed with which Rahner draws the reader into his "system", and the immense rewards in theological assurance and in spiritual stimulus if one goes with the tide, dissipate the difficulties about the initial move. The text is in any case very hard to understand in detail, or else the Anglo-Saxon reader, putting it all down to the foreign idiom, gives it the benefit of the doubt. This paper is a preliminary exploration of the basic epistemological problems in Rahner's philosophy of man, with the tentative proposal that a quite different starting-point needs to be accepted.

1 When he gets to them Rahner is already positioned to say that he need not go into the so-called proofs for the existence of God in any detail (*Foundations*, p 68). That is not the cop-out it might seem. He has been insisting all along that we have to see ourselves as the product of "transcendence towards the holy mystery". We exist, as he says, no doubt in the pregnant existentialist sense of *existieren* (roughly: the way in which we are always *outside* the world in which we are also always *inside*, of which more anon), "through our grounding in the holy mystery which keeps withdrawing from us insofar as it keeps constituting us by its surpas-

sing us and pointing us into the concrete particular realities of a categorial kind which we encounter in the space of our experience and which are in turn the mediation of, and the jumping-off point for, our knowledge of God" (p 73). In other words: we are what we are (human beings) because we are constantly being drawn out beyond wherever we actually are by that which enables us to see what is what in our world but itself eludes our sight all the time that it does so. Some philosophers might be inclined to say that, if you are going to talk in this sort of way at all, then this must surely be *language*. Rahner, however, thinks that it is *God*.

For Rahner, then, proofs for God's existence show us only what we know already. That is why we need not go into them. Natural theology, philosophical argument about the God question, can get off the ground only if it can be made clear to people that they have always been touched by this question (p 68). In fact if people can be made aware of the question that is already the answer. Rahner writes as follows: "A reflexive proof for God's existence is not intended to communicate a knowledge in which a previously completely unknown and therefore also indifferent object presents itself to people from without, an object whose significance and importance for them become evident only subsequently through the further determinations which are ascribed to the object". A proof of God's existence will show you nothing unless you already care about how it goes. It is not meant to introduce you to something "out there" of which you previously had no inkling. On the contrary: "A theoretical proof for the existence of God . . . is intended only to mediate a reflexive awareness of the fact that man always and inevitably has to do with God in his spiritual and intellectual existence, whether he reflects upon it or not, and whether he freely accepts it or not" (p 69). Proofs for God's existence show you only what you already know, or anyway what you should already know, about your own kind of existence. When you realize what you already know about your own sort of existence you already have the proof of God's existence, which is why you need not go through it in any detail.

What we should know runs as follows: "All knowledge . . . takes place against the background of the accepted holy mystery (or being as such) as the horizon of the asymptotic term and of the questioning ground of any act of knowledge and of its object" (ibid). It is relatively unimportant, so Rahner says here, whether you speak of "holy mystery", "being as such", "absolute Good", "supreme Thou", "ground of moral being", "last horizon of hope", or whatever. All these "names" for God come to one and the same point: "To the extent that a man attains the objective reality of the everyday in active involvement (*Zugriff*) and in conscious com-

prehension (*Begriff*) he is actualizing, as the condition of the possibility of such involvement and comprehension, the unthematized and unobjectifiable pre-apprehension (*Vorgriff*) of the inconceivable and incomprehensible single fullness of reality which . . . is at once the condition of possibility both for knowledge and for the individual thing objectively known” (ibid). In other words: whenever we have to do with the world to which we belong, whether physically interacting with it or conceptualizing it, we are always relying upon that prior hold on reality as a whole, or that anticipatory reaching out towards it, which Rahner calls our *Vorgriff*.

This “pre-apprehension of being as such”, which makes us what we are, Rahner speaks of as “this inescapable fundamental constitution”, *diese unentrinnbare Grundverfassung* (p 69). There are certain privileged experiences in which we can become aware of its reality. Rahner specifies six such experiences:

“the incomprehensibly luminous light of one’s mind;  
the absolute questionableness which one can direct on oneself, annihilating oneself so to speak, and in which one surpasses oneself radically;  
the annihilating *Angst* which is something quite different from any particular fear and indeed makes such fear possible in the first place;  
ineffable joy;  
moral obligation of an absolute kind in which one really renounces oneself;  
and the experience of death in which one knows oneself in one’s absolute powerlessness”.

