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Luther on Necessity

Knut Alfsvåg
School of Mission and Theology, Stavanger, Norway

Everything Happens with Absolute Necessity

Among the quotations from Luther's works condemned by the pope in 1520 was the statement that free will is something that exists in name only.[1] In his defense of this statement in *Assertio omnium articulorum*, published in December 1520, Luther goes one step further. Here he not only declares "free will" to be a concept without factual reference,[2] he even insists that there is no one in the position even to think on one's own, either good or bad, as everything happens with absolute necessity.[3]

This is certainly a strong argument defending the rejection of free will. But both friend and foe have since been wondering if Luther is not overshooting his target here. Even if one were to admit that free will may be a problematic concept, does its rejection necessarily imply a defense of the idea that everything happens with absolute necessity? Is not this idea rather at variance both with the basic tenets of the Christian faith and with the otherwise generally nondeterminist flavor of Luther's thought? Why does Luther in *Assertio* make himself dependent on the undoubtedly controversial and potentially inconsistent idea that everything happens by absolute necessity?

Luther does not always frame his answer to the question of free will in these terms. When he translated *Assertio omnium articulorum* into German and published it as *Grund und Ursach aller Artikel* in March 1521, his defense of the rejection of

[1] "Liberum arbitrium post peccatum res est de solo titulo, et dum facit, quod in se est, peccat mortaliter" (Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Schriften* [72 vols.; Weimar: H. Bühlau, 1883–1990] (WA) 7:142.23). The quotation is thesis 13 from the Heidelberg Disputation; see WA 1:354.5.

[2] ". . . figmentum in rebus seu titulus sine re" (WA 7:146.5).

[3] "Quia nulli est in manu sua quippiam cogitare mali aut boni, sed omnia . . . de necessitate absoluta eveniunt" (WA 7:146.7–8).

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free will did not contain any reference to the idea of absolute necessity,[4] and similar examples are not hard to find. On the other hand, what Luther wrote in *Assertio* seems to be more than tangentially attached to his own thinking. He defends it by referring to Scripture (Matt 10:29),[5] to doctrinal tradition (Wycliffe),[6] and Latin poetry.[7] In addition, the idea seems to be closely related to more extensive discussions in other works, particularly in the *Lectures on Romans* and in *De servo arbitrio*. The latter work was written as a refutation of Erasmus's attack on what he considered the determinism inherent in Luther's rejection of free will, and here Luther seems to go even further in defending the idea of absolute necessity.[8] At the same time, in this work Luther also goes quite far in maintaining both the idea that there is much in God that we do not know,[9] and that humans freely cooperate with God.[10] Luther's position concerning the divine determination of what occurs has therefore not only been criticized as incompatible with his own understanding of human freedom, it has also been criticized as incompatible with his insistence of the limit of human knowledge in relation to God. How can Luther maintain that God does everything when he at the same time both insists that we do not know what God does, and that humans freely do what they do? Is Luther just confused, or is there something his readers have a problem grasping here?

In what follows, I will try to answer these questions by taking a closer look at the passages where Luther develops his ideas of divine necessity most extensively

[4] WA 7:446–51. There is an English translation of *Grund und Ursach* in Martin Luther, *Luther's Works* (ed. Helmut T. Lehmann and Jaroslav Pelikan; 55 vols.; St. Louis: Concordia, 1958–1967) (LW), vol. 32; for this article, see pp. 92–94. There is as far as I know no English translation of *Assertio*.

[5] Luther's quotation is inaccurate: "Folium arboris non cadit in terram sine voluntate patris vestri." The text speaks about sparrows, not leaves, and says nothing about God's will; both the Greek and Latin texts have "without the Father."

[6] Wycliffe was condemned at the Council in Constance for defending the view that everything happens by necessity. Both Wycliffe and Hus pointed to the difference between the biblical idea of election and the closely connected emphasis on the hiddenness of the true believers, and the understanding of the church as an external organization; see Martin Anton Schmidt, "Dogma und Lehre im Abendland II: Die Zeit der Scholastik," in *Handbuch der Dogmen- und Theologiegeschichte* (ed. Carl Andresen; 3 vols.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989) 1:567–754, at 731–32 and 744. The reference to Wycliffe in a work where Luther defends his theology against attack from the pope is therefore hardly accidental.

[7] Luther quotes from the first-century A.D. Marcus Manilius, "certa stant omnia lege," everything stands by (eternal) law.

[8] "Ex quo sequitur irrefragabiliter, omnia quae facimus, omnia quae fiunt, etsi nobis videntur mutabiliter et contingenter fieri, revera tamen fiunt necessario et immutabiliter, si Dei voluntatem spectes" (WA 18:615.33).

[9] "In Deo esse multa abscondita, quae ignoremus" (WA 18:606).

[10] "Sed non operatur sine nobis, ut quos in hoc ipsum recreavit et conservat, ut operaretur in nobis et nos ei cooperaremur" (WA 18:754.13–14).

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and the historical context within which they are conceived.[11] By looking at one text written before and two texts written after Luther's so-called evangelical breakthrough, I will pay some attention to the question of how Luther's new understanding of salvation informs his view of predestination and necessity. I will try to substantiate the idea that, in his mature understanding of divine necessity, Luther holds together divine determination and human freedom without letting the one perspective subvert the other, a stance that is deeply informed by Chalcedonian two-nature Christology. In this way, I hope to contribute to the clarification of this central question in Luther scholarship.[12]

Luther's Understanding of Romans 8:28

Luther's first extensive treatment of the problem is given in his *Lectures on Romans* (1515) as a commentary on Rom 8:28: "We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose" (ESV).[13] Luther finds the doctrine of predestination and election to be a most delightful one, the reason being that if salvation did not depend on a divine decree, it would depend on something as contingent as human will and human works, and then it could not stand.[14] Only God's election and immutable will,

[11] The background of Luther's thought is usually found in *via moderna* Scholasticism, Renaissance humanism, and late medieval mysticism. Through the latter he was also familiar with the tradition of negative theology in a way that deeply influenced his understanding of theological epistemology. For a brief summary of the discussion of the historical context of Luther's thought, see Knut Alfsvåg, *What No Mind Has Conceived: An Investigation of the Significance of Christological Apophaticism* (Studies in Philosophical Theology 45; Leuven: Peeters, 2010) 177–80.

