

15. The Problem of Sin in Luther

Being and Time mentions Luther only twice (*BT*, 10, 190 n.), and both occurrences seem at most peripheral to its project of a fundamental ontology and analytic of Dasein. And yet, in this lecture on the problem of sin in Luther, the attentive reader will readily find, in Heidegger's close reading of Luther's text, ample opportunity to wonder about the impact of Luther on Heidegger's entire project. The record of evidence of this influence is now abundantly clear. Heidegger began to read Luther closely as early as 1918, sometimes with like-minded colleagues like Julius Ebbinghaus. A small grant through Husserl allowed Heidegger, "who is as poor as a church mouse" (Husserl to Winthrop Bell on September 18, 1921: *Briefwechsel* 3, 21), to obtain the complete Erlangen edition of Luther, from which he had already been citing in his lecture courses and seminars in "Catholic Freiburg." The move to "Protestant Marburg" thus gave Heidegger an immediate and uninhibited opportunity to demonstrate his long familiarity with the Lutheran opus precisely in the context of a semester-long participation in Bultmann's seminar on "Paul's ethics." The record of the seminar shows that Heidegger made his first significant contribution in a discussion of the Lutheran thesis of the justification of faith through God's act of judgment, and therefore the relationship between faith and ethical action (session of January 10, 1924). Heidegger's exegesis of Romans 6 on "living *in* faith" spilled over, in the following weeks, into the questions of the fulfillment of ethical commands and the special demands imposed on Christians. A discussion of the demands of conscience, guilt, decision (κρίσις), and freedom sets the stage for Heidegger's two-part commentary that concludes the semester.

At issue in his seminar presentation is Luther's conception of the radicality of

The following two-part lecture was given by Heidegger in the last two sessions (February 14 and 21, 1924) of Rudolf Bultmann's theological seminar on "Paul's ethics" at the University of Marburg in WS 1923–1924. A student transcript, the seminar "protocol" of Heidegger's two-part presentation, has been published in Bernd Jaspert (ed.), *Sachgemässe Exegese. Die Protokolle aus Rudolf Bultmanns Neutestamentlichen Seminaren 1921–1951* (Marburg: Elwert, 1996), 28–33. The protocol appears here in the English translation prepared by Brian Hansford Bowles and edited specifically for this volume by Theodore Kisiel with the permission of the publisher, N. G. Elwert.

sin and the consequences of this radicality for a theological understanding both of the being of the human and of the human's proper relation to God. The conclusion to this issue reached by Heidegger with Luther is that, "faith can be understood only when sin is understood, and sin is understood only by way of a correct understanding of the very being of the human being." Heidegger thereby attempts to lead the theological questions of sin, faith, and man's relation to God back to more properly philosophical territory.

A closer look at Heidegger's exegesis reveals that its guiding thread of interpretation, and so its criterion for the selection of texts, is the ontological concept of *affectus*, understood explicitly in a non-psychological way as the "how of being pos[ition]ed" (*Wie des Gestelltseins*) toward things, in the world, before God. To bring out this affective element, *Gestelltsein* has accordingly been translated as "being-disposed." This translation is confirmed by the repeated recurrence of the German term in the Aristotle course of SS 1924 as Heidegger's formula for affective habit, usually in close proximity with another Aristotelian category denoting the at first non-psychological state of always already finding oneself disposed in the world (*Befindlichkeit*). The theological dynamics of sin and faith subjected to the contrary forces of attraction and repulsion (traditionally, the "concupiscible" versus the "irascible" appetites) thus plays itself out in a situational habitat of being-in-the-world which begins with the drama of man's turning away from God in sin and seeks to end in being turned toward God in faith. The full register of the affects of sin is therefore rehearsed: aversion, rejection, revolt, impenitence, hatred, contempt. The horror and loathsomeness of the revolting things of the world provide occasions for the repentant return to God. The affective habit of faith, the attentive listening to the call of grace in the Word of God, is thus understood by way of the affects of sin. The lecture concludes by invoking Paul's and Kierkegaard's affect of a faith that stands before God in fear and trembling, in mortal anxiety of the spiritual trial and tribulation that it must suffer in passage.

