

Karl Rahner on the Possibility of Metaphysics of Knowledge

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Abstract: The main concern of this study is to look into Karl Rahner's conviction regarding the possibility of metaphysics. Rahner belongs to Transcendental Thomists movement which has affiliation to both Thomas Aquinas and Immanuel Kant in their line of thought. From Kant, Rahner adopts the transcendental method modifies it and uses it in his metaphysics of knowledge. From Aquinas, he adopts his metaphysics of knowledge, albeit in his own way. He blends both Aquinas and Kant's philosophical thoughts. Rahner's view concerning the possibility of metaphysics is as result of direct influence from the anthropocentric orientation of metaphysics seen in the transcendental turn by Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason*. Therefore, Kant's transcendental turn is of prime interest to Rahner and that is why this article begins by not only looking at Rahner's conception and usage of the term 'transcendental' but also incorporates Kantian understanding of the same term. This is closely followed by Rahner's own views on the possibility of metaphysics.

Keywords: transcendental, possibility of metaphysics.

1.0 Introduction

The aim of this article is to present Karl Rahner's position on the possibility of metaphysics. Rahner in response to Immanuel Kant, one of his influencers who limited human knowledge to *phenomena* in his *Critique of Pure Reason* holds the view that metaphysics is possible. He goes on to affirm the possibility of metaphysics through his conception of the term 'transcendental' in metaphysics and the human subject. Kant's transcendental turn is of prime interest to Rahner and that is why this article begins by not only looking at Rahner's conception and usage of the term 'transcendental' but also incorporates the Kantian understanding of the same term. This is closely followed by his view concerning the possibility of metaphysics.

1.1 The 'transcendental' in Karl Rahner

Rahner's adoption and usage of the term 'transcendental' is as a result of both scholastic and Kant's influence respectively. The scholastic refer to 'transcendental' as that which is above all categories (genus and species) and yet belongs to all kinds of beings-God, angels, men, animals, plants, *et cetera*- that every being can correctly be termed as ontologically good. While for Kant, the term 'transcendental' refers to the conditions (*a priori*) in the human that make knowledge possible.

Rahner therefore understands 'transcendental' as the *a priori* conditions in man which makes knowledge possible and unlimited horizon of man's knowing. Rahner's understanding of 'transcendental' is horizontal and vertical in nature because he believes that man possesses a horizontal opening in his knowledge and vertical opening also. This implies that man's knowledge cannot in any way be limited to sensation, but rather it begins with sensation and surpasses his space and time limited milieu. This is in contrast with Kant's vertical oriented notion of 'transcendental' due to his restriction of man's knowledge to *phenomena*. We hold the view that, Rahner's understanding of 'transcendental' in terms of horizontal and vertical reflects the possibility of metaphysics.

Rahner's conviction of man's transcendence seen in terms of his horizontal and vertical openness is further re-emphasized when he asserts that, man's transcendence belongs to him alone. Man's knowledge enables him to go 'beyond' the limitations of space and time, but, Rahner cautions us when he notes that man's transcendental experience which is a consequence of his knowing should not be seen as pure knowledge because of his limitation.¹

Lastly, Rahner uses the term 'transcendence' to refer to human transcendence, that is, ability to surpass (transcend) our finiteness and material world. This transcendency is seen in human performance of the question.

¹ Karl Rahner, *Foundations for Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*. Trans, William V. Dych. (New York: The Seabury Press, 1978), 20-21., *Foundations for Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* will be abbreviated as *FCF*.

By questioning, man, surpasses his finiteness and his material world towards the absolute.² This act of questioning begins in the world (horizontal perspective), and yet goes beyond its confines of time and space (vertical perspective). We believe that Rahnerian understanding of the term 'transcendental' points out his conviction about the possibility of ontological epistemology. And this is what we are now going to focus on.

1.2 Karl Rahner on the possibility of metaphysics

According to Rahner, the existence of metaphysics is something that cannot be called to doubt since metaphysics is an unavoidable phenomenon in human existence. To justify his conviction of metaphysics, Rahner uses method in metaphysics and the human subject to support his views concerning the possibility of metaphysics.

