



Recovering Rahner's Concept of Being in *Spirit in the World*

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It is an understatement that the prolixity of many theologians – Barth, Von Balthasar, Rahner – makes it nearly impossible to attain mastery over any one thinker, let alone several. “It therefore seems useful, almost necessary,” Karen Kilby observes, “to have some quick way of dismissing a theologian, some good reason not to bother with the difficult business of understanding him or her.”¹ Noting that Karl Rahner is often dismissed as a foundationalist, Kilby offers a nonfoundationalist interpretation of his oeuvre to forestall facile dismissals. Her intent is salutary:

Inssofar as such a reading in a certain way decouples Rahner's theology from his philosophy, it should make his theology more approachable to those who are frightened by his philosophy (*Spirit in the World* is, after all, a ferociously difficult book), and more usable to those who have grappled with but remained unpersuaded by the philosophy.²

Kilby believes that “the real case for the nonfoundationalist reading is that it makes possible the most plausible and most coherent reading of Rahner's theology taken as a whole.”³ Her interpretation of Rahner, consequently, seeks to engage wholesale dismissals of his thought due to the “philosophical basis of his thought, or to its supposedly anthropocentric, ‘from below,’ starting point.”⁴

Meant typically as obloquy, foundationalism is “defined . . . from a disciplinary perspective as the view that systems of knowledge, in content and method, require first principles.”⁵ Theological foundationalism looks “for something outside the circle of belief which can provide a support for belief.”⁶ To read Rahner thusly is to see him as crafting an independent philosophy and later working out the system's theological implications. But if a theology rests upon a philosophical

¹ Karen Kilby, *Karl Rahner: Theology and Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1.

² *Ibid.*, 2.

³ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁵ John Thiel, *Nonfoundationalism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 2.

⁶ Kilby, 6.

foundation, what becomes of a theology if its philosophical basis falters?

Kilby takes seriously this threat, devoting the beginning of her monograph to exposing oft-neglected weaknesses in his Rahner's early works. She first contends that the argument in *Spirit in the World*⁷ for the *Vorgriff auf esse* (pre-apprehension of being) is philosophically unconvincing. She follows with a chapter demonstrating that transcendental-style arguments are never successful. A third chapter questions the compatibility of the concept of revelation contained in *Hearer of the Word*⁸ with the development of the supernatural existential.⁹ Such fissures at the very basis of his philosophy, Kilby argues, threaten the stability of his theological corpus. Thus she asks whether "Rahner's theology might or should be read as logically independent of his philosophy."^{10,11} To be sure, she acknowledges that:

The theology cannot be read as *entirely* independent of the philosophy, since it clearly draws on ideas first developed in the philosophical writings; what I am suggesting is a logical independence, in the sense that the theology does not rely for the justification of its claims on the philosophy.¹²

In challenging the supposed logical dependence of his theology on his philosophy, she hopes to move "the theological world at large away from reading Rahner's thought as determined, even straitjacketed, by his philosophy, and thus to bring about a kind of *Gestalt* shift in the perception of his theology."¹³ While not placing Rahner's work beyond criticism, a nonfoundationalist reading ensures that "criticisms are less likely to be in a sweeping methodological key, and more likely to engage with particular theological claims, understood precisely *as* theological."¹⁴

Foundationalist and nonfoundationalist interpretations understand *SW* as advancing a "relatively pure philosophy"¹⁵ on which his "theology is logically dependent."¹⁶ The former see this as a successful enterprise while the latter remain unconvinced.

⁷ Henceforth, *SW*.

⁸ Henceforth, *HoW*.

⁹ Due to the spatial constraint, we will focus only on the first two arguments.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹² *Ibid.*, 133.

¹³ Kilby, 11.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 128.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

Semi-foundationalists¹⁷ try to straddle the two, recognizing that while his theology is not seen as deduced from his philosophy, it does depend on it at key points. Each enterprise, however errs in misunderstanding the relationship between philosophy and theology. Thus, I am forced to question Kilby's claim that her nonfoundationalist approach is "the *best* way he can be read."¹⁸ To my mind, such labels serve more to obscure, rather than illuminate, Rahner's thought. They fail, ultimately, because they misconstrue the role philosophy and theology play in Rahner's thinking.

Too often, interpreters of Rahner fail to recognize that philosophy and theology function as distinct yet inseparable co-principles. This interdependence is necessitated due to Rahner's explicit endeavor to engage the metaphysical question – the question about being in its totality – insofar it calls attention to the inescapable relationship between being and Being, or *ens* and *esse*. Neglect of this relationship leads to interpretations of *SW* as positing a strictly neutral philosophy. These interpretations, however, neglect the fundamental relationship between being and Being, effectively severing the metaphysical antipode of Rahner's project. In short, to neglect Rahner's metaphysical milieu risks languid and distorted interpretations of his thought.

