

2 Rahner's transcendental project

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Karl Rahner's accomplishment consisted in putting Catholic philosophy and theology on a transcendental footing. The undertaking spanned some fifty years, from his matriculation in philosophy at Freiburg University in 1934 to his death at Innsbruck in 1984. From beginning to end, the driving force behind the project was the seriousness with which Rahner regarded the transcendental turn in modern philosophy.

THE PROGRAM

Rahner's program unfolded in two stages, the first philosophical and the second theological. (Only the former is the focus of this essay.) The first stage occupied him from 1934 to about 1941 and found expression in two works, *Geist in Welt* (1939) and *Hörer des Wortes* (1941). The first of those two texts marshaled central elements of the work of Kant, Rousselot, Maréchal, and Heidegger for the goal of reformulating Thomism—its epistemology, philosophical anthropology, and metaphysics—as transcendental *philosophy*. In the second stage, which occupied him from the 1940s onward, Rahner used the transcendental Thomism of the first stage as the basis for rewriting Catholic doctrine as transcendental *theology*.¹

In March of 1966 Rahner outlined his program. "Dogmatic theology today has to be theological anthropology . . . Such an anthropology must, of course, be a transcendental anthropology." This entails "the necessity of considering every theological question from a transcendental viewpoint." That is, "we must explicitly deal with the apriori conditions for knowing a given object of faith; and this reflection must determine the concepts we use to describe the theological objects."²

The radical import of this project may be stated in two theses. (1) Since a transcendental philosophy of human nature establishes the a priori

possibilities and limits of all human experience, it also establishes the possibilities and limits of all *religious* experience. (2) Just as a transcendental philosophy of human nature is co-extensive with general metaphysics, so likewise, when employed as a theological anthropology, it is co-extensive with all that can be learned in theology.

Guiding Rahner's overall project was the classical metaphysical axiom, *operari sequitur esse*: operations are conditioned by and consonant with the ontological structure of the operator. (Or in another iteration, *qualis modus essendi talis modus operandi*: an entity's way of being determines its way of acting.) The import of these axioms is both methodological and substantive, as may be illustrated by the case of human being. As regards method: since natures are revealed by actions, we discover what human being *is* by analyzing what human beings *do*. As regards substance: once discovered, the ontological structure of human being is seen as determining the possibility, necessity, and scope of all human experience. Moreover, in Rahner's critical-transcendental approach, the human essence not only defines the structure and function of human experience but also delimits the range of objects available to that experience.

For Rahner this delimitation applies preeminently to metaphysics, not just the second-order science of metaphysics but more importantly the first-order activity of metaphysical *experience*. Like Kant before him, Rahner approaches metaphysics by (1) studying one particular human operation – predicative knowledge – for the purpose of (2) determining the structure of human being *qua* theoretical knower, for the purpose of (3) establishing the possibility, necessity, and limits of metaphysical experience, for the purpose of (4) delimiting the range of objects available to metaphysical knowledge.

Whatever operations human beings consciously perform – whether working, eating, speaking, enjoying, thinking, or whatever – those actions always take some form of *relatedness*, and that relatedness always has a bivalent structure: (1) relatedness-to-*another* (2) as relatedness-to-*oneself*. As far as one can tell, all human operations are bereft of perfect immediacy. Such immediacy, as pure coincidence-in-unity, would transcend all relatedness-to. Instead, human action is condemned to mediacy, thrown ineluctably into relatedness, but without the actor ever losing the ability to see and say “I” and “myself.” Even the attempt to deny the self–other bivalence ends up replicating it.

To judge by its operations, therefore, human being is an otheredness that is always self-related, and a self-relatedness that cannot exist without being othered. Since relation-to-another is the only way humans can relate to themselves, we may define human being as *self-related otheredness*.

"Self-relatedness" means self-awareness and self-responsibility – in a word, spirit. "Otheredness" means that human beings *need* to be affected by others – but are *limited* to being affected only by this-worldly corporeal others. In Rahner's phrase, human being is a "Geist in Welt," a this-worldly spirit that cannot see beyond, or exist without – much less ever leave – this material world.

