Awakening and Living the Gift Already Received:
an Exploration of Rahner’s Theology of Grace
Applied to the Life of Faith Today

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This thesis explores Rahner’s theology of grace. The Augustinian and Thomist legacies on grace are briefly reviewed, with particular reference to biblical teachings about grace. This is followed by a more detailed evaluation of the Neo-Scholastic approach to grace, whose extrinsicist tone activated criticism from la nouvelle théologie, which in turn was challenged by Rahner. Consideration is then given to some critiques of Rahner’s approach as being ahistorical and asocial.

The goal of this thesis is to show how the Rahnerian concept of grace, as the gift already received, functions as a foundation for a theology of grace that allows Christians to appreciate our direct experience of God’s grace in our contexts of history, culture, and religion. The main argument of the thesis is that Rahner’s transcendental project, a commitment to tradition, and yet with an openness to new questions, provides a satisfying completeness of intellectual inquiry and pastoral concern into the issue of grace in its relation to the human condition.

Everything else concerning our life of faith springs from this confirmed truth, namely, our existence is graced by the very self-giving of God bestowed in love.
Statement of Originality

I affirm that this thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other institution. To the best of my knowledge, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

Signed: Son Thai Nguyen
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Chapter 1: Introduction

To illustrate the concerns of this thesis, which aims to be both scholarly and pastoral, consider the following vignette. It deals with the issues of so called secularism and the Church and the world, and it invites us to revisit our thinking of grace in only ecclesiastical terms.

So the story goes: A Catholic couple brought their first child, whom they have named “Grace,” to the church to be baptized. The relatives of this couple are present at this ceremony, now having married and having had children of their own. Some are ex-Catholics, some non-Catholics, others call themselves ‘freethinkers’ or ‘humanists,’ i.e., they are not church-goers; some do not know where they stand. For this reason, most of their children have not been baptized. Amazingly, at the moment of water-pouring and saying the words of baptism, all the congregation, despite their religious differences, turned their eyes to Grace. The little children were the most excited. They jumped to Grace, called her name and curiously looked at Grace. The whole congregation was completely drawn to Grace, with an awareness that at least something extraordinary was happening here, if not indeed her rebirth in Christ. One child loudly asked her mother why she couldn’t be baptized like Grace. What was going on in this remarkable moment? Is it the majestic power of God’s loving grace, which, surpassing all kinds of differences, gathers and enfolds the whole congregation in one gesture, and at the same time speaks to each one, even the children, in accordance with their most intimate dispositions, and from within the individual situation in life that is peculiarly their own?

The answer to the above two questions – that a divine gift within has indeed been awakened – outlines the aim and scope of this thesis. The thesis explores a discussion of grace seen as the marvelous and yet mysterious point of contact between God and humans. Our purpose is not to write a thorough history of the evolution of the doctrines of grace in its relation to the human condition, but to unpack the location of grace and how grace is linked to human existence. The thesis will argue, following Rahner’s conviction grounded as it is on biblical witness, that grace is the gift within, i.e. the gift God has already given and we have already received. At the heart of this argument, the
thesis will unpack Rahner’s insistence on how important is the need to awaken grace as the gift within and then, to live this awakened gift in our everyday life. It is in this insistence that we will find Rahner as the theologian engaging in dialogue with the giants of the theology of grace who preceded him.

The dialogue between Rahner and the traditional theology of grace explores the questions as to whether or not, and how, we can experience grace. As we shall see, the traditional understanding of grace was tied into narrowly ecclesiastical (and/or sacramental) terms, thus treating grace as something divine externally added to us, and limited by the boundaries of the Church. Being co-operative with grace, thus understood, defined the term “awakening.” “Awakening” was seen in these terms as being awakened to the external grace by doing more good so as gain more grace given occasionally and almost in a disturbing way. “Awakening” to grace, traditionally understood, had an effect that encouraged the “elected” people of God to climb up to the top of the mountain, standing on the summit, without realizing that true happiness lies in the way we climb the slope. We kept on climbing up to meet God, thus forgetting that God has come down to meet us in our immediate contexts, i.e., who we are now and where we are now.

Rahner, by contrast, seeing grace as the gift within, argues that awakening involves an ever-deeper level than the passing show. One’s awakening ceases to be an awakening to grace; it is an awakening of grace itself. At this level, we are able to overcome the constraints of external values, no longer letting them pull us here and there, up and down. He challenges us to discover the little sacred space from which we contemplatively watch ourselves as if our self is someone else. There, we will experience God’s real presence at our innermost in the form of grace. We will find we are not doing things; they are being done to us. External values such as ethics, culture, history, religions and the like no longer define the core of our being. We use them as helpful means, however, so as to find our identity within, to learn to see things and ourselves as God sees them.¹

Rahner’s theology of grace unfolds against the background of traditional Catholic theology, climaxing with, though with different outcomes, Neo-Scholasticism and la

nouvelle théologie. Unpacking this background is therefore the focus of the following chapter. The Augustinian and Thomistic legacies will be briefly reviewed, followed by a more detailed evaluation of the approach to grace of the early Neo-Scholastics, whose extrinsicist tone activated criticism from la nouvelle théologie. The review and evaluation will be done in a way that permits us to investigate the failure of the two approaches regarding the method to awaken grace as the gift within. How Rahner defends his argument on the necessary awakening of grace is the main concern of chapter three. Chapter four will then examine how Christians live grace as the gift already awakened. In the fifth chapter, we will seek to critically evaluate Rahner’s insights by bringing them into dialogue with some recent challenges from Rahner’s critics. In our concluding chapter, chapter six, we will reflect on the significance of Rahner’s theology of grace for Christian living, with a particular reference to how we understand and receive the sacraments.

The goal of this work is to show how the Rahnerian concept of grace as the gift already received functions as a foundation for a theology of grace, allowing Christians to appreciate our direct experience God’s grace in our proper contexts of history, culture, and religions. Our central arguments are: (1) While not destroying traditional faith in an autonomous God, Rahner’s project calls Christians to open to an ever more personally mystical faith in, and experience of, God’s grace as God’s self-communication. (2) Rahner’s project brings less negative consequences and more positive consequences for Christian faith. (3) Though Rahner’s theology of grace gives priority to the personal and individual dimension of our lived faith, it by no means ignores the communal and social dimensions of human life.
Chapter 2: From Scripture to Theology

This chapter explores the biblical origins of the concept of grace and traces the theological developments of that concept with particular interest in the relationship between nature and grace as discussed in Neo-Scholasticism’s, la nouvelle théologie’s, and Karl Rahner’s theological syntheses. It will be shown that Rahner, in order to preserve the unexacted quality of grace, develops his theology of grace in a way that preserves both distinction and connection between nature and grace.

2.1 Grace as Gift: A Biblical Understanding

Grace is the English translation of the Latin word, gratia, which, in its turn, is the Latin translation of the word χαρίς in Greek. According to Fransen, the term χαρίς as used by the biblical authors renders “several Hebrew words conveying meanings reducible to three main ideas: condescending love, conciliatory compassion and fidelity.” On some readings, Scripture suggests that grace is a second gift graciously given by God as an addition to the first gift – the gift of creation. This second gift is described as either “election” or “blessing” freely bestowed on us by God (as seen in the OT), or “rebirth,” “renewal,” “resurrection,” “a share in the divine nature,” “an indwelling of the Holy Spirit,” also freely given to us by God (as found in the NT). Seen in this way, the connotation of the word grace expands to everything pertaining to a gift of God’s love gratuitously given us by God. It is an unmerited favour of God in our hearts that calls for our acceptance through a recognition and awakening of that favour, with an attitude of thankfulness.


3 Fransen, ibid., 15.

4 Gen 6:8; 19:19; 33:15; Ex 33:12; 34:9; I Sam 1:18; 27:5, etc.

5 Luke 1:30; 2:40, 52; Acts 2:47; 7:46; 24:27; 25:9, etc.
The question arises, however, as to actually what it is that God gives in giving grace. Since grace in its practical implications includes the gratuitous quality of God’s special love for humanity, it may refer to everything falling within the framework of Christian life. Creation is grace. Christ is grace and so his Spirit. Redemption is grace, since it is what Christ did for us. Salvation is grace as it is what Christ gained for us, etc.⁶ If this is the case, grace in its root sense primarily refers to, through the incarnation of Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the single act of God’s giving Godself to us, and thus transforming us by redemption into the life of God. Grace as such designates an energy of divine self-giving love presently working in us so as to forgive, heal and elevate us. Grace is, then, the daily fruit of the fact that God first loves us by giving God’s self to us, and thus transforming us from within, with its transformative power. It follows that an experience of grace as such is never separated from our daily and natural experience when we, in our freedom, are open to this transformative power of grace.

Because grace is a gratuitous gift of God’s self already given, according to the Letter to the Romans, it does not depend on our claim or merit in order to receive it. There is nothing at all I can do in order to attain this gift.⁷ Nor is there something I can do to lose this gift. Grace as gift has been already “sealed” within me as an indwelling of the divine in me. I should not believe in this “sealed” indwelling of the divine as one doctrine among others. Instead, I need to “draw new life from this deep well within me, and then I will naturally believe.”⁸ Rahner shares this view. Thus he writes:

In every human being … there is something like an anonymous, unthematic, perhaps repressed, basic experience of being orientated to God, which is constitutive of him in his concrete make-up (of nature and grace), which can be repressed but not destroyed, which is “mystical” or (if you prefer a more cautious terminology) has its climax in what the older teachers called infused contemplation.⁹

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⁷ Rom 8:10.
We will come back to this topic in 3.5 below. For the moment, our focus is on how the gift of grace can be neglected, and thus how its wonderful fruits can be lost. This neglect occurs when I sin. But it can also occur as a result of misconceptions of grace.

2.2 Grace as Gift Trivialized and Categorized

There is a wide consensus among theologians that, with Augustine, the understanding of grace underwent a “radical shift, one that remained decisive for theology in the West.” 10 Augustine was famous for his all-or-nothing understanding of grace, according to which a human person, having been seriously wounded by original sin committed by Adam and Eve, stood before two choices: either being a “slave to sin” or a “slave to God’s law;” either “all sin” or “all grace.”11 Apart from these choices, as Ormerod notes, there was no “middle ground” no “neutral place” that the human person could stand before God. However, Augustine’s all-or-nothing view on grace, Ormerod continues, has a danger of coming close to a form of “dualism whereby the finitude of our human state becomes identical with sin itself.”12 After Augustine, grace previously understood in the biblical sense as a universal energy of God’s love was narrowed down to be something locally administered by the Church through the Sacraments: grace as a gratuitous gift was perceived as a controlling force which predestined, determined, surrounded, envisioned, penetrated, oriented, and ordered the baptized, and even chose and did the good for them and kept them in constant perseverance.13 Grace was trivialized, ceasing to be a gratuitous gift, because people were forced to receive it. God had become very small and been whittled down to our established size.

Thomas Aquinas attempted to replace Augustine’s pessimistic view of the all-or-nothingness of grace with his optimistic theory of the grace and nature distinction, by providing the very point that Augustine’s theory of grace lacked – a middle ground or

10 Haight, op. cit., 6-8.
12 Ormerod, op. cit., 12.
13 Augustine, On Grace and Free Will, in FC 59 (1968), 16. 32.
neutral place where people could stand apart from grace. This neutral place for Aquinas was the desiderium naturale visionis dei (the natural desire to see God). Despite original sin being seen by Aquinas as a state of life which lacked original justice and extended to a person, in his origin, from the sin of the first parents, constituting the basis for all human existence, the person’s nature was not totally corrupted. The person still “can do some particular good … But he cannot achieve the whole good naturally to him, as if he lacked of nothing.” Accordingly, Aquinas portrayed human nature as having two ends – one natural and the other supernatural. But Aquinas was convinced that a person in her natural status already possessed a natural desire to see God. In other words, a human person, in her fallen status and with divine help, could will and do some good. But, in order to will and do the supernatural good of salvation, she needed God’s grace. It is in this context that Aquinas’s dictum, “grace perfects nature,” (gratia perficit naturam) becomes clear in meaning. Grace was permitted to work only in the supernatural spectrum and within an ecclesial framework.

Aquinas’s proposition on natural desire caused a dilemma for Cajetan, who asked whether the natural desire to see God was part of our human nature as such, or whether it belonged to the supernatural spectrum? If the former, human nature is then conceived of as self-sufficient and as naturally complete existence. But why then is there a need for grace? And if a human still needs grace so as to obtain eternal happiness, grace is then conceived of as something that God, in God’s justice, has to give so as to accomplish the human natural desire that God has planted within us, thus threatening the utter gratuity of divine grace. If the latter is the case, God holds the initiative in gracing human nature and aids the human will to act. The question arises as to how God moves the human will efficaciously to the consent of faith without taking away its freedom? This question will be further examined in 2.3 below.

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14 Ormerod, op. cit., 113.
15 Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica (ST) I-II, q. 85, a. 1.
16 ST I-II, q.109, a.2.
17 ST I-II, q.109, a.1.
18 ST I-II, q. 109, a.5.
19 ST I-II, q. 111, a. 2.
20 Ormerod, op. cit., 115.
Except for some fundamental differences, theological syntheses concerning grace up to the early medieval period generally held one thing in common: supernatural grace was said to be given within the Church. Because of this, incorporation into the Church through baptism was necessary, since this was the only way to access grace. Then comes the issue of how the baptized co-operate with supernatural grace. After baptism, the other sacraments were seen as occasions to receive more grace, through which Christians would be well equipped spiritually so as to exercise our complete obedience to the utter determinism of grace, as Augustine encouraged, or to a participation in God’s nature through acts, as Aquinas urged. These popular views on grace produced a Trinitarian understanding of justification being made possible only through the Sacraments.\(^{21}\)

As a whole, traditional theological syntheses on grace and their impacts on Christian life brought about a popular mentality among Christians, as Rohr remarks, that divided the world into “deserving and undeserving parts.”\(^{22}\) It hardly allowed for a “real experience of grace or undeserved mercy.” This narrow understanding of grace left us with a habit of judgment which was too “demanding, unforgiving, and weak in empathy or sympathy.” We have indeed remained inside “the prison of meritocracy, where all has to be deserved.” The life of faith became fear-based, dualistically locked inside a mechanistic universe, rather than love-based, non-dualistically walking within a world of harmony full of loving grace.

### 2.3 Grace as Gift Dualistically Split and Demanded

For nearly a century, from the later part of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century, the Roman Catholic Church saw the triumphal march of a movement backwards to the authentic thought of Thomas Aquinas, both theologically and philosophically. This began as a conservative move when Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (1879) ruled that the philosophy and theology of the angelic doctor and


\(^{22}\) This quote and the others in this paragraph are from Rohr, op. cit., 126.
his followers must be given a high honour in all the curricula of catholic seminaries at the time.

At the heart of the Neo-Scholasticism’s theology of grace lays a “strategy of separation.” In order to safeguard the sovereign gratuity of grace, Neo-Scholasticism adopted not Aquinas’s original theory of desiderium naturale visionis dei, but Cajetan’s extrinsic interpretation of this theory. In order to solve the dilemma caused by Aquinas’s theory of desiderium naturale, as we have seen in 2.2 above, Cajetan reasoned that if there was such a natural desire at all, it made sense only when “grace has elevated the desire and finality of nature.” Thus the Neo-Scholastics perceived grace as an added force to nature, with the purpose of elevating humans to the supernatural order.

