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Interpreting Rahner's Metaphoric Logic

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Recent provocative reinterpretations of Karl Rahner's theology illustrate the hermeneutical challenge of retrieving his achievement for a new era. The spectrum of positions is exemplified by Karen Kilby, Patrick Burke, and Philip Endean. The essay proposes an alternative interpretive scheme attentive to Rahner's metaphoric logic.

A NEW GENERATION OF SCHOLARS is raising fundamental questions about the balance, coherence, and foundations of Rahner's theology. They are bringing new questions and theological contexts to his thought and bringing Rahner's thought to bear on questions that had not been at the center of his attention—if on his horizon at all. While many of his former students and disciples have been content to explain and interpret Rahner in his own terms, this new generation seeks explanatory schemes that are not at all or much less dependent on his own conceptual framework and technical vocabulary. In critically engaging Rahner's texts, they take apparent discontinuities seriously while eschewing both overly generous harmonizations and unsympathetic caricatures. Their readings of Rahner illustrate the hermeneutical challenge of retrieving his achievement for a new theological era.

The spectrum of reinterpretations is exemplified by Karen Kilby, Patrick Burke, and Philip Endean.¹ Others could be cited, but these three illustrate

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¹ See Karen Kilby, *Karl Rahner: Theology and Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2004), a revision of her dissertation, "The *Vorgriff auf esse*: A Study in the Relation of Philosophy to Theology in the Thought of Karl Rahner" (Ph.D., diss., Yale University, 1994); Patrick J. Burke, *Reinterpreting Rahner: A Critical*

both the breadth of interpretations and the concern that something is out of balance in conventional accounts. Kilby proposes to save Rahner's thought by a nonfoundationalist reading. While admitting that this nonfoundationalist reinterpretation does not square with some of Rahner's texts and explicit positions, she contends that his later theology is incompatible with the earlier philosophy. In any case, she argues, his theology does not need his philosophy as a foundation and is more persuasive without it.

Burke, at the other end of the spectrum, defends a thoroughly foundationalist reinterpretation, suggesting that "dialectical analogy" is the key to understanding how Rahner endeavors to keep the various polarities of his thought in balance both with each other and with the Catholic dogmatic tradition. In Burke's view, however, the philosophical grounding of Rahner's thought is fundamentally flawed. Balance is saved precariously only by Rahner's genius and personal fidelity to the Church. Ultimately, the flaws in his philosophical foundations make it difficult for Rahner to sustain the intended equilibrium—particularly in his later work and in its appropriation by "Rahnerians" who, Burke suggests, often lack Rahner's intellectual subtlety and loyalty to Catholic doctrine. This leads Burke, like Kilby, to challenge standard readings of key positions and texts.

By and large, Endean's reinterpretation coheres more closely with typical lines of Rahnerian scholarship. He argues that the questions about balance and foundations stem from misreading Rahner's contribution as simply and primarily a "liberal" corrective to an overemphasis on the authority of tradition and the institutional Church. That account, however, misses the fundamental "subversiveness" of Rahner's achievement. So Endean also argues that the key to interpretation requires a revisionary account with respect to conventional understandings of Rahner's project.

I propose an alternative explanatory scheme for reading Rahner. While my hermeneutic shares Endean's fundamental position on the originality of Rahner's thought, it looks for a more precise description of exactly how Rahner's metaphoric logic reframes the conventional theological fields of meanings and thus avoids difficulties such as those associated with either foundationalism or nonfoundationalism. This article is merely a sketch. Articulating an alternative reading would require its own book-length study. Likewise, the three commentators' extensive exposition and argumentation call for much thicker analyses than can be provided in an article.

Study of His Major Themes (New York: Fordham University, 2002); Burke, "Conceptual Thought in Karl Rahner," *Gregorianum* 75 (1994) 65–93; Philip Endean "Has Rahnerian Theology a Future?" in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner*, ed. Declan Marmion and Mary E. Hines (New York: Cambridge University, 2005) 281–96; Endean, "Karl Rahner im englischsprachigen Raum," *Stimmen der Zeit*, special issue on Rahner, 222 (2004) 57–74; and Endean, *Karl Rahner and Ignatian Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University, 2001).

Although much in their reinterpretations is contentious, they are not merely “cherry picking,” to use Endean’s colorful description of authors who pull out ideas from Rahner’s work with absolutely no regard for their grounding in his larger theological vision.² Rather, these readings arise from opposed ways of framing the interpretation. The framing is key to the projects. Hence my focus will be on the framing of interpretation—both their framing and Rahner’s—as key to moving discussion forward.

NONFOUNDATIONALISM AS INTERPRETIVE KEY

Karen Kilby reads Rahner through a strong nonfoundationalist lens. She argues that this corrects common misreadings and makes it possible to bring his thought more directly into conversation with influential currents in philosophy and theology in the English-speaking world. For the moment, my objective is to describe how she frames this reading rather than to contest her interpretation of particular texts and conceptions.³ My assessment of her strategy and the readings to which it leads will be elaborated in due course.

Kilby grants that foundationalism is primarily “a term of criticism, a way of identifying what is problematic in another person’s position.”⁴ In philosophy the issue is an overreaction to skepticism—an “excessive desire for certainty, for intellectual security and closure; it is philosophy overreaching itself.”⁵ In theology the difficulty is “the assumption that Christian beliefs, if they are to be justified, require a foundation in something independent of and prior to the Christian faith.”⁶ She admits that “one meets few self-described foundationalists.”⁷ Moreover, she concedes that her nonfoundationalist prescription applies a focus on Rahner’s work that was not his own. Nevertheless, she argues, the lens is appropriate because so many of the criticisms aimed at Rahner—and defenses—interpret his work either explicitly or implicitly in foundationalist or semifoundationalist terms.

The primary advantage of a nonfoundationalist reading, for Kilby, is that it unhinges Rahner’s theological insights from philosophical positions that have been the source of criticism and that she herself judges unpersuasive. Second, this reading accounts for shifts that she discerns between Rahner’s earlier philosophical work and his theology. Third, her reinterpretation

² Endean, “Karl Rahner im englischsprachigen Raum” 62, 73 n. 20.

³ I take this course because her interpretation of Rahner, as well as her responses to the standard Rahnerian interpretations, is driven by the framing. Disputes about the meaning of particular texts, philosophical conceptions, and theological notions are unlikely to progress without clarification of that larger framing of the issues.

⁴ Kilby, *Karl Rahner* 2.

⁵ *Ibid.* 5.

⁶ *Ibid.* 6.

⁷ *Ibid.* 2.

proposes to overcome inherent tensions and inconsistencies within his theology. Finally, she contends that Rahner's appeal to "pre-thematic experience," which is commonly read as playing a foundational role, "is best seen as something to which his theology concludes rather than as its supposed starting point."⁸

Kilby's construal of Rahner's theology as nonfoundationalist and her defense of its contribution entail a simultaneous and substantial critique: a fundamental criticism of his earlier philosophical work, a denial of an overarching philosophical unity in his thought, as well as affirmation of significant contradictions within his theology. This prescription puts her at odds with most of Rahner's critics and admirers, and also with many of his explicit statements. It is a provocative prescription, but it makes a very convincing case on behalf of Rahner for those in the English speaking world whose philosophical leanings are in the Analytic tradition or whose theological inclinations are Postliberal. The reinterpretation does this by excising objectionable parts from Rahner on the grounds that they are not essential to his mature theology and that his theology is more coherent and persuasive without them.

Kilby first examines Rahner's contention in his early philosophical works that a *Vorgriff auf esse* and consequent dynamism toward God is presupposed in the act of judgment. She provides a concise and rather standard overview of Rahner's argument that the recognition of particular beings in abstraction ultimately presupposes a grasp of being-as-such. She does "not offer anything like an exhaustive critique here,"⁹ but she assesses this argument in *Spirit in the World* from a philosophical perspective very different from Rahner's. Rahnerians would contend that this leads to egregious misunderstandings. In any case, appealing to fundamental doubts that Wittgensteinian thinkers would have about Rahner's line of argumentation, Kilby initially asks rhetorically whether he is "being unduly led by the suggestiveness of Aristotelian/Thomistic language of the matter 'limiting' the form and of the 'liberation' of forms."¹⁰ She objects on narrow grounds that the argument trades on a pivotal equivocation between the sort of "limitation" involved in "applying a general (universal) concept to a particular thing" (e.g., "This is a rabbit.") and a second sort of "limitation" involved in recognizing that any particular thing "is limited insofar as it is one thing and not everything."¹¹ Rahner's argument, she concludes, is "either a tautology or a non sequitur" but hardly a convincing foundationalist argument for an implicit *Vorgriff* of being-as-such.¹² Kilby then argues more broadly, on the basis of discussions among Analytic philosophers,

⁸ Ibid. 10.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

⁹ Ibid. 29.