What is most stimulating, and confounding, about Kilby's argument is that she assiduously traces out the implications of reading Rahner without proper attention to metaphysics. Her decision to interpret *SW* as a "free standing piece of philosophy" is decisive.¹⁹ She justifies this, stating:

... *qua* interpretation of Aquinas *Spirit in the World* has been evaluated a number of times, and with largely negative conclusions. Second, even in Roman Catholic circles, the authority of Aquinas is no longer what it once was: even if Rahner *could* trace his position to Aquinas this would not in itself suffice to convince many readers to accept it.²⁰

But even if Rahner's interpretation of Aquinas is questionable, does this warrant reading him wholly apart from this tradition? What is the result of reading him apart from his metaphysical heritage?

My engagement with Kilby intends to illuminate the inherent dynamism of Rahner's metaphysics, a retrieval greatly indebted to Norris Clarke's retrieval of "Thomas's own highly dynamic notion of existential being (*esse*) as act and as intrinsically ordered to

¹⁷ Ibid., 75. "The semi-foundationalist, then, does not suppose Rahner to deduce or derive the whole of his theology from his philosophy: it is rather that at certain key points Rahner's theology requires the support of philosophically established claims."

¹⁸ Ibid., 10.

¹⁹ Ibid., 17.

²⁰ Kilby, 17.

self-communication.”²¹ This *resourcement* of Rahner's concept of being demonstrates how the philosophical problems Kilby identifies in *SW* are pseudo-problems arising from a failure to engage fully with his metaphysics. Within Rahner's metaphysics of knowledge, it is inappropriate to ascribe chronological antecedence to philosophy because Rahner's project demands recourse to both philosophy and theology; they are, in short, co-implicating disciplines necessary to describe adequately the relationship between being and Being. It is here that I see a fecund intersection between the thought of Wittgenstein and Rahner. Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* concludes where *Spirit in the World* commences: the human being standing before the silence of the world. But where Wittgenstein's silence is the result of the caducity of human language, Rahner's describes the anticipatory silence of the being summoned to stand before Being, the one who stands “in the presence of being in its totality insofar as he finds himself in the world” listening for “the word of God within the narrow confines of this world and within the fitting brevity of an earthly hour.”²²

Being Questioned

Rahner begins *SW* with the declarative: Man questions.²³ The act of questioning is “something final and irreducible,” the “only necessity, the only thing beyond question.”²⁴ It is true that one can turn away from this or that question, that one can pursue one line of questioning while foreclosing others. The necessity of questioning is “grounded in the fact that being is accessible to man at all only as something questionable [*Fragbarkeit*], that he himself *is* insofar as *he asks about being*, that he himself exists as a question about being.”²⁵ Aquinas's insight that “every agent acts according as it exists in actuality”²⁶ expresses that a person is as she acts: she is a question about being.

What occurs in the act of questioning? In the quotidian round, one raises myriad questions about this object or that. But beneath every particular question is “the compelling need to ask about being in its totality.” Metaphysics begins, not in a seminar, but the moment we reflect upon the very event of questioning, because metaphysics “does not concern this or that, but everything at once, being in its totality as something questionable.”²⁷ The necessary questioning of the being

²¹ W. Norris Clarke, SJ. *Person and Being* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2004), 3.

²² Karl Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, trans. William Dych, S.J. (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966), 62.

²³ *Ibid.*, 57.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 57.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

²⁶ *De Potentia* q. 2, art. 1.

²⁷ *Spirit in the World*, 59.

of beings is, consequently, doubly revelatory for what it means to be human. First, it means that the questioner “is already with being in its totality (*beim Sein im ganzen*); otherwise how could he ask about it?” It also reveals that the questioner is also “*tabula rasa, material prima in ordine intellectus*” (a clean slate, prime matter in the order of intellect), for precisely what he does is *ask* what he means when he asks about being in its totality.”²⁸ Emerich Coreth captures this by noting, “there is within us a mixture of knowing and not-knowing. In order to be able to ask the question we must know something, not everything, about the question.”²⁹

Rahner describes the paradox of taking questioning as the starting point for metaphysics:

It cannot be said in one word where this question begins. It takes its departure from nothing, insofar as it already comprehends the whole in order to start out on its way; in order to be the one who asks about being in its totality, man is already at the goal when he begins, since he must already know of being in its totality if he asks about it; and at the same time he confesses by his question that he himself is not the goal, but a finite man.³⁰

Metaphysics begins from a unity-in-duality, starting from the human questioner who is always already *with* being in its totality and yet who must still inquire *into* being. Questioning betrays an existential “nothing” that is not “an empty void which man fills arbitrarily according to his own whims” that is a summons “to ask about being in its totality.”³¹ The whence (*Woher*) of human questioning is not a meaningless abyss. Rather, the origin of our questioning is the knower’s very stance before being in its totality: the world.³² Thus, “there is only *one* knowing, in which man is himself: a knowing being-with-the-world [*ein wissendes Bei-der-Welt-Sein*].”³³

Rahner’s claim that being is questionable implies that being is knowable, for one could not raise a question about something that could not be known. Terrance Klein writes, “that which would be entirely an *alienum* to human discourse would simply not be, which is simply to say that it could never enter that discourse.”³⁴ Or, as Aquinas notes laconically: “whatever can be can be known.”³⁵ The

²⁸ Ibid., 60.

