

THE FREEDOM TO SAY "NO"? KARL RAHNER'S DOCTRINE OF SIN

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KARL RAHNER'S provocative thoughts on sin and human freedom, often cited uncritically, as if they bore a sort of authority, have yet to be critically examined.¹ Still less has his theology of sin been exploited as a point of departure for critically assessing his theology as a whole. Pursuing this task, I argue, despite my profound admiration for Rahner, that his notion of sin as a free and definitive "no" to God creates insurmountable inconsistencies in his doctrine of sin and indicates foundational inadequacies in his theological system. I suggest that these problems are rooted in a fundamental tenet of Rahner's theological method, namely, his practice of endowing engrafted human nature with divine-like attributes.

THE POSSIBILITY OF A FREE "YES" OR "NO" TO GOD

Even casual students of Rahner know he defines sin as a free "no" to God. The subtleties and implications of this definition, however, often elude the most sophisticated commentators. In some places Rahner seems to imply that a free "no" must also be definitive. Other texts seem to deny it. In some articles he emphasizes the equal freedom of the "yes" and the "no." There are others, though, in which he contests it. Consequently, in what follows I subject the relevant texts to more intense scrutiny than is usual in Rahner studies.

Sin as a Definitive "No" to God

The Christian faith, according to Rahner, affirms that sin in its essence is a free and definitive "no" to God, a rejection of God's gracious offer of self-communication. Human freedom is so radical and comprehensive, he argues, that it makes even God an object of choice, a choice which brings the human being to definitive completion as a "yes" or "no" to God. Modern people, however, find this claim incomprehensible, observes Rahner, for it is difficult to imagine any human beings

¹ Of the 948 items listed in Albert Raffelt's "Karl Rahner: Bibliographie der Sekundärliteratur (1948–1983)," none is devoted to this central issue of Rahner's doctrine of sin, and to my knowledge none has appeared since then. Raffelt's bibliography of secondary sources is found in *Wagnis-Theologie: Erfahrungen mit der Theologie K. Rahners*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1979) 598–622, which lists 646 works from 1948 to 1978, and in *Glaube im Prozess: Christsein nach dem II. Vatikanum*, ed. Elmar Klinger and Klaus Wittstadt (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1984) 872–85, which lists items 647–948, spanning the years 1979–1983.

uttering such a titanic "no" to God. We can see, our contemporaries reason, how humans may transgress a law of God or perhaps deny a finite concept of God, but this is not the same as denying the very person of God.² Isn't it true, the objection continues, that evil is better explained in terms of tragic fate rather than by the Christian notion of sin?³

Rahner's doctrine of sin is definitively shaped by the challenge of the modern objections. Accordingly, he accepts the task of demonstrating the possibility of a fully free "no" to the true God, the very person of God, i.e., the possibility of "really and truly saying "no" to God himself—and indeed to God himself, not merely to some distorted or childish notion of God."⁴

Drawing on his earlier work, in which he developed the concept of the supernatural existential (*übernatürliches Existenzial*),⁵ Rahner argues that God has freely chosen to be ever present to each human being in intimate closeness as an offer of self-communication. God is not merely the receding horizon of infinite being that grounds the possibility of human knowledge of finite entities⁶ and of human freedom

² Karl Rahner, "Theology of Freedom," in *Theological Investigations* (New York: Crossroad, 1982) 6.178–96, at 181. The German original, "Theologie der Freiheit," is found in *Schriften zur Theologie* (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1965) 6.215–37, at 218. See also *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Seabury, 1978) 99. The German original is *Grundkurs des Glaubens: Einführung in den Begriff des Christentums* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1976) 104. References to the German will follow the English in parentheses, and, at those points where my arguments depend on a very close reading of the Rahner texts, I have included extensive quotes from the German originals.

³ *Foundations* 92 (*Grundkurs* 98–99).

⁴ *Foundations* 101 (*Grundkurs* 107–8: "Der Mensch kann also als Wesen der Freiheit so sich selbst verneinen, daß er in aller Wirklichkeit zu Gott selbst nein sagt, und zwar zu Gott selbst und nicht bloß zu irgendeiner verzerrten oder kindlichen Vorstellung von Gott").

⁵ A full discussion of the supernatural existential is beyond the scope of this study. Fortunately, a thorough understanding of Rahner's justification for the concept is not necessary for the present argument. Among Rahner's works dealing with the supernatural existential, see "Concerning the Relationship between Nature and Grace," in *Investigations* 1.297–317 (*Schriften* 1.323–45); Josef Höfer and Karl Rahner, eds., *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1959) s.v. "Existenzial, übernatürliches," by Karl Rahner; and *Foundations* 126–33. Among the many secondary works which deal with the supernatural existential; see Kenneth D. Eberhard, "Karl Rahner and the Supernatural Existential," *Thought* 46 (1971) 537–61; George Vass, *Understanding Karl Rahner 2: The Mystery of Man and the Foundations of a Theological System* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1985) 64–83; Klaus Fischer, *Der Mensch als Geheimnis: Die Anthropologie Karl Rahners* (Freiburg: Herder, 1974); and Karl-Heinz Weger, *Karl Rahner: An Introduction to His Theology*, trans. David Smith (New York: Seabury, 1980).

⁶ The a priori conditions of human knowledge of finite reality are the subjects of *Geist in Welt: Zur Metaphysik der endlichen Erkenntnis bei Thomas von Aquin*, 2d ed. (Munich: Kösel, 1957); English translation: *Spirit in the World*, 2d ed., trans. William Dych (New York: Herder, 1968). For a thorough study of the metaphysical anthropology of

vis-à-vis finite goods.⁷ God also offers God's very person as an object of choice, and so makes possible a free "yes" or "no" to the true God. The horizon (God) which makes freedom of choice possible becomes itself the object of decision.⁸

God, according to Rahner, becomes the object of this choice, not directly but indirectly. The decision about God takes place in decisions about finite things, since God is unthematically present in every act of choice as its ground and goal. God is the author of the world of finite entities, other persons, and our own essential nature. Insofar as we say "no" to this finite reality, we also say "no" to God who is simultaneously experienced as the ground of our subjectivity. Rahner explains,

Of course, in so far as the source of the existence of an affirmative or negative attitude towards the absolute God lies precisely in the adoption of a right or wrong attitude towards finite goods (or those conceived as finite) in their divinely caused order, in virtue of the necessary relation of spirit to the absolute which supports freedom, freedom is in the last analysis the possibility, through and beyond the finite, of taking up a position towards God himself.⁹

Twenty years later, he says essentially the same thing:

Free actions within the categorical reality of our experience which contradict the essential structure of this reality which exists within the horizon of transcendence . . . [risk] the possibility of offending against the ultimate term of this transcendence itself.¹⁰

The decision for or against God is made in the real history of our lives. "Freedom is always mediated by the concrete reality of time and space, of man's materiality and his history."¹¹ Our being is a task to be

Geist in Welt, see Thomas Sheehan, *Karl Rahner: The Philosophical Foundations* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University, 1987).

