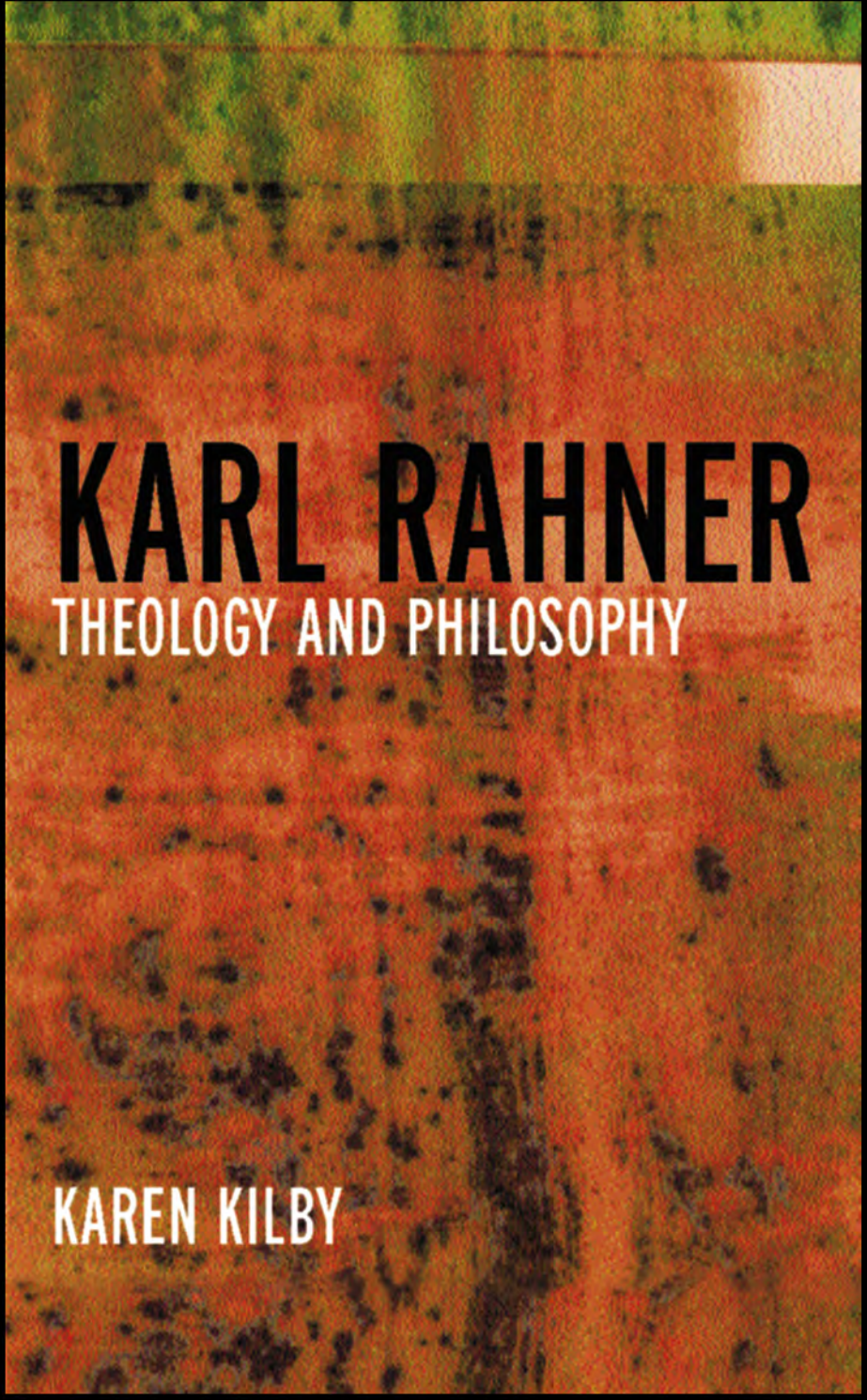

Karl Rahner

Theology and philosophy

Karl Rahner is one of the great theologians of the twentieth century. This bold and original book explores the relationship between his theology and his philosophy, and argues for the possibility of a nonfoundationalist reading of Rahner. Karen Kilby calls into question both the admiration of Rahner's disciples for the overarching unity of his thought, and the too-easy dismissals of critics who object to his 'flawed philosophical starting point' or to his supposedly modern and liberal appeal to experience.

Through a lucid and critical exposition of key texts including *Spirit in the World* and *Hearer of the Word*, and of themes such as the *Vorgriff auf esse*, the supernatural existential, and the anonymous Christian, Karen Kilby reaffirms Rahner's significance for modern theology and offers a clear exposition of his thought.

Karen Kilby is Lecturer in Systematic Theology at Nottingham University. She is author of *Karl Rahner* (Fount Christian Thinkers, 1997), a brief introduction to the thought of Rahner.

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To Marianne B. Kilby and Peter Kilby

Contents

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1 Introduction

Karl Rahner is universally recognized as important, but often lightly dismissed. He is not alone in this: it is a fate he shares with many theologians. Figures such as Schleiermacher, Bultmann, Barth, and Balthasar, to name but a few, are so difficult—they write so much, and of such a demanding nature—that few readers, even professional theological readers, manage to become thoroughly knowledgeable, thoroughly at ease, with the work of more than one or two of them. It therefore seems useful, almost necessary, to have some quick way of dismissing a theologian, some good reason not to bother with the difficult business of understanding him or her. In the case of Rahner, the dismissal can take a number of forms: with his famous theory of anonymous Christianity, Rahner is an inclusivist, and inclusivism is fundamentally patronizing towards other religions, and so not a viable option in the theology of religions; or again, Rahner uses "the transcendental method," and the transcendental method is essentially reductive, a priori—it levels out all difference and undermines the historicity and particularity of Christianity—so Rahner can be set to one side as representing an interesting but ultimately mistaken route for Christian theology to take.

Those who really know Rahner's work, of course, would not subscribe to either of these wholesale and rather simple-minded rejections. But because he is so hard to understand (in difficulty, if nothing else, Rahner is unsurpassed in the theology of the last few centuries), because there is such an investment of time and effort required before one can enter serious conversation about him, very often those who really know Rahner's work are in fact talking only among themselves, and have little impact on the wider theological world's reaction to him. Or if they have an impact, it may not be the one they intend: some Rahner scholars may, through their admiring emphasis on the unity and coherence of his thought, inadvertantly contribute to the too-easy rejection of Rahner by his detractors.

My aim in this book will be to work against such quick dismissals of Rahner on two levels. One is expository. I hope the book will be an aid to readers in coming to terms with some of Rahner's most difficult and

important philosophical and theological ideas, and with the ways in which these are related to one another. This is not to say that I can here provide a survey of everything Rahner said, nor an introduction to Rahner's thought for those entirely unfamiliar with it. The book is intended to be of use to those who are engaged already to some degree or other in grappling with Rahner's writings, to puzzled but reasonably serious students of his theology. Insofar as the expository aspect of the book succeeds, then, in making the process of getting to grips with Rahner—at certain points, at least—somewhat easier, I hope it may render the option of a quick and easy dismissal less necessary.

On a second level, I shall be setting out an argument for the possibility of a particular kind of interpretation of Rahner—a nonfoundationalist interpretation. This involves a claim about the relationship of different parts of Rahner's work, but also, and more importantly, a claim about the *kind* of enterprise Rahner's mature theology can be taken to be. Insofar 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. Insofar, on the other hand, as the reading casts his theology as such in a rather different light than it has often been seen, it will, I hope, undercut the grounds on which at least some of the quick dismissals of Rahner's work have rested.

Before all this can become clear, however, it will be necessary to say a bit more about foundationalism and nonfoundationalism and how these relate to Rahner.

Foundationalism and nonfoundationalism in philosophy and theology

Foundationalism is a notion borrowed from philosophy, adopted (and adapted) for theological use. In both discisplines it functions mainly as a term of criticism, a way of identifying what is problematic in another person's position: one meets few self-described foundationalists.[1] The notion has proved interesting to theologians in that it has allowed them to identify and criticize a common pattern in an otherwise highly diverse (Protestant and Catholic, conservative, and liberal) list of nineteenth- and twentieth-century theologies, a list on which Rahner's name almost invariably appears.

Foundationalism and nonfoundationalism in philosophy

As a technical term of philosophy, foundationalism refers to a particular theory of the way knowledge is (or ought to be) structured and the way beliefs are justified. The idea is that if one is asked to justify any given

belief, one will probably refer to one or more other beliefs. So, for instance, I believe that the consumption of a lot of butter will be bad for my health because I have beliefs about the amount of fat in butter, about the connection between the consumption of fat and heart disease, and about my own probable proclivity to heart disease. Each of these beliefs may in turn be justified with reference to further beliefs: for instance, I have a belief about my probable proclivity towards heart disease because of beliefs about the medical history of various family members, and because of a belief in the genetic component of heart disease, and so on. The foundationalist's contention is that the business of justifying beliefs by appeal to other beliefs cannot go on forever—it cannot be the case that *all* of our beliefs rest on one or more other beliefs, for this would lead to an infinite regress. There must, then, be some (justified) beliefs which are not themselves inferred from or justified on the basis of any other beliefs whatsoever—there must be a foundation, a stopping point. The beliefs in the foundation, on most versions of foundationalism, have some special status: they are self-evident, or certain, or indubitable. Our beliefs are (or ought to be) structured, then, so that they have a firm foundation, an unquestionable bedrock of certainty, and everything else is built upon this basis: if questioned about something we hold true, we ought in principle be able to trace it back ultimately to the unquestionable foundation.[2]

Arguably foundationalism has characterized much of modern philosophy, from Descartes onwards.[3] What exactly was believed to belong in the foundations varied widely—"logically unchallengable first truths"[4] for the rationalists, the immediate deliverances of the senses for empiricists—but the shared assumption was that there must be some certain starting point for knowledge which founded all the rest and which itself needed no further foundation.

This assumption has come under attack from many sides in recent decades. What might have been thought the clearest candidates for the "logically unchallengable first truths"—axioms in geometry, arithmetic, or logic—have, through the rise of non-Euclidean geometries, the ingenuity of Kurt Gödel and the development of quantum mechanics, become challengable after all.[5] The foundations of the empiricists, too, have been problematized—the idea that there could be uninterpreted sense data from which one might begin, deliverances of experience uncontaminated by prior beliefs or concepts, has come to look highly naïve.

It is worth dwelling a little on this latter point, for in the criticisms of the empirical forms of foundationalism, and in particular in the insistence that there is no such thing as pre-conceptual experience, we find a point where the philosophical and the theological versions of nonfoundationalism draw close. Wilfrid Sellars develops one of the classic attacks on pre-conceptual experience in his essay "Empiricism and the philosophy of mind."[6] His target is the notion that our knowledge can be traced back to and built out of basic, primitive, independent bits of experience.

Empiricists have varied to some degree in how they have characterized these bits of experience, but an important feature of their strategy is that they place in the foundations claims about how something looks (or sounds or feels), rather than about how something actually is,[7] since the latter, but not the former, can be mistaken—I may be wrong that there is a green spot over there, but I cannot be wrong about the fact that it appears to me that there is a green spot over there.

Claims about how the world actually *is*, then, are thought to follow as a second stage, inferred from the more basic beliefs about how things seem to a given person at a given time. Sellars argues convincingly, however, that on the contrary it is the propositions about how something *looks* that are derivative, more complex and secondary: one can only make use of the concept of something *looking* green if one already has the concept of something *being* green. Furthermore, the concept of "being green" turns out to be, itself, highly complex. The ability to use it involves "the ability to tell what colors objects have by looking at them—which, in turn, involves knowing in what circumstances to place an object if one wishes to ascertain its color by looking at it."[8] Sellars suggests that there is a kind of circularity here:

> Since one can scarcely determine what the circumstances are without noticing that certain objects have certain perceptible characteristics—including colors—it would seem that one couldn't form the concept of *being green*, and, by parity of reasoning, of the other colors, unless he already had them.[9]

He is not advocating sheer paradox, however, but rather the notion that our concepts are intertwined, not acquired one by one but as whole packages.[10] We are a long way, then, from having found any uncomplicated basic building blocks of knowledge: "there is an important sense in which one has *no* concept pertaining to the observable properties of physical objects in Space and Time unless one has them all—and . . . a great deal more besides."[11]

What Sellars argues, then, by looking at the very basic case of the recognition of color, is that the kind of thing taken by foundationalists of the empiricist variety to be the most simple, unproblematic building blocks of knowledge, that out of which everything else is to be constructed, turns out in fact to be unknowable unless one has *already* in place a rather complex intellectual structure. The pre-conceptual experience which foundationalists in the empiricist tradition need to get the ball rolling is simply not to be found.

It is worth noting that it is not *just* analytic philosophers who have come to this sort of conclusion. The rejection of pre-conceptual experience has in various ways been echoed across a range of disciplines. Thus, for example, psychologists studying perception have shown empirically that

our recognition even of such simple things as (again) color is heavily influenced by what we know and therefore are expecting to perceive.[12] In the philosophy of science, since the publication of Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, it is no longer plausible to think of scientists as theorizing about evidence which is itself independent of any theories. Art historians such as E.H. Gombrich have shown that the way in which the artist, or the child who draws, "sees" and therefore draws is always conditioned by their understanding of the world. Or again there is the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer, with its central insistence that we never come to the reading of a text or the understanding of a work of art innocently, but that our interpretation of it is always and necessarily shaped by our "prejudices," by the prior understandings we bring to it.

It is interesting that thinkers across so many areas and disciplines should have converged on, if not the same point, then at least structurally similar points. One might hypothesize that so many figures have felt the need to attack the notion of pre-conceptual experience or its equivalent because the instinct to look for some such pure, untouched data or starting point is in fact deeply entrenched in our culture, at least since the Enlightenment. Indeed, many of the philosophers who have criticized foundationalism present it not just as a technical philosophical theory (or meta-theory) which happened to be wrong and which we can now leave behind, but as a highly seductive view of things, a picture which has us in its thrall,[13] something with a powerful grip on our imagination and our common sense. Correspondingly, the reactions against it come in the form not only of particular objections to the various candidates for the foundations, but also of more general kinds of criticism: foundationalism represents an excessive desire for certainty, for intellectual security and closure; it is philosophy over-reaching itself, a kind of intellectual hubris.

Foundationalist patterns of thinking are so deeply ingrained in us that it is easy to imagine that the rejection of foundationalism involves the rejection of rationality and intellectual responsibility as such, that nonfoundationalists are advocating relativism, that they maintain that anything goes, or that they are renouncing all intellectual seriousness. Nonfoundationalists would reply that they are not abandoning reason as such, but a particular overly stringent, untenable, and unattainable *conception* of rationality. To put it another way, it is only because the *picture* of knowledge as a structure built up on foundations has such a grip on us that we become so very nervous of the thought that it is in fact foundationless. A number of alternative pictures have been proposed: our knowledge, or belief structure, can be thought of as a raft, a wigwam, or a spider's web.[14] Each of these images suggests that although beliefs are interrelated and support one another, no one of them single-handedly supports the others, and there is none that is not also itself supported *by* others. If one is thinking with the aid of these images, it ceases to

make much *sense* to ask which is the starting point on which everything else rests. Just as one does not inquire which strand of the spider's web is the one on which all the others are built, or which stick it is in the wigwam which is the first, which holds all the others up, so one need not look for a special belief or a special subset of beliefs which will play the role of grounding all the others without themselves in turn needing any grounds.

A final comment on philosophical foundationalism has to do with its relation to skepticism. Foundationalism in all its varieties is a response to problems of radical doubt. How can we be certain that anything we believe is justified? How do we know we are not completely mistaken, or at least how do we know that all our knowledge is not in fact mere opinion? The need to find an unshakable foundation, and to show how all else can be built upon it, is driven by the need to find an answer to such questions. This close connection between foundationalism and skepticism means that the antifoundationalist will need to have some take on skepticism as well. Merely to show that foundationalists have so far been unsuccessful will have little effect: if the foundationalists continue to need to answer skeptics, such criticism will do little more than push them into looking for different foundations. One of the characteristic strategies of the antifoundationalists, then, has been, not so much to find a new answer to skepticism, as to raise doubts about its very legitimacy. The challenge of skepticism may in fact be a false challenge, an unreal challenge, in some way an illegitimate challenge. So, for instance, the antifoundationalist might argue that no sane person in fact does or can doubt everything at once; the appropriate response to a person with the doubts of the (usually only hypothetical) radical skeptic would not be to construct a philosophical theory, but to raise questions of one's own about her mental health.[15] In one way or another, then, antifoundationalists need to show not only that foundationalism has failed, but also that there was no real need for it in any case.

Foundationalism and nonfoundationalism in theology

In theology the term foundationalism is used to describe the assumption that Christian beliefs, if they are to be justified, require a foundation in something independent of and prior to the Christian faith. The theological foundationalist is one who looks for something outside the circle of belief which can provide a support for belief; he or she is looking for a noncircular justification of belief, so that that which gives support for the claims of the Christian faith must not itself rest on this same faith.

Just as in philosophy, foundationalism in theology can take a variety of forms. Thus one can have a foundationalism of the right and a foundationalism of the left, both a fundamentalist foundationalism and a liberal foundationalism. A fundamentalist would count as a foundationalist if she

held, for instance, that the authority of the Bible could be demonstrated on the basis of some combination of independent historical verification of its claims and the witness of miraculous events, and that the occurrence of the miracles in turn could be established through a neutral historical examination of the evidence.[16] A liberal foundationalism, on the other hand, might make use of some sort of supposedly neutral philosophical prolegomenon to theology to establish the existence of a universal experience, and use this to demonstrate, if not the truth, then at least the meaningfulness or relevance, of Christian claims.

It is worth being clear about the way in which the theological use of the term *differs* from the philosophical. Most obviously, what the theological foundationalist is concerned about is not the foundations of any and all beliefs, but of a particular kind of belief, namely specifically Christian beliefs.[17] There is also a difference, however, as to what is required of the "foundations." Definitions of foundationalism in the philosophical literature usually include the stipulation that beliefs lying in the foundations do not depend for their justification on *any further beliefs whatsoever*; the way the word is used by theologians, on the other hand, is that all that is at stake is that the beliefs in the foundations must be independent of other specifically *Christian* beliefs. It would be at least logically possible, then, to be a philosophical nonfoundationalist and a theological foundationalist.

That these differences are non-trivial becomes clear if one considers the relationship of each of the two kinds of foundationalism to skepticism. As we noted above, philosophical foundationalism is closely tied to radical skepticism, in that it develops as a response to the skeptic's challenge; it is fuelled by the (perceived) need to answer the skeptic's universal doubt. One might also say that theological foundationalism is a response to skepticism, skepticism about the truth or credibility or even meaningfulness of Christian claims. There is a significant difference, here, however, in that the skeptic to whom the theologian is responding is a *real* one. While there may not be any real people who can (sanely) maintain the position of the philosophical skeptic, bringing absolutely all beliefs into doubt simultaneously, there is no shortage whatsoever of people capable of playing the role of the theological skeptic, calling all specifically Christian beliefs into question.

As I have already suggested, in theology as well as in philosophy "foundationalism" is a term of criticism: one meets few if any self-declared foundationalist theologians. The criticism operates on several levels. To accuse theologians of foundationalism is to suggest, first of all, that they have bought into a scheme that is no longer philosophically tenable, that they have been guided by a picture of the way knowledge and belief work which, though it may have presented itself as inescapable, on closer scrutiny turns out to be highly questionable. To such objections borrowed from philosophy, specifically theological objections are also, in some cases,

added; foundationalist theology is often seen as distorting or reducing the Christian message in its excessive anxiety to defend it.

Given the remarks above about the differences between foundationalism in theology and in philosophy, it is worth considering to what extent it is in fact legitimate to import into theology the criticisms developed of foundationalism in philosophy. There is, I would suggest, an element of analogy here, and not a direct fit between the philosophical objections and their theological application. The analogies, furthermore, work more easily in some respects than they do in others. The closest fit is probably to be found on the issue of pre-conceptual experience. The desire to find sense data which are independent of any conceptual thought or judgment in the empiricist tradition of philosophy has its parallel in the tradition of theological liberalism and its desire to find a universal human religious experience independent of the interpretation it may receive in any particular religious tradition, and even though a religious experience is not (usually) conceived of as just the same kind of thing as a sense experience, it seems plausible to suppose that the *kind* of argument used against the one will also be able to be used against the other.[18]

On another level, insofar as the philosophical rejection of foundationalism is the rejection of a metaphor, of a particular picture of the way knowledge works, then the theologian can point to, and problematize, the workings of that same metaphor in theology. Strictly speaking there is no reason why a metaphor which is inappropriate in one context might not be appropriate in another, but if one can make the case that the primary reason for the metaphor's prevalence in theology was its influence in the wider culture, and that philosophers and others have given us grounds for calling in question the wider dominance, then this might be good reason for thinking again about its role in theology.

The analogy begins to falter rather more, as we already hinted above, when it comes to the relation between foundationalism and skepticism. An important component of the philosophical case against foundationalism, we saw, was the rejection of skeptical doubt. Foundationalism is not needed as a response to skepticism because the skeptic's challenge was a false one, not a *real* challenge at all. It is not so clear, however, that it would be right to dismiss the theological skeptic's (the unbeliever's) challenge so lightly. One certainly cannot dismiss it by means of the same arguments which are used against the philosophical skeptic; while it may be impossible, inconceivable or insane to try to doubt all things at once, it does not seem to be impossible, inconceivable, or insane to doubt the whole of Christianity, since many sane people in our societies do so.[19]

It is here that additional, specifically theological arguments need to be drawn on in the theological version of antifoundationalism. The latter does include the rejection of skepticism—or to be precise, the rejection of making a response to skepticism the starting point, center or *raison d'être* of theology—but it does so for reasons drawn from the history of Christian

theology in the last few centuries rather than because of arguments borrowed from philosophers. Antifoundationalists argue that the experience of both Protestant and Roman Catholic theology has shown that when a desire to justify or render meaningful Christian beliefs before unbelievers has been a driving force in theology, the theology has suffered—foundationalist theology tends to distort the Christian message in its excessive anxiety to defend it, adopting to too large a degree the assumptions and standards of rationality of the larger culture in which it finds itself, and thereby losing its own distinctive identity.[20] One should abandon foundationalist approaches not because skepticism—unbelief—is a non-problem, but because putting this problem at the center of one's theological process turns out to be bad for the theology itself.

Nonfoundationalism remains a controversial position in theology. While few perhaps describe themselves as foundationalists, more than a few are made nervous by what seems to be the nonfoundationalist stance. Broadly speaking there are two (closely related) anxieties about nonfoundationalism. The first is the fear that nonfoundationalists are proposing an irrational, intellectually irresponsible, "anything goes" approach. Essentially this is the same fear already discussed above about the philosophical version of foundationalism,[21] and it illicits the same sorts of replies. In Roman Catholic circles this worry might take the form of asking whether a nonfoundationalist approach is compatible with the First Vatican Council's position on faith and reason—something to which we shall return in chapter 6. The second kind of anxiety is that nonfoundationalism represents a dangerously closed mentality in theology, a refusal to engage with those outside of one's own church, a loss of a sense of responsibility for or to the wider world. Whereas the philosopher may legitimately be able to decide that she does not need to engage with the radical skeptic because in fact radical skepticism is impossible and there is no such person, if the theologian makes the equivalent decision he seems to be arbitrarily cutting himself off from intercourse with a real (and large) group of people. To this the theological nonfoundationalist might reply that what he proposes is not necessarily no engagement whatsoever with non-believers, but rather that such engagement, and particularly the defense of one's beliefs to the non-believer, not be made the center and driving force of the theological project. How Rahner, interpreted as a nonfoundationalist, can nevertheless be understood to engage in apologetics is something we shall also consider in chapter 6.

Foundationalism and nonfoundationalism in the interpretation of Rahner

Rahner is often read, implicitly or explicitly, as a foundationalist. There are two sides to such a reading. First of all, it is frequently supposed that Rahner's early, philosophical books underpin, support, shape, and structure

his later theology. Among serious readers of Rahner few, if any, think that the theology can simply be read off of or mechanically deduced from the philosophy, but many do presume that the philosophy plays a major role as support for the theology; many believe, in other words, that the theology is logically dependent on the philosophy, even if it is not simplistically determined by it.[22] Second, it is often suggested or assumed that in Rahner one finds a Roman Catholic example of a typically modern and liberal foundationalist approach to theology, whereby an appeal is made to a purportedly universal pre-thematic religious experience ("transcendental experience" in Rahner's case) and this is used to legitimate and give meaning to the whole edifice of the Christian faith.

In the following chapters I shall be arguing against both aspects of this common foundationalist interpretation of Rahner. Against the first, I shall suggest that Rahner's oeuvre does not in fact need to be read as quite the tightly knit whole that it has often been taken to be—there are significant changes of both tone and position between philosophical and theological works. This is an important point in itself—a dense and challenging thinker can be made impossibly difficult if one is hunting for more coherence than is in fact there. However it is also important because it allows one to ask whether in fact Rahner's theology might or should be read as logically independent of his philosophy.[23] Against the second aspect of the foundationalist interpretation of Rahner, I shall argue that though pre-thematic experience does indeed play a central role in his thought, it need not be read as playing a *foundational* role. It is best seen as something to which his theology concludes rather than as its supposed starting point. On such a reading Rahner is doing something really rather different from the classic liberal modern theologies, even if at times he may sound quite like them.

The nonfoundationalist reading I will be proposing is just that—*a* reading. I will not claim that this is the *only* way Rahner can be read, but only that this is the *best* way he can be read. I will argue, in fact, that as well as shifts in position between Rahner's philosophy and his theology, there is a significant element of tension within his mature theology, and this tension itself calls forth different types of reading.

Although a foundationalist approach to reading Rahner predominates among non-specialists, and although even among specialists what I will be calling (in chapter 5) a semi-foundationalist approach is not uncommon, it should be noted that some scholarship already points in a different direction. In recent years there have been some calling for a move away from reading all of Rahner's work as a single coherent project[24] and others insisting on the centrality of spirituality and Rahner's spiritual writings for the interpretation of his thought (so that rather than seeing Rahner's early philosophical works as the driving force behind his theology, one ought to see his still earlier interests in spirituality and mysticism as the force behind both his philosophy and his theology).[25] In advocating a non-

foundationalist interpretation, then, although I will be following a rather different strategy than other recent scholars, I will to a degree be pursuing the same goal as some of them—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.[26]

Notions of foundationalism and nonfoundationalism are not ones that Rahner would have thought to apply to his own work, and perhaps for this reason the issue has not been taken up directly in much of the Rahner scholarship.[27] To ask how Rahner's thought is related to categories that Rahner himself did not employ, nevertheless, is a useful undertaking, both because it makes possible a very explicit rejection of very common types of misreadings, and because it allows Rahner's theology to be brought into more direct conversation with nonfoundationalist movements in philosophy and theology.

The plot of this book

I have said that the aim of this book is both expository (to provide an aid in coming to terms with some of Rahner's more difficult philosophical and theological ideas) and interpretive—to present and defend a nonfoundationalist reading of Rahner's theology. Readers will find, however, that exposition and argument are interweaved at every stage. I hope that this will serve to make the book interesting, rather than simply confusing. In chapters 2, 3, and 4, in particular, there is a good deal of exposition—of *Spirit in the World* and *Hearer of the Word*, of the notion of the supernatural existential, of the various ways in which the word "transcendental" is used in and about Rahner's thought—but in each case there will be argument as well. Chapter 2 offers not only an exposition of the kind of project *Spirit in the World* is and of its overall shape, but also an argument that its argument for the *Vorgriff auf esse* (which would, if anything, be considered central to the "foundation" of Rahner's subsequent theology) does not work. In chapter 3, I lay out the various ways in which Rahner uses the term "transcendental" and discuss their relationship to one another, and then go on to set Rahner's transcendental method in a Kantian and post-Kantian context of transcendental arguments, and consider questions deriving from this broader context about the very possibility of arguments of the type Rahner uses in *Spirit in the World*. Chapter 4 contains expositions of the notion of the supernatural existential and of the project of *Hearer of the Word*, but also an argument to the effect that these two are in fact in significant conflict with each other.

Chapter 5 is the heart of the book's argument: it is here that I describe what a nonfoundationalist reading of Rahner looks like and lay out the case for it. The remaining chapters work through the implications of such an argument. How can such a reading avoid turning Rahner into a relativist

or a fideist, and where does it leave Rahner's apologetic interests (chapter 6)? What light does it shed on the whole debate over the question of anonymous Christians (chapter 7)? What difference does such a reading in fact make to some of the classic criticisms of Rahner and to the way Rahner is positioned on a broader theological map?

2 *Spirit in the World*

Spirit in the World[1] is a dauntingly difficult book. And one of the implications of my own argument will be that grappling with *Spirit in the World* is not quite so vital for coming to terms with Rahner's theology as is sometimes supposed. Why then devote a chapter to it?

There are two reasons. First, although I will be suggesting that Rahner's writings are not best read as one entirely coherent whole, and arguing that the later theology need not be taken to depend logically on the earlier philosophical arguments, it does not follow that there are no connections whatsoever between *Spirit in the World* and Rahner's later theology. Some of the crucial ideas he uses later do indeed make their first appearance, or one of their first appearances, here. If it is, as I believe, a mistake to think of the theology as resting on *Spirit in the World* (and perhaps *Hearer of the Word*) as on a foundation, it is equally a mistake to suppose that the former has nothing to do with the latter.

Even if Rahner's theology is not founded upon his philosophy, then, one's understanding of the former can still be enhanced by getting some sense of what he was up to in the latter. The converse of this is that without at least *some* knowledge of *Spirit in the World*, of its contents and of the kind of work it is, the student of Rahner will find it difficult to feel confident in coming to terms with Rahner's theology—there may always be the lurking fear (even if to a large degree unjustified) that a major piece of the puzzle is missing.

The second reason for including a chapter on *Spirit in the World* is rather different. I shall be devoting the final section of this chapter to the exposition and critique of one important strand of *Spirit in the World*, Rahner's argument for the *Vorgriff auf esse*, the "pre-apprehension of being." This argument is by no means the whole of *Spirit in the World* or its sole purpose, but it is one of the most notorious and widely disputed elements of the work. Furthermore, if anything were to be in a philosophical foundation to Rahner's thought, it would have to be, or at least to include, this *Vorgriff*. To argue, as I will, then, that the case—the *philosophical* case—Rahner makes for the *Vorgriff* is thoroughly unpersuasive, is to give an added urgency to the interpretive issue of this volume.

Rahner originally wrote *Spirit in the World* between 1934 and 1936. He had finished his basic philosophical and theological training as a Jesuit, and had been ordained a priest. He had also by this time already published a number of articles on patristic and medieval spirituality.[2] Rahner was being directed at this point for a career in teaching the history of philosophy, and to this end he went to Freiburg to do a philosophy PhD.

The intellectual background to *Spirit in the World* is extremely complex. It is often presented as a response to Kant, and this is an important aspect of the book—and one to which I shall be returning in this chapter and the next. But that Rahner was not *simply* attempting to respond to Kant is immediately clear from the fact that he takes as his *starting point* precisely what Kant denies—that metaphysical knowledge, knowledge of what transcends the world, is possible. *Spirit in the World* is not infrequently described as following in the line of Fichte, but Rahner in later interviews suggested he had never read any Fichte.[3] Heidegger is clearly a presence—Rahner attended Heidegger's seminars during his time in Freiburg, and certain concepts and strategies are clearly borrowed from him. It would however be wrong to think of *Spirit in the World* as fundamentally a Heideggerian work, and those who try to read it in this light are forced to see Rahner as a very confused Heideggerian.[4] For the sake of tidiness, of keeping twentieth-century Roman Catholic thought in manageable categories, Rahner's philosophy is often designated as transcendental Thomist and lumped together with that of Bernard Lonergan and others, but in many ways this is more of a confusing than a helpful designation.[5] Certainly (and to this extent at least the transcendental Thomist label is justified) the writing of Joseph Maréchal is an important influence—it is well-documented that Rahner read and took notes on Maréchal's *Cahiers* during his earlier student days[6]—but in a variety of ways Rahner departs from Maréchal's approach. One thing is absolutely clear, which is that Rahner presents *Spirit in the World* as a reading of St Thomas—but almost everyone who has ever examined it from this angle, beginning with Rahner's own thesis director, has found it wanting.

The multiplicity of Rahner's sources, and the ambiguities of his relations to them, is one of the sources of difficulty in coming to grips with *Spirit in the World*. The reader is faced with multiple conceptual maps and multiple sets of technical philosophical terminology, none of which is necessarily used by Rahner in exactly the same way as they were used by those from whom he borrowed. If one wanted to summarize what was going on in a single sentence, one might say that in *Spirit in the World* Rahner is developing, under the general influence of Maréchal and with a few particular borrowings from Heidegger, a reading of Aquinas through the lens of Kant and the post-Kantians. This is, however, unlikely to bring enlightenment to those not already familiar with its contents.

I have mentioned that *Spirit in the World* is presented as an interpretation of Thomas Aquinas. It does not of course set out to present the whole of

Aquinas' thought. Rahner offers an interpretation of the "metaphysics of knowledge" of St Thomas, an interpretation focused on a single article of a single question of the *Summa Theologiae*—article 7 of question 84 of the Prima Pars, "Can the intellect know anything through the intelligible species which it possesses, without turning to the phantasms?" I need to say something first, then, about what is meant by metaphysics of knowledge, and second about the choice of this particular article as a point of focus.

The meaning of metaphysics of knowledge is best grasped by contrasting it with epistemology as a philosophical discipline, since both are concerned with knowing. Epistemology is centered on issues of justification—how do we know that we know?, what kind of grounds do we need?, and what is it that makes belief legitimate? Metaphysics of knowledge, on the other hand, is concerned with what is actually going on when we know, and of how knowing works. Anthony Kenny makes a similar distinction between epistemology and the philosophy of mind—the former is normative, the latter descriptive.[7] This in turn raises the question of how the metaphysics of knowledge differs from the philosophy of mind. In the categories of the contemporary analytic tradition the aspect of Aquinas' thought which Rahner is interpreting would indeed be described as philosophy of mind. The term "metaphysics of knowledge" carries different overtones, however, suggesting that the study of what goes on when we know, the study of how knowing works, cannot necessarily be cut off from questions of the nature of the things which are known, i.e. from metaphysics itself.

The fact that Rahner presents the whole of *Spirit in the World* as a commentary on a single article from Thomas is to a certain extent an artificial device (almost, one might say, the conceit of a doctoral student)—he does not in fact find everything he wants to say in this article alone, but draws far more broadly on Thomas' writings to justify his claims. Nevertheless, it is worth asking about the significance of the choice of focus. If, crudely, one approximates "intelligible species" here as concepts, and "phantasms" as images, then the issue of this article is whether we can employ concepts without the aid of images, and Thomas' answer is "no." At first sight this seems a rather odd and pedestrian focus for a work in which one is to demonstrate, among other things, that all human beings have a knowledge[8] of God. The point of *Spirit in the World* in fact, however, is to work out not just how we can have what one might call world-transcending knowledge, but to work this out in view of the fact that all our knowing is fundamentally rooted in contact with the world, with corporeal, spatio-temporal things. As Rahner understands this, it is not just that knowledge *begins* with the senses—so that we might at some point leave them behind and go on to something higher and purer: human knowledge, Rahner maintains, always *remains* dependent on sense intuition. Thus at least one reason for the selection of this particular article is its insistence that we

can never employ concepts (i.e. use our minds at all) except in conjunction with concrete images.

The very fact that *Spirit in the World* is presented as a work of interpretation is one source of its complexity, given that almost all readers take it to be not just a commentary on Aquinas but also a freestanding philosophical work in its own right. It is worth saying a little about how these two things fit together, and in what sense it is in fact justifiable to read *Spirit in the World* as philosophy in its own right, since in the second part of this chapter I will be presenting Rahner's arguments as *arguments*, and not just as interpretation.

Rahner does not directly raise the question of how his interpretation of Aquinas can at the same time be the development of his own argument. In fact he is more concerned to justify what might be considered the liberties he is taking in his treatment of Thomas than to claim any independent status for his reasoning. This may be because of the nature of the original work as a doctoral thesis; it certainly had something to do with the context in which Rahner was writing, where the truth of a position and its faithfulness to St Thomas were somewhat less distinct issues than they would be today, whether outside or within Roman Catholic circles.

Nevertheless, in Rahner's introductory remarks about the kind of interpretation of Thomas he is undertaking, one can find at least an implicit account of how an interpretation of another can also be an independently argued position. What he is after, Rahner insists, is an understanding of Aquinas' metaphysics of knowledge that is not merely historical but also genuinely *philosophical*. This means that it is not enough to "merely . . . 'narrate' what Thomas said": instead one has to "get back to the original philosophical event," to "relive the philosophy itself as it unfolds."[9] What might be meant by this "getting back" and "reliving"? "It is absolutely necessary," Rahner writes, "to begin with the starting point given by Thomas and to abandon one's self again and again to the dynamism of the matter itself so that the historically accessible fragments of his philosophy can really become philosophy."[10] In other words, it seems, the model is this: begin with Thomas' suppositions, more or less independently develop the consequences, and then check one's conclusions against the fragmentary evidence of Thomas' thought.[11] Except for the dependence on Thomas for the starting point, this is a recipe for simultaneously interpreting another and providing an independent argument.

Even the fact of starting with Thomas' "starting point," however, turns out to be no impediment to independence. Later in the introduction Rahner suggests that in a philosophical interpretation of a great philosopher, to suppose that the philosopher is making presuppositions "which are to be explained *only* 'historically'" is tantamount to admitting failure.[12] The "starting point" from Thomas with which one begins, then, cannot be something which merely *happened*, because of his circumstances, to be Thomas' basic presupposition. In the body of the text, furthermore,

for those things which Rahner identifies as Thomas' basic decisions, from which the rest is to flow, he also offers a metaphysical justification. Thus for instance Rahner begins the central part of the work with an analysis of the metaphysical question—something which owes more to Heidegger than to Aquinas,[13] and which Rahner presents as an indubitable Cartesian starting point for metaphysics—and then sets out to derive Thomas' basic presuppositions from this starting point. Beginning with the same starting point as Thomas turns out to mean, then, beginning with the same concerns and questions, asking about what Thomas is asking about, rather than simply accepting whatever material starting point Thomas takes, whatever concrete assumptions he may happen to make.

In short, giving a truly "philosophical" interpretation amounts to developing a philosophy capable of standing on its own which also can be attributed to Aquinas. The reader is free to evaluate what results, then, *either* as an interpretation of Thomas Aquinas *or* as a free-standing piece of philosophy. For the most part I will in fact do the latter: I will largely abstract from the interpretive aspect of *Spirit in the World* and discuss it as free-standing philosophy. There are two reasons for this. First, *qua* interpretation of Aquinas *Spirit in the World* has been evaluated a number of times, and with largely negative conclusions.[14] Second, even in Roman Catholic circles, the authority of Aquinas is no longer what it was: even if Rahner *could* trace his position to Aquinas this would not in itself suffice to convince many readers to accept it.[15]

In what follows I will not attempt to offer an exhaustive exposition of *Spirit in the World*, which would not only be beyond the scope of this book but would also severely stretch the patience of many of its readers. Instead I will try to describe the nature of the project, and briefly sketch the plot, as it were, of the whole, and then look more carefully and critically at one strand within the work, the argument for the *Vorgriff auf esse*.

The plot of *Spirit in the World*

The initial and most basic question of *Spirit in the World* is "how is metaphysics possible given that all our knowledge is grounded in the world?" The "world" Rahner defines as "the reality which is accessible to the immediate experience of man"[16]—it is the world of our ordinary experience, the world of time and space. Metaphysics, on the other hand, he takes to mean knowledge of that which goes beyond the world, knowledge of Being and of God. Roughly, then, the question is something like this: if all our knowledge starts with and remains enmeshed with the world of time and space, the world known through the senses, how is it that we can nevertheless know that which surpasses time and space and sense perception?

Directly guiding the unfolding of much of the central part of the argument is a second question, namely, "how is *receptive* knowledge possible,

given that knowing as such is *Beisichsein*, being present to oneself?" By receptive knowledge Rahner understands a knowledge whose proper object is the other. This is held to be the characteristically human kind of knowing: God knows things other than himself, but he knows them *through* himself, as that which he has created, and so not as proper objects—fundamentally what God knows is himself. (Angels also know things other than themselves, but they do so by a participation in God's knowledge.)[17] The fact that human knowledge is receptive is rendered problematic by the account Rahner gives of what knowledge as such is. He thinks it possible to show, from an analysis of the notions of knowing and being, not only that knowing and being are inseparable, but also that knowing is fundamentally "the self-luminosity of being," being present to oneself, *Beisichsein*. The fundamental structure of human knowing needs to be accounted for, then, in light of the fundamental nature of knowing as such. How can we know by knowing things outside ourselves if the nature of knowledge as such is, one might say, self-awareness?

What is clear from the start is that the answer to the second question will turn out to provide the answer to the first: metaphysics, the knowledge of that which transcends the world, will be shown to be possible precisely because it is a condition of the possibility of receptive knowledge, of knowledge of the world.[18] The overall plan of *Spirit in the World*, then, is to establish the possibility of our having a world-transcending knowledge by investigating how knowledge of the world itself works.

The first part of *Spirit in the World* is an introductory interpretation of question 84, article 7 of the first part of the *Summa Theologiae*; here Rahner elicits from Thomas' text the questions and issues he means to deal with.

