Four years ago (May 2016), I participated in a theology and literature congress in Buenos Aires, Argentina. The two organizers, Alejandro Bertolini and Cecilia Avenatti de Palumbo, had read my first book, Karl Rahner’s Theological Aesthetics (2014), and had taken interest in how it could complement work they were each doing on Hans Urs von Balthasar’s theological aesthetics. Avenatti de Palumbo published an article in 2015 that put Balthasar, Rahner, and T.S. Eliot into conversation, with my work as partial background.

She presents a rich analysis of Eliot’s Four Quartets that centers on the phrase “unimaginable zero summer” from Little Gidding, a three-word expression for a paradise that we anticipate though do not yet enjoy, which remains as yet invisible and inaudible to us. Here Avenatti de Palumbo detects a seemingly impossible crossing point between the divergent theological approaches of Balthasar and Rahner: “The gaze and hearing find their point of convergence in the same miracle of being, already manifest in glory, already sensed in the ontological disposition of the spirit open to mystery, pointed toward love as toward its center.”

1 The event was hosted by the Universidad Católica Argentina, and the congress was the sixth biennial meeting of ALALITE, the Asociación Latinoamérica de Literatura y Teología. The proceedings were published as Cecilia Avenatti de Palumbo and Alejandro Bertolini (eds.), El Amado en el Amante: Figuras, Textos, y Estilos del Amor Hecho Historia (Buenos Aires: Agape Libros, 2016).


3 Ibid., 29 (my translation): “La mirada y la escucha hallaron su punto de convergencia en el mismo milagro del ser, el cual ya manifestado en la gloria, ya presentido en la disposición ontológica del espíritu abierto al misterio, apuntó hacia el amor como a su centro.”
thinker of the *Schau der Gestalt*, understood foremost in the objective sense of the genitive, articulates the gaze that apprehends glory. Rahner, the thinker of the *Hörer des Wortes*, explicates the hearing (as an ontological, not merely ontic, disposition of the human subject) of divine mystery. Both express attunement to reality’s center: love. In this life, such love shines as the miracle that sustains all that is, if often invisibly; and it rings in the opening of all things to what sustains them, if often inaudibly. Avenatti de Palumbo is well aware that Balthasar is more than the theologian of seeing and Rahner more than hearing, Balthasar more than the theologian of “objective evidence” and Rahner more than “subjective.” But she finds these traditional readings generative for discovering theological complementarity where polemic alone would seem to be found.

Two years ago, given the generous hospitality of colleagues at the Karl-Rahner-Archiv in Munich, I read correspondence from Balthasar to Rahner, and other letters, including one from Rahner to Johann Baptist Metz, about Balthasar.\(^4\) Truly these two admired one another—even with their enduring differences—from their early study of each other’s work (I read a notebook of Rahner’s containing notes on Balthasar’s *Apokalypse der Deutschen Seele*) through their collaboration on an edited volume in the late 1970s. *Cordula oder der Ernstfall* (1966) was a significant bump in the road; ironically, Balthasar penned it at around the same time that Rahner was appealing to Joseph Ratzinger that Balthasar should be awarded an honorary theology degree from the University of Münster.\(^6\) Balthasar apologized at least twice in writing to Rahner for *Cordula*, calling it in a letter from 18 April 1975 “*die leidige Cordula*” (tiresome Cordula), while recognizing the difficulty—the impossibility, really—of taking back what he said there. Differences remained, for sure, as when Rahner criticized Balthasar’s “Neo-Chalcedonianism” from *Theo-Drama 4*.\(^7\) Despite the animus housed in secondary literature, I believe that the differences between these primary authors were amicable, even to the point where they could have worked on a common project, as they had earlier in their lives.

I begin in this way mainly as a response to Jonathan Ciraulo, but also as a reminder to myself, since at times in pursuing a project on Rahner and theological aesthetics I feel pulled toward polemics against Balthasar, from whom I have learned plentifully but with whom I have deep disagreements. Preferable would be a “loving

\(^4\) Archiv der Deutschen Provinz der Jesuiten (ADPSJ) 47-1010 (KRA) II, A, no. 1990 (Balthasar-Rahner correspondence); ADPSJ 47-1010 (KRA) II, A, no. 2342 (Metz-Rahner correspondence).

