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SAVING GOD

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ABSTRACT

Thomas Sheehan has made the "atheological" charge that "Christianity's original sin is to think it is about God," but there is a different lesson to take if attention is paid to the metaphoric dimension of the ways Aquinas, Rahner, Heidegger and even Sheehan himself think and speak about God. If there is an original fault from which Christianity must be saved, it has as much to do with the conception of what is happening when Christianity thinks and speaks, as it does with the conception of what this speaking and thinking is about.

"Christianity's original sin is to think it is about God."[1] That is what Thomas Sheehan charges in "From Divinity to Infinity," a provocative article which merits scrutiny because it articulates a fundamental theological challenge of our day.[2] The reputation of Sheehan's scholarship and success in engaging a broader public give reason to take his indictment seriously. He is a recognized authority on Heidegger's philosophy and advocate most recently for a paradigm shift in that field.[3] His study of the philosophical roots of Karl Rahner's theology is

[1] "From Divinity to Infinity," in *The Once and Future Jesus,* The Jesus Seminar (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 2000), 27-44, at 28; a paper originally presented in 1999 at a conference sponsored by the Jesus Seminar.

[2] Sheehan is a Professor of Religious Studies at Stanford University and Professor Emeritus in the Department of Philosophy at Loyola University, Chicago. An extensive bibliography of his work is available at: http://www.stanford.edu/dept/relstud/faculty/sheehan/Sheehan.html.

[3] "A Paradigm Shift in Heidegger Research," *Continental Philosophy Review* 32/2 (2001): 1-20; see also: "Geschichtlichkeit/Ereignis/Kehre," *Existentia (Meletai Sophias)* [Budapest] 11/3-4 (2001): 241-51; "Nihilism and Its Discontents," in *Heidegger and Practical Philosophy,* ed. David Pettigrew and François Raffoul (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 275-300; "Das Gewesen," in *From Phenomenology to Thought, Errance, and Desire,* ed. Babette Bablich (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1995), 157-77; and for a particularly accessible overview of Sheehan's Heidegger: "Heidegger, Martin (1889-1976)," *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* ed. Edward Craig (New York: Routledge, 1998), IV: 307-23.

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rigorously argued and penetrating.[4] His book on the historical Jesus and the origins of Christianity reflects the thinking and influence of the Jesus Seminar and, like his essays in the *New York Review of Books* over the years, has found a significant and receptive popular audience.[5]

A second reason for examining the article closely is that it raises questions which trouble people about the idea of a transcendent God and about the relevance of Jesus' message to our time and place. Sheehan makes a forceful philosophical case for a "radical social humanism" that, while affirming the experience of transcendence, is convinced this bespeaks not God but merely the endless open-endedness and mystery of human existence. Experience itself and reflection upon it do not get us to God. Nor in Sheehan's reading of the historical origins of Christianity is it necessary to postulate that Jesus' radical and liberating stance entailed getting a religious or metaphysical "fix" on God. This contradicts what Jesus stood for and constitutes Christianity's original sin. For Sheehan fidelity to Jesus is possible without the God he constantly oriented himself to. Failure to address explicitly and convincingly arguments such as these, as Anthony Godzieba has observed, is contributing to a "progressive eclipse" of much post-Vatican II Catholic theology.[6]

A third and most important reason for examining the article cited in note 1 is to clarify what is going on when "Christianity thinks it is about God." Sheehan concludes his article professing that it was something of a "sermon"—"nothing more than a very idiosyncratic enactment of one set of presuppositions"— and that his intention was "not to convince anyone to share these presuppositions but to suggest that each of us has some such story, a proto-anthropology and a proto-theology, mostly unthematized, which guides his or her interpretation of Jesus' message."[7]

[4]*Karl Rahner: The Philosophical Foundations* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1987). For reasons that will be elaborated here, however, I do not share his conclusion that Rahner's thought in the end carries too much theological baggage.

[5]*The First Coming: How the Kingdom of God Became Christianity* (New York: Random House, 1986; paperback edition: New York: Vintage, 1988) now available online at: http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/thomas_sheehan/firstcoming/index.shtml. The bibliography cited in note 2 above includes his many essays in the *New York Review of Books.*

[6]Anthony J. Godzieba, "Incarnation, Theory, and Catholic Bodies: What Should Post-Postmodern Catholic Theology Look Like," unpublished manuscript of his presentation in the Constructive Theology and Contemporary Theory Group, Catholic Theological Society of America (Cincinnati), June 6, 2003.

[7]"From Divinity to Infinity," 43. I share this conviction that each of us has a set of presuppositions that guide our interpretations and that will influence future appropriations of Jesus' message. Sheehan's essay itself, read with his other writings in mind, provides a compelling case study for this thesis because the article discloses the degree

There is, however, another deeper logic, or grammar, entailed in the "telling" of stories to which Sheehan's analysis does not attend. One has to get the genre right—the logic right—to get a story's point and its interpretive implications. Sheehan, with Heidegger's help, and sometimes with Rahner's, Aquinas's or Jesus', is very good at indicating something about "what" Christianity is not "intending" when it thinks and speaks of God. As Sheehan puts it provocatively, Christianity is not about "a transcendent God"—that is to say, not about the onto-theological God of metaphysical speculation. Sheehan is not so successful, however, at indicating what believers are doing, or about what he himself is doing, when they, or he, "think" and "speak" of God. Curiously, he, like Heidegger, continues to speak of God. His rationale for saving the concept of God, however, is not clear.

My aim in this article is to suggest that there is a different lesson that one might take from the ways Heidegger, Aquinas, Rahner and perhaps even Sheehan himself think and speak about God. If there is an original fault from which Christianity must be saved, it has as much to do with the conception of what is happening when Christianity thinks and speaks, as it does with the conception of what this thinking and speaking is about. Sheehan's article raises fundamental "questions about how presuppositions work and what they can do."[8] My reason for "saving" God has to do with more basic questions about how thinking, speaking and naming work and what *they* can do.

I. A Train Ride

"At the risk of being corny," Sheehan's sermon asks us to imagine ourselves on "a train ride."[9] The first leg covers what he calls finite or radical infinity, which he distinguishes from perfect infinity. Perfect infinity, for Sheehan, is the kind that we imagine God having.

> God. . .has everything together: he knows everything, controls everything, and has endless power. . . . As perfectly self-identical or coincident with himself—as Aristotle put it, an act of thinking that thinks of nothing other than of itself as an act of thinking: *noesis noeseos*—God already has everything.[10]

We humans on the other hand are finite. But our radical finitude entails a kind of infinity too. Unlike God, we do not have everything together. We "must search and question and learn endlessly, that is to say, infi-

to which his understanding of Heidegger's thought influences his account of Rahner's project and his interpretation of Jesus' message.

[8]Ibid., 32.

[9]Ibid., 33.

[10]Ibid.

nitely."[11] And, Sheehan adds, "these efforts are never over and done with. Like a mathematical infinity, you can always add one more on to the series, and one more again, endlessly, or at least until death."[12] This "radical humanism" entails an incompleteness. Human being is projected beyond itself into a future that never arrives. Sheehan notes that this has implications which will be unacceptable for many Christians.

> The only sin is to refuse to be the mortal, finite, and thus endlessly self-transcending infinity that we are. In principle there is nothing we cannot know and manage endlessly (and in principle completely), unbounded by divine restraints. There is no way in which God's perfect infinity could ever function as a brake on our finite infinity—and this is not some hybristic defiance of God's creative power but the very gift of that power.[13]

As a solicitous conductor, Sheehan recommends that those "who insist on putting an in-principle limit upon the human. . .mortal but infinite odyssey of intellect and will" might want to disembark at the next station.[14] So too, all "who think God has to be the final restraint on our finite infinity, that he is the wall we eventually will hit."[15] He admonishes those passengers to take their baggage with them. But he adds somewhat enigmatically that "those who believe in creation might want to stay on board" for awhile, since "that doctrine is precisely the tracks on which [Sheehan's] train is running."[16]

T. S. Eliot Express

On the next leg of the trip, Sheehan raises the question about our ultimate destination. Here he parts company with all those who "believe that the correlate of our finite infinity is the hidden God who stands beyond the horizon, drawing us onwards towards himself."[17] Sheehan's scenario has these passengers departing at track two on the T. S. Eliot Express.

> If you transfer to the T. S. Eliot Express you will soon notice that the people on that train have a tremendous advantage over us. Over there they believe that the correlate of our finite infinity is the hidden God who stands beyond the horizon, drawing us onwards towards him-

[11]Ibid.
[12]Ibid.
[13]Ibid., 34-35.
[14]Ibid., 35.
[15]Ibid.
[16]Ibid.
[17]Ibid., 36-37.

