

## The Use of Linguistic and Relational Ontology in Contemporary Lutheranism

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### Abstract

This essay is a study of the impact of linguistic and relational ontology in contemporary Lutheranism. In particular, the influence of John Austin's speech-act theory is explained in relation to its adaptation by Oswald Bayer and others associated with Radical Lutheranism. It is argued that though there can be some benefit in the use of the categories of linguistic philosophy, it is inadequate as an ontological system. The goal of this article is to demonstrate both the impact and flaws of linguistic and relational ontology on Radical Lutheran authors, and to validate essentialist ontology as a necessary backdrop for both linguistics and relation as discussed in Lutheran theology.

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# 1. Introduction

Since the nineteenth century, Lutheran theologians have often departed from the essentialist metaphysical convictions of Lutheran scholasticism in favour of other ontological approaches. Authors such as Johannes von Hoffman and Hans Martensen were influenced to an extent by the philosophy of Hegel, resulting in modifications to their understanding of God and other doctrines. Ritschl used the ethical philosophy of Kant in his reading of Luther (Lotz 1974). Later, Rudolph Bultmann adapted Martin Heidegger's existential views in his approach to Christian theology (MacQuarrie 1955). In recent decades, Lutheran theologians have often abandoned some of the important tenets of existentialism as well as the moralism of Ritschl, and the notions of progress and metaphysical unity in Hegel's approach. In place of these other systems, writers have adopted a linguistic approach to reality, especially as taught by JL Austin.

Several theologians have adapted Austin's speech-act theory to various degrees in their doctrinal systems. This has not been limited to Lutheranism. However, some thinkers have placed these ideas in a central position, even to the point of using linguistic philosophy as a replacement of the essentialist metaphysic in ancient Greek thought. The writers who have done this can be broadly placed under the rubric of 'Radical Lutheranism,' which is a phrase first used in a *Lutheran Quarterly* essay by Gerhard Forde (Forde 2004:3–16). The most important figures in this movement include: Gerhard Forde, Oswald Bayer, and Steven Paulson. Each of these thinkers has emphasised this linguistic turn in opposition to classical essentialist philosophy. Alongside of these authors, some Confessional Lutheran theologians such as Robert Kolb, Charles Arand, and William S Schumacher have adopted a linguistic ontology along with Bayer's critique of metaphysical essentialism.

In this article, it is argued that this shift has significant problems. Although aspects of contemporary linguistic philosophy can serve a beneficial purpose in explaining the relationship between the human creature and God's word, this cannot be done adequately without simultaneously affirming a traditional essentialist metaphysic. This article proceeds by first explaining the nature of modern linguistic philosophy, and JL Austin's work in particular. After this, the adoption of linguistic theology in the writings of three authors—Oswald Bayer, Gerhard Forde, and William Schumacher—is explained and critiqued. Following this, the idea of a relational ontology is discussed, which is a further element of the metaphysical system in these authors. The authors discussed

here are: Oswald Bayer, William Schumacher, Robert Kolb, and Charles Arand. The use of this philosophy is again criticised as inadequate without a firm foundation in classic essentialism. This essay then ends with a conclusion in which the findings here are summarised, and it is demonstrated that the shift away from essentialist ontology to linguistics and relation is not beneficial for the Lutheran church.

## 2. Linguistic Philosophy

### 2.1. The Development of Linguistic Philosophy in the Twentieth Century

If the central mode of philosophical discourse for the ancient Greeks was that of metaphysics, and the post-Kantian era of epistemology, much of contemporary philosophy can be placed within the category of linguistic philosophy. There are a number of contributing factors to this, which include the restructuring of logic through a deconstruction of propositions in Bertrand Russell, the development of symbolic logic in thinkers such as Paul Kripke and AJ Ayer, as well as the extensive influence of Ludwig von Wittgenstein (see Beaney 2017). Along with philosophy proper, schools of interpretation in literature which addressed similar problems also flourished in the twentieth century, such as the structuralism of Ferdinand de Saussure, the following Post-Structuralism movement (Belsey 2002), and then with deconstruction as practised by Jacques Derrida (Norris 2002). For present purposes, the linguistic school which is most important in its influence upon Radical Lutheran authors—as well as in theology more broadly—is the development of speech-act theory through the work of John L Austin, and its further modification in John Searle. The concepts set forth in these thinkers are connected with Luther's notion of the effective word, and it is proposed that several of the problems which have been associated with classical metaphysics can now be spoken of in linguistic terms. It is the contention of this article that such a proposal is inadequate.