[12] The most recent summary of the discussion is found in Robert Kolb, *Bound Choice, Election, and Wittenberg Theological Method: From Martin Luther to the Formula of Concord* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2005). For older overviews of the discussion with Erasmus and the relevant literature, see Klaus Schwarzwäller, *Sibboleth: Die Interprätation von Luthers Schrift 'De servo arbitrio' seit Theodosius Harnack* (Munich: Kaiser, 1969); Wolfgang Behnk, *Contra Liberum Arbitrium Pro Gratia Dei: Willenslehre und Christuszeugnis bei Luther und ihre Interpretation durch die neuere Lutherforschung. Eine systematisch-theologiegeschichtliche Untersuchung* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1982); Knut Alfsvåg, *Identity of Theology: On the Relation between Exegesis and Doctrine in Luther's* De servo arbitrio (Bangalore: Theological Book Trust, 1996). Harry J. McSorley gives an extensive argument for the view that Luther combines a biblically founded idea of enslaved will with an incompatible and indefensible idea of necessity (*Luthers Lehre vom unfreien Willen nach seiner Hauptschrift De Servo Arbitrio im Lichte der biblischen und kirchlichen Tradition* [Munich: Max Huebner Verlag, 1967]). Kolb (*Bound Choice*, 26–28) and Oswald Bayer ("God's Omnipotence," *LQ* 23 [2009] 85–102, at 98) suggest that Luther may have come to a similar conclusion himself, though their primary reference for this view is a later addition to the original text of *De servo arbitrio*; concerning the textual history of this passage, see Kolb, *Bound Choice*, 298–99.

[13] WA 56:381–88; LW 25:371–78. For an interesting comparison of the interpretation of this key passage by Augustine, Luther, and Calvin, see Steven D. Paulson, *Lutheran Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2011) 219–21.

[14] "Quia si propositum Dei non esset et in nostro arbitrio et nostris operibus staret salus, contingenter staret. Quam contingentiam quam facile, non dico omnia illa mala simul, Sed vnum illorum impediret ac peruerteret!" (WA 56:381.24–27; LW 25:371).

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which for Luther is the same as God's eternal and immovable love, has the power to resist all possible opponents of the salvation of humans.[15]

The Scholastics had tried to solve the problem of the relation between divine election and human freedom through the distinction between the logical necessity of a valid argument (*necessitas consequentiae*) and the factual necessity of the actual event (*necessitas consequentis*). In this way, Thomas Aquinas combines the logical principle that what God wills necessarily happens, with a rejection of factual or ontological determinism, since humans are still free to do or not to do what is for their best.[16] From Luther's point of view, the problem of this distinction is that it deprives Paul's argument in Rom 8:28 of its significance. If God's letting everything work for the good of the elect is dependent on the elect consenting to let God work in them in this way, the idea of God as the guarantor of good is void of meaning. For the argument in Romans 8 to work, God must determine the actual event, not merely the underlying logic.

Luther accepts the distinction between logic and event as an expression of the fact that the event is contingent, i.e., susceptible to change, in a sense that logic is not. But if the point of Paul's argument is the necessity of the event, the distinction between logical and factual necessity will not contribute to the understanding of Romans 8. The words by which the Scholastics maintain this distinction are therefore for Luther "*vacua verba*."[17] For even if the event is essentially contingent, i.e., not divine and therefore not immutable, it still takes place by necessity if God has predestined it.[18] Before God there is no contingency; this is only something that belongs to the realm of humans.[19]

In Luther's view, all arguments against predestination proceed from what he calls the prudence of the flesh, i.e., from placing oneself above God and subjecting him to questions of why he does what he does, which is the attitude Paul rejects in Rom 9:20.[20] Luther therefore defends his view of necessity by systematically refuting all

[15] "Ac non arbitrium nostrum, Sed inflexibilem et firmam suam predestinationis voluntatem per hec omnia probat" (WA 56:382.7–9; LW 25:371). The significance of this connection between omnipotence, predestination, and the rejection of *liberum arbitrium* is well captured in Paulson, *Lutheran Theology*, 19.

[16] McSorley, *Luthers Lehre vom unfreien Willen*, 146–50; Reinhard Hütter, "St. Thomas on Grace and Free Will in the *Initium Fidei*: The Surpassing Augustinian Synthesis," *NV* 5 (2007) 521–54.

[17] WA 56:382.24; LW 25:372.

[18] "Quia nullus querit aut dubitat, an res creata sit contingens in esse suo i. e. mutabilis, Et non Deus seu immutabilis, Sed queritur de necessitate sequele, An fiat necessario, quod Deus predestinauit, Et concedunt, quod sic" (WA 56:383.4–7; LW 25:372–73). Contrary to what is maintained by Christine Helmer, Luther thus does not follow the medieval rule that "only the relations in the divine essence are necessary" ("God from Eternity to Eternity: Luther's Trinitarian Understanding," *HTR* 96 (2003) 127–46, at 131).

[19] "Nulla est contingentia apud Deum simpliciter, Sed tantum coram nobis" (WA 56:383.19; LW 25:373). Here, too, Luther refers to the idea that not even a leaf of a tree falls to the ground without the will of the Father, but without committing the error of referring it to Matthew 10.

[20] WA 56:385.1–5; LW 25:375.

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such arguments. Free will without grace is in sin by necessity;[21] it should therefore, following Augustine's example, rather be called enslaved will. It is still free concerning the inferior things, but with regard to salvation, freedom presupposes grace.[22] The statement in 1 Tim 2:4 (God desires all people to be saved) therefore pertains only to the elect, and Christ did not die for everybody.[23] Nobody is forced to sin; God is therefore not unjust in condemning those who sin by necessity. Even in hardening sinners, God's will is good and should be recognized as such.[24] This is a teaching that is well suited to promote humility in humans. It should thus be taught in order to extinguish all prudence of the flesh so that humans resign to the will of God even if it leads them to hell; this is the highest level among the elect.[25]

Luther's interest is thus exclusively focused on the interpretation of the event. The question as to whether an event is in itself essentially good or bad, necessary or contingent, however, does not make sense in Luther's view; meaning and significance are always related to context. In relation to God, all events are necessary, as there is no contingency before God. They are necessarily good, if they take place according to God's immutable love, or necessarily evil, if they are determined by their opposition to God's will. But the created world is given to humans by divine decree, and humans must decide on their own what to do with it. Humans thus do what they want to do, but if an act is not determined by divine love, it is still necessarily evil. In this way, Luther maintains that humans are free to do what they want insofar as they are considered in their relation with the rest of creation, while at the same time holding that humans are determined by God's election as far as their relation to God is concerned.

Luther's discussion of necessity is thus not carried by a kind of metaphysics that tries to explain how God can be the cause of an event while still maintaining its contingence.[26] The coincidence of divine and human agency is for Luther the given starting point, not a conclusion to be defended.[27] It thus reveals what has been

[21] "Liberum arbitrium extra gratiam constitutum Nullam habet prorsus facultatem ad Iustitiam, Sed necessario est in peccatis" (WA 56:385.15–16; LW 25:375).

[22] "Habita autem gratia proprie factum est Liberum, saltem respectu salutis. Liberum quidem semper est naturaliter, Sed respectu eorum, que in potestate sua sunt et se inferiora, Sed non supra se, cum sit captiuum in peccatis" (WA 56:385.18–21; LW 25:375).

[23] WA 56:385.23–28; LW 25:375–76. Here Luther maintains what was later known as the Calvinist doctrine of limited atonement.

