

Article

“Ich Werdend Spreche Ich Du”: Creative Dialogue in the Relational Anthropologies of Martin Luther and Martin Buber

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Abstract: This article compares the relational anthropologies of Martin Luther and Martin Buber and suggests that both thinkers presuppose a notion of creative dialogue. This notion captures the understanding in the Hebrew Bible of the world as created and sustained through God’s utterance and, thus, of reality as spoken and human existence as reliant upon dialogue with God. It argues that this common grounding led Luther and Buber to suggest anthropologies that focus on relation rather than substance, on the role of language, and on creative dialogue as the kernel of sound interpersonal relationships, which articulate the human relationship with God. The perception of reality as constituted through dialogical relationships made them both question the prevailing philosophical ontology of their time: in Luther’s case, Aristotelean substance ontology, and in Buber’s case, Kantian subject–object dualism.

Keywords: dialogue; theological anthropology; ontology; Martin Buber; Martin Luther



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1. Introduction

“Answer me, when I call to you, my righteous God” (Ps 4:2). This is the insistent call of the psalmist in Psalm 4, urging God to enter into dialogue with his suffering creatures. Similar statements initiate several other Psalms and testify to the dialogical constitution of human existence in the Bible (cf. Pollmann et al. 2011). The human being becomes a ‘You’ in dialogue with God’s creative and saving ‘I’.¹ Moreover, the human ‘I’ is instantiated as a self, calling upon God’s ‘You’ in confession, in prayer, and in praise. The New Testament elaborates on this understanding of the individual as spoken into being and relying upon ongoing dialogue with God. Hence, the prologue to the Gospel of John interprets God’s incarnation in Jesus Christ as his divine Word becoming flesh (John 1:14). John anchors the understanding of divine revelation in the concept of *logos*, word or speech.² Behind the statement might lie an understanding of *logos* as a universal divine reason or wisdom.³ John’s salient point is, however, that this sequestered Word reveals itself in human flesh and rephrases God’s creative dialogue with human beings.

As a literary genre, dialogues came to play a central role in Christian identity formation in the Early Church. The truths of the new religion were negotiated through dialogues that were apologetic, such as Justin Martyr’s mid-2nd century *Dialogue with Trypho*, and anti-heretical, such as Origin’s *Dialogue with Heracleides* from the first half of the 3rd century, Jerome’s anti-Pelagian dialogue from the early 5th century, and his contemporary Augustine’s dialogues against the Donatists, the Manicheans, and the Pelagians. Other dialogues from this early period addressed fellow Christians with a didactic-philosophical or protreptic purpose, such as Gregory of Nyssa’s 4th century dialogue *Concerning the Soul and the Resurrection* and Augustine’s *Confessions*. These early Christian dialogues were inspired by the divine–human dialogue in the Bible, especially in the Book of Psalms, as well as the rich philosophical tradition of dialogical thinking. The Sophists introduced dialogue as a form of philosophical disputation, which Plato developed into a literary genre, influencing subsequent literary philosophical dialogues written by, for instance, Cicero and Seneca. The catechetical tradition depends on this understanding of dialogue as a

didactic method useful for conveying theological and philosophical truths to the unlearned. Hence, with the Protestant reformations of the 16th century, the leading reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin wrote new catechisms, whereby they sought to clarify the doctrinal groundings of the new confessions through questions and answers, which believers were to learn by heart. Furthermore, in the 17th and 18th centuries, devotional literature such as prayer- and hymnbooks that continued the tradition of human dialogue with God from the Book of Psalms became accessible for lay people of whom more and more had acquired reading skills.

Since the early 20th century, dialogue has become a central concept across different academic fields such as philosophy, psychology, theology, and political science. Thus, the concept of dialogue was crucial for the discourse ethics of Jürgen Habermas and Karl-Otto Apel. They argued that ethical praxis was oriented toward intersubjective understanding rather than objective duties and suggested a constraint-free dialogue, “einer herrschaftsfreie Diskurs”, as the only valid method for democratic societies to cultivate a reasonable discourse that was able to preserve their basic values (Habermas 1981, 2015). This political potential of dialogue as a conflict-solving method has become a tool that enables and nourishes interreligious and intercultural co-existence in societies defined by multiculturalism.

This considerable interest in dialogue was pioneered by the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber (1878–1965) in his philosophy of dialogue first presented in the main work *Ich und Du*, from 1923.⁴ Buber employed the principle of dialogue as a comprehensive hermeneutical method with potential life-changing consequences. By listening to the voice of the other—a person, a work of art, or a text—and suspending all pre-determined categories and concepts, the individual runs the risk of being transformed cognitively and existentially (cf. Mendes-Flohr 2015a, p. 2). In contrast with later discourse ethics, Buber’s primary interest was—at least in this early period—not political, but existential; with his philosophy, Buber sought to point out overlooked dimensions of what it means to be human and emphasized the relational and communicative constitution of human subjectivity.⁵ In doing so, he answered to the social and religious crisis of post-war Germany and contributed to the development of existentialist philosophy (cf. Lang 2021, p. 211). Rather than a method for political problem solving in democratic societies, Buber understood dialogue as a process of human identity formation.⁶ The human being gains existence through an authentic relationship to a dialogical partner. The dialogue between ‘I’ and ‘You’ constitutes a speech act, which is orchestrated by ‘the eternal You’ and reveals a world of relation. Buber opposes this world of relation to the world of experience (Buber [1923] 2021, p. 10). According to the influential Buber scholar Paul Mendes-Flohr, Buber’s concept of dialogue designates “authentic, that is, non-instrumental relations between individuals or between the human being and God” (Mendes-Flohr 2012, p. 124).⁷

In this article, I compare Buber’s dialogical anthropology with the relational anthropology of the German reformer Martin Luther (1483–1546) with the aim of inspiring contemporary theological anthropology. In doing so, I follow the lead of one of the most influential Lutheran theologians of the 20th century, Paul Tillich, who already in 1948 set out “to show what Protestant theology has received and should receive from his [sc. Buber’s] religious message and theological ideas” (Tillich 1948).⁸ According to Tillich, Buber anticipated later existentialist philosophy by asking and answering the question of how to become an ‘I’ rather than an ‘It’, that is, a person rather than a thing: “Long before the modern type of existential thinking appeared, Buber had asked and answered these questions on the basis and by the power of prophetic religion” (Tillich 1948). This religious rooting of Buber’s existentialist relational anthropology provides the incentive for a comparison with Luther’s relational anthropology. It is not my intention to provide a comprehensive comparison between the two, however relevant this would definitely be, since that would exceed the limits of an article. Rather, my more modest aim is to argue that both thinkers depend on a notion of creative dialogue originating in the Hebrew Bible in their efforts to explain human identity formation. This notion involves the understanding

of the world as created by God's utterance and, thus, of reality as spoken and of human existence as relying upon ongoing dialogue with God.

Despite their obvious differences, not least with regard to historical context, I argue that this common grounding led both Luther and Buber to understand humans as relational beings, whose identities emerge through a process of creative dialogue instigated by God. For Luther, this process unfolds in the human relationship to God, which facilitates sound interpersonal relationships, whereas for Buber, the interpersonal dialogue itself realizes the immanent presence of God.⁹ Differing from Buber, Luther does not examine the constitutive meaning of interpersonal dialogue for human identity formation, but maintains that human existence relies on ongoing dialogue with God in prayer and in praise, "ein ewig gespräch zwischen Gott und dem menschen" (Luther 1539, WA 47, 758c,24-25; cf. Mutschler 2007, p. 24; Welz 2023).¹⁰ By employing the notion of creative dialogue as an interpretative grasp to understand his doctrine of justification, I aim to shed new light on the controversial question of reciprocity in the human relationship to God, which has been the subject of ongoing debate in Luther research.¹¹ Moreover, I claim that Luther and Buber's joint understanding of reality as spoken and of human existence as dialogically constituted made them both question the predominant philosophical ontologies of their time: in Luther's case, Aristotelean substance ontology and, in Buber's case, Kantian subject-object dualism.

I take my starting point in the Hebrew Bible in order to show how creative dialogue characterizes the human relationship to God as creator and sustainer. Thereupon, I analyze Luther's relational anthropology focusing on his break with Aristotelean substance metaphysics in favor of an understanding of humans as recreated in the justifying encounter with God's revelation as a twofold word of law and gospel. I interpret justification as a dialogical event and argue that Luther's theological anthropology is rooted in his understanding of theological language as a *nova lingua* in comparison with the old language of philosophy. This religious language is incarnatory in the sense that it mediates divine attributes to humans through a relation of faith based on dialogue with God. Then, I examine Buber's philosophy of dialogue presented in *Ich und Du* as another example of a relational anthropology, which depends upon and transmits the Biblical idea of creative dialogue.