The notion of speech-acts in linguistic analysis was first proposed by a series of lectures given at Harvard in 1955 by JL Austin. These lectures were compiled into the highly influential book *How to Do Things with Words* (1962). In this first lecture, Austin argues that there are two forms of speech which must be distinguished from one another: *constative* and *performative* (1962:6). A constative statement is one which merely describes something, or states a fact. To say, for example, 'I got married yesterday', simply communicates information about something which may or may not

be true. These types of statements are ones that can be distinguished as either true or false (1962:13). For Austin, linguistic theory has too often focused exclusively on such statements (this is particularly true of Aristotle and other ancient Greeks), to the neglect of other forms of speech. He labels this other type of language as *performative*. These are not mere statements of description, but linguistic actions that actually effect some kind of reality in themselves. A prominent example of such is in wedding vows. When someone declares, 'I do', this is not a descriptive sentence, but one which binds one to a contract (1962:5). A second example is the naming of a child. When someone declares that their newborn son's name is Joe, for instance, this decision brings about a new reality that this individual will be addressed by such a title. These types of speech cannot easily be described as either 'true' or 'false,' in the same manner that a constative sentence can. It is incoherent to say that one's vows, or the name of a child, are true or false. It is this fundamental distinction between constative and performative speech which forms the rest of Austin's linguistic theory and is used by Oswald Bayer's interpretation of Luther.

A further division that is introduced by Austin, which is further developed by Searle, is between locution, illocution, and perlocution (1962:98). The locution of a given sentence is its literal grammatical meaning devoid of societal context. If, for example, a statement is made that 'this room is messy,' the grammatical rendering of the sentence is simply constative, an observation about the state of that room. The illocution is the intended meaning of the speaker within the broader linguistic context. If the statement, 'this room is messy,' is made by a mother in a harsh tone toward her child in his bedroom, this may carry a meaning beyond what is the literal rendering of the words included in that sentence. There is an intended meaning on the speaker's behalf that is not simply observational. Instead, she is implying the notion that the child must clean that room and perhaps that there will be consequences for not doing so. For Austin, these nuances of speech are present throughout ordinary conversation. A third and final aspect of a speech-act is perlocution, which is the impact of that statement upon the hearer. In this example, the perlocution is the response of the child. The statement may bring about fear of punishment, then resulting in him cleaning the room.

Proponents of speech-act theory have categorised illocutionary acts in a number of different ways, generally divided into between four to six categories. Since Austin is most significant for Bayer's use of speech-act theory, his categories are followed here. Austin

proposes five types of speech acts: verdictives, exercitives, commissives, behabitives, and expositives (1962:151). In the theological use of Austin's philosophy, there are two of these which are important: verdictives and commissives. A verdictive is a speech-act which either acquits or condemns (1962:153). The clearest example of such an act is the declaration of a guilty or innocent verdict from the judge in a courtroom. In such instances, the declaration of this verdict has the effect of actually delivering such a verdict to the individual. The second is the commissive, which is an act of promise (1962:157). In these acts, the speakers commit themselves to performing some kind of act for the one spoken to. It obligates the individual to do or not do certain actions. The verdictive speech-act is spoken in a second-person form, such as: 'you are guilty' or 'you are innocent.' The commissive uses an I-you manner of speech, in which the speaker proclaims: 'I promise you.' For some contemporary Lutheran theologians, these forms of speech accord with gospel proclamation as taught by Luther.

## **2.2. Oswald Bayer's Use of Speech-Act Theory**

Oswald Bayer is the thinker who most consistently uses Austin's ideas of speech-act in his exposition of Lutheran theology. He is then followed by Robert Kolb, William Schumacher, and Steven Paulson. For Bayer, linguistic philosophy corrects the errors of a purely existential approach to theology, while simultaneously using the beneficial aspects of Bultmann's approach. For Bayer, the existential approach succeeds in 'privileging proclamation over theology,' but fails in finding the heart of theology within an existential analysis of the human subject themselves, rather than with a communicative act between God and creatures (Bayer 2007:138). For Bayer, it can even be stated that the speech-act constitutes the 'essence of Christianity' (2007:138). It is clear that in Bayer's view, the notion of speech-act is not merely one aspect of philosophy to be explored by the theologian, but is the very centre of Christian faith and practice. Theology consists both in the actual doing of such speech-acts, as well as analysis of those actions in third-person constative discourse (2007:128). This is centred in the proclamation of law and gospel.