[24] WA 56:385.32–386.5; LW 25:376.

[25] "Tertius optimus et extremus eorum, qui et in effectu seipsos resignant ad infernum pro Dei voluntate, Vt in hora mortis fit fortasse multis. Hii perfectissime mundantur a propria voluntate et 'prudentia carnis'" (WA 56:388.10–14; LW 25:378).

[26] This is Thomas's perspective, aptly summarized as the idea of divine transcendental causality; see Hütter, "St. Thomas on Grace and Free Will," 521–54.

[27] Both McSorley (*Luthers Lehre vom unfreien Willen*, 288–303) and Hütter ("St. Thomas on Grace and Free Will," 530) find Luther inconsistent in that he accepts the contingency Thomas defends with the distinction *necessitas consequentiae/consequentis* without accepting the distinction itself. What they fail to consider is that Luther rejects the "metaphysics of being," which, according to Hütter, is what informs the distinction in the first place (ibid., 531).

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described as a relational ontology,[28] where the main characteristics of a phenomenon are determined by context and relation,[29] and the concept of causality is replaced by the idea of participation.[30] The same event can then simultaneously appear as determined in one relation and free in another. That this kind of metaphysics may issue in an untroubled combination of divine necessity and human liberty had been demonstrated some sixty years earlier by Nicholas Cusanus, particularly in his works *De possest* and *De visione Dei*.[31] These are works Luther never mentions or alludes to, and there is therefore no reason to suspect direct influence. Representing a similar attempt at modifying *via moderna* nominalism by means of mysticism and negative theology, they are still considerably more interesting as possible frames of reference for Luther's thought than the works of Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus.[32]

If Luther's understanding of necessity is read against the background of a metaphysics he did not share, it appears as a confused and inconsistent adherence to ontological determinism.[33] But from the point of view of a metaphysics of relations, it merely maintains what seems fairly obvious as long as one accepts Luther's basic point of orientation. When the almighty Creator acts, his acts are decisive,

[28] On the difference between substance ontology and relational ontology, see further Oswald Bayer, "Philosophical Modes of Thought of Luther's Theology as an Object of Inquiry," in *The Devil's Whore: Reason and Philosophy in the Lutheran Tradition* (ed. Jennifer Hockenbery Dragseth; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011) 13–22, at 18.

[29] See Ferdinand Edward Cranz, "Cusanus, Luther, and the Mystical Tradition," in *Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Religion* (ed. Charles Trinkaus and Heiko A. Oberman; Leiden: Brill, 1974) 93–102. Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle thus speaks of the "binary perspectival system that operates in Luther's argument," but erroneously identifies *Assertio* as its initial occurrence ("Stoic Luther: Paradoxical Sin and Necessity," *ARG* 73 [1982] 69–93, at 88).

[30] Cf. Robert W. Jenson, "An Ontology of Freedom in the *De servo arbitrio* of Luther," *ModTheo* 10 (1994) 247–52, at 252: ". . . the rapture-relation [through which we are rapt into willing and loving action] is not causative but participatory." On the shift from participation to causality and back again, see further Alfsvåg, *What No Mind Has Conceived*, 171–75 (on Thomas and Cusanus) and pp. 195–96 and passim (on Luther).

[31] See Knut Alfsvåg, "Human Liberty as Participation in the Divine in the Work of Nicholas Cusanus," in *Nicholas of Cusa on the Self and Self-Consciousness* (ed. Walter Andreas Euler, Ylva Gustafsson, and Iris Wikström; Åbo: Åbo Akademi University Press, 2010) 39–66; idem, "*Explicatio* and *complicatio*: On the Understanding of the Relationship between God and the World in the Work of Nicholas Cusanus," *IJST* 14 (2012) 295–309. Cusanus solves the problem of divine necessity and human contingency by relativizing the difference between potentiality and actuality; in God are enfolded both the potential and the actual, and humans choosing one possibility over another does not therefore bear upon necessity as seen from God's perspective. This shows a level of precision considerably beyond what is found in Luther's *Lectures on Romans*; it is still compatible with Luther's thought in a way that neither Thomism nor *via moderna* Scholasticism is.

[32] On similarities in thought structure between Cusanus and Luther, see Jean-Claude Lagarrigue, "Les souffrances 'infernales' du Christ en Croix," in *De venatione sapientiae: Akten des Symposiums in Trier vom 23. bis 25. Oktober 2008* (ed. Walter Andreas Euler; Trier: Paulinus, 2010) 301–18; Knut Alfsvåg, "Cusanus and Luther on Human Liberty," *NZSTR* 54 (2012) 66–80.

[33] Both McSorley (*Luthers Lehre vom unfreien Willen*) and Hütter ("St. Thomas on Grace and Free Will," 525–34) thus show that when one overlooks Luther's philosophical reasons for rejecting the *via moderna* and concentrates on his theological reasons, Luther appears to be either guilty or inconsistent regarding the accusation of determinism.

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and there is nothing within the realm of the created and the contingent that can ever change this fact. When humans are considered in relation to the finite world, however, they are free to do what they want to do within the restrictions posed on them as created beings. And the question of how these perspectives interact to the effect that human liberty is real without subverting God's being in control of the overall outcome of human history, is a question that from Luther's point of view can never be explored in detail.

Still, there are good reasons to doubt whether Luther is able to apply these assumptions in a consistent way in this passage from his *Lectures on Romans*. What he aims for is to retain the full force of Paul's argument that everything works for the good of the elect. He may thus be justified both in connecting the will of God with the actual event, and in maintaining the necessity of sin without grace. He may even be justified to a considerable degree in maintaining what he refers to in his refutation as the prudence of the flesh. He is, however, hardly justified in making the doctrine of predestination into a means of humiliation culminating in the doctrine of *resignatio ad infernum*. To induce in humans a sense of indifference as they are led by God to heaven or hell according to his eternal decision is most certainly not what Paul is aiming at in Romans 8. Neither is this an attitude that is compatible with the untroubled joy of the immutability of divine election that is the starting point of Luther's exegesis of this passage. Luther is thus captured by what could be described as the Manichaeic elements in his defense of Paul's argument to the extent that his exposition issues in a refutation of the apostle's doctrine more than its explication.

Luther therefore follows the logic of his rejection of Semipelagianism in a way that subverts what he claims to defend. This is not uncommon in Luther's works from this period.[34] He is quite precise in what he rejects, but his positive unfolding of the Christian faith still lacks a stable foundation.

Predestination as Unquestioning Trust in Omnipotent Divine Goodness

This inconsistency in Luther's thought changed, however, with what he later described as his theological breakthrough: the understanding of how God justifies sinners by transmitting to them his own righteousness through the proclamation of the word received in faith.[35] There has been much scholarly discussion concerning the date of the breakthrough; there are, however, reasons to regard the exegesis of Ps 5:9 in *Operationes in Psalmos* as the first time we find in Luther's works an interpretation of the righteousness of God that parallels the retrospective report

[34] For a defense of a similar way of reading even a work as late as the Heidelberg Disputation (1518), see Alfsvåg, *What No Mind Has Conceived*, 198.