¹¹ Ibid. 30.

that the very possibility of transcendental arguments is doubtful. The claim of such demonstrations to have found the one and only condition of possibility to explain a given phenomenon presupposes that all other possible explanations have been considered and found unwarranted. She contends that in principle it is impossible to imagine, let alone consider and rule out as satisfactory, all other possible explanations.¹³

Kilby adds an indirect and more explicitly theological rationale for a nonfoundationalist reading. She contends that the argument in *Hearer of the Word* and its conception of revelation are at odds with Rahner's later notion of the supernatural existential.¹⁴ In her unorthodox construal, a sharp either/or distinction runs through *Hearer of the Word* between revelation, which is communicated by God, and ordinary human knowledge, which is available through introspection and discursive reasoning. She interprets the supernatural existential as "a communication of God that is part of the ordinary human make-up, accessible, however imperfectly, to ordinary means of knowledge."¹⁵ If there is a transcendental supernatural existential that makes God accessible, she asks, then what real need is there for further historical revelation? On the other hand, if historical revelation is necessary—the position of *Hearer of the Word*—then on her view there can be no supernatural existential. She argues that the disparity between these two positions reveals a fundamental contradiction between Rahner's earlier philosophical argumentation and his later theological understandings of revelation and grace.

Kilby alleges that the same tension is evident in Rahner's explanation of the supernatural existential itself. She discerns two versions: a weaker one that sees the supernatural existential as only a potency for grace, and a stronger one that identifies the supernatural existential as such with grace and revelation.¹⁶ The stronger version, she contends, puts in question "the

¹³ Ibid. 43–48.

¹⁴ Karl Rahner, *Hearer of the Word: Laying the Foundation for a Philosophy of Religion*, ed. and trans. Andrew Tallon (New York: Continuum, 1994; originally published as *Hörer des Wortes: Zur Grundlegung einer Religionsphilosophie* (Munich: Kösel-Pustet, 1941).

¹⁵ Rahner, *Hearer of the Word* 62.

¹⁶ In the "weaker version" of the supernatural existential, Kilby reduces God's actually offered self-communication to a human potency. Her "stronger version" collapses the distinction between invitation and response. Her analysis misses the dynamic character of this process for reasons that I will explain later in the article. David Coffey argues against the notion that Rahner's later reflections on the supernatural existential are in conflict with the earlier writings. In an article published the same year as Kilby's book, he concludes that "one can say unhesitatingly that the only major change that occurred was one of context and perspective" (Coffey, "The Whole Rahner on the Supernatural Existential," *Theological Studies* 65 [2004] 95–118, at 110).

possibility of a purely philosophical analysis of human nature in the technical sense of the word." That, she believes, was the intention of the early philosophical works.¹⁷ On her reading of Rahner's later theological investigations, philosophy as such can have no genuine role: the presence of the supernatural existential would mean that philosophy could have "no way of knowing precisely what belongs to nature and what does not."¹⁸ Efforts by Johannes Metz in the second edition of *Hearer of the Word* and similar attempts by Rahnerians to harmonize these themes, Kilby argues, "can only lead to confusion" because the notions are based on "a different conception of the way revelation is related to the rest of human experience."¹⁹ Rahner contends in *Hearer of the Word* that God is free to speak or remain silent. Kilby alleges that this characterization is incompatible with the conception later in *Foundations of Christian Faith* that God is given in the supernatural existential and therefore is not silent.²⁰

For further evidence of the inconsistency, Kilby contrasts Rahner's emphasis on inescapable pluralism in philosophy and theology with his appeals to the transcendental. She regards transcendental arguments as efforts to overcome pluralism through religiously neutral, universally applicable, and logically persuasive demonstrations. One cannot have both transcendental arguments, in this sense, and incorrigible pluralism. She grants that many interpretations of Rahner are not foundationalist in such a strict sense but rather "semi-foundationalist." By "semi-foundationalist" she means interpretations that suppose that only certain key points of his theology, not the whole of it, are derived from and require the support of "an independently demonstrated philosophy."²¹ But even if transcendental arguments support only particular aspects of Rahner's thought, Kilby holds that this still relativizes his claims about the inescapability and extent of pluralism.²² Moreover, on such semifoundationalist readings, if Rahner's key philosophical demonstrations prove unconvincing, then "large swatches of Rahner's theology must collapse with it."²³

Hence Kilby argues for a nonfoundationalist reading that takes Rahner's *Foundations* as paradigmatic, interpreting it "as a work of theology from start to finish, which in fact contains no independent philosophy."²⁴ What looks like philosophy is "pure theology," that is to say, meant to be judged only on theological grounds according to whether it contributes to a convincing interpretation of Christianity.²⁵ This reading

¹⁷ Kilby, *Karl Rahner* 67.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 63. Although Metz's revisions in the second edition (Munich: Kösel, 1963) were endorsed by Rahner, the first edition provides a clearer indication of the genesis of Rahner's thought.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 68.

²¹ *Ibid.* 76.

²² *Ibid.* 94.

²³ *Ibid.* 76.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 79.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 81-82.

takes pluralism seriously, relativizing Rahner's allegedly transcendental theology as an ad hoc advocacy of one theological position among many. Kilby argues that there are sound theological reasons for advancing the *Vorgriff auf esse*, so use of the notion does not have to appeal to unconvincing philosophical demonstrations that also conflict, on her reading, with the notion of the supernatural existential. Moreover, she suggests, both notions and the consequent conceptual framework are not the philosophical basis for Rahner's theology but rather an understanding to which it concludes.

This reading, which reworks themes from Kilby's dissertation, exemplifies something of a tradition at Yale of advancing schemes for explaining Rahner framed in terms other than his own. There is much to applaud in these efforts. Reinterpreting Rahner from the outside, as it were, is essential if Rahner's achievement is to be retrieved for the present and future. Only a shrinking cadre of scholars is familiar enough with Rahner's Scholastic and transcendental interlocutors to engage explanations articulated entirely within those frameworks and specialized vocabularies. A broader reception, even among the current generation of theologians, not to mention a broader public, will require translation into new theological, spiritual, and practical idioms.

At the same time, this highlights the significant limitation of Kilby's reinterpretation. The development of her nonfoundationalist critique and her exposition of Rahner's thought are interwoven at every stage. I will return to her proposal in the concluding section where I will argue that the alleged contradictions are not inherent in Rahner's work but rather in the interpretive focus Kilby brings to it. Her account hinges on her narrow construal of philosophy as neutral and universally persuasive demonstration plotted exclusively at the intersection of foundationalist, semifoundationalist, and nonfoundationalist axes. In *Endean* I will find a persuasive argument against taking foundationalism in this way as a hegemonic interpretive key. I will argue, further, that there is an alternative way to interpret Rahner "from the outside" that does not require playing off the earlier philosophical work against the later theological investigations, and that avoids the dangers of foundationalism without requiring Kilby's strained readings of Rahner's texts—often against their presumptive meanings.²⁶

²⁶ Kilby, of course, while admitting that Rahner at some points "sounds more of a semi-foundationalist than a non-foundationalist" (*ibid.* 99), would insist that the consensus among Rahnerians about the presumptive meanings of his texts presupposes the foundationalist reading and coherence of the early philosophical and later theological work that her nonfoundationalist reading challenges.

DIALECTICAL ANALOGY AS INTERPRETIVE KEY

Patrick Burke reads Rahner quite differently than Kilby but still presumes a foundationalist axis of interpretation. He argues that "Rahner's theology is rightly recognized as a theological system because of the fundamental unity that runs throughout his writings."²⁷ Burke maintains that the key to this unity was elaborated in *Spirit in the World and Hearer of the Word*.²⁸ "Those who attempt to interpret Rahner without reference to these early philosophical writings or who dismiss them as unconnected to his later theology not only misunderstand him but also run the risk of distorting his remarkably nuanced and balanced system of thought."²⁹

At the heart of Rahner's "system," Burke contends, is "dialectical analogy." This is a term he uses, following his mentor John McDermott, to characterize—in a way at odds with most Rahner scholars—the foundational principle of Rahner's metaphysics, epistemology, and theology.³⁰ My first objective, as with Kilby above, is to describe how Burke employs this notion to frame his reinterpretation of Rahner. My assessment follows.

Burke and McDermott contend that the dialectical analogy manifests itself in *Spirit in the World's* description of human knowing as a dynamic hovering, or *Schwebe*, between the horizon of being and the sensible singular.³¹ The metaphysical grounding for this, they argue, is in humanity's very structure as finite, embodied spirit, which Rahner envisions as

²⁷ Burke, *Reinterpreting Rahner* vii.

²⁸ Karl Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, trans. William Dych (New York: Continuum, 1994; originally published as *Geist in Welt: Zur Metaphysik der endlichen Erkenntnis bei Thomas von Aquin*, ed. Johannes Baptist Metz [Munich: Kösel, 1957]).

²⁹ Burke, *Reinterpreting Rahner* viii.

