Rahner's Christian Ethics

The claim that Karl Rahner’s thought has great importance for ethics may surprise some readers. Little of his theological writing bears directly upon topics of the sort that traditional Catholic “moral theology” has claimed as its proper field of endeavor. Nor are the major contributors to new directions in Catholic moral science in any sense Rahner’s disciples. Rahner’s “theological ethics,” however, promises a sound basis for the systematic integration and further development of the advances lately made in “moral theology,” whether by Catholics or those of other Christian ethical traditions.

By accepting Kant’s “turn to the subject” as well as modern philosophy’s focus on “subjectivity,” and by using the Maréchalian version of Kant’s “transcendental method,” Rahner has succeeded in bringing to the forefront of attention the distinctively “personal” characteristics of human “nature.” Traditional “natural law” ethical reasoning of the pre-Kantian variety has tended to view the “nature” of man in a “cosmological” way, more in the likeness of infranatural “natures” than as uniquely characteristic of man. An infranatural “nature” specifies absolutely the nonfree forces of the infrapersonal entity. Thus, one studies such an infranatural “nature” by empirical methods because one always deals with such entities as “objects” distinct from the observer himself.

Rahner has shown that the appropriate method for knowing the personalized “nature” of man is a reflective investigation of those immediately experienced conditions of possibility within the “subject,” rather than an apparently “objective” discovery attained through empirical data-gathering about what seems hidden “within” an “object” outside of the observer. Thus, Rahner demythologizes what has often in the past appeared to be a “dogmatic” metaphysics of morals. He also furnishes the basis for overcoming that relativism which threatens a “natural law” grounded empirically in the data gathered by sociology and scientific anthropology in those new versions of “natural law” developing outside of the tradition.

As a result of these moves, Rahner understands human “nature” to include two reciprocally influential dimensions. For purposes of ethics, “nature” designates both what is “essential” in man, the permanent limits of human existence that are common to all men, and also what is “personal” in each individual man, the unique and inimitable at the core of man’s freedom (designated here as “personhood”).

In this view of the complex unity of human “nature,” “essence” must always be understood in its relationship to the free creativity of “personhood,” and “personhood” always in its relationship to the limiting and directing structure of “essence.” Both dimensions of man’s “nature” are understood to be available to man’s understanding primarily as inner dimensions of the “subject”; at the same time, these inner dimensions of the “self” must, by a painful adaptation of concepts and language called analogy, be thought about and spoken of in concepts and terms that derive directly from empirical “objective” experience. Man can articulate “essence” and “personhood,” which are “nonobjective” dimensions of himself, only as if they are like the “objects” he has experienced in his daily life.

Some of the consequences of Rahner’s method and the personalized conception of human “nature” that results from it can be indicated only summarily here.

The Link with History

Ethical principles are the articulated expressions of the “essential” dimension of man’s “nature” as it bears upon the specific content of human action. Since all formulations of the “essential” dimensions of personalized “nature” are necessarily linked to the hist-
Potential for development of doctrine exists in natural law ethics as in metaphysics. This excludes the kind of nonhistorical orthodoxy where principles are eternally "set."

torically particularized "objective" experience of a historical culture and community. It follows that ethical principles are only imperfectly in the permanence of "essence" itself. They are to that degree "relative": relatively correct as partial expressions of the way man's "essence" limits and directs his free activity in a particular era and culture, but also relatively inadequate to express all that that "essence" contains. There exists, therefore, in "natural law" ethics quite as much potential for "development of doctrine" as in metaphysics itself. This excludes the kind of "nonhistorical orthodoxy" that has led some schools of Catholic moral theology to treat principles as eternally "set," and thus to limit ethical reasoning to the casuistic application of inflexible principles to particular cases. The appearance of controversies like that about birth control within traditional "natural law" ethics testifies to at least some historicity in the understanding of man's permanent "essence." At the same time, any attempts to base "natural law" solely on the empirical human sciences must take account of man's "subjectivity" in order to find justification for the universalizing that successfully escapes the relativism of the raw empirical data.