> self. The passengers over there are able to have it both ways. They get history now and eternity later; they operate on faith during the journey but attain to the vision of God once they pull into the final station. Most importantly they know that their train, while being governed to some extent by the secondary causality of nature, science, and technology (Newton's laws of motion, diesel power, and so forth), is ultimately being pulled to its final destination not by the secondary causality of the locomotive up front but by the final causality of God up ahead.[18]

This "up-ahead" model of God as our "correlate" has no place in Sheehan's vision of things. He is convinced that "all we can affirm phenomenologically, i.e., experientially is this: Every step we take forward is answered by the horizon moving a step backward."[19] Our endlessness bespeaks not God or our movement toward God but only the endless open-endedness of our self-transcendence. He grants that we may appropriately call this "receding horizon a mystery, but it is the mystery of ourselves as finite infinity. What the receding horizon makes available to us is our world; and what constitutes the receding of the horizon is our own finitude—not God, or God's drawing power, or our alleged progressive itinerary toward God."[20] But just at this moment, when it sounds as though Sheehan has no place at all for talk of God, he explains, "To say this is not to deny that God exists but to deny that the 'up-ahead' model is an adequate way to speak of God." Nor, he adds, is it a matter of the people on his track being "undecided whether the correlate of our movement is God or the endless humanization of the world."[21] For while he holds that "the goal we are moving towards is not God but more of our finitely infinite selves," he again protests, "To say this is not to deny that God exists. . ." but only to deny that forcing a choice between God or humanization of the world "is a responsible way to think about God's relation to us."[22] In fact, Sheehan's argument at this point is quite paradoxical. He emphasizes, "In the final analysis our endlessness bespeaks not God but our present mortality and our future death," but he also argues that since this "endless lack" at the heart of our transcendence reflects the "very laws of our creation," "it is out of a deep sense of piety in the divine creator that we should refuse the name of God—much less the name 'Abba'—for that emptiness."[23]

[18]Ibid.
[19]Ibid., 35.
[20]Ibid., 37.
[21]Ibid.
[22]Ibid.
[23]Ibid., 38.

Despite such enigmatic caveats about God's existence and the doctrine of creation, Sheehan anticipates that most passengers will transfer at this point to the T. S. Eliot Express. While acknowledging the allure of the Express—"the train of the God-up-ahead, drawing us onwards as he recedes into mystery"—Sheehan advances three reasons for not jumping on board.

First, people on the Express according to Sheehan have "gotten it all wrong about the directionality of human vision."[24] "Over there," he warns, "they promise us an illusory metaphysical glimpse into the Beyond as a supplement to our ordinary vision of this world—something that Aquinas has showed [sic] to be impossible."[25] That is why Sheehan thinks Aquinas would not be transferring to the other train.

> He argues conclusively that we human beings have only one legitimate line of vision, the view that our senses have of this world of physical data, which we make sense of by means of our spiritual faculties. According to Aquinas we cannot look over and beyond sense data—cannot, as it were, stick our heads out the train window and peer up ahead into the metaphysical future, catch a glimpse of God waiting for us at the final station—and then return, assured and comforted, to our seats and to our normal vision of the world.[26]

Sheehan's second reason for not switching to the other track is that the people on the Express misconstrue its destination.

> Not only is it true that the horizon keeps receding, but we can never peer beyond it. And least of all should we ever attempt a leap of faith over it—because we would only land in nothing. The horizon is something like the expanding universe that keeps offering us more worlds to explore; but we cannot reach ahead and touch some "membrane" that defines the edge of the universe of experience, much less cut through it and penetrate to the other side—because there is no such "membrane" and there is no "other side," only more and more of this side.[27]

What we find on this side is not God but more of ourselves, our worlds, and our lives. But the most important reason for avoiding the Express, Sheehan tells us, "is that it is very dangerous."[28] Working out precisely

[24]Ibid.
[25]Ibid.
[26]Ibid.
[27]Ibid., 39.
[28]Ibid.

what he thinks is the nature of this danger, however, is a bit difficult. The surface argument is clear enough. Sheehan notes that since we are intrinsically social, the open-endedness of our finite infinity is more properly conceived as an endless *co*-openness. Sheehan's "radical humanism" entails a "radically *social* humanism." Our open-endedness is dependent upon and interrelated to everyone else's. If, as he has argued, the correlate of our endless openness is not some transcendent "other" who is out there, but rather the ever receding possibilities of our human self-transcendence, then the correlate turns out to be the ever receding possibilities of the whole human species' self-transcendence.

> This is why it is dangerous for those who are riding the T. S. Eliot Express to call the correlate of human becoming "God." For if one does choose to use the word "God" to name the open-ended correlate of human openness, then "God" would be a name for the perhaps asymptotic but nonetheless immanent fulfillment of the whole human species across history. The word "God" would be a marker for the full unfolding of all the natural and social powers of humankind. Then we really would be in bed with David Strauss, along with Hegel, Feuerbach, and Marx, and wouldn't that be fun. . . .[29]

Feuerbach-Strauss Line?

But what about Sheehan's own train? Does it also follow the tracks that Feuerbach laid in the 1840s? That is how John Caputo reads him,[30] and the last two lines of the quotation plus the concluding ellipsis could be taken as confirmation of that interpretation. On such a reading, the Eliot Express is dangerous because believers will discover that somehow they have ended up in the sleeper car not only with Feuerbach and his friends but, for Caputo, *with Sheehan himself*! It is clear why from a believer's perspective that would be considered a danger and why Sheehan might jest about this leading to some fun. But there are difficulties with that reading.

First, at the beginning of the article, Sheehan criticizes Strauss's program to retrieve the "latent truth" of Christianity for not going far enough. It is not clear that Sheehan himself wants to be in bed with Strauss, Feuerbach and company. Sheehan's thesis, "that Christianity's

[29]Ibid., 40; the ellipsis is Sheehan's.

[30]John Caputo, "Undecidability and the Empty Tomb: Toward a Hermeneutics of Belief," in his *More Radical Hermeneutics: On Not Knowing Who We Are* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 225, a revision of an earlier essay: "Radical Hermeneutics and Religious Truth: The Case of Sheehan and Schillebeeckx," in *Phenomenology of the Truth Proper to Religion,* ed. Daniel Guerrière (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 146-72.

original sin is to think it is about God," is presented as today's necessarily more radical diagnosis.[31] The rhetoric suggests, at least, that Sheehan thinks his argument is on a different track, not merely a continuation or extension of an earlier line.

Second, I noted previously that Sheehan twice protests that his analysis does not argue against God's existence—or at least does not do so at the points cited. Although he clearly is arguing that the metaphysician's God-up-ahead is not the horizon we experience phenomenologically, there are numerous places where he continues to evoke a notion of God which seems more than simply Feuerbach's cipher for the human species as a whole: for example, when he avows that the "endlessness" of human transcendence "is not some hubristic defiance of God's creative power but the very gift of that power."[32] This and a number of other references in the article to God may be simply rhetorical tropes. But if Sheehan, like Feuerbach, merely is reducing theology to anthropology, then why make disingenuous appeals to the notion of God?

A third difficulty in reading Sheehan's comments as an endorsement of the Strauss-Feuerbach line is the thought-experiment with which he concludes the article.

> Now a thought-experiment: What if, while still declining to ride the Eliot Express, we nonetheless chose to call the correlate of our social co-open-endedness by the name "God"?[33]

If calling the correlate of our social co-open-endedness God simply reiterates Feuerbach's reduction of theology to anthropology, then why does Sheehan present this as a new experiment. He knows his philosophy too well. That hypothesis has already been worked over many times. But if his is not the Feuerbach-Strauss line, then he means to say that the Eliot Express is dangerous because its passengers will end up in bed with Strauss and Feuerbach *but not with Sheehan*! But how then is his line different from theirs? And what is the danger that lies in the tracks of both the Eliot line and the Strauss-Feuerbach line, but not Sheehan's? I do have some guesses about this, but before entertaining these, it will be helpful as a first step to examine the three thoughts entailed in Sheehan's experiment more closely, looking for indications of how it might differ from Feuerbach's hypothesis.

The similarities are hard to miss. Sheehan's "first thought" is reminiscent of Feuerbach's insistence that his primary goal was constructive: to promote the good of humanity against the dehumanizing cul-

[31]See "From Divinity to Infinity," 29.
[32]Ibid., 35.
[33]Ibid., 40.

tural and religious forces of the nineteenth century.[34] Sheehan argues likewise that in our situation it is the suffering and hardship of humankind that calls for our love, care, reassurance, respect and attention. Moreover, humans deserve this "for their own sake, not as a second-order reflux from another's love of God, and not as a mere stepping stone towards some higher good."[35]

Sheehan's "second thought" asks us to imagine what would result if God did something quite unexpected. "What if God, without reserve and without expectation of return, were to lend his name as a stand-in for, and a protection of, the intrinsic and unending fulfillment of the human community? What if God allowed his name to be used for the open-ended correlate of our socially co-open infinity?"[36] The move is a reverse image of Feuerbach's, but still appears essentially the same. Instead of asserting that God is our projection of our humanity, Sheehan suggests we imagine the initiative on God's part. Is the result different? In both cases "God" designates—in Sheehan's formulation—"the asymptotic unfolding of our social powers precisely as immanent natural powers."[37] Moreover, in both hypotheses the word "God" ultimately serves to protect humanity "against the ever encroaching forces of dehumanization" that in our day "seek to reduce us to something less than our full social freedom, to make us into (for example) mere consumers, or bean-counters, or 'profit-maximizing animals,' or the like."[38] Like Feuerbach, Sheehan's rationale for "saving the name of God" is that we thus will be "saving ourselves."[39] The effect on the concept of God in at least some respects also seems identical. With his thought experiment, "we would also have finally lost the God up ahead and up above, the Supreme Being who, even after the Incarnation, continues to rule history from beyond history, who reveals himself to us from his supernatural heaven, and then draws us as he drew his only begotten Son, onwards, upwards, and outwards to our transcendent fulfillment."[40] But Sheehan at the same time seeks to distance himself from the Feuerbach line, insisting this move is not a declaration "out of pride or hubris, that we have outgrown our need of the traditional God" or that we "no longer find him useful."[41] Instead, Sheehan—appealing to very explicit theological categories—explains that in his thought

[34]Karl Barth, citing Feuerbach's conclusion to the 1848 Heidelberg lectures, notes this emphasis in "An Introductory Essay," *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), xi.

