

Heidegger's Existential Domestication of Luther

By the early 1920s Heidegger was already famous among German university students, though he had published virtually nothing. Hannah Arendt recalled that “in Heidegger’s case there was nothing tangible on which his fame could have been based, nothing written. . . .There was hardly more than a name, but the name traveled all over Germany like the rumor of the hidden king.”¹ When in 1926 his fame led him to be considered for professorships at both the University of Berlin and at Marburg University, he was pressured to publish something. Heidegger rushed into print the first two sections of *Being and Time*. The anticipated third section never appeared and, in fact, Heidegger abandoned the project, but his philosophical brilliance was confirmed. He was quickly appointed to a professorship at Marburg. Then, when his teacher Edmund Husserl retired, he was appointed to fill his position at Freiburg University. For almost fifty years *Being and Time*, one of the most important philosophical works of the twentieth century, seemed to have sprung fully formed from Heidegger’s genius like Athena from Zeus’s head. Only in 1975, with the beginning of the publication of 102 volumes of Heidegger’s *Gesamtausgabe*, a publication process that still continues thirty-five years later, did the world start to see the contents of Heidegger’s lecture notes and studies from the early 1920s. It was not until 1995 that the archives published Heidegger’s 1919–21 lectures on the phenomenology of religion; as a result only in the last fifteen years have we come to understand how central Martin Luther’s writings were for some of the key themes of *Being and Time*.

Here I will lay out some of the important ideas of *Being and Time* that can be traced back to Heidegger’s study of Luther: substantially, ideas of fallenness, conscience, and being-toward-

¹ “Martin Heidegger at Eighty,” *New York Review of Books*, Oct. 21, 1971.

death; methodologically, the idea of *destruktion*. What we will find is that while they originally provided Heidegger with religious inspiration, he attempted to transform them entirely into philosophical categories while still preserving their existential force. More than that, he was seeking the existential, phenomenological roots for views that would take hold not just in Lutheran theology, but in various ways across various theological traditions. So even as in 1927 he could write to Rudolf Bultmann about *Being and Time* that “Augustine, Luther, and Kierkegaard are *philosophically* essential for a more radical understanding of *Da-sein*,”² he also could say that philosophy is essentially atheistic and all theological views need to be clarified in light of their existential origins.³

Heidegger made no attempt to contribute to Lutheran scholarship; instead Luther appears in his writings as a source of influence for some of Heidegger’s most significant views. To ask about Heidegger and Luther then is to see the way that Luther’s views function in the background of Heidegger’s views as developed in *Being and Time*.⁴ I must stress *in the*

² Quoted in Theodore Kisiel’s *The Genesis of Being and Time* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 452. *Da-sein* is an antiquated German word for existence. Heidegger uses it to refer to beings for whom their being—both what they are and that they are—is a concern. It allows him to emphasize the there-being, as opposed to the here-being of human beings; that is, the idea that *Da-sein* is first, foremost, and fundamentally engaged in the world around it, and only secondarily reflective appropriating that world.

³ In his 1921–22 winter semester lecture course published as *Phenomenological Interpretations of Aristotle* he wrote, “theological anthropology must be traced back to its basic philosophical experiences and motives” (quoted in S. J. McGrath’s *The Early Heidegger and Medieval Philosophy: Phenomenology for the Godforsaken* [Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2006], 167).

⁴ Much of this material has been covered elsewhere and in greater detail. See Theodore Kisiel’s, *The Genesis of Being and Time*; John van Buren’s “Martin Heidegger/Martin Luther,” in *Reading Heidegger from the Start: Essays in his Earliest Thought* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 159–74; John van Buren’s *The Young Heidegger: Rumor of a Hidden King* (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 1994); S. J. McGrath’s *The Early Heidegger and Medieval Philosophy: Phenomenology for the Godforsaken*; Karl Clifton-Soderstrom’s “The Phenomenology of Religious Humility in Heidegger’s Reading of Luther,” in *Continental Philosophy Review* (2009)

background as Heidegger does not give Luther any credit as a source for his views in *Being and Time*. *Being and Time* only mentions Luther twice.⁵ Were it not for the publication of the lecture notes in the *Gesamtausgabe* we would not know the importance of Luther for Heidegger's early thought.