³⁰ For a very different interpretation see Leo O'Donovan, "Karl Rahner, SJ (1904–84): A Theologian for the Twenty-First Century," *Theology Today* 62 (2005) 352–63, at 359 n. 23; here O'Donovan disputes this translation and interpretation of *Schwebe* as "quite contrary to Rahner's clear intention." While O'Donovan, in my estimation, clarifies the many ways Rahner uses the term "dialectic" and clearly lays out the central notions in Rahner that speak against Burke's reading, my concern here is to offer a further hermeneutical explanation about why Rahner is often misread by interpreters like Burke.

³¹ See the following by John M. McDermott: "A New Approach to God's Existence," *Thomist* 44 (1980) 219–50; "The Christologies of Karl Rahner, Part 1," *Gregorianum* 67 (1986) 87–123; "The Christologies of Karl Rahner, Part 2," *Gregorianum* 67 (1986) 297–327; "Sheehan, Rousselot, and Theological Method," *Gregorianum* 68 (1987) 705–17; "Karl Rahner on Two Infinities: God and Matter," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 28 (1988) 439–57; "Dialectical Analogy: The Oscillating Center of Rahner's Thought," *Gregorianum* 75 (1994) 675–703; and "The Analogy of Knowing in Karl Rahner," *International-Philosophical-Quarterly* 36 (1996) 201–16.

a “dynamic oscillating midpoint between God and the categorical world.”³² But it is not just a matter of human knowing hovering between spirit and matter. Burke postulates a further epistemological oscillation. As one hovers between spirit and matter, one also moves either toward their unification or toward their divergence and distinction. Burke identifies the former with the unifying dynamism of judgment and the latter with conceptual distinction and abstraction. He characterizes the latter as static since, as he understands it, concepts abstract from time and place. He calls “this structure *dialectical analogy* because through it Rahner oscillated constantly between unifying dynamism and conceptual distinction and therefore united dialectically while still holding in distinction the traditional antinomies of Christian thought—God and the world, spirit and matter, grace and nature.”³³ According to Burke’s interpretation, “this complex and nuanced structure gave Rahner’s thought remarkable balance and flexibility, allowing him to develop a theological system that was both new and dynamic and that also maintained all the distinctions necessary for orthodox Christianity.”³⁴ The greater part of Burke’s reinterpretation aims to show how Rahner employed dialectical analogy as a principle for grounding Christian doctrinal claims metaphysically and for explaining them theologically. He is particularly concerned to demonstrate, first, how the principle works in Rahner’s theology to preserve both the unity and crucial distinctions between, for example, the natural and the supernatural in creation and grace, the human and divine in Jesus, and the changeable and unchangeable in dogma. Second, he endeavors to expose significant tensions within Rahner’s thought that need to be “addressed by Rahnerian scholars if the complex and profound balance of his theological vision is not to be endangered or even lost.”³⁵

The problem with Rahner’s use of this principle, on Burke’s reading, is that it is not adequately grounded metaphysically. Although Rahner declares his commitment to both sides of the polarity, his defense for this assertion is at best “weak.”³⁶ This undercuts Rahner’s dialectical analogy itself and according to Burke is the source of critical ambiguities throughout his theology. The basis for Burke’s critique is worked out more fully in his article “Conceptual Thought in Karl Rahner.”³⁷ His analysis focuses on issues of Thomist metaphysics and is quite technical but for these reasons also somewhat more illuminating than his book. Burke situates his discussion in the context of the Church’s rejection of Modernism and nominalism.

³² Burke, *Reinterpreting Rahner* viii. Although “categorical” is frequently used in translations of Rahner’s work, it has connotations in English that are misleading. I will use “categorical” instead.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.* xi.

³⁶ *Ibid.* viii.

³⁷ Burke, “Conceptual Thought in Karl Rahner,” *Gregorianum* 75 (1994) 65–93.

He takes it as axiomatic that any relativization of conceptual knowledge undermines the validity of dogmatic affirmations. He contends that "traditional Thomists, following Cajetan, always maintained that man could know reality through his concepts; in this way they defended human reason from the challenge of nominalism."³⁸ Thinkers such as Jacques Maritain stressed "the concept of being as the basis of metaphysics" because "if being is conceptualizable, all reality can be known through concepts."³⁹ Burke insists that "even when Étienne Gilson maintained that Thomas arrived at reality through the existential judgement, he in no way put into doubt the validity of conceptual knowledge obtained by abstracting essences from sensible realities."⁴⁰

Burke contends that in both Maritain and Gilson the passive intellect, seen as a separate faculty, played a key role in this process of abstracting the essence from the sensible reality. In *Spirit in the World*, Rahner collapses the distinction between the active and passive intellects.⁴¹ For him, sensibility, which emanates from spirit, becomes the receptive faculty of human knowledge with the result that "conceptual thought is defined, not as the liberation of the 'pure form' from its material suppositum, but merely as the recognition by the active intellect of the sensibly perceived object as limited, repeatable, and hence universal."⁴² Moreover, Burke continues, Rahner insists that such abstracted concepts are always grasped only in reference to some concrete subject. As a result "the form/concept, for Rahner, is never fully 'abstracted' or 'isolated' from time or space, as it was in the Cajetanian tradition."⁴³ At this point it is evident that Burke envisions only two alternatives: either a nominalist claim that concepts have no objective referents or Burke's interpretation of conceptualist Thomism in which concepts grasp essences as "pure forms" that are entirely abstracted and isolated from time and space. He assumes that if Rahner does not ground concepts in some way analogous to conceptualist Thomism,⁴⁴ his efforts to forge an intrinsically balanced system cannot be saved

³⁸ Ibid. 86.

³⁹ Ibid. 80.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ In *Reinterpreting Rahner* 31–32 n. 84, Burke argues that Rahner's understanding of this distinction "has been criticized widely as inadequate and untrue to Thomas," citing his own essay and earlier work by Cornelio Fabro, Peter Eicher, Josef Speck, and his mentor McDermott.

⁴² Burke, "Conceptual Thought" 83.

⁴³ Ibid. 84.

⁴⁴ "By conceptualist Thomism is intended that interpretation of St. Thomas's thought which maintains that *esse* can be grasped in an analogous concept and consequently that all reality can be conceptualized. The tradition of Cajetan and John of St. Thomas most strongly defended this position" (John M. McDermott, "The Analogy of Knowing in Karl Rahner," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 36 [1996] 102–16, at 206).

from readings that collapse into a Modernist relativization of dogma. Burke suggests that Thomas Sheehan's "atheological" interpretation of Rahner illustrates the room left for later Rahnerians to take such paths that undermine the very possibility of objective truth claims and doctrine.⁴⁵

These difficulties, Burke tells us, are reaffirmed in *Foundations* where Rahner addresses the analogy of being. In conventional Thomism the ability to grasp the world in valid concepts provides analogies for conceiving the reality of God. Rahner, on the other hand, argues that our transcendental experience is original and primary. Burke quotes a crucial passage from *Foundations*:

Transcendence is the more original in relation to individual, categorical, univocal concepts. For transcendence, that is, reaching beyond towards the unlimited horizon of the whole movement of our spirit, is precisely the condition of possibility, the horizon and the basis and ground by means of which we compare individual objects of experience with one another and classify them.⁴⁶

Burke recognizes how innovative this notion of analogy is. Rahner emphasizes that "analogy, therefore, has nothing to do with the notion of a secondary, inexact middle position between clear concepts and those which designate two completely different things with the same phonetic sound."⁴⁷ Rather, analogy refers to this original tension between our categorial starting point and the incomprehensibility of God.⁴⁸ Burke interprets this analogy as corresponding again to the oscillation of the human spirit between experience of the concrete sensible and experience of God as holy mystery. But he wonders how the analogy can ever be adequately grounded. "Within this knowing process there seems to be no prime analogate. Man has analogous knowledge of God from his experience of earthly realities, and an analogous knowledge of earthly realities from his transcendental experience of God."⁴⁹ The result, Burke concludes, is that concepts are always and only approximations of the subject's experience of reality, "and it is, therefore, difficult to see how the concept has not been already and always relativized, existing only as a shadow of the reality it seeks to capture."⁵⁰ While Rahner and "the best Transcendental Thomists have always sought to maintain the validity of conceptual knowledge, lest dogma be relativized and Modernism reemerge," Burke doubts whether in the end Rahner adequately grounds the validity of conceptual thought

⁴⁵ See Thomas Sheehan, *Karl Rahner: The Philosophical Foundations* (Athens: Ohio University, 1987); and *The First Coming: How the Kingdom of God Became Christianity* (New York: Random House, 1986).

⁴⁶ Burke, "Conceptual Thought" 89-90, quoting Rahner, *Foundations* 72.

⁴⁷ Rahner, *Foundations* 72.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 73. See note 30 above regarding the use of "categorial" rather than "categorical."