²⁹ Emerich Coreth, *Metaphysics* trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), 53.

³⁰ Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 61.

³¹ Ibid., 62.

³² For an intriguing treatment of “the world,” see Terrance W. Klein’s *Wittgenstein and the Metaphysics of Grace* (New York, Oxford, 2007).

³³ Ibid., 62–63.

³⁴ Terrance W. Klein, “Act and Potency In Wittgenstein?” *Heythrop Journal* XLVII (2006): 602.

³⁵ Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 68.

being can be questioned and known impels Rahner to reflect on the primordial unity of being and knowing. He writes:

If man, in order to come to a knowledge of an existent here and now, is already and always with being in its totality, then in the necessity by which he dwells with the individual existent in his knowledge, he affirms the questionability (*Fragbarkeit*) of being in its totality. Hence he has already come upon a fundamental determination of being as such: being is being-able-to-be-known (*Sein ist Erkenntseinkönnen*).³⁶

Knowing is not taking a look.³⁷ Properly understood, knowing is “being-present-to-itself of being.”³⁸ “Knowing” is not a passive action; instead, it is the subjectivity of being, it is being made present to itself. “Being itself,” Rahner writes, “is the original, unifying unity of being and knowing in their unification in being-known.” The original unity of being and knowing accounts for the transcendental intelligibility of being: intelligibility belongs to the basic makeup of every being.³⁹ Because being is intelligible it is knowable: *omnes ens est verum*, every being is true.

If being is intelligible, then why must being be asked about if it is being-present-to-itself?⁴⁰ “The one who must ask is being because in asking about being he is already with being,” Rahner writes, “and yet he is not it because he is not yet with being in its totality in such a way that this being-with-being is a questionless possession of being in its totality.” *Being*, consequently, is not a univocal concept: *being* admits of degrees. Rahner’s questioner stands within the realm of being but is not itself the entirety of being; he inquires into being, but the fact that he must raise the question reveals that, in the questioner, being is not wholly present-to-self. In other words, the human both *has* being but is not exhaustive *of* being. The degrees of being reveal that Rahner conceives of being analogically, as having a common feature present to every being while being able to account for differences in being.

If being is used analogically, and if being and knowing exist in a primordial unity, then likewise is knowing used analogically. The word *knowability* strikes most listeners as describing what is accessible to knowledge. For Rahner, knowability is not an indifferent being-there (*Dastehen*) but refers instead to an original being-able-to-be-present-to-self, as “an intrinsic determination of the essence of

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 68–9.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 69.

³⁹ *Karl Rahner, Hearer of the Word*, trans. Joseph Donceel. (New York: Continuum, 1994), 30.

⁴⁰ Rahner, *Spirit*, 71.

being itself.”⁴¹ The relationship between knowing (being-present-to-self) and knowability (being-able-to-be-present-to-self) is the relationship of being to matter; the intensity of being is formally determined by its relationship to matter. Matter limits being. Thus an essence without matter – an angel – is always present to itself. Rahner suggests that “if being is primarily presence-to-self, then the real and original object of a knowing being is that with which it originally is: itself. And from this it is self-evident that the intensity of being of the knower and that of what is originally known stand in a fixed relationship of equality.”⁴² Being is the originary grounding of being and knowing and is, consequently, wholly present-to-self. But given the analogical understanding of being, even material beings are able to be present-to-self although matter restricts knowability. Placed on a continuum, one might predicate knowledge super-eminently of Being which, without the restriction of matter, is fully being-present-to-itself. At the opposite end of the spectrum would be prime matter which is understood as sheer unintelligibility. The synthesis of being and prime matter – every *ens* – is knowable and able to know in relation to its degree of materiality.

The act of questioning reveals that the questioner both knows and does not know what is questioned; the being of the inquirer “is both being and non-being.”⁴³ The analogical use of being and knowing points to varying intensities of presence-to-self, ranging from prime matter to immaterial essences. In his discussion of sensibility, the human knower is portrayed as a mid-point:

...poised between a real abandonment to the other of matter and an intrinsic independence of being over against matter, so that the sensible act is in undivided unity material (*actus materiae*) and, as material, the act of the assertion of being (of form) over against matter. ⁴⁴

Simply put, “the being of the sentient knower is present-to-itself, but this being is precisely the undivided mid-point poised between a total abandonment to the other and an intrinsic independence over against this other.” Thus the dialectic is inscribed into the very nature of the human person, aptly expressed by Patrick Burke’s description of the human as “a *schwebende Mitte*.”⁴⁵

Burke notes that we should not be surprised by the similarity between the dialectical structure of the human as *Schwebe* and the structure of knowing: knowing is the subjectivity of being, it is

⁴¹ Ibid., 73.

⁴² Ibid., 75.

⁴³ Rahner, *Hearer.*, 36.

⁴⁴ Rahner, *Spirit*, 81.