⁷ Rahner argued that the unthematic grasp of God is the ground of human freedom. See *Hearers of the Word*, trans. Michael Richards (New York: Herder, 1969). Originally published in 1941, *Hörer des Wortes* was issued in a second edition, edited in text and notes by Johann Baptist Metz (Munich: Kösel, 1963). The English translation is of the second edition. For an extensive study of Rahner's anthropology contained in this work, see Peter Eicher, *Die anthropologische Wende: Karl Rahners philosophischen Weg vom Wesen des Menschen zur personalen Existenz* (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag Freiburg Schweiz, 1970).

⁸ Karl Rahner, "The Dignity and Freedom of Man," in *Investigations* 2.233-63, at 246 ("Würde und Freiheit des Menschen," in *Schriften* 2.247-77, at 259: ". . . ist die Freiheit im letzten durch das Endliche hindurch die Möglichkeit der selbstgetanen und selbstverantworteten Stellung zu Gott selbst").

⁹ Karl Rahner, "Dignity and Freedom" 246 (*Schriften* 2.259).

¹⁰ *Foundations* 100 (*Grundkurs* 106: "Dennoch besteht diese Möglichkeit, in dem freien, wesenswidrigen Umgang mit der kategorialen Erfahrungswirklichkeit, die innerhalb des Raumes der Transzendenz steht, gegen das letzte Woraufhin dieser Transzendenz selber zu verstoßen.").

¹¹ *Foundations* 36 (*Grundkurs* 47).

achieved, a project to be realized, a process to be brought to completion. We "determine and dispose" of ourselves as a whole.¹² Our final being is a "self-realization" (*Selbstverwirklichung*),¹³ a "self-achievement" (*Selbstvollzug*),¹⁴ worked out in time and space.

The central event in this history is the personal encounter with other human beings. "The categorized explicit love of neighbor is the primary act of the love of God."¹⁵ This act most fully embodies the transcendental decision of "yes" or "no" to God. Knowledge of the world and freedom vis-à-vis the world achieve their highest intensity and fulfillment in the act of a loving encounter with a "Thou (*Du*)."¹⁶ "The world of things can be a possible object for man's concern only as a moment of the world of persons."¹⁷ The act of personal love is, therefore, the "all-embracing basic act of man which gives meaning, direction and measure to everything else."¹⁸ This "a priori openness to the other human being"¹⁹ forms the very heart of the human essence. Therefore the decision to accept or reject one's own "a priori reference to the Thou,"²⁰ to love or hate the neighbor, is simultaneously to render a "yes" or "no" to God, the creator of both the human essence and the Thou.

The history of freedom is, therefore, the history of our decision about God, others, and ourselves as a whole. Freedom is not merely about finite objects being presented to human subjectivity one after another, for then there would be no freedom vis-à-vis the total self, freedom to decide definitively who we want to be. For freedom "is not the possibility of always being able to do something else, the possibility of infinite revision, but the capacity to do something uniquely final, something which is finally valid precisely because it is done in freedom. Freedom is the capacity for the eternal."²¹ But we have access to our total being only in the self-transcendence made possible by the self-offer of the infinite mystery of God.²² We decide definitively who we will be, therefore, only as we utter a "yes" or a "no" to this offer. Deciding about God and deciding about the totality of our being are one and the same act of freedom.

¹² Karl Rahner, "Theology of Freedom" 184 (*Schriften* 6.222: "Wird nun aber christlich gesehen, daß der Mensch über sich selbst als ganzen und zwar endgültig durch seine Freiheit bestimmen und verfügen kann").

¹³ *Ibid.* 185 (*Schriften* 6.223).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Karl Rahner, "Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbour and the Love of God," in *Investigations* 6.231-49, at 247 ("Über die Einheit von Nächsten- und Gottesliebe," in *Schriften* 6.295; "Die Kategorial-explicite Nächstenliebe ist der primäre Akt der Gottesliebe").

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 242 (*Schriften* 6.289).

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 240 (*Schriften* 6.287).

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 241 (*Schriften* 6.288: "Richtung und Maß gebende Grundakt des Menschen").

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Karl Rahner, "Theology of Freedom" 186 (*Schriften* 6.225: "sondern das Vermögen des einmalig Endgültigen, des gerade darum endgültig Gültigen, weil es in Freiheit getan ist. Freiheit ist das Vermögen des Ewigen").

²² *Foundations* 39 (*Grundkurs* 50).

To summarize: Responding to the modern skepticism toward the Christian doctrine of sin, Rahner defines sin in the strict sense as the fully free and definitive "no" to the person of God, made by the total human being in a whole life act in an encounter with God as mediated by the world of things and other people. This negative decision is simultaneously about God and the whole human person, and irrevocably brings the human being to completion as a "no" to God.

Are the "Yes" and the "No" Equal?

An important question forces itself on us at this point, an issue which will prove decisive in my assessment of Rahner's theology of sin: Are the "yes" and "no" equally free, and if so, what are the consequences of such equality? Rahner consistently refers to both "yes" and "no" as decisions made possible in the same way by the dynamic of God's offer of self-communication. He refers to both of them as possibilities of the freedom given by the supernatural existential and therefore as decisions which concern the whole subject without remainder. Rahner states this clearly in *Foundations of the Christian Faith*:

The point of our reflections upon the essence of subjective freedom is to show that the freedom to dispose of oneself is a freedom vis-à-vis the subject as a whole, a freedom for something of final and definitive validity, and a freedom which is actualized in a free and absolute "yes" or "no" to that term and source of transcendence which we call God.²³

A Difficult Text

In view of this straightforward statement and its centrality to Rahner's theology of sin, it would seem that we have found the answer to our question: for Rahner the "yes" and "no" are equally free. So it would appear. But, as we shall see, the answer turns out not to be that easy, for we find other Rahnerian texts that appear to say the very opposite. In contexts where he rebuts the "tragic fate" interpretation of sin by demonstrating the human capacity to incur real guilt, Rahner emphasizes the complete freedom and definitive nature of the "no" to God. On the other hand, different contexts force him to hedge the equality of the "no" and the "yes."

For example, in his article "Grace and Freedom," we discover Rahner arguing against the equality of the "yes" and "no." Early in the article he shows that morally good and "morally bad actions" are both

²³ *Foundations* 97 (*Grundkurs* 104: "Bei unseren Überlegungen über das Wesen subjektiver Freiheit kommt es darauf an, zu begreifen, daß die Freiheit der Selbstverfügung eine Freiheit gegenüber dem Subjekt als ganzem ist, eine Freiheit zur Endgültigkeit und eine Freiheit, die in einem freien absoluten Ja oder Nein gegenüber jenem Woraufhin und Wovonher der Transzendenz vollzogen wird, das wir 'Gott' nennen").

made possible by the supernatural existential.²⁴ But later he makes clear that

the morally good and the morally bad action, good and evil, are not however, in themselves, morally or even ontologically perfectly equal possibilities of freedom. Evil in the source of its freedom and in its objective embodiments has less of being and less of freedom. To that extent it can and must be said that in its deficiency as such it requires no origination by God. . . . [This] show[s] the creature's capacity to retain "something" wholly its own, the responsibility for which cannot be shifted to God, yet which does not require (like a good deed) to be returned to him thankfully as his grace.²⁵

Does this passage contradict the "straightforward" statement, quoted above, that "freedom . . . [can be] actualized in a free and absolute 'yes' or 'no' "? On the surface of this dense text, it does appear that Rahner denies the equality of the transcendental "no" and the transcendental "yes," and so contradicts his other statements on the question. A closer reading, however, overturns this interpretation. Rahner has just given his answer to the traditional problem of grace and human freedom. He lays down two truths which cannot be reduced to each other: every human act has (1) "total origin from God in every respect" and (2) "independent freedom."²⁶ Human freedom must not be pitted against "origin from God" in a facile answer to the problem of evil. But this raises "the problem of the relation between God and wicked freedom."²⁷ Is God then the origin of evil? No, says Rahner, for an evil act "has less of being and less of freedom," and this privation requires no origination by God. Rahner seems to be saying that an evil act, insofar as it is evil, lacks freedom and being; only these find their source in God. The focus is on the act in itself, not on the transcendental subject of the act. An act's level of freedom and being may fluctuate.

