ON BEING A SYMBOL: AN APPRAISAL OF KARL RAHNER

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THE NOTION of "symbol" has enriched discussions of a variety of topics in fields ranging from psychology and the social sciences to philosophy and theology.[1] Despite the prevalence of the notion, there is no reason to think that "symbol" always means the same thing; in fact, the variety of contexts in which it is used would suggest that we begin with just the opposite assumption. In theology alone the notion of symbol has been used to illuminate questions in every area ranging from exegesis to sacramentology.[2] Again, even in the field of theology, there is no need to assume that "symbol" has a univocal force whether it is used by exegetes, apologists, or liturgists; a study of the language game played by the notion in each of these areas is needed before any generalizations can be made.

The goal of this essay is to study the use of the notion of symbol in one segment of the theology of one theologian, Karl Rahner.[3] Two overlapping but logically distinct steps are required for such a study. First, I will propose the main conditions that would have to be fulfilled to evaluate Rahner's notion of symbol. At this stage I do not intend to actually evaluate the notion but merely to specify what one must keep in mind in order to evaluate it. To elucidate these appraisal conditions will require investigating the problems the notion of symbol is supposed to solve and the questions a metaphysical generalization of "symbol" is supposed to answer. Second, I will appraise an important segment of Rahner's thinking on this subject. I will propose that Rahner's notion of *Realsymbol* clears up certain ambiguities in some "symbol-talk," but that it also

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[1] E.g., see the bibliography in Kurt Goldammer's "Symbolism and Iconography, Religious," *Encyclopaedia Britannica Macropaedia* 17 (1974) 900–909. Those familiar with this topic will recognize the vast range of authors, from Carl Jung to Mary Douglas, referred to here.

[2] In exegesis, see the discussion of Austin Farrer, Lionel Thornton, Paul Tillich, and others in chapter 4 of David Kelsey's *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975); hereafter referred to as *Uses of Scripture*. In sacramentology, see the articles of Karl Rahner cited throughout this essay.

[3] The following abbreviations will be used for the texts by Rahner that are cited: T.I. = *Theological Investigations* (14 vols. London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1961–76; New York: Seabury, 1974–76); S.z.T. = *Schriften zur Theologie* (12 vols. Zurich: Benziger, 1959–75). I emphasize that this essay attends only to "one segment" of Rahner, because I do not want to gratuitously gloss over some important questions about the genesis and systematic shape of Rahner's theology. See nn. 15, 42, and 47 below.

trades on a certain notion of what it means to be human which is partially inadequate. The upshot of this appraisal would be to introduce a certain critical caution in the use of the notion; "symbol" might be retained, but its role as a warrant in theological arguments would be decentralized.

To carry out such a project would be no mean feat. While some rely on the reader's intuitive understanding of their notion of symbol, Rahner has attempted to explain exactly what he means by developing what he calls a "theological ontology of the symbol."[4] The essay containing this ontology forms the central text to be considered here. However, Rahner's "ontology" does not operate in a vacuum; he has certain problems in mind that prompt him to explain his use of "symbol." Thus, before centering on Rahner's ontological project, it will be helpful to answer another question: what can become problematic about the notion of symbol? In other words, why should someone like Rahner bother to explain what is meant by symbol?

WHY SYMBOL NEEDS TO BE EXPLAINED

Rahner says that there is no contradiction between our everyday use of "symbol" and his own "metaphysical explanation" (221–22, n. 2). This contrast is important, for it suggests that there are two different contexts in which the notion of symbol is used: everyday and metaphysical contexts. It is important to be able to explain the relationship between these two if one hopes to proceed from what is better known (everyday use of symbol) to what is less familiar (a metaphysical explanation of symbol). However, it is also important to understand the different sets of questions that arise in each context in order to appreciate the technical character of Rahner's proposal.

Thus, people quite frequently say that certain events (e.g., the election of a president) or persons (e.g., ordained or nonordained women) or things (e.g., wedding rings) are symbols. Some said the election of President Carter was symbolic because he provided a focal point for the "coming of age" of the South since the Civil War and a return to evangelical morality after Watergate. There is, common sense seems to say here, an "overplus of meaning" (225) in some events, persons, and objects that makes certain utterances about them seem impoverished. This suggests one question that might arise to challenge a claim that something was a symbol: what sort of utterances are taken as *standard* when one says that a symbol offers an "overplus" to (or "transcends") these utterances? If, for example, someone thought that a history of the South since the Civil War was part of the standard description of the

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[4] "The Theology of the Symbol," T.I. 4, 221–52; "Zur Theologie des Symbols," S.z.T. 4, 275–311. Page numbers in the body of this essay refer to the English translation of this article.

election of President Carter, he or she would wonder why this history should be construed as a symbolic overplus to the election. Arguments in this case would ensue not over whether the election was a symbol but over whether a historical depiction should be part of the standard description.

However, it may not always be this easy to separate the overplus from the standard. Suppose someone contended that a symbol was not simply the combination of a standard description and an overplus of meaning; the overplus, it might be argued, is somehow built into the event or person or thing. This person might, for example, admit that a history of the South could be part of the standard description of a presidential election but insist that it is still important to say the election was symbolic of this history. In this case, arguments would ensue not over the standard utterances at stake but also over the insistence that the standard description is symbolic. What is involved in this insistence? How might this argument be adjudicated?

Now my contention here is not that these questions always arise in the variety of ways the notion of symbol is used in everyday parlance. However, it is the case that they might arise if one wanted to challenge a claim that something (the Carter presidency, ordination of women, wedding rings, and so on) was symbolic of something else. These questions alone might urge someone like Rahner to explain what is meant by symbol.

However, it would be a long and complicated journey to canvass common sense for solutions to the questions raised above. As Rahner implies, the use of the notion we are interested in is embedded in rather technical schemes. From its Platonic, Neoplatonic, and Augustinian uses, through its application in the controversies over icons in the East, up to its revival in romanticism and German idealism, the notion has been used in rather complicated ways. We have a right to expect that even such complicated matters can be grasped if the technical nature of the complication is understood, but we do not have a right to expect that technical uses of a concept can be understood without detailed study of its systematic context. Thus I will now move on to one technical elaboration of "symbol" to determine what some other problems with the notion might be. We will see that common-sense questions about standard descriptions will arise again; thus there is a link between everyday and technical uses of symbol. But we will also see several other questions surfacing.