\(^5\) ADPSJ 47-1010 (KRA) IV, A, 85.

\(^6\) ADPSJ 47-1010 (KRA) II, A, 2342, letter from Rahner to Metz dated 26 August 1964. Metz responded on 5 September that, although Balthasar deserves it, he does not think that the faculty will be able to deliver.

\(^7\) For an extended treatment of this, see Brandon R. Peterson, *Being Salvation: Atonement and Soteriology in the Theology of Karl Rahner* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017).
struggle." If there is a Rahnerian theological aesthetic, and I am betting a great deal on there being one, it owes much to Balthasar’s inspiration. But it is different, maybe even counter-Balthasarian (in the sense Catherine Keller gives to “counter-”, as opposed to “anti-”).

This author response is called “The Hidden Good,” a phrase taken from Balthasar, yet deployed in a different direction. It indicates the transcendental of the good enworlded, made historical, thus mundane; the good that has undergone Christ’s katabasis and that finds expression in us humans as in a distorted mirror (1 Cor 13:12). “The hidden good” encapsulates the counter-proposal to a Balthasarian theo-drama: a Rahnerian aesthetic of freedom. So commences a response to the three inquiries from Ciraulo, the third of which implicates Theodor Sandal Rolfsen’s examination of concupiscent freedom in Dostoevsky’s characters.

Drama

Ciraulo registers three inquiries regarding Freedom Made Manifest (FMM): (1) whether Rahner should be distanced from the category “dramatic”; (2) whether the fundamental option as explained in FMM is Christologically dense enough; and (3) whether concupiscence is properly rendered. Each inquiry offers numerous in-roads for exploration and mutual critique.

Ciraulo probes my choice “to distance Rahner from the notion of the dramatic.” His investigation implicates not only FMM, but the whole projected trilogy.

He quotes my statement, “For Rahner, freedom is not primarily a matter of drama, certainly not high drama fit for a grand stage,” and my ascription to Rahner of an “aesthetic of fragility, not of dramatic heroism” (FMM, 237–38). He adds a cross-reference to an earlier page, where I observe (following Johann Baptist Metz), “[Rahner] rejects any theo-dramatization of suffering, opting instead to recognize suffering in its radical negativity” (FMM, 214). Ciraulo presses me, arguing that in fact I present a “a highly dramatic Rahner, one attentive to the vicissitudes and contingencies of human life, which encounters a God that wills in the particular and demands responses in kind.” I agree, depending on what means by “dramatic,” but with his next line we diverge: “Whether this drama appears remarkable or mundane

---

is utterly irrelevant to the one who has chosen the path of Ignatian indiferencia.” There is much to discuss.

For certain, I place Rahner in close proximity to Balthasar. Many people will cry foul that I contradict myself by calling distant what seems so near. Is not Rahner a Balthasarian theologian of beauty if he is a theological aesthetician? Not necessarily. If Rahner is a theological aesthetician of freedom, does this not mean that he must present a theological dramatic theory on Balthasar’s terms? Not the Balthasarian sort, and that is precisely the point I have made in FMM (Ciraulo understands this well). Balthasar declares in the preface of Theo-Drama 1: “the model of the theatre is a more promising point of departure for a study of theodrama [by which he means, I agree with Ciraulo, an account of the personal interaction of divine, infinite freedom and human, finite freedom] than man’s secular, social activity.”11 I am not entirely convinced. What I find particularly questionable regarding the Theo-Drama—for all its merits, which are many—and what I interrogate specifically (if allusively, with “grand stage”) is the outsized influence of Pedro Calderón de la Barca (1600–1681), particularly his autos sacramental, El Gran Teatro del Mundo (1634).12 Obviously, Calderón is not the only influence, and surely Calderón is a worthy author (and someone whom I have enjoyed reading and teaching). But inasmuch as Balthasar opts to see God as the author, the world as a stage, life as an apocalyptic drama, and people as playing typical roles (like, most controversially, Man [as word, Wort] and Woman [as answer, Antwort]), the influence is clear and, though fruitful, not unproblematic. In the Anatomy of Misremembering, Cyril O’Regan highlights the advantages of Balthasar’s debt to Spanish baroque drama, especially as it aids Balthasar in developing a maximally-eidetic (content-rich) apocalyptic theology resistant to suspect modern and postmodern apocalyptic discourses.13 In Karl Rahner’s Theological Aesthetics, I argued for Rahner’s status as an apocalyptic theologian, but, using O’Regan’s terminology, one who occupies a “metaxic space,” or who produces an apocalyptic theology more hesitant than Balthasar’s in comprehensively narrating the battle between good and evil, Christ’s victory over