It should be obvious by now that in this text Rahner is not discussing the transcendental "yes" and "no," but categorical transgressions of the moral structures of the created world, i.e., "morally bad action" thought of objectively. This recognition may not solve all the riddles posed by this obscure passage, but it does clear Rahner of the charge of contradiction. Within Rahner's system it makes perfect sense to draw

²⁴ Karl Rahner, ed., *Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi* (New York: Crossroad, 1975) s.v. "Grace and Freedom," by Karl Rahner; German original: *Sacramentum Mundi: Theologisches Lexikon für die Praxis*, 4 vols., ed. Karl Rahner et al. (Freiburg: Herder, 1967-1969).

²⁵ Ibid. s.v. "Gnade und Freiheit": "Die sittlich gute und die sittlich böse Tat, das Gute und das Böse sind aber an sich selbst weder moralisch noch auch ontologisch zwei völlig gleiche Möglichkeiten der Freiheit. Das Böse ist im Ursprung seiner Freiheit und in seiner Objektivation weniger seiend und weniger Freiheit. Insofern kann und muß gesagt werden, daß es in seiner Defizienz als solcher keiner Herkünftigkeit von Gott bedarf. Diese Feststellung . . . zeigt aber die Möglichkeit der Kreatur, "etwas" allein für sich zu behalten, was weder auf Gott abgewälzt werden darf noch (wie die gute Tat) als seine Gnade mit Dank an ihn zurückgegeben werden muß."

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

a distinction between the level of being and freedom in good actions and that in evil actions, looked at merely objectively. After all, such actions occur within a situation already partly determined by impersonal structures and the guilt of others. Our activity may reflect those sinful structures rather than our own subjective and free "no" to God.

It will become clear as we proceed that, in every case where Rahner argues for a quantitative distinction between the level of freedom in the "no" and that in the "yes," he speaks not of the transcendental "no" but of a categorical "no," i.e., of sin in an analogous sense.²⁸ For his main premise, the full freedom and definitive nature of both the transcendental "yes" and the transcendental "no," will not allow of such quantification:

It seems to be impossible to have a 'more or less' with regard to freedom, since the subject either decides or does not decide about itself as a whole definitively. . . . [T]he decision of freedom which takes place in the *whole* of a life, does not actually admit of degrees, that in it the subject has decided completely about himself and that the possibility of freedom which was imposed on the individual subject is really completely converted into this definitive decision.²⁹

So it seems that Rahner is very serious in his claim that the transcendental act ("yes" or "no") is a definitive decision about God and the total self.

Another Difficult Text

But just as we think we have solved the riddle, we discover in *Foundations of Christian Faith*, a new section entitled "'Yes' and 'No' to God are not Parallel."³⁰ This section begins only five pages after the affirmation of the one freedom "which is actualized in a free and absolute 'yes' or 'no' to that term and source of transcendence which we call God." Here Rahner argues that, though the "no" is "one of freedom's possibilities,"³¹ it cannot fulfill the human person. To the contrary, it is "something abortive, something which miscarries and fails, something which is self-destructive and self-contradictory."³² Again we find Rahner denying the complete equality of the "yes" and the "no." But this time there is no doubt that he refers to the transcendental "no." And in keeping with this, he makes not a quantitative

²⁸ This important Rahnerian concept is discussed below.

²⁹ Karl Rahner, "Guilt, Responsibility and Punishment," in *Investigations* 6.207 ("Schuld—Verantwortung—Strafe in der Sicht der Katholischen Theologie," in *Schriften* 6.250: "Ein Mehr oder Weniger von Freiheit scheint es nicht geben zu können, weil das Subjekt entweder über sich als Ganzes definitiv entscheidet oder nicht, und darum der Begriff der Totalität und Radikalität des Betroffenseins des handelnden Subjekts durch seine Freiheitsentscheidung zum Wesen der Freiheit gehört").

³⁰ *Foundations* 102 (*Grundkurs* 108: "Die Ungleichheit von Ja oder Nein").

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.* (*Grundkurs* 108: "gleichzeitig Mißglückte, Mißratene, Stechenbleibende, sich selbst gleichsam Verneinende und Aufhebende.").

distinction in the level of freedom but a qualitative distinction between the results of the "yes" and that of the "no."

We find the same qualification in another article, "The Punishment of Sins,"³³ where Rahner argues that the "no" to God cannot actualize human nature as can a "yes," but rather it sets up an inner contradiction between itself and the supernatural existential, which constitutes the essence of hell. Sin, he claims in this way, is its own punishment.

It is important to recognize that Rahner's concern in these two difficult texts is to keep clear of any implication that human beings may finally escape God and their created nature by authentically realizing themselves in a "no" to God, by becoming in reality absolute. One might have gotten the opposite impression from such statements as "freedom . . . [can be] actualized in a free and absolute 'yes' or 'no' to . . . God."³⁴ Rahner is well aware, however, that to argue for the equality of the "yes" and the "no" at this point would erase the difference between heaven and hell, and create a second end of human being alongside the vision of God. This he refuses to do.

An Unresolved Tension

How may we put all this together? Does Rahner really hold unequivocally that authentic freedom can be "actualized in a free and absolute 'yes' or 'no' "³⁵ to God? Are the two fundamental options of "yes" and "no" to God equal, though opposite, realizations of freedom? Or does he view the two possibilities as unequal in some respects?

It may be helpful to recall the two nonreducible theological facts about the relationship between God and human freedom which Rahner lays down in the article "Grace and Freedom": that humans have their "total origin from God in every respect" but also have "independent freedom."³⁶ As Rahner shifts back and forth between these two propositions, the possibility of a free "no" to God is seen in a different light. In contexts where he wants to demonstrate the possibility of real sin and full human responsibility for sin (the second "fact"), he emphasizes the equally free and definitive nature of both the "no" and the "yes." On the other hand, when he wants to avoid compromising the omnicausality of God and the eternal and total dependence of the creature on the Creator (the first "fact"), he views the "no" as infinitely qualitatively inferior to the "yes."

But can it really be both ways? Can the "no" be equal to the "yes" in its freedom to establish something definitive and to decide irrevocably about God, if it is not equal to the "yes" in its ability to fulfill human nature and to accomplish that at which it aims, to be absolute? How

³³ *Encyclopedia of Theology* s.v. "The Punishment of Sin."

