The Mystical and Political Body: Christian Identity in the Theology of Karl Rahner

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THE MYSTICAL AND POLITICAL BODY: CHRISTIAN IDENTITY IN THE THEOLOGY OF KARL RAHNER

by

Erin Kidd, B.A., M.T.S.

A Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School, Marquette University, in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT
THE MYSTICAL AND POLITICAL BODY: CHRISTIAN IDENTITY IN
THE THEOLOGY OF KARL RAHNER

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Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner (1904-1984) is well known for initiating the turn to the
subject in Catholic theology. The heart of Rahner’s theological reflection is the
experience of God as encouraged by Ignatius of Loyola’s Spiritual Exercises. In
questioning how the subject experiences God, Rahner develops a theological
anthropology that attempts to elucidate the original unity of spirit and matter. As he
argues, the human being is “spirit-in-world,”—the one who actualizes her transcendence
in space and over time. While Rahner’s readers have been quick to draw out the
implications of the subject as spirit, they have been less attentive to exactly how this
spirit is in-world.

I argue that feminist philosopher Shannon Sullivan’s account of the self as transactional
can illuminate Rahner’s understanding of the subject as spirit-in-world. Her theory
provides a way of speaking about a freedom that is no less embodied or socially
embedded, and can therefore illuminate how the freedom to effect a fundamental option
for God is social and historical. More broadly, appropriating Sullivan’s work into a
Christian theology of the body provides a framework for talking about the intersection of
embodiment and Christian identity. In turn, Rahner’s theology allows us to evaluate
forms of identity construction according to the norms of love of God, neighbor, and self.

When we understand that human beings are precisely those spirits that accomplish
themselves in and through matter, what follows is an understanding of the human body as
simultaneously the site of the experience of God and political transformation. This
understanding of the human person ultimately calls forth a way of life—one that demands
solidarity with those who suffer, vigilance over our habits of bodying, openness to
mystery, and hope in the world to come.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Erin Kidd, B.A., M.T.S.

This dissertation is a reflection on the fact that human beings are constituted by and for the other. My dependence on the following people in completing this work cannot go unsaid.

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Conventions Regarding References to Karl Rahner’s Work

Bibliographic information for Karl Rahner’s writings has been provided for both the English and German publications. Direct quotes are reproduced from the English translations, unless otherwise noted. The following abbreviations of Karl Rahner’s major writings will be of help to the reader:


- **SW** Karl Rahner, *Sämtliche Werke* 1-32 (Freiburg: Herder, 1995-).

Two of Karl Rahner’s early books, *Geist in Welt* and *Hörer des Wortes*, were later edited by his student, Johann Baptist Metz. The English reader of Rahner will not easily find a translation of the first edition of *Geist in Welt*—even the *Sämtliche Werke* contains only Metz’ edition. On the other hand, an English translation is available of the first edition of
Hörer des Wortes while the translation of Metz’ edition has gone out of print. All this leaves the English reader in the unfortunate situation of having to read Metz’s edition of Geist in Welt but the first edition of Hörer des Wortes. I have made note of Metz’s interpolations in Geist in Welt where necessary (excepting minor grammatical changes).
Introduction

*zwischen den Hämmern besteht
genur Herz, wie die Zunge
zwischen den Zähnen, die doch,
dennoch, die preisende bleibt.*

*Between the hammers our heart
endures, just as the tongue does
between the teeth and, despite that,
still is able to praise.*

- Rainer Maria Rilke

This dissertation attempts to offer a theology of the body in light of contemporary debates about the construction of the subject. What is the relationship between the subject and her body? (Or between the body and her subject?) How do we reconcile moral concepts such as freedom, agency, and responsibility with our awareness of the ways in which subjects are formed by the worlds in which they live? What is the relationship between self and world, and how is it mapped onto the body? How do embodied subjects encounter the divine? These questions have reached a heightened importance as the theological academy awakens to its own role in the exclusion of certain bodies in the church, the academy, and the world.

My starting point is the theology of Karl Rahner, a 20th-century Jesuit thinker known for his contributions to theological anthropology and, more specifically, for initiating the turn to the subject in Catholic theology. Rahner gained a considerable following for his work early in his career. Through his involvement in a number of

theological encyclopedias and lexicons, he shaped much of German theology in the early to mid-20th century. His advisory role as council theologian at the second Vatican Council extended his international reputation and also symbolized a shift from Rome’s suspicion of him to acceptance of his then rather innovative theological work.2

The heart of Rahner’s theological reflection is the experience of God as encouraged by Ignatius of Loyola’s Spiritual Exercises.3 In questioning how the subject experiences God, Rahner develops a theological anthropology that attempts to elucidate the original unity of spirit and sensibility. Rahner’s readers, however, have struggled to flesh out exactly how the two constitute a unity, and what the implications of that unity are for understanding human freedom and Christian identity. The first goal of this dissertation is to draw together Rahner’s writings on embodiment and to show how they illuminate perennial debates in the secondary literature. The second goal of this dissertation is to show how Rahner’s theological anthropology can be retrieved for a feminist theological anthropology today.4 To this end, I turn to debates over the construction of the body within feminist theory. By reading these discourses together, I

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2 For an introduction to Karl Rahner, including biographical information about Rahner and an overview of the impact he has had on Catholic theology, see Thomas F. O’Meara, God in the World: A Guide to Karl Rahner’s Theology (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007) and Herbert Vorgrimler, Understanding Karl Rahner: An Introduction to His Life and Thought, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1986).


4 Nancy Dallavalle, in the conclusion of her chapter on Rahner and feminist theology, suggests that “future feminist retrievals of Rahner’s theology might do well to focus less on what he did or did not say about female persons or ‘women’s issues,’ and focus more on a critical retrieval of his theological work as a partner for the fundamental theological questions raised by feminist theology. In particular, the systematic interrelation of questions that drive feminist theological anthropology will come into play: questions of a fully contextual reading of human personhood, questions of the significance of gender for embodiment and social roles, and questions that engage the ecclesial context of theology,” “Feminist Theologies,” The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner, ed. Declan Marmion and Mary E. Hines (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 273-4. It is such a retrieval I intend in this work.
highlight the body as the site of both the mystical experience of God and political transformation.

In Chapter One, I begin with three of the most provocative critiques of Rahner’s theology—those offered by Hans Urs von Balthasar, Johann Baptiste Metz, and Jennifer Erin Beste. Hans Urs von Balthasar, a once close friend and theological collaborator, was one of Rahner’s first critics. In a 1939 review of Rahner’s dissertation in philosophy, Geist in Welt, Balthasar argued that Rahner’s transcendental project prioritized spirit over sensibility, neglecting the form of revelation and treating the material world as only a catalyst to spiritual experience. Later, in his 1966 book The Moment of Christian Witness, Balthasar satirized Rahner’s notion of anonymous Christianity, for relativizing both the gravity of sin and the necessity of the cross, and dispensing with the need for martyrdom or other forms of Christian witness. Johann Baptist Metz, one of Rahner’s first generation of students and one of the founders of contemporary political theology, also came to criticize his theology as ahistorical. Metz argued that Rahner’s commitment to the graced possibility of the world, even in the midst of great suffering, made light of the horrific events of the 20th century and of catastrophe in general. More recently, Jennifer Erin Beste has raised questions about the adequacy of Rahner’s theology in light of the grave effect of trauma disorders on the operation of human freedom. As she argues, any theology that places freedom at its center must attend to the way in which interpersonal harm threatens human freedom.

These debates represent critical challenges to Rahner’s anthropology: Does Rahner’s transcendental-idealism, in its guarantee of eschatological hope, ignore the horror of individual suffering? Can it motivate a radical Christian praxis of discipleship?
In short, does the transcendental subject have a history? As I argue, each of these critiques—at least implicitly—calls into question Rahner’s understanding of embodiment. And yet, little has been written about this category in Rahner’s thought at all.

With these critiques in mind, Chapters Two and Three offer an examination of Rahner’s theological anthropology, particularly his understanding of embodiment. Chapter Two focuses on Rahner’s early work, particularly Geist in Welt. I argue that this text ought to be read in light of Rahner’s broader theological commitment to reflecting on Ignatian spirituality—particularly the commitment to finding God in all things and a belief that the experience of God is available to all. Viewed in this way, Geist in Welt does not merely offer a Thomistic metaphysics of knowledge, but an investigation into the embodied subject and her ability to know and love God. The subject, as embodied spirit-in-world, knows and loves God in and through her material existence.

In Chapter Three, I demonstrate how Rahner’s understanding of the embodied subject’s relationship to God develops. In particular, Rahner’s later theology is a reflection on the Ignatian process of discerning and effecting one’s “yes” to God. Because the subject is spirit-in-world, such a “yes” must be embodied in one’s life. But embodiment entails risk and ambiguity. While Rahner proclaims the universal freedom to effect a fundamental option for God, both his academic and personal writings display a deep attention to the potential limitations of that freedom. Since spirit and sensibility exist in an original unity, one’s relation to the world, the divine, and the self is always through the material and historical and therefore “still an interplay with everything that is
not free, not spiritual, and so on.” Thus there is a great ambiguity in Rahner’s theological anthropology: the bodily nature of the spirit is, at the same time, the condition for freedom and its limitation. At the end of Chapter Three I look to the work of Carmichael Peters and Bryan Massingale to demonstrate the liberative potential of this ambiguity, as well as where it needs to be developed.

Together, Chapters Two and Three develop a Rahnerian theology of the body, which offers a new way of understanding how many of Rahner’s larger themes cohere. The object of this dissertation is not merely to wax exegetically, but to offer Rahner’s account of the body as a way to navigate contemporary philosophical and theological accounts of human freedom and identity construction. Chapter Four traces a debate in feminist political theory over how to interpret the body as culturally constructed. After examining Judith Butler and her critics, I turn to Shannon Sullivan’s pragmatist account of the human body and its utility for combatting both racism and sexism.

Parallel to the theological difficulty in speaking of the Christian subject as both free spirit and historically situated body is the philosophical difficulty of speaking of the subject as simultaneously a moral agent and a culturally constructed body. Placing these discourses in conversation with one another can yield productive results in thinking theologically about the subject, embodiment, and Christian identity. In Chapter Five, I argue that Shannon Sullivan’s account of the self as transactional can illuminate Rahner’s understanding of the subject as both transcendent and historical, in part by explaining how subjects can be morally responsible for the ways in which they are socialized. Her theory provides a way of speaking about a freedom that is no less embodied or socially

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embedded. Appropriating Sullivan’s work into a Christian theology of the body provides a framework for talking about the intersection of embodiment and Christian identity. Together, these two thinkers offer a way of thinking about Christian identity as incorporation into the mystical and political body of Christ.
Chapter 1
The Crises of the Transcendental Subject

Karl Rahner is well known for initiating the turn to the subject in Catholic theology. For Rahner, the creation and redemption of human beings by the word of God is the story of a God who has expressed Godself in and through human being. In addition to attending to the experience of grace in the lives of believers, he argued quite forcefully that all “dogmatic theology today must be theological anthropology.” This theological anthropology must in turn be a transcendental anthropology. As Rahner explains, “A transcendental investigation examines an issue according to the necessary conditions given by the possibility of knowledge and action on the part of the subject himself.” In other words, theology must turn to the human person and ask about the conditions of the possibility of her knowledge and love of God.

Such analysis does not imply that one can deduce who and what God is from the features of human existence. Instead, it recognizes that human beings are those for whom the knowledge and love of God cannot merely be superfluous or irrelevant. A transcendental anthropology attempts to show how God as ultimate mystery surpasses all human understanding and that humans are fundamentally oriented toward being in relationship with God; that God’s grace is a free gift not due to human beings and that it

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8 Ibid., 29: 284.
relates to who human beings are in a deep and intrinsic way. Ultimately, Rahner argues, to understand God is to understand humans as oriented to God. As spirits-in-world, human beings are those beings who are always transcending themselves, their lives oriented toward and open to the absolute mystery of God.

Rahner’s transcendental anthropology has been the object of much criticism. Before we turn in this dissertation to a more detailed examination of Rahner’s theological anthropology in general, and his understanding of embodiment in particular, it will be helpful to review some of Rahner’s most provocative critics. In this chapter we will look at the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar, Johann Baptist Metz, and Jennifer Erin Beste, each of whom will introduce one of three crises of the transcendental subject: the Ernstfall, Auschwitz, and trauma. Each of these dramatic interruptions in human experience calls into question any optimistic and stable account of the subject and her relationship to God. Carrying Rahner’s theology forward will depend on whether or not his anthropology can address these crises or be modified to address them.

Balthasar, Metz, and Beste each raise questions about the adequacy of the relationship between self, world, and God in Rahner’s theology. In particular, each of these critics interrogates exactly how spirit is “in-world.” As I will argue in this chapter, these three lines of critique converge on Rahner’s conception of embodiment. Thus the future of Rahnerian theology demands thinking about the embodiment of the transcendental subject.

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9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., 36-7: 291.
The *Ernstfall*

*The Christian:* You are associated with us! I know who you are. You are a decent fellow. You are an anonymous Christian.

*The commissar:* Don’t be stupid, my friend. Now I’ve understood enough. You’ve liquidated yourselves and spared us the trouble of persecuting you. Dismissed!

So ends the satirical interrogation of an anonymous Christian in Hans Urs von Balthasar’s *The Moment of Christian Witness.*\(^\text{11}\) For Balthasar such a faith will not be persecuted because it is not recognizable: “Karl Rahner frees us from a nightmare with his theory of the anonymous Christian who is dispensed, at any rate, from the criterion of martyrdom and nevertheless thereby has a full claim to the name of Christian if he, consciously or unconsciously, gives God the honor.”\(^\text{12}\) While Balthasar allows the hope that all be saved,\(^\text{13}\) he rejects an understanding of Christian identity that attempts to free the subject from the demands of Christian vocation: a life lived in gratitude toward God, a willingness to take up one’s cross, and ultimately to die for one’s faith.\(^\text{14}\) For Balthasar, Rahner’s theory of the anonymous Christian relativizes both the gravity of sin and the necessity of the cross, and dispenses with the need for martyrdom and other forms of Christian witness.

This inattention to the Christoform shape of grace is the natural product, he argues, of Rahner’s philosophy in *Geist in Welt.* At the time of its publication, Balthasar

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\(^\text{13}\) Ibid., 152.

\(^\text{14}\) Ibid., 20-7.
expressed deep reservations over Rahner’s dependency on German idealism. In his 1939 review of the book, Hans Urs von Balthasar raises questions as to the adequacy of Rahner’s transcendental philosophy to account for the possibility of divine revelation.\(^{15}\) Because Rahner begins with Thomas Aquinas’s epistemological insight regarding the unity of knowledge and sensibility, the difficulty lies in explaining how one can have knowledge of God—or any in-sensible thing. Balthasar locates the problem precisely:

“So the question is this: How is, out of the remaining plane of sensibility, nevertheless a metaphysic, i.e. a disclosure of being, at all possible?”\(^{16}\) Rahner’s answer lies in his transcendental appropriation of Thomas’s *conversio* and *abstractio*: the return of the knower to herself in and through knowledge of the other. For Balthasar, this solution shifts the place of divine revelation from God’s loving activity in the world to the subject’s relation to herself. Consequently, the world is reduced to merely the material of self-actualization, with a Fichtean ego at the center.\(^{17}\) Rahner’s philosophy is therefore unable to provide an *Objektmetaphysic*, as it is locked up in reflection upon the subject.

For Balthasar, the development of Rahner’s “anonymous Christianity” proves that these concerns were justified. In *The Moment of Christian Witness*, he provides a genealogy of the contemporary “philosophical system,” tracing the anthropological legacy from Kant, through Hegel and Fichte, to a generalized philosophy in which the subject is the free and intellectual master over the natural world. This in turn reduces the


\(^{17}\) Benedict M. Ashley has offered a similar critique of Rahner, alleging that his metaphysics “reduces the physical world to a foil for reflexion on the knowing subject out of reach of the results of the natural sciences,” in “Fundamental Option and/or Commitment to Ultimate End,” *Philosophy & Theology* 10, no. 1 (1997): 123.
world to the material of freedom and self-actualization, which is no longer revelatory of the divine. As Balthasar summarizes, “…because man is seen as the center and aim of this process, nature itself loses its aura of a mediating agency for the divine purpose and is reduced to being a ‘worldly world.’” In this closed system of subject and world, the idea of God becomes superfluous.  

As Balthasar writes, transcendental philosophy exemplifies these tendencies:

Transcendental philosophy exhausts the notion of objectivity in order to develop a philosophy of the intellectual control of the universe and therefore no longer has this notion at its disposal for exploring man’s relation to God. In doing so it completely fails to take into account the equally important truth about God that, although “he is the All”, he is nevertheless not the world, and consequently, between the two, there exists the primal phenomenon of a relationship in which they are set over against each other.

The transcendental subject attempts to control the world, to make it her own medium of self-expression, and in so doing loses the ability for wonder. Wonder is only possible if a difference between this world and the heavenly realm—between existence and essence—is maintained. Balthasar argues that Rahner’s system flattens this difference by placing divine revelation within a horizon of anticipation [Vorgriff].

But Christ cannot in any way be anticipated. According to Balthasar, Christians occupy a place “in a position impossible to determine from the viewpoint of the world as it was before Christ’s appearance.” Any attempt to situate this event within a continuous horizon will miss the radical disclosure of absolute love:

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19 Ibid., 83.

20 Ibid., 67-9.

21 Ibid., 53.
The Christian lives in the sphere of an event that signifies absolute love—that is, in a boundless realm beyond which nothing greater can be imagined (*id quo maius cogitari non potest*). If one tries to imagine something greater, to sail for new horizons, he falls into a void that eventually destroys the man who was created for the sake of something greater than the world we know. This is not simply an “idea” transcending absolute “being”. It is expressly an event taking place in the world and constituting the essence and sum total of that “being”—the absolute triune love enacted between the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit. It is a human and genuinely historical event because God became incarnate, and at the same time it is an event that transcends history, which comes just as immediately to me as to everyone else.22

Balthasar is concerned here that the relationship between the transcendental subject and the world prevents the sort of radical disclosure of being in history that is necessary to understand Christ’s life and, most importantly, the work of the cross. If the world is simply the raw material of self-actualization then every historical event is equally a disclosure of revelation in service to an indifferent transcendence. For Balthasar, the Christ event must be a particular event in which God enters a world he is “set over against.”23 This means that it equally has to be “a human and genuinely historical event” but also truly a revelation of God and therefore something that cannot be anticipated or so easily contextualized.

The goal is to hold these two things—the historicity and incommensurability of the Christ event—in tension, but Balthasar accuses Rahner of flattening the difference and thus failing to address either of these aspects of Christian faith adequately. Thus he pointedly asks Rahner: “Do I see in the broken heart of the crucified Christ the love of

22 Ibid., 54. Balthasar’s reference to love here is key. In the afterword, Balthasar summarizes his 1939 critique of *Geist in Welt* as concentrated on Rahner’s reading of Thomistic “excessus.” According to Balthasar, Rahner wrongly links the faculties of knowing with the anticipation of the infinite. Rather, Balthasar suggests that it is “the encounter between I and thou, or personal love” that is more adequate to describe “the ‘precomprehension’ of Christian revelation.” Thus Balthasar argues that J.B. Metz, standing at the end of a line of philosophers who have developed the concept of “intersubjectivity,” stands closer to the truth than his teacher Rahner, Balthasar, afterward to *Moment*, 147.

the triune God—or don’t I?”

Balthasar’s concern over an “objective metaphysics” is thus motivated by the particularity of the cross as a revelation of the love of the Trinity within human history. Rahner’s Christ on the other hand is merely “a higher phase of development” which “does not seem indispensable.”

In Rahner’s theology, the cross expresses God’s saving will, it does not effect it, and therefore the work of Christ is obscured. As Balthasar summarizes Rahner’s thought, “For according to what we have said, man does not owe his redemption actually to Christ, but to the eternal saving will of God, which is made manifest to him in the life of Christ. There is no need, then, for the Ernstfall, and there is no more talk of it.”

Much has been written in Rahner’s defense with respect to this criticism. To begin with, Balthasar overemphasizes the role of Geist in Welt (and its alleged dependence on German idealism) within the whole of Rahner’s work; he interprets what are largely brief and ad hoc texts as overly determined by a philosophical system; and he in turn neglects the influence of spirituality on Rahner’s writings. He ignores texts in which

24 Ibid., 110. Interestingly, Balthasar introduces this critique by first admiring Rahner’s earlier work as faithful to the sacred heart: “Once he was a great exponent of the Ecclesia ex latere Christi and thus of devotion to the Sacred Heart. This was the real center for him. ‘This original source of love is the heart of the Lord,’ and it is ‘the anxious, exhausted, dead heart.’ And here was the ‘essential nature of time’ and of the ‘mission’. It was also said that this devotion was an inner balancing out of Ignatian spirituality, which, being based on indifference, risks inducing ‘an almost overdeveloped sense of the relativity of everything that is not God himself,’” 109.

25 Ibid., 102.

26 Ibid., 107.

27 Ibid., 109.


30 Phillip Endean, Karl Rahner and Ignatian Spirituality (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001),
Rahner answers many of his challenges,\(^3\) including the fact that “anonymous Christianity” is only an option for those who have not “heard, understood, and genuinely accepted the gospel,”\(^3\) and he fails to provide an alternative account for his own hope that all will be saved.\(^3\) Rahner himself, in a retrospective address, admits that his theology downplayed the importance of sin and forgiveness but only in order to emphasize the self-communication of God, which he focuses on precisely in order to explicate Christ’s unique role in salvation history.\(^3\)

As Phillip Endean notes, these responses have not quelled the tide of scholars and laypeople who find *The Moment of Christian Witness*, and Balthasar’s critique of Rahnerian theology in general, compelling. Endean suggests that Rahnerians not rush to the defense, but attempt to understand the “primal clash of intuitions” behind their respective theologies.\(^3\) Karen Kilby too argues that a more productive analysis is possible: “All in all, the criticisms are more useful as a pointer to what it was that Balthasar feared, what he saw as the dangers confronting theology and the Church, than as a guide to understanding the real relationship between his thought and that of

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\(^{35}\) Endean, “Von Balthasar, Rahner, and the Commissar,” 34.
Balthasar admits as much in the afterward to *The Moment of Christian Witness*, when he justifies his criticism against Rahner as more accurately levied against the way his theology has been taken up by his disciples, and over the way catchphrases like “anonymous Christianity” sound to the uninitiated. Balthasar’s concern is more with the precedent that Rahner’s theology sets, and the dangers that Balthasar predicts, than with Rahner’s theology itself. While Kilby pointedly asks whether or not “any theologian, including Balthasar, could survive such treatment—a treatment in which the full complexity of one’s position is ignored, and one is held responsible for the way in which it may be misinterpreted and misused,” it can still be useful as a lens with which to appraise the merits and pitfalls of Rahner’s work—particularly the dangers of pushing Rahner’s theology forward.

The focus of Balthasar’s critique, and consequently of Rahner’s defenders, is on the nexus of theological topics surrounding revelation and soteriology, particularly the Christian’s relationship to the cross. However, Balthasar’s review of *Geist in Welt* and his genealogy of philosophical atheism, demonstrate that these concerns emanate from a profound disagreement with Rahner’s anthropology. Thus while his criticism of Rahner extends beyond a critique of transcendental philosophy and the way it frames the relationship between subject and world, it is still ultimately rooted in it. In Balthasar’s analysis, “anonymous Christianity”—and therefore, anonymous atheism—is simply the natural unfolding of the Fichtean subject at the center of Rahner’s philosophy. It is on this

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38 Ibid., 119-20.
account that Rowan Williams argues that this debate over anonymous Christianity can in fact “be seen as one to do with the problem in contemporary philosophy about the status of the ‘autonomous’ subject or consciousness.”

Further, Balthasar’s criticism over the possibility of revelation within Rahner’s transcendental project can also be read as a criticism over Rahner’s ability to explain how the subject is both spiritual and sensible. On the one hand, Balthasar alleges that the way Rahner understands the union between knowledge and sensibility fails to allow for the disclosure of Being within the realm of sensibility; on the other hand, Balthasar accuses Rahner of relativizing sensibility—and along with it, the historical material world—in favor of a formless transcendental experience of God. Both of these critiques hinge on Rahner’s ability to truly unite the transcendental and the categorical, the *a priori* and the *a posteriori*, in the subject’s relationship to the world. In Balthasar’s analysis, Rahner’s theological anthropology fails to give an account of how the embodied subject relates to the transcendent God in and through the historical particularity of the cross.

While Balthasar accuses the Rahnerian subject of indifference to the in-breaking of the divine, Metz points to this same subject’s alleged immunity to more worldly forms of interruption. The transcendental subject, he argues, is not only insufficiently historical and interpersonal, but as a category of analysis prevents theologians from addressing catastrophe and its threat to subjectivity. As we will see below, his critique only heightens the urgency in answering whether Rahner’s theology successfully shows how the subject is spirit-in-world.

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Auschwitz

Born in Auerbach, Bavaria in 1928, Metz came of age under the shadow of the Third Reich. As a teenager he was conscripted into the military and placed at the front line in a company made up of other teenagers. Recounting the experience almost 40 years later, Metz describes a particularly horrific event that continues to traumatize him. After delivering a message to headquarters, a young Metz travelled all night through the burning countryside to find all of his comrades dead: “I remember nothing but a soundless cry. I strayed for hours alone in the forest. Over and over again, just this silent cry! And up until today I see myself so. Behind this memory all my childhood dreams have vanished.”

Telling the same story in 1998, Metz explains how this experience ruptured his theological world:

A fissure had opened in my powerful Bavarian-Catholic socialization, with its impregnable confidence. What would happen if one took this sort of remembrance not to the psychologist but into the Church? And if one did not allow oneself to be talked out of such unreconciled memories even by theology, but rather wanted to have faith with them and, with them, speak about God?

As part of the “impregnable confidence” of “Bavarian-Catholic socialization,” Metz describes that as a child he was largely protected from any consciousness of the Shoah. He writes for example that he was unaware that Dietrich Bonhoeffer was murdered only

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30 miles away from his childhood home.\(^{44}\) Thus Metz’s primary theological insight is the desire to bring memories of suffering—both one’s own and those of others—into the Church and into theological reflection.

As a young theologian, Metz believed such work could be done under the umbrella of Rahner’s transcendental theology.\(^{45}\) As a graduate student at Innsbruck, Metz studied under Rahner and devoted his research to promoting and developing Rahner’s transcendental Thomism.\(^{46}\) His dissertation, *Christliche Anthropozentrik*, can be seen as an apology for Rahner’s argument in *Geist in Welt*, and of the theological validity of the “turn to the subject” more broadly.\(^{47}\) Even here, however, his work demonstrates a profound concern for the historicity and materiality of human subjectivity, so much so that Francis Schüssler Fiorenza writes that it foreshadows Metz’s later work: “Man’s experience of the world as history is Metz’s point of departure for his later critique of transcendental-existential philosophy, of his questioning whether anthropology is an adequate horizon for our understanding of history.”\(^{48}\)

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\(^{44}\) Metz, “Communicating a Dangerous Memory,” 44.


\(^{47}\) Ashley, *Interruptions*, 41. However, Fiorenza notes that the later Metz is “foreshadowed” in his focus on the historicity of both the world and the subject, “The Thought of J. B. Metz,” 248.

Metz collaborated with Rahner on a number of projects, including a couple of theological dictionaries. Metz was also in charge of editing the second versions of both *Geist in Welt* and *Hörer des Wortes*. While Rahner provided his stamp of approval to both of these editions, they bear Metz’s unmistakeable fingerprints.

Most of Metz’s revisions of the 1957 edition of *Geist in Welt* (published in English in 1968 as *Spirit in the World*) are minor and bear little on content, such as the division into smaller chapters and sections and the translation of Latin passages into German. The most significant contributions are those in which Metz responds—either indirectly or directly—to criticisms offered to the 1939 text of *Geist in Welt*. Among these is a response to Balthasar. Metz begins his page-long interpolation by asserting that it is *only* through a transcendental deduction that one can avoid a self-enclosed metaphysics—precisely the kind Balthasar accuses Rahner of promulgating. As Metz argues, a transcendental deduction attends to the world precisely as its positive content, not merely the negative material of actualization as Balthasar asserts. Rahner’s transcendental approach investigates the conditions of the possibility of human experience of revelation. In other words, the transcendental is precisely that which “release[s] itself into the categorical,” and “as an *a priori* investigation it does not merely consider physics, the “world,” the *a posteriori*, as real negativity…but that metaphysics

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51 Rahner, preface to *Spirit* xlvi-xlviii: Vorwort zur zweiten Auflage, *Geist in Welt*, 6-7. Rahner himself, in expressing his approval of the edition, introduces them as minor or clarifying changes. For commentary on this, see Ashley, *Interruptions*, 78.
itself, in its own \textit{a priori}, first comes to itself in its \textit{content} through the \textit{a posteriori}.”\textsuperscript{52}

Since the transcendental only exists—and is only discovered—in and through the categorical, the transcendental and the categorical represent “one metaphysics of man.”\textsuperscript{53}

Thus from Metz’ perspective, Balthasar errs in interpreting Rahner’s “spirit-in-world” as a description of two phenomena set against one another rather than the one dynamic nature of human being.

Despite this evidence that Metz believed Rahner’s theology to have successfully posited the unity of the subject as spirit-in-world, he still had misgivings over this formulation of human being. We can see proof of this in his 1963 revision of \textit{Hörer des Wortes} (published in English in 1969 as \textit{Hearers of the World}). In a footnote to the conclusion of his summary of the argument of \textit{Geist in Welt}, Metz notes its lack of interpersonal analysis, which he diagnoses as a consequence of Rahner’s Thomistic approach. Since Rahner is approaching the question of human transcendence through Thomas’s epistemology, Metz argues that it is natural that he reflects here on “an objective world of things” rather than a personal \textit{Mitwelt}.\textsuperscript{54} However, Metz’s identification of this lack in Rahner’s thought motivates his revision of \textit{Hörer des Wortes}. In his edition, he attempts precisely to replace the Thomistic world of things with the personal world in Rahner’s system.\textsuperscript{55}

Indeed, Metz’s changes to \textit{Hörers des Wortes} are on the whole more extensive, effecting subtle but significant changes in both Rahner’s theology and ontology.

\textsuperscript{52} Rahner, \textit{Spirit} 404-5: \textit{Geist}, 403-4.

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 405: 298.

\textsuperscript{54} Rahner, \textit{Hearers}, 68, note 13: \textit{Hörer} (1963), 107, note 60.

\textsuperscript{55} Johann Baptist Metz, preface to \textit{Hearers}, viii-ix: \textit{Hörer} (1963), 7.
Admittedly, many are simply attempts to update the work with the contemporary state of Rahner’s theology—for example, inserting Rahner’s by then well-known concept of the “supernatural existential.” While both Metz and Rahner allege that these changes do nothing to the substance of Rahner’s work, Rahner’s readers have not always agreed. “It is difficult to escape the impression that we are no longer reading a genuine Rahner work,” Andrew Tallon writes in the preface to his own English edition of the original 1941 edition. 57

Roger Dick Johns argues that of the overarching themes that emerge through Metz’s revisions, the most critical of which have to do with Rahner’s metaphysics: “In his changes Metz takes as his point of departure the concrete situation of man’s being-in-the-world, instead of Rahner’s abstract quest for Being itself.” 58 This requires in part reframing the relationship between transcendental and categorical revelation, so that “world” is perceived not just as the limit, but the content (and thus the possibility) of transcendental self-knowledge. 59 This world (Welt), in turn, for Metz is not just an environment in which human activity occurs, it is a social world (Mitwelt). Thus, Johns states, “Metz’s ‘program’ can be said to be rethinking this entire theological project in

56 Ashley, Interruptions, 78. However, according to at least one critic, even this change is suspect. Karen Kilby argues that Rahner’s later understanding of the supernatural existential—and the general understanding of revelation it presumes—contradicts Rahner’s development of the word as concrete and historical in Hörer des Wortes, Kilby, “Philosophy, Theology and Foundationalism,” 133.

57 Andrew Tallon, preface to Hearer, viii. Given Metz’s eventual position as a critic of Rahner, Tallon argues it is all the more necessary to read the original edition, editor’s introduction to Hearer, ix-xxii.


59 Johns, Man in the World, 75-6.
terms of an understanding of human existence as *Mitsein* and the world of man as *
Mitwelt*.”

While Ashley argues that the second edition does not substantially change “the approach of the original,” he notes that Metz’s forward signals a critical shift. Metz introduces the work not as one about the relationship between philosophy of religion and theology, but between the subject and her history. Of course for Metz these two relationships are themselves intimately bound. In his summary of the argument of *Hörer des Wortes*, he explains why an analysis of the human person as a hearer of the word must necessarily be an analysis of the relationship between “man” and “history”:

*Hearers of the Word*—that biblical determination of man vis-à-vis revelation—is here to be recaptured in a sketch of the philosophy of religion which comes close to the thought of Thomas Aquinas but at the same time takes into account the problems and attempted solutions of modern religious philosophers. Man hereby becomes visible as that being which comes into self-recognition by means of history (just as history itself comes into its own only by way of man); man must listen in on history in order to encounter there the “word” that founds and enlightens existence, this word to which the perceptive reason of man has always been questioningly attuned. The founding of a faith-grounded existence upon the historical word of God, therefore, is not arbitrary in the least; in fact, it corresponds in a deep and fundamental way to this existence.

While these revisions represent Metz’s discomfort with Rahner’s inattention to the interpersonal, they also signal that both Metz and Rahner believed at the time that such analysis was in line with Rahner’s—and even Thomas Aquinas’—thought. Additionally, Metz’s preface to the text indicates that he still felt Rahner’s fundamental theology was

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61 Ashley, *Interruptions*, 78.


not only useful, but necessary to the development of contemporary theology.\(^{64}\) Thus, contra Tallon, Metz’s eventual position as critic of Rahner’s theology make this edition of *Hörer des Wortes* all the more useful in examining the limits of its project and its potential for contemporary reflection on the subject. If it obscures an “original” or “pure” Rahnerian theology, it also shows us a theology *in progress*, open to experimentation and response to critique. It shows us to what extent Rahner was willing to accommodate accusations that his subject was inadequately interpersonal and historical.

As late as 1966, Metz takes a Thomistic and Rahnerian starting point as a given in writing about freedom.\(^{65}\) However, in a 1967 essay—later published as a forward to the 1968 English translation of the second edition of *Geist in Welt*—Metz offered an appraisal of Rahner’s theology which combines both his admiration of his mentor and his growing concern over his transcendental starting point.\(^{66}\) After spending the majority of his time praising Rahner for being simultaneously creative and faithful to the deposit of faith, Metz raises a series of critical questions regarding the transcendental and existential foundation of his theology. In particular, Metz challenges the individualization and privatization of faith under the transcendental-existential model, as well as its separation from world-history and eschatology. Central to this critique is Metz’s claim that Rahner’s theology of the subject is insufficiently historical:

Does not such a transcendental-existential approach (which defines man *a priori* as that being characterized by absolute transcendence towards God) concentrate the necessarily historically realized salvation of man too much on the question of

\(^{64}\) Metz, preface to *Hearers*, viii: *Hörer* (1963), 5.


whether the individual freely accepts or rejects this constitution of his being? Is there not danger that the question of salvation will be made too private and that salvation history will be conceived too worldlessly, breaking too quickly the point of the universal historical battle for man? Anthropocentrically oriented theology places the faith quite correctly in a fundamental and irreducible relationship with the free subjectivity of man. However, is the relationship of this faith to the world and history sufficiently preserved (aufgehoben)? …But the faith is and remains (in the light of its biblical origins and its content of promise) in a social and political sense worldly. Therefore, should not the transcendental theology of person and existence be translated into a type of “political theology?”

As Guenther notes, these questions contain “in germ” much of Metz’s later criticism. At this point, Metz did not see that these questions entailed an ultimate rejection of Rahner’s theology. Indeed, language of “translation” into political theology suggests that Metz’s own new political theology could be seen as such a translation. At the least, Metz entertains the possibility that such theology could complement Rahner’s:

Such questions, coming out of Rahner’s program, need not be solved against him, but rather can be tested and further developed in dialogue with him. For finally Rahner’s theology in all the truly great and enduring things it has given us is properly characterized by one overriding “tendency”: the ever new initiation into the mystery of God’s love and the service of the hope of all men.

Thus Metz’s early theological work is marked by an increasing desire to push Rahnerian transcendental Thomism to a place where it could accommodate these critiques, while still proclaiming that the affirmation of human beings as subjects before God was critical to the Christian message. This would require that a transcendental project account for the historicity of both human subjects and their actualization.

68 Guenther, Rahner and Metz, 6.
69 Metz, “Forward,” xviii.
70 Ashley, Interruptions, 44.
71 Ibid., 54.
Metz’s optimism for the political potential of Rahner’s theology eventually dissipated. He became increasingly concerned over a general tendency for German theologians to ignore Auschwitz, even despite their alleged interest in historicity.\textsuperscript{72} Rahner was unfortunately one of these theologians. Metz speaks on multiple occasions to his mentor’s silence in the face of this catastrophe. In his 1984 article “Facing the Jews: Christian Theology after Auschwitz,” Metz provides a succinct explanation of his departure from Rahner’s theology, one full of both praise and criticism of his teacher:

I had the good fortune to learn that Catholic theology which in my eyes was the best of that time, and to it I owe everything that I can do theologically myself. I mean the theology taught by Karl Rahner. To be sure, gradually, much too gradually, it dawned on me that even in this theology Auschwitz was not mentioned. Thus, in confrontation with this catastrophe, I began to ask critical questions and to look for additional viewpoints of theological identity. Were we still caught in a kind of historical idealism? Did the logos of Christian theology still have much too high a content of apathy? Too much fortitude against the abysses of historic catastrophes?\textsuperscript{73}

Rahner’s theology “was the best of that time” and even still it turned its back on Auschwitz; thus Metz implies \textit{a fortiori} that no theology of the day was adequate to the task of responding to this horrible interruption. Rahner’s sin of omission is critical to Metz’s evaluation of contemporary theology, which he accuses of apathy and an “inability to confront historical experience in spite of all its prolific talk about historicity.”\textsuperscript{74}

Auschwitz becomes for Metz a litmus test for whether talk about the historicity of the subject is merely hypothetical. Moreover, he argues that a theology whose truth

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 42.
\textsuperscript{73} Johann Baptist Metz, “Facing the Jews: Christian Theology after Auschwitz,” in \textit{The Holocaust as Interruption} Concilium 175, ed. David Tracy and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1984), 27.
\textsuperscript{74} Metz, “Communicating a Dangerous Memory,” 41-2.
depends on ignoring the catastrophe of Auschwitz is a theology that is meaningless:
“…obviously there is no meaning of history one can save with one’s back turned to Auschwitz; there is no truth of history which one can defend, and no God in history which one can worship, with one’s back turned to Auschwitz.” To turn one’s face to Auschwitz means first to recognize that the right to attempt to answer the question of the meaning of suffering is given only to those who suffer—and certainly not to those who are complicit in the causes of suffering, and second to commit oneself to a discipleship rooted in the remembrance of those who suffer. For Metz this is not just one among many theological tasks, it is the theological task. Only “in the face of the Jews” can a theologian make claims about Christian identity. The realization that commitment to those who suffer is in an intrinsic part of theology (and not merely its application) serves as the starting point for Metz’s political theology.

In his quest to do theology in the face of Auschwitz, Metz became increasingly sympathetic to certain Marxist lines of critique, particularly those of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, two founders of the Frankfurt school. In their thought, he found an explanation for the failure of contemporary theology to meet the challenge of Auschwitz. J. Matthew Ashley writes that it is through their work that Metz connected this failure with the transcendental subject as starting point: “He took over their critique of the Enlightenment and of modernity under the rubric of the ‘dialectic of enlightenment’ and, like them, became increasingly wary of any conceptualization of a ‘transcendental

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75 Ibid., 42.
77 Ibid., 32.
78 Ibid., 26-28.
subject’ that could be formulated and utilized above or behind the backs of the terrifying ruptures in history, paradigmatically represented by the Holocaust.”

This critique condemned exactly the sort of theological work that Metz had been doing under Rahner, and he became increasingly suspicious of the adequacy of his mentor’s transcendental approach to address the horrors of the 20th century.

As he became more aware of the role of social location on the production of theological discourse, Metz became more convinced that traditional theology was “closed in on itself, sterile, cut off from the lived history of the endangered subject.” He looked outside transcendental Thomism for a new language with which to speak about the subject, turning in particular to “praxis” as a critical category for his theology, and focusing his analysis on the historical becoming of faith, reason, and the subject. It is not until the 1970s that this work is developed in a coherent way. By this point, Metz had completely abandoned Rahner’s transcendental Thomism.

Metz thus stands as first in a long line of political and liberation theologians who recognize themselves as both Rahner’s inheritors and critics, including Gustavo Gutierrez, Jon Sobrino, and Ignacio Ellacuría.

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79 Ashley, *Interruptions*, 43.

80 Susan Abraham has advanced a similar line of critique against Rahner’s transcendental anthropology—particularly its identification of the human spirit as free, asking “How is the idea of the subject who is already positioned in colonial discourse and lacking any recourse to say exactly who s/he is, because s/he functions within a system of unequal power relations free?” *Karl Rahner’s Theology of Freedom in a Postcolonial Context*, PhD Dissertation (Harvard Divinity School, 2003), 16-17. Abraham argues, however, that Rahner’s theology can be modified to “accommodate concerns of identity, ethical action, and social transformation,” 244.


82 Ibid., 54.

83 Ibid., 56.

84 See particularly Ignacio Ellacuría, “The Historicity of Christian Salvation,” in *Mysterium*
In his 1997 *Faith in History and Society*, where he presents this theology most systematically, Metz makes frequent, and sometimes rather scathing, comparisons to Rahner’s theology. This critique is best understood in the context of Metz’s larger argument, which begins with his definition of a “practical fundamental theology.” The objective of all theology, Metz writes, is to provide “an apology for hope,”—in particular the “the solidaristic hope in the God of the living and the dead who calls all persons to be subjects in God’s presence.”

A *fundamental* theology has a stronger responsibility to this apologetic task, in offering a defense of the foundations of Christian theology. Such a defense cannot be offered apart from the concrete practices of Christian living, or the historicities of Christian faith. Thus *practical* fundamental theology recognizes that Christian praxis is not merely application, but originary and intelligible in its own right. Traditional theologies have separated Christian praxis from dogmatics, and therefore relegated praxis to the mere application of a purely theoretical Christian theology. As Metz reminds us in the preface, his intention in developing a new political theology is precisely to uncover the ways in which appeals to any pure theology are not, in fact, “politically innocent,” but “evade the practical demands made by a radical

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85 Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 23.

86 Ibid., 26-7.

87 Ibid., 61.

88 Ibid., 65ff.
Christianity.™ But how do we place these demands back at the center of Christian

For Metz, answering this question requires that we turn to an analysis of our own
historical situation and the two contemporary crises that emerge for post-Enlightenment
Christianity.™ First, is Christianity’s own identity crisis as it becomes a minority religion
in an increasingly secular West. This decline in role challenges both the Church’s
articulation of its place in the modern world and its ability to minister to its members,
who find its mythology less and less compelling.™ For Metz, this presents two dangerous
alternatives: “extreme privatization on the one hand and a radical secularization on the
other.”™ But according to Metz, the Church must resist the temptation both to withdraw
from the world and to accommodate it. Second, is the crises of the subject precipitated by
the recognition that lurking behind “the ‘adult,’ ‘autonomous,’ ‘rational’ man of
modernity” was the bourgeois subject,™ one who privatizes morality and religion, usurps
authority and tradition, and reduces reason to a blunt and dominating rationality.”™ In
adopting this subject as its own religious subject, Metz argues that Christian theology has
contributed to the invisibility of other (particularly marginalized) subjects and has

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™ Ibid., xi.
™ Ibid., 29-31.
™ Ibid., 145-6.
™ Ibid., xi.
™ Ibid., 47, cf. 43.
™ Ibid., 48-58.
facilitated a worldview that, in reducing all to economic exchange and bureaucratic process, denigrates the value of all human persons.\textsuperscript{95}

Because Metz argues that the first crisis—that of Christianity’s role in the modern West—is not a matter of message, “but rather a crisis of its subjects and institutions,”\textsuperscript{96} both of these crises center on the subject. They support and interpenetrate each other and together lead to an increasingly “subjectless” theology.\textsuperscript{97} Theology must respond through a re-turn to the subject, which resists the absolutization of any particular subject.\textsuperscript{98} This turn to the subject must make all subjects visible; it must recognize suffering and engender political action—in short, it must advocate for all to become subjects before God: “Who will deny that Christian praxis must not only be concerned with one’s own being a subject before God, but also has to be concerned precisely with how persons can become and live as subjects in situations of misery and oppression?”\textsuperscript{99} With such an end in mind, Metz sketches an image of subjectivity along the categories of memory, narrative, and solidarity.

By placing memory and narrative at the center of Metz’s analysis of the subject, he directs our attention to the fundamentally historical nature of human subjectivity. The human person is not a static idea, but one who develops and becomes in history. Thus one’s identity is something that is remembered and narrated. Here Metz refers to the fact that oppression is often enabled by the erasure of historical identities—one is not just

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{95} Ibid., xi.
\item \textsuperscript{96} Ibid., xi, 23.
\item \textsuperscript{97} Ibid., 29.
\item \textsuperscript{98} Ibid., 48.
\item \textsuperscript{99} Ibid., 64.
\end{itemize}
enslaved, but separated from one’s family and lied to about one’s history. Memory and narrative are thus “dangerous.” They enable one to resist false narratives and to reclaim one’s subjectivity, what Metz identifies as the first step in political empowerment. Thus Metz’s category of “dangerous memory” entails both looking back in solidarity with those on the underside of history, and constructing a counter-narrative in order to make a new future possible. It is a “form of eschatological hope.”

Dangerous memory refers in an exemplary way to the memory of Christ’s passion, in which God took the side of the invisible and the oppressed in order to proclaim the Kingdom of God as one of liberation:

This *memoria Jesu Christi* is not one that deceitfully dispenses one from the risks of the future. It is no bourgeois counterfigure to hope. On the contrary, it holds a particular anticipation of the future as a future for the hopeless, the shattered and oppressed. In this way it is a *dangerous and liberating memory*, which badgers the present and calls it into question, since it does not remember just any open future, but precisely this future, and because it compels believers to be in a continual state of transformation in order to take this future into account.

The fundamental mark of a “political consciousness *ex memoria passionis*” is a willingness to suffer with others. Such solidarity reclaims the “pathic structure” of praxis, resisting both our apathy in light of suffering and the economic way of thinking of our interactions with other human beings as transactions. Thus through this theological anthropology of “memory-narrative-solidarity,” Metz connects the memory of Christ’s

100 Ibid., 75.
101 Ibid., 169.
102 Ibid., 89.
103 Ibid., 101.
104 Ibid., 67, 93.
105 Ibid., 167.
Rahner is a reoccurring foil in Metz’s development of this practical fundamental theology. Two features of Rahner’s theology in particular are the subject of his critique: Rahner’s evolutionary model of the world, and his transcendental analysis of the subject. Working in tandem, they eclipse the historical becoming of the subject. In Metz’s analysis, the scientific model of evolution has overly determined contemporary understandings of the progress of human history. In the modern world, evolution “functions as a root symbol for knowledge and logic in general, a symbol with a theoretically unexamined totalizing tendency.”

This model of evolutionary development has facilitated an almost unanimous and unquestioned worldview in which the free actions of individual subjects are seen as meaningless against the larger backdrop of inevitable upward development:

Exposed to a bleakly tinged cosmos, locked into the infinite continuum of a time devoid of surprise, people feel like they are being sucked into the waves of an anonymous evolution that mercilessly rolls over everything from behind. With this experience of a more fragile identity a new culture is in the offing, its first name is apathy, the absence of feeling. It is important to pay careful attention to the profound impact of this evolutionary consciousness, which shapes and undergirds an entire theory of the world.

What identity can stand against this steamrolling of evolution? What is the use of solidarity with the oppressed if history and progress are out of our control? Thus, this

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106 Ibid., 25.
107 Ibid., 26.
model of progress “finally shuts down history, the subject, and liberation as authentic realities.”\(^{108}\)

At the same time that Rahner’s evolutionary model of history threatens to overpower the significance of the subject, Rahner’s transcendental theology prevents one from admitting that this subject is vulnerable. Metz defines transcendental theology as that in which “the human being exists as the anticipatory grasp \([\text{Vorgriff}]\) of God, and this anticipatory grasp is the condition of the possibility of human knowing and acting.”\(^{109}\) At a fundamental level, this theology begins with a reflection on the human being that attempts to abstract from Christian praxis and from the historicity of subjects and their actualization.\(^{110}\) It presents a universal subject defined without recourse to memory or narrative. In short, Rahner’s theology, which ironically sought to privilege the place of the subject and her experience of God, is ultimately incapable of allowing for the historical structure of experience and the difficulties of becoming a subject before God. Ultimately, Rahner’s theology stabilizes the identity of the religious subject at the cost of not recognizing the subjectivity of those who suffer.\(^{111}\)

Metz’s sharpest criticism emerges in an entire chapter devoted to contrasting his theology with Rahner’s.\(^{112}\) While he admits that Rahner’s theology of the anonymous Christian is the only consistent response so far to Christianity’s identity crisis, and

\(^{108}\) Ibid.
\(^{109}\) Ibid., 74.
\(^{110}\) Ibid., 66, 150.
\(^{111}\) Ibid., 74-5, 150.
respects both the mysterious nature of human being and God’s will that all be saved, Metz argues that it is an inadequate response to the modern identity crisis facing Christianity. It reduces explicit Christianity to a matter of knowledge available only to the few and wise, while offering under the umbrella of “anonymous Christianity” a faith so diluted as to include everyone. In both aspects it presents a version of Christianity that demands little of the subject in terms of discipleship. In contrast to this, Metz argues that “the full and explicit (!) knowledge of faith is itself a practical knowledge. In what is most distinctive to it, the knowledge of faith is incommensurable with a purely scientific and philosophical-idealistic form of knowledge. It is rather the practical knowledge of discipleship that is ‘arcane.’” If Christianity is a narrow road, it is because it calls the subject to a difficult sort of praxis.