⁴⁹ Burke, "Conceptual Thought" 91. ⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 92.

over against this stress on the transcendental, intuitive, nonconceptual grasp of reality.⁵¹

Each thematic chapter in Burke's *Reinterpreting Rahner* concludes its exposition with a summary of the tensions and ambiguities inherent in Rahner's positions. Most of this is derived from earlier critiques.⁵² What is original, but very much open to question, is whether oscillation between unifying dynamism and static conceptualization is the key to understanding what Rahner is up to in the instances cited and whether it is his "weakness" in grounding the latter that "accounts for the progressively stronger emphasis on the dynamic, unifying side of his thought in his later works."⁵³ Burke identifies this alleged weakness as both the source of serious ambiguities and "also the reason why so many commentators have pushed Rahner's system further than Rahner himself either went or would have gone."⁵⁴ Burke contends that "sensing the inconsistency of the conceptualizing moment within the knowing process and also the priority of the dynamism in his later development, these commentators all too often have interpreted Rahner according to only one side of his thought. In doing so, they not infrequently have lost the balance and nuance of Rahner's original perspective."⁵⁵

While I can see no reason to quarrel with the generalization that a central feature of Rahner is his consistent affirmation of the balance between our unity with and distinction from God, and the many theological variations on that motif, the crucial questions are *how* to conceive that balance, whether Burke's interpretation of it as a hovering dialectical analogy describes it accurately, and whether foundationalism is the most helpful interpretive key for approaching the issue. I mentioned earlier in my discussion of Kilby that Endean offers a persuasive argument against making foundationalism the primary interpretive lens for reading Rahner. I will consider this next. In my final section I will argue for a different conclusion and an alternative interpretive scheme.

SELF-DISCLOSING MYSTERY AS INTERPRETIVE KEY

Endean does not comment explicitly on Kilby or Burke, but he questions whether foundationalism is the most helpful interpretive lens through which to read Rahner. That way of framing the issue gets at a partial truth but misses the most significant feature of Rahner's achievement. Endean

⁵¹ Ibid. 66.

⁵² Burke's notes provide a hearty sampling of critiques that support his larger thesis of an ultimately destabilizing oscillation in Rahner's philosophical foundations.

⁵³ Burke, *Reinterpreting Rahner* xi.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

agrees that it has been common for both followers and critics to focus on Rahner's contribution to a liberalization in Catholic theology and ecclesiology in the years before and after Vatican II. He cites the assessments of Anne Carr and Hans Urs von Balthasar as typical: in their interpretations "Rahner appears as a man struggling to hold together two potentially competing values: grace present universally in human experience at large, and the external authority of the Church and its tradition."⁵⁶ Carr regards Rahner's approach as creative and as a renewal of Catholic identity; Balthasar regards it as confused and as a seductive threat. Like Burke on this matter, Endean holds "that a correct reading of Rahner depends on recognizing that this temptation [giving systematic preference to one value at the expense of the other] is to be avoided."⁵⁷

Unlike Burke or Kilby, however, Endean cautions against framing the interpretation of Rahner narrowly in terms of the struggle in the Church between liberal and conservative responses to modernity. One problem with that account is the implication that any theology that offers a more nuanced explanation of the limitations of authority and tradition is inevitably taken as advocacy of the cause ascribed to Liberal Protestantism and Catholic Modernism. Rahner's contribution to *aggiornamento* in Catholic theology tells only half the story. Contrary to Burke and Kilby, Endean argues that "it is an error to see Rahner's most characteristic insights as a response to the 'problems of the modern world.'"⁵⁸ Rahner was also conscious of "how 'modern' patterns of thought and affiliation distort the reality of Catholic, Christian, truth," and he endeavored to correct that tendency as well.⁵⁹ It was not just a matter of maintaining the dialectic between one side or the other, as Burke argues. Nor was it simply a matter of adjusting traditional theological notions to accommodate a greater appreciation of modernity's emphasis on the dynamic, the subject, and historicity, which Burke suggests was Rahner's weakness and which Kilby argues was his strength. In Endean's view, Rahner sought to subvert that very way of framing the question. "The conventional picture of Rahner obscures how he was trying to move Christianity forward from the deficient epistemology which gave rise to a sense of inevitable conflict between tradition and innovation."⁶⁰

Endean, citing his own study of Rahner and Ignatian spirituality and Schwerdtfeger's research drawing on Finnish Lutheran theologian Tuomo Mannermaa, argues that Rahner's biography indicates a different

⁵⁶ Philip Endean, "Has Rahnerian Theology a Future?" in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner*, ed. Declan Marmion and Mary E. Hines (New York: Cambridge University, 2005) 281–96, at 284.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 285.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 287.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* O'Donovan makes a similar case in "Karl Rahner" 352–54.

⁶⁰ Endean, "Has Rahnernian Theology a Future?" 287.

trajectory.⁶¹ Rahner's most creative theological insights developed when he was "a young man, in isolated academic and seminary settings."⁶² They emerged in reaction to the Scholastic theology of his professors, from his study of Scripture and historical theology, and from his formation in the *Spiritual Exercises*, although Endean cautions against overemphasizing the latter's influence.⁶³ He gives a lucid and concise summary of his conclusions:

Rahner's account of how we know God's grace privileges neither subject nor object. Our discoveries in knowledge are essentially interactive: the external object can affect us only if there is a disposition within us; and this disposition becomes conscious only when the object affects the human mind from outside. The fundamental reliability of the system is not directly accessible either through the subject or the object, but rather through a God who is source of both and works through both in ways that are quite mysterious.⁶⁴

This interpretation, in contrast to Kilby's and Burke's, emphasizes how Rahner's view subverts both poles of the foundationalist/nonfoundationalist scheme and any mediating semifoundationalist positions. Rahner's "epistemology of self-disclosing mystery" resituates the relationship between nature and grace, and between all the related antinomies of Christian faith. Endean likens the effect of this epistemology to the way Wittgenstein's critique of ostensive definition as normative subverted the conventional interpretation of how language refers.⁶⁵

To speak of a "purely philosophical" foundationalism as opposed to a "purely theological" nonfoundationalism, as Kilby does, is foreign to Rahner. He does not privilege one over the other. Nor does his understanding of the relationship between faith and reason, or grace and nature, oppose them in the manner suggested by Burke's conception of dialectical analogy. In that sense, but only in that sense, I would concur, and suspect Endean would, with the description of Rahner as nonfoundationalist. But this would not mean that the way to save Rahner from the difficulties of foundationalism is to reject his earlier philosophical work as foundationalist in favor of his later allegedly nonfoundationalist theology. Rahner's thought does not have to be saved by a nonfoundationalist reading because he never advocated foundationalism. Reinterpreting Rahner as a foundationalist, semifoundationalist, or nonfoundationalist distorts his position. Rahner's thought subverts that grid in favor of an alternative logic. On the one hand, he never proposed that theology depends in a

⁶¹ Ibid. 288; Endean references his *Karl Rahner and Ignatian Spirituality* 35–41, 56–59; and Nikolaus Schwerdtfeger, *Gnade und Welt: Zum Grundgefüge von Karl Rahners Theorie der "anonymen Christen"* (Freiburg: Herder, 1982) esp. 150–60;

⁶² Endean, "Has Rahnerian Theology a Future?" 287.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid. 288.

⁶⁵ Ibid. 290.

foundationalist way on an independent and prior philosophy. On the other hand, he consistently held that philosophy is distinct from theology and has its own integrity even as it plays a genuine role in theological reflection.

Likewise, while a “dialectic” of sorts does situate the human between the finite and infinite, the dialectic is not founded on a *Schwebe*—and particularly not if this is understood as a hovering back and forth between opposed poles (grace over against nature, the divine over against the human, the supernatural over against the natural, the transcendent over against the categorial, the eschatological over against the provisional, the unchangeable over against the changeable). These are not opposed poles. The destiny and meaning of creation are realized in the dialogue between humanity and God initiated by God’s mysterious self-communication in our midst, that is to say, by God’s self-communication in Jesus and his Spirit. Consequently the divine is ultimately mediated through Jesus in our very humanity with all its embodied, interpersonal, social, historical, and cultural density. This conception of God’s self-disclosing mystery highlighted in Endean’s reinterpretation privileges neither the sort of “purely” theological grounding that Kilby espouses nor the “purely” philosophical foundation Burke supposes.

METAPHORIC ANALOGY AS INTERPRETIVE KEY

Endean summarizes his reading of Rahner in terms based on “what Chesterton once said about Christianity: It is not that Rahner’s theology has been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and therefore not really tried.”⁶⁶ This is a colorful exaggeration. Endean has in view primarily misreadings of Rahner in religious journalism or by theological critics who have read Rahner superficially or who, like Balthasar, start with fundamentally different intuitions about the sort of witness that revelation in Christ makes possible and requires.⁶⁷ Such differences in fundamental intuitions and whatever dissimilarities derive from framing interpretations on modernity’s foundationalist/nonfoundationalist axis offer only partial explanations of the divergent readings. These explanations do not satisfactorily account for why commentators such as Kilby and Burke, who could hardly be described as merely “cherry picking,” come to conclusions that differ so much from each other, as well as from the interpretations of more conventional Rahnerians. Moreover, Kilby and Burke are just two examples. Others could be cited. Also to be explained are the significant divergences even among those whom Kilby and Burke apparently group together as Rahnerians, for example, between Thomas Sheehan’s reading

⁶⁶ Ibid. 282.

