

The Immaterial Grounds of Transcendentality: A Thomistic Response to Terry Klein's "Spirit in the World"

**Giuseppe Butera
Providence College**

In response to Terry Klein's reflection on Rahner's views on the soul as articulated in the latter's "Natural Science and Reasonable Faith," I argue that although Rahner offers a number of brilliant observations about the soul, he fails to appreciate their metaphysical implications. Although he is right to make much of the transcendental nature of the human person, Rahner stops short of asking the metaphysical question that this fact of human being begs to be asked: What are the necessary conditions for the possibility of human transcendental nature? The answer, I suggest, must be something like Thomas's doctrine of the immaterial subsistent soul.

Since I am a virtual beginner in all things Rahnerian, I will not attempt to call into question any part of Fr. Klein's interpretive reading of Rahner's "Natural Science and Reasonable Faith." To my mind, Mark Fischer provides a very lucid and helpful theological response to his paper and I really have nothing to add to it from that perspective. For the purposes of my response, therefore, I will treat Rahner's "Natural Science and Reasonable Faith" and Fr. Klein's interpretation of it as being of a piece.

What I have to say in response to Fr. Klein's paper may be divided into three parts. In the first, I say what to me seems right about Rahner's take on the soul. In the second, I voice two complaints, one against phenomenologists in general, the other against Rahner's failure to give natural philosophy and metaphysics their due. Finally, in the third part, I offer a Thomistic assessment of Rahner's speculations on human evolution.

Part I

There is much in Rahner's treatment of the soul which I think is profoundly right. In his rejection of every attempt to identify the soul with any sort of "ghost in the gaps," Rahner clears the way for a critical appropriation of a much richer and infinitely more plausible conception of the soul, one purified of every Cartesian prejudice. And in drawing attention to the transcendental orientation of the soul "towards that which lies beyond the world,"¹ Rahner begins to trace the outlines of that conception, one that is able to do justice to the many dimensions of the human person.

For all that, I must confess myself to be one of those hopeless cases who, even after reading Rahner, cannot seem to break free of the "bewitchment of looking for the hidden 'soul' lying beyond what we observe,"² to quote Fr. Klein. But if I cannot break free of that spell,

¹ Terry Klein, "Spirit in the World," 9. Klein's paper was presented at the Metaphysics Colloquium, Saint Anselm College, 11 June 2008 and reprinted in this electronic journal.

² Klein, 6.

Rahner is partly to blame. For when he draws attention to the transcendental orientation of the soul, as much as he might wish us to consider “Geist” to be nothing more than a short-handed way of referring to “that part of the world that is oriented towards that which lies beyond the world,”³ I cannot help but wonder about the necessary conditions for the possibility of this basic fact about us. What is it about the human person that causes him to be oriented towards that which lies beyond the world?

Part II

When I turn to Rahner for an answer, what I find is sophisticated phenomenological analysis and description, but little in the way of metaphysics, at least the sort of metaphysics that seeks the causes of things. In leveling this criticism, I am setting my sights not only Rahner but also on phenomenology as it has come to be widely practiced. To my mind, there is a general tendency in phenomenological circles to confuse the method of phenomenological analysis with a philosophy. Evidence of this confusion is seen especially in the refusal of practitioners of the method to go beyond what they observe. Just when things start to get interesting, the phenomenologist packs up his tools and calls it a day.

But if, as Aristotle says, to reason is to seek the causes of things, then our observations cannot mark the end of our efforts at understanding; rather, they must form the basis of all our thinking about the world. For this reason, I find the phenomenological observation of the transcendental orientation of the soul to be an irresistible invitation to seek an understanding of the realities that supply the sufficient reasons for all the things we observe about ourselves. If these realities lie hidden from view, it is not because of their limitations, but our own. Yet they need not remain hidden. As the pre-Socratics discovered long ago, some things hidden from sight may stand naked and singular before the penetrating gaze of the intellect.

Even if it is granted that the sufficient reason for the intelligibility of the soul’s transcendental orientation must of necessity be supplied by something hidden from direct experience or the phenomenological analysis of that experience, there remains the question of the means of arriving at an understanding of these conditions. How are we to get at them? When we observe that “nothing in the world can satisfy the human desire to know, to complete the self by engagement with what is not the self,”⁴ as a philosopher I cannot help wondering what it is about us that lies at the root of this longing for completion. A similar wonderment is evoked by the observation that “the human person has what Rahner calls a transcendental hope for resurrection, transcendental because it characterizes the life of every human being.”⁵ What is it about us humans that makes it possible for us to be characterized in these ways? Observation leads ineluctably to investigation. But the sort of investigation it calls for in this case is suited neither to the method of science nor that of theology. Rather, it necessarily calls for a method suited to

³ Klein, 9.