As is well known, Heidegger often arrived at similar ontological insights for his thought through an examination of very different thinkers. And in this lecture one wonders about the apparent parallel between the characterization of the movement of sin and Heidegger's movement of *Verfallenheit*, the state of lapse; the respective emphases on *affectus* and disposition as primary modes of disclosing man's being; the issue of entanglement in the world and its relation to the possibility of authenticity; the horror of clinging to things in the world preceding the possibility of coming to God, Heidegger's analysis of anxiety and the possibility it opens of living mortally in authenticity; and the concept of the debit of "guilt" (*Schuld*) and its possible relation to the religious notion of sin.

But despite these apparent correspondences, there exists between these two thinkers a radical incommensurability. For in Heidegger, in opposition to Luther, there is no room to talk about the "original righteousness" of the human being.

And in fact it is precisely from this perspective that one would have to reconsider the aforementioned parallels between the two on the issues surrounding the determination of the being of the human. What in Luther's thought on the being of the human is a loss [*defectus*] vis-à-vis a prior mode of being becomes in Heidegger the finitude that determines Dasein as such. This finitude is of course not to be understood in terms of a defective mode of being that Dasein has fallen into from a higher mode and thus might try to overcome. That is, finitude for Heidegger does not name a condition to be alleviated through salvation or any other means. In that sense alone Heidegger's relation to Luther will always be a strained relation, where the latter assumes the future possibility of reacquiring a perfection beyond the human's current defective condition, whereas for Heidegger finitude is in its own sense perfect precisely in its essential incompleteness.

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Professor Heidegger made the following comments [February 14, 1924]:

The problem of sin will here be treated not as an object of religious contemplation but as a theological problem. Luther's theology will then be elucidated from the perspective of this question.

The object of theology is God, and its theme is the human being in regard to how he is placed¹ before God. But to be human is at the same time also to be *in* the world, and so that human beings also have before them the entire problematic of the world. Luther's theological questioning assumed a particular basic direction in starting from the problem of sin. Our question now reads: What does "sin" mean when humanity's relation to God is discussed as a theological problem? This problem is closely tied to the question of the original state [*Urstand*] of humanity in *iustitia originalis* [original righteousness]. For we are asking about human *being* at the moment of its emergence from the hand of God.

The human being must, on the one hand, be regarded as the *summum bonum* [highest good] of creation, and, on the other hand, be so created that the Fall and the being of sin become possible but are not blamed on God. Furthermore, the idea of redemption also depends upon the way in which original sin and the Fall are considered. The sense and essence of any particular theology can be read

1. [Editor's note: *Wie des Gestelltseins*, "how of being-pos[ition]ed or placed." Since this is Heidegger's formula at this time for an *affective habit*, it will usually be translated in what follows as the "how of being *disposed*" or some variant thereof. In SS 1924, Heidegger will relate the same formula to Aristotle's *dia-thesis* (dis-position), which he translates as *Befindlichkeit*, "finding oneself disposed" or the disposition of moods.]

off from its view of man's *iustitia originalis* [original righteousness]. For the more the radicality of sin is underrated, then the more redemption is disparaged and the more God becoming human in the Incarnation loses its necessity. We thus find in Luther's thought the fundamental tendency that the *corruptio* of man's being can never be grasped radically enough. And Luther asserted this particularly in opposition to Scholasticism, which always spoke of *corruptio* with qualification and in extenuation.

It is now a matter of showing: I) that the tendency toward this problematic is already operative in Luther's early period, and II) that the later Luther likewise displays this same tendency.

I

1. "Quaestio de viribus [et voluntate hominis sine gratia]" [The Question of Man's Capacity and Will without Grace] from 1516.²

Luther does not see sin as a growing accumulation of errors. He instead directs our view to *affectus* [affect], that is, to the way in which the human being is disposed [*Gestelltsein*] toward things, its being-displaced *and* horrified [*Entsetztsein*] by things, which comes from its clinging to them. The human being is stricken by a *horror* that is based in *quaerere iustitiam suam* [seeking its righteousness]. The *desperatio spiritualis* [spiritual despair] that arises from this is a despair before God that comes not from a multitude of sins but from the *affectus horrens peccatum* [affect of being horrified by sin]. And sin is defined by a very specific state of being disposed toward the world. The basic requirement of every theology is, consequently, to interpret man's being in the world in such a way that the human can depart from this state of being and come to God. This state of being should therefore not be presented as something good, for in it humans do not learn to love God. Instead, human beings must be brought to the point where they grasp their being as persisting in a world that offers not the delight of glories but the loathsomeness of revolting things. God in His mercy has profoundly shaken man's *quaerere iustitiam suam* so that he now knows, "I have nothing to expect from the world." Luther thus lays the emphasis on the *affectus subtilissime carnalis* [keenest of carnal affects] and arrives, in complete opposition to Scholasticism, at the proposition that *corruptio amplificanda est* [corruption is something to be amplified].

