Luther and Semantic Realism

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I.

I first encountered Luther at age thirteen in confirmation class reading the Small Catechism. My conservative German-born pastor undoubtedly supposed, and I too assumed (though I could not articulate it yet), a realist semantics with respect to Luther's language. Simply put, I believed that the word *God* actually refers to a supreme being having a triune nature, and that the terms *omniscience*, *omnipotence*, and *omnipresence* refer to properties possessed by that being. I further thought that *creates*, *redeems*, and *preserves* denote relations that God has to His creation. Thus I supposed that theological sentences assert the existence of states of affairs in which the divine is an ingredient. Finally, I thought that sentences correctly specifying existing theological states of affairs were true while those asserting nonexistent states of affairs were false.[1]

Although I was taught that human claims about God are justified only on the basis of God's revelation in Scripture, I knew that no empirical methods could ascertain the truth of these statements. It never occurred to me to question whether the truth or falsity of theological sentences is dependent on my knowing or believing them.

Simply put, I assumed that Luther's theological language has *evidence-transcending truth-conditions*; that the statement "God is in Christ reconciling the world to Himself," is true if and only if God is in Christ reconciling the world to Himself—even though I could not justify this truth empirically or deductively.

Ten years after reading the *Small Catechism*, I tried to read Kant. Two things occurred to me at that time: 1) Kant is much harder to understand than Luther; and 2) Kant seems not to be a realist about theological language. He argued, in fact, that there is a widely employed class of concepts that do not refer to objects. Kant called these concepts "regulative ideals of pure reason" and included among them the notion of a supreme being.

> Thus, while for the merely speculative employment of reason the supreme being remains a mere *ideal*, it is yet *an ideal without a flaw*, a concept which completes and crowns the whole of human knowledge… Necessity, infinity, unity, existence outside the world (and not as world-soul), eternity as free from conditions of time, omnipresence as free from conditions of space, omnipotence, etc. are purely transcendental predicates…[2]

Although we apply the term *God* and the transcendental predicates, we are not thereby declaring that divine states of affairs exist. Kant denies evidence transcending truth-conditions and thus effectively jettisons grounds for a realist theological semantics. Reading Kant, I learned that since God cannot be a substance having causal relationships with other substances, predicating "substance" and "cause" of God makes a very different claim than applying those terms to a boat or a planet.

After Kant, I read Lutheran theology in a new way. I now rejoiced that Luther had discarded the lifeless abstractions of medieval scholasticism in favor of real living faith. I was impressed by Luther's emphasis on the living Word and the way his theological language seemed to operate. "Luther's language is not primarily referential," I thought, "but rather makes present that about which it speaks." In other words, proclaiming law and grace does not *refer* to reality, but rather *donates* it.

Graduate school taught me that only so-called precritical readers believe that God is real in the sense that I had thought when young. Since I was convinced that theologizing must start with Kant, I gradually came to embrace theological semantic irrealism. Moreover, since the claim of divine agency and love is apparently consistent with any way in which the world might have developed, theological claims of divine agency and love make no cognitive claim at all.[3] Whatever theological language is doing, it cannot be referring to an objective divine realm.

The Luther Renaissance that began in Europe toward the end of the nineteenth century interested me because these thinkers seemed honest about what is theologically possible. Theologians returning to Luther research had sought to find in him themes that are intellectually defensible but consistent with Kantian presuppositions. Just as

Luther sought to make the Bible speak to the horizon of sixteenth-century German peasants, so Luther researchers sought to make Luther speak to the horizon of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century intellectuals. In so doing, they privileged the "new" Luther at the expense of the old.[4]

I now believe this attempt to square Luther's language with semantic irrealism is anachronistic. Lamentably, the tendency in Luther research has been to find in Luther something fundamentally new (e.g., a completely novel view of theological language) rather than to read Luther within his context.[5] But just as Luther's thinking on the Trinity is decidedly catholic, so too is his semantic theory quite traditional. In this brief article I try to connect the contemporary issue of semantic realism with Luther's own semantic assumptions. Section II discusses the nature of semantic realism; III argues that Luther embraced a realism of this type; and IV is a brief conclusion.

II.

The notion that language about the world can be true or false regardless of whether we have a way to ascertain its truth is called *semantic realism*. Michael Dummett refers to this type of realism as follows.