Metz clarifies the difference between his and Rahner’s theology through appeal to the German fable of the hedgehog and the hare. In the story, the hedgehog “wins” the race with the hare only because he has placed his identical wife at the opposite point in the track. No matter how hard the hare runs, he sees a hedgehog ahead of him. Exhausted, the hare eventually collapses. For Metz, the hare is the hero of the story. Despite his loss, he is the only one who dared to run the race. Meanwhile, Rahner’s anonymous Christianity is a trick akin to the hedgehogs’. Rahner assures us that the story ends well, obscuring those for whom the road is dangerous, and freeing those who are comfortable from the demand to suffer alongside them. What Rahner misses is that human persons only become subjects precisely by running this race: “The ‘running’—in which one can

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114 Ibid., 149.
also get left behind—is an integral part of securing one’s identity, together with the dangers it brings; it cannot be compensated for transcendently by anything else.”

Only the one who risks losing her life has any chance of finding it. Metz urges us therefore to take the “option for the hare.”

Metz’s critique raises critical challenges to Rahner’s theological anthropology and all anthropologies that treat the human being as static and ahistorical. If we state a priori that the subject is characterized by the freedom to effect a personal decision for God, then we will be blind to those who are struggling for freedom. If we begin an analysis of the subject without any reference to historical context, it is likely that we will offer our own experience as universal, justifying the marginalization of those whom we find different. Finally, if we remain confident that all will be well at the end of the time, we may lose a sense of urgency in fighting for justice in this time. Thus the question of whether Rahner’s subject is adequately embodied and in-world is not politically neutral.

The question at hand is therefore whether or not Metz’s assessment of Rahner’s theology is accurate. First, is “transcendental-idealism” truly the starting point of Rahner’s theological anthropology? If so, is such a starting point intrinsically inimical to an understanding of the historicity of the subject? Is Rahner’s theology completely wrong, or merely incomplete? There is significant debate over the answers to these questions. A number of Rahner’s readers suggest that his theology could have easily been expanded to provide a richer understanding of the subject.

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115 Ibid., 152.
116 Ibid., 150-1.
Rahner himself responds to the critique in *Faith in History and Society* by saying that, while it points out where his theology is incomplete, his understanding of the relationship between the transcendental and categorical aspects of human experience provides an answer to Metz’s criticism:

...it has always been clear in my theology that a “transcendental experience” (of God and of grace) is always mediated through a categorical experience in history, in interpersonal relationships, and in society. If one not only sees and takes seriously these necessary mediations of transcendental experience but also fills it out in a concrete way, then one already practices in an authentic way political theology, or, in other words, a practical fundamental theology. On the other hand, such a political theology is, if it truly wishes to concern itself with God, not possible without reflection on those essential characteristics of man which a transcendental theology discloses.  

For Rahner, the fact that the transcendental is always embodied in the categorical means two things: first, that Metz is misreading him by focusing on the transcendental as if it was not intimately connected with the categorical and second, that Rahner’s theology is always and already political. However, recent work by Jennifer Erin Beste suggests that Rahner’s understanding of the relationship between the transcendental and categorical may not be as sufficient in responding to catastrophe as Rahner hopes.

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118 Rahner himself incorporates Metz’s critique in his later work. For example, he employs the category of “dangerous memory,” and references Metz positively in speaking of the need for the Jesuit order to be a voice from the margins, Karl Rahner, *Ignatius of Loyola Speaks*, trans. Annemarie S. Kidder (South Bend, Ind.: St. Augustine’s Press, 2013), 34 and 39-40, respectively: Karl Rahner, “Rede des Ignatious von Loyola an einen Jesuiten von heute,” *SW* 25, 313-15.

Trauma

In her book *God and the Victim: Traumatic Intrusions on Grace and Freedom*, Beste challenges whether Rahner’s theology can adequately respond to cases of severe trauma. While the study of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other traumatic disorders is ongoing, there is a general consensus regarding the type of symptoms that survivors present. These symptoms include difficulties with understanding time, experiencing and articulating emotions, and making decisions regarding one’s life. In short, research in trauma studies dispels the myth of the self as a cohesive rational agent, capable of acting in her own self-interest.120 Beste’s research focuses in particular on children suffering from severe and long-term abuse who, on account of trauma disorders, never develop the capacity to relate to themselves or to others in a healthy way.121 Here Metz’s concerns about the subject are again crystallized. Memory and narrative are precisely the cognitive capacities affected in trauma disorders. Survivors lose the ability to experience memories as in the past. Constant flashbacks disrupt their sense of time and prevent them from understanding their lives under any cohesive narrative.

Early on in her theological education, fieldwork with such child survivors of severe abuse prompted Beste to ask: “Do these kids really have the freedom to overcome their self-destructive actions and cultivate healthy relationships with themselves and others? How can a God who is truly loving allow these kids to be subject to such human cruelty and be so damaged? How can we honestly have faith in the power of God’s grace

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when confronted with the suffering of these kids?"\textsuperscript{122} It is with the “dangerous memory” of these children in mind that Beste examines Rahner’s theology, whose emphases on the inalienable freedom to effect a fundamental option depends on a universal account of both God’s grace and human freedom.

As Beste summarizes, in Rahner’s theology all persons have, at the transcendental level, the freedom to effect a fundamental option for or against God. This freedom is determined at (though not exhausted by) the categorical level through one’s discrete choices. This relationship in turn explains the unity between love of God and love of neighbor in Rahner’s thought. The former Beste reads as a direct and proportional function of the latter: “…growing in our love for others is the only way we respond positively to God’s self-communication and experience human fulfillment.”\textsuperscript{123}

Beste acknowledges that in Rahner’s theology, not all categorical acts are actualizations of transcendental freedom, only those that are “sufficiently free.” Extenuating circumstances, for instance, may cause someone to fail to love one’s neighbor while their fundamental option for God remains intact. Thus while transcendental and categorical freedom exist in unity, it is not possible to reason from one’s visible choices to one’s relationship with God—even for oneself. Further it is through the aggregate of one’s freedom over time, not a given individual act, which a person effects a fundamental option for God.\textsuperscript{124}

According to Beste, this distinction between one’s actions and one’s option for God is not enough to answer the theological challenge trauma poses. The extent of the

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{123} Beste, \textit{God and the Victim}, 27.

\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., 28-30.
damage to one’s ability to act freely in the world is so severe in cases of early and repetitive abuse, that it calls into question any theology of freedom: “…incest victims’ experiences and feminist insights concerning the pervasive extent to which the self can be fragmented by oppressive discourses indicate that Rahner underestimates the extent to which interpersonal harm can thwart the development of adequate subjectivity and freedom,”\(^{125}\) without which, Beste argues, it is difficult to see how one is capable of the self-disposal necessary for effecting a fundamental option for God. She goes on to ask: “Could it be that the damage these incest victims and other trauma victims sustain means that their freedom to effect a fundamental option may not be realized in their temporal existence? If so what does this say about a theology of freedom that makes a fundamental option the center of what it means to be human?”\(^{126}\)

Ultimately, Beste argues that Rahner fails to adequately acknowledge the effects of interpersonal harm on one’s capacity to realize the sufficient freedom to effect a fundamental option. She diagnoses this failure as located in ignorance: Rahner was nearing the end of his life during the rise of trauma studies as a field and Beste argues that he would himself have revised his theology if he were aware of the challenge it posed. Instead, she must undertake this revision herself. She argues that a theology of grace and freedom must first acknowledge the power of sin to disable the neighbor’s freedom and then articulate how grace is also mediated through loving interpersonal relations. Here, she sees a grace that corresponds to the horrors of trauma: just as one’s

\(^{125}\) Ibid., 87.

\(^{126}\) Ibid., 88.
permeability to and need of community is the precondition for severe personal harm, it is also the precondition for healing. Grace is mediated socially.\textsuperscript{127}

Beste’s critique is most forceful if one agrees with her that salvation must involve a free response to God’s offer, and that the freedom to effect a fundamental option is dependent on one’s freedom to make healthy, rational, loving decisions in general.\textsuperscript{128} The dissolution of the self that trauma survivors experience is a tragedy in its own right, and one that raises critical questions about both God’s goodness and human vulnerability to harm. However, to speak of the implications of this dissolution for one’s relationship with God—and not merely one’s perception of one’s relationship with God—requires identifying precisely the relationship between one’s transcendental and categorical freedom.

Part of the problem entails mapping the type of self-disposal threatened by the symptoms of trauma disorders onto Rahner’s theology of freedom. On the one hand, we are not speaking merely of “external threats” to freedom. While the source of severe interpersonal harm is external to the self, what is threatened is not merely one’s relationship to the world and her ability to act freely in it, but one’s relationship to herself. Thus such violation of one’s freedom affects her entire self-relation at the root. On the other hand, even such self-relation—as it exists in space and time and is available to reflection (by the self or others)—is not simply identical with what Rahner refers to as theological freedom.

\textsuperscript{127} Ibid., 88-106.

\textsuperscript{128} Ibid, 9. While Beste confines her criticism to those theologies that place freedom at the center of salvation, she does not ever address the question of whether or not the freedom to effect a fundamental option in Rahner’s theology is a freedom like other freedoms.
But such hair-splitting does not resolve Beste’s questions. Even if the sort of self-
disposal threatened by severe interpersonal harm is not identical to one’s freedom to
effect a fundamental option for God, we are still left with the question of how these
freedoms relate. If the option for God is conceived (even analogously) as self-disposal
and/or self-relationship, in what way can we say it is embodied categorically when those
capacities are damaged? If theological freedom is severed from one’s freedom in history,
is the Rahnerian subject free simply by fiat? Ultimately, is it possible to maintain that
transcendental freedom is actualized categorically without also admitting the possibility
that external forces can threaten one’s theological freedom? A spirit-in-world seems to be
by definition vulnerable to that world and therefore to severe harm.

Whereas Metz is concerned that a commitment to a transcendental analysis of the
subject obscures the historical struggle for subjectivity, Beste is worried that the loss of
subjectivity is determinative of one’s relationship with God. While these analyses run in
different directions they both highlight the difficulty of speaking universally and
optimistically about the subject’s relationship with God when a casual glance at the world
shows that many are fighting just to be subjects. More relevant to our task, each
demonstrates the stakes of speaking adequately to the subject’s spiritual-embodied
nature. A theological anthropology must speak of both the subject’s vulnerability to
catastrophe as well as its potential for resistance, and this entails determining in what
ways the subject is constituted in and through transaction with the world.
Conclusion: Resurrecting the Body in Rahner’s Theology

We have examined three distinct crises of the transcendental subject: the *Ernstfall*, Auschwitz, and trauma. These crises represent critical challenges to the adequacy of Rahner’s anthropology: Does Rahner depend too much on a philosophical account of the subject who has no need of the cross? Does his transcendental-idealism, in its guarantee of eschatological hope, eclipse the plight of those who are struggling to become subjects before God? Does his understanding of freedom as essential to salvation undermine the ability to offer hope for those who suffer severe interpersonal harm? At the least, these questions indicate where Rahner’s theology is unclear, and at most where it is inadequate.

The lines of each of these critiques cross on the body. Balthasar, Metz, and Beste each question whether or not the relationship between the transcendental and categorical in Rahner’s thought is sufficient to explain how the subject is in-world. To raise this question is also to raise the question of embodiment. It is through the body that the transcendental is actualized in the categorical; it is as embodied that the spirit is in-world. Despite this fact, neither of these figures address in any substantial manner Rahner’s writings on the body. In fact, little has been written on Rahner’s theology of embodiment at all.\(^{129}\)

This neglect is likely because Rahner’s more concrete and ad hoc writings about the Christian life—in which a more historical and embodied subject emerges—have been eclipsed by more philosophical titles like *Hörer des Wortes*. For example, Phillip Endean

\(^{129}\) While Cheryl Ann Riggs argues that Rahner’s subject is an embodied, historically-situated person, she does not explore the body or embodiment as a category of Rahner’s thought, nor speak specifically of human bodies, *Rahner Self and God*, particularly the conclusion, “The Embodied, Embedded Rahnerian Subject,” 195-201. Rather, “embodiment” in this work stands in for a non-dualistic account of the self.
and Karen Kilby have argued that the role of Ignatian spirituality in Rahner’s work has often been ignored in favor of his alleged philosophical commitments (a point confirmed by two of Rahner’s biographers, Karl Neufeld and Herbert Vorgrimler). Endean and Kilby even suggest that Balthasar’s criticisms are rooted in this misreading. If however, Rahner’s writings on Ignatian spirituality and his more pastoral and spiritual writings on the difficulties and challenges of Christian life are made central to his theological anthropology, a more robust theology of embodiment and Christian discipleship emerges. As Harvey D. Egan writes, Rahner “unfolds these mysteries [of the Trinity, incarnation, and grace] into every dimension of human life, even into a ‘theology of everyday things’—a theology of work, of seeing, of laughing, of eating and sleeping, and of walking and sitting.” It is this theology of everyday things that we will attend to in this dissertation.

As we examine Rahner’s writings, we will look for aspects of his theological anthropology that might counter his more transcendental and idealist impulses, and lend texture and history to his subject. In short, we will seek to uncover—perhaps even resurrect—the body in Rahner’s theology. As I will argue in the next chapter, even when Rahner is operating in his most abstract philosophical register, such as Geist in Welt, his work attends to the paradox and ambiguity of the embodied nature of human being. In later chapters, we will see how this understanding of embodiment develops in his thought, and show how it may be carried forward in response to these crises.

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Chapter 2:

The Subject as Spirit-in-World

As we saw in the last chapter, much of the criticism of Rahner’s transcendental subject focuses on the extent his philosophical dissertation, *Geist in Welt*, influences his theological anthropology as a whole.\(^{132}\) To Balthasar, this text exposes Rahner’s later ideas—particularly that of the anonymous Christian—as rooted not in revelation but in a Fichtean philosophy of the subject. To Metz, Rahner’s analysis of the subject in *Geist in Welt* neglected the personal *Mitwelt* and made the matter of salvation too individual and ahistorical. While Beste’s criticism relates more precisely to Rahner’s later development of a theology of freedom, her interrogation of the ability for Rahner’s theology to account for interpersonal harm can be seen as a development of Metz’s concerns. Each of these critiques implicitly calls into question whether Rahner’s theological anthropology offers a sufficient account of embodiment. In this chapter we turn to an analysis of Rahner’s understanding of the body, beginning with his early work and focusing in particular on *Geist in Welt*.

It is the fact that *Geist in Welt* is the object of so much critique that makes focusing on it worthwhile in studying Rahner’s theology of the body. If this text represents Rahner at his most philosophical and idealistic, then it can serve as a limiting case for Rahner’s writing on embodiment. A limiting case represents the outer limits of a function under extreme variables. Here those extremities are represented by the purpose

and scope of the project, a development of a Thomistic metaphysics of knowledge, and by the material condition of the project, a dissertation in philosophy. In short, we have every reason to expect this text to offer the least historical and least theological account of the subject. Taken as a limiting case, analysis of this text can help us determine more precisely the nature of Rahner’s understanding of embodiment, and of its potential weaknesses. Likewise, any defense of Rahner we can posit from this text alone should support his work as a whole.

While Rahner’s ultimate goal in Geist in Welt is to develop a metaphysics of knowledge, his argument turns on an ontology of human being as that which becomes itself precisely in, with, and through the other. In interpreting how Thomas’ axiom that all knowledge is rooted in the senses can be reconciled with the possibility of metaphysical knowledge, Rahner proposes the paradoxical idea that spirit accomplishes transcendence because of, and not despite, its existence in the material world. This requires an examination not only of the knowing subject’s relationship to the material world, but to her own materiality. Thus the nature of the body—while Rahner rarely uses the term—is a central part of this text.

In reading Geist in Welt, we will take a broad view of the argument as a whole, zooming in on those portions of the text where Rahner specifically develops an understanding of embodiment. As we will see, his argument not only addresses early 20th-century debates on Thomistic epistemology, but also the nature of the experience of God. To see this, we will need to examine Geist in Welt within the context of some of Rahner’s other early works. Read in light of his early writings on spirituality, it becomes clear that what Rahner develops in Geist in Welt is a theology of an embodied subject in
her relationship to God. Thus while many have argued that *Geist in Welt* sets out the philosophical foundations of Rahner’s theology, I will argue that it represents just one spring through which Rahner’s deeper theological commitments come to the surface.

**The Early Rahner’s “Ordinary Mysticism”**

While *Geist in Welt* is often taken as a philosophical starting point for his whole theology, Rahner’s first writings were actually on the history of spirituality. In 1922, briefly after his graduation from high school, Karl followed in his brother Hugo’s footsteps and joined the Jesuits. Shortly after, in 1924, he published his first article, “Why We Need to Pray.” As a student of theology at Valkenburg he began collaborating with his brother on a number of projects on Ignatian theology. Between 1922-37 he and his brother Hugo developed a catalog of early Ignatian primary sources. The impact of Ignatian spirituality on Rahner’s thought is confirmed in the work of Karl Neufeld, Herbert Vorgrimler, Annemarie Kidder, Philip Endean, and Harvey D. Egan, who all argue that Rahner’s first major publications in 1932 through 1934—on the spiritual senses in Origin and Bonaventure and on Evagrius Ponticus’ spiritual writings—emerge from his attempt to wrestle theologically with Ignatius’ Spiritual Exercises.

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133 For an overview of this tradition of reading Rahner, see Karen Kilby, *Karl Rahner: Theology and Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 9-10.


135 Kidder, introduction, vii.


In particular, Endean notes that Rahner develops his understanding of the immediate experience of God (unmittelbare Gotteserfahrung) along the lines of Bonaventure’s spiritual touch: “[Unmittelbare Gotteserfahrung] indicates something dark and often tacit, more a matter of feeling than of knowing.”¹³⁸ In this way, Rahner rejected the terms of the turn of the 20th-century debates on the nature of mystical experience, which offered the following dichotomy: either all people were called to a prayer life with no direct experience of God or that a direct and miraculous mystical experience was reserved for the few.¹³⁹ Rahner’s appeal to Bonaventure’s spiritual touch offered a third way—an intimate union of God and the self that involves no mental representation. Rahner’s use of the word “immediate [unmittelbare]” here refers not only to the experience of the direct touch of God, but to the fact that such a relationship is not mediated by thought or language. As Endean explains, “Thus the word “immediate” here does not mean clear and distinct: rather “[it] refers to an immediate contact between the self and God—a contact to which our conscious awareness has some access, but normally of an obscure and oblique kind.”¹⁴₀

Through the metaphor of contact rather than traditional epistemological models, Rahner was able to explain how the experience of God is possible without appealing to the miraculous. This allowed him further to argue that the experience of God is intrinsic and necessary to the subject—and therefore available in some vague way to reflection—rather than a violation of laws governing experience. This metaphor ultimately allowed him to proclaim that the extraordinary experience of God is profoundly ordinary. While it

¹³⁸ Endean, Karl Rahner, 29
¹³⁹ Ibid., 24-6.
¹⁴₀ Ibid., 30.
is difficult to prove definitively, Endean suggests that this reading is motivated by an Ignatian understanding of the centrality of the experience of God to the Christian life. \[^{141}\]

In 1935 Hugo and Karl produced a German translation of Jerónimo Nadal’s address on prayer.\[^{142}\] In their introduction to this text, they name two principles of Ignatius’ theology as “fundamental and distinctive in the Jesuit calling”—finding God in all things, and being contemplative in action.\[^{143}\] Endean suggests that it is in translating Nadal that Rahner gets the insight that “openness to the transcendent God does not preclude human activity, but indeed demands it” and that this in turn leads him to rethink the fundamental theology of his training.\[^{144}\]

Rahner’s superiors had planned for him to teach philosophy, and sent him to study at Fribourg. There he took a seminar under Heidegger and wrote the dissertation that would become *Geist in Welt* under Martin Honecker, finishing in 1936. In Herbert Vorgrimler’s words, its thesis was that “human knowledge comes about first and foremost in the world of experience, as the human spirit is always directed toward the phenomenon (conversio ad phantasma).”\[^{145}\] Given the work that Rahner had been doing, this project appears to be motivated by a desire to theorize about the experience of God presumed in the Spiritual Exercises. How is it possible to find God “in all things?” Thus, as Vorgrimler writes, Rahner’s analysis of Thomas in *Geist in Welt* should not only be placed in dialogue with Kant and Heidegger, but also “Ignatius and the significance

\[^{141}\] Ibid., 30-1.

\[^{142}\] Ibid., 4-5.


\[^{144}\] Endean, *Karl Rahner*, 76.

which human sense have for him in relationship with God.”146 Rahner’s development of a Thomistic metaphysics of knowledge is part of a larger analysis of the subject’s relationship to God.

**Geist in Welt**

According to Rahner, his purpose in this text is to demonstrate “how, according to Thomas, human knowing can be spirit in the world.”147 This construction “spirit in the world”—more accurately translated “spirit-in-world”148—refers to both the human being’s transcendence of and embeddedness in the material world. Rahner defines the two terms dialectically: “By spirit I mean a power which reaches out beyond the world and knows the metaphysical. World is the name of the reality which is accessible to the immediate experience of man.”149 Human knowing, as spirit-in-world, is therefore that which reaches beyond what is immediate to know the metaphysical. The question is how this reaching is accomplished. If spirit is in-world, how can it transcend that same world? Thus Rahner’s task is to provide a metaphysic of knowledge that can explain how beings in the world can have knowledge beyond what is immediately accessible. While his argument initially addresses the possibility of metaphysics—as that which by definition exceeds an intuition delineated by space and time—Rahner is ultimately concerned with

146 Ibid., 61.


148 Rahner’s title in German lacks the definite article, a grammatical choice which challenges any interpretation of the phrase as describing two distinct realities: spirit and world. As Rahner develops his argument in this text, it is clear that he is describing one reality: the spirit-in-world. The image here is not a spirit simply placed in the world, but of a spirit who actualizes herself only on account of her in-world-ness.

the possibility of knowing God. How is that finite beings can know and love an infinite God?

In the register of human knowing, spirit is represented by the agent intellect as the capacity that reaches out beyond the world. Likewise, that which is immediately accessible to human knowledge is available through sensibility. To ask how “human knowing can be spirit in the world” is thus to ask how the intellect knows the metaphysical via sensibility. How can the human being know through sense experience what is by definition beyond sense experience?

It is important to emphasize at the outset that Rahner’s goal is not to provide a general account of the subject as spirit-in-world, but of the knower as spirit-in-world. Thus his analysis of both the transcendence and in-world-ness of the subject are cached out in epistemological terms. At times, “spirit” and “intellect” are used interchangeably in this text. It would be a mistake to interpret this limitation as evidence that Rahner defines the subject as solely, or even primarily, a knower—or worse, that spirit increases proportionally to one’s intellectuality. Rahner states that “the problem of receptive knowledge is identical with the question of man” only insofar as they both understand the subject as one whose “presence-to-self” is always a “being-with-the-other.” In this sense, what is foundational to the human subject is this relationship to the other, not the intellect as such. Rather, the intellect is that constituent of human knowing that “reaches out beyond the world.”

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150 “We would not be true to the ultimate purpose of this whole Thomistic metaphysics if we did not let its intrinsic movement reach that point towards which it is ultimately striving…Man concerns Thomas the theologian at the point at which God manifests Himself in such a way that He is able to be heard in the word of His revelation,” *Spirit*, 407-8: *Geist*, 300.

151 *Spirit*, 77: *Geist*, 68.
The Conversion to the Phantasm

Rahner’s analysis centers on Thomas’ doctrine of the conversion of the intellect to the phantasm. He begins the dissertation with an excerpt of the article in which Thomas describes this doctrine,⁵¹ and the first of three parts of the dissertation is Rahner’s exegesis of this text. Rahner describes his method of reading Thomas as philosophical rather than historical. Whereas the latter would focus on the sources Thomas Aquinas used and the person Thomas Aquinas was, Rahner’s philosophical reading attempts to follow the internal logic of the argument itself:

…If what matters is to grasp the really philosophical in a philosopher, this can only be done if one joins him in looking at the matter itself…So our procedure here cannot be that of gathering together everything and anything that Thomas ever said, as though all were of equal weight, and organizing it according to some extrinsic principle…Rather what we must try to do is grasp his philosophy anew as it unfolds from its first and often hardly expressed starting point.⁵²

Rahner learned this method from Heidegger. When looking back on the significance of the philosopher’s work on his life, Rahner cited less the content of Heidegger’s philosophy and more its process:

He taught us how to read texts in a new way, to ask what is behind the text, to see connections between a philosopher’s individual texts and his statements that wouldn’t immediately strike the ordinary person, and so on…In my manner of thinking, in the courage to question anew so much in the tradition considered self-evident, in the struggle to incorporate modern philosophy into today’s Christian theology, here I have certainly learned something from Heidegger and will, therefore, always be thankful to him.⁵³

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⁵² Karl Rahner, introduction to Spirit, xlix-l: Geist, 12.
One can see this particular way of reading in this dissertation of Rahner’s. Rahner’s exegesis of this article is shaped less by a concern for historical accuracy—note the relative lack of attention to any historical sources—than it is by following a Thomistic line of questioning from inside what Rahner saw to be the philosophies of his day.

Rahner begins this analysis by following Thomas’ definition of the conversion to the phantasm as the intellect’s “reference of the universal to a ‘this,’”\textsuperscript{155} in an act of judgment. Broadly speaking, the doctrine states that the human intellect knows only through a turn to the phenomenon. All objective knowledge requires a concrete reference to the material world. “Something” Rahner writes, “is always known about something.”\textsuperscript{156} No judgments can be made, no universals can be thought, apart from such reference. Conversely, Rahner notes that one cannot think of an object without reference to a universal: “An “it” alone, without a “something” about it, cannot be conceived in thought at all.”\textsuperscript{157}

The doctrine of the conversion to the phantasm signals that the human intellect cannot exist apart from sensibility (or the capacity for sensibility, the imagination), but in fact requires sensibility “to be able to be itself in actuality.”\textsuperscript{158} The intellect does not operate in the body like an astronaut manning a vessel in an uncharted world. Rather, the intellect becomes itself only in union with sensibility: “Thus the human intellect appears precisely not as a fixed quantity based on itself; it is itself only in a union with what is not intellect (corpus passibile-phantasma)…In the radical unity of intellect and imagination,

\textsuperscript{155} Spirit, 121: Geist, 101.

\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., 122: 101.

\textsuperscript{157} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{158} Ibid., 31: 35.
the essential unity of possible body and intellect comes to light for the first time.”\(^{159}\) To say that all knowledge is a conversion to the phantasm is therefore to speak of the radical union of intellect and sensibility that constitutes human being.

The doctrine of the conversion to the phantasm places the human being firmly and unambiguously in the world. But this appears to threaten the possibility for her to “reach out beyond the world” and know things outside of it. “Thus,” Rahner writes, “the question of the conversion to the phantasm is the question about the possibility of metaphysics based on an intuition which takes place within the horizon of space and time.”\(^{160}\) What remains is to explain how it is that the intellect knows the metaphysical despite the doctrine of the conversion to the phantasm.

Rahner’s answer to this question is somewhat paradoxical. He argues that it is the very constitution of the subject—in which the intellect is only itself in union with sensibility—that enables knowledge of metaphysical things and, ultimately, orients the subject toward God. Thus what seems to be at odds, the subject’s identity as “spirit” and her existence “in-world,” are aspects of the one human being that increase in direct proportion. To understand how this is possible, it is necessary first to start with Thomas’ own definition of what knowing is, and its relationship to being.

In Thomistic metaphysics, knowing is being present-to-self. By this definition, it would seem that the subject only has access to her own being as an object of knowledge. Knowledge of the other would only be possible if, in Rahner’s words, “the knower itself

\(^{159}\) Ibid., 31-2: 35.

\(^{160}\) Ibid., 28: 33.
is the being of the other.”\textsuperscript{161} However, this is, he argues, precisely what we find to be true of human being. What is distinctive about the human intellect (as opposed to, for example, the angelic intellect) is that it is embodied. Rahner’s retrieval of the doctrine of the conversion to the phantasm entails that the intellect is only itself in union with sensibility—in short, only in union with what is other. Thus the intellect is capable of knowing the other because itself has “already and always entered into otherness.”\textsuperscript{162} This does not mean simply that the knower is sensible and therefore receptive to knowledge of the sensible. As “the being of the other” the knower is fundamentally constituted for the other. This being for another is the condition of the possibility of knowledge of the other, since Rahner writes,


 Only if a being is ontologically separated from itself by the fact that it is not the being of itself, but the being of what is absolutely “other,” can it have the possibility of possessing a foreign ontological actuality as its own in such a way that everything that is its own is by that very fact another’s because the being of the knower in question is not being for itself, but being for and to another.\textsuperscript{163}

One’s ontological separation from oneself is the possibility for receptive knowledge of another. The human being is defined by relationality and alterity at her most fundamental level.

For this entering into otherness to count as true “being of the other,”—and not merely an inhabiting of the other—the relationship between intellect and sensibility must somehow be intrinsic to the actualization of the intellect itself. If spirit is to know the other, it must know itself as the other, and therefore must produce sensibility in such a way that it remains an intimate part of itself. The language that Rahner uses to describe

\textsuperscript{161} Ibid., 79: 70.

\textsuperscript{162} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{163} Ibid., 80: 70.
this relationship is potency. Rahner writes that spirit “produces sensibility as its potency” in such a way that it “thus retains in itself sensibility’s accomplishment as its own.”

This means in turn that sense intuition is not merely something added extrinsically to the activity of the intellect:

Hence conversion to the phantasm does not mean intellectual knowledge “accompanied by phantasms” (which after all are not things, but a content of the one human consciousness to which thought also belongs), but is the term designating the fact that sense intuition and intellectual thought are united in the one human knowledge.

The intellect accomplishes knowledge, and thus actualizes its own potency, only in and through sensibility. Rahner refers to this aspect of human spirit as possible intellect:

intellect that requires material to actualize itself. As the being of the other, the human being requires the other in order to come to herself.

The intellect accomplishes knowledge through sensibility, but sensibility, as the being of the other, is always an abandonment of self to the other. Through it, the knower abandons herself to undifferentiated union with the world:

…If sensibility is to be the first and original reception of the other, of the world, if it is to be receptive intuition, it made this possible only by the fact that it became an ontological abandoning to the other, an act of matter. Therefore, it cannot let the other stand over against it at a distance as object because it is not “subjective” enough itself, it is too “objective,” it is always and essentially actuality of the other.

By entering into the otherness of its own embodied sensibility, the intellect unites itself with the otherness of the world. Thus, Rahner writes that, “sensibility could be more
correctly defined Thomistically as the *a priori* possession of world as such.\footnote{Ibid., 115: 96.} That is, prior to any act of knowledge the subject exists in an undifferentiated unity with the world on account of the fact that she herself is constituted by spirit’s abandonment of itself to the other—and therefore the world.

Given this possession of the world, typical epistemological problems concerning the correspondence between “interior” mental states and the “exterior” world become absurd:

\[\ldots\] The interiority of sensibility as the act of matter is precisely its exteriority, and vice versa.\footnote{Ibid., 81-2: 71.} However, such a possession of the world is not knowledge, strictly speaking, because it does not make a distinction between subject and object. The real epistemological challenge is not to show how the divide between the subject and object can be overcome, but how subject and object can be differentiated: “Thus for the Thomistic metaphysics of knowledge the problem does not lie in bridging the gap between knowing and object by a “bridge” of some kind: such a “gap” is merely a pseudo-problem. Rather the problem is how the known, which is identical with the knower, can stand over against the knower as other, and how there can be a knowledge which receives another as such.\footnote{Ibid., 75: 66-67.}

In other words, how does the knower know the object *as another* and not merely as an extension of herself? And how does the knower, as the being of the other, become a subject?

Knowledge requires a process of objectification, in which the knower recognizes herself as a subject standing against an object. Rahner refers to this process as abstraction. Because human knowing originates in a primary “being-with-the-world” (*Bei-der-Welt-Sein*) or “being-with-another” it must set itself *against* the other in order to know it in-itself (*Ansich*): “But human knowing is first of all being-with-the-world (*Bei-
der-Welt-Seing), a being-with-another in sensibility, and therefore knowledge of this other in its in-itself (Ansich) as proper object is only possible by setting the other opposite and referring the knowledge to this other which is set opposite and exists in itself.”¹⁷¹ Briefly put, Rahner defines abstraction, as the “liberation of the subject from sensibility’s abandonment of the other of the world.”¹⁷² In abstraction, a judgmental affirmation is made about the object, in which the intellect recognizes the object as an instantiation of a universal.¹⁷³

Only in this abstraction from the original apprehension of the world does the distinction between subject and object emerge. As the knower stands against the object so she too becomes a subject for the first time. Her self-knowledge is the corollary rather than the ground of knowledge of the other.¹⁷⁴ She does not exist fully present-to-self and then come into contact with possible objects of knowledge. Rather she comes to know the object and herself as subject in the same movement of abstraction:

When man begins to ask about being in its totality, he finds himself already and invariably away from himself, situated in the world, in the other through sensibility. Sensibility means the givenness of being (which is being-present-to-self) over to the other, to matter. So the sensible is always situated at that undivided mid-point between self-possession through a separative setting-self over against every other (Sichabsetzen), and a total abandonment (Verlorenheit) to the other which would completely conceal the existent from itself. But man asks about being in its totality, he places it in question comprehensively and in its totality (and thereby himself), and by doing this he places himself as the one asking in sharp relief against all the rest, from world and from himself as being already and always in the world through sensibility. Thus he “objectifies” the other and his abandonment to it that is already realized in sensibility. He returns from “outside,” where he already and always was. The other, which he himself

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 130-31: 107.
¹⁷² Ibid., 119: 99.
¹⁷³ Ibid., 397: 292-93.
¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 76: 67.
was in sensibility, which he received and which was conscious to him in such a way that as sentient knower he could not separate himself from it, since sensibility as such only receives the other in that it becomes it: this other now places itself at a distance from the knower, it becomes object (*Gegen-stand*)… It is not until then that man stands in the world as man…

Thus the intellect can be defined not only as that which emanates sensibility as a part of itself, but as that which returns from sensibility to stand against the object. In Rahner’s words, the intellect is “the capacity of the one human knowledge to place the other, which is given in sensibility, away from itself and in question, to judge it, to objectify it and thereby to make the knower a subject for the first time, that is, one who is present to himself (*bei sich selber*) and to the other (*beim andern*)”.

Through this process of abstraction, the knower can be said to “return” to herself, though not in such a way that would imply an original fully-formed subjectivity prior to the encounter with the other. There is no self before this return. Since the knower is the being of the other, self-presence is accomplished via the other. As Rahner summarizes, “coming-to-oneself (*Zu-sich-selbst-kommen*) is a coming-from-another (*Von-einem-andern-herkommen*).” Such a return does not entail leaving the other to come back to oneself. One’s coming-to-oneself does not occur in a rejection or negation of the world. The return is not “a complete liberation from the sentient possession of the world,” but rather “is always a coming from world and can only exist as a continual coming from world.”

Thus, the human being is one who through continual engagement with the world comes to herself.

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175 Ibid., 117-18: 98.
177 Ibid., 229: 175.
178 Ibid., 119: 99.
The Vorgriff auf Esse

As we have seen above, abstraction entails a judgment about a concrete referent with respect to a universal.\textsuperscript{179} However, according to the doctrine of the conversion to the phantasm, human knowing begins with knowledge of the concrete individual. This means that the intellect contains no \textit{a priori} categories or universals, but must deduce these solely from what is given in sense intuition. This appears to render null the possibility of judgment. If all knowledge begins with the individual, where do the universals required for such judgment come from?

In order to show how human knowing can be spirit-in-world, Rahner must show how the intellect can transcend mere statements about thisness to statements about whatness. In other words, how do I identify that this individual furry grayness beside me is just one instantiation of a category of things we call “cat”? I have a concrete sense intuition of this particular creature, but not of cat-ness itself. According to the doctrine of the conversion to the phantasm, I must somehow intuit cat-ness via sensibility.

For Rahner, the condition of this possibility is “an anticipation [\textit{Vorgriff}] (although empty) of the world in general, of space and time as a whole.”\textsuperscript{180} To explain what he means by this anticipation [\textit{Vorgriff}], it is helpful to use the metaphor of sight, where seeing an object corresponds to knowing it. We could argue that true seeing requires an active looking on the part of the subject. Similarly, Rahner argues that the condition of the possibility of objective knowledge is the subject’s active and outward

\textsuperscript{179} Ibid., 124-25: 103.
\textsuperscript{180} Ibid., 48: 47. Such anticipation is “empty” insofar as it lacks \textit{a priori} mental categories or universals.
relationship to the world. She must be constituted by a dynamic openness. Because this
dynamism is always self-transcending, Metz refers to the Vorgriff as “a negative limit-
experience [eine negative Grenzerfahrung].”¹¹⁸¹ Tallon offers “a reaching out without
grasping” as an alternative which highlights both the insatiability of the Vorgriff as well
as the impossibility of grasping absolute being—which, we will see below, Vorgriff is
oriented toward.¹¹⁸²

I prefer the common English translation “anticipation.” The semantic range is
broad enough to cover the restless striving of spirit under many registers of analysis, not
just human knowing. It is active (opposed to a term like “waiting” or “receptive”) but
does not describe an intentional act (as does “reaching”). Compared to Metz’s and
Tallon’s options it is more obviously connected with desire. It is easy to imagine
anticipation as something transcending the categories of thought, affect, and will—
something more interior to the subject’s identity as well as her relationship to the world.

This translation choice risks the misunderstanding that Vorgriff precedes objective
knowledge temporally. As Tallon clarifies, “Rahner does not mean an apprehension that
occurs before the concept, but rather an action interior to and constitutive of the concept
and of objective knowledge.”¹¹⁸³ Here we can return to our sight metaphor to clarify why
this is true. Vision is a condition of the possibility of my seeing an object. In this way it is
logically prior. However, there is no vision that exists chronologically prior to sight of the
object. I am conscious of my vision only on account of what I see. Likewise one’s

¹¹⁸¹ Andrew Tallon, “Spirit, Matter, Becoming: Karl Rahner’s Spirit in the World (Geist in Welt),”
The Modern Schoolman 48, no. 4 (January 1971): 156. Tallon notes Metz’s use of the phrase in both his


¹¹⁸³ Ibid., 155.
anticipation, as the condition of the possibility of knowledge of an object, is coextensive to the object it exceeds.

One beholds an object as object only if it appears against a background. From the perspective of the knower, recognition of an object therefore requires a field of vision larger than the object. The possibility of having an object in sight therefore entails a distinct relationship between the viewer—who casts her vision beyond the object—and the world—against which the object appears.

In a similar manner, Rahner argues that this empty anticipation of the world allows the intellect to perceive the object against a horizon of possibility.\(^{184}\) Now this horizon cannot be another object. If it were, then it would need to appear against another, larger, horizon. The anticipation of the horizon must be a fundamentally different sort of act than the apprehension of an object. It is therefore important to distinguish anticipation from any cognitive or content-laden understanding of the world. Likewise, the subject does not compare the object against the horizon as if they were two objects. Again this would require another horizon against which they could appear. Rather, in one act of knowing, the subject apprehends the object against its horizon.\(^{185}\)

In doing so, the subject recognizes the object as finite. Against the horizon, the object appears as an instantiation of limitation. Just as an outline demarcates the space within from the space without, the comprehension of the object entails also an awareness

\(^{184}\) *Spirit*, 142: *Geist*, 115-16.

\(^{185}\) This is a significant way in which Karen Kilby’s critique of *Geist* misses the mark. As she argues, judgment requires a *Vorgriff auf esse* no more than a judgment regarding a house requires knowledge of the galaxy in which it resides, Karen Kilby, *Karl Rahner*, 30. However, Rahner is not arguing that objects appear against a backdrop of other objects, but that objective knowledge is only possible due to a logically prior unobjective anticipation of being. Otherwise, as Kilby points out, Rahner’s theory would lead to an infinite regress of horizons.
of its infinite possibility. Thus, Rahner argues, what is given in sensibility alone prompts the intellect to recognize an object as a form limited by matter. The intellect escapes the limits of “thisness”—transcending the raw sensory data given by the object—precisely because the object is always given in relief against such potentiality.

Thus the synthesis entailed in judgment is not a matter of uniting two concepts with some sort of mental copula. The mind does not have access to this-ness on the one hand and what-ness on the other, in order to place them together in a flash of inspiration. This would require that sensibility and intellect were two separate but parallel constituents of human being. It would also violate the doctrine of the conversion to the phantasm. Rather, synthesis is a unified reference to an object, which on account of the empty anticipation of world appears as form limited by matter. We can thus revise our definition of judgment as the synthesis of an object with a universal that is itself always and already referential, albeit to an ambiguous “this.” To speak of the knowing subject’s anticipation of the horizon of being is therefore to speak of one dynamic relationship between the subject and world, within which objective knowledge is possible.

We are now in a position to see why the relationship between conversion and abstraction is not sequential but simultaneous. Logically speaking, each presupposes the other. We have seen above why the intellect is blind without the conversion to the phantasm. In the absence of a priori mental categories all knowledge is a turning to matter. The agent intellect or spirit produces sensibility, a process that constitutes in itself

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186 Spirit, 140: Geist, 114.
188 Ibid., 119: 99.
what Rahner calls “the decisive conversion to the phantasm.”\textsuperscript{189} That is, our very selves—not just discrete acts of knowing—are oriented to the phantasm. This means however that the conversion to the phantasm arises out of spiritual ground. The sensible “bears the mark of the spiritual,”\textsuperscript{190} remaining always under the law of spirit. Conversion likewise presupposes an abstraction, in so far as an object of knowledge can only appear given the “empty anticipation” of world on behalf of the intellect. Thus, Rahner writes, “Hence conversion to the phantasm does not mean intellectual knowledge ‘accompanied by phantasms’ (which after all are not things, but a content of the one human consciousness to which thought also belongs), but is the term designating the fact that sense intuition and intellectual thought are united in the one human knowledge.”\textsuperscript{191} They are “two sides of the one process,”\textsuperscript{192} we more accurately should describe as an “abstractive conversion.”\textsuperscript{193} Together they describe the one human knowing, in which subject and object emerge from the profound unity of self and world.

Like vision of an object, knowledge of an object entails a particular relationship between the world and the intellect that anticipates it. The intellect perceives the object in relief, and therefore as a form limited by matter, precisely because the intellect anticipates a horizon against which the object appears. The predicate of a judgment is therefore not a concept the intellect makes use of like a building block, but is itself

\textsuperscript{189} Ibid., 264: 199.
\textsuperscript{190} Ibid., 265: 200.
\textsuperscript{191} Ibid., 238: 180.
\textsuperscript{192} Ibid., 278: 209.
\textsuperscript{193} Ibid., 279: 210.
already an ambiguous reference to the world, which is made concrete in the affirmative synthesis.

Unlike sense intuition, this anticipation extends beyond space and time. Otherwise, space and time would not themselves appear against it. Anticipation exceeds intuition. Thus it is precisely because all knowledge is grounded in a conversion to the phantasm—and not despite it—that metaphysics is possible. Drawing a functional equivalence to Thomas’ *excessus*, Rahner argues that anticipation has as its proper end absolute being, *esse*:

> It is always true that man knows the finiteness and limitedness of a concrete, ontological determination (of an existent) insofar as it is held in the broader “nothing” of its potentiality; but this broader nothing itself is known only insofar as it itself is held against the infinity of the formal actuality as such (of being), whatever this might be: essence or *esse*. In the anticipation of this all knowledge is grounded.\(^{194}\)

The infinite potentiality of the form limited here by matter is itself visible. One recognizes the object as form limited by matter against the broader horizon of being as such. Just as the abstraction of form is the condition of the possibility of knowledge of the object in-itself, so also “the abstraction of *esse* is the condition of the possibility of the abstraction of form.” Thus, Rahner continues, “the in-itself is always grounded in an *esse*.\(^{195}\) Therefore each and every judgment entails a simultaneous anticipation of *esse*.\(^{196}\)

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\(^{194}\) Ibid., 154: 124. I have replaced the translator’s “pre-apprehension” with “anticipation” for the sake of consistency.

\(^{195}\) Ibid., 170: 135.

\(^{196}\) Ibid., 179: 141.
We should not let the fact that being as such is often “designated after the manner of a human object”\textsuperscript{197} confuse us. The anticipation of being as such is not objective knowledge. Being does not exist in the world alongside other objects; neither does the anticipation of absolute being exist alongside the subject’s other relationships to the world. Rahner uses language of the “whither” to describe this veiled disclosure of being as such. In offering a tautology—that anticipation is directed toward a “whither”—Rahner attempts to resist any naming that might promote the reification or objectification of absolute being. This language also draws attention to the fact that the “whither” discloses itself precisely only as that to which the anticipation is directed. That is, I am only aware of a “whither” insofar as I reflect (and thus objectify) my own anticipation as unthinkable without such a “whither.”\textsuperscript{198}

In other words, I cannot focus my intellect on being as such. Rather, in making my way as an embodied spirit-in-world I can bring to consciousness the restless striving that animates my activity and can posit that it has a \textit{telos}. Thus to say that the whither is only revealed in the \textit{Vorgriff} is to recognize that I can only know that my transcendence has a “whither”:

the anticipation (and its “whither”) is known insofar as knowledge, in the apprehension of its individual object, always experiences itself as already and always moving out beyond it, insofar as it knows the object in the horizon of its possible objects in such a way that the anticipation reveals itself in the movement out towards the totality of the objects.\textsuperscript{199}

\textsuperscript{197} Ibid., 143: 116.

\textsuperscript{198} Ibid., 145: 117-18.

\textsuperscript{199} Ibid., 145: 118. “Pre-apprehension” has been changed to “anticipation” for the sake of consistency.
Following this line of reasoning, the possibility of metaphysics is a condition for the possibility of objective knowledge. The burden of proof lies not on the one who has to show how one can get from sense intuition to metaphysics, but on the one who thinks an objective knowledge is possible apart from metaphysics. In this way Rahner has flipped the original question of the work on its head.\textsuperscript{200}

For Rahner, this has broader implications than merely the possibility of judgment or metaphysics. Rather, it speaks to what it means to be human. The human spirit is radically oriented to absolute being. Insofar as the possibility of human knowing presupposes the anticipation of absolute being, so also does every concrete act of knowing entail a motion toward that same absolute being. The \textit{telos} of spirit is the reception of being, which it has already anticipated: “Being as such in this material fullness, absolute being, is therefore the end and goal of the spirit as such. Every operation of the spirit, whatever it might be, can therefore be understood only as a moment in the movement towards absolute being as towards the one end and goal of the desire of the spirit.”\textsuperscript{201} Thus the human being exists already in a fundamental relationship to absolute being as both the condition and the goal of all her knowing.

That the human spirit has absolute being as its \textit{telos} signals to something even greater. The anticipation of \textit{esse} is simultaneously an affirmation of the existence of God. Since \textit{esse} is precisely that which the subject encounters as “able to be limited by quidditative determinations,”\textsuperscript{202} Rahner argues that, “it shows itself to be non-absolute,
since an absolute necessarily excludes the possibility of a limitation.” 203 Only an Absolute Being could fill the breadth of the Vorgriff. Rahner concludes then that in this specific sense “the anticipation attains to God.” 204

This Absolute Being must be affirmed as real; it “cannot be grasped as merely possible.” 205 Rahner distinguishes this argumentative move from what he calls the “paralogism” of Anselm’s ontological argument. 206 Rather, the subject affirms a “whither” characterized by negative rather than privative infinity. In short, she affirms that her anticipation is directed at something “more” rather than nothing. In this way God, as the Absolute Being, manifests itself in the “whither,” insofar as “the affirmation of the real limitation of an existent has as its condition the anticipation of esse, which implicitly and simultaneously affirms an absolute esse.” 207 However, Rahner clarifies that this is not an *a priori* proof for the existence of God as such. Rather, God is the condition for *a posteriori* knowledge of an object. 208 The latter differs insofar as it requires a knowing subject in the world who affirms God implicitly in her affirmation of the world.

As Metz clarifies in an addition to the text, because the subject encounters God as the condition of the possibility of objective knowledge—and not as an object of knowledge directly—this affirmation should be called an “unobjective-unthematic

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203 Ibid., 181: 142.
204 Ibid., 181: 143. “Pre-apprehension” has been changed to “anticipation” for the sake of consistency.
205 Ibid.
206 Ibid., 185: 145.
207 Ibid., 182: 143. “Pre-apprehension” has been changed to “anticipation” for the sake of consistency.
208 Ibid., 181: 143.
consciousness” (Bewusstheit) or “transcendental experience” of the Absolute instead of an “objective-thematic knowness” (Gewusstheit). In the sense that the subject’s relation to Absolute Being is intrinsic to her constitution, this consciousness can be termed an “a priori knowledge” of God, as long as it is clear that such knowledge cannot be brought to reflection. Rather, it provides the condition for the necessary “thematic knowledge of God.”

Grounding the thematic knowledge of God in prior unthematic consciousness is necessary according to Thomas’ metaphysics of knowledge. A purely a posteriori knowledge of God, in which revelation defies any expectation, is impossible: “God can never be a pure a posteriori if man is ever to know anything at all about Him. An absolute a posteriori, and in this sense absolutely “unknown,” something “coming from without” in every respect, is not knowable at all to a human subject according to Thomistic principles. For knowing is essentially the self-present (beisichseiende) actuality of the subject itself.” If God is wholly other, then no knowledge of God is possible. If one accepts the fact that knowledge of God is possible, then it is necessary to posit a union between subject and object. Metz continues,

Every knowledge of another by man is a mode of his self-knowledge, of his “subjectivity”; the two are not merely extrinsically synchronized, but intrinsic moments of the one human knowing. Now this holds also for man’s knowledge of God. And his transcendental-a priori “knowledge” (Wissen) of the Absolute, which is the condition of the possibility of an articulated, objective knowledge of the Absolute, is only the application in the metaphysics of knowledge of the “anima (which as itself is of course always subjectivity, “knowing”) quodammodo omnia”.

