

MORAL THEOLOGY, KARL RAHNER AND THE IGNATIAN EXERCISES

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WHEN WE LOOK BACK ON THE PAST, we often wish we had behaved differently. Karl Rahner, the eminent Jesuit theologian, once publicly expressed his remorse at how passive he and other priests had been during the Nazi period. It was not that they had directly colluded with blatant outrages, or manifestly failed to meet the demands of morality and Christianity. What was at issue was more nebulous, harder to put one's finger on, a matter not of moral principle but rather of something more intuitive:

Think back to the time of the Third Reich. I think there were relatively few priests whom you can really prove to have clearly transgressed moral principles in their dealings with the ideology prevailing at the time, with the persecuted Jews etc. But can you then say with equal clarity that we all always really did the right thing (and I don't except myself here)? That much is certainly not clear to me.¹

Perhaps Rahner's anxieties here emerge from scruples or from an overdeveloped superego. Who can judge? But by the time Rahner gave the talk from which I have just quoted, he had come to see his unease as pointing towards an important theological insight: namely, that there were stronger links between ethics and spirituality than most people – or at any rate most theologians – in his time imagined. Rahner had become convinced that our obligations under God go beyond those arising from moral laws applicable in all or almost all circumstances – for example 'thou shalt not kill'. We can also, he claimed, have duties arising from what we would now call spiritual experience, discernment, intuition. Thus, just as Rahner's theology of grace subverted conventional ways of distinguishing between philosophy and theology, reason and revelation, so his theory of Christian decision-making blurred the boundaries between moral and ascetical theology – or, in today's terms, between ethics and spirituality. There are, for Rahner,

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some duties, some ethical truths, which we discover through processes conventionally thought of as 'spirituality'.

This conviction then led Rahner to see one spiritual text, the Ignatian Exercises, as a significant document precisely in moral theology. The standard view in his time was that Ignatian discernment dealt only with the ethically neutral: it helped a person seek the 'better', the 'more pleasing to God', from among a range of what ethics saw as equally permissible alternatives. Rahner challenged this received understanding. For him, the Exercises delivered ethical obligations. Admittedly, these obligations do not apply to specific individuals rather than to people in general, but nevertheless they remain obligations in the strict sense. Thus Rahner could interpret Ignatian contemplation in terms such as the following: the point of the meditations on Christ's life is not just to become aware of the commitments of discipleship in general, as 'new law', but more to read from the life of Christ the *imperative* that applies to me personally, and to make a corresponding choice about *my* discipleship.²

To work out what we should do requires not only deduction but also discernment. In the Christian life, 'It is just not true to say that everything can be deduced, rationally as it were. It is not true that the individual, in his or her distinctiveness, in his or her decision, is merely an instance of general abstract principles.' Ignatius' Exercises presuppose an approach to ethics implying 'an openness for what cannot be calculated and deduced rationally, in abstraction, by reflection on general essences'.³

In this article, I propose first to look at why Rahner felt it necessary to question the conventional distinctions between moral theology and spirituality, and then to explore how, within his enriched conception of ethics, the Ignatian Exercises played a pivotal role.

The wisdom behind 'situation ethics'

Rahner's reflections on ethics and spirituality feed into discussions of what was called 'situation ethics'. 'Situation ethics' is an elastic term – and often a smear-word – covering a range of different approaches to morality. The factor common to these approaches is a vision of ethics rooted in intuitive, one-off assessments of particular situations and their demands; general moral principles play either no role at all or merely a secondary, advisory one when it comes to deciding what to do.⁴ In common with many other Christian approaches to morality, situation ethics sees love as the supreme ethical value, but it interprets that supremacy in a distinctive way. In a number

of other theories, to love God is simply to keep God's commandments: 'love' functions as the ground for a range of *other* principles, and is authentically expressed only through the *observance* of these principles. By contrast, a situationist approach could invoke 'love' as grounds for *setting aside* a principle, appealing to the unique demands of a particular situation ('it is generally wrong to kill other human beings, but in this particular situation of my friend's being attacked I had no other option, and it seemed the right – or "only loving" – thing to do').

