

Karl Rahner's Idea of Transcendence in Foundational Human Experiences

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Abstract: This paper aims to demonstrate that Rahner's notion of foundational human experiences contributed significantly to a new way of understanding the experience of transcendence in the human subject. Since the Enlightenment a new way of understanding of human beings has emerged, and particularly the understanding of the human subject as playing a central part in the constitution of meaning. The inner self as a reasoning subject rather than the Divine Revelation, has become a sort of a source for a meaning. The significance of Rahner's idea is that it has deepened the understanding of foundational human experiences, and expanded the idea of transcendence beyond the theistic understanding of transcendence. Accordingly, first, it will show that foundational human experiences are present in everyone and are related with the inescapability of the experience of God. Second, human beings can transcend through the dynamics of questioning and the pre-apprehension of being. Third, non-theistic idea of transcendence in Ernst Bloch and Walter Benjamin is associated with the theistic understanding of transcendence. [14-15줄, 8.8pt]

Keywords: Karl Rahner, Transcendence, Foundational Human Experience, Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin (주제어: 5개)

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One of the key characteristics of the Renaissance in the Western society may be the shift of the power, to some extent, from the God to the human being. While during the Middle Ages the human beings were completely dependent upon God's mercy and omnipotence, since the Renaissance period they had begun to be aware of their own potential powers and achievements. That shift was accelerated by the spirit of the Enlightenment which were featured by the importance of reason and advancements of technology and science. In other words, the development of science and the power of reason were regarded as means through which ethics, aesthetics, logic and government were able to formulate their own authoritative system over against the traditional authority of the Church by referring to science, empiricism, and rationality. As a result, "the human subject played a central part in the constitution of meaning" (Dupre 6). As Max Weber called modernity as "the loss of an unquestioned legitimacy of a divinely instituted order," it can be suggested that the self as a reasoning subject, instead of the divine Revelation, has become gradually a source for a meaning since the Enlightenment (Dupre xi).

This empowerment of the human subject has opened a new paradigm for a way of understanding of transcendence. Traditionally, the meaning of transcendence may refer to the absolute Otherness of God, who is the very goal of union between human being and God. The locus of transcendence, however, appears now to be, to some extent, in the human subject rather than in God. In fact, as early as the fourth century, St. Augustine is regarded as having investigated the inner depth of the self in the relationship between God and human for the first time in the Western society. He points out, "do not go outward; return within yourself. In the inward man dwells truth" (Augustine XXXIX.72). For Augustine, the selfhood is not the source itself and the source for a meaning is still outside the inner self. Descartes, however, examined the

inwardness of the self far beyond Augustine. According to his famous dictum, *cogito ergo sum*, the certainty of knowledge lies in self-consciousness. Charles Taylor rightly claims that “Descartes situates the moral sources within us” (Taylor 143). Thus the human subject appears to be seen as the source for transcendence.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a number of philosophers and theologians have discussed the question of human transcendence, for example, Nietzsche, Sartre, Marcel, Lonergan and Rahner. Although both Nietzsche and Sartre deny the existence of God, they refer to the necessity of human transcendence. For Nietzsche, human being is a thing to be surmounted in a sense that he/she is “a rope stretched between beast and superman” . . . he/she is a bridge and not a goal” (Nietzsche 6-9). Sartre also sees human being fundamentally as the desire to be, so “human reality is its own surpassing toward what it lacks” (Sartre 89). For Marcel, transcendence denotes “an absolute otherness”, but he does not deny that there can be an experience of transcendence in human life because “the need for transcendence . . . is deeply experienced above all, as a kind of dissatisfaction” with life as it is (Marcel 50-1, 60). In the long run, Nietzsche, Sartre and Marcel regard “transcendence as fundamental to being human” (Macquarrie 29).

It was Karl Rahner who discussed the importance of human experience profoundly in articulating the idea of transcendence from the theological perspective. This article aims to demonstrate that Rahner's notion of foundational human experiences contributed significantly to a new way of understanding the experience of transcendence in the human subject. In order to show that, first, it will discuss that every human being has “foundational human experiences”, which is present in everyone and is related with the inescapability of the experience of God, focusing on experiential knowledge and conceptual knowledge. Second, it will investigate how, in spite of human limitation of the finiteness, the dynamics of questioning and the pre-apprehension of being make

it possible for human to transcend. Third, it is going to show how non-theistic understanding of transcendence may be related to the theistic approach by dealing with the two atheists, Ernst Bloch and Walter Benjamin. In the long run, it seems that Rahner's idea of foundational human experiences can be a useful frame through which foundational experiences in literature may be approached from the perspective of religion.