³⁴ *Foundations* 97 (*Grundkurs* 104). ³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Encyclopedia of Theology* s.v. "Grace and Freedom."

can an act which is "self-destructive and self-contradictory" (the "no" to God) be free in the same sense as an act that is the complete and blessed fulfillment of human nature?

Clearly it cannot be both ways. Rahner's denial of the equality of the "yes" and "no" in the one context demonstrates that he cannot hold to their full equality in the other. If they are not equal in actuality, they cannot have been equal in potentiality. To maintain the abortive, self-destructive, and nonsensical nature of the "no" to God (as we must in Christian theology), we must admit that this "no" to God cannot be free in the same sense and to the same degree as a "yes." But Rahner does not make this admission. Why? The answer is simple: it would contradict his claim to have demonstrated the possibility of the Christian doctrine of sin as a free and definitive "no" to the true God, the central thesis in his doctrine of sin. On the other hand, Rahner cannot bring himself to assign full freedom in every respect to the "no" to God, for this would posit a second end to human nature alongside the vision of God.³⁷ Thus he leaves us with an unresolved conceptual tension in his doctrine of sin.

A brief look at Rahner's concept of freedom will show why there is such pressure to limit the freedom attributed to the "no," pressure which he resists at the price of inconsistency. Freedom in Rahner's strict sense is attributable only to the "yes," for freedom, strictly speaking, is the subjective grasp of one's own entire being (*Beisichsein*, "being-with-self"),³⁸ so that there is no distinction between what one is objectively (or by nature) and what one is subjectively (or as a person). A free act is "a coming to oneself, a being present to oneself, with oneself."³⁹ One is what one wills, and one wills what one is. This state is intrinsically definitive, for all potentiality is actualized.

We can see that these conditions are fulfilled in the "yes." A "yes" to God is simultaneously a "yes" to all created reality with its created structures and laws, including created human nature. Becoming sub-

³⁷ The ambiguity in Rahner's treatment of freedom is also found in his commentators. E.g., when Thomas L. Knoebel speaks of the freedom of the "no," he uses the unqualified term "freedom," but when he speaks of the "yes" he says, "it is clear that true Christian freedom consists in self-surrender after the model provided by Jesus" ("Grace in the Theology of Karl Rahner: A Systematic Presentation" [Ph.D. diss., Fordham University, 1980] 202). Further on, he says that the "yes" is "freedom's highest possibility" (ibid. 205). And again, he claims that grace is the ground of "freedom's task calling man to respond to his Ultimate Horizon in an ultimately full and definitive 'yes'" (ibid. 208). But he reverts to another understanding of freedom when he says, "Freedom, ultimately, is the fundamental option: self-realization in the direction of God or a radical self-refusal towards God" (ibid. 201). If he takes Rahner's statement in all seriousness, why does Knoebel find it necessary to speak only of the "yes" as "true freedom"? And why speak of "freedom's task," if not to imply that freedom can be fulfilled only in the "yes" and not in the "no"? What kind of freedom is expressed in a "no"? Knoebel does not raise these questions, for he merely reproduces the contradiction found in Rahner.

³⁸ This important concept will be dealt with below.

³⁹ *Hearers of the Word* 98.

jectively what it is objectively (as God's creature), the human being fulfills and actualizes the created potential of its nature; it utilizes freedom for its true purpose, for loving God and conforming to the will of God. And, since there is a pure coincidence between person and nature, there is no desire or possibility of reconsideration. Temptation is no longer possible, its ground—the distance between what we wish to be and what God has created us to be—has been removed. Rahner's idea of an unambiguous and definitive "yes" is, therefore, a consistent and stable element within his system.

But this cannot be said of the "no." By uttering "no," we intend a world without God, without objective structures and laws, a world in which we are absolute. This cannot be. It is intrinsically, ontologically impossible. Regardless of the effort, we cannot become a "no" to God. Therefore the "no" cannot establish something intrinsically definitive. Created nature remains as a lure, tempting us to reconsider and to freely conform to our true being and destiny. The concept of the free and definitive "no" is, therefore, an inconsistent and unstable element in Rahner's thought.

The only way to conceive of the "no" as definitive is to imagine that God establishes its definitiveness extrinsically by refusing to allow any reconsideration of the refusal. The door of hell would then be locked from the outside. But this is something Rahner devotes an article to denying. In the essay "The Punishment of Sins," he argues at length that the punishment for sin—ultimately hell—is not imposed extrinsically, but is inherent in the very nature of sin. Sin is its own punishment.⁴⁰ Hell's gate is locked from the inside.

THE FORGIVENESS OF SIN

Now we approach Rahner's understanding of sin from another angle, the possibility of the forgiveness of sin. If sin in the strict sense is a transcendental "no" to God, a definitive refusal of God's gracious offer of self-communication, how can it be forgiven?

Analogous Sin?

The concept of analogous sin is central to Rahner's understanding of the forgiveness of sins. Not every act which is designated "sin" in Scripture and tradition is sin in the strict sense. Venial sin, original sin, and concupiscence, according to Rahner, must be understood as sin only in an analogous sense.

Attempting to clarify the distinction between sin in the strict sense and sin in an analogous sense, Rahner defines the human person as a process of movement out of an "original" (*ursprünglicher*) person into an "intermediary reality" (*Mittleren*) and back again to the "achieved"

⁴⁰ *Encyclopedia of Theology* s.v. "The Punishment of Sin."

(*endgültigen*) person.⁴¹ The "original" person is the human being, as it were, before the transcendental decision, as "transcendent spirit and freedom before God."⁴² The "intermediary reality" is a partial objectification of the original person in the medium of the world.⁴³ The "achieved" person is the human person who has subjectively exercised the transcendental capacity to choose what he or she will be definitively.

Rahner's concept of an "intermediary reality" demands closer inspection, since it is the key to his explanation of analogous sin. According to Rahner the medium into which we project ourselves—material world and the preceding history of spirit in the world—has its own preexisting alien and alienating structures, so that it cannot be fully shaped by the subjectivity of the original person.⁴⁴ So, the "intermediary reality," the total human as it appears objectively in the world in activity, is not simple but composite. It is composed of the intentionality of the original person and the preexisting structures of the world. This results in a fundamental ambiguity, for there is no way to discover whether or not a particular objectively evil act truly mirrors the intentionality of a subjective "no" to God. For it may reflect only the preexisting evil structure of the medium into which the subject must project itself.

Venial sin,⁴⁵ original sin,⁴⁶ and concupiscence⁴⁷ point to aspects of this "intermediate reality" whose objectively evil characteristics mirror only the preexisting evil structures within which the human must make itself concrete; they do not reveal the true subjectivity of the original person. These are not, therefore, sin in the most proper sense of the term, but only in an analogous sense.

An illustration may help us visualize Rahner's point. Suppose I walk into a room in which a slide projector is pointed toward a screen on which there is an illuminated image. I immediately assume that the image is the result of the projector. But it is possible that the projector contains no slide and is shining only unfiltered light onto a preexisting image fixed to the screen. Or the phenomenon of the image could be the composite result of any number of possible combinations of partial

⁴¹ "Guilt and its Remission," in *Investigations* 2.272–73 (*Schriften* 2.288–89).