The origin of the term 'situation ethics' is unclear, but its pejorative use was well established in clerical Roman Catholic theology by the 1950s. Pius XII expressed himself on the matter in two addresses given in 1952; more formally, the Holy Office in 1956 issued an instruction condemning the 'new morality' or 'ethics of situation'. The target was not precisely defined, but it is clear that the description was meant to cover any theory giving significant weight to a 'direct interior enlightenment' within the individual, and denying the importance of the general, universally valid principles that made up the natural law.⁵

Within the Catholic tradition Rahner inherited and accepted, ethics was based on 'natural law': we determine moral duties by reflection on the non-moral facts. Rahner's contribution can be summarized as the introduction, provoked by the situation ethics discussion, of one basic distinction: that between 'natural law' and 'naturalism'.⁶ Though morality is based on facts, though 'ought' is based on 'is', the connections between them are expressed not only in the application of universally valid principles, but also in other, more intuitive forms of reasoning. While accepting that a wholesale situationist approach could lead to lax, irrational and sentimental travesties of ethics, Rahner nevertheless insisted that there was a dimension of 'nature', of 'objective reality', unique to individuals or to groups of individuals. If we are created for relationship with God, the free and unpredictable interplay of creator and creature (Exx 15) is the ultimate basis of 'nature', and hence of a naturalist ethics. It follows that ethics has ultimately to be 'existential' or individual, not dependent exclusively on general laws and deductive reasoning: 'God is interested in history, not only in so far as it is the actual fulfilment of norms, but also in so far as it is an unrepeatable unity, and precisely thus of significance for salvation'.⁷ Thus Rahner, while echoing the Catholic tradition's insistence that our duties and obligations were laid upon us by the way things are, could see the 'situationists', for all their deficiencies, as reminding us that we discover these imperatives, not merely by applying general norms, but

also through some kind of individual discernment, through some more intuitive procedure. Though law had its place, a naturalist ethics was not just an ethics of natural law.

It follows that there is more to Christian ethics than keeping rules, than what Rahner called an 'ethics of essences'. Such procedures need to be complemented by what Rahner called an existential ethics, addressed to the concrete individual:

There is a summons of God which cannot be reduced to any other terms, and which is individual. It cannot be regarded simply as the sum and the application of general material principles of ethics and Christian morality. And this irreducible, individual, summons of God is not only a call to something within the bounds of what is possible and permissible in terms of general principle. It can be – admittedly not always, but, in certain circumstances, nevertheless quite absolutely – a summons to something significant for salvation, both personally and collectively, a call to an ought entailing a genuinely strict obligation.⁸

And the Ignatian Exercises are an important resource for morality because they give us a systematic process to help us, both individually and collectively,⁹ respond to such calls.

Rules and their limitations

Rahner's position derives in part from philosophical conviction, rigorously argued in the scholastic idiom in which he was trained. We are not just interchangeable members of the species *homo sapiens*, but individuals called, each of us, to a particular relationship with God. From this it follows that what is wrong for me in one set of circumstances may not necessarily be wrong for you, even if our circumstances are identical. But Rahner also offers a number of common-sense considerations to ground his central claim that there is more to ethics than keeping rules.

Firstly, the question arises of how moral rules are themselves to be justified. 'Thou shalt not steal' might be grounded on something more intuitive – 'you just mustn't' or 'God says you mustn't'; alternatively, theorists might try to ground it on a further principle, such as 'you should always do what makes for a better world'. But this second procedure, besides depending on a questionable factual claim that stealing will *always* make for a worse world, will leave a question begging: on what basis should we accept this new principle? Rahner's point is that such appeal to general principles has to stop somewhere,

and pass over to something more intuitive. Logical deduction can form only part of what justifies our moral convictions.¹⁰

Secondly, Rahner appeals to everyday experience. We often have to take crucially important decisions where no general rule will guide us. A career choice, for example, 'is of the greatest importance for individuals and their salvation', yet it would be unthinkable for the Church to impose any such choice on a person. Within social ethics, too, the Church rightly claims no direct competence in adjudicating complex situations:

Yet the choice between . . . several alternatives cannot be dismissed as indifferent and unimportant, for on just this choice, which the Church declares beyond its own competence, everything may depend historically, the rise or fall of a nation or a civilization.¹¹