In the final part, I compare their relational anthropologies, arguing that despite decisive differences with regard to historical circumstances and religious standpoints, both thinkers launch an ontological turn from a focus on the individual substance or the autonomous conscience and toward a relational and dialogical ontology. This ontology emphasizes interdependence and mutual trust as central for human identity formation drawing on the Biblical understanding of creation as spoken and of existence as sustained through dialogue. Finally, I suggest that the notion of creative dialogue might prove central for contemporary theological anthropology in a post-metaphysical era.

2. Becoming an 'I' in Dialogue with the Divine 'You' in the Hebrew Bible

The first creation narrative in Genesis interprets creation as a process inaugurated by God's speech. The statement that God speaks, "and God said" (*Wajomer Elohim*), is repeated eleven times in Gen 1 (v. 3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 22, 24, 26, 28, 29). Who is God speaking to? This question led to ongoing discussions, not least in the rabbinic tradition, of whether or not there are two powers in heaven (cf. Schäfer 2017). Wisdom, *hokma*, was interpreted as a potential conversation partner for God in correspondence with Proverbs 8:22-31. In Genesis, the actual dialogue between God and humans begins with God searching for Adam and Eve, who are hiding due to their trespass against his commandment not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. Adam answers God's calling with a confession: "I heard you in the garden and was afraid, because I was naked; and so I hid" (Gen 3:10). In the new postlapsarian condition, Adam and Eve have become "like God", that is, ethical subjects with knowledge of good and evil. For the first time, they are able to interrupt the divine monologue and enter into dialogue with God. At the same time, though, a paralyzing inability to recognize God *as God* and perform his will accompanies their novel knowledge. Adam and Eve sense

their guilt and seek to escape God's address. By doing so, they express how engaging in dialogue with God can be terrifying and potentially life-threatening, since he holds power not only to create and sustain, but also to judge and destroy (cf. Mathiasen Stopa 2018).

Job is a prime example of one who experiences this dangerous presence of God when he loses everything he owns, including his family. Job pleads with God to leave him be, but God responds by threatening him into dialogue: "I will question you, and you shall answer me" (Job 38:3). Job answers by speaking the truth about God, i.e., acknowledging his own inferior position in the dialogue, thus recognizing God *as God*: "I am unworthy—how can I reply to you?" (Job 40:4).

However, the psalmist's exclamation quoted in the beginning of this article shows how expulsion from dialogue with God is even more threatening than facing his interrogation, since human existence depends on the continuous word exchange with him who creates and sustains life through speech. This is evident throughout the Book of Psalms, for instance in the introductory questions of Psalm 13: "How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" (Psalm 13:1). Job experiences the blessings of dialogue as God responds by restoring all his fortunes. In Luther's theology, this process of God forcing the reluctant sinner, Job, into dialogue is termed justification.

3. Creative Dialogue in Luther's Relational Anthropology

3.1. Dialogue in the Human Relationship to God

The central aim of Luther's Reformation theology is to reinterpret the human relationship to God and, more specifically, the role of the human being in its restoration. Because of sin, human beings ignore God and deny their dependence on him. God reveals himself in Christ in order to restore his relationship with sinners by initiating a process of justification. Through their faithful relationship with Christ, sinful human beings are able to become righteous and participate in a proper and saving relationship with God. Breaking with the so-called works righteousness of scholastic theology, Luther underlines that because of the distortion of human nature through sin, human beings are utterly passive and receptive in this process. In accordance with Romans 3:28, Luther maintains that God makes individuals righteous "without works of the law through grace alone and faith in Christ".¹² In his saving relationship with human beings, God always holds the right to initiate. At the same time, Luther emphasizes the need for a human answer to his address and explains justification as a word exchange between God and the sinner (cf. Bayer 2007a, pp. 46–52). God's initial address invites a human answer and through their relationship with God, human beings gain a language to answer him with. When God reveals himself in Christ, he makes it possible for postlapsarian human beings to communicate properly with him in prayer and in praise despite their sin. The *dia* of this dialogue is God's gift of faith understood as trust.

Trinitarian theology allows for a personification of the *dia* in the figure of the Holy Spirit or the Paraclete, who serve as intermediaries between the divine and the human. However, with its distinctive Christological focus, Luther's theology understands the *dia* that sustains communication between humans and God as faith in the sense of trust (*fiducia*, *Zuversicht*, *Vertrauen*) in his Word. According to Luther, human relationships to God and neighbor are defined by either mistrust (sin) or obedient trust (cf. Mathiasen Stopa 2018). Rather than a human ability, faith is God's gift of trust. This gift is a precondition for dialogue with God, since it is only because of trust in his good intentions that human beings dare speak with him.

One of the key phrases in Luther's theology is the *pro nobis*, which occurs 1250 times in his writings in order to invoke trust in God by reminding believers that the incarnation and suffering of Christ happened 'for us'. The phrase testifies to the pastoral aim of Lutheran theology, namely, to comfort despairing souls, who fear their encounter with God and doubt his forgiveness. Whereas the second person plural emphasizes the communal aspects of human dialogue with the divine, the second person singular *pro te* (for you), which is also frequently used with 327 occurrences, expresses how Luther understands the divine—

human relationship as personal and unfolding through dialogue between the divine ‘I’ and the human ‘You’. According to Luther, this dialogue with God is not only appeasing but also threatening, since his Word is twofold and consists of both a condemning word of law that uncovers sin and a forgiving word of gospel. Humans answer God’s address when they acknowledge their sin and give him all honor and glory (cf. Mathiasen Stopa 2021).

In one of his main works, *Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen* or *Tractatus de libertate Christiana*, from 1520, Luther maintains this duty to honor God as one of three virtues of faith that defines the process of justification. Additionally, Luther claims that when God is honored through faith, he honors the soul back: “Wenn denn gott sihet, das yhm die seel warheit gibt und also ehret durch yhren glauben, so ehret er sie widderumb, und helt sie auch fur frum und warhafftig.”¹³ The two other virtues of faith concern the union between Christ and the Christian established through faith. According to Luther, this union is characterized by an asymmetrical exchange of attributes between the soul and Christ. In a so-called happy exchange and battle, “froelich wechßel und streytt” (Luther 1520, WA 7, 25,34), Christ exchanges his righteousness, life, and salvation with the death, sin, and damnation of the soul. Luther describes this barter with reference to the intimate union between the two lovers in Canticles. Upon receiving Christ’s righteousness, the soul exclaims:

If I have sinned—well my Christ, in whom I believe, has not sinned, and everything, that he has, is mine and everything, that I have, (Cant. 2:16) is his, just as in Canticles ‘My beloved is mine and I am his.’¹⁴

This understanding of justification as based on asymmetrical reciprocity is intimately connected with his interpretation of God’s attributes as gifts or words, which I outline below.

The relationship to God acquired through faith establishes a new identity in the Christian as “simul liber et servus”, simultaneously free and a slave (Luther 1520, WA 7, 50,3). In the eyes of God, Christians are freed from the obligation to perform good works and receive salvation through faith alone. In relation to their fellow human beings, though, Christians are obliged to enslave themselves as Christ did and become Christs for their neighbors (Luther 1520, WA 7, 49,22–25).

