New Blackfriars

DOI:10.1111/j.1741-2005.2010.01373.x

Transcendence and Postmodernity: A Rahnerian Response

Jessica Murdoch

I. Introduction

The central question of Christianity centers on the nature of the supernatural and the means and manner in which we have access to it. God has revealed himself most fully to humankind through the person of Jesus Christ. Thus, the nature of divine revelation and the meaning of the Incarnation are fundamental topics of the discipline of Christian theology. Yet, these fundamental doctrines must be placed in dialogue with contemporary thought in order to make a claim for credibility. Herein lays a difficulty, which it is hoped this paper will at least partially address. Many contemporary philosophical systems and approaches, including several which we might loosely group together under the unwieldy banner of "postmodernism," have challenged the possibility of a complete perspective, or an Archimedean foothold. In so doing they have challenged epistemological certainty and metaphysical grounding simultaneously. A tension arises between this contemporary deflationary and deconstructive hermeneutic, and a traditional Christian interpretation of revelation in Christ. It would seem that under a contemporary intellectual understanding of human knowledge, the Christian incarnational worldview and its concomitant conception of revelation must be understood as a certain type of constructed or historical conception. In other words, the postmodern critique of metaphysics and of rationality have called into question the classical conception of transcendence.

Within this context, Roman Catholic theologian Francis Schüssler Fiorenza offers a particularly serious critique of the so-called "transcendental" approaches to theology:

> Transcendental argument primarily tends to be circular and to overlook historical and hermeneutical dimension of human experience. They overlook the extent to which human experience and its theological interpretation is situated within the cultural tradition of Christianity and Western civilization. Both the experience and its interpretation have been predetermined by Christian belief.[1]

[1] Francis Schussler Fiorenza, *Foundational Theology: Jesus and the Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), p. 281.

© 2011 The Author. New Blackfriars © 2011 The Dominican Council. Published by Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2011, 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK, and 350 Main Street, Malden MA 02148, USA
https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2010.01373.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

Fiorenza's general critique of transcendental theology includes specifically the critique of the method and thought of Karl Rahner. In this paper I will argue that, despite the criticisms otherwise, Rahner offers a fruitful response to the postmodern challenge to transcendence, particularly as articulated by Jacques Derrida.

II. Postmodernity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida

Jean Francois Lyotard famously ends his *Postmodern Condition* with the battlecry: "Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unpresentable; let us activate the difference and save the honor of the name!"[2] Lytotard defines postmodernity in terms of a critique of totality, a critique of the present and a concomitant emphasis on perspectivalism and anti-systemic thinking. And yet, despite Lyotard's conception, postmodernity is difficult to characterize. There are two key reason why. First, inasmuch as we are still living in a postmodern context (though this is very much contended) it is quite difficult to delimit what falls under the aegis of the "postmodern." Hegel astutely observed that one cannot define what is current precisely because its limits have not yet been set.[3] Thus, in whatever way we define the postmodern, this definition must still be considered provisional since it is not yet delimited in terms of its end. The second difficulty with defining the postmodern is that postmodernity does not constitute a specific "school" of thinking. Though many postmodern thinkers share a similar intellectual heritage, those who consider themselves to be postmodern are really quite at variance from each other in terms of their particular intellectual projects. Furthermore, there is no agreement whether postmodernity is "post" modernity in terms of a completion, a negation, or a development of the project of modernity.[4] Nevertheless, one can point to the polemics of the so-called "death of God," the "death of the subject," and the "death of the author," as elements commonly included in postmodern thought.

With respect to the threefold "death" of the postmodern situation: the human person finds herself in a world in which she cannot adequately operate with any true agency, either as an individual or with others. This signals the deconstruction of both subjectivity and

[2] Jean Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington, Brian Massumi, and Regis Durand (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1984), p. 82.

[3] Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. T.M. Knox (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 3, 10–13.

[4] Cf. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, pp. 71–82; Jurgen Habermas, "Modernity: An Unfinished Project," *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity*, ed. M.P. D'Entreves and Seyla Benhabib (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996); Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978).

© 2011 The Author
New Blackfriars © 2011 The Dominican Council

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2010.01373.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

intersubjectivity. In the place of her formerly unified subjectivity lies fragmentation, ceaseless alterity, and ambiguity. It is precisely this experience of fragmentation that demands theological reflection. In other words, the battle against totality, as Lyotard phrases it, raises the question of the possibility of transcendence, divine and human. Before offering a theological reflection on these themes, I will first trace the dissolution of transcendence beginning with Nietzsche, who in many ways inaugurates a postmodern sensibility, to Heidegger's notion of the pres-absentiality of being, to Derrida's critique of presence.

