



Hegel in Rahner: A Study in Philosophical Hermeneutics

Author(s): Winfried Corduan

Source: *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 71, No. 3/4, (Jul. - Oct., 1978), pp. 285-298

Published by: Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Harvard Divinity School

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1509620>

Accessed: 07/07/2008 21:12

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=cup>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We work with the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

HEGEL IN RAHNER A STUDY IN PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS

Winfried Corduan

Taylor University
Upland, IN 46989

Philosophical hermeneutics concerns itself with the philosophical concepts a theologian uses to express the content of revelation. This paper is an exercise in the philosophical hermeneutics of Karl Rahner. It will focus on one particular aspect of his philosophical background, namely those elements which he shares with the philosophy of G. W. F. Hegel. This exercise is designed to be conceptual in nature, rather than historical. The question of how much of Rahner's thought is directly influenced by his reading and study of Hegel is probably not answerable with certainty and, at any rate, is not as interesting as the conceptual question of how these two thinkers took recourse to very similar ideas in order to solve some common problems.

Hegel and Rahner seem to be very dissimilar at first glance. However, both of their philosophies are structured along principles derived from Kant's transcendental method. Out of this common methodological commitment arise similar approaches on three levels: epistemology, anthropology, and Christology. Each level lays the foundation for the subsequent one. Thus we shall see themes initiated under the heading of epistemology become applied to anthropology, and then become the building blocks of Christology.

Previous analyses of parallels between Rahner and Hegel have been rather sketchy and have usually limited themselves to Christology, thus giving an inadequate picture of the relationship between the two thinkers. Specifically, both Wolfhart Pannenberg¹ and Hans Küng² have demonstrated some similarities in the area of Christology, but without going back to the essential matter of philosophical similarities. On the other hand, Kenneth Baker³ and Thomas Sheehan⁴ have pointed out a general conceptual alignment between Rahner and Hegel, but

¹Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Grundzüge der Christologie* (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1969) 327.

²Hans Küng, *Menschwerdung Gottes* (Freiburg: Herder, 1970) 648-52.

³Kenneth Baker, "Rahner: The Transcendental Method," *Continuum* 2 (1964) 51-59 and *A Synopsis of the Transcendental Philosophy of Emerich Coreth and Karl Rahner* (Spokane: Gonzaga University, 1965) 1.

⁴Thomas J. Sheehan, "Transcendental Method and Subjectivity as the Groundwork for Karl Rahner's Theological Anthropology" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Fordham University, New York, 1970) 164.

without going into specifics. A more complete study is made by Klaus P. Fischer.⁵ It spans several pages of his book on Rahner, but it remains general and does not establish a link between philosophical and theological similarities. Finally, in a recent article Thomas Pearl⁶ begins with an introduction to Rahner's and Hegel's philosophies, but does not adequately show whether they are related on the level of philosophy as well as theology. Then he unfortunately goes on to incorporate some serious misconceptions of both thinkers⁷ into his study. In short, a clear statement of the interrelatedness of Hegel and Rahner has so far been missing.

I

As is well known, in initiating his "Copernican revolution," Kant attempted to place philosophy on the same footing of certainty which the physical sciences were beginning to enjoy in the wake of the work of Isaac Newton. Kant realized that the essence of science lies not in the recording of facts objectively perceived, but in the assimilating of observations to a theoretical scheme provided by the scientist. Thus it is the scientist who provides the certainty, not nature itself. Turning to philosophy, Kant raised the hypothesis that the certainty of knowledge also is due to the contribution to knowledge by the knowing subject. The uncovering of these contributions is the essence of the transcendental method.⁸

Thus the transcendental method does not seek to construct new knowledge; it begins with knowledge. It assumes that whatever we know is true and certain. Then it asks the question, "How is it possible that we have this knowledge?" The answer lies in the fact that in some way the subject adds some structure or framework to the knowledge which makes it possible and certain. For Kant, the innovator of this method,

⁵Klaus P. Fischer, *Der Mensch als Geheimnis* (Freiburg: Herder, 1974) 345-55. See also Winfried Corduan, "Hegelian Themes in Contemporary Theology," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 22 (1979).