Rahner's *Geist in Welt* analyzes and interprets the operation of predicative knowledge – the act of correctly judging that predicate P pertains to subject S – for the twofold purpose of demonstrating that human being is what was said in the previous paragraph and drawing all the conclusions from that. Rahner's analysis is focused on a central text in Aquinas' epistemology (*Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 84, art. 7), and for the most part the text remains within the philosophical worldview and language of medieval scholasticism: abstraction of universals, conversion to the phantasm, formal and efficient causality, etc. However, Rahner's *interpretation* of that analysis propels his project out of the Middle Ages and into the modern (even Nietzschean) refusal of any metaphysics that makes pretensions to direct knowledge of otherworldly entities. For Rahner the human spirit is, for better or worse, stuck in this world with no escape; and the range of objects available to human experience – including metaphysical experience – is always and only material.

The stark outcome of *Geist in Welt* is that human knowledge is focused exclusively on the material order, with no direct access to the spiritual realm. Human being is certainly spirit (self-reflective, self-conscious, self-responsible), but the only thing such a spirit can properly know is the *meaning of things within the world*. If human being is ineluctably a this-worldly spirit with no intuition beyond the five senses, and if human knowledge is exclusively about what those senses perceive, then meta-physics – taken as the alleged knowledge of spiritual entities separate from matter – is impossible.

And along with such Platonizing meta-physics, theological entities like God and the supernatural content of revelation risk disappearing from the field of human experience. Either that – or the entire Catholic tradition of metaphysics, revelation, and theology must undergo a decisive and irreversible Copernican Revolution.

THE TRANSCENDENTAL TURN

In taking the transcendental turn, Rahner radically transformed both the field and the focus of traditional metaphysics and eventually of Catholic

theology. From Aristotle to Aquinas, the subject matter of first philosophy was everything real – whatever is in being, whatever is not nothing – in a word, *ens*. And the formal aspect under which first philosophy studied *ens* was its very condition of being real, its state of having-being (*ens qua ens = ens qua habens-esse*). Classical metaphysics carried out that task by tracing all *entia* back to the first principles of their *esse*. As Aquinas put it: “All things that are composite and that participate [in being] must have their causes in things that possess being by their very essence.”³

By contrast, the subject matter of transcendental philosophy is not objects taken by themselves (the independent-of-my-mind-out-there-now-real) or objects as supposedly meaningful of themselves. Nor is transcendental philosophy focused on subjectivity as something separated from the world. The field of transcendental philosophy is neither the subject nor the object taken by themselves, but the very *relatedness* of subject and object, knower and knowable. Strictly speaking, then, the transcendental turn is not simply a “turn to the subject” but more precisely a turn to the subject-*in-relation* – for example, the inquiring subject, which is already related (at least interrogatively) to whatever is being questioned.

Transcendental philosophy studies the a priori correlation between the meaningful and the constitution of its meaning, where “constitution” refers to the correlation’s active role in establishing the meaningfulness of the known. This correlation is called “transcendental” insofar as the knowing subject necessarily “transcends itself,” i.e., has already escaped from an imaginary Cartesian interiority and is always in a state of relatedness to possible objectivity as the a priori basis for knowledge. If classical metaphysics is the study of the independent-of-my-mind-out-there-now-real in terms of its mind-independent-out-there-now-realness (*ens* as material object; *habens-esse* as formal object), transcendental philosophy is the study of the meaningful in light of how it gets its meaning. The material object of a transcendental first philosophy is the *intrinsic relatedness* of the knower and the knowable; and its formal object is the *structure and source* of that correlation. In the terms of Husserlian phenomenology we would say that this material object is the outcome of a phenomenological reduction, whereas the formal object gets worked out by a transcendental reduction.

Rahner’s transcendental turn is nothing short of a Copernican Revolution in Catholic thought. *Geist in Welt* marks his radical and permanent shift from an object-focused theory of being (a *Seinslehre*) to a correlation-focused theory of meaning (a *Bedeutungslehre*), from an objectivist study of the real in terms of its mind-independent realness, to a transcendental study of the meaningful in terms of the constitution of its meaning. Nonetheless, one

of the challenges in understanding *Geist in Welt* is to remember that even when Rahner continues to use the pre-transcendental language of "being," he always means "meaningfulness" – that is, being as phenomenologically reduced: the intelligible in terms of the conditions constituting its intelligibility. *Geist in Welt* draws all the proper conclusions from Aristotle's and Aquinas' principle that being and meaningfulness, *einai* and *aletheia*, are interchangeable, including the phenomenological conclusions that being is known only as meaningfulness, and that meaningfulness is always transcendently constituted.