1.2.1 Method

Rahner in our own view is convinced about the existence of metaphysics. According to Rahner, the reality of metaphysics is something that cannot be called to doubt. For him, metaphysics is always done by each and every one of us. We are always engaged in metaphysics knowingly or unknowingly, whether we are aware of it or not.³ Thus, we cannot evade doing metaphysics.⁴ Contrary to other sciences which are a discovery of something which was previously unknown, metaphysics in its own right in Rahnerian context is a methodological reflexive knowledge.⁵ Our enquiry into being in general is what differentiates metaphysics from other sciences which enquire only about particular and limited aspect of being. Metaphysics contrary to other sciences enquires into totality of reality as a whole.⁶

Metaphysics is interested in grasping reality through ultimate causes, empirical sciences on the other hand, seeks a reasonable explanation of the *phenomena* using various scientific methods-observation, experiment and demonstration. It is the demonstrative nature of empirical sciences which make various particular sciences to be valid, but this is not the case with metaphysics, the queen of all sciences which possesses universal and certain knowledge which does not require any demonstration for it to be known.⁷

The demonstrability of the empirical science which makes them valid reveals the methodology used to arrive at this validity. Each empirical science depends on its material objects for its own method. For instance, medical sciences like medicine and nursing, depend on the human anatomy (material object) which influences the particular method it uses to study its material object (human anatomy). The results posited by empirical sciences are used in certain instances to justify their validity. Contrary to the empirical sciences which depend on their material objects for their respective methods. Metaphysics does not depend on any empirical raw data. This challenges metaphysics which considers itself to be the queen of all sciences to prove its possibility and justification as a science using its own method. As Baker indicates:

The method itself mediates the object and in some sense is prior to the object so that we do not have the same situation that prevails in the empirical sciences where the object can exert a corrective force on the method. Here, then, the object seems to presuppose the method and the method seems to presuppose the object. If metaphysics is to show its possibility, it must justify its own method.

This is not the case in any other science. No other science questions itself or questions its own possibility. This is always left to the domain of a higher science. But in the case of metaphysics there is no higher science to which this task can be left, since metaphysics seeks to knowledge of "being as being" and this leaves absolutely nothing out of consideration.⁸

Just like Immanuel Kant before him, the issue concerning the status of the possibility of metaphysics is of paramount concern to Rahner also. It then follows that in order for us to determine whether metaphysics is possible as a science, we have no option, but to establish what method it will use. This is because a science qualifies to be termed as one (science) if it has its own method, it is conscious of the nature of its own method and capable of defending it. If this rule binds all sciences, it is also binding especially to metaphysics, whose

²Karl Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 2nd Edition, translated by W. Dych (New York: Herder and Herder) 1968, 57, 60. *Spirit in the World* will be abbreviated as *Sp W*.

³Karl Rahner, *Hearers of the Word*, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 31. *Hearers of the Word* will be abbreviated as *Ho W*.

⁴Rahner, *Ho W*, 33-34.

⁵Rahner, *Ho W*, 33.

⁶Rahner, *Ho W*, 36-37.

⁷Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Posterior Analytics*, I, lesson 7.

⁸Kenneth Baker, *A Synopsis of the Transcendental Philosophy of Emerich Coreth and Karl Rahner* (Washington: Gonzaga University Press, Spokane, 1968), 4.

objects of investigation are beyond sense experience, thus, metaphysics cannot appeal to sense experience in order to justify its own procedure.⁹

If metaphysics does not rely on any empirical data or objects for its method, how then is it possible? The solution to this question, is within the same question, since, we cannot inquire if we do not have some awareness of the questioned in the questions we raise. We cannot question or raise questions if we do not have some faint knowledge on that which we seek to know. Thus, to ask the question, 'is metaphysics possible?' implies we have some knowledge of "is", "metaphysics", and "possible" and that is why we question, otherwise we would not question. The knowledge we have in this context is implicit (previous knowledge) that is not from experience which needs to be made explicit for it to be known. This process of bringing out of the implicit to explicit is nothing else but transcendental method.

Kant's endeavor to demonstrate the possibility of metaphysics resulted to his anthropocentric turn, bringing to us the transcendental method. It is this very method he employed and set out to prove the scientific nature of metaphysics, unfortunately at the end of this inquiry he ends concluding the impossibility of metaphysics. Rahner's concern for the possibility of metaphysics sees him use the same method to present his own convictions and demonstrate the possibility of ontology something that Kant initially failed to do. Kant's failure is because of his understanding of the 'transcendental' in horizontal term only. Whereas, for Rahner 'transcendental' is in horizontal and vertical terms.