As we shall see, Rahner rejects this standard ontological separation of nature and grace as “hopelessly extrinsic.” Rahner sees in this extrinsicism the danger that God’s gift of redemptive grace is understood to address us, not at the centre, but only at the periphery of our lives, resulting in an inevitable discontinuity between the ultimate purpose of God and human concrete existence. There must be, Rahner insists, some continuity if we are to say that our life is transformed by grace, which we can experience as a reality, historically and existentially. Unpacking this necessary continuity is thus, for Rahner, the task of theological reflection:

We must show that the supernaturalness of grace does not mean that man in his “natural” being is a closed system complete in itself with grace as a pure superstructure which leaves what is beneath unchanged; … we must make our own the idea of existential, personal “moment of grace” … and we must clear up the misunderstanding which leads people to that the idea of a “state” of grace, when grace is “present” but not necessarily “active,” is an aberration from the true biblical doctrine of grace.

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2.4 Grace as Gift Demanded

In another controversy, Rahner reacted to *la nouvelle théologie*, whose intrinsicist approach to grace was established as a response to the strategy of separation that defined the standard Neo-Scholastic framework. The best known theologian of this movement is Henri de Lubac, who, in his major work, *On the Mystery of the Supernatural*, explored Aquinas’s *desiderium naturale* as the starting point for his intrinsicist program. However, de Lubac goes beyond Aquinas’s understanding of the *desiderium naturale* (as previously outlined), arguing that it is a constitutive element of human nature, freely constituted by God in this way for the beatific vision or the supernatural end. A human person by nature, for de Lubac, cannot reach her supernatural end without God’s second gift of deifying grace bestowed graciously in a second moment, i.e., through Christ. Yet, endowed by God with a desire to see God, human nature is not “an order destined to close in finally upon itself, but in a sense open to an inevitably supernatural end.” Even though the “desire itself . . . does not constitute as yet even the slightest positive ‘ordering’ to the supernatural,” the fact that God has constituted this desire within human nature makes possible one’s natural openness to and yearning for an inevitably supernatural end, which, surprisingly, fits and efficaciously “orders” the very desire of nature. Thus, unlike Cajetan who doubted the existence of a natural desire as such, de Lubac insists that there must be a natural desire for the supernatural end, which, though still hidden from us, is already “the depth of our desire.”

For de Lubac then, human nature in its created state, possesses “already an inner and unconditional desire for grace and supernatural elevation.” Departing from the Neo-Scholastics’ strategy of separation, de Lubac argues that grace is an inevitable fulfillment of the inner and natural dynamism for the supernatural end built in human

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29 De Lubac, *MS*, 85.
30 Healy, op. cit., 547.
31 De Lubac, *MS*, 217.
32 Reno, op. cit., 104.
nature, so much so that the two become an integral entity. As a result, nature has now a demand of extraordinary grace. Or better, God is demanded to fulfill the secret desire of human nature placed by God. Though this fulfillment occurs as a surprise – i.e., with “a renunciation of self-sufficiency”33 from the recipient side – and must be absorbed into the ordinariness of everyday life, it is a debt that God owes us.

It is into this intricate web of theology in the middle of the twentieth century that Rahner entered. Seemingly, in his writing prior to 1950, Rahner shared in the intrinsicist agenda of la nouvelle théologie, and thus rejected Neo-Scholastics’ extrinsicist framework. Rahner lamented that the standard manual had created an assumption or belief that “the offer of inwardly elevating grace remains ex supposito outside or above real experience, and only becomes known in a faith which knows of its object ex auditu alone.”34 For Rahner, this Neo-Scholastic point of view was problematic because it narrowed grace to an extrinsic reality, which was known to a believer only in/through institutional moments of religious practices (for instance, the sacraments as the occasional celebrations of faith), and the Church’s teaching about faith. In short, grace remained information, but not revelation, and was inaccessible to one’s concrete existence in her daily life.35

Thus Rahner, together with les théologiennes nouveaux, insisted that one’s life of faith must be rooted in one’s religious experience of the supernatural element, which is “an interior ontological constituent” of human “concrete quiddity.”36 Genuine life of faith must reach and express the interiority, centrality and essentiality of being human, which we experience and cherish personally, historically, and culturally, rather than being limited to Church practices.37 Both Rahner and la nouvelle théologie were determined to replace the Neo-Scholastic strategy of separation with a more unified interpretation of grace and nature.

However, Rahner steps back from la nouvelle théologie’s intrinsicism. His main concern is the danger caused by la nouvelle théologie’s claim that humanity has a

33 Healy, op. cit., 548.
34 Rahner, “Concerning,” TI I, 300.
35 Rahner, Nature and Grace and Other Essays, 21; confer de Lubac, MS, xi.
37 Ibid., 303.
command on grace, since God has constituted humans in this way for a destined beatific vision. This natural command on grace, for Rahner, ultimately threatens the gratuity of grace. Thus, in overcoming the strategy of separation of the Neo-Scholastics, Rahner’s question echoes their very central concern: “The problem is this: is it still possible to conceive of grace as unexacted, supposing that the existential consisting of the inner and unconditional reference to grace and beatific vision were a constituent of man’s ‘nature’ in the sense that man as such could not be thought without it?”\(^{38}\) Rahner’s answer to this question is negative. The unexacted-ness of grace requires us to treat grace as a separate entity from nature.

Thus, in order to preserve the unexacted quality of grace, Rahner develops a theology of grace that preserves the distinction between nature and grace. But he determines this preservation in a direction that goes beyond the Neo-Scholastics’ extrinsicist framework by redefining the very status of our dynamism toward grace. On the other hand, Rahner departs from the intrinsicist agenda of la nouvelle théologie by treating nature, not as something that cannot be imagined apart from grace, but both as a central category of theological analysis and a “remainder concept” (Restbegriff).\(^{39}\) The implications of this departure are to relocate human desire for the beatific vision to “a universally constitutive, but not natural component of human life,” and to establish a separation of “the intuitive connection between human existence and human nature.”\(^{40}\)

How Rahner develops this theology of grace is the subject of the following chapter.

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\(^{38}\) Ibid., 304.

\(^{39}\) Ibid., 302.

\(^{40}\) Reno, op. cit., 108.
Chapter 3: Awakening Grace as the Gift Already Received

In chapter two we noted how grace, which Scripture describes as a universal and gratuitous gift, has been in turns trivialized, dualistically categorized, and even demanded. The purpose of this chapter is to more fully examine Rahner’s response, which suggests that grace is the gift of the loving God that we have already received in our being brought into existence.

The questions arise as to whether and under what circumstances one’s existence is intelligible without grace, even though according to Rahner only in grace can existence be fulfilled in the most complete fashion. How can one recognize and awaken grace as the gift within? What a priori conditions of possibility lie behind our possible reception of God’s loving grace?

We will attempt, in the third and fourth sections of this chapter, to examine Rahner’s answers to the above questions, through a study of his concepts of God as “Holy Mystery,” the “Vorgriff” (pre-apprehension), human openness to self-transcendence, and the supernatural existential. But first it would be well to identify our birthright and the proper starting point of a theology of grace, as Rahner suggests.

3.1 Discovering Our Birthright

Grace for Rahner is a gift with which we are born into life. And this grace as gift is God’s self-giving in love. If we are born into life with this gift, this suggests that we have already received it, and the very expressions of this reception are shown in our authentic potency, or capacity, or burning longing for God. In one sense, this potency is similar to Aquinas’s desiderium naturale. However, the difference between the two concepts is that while Aquinas excluded the desiderium naturale from the spectrum of grace, Rahner sees the human potency for God as an entity inseparable from grace. Thus Rahner writes,

Man should be able to receive this Love which is God himself … Thus man must have a real ‘potency’ for it. … Man is indeed someone always addressed and claimed by this Love. For, as he now in fact is, he is created for it; he is thought and called into being so that Love might bestow
itself. To this extent, this ‘potency’ is what is inmost and most authentic in him, the centre and root of what he is absolutely. He must have it always … must … always remains what he was created as: the burning longing for God himself in the immediacy of God’s own threefold life. The capacity for God of self-bestowing personal Love is the central and abiding existential of the human person as he really is.\textsuperscript{41}

3.2 Rahner on the Descent Revelation of the Loving God

We have noted Rahner’s thesis that nature and grace are separated, and yet intimately connected (see 2. 2 and 2.3 above). How can Rahner defend this argument? First, he asks, on philosophical grounds, “How am I to know that everything I in fact encounter in my existential experience of myself … does in fact fall within the realm of my ‘nature’?”\textsuperscript{42} Rahner contends that there are no valid arguments, either anthropological or theological, that show our human existence is merely natural. In the very natural moments we experience in our daily life, Rahner argues, in the very questions we ask about our existence, a supernatural element has been at work, “which could never in actual fact be bracketed off.”\textsuperscript{43} Philosophically, Rahner argues that grace is traced as a force always operative in every natural act of knowing and questioning, albeit in an unthematic way.

Rahner develops this philosophical ground of human cognitive acts in his early studies \textit{Spirit in the World} and \textit{Hearers of the Word}. There, developing Thomistic epistemology, he argues against any possibility of a purely “naturalized” account of human cognition (more on this in 3.3 below). Rather, a human being in her ontological make-up is endowed with an obediential potency, metaphysically made ready to be addressed by the God of love. But this is not an obediential potency understood as a potency of doing-what-I-am-told-to-do. Rather, it signifies a process of attuning her mind to the simple call contained in the complexity of a given situation. This means that, in her ordinary, temporal interaction with material things, the person is listening for a possible word of revelation in history, and her very ontological make-up thus

\textsuperscript{41} Karl Rahner, “Concerning the Relationship between Nature and Grace,” \textit{Theological Investigations} 1, [hereafter “Concerning,” \textit{TI} 1], 331-2.

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 300.

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 301.
created functions as the “condition of possibility of being addressed by the Word itself, which the Father speaks to human kind, primarily in Christ, but in other ways as well.”

The person’s mind is open and obediential to the Word that reaches her. All human natural cognitive activities therefore, for Rahner, are already done in accordance with, and under the influence of, the possible revelation, both transcendentally and categorically. In his later writings, Rahner identifies the grace that brings about this determination of human being as uncreated grace, namely, the self-communication of God.

If grace is found at work in every human existential experience, then grace, for Rahner, must be seen as the proper starting point of any discourse about not just human nature, but about the whole of human existence. It is as though Rahner moves beyond the classical philosophy of essence (and nature) to the contemporary philosophy of existentialism. By doing this, Rahner has resolved the discontinuity between God and human existence suggested by the Neo-Scholastics. Rahner’s beginning with grace also steers away from la nouvelle théologie’s constitution of human nature as totally being dependent on grace, and yet, having a demand on grace. Thus, in a highly methodological statement, Rahner writes:

A precise delimitation of nature from grace … and so a really pure concept of pure nature could thus in every case only be pursued with the help of Revelation, which tells us what in us is grace and so provides us with the means of abstracting this grace from the body of our existential experience of man and thus of acquiring pure nature (in its totality) as a ‘remainder.’

In order to defend the above claim, Rahner has to unpack his understanding of grace in the first place. Here, Rahner begins his theology of grace where Aquinas also started: with God. But, given the possible ambiguity and limitations of the word “God”, Rahner in his later writings prefers to call God das heilige Geheimnis, the Holy Mystery. By describing God as Holy Mystery, Rahner does not mean that God is unintelligible. Rather, he wishes to emphasize that “the fullness of God’s intelligibility exceeds our

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46 Rahner, “Concerning,” TI 1, 302-3.

human concepts.”\(^{48}\) Such Mystery is not, as Malcolm observes, “an object standing alongside others;” nor is it something that we will at some point master or comprehend, even in the immediacy of beatific vision. It stands, rather, as “the condition for the possibility of our being able to grasp or comprehend any particular thing in thought or action.”\(^{49}\) Indeed, apart from God’s self-communication to us, God remains incomprehensible.

The striking aspect of Rahner’s perception of God as Holy Mystery is that, as Malcolm further observes, this loving God, through the incarnation of the Logos, can become something “in another.”\(^{50}\) Thus, instead of pursuing a theory of the incarnation beginning with an established presupposition of what the Logos has assumed (human nature as finite, with all its finite attributes), Rahner unpacks the mystery of incarnation with a consideration of the “primordial phenomenon” of the incarnation, i.e., the “self-divestment,” “becoming,” “kenosis,” or an emptying of divine self of the Logos (Phil 2:5-9).\(^{51}\) To this end, Rahner chooses to start with creation. Yet, the notion of creation of humanity, for Rahner, is not simply a creation “out of nothing,” but the fact that God has become the other’s “most basic and primordial possibility.”\(^{52}\) Of course, this is an external act of God. Yet, this external self-expression of God is made to be a reality only insofar as it is conditioned by God’s immanent self-expression. Such kenotic movement of God into the world and to humankind makes possible a movement of the creation, and in particular of every human being to God. Said otherwise, God is the condition of the possibility of human ek-stasis or transcendence.

The question arises as to how Rahner accounts for God’s descending grace to the world and every human. In order to safeguard the classical dogmatic notion of grace as “unexacted,” the extrinsicists and the intrinsicists, as we have seen, have in turns portrayed God either as a distant creator (extrinsicist) or an obligatory debtor (intrinsicist) of humans as regard to grace-giving. Rahner, also with the intention to


\(^{50}\) Ibid., 123.

\(^{51}\) Ibid., 123.

\(^{52}\) Ibid., 123.
protect the unexacted-ness of grace, has however chosen to unpack the very essence of grace itself, which is “God’s self-communication in love” within the Triune God.\textsuperscript{53} There is no inseparability of the divine action in the movement of love, both \textit{ad intra} and \textit{ad extra}, for Rahner. Love, then, is seen as the constituent logic of the Triune Godhead.

In God’s \textit{ad extra} movement of love to the world and humankind, divine love, or grace, or God’s self-communication, requires an “other” or partner. Love hence is the constituent logic of God’s \textit{ad extra} gracing of human existence as well. How can this be? Rahner answers in two crucial formulations: (1) “God wishes to communicate himself, to pour forth the love which he himself is…. And so God makes a creature whom he can love: he creates man.”\textsuperscript{54} (2) It follows that a human person “as real partner, as one who can accept or reject [Love], can experience and accept it as the unexacted event and wonder not owed to him, the real man.”\textsuperscript{55} One as a creature is well prepared by God to be a real partner of God’s \textit{ad intra} self-communication in the form of loving grace. Yet, one “can and must at the same time accept [Love] for what it is: the ever astounding wonder, the unexpected, unexacted gift.”\textsuperscript{56}

Divine Love, then, for Rahner, is one and the same inner and outer movement of God. As regard to God’s \textit{ad extra} movement of love toward humanity, i.e., God’s self-communication in the form of grace, divine Love is both intrinsic and extrinsic.\textsuperscript{57} First, love is intrinsic. As we have seen, God’s self communication is viewed, for Rahner, as the “core” or the “innermost constitutive element of man.”\textsuperscript{58} Yet, before this human constitution for grace is made, God has eternally embraced every human being as God’s innermost object of love. In God, we find a constant orientation towards every human as a “thou” in love. Thus, love does not stop with the Trinity; it overflows, and the creation of humanity is the very fruit of the overflowing love of God, so to speak. Everything is sprung from and drawn to love. In the logic of love thus established,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{53} Rahner, “Concerning,” \textit{TI} 1, 307.
\item \textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 310.
\item \textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 311, in [] is mine. Rahner says much the same elsewhere, e.g. in \textit{FCF}, 149. 172.
\item \textsuperscript{56} Rahner, “Concerning,” \textit{TI} 1, 311, in [] added.
\item \textsuperscript{57} Declan Marmion, \textit{A Spirituality of Everyday Faith: A Theological Investigation of the Notion of Spirituality in Karl Rahner} (Louvain: Peeters Press, W.B. Eerdmann, 1998), 111.
\item \textsuperscript{58} Rahner, \textit{FCF}, 116.
\end{itemize}
Rahner argues, there is therefore no distinction between grace and nature; they are indeed inseparable.