Rahner begins the main body of the text, Part II, with a Heideggerian analysis of the metaphysical question, the question about Being. He maintains that questioning in general, and the metaphysical question in particular—asking about Being—is unavoidable for human beings. From the very fact that we do and must ask about Being, however, we can learn, Rahner thinks, quite a lot. The various presuppositions of the two guiding questions mentioned above, in fact, are all presented as flowing from this analysis: that human knowledge is fundamentally receptive, and has "the other" as its proper object; that we are from the start "with Being," i.e. have some preliminary knowledge of it; and that knowledge is fundamentally *Beisichsein*—all these things Rahner derives from the fact that we can and must ask "what is Being?"[19]

Now, reasons Rahner, if receptive knowledge is to be possible, and if knowing is essentially being present to one's self, then there must be two moments, two aspects, of knowledge. There must in this one knowledge be both an element of being away with the other, and also an element of being with the self, or, to add a misleading but apparently unavoidable hint of temporal ordering to the picture, a "return" to the self.[20] The element of

"being away with the other" is necessary since what is to be known is the other; the knower must in some sense *become* the other in order to know it. To put it another way, the knower must somehow overcome the otherness, enter into the otherness, of the other, in order to know it, if essentially knowing is a matter of self-presence. There must also be the "return," the moment of being with the self, if it is to be *my* knowing of the other, and not just the other knowing itself.[21] The first moment Rahner calls sensibility, and the second, intellect. (The second moment is also at times designated variously as the return, as thought, and as abstraction.)[22]

The organization of the body (i.e. Part II) of *Spirit in the World* is governed by this division of the moments of knowing. "The Foundation," which sets up the problem, is followed by successive chapters devoted to sensibility, abstraction (i.e. intellect), and the unity of the two. In the chapter on sensibility Rahner develops and tries to make intelligible the notion of the knower being "the being of the other" and to show that time and space are the a priori conditions of the possibility of sensible intuition.[23] In the chapter on abstraction he attempts to work out how it is possible that we do not simply remain at the level of sensibility, how we move from this "being with the other" to objective knowledge, and in particular, he shows that the *Vorgriff auf esse*, which we shall discuss below, is the condition of the possibility of the "return to the self." At every stage Rahner has in fact emphasized the inseparability of the two moments, so that what is distinctive about the final chapter of Part II, "Conversion to the phantasm," is the *way* in which he discusses their unity. The movement of the previous two chapters is here recapitulated in reverse order: Rahner begins with the notion that the human being is essentially *Vorgriff*, a spirit which reaches out towards infinite being, and then presents sensibility as a necessary emanation from spirit, as the "power" which the spirit releases from itself in order to be itself.[24]

In the relatively brief third part, Rahner draws together and summarizes his conclusions, and in a final paragraph gives a very brief anticipation of *Hearer of the Word*.

The *Vorgriff auf esse* and the philosophical arguments for it

The Vorgriff auf esse

Of central importance to *Spirit in the World*, and also to a good deal of Rahner's later thought, is the claim that a "pre-apprehension of being"[25] is a condition of the possibility of all our knowing (and, in the later renditions, willing). Whenever we apprehend some particular object, or (in later versions) will some finite value, Rahner maintains, we never *merely* recognize or choose the particular, but are always at the same time reaching beyond it towards the whole of being, and it is only because of this reaching beyond

that we are able in the first place to recognize or choose the individual finite object. Furthermore, in reaching towards the whole of being we also reach towards God. Because of the significance of this *Vorgriff* for much of Rahner's thought, it is worth saying a little more about what Rahner means by this claim (drawing on comments both in *Spirit and the World* and later writings) before going on to look more particularly at the arguments which are given for it in *Spirit in the World*.

To characterize the *Vorgriff*, and its relation to our knowledge or choice of particulars, Rahner relies on a number of images. One is taken from Heidegger: we are aware of infinite being as the *horizon* for our knowledge of finite things. An awareness of being and of God, to put it another way, forms the ever-present and necessary background for our knowledge of the particular objects that lie in the foreground of consciousness. A second image is borrowed from (though not original to) Aquinas: the *Vorgriff* is the *light* which in illumining the individual objects allows our intellect to grasp them. A third image, that of movement, Rahner owes chiefly to Maréchal: we have a dynamism towards being and God, so that the mind always moves beyond any particular, never entirely satisfied or at rest.

The notion that there is something like a pre-apprehension of being is at work in Rahner's thought often even when he does not use the term *Vorgriff*. Rahner frequently employs the language of transcendence, for instance, and in doing so he is usually speaking at least among other things of the *Vorgriff*. The human being's "transcendentality" (*Transzendentalität*) is its dynamism towards that which lies beyond the particular finite object; its "transcendental reference" (*transzendentale Verwiesenheit*) is its reference to this same beyond; its "transcendental experience" (*Transzendenzerfahrung*) is the moment in all experience of particular beings which is an experience of being as such or of God. Indeed, what Rahner means by describing the human being as "spirit" is closely linked to the notion that we are in possession of the *Vorgriff*: in *Spirit in the World*'s introduction, he defines spirit as "a power which reaches out beyond the world and knows the metaphysical."[26]

It is of critical importance, Rahner is always careful to insist, not to confuse the kind of awareness we have of being and of God with our knowledge of finite objects. The distinction between the two kinds of knowing is promoted by at least the first two of the three images mentioned above: the horizon always recedes, and can never be examined directly; the light is not one among the objects that we see, but that *by* which we see everything that we see, that which is known only in the seeing of other things. Similarly, then, the being of which we are aware in the *Vorgriff* is never known or grasped or disposed of in the way that individual beings can be—it never becomes an object of knowledge itself, but remains always only that of which we are aware *in* knowing concrete objects.

This distinction between two kinds of knowledge can be understood—in part—in terms of a more general distinction between two levels of consciousness which is one of the recurring themes in Rahner's thought.[27]

It is necessary to distinguish, Rahner insists again and again, between an *original* level of knowledge, or experience, or existence, and the level on which we use words and concepts. We use concepts to verbalize, thematize, or objectify our original experience, but the latter is never fully captured, never exhausted, by these concepts. The original experience always remains richer than any articulation of it, always eludes a complete verbalization. But though the thematization is always imperfect, and though the concepts with which we speak of an experience should never be mistaken for the original experience, the attempt to articulate an experience is necessary to, and a shaping element in, the experience itself.

This kind of distinction can be employed in discussing moods and emotions, and indeed it gains a good deal of its plausibility from the fact that it seems to make sense in connection with them. I can be angry or depressed or happy without explicitly realizing it; or if I do in some way realize it, I may well feel that I cannot quite succeed in putting into words exactly how it is that I am feeling. It is clear in such cases, then, that one can distinguish between having an experience "in an original way" and being able to conceptualize it. It is also clear, however, that though it ought not to be confused with the experience itself, the conceptualization does play a significant role in *shaping* the experience. (An anger which remains "pre-thematic," for instance, takes a very different course from one which is in some way expressed.)

The pre-apprehension of being, then, is pre-thematic, and is not to be confused with any concepts with which it may be described. As distinct from other things that might also be called pre-thematic, however, (such as moods and emotions), it is *also* to be distinguished from concepts in that it is the condition of the possibility of *every* concept, even those which may be used to describe it.

Rahner's conception of the *Vorgriff* is relatively constant—more so, for instance, than is his understanding of the supernatural existential (to be discussed in chapter 4)—but it does undergo some degree of variation over time. In *Spirit in the World* Rahner is careful to distinguish being from God (i.e. to distinguish being from "Absolute Being," *esse commune* from *esse absolute*): he first mounts an argument which shows that we have a pre-apprehension of being, and only then, in a further step, argues that we must also in the pre-apprehension be aware of God, that absolute being must be "co-affirmed" (*mitbejaht)* in the *Vorgriff*. In the later writings this distinction is not always maintained, and Rahner will sometimes simply say that a pre-apprehension of Absolute Being or an awareness of Absolute Mystery (both of which turn out to be ways of referring to God) is a condition of the possibility of our knowledge or love of finite beings.

There is also arguably a certain shift in that *for* which the *Vorgriff* is a condition. In *Spirit in the World* it makes its appearance simply as a condition of the possibility of knowledge of the world, i.e. of knowledge of particular spatio-temporal objects. In *Hearer of the Word*, the next book,

there is already a certain broadening: the *Vorgriff* is a condition of the possibility not only of knowing but also of willing. The latter is included, however, only because it in a sense already *contains* an element of knowing: Rahner holds that there is an act of judging in every action, since in every action "we have always to do with something that is such or such, of this or that kind."[28] The broadening is in no way radical. In later writings Rahner will sometimes speak of the *Vorgriff* primarily as a condition of the possibility of our dealings with other *people*: in "Experience of self and experience of God," for instance, he emphasizes that "man experiences himself by experiencing the other *person* and not the other *thing*."[29] Passages such as these, however, probably reflect an attempt to respond to accusations that with his strong focus on subjectivity Rahner does not do justice to *inter*-subjectivity, rather than any really radical shift in his views: the *Vorgriff* continues to makes its appearance fundamentally as a condition of the possibility of either knowing, or knowing and willing, or knowing and something related to willing (freedom, responsibility, love).

The arguments for the Vorgriff

To set out and evalute the arguments for the *Vorgriff* in *Spirit in the World*, it is in fact necessary to look in two different places. There is a certain ambiguity in the relationship of what is established in "The Foundations" about our knowledge of Being to that which follows. In principle, as we have seen, Rahner has shown from the start *that* we have a knowledge which transcends the world, so that the task of what follows is not to demonstrate the existence of this knowledge, but, assuming its existence, to work out how this is compatible with all our knowledge beginning with the world (thus, the fact that "man is in the presence of being in its totality insofar as he finds himself in the world" is "the paradox of the *starting point* of human metaphysics").[30] In the chapters that follow "The Foundations," however, Rahner nowhere appeals to the prior assumption of our possession of metaphysical knowledge, but arrives independently at the conclusion that we have a knowledge of infinite Being. The basic shift in the nature of the argument is already introduced, in fact, towards the end of "The Foundations," when Rahner turns, as we have seen, from the question about the possibility of metaphysics (given the worldliness of our knowledge), to the question about the possibility of receptive knowledge (given the nature of knowing in general). Although the answer to the second question turns out to contain within it the answer to the first, the second question itself does not presuppose everything assumed by the first—in particular it does not directly presuppose the existence of metaphysical knowledge.[31]

In any case, what this means is that there are in fact in *Spirit in the World* two distinct arguments in support of the *Vorgriff*, one in the context of a Heideggerian analysis of the metaphysical question and the other in the

treatment of abstraction. These can both I think be considered arguments for the *Vorgriff* even though in the first case what is advanced (the always already present knowledge of Being in its totality) is still somewhat vague and as yet lacks some of the characteristics of the *Vorgriff*. Certainly one can say, at the very least, that there are two distinct arguments which are not coordinated with one another but which are both relevant to the establishment of the *Vorgriff*. These separate arguments, then, will be examined in turn.

The first layer of argument

As we have seen, Rahner begins the systematic part of *Spirit in the World* with the question "what is being?" His strategy is not to attempt a direct answer to this question but rather to draw inferences from the fact that the question can be and is (inescapably, he maintains) asked. That this is a necessary strategy follows, or so Rahner maintains, from the nature of the case: because one is asking about being in general, one cannot look to any particular being or class of beings, to anything in the world at all, to find an answer: the only possibility, then, is to turn back upon the question itself—"the metaphysical question can take . . . the content of its answer, only from itself, from the compelling necessity to ask about being in its totality."[32]

It is interesting to note that while in the first edition of *Spirit in the World* Rahner begins Part II directly with the analysis of the question about being, Metz in the later edition adds a number of introductory paragraphs which serve to give a more emphatically Cartesian air to the undertaking: the necessity of the metaphysical question is (purportedly) established by a presentation of the logic of questioning. Just as according to Descartes the one thing that I cannot doubt is that I am doubting, so here the one thing that cannot be called into question is the question itself. Metz is not in fact altering the cast of Rahner's original argument, however, but only bringing it out more clearly. Rahner had assumed the necessity of the metaphysical question, and therefore implicitly that it gives an indubitable starting point for thought; Metz simply makes this assumption more explicit and offers a (rather weak) attempt to establish it rigorously.[33]

Rahner gets a good deal of mileage, as we have already noted, out of this question, but of interest to us here is only one of the conclusions he draws: asking the metaphysical question can be possible only if, Rahner maintains, we have a prior knowledge of being. If we were not in some way already familiar with being, we would not know to ask about it. (The knowledge in question is not, of course, anything like exhaustive knowledge, or we would not *need* to ask a question at all.)

This can be construed as a kind of transcendental argument, and I will be arguing in the next chapter that arguments of this form can never

succeed—they cannot establish anything definitively because they rely on an illegitimate appeal to the imagination. But what I now want to argue is that his account is not even the only imaginable way to make sense of our capacity to ask about being, and so it does not carry even this apparent plausibility. Our capacity to ask about being is capable of far simpler explanations. One could argue, for instance, as follows. Our languages, first of all, include in general the capacity to form nouns from verbs, whether by means of the participle ("being") or the infinitive ("sein"); and second, given any noun "x," we can formulate a grammatical question "what is x?" This is enough to account for the fact that we *can* ask the question. That some people at least *do* ask the question, and ask it quite seriously, of course, may need some further explanation, but here too one can easily think of alternatives to Rahner's proposal. One could argue, for instance, that people are misled by the surface grammar of a language into thinking that there must be some one thing corresponding to the noun which is formed from this particular verb. The surface grammar of our language might similarly enable or even encourage us to ask questions such as "what is the largest number?" or "how long is string?," but this does not mean that there is a largest number or that string as such has a length, much less that we have some prior if dim knowledge of this supposed largest number and length of string enabling us to ask such questions.[34]

Criticisms along lines such as these, however, seem too easy, so easy in fact that they arouse the suspicion that they must be based on a misconstrual of Rahner's arguments. It is hard to believe that Rahner could be falling into such a simple fallacy as I have just implied. Presumably, then, we are to understand something more, something deeper, by the notion of being able to ask the metaphysical question than literally being able to articulate a question of a certain form. This suggestion seems particularly plausible in connection with the way a similar argument is developed in Rahner's next major work, *Hearer of the Word*.[35] Here Rahner claims in one passage that everyone answers the question about being even if they refuse to ask it, and in another that in everything we do we are in fact asking this question. Clearly neither of these claims would even begin to make sense on a completely literal understanding of "the metaphysical question."

What exactly the non-literal understanding of asking the metaphysical question should be, however, is not easy to work out. The two passages alluded to in the previous paragraph in fact point in somewhat different directions. In one Rahner speaks about being in a way in which we are more accustomed to find meaning, or perhaps "the ultimate concern," treated:

> Even when we do not bother asking such a question or explicitly refuse to do so, we still answer the question . . . Every time we make of some reality our be-all and end-all, we make of it the center of everything around us and of all that we are. All the rest is but a means for

> or an expression of this unique reality. This is the way we say what we mean and wish to mean by being.[36]

Being, then, we take to be whatever is most important to us, and the question about being must be, roughly, the question about the meaning of life, about what it is that ultimately matters. In the other passage, by contrast, this same "question about being" seems already to be identified with the *Vorgriff* itself: Rahner affirms that the question about being is implicitly contained in everything the human being thinks or says and then proceeds in a very brief fashion to outline his argument that the *Vorgriff* is a condition of the possibility of every judgment.[37]

How exactly we are to understand the argumentative move from the assertion that the metaphysical question is asked to the claim that we must have some prior knowledge of being, then, is not entirely clear. Indeed, in light of what has just been said it could be debated whether this move should be viewed as an argument at all. It might in fact be more charitable to regard it rather as the preliminary statement and unfolding of Rahner's basic view. What is clear, in any case, is that this analysis of the question of being *cannot* function, as Rahner at least at times seems to present it, as an argument which beginning from nothing save what is inescapable and undeniable proceeds to lay a foundation for metaphysics.

The second, more detailed and explicit argument for the *Vorgriff* is developed in the third chapter of the main part of *Spirit in the World*, the chapter on abstraction. The starting point for this argument is not the fact that we can or do or must ask the question about being, but instead the fact that we make judgments of the form "this is a such and such" (i.e. "this is a tree," "this is a table," "this is red").[38] In making such judgments we are able to subsume a particular (the particular tree, table, or red thing) under a universal (the concept of tree, table, or redness). This is not to say, of course, that we first identify something as *a* tree and then acknowledge that as such it belongs to the class of trees in general: it is rather that in the initial recognition that before us stands a tree the subsumption of the particular under the universal has already taken place, for the general concept of tree has been applied to the particular "this."

The ability to make judgments of this form is, as Rahner sets things up, a fundamental aspect of our humanity. As we have seen, Rahner maintains that there must be two basic moments in human knowing: a moment of being with the "other" and a moment of being with the self, or of "return." Judgments of the form "this is a such and such" turn out according to Rahner to capture one of these moments: subsuming a particular under a universal is the activity in which the return to the self takes place.[39]

This itself needs some explaining. How is it that the return takes place in such judgments? Rahner is insistent, first of all, that the return to the self is not something separate from, occurring after or independently of, the "being with the other." The two are "moments" of a single knowledge.

In fact, the return to the self occurs precisely in the recognition of the other *as* other. I do not first recognize the other, and then second and separately, have a knowledge of myself, but in recognizing the other as other, I am implicitly aware of myself as that from which it is distinguished. Now this recognition of the other as other, or to put it another way, this subject–object opposition, occurs precisely, Rahner believes, when the subject forms judgments of the type "this is a such-and-such":

> the "this" appears as the reference point standing over against the knowing to which the knower refers what is (universally) known by him. But then the subject with the content of his knowledge (the universal concept) already stands to some extent at a distance from the "this" to which he refers the content of the knowledge. This content of knowledge is universal precisely because it stands on the side of the knowing subject in its opposition to the "this" and therefore can be related to any number of "this's."[40]

Rahner's view here seems to be that the universal in a sense *belongs* to the subject—it is my concept which I have in my head, so to speak—and so by distinguishing it from a "this" one is distinguishing something in the subject, and therefore the subject itself, from the "this." In brief, then, the line of reasoning is as follows: a universal is always referred to a "this" (i.e. we never have a concept except in a judgment about a particular); in order to refer a universal to a "this" I must first of all distinguish it *from* the "this"; the universal is located on the side of the subject; therefore in distinguishing the "this" from the universal I set the "this" over against myself; in setting the "this" over against myself I become aware of myself "for the first time"[41] (as that which is distinguished from the "this") and so "return" to myself from the (logically if not temporally) prior "indifferentiation of subject and object in sensibility."

The argument for the *Vorgriff*, then, takes its starting point from the fact that we can make judgments of the form "this is a tree" or "this is red"—and what we have just seen is that this is not a random or trivial starting point. As Rahner sets it up, having the *Vorgriff* is going to be intimately tied to what makes us human beings, conscious of ourselves and the world around us.

The argument itself unfolds in two phases. Roughly, in the first Rahner takes up the nature of our use of concepts (i.e. of "subsuming particulars under universals"), and in the second he examines the fact that we use concepts to make affirmations about reality. He insists (in what is becoming a familiar pattern) that these two things are not really distinct: he focuses more narrowly first on concept formation to introduce the notion of the *Vorgriff*, and then steps back to look at what the use of concepts is always a part of—the fact that we affirm things about reality—to broaden the understanding of it.

The first stage in the argument, then, is to show that the *Vorgriff* is a condition of the possibility of the use of concepts, of the subsumption of particulars under universals. Rahner has defined the universal concept as "a known intelligibility that exists in many and can be predicated of many"—or, to use the language of Aristotle and Aquinas, as a form that is "liberated" from its matter insofar as it is recognized as potentially the form of many "this's."[42] Now, in order for the form to be recognized as potentially the form of other matter, it must, Rahner reasons, be recognized as *limited* in the "concretion" of form and matter, in the particular sensibly intuited thing in which it is given. The question becomes, then, how can the form be known as limited in the individual form–matter synthesis in which it is first met? Only, Rahner maintains, if there is a *Vorgriff*:

> We must therefore ask how the agent intellect [which does the work of liberating the form and therefore abstracting] is to be understood so that it can know the form as limited, confined, and thus as of itself embracing further possibilities in itself, as bordering upon a broader field of possibilities. Obviously this is possible only if, antecedent to and in addition to apprehending the individual form, it comprehends of itself the whole field of these possibilities and thus, in the sensibly concretized form, experiences the concreteness as limitation of these possibilities, whereby it knows the form itself as able to be multiplied in this field. This transcending apprehension of further possibilities we call the *Vorgriff*.[43]

Seeing a universal instantiated in this particular, then, involves seeing the universal as *restricted* by this particular, which in turn requires having a simultaneous awareness of a broader possible field in which the universal could, so to speak, operate, and this awareness is the *Vorgriff*.

In the second phase of the argument, Rahner moves back from the concept (the universal) to the judgment. In order to work out the scope of the *Vorgriff*, what exactly the "further possibilities" are, he suggests, one has to consider the broader context in which it occurs.

Rahner is concerned to insist, as we have already suggested, that making judgments always involves making affirmations about reality. Following Maréchal, he maintains that it is in the nature of a judgment to affirm an *Ansich*, i.e. to say something about the way something is in itself, apart from and logically prior to the judgment.[44] The significance of this claim becomes clearer if one attends to what is being rejected. Maréchal, and presumably also Rahner, attributes to Kant the position that making a judgment is a matter merely of connecting two concepts, i.e. the concept of the predicate with the concept of the subject. According to the view they repudiate, then, for instance, I have a concept of tree and a concept of green, and when I say "the tree is green" I am simply connecting the two. Rahner, as we have seen, insists that I only have concepts in the first place

in connection with some particular (the universal is always "concretized"), so I in fact never simply think "tree" but always something more like "this tree." When I form the judgment "the tree is green," then, what I am really meaning is that the concept green applies, not to the concept tree, but to the thing to which I am applying the concept of tree.[45] One might put this same point as follows: one does not talk about one's concepts but *with* one's concepts, using the concepts to talk about something. The judgment, then, always points to something beyond itself—it intends to say something about something existing in itself, about an *Ansich*.

The *Vorgriff* was presented as the condition of the possibility of abstracting the form and therefore forming a concept, but concepts do not appear by themselves—they occur only in judgments. Knowing actually happens not by way of isolated concepts which are subsequently joined together, but first of all in the judgment. What must be liberated by the *Vorgriff*, Rahner concludes, is therefore whatever is the "form" of the judgment,[46] but "what was meant in the affirmative synthesis [the judgment] was *what-is-in-itself* (*das Ansichsein*)."[47] It is the in-itself, then, that the pre-apprehension liberates, and therefore, he maintains, it must be an unlimited in-itselfness that the pre-apprehension apprehends:

> We can therefore say that what the abstractive pre-apprehension attains to as unlimited is what was affirmed as limited in the synthesis (*complexio*) [another designation for judgment], the objective in-itself (*Ansich*) of the known. Hence what-is-in-itself as such (*das Ansichsein überhaupt*) is apprehended in the pre-apprehension.[48]

Thus, the question about the scope of the *Vorgriff* has been transformed into the question, what exactly is this *Ansich* affirmed in the judgment, or, to be more precise, what is the *Ansichsein überhaupt*, the limitation of which is affirmed in the judgment? And the answer is *esse*. Judgments have to do with being. Rahner defends this contention primarily negatively, by raising and refuting a number of apparent counter-instances. One might think that while some judgments may be about actual being, others only affirm something about ideal relations—that there are, in other words, distinct kinds of *Ansich*. Or one might think that judgments which are negative cannot affirm any being. Both contentions are refuted by way of a presentation of Thomas' arguments.

"Being," it could be thought, is the emptiest of things, the lowest common denominator, so to speak, of everything. The fact that I have being seems to be not the most exciting thing one could say about me, something that does not distinguish me from anyone else, from animals or plants or even from a bit of dirt. According to such an understanding, being is something to which one would need to add other things to get anything interesting. This intuitive sense of being, "empty being," is in fact at the opposite end of the spectrum from *esse*. *Esse* is to be conceived

rather as the *fullness* of being, that from which one must *subtract* in order to get a particular being.[49] Particular beings are by virtue of *esse*, but they have *esse* only in a limited form. A dog is a dog and not a cat—it is one thing and not another—and by this it shows that it has only a limited *esse*, and not the fullness of *esse*—a finite being and not being itself.

Judgments, then, are not just about concepts, but about something independent of the judgment, about an *Ansich*, and this *Ansich* is always *esse* in some limited form or other. In order for us in the judgment to be able to affirm a limitation of *esse*, so the argument goes, we must have a pre-apprehension of unlimited *esse*, and so the scope of the *Vorgriff* is *esse* as such.

Now, there are all kinds of points at which one might want to probe further or take issue with the argument I have just outlined. A great deal is presupposed, simply asserted, or only cursorily argued for. Are judgments of the form "this is a such-and-such" really so central as Rahner is claiming? Is one and the same thing always going on when we use concepts? (Wittgensteinian thinkers would certainly disagree on both counts.) Is Rahner being unduly led by the suggestiveness of the Aristotelian/Thomistic language of matter "limiting" the form and of the "liberation" of forms? Is he justified in his account of judgments' relation to the "*Ansich*," or in his account of "Being" and its relation to particular things?

I will not offer anything like an exhaustive critique here. In the next chapter I will take issue with a fundamental pattern of argumentation running through what I have described: at crucial points Rahner is deploying something like a transcendental argument, and I shall argue that in principle these cannot be successful. For the moment I want simply to point out that even if there were not a problem with such a pattern of arguing, and even if one could accept the legitimacy of the various categories and conceptualities that Rahner uses, and the way he sets up the issues in *Spirit in the World*, there is still a fundamental slippage in the way he deploys notions of limitedness and unlimitedness.

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? How is it possible for us to recognize that what we meet here in a particular "this" could also be met elsewhere—that this is one among many possible instances of redness or one among many possible rabbits? How can the form of red or of the rabbit be "liberated" from the particular in which it is found so that it can be recognized by us as something potentially more general? 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 other matter, and to recognize the form as limited by this particular matter—are simply two sides of the same coin. So the

question, "how do we universalize the form?" is, through a simple flip of the coin, transformed into the question, "how are we able to see the form as limited in this particular occurrence?" The answer Rahner gives is that we can know the form as limited only if we are aware of something unlimited, of a broader field of possibilities for the form.

One way this might be interpreted is simply as another flip of the coin. We could see the form as potentially the form of other matter by recognizing it as limited, and in just the same way we can recognize it as limited if we see it as potentially the form of other matter. This would of course not get us very far—we would simply have gone round in a circle. If however one interprets this "broader field of possibilities" in any other way, it is very difficult to see how it could be relevant. Only if we are aware of a broader field *precisely as* possibilities for the form would this awareness enable a recognition of the form as limited by the particular. Simply from an awareness of the particular on the one hand, and of some unrelated broader field on the other, no recognition of the limitation of the form in the particular would ensue.

Rahner is in fact trading on two different notions of limitation. There is the limitedness of the 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. To recognize that the form of this rabbit, for instance, could have been the form of that rabbit is to recognize the limitedness of the form by the particular; to distinguish the rabbit from some background, on the other hand—to recognize that the rabbit is not the hill on which it sits—is to recognize that the rabbit is not everything, the whole of being, and thus is limited in this second sense. What is at issue in Rahner's discussion of abstraction is how a limitation of the first kind is recognized: the awareness of a field of possibilities, however, unless they are known *as* possibilities of the form, would only make possible a recognition of a limit in the second sense. What Rahner offers us, then, is either a tautology or a non-sequitur. Either he is simply repeating the point that recognizing the form as universal and recognizing it as limited by this particular matter are equivalent, or he is introducing the *Vorgriff* to solve a problem which is quite different from the one he initially raised. Rahner's argument is, then, flawed by an equivocation on the notion of limit.

Indeed, when Rahner eventually concludes that this broader field is in fact the whole of Being, *esse*, it is clear that he has opted for the second notion of limitation, and also that we have departed very far from the initial problem. What Rahner is proposing is in some sense akin to the suggestion that in order to recognize that one's own house is one house among several, that there are other houses on the block, one needs to be taken into outer space and given a view of planets and stars and whole galaxies. The solution is out of all proportion to the problem, and simply leaves it behind.

One of the central arguments of *Spirit in the World*, then, depends pivotally on an equivocation. If this *were* the foundation of all Rahner's subsequent work, it would be, at this point in any case, a very shaky foundation. In the next chapter we will see another reason to be concerned about this shakiness: it is not just that a particular argument is as it happens very doubtful, but that the very possibility of the kinds of arguments Rahner uses in *Spirit in the World* and *Hearer of the Word* need to be called into question.

3 Transcendental

The meanings of transcendental

Reading Rahner, and reading about Rahner, one is sure to come across the term transcendental, and in many guises. Rahner is described as a transcendental Thomist and as a proponent of transcendental theology. He discusses the nature of a transcendental method. He speaks of transcendental experience, transcendental revelation, human transcendance or transcendentality, of transcendental investigations, and of transcendental anthropology. To understand the meaning of these words and phrases, and indeed the relationships in which they stand to one another, it is necessary to keep in mind two distinctions. The first is a distinction between two ways in which Rahner himself uses the word transcendental—a distinction which is all the more important to note since Rahner himself does not. And second, there is the distinction between the ways Rahner uses the word and the way in which others use it *of* him.

To transcend means to surpass, to go beyond or above, and one might expect "transcendental" to have something to do with that which goes beyond or rises above something. Immanuel Kant, however, introduced a distinctive and influential sense of the word which in fact has very *little* to do with this: he would call knowledge transcendental, he wrote, "which is occupied not so much with objects as with the mode of our knowledge of objects insofar as this mode of knowledge is to be possible *a priori.*"[1] Transcendental for Kant, then, refers to a type of investigation, an investigation where one studies not the things that we know, nor something which might be beyond what we know, but rather that which is in some sense *before* what we know—the constitution of the subject, of the one who does the knowing, insofar as this is a determining element in that which is known. Transcendental, then, is a description of a certain kind of rather inward-looking philosophical investigation. In a second and closely related sense, furthermore, Kant transfers the term to those things which are discovered *in* such an investigation—the a priori conditions of the possibility of experience which the Kantian transcendental procedure unearths are in turn known as *transcendental* conditions of the possibility of experience. So

in a transcendental investigation one looks to determine the transcendental conditions of the possibility of experience—what it is about us that makes us able to have experience, to know anything, in the first place.

It is worth noting that Kant's use of the term transcendental is not just different from what one might expect, but actually opposed to it. One of the purposes of the Kantian transcendental investigation of knowledge is to clearly delimit what cannot be known. If, on Kant's view, one properly understands the transcendental conditions of the possibility of experience, and the role they play, then one will know that no "transcendent" knowledge, no knowledge going beyond experience, beyond space and time, is possible. (Note, that Kant does then use the word "transcendent," as opposed to "transcendental," in a more traditional way, to refer to knowledge which would, supposedly, exceed the bounds of experience—but the context in which he uses this term is always a negative one, because transcendent knowledge is not on his account possible.)

In Rahner's thought, as I have already suggested, the term "transcendental" is used in two ways. It is used first of all in the way a naïve reader, unschooled in Kant, might expect, to refer to that which transcends, which goes beyond something—and in particular, to that which transcends individual finite objects: when Rahner speaks about our transcendentality, about transcendental experience, then at least part of what he means is that there is a dimension of us, of our experience, that reaches out and goes beyond all particular, limited objects. But Rahner *also* uses the term in what is least broadly speaking a Kantian sense, to refer to a particular kind of investigation, and to the results of such an investigation. Thus, for instance,

> a *transcendental investigation* examines an issue according to the necessary conditions given by the possibility of knowledge and action on the part of the subject himself,[2]

or

> A transcendental line of enquiry, regardless of the particular area or subject-matter in which it is applied, is present when and to the extent that it raises the question of the conditions in which knowledge of a specific subject is possible in the knowing subject himself.[3]

I have said that Rahner does not advert to the fact that he uses this one word in two different ways. In some sense he does not need to, because for him the two kinds of "transcendental" fit together very neatly. According to Rahner if one undertakes a transcendental investigation in the broadly Kantian sense, then, *pace* Kant, what one will discover is precisely that our experience has a transcendental dimension, that we are transcendental beings, in the non-Kantian sense. So, for instance, in *Foundations of*

Christian Faith, Rahner, having introduced the notion of transcendental experience, can write:

> This experience is called *transcendental* experience because it belongs to the necessary and inalienable structures of the knowing subject itself, and because it consists precisely in the transcendence beyond any particular group of possible objects or of categories.[4]

Here Rahner is giving *two* reasons for calling transcendental experience transcendental: first, because it corresponds to that which Kant might call transcendental, and second, because it actually involves the transcending of something.

One way to put this is that Rahner employs the term transcendental in both a formal sense—to refer to the conditions of the possibility of experience, knowledge, action, and the kinds of investigation which uncover such conditions—and a material one—to refer to a movement or openness in us which reaches out beyond all that is finite. If you follow the formal procedure, however, according to Rahner, what you in fact discover—or one of the things you discover—is the material transcendence. Given this happy coincidence, Rahner had no need to distinguish the two. Nevertheless, it is useful for readers to keep the distinction in mind. It is not a matter of *definition* that the formal and the material senses of the word should thus coincide: it is part of the substance of Rahner's position, a distinctive part of what he is claiming. To put the point in language borrowed from Frege, the word "transcendental" as Rahner uses it has at least two senses, and it is a central claim that Rahner makes that these two senses of the word transcendental do (often) have the same reference—that the transcendental condition of the possibility of experience is precisely transcendental experience, an experience of transcending all that is finite.

It is worth noting, furthermore, that although the references of the two senses in which Rahner uses the word transcendental overlap significantly, they are not simply identical. Thus the experience of transcendence is *one* of the conditions of the possibility of experience that a transcendental investigation uncovers, but it is not the only one: Rahner would also admit that a transcendental investigation into the conditions of the possibility of experience uncovers some of the more pedestrian Kantian sorts of conditions, such as space and time. On the other hand, Rahner is also capable of using the word "transcendental" when there is in fact *no* reference to a Kantian kind of argument. This can be seen, for instance, in the case of "transcendental revelation" as found in *Foundations of Christian Faith*. It is clear that transcendental revelation is called "transcendental" not because of the nature of the argument with which it is introduced—one finds nothing resembling a Kantian transcendental deduction in this chapter—but because it occurs in the realm of transcendental experience.[5]

In light of the distinction we have drawn, Rahner's own uses of the

term transcendental, one might think, could be grouped into two classes. On the one hand we have references to human transcendence and transcendentality, to transcendental experience and to transcendental revelation; on the other hand, to various kinds of transcendental *investigation*—transcendental method, transcendental philosophy and theology, transcendental Christology, transcendental anthropology, and so on. In the first usage group, the point is that there is (according to Rahner) something in us, something about the way we work, that always transcends the finite; in the second, the concern is with the method, the kind of investigation, which in some way or other stands in the tradition begun by Kant. It may be helpful to keep something like this distinction in mind as a rough guide to what Rahner is up to, but it is important to note that things are not actually quite so tidy. Rahner often shifts without warning from one sense of the word to the other; his discussions of transcendental theology, in particular, though they generally make central the procedural, Kantian, investigation-into-the-conditions-of-the-possibility sense of transcendental, often slide very easily into material uses of the word "transcendental."[6]

Within the second grouping mentioned above—the various kinds of transcendental investigation Rahner discusses—it is worth making a further distinction, a distinction between Rahner's early, philosophical transcendental arguments, and the kind of transcendental undertaking in theology that he sometimes later discussed or undertook. Although, as we shall see in the next section, the transcendental arguments of *Spirit in the World* do not in every way follow the Kantian pattern, they do, like those of Kant, undertake to investigate the conditions of the possibility of knowledge, or experience, or something along these lines, *in general*. The later, theologically adapted notion of transcendental method is much more targeted. Here one does not enquire what must be true a priori about us if we are to be capable of knowing anything whatsoever, but rather what must be true about us if we are to be capable of knowing or believing something very particular, a given dogma, whether that be about Christ or the Trinity or angels.[7] Such investigations are then less radical and less ambitious than either Kantian arguments or the transcendental arguments of *Spirit in the World*, since the issue is not somehow to get behind *all possible* knowing and experiencing, but only to examine what is going on in some particular sphere or even element of our knowing—our knowing of a particular dogma.[8]

These distinctions are important for our general theme of the relation of philosophy to theology in Rahner's thought, and indeed for the question of whether a nonfoundationalist reading is possible. It is important in any given instance, where the word transcendental is used, to consider exactly how much Kantian baggage comes with it, and not to presume to know this in advance. It is important to consider in any given instance, that is to say, whether the term is indicating a methodological commitment, or a material claim in theological anthroplogy, about which the *further* question

would then need to be asked about how we are supposed to know this and about how Rahner is supporting this claim. And even when the word is being used to indicate a methodological decision, before one jumps to the conclusion that Rahner is straitjacketing theology within a philosophical system, it is worth asking, how much exactly of a Kantian or post-Kantian method is Rahner commiting himself to in any given instance? Would Kant be able to recognize his influence on a discussion of transcendental Christology or transcendental angelology? It may be that such discussions have moved so far from their supposed Kantian origins that they in fact show more similarity to an examination of the coherence and significance of a particular dogma within a whole system of belief than they do to a genuinely Kantian transcendental argument about the conditions of the possibility of experience.

It is important to be aware of the complexities of the way in which Rahner employs the term transcendental, but also to be wary of the slightly different way the term is sometimes used by commentators to speak of his work as a whole. Often he is classed with Coreth, Lonergan, and others as a transcendental Thomist, seen as part of a distinctive school of thinkers influenced by Joseph Maréchal. (The term "transcendental," in this usage, is essentially functioning as a reference to Kant and post-Kantian thought). Though this may be a useful category to have for the purposes of writing certain kinds of history of thought, and perhaps in particular for painting in broad brushstrokes the varieties of Thomisms in the twentieth century, it is not a term that Rahner tended to use of himself, and if it is intended to characterize not just *Spirit in the World* but the whole of his work, it becomes particularly misleading.[9]

Often as well Rahner is presented as propounding a transcendental theology, or employing a transcendental method. Now, even though Rahner did introduce and discuss at length the term transcendental theology, and even though he did describe something like a transcendental method, it is still potentially misleading to identify his theology with either of these in any simplistic way. In discussing transcendental theology in "Reflections on methodology in theology,"[10] for instance, Rahner did not claim to be describing his *own* theology, nor did he claim to be describing the whole of theology, whether his own or anyone else's. In fact, he professed himself rather embarrassed at the request to discuss his own method, and seemed to suggest that he had not got one method, that the question of method had not been terribly important to most of his work, and that his approach was in reality unsystematic. What he then described as transcendental theology is in fact not, as we have hinted above, a very sharply defined entity, nor is it something that captures the essence of what he is up to in the vast bulk of his writings. If one limited oneself to *Spirit in the World*, *Hearer of the Word*, and his writings on transcendental Christology, and then perhaps did not read these too alertly, one might be able to see a single method being employed, but anyone with a wider acquaintance

with Rahner's writings is likely to find it quite difficult to fit them all neatly into any one box, including the box of transcendental theology. In short, then, a term which Rahner used (and not perhaps entirely successfully) to capture one *aspect* of theology is sometimes taken up in an effort to capture and define his theology as a whole.

Transcendental arguments

One of the ways in which the word transcendental is used of Rahner, we have seen, is to point to a link to the thought of Immanuel Kant and the approach to philosophy inaugurated by Kant, and this is the sense to which we now turn. In order to complete the argument of the previous chapter, we will look at a Kantian or quasi-Kantian pattern of argumentation Rahner uses in *Spirit in the World* (and also to some degree in *Hearer of the Word*) and raise a general question about its feasibility. *Spirit in the World* is, it must be said again, immensely complex, and there is a great deal going on in it: we will not attempt any kind of exhaustive analysis of its "method," but focus on one particular recurring pattern of argument. However, if it can be established that this particular pattern of argument is problematic, then much that is central to *Spirit in the World* will be placed under a question mark.

The title of this section needs some explanation. "Transcendental argument" is not among the many "transcendental" terms we mentioned in the previous section—indeed it is not a term that Rahner uses. And, though I have said my concern is to look at a Kantian aspect of what Rahner is up to in his philosophy, it is also not a term Kant used, or at least not in anything like the sense intended here.[11] What I am doing is to use a term Rahner himself did not in order to pick out something to which he gave no name. The virtue in using this *particular* name, however, is that it allows us to consider Rahner's arguments in the context of a significant body of literature in analytic philosophy. A good deal of care will be required in doing so, because what analytic philosophers envisage as transcendental arguments, and what I shall call transcendental arguments in Rahner's philosophy, differ in several respects. Nevertheless, the two are sufficiently similar that the literature of the analytic philosophers does cast some light onto Rahner; more particularly, certain of the criticisms which have been developed against the very possibility of transcendental arguments can, at least by analogy, be applied to the kinds of arguments Rahner offers.

Rahner himself does not engage in any kind of close reflection on the distinctive pattern of argument he uses in *Spirit in the World*. As we have seen above, comments he later makes in the context of discussions of "transcendental theology" are broad enough also to cover what is done in *Spirit in the World* ("a transcendental investigation examines an issue according to the necessary conditions given by the possibility of knowledge") but they are also so broad that they offer no *detailed* account of what is involved

when one undertakes such an investigation. The methodological reflection found in the early works, on the other hand, is not for the most part focused on the specifically "transcendental" aspect of the arguments. What methodological remarks there are in *Spirit in the World* are focused as we have seen on defending the kind of interpretation of Aquinas he is giving; those in *Hearer of the Word* are concerned with working out a particular understanding of philosophy of religion—in neither case is the primary issue to set out or justify a philosophical method.