Though Nietzsche's thought cannot be easily summarized or synthesized, two particular emphases dominate his thinking, both of which have been appropriated by 20th and 21st century thought; namely, the critique of metaphysics and the critique of rationality. These two critiques are inextricably linked though non-reducible. Perhaps the most illuminating discussion of Nietzsche's twofold critique occurs in *Beyond Good and Evil*. In this text Nietzsche presents a critique of the Western tradition framed in terms of criticisms leveled against the Platonic-Christian presuppositions of truth and value. Within this context he develops his metaphysical and rational critique:

> There are still harmless self-observers who believe 'immediate certainties' exist . . . but I shall reiterate a hundred times that immediate certainty,' like 'absolute knowledge' and 'thing in itself' contains a *contradictio in adjecto*: we really ought to get free from the seduction of words! Let the people believe that knowledge is total knowledge, but the philosopher must say to himself: when I analyze the event expressed in the sentence 'I think,' I acquire a series of rash assertions which are difficult, perhaps impossible, to prove . . . that I know what thinking is . . . In place of that 'immediate certainty' in which the people may believe in the present case, the philosopher acquires in this way a series of metaphysical questions, true questions of conscience for the intellect, namely: 'Whence do I take the concept of thinking? Why do I believe in cause and effect? What gives me the right to speak of an "I," and even of an "I" as cause, and finally of an "I" as cause of thought?'"[5]

We see here an interlocking relationship between metaphysics and rationality, a relationship that Nietzsche exploits in order to develop a new ethic:

> He who unmasks morality has therewith unmasked the valuelessness of all values which are or have been believed in . . . the concept 'God' invented as the antithetical concept to life . . . the concept 'the beyond,' the 'real world' invented so as to deprive of value the only world which exists . . . the concept 'soul,' 'spirit,' and finally even 'immortal soul' invented so as to despise the body . . . [the concept] 'holy' – so

[5] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), pp. 45–46.

© 2011 The Author
New Blackfriars © 2011 The Dominican Council

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2010.01373.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

> as to bring to all the things in life which deserve serious attention, the questions of nutriment, residence, cleanliness, weather, a horrifying frivolity!"[6]

For Nietzsche metaphysics is equatable with truth, and following the logic of Platonic-Aristotelian transcendentals, truth is equated with not only being, but goodness. But what has been deemed truth in the Western tradition, is for Nietzsche merely the expression of faith in "antithetical values."[7] Why, Nietzsche asks, can we not simply invert the paradigm, favoring the "truthfulness" of appearance, deception, and appetite, rather than being, truth and goodness? In this he underscores his basic confession that subjective evaluation is the ground even of logic.[8]

Nietzsche equates "dogmatism" with what he asserts to be the perspective-denying position of Christianity, as the religious form of Platonism.[9] Christian metaphysics is related to the pursuit of truth as a rational endeavor and it results in a *specific* ethic. Thus, the denial of the "will to truth" (in which Nietzsche summarizes the Christian endeavor) is a denial of both the "Who" that calls human beings to truth (God) and the "What" in human subjectivity that responds to truth.[10] Thus, we see that the death of God hearkens the death of rationality. The death of rationality for Nietzsche includes the critique of Cartesian,[11] scientific,[12] and religious certainty.[13]

Nietzsche substitutes the will to truth and the metaphysical conception of the universe that underlies it, with the will to power. This will to power takes on the status of a material principle or causal law in a world without metaphysics: "the world seen from within, the world described and defined according to its 'intelligible character' – it would be 'will to power' and nothing else."[14] Nietzsche's "turn-to-power" offers a radical reinterpretation of human subjectivity and epistemology. Since the goal of the human person is the assertion of one's selfhood, or the "venting of one's strength,"[15] Nietzsche's philosophy results in an extreme subjectivism: truly, "man is the

[6] Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), p. 104.

[7] Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 34.

[8] Ibid., p. 35.

[9] Ibid., p. 32.

[10] "*Who* really is it that here questions us? *What* really is it in is that wants 'the truth?'" Ibid., p. 33.

[11] Ibid., pp. 44–45.

[12] Ibid., pp. 64–65.