Second, love is in a sense extrinsic. God’s love for us surpasses and transcends our natural, social, religious and moral status. If God loves me just because I am a good creature of God, or even because I am a good Christian, God does not indeed love me with pure love. This is because a love based on natural, social, religious and even moral status – i.e., a love “because of” – is subjected to calculable standards and coercions. Rather, God loves me simply because I am a particular, unique and irreplaceable person that God has lovingly created for, and because of, love. Unlike Aquinas’s “objective genitive” reading of Rom 5:5, which saw God’s love poured into us as a force that helps us to love God,\(^{59}\) Rahner seems to prefer a “subjective genitive” reading of this verse, by seeing God’s love as, first and foremost, God’s loving act of gracing our human existence. This means that God first loves us, and our love is the second motion of this divine love. To this end, love must be seen as extrinsic, because I am the partner of God in love, and as a partner I am the other, the “thou” of God. The “real partnership” must always remains as “unexpected miracle,” as Rahner constantly insists. Yet, the logic of love, if seen as somehow extrinsic, requires a separation of grace from nature.

Consequently, Rahner pursues the argument that it is the logic of love, not an epistemological and ontological analysis of nature or grace as two separate entities, that must be seen as the starting point of any discourse about the relationship between God and humans.

The logic of love so established by Rahner allows him to correct la nouvelle théologie’s endorsement of this notion to be a constitutive element of nature, constituted by God for the beatific vision.\(^{60}\) Rahner’s contention against la nouvelle théologie can be summarized in a syllogism: (1) since God, as la nouvelle théologie claims, has constituted a natural desire or a “disposition for grace” in the depth of the human self, God, for the sake of creation, “must” fulfil this desire, otherwise, God will “offend against the meaning of this creation and his very creative act,” and so, God’s obligatory fulfilment of the human desire in grace is “exacted.”\(^{61}\) (2) But, any obligations or

\(^{59}\) Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica (ST)* I-II q.109, a.3.


\(^{61}\) Rahner, “Concerning,” *TI* 1, 309.
necessary fulfilment is against the logic of love and the relationship of self-giving. Therefore (3) “a disposition for grace belonging to man’s nature is impossible,” since, “God wishes to communicate himself, to pour forth the love which himself is. That is the first and the last of his real plans and hence of his real world too. Everything else exists so that this one thing might be: the eternal miracle of infinite of love.”

With this interpretation of the logic of divine love as the key to the theology of grace, Rahner has set up the starting point for his reformulation of the relationship between grace and nature. What is further required for Rahner is an exploration of the human possibility of receiving God’s loving grace as God’s self-communication. As Rahner has established above, real partnership in love requires an ability to recognize and receive grace. And more, there must be some “connaturality” between God and the human creature if God’s offer of loving grace is to be “a real possibility.” Thus Rahner maintains, “man should be able to receive this Love which is God himself: he must have a congeniality for it. He must be able to accept it (and hence grace, the beatific vision) as one who have room and scope, understanding and desire for it.” Moreover, this “room and scope” or “capacity for the God of self-bestowing personal love” cannot be at the periphery of human life. Rather, the partnership is between God in God’s fullness and every human in our created (and fallen) fullness. The moment of actualized partnership is always “the central and abiding existential of man as he really is.”

3.3 Rahner on the “Vorgriff” and Human Openness to the Transcendent

We are now in a good position to unpack Rahner’s concept of the gift already received, namely, the human core potency or capacity or burning longing for God’s loving grace seen as God’s self-communication. This core potency expresses itself most obviously in the transcendental dynamism of human knowledge, the knowledge of self and of the

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62 Ibid., 310.
64 Rahner, “Concerning,” TI 1, 311-12.
65 Ibid., 312.
66 Ibid., 312.
mysterious others, human and divine. So, our immediate task is to unpack this first interpretation of Rahner concerning the metaphysical depth of human knowledge, before we can discuss Rahner’s other two layers of the same complexity of human experience, viz., the experience of the self mediated by the historical experience of the others, and the mystical experience of the Transcendent. By so doing, we hope to answer the question as to whether we can know anything of God and how we know that we can know God, in Rahner’s view.

At this transcendental-metaphysical level of analysis, and in his early book *Spirit in the World*, Rahner shows his transcendental method as a re-reading of Aquinas’s theory of human knowing, following the method of transcendental Thomism pioneered by Maréchal. Besides, as Yarnold observes, Rahner’s method is deeply influenced by German Idealism, and its turn to the human subject.  Although there are significant differences between Rahner and these modern philosophers, it is not difficult to trace in Rahner’s works the philosophical impact of some leading figures of this philosophical trend, including Kant, and Heidegger.

Indeed, Rahner’s metaphysical thrust in this book centres on Aquinas’s fundamental metaphysical question, “Can the intellect actually know anything through the intelligible species which it possesses, without turning to the phantasms?” Aquinas’s answer to this question was negative; that is, we need to turn to the phantasms so as to know anything at all. Once the necessity of this turn had been established, our metaphysical apprehension of things, for Aquinas, was obtained through three following modes: “excessus (eminence or excess), comparatio (comparison), and remotio (removal or negation.)” In the “Reply to Objection 3” of *ST* I, q.84, a.7 Aquinas states:

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68 For example, while Kant so emphasized spatiotemporal and the other twelve categories of human knowledge of things that a human was finally blocked at the face of the thing-in-itself, Rahner, following Maréchal and Heidegger, claims that we humans have an unlimited power of questioning. By questioning we are able to dismantle the blockage occurred somewhere at the terminal of the flow of human knowledge set up by Kant, until we reach to Being as such.

69 Aquinas, *ST* I, q.84, a.7. By “phantasm” is meant something like experiential data or images one has based in her experience.

Incorporeal things, of which there are no phantasms, are known to us by comparison with sensible bodies of which there are phantasms. Thus we understand truth by considering a thing of which we possess the truth; and God, as Dionysius says (Div. Nom. i), we know as cause, by way of excess (excessus) and by way of remotion (remotio). Other incorporeal substances we know, in the present state of life, only by way of remotion (remotio) or by some comparison (comparatio) to corporeal things. And, therefore, when we understand something about these things, we need to turn to phantasms of bodies, although there are no phantasms of the things themselves.

Following the method of transcendental Thomism pioneered by Maréchal, Rahner agrees in principle with Aquinas concerning one’s necessary turn to the phantasm so as to know anything at all. Rahner, however, lays more focus on excessus. Thus he writes:

The excessus to metaphysics, which takes place in a conversion to the phantasm, is considered as a condition of the truth of the human experience of the world and metaphysics, insofar as it is on the one hand related to the world possessed in sensation and so always consists in a consideration of the thing through a conversion into phantasm, and yet on the other hand it contains a being-set-apart from knowledge and thing, and only in this does the knowledge become truth and the thing become object. In this being-set-apart, truth appears over against the world and thus is possible only in an excessus beyond the world which is possessed in sensation. Therefore it already belongs in the realm of metaphysics.

It is here that we notice Rahner’s agreement with and departure from Heidegger. Rahner’s notion of a human person as a spirit-in-the-world, or “the human experience of the world” as indicated in the above quote, resonates with Heidegger’s concept of a human person as a being-in-the-world. For both thinkers, a human person, in her present mode of existence, and by the act of her fundamental questioning about Being, will reach a ground or horizon of not only her knowledge but also of her existence; while Heidegger saw this horizon terminated in Nothing, Rahner sees it anchored in “God’s Infinite Eternity.”

Be this as it may, Rahner shares Heidegger’s conviction that it is only in “being-set-apart … against the world” that a human person is simultaneously a spirit in the world.

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71 Ibid.
74 Michaud, op. cit.
One’s experience of herself as a part of the world and yet as being transcendent beyond the world take place together and at the same time (more on this below). Rahner argues that the human person can undertake this both/and movement through her exercise of the *excessus* or, the *Vorgriff auf esse*, the term Rahner borrows from Heidegger, which means pre-apprehension of Being.

As “an *a priori* power given with human nature,”\(^75\) the main function of the *Vorgriff* is to help a human spirit to “reach out toward what is nameless and by its very nature is infinite.”\(^76\) The argument rests on the fact that the human person seeks and desires something ‘beyond’ and ‘unknown.’ Just as a little girl cannot ask for a Christmas gift unless she has some idea of what that gift looks like, so also the human subject cannot seek the infinite unless they have some sense of what that infinite might be like. In other words, this pre-apprehension of the infinite is a necessary condition of the possibility of one’s seeking the infinite. Seen in this light, the *Vorgriff* itself is the *a priori* condition of a human person’s openness to, not only other subjects, but also to the Infinite or the Transcendent, making possible her quest for knowledge of anything at all, while still remaining in the world. God’s mysterious being, in Rahner’s understanding, is the “Whither” of a human person’s pre-apprehension, presenting itself to her metaphysical movement as both “original unity of the possible objects” and “necessary horizon of experience of world.”\(^77\) Though God remains incomprehensible apart from God’s self-communication, the fact that God has already communicated Godself to the person in love has already established the origin, goal, and horizon of her transcendentality enacted in history. Said otherwise, because God has already communicated Godself to her, God is/provides in the end an *a priori* necessary condition for her yearning for God most obviously shown in the direction of her transcendent knowledge and experience of the world.

Rahner has so far portrayed, at metaphysical depth, a human being as an existential unity, who is both historically situated and, at the same time, transcendentally oriented.\(^78\) One’s existence as an existential unity, in its turn, is characterized by a

\(^{75}\) Rahner, *Hearers*, 47.


\(^{78}\) Michaud, op. cit.
dynamic oscillation (*Schwebe*) between transcendentality and historicity, so much so that this oscillation shows her destiny and defines herself as a being swinging from transcendentality to historicity and vice versa all the time.\(^79\)

These two features of human existence, namely historicity and transcendentality, are interrelated and mutually conditioned. On the historical level, the human subject finds herself to be not an isolated spirit, but always connected to the world of others, divine and human, within history and through her spatio-temporal and actual (or categorical) experiences. But the human person is not a product of history alone. There is another level where the human person finds herself transcending “beyond” her historical situation in order to reach out to the Infinite. This out-reaching to the Infinite, via questioning about and searching for an *a priori* datum of her categorical experiences, is the focus of Rahner’s transcendental method.\(^80\)

We have seen above how the “Whither” of the *Vorgriff* leads one to God’s mysterious Being. What further concerns us here is to examine how Rahner uses the notion of oscillation to elaborate his understanding of a human “being” as presence-to-self (*Beischinein des Seins*).\(^81\) Two things need to be said beforehand. First, in the transcendental argument, our power of questioning is not “unlimited” in its own right; it is “unlimited” simply because there is no limit regarding the span of meaning of our existence, within which the power of questioning exercises itself. We cannot easily satisfy ourselves with differing answers about the meaning of our existence. There is always *more* meaning to discover.\(^82\) Second, and this is at the historical pole, we know ourselves through the *Vorgriff* as dynamically oriented toward the infinite horizon of being, toward the whole; and yet we know this transcendental orientation only in and through our everyday “traffic with” (i.e., choosing and experiencing) material things. Yet, the *greater* meaning that needs to be discovered is the meaning about our subjective existence; and the everyday “traffic with” material things that channels our transcendentality is also a subjective act. Therefore, the oscillation between


\(^81\) Rahner, *FCF*, 30.

\(^82\) Ibid., 32.
transcendentalism and historicity that we experience will finally make us completely turn to our self, with “a conscious and free relationship to the totality of itself.”83 We turn out to the world of others so as to experience the world; and yet, by turning out to the world, we have turned back to our subjective selves. Thus, in Rahner’s terminology, openness to self-transcendence and openness to the Transcendent are two different ways of expression of the same human transcendentalism. Whenever we ask about the unknown of the world that we have partly known, the known-and-yet-unknown world and we, the questioners, are “already placed in question all the way back to their absolute ground, to a ground which always lies beyond the boundaries within [our] grasp, beyond the world.”84

In our daily life, however, even with our unlimited power of questioning, our radical experience of the unlimited horizon of knowing, and the on-going searching for the unlimited meaning of our existence, these gifts within can be ignored, go unnoticed or even be forgotten. The reasons for this are many. But seen within the scope of this study, the possible reasons for this ignorance may come even from indoctrination and religious education. Formed by the classical theology of grace, which sees grace as a scarcely created entity given occasionally through the sacraments, we may be trapped in two contrasting tendencies: either we may satisfy ourselves with the concrete and created graces in front of us, and not attend to the questions concerning the uncreated grace that surrounds and upholds us, the questions that are more fundamental and indeed indispensable for our on-going life with God.85 Or, we may paint black and white pictures of the human condition and of God, as if we could know everything about us and about God.

In response to these two dangerous tendencies, Rahner challenges us with two interrelated facts. First, “The concept of ‘God’ is not a grasp of God by which a person masters the Mystery, but it is letting oneself be grasped by the Mystery which is present and yet ever distant.”86 Second, we are spiritual persons properly constituted within the

83 Ibid., 30.
84 Michaud, op. cit, in [] is mine; confer, Rahner, Spirit, 407.
86 Rahner, FCF, 54.
logic of God’s love and with an intrinsic capacity for God as the Holy Mystery, i.e., the unanswered question. We can understand God only insofar as we allow ourselves to be taken by this unanswered question, through love and the act of questioning. The more we realize God’s loving grace is pro nobis, the more we should recognize it as an unexpected miracle. Closely tied to this mysterious relation with God as the Holy Mystery, we find our existence a question. Just as God is the question to which there is no definitive answer, so too, “the person is the question to which there is no [definitive] answer.”87 God is always greater, and thus the human person is always greater than what we can talk about and experience of God and of ourselves.