We can turn to a secondary source for at least the beginning of a map of Rahner's philosophical method. Peter Eicher, in the context of a large study of Rahner's philosophy, provides an account of Rahner's "transcendental method." Rahner's method, Eicher maintains, involves three stages: phenomenological explication, transcendental reduction, and transcendental deduction. In the first stage Rahner considers the act of knowing (*Erkenntnisvollzug*—the emphasis here is on the fact that he is beginning from the *act*, the performance, of knowing rather than from an object known) and attempts to unfold the various "moments" of this act. In the second stage—the transcendental reduction—he asks after (and, presumably, finds) the a priori conditions of the act which has been thus "exposed." Finally, in the transcendental deduction the direction is reversed, so that one moves from the a priori to the a posteriori: given a knowledge of the a priori constitution of the subject it is possible to determine the range and some of the most general characteristics of its possible objects. The three stages are mutually conditioning and interdependent.[12]

Eicher's analysis is not in every way satisfactory. The terminology, which is taken not from Rahner but from Emerich Coreth, is potentially confusing: "transcendental reduction" suggests Husserl, but the method in question has little to do with Husserl's notions of imaginative variation and the like, and similarly "transcendental deduction" is a term of Kantian origin used here in a not entirely Kantian manner. Furthermore, it is not clear that all three steps as Eicher describes them are *always* present. Rahner at times argues, for instance, by way of a series of "transcendental reductions," asking at each stage after the a priori conditions of what was established in the previous stage. The various components of Rahner's arguments, then, may not be consistently related to each other in the neat and schematic way Eicher suggests. Nevertheless, Eicher's map is useful in that it provides an initial description and differentiation of these three elements of Rahner's arguments, elements which, though they may not occur in precisely the pattern Eicher indicates, do all appear at one point or another in both *Spirit in the World* and *Hearer of the Word*. Eicher's distinctions are enough to allow us, then, to isolate the aspect of Rahner's argumentation which, with the aid of analytic philosophers, we want to probe further—namely, what Eicher presents as the "transcendental reduction," and which can more usefully for our purposes be called a transcendental argument.

In what I shall be calling transcendental arguments, then, Rahner moves from an act (the act of questioning or of judging, for instance), as it has been laid out in a phenomenological explication, to the a priori conditions in the subject of such an act—or, as I have suggested, he may sometimes move from one a priori condition to another, showing the second to be a condition of the possibility of the first. It is clear that broadly speaking this is a Kantian aspect of Rahner's argumentation: Rahner follows Kant in asking after what must be true about us so that we can have empirical knowledge at all, about what are the conditions which must be present in us to get the business of knowing going in the first place. To say *only* that Rahner is arguing in a Kantian fashion, however, would be misleading; for the sake of clarity it is important to notice that there are differences between what I am calling Rahner's transcendental arguments and the kind of arguments one finds, for instance, in Kant's first *Critique*. As we noted in the previous chapter, it follows for Rahner from the identity between knowing and being that to establish something as a condition of the possibility of experience is not to limit its validity to the "experienced" world, to the phenomenal world as distinct from the noumenal. In other words, though Rahner may in some way follow Kant's argumentative strategy, he does not take on the transcendental idealism which is for Kant its necessary corollary. Furthermore, the *kinds* of "condition of the possibility of experience" Rahner comes up with are, at least in some cases, significantly different from those to which Kant introduces us.[13] In suggesting, for instance, that in the *Vorgriff* we have an anticipatory awareness of being and of God, Rahner is arguing in a way Kant never did for the existence of a condition of the possibility of experience which is ordinarily in some sense *hidden*. When Kant argues that certain concepts or judgments are conditions of experience it is in order to legitimize the use that we all quite clearly already make of such concepts or judgments (we all make judgments about cause and effect, for instance). At issue, then, is not whether we do in fact think this way, but whether thinking this way is justified. Rahner, on the other hand, is trying to establish how we do think rather than how we may think: he wants to show that we all do think in a way that some people in fact do not *seem* to think, that we all operate within an awareness of which not everyone is aware. Where Kant's object is to show the *legality* (to borrow his metaphor) of a certain pattern in our thought, then, Rahner's is to establish its *existence*.

It is interesting to note that Rahner's language is the most explicitly and self-consciously Kantian in *Hearer of the Word*—his Kantianism comes more to the surface in this second work, one might say.[14] In the fifth chapter, for instance, after offering a description of the way in which human beings relate to their world and judge objects, Rahner asks "what is the a priori transcendental condition of the possibility of this subjectivity?" The Kantianism in *Spirit in the World* is not as express—one does not tend in the same way to find a whole series of Kantian tags (a priori,

transcendental, and condition of the possibility)—but it is nevertheless pervasive (perhaps more so than in the later work) and it is signaled by the repeated asking after the *possibility* of what has just been established.

Transcendental arguments among analytic philosophers

Since the publication of P.F. Strawson's *Individuals* in 1959[15] there has been considerable interest among American and British philosophers in transcendental arguments—what they are, how much they can accomplish, and whether they work. To this final question—whether such arguments can ever succeed—a number of philosophers (Stephan Körner, Richard Rorty, and Barry Stroud, for instance) have answered "no," and the reasons they give for this "no" are relevant for an evaluation of Rahner's transcendental arguments.

It cannot be a case, here, of making any simple identification between the transcendental arguments of the analytic philosophers and what I am calling transcendental arguments in Rahner's philosophy. As usually envisaged by the analytic philosopher, a transcendental argument is a response to skepticism—*philosophical* skepticism, that is, skepticism about the existence of an external world, of material objects, or some such thing. The skeptic calls into question a part of our conceptual scheme, or a framework belief, and the response is a transcendental argument showing that which is called into question is in fact a necessary condition of the possibility of experience, or of using language, or of something equally broad and inescapable.

The difference between such transcendental arguments and those of Rahner is two-fold. First, the arguments of the analytic philosophers, like those of Kant, are in a sense purely conservative—trying to justify what is already universally believed and acted upon, to show that the way we in fact think is also the way we must necessarily think; Rahner's arguments, on the other hand, might be called revisionist—they try, as we have already seen, to demonstrate that we in fact think (and necessarily think) differently from the way we think we think. And second, the analytic philosophers concern themselves with the nature of our conceptual schemes while Rahner generally tries to penetrate *behind* any use of concepts, to discover what goes on at a pre-thematic level.

It should also be noted, however, that the transcendental arguments of the analytic philosophers do not for the most part correspond with complete faithfulness to the kind of argument one finds in Kant. The arguments studied by the analytic philosophers do not, any more than do Rahner's, take on board Kant's transcendental idealism (though not, as in Rahner's case, because of the assumption of an identity of knowing and being). Connected to this is the fact that their arguments do not seek to demonstrate our "right" to certain beliefs and concepts in quite the same way that Kant tried to, but instead content themselves, through the

refutation of skepticism, with showing these beliefs or concepts to be *unavoidable*. Finally, the locus of the argument has shifted, so that the analytic philosophers generally eschew claims about our cognitive machinery and limit themselves to discussions of language and conceptual schemes. Rather than thinking of the analytic philosophers as the true heirs of Kant, then, and Rahner (or transcendental Thomists more generally) as somehow deviant, one should understand the analytic philosophers with their transcendental arguments and the transcendental Thomists with their transcendental reductions as moving away from Kant in two somewhat different directions.[16]

In any case, because of the differences between the analytic philosophers' transcendental arguments and those used by Rahner, it is not possible to treat Rahner's arguments simply as one instance of a more general category described by the analytic philosophers. But because there is in spite of all differences a basic structural similarity between these different types of arguments, the philosophers' critiques are nevertheless of interest—they can, as I have indicated, suggest at the very least the possibility of analogous objections to arguments of the type Rahner puts forward.

Two principal lines of attack on transcendental arguments have been developed in the philosophical literature of the last few decades: broadly speaking, the first denies the possibility of knowing that something is a necessary part of our conceptual scheme, and the second denies that knowing this can have the significance transcendental arguments attribute to it. Stephan Körner develops an argument in the first direction,[17] and Barry Stroud in the second;[18] Richard Rorty picks up in his own way on both lines of argument.[19] Both kinds of criticism may have relevance for the kind of arguments Rahner makes, but we will limit ourselves to a consideration of arguments of the first type, i.e. those made by Körner and Rorty.[20]

What Stephan Körner argues and Richard Rorty echoes, then, is that we can never be in a position to *know* that some part of our conceptual scheme (our categorical framework, in Körner's terminology) is a condition of the possibility of experience: we can never be in a position to know that without a particular schematization experience would not be possible. Our conceptual scheme may be the lens through which we do in fact see the world (to use a somewhat loose metaphor) but both Körner and Rorty deny that we could ever know that it is the necessary lens, the only possible lens. In order to identify our conceptual scheme, or some part of it, as a condition of the possibility of experience we would have to be able to consider and rule out all possible alternatives to it[21]—but (and here is the key point) how could we ever know that we had thought up all the alternatives? What we can imagine at any given point, Körner points out, is no guide to what is in principle *possible*, and at best we can rule out only those alternatives which we can imagine. "Nothing in heaven or earth," as Rorty puts it, "*could* set limits to what we can in principle conceive."[22]

Körner and Rorty consider unfounded, then, the move from the fact

that we actually *do* employ a certain conceptual scheme to the claim that we necessarily *must* do so. This is not of course a move Rahner characteristically makes, since his arguments do not concern conceptual schemes in quite this way. But what they object to *in* this move is that it involves an unacknowledged and illicit substitution of the imaginable for the possible, and what I want to suggest is that something very similar can be said of the Rahnerian transcendental arguments. To see how this is so it will be helpful first of all to look at three examples of such arguments, of what Eicher would call transcendental reductions, taken from three successive chapters of *Spirit in the World*.

Examples of Rahner's transcendental arguments

The first of our examples can be found towards the beginning of the chapter entitled "The Foundation," and it corresponds to what we previously described as the first layer of argument for the *Vorgriff*. Rahner argues here that the fact that we ask questions, or more particularly ask questions about being (i.e. ask the "metaphysical question"), can only be possible in virtue of a prior knowledge of being. Thus he writes:

> Man questions. This is something final and irreducible . . . Man questions necessarily . . . this necessity can only be 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

and somewhat further on:

> [Man] is already with being in its totality (*beim Sein im ganzen*); otherwise, how could he ask about it?[23]

The language is not explicit, but the argumentative move can at least be construed as follows: the human being asks questions about being (this is the phenomenological explication), and a prior access to being (albeit being as questionable) is a condition of the possibility of this questioning.[24]

Another example comes in the chapter entitled "sensibility," and takes the form of question and answer:

> How must a knower be understood ontologically, if, in spite of the metaphysical premise that knowledge is the presence-to-itself of an existent of a definite intensity of being, nevertheless there is to be an intuitive knowledge of another as the proper object? If according to the fundamental premise of the Thomistic metaphysics of knowledge only that which the knower itself is, is known as proper object, and if, nevertheless, there is to be a knowledge in which this known as proper

> object is the other, then both of these can be understood as simultaneously possible only by the fact that *the knower itself is the being of the other*.[25]

Here again, then, we have the move from what has already been established (not so much, in this case, by a simple "phenomenological explication" as by the whole of the preceding argument) to what alone can make it possible.

The third and final example, which appears in the chapter of *Spirit in the World* entitled "Abstraction," is again one we have already considered in the previous chapter. Having argued that the agent intellect recognizes the form in a particular form/matter concretion as limited by its association with this particular matter, he goes on to ask how this recognition is possible:

> We must therefore ask how the agent intellect is to be understood so that it can know the form as limited, confined, and thus as of itself embracing further possibilities in itself, as bordering upon a broader field of possibilities. Obviously *this is possible only if*, antecedent to and in addition to apprehending the individual form, it comprehends of itself the whole field of these possibilities and thus, in the sensibly concretized form, experiences the concreteness as limitation of these possibilities, whereby it knows the form itself as able to be multiplied in this field. This transcending apprehension of further possibilities . . . we call "pre-apprehension" ("*Vorgriff*").[26]

Thus is the *Vorgriff* shown to be the condition of the possibility of the abstraction accomplished by the agent intellect.

To summarize these examples, then, we have the following three claims: the fact that the human being questions necessarily is possible only if the human being has access to being, is "with being"; the fact that knowing is a being-present-to-self can be reconciled with our having the other as the "proper object" of our knowledge only if (i.e. these two things are "compossible" only if) the knower itself is the being of the other; the recognition of a form as limited by matter which occurs in every instance of human knowing is possible only if there is a *Vorgriff*, a transcending apprehension of further possibilities.

The impossibility of Rahner's transcendental arguments

Two points are worth noting about the above examples. The first is that in each case the basic movement is from what we *do* (we question, we know "the other," we abstract) to what we must be *like* to be able to do this—from the activity of knowing (or questioning) to the subjective conditions of the possibility of this activity. The second thing worth noting is that in each case Rahner provides no transition (apart perhaps from the word

"obviously") between the description of what we do and the affirmation that this is possible only if a certain state of affairs obtains. In each case he asserts that A is possible only if B, without in any case providing an explicit justification for the assertion.

Now in principle it would seem that to justify the claim that doing A is only possible if we are B one would need to do something like enumerate all the ways (possibly uncountably many) we could be, and then show that in all cases but that of B, A would be impossible. In fact, however, Rahner does not provide *any* enumeration of possibilities. Presumably, then, there is in some sense an implicit enumeration: we are supposed to be able to recognize easily, without it needing to be spelled out, that this one possibility is the only one among all the others that can do the job. This would in turn require, however, that we could at least in our imaginations easily survey all the possibilities, and if we accept Körner's point that the imaginable cannot be taken for the possible, then it is not at all clear that we could do so, even with the utmost effort. There may, in other words, simply be possibilities which we could not dream up.

What Rahner's arguments in fact involve, it seems, is the presentation of a problem (how can such and such be possible?), the proposal of a solution (it is possible if . . .), and an implicit appeal to the imagination—the proposed solution is the *only* possible one, this is the *only* way we can imagine being able to do such-and-such. To say "doing such and such is possible only if we are so-and-so" is to paint a picture of what we are like, a picture within which it makes sense that we could do such-and-such, and then to issue an implicit challenge to the reader's imagination: can you think of any *other* picture which would also work? But if the possible cannot be identified with the imaginable, then even if this challenge were always successful Rahner would not have proved what he set out to.

In short, in spite of the differences between the type of argument Rahner puts forward and those which Körner and the other analytic philosophers consider, it seems at least arguable that in Rahner's arguments just as in those of the analytic philosophers the fundamental problem is that to establish one thing as a condition of the possibility of another would require ruling out all possible alternative conditions, and one can at best *appear* to do this through an illicit appeal to the imagination.[27]

The astute reader may have noticed that both Körner's argument and the parallel to it which I have developed suffer from a problem of reflexivity—in each case it is possible in some sense to turn the argument against itself. To say that B is a condition of the possibility of A, we argue, would require one to survey and eliminate all the alternatives to B, which is not possible. An opponent might respond that to say that such an argument could be made *only* through the elimination of all possibilities itself requires that we have surveyed and eliminated all alternative methods, which by the same reasoning ought not to be possible. In other words, just

as we can say that there may be unthought of alternatives to the proposed condition, they can respond that there may be unthought of alternatives to argument by elimination of alternatives.[28]

Though it may be true, however, that the criticisms of transcendental arguments we have been examining rely just as much on the imagination as do the arguments they criticize, such a reliance is in their case considerably less problematic. The appeal to the imagination involved in transcendental arguments is peculiarly out of place, not so much because *no* argument should ever involve such an appeal, but because of the particular nature of these arguments. In the transcendental arguments of the analytic philosophers, what is under consideration is whether experience would be possible without our current conceptual scheme; how we can *imagine* experience, however, may have everything to do with what our current conceptual scheme in fact is. Thus an inability to imagine experience without some element of this conceptual scheme tells us very little—it is entirely what one would expect. Our imagination can be presumed to be formed and constricted by the nature of our conceptual scheme. In the Rahnerian transcendental argument an implicit appeal to the imagination is equally inappropriate, though for somewhat different reasons. Rahner places considerable emphasis on the point that his analysis is a metaphysical and therefore *not* an empirical one; our imaginations, however, are empirically formed. This is not to say that we can only imagine what we have encountered directly in experience; but the *kinds* of things we can imagine, or the kinds of relations between things we can imagine, must at some level be tied to what we have encountered. To invite our imaginations into an argument about supposedly non-empirical questions is to invite us to think about the non-empirical as though it were empirical. So for different reasons it is peculiarly inappropriate for either variety of transcendental arguments to rely on an appeal to the imagination. On the other hand, to rely on the imagination to work out what might be going on in an argument, to work out how one step is intended to follow from the next, is not particularly problematic. We have experience of arguments, experience of the ways people justify a move in an argument, and so our imagination in some sense has a relevant training. This is not to deny of course that our imagination may fail us, that there may be some way of justifying the move from A to B as the condition of its possibility that is simply missed. Such an argument against Rahner, then, cannot pretend to infallibility. The possibility that something may have been missed, however, does not here point to a flaw in the argument *in principle* but only to the ever-present hazards of interpretation.

A brief summary is perhaps in order here, for the argument has been an involved one. The transcendental arguments of the analytic philosophers are related to but not identical with arguments we find Rahner deploying. Transcendental arguments as understood by analytic philosophers have been criticized for allowing the imagination to set the bounds to what is

possible, and the same, I have suggested, can be said of those Rahner offers. This criticism itself however relies on the imagination, which must be called in to supply the answer to the question, in virtue of what does Rahner maintain that one thing is a condition of the possibility of another? At the purely formal level this suggests that the argument I have developed is subject to exactly the same reproach that it directs against the Rahnerian transcendental reduction, but attention to the particular nature of the respective cases shows that the appeal to the imagination can be appropriate in one instance and not in the other.

The criticism of Rahner's transcendental arguments I have sketched depends on a construal of how they are supposed to work, and one cannot claim to *prove* that there can be no other construal. In principle this problem is unavoidable, but not, as I have tried to show, particularly damning. In practice what matters is whether alternative construals are actually available to us. Is there some way we can explain to ourselves what Rahner is doing when he claims that one thing is a condition of the possibility of another, *other than* that he is implicitly claiming to have surveyed and eliminated all possible alternatives?

Once again we can turn for inspiration to the analytic philosophers' debate. Körner and Rorty are not without their critics, and Körner's view that a successful transcendental argument would require the survey of indefinitely many alternative possibilities has been disputed. His opponents have suggested that there are really only *two* alternatives to be considered: the proposed condition of the possibility of experience (or language or speech), and its negation. To establish that x is a condition of the possibility of experience, then, one need not consider and eliminate a possibly infinite set of alternatives, but only the single alternative of it being not the case that x.[29] The defender of Rahner might perhaps make the same claim: Rahner's transcendental arguments implicitly ask us to consider not an indefinite series of alternatives but only what would happen if the proposed condition of the possibility of questioning or abstracting or knowing were absent.

What this would amount to is the suggestion that we can know that doing A is possible only if we are B by knowing that if we were not B then we could not do A. In a sense this gets us nowhere, since "A is possible only if B" and "if not B then A is impossible" are two different formulations of the same proposition. The task of showing that if we were not B we could not do A is no easier, in other words—in fact it is in no way different—from the task of showing that B is a condition of the possibility of A. What might lie behind such a suggestion, however, and indeed behind the suggestion of Körner's critics, is the idea that the claim "A is possible only if B" is in fact analytic: no appeal to the imagination is required, no survey of alternatives, because such a claim can be seen to be true directly from an examination of the meanings of A and B. From not-B together with A, in other words, one can generate a contradiction. This, it would

seem, is the natural alternative to the supposition that such claims rest on a survey of all possibilities.

Such a line of defense, however, would have to be rated highly implausible, given the nature of the claims Rahner actually makes and the nature of the phenomena with which he is concerned. The concepts he uses and the way these concepts interact are too loose and inexact to make the suggestion that the argument is a logical or analytic one credible. The point that Rahner's concepts are inexact is not in itself a criticism: it may be that the nature of the subject matter is such that anything but loose and inexact language would be inappropriate to it. At the very least, however, given that Rahner is often using words in an unaccustomed way—given that he is stretching the meanings of concepts in various ways (concepts such as "limit" and "field of possibilities" as well as "being," "being with the other," and so on) —it makes no sense to suggest that his arguments are true merely in virtue of the meanings of the words he uses.

It may be worth saying something finally about the notion of retorsion, and about why this can provide no help here. Retorsion is an argumentative technique characteristic of transcendental Thomists, whereby the validity of a proposition is established by showing that its rejection involves the one who rejects it in self-contradiction. What is distinctive about such arguments is that there is nothing logically inconsistent about the negation of the proposition in itself: it is the *act of asserting* such a negation that is problematic—the content of what is asserted and the asserting of it come into conflict with each other. Rahner at times argues quite explicitly along such lines, and Emerich Coreth, who should perhaps be thought of as the systematizer of transcendental Thomism, claims that transcendental reductions are in general justified by retorsion.[30] Retorsion can successfully validate a given proposition, however, only if it is *known* that there is in fact a contradiction between the negation of that proposition and the act of negating it. Thus, *if* A is a condition of the possibility of any judgment,[31] then anyone who denies A is falling into what is sometimes called pragmatic self-contradiction, for the denial itself is a form of judgment. But if what is in question is precisely *whether* A is indeed a condition of the possibility of any judgment then it will *also* be uncertain whether the denial of A involves self-contradiction. Retorsion, then, cannot actually establish that one thing is a condition of the possibility of another. All that it does is to bring to the fore the epistemic status of something which can *independently* be recognized as a condition of the possibility of any act of judgment.

This chapter and the last have raised reasons to be concerned about any reading of Rahner's oeuvre which makes *Spirit in the World* absolutely central to all that follows. They thus provide a kind of indirect support for the nonfoundationalist reading to be put forward in chapter 5. To show that there are serious flaws in Rahner's philosophy does not in itself

demonstrate that the theology *must* be read in independence from it, but it does show that there would be advantages in doing so. In the next chapter, I shall attempt to provide another type of indirect support for a nonfoundationalist reading: I shall argue that there are elements of discontinuity in Rahner's thought which are not usually recognized. Once again this does not in itself *necessitate* a nonfoundationalist reading, but it goes some way towards removing one of the chief objections to such a reading—those who insist on understanding Rahner's theology as intimately bound up with his philosophy often do so in part out of an admiration for the overarching systematic unity of Rahner's thought.

4 *Hearer of the Word* and the supernatural existential

Hearer of the Word is Rahner's second book. Published in 1941 and based on lectures originally given in 1937, it is in some ways the companion piece to *Spirit in the World*. The supernatural existential is an idea Rahner famously introduced into a debate about *nouvelle theologie* in 1950;[1] it recurred in subsequent years and came to play a central role in many parts of his theology. The book and the idea are both important. Anyone who wants seriously to grapple with Rahner needs to come to terms with both. I bring the two together in a single chapter, however, so that the question of their relationship can also be considered. And this is a complicated relationship. There are important similarities between what Rahner was trying to do in *Hearer of the Word* and what he did with the notion of the supernatural existential, and between the patterns of thought at work in both. On the other hand I shall be arguing that the two are actually incompatible: both the project of *Hearer of the Word* and the conception of revelation upon which it is based are at odds with at least Rahner's stronger versions of the supernatural existential.

Though both sides of this complex relationship are important, in this chapter the accent will fall on establishing that there are discontinuities, real elements of incompatibility. The reason for this is not that the discontinuities are more important than the similarities—the reverse is probably true—but that there is such a preponderance of commentators who read Rahner's corpus as a single, unified whole, who work on the assumption that in some way or other it all fits together, that the balance needs to be restored.

The tendency to take Rahner as a unified whole is at least as widespread as the tendency to use the language of foundations mentioned in the first chapter. This is perhaps in part because the variety in Rahner's thought is so close to the surface. It is not at all hard to see that he wrote many, many essays on many, many topics, and so it is generally assumed to be the role of the commentator to show how everything fits together. Even scholars who note variation in Rahner's positions often write in terms of a smooth development, of the working out of ideas only latent in earlier texts, or at most of alteration in point of view and emphasis. Anne Carr, for instance,

admits that "the perspective has shifted in the development of Rahner's foundational thought from his metaphysics of knowledge to some of his theological essays,"[2] and thinks that the theory of the supernatural existential "places in question once again the meaning of *Spirit in the World* and *Hearer of the Word* as philosophical prolegomena to theology."[3] Nevertheless, she does not doubt that *Spirit in the World* and *Hearer of the Word are* prolegomena, nor that they form part of the foundation of the theology—it is just a matter of working out exactly *how*.[4] George Vass similarly pays some attention to differences between *Hearer of the Word* and *Foundations of Christian Faith*, but interprets them either as the development of what was already implicit (ideas that are *zum Begriff gebracht*) or as a concomitant diminishment of emphasis on certain other aspect of the earlier version.[5] For him, as for Carr, there are no inconsistencies sufficiently significant to prevent one finally from reading the whole of Rahner's corpus as the presentation of a single, complex position.

I shall be laying emphasis on points of discontinuity and incompatibility between *Hearer of the Word* and the supernatural existential, then, precisely because to do so is to fly in the face of the usual way of presenting Rahner. Points of discontinuity and incompatibility *need* to be noticed in order to restore the balance; that they really *are* such points needs to be argued thoroughly, since this will go against the instincts of many.

It should perhaps be noted that this chapter is not intended as an attack on Rahner, though it is critical of certain readings of Rahner. There is after all nothing wrong, in the course of a long and multi-faceted intellectual career, in not being perfectly self-consistent. Rahner himself is reported to have joked with his brother that "one should publish much and publish early so that one had something to smile about in old age."[6] Nor does the fact that I shall argue that the project of *Hearer of the Word* is inconsistent with a central feature of Rahner's theological position mean that I am disparaging *Hearer of the Word* itself—it is an interesting project in its own right, and relevant in many ways to Rahner's thought. In the previous two chapters I have leveled real criticisms at *Spirit in the World*, but here the target is neither Rahner as a whole nor *Hearer of the Word* in particular, but rather readings of Rahner which insist on treating his whole corpus as a single project.

Hearer of the Word

Hearer of the Word, as already noted, is something of a companion piece to *Spirit in the World*. If *Spirit in the World* was based on work done between 1934 and 1936, *Hearer of the Word* was the outcome of a lecture series given in the summer of 1937. *Spirit in the World* (or to be precise, *Geist in Welt)* was first published in 1939, and *Hörer des Wortes* appeared two years later in 1941. The analysis of the question about being as the starting point of metaphysics, which plays some role in *Spirit in the World*, becomes the

central and structuring principle of *Hearer of the Word*. And though *Hearer of the Word* does not focus upon a particular text of Aquinas, it does nevertheless present itself as referring to and indeed depending on Thomas' metaphysics.

Spirit in the World is a work of philosophy: the theological significance of what is being said is present throughout in the background, and brought out explicitly only in a final paragraph. In *Hearer of the Word* the emphasis shifts: the relation between philosophy and theology, and the theological significance of philosophical ideas, become the central concern; the philosophical arguments and interpretation of Aquinas are not as fully developed, and they are given primarily to fill out the picture Rahner wants to sketch of the relation of philosophy of religion to theology.

The final paragraph of *Spirit in the World*, then, offers a kind of anticipatory summary of what is to come in *Hearer of the Word*. Having said that in Thomas the larger context of all that has been discussed is a theological one, Rahner writes:

> Man concerns Thomas the theologian at the point at which God manifests Himself in such a way that He is able to be heard in the word of His revelation . . . In order to be able to hear whether God speaks, we must know that He is; lest His word come to one who already knows, He must be hidden from us; in order to speak to man, His word must encounter us where we already and always are, in an earthly place, at an earthly hour . . . If man is understood in this way [in terms of abstraction and conversion], he can listen to hear whether God has not perhaps spoken, because he knows that God is; God can speak, because He is the Unknown. And if Christianity is not the idea of an eternal, ominpresent spirit, but is Jesus of Nazareth, then Thomas's metaphysics of knowledge is Christian when it summons man back into the here and now of his finite world, because the Eternal has also entered into his world so that man might find Him.[7]

These are the themes that become central to *Hearer of the Word*: how to understand the kind of ontology and anthropology developed in *Spirit in the World* in relation not to an abstract God but to a God who reveals himself. At the heart of *Hearer of the Word*, then, is the business of coming to an understanding of ourselves as those who "can listen to hear whether God has perhaps not spoken."

The starting point of *Hearer of the Word* is the problem of how to understand philosophy of religion and its relationship to theology. How can philosophy of religion—and indeed metaphysics, to which it turns out to be equivalent—have a legitimate role to play, without in some way usurping the role of theology? If we supposed that philosophy of religion or metaphysics could tell us most of what we need to know of God, with theology only coming along after the fact to confirm, correct, and add the

finishing touches, this would derogate from the true dignity of theology. The issue, of course, is the place of revelation. How can we legitimately do metaphysics without trespassing on the territory of revelation, without that is to say setting up a system of knowledge which would at least in part pre-empt the need for the free initiative of God?

Metaphysics, on Rahner's account, must be logically prior to all other particular disciplines, determining their foundation and providing their epistemological validation—and this includes theology. In the case of theology, however, what metaphysics determines and validates is not the content of revelation, nor even the fact of revelation, but instead the *possibility* of revelation. What the philosophy of religion, or metaphysics, does is to show that we are beings who are capable of hearing a revelation from the free God, if it occurs, and whatever its content. Its role is to show us to be capable of being "hearers of the word," but not to show that the word in fact comes, or what the word is if it does come.

Rahner structures *Hearer of the Word*, as mentioned above, around an analysis of the metaphysical question, of our need to inquire about the meaning of being—"what is the being of beings as such and in general?" This question, Rahner maintains, has three "aspects." First of all there is the universality of what is asked after—the question "inquires about all being as such"; second, there is the fact that the question *is* a question, that it must be asked; finally, according to Rahner, is the fact that in the question a distinction is made between being and beings, between the many beings that there are and the one being that belongs to all of them.[8]

Apart from introductory and concluding chapters, *Hearer of the Word* is divided into three sections, each corresponding to one of these three aspects of the metaphysical question. The structure, furthermore, is a tight one: within each section Rahner tries to establish both an objective and a subjective correlate of the relevant "aspect" of the question (or to use his language, in each case he arrives at a proposition of "general ontology" on the one hand and of "metaphysical anthropology" on the other). Thus, from the fact that the metaphysical question asks about all being, Rahner concludes objectively to the "luminosity of being," that "the essence of being is to know and to be known,"[9] and subjectively to the *Vorgriff*—that the human being is spirit, the "absolute openness for being itself." From the fact that the metaphysical question is *a question*, that it must be asked, Rahner comes to conclusions about revelation and *freedom*: objectively (through a rather complicated argument), that God is free and unknown, the free God of a possible revelation, and subjectively that our openness to God's revelation is bound up with our own freedom. Finally, from the fact that in the metaphysical question we distinguish between being and beings, Rahner draws conclusions about the *historical* nature of revelation: objectively, that revelation if it occurs must occur "in the human word . . . as a historical event within the general history of mankind,"[10] and subjectively, that we must turn towards history to listen for a possible revelation.

If one is to read *Hearer of the Word* in the best light possible, it is arguable that one should take this tight structure I have just outlined—which suggests that all the claims Rahner wants to make flow from an analysis of the one metaphysical question—with a pinch of salt. This is at least in part a device to organize and give a sense of unity to an ambitious series of lectures. It is clear that there is a programmatic element to what Rahner is doing—he is offering a kind of outline of how the subject can work, rather than developing and defending it in every detail. He wants to outline an ontology and a metaphysical anthropology which can serve as useful prolegomena to theology without overstepping the bounds and encroaching on theology's own territory. He is not in every case deriving and defending the particular metaphysical claims he makes; to some extent he relies on an understanding of Thomas, and on what he argued in *Spirit in the World*. The main interest in *Hearer of the Word*, in any case, is not in how the individual claims can be defended, but in the overall conception of metaphysics and of its relation to theology and to revelation that is developed.

To appreciate this, it is necessary to note the somewhat paradoxical nature of what Rahner is attempting. An objection frequently raised against any kind of philosophical or anthropological starting point, foundation, or prolegomena to theology is that it will restrict theology, and control and determine it in advance. One might call this, in honour of its most famous and most insistent exponent, the Barthian objection. What Rahner offers in *Hearer of the Word* is a philosophical and anthropological prolegomena to theology, but one whose whole point is precisely to show that *no* restrictions are placed on revelation, and therefore theology, in advance. Thus for instance because of the *Vorgriff*, we have an *absolute* openness to being, an openness to the *whole* of being—we are precisely that kind of beings who do not place limits on the range of what can be revealed to us. And if it can be established that we are the sort of beings who must listen for a word from God, it is precisely of God as *free* and *unknown*, and whose revelation to us might perfectly well be to keep his silence. *Hearer of the Word* is then a kind of ground-clearing exercise, preparing the way for theology not by placing advance conditions on it, but by showing philosophically that in fact we have no business placing any advance conditions or limitations on what it can contain.

The supernatural existential

Rahner makes it clear in *Hearer of the Word* that he is leaving to one side any questions to do with grace as something which might be required for the reception of revelation. He does not deny a role to grace, but writing as a philosopher of religion rather than as a theologian, he abstracts from consideration of it.[11] When later, working as a theologian, Rahner does turn his attention to questions concerning grace, one of the proposals he makes, and the one he is most known for, is that all human beings are affected by

something called a "supernatural existential." What I shall argue below is that if one pays attention to the implications Rahner draws from this notion, the original attempt in *Hearer of the Word* to think as a philosopher in abstraction from any questions about grace is called into question. First, however, we need to consider the notion of the supernatural existential itself: not only is this an important and difficult concept, but it is one whose content in fact fluctuates (something that, once again, is not often adverted to in the secondary literature).

What is often considered Rahner's classic presentation of the supernatural existential appeared in a 1950 article in *Orientierung*,[12] a revised version of which was published as "Concerning the relationship between nature and grace" in the initial volume of the *Theological Investigations*. The article is an intervention in a debate, offering a proposal for how Catholic theology can steer a course between the "extrinsicism" of prevailing neo-scholasticism and the censured position of the *nouvelle theologie*. Rahner's suggestion here in brief is that human nature, if one understands nature in the every day sense of the word—as that which we encounter in all human beings—is characterized by the desire for the beatific vision and generally by an unconditional ordination to God's love, but nature in the technical, *theological* sense has no claim on grace because the desire is itself a "supernatural existential." Human nature as it is actually known to us, then, is already a mixture of nature in the theological sense and that which goes beyond nature.

At issue in the debate to which this article was a contribution was whether human nature is a self-contained, self-sufficient whole. The neo-scholastics held that it must be if grace is to be a genuinely free gift. In particular, if human nature as created were *not* capable of achieving by its own powers a "natural" happiness, with which it could be satisfied, then God would be obliged in justice to give grace (otherwise he would be responsible for the creature's frustration). Grace, in other words, can only be gratuitous if nature does not need it. Figures associated with the *nouvelle theologie*, on the other hand, argued that viewing nature as a self-sufficient whole has unacceptable consequences.[13] Grace becomes something with which in our experience we have little to do, something which takes place somewhere over our heads. It comes to seem not only superfluous but perhaps *de trop*—the icing on a cake that is sufficiently rich and sweet unfrosted. De Lubac indeed linked this view of grace to the development of atheism—if reality has two layers and the bottom one, the one that we are able to experience, is sufficient unto itself, then why not simply abandon the hypothesis of the second, supernatural layer? In other words, if nature does not need it, grace becomes irrelevant. In order to avoid such consequences it is necessary, according to the *nouvelle theologie*, to hold that human beings are created so that they can only be fulfilled in a fellowship with God (which all parties agreed to be beyond the capacity of unaided nature to achieve). The human being, they taught, has by nature an un-

conditional desire for the beatific vision, and consequently there is no natural end that can fulfill us.

In this context Rahner's proposal of the supernatural existential was essentially a suggestion that it is possible to have it both ways. Human nature as we actually find it fits the description given by the *nouvelle theologie*:

> as [man] now in fact is, he is created [for this love which is God himself and which is given in grace and the beatific vision]; he is called into being so that Love might bestow itself . . . this "potency" is what is inmost and most authentic in him, the center and root of what he is absolutely.[14]

Human nature in the technical sense, however, does not require grace and cannot demand it: the desire for the beatific vision, the ordination to grace that is part of the way we actually are is not to be ascribed to the theological concept of nature. So if we could subtract this supernatural existential, something would be left over, a pure nature, and about this the neo-scholastics in their turn would be right—it would have no claim on grace, and would be capable of some sort of natural fulfillment.

Although "Concerning the relationship between nature and grace" is often taken as the natural place to look for a definition of the supernatural existential, it is important to realize that what I have just described is in fact only *one* version of the notion, and indeed a relatively modest version. One can find considerably stronger claims about the supernatural existential in a number of other places, but most easily perhaps in the *Foundations of Christian Faith*.

In the fourth chapter of the *Foundations* Rahner takes as his theme that God communicates himself to human beings. This is a communication not of something *about* God, but of God himself, and what it means for the recipient is not a new piece of knowledge, nor that something new is possessed, but that the human being herself *is* something new:[15] "God in his own most proper reality makes himself the innermost constitutive element of man."[16] Now, what is described from God's side as self-communication is, viewed from the side of the human being, the supernatural existential. To be more precise, the supernatural existential is here identified as God's self-communication in the mode of offer. The self-communication may be accepted or rejected, but in either case it is genuinely present as an offer. In order to explicate this notion of divine self-communication Rahner introduces a concept of quasi-formal causality. We can think of God causing the supernatural existential, but according to the model of formal rather than efficient causality: the formal cause is in a sense *in* the thing caused, becoming a constituent of it. God acts only as *quasi*-formal cause, however—there is only an analogous relationship between the kind of thing the divine self-communication is and known instances of formal causality: in this one case alone the cause remains intact, free

over against the thing caused, unentangled in the being of which it nevertheless becomes the (accidental) form.

In this version, then, the supernatural existential is still supernatural—it is the result of "an act of the most free love, and indeed also with respect to the finite spiritual existent already established in being by creation" (in other words, it is gratuitous with respect to the created nature)—and it is still an existential, not a particular experience but a feature of all our experience:

> Such an element in Man's transcendental constitution is not the object of an individual, a posteriori and categorical experience of man *alongside of* other objects of his experience. Basically and originally man does not encounter this supernatural constitution as an object. The supernatural constitution of man's transcendentality due to God's offer of self-communication is a modality of his original and unthematic subjectivity.[17]

It is, however, not here described as a "potency,"[18] a desire for and ordination to grace; essentially it is here presented as grace itself.[19] So in this version of the supernatural existential Rahner is not offering a proposal to explain how grace can be received, but instead a suggestion about what grace *is*.

And indeed the supernatural existential has a significance which goes beyond the analysis of what grace is. It turns out, in the *Foundations*, to be identical with what Rahner calls "transcendental revelation." What we learn from revelation in the more ordinary sense of the word, from Christianity as a historical religion, from the Old and New Testaments, is not something simply new and previously unknown, not something that comes from outside and is unconnected with our experience. What is given is rather a thematization of that which is already experienced in our innermost depths. Revelation then is not primarily a set of truths, a God-given extension of our ordinary knowledge, but God's giving of *himself*, the divine self-communication to the human being in the supernatural existential.[20]

It is worth making two points about the relationship between the two versions of the supernatural existential we have outlined. The first is that there really is a difference. A defender of Rahner's consistency and the unity of his corpus might try to deny this: she might try to argue that what is found in *Foundations of Christian Faith* is nothing but a more fully developed and more fully worked out exposition of the idea presented in 1950. And since one of the purposes of this chapter is to counteract tendencies to read Rahner as overly unified, it is necessary to deal with such an objection. The second point that needs to be made is that the difference should *not* be construed simply as one of chronological development, so that an idea Rahner first dreamt up in order to make a contribution to the nature and grace debate he then subsequently radicalized.

First of all, then, there really is a difference. The defender of Rahner's consistency might point to the fact that Rahner sets out, in the essay in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 1, only to "set in motion a few considerations of principle without any idea of even touching upon everything of importance."[21] In the concluding paragraph he lists a number of questions needing further work, and includes among them "how the supernatural existential is related to grace itself, and in what sense it is distinct from it."[22] The earlier article, the defender might say, is relatively open-ended, and should not be seen as attempting to explain fully what the supernatural existential is. Subsequently Rahner develops his own original suggestions and in particular attempts to answer this question about the relationship of the supernatural existential to grace. The distinction in the earlier article, so this argument would go, between the supernatural existential as potency, desire, and ordination on the one hand, and grace as its fulfillment on the other, is not done away with but given a more precise content in Rahner's later thought. In the *Foundations* one still finds a distinction, namely that between God's self-communication in the mode of *offer* (the supernatural existential) and in the mode of acceptance (or rejection). Thus, the argument might go, the desire for grace, the potency for it, eventually becomes more precisely specified as grace already present but not yet fully there because not yet accepted. The potency is actualized only in the acceptance of the offer.

Such a reconciliation of the two versions cannot however be made to work. Consider for instance the following passage from "Concerning the relationship between nature and grace":

> Man should be *able* to receive this Love which is God himself; he must have a congeniality for it. He must be able to accept it (and hence grace, the beatific vision) as one who has room and scope, understanding and desire for it. Thus he must have a real potency for it.[23]

"Love" is what is given in grace as well as the beatific vision: the potency for it, the room, scope, understanding, and desire, it is clear from the context, are what Rahner is here calling the supernatural existential. The very grammar of these sentences works then against a reconciling interpretation. Rahner does not write "he must be able to accept the room and scope, the understanding and desire," but that "he must be able to accept *it* . . . as one who has room and scope . . . for *it*."[24] What is to be accepted is not the potency itself but the thing *for* which the human being has the potency; the potency is a potency for the love, not for the acceptance.