[13] Ibid., pp. 35,45,50. This is undertaken specifically in terms of a critique of the concept of the *causa sui*. Nietzsche alternately calls this concept a "fiction," "absurd," and "logical rape."

[14] Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 67.

[15] Ibid., p. 44.

© 2011 The Author
New Blackfriars © 2011 The Dominican Council

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2010.01373.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

measure of all things." But the human person is the measure not only in her being, but also in her knowledge. What is known is what is subjectively determined; what is valued is what is subjectively desired. For this reason, one can distinguish in Nietzsche's thought a relationship between perspectivalism and a relativistic ethic.

Nietzsche's critique of metaphysics and rationality is appropriated in Heidegger's post-metaphysical ontology. Heidegger maintains that being is essentially presencing. Yet even though being makes present, it is not intrinsically temporal.[16] Being and time bear a reciprocal influence on each other, without being reducible. Though being is presencing, being, rightfully *is not*. That is, one may say there is being, but being *is not*. Heidegger contends that absence constitutes presencing and, therefore, absence is unconcealed in the thinking of being. This absence (of being) is what is "encountered" in the unconcealment of presencing, in that what is concealed is also what is absent. Hence, being is involved as the gift of giving that also withdraws, and therefore, remains concealed: "A giving which gives only its gift, but in the giving holds itself back and withdraws, such a giving we call sending."[17] What is given as gift is being, and the being of this gift is given in the mode of sending. Heidegger calls this mode of sending "destinal momentum," or *Geschick*. The *Geshick* of being is both a making-present and a withdrawal, that the gift may come into view.[18]

"Presence" can be described as the "constant abiding that approaches man" and gives Dasein its being.[19] This abiding presence delimits what is not present, what is *approaching* Dasein from the future, and hence, what is absent. "Approaching" refers to what is future, but what will be given as present to one who is no longer present – in effect, three-dimensional time. This dynamic between past, present, and future constitutes a fourth dimension of time. It is this dynamic that Heidegger terms "giving." Since "giving" makes present, it is the fourth dimension of time which holds being in a *Nahheit* – a nearing nearness (which still conceals).[20] This "giving" is what Heidegger terms the "pres-absentiality" of being.

Derrida follows Heidegger and absolutizes him in his own "critique of presence," or alternately, his critique of "logocentrism."[21] He levels this critique chiefly at Saussure, whose linguistic system he deems to be emblematic of all Western discourse. According to

[16] Martin Heidegger, *On Time and Being*, trans. Joan Staumbaugh (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p. 8.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid., pp. 8–11.
[19] Ibid., p. 12.
[20] Ibid., p. 15.
[21] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, corrected ed., trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 43.

© 2011 The Author
New Blackfriars © 2011 The Dominican Council

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2010.01373.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

Saussure, meaning is understood as the expression, or signified, of an original factor, or signifier.[22] Derrida maintains that Saussure's conceptualization of meaning as a combination of signified and signifier established a hierarchy that places priority on "logo-phonic-ism."[23] Logophonicism moves (conceptually) concentrically from the "inside" of presence to the "outside" of operations.[24]

Essentially, Derrida believes that Saussure's philosophical system rests on a faulty presupposition: namely, the principle of arbitrariness.[25] Since for Sassure meaning is constituted by the idea (as signified) and the phonic (as signifier), both the phonic and the graphic signs are essentially arbitrary. Derrida rails against this because Saussure presumes the integrity of the signified and all of its concomitant unities, including self-identity. For Sassure, the signifiers are indeed arbitrary, that is exterior – all signs are artificial, the phonic and the graphic signs are constructed by the community, but they represent a concept which is in some sense universal and universally shared.[26]

Derrida's reflection on the inconsistencies of Sassure led to his development of the concept of "dedoublement."[27] Derrida maintains that in language the signifier does not simply express the signified, it also "doubles back" and alters the signified, such that the signifier is not just a mirror of the signified, but vice versa. What import does this bear? Namely, that the classical relationship between concept and reality is too simple, because each acts as signifier and signified at some point. In other words, Derrida insists that sense and the phonic and the phonetic are in a hermeneutical relationship.[28] At first glance, this seems to be a rather benign assertion, except that Derrida plays with the alternate meanings of "dedoubler" to yield notions of "splitting" and "gutting." Hence, the doubling back of the signifier splits the signified into signifier and signified. This "guts" the "inside" of sense, destroying the notion of a signified or "inside" altogether.The result: everything is signifier. There is no signified, but only fragmentation and dissolution.