Many of the decisions we take are crucially important, yet no general rule will guide us. Rahner claims, however, that Ignatian discernment helps us discover the way forward in such situations. Adopting the persona of Ignatius himself, the elderly Rahner wrote of how he learnt the need to make finer distinctions than those enshrined in right reason and church teaching: distinctions 'between that limited reality through which the fathomlessness of the boundless God willed to be near to me, and that which remained in some way dark and opaque to God (even though experienced normally and in itself quite sensible)'. Such distinctions are personal. To say that everything that exists 'must be transparent to God in equal measure for every single person', simply because all things have their origin in God, would be 'ridiculous'.¹²

Thirdly, an ethics based solely on general principles will lead to moral inertia, a reactionary existence which tacitly supports the *status quo* and avoids calls towards decisive and necessary growth by invoking an indefinite succession of ifs and buts. But,

It is perfectly possible for something to be completely in conformity with the Church's principles, and with general considerations, or at any rate for it not to be demonstrably wrong on that basis, and yet for that same thing here and now nevertheless to be in fact wrong.

The example Rahner then takes is the lack of progress in the ecumenical movement. As long as one has to proceed from general principles, nothing will happen, because one can always say,

'Of course we must obviously do something about reunion, but then we must also take this and that into account', and so on *ad infinitum*.

And thus, *ad infinitum*, both sides carry on talking, without anything serious and radical, anything which requires courage, in the end happening.¹³

To respond to Christ's will for unity we need the courage to move beyond conventional nostrums, however wise and prudent they may be, and respond to God's will as revealed to us by more charismatic means.

For Rahner, then, the ethical life demands an awareness of spirituality, a sense of who one is in unique relationship with God. Rahner's account is sketchy and incomplete: in particular it is unclear whether he sees his 'existential' ethics as a dimension of every decision we have to take (albeit one that is often only implicit), or whether there remain some decisions which can be settled simply by recourse to ethical principles. Out of an understandable defensiveness with regard to church authority, Rahner tends to write as if he holds the latter. But if the decision as to *which* principle(s) should apply in a situation is one that cannot itself be made through recourse to a principle, then it follows that there is an intuitive, spiritual aspect to *any* Christian moral decision.¹⁴

This dry, cautiously formulated material dating largely from the 1950s foreshadows many significant developments both in moral theology and in spirituality. While touching on the question of whether Christianity has distinctive moral implications, it also points forward to what are still all too acrimonious debates about the existence of 'exceptionless moral norms' and the legitimacy of what is called 'proportionalism': the claim that one can set aside a general moral principle for a proportionate reason – however that concept is to be understood.¹⁵ Conversely, Rahner's insistence that a spiritual text – the Ignatian Exercises – has a role in moral theology represents an early statement of how spirituality is not merely about the prayer of an élite, but something of vital importance for Christians at large. Yet this advance creates, of course, further problems, which are still very much with us. Is 'spirituality' co-extensive with 'Christianity' or 'religion', or in some alternative way still one aspect of these wider realities? More specifically, Rahner's material points forward to the rich, if somewhat confusing, contemporary interplay between the Christian disciplines of ethics and spirituality documented in this present collection. Should they ultimately merge, or do they continue to have distinct methods and objects of study?

The Ignatian Exercises and 'coming to oneself'

Rahner's essays on ethics and spirituality thus open up a range of questions which remain even now unresolved, and it lies well beyond the scope of this present piece to sort the issues out. Instead, I simply want to highlight the role Rahner envisaged for the Ignatian Exercises in his reformed version of moral theology.

When the prodigal son 'came to himself', he reflected on his situation and relationships, and acted accordingly: 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father . . .' (Lk 15:17-18). This brief passage illustrates the kind of process which Rahner sees the Exercises as fostering. But I emphasize '*kind of process*': it is central to Rahner's vision that people 'come to themselves' in different ways.