[35] Luther's most detailed report on this breakthrough dates from 1545 and is found in WA 54:185–86; LW 34:336–38.

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of the old Luther.[36] Interestingly, the exposition of this psalm also contains a fairly detailed discussion of the problem of predestination, which allows for an investigation of how Luther's evangelical discovery informed his understanding of divine necessity.[37]

The understanding of salvation as nothing but the transfer of divine righteousness to the sinner lets Luther explore the world of faith from a *creatio ex nihilo* perspective that necessarily issues in a doctrine of predestination.[38] But if there is absolutely nothing in humans to distinguish between the saved and the condemned, how can one be sure that one belongs among the elect?[39] Luther has two answers to this question. God above all wants humans to trust him; one can therefore be sure that questions of doubt come from the devil.[40] And if one is tempted to demand a sign of one's own election, this is merely a sign that one does not trust God and thus does not respect his divinity and wants to be god oneself.[41] To make queries about the reasons behind God's judgments is a task for the devil, not for believers. What God requires is that his will is given to humans in a way that issues in their unyielding trust and commitment.[42]

There is thus little left of the *resignatio ad infernum* perspective from *Lectures on Romans*. Luther no longer understands humans as indifferent in relation to the apparent randomness of the decisions of the almighty one. On the contrary, what follows from the new emphasis on the transfer of divine righteousness is a reinterpretation of human resignation according to the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*; it is precisely when humans understand that they can contribute nothing that the area is cleared for the recreation of humans in the image of God. The outcome is a kind of fusion of divine righteousness and human will whereby the human relationship with God is characterized as trust, not as *resignatio*.

[36] For a presentation of this passage with an overview of the main literature concerning Luther's theological breakthrough, see Alfsvåg, *What No Mind Has Conceived*, 200–1. The Latin text of *Operationes*, which are lectures on Psalms 1–22 held from 1519–1521, are found in WA 5 and in Martin Luther, *Operationes in Psalmos* (ed. Gerhard Hammer and Manfred Biersack; Archiv zur Weimarer Ausgabe der Werke Martin Luthers; 2 vols.; Cologne: Bohlau, 1981/1991). For an English translation of *Operationes*, see Martin Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms* (trans. Henry Cole; 2 vols.; London: Simpkin and Marshall, 1826); volume one, covering the commentary to Psalms 1–7 is reprinted as Martin Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-two Psalms* (ed. John Nicholas Lenker; trans. Henry Cole; vol. 1; Sunbury, Penn.: Lutherans in All Lands Co., 1903). In what follows, I refer to the latter edition as *Commentary*.

[37] The passage on predestination is found in WA 5:172–77; *Commentary* 280–90. For a more extensive discussion of this passage, see Alfsvåg, *What No Mind Has Conceived*, 212–20.

[38] On the understanding of salvation as creation from nothing in the commentary on Psalm 5, see Alfsvåg, *What No Mind Has Conceived*, 210–12.

[39] "Sed quid, inquies, si [diabolus] me de praedestinatione vexet et inquietet, quod frustra sperem, si non sum praedestinatus?" (WA 5:172.1; *Commentary* 280).

[40] WA 5:172.3–12; *Commentary* 280.

[41] WA 5:172.36–173.10; *Commentary* 282.

[42] "Neque enim aliud deus requirit, quam voluntatem suam nobis esse assidua sollicitudine commendatam" (WA 5:172; *Commentary* 281).

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Trust is, however, not knowledge. The new emphasis on faith and trust therefore sharpens the ontology of relations from *Lectures on Romans* by emphasizing that the desire for a divine justification for his doing this or that has nothing to do with faith and trust; it is, in fact, diabolic. God does what he wants to, and what he wants happens with necessity; in this respect there is no difference between *Lectures on Romans* and *Operationes in Psalmos*. New, however, is the emphasis that what God actually wants to do is to endow humans with his own righteousness. Humans will therefore, to the extent that they are captured by the biblical message, rest assured that what God gives them is necessarily good. This issues in a kind of trust that is only conceivable in relation to the immutable love of the eternal God.[43]

With the understanding that the transfer of divine righteousness is the foundation of the relationship between God and humans, Luther can relate to the all-determining power of God's will with confidence. Faith is the reception of the blessing inherent in the message that God determines all there is, including the reception of this message as a blessing. From this point of view, divine necessity necessarily (!) implies logical circularity; one will only trust God's determining power if that is what God determines by letting the human subject partake of trust in God. And in so far as it is given by God, this trust in God's goodness spontaneously does what God wants as an instrument of his power.[44] Good works are thus certainly to be done; what humans do is not uninteresting. But God can never be manipulated; his immutability is the fixed foundation of all there is,[45] and good works are never to be considered as meritorious. And the question of how divine immutability relates to the reality of humans being able to do what they want to do and being admonished to do what they ought to do is beyond human understanding and should therefore not even be asked.[46]

The doctrine of justification by faith is in this way expanded into an ontology of trust according to which God as the giver of good gifts is considered to be the ultimate reality of all that occurs. Relating to God in faith is thus the key element in grasping the world as it is. This can only be maintained if one refrains from asking the question of how the all-determining reality of God's activity relates to the freedom of human activity; the very act of asking the question squanders the

[43] Cf. Eilert Herms, "Gewißheit in Martin Luthers 'De servo arbitrio'," *LutherJb* 67 (2000) 23–50, at 26: "Der einzige und ausreichende Grund für die Infallibilität des Glaubens ist in Luthers Augen, daß es für den Glauben . . . wesentlich ist, daß sein einziger Gengenstand Gott selbst ist . . . wie er selbst durch sich selbst und durch nichts sonst sich dem Glauben vorgegeben und diesen dadurch auf sich bezogen hat." There is no difference between *Operationes* and *De servo arbitrio* in this respect.

[44] WA 5:168.34–169.8; *Commentary* 276.

[45] Luther here repeats the reference to the falling leaves (WA 5:174; *Commentary* 284).

[46] "Quando ergo his praeceptis dei prohibetur cura ista curiosa operum dei, quae nobis ostensa sunt esse supra captum et sensum nostrum et incomprehensibilia iudicia eius, cum timore in praeceptis dei potius occupari debemus, ut in eum speremus cum fiducia, et haec studia impossibilia diabolo in caput suum vertere" (WA 5:173; *Commentary* 283–84).

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theocentriciy of human freedom by revealing an ontology incompatible with the one inherent in the doctrine of justification.