Recalling that Derrida operates out of a post-Frege tradition wherein meaning is precisely how things appear in language,[29] Derrida's linguistic construal means something both for notions of

[22] Ibid., p. 11.
[23] Ibid., p. 18ff.
[24] Ibid., pp. 33–34.
[25] Ibid., p. 44ff.
[26] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Roy Harris (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1986), pp. 67–69.
[27] Cf. Robert Magliola, *Derrida on the Mend* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1984), p. 9.
[28] Ibid., p. 11.
[29] Ibid., p. 6.

© 2011 The Author
New Blackfriars © 2011 The Dominican Council

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2010.01373.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

subjectivity and epistemology, as well as for larger realities such "world." Thus, if we terms the signifier "self-expression" and the signified a "primordial unity of the self," then according to the principle of "dedoublement" self-expression shapes self-identity, and then doubles back and splits it. Thus the "I," reflexive conceptuality, one's own interior unity, and one's knowledge of this interior unity, becomes fragmented. The primary unity is trapped in perpetual non-inside/non-outside-ness, thus destroying any conception of the self-presence of the subject.

Saussure claims that the meaning of words is known based on how they are different from surrounding words.[30] Thus, words exist as a negative and not a positive reference. Derrida absolutizes this claim by insisting upon an absolute negative reference. Differences, Derrida argues, are not a something, they are *nothing*.[31] Furthermore, as Saussure relates, there is *only* difference; hence, when one relates this to subjectivity, there is no self-identity, but only self-difference.

In Derrida's estimation, therefore, difference is *not*, and we know it by what *is not*.[32] But it is not *just* not – it is not theological, not ontotheological, not ontological, and definitely not the hovering "not" of teleological difference (or Derrida terms it, "differ*a*nce"). Rather, absolute difference surpasses there semi-conceptual "nots" and falls into the truly nonconceptual. Hence. for Derrida, there is no hidden nucleus of identity, no transcendental nucleus of reality or Supreme identity.[33] Derrida firmly rejects the Supreme Nothing of negative theology on the grounds that a "nothing" must be reflected against a "non-nothing," that is, a presence. Absolute negative reference, however, is not the absence of the Presence. Rather, absolute negative reference "effaces" the "inside" of presence.[34]

III. Theological Questions

Derrida's thought in particular raises some questions from a theological standpoint. First, with respect to his conception of *dedoublement*, why does fragmentation *necessarily* result in a total lack of presence. In other words, why is fragmentation antithetical to presence? Why is fragmentation not simply antithetical to *total* presence, since in fact, anything that fragments is still to some degree present? In other words, even if unified meaning escapes us, as Derrida suggests, we nevertheless receive glimpses, traces, or fragmentary experiences of

[30] Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, p. 114.
[31] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 63.
[32] Magliola, *Derrida on the Mend*, p. 22.
[33] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 61. Cf. Magliola, *Derrida on the Mend*, p. 30.
[34] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 70.

© 2011 The Author
New Blackfriars © 2011 The Dominican Council

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2010.01373.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

presence in the everyday, which allow us to be present as persons and to make decisions at all.

Second, what happens to the category of experience? We have, however transitory and fleeting, experiences of identity, that are always fragmentary but nevertheless real. We may theorize about absolute negation, but what happens when our experience reveals something else? What do we do with the varied, though persistent, experiences of the Holy? What becomes of our experiences of love? In other words, what do we do with human experience that falls outside of the domain of nothing?

Lastly, with respect to *differance*, I am curious about Derrida's strict separation of this concept and conceptions of nothingness in negative theology. He maintains that negative theology makes statements about what the transcendental is not. The problem for Derrida is that the transcendental identity, though formally negated, still remains conceptually present. What if one speaks not of transcendental identity, but rather, of transcendental incomprehensibility?

Without in any way establishing a proof of transcendence, I would like to demonstrate the real possibility of transcendence in the midst of fragmentation. I argue that Karl Rahner's understanding of transcendence, though modernist in tone, points to an understanding of transcendence that both corresponds to and acts as a corrective for the postmodern denial of transcendence.