The dimension of 'Personhood'

Since human "nature" must be understood to include also the dimension of "personhood," "natural law" ethical reasoning must henceforth give careful attention to the process by which each man seeks to discern among the many possibilities for action offered by human "essence" that one activity uniquely appropriate for his free self-development in self-transcending love. "Personhood," as the source of free creativity of the "subject" in his uniqueness, is thus the source of what Rahner calls "formal existential ethics" —the study of the process by which the "self" discerns the unique demand of consistent "personal" development. This responds to a legitimate need expressed in contemporary "situation ethics," but avoids the latter's neglect of those "essential" limits and directions for free self-creativity to which "natural law" has traditionally paid almost exclusive attention.

Role of Free Creativity

Since the "essential" dimension of man's "nature" is always to be understood in its relationship to the free creativity of the "personal" dimension, it is possible that man will in some sense create himself through changes that affect even his "essence." Traditional "natural law" has given very little attention to this. The kinds of moral conflict and dilemma to which "situation ethics" gives vivid expression can be adequately dealt with only by taking this into account. In this period of man's growing awareness and exercise of technical control over his social organizations, over his body, and even over his psychological processes, "natural law" ethics must admit that man can and does uncover hitherto unsuspected potentialities for the actuation of his permanent "essence." "Natural law," therefore, must deal with the problem of when changes (e.g., by eugenic or social engineering) can be judged to be truly "humane" developments within man's permanent "essence." This requires that attention be given to the "nature" of "personhood"—the capacity to be a self-aware and free, self-disposing "subject."

The limiting and directive function of "essence" in man must always be understood in its capacity to sustain and enhance "personhood," never as a static constriction of free activity that is the function of infrapersonal "natures." Such attention both to the creativity of "personhood" and to the subordination of the limiting and directive function of "essence" in relation to the free existence of this creative "person" opens up another aspect of the historicity of "natural law." It calls for the acceptance of a certain degree of pragmatism or experimentalism in "natural law," since the potentialities for change within man's permanent "essence" cannot be known until the experiment reveals the consequences for the self-conscious and free "person."

Personal Moral Discernment

This points to the need for an adequate "natural law" ethics. It would consider the concrete moral experience of "persons" (and also of "personal" communities), especially insofar as such experience is of moral conflict and dilemma. It would be the creative source of development for an evolving understanding both of what is
really permanent in “essence” and of the latent potentialities for change within the permanent “essence.” Such an ethics must, of course, continue to require that “personal” discerning of the unique demand of the moment for each man take full account of the limiting and directing function of permanent “essence” as that has been understood and formulated in universal ethical principles up to the present historical moment. But “natural law” ethics can and should seriously strive to help the individual “person” to give a reasoned account of how those unique demands he believes he has discerned, but that appear to contradict hitherto accepted “essential” principles, are really consistent with “essence” understood in a new way. Thus, it is precisely through conflict with the demands of “essence” in the realm of the unique “personal” moral discernment that a signal may be given either of the need for a more profound understanding of what is “essential” in man than has been achieved in the past, or of the need for developing hitherto unsuspected potentialities of man’s “essence.”

From a Rahnerian point of view, then, it might be suggested that the current crisis about abortion may signal not a diminution of respect for life but rather the need for broader conceptions of the value of life that will result in eugenic and social engineering on a wide scale. The freedom consequent upon such engineering—to initiate pregnancy only when one chooses to do so, and to bring pregnancy to term without risking the gross economic, social and personal penalties today so frequently encountered—might enhance human “personhood.”

Rahner’s Contribution

Rahner’s philosophical anthropology and his use of transcendental method contribute to a formal theological reflection that draws upon the resources of Christian revelation. Similarly, his contribution to a developing “natural law” ethics can and should facilitate the expression of a specifically Christian “theological ethics.”

Why can theological ethics be understood, from Rahner’s point of view, as always a specially enlarged expression of “natural law” ethics, and the latter as a consistent development of the former? The answer is to be sought in Rahner’s theology of the relationship of historical “nature” to grace. He has consistently emphasized that grace constitutes an “inner” dimension of man’s “subjectivity.” The intention of God that all men shall be offered salvation in Christ, known only to part of mankind from revelation in Christ as an historical event, must, according to Rahner, and the most authentically Thomist tradition, have its real, created consequence in the “nature” of every man as he actually exists. This created consequence of the offer of grace must be more than an aspect of the constitutive principles of man’s being; it must also affect the conditions of his conscious “subjectivity.” Man’s conscious self-awareness and free self-disposal involve, therefore, a universally experienced directness toward the God who is offering himself in intimacy to man. (This is the “supernatural existential.”)