In Bayer's view, all of theology can be broken down into statements of first and second person discourse, or of 'address and response' (2007:18). This includes the deliverance of God's promises in speech-acts, along with the human response of offering praise and thanksgiving. The speech acts of God are twofold: law and gospel. These two words are described as the 'object of

theology', but he does not define them in their scholastic senses (2007:100). He likens them to a bird in flight, rather than propositions which can be studied in a scientific manner. Like Forde, Bayer understands God's law primarily within the context of its accusatory function, and does not write of the *lex aeterna* (Cooper 2017). The gospel, similarly, is identified with God's act of salvation in the present; this is the speech act of forgiveness proclaimed by the minister. This emphasis on linguistics, for Bayer, overcomes moralistic, existential, and metaphysical understandings of the Christian faith (2007:100). In his view, this understanding of law and gospel as speech acts was at the centre of Luther's reformation discovery.

In Bayer's view, Luther's turn from medieval theology was 'in the strict sense' the revelation that there is no strong division between *signum* (the sign) and *res* (the reality) (2007:129). In older approaches (at least according to Bayer) both the word and sacraments were understood as signs which pointed to a more ultimately reality found elsewhere. This notion comes primarily from St. Augustine's use of certain themes of Plato's philosophy, especially in his approach to language. For Luther, however, the *signum* is the thing itself. There is no reality which needs to be grasped apart from the sign. The most common manner of expressing this reality is with the words of absolution, which takes the form of a commissive speech-act with the 'I-you' formula of 'I forgive you all of your sins' (2007:130). In the absolution, the pastor does not merely declare that one's sins are *already* forgiven, or point one to forgiveness which can be received *elsewhere*, but the absolution does the act of absolving itself. In Austin's language, it is a performative rather than constative statement. There is no information being delivered in the words of absolution which is then subject to things like truth and falsehood, as is the case in constative utterances (2007:132). This very act brings about a reality between God and man, wherein the human creature stands before God now forgiven. This reality of the divine-speech act which constitutes the gospel is connected not only to the word of absolution, but also to the sacraments of Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper (2007:130). Each of these utterances, again, uses the 'I-you' formula which occurs in commissive speech-acts. Both the phrases 'I baptise you,' and 'my body given for you' are promises which extend from God to the human recipient. These linguistic utterances create a reality between these two subjects which did not exist previously.

Before exploring the notion of linguistic philosophy further in its relation to particular areas of Christian theology, such as one's

anthropology, some remarks must be made regarding the connections made thus far in Bayer between Austin's notion of speech-act and Luther's understanding of *signum* and *res*. There are certainly valid connections to be made between these two ideological systems. In linguistics, promises—which constitute a significant portion of Scripture—do not fit properly within earlier models of language. The recognition of commissives and verdictives need not be rejected by the classical metaphysician, as these are modes of speech which humans have always used (though perhaps without recognizing it), and can be validly applied without foregoing an essentialist metaphysical system. When God gives promises, they are not mere informatory statements, but actually effect reality itself. Lutheran theology has always had a strong notion of the efficacy of the divine word as living and active, instead of purely constative. Austin's categories are a beneficial way in which these traditionally Lutheran concepts can be understood. However, despite the usefulness of Austin's categories, Bayer moves far beyond a critical and moderate utilization of speech-act theory, and instead makes it determinative for the entirety of Christian theology.

One of the most apparent problems with the contention that speech-acts constitute the essence of the Christian faith is the fact that the proclamation of Jesus and the apostles does not always follow such a formula. It is true, certainly, that at times the apostles speak in a second person manner, such as when Peter speaks of Jesus as the one whom 'you crucified' (Acts 2:36). This is an instance of a proclamation of law which comports with the speech-act interpretation of law and gospel. The following chapter includes similar preaching, such as the statement that 'you denied the Holy One' (Acts 3:14). These instances of law also lead to baptisms, which then includes the formula, 'I baptise you.' Here, then, one could make a strong argument that both the law and the gospel, as proclaimed by the apostles, are performative rather than constative statements. However, this would not properly take into account several other texts in which the gospel is preached. In what is perhaps the most famous text of the entire New Testament, John 3:16, Jesus speaks in consistently constative statements. Jesus tells Nicodemus, 'God so loved the world' rather than, 'God so loved *you*.' He then continues by giving information about the results of God's love which culminates in the sending of Christ, whose benefits can be received by faith. This is a simple statement of what is the case. It grants information of an event which can be judged as either true or false, and thus fulfils Austin's requirement of what a constative utterance consists of.