So Rahner really does mean rather different things at different times by the supernatural existential. It might seem reasonable to suppose that what has been shown here is a development over time: an idea that Rahner first introduced to provide a useful way out of resolving a particular theological debate he eventually radicalized and put to a broader and more ambitious

use. In fact, however, this turns out to be wrong. Much that is at least strongly suggestive of the supernatural existential of the *Foundations* is already present in Rahner's writings well *before* his intervention in the debate surrounding the *nouvelle theologie*. Thus for instance in the essay "Priestly existence," first published in 1942, we read:

> "The revealed word . . . aids us towards a kind of 'self-understanding,' that is towards a knowledge concerning the depths of our actual existence created by grace,"

and:

> The preaching of the word in point of fact reaches a man who by his ontological status . . . already inhabits that order of reality which is announced by the message . . . [The Christian message of faith is] really an awakening, even though an absolutely necessary one, of that Christian self-consciousness which has already been in principle established in us with the "anointing" which is in us

or again:

> the proclaimed word is the attestation of a reality which, even prior to this word, has always belonged to the total reality and total potentiality of the concrete man as found in the actually existing order, has always belonged to it because Christ and therefore "Church" is a reality in the concrete existence of every man.

Though the full technicalities of the *Foundations* version of the supernatural existential are not present here, much of the substance of the position is anticipated. Both the idea of grace as already present in the depths of human experience, and of something quite like a transcendental revelation, are clearly suggested.[25]

One cannot, then, explain the variance in Rahner's use of the term "supernatural existential" primarily in terms of the evolution of his thought.[26] It may be more important to take into account the occasional nature of so much of what Rahner did. In the case of the debate over the *nouvelle theologie*, the issue was precisely an ordination towards and a desire for the supernatural, and whether this was part of our nature. The proposal that Rahner made, here, then, was much weaker than one that he *might* have made, because his purpose was not to develop a full account of his own understanding of grace, but to offer a resolution to a particular debate, a particular way out of a particular *impasse*.

Points of continuity between *Hearer of the Word* and the supernatural existential

The thinker behind *Hearer of the Word* is the same thinker who produced Rahner's theology; there is no radical change of direction following *Hearer of the Word*. We shall be arguing for some very significant elements of incompatibility below, but it is important to be clear about the great degree of overlap. To a large extent Rahner continues to use the same ideas, and he continues to pursue the same goals, in *Hearer of the Word* and in the theology that follows it.

A first point to note is that in *Hearer of the Word* Rahner explicitly envisages and deliberately leaves room for something else, for a theological complement to that which is done in *Hearer of the Word.*

> Is it enough for a real theology that the message should reach us as a revealed word coming from without? Or do we need, over and above the power of hearing such a message (a power whose existence may be established by metaphysical anthropology) an inner elevation produced by divine grace, before the perceived message may turn into theology? We cannot discuss this problem here.[27]

Hearer of the Word is envisaged as a work of philosophy, then, and Rahner prescinds deliberately from a discussion of grace, but acknowledges that such a discussion would be necessary to give the *full* picture of what is involved in the reception of revelation. One might say, then, that he leaves open the space for the supernatural existential, and that in his later writings on grace he is simply filling in this space (though as I shall show below, the *way* in which the gap is filled turns out to come into conflict with the plan of *Hearer of the Word*).

Second, the anthropology sketched out in *Hearer of the Word* (and indeed in *Spirit in the World*)—the picture of the human being developed here, the understanding of what it is to be spirit, to have an infinite openness, to transcend all particular objects already in the act of knowing and choosing them—remains firmly in place in the later theology. The supernatural existential is not something other, distinct or independent from this, but, particularly in the later versions, is welded into this picture. One way in which Rahner sometimes expresses the relationship is that the God of whom we are in some sense aware in the *Vorgriff* is not just the infinitely distant goal of all our striving but the goal which "draws near" and "gives itself" to us—this is what is experienced in the supernatural existential.

Finally, the theory (or theories) of the supernatural existential can be seen as continuous with the project of *Hearer of the Word* in the sense that the underlying motive, and the direction in which Rahner is moving, are the same. In *Hearer of the Word* Rahner is trying to establish that revelation, if it comes, does not come to us as a matter of indifference, as something

towards which we have no orientation: rather it comes to us as beings who by our very nature are listening out for a word from God in history—it comes to us as ones who are, by our fundamental constitution and a priori, hearers of the Word. The supernatural existential, in all its versions, serves the same function of combatting theological "extrinsicism": we do not meet the gospel as people to whom it seems foreign, a matter of indifference, something to which we pay attention only in an effort to safeguard our interests in the next life, but as those who find within themselves something which already corresponds to it—whether this is construed as a desire for it, or as a pre-thematic experience of it.

The incompatibility of *Hearer of the Word* and the supernatural existential

In spite of the very substantial continuity, on a number of fronts, between *Hearer of the Word* and Rahner's later work, there is a sense in which *Hearer of the Word* as a project is incompatible with Rahner's theory (or theories) of the supernatural existential. On the one hand running through *Hearer of the Word* is a concept of revelation which would, if accepted, rule out the legitimacy of Rahner's understanding of the supernatural existential as transcendental revelation; on the other hand, if the supernatural existential (in any of its guises) is adopted, then the kind of project represented by *Hearer of the Word* must be deemed impossible in principle.

First of all, then, the issue of incompatible conceptions of revelation. We have seen above that in *Foundations of Christian Faith* the supernatural existential turns out to be equivalent to "transcendental revelation," a self-communication of God to all human beings in the depths of their experience. The meaning of revelation is not exhausted by the notion of transcendental revelation, since there must always also be the expression of this in categorical revelation, but nevertheless revelation is here construed as in some sense of the word "originally," the universal elevation of human nature which takes place in the supernatural existential.[28]

Hearer of the Word is intended as a work of philosophy—philosophy of religion in particular—and not theology, and so it does not focus on offering a *theory* of revelation. Nevertheless, insofar as it concerns itself with establishing the conditions of the possibility of the reception of a revelation, it does necessarily presuppose some kind of conception of revelation. And the understanding of revelation that it presupposes is in stark contrast to the one associated with the supernatural existential: it is a revelation which is particular, historical and communicated "in the word."[29]

It is worth saying a little about what is meant by "historical" in this context. Rahner at times uses the word as a synonym for "categorical." He may call something historical in other words because it involves a human being's interaction with the world, with material things, with that which is not its own consciousness. There is a sense then in which everything that

is not a priori falls under the category of historical. Thus if I look out the window and formulate the judgment "that is a tree," one might say that my judgment has a historical as well as a transcendental component. To say that in *Hearer of the Word* revelation is historical would not be to say very much, then, if historical were meant only in this sense. It would be perfectly compatible with revelation being always and everywhere present to all human beings in the supernatural existential—after all, human beings are inevitably historical beings.

When in *Hearer of the Word* Rahner insists that revelation occurs in history, however, he is using the word in something closer to our ordinary sense of the word. "In history" here means in some part of history rather than in all of history: we must look out for revelation "as an event which has occurred at a certain point of space and time within the total history of man."[30] It is because revelation is historical in *this* sense that Rahner can insist on the need to refer *back* to a particular moment in history,[31] that he can raise the question of how we are able to bridge the gap of centuries between the revelatory event and the present,[32] and that he can criticize *Religionsgeschichte* for ruling out in advance the possibility that there can be no revelation privileging one part of history above others.[33]

A defender of the unity of Rahner's corpus might argue that while the understanding of revelation in *Hearer of the Word* is indeed narrower than the one Rahner later[34] develops, this entails no inconsistency. In the earlier book Rahner simply limits his attention to categorical revelation, or more precisely, to that portion of categorical revelation which is specifically guaranteed by God as the *unsurpassable* thematization of transcendental revelation—to official categorical revelation. This indeed seems to be the position taken by Metz who, in 1963, produced a second edition of *Hearer of the Word*. In the footnotes to this edition one repeatedly reads that at this point the text is of course treating *categorical* revelation, and that while this is worthwhile and perfectly legitimate, it would also be possible to undertake an analysis of revelation as transcendental.[35] Since the second edition was produced at Rahner's instigation and with his approval there is a *prima facie* case for accepting Metz's interpretation.

According to this approach, then, though Rahner may *discuss* primarily categorical revelation, there is nothing in *Hearer of the Word* to rule out the possibility of the broader understanding of revelation he later develops. I think that this is not so, however: *Hearer of the Word* not only does not (except in Metz's additions) introduce the notions of supernatural existential and transcendental revelation, it also does not leave room for them. As a result, if one tries to read the text together with Metz's footnotes[36] as a single whole, what emerges is a very confusing book, one that is at odds with itself.

Central to *Hearer of the Word* is the distinction between the conditions of the possibility of revelation and revelation itself. Again and again Rahner insists that philosophy of religion cannot anticipate the contents of

revelation: the conditions for hearing whatever-it-is-if-it-happens can be determined, but not the thing heard, not the "what" or the "whether" of revelation. This insistent distinction is itself part of, and motivated by, a more general opposition between revelation, on the one hand, and everything knowable from the side of the human being, on the other. Thus philosophy of religion cannot reach beyond the conditions of the possibility to the thing itself since *in general* any humanly attainable understanding cannot be allowed to encroach upon revelation. It is because of this sharp opposition between revelation and the humanly knowable that, as I will try to make clear, there is no room in *Hearer of the Word* for the supernatural existential.

It must be admitted that Rahner wants in fact to establish in *Hearer of the Word* a closer, more intrinsic relationship between revelation and the rest of human knowledge than was commonly envisaged in the Roman Catholic thought of the time.[37] But he wants to do so without violating the basic understanding of revelation which he still shares with this common view, according to which revelation is by definition *distinguished* from ordinary human knowledge. The struggle in *Hearer of the Word* is precisely to show how *in spite of the fact* that it cannot be anticipated, revelation does not appear as something unrelated and indifferent to us.

This assumption itself, that there is and necessarily must be a sharp distinction between revelation and the humanly knowable, is not something Rahner feels called upon to defend—he takes it to be obvious. [38] Thus we read in the first chapter that, according to the basic understanding of the nature of theology with and from which we must begin, "In its first and original meaning [i.e. positive theology as opposed to the subsequent systematic reflection on what has been heard] theology is not a system of valid statements, set up by human thought, but the totality of the divine discourse addressed by God to us in human language."[39] The structure of the sentence makes the alternatives clear: *either*, Rahner assumes, something is from the human being ("von durch menschliches Denken konstituierten") *or* it is revealed (it is "der von Gott selbst . . . Rede"), and theology falls into the latter category.[40] The same point is made in a different form in the final chapter: there we read that theology alone among the disciplines is *not*, fundamentally, anthropology. Theology is the only one of the sciences not grounded in the human being.[41]

If there really is a sharp distinction between revelation as that which is communicated by God on the one hand, and what is *only* human on the other, then there is no room for a supernatural existential, since the supernatural existential (in its fuller version) is precisely that which is communicated by God *and* part of the ordinary human make-up, accessible, however imperfectly, to ordinary means of knowledge. The supernatural existential, in short, is not compatible with the either/or assumption that runs through *Hearer of the Word*. [42]

The incompatibility of the supernatural existential with *Hearer of the*

Word, which I have so far defended on fairly general grounds, is confirmed in a number of passages of *Hearer of the Word* in which Rahner explicitly rejects positions looking very much like his own later theory.

In chapter 2 Rahner compares his own approach with, among other things, what he considers to be the two opposite and for that reason fundamentally similar basic types of Protestant philosophy of religion. He points to the liberal theology coming from Schleiermacher and Ritschl on the one hand, and the dialectical theology of Barth (the early Barth) and Brunner. Both approaches must be rejected, Rahner maintains, because they restrict God's freedom in revelation: whether revelation is thought to be the affirmation of everything most fundamentally human or its rejection, it is essentially correlated with and determined by what is human. According to the first type of Protestant philosophy of religion, Rahner tells us "the content of religion, as expressed in doctrine, worship, and so on . . . is merely the objectivation of the religious conditions of the human subject."[43] What is striking is that simply by omitting the adverb "merely" this could become a formulation of Rahner's own position once the supernatural existential (in its fuller version) has become central.

In chapter 13 Rahner maintains that revelation must take place in history, and indeed at a certain moment in history. This is a point we have already considered, but of particular interest here is one of the arguments he gives in support of the contention:

> It is inadmissible that we should be permanently and miraculously raised above our natural way of thinking and acting by God's revelation. This would ultimately reduce God's free revelation again to be but an essential element of humanity itself, since we would no longer come to know it as the unexpected.[44]

The supernatural existential is precisely the permanent (though Rahner would not call it "miraculous") raising above itself of the human being by God's self-communication, a self-communication which can also be called revelation. Thus, not only does the Rahner of *Hearer of the Word* not directly include transcendental revelation in his understanding of revelation, but he explicitly rejects it; indeed he rejects it for reasons which anticipate the kind of criticism theologians such as Hans Urs von Balthasar and Henri de Lubac will eventually level against the supernatural existential and the notion of anonymous Christianity.[45]

It seems, then, that any attempt, like the one by Metz in the footnotes to the second edition, to bring *Hearer of the Word* into full harmony with Rahner's later writings can lead only to confusion. This is because *Hearer of the Word* begins not just from a narrower conception of revelation than the one Rahner was later to deploy, but from a different one, and in particular from a different conception of the way revelation is related to the rest of human experience and knowledge.

It is perhaps worth mentioning that though the concept of revelation is not part of the subject matter of *Spirit in the World*, one can detect here also the "either/or" assumption about revelation and ordinary knowledge. In particular the pre-apprehension of God is thought to be the real content of a natural theology which is distinguished in the traditional way from revealed theology Thus, Rahner can write "Every natural theology . . . as a special discipline is . . . a repetition of general ontology or a usurpation of what can be possible only in a theology of sacred Scripture."[46] Here too, then, we can see the sharp opposition between that which is given in revelation and that which is known naturally, an opposition which leaves no room for something that is both revealed and accessible in ordinary experience.

So far I have been discussing the lack of fit between Rahner's early and later work from one direction—showing how the early views exclude the later theory—but the point can also be made from the other side. Not only do *Hearer of the Word* and *Spirit in the World* rule out anything like a supernatural existential, but the theory of the supernatural existential in turn casts some doubt on the projects undertaken in these early works. In one sense this follows trivially from what has already been argued: if the understanding of revelation found in the early philosophical works rules out the supernatural existential, then of course the supernatural existential will rule out their understanding of revelation. The implications for *Spirit in the World* and *Hearer of the Word* of the supernatural existential in fact go well beyond this, however: it is not only the understanding of revelation which they imply, but also the very possibility of a philosophical analysis of human nature like the one they offer, that is called into question. The problem is this: if the human being is always and everywhere already elevated by the offer of God's self-communication, then it seems that we do not actually have access to pure human nature. We cannot philosophically determine what it is, because we never meet it in its nakedness. We can only affirm, it would seem, on *theological* grounds (i.e. because grace must be unexacted), that pure nature is possible and that if it existed it would have a certain integrity of its own.

In "Concerning the relationship between nature and grace," where the somewhat weaker version of the supernatural existential is deployed, Rahner is already moving towards this conclusion, although there is a degree of ambiguity. Thus, in a footnote early in the essay he suggests that there is some philosophical access to pure nature which is still possible in spite of the supernatural existential—namely, access through transcendental analysis:

> This is not intended to deny that something which is recognized to be present in consequence of a *transcendental* analysis of human reality belongs to human nature (even in the theological sense). To this extent one does know *precisely* that this belongs to the nature . . . But once anthropology (in the widest sense) is forced to make use of a non-

> transcendental (and in this sense *a posteriori*) method in ascertaining man's nature, it begins at this point to become unavoidably "imprecise."[47]

Rahner seems here to be suggesting that transcendental analysis, as distinct from other anthropological methods, yields knowledge about pure human nature. The idea is presumably not just that transcendental analysis tells us something universal about human nature (since there may be traits which are universal but not ascribable to pure nature), but that it begins from such a minimal and fundamental description of the human being that this starting point must itself be part of pure human nature, and anything that is a condition of the possibility of something belonging to pure nature must also belong to it. Transcendental analysis can get us some way towards a knowledge of pure nature, then, even if it cannot give us a full picture of it.

At subsequent points in the text of the essay, however, Rahner more than once backs away from this position. Thus for instance we read that one

> may have recourse to a transcendental deduction in order to ascertain the irreducible quiddity of man, i.e. take that for man's purely natural essence which is simultaneously posited in first asking the question about his essence at all. But even then one does not know whether one may not have introduced too little into this concept of man, or whether in the very act of asking the question, contingently but for us unavoidably, a supernatural element may not have been at work in the questioner which could never in actual fact be bracketed off, and so would prevent one from laying hold *purely* of man's natural essence.[48]

Here a transcendental analysis is no longer a reliable guide to pure nature: it might tell one either too little or too much. Or again, later in the essay Rahner writes

> there is no way of telling *exactly* how his nature for itself alone would react, what precisely it would be for itself alone. This is not to deny that in the light of experience *and still more of Revelation* it might not be possible in some determinate respect to use a transcendental method to delimit what this human nature contains. "Animale rationale" may still in this respect be an apt description.[49]

Transcendental analysis *might* help and "animale rationale" *may* be a good description, but revelation, it seems, will need to be used to help determine if the results of the analysis in fact do pertain to pure nature.

Associated with some of the later appearances of the supernatural existential is a more unambiguous rejection of the idea that any kind of

philosophical access to pure nature is possible. Consider, for instance, the following passage:

> in every question which [man] poses about himself, in every judgment where he contrasts himself with an object and grasps it in the perspective of an unlimited transcendence, he experiences himself as something which he must necessarily be, as something that is a unity and a totality which cannot be dissolved into variables, which either is there as a whole or is not there at all. He grasps his metaphysical being; spirit in transcendence and freedom. And on the basis of this initial transcendental analysis of what is implicitly asserted about man in each of his human acts, much more could probably be affirmed as "essential" to him: his existence in a world, his having a body, his belonging to a society of his fellows. In a word, there is such a thing as a metaphysical knowledge of man, his essence and nature, by the light of his reason, which means here primarily independently of the word of revelation.[50]

Transcendental analysis can be used to discover a great deal about human nature, it seems. But Rahner continues

> but it also means knowledge through the means (his reason) which is itself an element of the essence so grasped. But it also follows from the theological data already given that this *de facto* human nature, as it knows itself here, and in view of all its experiences (especially when this human experience is viewed in the light of the whole history of mankind, where alone its development is fully realized) cannot and need not be considered the reflection of that "pure" nature which is distinguished in theology from everything supernatural.[51]

Transcendental analysis can indeed be used to discover a good deal about the human being, but it cannot with certainty attribute *anything* that it discovers to pure nature—or at the very least it can never be certain *how much* of what it discovers can be thus attributed. In *Foundations of Christian Faith*, similarly, Rahner writes that

> God's self-communication in grace . . . cannot by simple and individual acts of reflection and psychological introspection be differentiated from those basic structures of human transcendence which we tried to present in the second chapter of our reflections.[52]

It is only with the aid of revelation, then, only once grace can be recognized as such, that we can with any confidence (and even then only to some extent) distinguish in our experience what would be there in a state of pure nature from what is already affected by grace.

What this means is that if there is a supernatural existential, the possibility of a purely philosophical analysis of human nature in the technical sense of the word is very much cast into doubt, because philosophy has no way of knowing precisely what belongs to nature and what does not. From the standpoint of his theology, then, Rahner's philosophical works begin to look somewhat confused.

Once again, however, we need to consider Metz's attempt, in the second edition of *Hearer of the Word*, to harmonize the philosophical with the theological Rahner. According to Metz, the "nature" which Rahner in *Hearer of the Word* analyzes is *not* to be thought of as nature in the technical theological sense, i.e. not as pure nature, but as concrete human nature, as the already elevated humanity that we in fact are. Rahner is not presenting a portrait of the human being minus the supernatural existential, but rather developing an analysis of the actual human being, an analysis which, because it is philosophical rather than theological, simply does not try to specify what belongs to nature and what to grace.

Once again Metz's interpretation creates tensions in *Hearer of the Word*. In the original text, Rahner really does seem to assume that "nature" means "pure nature." There are a number of indications of this. First, Rahner explicitly considers the relationship between his enterprise and the traditional Roman Catholic understanding of the natural knowledge of God. The point of contrast is the *kind* of knowledge we have—discursive and derived by inference from the world, as natural knowledge of God has often been understood, or the inarticulable *Vorgriff*, accompanying and making possible from the start any knowledge of the world at all—but Rahner makes no mention of a difference in what is meant by "natural," and indeed the interest in the comparison requires *some* underlying similarity between the two projects. Again, when Rahner mentions grace in order to make it clear that this is not part of his subject matter, his way of introducing it is telling of his understanding of what he *is* doing: the question he wants to set aside is whether *in addition* to the conditions for revelation that can be specified by metaphysical anthropology an elevation by grace is *also* necessary. Thus it is quite clear that he here assumes that metaphysical anthropology tells us something about nature and *not* about grace.

There is also a deeper reason for rejecting Metz's interpretation. The evidence to which I have so far pointed suggests only that Rahner in fact seems to be thinking of pure nature, but not that this is in any way central to his argument. Had Metz done a more comprehensive editing job he could presumably have removed all the suggestions of "pure nature" mentioned above without in any way altering the overall pattern of the work. The real difficulty for his interpretation is that it cannot account for the fact that God is supposed to be free, according to *Hearer of the Word*, *either* to speak in history *or* to remain silent.

This is something upon which Rahner insists again and again. Although the human being is by nature directed to listen in history for a

possible revelation of God, God is not *obliged* to speak. One way of making this point is to distinguish between a metaphysical and a theological sense of "revelation." In the more usual, theological sense revelation occurs if God positively communicates something to human beings. However, *either* a theological revelation *or* the lack of it counts in the metaphysical sense as revelation, for even if God is silent, the very fact of this silence is an answer to the question that the human being inevitably puts to history.

If *Hearer of the Word* begins from human nature in the technical sense, then Rahner's insistence on this somewhat strained notion of revelation is not hard to understand. To say that human nature is of itself directed towards a revelation is to say that without such a revelation it would be unfulfilled, from which it follows that God, who thus created the human being, is obliged to fulfill it by giving it a revelation. But to say that God *must* reveal himself would be to undermine the gratuity of revelation and of the supernatural in general: if this were true then nature could demand the supernatural. The only way to see nature as oriented towards a revelation, then, without undermining the gratuity of the supernatural, is to introduce a concept of revelation sufficiently broad so that even non-revelation in the ordinary sense counts as revelation in this broad sense.

If, however, as Metz postulates, *Hearer of the Word* begins from concrete nature, from a nature that is already supernaturally elevated, then it is hard to make sense of Rahner's insistence that God might also remain silent. This is equally true whether one considers the more restricted or the fuller version of the supernatural existential. The weaker version, we have seen, was introduced precisely to make it possible to affirm, without endangering the unexactedness of grace vis-à-vis nature, that in our actual being we have an unconditional desire for and ordination to grace and the beatific vision (and therefore, a fortiori, to a revelation which is not merely God's silence). In its stronger version the supernatural existential is transcendental revelation, and transcendental revelation must thematize itself in history, and indeed must reach an absolute form at some point in history, so once again God's silence, the simple absence of a revelation in history, is ruled out. In whichever version we consider, once the supernatural existential is introduced, God has one degree less freedom than he is supposed to have according to *Hearer of the Word*: his freedom is in a sense used up apart from history in the universal supernatural elevation of human nature, so that there is no longer room for the affirmation that in history God can either speak or remain silent.

To put it in other words, the point is this: if the "nature" about which Rahner is philosophizing in *Hearer of the Word* is taken to be concrete nature, then he has no business suggesting that, with respect to what is learned of this nature, God could remain silent in history. What philosophy is reflecting on is a nature in which God has already in a sense intervened, and though *qua* philosophy it might not be expected to describe the situation in those terms, if it describes it in the *opposite*

terms—as one where God still remains uncommitted and free—it is, even *qua* philosophy, wrong.

Metz's suggestion, in short, that the "nature" which is philosophically described in *Hearer of the Word* should be thought of as concrete nature rather than nature in the precise theological sense not only runs counter to various superficial indications of the way Rahner himself is thinking about human nature at this point, but also cannot be reconciled with Rahner's frequent affirmation in *Hearer of the Word* that God may choose to remain silent. There is then no alternative but to revert to our initial assumption—that *Hearer of the Word* attempts to give an analysis of nature *apart from* grace—and our initial conclusion, that in light of the supernatural existential the attempt must be seen as impossible.

Something needs to be said about the significance, and particularly the limitations, of what this chapter has established in the context of the book as a whole. My larger purpose is to argue for a nonfoundationalist reading of Rahner's theology. It might be thought that in this chapter I have shown that the philosophy and theology cannot be read together, and therefore that the theology must be independent of the philosophy. In fact nothing quite so strong has as yet been argued. The contention of this chapter has been that the overarching *framework* of *Hearer of the Word*, and presumably also *Spirit in the World*, is inconsistent with a central theme of Rahner's theology, but this does not rule out the possibility that Rahner might without inconsistency continue to use *particular arguments* from these works to underpin this same theology.[53] We have seen the whole of Rahner's work ought not to be read as a single neat and tightly fitting system, but that the theology ought not be read as logically dependent on the philosophy is a stronger claim, and one that requires further argument.

5 The relation of philosophy to theology

A nonfoundationalist reading

We come now to the center of our argument: the contention of this chapter will be that Rahner's theology can be read—and indeed, that it is *best* read—nonfoundationally. That is to say, first, that his theology is best understood as logically independent of his philosophy, and second, that experience, which has such a significant role in Rahner's thought, is best construed not as the starting point of his theology, but as its conclusion.

It is important to be clear that what is at issue is the *logical* independence, and not the chronological independence, of Rahner's theology from his philosophy. There can be no doubt that there is a significant material overlap between his theology and his early philosophical works: ideas developed and defended in the philosophy play extremely imporant roles in the theology. The *Vorgriff auf esse*, which if I am right is unsuccessfully defended in *Spirit in the World*, is a clear example: the language of *Vorgriff* appears in many of Rahner's theological writings, and even more frequently the idea of it—that an absolute openness to, and reaching out towards, all of being takes place in every human act of knowing or willing. As we mentioned in chapter 2, Rahner's talk of human transcendence, of the human being as spirit, of the supernatural existential, and of prethematic revelation all make use of or require something like this concept of the *Vorgriff*. Similarly, one might point to Rahner's reflections on the nature of the symbol, which play a role in a number of areas of his theology and which are to some degree anticipated in *Spirit in the World*.[1]

If one were to strip Rahner's theology of all material that had roots of one kind or another in his philosophical writings, it would lose much of its richness and interest—and indeed substance. It is important to be clear that what is being proposed with the notion of a nonfoundationalist reading is not any such stripping. It is rather that this same material, when it appears in Rahner's theological writings, should be viewed as genuinely *theological* material, and not as dependent on previous philosophical demonstration. The same propositions, in other words, function differently in different contexts.

The arguments of the previous three chapters have set the scene for this

one. If Rahner's philosophical demonstration of the *Vorgriff* is fundamentally flawed, and if more generally Rahner's philosophical use of "transcendental arguments" is problematic, then whether Rahner's theology in fact logically depends on his philosophy becomes a crucial question. And if, as was argued in chapter 4, Rahner's corpus does not in other ways hang together quite so tightly as is often thought, then to read his theology with a certain degree of separation from his philosophy becomes at least thinkable.

The first step in this chapter will be simply to present two possible ways of reading Rahner. It is my contention that Rahner *can* be understood as a nonfoundationalist, but it must be acknowledged that he can also legitimately be construed as what I shall call a semi-foundationalist. In what follows, then, the main lines of a semi-foundationalist reading will be laid out, and the nonfoundationalist reading fleshed out more fully than it has been so far. In particular I will look at how the nonfoundationalist reading works in what at first sight seem two difficult contexts, the understanding of the *Vorgriff*, and the interpretation of *Foundations of Christian Faith*.

If Rahner is legitimately read in each of two ways, one can nevertheless ask whether there are considerations which should push us towards one reading or the other. The second step in this chapter, then, will be to evaluate the two readings. In this context I shall point to a significant tension running through Rahner's mature thought, a tension between his frequent emphasis on intellectual pluralism as an inescapable feature of the contemporary situation on the one hand, and all that one can call the transcendental side of his thought, on the other. A nonfoundationalist reading of Rahner is to be preferred overall, I shall argue, not only because of considerations arising from the previous chapters, but also because it offers a more acceptable resolution of this fundamental tension.

Before we embark on the business of setting out alternative interpretations of the significance of Rahner's philosophy for his theology, however, we need to consider something which has so far been touched upon but not yet examined fully. Rahner has his own things to say, explicitly, on the relation of philosophy to theology, and these need to be taken into account. One might indeed suppose that what Rahner himself has to say on the philosophy/theology issue ought to be our primary guide. There are, however, a number of reasons why this is *not* the case. First, it is not obvious that Rahner's discussions of the philosophy/theology distinction ought to be taken autobiographically: he is setting out, at a particular point in his career as a theologian, a conception of the philosophy/theology relationship, but he makes no claim to have himself over the course of his whole intellectual life embodied this relationship. Second, Rahner's discussions operate within a somewhat different framework from my own: his principle focus is not on the question of whether theological proposals logically depend on the success of philosophical arguments.[2] Finally, Rahner's

treatment of the issue is complex and contains as we shall see internal tensions. Rather than being capable of giving a clear answer to the question posed in this chapter, then, Rahner's reflections on philosophy and theology are themselves one of the aspects of his thought subject to differing construal by the fundamentally different orientations to his work we shall be exploring.

Philosophy and theology as an explicit theme in Rahner's own writing

A common element in most of Rahner's remarks on the relation of philosophy to theology (and particularly those he made as a theologian) is the word "within." Philosophy, and philosophizing, must take place *within* theology—philosophy is an "inner moment" of theology.

Sometimes the language of philosophy occurring within theology might be taken to be no more than an assertion that theology involves thinking, reflecting, and not just parroting received truths. So, for instance, in an essay on methodology to be discussed at some length below, Rahner describes every "theology which really involves conscious reflection and thought, and [which] is intended to be something more than a mere record of saving hisory" as "philosophical in character."[3] Theology is not just the repetition of what has been heard: for this to be really received, and indeed communicated, it must be reflected on.

That there is more than this, however, involved in the notion of philosophy as an "inner moment" of theology becomes clear in Rahner's fuller discussions of the subject, for instance in the essay "Philosophy and theology" in the sixth volume of the *Investigations*. Rahner's aim here is to overcome a sense which he takes to be prevalent in Catholic thought of "a basic strangeness existing between philosophy and theology," so that philosophy and theology "meet one another like two people who did not previously know one another, who are unrelated and will now try to see whether—even after all this time—one could not combine together in a tolerable symbiosis."[4] What he is wanting to find, then, is an understanding of the relationship of the two disciplines which will preserve the autonomy of philosophy and the dignity of theology and yet understand them as intimately and of their very nature connected—and not as strangers who happen to meet.

Rahner begins by contextualizing the philosophy/theology question within the larger issue of nature and grace.[5] Philosophy should be understood as an inner moment of theology because nature is an inner moment of grace. But what does it mean to say that nature is an inner moment of grace? The formula points to Rahner's rejection of the two-tiered understanding of nature and grace in neo-scholasticism discussed in chapter 4. Nature it is true does have a kind of self-sufficiency and independence—it can in some sense get along without grace. Grace really is "unexacted."

But this does not mean that grace, that which goes beyond nature, should be conceived as something which comes along as a bit extra on top. The real purpose of nature, the real context in which it must be understood if it is to be understood properly, is the reception of grace. Nature is for the sake of grace: it is there to be the thing which can receive grace. Its very independence is there so that grace can be received *as* grace, as real gift. Nature *can* be understood on its own, it does make a kind of sense of its own, but its real *raison d'être*, as God has actually ordained things, is to be that which is elevated beyond itself, that which can receive grace.[6]

What follows then for theology and philosophy? Philosophy, Rahner assumes, is about our nature, theology about that which goes beyond nature, i.e. grace and the supernatural. So if the thing which philosophy is about is an inner moment of the thing which theology is about, then philosophy is an inner moment of theology.

More particularly, just as nature has a certain independence and self-sufficiency, so too does philosophy: it is free, "an independent and basic science,"[7] master of its own household.[8] And just as the real purpose of nature is to be taken up into grace, so the real purpose of philosophy, as intended by God, is that it be taken up into theology, become an element within it:

> God has willed the truth of philosophy only because he willed the truth of his own self-revelation . . . he had to create the one from whom he could keep this truth a secret, i.e. the philosopher who, because he himself experienced God as the one who conceals himself, could accept revelation from him *as a grace*.[9]

The very autonomy and distinctness of philosophy, then, exists precisely in order that it can play its proper role *within* theology.

This conception of the relationship of the two disciplines is very similar to that found in *Hearer of the Word*, though articulated from the standpoint of theology rather than philosophy. In the middle of the essay, however, a shift occurs. With the comment "the unity of philosophy and theology within their theological distinction is much closer than has been suggested in our reflections up to this point"[10] Rahner proceeds to introduce considerations associated with the supernatural existential: salvation history is coextensive with universal history, and so, it follows, is revelation history; what we normally call revelation is the "concrete, propositional and divinely controlled '*thematisation*' of the universal gratuitous revelation;" this universal gratuitous revelation occurs by way of "a change in the unthematic horizon and in the basic condition of the mind of the person . . . on account of the accepted or rejected supernatural grace."[11] Although Rahner seems to present all this as an *intensification* of the relationship already described, in fact it follows from these considerations that the relationship between theology and philosophy established in the first half of

the essay can no longer hold. The philosopher was supposed to be the one from whom God kept revelation a secret, from whom God concealed himself: since it turns out that God offers a pre-thematic revelation to everyone, there is in fact no such philosopher—"in every philosophy men already engage inevitably and unthematically in theology."[12]

In the first half of this essay, then, Rahner sets up a particular vision of the philosophy/theology relation which in the second half he effectively denies. In the first half, insofar as one is a philosopher, one deals with a world *without* grace—"the philosopher . . . experienced God as the one who conceals himself'—precisely so that what one discovers as a theologian can be known *as* grace. But in the second half of the essay, it turns out that no one ever deals with a world without grace, and the distinctive nature of philosophy that had just been described is undermined, as indeed is its purpose.

To understand the relationship of the second half of the essay to the first it is useful to note that Rahner is implicitly distinguishing philosophy and theology both formally and materially. Formally they are distinct as regards the authority to which they appeal, the ground on which they argue: for theology, this includes Scripture, tradition, magisterium; for philosophy it does not. Materially, Rahner assumes, they are to be distinguished in terms of subject matter, what they are about: philosophy is about nature, theology about grace and the supernatural—hence the inclusion of the philosophy/theology question within the larger context of the relationship of nature and grace. In the first half of the essay, these two distinctions seem to coincide: the philosopher, reflecting on existence apart from historical revelation appears to be reflecting on a "natural" existence only, one in which God is experienced as "the one who conceals himself." In the second half of the essay, however, when considerations relating to the supernatural existential are introduced, the two ways of distinguishing philosophy and theology pull apart. Now one can still conceive of a philosophy in the formal sense—a philosophy which makes no appeal to revelation—but this is no longer materially distinct from theology, because the philosopher too lives in and reflects upon a world transformed by grace.[13]

Rahner's aim, we noted, was to overcome the prevailing "strangeness" between philosophy and theology which characterizes Catholic theology. What we have now seen is that he in fact sets out two different strategies for doing this. In the first half the estrangement is overcome by showing philosophy to be for the sake of theology, necessary as independent in order to allow theology to be itself. In the second half, the strangeness is overcome by showing that philosophy, though formally distinct from theology, is really *about* the same thing that theology is about, even if it may not itself realize this. But the second way precludes the first way: if philosophy is not in fact reflection on an experience as yet untouched by revelation, then it cannot quite play the role Rahner gives it in the first part.

Neither part of this discussion, in any case, explicitly addresses our own concern with the question of whether theological claims depend on the success of philosophical arguments, and more particularly whether *Rahner's* theology depends on the success of his earlier philosophical arguments. Indeed, as we shall see, the answer one chooses to this last question—about the logical relationship between Rahner's philosophy and Rahner's theology—will shape one's interpretation of many elements of Rahner's thought, and among these will be this very discussion of philosophy in relation to theology.

Two ways of reading Rahner

We shall begin by outlining what is to many scholars of Rahner, I believe, a commonsensical approach to our question. According to what I shall be calling the semi-foundationalist reading, Rahner can make the claims he does in his theology only because he has independently established certain claims in his philosophy. In this sense his theology *rests on* his philosophy. And what this means, of course, is that if the philosophy is, as philosophy, unsuccessful, then the theology too must fail.

It is important to note that what the nonfoundationalist reading of Rahner is to be constrasted with is a *semi*-foundationalist and not simply a foundationalist reading. The semi-foundationalist does not suppose that Rahner's theology is *entirely* based on his philosophy: no serious reader indeed could suppose Rahner to be a rationalist who thinks that Christianity as a whole can be philosophically demonstrated. True, he sometimes suggests that the whole of Christianity is in some sense experienced in the supernatural existential, but he is always insistent on the difficulty in thematizing this experience, and indeed the impossibility of doing so with any confidence apart from revelation in the ordinary sense of the word. 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. The philosophy cannot do the whole job, but it does nevertheless do a necessary job.

Semi-foundationalists would interpret Rahner's language of philosophy as an inner moment of theology as supporting their understanding. What Rahner first does as relatively pure philosophy in *Spirit in the World* and *Hearer of the Word* he subsequently takes up to become an element within his theology. In the early books he writes as a philosopher, abstracting at least in principle from what he knows as a Christian.[14] As a theologian, he then absorbs his own philosophy into the larger vision presented by his theology. But the philosophy, even in this larger context, continues to *be* philosophy, and to stand on its own two feet *as* philosophy. The theology then contains, and requires, as one of its elements, specifically philosophical arguments.

Semi-foundationalist readers of Rahner, then, see appeal to an independently demonstrated philosophy as one component in Rahner's theology. They need not go along with some critics in taking Rahner's theology to be entirely derived from and driven by a prior philosophical starting point, but they must nevertheless see it as largely dependent on the success of the philosophy. In other words, while semi-foundationalists would not present *Spirit in the World* as determining the whole of Rahner's theology, they would have to say that if *Spirit in the World* fails as philosophy, large swathes of Rahner's theology must collapse with it.

The alternative is a nonfoundationalist reading of Rahner's theology. On such a reading, though Rahner does make use of ideas developed in his philosophical writings, his theology is not *logically dependent* on the arguments he offers for these ideas. The theology stands on its own. The same claims, on such a reading, may function differently in different parts of Rahner's corpus: what is at one point presented as the conclusion of a philosophical argument may elsewhere function as a theological hypothesis. On such an account the fact that (if the arguments of chapters 2 and 3 are accepted) Rahner is not successful in offering a philosophical demonstration of the existence of a *Vorgriff*, for example, need not affect his theological deployment of the notion. Within his theology, this claim needs theological rather than philosophical justification.

What then of Rahner's comments about the necessary role of philosophy as an inner moment of theology? The nonfoundationalist reader will draw on the distinction, discussed above, between material and formal ways of contrasting philosophy with theology. What must be denied, for the nonfoundationalist, is that Rahner's theology is dependent on a philosophy *formally* distinct from it, on an independently argued philosophy which makes no appeal to revelation. But in a *material* sense, insofar as philosophy is defined not by its method but by its subject matter, it is clearly the case that philosophy is an inner moment of theology: theology, to speak of grace and revelation, must include philosophy in the sense of a reflection on human nature. On the nonfoundationalist reading, significant elements of Rahner's own philosophical works do indeed become an inner moment of his theology, but in so doing they remain philosophy only in what I have been calling a material sense.

All of this can become more concrete if, once again, we consider the place of the *Vorgriff auf esse* in Rahner's theology.

Fleshing out the nonfoundationalist reading: the Vorgriff auf esse

The *Vorgriff auf esse*, on a nonfoundationalist reading, is seen as an element in Rahner's theology *not* because he had previously philosophically established its existence, but because this is something that the theology itself requires.

How then is the *Vorgriff* theologically justified? One might say, quite simply, by its fruitfulness, by everything that Rahner can do with it. insofar as he can, with its help, untie theological knots, provide enlightening interpretations of traditional doctrines, and exhibit the inner coherence of Christian beliefs, he has justified it as a hypothesis. To the extent that the supposition that we have this kind of implicit awareness of and dynamism towards God helps make sense of everything Christians want to make sense of, it would be reasonable to accept it.[15]

One could also offer more concrete theological arguments. For instance, one might tease out a theological justification of the *Vorgriff* as a requirement for what Rahner believes needs to be said about grace. The *Vorgriff* is justified, in other words, because it is a condition of the possibility of the supernatural existential. Typically Rahner's understanding of grace is presented as firmly grounded in, and to a considerable degree determined by, his philosophical anthropology, but it is at least equally possible to view everything he has to say about grace as put forward for purely theological reasons, and to argue that these things which Rahner believes he must say about grace in turn lead him to posit a *Vorgriff*.

Such an argument might run as follows. God wills the salvation of all human beings, so justifying grace must be universally present, at least as offer.[16] Furthermore, faith in God and in Christ is a necessary means of salvation, so it is necessary that the transformation of human beings brought about by justifying grace should include a cognitive element. Since explicit belief in the church's proclamation is not in fact a possibility for all human beings, this cognitive element must be at something other than an explicit level: it must be possible somehow to accept God and God's redemptive action in Christ in an unthematic way. One finds the argument up to this stage quite explicitly set out in a number of places.[17] Now in order that grace not be conceived as introducing something completely new into human consciousness, something that has no connection whatsoever to human nature, the human being must be thought of as already, by nature, standing in *some* sort of cognitive but unthematic relationship to God. Grace must be the perfection and elevation of nature, not a radical alteration to it. If human beings are *capable* of being elevated by grace to an unthematic awareness and acceptance of God's self-offer, they must already have some unthematic orientation towards God in general. To put it another way, if there is going to be an unthematic supernatural faith there must also be an unthematic natural knowledge of God.