No doubt quite deliberately, this list recalls the opening pages of Heidegger’s *Introduction to Metaphysics* (the text of lectures given in 1935). By Anglo-Saxon standards it is all rather portentous and overblown. Mind is of course a puzzle and even a marvel, but there can be few sane Englishmen who would ever think of reflecting on the luminosity of their minds in the hope of detecting the horizon of the asymptotic term of their mental activity. Oddly enough, the English are slightly more likely to dwell philosophically on the dark mysteries of the unconscious as a starting-point for metaphysical reflection. Again, that we are fragile and contingent beings is a common enough reflection but the main question to which this paper is addressed is precisely what one may legitimately make of the thought. *Angst* (that untranslatable feeling), ineffable joy (whatever that may be), and dying, to be sure, take one to the very limits of intelligible and articulate human experience – but what more is there to say than that? Of Rahner’s six instances of how we transcend ourselves towards our ground surely none but the palpable weight of absolute moral obligation is very likely to give rise to any deep metaphysical or theological questions in Anglo-

Saxon circles. But the implicitly theological question resides for Rahner in the “transcendental experiences” of which the paradigm is always *knowing*.

2 Very early in his exposition (*Foundations*, p 14) Rahner raises “some basic epistemological problems”. He is going to expand the argument greatly to take in other sides of human life but it is significantly always *knowledge* that appears to him first as our most distinctive feature. We are the ones who know; indeed, we are the ones who know that we know. Consciousness, self-consciousness, is the great thing that distinguishes us. It may be suggested that language or action, communication or praxis, would be more illuminating features of human life upon which to focus attention but of course Rahner is in very good company. From Plato onwards the philosophical tradition has always insisted on the privileged status of what Rahner here calls “the self-presence of the subject in knowledge” (p 17).

Rahner’s first move is to attack certain pictures of what knowing is like which “often” (as he says) distort our understanding of what it is really like. We think of the mind as a *tabula rasa* upon which an object impinges as it were from outside and inscribes itself. We think of the mind as a mirror in which the object is reflected. It requires such pictures, so Rahner says here, to make possible “the famous problem” about how an “An-sich” can enter into the order of knowledge at all. The problem of whether we know things as they really are, or indeed of whether we know anything beyond our own ideas; could not arise at all but for the power of these misleading pictures. Rahner writes as follows: “In epistemology, especially in the defence of so-called Realism, of the picture theory of knowledge, or of the correspondence theory of truth, it is these pictures which are always predominant and presupposed as obvious. In all these pictures the known is something that comes from outside; it is something *other* which announces itself from outside according to its own law and images itself upon the passively receptive faculty of knowledge” (p 17). And with that Rahner passes rapidly on – “Knowing really has a more complex structure than that!” – and begins at once to unfold his own transcendental epistemology.

For sure, nobody would expect Rahner to delay at this point to offer a long technical refutation of the philosophical doctrines which he so summarily rejects. He always says that he is not a philosopher anyway and that he is simply making do with the minimum of philosophy that he needs for his work as a systematic theologian. But can he really be allowed to get away with this? This is the point at which the reader enters Rahner’s “system”. The decisive move in the conjuring trick is the casual gesture that

seems only to be clearing the air. If you give in at this point you are swept into the rhythm of Rahner's system and the whole of the Christian faith expands before you in what is surely the most elegant, economical and internally consistent exposition that any Catholic theologian in our day has achieved. But in that single throw-away transitional paragraph Rahner has set aside "so-called Realism", the "picture theory of knowledge", and the "correspondence theory of truth", and furthermore he has done so because these merely philosophical theories allegedly owe their power to the misleading idea that the human mind is either like a blank sheet of paper or else a looking-glass. These are two ways in which we "often" picture the mind — Rahner says so himself. It might seem, then, that such pervasive and tenacious images for the mind would require extensive examination if we were to be released from their fatally misleading influence. It has recently been argued (by Richard Rorty) that "the picture which holds traditional philosophy captive is that of the mind as a great mirror", but he assumes that freeing ourselves from this picture is desperately laborious work.<sup>1</sup> For that matter, rejecting one metaphor will likely only be to succumb to another one. John Locke, in 1690, was saying that the mind is "white paper, void of all characters without any idea" — but he was stressing the *tabula rasa* theory against the Cartesian doctrine of "innate ideas". And if the mind is not like a *mirror* are we to liken it rather to a *lamp*? And if knowledge doesn't *picture* reality then what is the better picture? If truth is not correspondence between what we say and what is there then what is it? And where do you go if you refuse to defend "so-called Realism"?