One could argue that the statement is not *purely* constative, as contextually it does indeed elicit some kind of response from the hearer (the perlocution), and ultimately beckons one unto faith in the messiah. What this demonstrates, however, is that while performative utterances may be helpful to an extent in descriptions of the gospel, both law and gospel have a strong constative element as well. Bayer states, to the contrary, that, 'The gospel is not a general idea but a concrete word that addresses a specific person in a particular situation' (2005:123). In this instance in John's Gospel (which is only one of many) Jesus does discuss a 'general idea' of what God has done for the world. Certainly, this applies to Nicodemus as an individual, but there is no dichotomy between constative general statements and particular and concrete performative ones. The divide between proclamatory speech-acts and theological statements which simply give information is not as strong as Bayer supposes.

This is perhaps even more clear in Gerhard Forde's description of two forms of speech as 'primary discourse,' and 'secondary discourse' (1990:2). In his book *Theology is for Proclamation*, he argues that the most essential type of theology is that which is spoken in a first to second person manner, using the 'I-you' formula which Bayer identifies with performative speech. Though he does not use Austin's language as explicitly, Forde essentially uses the same categories. For Forde, the law and gospel are defined as primary, rather than secondary, discourse. This serves as the basis for one's preaching. Forde differentiates between preaching the gospel and preaching *about* the gospel (1990:17). In his view, the majority of pastors never actually get around to preaching the gospel because they are simply speaking *about* it. As cited in the example above, this would mean that texts like John 3 are really not the gospel at all, because they do not contain direct 'I forgive you' statements. In reality there is no strong contrast between speaking the gospel, and speaking *about* the gospel. Both performative and constative statements are elements of preaching the gospel as evidenced by the New Testament.

Alongside of the inadequacies of Austin's categories in properly expositing the gospel, Bayer's idea of *signum* and *res* needs to be examined. As mentioned above, for Bayer, Luther's fundamental insight in the Reformation is that there is no strong divide between the sign and the reality standing behind it. Instead, the sign is the thing itself. While Luther certainly holds to a stronger connection between sacrament and reality than do Calvin and the later Reformed tradition, there is no indication in Luther's own writings that he self-consciously departed from the Augustinian

tradition in this matter. Had such a move been the very centre of Luther's thought, certainly this would have merited mentioning somewhere. The language of the sacraments as signs has a long history within Lutheranism. It is apparent in the entire scholastic era, from Chemnitz to Gerhard to Hollaz (Schmid 1899:520). One might simply argue that this is one of those areas in which the Lutheran tradition departed from its founder. However, the sign-signified language is consistent also within the writings of Melancthon, and it even gained confessional status in the Augsburg Confession (AC XIII). Luther never voiced disagreement on this point, either in communication with Melancthon or in his own public writings. While Bayer rightly expositis the unity of the sacraments and God's act for the sinner, once again he goes far beyond what the evidence actually merits. These problems with Bayer's method are even more apparent as they are applied to specific theological content—particularly anthropology.

For Bayer, humanity itself is defined by language. He proposes that we are not 'rational beings' as was supposed by Aristotle and other Greek philosophers, but instead are 'speaking beings' (2003:47). Speech is therefore definitional of humanity. It is this communicative nature of men and women that differentiates the human race from the rest of creation, and is the basis for one's relatedness to God. In a summary statement, Bayer defines his view thus: 'Our humanity consists of the fact that we are addressed and therefore can hear and can ourselves answer, being responsible for doing so' (2003:61). The implications of such a conviction are apparent in the manner in which he defines both the subject and object of theology. When speaking theologically, one must speak specifically of the 'sinful human', and the 'justifying God' (2005:98). While this, in and of itself, is not necessarily problematic, as these *are* properly spoken of in relation to soteriology, Bayer goes farther than would be done by the scholastics. He contends that these modifiers, both 'sinful', and 'justifying', are not accidental, but *substantial*. Bayer defines humanity—theologically at least—as 'people who are accused and absolved by God' (2005:98). God, in this system, is 'the one who accuses and absolves us' (2005:98). Bayer is careful to note that this does not imply a doctrine that God created humanity to be sinful in essence, but that theology is simply not concerned of classical metaphysical questions of man or God's essences in the abstract. The problems with such a theological anthropology are numerous. Here, two primary issues with Bayer's anthropology are discussed, followed by an examination of William Schumacher's use of such concepts.