⁴ Klein, 9.

⁵ Klein, 11.

discovering the causes of things whatever they might be, material or immaterial, temporal or atemporal.

No doubt, Rahner is right never to come “at the question of the soul by presuming that we have this invisible, secondary self that accompanies and animates the one that we and others observe.”⁶ The investigation of the realities underlying those essential features of the human person calling for a philosophical explanation must begin with experience. But if philosophical investigation of the nature and causes of these essential features leads to a conclusion which, to use Rahner’s words, “is repugnant to modern scientific anthropology,”⁷ why should that stop us from affirming it? After all, there are other ways of conceiving the soul than those found in the substance dualisms of Plato and Descartes, ways that might even complement the findings of modern science.

It is to just such a conception of the soul that I wish to turn in the last part of my response.

Part III

One of the things I admire most about Rahner’s treatment of the soul is his attempt to provide an account of the soul and its origins that respects the causal agency and creative potency of nature while avoiding the lure of naturalism. For lack of a better term, I will refer to Rahner’s view as punctuated theistic emergentism. With the help of the late, great Norris Clarke, I will offer a brief overview of Rahner’s position followed by a Thomistic critique.

Perhaps the most vexing problem facing evolutionary theorists from a philosophical point of view is how to account for the transition from one level or sphere of material being to a qualitatively higher one. For example, how are we to account for the transition from non-living molecules to unicellular organisms and more complex living beings? Or how are we to explain the qualitative jump from plant life to sensate animal life? Finally, and most problematic of all, how are we to explain the quantum leap from sensate animal life to the transcendently oriented animal life of human beings?

In trying to answer these questions, Rahner seems to have attempted to steer a middle course between the two extremes of naturalism, on the one hand, according to which everything that happens in nature can be explained by nature, and a gross theistic interventionism, if you will, according to which every transition is the result of a direct and unmediated miraculous suspension of the laws of nature to accomplish what nature itself cannot do. Rejecting both extremes, Rahner suggests that God could, when needed, supply nature with the requisite new potencies through the infusion of the information needed for the qualitative jump from one level of material being to the next. To quote Clarke:

⁶ Klein, 4.

⁷ Klein, 2.

The creation of the material world by God is an ongoing process, not just a one-shot affair in the beginning that leaves the system to evolve by itself with all its needed active potentialities for the whole process already contained immanently within it. Rather, God is constantly working creatively with the ongoing unfolding of the world's own built-in active potentialities, stepping up his creative collaboration at certain key thresholds to inject new information-sets—not necessarily new physical energy—into the process to enable new qualitatively higher ontological centers with new properties to appear on the scene. Such creative intervention, or perhaps better, creative collaboration of God, acting on a totally spiritual level, would entirely escape all empirical observation, quantitative measurement, or scientific detection in any way. Only the material results would be accessible to science, yielding empirical laws of succession, but not all the causal factors at work. Nature would appear then as a self-sufficient whole on the observable, scientific level, while the metaphysical account in terms of ontological sufficient reason would be much deeper and richer. . . . Such a creative collaboration of God might be necessary even down within the process of the early physical evolution, to nudge the ongoing process at key turning points with a bit of extra information, although neither we nor science might be capable of detecting this on our own.⁸

God's creative activity did not end with the Big Bang, as theistic naturalism would have us believe. Instead, God's creative activity is on-going, a conclusion necessitated by the inherent limitations of material being. With the actualization of the potential built into inanimate matter to rise to the level of organic molecules, the potential to rise any higher was exhausted. Rather than allowing the evolution of the universe to stop there, Rahner envisions God giving matter a boost, not by suspending the laws of nature—lowering the bar, so to speak, to make it easier for nature to do what it was too weak to do by itself—but rather by supercharging nature, as it were, infusing organic molecules with a surprising new potential for life. And when plant life had in turn exhausted its potential, God acted again in a similar fashion to give nature a new potential to bring forth sensate animal life.

The brilliance of this position is that it eschews naturalism without falling into the opposite error of treating the transition from lower to higher material being as the violent overlaying of one kind of existence on top of another. On Rahner's view, when God calls forth new and higher forms of life, he adds something new to nature not from the outside but from the inside. Impregnated with new possibilities, it is nature itself, renewed and made more truly itself, that brings forth the higher from the lower.