Rahner's most extended account of Ignatian discernment comes in an essay he published in 1956 to mark the fourth centenary of Ignatius' death.¹⁶ Using his own distinctive philosophical jargon, Rahner writes of particular moments 'of transcendence as such becoming a focus of awareness . . . (*ein Thematischwerden . . . der Transzendenz als solcher*), supernatural transcendence, and in this transcendence God . . .'. For Rahner, human consciousness is always orientated towards God: we have an innate sense of how all the particular things we perceive are grounded in absolute mystery. This sense normally remains tacit and implicit, but at this key moment it is 'expressly, explicitly experienced'.¹⁷ If such an experience occurs in connection with a particular option one is considering, it constitutes grounds for seeing that option as God's will, indeed God's command. To apply the point to Luke's parable: when the prodigal son comes to himself, he becomes one step more aware (or less unaware) of his true identity, and takes a decision based on his revised sense of self.

Rahner's idiom is abstract, not because the process takes place in some other-worldly realm of 'pure' transcendence – for Rahner our knowledge of God can only occur in and through our knowledge of particular things – but rather because the forms of such experiences will vary as much as human beings and human experience do. Rahnerian 'transcendence' means something different for each individual. Moreover, the process is a graduated one: when the prodigal son 'comes to himself' and realizes that he does not have to remain in his pigsty, his reasoning nevertheless remains self-centred – 'there'll be something better to eat at home' – and he still has a long way to go before he realizes the fullness of his father's love. Yet his turning-point is nevertheless a true example of 'transcendence as such becoming a

focus of awareness'. Rahner sees the Ignatian Exercises as fostering such moments, and thus facilitating the untidy process whereby each of us, by taking particular decisions, comes to appropriate our identity under God.

Any reader who has struggled with Rahner's essay, 'The logic of concrete individual knowledge in Ignatius Loyola', will realize that the above summary sidesteps some complicated issues. Some of these are connected with the technicalities of Rahner's philosophy, and can be relegated here to a discreet footnote.¹⁸ Others relate to how Rahner interprets particular Ignatian texts. Rahner sees his theory as documented in the discernment rule about consolation without preceding cause (Exx 330) and in a passage from Ignatius' first letter to Teresa Rejadell. He also takes himself to be describing the second of Ignatius' three 'times' of election, and marginalizes the other two: the first is seen as quasi-miraculous and exceptional, the third as a deficient form of the second.¹⁹ Various critics have, in my opinion conclusively, discredited these claims,²⁰ but not in such a way as to cast doubt on Rahner's most central point: namely, that the Exercises furnish us with a means of discovering our obligations under God as individuals, in ways not reducible to the application of general principles. However, the textual bases in Ignatius for such claims are different from those Rahner names in his 1956 essay.

The chief among these is the open-ended structure of Ignatian contemplation, running throughout the Exercises, inviting us 'to reflect and draw profit' (Exx 106) in ever new ways. The movements of consolation and desolation provoked by such prayer will differ from individual to individual, enabling people to find their distinctive mode of discipleship.²¹ Another is the basic Ignatian conviction expressed in the fifteenth annotation, a conviction which Rahner glosses as follows:

God is able and willing to deal directly with his creature; the fact that this occurs is something that human beings can experience happening; they can apprehend the sovereign command and arrangement of God's freedom over their lives – a command and arrangement that can no longer be predicted through objective argument 'from below' as a law of human reason (be that philosophical, theological or experiential).²²

Individuality and our knowledge of God

Most of Rahner's writings on Ignatian discernment stress its importance for moral theology. In his retirement, however, Rahner wrote a piece in which he suggested that systematic theology, too, had something to learn from Ignatius' process. He raised the old question of how

an unconditional commitment in faith could be rationally possible: how can we justifiably accept Jesus and the tradition stemming from him as in some special, unique sense the revelation of God? Rahner suggested that the process of Ignatian choice was structurally similar to that of the decision to believe in Christ at all. Both involved the recognition that a particular historical reality (a way of life, the person of Jesus) resonated with our deepest sense of ourselves under God, in ways that could not be fully articulated objectively. It was rather a matter of attunement, of recognizing a convergence between our deepest selves and a particular option facing us, be that option belief in Jesus or some other, more specific, course of action.²³

In an open letter written for the birthday of his brother, Hugo, in 1965, Rahner stated his conviction that Ignatius was of significance precisely for theology:

Ignatius was not simply a very holy man – after all, that much applies to every saint. With him, a new theology begins to be lived out, and the task of articulating this theology reflectively has not yet really been tackled. And the success of this enterprise will be a very substantial factor among those deciding the fate of future Catholic theology.²⁴

Central to this ‘new theology’ is a sense that we are not reducible to general laws, but individuals created for distinctive, unpredictable, ever new relationship with God-in-Christ. Thus spiritual discernment is foundational not only to ethics but also to theology as a whole, and the boundaries between spirituality, ethics, and indeed theology, become permanently, if creatively, fluid.