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209 Ibid., 182: 143.
210 Ibid., 182: 143.
211 Ibid., 182: 143-4.
212 Ibid., 183: 144.
Metz’s explanation here agrees with Rahner’s own declaration that this manifestation of God in the “whither” is not to be taken as positive objective knowledge: “For although esse is in itself the full ground of every existent, nevertheless, this fullness is given to us only in the absolute, empty infinity of our anticipation or, what is the same thing, in common being with the transcendental modes intrinsic to it. And so it remains true: the highest knowledge of God is the “darkness of ignorance.””

If this is true, we must revise our understanding of spirit as not merely that which reaches to know the metaphysical but that which is fundamentally oriented to God. Just as every judgment is simultaneously an affirmation of absolute being, so is it an affirmation of God:

If the agent intellect is the highest faculty of man, and if it must be understood as the faculty of man, and if in it absolute esse is simultaneously affirmed, then as a matter of fact the agent intellect is the metaphysical point at which the finite spirit comes upon his openness to, and his dependence upon, God. And that is true not merely in the general way in which every finite being points to the Absolute Being, but in such a way that the absolute esse is implicitly and simultaneously affirmed (implícite mitbejahnt) in every act of the agent intellect, in every judgment.”

Thus Rahner’s purportedly philosophical text opens the way for talking about the subject’s relationship to God. Here his epistemology emerges not only as anthropology, but theological anthropology.

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213 Ibid., 401: 295. “Pre-apprehension” has been changed to “anticipation” for the sake of consistency.

214 Ibid., 226: 173.
Insofar as abstractive conversion refers to the constitution of human knowing as intelligent and sensible, and to the necessary processes of judgment, it describes an unconscious process capable of being reflected on only through transcendental analysis. This is, however, only one register of human being as spirit-in-world. That human beings achieve self-presence through the other is a fact that conditions all of human life. That human being has God as its ground and goal affects the concrete and conscious lives of human beings.

Rahner begins Part Two by placing his analysis of the conversion to the phantasm under an existential and metaphysical approach to human being. Beginning with the irreducible fact that human beings question, Rahner demonstrates that the process of turn and return characterizes our entire being in the world. Rahner’s first move echoes the structure of the larger text: he translates the metaphysical question into the question about the subject herself. The one who questions simultaneously asks about the world and herself, since to ask about being is simultaneously to ask about oneself: “being is accessible to man at all only as something questionable [Fragbarkeit], that he himself is insofar as he asks about being, that he himself exists as a question about being.” At a personal level, knowledge of self and knowledge of world increase in direct proportion. Thus for Rahner, the metaphysical question is always and already the transcendental question, “which does not merely place something asked about in question, but the one questioning and his question itself, and thereby absolutely everything.”

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215 Ibid., 57: 54.
216 Ibid., 58: 55.
From what perspective does one ask the question about being in totality, and about herself as the one “who must ask about being?”\textsuperscript{217} She cannot stand outside herself; she cannot stand outside of being. It is a question that must be asked from within. The starting point is not some place outside the subject’s relationship to the world, but the question itself and her very need to question.\textsuperscript{218} The act of questioning, for instance, assumes a prior undifferentiated union with the world. The subject must always and already be in a (albeit implicit and unthematic) relationship with being. “Otherwise,” Rahner asks, “how could he ask about it?”\textsuperscript{219} And yet her asking demonstrates that she still lacks objective knowledge of being. What is implicit has not been made explicit.

The starting point is the question itself and the subject’s need to question. But where is this subject who questions? She is always and already in the world she asks about: “man is in the presence of being in its totality insofar as he finds himself in the world.”\textsuperscript{220} No negation of the world—here Rahner mentions mysticism and suicide as potential ways of rejecting the world—can ever erase the fact that the subject poses the metaphysical question from within the historical messiness of the world. Thus even for Thomas, Rahner writes, “there is only one knowing, in which man is himself: a knowing being-with-the-world [\textit{ein wissendes Bei-der-Welt-Sein}]. Only here is man called into the presence of being in its totality. It is here that he carries on the business of his metaphysics.”\textsuperscript{221}

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{217} Ibid., 59: 55.

\textsuperscript{218} Ibid., 59: 55-56.

\textsuperscript{219} Ibid., 60: 56.

\textsuperscript{220} Ibid., 62: 57.

\textsuperscript{221} Ibid., 63: 58.
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The fact that metaphysical questions are always asked by people in the world is not a simple truism for Rahner. It is a way of once again intervening into contemporary debates about the status of mystical experiences and of revelation in general. It is his way of definitively answering “no” to the possibility of experiences of God that do not abide by the normal laws governing human experiences. If the subject is to have an experience of God it is precisely in and through her being human and in-world, not despite it:

The world as known is always the world of man, is essentially a concept complementary to man. And the last-known, God, shines forth only in the limitless breadth of the anticipation, in the desire for being as such by which every act of man is borne, and which is at work not only in his ultimate knowledge and in his ultimate decisions, but also in the fact that the free spirit becomes, and must become, sensibility in order to be spirit, and thus exposes itself to the whole destiny of this earth. Thus man encounters himself when he finds himself in the world and when he asks about God; and when he asks about his essence, he always finds himself already in the world and on the way to God. He is both of these at once, and cannot be one without the other.  

One is in relationship with God because of, and in proportion to, her being embodied and embedded in the world.

In this existential analysis of human questioning, Rahner’s argument acquires a fractal character. Here, the relationship between knower and world is recapitulated at the level of subjectivity more generally. If our implicit relationship with absolute being is made explicit in our self-actualizing encounter with the world, so also is that entire structure of human being in the world made explicit in our reflection on the question of being. “Spirit-in-world” thus refers not only to the fundamental constitution of human being as embodied spirit, but the development of subjectivity over time in and through

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222 Ibid., 406: 299. The first line, “The world…to man” is an addition of Metz’s. “Pre-apprehension” has been changed to “anticipation” for the sake of consistency.
one’s encounter with the world. Parallel to the affirmation of God implicit in every judgment about the world, is the affirmation of God implicit in our question about being:

At every level of knowing, the human spirit reaches outside itself:
The human spirit as such is desire (Begierde), striving (Sterben), action (Handlung). For in itself it is possible intellect, that is, something which reaches its full actuality from its potentiality, and in fact by its own action, since by its own active power (agent intellect) of itself (always in act) it produces its object (the actually intelligible) from something only sensibly given.223

From the emanation of sensibility to her inevitable questioning, she is constituted by a restless desire for transcendence. In this restless transcendence, Rahner writes that the “the last-known, God, shines forth.”224 Thus, all human striving is ultimately a striving for God. This orientation toward God in turn constitutes the possibility of the subject hearing and responding to divine revelation.225

As spirit-in-world, the subject is simultaneously in the world and with God: “man is essentially ambivalent. He is always exiled in the world and is always already beyond it.”226 Following Thomas in defining human being “as a certain horizon and border between the corporeal and incorporeal”227 and “the horizon between time and eternity,”228 Rahner states that the human being is “the mid-point suspended between the world and God, between time and eternity, and this boundary line is the point of his definition and his destiny.”229 It is important not to misinterpret this language of suspension. The subject

223 Ibid., 281: 212.
224 Ibid., 406: 299.
225 Ibid., 407-8: 299-300.
226 Ibid., 406: 299.
227 Thomas Aquinas, SCG II. 68 quoted in Spirit, 407: Geist, 300.
228 Ibid.
229 Spirit, 407: Geist, 300.
is not stretched across the vast distance between the world and God.\(^{230}\) Rather, the revolutionary aspect of Rahner’s argument is the fact that these traditional antinomies are no longer opposed. The subject’s anticipation of the metaphysical makes possible her objective knowledge of the world, but in this objective knowing she encounters herself as one dynamically oriented to God. These are not separate activities: “man encounters himself when he finds himself in the world and when he asks about God; and when he asks about his essence, he always finds himself already in the world and on the way to God.”\(^{231}\) Thus Rahner writes, “each side of this ambivalence calls the other forth.”\(^{232}\) In the following section we will examine embodiment as the locus of this ambivalence.

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\(^{230}\) Here we depart from John McDermott and Patrick Burke, who have interpreted this ambivalence of human being as an oscillation [\textit{Schwebe}]. See particularly John M. McDermott “Karl Rahner on Two Infinities: God and Matter,” \textit{International Philosophical Quarterly} 28 (1988): 439-57, “Dialectical Analogy: The Oscillating Center of Rahner’s Thought,” \textit{Gregorianum} 75:4 (1994): 675-703; “The Analogy of Knowing in Karl Rahner,” \textit{International Philosophical Quarterly} 36 (1996): 201-16; and Patrick Burke, \textit{Reinterpreting Rahner: A Critical Study of His Major Themes} (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002). Rahner’s logic here is incarnational: Just as Jesus does not oscillate between his natures, nor do human beings oscillate between spirit and matter. Accordingly, McDermott and Burke’s interpretation is ultimately Nestorian. For a critique of this interpretation, see Robert Masson, “Rahner’s Metaphoric Logic,” \textit{Theological Studies} 71, no. 2 (2010): 380-409, particularly 387-91, 394-402. As Masson notes, “while a ‘dialectic’ of sorts does situate the human between the finite and infinite, the dialectic is not founded on a \textit{Schwebe}—and particularly not if this is understood as a hovering back and forth between opposed poles (grace over against nature, the divine over against the human, the supernatural over against the natural, the transcendent over against the categorical, the eschatological over against the provisional, the unchangeable over against the changeable). These are not opposed poles. The destiny and meaning of creation are realized in the dialogue between humanity and God initiated by God’s mysterious self-communication in our midst, that is to say, by God’s self-communication in Jesus and his Spirit. Consequently the divine is ultimately mediated through Jesus in our very humanity with all its embodied, interpersonal, social, historical, and cultural density,” 394.

\(^{231}\) \textit{Spirit}, 406: \textit{Geist}, 299.

\(^{232}\) Ibid., 407: 299.
As we have seen, in investigating “how, according to Thomas, human knowing can be spirit in the world,” Rahner develops an ontology of human being as that which becomes itself precisely in, with, and through the other. Embodiment is the result of spirit’s emanation of sensibility, or what Rahner also refers to as the “abandonment to the other of matter.” As Rahner clarifies, matter refers not to physicality but to possibility and potentiality. Matter is that which is determined by spatiality and temporality. In other words, in the emanation of sensibility, spirit becomes itself in space and over time.

In regards to knowing, this entails more specifically that the intellect, which is an active principle, develops a passive receptivity to the other that enables it to accomplish objective knowledge of the world. Thus, paradoxically, the activity of the intellect is the development of passivity. In Rahner’s words, “The spirit itself actively opens for itself its access to the world in letting sensibility emanate; it forms of itself the horizon within which the individual, sensible object can encounter it as already and always open.” The agent intellect has to produce its own capacity to receive knowledge of the world. It is important to note here that the structuring metaphor is not the penetrating gaze of the fully autonomous subject, but the openness of a possible subject. She accomplishes herself only in her exposure to the world. As we will see below, this exposure entails a certain amount of risk.

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233 Introduction to Spirit, liii; Geist, 14.

234 Spirit, 81: Geist, 71.

235 Ibid., 115-16: 95-6.

236 Ibid., 264: 200.
The human intellect requires sensibility “to be able to be itself in actuality,” it is “itself only in a union with what is not intellect.”237 But this union is not the later marriage of two fully autonomous individuals. The intellect emanates sensibility as proper to itself. In this way Thomas’ doctrine of the conversion to the phantasm entails the “essential unity of passible body and intellect.”238 The human spirit only exists as embodied and it actualizes itself via this embodiment. In short, spirit accomplishes transcendence because of, not despite, her embodied existence in world. Thus while Rahner does not extensively develop “the body” as a category in this text, the body—and problems of embodiment—are central to it. As Andrew Tallon writes, “implicit behind the specific effort toward working out a metaphysics of human knowledge is the more general motivating desire to establish a metaphysics of the human incarnate spirit, whose mode of knowing is but a way in which spirit is and shows its openness to all being, including God (as absolute Being).”239

This understanding of embodiment entails a fundamental ambiguity. Because spirit and sensibility constitute a union, but not a simple identity, sensibility is neither clearly identified with the self or the other. To speak metaphorically: it is truly I, not simply my body, holding this mug. And yet in reflecting on the touch of warm ceramic I objectify my own perceptions as data to be scrutinized, I posit myself as an “I” standing over them. In a similar manner, as the actualization of the agent intellect and “the receptive intuition of another as such,” sensibility is paradoxically both the “being-

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237 Ibid., 31: 35.

238 Ibid., 31-2, 49: 35, 47.

present-to-itself” and the “being-away-from-self-with-the-other” of the knower. In sensibility, the intellect simultaneously abandons itself to matter and sets itself over against it. On the one hand it represents the abandonment of spirit to the other in conversion; on the other hand it is precisely that by which spirit comes to itself in abstraction. Since abstraction and conversion are not two separate processes, but constitute the one human knowing, sensibility must simultaneously be self and not-self in its mediation between spirit and world. The resultant ambiguity of embodiment is not merely available upon transcendental reflection but also is, as we will see in the following sections, a feature of our conscious lives. The distance between spirit and sensibility limits the exercise of human freedom and makes human beings vulnerable to tragedy. But it also places us profoundly in community with one another as historical, interpersonal, and political beings.

As we have seen above, the body is the product of spirit’s emanation of sensibility from itself, by which the knower is the being of the other. This means at the outset that spirit does not have being proper to itself. Rahner clarifies this point at length:

To understand correctly what follows it is to be noted at the outset that in the question of the origin of one power from another and from the substantial ground of the spirit, we are not at all dealing with the relationship between a finished, complete existent as an efficient cause and an effect produced by it, but remaining extrinsic to it. Rather we are dealing with the intrinsic metaphysical constitution of an individual essence in itself as a single being in the plurality of its powers.

Sensibility is necessary to spirit’s accomplishment of self.

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240 Spirit, 81: Geist, 71.
241 Ibid.
242 Ibid., 253: 192.
This understanding of sensibility as intrinsic not only satisfies the requirements of Thomas’s metaphysics of knowledge—that knowing is the union of knower and known—but indicates something fundamental about the human spirit. Simply put, it is not self-identical. When speaking of the intellect Rahner describes the distinctiveness of human being as its possible intellect. We may then also say that the human spirit is possible spirit. It is fundamentally dependent on the other to come to itself.

Since it requires the other, the human spirit is not capable of full self-disposal. As Tallon clarifies, only “pure Being is already with itself” and perfect self-presence is the condition of perfect self-disposal. Thus, complete self-disposal is only possible for absolute being: “Matter is the mark of and the means by, in, through, and with which a different (and “lesser”) kind of spirit achieves, in many acts, acts that “take time” and “take place” what that other kind of spirit does in one act. This is the condition of the human spirit, whose self-presence is had only by first being present to other.” Tallon describes the limitation of this self-disposal by appealing to the metaphor of two “gaps” in the subject’s self-actualization. The first gap is the difference between spirit’s “actual self and its possible self,” which spirit attempts to close via the emanation of sensibility. Because this closure is incomplete—spirit does not accomplish itself perfectly via matter—there is a second gap, between spirit and matter itself. Enumerating these gaps highlights just how limited the subject’s self-disposal is. Not only does she have to accomplish herself over time, but must do so through a resistant medium.

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244 Tallon, “Spirit, Matter, Becoming,” 162. In these gaps, Tallon sees the root of the development of Rahner’s understanding of the supernatural existential and concupiscence, respectively.
In other words, self-actualization is something that occurs over time. I am not a fully-formed subject. I must become who I am. This process of becoming occurs in and through the material world. But here I experience another critical difficulty. The material of my actualization frustrates my self-actualization. A runner must master the course and herself. Likewise as I seek to close the distance between who I am and who I can be, I find myself at odds with myself. I am susceptible to fatigue, injury and sloth.\textsuperscript{245}

This gap however, between spirit and matter, is also the condition of the freedom of spirit. It is precisely because spirit is capable of objectification, of abstracting \textit{from} sensibility, that it can transcend sensibility. The runner is not identical to her fatigue, but capable of reflecting on it. While spirit is actualized via matter and only via matter, spirit is not exhausted in that actualization, nor reduced to that actualization.\textsuperscript{246} In abstraction, the subject distances herself from the object in order to know it as another. This distance however, since the knower is the being of the other, is also an objectification of herself as other. Simultaneous to the emergence of a subject against an object, is the emergence of spirit against matter.\textsuperscript{247} In this way, Rahner writes, humanity is “essentially ambivalent. He is always exiled in the world and is always already beyond it.”\textsuperscript{248}

Thus, in our analysis of spirit’s self-disposal we have arrived at an understanding of embodiment as fundamentally ambiguous. Spirit actualizes itself via sensibility but

\textsuperscript{245} The latter I mention specifically to counter the idea that materiality translates specifically to a colloquial understanding of the body as opposite the mind. Rather, for Rahner the human being is that being which accomplishes herself in and through matter, and our entire human being is such a spirit-in-world.

\textsuperscript{246} \textit{Spirit}, 292-4: \textit{Geist}, 220-1.

\textsuperscript{247} Ibid., 294-5: 221.

\textsuperscript{248} Ibid., 406: 299.
also encounters sensibility as other. The body is simultaneously the condition of self-disposal and its resistance.

In spirit’s emanation of sensibility, it “exposes itself to the whole destiny of this earth.” Such exposure cannot be without risk. The only concrete discussion of this ambiguity is when Rahner, following Thomas, mentions the possibility of insanity and senility as a consequence of this unity of intellect and sensibility in the conversion to the phantasm: “….human thought is delivered over to the powers of this earth even to the possibility of insanity (phrenetici) and senility (lethargici). The human metaphysical consideration of what man is begins at this point because in every man there is already realized what is to be understood conceptually in what follows: the human, intellective soul has its face turned towards the phantasm.” For Thomas and Rahner both, the doctrine of the conversion to the phantasm entails a fundamental human vulnerability. Spirit’s abandonment to the other is not without risk. The intellect’s dependence on sensibility to actualize itself entails that the capacity for human thought is subject to decay.

Rahner does not clarify how this vulnerability to decay can be reconciled with spirit’s freedom over against matter. How does one objectify one’s own rational processes? How does one stand as a subject opposite her own mental illness? Despite Rahner’s insistence that spirit transcends sensibility, insofar as spirit actualizes itself through the sensible its fate seems bound to the material world. What good is a freedom of spirit in the face of material destruction? There is an opening here to locate tragedy

249 Ibid., 34: 37.
more centrally in Rahner’s fundamental and philosophical account of the subject. In fact, Rahner’s later writings on the body—to which we will turn in the next chapter—extend this understanding of the body as vulnerability to the other.

At every level the human being comes to herself from another. Spirit accomplishes itself in and through materiality; the knowing subject emerges only against the known object; one comes to know oneself as a being already in relation with God and world. Rahner’s argument that coming-to-self is always a coming-from-another means that the self in his anthropology is not fully formed, but always in process and always in relation.

It is worth here returning to Metz’s criticism that Rahner’s transcendental method inoculates his analysis of the subject from the categories of history, memory, and solidarity. In Chapter One we reviewed Metz’s 1963 critique of Geist in Welt, embedded in his introduction to Rahner’s Hörer des Wortes, that Geist in Welt lacks analysis of the interpersonal nature of subjectivity. In particular, Metz charges that the focus on the spirit’s transcendence vis-a-vis objects of knowledge ignores the development of subjectivity vis-a-vis other subjects. We also examined Metz’s 1967 essay, provided as the forward to the 1968 English edition of Geist in Welt—where he suggests that this text’s own prioritization of freedom as a theological category necessitates the development of a “political theology.” Metz’s ultimate position is that Rahner’s transcendental theology leaves no space for the development of subjectivity in the face of the other.

To Rahner’s credit, while his transcendental method may appear to privilege a fully-formed subject in its focus on the stable and universal conditions of the possibility of human knowing, what Rahner names as the stable and universal aspect of human spirit is that it becomes itself in and through the other. Andrew Tallon has argued that this ontology opens the way for a theology of personization. Though Rahner does not use the categories of “person” or “personization,” in this Geist in Welt, Tallon argues that, “Rahner’s implicit concern, here in his earliest as well as in his later works, is personization, but never as a private, selfish, individualistic cult of self-perfection: the self-enacting of the person is through transcendence (openness) toward God as person, known and loved in, with, and through knowing and loving human persons for themselves.”  

Tallon admits that Geist in Welt alone is an insufficient account of the person, but names it as a major step in developing precisely the “metaphysics of person as personization” that “has made it more, not less, possible for him to go on to speak of person as free, self-creative openness to all persons, through whom persons become persons.”

Tallon’s reading is generous. Geist in Welt offers a subject who comes to self through the other, but—as Metz has made clear—not necessarily the personal other. Let us consider Rahner’s own example of the inherent risk of human embodiment: the possibility of senility and insanity. As we have discussed above, Rahner’s proclamation of the unity of spirit and body appears to open a space for tragedy. Nevertheless, this opening to tragedy remains apolitical. Insanity and senility appear as universally equal

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possibilities affecting the individual. This text offers no theoretical tools to analyze the way risk increases due to interpersonal harm, or natural and manmade environmental factors; of the intersection between access to treatment and one’s social location; or of the network of caretakers (or lack thereof) surrounding the victim. A successful anthropology will have the resources to ask, and propose solutions, to such questions. Such analyses require seeing subjects as fundamentally historical beings responsible for a past and to each other.

Admittedly, *Geist in Welt* is an idealized account of the human subject and not a full-fledged anthropology. Its scope is limited to an analysis of the human knower as spirit-in-world. Rahner’s purpose is both more fundamental and more modest than an attempt to offer an account of subjectivity. Rather he speaks of the condition of the possibility for subjectivity. Thus while I disagree with Tallon that in *Geist in Welt* we see Rahner begin to develop a theory of personization, I do not think such a lack is significant. The central interpretive question is whether Rahner’s analysis can be developed in the direction of a historical, political, interpersonal understanding of human being, or whether his starting point precludes such development. Is the personal other included in the umbrella of receptive knowledge of the other as such? Or does this metaphysics of knowledge diminish the ability for another subject to appear as anything but the material of one’s self-actualization? On the one hand Rahner’s system places the personal other under the subject of “other,” as if the person I meet face-to-face is one of many objects in my horizon. On the other hand, Rahner’s entire ontology of human being challenges the simple opposition of “self” and “other.”
We have shown above how Rahner’s metaphysics of knowledge in *Geist in Welt* turns on an ontology of human being as that which comes to itself in and through the other. Within this ontology, the body emerges as an ambiguity. It both constitutes the possibility of self-disposal and frustrates it; it expresses spirit and exposes it to risk and decay; it is the “other” through which spirit self-actualizes. Embodiment represents a liminal state between heaven and earth, home and exile, same and other. What remains is to see if this understanding of embodiment is sufficiently robust to describe the lived experiences of human beings. We turn now to the texts Rahner wrote immediately after *Geist in Welt*, which will clarify some of Rahner’s argument, and further solidify the place of Rahner’s anthropology in *Geist in Welt* in the context of an Ignatian understanding of the experience of God.

**Rahner after *Geist in Welt***

In Rahner’s own words, Martin Honecker failed the dissertation for being “too inspired by Heidegger.” To Honecker, Rahner’s dissertation was overly determined by contemporary concerns with the subject: he had replaced a classical analysis of revelation with a transcendental analysis of the subject and the possibility of revelation. By that time, however, Rahner’s superiors had already changed their plans for him. He would teach theology not philosophy. Rahner quickly began a second dissertation, finishing it shortly after arriving at Innsbruck. The dissertation, *E latere Christi*, is an analysis of

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257 Ibid., 62.
the typology of Church as Eve in John 19. We know from letters to his brother Hugo that he had already been working on this project by 1930. We know that Rahner exhausted his free time in Valkenburg reading patristics. Thus it appears that prior to, and perhaps concurrently with, his writing of *Geist in Welt*, he was developing an ecclesiology of Christ’s wounded body. It was to this material that he happily returned.

Rahner finished *E latere Christi*, which he called “a small, lousy, but at least according to the standards of the time, adequate theological dissertation” in September 1936. As Brandon Peterson summarizes, “The dissertation’s ecclesiology is not focused so much on the Church in se as a phenomenon, but upon the relationship of the body of Christians to the Person of Christ through the Holy Spirit, as expressed in biblical terms.” While the first five chapters of the dissertation runs through the history of the typology, Rahner concludes with some constructive ideas for a Christology founded on *E latere Christi*: that the piercing of Christ is important soteriologically; that salvation involves a symbolic participation of the Christian into the life of Christ; and that such participation is communal rather than merely individual. We mention this now to show that Rahner developed his argument in *Geist in Welt* while also researching and writing...

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263 Ibid., 260-5.
about Christian identity as a mystical, embodied, and communal participation in the person of Christ.

In 1937, Rahner wrote a series of prayers that would later be collected in the volume *Encounters with Silence [Worte ins Schweigen]*. A number of themes from *Geist in Welt* are repeated here: human being as that which restlessly seeks for the infinite; God as the horizon, “the infinitely distant One;” and the intimate connection between knowledge of God, self, and world. Read in tandem with *Geist in Welt*, this text clarifies a couple of major points with respect to Rahner’s overall argument.

First, Rahner is clear in this text that knowing represents a relatively narrow and insufficient understanding of the human desire for being. In “God of Knowledge” he writes that while it seems “that knowing is the most interior way of grasping and possessing anything…knowing touches only the surface of things… it fails to penetrate to the heart, to the depths of my being where I am most truly ‘I’.” Knowing itself is inadequate. Rahner argues that it is only when knowledge results in love that one is truly present to the object of knowledge, and only then does such knowledge actually effect a transformation in myself. Such knowledge and love is accomplished not through study, but through living: “Only knowledge gained through experience, the fruit of living and

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suffering, fills the heart with the wisdom of love.”

Thus, Rahner’s choice to analyze the human knower as spirit-in-world in *Geist in Welt* should not be taken as a privileging of knowing as an activity of spirit. The intellect is not the seat of spirit; it is but one expression of it. Further, this knowing born in living and suffering, present to the other in love, and effecting self-transformation, is not the activity of a subject who apprehends or comprehends the concept of God. Rather, Rahner says, “You have seized me; I have not ‘grasped’ You.”

Second, Rahner offers some insight in how to interpret the claim in *Geist in Welt* that the subject is always and already with God. On the one hand, Rahner argues that there is a silence and hiddenness to one’s relationship to God. If we hope to say with Augustine “You [God] were more inward to me than my most inward part,” Rahner laments that we are often separated from our own inwardness: “Every time I try to pray, I am doomed to wander in the barren wastes of my own emptiness, since I have left the world behind, and still cannot find my way into the true sanctuary of my inner self, the only place where You can be found and adored.”

On the other hand, he proclaims that relationship with God is a permanent element of human experience: “No matter how hard men try to break off relations with You, You are always present to them. Even when they attempt to lock and bolt their souls against You, You are there at the very core of these futile efforts.”

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269 Ibid., 30: 15.

270 Ibid.


Further, such always and already being with God does not negate the need for mediation. While the Infinite God is everywhere, Rahner argues, “We must take the ‘indirect route’ leading through Your Son who became man. Your grace comes to us not in the ‘always and everywhere’ of Your all-pervasive Spirit, but in the ‘here and now’ of Jesus Christ.”  

It is only through Christ that we encounter God and it is also only through Christ that we can truly encounter others. Thus Rahner’s insistence that we exist always in relationship with God is not a dismissal of the need for God’s revelation in Christ, only the condition of the possibility for us receiving that revelation.

Together these prayers flesh out the spirituality of Geist in Welt, offering us a subject always in contact with God, even if it is a dark and silent touch. Knowledge of self and knowledge of God are analogous precisely because neither is marked by the clear sight of objective knowledge, but by presence. Only by the light of Christ do we understand who we are, and who God is, more clearly.

In 1937 Rahner also published a small essay, “The Ignatian Mysticism of Joy in the World.” Here, Rahner places his argument from Geist in Welt in the context of an overall Ignatian theology. He begins with an analysis of the seemingly contradictory notion of mysticism, which seems to indicate an abandonment of world, and joy in the world. Part of the challenge in reconciling these two terms is the difficulty of defining

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“mysticism.” The problem is that mysticism seems to evoke an experience beyond ordinary faith or belief, and yet a real union with uncreated grace— with God in Godself—would not be a mystical experience but the beatific vision itself. The mystical experience must be something between: “Theologically, therefore, the question would have to be posed, whether and how there can be any middle term between faith and immediate vision of God, and if not, how then mystical experience should be conceived so that it remains really genuine and yet falls unmistakably into the sphere of faith.”

In this way of framing the problem we see support for Endean’s thesis that Rahner is trying to intervene in contemporary debates about the nature of mysticism and the problematic nature of separating mystical experience from a theology of grace more generally.

Unfortunately, Rahner does not continue his analysis here, but moves quickly instead to a discussion of piety as a cipher for a deferred understanding of mysticism. As he defines it, Ignatian piety is simultaneously committed to the cross and to the God beyond the world. In this duality lays the answer to the reconciliation between mysticism and joy in the world. In its dedication to the cross, Ignatian piety is fundamentally monastic. While the Jesuit does not necessarily leave the city like a traditional ascetic, in poverty, virginity, obedience, and prayer, he renounces the world in order to follow Christ. Thus whatever joy he has in the world, he does not have it apart from renunciation:

277 Ibid., 279: 281.
278 Ibid., 280: 282.
279 Ibid., 281: 282.
280 Ibid., 281-3: 282-4.
Ignatius does not admit for himself or his disciples any joy in the world in which the world and God, time and eternity, are from the beginning reconciled in amicable harmony. In the case of Ignatius, then, there can be no question of an acceptance of the world by which man is in the first place and as a matter of course in the world, that is by which he takes his first stand in the world, in its goodness and its tasks, strives for the fulfillment of humanity within this world and then finally—and as late as possible after this—also await happiness with God, to guarantee which, over and above his obvious task in the world and a moral life, he has to fulfill a few other conditions of a rather juridical and ceremonial kind.\textsuperscript{281}

Rahner states emphatically that for the disciple of Ignatius there can be no happy union with God apart from renunciation. The way of the Jesuit is the cross. If Christ demands that we too take up our crosses in denial of self and world, how is it that there can be an Ignatian experience of joy in the world? Paradoxically, Rahner argues that it is precisely this flight from the world that leads us to joy in it: “the basis of flight from the world constitutes the intrinsic possibility of Ignatian acceptance of the world.”\textsuperscript{282}

To demonstrate how this is possible, Rahner first has to set the cross in relief against the God of philosophy. As the ground of the world this God would seem to be present in it, but as free and personal, distinct from it. This God is ultimately hidden from reason and metaphysical reflection. Thus the one who seeks after God must instead wait and listen for this God to reveal Godself.\textsuperscript{283} Here, it should be noted, Rahner appears to be summarizing his argument from \textit{Geist in Welt}. As we saw above in this chapter, Rahner refers there to the manifestation of God in the whither of our transcendence as a hiddenness. His argument in \textit{Geist in Welt} ends with the subject waiting for a word from God in history.

\textsuperscript{281} Ibid., 283: 284.
\textsuperscript{282} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{283} Ibid., 284: 285.
In pursuit of this hidden God, the temptation is to identify God with the world. “But,” Rahner counters, “God is more than that. And as this more-than-the-world he has broken in upon man’s existence and has shattered the world, that which theology calls ‘nature’. He has revealed himself in Jesus Christ.”284 The one from beyond the world has entered into it. In turn, we are called out of the world—that is, out of the normal course of events, out of our nature left apart from such revelation—and into God.285 While our philosophical reflection leads us to a hidden God, the cross reveals a God beyond the world who has dramatically entered into history to call us out of it.

This radical interruption of the natural course of the world exposes it as insufficient and secondary:

And if God calls man in this command of his revealing word to a supernatural, supramundane life, as has in fact happened in the revelation of Christ, then this command must always necessarily be a breaking-up of the roundedness in which the world seeks to rest in itself, and so it becomes a degradation, by which the world—even the good world, the world in so far as it is the will and law of God — is condemned to a provisional status, a thing of second rank, subject to a criterion which is no longer intrinsic or proper to it.286

Insofar as the God beyond the world is recognized to be superior to the world, Christians must flee from the world.

At the same time, God’s freedom and hiddenness demand that we attend precisely to God’s word in the world, “for only his free action in history can reveal to us what he is in himself and how he wills to be related to men.”287 This is, Rahner says, what the

284 Ibid., 285: 286.
285 Ibid.
286 Ibid., 286: 286-7.
287 Ibid., 287: 288.
Exercises are intended for.\textsuperscript{288} Radically, this entails a commitment “to the Cross and to the foolishness of Christ.”\textsuperscript{289} To add to this, precisely in such obedience to the cross, one’s activity \textit{in} the world is elevated so that it also points beyond the world.\textsuperscript{290}

Suddenly, one’s ordinary life can be a sacrament of the extraordinary God. This is only the case, however, if one first submits to God:

\begin{quote}
Ignatius approaches the world from God. Not the other way about. Because he has delivered himself in the lowliness of an adoring self-surrender to the God beyond the whole world and to his will, for this reason and for this reason alone he is prepared to obey his word even when, out of the silent desert of his daring flight into God, he is, as it were, sent back into the world, which he had found the courage to abandon in the foolishness of the cross.\textsuperscript{291}
\end{quote}

Thus Ignatian immersion in the world is simultaneously recognition of the God beyond it.

From this perspective we can see the intrinsic unity, rather than contradiction, between the principles of indifference and finding God in all things.\textsuperscript{292} The Jesuit practices indifference precisely because God is beyond the world and therefore “all possession of God must leave God as greater beyond all possession of him.”\textsuperscript{293} But this also, paradoxically, means that God is beyond our privileged form of experiencing God. Mysticism itself is thus relativized. We can see now why Rahner chose to substitute piety for mysticism in his analysis: the mystical experience of God is, under Ignatian piety,
itself just one way to God. In Ignatian indifference one refuses to absolutize such a way, and is then open to seeing God in all things.\textsuperscript{294}

If we are correct in identifying the allusions in this article to the argument in \textit{Geist in Welt}, then Rahner’s metaphysics of knowledge exists within a broader Ignatian theology. Its description of the relationship between the self and God is merely a background against which the cross can be seen in relief. Whatever the nature of this dark touch, or of the \textit{Vorgriff auf esse}, it does not develop in a linear fashion toward the beatific vision of God. Rather, it must go through the cross.

This means further that to read \textit{Geist in Welt} as solely a philosophical text—to focus on its relationship to Heidegger and Kant for instance—is to miss that this entire metaphysical project is relativized in light of the cross. Whatever our philosophical reflections on the self, the world, and the Absolute, we wait for God’s word in history. For Christians that word has come, and continues to come, in the cross.

Unless we assume that Rahner, in a mere matter of months, is contradicting the overall thrust of his argument in \textit{Geist in Welt}, these reflections on the God-world relationship clarify in what way spirit is always and already with God. To begin with, this essay challenges the idea that the unthematic union with God, implicit in every act of desire, is sufficient for the Christian life. It is clear here that whatever the nature of this union is, it does not free Ignatius, or his followers, from renunciation of the world. Without the cross, God remains hidden; without renunciation of the world, it is not possible to find God in all things.

\textsuperscript{294} Ibid., 291: 290-91.
Conclusion: The Mystical Subject of Geist in Welt

Writing in the 1970s, Rahner retrospectively attributes the greatest influence on his work to Ignatius and Ignatian spirituality more broadly. We have seen in this chapter that Ignatian spirituality shaped even his earliest and most philosophical work, Geist in Welt. Read alongside Rahner’s other works, we see that it is only one part of a larger theological drama that Rahner centers on the disciple’s embodied relationship to the cross. Rahner is not merely concerned to show how the knower is spirit-in-world, but to theologize about the lived experience of God. The Ignatian influence is twofold: Rahner is reflecting upon the embodied experience of God as the content of his theology, but he is also reflecting on his own embodied experience of the Spiritual Exercises.

Many have read Geist in Welt as offering the philosophical foundation of Rahner’s theology as a whole. Indeed, as both Karen Kilby and Philip Endean have argued, the criticism Balthasar and his followers offer makes sense only if one assumes that this work is foundational to the rest of Rahner’s theology. Placing Geist in Welt in the context of Rahner’s prior and greater commitment to Ignatian spirituality, however, demonstrates that this work is simply the application of Rahner’s theological insight to the question of a metaphysics of knowledge. Here, Rahner’s lifelong commitment to

295 In a preface to his Theological Investigations 16, Rahner describes the Spiritual Exercises as an experience “characterised by discernment of spirits, by the process of choice, by the practical search for the will of God, to mention only a few aspects.” He goes on to say that such activity naturally expresses itself in theological reflection and that all of his “theological thinking sprang from the practice of the Ignatian Exercises,” Karl Rahner, preface to TI 16, viii and x respectively: SzT 12, 8 and 10. See also Endean, Karl Rahner, 4-5.

296 Anne E. Carr describes the development in Rahner’s thought between Geist in Welt and Hörer des Wortes, and Rahner’s later work, as an expansion from the human being understood primarily as knower to a conception of her as an embodied whole, “Theology and Experience in the Thought of Karl Rahner.” The Journal of Religion 53, no. 3 (July 1973): 359-76. Placing Geist in Welt in the context of “The Ignatian Mysticism” highlights that an understanding of the human person as embodied was always latent in his work.
proclaiming the ordinary character of the experience of God motivates him to engage in a transcendental experiment in fundamental theology of the *a priori* conditions of revelation. In Philip Endean’s words, “Rahner’s theology was driven by a passion to articulate what the human person must be like if prayer is possible, if we human beings can really make contact with God.” If the grace of God can be experienced in principle by all, then what are the conditions of the possibility of that experience? Here a deep underground river comes to the surface, but we should not mistake it for the river source. Such a reading can explain the deep connections between *Geist in Welt* and Rahner’s later theological ideas, without arguing that it provides their philosophical grounding. Rather, in *Geist in Welt*, we see the philosophical argument of a thinker deeply devoted to reflecting on the embodied experience of God.

It is in this broader context of theologizing about Ignatian spirituality that we must interpret the place of the body in Rahner’s theological anthropology. As we have demonstrated above, Rahner not only offers us an ambiguous body, but he offers it ambiguously. That is, ultimately the relationship between the transcendental and the categorical is still murky in these early texts. We do not yet have a robust understanding of the interpersonal, nor of a theology of divine revelation, nor of history. Rahner’s texts here, while they focus on the conditions of the possibility of the experience of God provide little in the way of guidance for concrete discernment of such experience. We turn now to Rahner’s development of these ideas in his later writings.

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Chapter 3: Freedom Embodied

In the 1920s and 30s, Karl Rahner began to develop a theology rooted in the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola, as well as the spiritual writings of Evagrius Ponticus, Origin, and Bonaventure. Central to this theology was the insight that the experience of God is available to everyone. In order to explain how such an experience could be integrated in the natural order of human lives without reducing God to something humans can understand, Rahner appealed to the metaphor of the dark touch. Human beings always and already exist in an intimate relationship with God apart from mental representation or knowledge in the strictest sense. In the prayers gathered together in Encounters with Silence, Rahner compares this knowledge of God to one’s knowledge of self. Self-understanding resists and defies classification. For example, I cannot articulate fully or even adequately who I am, or the complete motivations for what I do. And yet, Rahner would say, this failure is not to be conceived in terms of distance or ignorance. Whatever my relative success in self-reflection I remain myself. In a similar manner, Rahner argues that all human beings abide in deep intimacy with God, even if no light is ever shed on such union. Understanding the knowledge of God as a dark touch entails that unthematic knowledge of God is both more integral to self-identity and more primary in one’s relationship to God than any mental representation of God available to our conscious reflection.

As we saw in Chapter Two, reading Geist in Welt in light of Rahner’s Ignatian commitments exposes the text as not only a Thomistic metaphysics of knowledge, but also a profound reflection on the possibility of embodied experience of God. In it, he
examines the precise metaphysics of knowledge that would make such a dark touch possible. Beginning with Thomas’ doctrine of the conversion to the phantasm, he develops an ontology of human being as spirit-in-world. This spirit-in-world comes to herself in and through the other. Paradoxically, she is defined as the one who transcends herself. Her categorical experience of desire—seeking after truth, goodness, and beauty—is just the visible surface of a being who fundamentally desires God. She who is open to the other is radically constituted by openness for the Other. In this understanding of the human person, embodiment is the medium for, rather than the obstacle to, knowledge and love of God. Our unthematic knowledge of God via the dark touch is actualized in the material of our embodied lives.

At hand in this chapter is the relationship between this dark touch and our conscious religious (or non-religious) identities. In Rahner’s later work he continues to develop the precise relationship between this unthematic connection with God and our concrete, explicit, love of God. Some of his most famous and controversial ideas, like the supernatural existential or the anonymous Christian, arise from his understanding of this relationship. Rahner’s understanding of human being’s spiritual nature—encompassing both her relationship to God and her relationship to self—is grounded on an ontology of the human being as that spirit which becomes in and through matter. Thus the question of whether or not Rahner has adequately theorized about the relationship between the unthematic and explicit knowledge of God is ultimately a question about the adequacy of Rahner’s account of embodiment. In this chapter, I argue that the unity Rahner identifies between one’s fundamental option for God and her concrete activity allows us to locate the decision for God in history, as effected in a life lived in love of one’s neighbor, while
the distinction between them allows us to hold out hope for the possibility that what appears as a “no” at the categorical level may in fact be an actualization of an ultimate “yes” to God.

To see this, we must turn to those writings that address most specifically the tensions and paradoxes of embodiment, particularly with respect to how one’s always already relationship with God intersects with conscious religious activity. While Rahner’s theological anthropology—including his account of freedom—is the subject of entire books by Rahner, his writings on embodiment are scattered throughout his corpus, often under the heading of other topics. Piecing together a cohesive account of the body requires an interpretive dialectic, moving between Rahner’s often idealized accounts of the subject to his concrete and pastoral accounts of the reality of human—and Christian—existence.

We will begin with Rahner’s early theological writings following Geist in Welt, particularly Hörer des Wortes, in which Rahner continues to develop his theological anthropology.²⁹⁸ Within the context of offering a philosophy of religion, Rahner describes the human being as one who waits for God’s free revelation in history and who makes of her own history a “yes” or “no” to such a revelation. This broader understanding of the relationship between freedom and historicity of spirit-in-world

provides the contours of Rahner’s understanding of embodiment in general. Here he continues to proclaim that, in the human person, free spirit only accomplishes itself in the material of space-time. As Rahner develops in his later writings, this means that one exercises one’s freedom within a network of necessity, and thus freedom is always “still an interplay with everything that is not free, not spiritual, and so on.” In other words, since the human being is spirit-in-world, her self-actualization is always mutually constituted by the world in which she lives.

This universal feature of human existence becomes apparent when such worlds are hostile to the exercise of freedom. At the end of this chapter, we will turn to Carmichael Peters’ and Bryan Massingale’s understanding of black rage through the lens of Rahner’s conception of spirit-in-world. As they argue, if the objective material available to one’s freedom is precisely a world that rejects the operation and possibility of that freedom, then one’s affirmation of God and self can only take the form of a provisional “no” to the world. Their understandings of black rage as evidence that spirit is inviolable and yet profoundly affected by the category of “world” offers a concrete way to think of the relationship between the transcendental and categorical. Since the hostility of one’s world is constitutive of one’s self-presence, Peters argues that it is warranted to translate Rahner’s language of the “qualification of human transcendental self-presence” to a more contemporary understanding of “socialization.” Massingale goes further to argue that black rage is a mediation of grace in the world. Together they expose where Rahner’s work can be developed and

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301 Peters, “A Rahnerian Reading of Black Rage,” 205.
clarified for a theology of embodiment. This work will help prepare for a constructive re-reading of Rahner’s theology of embodiment in Chapter Five.

**Hörer des Wortes**

Rahner finished his theological dissertation, *E latere Christi*, in 1936. In the summer of 1937, between finishing his Habilitation and beginning to teach at Innsbruck, he presented a series of fifteen lectures entitled “On the Basis of a Philosophy of Religion” at the Salzburger Hochshulwochen. These he eventually published in 1941 as *Hörer des Wortes*.

The subject of these lectures is philosophy of religion. Theology is introduced only as a helpful comparison, through which the meaning and foundation of philosophy of religion can be deduced. The relationship of the two sciences is to be found in understanding their relationship to the ground of all sciences: metaphysics. Since philosophy of religion deals with “knowledge of the right relation between ourselves and God, the human and the Absolute,” Rahner argues that it is itself an inner moment of metaphysics. Thus, “the validation of the philosophy of religion coincides ultimately with the self-validation of metaphysics.”

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304 Ibid., 4: 14.

305 Ibid., 4: 16.
Theology however, is “a listening to the freely proffered self-revelation of God through God’s own word.”\(^{306}\) The epistemic validation of theology, and therefore its relationship to metaphysics, is more difficult to deduce. There is no standard, for instance, against which God’s word can be judged. Thus theology’s epistemic grounding must lie not in the validation of God’s word in history, but in the possibility of the human being to hear it: “it [an epistemological validation of theology] can establish that it is \textit{a priori} possible for us to hear an eventual revelation of God.”\(^{307}\)

This is exactly, Rahner argues, what metaphysics and philosophy of religion do:

Metaphysics, which is already a philosophy of religion, must acknowledge God as the one who is free and unknown; it must understand human persons as beings who, in our innermost spirit, live in history; it must refer us to our history and bid us listen in it to an eventual revelation of this free unknown God. Such a metaphysics will view God as one who is free and unknown, and who cannot be clearly grasped by human groping. It will not make bold to decide \textit{a priori} how this free, personal, unknown God will behave toward us, how and in what guise this God will be and can be revealed, how God will establish the relation between God and humanity.\(^{308}\)

Thus, Rahner argues, the question of the relationship between philosophy of religion and theology ultimately comes down to metaphysical anthropology. Such anthropology recognizes the human being as \textit{spirit}—that is, standing before a free God—and \textit{historical}—that is, “oriented toward the historical event of a revelation, in case such a revelation should occur.”\(^{309}\) If metaphysics identifies the human person as one who waits for a word from God in history, then philosophy of religion identifies specifically the relationship of this knower and the Absolute, and theology reflects upon revelation in

\(^{306}\) Ibid., 5: 16.

\(^{307}\) Ibid., 5: 18.

\(^{308}\) Ibid., 8: 24.

\(^{309}\) Ibid., 9: 26.
history. The goal of this text, then, is to offer a philosophy of religion—that is, a metaphysical anthropology—that shows how the human being is the one who waits for a word from the Absolute God in history.

Rahner’s argument in *Hörer des Wortes* can be briefly summarized as following: *First* being as such is present to self and therefore intelligible, the human being as spirit is open to being as such and, therefore being as such is fundamentally intelligible to human beings. *Second*, human beings are those who can and must inquire about being—can, because being is intelligible to them, and must, because they do not have *a priori* knowledge of being. As Rahner argues, pure being is free. Therefore God may choose to disclose Godself or not. In his words, “the God before whom we stand in our transcendence, is the free one.” *Third*, human beings are historical beings and therefore any possible revelation must take place in an historical word and thus “humankind must in our human history listen for the historical revelation of God which may come in the human word.”

The reader will recognize many of these steps from *Geist in Welt*—for example, beginning with the ontological starting point of the unity between being and knowing, and the anthropological starting point that human beings ask about being. Here, as in *Geist in Welt*, Rahner provides a metaphysical anthropology of the subject who, as spirit-in-world, is open to God as the Absolute Being, whom she co-affirms in all judgment as the whither of her transcendence. In many ways, this text is a sequel to *Geist in Welt*,

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310 Here I am following the contours of Rahner’s own outline on 140-42: 250, 252, 254.

311 Ibid., 140: 252.

312 Ibid., 142: 254.
which ends by proclaiming that the human being “can listen to hear whether God has not perhaps spoken, because he knows that God is; God can speak because He is the Unknown.” Where Geist in Welt addresses the general condition for the possibility of metaphysics given that human beings exist in space and time, here in Hörer des Wortes Rahner turns specifically to the condition for the possibility of hearing divine revelation. Geist in Welt is a transcendental analysis of the fact that man fragt; Hörer des Wortes is an analysis of the fact that man hört. The crucial difference in these arguments is the analysis of God as a free, personal being who chooses whether or not to reveal Godself. Here, Rahner clarifies that our unthematic knowledge of God does not render God’s freedom null, nor God’s revelation redundant.

The Free Word of God

After summarizing the first two steps of his argument, in which he demonstrates that the subject is open to being—which is luminous—and inquires about it, Rahner questions rhetorically whether or not this relationship between the human being and being as such excoriates the need for divine revelation:

What we have said hitherto might produce the impression that a revelation, in the sense of the free unveiling of something of itself essentially hidden, is impossible, because in principle every being is always already manifest, and does not need to be revealed. In this event revelation would be nothing else than the immanent and necessary unfolding of this openness of being that is the start always present in the spirit as such. The challenge is to show how human beings, as spirit, are genuinely open to being such that a revelation is possible. If the subject is closed off to being, she will have no ears to

\(^{313}\) Ibid., 408: 300.  
\(^{314}\) Ibid., 57: 108.
hear any word from God. If she is always and already in union with being, she will have no need for a historical word. Thus Rahner moves on from the basic anthropology first developed in Geist in Welt to ask the following question: “How can they [Christian anthropology and metaphysics] explain human nature in such a way that, without giving up either our transcendence toward being as such or the inner luminosity of being, human transcendence does not anticipate the content of a free revelation?”315 This is the question that drives much of what follows in Rahner’s argument. He goes on to say that the answer resides in God’s nature as a free and personal being: “The solution of the problem will have to show how a free self-manifestation of the free personal God remains possible despite the fact that this free revelation can be addressed to a being who is capable of perceiving it.”316

To begin with, Rahner notes that we can get a partial answer just by reflecting on our status as finite beings and the resultant limitations of knowledge. However, Rahner’s ultimate answer goes further than this—revelation is necessary not merely because we are limited, but because God is free and therefore free to remain hidden:

It is not enough for us to know that God is more than what we have hitherto grasped of God in our human knowledge, as we get to know it in an anthropology. We must also know that God may speak and may refrain from speaking. Only then can God’s actual speaking to us, if it really happens, be understood for what it is: the unpredictable act of God’s personal love, before which we fall upon our knees in worship.317

315 Ibid., 58: 110.
316 Ibid.
317 Ibid., 64: 124.
In other words, God does not just exceed our categories, but can remain hidden in another, more fundamental way—as a person God chooses whether or not to disclose Godself.