A good test-case for some of the difficulties that technical uses of the notion of symbol raise is its use in Paul Tillich's theology.[5] The "direct

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[5] I will rely heavily on David Kelsey's *The Fabric of Paul Tillich's Theology* (New Haven: Yale University, 1967); hereafter referred to as *Fabric*. See also Kelsey's *Uses of Scripture* 64–74. It should be noted that the main point of this essay will not be affected if

object" of theology, Tillich says, is "religious symbols."[6] However, it is not at all easy to determine what Tillich means by "religious symbols." David Kelsey proposes that, in various articles throughout the years, Tillich "seems to be moving from an explication of 'symbols' in terms of his 'ontology' to an explication of them in terms of their function in religious life."[7] That is, symbols in general have a number of ostensibly "ontological" characteristics: they point beyond themselves to what they symbolize, participate in the reality which they represent, and open up "dimensions of reality" correlated with "dimensions of the human spirit." Religious symbols in particular mediate "ultimate reality." But this does not mean that one can ontologically describe ultimate reality and then see if certain symbols adequately mediate it. Ontology, for Tillich, can only describe the most general features of reality; it can never describe the referent of religious symbols. It was perhaps Tillich's views on the limits of ontology and the difficulty of explaining the ontological characteristics of symbols in a clear (or at least nonmystifying) way that resulted in his emphasis on a different role for such symbols. It would seem that religious symbols are not explained by ontology but by the way they function in revelatory events.

What, then, is this function? A "revelatory event," says Tillich, has two sides: a "giving" side (or "miracle") and a "receiving" side (or "ecstasy").[8] The occurrence of such an event is expressed in "symbols"— or better, in a family of verbal and nonverbal objects grouped under the umbrella of "religious symbol."[9] Further, there are two different kinds of revelatory events: a symbol can function as the *expression* of an *"original"* revelation and it can function as an *occasion* for (or evocation of) *"dependent"* revelatory events later in time.[10]

For our purposes, it is only important to isolate two families of difficulties which Tillich runs into when he uses this notion of symbol in his theology. I will dub these families "vertical problems" and "horizontal problems" with the notion of symbol. The vertical (or synchronic) family has three members, but centers on the force and function of symbols regardless of the time when they operate. First, how do symbols have the functions attributed to them? Is it by an arbitrary and magical power that they express and occasion certain responses or is there a logic to their functions? Second, if symbols are the product of a revelatory event

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the reader disagrees with this interpretation of Tillich. The goal of this section is merely to prepare for an understanding of Rahner by isolating some prima-facie difficulties with the notion of symbol and not to offer a nuanced interpretation of Tillich.

[6] *Fabric* 3.

[7] The following account relies on *Fabric* 41–43.

[8] Ibid. 22.

[9] *Uses of Scripture* 65.   [10] *Fabric* 21–22 (my emphasis).

with a "giving" and a "receiving" side, is the integrity of either side exhausted in the event? In other words, does the function of symbols in revelatory events imply that God is not God (or that persons are not persons) unless they enter into the relation which produces the symbolic event? Do God and persons have any actuality prior to the revelatory event? Third, the standard utterances which symbols somehow transcend seem to include truth-claims of various sorts. If symbols are given a primary role in revelatory events, does this imply that descriptions of these events can never have the force of truth-claims?[11]

On the horizontal (or diachronic) plane, where symbols have both an "occasioning" and "expressing" function over a length of time, two questions arise. Some symbols which originally expressed a revelatory event can become dated and no longer able to occasion later revelatory events. Under what conditions is a change of symbols called for and under what conditions must the symbols be retained and recharged with their original power? Second, is there any way of holding together these expressive and occasioning functions? Kelsey proposes, for example, that a major weakness of Tillich's theology is that he has not shown how to do this: when Tillich explicates the expressing function of symbols, he uses the biblical picture of Jesus as the Christ; but when he explicates the occasioning function, he ignores the biblical picture and turns to his ontological anthropology. The result is that there is no reasoned connection between the way the symbol functioned in the original event and the way it functions today.[12]

There are surely other reasons one might offer for challenging someone to explain what he or she meant by "symbol." But the above questions are sufficient for now. It is time to turn to Karl Rahner's use of the notion. If Rahner wants to contribute to responsible "symbol talk" rather than perpetuate the vertical and horizontal problems, he must address these questions. I will propose that he has worked out ingenious ways of solving most of these difficulties, while also implying that some of them are not real problems.

RAHNER'S NOTION OF *REALSYMBOL*

Rahner has used the notion of symbol in a variety of contexts, even though his main explanation of it comes in the previously mentioned article on the ontology of the symbol. To understand what is at stake in the notion of symbol within Rahner's theology will require moving back and forth between some of his more concrete uses of the notion and the abstract statement of his general ontology.

[11] Ibid., esp. chaps. 5, 6, and 8.   [12] Ibid. 139–43.

The most perduring context for Rahner's discussion of symbols has been his attempt to explicate what is involved when devotional discourse says that the heart of Jesus is a symbol of his love.[13] Less frequently noticed, however, are the suggestions in Rahner's early writings that the notion plays a much broader role. Most importantly, his unpublished theological dissertation suggests applications in areas ranging from exegesis to Christology. This work deserves a brief examination.[14]

The dissertation is mainly an essay on the relationship of Scripture and tradition (and thus on development of dogma). That is, Rahner argues the following thesis: the representation or type or symbol of the Church as originating from the side of Christ (cf. Jn 19:34) was part of a preliterary apostolic tradition, even though all its elements (e.g., the connection of Adam and Eve with Christ and the Church) were not explicitly brought together until the later patristic period. This argument is interesting from several points of view,[15] but the suggestive segments for our purposes are Rahner's remarks on the notion of symbol.

At the beginning of the dissertation, Rahner promises that he will offer some conclusions on the nature of types and symbols. What is in fact provided as a result of his study are some suggestions for Christology.[16] The events in the life of Jesus, Rahner says, have a symbolical significance in John's Gospel.[17] That is, the life of Jesus "reaches into" (*hineinragt*) the life of the Christian not only through the grace merited by Christ and

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[13] "Coeur de Jésus chez Origène," *Revue d'ascétique et de mystique* 14 (1934) 171–74; "The Theological Meaning of the Veneration of the Sacred Heart," T.I. 8, 217–28.

