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DOCTORAL THESIS

Abstract

The Dialectic of Death in the Philosophy of Karl Rahner

An Attempt at Approaching the Problem of Death from the Perspective of Infinity

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Abstract

Among Karl Rahner's extensive body of work, which encompasses nearly every question in theology and the philosophy of religion, my doctoral dissertation focuses specifically on the existential interpretation of the problem of death. I examine Rahner's understanding of death, approaching the issue from the perspective of infinity.

Rahner was a committed advocate of the Thomist/Neo-Thomist tradition. He was convinced that human reason must play a role in exploring the questions of faith and theology. His explicit aim was to substantiate religious faith and theological truths through philosophical and scientific methods. Throughout his work, he sought to highlight the complementary relationship between philosophical inquiry and the theological search for answers. In this context, Rahner adhered to two central principles. The first is that intellectual inquiry, when properly applied, never uncovers anything that contradicts revealed truths. The second is that there are certain truths that intellectual investigation can neither prove nor refute; in such cases, these truths must simply be accepted as facts, as God's revelation.

Rahner's conception is based on the principle that the methodology of scientifically cultivated theology necessarily presupposes philosophical inquiry. He believes that without this, contemporary theology as a discipline would lose its capacity for knowledge and understanding. His work is directed toward the renewal of theology. He considers traditional theology of death unacceptable, views the theology of eschatological statements as incomplete, laments the absence of a "questioning" theology, and advocates for the development of a theology of thought.

Rahner sought to bring the philosophical questions and methods of his time into symbiosis with Neo-Thomist doctrines. Characteristic of his thinking is the synthesis of two paths to the revelation of truth: the validation of the compatibility between divine revelation and human reason. Along this line, he aimed to understand death in light of ecclesiastical tradition, uncovering its present reality in human life, its existential significance, and its lasting message in the context of the fulfillment of being.

My doctoral research follows the Rahnerian logic in its methodological approach. The research is both *philosophically* motivated and *theologically* significant. It targets the critical methodological stance within Karl Rahner's legacy, which moves beyond doctrinal rigidity without dismantling the essential principles. This is achieved by following the path of philosophical hermeneutics, questioning the meaning and interpretability of those principles.

Critically, it confronts the anthropological dualism of the scholastic tradition and, operating with a “new”, holistic view of humanity, highlights the existential significance of death.

The *aim* of my doctoral thesis is to demonstrate the metaphysical fundamentality of death.

The aim of my doctoral thesis is to demonstrate the metaphysical fundamentality of death. The religious-philosophical endeavor outlined by Rahner has become the guiding principle of my doctoral research and dissertation: according to him, in order to understand the infinite self-revelation of God as the “listener of the Word”, our theological method necessarily presupposes philosophical inquiry. Rahner addressed death as a transcendental phenomenon. He argued that a full understanding of death is only possible from the perspective of the infinite. Both our understanding of ourselves and the world, he maintained, can only be comprehended from the outside, “beyond” the end, from the standpoint of the absolute transcendence. Death, the “final dying”, is the fulfillment of human existence, which, while present in earthly life, only reaches its final form in the Absolute. In light of this, my research highlights that traditional death theology, which consistently considers death solely as a consequence of original sin, operates within very narrow confines. In contrast, the investigation presented in my doctoral dissertation places the problem of death in a broader horizon: it approaches death from the perspective of the infinite, emphasizing the transcendental nature of being.

Methodologically, my doctoral research is an interpretative investigation of a hermeneutic nature, rather than a descriptive and proof-based approach, which is why it does not outline hypotheses. In my research, I am not trying to prove something, but rather to interpretively uncover the processes of being related to death. In contrast to dogmatic axiomatic systems, I attempt to apply the method of philosophical inquiry and also experiment with the philosophical reinterpretation of traditional theological concepts. My secondary aim is to make theological statements accessible and interpretable from a philosophical perspective, and vice versa, to demonstrate the difficulties that the lack of clarity in philosophical concepts can pose for theology. Furthermore, I consider it important to outline a novel Christian anthropology based on Rahner’s holistic view of humanity.