Despite their freedom in Christ, Christians remain sinners in need of God’s forgiveness. As doubled-natured creatures of sin and righteousness, humans depend on ongoing dialogue with God in order to suppress sin, lead fruitful lives, and find comfort in tribulations. In a sermon on 1 Peter 4 from 1539, Luther explains how Christians have two weapons against the Devil, namely to hear, practice, and learn the Word of God and to scream and shout at God in prayers of lament. Luther defines both practices as dialogue with God: “... ein ewig gespraech zwischen Gott und dem menschen, aintweder, das er mit uns rede, da wir still sitzen und jm zu hoeren oder das er uns hoere mit jm reden unnd bitten, was wir bedürffen.”¹⁵ Luther emphasizes how this ability to listen to and speak with God is preconditioned by the transformative address of his Word: “Nemlich zum ersten, das sy ander leüt werden und mit Gottes wort umbgehn, dadurch sy jre newe geburt haben und erhalten.”¹⁶

In this way, Luther understands prayer as a dialogue with God; a performative practice with profound consequences for human identity formation.¹⁷ Humans receive the basic wording for this dialogue in Scripture, most importantly in the Book of Psalms and the Lord’s Prayer, but also in the Decalogue, which can serve as basis for prayer, so-called “Katechismusgebet” (cf. Stolt 2002). The understanding of prayer as a performative and dialogical practice is evident in Luther’s exposition of the Lord’s Prayer, *Deutsche Auslegung des Vaterunsers für die einfältigen Laien*, from 1519. Here, Luther defines prayer as “ein auffhebung des gemuts ader hertzen tzu got” (Luther 1519, WA 2, 85,9–10) and expounds the Lord’s Prayer as a rather tempestuous dialogue between the prayer, expressing God’s words of law and gospel, and an implicit ‘You’.¹⁸ According to Luther, the words of prayer cause this ‘You’ to emotionally acknowledge and confess sin: “Dein eygen gebeth strafft dich unnd ist widder dich, betzeugt dich, beclagt dich, da ligstu, wer helfft dir?”¹⁹ The

answer is God, who speaks his word of gospel, promising to help and forgive the repentant sinner. Luther's use of the second person singular aims to move the reader of the book to repent and receive God's forgiveness.

The Lutheran theologian Oswald Bayer underlines this reciprocal dialogue between God and humans in his interpretation of Luther's theology. Bayer explains the object of this theology as the linguistic relationship between the sinner and the justifying God, who promises to forgive and save (Bayer 2007a, pp. 46–52): "According to Martin Luther. The human is a creature that is addressed in an absolutely irrevocable manner, with whom God immortally wants to speak for all eternity, whether in wrath or on mercy" (Bayer 2019, p. 400). According to Bayer, the soul constitutes a realm of speech, in which the believer hears the divine Word and is heard by God. This encounter with God's words of law and gospel is a speech act that creates a new reality. With his use of speech act theory, Bayer risks downplaying the crucial emotional dimension of the process of justification. According to Luther, to encounter the divine Word does not only affect human beings cognitively but also emotionally and provides self-reflection and comfort (cf. Mathiasen Stopa 2022).²⁰ This is evident from Luther's definition of theological knowledge in a lecture on Psalm 51 from 1532:

Thus, this is the necessary theological knowledge, that human beings know themselves, that is, that they understand, feel and experience, that they are guilty of sin and have been handed over to death, and then also, that they understand and experience the opposite, that God justifies and saves such humans, who know themselves in this way.²¹

The relationship to God does not only concern intellectual understanding but also feeling and experience and provides human beings with a new self-understanding of knowing oneself to be guilty of sin and forgiven by God.

In this way, human beings are recreated through the justifying dialogue with God, whereby they gain new identities as simultaneously sinners and righteous. Moreover, it is a central claim in Luther's theology that God also gains identity through his relationship with humans, that is, when they acknowledge and honor him as God. Luther maintains that God *per se* remains unaffected by human beings in his absent metaphysical being. His theology, however, centers on God *pro me*; a personal god, who addresses human beings by means of a divine Word and depends on them answering him in faith. Hence, in *Lectures on Galatians*, Luther famously states that faith, as a medium for the God–human dialogue, creates the divinity in relation to human beings: "Faith is creator of the divinity, not in the person but in us."²² In *Vermahnung zum Sacrament des leibs und bluts unsers Herrn*, Luther even claims that humans are "makers of God":

Wiltu nu ein Gott macher werden, so kom her, hore zu (...) Nicht das du sein Gottliche natur machen sollest, denn dieselbige ist und bleibt ungemacht ewiglich, Sondern, das du jhn kanst dir zum Gott machen, das er dir, dir, dir, auch ein rechter Gott werde, wie er fur sich selber ein rechter Gott ist.²³

Whereas the metaphysical God *per se* utters his truths in monologues and remains unaffected by the sinful self-centeredness of humans, God *pro nobis* invites individuals into dialogue and depends on them answering him in praise and glorification. Through this ongoing dialogue, God is recognized as God and sinners become true human beings capable of loving their neighbors.

3.2. Beyond Substance Metaphysics

Luther's redefinition of justification relies on the Biblical understanding of identity formation through dialogue with God. This allows him to distance himself from the Aristotelean substance metaphysics propounded by contemporary scholastic theology and formulate a relational anthropology in which language holds the power to create.

The Latin term *substantia* corresponds to the Greek notion of *ousia*, which means 'being', and denotes "something that stands under or grounds things" (Robinson 2021).

Substances are the foundational or fundamental entities of reality; they are ontologically basic in the sense that they are the things from which everything else is made or by which it is metaphysically sustained. In the Middle Ages and into the early modern period, philosophical and theological discussions of substance were dominated by Aristotle's account hereof, especially in *Metaphysics*, book Z. Here, Aristotle describes substances as complexes of form and matter. The form designates the universal aspect of a thing, the essential unity shared by all things of the same type, whereas matter confers particularity and uniqueness.²⁴

Thomas Aquinas was among the leading scholastic theologians to transmit Aristotle's substance metaphysics, which was also central for late medieval scholasticism. Thus, Thomas describes the human being as a substance composed of the body as matter and the soul as form and his works entail lengthy discussions on the complex relationship between the two.

Rather than rejecting Thomist anthropology, Luther argues for a change of perspective and maintains that philosophical speculations on substance metaphysics and, for instance, the complex relation between body and soul are of little importance to theology. In a lecture on Psalm 51 from 1532, Luther asserts that holiness lies not in the category of substance but rather in relation.²⁵ The statement is an example of his ongoing refusal of philosophical sophistry in favor of the soteriological question of how God relates to the individual, the *pro nobis*-aspect. The crucial point is that holiness is bestowed in relation to God and is not based on human merits. As opposed to his scholastic contemporaries, Luther maintains that humans receive God's grace externally, *gratia externa*, rather than internally, *gratia infusa*, and refuses the claim that grace is able to perfect the fallen human nature. Human beings are restored to their original status as created in the image of God through their relationship with God in Christ, not by having their substance fixed through grace.²⁶

Luther counters and reinterprets notions from Aristotelean and Thomist substance ontology, and among these is the notion of substance itself. In his exposition of Psalm 69 in the *First Lectures on the Psalms*, he states that Scripture employs the notion of substance, both the divine and the human, differently than philosophy, since here it is understood metaphorically (Luther 1513–1515, WA 4, 419,25–420,13). Luther fails to develop a comprehensive metaphysics or ontology, that is, an overall theory of being. However, this does not mean that he refuses metaphysics or ontology as such (cf. Joest 1967, p. 13).²⁷ Instead, it is probably related to the fact that Luther was not “ein Systemdenker”, as Bayer has put it, and that the aim of his theological writings was not to establish unity and consistency of thought, but rather to provide comfort to people in need (Bayer 2007a, p. vii). Wilfried Joest suggests that Luther propounds a ‘relational ontology’ (Joest 1967). This notion has won widespread approval among Lutheran theologians such as Gerhard Ebeling and Bayer. With his notion, Joest seeks to capture Luther's understanding of the person as an eccentric, de-centered creature rather than a substantial and self-sufficient subject defined by conscious decisions of the will. Human beings gain their existence not in and through themselves, but outside of themselves in their trusting relationships with God and neighbors. With his Word of promise, God speaks a new reality and humans respond through faith. By emphasizing ‘faith alone’, *sola fide*, Luther focuses his ontology on the sphere ‘in-between’, which constitutes the self and the other in their mutual relationship.²⁸

3.3. Incarnatory Language and Creative Dialogue

Luther's redefinition of substance is part of his overall critique of philosophical reasoning in theology and his distinction between the language of philosophy, Latin, which is unable to express the relationship to God, and the language of the Bible, Hebrew, which he terms God's own language.

The semantic differences between Latin and Hebrew are at the core of Luther's argument in *De servo Arbitrio*, his famous 1525 writing against Erasmus of Rotterdam's defense of the free will. Here, Luther reinterprets the notion of the divine attributes as part of an exposition of Romans 3:23: “for all have sinned and lack the glory of God.” Luther

understands this glory of God as a distributive notion whereby God glorifies humans and explains this understanding by referring to the semantic differences between Latin and Hebrew. He includes faith and righteousness as parallel terms to glory and claims that Paul acquires their distributive meaning from Hebrew rather than Latin. In Latin, the faith of Christ means the faith possessed by him (substantially), whereas in Hebrew, it means the faith that humans have in Christ.²⁹ Similarly, in Latin, God's righteousness and glory denote attributes possessed by him, whereas in Hebrew, it means the righteousness and glory that humans have from him and in front of him.³⁰ Thus, whereas Latin speaks of God as he is in himself, Hebrew is able to describe his revelation and express his nature as a giver.