Luther thus consistently rejects an approach to the world that replaces the act of receiving all that occurs as divine gift with an ontology intent on achieving a timeless knowledge of things as they are in themselves,[47] and the significance of this rejection is considerably enhanced by Luther's theological breakthrough. According to the mature Luther in *Operationes*, we know what God does (everything), we know what we should do (all we possibly can), and we know that God's love is immutable to the extent that it is not changed by anything we do. The joy of this knowledge is the content of the Christian faith that issues in humans working according to the will of God. The understanding of the precise relationship between divine and human activity is, however, not given to humans as a meaningful area of scrutiny and research. It is lack of respect for this limit that leaves humans as followers of the devil instead of trusting believers in God.

The Chalcedonian thought structure of the mature Luther thus begins to emerge.[48] Real divinity and real humanity are united in a way that focuses precisely on the unknowability of the relationship in a way that closely parallels the negativity of the Chalcedonian adverbs (*inconfuse*, *immutabiliter*, *indivise*, *inseparabiliter*). Through this union, humans are given divine righteousness as the foundation of their trust, and divine goodness as the quality of their works.

Informed by his new understanding of divine righteousness as the foundation of human existence, Luther has left the idea of *resignatio ad infernum* that challenged the consistency of his thought in *Lectures on Romans* and made his exposition of Rom 8:28 into something more like a refutation. Luther has now appropriated both the apostle's untroubled joy in the reliability of divine predestination and his insistence that, if correctly perceived, it stimulates human activity rather than stifles it (cf. Rom 6:1–14). His thought thus appears considerably more consistent and satisfactory in *Operationes* than in *Lectures on Romans*.

What, then, about *De servo arbitrio*, which is arguably Luther's most penetrating analysis of questions related to the problem of necessity?

The Immutability of God's Promises

Erasmus reacts against the doctrine of necessity articulated in *Assertio* by maintaining that it is the result of irreligious curiosity even to discuss whether God's foreknowledge is contingent (in Luther's view, it is not), whether our will

[47] Cf. Luther's critique of the timeless logic of the Scholastics as summarized by Bayer, "God's Omnipotence."

[48] On the Chalcedonian structure of Luther's thought, see further Johann Anselm Steiger, "The *communicatio idiomatum* as the Axle and Motor of Luther's Theology," *LQ* (2000) 125–58; Kjell Ove Nilsson, "*Communicato idiomatum* as the Key to Luther's Theology," in *Reformationer: Universitet, kirkehistorie, Luther. Festskrift til Steffen Kjeldgaard-Pedersen* (ed. Tine Reeh and Anna Vind; København: C. A. Reitzels Forlag, 2006) 365–81.

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contributes to our salvation (in Luther's view, it does not), or whether what we do is good or evil by necessity.[49] Luther protests against this view vehemently.[50] In his view, it is essential for a Christian to know and assert that God's foreknowledge is not contingent, but that he determines everything through his infallible will.[51] This follows from Luther's understanding of the conflation of will, knowledge, and activity in God. God's knowledge of what will happen is the reason for what happens, and is never changed by what actually occurs.[52] It thus follows irrefutably, Luther argues, that what we do and what happens, even if it seems mutable and contingent to us, happens necessarily and immutably in so far as the will of God is one's point of orientation.[53] In a way that closely parallels the similar passages in *Lectures on Romans*, Luther therefore rejects the distinction between *necessitas consequentiae* and *necessitas consequentis*[54] and calls it a *ludibrium*, a laughingstock,[55] here, too, adding references to poetic passages on divine immutability.[56]

The knowledge that everything happens by necessity is essential for faith, Luther insists, as it is the foundation of trust in God's promises.[57] For this reason,

[49] *De libero arbitrio* Ia8, quoted from Erasmus, *Ausgewählte Schriften* (8 vols.; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1967) 4: ". . . nec erat irreligiosa curiositate irrumpendum ad illa retrusa, ne dicam supervacanea, ad deus contingenter praesciat aliquid, utrum nostrum voluntas aliquid agas in his, quae pertinent ad aeternam salutem, an tantum patiatur ab agente gratia, an quicquid facimus boni sive mali, mera necessitate faciamus vel patiamur potius." For a presentation of the context of the debate between Erasmus and Luther, see Alfsvåg, *Identity of Theology*, 11–21.

[50] "Hoc prorsus nihil valet Erasme, das ist zu viel" (WA 18:610.5; LW 33:29).

[51] "Est itaque et hoc imprimis necessarium et salutare Christiano, nosse, quod Deus nihil praescit contingenter, sed quod omnia incommutabili et aeterna infallibilique voluntate et praevidet et proponit et facit" (WA 18:615.12–14; LW 33:37).

[52] Horst Beintker summarizes it in this way: "Luther war von der Allgegenwart Gottes in jedem Augenblick durchdrungen, und darin wurzelt auch der Prädestinationsgedanke" ("Luthers Gotteserfahrung und Gottesanschauung," in *Leben und Werk Martin Luthers von 1526 bis 1546* [ed. Helmar Junghans; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983] 39–62, at 53)

[53] "Scilicet voluntatem immutabilem Dei praedicas esse discendam, immutabilem eius vero praescientiam nosse vetas. An tu credis, quod nolens praesciat, aut ignarus velit? Si volens praescit, aeterna est et immobilis (quia natura) voluntas, si praesciens vult, aeterna est et immobilis (quia natura) scientia.

Ex quo sequitur irrefragabiliter, omnia quae facimus, omnia quae fiunt, etsi nobis videntur mutabiliter et contingenter fieri, revera tamen fiunt necessario et immutabiliter, si Dei voluntatem spectes. Voluntas enim Dei efficax est, quae impediri non potest, cum sit naturalis ipsa potentia Dei, Deinde sapiens, ut falli non possit" (WA 18:615.26–25; LW 33:37–38).

[54] WA 18:616.13–617.19; LW 33:39–40.

[55] WA 18:617.14. When Hütter calls this "the most consequential philosophical error" in *De servo arbitrio* without even trying to grasp the philosophical position from which the rejection is made, one is tempted to extend Luther's critique to his (mis-)interpreters ("St. Thomas on Grace and Free Will," 530).

[56] WA 18:617.23–618.18; LW 33.41. The important poet is now Virgil.