### 2.3. A Critique of Bayer

The first issue with Bayer's approach is that it narrowly limits the field of theology to a reductionistic law–gospel schema. While the distinction between law and gospel is an important theological principle, it should not be the sole question in all doctrinal discourse. Joel Biermann has demonstrated the many inadequacies of such a reductionism in his *A Case for Character* (2014). And even in relation to law and gospel, Bayer further limits such study to their function in a proclamatory performative context, while Lutheran Orthodoxy defined the essences of both law and gospel first, which then informed their impact on the individual, whether linguistically or existentially. If God is purely understood through his acts of accusation and absolution, this negates a significant amount of productive discourse about subjects such as, creation, the divine attributes, the relationship between God and creation, and other important topics. In Bayer's view, theology is essentially *only* soteriology. This leaves no place for discussion about God as he is in himself (inter-Trinitarian relations, divine simplicity and immutability, and so on) or of humanity in either the prelapsarian or glorified state in which one is certainly not identified as the 'sinful human.' What Bayer proposes here is a theological novelty, and not a helpful one.

The second issue with this proposal is that it inevitably leads to Flacianism. When the reformer contended that sin constituted the essence of humanity, the other Lutheran theologians recognised the problems with such an approach. Bayer, in rejecting the traditional essence-accidents distinction in Aristotelian philosophy, ends up in the same position by defining humanity itself by sin. His small qualification that this does not mean that God himself created the human essence as sinful does not resolve the problem (2005:98). Whether one wants to speak of sin as the essence of man theologically, metaphysically, or something else, this still introduces a radical discontinuity between the human person at some point within the process of redemption. If sin is of the essence of humanity, this appears to imply that Adam himself had a different essence before and after sin. Similarly, so does the human person who passes into a glorified state. This demonstrates, once again, that linguistic philosophy simply does not have the necessary categories to speak with the theological nuance which is necessary biblically. Essentialist metaphysics, with the distinction between essence and accidents has a way in which theologians can uphold two important truths: that sin is a real and damaging problem upon humanity, and that despite this sinful nature, one still remains essentially human from the

prelapsarian to the post-lapsarian state into the glorification of humanity at the Parousia. Bayer's proposal simply cannot do this, which is a further demonstration of its inadequacy. These problems are magnified in William Schumacher's use of linguistic theological anthropology in his critique of the Finnish approach to Luther.

#### **2.4. William Schumacher's Linguistic Theology**

Schumacher's proposal is especially important because he writes in opposition to Platonic philosophy, which he argues is opposed to Luther's metaphysical system. He argues in *Who Do I Say that You Are* against Tuomo Mannermaa and the Finnish interpretation of Luther. These Finnish authors contend for the notion that Luther's theology of justification is, in some respects, consistent with the Eastern Orthodox belief in theosis. Rather than arguing against the particulars of union with Christ and its relationship to justification in the *ordo salutis*, Schumacher finds the central problem with Mannermaa to be one of metaphysics. The Finnish authors approve of theotic notions because they believe in Platonic essentialism, which Schumacher argues stands in opposition to a word-centric metaphysics that is found in Luther. He applies these principles to a theological anthropology that comports with Bayer's as discussed above.