> Realism I characterize as the belief that the statements of the disputed class possess an objective truth-value, independently of our means of knowing it: they are true or false in virtue of a reality existing independently of us. The anti-realist opposes to this the view that statements of the disputed class are to be understood only by reference to the sort of thing which we count as evidence for a statement of that class.[6]

Of concern for any realist is how to answer the objections to semantic realism put forward in arguments based on *acquisition* and *manifestation*. Manifestation arguments ask what aspect of language employment provides evidence of correlation between sentences and states of affairs independent of the mind. Acquisition arguments claim that if linguistic competence were tied to undetectable extralinguistic states of affairs, we could never learn language at all. Accordingly, how could we know the states of affairs correlated to a sentence like "God the Father has begotten the Son eternally," and how could we speak trinitarian language, if grasping this correlation were necessary for such speaking?

The question of the possibility of evidence transcending all truth-conditions is an acute problem for theological language. Since much theological language concerns states of affairs incapable of epistemic detection, many scholars simply deny that theological language asserts states of affairs at all. The following four options reject semantic realism:

1) Language about God is truth-apt but false. Accordingly, theology instantiates an error theory; that is, since there is no God, all theological language is false.

2) Language about God is not truth-apt at all. Accordingly, talk about God is a projection of human emotion, sentiment, or existential orientation upon the world.

3) Language about God is truth-apt and not false; yet it is *not* about what people have assumed. *God* refers reductively to something determinate within human existence itself.

4) Language is truth-apt but not in a traditional way. Instead of adopting a correspondence, coherence, or pragmatic model of truth, truth is understood as a fundamental phenomenological experience. This view claims that theological language somehow inculcates this experience in human beings.

I believe that if theology is to survive, it must make definite truth claims; it must assert propositions in logical space, the satisfaction of which instantiate particular divine and divine/temporal states of affairs.[7] This approach is necessary, I think, because long-term prospects for theology demand the adoption of *theological realism*—the assertion that divine objects, events, properties, and states of affairs exist independently of human awareness, perception, conceptions, and language.[8] Despite the fact that Luther research has tended to downplay Luther's theological realism, Luther clearly believes that God exists and that His existence is independent of human awareness, perception, conceptions, and language. Accordingly, Luther assumes that evidence transcending truth-conditions, not mere *assertibility conditions*, governs the employment of trinitarian language. In order to see this point, we must look at the semantic theory underlying Luther's theological assertions.

III.

Luther knew the late medieval semantic and ontological traditions well and was comfortable working within them. Our concern here is with those semantic features that Luther holds in common with the tradition and that support semantic realism.

Fundamental for Luther's understanding of language is the distinction he inherits between *signification* and *supposition*. Paul Vincent Spade claims that "a term signifies that of which it makes a person think, so… it is a species of causal relation."[9] Logicians in Luther's day mostly held that there are three kinds of terms and languages: written, spoken, and conceptual. Concepts were thought to signify the thing "naturally"; spoken terms signify the concepts; and written terms signify the spoken terms. The last two signified *ad placitum*, or conventionally.[10] Signification, however, must be distinguished from the contemporary notion of meaning. While meaning is a relation among terms, signification involves minds, as in this late-scholastic definition: "To signify is to *represent* (a) something or (b) some things or (c) somehow to a

cognitive power."[11] For the medieval tradition, because a single imposition has a single signification, a word was deemed univocal—having only one meaning—if and only if it has the same signification each time it is used. However, the word was considered to be equivocal if it has more than one imposition; that is, if it has different significations on different occasions.[12]

In addition to the signifying relation, medieval semantics claimed that there is a "standing-for" relation called *supposition*. Accordingly, a term might stand for or supposit for different things in different propositions. Supposition, unlike signification, is a relation between the terms in a proposition and the things to which they refer, that is, their extension. Specifically, supposition is the referring property of categorematic (nonlogical) words serving as subjects or predicates in propositions.[13] According to the English Franciscan, William of Ockham (ca. 1248–1348), the predicate term supposits for—refers to—"everything of which it is truly predicable."[14]

The medieval tradition distinguished among *personal*, *material*, and *simple* suppositions. The term stands for an individual in the personal supposition; refers to a spoken or written expression in material supposition; and for the nominalists—the form of scholasticism in which Luther was trained—the term denotes a universal concept in simple supposition.[15] For Ockham, written and spoken terms are subordinate to mental language concepts, and they *primarily signify* what those concepts signify: individuals. In personal supposition, a term supposits for what it primarily signifies. When it supposits for everything it primarily signifies, it is "taken significantly."[16] Accordingly, in the statement "'God is infinite' is true," the term *God* supposits for the same individual as the term *infinite*, for *infinite* supposits for each and every infinite thing. Because "God" and "infinite" supposit for what they primarily signify, the terms are taken significantly.