Imagine that I stand before a person. This face-to-face encounter is on its own a certain relationship, and satisfies the condition of the possibility of speech. But it is not yet speech, nor is it a demand for speech. Unless the other chooses to disclose herself, I cannot know her. She is doubly hidden: characterized by a depth I cannot exhaust, but also free to communicate herself or not. Likewise, as spirits open to being we stand in front of God and wait for a word. But this standing face-to-face does not force God to speak, nor is it a sufficient revelation unto itself.\textsuperscript{318} This standing face-to-face is an opportunity for revelation. The fact that we \textit{can} and \textit{must} inquire about God, then, is not merely a statement about our being finite, or our position with respect to the infinite: it is a statement about God, who as a personal being is free. Highlighting God’s nature as a free, personal being, not only explains how revelation is still possible, but also emphasizes that such a revelation, given in freedom, would be a gratuitous act of love.

Such a free revelation of oneself is qualitatively different than any other unfolding of knowledge. It is not governed by any exterior circumstance. God’s self-revelation is not determined by spirit’s natural openness for God: “Now a free activity is always unpredictable, hence final and unique. Therefore such a revelation is not simply the continuation of the manifestation of being that would already, although only inchoately, have started for us in its definitive and final direction with our natural knowledge of

\textsuperscript{318} Rahner admits that in a certain way both silence and speech constitute a revelation. That we stand in front of God with ears to hear, waiting in anticipation means that there “always occurs something like a revelation, namely, the speaking or the silence of God” because “should God not speak, the spirit hears God’s silence,” Ibid., 72: 138.
Divine revelation does not serve as a step stool, assisting us in grasping just what is out of reach, or a telescope pointed further down a line we have already surveyed. As a free, personal being, God’s self-revelation is always gratuitous, always a disclosure of the unknown, even when we are already standing face-to-face or united with God in a dark touch.

*Human Being as Hearer of the Word*

*Geist in Welt* established the possibility of an intuition that reaches beyond space and time, but this only places the subject before Absolute Being. In *Hörer des Wortes*, Rahner clarifies that though she has ears to hear, she must still wait for God to speak. Two significant aspects of Rahner’s anthropology come to light in this text: the subject’s freedom and the subject’s historicity.

Just as God is free to disclose Godself or not, the human being is also free to respond to such a revelation. As spiritual beings, we are capable of directing our own lives. Such freedom is built into our most basic activities of knowing and doing. Repeating his argument from *Geist in Welt*, Rahner identifies the return of the subject to herself—who now stands against the world as hers—as constitutive of freedom:

Human activity is free. But there can *a priori* be freedom only where as acting subjects we occupy a position that is independent of the position of the object of our actions. Because in our judgments we return completely into ourselves, thus occupying a position opposed to and independent of the objects of our knowledge, we are free before this object and can freely act upon it. And the other way round: the fact that we can act freely with the things of our world shows that, when we act on purpose, we are self-subsisting in our knowledge and action.320

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319 Ibid., 71: 136.
320 Ibid., 43: 84, 86.
In standing against the object of knowledge, the knower recognizes herself as separate from it, and thus capable of judging and acting upon it. Independence from objects in and through the return to the self is thus the most basic form of freedom and, therefore, spirituality: “we are self-subsistent and capable of freely acting and deciding our own destiny. We call this basic makeup of the human person, affirmed in every act of knowledge and of freedom, our spiritual nature.”

However, this is only half of the story. We know from Geist in Welt that human knowledge is both active and passive, free and unfree. Before the subject stands against the object, the object produces an effect upon her, it impresses itself on her senses. Here we see freedom as part of a call and response between the subject and the world. The freedom to judge and act upon the world is marked by separation, but not a complete or primary one. The subject moves from receptive (the object impressing on her senses) to active (the agent intellect acting upon the object). Since we know from Geist in Welt that conversion and abstraction are not two subsequent activities, but two simultaneous moments that constitute the one knowing, so also the subject is simultaneously the one acted upon and the one freely acting. This must affect how we interpret what Rahner means by freedom. If the subject’s freedom—and therefore her spiritual nature—is constituted by the ability to judge and act upon the world as a subject separate from it, it is equally constituted by the ability to be acted upon by the world. The return to the self is always a return from something. The subject who acts as a free agent in the world does so...

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321 Ibid., 53: 102.

322 Ibid., 114: 202, 204. Receptive knowledge fundamentally entails the acting of one being upon another.
as one capable of recognizing and reflecting upon the impressions the world has made on her—not as one who is by nature unimpressionable.

As Rahner argues, this freedom to determine oneself is itself an aspect of the human being’s spiritual nature. This is because in and through such determination the subject makes a decision about herself and about God. To understand how this is the case we must first look at the peculiar nature of human freedom. Following Heidegger, Rahner proclaims that human existence is thrownness [Geworfenheit]. That is, it is marked by a radical contingency. I am indeed the product of other free beings, exercising free—and thus unpredictable—choices. I can imagine the past otherwise. The world would be intelligible without me. And yet here I am, and this “I” is itself a center of free activity, which in exercising its will affirms its value over and against the world. Entailed here is a paradox: despite our thrownness, “we must necessarily be present to ourselves, affirm ourselves, posit ourselves absolutely.”\footnote{Ibid., 67: 128.} That is, though we are contingent we take up a relationship to ourselves that is absolute. We make a choice for ourselves.

To posit the contingent absolutely is by definition to will.\footnote{Ibid., 68: 130.} Thus the primary self-relation is one of will,\footnote{Ibid.} and in this will, Rahner argues, we ratify God’s own choice for us:

At the basis of human existence is always enacted [sich vollzieht] a necessary and absolute affirmation of the contingent reality that we ourselves are, i.e., will. It always goes together with an affirmation of the luminosity of being as such. It follows that this necessary volitional affirmation can only be conceived as the ratification [Nachvollzug: re-enacting] of a free absolute positing of something that is not necessary. For should this absolute positing of contingent human
existence not originate from a free will, the basic luminosity of being as such would be eliminated. By affirmation, Rahner is referring to a radical, formal relationship to oneself independent of the specific, categorical content of that relationship:

We necessarily assume an affirmative stance toward ourselves, because even when in thought and in action we say “No” to ourselves, we still affirm ourselves as being, because in the very act of such a denial we still presuppose ourselves as possible object of such an act, hence as being…our existence is, despite and in its contingency, something unavoidable for us, something we have to take up.

In other words, whatever form my self-reflection takes—whether I consciously affirm myself as made by God or fall into despair—I still affirm myself in some way. Both acceptance and rejection of my own self as something willed by God affirms the fact that I am something that demands accepting or rejecting, that I am a free, personal, being whose presence demands a response, even from myself. Thus any act of will is implicitly an affirmation that God has first willed me.

In recognizing that she could not have been, the subject understands herself as freely willed by God. To be willed by God is to be loved into being: “For love is the luminous will willing the person [gelichtete Wille zur Person] in his or her irreducible uniqueness.” In positing her contingent self absolutely—whatever the form that self-relationship takes—she too affirms herself as one willed and loved by God. This affirmation is what makes God’s activity intelligible. We join God in God’s love and affirmation of our uniqueness, and from here we can know and love God:

Now God’s free action is luminous for us only when we do not merely take it as an act. We must also ratify [nachvollziehen: re-perform, re-enact, identify with,

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326 Ibid., 69: 130.
327 Ibid., 77: 144.
328 Ibid., 81: 150.
actively unite with] it in our love for it, thus experiencing [erleben] it, as it were, in its origin and its production. Thus love is the light of the knowledge of the finite and since we know the infinite only through the finite, it is also the light of the whole of our knowledge. In final analysis, knowledge is but the luminous radiance of love.\textsuperscript{329}

Here love joins knowledge as the center of Rahner’s analysis of the subject as spirit-in-world and hearer of the word.\textsuperscript{330}

But if every act of the will—including hatred of God and self—implicitly affirms both God and self, then there exists an irreducible love of God in every human being:

At the heart of the finite spirit’s transcendence there lives a love for God. Our openness toward absolute being is carried by our affirmation of our own existence…This implies that our self-actualizing [sich vollziehende] standing before God through knowing (which constitutes our nature as spirit) possesses, as an intrinsic element of this knowledge, a love for God: our love for God is not something that may happen or not happen, once we have come to know God. As an intrinsic element of knowledge it is both its condition and its ground.\textsuperscript{331}

This however seems to threaten the very freedom for which Rahner is arguing. Is the subject, for instance, free to say “no” to God?

Rahner answers this question by affirming that all humans are free with respect to finite objects and values.\textsuperscript{332} That is, with respect to any particular thing, the subject exercises her will freely. And while affirmation of self and God are ultimately necessary, Rahner argues that a person is still free with respect to the finite objects and values through which she makes this affirmation: “Before single values, insofar as they are given in our representations, we are free, because values are always represented as finite

\textsuperscript{329} Ibid.,
\textsuperscript{330} In fact, Rahner insists that willing and knowing are “the two inseparable components of the one basic human structure, as we stand before God,” which constitute an original unity, Ibid., 82: 152.
\textsuperscript{331} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{332} Ibid., 85: 156.
(although not necessarily affirmed as finite). In this way we are also free with regard to the conditions of the possibility of our openness to value as such, if and insofar as they become in our reflection, objects of knowledge."333 This difference, between infinite and finite values, is what allows Rahner to proclaim that the explicit rejection of self and God coexists with a more foundational love of self and God:

This makes it possible to understand suicide or hatred for God, although implicitly we continue to affirm ourselves and the absolute value, as the conditions of the possibility of our negative attitude with respect to our own existence and to the absolute value. As objects they are not conditions of possibility and that is why we can be free with respect to them.334

Here Rahner makes a comparison with other axiomatic principles: “Love of God, which is necessarily present deep down in human existence, may be explicitly welcomed by us in our free activities, or the latter may contradict it, exactly as a single judgment may agree with the first laws of being and of thinking, or may stand in contradiction to them.”335 So then, affirmation of self and God exist even in their conscious denial, much as the fact that the proposition “some statements are true” is assumed in its denial. Insofar as the “self” and “God” exist as objects of thought, however, they can be denied.

At the same time, Rahner argues that our decision about finite values does impact our radical openness toward being:

It is a fact that the free decision about single values (among which belongs also the decision about the absolute value as objectified by our reflection in our a priori openness to values) has a repercussion upon our fundamental openness for the right order of values. This does not mean that this openness could be altogether destroyed. But a free decision about a single value is ultimately always a decision about and a molding of oneself as a person. In every decision we decide about ourselves, not about an action or a thing. Thus in our free decisions

333 Ibid.
334 Ibid.
335 Ibid.
we work back upon ourselves; we affect the very criteria of our love, which determine our own being.\textsuperscript{336}

In other words, “we do not simply perform good or bad actions: we ourselves become good or bad.”\textsuperscript{337}

Thus, there appears to be a basic, inviolable human affirmation of self and God, which can either be contradicted or ratified over the course of one’s life, but can never truly be erased. Even as one’s free choices place her further from God, by closing off the avenues of her transcendence, her basic spiritual nature always persists. This basic, inviolable affirmation does not render one’s “yes” to God irrelevant—rather it calls it forth.

Just as the embodied subject must attend to God’s revelation in history, so also is one’s “yes” to God effected in a turn to the concrete world. As Rahner argues, our love for God is always “combined” with our love of finite objects:

\begin{quote}
The way we know and understand God is always also carried by the order or disorder of our love. We do not first know God in a “neutral” way and afterwards decide whether to love or hate God. Such a neutral knowledge, such “objectivity” is an abstraction of the philosophers. It is real only if we suppose that our concrete order of love is correct, that it agrees with the necessary order of love, which comes from God and rules in our innermost being. The concrete way in which we know God is from the start determined by the way we love and value the things that come our way.\textsuperscript{338}
\end{quote}

Whatever this primary love of God is, it does not exist apart from our concrete existence. The freedom to order finite loves is thus simultaneously the freedom to “[narrow] the absolute horizon of our openness for being as such” and “[make] it impossible for the word of God to say what it might please God to say, to tell us under what guise God

\textsuperscript{336} Ibid., 85: 156, 158.
\textsuperscript{337} Ibid., 86: 158.
\textsuperscript{338} Ibid., 86-7: 160.
wishes to encounter us.” Insofar as human beings are free with respect to finite values and, through them, free to shut themselves off from the possibility of a divine encounter, Rahner states that “we are the free ones, who decide about ourselves and thus make up our minds whether and to what extent we wish to hear the truth and to let God’s light shine in our spirit.” We as free beings await the free word of God in history. Thus, to be human is to stand before the free personal God and wait for a possible revelation. But while this openness to a divine word is an essential aspect of our spiritual, and thus human, nature, it is also in Rahner’s words “determined by our free attitude.”

Critical to Rahner’s argument in *Hörer des Wortes* is the fact that humans are “fundamentally referred to history.” In order to explain why human beings can and must look for a divine word from God in human history, he must first argue (contra Lessing and his pesky ditch) that history is the site of metaphysical truth. To do so, Rahner turns to analysis of the human person as embodied. Here, he refers back to his ontology of human being in *Geist in Welt*, and the spirit’s entering into the other of materiality. Recall that for Thomas, “materiality” is a reference to possibility, not substance. To speak of spirit becoming matter is to claim that in human being, spirit has entered into the realm of possibility—and, therefore, into the realm of space and time: “It [matter] is the ground of the *spatiality* and the *temporality* of the being of which it is

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339 Ibid., 88: 162.

340 Ibid., 89: 164. An error regarding subject/verb agreement is corrected from the Donceel translation.

341 Ibid., 88: 162.

342 Ibid., 15: 36.

343 Ibid., 101: 186.
an essential component.” The indetermination of matter means that the material being is always in progress, always in motion between different potentialities. Matter is also the principle of individuation of a given being. It is what distinguishes this particular instantiation of human being from another.

The sum of these principles of matter is that an individual human being is inherently limited, only ever actualizing some possibilities at a time. Thus it is only at the level of humanity as a whole that the possibilities of human nature are realized:

This is why referring to other beings of one’s own kind, which everyone does as this particular individual, is not something unimportant; it is a referring to a multitude of human beings, to a humanity which, only as a whole, can really make manifest that which is essentially given to each of us single persons deep down in our possibilities, but only as possibilities. We are actually human only in a humanity.

All of this together gives us a grasp of what Rahner means by saying that human beings are historical beings. We are spatio-temporal beings by nature who are not thrown into the world of space and time like strangers in a strange land. We accomplish our spirituality in space and in time, and therefore, as part of a historical human community: “Thus we are essentially human in humankind; in space and time we carry out the work of our freedom together with the whole of mankind. We live as historical beings.” It is precisely because we ourselves are embodied in space and time that this is where we must look to find metaphysical truth.

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344 Ibid., 109: 196.
345 Ibid., 106: 192, 194.
346 Ibid., 111: 200.
347 Ibid., 117: 208.
Spirituality is accomplished within human history in such a way that historicity is “an essential element of the transcendental spirituality itself.”³⁴⁸ History and metaphysics are not distinct, nor opposed. History is the site and the material of human spirituality. Human beings ask the question about being within history and come to know being within history: “A spirit of this kind [that is, human] penetrates into matter in order to become spirit. We penetrate into the world in order to reach being as such, which extends beyond the world.”³⁴⁹

If there is to be a divine revelation—an appearance of God—it must be within “the domain of transcendence which is also always already historicity.”³⁵⁰ This means first, that a word from God must take place within history in order that humans hear it. No ahistorical word can be heard. As a free, and thus unrepeatable word, this means that it must take place in a particular space and time.³⁵¹ Second, since the human being is that spirit which accomplishes itself in history, it is fitting that such a word be spoken within humanity itself.³⁵² This reference to history allows Rahner to distance his anthropology of the subject as spirit-in-world from two different hypotheses: that one could come to know the extent of the Vorgriff apart from a particular object in a concept-less mysticism (or its secular philosophical equivalent, German idealism)³⁵³ or that the “immediate intuition of

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³⁴⁸ Ibid., 119: 212.
³⁴⁹ Ibid., 120: 214.
³⁵⁰ Ibid., 128: 226.
³⁵¹ Ibid., 134: 238, 240.
³⁵² Ibid., 138: 248. This is as close as Rahner gets in this text to saying why it is fitting that the word takes flesh.
³⁵³ Ibid., 60-1: 116, 118.
God” would be owed the human person as the fulfillment of the *Vorgriff.*\(^{354}\) “Thus,” Rahner writes, “every kind of rationalism, as an attempt to lift human existence above history, must be rejected as inhuman and therefore also as lacking due respect for the human spirit.”\(^{355}\) It is only in human history that human beings can await a revelation from God.

So then, as Rahner summarizes at the end, theology is itself totally dependent on this word of God which is given freely—God could have remained silent—and which is not limited or determined by either philosophy of religion or metaphysics.\(^{356}\) At the same time, there would be no word without those who could hear it.\(^{357}\) Thus theological anthropology refers not only to the content of revelation that addresses humanity, but to “the sense that some, albeit naive, unreflective self-understanding of human beings is the condition of the possibility of theology.”\(^{358}\) That revelation is received entails something—no matter how minimal—about the one who receives it.\(^{359}\) Thus “it follows that theology presupposes a ‘theological’ anthropology which may be called fundamental theological anthropology,” which, Rahner says, is the substance of these lectures, for a fundamental theological anthropology and philosophy of religion are in the end identical.

\(^{354}\) Ibid., 61-3: 118, 120, 122. Rahner answers this second challenge by stating that since we arrive at knowledge of the *Vorgriff* as a condition for the possibility of the concrete object, it’s natural fulfillment is precisely that: knowledge of the object.

\(^{355}\) Ibid., 138: 248.

\(^{356}\) Ibid., 145: 258.

\(^{357}\) “…of such a theology it is true that it exists because God speaks, not because we think: what appears in this theology is God, not, as in all other sciences, humanity in its essence. Yet even in such a science humanity cannot simply be overlooked or eliminated, since there would exist no word of God, if there were not someone who would at least be capable of perceiving it,” ibid., 146: 260.

\(^{358}\) Ibid., 146: 260.

\(^{359}\) Ibid.
Philosophy of religion is preparatory for the gospel insofar as it addresses the relationship of the hearer to a potential word of God. Much as “The Ignatian Mysticism of Joy in the World” did, *Hörer des Wortes* places *Geist in Welt*—which, according to the taxonomy here, would also be a philosophy of religion—as a preparation for, rather than replacement of, the gospel. It names the possibility of a subject hearing revelation. It does not preclude the need for such a revelation but in fact demonstrates its necessity, if God is to be known at all. Spirits-in-world can and must inquire about Absolute Being and they turn toward history for that answer.

Andrew Tallon argues we can understand the argument of the book as a whole by focusing on three key terms—spirit, freedom and history: “these three ideas really constitute one complex idea, namely, that to be spirit is to be open to being, to be person is to be spirit free to open or not to another, and to be finite spirit is to be person in history, in space and time, the where and when of God’s incarnation in order for it to reach and be reached by finite spirit.” That is, the spirit-in-world is open to God, but as a being with freedom God remains hidden apart from revelation, which occurs in history. Where *Geist in Welt* stumbles in being too abstract, too idealistic, too philosophical, *Hörer des Wortes* highlights that the story of human spirit as open to being is a drama in which free persons await a free word from God in history, and in which becoming a subject entails loving who God loves, including oneself. As Tallon summarizes,

*The heart of this entire metaphysics*, and it is easily missed in the midst of so much abstraction and especially with so much discussion of an terminological orientation around cognition, *is that being is personal*. That is, as a person is free

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360 Ibid.

361 Ibid., 150: 268.

to reveal himself or not, to obscure or veil himself or not, so at the very core of knowing and knowability (and thus of being), is will, and thus love. Being is inadequately described or defined, therefore (and one cannot help wishing that Rahner had put this even more forcefully), only as Beiseichsein, as self-presence, consciousness, or self-consciousness; being is also good and will.\textsuperscript{363}

It is for this reason, despite Rahner still preferring “human” and “spirit” over “person,” that Tallon argues the text entails a robust personism—what Tallon defines as “focus[ing] on freedom (will, love) and relationality rather than on knowledge (consciousness, thought, mind, intellect, etc.) and substantiality as characteristic of man.”\textsuperscript{364}

That being said, Rahner’s understanding of the relationship between the human and the divine still raises questions, particularly insofar as how exactly this basic affirmation of self and God is actualized in and determined by our love of finite objects. Recall that even “when in thought and in action we say No to ourselves, we still affirm ourselves as being, because in the very act of such a denial we still presuppose ourselves as possible object of such an act, hence as being…our existence is, despite and in its contingency, something unavoidable for us, something we have to take up.”\textsuperscript{365} Rahner argues that even a radical denial of oneself, such as suicide, is at some basic level an affirmation—of one’s activity as a free agent to perform such an act and of one’s existence of an object of such an act. In this way, the “absolute affirmation of the contingent reality that we ourselves are” is a necessary aspect of human existence. Human being is that being which asks about being, it is that being which takes up a position regarding itself. So then, even exercising one’s freedom in contradiction to

\textsuperscript{363} Ibid., 915.

\textsuperscript{364} Ibid., 916.

\textsuperscript{365} Rahner, \textit{Hearer}, 77; \textit{Hörer}, 144.
God’s free love of the human being—either in hatred of self or of God—is still a ratification of the freedom we exercise as a result of God’s loving us into being.

Just how substantial is this basic affirmation then, and what aspect of one’s spiritual identity does it shore up? We know from our investigation in Chapter Two that Rahner is concerned to show not only how an experience of God is possible, but how such an experience might affect the subject as something intrinsic to her identity and simultaneously available to reflection. By placing the decision for God into the very nature of human being itself Rahner has done this—the human being is the one who, by nature, makes a decision for God. She must make a decision one way or another, and she does this through all of the decisions she makes, which implicitly are a decision for herself as one loved into being by God.

Here, human freedom mirrors divine freedom. Just as divine freedom entails the possibility of God’s silence, human freedom entails the possibility of saying “no.” God is free to disclose Godself or not, but as Rahner notes, even silence is a certain form of revelation—the revelation that God has chosen not to speak. In fact, it is only because God could speak, only because there is a possibility that God could, that God’s silence could be heard. Thus, the condition for the possibility of God’s freedom to reveal Godself is the appearance of God within the horizon of the encounter—itself a form of revelation. In a similar way, the human being’s freedom to accept God or not is predicated on a basic affirmation as a result of her place as a spirit-in-world. She is set before God in such a way that she can say “yes” or “no,” but she cannot leave the space of the encounter. Even her silence is an exercise of freedom with respect to self and respect to God.

So then, this basic and implicit affirmation of God and self does nothing but demonstrate the necessarily spiritual nature of all human beings as subjects who stand before God. It does not determine one way or the other what one says to God, only that we are placed in a situation where even our silence cries out. Just as proclaiming human beings as those open to being does not relinquish the need for concrete revelation in history, neither does proclaiming human beings as those who implicitly affirm being relinquish the need for re-enacting God’s love for us in our own lives.

Human beings in all their contingent particularity, all their thrownness, are willed and loved into being by a gracious God. In all our knowing and doing we re-enact this free creation, so that even when we say “no” in hatred of God or self, we expose the fact that human beings are those to whom God has said “yes” and who are capable of offering a loving “yes” back. At the same time, whether or not we say “yes” or “no” has an affect on our ultimate openness to God—though not, however, enough of one to completely close us off from God. On the one hand, our transcendental openness toward God is always and already realized and determined by our concrete, day-to-day choices. On the other hand, these choices never completely obliterate one’s transcendental openness toward God. The transcendental is realized, but not exhausted, in the categorical.

Hörer des Wortes as Ignatian Theology

In *Geist in Welt*, Rahner grounded the possibility of metaphysics in the ontology of human being as spirit-in-world, who actualizes herself in and through the other—including materiality (that is, spirit’s entering into the spatial and temporal world) and the object of knowledge (both personal and impersonal). In Chapter Two, I argued that *Geist*
functions within a larger Ignatian theology. Asked to complete a dissertation on philosophy, Rahner develops a metaphysics of knowledge in which the human subject is oriented to absolute Being as the horizon of her experience. As Rahner’s writing months later in “The Ignatian Mysticism of Joy in the World” shows, such a project serves to highlight precisely the disruptive nature of the cross. The God of philosophy is ultimately hidden, but Christian faith proclaims that God has manifested Godself precisely within time and space. God has chosen not to remain hidden from the world as the whither of our transcendence, but to enter this world and walk among us.

In Hörer des Wortes, Rahner clarifies that to be embodied spirit is to be free to listen for and respond to God’s word in history. In turn, human beings, as spirits-in-world, make the world the material of their “yes” or “no” to God. This work also bears the mark of Ignatius’ Spiritual Exercises, particularly its emphasis on the experience of God in one’s life and the discernment of how to make that life a “yes” back to God. Thus, even in his lectures on philosophy of religion, Rahner continues to speak of the human being in light of the insights he learns from Ignatius.

We can see the continuity between Rahner’s theology and the Spiritual Exercises in his own direction of them. Here Rahner speaks concretely to his retreatants about effecting one’s “yes” to God in one’s everyday life.  

Karl Rahner, forward to Spiritual Exercises, trans. Kenneth Baker (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965): Karl Rahner, Betrachtungen zum ignatianischen Exerzitienbuch in SW 13. Published in 1965, Rahner’s Spiritual Exercises was compiled by Rahner’s students from notes taken by his retreatants, 7: 37-8. In his direction of the Spiritual Exercises, a number of features of Rahner’s more academic theology are visible. He speaks of the difficulty in perfectly reflecting on one’s own or others’ agency—and therefore of making absolute judgments, 42: 62; the call to make the necessities of one’s life—including “our time and inclinations, our character, what we have inherited, our fellow men, the social and religious milieu in which we were born,” the material of our freedom, 70: 82; the process of renunciation of world in order to see the transcendent God’s activity in the world that we saw in Rahner’s early essay “The Ignatian Mysticism of Joy in the world,” 70-9: 82-9; Rahner even refers to Ignatius as theologian dedicated to the conversion to the phantasm, 44: 63!
Exercise over 50 times. Writing in 1975, Rahner describes the Spiritual Exercises as an experience “characterised by discernment of spirits, by the process of choice, by the practical search for the will of God, to mention only a few aspects.” He goes on to say that such activity naturally expresses itself in theological reflection and that all of his “theological thinking sprang from the practice of the Ignatian Exercises.” In his 1978 “Ignatius of Loyola Speaks”—which he later described in 1983 as his “last will and testament” to the youth of that day—Rahner adopts the voice of Ignatius and speaks provocatively about the certainty with which he has experienced God, at times taunting modern theologians to try to explain it. It is this experience which Rahner wishes to direct his retreatants, and it is the possibility and nature of this experience upon which much of his theology reflects.

While Rahner only attributed the substantial influence of Ignatius and Ignatian spirituality on his theology retrospectively, one can see the echoes of the Spiritual Exercises throughout his theology. As we will see in the rest of this chapter, as Rahner

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368 Karl Rahner, preface to TI 16, viii: SzT 12, 8.

369 Ibid., x: 10.


371 Note for instance the following statements which Rahner pens in Ignatius’ name: “When I insist on saying that I have experienced God, I have no need to tie this statement to a theological theorem on the nature of such an unmediated God experience, and it is not my intention either to talk about all the accompanying phenomena of such an experience, along with their inherent historical and individual intricacies. I am not talking about concrete visions, symbols, voices, the gifts of tears, and similar things. All I am saying is this: I have experienced God, the nameless and unfathomable one, the silent and yet near one, in the trinity of his love for me. I have experienced God also and most especially beyond all concrete imagery: the one who when drawing near of his own accord and out of sheer grace cannot be confused with anything else and “Whether one wants to call this experience mysticism or something else is irrelevant here: how mysticism or something else is irrelevant here: how something like that can be made even remotely clear and put into human words is for your theologians to figure out,” Rahner, Ignatius of Loyola Speaks, 6 and 8 respectively: “Rede des Ignatius von Loyola an Einfene Jesuiten von Heute,” 300.
develops his theology, he continues to examine how it is that the subject as spirit-in-world attends to the revelation of God in history, making her life a “yes” in response to God’s “yes.” His theology bears the marks of a thinker not only academically committed to an Ignatian understanding of mysticism and the Christian life, but one personally formed by the Spiritual Exercises and Ignatian spirituality more generally.

The Later Rahner: On Embodying One’s “Yes” to God

In Rahner’s later theological writings, his analysis of the relationship between one’s unthematic knowledge of God and the material of one’s life becomes more complicated. Perhaps Rahner’s most significant contribution to theological anthropology is his conception of the “supernatural existential,” a universal aspect of human experience through which God’s grace is offered to all. By virtue of this supernatural existential, he argues that all are given the freedom to effect a fundamental option for God—that is, to accept God’s salvation. More controversially, Rahner proposes that this supernatural existential is the ground for the possibility of an “anonymous Christian,” a subject who can accept God’s offer of salvation without explicit affirmation, or even knowledge, of Christ. The inter-religious and soteriological aspects of this part of Rahner’s theology have been debated extensively.  

What I am concerned with here is the way in which this theology develops the ontology of human being Rahner sets up in Geist in Welt, particularly with respect to understanding the subject as embodied.

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In *Hörer des Wortes*, Rahner explicitly brackets the question of the grace needed to hear or respond to God’s word. His analysis is of the *a posteriori* condition of human being as spirit-in-world attendant to the revelation of a free God in history. This is appropriate given that his lectures are on philosophy of religion and what he offers there is a metaphysical anthropology. As Rahner develops his theological anthropology—particularly as debates surrounding the relationship between grace and nature dominated contemporary theological discussions—he has to investigate what aspects of this capability to hear and respond to the word of God are gratuitous gifts of God and not proper to human being itself.

It is in his entrance into the 1950s debates on nature and grace, particularly as an attempt to offer a corrective to de Lubac’s theology, that Rahner first mentions the term “supernatural existential.”373 In an essay titled “Concerning the Relationship between Nature and Grace,” Rahner argues that the theologians of the so-called “Nouvelle Theology,” in their rightful critique of traditional scholastic accounts of grace as extrinsic to the human person, fail to maintain both that the human being is oriented to a supernatural end and that grace is unexacted, without falling into contradiction.374

In order to show how an orientation toward God could be intrinsic to the person in her depths, as well as a gratuitous gift of God, Rahner proposes the idea of a supernatural existential. This theory states that, “the capacity for the God of self-bestowing personal Love is the central and abiding existential of man as he really is.”375 As a result of God’s

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grace, concrete human existence—not, it is important to note, human being—has been elevated so that it can respond positively to God’s word. In *Foundations*, Rahner describes this elevation at “present in all men as an existential of their concrete existence.” Thus, while this elevation is both universal, and prior to any human reflection, it is not proper to human nature as such. This elevation is not sanctifying grace itself, but as David Coffey says, “rather a relationship to this grace.” Through the concept of the supernatural existential, Rahner is better able to say how all subjects are oriented to God and have such orientation as a principle of their subjectivity, without positing the fulfillment of that orientation as something due to humans.

If all human beings are gifted with the supernatural existential, then all human beings are oriented to God and capable of responding to God’s word in history. Thus, the supernatural existential is the ground for the idea of Rahner’s most often described as “the freedom to effect a fundamental option for God,” that is, to the freedom to make one’s life a “yes” to God. Before we address how this option is effected, and the relationship between one’s fundamental option for God and one’s concrete acts, we need to first examine what Rahner means by “freedom.”

In his essay “Theology of Freedom,” Rahner builds on the understanding of freedom he set out in *Geist in Welt* and *Hörer des Wortes*. Freedom is by definition self-
disposal.\textsuperscript{379} This capacity is not one among others, but rather an essential aspect of transcendence, and therefore as permanent and constitutive of human being as spirit itself.\textsuperscript{380} As self-disposal, freedom necessarily involves one’s relationship with oneself, which Rahner refers to as “subjectivity,” and which is therefore also a permanent aspect of human existence. This transcendent subject is one who is always present to herself and who must therefore take up a position regarding herself.\textsuperscript{381} Since freedom has God as both its horizon and object, this position ultimately is for or against God.\textsuperscript{382} Thus human freedom is fundamentally the capacity to effect a decision for God.

Such a decision is always effected historically and categorically.\textsuperscript{383} As we saw in \textit{Geist in Welt} and \textit{Hörer des Wortes}, freedom is the disposal of a self who is flesh, who exists in space and time, and who makes the other the material of her actualization:

“…Man as spirit is not an abstract subject but an embodied, historical spirit who achieves his transcendence precisely by means of the material of the world, of its bodily corporeality and history.”\textsuperscript{384} Writing on devotion to the Sacred Heart, Rahner writes of the fundamental unity of soul and body. Words like “flesh” and “heart” refer to a unity of being “which is \textit{anterior} to the dichotomy between body and soul, action and thought,


\textsuperscript{381} Ibid., 184: 98-9.

\textsuperscript{382} Ibid., 179-80: 93-4.

\textsuperscript{383} Ibid., 189: 103-4.

It is this united human person who effects a free decision for God:

This unity of man, original, originating and holding together what it originates is a personal unity, that is to say, one which knows itself, ventures forth and freely makes its own choice, which answers and—in love—affirms itself or denies itself. It is the point where man borders on the mystery of God, the point where man, whose own origins is from God, as God’s partner either leaves himself and gives himself back to God in his original unity, or else blasphemously refusing himself to Him and turning himself downward plunges into the void of his own damnation.

Since human beings are spirits-in-world, they effect their decision for or against God bodily. One’s fundamental option for God is effected in and through one’s concrete decisions.

Since freedom is by definition radical disposal of oneself, such a disposal cannot be merely provisional. As such, Rahner argues that,

Freedom is not the power constantly to change one’s course of action, but rather the power to decide that which is to be final and definitive in one’s life, that which cannot be superseded or replaced, the power to bring into being from one’s own resources that which must be, and must not pass away, the summons to a decision that is irrevocable.

But in virtue of our being embodied, we exist in space and time and therefore are always open to this sort of revision. Only in death does our exercise of freedom become irrevocable. Thus to will that one’s life mean something irrevocably is to will death.

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385 Karl Rahner, “‘Behold this Heart’: Preliminaries to a Theology of Devotion to the Sacred Heart” TI 3, 323: “‘Siehe dieses Herz!’ Prolegomena zu einer Theologie der Herz-Jesu-Verehrung,” SW 13, 490.

386 Rahner, “‘Behold this Heart,’” 323: “‘Siehe dieses Herz!’,” 490.


The Body of Christ

In Rahner’s later theology it becomes clear that his understanding of human embodiment is grounded not merely in an ontology of human being as spirit-in-world but in the revelation of a God whose word effects the creation of human being, whose word assumes human being, and who accomplishes salvation bodily. In Rahner’s words, this entire history of salvation can be summed up as follows, “when God desires to manifest himself, it is as man that he does so.”\(^{389}\) Thus despite the fact that, as embodied creatures, we could look nowhere else for our salvation than in human history (as Rahner argues in *Hörer des Wortes*), Christians owe a particular attentiveness to human history as the site of revelation as a result of the doctrine of the Incarnation. Christ’s obedience is embodied in space and time, in the shedding of blood. God has made it such that the material historical world is the site of salvation:

We have been redeemed through an event which is, of course, spiritually free and personal in its nature. But according to the Father’s will, it took place, and could only take place, in this entirely concrete, bloody reality, given over to death. The place where this love and obedience are to be found is therefore this bodily existence, if love and obedience are what they are intended to be—i.e. redemptive.\(^{390}\)

This salvation is effected bodily, and only as such are we capable of taking hold of it.

It is ultimately this fact that the Word has been made flesh that shows us what it means to be flesh, not the other way around.\(^{391}\) To be clear, Rahner is using “flesh” following John’s use of *sarx* and defines it accordingly “[it] always means the whole


\(^{390}\) Ibid., 76: 163.

\(^{391}\) Ibid., 74: 161-2.
man, but in his actual, bodily nature;”\textsuperscript{392} such that “flesh” is not opposed to “spirit.”\textsuperscript{393} The significance of human embodiment—not to be misunderstood as something over against human spirituality—comes from its being the language of God’s self-revelation: “flesh, man as a bodily, concrete, historical being is just what comes into being when the Logos, issuing from himself, utters himself. Man is therefore God’s self-utterance, out of himself into the empty nothingness of the creature.”\textsuperscript{394} The ultimate Christian answer to the question about embodiment is thus simply this:

‘And the Word became flesh.’ The \textit{sarx} is what comes into being when the Logos becomes something which it is not already in itself, in its divine nature…The flesh which is man is the self-utterance of God himself…The being of man is what comes into existence when God utters himself into the otherness of nothingness; and that means man, in so far as he is sarx.\textsuperscript{395}

Thus, the emanation of spirit into what is not spirit described in \textit{Geist in Welt} is part of a much larger emanation of God into what is not God.

Furthermore, for Rahner, Christian theological anthropology presents a fundamental continuity among all human beings. This continuity is what makes sense of Christian understandings of sin and grace. My membership in the human family is what implicates me in original sin;\textsuperscript{396} it is also what allows me to take hold of the redemption offered in Christ. To borrow from Paul, “For as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ” (1 Corinthians 15:22 \textit{NRSV}). We take hold of salvation in Christ not merely because it happens within the horizon of space and time, but because it radiates through

\textsuperscript{392} Ibid., 75: 162.
\textsuperscript{393} Ibid., 77: 164.
\textsuperscript{394} Ibid., 74: 162.
\textsuperscript{395} Ibid., 75: 162-3.
\textsuperscript{396} Ibid., 73: 161.
“this community of the body, this blood-relationship which binds [all] in Adam to a common destiny.”

The Word does not merely become a human, but enters into humanity as a whole.

This concrete and bodily nature of salvation is why “the Church as a concrete, bodily, sociologically constituted community sees itself as the Church that is necessary for salvation,” and why “sacraments consisting of physical elements are necessary for salvation.” They are salvific because of, not despite, the fact that they exist as incarnate in human history. Against any false understanding of Christianity as the sphere of the soul, Rahner states quite strongly that, “Christianity is continually concerned with the body. It is a bodily, concrete, shaping, speaking, acting, organised, ecclesiastical, sacramental religion, a religion which concerns itself in its dogmas with concrete things, and expresses something through these dogmas.” Christianity is the realm of the body; it attends to bodily things.

The Body as Symbol

This understanding of the body as site of salvation can be extended through Rahner’s understanding of the body as symbol. Rahner contrasts his understanding of symbol with that which views symbol as a connection between two objects, based on a relative agreement perceived in the act of judgment. This is a derivative, not foundational, notion of symbol. Rather, he argues that all finite beings are inherently symbolic in

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397 Ibid., 77: 164.

398 Ibid., 78: 165.

399 Ibid., 79: 166.

themselves. Since in them essence and existence are not simply identical, finite beings are constituted by a plural unity. In this plural unity, beings achieve presence-to-self through expression into the other, in such a way that the expression is still united with the original unity. This expression or presence-to-self is not a secondary element, but is precisely what we mean by being: each being is symbolic insofar as it realizes being. This self-presence is not only the being’s fulfillment, but also the ground for it being present-to-us as an object of knowledge and love. From the side of the knower, knowledge is “mediated” by the symbol: “The being is known in this symbol, without which it cannot be known at all.”

A paradigmatic example of what Rahner means by symbol is the body. Thus in “The Theology of the Symbol” he uses language of “symbol” to translate the Thomistic account of the person as composed of soul and prime matter: “It follows at once that what we call body is nothing else than the actuality of the soul itself in the ‘other’ of materia prima, the ‘otherness’ produced by the soul itself, and hence its expression and symbol in the very sense which we have given to the term symbolic reality.” This dynamic concept of symbol points to the transcendence of the human person over against a reductionistic empiricism that preaches the independence of the “material reality of the body,” while also admitting that we are limited in a real way by the determinations of concrete matter. In short, we are both more than and circumscribed by our bodies.

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402 Ibid., 231: 432.
403 Ibid., 247: 452.
404 Ibid.
That God is triune—and therefore plurality and simplicity are not contradictory—grounds Rahner’s metaphysic of plural unity. Thus our own plurality is not only a marker of finitude, but also an indicator of our being made in the image of God. We are symbolic because God is symbolic. Divine self-expression is the generation of the Word, the image of the Father, which constitutes the Father’s own self-knowledge. Thus, it is appropriate to speak of the Logos as the symbol of the Father, the self-expression through which God comes to know Godself and in which God has God’s being. 405

The Incarnation of the Logos is a continuation of this expression. 406 In expressing itself, the Logos does not merely take on humanity like a uniform—in that case Jesus would only be able to proclaim the Logos, but not present the Logos. Rather, the expression of the Logos into the other constitutes the humanity of the Logos: “The humanity is the self-disclosure of the Logos itself, so that when God, expressing himself, exteriorizes himself, that very thing appears which we call the humanity of the Logos.” 407

The humanity of Christ is thus the Realsymbol of the Logos of God. 408 While other signs and symbols will vanish at the eschaton, the humanity of the Logos has eternal significance: “here, and now, and always, my salvation, my grace, my knowledge of God, rests on the Word in our flesh.” 409 It will continue to immediately mediate even in the beatific vision. 410 Devotion to the sacred heart of Jesus, as “the original centre of the


406 Ibid., 236-7: 437.

407 Ibid., 238-9, quote on 239: 438-9, 439.

408 Ibid., 238: 439.

human reality of the Son of God” is therefore also “the centre of mediation, through which all our movement must pass if it is really to arrive at God.”

Rahner’s understanding of Christ as the Realsymbol of God grounds his larger understanding of the relationship between God and humanity. Humanity is that which is created when God speaks Godself into what is not God. As God’s self-utterance, humanity constitutes the obediential potency of the hypostatic union, which is precisely God’s gift of Godself in an ultimate and irrevocable way. Since God is the only one who can create such that the creation acquires autonomy, “radical dependence upon him increases in direct, and not in inverse, proportion with genuine self-coherence before him.” Freedom is therefore not opposed to dependence on God, and the autonomy of Jesus’ human will does not threaten his divinity. Further, humanity, in its radical openness to the transcendent, is oriented toward the beatific vision. This telos is achieved in Christ, so that the union of the Logos with Christ’s humanity fulfills rather than subsumes that humanity. Therefore in Christ who constitutes the perfect relationship between Creator and creature, the human and the divine increase in direct proportion.

We should therefore not interpret his two natures as somehow waging war, so that a

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robust understanding of one leads to the denigration of the other. Christ, as the symbol of God, truly makes the Father present while fulfilling what it means to be human.

The Christ-event does not only fulfill the telos of humanity and the history of the world; through the Incarnation, the symbolic nature of all finite beings is infinitely extended. That which has been assumed by the word is now radically and substantially altered so that the created order no longer merely points to God as its cause, but “as to him to whom this reality belongs as his substantial determination or as his own proper environment.” 415 What was before a natural transcendence toward God as creator is now, by the grace of God through the incarnation of the Word, the manifestation of God in our symbolic world. Thus all reality is capable of transcending itself to speak of all reality and, ultimately, God. 416

Understanding the body in light of Rahner’s theology of symbol places his conception of the human person as spirit-in-world within a broader constellation of Christian ideas. Here we see that spirit pouring itself into matter is an extension of God’s creation of the human person in the image of God. The symbolic nature of human beings is metaphysically grounded in the symbolic nature of God, who expresses Godself in the creation of and incarnation in human being. In Christ we also see the perfection of humanity as openness and obedience to God.


Love of God and Love of Neighbor

If the finite world is capable of manifesting the symbolic presence of the divine, then the human person—as the one who is created through and assumed by the Word—is the privileged form of such revelation. It should be no surprise then, that Rahner proposes a “radical identity” between the love of neighbor with the love of God. While it is generally recognized that those who love God do so via the love of neighbor, Rahner makes the more controversial claim any love of neighbor is an act of the love of God—even if the lover does not explicitly intend so.

As we saw in Hörer des Wortes, one’s decision for God—the ultimate Good—must be embodied through one’s relationship to finite goods. Privileged among these “finite goods” is the neighbor, love of whom is “the original relationship to God.” Thus Rahner speaks of the unity between love of God and love of neighbor such that “the one does not exist and cannot be understood or exercised without the other, and that two names have really to be given to the same reality.” The unity is not founded on the command: love of neighbor is not simply proof of love of God. Rather, Rahner points to the synoptic tradition that what is done to the least of these is done to Jesus, and to the Johannine tradition that God is love, as evidence that how we treat one another is

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ontologically how we accept or deny Jesus in our lives.\[^{421}\] We who cannot see God can only love the “God in us.”\(^{422}\) The neighbor serves as an icon of God. Since true love of neighbor is made possible by supernatural grace, in both act and its object it is a participation in divine love.\(^{423}\)

But Rahner takes this unity to its rather provocative end: “that wherever a genuine love of man attains its proper nature and its moral absoluteness and depth, it is in addition always so underpinned and heightened by God’s saving grace that it is also love of God, whether it be explicitly considered to be such a love by the subject or not.”\(^{424}\) Rahner clarifies that this is possible precisely because of the distinction between an action’s “explicit object” and its “\textit{a priori} formal object, the transcendental horizon or ‘space’ within which a determined individual object is encountered on the other hand.”\(^{425}\) At the formal level the two loves are not identical. One can pray, for instance, without holding the neighbor as an explicit object of thought. However any true love of the neighbor that disposes of the self radically, “where the whole ‘transcendental’ depth of interhuman love is realised and represented”—that is, a love that ratifies one’s transcendental openness to being—is therefore also an implicit love of the whither of that transcendence.\(^{426}\)

\[^{421}\text{Ibid.}, 234: 78-9.\]
\[^{422}\text{Ibid.}, 235: 79.\]
\[^{423}\text{Ibid.}, 236: 80.\]
\[^{424}\text{Ibid.}, 237: 81.\]
\[^{425}\text{Ibid.}\]
\[^{426}\text{Ibid.}, 238: 82.\]
It is this union of love of God and neighbor that Rahner identifies as the presupposition of his controversial understanding of “anonymous ‘Christianity.’” Rahner argues that, on account of the grace offered to all, all moral acts are potentially salvific:

that wherever man posits a positively moral act in the full exercise of his free self-disposal, this act is a positive supernatural salvific act in the actual economy of salvation even when its *a posteriori* object and the explicitly given *a posteriori* motive do not spring tangibly from the positive revelation of God’s Word but are in this sense ‘natural.’ This is so because God in virtue of his universal salvific will offers everyone his supernaturally divinising grace and thus elevates the positively moral act of man. Furthermore, the thereby already given, supernaturally transcendental even though unconscious horizon of the spirit (its *a priori* orientation towards the triune God of eternal life) includes an element of (transcendental) revelation and possibility of faith which also gives such an act that sufficient character of ‘faith’ necessary for a moral act being a salvific act.\(^427\)

Insofar as love both most engages one’s transcendental depths and orients one to the neighbor in whom God lives, love of neighbor is such an act of self-disposal *par excellence*:

The act of personal love for another human being is therefore the all-embracing basic act of man which gives meaning, direction and measure to everything else. If this is correct, then the essential *a priori* openness to the other human being, which must be undertaken freely, belongs as such to the *a priori* and most basic constitution of man and is an essential inner moment of his (knowing and willing) transcendentality. Precisely this *a priori* basic constitution (which must be accepted in freedom, but to which man can also close himself) is experienced in the concrete encounter with man in the concrete. The one moral (or immoral) basic act in which man comes to himself and decides basically about himself is also the (loving or hating) communication with the concrete Thou, in which man experiences, accepts or denies his basic *a priori* references to the Thou as such.\(^428\)

In the neighbor we affirm or deny our radical being for the other, and thus implicitly affirm or deny the other for whom and by whom we are ultimately constituted. As such, love of neighbor is “the one basic human act.” In this sense, refusal to love the neighbor

\(^{427}\) Ibid., 239: 82-3.

\(^{428}\) Ibid., 241: 84-5.
is a refusal of one’s own transcendence, simultaneously cutting oneself off from God and one’s humanity: “‘no’ to it imprisons the whole man within the deadly lonely damnation of self-created absurdity,” and likewise, “the totality of reality, which freely gives itself and is accepted and understood as the blessed incomprehensibility—which is the only self-evident thing—opens itself only if man opens himself radically in the act of love and entrusts himself to this totality.”

Since it is through love of neighbor that we love God, Rahner argues that even acts that have God alone as their proper object—for example, prayer—are made possible only by love of neighbor. One’s fundamental option for God, made possible by an offer of grace made to all humans, is effected not in some “gnostic-mystic interiority alone,” but embodied in the love of neighbor. In the concrete act of loving my neighbor I ratify my profound being-for-other. I dispose my whole self in an act of love and thus participate in divine love itself. Thus Rahner writes that our freedom to effect a fundamental option is identical to our capacity for love.

To summarize: one makes of one’s life a “yes” to God in disposing of oneself in love of the neighbor. Such disposal is finalized in death, making one’s choice of the neighbor and of God irrevocable. Since all such disposal is (through the supernatural existential) salvific, the life of Christian perfection does not belong to Christians in name alone. Indeed, it might not even belong to some Christians. Thus, Rahner’s understanding

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429 Ibid., 242: 86.
430 Ibid., 247: 89-90.
431 Ibid., 235: 79.
of the demand to embody one’s “yes” to God through love of neighbor also opens up the possibility that some may love God without explicit knowledge of it.

**Concupiscence**

As the subject disposes herself, shaping her life into a “yes” to God over time, in space, through the concrete choices she makes to affirm all that is good, true, and beautiful, she encounters resistance. There exists in her own person desires that precede any rational will. One’s attempt to exert rational control over one’s life is not merely limited by external constraints, but by the utter spontaneity of one’s own will, which like a grocery cart with a loose wheel, surprises one at every turn.

