



Freedom and free will in the early thought of Karl Rahner SI (1904-1984)

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The Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner knew a great appreciation after the Second Vatican Council in many intellectual Catholic circles, because his theology was considered as capable of establishing a dialogue with the new philosophical currents of a changing society. His main merit was his pretended conjunction of the “modern” idea of freedom and the Christian faith. The aim of this paper is to show that the notions of “freedom” and “free will” in the early writings of Rahner are truly misleading and presupposed a deterministic historicism which deny the God’s and human freedom. This aspect is underlined by a growing critical literature about Rahner’s theological thought¹, even though there are still many supporters of his philosophy and theology². Today scholarly literature in theology has not yet shown a dialogue between supporters and adversaries of Rahner’s thought: the present paper aims to be a contribute to a shared reception of his allegiance. I think that the difference between today theologians with respect to Karl Rahner’s thought is the *interpretation* of his ideas rather than the *evaluation* of such ideas. The criticisms underlined that his epistemology is idealistic and, as a consequence,

* I warmly thank father Giovanni Cavalcoli OP, Carlo Ludovico Cordasco and an anonymous referee of the “Journal of Liberty and Society” for their helpful observations on a previous draft of this paper. Mistakes and infelicities are of course only mine.

The translations from the original texts of Giovanni Gentile and of Karl Rahner are mine.

¹ I think in particular to Cavalcoli (2009) and to Lanzetta (2009). In the recent past Rahner’s thought has been criticized by Hans Urs von Balthasar, Leo Scheffczyk and Joseph Ratzinger, but these three authors didn’t deal with Rahner’s philosophical positions, but only with his theological speculation. Even some Church of England scholars raised objections against Rahner’s theological method: archbishop Rowan Williams maintains along with von Balthasar that Rahner’s theology is so dependent upon philosophy that it shares the aprioricity, rationalism and transcendentalism upon which it is built (cfr. Williams (1986)).

² A conference in March 2004 at the Pontifical Lateran University on Karl Rahner’s thought gathered the today leading Rahnerian theologians. A brief introduction to the conference may be found in Barrajón (2005). An example of an orthodox theologian who supports Rahner’s views is Burke (2002), which tries to develop a notion of analogy as the key concept which could be able to join together the conflicting aspects of his thinking, which may lead interpreters – as Burke admits – to understand Rahner’s thought in way which is no more compatible with the teaching of the Church.

everything is immanent to the conscience and to the thought and faith is a sort of answer to the *a priori* knowledge of the necessity of the historical revelation of God and of the Redemption. Faith becomes in this way “pseudo-supernaturalistic” and we see the doors open to the statement of pantheism³. Despite Rahner professed to be in philosophy a follower of Aquinas, an important scholar like Cornelio Fabro pointed out that Rahner developed an epistemology opposed to the Thomistic one⁴. On the contrary Rahner’s supporters say that his theology shows the possibility of a dialogue of the Christian faith with modern philosophy and that he has not defended heterodox doctrines. Differences concern the *interpretation* rather than the *evaluation* of Rahner’s thought, because if it would be clear that he held an idealistic epistemology, all of his supporters will reject the pantheistic metaphysics which can be drawn from such an epistemology; and if Rahner is on the contrary perfectly orthodox in his writings, all of his critics will have no difficulties in acknowledging his merits. The point is that his works are not clear and the interpretation of his philosophy and of his theology is quite complex; but the philological approach to texts has scientific standards that every scholar recognize. As a consequence, what can be proved on this basis must be a shared acquisition for the interpretation of Rahner’s thought. This is the reason why I think that it is possible to reach a shared interpretation at least of the main ideas of the Jesuit theologian, in order to establish a precious dialogue between scholars about the right evaluation of Rahner’s allegiance – a dialogue which is still expected.

I. Rahner and 20th century idealism: an introduction

An useful tool in order to examine Rahner’s thought on human freedom is a comparison with idealist philosophers like Giovanni Gentile⁵. According to Gentile, the founder of the so-called Actualism, every act of the immanent Spirit is moral and good, *qua* act by virtue of which the Spirit is capable of knowing and of generating itself (“autoctisi”). There is no “natural law” with whom it is possible to establish a comparison in order to evaluate the morality of an act whatever: such an act may therefore be a positive law, or an act of violence.