This understanding of Hebrew semantics corresponds with Luther's overall rephrasing of the doctrine of divine attributes. Scholastic discussions on this doctrine centered on the Biblical predicates or names of God and on his metaphysical attributes deduced from the Aristotelian understanding of transcendentals. Luther reinterprets this doctrine in light of the biblical understanding of God's glory as an overwhelming revelatory reality and maintains that the divine attributes gain new meaning in Christ, as they become gifts given to humans rather than qualities inherent to God's metaphysical being. God distributes these gifts to humans when he reveals his glory in Christ (cf. Mathiasen Stopa 2021, pp. 123–36; Bayer 2007b).

Luther's new grasp of divine attributes as gifts plays an important role in his understanding of theological language as a *nova lingua* in opposition to the old language of philosophy. In *De divinitate et humanitate Christi*, Luther claims that terms such as God, person, word, human being, and creature mean completely different things in the concrete being of Jesus and in the universal language of philosophy (Luther 1540, WA 39 II, 10,27–31). Luther proclaims a new conception of theological language as an incarnatory language, which relies on the claim that concepts receive new meaning in Christ. The background is the intimate relation between the two natures of Christ in which an exchange of attributes takes place between two substances of the one person:

From this truth on the twofold substances and from the unity of the person follows that which is called the exchange of attributes. In order that this, which is of humans, could be said of God, and, by contrast, this, which is of God, can be said of humans.³¹

The exchange between the two natures of Christ means that every word receives new meaning in Christ; as human notions, they become partakers of the divine. This word exchange causes statements such as "this human being has created the world" or "this God has suffered, has died, and has been buried" to be true. Moreover whereas creation in the old language is separated from divinity, in the new language, it is inseparably connected to divinity in Christ. Luther maintains that this is true of other terms as well and discerns between a human and a divine meaning of words. The *nova lingua* of theology involves a divinization of terms, which become distributive notions for humans to participate in. With the revelation of divine glory, the world is reconceptualized as a place in which God distributes his attributes through Christ and creates a new reality.

In this way, God addresses humans by revealing his Word, which mediates his attributes or words and inscribes human beings in the incarnation narrative of Christ. Theological language is incarnatory in the sense that notions receive new meaning in Christ and incarnate in believers through faith. As a result, individuals gain new identities and are able to answer God's address by acknowledging their sin and by praising and glorifying him. When God speaks his Word, he creates a reality resting on dialogue with his creatures.³²

4. Creative Dialogue in Buber's Relational Anthropology

In 1923, another Martin, with the surname Buber, published his seminal work of religious philosophy *Ich und Du*.³³ Around four hundred years after Luther propounded a relational anthropology centered on dialogue with God, Buber suggests an understanding

of being as created through dialogue in response to the modern notion of the autonomous I-consciousness. Like Luther, Buber breaks with the predominant contemporary ontology guided by his intimate acquaintance with the role of language for creation in the Hebrew Bible. The philosophical essay marks a turn in Buber's work from focusing on an individualized, subjective spirituality inspired by mystical thinking and on the question of what it means to be Jewish to developing a social philosophy of dialogue with a focus on the broader question of what it means to be human in community with other human beings.³⁴ Buber addresses the educated elite of post-war Germany marked by a sense of alienation and isolation and answers to an urgent need for a novel kind of philosophy capable of defining a new way of life (cf. Lang 2021, p. 212). He responds by outlining an anthropology that highlights the relational constitution of individuals in their dependent relationships to God and fellow human beings as well as the role of trust for these relationships. Thus, Mendes-Flohr describes Buber's philosophy of dialogue as an existential phenomenology of mutual trust and argues that Buber was inspired by the Biblical understanding of faith (*emunah*) as trust to understand God, who becomes present in inter-human dialogue, as the ontological foundation of interpersonal trust (Mendes-Flohr 2012, p. 126).

Along with several of his contemporaries inhabiting the vibrant, intellectual milieu of 1920s Germany, Buber criticizes the Kantian emphasis on the autonomy of the individual and the hegemony of reason; a world view which had suffered a devastating defeat in the all too corporeal trenches of the First World War.³⁵ "Es-Menscheit" is Buber's term for a kind of anthropology that views individuals as isolated entities *an sich*. He contrasts this with a truer notion of human beings as constituted through dialogue. The individual becomes an 'I' in an affirming conversation with the other, who is spoken into being as 'You': "Ich werde am Du; Ich werdend spreche Ich Du."³⁶ Buber understands dialogue as a creative process that establishes the identities of 'I' and 'You'. The I-consciousness awakens in the mutual and repeated encounters between these two individuals:

Der Mensch wird am Du zum Ich. Gegenüber kommt und entschwindet, Beziehungsereignisse verdichten sich und zerstreuen, und im Wechsel klärt sich, von Mal zu Mal wachsend, das Bewußtsein des gleichbleibenden Partners, das Ichbewußtsein.³⁷

Buber's philosophy of dialogue is indebted to what I would term a distinct ontology of creative dialogue characteristic of the Jewish-Christian tradition. This ontology is rooted in the creation account in Genesis 1, where God speaks the world into existence. "Im Anfang ist die Beziehung,"³⁸ Buber states, paraphrasing John 1:1: "In the beginning was the Word", which again echoes the *Bereshit* of the creation narrative. By using the present tense, Buber asserts that the dialogical relationship creates reality here and now, as it constitutes the 'I' and the 'You'.

This creative encounter is instituted neither by the 'I' nor by the 'You' but by a divine presence, which Buber names the spirit, the Word or "Das ewige Du" (Buber [1923] 2021, p. 41; cf. Mendes-Flohr 2019a, p. 16). Buber identifies the spirit as the human relationship to that which transcends the world (cf. Wood 1969, p. 112). This spirit acts out of grace alone, which entails that the event of dialogue happens effortlessly: "Das Du begegnet mir von Gnaden—durch Suchen wird es nicht gefunden."³⁹

Buber depicts this I-You relationship as fundamentally different from an objectifying I-it relationship and claims that it establishes a different kind of ontology: "Die Welt als Erfahrung gehört dem Grundwort Ich-Es zu. Das Grundwort Ich-Du stiftet die Welt der Beziehung."⁴⁰ This world of relation is grounded in the ontological space in-between the 'I' and the 'You' (cf. Mendes-Flohr 2015a, p. 6). When the understanding of the world is based on experience, it highlights the separation between the experiencing 'I' and the experienced world. Instead, Buber interprets the world from the perspective of relationships, emphasizing the ongoing, unmediated, and reciprocal encounter between the 'I' and the world. Whereas this genuine encounter involves the totality of one's being, the distanced relation to the it-world only involves the practical or cognitive part. Buber's distinction between the two worlds is inspired by his teacher Wilhelm Dilthey's influential

discernment between *Erfahrung*, which serves as the basis for objectively explaining the world (*Erklärung*), and *Erlebnis*, which leads to subjective understanding (*Verstehen*; cf. Mendes-Flohr 2019a, p. 15). In the later essay “Religion and Philosophy”, Buber distinguishes between the philosophical knowledge of the I–it relationship and the religious reality of the I–You relationship in a manner similar to Luther’s discernment between philosophical and theological knowledge:

I–Thou finds its highest intensity and transfiguration in religious reality, in which unlimited Being becomes, as absolute person, my partner. I–It finds its highest concentration and illumination in philosophical knowledge. In this knowledge the extraction of the subject from the I of the immediate lived togetherness of I and It and the transformation of the It into the object detached in its essence produces the exact thinking of contemplated existing beings, yes, of contemplated Being itself. (Buber [1952] 2016, p. 37)

In *Ich und Du*, Buber explains how the world of relations unfolds in three different spheres. First, life with nature, which he describes as “*untersprachlich*” in the sense that human dialogue with nature takes place at the limits of language (Buber [1923] 2021, p. 10). The second sphere is life with humans. Here, interpersonal relations unfold through language, which enables humans to give and receive the ‘You’ in dialogue. The third sphere consists of life with spiritual entities, where the relation is clouded and reveals itself “*sprachlos, aber sprachzeugend*” (Buber [1923] 2021, p. 10) in works of art, music, etc. In this way, Buber has a clear eye for the decisive role of culture in human identity formation. Moreover, according to Buber, culture itself is created through an event of dialogue staged by the spirit: “Jede große völkerumfassende Kultur ruht auf einem ursprünglichen Begegnungsereignis, auf einer einmal an ihrem Quellpunkt erfolgten Antwort an das Du, auf einem Wesensakt des Geistes.”⁴¹