Due to the fundamentally hermeneutic nature of my research, I have relied mainly on *primary sources* and literature available in the Karl Rahner Archive. This was because I was interested in the declarative content of the original texts. Additionally, there is relatively little literature that explores Rahner’s anthropology, Christology, or eschatology beyond strictly theological questions. Therefore, I decided to place the background of the theology of death within a theological-historical horizon that, starting from the realm of metaphysics, reaches

back through the reflections of scholasticism (primarily Neo-Scholasticism) to the world of ancient and medieval (Middle) Platonist and Aristotelian thinkers. In this way, by shedding light on the roots of Rahner's line of thought, my dissertation has acquired a somewhat historical character.

My doctoral thesis, titled *The Dialectic of Death in Karl Rahner's Philosophy*, is divided into seven chapters.

In the first chapter, *Introduction to the Rahnerian Problem of Death*, I address the renewal of twentieth-century theology, followed by the philosophical antecedents of Rahner's theological anthropology, attempting to trace the origins of the interpretation of death represented by (Neo-)Thomism. I focus specifically on those thinkers who were emblematic for the Catholic Church up until the twentieth century. I focus specifically on those thinkers who were emblematic for the Catholic Church up until the twentieth century. The Platonic framework (Saint Augustine) and the scholastic roots (Thomas Aquinas) are outlined in more detail. In connection with Augustine, I briefly touch on certain aspects of Platonist thought, which form the basis of the veiled dualism in Christian doctrine. Rahner considers this type of interpretation of death to be insufficient. The Platonic *reditio incompleta in se ipsum* provides a new metaphysical foundation for him. The "unprovable necessity" of human reason and existence, and their transcendent openness, are incorporated into the *I–Thou* dialectic between God and man. The second part of the chapter examines Rahner's closer sources, focusing on the transcendental philosophical and neo-scholastic influences, particularly the transcendental metaphysical theses of Pierre Rousselot and Joseph Maréchal. The introduction concludes with an overview of the thoughts of Béla Weissmahr, Hans Küng, and Gisbert Greshake, theologians whose ideas evolved in the footsteps of Rahner. The third section of the chapter addresses the approach to the question of death from the perspective of finitude in Martin Heidegger's philosophy. It explores the question of the meaning of being, the concept of *Dasein* and its existential aspects, the problem of finitude, and the relationship between being and death. Heidegger's methodological influence on Rahner is evident, with Rahner primarily adopting Heidegger's method of questioning the nature of being.

The second chapter – *Rahner's Concept of Death from the Perspective of the Infinite* – delves into the core theme of the dissertation. Here, special attention is given to Karl Rahner's two foundational works, *Geist in Welt* and *Hörer des Wortes*. In his doctoral dissertation *Geist in Welt*, Rahner analyzes the epistemology of Thomas Aquinas and approaches theological thought from the perspective of the totality of being and the infinite God. In relation to the problem of death, I emphasize the significance of the term "the listener of the Word", which

refers to divine revelation, harmonizing with Rahner's hermeneutical methodology. According to Rahner, by listening to and receiving the Word, humanity discovers death and moves toward absolute being. In the second part of the chapter, I explore Karl Rahner's concept of death and time, and in the third part, I focus on the analysis of Rahner's concept of death. Rahner approaches death from the perspective of the infinite God as the Absolute future, rather than from the standpoint of finitude. In this view, death does not signify the separation of body and soul, but rather the ultimate fulfillment of the whole person. As such, death is an act of freedom and the mystery of life. Distancing himself from the scholastic tradition, Rahner examines the existential nature of death, focusing on how a person consciously surrenders and hears their own death, which leads them toward fulfillment. According to Karl Rahner, human life unfolds in earthly *chronos*, while life after death extends into a timeless dimension. Death, therefore, is not just a moment or a process, but a phenomenon that carries the transformation of *chronos* into *kairos*, enabling death to be approached from the perspective of the infinite. Rahner argues that as a transcendent being, humans experience themselves, reflecting on their finitude and freedom, which endows them with responsibility. Through the transition of death, they reach ultimate self-realization, which unites self-consciousness with the desire for being's infinite direction.