[35]"From Divinity to Infinity," 40.

[36]Ibid., 40-41.

[37]Ibid., 41.

[38]Ibid.

[39]Ibid.

[40]Ibid.

[41]Ibid.

experiment "the very meaning of 'God' would have revealed itself to be *kenosis,* a self-emptying self-communicating God poured out without remainder, not clinging to the form of a transcendent divinity but emptying himself into the form of finite infinity, happily dying as transcendent in order to be reborn in the endless mortal struggle to live our co-openness in common, to endlessly enhance each other, to humanize nature and naturalize the human—not for any transcendent divine motive but for no other reason than itself."[42]

Sheehan continues, exploring the implications of his thought experiment for other key notions in the Christian scheme, reinterpreting "every category and attribute of 'God' as a marker of our infinite co-openness," just as Feuerbach had reinterpreted Christianity's theological doctrines anthropologically.[43] He warns that his reading might mean the "end of transcendence" and the "end" of "God." Still, he promises prophetically:

> But what a labor this would be. . . to take the highest name for God—the Holy, the Blessed One—and read it instead as "making holy, making blessed"—in a word, "anointing"—such that the title *messiah* or *christos,* "the anointed and blessed," would become an ontological designation of our finite infinity, and such that the doing of justice and mercy would become (to use the name the early Christians used for their way of living) the holy and blessed Way.[44]

But would Jesus keep a seat on Sheehan's imaginary train? Or would he jump to track two and catch the T. S. Eliot Express? Sheehan admits that he cannot speak for Jesus and that to pose the question about how Jesus would respond might "seem foolish and trivial, perhaps even offensive."[45] Sheehan, however, clearly thinks that sticking to his own "idiosyncratic" course is what fidelity to Jesus, experience, and self requires. That, he contends, is "not foolish or trivial (though it may turn out to be offensive)."[46] So what would any of this have to do with the historical Jesus?

> Imagine that only half of what we know of the Jesus of history were true: common table fellowship, overturning the dominant social hierarchy, consorting with outcasts, challenging the empire and the religious establishment. Then postulate that Jesus somehow found out that he had no Abba in heaven who gives us our daily bread,

[42]Ibid.
[43]Ibid., 42.
[44]Ibid
[45]Ibid.
[46]Ibid.

> forgives our sins, and promises to realize his heavenly kingdom on earth. On that premise, can you imagine Jesus giving it up, throwing it all over, eating only with the rich, joining the conservative establishment, reaffirming the old hierarchies, kissing the wrist of Rome? Did Jesus' message of the kingdom stand or fall with his faith in the transcendent God?[47]

There can be no doubting Sheehan's answer to the rhetorical questions. Jesus' radical and liberating stance does not require religious and metaphysical attempts to get a fix on God. Peter's Easter experience arose from the valid insight that Jesus' presence was not necessary for the enactment of what he preached. Peter's mistake was the further identification of Jesus with the Kingdom. The emergence of a new religion which claims to have a fix on God contradicts what Jesus stood for and this constitutes Christianity's original sin.

This brings us back to the question: how is this "line", or at least the bottom line, different from Feuerbach's? Can Sheehan's thought experiment and appeals to the notion of God be anything more than rhetorical tropes—disingenuous ones, at that? I find nothing in his talk for the Jesus Seminar or in his book on Jesus which directly or persuasively settles the question. As he notes, the former is little more than an outline of some presuppositions and the latter their enactment. To get a better understanding of how his presuppositions work, the declared objective of his essay, it is necessary to look at their more nuanced formulations in his interpretations of Heidegger and Rahner. There we can find some indications for making a surmise about why he thinks his position is not merely a continuation of the Feuerbach-Strauss line. We also will find there that the manner in which Sheehan himself speaks and thinks about these matters suggests the possibility of a third line which his imaginary account overlooks. I will argue that the platform for this third track is where we will find Aquinas, Rahner and much of Christianity disembarking to follow Jesus.

II. Philosophical Baggage

The guiding theme of Sheehan's monograph, *Karl Rahner,* is much the same as the essay we have been discussing. Although the book traces the philosophical foundations of *Geist in Welt* (*Spirit in the World*), placing Rahner's scholarly achievement is not its ultimate objective.[48] The concern is again anthropology and the focal question is about the reach of human transcendence. Sheehan sees two alterna-

[47]Ibid.

[48]Karl Rahner, *Geist in Welt,* 1st ed. (Innsbruck: Rauch, 1939); 2nd ed. expanded and reworked by Johannes B. Metz (Munich: Kösel, 1957). Corrected translation by William

tives: For Rahner, man is about God; for Heidegger, man is about *alētheia*.[49] Sheehans issue is the implications of these alternatives for us today. That is his motivation for putting Rahner and Heidegger into dialogue: "not to find out which thinker is 'better' than the other, but to find out what man is about;" not to determine "what a certain theologian and a certain philosopher have said," but to determine "what we might learn from them. We are not asking about Rahner and Heidegger but about ourselves."[50] Sheehan's expedition through Rahner's philosophical reflections concludes, as his Jesus Seminar paper had, that a strictly phenomenological analysis discloses no more than the mystery of human open-endedness as such. In addition, however, the dialogue between Rahner and Heidegger enables him to explain why the crux of this disagreement goes much deeper than the conclusions. The disagreement is rooted in the very questions asked.[51] To appreciate the difference in the two perspectives, it is essential to see that Sheehan and many other Heideggerian scholars are convinced that in asking a fundamentally different question, Heidegger transforms the whole context of the discussion and so, likewise, alters the understanding of any differences between conclusions.

Here lies a possible key to understanding why Sheehan may think his Heideggerian line follows a different track than Feuerbach's. Feuerbach, at least on one reading, still works within the framework of metaphysical "onto-theo-logy" which presumes that we can get a fix on the correlate of our endless co-openness. He answers that the correlate is not God but a projection of our own humanity. Such a reduction of theology to anthropology, while coming to a different conclusion than that of the believer, still presumes that we are positioned to pose and answer the question philosophically. It presumes that the horizon of human dynamism comes within our grasp. Sheehan's atheological appeal to Heidegger insists that we are neither in such a position nor able to get ourselves into one—at least not phenomenologically or philosophically.

Dych, S.J., *Spirit in the World* (New York: Continuum, 1994); CD Version (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1994). Hereafter: *GW*.

[49]*Karl Rahner*, 310.

[50]Ibid.

[51]I argued for the same conclusion but toward a different end and without such detailed and insightful analysis in "Rahner and Heidegger: Being, Hearing and God," *Thomist* 37 (1973): 455-88, and in my dissertation "Language, Thinking and God in Karl Rahner's Theology of the Word: A Critical Evaluation of Rahner's Perspective on the Problem of Religious Language," Fordham University, 1978.

Locating Heidegger's Topic

It is now much clearer than when Rahner studied with him that Heidegger's issue, *die Sache selbst,* is not the question of traditional metaphysics. This could almost be taken for granted—except that the scandal for Heideggerian-inspired philosophy, as Sheehan himself points out, is that both Heidegger and his commentators have had such difficulty articulating the all important "difference" from metaphysics in language accessible "to those who stand outside the circle of Heideggerians of the strict observance."[52] Moreover, although it would seem something of a dictum today that Heidegger sought to "overcome" metaphysics, it is not clear how well those outside the circle understand what is meant by this. Nor is it clear that many outside the circle are convinced he was successful. A few comments here will not resolve those problems, but Sheehan's efforts to locate Heidegger's topic by indicating five common misunderstandings point us in a helpful direction.

First, it is a truism but misleading to say that Heidegger's subject matter is "being." In the book on Rahner, Sheehan suggests that one could make a good case for retiring altogether references to "being" (*das Sein*) and the "question of being" (*die Seinsfrage*).[53] In a more recent essay, he unequivocally argues for dropping the terms.[54] The language is misleading, in part, because it serves as Heidegger's shorthand for the line of questioning that developed throughout his career: "from the question of the 'meaning' of being, to the question of the 'truth' of being, to the question of the 'place' or 'clearing' of being."[55] Heidegger's question is not about the "beingness" of beings or about the cause which makes them to be, or about the ultimate and highest instance of "beingness." Nor is he asking the transcendental question about the necessary conditions of possibility for beings or beingness understood in those senses. Rather, he is asking what he takes to be a prior question about what makes it possible to pose such questions about beings and their "beingness" in the first place. He is asking about the prior "clearing" required for such inquiry. His question is about that realm of disclosure or "movement which issues in intelligibility"[56] in which the distinction between beings and beingness is given.

