

Karl Rahner, Friedrich Schelling, and Original Plural Unity

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Abstract

Despite the common perception that Rahner's affinity with German Idealism places him near either Kant or Hegel, his thought accords better with that of Friedrich Schelling, whom he studied under Heidegger. The author examines this historical point, and then reads several of Rahner's works to identify systematic resonances with Schelling. The article argues that the thought of Rahner and Schelling are well paired because both insist that at the origin of reality lies a plural unity. This Rahner–Schelling commonality regarding metaphysical pluralism could contribute to a theological aesthetic centered on freedom.

Keywords

freedom, German idealism, hylomorphism, infinite, Rahner, Schelling, theology and metaphysics, theological aesthetics, symbol

Stephen Fields's *Being as Symbol: On the Origins and Development of Karl Rahner's Metaphysics* renders scholars of twentieth-century theology a valuable service.¹ The book traces over a dozen theological and philosophical influences

1. Stephen M. Fields, S.J., *Being as Symbol: On the Origins and Development of Karl Rahner's Metaphysics* (Washington: Georgetown University, 2000).

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in Rahner's corpus. Its principal strength and contribution consists in presenting the philosophical underpinnings of a central operator in many of Rahner's writings, and an active, implicit undertow in others, namely, the *Realsymbol*. Fields's analysis of the philosophical prolegomena to Rahner's metaphysics treats some of the usual suspects—Joseph Maréchal, G. W. F. Hegel, and Martin Heidegger—but adds comparatively less-discussed ones like Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Johann Adam Möhler. These latter two prove rather important as Fields explicates how Rahner's theory of the symbol positions itself vis-à-vis Immanuel Kant and Hegel.² According to Fields, Goethe passes along to Möhler and then Möhler to Rahner a symbolic theory that steers a middle course between Kant and Hegel. Rahner thus occupies a place of tension along the trajectory of German Idealism.

I propose to deepen and extend Fields's insight regarding Rahner's place vis-à-vis German Idealism and from that standpoint argue that Rahner, working within German Idealism, finds a way to surpass it. I do this by exploring a virtually unexamined question: How does Rahner relate to the famous yet little-studied German Idealist Friedrich Schelling (1775–1854)?³ Fields almost raises this question in his discussion of Rahner as somehow “between” Kant and Hegel—a designation Schelling has long endured. The question must be expressly raised, though, once one realizes that Rahner spent the summer semester of 1936, a pivotal time in his philosophical education, intensively studying Schelling's crucial work, *Philosophische Untersuchungen über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit* (1809), under the tutelage of Martin Heidegger.⁴ With Fields's insight and this point of history in mind, we can bring to light some new discoveries about Rahner's theology and philosophy.

I argue that Rahner's thought resonates well with Schelling's because both thinkers insist that reality originates in a plural unity. The argument proceeds in three parts. The first narrates Rahner's meeting with Schelling in Heidegger's lecture hall. Next I read portions of Rahner's *Spirit in the World* (1939)⁵ to discover where it resonates with

2. See especially *ibid.* 90.

3. Thomas O'Meara raises this question in at least two of his books, first implicitly, then explicitly: Thomas F. O'Meara, O.P., *Romantic Idealism and Roman Catholicism: Schelling and the Theologians* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1982); *idem*, *God in the World: A Guide to Karl Rahner's Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2008) 33 n. 37, 91 n. 15.

4. Friedrich Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt (Albany, NY: SUNY, 2006). On Rahner's coursework at Freiburg with Heidegger, see Thomas Sheehan, *Karl Rahner: The Philosophical Foundations* (Athens: Ohio University, 1987)—a list of courses is given on p. 5; and Thomas F. O'Meara, O.P., trans., “Johannes B. Lotz, S.J., and Martin Heidegger in Conversation: A Translation of Lotz's *Im Gespräch*,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 84 (2010) 125–31. For more on Rahner's studies with Heidegger, see Karl Rahner, *Geist in Welt: Philosophische Schriften, Sämtliche Werke 2*, ed. Albert Raffelt (Freiburg i. B.: Herder, 1996) xvii–xviii (hereafter *Geist in Welt*).

5. Karl Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, trans. William Dych, S.J. (New York: Continuum, 1969).

Schelling's philosophy, the central site of resonance being Rahner and Schelling's similar retrievals of Aristotle's idea of prime matter. My third part continues the Rahner–Schelling conversation by proposing that Rahner's "The Theology of the Symbol" (1959)⁶ be read as a text centered on an account of freedom that resembles Schelling's view in the treatise Rahner studied with Heidegger. The reader should note that my thesis and argument take care not to overestimate Schelling's influence on Rahner—"resonance" is a word I will use throughout to mark my modest claim.

Rahner and the Heideggerian Schelling

In this part I aim to establish a context for the reading of Rahner that I carry out in the next two parts. Along the way I answer the questions of how Rahner came to know Schelling's thought, how well he knew it, and, given Rahner's statements in the *Sämtliche Werke* about German Idealism more generally, how this knowledge of a particular German Idealist was likely to function in his thought once he acquired it. I argue that Rahner familiarizes himself with the "middle" Schelling inflected by Heidegger, that is, an ontological Schelling who, despite Heidegger's protests, is open to a Catholic view of the interplay between divine and human freedom.⁷ Rahner casts his lot in with this Schelling, thus staking a definite—and not Kantian or Hegelian—position with respect to German Idealism.

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6. Karl Rahner, "The Theology of the Symbol," *More Recent Writings*, Theological Investigations (hereafter TI) 4, trans. Kevin Smyth (Baltimore, MD: Helicon, 1966) 221–52.
 7. Having just referred to the "middle" Schelling, I must comment on the periodization of Schelling's works, a matter of heated and lively controversy. To economize, I stipulate, rather than argue for, a few salient points to illustrate where I stand. First, I am persuaded by scholars who hold to a three-period view of Schelling's philosophical development: (1) an early period including the nature philosophy of the 1790s and the transcendental idealist and identity philosophy of the early 1800s; (2) a middle period stretching from 1809 to 1821 (or possibly 1827) that focuses on freedom and time; and (3) the late period, from the 1820s to his death in 1854, during which he develops his so-called "positive" philosophy of mythology and revelation. Second, though theologians like Paul Tillich and Walter Kasper have found Schelling's late philosophy theologically fruitful, I deem the middle period's foregrounding of freedom to accord best with Rahner's theology. Third, this preference for the middle period coheres with the historical point that Rahner studied the flagship "middle" text with Heidegger. Fourth, even if I prefer the middle period to others, I agree with Joseph Lawrence that the continuity of Schelling's corpus (which Schelling himself maintained) is often missed, and that the differences between his "periods" are overplayed. This last point is crucial, since later in this article I shuttle between the early and the middle periods, contending that certain important ideas remain largely the same from the 1800 *System of Transcendental Idealism* [trans. Peter Heath (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1978)] up through the 1809 freedom treatise. For, to my mind, the best discussion of Schellingian periodization currently in print, see Joseph Lawrence, "Schelling: The Philosopher of Tragic Dissonance," in *The History of Continental Philosophy*, 8 vols., ed. Alan D. Schrift (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2010) 1:163–86.

Heidegger's Schelling Lectures

Rahner took quite an array of courses from Heidegger over a mere two-year span, 1934–36: lecture courses on Friedrich Hölderlin (winter 1934/35); seminars on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (winter 1934/35 and summer 1935);⁸ Leibniz's concept of world and German Idealism (winter 1935/36); and Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (summer 1936). Just these five courses, plus the one on which I will focus, the lecture course on Schelling's *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*,⁹ illustrate the solid grounding in German Idealism that Rahner developed from direct contact with Heidegger. We also know that Rahner had read and been deeply influenced by Heidegger's *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* (1929).¹⁰ Finally, Rahner likely had access to notes from Heidegger's 1930 course, "On the Essence of Human Freedom." This course includes a constructive reading of Kant's account of freedom, which serves as a direct link in Heidegger's itinerary of thought between his 1929 Kant book and his 1936 course on Schelling.¹¹

The main text examined in the 1936 course is Schelling's treatise on freedom. Heidegger believes that by coming "to comprehend the essence of human freedom," students will arrive at the central question of philosophy, understand the whole of Schelling's philosophy, and come to a new perspective on German Idealism.¹² Heidegger pursues these wide-ranging aims through intensive examinations of foundational questions in Schelling's treatise.

