

Karl Rahner on the Soul

**Rev. Terrance W. Klein, S.T.D.
Fordham University**

Karl Rahner rejects the notion that when Christians speak of a soul they are citing a surreptitious citizen of a realm that lies beyond or above science. For Rahner, the purpose of calling the soul the supernatural element of the human person is not to establish two spheres within one human being, but rather to attest to the sheer gratuity of our orientation toward God in Christ. When we use the word “spirit,” we philosophically reference our disposition over and against the world. When we use the word “soul,” we theologically assert the ultimate orientation of this spirit towards God.

On Interpretation

First, a word about interpretation, which is my task. One of the great Heidegger-inspired insights of twentieth century philosophy is that of the hermeneutical circle. Essentially the notion that we cannot simply seize the insights of another as though these were objects lying ready to hand. Rather, when we try to understand another, we become *de facto* interpreters, because we can't help but approach the other in the light of our own preunderstanding. Hence, one cannot hope to approach a text without prejudice, which is always present. What one can do is to try to expose one's own preunderstanding, so that, brought to light, its engagement with the text can be seen for what it is, a starting place in what is ultimately a conversation with the author. Gadamer taught us that what ultimately makes the conversation a fruitful dialogue, rather than a rapacious misreading, is a common tradition, the mutual questions and concerns that both the author and the interpreter share.

That being said, it helps to know that my reading of Rahner is heavily influenced by Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Of course the former was a major influence upon Rahner himself. The latter moved in a quite different philosophical milieu. Ironically, I came to Wittgenstein after Rahner, which means that I read the Cambridge philosopher with a Rahnerian slant. Any good Wittgensteinian would charge me with that. And I went back to read Heidegger after having read Rahner and Wittgenstein, so my appropriation of him is colored by them. I realize that I am being very circuitous, but that's the nature of any hermeneutical circle. I merely want to indicate my point of ingress.

What follows is an interpretation of Karl Rahner on the soul, specifically his brief exposition of the topic in Volume XXI of *Theological Investigations*, an article entitled “Natural Science and Reasonable Faith.” If an interpretation isn't being sought, one could simply read Rahner for one's self, though of course even then an interpretation will occur. Hopefully my explicit prejudices will allow Rahner to speak in a new way. Hopefully seeing mine will expose some of the reader's own.

There are three parts to my presentation: the first is philosophical, showing the precedents and presuppositions underlying Rahner's thought on the soul; the second is theological, examining the picture of the soul that Rahner draws, and finally, an eschatological section, considering the radical future of the soul in resurrection.

Philosophical Prejudices, Precedents and Presuppositions

The prejudice, or problem, that the ordinary Christian believer has in approaching Rahner on the question of the soul is a naive anthropology, one drawn not from revelation itself but from an amalgam of sources which feed into Western thought. Some of these were present in the very formation of the canonical scriptures; others are later accretions. Either way, bringing them to light allows revelation itself to appear more vividly, allows our reception of it to be both more efficacious and true.

Rahner consistently rejected the picture of the soul held by the commonly catechized Christian. Rahner refuses to think of the soul as one part of the Greek dichotomy of body and soul, "which (to put it simply) is repugnant to modern scientific anthropology".¹ I think there are two additional reasons for this. It's not Hebraic, and it's not Heidegger. Hebrew thought posits no such divide. Allow one psalm verse to stand for several pages of scriptural recapitulation. "Do you work wonders for the dead? Do the shades rise up to praise you?" (Ps 88: 10) For the Hebrew mind, relationship with the deity was truly intra-worldly. To stand in covenant with the God of Israel was to know his blessing in this life, in one's physical body, one's descendants, one's crops and herds. Sheol was the abode of the dead, a place of shadows, the very residue of life itself. This is why the psalmist can ask with sarcasm, "do you work your wonders for the dead?"

And we can cut through reams of Heidegger—always worth doing—simply by pondering his phrase for the human person, *Dasein*. To be human is "to be there," to be thrown into a world, to be that part of this intensely physical place which has the role of questioning both itself and its place. To my mind, the greatest insight Rahner drew from Heidegger is the notion that one can never separate a human from a world. To be human is to be in the world, indeed, it is to be precisely that part of the world that questions. There is a lapidary statement of Rahner's that perfectly captures his rejection of any hermetic delineation between the human person and the world. "Difficulties can really only arise where one thinks that man ceases to be at the point where his skin forms a limit, and that everything is extrinsic which cannot be localized imaginatively within this sack of skin."² We must not think of the human as a person ending with the skin. To do so would be to have lost his or her world.