⁶⁷ See Philip Endean, “Von Balthasar, Rahner, and the Commissar,” *New Blackfriars* 79 (1998) 33–38.

and the influential interpretations in the English-speaking world of American Jesuits who studied under Rahner such as William Dych, Leo O'Donovan, and Harvey Egan.⁶⁸

Kilby, Burke, and Endean note other partial explanations for the divergence. Much of Rahner's writing had an occasional nature and was not always precise or consistent. Endean observes, for example, that when Rahner "was focusing on one particular problem, he had the habit of presupposing conventional positions . . . on other problems. This he could do, even when he himself had elsewhere criticized these conventional accounts radically. It follows," Endean concludes, "that a hostile critic could certainly find evidence to make a case for incoherence in Rahner's writings regarding experience and authority."⁶⁹ But the people in question, despite their reservations and critiques, intend attentive and in many respects sympathetic readings. The divergence of interpretations and the confidence with which they are advanced beg for a clearer and fuller explanation.

Endean is correct in suggesting that the divergence stems from readers missing the fundamentally subversive character of Rahner's epistemology of self-disclosing mystery. But Endean's understanding of that epistemology does not differ substantially from that of many, if not most, Rahner scholars. His reading is consistent, for example, with interpreters such as Dych, O'Donovan, and Egan. Why do Kilby and Burke miss what others take as so central? The incorrigibility of such divergent interpretations requires something more than yet another insider's exposition of Rahner's epistemology and its implications. It requires a more precise and constructive description of how Rahner's conceptual moves are subversive. How exactly does Rahner subvert and reframe the theological terrain? Why is the subversion apparently obvious to some interpreters yet missed by others? My intent in raising these questions is neither merely to defend conventional interpretations of Rahner nor to deny any value to alternative readings. My goal is (1) to explain how the logic of Rahner's thinking and particularly how specific steps in his argumentation enable such divergent readings, and (2) to propose some criteria for interpretation.

Put simply, I believe the divergence of readings lies in the metaphoric character of Rahner's thought. I could say "analogical" here as well as "metaphoric," but it will be important to understand how what I mean by

⁶⁸ William V. Dych, *Karl Rahner* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1992); Harvey D. Egan, *Karl Rahner* (New York: Crossroad, 1998). For O'Donovan see note 20 above as well as the influential anthology he edited: *A World of Grace: An Introduction to the Themes and Foundations of Karl Rahner's Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1980).

⁶⁹ Endean, "Has Rahnerian Theology a Future?" 286.

“metaphoric analogy” differs from what Burke and McDermott have in mind when they speak of “dialectical analogy.”

Metaphoric Analogy

The concept of metaphoric analogy that I am proposing is not derived directly from Rahner. I believe there is some virtue in this. I acknowledged earlier that, given the difficulty of Rahner’s thought and its specialized vocabulary, it is helpful to offer ways of explaining what he is doing that do not presuppose his framework from the start.⁷⁰ “Metaphoric analogy” is derived from Mary Gerhart and Allan Russell’s conception of metaphoric process.⁷¹ This conception offers a new way of describing a key aspect of Aquinas’s use of analogous language—at least as David Burrell interprets it.⁷² A brief digression explaining Gerhart and Russell’s conception and my application of it to Burrell’s reading of Aquinas will prepare for the further application of “metaphoric analogy” to describe the logic of Rahner’s thought.

Burrell suggests that to understand Aquinas’s thought, it is crucial to focus on how he uses analogous language. If we do this, he claims, it becomes apparent that Aquinas’s appeal to analogy at its core is not proposing any sort of direct comparison (whether of proportion, proportionality, or attribution) between some natural reality and God. Rather, Aquinas stretches our usual ways of speaking to lead us to insights we could not otherwise reach. For example, on Burrell’s reading, when Aquinas speaks of God’s simplicity, he is not pointing to some experience of simplicity in the natural world that is in some ways like and in some ways different from divine simplicity. The logic of his appeal is just the opposite. He observes

⁷⁰ By this I do not mean to suggest that Rahner’s distinctions and specialized vocabulary can be avoided or explained entirely from the outside. Rather, with the goal of elucidating the internal logic of his conceptual moves, “metaphoric analogy” provides a way of describing how Rahner uses his distinctions and specialized vocabulary.

⁷¹ Mary Gerhart and Allan Russell, *New Maps for Old: Explorations in Science and Religion* (New York: Continuum, 2001); and *Metaphoric Process: The Creation of Scientific and Religious Understanding* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University, 1984). For my appropriation of their theory see my “Analogy and Metaphoric Process,” *Theological Studies* 62 (2001) 571–96; “The Clash of Christological Symbols: A Case for Metaphoric Realism,” in *Christology: Memory, Inquiry, Practice*, ed. Anne M. Clifford and Anthony J. Godzieba (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2003) 62–86; “Reframing the Fields,” *Zygon* 9 (March 2004) 49–62; “Saving God,” *Horizons* 31 (Fall 2004) 239–71; “The Force of Analogy,” *Anglican Theological Review* 87 (2005) 471–86; “Rahner’s Primordial Words and Bernstein’s Metaphorical Leaps: The Affinity of Art with Religion and Theology,” *Horizons* 33 (2006) 276–97.

⁷² See David B. Burrell, *Aquinas: God and Action* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame University, 1979).

that we understand natural realities by locating them in terms of various kinds of composition (form and matter, essence and existence, act and potency, substance and accident, genus and species, etc.). Aquinas demonstrates that if God is to be what Christian faith confesses, then none of these conceptual approaches enables us to grasp God, at least in any way comparable to natural realities. To say that God is simple in this sense, it turns out, is to stretch toward an idea of simplicity that has no comparison to what we experience as simplicity in any worldly reality.

Of the composites just mentioned, the crucial couplet in Aquinas's talk about God is essence and existence. But in the case of God, Aquinas says the most extraordinary thing: that God's essence is *esse*, or being-as-such. The difficulty with this affirmation is that "being" is not a predicate in the normal sense. Analytical philosophers who seized on such use of "being" as a category error are correct that the rules of predication are broken in this statement. Aquinas is using an assertion (a claim that something is) as a predication (a statement that something has this or that quality). So again, this "analogous" use of language does not deliver a concept for God that in some ways is like and in some ways different from our concepts of natural realities. Aquinas is stretching language, breaking one of the most fundamental rules of discourse (the distinction between saying *that* something is and saying *what* it is) to intimate a divine reality that is beyond the grasp of any concepts.

We can go beyond Burrell's analysis, but in a way consistent with it, by noting that, on this reading, when St. Thomas says that God is simple, or that God's being is "to be," he affirms an identity and "forces an analogy" in an unexpected way between two known concepts. Given the conventional world of meanings the analogy is unwarranted. The consequence of forcing the analogy between the concepts is that it changes the field of meanings associated with both. If God is simple in the way suggested, then we are intimating a concept of simplicity that is like no other. I say "intimating," because the point is that we cannot locate what simplicity means here except by distinguishing how this meaning is different from any of the other ways that we might affirm simplicity of something. Likewise, if God is simple in this way, then "God" (and the concept "God") also must be affirmed in distinction from every other being (and every other concept). God cannot be thought of as another reality in the world or even outside it, except in a very different way. To say that God is simple in this way opens up very different conceptual space for thinking about what simplicity is and who God is. The logic of simplicity in this changed and new field of meanings is different from simplicity in the conventional senses of the term. It is likewise for the concept of God.

To make an affirmation that within a given field of meanings is unwarranted (i.e., breaks the rules) and that changes our larger fields of

meanings is an example of what Gerhart and Russell call metaphoric process. The process of forcing analogies creates the possibility to say things that could not otherwise be said. It creates new conceptual and logical space. They maintain that the same kind of thing happened in the history of science. Newton equated earthly and heavenly mechanics. Copernicus insisted that the sun is the center of our solar system, not the earth. William Thomson and James Prescott Joule asserted that heat is motion. Einstein affirmed that Galileo's concept of relativity applied not only to mechanical phenomena but to electromagnetic phenomena as well, leading to his metaphoric insistence that the laws of physics and the speed of light are the same for all observers regardless of their position or motion.⁷³ These affirmations, unwarranted in the science of the day, fundamentally changed the larger fields of meanings. These metaphoric affirmations created conceptual and logical possibilities for imagining, conceiving, and talking about things that before the metaphoric act were unavailable, and that even after it can seem quite counterintuitive. Hence, in speaking of "metaphoric process," Gerhart and Russell are not speaking of the sort of figurative language that we often have in mind when we speak of "metaphors."