With his accentuation of the world of relation, Buber contributes to the phenomenological critique of the subject–object dichotomy based on the insight that humans are social beings, who are always already interacting with the world, as propounded by Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, among others (cf. Theunissen 1977). According to Robert E. Wood, Buber initiates a second Copernican revolution by insisting on “an ontologically prior relation of *Presence*, binding subject and object together in an identity-in-difference which he termed the I–Thou relation and which constitutes the region of what he calls the *Between* (*das Zwischen*)” (Wood 1969, p. xii).⁴²

However, Buber’s understanding of humans as relational beings does not entail an erasure of individual characteristics or the subjection of the individual to fellow human beings or to a common ‘we’. Instead, the relationship to the other is exactly what enables the individual to become a distinct and autonomous ‘I’ (cf. Mendes-Flohr 2015a, p. 5). In *Urdistanz und Beziehung* from 1951, Buber asserts the need for distance in the dialogical process of creation. Outlining the basic principles of his anthropology, he states that the principle of humanity consists in a double movement:

Die erste sei die Urdistanzierung, die zweite das In-Beziehung-Treten genannt. Daß die erste die Voraussetzung der zweiten ist, ergibt sich daraus, daß man nur zu distanziertem Seienden, genauer: zu einem ein selbständiges Gegenüber gewordenen, in Beziehung treten kann.⁴³

According to Buber, the ability to distance themselves is what separates humans from animals. By stressing this primordial distance, the difference between the ‘I’ and the ‘You’ comes to serve as an ontological basis of relation (cf. Mendes-Flohr 2019a, p. 13). In this sense, Buber is indebted to a modern Kantian notion of selfhood founded on the idea of the autonomous consciousness of the individual, which differs vastly from Luther’s premodern understanding of humans as heteronomously determined by either God or Devil.

Despite of this difference between the two thinkers, Buber concurs with Luther in asserting that God needs the human being as a conversation partner in order to become God:

Daß du Gott brauchst, mehr als alles, weißt du allzeit in deinem Herzen; aber nicht auch, daß Gott dich braucht, in der Fülle seiner Ewigkeit dich? Wie gäbe es den Menschen, wenn Gott ihn nicht brauchte, und wie gäbe es dich?⁴⁴

Whereas Luther would never claim that God as he is in his eternal self depends on dialogue with human beings, Buber formulates these questions after Nietzsche announced the assassination of the transcendent, metaphysical God of theism and Feuerbach declared him a human projection.⁴⁵ Hence, though he agrees with Luther in refusing to make statements on the nature of God in himself, Buber does not adopt his premodern, Christian distinction between the metaphysical God *per se* and the revealed God, but propounds a relational notion of God as an 'eternal You', who depends on interaction with autonomous human beings in order to become God (cf. Wood 1969, p. 98). In a later essay on "Religion and Modern Thinking", Buber confirms this notion of God: "God needs man independent [. . .] as partner in dialogue, as comrade in work, as one who loves Him; God needs His creature thus or wills to need him thus" (Buber [1952] 2016, p. 63).

Inspired by mystical theology, Buber asserts that God is realized through the human being and argues that this realization unfolds in interpersonal relationships (cf. Friedman 1955, p. 27). Moreover, according to Buber, human beings hold a central role as speakers in God's ongoing creation, and he describes the act of speaking the basic word I-You as an integral part of being human: "Aber das ich zu ihm das Grundwort spreche, ist Tat meines Wesens, meine Wesenstat."⁴⁶ Because they are created in the image of God, human beings are able to utter his Word and become co-creators in his creative dialogue. Buber emphasizes God's immanence when asserting that the human being meets and accepts 'the eternal You' in the finite 'You' (cf. Tillich 1948). He shows his dependence on Kant in affirming God as a moral absolute, but rather than grounding morality in the autonomy of reason, it emerges from the individual's response to another (cf. Batnitzky 2016, p. xviii). In an epilogue to *Ich und Du* from 1957, Buber summarizes his most essential concern as the close connection between the relationship to God and interpersonal relationships (Buber [1957] 2019c, p. 243). Hence, it is by coming into relation with the world that human beings come into relation with God (cf. Ziegler 1960, p. 92).

5. Creative Dialogue in Luther and Buber

At first glance, the two Martins inhabited very different worlds, both historically and religiously. Luther was a devout Augustinian monk for whom there was no salvation outside of Christ, and he became one of the most influential reformers in the two thousand years-long history of Christianity. Moreover, he was a late medieval human being, who believed the Earth was flat and existed in an enchanted cosmos marked by the presence of angels and demons and with death and damnation as imminent threats. By contrast, Buber lived in an era when the world became increasingly disenchanted due to scientific progress and growing historical awareness and fragmented because of urbanization and industrialization. Born into a Jewish minority in Poland, Buber became strongly engaged in defining Jewish identity as distinct from the Christian majority culture.⁴⁷

At a closer look, though, several interesting interconnections between the two thinkers present themselves. Most importantly, both Luther and Buber outline a relational anthropology inspired by the understanding of reality as spoken and of human existence as sustained through creative dialogue with God in the Hebrew Bible. I suggest calling this common denominator rooted in the Jewish-Christian tradition 'dialogical ontology'. It entails an understanding of being or reality as created through communicative relationships sustained by trust: the foundational God-human relationship and interpersonal relationships that realize the human relationship with the divine. Moreover, for Buber, human dialogue with nature holds a central place.

Luther's theology, defined by his premodern world view, does not include a distanced I-it relation to the world, and the dialogical ontology concerns creation as a whole. According to Luther, God creates and sustains the natural world and saves human beings by giving his attributes such as righteousness, life, and salvation through Christ. Luther

explains these creative processes as word exchanges that take place when God reveals himself in his manifold words, i.e., the ongoing acts of creation, and in his saving Word, Christ, at the incarnation. For Luther, language and reality, word and world, converge.

Even though nature is a treasured dialogue partner for Buber, the dialogical ontology he proposes is modern in the sense that it is a social ontology that concerns human identity formation and culture. His distinction between the world of experience and the world of relation results from the scientific exploration of the natural world, which entails a separation of nature from culture, as well as the increasing knowledge of foreign cultures, which relativizes and questions the existing majority culture. These developments made it a pressing issue among European intellectuals in the beginning of the 20th century to define society and the social structures upholding it, which were no longer understood as God-given.⁴⁸

Luther and Buber both had vast knowledge of mystical theology, not least Meister Eckhart. Luther translated the *Theologia Deutsch*, a German mystical writing from the 14th century, and was inspired by mystical insights when rephrasing the human relationship to God as characterized by a union with Christ.⁴⁹ Buber wrote his dissertation on the relation between the unity of God and the multiplicity of creatures as dealt with by the medieval theologian Nicholas of Cusa and by speculative mystics from Eckhart to the Lutheran theologian and mystic Jakob Boehme (cf. Wood 1969, p. 6). At the core of this mystical tradition is a yearning for the immediate presence of the divine and for union with God (*unio mystica*), which is central to both Luther and Buber's understanding of the human relationship to God.⁵⁰ Both express a profound longing for unity with God and employ mystical vocabulary to interpret the reciprocal God-human relationship. Furthermore, they maintain that creative dialogue—be it with God, as in Luther's theology, or with fellow humans, as in Buber's thought—expresses the presence of God.

Moreover, both had extensive experience with living withdrawn lives of contemplation: Luther as an Augustinian Monk; Buber in a five-year retreat (from 1904) studying Hasidic teachings, beliefs, and practices. However, they both broke with the secluded lifestyle and came to understand the aim of religion as hallowing the everyday.⁵¹ As a result, both denied the relevance of speechless mystical experiences in favor of a dialogical relationship to God mediated by concrete words of Scripture or by the ethical demands of interpersonal relationships in the everyday lives of ordinary people (cf. Habermas 2015, p. 10). Reflecting on this development later in life, Buber states:

Since then I have given up the “religious” which is nothing but the exception, extraction, exaltation, ecstasy; or it has given me up. I possess nothing but the everyday out of which I am never taken. The mystery is no longer disclosed, it has escaped or it has made its dwelling here where everything happens as it happens. I know no fullness but each mortal hour's fullness of claim and responsibility. Though far from being equal to it, yet I know that in the claim I am claimed and may respond in responsibility, and know who speaks and demands a response. I do not know much more. If that is religion then it is just everything simply all that is lived in its possibility of dialogue. (Buber 1947, pp. 16–17; cf. Buber 1967, p. 26)

Luther and Buber took their starting point in fundamental human experiences rather than in philosophical sophistry: Buber's philosophy emerged from the everyday experience of the I-You encounter (cf. Mendes-Flohr 2012, p. 126). Luther's theology dealt with the common human experience of suffering, which he interpreted as an experience of being abandoned by God and merely encountering his Word as a condemning word of law. Luther contrasts this experience with the good news of the gospel: God's promise of salvation.