There is much in Rahner's solution to recommend it. But what of the human soul? Fr. Klein writes that "for Rahner, our ultimate transcendence of the world is due to the unlimited

⁸ W. Norris Clarke, *The One and the Many: A Contemporary Thomistic Metaphysics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 256.

scope of our questions. Put simply, there is nothing in the world that can satisfy the human desire to know, to complete the self by engagement with what is not the self.”⁹ Doubtless, the unlimited scope of our questions is essentially related to our transcendence of the world. But I do not see how it can be the cause of it. To say that our transcendence is due to the unlimited scope of our questions is to confuse the order of knowing with the order of being. Of course, if one is only interested in the way things appear to us, then I think it is true that our transcendence of the world is revealed by the unlimited scope of our questions. This hardly amounts to an explanation for our transcendence, however, anymore than smoke explains fire.

It seems to me that our transcendence, revealed not only by the unlimited scope of our questions but more fundamentally by the universality of our concepts, calls for a causal explanation. What must we humans be like to be capable of such wonders? Is it possible for sensate animals to give rise to human beings even with the creative action of the divine infusion of information necessary to give matter the requisite organizational complexity? For reasons that the limited scope of my response will not permit me to elaborate, I believe the answer to this question must be no. Willing, knowing, questioning, all our striving for happiness which mocks us for wanting too little, not too much, all these distinctly human actions and their prior potentialities demand a cause that transcends the limits of material being. Hence the Thomistic doctrine of the immaterial subsistent soul.

This is not, of course, to say that the soul must therefore be “an invisible, secondary self that accompanies and animates” the persons we and others observe.¹⁰ There is no question of a Platonic or Cartesian dualism in Thomas’s conception of the human person. *To be* for human persons is to be simultaneously material and spiritual. Bound by an existential unity, the body existing in and through the soul, there are not two substances but only one, the human person. Indeed, Thomas goes so far as to say that the death of the body marks the death of the person.¹¹ So, while the soul survives the death of the body, the person does not. It is well that we should

⁹ Klein, 9.

¹⁰ Klein, 4.

¹¹ Although a fully developed argument for this interpretation cannot be given here, the following three passages provide strong support for it: (1) In ST I, q. 29, a. 1, Thomas examines Boethius’s definition of “person” as an individual substance of a rational nature.” The fifth objection argues that since a separated soul is not a person, the definition must be wrong. In his response, Thomas counters not by affirming the personhood of the separated soul but rather by denying its status as a substance. (2) In ST III, supp. q. 75, a. 1, Thomas considers a handful of objections to the doctrine of the bodily resurrection. According to the second objection, there is to be no bodily resurrection because it is unnecessary for personal immortality, a conclusion drawn from the fact that when he walked this earth, Christ referred to Abraham as being alive. In response to this objection, Thomas maintains that since “Abraham’s soul, properly speaking, is not Abraham himself,” (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province [Westminster, MA: Christian Classics, 1948], 5:2863), Christ must have been speaking of Abraham in light of the future resurrection. (3) In ST II–II, q. 83, a. 11, where Thomas takes up the question whether the saints in heaven pray for us, he does not reject the assertion that “the soul of Peter is not Peter.” Rather, he says that “[i]t is because the saints while living merited to pray for us, that we invoke them under the names by which they were known in this life, and by which they are better known to us: and also in order to indicate our belief in the resurrection, according to the saying of Exodus 3:6, ‘I am the God of Abraham,’ etc” (ibid., 3:1540). Strictly speaking, therefore, our prayers are not heard or answered by the saints but by their souls, which await the resurrection of the body, not just in order that they might be complete but in order that the persons to whom they once belonged might live again.

hate death, because it is nothing less than the destruction of the human person. On Thomas's view, the resurrection is both necessary and glorious: necessary because without it there can be no personal immortality; glorious, because death is so terrible.

Conclusion

In my response to Fr. Klein's paper, I have attempted to do three things: (1) to say what I think Rahner got right about the soul; (2) to draw attention to some limitations in his method of inquiry, and; (3) to offer an assessment, partly affirmative, partly critical, of Rahner's speculations on human evolution.

For reasons that appear to be rooted in his adoption of the phenomenological method as it has come to be widely used, Rahner stops short of asking the most interesting philosophical questions concerning the necessary conditions for the very possibility of human transcendental. Granted that the human person is transcendentially oriented "through the world towards that which is not the world but rather its creator,"¹² the metaphysician in me cannot refrain from wondering what could possibly account for this remarkable feature of human being. Reducible neither to the ghosts of Plato and Descartes nor to a brute fact of human existence, we are lead to conclude that the transcendental of the human person is possible only because the human soul is immaterial and subsistent, an incarnate spirit. As such, even the supernatural infusion of new information cannot account for the transcendental orientation of the human person. For that, we must turn to something wholly unexpected from an evolutionary standpoint: the proto-Incarnational raising of nature by God not from within but from above.

¹² Klein, 10.