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Rahner uses the distinction between mortal and venial sin to develop a Roman Catholic sense of Luther's formula *simul justus et peccator*; see "Justified and Sinner at the Same Time," in *Investigations* 6.218–30 (*Schriften* 6.262–76).

⁴⁶ Among Rahner's many articles on original sin, see "The Sin of Adam" in *Investigations* 11.247–62 (*Schriften* 92.259–75); *Encyclopedia of Theology* s.v. "Original Sin"; and *Foundations* 106–15. For an extensive study of Rahner's view of original sin, see George Vandervelde, *Original Sin: Two Major Trends in Contemporary Roman Catholic Reinterpretation* (Washington: University Press of America, 1981).

⁴⁷ See Karl Rahner, "The Theological Concept of Concupiscentia," in *Investigations* 1.347–82 (*Schriften* 1.377–414).

images from the two sources. The image alone cannot disclose the true nature of the projector's "intentionality."

The point of this illustration is obvious. The transcendental "yes" or "no" must be achieved in categorical activity in the world, but the objective character of this activity (the image on the screen) cannot provide an infallible indication of the nature of the transcendental decision. An evil deed may reflect a "no" to God, but it may instead reflect merely the preexisting evil structures, while the true intentionality of the act is really a "yes" to God. A person may deny a certain concept of God and at the same time affirm the person of God transcendently. The contrary is also true, for even a good deed may after all hide a subjective "no" to God.

The Dilemma of Forgiveness

Now we come face to face with another deeply rooted problem in Rahner's doctrine of sin. How can his theory take account of the scriptural and ecumenical confession that God forgives sin? Sin in the proper sense is by Rahner's definition definitive, so how can it be forgiven? Original sin, concupiscence, and venial sin can be removed, but these are sin only in an analogous sense, as something we suffer. So, what is there to forgive?

To be sure, Rahner speaks of the forgiveness of sins (*vergebende Gnade*).⁴⁸ He writes about "God's free and forgiving self-communication."⁴⁹ In his article "Salvation IV. Theology,"⁵⁰ he argues for the need of redemption from "guilt" and for the possibility of its forgiveness. Because of guilt's nature as a "state of original sin" (*erbsündliche Schuldsituation*) and "the action of individual freedom" (*Tat der einzelnen Freiheit*) humans cannot extricate themselves from its snare.⁵¹ On the other hand, redemption from guilt is possible "ultimately because even his freedom is finite and remains comprised within God's creative love."⁵² We must now examine the key text at length:

Guilt in the concrete order as "sin" is the free "no" to God's direct, intimate love in the offer of his self-communication. . . . Through a "no" to divine love of that kind, man of himself can no longer reckon on the continuance of that love Only if that love freely endures even in the face of such a refusal and, as divine and of infinite power to set free, goes beyond that guilt, is forgiveness

⁴⁸ *Encyclopedia of Theology* s.v. "Grace II. Theology."

⁴⁹ *Foundations* 116. These words appear in the title to chapter 4. The full title is "Man as the Event of God's Free and Forgiving Self-Communication."

⁵⁰ *Encyclopedia of Theology* s.v. "Salvation IV. Theology."

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.* (*Theologisches Lexikon* s.v. "Erlösung": "letztlich weil auch seine Freiheit endlich ist und von der schöpferischen Liebe Gottes umgriffen bleibt.")

possible, i.e., is there any possibility of man freely loving, responding in a genuine dialogue, made possible by God.⁵³

We must read this text carefully, for on the surface it seems that Rahner argues for the necessity and the possibility of forgiveness for the transcendental "no" to God, i.e., for sin in the strict sense.⁵⁴ Upon analysis, however, this interpretation breaks down.

First, a general consideration. In the first section of this article we discovered that Rahner argues for a concept of freedom in which "something of final and definitive validity" is achieved, and for a freedom which can be finalized "in a free and absolute 'yes' or 'no' . . . to God."⁵⁵ This free decision "does not actually admit of degrees," but is rather the occasion in which "the subject is really completely converted into this definitive decision."⁵⁶ It would be odd, to say the least, if, after having argued so clearly for the definitive nature of the free "yes" or "no" to God, Rahner now proposed the opposite, the reversibility of the free "no." It would seem reasonable then to approach this text with a bit of suspicion, for either Rahner contradicts himself by affirming that the "free no" is both definitive and not definitive at the same time and in the same way, or he does not mean the same thing by a "free no" in both instances. I will make a case for the latter.

Earlier in the same article, "Salvation," Rahner points out that Christianity, unlike "pessimistic existentialism," acknowledges that humankind is "capable of salvation" (*erlösungsfähig*).⁵⁷ Redemption is a possibility "ultimately because even his freedom is finite and remains comprised within God's love."⁵⁸ Note that here he speaks of "finite" freedom, whereas in other discussions of freedom he speaks of an "ineradicable" (*unausweichlich*)⁵⁹ and "definitive" decision. What can Rahner mean by "finite freedom"? Given his understanding of the

⁵³ Ibid. (*Theologisches Lexikon*, s.v. "Erlösung": "Schuld ist in der konkreten Ordnung als 'Sünde' das freie (und als Freiheit auf Endgültigkeit zielende) Nein zu Gottes unmittelbarer intimer Liebe im Angebot seiner Selbstmitteilung . . . Nach einem Nein solcher göttlichen Liebe gegenüber kann der Mensch von sich aus nicht mehr mit dem Aufrechterhaltenbleiben dieser Liebe rechnen . . . Nur wenn diese Liebe sich frei auch diesem Nein gegenüber als bleibend setzt und als göttliche von unendlich befreiender Macht diese Schuld überholt, ist Vergebung, d. h. die Möglichkeit freier Liebe des Menschen [als wesentlich dialogisch antwortende und von Gott her ermächtigte], möglich.")

⁵⁴ Anselm Grün, in his study of Rahner's doctrine of redemption, refers to this text as documenting Rahner's view of the forgiveness of sins, without noting any of the difficulties I have pointed out. Grün is answering the self-posed question, "Verfälscht er damit nicht das traditionelle Verständnis der Erlösung?" The text under discussion is quoted by Grün as evidence that a negative answer should be given to this charge (*Erlösung durch das Kreuz: Karl Rahners Beitrag zu einem heutigen Erlösungsverständnis* [Münsterschwarzach: Vier-Türme, 1975] 41-43).

⁵⁵ *Foundations* 97 (*Grundkurs* 104).

⁵⁶ "Guilt, Responsibility and Punishment," in *Investigations* 2.207 (Schriften 2.250).

⁵⁷ *Encyclopedia of Theology* s.v. "Salvation IV. Theology."

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ *Foundations* 96 (*Grundkurs* 103).

"intermediate reality," he must mean a freedom which is conditioned by the finite and evil situation within which we make our decisions. But such "finite" freedom is not the same as freedom in Rahner's most proper sense of the term, and therefore is not capable of "sin" in the most proper sense.