“If a moral reality exists,” Gentile writes “it exists if and only if the man decides that it has to exist. And if we call “will” the spirit as a productive activity of its own reality, it is obvious that who refers to the “good” or to the “evil” refers to a will who generates the good and the evil. It “generates” because what we call “good” or “evil” is made by the will”⁶. “The will is self-posing, like each knowledge is a self-posing self-knowledge”⁷. As a consequence the evil is a necessary moment of the immanent movement of the spirit in his creative activity: if there were no evil, according to Gentile, it would have been impossible to choose the good and there couldn’t be any morality: “If there were no evil, we could

³ This one is the core criticism developed by fr. Giovanni Cavalcoli in his quoted work.

⁴ Cfr. Fabro (1974).

⁵ On the philosophy of Giovanni Gentile see Lo Schiavo (2001); on the relation between Gentile’s philosophy and fascist ideology see E. Gentile (1975).

⁶ Gentile in Rosmini-Serbati (1914), p. 193.

⁷ Gentile (1923), p. 33.

conceive an already realized good, without any will: a good which will make mankind not free, because a man is good inasmuch he wants the good"⁸. In a coherent way Antonio Aliotta, a less known neoidealist philosopher, draws the practical conclusion of Gentile's moral theory: "If the evil must always exist, or, better, if it is the antithesis which allows the superior synthetic perfection of the Absolute, it is not only worthless to fight against it, but that is the worst service we can offer to God, which needs the evil in order to reach his eternal triumph"⁹. In a similar way Gentile himself defines the evil as a fact whatever of the immanent activity of the spirit: if the actuality of thought is the only reality, the evil is just the opposition to actuality. It is, in other words, "an already surpassed and therefore worthless position"¹⁰.

We are accustomed to think that human liberty, at the moral stage, implies the possibility to choose between the evil and the good: this is what the traditional terminology calls "free will". But if every act of the spirit is good and the evil is only a surpassed fact, it is impossible for an Idealist to speak of free-will in the traditional way. And if words have a meaning, there is no place for freedom in the idealistic philosophy. As a consequence it is not strange to find the attempt of identifying necessity and freedom in the writings of many idealist philosophers¹¹.

It is not a surprise to discover that Gentile was one of the prominent figures of the Fascist dictatorship: his philosophy indeed justifies as necessary moments of the self-generation of the Spirit every fact, like a parliamentary law or a decree of Benito Mussolini or an act of violence. If there is no natural law, the rebellion of Antigones against the cruelty of Creon is immoral, and the acts of the *Weisse Rose* are as moral as the death penalty judgment of the Scholl brothers. Gentile's thought is without doubts the extreme (and the more coherent) presentation of the idealistic philosophy.

But from an analogous philosophy, like the one of Karl Rahner, it is possible to drive analogous practical consequences. Let us start from the consideration of the practical consequences of Rahner's transcendental anthropology. According to him¹², we can drive a distinction between the "categorical" and the "transcendental": the first side includes things of which I have self-awareness; the latter is the fundamental constituent of a human being. The possibility of refuse God's grace and of doing something morally wrong is a *concrete* possibility only with respect to the "categorical side". In man's transcendental existential – i.e., in his fundamental and original constituent – everyone has God's grace and *cannot* lose it. This means, according to Rahner, that the possibility of a definitive

⁸ Rosmini-Serbati (1914), p. 196.

⁹ Aliotta (1917), p. 140.

¹⁰ Gentile (1916), p. 249.

¹¹ See for exaple the solution to the problem of determinism and free will which has been presented by Benedetto Croce in his Croce (1909), part 1, sect. II, n. 1: "We cannot accept the dilemma: the will is necessitated or free, and we cannot choose only one of the two sides of the dilemma. We have rather to deny the form itself of the question and we must say that the will is necessitated and free at the same time. The will emerges not from nothing, but from a determined situation, from an historical context, from a fact which, if it has the case, is necessary [...]. But the will produces something different, something new: it is creation and therefore an act of freedom [...]".