It is also important to note that the forced analogy and alteration in fields of meanings in such cases are not necessarily at the level of concepts. In the instance of Aquinas's affirmation that God is simple, the shifts in fields of meanings are an implication of a move that Burrell characterizes as grammatical. Aquinas uses "simplicity," although grammatically a substantive, as shorthand for denying that any substantives, at least as we know them, can apply to God. Aquinas's affirmation that the nature of God is *esse* operates at a deeper level, since to display and speak of what is beyond language's grasp he forces an identity between the grammatical logic of asserting and the grammatical logic of predicating.

Rahner's Metaphoric Conception of Analogy

When Rahner speaks of analogy in the crucial text that Burke cites from *Foundations* and claims that transcendental experience is original and primary, he is making just such a metaphoric move. That there appears to be no prime analogue in the sense Burke expects is not an indication of a weak conceptual basis for the analogy Rahner is making between created reality and God. Rather, it is a clue that Rahner is making a logical move that Burke misses. It is a move that parallels Aquinas's—and for the same reason. It is an appeal to analogy, but not to the kind of analogy between concepts that Burke supposes. While Burke acknowledges that "transcendental Thomism

⁷³ Gerhart and Russell, *New Maps for Old* 23–27, 41–42.

stressed man's intuitive, non-conceptual grasp of reality,"⁷⁴ he takes this only as affirming greater emphasis on the nonconceptual (conceived as one side of a dialectic between the conceptual and nonconceptual) rather than as a radical reconfiguration of what constitutes knowing in the first place. But Rahner is not merely offering an apophatic reminder of God's transcendence. He holds that our concepts for God have a fundamentally different logical status than concepts about other realities. Even to use the phrases "other realities" or "concepts" with respect to God is misleading. God conceived as "the one ultimate measure cannot be measured" or grasped conceptually in the conventional senses of the terms.⁷⁵

Rahner explains this difference of logic in language reminiscent of Burrell's interpretation of Aquinas: since the ultimate measure "is the condition of possibility for all categorized distinctions and divisions, it cannot itself be distinguished from other things by the same modes of distinction."⁷⁶ That is why Rahner insists, in the quote cited by Burke, that analogy is not based on some similarity discerned in concepts but rather in our existential relationship to the incomprehensibility of God as Holy Mystery. We ourselves exist analogously in and through our being grounded in this Holy Mystery, which always surpasses us.⁷⁷ Our reflexive awareness of our knowing, loving, and freedom reveals a kind of anticipation or intimation (*Vorgriff*) of a "whither" that always exceeds our conceptual grasp. It is this reflexive awareness that enables us to speak of that incomprehensible Other, but without thereby grasping in concepts the One we anticipate. In other words, we can identify the "whither" of our transcendence in terms of our movement in knowing, loving, and self-commitment. We can speak of that Other toward which knowing, freedom, and love move as our "horizon," "term," or "goal." In doing so our concepts have not literally described or directly grasped God. For all that we truly grasp conceptually is ourselves and the openness of our spirit outward beyond ourselves toward an Other beyond our reach. Yet this does enable genuine predication.

"Analogical" for Rahner indicates this radically indirect and reflexive manner of predication. God "can be spoken of only in a qualitatively different kind of statement."⁷⁸ Like Burrell, Rahner argues with respect

⁷⁴ Burke, "Conceptual Thought" 66.

⁷⁵ Karl Rahner, "The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology," in *Theological Investigations* 4 (New York: Seabury, 1966) 37-73, at 51 [*Schriften zur Theologie* 4 (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1954) 51-99, at 70]. Hereafter I cite first the English translation as TI followed in square brackets by the volume and pagination of the German text as ST.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* 72-73.

⁷⁸ Rahner, "Science as a 'Confession'?" TI 3:385-40, at 391 [ST 3:455-72, at 461].

to the statement "God is" that it "is not a proposition which one can range alongside other propositions which constitute science" or ordinary language. Its logic is of an "utterly different kind."⁷⁹ This reflexive knowledge, he argues, is not secondary or inferior to our grasp of entities in objective concepts, but rather is the necessary condition of possibility for such objectifications—their flip side, as it were—and, in a sense, more original.

This fits Gerhart and Russell's conception of a metaphoric act because Rahner forces an analogy between two "knowns" that changes the larger field of meanings. The first known is what Rahner calls "transcendental knowing"—or more accurately, the transcendental moment of knowing: the reflexive, indirect presence-to-self and anticipation (*Vorgriff*) of the horizon of knowing, love, and freedom. The second known is the knowledge of objects or categorial moment in knowing. Rahner forces an analogy by insisting against conventional understanding that the primary model for conceptualizing how we understand "knowing" should be the transcendental moment rather than the categorial moment. The former is not a derivative, secondary, or inferior way of knowing. Forcing the analogy, that is to say, speaking of God as known transcendently rather than categorially, creates a logical space for talking of God, even though as Holy Mystery God is still beyond our grasp and so can be spoken of only in this indirect metaphoric way. The logic of God-talk is governed by the intrinsic reflexivity and indirectness of this metaphoric signification.

If this intrinsic reflexivity and indirectness is forgotten, one is liable to fall into the mistaken notion that transcendental reality is a transcendental "object" that can be known, spoken of, or described in concepts the way we conceptualize categorial objects. Rahner's use of terms like "Holy Mystery," "nameless whither," "horizon," and "asymptotic goal" are meant to call attention to this metaphoric shift in signification. Moreover, characteristic of metaphoric signification, affirming that God is transcendental reality effects fundamental and global changes in the available theological and metaphysical fields of meanings. The difficulty with Burke's reinterpretation is not that he considers and rejects this metaphoric move, but that he appears to miss it altogether. Much the same difficulty is inherent in Kilby's nonfoundationalist reading. Rahner's appeal to the transcendental is not aimed at establishing an entirely independent philosophical foundation for God-talk but rather at reconfiguring how we think and talk about God in the first place. Missing this metaphoric move skews not only his understanding of analogy but the fundamental logic of his thought.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

The Metaphoric Logic of Rahner's Thought

Many of the statements that Kilby and Burke interpret as paradoxes to which Rahner's thought inevitably leads are key articulations of the metaphoric logic at the heart of his philosophical and theological vision. To interpret his thought, it is necessary to trace how he employs these unexpected and "unwarranted" affirmations to open up new conceptual possibilities. In fact, the best Rahner scholarship often does this implicitly, but without attention to the metaphoric character of these conceptual moves. Focusing more explicitly on this metaphoric aspect of his moves and explicating their logic clarify what is going on in Rahner's thought that is often missed. Hence my argument that analyzing the metaphoric logic of Rahner's thought is a crucial interpretive step, one that explains why Rahner's meaning is misunderstood even in reinterpretations such as Kilby's and Burke's that aim to be conscientious as well as critical.

It would be possible to explore all the central motifs of Rahner's theology attentive to its metaphoric logic. For example, he opens up new conceptual space in epistemology with the metaphoric claim that "the supreme act of knowledge is not the abolition or diminution of the mystery but its final assertion, its eternal and total immediacy."⁸⁰ At the heart of his Christology are several crucial metaphoric claims: that "the closeness and the distance . . . of the creature and God do not grow in inverse but like proportion";⁸¹ that "Christ is most radically man, and his humanity is the freest and most independent, not in spite of, but because of its being taken up, by being constituted as the self-utterance of God";⁸² that symbol and analogy are based originally in the self-expressiveness of being rather than in any likeness between beings; and that there is an identity between the *Realsymbol* and what it symbolizes.⁸³ Then there is also the identity of the economic and immanent Trinity; the priority of uncreated grace over created grace; the identity of love of God and love of neighbor; and a sacramental causality that has retrospective consequences. Of course, recognizing such claims as metaphoric as such does not prove them true. But understanding how they purport to be true (that is to say, how they work logically and conceptually) is a necessary first step toward any further assessment of their truth and coherence. It would require a monograph, at the least, to explicate such metaphoric moves in Rahner's thought.

⁸⁰ Karl Rahner, "The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology," TI 4:41 [ST 4:58].

⁸¹ Karl Rahner, "On the Theology of Incarnation," TI 4:117 [ST 4:151].

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Karl Rahner, "The Theology of the Symbol," TI 4:224–28 [ST 4:278–83]; regarding the metaphoric moves entailed in Rahner's theology of the symbol see Masson, "The Clash of Christological Symbols."

The contrast just discussed between Rahner's metaphoric understanding of analogy and Burke's reinterpretation offers an illustration. In lieu of a comprehensive analysis, I offer two more.