A second risk for misunderstanding arises from Heidegger's use of the term *Sein.* Sometimes he employs *Sein* to indicate the matter of

[52]Karl Rahner, 281.
[53]Ibid.
[54]"A Paradigm Shift in Heidegger Research," 7-8.
[55]Karl Rahner, 281.
[56]Ibid., 283.

concern to him: namely, "the *prior disclosive movement* which issues in the beingness-of-beings."[57] But at other times he uses *Sein* to signify the standard concerns of metaphysics with beingness (*Seiendheit*) in its universal traits (ontology) or in its highest instantiation or cause (theology). Heidegger's effort to correct consequent misreadings leads him to adopt a number of strategies for clarifying that *his* question is about the prior "event": for example, by emphasizing that his topic is not "being" but the "ontological difference," by using the old German word *das Seyn,* by using a cancellation sign in the typing of *das Sein*, and eventually by dropping the use of the term altogether and speaking "instead of the 'meaning' or 'truth' or 'place' of beingness."[58]

The third cause of misunderstanding is the reification of Heidegger's topic which "invariably hypostatizes and inflates it into 'Big Being,' a metaphysical 'Something' (however ethereal) that lies beyond entities and that we allegedly 'pursue' and 'relate to'."[59] Sheehan criticizes Heidegger himself for lapsing into "ousiological" language that gives this impression. And Sheehan laments that among Heideggerians today "'being' has become a ridiculous metaphysical caricature, so freighted with confusion and absurdity that it cannot serve as a marker for Heidegger's focal topic."[60]

> In this aggrandized and reified form, Big Being ends up performing a host of extraordinary activities (all in the middle voice, we are told): it conceals itself and reveals itself, withdraws itself yet dispenses epochs of being, calls out to us while abandoning us to technology, wraps itself in mystery and yet occasionally pulls aside the veil to show Itself to select human beings—nowadays only to paid-up Heideggerians.[61]

Sheehan insists that if we hypostasize "being" and chase after it, we have lost the sense of Heidegger's question.

The fourth area of misunderstanding concerns Heidegger's "audacious claim" about the forgottenness of being in the entire history of Western philosophy.[62] Again, Sheehan emphasizes that Heidegger is not claiming that "being" in the usual metaphysical senses of the term has been forgotten. Sheehan readily grants the arguments of Thomists that "Aquinas raised metaphysical questioning to a new and indeed revolutionary height by his thematization of the primacy of esse, the

[57]Ibid., 282.
[58]Ibid., 155.
[59]"A Paradigm Shift in Heidegger Research," 7.
[60]Ibid.
[61]Ibid.
[62]*Karl Rahner,* 285.

existential act of to-be, over form and essence."[63] But this is still a metaphysical questioning after the cause and highest instantiation of beingness, not Heidegger's inquiry about the prior "event" or "clearing" which makes such thematization possible. Likewise, Sheehan acknowledges that Rahner's effort in *Geist in Welt* to reground metaphysics brings "onto-theo-logy to its very limits," but his achievement is still bound to the language and logic of onto-theo-logy. If Rahner's later emphasis on God as mystery moves in Heidegger's direction, Rahner never clearly escapes the ousiological conceptuality of the philosophical traditions upon which he draws. *Seinsvergessenheit*—Sheehan thinks "hiddenness of being" comes closest to Heidegger's meaning—does not derive from some alleged deficiency in philosophy or philosophers, or from some psychological or educational deficit, but arises from the "intrinsic unknowability" of the "opening up of openness" which is Heidegger's topic.[64] Sheehan strains in his effort to articulate this for those "outside the circle."

> Whereas we do in fact perceive and know entities and their modes of givenness, and whereas we immediately experience our transcendence, we do not know, cannot argue to, and (if we stay with our experience) cannot postulate any supposed "moving source" of that givenness and that transcendence. In fact, it is misleading to speak of "the giving of the givenness of entities," as if there were some thing or event behind the givenness of entities. Rather, the only thing man experiences in that regard is the sheer facticity of the "that-there-is-given" of the meaningful givenness of entities in conjunction with human transcendence.[65]

The overlooking or forgetting happens because of the intrinsic recessiveness of what his questioning seeks to bring from concealment (λήθη). The overcoming of metaphysics, consequently, does not mean the overcoming of the sheer facticity of this concealment. Nor could it be a matter of doing away, once and for all, with ones own or anyone elses overlooking of the hiddenness of beingif only because such overlooking is due not to a defect in man but to the very nature of being.[66] So what is the truth or bringing from un-concealment (α-λήθεια) which Heidegger seeks.

> Rather, the overcoming of *Seinsvergessenheit* means, negatively, ceasing to overlook the facticity/hiddenness of "being," that is, awak-

[63]Ibid., 286; see also 142-46, 152.
[64]Ibid., 285-88.
[65]Ibid., 287.
[66]Ibid.

> ening from the dream of metaphysics, which believes that thinking can trace beingness back to God. And positively, the overcoming of *Seinsvergessenheit* does not mean abolishing the facticity/ hiddenness of "being" but accepting it, "going along" with it by living out one's own (inexplicably evoked) transcendence.[67]

Heidegger's *Sache selbst* on this reading is thus no more and no less than what Sheehan referred to in the Jesus Seminar essay as our finite infinity, our endless open-endedness, the ever receding possibilities of our human self-transcendence. The Sheehan "line" pushes Heidegger's thought to its logical conclusion: "Our finitude is *die Sache selbst.* It does all the work. No more room for Big Being."[68]

This brings us to the fifth area of possible misunderstanding: Heidegger's famous "turn" (Kehre). Sheehan argues that there is much more to Heidegger's "turn" than a shift in language or style, but it does not amount to the emergence of a new topic. Rather it refers to the necessity of what Sheehan calls mans turn to *lēthē* and what Heidegger calls the transformation of mans being.[69] Human authenticity (*Eigentlichkeit*) consists in being-appropriated into a movement whose term cannot be grasped.

> That movement with its unknowable source is what allows men to grasp present beings, and the point is to let oneself go beyond beings-in-their-beingness in the direction of that unknowing. This release means that man must "reappropriate his appropriation," but without hoping to bring it under control. And this entails letting go of the securities of the substantial ego and its tidy world. To do that is to have "taken the 'turn'." Heidegger's thought is entirely at the service of such a transformation of man's being," and this is the only "turn" worth talking about.[70]

Moreover, taking this turn is what appears to distinguish Sheehan's "line" from Feuerbach's. It is dangerous for those riding the T. S. Eliot Express to call the correlate of human becoming "God," because doing so fosters the metaphysical illusion that in human transcendence we experience some "other" on whom we can get a fix. The believer calls the "other" God. Feuerbach reduces the "other" to humanity. Sheehan with Heidegger insists that there is no getting beyond "one's own (inexplicably evoked) transcendence." Experience and philosophical reflection upon it do not get us to such an "other." Nor does experience

[67]Ibid.
[68]"A Paradigm Shift in Heidegger Research," 17.
[69]*Karl Rahner,* 289.
[70]Ibid.

afford an intellectual grasp (intuition or conceptual knowing) of our inexplicable movement itself, as Feuerbach might be taken to hold. Although there might be similarities at the practical and political level between Feuerbach's humanism, a liberal Christian humanism, and Sheehan's radical humanism, the underlying visions of reality are headed off in very different directions. On this reading, it turns out that people on the T. S. Eliot Express and the Feuerbach line are burdened with much of the same philosophical baggage and so end up headed off together in the wrong direction. Sheehan's atheology, on the other hand, calls for a radical surrender to human transcendence which resists any onto-theo-logical attempt to hypostatize either humanity's inexplicable dynamism or its horizon. "The movement is governed by its own intrinsic recessiveness—a non-hypostasizable 'nothing' that always outrides every moment in the movement while, so to speak, 'pulling' the movement on."[71]

III. Theological Baggage

But then, what about Sheehan's idea that we are likely to find Thomas Aquinas and even Jesus on his train? The rationale for his suggestion is implicit in his analysis and evaluation of Rahner. In the 1940 article on Heidegger, Rahner does not appear to appreciate the difference between Heidegger's question and his own. He identifies Heidegger's problematic with the metaphysical inquiry about beingness in general and about God as the highest instance and cause of beingness. Rahner's position at this point, however, is not without some ambiguity. Sheehan analyzes a misquotation in the article of a seminal line from Heidegger's *Was ist Metaphysik?* which suggests an intimation of what Heidegger was after.[72] But the intimation at this point is at best only tacit. In the major works from this period, Rahner not only uses Heidegger's thought "to extort an existential transcendental turn out of Aquinas," he also "uses Aquinas to extort an affirmation of God out of Heidegger."[73] Sheehan summarizes the essential difference between their positions at the time this way.

[71]Ibid., 299.

[72]Ibid., 114, where Sheehan explains that Heidegger asked "*Warum ist überhaupt Seiendes und nicht vielmehr Nichts?*" which could be translated as "Why are there beings at all and not rather Non-being?" Rahner's quotation in French (there is no copy of an original in German) asks "Pourquoi y a-t-il de l'être au lieu du pur néant?" (Why is there being rather than pure nothingness?) which by conflating *Seiendes* with *Sein,* and Heidegger's "*Nichts*" with "pure nothingness" ironically approximates Heidegger's position.

