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KARL RAHNER'S NOTION OF *VORGRIFF*

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The paper will examine the role of the notion of *Vorgriff* in Rahner's thought. Rahner was convinced that man's nature is being oriented towards God. The meaning of the notion of *Vorgriff* ('preapprehension') depicts man as a being who lacks something and whose main characteristic is "world-openness". In which sense can one preapprehend being? Is it apprehended in totality, or partly? Is it an explicit or implicit knowledge about being? If we proceed with this motion of the intellect to infinity, how can one, without further ado, identify infinity with God? In the paper, I shall examine the philosophical roots of Rahner's notion of *Vorgriff*, as one can find it in Maréchal and Heidegger. In addition, I will show how Rahner reconciles the Kantian challenge with Maréchal and Heidegger. Finally, I will argue that the notion of *Vorgriff* opens the way of transcendental Thomism towards the Platonic tradition.

The word *Vorgriff* is usually translated as 'preapprehension'. Rahner's theory of the *Vorgriff auf das Sein*, the preapprehension of being, plays a decisive role in his theology and philosophy. He thinks that by the help of this word one can express the fundamental being and God-orientedness of man. In other words, if we were to rank theology and anthropology in terms of their respective importance, then theology would be primary. But, as a starting point, the word 'preapprehension' is very important in his anthropology as well, namely it depicts the man as a being who lacks something and whose main characteristic is "world-openness". This world-openness reveals that man already possesses somehow the totality of being. Therefore, the relation between

theology and anthropology (Rahner's anthropology in *The Hearer of the Word* is called sometimes natural theology) is hardly definable.

Not only the question of the relation of theology to anthropology is controversial, but the word *Vorgriff* as well. What does it mean to preapprehend being? In which sense can one preapprehend being? Is it apprehended in totality, or partly? Is it an explicit or implicit knowledge about being? If we proceed with this motion of the intellect to infinity, how can one without further ado identify infinity with God? These and other questions arise here and we hope that with the analysis of the notion of *Vorgriff* we can give proper answers to these questions.

Let us approach the problem from another point of view, from Joseph Maréchal's interpretation of Kant. Actually Maréchal's work was not an interpretation, rather it was a confrontation of Thomism with the 'critical' philosophy of Kant. He wanted to give a possible Thomistic answer to the questions raised by Kant. Maréchal's original thought was that if one develops further St. Thomas Aquinas' idea of intellectual dynamism, then one can overcome the antinomy between the (Kantian) understanding and (Kantian) pure reason. Kant's question was: how can one have absolutely certain knowledge? He formulated a radically different answer, namely he rejected experience as non-reliable datum and turned to the preconditions of every kind of experience. The absolutely certain knowledge is founded upon the preconditions of experience, in other words, "our *a priori* knowledge is based, not on the nature of things we know, but on the nature of our way of knowing things."[1] And it was a very new approach to shift the focus of philosophical inquiry from reasoning about experience to reasoning about having experience and its subjective preconditions. This is the examination of the *a priori*, which is independent of experiences. To be independent of experiences means that this kind of knowledge, the *a priori* knowledge, is the basis of every other kind of knowledge. In order to get this *a priori* knowledge one has to analyze the mental constructions. This was Kant's "transcendental philosophy", but not transcendental enough for Maréchal! Maréchal claimed that Kant was inconsistent in two things: firstly, in emphasizing the dynamic nature of the intellect; and secondly, in appreciating that this dynamic movement of the intellect is toward absolute being, toward God. According to Maréchal, this dynamic movement is revealed in every judgment at least partially, as the subject in every act of judgment points beyond the object and points at an absolute being. But at this point Maréchal is

[1] W. A. Herr: *Catholic Thinkers in the Clear*, Allen, Texas: Thomas More, 1985 : 248.

in opposition to Kant, because stating that God is the ultimate goal of the intellect's movement means that God is not only a postulate of the practical reason, but a speculative necessity of knowledge. In his philosophy, God is not a mere postulate, "a system filling in god", but the ground of every possible cognition.

The dynamic movement of the intellect can be observed in every judgment. In the act of judgment the subject sets itself over against the object and it is a partial realization of the intellect's dynamic orientation, as the subject takes its place in a wider context of the cognition. The judgment, according to Maréchal, implicitly affirms its movement's ultimate goal, that is, God. We have to emphasize here that Maréchal doesn't speak about explicit knowledge about God in the act of judgment. God in the judgment is not a direct object, but, on the one hand, he is revealed as the *a priori* condition of objectification, as He who makes possible the judgment as such, and, on the other hand, He is revealed as the aim of the movement of the intellect.