[14] "E latere Christi: Der Ursprung der Kirche als Zweiter Eva aus der Seite Christi des Zweiten Adam. Eine Untersuchung über den typologischen Sinn von Jo 19, 34" (unpublished Th.D. dissertation, Innsbruck, 1936; microfilm from the Center for Research Libraries, University of Chicago); hereafter referred to as "E latere Christi."

[15] Since the dissertation has not (to my knowledge) been extensively analyzed, it may not be out of place to mention some of these areas of interest. Thus, although Rahner continues to emphasize that tradition is not an external norm of exegesis but "an inner moment of its own method" ("E latere Christi" 4), his later emphasis on the possibility of a genuine development of doctrine ("Considerations on the Development of Dogma," T.I. 4, 3–35) makes the need to argue to a preliterary scriptural tradition superfluous if not strained. Again, although Rahner continues to focus his interests on "the source *whence*" [Rahner's emphasis] a scriptural author "learned what he is saying" ("Theology in the New Testament," T.I. 5, 32), his later emphasis on the material sufficiency of Scripture ("Scripture and Theology," T.I. 6, 91) calls into question how much is gained by such an argument to a preliterary tradition. Finally, although Rahner does periodically mention the motif of "e latere Christi" in later writings ("The Church as the Subject of the Sending of the Spirit," T.I. 7, 186–87), these later writings spend more time explicating the symbol of the Sacred Heart—precisely the symbol criticized as too individualistic in "E latere Christi" (116–17). For further analysis of developments in Rahner's theology, see Leo J. O'Donovan, ed., "A Changing Ecclesiology in a Changing Church: A Symposium on Development in the Ecclesiology of Karl Rahner," *TS* 38 (1977) 736–62.

[16] "E latere Christi" 113–17.   [17] Ibid. 22, 79, 83.

Christ's moral example (*Vorbildlichkeit*); the mysteries of the life of Jesus "as individual" also work their way into the lives of Christians.[18] How does this happen? Rahner says that two problems must be solved to answer this question: first, a general ontology of the contemporaneity of human events for later times—like a philosophy of history—must be constructed; second, this must be applied to the life of Jesus by showing that these events in his life are not merely symbols of the supratemporal work of a saving Logos in the life of a Christian, "but rather that they *are* such 'symbols' through their positing (*Setzung*) by a historical-spiritual person in advance (*von vornherein*)." The events in Jesus' life are posited "in advance" as an address (*Anrede*) to a later person.[19]

Rahner does not explain further in the dissertation what this means. However, in a discussion a few years later on the theology of the Mass as sacrifice, he does give one example of how Jesus "posits" events in his life so that they have the requisite symbolical significance. Here Rahner claims that Jesus' death consisted in a sacrificial disposition (*Gesinnung*) and a sacrificial action (*Handlung*).[20] In fact, the latter is the genuine and full expression of the former: Jesus suffered and enacted death on the cross as the symbol of his obedient (and so self-sacrificing) attitude toward the Father. But, says Rahner, the disposition and the action are distinct even though inseparable. The action is unrepeatable but the disposition (because it is that of a "spiritual person") is somehow "eternal."[21] Thus Jesus posits this event (his death) as symbol because it happens only once and yet calls for a sacrificial attitude and action (the Mass) on the part of later Christians.

Surely more examples and considerable explanation are still needed to understand what Rahner means by symbols and what roles they play. But we now have enough material to understand the variety of issues at stake that would urge Rahner to develop his ontology of the symbol. It is now time to turn to that endeavor before returning to concrete examples.

Rahner begins his ontology by noting that "the concept [of symbol] is much more obscure, difficult and ambiguous than is usually thought" (222). He warns that if his effort to explicate the notion "raises many problematical and unsolved points, the fair-minded reader will not be

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[18] Ibid. 114.   [19] Ibid. 114.

[20] "Die vielen Messen und das eine Opfer," *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie* 71 (1949) 257–317. I will use the following English translation, which includes revisions of this article by Rahner and Angelus Häussling: *The Celebration of the Eucharist* (New York: Herder, 1968) 15–18. See also "Some Thoughts on 'A Good Intention,'" T.I. 3, 105–28, and "The Eucharist and Suffering," T.I. 3, 161–70.

[21] *The Celebration of the Eucharist* 16–17, 24–26, 37–38. See also *Watch and Pray with Me* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966).

surprised" (222). Thus, at Rahner's urging, the reader is warned to keep eyes open for ambiguities and unsolved difficulties. Rahner's own discussion first offers "an ontology of symbolic reality in general" (225–35), then shows how this implies a "theology of symbolic reality" (235–45), and finally elaborates the particular case of "the body as the symbol of man" (245–49); he concludes with some suggestions on the place of symbol in a theology of devotion to the heart of Jesus. The following is a selective account of what Rahner has to say.

"All beings (each of them, in fact) are multiple."[22] There are two notions of multiplicity at work here: (1) there are many entities; (2) each one of these entities is composed of many aspects. All these entities "agree" or "represent" (or "are related to") all other entities "in some way or another." But they are related in different ways. Sometimes they are related "extrinsically," as "merely arbitrary 'signs,' 'signals,' and 'codes' ('symbolic representations' [*Vertretungssymbol*])," as "merely derivative modes of symbolic being." This is the meaning that ordinary language attributes to the notion of symbol (235–36). On the other hand, these entities are sometimes related symbolically; these are *Realsymbole*. Between "mere signs" and "real symbols," Rahner says, "the margins are fluid." Further, some (not all) symbols can lose their symbolic character over the course of time.

What, then, is this relationship between entities which is "symbolic"? In short, "all beings are by their nature symbolic, because they necessarily 'express' themselves in order to attain their own nature." Note that this definition pertains to "all beings." Apparently "mere signs" can function as "symbols" vis-à-vis an entity other than the one for which they are "mere signs"—that is why their function as sign is a "derivative mode" of their symbolic function.

This last move creates problems for the claim that symbols change; this is a point to which I will return. But it is more important to note that the key concept in the preceding definition is "express." Rahner uses other concepts to state the relationship he is trying to get at: "represents," "allows the other to be there," "resolves and discloses itself," and so on. He is now dealing with the second notion of multiplicity mentioned above—although (he would claim) it is related to the first. There are several sorts of beings, but each of these beings is both "one and many"— a unity expressing itself in a plurality.