2. M. Luther, "Quaestio de viribus et voluntate hominis sine gratia disputata" (1516) in *D. Martin Luthers Werke* 1 (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau, 1883) [= *WA* 1 = Weimarer Ausgabe (i.e., Weimar edition), vol. 1], 142–51. These notes to the published German text of the seminar protocol, including the bracketed in-text references to the German of Luther's works, have been added by the German editor, Bernd Jaspert.

2. “Disputatio contra scholasticam theologiam” [Disputation against Scholastic Theology] of 1517.³

a) Thesis 17: Man of himself is not able to want God to be God. It is much more the case that man wants to be God. But this is precisely the essence of sin: *velle se esse deum et deum non esse deum* [to want himself to be God and God not to be God; *WA* 1, 225.1–2/10].

b) Thesis 25: Hope comes not from works, but from suffering [*WA* 1, 225.15–16/10].

c) Thesis 30: On man’s part, nothing but the revolt against grace can preempt grace itself. The possibility of its existence does not reside in the human being [*WA* 1, 225.29–30/11].

d) Thesis 37: All of human action is presumptuous and sinful. These statements separate Luther from Aristotle and all of Greek ontology such that in thesis 50 Luther can say: *Totus Aristoteles ad theologiam est tenebrae ad lucem* [All of Aristotle is to theology as darkness is to light; *WA* 1, 226.26/12].

3. The Heidelberg Disputation of 1518.⁴

Luther here quite clearly characterizes theology’s task by contrasting two theological perspectives. The first of these is *theologia gloriae, quae invisibilia Dei ex operibus intellecta conspiciunt* (Thesis 22 [*WA* 1, 362.35]) *et dicti malum bonum et bonum malum* (Thesis 21 [*WA* 1, 362.21]) [the theology of glory which sees the invisible things of God in works as perceived by man and calls evil good and good evil]. In opposition to this stands the *theologia crucis* [theology of the cross], which starts from the actual state of affairs (*dicunt id quod res est* [tells us how things really are; *WA* 1, 362.22/53]).

The Scholastic takes cognizance of Christ only after he has defined the being of God and the world. This Greek way of thinking adopted by the Scholastic magnifies human pride. But he must first go to the cross before he can say *id quod res est* [how things really are; *WA* 1, 362.22/53].

We thus find in the Heidelberg Disputation of 1518 the most pointed state-

3. M. Luther, “Disputatio contra scholasticam theologiam” (1517) in *WA* 1, 221–28. [“Disputation against Scholastic Theology,” trans. Harold J. Grimm in *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 31: *Career of the Reformer* (Philadelphia: Concordia, 1957), 9–16. Henceforth cited as ‘*WA* 1’ with page and line numbers separated by a period and followed the English page reference, which is separated from the German reference by slash—e.g., “*WA* 1, 225.1–2/10” = *WA* 1, p. 225, lines 1–2; English translation, p. 10.]

4. M. Luther, “Disputatio Heidelbergae habita” (1518), in *WA* 1, 350–74. [“Heidelberg Disputation,” trans. Harold J. Grimm in *Career of the Reformer*, 39–70. Heidegger had already cited these “Heidelberg theses” of the young Luther in his course on Augustine in SS 1921: see *GA* 60, 281–82.]

ment of Luther's position on sin in his early period. Our next hour will demonstrate that the same tendency persists even into the later period of Luther's theology.

Continuation of Professor Heidegger's talk [February 21, 1924]:

II

1. Before we critique the relation between the problems of sin and *iustitia originalis* in Luther, it will be useful to consider the same problematic in Scholasticism. Scholasticism's response to the question of *iustitia originalis* is here related to its basic conception that the church is the authority in matters of faith. But this is something that the church can be only insofar as it is a divine institution, which must be demonstrated *rationaliter* [rationally]. For this it is necessary to prove 1) the existence [*Dasein*] of God, and 2) the possibility of a historical Revelation attested to in inspired Scripture and carried on in the Church that is grounded in it. In order to be able to bring about these demonstrations, it is presupposed that the human being by nature overtly possesses the possibility of knowledge of God. This can be presupposed only if the *natura hominis* [human nature] is *integra* [un-corrupted and whole] even after the Fall.