II

Rahner has opened a new way of understanding of the experience of God [transcendence, Spirit or mystery] in a sense that it can have its own unique depth and value over against Christian faith. For Rahner, "experience is one of the ways we grasp the objects of knowledge," and there are two different kinds of knowledge, "experiential knowledge" and "conceptual knowledge" (Marmion 112-3). In other words, Rahner draws a distinction between "man's original and non-thematic experience of himself and God" and "an objectified and interpreted knowledge about God and man." That is, there is a difference between experience itself and interpreted knowledge of that experience. Although there is no clear cut boundary between them, each of them has its own main features.

In his book, *the Liturgy of the World: Karl Rahner's theology of Worship*, Michael Skelley explains how experiential knowledge is different from conceptual knowledge. Firstly, the former is "a passive way of knowing" in a sense that we "receive it with a minimal amount of analysis or examination" (Skelley 66). The latter, however, is more active. When we know things conceptually, "we actively categorize them according to our perspectives and methods, and we deliberately subject them to critical investigation and analysis" (Skelley 66). Secondly, experiential knowledge is more immediate, complete and accurate, than conceptual articulation. Thirdly, conceptual knowledge is within

our control because the extent of conceptual grasp of anything is based on the amount of our efforts of analyzing. Experiential knowledge, however, is inescapable on the grounds that “experience is not within our control” and “we still have basic experiences” even in our ignoring, suppressing, or denying them (Skelley 69).

Although there are some differences between the two ways of knowledge, it is certain that there should be an integration between them. Rahner argues that an experience of something can be “accepted more profoundly, more purely, and with greater freedom when we achieve a knowledge of its true nature and its implications at the explicitly conscious level” (*TI* 11, 152). Further, he is convinced of “the need to move from an anonymous experience of grace to a more explicit interpretation and appropriation of this experience in the context of Christian faith” (Marmion 110). The implication is that experiential knowledge is inescapable, and more immediate and complete, but it needs to be recognized and interpreted.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that the experience of God has its own unique depth and value over against Christian faith, in relation to its openness to everyone, the inescapability of the experience, and the fact it is foundational human experience. Rahner seems to extend the relationship between God and human beings [the world] to the extent that the experience of God is present in every man. On the one hand, the experience of God may be limited merely to special, particular and isolated occasions, for example, the practices of the Sacraments or an approved revelation of God to a mystic. On the other, Rahner argues the experience of God is “not the privilege of the individual mystic, but is present in every man even though the process of reflecting upon it varies greatly from one individual to another in terms of force and clarity” (*TI* 11, 153). That is, his idea is that it is impossible for any human being not to have the experience of God.

So, this experience of God as the absolute mystery is not confined to the

individual mystic or to those who interpret their lives explicitly according to categorical knowledge of religion. Further, the experience, for Rahner, is not only present in every human being but also unavoidable in the end, regardless of our attitudes towards it. Even though we may suppress or accept it consciously or unconsciously, interpret it rightly or wrongly, we cannot avoid it. Rahner claims that the experience is “so inescapable that in its ultimate structures its reality is implicitly asserted in the very act of denying it or calling it in question” (*TI* 13, 123). In addition, he explains that “wherever there is selfless love, wherever duties are carried out without hope of reward, wherever the incomprehensibility of death is calmly accepted . . . in all these instances the Spirit is experienced, even though a person may not dare give this interpretation to the experience” (Rahner, 1986, 142).

Interestingly enough, Rahner’s understanding of the inescapability of the experience of God appears to be linked with something which can be experienced in our ordinary daily life. When Rahner refers to the experience of God in relation to ordinary daily life, that experience needs to be understood in a broad sense, rather than in the explicit context of Christian faith. Every human being has “foundational human experiences” (“Grunderfahrungen”) such as the experience of personal love, facing one’s personal responsibility and the approach of death, etc., and in these experiences “it is borne in upon him/her that his/her existence is open to the inconceivable mystery” (*TI* 11, 158). That is, for Rahner, the implicit or explicit experience of God is present in “Grunderfahrungen.” In particular, when we are “thrown back on ourselves” in the experience of “loneliness, fear or imminent death,” Rahner suggests that we should “allow such ultimate, basic human experiences to come first. Then in fact something like a primitive awareness of God can emerge” (Rahner, 1970, 7-8).