Furthermore, Buber and Luther had an intimate knowledge of the Hebrew Bible, which they translated into German. They both wrote extensive exegetical works acknowledging the difficulties of discerning the true Word of God from the manifold words of human beings (cf. Mendes-Flohr 2015b, p. 141). Buber's translation, which was partly

done with Franz Rosenzweig, was said to be the best German translation since Luther's (cf. Panko 2016, p. 14). With their understanding of the translatory practice, Buber and Rosenzweig sought to move beyond historical criticism, which had engulfed the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* from the early 19th century onward (cf. Pajević 2019, pp. 185–97). In response, they asserted that the texts embodied 'the eternal You' (cf. Mendes-Flohr 2019b, p. 178).⁵² They shared this notion that the concrete Hebrew semantics was a medium of divine revelation with Luther (Buber 1936, p. 55). All three understood language to create reality. In an article on "Biblical Humanism" from 1933, Buber writes:

Humanismus geht von dem Geheimnis der Sprache aus und auf das Geheimnis der menschlichen Person zu. Die Wirklichkeit der Sprache soll im Geist der Person wirkend werden. Die Wahrheit der Sprache soll sich in der Existenz der Person bewähren. Das hat humanistische Erziehung gemeint, solange sie lebendig war.⁵³

Luther and Buber both highlighted the importance of engaging orally with the written words of Scripture: Buber focused on the spiritual act of spokenness between human beings. Luther asserted the importance of the external Word, *verbum externum*, mediated to humans in the outer words of prayer, hymns, or sermons and in the edible Word of the Eucharist. This encounter with the outer Word constitutes a creative dialogue central to human identity formation; a speech act infused with the power to create reality anew.⁵⁴ They were indebted to a tradition of 'dialogical ontology', which states that being is created through speech and sustained through dialogue. Thus, one of the first paragraphs of *Ich und Du* relies on the Genesis account of creation when stating: "Ich sein und ich sprechen sind eins."⁵⁵ On this basis, they questioned the prevailing ontologies of their time: Aristotelean substance ontology and Kantian subject–object dualism.

In this way, the relational anthropologies of Luther and Buber are rooted in the understanding of reality as spoken into being by God. Both thinkers maintain that God has the right of initiative. He bestows and human beings receive, as Buber states. At the same time, though, God's address calls for a human answer. He invites individuals into a creative dialogue, whereby they become co-creators through their interpersonal relationships. For Luther, the divine–human relationship is dialogical in the sense that God gives his gift of faith, which enables human beings to respond to his Word of condemnation and forgiveness in prayers of lament and praise. Through this dialogical encounter with God's Word, the human being is able to recognize sin and receive a new existence as Christ for the neighbor. Thus, Luther understands the human being as heteronomously constituted by the relationship to God. Buber agrees with Luther in stating that God needs a human response. However, in Buber's thought, the creative event of dialogue takes place between human beings, even though it is sustained by 'the eternal You' or the spirit. These interpersonal dialogues serve as eye-openers; they reveal a truer understanding of reality. Buber underlines divine immanence by asserting that human beings are able to know and relate to God as 'the eternal You' through their dialogical relationships with other human beings and the world. At the same time, though, Buber maintains that God in himself remains unknowable. In this way, God remains more radically transcendent in Buber's Jewish thought than in Luther's profoundly Christological theology, where Christ as "*Deum verum de Deo vero*"—as stated by the Nicene Creed—enters into a dialogical relationship with the human being. For Luther, humans are only able to know and relate properly to the world, because of their primordial relationship to God through Christ, whereas for Buber, humans encounter God when they know and relate to the world.⁵⁶

Moreover, Buber's philosophy of dialogue relies on and responds to a modern notion of selfhood unknown to Luther. Buber's understanding of the 'I' is indebted to Kant's notion of the self as an autonomous, individual consciousness. However, by underlining interdependence and the creative role of communication for human identity formation, Buber challenges this understanding, albeit without consenting to Luther's premodern notion of the human being as heteronomously constituted. The ammunition for this

attack on the autonomous self is theological and provided by the Hebrew Bible as well as the subsequent Jewish and Christian tradition, which is the nodal point that makes the comparison between Luther and Buber relevant.

Despite the differences with regard to the primary locus of creative dialogue connected with diverging understandings of the human relationship to God as well as the basic understanding of selfhood, Luther and Buber agree that human beings live out their relationship to God in obliging interpersonal relationships that are defined by trust. Certainly, this insight has profound ethical implications.⁵⁷ Thus, in an essay on the relation between “Religion and Ethics”, Buber asserts:

Living religiousness wishes to bring forth living ethos. [...] Only out of a personal relationship with the Absolute can the absoluteness of the ethical co-ordinates arise, without which there is no complete awareness of self. Even when the individual calls an absolute criterion handed down by religious tradition his own, it must be re-forged in the fire of the truth of his personal essential relation to the Absolute if it is to win true validity. But always it is the religious which bestows, the ethical which receives. (Buber [1952] 2016, p. 86)

Adhering to a Biblical notion of creative dialogue, Luther and Buber challenge contemporary theological anthropology to acknowledge the relational character of human existence and to consider human identity formation as a dialogical process: “Ich werdend spreche Ich Du” (Buber [1923] 2021, p. 16). Moreover, their thinking asserts the uncompromising ethical responsibility for the other, which characterizes any authentic interpersonal encounter. Such a contention may serve as a rejoinder in a world where globalization and multiculturalization mean that intercultural dialogue is more needed than ever. Finally, the notion of creative dialogue underlines the hermeneutical task of theology: undertaking contemporary theology—Jewish or Christian—is to speak a language that re-conceptualizes the world and creates reality. In the beginning is the Word.

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Notes

¹ I follow Martin Buber in capitalizing the second-person singular pronoun ‘You’.

² *Logos* meant a number of things in ancient Greek (e.g., word, speech, mind, reason, plan; cf. “Logos” in Liddle and Scott’s *Greek–English Dictionary*), and its meaning in the Gospel of John has been a matter of dispute throughout the history of theology. The Vulgate translates *logos* with *verbum*, word. However, several church fathers and later theologians preferred to translate *logos* with *sermo*, speech or discourse. Thus, Erasmus of Rotterdam defended his preference for *sermo* in *Apologia de ‘In principio erat sermo’*, arguing that *logos* only rarely means a single word and more often denotes an utterance (Erasmus of Rotterdam [1520] 2015). According to Erasmus, *logos* “has multiple meanings: it may be ‘speech’ [*sermo*], ‘word’ [*verbum*], ‘discourse’ [*oratio*], ‘reasoning’ [*ratio*], ‘wisdom’ [*sapientia*], or ‘calculation’ [*computus*] (. . .) However, Latin speakers liked *sermo* or *verbum* best” (Erasmus of Rotterdam [1520] 2015, p. 18). Erasmus shows how church fathers such as Cyprian, Tertullian, and, on occasion, Augustine, Anselm of Canterbury, and Thomas Aquinas either translated *logos* with *sermo* or failed to distinguish between *sermo* and *verbum*. The choice of *sermo* over *verbo* expressed the idea of dialogue, which is central to *logos* as the second person of the Trinity (Jarrot 1964, pp. 36–37). With reference to Augustine, Erasmus maintains that this second person, the Son, is constituted through speech. Jarrot explains: “It is this generative discourse between the Father and the Son which, in the mystery of the Trinity, is the Son. Therefore “sermo” is more fitting than “verbum”” (Jarrot 1964, p. 38). In this way, translating *logos* with *sermo* underlines the dialogical constitution of the trinitarian God in himself and of his revelation in Christ. I argue that the latter is central to Martin Luther’s doctrine of justification.