⁴⁵ Patrick Burke, *Reinterpreting Rahner* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 44.

being-present-to-itself.⁴⁶ Klein teases out the implications of the relationship between being and knowing:

Following Aquinas, Rahner insists that human knowledge is neither inert reception nor noetic subjugation on the part of the knower vis-à-vis the known. It rather involves a certain communion with what lies outside the self, since the knower is ordered to the world and, conversely, all that lies within the world is ordered toward knowing.⁴⁷

Both grasp Rahner's insight into the circumincessive character of being and knowing. The knower is not an indifferent, passive spectator who simply takes a look at the world. The event of knowing is not simply a noetic transfer; quite to the contrary it is an ontological event of engagement with the world through the senses. To be in the world is not to be a passive recipient. To be in the world is to be in relationship with the world.

The knower is not, *pace* Kant, a passive recipient of an influx of sensations; the knower launches forth from the whence of knowing, the world, and driven to inquire into the very being of being. That Rahner understands this dynamism as an ontologically significant relationship, rather than a merely ontic modification, is clear:

Knowing is understood as the subjectivity of being itself, as the being-present-to-self of being. Being itself is already the original, unifying unity of being and knowing, is onto-logical; and every actual unity of being and knowing in the actualization of knowledge is only raising to a higher power that transcendental synthesis which being is "in itself."⁴⁸

The act of knowing is not merely an accumulation of facts. It is a dynamic process engaging the world and, in every event of knowing, being is made present-to-self. With each new encounter and experience, being is made more and more present-to-self. Human being is human knowing: it is an expansive process, an incessant expansion. Human knowing is not simply an act of heuresis because humans *are* heuresis: we are what we do, we are ever-expanding questions, beings engaged in knowing in the world.⁴⁹

What we can see is that, for Rahner, the world is not only the whence of knowing, it is also its whither: in raising the question of being, we set out from our experience of the world in order to make sense of the world. The world is not neutral to the act of knowing: as being, it is knowable and able-to-be-present-to-self. In the knower, being becomes present-to-self such that knowledge is the

⁴⁶ Ibid., 45.

⁴⁷ Terrance Klein, *Wittgenstein and the Metaphysics of Grace* (New York: Oxford, 2007), 110.

⁴⁸ Rahner, *Spirit*, 70.

⁴⁹ Klein, *Metaphysics of Grace*, 107.

event of synthetic unity between the knower and the known. Every *ens* "utters itself to some extent in its outward activity, thus showing what it is."⁵⁰ The world proclaims itself as knowable to the human knower; non-spiritual material being, unable to be present-to-self, speaks itself in order to the knower in order to become luminous in the act of knowing.

It seems hard to neglect relationality present in Rahner's consideration of the being driven to question being. Humans stand always in relation to the world as both the source and directedness of their questioning.⁵¹ The world is not a neutral stage where knowing happens because it has itself a pivotal role: the world, so to speak, is an actor in the human drama of knowing and being known. Knowing is an event, and intentional engagement with the world and what is known is not passively present to be known, but it is itself knowable self-disclosing to the knower. The language Rahner uses to describe the relationship between the knower and matter seems to indicate his understanding of this relationship: material being as actively self-manifesting and self-uttering to the knower.

This relational characteristic of being is not *sui generis* to Rahner. Norris Clarke's retrieval of Aquinas highlights the notion of real being, i.e. actually existing being, as intrinsically active and self-communicating.⁵² Being, as understood by Aquinas, is not an inert ground but, rather, actively communicative and, consequently, inherently relational.

Clarke's retrieval is attentive to a central, albeit neglected, theme in Aquinas's thought: Being is self-communicating. "It is the nature of every actuality to communicate itself insofar as it is possible," Clarke quotes Aquinas, "Hence every agent acts according as it exists in actuality."⁵³ Clarke interprets this to mean:

Not only is activity, active self-communication, the natural consequence of possessing an act of existence (*esse*); St. Thomas goes further to maintain that self-expression through action is actually the whole point, the natural perfection or flowering of being itself, the goal of its very presence in the universe.⁵⁴

Every *ens* strains, "to share its own goodness with others, to pour over into production of another actuality in some way like itself." Finite being is communicative for two reasons:

⁵⁰ Rahner, *Hearer*, 38.

⁵¹ Here we see most clearly Rahner's Heideggerian patrimony. "Being-in-the-world, as concerned," Heidegger writes, "is *fascinated* by the world with which it is concerned." Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: HarperPerennial, 2008), 88. The world, for Heidegger, is not epiphenomenal. It is, rather, a fundamental *existentiale* or feature of *Dasein's* existence.