It appears to us that in Rahner's understanding his adoption of the Transcendental Method in his metaphysics plays a very significant role in affirming the place of metaphysics among other sciences, besides this, it affirms that man through the transcendental analysis of the question can transcend his finiteness and material world towards the Absolute Being, God. We hold that, that man is metaphysically constituted as a spirit in matter is clear for Rahner it is the spirit element that reveals his transcendental ability. The human subject constitution reveals the possibility of ontology and affirms metaphysics.

1.2.2 The human subject

Rahner follows Immanuel Kant's transcendental deduction as he presents his views concerning the possibility of metaphysics. Kant arrived at *a priori* categories through transcendental deduction. Deduction starts with the question concerning the human subject *a priori* conditions that points to the possibility of the science of being. The role of the human subject in knowing is of primary concern than his objects of knowledge. The *a priori* structures are what are termed as 'transcendental.' And this is why Kant's metaphysical system is known as 'transcendental idealism.'

For Rahner, transcendental deduction begins our inquiry into the *a priori* conditions that are necessary for the affirmation of the possibility of metaphysics. The answer to this inquiry lies in the transcendental (*a priori/given*) structure of the subject, for instance, in his performance of the question. Rahner describes the process of the transcendental deduction in the following terms:

[T]he structure of the subject itself is an "a priori," that is, it forms an antecedent law governing what and how something can become manifest to the knowing subject.... This in no way implies that the realities which present themselves cannot manifest themselves as they really are. A keyhole forms an "a priori" law governing what the key fits in.¹⁰

Rahner's reference to man as a finite spirit who lives in the world points to the spiritual aspect of man that enables him to go beyond his world towards the metaphysical reality, while he is still immersed in the world. The spiritual nature of man reveals to us that he has an *a priori* that is devoid of any experiential knowledge. On the other hand, as a dweller of the world, he also has the *posteriori* knowledge that tells him his knowledge starts from experience or rather it is acquired from experience. Man as a knower, comes to the awareness of the *a priori* through the *posteriori* (sense experience).¹¹ Briefly, the metaphysical knowledge that is within man is discovered through his senses.

Rahner like other Transcendental Thomists does not doubt the ontological possibility of philosophy of being (metaphysics). His main concern therefore, is to show how philosophy of being (metaphysics) is possible.¹² For the Transcendental Thomists, being (metaphysics) is *a priori-ly contained* in the intellect, man only discovers being through his senses. This is because man's knowledge of being is virtually inborn and he

⁹Emerich Coreth, *Metaphysics*, translated and edited by Joseph Donceel (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968),31.

¹⁰Rahner *FCF*, 19.

¹¹Karl-Heinz Weger, *Karl Rahner: An Introduction to his Theology*, (London: The Seabury Press, 1980) 13.

¹²Rahner, *Ho W*, 31-34.

comes to the discovery of this knowledge through experience.¹³ He becomes aware of metaphysics through the objects of our sensation. Unlike other sciences that man passes from faint knowledge of a given science to full knowledge of it, in metaphysics we pass from unthematic (implicit) knowledge to thematic (explicit) knowledge.¹⁴

Donceel in his defense of Transcendental Thomists in particular, Rahner asserts that “as a being is, so it acts,”¹⁵ this comment by Donceel appears to fit well with Rahner’s conviction that the man’s constitution of soul and body reveals that he is a metaphysical being. According to Rahner, man is a unit (hylomorphically constituted). Additionally, Rahner also describes man in the following terms “matter and spirit, body and soul, subject and matter...”¹⁶ The conception of man as a unit reveals the ontological relation of the *a priori* and the *posteriori*. In addition, this conception reveals man as a metaphysical being and this is reflected in all his activities including his knowing activity.

Aquinas too appears to be convinced that metaphysics is virtually inborn in man something that Rahner and other proponents of Transcendental Thomism uphold, since it is through the first principles of being we judge everything. Aquinas holds that man’s make-up (hylomorphic constitution) points to this fact. In line with Aquinas, Rahner asserts that man’s make-up (spirit and matter) points to the same fact. Man’s spiritual nature enables him to transcend his phenomenon.