³ The Gospel of John’s concept of *logos* draws on the figure of ‘wisdom’ in Hellenistic Jewish literature, most prominently presented in the Wisdom of Solomon (cf. Engberg-Pedersen 2012, p. 30). It is an ongoing discussion among scholars whether the account of *logos* in the Johannine Prologue has its traditional historical roots planted primarily in the Septuagint, in the Platonic Hellenistic Jewish thinking of, for instance, Philo, or rather in Stoicism, as Troels Engberg-Pedersen has argued. According to Engberg-

Pedersen, John relies on Stoic philosophy of mind, which maintains that all phenomena have a physical and a cognitive aspect and understands *logos* as the cognitive aspect of spirit, *pneuma* (Engberg-Pedersen 2012, p. 35).

In a 2015 article, Habermas describes Buber's later writings as footnotes to this groundbreaking work and admits the pivotal influence of Buber's philosophy of dialogue has had on his own philosophy, not least his theory of communicative action (Habermas 2015, p. 11). In view of his various and original work, Buber was not only a philosopher, but also a scholar of comparative religion, a biblical scholar, a scholar of Hasidism and mysticism, and a professor of social philosophy and sociology. Paul Mendes-Flohr calls Buber "a polymath of exceptional learning" (Mendes-Flohr 2015a, p. 2) and stresses the difficulties in determining Buber's academic discipline by quoting Buber's own claim that he was not a university person (Mendes-Flohr 2015a, p. 1).

Reflecting on his work in 1962, Buber denies having developed a certain kind of teaching and claims that he has merely pointed out something about reality that has so far been overlooked (Buber 1962, p. 1114).

This assertion of dialogue is also outspoken in the central works of other contemporary thinkers such as Hermann Cohen's *Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums* (1919), Franz Rosenzweig's *Stern der Erlösung* (1921), Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy's *Angewandte Seelenkunde* (1924), and Ferdinand Ebner's *Das Wort und die geistigen Realitäten: Pneumatologische Fragmente* (1921). Apart from Ebner, all these thinkers had Jewish backgrounds. Rosenstock-Huessy later termed this way of thinking "Dialogismus" (Rosenstock-Huessy 1956, p. 152; cf. Theunissen 1964). This dialogical thinking agreed with Heidegger's 'Fundamentalontologie' in turning attention away from the subject or the individual consciousness toward the actual, interconnected lives of individuals, "die Faktizität des menschlichen Daseins" (Theunissen 1964, p. 320).

All translations from German and Latin are the author's own.

In the article, written in celebration of Buber's 70th birthday, Tillich identifies three main points of inspiration: "Buber's existential interpretation of prophetic religion, his rediscovery of mysticism as an element within prophetic religion, and his understanding of the relation between prophetic religion and culture, especially in the social and political realms."

Buber's philosophy of dialogue was enthusiastically embraced by several Lutheran theologians including Emil Brunner, Friedrich Gogarten, and, as mentioned, Paul Tillich, as well as the reformed theologian Karl Barth (cf. Friedman 1955, p. 268; Tillich 1948). Leora Batnitzky suggests that they find an exposition of divine grace in Buber's understanding of the I-You relation (Batnitzky 2016, p. xxi).

I refer to the online version of the Weimar Edition of Luther's works (Luther 1883–1993) and use the common abbreviation WA.

In recent years, several Luther scholars have asserted the role of reciprocity in Luther's understanding of the human relationship to God. For instance, Finnish Luther research led by Tuomo Mannermaa has underlined the effective or transformative dimension of justification, highlighting the importance of participation in and union with Christ for Luther's theology (Braaten and Jenson 1998). Moreover, Bo Holm, among others, has interpreted Luther's theology from the perspective of gift-giving, arguing that a basic structure of reciprocity undergirds his understanding of the human relationship to God (Holm 2006, p. 130). Hence, according to Claudia Welz, the concurrence of activity and passivity is a fundamental insight of reformation theology: "Martin Luther stated that faith is only received passively, yet is practised in and through love's spontaneity" (Welz 2009, p. 129). Analyzing the notion of trust so central to the human relationship to God, Welz shows how it entails both passivity and activity and defines trust as both a gift and a talent.

Luther 1531, WA 40 I, 113b,12: "... sine operibus legis per solam gratiam et fidem in Christum." This quote is from the *Lectures on Galatians*, but the statement is repeated throughout Luther's works.

Luther 1520, WA 7,25,18-20: "When then God sees that the soul grants him truth and thus honors him through its faith, then he honors it in return and considers it pious and truthful."

Luther 1520, WA 7, 55,31-33: "'Si ego peccavi, at Christus meus non peccavit, in quem credo, cuius omnia mea sunt et omnia mea (Hohel. 2, 16.) illius', sicut in Canticis 'Dilectus meus mihi et ego illi'." Holm analyzes this reciprocity between the soul and Christ (Holm 2006, p. 117).

Luther 1539, WA 47, 758c,24-26: "... an eternal dialogue between God and human beings, either that he speaks with us while we sit still and listen to him, or that he listens to us talking to him and praying for what we need."

Luther 1539, WA 47, 758c,10-11: "Namely first, that they become other people and associate with God's Word, through which they have and sustain their rebirth."

Cf. Mutschler 2007. Claudia Welz argues that Luther understands prayer as a dialogue, but emphasizes how God always has the first and the last word (Welz 2023).

Luther wrote the book in 1519 in the aftermath of the controversy over indulgences. The title reveals its catechetical and pastoral purpose as part of his endeavor to educate the laity and guide them in their religious practice (cf. Mathiasen Stopa 2021, pp. 184–94).

Luther 1519, WA 2, 93,27-28: "Your own prayer punishes you and is against you, gives evidence against you, accuses you. There you lie, who will help you?" Mikoteit analyzes a similar penitential dialogue, a *confessio peccatorum*, in his analysis of Luther's *Third Lectures on the Psalms* (1532–1535). Occasioned by the text of the Psalm, the dialogue takes place between the divine 'You'

and two humans: An unfaithful human ‘You’, who accuses God of lying, and a faithful human ‘You’, who acknowledges his or her sin and repents (Mikoteit 2004, p. 246).

In his exposition of the human answer to God’s address in creation, Bayer does, though, emphasize the affective dimension central to three basic responses: “Staunen, Seufzen, Schauen” (Bayer 1990, p. 170).

Luther 1532, WA 40 II, 328,30-33: “Ergo necessaria haec Theologica cognitio est, ut homo se cognoscat, hoc est, ut sciat, sentiat et experiatur, quod sit reus peccati et addictus morti, Deinde etiam, ut contrarium sciat et experiatur, quod Deus sit iustificator et redemptor talis hominis, qui sic se cognoscit.”

Luther 1531, WA 40 I, 360a,5-6: “Fides est creatrix divinitatis, non in persona, sed in nobis.”

Luther 1530, WA 30 II, 602,39-603,4: “If you want to become a creator of God, then come here and listen (. . .) Not in the sense that you should create his divine nature, for this is and remains eternally uncreated, but in the sense that you could make him a god for you, so that he would become a true god for you, you, you, just as he is a true god for himself.”

Form is what kind of thing the object is, matter is what (ever) it is made of. Together, form and matter compose the individual substances, which have certain accidents. According to Aristotle, form is the most fundamental case of substance. The individual substance is the form individualized in the matter, which functions as a catalyst by means of which the form becomes an individual substance. Aristotle is a realist in the sense that he thinks that substantial forms are something more than a collection of properties.

Luther 1532, WA 40 II, 354,3-4: “Nec Sanctitas est in praedicamento substantiae sed relationis.”

In *Rationis Latomianae confutatio*, his most comprehensive account of the doctrine of justification, Luther presents this understanding of grace as externally given: “At gratia dei est externum bonum, favor dei, opposita irae” (Luther 1521, WA 8, 106,22). In addition to grace, God grants believers his gift, i.e., faith in Christ and a new righteousness by faith, whereby they are gradually purged from sin: “Remissa sunt omnia per gratiam, sed nondum omnia sanata per donum” (Luther 1521, WA 8, 107,21).

The term ontology understood as a theory of being was not employed until the late 16th century. In his *Philosophisches Lexicon* (1733), Johann Georg Walch defines this relatively new notion: “Ontology means the doctrine of being (Ente), and is understood as a name whereby a new philosophy of metaphysics is established, i.e., that discipline that treats being in general and its properties” (quoted in Bielfeldt 2017, p. 3).