Somewhat further on in his discussion of salvation Rahner makes the point that only God can redeem human beings from their freely incurred guilt, because "it aims at finality, definitiveness" (*auf Endgültigkeit zielende*).⁶⁰ Again, note the difference in the language. In his reflections on the nature of freedom, discussed above, Rahner makes definitiveness and finality the *sine qua non* of freedom. He says, "Freedom therefore is not the capacity to do something which is always able to be revised, but the capacity to do something final and definitive. It is the capacity of a subject who by this freedom is to achieve his final and irrevocable self."⁶¹ But in the present context the "free no" only "aims" (*zielende*) at finality. This subtle change is highly significant, for finality is no longer of the essence of freedom. Given this change, can he be speaking of freedom in the most proper sense?

Finally, Rahner comes to the second aspect which grounds the human capacity for salvation. In infinite love God wills to endure the human "free no" and go beyond the guilt by renewing the offer of self-communication. Let us repeat Rahner's words: "Only if that love freely endures even in the face of such a refusal and, as divine and of infinite power to set free, goes beyond that guilt, is forgiveness possible, i.e., is there any possibility of man freely loving, responding in a genuine dialogue."⁶²

Several things stand out in this statement. First, God brings to bear "the infinite power to set free" (*unendlich befreiender Macht*). Evidently the "free no" (*das freie Nein*) under discussion is not so free after all, for the subject of that "no" must be "set free." Second, God "goes beyond" (*überholt*) the supposedly "free" no. In going beyond it, does not God treat the "free no" as less than definitive and ineradicable? Obviously so. Third, note what the "going beyond" guilt does for humans. It provides, not forgiveness itself, but the possibility (*Möglichkeit*) of forgiveness, which is the same as "man freely loving (*freier Liebe des Menschen*), responding in a genuine dialogue." It seems, therefore, that the original "free no" could not have been a fully free "no" to the true God (freedom in the proper sense). If the first "no" were really a free negative response of the transcendental subject to the true self-communication of God, then God could not "go beyond" it, for to do so would be to surpass the original offer of self-communication.⁶³ For,

⁶⁰ *Encyclopedia of Theology* s.v. "Salvation IV. Theology."

⁶¹ *Foundations* 96 (*Grundkurs* 103).

⁶² *Encyclopedia of Theology* s.v. "Salvation IV. Theology."

⁶³ Here, as with the problem of freedom, Rahner's commentators reproduce his ambiguity. For example, J. Norman King, in *The God of Forgiveness and Healing in the*

since God has nothing new or more to offer than God's self, there can be no grounds for the hope of "man freely loving, responding in a genuine dialogue" in the future any more than in the past.

How are we to explain this tension? I believe we find exposed here one of the seams where Rahner has unsuccessfully attempted to sew together traditional dogma and his metaphysical anthropology. On the one hand, he finds the existentialist view of freedom—a radical openness and a capacity for definitive self-creation—helpful in explaining the traditional doctrine of sin.⁶⁴ It helps us understand how humans can become sinners before God and be held responsible for their evil decisions. On the other hand, the tradition also holds that sinners are redeemable and that God forgives real sin. Here the former concept of freedom becomes a liability. How can real sin be forgiven and the real

Theology of Karl Rahner (Washington: University Press of America, 1982) 30, quotes Rahner's definition of guilt (found in "Guilt, Responsibility, and Punishment" 6) as "the total and definitive decision of man against God." King himself says, "As a negative act of freedom, guilt, at its deepest, transcendental level, is a refusal of that infinite, self-bestowing mystery" (30). But later he refers to God as that "infinite nearness" which "forgives its [i.e., freedom's] most destructive use" (33). In the next section (34–46) King sets out the "fundamental option" in good Rahnerian form, but when he comes down to the end he adds two words which change the meaning. He summarizes, "Guilt is the free, culpable, and of itself definitive 'no' to and personal betrayal of the infinitely near . . . [God]" (46). I use the emphasis to mark the qualification King makes to Rahner's ordinary way of expressing this idea.

Finally, King almost recognizes the problem which I have pointed out. He says, "The removal of guilt would demand a free repudiation and reversal of one's basic option. Yet, if the original act has sought to incorporate the whole self definitively, it is not easy to explain how such a total transformation is possible" (64). But he does not follow through to the real depths of the problem, for in the very next line he switches, just as Rahner did, from speaking of the transcendental act to a discussion of categorical acts: "Such a reversal can only occur to the extent that the attempted integration does not fully succeed" (64). In the Rahnerian thought world this unsuccessful evil act must be considered sin only in an analogous sense, i.e., the evil act reflects the evil situation in which the subject must express itself rather than the true intentionality of the transcendental subject. Nevertheless, King pursues the logic of this reversible fundamental "no" to God, and in doing so coins the term "new fundamental option" (65), an obvious contradiction in terms which empties Rahner's fundamental option of its transcendentality and voids its usefulness as a hermeneutical tool to explain the possibility of a final and definitive "no" to the true God. The free "no" to God of the fundamental option turns out, in King's rendering, not to be, as Rahner affirms so often, "the total and definitive decision of man against God." King compounds the problem which he dimly perceives, but ultimately the source of the contradiction lies in Rahner himself.

⁶⁴ Robert L. Hurd points out that Rahner's doctrine of freedom was hammered out in implicit dialogue with, on the one hand, the Parmenidean sacrifice of human autonomy for the sake of Absolute being, and on the other hand, the modern notion (found in Marx, Feuerbach, Nietzsche, and Sartre) that Absolute Being must be negated in the name of the open-ended, self-creating human being. Rahner argues rather that human freedom finds its ground in dependence on God ("The Concept of Freedom in the Thought of Karl Rahner," *Listening* 17 (1982) 138–52). What Hurd does not say is that in spite of his rejection of the modern objection that God is a hindrance to human freedom, Rahner accepts the modern notion of freedom as definitive self-creation, grounded though it is in the supernatural existential.

sinner be redeemed, if sin is definitive and ineradicable by definition? Rahner does not resolve this difficulty, and he leaves himself exposed to the charge of inconsistency. The traditional doctrine that real sinners are redeemable forces him to use the same terms to describe guilt (sin) in this discussion of redemption as he does in his studies on freedom and the nature of sin (i.e., a free "no" to the self-communication of God). But, through subtle linguistic shifts, these terms are given another meaning, a meaning which approximates what Rahner calls "sin in an analogous sense."⁶⁵ The "free no" here obviously means a categorial act which is conditioned by the situation of finitude and original sin. Only in this way is it understandable how God could go "beyond it" and make it possible to revise this "no". But where then is the "forgiveness of sins"?

THE ROOT OF THE PROBLEM

We have exposed the internal tensions caused by Rahner's notion of a free and definitive "no" to God and surfaced the tensions this idea creates with the traditional Christian teaching on sin. We will now seek to discover the tap root of these problems. Where within Rahner's theology lies the decisive commitment which determines his doctrine of sin to be as we have found it?

The Hermeneutics of Retrieval

Rahner's stated aim is to translate obscure (but true) church dogma into language understandable by modern people. Surely the first step in such a procedure must be to deal fairly with the texts and the historical context in which church dogma is found. The translation of the original meaning into the new language must be shown to arise from within the old texts. But Rahner does not do this. He rarely indicates the source, much less gives a historical context, for what he asserts as the Christian doctrine of sin. And without this context in the sources how can Rahner forestall the objection that he is emptying Christian teaching of its original content and substituting an alien content?

