

ANALYSIS OF RAHNER'S CONCEPTION OF MAN AS A QUESTIONER OF BEING

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Abstract – Man is presented by Karl Rahner in his metaphysics as the questioner of being. The objective of this study is to establish how Rahner arrives at the conception of man as questioner of being. Kant's transcendental method although is the best legitimate method for metaphysics needs to be brought to its ultimate conclusion. This was achieved by Rahner, through his conceiving man as questioner of being. The necessity of man's quest for being is conditioned with his unlimited desire and the nature of being in its totality given to man as something questionable. Whenever man questions wants to know and being knows itself as act. Hence, being and knowing have immediate unity. The world is a constitutive structure of man as questioner of being, such that all transcendental existence of man must be understood on the basis of his world. In the world man lives with other beings. Moreover, man in the act of questioning being as being, surpass his finiteness and his world as he strives towards the absolute being.

Keywords: Man, Questioner and Being

Introduction

This paper aims at analyzing of Rahner's conception of man as questioner of being. Everyone is involved in the question of being in one way or another. When we ask someone who is Socrates or what is biology we are asking about being. Such interrogations whether addressed to others or ourselves by ourselves, are particular questions about beings. But, when (as metaphysicians) we raise the question of being we do not pursue just one or more of these particular investigations. We ask question that is somehow essentially singular, a question that cannot be made into many. A question of being as being.¹ However, this metaphysical question in Kant's transcendental method became impossible question for man. Kant reasoned that man in his capacity can only know what appears to him (particular beings) but he cannot proceed to know that which does not appear, the thing in itself (that is, being as such). This paper intends to solve the impossibility of Kant. In analyzing Rahner's conception of man as questioner of being, we will recognized that man is not satisfied questioning particular beings. This desire necessarily transcends man to question the totality of being, which includes the absolute Being.

1.1 Karl Rahner on Man as a Being who must Question Being

Continuing Marechal's dialogue with modern philosophy, Karl Rahner also situated himself "at the starting point of metaphysics." But where Marechal and his followers at Louvain centered their attention on the object actualized in the judgment, Rahner grounds his doctrine of being in reflection upon, the being who must question being. Rahner argues that:

Man questions. This something final and irreducible. For in human existence the question is that fact which absolutely refuses to be replaced by another fact, to be reduced back to another fact and thus to be unmasked once again as being itself derivative and provisional. For every placing-in-question of the question is itself again asking a question, and thereby a new instance of the question itself. So the question is first of all the only "must," the only necessity, the only thing beyond question to which questioning man is bond, the only circle in which his questioning is caught, the only apriority to which it is subject. Man questions necessarily.

¹ M Makumba, *Introduction to Philosophy*, 43.

But this necessity can only be grounded in the fact that being is accessible to man at all only as something questionable, that he himself is insofar as he asks about being that he himself exists as a question about Being.²

Rahner finds in the questionableness of being a certain intellectual dynamism. But how can one explore this dynamism and how can this be done in the best way? He follows Thomas Aquinas in the inquiry about human knowledge and says that the facts that we perceive are not empty facts; they do not hang in the air. We not only accept the facts, but we also constantly evaluate, compare, and question them.³ The facts are standing in a wider context from the perspective of the knower. Owing to this wider context, we know that these facts are limited and we experience that we are limited as well. The finite being, man, at the same time has an *a priori* knowledge of being; at least he has knowledge about the fact that the being is not absolutely unknown. "Being is questionability."⁴ This is the starting point.

It is important therefore that the metaphysical question of being necessarily belong to man. Man can never rest his thinking or his act with this or that alongside his experience. He must seek to know what everything is in the very unity in which things always confront him. He poses questions about ultimate horizons, about the unified ground of all things and, to the extent that he knows all particular things as being, about the very being of all being, in this way he does metaphysics. Even when he tries to ignore, or explicitly deny such a mode of questioning, he nevertheless gives an answer to this question.⁵ For instance as positivists would say all metaphysical questions of being are arbitrary, dark or meaningless, they in fact still give an answer that being is arbitrary, dark or meaningless in each and every being. Rahner adds that:

For whatever a man lets his entire existence, his very life's blood, flow completely into such a being, he declares through this absolute positing of a determinate being, that this being is the focal point of all that he is and of all that is around him, everything else being either a means toward or an extension of this one thing (being). Consequently he asserts what he understands (intends to understand) by being, he therefore does metaphysics.⁶

How is the question about being itself possible? Rahner explains that, "in order to be the one who questions the whole of being, man begins with his goal, because he must know about the whole of being if he is to pose a question about it, and to recognize precisely in his questioning that he is not himself the goal, but only a finite human being."⁷ The question about being must already know about being in order to be a question.

