

RAHNER ON ORIGINAL SIN: A RESPONSE TO THE SYMPOSIUM

KAREN KILBY
Durham University

When I need to give a brief overview of Karl Rahner's theology, I often find myself including a list of some of the topics on which he wrote. Not only did he publish on grace, ecclesiology, Christology, sacraments, and the doctrine of the Trinity, I might say, but also on leisure, childhood, poetry, death, televising the Mass, old age, indulgences, sleep, power, penance, the spiritual senses, and so on. A list can communicate something about the range of Rahner's work, and its occasional quality. Though I've used different lists on different occasions, original sin has never appeared on any of them. Original sin wasn't in fact a central topic for Rahner. This does not mean that he was a naïve optimist who didn't take sin seriously, but simply that the particular doctrine, as a subject of controversy or puzzlement, wasn't a particularly prominent focus of his attention. I therefore came to this symposium on Rahner on original sin with a fear that it would turn out to be a little thin. In fact, the opposite has proved to be true—this is a rich, fascinating, and valuable set of papers.

The essays of Carl Scerri and David Sendrez both have a philosophical focus, and converge in other ways, so I will take them, below, as a pair. I will begin, however, with few brief comments about Stephen Fields's paper.

Fields presents what is—in spite of the admirable clarity of his prose—quite a dense and complex essay. He covers, first, Rahner's understanding of original sin against the background of the concept of the supernatural existential; second, his (Fields's) own position on original sin, including the suggestion that Adam's fall brought about genetic and chromosomal change, together with a revisionary proposal about Adam's relation to sanctifying grace; and then, finally, an overall critical evaluation of the concept of supernatural existential.

It is beyond the scope of this response to take up everything in Fields's paper, so I will limit myself to one quite specific and one general comment. The specific point has to do with a distinction Fields makes between 'categorical supernatural existential' and 'transcendental supernatural existential'. These expressions come not directly from Rahner but from a proposal for reading Rahner which Fields adopts from Weger. In my view it is a proposal we should approach with caution. It is not only that 'supernatural existential' is already too much of a mouthful as it is, or that to push Rahner's thought towards becoming a more elaborate and self-contained system revolving around his own technical terms is to do it a disservice; it is also that, as far as I can see, 'categorical supernatural existential' is an oxymoron. As Rahner uses these terms, 'categorical' and 'existential' pull in exactly opposite directions. This is not to say that Fields's basic presentation of Rahner's view is inaccurate, but only that it tends to make the topic a little more complex and confusing than it need be.

Fields is ultimately critical of the concept of the supernatural existential and unpersuaded by Rahner's understanding of nature in relationship to grace. Here one could say he is broadly following a path made influential by John Milbank, which sets Rahner and de Lubac

into opposing camps as regards nature and grace. Fields's paper concludes, then, by pointing to de Lubac as the corrective to Rahner. This oppositional patterning of the two thinkers, in my view, does justice to neither of them. Rahner first introduced the concept of the supernatural existential in 1950 in an article focused precisely on the controversy that de Lubac's *Surnaturel* had generated.¹ The concept of the supernatural existential is offered essentially as a supportive corrective to de Lubac's position, showing a path along which, with a slight adjustment, de Lubac's fundamental vision can be retained but also defended against his critics. And so it is not surprising that we find de Lubac himself, in his 1965 *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, not only referring to the respect and friendship between himself and Rahner, but also insisting that there is no difference between their positions. This is not the place to go into nature/grace debates in detail, but readers should be aware that there is an alternative possibility to the oppositional reading of Rahner and de Lubac—and concomitant dismissal of Rahner—that Milbank has made so popular, and which Fields's concluding pages tend to reinforce.²

We move into slightly different territory with the other two papers. Both Scerri and Sendrez turn their attention to Rahner's relationship to his philosophical sources as a way to set the scene for his understanding of original sin. While at first sight they go about the task in quite different ways—Scerri makes the unusual move of introducing Husserl into the conversation, Sendrez suggests we should focus on key *images* in Rahner's writings—they overlap significantly. They share a central interest in what Rahner means by 'transcendental', and each makes the case that Rahner is not straight-jacketed by the philosophical tradition in which he stands, but (on theological grounds among others) expands it in significant ways. This is a fundamentally important point: too often there has been a blanket dismissal of Rahner based on a simple alignment of his thought with a philosophical figure or school. 'We know that Rahner is Kantian (or modern, or drawing on idealism)', the argument goes, 'and we know what is wrong with Kant (or modernity, or idealism), and so there is nothing more to say.'

The papers by Scerri and Sandez have something else in common: they both make significant programmatic proposals. Sendrez points towards the significance of attention to the imagination, and more concretely to the use of images, in philosophical and theological work. I am convinced this could, if taken up, lead to a valuable enrichment of Rahner scholarship. Scerri's excellent paper offers a fresh way to think about Rahner's philosophical sources, asking that we attend to a broad hinterland rather than limiting ourselves to specific strands of indebtedness. Scerri also proposes that theology can function as *ancilla philosophiae*. His suggestion is not to subordinate theology to philosophy; it is rather that we recognise that when a theologian goes about their task faithfully, they may sometimes be led to uncover new philosophical possibilities, or find new solutions to old philosophical problems.

Something which unites all *three* papers is a focus on *Foundations of Christian Faith*, the only work Rahner wrote which comes close to being a 'systematic theology'. It's a mistake, in my view, to take this text as the highlight or complete summation of Rahner's thought. He wrote

¹Rahner originally published the article in the journal *Orientierung*, and then republished it in the first volume of the *Theological Investigations* as 'Concerning the Relationship Between Nature and Grace'.

²For a very helpful reading of de Lubac which sharply differs from that of Milbank, and which I find persuasive, see Jordan Hillebert, *De Lubac and the Drama of Existence* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2021).

it quite late in life, when he was not necessarily at the height of his powers. It was based on a course he was teaching at the time, and much of it is stitched together from chunks of earlier writings. Because the vast majority of Rahner's writing is so occasional, addressing individual themes and problems, one can get a somewhat misleading impression of the nature and character of his work if one approaches it only through the *Foundations*.

Nevertheless, on a topic on which Rahner wrote very little, such as original sin, there is not much choice except to focus here, and in a case like this the *Foundations* does in fact come into its own, as these papers make clear.