

# Human Beings are Transcendent: A Response to Fergus Kerr's *Rahner Retrospective III*

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I get my copies of *New Blackfriars* in a rather unusual manner, once a year and all at once, a whole year's worth at a time. So it was only in May 1982 that I came across Fergus Kerr's article *Rahner Retrospective III: Transcendence or Finitude* in the September 1981 issue. It gives such a seriously misleading view of Karl Rahner's understanding of human nature and offers such an inadequate substitute as the proper philosophical foundation for Christian theology that it requires to be countered without delay.

As the title of his article suggests, what Kerr objects to in Rahner's view of human nature is his notion that we are transcendent beings. What he wants to put in its place is a certain understanding of our finitude.

Kerr describes his paper as "a preliminary exploration of the basic epistemological problems in Rahner's philosophy of man, with the tentative proposal that a quite different starting-point needs to be accepted" (p 370). He then sets out his argument in four stages:

1 He points out that Rahner's view of man as a transcendent being entails (for Rahner) the notion of a "pre-apprehension of the inconceivable and incomprehensible single fullness of reality which . . . is at once the condition of possibility both for knowledge and for the individual thing objectively known". (Rahner, 1978: 69)

2 Because Rahner takes the fact that we are able to gain true knowledge of the world as the clearest sign of our transcendence, and therefore of our special relation to "the inconceivable and incomprehensible single fullness of reality", Kerr offers a sketch of Rahner's theory of knowledge to show how it entails our transcendence of finiteness. In passing he offers critical remarks on Rahner's apparent rejection of realism and the correspondence theory of truth. He concludes, however, with a brief statement of his own view that a certain understanding of finiteness offers a truer and more theologically relevant picture of human nature.

3 Kerr contrasts Heidegger's approach to human nature with that of Rahner. In doing so, he lays a sort of foundation for his

own view. Heidegger takes feeling, our capacity to have moods and to experience affections, as that human characteristic that best manifests our nature. In this his starting point is clearly different from that of Rahner. And though, like Rahner, he uses the term 'transcendence', Heidegger also asserts that the term of our transcendence is not something beyond the world but the world itself.

4 Finally Kerr outlines his own view by means of suggestive references to a number of other thinkers, including Wittgenstein, Stanley Cavell and Schillebeeckx.

I now propose to offer critical comment on Kerr's interpretation of Rahner and on the alternative he offers. I shall then give my own outline of Rahner's view and say why I think it to be both true and an adequate philosophical foundation for Christian theology.

First of all one must clear up an ambiguity in Kerr's summary formula for Rahner's picture of man "as the being who transcends his finitude just by recognising it" (p 370). Whatever "transcends his finitude" does mean it cannot mean "ceases to be finitude" or "realises his infinitude". Yet Kerr seems really to understand it in that way. Instead it must mean something like "realises itself in relation to something infinite, or under the influence of something infinite". Rahner certainly wishes to bring out our peculiar capacity for what is infinite; he never suggests that we cease to be finite. This expression of Kerr's is moreover actually inaccurate. Rahner does not think that we transcend our finiteness only if we recognise it. He thinks that we do so in all our cognitive and volitional activity, whether we recognise it or not. The pre-apprehension of something infinite is not knowledge but the precondition of knowledge; it is an awareness that is implicit in our consciousness of any thing at all. Whereas *recognising* that we are finite is a very specialised and sophisticated sort of knowledge indeed.

In the second section Kerr attempts a summary of Rahner's theory of knowledge, and claims that it is difficult to see what Rahner is getting at when he says that in our knowing of things in the world we are at the same time aware of ourselves as knowing subjects and of the act of knowledge as well. What Rahner is getting at is the essential self-reference of all our distinctively personal (or spiritual) activity. When we come to know something we are aware of ourselves as knowers; when we act we are aware of ourselves as agents. This cognitive and volitional self-reference is crucial to Rahner's understanding of human nature because it is precisely this that makes us transcendent beings. This self-reference in thought and action – self-consciousness and self-determination – is what makes us free of the causality of other finite things and so able to transcend the whole realm of the finite. It is the

chief purpose of Rahner's theory of knowledge to show that such self-referring activity is only possible on the assumption of the causal influence of something infinite. And he usually chooses knowledge to demonstrate this because there this influence is clearest. He never, however, holds that only knowledge reveals this relation. In fact he also uses the experience of choice and of love to make the same point.