NOTES

¹ Karl Rahner, ‘Der Anspruch Gottes und der Einzelne’ in *Schriften zur Theologie* 6 (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1965), pp 521–536, here p 531. This particular essay is not included in either of the English books containing translations from this volume: *Theological investigations* 6 (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1969), or *The Christian of the future* (London: Burns and Oates, 1966). It originated as a talk for a meeting of priests in Vienna just after Christmas 1959.

² Karl Rahner, *Betrachtungen zum ignatianischen Exerzitienbuch* (Munich: Kösel, 1965), pp 129–130; *Spiritual exercises*, translated by Kenneth Baker (London: Sheed and Ward, 1966), p 127. I tacitly amend published translations in the light of the originals; in this particular case I have added emphases.

³ Karl Rahner, ‘Being open to God as ever greater’ in *Theological investigations* 7 (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1971), pp 42, 43.

⁴ Among English-speaking theologians, the most famous exponent of such an approach is the American, Joseph Fletcher, in his book *Situation ethics: beyond the new morality* (London: SCM Press, 1966). This book comes significantly later than the German-language versions against

which Rahner and the Holy Office are reacting. For a helpful, lucid survey of the range of positions designated under this heading, see James F. Childress, 'Situation ethics' in *A new dictionary of Christian ethics*, edited by James F. Childress and John Macquarrie (London: SCM Press, 1986), pp 586–588.

⁵ *Acta apostolicae sedis* 48 (1956), pp 144–145; see also 44 (1952), pp 270–271, pp 413–419.

⁶ This section draws chiefly on the following pieces by Rahner: 'The appeal to conscience' in *Nature and grace' and other essays*, translated by Dinah Wharton (London: Sheed and Ward, 1963), pp 84–111; 'On the question of a formal existential ethics' in *Theological investigations* 2 (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1963), pp 217–234; 'Introduction' and 'Principles and prescriptions' (better translated as 'Principles and imperatives') in *The dynamic element in the Church*, translated by W. J. O'Hara (London: Burns and Oates, 1964), pp 7–12, 13–41; 'Der Anspruch Gottes und der Einzelne', cited in n 1 above; 'Situation ethics in an ecumenical perspective' in *The Christian of the future*, translated by W. J. O'Hara (London: Burns and Oates, 1966), pp 39–48. For a useful introductory summary and critique of this material, see Donal J. Dorr, 'Karl Rahner's "formal existential ethics"', *Irish Theological Quarterly* 36 (1969), pp 211–229.

⁷ 'On the question of a formal existential ethics', pp 227–228.

⁸ 'Der Anspruch Gottes und der Einzelne', p 536.

⁹ When talk of communal discernment became fashionable in the 1970s, Rahner wrote a piece pointing out that his theory of a divine call going beyond general principles could apply not only to individuals but also to groups, and hence that it was possible to imagine collective versions of Ignatian discernment. See 'Modern piety and the experience of retreats', *Theological investigations* 16, pp 135–155.

¹⁰ See 'Reflections on a new task for fundamental theology' in *Theological investigations* 16 (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1979), pp 156–166, at p 160: '... all reflection which seeks to offer grounds for a decision is itself conducted within a given horizon of understanding and under the influence of selective patterns of salience. It is obviously legitimate to attempt such reflection and partial success is always possible. But nevertheless it depends on psychological, historical, cultural and social conditions that cannot themselves be critically appraised in the same kind of reflective way without our falling into infinite regress.'

¹¹ 'Principles and prescriptions', pp 25–26.