To put it otherwise, Rahner "retrieves" from Thomas Aquinas a turn to the transcendental that is at best implicit in the Angelic Doctor. However, once in possession of that transcendental ground Rahner never retreats from it, even when *Geist in Welt* and *Hörer des Wortes* continue to use Aquinas' objectivist language of "being" (*Sein*, *Seiendes*). In order to underline and preserve the phenomenological gains of that retrieval, the present essay will translate Rahner's philosophical terminology from an ontological register to a transcendental one:

<i>from:</i>	<i>to:</i>
1. a being (<i>ens</i>)	1. the meaningful
2. the being of beings (<i>esse entium</i>)	2. the sense or meaning of the meaningful
3. being as such (<i>esse schlechthin</i>)	3. unlimited meaningfulness, or sense as such.

So, for example, instead of Rahner's "understanding the being of beings," I will speak of "making sense of things" or "being familiar with what something means." And in place of "the pre-grasp of being as such," I will speak of the human need for unlimited meaning, that is, our ontological fate of being *capax omnium*, able to make sense of whatever we encounter, and unable to encounter anything without making sense of it. These translations from the ontological register of being to the transcendental register of sense will help us see that the only infinity that human beings know is not God's, but their own finite infinity.

PRE-CRITICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS

Rahner brought to his doctoral studies in philosophy and to his drafting of *Geist in Welt* (1934–36) a set of pre-critical presuppositions garnered from his earlier reading of Aquinas, Rousselot, and Maréchal. Chief among them was the Aristotelian-Thomistic principle that the criterion of reality is not

just identity but *self*-identity, subjectivity – what Aquinas calls a “return to oneself” that entails “knowing oneself” (*reditio completa in seipsum* as *cognoscere seipsum*). Laying out the traditional metaphysical grounds for that pre-critical position will require a few steps.

Aquinas shares classical philosophy’s “top-down” understanding of being, specifically the conviction that the norm of reality lies in the ideal, the perfect, and the whole. In this view, metaphysics actually reads reality “downwards” (deductively) from the *de jure* perfect to the *de facto* imperfect, from the a priori to the a posteriori – rather than “upwards” (inductively) from the imperfect to the perfection it strives for. Philosophy begins with some sense of the ultimate and perfect (how else would it know anything as imperfect?) and then works backwards from the ideal to the real, from the fully achieved to what is still on-the-way, from the whole to what participates in it.

Aquinas follows Aristotle in this regard. Something is perfect (Greek, *teleion*) when it is in complete possession of itself, when “it already has its fulfillment” such that “not the least part of the thing can be found outside of it.”⁴ Such perfect self-possession is also called “wholeness.” Something is whole (*totum*) and therefore its own when “it lacks no part of what belongs to it by its nature.”⁵ These ideas converge in Aquinas’ terms *perfectio* and *actus*, which translate Aristotle’s *en-tel-echeia*, “being-wholly-fulfilled,” and *en-erg-eia*, “being a completed work [which therefore has begun to be].” To be perfect means to have arrived at one’s essence, to have come into one’s own. And since “perfection,” “wholeness,” and “ownness” are analogous rather than univocal terms, we must say that every entity is perfect to the degree that it is self-coincident, i.e., has arrived at its essence and come into its own.

In the Aristotelian and Thomistic universe, self-coincidence entails self-transparency. Therefore, the degree to which something knows itself is equally a measure of its degree of *habens-esse*. At the divine apex of reality, perfect being is pure self-presence and self-intuition (*Bei-sich-sein*). Knower and known are one and the same in God; in fact, God’s very being is a unity of knowing and self-knowing.⁶ That paradigm sets the norm for all other spiritual entities. Whether in God, angels, or human beings, the proper term of knowledge is not an external object but the knowing subject itself, along with all that this subject is and does.⁷

Therefore, the word *completa*, in the phrase *reditio completa in seipsum*, is analogical. Properly interpreted, it means “perfect,” but perfection comes in various degrees. The divine returns to itself in keeping with its supreme

degree of perfection, and therefore knows itself as entirely self-transparent. Human being returns to itself with its limited degree of perfection, and thus knows itself as *chiaroscuro*. In the analogically structured universe of St. Thomas, where *ens* is inseparable from other trans-categorical characteristics like *unum* and *verum*, a thing is real *to the degree* that it knows itself. *Ens = unum = verum*. The real = the self-identical = the clear (the knowable and self-knowing). A thing has as much being as it has self-transparency.