Identification of God and Being-As-Such

I mentioned earlier that Burke regards Thomas Sheehan's "atheological" reading of Rahner as one that undermines the very possibility of doctrine and objective truth claims. I share reservations about Sheehan's interpretation but not Burke's conclusion that Sheehan's reading stems from a weakness inherent in Rahner's philosophical stance. Rather, Sheehan's reading is problematic for the same reason that Burke's is. He also misses, or at the minimum implicitly refuses to follow, Rahner's metaphoric logic. This argument, which I have made at length elsewhere, can be recapped briefly.⁸⁴

The issue centers around Rahner's identification of God and being-as-such. Sheehan probes the Heideggerian roots of this notion in Rahner and concludes that the "baggage" Rahner brings as a believer and from Thomism undermines the insights he derived from Heidegger. The evidence, however, indicates to the contrary that Rahner forced an identification of meanings that for traditional Thomist metaphysicians and strict Heideggerians are incommensurable. He stretched language and thought to create conceptual space to say something new. In identifying God as the Holy Mystery who claims us but always remains beyond our grasp, Rahner transforms both the conventional Thomist and Heideggerian fields of meanings. His is not simply the inherited neo-Thomist metaphysical conception of God. His is not merely a Heideggerian recessiveness that bespeaks only the claim of finite transcendence. Rahner's metaphoric handling of what he received from Aquinas and Heidegger enables him to extract from both of them (both against the conventional interpretations of their meanings and in continuity with them) a recognition of our movement toward a horizon that is always ahead of our grasp. In this way Rahner uncovers a "clearing"—an "openness"—within which it is possible to recognize that we are claimed by the mystery of God. Rahner, like Aquinas, handles the "baggage" his faith tradition offers, not as burdensome freight, but as a rich, supple vocabulary and grammar for theological reflection—a vocabulary and grammar capacious enough to appropriate insights from Heidegger and Aquinas, just as Aquinas found ways to appropriate both neo-Platonic and Aristotelian insights.

Where Sheehan reads Rahner as unfaithful to his Heideggerian roots, Burke, following McDermott, reads him as unfaithful to his Thomist and metaphysical roots. Sheehan and Burke presume, correctly, I think, that if

⁸⁴ See the extended argument for this in Masson, "Saving God."

narrowly interpreted, Heidegger's thought and Thomist metaphysics are incommensurable worlds of meanings. Kilby expresses similar reservations, noting that "almost everyone" who has examined *Spirit in the World* as a reading of Aquinas, "beginning with Rahner's own thesis director, has found it wanting."⁸⁵ Likewise she agrees that those who try to read *Spirit in the World* "as a fundamentally Heideggerian work . . . are forced to see Rahner as a very confused Heideggerian."⁸⁶ Sheehan and Burke also assume—but here I disagree—that the only alternatives are to adopt a narrowly circumscribed version of one or the other position, or to subsume one position into the other. From their respective perspectives they show (and also instantiate) that the latter options are doomed to failure. Rahner follows the alternative that they do not consider: he explores whether an original and different world of meanings can be created by forcing an unexpected analogy here. This is the sort of conceptual move characteristic of much of Rahner's thought that I propose as a clearer hermeneutical clue to its philosophical coherence and theological balance.

Missing and Rejecting a Metaphoric Move Not the Same

The question here, I stress, is not whether Sheehan or Burke would agree with Rahner's conceptual move. My claim is that neither has recognized it. Missing it and rejecting it are not the same thing, although I have little doubt that if Burke or Sheehan were to accept the clarifications I offer here, they would still object to Rahner's line of reasoning. But in that case, there would nevertheless be greater clarity about what is being rejected and on what grounds.

Let me explain a bit further. For those who have read Rahner closely and follow his conceptual moves, it is problematic and puzzling that other thoughtful commentators, such as Kilby, Burke, and Sheehan, come to readings so contrary to the presumptive meanings and conventional interpretations of Rahner's thought. For conventional Rahnerians such critiques seem more to misrepresent than to miss the point. Likewise, Kilby and Burke attribute to Rahnerians unjustified harmonization of ambiguities, as well as interpretations that allegedly go beyond anything Rahner himself would have countenanced. Sheehan, for his part, has no hesitation about going beyond Rahner in such ways. Still, missing the point is not the same as misrepresenting or rejecting a point. Metaphoric moves, because they make unexpected and uncalled for uses of conventional terms can easily be missed. It is not even necessary that those who propose a metaphoric affirmation are themselves explicitly conscious at a theoretical level that what they are doing is metaphoric. At the same time, however, reception

⁸⁵ Kilby, *Karl Rahner* 14.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

(although again not necessarily in a self-conscious way) is a crucial element in metaphoric affirmations. The new meanings and logical entailments are available only to those who are “alive to them”—who are able and willing to accept the reframed field of meanings. It is always possible that one might not “get the point.”⁸⁷

Rahner’s Transcendental Perspective: Metaphoric Rather Than Foundationalist

Not getting the point appears to be the case with Kilby’s contention that Rahner’s argument in *Hearer of the Word* precludes the notion of transcendental revelation in his later theology and that it conflicts with the notion of a supernatural existential. Her argument hinges on two claims: (1) that *Hearer of the Word* postulates a sharp either/or opposition between revelation and that which is accessible to human knowing; and (2) that the conceptions in his later theology of transcendental revelation and the supernatural existential entail that God is in fact accessible to human knowing, however imperfectly.

But Kilby’s argument for a sharp either/or opposition between revelation and what is accessible to human knowing misses a crucial distinction. The logic of “transcendental” applied to “knowledge” in *Spirit in the World* and *Hearer of the Word* differs in a significant way when applied to “revelation” and when presumed in the notion of the supernatural existential. In Rahner’s early philosophical works, his argument is not that some specific categorial experience presupposes and anticipates God as the nameless whither of knowing, willing, and loving, but that any categorial experience of human knowing, willing, and loving entails this dynamism of the spirit. Indeed, it is essential to understand that when Rahner talks about an experience of God, he is not talking about some specific experience but

⁸⁷ One sees this lack of reception played out frequently in discussion in popular culture of the Christian claim that Jesus is the Messiah or in the disputes over creation and evolution. Given the images current in the eschatology of Jesus’ day, affirming that God was victorious in the crucified son of a craftsman from Nazareth was wholly unexpected. In fact, most of the key eschatological images by which Jesus is identified in the Gospels have something of this metaphoric dimension. By ordinary logic he was not a victorious King of Israel, a Son of Man who descended gloriously from the heavens, or acknowledged by his people for vanquishing their enemies. To affirm that Jesus is the Messiah is to force an analogy between him and Israel’s expressions of hope and trust in God. This in turn requires a different understanding of God, Israel’s hope, and Jesus. Affirming that Jesus is the Messiah forces a thoroughgoing revision of the field of meanings operative in the narrative worlds of the Bible. In an argument between a skeptical historian and a fundamentalist Christian, both parties miss what is really at issue, just as debates between creationists and their secular opponents miss what is affirmed in the metaphoric affirmation that God is creator.

rather about a dimension that qualifies all experiences of the human spirit.⁸⁸ Strictly speaking, “transcendental” and “categorical” do not designate two different ways of knowing, willing, or loving but rather two sides of the same activity. There is never one without the other. One never escapes the necessity of conversion to the phantasms.

When this distinction is at issue, the scenario Kilby envisions applies. Rahner's argument for a transcendental knowledge of God as a nameless whither who could speak or remain silent entails that, no matter how unconscious and anonymous this knowledge, it is humanly accessible, at least in principle. That is to say, it is something given with human experience as such, and something in theory that humans could bring to consciousness at least imperfectly for themselves. But it must be noted that this transcendental knowing of God entails no self-disclosure of God. God known in this way is “grasped at” only as the nameless whither that could reveal itself or remain silent.

Something different is envisioned in Rahner's conception of the supernatural existential and the related notion of a transcendental revelation. A theological postulate (belief that Jesus' life, death, and resurrection constitute God's definitive self-communication) reframes the conceptual world of *Spirit in the World* and *Hearer of the Word*. In his theological works, Rahner is inquiring about the transcendental presuppositions of that revelation in history rather than about the transcendental presuppositions of categorical experience in general. In the philosophical analysis, “transcendental” and “categorical” specify inseparable flip sides of human experience as such. In the theological works, “transcendental” specifies the inseparable flip side of the particular events that constitute salvation history. The conception of a supernatural existential and transcendental revelation is possible only retrospectively because of what God has wrought in Jesus and the Spirit, and because this has been made known to us in Scripture and tradition. The mutual interaction between the transcendental and categorical still applies. There is no transcendental dimension or divine self-communication for us without the categorical events of salvation history and their culmination in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Transcendental revelation and the supernatural existential require those specific categorical events, not just any categorical events whatsoever.