Maréchal accepted the Kantian starting question about the possibility of absolutely certain knowledge and he appreciated as Kant did the activity of the mind, but as Maréchal says he (Kant) should have considered the dynamism of the intellect as an *a priori* condition of knowledge. Maréchal was convinced that the consequent use of the Kantian method can lead to the solution of the problem and one can overcome Kantian skepticism. He thought that one can make a comparison between St. Thomas Aquinas and Kant and with the developing of the implicit idea of the intellectual dynamism of Aquinas one can give a satisfactory answer to the questions of the modern philosophy. He adopted the transcendental method, which he believed was virtually present in the thought of Aquinas, and with this he prepared the way for the so-called "transcendental Thomism". Of course, he was strongly criticized because although he accepts the Kantian point of departure and method, he draws too far-reaching conclusions from it, namely he tries thereby to establish the existence of God. His critics say that these consequences are illegitimate; Kant didn't want to prove the existence of God and by no means in such a way. For Maréchal, adopting Kant's transcendental method was not a scholastic baptizing of Kant, but the appreciation of his insights concerning the possibilities of the mind's intentional acts. Moreover, for Maréchal as a scholastic philosopher, Kant's thought on the existence of God as the postulate of the practical reason was unacceptable. Maréchal was aware that Kant imposes a limit of the activity of always reaching beyond the intellect: he limits it

to the realm of things we experience within space-time. What Maréchal did was to drop these limits.

With the reception of the Kantian method, Maréchal prepared the way for Rahner's notion of *Vorgriff*. Nevertheless, the creator of the word was not Maréchal, but Martin Heidegger. Rahner, while in the Jesuit novitiate in Feldkirch, Austria studied mostly Maréchal and Kant, later in Freiburg-im-Breisgau Rahner attended the lectures of Heidegger. In Heidegger's lectures Rahner met first with the word *Vorgriff*. From the 20's on, Heidegger used this word not exclusively, but together with *Vorhabe* (fore-having) and *Vorsicht* (foresight). According to Heidegger, in the realization of every philosophical thought, the realization exists in a region-foregoing preapprehension (*in einem region-vorwegnehmenden Vorgriff lebt*).[2] The preapprehension plays the role of an original motivation-basis (*ursprüngliche Motivbasis*),[3] from where the philosophical inquiry can set out. In another place, Heidegger says that there is a kind of fundamental experience of the consciousness of existence (*Dasein*) and from this fundamental experience follows the claim of the reflection upon preapprehension, fore-having and foresight, from which philosophy stems (*entspringt*) and always strikes back (*zurückschlägt*).[4]

In the *Being and Time*, Heidegger says that the fore-having is understood in a pre-philosophical sense but is not yet enfolded (*aber noch Eingehüllte*). One has certain knowledge about it, but it isn't a thematic knowledge. Because of the existential structure of the *Dasein*, an unconditional starting point is impossible — so said Heidegger. Therefore, regarding its full-being-possibility (*Ganzseinkönnen*) the *Dasein* stands in the fore-having. Especially the mode of being of the being in question needs such a fore-sight, a preliminary sight of the original existence (*Vor-sicht auf die ursprüngliche Existenzialität*). Heidegger emphasizes that the preapprehension (*Vorgriff*) remains unperceived, but at the same time the object has to be measured against the preapprehension, in other words: in the preapprehension every structure of being is elevated (*alle Seinsstrukturen zu heben*).[5] In *Being and Time*, Heidegger wanted to give a conceptual analysis of the *Dasein* and as we see, one of the results of this conceptual analysis was the notion of preapprehension.

[2] M. Heidegger: *Anmerkungen zu Karl Jaspers "Psychologie der Weltanschauungen"* (Gesamtausgabe Band 9), Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1976 : 4.

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] See M. Heidegger: *Sein und Zeit* (Gesamtausgabe Band 2), Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1977 : 51.

[5] See Heidegger (*op.cit.* : 232).