[57] "Si enim dubitas aut contemnis nosse, quod Deus omnia non contingenter sed necessario et immutabiliter praesciat et velit, quomodo poteris eius promissionibus credere, certo fidere et niti?" (WA 18:619.10–15; LW 33.42). Jenson comments on this text in the following way: "for someone to always keep his promises, he must be sovereign over all contingencies" ("Ontology

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the doctrine of divine immutability is central in the Bible, and to prove it, Luther quotes Rom 3:4 (God is true though everyone is a liar), 9:6 (the word of God has not failed), and Titus 1:2 (God, who never lies, has promised).[58]

The kind of necessity that Luther maintains is immutability, not coercion.[59] What humans do when God is not working in them for good, is thus necessarily evil, even though they are not forced to do it; they certainly do it willingly enough.[60] There are two reasons this doctrine should be proclaimed: it promotes humility[61] and opens the possibility for faith as trust in God.[62] This possibility is realized if God works in us so that our will, breathed upon by the Holy Spirit, wants and does good in a way that can never be overcome even by the gates of hell;[63] the goodness of the human will in this case is established through its union with divine immutability. It is the same circularity that is at play here as in *Operationes*; by being fused with divine immutability, humans necessarily do what is good, just as they necessarily do what is evil if this relationship is not established. Luther is not maintaining ontological determinism; he is insisting on the theocentricity of goodness with the implication that if the trusting unity between God and humans is not established, humans cannot avoid doing what is evil.[64]

Why, then, is the circularity of evil broken and faith and goodness established in some cases, but not in others? Luther's answer is that we do not know; we are not even allowed to ask, as the secret will of the divine majesty is not a matter of

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of Freedom," 248). In a similar way, Boyle maintains that divine infallibility must be preserved, "because otherwise a man cannot believe in God's promises" ("Stoic Luther: Paradoxical Sin and Necessity," 90). Both John Loeschen ("Promise and Necessity in Luther's *De servo arbitrio*," *LQ* 23 [1971] 257–67) and Herms ("Gewißheit") therefore primarily understand *De servo arbitrio* as theology of trust. Bayer emphasizes that trust in the promise is what "unlocks Luther's entire understanding of God's omnipotence" ("God's Omnipotence," 87). Paulson points to the enormous difference between predestined silence ("fate") and predestined promise (*Lutheran Theology*, 22).

[58] WA 18:619.10–15; LW 33.42.

[59] That necessity for Luther means immutability, not compulsion is emphasized by Boyle ("Stoic Luther: Paradoxical Sin and Necessity," 86). This is therefore a kind of necessity that does not exclude reward; see WA 18:693.30–694.29; WA 33:151–52; and further Knut Alfsvåg, "God's Fellow Workers: The Understanding of the Relationship between the Human and the Divine in Maximus Confessor and Martin Luther," *ST* 62 (2008) 175–93.

[60] WA 18:634.14–36; LW 33:64. As maintained by Paulson, this is the reason humans acting out of their own potential are under the wrath of God (*Lutheran Theology*, 83–84).

[61] WA 18:632.27–633.6; LW 33,61–62. According to the *resignatio*-doctrine in *Lectures on Romans*, this is the only reason.

[62] WA 18:633.7–24; LW 33:62–63.

[63] "Si Deus in nobis operatur, mutata et blande assibilata per spiritum Dei voluntas iterum mera lubentia et pronitate ac sponte sua vult et facit, non coacte, ut nullis contrariis mutari in aliud possit, ne portis quidem inferi vinci aut cogi, sed pergit volendo et lubendo et amando bonum" (WA 18:634.37–635:2; LW 33:65).

[64] As maintained by Jenson, humans "cannot choose what to choose"; they are always determined by what they have chosen to do ("Ontology of Freedom," 248–49). This is an important reason why Luther considers "liberum arbitrium" an empty word.

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human concern.[65] One should rather occupy oneself with God incarnated, which is where all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden.[66] The unity of divine immutability and human createdness was paradigmatically established with the incarnation of Christ, and there is no other way of reestablishing it than by taking this particular unity as its given foundation. The christological foundation of Luther's thought is thus even more explicit in *De servo arbitrio* than in *Operationes*.[67]

This lets Luther adjust his earlier interpretation of God's universal will to salvation as maintained in 1 Tim 2:4. In *Lectures on Romans*, Luther says that this passage only pertains to the elect. According to *De servo arbitrio*, however, the passage informs us that God's saving will is universal as far as God is revealed and proclaimed, i.e., as far as he is known through Christ, and for Luther, this is now the only thing that matters.[68] Questions beyond that will never be answered and should not be asked, at least not in a way that presumes there is an answer.[69] Humans can rest assured that in so far as they relate to God through his Word, his promise of salvation is immutable and therefore absolutely reliable. The point is the same as in *Operationes*; predestination is manifest as trust in God, and what does not promote this trust does not have its origin in God.

What those who remain untouched by the proclamation of the promises do is therefore necessarily evil by the same kind of immutability that for believers establishes the trustworthiness of the promises. One may therefore ask—and

[65] Luther maintains this with a one-sidedness that borders on the *resignatio*-idea from *Lectures on Romans*, but still with a different emphasis on faith as trust in tribulation: "Sed fides et spiritus . . . Deum bonum credunt, etiam si omnes homines perderet" (WA 18:708.8–9). Following Luther's insistence that the Holy Spirit is found in the grammar, it is tempting to locate the evangelical center of Luther's thought precisely in the shift from the reality of the "in effectu seipsos resignant ad infernum pro Dei voluntate" in the *Lectures on Romans* (note 25) to the anxiety of "etiam si omnes homines perderet" as the ground from which faith grows.

[66] "Nos dicimus, ut iam antea diximus, de secreta illa voluntate maiestatis non esse disputandum et temeritatem humanam, quae perpetua perversitate, relictis necessariis, illam semper impetit et tentat, esse avocandam et retrahendam, ne occupet sese scrutandis illis secretis maiestatis, quae impossibileest attingere, ut quae habitet lucem inaccessibilem, teste Paulo. Occupet vero sese cum Deo incarnato seu (ut Paulus loquitur) cum Jhesu crucifixo, in quo sunt omnes thesauri sapientiae et scientiae, sed absconditi; per hunc enim abunde habet, quid scire et non scire debeat" (WA 18:689.18–25; LW 33:145–46).

[67] There has been some discussion of the relation between Christology and predestination in *De servo arbitrio*; for a summary of the discussion, see Alfsvåg, *Identity of Theology*, 134 n. 183. The idea of a substantial difference between *De servo arbitrio* and Luther's more christocentric work as maintained, e.g., by Hütter, is unfounded ("St. Thomas on Grace and Free Will," 524–25).

[68] Cf. Paulson, *Lutheran Theology*, 24: "For that reason, the ground on which the church stands or falls is not an objective doctrine of justification, it is the advent of the preached word."

[69] "Recte, inquam, si de Deo praedicato dixeris. Nam ille vult omnes homines salvos fieri . . . Verum quare maiestas illa vitium hoc voluntatis nostrae non tollit aut mutat in omnibus, cum non sit in potestate hominis, aut cur illud ei imputet, cum non possit homo eo carere, quaerere non licet, ac si multum quaeras, nunquam tamen invenies, sicut Paulus Rom. 11. [9, 20] dicit: Tu quis es, qui respondeas Deo?" (WA 18:686.5–12; WA 33:140).

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Erasmus certainly does[70]—whether this does not result in an understanding of God's all-determining omnipotence that places good and evil equally close to God's will. Does Luther's insistence on the divine determination of all that occurs, at least as far as its moral character is concerned, suggest that God is morally ambiguous?