Some other examples at this point would clearly be helpful, and Rahner

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[22] "Ein Seiendes (d.h. jedes) in sich plural ist" (S.z.T. 4, 279–80). Given the difficulty of this article, the translation is very good; even when, as in the quotation here, the translation is not literal, the sense is entirely accurate. Quotations in the following paragraphs are from T.I. 4, 224–25, unless otherwise indicated.

is quick to provide a variety of them. The Trinity, he says, is the "background" of his thoughts on symbol: a single entity expressing itself in knowledge and love (226, 235). He is here addressing a problem his doctrine of God might seem to create: if the concept "God" in the New Testament is the name of the Father who imparts Himself in Word and Spirit, how is the unity of God sustained?[23] The answer seems to be that the unity of God is like that of a symbol: the Father "attains His own nature" (in the self-possession of love: the Spirit) in "expressing Himself (in the Word)." To appeal to Rahner's Hegelian formulation, the encounter with another (here the Father) takes place not through the immediacy of the encounter with the other's inner "self" (here the Spirit) but through the mediated immediacy of Word and Spirit.

Another example of a symbol is the humanity of Jesus, which is the "supreme form" of symbol: the Son is who He is in expressing Himself in His humanity (235). The Logos' assumption of human nature is grounded in an "expression" (kenosis) intrinsic to His nature.[24] In fact, the symbolic events of Christ's life (as Rahner suggested in "E latere Christi") are salvifically symbolic for all humanity precisely because of the intrinsically "symbolic quality" of Jesus' humanity.[25]

Jesus as *Realsymbol* provides the transition to a complex of other examples of symbols, for God's *ad extra* activity is a "continuation" of His immanent constitution (236–37). Self-knowledge is symbolic because one must "express" oneself in order to "know oneself" (229). That is, self-knowledge is not an utterly private sort of knowledge and is, in fact, enriched by its public expression. One's bodily existence is symbolic because the body is precisely the expression of the soul (245). Further, knowledge of others is symbolic in that one makes oneself known to others as one realizes oneself symbolically; it is precisely because others are also symbols that one can have knowledge of them (230–31). In fact, "water, bread, hand, eye, sleep, hunger and countless other affairs of man and of the world which surrounds him" are also symbols (239). While Rahner here says that these things are symbolic "in themselves," other articles indicate that he is also (and perhaps primarily) interested in the uses of these notions in kerygmatic proclamation and in certain poetic contexts—including the "poetic" sections of Scripture.[26] Finally, the Church and sacraments are symbolic in that they continue "the symbolic

[23] "Theos in the New Testament," T.I. 1, 79–148.
[24] T.I. 4, 235. Compare the notions of Christ's unity in "Current Problems in Christology," T.I. 1, 180–85, and Christ's humanity in "The Eternal Significance of the Humanity of Jesus for Our Relationship with God," T.I. 3, 35–46.
[25] See especially "Der eine Jesus Christus und die Universalität des Heils," S.z.T. 12, 251–82.
[26] E.g., "Poetry and the Christian," T.I. 4, 357–67.

function of the Logos in the World."[27]

Each of these examples (e.g., the relationship between the public and private aspects of self-knowledge; the relationship between knowledge of self and knowledge of others, and so on) obviously deserves discussion. But the following is the crucial point: Rahner has continuously used the notion of symbol in a variety of contexts: it is relevant to exegesis, the doctrine of the Trinity, Christology, soteriology, sacramentology, ecclesiology, preaching, and even aesthetics. The notion of symbol highlights the characteristic of entities which requires that they express themselves in order to be themselves. The examples are obviously rich, even if Rahner's ontology is still obscure. What is needed is further analysis of his proposal which provides some criteria for appraising it.

ANALYSIS AND APPRAISAL OF RAHNER'S NOTION OF SYMBOL

As I begin this lengthy section, one point needs to be re-enforced: Rahner's "symbol" is an elaborate notion and we cannot expect that it can be summarily handled as if it were not a technical term. A certain patience is required to sort out the different strands of his proposals, and to do this in a way that does not merely repeat his own discussion. Thus the analysis and appraisal of Rahner's theology of the symbol will have two stages. First, I will indicate the way it solves (or dissolves) certain problems previously raised about the notion of symbol. Second, I will apply certain diagnostic questions to Rahner's ontology of the symbol.

Rahner has solutions for the problems raised by common sense and Tillich's technical use of "symbol." There are no standard utterances to which an "overplus of meaning" is then added, because this would turn a "real symbol" into a "mere sign." Just as it is a mistake to think that a paraphrase of a poem has the same force as the poem, so also with any attempted paraphrase of a symbol. One may, of course, question whether the notion of symbol does not downplay the richness of the standard utterances of our everyday parlance.[28] The previously cited example of

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[27] Rahner says that these various symbols are organized according to their "degree of being" in an "analogy of being." This is not explained in detail in this article, but see 226, 228, 231, 234. This has important implications: e.g., the Trinity is *the* symbol of which others are derivative modes; thus the distinction Rahner often makes between the "transcendental (self-possession)" and the "categorial (self-expression)" is grounded in the inner-Trinitarian being. This analogy of being is crucial for appraising the character of Rahner's proposal as an ontology, but I am more interested in the prime analogate than an explanation of what happens when it is used analogously; again, I am more interested in the order of knowing that produces the symbol-analogy than the order of being that uses the Trinity as paradigmatic. I would only suggest that some tools for a critical analysis of Rahner at this point are provided in David Burrell's *Analogy and Philosophical Language* (New Haven: Yale University, 1973).

[28] That Rahner may have underestimated this diversity is indicated by his claim that "symbol" must have an "original radical meaning" (224).

the "symbolic" aspects of Jimmy Carter's presidency can surely be redescribed in ways that would say the same thing without claiming that symbolic statements were being made. In fact, it seems to me that most everyday uses of the notion of symbol are vacuous unless the target can be described nonsymbolically. Perhaps this is because our everyday use of "symbol" usually pertains to conventional signs (and not "real symbols"); but another rejoinder to such objections is that Rahner emphasizes that his notion of symbol is technical and therefore not always perfectly coherent with common-sense usage.