¹ Karl Rahner, "Natural Science and Reasonable Faith: Theological Perspectives for Dialogue with the Natural Sciences," in *Theological Investigations XXI*, trans. Hugh M. Riley (New York: Crossroad, 1988) 42. Hereafter "Natural Science and Reasonable Faith."

² Karl Rahner, "Questions of Controversial Theology on Justification," in *Theological Investigations IV*, trans. Kevin Smyth (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966) 200.

So, Rahner never comes 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. That, as Wittgenstein would say, is the picture that holds us captive. To see how truly Hebraic and Heideggerian Rahner is on this point, one need only ruminate on the title of his first major work *Spirit in the World*, which began life as his doctoral dissertation. For Rahner what stands between these two words is more conceptual nuance than ontology, for there can be no human being apart from the world. The distinguished Georgetown theologian Peter Pham once likened reading *Spirit in the World* to riding a bicycle through sand dunes. He's right, but I see Rahner establishing philosophical presuppositions in this work from which he never wavered. He called it an extended analysis of Question 84, Article 7 of the *prima pars* of Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*: "Whether the intellect can actually understand through the intelligible species of which it is possessed, without turning to the phantasms?" But one has to be willfully nearsighted not to see the ready resemblance between *Geist in Welt* and *Dasein*. There have been those who criticize *Spirit in the World* as Rahner's surreptitious rereading of Aquinas in Heideggerian terms. Rahner was sanguine about the charge. Everyone rereads Aquinas in some light. Only the fundamentalist thinks himself free of prejudice in the act of reading. What's important for our questions is that in both systems of thought, Thomistic and Heideggerian, human knowledge occurs through engagement with the world, and in both systems growth in knowledge is seen as the act by which the human person completes the self. Or, as Rahner puts it, "Human beings are bodily creatures who have a fundamentally unlimited openness to being as such in knowledge and freedom."³

Theological Choices

When speaking of the human person, Rahner will consistently prefer the term spirit (*Geist*) over that of soul (*Seele*). This is a significant choice for his theology. For Rahner, any Christian discussion of the soul has to be drawn from revelation itself, not from our cultural patinas overlaying it. And this means that what we say of the soul must be a truly Christian anthropology, one which is formed by meditation upon the God-human, Jesus Christ.

What is Rahner's primordial understanding of the human person, which he sees as underlying the revealed message of Christianity? "The first thing to be said about man is that he is a person and a subject."⁴ To be a person and a subject is to stand over and against the world, to be a part of the world that is not subsumed by a philosophical or empirical appropriation of the world. Here one can see Rahner's roots in Husserl. There is always a self which apprehends the world and yet cannot be reduced to the world, cannot be subsumed by our various scientific appropriations of the human person.

³ "Natural Science and Reasonable Faith" 42.

⁴ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: The Seabury Press, 1978) 26. Hereafter *Foundations*.

This is the meaning of transcendence in Rahner's thought. It is not a secondary or otherworldly strata that overlays the person, but rather our inherent constitution as that intellect which stands over and against the world. "Man experiences himself precisely as subject and person insofar as he becomes conscious of himself as the product of what is radically foreign to him."⁵ One could express this by saying that we are that intelligence that knows that it knows. Unlike a computer, we are aware of ourselves as knowing in the act of knowing. Or, in another lapidary statement of Rahner, "A finite system cannot confront itself in its own totality."⁶

Here Rahner does for theology what Wittgenstein did for the philosophy of language when he asserted in the *Investigations* that the meaning of a word is its usage, not an occult object lying beyond it. In like manner, Rahner frees us of the bewitchment of looking for the hidden "soul" lying beyond what we observe, beyond our own experience of ourselves as those in the world who question the world. "The nature of man...is absolute receptivity for being in general, or in other words, man is spirit."⁷

He rejects the notion that when Christians speak of a soul they are citing a surreptitious citizen of a realm that lies beyond or above science. "From the Christian standpoint there is no reason to limit the claims of empirical anthropology within certain materially and regionally defined areas of human life, and to call what lies within the province of these empirical anthropologies 'matter' or 'body' or something similar, and then to differentiate from this another part which can be empirically and clearly separated, and call this 'spirit' or 'soul.'"⁸

For Rahner, the purpose of calling the soul the supernatural element of man is not to establish two spheres within one human being, but rather to attest to the sheer gratuity of the human person's orientation toward God in Christ. He writes that

this standpoint outside of and above the system of empirical, individual and specifiable data may not be understood as an individual and separable element in the empirical reality of man. This is how the school theology likes to understand it when it speaks of spirit or of man's immortal soul as though what is meant by this were an element within the totality of man which can be encountered immediately and in itself, and distinguished empirically and in test-tube from the rest of him.⁹

Behind Rahner's thought here is the work done by his eminent Jesuit predecessor, Henri de Lubac who rejected a two-tiered world, one divided between the natural and the supernatural, as a medieval construct that is meaningless to modern thought and unfaithful to the original Christian witness. He argued with persuasive force in *Surnatural* (1946) and again in *Le mystère*

⁵ *Foundations* 29.