Rahner maintains that Heidegger is essentially a metaphysician concerned with establishing a new, more fundamental ontology through a transcendental analysis of man as the one who necessarily poses the question about being. However, as far as Rahner can tell, Heidegger's analysis seems to lead to the conclusion that man transcends towards nothingness.⁸ In *Hearers of the Word* Rahner is also concerned with carrying out an existential analytic of man as the one who necessarily poses the question about being. Like Heidegger he appears to maintain that man is able to raise the question about being because man already has a comprehension of being as such.⁹ Like Heidegger he appears to maintain that the being of which man has a pre-comprehension is distinct from all other beings. But unlike Heidegger (as Rahner understands him), he maintains that the ultimate sense of man's quest for being is not nothingness but rather, God, grasped in the movement of all human affirmation, whether in act or deed, towards pure and absolute "having being."¹⁰

1.2 The Conditions for Man's Possibility of Questioning Being

² K. Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 57.

³ Cf. Duns, Ryan, "recovering Rahner's Concept of Being in Spirit in the World," 578.

⁴ K. Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 68.

⁵ Cf. J. Henle, *The Thomist Spectrum*, 168.

⁶ K. Rahner, *Hearers of the Word*, 44.

⁷ K. Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 62.

⁸ R. Masson, "Rahner and Heidegger: Being, Hearing and God," 472.

⁹ G. Mccool, *The philosophy of the Human Person in Karl Rahner's Theology*, 539.

¹⁰ K. Rahner, *Hearers of the Word*, 63-64.

According to Rahner man as a questioner, it belongs to the essence of man to ask questions, the inescapability of asking question is proved by the fact that “every placing-in-question of the question is in itself again asking a question, and there by a new instance of the question itself.”¹¹ That does not mean that the human being is not able to put aside particular question, to choose its source of information or to turn away from particular question. But By saying that man is a questioner, Rahner points at the one question that human beings never can turn away from: the question about being itself. This unavoidable question concerns the human being in its fundamental existence, and thus it is transcendental question.¹² The conditions therefore for man asking such question, should first be his unlimited desire to question for being, and second condition follows from the first, is that, the totality of being is presented to man something questionable. With these two presuppositions man according to Rahner cannot avoid questioning being.

1.2.1 Man’s Unlimited Desire to Question Being

Rahner in discussing this first begins his argument that, to ask a question is a normal everyday activity for a lot of people and is a constitutive aspect of being human. A question communicates we do not know something but we want to know it. There is in the question a searching for the truth as we suspect there is something further to be known, in other words, “asking a question reveals that we are in touch with a known unknown.”¹³ When we receive an answer then from our question, we do not stop there, as inquisitiveness impels us to ask even more questions. Each question is a stepping stone to further understanding and further questioning. It is this questioning that reveals we are dynamically searching for and open to the Truth or the Infinite.¹⁴ Yet, does this constant questioning ever stop? Do we reach a point of fulfilment or is there an unquenchable human desire always to know more? Existentialist philosophers would agree that human beings are always searching for and open to the ‘more’ or the infinite in their lives However, they would disagree as to whether people ever reach a fulfilment.¹⁵ John Paul Sartre for example, acknowledged we are open to the more or the infinite in our lives, but because life is absurd, we are destined never to be fulfilled.¹⁶

Rahner in his final analysis of man’s unlimited desire to question being comes to argue that, we are by our nature open to the ‘Infinite’ questioning of being, we are only going to be satisfied by this act of questioning to the Absolute Being, or, in the words of St. Augustine, “You have made us for yourself, O God and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee.”¹⁷ Thus, each question we ask leads inevitably to Absolute Being who is the fulfilment of our desire to question and know more. Indeed, for Rahner, it is not only questions that reveal we are open to and drawn to this absolute being. When we love and are loved we show dynamism of the human spirit in its search for love. A dynamism that reveals that we are only satisfied by infinite love.¹⁸