[73]Ibid. The major works of the period, of course, are *GW* and *Hörer des Wortes,* first edition (Munich: Kösel, 1941), second edition reworked by Johannes B. Metz (Munich: Kösel, 1963); *Hearer of the Word,* translation of the first edition by Joseph Donceel, edited by Andrew Tallon (New York: Continuum, 1994); CD Version (Milwaukee: Marquette

> Rahner claims that Heidegger is carrying out a transcendental inquiry into the universal and ultimate structure of *esse*. Heidegger claims that he is trying to "locate" esse and all other forms of beingness within a larger horizon. Rahner will hold that a transcendental turn to the existential structures of human being can reawaken metaphysics in general and the affirmation of God in particular, i.e., "reground" them on a modernly acceptable "foundation." Heidegger claims that to follow out man's existential movement into its appropriation by the self-withdrawing, self-hiding mystery (*Geheimnis*) will not ground any ontology or theology, in fact will lead to an "abyss" (*Abgrund*) which, beyond pessimism and optimism, is the inexhaustible origin of meaningful presence. Rahner. . .claims that one can and indeed must—even if only implicitly—know this "mystery" as the divine. Heidegger will answer with a measured skepticism.[74]

Sheehan surmises that Rahner later came to appreciate the difference in perspectives, at least to some extent. He observes that from the 'sixties there is a "gradual de-emphasis" of earlier references to God "as pure and absolute beingness." Rahner's tendency from that time on is to speak more of God as "mystery" or "the holy mystery".[75] Sheehan wonders if one of Rahner's latest works, *Foundations of Christian Faith,* indicates an even more explicit shift away from ousiological language about God as *das Sein*. He cites Rahner's statement:

> We could, of course, follow the venerable tradition of the whole of Western philosophy, a tradition to which we are certainly responsible, and simply call it "absolute being" [*Sein*] or "being in an absolute sense" or the "ground of being" which establishes everything in original unity. But when we speak this way of "being" and the "ground of being," we run the deadly risk that many contemporaries can hear the word "being" only as an empty and subsequent abstraction from the multiple experience of the individual realities which encounter us directly. For this reason we want to try to call the term and the source of our transcendence by another name. . . . We want to call the terms and source of our transcendence "the holy mystery."[76]

Sheehan interprets Rahner here as suggesting "a formal homology between the Christian God and the *lēthē*-dimension of disclosure in

University Press, 1994). This translation is much more reliable than the earlier one by Michael Richards: *Hearers of the Word* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969).

[74]Ibid., 115-16.

[75]Ibid., 309.

[76]Ibid., quoting *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Seabury, 1978), 60.

Heideggers thought.[77] Once Rahner understands, as he had not in the 1940 article on Heidegger, that *das Nichts* was not pure nothingness but rather the withdrawing, self-hiding dimension of the disclosive process, Rahner feels "free to adapt Heidegger's thought to his own theological ends."[78] The difficulty, of course, is that Heidegger insists his own thought does not demonstrate a transcendence toward God as the unnamable mystery.

Sheehan grants that Rahner has the right to push beyond Heidegger's conclusions, but Sheehan also argues that in doing so "Rahner's language falls behind his insights."[79] The insight which prompts *Spirit in the World* is the "non-philosophical, non-metaphysical belief in the God of Christian faith."[80] But, from Sheehan's standpoint, Rahner articulates that insight in metaphysical language which is inadequate to the task because it already knows the answer it seeks. From the start it assumes the identification of the God of Christian faith with Aristotle's conception "of the divine as a self-intuiting intuition, a perfect self-coincidence in a unity of being and self-knowledge."[81] Consequently, Rahner's transcendental turn is "scored on a hidden premise: that man is an intuition *manquée,*" that is, on the assumption that the movement of our being finds its truth only insofar as it approximates the ideal state of God's perfect self-knowledge.[82] Given the premise, it is inevitable that Rahner will discover in human intellection a co-affirmation of God as the pure act of beingness, whereas Heidegger will see only an ever-recessive anticipation and movement.

Since Sheehan is convinced by his reading of Heidegger that Rahner's earlier "ousiological" language about God as absolute esse does not and cannot provide an adequate conceptualization of the dimension of mystery disclosed in the movement of the human spirit, he concludes that "Rahner's later shift from the language of beingness to that of mystery. . . represents more than a rhetorical strategy; it is rather a rending of the ousiological garment, a surrender of its language and viewpoint in order to attempt to find words adequate to an insight that transcends the metaphysical experience."[83] In Sheehan's scenario, however, it is not a clear or consistent break. He observes that Rahner continues "to speak now and again of 'infinity' and 'infinite actuality'," or of God as "a being (*Sein*) of perfect self-presence (*Bei-sich-sein*)" even though "he means the mysterious incomprehensibility of the God

[77]Ibid.
[78]Ibid., 312.
[79]Ibid., 313.
[80]Ibid.
[81]Ibid., 311.
[82]Ibid.
[83]Ibid., 313.

of faith."[84] Sheehan wonders: "Are these the careless slips of a theologian who is not fully aware of when his philosophy edges beyond ousiology and when it falls back into it?"[85] He concludes that "Rahner, it seems, is simply not concerned with this matter."[86]

Atheological Turn

To Sheehan this "indifference" is both the strength and the danger of Rahner's theology. "The strength lies in the insight, which comes from outside of philosophy, that man is claimed from beyond himself. The danger lies in the fact that Rahner's slips back into the grammar of ousiology may end up forfeiting the mysteriousness of the mystery that he believes in."[87] Sheehan warns: "An adequate language may not guarantee an insight, but it can protect it."[88] The insight of Rahner's that Sheehan contends needs such protection sounds at this point nearly identical to Heidegger's: that the whereunto (*Wohin*) of human transcendence "presents itself to us in the mode of withdrawal, of silence, of distance, of being always inexpressible, so that speaking of it, if it is to make sense, always requires listening to its silence."[89]

So despite the slips back into onto-theo-logical language, Sheehan sees Rahner's best insights affirming humanity's radical open-endedness. The essence of our humanity is this movement in ever-recessive mystery. Sheehan notes that in speaking of this movement (*Vorgriff*), even in the early work, Rahner prefers language which suggests a "going towards (*gehen auf*) or aiming at (*zielen auf*)" its horizon.[90] So the English translations which suggest that the *Vorgriff* is a pre-apprehension that "attains to God" miss the "brilliance of the revolution he brought about within ousiology and the breakthrough he made—partially and tentatively—beyond ousiology."[91] While granting that Rahner goes beyond Heidegger in claiming to discover here a movement toward God, Sheehan nevertheless concludes that "the purpose of Rahner's entire philosophical effort is to show that man has only one apprehension—of worldly things—and no prior apprehension (pre-apprehension, pre-grasp) of God."[92] That, recall, was the same thing he said about Aquinas. And this would appear to be the reason why despite their ousiological slips, Sheehan thinks that Aquinas—

[84]Ibid.
[85]Ibid.
[86]Ibid.
[87]Ibid.
[88]Ibid.
[89]*Foundations of Christian Faith,* 68; quoted in *Karl Rahner,* 314.
[90]*Karl Rahner,* 314
[91]Ibid.
[92]Ibid.

and I presume Rahner too—would not join the others switching to the T. S. Eliot Express. At their best, Sheehan would have us believe, Aquinas and Rahner know with Heidegger that our humanity is about *alētheia*. God appears precisely by not appearing, for man is the question to which there is no answer. The infinite horizon of human questioning is experienced as one which recedes further and further the more answers man can discover'."[93] The experience of God, consequently, "is not an intuition, grasp, or apprehension (prior or posterior). It is more a hope than it is a surety or a vision. It is more authentically found in the experience of the insecurity and groundlessness of experience than in the supposed sighting of the stable ground that holds everything together."[94]

Sheehan's "atheological" turn seeks to retrieve that insight and to free it from the devolving history in which "faith became a matter of theology."[95] That happened, according to Sheehan, when the God of metaphysics (the stable perfectly self-present and infinite knower, known in Greek as *theos*) was taken over by Christianity. Theology came to be construed as the guide to the fulfillment of humanity's desire in the contemplative vision of God. "The movement of man's desire, the experience of his incompleteness, had its goal set for it: the intuition of stable, eternal self-coincidence."[96] Sheehan suggests that although Rahner himself never traced such a devolution, "his philosophical and theological accomplishment points to an alternative, a way of overcoming it." Not surprisingly, that way is the one which we have seen Sheehan himself advocate: the return to the experience of the movement of our own open-endedness and the surrender to its recessiveness as always beyond reach. "Rahner has turned the discourse about God (theo-logy) back to a discourse about man (kineo-logy)."[97] Sheehan proposes to carry the retrieval of this "unsaid" insight to its logical conclusion.