We now connect Luther's own work with late medieval semantic theory and semantic realism. Luther's disputations are fruitful places for exploring this connection, especially the three very late trinitarian disputations: The *Promotionsdisputation of Erasmus Alberus* from 1543, the *Promotionsdisputation of Georg Maior and Johannes Faber* from 1544, and the *Promotionsdisputation of Petrus Hegemon* of 1545.[17] In all three, Luther struggles with the question of speaking correctly about the Trinity. The three disputations are enormously complex, dealing with a number of theological, metaphysical, epistemological, and semantic issues. In order to illustrate some of the semantic issues involved, I should like to point to a brief section of the 1543 disputation in which Luther is concerned with correctly asserting the unity of the divine being despite the distinctness of the persons. Luther writes:

> 3. Nevertheless, one cannot say that any one person alone is God.[18]
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> 4. In fact, this would be the same as saying "God is nothing," since by excluding any person, all of God would be excluded, and the person would thus be excluded as well.
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> 5. Here, in fact, reason, corrupted by original sin, must be taken captive; moreover, it must be extinguished, with its own light and wisdom, through the obedience of faith.
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> 6. It is a different thing to say, "one person is all of God" (*una persona est totus Deus*), and "one person alone is the one God" (*una persona sola est unus Deus*).
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> 7. In this way the person should be distinguished from the divine itself; it is not to be sought out by reason, nor is it comprehensible to the angels.

Notice that Luther presupposes that truth is here at issue. The question concerns what we can correctly say about God. Luther says this statement is false: "Any one person alone is God." The reason for this assertion is that one person alone does not constitute God because God is triune. Simply put, God has a triune structure that precludes one of the persons from being God by Himself. That this is so is clearly *evidence-transcending*; God is triune regardless of what humans might know or believe. To say that "one person alone is God" is to say that one and only one thing supposited for by *person* is supposited for by *God*. But this is clearly false, for its truth would preclude the other two persons from being referred to by the term *God*. If God is triune, and if it be true that one person alone is God, then it would follow that there is no God.

Consider these statements:

> (1) One person is all of God.
> (1*) One person alone is the one God.

The two sentences make quite different claims. Sentence (1) says truly that the whole of God is predicated of one person; (1*) declares falsely that one person *and no other* is the one true God. In (1), *God* signifies, or makes the mind think about, all the divine-making properties and thus supposits for the triune God. Because "one person" and "God" each supposit for the triune God, sentence (1) is true. But sentence (1*) is false because it claims that one person and only one person is identical to the One God; *three* persons and not *one* person are identical to the one God.

The important Latin terms here are *totus* and *sola*. In sentence (1), *totus* is used syncategorematically, while in (1*) *sola* is used categorematically. While categorematic subject and predicate terms signify completely, syncategorematic terms do not. Rather, they are used with categorematic terms in fixing the supposition of those terms and thus ultimately the truth-values of the statements in which they appear. In other words, categorematic terms signify the content or matter of the proposition while syncategorematic terms signify via the form or struc-

ture of the proposition. If *sola* signifies categorematically as in sentence (1*), then what the mind is caused to think about is the content "only one person." If *totus* signifies syncategorematically as in (1), then the mind is caused to think the content "God," while *totus* merely helps to fix the supposition of the term. In sentence (1), "All of God" is not signified, only God is; in sentence (1*), "the person alone" is signified.

Luther does claim in thesis seven that *how* the distinction between the person and the divine itself obtains cannot be comprehended by reason. Following the precedent of the *via moderna* (the nominalist tradition), he criticizes Duns Scotus's later formal distinction, which would claim an objective distinction between the persons and divine nature that is more than merely conceptual and yet less than real.[19] Scotus (1266–1308) had employed the distinction in order to protect the Trinity from those who would claim that a merely conceptual distinction compromises the distinctiveness of the persons and thus moves toward modalism, while a real distinction compromises the unity of the divine generally and thus heads toward tritheism. Luther is quite content not to know *how* the three can be truly one but is equally adamant about asserting *that* the three are indeed one.

IV.