Joest begins his influential book, *Ontologie der Person bei Luther*, with some remarks on the notion of ontology, criticizing the vague way in which it is often used among Luther scholars. Ontology means a structure common to every kind of being, from humans to the inorganic. Often, ontology includes a notion of substance as the stabile core of being (substance metaphysics). Relations are secondary to this substance. Against this understanding of being stand dynamic, actualizing, relational, or personal understandings of reality. These are, however, also ontological since they concern the understanding of being. Joest defines ontology as the question of the meaning of being and of how reality exists (Joest 1967, p. 14).

Luther 1525, WA 18, 768,39-769,1: “[. . .] fides Christi latine sonat, quam Christus habet, Sed Ebraeis fides Christi intelligitur, quae in Christum habetur.”

Luther 1525, WA 18, 769,1-4: “Iustitia Dei latine dicitur, quam Deus habet, sed Ebraeis intelligitur, quae ex Deo et coram Deo habetur. Ita gloriam Dei non latine, sed Ebraice accipimus, quae in Deo et coram Deo habetur et gloria in Deo dici posset.”

Luther 1540, WA 39 II, 93,4-7: “Ex hac veritate geminae substantiae et unitate personae sequitur illa, quae dicitur, communicatio idiomatum. Ut ea, quae sunt hominis, recte de Deo et e contra, quae Dei sunt, de homine dicantur.”

Building on Luther’s notion of the revealed God and on the trinitarian theologies of Eberhard Jüngel and Jürgen Moltmann, Christoph Schwöbel has argued for a metaphorical understanding of God’s being as communication: “In Gott bestehen Sein und Kommunikation in untrennbarer Einheit [. . .] Alles, was ist, gehört zum Vokabular Gottes und wird durch die göttliche Grammatik geordnet” (Schwöbel 2020, p. 534). Schwöbel distinguishes philosophical reflection about God in contemporary analytical theology from Luther’s understanding of God, which depends on a living experience of communicating with God, and questions whether philosophical principles are able to conceptualize this communicative relationship (Schwöbel 2020, p. 529).

The book is based on a number of lectures on “Religion als Gegenwart” held by Buber at the Freie jüdische Lehrhaus in Frankfurt. Paul Tillich poignantly describes *Ich und Du* as “a most important and influential philosophy of religion—if this term can be used for a small book which is at least as much a religious pronouncement as it is a cognitive analysis” (Tillich 1948).

In the first decades of the 20th century, Buber aspired to foster a cultural and ethical rebirth of Jewish values inspired by Hasidism and was associated with the zionist movement (cf. Kuschel 2015, p. 116). Buber grew up as part of the Jewish minority among Polish Catholics in Lemberg, Poland (today Lwiv in Ukraine). Studying at the universities of Vienna, Leipzig, Zürich, and Berlin, Buber acquired broad knowledge of European history, philosophy, theology, psychology, and art history. Thus, Buber had profound insight into Christian theology and wrote his dissertation (1904) on the Catholic cardinal and renaissance humanist Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464) and the Lutheran theologian and mystic Jakob Boehme (1575–1624). Moreover, Buber was influenced by Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism. According to Maurice Friedman, Buber’s thought developed in three stages beginning with an early stage of mysticism through a middle stage of existentialism to a final stage of dialogical philosophy (Friedman 1955, p. 27). Mendes-Flohr has described this development as a turn from an asocial *Erlebnissphilosophie*, which led Buber to support the First World War as an important collective experience, to the mature philosophy of dialogue with its social moral vision (Mendes-Flohr 1989).

- At the same time, though, Buber admitted to being profoundly influenced by Kant's philosophy throughout his life (cf. [Wood 1969](#), p. 35).
- [Buber \[1923\] 2021](#), p. 16: "I become through You; becoming I, I speak You."
- [Buber \[1923\] 2021](#), p. 33: "The human being becomes an I through the You. That which confronts him comes or disappears, relational events condense, then are scattered, and in the change, the consciousness of the changeless partner, the I-consciousness, becomes clear, every time growing."
- [Buber \[1923\] 2021](#), pp. 22, 54: "In the beginning is the relation".
- [Buber \[1923\] 2021](#), p. 15: "The You encounters me out of grace—it cannot be found through seeking."
- [Buber \[1923\] 2021](#), p. 10: "The world as experience belongs to the basic word I-It. The basic word I-You establishes the world of relation."
- [Buber \[1923\] 2021](#), p. 55: "Any huge culture that encompasses a people relies on an original event of meeting, on an answer to the You given once at its place of origin, on an act of creation by the Spirit."
- Friedman describes this as "the 'sphere of between' (*das Zwischenmenschliche*)" ([Friedman 1955](#), p. 85).
- [Buber \[1951\] 2019b](#), pp. 197–98: "The first is called primordial distancing, the second relating to. That the first is a precondition for the second is evident from the fact that you can only relate to a distanced being, more precisely: to an independent opposite."
- [Buber \[1923\] 2021](#), p. 82: "You always know in your heart that you need God more than anything else; but do you also know that God needs you, in the fullness of his eternity, you? How would humans exist, if God did not need them, and how would you exist?"
- Buber's first publication was a Polish translation of Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra*. As a student at the university in Vienna at the turn of the 20th century, Buber was taught by F. Jodl, who edited the works of Feuerbach, and according to Buber, reading Feuerbach gave him a decisive impetus mainly because of the assertion that philosophical anthropology concerns the relation between the I and the You (cf. [Wood 1969](#), p. 5; [Friedman 1955](#), p. 164).
- [Buber \[1923\] 2021](#), p. 15: "But that I speak the basic word to him is an act of being, my being's act."
- Unfortunately, this paper does not leave room for a thorough analysis of Buber's discussions on the relationship between Judaism and Christianity, which can be found in his *Vorlesungen über Judentum und Christentum* (Martin Buber Werkausgabe vol. 5. Edited by Orr Scharf. Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2017) or his various critical writings on Christianity (see for instance *Schriften zum Christentum*. Martin Buber Werkausgabe vol. 9. Edited by Karl-Josef Kuschel. Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2011).
- Among the contemporary sociologists, Buber was most profoundly influenced by the work of his teacher in Berlin Georg Simmel.
- Volker Leppin has researched the influence of mystical theology on Luther's theology (e.g., [Leppin 2016](#)). Finnish Luther research has underlined the importance of the mystical notion of union with Christ for Luther's theology ([Braaten and Jenson 1998](#)).
- Luther only mentions John of Cusa a few times, but as Knut Alfsvåg has shown, there are several overlaps in their theologies ([Alfsvåg 2016](#)).
- On Buber see [Panko 2016](#), p. 10; [Tillich 1948](#) and on Luther see [Bayer 2007a](#), p. 129; [Mathiasen Stopa 2021](#), pp. 210–11. Ronald F. Thiemann has suggested the notion of sacramental realism to explain how Luther's Christology and Eucharistic theology "sacralize" the everyday" by maintaining Christ's mediated presence "clothed in the familiar, ordinary and everyday" ([Thiemann 2014](#), p. 169).
- According to Claire E. Sufrin, "Buber and Rosenzweig attempted to create a German text that would restore the power of the text as a whole and call readers away from biblical criticism" ([Sufrin 2013](#), p. 76).
- [Buber \[1933\] 2019a](#), p. 82: "Humanism arises from the secret of language and is directed at the secret of the human person. The reality of language should be effectuated in the spirit of the person. The truth of language should prove itself in the existence of the person. This is what humanist education meant, when it was alive."
- As Paul Mendes-Flohr states, the philosophy of dialogue understands the speech act, not reason, as the primary organ of realization ([Mendes-Flohr 2012](#), p. 124).
- [Buber \[1923\] 2021](#), p. 8: "To be I and to speak I is one and the same thing."
- Ziegler identifies this as a basic difference between Kierkegaard, a genuinely Lutheran theologian, and Buber ([Ziegler 1960](#), pp. 92–93).
- Friedman argues that theologians such as Emil Brunner and Friedrich Gogarten overemphasize human sinfulness and downplay the importance of ethical action in their interpretation of Buber's philosophy of dialogue ([Friedman 1955](#), p. 272). The same could be said of the interpretation of Luther's theology among their generation of Lutheran and reformed theologians, connected with the movement of dialectical theology, who tend to overlook the important role of works of love for the doctrine of justification and fail to acknowledge how his emphasis on the totality of sin and, hence, on human passivity and receptivity in relation to God is accompanied by the assertion that this relationship facilitates spontaneous and free activity for the sake of the neighbor.

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