> A philosophical effort to name the unnamable while leaving metaphysics behind might conceive of itself as an "atheology." This would be a mode of discourse (logos)—or better, a silent attunement to one's own movement (logos as kinesis)—that recognizes that the theos of traditional metaphysics and Christian theology is hardly adequate to the mystery inscribed in that movement. Atheology is a refusal of all claims to know already that the world is grounded in self-identical cognition. It radically calls into question the ontology

[93]Ibid., quoting *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 32.
[94]Ibid., 315.
[95]Ibid.
[96]Ibid.
[97]Ibid.

> of coincidence that rules from the noesis noeseos of Aristotle, through what Rousselot called "the intellectualism [= intuitionism] of St. Thomas," down to the being-as-*Bei-sich-sein* of Rahner. In Heidegger's terms, it would be a kind of thinking that is captured by difference rather than identity, by movement rather than stasis.[98]

It is noteworthy that Sheehan's atheology offers a critique of Heideggerians too. He thinks that they also "would do well to heed" the return to human experience which he "retrieves" from Aquinas and Rahner. They too need to overcome the "unfortunate tendency in Heidegger's own work, and in the work of his commentators, to hypostasize 'being' into an autonomous 'other' separate from entities and from man and almost endowed with a life of its own."[99] We have seen already that Sheehan does not find warrant in Heidegger's phenomenological analysis for expecting any kind of "advent of being" that would issue in a "secular beatific vision."[100]

Thus Sheehan's atheology finds the best insights of both Rahner and some Heideggerians at odds with their language. The question which remains is whether Rahner's central insights are at odds with one another. Is humanity about *alētheia*? Or is humanity about God? How far does Sheehan want to push this disjunction? It is clear that he thinks Rahner did not go the whole way.

> Rahners retrieval of the unsaid in Aquinas did not go far enough. Rahner recaptured a hidden theme in Aquinas that is finally only a transcendentalized Aristotelianism. But Rahner did not go deep enough into the pre-philosophical roots of Aristotle (I mean the archaic Greeks) or into the pre-theological roots of Aquinas (I mean Jesus). [101]

If Rahner had taken those further steps, it would "have meant a decisive move out of metaphysics as natural theology" conceived as "the rational search for the stable ground of all that is."[102] But how far then does this overcoming of metaphysics as natural theology go? Certainly Sheehan objects to *Spirit in the Worlds* argument for "regrounding a theological metaphysics on a transcendental-anthropological base, even a kinetic base."[103] Does saying this—that humanity is about *alētheia*—leave room for a conception of humanity that is about a "God" who is

[98]Ibid., 316.
[99]Ibid., 315-16.
[100]Ibid., 316.
[101]Ibid., 316-17.
[102]Ibid.
[103]Ibid., 317.

not identical with the "God" of metaphysics? Does it leave room for Rahner's notion of God as mystery, the hidden God of faith who always recedes from our grasp? Perhaps. Sheehan says that atheology "might harbor the possibility of belief."[104] He insists, however, that this belief could not be "a pre-vision of *theós*." Rather it must be "a resolute commitment, a surrender, to an unceasing exploration that constantly returns to where we started: the darkness of interrogative knowing."[105] But then it must be asked, does this "darkness of interrogative knowing" leave room for the God of faith? Sheehan is indefinite. On the one hand, he says only that atheology *might* harbor the *possibility*. On the other hand, he urges us beyond the unmasking of Aristotle and Aquinas to unmask the experience of Jesus. And this "one last move" leaves us according to Sheehan, "for better or worse, with ourselves: the radical question that finds no answer." Rahner's early work in *Spirit in the World* carries "too much presupposed, unquestioned baggage for such atheology." Sheehan concludes ambiguously that "for those who do not carry that baggage, the task of finding out who man is remains open."[106]

IV. Alētheia or God?

Is our humanity ultimately about *alētheia* or about God? Sheehan resorts to his image about the train ride, in part, because a short essay could hardly unpack all the baggage that would be necessary to get an adequate response off to a good start. I face the same limitation. In probing his analogy a little further, I merely intend to raise the possibilities of an alternative view and a different set of presuppositions.

Sheehan said that his concern in the essay was to demonstrate that each of us has a set of assumptions that guide our interpretations and influence our appropriations of Jesus' message. It is not necessary to say much more about that. Sheehan's book on Rahner does not disguise how its Heideggerian commitments determine what constitutes the retrievable in Christian philosophy and theology, and particularly in Aquinas and Rahner. While the essay for the Jesus Seminar does not explicitly lay out its presuppositions as Heideggerian, it does candidly acknowledge the degree to which they inform Sheehan's hypothesis about how the kingdom of God became Christianity. His historical arguments presuppose the philosophical baggage.

In excursions of the mind, unlike train trips, no one leaves their baggage behind. Sheehan himself, of course, is in part making that point in equating our baggage with the questions and presuppositions

[104]Ibid.
[105]Ibid.
[106]Ibid.

we bring to our understanding of the human journey. The train trip analogy, however, does not convey adequately the degree to which our baggage actually carries us along on the journey. And trains, busses, cars and planes are all part of our baggage. Our use of one vehicle rather than another has momentous consequences. It affects the speed of our ride, the route, the relative comforts, the impact on the environment, and even the destination—some towns are not served by trains; some cities have no airports. And how we use and adapt the vehicles may be even more consequential. The human being's incredible co-open-endedness is manifested in the ways these once naked animals cooperatively have taken on tools, progressively modifying them in ways that open new and amazing possibilities: the sandal, the wheel, the sail, the wing, the rocket, not to mention paper, pen, transistor, micro-chip and all the attendant conceptual and affective infrastructures. What we have done with such baggage effects how we go, where we go, and how far we go. It gives us new worlds and new horizons. It changes what humans can do and what they can become: from hunter-gatherer to space explorer, from shaman to scientist.

Rather than ask with Sheehan about the ultimate destination of the train, or about the passengers' assumptions about the directionality of human vision, or about their preconceptions about what will be found at the final station, suppose we first ask about what the passengers are doing with their baggage. How are they carrying it? How is it carrying them along?

Our language, meanings and understandings, of course, constitute much of the freight. This is the sort of baggage that we can never leave behind and that carries us along. Indeed there is no movement of the sort Sheehan has been talking about apart from such baggage. Mary Gerhart and Allan Russell have drawn attention to an important mechanism of that movement which they call the "metaphoric process."[107] Their understanding about what happens with such metaphoric meanings suggests that there might be something Sheehan overlooks about how Aquinas and Rahner handle their baggage—about how, perhaps, even Heidegger and Sheehan carry theirs.

Metaphoric Process

Raising this question requires a brief overview of the Gerhart-Russell theory.[108] They imagine our inquiries about the world and

[107]See Mary Gerhart and Allan Melvin Russell, *Metaphoric Process: The Creation of Scientific and Religious Understanding* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1984); and *New Maps for Old: Explorations in Science and Religion* (New York: Continuum, 2001).

[108]See also my "Reframing the Fields," *Zygon* 39/1 (March 2004): 49-62.

ourselves taking place in cognitive spaces or "worlds of meanings." These worlds of meanings are made up of networks of interrelated concepts, or "fields of meanings." The various sciences, religion, theology, philosophy and the "common sense" of each epoch and culture are examples of such fields of meanings. The concepts within these fields do not stand directly for things themselves, but for our notions of these things. The notions are defined by their interrelation with other notions. For example, to get some conception of "house," one must have other notions available (lumber, bricks, wall, window, roof, and so forth). These other notions are variable, as well as the relations between them (not all houses are wood or brick, have four walls, etc.). So meaning as a social, cultural, and historical artifact "arises out of the interaction of concepts and relations, and is expressed in the topography of the field."[109] Gerhart and Russell are most interested in explaining how new understandings and meanings develop among people who share such worlds of meanings. What they have to say on the matter is particularly relevant to our question about how conceptual baggage is carried and carries us along.

They distinguish the discovery of new meanings from the acquisition of new knowledge. The latter involves merely an addition of data and does not change the notions or fields of meanings themselves. For example, we can learn of new cities or new planets and so gain additional information for ourselves or the field of astronomy. In doing this, however, we usually do not change the notions of "city," "planet," or "solar system." In contrast, Copernicus' insistence that the sun is the center of the universe or Newton's insistence that the mechanical laws of the heavens are identical with the mechanical laws of the earth, created new understandings that changed fundamental notions within physics and indeed changed how ordinary people understood things. Much of the routine work of scientists, philosophers and theologians is devoted to the former sort of acquisition aimed at expanding the current knowledge base. Insights of the latter sort are occurrences of genius and discovery typically associated with more extraordinary and consequential developments in a field.