IV. Fragmentation and Transcendence: A Rahnerian response

Rahner defines transcendental experience as "the subjective, unthematic consciousness of the knowing subject, given with every spiritual act of knowing, which is necessary and essential, and its focus on the limitless expanse of all possible reality."[35] He further remarks: "Transcendental experience is the experience of transcendence, in which experience the structure of the subject and thereby also the ultimate structure of all intelligible objects of knowledge are given together in identity."[36] One could hardly find a statement that is more problematic vis a vis postmodern claims. In order to understand the inner meaning of Rahner's conception of transcendence as elaborated in these statements, one must turn to his conception of the human person.

For Rahner the human person can be described as a dynamic spirit with an open posture of self-questioning. As spirit, the human person cannot escape the question of being as such, or its own being.

[35] Karl Rahner, *Grundkurs des Glaubens: Einführung in den Begriff des Christentums* (Freiburg: Herder, 1984), p. 31.

[36] Ibid., p. 31–32.

© 2011 The Author
New Blackfriars © 2011 The Dominican Council

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2010.01373.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

It is this posture of questioning that belies that human beings are characterized by a radical receptivity for God. As *capax Dei* human beings bear an obediential potency for God as Absolute Mystery. This obediential potency describes the human capacity for receiving and responding to revelation, while in no way demanding a response as an internal necessity.[37] Christological reflection yields knowledge that not only is revelation possible, but it is actual and historical. And within human transcendentality it takes the form of a "supernatural existential."[38] God's grace given in the mode of offer constitutes human transcendence.

But who is the God who grounds human being and all reality through active self-gift in history (Christ) and in human transcendentality (the Holy Spirit as uncreated grace)? For Rahner God is Incomprehensible Mystery, or alternately, Absolute Mystery. Rahner notes that the conception of God's incomprehensibility is found throughout tradition, from the inscrutable actions of Yahweh in the Old Testament, to God's impenetrability in the Pauline literature, from the early ecumenical councils, through the medieval reflection up to the Second Vatican Council.[39] And yet, Rahner's understanding of incomprehensibility differs from that of the neothomistic dogmatic tradition. He notes that the neothomists wrongly included incomprehensibility as one attribute among the other attributes of God. Hence, incomprehensibility held no particular significance for our understanding of God and remained more of an extrinsic concept. Rahner, however, corrects this extrinsicism: incomprehensibility is not one attribute, but the attribute of God *par excellence*, from which all the other attributes of God prescind.[40]

The concept of incomprehensibility points to both human finitude and divine infinitude. In other words, it is a function of a particular understanding of epistemology and metaphysics. With respect to human finitude, human beings are unable to comprehend God precisely because God transcends human rationality. With respect to metaphysics, God as infinite being, is necessarily inscrutable. In other words, the incomprehensibility of God is not ultimately a function of human finitude; but rather, it is a characteristic of God as such. For this reason Rahner notes that God remains incomprehensible mystery "here, always and for all eternity" and this is not resolved even in the Beatific Vision.[41] When human beings come face to face with God,

[37] Karl Rahner, *Hörer des Wortes: Zur Grundlegung einer Religionsphilosophie* (Munich: Kösel-Pustet, 1941), p. 9.

[38] Rahner, *Grundkurs des Glaubens*, p. 130.

[39] Karl Rahner, "The Human Question of Meaning in Face of the Absolute Mystery of God," *Theological Investigations*, vol. 18, trans. Edward Quinn (New York: Crossroad, 1983), p. 90–91.

[40] Ibid., p. 92.

[41] Ibid., p. 92–93.

© 2011 The Author
New Blackfriars © 2011 The Dominican Council

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2010.01373.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

they confront God's unknowability. This is not penetrable by human rationality even in death. Whereas the older tradition presumed that in the Beatific Vision God's incomprehensibility would be rendered "not what is seen, but what is not seen, from which we avert our gaze,"[42] for Rahner incomprehensible mystery remains what is *never seen*. God's incomprehensibility, so conceived, holds for God both *in se* and *ad extra*. For this reason, Rahner notes that the conception of the *Logos* does not solve the "problem" of God's incomprehensibility: "If we speak of Word it is always as the Un-Word, the incomprehensible Word of the incomprehensible God that never permits us to 'pull all things together' into a unity of understanding but whom nevertheless we believe understands and unites."[43] In other words, Rahner does not confuse the human incapability of complete knowledge with the divine attribute of totality.