Of course we don't want to claim that Heidegger used the preapprehension in a Rahnerian sense, we would like to say only that his use of the word has a certain tendency toward the Rahnerian interpretation, which enables him to adopt the word in his theology and philosophy. According to Heidegger, the man has a pre-reflective sense of being, when he is asking about being. One can draw a parallel between Heidegger and Rahner, as when Heidegger speaks about this pre-reflective sense of being and then Rahner uses the word preapprehension. When Heidegger claims that man is able to raise the question about being and thus is open to being, Rahner goes further and says that man is not open only for the being, but for God as well. Again, it is very important that the later Heidegger was inclined to say that as the man is open to being, similarly is being open to God, that is, man is transparent to being, and being is transparent to God.[6]

But let us turn now to Rahner's work *Spirit in the World*. The main question of the *Spirit in the World* is a very simple one, namely, who are we? This "who are we?" indicates an investigation into human knowledge, into human cognition. "*Spirit in the World* uses a Thomistic metaphysics of knowledge explained in terms of transcendental and existential philosophy to define man as that essence of absolute transcendence towards God insofar as man in his understanding and interpretation of the world respectfully 'pre-apprehends' (*vorgreift*) towards God."[7] When Rahner talks about investigation under the conditions of the human cognition, he claims that man is such a being who has questions about his own existence and about the totality of the world altogether. "Man questions"[8]—as he says, and in this simple fact one can find the point of departure of metaphysics. The things of the world and man's being as well, can be set against the questioner, and this is a final and irreducible phenomenon. The ground of the necessity of questioning is the questionableness (*Fragwürdigkeit*) of being in its totality.

Rahner finds in the questionableness of being a certain intellectual dynamism. But how can one explore this dynamism and how can this be done in the best way? He follows Aquinas in the inquiry about human knowledge and says that the facts that we perceive are not empty facts; they do not hang in the air. We not only accept the facts, but

[6] See P. Bolberitz & F. Gál: *Aquinói Szent Tamás filozófiája és teológiája*, Budapest: Ecclesia, 1987 : ch. 2.

[7] J. B. Metz: 'Foreword', in: K. Rahner: *Spirit in the World*, New York: Continuum, 1994 : XVI.

[8] K. Rahner: *Spirit in the World*, New York: Continuum, 1994 : 57.

we also constantly evaluate, compare, and question them. The facts are standing in a wider context from the perspective of the knower. Owing to this wider context, we know that these facts are limited and we experience that we are limited as well. The finite being, man, at the same time has an *a priori* knowledge of being; at least he has knowledge about the fact that the being is not absolutely unknown. "Being is questionability."[9] — This is the starting point.

We see that Rahner sets out from everyday experience, from a single fact. We experience something, and in this experience we are directed to its ground or foundation. The everyday experience reveals the contingency of man, but this the feeling of contingency doesn't satisfy the truth-seeking intellect. Starting from everyday experience, and reasoning *a posteriori* is of course a very Thomistic way of proceeding. It is precisely this which we see in the method of the so-called "five ways". Whereas, the basic experience of contingency is a natural companion of our worldly existence. Nevertheless, the human being has an eminent place within the world, since he/she is aware of this contingency, whereas the other creatures — i.e., the irrational ones — are not. Only the human being is capable of asking questions and directing his senses beyond himself. The human being is the one capable of passing himself over, of regarding himself from the outside, i.e., from a remote point of view. Yet, the human being does not analyze himself only, but beyond this, the entirety of existence. This transcendent necessity and direction can be observed also within the arguments based on contingency: in order to be satisfied, we have to postulate a self-existing and by itself necessary world, which underlies every occurrence from every viewpoint (*ipsum esse subsistens per se necessarium*). The existence of such a world excludes non-existence and a cannot-be-otherwise existence, its greatness lies within its being the basis for everything, and as such, it is not very far from the mystery of the transcendental experience.

Nevertheless, the way in which Rahner proves God's existence seems to be similar to Aquinas' way, but after a careful consideration one has to admit that Rahner's thought has nothing to do with the *a posteriori* proofs for the existence of God. He approaches the problem from another point of view, namely, from the transcendental activity of the intellect. His main question is, what *a priori* fact about ourselves do these transcendental experiences point to? The answer is that there is a transcendental reality in us, that is, there is something in our innermost part of the soul, which leads us to investigate the world. Altogether,

[9] Rahner (*op.cit.* : 68).

that is the precondition of having experiences and expressing our spirituality. This transcendental reality in us is God. But this characteristic of Rahner's thinking is very Platonic. One can render it into the Augustinian language: God is *intimor intimo meo*...

But of course, our knowledge about this *intimor intimo meo*—reality is not an explicit knowledge, although it is the precondition of every kind of reality-experiencing. But precisely, since God is not of the same nature as a direct object is, and he is the precondition of cognition and precondition of the transcendental experience, it means that one cannot deny the existence of God—and this is very Anselmian.