Heidegger had a thoroughly theological education. He was raised Catholic and from 1909–11 studied to be a priest. Influenced by his reading of Edmund Husserl, he shifted to seeking phenomenological foundations for Scholasticism; his *habilitationsschrift* was a phenomenological analysis called "The Theories and Categories of Meaning in Duns Scotus." His wife was Lutheran, but they were married in 1917 in a Catholic church, in part, according to her, to help reinforce his waning Catholicism. As early as 1917 Heidegger realizes that "The 'holding-to-be-true' of Catholic faith is founded entirely otherwise than the *fiducia* of the reformers."⁶ By 1918 they had decided not to baptize their son in the Catholic Church and in 1919 he had written a letter to his priest and close friend Engelbert Krebs stating that "the *system*

42:171–200; and Timothy Staley's "Heidegger on Luther on Paul," in *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* (2007) 46/1: 41–45.

⁵ In the first part of the introduction Heidegger writes, "Theology is searching for a more original interpretation of human being's being toward God, prescribed by the meaning of faith itself and remaining within it. Theology is slowly beginning to understand again Luther's insight that its system of dogma rests on a 'foundation' that does not stem from a questioning in which faith is primary and whose conceptual apparatus is not only insufficient for the range of problems in theology but rather covers them up and distorts them" (*Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), 8). His second reference comes in a footnote to the claim that angst and fear are seldom treated existentially. After mentioning the importance of angst and fear for the history of Christian theology, he says that "Apart from the traditional context of an interpretation of *poenitentia* and *contritio*, Luther treated the problem of fear in his commentary on Genesis, here, of course, least of all conceptually, but all the more penetratingly by way of edification" (*Being and Time*, 404 fn.4). Thus exhausts Heidegger's references to Luther in *Being and Time*.

⁶ *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, vol. 1 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 236.

of Catholicism” had become “problematic and unacceptable.”⁷ He makes clear that he thinks Catholicism has lost touch with the primal experience of Christianity; for example, in his 1919 winter semester course on *Basic Problems of Phenomenology* he writes, “the ancient Christian achievement was distorted and buried through the infiltration of classical science into Christianity. From time to time it reasserted itself in violent eruptions (as in Augustine, Luther, and Kierkegaard).”⁸ Whatever ultimately moved him to break with Catholicism—some speculate it was his wife, some his experiences in World War I, some his reading of Paul Natorp’s *Deutscher Weltberuf*—we know that Heidegger turned his close attention to Luther.

Heidegger’s references to Luther appear regularly in his lecture courses between 1919 and 1923. Karl Jaspers reports visiting Heidegger in 1920 when Heidegger was steeped in studying Luther. In 1921 Heidegger acquired a full set of Luther’s collected writings and in 1922, when Heidegger was seeking an appointment at the University of Marburg, Husserl wrote

There is one major theme of [Heidegger’s] studies, which are centered essentially upon the phenomenology of religion, that he, as a former ‘Catholic’ philosopher, understandably cannot treat here [at Freiburg] freely, namely, Luther. It would probably be of great importance for his development if he could go to Marburg.

There he would be an important link between philosophy and Protestant theology (with which he is thoroughly acquainted in all of its forms and which he appreciates fully in its great unique values).⁹

In Marburg he influences and is influenced by Bultmann and gives a number of lectures on Luther. John van Buren claims that in the early 1920s “Heidegger saw himself . . . as a kind of

⁷ “Letter to Father Engelbert Krebs,” in *Supplements: From the Earliest Essays to Being and Time and Beyond*, edited by John van Buren (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002), 69.

⁸ Quoted in van Buren’s “Martin Heidegger/Martin Luther,” 160.

⁹ Quoted in Kisiel, 530.

philosophical Luther of western metaphysics.”¹⁰ Nonetheless, by the mid-1920s as he works towards the final draft of *Being and Time* the references to Luther diminish. If anyone captures Heidegger’s attention after 1922 it is Aristotle, and we might say for surprisingly Lutheran reasons. Aristotle was a polemical whipping boy for Luther; he took the Aristotelianism of Scholastic Christianity as the great theological confusion in the history of Christianity. Luther thought we needed to get behind the Scholastic distortion of Christianity to capture Christianity’s primal meaning. Heidegger, in a parallel manner, came to see that we needed to get behind the Scholastic distortion of Aristotle to capture the primal meaning of Greek thought. The great synthesis of Christianity and Aristotle in Scholasticism distorted both Christianity and Aristotle and kept us from appreciating the lived vitality of both. One thing Heidegger discovered in his Aristotle studies in the early 1920s was the Greek sense of *ousia* as presence; with that began his exploration of what it would mean to understand being in terms of time.¹¹

Heidegger’s appropriation of Luther in *Being and Time* is focused around the question of authenticity. To arrive at a new understanding of the nature of being in terms of time we need to clearly grasp ourselves as beings concerned with the question of being. But that sort of perspicuity does not come easily. Much of *Being and Time* could be seen as a diagnosis of why self-knowledge is so elusive. The two main reasons Heidegger offers are that, first, we are above all and primarily practical beings engaged with the world and defined through our engagements. Reflection on our situation comes late and typically only in response to a breakdown of our normal practical engagement. This is not enough to fully explain why it is that we cannot achieve

¹⁰ “Martin Heidegger/Martin Luther,” 171.