Therefore, in the great chain of being in which reality is proportionate to self-possession and self-knowledge, to be *othered* (even to be a self-related otheredness) is an index of imperfection. Human being is able to return to, possess, and know itself only by turning to, possessing, and knowing what is other than itself. Yet insofar as it is the *essence* of human being to be a self-related otheredness, that condition must have and be its own analogical perfection. To be human is to be fated to "almosting it." Almost is good enough – in fact, it's as good as it gets. "For us there is only the trying. The rest is not our business."⁸

If we compare human being with the divine, we see that whereas God is perfectly perfect, human being is *perfectly imperfect*. Both are instances of perfection, but with a difference. The divine being is whole and perfect in its unending state of pure self-possession, whereas human being is whole and perfect in its mortal condition of self-related otheredness. Ontologically, human being is going nowhere – precisely because it already *is* where it is supposed to be. It has no prospect of achieving some idealized (fantastical) non-othered perfection, such as cutting all ties with matter and living forever in heaven as a disembodied spirit. Ontologically, we have already come into our own, and that ownness consists in our perfectly imperfect (*completa*) self-presence (*reditio in seipsum*). At the level of essence, human perfection consists in its humanly specific imperfection; and at the level of existence, one's individual perfection consists in responsibly living out one's personal imperfection. Authenticity – i.e., actually *being* my own self – means always becoming existentially what I already am ontologically: a perfectly imperfect self-related otheredness.

Before we move on to *Geist in Welt*, there is one last pre-critical presupposition that guides Rahner's work, namely, that making sense of something – i.e., knowing it by understanding its meaning or being – is an index of finitude.

God and angels do not make sense of anything. They cannot, because they are unable to wonder what anything might mean. Since they are, each in its genre, a pure self-coincidence (God as perfect subsistent existence;

each angel as a perfect spiritual essence), their knowing consists not in inquiry, hypothesis, and judgment (*ratio*) but in simple and direct intuition (*intellectus*) both of themselves and of others. By contrast, meaning and mediation are human stand-ins for pure self-presence. Making-sense-of and understanding-the-meaning-of – i.e., knowing something through its meaning or being – is the task and glory of human beings. That is because our essence consists not in pure self-coincidence – literally “having our act together,” *actus perfectus* – but in always *having to get* our act together, without hope of finally succeeding. We are an *actus imperfecti*, a work forever in progress. That is why human spirituality is not pure *intellectus/nous* (understanding all-at-once) but *ratio/logos* (learning-by-gathering-things-together).

Our own being is, in principle, endless self-synthesizing, and that is why we know everything that we know only by way of synthesis and judgment. *Qualis modus essendi talis modus operandi*. Fated to an endless *pulling* of ourselves together, we know whatever we know only by endlessly *putting it* together – subjects with predicates, tools with tasks, things with their meanings, ourselves with our essence. And in doing so, we have no illusions of attaining final unity, reaching the ultimate oneness that would end inquiry, abolish work, and transform each of us into the perfection of his or her essence (every she the ultimate Aphrodite, every he the absolute Apollo).

This may sound like the punishment of Sisyphus – but no, it is our essence, our perfection. Only if we were to compare this human condition to the pure self-coincidence of God and angels would we speak of “imperfection.” Therefore, instead of “perfect imperfection,” which is merely a stand-in term, we should rather speak of our “specifically human perfection,” the perfection of *finitude*, a finite infinity that consists not in God’s all-at-once-ness but in our own finite infinity: unlimited self-synthesizing, self-mediation, and self-interpretation, unlimited responsibility, knowledge, and creativity – and then we die. That is:

We *know* only by

1. relating one thing to another (this subject to that predicate) and
2. relating the whole S-and-P to ourselves (“I *adjudge* this S to be *meaningful* as P”)

because we *are* only by

1. relating ourselves to ourselves (= ever becoming ourselves) and
2. relating the whole of our self-becoming to our otheredness and to what it gives us.

THIS-WORLDFY SPIRIT

Rahner's *Geist in Welt* seeks to inscribe as much of the above as possible within a critical-transcendental framework, while also remaining within the language of Thomistic epistemology and psychology. Demonstrating that Aquinas was a transcendental thinker *avant la lettre* is no easy task, and Rahner is frequently compelled to admit that some of the most important interpretations he advances are "hard to capture within the usual categories of Thomas."⁹ But that hardly seems to trouble Rahner, because, as he writes, "As far as I can see, the only reason to work on Thomas is for the sake of the questions that motivate my own philosophy and the philosophy of my times."¹⁰

In commenting on *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 84, art. 7, Rahner argues (1) that, lacking a pure intellectual intuition, we make sense only of material things; (2) that we do so by differentiating meanings (universals) and things (particulars) and then synthesizing them by judging (correctly or not) that they go together; and (3) that we do so because we cannot relate to anything except through meaning, and therefore can never step beyond meaning. For us, meaning has no limit; and by living in that limitlessness of meaning, we are able to make sense of everything we meet.

