

96000DTE070: Response to William Dych, and the Marquette Rahner Symposium

My title is 'Karl Rahner's Method in Theology.' It's only partly on that. I end up with my own. I haven't got very much on Fr Dych's paper, which is extremely valuable; but I received it only on Tuesday, with all sorts of stamps on it.

In the eleventh volume of his *Theological Investigations* Fr Rahner published a 68-page paper setting forth his 'Reflections on Methodology in Theology.' He began by expressing his embarrassment when asked to treat this topic for, while over the years he had touched upon methodological aspects of particular questions, he had never attempted to tackle the issue in its full range. I think we have to accept some such view of Rahner's work, more or less. Dr Anne Carr of the University of Chicago Divinity School did a doctoral dissertation on Fr Rahner's views on method and found it necessary to reach them by inference from his writings on more particular topics. And Fr Dych, whom you have just heard and to whose address I am offering an appendage, reviewed Dr Carr's work favorably in *Theological Studies*. But if Fr Rahner has not tackled the problem of method in a general fashion, he has given us an extremely penetrating account of the difficulties of that task at the present time. The work of a contemporary theologian, he said, has to find a niche in the midst of an uncontrollable pluralism of theologies. This pluralism emerges out of an ongoing and incalculable development of human thought. His task can hardly be the contribution of a collaborator working on a common site on which a single building is being erected according to a settled plan that is known to all. On the contrary, he finds himself an alien, alone, isolated. He may work on the basis of a world of ideas, from certain premises, with certain philosophical preconceptions as his tools. But he can hardly fail to be aware that all such suppositions are subject to historical conditions and to the limitations of particular epochs. Yet such awareness does not make him capable of eliminating these limitations. For the first time in the history of

theological thought, theology not only is conditioned by history but also is aware of being unable to overcome this conditioning.

Such sentiments are not peculiar to Fr Rahner. Well before Vatican II, while I was teaching at the Gregorian University in Rome, Fr Eduard Dhanis, who held a succession of high offices at the Gregorian and in the Roman Congregations, expressed to me privately his firm conviction that, while Catholic theologians agreed on the dogmas of the church, they agreed on little else. Finally, while Vatican II brought many blessings, it remains that Fr Rahner's paper on methodology in theology was begun in 1969, and that Fr Dhanis's contention that theologians were unanimous in their acceptance of the dogmas of faith only with difficulty can any longer be maintained.

It remains that Fr Rahner himself has very clear ideas on a particular method. He names it indirect method. He has given us a large sample of it in his *Foundations of Christian Faith*. It is a method that can be backed by appeals to the rules for the discernment of spirits for the second week of St Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises*, to Cardinal Newman's *Grammar of Assent*, to Polanyi's tacit knowledge, to recent articles by Eric Voegelin, and to my own account of 'Natural Right and Historical Mindedness.'

Nor is his contribution limited to such an indirect method. For if one understands by method, not something like 'The New Method Laundry' or a book of recipes for a cook, but rather a framework for collaboration in creativity and, more particularly, a normative pattern of related and repeated operations with ongoing and cumulative results, then I believe one will find ways to control the present uncontrollable pluralism of theologies (provided you're not expecting immediate results); one will cease gradually to work alien, alone, isolated; one will become aware of a common site with an edifice to be erected, not of course in accord with a static blueprint, but under the leadership of an emergent probability that yields results proportionate to human diligence and intelligence, and of course good luck. In brief, I should say that Fr Rahner has laid down the conditions and expounded the need for a radical development in theological thought.

A first point, of course, is that ‘method’ means different things in different historical contexts. Perhaps the most celebrated was Descartes’s proposal that we begin from indubitable truths and proceed by deduction, even to the point of deducing the conservation of momentum from the immutability of God: a point reported by Étienne Gilson. In contrast, Hans-Georg Gadamer, in his great work on *Wahrheit und Methode*, *Truth and Method*, has been understood to take ‘method’ in a Cartesian sense and to contend that the search for truth was what counted while ‘method’ was an obstacle.

The ... in historical contexts leads me to say something on my own context.

My thought on method began in England where I studied philosophy. An Oxford Don, H.B.W. Joseph, in his *Introduction to Logic* – some 600 pages, and this was before symbolic logic – not only grounded one thoroughly in the Aristotelian syllogism but also offered an instructive introduction to scientific procedures, an account that was broadened by some knowledge of the calculus and of the logical inadequacy of Euclid’s argumentation. It’s full of flawed logic. The work has been redone on the supposition of implicit definitions that exclude images. Logical fallacies come from insights that are not formulated among the postulates, definitions, and the other things he lists at the beginning of his book. And ... right through. Then Newman’s *Grammar of Assent* charmed me with its convincing account that common sense does not develop in accord with the rules of syllogism. He was attacked vehemently in the English Jesuit monthly periodical *The Month*, in about six articles in which it is argued that unless one was thinking in the form of Aristotle’s syllogisms, one was not thinking at all. From Newman I went to Plato and from Plato to Augustine’s early dialogues at Cassiacum. I studied theology in Rome where among my companions was an Athenian who had studied philosophy at Louvain, was at home with Maréchal, and taught me what was meant by the statement that human knowledge was discursive, not a matter of taking a look with the eyes of the mind, but of asking questions and coming to know when one chanced upon satisfactory answers. Doctoral work on Aquinas’s development of the notion of