The sum of this spontaneity is how, Rahner argues, we ought to understand the Christian doctrine of concupiscentia.433 These desires may incline her toward good or evil, but in either case they are not, specifically speaking, anything for which she is morally responsible. Rather, Rahner refers to them as “pre-moral.”434 However, such spontaneous inclinations are included in the material of her self-disposal. Will she act on this desire? How will she integrate this desire into her life?

Lest we misinterpret this as resting on some sort of ontological dualism, Rahner is clear that these desires can be “spiritual” or “sensual.” Both lust and despair can be examples of spontaneous impulses over which the subject has no control. Thus this understanding of concupiscentia does not depend on a false dichotomy between spirit and

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body, but of the existence of the whole person in space and time: “It is not that the ontically lower in man is intrinsically at variant with the higher, but that man is divided against himself.” While it is easy to read this as spirit encountering resistance in sensibility, Rahner challenges an overly simplistic account:

Here too is to be found the nucleus of truth in that otherwise too crude distinction between the spirit as the freely operative principle and the sensibility as the principle which resists this free decision. In reality of course the whole ‘nature’ given prior to freedom offers resistance to the ‘person’s’ free and total disposition of himself, so that the boundary between ‘person’ and ‘nature’ stands as it were vertically in regard to the horizontal line which divides spirituality from sensibility in man.

That is, we are not talking merely or simply about the ontology of spirit actualizing itself as matter, but of the whole person—the spirit-in-world—making her life the material of her free decision.

Critical to this idea of concupiscence is the metaphor of embodiment as mass. The metaphor works in two specific ways. First, one’s life has weight. It must be taken up, it must be formed, it must be carried along the way. Self-disposal is not a matter of simply choosing what life one wants to live, but involves the practice of daily exercise, as we embody that will in the material of our own lives. To use a pun, one’s life matters. Second, one’s life has inertia. As individual acts become habits, they shape even our

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436 Ibid., 364: 17.
437 Thus while Robert E. Doud argues that Rahner’s understanding of concupiscence is a development of his understanding of the relationship between spirit and matter in Geist in Welt, he wrongly identifies this connection as parallel, “Sensibility in Rahner and Merleau-Ponty,” The Thomist 44, no. 3 (July 1980), 375. Concupiscence is not merely phenomenological experience of spirit accomplishing itself in matter, but of the one person as spirit-in-world making her own nature the material of her freedom. In other words, concupiscence governs the relationship of spirit-in-world to herself (as person to her nature) not spirit’s relationship to matter.

spontaneous desires. Each choice we makes propels us in a certain direction, so that over time the energy of the free decision converts what is initially resistance—what Rahner calls “passive sluggishness”—\(^{439}\) into momentum. By consistently choosing the good, we accrue speed, and the resulting momentum means that any spontaneous inclination to evil will have less effect.

Such dominion is never effected completely:

The free act does indeed dispose of the whole subject, in so far as it is as free act an act of man’s personal centre, and so, by the root as it were, draws the whole subject in sympathy with it. And yet man’s concrete being is not throughout its whole extent and according to all its powers and their actualization the pure expression and the unambiguous revelation of the personal active centre which is its own master.\(^{440}\)

There remains always a distance between the free act and its expression in the subject’s life. So while what Rahner refers to as concupiscentia [Konkupiszenz] is merely the spontaneous desire that precedes a free act, he reserves the term concupiscence \([Begierlichkeit]\) for this resulting distance. Concupiscence in the narrowest theological sense refers only to this second concept:

Concupiscence \([Begierlichkeit]\) consists essentially in the fact that man in this regime does not overcome even by his free decision the dualism between what he is as nature prior to his existential decision and what he becomes as person by this decision, not even in the measure in which it would absolutely speaking be conceivable for a finite spirit to overcome it. Man never becomes wholly absorbed either in good or in evil.\(^{441}\)

To the extent that this concupiscence can incline us to good or evil—Rahner writes that “Both the good and the bad moral decision encounter the resistance, the solidity and the impenetrability of nature. Concupiscence in the theological sense shows itself for

\(^{439}\) Ibid., 372: 24.

\(^{440}\) Ibid., 369: 21.

\(^{441}\) Ibid., 369: 21.
instance just as much when a man blushes in the act of lying as when the “flesh” refuses to follow the willingness of the “spirit” for the good”—it is morally neutral just as its predecessor concupiscence. However, phenomenologically speaking, insofar as we experience concupiscence as that which limits our free activity, we experience it as something that ought not to be.

It is this narrow meaning of concupiscence [Begierlichkeit]—not desires themselves but their frustration of one’s will—which the gift of integrity removes. As a counter-factual, Rahner explains that the story of Adam and Eve is the story of two people who, precisely because of a lack of concupiscence, were able to take up the material of their own lives with complete control. Only as such are they able to utter a perfect “no” to God. Likewise Rahner argues that the telos of Christian perfection is the domination over desire, not its eradication. Nowhere is this clearer than in Christ, who while he did not lack integrity, demonstrates such desire when he cries in the garden. Since such desire persisted even in Christ’s perfection, concupiscence [Konkupiszenz] must not be something that is antithetical to human freedom.

443 Ibid., 374-82: 26-32.
446 Ibid., 360: 13-4. G. J. McAleer has argued that Rahner’s use of “dominion” here to describe Christian integrity is a departure from Thomas’ theology—in which the intellect persuades the faculty of the senses—to an understanding of the self marked by violence and coercion. According to McAleer, such a model envisions freedom as colonial domination, “The Politics of the Flesh: Rahner and Aquinas on Concupiscenza,” Modern Theology 15, no. 3 (July 1999): 355-65. Rahner’s description of Christian integrity is broader than just the word “dominion,” however, and includes bringing one’s desires in line with one’s freedom over time so that one “spontaneously” loves the good that one wills. Given the neutrality of desires as such, and Rahner’s commitment that experiences of duality do not map on to “higher” and “lower” faculties, I do not think the connotation is as serious as McAleer makes out.
The distinction between concupiscentia \textit{[Konkupiszenz]} and concupiscence \textit{[Begierlichkeit]} is critical because it clarifies that human perfection does not require the eradication of our desires, nor some battle between spirit and sensibility:

A man who possesses the gift of integrity is no less ‘sensitive’, he is no more ‘spiritual’ in a Neoplatonic rather than a Christian sense, involving the lack of an intense vitality. Rather he is free really to dispose of himself through a personal decision in so sovereign a way that within the area of his being there is no longer anything to resist this sovereign self-determination by a sort of passive sluggishness.\textsuperscript{448}

Integrity grants one the opportunity to exercise one’s will in the fullest sense, to make of one’s life the perfect expression of one’s freedom:

For integrity is in face that makes possible the exhaustive realization of the tendency associated with every free decision: the tendency of the person totally to dispose of himself before God. Without the gift of integrity this tendency, which is undoubtedly proper to every free decision, will find expression in greater or less degree according to the circumstances.\textsuperscript{449}

We miss the point then if we align either embodiment or desire with original sin. The gift of integrity not only allows human nature to persists, but it makes of it the material of one’s “yes” to God. It seems however, that perfect integrity is only to be hoped for eschatologically; until then, while the subject is capable of saying “yes” to God, she is always unable to make of her whole life a complete expression of this “yes.” Rahner cites this struggle as the locus of human participation in Christ’s suffering.\textsuperscript{450}

Because such a gift of integrity is only given to human beings along with sanctifying grace, asymmetry opens up in salvation history. Whereas Adam and Eve were

\begin{itemize}
  \item Der Konkupiszenz,” 20.
  \item \textsuperscript{448} Ibid., 372: 24.
  \item \textsuperscript{449} Ibid., 373: 25.
  \item \textsuperscript{450} Ibid., 379: 30.
\end{itemize}
able to dispose of themselves totally in a “no” or “yes” to God, human beings are only able to totally dispose of themselves in a “yes”: “In Adam the person’s freedom to dispose of the nature made it possible for him exhaustively to engage his nature both in a good and in an evil direction. The blessed freedom of disposal possessed by the perfect Christian, the saint, is the freedom of a man who has succeeded in surrendering his whole being and his whole life to God totally.”451 Ironically, without sanctifying grace, their rejection of God is always impartial. Thus while a “no” must be possible, saying “no” is not formally equivalent to saying “yes” to God, because full self-disposal is not possible without the restoration of integrity to our concupiscent nature.452

Perfect restoration of that integrity appears to be part of what Christians can hope for in the resurrection of the body—though Rahner is hesitant to speak precisely about this mystery. Just as Jesus’ body has eternal significance for our relationship to God, so also do our own bodies. Rahner is adamant that materiality, as that which spirit actualizes itself, cannot merely be shorn off, but must instead be redeemed.453 The doctrine of resurrection of the body entails that our whole lives and our whole selves are brought into

451 Ibid., 374: 25.

452 I disagree with Ron Highfield who argues that Rahner equivocates on whether a “no” can be uttered in freedom. Highfield argues that it is a contradiction that Rahner holds human beings as responsible for their “no” in writing about sin, but then speaks only of a “yes” a full operation of human freedom, “The Freedom to Say ‘No’? Karl Rahner’s Doctrine of Sin,” Theological Studies 56 (1995): 485-505. However, as we saw in Hörer des Wortes, the asymmetry between these options begins with the fact that they are both enabled by God’s own “yes” to human beings, and one’s transcendental openness to God. Thus already one’s “yes” is an affirmation and ratification of one’s being, while a “no” contradicts it. Add to this the asymmetry of Rahner’s understanding of the operations of concupiscence and grace, such a “no” is always fragile and precarious, while one’s “yes” to God is emboldened. While one is equally morally responsible for both responses, there is no inconsistency in saying that grace only strengthens one of them. For more on the asymmetry of grace, as well as how such an understanding of salvation preserves both the gratuity of grace and the integrity of human freedom, see Heidi Ann Russell, “Efficacious and Sufficient Grace: God’s One Offer of Self-Communication as Accepted or Rejected,” Philosophy & Theology 22, no. 1-2 (2005): 353-72.

eternal life: “‘Body’ (Fleisch) means the whole man in his proper embodied
[leibhaftigan] reality. ‘Resurrection’ means, therefore, the termination and perfection of
the whole man before God, which gives him ‘eternal life.’” 454 Given the eternal
significance of the body, we would be wrong to oppose materiality with spirituality in
this life: “We must simply try to realize clearly and soberly that a spiritual union with
God cannot be regarded as something which grows in inverse proportion to the belonging
to the material world, but that these are two quite disparate matters in
themselves…Remoteness-from-the-world and nearness-to-God are not interchangeable
notions, however much we are accustomed to think in such a framework.” 455 It is not
ours to denigrate the human body when God has chosen to create, assume, and
transfigure it: “Whatever has been created by God, assumed by Christ and transfigured by
his Death and Resurrection, is also destined to finality and consummation in us.” 456

_Freedom as Created Mystery_

As spirits-in-world, one’s decision for God is effected bodily in space and over time. This
does not mean, however, that one’s categorical acts exist in an obvious and visible
relationship to one’s transcendental decision for God. One cannot work backwards to
deduce the status of one’s own or another’s fundamental option. We have already seen
that freedom is disposal of one’s whole self. Freedom is not a matter of distinct atomized
acts, but of one’s disposition of the whole self in one’s whole life made irrevocable in

455 Ibid., 211: 517-8.
456 Ibid., 216: 521.
death.\textsuperscript{457} In this case, one cannot reason from the parts to the sum. Individual acts are not equally determinative or representative of one’s self-disposal. In fact, the reverse is true: an act is only constituted by freedom to the extent that it is part of this total self-disposal.\textsuperscript{458} In addition to this, two other characteristics Rahner attributes to freedom complicate the relationship between one’s categorical acts and one’s fundamental option for God.

First, freedom is mystery. This means first and foremost that it is not absolutely objectifiable. Simply put, freedom is not a “datum of empirical psychology.”\textsuperscript{459} Even the explicit “yes” one says to God, in prayer or moments of conversion, is an inadequate objectification of one’s relationship to God. This is more than just the distinction between intention and acts. Rahner argues that even our true intentions are hidden from ourselves: “Even one’s ‘intentions’ are themselves external to the heart of freedom. This goes further than merely the distinction between intention and effect; but the failure to objectify the intention to begin with, so that even the conscious intention is itself a matter, like the effect, ‘external’ to the subject’s disposal.”\textsuperscript{460} When Rahner talks about embodying one’s fundamental transcendental option for God, he is not speaking about acting on one’s inward disposition. One’s private thoughts and intentions are also categorical acts. As such, one is not able to interpret even herself with certainty, but must instead wait on God’s judgment.\textsuperscript{461}


\textsuperscript{458} Ibid., 186: 100.

\textsuperscript{459} Ibid., 190: 105.


Second, freedom is created. Its material is always external to self. What Rahner means by this is that one’s freedom is always mediated in the given of the *a posteriori*, in the “uncontrollable and ultimately unplanned” world constituted by our environment and intersubjective relationships.\(^{462}\) We are thrown into a world full of personal and impersonal forces that constrain our possibility for movement within it. Because our freedom is always effected through the material and historical, it is therefore “still an interplay with everything that is not free, not spiritual, and so on.”\(^{463}\) Thus when Rahner speaks of freedom being a necessary and inviolable aspect of subjectivity, he does not mean that the subject exercises complete autonomy over the decisions that make up her life.

Rahner’s solution to this apparent contradiction is somewhat paradoxical: one exercises one’s freedom precisely in relationship to these externally imposed necessities.\(^{464}\) It is worth reiterating that Rahner’s focus on “self-disposal” and “freedom” cannot simply be translated as autonomy or freedom from imposed necessities. Rather, freedom exists precisely in one’s relationship to such necessity. The freedom to effect a fundamental option is not threatened by general human vulnerability to outside influence, but is made possible through it. In fact, Rahner connects this interplay between freedom and limitation in our being for the other. Thus, while freedom is only exercised fully in a “yes” to God, we arrive at the pinnacle of the paradox of freedom and dependence, as the only exercise of complete human freedom is simultaneously a giving over to the other.

\(^{462}\) Ibid., 193-4: 108.


Such giving over of oneself becomes irrevocable in death. To will that one’s life become a “yes” to God is to will death—that is, to face with freedom precisely that which appears to be the most radical limitation of our freedom. Rahner writes that this understanding of death is revelatory of the broader way in which freedom and necessity intersect at all times:

The freedom which is exercised on the embodied plane is, in fact, that freedom by which man lays himself open to intervention from without, submits to control by another power or powers. The embodied side of man’s nature constitutes the sphere in which the interplay takes place of action from within himself and passion as imposed from without. As an embodied being endowed with freedom man has to take cognisance of the fact that he occupies an intermediary position. He is neither wholly self-directing nor wholly subject to control by another, but half-way between these two. The mysterious interplay between action and passion in the exercise of human freedom appears above all in the fact that it is precisely at the very point at which man freely achieves his own perfection that he is, at the same time, most wholly subject to control by another. The ultimate act of freedom, in which he decides his own fate totally and irrevocably, is the act in which he either willingly accepts or definitively rebels against his own utter impotence, in which he is utterly subject to the control of a mystery which cannot be expressed - that mystery which we call God. In death man is totally withdrawn from himself. Every power, down to the last vestige of a possibility, of autonomously controlling his own destiny is taken away from him. Thus the exercise of his freedom taken as a whole is summed up at this point in one single decision: whether he yields everything up or whether everything is taken from him by force, whether he responds to this radical deprivation of all power by uttering his assent in faith and hope to the nameless mystery which we call God, or whether even at this point he seeks to cling on to his own autonomy, protests against this fall into helplessness, and, because of his disbelief, supposes that he is falling into the abyss of nothingness when in reality he is falling into the unfathomable depths of God.  

Rahner is therefore adamant that any necessity can be made the object of one’s freedom.  

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465 Rahner, “On Christian Dying,” 289-90; “Über das Christliche Sterben,” 537. The English translation unfortunately uses the word “physical” in the first three sentences for “Leiblichkeit” and “Leibhaftigkeit.” I have instead substituted the word “embodied,” as physicality is not only a reduction of the human person in Rahner’s system, but also not even an accurate description of his understanding of materiality, which concerns actualization in space and time.

What follows from these characteristics of freedom is that not all acts are equally free, nor is the freeness of a given act available to reflection.\footnote{Ibid., 194: Ibid., 108.} Two acts may be equal in form but not in freedom.\footnote{Rahner, “Guilt—Responsibility—Punishment,” 207-8: “Schuld – Verantwortung – Strafe,” 11-12.} A person’s actions may be so limited, that what is ordinarily considered objectively wrong may represent the ultimate possible affirmation of freedom:

…The objective material offered to freedom …can be finite, variable and greater or less. This can, however, go so far that, for example, the material offered for a concrete free choice embraces only objects which are completely evil and forbidden according to the standards of objective morality. In such a case, we could at times no longer talk about freedom of choice and imputability according to the \textit{a posteriori} criteria of everyday life and of psychology, although it could always still remain open whether there could not be a decision for or against God even with reference to such material.\footnote{Ibid., 208: 12-13.}

The relationship between the freedom of acts (normally, psychologically considered) and theological freedom is therefore “\textit{analogous},”—a critical reason why there can be a distinction in Catholic moral theology between moral and venial sin, which differ precisely in the extent that the choice to do evil is a “\textit{real self-disposal of the subject}.”\footnote{Ibid., 209: 13.} But because freedom is mystery it is therefore impossible to know with certainty whether an act is the impression of an imposed necessity or a part of one’s authentic self-disposal.\footnote{Rahner, “Guilt and Its Remission: The Borderland between Theology and Psychotherapy,” \textit{TI} 2, 276-8: “Schuld und Schuldvergebung zwischen Theologie und Psychotherapie,” \textit{SW} 421-422.}

In extreme cases, what appears to be an explicit rejection of God and active embrace of evil may in fact be no decision at all, or even a decision for God.\footnote{Rahner, “Guilt—Responsibility—Punishment,” 208: “Schuld – Verantwortung – Strafe,” 12-} As we
saw above, it is precisely because of the great identity Rahner draws between love of God and love of neighbor that he is able to argue that a transcendental option for God can be effected in the absence of an explicit love for God. But because of this analysis of freedom, Rahner is able to go further to argue that even explicit atheism and an anonymous or implicit Christianity are not mutually exclusive. Conversely, the appearance of faithfulness may belie a “no” to God.\textsuperscript{473}

For Rahner, denial of God is not always a matter of personal sin. For one, those who have “not come into contact with the explicit preaching of the Gospel,”\textsuperscript{474} cannot be responsible for it. \textit{Gaudium et spes} seems to distinguish between an intentional rejection of God and a widespread default atheism, that in turn suggests not all cases of atheism are sinful.\textsuperscript{475} For Rahner, on account of the supernatural existential, even those outside baptism are in someway graced—no one, even under original sin, is “simply a ‘natural’ man.”\textsuperscript{476} If someone who is not morally culpable for their atheism follows their conscience, there is no reason not to hope, alongside \textit{Gaudium et spes}, that grace can work “in an unseen way.”\textsuperscript{477} Insofar as one’s conscious is an absolute moral demand, it implies an affirmation of God. Therefore obedience to it implicitly affirms God (the absolute) even under an explicit rejection. Just as an uneducated man can affirm the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[476] Ibid., 146: 188.
\item[477] Ibid., 149: 193.
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principles of logic without knowing them anytime he “acts sensibly and with insight,” so too does someone outside Christianity affirm God anytime she freely affirms the absolute moral demand placed on her.\textsuperscript{478} Thus Rahner argues for the “possibility of coexistence of a conceptually objectified atheism and a non-propositional and existentially realised theism.”\textsuperscript{479}

Rahner states explicitly that such a possibility hinges on drawing a distinction between one’s transcendental and categorical theism. But this possibility also entails that those who express faith in God categorically may not, at heart, truly love and depend on God. Whether someone denies or affirms God at the categorical level does not necessarily give us any insight into their transcendental affirmation of God—what Rahner elsewhere refers to as the fundamental option. Rahner maintains however, that a free, transcendental atheism is possible. One can effect a fundamental rejection of God.\textsuperscript{480} Thus while one’s fundamental option is effected historically, it remains in a real sense hidden from both others and oneself.\textsuperscript{481}

On the one hand, the unity Rahner identifies between one’s fundamental option for God and her concrete activity allows us to locate the decision for God in history, as ideally effected in a life lived in love of one’s neighbor. Such a unity is so radical that an “anonymous Christian” may effect a decision for God unknowingly or even unwillingly. On the other hand, because the fundamental option is effected in history, it is also subject

\textsuperscript{478} Ibid., 153-54: 197-8.

\textsuperscript{479} Ibid., 148: 191.

\textsuperscript{480} Ibid., 155-8: 200-4.

\textsuperscript{481} This does not mean, however, that examination of one’s conscience is not appropriate, just that such analysis can not be seen to have the final word in interpretation—which is left to God alone, Rahner, “Guilt—Responsibility—Punishment,” 206: “Schuld – Verantwortung – Strafe,” 10-11.
to necessity. What appears as a “no” at the categorical level may in fact be an actualization of an ultimate “yes” to God. As such, Rahner’s theology represents a departure from classical moral theology, in which the form of the act is prioritized and one is in constant threat of losing her salvation through mortal sin. It not only makes a shift from the act to the person as the proper unit of moral analysis, but also is sympathetic to why it is that people sin (or appear to sin) and the limitations of freedom that are often involved.482

The Body as Open System

One exercises one’s freedom within a network of necessity. Such limitation is not merely of the world in which the subject exists, but her very subjectivity itself. Remember that the “in” in spirit-in-world does not denote location but modality.483 The human spirit does not inhabit the world as a stranger in a strange land. Rather, spirit-in-world describes one reality, not two. “Embodiment,” as shorthand for the becoming of spirit through matter, speaks to the spirit’s self-actualization within the world of possibility, in space and in time. This means that when we are speaking of the interplay between freedom and necessity we are not merely talking about a free agent constrained by external necessities.


483 Carmichael Peters offers a helpful explanation of this: “This particular use of ‘in,’ therefore, must be understood existentially and not spatially—“a cup ‘in’ the cupboard,” for example, is a spatial use of ‘in’, whereas “a child ‘in’ trouble” is an existential use. The “in” of our “being in the world” points to our inescapable wordliness,” in “A Rahnerian Reading of Black Rage,” 195-6.
Rahner’s subject is not self-contained; she is “in-world,” and thus the interplay between freedom and necessity crosses right through her center.

When Rahner writes that the objective material of one’s freedom is variable he is not only speaking of the difference in choices available to people in their lives, but of the material of their own person. For an example of this we can turn to a short essay in which Rahner wrestles with the question of why God allows suffering. In it Rahner dismisses any theory that attempts to explain suffering as necessary for Christian maturity, pointing instead to the detrimental effect that human suffering can have on the ability for human persons to develop as moral agents:

The children burned to death by napalm bombs were not going through a process of human maturing. Elsewhere, too, in innumerable cases there is suffering which is destructive in effects, despite all good will to endure it in a human and Christian way, which simply demands too much from a person, warps and damages his character, leaves him preoccupied solely with satisfying the most primitive needs of existence, makes him stupid or wicked.⁴⁸⁴

Rahner does not speak more in this essay about the effects of suffering on one’s fundamental option for God. Still, we can see here that the objective material of one’s freedom includes one’s own development. In this example, one’s failure to develop intellectually and morally is not a matter of free self-disposal, but of the grave evil inflicted by others. War does not merely take away someone’s options—for education, healthcare, employment, and overall flourishing—it can also affect the ability to make good choices. To speak of the interplay of freedom and necessity is thus not only to think of the operation of a moral agent in the world, but in the very development of that moral

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agent. As spirit-in-world, embodied subjects are constituted in and through materiality—even if that materiality is hostile to human flourishing.

We must not misunderstand Rahner as saying that one’s free spiritual nature is trapped within the limitations of the body. Spirit is in-world in such a way that there is no clear distinction between the two. In “The Body in the Order of Salvation” Rahner clarifies their relationship. While we can distinguish “spirit” and “body” conceptually, they exist in a fundamental unity: “What we call ‘inwardness’, our innermost heart, is the inwardness of an actual, bodily spirit, an incarnate spirit. And what we call man’s externals are the external form of this very same incarnate spirit.”

Understanding the subject as one incarnate spirit, instead of a spirit inside a body, means that,

The loftiest spiritual thought, the most sublime moral decision, the most radical act of a responsible liberty is still a bodily perception or a bodily decision. It is still incarnate perception and incarnate liberty—and hence, even by virtue of its own nature, it is still an interplay with everything that is not free, not spiritual, and so on. And conversely, even the most external thing about man is still something that really belongs to the realm of his spirituality; it is still something that is not just mere body.

Thus Rahner complicates any spatial understanding of the spirit in the body, or of the distinction between what is “inward” and “external” to the subject. Just as one’s intentions are, in Rahner’s moral analysis, external to one’s real freedom, so is what we consider “inwardness” equally an aspect of our embodied nature.

We come to ourselves only in and through the other, and thus our entire subjectivity is embodied. Here, Rahner repeats the ontology of human being from Geist in Welt, naming the body as that matter which spirit emanates:

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486 Ibid., 82: 168-9.
What I call the body is the outgoing of the spirit itself into the emptiness of space and time, which we call ‘first matter’, in which the spirituality now itself appears; so that outgoing into its bodily form is the condition which makes spiritual and personal self-discovery possible, not an obstacle in its way. There is no coming to oneself except by way of exit into the bodily reality into which the spirit first reaches out and finds itself, forming itself and going out of itself. And it is only this which makes personal, spiritual freedom possible. Of course this bodily nature, as the spatial and temporal existence of the spirit itself, is always an entering into the truly Other.\textsuperscript{487}

Within this ontology, a view of the body as limiting the spirit is incomplete; it is also the body that makes possible spiritual freedom. But because our spiritual freedom is accomplished in time and space, in the realm of possibility, Rahner argues that it entails a fundamental ambiguity (between what is internal to the human being and external) and vulnerability (to influence from the other).

Rahner addresses this ambiguity most clearly when writing about sickness. He writes that while extreme sickness appears to be an interruption in our freedom, it is merely a visible sign of the embodied nature of human freedom, which is always taking up foreign elements as its object. In sickness, as in ordinary time, the human being affirms her existence by “integrating this intervention from without which we call sickness into the single overall meaning which a man has to find in his own existence.”\textsuperscript{488} Such integration occurs when a sick person accepts the bewilderment of her circumstances as the blinding light of God rather than the dark void.\textsuperscript{489} Through her

\textsuperscript{487} Ibid., 85: 171.


acceptance of her own sickness, a sick person accepts the more profound and difficult truth that her life is “in its final outcome, to be decided for [her] by another.”

While in sickness we may experience our bodies as something foreign, even hostile, Rahner reminds us that, “Body [Leib] is not something added on to the soul. Rather it is a concretisation of it, the projection of soul as basic life-force into an already existing sphere of space and time. Thus in a certain sense it is that in the soul which causes it to exist in that concrete dimension of space and time in which it comes (figuratively speaking) to its due fullness and flowering.” Words like “soul” and “body” ought to be used carefully, so as not to give rise to the impression that they describe two ontologically distinct elements of human nature. Rather, Rahner argues that they are more accurately words that describe a unified reality from different perspectives: “It follows from this that what we experience as soul is in reality our own being which is objectively speaking a single and whole entity as viewed from within. And what we call our body [Leib] is ultimately this same entity in its oneness and wholeness as experienced from without.” The words “soul” and “body” describe the starting point of our analysis of the one human being. This language of interiority and exteriority help to highlight the fact that embodiment is the actualization of spirit in space and time.

What complicates the exercise of freedom in times of sickness is that the line between what is a free element of the person and what is a foreign intervention is difficult to determine. What is experienced personally as a spiritual or mental failure may in fact

490 Ibid., 279: 417.
491 Ibid., 276: 415-16.
492 Ibid., 275: 415.
be the sickness itself, such as in the case of clinical depression.493 The intimate relationship between body and spirit entails that even that which seems on self-reflection to be an aspect of one’s inwardness may be merely “sickness”—involving no more guilt than the flu. Even more so, depression and despair may actually be a side effect of a sound spirit in struggle.494 For Rahner, such interplay and confusion between what is internal and external to a person is a general truth of human being.495

Rahner states that one’s acceptance of sickness is not merely the acceptance of limitations placed upon one’s freedom, but also acceptance of the very fact that one cannot parse with certainty the free from the necessary:

Sickness sharpens a man’s awareness of both factors in his life, both that he is in control and that at the same time he is subject to control from without. But he must accept that these are two distinct aspects of what is ultimately one and the same situation, namely the state of being ill, just as body and soul are two distinct elements in the single entity that is man himself, and just as an openness to outside influence and the power to direct himself are intrinsic to his own nature. And if he does this, if he accepts his sickness as a single reality involving both action and passion but ultimately a mystery beyond our own personal control, then both the sick man himself and his sickness are in God’s hands. Then the sickness acquires a redemptive value.496

Here, the paradox of freedom-in-dependence gains another layer: one exercises one’s freedom in accepting that the relationship between freedom and dependence is opaque.

In addition to this ambiguity within our own subjectivity, our bodily nature also entails a vulnerability to others. By entering into the truly other, spirit lays itself open to forces outside it: “In other words, man utters himself and constitutes himself in his

493 Ibid., 277: 416.
494 Ibid., 277: 416.
495 Ibid., 278: 417.
496 Ibid., 279: 417.
concrete nature and thereby opens himself by that very fact to the break-through from outside. In his bodily nature he enters into a sphere which does not belong to him alone.”

And this vulnerability, Rahner argues, goes all the way down. Since it is our very spirit that actualizes itself in the other, and not merely some exterior projection, even our most inward self lies vulnerable: “There is no ‘inwardness’ which does not also stand open, as it were, to what is without.”

This means that the entire realm of spirit’s actualization is marked by risk.

Embodiment places one within “the common sphere of space and time.” I am vulnerable to others, but cannot withdraw into interiority or indifference. I am, unavoidably, a part of a common history and one in which God has entered into: “Two thousand years ago someone died on the cross in all the darkness of his death out of love for the Father. And this took place from the very outset in a sphere which is my own reality.”

Embodiment is thus not a circumscription or an enclosure, bodies are “open systems” which interact with the world. I am not a body in a world, rather my embodiment places me in continuity with the world:

Through bodiliness the whole world belongs to me from the start, in everything that happens. Of course we must not get the impression in this connection that our body stops where our skin stops, as if we were a sack containing a number of different things, which clearly ceases to be what it is where its ‘skin’, the sacking, stops…In a certain sense—and I am exaggerating here, in order to make what I want to say clearer—we are all living in one and the same body—the world. And

498 Ibid., 87: 172.
499 Ibid., 86: 172.
500 Ibid., 87: 173.
501 Ibid.
502 Ibid.
because that is so (and this is really the metaphysical, theological premise) something of the nature of original sin, and something of the nature of redemption can exist too. This one total physical existence as the common space which makes intercommunication between individual spiritual subjects possible from the start—this one concrete space can of course be accepted by the individual spiritual subject in various ways: it can be loved, put up with, or hated.  

This understanding of embodiment fundamentally challenges any understanding of one’s “yes” to God as individualistic. When I affirm myself as one willed by God, I do so within a network of solidarity, understanding myself as one part of a great human family. I am not merely responsible for myself, but am so united to others that I am complicit in their sin and bound up in their redemption.

Thus Rahner provides us with resources for addressing how his understanding of a fundamental option for God can coexist with the subject’s diminished capacity for self-determination. First, he underlines the difficulty we have already stated in determining the subject’s position toward God. One’s despair or hatred of God may not be an expression of the subject’s theological freedom and therefore have little to bear on her ultimate relationship with respect to God. Second, he reiterates that guilt can only be freely acquired: “Only when someone sins knowingly against God can there be guilt…Objectively speaking, no situation can force us into guilt.” Third, he warns against the healthy theologizing about the ethical demands placed on the ill. Nevertheless, Rahner still cautiously hopes that one can make of one’s sickness the material of an option for God, by integrating it into one’s self-understanding.  

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503 Ibid., 87-88: 173.
conscious and explicit acceptance of one’s relationship to self, world, and God is not identical to one’s fundamental “yes,” it is still a privileged mode of its expression. And while theological freedom and one’s activity in the world may appear at odds, Rahner holds out hope for their union.

Questions Remaining about Rahner’s Understanding of Embodiment

Three important questions remain about this understanding of embodiment. First, who—or what—is the “I” that integrates experiences of limitation into her life? Rahner is adamant that there is no interiority beyond the reach of external forces. The problem is that this suggests that the subject who exercises her theological freedom with respect to external necessities is the same subject affected by those necessities. The difficulty can be seen most clearly in Rahner’s writing about depression as a sickness. Rahner argues that the subject ought to somehow accept her own mental illnesses. He even names examples of what not accepting it might look like, including overcorrecting into false optimism, and overmedicating in order to suppress anxiety over existential questions that must be faced honestly and bravely.  

This discussion about one’s moral responsibility toward one’s own depression appears to posit an inner self untouched by depression. As we saw in Jennifer Beste’s analysis of trauma disorders, integrating events into one’s life, making proportional healthy choices in the face of grave suffering, are themselves capacities that can be affected by mental illness.

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506 Ibid., 282-3: 419.

507 Rahner, thankfully, expresses caution about theorizing too much about such things: “we should not be too ready to discourse about the sick and the patience they should exercise, for this is not a subject on which the healthy should have much to say,” Ibid., 279; 417.

508 This is why I am suspicious of the optimism with which Brian McDermott writes about the
Second, and following from the first, is whether or not Rahner’s language of “integration” and “acceptance” refers to specific categorical acts or to one’s fundamental and transcendental freedom. For instance, in practice, Rahner’s discussion of integrating sickness into one’s life appears to assume a specific kind of behavior. Rahner writes as if “acceptance” is an emotional and cognitive act on the part of the sick subject. On the one hand, if intention and act are equally external to one’s freedom, if even the deepest expressions of inwardness are equally embodied as one’s physical flesh, then such behavior is only ideally, but not necessarily, linked to one’s fundamental option for God. On the other hand, if one’s transcendental freedom is so fundamental that it lies beneath even one’s conscious inwardness, to what extent is it an element of one’s self at all? In other words, has Rahner lost sight of his commitment that grace can be experienced? The sum of this line of questions is to ultimately ask our third question: In what ways can external threats affect one’s freedom to effect a fundamental option?

**Rage and Resistance: The Liberative Potential of Spirit-in-World**

In their analysis of how transcendental freedom is exercised under the regime of white supremacy, Carmichael Peters and Bryan Massingale offer some useful tools in thinking about how freedom is embodied. In Peters’ article “A Rahnerian Reading of Black Rage,” he identifies black rage as the expression of a freedom under grave threat. While paradox of freedom and dependence in Rahner’s thought. McDermott’s example of one who effects her freedom in the material of necessity is the story of Victor Frankl, whose love of writing and his wife allows him to “transcend his imprisonment,” during the Holocaust, “The Bonds of Freedom,” *A World of Grace: An Introduction to the Themes and Foundations of Karl Rahner’s Theology*, edited by Leo J. O’Donovan (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1995), 53. Holding examples up such as these unwittingly suggests that a lesser response to such a horrific experience is a moral failing. While I share McDermott’s desire to proclaim the subject as free even in the face of our growing recognition of how human beings are biologically and socially conditioned, I find his particular solution unhelpful.
rage in itself is morally ambiguous, since it can be expressed in criminal and pathological ways. Peters argues that it can be a manifestation of the struggle of spirit to transcend a world that is largely hostile to it: “rage ‘expresses finitude from the inside’ for those who belong to social locations which fundamentally and systematically deny or frustrate the indeterminateness of their finite transcendence.” If the objective material available to one’s freedom is precisely a world that rejects the operation and possibility of that freedom, one’s affirmation of God and self can only take the form of a provisional “no” to the world.

In Rahner’s anthropology, human openness to the world is constituted so that even self-presence is mediated by the encounter with the world. Peters argues that if that world is deliberately hostile, one’s fundamental option will be limited to a choice between resignation and rage:

- If my lifeworld deliberately and fundamentally denies the spiritual character of my transcendence, it will so intimately qualify my *reditio* [self-presence] that my ‘fundamental options’ will be accompanied by the moods of resignation or rage. In other words, I will come to know that I have either to resign myself to the world’s denial of grace as the content of my transcendental self-presence or to defy the world by ratifying being’s self-offer as that content.

Thus the hostility of this world is not just external. In shaping the categorical options available in one’s lived experience, it strikes precisely to the heart of the subject and her self-presence. Therefore, Peters argues that it is warranted to translate Rahner’s language

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510 Ibid., 191-2.
511 Ibid., 205.
512 Ibid.
of the “qualification of human transcendental self-presence” to a more contemporary understanding of “socialization.”

For black existence in the U.S. this socialization is one of “colonization” in which a “double-consciousness” is effected. This double-consciousness means that at the categorical level, the striving for transcendence is experienced as a contradiction. One understands one’s humanity and blackness as at odds. Peters cites the consequent self-loathing and resignation as causes for the high suicide rate in the African-American community, especially among teens. Insofar as one’s fundamental option is effected through relationship to the self, it must entail a decolonization of the self. Rage then is a constitutive element of the decolonization of the self. As resistance to all forms of injustice, and as a declaration that one is not who the world proclaims her to be, rage has great potential for liberation. Thus Peters employs Rahner’s concept of spirit-in-world not only to explain, but also to legitimize, black rage in the United States as resistance to systems fundamentally in service to ideologies of white supremacy.

But how is the self that is formed by hostile socialization capable of resisting it? Where does such resistance come from? In arguing that such decolonization is possible, Peter appeals to the permanent nature of human freedom and transcendence:

Socialization never has the power to so ontologically alter the structure of human ex-sistence that it erases the spiritual potential for indeterminate possibilities…On

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513 Ibid.
514 Ibid., 205-6. These terms are borrowed from bell hooks and W. E. B. DuBois, respectively.
515 Ibid., 207-8.
516 Ibid., 212.
517 Ibid., 194.
518 Ibid., 203-5.
the one hand, it is delivered over to a world which deliberately and fundamentally
denies its spiritual potential, and, on the other, it inexhaustibly reaches beyond ‘in
that world’ and necessarily asks about the ultimate whither of its transcendence. 519

Mediating between spiritual potential and worldly influence is what Peters refers to as
“mood.” Borrowing the term from Heidegger, Peters argues that, “human ex-sistence
always has a mood.” 520 A hostile environment can shape not only the categorical acts
available for the subject’s self-determination (to speak concretely, we might name access
to education and healthcare as prerequisites to making informed decisions about one’s
future), but also, more deeply still, the disposition of the one who acts. In the case of
black ex-sistence in the US for example, double-consciousness coincides with a mood of
resignation. 521 If one wishes to engage in the decolonization of the self, one finds oneself
much in the position of “a caged panther.” 522 The mood of human ex-sistence reaching
out beyond the bars of societal oppression is rage. Thus while Peters argues that human
transcendence is not erased under oppressive situations, it can be shaped enough by them
so as to be profoundly harmed. What is potentially lost here is the freedom of being able
to effect one’s self-disposal in moods other than resignation or rage. Peters therefore
offers us a way of thinking of the inviolability of human transcendence without glossing
over the real way in which freedom is affected by political oppression.

Massingale extends Peters argument by underscoring “the positive dimensions of
black rage as a medium for social liberation and truth.” 523 Insofar as such decolonization

519 Ibid., 209.
520 Ibid., 206-7.
521 Ibid., 207.
522 Ibid., 209.
refutes the denial of one’s freedom and transcendence, it is not merely “legitimate” but is itself a “categorical mediation of forgiveness, grace, and right relationship with God.”

Decolonization is therefore a critical locus for Christian perfection. Further, if Rahner is right that substituting a finite perspective for the transcendent is idolatry, black rage can therefore serve a protest against the idolatry of white supremacy. It thus has even broader theological significance than the decolonization of the self. In its affirmation of both self and God and its protest against injustice, black rage is a Christian virtue. Finally, the ethically ambiguous nature of rage—that it may be directed in ways not oriented toward the mediation of grace—must in itself be recognized by the fact that such rage exists in a racist world, and is therefore co-determined by the guilt of white supremacy.

If a Rahnerian reading of black rage is to do more than legitimate the experience of people of color through the writings of white men, Massingale argues that it is then necessary to assume that black rage also has something to legitimate or correct in Rahner. To begin with, black rage confirms Rahner’s anthropological assumption that transcendental freedom is a permanent aspect of human being, even under oppression. Without analysis of the passion of human dynamism fighting against its own decolonization, Massingale argues that we are left with only philosophical musings of transcendence: “Is it too much to say that without phenomenons such as black rage, Rahner’s anthropology would be unintelligible at best, or illusory speculation at worst?”

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524 Massingale, “Anger and Human Transcendence,” 222.
525 Ibid., 221-3.
526 Ibid., 224.
527 Ibid., 226.
exact nature of the constraints that historicity and social location place upon freedom are largely undeveloped." This lack of development threatens the integrity of Rahner’s own understanding of the human being as spirit-in-world, as it deemphasizes the “world” side of human being. As global awareness of the extent of catastrophe grows, such analysis cannot be placed on the margins, but must be seen as a necessary center of any discourse on freedom.

Peters and Massingale demonstrate that Rahner’s theological anthropology is open to analysis of the social and political constraints on human freedom, though their analysis also raises critical questions about the relationship between the transcendental and categorical in Rahner’s understanding of freedom. In their analysis, one’s transcendental freedom is permanent, but is expressed in different moods depending on the way in which one is shaped by her environment. A “yes” to oneself is always possible, but it may entail a corresponding and categorical “no” to a world that is hostile to it.

“Mood” here becomes something of an intermediary term between one’s fundamental option for God (and oneself) and one’s categorical acts. In Heidegger, “human ex-sistence always finds itself (sich befindet) already intimately belonging to a world (that is, socialized). And it comes across its intimate wordliness always in ‘the mood (Stimmung) that it has.’” Peters also compares it to Kierkegaardian anxiety—it is “an ontological characteristic of being human,” not merely directed toward specific

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528 Ibid., 226-7.
529 Ibid., 227.
530 Peters “A Rahnerian Reading of Black Rage,” 206.
Rage characterizes a fundamental way of being-in-the-world: “I basically want to argue that rage ‘expresses finitude from the inside’ for those who belong to social locations which fundamentally and systematically deny or frustrate the indeterminateness of their finite transcendence.” This concept of mood explains how freedom can be inviolable without it existing separately or prior to one’s categorical being in the world. It is not as if the “yes” to oneself precedes the “no” to the world. They are in this case identical and coextensive. In this way we can speak of the radical way in which human beings may be socialized, without forsaking an understanding that the human being is always free and always self-transcending. Most importantly for this work, they demonstrate how freedom can be inviolable without appealing to some aspect of self untouched by the external world. They provide a cohesive account of how one socialized under an oppressive regime can find the motivation to resist it—in short, how the spirit-in-world can operate against-world. Thus “mood” helps us talk about the way in which embodied subjects are constituted by their world while remaining agents within it.

**Conclusion: Toward a Christian View of the Body**

A young Rahner sought to explain how the grace of God could be experienced by all, theorizing about a dark touch experienced by spirits-in-world. In *Hörer des Wortes*, Rahner clarifies that such subjects await a historical word from God in history, to which they respond in freedom. As becomes clear in his later theology, Rahner’s anthropology of the subject as spirit-in-world is part of a larger Christian theology that attends closely

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531 Ibid., 191.
532 Ibid., 191-2.
to embodiment as the site of salvation. Human beings are by virtue of their common humanity bound up in a common wounded nature. It is this same common nature that makes it possible for Christ to effect salvation for all human beings. It is in bodily existence that God offers salvation, and it is in bodily existence that human subjects effect their “yes” to God in the love of neighbor. Just as Christ made his “yes” to God and God’s “yes” to humanity irrevocable in death, so also do human beings make their “yes” to God irrevocable in death.

But this bodily existence also threatens a cohesive account of the self and the exercise of her freedom. As Rahner develops his theology, he distinguishes between transcendental and categorical freedom: the “yes” that one utters in the world is not simply identical to one’s fundamental option for God. In limit experiences such as anonymous Christianity, suffering, sickness, and dying, there may be a stark contrast between what one appears to be embodying and one’s actual option for God. On the one hand one’s free love of God must be made body; on the other hand embodiment is the realm of everything that is not free. On account of this latter aspect of embodiment, our understanding of any given fundamental option must be shaped by both apophaticism and hope. This is not to weaken the call for discipleship, but to claim decisively that our interpretation of one another’s freedom must take into account our particular embodiment. It is at times difficult for both Rahner and his readers to hold on to this tension.

Carmichael Peters and Bryan Massingale have offered a coherent way of reading Rahner in and through Peters’ understanding of “mood.” They also show the deep liberative potential in Rahner’s understanding of spirit-in-world. To flesh out Rahner’s
theology of embodiment requires that we think through this understanding of the freedom of subjects who are socialized, particularly for those who are socialized in harmful ways by hostile environments. In doing so, we follow Rahner’s own call for a theology of embodiment that understands that freedom is accomplished in a world of risk:

The body is therefore nothing other than the self-consummation of the spirit in space and time. But this self-consummation of everything except God is of such a kind that it is essentially ambiguous and takes place in a sphere of existence in which all men and women communicate with one another from the very beginning.

In the narrower sense of the word, the body is that through which I fulfill myself in the one world in which all spiritual persons exist. And it is from this starting point that we should have to think through anew the individual and more specific features of a Christian view of the body.\(^{533}\)

Chapter 4:

Transactional Bodies

We began this dissertation looking at three challenges to Karl Rahner’s transcendental theology under the guise of three crises of subjectivity: the *Ernstfall*, Auschwitz, and trauma. Each of these crises raises critical questions about the adequacy of any transcendental account of the subject. For Baltasar and Metz, a theology that places her always and already in relationship to God neglects that faith, and even subjectivity itself, are things that must be accomplished. For Beste, the simple identification of relationship to God with relationship to self and world makes this theology unable to speak to those whose relationship to self and world are ruptured by severe interpersonal harm. As I have argued, these concerns are ultimately rooted in the adequacy of Rahner’s account of embodiment.

Our turn to Rahner’s work in chapters two and three focused on uncovering his theology of the body. This work indicated there are more resources in Rahner for talking about subjectivity than one would expect. In chapter two I demonstrated that Rahner’s philosophical and transcendental account of the subject is a moment within a lifelong search to speak of the everyday mysticism described in Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises*. What is primary in Rahner’s work is therefore not the particular way in which he resolves the epistemological problem of how knowledge of God is grounded in the senses, but his larger concern for how the love of God is embodied in people’s actual, concrete lives.

We see this in his later work, as Rahner’s negotiation of the relationship between the transcendental and categorical becomes a way to maintain that on the one hand, one’s faith is not separated from one’s life, and on the other hand, we must remain apophatic in
interpreting both our and others’ faith. Such a reading is developed by Carmichael Peters who argues that black rage is a legitimate expression of affirmation of God in a hostile world, and Bryan Massingale who goes further to argue such rage is a mediation of grace. In their understanding of spirit-in-world, freedom is persistent as well as permeable. That is, while living in a white supremacist society may shape one’s own subjectivity so much that one has a “double consciousness” about one’s own worth, the transcendence of spirit is inviolable. As such they navigate between the errors of proclaiming the subject as either impervious to harm or completely vulnerable. If Peters and Massingale are right in this understanding of spirit-in-world, it may be possible to talk about the inviolability of the human spirit without neglecting the ways in which subjectivity is threatened. While they do not use the language of the “body” or “embodiment,” their work attends to the way in which human beings, as spirits-in-world, actualize their spirituality with respect to the materiality of their own bodies and within a world that is hostile to certain bodies. They push us to recognize that speech about embodiment is always speech about particular bodies. Whether one’s body is read as black or white in a white supremacist society for instance, will shape one’s connection to self, world, and God.

What still needs to be explained is the precise way in which one’s transcendental self-affirmation occurs within a world of hostility. That is, what are the mechanisms by which power structures are replicated, not merely politically, but within the very production of subjectivity? Such interplay has been the focus of debate in feminist political thought for decades.\(^5\) Inspired in large part by Michel Foucault’s claim that the

body is culturally constructed, feminist theorists have challenged the idea that human bodies exist prior or apart from social norms. What they are questioning is not the facticity or materiality of bodies, but their impermeability to what Metz would call the Mitwelt. We see in this discourse a desire to theorize about bodies as both vulnerable to harm and capable of resistance. Thus parallel to (and intersecting) the theological difficulty in speaking of the Christian subject as both free spirit and politically situated body is the philosophical difficulty of speaking of the subject as both agent and patient. As I will demonstrate in the next chapter, placing these discourses in conversation with one another can yield productive results in thinking theologically about the subject, embodiment, and Christian identity.

In this chapter I begin by tracing a debate over two decades between Judith Butler on one side and Martha Nussbaum and Seyla Benhabib on the other. The former argues for a radical understanding of the construction of the subject, while the latter proclaim that such construction is not total. In fact, Nussbaum and Benhabib each argue that an understanding of the subject as radically constructed makes it impossible to theorize about and hope for resistance to harmful political regimes. My point in tracing this debate is to demonstrate the possibilities of thinking about the body as constructed and the stakes in such analysis. As I argue, Butler’s successfully theorizes about the cultural construction of the body without abnegating moral agency and accountability. Ultimately however, Butler’s understanding of materiality directs our attention to the ways in which the construction of identities keeps us from recognizing all human persons as subjects. She is interested primarily in fundamental claims about how identities work as such, rather than the way in which any identity is embodied.
In the second half of the chapter, I turn to the work of Shannon Sullivan, a feminist pragmatist philosopher. Sullivan’s work builds on Butler’s to focus particularly on the ways in which identities of race and gender are mapped onto the body. Sullivan’s language of “transactional bodying” offers a way of thinking about the interplay of self and world that speaks more directly to the concrete change human beings need to effect in their forms of bodying in order to offer resistance to forms of sexist and racist oppressions. Read together, Sullivan and Butler offer a way of thinking about the subject as both culturally constructed and a moral agent in the world.