⁶Thomas Pearl, "Dialectical Panentheism: On the Hegelian Character of Karl Rahner's Key Christological Writings," *ITQ* 41 (1974) 119-37.

⁷Pearl understands Hegel only from the vantage point of a strictly formal system of thesis-antithesis-synthesis, relying for the most part on English secondary sources. He is familiar with only one time that Rahner mentioned Hegel by name, surely an inadequate basis for judgment on Rahner's relation to Hegel. The only works by Rahner to which he makes reference are *Spirit in the World* and a few articles from *Theological Investigations*, both in the English translations.

⁸Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (trans. Norm Kemp Smith; New York: St. Martin's, 1929) 17-22. See also Klaus Hartmann, "On Taking the Transcendental Turn," *Review of Metaphysics* 20 (1960) 223-49; Joseph deVries, "Approach to Metaphysics: Objective or Transcendental?" (trans. William D. Seidensticker; New York: Herder & Herder, 1968).

those contributions consisted of the a priori forms of space and time and the pure concepts of understanding.

Both Hegel and Rahner use this method in their philosophies. Though there are many differences between them, their first point of agreement lies in a common commitment to the transcendental method.

Hegel's philosophy is characterized by the quest for absolute knowledge.⁹ This is knowledge whose truth is self-grounding and, therefore, indubitable. Hegel sets up this quest as a challenge to the Kantian philosophy which prohibits this possibility with the conception of the human subject as a tool or a medium through which all knowledge must pass, and which thereby distorts all knowledge.¹⁰ In contrast, Hegel wants to establish that a transcendental analysis of knowledge can yield absolute certainty. The method he chooses is an investigation of various shapes of consciousness, beginning with the most primitive, then showing how an analysis of this shape of consciousness, by using the very standard of truth inherent in it, will lead us to see it as negated. Thus this analysis will cause us to move on to a further shape of consciousness where the process is repeated until the Absolute is realized as the ultimate shape underlying all others—the final “category.”¹¹ In the *Phenomenology* this transcendental inquiry begins with naive sense certainty and ends its circuitous route with Absolute Spirit.¹² In the *Logic* the same process takes us from Being to the Absolute Idea.¹³ In either case we arrive at a final point at which all knowledge is grounded with absolute certainty.

Rahner states about his major philosophical work, *Geist in Welt*, that it could also have been entitled, *Conversio ad phantasma*.¹⁴ This *conversio* is the Thomistic doctrine that knowledge is possible only insofar as the subject makes reference to the sensible species, the phantasm of an object, which exists in his soul at the outset of the act of knowledge.¹⁵ But a *con-versio* would hardly be necessary if it were not preceded by an *a-versio*, a turning away from the phantasm, into the subject himself, there to find the conditions which make it possible to see the object of knowledge as having existence independently of the

⁹G. W. F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1952) 63–75.

¹⁰Ibid., 63–65.

¹¹Ibid., 66–75; cf. Kenley Royce Dove, “Hegel's Phenomenological Method,” *Review of Metaphysics* 23 (1970) 615–29.

¹²Ibid., 548–64.

¹³G. W. F. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1963) *passim*.

¹⁴Karl Rahner, *Geist in Welt* (2d ed.; ed J. B. Metz; Munich: Kösel, 1957) 15.

¹⁵Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 84, a. 7. Rahner prefaces his own discussion with an exegesis of this article.

subject.¹⁶ Knowledge, for Rahner, begins with a unity of the subject and the object, and he sees the task of his philosophy to create a "gulf" between the two in order to recognize the being of the object.¹⁷ We can see this pattern in Rahner's transcendental method: a sensible intuition, followed (logically, not temporally) by a transcendental reflection which allows us to establish the reality of the knowledge of an entity. This turn into the subject (*reditio in seipsum*) does make this an unmistakably transcendental philosophy.¹⁸

Hegel and Rahner use different forms of the transcendental method. But we will now see that there are a sufficient number of similarities to give rise to further similarities in solving more detailed problems. Let us begin with a look at epistemology.