¹¹ See Chapter Five, “What Did Heidegger Discover in Aristotle? (1921-23),” in Kisiel’s book for a detailed discussion of this transformation.

an authentic (*eigentlich*) self-understanding, however. The second reason is that we are in a perpetual state of *verfallenheit*—fallenness or falling prey.

In his lecture on Luther for Bultmann's class, Heidegger stresses the radicality of sin in Luther. He points out,

the idea of redemption is indeed dependent on the way original sin and the Fall are viewed. The sense and essence of any theology are to be read off in light of *iustitia originalis*. The more one fails to recognize the radicalness of sin, the more redemption is made little of, and the more God's becoming man in the Incarnation loses its necessity. The fundamental tendency in Luther is found in this manner: the *corruptio* of the being of man can never be grasped radically enough—and he said this precisely in opposition to Scholasticism, which in speaking of *corruptio* always minimized it.¹²

It is a well-known and defining feature of Luther's theology that our sinfulness runs so deep in our nature, and it so distorting of our understanding, that we cannot even understand it. Reason, corrupted by sin, is incapable of realizing the depths of its own corruption. Heidegger stresses later in the same lecture that we should not think of sin as just something *about* us; instead we must think of sin *as* us. "The being of man as such is sin. . . . Thus sin is not affixing moral attributes to man but rather his real core. In Luther, sin is a concept of existence."¹³ John van Buren suggests that Heidegger got the term *verfallenheit* directly from reading Luther,¹⁴ and certainly Heidegger's understanding of fallenness shares some of Luther's understanding of sin.

¹² "The Problem of Sin in Luther" in *Supplements*, 106.

¹³ "The Problem of Sin in Luther," 108.

¹⁴ "Martin Heidegger/Martin Luther," 170.

For Heidegger “Da-sein has initially always already fallen away from itself and fallen prey to the ‘world.’”¹⁵ By being entirely absorbed in what “one” should do, we are distracted from ourselves though “idle talk, curiosity, and ambiguity.” These three features of the world keep us in a state of “groundless floating” and too preoccupied to notice our lack of authenticity. “Inauthenticity” for Heidegger,

does not mean anything like no-longer-being-in-the-world, but rather it constitutes precisely a distinctive kind of being-in-the-world which is completely taken in by the world and the *Mitdasein* of the others in the they. Not-being-its-self functions as a *positive* possibility of beings which are absorbed in a world, essentially taking care of that world.¹⁶

In virtue of our fallenness in the world we are lost in activities, which, because they are just what “one” does, by their nature conceal from us what Heidegger will call our “ownmost potentiality”—our individuality and possible authenticity. This existential fallenness, as “an essential, ontological structure of Da-sein,”¹⁷ is the existential foundation for the kind of fallenness one finds in theological discussions. Heidegger writes,

Our existential, ontological interpretation thus does not make any ontic statement about the “corruption of human nature,” not because the necessary evidence is lacking, but because the problematic of this interpretation is *prior* to any assertion about corruption or incorruption. Falling prey is an ontological concept of motion. Ontically, we have not decided whether the human being is “drowned in sin,” in the *status corruptionis*, or whether he walks in the *status integritatis* or finds

¹⁵ *Being and Time*, 164.

¹⁶ *Being and Time*, 164.

¹⁷ *Being and Time*, 168.

himself in an interim stage, the *status gratiae*. But faith and "worldview," when they state such and such a thing and when they speak about Da-sein as being-in-the-world, must come back to the existential structures set forth, provided that their statements at the same time claim to be conceptually comprehensible.¹⁸

Here we see the general pattern: Luther's concept of sin inspires the development of Heidegger's concept of fallenness, yet (Heidegger will claim) his secular concept of fallenness describes a primordial human phenomenon upon which Luther developed his concept of sin. If fallenness is in any way as comprehensive for Heidegger as sin is for Luther, it is hard to see how Heidegger will be able to explain, with only secular resources, how authenticity might be possible.