¹² Karl Rahner, 'Ignatius of Loyola speaks to a modern Jesuit' in *Ignatius of Loyola*, with an historical introduction by Paul Imhof, translated by Rosaleen Ockenden (London: Collins, 1978), pp 11–38, here p 17. The original can be found in *Schriften zur Theologie* 15 (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1983), p 381.

¹³ 'Der Anspruch Gottes und der Einzelne', p 534–535.

¹⁴ Any of the essays cited in n 6 will contain documentation for the more cautious reader. For a hint towards the more radical interpretation, see 'The logic of concrete individual knowledge in Ignatius Loyola' in *The dynamic element in the Church*, pp 84–170, at p 111: 'For even with the syllogistic subsumption of the individual case under a general principle (if one is claiming that this is an *exhaustive* method of finding an individual moral decision), one would have to enquire once more how the individual case was known and understood ...'.

¹⁵ The literature on this topic is vast. For an overall survey, see Bernard Hoose, *Proportionalism: the American debate and its European roots* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1987).

¹⁶ The logic of concrete individual knowledge'; for details, see n 14.

¹⁷ 'The logic of concrete individual knowledge', pp 145–154, quotations from pp 148–149, 154.

¹⁸ There are questions about the sense in which the kind of experience named by Rahner can be said to give certain or indubitable evidence regarding God's will. Some of Rahner's formulations in the 1956 essay seem to imply that the experience of 'transcendence becoming a focus of awareness' yields certainty about particular ethico-spiritual decisions: a controversial, indeed implausible claim. But Rahner's talk of certainty refers not to the guaranteeing of any particular experience or set of experiences, rather to the foundations of any system of knowledge. In making any meaningful statements whatever, even false ones, one is implicitly committed to such basic logical axioms as the principle of non-contradiction. These principles are 'certain' in the sense

that rational discourse is simply impossible unless they are true. What Rahner finds in Ignatius is not a formula guaranteeing automatically successful divination of God's commands, but rather an axiomatic assurance that such commands are issued, that they are accessible to our experience, and hence that the quest for God's will is a sensible one.

There are also issues about just what Rahner means when he says that the experience in question is non-conceptual, or 'without object', issues further complicated by questions of translation. In my view, Rahner cannot mean that the experience in question is removed from the realms of language or matter. The point, rather, is that the moment of growth is one in which it is our subjective horizons that change. When the prodigal son 'comes to himself', the change is in his self-perception, not in the squalor of the pigsty.

¹⁹ 'The logic of concrete individual knowledge', pp 127–8 (n 25), pp 102–106.

²⁰ On Rahner's interpretation of consolation without preceding cause, the most accessible and cogent of all the critics is Jules J. Toner, in an appendix to his *A commentary on Saint Ignatius' rules for the discernment of spirits* (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1982), pp 301–313. For a conclusive refutation of Rahner's claims about the second time of election, and indeed for enlightenment on many other topics, see Toner's later book, *Discerning God's will: Ignatius of Loyola's teaching on Christian decision-making* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1991), especially pp 316–322. I report on various interpretations of the letter to Teresa Rejadell in my 'Discerning behind the Rules: Ignatius' first letter to Teresa Rejadell', *The Way Supplement* 64 (Spring 1989), pp 37–50. Karl Rahner's discussion of this text ('The logic of concrete individual knowledge', pp 152–154) is seriously disabled by his reliance on an overcreative German translation of the original made by his brother, Hugo.

²¹ For an impressive Rahnerian exposition of this point, see *Betrachtungen*, pp 117–124; *Spiritual exercises*, ch 13; I have tried to set out the links between Ignatian contemplation and the discernment of God's will in 'To reflect and draw profit', *The Way Supplement* 82 (Spring 1995), pp 84–95.

²² 'Ignatius of Loyola speaks to a modern Jesuit', p 13; *Schriften zur Theologie* 15, p 376.

²³ 'Reflections on a new task for fundamental theology' (see n 9).

²⁴ Karl Rahner, 'Ein brüderlicher Geburtstagsbrief' in '*Gemeinsame Arbeit in brüderlicher Liebe*': *Hugo und Karl Rahner – Dokumente und Würdigung ihrer Weggemeinschaft*, edited by Abraham Peter Kustermann and Karl H. Neufeld (Stuttgart, 1993), pp 69–74, here p 72.