Kilby suggests that a transcendental revelation and supernatural existential mean that God's self-communication is “part of the ordinary human makeup, accessible, however imperfectly, to ordinary means of

⁸⁸ For a helpful discussion of this see Rik Van Nieuwenhove, “Karl Rahner, Theologian of the Experience of God?” *Louvain Studies* 29 (2004) 92–106.

knowledge."⁸⁹ This suggestion presupposes that it might be possible to escape this interdependence of the transcendental dimension of God's self-communication and the actual historical self-disclosure itself in the categorial events of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. But for Rahner the interdependence is both ontological and epistemic. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection not only reveal God's self-communication; they constitute it. In this sense, apart from these events there can be nothing remotely like Kilby's "accessing" God's self-communication by ordinary means of knowledge, imperfectly or otherwise. In this sense, apart from those events, there is no divine self-communication. This is a crucial implication of Rahner's conception of the *Realsymbol* and what he later refers to as "sacramental causality" and "sign causality."⁹⁰ These notions, which presume Rahner's metaphoric assertion of a causality that has retrospective consequences, are already implicit in *Spirit in the World's* "metaphysics of the emanation of the faculties from the soul."⁹¹

So this difference in principle between the transcendental knowledge of God as the nameless whither of the human spirit and the transcendental revelation of God as self-disclosing mystery is implicit in the logic of *Spirit in the World* and *Hearer of the Word*. Moreover, the difference is not altered by the fact that it is God, not two different realities, who is intended in both cases. Nor is the difference altered by Rahner's subsequent argument, with the notion of the supernatural existential, that God's free self-disclosure must have been a factor in human existence from the beginning, and must be a factor in human existence generally. The first distinction provides a logic for talking about God apart from faith—that is to say, in a way that does not presuppose God's self-disclosure or knowledge of that self-disclosure as grounds for the discussion. The second distinction provides a logic that reframes the former in unexpected and even uncalled for ways in the light of God's self-disclosure and the Christian tradition's understanding of that self-disclosure. In this latter context, it can be said that grace and God's self-disclosure are at least anonymously accessible to all humanity—but still only in virtue of Christ. This conceptual move is metaphoric because it reframes things in such unexpected ways, opening up space in which it is possible to say both that there is no grace apart from Christ and that grace is universally available, at least as offer. This conceptual move is retrospective, or transcendental, because its reframing is possible only in light of what happened in Jesus and the Christian understanding of that. It is theological for the same reason.

⁸⁹ Kilby, *Karl Rahner* 62.

⁹⁰ See especially Karl Rahner, "The One Christ and the Universality of Salvation," *TI* 16:199–224.

⁹¹ See Gerald McCool, "Karl Rahner and the Christian Philosophy of Saint Thomas Aquinas," in *Theology and Discovery: Essays in Honor of Karl Rahner, S.J.*, ed. William J. Kelly, S.J. (Milwaukee: Marquette University, 1980) 63–101, at 77.

Rahner's appeal to the transcendental was aimed as much at clarifying how we think and talk about God as at justifying the legitimacy of such talk. His goal, as Endean explains, was never to establish an independent philosophical foundation for theology.⁹² But this did not mean that the role of philosophy must collapse into theology or be abandoned. The distinction Rahner proposed between the transcendental and categorial moments of knowing was properly philosophical, and he made it for distinctly philosophical, as well as theological, reasons. Clearly one can investigate, without appealing to faith or revelation, the question about whether the ineffable "whither" of human knowing, freedom, and love can be grasped as other realities are grasped, or whether all talk of this "whither" must entail a fundamentally different and more basic kind of reflexive, indirect, nonconceptual sort of "knowing." This latter solution, Rahner's distinction between the transcendental and categorial knowing, is radical because it reframes standard ways of thinking with the unexpected implication that knowing is at its roots, and most basically, nonconceptual, nonthematic, and nonobjective.

Robert Sokolowski has argued persuasively that making just such distinctions is precisely the task of philosophy.⁹³ Even in metaphysics, he contends, "the decisive philosophical move is made by distinctions, not by reasoning from effects to causes."⁹⁴ There is as much evidence for interpreting Rahner's appeal to the transcendental along these lines as there is for interpreting it as foundationalist in the narrow sense that Kilby eschews. One can argue philosophically for or against the distinctions Rahner proposes, contend that some are more plausible and others unpersuasive, or propose alternative distinctions. This activity is properly philosophical because it need not appeal to justifications grounded in religious beliefs. Moreover, making such distinctions even within a theological context is properly philosophical insofar as it prescind from justifications that appeal to religious beliefs. On the other hand, while distinctions reached through such efforts might play very helpful roles in theological reflection and contribute to conceptual clarification, consistency, and plausibility, there is no necessity to assume with Kilby that they intend to establish an independent foundation for faith. Nor is there any necessity to assume with Kilby that theological arguments "grounded" in such efforts at philosophical perspicuity and consistency are "grounding" in the foundationalist or semifoundationalist senses she eschews. She admits that Rahner was not consciously or directly addressing the issue of

⁹² See Karl Rahner "Philosophy and Theology," TI 6:71–81 [ST 6:91–103]; and "Philosophy and Theology," TI 9:71–81 [ST 8:66–87].

⁹³ Robert Sokolowski, "The Method of Philosophy: Making Distinctions," *Review of Metaphysics* 51 (1998) 515–47.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* 532.

foundationalism as such.⁹⁵ But the weight of her objections to *Spirit in the World* and *Hearer of the Word*, as unpersuasive and as contradicted by his later theology, hinges to a large extent on her premise that those works must be read as foundationalist. Hence her appeal to interpretations that are often against the obvious meaning of the textual evidence and against Rahner's intent are no more cogent than this problematic interpretive premise.

HERMENEUTICAL PRINCIPLES FOR A METAPHORIC READING OF RAHNER

Of course, asserting that Kilby's critique misinterprets Rahner's metaphoric moves as foundational does not attend to important questions she raises about the persuasiveness of his distinctions or about the cogency of his arguments for them. Likewise, I have hardly touched on the many issues that Burke presses Rahnerians to address. All that I have tackled here is a more preliminary question about how Kilby's and Burke's readings of Rahner's theology are framed. My point in arguing for an alternative interpretive scheme has not been to urge that there is only one correct way to read Rahner or assess whether his thought is balanced. Given the significant changes in historical, intellectual, and theological contexts, it is imperative to interpret his thought today in dialogue with new interlocutors and questions—to read him, as it were, from the outside and from multiple perspectives. My evaluation of the reinterpretations of Kilby, Burke, and Endean has been narrowly circumscribed. It intends an alternative reading that aims at doing justice to the integrity of Rahner's thought and at the same time aims to explain how serious interpreters can advance such different readings. The thrust of my suggestion can be summarized in five hermeneutical principles for reading Rahner:

- (1) Interpreting Rahner requires taking the metaphoric character of his thought into account and carefully attending to its logic. This is especially important when his conceptual moves reframe the conventional theological terrain.
- (2) Given the way Rahner transforms the many sources and inspirations of his thought and his extraordinary creativity in reframing the theological questions he investigates, a genetic interpretation should give a relative priority to the later work over the earlier. This principle contrasts with Burke's procedure which gives hegemony to Rahner's early philosophical work and neo-Scholastic sources for interpreting the direction of his thought. If an architect is constructing a revolutionary kind of building, one cannot tell in advance which structures will be foundational. In arguing for a retrospective hermeneutics I intend to assert, however, only a

⁹⁵ Kilby, *Karl Rahner* 100.

relative priority. Obviously genetic information—for example, Endean's point about the genesis of Rahner's epistemology in his early reflections on grace—can have immense significance for an accurate reading.

- (3) For the same reasons, relative priority should be given to an internal reading. This should not be an excuse for denying ambiguities in Rahner's work or its limitations, but it does caution against readings like Kilby's that are contrary to the presumptive meaning of what Rahner says, or readings that emphasize consistency with one or another text over principles of consistency that emerge from the whole of Rahner's work.
- (4) Significance should always be given to Rahner's performance as well as to his theoretical and methodological pronouncements. Rahner, for example, never worked out an explicit theory of analogy. In his published writings apart from a very early article, he says little about Heidegger. He said nothing explicitly about the sort of metaphoric logic I have attributed to his thought. In the first instance, interpretation must rely on attentive analysis of his actual appeals to analogy and uses of analogous language. In the second instance, interpretation must discern where Rahner follows Heidegger's lead and where he takes a different direction. In the third instance, the justifications I have offered for the metaphoric logic of Rahner's thought are based on analysis of how he argues rather than on any explicit statement in his arguments about metaphoric process.
- (5) The case I suggest for a retrospective hermeneutic of Rahner's metaphoric moves attentive to its internal coherence and actual execution should not be taken as an effort somehow to isolate Rahner's theology from the sort of theological and dogmatic criteria of accuracy and truth that must be applied to all theological claims. To argue that a conceptual move is metaphoric is not to prove it true or to dodge the question of truth but only to make a claim about how it purports to be true. So it is not illegitimate for Burke to ask whether Rahner's "emphasis on Christ's humanity really encompasses the traditional Christology of the Church, as he claimed it did." On the other hand, to answer a question such as this legitimately, it is crucial to make sure that Rahner's metaphoric logic has been taken into account and not simply missed or dismissed.⁹⁶

⁹⁶ Burke, *Reinterpreting Rahner* 155. By way of contrast, David Coffey's argument for what he calls the "theandric" nature of Christ demonstrates how the logic of Rahner's metaphoric move can be made more explicit and how a rigorous theological analysis can be advanced to justify its orthodoxy. See David Coffey, "The Theandric Nature of Christ," *Theological Studies* 60 (1999) 405–31.



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