⁵² Clarke, *Person and Being*, 6.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

(1) because it is poor, i.e., lacking the fullness of existence, and so strive to enrich itself as much as its nature allows from the richness of those around it; but (2) even more profoundly, because it is rich, endowed with its own richness of existence, however slight this may be, which it tends naturally to communicate and share with others.⁵⁵

Existence itself (*esse*) becomes “for Thomas the ultimate root of all perfection, with unity and goodness its transcendental properties or attributes, facets of the inexhaustible richness of being itself.” For Clarke, as for Rahner, “to be” is not simply “to be present.” To the contrary, “to be” is to be self-communicative, self-manifesting; “to be” is to be actively present.⁵⁶

Clarke believes that being's dynamic “overflowing into self-manifesting, self-communicating action” is present in Aquinas, if one knows where to look. Less obvious he believes, is the correlative category of *relationality*. Clarke holds that the active self-manifestation of being, far from being a neutral self-presentation, actually establishes relationships. He writes:

... relationality and substantiality go together as two distinct but inseparable modes of reality. Substance is the primary mode, in that all else, including relations, depend on it as their ground. But since “every substance exists for the sake of its operations,” as St. Thomas has just told us, being as substance, as existing *in itself*, naturally flows over into being as relational, as turned *towards others* by its self-communicating action. *To be* fully is to be *substance-in-relation*.⁵⁷

Every being, consequently, has a dyadic nature: an introverted ‘in itself’ dimension (substance) and an extraverted toward-others dimension (relationality).⁵⁸

If we take the intrinsically dynamic structure of being as substance-in-relation, its dyadic nature accounts for its being (substance) in the world (relationality). The tension between the poles of the dyad must be maintained. To emphasize exclusively its substantiality risks reducing every *ens* to an introverted, non-disclosive automaton. Likewise would an exclusive emphasis on relationality be disastrous: how can there be relationship without beings to be in relation? Because *to be is to be in relation*, beings matter. That is, “real beings are active, they make a difference in the real world by communicating themselves.”⁵⁹ Metaphysics, in this light, is not a disengaged philosophy describing the world “out there.” Quite to the contrary, it is a reflection on the

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 9–10.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵⁹ W. Norris Clarke, *The One and the Many* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 31.

encounter between being who stands before and is addressed by the world and, ultimately, Being itself.

It is not my intent to make Rahner into a crypto-existential Thomist, nor do I wish to portray Clarke as a closet transcendental Thomist. Nevertheless, what Clarke makes thematic in the work of Thomas I detect as operative in Rahner. The rehearsal of the early argument of Rahner's *SW* meant only to show that Rahner's consideration of the knowing subject was never abstracted from the subject's relatedness to the world. That *SW* is meant as an interpretation of q. 84 a. 7 – whether humans can know without a conversion to the phantasm – evidences that Rahner neither did, nor could, countenance a consideration of the human person apart from the material world. Indeed, in his chapter “Sensibility” Rahner writes that sensibility, as the act of matter, “has already moved out into the exterior of the world.”⁶⁰ The wrong picture obtains to conceive Rahner as arguing for the human knower who imperialistically knows a neutral world. The knower is always already in relation to the world as knowable, as communicating itself. It is this relation that his metaphysical reflections seeks to highlight.

It is not always clear whether interpreters of Rahner appreciate fully his awareness that the world is not indifferent to knowing. Knowing is not simply a glance, a mere “taking a look.” In knowing, being becomes present-to-self: the knower is the very subjectivity of being. For Rahner:

...knowledge is not an ‘intentional’ stretching out of the knower to an object, it is not ‘objectivity’ in the sense of the going forth of the knower out of himself to something other, not an externally oriented entering into contact with an object by means of the cognitive faculty; it is primarily the being-present-to-itself of an entity, the inner illuminatedness of an entity for itself on the basis of its determinate grade of being (immateriality), it is a being-reflected-upon-itself.⁶¹

Far from being indifferent, being manifests itself, communicates itself. To be it to be always already in relation to being, being communicates itself in order to be known, to be present-to-self.

When *SW* is read without due attention to his understanding of being, the consequent interpretation portrays him far more as a disciple of Kant than of Aquinas. The dynamism of being highlighted by Clarke pulsates beneath the surface of *SW*. To be in the world is to be addressed by and called into relationship with it. Human knowing is the active response to the call of the world's yearning to be known. If I have been successful in arguing that being is

⁶⁰ Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 95.

⁶¹ Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* vol. 1, trans. Cornelius Ernst, OP (Baltimore: Halicon Press, 1969), 327.

self-disclosing, that being is not neutrally “out there” that is passively known, but is, rather, relational, then I have prepared us to consider Rahner's understanding of the *Vorgriff auf esse* in light of Kilby's criticisms.

Critiques of Rahner: *Vorgriff* and Transcendental Arguments

The first three chapters of Kilby's monograph intend to destabilize foundationalist and semi-foundationalist readings of Rahner. In a chapter entitled “Spirit in the World” she recognizes that while Rahner's theology need not be read as logically dependent upon *SW*, it would be mistaken to assume that there are no connections between this work and his later theology. Her main intent, however, is to argue that “the case – the *philosophical* case – Rahner makes for the *Vorgriff* is thoroughly unpersuasive.”⁶² For Kilby, the case for the *Vorgriff* “depends pivotally on an equivocation”⁶³ which would, were Rahner's theology wholly dependent upon his philosophy, make for a very shaky theological foundation.