III

As a result, for Rahner, the experience of God is not restricted to a particular group of people, but is present in everyone; it is inescapable whether we may deny or misinterpret it; it is linked with foundational human experiences. The implication is that every human being can have the experience of transcendence in his/her own foundational human experiences even without, to some extent, referring to Christian faith. One of the key reasons for this understanding of the experience of God is his notion of human being in relation to God. In terms of the relationship between human being and God, Rahner's main concern is how the finite human being can know the infinite God. In the introduction of *Spirit in the World*, Rahner defines spirit as "a power which reaches out beyond the world and knows the metaphysical" (*SW*, liii). The question is how human knowing can be spirit in the world.

First of all, human being may be characterized as a being in his/her finiteness on the grounds that he/she has his/her origins within the world and has his/her roots in empirical realities. That is, human being is a being in history and the world within contingency, finiteness, and empirical experience. There is, however, the openness of the human mind and heart to the infinite through the dynamics of questioning. For Rahner, "the transcendental subject . . . ultimately apprehends himself as a question" (*TI* 11, 88). In other words, "the individual raises questions about him or herself, and is thereby opened to the unlimited horizons of such questioning," so "in this radical questioning . . . the human person experiences him or herself as a subject oriented towards the totality and as pure openness for absolutely everything, for being as such" (Marmion 131). Thus the person's ability to question is the crucial element to the possibility of opening to the absolute Mystery.

The possibility of the openness to the infinite lies in an a priori "givenness" in human being as well as the dynamics of questioning. For Rahner, the

experience of transcendence (God or Mystery) is linked with the matter of knowledge. In other words, the issue is how the finite being may have the knowledge of the infinite mystery. Here Rahner refers to Kant's notion of the a priori knowledge in the human person. Kant objects to the notion of knowledge as a copy of objects, but claims the a priori knowledge: ". . . understanding has rules which I must presuppose as being in me prior to objects being given to me . . . They find expression in a priori concepts to which all objects of experience necessarily conform and with which they must agree" (Kant, 1929, 24, B xvii). For Kant, this subjective element as the a priori of human knowledge is the possibility of knowledge, and in this context he introduces the term "transcendental": "I entitle transcendental all knowledge which is occupied not so much with objects as with the mode of our knowledge of objects insofar as the mode of knowledge is to be possible a priori" (Kant 59, B 25).

Rahner, like Kant's notion of the a priori knowledge, explores the idea of the "pre-apprehension (*Vorgriff*) of being" which is one of the key terms in *Spirit in the World* and also in his later thought. To ask the metaphysical question can be possible only if we have a prior knowledge of being, and Rahner's contention is that a "pre-apprehension of being is a condition of the possibility of all our knowing" (Kilby 19). The pre-apprehension is non-thematic because it is prior to concepts and objects. On the one hand, Rahner's idea of the a priori knowledge seems to be similar to that of Kant in a sense that both of them refer to the knowledge which is prior to concepts and objects in the human person.

On the other, Rahner's notion goes beyond the aspect of a priori itself. The grounds for man's openness and his reaching out in the unlimited expanse of his transcendence cannot be an empty void. In other words, "this pre-apprehension as merely a question is not self-explanatory," so "it must be understood as due to the working of that to which man is open, namely, being in an absolute sense (*FCF* 34). The implication is that, for Rahner, the term transcendental "never refers solely to the question of the subjective conditions of the possibility of

knowing and acting," but, rather, "God is the pre-supposition, the condition of possibility for all human knowledge" (Marmion 137). If Kant recognizes his term transcendental just as the aspect of a priori, Rahner's notion is more than that.

Although human being appears to be limited to the finiteness of his/her system, the dynamics of questioning and the pre-apprehension of being make it possible for him/her to transcend him or herself. "In doing this one is affirming oneself as more than the sum of the analyzable components of one's reality" (*FCF* 29). The more answers one can discover, the further the infinite horizon of human questioning may recede. That is, one "experiences oneself as infinite possibility because in practice and in theory he/she necessarily places every sought-after result in question" (*FCF* 32).