3.4 Rahner on the Supernatural Existential

As we indicated earlier, the Vorgriff, as a priori knowledge of being or meaning, is the given gift upon which a human person knows and seeks God as the depth, finality or silent horizon of her transcendental movement. We also stated that God has determined human capacity for self-transcendence in such a way as to reveal and to address Godself to the person, and all these occur in the logic of God’s loving grace. This is the first dimension of human experience of the self that Rahner has established. However, the implication of our existence as spirits-in-the-world is not merely limited within the totality of knowledge, even our possible knowledge of God.88 In fact, the implication of our existence as spirits-in-the-world essentially embraces our interpersonal relationship with God as well. And this is interrelationship in love. Hence, also through the Vorgriff, we know that God is not merely a silent horizon, or a distant question. Rather, for Rahner, the personal God, and not just God’s gifts seen as created graces, is the ultimate answer, lovingly drawing near to us, choosing us to be partners in loving relationship.89

With this focus on interpersonal relationship, we turn to the second dimension of human experience, that is the experience of the self mediated by the historical and existential experience of God’s grace. Rahner develops this theme by asserting that our openness to self-transcendence has been elevated by grace, becoming the “supernatural existential.”

Rahner borrows from Heidegger’s philosophy the concept of “existential,” which is different from “existentiell.” Although both are inseparable in describing the same human finitude, the former, used as a noun, refers to “the structural characteristics of Dasein prior to its free activity, to the horizons within which the concrete “existentiell” possibilities of every individual Dasein fall.”⁹⁰ The latter refers to “what has to do with a person’s concrete situation and free decisions, with his or her self-understanding and self-appropriation.”⁹¹ Rahner combines this concept of existential with the concept of “supernatural,” so as to point to an invisible and yet real and present ontological constitution of a person established by God, the ontological constitution that is not phenomenologically seen but disclosed in human questioning and desire. And as such, it is real and ever-present.

By itself however, the supernatural existential is not yet the uncreated grace understood as God’s self-communication. Rather, it is present “in every person,”⁹² and as “an existential of their concrete existence,”⁹³ in a mode of an antecedent offer of uncreated grace, in a mode of acceptance, or even in the mode of rejection. In the first quote, about presence in every person, Rahner suggests that the supernatural existential points to the effective outcome of God’s universal saving will, and in the second, about concrete existence, he describes it as an ontological drive that belongs to human existence rather than human essence or nature.⁹⁴ Taken altogether, the supernatural existential, in Rahner’s view, refers to one’s ontological “room and scope” unconditionally and universally constituted by God, pointing to an insurance of God’s loving offer of

⁹¹ Ibid., 293.
⁹² Rahner, FCF, 127
⁹³ Ibid., 127.
Godself in the form of grace, which is given “always and everywhere,” and “is present prior to one’s freedom, one’s self-understanding and one’s experience.”

In short, the supernatural existential basically refers to our congeniality for receiving or rejecting grace; and yet when we in our freedom, i.e., as an existentiell, accept God’s self-communication in love, it is God that bears this acceptance, so that it, too, is grace. Just as God has lovingly communicated Godself to a person, and thus become the condition of the possibility of human yearning for any knowledge of God, so too, in God’s act of gracing humanity through the supernatural existential, “God’s self-communication as offer is the necessary condition which makes” possible the person’s acceptance of grace. The only difference is that with the supernatural existential one as a creature has entered into her daily personal relationship with God, her Creator.

Moreover, God’s gracing humanity in love should not be seen as an offer given occasionally and according to our response or our merit. God has constantly, consistently and irreducibly given Godself for us so as to draw us to God. God has effected this offer, once for all, in creation and redemption, i.e. through the Christ-event. Creation and redemption thus go hand in hand with one another, though creation refers to the level of nature while redemption points to some level of grace.

But, as suggested by the logic of divine love discussed in 3.2, just as there is no disconnection between the ad intra and ad extra movements of God’s love, so too, there is no discontinuity as regards Jesus Christ being the origin and destination of creation. Revelation and salvation are by no means add-ons to the order of creation but because of the grace of human freedom, are operative from the beginning. The “new” creation – the term used very often by Paul – is “simply the human appropriation of the one and only creation, which is identical with God’s self-communication to humankind ab

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95 Rahner, “Concerning,” TI 1, 312.
96 Rahner, FCF, 133.
97 Ibid., 128.
98 Coffey, op. cit., 101.
99 This is not meant to challenge orthodox teaching about sin and redemption, but to express Rahner’s insights into that everything in creation about and in creation is oriented to the Christ-event. (See Rahner, FCF, 201-3).
This means that God has not created us in love and then called us to something foreign to our existence that falls out of the consistent movement of God’s love. In creation God gives us ourselves, and in grace, God gives us Godself. But as created beings, we have “room and scope” for grace as God’s self-communication in love: God’s giving ourselves and God’s giving Godself to us are synonymous, and take place together. For Rahner, this one and the same descent of the loving God forms our ontological constitution for grace and, as such, it is supernatural, or better, both supernatural and existential, “a binding ordination to the supernatural end.”\(^{101}\) The supernatural existential is then our inner reference to God, our intrinsic capacity for grace, and so a precious gift given always and everywhere, but not as part of our created nature as a matter of necessity.\(^{102}\)

The question arises as to how Rahner accounts for human essence or nature and its functions in the logic of love so established? The answer to this question will draw us to Rahner’s decisive steps in his reversal of la nouvelle théologie’s project of conflation of grace with nature and the Neo-Scholastics’ strategy of separation between the two.

First, to challenge la nouvelle théologie’s reductive momentum, Rahner, having endorsed the Neo-Scholastics’ thoughtful insight, argues that “Were [man] simply this existential, and were this his nature, then it would be unconditional in its essence, i.e., once it has been given, the Love which is God would ‘have to’ be offered by God.”\(^{103}\) It is true for Rahner that the supernatural existential, together with human capacity of self-transcendence seen as a graced openness and the Vorgriff seen as a priori a knowledge of being or meaning, now form the whole package of the bestowed inner gifted capacity for grace, and this truth presupposes that our actual existence is already supernaturally characterized. Yet, the logic of divine love (as defined above) seeks partnership, and not dependency. God does not force anything on us that we do not desire. Thus a lovely dance is constituted between God and us in a way that it protects


\(^{101}\) Rahner, “Concerning,” TI 1, 302.

\(^{102}\) Craigo-Snell, op. cit., 29.

\(^{103}\) Rahner, “Concerning,” TI 1, 313, in [] is mine.
the freedom of both partners. Grace as gift is objectively already within, and yet has to be desired and awakened by us. We will not experience and appreciate the gift within if it is not awakened.\textsuperscript{104}

Therefore, even though Rahner sees this gift as being found wherever there is human nature, one must posit a human nature separate from grace if one wishes to rightfully see grace as an “unexact” gift. This means also that outside the spectrum of grace as love, our identity as a natural being is still imaginable, and thus affirmed.

But Rahner’s treatment of nature separated from grace is not identical to the Neo-Scholastics’s strategy of separation. Given the fact that God has determined to offer Godself pro nobis always and everywhere according to Rahner, and that this offer is God’s universal act of gracing our existence in love, then our nature, too, is embraced in and by God’s grace as love. Our nature is a grace\textit{d} nature. For this reason, nature should be seen as only a remainder concept, i.e., when everything pertaining to supernatural grace is subtracted,\textsuperscript{105} yet, for Rahner, this subtraction never becomes a possibility, since the limit of the supernatural grace is unlimited.\textsuperscript{106} Hence, an affirmation of nature remains now only as purely theological, as Rahner defines it, “‘Nature’ in the theological sense (as opposed to nature as the substantial content of an entity always to be encountered in contingent fact), i.e., as the concept contraposed to the supernatural, is consequently a remainder concept (\textit{Restbegriff}).”\textsuperscript{107} With the Neo-Scholastics, Rahner still maintains a treatment of nature separated from grace, but he departs from them by transforming this separation from an ontological to a begrifflich, namely, a “grammatical” distinction.\textsuperscript{108}

We can now answer the question as to whether or not Rahner, with his theory of the supernatural existential, sees human intrinsic capacity for grace as synonymous with Aquinas’s theory of the \textit{desiderium naturale}. The answer seems to be negative. While de Lubac, in his reductive momentum, views the \textit{desiderium naturale} as belonging to


\textsuperscript{105} Coffey, op. cit., 101.

\textsuperscript{106} Rahner, “Concerning,” \textit{TI} 1, 315.

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 313.

\textsuperscript{108} Reno, op. cit., 117.
human nature as such and having a claim for grace, Rahner maintains that the desiderium naturale is already a gift of grace and hence supernatural.\(^{109}\) This is the case because, in Rahner’s view, the unexactness of grace, and even our acceptance of grace, are all carried by God’s gift of Godself in grace as love. Within a pure nature as remainder concept, the desiderium naturale, Rahner contends, should be seen as one’s “dynamic opening” to, or an obediential potency for, grace.\(^{110}\) “This potency is called obediential,” Rahner continues, “because what it really is would still be meaningful if God did not communicate Godself.”\(^{111}\) But as God does communicate Godself and this communication touches the recipient at the centre of her existence, the desiderium naturale is also conditioned and embraced by God’s interior and beatifying presence. Although one does not and cannot master God as the Holy Mystery, one already enjoys a glimpse of the beatific vision and thus the light of glory in one’s experience of God, hic et nunc, i.e., in one’s everyday life of faith, ultimately shown in the act of love.\(^{112}\)

3.5 Awakening the Gift within via Daily Experience of Grace

As briefly indicated in 2.1, Rahner deeply shares the biblical understanding of grace as a gift “sealed” within every person. Though the presence of grace as such is primordial to and indeed “constitutive of man in his concrete make-up,” it is often repressed or anonymous, and thus waiting for an awakening from the person.\(^{113}\) This awakening is made possible via the person’s daily experience of God, precisely understood as an experience of her reference to a double mystery – her deepest mystery and God as Holy Mystery. Rahner calls this awakening a mystical moment.\(^{114}\)

Of course, there is the specially deep and pure mystical experience of the saints. Yet, given the grace-elevated stage that all humans share (as discussed above), a normal

\(^{109}\) Coffey, op. cit., 102.


\(^{111}\) Ibid., 366.

\(^{112}\) Rahner, *FCF*, 120.


\(^{114}\) Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, op. cit., 301.
level of this experience belongs to everyone, and it basically refers to “an experience, the interior meeting and union of a man with the divine infinity that sustains him and all other beings.” Said otherwise, a mystical experience is a normal person’s daily experience of grace as God’s self-giving in love, i.e., a mystical moment in which all are compressed into Mystery and which unfolds Mystery’s loving embrace of our daily life. In that moment, the person can and should feel and taste some kind of inner transformative manifestation of grace as an elevated transcendence emerging into awareness and occupying, to a greater or lesser degree, the person’s centre of attention. This inner transformative experience of grace, precisely understood as the bringing an explicitly conscious focus on our grace-elevated transcendence, is normally done without the usual mediation of concepts, or any belief systems or belonging systems. It points to the “how” of lived belief, rather than the “what” of categorical concepts. It is not simply information, but mainly revelation, since it involves a moment of an explicit and natural awareness of a “return” to our very “source” so as to realize that grace is the gift we have already received, the gift that we are now awakening via the very “return” to self. This is our primordial experience of God’s self-communication, which needs to be ever-deepened and intensified.

Thus, a mystical moment involves, for Rahner, the experience of our own deepest mystery – via an explication and thematizitation, a strengthening and deepening of the ultimately inner horizon of all meaning and experience within us – which he calls grace. It can be a favour we ask God for. Yet, “asking something from God is not,” as Rohr suggests, “talking God into that something, but a recognition and an awakening of that something as the gift we already received, and falling in love with it.” In that moment, we find ourselves standing before the undeserved radical grace as the God within who is both the ground and abyss of our existence. To this God we are called to surrender ourselves in trustful love, faith and hope, which is made possible via an experience of the Presence that, paradoxically, fills “the abyss and shakes the

117 Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, op. cit., 301.
This is the point at which we find ourselves living in the meaningful present moment, in the fullness of who we are. This, for Rahner, should be the picture of future Christian life: “The devout Christian of the future will either be a ‘mystic,’ one who has ‘experienced’ something, or he will cease to be anything at all.”

Rahner thus departs from traditional understandings of grace in a number of ways. First, unlike Aquinas, who gives priority to created grace seen as a habit or quality of the human soul infused by God, (who is uncreated grace), Rahner, having endorsed the biblical and patristic understandings of grace, sees created grace as only the consequence of uncreated grace. So, grace for Rahner, is first and foremost the communication of God as the relation of love commonly called Holy Spirit to a recipient. The immediate consequence of this divine communication is the inner transformation of the person. Seen in this way, there is no discontinuity between the truths of salvation history and one’s mystical experience of an inner transcendental horizon of meaning. The loving God of eternity who made Godself known in the historical Jesus is the same God revealing Godself through the Holy Spirit to and being encountered at the innermost of every person, here and now.

Second, with Rahner’s view of the supernatural existential, the horizon of salvation is universalized and at the same time, personalized. Grace is not a scarce gift which is limited within the Christian sphere, externally and arbitrarily imposed on us in “disturbing” ways, as the extrinsicists understood. Instead, grace as God’s self-imparting in love is abundantly and universally given to every person insofar as it permeates all spheres of human life. Since a mystical experience of grace is, for Rahner, the moment of encountering, which contains both our feeling of being drawn to Mystery and the unfolding of Mystery’s loving embrace of our daily life, such a moment is a present reality made possible through everyday things, work, sleep, eating, drinking, seeing, sitting, and standing.

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119 Ibid., 22.


121 Rahner, FCF, 116.

122 Rahner, “Concerning,” TI 1, 298-300.

confirms our Easter faith, a “faith that loves the earth.” It is already a beatific vision, available in one’s everyday life of Christian faith, for no higher experiences can be obtained in this life than faith experiences in the Holy Spirit, the “ordinary life of grace.” Thus to use Haight’s words:

Grace is operative in the experience of infinite longings, of radical optimism, of disquenchable discontent, of the torment of the insufficiency of everything attainable, of the radical protest against death, the experience of being confronted with an absolute love precisely where it is lethally incomprehensible and seems to be silent and aloof, the experience of a radical guilt and of a still-abiding hope, and so on.

Within the scope of the universal and yet personal operation of grace, Rahner seems to suggest that “whenever secular life is lived with unreserved honesty and courage; whenever the virtues of the world are practiced with courage; whenever there is a lived moderation without any thought of reward; whenever there is a silent life of service to others, there too, can be found the mysticism of daily life.”

In conclusion to this chapter, we have shown that the early Neo-Scholastics, with their strategy of separating nature and grace, implied the impossibility of experiencing grace in our everyday concrete living. Rahner argues for the contrary, saying that an experience of grace is always possible in our everyday living. We can experience grace because, firstly, God has determined to give Godself to us, touching us at our innermost, and because God has made this divine self-giving a reality by having created us precisely in a way that we can receive it, can live “consciously” in the presence of the Triune God. Secondly, since our acceptance of God’s self-giving is made possible through an exercise of our graced openness to the infinite, a “Whither” of this openness is always before us. Somewhere at that end of our transcendent activities, a contact is made between the seeking person, as spirit, and God, who is the horizon or field in which the spirit operates. Seen in this perspective, human transcendent openness to the Holy Mystery is the vehicle of the operation of grace, and this operative grace can be consciously experienced.