What, then, does Rahner's technical notion of symbol have to say about the difficulties in Tillich's use of the notion? First, some of the vertical problems mentioned above are solved, because Rahner's notion is neither magical nor dependent on the way it functions in "revelatory events." Symbols are not objects that attach to certain events or qualities of these events. Events, persons, and things do not *have* a symbolic quality; they *are* symbols. Despite the fact that Rahner speaks of a "function of expressiveness" in symbols (225), the whole point of his discussion is that they are not defined merely by their function. A *Realsymbol* is symbolic "for itself and in itself" before it is such "for others." The former is a "condition of the possibility" of the latter. A symbol does not express the confluence of a "giving" and "receiving" side of a revelatory event; rather, each side is symbolic (according to its "degree of being"). It is in a prior actuality that God is Trinitarian *Realsymbol.* Finally, Rahner does not want the importance of symbol to obscure the fact that Christians do make truth-claims. Dogmatic statements, for example, "should fulfill all those inner structures and laws which do or can belong to an ordinary statement"; they are "meant to be a true statement by the very fact that a human statement has this intention and makes this claim."[29] As I will show in a moment, such truth-claims can be abstracted from a symbolic statement for certain purposes—even though the concrete context in which they belong remains symbolic, because such truth-claims must constantly "transcend" themselves in speaking of God.[30]

The problems with the horizontal dimension of symbols are more complex, for it was previously noted (and will be developed shortly) that it is not obvious how Rahner can simultaneously say that "symbols" can change into "mere signs" and that all beings are at all times "symbolic." But at least this much can be noted vis-à-vis Tillich. First, the emphasis

[29] "What Is a Dogmatic Statement?" T.I. 5, 44, 46.

[30] T.I. 5, 46. Compare "What Is a Sacrament?" T.I. 14, 140, n. 10, where it is also clear that, although the Word of God is "an exhibitive word" and is not "in propositional form 'about something,'" such propositional truth-claims can be considered a "deficient mode" of the "exhibitive word."

in Rahner is not on the "expressing" and "occasioning" functions of
symbols (as it is in Tillich) but on their "self-possessing" and "self-
expressing" roles: entities "express themselves" in order to "possess
themselves." Second, I noted that Rahner's theological dissertation called
for an "ontology of the contemporaneity of past events" and that later
writings supply some suggestions along these lines. The very attempt to
do this is an attempt to answer the questions raised by Tillich's difficulties
connecting the expressing and occasioning functions of symbols. I think
it is difficult to understand how Jesus' action is unique while his dispo-
sition is eternal, but it is at least clear that it is precisely as *Realsymbol*
then and *Realsymbol* now that the "original revelation" and the contem-
porary "derived revelation" are connected.[31] The present occasioning
function is not merely grounded in a past expressive function, but also in
the fact that such expression is also a self-possession.

However, this qualification must be remembered: Rahner has not
worked as much on the horizontal as on the vertical dimensions of the
Realsymbol.[32] There seem to be two reasons for this. First, it might be
very difficult to develop an "ontology of the contemporaneity of past
events" using a theology of the symbol alone; whether this is the case
depends upon how persuasive my upcoming critique of Rahner is. Second,
the connection between the "original" and "derived" revelation for Rah-
ner is provided not only by the continued symbolic mediation of Jesus
Christ but also by the tradition of the Church. In sum, even if Rahner
has had difficulties with the horizontal dimensions of symbols, they are
neither the same nor as theologically debilitating as Tillich's.

This provides a negative criterion for appraising Rahner's ontology: it
avoids the pitfalls of certain problematic uses of the notion of symbol.
But the difficult task still lies ahead. Perhaps one agrees that Rahner's
notion is different than that of someone like Tillich, but this does not
imply that the notion is adequate. The previous sketch of Rahner's
ontology and its concrete exemplifications may still seem obscure and/or
confused. The next question becomes crucial: how is this sort of ontology
of the symbol to be appraised? Note that it is not a question of deciding
at this point on the adequacy or inadequacy of Rahner's proposal; rather,
it is a question of specifying the conditions that would have to be fulfilled
in order to make a judgment about its adequacy or inadequacy. Short of
this we are left adrift between what some would regard as the obscurity
of the general ontology and the obvious richness of at least some of
Rahner's concrete examples.

[31] See "Theology in the New Testament," T.I. 5, 23–41. Hence also "the *eternal* signifi-
cance of the humanity of Jesus" in the article cited in n. 24 above.

[32] But see n. 25 above.

At this point William Christian's suggestions on "some uses of reason" in metaphysics will be helpful in sorting out a few such conditions of appraisal.[33] Of the several kinds of reasoning that are involved in speculative philosophy, Christian isolates three that provide some guidelines for appraising Rahner's proposal. First, there is the "analysis" involved in the "basic questions" asked in speculative inquiry.[34] Christian proposes that there are at least two kinds of basic questions that speculative philosophers have traditionally asked. First, there are questions like "What is reality?" Second, there are questions like "What sorts of things are there?" The difference between these two types of questions is that the first proposes a unique logical subject (e.g., reality) and asks what can be predicated of it; the second proposes a predicate (sorts of things) and asks to what logical subject it applies. Without introducing some of the nuances Christian mentions, I will call these alternative basic questions (respectively) "monistic" and "pluralistic" basic questions.

A second use of reason might be called "speculative construction."[35] If the basic question is monistic, this construction often relies on a "paradigmatic suggestion" to answer its basic question. For example, Plotinus' paradigmatic suggestion might be an experience of self-unification, while Schopenhauer's paradigm might be some experience of "my will." This paradigm is then elaborated in some way to apply to all reality and thus answer the question "What is reality?" If the basic question is pluralistic, the construction takes the form of an interpretive scheme which attempts to answer the basic question.[36] Speculative construction here may also use a paradigmatic suggestion, but the goal is to explicate a *set* of categories which answer the pluralistic basic question. For example, Whitehead's categorial scheme is pluralistic but relies on an analogy to aesthetic experiences as paradigms to explain actual entities.[37]

A third sort of reasoning involved in speculative philosophy is a judgment as to whether the speculative claim made is true or false.[38] Christian only makes some suggestions about this "vexing problem,"

[33] "Some Uses of Reason," in *The Relevance of Whitehead*, ed. Ivor Leclerq (New York: Humanities, 1961) 45–89. It is appropriate to note that Rahner's ontology, unlike Tillich's, does claim to describe more than general structures; pursuing the reasons for this—and for other ways of distinguishing ontology and metaphysics—does not seem relevant to the issues being considered here.