At the same time, it should be noted that one's possibility of the openness to the infinite does not necessarily put up an opposition to the finite (the world or material), but rather it implies a sort of integration or unity between them. In *Hearers of the Word*, Rahner claims that "man's sense perception must be conceived . . . as a faculty of the *spirit*," and "the spirit possess its openness to being in general (and hence to the absolute being of God) only in and through the possibility of an encounter with materially existent things in time and space through its penetration of the *material*" (*HW* 141). The implication is that the possibility of the experience of transcendence may be found in and through our finite history or world.

In fact, God cannot be one object among other objects. Further, the experience of God is not understood as one of the various experiences in our life in a sense that God is hidden and absolutely incomprehensible. The question is how the term of the experience of transcendence can be situated in our finite life. Here Rahner draws a distinction between "real transcendence" and "transcendence as the a priori openness." On the one hand, real transcendence "is always in the background, in those origins of human life and human knowledge which we have no control," so it "is never captured by metaphysical

reflection” (*FCF* 35). It cannot be mediated objectively. On the other, Rahner regards human transcendence as “the a priori openness of the subject to being as such, which is present precisely when a person experiences himself as involved in the multiplicity of cares and concerns and fears and hopes of his everyday world” (*FCF* 35). As a result, human being may have the experience of transcendence by being open to God in and through contact with the world, with corporeal, spatio-temporal things.

IV

On the one hand, for Rahner, there is an absolute Otherness in terms of transcendence, and human experiences need to be interpreted and appropriated according to Christian faith or dogma. On the other, a person’s ability to question and ‘pre-apprehension’ may enable a person to be open to transcendence, so the experience of transcendence is inescapable and open to everyone. That is, every human being has his/her own ‘foundational human experiences’ in and through which he/she may have the experience of transcendence even without referring explicitly to Christian faith or whether he/she denies or misinterprets that experience. In other words, for Rahner, every human being has the possibility of experiencing transcendence in foundational human experiences.

The implication is that Rahner may open a room for describing the experience of transcendence even in non-theistic areas. As discussed above, the locus of transcendence has lied not only in God but in the human existent since the Enlightenment. So, the term, transcendence, may refer not only to the Absolute Otherness, but to a quality of human life. In terms of that quality, transcendence may mean literally ‘going beyond’, ‘exceeding the limits’, ‘climbing across’ or ‘becoming more.’ In this respect, every human being may be able to experience transcendence by ‘becoming more’ through foundational

human experiences even without referring to God. Ian Fraser points out that “a humanist could just as easily point to moments of self-transcendence that are of the greatest spiritual fulfillment but which do not point to God” (Fraser 38). The question is how non-theistic understanding of transcendence may be related to the theistic approach. Does the non-theistic experience of transcendence have any value from the theistic points of view?

Vincent Geoghegan argues that “at a fundamental level the atheist and the theist are united in a perception of the richness and mystery of the universe” (Geoghegan 102). If we look at briefly the two atheists, Ernst Bloch and Walter Benjamin, it can be shown that their ideas of religion and God do not necessarily oppose to the theistic understanding of transcendence. Although both Bloch and Benjamin are Marxist materialists, they, unlike orthodox Marxists, do not reject religion completely. In his *the Principle of Hope*, Bloch explores the meaning of religion in a very positive way. Religion is a myth, but “religious imagination certainly cannot be dismissed in toto by the achieved demystification of the world-picture” (Bloch 1202). Rather, religion is an expression for “the explosive hope” for the good and a better world. As a result, Bloch tries to describe the contrast of the struggle for human flourishing between in the here and now and beyond this current situation where we may “grasp ourselves and establish what are ours”: “homeland” (Bloch 1376).

After the outbreak of war in 1914, Benjamin had a sort of a traumatic experience and withdrew to a more or less religious level, “from which he contemplated the nature of salvation from the horrors of this earth” (Roberts 109). That is, he puts an emphasis on religion as salvation from the disasters of the world. The Kabbalist Judaic tradition has influenced “his understanding of history as being in eternal decline and decay but from which we can achieve salvation” (Fraser 65). In his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” referring to Klee’s painting ‘Angelus Novus,’ Benjamin argues that our history needs to go beyond the wreckage of our current situation to a better world [salvation or

‘Paradise’]. Although the angel of history turns toward the past and would like to stay and awaken the dead, “a storm is blowing from Paradise.” Eventually, “this storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned” (Benjamin, 1992, 249).