11 Balthasar, TD 1: 11–12.
12 Helpful on this topic (though more circumspect in its claims than the one I am making here) is Cecilia Inés Avenatti de Palumbo, La Literatura en la Estética de Hans Urs von Balthasar: Figura, Drama, y Verdad (Salamanca: Secretariado Trinitario, 2002), 312–20. Avenatti de Palumbo notes, “Balthasar not only attended on various occasions performances of Calderón’s El gran teatro del Mundo in Einsiedeln, but also, furthermore, he ventured to translate it [translation published 1959] and to adapt it to put it onstage” (my translation).
death, and the roles humans play in salvation history. In keeping with that argument, if we were to call Rahner “dramatic,” we must put the term in inverted commas and know that if Rahner’s theology of freedom admits of a “dramatic” correlate (as with Balthasar and Calderón), it would likely be contemporary performance art, with its mixture of mundane subject matter and rich if hidden content. That is a case to be made elsewhere.

Balthasarian critiques of Rahner tend to be suspicious of his symbolic-sacramental Christology. Is there, perhaps, some measure of this in Ciraulo’s examination of FMM’s opening question: “How can the insignificant announce the eternal?” (FMM, 1)? It could be. But were one to interpret Ciraulo more generously, one could see that he is laying bare a warrant for rapprochement between Balthasarians and Rahnerians. At issue is the verb, “announce.” Ciraulo rightly notices that when I write “announce” it does not mean (merely) signifying, but something closer to “enacting.” In pointing this out, Ciraulo shows that he has understood well the argument of the introduction, chapter 1, and various other places in the book. Freedom is, in its “ground”, invisible and inaudible, but in its “existence” becomes manifest as visible, audible, and tangible. Such manifestation is not mere signification, “pointing” to something that is always already there, but rather the emergence of the freedom at the ground of all appearances in a particular appearance. Even more important is what I say without saying it with the word “announce.” Heidegger is behind this word. In Being and Time §7, he famously describes phenomena as “announcing” (melden) themselves, meaning that they both—in terms borrowed from Kevin Hart—reveal and re-veil being as they appear. Ciraulo treats it as a matter of course that insignificant things (he uses the geometric figure of a circle, an example of which I am unsure; I prefer a common hare, or a condemned peasant hanging on a Roman cross) would “easily” announce the eternal. Here, even though we may agree in general, I would have a particular quibble. I am uncertain that things are so straightforward. We should regard it as a miracle (though it need not be baroquely dramatic) that the God of glory may be revealed by “poor” phenomena; even if saying that impoverished things veil God’s goodness, making it a hidden good, would make sense. “Announcing” involves both the miracle and the hiddenness; like Rahner’s theology, it denotes a middle space, or voice, where God shines through the soil of circumstance (see FMM, 245).

Above I quoted and promised to discuss Ciraulo’s remark on indifference between the remarkable and the mundane. I cannot but disagree with it, though I

---

can sympathize with Ciraulo’s interpretation of Ignatian indifference. Indifference can mean more simply that neither the remarkable nor the mundane/insignificant would be privileged over the other as a path toward finding God (e.g., for Ignatius, I should not desire to be rich or poor, etc.). Thus these would seem equated. On this reading, which I think coheres with a Balthasarian theo-drama, one can viably privilege the significant *dramatis personae* and events in salvation history in order to illustrate what freedom is and how it is properly deployed; all this in the mold of the pedagogical function of the Spanish baroque *auto sacramental*. One can reasonably assume that if drama at a high level is properly apprehended, all mundane details regarding the nitty-gritty of salvation will “quite easily” fall into place. Or maybe not. Indifference can also mean openness to the remarkable and the mundane in all their details, where the difference between them would become more rather than less pronounced. The latter is my position (which I take to be the Rahnerian position) on indifference. This is the insight behind Rahner’s rather strange essay on the logic of *existentiell* recognition in Ignatius Loyola, in which Rahner makes a plea, which he was never able to fulfill, for an ontology that respects rather than glossing over individual particulars (see *FMM*, 149). Indifference could be a great equalizer, or the great as equalizer, with people falling into typical roles (e.g., Man or Woman), or it could be openness to all the details of individuality, where freedom appears as frustratingly complicated, atypical, where one is challenged to find a divine calling in the strangest of places. Some would call this dramatic. I would select a different term.