I believe Rahner is at least to some degree guilty of this substitution in his doctrine of sin. He takes words and phrases, such as "freedom," "offense against God," "sin," and "responsibility," from the sources and pours into them a meaning determined by his transcendental anthropology. For example, his strict definition of sin as a fully free and definitive "no" to God renders many of the central biblical texts on sin incomprehensible. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23 [RSV]). Does this text mean that all have sinned in an analogous sense or in the strict sense? The first alternative weakens

⁶⁵ *Foundations* 111 (*Grundkurs* 118: "in einem analogen Sinn gebraucht wird").

this classic statement to a triviality, and the second has it proclaim universal damnation. Examples could be multiplied.

Thomas Sheehan⁶⁶ points out the debt Rahner owes to Martin Heidegger's book on Kant, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* (1929). In *Spirit in the World*, Rahner used Heidegger's method of retrieval (*Wiederholung*) to reinterpret Thomas Aquinas. The method of retrieval reverses the common axiom that actuality is higher than potentiality. To the contrary, the unsaid (potentiality) in a text is alive, whereas the said (actuality) is merely the "has-been."⁶⁷ Thus Rahner seeks not the historical Aquinas but the "original philosophical event in Thomas."⁶⁸

Rahner does something very similar in his reinterpretation of the church dogma concerning sin. He seeks his way past the words of the texts to the (this time) theological event itself which he can then express in the language of his metaphysical anthropology. I will grant that, perhaps, retrieval is a defensible method of interpreting a philosophical text, at least given Rahner's definition of metaphysics as an analytic of the metaphysical act which human being is.⁶⁹ But, unless theology is also thought of as an analytic of human being, the method of retrieval should not be applied to normative or authoritative Christian texts in the same way as to philosophical texts. In philosophical texts the "unsaid" is always already with us as our being. But the autonomy, and hence the substance, of Christian theology stands or falls with the premise that the "unsaid" can be had only by means of the "said" of the authoritative texts.

Rahner's fully developed idea of the supernatural existential puts this autonomy in serious jeopardy. In his later writings he begins to speak of a twofold revelation, "transcendental" and "categorical-historical" (*kategorial-geschichtlicher*).⁷⁰ Transcendental revelation is

⁶⁶ Thomas Sheehan, *Karl Rahner* 177-80.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* 180.

⁶⁸ *Spirit* 1 (*Geist* 11).

⁶⁹ *Hearers* 33 (*Hörer* 49: "eine metaphysische Analytik des menschlichen Seins").

⁷⁰ *Encyclopedia of Theology* s.v. "Revelation"; see also *Foundations* 140-46 (*Grundkurs* 145-51). In the original text of *Hörer des Wortes* (1941), the notion of revelation is reserved for what we think of as historical revelation in the usual sense. Only with J. B. Metz's revisions in the 2d edition (1963) is the later notion of a twofold revelation introduced. Metz mentions these additions in the preface (ix), referring to changes in the text itself as well as to the notes at the bottom of the page. Note the following example. On page 73 (*Hörer*, 2d ed. 91), Rahner begins to address an important question: "How can a Christian anthropology and metaphysics expound the nature of man so that, without violating his transcendence . . . this transcendence does not anticipate the content of a possible revelation?" Metz's page and a half footnote completely contradicts the meaning of the original text. According to Metz, "a concept of revelation that takes its starting point with man and his spirituality distorts the comprehension of revelation *interiorly* [sic: the German text reads: "*immanentistisch*", obviously a technical term meaning something like "in the manner of immanentism"] only when it comprehends the essence of man without taking into account his free historical transcendence (subjectivity), that is, when it refuses to acknowledge the inner different [sic: difference] between "nature"

the universal presence of the self-giving God to humans in the supernatural existential. Categorical/historical revelation is "the historical mediation and conceptual objectivization" (*die geschichtliche Vermitteltheit, die gegenständliche Objektivierung*) of transcendental revelation.⁷¹ Historical revelation brings nothing which is not already unthematically present to humans in transcendental revelation. Rahner's lack of attention to the words and historical meaning of scriptural and traditional doctrines may find its root here. It is as if he already has access to the "unsaid" in the texts of Scripture and dogma, and therefore he need not bother with the "said."⁷²

This becomes obvious as we examine Rahner's understanding of the "unsaid" of the Christian doctrine of sin. I have pointed out already that his definition of freedom as complete self-determination through a "yes" or "no" to God creates serious internal tensions. On the one hand, the "yes" and the "no" must be equal in their freedom, i.e., their ability to accomplish something definitive. On the other hand, the "no" cannot be the equal of the "yes," for that would make hell just as much a fulfillment of human nature as heaven.

If sin in the strict sense is a free and definitive "no" to God, then sin cannot be universal, as the scriptural and confessional documents of the Church seem to say, for that would imply universal damnation. Nor is sin in the strict sense forgivable, as the Church has always taught, for that would deny the definitiveness, and therefore the freedom of the "no" to God.

So it seems that Rahner has not allowed the texts which speak of sin's universality and forgivability to speak for themselves and to be heard on their own terms. But what accounts for this deafness to the texts?

Human or Divine Freedom?

Whenever Rahner deals with the doctrine of sin, he brings with him a ready-made notion of freedom worked out in his metaphysical anthropology. This metaphysical doctrine of freedom becomes the central, all-determining thesis in his doctrine of sin and renders superfluous any serious hermeneutical study of the scriptural and ecclesiastical statements on sin.

and "grace," of the essence of man as historical spirit" (73–75 n. 2). For Metz "transcendence" obviously does "anticipate the content of a possible revelation," albeit only by grace.

⁷¹ *Encyclopedia of Theology* s.v. "Revelation."

⁷² William J. Hill, O.P., pointed out the same problem in Rahner's interpretation of the documents of the Council of Trent. "What Father Rahner offers is an interpretation, but one that goes against the literal meaning of these words of the magisterium, and there is about it a certain gratuitousness at the very least. . . . The procedure suggests that the author has reasoned to a personal opinion highly complex and quite original, and then has been forced to distinguish away an authoritative pronouncement in its defense" ("Uncreated Grace—A Critique of Karl Rahner," *The Thomist* 27 (1963) 354.

Rahner's view of freedom is intimately related to his view of the meaning of being. Being, for the Rahner of *Spirit in the World* and *Hearers of the Word*, means *Beisichsein*, "being-with-self," i.e., being a fully self-possessed, self-determining subject. Only God has being (being-with-self) to the fullest degree, absolutely,⁷³ but all beings may be said to "have being"⁷⁴ insofar as they are a "being-with-self." Rahner uses the same terminology when he speaks of freedom. A free act is "a coming to oneself, a being present to oneself, with oneself."⁷⁵ Clearly, being and freedom are correlative concepts for him, a relationship that Klaus Fischer captures when he observes that "freedom thus becomes another word for the 'being-with-self' (*Bei-sich-sein*) of the Spirit as such."⁷⁶ Insofar as a being lacks being (being-with-self), it lacks freedom; the extent to which it has freedom, it has being. Just as an anticipation (*Vorgriff*) of being in general is the condition of the possibility of knowing the being of particular beings, so an anticipation of the absolute good is the condition of the possibility of the freedom to judge the good of particular goods.