Benjamin and Bloch also illustrate a kind of materialistic appropriation of the real human concerns in relation to the idea of God. Traditionally, it is through the Incarnation that we may recognize the presence of God in the world and have a “transcendental outlook” (Taylor 19). Benjamin, however, refers to God’s relation to the world through the dynamics of language in a sense that God created the world in his word and in his naming of things. Likewise, the human beings can name things and such naming may imply “the communion of man with the creative word of God” (Benjamin, 1997, 116). For Bloch, God “appears as the hypostasized ideal of the human essence which has not yet become in reality” (Bloch 1289). He argues that Christian mysticism results in a ‘breaking into God’ where the division between subject and object disappears and we enter the ‘nunc aeternum’ (eternal now). So the idea of God is not an external or distant being but is instead “part of our own essential being where our consciousness can glimpse moments of the not-yet” (Fraser 69).

Although Bloch and Benjamin are Marxist materialists and deny the traditional notion of God, they understand religion and the idea of God in a positive sense. For Bloch, religion is a vehicle for a better world and God is present in our lives in relation to the notion of ‘eternal now.’ For Benjamin, it is a form of salvation from history and God’s creation is mediated by language. The implication is that their ideas are not just about human flourishing in the present, but about ‘aiming beyond life’ or ‘a change in identity.’ As a result, their understanding of transcendence does not necessarily oppose to Rahner’s notion of transcendence in relation to foundational human experiences. Rather, it appears that they share a common ground in understanding the experience of transcendence on the grounds that they associate the experience of transcendence

essentially with human life as it is.

V

So far, we have discussed how Karl Rahner underlines the importance of human experience profoundly in articulating the idea of transcendence from the theological perspective. It has been shown that: 1) foundational human experiences are present in everyone and is related with the inescapability of the experience of God; 2) human beings can transcend through the dynamics of questioning and the pre-apprehension of being; 3) non-theistic idea of transcendence in Ernst Bloch and Walter Benjamin is associated with the theistic understanding of transcendence. Since the Enlightenment a new way of understanding of human beings has emerged, and particularly the human subject played a central part in the constitution of meaning. The inner self as a reasoning subject, to some extent, rather than the Divine Revelation, has become a sort of a source for a meaning. In particular, Rahner has opened a new way of understanding of human experience in articulating the experience of transcendence in human subject. The significance of Rahner's idea may lie in the fact that it has deepened the understanding of foundational human experiences, and expanded the idea of transcendence beyond the theistic understanding of transcendence. Furthermore, Rahner's thought contributes enormously to the interdisciplinary field of literature and religion on the grounds that it can enrich and deepen foundational human experiences which are described in literature.

That contribution will provide "a good opportunity for religion to engage with literature which represents human life" (Lee 21). Thus foundational experiences in literature may be analyzed by the perspective of religion, which may broaden and strengthen the depth of literature.

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근본적 인간 경험의 초월적 개념: 칼 라너를 중심으로

국문초록

김치헌

본 논문은 칼 라너가 주장한 근본적 인간 경험의 개념이 인간 주체 안에서 이루어지는 초월적 경험을 이해하는데 있어서 매우 중요한 새로운 방법을 제시하고 있음을 연구하고자 한다. 계몽주의 시대 이후로 인간에 대한 새로운 이해의 시각이 대두되기 시작했으며, 특별히 인간이 주체적으로 의미를 형성하는데 중심적인 역할을 하기 시작했다. 신적 계시 보다는 사고하는 주체로서 인간의 내면적 자아가 어떤 측면에서 의미의 원천이 되는 경향을 보이기 시작했다. 라너의 사고의 중요성은 근본적 인간 경험에 대한 이해의 깊이를 심화 시켰다는 것과 초월의 개념을 초월의 유신론적 이해를 넘어서, 더 확장 시켰다는 것이다. 따라서 본 논문은 첫번째로 근본적 인간 경험이 모든 사람들에게 존재한다는 것과 동시에 신에 대한 경험을 피할 수 없다는 것을 보여 주고자 한다. 두번째로 인간은 질문이라는 역동성과 존재에 대한 선험적 인식을 통해서 초월 할 수 있다는 것을 도출할 것이다. 세번째로 에르네스트 블로흐와 발터 벤야민에서 드러나는 무신론적 초월의 개념이 초월의 유신론적 이해와 매우 연관이 깊다는 것을 연구 할 것이다.

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