The *Vorgriff* is introduced in *SW* in the chapter entitled “Abstraction.” Offering an exposition of *ST* 1 84.7, Rahner argues that in the conversion to the phantasm that the human knowledge is ineluctably bound to sense intuition. Furthermore, knowing is not passive receptivity. It is the ontological event in which the *knower itself is the being of the other*.⁶⁴ What follows is crucial:

Antecedent to any apprehension of a definite other, the knower of itself must have already and always entered into otherness... the being of the knower in question is not being for itself, but being for and to another.⁶⁵

Knowledge occurs *after* the union of knower and the known. The knower is not hermetically sealed from being but is, rather, always already engaged with being. We are, so to speak, in the presence of being before we know being. But this raises a problem: how is it that the subject makes a synthetic judgment of “this object” and a predicate if the knower itself is the being of the other? How does the knower distinguish the self from what is known in and through the affirmative synthesis?

The affirmative synthesis, or judgment, makes possible the *reditio* or return-to-the-self that objectifies the object over and against the subject. This is accomplished through abstraction, by which the form

⁶² *Ibid.*, 13.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁶⁴ Rahner, *Spirit*, 79.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 79–80.

is liberated from its material instantiation. Through abstraction, the form of the sensibly other (duck) is differentiated from the particular instance of the form (this duck). The agent intellect knows “the sensibly intuited as limited, as a realized concretion, and only to that extent does it ‘universalize’ the form possessed sensibly, only to that extent does it liberate the form from its material concretion.”⁶⁶ The agent intellect apprehends the form of sensibly intuited matter *as* limited, *as* a concretion, and in knowing an object *as* a concrete instance of a form, the agent intellect universalizes the form, conceiving it as applicable within a broader field of possibilities. In short, in an encounter with “this particular duck” the form “duck” is liberated from “this duck” and universalized. The resultant concept can then be applied to “this duck” and, through this application, a distinction obtains between the knowing subject and the object. Thus the *reditio*, or return to self, is accomplished by subsuming the particular under the universal. The knower that was originally the being of the known is now differentiated as the knowing subject who knows an object.

This *reditio* accomplished through abstraction is itself possible only insofar as the agent intellect apprehends the form as limited in a concretized instance and yet multipliable in a field of possibilities. Rahner proposes the *Vorgriff* – akin to the *excessus* of Aquinas – as the “transcending apprehension of further possibilities, through which the form possessed in a concretion in sensibility is apprehended as limited and so is abstracted.”⁶⁷ The *Vorgriff* does not grasp any *thing*, its whither toward which it strains is the horizon against which every grasped object is known to be limited. Succinctly, the *Vorgriff* is “the movement of the spirit towards the whole of its possible objects, for it is only in this way that the limitation of the individual known can be experienced.”⁶⁸

The *Vorgriff* enables the agent intellect to grasp each particular being as limited against an infinite horizon. In a sense, the *Vorgriff* acts both to affirm and critique each sensibly intuited being, enabling the judgment “This is an X” while muttering “You are *a* being, but not all of being. You do not sate my longing for the infinite. I must move on.” Never filled by any objective affirmation, the *Vorgriff* strains forward toward an infinite horizon. Consequently, every *ens* grasped is apprehended as limited (form limited by matter) and as limiting. It is limited in that every *ens* is a form that is limited by matter. It is limiting in that in being sensibly intuited, it is affirmed to be actual (*Wirklichsein*) but it is not, itself, the entirety of *esse*. The whither of the *Vorgriff* is *esse*, which

⁶⁶ Ibid., 142.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 142.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 145.

... is no longer mere presence (*Vorhandensein*), the indifferent ground, as it were, upon which identical and undifferentiated ground the different essences must stand, if in addition to their real ideal being they also which to be really. *Esse* is not a 'genus,' but appears rather as intrinsically variable, not as statically definable, but oscillating, as it were, between nothing and infinity.⁶⁹

In every judgment, *esse* is apprehended as the unifying ground of all essences. *Esse* is neither passive nor indifferent to being; indeed, *pace* Clarke, *esse* is what makes things *to be* at all. The affirmative synthesis recognizes the self-manifesting of *esse* in its grasp of each particular being, recognizing that each essence is a limitation of *esse*. The *Vorgriff* is a moment within the event of human cognition, permitting each finite being to be grasped as finite while transcending every individual *ens* in its dynamic thrust toward its ultimate whither, *esse*.

Humans are always already in the world, faced with a seemingly infinite array of knowable objects. As a thought experiment, if we lined up every object in existence would this array sate the quest of the *Vorgriff*? No – because in enabling the agent intellect to grasp the entire array of conceivable goods, the *Vorgriff* would still transcend the series. Any conceptual apprehension of *esse* entails a limitation of *esse*: if we can grasp it, it is not without limit! Thus Rahner believes that in every judgment enabled by the pre-apprehension of *esse* concomitantly affirm the existence of Absolute Being or *esse absolutum*.⁷⁰ The *Vorgriff* co-affirms Absolute Being as illimitable and, therefore, inconceivable/non-objectified *esse*. Absolute Being is dynamically communicative, disclosing itself in and through every *ens*. As a moment in Rahner's metaphysical anthropology, the *Vorgriff auf esse* enables both human knowledge of particulars through judgment and, in its infinite stretching toward being, affirms the existence of *esse absolutum* as the non-graspable whither of being.