Kerr criticises Rahner in this section for "setting aside" "so-called Realism", "the picture theory of knowledge", and "the correspondence theory of truth". Surely Kerr cannot seriously believe that the thinker who spent the whole of *Spirit in the World* vindicating Aquinas' theory of knowledge would set aside any realism worthy of the name. As for "the picture theory of knowledge", Rahner, like Lonergan, is concerned to refute the empiricist theory of knowledge that has been so influential in English-speaking philosophy. This is the theory (as Lonergan puts it) that knowing is like taking a look or "seeing". He, and Rahner, are at pains to demonstrate the polymorphic nature of knowing. As Lonergan has it, knowing consists of three elements, experience, understanding and judgment, none of which is reducible to the others. This complex has moreover an essentially *active* character, something which empiricism with its assimilation of knowledge to the passivity of sensation entirely overlooks. Finally, with regard to the correspondence theory of truth: it is certainly not the case that Rahner wants to deny that our intellects are capable of grasping things as they *really* are. As the context makes quite clear he wishes to deny the theory that depicts knowledge as possessing an image or likeness or reflection of something in the mind which the knower can then compare with the actual thing and thus pronounce on the degree of "correspondence" between them. For Rahner wants to stress that knowing something is, in a sense he is very careful to define, becoming it, so that the being of the knower is augmented by this cognitive identification with the thing known. To put it more graphically, in knowledge you are not "outside" what you know as a reflection or a copy is outside what it is a copy or reflection of, but you are "inside" it, in the sense that what it is becomes part of you.

All these criticisms of Kerr's stem in fact from his failure to grasp Rahner's central intention in his discussion of knowledge, which is to demonstrate the necessary self-presence of the knowing subject to himself in every act of knowledge. Seen in relation to this over-riding aim it is not difficult to understand his critical remarks concerning other approaches.

In the section on Heidegger, Kerr commends Heidegger's approach to understanding human nature on the two counts I have

mentioned. Both seem to me inadequate, though for different reasons.

Kerr quotes Heidegger (1927; 138) to the effect that “mood is a basic kind of being that humans have in which they are disclosed to themselves *before* all knowing and willing and *beyond* their range of discovery”. This may be true but if so it is surely because human beings *do have* wills and intellects and it is precisely the possessing of these faculties that make their moods at all a mode of self-disclosure. There is no reason to doubt that animals have moods – indeed I find it quite plausible to suppose animal consciousness to be almost wholly and continually “moody”, much more so than most human beings – but their moods are not similarly a source of *self*-disclosure for them. The possession of intellect and will as faculties fundamental to our nature must not be supposed to entail continuous activity of reasoning and choice going on in the midst of all the other less conscious processes of our psyches. Far better surely to see these spiritual faculties as making their presence felt in greater or lesser degrees, having their roots deep in unconscious contents of our minds and finding expression in intimate association with all sorts of imaginative and emotional concomitants in our conscious lives.

As a Christian philosopher, Rahner is concerned to emphasize those aspects of a philosophically adequate anthropology that fit man to receive God’s self-communication. And clearly the fact that man can know and will is more significant in this respect than the fact that he has moods.

As far as the second of Heidegger’s insights about man that Kerr commends is concerned, I am a bit mystified. If it is to the finite world about us (in what sense is this world an “absolute”?) that we are said to transcend, then what does such transcendence tell us about human beings? Unless our relation to our worldly environment is in some way *peculiar*, and not simply the same as that of all other sorts of beings, then it tells us nothing about being human at all. Rahner certainly holds that we have a peculiar relation to our worldly environment, but precisely because we stand in a transcendent relation to something beyond it. And as for the suggestion that we learn to live within the confines of this world – “and then, by surplus or a kind of grace, God’s presence may be granted” (p 377), this seems totally unsatisfactory as a possible basis for a Christian anthropology. The gap between God the creator and God the redeemer is too great, if even the question about and the quest for God is removed as a necessary element of our life in the world.