Paramount among Schelling's questions is the interrelation of freedom and system. Heidegger writes, "Schelling's efforts from 1809 until his death . . . [were] dedicated to the building of the system of freedom in a formed work."¹³ The philosophical battles of Schelling's time were waged precisely over the issue of freedom and system. Some of his contemporaries thought that a rational system precluded freedom, for reason was used to discover the necessary laws of the universe, and freedom's rationality lay

8. It is well known, yet nevertheless notable, that Hölderlin, Hegel, and Schelling were friends from their university days in Tübingen.

9. Martin Heidegger, *Schelling's Treatise on the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Athens: Ohio University, 1985).

10. See Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, 5th ed., trans. Richard Taft (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1997). And for Rahner's incorporation of the insights of Heidegger's Kant book, see my *Karl Rahner's Theological Aesthetics* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 2014) esp. chap. 1.

11. Martin Heidegger, *The Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Ted Sadler (New York: Continuum, 2002). Heidegger's students at Freiburg circulated notes from his previous courses; Rahner possessed some such notes on Heidegger's 1929 lecture "What Is Metaphysics?" The lecture is published in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: HarperCollins, 2008) 89–110.

12. Heidegger, *Schelling's Treatise* 4.

13. *Ibid.* 21. "Formed work" is an awkward expression in its German original as well as in this translation. Heidegger means that Schelling wishes to present coherently a system of philosophy that accounts for freedom.

only in its conformity to this necessity. Schelling countered this opinion by seeking a way to integrate system and freedom.

Heidegger writes at length about how Schelling accomplishes this integration mainly through discussions of evil that comprise the lion's share of his treatise and constitute his main metaphysical contribution. Heidegger deems one passage central to Schelling's treatise:

In man there exists the whole power of the principle of darkness, and, in him too, the whole force of light. Man's will is the seed—concealed in eternal longing—of God, present as yet only in the depths—the divine light of life locked in the depths which God divined when he determined to will nature.¹⁴

For Heidegger, this is the passage through which the whole treatise might be comprehended. I take his interpretation of it as the key to his whole reading of Schelling.

Heidegger asserts that Schelling does not come through on the promise implied in his treatise's title.¹⁵ *Philosophical Investigations of the Essence of Human Freedom* does not deliver an actual analysis of human freedom. Instead, Schelling treats divine freedom at length and only from time to time returns to human freedom. Heidegger acknowledges that the fundamental guiding principle of Schelling's system, "like is known only by like" (freedom is recognized only by freedom), has God at its center.¹⁶ The passage quoted above shows this amply. Put more succinctly, "the god outside us is known through the god within us."¹⁷ Hence, when Schelling speaks of "man's will," he turns more often than not to the "divine will," "divine light," and "God's longing." Thus, to better understand the quoted passage and the treatise as a whole, one must grasp what Schelling means by "divine" and "God."

Heidegger purports to have such a grasp. The constitutive feature of Heidegger's interpretation of this passage, and thus of the whole treatise, lies in his definition of God's function in it. Heidegger disallows Schelling's talk of God from being considered properly theological, forcefully arguing that the "theological question" in Schelling always turns back toward the "ontological question."¹⁸ "God" and "theological," as Schelling uses these words, belong to philosophy, not to some ecclesiastical faith.¹⁹ The "theological" question concerns the ground for metaphysics.

Seven years earlier, in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, Heidegger discussed another attempt to "lay the ground for metaphysics," Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*.²⁰ There Heidegger witnessed a collapse of the theological question into the ontological

14. Ibid. 53.

15. See *ibid.* 162.

16. Ibid. 56.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid. 65.

19. "The metaphysical theology carried out here also lies completely outside a formal analysis of the determinations of a dogmatic concept of God" (*ibid.* 110).

20. Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* 1–2 and *passim*.

question as the foundational question for system. In the Schelling lectures, he recalls his book on Kant: “Granted Kant already speaks of the metaphysics of metaphysics. For him, that is the *Critique of Pure Reason*; for Schelling, the metaphysics of evil.”²¹ This brings us back to the first portion of the passage from Schelling: “In man there exists the whole power of the principle of darkness.” Just as Heidegger discovers the ingredients for refounding metaphysics in Kant’s “schematism of the transcendental imagination,” so he hits upon another, potentially new, beginning of metaphysics in Schelling’s “power of the principle of darkness.” Heidegger observes, “Evil itself determines the new beginning in metaphysics.”²² Again, at issue here is the interrelationship of human and divine wills. “Evil” refers to the human capacity for reversing the will of God.²³ But Heidegger reindexes Schelling’s view of evil so that it appears in the ontological, not theological, register.

Heidegger’s dismissal of God from Schelling’s treatise on freedom is, he admits, rather “one-sided in the direction of the main side of philosophy, the question of Being.”²⁴ Likewise, the one-sidedness of Heidegger’s reading of Schelling consists in his objection that Schelling ignores the proper bounds of philosophy, which are set by human finitude.²⁵ Schelling’s downfall, which keeps him mired in metaphysics, is his faith that the absolute (= God) can and should be thematized in the philosophical field.²⁶ Whereas Kant’s shortcoming—in Heidegger’s view—lies in his devotion to epistemology, Schelling’s is his commitment to ontotheology.

Why did Heidegger choose this text, then, as the main focus for the lecture course? He justifies the choice at length. The freedom treatise injects a “new, essential impulse” into philosophy that ever since “was denied.”²⁷ The new impulse that Schelling gives to philosophy is the splitting open of the German Idealist drive to formulate systems. For Heidegger, Schelling’s treatise “shatters Hegel’s *Logic* before it was even published!”²⁸—by facing head-on a reality that cannot be systematized, namely, evil.

Heidegger offers Rahner an ontological reading of the freedom treatise that foregrounds the distance at which the treatise places Schelling from both Kant and Hegel. Schelling’s treatise on freedom rejects two restrictions of the philosophical field: Kant’s limitation of it to epistemic conditions, and Hegel’s mastery of it through dialectical logic.

21. Heidegger, *Schelling’s Treatise* 104.

22. *Ibid.* 97.

23. See *ibid.* 141–49.

24. *Ibid.* 146.

25. “Here, too, Schelling does not see the necessity of an essential step. If Being in truth cannot be predicated of the Absolute, that means that the essence of all Being is finitude and only what exists finitely has the privilege and the pain of standing in Being as such and experiencing what is true as beings” (*ibid.* 161–62).

26. *Ibid.* 161.

27. *Ibid.* 98.

28. *Ibid.* 97.

Rahner's Reaction

We do not know how exactly Rahner reacted to Heidegger's presentation of Schelling, but the evidence we do have, especially Rahner's notes on Heidegger from the *Sämtliche Werke*,²⁹ sheds light on the subject. Soon after his exposure to Heidegger's Schelling lectures, Rahner prepared a course on contemporary philosophy that had the dual aim of assimilating Heidegger's best insights and critiquing his oversights. The following pair of phrases summarize Rahner's ambiguous sentiments toward Heidegger: "realistic with us against idealism . . . against us, wherein we [are] idealistic."³⁰ Heidegger's keen attention to the world, so stridently argued in *Being and Time* and "What Is Metaphysics?," lends his philosophy a sober realism. But Heidegger's realism bans the ideal from philosophy. This latter point Rahner cannot accept. By comparison with Heidegger, he leans toward German Idealism. Or more precisely, through a particular expression of German Idealism, he finds a way beyond the split between realism and idealism. In this way he looks a lot like Schelling, who, especially in his "middle" period (which the freedom treatise inaugurates), labors to construct an idealism beyond precisely this realism-idealism disjunction.