On Kilby's reading of *SW*, Rahner's argument for the *Vorgriff* falters due to an equivocation of the word "limited" in his argument. She writes:

The *Vorgriff* is initially introduced in connection with a quite specific issue: in saying "this is a such-and-such" – "this is a rabbit" or "this is red" – we are applying a general (universal) concept to a particular thing, and the question is, how is this possible? ... Rahner's first step, we saw, was to argue that 'liberating,' or universalizing the form was simply the equivalent of recognizing it as limited in its occurrence in this particular thing. The two things – to recognize the form as universal, as potentially the form of some other matter, and to recognize

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 181.

the form as limited by this particular matter – are simply two sides of the same coin.⁷¹

Rahner equivocates by employing two different notions of limitation. There is the limitation of “form by matter – it is limited by being in particular matter – and there is the more general limitedness of any particular object, which is limited insofar as it is one thing and not everything.”⁷² Rahner initially tries to employ the *Vorgriff* in regard to the type of judgment that recognizes the limitation of form by matter, but ultimately uses it to argue for the general limitedness of particular objects.

What Kilby understands as an equivocation is a plausible interpretation provided that Rahner's thought is read apart from metaphysics. If Rahner is considered only to be articulating a neutral philosophy, of which the *Vorgriff* is an epistemological tool, then she would be right to note that the two notions of limitation are not identical: the limitation of form by matter is not the same type of limitation as one being's limitation accounting for its not being everything. Rahner's argument for the *Vorgriff* would then indeed be based on two disjunctive propositions that the introduction of the *Vorgriff* fails to reconcile.

And yet if we are attentive to Rahner's metaphysics, this becomes a pseudo-problem. Rahner is not positing a neutral knower who shows up and decides to start to investigate the world. The human is always already confronted by the world; before any judgment is made, she is addressed by and at one with being. The *Vorgriff* describes the relationship of the human knower to being, rather than giving simply a mechanistic account of cognitional processes. The human knower, as being in the world, is addressed by being: the world speaks to us and we are receptive to the world. In our drive from the whence of the world toward the whither of the *Vorgriff*, we encounter beings of all sorts and we are able to make sense of every being we encounter – we are able to know the world. In knowing the knowable we become the ever-expanding subjectivity of being. Through the affirmation of every particular, we recognize the dual limitation of each *ens*: as both a limitation of the form restricted to this particular matter (it could be multiplied) and as a limitation of *esse* (this *ens* is not the totality of being).

Kilby is right that Rahner does not use the word ‘limited’ in a univocal manner. But neither does he use it equivocally: for it is used analogically. Form is limited by matter in a manner analogous to the way that every *ens* is a limitation of *esse*. The *Vorgriff* describes the dynamism enabling the abstraction of the form from matter through

⁷¹ Kilby, 29.

⁷² Kilby, 30.

the recognition of it as potentially the form of other matter. Likewise does it enable each individual *ens* to be affirmed as a limitation of *esse* as a critique of each *ens* for not being the totality of *esse*. Rahner's argument for the *Vorgriff* is not a neutral examination of the human being, because Rahner does not see being itself as neutral. To be is to be self-communicating and to be a knower is to be in relation to the world.

The foregoing discussion lays the groundwork for engaging Kilby's second criticism. In her third chapter, she argues that transcendental arguments are never successful because they make an illegitimate appeal to the human imagination. The gist of the argument is this: transcendental arguments operate by making a claim on what humans must be like in order to do something. They intend to offer a description universally applicable to all human beings. Kilby, drawing an analogy to strains of analytic philosophy, contends that these types of arguments are impossible insofar as they are unable to exhaust *all* other ways of enacting whatever operation is under consideration. Rahner's argument for the *Vorgriff* as the necessary pre-condition enabling every act of human knowledge illegitimately appeals to the imagination, presenting itself as the *only* possible way for human knowing to take place. Such arguments, unable to exhaust all other options, must be deemed unsuccessful.

But in treating *SW*, Kilby focuses exclusively on the knowing subject. And yet, treating Rahner as a Kantian rather than one in standing in line with Aquinas severs the metaphysical antipode of *SW*. To read Rahner as advancing a strictly Kantian argument is to radicalize his turn to the subject, effectively bracketing the subject from the world. But as we have seen, Rahner's knower is subject-in-relation; the knower is always already in a relationship with the world, addressed by and living in response to the world's address. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza writes, "Rahner uses the transcendental method less as a specific philosophical method – such as Kant's transcendental deduction and justification – and much more as a way of questioning and relating religious beliefs to basic human questions and experiences of life."⁷³ If one reads Rahner as articulating a neutral epistemology, then perhaps he is vulnerable to arguments against Kantian transcendental arguments. But if he is read as engaging in a metaphysical project, reflecting on the relationship between being and Being, this criticism is unpersuasive.