I write this during a time of global pandemic, an *Ernstfall* if there has ever been one, a time under the sign of the Apocalypse, where the force of evil seems to have been unleashed to frustrate the good, a plague during which many world leaders are unabashed in their disdain for the general populace and their devotion to Mammon, and during which strong forces aim to divide God’s church. If we must choose between Rahner and Balthasar (and I am not convinced that we must—Ciraulo and I concur on this, I believe), a Balthasarian reading of freedom may speak better to our time. But I think there is a Rahnerian dimension to it, also. For those of us who bide our time at home, whose lives are marked less by the ravages of disease and more by the tedium of caring for children (including the nuts and bolts of their education), preparing meals, maintaining a household, all the while trying to eke out a little time for work related to our occupations, a theology of the muted freedom of the everyday seems apropos. Or maybe Balthasar and Rahner can converge, in a quiet Holy Saturday theology for a grandmother isolated in a nursing home, dying silently and breathlessly from COVID-19. Her struggle is profound, if mundane, apocalyptic, yet non-eidetic, sustained (we hope) by the Lord of History, but who one can only imagine comes in a still-small voice.
Christological Density

Ciraulo recognizes room for elaboration in my assessment of the Christological density of the fundamental option. My treatment of the fundamental option as a Christological concept (FMM, 10) could be fortified by a discussion of the monothelite controversy and its dogmatic resolution at Constantinople III; or, short of such discussion, a general treatment of the theological and dogmatic stakes behind this controversy and resolution. There is something to be said for this suggestion, especially since Rahner so dutifully attended to the history of dogma throughout his career. But Ciraulo’s central concern is less with dogmatic councils and more with how I, along with Rahner, attempt to discuss the “subjective” valence of Christ’s freedom (i.e., Jesus Christ’s freedom as he himself deploys it), and not just Christ as an objective coordinate for human freedom.

Ciraulo appreciates the Christological reflection in chapter 4 on Christ’s agony in the garden (with Lutheran theologian Lois Malcolm as the main interlocutor). I saw this as a culminating point of many passages in chapters 3 and 4. In all of these, Christ’s subjective freedom is at issue. Christ paves the way for a proper “yes.” A “yes” is always in imitatio Christi, a continuation of Christ’s subjective life, even if it is not a direct repetition of Christ’s life “for the nth time,” as Rahner puts it (FMM, 141). We have a Christology of Christ’s subjective life that is not directly conversant with dogmatic councils but rather with piety, even popular piety, the kind that gave rise to the controversies that necessitated the dogmatic councils. In this humble way, I believe I can favorably meet Ciraulo’s suggestion that attention to, for example, Constantinople III, may have been appropriate. What so draws me to popular piety, though, is the following: pious devotion does not merely look to Christ as the object of devotion, to which we may be tempted if our focus is more on doctrines, dogmas, and councils. Pious devotion means to inhabit Christ’s life.

In a published review of Freedom Made Manifest, Leo O’Donovan, SJ relates it to Rahner’s Worte ins Schweigen. There Rahner imagined “his entire life as one long prayer to God (a clear anticipation of what he would later call a fundamental option)” and he “pressed the Christic form of that prayer.” O’Donovan explains, “In effect he was interpreting for the 20th century the great Pauline text on Christ as the ‘Yes’ to all the promises of God and the mediator of humanity’s invitation to humanity for it to offer in turn the eternal affirmation of its creating and redeeming