Grace as God’s self-communication in love is available to everyone, though not, since it is love, measurable or calculable.
Chapter 4: Living Grace as the Gift within: From Knowledge to Love

In the previous chapter, we examined how Rahner understands grace as the gift already given and received and how he argues that we need to awake this gift theologically and pastorally. At the core of our awakening of grace as the gift within is a mystical moment of eternity in time, in which we may feel and taste that God’s love has touched our hearts, and thus empowers and upholds our love in return. In this chapter we will look more closely at the possibility of human love for God, which, in Rahner’s view, must generate and be rooted in our very experience of being loved by God historically and existentially. For Rahner, love is greater than knowledge.

4.1 The Priority of Love

Given the incomprehensibility of God and of humanity, for Rahner human knowledge, even the knowledge of God, is not the ultimate aim and goal of humanity or of Christianity. Rather, Rahner contends, only in love can a person accept God’s incomprehensibility “without being broken by it,” and on this ground alone can she accept the incomprehensibility of her existence as well as of the mysterious other. The person finds herself facing the mysterious God, yet this unknowing experience facing mystery “forces knowledge either to be more than itself or to despair.” Her knowledge is to become more than itself – and indeed preserves and transforms itself – when it becomes love. Here, love, properly seen as a mystical experience of the transcendent God, is the integration of one’s knowledge of God at its metaphysical depth and her experience of self mediated by her historical and existential experience of God, who is at the core of her existence, and of the world around her understood primarily as the world of persons.

Seen in this perspective, love is the ultimately transcendent act in freedom, to be carried out by a human being, properly seen as a person and a subject, whose personhood and subjectivity are expressed fully in and through a communion with God. Love, hence, is an occasion capable of awakening and living grace as the gift within. Through love, a human person is, though situated in finite circumstances, oriented to God in such a way that she is able to imagine many future possibilities of her existence. Yet, it is in and within her finite living situation that she is called to be responsible and free in the act of love. But love is ultimately, because it is completely self-giving, openness to the Other. When loving, one practices heaven now.

4.2 Human Freedom and Finitude

Any further words about such an act of love require an examination of Rahner’s perceptions of human freedom and finitude. First, traditionally, human freedom was perceived as a neutral capacity to choose one act or the other in the matrix of human moral acts. For Rahner, on the contrary, freedom is primarily the freedom to decide about oneself in one’s totality and in relation to God. Freedom is therefore a decision which has a life-long value, fundamentally referring to the acceptance or rejection of one’s orientation to God, by participating in and thus actualizing one’s own creation, or by not doing so. Rahner calls this choice the “fundamental option,” the option that is “granted eternal validity by God”. 131 This is the case because even the exercise of freedom is also empowered by God’s universal grace. “God’s grace,” Rahner argues, is not simply “put at man’s disposal” in “the miracle of love;” it also operates in such a way that it helps humans to transcend themselves, so as to let “oneself be disposed of” by God. 132 Human freedom is choice and decision made in favour of not merely nature, but also of person. That is, the more a person lets herself be disposed by God’s grace, the more her personhood and subjectivity are affirmed, and the more she is in communion with God in love.

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Once a person as a human subject experiences that she has freedom to say “yes” to God’s self-communication in the act of love, she painfully realizes also that her freedom is much conditioned by her historical situations, which are not subject to her own choice. These historical situations on the one hand condition, limit and challenge the exercise of her freedom; on the other hand, they mediate and shape the possibilities of her transcendentality and freedom. As historical, existential and inter-dependent human subjects, we actualize our gifted freedom as the fundamental option under the influence of the categorical choices, namely the choices humans make in daily lives, including our previous choices and those of others.

Rahner’s perception of freedom entails two crucial implications for Christian life and the nature of guilt and sin. Firstly, we cannot claim with any reflective certainty whether an objectively guilty act is a free rejection of [one’s] orientation to God, or “is more in the nature of a manipulation which … has about it the character of necessity.” Secondly, sin is seen not just as a possibility, but primarily as a reality. The historical circumstances in which a person actualizes her freedom are marked and indeed co-determined by guilt, both her own and others’, even to the extent that a good act may appear to her as an ambiguous act.

For Rahner, human freedom so co-determined by guilt, when understood to be universal and permanent, is related to the theory of original sin. However, Rahner does not understand grace, as we have seen, in the way it was traditionally understood. He does not set grace against the background of original sin, seen as the sin “transmitted to us as our moral quality,” through some kind of “juridical imputation,” or “biological heredity,” negatively influencing human freedom as such. Rather, for Rahner, original sin, if original at all, is only “the existentiell no of personal transcendence toward God or against him,” and hence, it is not imputed or transmitted to others. Original sin is simply a universal, co-determining and inescapable effect of others’

\[134\] Rahner, *FCF*, 104.
\[135\] Ibid., 109-13.
\[137\] Ibid., 526.
guilt, which bears a stamp on “the situation or realm of other persons’ freedom,” but “not freedom as such.”\footnote{138}{Ibid., 527.} This is what we experience of ourselves in the present history of salvation. We experience also, in the same history of salvation, grace seen as God’s offer of Godself, as “most radical and most deep in the existential situation of human freedom,” which “designates the quality sanctifying the human person prior to her free and good decision.”\footnote{139}{Ibid., 527.} Moreover, since “God’s offer of Godself always remains valid because of Christ and in view of him,” despite the existentiell no of the particular person or persons at the beginning of the human race, Rahner concludes, “God’s self-communication in grace” does not come from “Adam, not from the beginning of the human race, but from the goal of this history, from the God-Man Jesus Christ.”\footnote{140}{Ibid., 528.}

### 4.3 Following Jesus in Freedom - Not Imitating Jesus

In Christ, Rahner argues, God has lovingly come to abide eternally in humanity; and, in Christ, God has irrevocably accepted humanity.\footnote{141}{Karl Rahner, The Love of Jesus and the Love of Neighbor, trans. Robert Barr (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 41-3.} It follows that the personality of Jesus Christ and his life, on the one hand, form the normative witness to the commitment of God’s love for humanity. In and through the historical Jesus, the infinite question about our being has been definitively and irrevocably answered by loving Mystery. A crucial implication arising from this argument is that whenever a person who “has reached the age of moral reason,”\footnote{142}{Karl Rahner, “Concerning the Relationship between Nature and Grace,” Theological Investigations 1, trans. Cornelius Ernst (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961), 312-3.} without knowing Christianity or possessing explicit faith in the Christian God, makes a wholehearted commitment to the God of Jesus by means of free moral action in history, she is already embraced in God’s eternal abode and thus accepted by God. This is the notion of “anonymous Christians,” to use Rahner’s term.\footnote{143}{Karl Rahner, “Anonymous Christians,” Theological Investigations 6 [hereafter TI 6], trans. Karl-H Kruger (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1969), 390-9.} Rahner insists even further that if someone, despite her different religious, social, educational status, unconditionally loves someone else in
the way Jesus has loved, she loves God. People who love are saying ‘yes’ to God and are saved by Jesus, even if they do not know it.

On the other hand, Jesus and his life provide an example of, and the enabling ground for, our love as returning love for Love. Hereafter our focus is on love within the Christian sphere of meaning. However, following Jesus’ example of love need not necessarily be an explicit imitation of him – a kind of “Jesus-ism” or “Jesuanity.” The reasons are twofold. First, an enthusiastic following of the historical witness of Jesus may detach one from her own search of meaning via the capacity for self-transcendence and the possibility of mystical experience here and now (as outlined above). If the historical Jesus is solely presented to us as an example of abstract moral values that may be different from ours, then he is no longer of necessity or efficacy in the promotion of these values, and thus Christology is reduced into a mythology. So, our following Christ today for us is primarily to seek to discern what God wishes to speak to us personally “here and now,” and in the concrete circumstances of our current lives. This leads us to the second reason: our following Jesus includes in itself an acceptance of our human graced lives in the way Jesus did when he assumed this life to be his own. Jesus has accomplished his life and offered it to us, but not in the way of submerging us within his identity, but of “letting us exist in our own right.” To put it differently, the redemptive grace given to us through Christ is not a forensic decree merited for us externally, affecting us only in juridical or moral terms. Rather, it involves our ontological participation in the life Christ has already accepted.

The question arises, “What does Jesus Christ’s life look like for Rahner?” It is essentially characterized by an emptying of the divine self (kenosis), becoming fully human in order that we might share in the fullness of divine life (theosis). With full autonomous freedom seen as the decisive and final option made for his whole life, the Incarnate Word embraces all dimensions of human existence as his own – not only the

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“dignity of a mission,” the “abyss of ruin,” but also the “deep love of the heart.” Or better, he deeply loves his fellow brothers and sisters, and thus fulfilling his mission as the one sent to make God known. He carries out this mission unto death on the cross and in the midst of his experience of others’ hatred and God’s abandonment. As O’Day puts it:

Loving us, Jesus does not give up his life, but he does give it away. This distinction between these prepositions is important, because the love that Jesus embodies is grace, not sacrifice [or better, both grace and sacrifice]. Jesus gives his life to us as an expression of the fullness of his relationship with God and of God’s love for the world. Jesus’ death in love is not simply an act of self-denial, or an unsurpassable moral event understood merely in the sense of a superficial satisfactory theory. Rather, Jesus’ death is the Word’s personal act. It is an act of fullness, of living out his life and identity fully, even when that living would ultimately leads to death.

But Jesus does not love us by himself; he loves us in trustful faith in his Father, who also loves us greatly (John 3:16). Jesus loves us together with God, or God loves us with the loving heart of Jesus. But Jesus’ love for us, and any growth resulting from his love, would not go deeper without another opening up or letting go, and as Rohr argues, in his humanity Jesus has to learn to love again and again. Jesus’ trustful faith in the Father is therefore a condition for his love, a faith understood as a breaking-through, which allows him to hold on in his love – precisely because now his Father is holding on to him, and through him, to us.

By so doing, the Incarnate Word fulfills his mission of making God known. This means that, through Jesus’ life as an ineffable outpouring of love in the face of death, God’s freedom, i.e., God’s absolute holiness, God’s universal saving will, and God’s goodness in the face of sin, evil, and the nothingness of death, are all succinctly revealed, and indeed born anew through Jesus who “lets himself go in love.” And what is more, death does not have the final word in Jesus’ case. He is indeed raised and ascends. Yet,

148 Ibid., 240.
151 Brian Linnane, op. cit, 240.
152 Rahner, Spiritual Exercises, 250.
Rahner argues, when being raised up, Jesus’ own body is glorified not as something “accidental,” but as the “complete possession” of his life.153

Our humanity, which Jesus assumed to be his own, is therefore not lost. Rather, it remains forever as a “piece” of God’s own life on earth, but is now finally changed into “the glorious, immeasurable house of the living God and the heart of the God-filled soul of the Son.”154 Furthermore, what Jesus has gained for us through his kenotic life is the glorifying Spirit. But this Spirit for Rahner is not understood in the Augustinian concept of “appropriations,” but is One who “fathoms the depths of God,” through whom we, already as God’s sons and daughters, have an “immediate” and intimate relationship with God here and now, so much so that “what [we] already [are] must only become manifest.”155 This relationship is shown in the love we exercise, not merely as moral obligation, but as an act of freedom sprung from the inner law of the heart undertaken in light of Christ’s kenotic life.

In short, through the Incarnate Word, God has succeeded in complete self-giving to each and all. By the totality of Jesus’ kenotic life of love, our human contingent existence and our history have been given an aspect of absoluteness, irrevocableness and finality. Seen in light of the logic of mystical experience as discussed in 3.5, Jesus has become a mystic in his own time: he totally self-surrenders to loving Mystery as both ground and abyss, so that he no longer belongs to self but to God. It is within this context that Rahner explicates the various mysteries of the one Mystery making history, in which our own history, albeit rooted in the irrevocable history made in Jesus, is not simply a repetition of the former, but a unique history appropriate to our social and religious contexts, a history towards which we must necessary turn.156

153 Ibid., 251.
154 Ibid., 253.
155 Ibid., 256-9; FCF, 120, in [] are mine.
4.4 Unity of Love of God and Love of Neighbour: Living Icons of both/and

We can now unpack the unity of human love – love of God and love of the neighbour – which is the axiom at the heart of Rahner’s ethics. Rahner’s axiom triggers criticism from Hans Urs von Balthasar, however, who is concerned that Rahner’s theology is just a reduction of Christian living “to a bland and shallow humanism.” More about Balthasar’s criticism will be discussed in the next chapter. Our immediate interest here is to examine three questions that arise from Rahner’s understanding of Christian love: “In what way do we know that we love God and others and where is this love to be expressed?” “How is a unity of love of God and love of neighbour possible?” and “What does Christian love look like?”

First, “In what way do we know that we love God and others and where is this love to be expressed?” As seen earlier, within the logic of God’s love, what is true with human self-transcendence towards God as regards knowledge is also true with our dynamic self-transcendence towards God in terms of love. In creation, God has lovingly chosen to be the horizon and innermost centre of our humanity. That is, God has created us in a way that we can accept and experience God’s creative love on the one hand, and in a way that we can love God in return on the other hand. In short, “love is what we long for and were created for – in fact, love is what we are as an outpouring from God.”

In redemption, the human capacity to accept God’s love and to love God in return is made to be a vocation to be carried out and a task to be fulfilled. Yet, we cannot love others without God first loving each of us personally. The fact that we can love God and others is also grace. Otherwise, we easily deceive ourselves that salvation is achievable through our own capacity. On the way of transcendence to God in love we find ourselves as persons who can love; yet, even this transcendence is a gift given us by God, so that within the present interim time of salvation our love of the neighbour as our self-defining act is also divinized. True also, we cannot love God outside of the world we are part of; rather, we can love God only in and through our interaction with

158 Rohr, op. cit., 123.
the world, and most particularly, in and through our loving relationship with other persons.160

Second, “how is a unity of our love of God and love of neighbour possible?” The unity primarily expresses itself in one’s mystical experience of God, self and the other. As already indicated (in 3.5 above), at the core of one’s mystical experience of grace, she encounters the loving God within as the source of her being. Thus, in loving others, it is God who touches the heart of the lover, the heart that generates and upholds her loving touch on the others’ hearts. God loves the others with our love-elevated hearts, so to speak. However, often we think of the great commandment of loving our neighbour (Matt. 22:40) to stand apart from the other great commandment, the commandment to love God. For Rahner, however the two loves share a particularly intimate unity. Thus he writes:

Love of neighbor is the compenetration of two such mysteries, in which Mystery simpliciter - God - is present and thereby ultimately renders all boundaries of these two subjects unrecognizable, inasmuch as at least what we Christians call grace makes God himself, as such, the inward determination of the finite subject, and thus God himself becomes an inward determination in both subjects’ exchange through love of the neighbor, or brotherly and sisterly communion.161

In our mystical experience of love, as Rohr suggests, “the same Source and the same Love of God upholds us from within,” and thus enables us to love ourselves, the other and God, at the same time. Once one experiences being loved by God in such a way, it is almost natural to hand it on to the others. “We,” Rohr continues, “become a conduit of what we ourselves have received.”162

Thus, Rahner’s approach to love is clearly non-dual, or at least with a unitive orientation. The way we love is exactly the way we have accessed love. This approach goes beyond Aquinas because it focuses on the way we love as well as on how we have been given the gift of love. Arguably, the core biblical message is that God loves us even to death and that we cannot love completely without a deeply conscious experience of being loved by God; outside of God we cannot love genuinely, “Cut off

162 Rohr, op. cit., 127.
from the vine, you can do nothing” (John 15:5). “Vine and branches” is a great metaphor of a deep communion and a nonduality between God and a human person. Alone and by herself, a person finds the constraints of will power and the intellect limiting their ability to love over time, especially in difficult situations.\textsuperscript{163} Rahner repeatedly alerts us to disillusioned, superficial or exaggerated idealism emerging from a dualistic understanding of love, where we might try to obey the second commandment of love without the first, while in fact the first promises and indeed upholds the second.\textsuperscript{164} In short, to love genuinely, for Rahner, a person must start from her love-elevated heart.