In the third chapter – *The Art of Death as Transformatio Mistica* – Karl Rahner's concept of death is connected to the mystical perspective of Meister Eckhart. From this interpretive standpoint, death is not merely an endpoint, but rather a process of deeper understanding of life and the soul's striving for divine unity, which can be expressed through the concept of *transformatio mistica*. This symbolizes the continuous transformation of the person and the fulfillment of the soul. According to Rahner, this *transformatio* takes place in time, as death, with its constant presence, accompanies the individual in their daily life. The term "shadow" not only signifies a deficiency in the everyday sense but also encompasses the concepts of "non-self" and "the other", which contribute to a deeper understanding of human existence. In his work *Zur Theologie des Todes*, Karl Rahner portrays death as a daunting shadow that confronts the individual with their finitude and uniqueness, yet not as a frightening description, but rather within a deeper philosophical context.

The fourth chapter – *The Mystery of Death and Suffering* – deals with the symbolic nature of death and its placement within the narrative of suffering. In Rahner's thought, death represents the symbolic and essential fulfillment of human finitude, where, in the unity of body and soul, human existence finds its ultimate meaning. According to him, Christ's death on the cross symbolizes divine love and redemption, in which death, when connected to God,

transforms the finitude of human life into the fullness of life. According to Rahner, suffering is not merely a biological necessity; it also carries deeper issues of human freedom, self-determination, and responsibility within the spiritual and moral dimensions. Rahner emphasizes that human suffering is part of God's mysterious presence, expressing the mystery of divine freedom and love. Karl Rahner argues that God can be experienced in everyday life, in suffering, and in death because He is the unfathomable mystery that serves as the foundation of hope. Like Rahner, Bonhoeffer also believes that a God constrained by human limits is not truly real, for God's essence lies in His incomprehensibility.

The fifth chapter – *Order and Chaos in Rahner's Problematic of Death* – continues the previous chapter by examining the temporal aspects of order and chaos in Rahner's thought, in connection with his effort to demythologize the relationship between body and soul. Self-transcendence (*Selbsttranszendenz*) in Karl Rahner's philosophy refers to the process by which an individual surpasses the limitations of the self to open up to the transcendent reality. This concept expresses the fundamental orientation of human existence, which transcends its own finite, limited reality and is directed toward the infinite, toward the absolute God, while also signaling the unity of body and soul. The argument also touches upon the question of the Assumption of Mary, as Rahner did not view Mary's death as an exception, but rather as an archetype of the eternal unity of body and soul according to divine order, applicable to all humanity. According to Rahner, Mary's death cannot be understood in terms of the consequence of sin, but rather as something that occurs out of love for God.

The sixth chapter – *Death as the Intersection of Parousia and Eschatology* explores Rahner's eschatological understanding of death. According to Rahner, eschatology examines the ultimate purpose of human life and the absolute future – God and the relationship with Him – which is not just a distant event but an integral part of the present. Human life, through the dynamic of anticipation, continuously moves toward the future, actively participating in salvation history. Contrary to apocalypticism, eschatology describes the ultimate completeness that operates in the present, where the unity of body and soul leads to the fulfillment of the human being. Rahner's concept of eschatology unfolds as a deconstruction of Neo-Scholasticism, interpreting eschatological statements in light of the Scripture's hermeneutics and making them understandable to contemporary humanity. The future must be present in human existence because the future is the dynamic presence of the divine mystery: through Christ, eternity has entered the human sphere, and this defines the meaning of human existence. In Rahner's eschatology, the concept of "*prolixitas mortis*" emphasizes the continuous presence of death. This concept refers to the fact that the prolonged process of death is present

throughout the entirety of human life; therefore, the future eternity already touches existence, and death cannot be considered merely as an endpoint, but rather as the process of the fulfillment of salvation. According to Rahner, death must be viewed holistically, in its complete unity. In Rahner's eschatology, the future is already present in the moment, in which human existence is oriented towards eternity. The divine vision, "*visio beatifica*", represents the final fulfillment of existence in death.

In the seventh chapter – *Summary of Criticisms Related to Rahner* – the various critiques formulated by Rahner regarding different concepts of death are examined, and this section also addresses the criticisms directed at Rahner himself.

Rahner's critical attitude emerged in the fields of eschatology and dogmatics, focusing on the inadequacies of the body-soul dualism and the Platonic traditions, highlighting the lack of a deeper theological interpretation of death. One of Rahner's fundamental critical observations concerns the traditional concept of purgatory, emphasizing that it is not a temporal or spatial location, but a personal state encountered during the meeting with God. Rahner also critiques scholastic philosophy, which, according to him, does not place sufficient emphasis on the humanity of Christ, warning of the danger of "hidden monophysitism" in Christological teachings. This chapter also addresses the question of pluralism, which, through the concept of "emptiness" and the capacity for change, emphasizes the communicative and self-understanding aspects of human existence, critically opposing the state of monadic isolation.