II

In the area of epistemology, the common problem which confronts Rahner and Hegel is the question of the relation between a knowing subject and the object of his knowledge. Their use of the transcendental method leads them to establish a similar point of view on this topic.

To someone only casually acquainted with the works of these two thinkers such an assertion may come as a surprise. However, a deeper look at what the two thinkers are attempting to do with their arguments will reveal that their arguments are quite closely allied.

This alliance was recognized by Rahner. In introducing a lecture on (his understanding of) Thomistic epistemology, Rahner stated,

The reflections that we are going to make can be grouped into three equal parts. In Thomistic terms, these are: the judgment; the light of the agent intellect; God, pure being, pure thought. And if we adopt Hegelian terminology corresponding to the three parts of his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, we would have: consciousness (*Bewusstsein*); self-consciousness (*Selbstbewusstsein*); absolute Spirit.¹⁹

In expanding on this general correlation, we can make it clear how Rahner and Hegel share a similar three-stage analysis of knowledge: (1) a rejection of naive objectivity; (2) validation of the object through the self-reflection of the subject; (3) the final validation of all knowledge by the Absolute.

1) The first step in any transcendental philosophy has to be a dismissal of a simple objectivity which envisions knowledge as a confrontation between a subject and an object standing in opposition to each other.

¹⁶*Geist*, 130–31.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 88–89.

¹⁸Cf. Rahner's article on Heidegger in which he expounds many of his own views: "The Concept of Existential Philosophy in Heidegger," *Philosophy Today* 12 (1969) 126–37.

¹⁹Karl Rahner, "Aquinas: The Nature of Truth," *Continuum* 2 (1964) 62.

Both Rahner and Hegel share this rejection, and both do so on two levels.

First, knowledge cannot be mere sense-awareness of particulars. For there to be true knowledge, a universal always has to come into play. Rahner argues that one component of knowledge is an “affirmative synthesis,” in which the intellect judges that a universal is localized in a certain particular.²⁰ In fact, Rahner really sees this as the essence of the *conversio ad phantasma*. “*Conversio* is just the act of referring a universal to a ‘this-here.’”²¹ In the first chapter of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel shows that mere sense-certainty does not do justice to the knowledge we have.²² For even the simplest statements, such as “Now it is night” or “This is a tree,” lose their truth instantaneously as one’s vantage point in time or space changes. Writing down these truths can do nothing to assure their persistence.²³ However, the ability to pass judgment on these propositions does remain; it is always possible to understand the terms and to say whether the sentence is true or not. This is possible because, even though the state of affairs changes, the universal persists, and knowledge is not of the particular but of the universals.²⁴ Hegel has very little use for particulars. He feels that animals know how to treat them most profoundly because they simply go ahead and devour them.²⁵

However, this knowledge of universals may not be understood as a simple reception by the intellect of a universal, prescinded from the object of knowledge. Such a simple theory would not be in keeping with Hegel’s and Rahner’s transcendental methodology—it would be a return to a simple subject-object or camera-picture theory of knowledge. Instead, both thinkers argue for a theory of knowledge in which the universal is derived from the subject himself in some way.

Rahner sees man-the-knower always already inextricably involved with the being which is known. He argues that being can never be approached head-on as one object among others.²⁶ The only way that any being can be known is in man’s own subjectivity as he uncovers within himself the structures which yield the conceivability of being.²⁷ Thus when we say that the subject perceives an object through the

²⁰*Geist*, 54–56, 134–37.

²¹*Ibid.*, 132.

²²*Phänomenologie*, 79–89.

²³*Ibid.*, 81.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 82.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 87.

²⁶“Existential Philosophy,” 129.