¹² Cfr. his Rahner (1976).

refuse of God's will of saving men is purely an *abstract* possibility, which doesn't ever realize *in fact*: this is the reason why Rahner thought the hell is empty. If everyone is a good man and has God's grace, how is it possible an eternal loss? The point deserves also a philosophical interest, even though it properly belongs to theological discussion¹³: from that follows that men are only in an *abstract* and *non historical sense* the concrete possibility of choosing the evil; in the concrete reality their free will is bound to the transcendental choose of the good. Rahner says that such a necessary choice is really *free* and not determined. This is the crucial point in my opinion if we want to clarify Rahner's ideas on freedom and free will. Traditionally human free will implies the concept of "*potentia ad opposita*", i.e. the possibility of orientate one's will to the two sides of a choice: yes or no, the good and the evil. Rahner still uses this terminology, but the possibility of doing something wrong is an ideal one: in reality every human being is transcendently open to the self-communication of God and to his grace, which cannot be refused on this stage – the only refuse which Rahner admits is on the "categorical side". This means that someone can be, in his opinion, not aware of his having God's grace, but in reality grace is always present, even though *in way of refuse*. We have therefore seen that Rahner doesn't maintain the traditional explanation of human free will in terms of "*potentia ad opposita*". But can the concept of freedom be reduced to this two-sided possibility? Even the Thomistic tradition knew a different freedom, which cannot sin: God's freedom. According to Aquinas God could decide to not create the world, to not redeem mankind etc., but He cannot do evil, because every decision of God – which is really identical with His Essence ("*Simplicissima Essentia*") – is ordered to Himself as to the *summum bonum* which cannot be not chosen¹⁴. Aquinas wanted to give a definition of "freedom" which was predicable of both human and in general created freedom and God's freedom and he says that freedom is the capacity of ordering certain means to an end. In the case of God the end is God Himself and therefore the end is necessarily chosen by the free Agent. In the case of men the necessary end is happiness, which everyone necessarily desire, according to Aquinas. But between the means which may be chosen in order to reach such a necessarily desired end

¹³ By the way, the "empty-hell thesis" has been contested on biblical basis in recent theological debate, because Jesus Christ said that "many" men walk on the way which brings to damnation (cfr. Matthew 7, 13-14; Luke 13, 24).

¹⁴ See for example his *Summa Theologiae*, Ia pars, qu. 19, art. 9, resp.: "respondeo dicendum quod, cum ratio boni sit ratio appetibilis, ut supra dictum est, malum autem opponatur bono; impossibile est quod aliquod malum, inquantum huiusmodi, appetatur, neque appetitu naturali, neque animali, neque intellectuali, qui est voluntas. Sed aliquod malum appetitur per accidens, inquantum consequitur ad aliquod bonum. Et hoc apparet in quolibet appetitu. Non enim agens naturale intendit privationem vel corruptionem; sed formam, cui coniungitur privatio alterius formae; et generationem unius, quae est corruptio alterius. Leo etiam, occidens cervum, intendit cibum, cui coniungitur occisio animalis. Similiter fornicator intendit delectationem, cui coniungitur deformitas culpae. Malum autem quod coniungitur alicui bono, est privatio alterius boni. Nunquam igitur appeteretur malum, nec per accidens, nisi bonum cui coniungitur malum, magis appeteretur quam bonum quod privatur per malum. Nullum autem bonum Deus magis vult quam suam bonitatem, vult tamen aliquod bonum magis quam aliud quoddam bonum. Unde malum culpae, quod privat ordinem ad bonum divinum, Deus nullo modo vult. Sed malum naturalis defectus, vel malum poenae vult, volendo aliquod bonum, cui coniungitur tale malum, sicut, volendo iustitiam, vult poenam; et volendo ordinem naturae servari, vult quaedam naturaliter corrumpi". See also *Summa Theol.* Ia pars, qu. 48, art. 6; qu. 49 art. 2; Ia-IIae partis, qu. 79, art. 1; IIa-IIae partis, qu. 19, art. 1, ad 3; *Contra Gent.* Lib. I, cc. 95-96.

there are also morally wrong instruments: these are bad actions. Denying that man can *de facto* do bad actions, Rahner doesn't deny in general that men are free, but the freedom that he attributes to them is more similar to the divine one than to the traditional description of human freedom in terms of capacity of ordering means to an end which involves a "*potentia ad opposita*". But things being so, we have a notion of freedom which is comparable to the one of the Spirit described by Gentile: a freedom which allows him to posit *every fact* in order to reach his self-knowledge. As a consequence evil is only an abstract moment of the immanent movement of the spirit, but the movement in itself cannot have moral characterization, because it is really identical with the self-moving essence of the Spirit. I don't want to claim that Rahner explicitly stated such a vision of reality, even though without doubts in the first pages of his *Grundkurs* he defended a theory which is theoretically linked to an idealistic philosophy like the one of Giovanni Gentile. Rahner says that we discover our transcendental *Vorgriff* in every act of knowledge, because knowing something external to us we know at the same time ourselves ("*mit-wissen*"). We are not far from the idea that those acts are necessary in order to constitute our own essence, which, as we will see, is transcendental openness to the Absolute (the "sacred Mystery"). Even for Gentile in every act we discover our essence to which the reality is immanent as an historical self-moving process. Rahner reached these conceptions in his *summa* at the end of his career. But we may find also in his early writings an anticipation of this notion of freedom, which is linked to a definition of "Being" as "Self-Awareness".