[34] The fact that Rahner does not explicitly make the distinction made in this paragraph between monistic and pluralistic basic questions—because he (at times) says that the subject matter of metaphysics is "the Being ['monistic'] of beings ['pluralistic']"—will not affect the adequacy of my account. It does raise the question of the role of the analogy of being which I promised to avoid in n. 27 above. For development of these "basic questions," see "Some Uses of Reason" 57–60.

[35] Ibid. 65–68.

[36] Ibid. 70–71.

[37] Ibid. 82–83.

[38] Ibid. 68–73.

mostly in reference to Whitehead. But the following question is the most important for our purposes: beyond the internal tests of self-consistency and coherence, an important test for a speculative proposal is whether it can interpret the various elements of our experience. Does the scheme, for example, show the interconnection of all of our experiences?

These three speculative uses of reason can be applied to Rahner in the following way. His basic question in this article is clearly monistic. He asks "What is reality?" His answer: "Reality can be explicated by the category 'symbol.'" Two caveats must be issued on this score. First, because Rahner prefers to develop his technical categories in connection with a series of concrete issues, he has not developed a complete categorial scheme. This means that his ontology of the symbol is not his entire metaphysics; indeed, there may be other strands in Rahner which prefer the pluralistic basic question. But the task here is not to study his entire conceptual scheme or to discuss the coherence of its various parts; our task is to analyze and appraise his notion of symbol. Second, this is only a monism with respect to his basic question; it is not to be confused with other uses of the notion of monism (e.g., as applied to German idealism). "Symbolic reality" is not one big symbol but a variety of symbols distinguished analogically by their "degree of being."

Further, it would seem that Rahner's "speculative construction" does indeed have a "paradigmatic suggestion" at work. This point is crucial for the thesis of this essay. The paradigm of expressiveness which Rahner uses is a performative utterance. The point of symbol-talk is not only that *persons and things are symbols* and do not merely have a symbolic quality or function; the point is also that *I am a symbol.* Utterances like "I exist my body" (Sartre) or (more importantly) "I love you" are the paradigmatic instances of entities "attaining their own nature in express-ing themselves." In still other words, Rahner's claim that his theology of the symbol "derives from" the doctrine of the Trinity and Christology applies to the order of being; in the order of knowing, however, what Rahner has done is elaborate a particular notion of the moments most important to being human which analogously describes the Trinitarian being. In sum, Rahner's ontology of the symbol relies in part on what can be called a performative anthropology. This point requires further expla-nation.

Performatives, in Donald Evans' excellent and intricate study, can be either verbal or nonverbal.[39] In either case, the most interesting charac-teristic of many performatives is that the words and/or deeds are self-

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[39] *The Logic of Self-Involvement* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969) 75–76. For the origin and some problems with the notion of performative utterances, see James W. McClendon, Jr., and James M. Smith, *Understanding Religious Convictions* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1975) chap. 3.

involving. A good example of self-involving actions might be various liturgical gestures (kneeling, blessing, shaking hands, and so on). A good example of self-involving words might be utterances which make explicit the self-involving character of these actions. Since the interpretation of nonverbal actions as self-involving seems to trade on the notion of verbal performatives, it will be most helpful to focus on the notion of such utterances. Performative utterances are of various sorts and Evans offers the following examples:

In saying, 'I submit to your authority', I *commit* myself to various future *actions*.
In saying, 'Thank you for your kindness', I *imply* that I have an *attitude* of gratitude.
In saying, 'Glorious!', I *express* my *feelings*.
In saying, 'I look on life as a game', I *express* my *attitude* towards life.[40]

Each of these classes has various subdivisions, but they all have in common the fact that in *saying* something I *do* something; in Rahner's broad terms, in "expressing myself" in various ways I "possess myself." The "doing" involved is not causal in just any sense; "I love you," for example, does not efficiently cause the other to be loved like a magical formula. Evans and Rahner are making logical remarks about the meaning of an utterance in certain situations. This point is important, for one of the main roles of Rahner's real symbol is to suggest that the efficient causality of the sacraments is subordinate to their performative causality.

One can respond in various ways to such performative utterances. First, one could respond with a correlative performative: "I appoint you as my steward over nature" might bring on the response "I accept this role."[41] In fact, it might be said that a performative utterance sometimes calls for (and to this extent causes) a reciprocal performative. Second, one could decide that there is a certain infelicity about the performative utterance that makes it not exactly false (for it is not primarily a truth-claim) but inappropriate. Standard examples of this response are the various arguments over the conditions that must be fulfilled before the performative utterance of the baptismal formula is valid. Third, for certain performative utterances a content can be abstracted which is open to appraisal in terms of truth or falsity. This is the point at which Rahner's symbols not only permit but require truth-claims: as the performative utterance of an "I love you" would logically require that one be willing to offer descriptions of the object of one's love in appropriate circumstances, so the performatively symbolic proclamation of the kerygma requires that certain claims can be abstracted from this kerygma. One can apparently even abstract certain moments of the *Realsymbol*

[40] Ibid. 12.   [41] Ibid. 78.

from the performative movement, but to further elaborate this would involve moving into areas of Rahner's theology that would distract from the present point.[42]

That the paradigmatic suggestion for Rahner's ontology of the symbol is the self in situations where remarks like "I love you" are appropriate, and that this paradigm can be called a performative anthropology, is borne out in many of Rahner's other remarks on being human. For example, the argument of *Hearers of the Word* can be read as an attempt to show that, as creaturely subjects are real symbols (open, free, embodied subjects in history), so they can expect that the "hidden God" will "reveal Himself" symbolically (or "through the Word").[43] Again, the climactic point of Rahner's anthropology is variously articulated in terms of faith, hope, and love.[44] What these virtues have in common is summed up in paradoxical formulas: "man *is* insofar as he gives himself up," or " 'letting of one's self go' is certainly the essence of man."[45] "Self-possession" is attained through "self-expression." One way to interpret such remarks is that it is of the very essence of human subjects to "express themselves in the other," to utter a performative "I love you" to God and neighbor, to be a *Realsymbol*.