We come now to Kerr’s fourth section where he outlines his own alternatives to Rahner’s view of human nature. As I have said,

he does this by means of brief reference to a number of other thinkers. Thus he commends Nietzsche's refusal to allow "that we can transcend our situation in the world", and Wittgenstein and his followers for "putting our souls back into our bodies" and stressing our "need to learn to live within the necessities of our social and physical world". He stresses again that our finitude must not be seen as a lack (as he thinks Rahner does), but that "we must learn to live within the limits of our historicity" (378).

All of these points have been previously made in the course of his article and are simply brought together here in a summary way. Kerr does however present a fuller picture of what he approves of by referring to a short section entitled "What is humanity?" in Schillebeeckx's recent book *Christ: The Christian Experience in the Modern World* (1980: 731-743). In this section Schillebeeckx presents six "anthropological constants" as the fundamental critical framework for understanding human history and establishing the direction in which human liberation must move. Kerr commends this system as a first attempt to construct a theologically meaningful picture of man that does justice to his finiteness, his "historicity", the limitations inherent in his concrete being in the world. This being so it is necessary to take a brief look at this section of Schillebeeckx's book to see what light it throws on the view of man that Kerr wishes to put in the place of that offered by Rahner.

Kerr lists the six "anthropological constants" in his own article; they are (in Schillebeeckx's own words); relationship to human corporality, nature and the ecological environment; being a man involves fellow men; the connection with social and institutional structures; the conditioning of people and culture by time and space; mutual relationship of theory and practice; the religious and 'para-religious' consciousness of man.

There is some doubt concerning the status we are to attribute to this system of anthropological constants. Kerr takes them to be a description of human nature and I think he is right. He also takes them to present a picture of man that is radically opposed to that offered by Rahner. In this I think he is wrong. Rahner is not concerned to present (even in outline) a complete anthropology but only that element of human nature that enables us to be the recipient of God's self-communication. None of Schillebeeckx's constants do this *except the last*, namely what he calls the religious and 'para-religious' consciousness of man. This is "the 'utopian' element in human consciousness" which inclines and enables us to produce "totalitarian" or all-inclusive "*cognitive models of reality*" (Schillebeeckx's stress), which interpret the whole of nature and history in theory and practice and now or later allow

it to be experienced as a 'meaningful whole' (yet to be realised)". The important characteristic of such a utopian orientation of our nature from the point of view of this paper is the fact that it is a projection that intrinsically transcends any scientifically justifiable or practically implementable conception of a future fulfilment of humanity. As such, even when it is explicitly irreligious as in Marxism, it is, as Schillebeeckx makes clear, always a *form of faith* ('his stress'). Hence the title of this section: The Religious and 'para-religious' consciousness of man. Religion in this sense of a fundamental tendency of human nature 'is an anthropological constant without which human salvation, redemption and true liberation are impossible'. To those who know Schillebeeckx's work this understanding of the utopian element in man as essentially religious is not surprising. He has after all even titled one of his books *God, the future of man*. The idea of God as the "absolute future" towards which man is oriented is a fundamental one in his theology. But the fact that he considers this orientation towards an absolutely transcendent future that is God's to be an anthropological constant, ultimately makes his whole view of man as transcendent as that of Rahner. There is that in man which ceaselessly points and pushes beyond history and the world.

So Schillebeeckx's system of anthropological constants does not in fact provide an alternative to Rahner's transcendent view of human nature. As a whole defines the significant different areas of human life that God's self-communication will transform. In addition the sixth is the necessary condition for a self-communication of God to man *having any significance at all*. I think that Kerr has been misled by Schillebeeckx's rather woolly and imprecise treatment of this topic into a mistaken estimate of his anthropological system.