²⁷*Ibid.*

object's universal, we are in fact affirming knowledge through his act of judgment.²⁸

Hegel's deliberations appear very different on the surface, but their goal is the same. We see him develop his method in the first three chapters of *Phenomenology*. After he has argued that knowledge is of universals, he goes on to show that in itself such a statement does not adequately describe knowledge either. For this theory of perception cannot account for the way in which we do know things and their attributes.²⁹ To remedy this defect, Hegel introduces successively a set of forces which elicit perceptions, a kingdom of laws which govern the forces, and an inverted world which permits distinctions. But none of these devices can account for knowledge in anything but tautological terms.³⁰ At the end of this discussion we are left with the conclusion that an explanation simply cannot be had, and that the only way we can account for the content of our own consciousness is by our consciousness itself. "There is nothing behind the curtain . . . unless we go behind it ourselves."³¹ Thus all consciousness is self-consciousness.

We see here two very different arguments: Rahner's dry establishment of a consistent transcendental method, and Hegel's flamboyant description of the workings of knowledge. Nonetheless, in both cases the conclusion is the same: knowledge is possible only because it is based on the reflexive self-consciousness of the subject.

2) In the quotation from Rahner with which we began this discussion, the next pair of equivalents are self-consciousness (Hegel) and the light of the agent intellect (Rahner). Here we can observe that for both thinkers it is self-consciousness which now—almost paradoxically—establishes the independent being of the object. Again outwardly dissimilar arguments lead to the same goal and conclusion.

Hegel's argument, as given in the *Encyclopedia*, begins with desire (*Begierde*), the attempt by the subject to completely assimilate the object into himself.³² But this assimilation means that the subject begins to need the object, and through this need the object will attempt to gain ascendancy over the subject. But thereby the subject is forced to recognize the object as another subject outside of himself. This "recognitive" self-consciousness³³ leads to a life-and-death struggle of

²⁸*Geist*, 133.

²⁹*Phänomenologie*, 97–101.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 102–28.

³¹*Ibid.*, 129.

³²G. W. F. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1959), section 426–49. Hereafter all references to the *Encyclopedia* will be cited by the section number.

³³*Ibid.*, 430–35.

the subjects, each attempting to turn the other into an object. When one subject wins out, a master-slave relationship is initiated. However, as a slave finds self-fulfilment, he once again becomes a free subject. The final stage in which every subject is recognized as free is “*universal*” self-consciousness.³⁴

This rather involved series of arguments is not primarily a social commentary—it is not taken from Hegel’s treatment of society which would appear under the heading of “objective spirit.” Rather, it is a dramatized description of the workings of human subjectivity. The truth we are to learn here is that through self-consciousness the “other” is given its own independent existence and reality.

Rahner equated Hegel’s *Begierde* with his own conception of the agent intellect.³⁵ The agent intellect also serves to internalize the object and to make it his own—thereby preventing the subject and the object from standing in opposition to each other.³⁶ But here also the very attempt by the subject to usurp the object has the opposite result of endowing the object with its own reality. The turn into the subject (*reditio in seipsum*) is the *a-versio*, the turn away from the phantasm of the object present in the soul. But inside of himself the subject now finds the very criteria which provide the object with independent reality.³⁷ This is primarily the work of an activity which Rahner has named the *Vorgriff*.³⁸ As the agent intellect discerns the object within the subject, it recognizes the object in terms of a particular set of universals taken from the entire range of universals which the object could have possessed. For example, it may be round rather than square or triangular, red rather than blue or green, etc. But by seeing the object as the exemplification of this particular set of universals, one has to recognize it as more than merely an image within the workings of the intellect. The universals must have their own metaphysical reality in common being—*ens* (see the next section for the grounding of this idea). Thus the object can also be known to exist independently of the subject.

We can see, then, that by two very different arguments Hegel and Rahner arrive at the same conclusion: the very act of focusing on the subject provides the “other” with its existence as a proper object of knowledge.