Rahner's theory of knowledge goes as follows, in his own words (*Foundations*, pp 17-21); "The knowing possession of knowledge as such, as distinguished from its objectified object, and the knowing possession of self are characteristics of all knowledge. In knowledge not only is something known, but the subject's knowing is always co-known. . . . It is something which goes on, so to speak, behind the back of the knower, who is looking away from himself and at the object. . . . But it is not the case that this co-known, unthematic self-presence of the subject and its self-knowledge is merely an accompanying phenomenon in every act of knowledge which grasps an object . . . Rather the structure of the subject is itself an a priori, that is it forms an antecedent law governing what and how something can become manifest to the knowing subject . . . This in no way implies that the realities which present themselves cannot manifest themselves as they actually are. A key-hole forms an a priori law governing what key fits in, but it thereby discloses something about the key itself. . . . If we ask what the

a priori structures of this self-possession are, then we must say, without prejudice to the mediation of this self-possession by the experience of sense objects in time and space, this subject is fundamentally and by its very nature pure openness for absolutely everything . . . For a subject which knows itself to be finite . . . has already transcended its finiteness. It has differentiated itself as finite from a . . . horizon of possible objects that is of infinite breadth . . . Insofar as (the human subject) experiences himself as conditioned and limited by sense experience, and all too much so, he has nevertheless already transcended this sense experience. He has posited himself as the subject of a pre-apprehension (*Vorgriff*) which has no intrinsic limit, because even the suspicion of such intrinsic limitation of the subject posits this pre-apprehension itself as going beyond the suspicion”.

Obviously three pages cannot be reduced to a paragraph and Rahner's first book, *Geist in Welt*, is a lengthy and impressive outline of his position. But the gist of the argument is clear enough. It is always the remarkable phenomenon of “knowing” which attracts Rahner's attention. Whenever I know anything I also know that I do so and I know myself as I do so. In fact Rahner switches from “knowledge” words to “consciousness” words with no apparent difficulty. He thinks primarily of “knowledge of an object presenting itself from without” (p 18), and is claiming that in all such knowledge one has an implicit awareness both of one's knowing and of one's own being. It is difficult to make out what this means. As I apprehend some item of the external world I apprehend in the very act of doing so this selfsame cognitive operation of mine — and apprehend myself into the bargain? If I know then I must *ipso facto* know that I do so? What is going on “behind the back of the knower” when he is looking at some object that has caught his eye? Rahner is clear that this open structure of our cognition is not itself any kind of phenomenon open either to observation or introspection. Rather, it is the *possibility* of all phenomena. When you think about it you are bound to conclude to the existence of this absolute openness. He always uses the same argument: if you say it doesn't exist you are already admitting that it does: “Anyone who says that truth does not exist is offering that as a true statement, *ergo*”. So in this case: anyone who suspects that our openness for knowledge is limited is doing so from a position that is already outside the limit. A finite system cannot double back or face itself without showing itself to be more than finite: “The experience of radical questioning and man's ability to place himself in question are things which a finite system cannot accomplish” (p 30). The system, empirically, is in the detail of specifiable data but when the system is comprehended, *umgriffen*, it is necessarily

so from a “standpoint outside the system” (ibid.). You encounter your limitations and that suffices to put you beyond them. When you discover yourself physically limited and conditioned – “all too much so” – you have nevertheless already reached out beyond (*hinausgegriffen*) it and established yourself as the subject of an always-reaching-forward, *als Subjekt eines Vorgriffs*, which has no inside limit.