Rahner's philosophy has been criticized primarily for its anthropocentrism. His contemporary, Hans Urs von Balthasar, criticized Rahner's modernist approach, emphasizing the transcendent significance of Jesus' death. Rahner's Mariological interpretation of death also sparked strong criticisms. According to Rahner, the Assumption of Mary is a theological truth that must be made comprehensible for faith. One of his greatest critics, Johannes Brinktrine, emphasized the simple acceptance of dogmas, disregarding the importance of the dialogue between theology and philosophy.

The dissertation concludes with a list of abbreviations and the bibliography (both primary and secondary sources) after the formulation of the conclusions.

In my final *conclusion*, I assert that death, when examined from the perspective of the infinite, is not an abstract philosophical question, but an integral part of existence, forming a common intersection between philosophy and theology, as well as their shared border area.

The attempt to interpret death from the perspective of the infinite highlights that one can only understand both oneself and death through the transcendence of finitude. The dialectic of chaos and order, the unity of matter and soul, and the questions surrounding the interpretation

of death led to the realization that death is not merely an event, but an essential aspect of existence as a whole. The human being inquires about the meaning of death within the dimension of eternity, while the very act of posing the question becomes one of the fundamental experiences of being. In reflecting on death, the individual simultaneously gains a deeper understanding of oneself. In my research, I have come to the conclusion that Rahner's thought provides an opportunity to interpret death not merely as a terrifying end, but as a revelation of the fullness of life and existence. This perspective helps the individual to view death not just as a closure, but as an essential part of the experience of being – an event that marks a significant stage on the path towards self-knowledge and transcendence.

According to Rahner's approach, death is not merely the cessation of vital functions, but an existential of *Dasein*, which encompasses the entirety of being. In connection with this, I undertook a novel interpretation of space and time. From this, a distinctive historical perspective can be deduced. The human being is a historical entity, not merely existing in a sequence of successive temporal events. Historicity is an essential characteristic of human existence, which encompasses the unity of anamnesis and prognosis: the present validates its past, advancing toward the future. Death is the meeting point of the past and the absolute future, thus presenting a unique opportunity for understanding existence. It functions as a boundary, through which *Dasein* can be defined, yet it can only be understood from the perspective of the infinite. Human existence, as a whole, does not remain confined within itself but steps beyond itself in order to ultimately return to itself. This process is the path of self-knowledge, in which there always remains an additional "yet-to-be" element.

In Rahner's theology of death, the question of freedom plays a crucial role. He distinguishes three essential aspects of freedom: its internal essence, the unity of its fulfillment and actualization, and the decision that brings about its completion. In this context, I aimed to present the freedom of decision, which defines human existence and finds its fulfillment in accepting the word of God. Since this freedom is a response to God's self-revelation, it permeates the entirety of human life.

The main outcome of my research is the elaboration of Rahner's concept of *self-transcendence* and its application in the interpretation of death. According to this, through extension, the human being surpasses their own limits, *transcends* their finitude, and, opening up to the world, returns to themselves – this epistemological dynamic is expressed in the concept of *reditio in se ipsum*. The meaning of death can only be understood in its entirety if we take into account the process of self-transcendence, whose ultimate source is the Infinite, that is, the Giver of Being. Human existence originates from the Absolute Being, and thus death

can only be understood through this perspective. In this sense, eternity is not a distant and unattainable concept, but a reality that permeates all of existence, serving as a kind of bridge that accompanies the person through their earthly life and beyond.

Rahner's concept of death, from a hermeneutical perspective, provides the opportunity for a discourse on death that is not merely one aspect of speaking about life but fosters a deeper, dialectical dialogue on the relationship between being, finitude, and eternity. According to this approach, death is not merely the physical closure of earthly life but a transcendental opportunity that opens new dimensions in the understanding of existence. Therefore, I have endeavored, throughout my research, to focus on the connections between death, eschatology, and hermeneutics, all of which contribute to a deeper interpretation of human life.

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