A man outside the Christian community may be only implicitly aware of this directness, and may articulate this dimension of “self,” immediately available to his awareness, in a variety of philosophical and religious forms according to his historical culture. A man within the Christian community has access to a privileged articulation, in “objective” form, of this experience of “subjectivity”; he has this in the event of Jesus Christ and from the community which lives in Christ by the Spirit. Both the man outside the Christian community and the man within may have (through grace itself) accepted God’s self-offer through faith, hope and love precisely in accepting his own directness toward this offer. The former does so “anonymously,” the latter in an explicitly Christian way.

Three consequences follow for ethics from this theological anthropology.

Christian-Secular Dialogue

First, an ethics which consciously employs the resources of Christian revelation, the “objectification” in Jesus Christ of what every man experiences of himself in his “subjectivity,” does not and cannot add to human ethical self-understanding as such any material content that is, in principle, “strange” or “foreign” to man as he exists and experiences himself in this world. This remains true even though what the Christian ethician has to say may sound “strange” and “foreign” because the “objectified” articulations of
man’s inner self-experience in extra-Christian philosophies and spirituali-
ties have assumed forms quite differ-
ent from the categories developed with-
in historical Christian communities.

Christian Ethics Is for Others

At the same time, a specifically Christian ethics should understand that the
resources of scripture, dogma and
Christian life (especially liturgical prac-
tice in the sacraments) are the fullest
available “objectification” of the com-
on-human experience. Thus, the artic-
ulation of man’s image of his moral
good, that is possible within historical
Christian communities remains privi-
eged in its access to enlarged perspec-
tives on man. Yet this articulation is
not meant merely for the inner-directed
moral development of a closed com-

munity. An ever more intensive study
of specifically Christian resources will
be encouraged by Rahner’s theology.
The third consequence of Rahner’s
theological reflection for Christian
ethics is that an openness to, and ac-
tive dialogue with, extra-Christian
ethical reflection is demanded by it.
The articulation of extra-Christian
ethics, even where for historical rea-
sons it appears to be positively anti-
Christian, can enrich Christian ethics.
It will always remain an open question
whether the particular insights or the
general approach of a Buddhist or
Marxist ethics may not have articu-
lated, in “objective” form, certain as-
pects of the universal Christian inner
experience that improves upon avail-
able categories within historical Chris-
tian ethics.

At the same time, the Christian
ethicist must also aid every extra-
Christian ethics to achieve a fuller ar-
ticulation of its own implicit Christian
inner experience. He does this by com-

municating explicitly Christian articu-
lations of this self-experience in ways
that are fully intelligible to the extra-
Christian philosophy or spirituality.
The problem the Christian ethicist
must face now and in the future is
simply the “hermeneutical problem,”
the task of becoming critically aware
of the distinctive characteristics of his
own viewpoint as it differs from the
distinctive characteristics of other view-
points in history and in varying his-
torical cultures. His focus on “sub-
jectivity” enables him to make this
scientific effort. To face this problem,
however, is to make possible a mutual
enrichment of both Christian and extra-
Christian ethics. It will permit both
kinds of ethics to evolve toward their
common inner goal of orienting man’s
freedom toward his fulfillment in Jesus
Christ.

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ology in Rahner and Lon Fuller.]

Rahneriana: Wit and Wisdom III

On testing the spirit

One has the impression that there
are people in the Church who infer
from Gamaliel’s words (Acts 5:38)
that the authenticity of the Spirit
is shown by its not being extin-
guished by the most frivolous and
malicious opposition from other
people, and that consequently they
have the right to put the Spirit to
the test on the largest possible scale.
Gamaliel for that matter drew
from his maxim the contrary con-
clusion. He inferred that one must
be as tolerant as possible toward a
spirit whose origin one cannot yet
clearly make out.

On encountering grace

Have we ever tried to persevere in
the love of God when all emotion
and enthusiasm had deserted us;
when we could no longer mistake
our own doings and impulses for
manifestations of God’s will; when
everything seemed to be incompre-
hensible and devoid of all mean-
ing? Let us look into our lives, then,
and see if we can discover... any
such experience. If we find it
we may be sure that the Spirit
was at work... and eternity and
ourselves had a brief encounter.