The first two points are relatively uncontroversial. The third should also be uncontroversial – except that some commentators believe *Geist in Welt* makes the extraordinary claim that, in order to grasp S-as-P, a person must have a "prior grasp" or "pre-grasp" (*Vorgriff*) of God as absolute being and as the perfect coincidence of knowing and known. If that were the case, Rahner would have produced an air-tight proof for the existence of God. In point of fact, however, *Geist in Welt* does not produce such a proof, because it does not claim that we have anything like a "prior grasp" of absolute being. Quite the contrary, the book demonstrates that we have no grasp of God at all, either prior or posterior.¹¹

Rahner argues that we have no knowledge of God's perfect infinity, the point where knowing and known would converge absolutely. At best we have a sense of our own finite infinity and of the fact that we are ontologically fated to meet nothing of which we cannot make sense. (If we cannot make sense of it, we cannot meet it.) Our limitless gathering-together of things and their meanings – rendering the former transparent in terms of the latter – understandably lets us postulate a perfectly achieved in-gatheredness of transparency, which people call "God." But in order to make sense of any S in terms of a P, all that is required is this: that no matter how far we look, we can and must make sense of any material object we

meet, by placing it within our limitless world of sense. We may choose to call that world “meaning as such” or, with Rahner, “being as such” (*das esse schlechthin*). However, *any* form of meaning or sense (any understanding of “the being of an entity”) is an index of finitude. If we claim to have any intimation of a perfectly infinite God, it is only by analogy with our own finite infinity.

The argument of *Geist in Welt* is thick and brilliant. But it is also difficult; and a good deal of the difficulty lies in Rahner’s insistence on using Aquinas’ pre-critical language of being instead of the transcendental language of meaning. Rather than analyzing the book’s complex argument about abstraction and conversion (which I have done elsewhere) and in the process replicating Rahner’s language of “being,” I will illustrate the core argument of the book by way of an allegory built around the idea of being as meaning, and knowledge as familiarity with the meaningful.

Imagine the biggest family reunion that the Sheehans have ever planned, set for a sunny Saturday at a large meadow in San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park. The family has spent months organizing it, and this time we have decided to invite not just our close relatives, but everyone we believe is related to us – Irish, Jewish, Italian, American, Mexican – whether their names be Cullen, Sheehan, Myatt, or Rasi; Vargas, Masciaga, Wynn, or Libertini; Glovski, Del Vecchio, Schumacher, or Gasparinetti – all the clans and tribes in their scores and hundreds. We are related to them all, and hope to meet each one. And we are at least *able* to figure out where they fit on the family tree. We have our genealogical charts with us. We can speak English with some of them, Italian and Spanish with others, and invent sign language when all else fails. We are *capax omnium*, able to make sense of all those to whom we are related, once we meet them.

As our family of five drives to the Park, we ask ourselves: How will we decide who’s who? How will we connect unfamiliar people with this or that family? My children suggest that, instead of asking them their names, we try *guessing* who fits into what family. They argue that we already know how a typical Myatt or Sheehan looks and acts, and we are generally familiar with what makes a Wynn and a Masciaga tick. With families whom we know less well, the photos we have seen may help us place them. And the e-mails we have exchanged with relatives we have never met will help us make those connections. It will be a matter of linking up unfamiliar faces with the family characteristics that we already know, putting the individual together with his or her *gens*, fitting people to the clans of which they are members. Not much different from what Aquinas called *compositio* and *divisio*: we come to understand the heretofore unfamiliar by taking it as

a non-exhaustive instance of a general group with which we are already somewhat familiar.

We arrive at the meadow, and it is packed with hundreds of people. But we are not overwhelmed, because as *capax omnium* we realize that everyone we see is related to us and is either already familiar or able to become familiar. So we begin the guessing game.