What would Rahner have thought when he compared Schelling's actual text to Heidegger's exposition of it? Surely he would have noticed the similarity in argumentation between Heidegger's lectures on Schelling and his Kant book. It is remarkable how the lectures repeat the overall message of the latter. Kant abandoned his discovery of the power of the transcendental imagination as soon as he made it.³¹ Likewise, Schelling abandoned his discovery of freedom.³² In other words, both failed to think through the finitude of human *Dasein*. In noticing this similarity of argumentation, Rahner might also have disagreed with it in the case of Schelling. Kant is a clear opponent of Rahner's because Kant sets strict limits on human cognition that, as one can see with *Spirit in the World*, Rahner rejects. But Schelling's removal of many Kantian limitations would make him a potential ally. Rahner would, then, be willing to accept Heidegger's chastisement of Kant as simply another instantiation of modern metaphysics, but would turn a critical eye toward Heidegger's reservations about Schelling.

Likewise, we can surmise that Rahner objected to Heidegger's banning God from Schelling's philosophy. In the same lecture notes, Rahner points out that an "apriorism of finitude" (*Apriorismus der Endlichkeit*) sustains Heidegger's thinking.³³ Without a supporting argument, Heidegger insists throughout his thinking that the infinite is a priori unavailable to philosophical reflection. For Rahner, Heidegger's apriorism of

29. Karl Rahner, "Vortragsskizzen und Materialien," in *Geist in Welt* 438–60.

30. "Realistisch mit uns gegen Idealismus . . . gegen uns, worin wir idealistisch" (Rahner, "Vortragsskizzen und Materialien" 444–45).

31. Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* 112–20.

32. See Heidegger, *Schelling's Treatise* 161–64.

33. Rahner, "Vortragsskizzen" 444.

finitude is an illicit restriction of philosophy's scope.³⁴ Heidegger rightly associates the theological element of Schelling's freedom treatise with an attempt to think the infinite (i.e., the absolute). For this reason, Heidegger quarantines that element and redirects it toward an ontology of finitude that he sees as Schelling's great missed opportunity. It seems that Rahner, given his disapproval of Heidegger's apriorism of finitude, would reject this aspect of the lectures.

Not that there are no grounds for a Rahner–Heidegger agreement. Heidegger's quarantine of Schelling's theology in the freedom treatise has advantages for Catholic theology. His "middle" period is marked by heavy borrowing from heterodox sources, most notably Jacob Boehme, who speculates wildly about the inner life of God in a way that Rahner would never deem licit. Heidegger's ontological revision of Schelling's theology is not, then, entirely unwelcome. Nevertheless, the issue remains that Heidegger over-revises him, thereby eliminating a thrust of thought toward the infinite that Rahner would find not only unobjectionable, but rather helpful in linking the Catholic *philosophia perennis* to a significant strand of modern philosophy.

Rahner had finished writing his philosophical dissertation—it would become *Geist in Welt*—by May 1936, the month after he began Heidegger's Schelling course. Rahner likely did not have Schelling in mind as an interlocutor. Nevertheless, it is still worth seeking resonances between *Geist in Welt* and Schelling's thought. This is especially true because three years elapsed between Rahner's completion of his dissertation and its publication. I show in my third part how Schellingian resonances appear in *Hearer of the Word* (lectures 1937, published 1941). These echoes suggest that even if Rahner did not substantively revise the words of his philosophical dissertation on account of Heidegger's Schelling lectures, upon its publication *Geist in Welt* stood in a different context because of these lectures. Rahner's philosophical perspective drew on a variant of German Idealism that was neither Kant's nor Hegel's.

Geist in Welt and German Idealism

The literature on *Geist in Welt* / *Spirit in the World* has so far insufficiently treated it as a book in deep dialogue with German Idealism.³⁵ To be sure, numerous references have connected Rahner's text and German Idealism as an abstract movement. Some scholars, most notably Hans Urs von Balthasar, have noted and lamented echoes of Johann Gottlieb Fichte in Rahner's philosophy.³⁶ Also, commentators have attempted

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34. See Karl Rahner, *Hearer of the Word: Laying the Foundation for a Philosophy of Religion*, trans. Joseph Donceel, ed. and intro. Andrew Tallon (New York: Continuum, 1994) 50, where he likens Heidegger to "the Kant who opposed German idealism." Rahner indicates that Heidegger and Kant share an antipathy toward "the presupposition of perennial philosophy" that only "the infinity of being" reveals beings in their finitude. That is, one must attend to the infinite in order to know the finite.
 35. By far the most successful treatment is Francis Fiorenza, "Karl Rahner and the Kantian Problematic," introduction to *Spirit in the World* xix–lv.
 36. Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Rezension: Karl Rahner, *Geist in Welt*, und J. B. Lotz, *Sein und Welt*," *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie* 63 (1939) 371–79; Balthasar, *The Moment*

to effect dialogues between Rahner and Hegel.³⁷ It is true that Rahner envisions his book as conversant with the tradition extending from Kant to Heidegger³⁸ with Hegel as a natural signpost on this road. But Schelling better suits Rahner's work. Heidegger, who prefers Schelling to Hegel, primed Rahner for an inclination toward Schelling. A close reading of key portions of *Spirit in the World* can reveal that once Rahner read Schelling, he found in him an ally. The alliance is based in the resonance between the ways these two thinkers view the origin of reality. At the heart of all reality is a plurality that, even in its multiplicity, is unified. Reality is based neither in division nor in mere identity, but in plural unity.

Spirit in the World and the Metaphysics of Knowledge

I will forgo an introductory explanation of *Spirit in the World*, since its structure and overall thrust have been well documented in Rahner research.³⁹ I do, though, want to establish what it means that Rahner presents *Spirit in the World* as a book on the metaphysics of knowledge. One must understand that the metaphysics of knowledge is not the same as epistemology. The former is a far broader discipline than the latter. Much of Heidegger's intellectual labors in the late 1920s and early 1930s were devoted to making and maintaining this distinction. Rahner follows this Heideggerian path. In the preface, he makes a crucial distinction:

Let it be said here explicitly that the concern of the book is not the critique of knowledge, but a metaphysics of knowledge, and that, therefore, as opposed to Kant, there is always a question of a *noetic* hylomorphism, to which there corresponds an *ontological* hylomorphism in the objects, in the sense of a thoroughgoing determination of knowing by being.⁴⁰

of *Christian Witness*, trans. Richard Beckley (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1994) 100–30, 143–55. Karen Kilby notes that Rahner claimed never to have read Fichte. Karen Kilby, *Karl Rahner: Theology and Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2004) 14. See Vincent Holzer, "Philosophy with(in) Theology: Rahner's Philosophy of Religion," *Heythrop Journal* (forthcoming), which pairs Rahner and Fichte via French phenomenologist Michel Henry.

37. See Dennis M. Bradley, "Rahner's *Spirit in the World*: Aquinas or Hegel?," *Thomist* 41 (1977) 167–99; Thomas Pearl, "Dialectical Pantheism: On the Hegelian Character of Karl Rahner's Key Christological Writings," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 42 (1975) 119–37.

38. Rahner, *Spirit in the World* lii. See also Rahner, "Begleittext zu 'Geist in Welt,'" in *Geist in Welt* 431–37.

39. Here I mention only Fiorenza's introduction (cited above) and Andrew Tallon, "Spirit, Matter, Becoming: *Spirit in the World* (*Geist in Welt*)," *Modern Schoolman* 48 (1971) 151–65, both of which initiated English-speaking scholars into *Spirit in the World*. For recent introductions, see Kilby, *Karl Rahner: Theology and Philosophy* 13–31; and Patrick Burke, *Reinterpreting Rahner: A Critical Study of His Major Themes* (New York: Fordham, 2002) 1–46.

40. Rahner, *Spirit in the World* liii, emphasis added.

Despite the common perception that Rahner positively appropriates Kant, this quotation shows that *Spirit in the World* is a book that vigorously resists Kant, from beginning to end. An explanation of Rahner's terms can clarify this resistance.