**Judith Butler and the Paradox of Bodily Inscriptions**

In an early article on Michel Foucault, Butler begins by describing what she calls “the paradox of bodily inscriptions” that remains in the wake of Foucault’s claim that the body is constructed: “The body is a site where regimes of discourse and power inscribe themselves, a nodal point or nexus for relations of juridical and productive power. And, yet, to speak in this way invariably suggests that there is a body that is in some sense there, pregiven, existentially available to become the site of its own ostensible construction.”535 As Butler goes on to say, the grammar of the phrase “the body is culturally constructed” itself suggests that the body exists prior to construction, at least as the site of a possible construction.536 Two of Butler’s most central lines of inquiry develop from this paradox of bodily inscriptions.


536 Butler, “Foucault,” 601.
The first line of inquiry is Butler’s dedication to exposing the exclusionary way discourses function. She does this here in her continued analysis of the phrase “the body is culturally constructed.” As she explains, what the language obscures is the way in which even the “the” of this phrase is a product of construction. The use of a definite article, which points to the particular subject of the sentence, means that a process of selection has already occurred. The sentence has a particular body in mind, and thus some sort of criteria for what counts as “body.” In other words, whatever we mean by the body or the site of construction is itself also a product of construction.537

It is only at the other end of the process of construction that one can speak meaningfully of definite, individual bodies. To help see what she means, it is helpful to think of “construction” non-metaphorically. Consider the human development of land. In Butler’s understanding, the site of construction would not predate the construction. While a physical place is, of course, temporally and logically prior to any development of it, it is not the site of construction until construction occurs. For example, how big is the site? Where is its center? If the site existed prior to construction then answering questions like this ought to be easy. Instead however, the site of construction only becomes a meaningful reference a posteriori. In a similar way, Butler is not denying the materiality of the body, but pointing to the fact that if we are addressing the body—that is, a demarcated body—then we are already looking at a site under construction. Butler instead suggests we read the sentence with a different inflection: even what counts as the

537 Ibid.
body is culturally constructed, where the body is not something that construction is done to, but is the product of construction.\textsuperscript{538}

While this grammatical analysis may seem overly pedantic, Butler’s aim here is not simply to show the extent of construction. Rather, as we will see in her later work, Butler is concerned that theorists are too quickly jumping to the question of “how are different subjects constructed?” and ignoring the more critical way in which some are excluded from subjectivity from the outset. Social norms do not just produce various subjectivities, they also make only some subjects recognizable as such. They can blind us to the subjectivity of others, those whom Butler refers to as the “abject.” For example, to speak of the way in which a culture produces men or women, is to automatically exclude—indeed be unable to recognize—those who are not captured by these binary terms. Thus Butler’s exposure of “the” as a product of construction is not a matter of some epistemological fatalism, but rather a hypervigilance concerning who is made invisible by the questions we ask.

The second line of inquiry relates to the materiality of bodies vis-à-vis their cultural construction. Foucault himself, Butler argues, is ambivalent or inconsistent on the question of the materiality of bodies. While he argues that bodies are not stable sites of meaning, and sex is nothing more than an “imaginary point,” his description of the construction of bodies at times appears to assume that materiality does in fact preexist construction. His ideas that “there could be no body before the law, no sexuality freed

\textsuperscript{538} Ibid., 602.
from relations of power”⁵³⁹ are contradicted by how he develops this theory of construction. Butler writes:

If the body in its indefinite generality, however, proves to be a point of dynamic resistance to culture per se, then this body is not culturally constructed, but is, in fact, the inevitable limit and failure of cultural construction…whereas Foucault wants to argue—and does claim—that bodies are constituted within the specific nexus of culture or discourse/power regimes, and that there is no materiality or ontological independence of the body outside of any one of those specific regimes, his theory nevertheless relies on a notion of genealogy, appropriated from Nietzsche, which conceives the body as a surface and a set of subterranean “forces” that are, indeed, repressed and transmuted by a mechanism of cultural construction external to that body.

Part of the problem Butler identifies with Foucault’s work is that it employs the metaphor of inscription in an overly deterministic way—in which history, conceived primarily as language, is written on the blank slate of the body. But one can envision a blank body distinct and prior to an inscribed body, one can even mentally work backwards from the inscribed body to a blank one. Presumably, this is exactly the kind of reasoning that claiming “the body is culturally constructed” is designed to dismantle. However, when Foucault imagines such inscription as harmful, Butler suggests that he seems to be thinking of something like Kafka’s *Penal Colony*, in which the body is destroyed in its being inscribed upon. But if the body is culturally constructed, inscription cannot be a process by which a healthy, meaningful, and meaning-making body is harmed. It would have to be the process through which such a body comes to be.⁵⁴⁰

Butler’s metaphor of Kafka’s *Penal Colony* is a helpful one to keep in mind when we are judging the adequacy of any theory about the materiality and discursiveness of the body. On the one hand, if the inscription is the process by which subjects are formed, it

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⁵³⁹ Ibid., 603. Here Butler is summarizing Foucault’s thought.

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid., 603-4.
seems difficult to theorize about such formation as harmful, since no prior thing exists to be harmed, nor any counterfactual to determine what harm means. On the other hand, if we envision the role of cultural norms upon the subject as an inscription upon a body—like Kafka’s torture device which slowly kills the one being inscribed upon—then we are not talking about forces that shape who a subject is, but merely things that happen to it. If we accept that human persons are deeply constituted by the social world in which they emerge, then talk of political resistance will need new theories and metaphors to speak about the self.

Ultimately, Butler argues that Foucault’s description of the body as inscribed by and opposite to history, and thus as capable in some way of resisting it, undermines his “stated program to formulate power in its generative as well as juridical modes.”\(^{541}\) If the body is culturally constructed, then what resources does it draw from in order to resist cultural construction? Butler encourages us to read Foucault against himself. If we play the role of Foucault and analyze his own writings according to his genealogical method, we could make a Foucauldian argument for refusing Foucault’s own reliance on a pre-existant and resistant body. We would see that “the culturally constructed body would be the result of a diffuse and active structuring of the social field with no magical or ontotheological origins, structuralist distinctions, or fictions of bodies, subversive or otherwise, ontologically intact before the law.”\(^{542}\)

\(^{541}\) Ibid., 607.

\(^{542}\) Ibid.
Within a year of publishing this article, Butler released *Gender Trouble*, in which she applies Foucault’s insight that the body is culturally constructed to the question of gender identities. Within this text, we see her trying to avoid the theoretical challenges that plagued Foucault’s attempt to hold the materiality and discursivity of the body in tension. Throughout this text, Butler highlights the circular and often self-defeating logic of theorists who attempt to subvert heterosexism through appeal to either the body as given or gender as discrete.

Butler begins the by interrogating the stability of the category “woman,” since it is always discursively constructed in a concrete historical context and varies across factors like race, class, and orientation. Nor can one simply appeal to the sex of the body as a given. How one defines the sex of the body—whether it be “natural, anatomical, chromosomal, or hormonal” is itself a product of the discourse surrounding gender, and bodies are more varied on all of these axis than a binary recognizes. Thus Butler argues that, “the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all.” Those who use it for the sake of subversive politics in fact tie themselves to what she refers to as “Christian and Cartesian” accounts that view the body as either passive or profane. The body therefore cannot secure the stability of “woman.”

In fact, Butler challenges the very search for a stable notion of the category. She argues that “woman” is not a natural category to which one can appeal in furthering

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545 Ibid., 175-6.
political representation, but is itself a construct of the regulatory procedures of the exclusionary political status quo. Claims about who or what a “woman” is always involve an exclusionary refusal to recognize certain subjects. For Butler, politics of identity always function through exclusion—not merely the structural opposition of man and woman, but the exclusion of those who are not visible as women.546

Because of this exclusionary function of identities, Butler argues that a feminist political agenda which pushes for the representation of women under the law is therefore mired in contradiction which threatens not only its success, but opens up the possibility to inadvertently further exclusionary practices. Even “strategic” appeals to the category of women fall into this pit.547 A stable notion of “woman” is not necessary for the justification and development of a feminist political agenda. Rather, a feminist agenda should aim precisely to interrogate such identities, particularly as they are produced by “contemporary juridical structures”: “a new sort of feminist politics is now desirable to contest the very reifications of gender and identity, one that will take the variable construction of identity as both a methodological and normative prerequisite, if not a political goal.”548 This interrogation begins by giving up the quest for a unified notion of “woman” or of “feminism,” instead beginning coalitions of smaller groups that may discover different notions of these terms and “[taking] action with those contradictions intact.”549 By allowing, from the onset, an essential or definitional “incompleteness” of the category of “woman” it may “serve as a normative ideal relieved of coercive

546 Ibid., Ch. 1, see particularly 2-8.
547 Ibid., 2-8, 18-22.
548 Ibid., 7-8
549 Ibid., 20
The appeal to “woman” therefore can only be an appeal to a site of contested meanings, navigated and negotiated by localized groups and discerned from the ground up.

Butler’s dismissal of the category of “woman” is not a dismissal of gender identity as such, but the policing of the borders of these identities, which always seeks to determine who is inside and who is outside them. Inevitably, appeals are made to who is a “real” woman. While as far as I know Butler has not written about this issue, one helpful example to illustrate what she is describing is Michfest, the Michigan Womyn’s Festival that proclaims itself as a womyn-only space. In 1991, Michfest removed Nancy Burkholder, a transwoman, from the festival. Butler would argue that because the philosophy of Michfest appeals to the category of “woman” in its rejection of sexist and patriarchal cultural norms, it has perpetuated rather than dismantled the systematic

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550 Ibid., 21


exclusion of people based on their identities. Indeed, in Butler’s language, it has rendered transfolk unrecognizable—they are, in this analysis, men invading women’s space. Ultimately Michfest’s appeal to womanhood functions as a statement not merely about gender identity, but about subjecthood in general. In their scheme, transfolk simply do not exist.

In Butler’s diagnosis, contemporary language of gender identity either mistakenly posits gender as an essential core of one’s identity or as a mere and arbitrary accident. The problem with both options is that they both assume a true authentic self underneath a thin layer of construction—the question is only which side of the line sex/gender identity falls on. Either “woman” is a thin artifice, or some essential and unchanging core. Part of the problem behind this dichotomy is a tendency to appeal to metaphors of interiority. For Butler, however, dividing the self into “inner” and “outer” is already a discursive move. It depends on a metaphysics of substance which assumes “a substantive person who is the bearer of various essential and nonessential attributes.” As Butler provocatively suggests, such a metaphysics emerges as the justification of exploitation. One justifies the domination of other bodies through appeal to one’s own superior identity, which must then be made a matter of essence rather than mere accident. In turn, if one imagines that one’s gender performance is the expression of one’s core

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553 In using the term “sex/gender” I am following a number of feminist theorists who, like Butler, refuse to admit that there is qualitative difference between the two. Both are constructed and, as Butler argues, they mutually constitute one another.


555 Ibid., 14, see also 26-34.

556 Here, Butler is referring to Iris Young’s own use of Julia Kristeva, *Gender Trouble*, 182. One could imagine as support for the theory the way in which the idea of whiteness—not as merely an accident of pigment or geography, but as a superior race—developed as justification for slavery.
identity, one does not need to peer behind the curtain to ask where her desires come from and who or what they serve.\textsuperscript{557}

Butler’s response is not to locate sex/gender under the heading of “nonessential” but to rather challenge the entire distinction between essential and nonessential. In order to avoid any confusion, Butler offers the language of “performance” rather than construction in speaking of sex/gender. Here she is explicitly taking up Nietzsche’s claim from \textit{On the Genealogy of Morals} that “there is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming: ‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything.”\textsuperscript{558}

Rather than viewing sex/gender as something that is constructed on top of our given bodies, as something exterior to our authentic interiority, Butler proclaims that sex/gender is something that we do: “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results.”\textsuperscript{559} By arguing that identities are something that are performed, Butler removes any debate about whether our visible identities correspond to our inner selves—rather, our lives authenticate themselves in the doing.

One of her clearest definitions of this theory comes in a later preface to the book, where Butler is clarifying the theory in response to criticism: “In the first instance, then, the performativity of gender revolves around this metalepsis, the way in which the anticipation of a gendered essence produces that which it posits as outside itself.

Secondly, performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a

\textsuperscript{557} Ibid., 186.
\textsuperscript{558} Ibid., 34.
\textsuperscript{559} Ibid.
culturally sustained temporal duration.” In short, it is our anticipation of gender as a reality that makes it one, as the gendered habits of our life settle into a stable identity.

Within an understanding of sex/gender as performance, there is no true identity or sexuality that exists apart from, before, or underneath the legal and social networks we live in. Instead, following Foucault, she argues that sexuality and power are intimately bound up. A sexuality “free” from the constraints of social norms—what she sometimes refers to in Lacanian terms as “the Law”—is impossible. Instead of imagining a free sexuality, what is necessary is to “[rethink] subversive possibilities for sexuality and identity within the terms of power itself,”—in other words, imagine different ways of operating within those norms.561

She suggests that a feminist politics must attempt to answer the following questions: “What possibilities of gender configurations exist among the various emergent and occasionally convergent matrices of cultural intelligibility that govern gendered life?”562 “What kind of subversive repetition might call into question the regulatory practice of identity itself?”563 Butler urges her readers to “make gender trouble” in order to call into question the notions of identity propagated by the “masculine hegemony and heterosexist power.”564 Such “practices of parody” would expose the lie of the epistemologies and ontologies that undergird compulsive heterosexuality, opening up

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560 Butler, preface (1999) to Gender Trouble, xv.
561 Butler, Gender Trouble, 28-30.
562 Ibid., 31.
563 Ibid., 32.
564 Ibid., 34.
new ways of seeing and being which, in turn, would make a new form of politics possible.\footnote{Ibid., 200-3.}

\textit{Removing the Doer from the Deed: Seyla Benhabib’s Critique of Butler}

At first glance, such an understanding of the construction of the self may appear to threaten even the thinnest sense of freedom (or even the existence of a self at all). Here there appears to be no spirit but only a \textit{tabula rasa} shaped by in-worldness. In her 1992, \textit{Situating the Self}, Seyla Benhabib argues that Judith Butler’s philosophy removes the doer from the deed and therefore abnegates any moral responsibility or impetus for change.\footnote{Seyla Benhabib, \textit{Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics} (New York: Routledge, 1992), particularly “Chapter 7: Feminism and the Question of Postmodernism,” 203-41.} In Benhabib’s estimation, Butler is one of many feminist theorists who have wrongly appropriated the postmodern turn and its prohibition against identity politics.

While Benhabib recognizes that certain postmodern turns are helpful insofar as they critique mainstream philosophy from the margins, she resists what she calls “strong postmodernism” that hails the death of “Man, History and Metaphysics.”\footnote{Benhabib, \textit{Situating the Self}, 210.} As she points out, women have never been able to narrate their lives or act autonomously to the same extent that men have. It is contradictory, therefore, for feminist politics to hail the death of the subject at the same time that so many women have fought and are still fighting for the recognition of their subjectivity. What’s more, given the fact that so many women are gendered precisely to be selfless, the removal of the “self” as a stable category is even
more problematic.\textsuperscript{568} Thus she laments that in their excitement over the dismantling of much of the philosophical ideals that have undergirded colonialism and patriarchy, feminists have sabotaged their own theoretical foundations in working towards gender justice.

Benhabib singles out Butler in particular for employing an argument that is ultimately self-defeating. If there are no identities behind our performances, then who or what is it that is performing? Such a position is philosophically incoherent as a foundation for female emancipation. Benhabib goes further to question the practical effect of Butler’s theory. With only deeds, but no doers, what sort of talk about moral responsibility is possible? How can Butler hold people accountable—either for being complicit in regimes of power that marginalize people or for engaging in acts of resistance?\textsuperscript{569}

Rather, Benhabib suggests that feminist politics does in fact demand a notion of “woman.” While Benhabib argues that a strong postmodernism is incompatible with feminism, she suggests we take the death of “Man, History, and Metaphysics” not to mean that the pursuit of knowledge is false or that the subject doesn’t exist but that the quest for knowledge must be proceduralist and interactive. Much like the scientific method demands both the positing of a hypothesis and its subjection to testing and critique, Benhabib argues that we must be willing to say something about the self, even if it must also be suspicious and open-ended.\textsuperscript{570}

\textsuperscript{568} Ibid., 214-5.
\textsuperscript{569} Ibid., 214-18.
Benhabib’s criticism both exemplifies one major tradition of reading Butler, and identifies what is at stake in addressing theoretical understandings of the self, in general, and of gender identity, in particular. For Benhabib, the dangers of a call for humble apophaticism with respect to the identities of human persons is that we will be timid in demanding justice for the particular identities that are excluded in any given moment. Does Butler’s suspicion of identity politics hamper her ability to accomplish her goal of radical inclusion?

*Bodies that Matter*

In her 1993 book *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex,”* Butler responds to criticisms like that of Benhabib’s’ by arguing that her understanding of the cultural construction of the body does not ignore the materiality of the body nor preclude the possibility of political resistance. As she argues in the introduction, many of the accusations directed toward her continue to assume a division between the natural and the social. Construction, however, is not an imprint of the social upon the natural, but the very condition of our making such distinctions. That is, gender is not simply a network of meaning constructed on top of a foundation of natural and biological sex difference. Rather, she argues, the appeal to the “natural” is already in and of itself a move that operates within a given discourse.

In addressing the appeal to “sex” as a category pertaining to the simple identification of real bodies, Butler argues:

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571 Judith Butler, preface to *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex,”* (New York: Routledge, 2011), viii-x.
The category of “sex” is, from the start normative; it is what Foucault has called a “regulatory ideal.” In this sense, then, “sex” not only functions as a norm, but is part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs, that is, whose regulatory force is made clear as a kind of productive power, the power to produce—demarcate, circulate, differentiate—the bodies it controls. Thus, “sex” is a regulatory ideal whose materialization is compelled, and this materialization takes place (or fails to take place) through certain highly regulated practices.\textsuperscript{572}

For example, female secondary sex characteristics include a lack of body hair and slightness of frame. These are allegedly natural differences that mark off the female body. But the amount of money the cosmetics industry makes on hair bleaching and removal combined with the strength of the diet and fitness industry indicate that being small and relatively hairless is actually the end result of a rigorous and often expensive bodily practice. Ironically, it is precisely the perceived naturalness of these characteristics that make faking them so important.

In short, there are no human bodies that exist apart from human cultivation. The materiality of bodies is therefore not opposed to the social construction of those bodies. Our materiality itself is a product of construction. The social construction of femininity affects the materiality of bodies labeled “female”—for example, when women work out so as to stay thin but not gain muscle mass they are intentionally conforming their bodies to an image of what a “natural” woman is. There is no materiality we can access prior to or apart from such shaping. On top of this, the turn to materiality as an indicator of the real is itself the product of a given social location. In other words, neither the body nor the theorist exists before or apart from social construction. One cannot turn “away” from reflection on social construction to the materiality of the body.

\textsuperscript{572} Butler, introduction to \textit{Bodies that Matter}, xi-xii.
To avoid confusion Butler shifts here from language of “construction” to language of “materiality” to describe the ways bodies are regulated. The reference is not to some original passive material which is then imprinted upon by cultural norms, but to the way in which our materiality is itself shaped by cultural norms: Materiality is “a return to the notion of matter, not as site or surface, but as a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter.”573 What I consider to be my material existence is itself effected by cultural norms (through practices designed to produce allegedly “natural” gender markers). Within such an analysis both what is referred to more commonly as “gender” and as “sex” are the legacy of a process of materialization.

Far from being merely inaccurate, appeals to the natural with respect to sex difference always function to secure some forms of subjectivity at the expense of others. Naming of a biological womanhood that can be accessed apart from social norms depends on the exclusion of the abject: “The abject designates here precisely those “unlivable” and “uninhabitable” zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the “unlivable” is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject.”574 In other words, one is not just living in contradiction if she maintains that women are not bearded while plucking her chin. She is also substantiating the claim that to be a bearded woman is an unlivable situation. I can maintain the illusion that I am a natural woman only by

573 Ibid., xviii.
574 Ibid., xiii.
positing others as unnatural. After all, without such comparison, without the dismissal of what is seen as “natural,” what is the point of the appeal?

Butler returns here to the notion of performance, but clarifies that what is meant is not roleplaying—as if one could hide an authentic identity under a costume for a spell—but J.L. Austen’s performative speech-acts: statements like “I promise” or “I do take you as my wife” which enact what they describe. These statements themselves are productive—they effect what they say, and are thus always self-authenticating. Here, Butler is following Jacques Derrida’s specific reading of speech-acts, which highlights the way that they are made possible only through practices—for example, the legal codes surrounding marriage—that are then reiterated: “Performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate “act,” but, rather as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names.” Speech-acts gain their power not from any willing agent, but by the citation (and therefore sedimentation) of regulating norms. That is, the answer to the question, “Are they really married?” is a question of whether or not a given set of norms was enacted. To stand in front of a justice of the peace and perform a set of actions is not to pretend to be married, but to be married.

Declaring that all identities operate in this way means that we must shift from thinking about authenticity as a matter of correspondence between one’s “inner” and “outer” self, but to the accomplishment of identity through social norms. Butler here is shifting the metaphors we use in thinking about identity from that of substance to activity, and from that of the individual to the social. Identities are not interior facts about the self that are discovered over time. Identities are something we do within our given

\[575\] Ibid., xxi.
social world. The sedimentation of materiality is therefore accomplished through performance—that is the citation of social norms.\(^{576}\)

What this entails is the paradox, recognized by Foucault, that those who resist a given set of norms have themselves been produced by it. But, as Butler points out, not all of them are produced as subjects within it. Since the Law shores up identities through exclusion—by creating a boundary which defines some as “inside” and others as “outside”—it creates abjects as well as subjects. However, those that are produced as abject under the law are themselves indication that another law is possible. Thus the law contains its own undoing. From the standpoint of the abject, one sees the Law not as unnecessary or inevitable, but as one possibility. Thus Butler poses the following question—one that works well in summarizing her work as a whole: “What challenge does that excluded and abjected realm produce to a symbolic hegemony that might force a radical rearticulation of what qualifies as bodies that matter, ways of living that count as “life,” lives worth protecting, lives worth saving, lives worth grieving?”\(^{577}\)

*The Professor of Parody: Martha Nussbaum’s Criticism of Butler*

In the late 1990s, much of Martha Nussbaum’s research challenged the reign of post-structuralists who had critiqued liberal feminist political thought and its emphasis on the individual and her rights. In her 1999 article “Professor of Parody,” Nussbaum offers a scathing critique of Butler in particular. The essay lambasts her prose, her lack of originality in speaking about the subject as constructed, her inability to engage with

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\(^{576}\) Ibid., xxiii.

\(^{577}\) Ibid.
social science research, and, most importantly, what Nussbaum identifies as the political impotence of Butler’s project. As Nussbaum argues, the lack of any stable self prior to a regime of power makes it impossible to talk about resistance to that power: “What should be resisted, and on what basis? What would the acts of resistance be like, and what would we expect them to accomplish?” At the practical level, she finds Butler’s own political proscriptions woefully inadequate. What is the use of making “gender trouble” when girls do not receive education? Nussbaum particularly laments the rise of feminist theorists whose political activism is reduced only to gender play, with little concern for the lack of healthcare, education, and material goods that affects women all over the globe.

At the beginning of the essay, Nussbaum laments that,

It is not only that feminist theory pays relatively little attention to the struggles of women outside the United States. (This was always a dispiriting feature even of much of the best work of the earlier period.) Something more insidious than provincialism has come to prominence in the American academy. It is the virtually complete turning from the material side of life, toward a type of verbal and symbolic politics that makes only the flimsiest of connections with the real situation of real women.

The problem is, in large part, due to certain readers of Foucault—particularly Butler. According to Nussbaum, Butler’s problems are varied: she writes poorly, never clearly defining her own position; she casually alludes to thinkers without justifying what is often a minority or otherwise contentious read of them, so that the general reader is bewildered and the specialist reader disappointed; and it offers nothing to those outside the academy concerned with the material reality women face. Nussbaum can only surmise that her texts are written for “young feminist theorists in the academy who are


579 Nussbaum, “Professor of Parody,” 38.
neither students of philosophy, caring about what Althusser and Freud and Kripke really said, nor outsiders, needing to be informed about the nature of their projects and persuaded of their worth.” Such readers must be “remarkably docile,” Nussbaum continues, to not ask questions of Butler’s work—since Butler imagines no interlocutors, nor rebuttals. Indeed, the reader does not even mind the lack of answers since, as Nussbaum argues, Butler rarely owns her own positions, but rather couches them in statements of possibility or probability. 

Butler’s initial insight, that gender is constructed, is nothing new. It is an idea that, as Nussbaum reminds us, goes back at least to John Stuart Mill’s _The Subjection of Women_, and had been developed by many feminist philosophers, natural scientists, and social scientists—notably Catharine MacKinnon, Andrea Dworkin, Nancy Chodorow, Anne Fausto Sterling, Susan Moller Okin, and Gayle Robin. To these accounts, Nussbaum alleges that Butler adds nothing but the claim that gender, since not tied to sex, need not be a binary. 

The primary focus of Nussbaum’s critique is the fact that Butler’s unoriginal claims regarding gender are tied to an understanding of the self as “completely inert” prior to its construction via social norms. Such an understanding of construction offers a depressing account of the possibility of moral agency, particularly resistance to social norms: “Butler does in the end want to say that we have a kind of agency, an ability to undertake change and resistance. But where does this ability come from, if there is no

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580 Ibid.  
581 Ibid.  
582 Ibid., 39.  
583 Ibid., 40.
structure in the personality that is not thoroughly power’s creation?” For Nussbaum, it is rooted in the human striving evident in the pre-cultural desires “for food, for comfort, for cognitive mastery, for survival.

Butler however, in arguing against the possibility of any desire apart from the law, has no such foundation to stand on. Nussbaum also challenges Butler’s claim that the body is constructed. While she agrees that the division of bodies into two sexes is overly simplistic, exclusive of certain bodies, and perhaps only one of many more relevant ways of categorizing bodies in society, she asks provocatively whether or not it would make a difference if we “had the bodies of birds or dinosaurs or lions.” At some point, real human bodies matter.

Bracketing the accuracy of Butler’s understanding of the body and self as constructed, Nussbaum continues asking about the political potency of such a theory:

Suppose we grant Butler her most interesting claims up to this point: that the social structure of gender is ubiquitous, but we can resist it by subversive and parodic acts. Two significant questions remain. What should be resisted and on what basis? What would the acts of resistance be like, and what would we expect them to accomplish?

As she points out, Butler studies no actual forms of resistance. And her refusal to speak normatively places those who seek justice in a passive and reactionary position. Butler cannot name an ideal for which to strive, but only wait on a particular context within which to speak out. Nussbaum goes on to say that many things fall under the category of “subversive”: refusing to pay taxes for libertarian reasons, poking fun at feminists in

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Ibid., 41.
Ibid., 42.
Ibid.
Ibid.
one’s law class, or tearing down pro-gay posters. Butler, Nussbaum argues, offers no norms to show why these acts of parody are not to be welcomed.588

Naming “parody” as the only form of political resistance is woefully inadequate, and not merely because it can be used for any cause. It is radically unfair to those who suffer human rights abuses and other assaults to human dignity. As Nussbaum asks,

Isn’t this like saying to a slave that the institution of slavery will never change, but you can find ways of mocking it and subverting it, finding your personal freedom within those acts of carefully limited defiance? Yet it is a fact that the institution of slavery can be changed, and was changed—but not by people who took a Butler-like view of the possibilities. It was changed because people did not rest content with parodic performance: they demanded, and to some extent they got, social upheaval. It is also a fact that the institutional structures that shape women’s lives have changed. The law of rape, still defective, has at least improved; the law of sexual harassment exists, where it did not exist before; marriage is no longer regarded as giving men monarchical control over women’s bodies. These things were changed by feminists who would not take parodic performance as their answer, who thought that power, where bad, should, and would, yield before justice.589

Rather than identify the injustices in our day, and motivate her readers to effect change, Butler merely invites them to “focus on cultivating the self rather than thinking in a way that helps the material condition of others,”590—a priority Nussbaum argues is particularly easy for self-involved middle-class Americans to get on board with. Perhaps the most damning criticism Nussbaum offers is the simplest, in one of her closing sentences of the essay: “Hungry women are not fed by this, battered women are not sheltered by it, raped women do not find justice in it, gays and lesbians do not achieve legal protections through it.”591

588 Ibid.
589 Ibid., 43.
590 Ibid., 44.
591 Ibid., 45.
In *Sex and Social Justice*, which was published the next year, Nussbaum offers a fuller defense of the liberal project against feminist and postmodern critiques. She argues that the hyper-vigilant respect for difference that has become characteristic of postmodern thought actually aligns with conservative, rather than progressive, approaches to human rights, leaving feminists with no concrete tool to help women.\(^{592}\)

Liberalism, however, provides a way of speaking of the inherent value of the individual as an end in herself—all the more important to women, who are often considered as represented and subsumed under groups (for example, the family) or as means to other ends (for example, reproduction). Nussbaum defends a conception of feminism that is international, humanist, liberal, and concerned with the social shaping of preference and desire, and sympathetic understanding.\(^{593}\) Through this conception she attempts to escape the troublesome victim/agent dichotomy which she argues plagues feminism, by paying attention not only to the role of choice, but encouraging the conditions for people to make real choices.\(^{594}\)

Nussbaum’s criticism most clearly articulates some limits to Butler’s approach, particularly her inattention to analysis of the way in which sexism is codified legally. However, I do not think that Butler leaves us with as little resources as Nussbaum alleges. Nowhere in her summary of Butler’s thought does Nussbaum mention the distinction between the production of the subject and the abject. But Butler’s concern for those who are created as abject does, in fact, offer an implicit norm. Butler is not merely calling for subversion as such. Recall that in *Gender Trouble* Butler describes “practices

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\(^{593}\) Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, 6-14.

\(^{594}\) Ibid., 18-9.
of parody” as those that expose the lie of the epistemologies and ontologies that undergird compulsive heterosexuality. In *Bodies that Matter* she asks more broadly, and more provocatively: “What challenge does that excluded and abjected realm produce to a symbolic hegemony that might force a radical rearticulation of what qualifies as bodies that matter, ways of living that count as “life,” lives worth protecting, lives worth saving, lives worth grieving?”

Butler is not concerned with subversion for subversion’s sake, but for recognizing those whose subjectivity are denied under the present social norms. The acts that Nussbaum describes as subversive—refusing to pay taxes, making fun of feminist, vandalizing pro-gay posters—do not constitute what Butler would identify as “parody.” The abject is not merely defined by statistical minority. Being libertarian, or anti-feminist, or anti-gay are visible, livable positions in our society. Popular or not, one can successfully run for office with such opinions, and one’s chances of becoming a victim of violent crime does not increase when one converts to any of these positions.

This in itself may change, however. As Butler’s own suspicion about the word “woman” highlights, she is sensitive to the ways in which popular social justice movements—like feminism—can themselves become exclusionary. Who the abject is will change given the time and place. Thus for Butler the ideal is not to lift up a given identity or identity politics, but to develop habits of vigilant listening to the other, that keep us examining any given politics for who it excludes, and whose lives it renders

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596 Butler, introduction to *Bodies that Matter*, xxiii.
unlivable. Parody open up what lives are thinkable. This in itself is a type of justice for the marginalized.

As Butler defends herself in the 1999 preface to *Gender Trouble*,

The aim of the text was to open up the field of possibility for gender without dictating which kinds of possibilities ought to be realized. One might wonder what use “opening up possibilities” finally is, but no one who has understood what it is to live in the social world as what is “impossible,” illegible, unrealizable, unreal, and illegitimate is likely to pose that question.\(^\text{597}\)

As she goes on to clarify, her call is not to let all flowers bloom with respect to gender and sexuality—but to render such positions thinkable so that one’s ethical reflection is not merely governed by taboo.\(^\text{598}\) This explains why at the end of *Gender Trouble* she does not name “practices of parody” as a political movement unto itself; rather such practices—in exposing the lie of the epistemologies and ontologies that undergird compulsive heterosexuality—would open up new ways of seeing and being which, in turn, would make a new form of politics possible.\(^\text{599}\) Nussbaum is mistaking what Butler is identifying as the condition for the possibility of a liberative politics for the politics itself.

Butler’s work in her 2004 *Undoing Gender* show the possibility of this system to serve as a norm for concrete issues facing gender and sexual minorities. Describing human being as ec-static—that is, as something always going out from itself—Butler argues that the desire for recognition is a fundamental aspect of the human experience.\(^\text{600}\)

But both the recognition and the desire for it can function in such a way to exclude the


\(^{598}\) Ibid., viii-ix.

\(^{599}\) Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 200-3.

recognition of others. In other words, we shore up our own humanity by denying it to others.\textsuperscript{601} This creates a situation where many have to choose between being recognized as human or recognized as themselves\textsuperscript{602}—here Butler alludes to Frantz Fanon’s statement “the black is not a man” as an example of such contradiction.\textsuperscript{603}

In this text, Butler also provides a greater challenge to the liberal feminism, the kind of which Martha Nussbaum is a proponent. The problem with appeal only to rights language is that it depends on an understanding of the self as solely autonomous. But, as Butler argues, members of the transgender and intersex community do not merely want to assert their rights—particularly their bodily autonomy—but want to be members of communities. They want to be recognized. Language that only appeals to the subject as sovereign, without being joined by language of the subject in mutual dependence with others, cannot help these broader conditions of flourishing.\textsuperscript{604} It is the body for Butler that offers up “a different conception of politics”:

The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others but also to touch and to violence. The body can be the agency and instrument of all these as well, or the site where “doing” and “being done to” become equivocal. Although we struggle for rights over our own bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own. The body has its invariably public dimension; constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine.\textsuperscript{605}

This placing of the body in the liminal space between the world and me challenges us to think about challenging exclusive political systems without appealing to false

\textsuperscript{601} Butler, \textit{Undoing Gender}, 2-4.
\textsuperscript{602} Ibid., 4.
\textsuperscript{603} Ibid., 13.
\textsuperscript{604} Ibid., 6-8, 20-2.
\textsuperscript{605} Ibid., 21.
understandings of ourselves as solely our own. Insofar as Butler’s system attends to a
more honest account of the body, and seeks the full recognition of persons in community
rather than just legal protection, her goals can be seen as much broader and more
ambitious than Nussbaum’s.

As an example of what it means to falsely shore up one’s identity through self-
enclosure, Butler points to U.S. policy and social trends since September 11, 2001. In the
face of our vulnerability to great violence, “the dominant mode in the United States has
been to shore up sovereignty and security to minimize or, indeed, foreclose this
vulnerability,” but Butler argues that “the fact that our lives are dependent on others can
become the basis of claims for nonmilitaristic political solutions, one [basis] which we
cannot will away, one which we must attend to, even abide by, as we begin to think about
what politics might be implied by staying with the thought of corporeal vulnerability
itself.” Choosing to see our own vulnerability as impetus for protecting others who are
vulnerable—rather than to partake in actions that directly and indirectly harm those in the
world who are already particularly vulnerable—requires that we recognize certain lives
as grievable. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are examples of Butler’s claim that some
bodies are seen as valuable and others are not: “Certain lives will be highly protected, and
the abrogation of their claims to sanctity will be sufficient to mobilize the forces of war.
And other lives will not find such fast and furious support and will not even qualify as
‘grievable.’”

In addition, Butler mentions the examples of lives in Africa lost to

606 Ibid., 22-3. Butler also develops the connection between grief and vulnerability in Preca

607 Butler, Undoing Gender, 24.
Aids,\textsuperscript{608} the invisibility of “drag, butch, femme, transgender, transsexual persons” and those seeking other forms of kinship in the Human Rights Campaign’s push for gay marriage;\textsuperscript{609} the murders of gender and sexuality minorities that in turn go unpunished;\textsuperscript{610} the surgical “correction” of intersex children;\textsuperscript{611} the life of David Reimer, who after having his penis burned as an infant was raised as a girl by his parents—his parents finding the idea of a man without a penis as unlivable;\textsuperscript{612} and the medical pathology of certain gender identities in \textit{DSM-IV}.\textsuperscript{613} In turn, I think Nussbaum downplays the ways in which recognition of one’s life is prerequisite for flourishing. Not all of the factors that contribute to the lives of gender and sexual minorities being unlivable are related to policy. Thus, defending her call to open up possibilities of gender, Butler writes: “Some people have asked me what is the use of increasing possibilities for gender. I tend to answer: Possibility is not a luxury; it is as crucial as bread.”\textsuperscript{614}

\textit{Giving An Account of Oneself}

Of Seyla Benhabib’s and Martha Nussbaum’s criticism, the most relevant concern for this dissertation is their claim that it is impossible to theorize about political resistance while maintaining that the body is culturally constructed. Butler responds directly to this

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{608} Ibid., 25.
  \item \textsuperscript{609} Ibid., 25-9, as well as all of Chapter 5.
  \item \textsuperscript{610} Ibid., 34.
  \item \textsuperscript{611} Ibid., 53.
  \item \textsuperscript{612} Ibid., Chapter 3.
  \item \textsuperscript{613} Ibid., Chapter 4.
  \item \textsuperscript{614} Ibid., 29.
\end{itemize}
charge in her 2005 *Giving an Account of Oneself*.\(^{615}\) This book collects Butler’s 2002 Spinoza Lectures at the University of Amsterdam.\(^{616}\) In it, Butler uses a number of continental philosophers and psychoanalytic thinkers—who each, in their own way, attempt to show how the subject is constructed precisely in and through the encounter with the other—to dismantle the idea that one’s moral agency is threatened by one’s social construction. She ultimately argues that we are all intimately bound up with one another. Such binding is not completely thematizable—I am ignorant for instance of all the social factors that contributed to my infant development, which preceded and produced this “I” writing right now. Perhaps counterintuitively, Butler argues that this inability to fully give an account of oneself calls us to greater and more vigilant ethical behavior. It is precisely because I am constituted by my relationship to others that I am obligated not to behave as if I am an individual automaton. It is precisely because I become myself in the face of the other that I am obligated to respect the face of the other. The apophatic nature of our own self-knowledge requires that we resist full and final judgment on ourselves and of others. In short, the inevitable failure to be able to give an account calls for us to refrain from ethical violence.

She begins by tracing a tension in continental thought in talking about the individual. On the one hand, figures like Kierkegaard, Adorno and Hegel have warned us of the violence a universal ethics—which does not take into account context and particularity—can exert over the individual. At the same time, such thought has challenged the idea of an individual “espoused as a pure immediacy, arbitrary or


\(^{616}\) Butler’s 2002 Adorno Lectures for the Institute für Sozialforschung are a revised version of these same lectures, acknowledgments to *Giving an Account of Oneself*, vii.
accidental, detached from its social and historical conditions—which, after all, constitute the general conditions of its own emergence.”617 That is, a suspicion of the ways in which society constrains the individual has developed alongside a growing recognition of the function of society in constituting the individual. The first imagines the individual opposite cultural norms; the second as produced by them. The question is of particular importance for theorizing about morality. As Butler responds to Adorno:

[Adorno] is clear that there is no morality without an “I,” but pressing questions remain: In what does that “I” consist? … there is no “I” that can fully stand apart from the social conditions of its emergence, no “I” that is not implicated in a set of conditioning moral norms, which, being norms, have a social character that exceeds a purely personal or idiosyncratic meaning.618

Butler does not have in mind here a pure determinism. The emergence of the self is not formulaic or predictable. As Butler writes, “the ‘I’ is not causally induced by those norms.”619 Rather, the problem is of a self who is implicated in social norms:

We cannot conclude that the “I” is simply the effect or the instrument of some prior ethos or some field of conflicting or discontinuous norms. When the ‘I” seeks to give an account of itself, it can start with itself, but it will find that this self is already implicated in a social temporality that exceeds its own capacities for narration; indeed when the “I” seeks to give an account of itself, an account that must include the conditions of its own emergence, it must, as a matter of necessity, become a social theorist.620

Thus, in giving an account of itself, the “I” which emerges from social forces reflects upon those social forces. Moral agency requires a reflection not only upon oneself, but

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617 Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 7. Here she is expositing Adorno’s understanding of this tension, though it works more broadly.

618 Ibid.

619 Ibid.

620 Ibid., 7-8.
also on the wider social milieu. Engaging ethics therefore requires engaging in social theory.\textsuperscript{621}

In seeking to give an account of oneself, one realizes that she can only do so impartially. For Butler, as bodies, we are opaque to ourselves: “To be a body is, in some sense, to be deprived of having a full recollection of one’s life. There is a history to my body of which I can have no recollection.”\textsuperscript{622} Consider how much of our subject formation is a product of forces not only that we cannot control, but that we cannot remember (early childhood development, for instance). In addition, the account we give of ourselves is always to another. We are constituted by an address that calls us to be accountable. In this way the subject is multiply ungrounded, her past in a shadowy mist, her present part of a relationship bigger than herself.\textsuperscript{623} My exposure to the other, the primary relations that contributed to the forming of my personhood, a past I cannot retrieve, the norms within which I operate, and the “structure of address” are all indices of my failure to give an account of myself.\textsuperscript{624} Thus we are left with the following question: “Does the postulation of a subject who is not self-grounding, that is, whose conditions of emergence can never fully be accounted for, undermine the possibility of responsibility and, in particular, of giving an account of oneself?”\textsuperscript{625}

We are not our own. But this does not absolve us from our moral responsibilities. Butler writes, “I am interrupted by my own social origin, and so have to find a way to

\textsuperscript{621} Ibid., 8.
\textsuperscript{622} Ibid., 38.
\textsuperscript{623} Ibid., 19-20.
\textsuperscript{624} Ibid., 39.
\textsuperscript{625} Ibid., 19.
take stock of who I am in a way that makes clear that I am authored by what precedes and exceeds me, and that this in no way exonerates me from having to give an account of myself.”\textsuperscript{626} Whatever responsibility is, “it cannot be tied to the conceit of a self fully transparent to itself.”\textsuperscript{627} So what does responsibility without an ability to fully give an account of oneself look like?

For Butler this inability to fix the subject is not a problem for speaking about ethical responsibility; in fact she argues that it is quite the opposite. It is precisely because we are bound up with each other—in ways that we may not even know—that makes us responsible to one another: “…A theory of subject formation that acknowledges the limits of self-knowledge can serve a conception of ethics and, indeed, responsibility. If the subject is opaque to itself, not fully translucent and knowable to itself, it is not thereby licensed to do what it wants or to ignore its obligations to others. The contrary is surely true.”\textsuperscript{628} That we are unable to completely reflect upon or thematize our own development of subjects is but one part of the fact that we are truly beings who develop in dependent relationships on others. That we come to consciousness already set in motion by our interactions with others ought to highlight rather than dismiss the necessity of careful consideration about how we interact with others. If for example I believe that I am a subject who is a product of socialization, I have every reason to invest my efforts

\textsuperscript{626} Ibid., 82.
\textsuperscript{627} Ibid., 83.
\textsuperscript{628} Ibid., 19-20.
into creating positive social worlds. Thus Butler offers an “ethics based on our shared, invariable, and partial blindness about ourselves.”

One’s failure to give an account of oneself serves as motivation to develop capacities for humility, generosity, and forgiveness:

Can a new sense of ethics emerge from such inevitable ethical failure? I suggest that it can, and that it would be spawned by a certain willingness to acknowledge the limits of acknowledgment itself. When we claim to know and to present ourselves, we will fail in some ways that are nevertheless essential to who we are. We cannot reasonably expect anything different from others in return. To acknowledge one’s own opacity or that of another does not transform opacity into transparency. To know the limits of acknowledgement is to know even this fact in a limited way; as a result, it is to experience the very limits of knowing. This can, by the way, constitute a disposition of humility and generosity alike: I will need to be forgiven for what I cannot have fully known, and I will be under a similar obligation to offer forgiveness to others, who are also constituted in partial opacity to themselves.

We should likewise be cautious if we think we have given an account of ourselves or of others. As Butler argues, our desire to be recognized and to recognize is one that cannot be resolved. Any full recognition we think we have come to is in fact false. Thus Butler urges us, “So if there is, in the question [“Who are you?”], a desire for recognition, this desire will be under an obligation to keep itself alive as desire and not to resolve itself.” In other words, the other is always more than I am able to sum up. No matter how much I desire to know someone, thinking I already know them is a form of violence. Instead, a life characterized by an acknowledgement of the limit of acknowledgement is non-violent—“If violence is the act by which a subject seeks to reinstall its mastery and

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629 Ibid., 20.
630 Ibid., 41.
631 Ibid., 42.
632 Ibid., 43.
unity, then nonviolence may well follow from living the persistent challenge to egoic mastery that our obligations to others induce and require.”⁶³³ The failure for me to narrate my own life completely, or for anyone else to narrate his or her own, ought to compel me not to exert any sort of violence upon the other. I cannot seek to master or control; such activity is a lie.

What Butler is describing here is not apathy, but a deep encounter with the alterity of the other in an almost spiritual practice of seeking to relinquish one’s control over others. Butler calls for such a response even in the face of violence itself. Employing Levinas to show how one can be responsible for what is done to them,⁶³⁴ Butler argues that even being the victim of violence is a situation in which we ought to be non-violent:

What might it mean to undergo violation, to insist upon not resolving grief and staunching vulnerability too quickly through a turn to violence, and to practice, as an experiment in living otherwise, nonviolence in an emphatically nonreciprocal response?...It might mean that one does not foreclose upon that primary exposure to the Other, that one does not try to transform the unwilled into the willed, but, rather, to take the very unbearability of exposure as the sign, the reminder, of a common vulnerability, a common physicality and risk (even as “common” does not mean “symmetrical” for Levinas).⁶³⁵

Here, Butler proceeds carefully. She does not want to attribute positive meaning to violence itself, neither committing it nor suffering it. At the same time, it is proof of our vulnerability to one another: “Violence is neither a just punishment we suffer nor a just revenge for what we suffer. It delineates a physical vulnerability from which we cannot slip away, which we cannot finally resolve in the name of the subject, but which we can provide a way to understand that none of us is fully bounded, utterly separate, but, rather,

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⁶³³ Ibid., 64.
⁶³⁴ Ibid., 85-88.
⁶³⁵ Ibid., 100.
we are in our skins, given over, in each other’s hands, at each other’s mercy.” My responsibility to not exert violence upon the other comes precisely from the fact that neither of us is fully accountable for our selves, and such a responsibility persists even if the other exerts violence over me.

Butler includes in her argument an important proviso regarding trauma. While we cannot give a full account of ourselves, integrating one’s life into a cohesive story is an important aspect of crafting oneself. So while she is suspicious of psychoanalysis that seeks to give a complete account of the self, Butler is not calling us to leave off narratives, or judgments, but is rather calling for recognition that all such are incomplete and provisional. What she is calling for is humility in the faces of ourselves and of the other. That there are people who desperately need to integrate dissociative aspects of their self-experience should keep us from being blasé about the need to give an account for oneself. Though we will fail to give a complete account of ourselves we must try: “No one can live in a radically non-narratable world or survive a radically non-narratable life.”

While this text does much in the way of defending the possibility of agency and moral responsibility in light of an understanding of the self as given over to the other, Butler does little to provide concrete assistance in navigating the ethical dilemmas of one’s life. How does one discern for instance the difference between the way in which we are all given over to one another, and the ruptures of self that are the result of grave harm? Given that gender and sexual minorities are at higher risk of violence being done

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636 Ibid., 101.
637 Ibid., 52-3.
638 Ibid., 59.
to their bodies, and that women’s bodies in particular are seen to be public objects of scrutiny, the stakes are high in how we talk about our bodies as being constituted by vulnerability to the other.

*Constructing the Body after Butler*

In thinking about Michel Foucault’s claim that the body is culturally constructed, Judith Butler argues that we must recognize that the body does not exist apart from such construction. On account of this, any resistance to harmful political regimes cannot be described as resistance to or removal from social construction as such. Rather she argues that since laws always function through exclusion, the perspective of those who are abject under them offer the vantage point necessary to imagine new worlds. In other words, she focuses not merely on the fact that bodies are culturally constructed, but in the ways that cultural construction makes some bodies unrecognizable.

Of note is the particular way in which Butler’s solution to this problem echoes Rahner’s. Remember that Rahner argued that the subject as spirit-in-world accomplishes her freedom via the other, which is therefore dependent upon rather than threatened by the other. In a similar move, the paradox of the individual-in-community is that one’s moral agency is developed *because of* not *despite* being constituted in relationship with the other. Our identification of threats to freedom must correctly diagnose the problem as one regarding the nature of one’s relationship to others, not the fact that one is so related. As we will see in the next chapter, her answer to the paradox of bodily inscription is a helpful way of thinking of the paradoxes that run through Rahner’s understanding of the relationship between the transcendental and categorical.
Contra Martha Nussbaum, who faults Butler for not speaking concretely about the demands of activism on behalf of women, I have argued here that Butler’s thought is best understood as fundamental moral philosophy. Making gender trouble, or engaging in practices of parody, open up our ability to recognize all lives as livable. This is in itself is a moment of justice for those whose subjectivity goes unrecognized. But as Butler reminds us, this is merely the condition for the possibility of ethical and political reflection that is not governed solely by taboo. In her later work, Butler offers better examples of what this second moment of ethical reflection looks like. Ultimately, Butler’s interest in the materiality and discursivity of the body is oriented at analysis of how identities operate in exclusionary ways and the ways in which such exclusion supports harmful politics.