Luther meets this question with a double strategy. On the one hand he maintains that, if the alternative to understanding God's presence as decisive is to understand him to be absent while humans on their own make up their minds about good and evil, this would dethrone God and reduce faith in God to an absurdity.[71] In Luther's view, God is either Lord or uninteresting. In so far as faith retains its necessary realism, it therefore cannot replace the doctrine of the determining power of divine immutability with a doctrine of the omnipotence of human liberty, which may or may not employ God in its service.[72]

On the other hand, Luther defends a doctrine of God working in and through even the evil ones, but at one remove from their wickedness and godlessness. It is, he maintains, as when a good craftsman works with a jagged ax; the outcome is bad, irrespective of the goodness of the craftsman.[73] Luther thus combines an understanding of God's essential goodness with his insistence that God indeed is the acting agent in all that occurs as far as the will of God is concerned.[74]

It has been objected that Luther here introduces a new inconsistency in his thought by trying to answer the very question he tells his readers not to ask: he here makes God responsible for evil in a way that is incompatible with Luther's insistence that we do not know what God in his essence is responsible for.[75] In my view this objection fails. Understanding God as the acting agent in all that occurs in the world is for Luther an essential part of the Christian faith.[76] What we do not understand, apart from faith that adheres strictly to promises, is how this seemingly morally dubious activity can be the work of the loving Father. In Luther's view, there is no doubt that the history of salvation culminating in the

[70] *De libero arbitrio* IIa15.

[71] WA 18:688.19–20; LW 33:144.

[72] Gavin Hyman argues that the beginning of modern atheism is Descartes's instrumentalization of belief in God; Luther's argument in *De servo arbitrio* amounts to his insistence that Erasmus in this respect should be seen as Descartes's predecessor (*A Short History of Atheism* [London: Tauris, 2010]).

[73] WA 18:709.10–36; LW 33:175–76.

[74] Herms ("Gewißheit," 42) emphasizes Luther's belief that humans, as sinners, are determined by divine creativity and not, as in Kant, by their own freedom.

[75] For a summary of this critique, particularly as maintained by Barth and his followers, see Behnk, *Contra Liberum Arbitrium*, 128–31; Bayer, "God's Omnipotence," 89. Defending Luther against his accusers are Fredrik Brosché, *Luther on Predestination: The Antinomy and the Unity between Love and Wrath in Luther's Concept of God* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1978) 120; and Regin Prenter, "Luther als Theologe," in *Luther und die Theologie der Gegenwart* (ed. Leif Grane and Bernhard Lohse; Göttingen: PUBLISHER, 1980) 112–24.

[76] As emphasized by Bayer ("God's omnipotence," 91), this is closely related to God's oneness; there is no similar power next to God. According to Paulson (*Lutheran Theology*, 20), the doctrine of free will is therefore incompatible with monotheism.

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passion and death of Christ is a manifestation of the general principle that what happens in the world are God's acts "Si Dei voluntatem spectes." By insisting that what these events reveal is God's goodness, faith moves into lands unattainable through reason and experience and therefore must navigate on trust alone.[77] This is a level of understanding that can only be achieved by receiving the story of the cross as God's promise of salvation.

Luther's solution to the problem of Manichaeism is thus strictly christological. That the events, when seen from another perspective, may still seem to be evil is then no contradiction. This is certainly a view of evil with which one can find oneself in disagreement, but hardly for the reason that it is inconsistent.

Neither is Luther inconsistent when he maintains both that God necessarily determines all that happens, and that humans are free to do what they want. Luther's view of the necessity of the event, as maintained in *De servo arbitrio*, is primarily an emphasis on the immutability of its moral character. If not determined by the union of God and human as established through faith, what humans do is necessarily evil. Luther is primarily interested in this problem insofar as it contributes to the understanding of humans as created and recreated in the image of God, which is the necessary condition for their doing what is good. He insists that (the lack of) this recreation has immutable consequences. Luther is less interested in the problem of how to relate divine providence and human freedom in general, though he remains convinced that the Scholastic way of handling it (the *necessitas consequentiae/consequentis*-distinction with its implied understanding of God as differentiated transcendental causality) is incompatible with biblically informed perceptions both of creation as God's gift and salvation as transfer of and participation in divine righteousness.[78] He might have found Cusanus's approach to this problem in *De possest* compatible with his own approach in a way that Thomas's is not; it is probably even more significant that Luther did not find this particular problem worthy of serious consideration.

De servo arbitrio thus remains one of the most penetrating analyses of the relation between divine immutability and the human ability to choose. Humans

[77] Cf. the emphasis on "lux Euangelii, quae solo verbo et fide valet" in WA 18:785.20; LW 33:292. In his interpretation of this passage, Paul R. Hinlicky goes considerably beyond Luther's perspective in conflating faith with reason as informed by the light of glory ("Leibnizian Transformation? Reclaiming the Theodicy of Faith," in *Transformations in Luther's Theology: Historical and Contemporary Reflections* [ed. Christine Helmer and Bo Kristian Holm; Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2011] 85–103, at 101).

[78] See further Michael Plathow, "Das Cooperatio-Verständnis M. Luthers im Gnaden- und Schöpfungsbereich. Zur Frage nach dem Verhältnis von Mensch und Schöpfung," *Luther* 56 (1985) 28–46, at 37: "Bei den Aussagen zu . . . Mitwirken des Geschöpfes geht es . . . um Gewißheitsaussagen, die Luther aus der Interpretation biblischer Texte gewinnt und in der Bibel bezeugt weiß. Es geht also nicht um Erwägungen und Reflexionen, die Schöpfer und Geschöpf als causa prima und causa secunda in ein allgemein einsichtiges ontologisches System der naturlichen Vernunft einordnen, wie es die thomistisch-molinistischen Auseinandersetzungen beherrschte, den Streit um Bajus und den Jansenismus, aber auch die altprotestantische Orthodoxie."

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necessarily do as they want to do, and the immutability of this situation is their basic problem, which is solved only by their discovering and being included in the love of God. This love is the key to understanding the world, and it is hidden in the inexplorable—though in faith fully manifest—unity of God and humans in Christ.

The Immutability of Divine Creativity

In Luther's view, one can only relate adequately to God's acts by receiving them as decisive.[79] Created entities therefore have no independent reality in so far as their relationship with God is concerned. What exists owes its existence and manifestation to God. Due to their sinfulness, humans have to be recreated in order to recognize this dependence. Basically, however, even human dependence is closely related to the kind of dependence other kinds of created entities have. At the same time, humans are created with the capacity of acting independently, and their dependence as creatures does not nullify this independence.

The key to an adequate perception of the world is therefore to understand life as a divine gift in a way that establishes the possibility of human creativity and independence. Luther's solution to this problem is to insist that life is only lived as it was meant to be, through the transfer of divine justice and goodness to the human. Thus endowed, humans act as created in the image of God; they manifest their humanity as dependence on their Creator.[80] This happened paradigmatically in Christ, and will therefore only be repeated through participation in Christ as truly human and truly divine.[81] The realization of true humanity therefore only occurs by receiving the story of Christ as the means through which the recreative power of God manifests itself.