First, *hylomorphism*: this word refers to the relationship between matter and form or, in the language of critical philosophy, objectivity and subjectivity. Second, there are two ways of approaching this relationship: noetic and ontological. To account for hylomorphism noetically is to consider objects primarily through a description of epistemic faculties. Objects are reduced in a double sense (decreased and led back) to human mental processes. By contrast, ontological hylomorphism allows objects a reality unto themselves. Ontological hylomorphism does not, however, equal naïve realism, as Kant would fear. Instead, ontological hylomorphism, if carefully deployed, yields a critical metaphysics. Rahner resists Kant because he reads Kant as an epistemologist who abandons metaphysics, whereas Rahner reinstates metaphysics. In this way, Rahner resembles Schelling.

Before Rahner thematized the crucial distinction between epistemology and metaphysics, Schelling had done so—and amid much misunderstanding due to Kant's conflation of the two. Frederick Beiser observes, "In his early years Schelling saw something that many of his contemporaries, and many still today, fail to appreciate. He recognized that the solution to the fundamental problems of epistemology requires nothing less than metaphysics."⁴¹ Schelling gradually came to this conclusion, beginning with his systematic works of the 1790s and early 1800s, and then in the works of the decades to follow, especially the one Rahner studied. In fact, one could plausibly argue that Schelling's freedom treatise enacts a sharp and resolute turn away from epistemology toward fundamental ontology—hence his wrestling with the fundamental question of theodicy.

My question here is whether Rahner discloses in *Spirit in the World* what Schelling sought throughout his career, but especially in the "middle" period: an ontological hylomorphism that surpasses the noetic hylomorphism left in Kant's wake, a noetic hylomorphism that reached its apogee in Hegel. I venture here an inchoate "yes," based on two points: first, Rahner's explication of spirit in world; and second, his reading of Thomas Aquinas's "*a priori*." My yes affirms that Rahner, like Schelling and unlike Kant and Hegel, identifies through his metaphysical examination of human knowledge an original plural unity that holds together spirit and matter because both are grounded in it. Like Schelling, Rahner appropriates the best moments of German Idealism while moving beyond its worst. He does so by retrieving insights from the perennial philosophy of Aristotle to guide philosophy after German Idealism.

Spirit in World: Matter, Form, and Influences

The title *Geist in Welt* lacks a definite article. Although it is translated into English as *Spirit in the World*, a proper translation would read "Spirit in World." This is no small

41. Frederick C. Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle against Subjectivism, 1781–1801* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2002) 466.

matter. Instead, the absence of the definite article in German indicates something crucial to the book's subject. Rahner examines how spirit functions when infused in worldly matter, and how world operates by an infusion of spirit, and how both are based in the plural unity of a dynamic reality that transcends the distinction between spirit (or form) and matter. The introduction of the definite article intimates a separation between spirit and world, as if spirit has traveled from outside the world then to work its way into the world, which is integral without spirit. The absence of a definite article places spirit and world in radical proximity and points to their common origin. The definite article's presence suggests external correspondence between spirit and world, while its absence indicates internal coherence. In his book, Rahner describes the internal coherence of spirit and world. From here on, I refer to the book as *Spirit in World*.

The limited scale of an article permits me to consider only one text to support the above claims: chapter 4, section 9 of *Spirit in World*, entitled "Intelligible Species II: Towards the Ontology of Inner-Worldly, Efficient Causality."⁴² Here Rahner turns a specific question about the metaphysics of knowledge, the "permanence of the intelligible species" (the likeness of an object produced by the intellect) "in the spirit as such," into a more general question about reality.⁴³ This question about knowledge, he contends, reduces to a wider, ontological question "about the relationship between the formal, essential ground of an existent in general and its accidental properties."⁴⁴ This general problem covers the ideas of "action" and "passion" and their mutual inclusion.⁴⁵ How can an "active" spirit and a "passive" object *both* be said to move and to be moved?⁴⁶

Rahner derives this line of questioning from Aquinas, who in turn derived and developed it from Aristotle. Statements from Aquinas like, "Every patient receives the action of the agent according to its own mode," indicate that he identifies, even if he does not fully explicate, action and passion's mutual inclusion.⁴⁷ The general ontological problem comes to light in Aquinas's thinking on "influences." Rahner names two types of influences in a "passive" object: "emanating" (*ausfliessende*) and "received" (*übernommene*).⁴⁸ To reach an explanation of these influences, Rahner deduces the concept of matter, the *hyle* of hylomorphism.⁴⁹

42. Rahner, *Spirit in the World* 330–66.

43. Ibid. 330.

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid. 333.

46. See *ibid.* 359.

47. Ibid. 336.

48. See *ibid.* 337–39. Rahner here intentionally expands on Aquinas. He remarks that when Aquinas discusses, for instance, the influence of a knower on a known object, the influence almost always operates in a unidirectional fashion, emanating from the knower into the object; Rahner calls this the "emanating influence." His expansion of Aquinas centers on the "received" influence, which is the object's contribution to the act of knowing. But Rahner adduces textual examples to show that Aquinas glimpsed something like the received influence, and that adding this idea to his philosophy helps reveal the spirit of his thinking.

49. Ibid. 340–55.

For Thomistic-Aristotelian metaphysics, matter is that which may be formed. An object is material insofar as it receives a determination from an active external form, the *morphe* of hylomorphism. But Aquinas's teaching that the object receives formal determination "according to its own mode" implies that "something can be a determination of an existent only by the fact that it is produced by the substantial, ontological ground of the determined existent itself."⁵⁰ An external influence can occur only with the active cooperation of the receiver. Surely matter must be the "passive, of itself indeterminate 'wherein' (*Worin*) of an ontological determination." But in the case of human knowing, the complexity of matter manifests itself, because the activity of human knowing depends on matter's "active potency" to receive determination.⁵¹ Rahner is arguing, then, that matter is dynamic. It does not merely receive form from a knower or from other material objects. Instead, when matter is influenced, it also influences.

Rahner elaborates his case over the next several pages. He stipulates, with support from Aquinas, that the "essential characteristic of matter is . . . absolute space."⁵² A corollary is that though matter admits of plurality, it is fundamentally one. Even when matter is determined and divided by form, at a deeper level it remains one and thus retains its ability to receive other forms.⁵³ And substantial form bears an analogous tendency toward wider possibilities. It is always ordained "towards the total breadth of its possibilities," but at the same time "this realization is always possible only in determinations which in principle never realize the whole breadth of these possibilities at once."⁵⁴ This consideration of the analogous relationships that matter and form have with respect to their possibilities shows the mutual and ineluctable involvement of matter and form in each other's self-realization.

The matter-form relationship (hylomorphism) is, to put it more simply, fluid. Form determines and activates matter, but also matter determines form "for its actualization of the potentialities of matter." In this way, the form "suffers," but this suffering is never precisely passive.⁵⁵ Rahner's deduction of matter lays bare a mutual influence of matter and form, where both terms are passive and active. This mutual influence of matter and form is intrinsic to both—hence Rahner's reduction of efficient causality (which operates extrinsically) to formal causality (which operates intrinsically),⁵⁶ and this mutual influence is original: matter and form derive from an original plural unity.

These ideas present a serious parting of ways with the particular type of Thomistic-Aristotelian philosophical system in which Rahner was trained. It may seem that he has taken a stake in Hegel's dialectical-evolutionary scheme, where spirit and matter mutually influence each other during spirit's odyssey toward absolute knowledge

50. Ibid. 341.

51. Ibid. 342.

52. Ibid. 346.

53. Ibid. 348.

54. Ibid. 352.

55. Ibid. 355.

56. Ibid. 357.

(thus canceling both spirit and matter). But before one draws this conclusion, one must understand why Rahner's break with this particular type of Thomist-Aristotelianism was not a break with Thomist-Aristotelianism altogether, and thus why Rahner is not a Hegelian. To establish this point, I look briefly at Schelling.