It turns out then that it is impossible for me to present a clear account of what Kerr wishes to offer in place of Rahner's view of man on the strength of this article. In fact, there are signs of an unexamined assumption which seems to be fundamental to Kerr's way of thinking but which, if properly understood, might even provide a bridge between him and Rahner. I refer to the two places in this article where he brings into his argument the human capacity for speech. The first place (p 371) is in commenting on Rahner's account of what it is that enables us to transcend our particular situation in the world: "Some philosophers might be inclined to say that, if you are going to talk in this sort of way at all, then this must surely be *language*. Rahner, however, thinks that it is *God*." And in the second (p 378) he enjoins on us the task of "curing ourselves of the inveterate idea that we can get outside our world in some more substantial sense than that we talk about our

world . . .”

In both these cases Kerr is opposing one notion of transcendence (that of being able to speak about the world) to another (that of being oriented to something infinite). The first is his, the second Rahner's. However, the apparent equivalence implied by this opposition is mistaken. Our ability to speak and its distinctive product, language, is, in the question of our relation to the world, the *explanandum* and not, as Kerr seems to think, the *explanans*. There is a question to be asked about what it is in human beings that enables them to speak about the world and to form linguistic community in the way they do. Kerr doesn't ask this question, but Rahner's whole philosophical anthropology is an answer to it. Language is a human product and as such revelatory of our nature. Rahner's analysis of the necessary conditions for judgment of fact, or of human cognition generally, can be applied to the whole field of linguistic behaviour without any need of radical change. It is precisely our orientation to something infinite, and the conscious self-possession that goes with it, that makes *human* language – a conceptual structure characterised by abstractness and generality – possible. Thus language is one of the *signs* of the peculiarity of human nature. As such it is part of the question about what we are, not part of the answer. If Kerr were to analyse the necessary conditions for human language he might come up with a philosophical anthropology not unlike Rahner's. But he does not seem to see the need or even the possibility of doing this. Therefore, on the strength of this article one is forced to say that Kerr doesn't really give one an indication of what an alternative to Rahner's view of man could be. His remarks are, however, sufficiently suggestive to indicate his dissatisfaction with the general tenor of a view such as Rahner's. And this raises two interesting questions that I will presently consider in conclusion.

I have set out, at some length, why I feel Kerr's view of Rahner's philosophical anthropology is mistaken. I will now set out my own summary statement of Rahner's view as I understand it.

What Rahner means by saying that we are transcendent is that neither we nor our behaviour can be fully explained nor brought into being by the operation of any system of finite causes whatsoever. We are subject of course to the laws of non-human nature but they are not sufficient in themselves to explain either our existence or all our behaviour. So we transcend them. Hence, because of this, we can be said to be free or *self-determining*. We have at least the capacity for free or self-determining behaviour.

Rahner proves that we have this capacity by analysing those aspects of our behaviour that most clearly manifest it. For example, he considers the making of a true assertion about the world and



asks what sort of beings human beings must be if they are indeed capable of doing this. In other words, he enquires after the necessary conditions for making a true judgment about the world. His conclusion is that we could only come to know anything about some finite thing in the world if we were from the outset aware of something infinite. In order to have *knowledge* about the world it is necessary to be able to know things as they *really* are and not simply as they *appear* to oneself. In *knowing* something about the world one thus does *transcend* one's own subjective perception of it and grasps something objective. In order to be able to tell which of one's ideas about the world correspond to reality one must have some, however implicit, standard of reality to measure them against. Rahner calls this a 'pre-apprehension of being'. It is not an insight into this or that kind of being, but into being as such, of what it is to be at all. And this, since it is not limited to this or that kind of being, is infinite in scope. Indeed it is only because we are conscious of something that is infinite that we are able to grasp the way in which each kind of finite thing is limited in being, i.e. able to grasp its way of being, or nature.