What has been sketched so far is perhaps enough to suggest why on theological grounds Rahner needs *some* notion of a universal awareness of God—namely, in order to show that there is room, that there is a place, for the universal possibility of grace and faith: but why does he need to maintain that this awareness is in particular the condition of the possibility of all knowing and willing, the horizon within which we apprehend and choose particular things? Here, too, I think, one can find a theological

rather than a philosophical answer. The possibility that there could be an immediate intuition of God prior to and apart from our knowledge of the world was eliminated as an option open to a Catholic theologian by the condemnation of ontologism in the nineteenth century. The usual alternative to knowledge of God by direct intuition is a knowledge of God that is inferred from knowledge of the world. Since one cannot have an inferred pre-thematic knowledge, this will not fit the bill. The only option, if knowledge of God can be neither independent of knowledge of the world, nor subsequent to it, is that we are aware of God in the very act of knowing something in the world, that the knowledge of God is a condition of knowledge of the world.[18]

It might be objected that this theological argument for the *Vorgriff* is open to fundamentally the same objection set out in chapter 3 against the transcendental arguments —it might be objected, that is, that once again such an argument would involve an unsubstantiated uniqueness claim. Certain axioms are set out—God's universal will to save, the necessity of faith in Christ for salvation—and a particular anthropology is presented as the way to reconcile these axioms. But how do we know that this is the *only* possible way? Does not such an argument for the *Vorgriff* depend on the implicit claim that Rahner's transcendental anthropology constitutes the unique solution to the dilemma with which he starts (namely how God's universal salvific will can be reconciled with a *solus Christus* understanding of salvation), and would not such uniqueness be impossible to prove?

This difficulty is not a purely abstract one. An alternative solution is in fact concretely available. In or after death, some have proposed, all human beings are to be confronted (explicitly) with the gospel. Because *everyone* will be confronted with the gospel, the universality of at least the offer of salvation is upheld; because it is *the gospel* with which they are to be confronted, the centrality of faith in Christ for salvation is upheld. (George Lindbeck has dubbed this the "prospective *fides ex auditu*" theory.) The data with which Rahner begins, then, do not dictate the particular solution he offers.

Such an approach, though logically possible, would be theologically uncongenial to Rahner for two reasons. First, though Rahner himself also regards the moment of death as decisive, the moment of death is not in his view independent of or distinct from the life that precedes it. The prospective *fides ex auditu* approach, according to which something completely new, to which the preceding life was to a large degree irrelevant, occurs at death, would therefore require quite a different theology of death than Rahner's own. Second, Rahner's starting point, theologically, is not the problem of the salvation of people of other faiths, but God's universal salvific will. The distinction is a fine one, but nevertheless significant. If the salvation of non-Christians is what is in question, then as long as they can somehow be saved one will be content. From the point of view of a belief in God's universal salvific will, however, there may be something

unsatisfactory in a theory which has everything happening at death. Why, if God *does* have a saving will, would God do nothing about the salvation of most human beings during their lifetime? While it may not be strictly necessary, it seems in keeping with this view that God be thought to be *always* working for the salvation of all human beings.[19]

In any case the more general point remains that a theological argument for the *Vorgriff* which depended on viewing it as part of the only possible solution to a particular aporia would be subject to the same censure as the transcendental arguments considered in chapter 3. Such a uniqueness claim is not, however, necessary. The *Vorgriff* and the supernatural existential can be viewed as *one* way of working out the compatibility of God's universal salvific will with the insistence that there can be no salvation apart from faith in Christ. One could not then claim to have given watertight theological *proof* of the existence of the *Vogriff*, but one will have made a case for it as something one might want to believe, a reasonable hypothesis.

A specific theological argument for the *Vorgriff* can of course be combined with a more general one. Beginning with what one needs to say about grace (or perhaps in a similar way, with what needs to be said about the incarnation), one arrives at the *Vorgriff* as part of an understanding of the human being which makes this possible. The idea that this *particular* theological anthropology is a useful and fruitful one is then confirmed by the way it functions in other areas, by everything that can be done with it.

On the nonfoundationalist readings the *Vorgriff* stands or falls for these sorts of theological reasons, and not because of the success or failure of the philosophical arguments to be found in *Spirit in the World* or *Hearer of the Word*.

Fleshing out the nonfoundationalist reading: Foundations of Christian Faith

A casual reader might suppose that *Foundations of Christian Faith*, which is as close as Rahner came to a systematic presentation of his thought, and which moves on to specifically theological topics only after an initial two chapters of what appears to be philosophy, would present a difficulty for a nonfoundational interpretation—surely here it is made clear that the theology is built on a philosophical basis? On more careful inspection, however, *Foundations of Christian Faith* does not create problems for the nonfoundationalist. In fact it can be taken to bear out the nonfoundationalist reading.

Foundations of Christian Faith is best interpreted as a work of theology from start to finish, which in fact contains *no* independent philosophy. Many of Rahner's comments only make sense in this light. It is because *Foundations of Christian Faith* is a work of theology through and through that Rahner can affirm from the beginning of the volume that "[w]e are

presupposing here the existence of our own personal Christian faith in its normal ecclesial form, and we are trying . . . to reach an *idea* of this"[20] and it is because it is *not* a question of even partially justifying Christianity by an independent philosophy that he can describe as his aim "to give people confidence from the very *content* of Christian dogma itself that they can believe with intellectual honesty."[21]

Rahner does, it is true, describe himself as operating at the level of a "unity of philosophy and theology" but here philosophy is being distinguished from (or related to) theology in terms of its subject matter (materially) rather than its manner of proceeding (formally). *Foundations of Christian Faith* is a unity of philosophy and theology not because it brings together two different modes of arguing, one which appeals to revelation and one which does not, but because what is to be discussed falls into the territory, the subject matter, of both philosophy and theology. When in the introduction, then, Rahner first mentions a unity of philosophy and theology, he explains it as follows:

> [W]e are reflecting upon the concrete whole of the *human* self-realization of a Christian. That is really "philosophy." We are reflecting upon a *Christian* existence and upon the intellectual foundation of a *Christian* self-realization, and that is basically "theology."[22]

One does philosophy or theology, then, depending on whether what one is reflecting on is existence *qua* human or *qua* specifically Christian: it is the thing being reflected on and not the method of reflection that distinguishes the two. That there is no philosophy in the methodological, formal sense in the *Foundations* is suggested by the claim that "[i]t is characteristic of this unity that in the appropriate place explicit reference is made to theological data which cannot possibly be reached by a secular philosophy as such":[23] Rahner does not suggest that the philosophical part has to come to an end when reference to theological data is made, but rather that such reference does not violate the way in which the philosophy forms a part of this unity.

In discussing his undertaking in terms of a "unity of philosophy and theology," then, Rahner never suggests that he is melding together with his theology an independently argued philosophy. The most serious objection to the suggestion that there is no independently argued philosophy in *Foundations of Christian Faith* would seem to come, however, not from any specific remark Rahner makes about philosophy or philosophy and theology, but from the fact that it *looks* like he is doing philosophy in much of the first and second chapters. More precisely, it looks like he is doing philosophy rather than theology in the second sense of the distinction—he makes no appeal to revelation, faith or any of the data of Christianity but builds up a picture of the human being that can be defended on purely general grounds. In the first chapter Rahner argues that because the human being can always ask another question, can always call into question any

finite horizon, it cannot *have* a finite horizon (for if one can call it into question it is no longer the horizon), and so must have an infinite horizon, must be infinitely open. Because of experiences such as those of hope, freedom or responsibility, one can show that this infinite openness cannot be grounded in nothing, but in absolute being, and so on. Rahner apparently moves towards the assertion that all human beings are oriented towards God beginning with nothing but some basic observations—we are able to ask questions, and we experience things like hope and responsibility. In the second chapter the phenomenology gets a little more subtle—here Rahner begins not merely from questioning and hope and the like, but from the subjective pole of experience, the awareness of the self that is always also present, though in an elusive way, in a human being's act of knowing an object. Nevertheless, what he offers still looks like a neutral analysis, something that anyone could recognize in his own experience.

Taken in isolation, then, (and if we ignore the first passage of each of them) chapters I and II do indeed look like philosophy. In the context of the work as a whole, however, they do not. In this larger context they can be seen instead as offering elements of *an* interpretation of experience—one interpretation among many possible ones, and one which is to be believed, not only insofar as it makes sense of experience, but also insofar as it helps make sense of Christianity as an interpretation of experience. To explain this we need to begin again from quite a general level.

Rahner's object in *Foundations of Christian Faith* is to help his students in particular, and reflective Christians in general, justify to themselves their faith. The way he proposes to do this is by presenting an interpretation of Christianity (thus "to give people confidence from the very *content* of dogma") which will exhibit it as worthy of belief. One of the chief features of the interpretation of Christianity that Rahner in fact develops is that it presents Christianity as itself an interpretation of experience. Now, if we keep in mind that Rahner's object is not to convince anyone whatsoever that he must accept Christian dogma, but rather to reassure the Christian thinker that she *may* in good conscience continue in her belief, then it should be clear that he has no need to show that the interpretation of existence which he is offering as an interpretation of Christianity is the only possible or even the best interpretation of existence: it is enough if he can present it as sufficiently plausible that there is no obviously superior approach available.[24]

If the first two chapters of *Foundations of Christian Faith* form part of such an enterprise then the anthropological claims that are made in them are not meant to be judged on purely philosophical grounds, but also according to whether they contribute to a convincing interpretation of Christianity. The project as a whole is warranted insofar as it can make sense of *both* experience *and* Christianity, or more precisely, insofar as it can make sense of Christianity as something which can make sense of experience. If it is successful, then the reflective Christian can be satisfied:

the justification of her faith need not rest solely on historical considerations, which are difficult and perhaps inconclusive, but also on the fact that Christianity interprets her experience.[25]

The first two chapters (the first three in fact, but for our purposes the third is less important) of *Foundations of Christian Faith* do differ from what follows. They are part of the Christian interpretation that is not distinctively Christian, a part that may be shared by other interpretations of existence. Thus in the fourth chapter Rahner acknowledges that what has so far been said "was not yet so specifically Christian that anyone who accepts these assertions as his own self-understanding could already be called a Christian on the level of an explicit and reflexive profession of faith."[26] The fact that the material of the first two chapters is not yet *specifically* Christian, however, means neither that it is not Christian nor that it is justified independently of Christian considerations. It does not follow that it is not Christian, first of all, from the fact that some claim falls into the intersection of Christianity and some other way of interpreting experience (tea is no less an English form of sustenance than crumpets even though the one is consumed elsewhere and the other is not). And second, because it is not a uniquely Christian claim it does not follow that Rahner is trying to justify it on purely general, a-Christian grounds. At least part of the warrant for the anthropological claims of these initial chapters is that they are the presupposition for what is to follow, that the *whole*, taken together, is persuasive.

My proposal, then, is that the interpretation of experience Rahner presents in the first two chapters is offered as part of Christianity's interpretation of existence rather than as something that stands alone and independently supports Christianity. The fact that he may not be constantly referring to Christianity as he presents this interpretation does not affect the matter, and indeed he makes it quite clear at the beginning of chapter 1 what he will be doing: he is outlining the presuppositions of Christianity. "Presuppositions" here means, not those things which one must *first* and independently presuppose in order to accept Christianity, but those things which Christianity itself presupposes:

> Christianity *assumes* that these presuppositions which it makes are inescapably and necessarily present in the ultimate depths of human existence, even when this existence is interpreted differently in its reflexive self-interpretation . . . and these very presuppositions themselves belong to the content of a revealed theology which announces Christianity to man so that this essential being of his . . . does not remain hidden from him.[27]

In short, then, *Foundations of Christian Faith* includes philosophy if one defines philosophy by its subject matter, but it is pure theology in the sense that at every point Rahner is presenting a specifically *Christian* inter-

pretation of existence, and at no point does he try to ground this on something which is independent of it.

Evaluating the two readings

How is one to decide between the two ways of reading Rahner I have outlined above? One might suppose that there is a presumption in favor of the semi-foundationalist reading. If a theologian publishes two major philosophical works, and then uses ideas from these within his theology; if two decades later he authorizes the creation of second editions of the original philosophical writings; then surely we must assume that he intends his theology to refer back to, and to rest upon, what he has achieved in his philosophy. The argument of the previous chapter, however, counts at least to some degree against such a presumption. Rahner's corpus is not in fact a smoothly interlocking unity of philosophy and theology: though there are many strands of continuity, the parts do not fit neatly together. The previous chapter does not demonstrate that it would be *impossible* for his theology to depend on elements of his philosophy, as we have seen, but it does call into question too easy an assumption that everything must be read as a tightly knit whole.

What is however a strong point in favor of a semi-foundationalist reading is the *way* in which, at certain points at least, Rahner introduces elements from his philosophical work into his theological writings. The first thing a semi-foundationalist might note is that Rahner does not, when introducing something like the *Vorgriff* into his theology, offer an explicit theological justification for it. The theological case for the *Vorgriff* presented earlier was one constructed out of elements of Rahner's thought, but not one that he himself puts forward anywhere in so many words.

Very often when something like the *Vorgriff* is introduced, no explicit justification of any kind is offered for it, and this itself the semi-foundationalist might take to support his or her position. Thus for instance in "The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology," after discussing some implications of the doctrine of the beatific vision, Rahner begins again from a different angle:

> We meet the same type of problem if we take the nature of spirit as our starting-point. Spirit is transcendence. Spirit grasps at the incomprehensible, in as much as it presses on beyond the actual object of comprehension to an anticipatory grasp of the absolute.[28]

Rahner does not specify how we know about spirit, how we know that it is transcendence and that it presses on beyond the object of comprehension. The very fact that he does not need to go into this, however, the semi-foundationalist might argue, points to the fact that he is implicitly relying on his own earlier philosophical arguments.[29]

At some points, furthermore, Rahner is in fact clear that he thinks that something like the *Vorgriff* can be known independently of theology, and he makes explicit reference to the possibility of a philosophical justification. In "Transcendental Experience from the Standpoint of Catholic Dogmatics" he writes that

> [I]t is of course no part of our task to show with the aid of an epistemological and existential ontological reflection that the experience of transcendence (which forms our present theme) actually exists as such in man, to show that, in its transcendental necessity with which it is present as a condition of human knowledge as a whole, it also includes an equally necessary and irreversible dependence of the mind (in knowledge and freedom) on that which or him whom in Christian terminology we call God. All this is simply presupposed here . . . we assume that the experience of transcendence is philosophically objectified.[30]

The semi-foundationalist, in sum, is able to point to the fact that Rahner does not offer an explicit theological justification for an idea such as the *Vorgriff*, and on the other hand that he *does*, at least at times, explicitly make reference to a philosophical justification for it, in support of his reading.

This is, as I have said, the strongest point in favor of a semi-foundationalist reading, and it is genuinely a strong point. Nevertheless, it is not absolutely decisive. First of all, in passages such as the one quoted above, although Rahner does presume the possibility of the philosophical establishment of something like the *Vorgriff*, he does not in fact either repeat his own earlier arguments or direct the reader back to *Spirit in the World*. The semi-foundationalist will assume that when Rahner writes something like "[b]ut this philosophical argument for . . . will not be pursued any further in the present context," he is not wanting to interrupt his theology with long philosophical discussions, and that he does not need to *precisely because* he has done it before. But the nonfoundationalist can put a different construal on the situation: if Rahner neither offers a full demonstration, nor explicitly point to where he has already set one out, this only underlines the fact that prior philosophical demonstration is not needed for theology—if Rahner assumes that a philosophical demonstration can be given, he also assumes that it is not important to do it because his theological position does not depend on it. The brevity with which Rahner refers to the notion that philosophical demonstration is possible, in short, can be taken in two ways: he is brief because he is relying on the full philosophical case already having been made elsewhere; or he is brief because it does not really matter deeply in the theological context.[31]

Second, even if one did take these passages to involve an implicit reference back to Rahner's own early philosophical arguments, though this would count against a nonfoundationalist reading, it would not count *deci-*

sively against it. This is because the real case for a nonfoundationalist reading does not rest on the construal of individual passages in which Rahner may, or may not, be implicitly calling upon his earlier philosophical arguments. 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. Even if, then, it turns out that at particular points Rahner makes appeal to his earlier philosophy, the nonfoundationalist would argue that this represents merely a remnant of an earlier kind of thinking, one which is extraneous to the basic drift and at odds with the overall thrust of Rahner's theology.

In particular, the nonfoundationalist reading allows one to make sense of the very significant discussions Rahner offers of pluralism, and to understand how these cohere with all in his theology that in one sense or another is "transcendental." The semi-foundationalist can also attempt a reconciliation of these two aspects of Rahner's theology, but not, as we shall see, in a very satisfactory way. In order to make the case fully for a nonfoundationalist reading, then, we need to turn to a consideration of Rahner's reflections on pluralism, and the relation of these to the "transcendental" in his theology.

The tension between pluralism and the transcendental in Rahner's theology

In a variety of essays and a variety of contexts Rahner draws attention to pluralism as a new problem for theology, for individuals and for the church.[32] The intellectual world with all its specializations and divisions has expanded dramatically, so that there is simply too much to know. Not only can no one now be competent in all fields of knowledge, but no one can be competent in all the areas that are relevant to theology and to faith, to "forming a world view." The problem cannot be overcome by collective work because the conclusion of an argument or a line of study is usually of little use to anyone who has not also repeated the process of arriving at the conclusion. The situation, Rahner suggests, is radically different from what has held in previous generations, even in the generation to which Rahner's own teachers belonged: it is something which has changed dramatically during the course of Rahner's own adult life.

Rahner points to the problem posed by this pluralism in a number of ways. How can the Church be understood as one and as unified by its single creed if on the one hand there is no getting at this creed in its "purity," apart from some theology, and on the other hand there is a pluralism in theology, or a pluralism *of* theologies, that is not only beyond synthesis but also beyond being schematized? How can one responsibly make a decision for, or even responsibly hold, any world view, and in particular the Christian faith, if one cannot possibly in a lifetime come to grips with all the questions and all the information directly relevant to holding this world view?

What is the theologian to do about philosophy if on the one hand there is no avoiding philosophizing within theology, and on the other hand there are so many brands of philosophy and so many problems within philosophy that no individual can ever really understand them all?

That the pluralism which the theologian faces is "irreducible" is an empirical assertion rather than a philosophical theory. Rahner does not, in other words, make any claim about the "incommensurability" of different theological options. It is the shortness of life rather than the unbridgeability of different languages or conceptual schemes which creates the problem. The problem itself, nevertheless, has some similarities to that posed by relativism. It is impossible to adjudicate between all conflicting claims, or even to perceive where these *are* conflicting claims, and it is impossible ever to establish any one position as superior to all alternatives: even if we do not live in a relativist's world, we live in a world which in some ways might as well be.

It will be helpful for what follows to draw a distinction, though once again Rahner himself does not always clearly do so, between two kinds of pluralism, or perhaps two aspects of the one problem of pluralism. On the one hand the theologian or thoughtful Christian suffers from an excess of "data":[33] the amount of potentially relevant information available in one or another of the "sciences" (including the various sub-disciplines of theology—biblical exegesis, church history and so on) dramatically exceeds the amount that she can ever personally appropriate. On the other hand there is the problem of theology's *own* pluralism: the number of alternative theologies in existence is so great, and the ways in which they differ so manifold, that it is not possible for any one theologian or Christian to do justice to them all. There is no hope of developing a single system in which everything that is right in other theological options can find its place and what is wrong in them be shown to be wrong. (This distinction between what we might call general intellectual pluralism on the one hand and theological pluralism on the other is not of course entirely clear-cut. Theologies differ in part according to the "data" to which they have given their attention, so that the first aspect of pluralism may be one of the causes of the second. Furthermore, insofar as the existence of a multiplicity of theological positions adds to the complexity of what can be known in general, the second aspect of pluralism contributes to the first.)

The pluralism to which Rahner constantly returns has numerous consequences. One of these is that we simply have to accept that we will live with a certain "gnoseological concupiscence." We will find ourselves increasingly unable to integrate all the various things we know and believe so that they coexist in us in any kind of harmony. We must continue to try, for we cannot simply stop thinking, and in particular we cannot stop trying to integrate our faith with the rest of our beliefs, but we can never expect to be entirely successful. A second consequence, one which we have already touched upon, has to do with the individual's justification of her

belief. Even if in principle Catholic theology assumes that the rational justification of faith is possible, in the light of the expansion of our intellectual world and the overwhelming amount of relevant and available information, it is no longer possible for any individual, no matter how well-educated, *directly* to justify her choice to remain a Roman Catholic. The questions which in principle *ought* to be considered and answered are in practice too numerous and too complex to be dealt with in any one lifetime. It follows, argues Rahner, that some *indirect* method of rational justification must be possible and should be developed. A third consequence, according to Rahner, is that the *magisterium* will no longer be able to function in the way they have done in the past: no more than anyone else will those who have teaching authority within the church be able to understand and judge definitively among all the theologies which are offered to the church, and concerning that which they cannot fully understand they cannot (or ought not) definitively pass judgment.

This emphatic and repeated insistence on the inescapability of pluralism stands in at least apparent contrast with the aspects of Rahner's theology that can be called "transcendental." In chapter 3 we distinguished between two ways in which Rahner uses this word—a formal sense, in which it refers to a certain method of investigation, inspired ultimately by Immanuel Kant, and a material sense, in which it refers to a concrete anthropology, according to which the human spirit is always transcending all that is finite towards God. The two senses, as we saw, are never sharply distinguished by Rahner, and they come together in the way he uses them. So we might call Rahner's theology transcendental insofar as it (sometimes) uses and or advocates a transcendental method, and insofar as it (often) involves a transcendental anthropology. Both these aspects, however, seem to stand in tension with his insistence on pluralism—both the fact that Rahner seems to advocate the necessity of doing theology in one particular way, a way that draws at least its explicit inspiration from one particular stream of philosophy, and the fact that Rahner's theology is so centrally bound up with the notion that one can talk of a universal, timeless, unchanging, a priori aspect of human nature. What we find, then, is on the one hand an insistence that there are and will continue to be many theologies and that no one of them can rise above the others and definitively establish itself as superior, and on the other hand the development and advocacy of one kind of theology as, it seems, universally necessary; on the one hand the insistence that there is no getting around pluralism and the historically conditioned nature of our intellectual situation,[34] and on the other hand the advocacy of a theology revolving around "the changeless a priori structure of the human mind."[35]

The tension in Rahner's thought is perhaps most neatly exemplified in an article on methodology which originated in a set of three lectures given in Montreal in 1969, and a brief review of this article may serve to highlight the tension. Rahner was asked to speak about his own theological

method, but he claimed to be thrown "into considerable confusion" by this and so to prefer to speak more broadly about what is demanded of theological method in general "by the direction which Catholic theology is taking today."[36]

In the first of these lectures Rahner once again takes up the question of pluralism. He observes that the situation which the Catholic theologian now faces "has become in the highest degree incapable of analysis and, so far as the individual is concerned, incapable of being grasped and apprehended as a whole."[37]

There is now an "uncontrollable pluralism of theologies," and the theologian must do his work in a situation of gnoseological concupiscence.[38] In particular:

> He works on the basis of a world of ideas, from certain premises, and with certain philosophical preconceptions as his tools, yet is well aware that these are subject to historical conditions and the limitations of particular epochs. Yet for all this formal awareness he is incapable of eliminating or overcoming these limitations.[39]

Theology has perhaps always been conditioned by its historical circumstances, but because of the pluralism of theologies that is now manifestly present in the church, and the pluralism of philosophies and other secular disciplines on which the theologian must draw, theologians are also in a position to be *aware* of the historical conditioning of their thought. One knows that one cannot master all that is relevant, that one cannot rise above the multiplicity of positions that are available and achieve a balanced judgment of each or a synthesis of all, and so one cannot but conclude that one's thinking is inescapably influenced by one's own particular position.

From this general discussion of pluralism Rahner moves to a specific problem it poses for the theologian, and then to the proposal of a solution. The problem on which he focuses is that theology should be "the justification of the intellectual honesty of faith,"[40] but in view of the contemporary intellectual situation it is not possible for any individual theologian to solve directly all the problems involved in such a justification; the solution he proposes is that indirect methods should be employed.[41] What we are to understand by "indirect methods" Rahner tries chiefly to illustrate by example, but it is interesting to consider his general formulation:

> These methods will be indirect in the sense that they will legitimately bypass the particular material problems involved, and that they will apply first and foremost in the particular concrete situation of the individual in the development of his thought, and not lay claim to any permanent or universal validity.[42]

The first clause here gives no positive insight into what in particular Rahner has in mind: to say that the methods in question will bypass the particular material problems is only to repeat that they will be indirect, that they will attempt something *other* than the traditional direct justification of the intellectual honesty of faith. The positive proposal, then, comes essentially in the second clause: the methods Rahner is advocating will be able to justify the faith of an individual without having to follow the traditional (and now impossible) route *because* they will involve what one might call localized arguments, arguments that draw part of their force from their relationship to a particular situation in which the hearer finds herself. And because they draw their force from their relationship to a particular situation, they will not be able to pretend to be permanently or universally valid.

Everything that Rahner subsequently says about indirect methods here serves to confirm the point that the one thing that characterizes and distinguishes them is that they involve situation-specific arguments, arguments effective only for a particular audience. He suggests that such methods are already semi-consciously used in apologetics, and that they are thought of as a kind of *ad hominem* argument, i.e. an argument targeted at and valid for a particular audience only. In the example he sketches—a justification of membership in the Catholic Church, as distinguished from the Churches of the Reformation—the first step in the argument is to establish that

> every Christian has the right to presume, until the contrary is proved, that his own Christianity and his adherence to the Church in the concrete are valid on the basis of the power of grace and the working of the Spirit which he feels within him.[43]

The argument which follows, it seems, may be sufficient to persuade a Catholic of the justifiability of remaining a Catholic without being sufficient to persuade a Protestant to *become* a Catholic. The argument depends for its force, in other words, on the fact that the hearer *already is* a Catholic.

In the first lecture, in short, Rahner draws our attention to the problems posed by pluralism, as he has done at many other points, and then develops a proposal for how theology ought to operate in the face of this pluralism: theology must recognize its own inescapable historical conditionedness and content itself with developing arguments which are convincing to people in particular situations rather than arguments which pretend to be universally persuasive.

In the second lecture we turn to transcendental theology. Rahner offers no transition between the two lectures, no attempt to relate the one to the other beyond the fact that in each case it is a question of the appropriate methodology for Catholic theology.[44] He simply places side by side what on the surface seem to be two recommendations very much at odds with each other.

In this second lecture, then, Rahner sets out to describe what the method of transcendental theology is and to advocate its use. His advocacy of transcendental theology does not, as we have already noted, go so far as to suggest that there should be *nothing but* transcendental theology, but on the other hand he does seem to think that all good theology needs to be at least *in part* transcendental.[45]

Rahner starts off with an admittedly very broad understanding of transcendental theology, so broad that one might initially suppose that he is not really trying to impose any particular approach to theology after all. Transcendental theology is theology which involves transcendental philosophy,[46] and since on the one hand all genuine philosophy is and has always been transcendental philosophy, even if it has not always been explicitly aware of this fact, and on the other hand all theology involves a reflective and therefore a philosophical component, it follows that all respectable theology is and has always been in some sense transcendental theology.[47] It soon becomes clear, however, that if Rahner is willing to call pre-Cartesian philosophy transcendental this is intended not so much to indefinitely broaden the notion of transcendental theology as to legitimate it. In saying that all theology should be in part at least transcendental theology Rahner in fact turns out to be advocating something considerably more specific, then, than the presumably unassailable thesis that all theology should be reflective.

The specificity of what Rahner advocates first emerges in his discussion of the nature of transcendental philosophy, i.e. the method of transcendental theology. Transcendental philosophy is (after some hesitation) defined as follows:

> A transcendental line of enquiry, regardless of the particular area of subject-matter in which it is applied, is present when and to the extent that it raises the question of the conditions in which knowledge of a specific subject is possible in the knowing subject himself. The fact that an enquiry of this kind is in principle possible, legitimate and under certain circumstances even necessary hardly needs to be discussed.

In spite of this last assertion Rahner proceeds to give a brief discussion of the possibility, legitimacy, and necessity of transcendental philosophy. We do not need to examine in any detail the particular material presented in this discussion—much of it we have already considered at some point — but it is worth quoting the passage simply to make it clear just how much of a positive position Rahner is in fact presupposing in his "pre-philosophical"[48] notion of a transcendental enquiry:

> In any act of cognition it is not only the object known but also the subject knowing that is involved. It is dependent not only upon the distinctive characteristics of the object, but also upon the essential

> structure of the knowing subject. The mutual interconnection and the mutual interconditioning process between the subject knowing and the object known precisely as known and as knowable are in themselves the object of a transcendental enquiry. The *a priori* transcendental subjectivity of the knower on the one hand and the object of knowledge (and of freedom) on the other are related to one another in such a way that they mutually condition one another, and they do this in such a way that knowledge of the *a priori* conditions which make knowledge possible in the subject necessarily constitutes also an element in the actual knowledge of the object itself both with regard to the question of what the nature of the object known is as a matter of metaphysical necessity, and also with regard to the question of what the concrete historical conditions of this object are, factors which are precisely not intrinsically necessary. Thus a transcendental enquiry constitutes not merely the posing of a question which is supplementary to the question of the object in its autonomy and as it is presented *a posteriori* and at the empirical level. Rather it is only in this transcendental enquiry that knowledge of the object as it exists in itself achieves the fullness proper to it. Knowledge on the part of the knowing subject in himself is always at the same time a knowledge of the metaphysical (and in an objective sense transcendental) structure of the object itself.[49]

The transcendental method which all theology is to some extent to follow, then, presupposes the distinction between subject and object, the existence of an "essential structure of the knowing subject," a constitutive role for the a priori conditions in the knowing subject, the necessity of an awareness of this role for a full knowledge of an object, and so on. Rahner suggests in the next paragraph that it is only lack of time which prevents him from devoting "any further consideration to the metaphysical presuppositions and implications of this statement," and then goes on to fill out the picture further with the affirmation that "the transcendental subject, even in the boundlessness of his own transcendentality, ultimately apprehends himself and must apprehend himself as *question*."[50] The examples of transcendental theology Rahner gives, which presuppose among other things the *Vorgriff* and the supernatural existential, further confirm the impression that something considerably more distinctive is at stake than the affirmation that all theology should be reflective.

In one lecture, then, Rahner speaks of a pluralism of theologies "which cannot be controlled or mastered," and in the other he promotes as necessary what looks very much like a single kind of theology. In one lecture he insists that there is a pluralism of philosophies which no individual can surmount, and in the other seems to advocate as necessary a theological method resting on what appears to be one quite definite and specified philosophy. In one lecture he suggests that the tools with which the theologian

works are inescapably historically conditioned, and advocates that theologians' arguments too ought to be historically particular, valid only temporarily and in particular conditions; in the other he advocates the possibility of doing theology in a way that is rooted in the human being's changeless a priori transcendental subjectivity.

Before turning to the question of how the tension between these two apparently conflicting lectures, and more generally between the two apparently conflicting strands in Rahner's thought, may be resolved, it will be useful to introduce one more way of thinking about the conflict itself. At one point in the first of the lectures we have been examining, Rahner contrasts the intellectual situation of the previous generation of theologians to the one that now prevails. The way in which he characterizes the situation of the earlier generation is particularly suggestive, and the passage is worth quoting in full:

> I can still remember those who taught me theology then, and so can still perceive how they felt about themselves and their theology, and how they understood their situation . . . These theologians of the generation before our own went about their work in a theological territory which was already defined for them, one with which they were familiar. They spoke a common language. They had almost a fixed repertoire of "quaestiones disputatae," and if they disagreed about these they did so in a manner such that each of them knew why and in what respect they did disagree, and that in these respects they could disagree without the teaching authority of the Church being invoked against them. At the same time they were likewise aware of those areas in which they were and had to be in agreement, namely on a number of particular theses traditionally defined, and which could be expressed in precise theological terms. They developed their scholastic theology along lines which were already determined by tradition. It was a sort of "Denzinger theology," and they were convinced that they had at their disposal in the practice of this a sufficiency of clear, exegetically unassailable "dicta probantia," and at the same time a sufficiency of assured knowledge from the history of dogma and theology to confirm their own propositions as the outcome of a permanently valid tradition . . . One could put it this way: as little as thirty years ago the state of Catholic theology was that of a system closed in upon itself in such a way that any further developments that took place within it took place according to laws which were both already given within it and also already known to the upholders of the system, namely the theologians. In the light of this we can also understand that it was taken for granted that any further developments in dogma and theology would constitute so many further logical explicitations and articulations of dogma already given. So much was this the case that it was only really possible to conceive of these further explicitations as taking place on

> the periphery of the system of ideas, as for instance in the sphere of Mariology . . . Today all this is quite different.[51]

What Rahner's description of his teachers' generation suggests is that they enjoyed a kind of theological equivalent of a period of "normal science" in the sense of the phrase that Thomas Kuhn has developed. Like the scientists Kuhn discusses they shared a common language and a common paradigm. All knew which questions were already resolved, which were still open, and how these were to be approached. There was a large degree of consensus, including consensus as to where consensus was absent and how it was to be extended. And like all scientists during a period of "normal" science, they presumably believed that this was simply the way things were and the way they would continue.

The analogy with Kuhnian ideas suggests another way to frame the basic tension running through Rahner's thought. The one thing that is clear is that theology can no longer proceed as it did in the time of his teachers. What this means precisely however is not so clear. In his writing on irreducible pluralism Rahner seems to suggest that there can never again be a period of "normal science" in theology, that nothing like the situation of the previous generation can ever again appear. The intellectual and cultural situation is such that no one "paradigm" will ever again be able to hold unquestioned sway within the church. In his promotion of transcendental theology, on the other hand, he seems to be promoting just such a new paradigm, trying to bring theology to a new kind of "normalcy." The tension, then, is between a Rahner who seems to insist on the end of any "normalcy" in theology and one who appears to promote a new normalcy.

Resolving the tension

The conflict between these two strands in Rahner's thought is not absolute. It is possible at least to a large extent to reconcile them, to show that a proclivity towards the transcendental and an emphasis on pluralism can coexist, and so to regard the conflict as largely only apparent, the tension for the most part superficial. But much depends on how one achieves such a reconciliation. Different ways of resolving the conflict involve very different orientations towards Rahner's theology. One can either begin with the "transcendental" side of Rahner's thought and take this as the framework in which all else is to be understood or one can take with full seriousness the comments on pluralism and allow these to shape the interpretation of all that is "transcendental" in his thought. The first solution corresponds with a semi-foundationalist, and the second with a nonfoundationalist, reading.

If one begins, as a semi-foundationalist reader would be likely to do, with the transcendental side of Rahner's thought, one reads everything he

has to say about pluralism in philosophy and theology with the prior assumption that he believes unshakably in the possibility of a transcendental theology based on the kind of transcendental knowledge of the human being worked out in *Spirit in the World* and *Hearer of the Word*. In this case, in other words, one *subordinates* the talk of pluralism and everything connected to it to the transcendental aspects of Rahner's thought.

The tension between the two strands of Rahner's thought can be resolved more particularly by showing that that which is transcendental *underlies* that which is plural: beneath our experience of the multiplicity of the world is a pre-thematic experience of unity; behind the pluralism of theologies and philosophies lies a single transcendental experience which they all seek to express. Pluralism belongs to the historical aspect of human existence, but it does not effect the unity and universality of the one transcendental experience. On this view, indeed, the very existence of an insurmountable pluralism in philosophy, theology, and our intellectual world in general is precisely what drives us all the more firmly towards a recognition of and a return to that which is transcendental, that which underlies the many (even if of course we cannot do this in such a way as simply to escape and ignore the historical).

A proponent of this interpretation would insist, in short, that although one cannot *surmount* pluralism, cannot gain a standpoint *above* it all from which to judge and synthesize the many, one can *go below* the pluralism, one can return to something which is beneath it and from which the many emerge. And this is precisely what Rahner is doing when he shows that there is a *Vorgriff auf esse* and a universal transcendental experience of grace, and when in general he develops the notion of a transcendental theology. Even on this account, of course, one would not maintain that transcendental theology in any sense abolishes pluralism, for transcendental theology can never, as Rahner makes clear, attempt to be the *whole* of theology. There must always also be a historical element. Transcendental theology does, however, provide at least a core for theology, and in light of the existence of this core, the historical vicissitudes to which the rest of theology is subjected can be contemplated with relative tranquillity.

A key element in such an account, it should be noted, must be the claim that what Rahner says about transcendental experience is *pre*-philosophical. He is not aligning himself with any particular philosophy but trying to get at that which underlies all the different philosophies, to get at that which is prior to and more basic than any particular philosophical system. Anyone who denies the transcendental orientation of the human being immediately falls into self-contradiction—even to say that the human being is inevitably historically conditioned is to make a transcendental claim—and so what Rahner is working from is not one optional philosophy among many but a pre-philosophical and undeniable feature of human nature.

It is true, an advocate of this interpretation would admit, that Rahner

speaks of transcendental theology as using "transcendental philosophy"—but by transcendental philosophy he means not any one particular system or school but the whole direction in which philosophy has developed since Descartes. If this development is understood as irreversible, and if it is also understood that philosophy before Descartes may have in any case been *implicitly* transcendental, then it can be made clear that Rahner is not in fact advocating one among the many philosophies but something far more basic. I suggested above that in "Reflections on methodology in theology" Rahner develops quite a specific characterization of transcendental philosophy, so that what he means by "transcendental theology" is something considerably more definite than merely "reflective theology." A proponent of semi-foundationalism would presumably suggest that this both is and is not true: to borrow Frege's distinction once again, the *sense* of "transcendental theology" might differ from the sense of "reflective theology," but the reference of the two terms is identical. All reflective theology is *in fact* transcendental theology, in other words, even though the full implication of what it is to reflect—namely, to reflect transcendentally—may not always be explicitly understood.

In summary, on this view transcendental experience forms the basis on which the multiplicity of human life develops, the unchanging ground of our changing thought, the single root of the many; and the understanding of transcendental experience forms the frame within which Rahner's discussion of pluralism is set, and provides the implicit limit upon everything which he has to say about inescapable pluralism. Just as in spite of the multiplicity that besets our existence and which we cannot overcome, transcendental experience is fundamentally one, so in spite of the inescapable plurality of philosophies and theologies there is nevertheless a privileged place for a theology centered on transcendental experience. When Rahner speaks of the conditioned nature of our thought it is always with the prior understanding that there is a level beyond conditioning, that the conditioned and the historical exist only within a certain sphere of human existence.[52]

In many ways this is an elegant solution to the problem. It has one serious weakness, however; it is profoundly improbable to consider a book like *Spirit in the World*, and the arguments it contains, as *pre-philosophical*, as themselves something which can escape the question of pluralism and the situation of being historically conditioned in a very particular way. We saw in chapter 2 that *Spirit in the World* emerges out of a distinctive and indeed rather complex set of intellectual precedents: Aquinas, Kant, Maréchal and Heidegger at the very least must be mentioned. It is a book written by someone immersed in the thought of a certain range of philosophers, who has learned distinctive philosophical questions, language, and techniques from them. And it is a book which is in fact full of long and difficult analyses and arguments. So the idea that *Spirit in the World* escapes the general situation of being particular, historically conditioned, and one

philosophy among many others, is deeply improbable. It is true that *Spirit in the World* wants to establish the existence of certain things—such as the *Vorgriff*—which are themselves supposed to be prephilosophical, but the way in which it tries to establish them must surely be considered philosophy. To suppose that reflections on pluralism, and on the historical conditionedness of philosophy, do not impinge on the transcendental side of Rahner's thought seems therefore problematic.

The second approach to reconciling the different strands in Rahner's thought begins from Rahner's writings on pluralism and allows these to shape an understanding of his advocacy of a transcendental theology and all that is entailed by it. Thus instead of using the transcendental side of his thought as the framework for his comments on pluralism, one does the reverse: one takes quite literally and with complete seriousness Rahner's assertion that there is no escaping pluralism, and so understands his advocacy of transcendental theology as the advocacy of one theological position among many, as one approach that is advanced in, and may be appropriate to, certain circumstances.

We saw above that in the first lecture of "Reflections on methodology in theology" Rahner promotes the use of "indirect methods," the chief feature of which is that they employ arguments which depend for their persuasiveness in part on the particular circumstances of the hearers, and that in the second lecture he champions the development of a transcendental theology. At first sight Rahner seems in the two lectures to be pointing in opposite directions—one method is avowedly and unashamedly particular and history-bound, the other seems to want and claim to transcend history—but given the interpretive approach we are here suggesting they can without great difficulty be reconciled.[53] Transcendental theology, on this view, comes to be seen as a particular method useful in particular circumstances[54]—it is precisely *one* possible indirect method.[55]

The problem that an interpretation along these lines must face, of course, is not just to reconcile the fact that Rahner develops and advocates a single kind of theology with his recognition of theological pluralism, but the actual nature of the particular kind of theology he in fact promotes. What must be shown, in other words, is that one can consistently advocate a *transcendental* theology while insisting on the inescapability of pluralism. Can there in fact be such a thing as a modest transcendental theology?

Here we come again to the question of the dependence of Rahner's theology on his philosophy. To maintain, as Rahner does in his early works, that a religiously neutral, universally persuasive argument can be developed to demonstrate that everyone is aware of God whether they know it or not is anything but modest and is not very much in line with the affirmation of an inescapable pluralism of philosophies; similarly, to maintain that a theology can be built around this kind of philosophical transcendental anthropology does not sit easily with the full-blooded affirmation of an uncontrollable pluralism of theologies. To think that one

could in this way philosophically demonstrate the existence of the *Vorgriff* would be to think that one had found an escape route from pluralism and from the historically conditioned nature of our understanding, that one was somehow able to wriggle one's way underneath it all and build something sturdy and unquestionable on an ahistorical and indubitable basis. To think that such an argument could be possible, in other words, would be once again to think that transcendental reflection can stand outside the pluralism which Rahner so insistently points to, and this is precisely what is being denied on the interpretation in question.