1.2.2 Being in its Totality Given to Man as Something Questionable

It has already been argued that, man questions, and that this questioning is irreducible because every question presupposes a placing in question. Rahner maintains in this second condition for man’s questioning being that, man necessarily questions because being in its totality is given to him only as something questionable.¹⁹ For instance in the quotidian round, one raises myriad questions about this object or that. But beneath every particular question is “the compelling need to ask about being in its totality.” Hence forth metaphysics begins not in a seminar, but the moment we reflect upon the very event of questioning, because metaphysics “does not concern this or that, but everything at once, being in its totality as something questionable.”²⁰

When man questions being which is given to him as something questionable it reveals two basic elements or presuppositions, it first reveal that, man can possibly question being because “is already with being in its totality

¹¹ K. Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 57.

¹² K. Baker, *A Synopsis of the Transcendental Method of Emerich Coreth and Karl Rahner*, 8.

¹³ K. Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 22.

¹⁴ K. Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 23

¹⁵ F. J. Lescoe, *Existentialism: With or Without God*, 213-214.

¹⁶ Cf. J. P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness, An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, 439.

¹⁷ Augustine, *Confessions*, 111.

¹⁸ K. Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, 26.

¹⁹ K. Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 59.

²⁰ K. Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 59.

(*beim Sein im ganzen*); otherwise how could he ask about it?" It also reveals that the questioner is also "*tabula rasa, material prima in ordine intellectus*" (a clean slate, prime matter in the order of intellect), for precisely what he does is ask what he means when he asks about being in its totality."²¹ Coreth captures this by noting that, "there is within us a mixture of knowing and not-knowing. In order to be able to ask the question we must know something, not everything, about the question"²²

Rahner analyze this paradox of man who is presented to being in its totality as something questionable, as man begins questioning he realizes that he has knowledge about being but as finite being it also reveal his ignorance of being. Concerning this Rahner argues that:

It cannot be said in one word where this question begins. It takes its departure from nothing, insofar as it already comprehends the whole in order to start out on its way; in order to be the one who asks about being in its totality, man is already at the goal when he begins, since he must already know of being in its totality if he asks about it; and at the same time he confesses by his question that he himself is not the goal, but a finite man.²³

Metaphysics for Rahner therefore, begins from a unity-in-duality, starting from the human questioner who is always already with being in its totality and yet as finite being must still inquire into being. Questioning betrays an existential "nothing" that is not "an empty void which man fills arbitrarily according to his own "whims" that is summons "to ask about being in its totality."²⁴ The whence (*woher*) of human questioning is not a meaningless abyss. Rather, it is "the unambiguous need for finite man to be able and to have to encounter being in its totality in his questioning."²⁵ This for Rahner does not only describe the condition for man to question being but also describes the starting point of metaphysics as the questioning man who is already with being in its totality:

This gives the starting point of metaphysics a peculiar duality and a unity at once: the starting point is questioning man, who as such is already with being in its totality. This starting point is a question and no answer reaches out beyond the horizon which the question has already set as a limit beforehand.²⁶

Therefore, finite man necessarily questions because being in its totality is given to him only as something questionable. For Rahner the ontological implication of the fact that man necessarily questions is the conclusion that man exists as the question about being in its totality. Thus, the question about being as posed by man is the point of departure for metaphysics.

Conclusion

The paper has grasped the problem of man as questioner of being. Which for Rahner is unitary phenomena that he applies to establish possibility of thomistic metaphysics under the conditions of transcendental method. We saw that man as a questioner of being, is being conditioned with unlimited desire to question the totality of being, but this being in its totality is not fully known to man but is presented to him as something questionable. This act of questioning therefore gets its fulfilment as man in his material world, surpasses his finiteness and his world as he strive towards the absolute being.

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²¹ Cf. K. Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 60-70.

²² E. Coreth, *Metaphysics*, 53.

²³ K. Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 61.

²⁴ K. Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 62.

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