Joseph Lawrence argues that Schelling surpasses Hegel (as well as Kant and Fichte), and opens a postidealist philosophical epoch, because he is an Aristotelian. By this Lawrence means several things, but his central point is Schelling's agreement with Aristotle that prime matter "as the undying *appetitus materiae* for form and actuality gives itself over to the ordered and organic world of completed nature."⁵⁷ Matter hungers actively for form and, it must be added, form can only come to fruition through matter. Both emerge together from a ground that precedes them and to which, together, they give order. Form and matter both derive from possibility, or metaphysical potentiality. This potentiality can never be fully cognized. For Schelling, as for Aristotle, the ground of reality is indeterminate and imparts to forms an indissoluble indeterminacy, even when they become forms of concrete, material individuals. Schelling refers to this indeterminacy in a frequently quoted passage in his freedom treatise: "This is the incomprehensible base of reality in things, the indivisible remainder, that which with the greatest exertion cannot be resolved in understanding but rather remains eternally in the ground."⁵⁸ Even ordered reality, then, reflects an original plurality where contraries are allowed to strive together from their ground toward existence. Schelling uses this idea in his freedom treatise to explain the origin of evil as the mutual possibility of evil and good.⁵⁹ But the idea has wider application, one that brings Schelling and Rahner into close proximity.

Rahner's ideas from *Spirit in World* resonate resoundingly with Schelling's thinking. The interplay of influences in existents points back to an original belonging-together from which existence develops, and points forward to a future when this belonging-together will be allowed to remain. Via Aquinas, Rahner makes his discovery in dialogue with Aristotle, a dialogue partner he shares with Schelling. Both take from Aristotle the ingredients for articulating their respective visions of original plural unity. This vision breaks the German Idealist will to system, by pointing to the plurality that evades systemic identity.

*The Dynamic a Priori*⁶⁰

To illustrate further the resonance between Rahner and Schelling, I must reflect on a crucial footnote in *Spirit in World*. Rahner discusses the difference between an

57. Joseph P. Lawrence, "Schelling as Post-Hegelian and Aristotelian," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 26 (1986) 315–30, at 324.

58. Schelling, *Essence of Human Freedom* 29.

59. See *ibid.* 33, 37–39.

60. Starting with this section I use the phrase "a priori" somewhat idiosyncratically, to designate a substantive noun with two distinct yet related meanings: (1) more conventionally, an idea that exists prior to experience, and (2) a real principle that operates prior to being objectified by thought. This usage should become clearer (by induction) as my argument proceeds.

Augustinian and a Thomistic metaphysics of knowledge. Contrary to those who differentiate the two as a Platonist-idealist-apriorist and an Aristotelian-empiricist-aposteriorist respectively, Rahner characterizes both as a priori thinkers. He renders the difference as follows: “an apriorism of the intellectual light (*lumen intellectuale*) as a formal *a priori* of the subject in Aquinas, and the apriorism of an idea objectively existing in itself in Augustine.”⁶¹ Rahner here treats both Augustine and Aquinas as apriorists. Augustine’s apriorism is a static idealism, while Aquinas’s is a dynamic thinking beyond idealism. I can better illustrate the contrast by borrowing a passage from Schelling’s *System of Transcendental Idealism*. Though this “early” text is markedly different in outlook from that of his freedom treatise, it contains ideas that the freedom treatise will take up, refine, and, for my purposes, put into a form that resonates well with Rahner’s ideas.

I begin with Schelling’s rendering of the difference between dogmatic idealism and transcendental idealism. Using Descartes as a foil, Schelling writes,

Descartes the physicist said: give me matter and motion, and from that I will fashion you the universe. The transcendental philosopher says: give me a nature made up of opposed activities, of which one reaches out into the infinite, while the other tries to intuit itself in this infinitude, and from that I will bring forth for you the intelligence, with the whole system of its presentations.⁶²

Descartes holds an apriorism of an idea existing in itself that might be projected outwardly as a world integral in itself. By contrast, Schelling focuses on a formal *a priori* of the subject that brings forth a system of presentations. The contrast lies in the difference between a static and a dynamic *a priori*. Descartes draws on a standing reserve and makes a static world. Schelling intuitively interfuses forces that produce world. Combining this passage from Schelling with Rahner’s footnote indicates that Rahner likens Augustine to Descartes, and Aquinas comes off looking like Schelling. Aquinas is a thinker of a dynamic *a priori*, an intelligence that reaches out into the infinite and a sensibility that intuitively itself in this infinite.

One more statement from the *System of Transcendental Idealism* can help illustrate the meaning of Aquinas’s “dynamic *a priori*.” Schelling writes, “What is commonly called theoretical reason is nothing else but imagination in the service of freedom.”⁶³ Clearly this quotation anticipates the freedom treatise by making freedom the focal point for the study of reason. In connection with this quotation, I can extend my argument that Rahner’s view of theoretical reason (his metaphysics of knowledge) proves isomorphic with Schelling’s view.

Rahner titles the third and final part of *Spirit in World* “The Possibility of Metaphysics on the Basis of the Imagination.”⁶⁴ Within this part, he makes a twofold

61. Rahner, *Spirit in the World* 390 n. 9.

62. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism* 72–73.

63. *Ibid.* 176.

64. Rahner, *Spirit in the World* 387–408.

contention: “human thought remains permanently bound to sense intuition” (to which Rahner, following Aquinas, annexes imagination), and simultaneously human thought affirms “a being beyond the realm of imagination.”⁶⁵ Rahner relates this contention to another: “the free spirit becomes, and must become, sensibility in order to be spirit, and thus exposes itself to the whole destiny of this earth.”⁶⁶ He is building the case that human thought (theoretical reason) is a work of the imagination. This work occurs when freedom (of spirit) allows itself to exist as imagination. In so existing, freedom exposes itself to the whole breadth of the imagination, and in so exposing itself, freedom shows itself to be directed somehow beyond imagination (otherwise it would not have the power to expose itself so widely). This is a long way of saying, “Theoretical reason is nothing else but the imagination at the service of freedom.”

This resonance between Rahner and Schelling stretches into Schelling’s treatise on freedom. His view of reason in this treatise carries forward the one from the *System*. For my purposes, though, I note that Schelling makes one vital amendment to his view of reason in the intervening years between the two texts. In the freedom essay, he likens reason to mystical indifference:

Reason is in man that which, according to the mystics, the *primum passivum* or initial wisdom is in God in which all things are together and yet distinct, identical and yet free each in its own way. Reason is not activity, like spirit, nor is it the absolute identity of both principles of cognition, but rather indifference.⁶⁷

Schelling defines indifference more specifically a few pages earlier: “Indifference is not a product of opposites, nor are they implicitly contained in it, but rather indifference is its own being separate from all opposition, a being against which all opposites ruin themselves.”⁶⁸ And, significantly, he adds that indifference “is indeed the only possible concept of the absolute.”⁶⁹ Were one to conceive of the absolute without reference to indifference, one would have to start with a primal duality, or better, dualism.⁷⁰ Schelling has in mind Hegel, for whom reason and freedom operate out of a primal duality that is resolved through conflict and, eventually, cancellation. For Schelling, by contrast, all being, reason, and freedom (since one can only distinguish, but not separate, these three) arise from an irresolvable plurality, and this plurality is always preserved. This is what Schelling means by indifference as the “ruining of all opposites.” A close reading of the freedom treatise and the private lectures delivered at Stuttgart a year later⁷¹ makes clear that “indifference” is Schelling’s word for primal

65. Ibid. 387, 398.

66. Ibid. 406.

67. Schelling, *Essence of Human Freedom* 76.

68. Ibid. 69.

69. Ibid. 73.

70. Ibid. 71.

71. Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, “Stuttgart Seminars (1810),” in *Idealism and the Endgame of Theory*, ed. and trans. Thomas Pfau (Albany: State University of New York, 1994) 195–243, at 198 and 203. Beyond Schelling’s explicit use of “indifference” on

and ultimate irresolvable plurality. The Stuttgart seminars help clarify that, for Schelling, “indifference” not only and primarily manifests itself within God’s own life as latent possibilities or “potencies,” but it is also reflected in all that God creates.⁷²

Rahner’s concept of the absolute provides an analogy to Schelling. For Rahner, the “absolute” is being, and being is analogous. Human reason is directed by absolute, analogous being, which enlightens human consciousness by what Rahner calls a *Vorgriff* (anticipation).⁷³ *Vorgriff* is another word for Rahner’s dynamic a priori. This *Vorgriff*, for which absolute being is the form, in turn forms the dual aspects of human experience: sensation and imagination on the one side, and intellection on the other. The *Vorgriff* operates indifferently with respect to this duality. God is the “absolute” that appears in the *Vorgriff*. From this, one can infer that God operates indifferently toward the dualities of God and world, and eternity and time. One might even say that God is the indifference that “ruins” all these opposites, just so long as one hears in this statement an affirmation of the Thomistic analogy of being. Rahner mentions the analogy of being in the closing pages of *Spirit in World*, and though he indicates that he cannot pursue the idea, my aim here is to show that Rahner’s view of human reason and freedom—and God’s reason and freedom—centers on an analogous conception of being. Rahner’s rendering of this analogy places him close to Schelling’s view of “indifference.”