Of course we are predictable and confined – “all too much so”, as Rahner says. But is that the only, or theologically the most productive, way of regarding ourselves? What if our relation to our social and physical boundaries is a matter more for gratitude and celebration? Where would we be if we were not predictable and confined, *bedingt und begrenzt*? This is, to be sure, the customary and traditional apologetic and hermeneutic approach to the theological question. We are the ones who, by our endless questioning, are, implicitly and anonymously, creatures of a process of transcendence towards the ever-receding horizon of the Absolute. But what if Bernard Harrison’s remark makes better sense to you? “The idea that we can transcend our entire concrete, phenomenal situation in the world is a very ancient and enticing one in philosophy”.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Rahner is often said to owe a lot to Heidegger with whom he studied in the mid-thirties. One thing is sure: the doctrine of man as transcending his situation in the world towards the absolute which is implicitly God is not a doctrine that comes from Heidegger. In fact to go on saying the kind of thing outlined above, after having studied with Heidegger, shows very considerable powers of resistance to the master’s main thoughts.

The word *Vorgriff* comes from Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit* (1927). Of course Rahner put it to somewhat different use in *Geist in Welt* (completed in 1935), as he was entitled to do. In both cases, however, the point of the neologism is to do with cognitive and incipiently conceptual grasp. It is, as we have seen, at the forefront of Rahner’s epistemology: man is constituted by this *Vorgriff*. For Heidegger, on the other hand, it comes very late on the scene. It appears in paragraph 32 of *Sein und Zeit* but by then a wholly different picture of the human way of being has been developed from the Rahnerian philosophy of man.

Where you start makes all the difference. Rahner always starts with the idea of cognition when he presents his view of man and everything else is therefore fitted into that pattern of exposition. Heidegger, on the other hand, begins (paragraph 29) with *Befindlichkeit*: feeling, the ‘mood’ we are always in, our affective relationship with the social and physical world – “mood is a basic kind of being that humans have in which they are disclosed to

themselves *before* all knowing and willing and *beyond* their range of discovery” (p 136). Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* needs to be rehabilitated philosophically and read as “the first systematic hermeneutic of the everydayness of social being” (p 138). Our judgements and expectations, not to mention our much rarer acts of cognition and volition, are embedded in our emotional response to the way things are and happen to us. Only now does Heidegger proceed to introduce the notion of understanding (paragraph 32), and it rapidly emerges that he wants first to stress the practical understanding that takes place in multiple ways in our complex relationship with the social and physical world. Things are always understood within the relational whole which is our everyday world. Our everyday practical interpretation is grounded in a *Vorhabe* – in our already “having” our world. When some item in our world comes to the fore then it is always in a *Vorsicht* – in the “sights”, so to speak, which already divide our world up one way rather than another. And finally, what is held in our *Vorhabe* and envisaged in our *Vorsicht* can also become conceptually known – and that then depends on our *Vorgriff*: the way that we are, provisionally or definitively, bound to pre-conceive it. Whatever the detail of the jargon the main point is clear: cognition, knowing in the traditional sense of conscious and conceptual knowledge, which is so privileged in Rahner’s transcendental anthropology, has no such prominence in Heidegger’s holistic pragmatism.

Secondly, that with which we are always engaged in such a complex way is, for Heidegger, the absolute which is the world itself. His deepest plea is that we should learn to live within our world and to stop yearning for some “standpoint outside the system”. The word “transcendence” which Rahner relies on so much also comes from Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit* – but there it is never to God but simply to our social and physical world that one transcends. Heidegger, following Nietzsche (though perhaps not very consciously at that time), thought that man would learn to be more human only if he turned more deliberately and more reverently towards the world to which he belongs. Whereas Rahner would say that man becomes human only as he seeks God, Heidegger would reply that man becomes human only as he learns to live within the confines of the world – and then, by surplus or a kind of grace, God’s presence might be granted.<sup>3</sup>

4 Since Nietzsche’s premonitory notes, in fact, there has been an increasing desire to reclaim humanity from the power of that ancient and enticing idea that we can transcend our situation in the world. With Wittgenstein, for example, from the early ‘thirties onwards, there has been a systematic assault on the doctrine of the dominance of cognition in our self-understanding, with a rehabili-



tation of feeling as well as of practical knowledge. As one of his most profound and original interpreters says, philosophical problems end for Wittgenstein (in the *Investigations* at any rate) "when we have gone through a process of bringing ourselves back into our natural forms of life, putting our souls back into our bodies". In philosophy since Wittgenstein, he also says, "understanding from inside is methodologically fundamental".<sup>4</sup> In other words, far from trying to understand ourselves from some hypothetical Archimedian standpoint outside the system to which we belong (taking the God's eye view), we need to learn to live within the necessities of our social and physical world. "There are those for whom the denial of the human *is* the human", Cavell says: "Call this the Christian view".<sup>5</sup> And he questions whether the age-old (and Rahnerian) conversion of human finitude into a *lack* is not precisely what philosophers since Nietzsche, including Heidegger and Wittgenstein, have sought to stop, once and for all, so that we can at last discover the sufficiency of finitude.