Thus, starting from something we take for granted, our ability to make true judgments about the world, Rahner shows that in order for them to occur, something must take place that could not be caused by any finite thing, a pre-apprehension of being in its infinite scope. Because the object of this pre-apprehension is infinite awareness of it cannot be brought about by any finite cause. Thus, as the subjects of such a pre-apprehension we are self-determining, free to the extent of the effects of other finite causes. If Rahner is right, the necessary condition for this pre-apprehension is the causal operation of something infinite *within* our free making of a true judgment. But this does not make the act any less free from *finite* causes. And so it is transcendent in Rahner's sense.

Rahner holds that our transcendence of the causal influence of finite things is also manifested in the making of a deliberate choice. Here, since both the will and the intellect are involved, we are self-determining in a more complete and comprehensive way. Our choices express us more fully than our assertions. But the necessary condition for the making of a deliberate choice is the same as that for a judgment of fact, namely the causal influence of something that is *not* finite in any way. Here it is even more clearly the case that if human beings have the capacity to act in certain circumstances in a way that is independent of all causal influence of finite things, then both their having the capacity at all and its exercise must be due to something infinite. No believer in human freedom would claim that we provide ourselves with such a capacity. Hence we must have received it from something infinite. But it is



no less true that since we are finite things, we are unable even to exercise the capacity apart from the causal influence of a genuinely infinite being.

So, for purely philosophical reasons, Rahner holds that a proper understanding of human cognition and volition will reveal as a constitutive element of these aspects of our behaviour the operation of a strictly infinite being. We are transcendent not because we are not finite but because we have the (natural) capacity to receive the influence of an infinite being directly and from within the dynamism of our own acts rather than as mediated by finite beings other than ourselves. One can call the capacity a capacity for infinite being if one wishes but that is ambiguous. It cannot mean that we are able "to become infinite" if that means anything at all! It can only refer to the relation in which we stand to a being that is genuinely infinite.

Now if what Rahner says is true and there really does exist something infinite of which we are aware (however unreflexively or unthematically) in every judgment and choice then I, as a Christian, am bound to identify it as the Trinity, the God whom I worship. Such a God is certainly infinite and there cannot be *two* infinite things. Of course to say that one is aware of something infinite is not the same as saying that one is aware that something is infinite, still less that what one is aware of is God. To come to awareness of these things one would have to tread the long winding philosophical road that Rahner follows in *Spirit in the World* and then the equally tortuous though slightly shorter road in *Hearers of the Word*. Nevertheless, in showing that our transcendence implies a capacity for infinite being Rahner has established an essential condition for our being able to be the recipients of the divine life that Christian faith holds us to be. To be anything less than what Rahner's philosophy says we are would not be enough. To be able to prove that we are what Rahner says we are is all to the good. Even if we have to admit that Rahner's proof is not conclusive, or even that none could be, would not be a disaster.

To sum up then, what Rahner means by saying that we are transcendent beings is that we have the capacity for self-determination and so transcend the causal influence of any system of finite things. And human beings only have this capacity and are able to exercise it because of the way in which human nature is open to and normally susceptible of the influence of something genuinely infinite. It is only because we have this sort of nature that we are capable of that sort of communion with God that Jesus proclaimed as possible. Having such a nature is at least a necessary condition for that sort of life.

There is unfortunately no room in this article to present an

exhaustive argument to show that my view of Rahner is the correct one. I am quite prepared to do that if there is sufficient interest in the issue. My real interest in the view that I have presented in summary is that it seems to me to be *true*. If it is an accurate summary of Rahner's so much the better. However, to satisfy those who would like the authentic voice of Rahner appearing on my side of the argument here is an (even more) summary statement by Rahner of his own position. It is taken from the book where he presents his fullest proof of his view of man, *Spirit in the World*:

“Human knowledge as pre-apprehending is ordered to what is absolutely infinite, and for that reason man is spirit. He always has this infinite only in the pre-apprehension, and for that reason he is finite spirit. Man is a spirit because he finds himself situated before being in its totality which is infinite. He is finite because he has this infinite only in the absolutely unlimited breadth of his pre-apprehension.” (Rahner, 1957, 186)

This quotation seems to rule out the exaggerations of Kerr's interpretation.