What this means, however, is not that Rahner's theology would, in order to be consistent, need to be purged of the *Vorgriff* and the whole notion of transcendental experience that goes with it, but only that a non-foundationalist reading of the place of the *Vorgriff* in Rahner's theology is required. As we have seen, it is possible to affirm that a pre-apprehension of infinite being and of God is a condition of the possibility of all our knowing and willing *without* claiming to establish this simply from a supposedly neutral philosophical examination of the said knowing and willing. It is possible to understand the *Vorgriff* as a properly *theological* claim, a suggestion as to how it might make sense for Christians in certain circumstances to think, rather than as an assertion of a truth that can be established *prior* to Christian belief.

Rahner's early philosophical writings, I am suggesting, are incompatible with his later emphasis on pluralism if this is taken fully seriously. It is inconsistent with Rahner's own view of our intellectual limitations to suppose that one could successfully develop arguments for the *Vorgriff* of the kind that he there attempts. If however one has some reason to affirm that there is such a thing as a *Vorgriff other* than the belief that one has managed to escape from or burrow beneath history and discover directly what lies beyond it, then the situation may be quite different. If the *Vorgriff* is advanced primarily as a theological hypothesis then it may not be incompatible with Rahner's insistence on the inescapability of pluralism and the necessarily historically determined nature of our understanding.

The *content* of what is being affirmed, on this account, still has an ahistorical, universal character. What is affirmed is precisely that there is an aspect to our experience which transcends history and particularity and difference. The *manner* in which this is affirmed, however, is crucially different—the claim that there is something transcending history does not *itself* pretend to transcend history. What is at issue, then, is a historically rooted affirmation of the ahistorical character of an element in our experience. The key point is that Rahner on this account could be offering a description *of* experience which was not primarily an appeal to or an argument *from* experience.

In short, if one maintains that everyone is aware of God whether they know it or not, but does not claim to be able to *establish* this fact in a way which should be persuasive to everyone, then one is not claiming to have

found an argument transcending the general intellectual pluralism which inescapably characterizes, according to Rahner, the modern situation. If this is so, then it should make sense to view transcendental theology as an option which Rahner develops and defends *within* a recognition of the broader pluralism.[56] The two sides of Rahner's theology are genuinely reconcilable, in other words, within the context of a nonfoundationalist reading.

Conclusion

I have said that a nonfoundationalist reading of Rahner's theology is not only a particular reading of the way the theology is related to his own earlier philosophy, but also a distinctive way to read the theology itself; to read the theology as not requiring logical support from the philosophy is really to read the theology as a different kind of entity. We are now in a position to draw together some of the strands of the chapter and see why this should be the case.

A nonfoundationalist reading, first of all, allows one to take seriously Rahner's recognition of the inescapability of pluralism in philosophy and theology, and the historical conditioning of these disciplines, and not to suppose that he tacitly exempts his own work from these reflections. It allows one to adopt a more modest reading of Rahner's theology.

A nonfoundationalist reading allows not only for a more modest, but also for a more theological interpretation of Rahner's theology. His theology, on this account, is not driven and shaped by an independently given framework, by a prior commitment to a philosophical model of God, the human being, and the relationship between the two. Read nonfoundationally, then, Rahner's Christology and his theology of grace are not shaped and underpinned by a prior anthropology, but rather they lead to and themselves shape the anthropology that Rahner offers.

A nonfoundationalist reading, finally, reorders the way in which theology and experience are frequently taken to be related in Rahner's work. As we mentioned in the introduction, Rahner is often aligned with nineteenth- and twentieth-century liberal Protestant thought insofar as he invokes a universal religious experience which is supposedly prior to the interpretation put upon it within any particular religious tradition. And it is true that Rahner does maintain that there is such an experience, and makes a concern with it central to a good deal of his theology. But, on a nonfoundationalist reading, this experience is not the starting point of his theology, but one of its conclusions. Rahner may be committed to the idea that theology is secondary to a more fundamental experience, but this is itself a theological commitment. So on a nonfoundationalist reading, if Rahner holds experience to be actually prior to theology, it is nevertheless methodologically, in the order of Rahner's argument, secondary.

We have not established that Rahner *must* be read in this way. He is also

open to a semi-foundationalist reading. And at some points it must be admitted he sounds more of a semi-foundationalist than a non-foundationalist. But in some important ways, as I have tried to show in the previous section, he only really makes sense, can only really be interpreted as offering a coherent and plausible theological position, if he is read as a nonfoundationalist. The force of chapters 2, 3, and 4 has been to show that he is indeed *best* read in this way.

There are however bound to be objections, not just to the plausibility of such an interpretation, but to its desirability. And it is to these we turn in the next chapter.

6 Defending a nonfoundationalist Rahner

In this chapter I will consider a number of possible objections to the nonfoundationalist interpretation of Rahner's theology outlined in the previous chapter, and in so doing, fill out that interpretation. The criticisms to be considered here are not so much textual—whether Rahner's writings can bear the interpretation I am proposing—as substantive: if this is Rahner's theology, a critic might say, then he sounds both strange and unattractive. More particularly, I will consider three potential objections: the Rahner I present, it might be thought, seems more of a Protestant than a Catholic; he has been transformed into a relativist; and on my account he can have no room for an apologetic dimension to theology. Even if one has no loyalty to Rahner's philosophy, or to the consistency of his corpus, it might be argued, the proposed interpretation needs to be rejected as implausible and intellectually uncharitable, because of one or more of these problems. In what follows I shall develop and respond to these criticisms in succession.

A Protestant Rahner?

To introduce into a discussion of Rahner the whole debate over foundationalism and nonfoundationalism, and to place him in the latter camp is, it might be argued, to force him into a procrustean bed. As already noted, Rahner neither used the language of foundationalism and nonfoundationalism, nor raised with different language the precise issues discussed here. To this it might be added that foundationalism and the critique of it have been considerably more a pre-occupation of Protestant than of Roman Catholic theology (though there have been some exceptions). While Protestant thinkers have often been suspicious of "natural theology," reason has never been so problematized in Roman Catholic thought. And the anxiety about foundationalism, it might be said, though dressed up in a new philosophical guise, fundamentally represents a recurrence of the Protestant worry over the pretensions of human reason to know God.

One can perhaps articulate this kind of concern most sharply in terms of

the teaching of the First Vatican Council on faith and reason. Here, one could say, the fundamentally positive Roman Catholic evaluation of human reason finds authoritative articulation. How can a Catholic be a nonfoundationalist without abandoning the First Vatican Council? And how can one interpret Rahner as a nonfoundationalist when he clearly wants to be a loyal Catholic theologian?

At first sight indeed the First Vatican Council's dogmatic constitution *Dei Filius*[1] might be taken as an example of foundationalism, or at least of what I have called semi-foundationalism. God can be known, it is asserted, with certainty "by the natural power of human reason": anyone who denies this is anathematized. Reason is not, of course, everything: in addition to what can be known of God by reason are those things which can be known only because God chooses to reveal them. There is therefore "a twofold order of knowledge," that which can be known by reason built upon and supplemented by that which is given in revelation only.

This, then, would seem to create two problems for the interpretion of Rahner I am proposing. First of all, while the Council insists that God is not just known by reason, but known with *certainty* by reason, Rahner as I present him allows no escaping on any level from philosophical and theological pluralism, and therefore, presumably, no certainty. And second, the pattern for relating faith and reason set out by the Council seems to be precisely the pattern for relating philosophy to theology that the proposed reading of Rahner rejects: whereas *Dei Filius* teaches that "right reason established the foundations of the faith,"[2] I am insisting that Rahner's theology rests on no philosophical, rationally established basis. Altogether, it might be argued, the semi-foundationalist reading of Rahner, according to which his theology does rest on a significant philosophical basis, and according to which his remarks on the inescapability of pluralism do not touch his own argument for, for example, the *Vorgriff*, is the only one which allows Rahner to remain faithful to the decrees of the First Vatican Council.

My response to these worries comes in two parts, one to do with the Vatican Council and one to do with Rahner. First of all, whatever the apparent resonance of the First Vatican Council with what I am terming foundationalism or semi-foundationalism, a closer reading shows that something rather different is in fact being asserted by the Council.

The first thing to notice is that *Dei Filius* does not offer a philosophical demonstration that God exists: it asserts that reason can prove the existence of God, but it does not *employ* reason to do so. What one has, somewhat paradoxically, is an authoritative church statement to the effect that the existence of God can be known without recourse to church authority ("The same holy mother church holds and teaches that God . . . can be known . . . by the natural power of human reason"): what one does not find is the church temporarily casting aside its authority in order to demonstrate the basis for this authority from "the natural power of human reason."

It is, then, a statement *of* faith, rather than a statement *in support* of faith, that God can be known "by the natural power of human reason." For this reason the corresponding anathema is directed, not against those who do not base their belief in the existence of God on rational argument, but against those who deny that belief in God can be so based. An understanding of the relation between God and the power of reason, then, is here being presented as part of the *content*, rather than as part of the justification, of faith.[3]

That it is not a foundationalist model that is being proposed by the Council is clear also from the way in which the content of revelation is presented as *usefully overlapping* with that which can be known "from the consideration of created things." Revelation adds to natural knowledge that which is definitively beyond it, but it also confirms what is in principal knowable rationally: "It is indeed thanks to this divine revelation, that those matters concerning God which are not of themselves beyond the scope of human reason, can, even in the present state of the human race, be known by everyone without difficulty, with firm certitude and with no intermingling of error." If the Council were envisaging the role of natural knowledge of God as one of undergirding and legitimating the acceptance of revelation, this assertion would make no sense: how could it help matters that that which was supposed to justify the acceptance of revelation was itself conveyed in revelation? Revelation is here presented as (at least "in the present state of the human race") a *more* reliable way of knowing even that which is naturally knowable "with certainty," rather than as something which in part derives its own credibility from independently established knowledge.

Vatican I does not, then, impose any kind of foundationalism on Roman Catholic theology. The argument flows in the opposite direction from a foundationalist one: it is not because one can demonstrate certain things rationally that one may adopt the Christian faith, but it is rather because of this faith that one must insist that certain things are rationally demonstrable.

The second point that needs to be made is that to interpret Rahner nonfoundationally, and in particular to take fully seriously his comments about pluralism, is not inconsistent with reading him as a theologian who is obedient to the Council's insistence on the certainty of the natural knowledge of God.

The natural knowledge of God of which the Council decree speaks is, for Rahner, located primarily on the pre-thematic level. Propositional proofs may be given, but these are secondary to, and expressions of, the more fundamental pre-linguistic, pre-conceptual awareness, the *Vorgriff*, of God. Although the *Vorgriff* is not arrived at by a process of *reasoning* from "created things," it occurs only in our *encounter* with created things, and to that extent is a posteriori in the sense required by the Council's decree. Furthermore, the *Vorgriff* is inescapable. It is not something that may or

may not happen, something that comes and goes. It is built into the very nature of our way of knowing and relating to the world. Thus one could say that on the pre-thematic level there is absolute certainty about God: on the pre-thematic level there is no room for doubt, even though there may be a good deal of room for confusion, misinterpetation, and doubt in any attempt to articulate the pre-thematic on the thematic level.

The *Vorgriff* arguably represents, then, the kind of certain natural knowledge of God required by the First Vatican Council, albeit one which has migrated to a pre-thematic level. That *there is* a *Vorgriff*, however, is not something for which Rahner, as I am reading his theology, can claim a similar certainty. If Rahner sees the whole of his own theology as taking place within the inescapable intellectual pluralism he so often discusses, and if as I have suggested the *Vorgriff* ought to be understood to function more as a theological proposal than as a prior philosophical claim, then the *Vorgriff* too will have to be seen as part of *one* way of describing experience, part of *one* way of resolving certain theological difficulties, part of *one* way of articulating a theological vision, *among others*. One can make arguments for it. One can put forward considerations in support of its preferability to this or that alternative. Such considerations may be persuasive. But if theological pluralism is as Rahner says insurmountable, one will not be able to achieve a perspective such that one would be able to exhaustively and definitively demonstrate the superiority of the theological approach of which the *Vorgriff* is a part to all alternatives. The case for the *Vorgriff*, then, may or may not be a good one, but it can never in principle be a certain one.

This need not, however, create problems for Rahner's relationship to the First Vatican Council. What Rahner's discussions of insurmountable pluralism suggest is that henceforth there will always be not only a pluralism of theologies, but a pluralism of theologies which are, or aim to be, of the orthodox Roman Catholic variety. And any orthodox Roman Catholic theology will have to have some way of coming to terms with the requirement of Vatican I as regards the certainty of natural knowledge of God. Each Roman Catholic theology, then, will have to find some way of working out what this certainty means, and some way of making room for such certain knowledge (though not necessarily of offering any certain *demonstration*). The ways in which this is done in different theologies may well be different, even contradictory. As a Roman Catholic theologian, then, Rahner is (on the basis of the authority of Vatican I) absolutely committed to the belief that God can be known with certainty apart from revelation, and he offers a particular account of this certain knowledge of God, but he has no need to be certain that his own account is the right one.

The uncertainty surrounding the certainty that *Dei Filius* asserts is in fact gestured towards in the Vatican document itself. We read that it is thanks to revelation that even that which is knowable by reason can "even

in the present state of the human race, be known by everyone without difficulty, *with firm certitude* [*firma certitudine*] and with no intermingling of error." The implication is of course that without revelation we would know only with difficulty, with an intermingling of error, and without firm certitude. How can this be reconciled with the assertion that God can be known by reason "with certainty" [*certo*]? One solution would be to distinguish between objective rational certainty, on the one hand, and a subjective certainty possessed by us. One might think of the analogy of a difficult mathematical theorem. If one proves a theorem, it follows that it is known with certainty. But can one be certain that one has in fact proven it, that one's proof is complete and free of error?[4] Similarly, I am suggesting, a theologian might propose an account of certain natural knowledge of God, without necessarily having certainty about the account itself.

A relativist Rahner?

A second objection to the interpretation I am developing might be that to push Rahner's remarks on pluralism as far as I do, taking them as the context within which to understand even the transcendental aspects of Rahner's own theology, is to portray him as a relativist, to whom questions of truth ultimately are of no concern. If there is no rising above or digging below philosophical and theological pluralism, then this would seem to suggest that there can be no access to the truth, that one could always only speak of truth relative to one's own particular theological and philosophical framework. Theology then becomes merely pragmatic and strategic: views are to be adopted not because of their truth but because they have an appeal at a particular time and place, because they bring about some desirable consequence.

This does not, however, follow. It must be remembered that Rahner's remarks about the inescapability of pluralism focus primarily on the sheer *quantity* of information and of philosophical and theological positions available. Rahner does not suggest that given any two claims, positions, or approaches to theology, it is in principle impossible to adjudicate between them—there is no reason to rule out that there can be concrete disagreement between one position and another, that arguments can be put forward against particular positions, or even that a particular theological or philosophical position may be shown to be wanting in particular respects or altogether. There is no question, in other words, of the pluralism which Rahner discusses arising because different philosophical or theological systems are in principle incommensurable—no question, that is, of judgment between theologies being ruled out *a priori* because everything must be judged relative to its own particular framework. What is ruled out is rather the possibility of being in a position to form a judgment which can take into account *all* available theological positions.

Rahner's discussions of pluralism, then, still leave room for considera-

tions of better and worse in theology. Nevertheless, insofar as they deny that one can rise above the fray, as it were, and form a judgment about *everything* available, they rule out the possibility of being able to definitively present a theological position as superior to all competitors. But this is not to say that a theologian is not aiming for truth. He offers his theology as true, as an attempt to articulate or point to what is true—but he does so in the context of other people offering different theological visions, not all of which he can digest, assess, and assimilate, and some of which might turn out to be at least in some regards incompatible with or contradictory to his own. What is entailed by Rahner's vision of pluralism and its insurmountability, then, is not that there is no truth, nor that his theology is not or cannot be true, but that there can be no special and guaranteed access to truth, no by-passing of the situation in which one is one among many (in some cases and in some degree) competing and contradictory claimants to the truth.

Once again it will help to consider the *Vorgriff* in order to articulate this a little more concretely. In making the claim that there is a *Vorgriff*, I have suggested, Rahner does not escape the situation of pluralism: this is a particular theological claim, with a particular philosophical pedigree, which is part of a theological vision which is to some degree in competition with other theological visions. Rahner thinks that there *is* this pre-thematic experience, and if he is right, then this common experience itself underlies all intellectual, philosophical, and theological pluralism. But the proposal *that* there is such an experience is one proposal among many. In other words, Rahner *thinks* that there is an experience which underlies all historical conditioning and pluralism, but his *thinking* this is not itself something which escapes historical conditioning and pluralism, nor must he himself suppose that it does.

Rahner and apologetics

A serious objection to the interpretation I have developed arises in connection with the apologetic dimension of Rahner's theology. As I read him, Rahner presents the Christian faith as making certain claims about the nature of universal human experience, but not as independently grounded in this experience. We do not adopt faith because a prior experience leads us to do so, but we adopt an understanding of experience because our faith points us to it. But what, one might say, for those who do not already possess this faith? If Rahner is not offering them a way into faith, through experience, what happens to the apologetic concern of his theology? Thus for instance, if the existence in all human beings of a pre-apprehension of God is not to be established prior to the acceptance of revelation, if this pre-apprehension can itself be apprehended only *within* the circle of faith, then it would seem to be of no help to those who do not already believe. My reading, it seems, truncates Rahner's thought rather dramatically,

eliminating one of the most important aspects of his work, namely, its apologetic dimension.

Such an objection can be framed more broadly. Rahner's work is generally understood as an effort to open the church to the world, to overcome the inward-looking, self-enclosed, ghetto-like character of the Catholicism of his day. On my reading, however, or so an objector might argue, Rahner turns out to be urging Catholic thought to retreat still further, to close itself off all the more decisively to the outside world. A Rahner who thinks that the basic experience on which belief in God and Christianity itself is grounded is knowable only from within Christianity, that is, would be a Rahner for whom faith is cut off from rational discourse and for whom apologetic efforts are impossible. Once one begins to think about questions of apologetics and the need to talk to the outside world, then, my reading would come to seem both implausible (for surely anyone familiar with Rahner's work will insist that he is *not* in favor of closing off discourse) and uncharitable.

This is a natural line of objection, and one meriting careful response. Rahner is indeed deeply committed to apologetics. What needs clarification is the nature of his engagement in it. Apologetics can be undertaken in a nonfoundationalist context, and I shall argue that a great deal of what Rahner writes ought to be understood in this light. Even at those points where Rahner *appears* to come closest to advocating explicitly a foundationalist apologetics, where he suggests that the first stage in approaching the non-believer is to bring her to an awareness of her own transcendental experience of God, he can still, I shall argue, be interpreted nonfoundationally.

Rahner and nonfoundationalist apologetics

We can begin to reply to the objections just outlined at a quite general level. A point that has been made repeatedly in discussions of post-liberal theology, and which has already been touched on in the introduction, is that a failure or refusal to establish independent foundations for Christian belief by means of a religiously neutral argument should not be identified with capitulation to an irrational fideism:[5] to refuse to offer foundations for belief is not to succumb to irrationality but rather to avoid succumbing to one particular model of rationality, a model which arose at a definite point in history and which in recent decades has come under wave after wave of criticism.

But even if belief without foundations is not irrational, how is it possible to persuade others without appeal to such foundations? The slogan under which this possibility has traveled in discussions of post-liberal theology is "ad hoc apologetics": one can engage in an "ad hoc" manner with particular people over particular issues, defending specific aspects of Christian belief in the face of specific objections or misunderstandings. The precise nature of the defense, on this account, will in each case depend on

the particular range of beliefs the Christian shares with the objector. It is possible to defend specific aspects of the Christian faith in specific contexts, then, without presuming the existence of a neutral and universally available starting point from which to argue.

The nonfoundationalist apologist need not in fact restrict herself to defending Christian claims one by one, though this may at times be implied by proponents of ad hoc apologetics. Insofar as a world view can be judged by its coherence and assimilative power, one can also engage in apologetics by bringing these things out, by exhibiting the internal coherence of a particular world view and by developing and applying it in new situations.[6]

Rahner's theology in particular, then, is indeed strongly apologetic, but it is for the most part apologetic in the way that I have just outlined. Rahner wants to make Christianity easier to believe. He hopes to do so, however, not primarily by constructing firm arguments beginning from indisputable and "unbiased" data, but rather by presenting particular doctrines in such a way that specific difficulties people have with them can be lessened or overcome, and by presenting Christianity as a whole in such a way that it seems as a whole credible and attractive (one should perhaps say, in such a way that its *inherent* credibility and attractiveness are not obscured).[7] In Rahner's own language, he thinks that "fundamental" and "dogmatic" theology need to be brought into a much closer unity.

It is worth noting that Rahner in fact directs the majority of his apologetic efforts to those who are already *within* the church, to Roman Catholics who believe but do not necessarily find belief easy. Such an "internal apologetics"[8] has become necessary in a situation where Christians are no longer deeply socialized into their faith, and where there are many other intellectual influences on those who also want to be believers. It is necessary, in other words, in a situation where no one can be presumed to be *wholly* Christian.[9] In the context of such an internal apologetics it is particularly natural to offer a defense of faith which itself presupposes faith,[10] one which does not try to step outside the faith in order to justify it from some other viewpoint.[11] What I want to suggest is that insofar as Rahner *also* concerns himself with those who are not already Christians, he continues essentially the same strategy.

Very often in Rahner's theology one comes across remarks about what is and is not credible to the modern person. A great deal hinges on how such remarks are interpreted. What Rahner is *not* doing, I believe, is setting up the beliefs and instincts of the modern person as an independent and prior standard before which the claims of faith must be justified. He is instead recognizing the particular conditions under which faith must be preached and reflected upon. His object, then, is not to develop a direct, knockdown argument for the truth of Christianity which will persuade a "modern man," but rather to help those Christians who are *also* modern people to more fully integrate their faith with other parts of their existence

and their thought-world. His object is to help Christians be *more* faithful, to allow the influence of their faith on their lives to grow by bringing a larger part of their lives into contact with it.

Rahner's primary audience, then, is usually Roman Catholics in danger of segregating their Christian belief from the rest of their thinking, and his object is in many cases to overcome this fragmentation, at least to some degree, by removing the apparent incompatibilities between the different parts of their thinking and by bringing out, insofar as this is possible, positive affinities between their faith and the rest of their mental world.

To say that Rahner's primary audience is those within the church, however, is not to imply that his theology is therefore closed off from and indifferent to people on the "outside," for arguments which work for insiders also work by extension for outsiders. Arguments which remove intellectual difficulties faced by the believer and which help integrate a believer's faith with the rest of their mental world can also do something for those who are not already "within." If one cannot in fact *expect* to be brought from without to within by an argument which itself begins from without and works its way in, then one cannot hope for anything *more* than arguments which remove particular barriers to belief, which highlight points of attraction and harmony with what one already believes, and which exhibit the inner coherence of the faith.

An example: "Christology within an evolutionary view of the world"

Rahner's essay "Christology within an evolutionary view of the world"[12] provides a good example of this kind of nonfoundational apologetics. Rahner here very explicitly seeks to bring together the way of thinking of "the person of today" and the Christian faith—or to be precise, he seeks to bring together a central element of each of these. The aim is to show that Christology can fit into an evolutionary world view.[13] The words "fit into" here must be properly understood: the object is not to deduce one thing from the other, nor merely to show that the two do not stand in logical contradiction with each other, but to bring out a certain *harmony* between Christology and an evolutionary view of the world, to bring out "the inner affinity of these two doctrines—a sort of similarity of style."[14]

It is important according to Rahner to bring out such an inner affinity so as to be able to avoid or at least to some degree overcome a kind of intellectual schizophrenia on the part of believers

> even if the doctrine of the Incarnation of the divine Logos is seen as a doctrine not directly denied by the present-day evolutionary view of the world—or is seen as a doctrine not invalidated by propositions contradicting it on purely logical grounds—it would still be experienced as something foreign in the mind of man. For a man disposed to

> think in terms of the evolutionary view of the world would in this case experience the doctrine of the Incarnation as something quite unrelated to his other thoughts and feelings; if such a man were or is nevertheless a Christian for some other reasons, he would then be forced to think along two completely unrelated lines of thought.[15]

The goal, then, is not to establish the truth of a Christian claim by showing that it follows from something self-evidently true, nor is it to defend the coherence of such a claim before the tribunal of what modern people assume. The primary goal is rather to enable an integration to occur in the mind of someone who in fact believes both things. The evolutionary view is not being used to provide a secure ground for Christianity in any way, nor is it being set up as the judge of Christianity. Indeed, from his frequent references to the "*present day* (*heutige*) evolutionary view of the world" and from his talk of a person being *disposed* to think in certain ways it is clear that Rahner is considering the evolutionary view of the world as the outlook of a particular period rather than as something more self-evident and obviously worthy of belief than Christianity. Because it happens to be the outlook of *our* period, however (or the period for which Rahner is writing), it is at some level inescapable. Therefore the theologian ought to come to grips with it.

It is perhaps worth noting that Rahner does not first offer an account of the evolutionary view, and then a description of Christology, and then turn to fitting the two together. Instead he tells a *single* story which serves *both* as an evolutionary view of the world *and* as a view of the world culminating in the Incarnation. The evolutionary account that he unfolds, in other words, is Christian from the start.[16] One of the ways in which one might talk about an evolving world is also one of the ways in which one might talk about Christ, and so there is an intersection between the two sets, a way to think as a Christian without alienating one's own secular self (at least insofar as this particular question is concerned). And of course there is therefore a way of presenting Christianity (again, in this particular respect) so that it is true to itself and yet has a greater chance of being attractive to the modern secular unbeliever—there is no way of proving its truth in part or in whole from grounds that can be undisputed by all, but there may be a way of presenting it in such a way as to make it more palatable to people of a particular mind-set.

Transcendental experience and apologetics

Rahner's discussion of Christology and the evolutionary world view provides an example of a nonfoundationalist apologetic strategy in a very particular case. But his broad use of the notion of transcendental experience can also be seen in this light—not, that is to say, as a foundationalist move, but as part of a *non*foundationalist apologetic.

One of the things that makes Christianity difficult to take in for the modern person, on Rahner's view, is that it can seem arbitrary and alien, something which asserts itself from outside our life and appears irrelevant to that life. This is the problem of extrinsicism, discussed in chapter 4. Any way of understanding Christianity, then, which somehow attaches it to our life and so overcomes this extrinsicism will have an apologetic value—it will help defeat one of the barriers to belief (a barrier that can of course exist in a Christian as well as in a non-believer). An understanding of Christianity as something which is really all about what is already going on in our experience, then, can do precisely this.

As we have seen, in texts such as *Foundations of Christian Faith* Rahner holds that the whole of Christianity is in some sense contained in the modification of the *Vorgriff* by the supernatural existential, for "transcendental revelation" turns out on closer examination to be nothing other than God's universal offer of grace (or God's universal communication of himself, to put it in other terms) in the supernatural existential. Christianity as history, doctrine, and revelation in the ordinary sense can then be understood as the appropriate expression in the realm of the "categorical" of this transcendental revelation, of what is already given in the supernatural existential. Rahner is thus in a position to claim—and does in fact claim—that Christianity as a system of belief is not really extrinsic to us, that it does in fact have everything to do with our real and ordinary lives: fundamentally it is not something alien coming from without, but the articulation of what is deepest within. Thus one of the chief barriers to belief for our time is dissolved.

All this is by now familiar territory. The point that needs to be made here is that this line of argument is not fundamentally dependent on thinking that transcendental experience or any aspect of it can be known *apart from* that which comes from without, apart from Christianity in its historical form. The anti-extrinsic force of this view does not depend on any supposition that we can *first* identify a transcendental experience and *then* recognize Christianity as its most appropriate expression. Even if we do not know of the experience independently, simply the fact that Christianity can be conceived as the interpreter of an experience which goes on in the depths of our consciousness means that it can be thought of as not fundamentally alien.

One might object that the experience itself would seem alien if one first learned of it not by introspection but by being told about it from without—that Christianity is all the more alienating if it intrudes on one's innermost depths and claims that something is happening there of which one is not aware. This objection would only hold, however, if it were the case that one could have a well-defined sense of one's experience which was independent of and prior to any attempts to interpret it. If it were possible to know without a doubt what one's experience *really* was then Christianity's trying to tell one something else would be felt as an intrusion. If it is

assumed, however, that experience is never had apart from interpretation, and that one's experience is not therefore a fixed quantity by which one can judge different attempts to interpret it, then this objection is undermined. Christianity includes an interpretation of experience, an interpretation which claims that there is a transcendental experience of which Christianity is the articulation. This is not something that can be established by a supposedly religiously neutral analysis of experience, but it is *also* not something that can be ruled out by such an analysis.

What we have seen, then, is that in spite of what one might first think, Rahner's theology as a whole can be understood to have considerable apologetic force without being built upon a neutral and universally accessible foundation, and in particular that Rahner's conception of transcendental experience can continue to be apologetically significant even if its existence is not established in whole or in part by a religiously neutral philosophical argument.

The use of experience in wooing the unbeliever

Although as I have suggested above Rahner's attention is most often directed towards those within the church, there are a number of essays in which he raises the question of how the apologetic task is to be pursued with regard to atheists. Furthermore, it is central to the approach he recommends, in some of these essays at least, that the unbeliever must be brought to a recognition of her own transcendental experience of God. On the face of it this seems to create a problem for the claims of the previous section. If an appeal to experience is the first stage in the conversion of those who do not already accept Christianity, then surely experience *is* functioning foundationally. Even here, however, Rahner *need* not be read as a foundationalist. To show that this is so I will consider two examples of such apparently foundationalist apologetic proposals.

"Theological considerations on secularization and atheism" was first written as a lecture for a conference of the Secretariat for Non-believers.[17] Its context is thus the institutional reflection of the Catholic church on its method of approach to those who are (intellectually) most distant from it, and Rahner's specific concern is the question of how best to attack the atheism which arises from the process of secularization.

What needs to be done away with, Rahner argues in this essay, is the assumption that it is not possible to remain an atheist without culpability—that though everyone may not have had a chance to encounter Christianity, no one can have any good excuse for not (explicitly) acknowledging at least the existence of God. In the sociologically changed situation, in which the (social) world as a whole does not underwrite belief in God, such belief is no longer easy or natural or to be assumed. Theism should instead be regarded as the characteristic of an élite, as the preserve of those who have "advanced to the stage of being able to achieve an

overall view of the functional interconnection between the individual elements in their existence and in the world and explicitly to objectify this at the conceptual level."[18] Apologetics, in turn, becomes the process of wooing an élite. In a final section Rahner specifies more concretely how this wooing should be done: not in the traditional manner of presenting "the old proofs of God's existence,"[19] but instead by an "initiation, an 'inauguration' into an experience of God that is ultimate and basic."[20] Rahner does not spell out in any detail what he means by this "inauguration," but what little he does say is enough to make quite clear the direction in which he is pointing:

> if any understanding has been achieved of that reality which we have already often designated as man's transcendental reference to the mystery called God, if this transcendental reference is not once more confused with the concept corresponding to it and objectifying statements about it, if we do not speak of this transcendental reference in merely abstract and formal terms, but rather point it out to man in his concrete life (for it is precisely *here*, in his own life, that he makes this experience all unnoticed and undefined, whether he wills it or not) then it is no mere empty talk to speak of the possibility of and necessity for inaugurating him into an ultimate experience of God.[21]

From Rahner's somewhat uncharacteristic reference to his own writings here it is clear that what is at stake is to make people aware of their pre-apprehension of God, to initiate them into an awareness of their transcendental experience.

In "The Foundation of Belief Today," a paper delivered some five years later to preachers and catechists, Rahner once again addresses the problem of how to approach those who do not already believe: Catholic theology has always included an apologetic element, has never accepted an irrational, leap-in-the-dark view of faith, and so "appeal must be made to the unbeliever, the doubter and those on the way to faith."[22] Theology must offer "grounds for Christian belief,"[23] "a grounding of faith,"[24] and to do this it can "begin quite happily with man."[25] Echoing the earlier lecture, then, Rahner insists that the grounding of Christian faith must today "consist in personal initiation and in arousing an inner experience of faith." He spells out how such an initiation might proceed in a section entitled "from the experience of faith to the establishment of belief": beginning with notions of subjectivity, freedom, responsibility, and especially hope, he offers an argument that just as one cannot really in "the actual business of living" do without hope or believe that this hope is ultimately false, so one cannot but believe in an ultimate ground for one's hope, namely God. The listener is to be persuaded, then, that a pre-thematic awareness of God lies at the basis of all she does, and this is to be the first step in bringing her to a fully-fledged Christian belief.

In spite of all the language of "grounds" of faith, these proposals can, I want to suggest, be understood in a nonfoundationalist manner. In particular, just because Rahner suggests that apologetics should begin by pointing to an experience in the listener, it does not follow that a recognition of this experience must be considered to be independent of the framework of Christian beliefs. Any attempt to persuade someone to adopt this Christian framework, after all, has to begin *somewhere*—one must talk about one aspect of Christianity, or one aspect of the way a Christian sees the world, before others. Rahner can be understood, then, to be proposing simply that the claim that Christianity makes to correspond to a deeper experience is an opportune place to begin the business of catechesis—or more specifically, perhaps, that the way a Christian understands hope and its significance is an opportune place to begin. It is opportune not because the listener can independently identify the experience one is talking about, not because one can prove to him that he *must* interpret what Rahner is identifying as hope along these particular lines—but rather because, as we have seen above, a Christianity which is presented as an interpretation of experience, even if it is an experience which is not known in advance of Christianity, has a greater appeal to the modern person. To present Christianity from the start as an interpretation of experience is to make it from the start more palatable—or at least it is to overcome from the start one of the more likely grounds of distrust of Christianity.

What I am suggesting, then, is that if one were to follow the apologetic method Rahner outlines, and if one were able to lead the unbeliever to acknowledge that he did indeed have the kind of transcendental experience Rahner claims he does, then one would *already* have succeeded in indoctrinating him. To bring him to see his experience in this way is to bring him already to (a perhaps still deficient) Christianity. Rahner is not, in other words, offering a two-step apologetic in which one first establishes that there is a religious dimension to experience and then argues that Christianity adequately thematizes it.[26] Instead he is presenting Christianity to the unbeliever by giving a Christian account of experience. To "initiate" the unbeliever into a certain kind of experience, in other words, is already also to initiate him into Christianity. One does not first step outside of one's Christian belief in order to scrutinize experience together with the unbeliever in a neutral way, but rather one tries to make a Christian view of experience as compelling to him in its own terms as possible.

It is worth noting that in both of these essays Rahner presents his approach to apologetics not as the only possible one or the best in any absolute sense, but as the most appropriate in a particular situation. Thus in "Theological Considerations on Secularization and Atheism" he insists on the point that there are in fact a number of different kinds of atheism, and that he is offering a strategy in response to *one* of these only; in "The Foundation of Belief Today" he acknowledges that Catholic theology has at different times carried out its one apologetic task in very different ways,

and advances his own approach only after a fairly extensive discussion of the contemporary intellectual situation.[27] Arguably, then, what he is suggesting is not that it is possible to give a neutral account of human nature which will convince any intelligent person whatsoever that she in fact has a "transcendental reference to the mystery called God," but that in light of the particular circumstances of a particular audience, a certain presentation of Christianity, beginning from a certain point and with certain emphases, will prove the most effective.

It would be going too far to suggest that what I have outlined is the only reading of these essays and others like them, but it is a reading to which they are open. One might of course reject my view and hold that Rahner is indeed advocating a two-step approach, whereby the apologist *first* draws the hearer's attention to an experience and *then* persuades her to accept Christianity as the most appropriate articulation of it. Anyone adopting such an interpretation, however, will at least have to admit that Rahner is not very precise in distinguishing between the two steps, that he blurs the transition and has a certain tendency in the first stage to forget his neutrality and slip into distinctively Christian language.

7 The theory of the anonymous Christian

Nothing in Rahner's oeuvre has received so much attention as the theory of the anonymous Christian. In large part this is because questions of religious pluralism and interreligious relations command the interest of a broad audience—broader than do systematic or dogmatic theology—and because Rahner has been taken to offer a (or indeed the) classic example of the "inclusivist" position. Many therefore are familiar with Rahner's views on the possibility of salvation outside the (visible) church who are not familiar with the rest of his theology, and some at least presume that the theory of the anonymous Christian is in fact the central purpose of Rahner's work.

Rahner does, certainly, take up the question of the salvific status of those outside the (explicit) church on a number of occasions, but if one considers this theme in the context of the whole of his work, it has to be seen simply as one among the many intellectual and pastoral problems facing contemporary Christians to which he turns his attention. It is no more helpful to see the theory of the anonymous Christian as the goal towards which the whole of Rahner's theology is directed than it is to cast *Spirit in the World* as its foundation.[1]

We turn in this chapter to the theory of the anonymous Christian, then, not because it is the logical and inevitable conclusion to any discussion of Rahner's theology, but because, given the level of interest and criticism it has attracted, it makes a useful case study for the nonfoundationalist reading of Rahner.

Rahner's proposal

In spite of the volume of secondary literature it has generated, Rahner's theory of anonymous Christians is relatively simple.[2] Rahner starts from the fact that Christians believe on the one hand in the universal salvific will of God, and on the other in the necessity of faith in Christ and membership of the Church for salvation. The question is, how can these two things be reconciled? If Church membership is necessary for salvation

then, reasons Rahner, it must be a possibility for all people, and if an explicit church membership is not a real possibility for some people then it follows that there must be some other kind of church membership. Similarly, if faith in Christ is necessary for salvation but explicit, professed faith is not a real possibility for all, then there must be something which is *not* explicit and professed and yet which still is faith in Christ. When it comes to explaining how what *must* be the case *can* be the case, ideas of supernatural existential and transcendental revelation become useful. Individuals who are not professed Christians, who even have never come across Christianity, are nevertheless offered the grace of Christ in the depths of their experience, and may indeed, without ever recognizing it to *be* that, accept it. Thus they may be anonymous Christians.

Rahner has been criticized for this theory from a variety of perspectives, and in what follows I will attempt to categorize these criticisms and consider a representative sample from each category. One might be tempted to divide critics into those on the left and those on the right, or into those in the pluralist camp and those from the exclusivist camp, but left and right have long been problematic terms in theology, and the exclusivist/inclusivist/pluralist typology is increasingly questioned.[3] Rather less contentious, perhaps, is to distinguish between criticisms to the effect that Rahner's theory does not do justice to Christianity, and those which suggest that he does not do justice to other religions and systems of belief. Criticisms in the second category have, especially in the English speaking world, been numerous: in what follows we will further divide these, into those which treat the theory of anonymous Christianity as logically problematic on the one hand, and those which take it to be ethically or empirically problematic on the other.

Criticisms by Balthasar and de Lubac

The most well known and also the most biting attack on what one might call the Christian adequacy of the theory of anonymous Christianity comes in Hans Urs von Balthasar's highly polemical *The Moment of Christian Witness*.[4] The notion of anonymous Christianity, Balthasar suggests, leads to a loss of the distinctiveness of Christianity, and also a loss of commitment: "Karl Rahner frees us from a nightmare with his theory of the anonymous Christian who is dispensed, at any rate, from the criterion of martyrdom."[5] If one can be a Christian anonymously, why then bother with the costly business of actually professing Christianity? Rahner is making things too easy, dissolving Christianity, evacuating it of its content, so that what we will be left with, if we go down his route, is a church full of anonymous atheists.

Before taking up the question of how far this is a caricature, and how far it points to a real difference of view between the two theologians, it is worth saying something about the larger context within which Balthasar sets out

the criticism. A consistent theme in his discussions of Rahner is the degree to which Rahner's thought is (as Balthasar sees it) formed and controlled by philosophical allegiances, and in particular by an appropriation of German idealism. Balthasar reviewed *Spirit in the World* in 1939, and he appears to be among those who think that this is of decisive importance for all that followed. Thus, for instance, Balthasar was able to describe Rahner as someone who had fundamentally taken the path of Kant, as opposed to his own following of Goethe.[6] Or again, nearly 40 years after the publication of *Spirit in the World*, Balthasar's depiction of Rahner as "the best-known representative of the transcendental approach" still begins with the fact that he is a follower of Joseph Maréchal in his concern to reconcile Aquinas with German idealism—i.e. it begins with a description of Rahner as essentially the Rahner of *Spirit in the World*.[7] The criticisms of anonymous Christianity which we have just described in *The Moment of Christian Witness* are also implicitly linked to the notion that Rahner subscribes in some way to German idealism. The context of these criticisms, that is to say, is a larger discussion of Christian witness (martyrdom) on the one hand and "the System" (the system of German idealism) on the other. Christians who want to be modern, to adapt to the times, to be able to speak to their fellow human beings in a language that can be understood, will be tempted to adopt The System in some form, but the cost, Balthasar maintains, will be the loss of martyrdom, of genuine witness, of genuine Christianity. The theory of the anonymous Christian, then, is presented essentially as the concrete form this capitulation to the philosophical system takes. In a later postscript to *The Moment of Christian Witness* Balthasar responds to rebukes for being so critical of Rahner by pointing again to concerns he had voiced in his original review of *Spirit in the World*, and raising again the question of the legitimacy of the interpretation of Aquinas developed by Maréchal and his followers. In other words, he presents Rahner's involvement in German idealism, as evidenced by *Spirit in the World*, as the decisive element in his own reaction against Rahner.

If Rahner is interpreted nonfoundationally, then clearly the philosophical dimension to Balthasar's criticisms must fall away. Balthasar is wrong to see Rahner's oeuvre as so determined by the position developed in *Spirit in the World*, and Rahner's theological proposals must be judged as just that—genuinely *theological* proposals, and not a philosophical infiltration of theology.