What we wanted to say is that Rahner starts from an everyday experience, namely from the fact of questionableness, and believes that the presence of God is presupposed in our everyday actions, which seems to be very *a posterioristic*, very Aristotelian. According to William A. Herr, Rahner has developed a non-dualistic, non-Platonic theology,[10] but in my view, this opinion is an exaggeration. Herr says that Rahner has attacked "the basic presuppositions which have guided the mainstream of Catholic theology since the time of Augustine"[11] and in addition he freed the Catholic doctrine from Platonism. But precisely, because of the above mentioned characteristics we have to say that the Rahnerian theory is not completely anti-Platonic. The God who inhabits our very consciousness and discloses Himself therein are very Platonic ideas.

To get closer to Rahner's notion of preapprehension, we have to investigate his theory of knowledge. In his theory of knowledge (and in Aquinas' as well) the agent intellect forms universal concepts from the particular objects of sensation. The agent intellect can form these particulars and limited realities only because of the antecedent transcending of the whole field of possible objects by the agent intellect. Precisely the experience of the object in question as limitation shows the possibility of transcending it. Rahner gives a definition for agent intellect as preapprehension: "This transcending apprehension of further possibilities, through which the form possessed in a concretion in sensibility is apprehended as limited and so is abstracted, we call 'preapprehension' (*Vorgriff*)."[12]

Rahner characterizes the preapprehension as a horizon. This horizon gives the possibility to experience the objects of the senses as lim-

[10] See Herr (1985 : 257).
[11] *Ibid.*
[12] Rahner (1994 : 142).

ited and, at the same time, gives the possibility to experience the horizon's unlimitedness. The horizon is in principle unlimited, its goal is the unlimited being, so, and at this point Rahner contradicts Kant, it transcends space and time.

Further on, Rahner gives four characteristics concerning the nature of preapprehension:

1. "Preapprehension as such does not attain to an object."[13]
2. The preapprehension by its very essence "[...] is one of the conditions of the possibility of an objective knowledge."[14]
3. (The third point follows from the second point.) The objects, let's say the first objects, are able to be apprehended only in a preapprehension.
4. And the fourth point follows from the first point, and can be conceived as a conclusion: "The preapprehension can only be determined by establishing that to which it attains."[15]

From the fourth characteristic which deals explicitly with the determination of preapprehension Rahner derives five further points:

1. The first point says that the preapprehension tends towards something, as Rahner says it has a "whither" (*Worauf*). From this follows that the preapprehension has no "humanly conceivable object".[16]
2. The second point has to do again with the object of preapprehension. Rahner refines it by saying that we have to conceive the preapprehension as an object, although its "whither" is not meant as such.
3. A very important feature of the preapprehension is that during the cognition of one object, it discloses the real possibility of other objects, that is, there is no obstacle not to cognize other objects.
4. The preapprehension has to be characterized as the only condition of human knowledge, because it "is not an inconsequential supplementation, but the condition of the possibility of any objective knowledge at all."[17]
5. The preapprehension can be explained as movement towards the totality. In this sense, this movement is the movement of the soul. It is a continuous and unthematic movement, where the intellect

[13] Rahner (*op.cit.* : 143).
[14] *Ibid.*
[15] *Ibid.*
[16] *Ibid.*
[17] Rahner (*op.cit.* : 145).

> can experience at the same time its limitedness and unlimitedness. So the preapprehension is not a static state, rather a dynamic process.

Now, what was Rahner's primary contribution to philosophy with the notion of *Vorgriff*? I am convinced that with the notion of preapprehension and with its intrinsic reality Rahner tried to bridge over the differences between the two main philosophical traditions, namely the Platonism and Aristotelism, although it wasn't his primary intention. Another question is, how did Rahner contribute to theology? This question involves another question, namely, are we right to give a religious interpretation to our world-openness? John F. Crosby gives a very simple answer to this question. "If we hold on other grounds [...] that God exists and we human persons are grounded in God, then it becomes natural to recognize in the sense of infinity conditioning our experience of things a certain presence of God in our conscious lives."[18] One has to admit that the theistic reading of our sense of infinity is the only reasonable reading of Rahner's theory if we are consistent.[19] Therefore, it is a genuine contribution, because it opens the way of transcendental Thomism towards the Platonic tradition.

[18] J. F. Crosby: *The Selfhood of the Human Person*, Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996 : 164.

[19] See *ibid.*