This description of man as *Geist in Welt* reveals the metaphysical constitution of man. Man’s nature is both spiritual and material. Man is a finite being in matter, the immediate world of his experience is the material world. As a finite spirit in matter he lives in a material world that he shares with other beings.¹⁷ Besides this, the component of the spirit is what makes man superior to other beings because through the act of questioning, man can surpass (transcend) his finiteness and the world and arrive at the Absolute Being.¹⁸ Rahner further elaborates:

We call this the basic the basic makeup of the human person, affirmed in every act of knowledge and of freedom our spiritual nature (*Geistigkeit*). To be human is to be spirit (*Der Mensch ist Geist*), i.e., to live life while reaching ceaselessly for the absolute, in openness toward God. And this openness toward God is not something that may happen or not happen to us once in awhile, as we please. It is the condition of possibility of what we are and have to be and always also are in our most humdrum daily life. Only that makes human: that we are always ready on the way to God, whether or not we know it expressly, whether or not we will it. We are forever the infinite openness of the finite God.¹⁹

This implies that man is a rational animal besides this, he is a spiritual animal who goes out to know more. He goes beyond what his sense provides for him to the knowledge of the immaterial beings. Man is different from other beings, because he can stop and reflect on who he is and can transcend himself. Other beings *are* as Heidegger observed, but it is only man who exists. He is the only being who asks the question about the sense of life. This act of questioning reveals that man is a metaphysical being, who begins his metaphysical quest with the transcendental analysis of the question (transcendental method).

In the previous section, it was noted that man’s transcendental activity is seen in the performance of the question, and through the act of questioning; he surpasses his finiteness and his material world, and this reveals the metaphysical constitution of man. Hence, man as a finite existent in his material world through his body engages himself in the events of the world. He is not on the other hand, wholly tied down by space and time, and so he seeks to transcend his material world through his spiritual nature.²⁰ For Rahner, spirit and body are not two separate entities, because the body is the medium of the spirit and the spirit has to perform itself in the body. Therefore, there is a dialectic between immanence and transcendence, the former is already surpassed by human acts whereas, the latter is necessarily tied to the activity of the immanence.²¹

¹³Joseph Donceel, Transcendental Method, *The Monist*, Vol. 58. No. 1, Thomas Aquinas 1274-1974 (January, 1979), 77. Published by Hegler Institute.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable27902344> Accessed October 31st 2018.

¹⁴Rahner, *Ho W*, 31-32. See also Donceel, *Transcendental Thomism*, 77.

¹⁵Joseph Donceel, Editor’s Preface in Emerich Coreth’s *Metaphysics*, 8.

¹⁶Weger, *Karl Rahner*, 12

¹⁷Coreth, *Metaphysics*, 60.

¹⁸Coreth, *Metaphysics*, 154.

¹⁹Rahner, *Sp W*, 53.

²⁰Baker, *A Synopsis of the Transcendental Philosophy*, 53.

²¹Baker, *A Synopsis of the Transcendental Philosophy*, 56.

Rahner is very sensitive to the centrality of man. Man as Rahner maintains, occupies the supreme place in the hierarchy of particular existents: the performance of the question therefore, is an act that reveals man as a *homo metaphysicus* (metaphysical being) and at the same time grants him access to the fundamental understanding of being.²² Rahner's description of man as a finite spirit who lives in the world, implies that ontological discourse is not exclusively but principally a discourse about man. Metaphysics finds in man its highest realization and its most meaningful interpretation. Man is a carrier of being in its relative totality as Aquinas says: "Man is, in a certain sense, the totality of being."²³ All being centres itself and interiorizes itself in man, without ceasing to be exterior to him. Man, therefore is a carrier of being and it is only through him that this being can be rediscovered in its relative totality.

1.3 Conclusion

Karl Rahner's conception and usage of the term 'transcendental' is a hybrid of both scholastic conception and Kantian conception of the term. Unlike Kant, who conceives the term transcendental in vertical terms only and thus, limits the possibility of metaphysics. Rahner, conceives and uses the term in both vertical and horizontal ways because of his conviction that man's knowledge can transcend his spatio-temporal situation. By this Rahner is affirming the possibility of metaphysics.

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²² Karl Rahner, *Hearers of the Word*. Trans. Michael Richard. (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 67-68. Rahner's *Hearers of the Word* will now be abbreviated as *Ho W*.

²³ Aquinas, *De Anima*, English translation by Foster and Humphries (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1954), III, lecture 13, n. 790

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