The theocentricity of Luther's worldview thus issues in a Christology of participation conceived as a doctrine of justification. As the goal of this doctrine is to maintain human independence and creativity as dependence on God as creator, the doctrine can only be upheld through an ontology of relation whereby human experience is interpreted according to two different contexts, the relation to God and the relation to other creatures.[82] In relation to God, humans are always dependent in a way that can only be captured through a doctrine of necessity and

[79] As emphasized by Bayer, Luther rejects the Ockhamist view of omnipotence as divine potentiality in favor of an understanding of God as actively present in what actually occurs ("God's omnipotence," 97).

[80] As emphasized by Jenson, there is in this respect no difference between fallen and unfallen creation ("Ontology of Freedom," 250).

[81] Herms therefore speaks of "Heilsgewißheit als Gewißheit eines *asymmetrischen Inklusionsverhältnisses*" established through "das äußere Wort des Evangeliums" ("Gewißheit," 43–44).

[82] So also Inge Lønning, "Gott VIII. Neuzeit/Systematisch-theologisch," in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* (ed. Gerhard Müller; 36 vols.; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1984) 13:668–708, at 672: "Für Luther hängt alles an der Unterscheidung der beiden Relationen [Weltverhältnis und Gottesverhältnis]. . . . Für Erasmus geht es dagegen darum, die tendenzielle Identität der beiden Relationen festzuhalten."

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predestination;[83] in relation to other creatures, humans are free in a way that can only be captured through a doctrine of human liberty.[84] Confusion occurs when the Chalcedonian *immutabiliter* is replaced by a divine-human mixture according to which the relationship with God is seen as established through free choice, or determinism is seen as what characterizes humans' relationship with other creatures. This invariably occurs, though, when the ontology of participation is replaced with an ontology of being, according to which the question of who decides, God or human, can be answered while being detached from the distinction between Creator and creation. Both Semipelagian Scholasticism and Erasmian deliberative humanism are examples of this kind of ontology, which result in the understanding of human freedom as the abstract ability to choose, both in relation to God and the world. In Luther's view, both are incompatible with the theocentric anthropology of the Christian faith. Understanding divine action through the telling of the story as decisive, Christian thought is in Luther's view incompatible with an ontology of the timeless, as faith is always dependent on what occurs when God acts.[85]

Predestination thus manifests itself in the reception of the biblical story of Christ, who is the manifestation of the immutable infinity of divine love as liberation of humans from the chains of sin and disbelief. For faith, it is therefore this story that defines the reality of what occurs in the world. The doctrine of necessity as understood by Luther is therefore closely related to the kind of spirituality whereby faith finds the realities of the world made manifest through the Word of God. This presupposes an understanding of the divine promises as absolutely reliable; Luther's ontology of relations is therefore basically a worldview that finds the promises of God to be the one and only foundation for the adequate reception of what occurs. Real existence is existence according to these promises. Even in this respect, non–relational ontology fails, and should therefore in Luther's view never be accepted within Christian theology.

Luther reacted against an ontology that combined the doctrine of divine immutability with an understanding of human liberty as independence. It is tempting to read Nietzsche as a confirmation that Luther was right; religiosity founded on human choice reduces the significance of divine presence in a way that entails the birth of modern atheism.[86] In this perspective, Hegel represents an attempt at reestablishing religion by modifying the idea of divine immutability, an approach that arguably has informed much twentieth-century theology, as seen, for example, in the discussion of the alleged identity between the immanent and the economic

[83] According to Herms, assurance in relation to the Creator is therefore always "Notwendigkeitsgewißheit" ("Gewißheit," PAGE no.)

[84] Cf. Herms: "Als geschaffene Freiheit kann sie nur im eingeschränkten Sinne frei genannt werden. Aber in diesem eingeschränkten Sinne ist dieses Freisein real" ("Gewißheit," 36).

[85] Cf. the difference in Herms between truth as "Sache" and "Geschehen," where Luther is exclusively interested in the latter, both in the sense of memory and expectation ("Gewißheit," 26–27) .

[86] Cf. Lønning, "Gott," 673 (on Erasmus): "Es fällt jedoch auf, daß die Vorherrschaft der Moralischen Dimension . . . zu einer Entfunktionalisierung des christlichen Gotteslehre . . . führt."

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Trinity.[87] Luther, for all his emphasis on the identity between God and Christ, still insists on the difference of immutability to the extent that he considers the idea of *Deus absconditus* essential.[88] In relation to much contemporary theology, Luther's voice therefore can only be heard as a voice of protest.[89] In Luther's view, divine presence is manifest in promises,[90] the trustworthiness and reliability of which can only be maintained through a doctrine of divine immutability and changelessness. Mutability is then an essential aspect of the created, and for this reason it is unsuitable as the foundation of an ontology comprising all aspects of reality. Such an ontology can only be founded on the rationally unbridgeable and christologically transcended difference between Creator and creation. For Luther it is therefore the story of Christ that manifests the reality of what occurs in the world to the effect that one's receptivity or lack thereof to this story immutably establishes the fundamentals of human existence. Luther's is thus a daring view of Christ and the world. But it is hardly inconsistent, and it is as challenging today as it was five hundred years ago.

[87] To maintain that the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity could be seen as an attempt at defending the reality of revelation, whereas the identity of the immanent Trinity with the economic Trinity may lead to a conflation of God and history, the ultimate outcome of which is arguably Feuerbach's theory of religion. On this issue, see Peter C. Phan, "Systematic Issues in Trinitarian Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Trinity* (ed. Peter C. Phan; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 13–29, at 17–18.

[88] For an interesting discussion of how Luther's Christology informed his understanding of divine impassibility, see Jeffrey G. Silcock, "The Truth of Divine Impassibility," *LTJ* 45 (2011) 198–207. His conclusion is that "Luther regarded the suffering of God in the suffering of the man Jesus as an incomprehensible mystery that can only be expressed paradoxically." God thus suffered impassibly in the flesh; the Chalcedonian combination of *inconfuse* and *inseparabiliter* is maintained to the effect that the how of this act remains inexplicable.

[89] So also Mark C. Mattes, *The Role of Justification in Contemporary Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2004), criticizing Jüngel, Pannenberg, Moltmann, and Robert Jenson (who attaches to the anthropology mentioned above a Trinitarian speculation for which there is no precedent in Luther). For a strikingly similar critique from Orthodox and Catholic perspectives, see David Bentley Hart, who mainly criticizes Jenson (*The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2003] 155–67); and Lewis Ayres, who mentions Barth, Balthasar, process theology, Volf, and Rahner, among others (*Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004], 404–14)..

[90] According to Oswald Bayer, the "grandiose blunder" of not distinguishing between the hidden and trinitarian God dislocates the gospel and leads to post-Christian natural theology in the form of the "speculative philosophy of Hegel" (*Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2008] 339),

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