With the lostness in the they, the nearest, factual potentiality-of-being of Da-sein has always already been decided upon—tasks, rules, standards, the urgency and scope of being-in-the-world, concerned and taking care of things. The they has already taken these possibilities-of-being away from Da-sein. The they even conceals the way it as silently disburdened Da-sein of the explicit *choice* of the possibilities. It remains indefinite who is 'really' choosing. So Da-sein is taken along by the no one, without choice, and thus gets caught up in inauthenticity. This process can be reversed ... by *making up for this not choosing*. But making up for this not choosing signifies *choosing to make this choice*—deciding for a potentiality-of-being, and making this decision from one's own self. In choosing to make this choice, Da-sein *makes possible*, first and foremost, its authentic potentiality-of-being.¹⁹

¹⁸ *Being and Time*, 168.

¹⁹ *Being and Time*, 247–48.

What being fallen prey to the “they” amounts to, above all, is the failure to recognize our own agency in our actions. We simply do what one does, what “they” think is right. We don’t decide to act in any particular way. By not having to take responsibility for our choices we also do not have to take responsibility for ourselves. It’s not that we’ve made choices that are not true to ourselves, as some might think of authenticity, it’s that we’ve failed to make choices at all—failed even to see that we should be making choices.

Fallen Da-sein, which is not only freed from the burden of choosing but blinded to its responsibility to choose, must be called to choose. It must be awoken to itself. Heidegger receives from Luther the idea that it is our conscience that calls us to ourselves.

According to Gerhard Ebeling (who consulted Heidegger in 1961 for the second volume of his *Lutherstudien*),

[Luther] is not following that idealist interpretation of conscience as an independent voice within man’s heart which gives him independence, and is thus the basis for man’s autonomy. What he means is that man is ultimately a hearer, someone who is seized, claimed, and subject to judgment, and for this reason his existential being depends upon which word reaches and touches his inmost being.²⁰

For Luther the conscience does not function to provide reliable moral judgments, rather it is a reminder to ourselves that we are always subject to God’s judgment. It reminds us that the path of our true nature is through righteousness before God. The conscience for Luther, as an immediate awareness of our sinfulness *coram deo* is also the one place where we can see ourselves as a person.

²⁰ Gerhard Ebeling, *Luther: An Introduction to His Thought*, trans. R. A. Wilson (London: Collins, 1970), 119–20.

For Heidegger, “the call of conscience has the character of summoning Dasein to its ownmost potentiality-of-being-a-self.”²¹ One is summoned by the call of conscience to oneself, or rather, “to one’s own self”;²² conscience calls one back from the “uncanniness” of (*unheimlichkeit*—our inability to be at home in) the “they.” The guilt felt in the existential call of conscience is not the guilt for failing to take responsibility for ourselves; conscience calls us to become aware of the feelings of guilt for not choosing our ownmost potentiality-for-being. So the call of conscience does not call us to be one thing or another, it calls us to become attuned to our care for becoming authentic and the angst that accompanies that care. Heidegger says that “we shall call the eminent, authentic disclosedness attested in Da-sein itself by its conscience—the *reticent projecting oneself upon one’s ownmost being-guilty which is ready for Angst*—resoluteness.”²³ Resoluteness needs direction before it can point a way towards authenticity. This direction must be away from the “they” and towards something that can establish Dasein in its own individuality; Heidegger turns towards the phenomenon of being-towards-death, another view inspired by Luther. As Luther writes, “we must turn our eyes to God, to whom the path of death leads and directs. Here we find the beginning of the narrow gate and the straight path to life.”²⁴

The problem of fallenness is the problem of losing ourselves in the crowd. To establish our authentic, *eigentlich* form of being-in-the-world, we need to find that perspective from which we can consider our lives independently of others. According to Heidegger our death is something we always do alone, and therefore resolutely being-towards-death provides a way of becoming authentic. Heidegger gets this idea of death straight from Luther. “The summons of

²¹ *Being and Time*, 249.

²² *Being and Time*, 252.

²³ *Being and Time*, 273

²⁴ Helmut Lehmann, ed., *Luther’s Works* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1969), 42:99.

death comes to us all, no one can die for another. We can shout into another's ears, but everyone must himself be prepared for the time of death, for I will not be with you then, nor you with me."²⁵ All the ideas we have seen are here linked together by Heidegger:

Understanding the call of conscience reveals the lostness in 'the they.'

Resoluteness brings Da-sein back to its ownmost potentiality-of-being-a-self.

One's own potentiality-of-being becomes authentic and transparent in the understanding being-toward-death as the ownmost possibility. . . .The call of conscience . . . individualizes Da-sein down to its potentiality-for-being-guilty which it expects to be authentically. The unwavering trenchancy with which Da-sein is thus essentially individualized down to its ownmost potentiality-of-being discloses anticipation of death as the non-relational possibility.²⁶

The non-relationality of death is what makes projecting our life unto our death a means for escaping the pull of the they. It's not that we overcome death this way, nor live for death, as Socrates might say the philosopher lives for death, but that we live with the certainty of our death always with us and we let that certainly be the force of the call to become authentic.