Rahner’s “analogy of being” and Schelling’s “indifference” are two resonant ways of expressing the plural unity from which all reality originates. I access the Rahnerian view of original plural unity by examining how the dynamic a priori in Rahner’s Aquinas resonates with Schelling’s explication of reason. This dynamic a priori is a major contribution to Catholic thought, but it has not yet been adequately appropriated since Rahner’s readers have found this idea redolent of illicit Kantianism or Hegelianism. I have suggested instead that Rahner’s proximity to Schelling exemplifies how German Idealism might cohere with a Catholic, analogical imagination.

I again refer to Lawrence’s idea of Schelling’s affinity for Aristotle to specify Rahner’s engagement with German Idealism. Beyond the specific example of the belonging-together of form and matter, Rahner’s view of the analogy of being as an indifference that ruins all opposites shows his wider commitment to an Aristotelian rendering of reality as grounded in original plural unity. This commitment obtains throughout Schelling’s writing. It opens his thinking not only to a universality that is not predicated on noetic determination of everything, but also to a catholicity that conventional German Idealism forbids. Rahner’s thinking resonates with Schelling (especially the “middle” Schelling) because Rahner, too, through his dialogue with

these and other pages, the main idea of these seminars, “identity,” bears close affinities to the freedom treatise’s idea of “indifference.” Though controversy abounds among Schelling scholars with regard to the relationship between the Stuttgart seminars and the freedom treatise, I see them as closely related, the former elucidating the latter.

72. For Schelling’s clearest explication of the doctrine of the potencies, see *ibid.* 202–203.

73. Rahner, *Spirit in the World* 402. See Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1, q. 13, a. 5, ad 1.

German Idealism, outstrips it. He exceeds German Idealism by turning it back toward the *philosophia perennis*.

The Symbol and the Aesthetics of Freedom

Within the past decade Rahnerians have warmed to the idea that Rahner presents a theological aesthetic.⁷⁴ Further investigation into this question ought to be made, for the obvious reasons that in recent decades theological aesthetics has become an influential discipline and that Rahner remains under-consulted on the topic. But more specifically, Rahner's elective affinities with noted philosophical aestheticians offer prima facie possibilities for reflection, and one must wonder whether something interesting lies beneath this surface. My own pursuit of this "something" focuses on Rahner's famous essay, "The Theology of the Symbol." In choosing this focus, I am again following Fields, whose whole book suggests that this essay is the entryway to Rahner's theological aesthetic.

Here I argue several points: (1) Schellingian resonances detectable in Rahner's symbol essay indicate his continued engagement with Schelling's essay on human freedom long after he studied it with Heidegger. (2) This ongoing engagement can be discovered if one reads "The Theology of the Symbol" through the lens of *Hearer of the Word*, a text whose initial development coincided with the end of Rahner's study with Heidegger. And (3) Rahner's engagement with Schelling's ideas on freedom shapes the character of his aesthetic perspective in the symbol essay, which centers on original plural unity.

Rahner's Symbol Essay and Metaphysics

Rahner's symbol essay commences by invoking contemporary discussions of devotion to Jesus' Sacred Heart and declares his intention to contribute to this conversation.⁷⁵ It quickly turns to broader considerations—that is, to metaphysics. This

74. For an intensive look at Rahner as a theological aesthetician, see my *Karl Rahner's Theological Aesthetics*. See also Brent Little, "Anthropology and Art in the Theology of Karl Rahner," *Heythrop Journal* 52 (2011) 939–51; Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen, "Karl Rahner: Toward a Theological Aesthetics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner*, ed. Declan Marmion and Mary Hines (New York: Cambridge University, 2005) 225–34; Richard Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty, and Art* (New York: Oxford University, 1999); James Voiss, S.J., "Rahner, von Balthasar, and the Question of Theological Aesthetics," in *Finding God in All Things: Celebrating Bernard Lonergan, John Courtney Murray, and Karl Rahner*, ed. Mark Bosco, S.J., and David Stagaman, S.J. (New York: Fordham University, 2007) 167–81. A notable exception is Roman Siebenbrock, who hopes that the "aesthetic age" so dominated by Balthasar and others is coming to an end. See Siebenbrock, "Foreword" to *Karl Rahner: Theologian for the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Pádraic Conway and Fáinche Ryan (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010) xii.

75. Rahner, "Theology of the Symbol" 221–23; see also 249–52.

transition is philosophically and theologically significant. The structure of Rahner's text indicates that the Sacred Heart is a concrete symbol of a metaphysical ground.

The bulk of the essay consists in an in-depth exposition of six propositions on the metaphysics of symbol, starting from a theological point of view. The first two propositions are meta-propositions about (1) being's necessary self-expressiveness and (2) symbolic being as self-realization in another.⁷⁶ They speak to reality as a whole. The third and fourth propositions are transitional. They concern (3) theology's general need for the concept of the symbol in order (4) to make sense of God's saving action. The last two propositions are specific to the human person, namely, the symbolic relationship between body and soul (5 and 6).⁷⁷ All six propositions center on Rahner's general definition of symbol: "the representation which allows the other to be there."⁷⁸

Prior treatments of the symbol essay have focused mainly on the anthropological propositions (5 and 6). Illustrative and influential in this respect is James Buckley's 1979 article that foregrounds the anthropological dimension of Rahner's theology of symbol.⁷⁹ Research remains to be done, though, on the macroscopic problem outlined in Rahner's first two propositions.

The first two propositions center on being's "self-expression." Rahner takes it to be axiomatic: "being" means being expressive or expressed. Each single, finite being is, then, multiple.⁸⁰ Rahner regards this axiom as philosophically grounded in the condition of finitude: a finite thing is "not absolutely 'simple,'" that is, not self-sufficient or self-sustaining. It needs "another" to be the medium of its expression. Or, from the other side, it needs another's expressiveness to be expressed through it. And by virtue of these needs, the finite being is multiple. The axiom is theologically grounded, too, in that God is Trinity: "multiple," three-in-one. Intra-trinitarian plurality helps make sense of creaturely finitude. Given that a trinitarian God creates each finite being, finitude need not be viewed as merely privative, "but also as a consequence . . . of that divine plurality which does not imply imperfection and weakness and limitation of being, but the supreme fullness of unity and concentrated force."⁸¹ For both philosophy and theology, being is self-expressive. And this expressiveness is a function of being's original plural unity.