⁶ *Foundations* 30.

⁷ Karl Rahner, *Hearers of the Word*, rev. ed., trans. Michael Richards (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969) 37. Hereafter *Hearers of the Word*.

⁸ *Foundations* 27.

⁹ *Foundations* 30.

du surnaturel (1965) that something had become jejune in Christianity's speaking of two realms. De Lubac's work is clearly behind Rahner's assertion that to speak of the soul is to reference an intellectual transcendence oriented toward God, not an occult ontic entity. Rahner writes, "Theologians need only be able to affirm that human consciousness possesses that unlimited transcendental in which there is present an openness, capable of legitimizing itself to the absolute reality of God."¹⁰

I have heard theologians attempt what I would call a "ghost in the gaps" approach to the soul, trying to locate it in some empirically nebulous region of neuro-psychology. Two problems with this approach. First, today's nebula is tomorrow's network. Where does the soul "go" when the gap closes? Secondly, theologians never advance our understanding of revelation by trying to explain it according to the epistemological norms of science. To do so is to commit a categorical error. The soul is not one more thing in the world, not even in a second-tiered occult region of the world.¹¹ When we use the word "spirit," we philosophically reference our disposition over and against the world. When we use the word "soul," we theologically assert the ultimate orientation of this spirit towards God.

Rahner does not long engage current questions regarding the relationship of what is called the brain to what we call mind. Obviously the mind is dependent upon what scientists study as the brain. But the philosophical and theological issue for Rahner is that the mind represents the evolutionary emergence of a higher sphere of existence. "[T]he modern theory of evolution does itself recognize a self-transcendence of the lower to the higher which is more than what has preceded and which always implies an element of the unexpected and the unpredictable." For Rahner, the focus is anthropological: "Because of the transcendental of human beings, they possess an element in their nature which forbids us simply to reduce them to that reality which otherwise appears in natural science and which also limits its area."¹²

Yet there is a reason to use the word "soul" or "spirit," even if we reject the notion that in doing so we are positing an invisible self. Language isn't idling, as Wittgenstein would say, but it bewitches us if we think we mean by the word a ghostly and ephemeral reality. For Rahner, our ultimate transcendence of the world is due to the unlimited 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. "[M]an in his 'infinitude' is unable by his own capacities to anticipate and reach the absolute totality of truth."¹³ The term and the terminus of this virtually unlimited desire is God. "Thus God is either the inner meaning and the possibility

¹⁰ "Natural Science and Reasonable Faith" 43.

¹¹ See "Natural Science and Reasonable Faith" for Rahner's delineation of the respective expertises of natural science and theology. Hence: "The natural sciences investigate concrete individual phenomena which people encounter in their objective experience," (19) while theology "makes an affirmation about God as the one absolute ground of all realities. It grounds the multiplicity of all realities which can be experienced as individual realities in an absolute reality, which is not one individual element *within* this manifold world, but rather its ground, which, although incommensurable with this multiplicity, establishes it and holds it together" (21).

¹² "Natural Science and Reasonable Faith" 44.

¹³ *Hearers of the Word* 26.

of the world and the historical existence of man and no more, or the sheer contradiction of man and his world.”¹⁴ Thus to speak of the human person as spirit or soul is really to reference the human person as that part of the world that is oriented towards that which lies beyond the world. “Whenever man in his transcendence experiences himself as questioning, as disquieted by the appearance of being as open to something ineffable, he cannot understand himself as subject in the sense of an *absolute* subject, but only in the sense of one who receives being ultimately only in the sense of grace.”¹⁵

Resurrection of the Flesh

As Rahner sees it, to understand our disposition over and against the world is to raise the question of both our freedom and our ultimate orientation towards God. When this is done, one has set the stage for a discussion of resurrection, because resurrection is the radical future of the human person before God. The resurrection of the flesh, which we affirm in the creeds, is the soul’s destiny, provided that one has begun to think of the soul as the human person in the world, one who is oriented through the world towards that which is not the world but rather its creator. One could say that Christ’s resurrection in the flesh is the revelation that finally exorcizes the ghost in the gaps.