My children are fairly good at figuring out who fits into what family, but my wife and I have mixed luck. She correctly identifies Molly as a Vargas and Bernadine as a Sheehan, even though she had not met either of them before. She also thinks that the cute guy in the tux *has* to be a Myatt because of his thick curly hair. She marks him down as such, while realizing, of course, that he is only *one* of the Myatts and does not exhaust the clan. Just as Aristotle and Aquinas would have predicted, she synthesizes *and* distinguishes "Myatt family" and "cute-guy-with-curly-hair." I do much the same with a lovely young woman I notice. I think she *must* be a Glovski, because they are all so good looking. As it turns out, the guy in the tux is actually a waiter, and the young woman is a professional photographer hired for the occasion. But whether our guesses are right or wrong, we are playing by the rules of *compositio* and *divisio*, synthesis and distinction. We are making sense of people by (1) linking up individuals whom we do not know with family characteristics that we already know (2) while realizing that each family is larger than – hence distinct from and not exhausted by – any individual. We are successfully performing acts of abstraction and conversion to the phantasm (even when our guesses are wrong) by affirming, for example, Vargas-hood of Molly while realizing that Molly *does not exhaust* Vargas-hood.

Then imagine that, dream-like, the cosmic video camera filming this reunion begins to pull further and further back and move higher into the sky in order to get a wider view of the meadow, the Park, the Sunset District, and the whole of San Francisco. The camera now reveals that there are not just hundreds of people gathered at the reunion, but thousands. The crowd spills out beyond Golden Gate Park, as far as Pacifica to the south, the Presidio to the north, and Potrero Hill to the east – and everyone, we presume, is related to us. And then, magically, the video camera begins to pan the entire *history* of all those people, backwards in time to the beginning, and forwards in time to forever. My family and I realize that, willy-nilly, we are somehow related to *everyone* (including the waiter and the photographer). And if given enough time, we could come to know them all and thereby make them *quoad nos* what they already are *quoad se*, namely, *familiares*, members of our clan.

We are able to know the whole human race as well as everything in the material world. Everyone is related to someone and, in the final analysis, to everyone; and everything is related to everything else. And we human beings are the only ones able to recognize and understand that. There is, in principle, no limit to our ability to make sense of, to become familiar with, everyone and everything.

CONCLUSION

We may draw some lessons from this allegory: (1) We are able to make sense of everything we encounter because we cannot *not* do that. The ability to make sense of ourselves and of all other entities is our very essence. That is what it means to be a rational animal.

(2) What we make sense of is always ourselves – along with all that we are and do. So yes, each of us is a *self*-relatedness. But even as self-related, none of us is ever a monad. We are all related to someone and something: everyone has a mother and a body. In fact, everything we can encounter is a body and therefore is actually or potentially related to every other body, because everything we can encounter (including ourselves) is othered. The uniqueness of *our* form of otheredness consists in being self-related and thus able to understand all the others. So when we say that the object of sense-making is always ourselves, we mean by “ourselves” not just our personal and social selves but also our material selves. Materiality and sociality are inseparable from human selfhood.

(3) As humans, each of us is, and struggles to sustain, our own finite measure of self-transparency. Such a *chiaroscuro* self is our consolation prize for what we are not and can never be: pure self-transparency. We certainly can dream of such transparency, but we can never be it (nor would we want to) because if *per impossibile* we did become it, there would be no “we” (no social-material-othered self-relatedness) to “be” it.

(4) Nevertheless, since we are *capax omnium*, we can make some kind of sense of such an absolute self-transparency. And hypothetically we *could* become familiar with it – but only if it were to bend itself to meet the transcendental conditions that our essence lays out for such an unlikely encounter. That is: It would have to show up within our material otheredness by *not* showing up (because pure self-transparency cannot be othered, material, and temporal). It would have to leave us alone to live out our history without appeals for help from “the other world” (lest we lose the self-responsibility that makes us human). It would have to communicate

with us without breaking into our conversation from without. (We do not tolerate the rudeness of otherworldly interruptions.) And it would not be allowed to tempt us out of our self-related otheredness, or coax us away from our happy fate of being this-worldly spirits.

Surely all that could never come to pass! It must be only a dream. And yet, like some of our best dreams, it may be trying to teach us a profound lesson. Perhaps, in the spirit of Karl Rahner, it is telling us: Give up trying to transcend yourself. Remain within this social, material world, stay with your bodily relatedness and all that it gives you. Be happy with being only human, with making sense only of the people and things you encounter – while never forgetting that the human power to make sense of this world, and to transform it, is without limit. Forget pure self-transparency, which, if it is at all, is off somewhere beyond what you could ever experience. If it wants to find you, it will; and if it does, it will certainly *not* arrive as pure self-transparency! Above all, remember that you need no faith, no religion, no church or theology that would alienate you from your this-worldly selves. Stay with yourselves, with your material, historical, and social community – the human community.