---

16 While I cannot cite specific pages (there would be too many!) from his writing to substantiate this fully, I should note that I gathered this insight under the tutelage of Brian Daley, S.J., especially in his fall 2006 seminar on the Cappadocians and his translations of Gregory of Nazianzus, but also, more recently, upon reading portions of his relatively recent book, God Visible: Patristic Christology Reconsidered (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).
God (2 Cor 1:19–20).”17 The passage from Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians reads as follows: “For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was proclaimed to you by us, Silvanus and Timothy and me, was not ‘yes’ and ‘no,’ but ‘yes’ has been in him. For however many are the promises of God, their Yes is in him; therefore, the Amen from us also goes through him to God for glory.” Quite honestly, I did not have this Pauline passage in mind as I wrote \textit{FMM}. But it makes sense, and I am grateful to O’Donovan for spurring me to further thought. The Amen that issues from us—should it do so—takes part in Christ’s Yes to God, and travels along his subjective trajectory toward God. The Yes is in Christ, but the Amen is in us—or, should we bring in (sneak in?) the negative side of the fundamental option here, the Amen is obscured, unpronounced, or rejected by us. The subjective freedom of Christ conditions human freedom, provides it with a trajectory, but this trajectory must be traveled. The Yes is embodied by Christ; the Amen—the Amens—must be embodied by us. What I aimed to articulate in \textit{Karl Rahner’s Theological Aesthetics} regarding ethos (the comprehensive way of life that the Christian is challenged to inhabit) aligns with what I tried to say in \textit{FMM} (the fundamental option may be seen as the activity of inhabiting, and the receptivity of being exposed to, this ethos). For the prayerful and devoted Christian, Christ becomes her life, which also remains, paradoxically, her own.

Near the beginning of the \textit{Theo-Drama}, Balthasar states, “By entering into contact with the world theater, the good which takes place in God’s action really is affected by the world’s ambiguity and remains a hidden good.”18 I am most interested in this hiddenness of the good, in precisely the way that Balthasar is talking about it here, where Christ so completely takes on our life that the divine glory in him becomes murky. Apparently, this is an uncomfortable thought for Balthasar. Elsewhere in the \textit{Theo-Drama}, he is more concerned with how a super-version of hiddenness transpires within the immanent Trinity, often, I would argue (and here I am Rahnerian and “allergic” to Constantinople II, as Ciraulo puts it) economic hiddenness is unduly eclipsed. The danger here would be that the subjective freedom of Christ, the Yes, would so outshine human freedom’s Amen as to make it an afterthought, if a thought at all.

Brandon Peterson’s account of Rahner’s soteriology may serve as an aid. Peterson’s \textit{Being Salvation} responds to Balthasarian critiques of Rahner’s symbolic-sacramental Christology by discovering Rahner’s “representative” Christology and soteriology. At stake here is whether Rahner’s soteriology is sufficiently

---


18 Balthasar, TD 1: 19.
Christocentric, and whether his emphasis on the Incarnation within his Christology comes at the expense of an anemic staurology. In short, Balthasar is concerned that Christ does not bring about salvation, but merely notifies us that salvation has occurred. Rahner’s theology does not emphasize the dramatic *stellvertretenden* (vicarious) role of Christ as the one who came to die and thus redeem us (though he does not deny it, either, as Peterson closely documents). But this hardly means that Jesus does not represent humanity in a strong sense, as both “objective redemption” and as divine-human subject; he does. The way that Rahner articulates this representation, namely by holding in productive tension Jesus’ unmixed full humanity and full divinity, could help theologians to account for how our human subjectivity may be transformed by and align with Jesus’ subjectivity. Peterson summarizes: “In virtue of Jesus, who is himself the ‘origin of redemption,’ each person has a salvific responsibility to which her freedom can be directed—namely, God.”

Our responsibility is to travel the ambiguous track of this world, where the good is often hidden, through a personal yes (toward God) or no (away from God).

Concupiscence, Finitude, and Art

Here we can bring in Rolfsen, who faithfully represents what is said about concupiscence in *FMM*, and thus could bring some tension to bear on Ciraulo’s critique of the relationship between concupiscence and finitude in *FMM* as he reads it. Rolfsen writes, “Concupiscence can never be truly overcome. It is ‘a condition of finitude’ (*FMM*, 69), a feature of our existence as limited creatures. This belongs to the *Geworfenheit* of the human being and the general paradox of the ground of human freedom being simultaneously its wellspring (as the condition of freedom’s possibility) and its chain (as what freedom can never truly master or determine).” This is right, assuming we are discussing finitude in its infralapsarian conditions, which I have no reason to doubt that Rolfsen is. Rolfsen’s word, “the chain” could be used in combination with the Schellingian phrase I adduced, “*der nie aufgehende Rest*” (the indivisible remainder) to issue a collegial correction to Ciraulo’s reading of *FMM* and Rahner’s “The Theology of Power.”