For the sake of this dissertation however, I want to focus on what this understanding of the discursivity and materiality of the body has to bear on individual bodies in the world, particularly with regard to how subjects navigate freedom. Butler does not give much attention to this kind of discernment. What, for example, constitutes harm in *Giving an Account of Oneself*? What is it that we are called to forgive, and what does generosity look like? As we will see in the next section, Shannon Sullivan’s understanding of the body as “transactional” offers a way of preserving Butler’s insights, while directing our attention to the concrete lived experiences of bodies and the ways they are constructed under given social norms. By developing Butler’s ideas in tandem with John Dewey’s pragmatist philosophy, she offers both a theoretical account of how resistance is possible and more practical attention toward the effecting of such change.
Shannon Sullivan and Transactional Bodying

In *Living across and through Skins*, Shannon Sullivan employs the concept of “transaction” to speak about the ways in which subjects relate to the world. She contrasts this understanding with a more simplified understanding of the subject as merely interacting with the world. Whereas “the term ‘interaction’ suggests two independently constituted entities entering into an exchange or relationship with one another,” Sullivan argues,

> The term ‘transaction’ reflects a rejection of sharp dualisms between subject and object, and self and world, as well as a rejection of the atomistic, compartmentalized conceptions of the subject and self that often accompany such dualisms. The boundaries that delimit individual entities are permeable, not fixed, which means that organisms and their various environments—social, cultural, and political as well as physical—are constituted by their mutual influence and impact on one another…Thus “transaction” designates a process of mutual constitution that entails mutual transformation, including the possibility of significant change.\(^{639}\)

The word “transaction” thus signifies a process in which the subject and her world are mutually co-constitutive. In this transactional understanding, the subject is both vulnerable to outside influence and the agent of influence on the world—but not in such a way that one can conceive of “subject” and “world” as two categories pre-existing such transaction. Indeed, the process of transaction means that the division between these two categories is not clear: “To think of bodies as transactional… is to realize that bodies do not stop at the edges of their skins and are not contained neatly and sharply within them.”\(^{640}\)

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John Dewey and the Habits of Transactional Bodying

Sullivan’s understanding of the body as transactional comes from John Dewey. For Dewey, the word “body” refers to all physical beings. All bodies are psycho-chemical and transact in the world with “bias”—that is, “in a selective manner.”\textsuperscript{641} Consider for example the way a black cloth converts light into heat, copper conducts electricity, or water resists changes in temperature through its covalent bonds. Animate bodies are those that act in such a way as to preserve themselves. Dewey refers to such organization as “psycho-physical.”\textsuperscript{642} Some psycho-physical beings are capable of meaning—for example, when a dog experiences fear. Dewey identifies consciousness, or a mental life, when such a psycho-physical organism is sufficiently “complex enough for it to be aware of meanings.”\textsuperscript{643}

It is important to note here that for Dewey, this is not a taxonomy of things but of different ways of functioning in the world.\textsuperscript{644} As Sullivan writes, “For Dewey, mind, including consciousness, is not something radically divorced from the physical. Rather, mind marks a particular way for some physical bodies who are organisms to transact with the world.”\textsuperscript{645} Bodies are themselves a doing. They are not lumps of matter, but organizations of biased transaction with the world. This is why Dewey suggests using

\textsuperscript{641} Ibid., 24.
\textsuperscript{642} Ibid., 25.
\textsuperscript{643} Ibid., 26.
\textsuperscript{644} Ibid., 25.
\textsuperscript{645} Ibid., 26.
gerunds and verbs rather than nouns: one does not have a body, she *bodies.* Mind is one way of *bodying.*

Thus for Dewey mind and body are not two separate substances. For this reason “body-mind”—alongside “organism”—is one of the ways in which he designates the unified human person. Sullivan offers the following text from Dewey:

Body-mind simply designates what actually takes place when a living body is implicated in situations of discourse, communication and participation. In the hyphenated phrase body-mind, ‘body’ designates the continued and conserved, the registered and cumulative operation of factors continuous with the rest of nature, inanimate as well as animate; while ‘mind’ designates the characters and consequences which are differential, indicative of features which emerge when ‘body’ is engaged in a wider more complex and interdependent situation.

Such a designation of the person as body-mind does not collapse the mind on to the body. Rather, as Sullivan argues, “Body is the activity out of which mind emerges.” The relationship, however, is not unidirectional. The mind itself refigures the physicality of the body, for instance in memory creation. In referring to the human person, Dewey used the phrase “body-mind” or “organism” in order to avoid any dualistic account of the self. As Sullivan interprets him, “both terms designate bodies as transactional, that is, as constituted by and constitutive of their various environments, mental, social, cultural, and political, as well as physical and natural.”

In Dewey’s thought, what gives bodies their stability is not matter, but habit. As Sullivan describes, “Bodying is constituted by habits, which are an organism’s...”

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646 Ibid., 30.
648 Ibid., 29.
649 Ibid.
650 Ibid., 24.
styles of activity that organize the energy of its impulses.” Over time the initial impulses that govern one’s bodying are organized into habits. “Broader and richer than mere repetition or routine,” Sullivan quotes Dewey’s definition of a habit as “an acquired predisposition to ways or modes of response.”

Sullivan offers the examples of language and walking to explain what Dewey means by “habit.” Consider the way in which a child might learn to speak. Her initial language learning involves much effort for apparently little gain. She must learn to make complicated movements with her tongue and mouth at the same time modulating her breathing. She must constantly refine this activity using the feedback from her own hearing and the communication she receives from others. Over time however, such movements become natural to her. A fluent English speaker does not consciously think about how to form the “[p]” sound. Rather, she is able to respond quickly to her interlocutor, likely without giving any thought to the mechanics of her speech. This is because speaking has become habitual. Out of habit, a number of discrete and complicated activities have become consolidated into a routine activity of her bodying. What once was the product of conscious effort is now automatic.

What this example highlights is the necessary role that habits play in our lives. We would be able to accomplish very little if every discrete activity required our conscious attention. Within this understanding of bodying as habitual doing, a certain duality of the self emerges, between that which is conscious and intelligent and that

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651 Ibid., 30.
652 Ibid.
which is routine and automatic. The two relate however. While our moments of creativity and innovation depend upon the sedimentary habits of our bodying, such moments may also lead to their modification. A transaction can serve to reinforce or undermine a particular habit. Change therefore occurs via a spiraling process in which modified habits make possible transactions with greater modification potential. Sullivan distinguishes in turn “rigid” and “adaptive” habits depending on the likelihood of their adaptability. This relationship opens up a possibility that one may change both one’s own habits and one’s own environment. Sullivan warns us not to map this on to a false distinction between the body and mind, however. Habits are activities of the body-mind.

While it is easy to think of habits as constraining our activity—for instance, when we think of all the bad habits one can develop—habits are what make possible all meaningful activity. Only when the child has made speech a habit can she wield it creatively and freely. In a similar way, the habits entailed in walking enable one to move where one pleases. Habit is not imprinted upon a free self; habit is the condition of the self’s free activity. One achieves agency precisely in and through habit.

Thus, while Sullivan leaves open the question of whether or not there are pre-discursive impulses and drives—it is unclear, whether or not Dewey believes that there is a moment in a human being’s life where they exist before or apart from habit—she

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653 Ibid., 33.
654 Ibid., 36.
655 Ibid., 37.
656 Ibid., 32.
657 Ibid., 31.
argues that the question is ultimately irrelevant. If such a moment exists where one’s impulses are not shaped by habits, it exists only briefly in infancy. Impulses only become meaningful through habit, which are discursive.\textsuperscript{658} Impulses are unintelligible and unable to be acted upon. This leads us to one of Sullivan’s most important insights into the construction of bodies: what needs to be aspired to is not a self “free” from habits, but a self organized by appropriate habits.

Habits do not arise spontaneously from an act of the will—rather, they are formed by the body’s transaction with the world: “Habits are formed in and through an organism’s transaction with its various environments.”\textsuperscript{659} Since habits are themselves conditions for agency, this means that bodying is always and already transactional: “To conceive of bodies as atomistically sealed up within themselves or as existing as a lump physical thing is to misunderstand them.”\textsuperscript{660} Common environments encourage common habits of bodying. That is, cultural consistency comes from individuals transacting with similar habitats. As Sullivan argues, Dewey’s understanding of habit can therefore be compared to Foucault’s understanding of discipline: “the lines of cultural and institutional power relations that crisscross and thereby constitute an individual’s body [in Foucault’s thought] can fruitfully be understood as habits.”\textsuperscript{661}

Sullivan identifies a number of benefits in thinking of the body as transactional. \textit{First,} it fosters a “non-reductive recognition of the significance of bodily materiality to human lived existence” since the environment of transaction is not merely physical but

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{658} Ibid., 37.
\item \textsuperscript{659} Ibid., 33-34.
\item \textsuperscript{660} Ibid., 39.
\item \textsuperscript{661} Ibid., 35.
\end{itemize}
also cultural—as she writes, “bodies are primary” but they are not all there is. Second, it avoids a false dualism between nature and nurture. “If bodies are transactionally constituted,” Sullivan argues, “then bodies are not lumps of passive matter imprinted with significance and meaning by an active culture. Nor are bodies sealed off from culture such that, at least on some level or in some respect, they remain untouched by culture.” Transaction offers a way of viewing the relationship between subject and world as mutually co-constitutive and therefore avoids conceiving of the subject as either a purely passive victim of her environment or as an agent unaffected by it. Third, it does this without collapsing self onto culture or vice versa. A mutually co-constitutive relationship does not abolish all differences between the bodies in play. Fourth, it resists conceiving of the subject in terms of a dualism between body and mind. The transactional body is not opposed to the mind. Rather, the mind is something that the body does. For Dewey’s, bodies are “patterns of behavior” that cement into habit: “Thinking of bodies as patterned activities that come to have complex and multiple meanings, which on Dewey’s terms constitute “mind,” undercuts mind-body dualism without positing a monism of either body or mind.” Fifth, recognizing that the subject, including the mind, is an activity of the body, directs our attention away from the body as a static lump to be analyzed but toward the act of bodying. Finally, this attention to the body also directs

662 Ibid., 2.
663 Ibid.
664 Ibid., 3.
665 Ibid.
666 Ibid., 4.
us always to be mindful of “the significance of the concrete, lived experience of bodies.” 667

How can a transactional understanding of the body intervene in the debates over the construction of bodies in feminist theory? As Sullivan notes, one of the biggest points of contention is whether or not a pre or non-discursive body exists. As we saw above, this is the source of both Seyla Benhabib’s and Martha Nussbaum’s criticism of Butler. For both Benhabib and Nussbaum, a pre or non-discursive body is necessary to theorize about and hope for subjects resisting oppression.

In investigating this question, Sullivan uses the word “discursive” to refer to a broad sense of discourse as “the entire interlocking web of cultural, societal, and other meanings, most of which are contained not in speech or grammar, but in institutions, buildings, habits, etc.” 668 We are not talking merely about linguistic construction, but the entire social world in which persons exist. To ask whether or not a pre or non-discursive body exists is thus to ask whether or not the human person exists in a meaningful way apart from such institutions: “The heart of the matter is the more substantial issue of whether there is anything bodily, material, or natural to be found apart or outside of the wide range of discursive formations.” 669

The question is not an exercise in epistemological tedium. On the one hand, she points out, appeals to a “natural” difference across bodies has funded some of the greatest atrocities in history: “the social and political oppression of some groups over others, such as men over women, white people over people of color, the ‘civilized’ European over the

667 Ibid.
668 Ibid., 42.
669 Ibid.
native ‘savage,’” were all seen to be appropriate consequences of allegedly natural differences.\textsuperscript{670} Of course, from our viewpoint we recognize that such differences are not natural at all. Belief in a natural hierarchy of race is in fact a highly specific cultural product. Thus, we should be suspicious therefore, of the ways in which contemporary understandings of what is natural may in fact be motivated by our personal and cultural biases.

Sullivan takes this suspicion one step further. The appeal to the natural \textit{in itself} is an argumentative move that only makes sense given a certain set of operating cultural assumptions. Pointing to the natural as a bedrock axiom obscures the need to ask more fundamental questions: Who arbitrates what is considered natural? What sources are authoritative and what disciplines are appropriate? Why is the natural to be prioritized? It is not merely that we can be wrong about what is natural. Sullivan argues that the appeal to the natural tends toward conservation of the status quo. Simply speaking, it is not a neutral category to begin with. It privileges the way things have been. Thus Sullivan argues that,

resistance to oppressive normative standards is not likely to be achieved by positing a natural, noncultural body if the way in which the body is delineated as natural is itself a product of culture. In such a case, rather than to transform culture, appeals to a body outside of cultural influences, meanings, and understandings tend to have an effect opposite of that which is desired: they further secure, rather than undermine, the cultural, social, and political status quo.\textsuperscript{671}

For example, if we want to counter the idea that men are naturally more intelligent than women, or that homosexuality is unnatural, Sullivan would urge us not to accept the

\textsuperscript{670} Ibid., 41.
\textsuperscript{671} Ibid.
terms of the debate. If we argue, for instance, that men and women are naturally equally intelligent, or that multiple forms of sexuality are equally natural, we have won a battle at the cost of our ability to ask more serious questions: Who determines what is “natural”? Why is “natural” synonymous with “good”? And who does this benefit? We will have accepted that the quest for gender justice must justify itself through the physical sciences, and more broadly, that the ethics of human sexuality are determined only by biology. In Sullivan’s words, “The attempt to think of bodily materiality as prior to or nonconstitutively outside of the cultural or social is already to make a political claim.”

To be clear, Sullivan’s proclamation that there is no non or pre-discursive body is not to say that all is merely language. Rather, quoting Butler, Sullivan argues that “to claim that discourse is formative is not to claim that it originates, causes, or exhaustively composes that which it concedes; rather it is to claim that there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further formation of that body.”

On the other hand, without such a pre or non-discursive body it is difficult to conceive of the possibility of political resistance. Is the “no” one voices to an oppressive regime possible without an understanding of the self apart from that regime? Doesn’t the process of decolonization that Peters and Massingale discuss require a moment in which one says, “I am not what you say I am?” And doesn’t such a statement require that we are, deep down, really something regardless of the world in which we live? Sullivan is particularly concerned with the difficulty in theorizing about how one exercises freedom against a system if they are defined by it: “If cultural norms totally imprint a body in their

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672 Ibid., 59.

disciplining of it, if they “go all the way down,” as it were, then resistance to them appears to be impossible.”  

While Sullivan argues that there is no pre or non-discursive body, she ultimately proposes, following Butler, that the most important question is not whether, but how the body is discursive—“the disagreement over whether a non- or prediscursive body exists ultimately is redirected here to questions about the particular ways in which bodies transact with the world.”  

That is, the ontological question about the facticity of the pre or non-discursive body actually derails conversations about how discourses shape bodies and which bodies are harmed. As Sullivan notes, Butler is more concerned not with debating whether there is such a body but the political interests that benefit from appeals to it: “When theorists stop dwelling on questions about the ability of bodies to stand outside of discourse, they can then redirect their energies where they should be, that is, into examining and transforming, if needed, the effects of current discourses about and attitudes toward bodies.”

Yet, Sullivan points out, Butler herself neglects to attend to concrete ways in which discourse produces bodies. While Butler argues that we need to direct our theoretical and political analysis toward the ways in which concrete material bodies are shaped by discourse, she herself rarely attends to this kind of close attention to the body itself, as much as she does to what bodies count. As Sullivan argues, the body that Butler is analyzing does not appear to be a body that sneezes or bleeds. According to Sullivan,

674 Sullivan, Living, 41.
675 Ibid., 43.
676 Ibid., 60.
677 Ibid.
the flaw in Butler’s argument is largely that it omits “the concrete experiences of lived bodies.” Of course for Butler, that is because she doesn’t care about the content of gender identities—their “realness”—but of the policing of identities that necessarily involves political exclusion. Political action involves bringing subordinated identity into the public domain, while also being careful not to replicate, through identity politics, the same exclusion. Rather than attending to particular identities, Butler is calling for vigilance in recognizing the ways in which all identities can function exclusively. However, Butler’s concrete proposals—for subversive parody, for instance—are weaker on account of a lack of this sort of analysis of how gender is mapped onto the body, and for how such parody can be achieved. Thus Sullivan positions herself as an inheritor of Butler’s suspicion of the appeal to the “natural,” while recognizing the need to theorize better about the possibility of moral resistance.

On the other hand, she argues, a number of theorists “have emphasized bodily lived experience by conceiving of bodies as atomistically sealed off from the cultural world.” According to Sullivan, thinking of bodies as transactional allows for a third way, in which “the importance of both recognizing the discursivity of bodies and attending to lived bodily experience can be acknowledged.” That is, the concept of transaction does not make one choose between the materiality of the body and the productive value of discourses. Rather, in a transactional understanding of the body, the body holds a primary position while being understood to have been shaped—even materially so—by the world in which it transacts.

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678 Ibid., 61.
679 Ibid., 8.
Thus Sullivan modifies Butler’s understanding of performativity, enriching it with Dewey’s understanding of habit: “habit is an organism’s constitutive predisposition to transact with the world in particular ways, and performativity is the process of repetitive activity that constitutively stylizes one’s being. Together these ideas provide powerful tools with which to understand the composition and transformation of gender.”

Employing habit in tandem with Butler’s performativity corrects a tendency of Butler’s to analyze performativity only with respect to speech acts. The concept of habit reminds us that our entire bodies are the performances of citations: “Holding that bodily activities are shaped by transactions with their environments is valuable to philosophy in particular, and to life in general, because such an understanding of bodying encourages people to ask whether, when, how, and for whom those transactions are beneficial.”

The Transactional Body and Identity Politics

How can the concept of “habit” help us understanding identities like gender? In Butler’s thought, saying that gender is constructed is not to say that it is arbitrary or at will: “A construction is, after all, not the same as an artifice.” That is, it is constitutive of one’s

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680 Ibid., 88. As Sullivan notes, one problem with using the category of “habit” to interpret Butler’s thought is that she critiques Bourdiou’s “habitus” in *Excitable Speech*. However, according to Sullivan, Butler’s problem is the inability for a theory of habit to explain how those habits are transformed without positing some remainder of the self untouched by habit. Sullivan argues that her own understanding of habit is not subject to the same criticism, since it does not require thinking of a self larger or outside of habit. In Dewey’s thought, the only aspect of the self that could be thought of as in excess of habit are impulses—but these, because they lack organization, are not capable of resisting habit, 99-103.

681 Ibid., 88-89.

682 Ibid., 64.

identity.\textsuperscript{684} The difficulty is explaining exactly how something can seem to be imposed from without (as is implied when we talk about the ways people are constructed harmfully) while also recognizing the ways in which gender identities are for many people real aspects of their self-understanding, not merely costumes put on every morning.

But as we’ve seen before, Dewey’s understanding of the body allows for a more nuanced understanding of how subjects are formed. For one, understanding that selves are constituted by habits developed in transaction with the world reminds us that even agency is itself dependent on a relational understanding of the world. I can only direct my body according to my will if, beforehand, I have mastered a number of complicated maneuvers which are developed in transaction with my environment. This means that on the whole we must reject any schematic that sees agency as deriving from some pure, unaffected, aspect of the self. Agency is made possible precisely in relationship to the other.

As Sullivan argues, this allows a way of speaking—more precisely than Butler can—of the way in which, on the one hand persons are \textit{gendered} and on the other hand that gender identities are real. Habits are not merely facades. They are constituent of the self. The fact that they are the result of interaction with the outside world, learned from other, or passed on through centuries of tradition, does not mean that they are not also who the self really is. Butler, for example, in an attempt to find a way to talk about gender, describes it as a “domain of constraints” by which we become who we are. Sullivan suggests a better metaphor—one in which the productive, and not just

\textsuperscript{684} Sullivan, \textit{Living}, 90.
constraining, aspect of gender is clearer. Here she provides Dewey’s analysis of “structure” as a concept to explain how habits are organized and constructed:

A house has a structure; in comparison with the disintegration and collapse that would occur without its presence, this structure is fixed. Yet it is not something external to which the changes involved in building and using the house have to submit. It is rather an arrangement of changing events such that properties which change slowly, limit and direct a series of quick changes and give them an order which they do not otherwise possess…Structure is what makes construction possible and cannot be discovered or defined except in some realized construction, construction being, of course, an evident order of changes.685

It would be too far afield to examine how, in Dewey’s pragmatism, this example is part of a larger critique of the idea of forms, and indeed, of any traditional metaphysics in general. Rather, let us examine it for what it might say about the construction of identities.

To begin with, this understanding of construction help shifts the metaphor away from a stamp imprinting upon wax, carvings on a blank slate, or tattoos on a body a la Kafka’s *Penal Colony*. In Dewey’s understanding, neither the person nor the constructed identity exists in any meaningful way apart from each other. Here, construction is precisely that which organizes material into a meaningful order. One’s impulses are meaningless without a structure of habits, in a similar way that raw materials strewn across a field are. It is not that the form of a house is imprinted upon something that has already form. The wax and blank slate metaphors are unhelpful because they imply that the structure given is itself stable and whole unto itself. For Dewey however, the structure does not exist apart from the particular construction. In fact we could add that the structure will exist in a transactional relationship with the materials and surrounding environment. One must build different houses with wood than with brick, in wet

environments than in dry. Here in the house metaphor we see a distinction between more and less stable habits. While one may knock out walls or extend a porch, some elements of the house will remain—a roof, exterior walls. Thus the metaphor also helps us see how the construction of identity allows both stability and flexibility.

Of course, human beings are not houses. How does this metaphor help us understand gender identity? It reminds us that construction is itself a necessary part of the self. Our impulses are meaningless without more stable organization. As we saw above, such organization occurs in transaction with our greater environment, including the social world that we exist in. One’s own identity emerges in transaction, and thus there is no fully-formed stamp of “woman” imposed from without. Rather, gender identities, developed transactionally, offer a structure through which we become ourselves:

As is the case for all cultural constructs on Dewey’s terms, gender is not some external, accidental characteristic overlaying the allegedly internal, essential, nongendered core of ourselves. It instead is one of the ways in and through which we arrange and are arranged as the selves that we are. Relatively, but not absolutely fixed, one’s gender constitutes one of, but not the only, key arrangements of the changing events that are one’s self.686 This arrangement occurs bodily. Sullivan provides the example of walking in high heels. Such a habit does not merely involve putting on high heels in the morning. To walk in them well, one must develop particular core and leg muscles, as well as adjust one’s posture in order to maintain balance. These are not merely skills, but the rearrangement of one’s skeletal and muscular structure—so much in fact that there are many health risks related to walking in high heels. Our habits are embodied. Thus even for what at first appears to be costume—walking in high heels—is something that affects our material

686 Sullivan, Living, 91.
existence to the core. The style of one’s life is not a thin “veneer.” We could add to Sullivan’s analysis that such a habit is itself culturally variable. The semiotics of walking in high heels and its corollary with any given gender identities is a product of a specific social system. The reality of gender identity (and other identities) in this system is not built upon a permanent metaphysical essence, but because it describes something real about the way in which bodies transact with the world.

Transforming Habits

As we saw above, our habits are embodied, and only such bodying makes agency possible. The alternative to harmful construction is therefore not freedom from construction, but alternative constructions: “The constitutive role of habit means that one’s response to the problem of rigid gender categories should not be a pronouncement that all cultural structure is oppressive and thus in need of elimination so that one can be “free.” The idea of a self free from any construction is a false illusion. Quoting Dewey, Sullivan pushes us to understand how freedom can be exercised in and through construction: “Freedom from restriction, the negative side [of freedom] is to be prized only as a means to a freedom which is power: power to frame purposes, to judge wisely, to evaluate desires by the consequences which will result from acting upon them; power to select and order means to carry chosen ends into operation.” Years before Foucault would argue the same thing, Dewey recognized that freedom is not the absence of power

687 Ibid., 91-3.
688 Ibid., 94.
but its manipulation in and through a given structure. In Sullivan’s words “the habitual structures of my life are the means by which I transact with my world, not mere obstacles to that process.”

Because of this, Sullivan argues that the focus of political resistance to harmful gender constructions should be on renegotiating gender rather than abolishing it: “in order to free ourselves from the current ways in which we are gendered, we should try to change how we are gendered,”—that is replacing destructive habits with new ones. Here she sees Dewey’s argument supporting a common sense adage: that bad habits are only replaced with good ones. There is no being outside of habit or structure. Attempts to exorcise one’s bad habits out of one’s life without replacing them with new ones inevitably invite the return of the “old” habits.

The necessity of habit is therefore due not only to the human being’s existence in a social world but also in the need for structures to organize and give meaning to impulses. How then do we replace old habits with new ones? And more fundamentally, how is it that a subject desires to replace habits, if he or she is fundamentally shaped by them? Is not the possibility of a person identifying his or her own construction as harmful akin to an eye examining itself? Thus we have challenges at both the theoretical and the practical level.

Sullivan’s answer lies in her understanding of the plasticity of the self. In Dewey’s thought, the self is being constantly remade because each iteration of a habit

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690 Sullivan, Living, 94.
691 Ibid.
692 Ibid.
693 Ibid., 95.
modifies that habit in some regard. Every time I engage in a given activity of bodying I am either reinforcing that habit or modifying it in some way. Habit is a process, a way of bodying over time. Sullivan notes the strong similarity between Dewey’s concept of the iteration of habit and Butler’s use of “performativity” as a term to describe one’s citation of social norms. In both theoretical models there is an opportunity for a spiral interaction, in which a given iteration modifies a habit in such a way to make more iterations possible. In this way, habits are like muscles that, through stretching, become more flexible. A subject can develop and refine her habits just like she might, over time, increase her flexibility.

As we saw above, Butler is often critiqued for her fatalism. Nussbaum in particular is concerned that Butler can only encourage activists to subvert norms. But as Sullivan notes, translating Butler’s theory into Dewey’s understanding of habit helps demonstrate and support what Butler means when she says we cannot escape the norms in which we are constructed. If gender is not just a legal reality, but something which affects us to the core—our desires, our postures, our emotional responses—if indeed it is a habitual way of bodying in the world that not only constrains us but makes our agency possible, it makes sense why Butler does not call for the abolition of gender, but of its subversion. In short, understanding gender as habit affirms two of Butler’s largest claims: that one can subvert norms only from within them and that agency and construction are not opposed. But it also extends her works by offering more than just parody:

Thinking of corporeal existence as composed of habit recognizes that the gendered and other habits that structure a person are the person. Habit makes

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694 Ibid., 9-6.
695 Ibid., 97.
human existence possible, as well as constrains it to the particular forms of existence that constitute it. Reading habit in conjunction with Judith Butler’s notion of performativity shows how an organism and its cultural and other environments can be altered even though they might reinforce each other in ways that can make substantial change seem unlikely.\(^{696}\)

Though any change in one’s bodying must occur through spiral transaction, Sullivan’s understanding of the flexibility of habit demonstrates that there is actually great potential for the improvement of both self and world. Given such flexibility, Sullivan suggests then that we think of the construction of bodies using the category of “hypothetical construction.” A transactional account of the body entails that both one’s habits and the meaning one attributes to those habits are co-constituted with the world. Both the person I become and the person I think I am develop in relationship with the other. Hypothetical construction entails that one limits oneself to hypothetical meaning-making about one’s bodily comportment. Because my bodying exists in public, the semiotics of my activities are not dictated by my intent alone. I exist in a community and my actions will be interpreted not only according to my intent, but also in their relationship to other people and the relevant social and cultural institutions. Thus my understanding of my own bodying must be hypothetical—that is, open to revision according to new information.\(^{697}\)

Sullivan provides an example of what she means in her analysis of her relationship with a colleague. At first their relationship is difficult. When conflict arises, the colleague raises the volume of his voice, speaks in such a way that makes interruption difficult, and leans in. Sullivan on the other hand lowers the volume of her voice, speaks less often, and finds herself backing away. Sullivan’s initial interpretation of these

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\(^{696}\) Ibid., 9.

\(^{697}\) Ibid., 75-77.
interactions had been that her colleague was overtly aggressive and hostile. Reflection on her own posture however leads her to consider the ways in which her own behavior during conflict is unproductive. She locates her diminutive bodying as a result of a certain regional gendering. Sullivan is a southern woman, and she reflects in what ways her actions with her colleagues are products of habits that have developed in transaction with a certain environment. But here the habits are being cited in a new environment, and she must ask whether or not the scripts of polite Southern femininity are intelligible and appropriate in this context. That is, are her activities even being read as polite in the context of an academic debate with a colleague? Even if so, is politeness the most relevant trait to be bodying?\(^\text{698}\)

The category of transaction allows Sullivan to recognize that she herself is a member of multiple communities, and that she is bringing habits from one into another. In effect, it allows her to understand conflict in more nuanced terms than “my intent is good; this other person is being rude,” but to investigate the difference between her own understanding of her activity and how others might understand it. Sullivan considers for instance that what she considers polite behavior may seem bewilderingly passive and even apathetic to others. Could her colleague be frustrated because her behavior—few words, lowered voice, body pulled back with arms crossed—signal boredom and disinterest rather than deference? Likewise she wonders whether her own habits of bodying allow her to easily distinguish passion from aggression, since both equally violate the social mores of polite Southern femininity. As she writes, the point of hypothetical construction is “to negotiate meaning in bodily and verbal ways that

\(^{698}\) Ibid., 77-78.
acknowledges and respects the different protomeanings that individuals bring to one another.”

Sullivan decides to approach her relationship differently with the colleague, and begins keeping her volume, rate of speaking, and posture level while they converse. What she finds is that he responds by likewise easing off on the behaviors she had initially read as aggressive. Sullivan’s theory of “hypothetical constructivism” thus refers not only to the fact that we can only tentatively arrive at the meaning of our own bodying, but also to the process of testing hypothesis precisely in activity like this.

Sullivan is able to develop a more healthy relationship with her colleague once she recognizes that neither of them are the sole arbiter of the meaning of their bodying—not merely that they can each be misread by the other, but that they cannot control the semiotics of shared spaces. This does not lead her into despair about the ability to ever communicate with her colleague. Rather, this honest appraisal of the way in which we transact with the world allows her to initiate change in what she perceives as unhealthy transaction. The open-endedness of hypothetical construction is an opening to break the circle of misrelating to one another.

Though her work does include analysis of specific habits and prescriptions for change, Sullivan follows Dewey in calling for the development of flexible habits. Thus Sullivan’s call for the subversion of habits is not a matter of a one-time replacement (even understanding that such replacement would occur over time). Rather, we should

699 Ibid., 79.
700 Ibid., 76-77.
701 Ibid., 78.
702 Ibid., 110.
fight any form of inflexibility in our habits. In Dewey’s words, “what is necessary is that habits be formed which are more intelligent, more sensitively percipient, more informed with foresight, more aware of what they are about, more direct and sincere, more flexibly responsive than those now current.”

This is not to do away with habit altogether, which is impossible, but to develop habits that are flexible. For example, the habit Sullivan is developing—engaging with others according to her understanding of hypothetical construction—is one that better prepares her for the possibility of understanding another person than her habits of southern feminine deference did. What we might call “meta-habits” are postures of listening and adaptability that in turn can help fund the development of new habits for new situations. Thus Sullivan asks us to “seek out the reconfiguration of habit and the configurations of gender, sex, and sexuality, that structure human existence. Only by doing so can we free ourselves of the rigidity and stagnation of the self that accompany gender binarism.”

Only in this way would we not just create new gender roles, but challenge the over-determination of the roles themselves in fixing identities. That is part of the problem is not merely the content of gender roles, but the overdetermination and rigidity of them.

Such change is not only possible in one-on-one relationships. Sullivan argues that “hypothetical construction” can help us facilitate political change. In this text she refers to radical transformations at the end of the 20th-century regarding the visibility, inclusion, and protection of gender and sexual minorities. Sullivan cites the increase in employers offering benefits to same-sex partners and spouses as a clash of rigid habits—the desire to

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attract and retain competitive employees and the normative heterosexism of most institutions in the U.S. It is precisely this clash that makes transformation possible, just as the clash between Sullivan and her aggressive colleague opened up the possibility of embodying new habits. In transaction with a world in which gender and sexual minorities are demanding full inclusion, the habits of institutions have changed.705

For Sullivan, such a change cannot be affected merely at the individual level: “A person’s habits are always in transaction with and thus have an impact on the institutions in which she engaged. The impact of one person, however, many times does not carry enough force to counter the inertia of cultural custom, and thus, an individual’s impact often is absorbed within or co-opted by cultural institutions.”706 What is necessary are coalitions of individuals, operating through “feminist cultural structures.” Thus in addition to developing flexible habits, Sullivan calls on people of good will to develop the habit of organizing around the transformation they wish to see in the world: “Recalling Dewey’s somewhat paradoxical sounding advice that people need to form the habit of not forming fixed habits, we could say that a person who is concerned about social and political change needs to cultivate the individual habit of not focusing solely on her or her own individual habits.”707 It is important to note here that both of these ethical imperatives demand that persons engage in habits that are mindful of the fact that human beings are constituted in and through the other.

705 Ibid., 107-8.
706 Ibid., 109
707 Ibid.
Habits of Race and Racism

In her second book, *Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege*, Shannon Sullivan applies her understanding of transactional bodies to the subject of white privilege. In doing so she develops the concept of “unconscious habit” by fusing the thick notion of habit in Dewey’s pragmatism and a psychoanalytic understanding of the unconscious. We are habitual beings; the interrogation of our complicity in white privilege cannot merely be an intellectual process. It is not a matter of willpower or changing one’s thought, but “altering the political, social, physical, economic, psychological, aesthetic and other environments” that feed our unconscious habits of racism.\(^7^0^8\) By referring to these habits as “unconscious” Sullivan is attempting to combat the way in which structural and interpersonal racism is often perpetuated without explicitly racist intent and by those who would not self-identify as “racist.” She is also attempting to redirect anti-racist activity from a focus on the intellect or will—not thinking white people are better, or not wishing black people harm—but to the ways in which white privilege is embodied. The former are easy for people of good will to pat themselves on the back for having accomplished, but Sullivan pushes white people to engage in deeper reflection about the ways in which their transactional bodying in the world contributes to white supremacy.

As she argues here, white privilege is not a matter of intent but of bodying:

“White privilege is best understood as a constellation of psychical and somatic habits

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\(^7^0^8\) Shannon Sullivan, *Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege* (Bloomington, Indiana University, 2006), 9.
formed through transaction with a racist world.” Sullivan mentions a number of examples throughout the book of what such unconscious psychical and somatic habits look like, many from her own experience. Growing up in West Texas, she recalls white people referred to Mexican-Americans, Chicano/as and other Latino/a Americans all as “Mexican”—when they weren’t using a racial slur. As a result, Sullivan herself cannot use the word without wincing: “As an adult, I have trouble hearing or saying the word “Mexican” without anxiety because it sounds like a racial slur to me, and I do not seem able to discard that auditory habit.” The problem here is not a lack of education or good will—Sullivan knows “Mexican” is not a bad word, and she does not actively think poorly of Mexicans (or those labeled incorrectly as “Mexican”). But the associations she has with the word are so strong that even to this day she has an intense, embodied, reaction.

While this may seem a rather small matter, this example is helpful for explaining not only how these habits have little to do with the will, but the way in which they are replicated across generations. Sullivan recalls in particular the sound of her grandmother hissing the word “Mexican” as if it were a slur. Her psychosomatic unconscious habits of repulsion at the word “Mexican” come from somewhere. They are an inheritance. We are not culpable for the creation of such habits—many of which are initiated in childhood. But the fact that these habits are embodied does not mean that we are not responsible for changing them. As Sullivan argues, just as we can hold someone

709 Sullivan, Revealing Whiteness, 63.
710 Ibid., 68.
711 Ibid., 69.
712 Ibid.
responsible for remaining in ignorance, we can hold someone responsible for refusing to do what is necessary to change these racist habits.\textsuperscript{713} Unfortunately, habits resist change.\textsuperscript{714} Since habits are transactional, such activity has to reflect not only on the way in which one performs such habits, but also the environments in which they develop. Without reflecting on both habits and environment, anti-racist activity is doomed to fail.\textsuperscript{715}

Following Du Bois—particularly his analysis of World War I as emerging from a belief in “the duty of white Europe to divide up the darker world and administer it for Europe’s good,”\textsuperscript{716}—Sullivan identifies the unconscious habits of white privilege as rooted in “ownership of the earth:”

Unconscious habits of white privilege manifest an “appropriate” relationship to the earth, including the people and things that are part of it. The appropriate relationship is one of appropriation: taking land, people, and the fruit of others’ labor and creativity as one’s own. Failure to embody this proper relationship with the world marks one as a subperson, as a quasi-thing that is then legitimately available for, even in need of, appropriation by full persons. Somewhat ironically, an inappropriate relationship to the earth renders one indistinguishable from it as a natural resource waiting to be put to proper use.\textsuperscript{717}

In other words, whiteness is the practice of dominion that only acknowledges the humanity of those also exploiting the earth and its people.

\textsuperscript{713} Ibid., 18-20.
\textsuperscript{714} Ibid., 22.
\textsuperscript{715} Ibid., 27.
\textsuperscript{717} Sullivan \textit{Revealing Whiteness}, 122.
Such habits of white privilege emerge for instance when white people co-opt the cultures of others;\textsuperscript{718} when gentrification offers safe spaces for white people to enjoy the credibility and exoticism of poor black neighborhoods without any solidarity against the structural injustices that plague such neighborhoods;\textsuperscript{719} and when white people refuse to acknowledge race and racism, as if recent limited civil rights gains ought to be enough.\textsuperscript{720} These are not individual activities undertaken by isolated ignorant individuals; rather, they emerge from a posture of ownership that constitutes a highly stable consolidation of habits capable of replicating itself in institutions and across generations. These racist appropriations \textit{are} whiteness.

Viewing whiteness this way neither limits race to a historical accident nor appeals to an understanding of “fixed racial essences.”\textsuperscript{721} As Sullivan argues,

Racial categories are historically, socially, economically, and psychologically constructed—and are nonetheless real for being so...The being of white people \textit{qua} white, for example, often is malicious, possessive, and destructive. These characteristics are fundamental to what it is today to be white, although this fact of the white world need not always be the case in the future.\textsuperscript{722}

Because the unconscious habits of white privilege involve dominion over the earth and people of color, Sullivan calls for those who exercise white privilege to recognize that there are spaces that are not theirs, that they do not deserve access to the culture, history, and land of other people. This does not necessarily mean that a white person ought to retreat into an all-white enclave—rather, white folk need to adopt habits of listening to

\textsuperscript{718} Ibid., 125-6.
\textsuperscript{719} Ibid., 126.
\textsuperscript{720} Ibid., 127-8.
\textsuperscript{721} Ibid., 128.
\textsuperscript{722} Ibid., 128-9.
the other. In short, if the future of whiteness is not going to be racist, Sullivan argues that it must leave its colonial spirit behind and wait for welcome, knowing that it might not come.\textsuperscript{723}

**The Physiology of Sexist and Racist Oppression**

In her 2015 *The Physiology of Sexist and Racist Oppression*, Sullivan emphasizes the physiology of habits developed in transaction with and sexist and racist world. What she means by “physiological” does not reduce to the physicality of the body isolated from the world in which it transacts. Rather, she is pointing to activities like blushing, which are simultaneously “governed by the autonomic (sympathetic) nervous system” and yet are intersubjective. A blush, while not a product of the will, is a product of a given relationship to the world—in what one is embarrassed by and whom they are embarrassed in front of. Sullivan writes, “Blushing is a physiological habit, a way of transacting with the world that illustrates how other beings are entangled in the psychosomatic functioning of a person’s body.”\textsuperscript{724} So while Sullivan is focusing particularly on human physiology, it is not in such a way that views it in isolation from the world in which it transacts.

Sullivan’s thesis in this book is that our bodies are in a real way constituted by sexism and racism, and such constitution can be seen in the operation of our physiology:

By “constitution” I intend a dynamic, transactional relationship between the social and the biological in which the two are inextricable…The physiological effects of racism and sexism are different for members of dominant and subordinate groups.

\textsuperscript{723} Ibid., 167-8, 180-1.

The effects of racism are not the same for white people and people of color, for example. But both groups are affected physiologically by social-political practices of white domination. In a racist and sexist world, racism and sexism get inside the physiological bodies of all of us in some fashion or other, no matter what our gender or race.\textsuperscript{725}

To support such a claim, Sullivan provides an account of the body “whose unconscious habits are biological. They are located in the physiological materiality of not only (or perhaps even primarily) the brain, but in the hips, pelvic floor, stomach, heart, and other bodily tissues and organs.”\textsuperscript{726}

As she develops this thesis, Sullivan extends William James’ claim that emotions are not mental states but bodily reactions, which can explain in turn why certain forms of bodying, like a yoga posture, can “unlock” emotional responses to childhood traumas;\textsuperscript{727} that trauma manifests in the gut, as women who have suffered sexual abuse have an increase in Irritable Bowel Syndrome and Crohn’s disease—and can even pass that physiological response to trauma to their children;\textsuperscript{728} and that racial disparities manifest in health disparities.\textsuperscript{729} Social location is not merely a description of our world or our interaction in it, but is constitutive of the very minerals in our bones, tightness of our muscles, and the state of our cardiac and digestive health: “The effects of sexism and racism can go all the way down to the bone, as the saying goes, and also down to the tissues, hormones, and genetic markers that constitute human beings. The effect of

\textsuperscript{725} Sullivan, \textit{The Physiology of Racist and Sexist Oppression}, 18.

\textsuperscript{726} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{727} Ibid., Chapter 1.

\textsuperscript{728} Ibid., Chapter 2.

\textsuperscript{729} Ibid., Chapters 3 and 4.
sexism and racism are not only social, political, and economic, but also physiological—which is to say psychological, affective, and often emotional.”

A turn to the body demonstrates that oppression does not just occur in the space between the individual and the political, it shapes the very constitution of human bodies. In such a way, race and gender are real biological identities, insofar as the raced and gendered habits of transactional bodying affect the very physiology of bodies. This diagnosis of the extent of the effect of racist and sexist oppression entails that overcoming racism and sexism must also involve attention to the body, and vice versa:

…the primary root cause [of higher incidences of cardiac problems among black people] is white people’s institutional and (inter)personal habits of racial supremacy and privilege. Likewise, the root cause of many women’s gastrointestinal health problems is not a malfunctioning gut or pelvic floor considered in an isolated fashion. It is a sexist and male-privileged world that generally licenses the domination and abuse of women, girls, and other feminized people.

We must recognize that oppression affects the operations of people’s bodies, and we cannot effect change in health without recognizing that such disparities are caused by structural injustice. Similarly, in addressing white supremacy and white privilege, white people must under go “psychosomatic soul work”—changing the gut reactions that lead them to, for example, fear black bodies. Sullivan thus calls for anti-racist and anti-sexist work to transform institutions and engage in body work—yoga, dance therapy, or other forms of psychosomatic therapy—to combat the effects of racism and sexism.

730 Ibid., 162.
731 Ibid.
732 Ibid., 163.
733 Ibid., 166-67.
against individual bodies.\(^{734}\) In fact, each of these activities ought to affect the other positively, so that habits of racist and sexist bodying can be transformed.

**Conclusion: The Body as Transactional**

Shannon Sullivan’s work provides a framework for thinking about the cultural construction of the body without falling into a number of paradoxes that have plagued feminist political thought. Her theory of transactional bodying allows us to talk about the way in which subjects are formed by their social worlds and also capable of resisting them; how human freedom and agency operate in and through the structures of social mores; and how material bodies can be discursively constructed. Most importantly, it does so without depending on dualistic understandings of the self. Thus Sullivan is able to appropriate Michel Foucault’s statement that “the body is culturally constructed” without falling into the trap Butler identifies of thinking of construction as a form of imprinting on a blank slate, or of the torture instrument in Kafka’s *Penal Colony*. In addition, understanding the human person in terms of “transactional bodying” highlights the role of the body in moral formation. Anti-racist and anti-sexist activism demands attention to the ways in which oppression affects actual concrete bodies; in turn, white and male privilege must be recognized as forms of transactional bodying that require more than conversions of the will or intellect to eradicate.

As I suggested at the beginning of this chapter, debates about the production of subjectivity within feminist political thought parallel those around how Rahner’s spirit is in-world—particularly how one’s transcendental affirmation of God, self, and world is

\(^{734}\) Ibid., 172-82.
“still an interplay with everything that is not free, not spiritual, and so on.”

Thus Shannon Sullivan’s understanding of transactional bodying is not merely useful for carrying feminist political philosophy forward, but for thinking theologically about the human being as spirit-in-world. In the following chapter, we turn to analysis of Rahner’s theological anthropology in terms of transactional bodying.

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Chapter 5:
Returning to the Subject as Spirit-in-World

Rahner’s understanding of the subject as spirit-in-world who is always and already in an unthematic relationship to God has been criticized from all sides—as relinquishing the need for Christian witness, failing to challenge the subject to be responsible for the suffering of the other, and offering little hope for those who are traumatized. As I argued in Chapter One, this criticism ultimately focuses on whether or not Rahner successfully theorizes about how the subject is embodied in-world. In Chapter Two we saw that Rahner’s early work is motivated by the insight that mystical experience is not reserved for the few. It is in working out how grace operates in the lives of ordinary people that Rahner writes *Geist in Welt*, his treatise expositing Thomas’ declaration that all knowledge is rooted in sensory experience. Thus Rahner’s philosophical tome is grounded by a concern to show how the knowledge of God is embodied. How are we as embodied spirits able to know the unbound God? Rahner’s answer in *Geist in Welt* is that the human spirit is actualized in and through the other and thus fundamentally oriented to God. While in *Geist in Welt* Rahner emphasizes the other of materiality—spirit actualized in time and space—his later work develops an understanding of spirit actualized in the social world. Thus Carmichael Peters and Bryan Massingale find it a helpful way to analyze black rage as an exercise of freedom in a hostile, white supremacist world. While such work demonstrates the utility of carrying Rahner’s understanding of the subject forward, it also exposes a critical place where his work needs to be developed: the precise way in which one’s transcendental and categorical freedom relate.
The challenge is to maintain Rahner’s insight that one’s freedom and one’s (albeit unthematic) relationship to God are inviolable—this is, after all, what it means to Rahner to be spirit—while also following Rahner in his understanding that the transcendental is always embodied in the categorical. Balthasar and Metz have each read Rahner as if the actualization of spirit in matter is of secondary importance: for Balthasar the demands of Christian witness are relegated to merely the expression of one’s permanent faith, which is now itself contentless; for Metz the security of the always and already relationship with God prevents us from prioritizing the catastrophes that the other has been subject to. What each of these thinkers neglect is the union of spirit and matter in Rahner’s work, so that there is no transcendental apart from the categorical. The world of space and time is the real world in which salvation occurs. Meanwhile Beste has pushed Rahner in the opposite direction. In taking his word seriously that the transcendental does not exist apart from the categorical, she has understood him as saying that a visible categorical “no” to the world—for instance, from those who on account of trauma disorders do not love the finite objects that could open them up to the greater mystery of God—is necessarily a transcendental “no” as well.

As we saw in Chapter Four, this difficulty in speaking about the way in which freedom is embodied is not unique to Rahnerian, or even theological discourse. A similar paradox is central to contemporary feminist political discourses on the nature of the subject. Judith Butler’s work demonstrates a concern to maintain an understanding of moral responsibility in the face of Foucault’s insight that the body is culturally constructed. She argues that it is precisely because we cannot fully give an account of ourselves that we are ethically responsible to one another. Shannon Sullivan offers a way
of thinking about the subject as both produced by and resistant to socialization, without appealing to a false notion of some inner, essential self. As I will argue in this chapter, both Butler and Sullivan offer ways of pushing Rahner’s work forward in talking about embodiment in general, and in the formation of Christian identity.

**Spirit-in-World as Transactional Bodying**

What does it look like to interpret Rahner’s spirit-in-world through the lens of Judith Butler’s materiality and Shannon Sullivan’s transactional bodying? What new ways of envisioning the embodiment of spirit—and more particularly the relationship between the transcendental and the categorical—do these theories provide? How does this help us understand and/or modify Rahner’s understanding of spirit-in-world? And vice versa?

*The Self as Constituted by the Other*

As I argued in Chapters Two and Three, one of Rahner’s fundamental anthropological claims is that the human being is constituted in and through the other. This is the most simple definition of his identification of human being as spirit-in-world. As compared to other kinds of beings—for example angels, who Rahner identifies as pure spirit—human beings actualize themselves in space and over time.

For Rahner, this understanding of human being helps resolve a number of philosophical and theological problems. The fact that human beings are not self-enclosed is the condition for the possibility of knowledge of the other. More importantly for Rahner, this openness to otherness is the foundation of the possibility of knowledge of
the Other, God. Thus, in Rahner’s anthropology, the materiality of human bodies does not inhibit our knowledge of God but makes it possible.

As we saw in Chapter One, much of the criticism directed at Rahner hinges on how we interpret this relationship between God, self, and world. For Balthasar, it reduces the world to the material of self-actualization and relativizes the revelation of God in Christ. For Metz it shores up one’s relationship with God against the world and against the recognition of those in the world who are fighting for their subjectivity. For Beste, it collapses God onto world so our categorical capacities—to love, trust, discern, each of which are vulnerable to interpersonal harm—become determinate of our relationship to God. Each of these interpretations alleges that Rahner has failed to develop a theological anthropology that is truly open to alterity: the alterity of God, the alterity of others, and the alterity of self.

That each of these figures sees Rahner’s thought as collapsing in on itself in different ways highlights the difficulty in interpreting his work and—as I have argued in this dissertation—an underlying ambiguity in how he speaks about the subject as embodied. In an interview with Paul Imhof late in his life, Rahner concedes that he has not always adequately theorized about the relationship between the transcendental and the historical, particularly when attempting to apply it to more concrete situations.736 In Chapter Three, we saw that Rahner’s theology comes to a critical impasse in speaking about the subject as constituted by an inviolable freedom and vulnerable to external forces. As I argue in this chapter, Judith Butler and Shannon Sullivan offer a way of thinking about these two aspects of human nature without contradiction.

Part of Rahner’s difficulty in maintaining his thesis that the subject is constituted by the other is that occasionally his language about the relationship between the transcendental and the categorical implies an opposition between them. Between the foundational claim that the self is constituted by the other, and his ultimate argument that freedom and dependence increase in direct proportion, Rahner occasionally talks about transcendental freedom as if it is trapped or delimited by one’s bodily freedom. Remember his hope for persons to integrate mental illness into their “yes” to God. Such a practice only makes sense if we posit an inner self, untouched by illness, who can look upon herself as afflicted. But there is, even according to Rahner in the rest of his writings, no such self. It would be more consistent within his work to say instead that integrating mental illness into one’s life is merely one visible—perhaps privileged—way in which a transcendental “yes” can be made.

Ultimately, while Rahner is quick to maintain that there is no self prior to the encounter of the other, he is better at describing this at the more fundamental level—spirit’s pouring itself into matter, for example—than in the way that one navigates one’s transcendental freedom within the network of interdependence within which one lives. Rather, his writing best accomplishes a call for humility and patience in discerning the exercise of human freedom. What is necessary is a way to carry these insights forwards into the messiness of concrete lives, without resorting to a false understanding of the self.