What are we to make of this discussion? Luther struggles here and throughout these disputations to state precisely what is the case with regard to the internal structure of the Trinity, which he clearly believes is what it is apart from human awareness, perception, conceptions, and language. The truth-conditions for trinitarian language are obviously realist. Statements about the Trinity are true or false regardless of whether or not those things spoken about are manifest.

In assuming semantic realism, Luther uses the semantic equipment of the day—equipment designed to operate within the general framework of theological and semantic realism. It is, of course, not surprising that this would be so. While Luther clearly recognized the epistemic limitations on *how* it is that we can understand what is divinely so, he never wavered in asserting *what* is divinely so. The medieval tradition knew the importance of making definite claims about God that are not graspable by human reason. In divorcing the truth-conditions of theological language from the question of how we know them, Luther worked within a traditional paradigm of thinking about the divine—a realist paradigm I suggest is requisite if theology is to flourish again in our time. *LF*

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Notes

1. For a more complete version of this argument, see Dennis Bielfeldt, "Luther's Late Disputations: Semantic Realism and the Trinity," in *The Substance of Faith*, eds. Dennis Bielfeldt, Mickey Mattox, and Paul R. Hinlicky (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 59–130.

2. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's, 1929), B669–70. Emphasis in original.

3. See Anthony Flew, "Theology and Falsification," in *The Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Basil Mitchell (London: Oxford, 1971), 13–22.

4. See Christine Helmer, *The Trinity and Martin Luther: A Study on the Relationship between Genre, Language and the Trinity in Luther's Works* (1523–1546) (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1999), 7–8.

5. Graham White has alluded to this penchant to find Luther a brilliant, creative theological hero. See White, *Luther as Nominalist: A Study of the Logical Methods Used in Martin Luther's Disputations in the Light of Their Medieval Background* (Helsinki: Luther-Agricola-Gesellschaft, 1994), 37.

6. Michel Dummett, "Realism," in Dummett, *Truth and Other Enigmas* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1978), 146.

7. Semantic realism is compatible with different kinds of realism about objects, e.g, naïve realism, direct realism, critical realism, metaphysical realism, and internal realism.

8. We live in a time that assumes that to be real is to have causal powers. Our age does not find religious and theological language presumptively and profoundly meaningful. For us, such language is one option among many. I believe that what is desperately sought and needed in our time is knowledge of whether such language is true.

9. Paul Spade, "The Semantics of Terms," in *Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy*, eds. Norman Kretzmann, Anthony Kenny, and Jan Pinborg (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1982), 188–96.

10. Ibid., 189.

11. Gabriel Nuchelmans, *Late-Scholastic and Humanist Theories of the Proposition* (Amsterdam: North Holland, 1980), 14: "…significare est repraesentare potentiae cognitivae aliquid vel aliqua vel aliqualiter."

12. Lambertus de Rijk, "The Origins and the Theory of the Properties of Terms," in *Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy*, 164.

13. Supposition and signification differ in that whereas terms can signify outside a propositional context, supposition occurs only within a context. Moreover, within propositions terms can supposit for that which they do not ordinarily signify.

14. Spade, "Semantics of Terms," 192.

15. Ibid., 193.

16. Paul Spade, *Thoughts, Words and Things: An Introduction to Late Medieval Logic and Semantic Theory*, available at http://pvspade.com/logic/index.html, p. 252, accessed April 22, 2009.

17. These are translated by Mickey Mattox and Dennis Bielfeldt, and annotated by Dennis Bielfeldt, in *The Substance of Faith*, 191–209.

18. Propositions 3–7 are my translation from *Luthers Werke*, Kritische Gesamtausgabe, 60 vols., eds. J. F. K. Knaake et al. (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883*ff.*), 39ii, 253:6–14:3. The original Latin reads as follows: "Nec tamen dici potest, quamlibet personam solam esse Deum. 4. Hoc enim idem esset dicere, Deum nullum esse, cum qualibet persona exclusa totus Deus esset exclusus, et quaelibet persona esset exclusa. 5. Hic enim ratio corrupta originali peccato captivanda, imo exstinguenda est cum sua luce et sapientia in obsequium fidei. 6. Aliud est dicere: Una persona est totus Deus, et una persona sola est unus Deus. 7. Quomodo distinguatur persona a divinitate ipsa, non est rationis inquirere, nec angelis comprehensibile."

19. Ibid., 39ii, 253:17–18.