Balthasar's criticisms also, as has often been noted, contain elements of misrepresentation and caricature. Rahner is consistently clear in the way he articulates the relationship between the transcendental and the categorical that for those who have heard, understood, and genuinely accepted the gospel, explicit confession of belief and explicit practice are not optional extras. His repeated insistence that the transcendental never exists apart from the categorical, that the two are always closely connected, means that it would make no sense for someone who really understood what

Christianity is about to decide not to bother to be a professed Christian, opting only to be one in the implicit depths of experience. To do this, on Rahner's account, would actually be to reject the offer of grace, to turn away from God. Even for the Buddhist or atheist, second, Rahner makes it clear that the offer of grace and its acceptance only reach their fullness, only become completely themselves, when they come to expression in explicit Christianity. So Rahner does not present an implicit, anonymous Christianity as fully satisfactory and sufficient unto itself, for anyone.[8]

Balthasar's criticisms are puzzling, furthermore, in that it is not easy to work out how his own views differ from Rahner's on questions of non-Christians and their relationship to Christ, grace, and salvation. Balthasar does not deny the possibility of salvation outside the boundaries of explicit Christianity—in fact he is probably more emphatic than Rahner in maintaining the legitimacy of Christian hope for universal salvation. Nor does he deny the premise that salvation, even for those outside the Church, must not be apart from, but somehow through Christ—that the grace of Christ is active outside the visible church.[9]

Nevertheless, it would be misleading to suggest that there was no real difference whatsoever underlying Balthasar's attack on Rahner. For one thing, though Balthasar may have shared Rahner's views on the possibility of salvation outside the (visible) Church, unlike Rahner he felt no need to offer an explanation, a theory, of how this was possible: at the very least there is a difference here in their conception of the role of theology. And Balthasar was genuinely uneasy about the direction in which Rahner's explanation moved. If one can conceive of Christianity existing in people apart from conscious, explicit reference to Christ and his cross—even with all the qualifications Rahner introduces—this seems to undermine an understanding which Balthasar is keen to insist on of Christianity as a distinctive, particular form of life in response to the distinctiveness of Christ's love.

A similar anxiety emerges in Henri de Lubac's *The Church: Paradox and Mystery*.[10] Once again in many of the details de Lubac's criticisms may or may not apply to Rahner's followers, but certainly do not apply to Rahner himself. The two points at the center of de Lubac's objections, however, do have a bearing on Rahner's own presentation of anonymous Christianity. De Lubac maintains first of all that the theory of anonymous Christianity underrates the newness of Christianity, and second that it misses the deeply transformative character of the gospel, the genuine conversion which Christianity involves. Rahner can of course speak of a certain newness of Christianity—a newness on the categorical level—but not of a "truly revolutionary newness"[11] which de Lubac requires. Similarly, there is no room in his thought for a "metanoia brought about by the gospel which has *profoundly* transformed the heart of man."[12] at least not if one understands the "gospel" in the sense of something which came at a certain time in history and does not tinker too much with the meaning of "profound."[13]

An insistence that Rahner's theology not be read as determined by or dependent on his philosophy does not make concerns such as these disappear. It does, however, establish the context in which they should be understood. What is at issue is not in fact (whatever Balthasar might think) a theological objection to a philosophically determined vision, but the coming into conflict of alternative theological visions. One could go a step further and say that what is at stake are different ways of working out a Christocentric theology. Balthasar is concerned to preserve the distinctive relation of Christianity, and of the Christian life, to the concrete and particular figure of Christ. Rahner, on the other hand, is determined to think through the full significance of Christ: if the Word has become incarnate, this alters everything radically, and human life cannot be the same as it would have been. In one theological vision the emphasis is on the distinctiveness, in the other on the universal significance, of Christ.

Balthasar's attacks are not particularly fair, then, and in my view Balthasar misconstrues the nature of Rahner's theology insofar as he presents it as all flowing out of *Spirit in the World*. But it would be a mistake to suppose that if Balthasar had really understood Rahner, and been entirely fair to him, he would have found himself in complete agreement. Balthasar and Rahner do develop genuinely different construals of the nature of the Christian faith in Christ, and it is to this that Balthasar's criticisms rather stridently give voice.

Anonymous Christianity as logically problematic

The next cluster of criticisms to consider can most usefully be classified as logical. In many cases these are in fact found in conjunction with the ethical and empirical objections to be discussed below, but they are in principle distinct from the latter.

Alan Race develops an extended critique of Rahner's anonymous Christianity, but at least one strand of his argument is logical. He writes about Christian approaches to non-Christian religions, and takes Rahner as a leading exponent of the "inclusivist" option:

> Theories of inclusivism impose themselves *a priori* on the world faiths, whose acknowledged salvific value makes no real difference to the shape of one's own theological commitment. There is a sense in which the inclusivist theorizing is no more than *tautologous*. If Jesus Christ is posited as the only true saviour . . . and all people in their various faiths have been created oriented towards Christ as their goal and fulfillment . . . then to say that Christ and his Church therefore represent the fullness of religion is to do no more than *argue in a circle*.[14]

Race goes on to quote Maurice Wiles advancing a similar accusation of circularity: "On this argument since all good comes from the Logos and Jesus

is the Logos incarnate we can know in advance that every good belongs to him, whatever the empirical evidence."[15]

Closely connected to the claim that Rahner is caught in a logical circle is the objection that words such as Christianity lose their meaning under his treatment. "It is a puzzle," Race writes "to know what meaning to attach to the language,"[16] and John Macquarrie makes the point somewhat more forcefully:

> The most serious objection to such methods of debate, whether practiced by Christians or atheists, is the logical one that terms become eroded and distinctions blurred. If the words "theist" or "atheist" or "Christian" can be used so broadly that they can apply to anybody, then they no longer signify anything at all.[17]

Both of these logical objections depend on assumptions about the intended function of the theory of anonymous Christianity, and both are susceptible of very simple refutation. In response to the first objection one can point out that there is nothing wrong in itself with the circularity of which Rahner is accused—mathematical arguments, indeed all deductive arguments, also exhibit this kind of circularity. Similarly one can point out that there are many words used "so broadly that they can apply to anybody" whose meaningfulness is not usually questioned: most people in our society would recognize the meaningfulness of words like "human being" and "person," and most Christians would treat as both meaningful and applicable to anyone words such as "creature" and "sinner."

Only if one assumes that the theory of anonymous Christianity is intended to function primarily as a debating point do these objections begin to make sense. If one decides to try to "win" an interreligious debate (or a Christian–atheist or Christian–Marxist debate) by proving that all participants are (at least if they are decent people) already anonymous Christians—if one wants, that is to say, to establish the existence of an anonymous Christianity by arguments that are not themselves specifically Christian—then one will have to water down in a quite dramatic way the meaning of what it is to be Christian, thereby evacuating the word of all content and defeating the purpose of the exercise just as Race and Macquarrie suggest. Similarly, if one is proposing anonymous Christianity as a supposedly neutral theory, if one is pretending to start outside of Christianity on some neutral and indisputable ground and demonstrate to one's opponents that they are in fact already Christians, then the circularity to which Race and Wiles point will certainly be a problem. One will have surreptitiously slipped a Christian premise into an argument that was supposed to be neutral and persuasive even to those who do not already believe.

Gavin D'Costa has defended Rahner's theory against similar criticisms by suggesting that the critics misunderstand the intended *context* of the

phrase "anonymous Christianity." Its appropriate place is the internal discourse of the Christian church and *not*, he suggests, interreligious dialogue.[18] In intention this defense is fundamentally similar to the one I have offered, but there are aspects of the notion of context that may be misleading. The appeal to context could be taken to imply that there are things Christians may say to one another about non-believers but not to the non-believers themselves—in other words it might be taken to suggest quite the opposite of what D'Costa intends, namely that the theory of anonymous Christianity is inherently offensive, or at least condescending: it falls into the category of something not to be mentioned "in front of the children."

On my account the theory of anonymous Christianity does not function primarily as a move in a debate, but that does not mean that it must necessarily be *excluded* from interreligious (or other) dialogue and debate. Like any other tenet of Christianity (or at least of the participant's version of Christianity) it might come up in conversation. What it does mean, however, is that in saying "I believe that you are in fact already Christian" one is not trying to transcend the dialogue, to take a position above or beyond the particular positions of the two parties and encompass them all. One is only saying something which is part of one side of the dialogue. If one holds to the theory of anonymous Christianity, and also understands that it functions as a theological theory, then to say "You are probably in fact already a Christian" is equivalent to saying (to put it crudely) "if Christianity is the true religion, then you are probably already a Christian." Since whether Christianity *is* in fact the true religion is precisely what is in question, this does not in any way prejudge the outcome of, or deny the necessity for, the dialogue.[19]

In *The Diversity of Religions* J.A. DiNoia sets out a more sophisticated version of the logical objection to Rahner's anonymous Christianity.[20] In brief, DiNoia's argument is that Rahner offers a general theory of religion into which he illicitly slips a specifically Christian premise, and so becomes guilty of circularity. (In his essay in *The Modern Theologians* DiNoia offers a much more sympathetic treament of Rahner. In *The Diversity of Religions* he introduces Rahner primarily as an example of one *type* of theology of religions, and this may explain his more critical attitude: it is perhaps Rahner as he has been received, Rahner the typical inclusivist, whose logic is being faulted, rather than Rahner himself.)

DiNoia suggests the following framework for thinking about general theories of religion. Religions (or more precisely "a religious community's scheme of doctrines") have "basic valuations" which can be expressed in doctrines of the form "m is P" where "m" is "that existent or state of being on which the religious community's life is centered" and P is a predicate or series of predicates ascribed to "m."[21] Thus an expression of the Christian basic valuation might be "the Blessed Trinity is most holy" and an expression of the basic Buddhist valuation "Nirvana is the supreme goal of

life."[22] The "m" in these cases is respectively "the Blessed Trinity" and "Nirvana," and P is "most holy" and "the supreme goal of life." One thing a general theory of religion might do, DiNoia suggests, is propose "some broadly applicable value for the predicate terms in doctrines that propose basic valuations."[23] By this I think he means that the general theorist would propose a new predicate P which has the feature that it can be used to characterize all the other Ps that might occur in basic valuations. The new P would be offered, it seems, as a general description of the kinds of things all the other Ps are, or as a neutral and abstract substitute for the other Ps which can provide a useful framework for talking about them. The crucial point, on DiNoia's account, is that if it is to be a general theory of religion and not a particular basic valuation then one is allowed to put forward some neutral substitute for the Ps but *not* for the "m"s.[24]

The problem with Rahner, then, on DiNoia's account has to do with the "m"s and the Ps. Rahner seems, he suggests, to offer a general theory of religion whose roots lie in the "philosophical theology" of *Spirit in the World* and *Hearer of the Word*. This general theory proposes as a value for P something like "that which ought unconditionally to engage human beings" (this is not Rahner's own phrase but what DiNoia thinks captures what Rahner means by "Absolute Mystery"). The problem is that the supposedly general theory *also* sneaks in a value for "m": the Absolute Mystery which ought to engage us unconditionally is identified with the triune God. Rahner's argument, as DiNoia has laid it out "seems not to envisage (logically speaking) the application of this predicate value [i.e. 'that which ought unconditionally to engage human beings'] to the referents [i.e. the 'm's] of any basic valuation other than the Christian one."[25] In short, then, "by importing a basic religious valuation into an apparently general theory of religion (developed in the context of philosophy of religion), the argument presupposes what it must in fact show."[26]

This move has the effect of making interreligious dialogue impossible because "prior to dialogue, the universal claims of Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and Judaic communities would be absorbed into the embrace of Christian doctrines."[27]

DiNoia's version of the logical objection is particularly interesting in that it brings out the connection between the question of circularity and the issues discussed in earlier chapters of this work. It is clear on DiNoia's account that the circularity in Rahner's argument arises from the fact that he slips from one mode of discourse to another: in the context of what is *supposed* to be a general theory of religions Rahner surreptitiously introduces what is actually a particular religious basic valuation. The only evidence DiNoia actually brings forward, however, in support of the assumption that Rahner is indeed striving to give a general theory of religion is the fact that the theory has its roots in *Spirit in the World* and *Hearer of the Word*: because it is "developed in the context of philosophy of religion," he seems to imply, it must be such a general theory. In other words,

the result of reading Rahner's corpus as a unity (something which in another context DiNoia actually recommends against),[28] the result of seeing a single argument stretching from the earliest works through to Rahner's mature theology of religions, is that the theology of religions appears to be deeply flawed.

Anonymous Christianity as ethically and empirically problematic

In *Unapologetic Theology* William Placher mounts an argument against the notion that there is a common core to religion, taking Rahner's anonymous Christianity as one of his two examples of this position. According to Placher,

> many contemporary theologians and philosophers of religion seem extraordinarily uncomfortable with genuine religious pluralism. They cannot accept the possibility that there may be just different, even conflicting, religions and no point from which to evaluate them except from within some one tradition or another.[29]

According to the reading of Rahner developed in this volume the last phrase in this passage cannot be applied to him. If Rahner does not attempt to advance a "general theory of religion," if he does not rely on supposedly universally accessible philosophical arguments to establish the *Vorgriff*, if the claims he makes about religious experience are not so much appeals *to* religious experience as theses arising out of a Christian anthropology, then there is nothing to prevent him from accepting that there is no point from which to evaluate the religions "except from within some one tradition or another," for it is precisely an evaluation of the religions from within one tradition which he offers.

The last phrase in the passage quoted, then, can be dismissed. But what of the rest? Is it true that Rahner is "uncomfortable with genuine religious pluralism," that he does not accept that there are different and possibly conflicting religions? If Placher's claims are granted then Rahner's anonymous Christianity comes in for both empirical and ethical objections. Even if Rahner's theory makes no claim to be based on the empirical evidence, there is nevertheless a problem if the theory is *contradicted* by empirical evidence, and it can at least be argued that an empirical study of the religions makes it difficult to continue to think of them as fundamentally the same.[30] To fail to recognize the real "otherness" of non-Christian religions, furthermore, is ethically problematic insofar as it shows a lack of respect: one assumes one knows what the other religions are *really* about better than do the religions' own adherents, and so fails to take them seriously on their own terms.[31]

On both empirical and ethical grounds, then, it seems objectionable to

try to level out and smooth over differences between the religions, and this holds even if one attempts only an "intra-Christian" theology of religions. The question is, is Rahner in fact smoothing over differences? Does he in fact refuse to recognize genuine religious pluralism? What I want to suggest is that though Rahner may sometimes have a tendency to do so, there is in principle nothing in the ideas of the *Vorgriff*, the supernatural existential, transcendental experience, or anonymous Christianity which necessitates such a minimization.

The best way to make both these two points, namely that Rahner does at times minimize differences and that he does not need to, is to begin with the particular formulation of the problem set out by J.A. DiNoia. DiNoia charges both inclusivist and pluralist theologies of religion with failing to do justice to the diversity of religions, and outlines an alternative approach which can acknowledge this diversity while also accounting for what inclusivism and pluralism are developed to allow, namely the possibility of the salvation of non-Christians. What inclusivists (of whom Rahner is one of the main examples) together with pluralists all fail to allow in particular is that not all religions in fact aim at salvation, that the different religions may have genuinely different aims, and that they may therefore promote different patterns of life in accordance with these aims.[32]

Now, though Rahner does not speak of the religions as all in their different ways "seeking salvation," he does at times suggest that they all attempt to do the same thing, namely, to thematize the divine revelation given in transcendental experience:[33] "The attempt is made in every religion . . . to mediate the original, unreflexive and non-objective revelation historically, to make it reflexive and to interpret it in propositions."[34]

In the non-Christian religions these attempts will be partly successful, but such success will be mixed with "error [and] sinful delusions and their objectifications."[35] Thus on Rahner's account the non-Christian religions strive for and succeed in varying degrees to do what Christianity alone can accomplish with "reflexively guaranteed purity." On one level of course this account still leaves room for different religions having different "finalities": insofar as they thematize the one transcendental revelation *differently* they propose for their adherents different aims of life. But DiNoia's objections at least in part hit the mark: Rahner does not suggest the Christian should approach the other religions *as* different, but instead as in part the same and in part wrong. One does not see them as wholes pointing in different directions, but instead as containing "elements" which come from grace and are legitimate thematizations of the original revelation (and which therefore overlap with Christianity) and "elements" arising out of sin. There seems to be no hint in Rahner's approach to the religions for what DiNoia calls the "providential diversity of religions."

The interesting point to note, however, is that Rahner's account of the religions is not in fact necessitated by the theory of anonymous Christianity or more generally by his understanding of transcendental revelation.

This becomes clear if one considers the absolute *generality* not only of transcendental revelation but also of its historical mediation. Transcendental revelation is in fact God's self-communication to the human being in grace, and this is present at least as an offer at all times and to all people—hence the phrase 'supernatural existential." And not only is this transcendental revelation omnipresent, but so are its categorical mediations: "supernaturally elevated transcendentality is . . . mediated to itself by *any and every* categorical reality in which and through which the subject becomes present to itself,"[36] and as we have seen the subject becomes present to itself in every act of knowing and willing. Because the human being is both social and historical, the mediation of transcendental revelation needs to come not just through individual acts of knowledge and volition but also through social and historical realities. There is no reason for these to be limited, however, to religion:

> the categorical, historical self-interpretation of what man is [which includes the supernatural existential] takes place . . . in what we call simply the history of culture, of society, of the state, of art, of religion, and of the external, technical economic mastery of nature.[37]

Not just religions, then, but the whole of culture and indeed the whole of human life can be seen as the mediation of the revelation given in our "transcendentality."

Now, Rahner does single out religions from history and culture in general—in religions, he suggests, the reflection on transcendental revelation which is everywhere going on becomes explicit and reflexive. But in principle there is no need for this distinction—it arises not so much from the logic of his understanding of revelation and its historical mediation as from a perhaps unreflected background assumption that religions must share some one "essence." Rahner could just as easily maintain that religions like all other forms of culture mediate transcendental revelation but, with the exception of course of Christianity and perhaps of Judaism, no more than any other form of culture do they necessarily *understand* themselves as doing so. Rahner's account of revelation requires that our transcendental experience be mediated outside Christianity, and it requires that it be mediated at a historical and social as well as an individual level, but it does not in itself require that any special status be given to its mediation by other religions.

The logic of Rahner's position, then, does not actually demand that the aims of other religions be identified with the aims of Christianity. Or to be more precise, it does require such an identification, but only at the very general level on which one would also have to say that the aims of all poetry, all drama, all science, all architecture, all politics, and so on are the aims of Christianity. The dynamism towards God which Christianity best expresses is present in everything human beings do, and so in some sense

everything (except insofar as it is distorted by sin) can be described as having this common aim.

What I want to suggest, then, is that it is necessary to distinguish between offering an ultimate account of what some human activity is about and offering an intermediate account of the same activity. Ultimately all that we do, including, say, building houses, can be said to aim at objectifying transcendental experience, but at another level things have very different aims: the object of building a house is to have somewhere to live, or to earn money, or to exercise the art of house-construction, or some other relatively specific thing. Buddhism, then, could be said to be an attempt to thematize the transcendentally given revelation of the triune God, but there is another level on which what the Buddhist seeks has to be described not with reference to God but rather with reference to Nirvana. One might draw a comparison here with the notion of creation: the Christian can say of all things apart from God that they are created, without thereby denying their individuality and diversity, and without either precluding or devaluing other levels of explanation.

One cannot say that a nonfoundationalist Rahner escapes all reproach. Nevertheless, it seems that the majority of the criticism aimed at Rahner's notion of the anonymous Christian is bound up with the kind of assumptions I have been arguing against throughout this book: that Rahner's corpus ought to be read as a single system; that theological proposals such as that of the anonymous Christian are grounded directly in *Spirit in the World*; that Rahner tries to found his arguments on a neutral, independently known experience. If Rahner is read as a foundationalist, he is ultimately unpersuasive and, as many of the objections I have outlined suggest, at least a touch offensive. Read nonfoundationally, on the other hand, he is perhaps not *always* persuasive, but he offers a considerably more interesting, and less easily targeted, position.

Conclusion

It will be clear to the reader that what has been developed in this book is neither a defense of the truth and consistency of everything Rahner ever said, nor a fundamental criticism of his theology. The reception of Rahner has suffered, I believe, from the fact that too many people have written about him either as disciples convinced that all criticism must be based on misunderstanding, or as critics striving to show that some fundamental decision "at the beginning" of his thinking vitiates all that follows. The two camps, of course, are not unrelated. Those who have suggested that one cannot question any aspect of Rahner's thought without endangering the whole "synthesis" have in some sense played into the hands of those inclined towards wholesale rejection. The enthusiasm of the defenders, it is arguable, has contributed to the hostility of the critics.

If this book is neither wholesale defense nor wholesale attack, it is nevertheless intended as defense of a kind. What is needed to bring out the best of Rahner, it seems to me, is not so much a vindication of his treatment of particular issues, but rather a *Gestalt* shift, a fundamental change in the way he is perceived, and it is this that I have been pointing towards in suggesting that Rahner can be read as a nonfoundationalist. True, Rahner is a philosophically dense theologian. True, Rahner makes central use of the notion of a universal experience. But this need not mean that philosophy is his *starting* point, nor that he attempts to *build* his theology on an appeal to experience.

Many of those who have wanted to reject Rahner's theology wholesale have pointed to the supposed philosophical basis of his thought, or to its supposedly anthropocentric, "from below," starting point. Such criticisms, if the reading which has been developed here is adopted, will not stick. This does not of course mean that one has only to take up a nonfoundationalist interpretation and all difficulties with Rahner magically disappear. Difficulties there are and will remain, and criticism of Rahner is needed: Rahner is a profound, creative, and fresh thinker, but he is also sometimes reductive, and sometimes unpersuasive. If a nonfoundationlist

reading is adopted, however, criticisms are less likely to be in a sweeping methodological key, and more likely to engage with particular theological claims, understood precisely *as* theological.

Notes

1 Introduction

1 The exception is in the more technical end of analytic philosophy, where some philosophers do continue to take up and defend a foundationalist position.
2 For more detailed philosophical presentations of foundationalism, and the distinctions to be made among different types of foundationalism, cf. William Alston, "Two types of foundationalism" in *The Journal of Philosophy*, 1976, vol. 73, 165–88; Ernest Sosa, "The foundations of foundationalism" in *Nôus*, 1980, vol. 14, 547–64, and many contemporary textbooks on epistemology. For discussions of foundationalism and theology, see, among others, John E. Thiel, *Nonfoundationalism*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1994; William C. Placher, *Unapologetic Theology: A Christian Voice in a Pluralist Conversation*, Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989; Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, *Foundational Theology: Jesus and the Church*, New York: Crossroad, 1984.
3 Cf. Thiel, op. cit., p. 4, for an analysis of the way in which modern philosophy, beginning with Descartes, *differs* from premodern philosophy as regards foundations. There is no consensus here, however: Alvin Plantinga, in "Reason and belief in God," presents some premodern thinkers, including especially Thomas Aquinas, as "classical foundationalists" in Plantinga and Wolterstorff, eds, *Faith and Rationality*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984.
4 Placher, op. cit., p. 26.
5 Cf. Nicholas Everitt and Alec Fisher, *Modern Epistemology*, New York: McGraw Hill, 1995, chapter 6.
6 Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997 (originally published in 1956 in *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*). Wittgenstein's private language argument is another classic attack on pre-conceptual experience—or that is how it is often taken, though it is rife with interpretive difficulties.
7 Or in another version, sense data, facts about the sense impressions we have rather than facts about the world.
8 Wilfred Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987, 43.
9 Ibid., p. 44
10 In order to have the concept of green it is necessary to have "a whole battery of concepts of which it is one element" (ibid., p. 44).
11 Ibid., p. 45.

12 Cf. the experiment with anomolous playing cards by Jerome S. Bruner and Leo Postman, "On the perception of incongruity: a paradigm," *Journal of Personality*, 1949, vol. 18, discussed in William Placher, *Unapologetic Theology: A Christian Voice in a Pluralistic Conversation*, Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989, 27.

13 Cf. especially Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979.

14 The raft image comes from Ernest Sosa, "The raft and the pyramid: coherence versus foundations in the theory of knowledge," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 1980, vol. 5, 3–25. This image suggests not only that no one subset of beliefs grounds the rest, but also that the whole structure of beliefs may float upon something that is not itself stable. For the wigwam image, cf. for example Everitt and Fisher, op. cit. The image of the spider's web is from W.V.O. Quine's celebrated essay "Two dogmas of empiricism," *Philosophical Review*, 1951, vol. 60. Charles Peirce, writing before the terms foundationalism and nonfoundationalism were coined, suggested along somewhat similar lines that "reasoning should not form a chain which is no stronger than its weakest link, but a cable whose fibers may be ever so slender, provided they are sufficiently numerous and intimately connected," "Some consequences of four incapacities" in *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, 5, 156, quoted in Thiel, op. cit.

15 By way of analogy, one might think of the case of an individual with worries. If someone comes to me with particular worries, I may try to discuss the way the world is and whether or not the worries are justified. But if it turns out that they are worried about absolutely everything, then I would be inclined to shift my attention away from the way the world is and whether or not it corresponds to the particular worries, and instead onto the person, and what it is that is in her that is generating this obsessive anxiety. Individual worries one may take seriously, but worries about absolutely everything are a sign of something wrong with the worrier.

16 Whether any fundamentalist would list these sorts of verification without also mentioning the inner workings of the Holy Spirit on the believer is another question. Presumably, however, if she thought that these historical grounds were at least objectively sufficient to demonstrate the authority of the Bible, she would be considered a foundationalist.

17 It is worth noting, however, that theological problems may have been at the root of the development of two of the most historically significant philosophical versions of foundationalism, those of Locke and Descartes.

18 One might want to make an argument a fortiori: if even something so simple and basic as the experience of seeing green is already necessarily permeated with concepts (and presumably culturally conditioned concepts) then all the more so must it be the case that the much less straightforward business of having a religious experience will be. It is, of course, open to the theological liberal to try to argue that the religious experience is *more* straightforward and *less* problematizable than the sense experience.

19 Various thinkers, of course, have argued that although it may *appear* possible to doubt or reject religious belief wholesale, it is in reality impossible; one might include figures as different as Anselm, Schubert Ogden, and Rahner himself on such a list.

20 "[T]he foundational view tends to subordinate the characteristic patterns of Christian speech to the patterns of the philosophical and apologetic argument" according to Ronald Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology: The Gospel as Narrated Promise*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985, 74. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza similarly portrays Roman Catholic fundamental theology as having become increasingly reductionist as it became more thoroughly foundational in *Foundational Theology: Jesus and the Church*, New York: Crossroad, 1984.

21 It is arguable, however, that in the case of theology such worries are intensified by the fact that what is at stake is not just knowledge and belief in general, much of which may be relatively noncontroversial (e.g., how do I know that I am justified in believing that there are a particular number of coins in my pocket?), but beliefs which some people strongly hold and others equally strongly reject. It may thus be particularly disquieting to suggest that what one instinctively thinks of as the procedure for determining the rationality of beliefs is not actually available to the believer. Disquiet about irrationality and irresponsibility, then, may be all the stronger in the theological case.

22 Gerald McCool, editor of the useful *A Rahner Reader*, provides an unusually explicit and full example of such an approach. McCool is a great enthusiast for the systematic and structural unity of Rahner's thought: "One of the strongest impressions left with the reader after his perusal of these books {*Geist in Welt, Hörer des Wortes* and the first three volumes of *Scriften zur Theologie*} is sheer admiration at the unity and metaphysical coherence of Rahner's thought," "Philosophy of the human person in Karl Rahner's theology," *Theological Studies*, 1961, vol. 22, 537.

More particularly, Rahner's thought is, in McCool's view, a unity of philosophy and theology, in which the philosophical work underlies and upholds the theological. McCool speaks of Rahner's philosophy as the "basis" of his theology ("On the basis of his metaphysics, grounded on man's inner experience, Rahner structures the data of Scripture and tradition into the synthesis of his theological anthroplogy"), as the framework ("the philosophical framework on which Rahner's theological constructions are built") and as the armature ("there are not many theologians who have worked as thoroughly and consistently to provide a theoretical armature for their reflections through the use of contemporary philosophy,") *A Rahner Reader*, New York: Crossroad, 1984, xxiv; "Philosophy of the human person," p. 539; and "Philosophy and Christian wisdom," *Thought: A Review of Culture and Idea*, 1969, vol. 44, 494.

McCool is aware, however, of the implications of his view: if the theology is built on the philosophy, it is vulnerable through it: "If the metaphysical conclusions reached in {*Geist in Welt*} are justified by the philosophical method employed in it, then its author has won the right to proceed with his theological anthropology; but if on the other hand they are not so justified, then, despite its individual successes in dealing with one problem or another, his theological anthropology as a systematic theological method will be doomed to failure", "Philosophy of the human person," op. cit., pp. 561–2.

In a similar vein, he writes that "The major difficulty of Rahner's critics" is with "what they consider the excessive dependence of his whole system upon

Transcendental Thomism . . . As a philosophical theologian, however, Rahner would simply refer these critics to the texts in which he has tried to justify his basic metaphysics of knowledge and being. There is little more that a philosophical theologian can do." *A Rahner Reader*, op. cit., p. xxvii.

Though McCool is unusually full and explicit in his foundationalist reading, he is by no means unusual. Langdon Gilkey, in a review of *Spirit in the World*, describes the volume as "the most complete statement of the anthropology, and thus of the philosophical prolegomenon, on which [Rahner] builds all of his further theological construction," so that "no one who seeks to understand any of Rahner's later work in philosophy of religion or theology should fail to read this book with care" (Review of *Spirit in the World* in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 1970, vol. 7, 138). Rowan Williams outlines Rahner's "philosophical starting point," and refers to the "foundations laid in *Spirit in the World*" ("Balthasar and Rahner" in *The Analogy of Beauty: The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, ed. John Riches, Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark Ltd, 1986, 19). Gordon Kaufman writes of the "anthroplogical foundations" of Rahner's thought, which he glosses as "philosophical anthroplogy" ("Is there any way from Athens to Jerusalem?" *Journal of Religion*, 1979, vol. 59, 341, 342). Similarly Emerich Coreth, though insisting that Rahner is a theologian and not a philosopher, uses the language of philosophical foundations of Rahner's theology, writes of philosophical insights and convictions as forming the basis of Rahner's theology, and attributes the misunderstandings of critics to a failure to grasp Rahner's philosophical presuppositions ("Philosophische Grundlagen der Theologie Karl Rahners," *Stimmen der Zeit*, 1994, vol. 212).

The result of such interpretive frameworks is that anyone who finds the philosophy *qua* philosophy unpersuasive will be led to reject the theology wholesale: thus it is not surprising to find a comment like the following in the introduction to a doctoral thesis:

My own conclusion was that Rahner had misunderstood Kant's doctrine and that, in any case, his argument that the intellect must affirm the existence of a dimension beyond space and time as a condition of its knowledge within the world is not successful . . . By denying the validity of his philosophical position I seem to have undermined the foundations on which his theology was constructed, viz. that man has an implicit knowledge of God in all knowledge and activities within the world. Paul de Rosa, *Karl Rahner's Concept of "Vorgriff": An Examination of Its Philosophical Background and Development* (Oxford University Press, 1988).

The foundational importance of *Spirit in the World* and *Hearer of the Word* has recently been robustly reaffirmed by Patrick Burke: "Rahner's theology is rightly recognized as a theological system because of the fundamental unity that runs throughout his writings. The key to this unity of approach lies in a foundational structure of thought that is revealed in the philosophical works with which he began his intellectual career and that is apparent throughout his theological development. His early philosophical works, *Geist in Welt* and *Hörer des Wortes*, are therefore absolutely intrinsic to a correct understanding of his theology" (Patrick Burke, *Reinterpreting Rahner*, New York: Fordham, 2002, vii–viii).

Burke (whose work follows an earlier article by John McDermott) gives an

interesting presentation of a range of Rahner's work in terms of a dialectic between a "dynamic, unifying" side of his thought and a "conceptualizing, distinguishing" side. What he does not consider, however, is the possibility that the presence of this same pattern in *Spirit in the World* and *Hearer of the Word* need not make these the *key* to all that follows; they might instead be seen simply as works which contain an early instance of a characteristically Rahnerian thought-pattern.

Of course to use the language of foundations or "foundational" in connection to Rahner's early philosophical works is not thereby to commit oneself to construing Rahner as a fully-fledged foundationalist in the technical sense described above. In chapter 5, I shall be terming the reading to which I will oppose my own "semi-foundationalist." This I think better captures the reality of the way many serious scholars of Rahner think about his work, as well as posing an alternative to my own interpetation more credible than would be a fully foundationalist one. Nevertheless, the term foundationalist is appropriate for describing the way in which, in broader theological contexts and among non-specialists, Rahner is frequently construed.

23 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.

24 Cf. N. Healy, "Indirect methods in theology: Karl Rahner as an ad hoc apologist," *The Thomist*, 1992, vol. 56, 613–34, and J.A. DiNoia, "Karl Rahner" in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*, second edition, ed. David Ford, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1997. Both Healy and DiNoia point away from reading Rahner's corpus as a single unified project. Neither of them, however, goes so far as to suggest that Rahner is not consistent over time.

25 Cf. especially Philip Endean, *Karl Rahner and Ignatian Spirituality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. At the heart of Endean's impressive reading is the suggestion that "Rahner's whole achievement . . . proceeds from a fusion, inspired by the Ignatian Exercises, of the idioms of mysticism and grace" (op. cit., p. 35). And if this is right, then *Spirit in the World*, though still having a role to play, is not to be seen as the central or most significant element in Rahner's thought "by claiming that Rahner's achievement is ultimately rooted in his spirituality, this study relativizes the importance of his early philosophical works, and confirms how unhelpful it is to see Rahner's theological achievement as merely the outgrowth of *Spirit in the World*" (ibid., p. 7). Cf. also Declan Marmion, *A Spirituality of Everyday Faith: A Theological Investigation of the Notion of Spirituality in Karl Rahner*, Louvain: Peeters, 1998, for a recent survey of Rahner on spirituality.

26 In the context of this *Gestalt* shift, *The Ordinary Transformed* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995) by R.R. Reno ought also to be mentioned. This is a wide-ranging book, at the heart of which is a sustained engagement with Rahner—and the Rahner with whom Reno engages is deliberately presented as one who sees creedal commitments and the Christian interpretation of reality as giving rise *to* claims about experience, rather than one who seeks primarily to justify Christian beliefs *from* experience.

27 Though Rahner is often mentioned in discussions about theological founda-

tionalism, in other words, issues of foundationalism and nonfoundationalism are not usually addressed in discussions of Rahner.

2 *Spirit in the World*

1 *Spirit in the World*, New York: Herder and Herder, 1968. This is a translation of the second edition of *Geist in Welt: zur Metaphysik der endlichen Erkenntnis bei Thomas von Aquin*, Munich: Kösel, 1957, which includes revisions by J.B. Metz. The first edition of *Geist in Welt* was published in 1939.
2 Cf. the second chapter of Philip Endean, *Karl Rahner and Ignatian Spirituality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, for a discussion of some of the themes of these early writings and their connection to central Rahnerian concerns.
3 *Faith in a Wintry Season: Conversations and Interviews with Karl Rahner in the Last Years of His Life*, New York: Crossroad, 1990, 54.
4 Cf. Thomas Sheehan, *Karl Rahner: The Philosophical Foundations*, Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1987, for a reading of Rahner's philosophy from a largely Heideggerian perspective.
5 Similarities between Rahner and Lonergan, for instance, though real, are limited, and they are offset by considerably greater dissimilarities.
6 Martin Honecker famously failed Rahner's PhD thesis. Among the published criticisms of Rahner as an interpeter of Aquinas, cf. Cornelio Fabro CPS, *La svolta antropologica di Karl Rahner*, Milan: Rusconi Editori, 1974; John F.X. Knassas, "*Esse* as the target of judgement in Rahner and Aquinas," *The Thomist*, 1987, vol. 51, 222–45; Paul de Rosa, "Karl Rahner's concept of 'Vorgriff': an examination of its philosophical background and development" (doctoral thesis, Oxford University, 1988).
7 In *Aquinas on Mind*, London: Routledge, 1993.
8 As will be come clear below, the word "knowledge" is used in a very broad sense here.
9 *Spirit in the World*, op. cit., 1968, pp. li, l.
10 Ibid., p. l. In general what Rahner is here articulating, as both Carr and Sheehan point out, is a "retrieval" in the Heideggerian sense of the word, although Rahner does not in fact introduce the term *Wiederholung*. Cf. Anne Carr, *The Theological Methodology of Karl Rahner*, Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977, and Thomas Sheehan, *Karl Rahner: The Philosophical Foundations.*
11 At a number of points it is very clear that Rahner proceeds in two stages: he first shows how something can be "inferred from Thomistic presuppositions," and then argues either that this is also "immediately Thomistic" or that it is in accord with certain lines of thought which are themselves immediately Thomistic, i.e. found explicitly in the texts of Thomas.
12 *Spirit in the World*, op. cit., p. li.
13 The debt is not explicitly acknowledged—indeed it is Aquinas and not Heidegger that Rahner is even at this stage quoting.
14 Cf. Peter Eicher, *Die Anthropologische Wende: Karl Rahners Philosophischer Weg vom Wesen des Menschen zur Personalen Existenz*, Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1970, especially pp. 72–8, and the works of de Rosa and Fabro cited above. George Lindbeck, in "The a priori in St Thomas's theory of knowledge" in *The Heritage of Christian Thought*, eds Robert E. Cushman and Egil Grislis, New York: Harper, 1965, is something of an exception, but his conclusion, which

is neither positive nor negative, pertains only to a very carefully restricted question.

15 This is not to say, of course, that invoking Thomas' authority no longer has *any* argumentative force, but it is no longer so decisive as it was.

16 *Spirit in the World*, op. cit., p. liii.

17 The term "receptive knowledge" (*hinnahme Erkenntnis*) can be found in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990) and like Rahner, Heidegger contrasts it with the kind of knowledge of others that God has (or would have in principle) (cf. e.g. p. 16 of *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*).

18 There is perhaps an analogy to be drawn here with the two Kantian questions, "how are synthetic a priori judgments possible?" and "what are the conditions of the possibility of experience?"

19 As we shall see in chapter 4, the same kind of analysis appears again towards the beginning of *Hearer of the Word* (New York: Continuum, 1995). This is a translation of *Hörer des Wortes*, Munich: Kösel-Pustet, 1941.

20 Rahner constantly insists that there is no such temporal ordering and yet also constantly employs language suggestive of such an ordering.

21 "If . . . only that which the knower itself is, is known as proper object, and if, nevertheless, there is to be a knowledge in which this known as proper object is the other, then both of these can be understood as simultaneously possible only by the fact that *the knower itself is the being of the other*" (*Spirit in the World*, p. 79); "knowing the other as proper object means essentially and ontologically 'being-away-from-the-self-with-the-other'" (ibid., p. 81).

22 Thus "the grasping of its possibility [the possibility of the one human knowledge of the world] must take place in two phases: in sensibility as such, man has already and always lost himself in the world (or would have, if his knowldge could ever be sensibility alone). He acquires his position as man in a self-liberating return from his abandonment in the subject–object unity of sensibility" (*Spirit in the World*, op. cit., pp. 118–19). The Hegelian overtones—knowing the self by overcoming the otherness of the other—are clear here.

23 The key move here seems to be the introduction of a notion of matter which is transcendentally derived.

24 It is here that people have heard the overtones of Fichte though, as we have seen, Rahner insisted that the influence, if there was any, could only have been indirect.

25 This is the most common English rendition, though by no means the only one. Others include "anticipation," "pre-grasp," and "dynamic transcendence." The use of the term "*Vorgriff*" is probably derived from Heidegger, who speaks of the human being's "projection" in terms of *Vorhabe*, *Vorsicht*, and *Vorgriff*. Cf. Thomas Sheehan, op. cit., pp. 200, 204. As Sheehan points out, however, Rahner's appropriation of Heidegger's term is only a loose one.

26 *Spirit in the World*, op. cit., p. liii.

27 It becomes increasingly prominent in his later work—the distinction on this *general* level is not particularly characteristic of *Spirit in the World* or *Hearer of the Word*, or of Rahner's earliest theological essays.

28 *Hearer of the Word*, op. cit., p. 45.

29 "Experience of self and experience of God," *Theological Investigations*, vol. 13, p. 127.

30 *Spirit in the World*, op. cit., pp. 62, 64 (emphasis added). In the original, this latter phrase is "die Schwebe des Ausgangspunkt menschlicher Metaphysik" (*Geist in Welt*, p. 77).

31 The disparity between the way Rahner begins and the way he continues is to a certain extent covered over by an equivocation in his use of the word intellect. (The meaning of the word "sense" may also shift in a similar way, although the case here is somewhat less clear.) At times intellect refers to knowledge of being ("if we say that sensation is being with a thing in the here and now of the world, and that intellect is the knowledge of being in its totality" (*Spirit in the World*, op. cit., p. 66)), at times to the capacity to abstract. It will turn out of course that the latter is dependent on the former—that we can only abstract because of our knowledge of being, can only have intellect in the second sense because we have it in the first. (One could say, borrowing Frege's terminology, that Rahner's two uses of *intellect* have the same referent but different senses.) The fact, however, that Rahner uses this notion in what are at least initially two different ways means that the shift in his project can be disguised by a single description of it. Throughout Rahner can say that he is inquiring into the possibility of the unity of sense and intellect: at first this means that he is trying to work out the unity of our knowledge of beings and our knowledge of Being; subsequently it means that he is seeking to work out the unity of the two moments that occur in our knowledge of particular beings—the moment of being-with-the-other and the moment of abstracting (where abstracting can only *by argument* be shown to require, or perhaps to be identical with, the knowledge of Being).

32 *Spirit in the World*, op. cit., p. 59.

33 Arguably one could understand Metz's addition more charitably if one took it as an attempt to give a certain initial plausibility to the assumption rather than an attempt to establish it rigorously.