As Butler diagnoses in an analogous debate in feminist political theory, part of the problem that plagues discussions of agency and subjectivity is reliance on metaphors of interiority. If we disabuse ourselves of the notion that there is any self apart from social and political structures, and therefore of an “inner” or “essential” self, then we are in a
better position to understand Rahner’s statements about freedom. What is it then that constitutes “spirit” if there is no self under, in, or behind my materiality? Thinking about Rahner in light of Butler and Sullivan reminds us that spirit, for Rahner, is not some inner spark or inner mind. It is transcendence—or to avoid the confusion that comes from using substantives, spirit is transcending. Such spirit is present whenever human persons see beyond the limits of their present situation: when they imagine a different world is possible, when they sympathize with another, when they strive to become a better person.

For Rahner, this spirit is inviolable. And yet, in what appears to be a contradiction, spirit can only accomplish itself in and through the material world, in such a way that “There is no ‘inwardness’ which does not also stand open, as it were, to what is without.” One way to understand how both of these things can be true is to think about how they are (at least in analogous ways) both maintained by Butler and Sullivan.

Butler’s argument in Giving an Account of Oneself is particularly helpful here. As she writes, giving an account of oneself requires an attention to the various forces that have shaped who one has become. But this leads to two difficult insights: first, that we

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737 Thomas M. Beaudoin makes a similar point in arguing that Rahner’s and Foucault’s understanding of subjectivity is “asymptotic” insofar as they both approach a non-dualistic understanding of the subject in which transcendence is mediated in the concrete historicity of the subject, where Rahner approaches from “above” (erring on the side of transcendence) and Foucault from “below” (erring on the side of historicity), “Engaging Foucault with Rahner,” Philosophy & Theology 20, no. 1/2 (2008): particularly 321-4.

738 It should be noted that such transcendence does not mean one “rises above” the situation as if it no longer affects them. Rahner is speaking of a more basic transcendence here. Crying out “No” against the denigration of oneself or others is transcendent insofar as such a denunciation requires an imaginative counterfactual—a world in which this harm is not done, for instance. This kind of transcendence does not abstract away from the concrete situation. If anything it compels one to change it. It is precisely the ability to transcend this world and imagine a new one that enables and gives urgency to changing this one. Thus when Rahner speaks of the inviolability of human transcendence, this is not to say that all will be well. In clarifying this, I am indebted to conversations with Julia Feder.

are not ourselves. Our origin stories are located before and beyond us. Second, we cannot even fully theorize about the way in which we are shaped by outside forces. In other words, in seeking to give an account of myself, I encounter myself not only as one who has been formed from without, but even this formation is not transparent to me. I ultimately cannot give an account of myself.

As Rahner argues, one cannot speak authoritatively about the motivations of an action—whether they were in freedom in such a way as to be a meaningful decision not only of finite goods but also of the infinite Good, or whether they were constrained. Butler helps us see why, for Rahner, this is not the end of theological reflection on the person but the beginning. As she argues, it is precisely because I cannot have that knowledge about myself or about others that ought to direct me to act with sympathy and solidarity. Humility about our ability to theorize precisely about the exercise of theological freedom does not mean refraining from ethical judgment. Rather it calls for it. I must forgive as if the other is not free; I must also recognize myself as having the power to affect others for ill.

As Butler argues, and Sullivan develops, constitution by the other is not limited to what psychoanalysis can tell us about infant development. The practices of our daily lives are socially and historically mediated. Even my mundane habits bear the mark of a particular social location. They are learned citations of codes and mores that exist before and apart from me.

As we saw in Chapter Four, that we are constituted in such a way does not threaten our ability to uphold human agency—since an understanding of agency as freedom from such constitution is a false ideal. Recall Sullivan’s discussion of the habits
of talking, walking, and driving. Each of these habits consolidates years of practice and learned muscle movements into smooth and automatic motion. In doing so they enable one to move and communicate according to one’s will. That these are learned habits passed on through communities and developed in transaction with the particularities of the physical environment in which one lives do not detract from the freedom of the one engaging in them. Rather each of these habits of body enable a certain activity. The exercise of human agency is only possible in and through habits developed in transaction with the world.

As Sullivan briefly suggests at the end of The Physiology of Sexist and Racist Oppression, her understanding of transactional bodying does not preclude discussion of transcendence. In fact, she argues that, “the remarkable level of its biopsychosocial capabilities means that the body could be considered a site of transcendence. Rather than flatten or eliminate the transcendental and spiritual aspects of human life, an account of emotional and affective habits as thoroughly physiological can refresh our sense of what the transcendental and the spiritual might mean.” Employing Victor Kestenbaum’s work on transcendence in Dewey’s thought, Sullivan proposes an understanding of transcendence rooted in human habits rather than “something supernatural or formally religious.” Kestenbaum offers the metaphor of the horizon, in which transcendence is “the source of what comes into view and…the limiting condition of what is viewable, that is, of what transcends my view.” As Sullivan explains:

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740 Sullivan, The Physiology of Racist and Sexist Oppression, 183.

741 Ibid.

A person’s “view” involves much more than what she can literally see. It is that of which she is consciously aware, conditioned by an immeasurable number of things of which she is not. Our physiological habits are part of that horizon, one of primary sources and limiting conditions of what transcends conscious life. In and through her physiological, affective life, a person transcends him- or herself. There is always more to his or her life, “an existing beyond” as William James poetically put, and that “more” can be found in the physiological functions and character of the body. Far from being reductive, physiological habits can be a site of transcendence that is thoroughly engaged with one’s social and political environments. This is why they also can be an important site of social and political change.⁷⁴³

Speaking of the human being in terms of her habitual transaction with her environment does not deny the possibility of transcendence. In fact, we might add to what Sullivan writes here and say that it is the condition of it. It is precisely because the human being is always in relationship with something other than herself that allows her to transcend herself. As demonstrated in her own work, habitual beings are capable of imagining and enacting new ways of transacting with the world.

More so, these are not simply activities that I do; ultimately these activities are who I am. Recall that for Rahner being spirit-in-world means that the self accomplishes itself in and through the other. There is no self apart from such accomplishment. Likewise for Butler, there is no self underneath one’s performance. In Sullivan’s framework, the self is precisely our habits of bodying. Sullivan’s troubling of grammar helps to highlight the need to rethink our language of the self. It reminds us that we cannot interpret Rahner’s theological anthropology in such a way that would violate his fundamental anthropological insight that spirit is actualized in and through the other. By speaking of transcendence as located in the body’s transaction with the world, we avoid dualistic interpretations of spirit-in-world.

⁷⁴³ Sullivan, The Physiology of Racist and Sexist Oppression, 184.
Of course, unlike Sullivan and Kestenbaum, I am seeking to talk about transcendence specifically in a “supernatural or formally religious way.” The critical distinction between my and Sullivan’s understanding of the body’s transcendence is that I agree with Rahner that the world we live in is precisely already the supernatural one. Rather than thinking of the supernatural as some miraculous intervention into the everyday, I follow Rahner in recognizing that in Christ God has already made the everyday miraculous. Thus while my motivations are most likely at odds with Sullivan’s in seeking a non-dualistic account of the self, her understanding of the body is not inimicable to a theological anthropology. As I argue in this chapter, if we translate Rahner’s fundamental anthropological claims into language of transactional bodying, we are in a better place to talk about the exercise of transcendental freedom in our daily lives. In what follows I argue that such a translation is helpful in understanding traditional theological themes in Rahner’s work with respect to the acknowledgment that human beings accomplish themselves in space and over time.

*Spirituality as Historically Mediated*

As I argued in Chapter Two, Rahner’s motivation for developing such a metaphysics of knowledge is to explain and justify the Ignatian insight that knowledge and love of God is not reserved to the spiritually elite. The Thomistic metaphysics of knowledge in *Geist in Welt* is in service to an understanding that all can know and love God. It is a metaphysics of knowledge that makes possible an everyday mysticism. Rahner wishes to support the claim that the experience of God is offered to all—and, further, that it is constitutive of one’s identity.
In his 1937 “The Ignatian Mysticism of Joy in the World,” Rahner places his argument in *Geist in Welt* in the overall context of an Ignatian theology, where he lifts up the Exercises as a way of attending to God’s word in the world.\footnote{Rahner, “The Ignatian Mysticism,” *TI* 3, 287: “Die Ignatinische Mystik der Weltefreudigkeit,” *SW* 7, 288.} According to Rahner, this kind of practice allows the subject to make thematic her own immediate experience of God and, in doing so, understand the specific moral imperatives within her own life. As Rahner himself argued, one’s duty to God demands particular activity in certain times and places. In one of his only statements about the holocaust, Rahner himself highlights the insufficiency of a universal ethic in a time of crises:

Think back to the time of the Third Reich. I think there were relatively few priests whom you can really prove to have clearly transgressed moral principles in their dealings with the ideology prevailing at the time, with the persecuted Jews, etc. But can you then say with equal clarity that we all always really did the right thing (and I don’t except myself here)? That much is certainly not clear to me.\footnote{Rahner, “Der Anspruch Gottes und der Einzelne,” *SW* 10, 476-7. English translation from Endean, *Karl Rahner and Ignatian Spirituality*, 110.}

A particular context brings with its own demands, and an event like the rise of the Third Reich brings with it a call to a radical witness. Only in careful attention to the world can we understand the moral imperatives placed upon us.

But, as Endean notes, in offering practical advice for Ignatian discernment, Rahner’s theology falters: “Rahner is not precise about the sense in which our experience of God yields certitude, and he does not clarify the relationship between our ongoing experience and the traditions we inherit.”\footnote{Endean, *Karl Rahner and Ignatian Spirituality*, 136.} He is unable to speak with certitude about the way in which one’s reflection on one’s transcendental relationship with God is itself
mediated in and through the categorical.\textsuperscript{747} How, exactly, does God speak to us in these particular contexts? And how do we listen to that speech? Rahner’s commitment that such a relationship with God will look different in different times and places—indeed demand different things of us at different times and places—makes such a process of discernment all the more important.

If spirit is in-world, then any spiritual discernment must engage in a twofold task: recognize the moral imperatives of one’s particular context, and discern how one’s own subjectivity is the product of a process of construction that takes place in that context. What are the crises of this generation and in what way am I called to meet them? How am I blinded to situations of injustice by being a product of my social world and what can I do from where I stand? In other words, one must give an account of oneself and of the world in order to discern how to live in it.

Precisely because the transcendental is mediated in the categorical—precisely because we are spirits-in-world—spirituality must be governed by an attention to the political structures of one’s time and to the production of subjects under them. Just as Butler argues, we cannot give an account of ourselves without attending to the social and moral norms that have constructed us. Likewise, any account of our relationship with God must attend to the construction of our identities. If my relationship with God is mediated in and through my relationship with self and world, and therefore through my own identity, then a life of Christian discipleship demands that I interrogate the origin of my habitual bodying. Sullivan invites us to think more concretely about the ways in

\textsuperscript{747} Ibid., 136-8.
which these habits have developed in transaction with the world, and the ways in which we can go about effecting their change.

The process of decolonization that Carmichael Peters and Bryan Massingale refer to in their discussion of black rage is precisely this form of self-interrogation. Recall that Peters argued that rage is ambiguous in itself, and can be a legitimate response to a hostile world. Black rage can therefore be seen as an exercise of transcendental freedom under the constraints of a white supremacist world. Massingale argued that in such a situation rage is not merely legitimate but actually a mediation of grace, in which one affirms one’s own dignity and protests a system that harms the dignity of others and is idolatrous. Thus rage is actually incumbent on persons as a moral duty. To the extent that rage can be unproductive and negative, we must focus our diagnoses of the problem on white supremacy itself, not in the failures of those who resist it.

For the most part Peters and Massingale are dealing with black rage as a public phenomenon, but their analysis has great implications for understanding spirituality. Their work highlights the way in which even our most seemingly primal emotions—like rage—are constituted by broader social and cultural norms. In turn, growing in recognition of the mystery of God, and therefore the mystery of humanity, will involve not only combatting white supremacy at the structural level, but in resisting the way in which one has been socialized under it. Thus spiritual discernment, insofar as it involves interpreting one’s own mood and the moral imperatives incumbent upon one’s life, requires political and social analysis.

Butler and Sullivan helps us think generally about the “materiality” of the self—that is, of the accomplishment of the subjectivity of the spirit-in-world in and through the
other. Rahner’s anthropology directs our attention to this other as both the world we live in but also as constitutive of our identities. Speaking of the construction of identities within systems of power is therefore a natural byproduct of thinking seriously about Rahner’s theology. In turn, Rahner’s theology situates the discussion of identity construction within the broader relationship of subject, world, and God. This offers love of God as a norm that governs one’s relationship to both self and others. It also, as Bryan Massingale has argued, recognizes political resistance as a mediation of God’s grace.

_Habit and Concupiscence_

As we saw in Chapter Two, embodiment for Rahner entails that human being is marked by concupiscence, which creates a certain distance between freedom and its exercise. Our self-disposal is never complete. According to Rahner the origin of concupiscence is in the spontaneity of one’s own desires, which precede any rational and intentional act of the will. This is further compounded by the fact that we actualize ourselves over time. Understanding concupiscence in light of transactional bodying allows us to greater understand its operation in the Christian life.

First, thinking of concupiscence in terms of habit allows us to focus on the way in which concupiscence is _social_. While this is technically true in Rahner’s theology, it is not in the foreground. Much of his writing about concupiscence is restricted to the difficulties matter poses to self-actualization. When he highlights the social character of concupiscence it is to point out the fact that humans are bound to one another in such a way that they share a human nature. This nature is what makes redemption through Christ
possible, since it is the way in which his humanity relates to ours. There is little attention
given to the way in which a given social world shapes one’s concupiscence.

Sullivan’s theory of transaction allows us to understand how even our
spontaneous desires are themselves products of the social world we live in. As she
argues, habits of bodying are received. By the time I am conscious I have already
developed habits in transaction with the world in which I live. If such a world is sexist
and white supremacist, then these values have likely replicated themselves in my habits
of bodying. I may consciously reject the ethics and social mores of a previous age while
reproducing them in my daily life. A given social world will reproduce different habits.
So then, while concupiscence may affect us all, in offering resistance to our self-
actualization, the shape of our concupiscence will be affected by the world in which we
are formed.

Correspondingly, a sin like white supremacy reproduces itself differently based
on the identity of the individual. Shannon Sullivan’s description of a white person’s
attempts to change her racist habits or W. E. B. Du Bois’ description of the decolonization
of the self each represent resistance to white supremacy. This is not to suggest that these
activities are parallel morally. White people, as the benefactors of white supremacy, bear
the guilt of its reproduction.

Second, this understanding of the way in which structural injustice can be
replicated unthinkingly allows us to better understand the way in which sin can be
transmitted. The doctrine of original sin can appear paradoxical—as if human beings are
in some way responsible for sins they did not commit, or cannot help but commit.
Transaction allows us to understand how sin is passed down from generation to
generation as a result of the interdependence of all human beings, and how it is that I may be responsible for something I have never intentionally willed. While I did not seek out habits of white supremacy, for example, I am responsible for changing them. In a similar way each of us is thrown into a world, mired by sin, in which we are somehow implicated.

This brings us to our third point. Thinking of concupiscence in terms of transactional bodying highlights the way in which moral responsibility is not limited to conscious and intentional activity. If I am aware of the way in which sins like racism and sexism shape my world, the work of redemption is not finished when I have intellectually renounced these worldviews. I still have to take up the material of my life and shape it according to the intellectual conversion I have had. I have to interrogate my habits and, in attempting to change them, I will encounter difficulty and resistance.

Fourth, transactional bodying more clearly protects against the idea that the relationship between freedom and concupiscence maps onto that of the soul and the body—or, more precisely in Rahner’s language, spirit and matter. As Rahner states, in concupiscence “the whole ‘nature’ given prior to freedom offers resistance to the ‘person’s’ free and total disposition of himself, so that the boundary between ‘person’ and ‘nature’ stands as it were vertically in regard to the horizontal line which divides spirituality from sensibility in man.” In other words, concupiscence is not the resistance spirit encounters in matter; it is the resistance the unified spirit-in-world encounters in effecting self-disposal. This distinction is important in countering any

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pernicious understanding that specifically links the body, as opposed to the soul or mind, with sin. One’s “yes” to God is not made despite, but through embodiment.

_Hope and Redemption in the Body of Christ_

Redemption is therefore not a matter of flight from the body. Redemption is corporal. In speaking of redemption in Christ, Rahner argues, “it took place, and could only take place, in this entirely concrete, bloody reality, given over to death. The place where this love and obedience are to be found is therefore this bodily existence, if love and obedience are what they are intended to be—i.e. redemptive.”

749 Christ actualizes his “yes” to both God and us in the material of the world. His love and obedience become redemptive in “concrete, bloody reality.” Likewise our love and obedience to God must be materialized in “this bodily existence.” The theory of transactional bodying helps us understand just how this materialization happens.

First, transactional bodying helps us attend more specifically to the development of moral subjects as agents in a world in which they are also passively vulnerable to outside influence. As I argued in Chapter Three, Rahner’s theology does not provide an adequate understanding of how it is that subjects can offer resistance against the very environments in which they are formed. Butler’s work points to the failure of discourses to replicate themselves, as the very power of the law is the creation of the separation between those inside and outside it. As such, it funds its own subversion. We do not need to imagine an aspect of the human person as inviolable to external influence in order to see how spirit operates in-world to resist and transcend hostile regimes. As Sullivan

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demonstrates, habits also collide in productive ways: she can gain perspective on her southern femininity vis-à-vis forms of academic socialization and vice versa. Thus we can maintain two of Rahner’s fundamental anthropological premises: that human being is spirit—always striving, always transcending—and yet is constituted in and through the other in such a way that no part of the human person is impermeable.

Meanwhile, Rahner’s theology places the analysis of the self that Butler and Sullivan perform within a broader context of orientation to the divine. While Butler has difficulty naming the foundation of her ethical system—the largest piece of which is the inclusion of those who are considered abjects—Rahner’s theological anthropology places such work in the context of relationship with God. If human beings are oriented to the mystery of God in Christ, if God has assumed humanity into God’s own life, I contradict my own very humanity by failing to recognize it in others.

Second, thinking of redemption in terms of transactional bodying highlights the role of habit in the life of discipleship. Recall from our discussion of concupiscence in Chapter Three that growth in Christian discipleship and the grace of God entails mastering (though never completely) one’s concupiscence. Over time, one develops the integrity that allows one to dispose of oneself more fully. This is not a matter of the spirit conquering the body, but of the unified spirit-in-world who, by the grace of God, is able to make one’s life a “yes” to God. Integrity is not the removal of the desires of the will, but the ability to take them up as the material of one’s freedom.

The theory of transactional bodying helps us see why it is that our redemption must occur this way. Without impulses and desires, and their consolidation into habits, our bodying would be meaningless. As Sullivan argues, these elements of human
existence do not threaten or constrain freedom, they are the condition of its possibility. Further, when we recognize in ourself desires or habits that we would prefer to change, the solution is not to flee from desire or habit as such, but to cultivate new habits and desires. Though we may phenomenologically experience them as inimical to our salvation—crying out like Paul that “I do not understand my actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate” (Romans 7:15 NRSV)—our habits and desires are also the material of our salvation. Conversions of the heart and mind toward greater love of the mystery of God and the mystery of humanity must be actualized in the quotidian habits of one’s life. In other words, conversion must be a matter of the entire person, made real in her bodying.

This understanding of embodiment brings into focus the role of Christian practice in shaping the life of discipleship. Recall that against the idea of Christianity being a religion of the soul, Rahner states quite strongly that, “Christianity is continually concerned with the body. It is a bodily, concrete, shaping, speaking, acting, organised, ecclesiastical, sacramental religion, a religion which concerns itself in its dogmas with concrete things, and expresses something through these dogmas.”750 Regular and ritualized activities performed alongside a community—and to be clear, I include in this category aspects of cultic practice as well as political activism—are effective forms of reshaping one’s most consolidated habits of bodying and even—according to both Sullivan and Rahner—one’s desires. In turn, placing Sullivan’s call for anti-racist and anti-sexist habits of bodying within Rahner’s broader theological anthropology offers greater resources to support such work: wisdom traditions that recognize the difficulty of

the good life and the need for constant vigilance; comfort that there are others who travel along the way; rituals (like reconciliation) that highlight the importance of moral development and the inevitability of failing that standard; communities that practice, support, and hold one another accountable; and hope that the evil suffered on earth is not the end. Together, these two discourses offer a way of thinking about Christian identity in the 21st-century that concentrates our ethical activity on the concrete demands of a life of discipleship—including social analysis of the conditions of human flourishing.

Third, redemption is therefore not only corporal but corporate. We develop habits in transaction, and thus they are best supported in communities and environments which encourage them. Both Butler and Sullivan helps us flesh out what it means to speak about the exercise of human agency while maintaining that human beings are constituted in their relationships to others. A world in which all human subjects are capable of accomplishing their “yes” to God is not a world in which subjects are no longer mired in networks of interdependence. It is rather one in which such interdependence supports and sustains the kinds of practices and habits that allow human beings to act with integrity.

In Chapter Three we saw that human persons, embodied as they are in and through the other, are bound up in a common story of sin and redemption. The very materiality that makes us vulnerable to harm, connects us to one another and—through the incarnation—to God. Human beings are not self-enclosed, but are instead open systems. While he admits that he is exaggerating, Rahner even says that, “we are all living in one and the same body—the world.”751 Thus it is not merely that my individual

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751 Ibid., 88: 173.
relationship to God is lived out in and through my relationship to others; there is a real way in which salvation is worked out collectively.

In writing about human finitude, Rahner points out that it is only at the level of humanity as a whole that we can talk about the realization of human potential. Rahner argues that speech about human nature is “a referring to a multitude of human beings, to a humanity which, only as a whole, can really make manifest that which is essentially given to each of us single persons deep down in our possibilities, but only as possibilities. We are actually human only in a humanity.”\(^752\) We can therefore say that human beings effect their “yes” to God in relationship to one another, and it is only fully effected as a collective “yes.”

This means that other persons are not merely the material of my self-realization. We truly need one another for redemption to be possible. In his direction of the Spiritual Exercises Rahner argues all human beings—including Christ—accomplish themselves in relationship with those who are other:

If human persons are to find their own existence, they need those who are human with them genuinely to be other, to be different, i.e. precisely not clones (Doppelgänger). Human beings find their own perfection only in the otherness of those who are human with them, an otherness acknowledged, affirmed and sheerly loved. This applies also to Christ, indeed especially so. We must say also of him: through the Word made human loving human beings as others and because they are others, he too attains the fullness of his nature.\(^753\)

As Phillip Endean comments on this passage, “Through our responses to him, individual and inalienable as they are, Christ can realize unique and unrepeatable potentials in his

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\(^753\) Endean, *Karl Rahner and Ignatian Spirituality*, 118: *Betrachtungen zum ignatianischen Exerzitienbuch*, 119-20. I prefer this translation of Endean’s to the one in the English translation of Rahner’s *Spiritual Exercises*, 118. It preserves the idea that we need not only other human beings, but also precisely people different from ourselves.
own existence.” It is precisely in the sum of human existence that a true “yes” to God is possible. As Tiina K. Allik summarizes Rahner’s conception of the human person, “Because of their materiality and interdependence with the world, human persons can never be totally autonomous, self-integrated, or self-aware agents. This is not a condition that needs to be overcome, but is rather a part of the goodness of God’s creation.”

The Praxis of Christian Identity

In Chapter One we examined three critiques of Rahner’s theological anthropology, that of Hans Urs von Balthasar, Johannes Baptist Metz, and Jennifer Beste. These criticisms demonstrate where Rahner’s transcendental account of the subject is potentially problematic. But these criticisms also point us to the adequacy conditions of an understanding of Christian identity. First, it must call Christians to a rigorous form of discipleship. Christian hope and consolation must not merely pacify, but encourage and embolden those who face their own Ernstfall. Second, such discipleship must live “in memorium Christi,” motivating Christians to solidarity and accountability in the face of the other. It must respond to those who struggle for their own subjectivity and remember those who suffer. Third, it cannot collapse Christian identity into understandings of agency and autonomy impossible for those suffering from severe interpersonal harm. If the second condition calls Christians to be in solidarity for those fighting for political autonomy, the third calls for solidarity with those who lack the integration of self necessary to exercise such autonomy. In this section I wish to return to these criticisms,

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in order to show how reading Rahner’s spirit-in-world as transactional bodying can satisfy these adequacy conditions.

*Rahner and Balthasar*

In *The Moment of Christian Witness*, Hans Urs von Balthasar critiques Rahner’s understanding of the anonymous Christian because it attempts to free the subject from the demands of Christian vocation: a life lived in gratitude toward God, a willingness to take up one’s cross, and ultimately to die for one’s faith. For Balthasar, this failure is an inevitable result of Rahner’s argument in *Geist in Welt*, which he alleges reduces the world to the material of self-actualization rather than the place of divine revelation. Because Rahner’s answer to the question of “how, according to Thomas, human knowing can be spirit in the world,” lies in the metaphysics of knowledge—and therefore the constitution of the subject, rather than the objective ability for the material world to be the site of divine—Balthasar is worried that Rahner’s philosophical foundation either precludes or relativizes the revelation of the Christ event. Once Christ is only one of many possibilities of revelation, Balthasar argues that the demands of martyrdom, and of Christian discipleship in general, are undercut.

I do not wish to offer an *apologia* of Rahner’s theology, however. As I argued in Chapter One, I find more compelling Karen Kilby’s and Phillip Endean’s suggestions that we look at the clash between Balthasar and Rahner as a way of seeing the potential dangers in carrying Rahner’s theology forward. Doing so not only recognizes Balthasar’s

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757 Balthasar, review of *Geist in Welt*, 377.

758 Karl Rahner, introduction to *Spirit*, liii; *Geist*, 14.
own statement about the real target of his criticism, but is more productive in thinking about the future of Rahnerian theology.

In addition, while I ultimately do not think Balthasar’s critique of Rahner’s understanding of revelation or soteriology is based on anything but caricature, this does not mean that Rahner is at all times successful in supporting the radical demands of Christian discipleship that Balthasar rightly calls for. While I have argued in this dissertation that Rahner’s larger theological frame is Ignatian, and therefore even his happiest theology must be read within a context of renunciation and the cross, one can read hundreds of pages of Rahner without being reminded of this. Phillip Endean has pointed to the particular way in which Rahner’s theology falters in theorizing about discerning God’s revelation in the world. Even Johann Baptist Metz, whose sympathies and intuitions are often diametrically opposed to Balthasar, argues that Rahner’s transcendental approach inoculates the subject against the world. What does it look like then, to push Rahnerian theology forward while listening to Balthasar’s warnings? In other words, is there a Rahnerian subject who can persevere in The Ernstfall?

In this dissertation I have attempted to pull out the writings of Rahner’s which best flesh out how the human being is spirit-in-world—particularly how our love and knowledge of God is mediated in our concrete embodied existence. I have argued that a

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tradition of feminist political thought, particularly Shannon Sullivan’s understanding of the self as “transactional bodying,” offers a helpful way of interpreting what it means to be spirit-in-world. Of particular relevance here is the way in which it reminds us that there is no self underneath or apart from our actual being in the world. For Rahner, the human spirit only exists as that which constitutes itself in and through the other.

This means that our “yes” to God does not exist beneath or apart from our bodily existence. We must shape our entire lives as a “yes” to God. Christ, and the Church, are not merely instances of divine revelation among many. Rahner’s understanding of Christ as the realsymbol of God identifies the person of Christ as the real and objective presence of God. This presence is extended through the Church and particularly present in the sacraments. If one seeks to know and love God, God is particularly and objectively present here. That Rahner is not willing to limit God’s activity and presence does not mean that he is de-centering the role of Christ or of the Church, but is attendant as well to the operation of grace in the margins. Indeed, it is only through Christ, he argues, that the rest of the world as assumed by him, is capable of manifesting the divine in such a way, and capable of mediating both the divine and human “yes.”

This calls forth a radical understanding of discipleship, since there is no love of God apart from that which is embodied. The other side of this is that anyone who embodies the love of God truly loves God, whether they know it or not. An atheist guard in Balthasar’s scenario, who chooses to be killed rather than execute a Christian, has indeed followed the footsteps of Christ who died for his friends, regardless of what he consciously reflected upon along the way: “For he who lets go and jumps, falls into the depths such as they are, and not such as he has himself sounded. Anyone who accepts his
own humanity in full—and how immeasurably hard that is, how doubtful whether we really do it!—has accepted the Son of man, because God has accepted man in him.”761 In other words, our relationship to God is an objective fact not limited by our understanding of it.

Rahner’s belief that atheism is not necessarily sinful, as well as his more general claims that we cannot deduce from categorical acts to one’s relationship to God, do not contradict this general understanding of the need for faith to be embodied. Rahner is motivated by three particular principles: belief that the human person is mystery, recognition of the way in which human freedom is limited precisely because human beings are embodied, and hope that all may be saved. They do not constitute a claim that one’s material existence is superfluous to one’s relationship for God. Rather, they are ways of acknowledging the surprising ways in which a “yes” can be embodied under threatened freedom, and of the ultimate freedom of God to save. But between the humble acknowledgement that both the human and divine are radical mysteries, Rahner lays a clear path of Christian discipleship: the fashioning of one’s life as a “yes” to God.

In fact, Endean argues that this hesitance to speak too definitively about the God-world relationship makes Rahner’s epistemology more not less God-centered: “This God-centredness leads Rahner into a disciplined tentativeness. The kind of security von Balthasar seeks in Christianity is an idolatrous illusion.”762 As for the Ernstfall, Endean makes a compelling case that real martyrdom, like that of Alfred Delp, often involves

doubt of both God and self against which faith becomes difficult and ambiguous. Delp’s correspondance exposes Balthasarian martyrdom as a kind of hagiography:

For von Balthasar, Christianity offers some kind of miraculous exception to the human condition's insecurity and unfinishedness, and hence will always be a matter of clear lines and authority. God's last word has been spoken, in unsurpassable beauty. It is for us to contemplate, to respond in obedience—but never to doubt. Rahner's vision is structurally different. Christianity offers a promise empowering us to live and accept that insecurity without denial, in faith and patience.\footnote{Ibid., 37.}

Reading spirit-in-world as transactional bodying allows us to theorize about the real ways in which human persons accomplish their “yes” to God in and under conditions of great despair not only in apocryphal displays of strength; it allows us to recognize black rage as a radical moment of Christian witness; and encourages us to interrogates the particular demands upon our habits of bodying for our given political context.

\textit{Rahner and Metz}

As we saw in Chapter One, Metz’s theology—initially Rahnerian in its trajectory—was “‘interrupted’ at key junctures by a deep and disturbing consciousness of God’s presence to the world of late modernity” that pushed his theology away from his mentor’s transcendental approach.\footnote{Ashley, introduction to \textit{Interruptions}, xii.} In his now famous comparison of Rahner’s theology to the German folktale of the hare and the hedgehog, he accused Rahner of speaking of the subject as always and already with God in such a way that obscures the struggle of those who die fighting for their subjectivity and which artificially shores up the identity and complacency of those whose races have already been run for them. In turn, Metz himself
seems to have critically interrupted Rahner at various points in his theology. In his 1963 edition of *Hörer des Wortes*, he pushed Rahner’s theology not only to examine the subject as spirit-in-world [*Geist in Welt*] but as spirit-in-personal-world [*Geist in Mitwelt*]. Indeed, he reframes the entire project under the heading of the subject and her historicity. Recall that in his introduction of *Hörer des Wortes*, he reframes the text as addressing the relationship between the subject and history, rather than philosophy of religion and theology. It is precisely this relationship in Rahner’s theology that I have traced in this dissertation. Perhaps Rahner’s approval of Metz’s revisions was motivated by recognition in retrospect that it is this theme for which *Geist in Welt* is fundamental to Rahner’s theology. Any interpretation of the relationship between Rahner and Metz must recognize this dialogue between them. What I propose to do in this section is to continue this dialogue—to allow the future of Rahnerian theology to be interrupted by Metz.

One helpful way of thinking about the difference between Rahner’s and Metz’s theologies, according to J. Matthew Ashley, is in terms of direction: Rahner argues from the *Seinsfrage* and the transcendental to human historicity; Metz argues from the historical to the transcendent. This is not an unimportant distinction. It is likely the reason that the writings of Rahner’s that most helpfully address the historicity of subjectivity are scattered and lack cohesion. It is not that they are afterthoughts to his theology, nor is such attention to historicity precluded by his theology, rather it is that his most systematic thinking is directed first and foremost at questions of fundamental theology.

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766 Ibid., 82-3.
As we investigated in Chapter One, Rahner’s response to Metz’s criticism involves pointing back to the relationship between the transcendental and the categorical. Admitting that Metz’s *Faith in History and Society* points out where his theology is incomplete, Rahner argues that his understanding of the relationship between the transcendental and categorical aspects of human experience provides an answer to much of Metz’s criticism:

…it has always been clear in my theology that a “transcendental experience” (of God and of grace) is always mediated through a categorical experience in history, in interpersonal relationships, and in society. If one not only sees and takes seriously these necessary mediations of transcendental experience but also fills it out in a concrete way, then one already practices in an authentic way political theology, or, in other words, a practical fundamental theology. On the other hand, such a political theology is, if it truly wishes to concern itself with God, not possible without reflection on those essential characteristics of man which a transcendental theology discloses.\(^767\)

For Rahner, the fact that the transcendental is always embodied in the categorical means two things: first, that Metz is misreading him by focusing on the transcendental as if it was not intimately connected with the categorical and second, that Rahner’s theology is always and already political.

Thinking about spirit-in-world in terms of transactional bodying however reminds us that spirit is only ever accomplished in-world. The human spirit is precisely that form of spirit that cannot and does not exist outside of its actualization in space and time. While a transcendental analysis of the nature of spirit begins by making universal claims about spirit, ultimately these claims are subverted by the definition of spirit precisely as that which is constituted in and through the other. In fact, Francis Schüssler Fiorenza has argued that the prominent difference between Rahner’s and Metz’s theological

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\(^767\) Karl Rahner, introduction to Bacik, *Apologetics and the Eclipse of Mystery*, ix-x. See also J. Matthew Ashley’s analysis of this passage in *Interruptions*, 171-5.
anthropologies is merely the nature of this “other” and of the human concupiscence in which it results. Ashley agrees, noting that where Metz is concerned about the ways in which one’s Mitwelt frustrate personal freedom, Rahner is more concerned with one’s nature:

For Rahner, too, freedom is the capacity to come to self-presence and self-realization in and through embodied existence. For both, no one action can fully incarnate my self-realization and self-presence. But, whereas for Metz concupiscence arises from the dialectical nature of our self-realization within an ambiguous Mitwelt, for Rahner the relevant dialectic is that of nature and person. “Nature,” as the counterpart to the freedom that makes us persons, has a certain innate spontaneity and inertia which resists the integrating will of the person. It is this inner reality of human becoming that is the primary threat to self-realization, not the social constitution of the person in a Mitwelt. Metz’s concern to place his anthropology in a more social and historical framework is evident in this early difference with Rahner.

This however, seems to collapse world and body in Rahner’s thought. The “other” through which human spirit accomplishes itself is not merely the materiality of one’s body, but through the body, the entire world. Body is precisely the location of spirit’s entering into materiality as a whole. As I have argued in this dissertation, this entails the cultural construction of bodies in the Mitwelt. One’s nature is not simply given, but constituted in relationship with others.

If spirit only accomplishes itself in the world, then there is no hedgehog on the other side of the track. Spirit exists neither as something apart from the subject in her historicity, nor as something already accomplished that only needs to be expressed. The inviolability of spirit does not represent a space apart from suffering and responsibility. It is not the transcendence of one who is safe from the world, but the transcendence present

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769 Ashley, Interruptions, 88.
in any negative contrast experience where one says “no” to grave injustice, and dies fighting against it. God’s presence in Christ ought to confirm such an understanding of transcendence. Christ himself does not get to skip over the cross but must go through it. Nor is he granted freedom from its memory. Rahner argues that Christ holds his past together with his present as one. His cross is not “behind him.” The glorification of his body—which remains scarred—is the further taking up of this history into God’s.\textsuperscript{770}

It is the hare in the story, not the hedgehog in whom spirit is moving. In fact, since the human spirit realizes itself most fully when it is open to the mystery of God in and through the privileged form of the mystery of the human person, the option to cheat rather than to run is a grave violation of spirit. The cheating hedgehogs are only an appropriate analog for Rahner’s theological anthropology if one assumes that “spirit” in his work is an essence or substance that has already been accomplished—or which one knows will be accomplished. But understanding spirit-in-world as transactional bodying reminds us that spirit is an unaccomplished dynamic present only in the concrete striving of individual subjects in the world.

\textit{Rahner and Beste}

What do we do though, when it appears that it is precisely this capacity to resist and fight that is vulnerable to harm? As Jennifer Beste has argued, the unity between the transcendental and categorical suggests that those we don’t see fighting—who have indeed lost the capacity of self-integration as a result of severe trauma disorder—are no

longer capable of the love of God. For Rahner, the loss of such capacity would make one cease to even be human.

But a number of aspects of spirit-in-world challenge such an interpretation of Rahner. As we saw in Chapters Two and Three, the fact that human freedom is exercised in the world means that is always to some extent in interplay with what is not free. Whether or not a given categorical act is an expression of one’s freedom is not available to reflection—either to oneself or to another. Limits to human freedom may also mean that what looks like a “no” is actually an affirmation of the mystery of God. Thus the fact that spirit is in-world and thus that the transcendental is only expressed in the categorical, entails that one cannot reason back from the categorical to the transcendental. One’s relationship to God is ultimately a mystery.

This opens a space between what we would understand as the capacity for self-integration at the categorical level—involving those human capacities affected by severe interpersonal harm—and the self-disposal required to make one’s life a “yes” to God. Thus Rahner’s theology says nothing about whether or not someone who appears to no longer be capable of loving finite goods is capable of loving God. In fact, it demands a certain amount of humility in speaking at all about such connections. In addition, I would argue that within Rahner’s understanding of spirit—because it is not limited to what one can consciously intend or reflect on—we can see the symptoms of trauma disorders themselves as coping mechanisms for dealing with grave evil, and therefore as the human spirit struggling against the most horrific of conditions.771

771 In a similar argument, Marie Baird argues that the fundamental struggle to stay alive under Nazi death camps—even as that struggle was experienced phenomenologically as a reduction to one’s bodily and material existence—constitutes a form of transcendence, “Death Camp Survival and the Possibility of Hope: A Dialogue with Karl Rahner,” Philosophy & Theology 10, no. 2 (1997): 385-419.
But to defend Rahner’s theology against accusations that it implicitly damns those with severe traumatic disorders is faint praise indeed. What resources does Rahner’s theology offer, if any, in thinking about the lives of those whose capacity for self-integration is damaged by interpersonal harm? In other words, in the face of grave evil, for what can we hope?

As Rahner argues, the condition of the possibility of grave harm is also the condition for the possibility of human redemption. That we are connected to one another is the possibility of our being connected to God through Christ. Perhaps the strongest Rahnerian response to trauma that can be offered is to make this move from analysis of grace at the individual level to the corporate.

When trauma disorders are the result of interpersonal harm they are not merely the result of one individual’s actions. This is easy to understand when the cause is war, but even sexual abuse is enabled by communities—who do not listen to victims, who protect hierarchy at all cost, who raise children to believe they do not have the right to control who touches their bodies. Recognition that, as spirits-in-world, our bodies are open systems ought to highlight the radical demand that we build healthy communities—which support the habits of bodying that help prevent abuse and better enable survivors to

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receive the support they need. Not only does Rahner’s theological anthropology demand that we refrain from pronouncing judgment against those whose apparent sin is the result of trauma, it entails a radical imperative to stand in solidarity with those who are traumatized and to prevent the traumatization of others.

As Rahner says in his direction of the Spiritual Exercises, as a result of our unity in the mystical body of Christ, sin against one another is a sin against Christ and vice versa. When human bodies are denigrated, so also is God’s body: “The body of Christ, which is being disfigured in the Roman prison by the scourging, the mocking, the crowning of thorns, and the bodily exposure, is the body in which God wants to give Himself to us. And the essence of sin is the violation of God in the body of the world.” This solidarity between God’s body and ours means that we cannot deny the presence of God in those who are harmed: “By following Him, we achieve a true humanism that has value in God’s eyes—a humanism that has no illusions about what man is, but rather is able to perceive the face of God in this disfigured man.” To be clear, to say that the

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773 A similar line of reasoning is taken by Shannon Craigo-Snell, who argues that Rahner’s focus on love of neighbor and openness to other should not be taken to mean that one should not enforce healthy boundaries in one’s relationships, even if Rahner does not give many concrete resources for navigating this tension. In the moral imperative to love the other as other (that is, not as an instrument of my own actualization) there is an implicit understanding that I am not to let myself be treated any other way either, *Silence, Love and Death: Saying “Yes” to God in the Theology of Karl Rahner* (Milwaukee: Marquette University, 2008), 93-4.


776 Ibid., 232-3: 211. Paul Crowley sees a similar liberative potential in this aspect of Rahner’s thought. He argues that Rahner’s understanding of the paradox of human freedom and dependence constitutes a “Christian pessimism” which paradoxically supports Christian hope even in the midst of tragedy. Since Rahner is honest that freedom—even Christ’s freedom!—is enmeshed in a world of tragedy and necessity, an analysis of a situation as tragic does not preclude it from being the material of our freedom or of God’s grace, “Rahner’s Christian Pessimism: A Response to the Sorrow of AIDS,” *Theological Studies* 58 (1997): 286-307. Kathryn Reklis has also argued that such a theology of freedom is most adequate to understanding suffering, as it simultaneously recognizes tragedy and hope: “[Rahner’s]
face of God is in those disfigured by violence is not to justify that violence but to condemn it. This is why Rahner argues that the Eucharist, as the sacrament of Christ’s presence on earth and our unity in his body, is both the source and the judge of our love of one another.  

Conclusion: The Mystical and Political Body

Using Rahner’s understanding of the body as a lens to read his anthropology focuses our attention on 1) the way in which the transcendental is always categorical, 2) Rahner’s goal to understand how human beings, as material, are capable of knowing and loving God, while 3) highlighting the lesser known writings on vulnerability and catastrophe.

Under the category of the “body” these are not merely ad hoc pieces of Rahner’s theology, but one unified understanding of the human being who becomes herself in space and time. Such attention to the difficulties and vulnerabilities of human life is not given despite Rahner’s transcendental anthropology but because of it.

Interpreting Rahner’s understanding of embodiment or spirit-in-world as “transactional bodying” better enables us to speak of Christian identity not opposed to, but through, the concrete materiality of the life of discipleship. As bodies we are intimately connected to one another and so called to care for one another—so much that neighbor-love can be an authentic way of loving God. Here the face of the other becomes an icon for God. But such connection is also vulnerability—in more generalized ways

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sense of the tragic in a Christian conception of the world can both undermine a saccharine theology immune to the threats of a contingent history and, paradoxically, be a means of reengaging a Christian theology of hope, understood as commitment to the world,” “A Sense of the Tragic in a Christian Theology of Freedom,” Theological Studies 70 (2009): 37.

777 Ibid., 215: 197.
(socialization in a hostile world) or more acute (trauma inflicted by interpersonal harm). This entails an ethical imperative: not to live in the false lie that my life is unaffected by and does not affect others. Christian discipleship demands that I care for the bodies of others as if they were my own. Such an ethic requires that I examine the ways in which subjects are produced and therefore requires precisely the kind of social analysis that would direct my attention to the intersecting ways in which some bodies are recognized as subjects.

If, as Rahner argues, the human being is spirit-in-world, then her relationship to God is always embodied in a particular context. The mystical is political. My experience of God is not a magical interruption of my life, but takes place in and through my relationship to finite goods—and in particular, my relationship to myself and to others. But this entails that the political is also mystical. The activities I engage in which lead to the flourishing of subjects—which invite me to greater recognition of the mystery of humanity and the mystery of God, and which promote such recognition of others—are the site of my relationship with God, not merely an expression of it.
Conclusion

Rahner himself, speaking later in life of his experience as a Catholic theologian, offers us advice in how to approach his theology. Admitting that his theology may at times contradict itself, he invites his readers to focus more on his approach than its results:

Of course I know that perhaps a great deal of what is said in my theology in no way fits together clearly and unambiguously, for a human being is in no way in a position to carry through an exhaustive and comprehensive reflection on how the particular things they say hang together, given that the sources of their knowledge are from the outset pluralist. A theologian can therefore only ask supporters and opponents of their theology to come at this theology with an indulgent benevolence, to see its approaches, basic tendencies, ways of putting questions, as more important than its ‘results’—results which, in the end, cannot after all be definitively valid.778

One cannot help but notice the similarities of this method of reading to Rahner’s own method of reading Thomas in Geist in Welt.

Rahner himself wrote often of the fleeting relevancy of any philosophical system. In more than a few places he worries that his own theology may itself already be outdated. But Rahner does not hope for some universal philosophy. Rather he speaks of the urgency that theologians wrestle with the philosophical questions of their day.779 This is what Rahner does in dialogue with Thomas’ theology and it is what Rahner asks us to do with his own theology. In writing this dissertation I have sought to follow this method myself, offering a new reading of Rahner that is still consistent with his questions and commitments. I have tried to imagine just what Karl Rahner would say to a (post?)modern theologian today. What does it look like to do what Rahner did: reflect

778 Rahner, “Erfahrungen eines katholischen Theologen,” 54. English translation provided by Phillip Endean in Karl Rahner and Ignatian Spirituality, 149, which is considerably less clumsy than the on in Rahner, “Experiences of a Catholic Theologain,” 306.

theologically on the experience of God in dialogue with philosophical questions of today? How can we hold fast to the belief that grace is available to all? That it does not merely come upon us from without, but also constitutes our own identity?

Answering these questions for today demands that we take up the question of the cultural construction of human bodies. While I do not think that Rahner himself would have seen the body as a central category of his own thought, it offers a unique vantage point from which one can understand much of the rest of his theology. A manmade structure may offer as complete a vista as a mountaintop. If there is any artifice in reading Rahner from the lens of questions that began to dominate the humanities only after his death, I hope this project will be judged by the view it offers rather than how naturally it is grounded in Rahner’s own theology.

There is a certain logic that pervades Rahner’s arguments when he is operating in his most systematic and philosophical mode. Traditional theological antinomies between the divine and human increase in direct rather than inverse proportion. Love of God and love of neighbor grow together; the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and vice versa; the same theology is theopocentric and anthropocentric; finally, Christ’s natures are perfected by and through one another. This same logic shapes Rahner’s understanding of the human person, in whom spirit and matter are unified rather than opposed and who, as a result of being embodied spirit, actualizes her freedom precisely in necessity.780

This logic is not self-grounding. It arises from reflection upon the praxis of Ignatian spirituality, particularly Rahner’s understanding that grace is available to all and

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780 Robert Masson has argued that a “metaphoric logic” undergirds these moves and others, insofar as Rahner “employs these unexpected and ‘unwarranted’ affirmations to open up new conceptual possibilities,” Masson, “Rahner’s Metaphoric Logic,” 401.
affects the experience of one’s own identity. It is this tradition through which Rahner attempts to understand Christian doctrine. Committed to doing theology that makes sense of that grace, which is not merely extrinsic to the human person but also rises up from within, Rahner approaches theology with an understanding that through Christ, God reaches the human heart.

This means that from the perspective of Rahner’s understanding of the body, we can see the contours of his larger theological project. The proportional relationship of spirit and matter in the human person is a recapitulation of the cosmic story of God’s love for humanity. This aspect of Rahner’s understanding of human embodiment has been missed by many of his readers, who view the relationship between spirit and matter as one of opposition, simple identity, or oscillation. Indeed, Rahner himself often fell into such traps in attempting to speak about the embodied nature of human transcendence.

It is critical today to hold on to both of these aspects of the human person. It is precisely the denigration of real human bodies that demand we attend to the significance of human embodiment in the Christian theological tradition. Insofar as human persons cry out “no” to such denigration, they embody transcendence. Theology must witness not only to those who suffer but also to those who resist suffering. According to Rahner, we do not have to prioritize one of these over the other. As paradoxical as it seems, the human person is precisely the being who accomplishes her transcendence materially. A theological account of the human being as free spirit is therefore also an account of the human being as vulnerable to tragedy.

781 Here I am following Rahner’s own metaphor of grace as an irrigation system that meets up with deep underground wells in Ignatius of Loyola Speaks, 14-16: “Rede des Ignatius von Loyola an einen Jesuiten von Heute,” 303-4.
Reading Rahner through Judith Butler and Shannon Sullivan offers a way of speaking about the human person that preserves the fundamental insight of this logic. In dialogue with these thinkers, I have chosen to talk about this transcendence as a form of bodying. My goal is not to reduce the human person to her materiality, but to do anthropology from below. Using language of “the body” and “embodiment” to speak of the unified human being forces us grammatically to wrestle with Rahner’s claim that spirit does not exist apart from pouring itself into matter, and to draw our attention to the concrete lives of subjects constructed by the worlds in which they live.

Loving a thinker demands holding them to the highest standards, and I have tried to read Rahner alongside some of his most provocative critics. Hans Urs von Balthasar, Johann Baptist Metz, and Jennifer Erin Beste each question the adequacy of Rahner’s theological anthropology. In different ways, they challenge his method of transcendental analysis as well as his understanding of human transcendence. By focusing on Rahner’s understanding of embodiment, I hope to put forward an understanding of Rahner’s theology that does not relegate the demand for Christian witness, accountability to the face of the other, or hope for the traumatized.

Rather, when we understand that human beings are precisely those spirits that accomplish themselves in and through matter, what follows is an understanding of the human body as simultaneously the site of the experience of God and political transformation. Our identities as Christians do not float above our heads as spectres, they are shaped in the concrete here and now, by the worlds in which we are formed. This understanding of the human person ultimately calls forth a way of life—one that demands
solidarity with those who suffer, vigilance over our habits of bodying, openness to mystery, and hope in the world to come.
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