If Rahner's project in *SW* deserves the appellation of 'transcendental,' it is due more to the fact that he is working out the implications of a metaphysical inquiry into the being of beings, an inquiry that

⁷³ Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, "Method in Theology" in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner*, ed. Declan Marmion and Mary Hines (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 77.

co-affirms the existence of Absolute Being the moment the question of being is itself raised! His transcendental argument involves being in relation to Being, the dialectic between the self-expressive Being and the being who inquires into being. This is not to say that Rahner is uninterested in inquiring into *how* the knower knows, but only that his inquiry is not restricted to intra-mental states. His investigation takes place as an inquiry into what it means to be in relation to Being. The necessary pre-conditions of knowing are not to be found exclusively in the subject: the world itself is an *a priori* condition for human knowing for, were there to be no world, there would be no being to inquire into it: "The universality of *esse* in itself is of a trans-categorical kind. For it is the one ground of all categorical determinations."⁷⁴ To understand Rahner's transcendental considerations, one must include both the way the knower knows and the *esse* intended by *Vorgriff*, being's relation to and striving toward Being.

Kilby's decision to read *SW* as offering an independent philosophy fails to appreciate the relationship between the being who questions and the Being who is the whither of. Neglect of this relationship between being and Being distorts Rahner, casting *SW* as a neutral, and untenable, epistemology. In this case, then, critics are right to chide Rahner for the f-word and it should be expunged. But, as I have argued, Kilby's criticisms of Rahner are apt only if he is read apart from metaphysics. For if one is attentive to his indebtedness to Thomistic metaphysics, then it is more the case that her reading, rather than his writing, suffers from certain incoherencies.

Being in Relation to Being

Ludwig Wittgenstein famously opens his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* with a series of apothegms:

- 1 The world is all that is the case.
 - 1.1 The world is the totality of facts, not of things.
 - 1.11 The world is determined by the facts, and by their being all the facts.
 - 1.12 For the totality of facts determines what is the case, and also whatever is not the case.
 - 1.13 The facts in logical space are the world.
 - 1.2 The world divides into facts.
 - 1.21 Each item can be the case or not the case while everything else remains the same.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Rahner, *Spirit*, 178.

⁷⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D.F Pears and B.F. McGuinness (New York: Routledge, 2006), 5.

The picture-theory of language arising from this work understands the world as an imbricating series of words, thoughts, and ideas. Logical Positivism adopted this line of thinking, arguing that if something could not be experienced, it could not be talked about. God or the soul, unable to be experienced, cannot be discussed. Does not Wittgenstein himself agree: What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence (§7)?

And yet the world is not a catalogue of all the things that are can be experienced but, rather, the totality of relationships between objects. For Wittgenstein, even if the human knower came to know “all that is the case,” he would still not have exhausted the desire to know. Why? Because even if the knower apprehended every thing in world, he would not have grasped the world's meaning. The ultimate meaning of the world lies outside it and is not contained as one more thing within it:

The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world, everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen: in it no value exists – and if it did exist, it would have no value... What makes it non-accidental cannot lie within the world, since if it did it would itself be accidental (§6.41).

It is telling, then, that the concluding section of the *Tractatus* contains a line evocative of Aristotle's wonder at creation: “It is not *how* things are in the world that is mystical, but *that* it exists (§6.44).

Wittgenstein realized that the world is fundamentally knowable. His knower can investigate any number of relationships between things, can query all states of affairs. “The limits of my language,” he writes, “means the limits of my world” (§5.6). The world of the knower grows and expands with the introduction of every new object or idea. Every experience adds to and deepens language. Nevertheless, the mystical question arises once one turns her eyes from the quotidian round and reflects on *why* a world exists at all. The project of the Logical Positivists is scuttled when the question of *why* is raised: why beings? Why anything at all? The question *why* casts us into the realm of metaphysics, the investigation of the being of beings.

If Wittgenstein's so-called mysticism found in §6 of the *Tractatus* represents the limits of human language, for Rahner the obverse is true: he begins with the inexpressible, for he begins as a being in relation to Being. Given this starting point, he cannot but engage both philosophy and theology. The wrong picture of Rahner emerges if he is thought to use philosophy simply to talk about [being] in an epoché and then, later, to theologize about [Being] and its attributes because Rahner begins with the being always already addressed by Being. In his metaphysics of knowledge, philosophy and theology are co-implicated for each is necessary to answer the question (1) who is the person addressed (philosophy) and (2) what is the meaning

of this address (theology)? Philosophy and theology are distinct yet interdependent insofar as both involve and reflect upon the being who, in the transcendent act of questioning being, experiences oneself in relation to Being.

Without sensitivity to the distinct yet inseparable relationship of philosophy and theology, one risks either rationalism or fideism. Being in the world demands engagement with the world, a ceaseless questioning through the transcendence of finite beings toward the infinite horizon of the *Vorgriff auf esse*. In exploring this dynamism, we realize ourselves to be those who strain to hear the Word that speaks freely in and through history; we realize ourselves in history as the beings addressed by Being. While often described as a dialectic, perhaps this relationship is better expressed as dialogic. To be human is to stand in dialogue with Being itself, to embrace one's vocation to be in relation with Being so as to be a hearer and, in the assent of faith, both a speaker and doer of the Word.

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