34 Emerich Coreth is considerably more careful in his treatment of questions and what they presuppose in his *Metaphysics* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968). In his terminology, the preliminary knowledge of the "x" which is presupposed by the question "what is x?" is the "constitutive co-knowledge" of the question, but it is not self-validating and may indeed be false. Coreth's view, then, is that one cannot start with any particular question, which could always be based on false presuppositions, but instead with the nature of questioning in general.

35 *Hearer of the Word*, op. cit.

36 Ibid., pp. 24–5.

37 "The question about being belongs necessarily to our existence, because it is implicitly contained in everything we think or say. And without thinking and speaking we are not human. Every statement is a statement about some being. Hence it occurs against the background of a previous, although unthematic knowing of being in general. Every true statement, every judgment, every intentional activity . . . contains two components: 1) a synthesis of two concepts, with the claim that this synthesis is correct; 2) the referring of this mental synthesis to 'reality in itself,' to the objective synthesis of which the mental synthesis is a reproduction. But how can we have access to this 'reality in itself,' to which we refer the synthesis of subject and predicate of every statement? Precisely through our previous knowing of being as such," ibid., p. 26.

38 In *Hearer of the Word*, as we have seen in an earlier note, there is some indication that this second argument subsumes the first. This is not to say that Rahner explicitly adverts to the presence of two distinct arguments. However, as we shall discuss below, Rahner claims that, in everything we do, we in fact make judgments of this particular form, and so also in asking about being. Thus it would seem to follow that the analysis of the question about being is just one case of the more general analysis of what is contained in any judgment (or indeed of any action).

39 One has of course to be very careful here. Just as the return is a *moment* in knowing and not a separate act of knowledge, so the subsumption of the particular cannot be something that takes place in a separate act from some prior knowing of the particular. In speaking of this subsuming as "the activity," then, I am speaking somewhat loosely: it is, one should perhaps say, the *element* in the single act of knowing in which the return takes place.

40 *Spirit in the World*, op. cit., p. 122.

41 *Spirit in the World*, op. cit., p. 122. Note again the inevitable temporal language.

42 Rahner's introduction of the language of form and matter here need not mean that he is simply accepting an Aristotelian metaphysics on Aquinas' authority. He uses the language of form and matter in his own distinctive way.

43 *Spirit in the World*, op. cit., p. 142.

44 Thus "what was meant in the affirmative synthesis [i.e. judgment] was *what-is-in-itself* (*das Ansichsein*), what is absolutely in the sense that the content of the affirmation . . . attains to the thing . . . in such a way that what was meant in the judgment . . . already belongs of itself to the thing designated by the subject of the proposition, that is, it belongs to it independently of the realization of the affirmative synthesis, and so an already realized synthesis . . . is always given prior to the affirmation of the judgment" (ibid., p. 155).

45 Thus "[N]ow usually the judgment is understood as the synthesis of the two concepts of subject and predicate. This understanding can be justified so long as one is aware of the intrinisic structure of the concept itself . . . Presupposing this, how is the synthesis of the two concepts of a proposition to be understood more precisely? Obviously in this way, that the universal contained in both concepts is synthesized with the same supposite. In the judgmental synthesis, therefore, it is not at all a question of the synthesis of two quiddities of the same order with each other, but of the reference (*Hinbeziehung*) of two quiddities to the same 'this'," (ibid., p. 124).

46 "[W]hat is 'form,' in other words, predicate in the affirmative and not merely concretizing synthesis, is what is first and fundamentally liberated" (ibid., p. 155).

47 Ibid., p. 155.

48 Ibid., p. 156.

49 It is thus analogous to Kant's transcendental ideal, with the difference of course that for Rahner it is not *merely* a regulative idea of reason.

3 Transcendental

1 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, New York: St Martin's Press, 1965, B25.

2 "Theology and anthropology," *Theological Investigations*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1963–81, vol. 9, 29. As suggested in the text, this is a broadly Kantian definition. It is not absolutely so, however: most obviously there is the fact that it adds action to knowledge as that of which the conditions of possibility are examined. In addition, as we shall discuss below, it is clear from the context of the article that it is not the conditions of the possibility of all knowledge (and action) whatsoever that are at stake here, but the conditions of the possibility of, for instance, knowledge of some one particular dogma.

3 "Reflections on methodology in theology," *Theological Investigations*, op. cit., vol. 11, p. 87.

4 *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, New York, Crossroad, 1989, 20.

5 Rahner could *in principle* of course argue for the existence of transcendental revelation as a condition of the possibility of categorical revelation, or of our grasp of categorical revelation, and this would then be a Kantian kind of argument in the broad sense discussed below (as well as being an updated version of *Hearer of the Word*). But this is not *in fact* how he develops and presents the notion of transcendental revelation in the *Foundations of Christian Faith*. For a very full discussion of Rahner's varying uses of the term transcendental, and the way in which these relate to Kant, see Nikolaus Knoepffler, *Der Begriff "transzendental" bei Karl Rahner: zur Frage seiner Kantischen Herkunft*, Innsbruck: Tyrolia, 1993. I have not followed Knoepffler's terminology or analysis, though my own presentation overlaps with his to some degree.

6 Cf. "Reflections on method in theology," op. cit.

7 *Hearer of the Word* is interesting in this connection as a kind of transition. As we shall see in the next chapter, it contains both the broader and the narrower kind of transcendental argument, and is indeed structured by the interaction of the two.

8 In practice the distinction may not always be so noticeable, because materially the answers to this more restricted kind of transcendental investigation can often turn out to be similar to the answers to his earlier, philosophical ones.

9 Those classifying Rahner as a transcendental Thomist will in fact not infrequently take *Spirit in the World* to be the defining and most significant element in his work.

10 *Theological Investigations*, op. cit., vol. 11, p. 87.

11 Kant used the term transcendental argument "to signify an argument that transcends the limits of the proper employment of the understanding, hence an argument that is *not* a legitimate part of transcendental philosophy." (Paul Franks, "Transcendental arguments, reason and skepticism: contemporary debates and the origins of post-Kantianism" in Robert Stern, ed., *Transcendental Arguments: Problems and Prospects*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1999. Franks' paper, together with that of Bell in the same volume, usefully discuss the relation of current analytic discussions of transcendental arguments to their Kantian precedents.)

12 *Die Anthropogische Wende: Karl Rahners Philosophischer Weg vom Wesen des Menschen zur personalen Existenz*, Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1970.

13 There is also some overlap: in the chapter on sensibility in *Spirit in the World*, for example, space and time emerge as such conditions of experience.

14 The explanation here may have something to do with academic politics. Rahner was presenting his dissertation (i.e. *Spirit in the World*) to a director who might hold his Kantianism against him, and who could and did fail him; by the time he came to deliver the lectures that became *Hearer of the Word*, on the other hand, he was in a less vulnerable position.

15 P.F. Strawson, *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics*, London: Lowe and Brydon, 1959.

16 This paragraph applies somewhat less to Stephan Körner than to most of those who write about transcendental arguments. Körner is also a Kant scholar, and his refutation of transcendental arguments is formulated very carefully with Kant in mind.

17 Cf. "The impossibility of transcendental deductions," *The Monist*, 1963, vol. 51, 317–31.

18 Cf for instance "Transcendental arguments," *Journal of Philosophy*, 1968, vol. 65, 241–56. Judith Jarvis Thomson might also be mentioned in this context: cf. "II. Private languages," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 1964, vol. 1, 20–31.

19 Cf. "Verificationism and transcendental arguments," *Noûs*, 1971, vol. 5, 3–14, and "Transcendental arguments, self-reference and pragmatism" in P. Bieri, R. Horstmann, and L. Krüger (eds), *Transcendental Arguments and Science*, Dordrecht: Riedel, 1979. In the former Rorty draws on the work of Stroud and Thomson, and in the latter offers a line of argument similar to Körner.

20 For a criticism of Rahner's transcendental approach which arguably parallels Stroud's objection cf. Winfred George Phillips, "Rahner's transcendental deduction of the *Vorgriff*," *The Thomist*, 1992, vol. 56, and "The transcendental approach in philosophical theology," doctoral thesis, Yale University, 1989, 82–154. The parallel with Stroud is not explicit: Phillips arguments are developed independently.

21 Körner in fact initially suggests three possible ways in which one might think one could establish the necessity of a particular conceptual scheme, but the other two—comparing it directly with experience and examining it "from within" ("The impossibility of transcendental deductions," op. cit., pp. 320–1)—can immediately be seen to be impossible. I am deliberately giving a non-technical description of Körner's argument, omitting his painstaking definition of the notion of a categorical framework as well as other details such as those just mentioned. I am doing so partly so as to bring out the similarity between the positions taken by Körner and Rorty and partly to avoid clouding what are for our purposes the important issues.

22 Richard Rorty, "Transcendental arguments, self-reference and pragmatism" in P. Bieri, R. Horstmann, and L. Krüger, eds, *Transcendental Arguments and Science*, Dordrecht: Riedel, 1979, 83.

23 *Spirit in the World*, op. cit., pp. 57 and 60. The first quote, but not the second one, is taken from a part of the text which was added by Metz.

24 A similar line of argument can be found in *Hearer of the Word*. My phrasing is somewhat cautious here because this passage might also be construed in such a way that it would not seem to be a transcendental argument. I am inclined to include it among my examples, however, because Eicher takes it as *the* definitive example of a transcendental reduction.

25 *Spirit in the World*, op. cit., p. 79. In the original, what is for our purposes the

key part of the sentence reads "so ist beides als zugleich möglich nur dadurch zu begreifen, daß . . ."

26 *Spirit in the World*, op. cit., p. 142 (emphasis added).

27 Kathryn Tanner, in *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988, 20–4, suggests that not all transcendental arguments need to supply the necessary or unique conditions for something. In some cases it is enough to produce *sufficient* conditions, and in these cases there would be no need to enumerate and eliminate all possible competitors. At first sight this might seem, then, to provide for the possibility of a charitable interpretation of Rahner's philosophy. As is clear from Tanner's account, however, this more modest kind of argument can *not* be sufficient for what Rahner is in fact trying to do in *Spirit in the World* and *Hearer of the Word*. Tanner makes clear that establishing B as a merely sufficient condition for A may be fully satisfactory if one is trying to defend the legitimacy of A, but not if, as is the case here, one is trying to move *from* A, which is taken as given, *to* B, and in both works this is what Rahner is trying to do: he moves *from* the indisputable fact that we question and judge and so on *to* the claim that there is a *Vorgriff*. In *Hearer of the Word* Rahner is also, at the same time, doing something else, namely proposing the *Vorgriff* as a condition of the possibility of the reception of revelation (the presence of two related kinds of transcendental analysis in *Hearer of the Word* will be discussed more fully in the next chapter) and here Tanner's approach may be applicable, but this is not strictly speaking part of the *philosophical* case for the *Vorgriff*.

28 This problem is pointed out in connection with Körner's argument by Eva Shaper in "Arguing transcendentally," *Kantstudien*, 1972, vol. 63, 101–16.

29 Cf. Eva Schaper, op. cit., and Eckhart Förster, "How are transcendental arguments possible?" in Eva Schaper and Wilhelm Vossenkuhl, eds, *Reading Kant: New Perspectives on Transcendental Arguments and Critical Philosophy*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989, 3–20. It is not necessary for our purposes to determine who is in the right in this dispute.

30 This is at least the way his student, Stephen Wentworth Arndt, presents his approach in "Transcendental method and transcendental arguments," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 1987, vol. 27, 43–58.

31 I say "judgment" for the sake of simplicity here, but the argument could also be worked out if one substituted, for instance, "abstraction."

4 *Hearer of the Word* and the supernatural existential

1 It was however, as we shall see below, anticipated well before 1950.

2 Anne Carr, *The Theological Method of Karl Rahner*, Missoula: Scholars Press, 1977, 120.

3 Carr, ibid., p. 114.

4 At times Carr does seem to indicate a real tension between the supernatural existential and the earlier works, but this is a point she seems reluctant to push too far. Thus for instance she goes as far as to say that "the theological notion of the supernatural existential . . . signifies implicit self-criticism on Rahner's part with regard to his early writings," but from this she concludes no more than that "what is implicit in Rahner's philosophy of religion becomes explicit in several later essays" (ibid., p. 107).

5 George Vass, *Understanding Karl Rahner, Volume I: A Theologian in Search of a Philosopher*, London: Sheed and Ward, 1985. Patrick Burke, in *Reinterpreting Rahner*, op. cit., similarly writes in terms of shifts in emphasis over time.
6 William Dych SJ, *Karl Rahner*, Outstanding Christian Thinkers series, London: Continuum, 1992, 4.
7 *Spirit in the World*, op. cit., p. 408.
8 *Hearer of the Word*, op. cit., p. 27.
9 And hence that being is *capable* of being revealed in the word.
10 *Hearer of the Word*, op. cit., p. 141.
11 Cf. for instance Rahner's comment in the only footnote to the first edition, on p. 56 of *Hearer of the Word*, op. cit.
12 "Antwort (Ein Weg zur Bestimmung der Verhältnisses von Natur und Gnade)," *Orientierung*, 1950, vol. 14, 141–5.
13 The largest component of their arguments was actually often historical, to the effect that neo-scholasticism represented a distortion of the tradition it thought of itself as upholding.
14 "Concerning the relationship between nature and grace," *Theological Investigations*, vol. 1, 313.
15 There is of course nothing new *chronologically* speaking: the human being is different from how she *would have been*.
16 *Foundations of Christian Faith*, op. cit., p. 116.
17 Ibid., p. 129.
18 Ibid., p. 311.
19 It might be objected that the supernatural existential is not grace until it is accepted. Given that one speaks of grace *itself* as something which needs to be accepted, however, such an objection would meet difficulties.
20 Transcendental revelation of course does not *exhaust* the meaning of revelation for Rahner, since it must always be paired with categorical revelation, the making concrete in the world and in history of what is given at the transcendental level.
21 "Concerning the relationship between nature and grace," p. 297.
22 Ibid., p. 316.
23 Ibid., p. 311.
24 This point holds equally, it is perhaps worth adding, in respect of the original German: "Der Mensch soll diese Liebe, die Gott selbst ist, empfangen können . . . Er muß sie (also die Gnade, die Gottesschau) aufnehmen können als einer, der Raum und Weite, Verständnis und Verlangen nach ihr hat," *Schriften zur Theologie*, p. 338.
25 "Priestly existence," *Theological Investigations*, vol. 3, 245, 252.
26 The fact that in 1942 the idea of the supernatural existential is already present, in germ at least (the term itself is used in "Priestly existence," although only in adjectival form), also means that the supernatural existential ought not be presented, as it so often is, as an idea originating in the nature/grace debate. Its origin is rather in Christological considerations. Cf. Philip Endean, "Rahner, Christology and grace," *Heythrop Journal*, 1996, vol. 37, 284–97, for this argument, and Nikolaus Schwerdtfeger, *Gnade und Welt: zum Grundgefüge von Karl Rahners Theorie der "anonymen Christen,"* Freiburg: Herder, 1982, on whom Endean bases his argument.

27 *Hearer of the Word*, op. cit., p. 6. See also p. 56, text and footnote, for similar comments.

28 Rahner speaks of categorical, historical revelation as necessary because it mediates "the *original*, unreflexive and non-objective revelation historically," *Foundations of Christian Faith*, op. cit., p. 173 (emphasis added).

29 T. Mannermaa has argued in "Eine Falsche Interpretationstradition von Karl Rahners 'Horers des Wortes'" (*Zeitshrift fur Katholische Theologie*, 1970, vol. 92, 204–9) that "the word" in *Hearer of the Word* has been wrongly interpreted by Metz and others, and that Rahner's concept of revelation in the first edition of *Hearer of the Word* is *not* impersonal, objective, and propositionalist. As will become clear in my disagreements with Metz below, I do not stand precisely in this same "tradition of interpretation." I think Mannermaa is right that the Rahner of *Hearer of the Word* was not a propositionalist, although on the other hand I do not think "in the word" as it is used in *Hearer of the Word* can be glossed "in the supernatural existential." In any case, what is important for my argument is primarily Rahner's insistence that revelation is necessarily *historical*.

Mannermaa also maintains that Rahner was already, at the time of delivering the lectures on which *Hearer of the Word* are based, in possession of an early version of the notion of transcendental revelation. As evidence of this he points to a sermon given during the same period. Mannermaa may be right about this, but if he is then one must conclude from the evidence of *Hearer of the Word* itself, as we shall see, that Rahner had not conceptually caught up with his own insights in this area.

It is perhaps worth underlining that the arguments I am making in this chapter are not essentially temporal—it is not a question of distinguishing sharply between different *periods* in Rahner's intellectual life. I am suggesting that the different parts of his oeuvre do not always fit neatly together on a conceptual level like so many pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, but this does not necessarily mean that they *do* fit neatly together as part of a linear narrative of intellectual development—or at any rate, it is not part of my purpose to supply such a narrative, and my argument does not depend on one.

30 *Hearer of the Word*, op. cit., p. 136.

31 Ibid., p. 135: "We must forever refer back again to this certain exceptional point as to the unique point in human history at which God's revelation has originally emerged."

32 Ibid., p. 136.

33 Ibid., p. 155.

34 I shall be using the language of "later" here to describe theories of supernatural revelation and transcendental revelation as a kind of shorthand. It may be that these theories are not entirely "later" than *Hearer of the Word*, and that, as Mannermaa argues (see note 29 above), they were present in germ at a very early stage. It is nevertheless "later" that they are more fully developed and articulated, and come to take something like center stage in significant portions of Rahner's writings.

35 Metz does not, I think, distinguish between categorical revelation in general and special, "official" revelation.

36 Metz's editing of *Hearer of the Word* extends to the text as well, but most of the alterations significant for our purposes occur in the footnotes.

37 He details his unhappiness with the way Roman Catholic theology has treated, or failed to treat, the relationship between natural knowledge of God and revelation in a section of the second chapter.
38 What he feels the need to defend is rather that what he is doing does not *violate* this assumption.
39 *Hearer of the Word*, op. cit., p. 5.
40 *Hörer des Wortes*, op. cit., p. 21.
41 "All sciences are, in a true sense, anthropology, except for theology" (ibid., p. 145). This is of course ironical in view of his later frequent insistence on the reverse.
42 The fact that it may not be possible to thematize fully successfully the supernatural existential apart from historical revelation does not alter the situation: one could still never *contrast* what is given in this historical revelation with what is accessible in ordinary experience.
43 *Hearer of the Word*, op. cit., p. 18. By contrast, then, Rahner's own task will be to "show that God's self-revelation is possible in such a way that this revelation is more than the mere objectivation of humanity's subjective state."
44 *Hearer of the Word*, op. cit., p. 135.
45 Cf. chapter 7 for a discussion of their criticisms.
46 *Spirit in the World*, op. cit., p. 389.
47 Ibid., p. 288–9
48 Ibid., p. 301.
49 *Spirit in the World*, op. cit., p. 314 (my emphases in the second sentence).
50 "Nature and grace," *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4, 182.
51 Ibid., pp. 182–3.
52 *Foundations of Christian Faith*, op. cit., p. 129.
53 One ought also, of course, not to rule out the possibility that Rahner might *inconsistently* continue to use his earlier philosophical arguments.

5 The relation of philosophy to theology

1 One might also point to continuity on a slightly different level. Many of the motives and instincts underlying *Spirit in the World* and *Hearer of the Word* are the same as those which drive Rahner's later theology. We saw this to some degree in the previous chapter, and it is a point that could easily be developed further. To grant all this, however, is not to be committed to reading Rahner as a single project, nor to understanding his philosophy as logically undergirding his theology. The same concerns and instincts may drive a person to attempt different and incompatible projects at different points in his development.
2 This is to re-articulate a point made in the introduction: the question being put to Rahner's theology in this study is not one that he would have himself thought of raising. But as I argued in the introduction, that does not mean it is an illegitimate question.
3 "Reflections on methodology in theology," *Theological Investigations*, vol. 11, 87.
4 "Philosophy and theology," *Theological Investigations*, vol. 6, 73.
5 "This question is ultimately only part of a much greater theological question about the relationship between nature and grace," ibid., p. 72.

6 This is one of the points at which Rahner's theology draws close to Karl Barth's: "The statement that the covenant includes creation and that the latter does not simply precede the former in time, can be understood in a perfectly correct sense which does not destroy the real Catholic meaning of the distinction between nature and grace but rather makes it possible and indeed provides the basic reason for it," ibid., p. 76.
7 Ibid., p. 71.
8 "[T]he indispensable *ancilla theologiae* can be such only if it is at the same time *domina* in its own house," ibid., p. 75.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid., p. 77.
11 Ibid., p. 78.
12 Ibid., p. 79.
13 Thus, Rahner writes "in the present, universal order of salvation which actually concerns all men in all ages, that self-clarification of man's existence which we call philosophy, can certainly be 'pure' philosophy in a particular sense; namely in the sense that it does not take any of its material contents and norms from the official, socially constituted and hence ecclesiastical, special and thematised revelation; it is not true in the sense that the unthematic illumination of human existence, out of which it draws life and which it never adequately catches up on or can replace, *only* contains elements arising out of the *natural* being of man" (ibid., p. 78).
14 The semi-foundationalist may well hold that Rahner in writing his philosophy *always had in mind* a larger theological role for it: they might hold, that is to say, that the *telos* of the philosophy was always, from the start, theological. The philosophy as philosophy is nevertheless independent of the theology: one may not be able properly to describe Rahner's purpose in developing it without reference to theology, but the internal logic of the philosophy itself is that it does not require any such reference—it is argued independently of revelation, tradition, and magisterium. One is on this account a semi-foundationalist if one maintains that the theology depends on an independently *argued* philosophy, even if as it happens this was never an independently *motivated* philosophy.
15 If it makes sense of *more* than Christians want to make sense of this may of course be an argument against accepting it. One might think that Rahner is too successful in understanding what should in fact remain mysterious. Fergus Kerr hints at such a line of criticism in *Theology after Wittgenstein*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986, chapter 1.
16 Presuming, of course, that salvation is possible only by grace.
17 Cf. for instance "Anonymous Christians," *Theological Investigations*, vol. 6, 391–3.
18 One might still ask why an awareness of God must be a condition of *all* our knowledge (and all our willing): the argument so far has only established that such an awareness must be a condition of the possibility of *some* worldly knowledge or *some* finite choice. One might argue, however, that to make an apprehension of God a condition of the possibility of only some knowing or willing would in fact be to undermine the fundamental distinction between creature and creator. If some but not all of our dealings with the world brought with them an awareness of God, then the particular objects involved

in this subset of our dealings would become elevated above the rest, nearer to God than other parts of creation. That an awareness of God should be the condition of *all* our knowing, then, is appropriate in light of the fact that God stands as creator and sustainer to the *whole* of the world, and also in light of the infinite qualitative difference between creator and creature. Or so one might perhaps argue.

19 J.A. DiNoia OP in *The Diversity of Religions: A Christian Perspective* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1992) also offers a "prospective" account of salvation: "Rather than attributing an implausible implicit faith in Christ to members of other religious communities, theology of religions in a prospective vein contends that non-Christians will have the opportunity to acknowledge Christ in the future. This opportunity may come to them in the course of their lives here on earth or in the course of their entrance into the life to come" (p. 107). DiNoia's account is based on Lindbeck's but is filled out in a distinctively Roman Catholic manner through its appeal to the doctrine of purgatory.

20 *Foundations of Christian Faith*, op. cit., p. 1.

21 Ibid., p. 12.

22 Ibid., p. 10 (my emphases).

23 Ibid., p. 11.

24 If one assumes that given any two interpretations of existence it may not be easy to say which is the superior, then the difference between presenting a plausible interpretation of this sort and proving that one has the *best* interpretation may be significant.

25 It is perhaps worth making clear that a move away from justifiying belief historically need not entail a move away from the historical component of belief itself. One may have non-historical reasons for believing that something occurred in history. For instance, if the tomb being empty is central to Christianity as a whole, and Christianity as a whole successfully interprets my experience, then I may for this reason believe that the tomb was empty.

26 *Foundations of Christian Faith*, op. cit., p. 116.

27 Ibid., pp. 24–5.

28 *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4, p. 42.

29 A similar impression is created in "Anonymous Christians," *Theological Investigations*, vol. 6. Here even though the larger framework of the argument is quite clearly a theological one, and even though Rahner does not explicitly invoke a philosophical anthropology, when he comes to discuss what grace presupposes in the creature he still gives the impression that a prior philosophical knowledge is presumed: the creature must be, to begin with, a being of unlimited openness for the limitless being of God, therefore *that being we call spirit*. *Spirit signifies* that immaterial being prior to and going beyond every individual thing that can be known and grasped, that openness which is always already opened by the creative call of mystery which is and must be the ultimate and the first, the all-inclusive and the fathomless ground of all that can be grasped, of all that is real and all that is possible (p. 392).

"Spirit" seems from his phrasing to be something that the audience is expected to know about independently, something that has already been worked out before the theological reflection begins. (Cf. also "Theology and anthropology," *Theological Investigations*, vol. 9.)

30 *Theological Investigations*, vol. 18, pp. 173–4. A similar reference occurs in "Experience of self and experience of God." Rahner writes: "The unity which exists between experience of God and experience of the self as here understood could of course be made clear in a process of transcendental reflection . . . The transcendentality of man in knowledge and freedom, as it reaches up to absolute being, the absolute future, the inconceivable mystery, the ultimate basis enabling absolute love and responsibility to exist, and so genuine fellowship (or whatever other presentation we may like to make in fuller detail of this transcendentality of man) is at the same time the condition which makes it possible for the subject strictly *as* such to experience himself and to have achieved an objectification of himself in *this* sense all along. But this philosophical argument for the unity between experience of self and experience of God will not be pursued any further in the present context" (*Theological Investigations*, vol. 13, p. 126).

31 The nonfoundationalist might also point to comments Rahner made on a number of occasions *distancing* himself in one way or another from his own early writings. For instance, in a Preface to a book entitled *The Achievement of Karl Rahner* he seems to want to get away from too systematizing a reading of his work, writing "It goes without saying that today I would not always or necessarily say about certain subjects . . . what I said about them in previous years" (Louis Roberts, *The Achievement of Karl Rahner*, New York: Herder and Herder, 1967, p. viii.) He liked to insist that he was not a philosopher and did not imagine himself capable of being one (cf. for instance his Foreword to Peter Eicher's *Die Anthropologische Wende: Karl Rahners Philosophischer Weg vom Wesen des Menschen zur personalen Existenz*, Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1970). In an interview in 1974 he described *Spirit in the World* and *Hearer of the Word* as "lopsided works of my youth" and indicated that he did not like being stereotyped by them (*Faith in a Wintry Season*, New York: Crossroad, 1990, 22). At other points he distanced himself in certain ways from the whole attitude towards philosophy of his early years: "When I was young I was devoted to the study of philosophy through thick and thin. And at that time our whole attitude was colored by a belief in *one single* philosophy. Obviously we were aware (as men always have been) of the fact that in practice there were many philosophies. Indeed we studied the history of philosophy and there came to know of a whole range of the most varied systems and theories. And in systematic philosophy we took up a critical attitude towards these systems, deciding what to accept and what to reject in them. But in all this we were, after all, constantly, albeit tacitly, taking as our starting-point the belief that in adopting this approach we were touching more or less upon everything in the philosophy of the past and present alike which was of real philosophical importance; that we could and did draw from it into our own system everything that was true and valuable; finally that we were fully justified in rejecting the rest . . . Now I believe that the situation today is radically and insuperably different" ("On the current relationship between philosophy and theology," *Theological Investigations*, vol. 13, p. 71).

32 See, among others, "The pluralism in theology and the unity of the creed in the Church," *Theological Investigations*, vol. 11, pp. 3–23, or "The faith of the Christian and the doctrine of the Church," *Theological Investigations*, vol. 14, pp. 24–46, or the passage in *Foundations* discussed below.

33 As does, presumably, anyone else committed to a "world view."

34 The theologian "works on the basis of a world of ideas, from certain premises, and with certain philosophical preconceptions as his tools, yet is well aware that these are subject to historical conditions and the limitations of particular epochs. For the first time in the history of theological thought theology is not only conditioned by history, but is also aware of being so conditioned, and besides this is aware of being unable to avoid this conditioning." "Reflections on methodology in theology," op. cit., p. 74.
35 In a phrase of Gerald McCool. Cf. the Introduction to McCool's *A Rahner Reader*, New York: Crossroad, 1984, p. xxviii.
36 "Reflections on methodology in theology," op. cit., p. 69.
37 Ibid., p. 70.
38 Ibid., p. 73.
39 Ibid., p. 74.
40 Ibid., p. 75. From the context it is clear that this is not necessarily the *only* function of theology.
41 "[I]t is necessary for theology today, in this contemporary situation in which it stands and which it can no longer control, to develop *indirect* methods of achieving a justification of faith such as will satisfy the demands of the individual conscience on the question of intellectual truth," ibid., p. 75.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid., p. 77.
44 There is also a third lecture, in which Rahner takes up the theme of mystery in Catholic theology, but for our purposes it is enough to note that it, too, gives no explicit indication as to either its relationship with the first two or their relationship with each other.
45 Ibid., p. 90.
46 Ibid., p. 85. The philosophy here must be understood as an *internal* element of the theology, Rahner insists, and not as something alien introduced from without.
47 "Let us take as our starting-point the principle that *every* philosophy, i.e. every genuine metaphysics worthy of the name must proceed along the lines of transcendental philosophy, or else is not philosophy in this authentic sense at all; then it is of course possible to reply that every theology which really involves conscious reflection . . . is *ipso facto* at the same time that theology which involves transcendental philosophy—is, in other words, transcendental theology" (ibid., p. 85).
48 The definition of a transcendental inquiry quoted above was preceded by the following sentence: "Quite simply, therefore, and in a sense that is almost prephilosophical, we shall make the following statement" (ibid., p. 87).
49 Ibid., p. 87.
50 Ibid., p. 88.
51 Ibid., pp. 70–1.
52 The word "sphere" here should not be misunderstood. Rahner does not talk about the transcendental and the categorical as two completely distinct spheres lying side by side. Nevertheless, no matter how much must be said about the interaction between the two, on this account one never gets away from the fact that *there is* an element to our existence which precedes the historical and the conditioned.
53 The first method of reconciling the two strands in Rahner's thought could

also, it should be noted, suggest a resolution of the apparent conflict here, though of course a somewhat different one. Indirect methods, on this view, would be appropriate for those questions of justifying faith which were essentially historical. The proponent of such an approach might even suggest, in fact, that indirect methods provide a way around the need to solve complex historical questions by drawing attention to how far in any particular case the problem of justifying the intellectual honesty of faith can in fact be resolved at something like a transcendental level. The "first level of reflection" as it is developed in *Foundations of Christian Faith* is one kind of indirect method, and it could be argued that it functions in this way.

54 *What* the exact circumstances are which make transcendental theology particularly appropriate will become somewhat clearer below.

55 Cf. Healy, "Indirect methods in theology: Karl Rahner as an ad hoc apologist," *The Thomist*, 1992, 56, 613–34, for a similar suggestion.

56 It might be objected, and not unreasonably, that in the article on methodology discussed at length above, Rahner does in fact insist that all theology be transcendental, or at least that transcendental theology always needs to be a component of theology, and this is precisely what is being denied on the reading proposed.

What is interesting about the discussion of transcendental theology in question is the gradual slide it makes from what is relatively open-ended and uncontroversial towards considerably more specific and contestable claims. Rahner moves from an initial suggestion that any theology which is "consciously reflective" is *ipso facto* transcendental, to a simple definition which is, nevertheless, concretely reminiscent of Kant rather than other philosophers, to a fuller discussion of transcendental philosophy involving a significant dose of technical language, to examples of transcendental theology which are effectively pieces of his own theological argument. He does not himself appear to notice this slide in the discussion.

To read the article consistently with the larger shape of his theology one would have to say that while as the discussion progresses Rahner moves closer to a presentation of his own distinctive version of a transcendental theology, the claims for a universally necessary transcendental theology really attach only to the opening, and open-ended, conception of transcendental theology as any theology which is genuinely reflective and not merely a recitation of something given historically.

6 Defending a nonfoundationalist Rahner

1 "Dogmatic constitution on the Catholic faith," in Norman Tanner SJ, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, London: Sheed and Ward, 1990, 804–11.

2 In the original, '*cum recta ratio fidei fundamenta demonstret*,' ibid., p. 809.

3 Cf. the first chapter of Denys Turner, *Proving God*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming, for an argument along these lines.

4 Fermat's Last Theorem or the solution to the Four Colour Problem are now held to be known "with certainty," though for most of us, perhaps even including those who have the credit of proving these theorems, there could be no firm certitude about them if we did not trust the mathematical world's peer review process.

5 Cf. for instance George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1984, especially the final chapter, and Ronald Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology: The Gospel as Narrated Promise*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza's *Foundational Theology: Jesus and the Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1984), though not explicitly post-liberal, does contain an explicitly nonfoundationalist account of the justification of Christian belief (or, in his words, of "disclosing the meaning and truth of [the Christian] religious tradition" (p. 301)).

6 On such a view the distinction between theology and apologetics falls away. Even that which is most "internal," which is nothing but a study of the inner logic of beliefs, undertaken without reference to the objections of any particular unbeliever, may in fact function apologetically.

7 Both aspects of such an apologetic strategy are, it should be noted, historically particular: whether in dealing with specific difficulties and specific doctrines, or in attempting to bring out the credibility and attractiveness of Christianity as a whole, one is working in a particular intellectual environment where some strategies and not others will be effective. One can do something to bring out the credibility and attractiveness of Christianity within a particular culture, but cannot necessarily do so once and for all time.

8 I owe this term to conversations with Nicholas Healy, who underlines the internal side of Rahner's apologetics in his "Indirect methods in theology: Karl Rahner as an ad hoc apologist" (*The Thomist*, 1992, vol. 56, 613–34).

9 One might of course argue that people never have been *wholly* Christians, that the struggle between faith and unbelief, and the "impurity" of faith have never been absent. There is nevertheless a level at which the intellectual situation of many twentieth-century Christians is genuinely different from that of those who grew up in sociologically Christian surroundings, or so Rahner would argue.

10 "We are presupposing here the existence of our own personal Christian faith in its normal ecclesial form" (*Foundations of Christian Faith*, op. cit., p. 1).

11 This is not to deny that some theologians in fact pursue a foundationalist strategy for the purposes of an internal apologetic. It is arguable, for instance, that this is what Langdon Gilkey does in *Naming the Whirlwind* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969). The assumption is often that the only way one can justify the intellectual honesty of her faith to someone who already believes is to give an argument which could in fact persuade someone who was entirely "unbiased."

12 *Theological Investigations*, vol. 5. Largely the same material is to be found in the first section of the sixth chapter of *Foundations of Christian Faith*.

13 It is important to note that Rahner insists that one could also ask the question in reverse—whether an evolutionary world view fits into Christology—and that this indeed would be the "better and more radical" question ("Christology within an evolutionary view of the world," p. 157).

14 Ibid., p. 158.

15 Ibid.

16 Thus for instance Rahner begins the first paragraph with the statement "The Christian professes in his Faith that all things—heaven and earth, the material and the spiritual world—are the creation of one and the same God" (ibid.,

p. 161) and he begins the second paragraph as follows "This 'community' shows itself first of all—and at its clearest—in the unity of man himself. *According to Christian teaching*, man is not an unnatural or merely temporary composite of spirit and matter" (ibid., p. 161, emphasis added).

17 Published in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 11. The lecture was first given in 1968.
18 "Theological considerations on secularization and atheism," p. 181.
19 Ibid., p. 182.
20 Ibid., p. 183.
21 Ibid., p. 183.
22 "The foundation of belief today," *Theological Investigations*, vol. 16, p. 3.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid., p. 4.
25 Ibid., p. 9.
26 This is the approach Langdon Gilkey promotes in *Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God Language* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969) and David Tracy in *Blessed Rage for Order* (Minneapolis, MN: Seabury Press, 1975).
27 Hence the section entitled "From the experience of faith to the establishment of belief" is preceded by "The situation of belief today" and "The consequences of the modern situation."

7 The theory of the anonymous Christian

1 What is in fact best, and most in keeping with Rahner's own comments about the nature of his work, is to avoid construing his oeuvre as directed towards *any* single goal—he genuinely takes up a variety of questions. But if one were forced to single out one theme, then perhaps the desire to combat extrinsicism, discussed in chapters 4 and 5, would make a better candidate than the anonymous Christian.
2 A classic article in the sixth volume of the *Theological Investigations* requires only nine pages.
3 Cf. for instance Gavin D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2000.
4 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Moment of Christian Witness*, San Francisco, CA: Ignatian Press, 1994. (In German, *Cordula, oder der Ernstfall*, Einsielden: Johannes Verlag, 1967.)
5 Ibid., p. 101.
6 Balthasar suggests this characterization in an interview, in the context of a reference to a book by Georg Simmel, *Kant und Goethe*. The comment is quoted in Edward T. Oakes, *Pattern of Redemption: The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, New York: Continuum, 1994, 72.
7 "Current trends in Catholic theology and the responsibility of the Christian," *Communio*, 1978, pp. 78–9.
8 Balthasar in some sense acknowledges his unfairness to Rahner in the postscript to the later editions of *Cordula*, where he suggests that he was targeting those who made use of Rahner's ideas and language as much as Rahner himself.
9 The question of the similarity is taken up and dealt with thoroughly and carefully in Eamon Conway's *The Anonymous Christian—A Relativised Christianity?*

(Frankfurt and New York: Peter Lang, 1993). Balthasar eventually (for instance, in the later postscript to *Cordula*) adopts from Henri de Lubac a distinction between "anonymous Christians" on the one hand and "anonymous Christianity" on the other: one can accept that there might be individual anonymous Christians "who in one way or another have received insights originating from the Gospel," but not some sort of universal phenomenon of implicit, anonymous Christianity "spread everywhere in humanity." Exactly how this distinction will work is not easy to see, however. One interpretation of de Lubac's formulation is that it is in part a question of numbers: it is acceptable to suppose that here and there, in some exceptional way, individuals outside the church are affected by the grace of Christ, but not that this happens systematically and everywhere. This still leaves a puzzle, however, given Balthasar's fundamental optimism about universal salvation.

10 Henri de Lubac, *The Church: Paradox and Mystery*, Shannon: Ecclesia Press, 1969.
11 Ibid., p. 89.
12 Ibid. (my emphasis).
13 At the very least one can say this: the transformation brought about by the gospel is not on Rahner's account *as* profound as what de Lubac is looking for.
14 Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism*, London: SCM Press, 1983, 55–6 (emphasis added).
15 Quoted from Maurice Wiles, *Explorations in Theology*, London: SCM Press, 1979, 32.
16 *Christians and Religious Pluralism*, p. 56.
17 John Macquarrie, *Thinking about God*, London: SCM Press, 1975, 95–6.
18 Gavin D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluarlism: The Challenge of Other Religions*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986, 89 ff. D'Costa's views on Rahner and on "inclusivisim" have since moved on.
19 It should perhaps be noted that on the account I have offered, anonymous Christianity not only does not function as a debating point, but it is also not intended primarily as a way of soothing the other, something which would be essentially condescending. The point is not to reassure the dialogue partner that they are really all right, but rather to reassure the Christian that God is not unjust.
20 J.A. DiNoia, *The Diversity of Religions: A Christian Perspective*, Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1992.
21 *The Diversity of Religions*, ibid., p. 135.
22 Ibid., p. 134
23 Ibid., p. 135.
24 DiNoia's general theory of general theories of religion is interesting, but raises all kinds of questions. He seems to come very near to transgressing his own prescription that one should not offer a value for "m" when he describes it as the "existent or state of being on which the religious community's life is centered." (Arguably this is simply an abstracted description of God (existent) and Nirvana (state of being) and reflects the fact that the two religions he thinks about the most are Christianity and Buddhism.) In any case the insistence that one can generalize with respect to P but not with respect to "m" calls out for further explanation: in virtue of what does he insist on this asymmetry?

25 *The Diversity of Religions*, p. 136.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid., p. 138.
28 In his essay on Rahner in *The Modern Theologian*, DiNoia stresses that individual essays should be read in their own terms and *not* interpreted in terms of the "foundational" book-length texts, i.e. *Spirit in the World*, *Hearer of the Word*, and *Foundations of Christian Faith*.
29 William Placher, *Unapologetic Theology*, Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989, 144.
30 This point is made by Placher—"the study of various religions renders it highly implausible that they are all 'trying to say the same thing.' They make quite different claims about the ultimate nature of things, the destiny of human beings, and the kind of life we ought to try to lead" (ibid., p. 143)—and DiNoia, among others.
31 Once again an ethical objection along these or similar lines is put forward by both Placher and DiNoia.
32 With respect to the inclusivists DiNoia qualifies this point carefully. In the Preface he writes that "Inclusivists espouse some version of the view that all religious communities implicitly aim at the salvation that the Christian community most adequately commends, *or at least* that salvation is a present possibility for the member of other religious communities" (ibid., p. ix, emphasis added).

    What follows the "or at least" here in fact represents a far more modest proposition than what precedes it, for it pertains only to individuals and need not entail any interpretation of the doctrines of religious communities, of what the communities *qua* religious communities seek. Similarly, somewhat later in the text we find "The burden of inclusivist arguments is to demonstrate that salvation as Christians understand it is in some sense what most religions seek, *at least insofar as they express their adherents' grace-endowed present orientation to this aim*" (ibid., p. 38, emphasis added).

    In spite of these passages in which he seems to recognize that what is really central to the inclusivist position is an evaluation of non-Christian *individuals*, for the most part DiNoia in fact treats them as tied to an account of non-Christian *religions* and their aims.
33 One might say that on Rahner's account religions do not so much aim at salvation as aim to *express* salvation.
34 *Foundations of Christian Faith*, op. cit., p. 173.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid., p. 151 (emphasis added).
37 Ibid., p. 153.

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