actual grace – he never uses the term ‘actual grace’ but he gets to the reality; he hasn’t got it in the *Sentences*, and he has it in the *Summa theologiae*, and he has more of it as he goes along in the intermediate works -- and of the dependence of concepts on understanding helped me towards a rounded view.

So by 1949 I began to work out my notion of method as a Generalized Empirical Method. A first stage was the book *Insight*, which found common features in mathematics, physics, common sense, and philosophy, and later, with help from Hans-Georg Gadamer, in interpretation and history.

I recount strange personal incidents because they throw some light on my perhaps stranger opinions. I list them with some attempt at order.

First, metaphysics is first in itself, first *quoad se*, but it is not first for us. What is first for us on a reflective level is our own conscious and intentional activities. Such reflection must not presuppose metaphysics, else the metaphysics cannot be critical – it has nothing to criticize with; it will assume the ordinary blunders about knowledge that have been prevalent in Scholasticism since the blowup at the end of the thirteenth century when Franciscans and Dominicans wrote *Correctio Fratris Thomae* and *Correctio Correctorii Fratris Thomae*, *Correctio Corruptiorum* ... and so on. Such reflection must not presuppose metaphysics, else the metaphysics cannot be critical. And so it does not speak of potencies and habits, however implicit, but only of conscious and intentional events and their experienced interrelations, which also are conscious.

Second, as Vernon Gregson has remarked in a dissertation submitted at this University, such reflection is like a therapy. Just as Carl Rogers’s client-centered therapy aims at having the client discover in himself the feelings he cannot name or identify, so reflection on one’s interior operations is a matter of coming to name, recognize, and identify operations that recur continuously but commonly are thought to be very mysterious. Insights are a dime a dozen, most of them are inadequate when taken singly,

but far too many people are certain either that insights do not exist or at least that they are excessively obscure. (Gives the example of Euclid's first proposition.)

Third, the omission of talk about potencies and habits and concentration on events and their experienced relations pulls thought out of the realm of faculty psychology into that of intentionality analysis. That yields a psychology of data, questions, and answers, with the questions on the three levels of questions for intelligence (What is it? Why is it so? How often?), questions for sufficient reason for factual judgments (Are you right? Are you certain? – my father used to say, Are you sure?), and questions for evaluation and decision: not, What's in it for me, or what's in it for us? That's egoism. But, Is it really worthwhile? Is it truly good? The transition from the earlier types of morality listed by Kohlberg into the fourth and fifth levels: questions for evaluation and decision.

Fourth, this makes the precedence of intellect on will like the precedence of sense on intellect. They're different levels. You can be simply on the level of sense, lying on the beach, ... not a question. You're not worried about anything at all. The *intellectus agens* is at rest. Questions can arise, and when they do, you're moving from the level of sensitivity to the level of intelligence. You haven't got the answers yet, but you can start looking for answers. And when you get something there, well is that really so? You've moved up to a third level. And when you've found an answer that is really so, well, what are you going to do about it? That's the fourth level. So this precedence of intellect on will simply means that is what normally happens. It does not exclude divine operation directly on the fourth level, or if you wish to call it, the fifth. As St Paul instructed the Romans: God's love has flooded our inmost hearts by the Holy Spirit he has given us [Romans 5.5]. Such flooding hardly can be due to some intellectual apprehension in this life, especially since the mystics are given to celebrating their cloud of unknowing.

Fifth, at this point Generalized Empirical Method becomes theological. The transition may be illustrated by the words of our Lord to St Peter, 'Blessed art thou, Simon Bar Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to thee but my Father who is

in heaven' (Matthew 16.17), words that Eric Voegelin contrasts with the words to the other disciples, 'Tell no man that I am the Christ' (see Matthew 16.20). According to Voegelin, in the first case you have the operation of the Father on Peter, you may very well have it on the other disciples, but every person the disciples are going to meet may not have that operation, and then they'd be just giving not revelation, but information. A similar doctrine is to be had from John 6.44-45. 44: 'No man can come to me unless the Father draw him.' And 45: 'Unless a man listens to the Father and learns from him, he will not come to me.' And this can be complemented with John 12.32: 'When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men to myself.' Besides the inner gift of the spirit, there is the sensible spectacle of Christ on the cross. With those steps we are already into Christian theology, and we've achieved the final step in generalized empirical method.