3) Neither Rahner nor Hegel will now stop with the finite subject as the guarantor of knowledge. For both of them, knowledge is ultimately certified only because it is transcendently grounded in the Absolute.

³⁴Ibid., 436–37.

³⁵“Truth,” 62.

³⁶*Geist*, 88.

³⁷Ibid., 130.

³⁸Ibid., 173–92.

The goal of Hegel's philosophy, as he tells us in the introduction to the *Phenomenology*, is absolute knowledge,³⁹ and this kind of knowledge is established through Absolute Spirit.⁴⁰ Absolute Spirit is totally self-reflective self-consciousness.⁴¹ All distinctions are overcome, though only for the moment. All content of knowledge belongs to Spirit himself. We do not have here so much a stage of knowledge that can be attained, but a type of knowledge which underlies all knowledge in the manner of a transcendental category. Knowledge is possible because the possibility of absolute knowledge is guaranteed by Absolute Spirit.

For Rahner knowledge is also grounded in the Absolute. The *Vorgriff* does not act purely on the resources of the agent intellect. When it discerns which universals are exemplified by an object, it scans the entire range of possible universals. But as it takes this recourse to the total sum of possibilities, it thereby makes use of the totality of forms in which being could have appeared. But this sum total of essences is nothing other than being-in-general, common being (*ens*). And common being is only possible as it is grounded in pure being (*esse*). But pure being is God.⁴² Thus the *Vorgriff* scans backwards to God as the transcendental facilitator of the discernment of an object. "In this sense, and in this sense only, can it be said that the *Vorgriff* penetrates to God."⁴³ This is no proof for God's existence, nor may it be said that God is the object of all acts of knowledge—transcendental categories are never objects of knowledge. It does show that knowledge would not be possible if God did not stand behind it in order to transcendently certify it. In this way we can see how Rahner and Hegel share the idea of the Absolute as grounding knowledge.

A theme which emerges from the foregoing analysis is that of a reciprocal relationship between the subject and the object, between the "self" and the "other." Both need each other. This is certainly not surprising for Hegel in whose well-known "dialectic" the working of the negative causes something to become other than its original self. But it is also true for Rahner. For him, also, the subject is the object for a moment, as we have seen. Then, as the "otherness" of the object is established, the subject actually is the "other" for that moment, and only through this phase is it possible to have a clear understanding of the object as well as a better grasp of the subject and his powers.

³⁹*Phänomenologie*, 63ff.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 549–64.

⁴¹*Enzyklopädie*, 577, refers to "the Idea of philosophy which is centered around self-knowing reason." See also *Phänomenologie*, 561.

⁴²*Geist*, 175, 393.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 190.

III

Insight into what it means for a human subject to know an object can lead us to greater knowledge about man and his relationships to God and the world. We will now analyze how Hegel and Rahner agree on many points as they attack the issues of anthropology.

We have already observed that Rahner and Hegel share the view that the Absolute is a transcendental condition for all possibilities of human knowledge. This idea allows us to infer a basic constitutional relation of man to God, one which we will explicate presently. At the same time man never loses his rootedness in the world either. Thus he stands at the interface of spirit and matter, with deep roots into both realms.

For Hegel, this view is brought out by the very location in his system to which he assigns man and brings him to the forefront. The system begins with logic, the investigation into the pure "eternal idea,"⁴⁴ which Hegel also calls the study of "the representation of God, as He is in His eternal essence before the creation of nature and of finite spirit."⁴⁵ From there the system shifts to the material realm, the philosophy of nature. The third part of the system is the philosophy of spirit, a transcendental reconciliation of these first two parts,⁴⁶ and the connecting link between them is man.⁴⁷ Man himself, under philosophic scrutiny, is seen first as a primarily material being;⁴⁸ ultimately he becomes the transcendental doorway to Absolute Spirit.⁴⁹ Thus man is a transitional being, both physically and spiritually, but as such he stands at the center of the system and serves as focal point for both realms.