Both being and freedom are analogical concepts, fully realized only in God. Commenting on Rahner's concept of *Selbstvollzug*, Leonardo R. Silos, S.J., remarks, "causality as self-actuation [*Selbstvollzug*] must be conceived analogically. For it is predicated of the transient action of a purely material being as well as of the free creative act of God. . . . The analogy of self-actuation is the analogy of Being itself."⁷⁷ God is the being who has being absolutely. Though Rahner does not develop the parallel, it would be consistent with his line of argument in *Hearers of the Word* to affirm that only God has freedom in the proper sense.⁷⁸ God's being is a freely willed being. God is fully what God wills, and God is nothing which God does not will. Humans, however, have neither being nor freedom absolutely. In analogy to divine absolute freedom (and divine "having-being"), humans have freedom insofar as their willing and their particular "having-being" coincide. It also

⁷³ *Hearers* 50 (*Hörer* 68).

⁷⁴ *Hearers* (2d ed.) speaks of the "analogy of having-being" (*Analogie der "Seinshabe"*) rather than the "analogy of being." I follow that terminology here.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* 98. The emphasis is that of the translator and is not in the original (*Hörer* 122: " . . . ein Besitznehmen von sich selbst, von der Wirklichkeit seiner eigenen schöpferischen Macht über sich selbst. Sie ist also ein Zu-sich-selber-Kommen, ein Beisich-sein in sich selbst").

⁷⁶ Klaus Fischer, *Der Mensch als Geheimnis: Die Anthropologie Karl Rahners* (Freiburg: Herder, 1974) 152.

⁷⁷ Leonardo R. Silos, S.J., "A Note on the Notion of 'Selbstvollzug' in Karl Rahner," *Philippine Studies* 13 (1965) 464-65.

⁷⁸ Thomas L. Knoebel, in his reading of *Hearers*, notices the same relationship between divine and human freedom which I have noted. He says, "Rahner's definition of freedom as it exists for absolute reality, therefore, is the definition which serves throughout all of his writings as the goal of human freedom as well" (*Grace in the Theology of Karl Rahner* 197). Knoebel does not, however, notice the problem of attributing to the human being the possibility of a definitive decision about God.

follows, since the human "having-being" is a free creative act of God, that human freedom is at the analogical maximum only when the human being perfectly wills that which God wills.⁷⁹ A human "no" to God would contradict the analogical concept of freedom, for a "no" to God would also be a "no" to the human "having-being." Human will and human "having-being" would be at odds. One would not be what one willed, but, to the contrary, would be what one did not will. The trajectory of *Hearers of the Word* is obviously in tension with Rahner's later theology of freedom.⁸⁰

Hearers of the Word has only hints of Rahner's fully developed view of the theology of freedom. In this early work, human freedom is thought of primarily as freedom vis-à-vis particular goods, just as conceptual knowledge is knowledge of particular entities. But, as his later work moves into the unambiguously theological arena, he avails himself of dogma and theologoumena which enable him to say more than he could when writing philosophy of religion.

The scholastic theology of Cajetan defined the *potentia oboedientialis* negatively as "a mere passive nonresistance to grace" and the vision of God.⁸¹ In *Hearers of the Word*, Rahner defines it positively as a dynamic drive toward God, a love for God, or an "ontological alert" for God.⁸² In his later writings,⁸³ the *potentia oboedientialis* becomes the supernatural existential, which is more than the human love of God or an "ontological alert" for God. It is rather an "ontological determination."⁸⁴ God's own being—the Trinitarian life itself—in the mode of an offer, is seen as constitutive of concrete human being. Human beings everywhere and always have a supernatural existential joined to their "pure" nature, so that being human means—not by nature but by the free, gracious act of God—being a pure human nature and God in relationship. Concrete human being is theanthropic.

Finally, we have come to the tap root of the tensions in Rahner's doctrine of sin. Since the concrete human being is thought of as a union of God (supernatural existential) and (pure) human nature, Rahner

⁷⁹ Rahner says essentially the same thing in *Encyclopedia of Theology* s.v. "Freedom": "Dependence on God and degree of being grow in equal and not inverse proportions . . . so too with created freedom (so gilt von der geschaffenen Freiheit) . . . because dependence on God—contrary to what takes place in the intramundane causality—actually means being endowed with free selfhood"; see also *Encyclopedia of Theology* s.v. "Grace and Freedom." Rahner is correct—indeed brilliant—on this point, but doesn't this idea contradict his understanding of the equal freedom of the "yes" and the "no" to God and his view that humans can definitively decide about the true God?

⁸⁰ I refer to the original text and not to Metz's footnotes to the 2d edition.

⁸¹ Kenneth D. Eberhard, "Karl Rahner and the Supernatural Existential," *Thought* 46 (1971) 538. See also William C. Shepherd, *Man's Condition* (New York: Herder, 1969) 36–40.

⁸² *Ibid.* For Rahner's discussion of the inborn "love of God," see *Hearers* 100–2 (*Hörer* 123–26.).

⁸³ Especially those mentioned in section two above.

⁸⁴ Eberhard 538.

considers himself able to attribute to this human, by a sort of "communication of properties,"⁸⁵ the freedom which is characteristic of the divine life alone. Under the flag of grace, an attribute of God can be safely transferred to the human being, so that human beings are said to have the freedom to decide definitively about God and the totality of their own being; thus they are free to realize themselves as a "yes" or "no" to God.

Now, it is theologically adequate and conceptually self-consistent to speak of God as the being who is free to decide about God, for God's freedom is God's eternal affirmation ("yes") of God's being. (It is self-contradictory to speak of God as having the freedom to deny God's being.) God is only what God wills to be. But no being other than God can be thought to decide about God freely and definitively. Only where freedom is absolute are the conditions fulfilled for the possibility of such a decision. And what are the implications if, nevertheless, Rahner understands the human being to be able to make this judgment?

Instead of listening to scriptural and dogmatic texts for their understanding of human freedom, Rahner runs past them, attributing to the human being a divine-like freedom. This move violates the texts, creates the hopeless internal contradictions mentioned above, and runs the risk of effacing the distinction between Creator and creature, nature and grace, and theology and philosophy.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ This reference to Christology is not amiss. Rahner's Christology suffers from the same fault. He refers to the concrete human being as a "*potentia obedientialis* for the hypostatic union" (*Encyclopedia of Theology* s.v. "Man, Anthropology III. Theological"). The Incarnation of God in Christ is the definitive realization of what humans always already are. The Christological notion that certain attributes and qualities of the divine nature may rightly be attributed to the human nature of Christ, and vice versa (the "communication of properties") is, in Rahner's doctrine of sin, pushed back into concrete human being.

⁸⁶ William J. Hill, O.P., voiced a similar concern in 1963 in his study of Rahner's concept of uncreated grace: "The doctrine of Father Rahner must involve an unthinkable fusion of God with the creature, or a transformation of the creature into the divine by way of hypostatic union or glorious vision. Grace is none of these. The most disquieting feature of this theory (and its variants) is that it is impossible to see that it does not slight the transcendence of God" ("Uncreated Grace" 356).