Given his construal of incomprehensibility, Rahner raises two questions: first, how can human knowledge raise the question of God's incomprehensibility at all? Second, how can human beings accept the divine incomprehensibility without despair or irrationalism?[44] With respect to the first question, Rahner eschews a functionalist conception of reason; hence, for Rahner like Lonergan knowing is not merely "taking a look." Reason must be understood more fundamentally as precisely the capacity of the incomprehensible, as the capacity of being grasped by– but not by grasping – what is always insurmountable, that is, circumscribable knowledge or certitude. Thus, knowing is not seizing, not possessing, neither apprehending nor knowing fully. It is neither comprehending, nor mastering, nor subjugating. Knowing is *excessus*. Reason goes out from the inaccessible (oneself) to the inaccessible (ontic realities) and gathers an intimation, always brief, always incomplete, of the other and of oneself. Such an intimation highlights the unfathomableness, ineffability, and incomprehensibility of (the horizon of) reality itself. This basic human experience of knowing ontic reality provides a basis for understanding the incomprehensibility of God.

With respect to Rahner's second question: how shall we accept this situation marked by human finitude and divine incomprehensibility with a clear head and a light heart? How ought we accept the limits of human experience with neither bitterness or bad faith? Rahner notes that we can accept this basic human situation only through "the act of self-surrendering love, trusting entirely in this very incomprehensibility, in which *knowledge surpasses itself*, rising to its supernature, and is aware of itself only by becoming love [emphasis

[42] Ibid., p. 93.
[43] Ibid., p. 95.
[44] Ibid., p. 96.

© 2011 The Author
New Blackfriars © 2011 The Dominican Council

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2010.01373.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

mine]."[45] Only in loving acceptance of God's incomprehensibility, of one's own constitutive incomprehensibility grounded in the supernatural existential, and of the incomprehensible matrix of all intelligible reality does one fall into an abyss, not of meaninglessness, but of love and freedom. One gains fleeting glimpses of love and freedom in one's daily experiences of being and knowing. Indeed, knowledge, even if provisional, can only achieve itself by being raised up in love.[46] Only thus do we becomes not merely the "shepherd of being" as Heidegger claims, but rather, "the one protected by the mystery."[47]

It was noted above that Heidegger speaks of a "pres-absence" of being as the inner identity and quiddity of being. At times almost personifying presabsentiality, Heidegger argues that pres-absence approaches being and gifts it with its being, drawing close in a nearing nearness, and springing forth through event (*Ereignis*). Rahner's metaphysical anthropology and his understanding of human transcendence seem to echo these aspects of Heidegger's thought. Indeed, God, as Absolute Mystery, draws near to us so intimately that God constitutes our very being. He draws near as a supernatural existential, as self-gift, as the offer of love and freedom. And yet, this self-gift preserves the being of the giver: the giver is never wholly exhausted in the gift. Hence, God is experienced as withdrawal also, as distance too. Human beings, as finite transcendence, can never fully appropriate absolute transcendence. Instead, human being is appropriated by absolute transcendence. Though God's transcendence and human transcendence are linked, they are not reducible to each other. Thus, at the core of human being, in every categorical act (whether thematized or not) lies the experience of the pres-absence of Absolute Mystery.

One may speak, then, of God's presence, indeed of God's presence that is so intimately near to us that it constitutes us as a nearing nearness. Yet, Absolute Mystery always approaches human beings as a presence of incomprehensibility. It is never the presence of unity, certitude, or even being, but rather, the presence of Mystery. This presence of incomprehensibility is not circumscribable, but neither is it mere absence. It is unlimited and eternal inscrutability. Such a conception of presence is not reducible to the modernist conception of presence at all.

It would seem that Derrida's critique of presence, which on the surface seems to threaten theology at its very core, is, perhaps, not so very detrimental. Derrida inaugurates (or at the very least absolutizes) the fragmentation of the self, of certain knowledge, and of reality

[45] Ibid., p. 100.

[46] Cf. Rahner, *Hörer des Wortes*, p. 125.

[47] Karl Rahner, "The Hiddenness of God," *Theological Investigations*, vol. 16, trans David Morland (New York: Seabury, 1979), p. 236.