II. Rahner on human freedom in his early writings

In 1937 Rahner held a series of lectures in Salzburg on the philosophy of religion, which have been published in 1941 with the title "*Hörer des Wortes*" ("*Hearers of the Word*"). A second contains the basis of his thought on freedom as an essential constituent of human essence, which will be developed in the *Grundkurs*. Rahner with "*Hearers of the Word*" and with "*Geist in Welt*" introduced a transcendental turn, which may be considered "a Copernican revolution in Catholic thought"¹⁵: there is a sort of shift from an object focused theory of being (a *Seinslehre*) to a correlation-focused theory of meaning (a *Bedeutungslehre*): the proper object of transcendental philosophy is neither an abstract entity, nor something distinct from the knowing subject. It is instead the relatedness of subject and object, knower and knowable. In other words, Rahner embraced a philosophy quite different from the realism of the Thomistic tradition which was the philosophy to which in those years pope Pius XII wanted to address theologians in the encyclical *Humani generis*.

The aim of "*Hörer des Wortes*" is to analyze human essence in order to show the possibility of an historical revelation. Rahner uses the traditional notion of "*potentia oboedientialis*" as useful in order to describe the transcendental openness of man to the *historical* fact of the revelation. It seems therefore that the steps of the German theologian follow the traditional presentation of a philosophy of religion. Rahner rightly doesn't want to study the historical fact of Christian revelation, because such an approach belongs to theology rather than to philosophy. His aim is to develop a philosophy which he solves in

¹⁵ Sheehan (2005), p. 32.

a transcendental anthropology, because the prime subject of metaphysical consideration is, according to Rahner, God's essence and therefore it is very important to establish if God has revealed Himself; but while the reflection on revelation is the aim of theology, philosophy has to show the possibility of such a Self-Communication of God to mankind. The consideration of philosophy will be anthropological, because the metaphysical question about God involves the analysis of the openness of man to the Absolute as necessary condition in order to allow us to speak of the possibility of an historical revelation. As a consequence a study of the early philosophy of religion of Karl Rahner is at the same time the study of his early anthropology and it seems to me the right perspective in order to clarify his first conception of freedom and free will. Hence, let us see his definition of "metaphysics". According the Jesuit theologian, metaphysics "must conceive man as an historical being tank to his transcendental subjectivity and it must drive him in such an historicity to his history and it must impose him to hear in his history the possible revelation of this free and unknown God"¹⁶. It may seem that speaking of a "free God" and of a "possible revelation" Rahner preserves the doctrine of the "*potentia ad opposita*" and that according to him God could really not reveal Himself to mankind. But this is not the interpretation that Rahner wants that we develop. There is an interesting note, the twelfth to the first lecture of "*Hörer des Wortes*", which shows us the right interpretation of Rahner's assertion of God's freedom. In the note we read that "we don not want to state that the self-interpretation of man as a being that *can* hear a possible revelation is prior under every aspect to the *effective* hearing of such a revelation. A possibility, which is oriented in itself to history, realizes itself only in accord to the actual historical event."¹⁷

This passage is crucial because it clearly presents Rahner's opinion about the "possible": if a thing is possible, it is *in reality* either already happened or it will happen, because the notion of "possibility" is strictly linked to the actual realization in history. In logic these opinions bring to the so-called *collapse of modalities*¹⁸. We may wonder if these note, which is due to the editorial care of J. B. Metz, expresses the true thought of Karl Rahner. We can claim that this was his opinion at least in 1967, when he approved the new edition of his "*Hörer des Wortes*", prepared by Metz. But a clear evidence that these conception of "possibility" belongs to Rahner's own thought comes from his "*Grundkurs*": in the last pages, as I said, he says that everyone is in grace and that nobody actually is damned: "In the doctrine of hell" Rahner writes "we maintain the possibility of eternal loss for every individual, for each one of us, otherwise the seriousness of history would be abolished. But in Christianity this open possibility is not necessarily the doctrine of two parallel ways which lie before a person who stands at the crossroads. Rather the existence of the possibility that freedom will end in eternal loss stands alongside the doctrine that the world and the history of the world as a whole will *in fact* enter into eternal life with

¹⁶ Cfr. Rahner (1967), first lecture.