The purpose of Rahner’s anthropology is ultimately to describe the person who receives revelation, to describe those constituent features that make the human person ready to receive the revelation of God. Hence the lapidary title of his first major theological work, *Hörer des Wortes* (*Hearers of the Word* in English). Rahner called it a philosophy of religion, one which was essentially a philosophical anthropology.¹⁶

For Rahner, the human being is that intelligence which orients towards completion of the self in the world, despite its knowing that the world, in the sense of what science calls nature, will call for its own biological death. Yet Rahner insists that human intelligence can’t help but envision itself as ordered towards a completion that will not be obliterated by death. In other words, we can’t ultimately view our deepest activity as purposeless.

An act of hope in one’s own resurrection is something that takes place in every person by transcendental necessity either in the mode of free acceptance or of free rejection. For every person wants to survive in some final and definitive sense, and experiences this claim in his acts of freedom and responsibility, whether he is

¹⁴ *Hearers of the Word* 26.

¹⁵ *Foundations* 34.

¹⁶ Cf. *Hearers of the Word* 15. “We seek to elucidate one problem (which is a single metaphysical question): whether by metaphysical reflection man may legitimately define himself as possessing a nature capable of looking into his own history, hoping to see there a possible revelation from God who appears to him in human metaphysics as the essentially unknown.”

able to make this implication of that exercise of his freedom thematic or not, and whether he accepts it in faith or rejects it in despair.¹⁷

Thus it is the total person, who lives and animates his or her world, and around whom that world constitutes itself, who hopes for survival.

The human person has what Rahner calls a transcendental hope for resurrection—transcendental because it characterizes the life of every human being. As Rahner sees it, we can't help but hope for resurrection, and Christianity is the revelation, in and through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, that the complete human person and the world, by which he or she came to be, are destined to be taken into, and ultimately find permanence in, that which lies beyond the world, namely, its creator God, the one whom the New Testament identifies as "Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead" (Gal 1:1). Hence, in Christ, human aspirations encounter God's fulfillment of them.

If we began by rejecting a misleading philosophical picture, that of the soul as an occult, other self, one can add that many Christians suffer from an equally misleading image of the resurrection. Rahner completely rejects the notion of a disembodied, unworlded soul surviving after death. But isn't just such a survival a core teaching of Christianity? Put in the way I just did, it's a core teaching of Plato, not the Christ. Rahner's reasons for rejecting the notion are two-fold. Philosophically, as we've seen, he never sees such an entity as ever existing; theologically, it's not what happened to Christ.

For Rahner, revelation is always read-off of the resurrection, its foundational event. In other words, one can't begin with the soul and then ask what sense one makes of the resurrection. One must begin with the resurrection and in its light define what one means by the soul. In this sense, eschatology is not the final subset of Christian theology. It's the font. As Rahner puts it in *Foundations*, "Resurrection is not an additional assertion about the fate of a secondary *part* of man, an assertion which could not be known in hope from a primordial understanding of man."¹⁸ Resurrection is so much more than the survival of only one part of the totality of the human person.

Rahner wants to suggest that in death the spirit which was in the world remains incarnate within the world, remains oriented towards the world, but now does this in a mode of appropriation characteristic of eternity. The language used may be particular to Rahner, but the notion that we await a glorified, reconstituted creation, not a departure from it, is the very witness of the New Testament. "*And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband*" (Rev 21:2).

¹⁷ *Foundations* 268.

¹⁸ *Foundations* 268.

To understand resurrection, one must dispel inadequate notions of eternity. One cannot think of the soul as some parcel of the human person that rides into eternity, leaving what we have called “spirit in the world” behind.

Hence if we have to speak in Christian eschatology of the dead who are still alive, we have to say first of all what this means, or better, what it does not mean. It does not mean that all things continue on after death as though, as Feuerbach put it, we only change horses and then ride on—that is, as though the dispersion and the empty, indetermined and even determinable openness characteristic of temporal existence continued on. No, in this respect death marks an end for the whole person. If we simply have time to continue beyond a person’s death, and have the “soul” survive in this time, so that new time comes to be instead of time being subsumed into its final and definitive validity, then we get into insuperable difficulties today both in understanding what the Christian doctrine really means and also in living it existentially.¹⁹

Eternity cannot mean an endless temporal sequence, since the very nature of the human person calls for completion. “We may not understand the existence which arises out of death as a mere ‘continuation’ in the characteristic dispersion and the indeterminate openness of temporal existence, an openness which can be determined ever further, and thus is really empty. In this respect, death marks an end for the whole person.”²⁰

So what is eternity? It is “not an incalculably long-lasting mode of pure time, but a mode of spirit and freedom which have been actualized in time...” Or, in a more lapidary sentence, “In reality ‘eternity’ comes to be in time as its own mature fruit.”²¹ (I realize that I have identified three sentences of Rahner that I have called lapidary, or quotable. I do this because he is so often accused of never having produced one.)