© 2011 The Author
New Blackfriars © 2011 The Dominican Council

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2010.01373.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

itself. His critique of presence, therefore, seems upon reflection not to be antithetical to a Rahnerian reading of transcendence, since transcendence, as the unified center of human subjectivity is a participation in the Transcendent, who, in turn, is "known" as Incomprehensible Mystery. Derrida's critique of presence, and its concomitant emphasis on fragmentation, strikes fear in the heart of modernists, given our recent history of totalizing claims of unity. But, what if the fragmentary is our best, though provisional, attempt to comprehend what the tradition has understood as transcendence? Fragmentation speaks on the one hand of what cannot be gathered, what does not cohere, what cannot be apprehended. The fragmentary surrounds us and constitutes us, but it cannot be grasped. It connotes what is begun, but what is always unfinished; fragmentation is the liminal moment between the ever complete and the always continuing. It disintegrates, divided, and breaks all conceptuality that in hubris attains to absolute knowledge, and in fact doubles back and illumines that this experience of fragmentation is precisely human transcendence.

The God, of whom we acquire fleeting glimpses in our experiences of unity and fragmentation, and who we mirror in the depth of our own being, is precisely this One, who cannot be "gathered in," who cannot be drawn together into a cohesive whole, who is not at His core circumscribable, in short, Incomprehensible Mystery. God, as Incomprehensible Mystery, is the inscrutable One, simultaneously disclosed and concealed, revealed and yet unfathomable. Perhaps fragmentation is transcendence – the holding together of what is unable to be held together and yet what is, nevertheless, a real and vital unity. But to comport this requires a leap of faith, and not a leap of bad faith. Rather, it requires faith in the real possibility that transcendence may arise from unknowability.

Returning to Rahner's definition of transcendence: Rahner defines transcendental experience as "the subjective, unthematic consciousness of the knowing subject, given with and in every spiritual act of knowing, which is necessary and essential, and its focus on the limitless expanse of all possible reality." The Rahnerian subject is the transcendental subject, who at her core bears God's gift of grace in the mode of offer, which as such is incomprehensible. This definition subverts the modernist conception of subjective identity. The transcendentality of the subject is brought to bear in every categorical act, and grounded in God's pres-absential and infinite transcendence. Fundamentally, Rahner's conception of transcendence does not require the closed system of modernist conceptions of identity, nor does it rely on a foundationalist conception of knowledge.[48]

[48] For a more elaborate treatment of nonfoundationalism in Rahner, cf. Jessica Murdoch, "Overcoming the Foundationallist/Nonfoundationalist Divide: Karl Rahner's Transcendental Hermeneutics," *Philosophy and Theology* (forthcoming).

© 2011 The Author
New Blackfriars © 2011 The Dominican Council

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2010.01373.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

V. Conclusion

As was noted above, the primary theological problem with postmodern thought is that it tends towards reduction. The most serious reduction is that of perspectivalism. The collapse of rational certainty and an emphasis on alterity has rightly underscored the element of perspective in human knowing. The theological problem is that this confuses a *lack* of perspective with an *abundance* of perspective.[49] The claim that human knowing is completely delimited by its historicity has resulted in the presumption of an abundance of perspectives that are irreducible, resulting in irreducible pluralism. In other words, we are trapped within the world and its history, and cannot achieve an Archimedean standpoint. I do not contend otherwise. Neither does Rahner. Nevertheless, this might also also be interpreted not merely as the reduction to pluralism, but as a lack of authentic perspective, the lack of an "outside" view; in short, the lack of absolute perspective. But it is precisely this outside perspective that is necessary for theology. The reduction of perspectivalism to history remains somewhat two dimensional. It fails to underscore God, as absolute perspective, which situates human perspective and grounds it. In other words, it denies metaphysics. Derrida's reduction of the "inside" to the "outside" from a theological point of view does not result because there is no point of reference outside of human reality, but precisely because human beings lack this perspective. This, of course, does not necessitate that there is no such perspective. Furthermore, the incarnational foundation of Christian theology requires it. The danger of a too strongly constructivist-perspectivalist position is precisely its inadequacy with respect to the possibility of a Christian incarnationalism – of the coalescence of the human and the divine in a way that neither destroys human historicity and agency, nor divine agency and priority. Rahner manages to articulate a conception of human transcendence that relates the fragility of human reason to the infinite transcendence of Absolute Mystery.

Jessica Murdoch
Email: Jessica.Murdoch@villanova.edu

[49] Ironically, Nietzsche points to this lack of perspective as well. Pondering Zarathustra's "Death of God" pronouncement, he muses: "Who gave us the sponge to wipe up the whole horizon?"

© 2011 The Author
New Blackfriars © 2011 The Dominican Council

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2010.01373.x Published online by Cambridge University Press