In Rahner’s view, human love in its unified form and as one’s mystical experience of God, self and the other, is manifested in one’s love of Jesus. One can love Jesus, Rahner argues, “as a true man in the most proper and vital meaning of this word. Indeed because of who the God-man is, this love is even the absolute instance of a love in which love for a man and love for God find their most radical unity and mediate each other mutually.”\textsuperscript{165} Only the love of Jesus has “the right of extravagance,” in the sense that “the unconditionality of God is behind this love, both in that Jesus can be loved absolutely without perversity because he is the incarnation of the God of faithfulness, and in that the power for a human being to love Jesus is a gift from God’s own love.”\textsuperscript{166} Accordingly, in any genuine act of love of neighbour, no matter how anonymous it is, a presence of Jesus can be disclosed. And if it is the God-man’s presence, i.e., the Son who is the historical Revelation of Mystery, God-with-us, then it is also the Father, the Mystery of the ever-greater God, God-above-us, the “God beyond even the world of experience of the mystic,”\textsuperscript{167} and the Holy Spirit, the Intimacy of Mystery, God-in-us.\textsuperscript{168} But unlike the Neo-Scholastics, whose strategy of separation permits a possibility of love of neighbour as well as the love of God only within the economical spectrum of grace, Rahner, with his perception of universality of grace, insists that every

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{163} Rohr, op. cit., 128.
\item \textsuperscript{164} Rahner, “Reflections,” \textit{TI} 6, 235.
\item \textsuperscript{165} Rahner, \textit{FCF}, 310.
\item \textsuperscript{166} Craigo-Snell, op., cit., 89.
\item \textsuperscript{167} Karl Rahner, “The Ignatius Mysticism of Joy in the World,” \textit{Theological Investigations} 3, 291.
\end{itemize}
unconditional act of love of God is also the act of love of neighbour. And whenever love occurs in such a way between humans, a mystical experience of the triune God is really occurring.

We come now to our third question, “What does Christian love look like, for Rahner?” Christian love of God and love of neighbour are not just moments of romantic love, or of mutual exchange of affections between people of goodwill. Rather, as shown in the case of Jesus, they point to a radically decisive self-surrender, self-abandonment and self-commitment to God as the Holy Mystery and to the other as “incalculably mysterious subjects.” Nor are they merely categorical moral achievements among others; but they describe “the fundamental act of human moral reality, of man himself.” They are self-defining acts of human freedom as one’s “free self-disposal.” When one loves God one plunges herself into God, and such a love requires of her a self-abandonment or surrender to the mysterious abyss, so as not to reduce God into something calculable or manipulable, that falls into the matrix of human coordinates. Similarly, in loving another person, one offers the same surrender, going beyond seeing the beloved as one she can understand completely or use to her advantage. In short, love thus understood is not a love because of some profit to the lover. Rather, it requires mutual recognition of and respect for otherness and mystery.

Does Rahner’s perception of love lack material content or neglect the actions by which love is concretely expressed? Traditionally, the virtue of *caritas* must show its credibility in concrete acts. Aquinas for example insists that Christian *caritas* is to be expressed in almsgiving, benevolence and fraternal correction. Rahner is reluctant to provide an overly specific list of categorical dimensions of Christian love. This is because the focus of his existential ethics is on the unique relationship between a human person and God, which is characterized by her positive fundamental option and needs to be expressed in her particular historical, cultural, social and religious contexts. And further, love, which is found at the centre of this option, has the potential for ever new

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169 Craigo-Snell, op., cit., 92.
171 Rahner, Everyday Faith, 110.
172 Rahner, “Reflections,” TI 6, 239.
173 Thomas Aquinas, *Summae Theologica (ST)* II, q. 33, a. 1.
historical expressions, and does not conform to any kind of imitation or mimicking. Indeed, once the framework and nature of the positive fundamental option has been constituted, Rahner moves on by specifying the meaning and limit of Christian love, which are expressed in our daily share in the death of Christ.

Not all of Rahner’s extensive reflections on love as being essentially expressed in one’s dying with Christ have been discussed here. But basically, love as “dying with Jesus,” for Rahner, captures the *kenotic* self-disposal of the person as the lover, which was once expressed excellently in the same *kenotic* self-disposal of Jesus, the historical person, who has accepted in obedience his death on the cross as the ultimate outcome of his love for humanity. There is a straight line between love and suffering or, Rahner’s preferred term, “death.” If we love greatly and genuinely as Jesus has loved, it is fairly certain we will soon suffer a death, because we have somehow given up control to another. Yet, death, before coming to its complete form physically, is a daily experience, underscoring the reality of human finitude, limitation and dependence and at the same time, the reality of one person’s freedom of choice, which is, understood in Rahner’s terminology, the daily expression of, and response from, the person to her fundamental option. Just as in the face of physical death a person is free to respond – whether in resistance and despair or with trusting surrender and acceptance in love – to God as the Holy Mystery, so too, in her daily moral *kenotic* life, the person is called to make similar responses, which are manifest in her concrete loving service to her neighbour.

Concretely, Rahner categorizes one’s daily moral choice, grounded as it is in freedom, into autonomous and theonomous deaths. The former expresses itself in the person’s rejection of both her free liberty and grace as the gift within, and this occurs when the person commits a mortal sin. By contrast, the latter represents the person’s free, definitive, and radical self-disposal to the inscrutable mystery of God. Because the choice arising between the two deaths confronts a person throughout the course of her life, Rahner suggests that every act of love is an event of theonomous death, which is an act of human freedom, conditioned and empowered by grace given through Christ.

174 Rohr, op. cit., 128.
176 Ibid., 119.
If this is the case, one’s love as theonomous death is vividly shown when “the person puts another’s interests before her own, when she chooses to stay with someone even when it would be easier and pleasanter to leave, when she unconditionally trusts another person with her own self, and when she in turn is truly open to the unknown and uncontrollable reality of another person’s identity.”

This kind of love, and the death for or because of that love, must be a fruit of our experience of being loved by the God within, who has chosen to give Godself to us in the form of grace, because it has an element of unlimited unconditionality about it. It is our returning love to Love at the heart level, i.e., from our grace-elevated hearts. Our minds alone cannot bring us there, since the mind normally enjoys judgments and often tries to calculate love or to understand it before we dare to give ourselves to it. Our graced openness to God’s Word of Love, the Word that has creatively touched the depth of our being through love in a way that it will send us to love in our turn, needs to go beyond the rational level so as to reach the level of a listening heart. To this Word and the mission of love it entrusts us, we are obedient and listening.

Thus, loving genuinely, we are willing to risk everything or to hold nothing back, and thus we are awakening and living grace as the gift within, precisely seen as God’s constant self-giving. Dying greatly for/because of love, we more trustfully surrender our controlling will to God, and thus open ourselves up to the whole field of living grace. Facing death in peculiar situations – such as struggling with our own shadow self, our interior conflicts and moral failures, our daily humiliations or any form of limitation, dealing with others’ misunderstanding, rejection or even abandonment of us – is a gateway into deeper consciousness of a graceful Presence giving itself to us always and everywhere. We become less defensive, but more attentive, more compassionate, and utterly open to the edge of our inner resource where we “fall into the loving hands of the living God” (Hebrews 10:31). In short, while human love opens the door for one to a broad and deep communion with God, death for/because of that

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177 Craigo-Snell, op. cit., 88.
love “keeps that door open and available to ever greater growth.”

One affirms in her daily act of love, seen as a moment of “eternity in time,” her self, the other and God.

4.5 Love, Faith and Hope

Rahner argues that there is a mutual conditioning between love, faith and hope. As in the case of Jesus, a person’s genuine love is indeed conditioned by her initial faith, understood as a graced letting go of, and an opening up of the self to, or a holding onto, God who is holding on to us always and everywhere. Love then, in its turn, is an implicit affirmation of one’s faith in God. Love confirms the meaning of faith, a faith that surpasses all the overwhelming evidence to the contrary, so much so that even the chaos and pain of this world are held within the horizon of the loving God. In loving, one also believes that she is present as existentiell to the world, faced with limitations, weaknesses, crises, chaos or sins; yet, even within these negative situations she is still called to love, a love sprung as an expression of her own original depth – the grace-elevated constituted in her innermost, that is, an divine offer of grace, transcendence and freedom.

Love carried out in faith thus understood is made possible only through hope. A Christian is not a special human being; she is a member of the human race, like all others. Christian life is not a special instance of human life; Christian life reflects human life as it really is. The only differences are that, as in the case of faith, in loving, a Christian explicitly hopes in God despite the dark, bitter and hard elements of human existence; and thus, Christian life opens to and accepts the reality of human life in its fullness without attempting to escape its burdens and responsibilities. Christian hope, by its nature, refers to God’s future – “the absolute and infinite future.” Yet, this future of God has been made present in the forms of grace as the gift within ultimately given in Christ. God’s future, then, belongs to every Christian. A Christian hopes in

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178 Rohr, op. cit., 129.


180 Rahner, FCF, 402-3.

181 Ibid., 404.
God since she knows that the present is not the whole of reality. Hence, she “hopes for the infinite and therefore confronts the finite calmly.”\(^{182}\) Taken altogether, Christian love, faith and hope are mutually linked. If love is the “letting of one’s self go,” which is made possible only with one’s faith best described as the “‘outwards from the self attitude into God as the absolutely uncontrollable,” then hope is “the unifying medium” connecting love with faith.\(^{183}\)

In conclusion, in this chapter we have shown how love is ultimate gift and expression of our life of faith. Living in love, moreover, means living in true freedom. Any theology of grace and Christian life must allow for the unrestricted existential expression of this freedom in love.

\(^{182}\) Ibid., 405.

Chapter 5: Critiques and Opportunities: Grace and the Existential

In chapter four we offered a particular interpretation of Rahner’s transcendental project, centered on the question of how an experience of grace properly understood as God’s self-giving in love is possible to a human being in her existential situation. With this project, Rahner made the modern turn to the individual subject, and the shift from essence to existence, to serve his own theological investigations.

In this chapter we shall consider some criticism of Rahner’s focus on the existential subject. While there is some validity in the claim that Rahner focuses on the subject and seems to neglect social, historical, and political circumstances, it is not true that Rahner’s theology takes no account of the unique social context of every human subject.

In order to assess the credibility of the above statement, we will start this chapter by sketching some characteristics of modernity and post-modernity, so as to serve our current evaluation of Rahner’s work. We will then discuss the concerns of some of his more recent critics, including political theologians as well as postmodern scholars. Once these two steps have been taken, we will provide a broader assessment of Rahner’s transcendental method. Our argument is that Rahner in his theory of grace does not sacrifice the communal ethos of Christian life for individual gain. While Rahner is not a postmodern thinker, it is not justified to label him a modernist whose insights and method have been superseded. Rather, Rahner’s transcendental project, critically understood and brought into conversation with postmodern thought, has laid a solid foundation for further theological effort in the future.

5.1 Postmodernity vs. Modernity

Though some might argue that many unacknowledged assumptions of modernity were generated in Greek thought going back to Plato, the decisive beginnings of modernity

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185 Ibid., 156.
are usually located in the work of René Descartes. In the social and cultural disturbance of the 17th Europe, notably characterized by wars, the emergence of natural sciences, and economies in transition, Descartes sought certain and stable truth: “I think therefore I am.” Descartes then portrayed a human subject as a self-present, autonomous and essentially rational individual. The human person, in Descartes’ celebrated axiom, had a capacity of thinking, constituting the possibility of knowing detached from cultural and historical circumstances. Arguably, we are, in Descartes’ view, our thinking. With this certain foundation, Descartes proceeded to demonstrate the existence of God, of the human soul and everything else pertaining to human nature. This is the heritage Descartes left to the modern era.

Postmodern movements include thinkers who lived in the modern era, but who questioned, to use Heidegger’s word, “the un-thought of modernity.” One feature of postmodern philosophy is a destruction and re-thinking of modern thought by identifying the unacknowledged, forgotten, even repressed conditions of modernity. Chauvet, for instance, alerts us to one main condition of knowledge which modernity – particularly German modernity – held dear. Being was traditionally understood, Chauvet’s argument goes, as a caused property common to all created entities, and as such this being must have its source in a fundamental Being or God, who is by definition uncaused. God was seen by early modernists as the one who guarantees certainty and stability of human knowledge by way of providing a central, stable grounding point of presence (though this certitude was later replaced by faith in empirical science). The classical view of being thus understood, Chauvet continues, results in a common view that, as everyone and everything derives from God, they could operate only in an ordered and closed system held together by God; any kind of ontological difference is thus overlooked or denied.


188 Ibid., 108.

This does not mean that postmodernists deny the existence of being as such. What concerns them (among others, Gianni Vatimo, Jean-Luc Marion, John Caputo, and the later Martin Heidegger)\textsuperscript{190} is that the strong ontology of a “being of beings” sees a human being as finite yet stable being who is ordered to the Infinite, the Absolute, and engages in causal relationships with other beings through a process of measurable giving and receiving. This strong ontology is problematic for some postmodernists, precisely because it over-emphasizes the constituting role of the epistemic subject as a stable being. Aiming at replacing the concept of being as a stable subject, these postmodernists, though differing in approaches, prefer to speak of a destabilization of this strong ontology. Thus, for example, the later Heidegger cherishes “an understanding of being as existence in time – a being that is both disclosed and hidden in its givenness.”\textsuperscript{191} Vattimo favours an explication of being as \textit{kenosis}, namely the self-emptying of being. Being as \textit{kenosis} is now only “half-being,” whose existence depends on the gift of the other, or better expressed, on the other’s self-giving. In short, for Vattimo and others who share his rejection of a strong ontology, there is no being there; only the giving that counts.\textsuperscript{192}

\textbf{5.2 Rahner Facing Postmodernist Sensibilities}

Given Rahner’s anthropological starting point and his turn to the subject – a process of one’s being present to self during which she knows herself, and within her active presence to herself, she finds the infinite horizon, or God – his theology has been subjected to a strong criticism from some postmodern thinkers. Generally, they argue that Rahner’s legacy is nothing more than an echo of Descartes’ search for epistemological certainty, and of similar voices of modernity, portraying the human person merely as a ‘mentalist-individualist self.’\textsuperscript{193} Thus, what the postmodernists criticize in modernity they also criticize in Rahner.


\textsuperscript{191} Ibid., 580.

\textsuperscript{192} Gianni Vatimo, \textit{Belief}, trans. Luca D’Isanto and David Webb (California: Stanford University, 1999), 35-9.