Rahner explains this original plural unity using the word "agreement" as his anchor point:

Each being, as a unity, possesses a plurality-implying perfection—formed by the special derivativeness of the plural from the original unity: the plural is in agreement with its source in a way which corresponds to its origin, and hence is "expression" of its origin by an agreement which it owes to its origin.⁸²

76. Ibid. 229, 234.

77. Ibid. 245, 247, 248.

78. Ibid. 225.

79. James J. Buckley, "On Being a Symbol: An Appraisal of Karl Rahner," *Theological Studies* 40 (1979) 453–73.

80. Rahner, "Theology of the Symbol" 226–27.

81. Ibid.

82. Ibid. 228.

He deploys the term “agreement” to indicate that ontology comes down to a relation quite different from efficient causality. Self-expression is not primarily governed by efficient causality: being as symbol does not mean that beings self-realize in the same way that my car gains speed when I depress the accelerator (I apply a force external to the internal combustion engine that makes the car “go”). Instead, Rahner suggests that a being’s self-expression is better understood under the Thomistic rubric of formal causality, where the “‘form’ gives itself away from itself by imparting itself to the material cause,” and where “the ‘effect’ is the ‘cause’ itself.”⁸³ Formal causality entails internal agreement, while efficient causality tends at best toward external correlation.

If a symbol “allows the other to be there,” it makes more sense that a symbol would be discussed in terms of internal agreement rather than external correlation. The symbol, as a representation implicated in internal agreement, would have a stake in what it represents. It would express and be expressed all at once, rather than doing just one or the other. With the concept of formal causality in mind, Rahner restates his definition of a symbol: it “is created by that which is symbolized as its own self-realization.”⁸⁴

This all relates to my prior discussion of matter, form, and influences in *Spirit in World*. There Rahner explains that if one examines matter and form at a sufficiently fundamental level, one sees that they mutually implicate each other because they derive from the same ground. It is no small matter that Rahner develops this idea (which coheres with his deduction of matter) within a section that rereads the Thomistic-Aristotelian ontology of inner-worldly efficient causality. This rereading proposes, as I showed above, that efficient causality be reduced to formal causality. Thus Rahner remains consistent between *Spirit in World* and “The Theology of the Symbol” on this point. And insofar as *Spirit in World* resonates with Schelling’s retrieval of Aristotle’s metaphysics, so does the symbol essay.

Another commonality between Rahner’s “earlier” and “later” texts emerges as he treats the second proposition regarding the self-realization of a being in the other. He conjoins his metaphysics of the symbol to the analogy of being. He indicates that a symbol and the being it symbolizes share the *analogia entis*.⁸⁵ As he does near the end of *Spirit in World*, Rahner associates the *analogia entis* with the “ruining” (or dissolution) of opposites, in this case the symbol and the symbolized, the expression and the expressed. He invokes analogy to suggest that at the heart of being lies a foundational—yet dynamic—agreement between beings. This agreement grounds any expression, any self-realization, or any manifestation.

This last word, “manifestation,” brings me to the topic of aesthetics, since aesthetics is the study of manifestation. “The Theology of the Symbol” is a study in manifestation. This becomes most clear when Rahner returns in the essay’s closing pages to the topic of devotion to the heart of Jesus. Rahner contends that theologians who

83. Ibid. 231–32.

84. Ibid. 232.

85. Ibid. 235.

wrangle over whether it is licit to refer to the Sacred Heart as a symbol, or whether Jesus' bodily heart or a more abstract notion of Jesus' love is the object of devotion, misunderstand symbolic manifestation. The word "symbol" need not be avoided, because no symbol is a *mere* symbol. No symbol manifests purely extrinsically what it symbolizes. Instead, "the symbol is the reality, constituted by the thing symbolized as an inner moment of itself, which reveals and proclaims the thing symbolized, and is itself full of the thing symbolized, being its concrete form of existence."⁸⁶ Thus the bodily heart of Jesus and Jesus' spiritual love cannot be separated, even if they might be mentally distinguished. This mental distinction, as it turns out, is an expression of the original plural unity of heart and love, the symbol and the symbolized.

Freedom and Eternal Manifestation

Though it may not be immediately obvious, Rahner's essay on symbol is about freedom. It is an essay about the heart—Jesus' Sacred Heart—and for Rahner, freedom is "the capacity of the heart."⁸⁷ I have just compared this "later" essay with the "earlier" *Spirit in World*. In this section I bring in Rahner's other famous "early" philosophical text, *Hearer of the Word*, whose initial development was contemporaneous with the interval between his writing of *Spirit in World* and its publication. Also, Schelling's freedom treatise reenters the discussion. The three main texts under consideration—"The Theology of the Symbol," *Hearer of the Word*, and *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*—all concern freedom. They also concern manifestation. In fact, for each text freedom is, fundamentally, self-manifestation that allows the other to be there.

As I have argued, Rahner's symbol essay speaks of the symbol in terms of self-realization. This way of describing symbol is by no means self-evident. Just because something shows itself in a symbol does not necessarily imply that this showing entails self-realization. But Rahner discusses symbol in this way. In so doing he implicates the theme of freedom into his metaphysics of symbol. The other themes that I elucidated above, "allowing the other to be there" and "agreeing with the origin," also involve freedom, since "allowing" and "agreeing" are dispositions of freedom. Rahner is not simply developing a set of metaphors. He means quite literally that every symbol, insofar as it is true, acts freely—thus manifests freely.⁸⁸

86. Ibid. 251.

87. Karl Rahner, "The Theology of Freedom," in *Concerning Vatican Council II*, TI 6, trans. Karl-H. and Boniface Kruger (Baltimore: Helicon, 1969) 178–96, at 187.

88. Two points bear further comment here. First, by "true" I mean uncoerced. An untrue manifestation, for example, would be a confession elicited through so-called "enhanced interrogation techniques." Second, one might raise the question of how "purely material" things, like rocks or rugs (to use examples posed to me by a reader), might "freely" symbolize something else. Rahner anticipates this question in his discussion of the body as the symbol of a human person. He writes that various parts of the body differ in their "power of expression, their degree of belonging to the soul, their openness to the soul"

Free revelation is the central theme of *Hearer of the Word*. The focal question of the text arises in conjunction with Rahner's dual insistence that divine (infinite) being is pure luminosity, and that the human spirit is, per the Scholastic description, *quodammodo omnia*: finite openness to the infinite.⁸⁹ Rahner's question is this: "Why does the absolute transcendence of the spirit as the *a priori* opening up of a space for revelation, combined with the pure luminosity of pure being, not from the start render superfluous any possible revelation?"⁹⁰ In effect, Rahner asks how revelation can be free if it is also necessary. How can God choose to self-reveal if the makeup of the human spirit demands a divine self-revelation? Rahner arrives at an answer through a metaphysical examination of will, both human and divine.

Rahner's depiction of human will has a distinctive tenor to it: "At the basis of human existence is always enacted a necessary and absolute affirmation of the contingent reality that we ourselves are, i.e., will."⁹¹ He characterizes the human will as at the "basis"—or origin—of human existence. As he puts it in a later lecture on freedom (1964), "it would be a complete misconception of the nature of freedom to try to understand it as the capacity of choice between objects given *a posteriori*."⁹² Instead, the nature of freedom lies in an *a priori* decision. Freedom is a dynamic *a priori*. This dynamic *a priori* affirms and reenacts "a free absolute positing of something that is not necessary."⁹³ The "free absolute positing" is the creation of the contingent ("not necessary") human being. By affirming this absolute positing, the human person affirms the luminosity of being that emits from what Rahner calls the "ground of human existence."⁹⁴ Being's luminosity, though it shines from within the human person, must be recognized, Rahner contends, as originating in the free act of another. This freely acting "other" is the divine will. The essence of human freedom is the necessary positing of something contingent. Human action grounds itself in a fundamental acceptance that I am here, and that I have been placed here by an other. This acceptance is, then, necessary, but it is the necessary acceptance of a free act: "Humanity is necessarily posited, because posited by a free will."⁹⁵

All this discussion of freedom and necessity helps Rahner answer his central question. The infinite openness of the human spirit is nothing other than the affirmation of

(Rahner, "Theology of the Symbol" 249). Something similar goes for rocks and rugs. If we take them to be symbols of their Creator, or, in the case of rugs, of their human maker, then we could say that they "freely" symbolize in that they "allow" expression to be made through them. Surely they differ widely in their power of expression, thus in their freedom, from higher-order symbols like the human person (*vis-à-vis* God). Nonetheless, according to Rahnerian principles, it is not completely strange to ascribe some measure of freedom to them.