"Le plus profond, c'est la peau", said Paul Valéry: the skin is what is the deepest thing.<sup>6</sup> It would of course be enormously difficult to rethink Christian theology after the spread of such views. Everybody wants Rahner's transcendental anthropology to be true. Certainly very little theological work since Wittgenstein has taken his ideas seriously. For that matter it is not at all clear that Christianity could now survive without its traditional Platonism. But couldn't it be tried? Doesn't it *have* to be tried? The work of curing ourselves of the inveterate idea that we can get outside our world in some more substantial sense than that we talk about our world would no doubt prove laborious, particularly for religiously minded people. The *programme*, at any rate, has been set out in a dozen important pages in Edward Schillebeeckx's *Christ*.<sup>7</sup> He too has to start somewhere but he speaks of a *system* of anthropological constants, all of which must be equally honoured. The first one, however, is the relationship of a human being to his own *physicality*, and hence to the wider sphere of nature and our ecological environment. Then he lists *intersubjectivity* (your face is for others). Thirdly, *social institutions*. Fourthly, being in *time* and in *place* we have historical and geographical boundaries: "the charm of taking up a standpoint outside historical action and thought is a danger to humanity". Fifthly, we are inextricably *theoretical and practical* beings. Sixthly, we are *utopian*: we have faith in the future. These six constants (constantly in flux) plot the sense of the human with which theologians might at last begin to work. But Schillebeeckx is categorical, and he cannot have forgotten what Karl Rahner says: we must learn to live within the limits of our historicity — "that is, unless we want to become 'megalomaniacs' who

have got it into their heads that they can get beyond their human finitude”.

- 1 Cf *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* by Richard Rorty, Oxford 1980.
- 2 In his review of Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Colour* in the October 1978 issue of *Philosophy*, p 566.
- 3 In a footnote to *Vom Wesen des Grundes* (1929) Heidegger writes: "The ontological interpretation of being human as being-in-the-world tells neither for nor against the possible existence of God. One must first gain an *adequate concept* of being human by illuminating transcendence. Then, by considering being human, one can *ask* how the relationship of being human to God is ontologically constituted".
- 4 Cf *Must We Mean What We Say?* by Stanley Cavell, New York 1969 – the references are to p 84 and p 239.
- 5 Cf *The Claim of Reason*, Oxford 1979, p 493.
- 6 Cavell again, *Claim*, p 430: "The crucified human body is our best picture of the unacknowledged human soul".
- 7 Cf *Christ: The Christian Experience in the Modern World* by Edward Schillebeeckx, London 1980, pp 731 to 743.

## Theology and Rhetoric

### Ricca Edmondson and Markus Wörner

In this paper we should like to examine some rhetorical aspects of theological language. Before doing so, it is necessary to argue for the view that there is a special mode of discourse appropriate to theology, as opposed to the view that theological language is composed of statements which differ from others only in terms of their subject-matter. There is a distinguished history of opposition to the view we propose; in a very ancient debate it has repeatedly been maintained that theology should be concerned only with discovering and promulgating true statements about God and our knowledge of God, and that any concern with developing sorts and styles of language can only distract and distort. This position is connected with another, which has received support from natural-scientific quarters since the mid-19th century especially: it presents a contrast between academic and non-academic language, founded on the contention that academic discourse occurs in the course of researches where the *truth* of a statement matters, but virtually nothing else about it does. According to this position, as long as a statement is true it should not matter to the researcher whether anyone finds it important or believable, or whether it impinges on anyone's interests or needs. (Hence the expressions, presumably used chiefly in non-academic circles, 'an academic point', or 'of merely academic interest'.) The concept of rhetoric