If this is the natural condition of man, then humans before the Fall must have possessed another and higher knowledge of God due to a *donum superadditum* [surplus gift]. As is well-known, this gift consists in the three theological virtues.⁵ Humans lose this surplus through sin, but do not lose—and this is the decisive point—their natural state of being disposed before God.

Luther rebels against this and instead appeals to *experientia* [experience]. The *natura hominis* is *corrupta*. The being of man as such is itself sin. Sin is nothing but the opposite of faith, where faith means standing (being placed and disposed) before God. Sin is thus not something tacked onto the moral condition of humans but is rather their essential core. With Luther, sin becomes a concept encompassing existence, which his emphasis on *affectus* already indicates.

Along with this basic determination of sin, Luther directs his attention to the movement that sin, as a mode of the being of humans, carries within itself: one sin begets another and pulls man down ever lower. The true sin is *incredulitas*, that is, disbelief, *aversio dei* [turning away from God]. Inasmuch as man, in this movement of being averted or turned away from God, is being put into the world [and so put upon by it], true sin is accompanied by *pavor* [fear and trembling]. This basic affect is soon followed by others: *fuga* [flight], *odium* [hatred], *desperatio* [despair], *impoenitentia* [impenitence].

5. Faith, hope, and love (see 1 Cor. 13:13).

2. The above account can be elucidated by Luther's lecture course on Genesis in 1544 (*Erlanger Ausgabe* [Erlangen edition], *app. exeg. lat. tom. I*).⁶

a) The difference of opinions is clearly expressed on page 208: *Scholastici disputant, quod iustitia originalis non fuerit connaturalis, sed ceu ornatus quidam additus homini tanquam donum* . . . [The Scholastics argue that original righteousness was not a connatural state but, like some ornament, was added to humans as a gift . . .]. Against this Luther says: . . . *iustitiam* . . . *fuisse vere naturalem, ita ut natura Adae esset diligere Deum, credere Deo, agnoscere Deum* . . . [righteousness . . . was truly part of human nature, so that it was Adam's nature to love God, to believe God, to know God . . . ; *EA* 1, 209/164–65].

The consequence that follows from the Scholastic determination of man's *iustitia originalis* would be that if this did not belong to the true essence of man, then neither would sin belong to him. However: *fugiamus deliria ista . . . et sequamur potius experientiam* [let us shun those ravings . . . and instead follow experience; *EA* 1, 210/166]. *Experientia . . . docet nos de his calamitatibus* . . . [experience teaches us about these calamities; *EA* 1, 178/141–42], namely, *defectus* [the loss] that resulted from sin. But we recognize the enmity of this loss only when from a correlative consideration we see God as God. For only then do we understand what *aversio Dei* means.

b) The Fall through sin . . . *inveniemus summam et acerrimam omnium temptationum hanc fuisse, quia serpens invadit ipsam voluntatem Dei bonam, et nititur probare, Dei voluntatem erga hominem non esse bonam. Ipsam igitur imaginem Dei . . . petit* [. . . we shall find that this was the greatest and severest of all temptations; for the serpent assails God's good will and dares to prove that God's will toward man is not good. It thus launches its attack against the very image of God. . . . ; *EA* 1, 184/147]. Adam and Eve are therefore not tempted by a single specific sin, but are instead incited against God himself and his Word. Their sin consists simply in lending an ear to a word that is not God's Word, in allowing themselves to become involved at all in such a *disputatio* [argument]. They thus lose their original being before God.

c) The movement of sin: *Primum enim cadit homo ex fide in incredulitatem et inoboedientiam: incredulitatem autem sequitur pavor, odium et fuga Dei, quae desperationem et impenitentiam secum adducunt*. [Humans first fall from faith into disbelief and disobedience. Then come fear, hatred, and flight from God, and these

6. M. Luther, *In primum librum Mose enarrationes* = *Enarrationes in Genesin*, cap. I–IV, 7 in *M. Luther, Exegetica opera latina*, ed. Christoph Steph. Theoph. Elsperger, vol. 1 (Erlangen, 1829) (= *EA* 1 = *Erlanger Ausgabe*, vol. 1); see *WA* 1, 42–44. [*Lectures on Genesis*, trans. George V. Schlick, vols. 1–8 of *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1958), here citing from vol. 1. Henceforth cited as '*EA* 1' with German and English page references, respectively, where relevant.]

bring on despair and impenitence; *EA* 1, 217/171] God is unbearable to humans. They are frightened by God even in the slightest rustling of leaves, because they are shaken and disturbed in their very being. They flee from God and thereby betray their *intellectum depravatum* [depraved intellect]. *An non enim extrema stultitia est . . . Deum fugere, quem non possunt fugere?* [Or is it not the height of folly . . . to flee from God, from whom they are unable to flee? *EA* 1, 217–18/172] They flee because they do not see that *sin* itself means the *vera discessio a Deo, nec oportuit maiorem fugam addere* [total separation from God, so that there is no need to add any further flight; *EA* 1, 218/172–73].