Rahner paints for us a similar picture of the position of man. In an article dealing with theological aspects of an evolutionary world view,⁵⁰ Rahner also places man at the interface of matter and spirit. In an understanding very similar to Teilhard's, Rahner sees evolution not as an aimless series of random adaptations but as the systematic and directed progress toward God as its final goal (in the sense of a final cause—the *telos* toward which all is aimed). This teleological nature of evolution holds true already for the lowest levels of material development. They

⁴⁴*Logik, passim; Enzyklopädie, 53ff.*

⁴⁵*Logik, 31.*

⁴⁶*Enzyklopädie, 381.*

⁴⁷The discussion of man is Hegel's "subjective spirit"—*Enzyklopädie, 387–482*. See Iring Fetscher, *Hegels Lehre vom Menschen* (Stuttgart: Fromman, 1970) *passim*.

⁴⁸Hegel reserves the term "anthropology" for the first part of "subjective spirit." *Enzyklopädie, 388–411.*

⁴⁹*Enzyklopädie, 386, 481.*

⁵⁰Karl Rahner, *Schriften zur Theologie V* (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1965) 183–221. See also Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (trans. William V. Dych; New York: Seabury, 1978) 26–35, 178–92.

receive their first culmination with the emergence of man which is simultaneously the emergence of spirit. Man combines in himself the material and the beginnings of the spiritual nature of the universe. From then on, evolution takes a decidedly spiritual turn and gives way to the revelation of purely spiritual beings, the angels, and ultimately God himself—Absolute Spirit.

Viewed analytically, man's spirituality can already be detected in the presence of the *Vorgriff*—man is constitutionally open to God, and as such he is spirit.⁵¹ This means that having a relationship to God is part of the essential nature of man. In fact, Rahner goes so far as to say that it is this ability to stand open to (to "hear") God, the *potentia obediendialis*, which defines the essence of man.⁵² Coming to know God is nothing alien to man's nature; it is a fulfilment of man's nature. Thus Rahner claims for man a "supernatural existential,"⁵³ an aspect of man's very being devoted to establishing a relationship to God, the Absolute.

The importance of this anthropological conclusion must not be underestimated. Part of man himself is a relationship with God. It is true that at this point it is only possible to speak in very general terms, e.g., that man's being is grounded in a transcendental mystery,⁵⁴ but such a statement carries many implications. After all, Rahner could theoretically have made man's relationship with God merely a result of God's grace in salvation.⁵⁵ And Hegel could, for that matter, have stopped with man as his own Absolute, as Feuerbach did after him.

But both thinkers see man as occupying the interface between spirit and matter. Consequently, they see characteristics of both realms exemplified in man. For purposes of this study it is most interesting that man carries the marks of the divine. Hegel and Rahner agree that one of the chief traits of being a spiritual entity is that man possesses the faculty of freedom.⁵⁶

IV

These themes now find their cumulative expression in the discussions of Christology by Rahner and Hegel. It will now become apparent that those similarities which may have seemed accidental or arbitrary if one looks only at Christology are actually the logical results of the fact that Hegel and Rahner made use of similar conceptual "building blocks" in

⁵¹*Geist*, 195.

⁵²Karl Rahner, *Hörer des Wortes* (2d ed., ed J. B. Metz; Freiburg: Herderbücherei, 1963) 63 and *passim*.

⁵³*Schriften*, I. 324–45.

⁵⁴*Foundations*, 57–66.

⁵⁵This would be the "extrinsicist" position which Rahner rejects, *Schriften*, I. 324–45.

⁵⁶*Enzyklopädie*, 481–82; *Geist*, 298, *Hörer*, 103; *Schriften*, II. 260–62.

preparation for the topic. Thus we will find the ideas arising out of epistemology and anthropology now come to the forefront in Christology.