That community does not demand anything of you that lies beyond your nature. It simply says: Ally yourself with what is genuine, with the challenging, with what demands everything of you. Have the courage to accept your perfect imperfection, your finite infinity.

That community tells you: Go on, wherever you find yourself at this particular moment, follow your own light, no matter how dim, and tend the human fire lest it burn low. Live out your own personal and social becoming, even though you will never understand it completely. In doing so you will find a hope that is already blessed with fulfilment.

If you set out on this path, you may find yourself far from religion, you may feel like an atheist, you may fear that you do not believe in God. Religious doctrines and morals may appear strange and even oppressive to you.

But keep going, follow whatever measure of clarity you find in the depths of your heart – for this path has already arrived at the goal.

If there were a community that actually believed that – that embodied it in human language and symbols, and tried to live it out authentically – it might be worth a second look. But surely there is none, is there?¹²

Notes

- 1 For bibliographical details on the works of Rahner, Rousselot and Maréchal, see below. All translations in this article are my own.
- 2 "Theology and Anthropology," in *The Word in History*, ed. T. P. Burke (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1966), 1, 2, and 14.
- 3 Thomas Aquinas, *In metaphysicam Aristotelis commentaria*, ed. M.-R. Cathala (Turin: Marietti, 1926), 102: Liber II, lectio II, no. 296, commenting on *Metaphysics* II, 1, 993b 23–29.
- 4 *In metaphysicam Aristotelis*, p. 324: Liber v, lectio XVIII, no. 1039, commenting on *Metaphysics* v, 16, 1021b 23–25. Ibid., p. 323, no. 1034, commenting on *Metaphysics* v, 16, 1021b 12–13.
- 5 *In metaphysicam Aristotelis*, p. 339: Liber v, lectio XXI, no. 1098, commenting on *Metaphysics* v, 26, 1023b 26–27.
- 6 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, 14, 4, c. Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* XII, 9, 1075a 3–5 with 1074b 34–35.
- 7 Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, I, 14, 2, c. abd 1, 14, 4, c, ad 1, and ad 3.
- 8 Regarding "almosting it," see James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: The Modern Library, 1961), 47, line 6. Regarding "For us there is only the trying," see T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, "East Coker," v, in *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot*, ed. V. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), 182.
- 9 SW, 342.
- 10 Ibid., lii.
- 11 FCF, 64–65 (translation amended): "[The divine] is given to us only in the form of a distance that refers us to what is other than itself [*im Modus der abweisende Ferne*]. We never have direct access to it, nor can we grasp it immediately. It is given only by silently referring us to something other than itself, something finite that is the object of our direct intuition and action."
- 12 Regarding the indented paragraphs: compare Rahner's "Thoughts on the Possibility of Belief Today," *TI* v, trans. K.-H. Kruger (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966), 21.

Further reading

- Maréchal, J., *Le point de départ de la métaphysique. Leçons sur le développement historique et théorique du problème de la connaissance* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, and Brussels: L'Édition Universelle, 1922–47), Cahier v: *Le thomisme devant la philosophie critique* (Louvain, 1926).
- Rahner, K., *Geist in Welt. Zur Metaphysik der endlichen Erkenntnis bei Thomas von Aquin* (Innsbruck and Leipzig: Felizian Rauch, 1939; 2nd edn., expanded and reworked by J. B. Metz, Munich: Kösel, 1957) [= *Spirit in the World* (SW)].
- Hörer des Wortes. Zur Grundlegung einer Religionsphilosophie* (Munich: Kösel-Pustet, 1941; 2nd edn., reworked by J. B. Metz, Munich: Kösel, 1963).
- Grundkurs des Glaubens. Einführung in den Begriff des Christentums* (Freiburg, Basel, Vienna: Herder, 1976) [= *Foundations of Christian Faith* (FCF)].
- Rousselot, P., *L'Intellectualisme de saint Thomas*, 2nd edn. (Paris: Beauchesne, 1924), p. xvii; cf. 56–57. (ET by A. Tallon, *Intelligence: Sense of Being, Faculty of God* [Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1999].)