Likewise for Luther an awareness of death should be our constant companion as righteousness can only fully be revealed in the final judgment. For example he will write,

The significance of baptism—the dying or drowning of sin—is not fulfilled completely in this life. Indeed this does not happen until man passes through bodily death and completely decays to dust . . . Spiritual baptism, the drowning of sin, which it signifies, lasts as long as we live and is completed only in death. . . .

²⁵ John Doberstein, ed., *Luther's Works* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1959), 51:70.

²⁶ *Being and Time*, 283.

Therefore this whole life is nothing else than a spiritual baptism which does not cease till death.²⁷

For Luther the idea of being righteous cannot be divorced from the awareness of death; inversely, for Heidegger, the awareness of death is the key to becoming authentic. The opening quotation to Heidegger's 1921 course on Aristotle was from Luther: "Right from our mother's womb we begin to die."²⁸

Heidegger's three themes, fallenness, conscience, and being-toward-death all have their roots in Luther's theological anthropology; they may all be summed up under the influence of one great Lutheran theme: the replacement of the *theologia gloriae* with *theologia crucis*. Rather than a theology based on glorifying the knowledge of God by recognizing Him in his creation, Luther substitutes a theology based on sharing in the suffering of Christ on the cross. Rather than a theology based redemption through knowledge of God, we have a theology based on sinfulness and suffering unto death. Luther quotes I Corinthians 1:19 to the effect that we need to *destroy* the wisdom of the wise to preserve the power of the Cross. We need to *destruere—to dismantle*—what Scholasticism has constructed in order to return to the essential experience of being Christian. Unrelated to Luther, Husserl in his phenomenological theory had also argued for a kind of dismantling, an *Aufbau*, of meaning to get back to its core motivated phenomena. Heidegger brings Luther's criticism and Husserl's phenomenology together to argue for a *Destruktion* of the tradition of metaphysics to recapture the fundamental phenomena of Being. He writes,

If the question of being is to achieve clarity regarding its own history, a loosening of the sclerotic tradition and a dissolving of the concealments produced by it is

²⁷ E. Theodore Brachmann, ed. *Luther's Works* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1960), 35: 30.

²⁸ Quoted in McGrath, 171.

necessary. We understand this task as the destructuring [*Destruktion*] of the traditional content of ancient ontology which is to be carried out along the *guidelines of the question of being*. This destructuring is based upon the original experiences in which the first and subsequently guiding determinations of being were gained.²⁹

The *Destruktion* is not essentially negative; rather it is positive in that it lets the original phenomena show themselves from themselves and in themselves in a manner suitable to phenomenological investigation, freed from the traditional conceptualizations that have been handed down to us. Traditional theoretical interpretations of human nature tempt us to simply investigate them theoretically—to engage in philosophical debate; they thereby distract us from the phenomena of life which give the interpretations their validity and which must be continually re-accessed and confronted anew. This is the final point, a methodological point, where Heidegger was clearly influenced by Luther.

Just as Luther sought to free theology from its Scholastic distortions to bring us back to the primal experience of Christianity, to an experience of our sinfulness and the redemptive power of the suffering on the cross, so Heidegger sought to free philosophy from its Scholastic distortions, to bring us back to the primal experiences of Being that inspired the Greeks to philosophize. What Heidegger tries to do with the history of philosophy—to phenomenologically get behind its traditional interpretations to uncover the existential experience that gives birth to the concepts—he tries to do with Luther too. Although influenced by Luther, he always holds that, as a philosopher, he needs to phenomenologically get to the existential underpinnings of Luther's theological language. The cost of Heidegger's secular existentialist domestication of

²⁹ *Being and Time*, 20.

Luther's views is that we lose Luther's radicalness. Ironically the attempt to find a philosophical, atheistic ground for Luther's insights diminishes their existential force. The problem is multiplied when Heidegger scholars lose track of the Lutheran roots of Heidegger's ideas; they risk producing anodyne interpretations of profoundly existential themes.³⁰

³⁰ I have in mind interpretations such as John Haugland's. Haugland says that for Heidegger "what conscience really articulates . . . [is] the difference between one's own life 'working' and its breaking down or failing to 'work'" ("Truth and Finitude: Heidegger's Transcendental Existentialism" in *Heidegger, Authenticity, and Modernity*, ed. Mark Wrathall and Jeff Malpas [Boston: MIT Press, 2003], 64). This is a long way from sinfulness *coram deo*.