Ciraulo reads Rahner as saying that concupiscence will eventually be left behind, and, were this the case, it would raise fundamental questions regarding my treatment of concupiscence. I read it differently. Let us set the context. Rahner discusses the role of power (manifest as force) in society. Christian hope holds that

---

19 For an explanation of “representative,” see Peterson, *Being Salvation*, 40–46, and for how Rahner and Balthasar differ on this topic, see 46, 263–64.
over time, the use of force will diminish. Force, like concupiscence, is a result of sin. As such, even though it is “natural” (at this point in time, it is there as if it has always already been there), it ought not to be. Rahner explains that the authentic Christian stance toward the use of force should be the same as the Christian stance toward concupiscence. One struggles against concupiscence as something “to be overcome.” Where Ciraulo and I diverge is in our apprehensions of the phrase “to be overcome,” as the English translation has it. This “to be overcome” (zu Überwindende), in my view, should be understood in the sense of the gerundive in Latin, which carries a connotation of “ought.” Ciraulo prefers a sense of “will.” I do not accept this reading, even if I find it plausible. Concupiscence remains, which is why I found Schelling’s phrase, “the indivisible remainder,” so compelling for elucidating Rahner’s theology of concupiscence—“chain” works, too! Within the “Theology of Power” text, Rahner precisely rules out that it would be worth imagining a paradisaical condition where concupiscence were inoperative. If we want to talk about human finitude, which Ciraulo does and I do too, we have to talk about concupiscent finitude. This is our fact.

We could venture a comparison with another site in Rahner’s theology: concupiscence functions by way of analogy with Rahner’s understanding of mystery. While mystery is something that we often approach with the intent that it be overcome (through knowledge), realistically it will not be. Where the analogy would seem to break down is that mystery is positively valued, and concupiscence at best neutrally, but perhaps the analogy holds, and in an important way. Concupiscence is part and parcel of the mysterium iniquitatis, a mystery whose effects abide—precisely this is why it is so mysterious—even after the definitive victory over sin by Christ (1 Cor 15). Regarding Christ, in conjunction with whom Ciraulo raises further critical questions, yes, Jesus Christ lived without concupiscence. But just as he was like us in all things but sin (Heb 4:15), yet he took our sin upon himself (2 Cor 5:21; 1 Pet 2:24; see also Rom 8:3), so too did he, as nonconcupiscent, take on our concupiscence (this is my reading of “He is able to deal patiently with the ignorant and erring, for he himself is beset by weakness” [Heb 5:2]). If we wish to talk about the eternal significance of the humanity of Jesus (that terrific essay from TI 3 to which Ciraulo alludes), it would be worth noting how concupiscence leaves its mark on Jesus, and all of us, to all eternity; the resurrected Christ still bears the wounds of the cross.

Rolfesen’s fascinating reading of characters from Dostoevsky’s The Brothers Karamazov becomes particularly important on this count. Before I elaborate, I must admit that his interpretation is not something that I could have accomplished. I have read minimal Dostoevsky, and not that well. It is a joy to see FMM applied to art. I attempted a brief application to Albrecht Dürer’s Feldhase within the book itself. A long-term hope is to utilize ideas from FMM, Karl Rahner’s Theological
Aesthetics, and, should it materialize, *Love’s Terrible Radiance* to illuminate other works of art (given my own artistic proclivities, which lie not in literature but contemporary visual art, I would track in that direction). In the meantime, should others converse with the type of Rahnerian aesthetic with which I am experimenting, that would be a great gift.

Rolfsen focuses on the friction exerted on the fundamental option by the concupiscent remainder as a way of elucidating Dostoevsky’s characters from *The Brothers Karamazov*. He believes, rightly, that Rahner and Dostoevsky can mutually illuminate regarding the complexity of saying “yes” or “no” to God. Grushenka is the wicked woman whose “wickedness” cannot absorb her wholly (a better spin on concupiscence than the idea that Christians can never expect to eliminate violent force fully from human relations!). Grushenka’s brief display of compassion to Alyosha manifests the hidden good that still remains within her as, to put it in Pauline terms, she does not understand what she does (see Rom 7:15–20). At the end of *FMM* chapter 1, I cite a footnote from Rahner’s article on concupiscence from *Theological Investigations 1* in which he suggests that concupiscence aids in repentance (*FMM*, 75). Because human beings cannot exhaustively self-determine, for good or for evil, concupiscence stands as a kind of good news, inasmuch as it keeps the human person from closing himself off fully from God’s mercy.