It is important to note that this insight into Rahner's paradigmatic suggestion is not yet a criticism. If Christian's notion of speculative construction is plausible, it must be said that Rahner has proceeded in a rather traditional way on a rather nontraditional topic. Pointing out the paradigmatic role of the performative self in Rahner's ontology does not tell one how to appraise his *use* of the notion; he uses the paradigm to construct (not deduce) his ontological scheme. What this insight does is

[42] For example, Rahner often discusses the "presence to self" (which is always a "presence to others") in abstraction from this presence to others. This is most notable in the case of those anonymous Christians whose presence to self is Christian but whose conceptual (in contrast to behavioral) presence to others seems utterly private; in other words, their presence to others which symbolizes their presence to self is a love of neighbor which is not yet explicitly or conceptually recognized as Christian. Again, Rahner discusses the *Vorgriff*—which, in this context, is the skill (and therefore nonobjective) which enables one to speak performatively—independently of its objectification, even though this nonobjective skill and its conceptual implementation can never be separated. Finally, a symbol is the climax of a process of self-transcendence; self-transcendence is the history of the unity-in-difference of spirit and matter, and Rahner frequently discusses both spirit and matter in abstraction from their unified enactment in performative symbols.

[43] *Hörer des Wortes: Zur Grundlegung einer Religionsphilosophie*, ed. J. B. Metz (Munich: Kösel, 1963) esp. 185 f. The dialectic implied here between symbols as concealing and revealing is another aspect of Rahner's *Realsymbol* that cannot be pursued.

[44] Rahner thinks that any of these three theological virtues can provide the key concept or symbol for different eras; see "The 'Commandment' of Love in Relation to the Other Commandments," T.I. 5, 457–59.

[45] See "On the Theology of the Incarnation," T.I. 4, 110, and "On the Theology of Hope," T.I. 10, 250.

give one an initial handle for appraising Rahner's proposal. Short of another alternative for explaining how Rahner's ontology gets off the ground, the paradigmatic suggestion proposed above seems to explain a great many things that seem obscure without it.[46]

THE ADEQUACY OF RAHNER'S ACCOUNT

We are only now in a position to relate Rahner's proposal to Christian's third question: is Rahner's speculative scheme true or false? Or better: is Rahner's scheme an adequate or inadequate account of reality? Obviously, I cannot give a complete answer to this question. Such an answer would involve appraisal of each of Rahner's examples of symbols (e.g., the Trinity, Jesus Christ, the Church, the sacraments, preaching, exegesis) to see whether the notion is helpful. I can, however, begin such an appraisal by mentioning three overlapping areas which gradually converge on a single point.

There is, first, the question of what might be called the application of the scheme. Rahner is not altogether clear about what the relationship is between his ontology and other fields of discourse. He says that his "metaphysical explanation" does not contradict "everyday language" (221–22, n. 2), but he also says that our everyday notion of symbol is precisely that of extrinsic sign (235–36). Is the ontology a sort of super-language game which claims to state in clearer fashion what we only stutter over in our everyday discourse? Or is it an attempt to point to the connections among a variety of experiences to which common sense does not usually attend? Or is there another option for the role of such an ontology? Rahner is not clear on this point.

Second, there are some questions about the internal coherence of the scheme. These center on the relationship between sign and symbol. All beings are by their nature symbolic; yet there are some things called "mere signs," and symbols can even become such mere signs over the course of time. But if some entities cease to be symbols, how can it be said that "all reality is essentially symbolic"—unless these ex-symbols become symbolic in another respect after their demise? On the other hand, if Rahner were prepared to admit that everything does remain symbolic in some respect, the problem becomes: what about those various symbols in human history that have indisputably become mere signs? Perhaps Rahner would have to say that even such mere signs still have the *potential* to become symbolic; this would be the significance of saying that "all beings ... are *or can be* [my emphasis] essentially the expression of another ... " (225–26). If this were said, perhaps this question of

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[46] Of course, those who think that William Christian's questions or Donald Evans' analysis obscures rather than illuminates Rahner's ontology will want to provide such an alternative account.

internal coherence might be momentarily conceded for the sake of moving on to the most pointed question.

The third question pertains to the speculative construction undertaken in Rahner's ontology. Even if one agrees with Rahner that one's basic question ought to be monistic (in the technical sense stipulated above), there are alternative notions of the self that one might want to use as paradigmatic suggestions. It is thus that we arrive at the crucial question that this essay puts to Rahner's notion of symbol.

To understand the import of the following remarks, recall that the main point of Rahner's symbol-talk is not only that persons should learn to *use* symbols but also that people *are* symbols. In fact, to put the point in the third person is downright deceptive: the point of Rahner's symbol-talk is to propose that *I* see myself not only as a *user* of symbols, but that *I* see myself *as* a symbol. The first question to pose to Rahner's ontology is not whether reality is symbolic but whether I am a symbol. Despite the fact that a superficial reading of Rahner at this point might dwell on the obscurity or even impersonality of the ontology of the symbol, the fact is that appraisal of it requires a judgment about the locus of my personal identity.

The locus provided in a performative anthropology has advantages over at least two other options. On the one hand, it demands a personal engagement with one's existence in a way not demanded by certain uses of a body-soul framework. For example, the notion of *Realsymbol* makes it clear that remarks about "my body" are not expressions of an observer on a tool he or she uses or has; rather, they express the fact that my body is performatively identical with me. Again, the "turn to the subject" involves the insight that who I am is not reducible to the sum of my personal characteristics but also includes the fact that it is I who hold these characteristics together; the latter means that attention must be given not merely to the self as a member of a class of other selves but also to my own self-avowals. On the other hand, this self-involvement does not mean that the self must be privatized in attempting to specify its most uniquely self-involving moments. Because this involvement must "express itself in order to be itself," my identity is always implemented in the public forum. Surely no adequate notion of the self can ignore such performative moments.

However, it is a big jump from here to the contention that it is in these moments that we are paradigmatically human. The "turn to the subject" must not (among other things) neglect the fact that there are alternative descriptions of the subject to which one can turn; indeed, there are alternative self-avowals besides symbolic performatives. In sum, it is a fair question to ask whether one must localize the essence of personal identity in self-involving performative utterances—even when they are

addressed to God or God addresses them to humanity (in Jesus Christ and the Spirit).