In keeping with our analysis of Rahner's and Hegel's thought as being based on the transcendental method, it is not surprising that Christology in both thinkers can be said to carry a transcendental function. We stated much earlier that both thinkers recognize the Absolute as a final condition of all knowledge. But Jesus Christ becomes the door through which we can have access to the Absolute. Thus it can be said that for Rahner and Hegel, Christ is the transcendental condition for man to know God. The key to understanding such an assertion lies in the fact that Christ is both man and God, combining in himself the attributes of both man and God.⁵⁷ We shall now take a closer look at how this works out in detail.

We saw that for both Rahner and Hegel, any act of knowledge is ultimately grounded in the Absolute. For Rahner this became clear with an analysis of the *Vorgriff* which always reaches back to God; for Hegel, similarly, Absolute Spirit is the final "category" rendering absolute knowledge possible. This epistemological understanding had implications for anthropology—it led us to see man as a being who stands in a very basic openness to God. In fact, man thereby even participates in God's spiritual nature. Now we can take one step further and see that this essential feature of man is present to a perfect degree in Christ as the perfect man. Rahner argues that the relationship to God which any man enjoys at least to some degree (the *potentia obediencialis*) is epitomized in the incarnation.⁵⁸ Jesus Christ represents a unique example of what any man could realize theoretically. Hegel holds a similar view, and remarks on a didactic aspect of the incarnation: the example of Christ can serve to teach any man his own basic divine nature.⁵⁹

Rahner, as is well known, makes use of this idea when he turns to discuss the hypostatic union, the union between the divine and human natures in the one person of Jesus Christ.⁶⁰ The definition of Chalcedon specifies that this union be understood as neither a mixing nor

⁵⁷“Only Christianity, through its teachings of the incarnation of God and of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the believing community, has provided for the human consciousness a completely free relationship to the infinite, and has therefore made possible the comprehending knowledge of spirit in its infinity.” *Enzyklopädie, 377 Zusatz* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970) 10. One of the many places where Rahner makes a similar point is in the article, “Jesus Christus, systematisch,” in *LThK* (ed. J. Höfer and Karl Rahner; Freiburg: Herder, 1956–65), V. 956.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*

⁵⁹G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1927) 141.

⁶⁰*LThK*, V. 956; *Foundations*, 192–203.

commingling on the one hand, nor as a loose side-by-side existence of two separate natures on the other hand. There has always been bafflement of how the two mutually opposed elements—humanity and divinity—could exist together. But now Rahner argues that it is not necessary to see the two natures as polar opposites. Instead, we can say that, in the incarnation, humanity, of whose essential nature it is to seek oneness with God, is totally fulfilled in its union with Deity. The *potentia obediendialis* is perfectly actualized. This does not remove the mystery from the incarnation, but Rahner believes that it does remove some of the mythological appearance from it and makes it more believable for modern man.⁶¹

The above analysis applies to the human side of the hypostatic union, but we also see a common understanding by Hegel and Rahner of the divine side of the incarnation. The issue is: How could God become man in JESUS Christ? How can we even speak of God's "becoming" anything? Is God not immutable and therefore immune to any kind of change? But for God to *become* man in Christ certainly seems to deny this traditional position. Both Rahner and Hegel are strongly convinced that God does in fact change in the incarnation.⁶² Hegel is no doubt a lot more radical than Rahner in this respect. Rahner wants to retain an immutability of God in His essential nature. Hegel, sharing this constraint in theory, is not so careful to observe it throughout all of his writings. Nonetheless, they both agree on the fact that God does *become* man in the incarnation, and they both take a similar way of understanding this change.

Once again we need to return to the paradigm of how a subject knows an "other" to which we have made reference so many times already. One of the phases of the act of knowledge involved a unity of the subject with the object. At that point the subject *is* the "other." But does this take away from the integrity of the subject's own essential nature? No; on the contrary, we saw that in this method of knowing the subject actually finds himself and comes to terms with his own nature during the course of this process. The converse of this observation is true as well: the true essential nature of the subject enables him to experience unity with the object and thereby to realize the reality of both subject and object. This same logic applies in Rahner's and Hegel's understanding of the incarnation. God's essential nature is not violated as he becomes one with man, the "other." Rather it is precisely God's essential nature which allows him to undergo the incarnation, and, instead of taking away from

⁶¹Cf. Winfried Corduan, "The Christology of Karl Rahner: A Critique," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, forthcoming.