Et tamen haec (stultitia and pavor) sunt quasi praeludia [And yet these (folly and fear) are, so to speak, mere preludes; *EA* 1, 218/172]. The true meaning of sin is that once someone flees, his flight is such that he continually wishes to distance himself even further, and *fugit in aeternum* [flees forever; *EA* 1, 218/173]. And Adam flees *excusando mendaciter peccatum, peccatum peccato addit. . . . Sic peccatum pondere suo semper secum trahit aliud peccatum, et facit aeternam ruinam* [by excusing his sin with lies, heaping sin upon sin. . . . Thus sin by its own weight always draws with it other sins and brings on eternal ruin; *EA* 1, 221/175].

Adam goes so far as to make an *excusatio* [excuse], and then *perstat in excusatione* [to persist in his excuse; *EA* 1, 223/177]. He is presumptuous enough to make an *accusatio et culpam a se in Creatorem transfert* [accusation and to transfer his guilt from himself to the Creator; *EA* 1, 221/175]. *Non enim possunt (peccatores) aliter, quam Deum accusare et se excusare* [They (sinners) cannot do otherwise than to accuse God and to excuse themselves; *EA* 1, 225/178]. That is the real despair.

It gets even worse: In her excuse, Eve directs her accusation at God as the *creator* of the serpent and thereby depicts God as *auctor peccati* [the author of sin]. *Ita ex peccato humano fit peccatum plane diabolicum, et incredulitas vertitur in blasphemiam, inoboedientia in contumeliam Creatoris* [A human sin thereby leads to a clearly demonic sin; disbelief turns into blasphemy, disobedience into contempt for the Creator; *EA* 1, 226/179]. *Hic ultimus gradus peccati est* [This is the ultimate degradation of sin; *EA* 1, 227/179].

d) And yet, the situation of the human being who alienates himself from God is still a relation to God. This relation is still manifest when the alienated human being looks back and repudiates God as *auctor peccati* [the author of sin] and says that “God is not God.”

This human situation is in fact brought on by God, who after the Fall does not keep silent but still *loquitur* [speaks], and quite loquaciously; which is the *summa gratia* [highest grace; *EA* 1, 229/181]. It should also be noted how the being of God is always taken to be *verbum* [word], and how the basic human relation to God is regarded as *audire* [listening, hearing].

e) In summary, all of these comments show how [1] Luther’s orientation in regard to sin is completely different from that of Scholasticism and how [2] he un-

derstands sin as a fundamental antithesis to faith. In theological terms this means: [3] "Faith can be understood only when sin is understood, and sin is understood only by way of a correct understanding of the very being of the human being."

Protestant theology today generally does not demonstrate the understanding of sin we have just outlined and the understanding of the relation of God and man that this entails. And when, in the latest theological movement, it is once again made clear, it is discounted and resisted out of fear of the import of such an understanding. In this way, the Protestant Principle is once again betrayed.

f) What this means can be illustrated by a remark about Catholicism and Protestantism found in Kierkegaard's journal of 1852 (II, p. 284 ff.),⁷ the gist of which is briefly the following:

Just as Luther is Luther only on the spiritual ground of Catholicism, so is Protestantism only a *corrective* to Catholicism and unable to stand alone as normative. When Catholicism degenerates, then the "sham sanctity" of sanctimonious hypocrisy arises. But when Protestantism degenerates, then "worldliness without spirit" arises. What would appear as a result is a refinement in Protestantism that cannot emerge in Catholicism. For in Catholicism, when a representative of its principle degenerates into worldliness, he brings upon himself the *odium* [opprobrium] of worldliness. But when a representative of Protestantism degenerates into worldliness, he is praised for his piety and honesty. And this is so because Catholicism is based on the general presupposition "that we human beings are all really scoundrels." "The Principle of Protestantism has a special presupposition: a human being who sits there in mortal anxiety—in fear and trembling and great spiritual trial."

7. See *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, vol. 3, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), 669–72.