I note all this because Rolfsen worries that right around the same point in *FMM*, I back into a paradox, where concupiscence, which I had been arguing functions neutrally, all but determines that the human person cannot but misapprehend God’s word (Word?) and thus say “no” to God. It seems to me that the example of Grushenka could have pointed Rolfsen’s analysis in the opposite direction, thus toward the kinds of thoughts I have just reviewed. The oddity of concupiscence is that this effect of original sin (thus a kind of evil) keeps luring us toward the good. This view of concupiscence is congruent with Thomas Aquinas’s, whatever other revisions Rahner makes to Thomas. For Thomas, concupiscence is a tendency toward the good.22

As Rolfsen acknowledges, though, the problem with concupiscence is that it leads to absorption in sensible appearances, thus hindering the freedom of spirit in its striving through them toward something higher. Though concupiscence is a brake on saying “yes” to God, it is not so much of a hindrance that it coerces a “no.” Rather, it funnels freedom toward an incomplete yes—or no. Rolfsen uses the example of Alyosha’s loving distress after Zosima’s death as evidence to bolster his objection that I seem to figure the difficulty (or incompletion) of saying “yes” to God as a matter of ignorance. The word “ignorance” appears only three times in *FMM*, and only once does it possibly suggest what Rolfsen thinks. I refer to “human

---

22 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a-2ae, q. 23, a. 1 and 1a-2ae, q. 30, aa. 1 and 2.
ignorance’ in the case of Christ’s agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, meaning that Christ (as human) did not know what his fate would be (FMM, 231). Like Alyosha, Jesus is well aware of his Father’s love—not ignorant of it—but is overtaken with death-dealing sorrow. If this is the place in FMM that Rolfsen found problematic, then, we must agree to disagree. For me (as for Rahner), the concupiscent incompletion of a ‘yes’ is not a matter of ignorance, but of misdirected love for the good. That could be of two sorts: (1) misapprehension of an apparent good for the proper end of one’s desire, or (2) love that has been harmed or violated, since all human love is ‘exposed,’ as FMM chapter 4 explains at length. Perhaps ignorance could be a factor, but that is not something I wrote about in FMM. This could be food for future thought, particularly since I intend to write about ‘gnoseological concupiscence’ in Love’s Terrible Radiance. That said, saying ‘no’ to God is not necessarily or primarily a matter of ignorance. Much of chapter 2 is devoted to arguing the contrary, inasmuch as the possibility of the ‘no’ becomes a live theological question in conjunction with the question of whether baptismal grace (which coordinates with faith and, presumably, some knowledge of God) may be lost.

Rolfsen asks an important, related question: ‘What if exposure to the Word can make a person elect to stay ignorant of it?’ This is the question of the hardening of heart. We could call it the Psalm 95 question: if today you hear God’s voice, will you harden your heart (see Ps 95:7–8)? A fundamental option of ‘no’ would, I think, be tantamount to refusing to acknowledge God’s offer of mercy and salvation. Dostoevsky’s characters who refuse forgiveness (Fyodor foremost) illustrate this well. Even for such as these, Rolfsen suspects, the ‘no’ serves as a kind of self-protection, a glimmer of concupiscent attraction toward the hidden good. In this way, maybe, the ‘no’ can serve not just (or at all?) as the opposite to the ‘yes,’ since it may just be that to say ‘yes’ to God is to admit one’s weakness before God. As Rolfsen puts it, ‘The fundamental ‘yes’ to God is not a heroic grandstanding.’

I suppose this returns us to the beginning, where I contrasted Balthasar’s theo-drama with Rahner’s aesthetic of fragile freedom. Surely a Balthasarian theo-drama can illuminate Dostoevsky. Ample citations across Balthasar’s trilogy attest to this. But Rolfsen heartens me in his contention that a Rahnerian aesthetic has something to offer—something different, a hidden good that, little by little, I have attempted to uncover.