89. Rahner, *Hearer of the Word* 56.

90. *Ibid.* 64.

91. *Ibid.* 69.

92. Rahner, "Theology of Freedom" 179.

93. Rahner, *Hearer of the Word* 69.

94. *Ibid.* 68.

95. *Ibid.* 69.

the free will of God. Thus, human freedom of spirit does not cancel the freedom of God's revelation. The more one recognizes the limitlessness of human freedom, the more one proclaims God's freedom to reveal or not to reveal. The independence of the human person is not inimical to the dependence of the human person on God. And the independence of the human person from God is not inimical to God's independent capacity for revelation. With these words, I have begun to suggest how Rahner's ideas in *Hearer of the Word* and the reverberations of *Hearer of the Word* in the later symbol essay relate to Schelling's freedom treatise.

Even though he does so in a different mode and toward a different end, Schelling shares Rahner's project of inquiring into God's freedom to self-reveal. For Schelling, God self-reveals freely. Furthermore, God self-reveals in free beings. Schelling argues that God would not be truly God if God self-revealed to or through "mechanical" beings, that is, beings that would be able to receive God's self-revelation only by necessity or coercion, or that would be gleefully unaware of the revelation. Schelling states, "The procession of things from God is a self-revelation of God. But God can only reveal himself to himself in what is like him, in free beings acting on their own, for whose being there is no ground other than God but who are as God is."⁹⁶ God and creation have freedom in common. Freedom is the linchpin that holds reality together. It links creation to its God. Schelling invokes Jesus' saying, "God is not God of the dead, but of the living" (Lk 20:38). The life of the "living" is freedom. And freedom means "independence." Schelling expresses this in terms reminiscent of Rahner's symbol essay: "The representations of the divinity can be independent beings only; for what is the limiting element in our representations other than exactly that we see what is not independent?"⁹⁷ Creation remains unlike God, then, because only God is purely free, and the creature exists as free and unfree—dependent. Creatures represent God in both their independence from and dependence on God. They are symbols of God.

Schelling went further than Rahner would go, insisting that for God to reveal God's self there *must* be such independent expressions. In a manner of speaking, God is dependent on the world. Rahner, being a traditional Catholic theologian committed to the immutability, impassibility, and omnipotence of God, would reject this Schellingian tenet, which, despite Schelling's teaching that God is utterly free, seems to submit God to a necessity beyond God's control. Thus we could hearken back to the potential helpfulness from Rahner's point of view of Heidegger's bracketing of Schelling's heterodox theology (see the first section above). Notwithstanding these theological difficulties, though, Schelling's account of free divine self-revelation in creation, particularly when he applies this directly to humanity,⁹⁸ provides an interesting template for reassessing Rahner's "Theology of the Symbol" via *Hearer of the Word*.

96. Schelling, *Essence of Human Freedom* 18.

97. *Ibid.*

98. Schelling writes, "The human will is the seed—hidden in eternal yearning—of the God who is present still in the ground only; it is the divine panorama of life, locked up within the depths, which God beheld as he fashioned the will to nature. In him (in man) alone God loved the world, and precisely this likeness of God was possessed by yearning in the

Again the Rahner–Schelling nexus is seen most clearly in Schelling’s development of Aristotle’s idea of prime matter, which, we saw above, redirects the thinking of “ground.” For both Schelling and Rahner, any discussion of human independence from or dependence on God must consider the ground for this independence or dependence. The ground for both Rahner and Schelling, though they deploy it in distinct senses, is an eternal decision. This does not mean that temporal acts of freedom are merely epiphenomenal. To the contrary, without these temporal acts, the eternal decision never takes shape. Eternal decision is possibility, the pluriform possibility that produces actuality. By analogy with their thinking on matter and form, then, Rahner and Schelling present views of freedom centered on the original plurality of possibilities that conditions actuality.

Put succinctly, since this article is, in any event, programmatic, the Schellingian template would call for a reading of Rahner’s theology of the symbol as itself a symbol of a wider theological aesthetic operative in Rahner’s corpus. Fields has already done much of the legwork of putting forth exactly this insight. But he has not yet specified the character of Rahner’s theological aesthetic in a way that an encounter with Schelling might. An in-depth dialogue between Rahner and Schelling would reveal that, for Rahner, the manifestation described in theological aesthetics is the manifestation of divine freedom to and through creaturely freedom. Theological aesthetics explicates the free divine self-revelation to creatures who are free to apprehend this revelation, but who likewise depend on and yearn for it. More simply, theological aesthetics investigates the original plural unity of divine and human freedom.

The upshot of all this is that the Rahner–Schelling conversation reveals a way of articulating the analogy of being in a critical idiom. This is not just a difference of language—no symbol is a mere symbol—but a serious reappropriation of Thomistic-Aristotelian metaphysics for an age after German Idealism. Schelling helps us discover in Rahner a participatory metaphysics that is pronouncedly dynamic. The eternal manifestation of God moves through creation, especially through free human action, toward its greater honor and glory. This glory comes not through human autonomy (Kant) or through knowledge (Hegel), but through a polymorphic ethos, a way of life that enacts the plural-yet-unified ground of all that is.

Conclusion

I have here examined the hitherto untraversed territory of the relationship between Karl Rahner and Friedrich Schelling. I started with Stephen Fields’s placement of Rahner in a place of tension along the German Idealist trajectory, a place similar to the one Schelling is often understood as occupying. In keeping with Fields’s insight, I

centrum as it came into opposition with the light. Because he emerges from the Ground (is creaturely), man has in relation to God a relatively independent principle in himself; but because precisely this principle . . . is transfigured in light, there arises in him something higher, *spirit*” (ibid. 32).

investigated a point of history: Rahner studied Schelling under Martin Heidegger. I speculated as to how this portion of Rahner's education might illuminate his works, while also trying not to overstate the influence of Schelling on Rahner. I explored how Rahner's *Spirit in World* evidences openness to Schelling's thought, particularly with respect to Schelling's rehabilitation of Aristotelian metaphysics after Kantian and Hegelian idealism. Using Schelling's thought as a template, I began to develop a generative reading of *Spirit in World* as a text about original plural unity. Finally, I commenced reconsidering Rahner's "The Theology of the Symbol," using Schellingian ideas to discover in this text a theological aesthetic centered on the original plural unity of divine and created freedom.

Original plural unity should be a guiding idea for theological aesthetics. The idea can help mitigate some of the dangers that accompany the benefits of theological aesthetics, like the tendency to reduce reality to a spectral scene or to a worldly drama that, when it comes down to it, is merely an epiphenomenon of the heavenly drama. With Schelling's help, I have found Rahner articulating an idea of original plural unity, a coinherence that is held together dynamically by free divine and human acts, where all parties have a real stake in the action and no one is a spectator. Further exploration of original plural unity in Rahner, with Schelling as an interlocutor, could complexify the idea, particularly with respect to sin.⁹⁹ This fuller consideration would demonstrate how one may find in Rahner's works a theological aesthetic attentive to both the divine light and the darkness that tries, but fails, to overcome it (see Jn 1:5; recall Heidegger's quotation from Schelling in the first section above). In a world where darkness continually disguises itself as light, a discerning, Rahnerian theological aesthetic proves as necessary as ever.¹⁰⁰

Author biography

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99. A starting point would be to delve into the difficulties so perceptively identified by Ron Highfield's article on Rahner's doctrine of sin: "The Freedom to Say 'No'? Karl Rahner's Doctrine of Sin," *Theological Studies* 56 (1995) 485–505.

100. I am grateful to Cyril O'Regan, Joseph Lawrence, Jennifer Martin, and Matthew Eggemeier, who read and offered incisive critiques of drafts of this article; to my student, Timothy Nowak, with whom I discussed at length my ideas on Schelling; to the anonymous referees whose comments, queries, and criticisms substantially improved this work; and to the editor for his patience with my prose's eccentricity.