¹⁷ Cfr. Rahner (1967), first lecture, note 12.

¹⁸ We may have a *collapse* if we say – as Rahner does, in my opinion – that what is possible is actual (" $\diamond a \rightarrow a$ "): this is logically equivalent to the statement that what is actual is necessary (" $a \rightarrow \square a$ ").

God"¹⁹. Even though nobody actually goes or will go to hell, there is still an abstract possibility of damnation: it is *abstract* because it doesn't belong to the *actual historical* reality. As in "*Hörer des Wortes*", we do not have a real possibility: there we found is necessity, here we have an impossibility. The lack of distinction between the actual and the possible has interesting philosophical consequences, which bring us to the main subject of this essay. The first metaphysical distinction which falls with the collapse of modalities is the one between the substantial essence of a thing and the accidental property of the thing. While the former is composed by properties which necessarily belong to the thing, the latter is contingent and therefore cannot be predicated as *actually* belonging to a thing's essence. Between accidents there are also human acts, as the acts elicited by human free will. On this ground in his "*Grundkurs*" Rahner defines man in term of a being eliciting acts of freedom, as if those acts of freedom would belong to the essence of man. This is quite strange, because there are many instants of the flow of time in which a man doesn't elicit an act of freedom, as when he is sleeping. Is therefore something different from a man? If we accept Rahner's positions, we are brought to maintain this thesis in my opinion. And since God's grace is also an accident according to the traditional Thomistic theology (cfr. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia-IIae, qu. 110, art. 1), Rahner implicitly must assume the opposite vision, since there is no difference between substance (the soul's essence) and accident (God's created grace). If a man is in grace – and every man is in this desirable state, according to Rahner – his soul must *be* the grace which God communicates to human essence. Therefore human essence, as such, is divine. As a consequence, liberty and necessity, which have no more a proper meaning, are identified: human essence is historically determined by God's action – and every man is therefore good and in grace – and, at the same time, every man his free, because he realizes his own essence following this historically determined path. I don't want to claim that Rahner explicitly maintains this very contradictory position about human freedom in his early writings, but he developed the basis for such a theoretical construction, that will bring him to the idealistic philosophy of the "*Grundkurs*". In this work we may read a definition of the man in these terms: "just as with subjectivity, so too a person can evade his responsibility and freedom, and can interpret himself as the product of what is not himself. But this very act of self interpretation which we perform – which we must not confuse with the content of this interpretation – is something done by the subject who denies his subjectivity or interprets his freedom as being condemned to the senseless arbitrariness of what is foreign to him [...]. In other words: freedom always concerns the person as such and as a whole. The object of freedom in his original sense is the subject itself [...]. When freedom is really understood, it is not the power to be able to do this or that, but the power to decide about oneself and to actualize oneself"²⁰. It is clear that these lines of thought, though complex and not perspicuous, bring us to an idealistic definition of man, in term of his acts of freedom. We reach the implausible conclusion that man, with the act of freedom, makes himself; but since this self-making is at the same time openness to the self-communicating Absolute, we may infer that according to Rahner with whatever act of freedom – either with a sin, or with a good action – a man discover himself and makes his own essence as a

¹⁹ Rahner (1978), p. 444.

²⁰ Rahner (1978), p. 38.

spirit always open to self-transcendence. These lines of thought are truly similar to the ones we discovered in neo-idealistic philosophy and in particular in Giovanni Gentile's writings.

I think that this contradictory position cannot be held by a true supporter of human liberty and of his ontological foundation, because of the internal conflict of Rahner's views on this crucial theme, which the same contradictions of the Idealistic philosophy, according to which freedom and necessity are identified and the evil becomes a necessary moment in order to establish man's freedom, and not a failure of these free will. On the historical side of the reconstruction of Rahner's thought I don't want to claim that we may find a direct derivations of the main lines of thought of the Jesuit theologian from the elaboration of neo-idealistic philosophy, though Rahner was acquainted with the philosophy of Hegel and he knew very well the theological *Wirkungsgeschichte* of German idealism, as it has been show by many convincing studies²¹. I would rather underline that a similar theoretical construction in the metaphysical and in the epistemic fields leads to similar moral consequences, as in the case of the description of freedom and free will.

²¹ See in particular Fabro (1974) and Cavalcoli (2009).

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