The best way to pursue such a question would be to offer an alternative anthropology, and that obviously cannot be done here. However, a return to previously made points will suggest the direction in which such an alternative would have to move. First, on the one hand, I noted that Rahner seems to be able to deal with both the vertical and horizontal problems with the notion of symbol more adequately than Tillich; on the other hand, I proposed that Rahner solves the vertical more persuasively than the horizontal problems. The implication is that Rahner's notion of the symbol is more adequate in dealing with the logical force of symbols in each vertical moment than on the horizontal plane of historical continuity. Second, this first point is obviously only an externally imposed formulation of a problem which arises in a way internal to Rahner's ontology in his distinction between sign and symbol (or in the distinction between ordinary use of the notion of symbol and its metaphysical explanation). From one point of view this distinction is (as noted above) merely an internal incoherence which might be conceded insofar as signs are always construed as potentially symbols. But, from the point of view of the issue now under consideration, it must be asked whether this distinction does not suggest a larger problem: are the difficulties with sign and symbol endemic to Rahner's ontology? Unless Rahner can specify more exactly the conditions under which potential symbols (signs) become actual symbols in the course of time, the ontology seems to be inadequate.

These two points are symptomatic of a more general point to be made: a performative anthropology seems better able to account for the fact that it is my own self-avowals which hold together the self at any given moment than it is able to account for changes in the self over longer stretches of time. Performative remarks—those in which saying something is doing something—are felicitous in certain moments but they tell us little about how the doing (the self-possession) is also a continuous, ongoing, and acquired affair. Granted that I am a symbol in certain performative moments, how can I follow through on this identity in a historically patterned way? Rahner's notion of symbol deals with the self-involved "I" in individual moments without dealing with the ongoing moments of personal identity which are not always performative. The direction in which an alternative anthropology would have to move is precisely the explication of those features of the self which can hold together symbolic self-expressions and historical identity, the self as actually and potentially symbolic, the vertical and horizontal planes of human existence.

The point must be re-enforced that this is not a criticism of Rahner's

anthropology.[47] Subsequent investigation might show that Rahner's other conceptual tools provide ways of dealing with historical identity, but the point is that these tools would have to be different than those provided in his ontology of the symbol. The same point applies to concrete examples of symbols. Thus, in exegesis one may want to attend to scriptural genres not readily amenable to symbolic interpretations; the narrative portions of Scripture are promising in this regard, for the depiction of persons over a stretch of time is one characteristic of stories. In Christology, attention might be given not only to Jesus' self-involving self-expressions but also to the continuous pattern of his life. In sacramentology, discussion of symbols may want to center on a pragmatic notion of symbols—where symbols, precisely in being extrinsic, are liturgically useful; in fact, this seems to be precisely the use of symbol in certain discussions of ritual in the social sciences.[48] Finally, must kerygmatic proclamation of the Word always be performative? Perhaps good preaching can at times be confession of beliefs or narrative reiteration. Note carefully that I am not claiming that Rahner's symbol-talk be abolished from exegesis, Christology, and sacramentology. On the contrary: just as performative utterances do isolate one moment of our self-avowals, so also symbols do articulate one part of what is happening in those activities traditionally called "sacraments" (or one part of ecclesiology or Christology). The argument is that one should beware of saying that symbolic activity is always the most important, much less the only, segment of the network of activity involved in liturgical celebration (or exegesis of Scripture or the work of Jesus Christ).

CONCLUSION

I began this essay by noting that symbol is used in a variety of ways in many different fields; in theology itself, the notion is used in different contexts and for different purposes. In conclusion I will explain how the constructive and critical lessons learned in this essay apply to three other ways of appraising Rahner's notion of symbol.

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[47] One must, of course, keep in mind the internal pluralism of Rahner's theology, i.e., Rahner's intentional endeavor to do "systematic theology" by treating "*individual* schemes in an unsystematic manner" ("Reflections on Methodology in Theology," T.I. 10, 69 [Rahner's emphasis]). For arguments that Rahner's anthropology has a more systematic shape than my analysis implies, see Klaus Fischer, *Der Mensch als Geheimnis: Die Anthropologie Karl Rahners*. Mit einem Brief von Karl Rahner (Freiburg: Herder, 1974), and Karl H. Neufeld's review in *Stimmen der Zeit* 192 (1974) 429–30; also Gerald A. McCool, S.J., "The Philosophy of the Human Person in Karl Rahner's Theology," *TS* 22 (1961) 537–62.

[48] E.g., see John Skorupski's *Symbol and Theory: A Philosophical Study of Theories of Religion in Social Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1976).

This article has been a study and partial appraisal of Rahner's notion of symbol. I have been concerned, first, with setting forth some of the conditions that would have to be fulfilled to make a judgment about Rahner's theological ontology of the symbol. This constructive aspect of the essay is addressed to two alternative positions. On the one hand, those who feel that the notion of symbol in general, or Rahner's notion in particular, is enshrouded in obscurantism would do well to attend to his rich and nuanced use of the concept. His paradigmatic symbol is the human subject—better, I am the paradigmatic symbol. The application of symbol in topics ranging from exegesis to Christology is intended to emphasize the self-involving character of each of these loci. The difficulties with a purely functional notion of symbol are overcome, for all symbols trade on the fact that the basic human being and activity is that of being a symbol. On the other hand, those who recognize that Rahner's ontology is not the only alternative for construing symbols are entirely correct. These different notions in theology and other fields bear study in their own right. However, I have proposed that Rahner has explicitly and implicitly provided the reader with some relatively clear ideas on how to appraise his notion of symbol. Hence his ontology challenges these alternative notions to explicate the conditions for appraising their own use of symbol.

This constructive endeavor will be helpful to those who actually use Rahner's theology of the symbol, for they above all should be interested in sorting out the conditions of its appraisal. But it is primarily to this group that the essay's critical edge is also addressed. Rahner's ontology does indeed, in his own words, "raise many problematical and unsolved points" (222). The critical argument has been that certain minor incoherent components of Rahner's ontology (i.e., the relationship between sign and symbol or between everyday and metaphysical uses of symbol) are symptomatic of the fact that his notion of symbol relies on a notion of the self which is incomplete. The paradigm of the self used in the ontology is applicable vertically but not on the horizontal plane of historical continuity. Meeting this critique would require proposing alternative appraisal conditions and/or defending a performative anthropology. I have not attempted to construct an alternative anthropology, much less a generalization to cover every theological topic. Neither have I argued that the criticisms apply to other segments of Rahner's theology; I have mainly addressed myself to one article and its obvious exemplification in other sources. Even with these qualifications, however, those using Rahner's theology of the symbol to back up positions in Christology, ecclesiology, and sacramentology would do well to consider how heavily they intend to rely on such a notion of the self.