Two questions remain. They are interwoven, because the first inevitably raises the question of the second. The first question concerns the intermediate state of the dead, before the consummation of history. The second asks how human intelligence survives the biological disintegration of the human person in the world. Rahner never explicitly answers the second question—to do so would be to speculate beyond revelation, not about it—but what he says of the first does adumbrate a possible answer.

Regarding the intermediate state of the dead, what happens to the dead between the time they die and they find themselves reconstituted before God in a glorified cosmos, Rahner’s answer may appear quite speculative, but is deeply woven from his anthropological presuppositions. He writes:

¹⁹ *Foundations* 436–37.

²⁰ *Foundations* 271.

²¹ *Foundations* 271.

Precisely in virtue of its openness to reality as such the spirit is not wholly removed from the world at death; indeed, the underlying unity of reality as a whole actually opens up to it, so to say, at a new and deeper level. All things become present to it immediately and without distortion. For this reason, the dead man is more closely and intimately united to the inward meaning of all that is real. But this totality of the real is still present to it in a peculiarly dim and remote manner. For the dead man this experience of the world in depth, as it were, is painful rather than joyful. He cannot really entertain it or express to himself that in it which is the object of desire to world and finite spirit alike, name to come to themselves. Everything has become less real, has receded into remoteness, has become more alien and more lonely.²²

Rahner suggests that the dead person is oriented toward God and yet at the same time retains a profound connection to the world. The difference between a living person and one who is dead has to do with the way in which spirit orients itself toward matter. In the living human being, the union between the two is localized in a stable, physically distinct human nature. A way of putting this is to say that my spirit can only access that part of the world available to it through interaction with my matter. In death, human intelligence, individual spirit, takes on one attribute of the angelic. It is no longer localized, but rather finds itself for the first time as permeating all of matter. If this is so it would mean that human intelligence would come to share a second characteristic of angelic knowledge as it is understood in Thomistic thought. It would be intuitive rather than discursive, which is to say that it would know reality not through ratiocination based upon the senses, as we know in this life, but rather that it would, in the divine dispensation, know intuitively, in a more direct manner.

Note that in the intermediate state Rahner sees this form of knowing as burdensome, “more painful than joyful.” How can we know all the world in a manner never before experienced and still be sad? Precisely because in the intermediate state we are no longer in a process of self-creation through our interaction with the world. What the dead have become in the world is complete. They are now those who watch the world. One watches the dance from the side. I think Thornton Wilder wonderfully captures this vision of the afterlife in his classic American play, *Our Town*, where the departed denizens of Grover’s Corners sit above the town with utterly passive, but keen, interest in its activities.

In the glorified cosmos, human intelligence remains free of its temporally and spatial limitations, but now the totality that is the spirit of the individual person finds itself effectively united with the totality that is the redeemed and glorified cosmos, namely, matter itself, and dwells in corporate union with the other human intelligences that came to fruition in the world.

²² Karl Rahner, “He Descended into Hell,” in *Theological Investigations VII*, trans. David Bourke, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971) 148.

What stands behind Rahner's ruminations for the future is the same deep conviction with which he views the current world and our place within it. Namely, that matter cannot be conceived as spiritual detritus. If it comes forth from God who is pure Spirit, then it cannot be conceived as the converse of the Spirit, as it is in neo-Platonic thought. On the contrary, one would have to say that what is material is always oriented toward the spiritual. The cosmos as we know represents an ascending ratio of matter and spirit. Rahner reads the Thomistic affirmation *ens et verum convertuntur* as ultimately asserting that all of matter is oriented towards intelligence, or spirit (*De Veritate* 1.1). "[M]atter, by virtue of its origin and the end toward which it tends, must, after all, be quite 'spiritual,' inasmuch as its creator is absolute spirit and can hardly be the cause of something that is purely spiritless."²³ One could say that matter itself will have become deified in the Parousia, that then the Incarnation of the Christ will have run its course. The world would have found its completion in God, which is another way of saying that matter would be entirely drawn up into that which is spirit.

²³ "Natural Science and Reasonable Faith" 29.