⁶²*Vorlesungen*, 166; *Schriften*, I. 196; *Foundations*, 212–28.

his essence, it brings it out into the open.⁶³ This “change” in which God is participating is not the result of an alteration in his nature from the outside; it is the result of the realization of God’s true nature.

Hegel and Rahner even use this same paradigm in understanding the intra-trinitarian distinction of God-the-Father from God-the-Son. We find Hegel arguing that the very completeness of God (viz., the full realization of the subject in the paradigm) allows the generation of the Son (the actualization of the “other”).⁶⁴ Rahner makes this point in the context of an article on symbols.⁶⁵ A symbol, to him, is the expression of a referent arising out of the *reditio in seipsum*, the active self-realization, of the referent; e.g., if a reality “a” enacts itself in compliance with its nature, it may give rise to its symbol, “s.” “s” is other than “a,” but “s” receives its true meaning from “a,” and “a’s” true nature is revealed through “s.” Substituting members of the Trinity into this way of understanding, we find that the Son is a symbol for the Father in the sense that the Son is generated out of the self-enactment of the Father’s true nature.⁶⁶ The Son is other than the Father, but the Son is an expression of the Father’s essential nature. But this is again just another way of stating our epistemological paradigm where the full realization of the subject establishes the object.

It is very difficult to assess who Christ is in the thought of Hegel and Rahner. In neither case are we restricted to the unique historical individual, the carpenter of Nazareth. Jesus Christ represents the epitome of man, as we have seen. But then we cannot deal with any particular man, but with universal man. And then we are not dealing with Christ merely as an individual but with a universal Christ in whom every man has a share.⁶⁷

A word must be said about the occasions on which Rahner deliberately distances himself from Hegel, especially in this context.⁶⁸ Rahner repeatedly protests that his Christological ideas did not originate with Hegel. For instance, in discussing the theory that God does not change in himself, but does so in the “other,” Rahner says, “It would be a sorry state if it took a Hegel to teach us Christians that fact.”⁶⁹ This caution must be observed: Rahner believes what he teaches to be Christian

⁶³*Vorlesungen*, 140; cf. 134–35; *Schriften*, IV. 146–47.

⁶⁴*Vorlesungen*, 57.

⁶⁵*Schriften*, IV. 275–311.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 290. Cf. also Karl Rahner, “Der dreifaltige Gott als transzendenter Urgrund der Heilsgeschichte,” *Mysterium Salutis* II (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1967) 327–36.

⁶⁷*Vorlesungen*, 141. For Rahner this universality becomes the basis of his famous doctrine of the “anonymous Christian.” *LThK*, V. 958; *Schriften*, V. 136–59; VII. 187–213; X. 531–47.

⁶⁸*Schriften*, I. 196, 202; IV. 147.

⁶⁹*Schriften*, IV. 147.

doctrine which is true independently of any possible link to Hegel. We are here not attempting to prove the opposite. We can even concede that Rahner may have asserted his Christological views completely apart from Hegel's historical influence (as improbable as that would be). It would still remain true that the ideas are very similar to Hegel's and that this similarity can be traced back to a similarity in philosophical notions—which Rahner himself has shown to be parallel to Hegel's!⁷⁰

There are many areas in which Rahner and Hegel are in disagreement. No claim is made that Rahner is a "Hegelian" theologian. However, we have exposed some philosophical themes which Rahner does share with Hegel and have shown how these themes then find application in anthropology, whence they are carried over into Christology. This analysis is intended to be helpful not only to further understanding of Rahner's theology, but also to the whole endeavor of philosophical hermeneutics.

⁷⁰"Truth," 60–72.