First, Rahner is criticized for seeking epistemological certainty in the same way as Descartes did at the beginning of the modern period.\(^{194}\) The centrepieces of Rahner’s anthropological theology – the possibility of knowledge at its metaphysical depth conditioned by the Vorgriff, the mystical experience of grace made possible through the *supernatural existential* – are also the “foundation, the universal touchstone upon which knowledge is built in the pursuit of certainty.”\(^{195}\)

This leads to a second accusation, namely, that Rahner has given an essentialist view of humanity. By the term “essentialist” is meant “having innate existence or universal validity rather than as being a social, ideological, or intellectual construct.”\(^{196}\) This is also sometimes called universalism. Accordingly, as Craigo-Snell observes, Rahner has painted a universalizing picture of humanity with ontological definitive elements that fit all persons, without which one would not be a human: everyone appears to be assembled, with an ontologically necessary structure already hardwired at birth and prior to any social and cultural influence they have in particular historical contexts.\(^{197}\)

That is to say, this picture of humanity would disallow real differences among persons, which characterize the later human formative elements obtained through their interactions with particular culture, society, language, and history.

Closely related to the accusation of Rahner as a theologian giving an essentialist view of humanity is the criticism of his understanding of human freedom.\(^{198}\) For Rahner, before a human enacts her freedom categorically as an *existentiell*, she as a subject (that is, free) first enjoys it transcendentally as something interior and subjective before the gracious Mystery, namely God. This transcendental freedom involves the subject’s definitive acceptance or rejection of God by means of a self-disposition in saying “yes” or “no” to God. Thus it is original, fundamental and essential for the actualization of one’s personhood. Rahner calls it the fundamental option.\(^{199}\) It seems that human

\(^{194}\) Crowley, op. cit., 579.

\(^{195}\) Craigo-Snell, op. cit., 167.


\(^{197}\) Craigo-Snell, op. cit., 168-9.


freedom, in Rahner’s view, is not only essential, but also inviolable. The expressions of this freedom in moral action are secondary to the fundamental option. The core of this criticism therefore lies, again, in Rahner’s deeply individualist and subjective centered portrait of humans. In the eyes of Kelsey for example, it is not clear how Rahner connects “overt and public behavior to our inner and private acts of decision.”

5.3 Rahner Facing Political Theologians

A somewhat different critique of Rahner’s transcendental project comes from political theologians. This critique is not so much about Rahner’s understanding of the foundations of knowledge; it is concerned more with the point of departure of his theological reflection. Johannes Metz, one of Rahner’s most prominent students, argues that Rahner’s emphasis on self-transcendence encourages an ahistorical view of human beings, which overlooks both the historical specificity of Christianity and the concrete struggles of Christians today. First, in Metz’s reasoning, Rahner undermines historical specificity, because he places too much emphasis on the supernatural existential seen as an ontological element constituted by God to be a constant offer of grace, thus failing to do justice to God’s involvement in history, contacting with humanity in grace, begun with the Hebrew people, and culminating in the concrete, historical birth, life, crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ. Rahner has thus “privatized” the Christian message, Metz continues, and the practice of faith is reduced to the timeless decision of the person. Second, Rahner overlooks the concrete struggles of Christians today, Metz argues, because the human person in Rahner’s anthropological theology is “always already,” despite whether she wants to be or not “with God.” With this presupposition, Rahner does not offer enough focus on how a

200 Ibid., 94-7.


human in her concrete historical, social and religious situations accepts God’s offer of salvation.

Tied to Rahner’s theory of the supernatural existential, Metz argues, the human person loses her uniqueness, which includes historical differences. She, together with her Christian history, is “guaranteed for a too high price: the price of confusing identity with tautology.” 204 Taken altogether, Metz fears that Rahner’s anthropological theology has brought Christianity into a risky field of ahistorical identity where “the beginning is like the end, paradise is like the end of time, creation is like the fulfillment and at the end the beginning repeats itself. History itself – with its forms of identity that are constantly threatened and in danger of being overcome – cannot intervene.” 205 In short, Rahner is criticized by Metz as being insufficiently attentive to history and to the actual concrete conditions within which people live.

John Milbank concretizes Metz’s critique of Rahner in more specific terms, saying that Rahner’s ahistorical transcendentalism has equated the individual and the social dimensions of Christian life. What Rahner has provided is no more than a general motivation, namely, an anonymous, unspecified love of neighbour. The demand of love of neighbour is a necessary element for salvation, yet understood by Rahner only at an individual level. 206 Milbank’s concrete critique echoes von Balthasar’s critique, which was briefly noted above (in section 4.4). According to von Balthasar, Rahner’s theology has a danger of ontological reduction by equating love of neighbour with love of God, and thereby turning religion into ethics and losing sight of the true nature of Christian life. Besides, Rahner’s notion of anonymous Christians also provokes von Balthasar’s anxiety, for it presumes a common ontological structure of openness given to all humanity, promising a possibility of a human response to grace even though one does not belong to the visible Church through baptism. Rahner’s propositions, for von Balthasar, show the error in Rahner’s theological effort in the sense that it has led the Church in a dangerous direction. Von Balthasar’s critique of Rahner can be summarized as follows: Rahner is too eager to ease the worries as well as the demands of modern

204 Johannes Metz, “An Identity Crisis in Christianity?” 174.
205 Ibid., 175.
persons by reducing Christian agape to only the love of the neighbour and showing the credibility of Christianity by an illegitimate inclusion of anonymous Christians into God’s universal salvation; by so doing, Rahner makes Christians lose “what is distinctive about Christianity,” and abandons or at least endangers the substance of Christianity.207

5.4 Rahner, the Integral Theologian

As we have seen (in 3.3), there are three main streams of thought that influence Rahner’s theology. On the one hand, some pre-modern figures such as Thomas Aquinas and Ignatius of Loyola have deeply influenced Rahner’s theology. On the other hand, as one of the pioneers of the development of Catholic thought in the second half of the twentieth century, Rahner has brought traditional theology into dialogue with modern philosophy, particularly in the Kantian tradition. Thus, a modern effect shaping his philosophy and theology is undeniable. Finally, the work of Heidegger, who is arguably an early postmodernist, has also had impact on Rahner’s account of being and existence, notably in the shift of focus in his transcendental philosophy from the epistemological to the existential. Among these influences, it could be argued that the pastoral and spiritual elements more profoundly shape his theological substance than his philosophical heritage. Rahner affirms this conclusion in an interview of 1979, saying Ignatian spirituality was “more significant and important” in shaping his theology than “all learned philosophy and theology.”208

Rahner also detaches himself from what he sees as dangers to Christian philosophy in virtue of the modern turn to the subject. Thus Rahner notes, “modern philosophy’s transcendental anthropological change of direction since Descartes” is “[w]ith few exceptions … profoundly un-Christian in so far as it pursues a transcendental philosophy of the autonomous subject, who stands aloof from the transcendental experience in which he experiences himself as continually dependent, with his origin


Rahner nevertheless acknowledges the benefit of modernity: modernity has provided a significant shift for theological reflection. Modernity can be seen, Rahner writes, “as most profoundly Christian” in the sense that humanity “is not ultimately one factor in a cosmos of things … but the subject on whose freedom as subject hangs the fate of the whole cosmos.” Having discerned both benefits and costs of modernity, Rahner creatively imports the modern positive tenets into his theology, and selectively develops it in such a way that it is not a return to the pre-modern period, and at the same time, it is not a big jump beyond “modernity directly into whatever is to follow.”

Thus Rahner chooses to start his theology where modernity started – the human subject. Yet, his choice of entry is not simply a repetition of modernity. Indeed, by addressing the modern tradition beyond Descartes, most notably with Kant, Maréchal and Heidegger, Rahner has offered, philosophically and theologically, “a foundation firm enough, and a framework capacious enough, for holistic refection on God and human realities.” Rahner makes a return to the subject not in the way Descartes did, which is an elevation of the human subject to be an autonomous and rational being. Rather, Rahner tries to draw our attention to the fact that God is really involved with the human subject. His theology has an effect sprung from tradition yet expressed in “philosophically rigorous terms that also illuminate what it means to be human before God.”

Recalling Rahner’s controversies with the Neo-Scholastics and la nouvelle théologie as discussed above (in sections 2.3 and 2.4), one can demonstrate that Rahner’s turn to the subject bears a carefully articulated re-thinking of the relationship between grace and nature. Grace, in Rahner’ view, is not solely a divine created gift, or a concept, or even an existence that the Church convinces us of through dogma. “The contents of dogma”

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210 Ibid., 39.

211 Craigo-Snell, op. cit., 175.


213 Ibid., 5.
Rahner writes, must be perceived in its connection with a person’s experience of herself and grace, but not “as logical connections of deduction or explication.”214 Rather, grace as God’s self-donation is connected to our daily life and accessible to our experience. This is possible since, when granting grace, God does not simply give a gift, but primarily gives God’s own self. Thus, when we receive grace understood as both gift and gift-Giver, we express both appreciation and trust. The courageous confidence that trusts in the Giver of all gifts is faith. We cannot make sense of our existence as such without a reference to God.215 In short, for Rahner, the truths of Christianity are by no means recognizable only within the mind of the subject, with clear goals measurable with human rational standards; they are experienced and lived also with our bodies, emotions, hearts, and spirits.

Rahner therefore may not be a modernist in the usual sense of the term. But how can we account for his beginning with the individual and arguably giving an individualistic account of the human self in which “other people remain marginal”?216 In terms of method, one cannot read Rahner’s legacy in its totality as simply an elaboration of his early philosophical works, which have a clear focus on the individual. This does not mean that Rahner’s theology is inconsistent in itself. Rather, Rahner knows how to give priority in his theology to what is most important: before entering into any communal relationships, the human subject must know the truths about herself, such that one is created out of and ordered to a communion with God, which is best shown in her positive choice to love the mysterious others, both divine and human. In other words, the turn to the human subject that marks Rahner’s point of departure does not follow the “modern vision of solitary certainty in self-presence,”217 but signifies a strong return to the subject who is in relation to self, neighbour and God. For Rahner therefore, the others, instead of being marginal to us, are validated in our subjective turns, even becoming the centre of our existence. Thus Rahner writes:

214 Rahner, “Theology and Anthropology,” TTI 9, 42.
216 Kerr, op. cit., 12.
217 Craigo-Snell, op. cit., 177.
The personal spirit is a spirit referred to others. An absolute lonely spirit is a contradiction in itself and – so far as it is possible at all – is Hell … Where there is man, there is necessarily – not only in fact – human community, i.e. bodily personal community, personally spatio-temporal community.\footnote{Karl Rahner, “Theological Reflexions on Monogenism,” \textit{Theological Investigations} 1, trans. Cornelius Ernst (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961), 287.}

We come now to the accusation that Rahner has given a universalizing account of humanity in a way that denies any kinds of difference. There is some evidence for the first part of the above statement, but there is none for the second. With his theory of a common human structure characterized by grace as the gift within, it is arguable that Rahner portrays a picture of humanity as always and everywhere the same ontologically. Moreover, some scholars are concerned that when Rahner gives a universalizing account of humanity as such, he may reflect his own experience as an “educated, middle class, religious white German man,” and then imposes this experience on others.\footnote{This is noted in Craigo-Snell, op. cit. 168.} This concern is unwarranted, in my reading of Rahner, for two reasons.

First, Rahner repeatedly affirms,\footnote{See for example, Karl Rahner, “Christian Dying,” \textit{Theological Investigations} 18, trans. Edward Quinn (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1983), 237.} [as he is usually understood by others]\footnote{Herbert Vorgimler, \textit{Karl Rahner: His Life, Thought and Works}, trans. Edward Quinn (New York: Deus Books, 1966), 22.} that the focus of his theology is on the possibility of a normal and average person’s daily experience of grace. Secondly, though everyone shares in common an ontological structure, which carries a possibility of a positive response to God’s call to love, one’s response in freedom to that call may differ from others’, depending on her own concrete social, religious, and historical contexts. It is, indeed, one’s circumstances of life that define and test one’s capacity for and free response to love, which are expressions of her universality. Said otherwise, the universality of being humans is actualized and particularized and indeed obtained through the social interactions one has for others in her act of love. Hence, Rahner’s universalizing account of humanity always has room for differences to the extent that it “opens the door for one to claim her experience as a starting point for theological reflection” from her own perspective.\footnote{Nancy Dallavalle, “Feminist Theologies,” in \textit{The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner}, ed. Declan Marmion and Mary Hines (U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 265.}
My reading of Rahner as giving a universalizing account of humanity, yet not denying inter-contextualized differences, is further consolidated by his understanding of being, which is similar to (but not identical with) the metaphor of being as gift contended by Derrida and his followers.\(^{223}\) Rahner suggests that – and this he shares with the deconstructionists – “being is the totality and unity of all that is, both realized and potential; as such, it is the condition for the possibility of anything at all,” even the possibility of any causal relationship.\(^{224}\) In other words, being, in Rahner’s view, is connected to becoming, and its becomingness is formed and accomplished in space and time through its “life and action, decision and execution.”\(^{225}\) There is a sense of *givenness* of being and, as such, being is both revealed and concealed. Though one’s encounter with a world of what is concealed or not positively grasped constitutes the possibility of knowledge, most especially the knowledge of God as the Absolute Being, being as such cannot be exhausted. Being is luminous. There is always more about being to encounter, discover and live.

But, at least, one thing has been confirmed for Rahner: God’s free self-donation, wonderfully and without restraint, is made to fit with the human subject’s disposal toward it, which becomes a reality in a mutuality of giving and receiving. The human being has been created in a way that enables her precisely to be able to receive God’s grace. Louis Dupré comments that in this kind of view, “God is not an object [among others] but an absolute demand … [and] to accept God is not to accept a ‘giver’ but a ‘Giving.’”\(^{226}\) Similarly, Crowley argues, Derrida speaks of a “God who gives God.”\(^{227}\) For both thinkers, being as such appears (and is concealed) within the world of existing persons and things and the cultures they construct, where the gift (or Giving) is encountered. The only thing that makes Rahner different from Derrida is that one’s religion, culture, and history are for Rahner prior structures within which one’s openness to the Transcendent is to be actualized, and as such they are irreducible. On

\(^{223}\) Thus Crowley, op. cit., 582.

\(^{224}\) Ibid., 581.


\(^{227}\) Crowley, op. cit., 582.
the contrary, as Crowley suggests by referring to Derrida’s article, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” (1978), Derrida questions any kind of *a priori* structure of openness to the Transcendent.\(^{228}\)

Closely tied to Rahner’s understanding of being, his universal picture of humanity steers away the charge that Rahner is an essentialist. This is made clear in Rahner’s notion of the *supernatural existential*. However it is this notion that most provokes his opponents’ anxiety.\(^{229}\) The *supernatural existential*, his critics claim, functions as a delineating essential existing prior to one’s exercise of freedom as an *existentiell*. As was discussed in 3.4, the *supernatural existential* is not something added to created nature without which a human is less fully human. Rather, while it is present always and everywhere to a human being, it remains an offer waiting for human acceptance or rejection of it. This means that the *supernatural existential*, albeit a constitutive element of human existence, is not hardwired into human nature intrinsically. It needs to be actualized in one’s historical particular situation. Moreover, if the *supernatural existential* is seen as an initial expression of God’s universal salvific will, it is fully effective only in the concrete realities of Jesus Christ and his Church enacted in history.\(^{230}\) Even so, the *supernatural existential* bears in itself a historical and social element whereby it enacts its constitutive function, thus making sense of human existence.