So, to pursue our analogy, Gerhart and Russell's focus is not on the ways we cumulatively add to our baggage, or the ways we might switch or confuse different pieces of luggage. They are interested in the procedures that enable us to develop altogether new types of gear—gear that creates possibilities for different ways to travel and, with that, possibilities for new destinations. The process which they see frequently acting as the mechanism for such movement entails "forcing"

[109]*New Maps for Old*, 12.

an analogy between two meanings that, given current understandings, is unwarranted. In Copernicus' case, for example, the affirmation that "the sun is the center" conflicted with the standard account at the time that "the earth is the center." To affirm that the laws of heaven and the laws of earth are the same, as Newton did, also entailed forcing an affirmation which contradicted "meanings" taken for granted in the science of the day. But the effect of these forced affirmations, despite their apparent unreasonableness, was to open up possibilities for understanding which had not been available before. What most distinguishes such uncalled-for analogies is the disruptive effect on the fields of meaning associated with them. The force of the analogies did not simply add new information to the world of physics, expanding it the way the discovery of a new planet or a new mechanical law might have. Nor did it clarify the given world of meanings, the way affirming an apt analogy between something known and something unknown might have. In Newton's day, for example, Galileo's understanding of the heavens and Kepler's understanding of mechanics were already known. The uncalled-for analogies had a more "tectonic" effect because they forced a reconfiguration in the until-then accepted fields of meanings. The result was newly shaped fields of meanings that constitute a better understanding of what we know of reality.[110] In that sense, the result is a new world. Moreover, such shifts in fields of meanings typically makes available a new logic and understanding of what is reasonable. Conceptual moves are possible in Einstein's world that were inconceivable in Newton's. And moves in Newton's world would not have made sense in Galileo's. Each metaphoric move has the potential to lay the groundwork for later moves otherwise unthinkable.

This creation of significant changes in fields of meanings is the fundamental characteristic of the process Gerhart and Russell call "metaphoric." That is what distinguishes it from rhetorical moves we more commonly label "analogy" or "metaphor," neither of which reshapes the very fields of meanings or logical relations between them. (In Gerhart and Russell's theory "metaphoric" and "metaphorical" are not equivalent. And on their accounting many metaphors are not genuinely metaphoric because they do not create the possibility for new meaning by creating fundamental shifts in our fields of meanings.)

Sheehan's Thought-Experiment

Gerhart and Russell examine examples of metaphoric acts in religion, as well as science. To introduce theological examples at this point might be tendentious, given my assertion, not yet fully explained, that

[110]Ibid., 41-42.

Sheehan's atheological analysis appears to miss the metaphoric dimension of Christian thought, speech and action. So, perhaps we could consider as illustrations his own proposed identification of God with the open-ended correlate of our socially co-open infinity, and the implications: that humanity is about *alētheia,* and that the original sin of Christianity is to think that it is about God. It is an interesting question whether this suggestion is philosophical, theological, or religious, but for our immediate purpose that does not have to be settled. Sheehan hedges his proposal by describing it as a thought-experiment. Nevertheless, the thrust of his analysis of Heidegger, Rahner and Jesus suggests that Sheehan really means to affirm in a quite radical and serious way that humanity is about *alētheia.* The aim of his affirmation and his rhetoric is to fundamentally alter the fields of meaning associated with the concepts of God, human transcendence, being, truth, mystery and Jesus—just as Heidegger aims to alter the fields of meaning associated with ontology. The questions are entirely transformed. Old assumptions and logic (onto-theo-logic, that is) no longer hold. A new world opens up. I believe this is what Sheehan means when he promises that entertaining his new paradigm for Heidegger research "would just be the beginning of the fun"[111] or when he suggests that with his thought-experiment the need for many standard theological distinctions would disappear.

Three entailments of this sort of conceptual move are noteworthy. First, metaphoric moves make real, though logically and semantically altered, affirmations. Within the new context, moves that previously would have been regarded as merely symbolic or metaphorical (as opposed to metaphoric) may now function in a more "literal" way. I use "literal" here advisedly. The conception of metaphoric process destabilizes the meaning of "literal" itself and warrants this qualified use. Although reference to the literal meaning often presupposes that exact and primary meanings are univocal and constant, and that fields of meanings are stable, the metaphoric process demonstrates that this is not always the case; meanings are dynamic. In a metaphoric affirmation words come to have new exact and primary meanings. Moreover, these meanings can be semantically proper, logically warranted, and factually the case—three further important denotations of "literal." So after Thompson and Joule, heat is motion. After Einstein, it is literally true that the speed of light *is* the same for all observers and this means "that moving clocks must run slow, that objects get short in their direction of motion, [and] that moving particles increase in mass. . . ."[112] For Sheehan, after Heidegger (and after what he considers the pre-philosophical

[111]"A Paradigm Shift in Heidegger Research," 19.
[112]*New Maps for Old,* 42.

roots of Aristotle in the archaic Greeks and the pre-theological roots of Aquinas in Jesus), humanity *is* literally about *alētheia*. Our "finitude does all the work. No more room for Big Being."[113] Does that mean no more room for God?

Second, reception is a crucial element in metaphoric acts. The new meanings, logical entailments, and insights are available only to those who are able and willing to accept the proposed changes in the fields of meanings. Getting the point of how the forced analogy stretches and alters the available fields of meanings is thus crucial to understanding the metaphoric act. It is always possible that one might not, as we say, "get the point." And there are a number of ways of not getting the point. Sheehan's affirmation, for example, could be taken as *metaphoric,* that is, as opening up a new world of meaning in which onto-theo-logic has been overcome. This is, in fact, what it appears to me he is doing. But no doubt some readers, like some readers of Heidegger's later works, will conclude that language here has gone on a holiday and not get his point at all. It is *nonsense.* Others might take Sheehan's hedging to indicate that he is speaking *symbolically* and *metaphorically,* and so they conclude: he is not literally denying God's existence. Some might miss the thrust of his critique of Rahner and conclude that Sheehan's hypothesis intends to line up *analogical* similarities-in-difference between Heideggers notion of *alētheia* and the believers notion of God to clarify one or the other of these notions. It is conceivable that someone might think naively that they could use Sheehans interpretation of Heideggers *alētheia* as an apologetic *simile* to help those who have not experienced God to learn what the term actually signifies. We have already investigated how a strong case could be made for reading Sheehans affirmation *literally* as a reduction of theology to anthropology akin to Feuerbach's. So, there are a number of alternatives that appear if we focus on what is done with the baggage rather than on what baggage is carried. One has to get the genre right and the logic right, to get the point.

Third, recognizing a move as metaphoric does not prove it true. Nor is someone who makes such a move necessarily conscious of it as metaphoric. Case in point: although I am quite sure that there is something metaphoric going on in Sheehan's argument and rhetoric, I am not convinced he is correct. Nor could one conclude from his writings that he had any awareness that he was handling his baggage in a metaphoric way along the lines described by Gerhart and Russell. Still, if my hunch is right, something significant is gained by attending to the metaphoric thrust of Sheehan's argument and rhetoric. It then becomes ap-

[113]"A Paradigm Shift in Heidegger Research," 17.

parent how the clearing he seeks to open with the help of Heidegger is quite different from Feuerbach's position. Perhaps, then, it becomes understandable also why he saves "God" even though he proposes to move us to a world of meanings where such concepts would no longer have the old significance. The clearing is created precisely by the metaphoric stretching of such words and the related fields of meanings to uncover a new way of thinking and talking about our humanity and its meaning. In this new atheological world of meaning, the question of God—the question that hunts for philosophical traces of Aristotle's self-coincident absolute knower—never arises. Hence, in that new atheological world of meaning, Sheehan perhaps does not speak falsely when he protests that his analysis does not argue against God's existence. In this new world of meanings perhaps there is also a sense in which it can be said that our human open-endedness is the very gift of God's power. To many, the charge of disingenuous rhetoric would still seem to apply. But perhaps not necessarily. Sheehan acknowledges that the insights which prompt Aquinas and Rahner are ultimately grounded in the Christian faith's non-philosophical, non-metaphysical conviction that we are claimed by God. Perhaps Sheehan's atheological world does intend to leave room for meaningful talk about God's claim on us. But if he does, he does not appear to provide for a conceptuality to articulate and protect such talk. It is not clear that his analysis even leaves room for that.

An Alternative Thought-Experiment

What if as an alternative thought-experiment, we suppose that there was something metaphoric going on from the beginning with the way Rahner, Aquinas and Jesus were handling their linguistic baggage. Consider the case of Rahner. My thought-experiment would not require that he was consciously seeking to do something metaphoric, only that something quite new was coming to light as he brought together the different worlds of meanings with which he grappled as a believer, Jesuit priest, philosopher, and theologian. This does not necessitate that, from the start, he knew how to adequately articulate his insight or appreciated all its implications. On my supposition, what Sheehan portrays as a disjunction, Rahner to the contrary affirms as an identity. Is humanity about God? Or is humanity about *alētheia*? Rahner answers: both God and *alētheia*. I use "God" here to indicate the complex of meanings which Rahner inherits from his faith (including Aquinas'). I take *alētheia* to indicate the meanings Rahner aims to appropriate, although perhaps understands imperfectly, from Heidegger.