There remains, however, the question of truth. Is Rahner's understanding of human nature true? It seems to me that it, or something like it, is practically incontrovertible. Positive proof of his position, which Rahner provides in *Spirit in the World*, is necessarily long and complex. There is, however, a short and simple negative rebuttal of anyone who would affirm the opposite of what Rahner wants to claim about human nature. It is of the same kind as Aristotle uses against the sceptic in the *Metaphysics*. There he makes the point that a complete scepticism about the possibility of truth is self-refuting. For if the sceptic claims, “there is no such thing as truth”, he is (at least implicitly) claiming his own statement to be true.

Essentially the same move can be made in support of Rahner's claim that man transcends the causal influence of any system of finite causes whatsoever, on account of possessing the capacity to make true judgments about the world. For if a judgment about the world or any thing in it was caused by some external cause or other, or by anything other than man's own rational grasp of the evidence, one would have no reason whatever to suppose it to be true. Determinists such as Freudians and Marxists make use of this fact to discredit religious belief. Religion is dismissed because it is the product of either wish-fulfilment or bourgeois social conditioning. Of course Freudians and Marxists make an exception to their deterministic outlook in respect of their own views. But someone who wishes to deny human transcendence of the sort Rahner

wishes to assert must hold that *all* our beliefs are the product of causes of a natural or social sort. And if that is so what possible reason can he have for supposing his belief, rather than Rahner's, is true? Because Rahner's belief in the freedom of our minds contradicts the (presumed truth) of determinism? But why should contradiction matter to a determinist? Contradiction has nothing to do with causality. The causes of one belief are as good as another, simply as causes.

In fact, for us to judge certain beliefs to be true we have to be sure that they follow from or are at least consistent with other true beliefs and ultimately with self-evident principles of thought. Thus the capacity to make true judgments is a capacity for self-determination, the logical expression of which is the principle of non-contradiction. If we are indeed able to make true judgments about the world, (and as I have shown, this is impossible to deny) then determinism is false. Thus the view that holds that man is free of complete determination by external causes and hence transcendent is true.

In addition to the question as to whether a particular view of human nature is true or not, there is also the question as to whether or not it is compatible with Christian faith. Of course, from a Christian point of view, a true view of man will of necessity be compatible with Christian belief. And any view that is incompatible will of necessity be false. Now it seems to me that any view that wishes to deny man's transcendence is incompatible with Christian faith, and hence the view that Kerr wishes to assert (whatever it precisely is) will be as well.

Some might hold that the question of compatibility is misconceived. Whatever human nature happens to be, they may say, what is important is that God is capable of uniting it to himself in the closest possible intimacy. One can believe that he will do this without knowing anything about it whatsoever.

One can of course hold the Christian faith without having any explicit anthropology. But if one believes that God is capable of uniting us to himself, or communicating himself to us, one must of necessity have some notion of what sort of union or communion is envisaged, and one must have some notion of what one is referring to by "God". And unless one's conception of what the Christian hope consists in is entirely fanciful or mythological it will contain an implicit view of human nature. At least we are *capax Dei*, and this excludes certain possibilities. Rahner's philosophical anthropology is an account of the necessary conditions for our nature to be *capax Dei*. Now it seems to me that unless we have a natural orientation beyond the world of finite things to something infinite there is no possibility of our sharing in the divine life. God could

only make us sharers in his life by creating us anew *and different*. We speak of grace as a *new creation*, but this must be seen as a new (non-natural) transformation of our (already existing) nature. And our nature determines what sort of transformation is possible.

A final possible objection is that to say that we have a natural orientation towards or capacity for something infinite is not to say anything positive at all about human nature, since no determinate idea attaches to a term like infinite. But this is misconceived. Although we have no notion of what it is to be infinite it makes perfectly good sense to deny limitation by what is finite. We should not deny it of a dog or a dogma. And, if Rahner's view of man is right, we human beings do actually experience this lack of limitation made possible by our orientation to something infinite. We experience it in every deliberate choice or reasoned judgment. If we were not capable of that we would not be capable of God either. Our freedom is our best image of God; it defines him as the one who alone is able to develop without.

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