Indeed, Rahner acknowledges the effects of social construction on the self, both as an observable occurrence in daily life as well as in sacramental efficacy in Christian life.\(^{231}\) Clearly, by establishing human existence, and particularly Christianity, in a social, historical and ecclesial framework, Rahner shows himself as strongly speaking against any movement that claims human essential elements as exclusively inborn characteristics. For Rahner, the human person, paradoxically, is called to co-create

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\(^{228}\) Ibid., 583.

\(^{229}\) See, among others, Kerr, op. cit., 174.

\(^{230}\) Rahner, *FCF*, 114.

\(^{231}\) Ibid., 24, 389.
herself by acknowledging and embracing the fact that she is someone who is profoundly open to the mysterious God who has created her and continues creating her.\textsuperscript{232}

If Rahner is an essentialist at all, he is an essentialist who speaks in his own tone, which is quite different from that of modernity’s mainstream. Instead of presenting a human person as a rational autonomous being as the modernists do, Rahner depicts the person fundamentally as one who has been called into a constant communion with God, and she accepts in freedom this vocation by opening herself in love to the unknown other, both divine and human.\textsuperscript{233} The outcome of our graced openness thus understood includes in itself a realization of, and a grateful attitude to, the brilliant and loving God who creates us as beings who then can keep creating ourselves.

We come now to George Lindbeck’s and David Kelsey’s criticism of Rahner’s understanding of human freedom (as indicated in 5.2 above), such that human freedom is, seen in Rahner’s view, immune to historical effects. For convenience of discussion, we shape the issue into the following question: What has the last word in the shaping of our existence: is it the fundamental option made at a transcendental level, or is it what we do everyday in the world?

Rahner’s answer to this question, despite the importance he places on the fundamental option in terms of human being, and despite his habit of balancing the immanent and the transcendent, seems to incline to the second of the two possibilities. One can read Rahner’s view on the mutuality between freedom and its daily expressions as a development of Kant’s ethics, according to which one’s transcendental realities are expressed, fulfilled and objectified nowhere else than in her concrete categorical actions.\textsuperscript{234} Others can also understand Rahner as trying to paint a picture of humanity with a more Thomist bent, in his discussion of virtues, according to which, what a person does concretely and profoundly shapes who they are.\textsuperscript{235} Love for example, once


\textsuperscript{233} Craigo-Snell, op. cit., 184.

\textsuperscript{234} Ibid., 85.

becoming a habit, “can be both a source of actions and the result or product of these actions.”

My suggestion is that Rahner imports both Kant’s ethics and Aquinas’s theory of the mutuality between a human being and her acts in order to present a more intelligible picture of humanity within his theology of the symbol. For Rahner, a symbol is that through which a being expresses itself in a way necessary for its own self-realization. Accordingly, a symbol is not just a means by which another reality becomes present in the world, but what is symbolized determines the way the symbol itself is understood. Rahner is convinced that a symbol is not the same as what it symbolizes; yet, it cannot be perceived of as separable from what is symbolized.

Thus while Kant cherished a transcendental ethics characterized by categorical actions without any contact with being-in-itself, Rahner clearly sees the human body together with her daily acts as the necessary embodiment of the human person as a worldly spirit, whose primordial decision is grounded on God as the absolute Being or horizon. Thus he writes, “the bodily reality of man, and so his acts in the dimensions of space and time, history and society, are conceived of as symbolic realities embodying his person and its primordial decisions.” For Rahner then, it is through the embodiment of the spirit and its historical acts that the human spirit is fully realized in its symbolic relationship to self and the mysterious others. It follows that only with the human embodied spirit who is made to be in communion with God can the human person make sense of her bodily existence.

Furthermore, while Aquinas acknowledged freedom not as a product of individual self-creation but rather as fulfilled by “embracing in a concrete and personal way the hierarchy of goods appropriate to our nature,” Rahner sees freedom as an expression of human openness to the Transcendent, which is the graced openness, he calls the

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236 ST I-II, 65.
241 Ibid., 242-243.
242 Thomas Aquinas, On Human Nature, xix
supernatural existential. This openness to the Transcendent, if worthy of its name, must include an openness to others. As a worldly spirit, one’s constitutive essence is made to be a symbolic reality only through responding “yes” to God, precisely shown in her love of others, both divine and human.243 This is not a highly abstract ethics without content, however. As we have argued above (in section 4.4), when one, in the midst of her concretely social and religious life, embraces Jesus’ death clearly shown in one’s love of others, with or without being aware of the fact, she is living the very constitutive element of her human existence. Every human being is born alike, namely, sharing a common ontological structure for knowing and loving, yet, our way of living and dying make us different. Through love in one’s life and death, one has communion with God that allows her to reach the innermost centre of her. Seen in this perspective, one’s moral choices in the future are much affected by her past and present choices in saying “yes” or “no” to God in love, limiting the scope of one’s future choices and her orientation toward or away from her culminating goal. In short, what one does in history shapes who she is.

If this view of Rahner is acceptable, another question arises: to what extent do our daily actions and the actions of others, while being done at an existentiell level and within history, affect our freedom as the constitutive element? Far from being an individualist as accused by his critics, Rahner repeatedly affirms that human beings are dependent and historical. Thus, our freedom – though universally present as it is – is actualized in history and not an absolute freedom. This means that our freedom is not immune to the danger of history; and the actions of the others influence, positively or negatively, who we are. Rahner does not portray a pre-existent, fully realized human being who then opts for or against God.244 Rather, a human person, in Rahner’s picture of humanity, participates in her creation precisely in her saying “yes” or “no” to God in love.

We have noticed (in section 4.2 above) the negative effect of original sin understood by Rahner as a co-determinative element of the concrete situation in which human freedom is enacted. Yet, there are positive sources of influence on human freedom as well. Genuine love, understood in its close link to death (already outlined in 4.4), is one of them. If one tries to love another person directly in the full, unconditional sense


244 Craigo-Snell, op. cit., 187.
of the word, she will always find that her love has a power and an energy penetrating into and transforming the heart of another person’s freedom. Just as through love one reaches her innermost existence via her becoming one with God, the same truthfulness to being occurs when one loves her neighbor genuinely; with an other-centered love, she has a union with God that allows her to reach the innermost centre of the other.\textsuperscript{245}

Clearly, human freedom for Rahner is not an inviolable reality. One’s freedom is vulnerable to history which is constituted by guilt, both of the individual person and of others in society. However, the negative effects of guilt thus understood do not irrevocably impair one’s freedom; nor can the damage one does to another have eternally damning consequences, totally destroying one’s freedom and ultimately overriding God’s saving will. This is true since history is primarily marked by the event of God’s self-communication in Christ, which for Rahner is grand in scope, including creation, the birth, life and death of Christ; the sending of the Holy Spirit; and the ongoing life of the Church.\textsuperscript{246} Following Ignatius, Rahner optimistically argues for a Christian life in which the main agents remain God and the individual person.

To sum up, while accused by some postmodernists of giving an essentialist view of humanity, Rahner’s theological writings show a clear appreciation of the everyday context of life, wherein a person comes to be through freedom and love. Against the criticism from some political theologians that Rahner has given an ahistorical account of humanity, Rahner indeed takes history very seriously, such that history is, for Rahner, an eternally happening event captured by the constant self-communication of God to human subjectivity, promising the interpersonal reality of subjectivity within ceaseless unfolding of historical contexts.

Thus, far from risking the true message of Christianity as claimed by von Balthasar, Rahner poses the need to understand what it means to be a Christian in a modern world where Christian theology needs to live out Christian truths in such a way that contemporary persons will see the fundamental connection of these truths to their own experiences. This is by no means to be taken for granted. Openness to the other, despite their social, religious and historical differences, is central to Christian faith. While

\textsuperscript{245} Karl Rahner, “The Consecration of the Layman to the Care of Soul,” \textit{TI} 3, 270-1.

\textsuperscript{246} Rahner, \textit{FCF}, 329-30.
Balthasar calls for a conversion of modernity to Christianity, Rahner highlights the ever importance of how to integrate the two. To this end, Christianity has to take the initiative.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

Rahner raises, in the introductory chapter to his most systematic book, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, two questions: “what are the conditions of the possibility of human knowing?” And, “what are the conditions of the possibility of the Christian message being heard?”

The answer to the first question rests on Rahner’s foundational understanding of grace as God’s unconditional and mysterious self-imparting given always and everywhere. From this foundation, Rahner has provided philosophical and theological schemes which one can use to explore all kinds of issues concerning human existence, creation as whole, and the boundaries between human finite existence and the Infinite. Then and only then, can one ponder with wonder one’s existence as a human called to be in encounter with God as the Holy Mystery, both at a metaphysical depth and at historical and existential levels, which occur in the world where the human person exists as a spirit and in relation to others. God has freely constituted a human being in a way that she is always open to the mystery of God. One experiences this fact when one reflects on the mystique of God, of the world, and of human being and knowing. One knows this fact better when one loves God and neighbour with a selfless love. Thus, Rahner’s theology of grace targets the daily work of a normal person as a human subject. It primarily involves the human subject’s explication of her encounter with grace seen as God’s self-giving in love, which grounds her understanding of her faith, hope and love as something already known and lived, and yet needs to be ever-awakened and ever-intensified. This is the core experience of our existence before God as the Holy Mystery, despite our cultural, historical, social and religious differences.

The above also helps us to partly answer the second question as to “what are the conditions of the possibility of the Christian message being heard?” Our core experience of the Transcendent needs to become enfleshed and hence true to life. The mystery of God unpacked in a human person’s human experience reveals her human mystery, which is inextricably expressed in the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, a historical person. The human mystery Jesus has embraced and lived shows the coherence between our most careful thinking and our most intense moments of believing. What has been said maps out the path of our everyday life with God, which
fundamentally involves our everyday return to the specific, mysterious yet concrete sacramental encounter with Jesus Christ. Within this framework, this thesis has argued, Rahner has provided a way of understanding and receiving the sacraments, which expresses itself in the following implications.

First, Rahner insists that sacramental theology must be rooted in Christology. The Logos when incarnated within the *ad extra* movement of the economic Trinity is the absolute symbolic expression of the Trinity in the world. In other words, Jesus Christ is the fundamental Sacrament of the Trinity’s mysterious and loving presence in the world. The Christological root of the sacraments, in Rahner’s view, functions as a connection between Church and the world, between Church and the sacraments, between the ecclesial and individual dimensions of the sacraments.

Second, the Church is the basic Sacrament of Christ, which, seen in Rahner’s perspective, is a prolongation in time of God’s initial salvific grace, sacramentally spoken to humanity in the person of Christ. This presupposes that before the historical constitution of the Church as the basic sacrament of Christ, grace as God’s self-imparting to the world has already been effective. It follows that the liturgy of the Church must reflect its intrinsically mutual relationship with “the liturgy of the world.” Rahner situates ecclesial liturgy into the liturgy of the world, which is the continuous drama of life, death, resurrection, love, faith, hope and the like, which a human person embraces under God’s secret providence and sustaining guidance. Accordingly, sacramental celebrations designate what the Church as the basic sacrament designates, that is, grace is effective and present to the world constantly. Said otherwise, the Church and its sacraments signify graces, which do not touch the unhallowed world from without, and indeed the concrete expressions of grace are already operative in the world.

Third, in Rahner’s framework, the individual sacraments must be seen within the perspective of the Church as the Sacrament of Christ as well as within the historical scope of our individual lives. The sacraments are then seen as mediators, constituting an intrinsic bond between the Church and the individuals receiving them. This bond is expressed as follows: a recipient, having awakened grace as the gift within, both offers

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contribution to and receives the spiritual benefit from the self-realization of the Church through sacramental celebrations. The sacraments when celebrated in and by the Church are efficacious since they signify what God has done – and continues to do – namely, to offer God’s own self to humanity in the forms of grace and life. When a person receives a sacrament she, together with the Church, makes explicit the already given grace, which has inherently worked within the spectrum of her own history of salvation. Thus, the sacramental celebration is the ultimate moment, tangibly signifying the grace unacknowledged in the secular, where it is nonetheless efficacious.

Fourth, since grace, for Rahner, operates at the root of human freedom, it is efficacious only when the person in freedom accepts it. Hence, as the embodiment of the irrevocable and absolute offer of God’s grace, the Church celebrates a sacrament in a way that it encounters a believing individual who either accepts the offer or rejects it. The sacraments are not magical rites. In the sacrament of reconciliation for example, though human sinfulness in its totality suggests that one cannot completely grasp God’s justifying grace in this history, sins cannot supplant grace. Though human sin has masked what would be the final victory of grace, sin does not destroy our capacity to confess that sinfulness and to make positive choices again. To affirm this is to proclaim that healing grace has been at work even before any sacramental celebration in and by the Church.

Finally, Rahner’s understanding of sacramentality, together with his theology of love, eases the tension between the Church and the individual. Considering sacramentality, as in his consideration of love, Rahner always begins with the individual; yet since sacramentality and love require an “other,” he then moves them towards their social, interpersonal and communal contexts. When everyone appreciates sacramentality thus established, and leads a life of loving service, this promises a whole new concept of the possibilities of community. In other words, Rahner’s ecclesiology is intersubjective by its nature.

This “intersubjectivity” is expressed through the coming together of every spiritual subject motivated by grace. There is no praxis of solidarity with one’s neighbour in the concreteness of space and time without one’s experience of being firstly elevated by grace for that solidarity in her social and religious concreteness. Only when this subjective level of experience of grace as God’s self-donation is affirmed can people
come to be as such in relation to one another, because they have in common a subjectivity and personhood that are graced and historically mediated. Thus, a strong sense of freedom – and the personal aspect of human life – is necessary in order to have realized the possibility of communities. The Church thus becomes a professed social-historical manifestation of the Christian good news, including those who can and should primarily awake and interpret the most interior aspect in us and the ultimate depth of our existence, then being gathered in loving intersubjectivity to the whole field of life. This existential, personal and unique element of Christian life must be given a priority. While not ignoring its communal and social dimensions, this element is by no means replaced by any kind of ecclesiastical collectivism.

Thus, the conditions of the possibility of human knowing and the conditions of the possibility of the Christian message being heard primarily rest on God’s constant self-giving in love to everyone and each one. They rest also on every Christian’s openness to the Transcendent via our loving, believing and hoping, which cannot be possibilities without the descent revelation of the loving God. In our daily acts of love, faith and hope, we are living a faithful witness, as indicated in the introduction of this thesis, to the majestic power of God’s loving grace, which, surpassing all kinds of differences, gathers and enfolds the whole humanity in one gesture, and at the same time, speaks to each one, in accordance with our most intimate dispositions, and from within the individual situation in life peculiarly to our own.

The abiding question addressed to us every day is this: Do we perceive in our human life – characterized by our capacity of questioning, desiring, and reflecting on the limits of human finite circumstances the emergence of the Transcendent – the incipient self-communication of the eternal mystery in whose light we may understand our lives as graced and loved? The answer to this crucial question lies in our daily mystagogical moment, a moment which attempts to evoke, awaken, and deepen every person’s core experience of being referred to the loving, holy Mystery.
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Abbreviations

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