I agree with Sheehan that in identifying these, Rahner combines incommensurable meanings.[114] So on this supposition, the early work such as *Spirit in the World* is neither proper metaphysics, as Rahner's mentor apparently concluded when he failed the dissertation, nor consistent with Heidegger, as Sheehan alleges. With that premise, and the evidence that Rahner later came to a clearer appreciation of the difference between the metaphysical conception of God as *ipsum esse* and Heidegger's conception of his own problematic, there are grounds for concluding with Sheehan that Rahner's language falls short of his insight. The problem with this supposition, however, is that Rahner continues to talk in ways that are quite inconsistent with Heidegger's perspective, indeed much more so than Sheehan lets on. Moreover, as Sheehan notes, Rahner seems not concerned about this at all. Sheehan has no explanation for this aside from the suggestion that these are the slips of a believer whose baggage prevents him from recognizing "when his philosophy edges beyond ousiology and when it falls back into it."[115]

The other possibility is that in forcing the identification of meanings that for metaphysicians and Heideggerians are incommensurable, Rahner is stretching language and thought to create conceptual space to say something new. In identifying God as the holy mystery which claims us but always remains beyond our grasp, Rahner transforms both the Thomist and Heideggerian fields of meanings. His is not the Aristotelian, metaphysical conception of God. His is not merely a Heideggerian recessiveness which bespeaks nothing about a human

[114]This entails agreement with Sheehan that there is little ground for hoping that one field of meanings can be explained in terms of the other in a manner which would be acceptable to both Thomists and Heideggerians. No attempt to do so has been successful yet. And on both Sheehan's accounting and mine, although for very different reasons, there is no need for this. The strongest case against this claim is argued by William Kangas, "In the Proximity of Guilt and Danger: Karl Rahner As Heidegger's Other," *Philosophy Today* 44/3 (2000): 259-82. While Kangas' interpretation of Rahner and Heidegger is in large measure persuasive, he does not take adequately into account the metaphoric character of Rahner's moving "within the space which Heidegger's thinking opened up" (264). If one takes seriously the difference in questions from the very start, Rahners identification of the experience of God with Heideggers experience of *alētheia* is a more fragile interpretive move than Kangas presumes. As a consequence, the infrastructure and implications of the metaphysical field of meanings in Rahner's thought are more radically transformed, or at least put in question, than Kangas acknowledges. Kangas is definitely right, however, in pointing to the difference in Rahner's and Heidegger's accounts of the experience of the "other" as crucial to understanding why Rahner finds warrant to hazard the identification of the experience of transcendence with the experience of God. A retrieval of Rahner for the contemporary context requires a more robust explanation of the metaphoric and fragile interpretive character of this move, and more comprehensive accounts of the experiences of intersubjectivity and ethical and religious responsibility in which it is rooted. For more on the latter see the reference to Fiorenza, note 120 below.

[115]Karl Rahner, 313.

possibility for experiencing a claim of God that is more than, that is to say, not reducible to—the claim of finite transcendence. Rahner's metaphoric handling of the baggage he received from Aquinas and Heidegger enables him to extort from both of them (both against their meanings and in continuity with them) a recognition of our movement towards a horizon that is always ahead of our grasp in order to uncover the "clearing" or "openness" within which it is possible to experience and discern that we are claimed by the mystery of God. In my thought-experiment, what Rahner and Aquinas, along with much of the Christian tradition, have in common with Jesus, is that in continuity with him, they find the metaphoric resources to stretch language in ways which open such clearings and within them discover a claim of the holy mystery "whom" Christians call God. In his later works Rahner does not shrink from the implication that this move entails an appeal to faith experience which goes beyond philosophy as such. But it is a move that can be explained philosophically. A further role for philosophy in "proving" such convictions becomes a moot issue with Rahner's arguments in the later works for an irreducible pluralism of philosophies and a human nature which in fact has never existed in a pure state apart from God's initiative in grace.

So I agree with Sheehan that Rahner brings metaphysics to the point where its structure begins to come unglued. But where Sheehan sees a failure of nerve to go all the way with Heidegger, I see a metaphoric move that purposely goes in another direction. Where Sheehan sees Rahner's retrieval of Heidegger attempting illegitimately to advance an argument from phenomenology (or philosophy as such) for an awareness of God in our transcendence, I see Rahner forcing the available philosophical tools to a different task. He does indirectly appeal to Heidegger, but he does so to transform the field of meanings rather than press forward along the same track. Where Sheehan sees Rahner undoing Aquinas's metaphysical conception of God but unable to abandon Aquinas's ousiological language, I see Rahner retrieving Aquinas' own metaphoric moves and in this performance disclosing a way to think and speak of God that is fundamentally different than the metaphysical thinking and speaking of Thomists who, like Heidegger and Sheehan, miss Aquinas's metaphoric thrust or who try to capture it in ousiological language inadequate to the task. The pretext in *Spirit in the World* and *Hearer of the Word* of regrounding a metaphysical basis for theology fades away as the implications of the metaphoric moves in those early reflections are worked out in subsequent theological investigations. One sees this in Rahner's essays on: the relationship between nature and grace, the concept of mystery, the role of philosophizing in theology, the irreducible pluralism of philosophy and intellectual

frameworks, and the historicity of philosophy and theology. On this supposition, Rahner's theological essays become explorations of this metaphoric move rather than a reduction of statements about God to statements about humanity, as Sheehan suggests without much convincing textual warrant.

My thought-experiment also shares Sheehan's judgment that the underlying and most important thrust of Rahner's retrieval of Aquinas and Heidegger was neither completely explicit nor consistently executed. But where Sheehan sees the inherited Thomistic language undermining Rahner's best insights, I think the language hindered primarily his explanation of what he was doing. There is no question that Rahner is aware of the novel conceptual moves he makes, but the metaphoric and tectonic character of his performance is hidden since he explains the moves themselves and the difference between the logic of discourse about God and about everything else by appealing to notions that can also be interpreted in purely ousiological categories: namely, analogy and the distinction between categorical and transcendental knowing. Attentiveness to the metaphoric character of his performance, sheds new light on such explanations.[116] It also clarifies why Rahner never elaborated Sheehan's theory about the devolution of Christian faith into theology. The need to postulate a devolution follows only if the metaphoric character of language and thought about God is missed.

What if Aquinas' moves, likewise, can be described as metaphoric? David Burrell and Robert Sokolowski have offered good reasons to think this is appropriate.[117] What if such metaphoric moves can be traced back to Jesus himself? What if Peter's resurrection experience was a response to the metaphoric character of what Jesus taught and did? James Alison makes an intriguing case for this in *Raising Abel,* though admittedly not on historical grounds that would be acceptable in the Jesus Seminar.[118] This is not the place to argue so broad a case.

[116]For further analysis of the metaphoric character of Rahner's thought see my "Analogy and Metaphoric Process," *Theological Studies* 62/3 (2001): 571-96; and "The Clash of Christological Symbols: A Case for Metaphoric Realism," in *Christology: Memory, Inquiry, Practice,* ed. Anne M. Clifford and Anthony Godzieba (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 62-86.

[117]For an overview of the metaphoric thrust of Burrell's theory of analogy see my "Analogy and Metaphoric Process." Sokolowski's analysis of the logical entailments of what he calls the "Christian distinction" in effect is an effort to map the shifts in fields of meanings forced by the metaphoric affirmation of God as creator. See his *The God of Faith & Reason: Foundations of Christian Theology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1982) and *Eucharist Presence: A Study in the Theology of Disclosure* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1994).

[118]James Alison, *Raising Abel: The Recovery of the Eschatological Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1996). It is an interesting question whether the hypothesis of a meta-

My point is merely to suggest why attention to the way that baggage is carried and carries us along might incline some of us to look on the platforms for another track than Sheehan's, Feuerbach's or the T. S. Eliot Express.

This also provides sufficient indication of why in hope I think it likely that we will find Rahner, Aquinas and many other Christians on this alternative track expecting to follow Jesus' lead and not abandoning talk of God. An adequate explanation of the metaphoric character of this alternative line and of its deeper pre-philosophical and pre-theological roots still needs to be written. People on this train will be on the lookout, no doubt, for someone who can articulate the character of the metaphoric route more clearly for the current generation, the way Rahner and Aquinas did in their day. Moreover, these passengers will trace their track back to experiences of community and social responsibility shaped by metaphoric and religious sensibilities, not to the archaic Greeks or to Jesus as conceived by Sheehan. So they will be on the lookout, too, for a more nuanced and contemporary account of the fragile interpretive moves which lead them to hazard their identification of *alētheia* and God.[119] Passengers on this line no doubt will share Sheehans reservations about articulations of the Christian faith that appear to know too much. But they also will pay more careful attention to how people carry their linguistic baggage and to how it carries them along. Like Sheehan they will recognize that we do not have a conceptual lock on God at the end of the line. But they will appreciate that some tracks go off in more helpful directions than others. If there is an original sin for people on this train, it is not to think that humanity is about God. Nor is it to think humanity is about *alētheia;* on this train there is room for all people of good will. If there is a fault from which we must be saved, it is failure to be attentive enough to the openings that sometimes can be cleared when language and thought are stretched to new uses in response to the wonder of humanity and the mystery which claims us—no matter what name is given the mystery.

phoric thrust could also be affirmed in the parables and sayings of Jesus as reconstructed by the Jesus Seminar.

[119]Although Sheehan's focus on "being" and "otherness" gestures at two important indicators of the meaning of transcendence, Francis Schüssler Fiorenza more helpfully locates its meaning as a fragile interpretive implication of the experience of intersubjectivity and ethical religious responsibility; that is the site where we will find the pre-philosophical and pre-theological roots of the deeper claim to which Christian theology responds. See Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, "Being, Subjectivity, Otherness: The Idols of God," in *Questioning God,* ed. John D. Caputo, Mark Dooley, and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 341-69.