The core of Schumacher's anthropology is stated at the beginning of his book, when he says that 'the essential being of human creatures is determined and defined by a word said about them—indeed, by a word said to them' (2010:1). Being is subsumed under word, setting up a strong distinction between Schumacher's approach and that of real-essentialism. Schumacher argues that human nature is not to be described in 'substantial' language, as this implies that the definition of being is somehow within the human self, rather than in God (2010:14). Instead, in a theological anthropology, it is the performative word of God which is definitional—not substance. In Schumacher's view, this performative word is not only creative at the beginning of human existence, but continues its sustenance and preservation in creation (2010:15). He refers to this as an 'ontology of the word' that stands in stark contrast to the Platonic convictions present in the proponents of the Finnish interpretation of Luther (2010:15). He criticises Mannermaa for holding to what he labels a 'static realism' in which everything that is real is necessarily within the realm of being (2010:48). For Schumacher, Luther's approach to reality is exclusively defined by the word, which leads to a 'real-verbal' view of the life of faith (2010:49). Schumacher's work is one

which sets up a strong dichotomy between word and being. This is a problematic approach.

This dichotomy proposed by Schumacher is a false one. He is highly critical of any language of substance or essence as the real in favour of the dynamic word of God as a better theological alternative. However, there is no reason why these two aspects of reality must somehow be placed in opposition to one another at all. One of the criticisms of essentialism that Schumacher proposes is that it defines human creatures by something in themselves, rather than by God's act (2010:14). However, this simply is not true in traditional essentialism in any of its forms. While it is true that individual things have essences in which they participate, these are not in any sense autonomous things. God's word is active in creation—this is not doubted by any Christian thinker. However, when God creates, he does not only make merely the particular, but also the general. It is not to attribute some kind of autonomy to the human race to acknowledge that God's word creates, not only individual persons, but an actual human nature which can be examined and defined. This is precisely the nature of the creation account in Genesis. God's word is the instrument of creation (Gen 1:3), which makes both particular objects (Gen 1:20), and various 'kinds' in which these objects are placed (Gen 4:2). Christian Neoplatonism, in particular, has emphasised all three of these realities with the notion that the Logos is the intermediary between God and man who is the instrument of creation, and in creation, particular objects are made but participate in their essences which are in the mind of God. This is far from any notion of autonomy, as essences themselves are always participatory, as nothing has being at all apart from God. While it is not that clear, it appears that Schumacher confuses essentialism with the notion of autonomy which arose in modern philosophy, and was promoted during the Enlightenment (2010:5). Classic essentialism retains a proper balance between the realities of both the dependency of created things on the Logos, and the belief in a strong realism with regard to essences.

In Schumacher's approach, Mannermaa errs largely in his definition of justification, which is placed in categories of substance, and the central soteriological motif is the real-ontic union of God and the believer (2010:47). This leads to a theological schema which mirrors that of Andreas Osiander, who is condemned in the Formula of Concord. Schumacher is correct here in differentiating ontology from justification as do the Lutheran scholastics. Justification is not synonymous with union in Luther, though the two are intimately related concepts as is argued in *The*

*Righteousness of One* (Cooper 2013). The problem, however, is that Schumacher throws out the entire Platonic and Aristotelian tradition because ontological categories are insufficient in expositing Luther's doctrine of justification, which is a legal rather than metaphysical act. As is argued in *Christification: A Lutheran Approach to Theosis* (Cooper 2014), there is no reason why forensic and ontic categories should be pitted against one another. Salvation is comprehensive, and includes a variety of metaphors and facets which no one particular idea exhausts. The Lutheran orthodox tradition affirms both classical metaphysics and the centrality of the proclaimed word as efficacious in justification. To be fair, the dichotomy does not begin with Schumacher, but it is Mannermaa himself who pits his ideas against the Lutheran Confessions. Within the scholastic view, however, both Schumacher's focus on the primacy of divine speech *and* Mannermaa's contention for a real-ontic union are affirmed together, without neglecting the import of one or the other.

Another problem that arises in Schumacher's proposal for a purely word-centric approach to reality is that it does not comport with the Lutheran Confessional tradition. This is significant because Schumacher is a member of the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod and has therefore vowed to uphold a *quia* subscription to the Book of Concord. There is plenty of essentialist language utilised in the various documents comprising that text, as has been demonstrated above. The most basic is the Nicene Creed which speaks strongly about a divine and human essence. There is no indication within the text itself that the Council of Nicea understood human nature as defined by a performative speech-act. Instead, the confession of Christ's divine and human natures uses traditional Greek categories. It is clear that the Lutheran confessors continue to understand humanity in essentialist terms, especially in the Osiandrian controversy explain in Article I of the Formula of Concord. It is specifically in relation to the human essence in which the essence-accidents distinction in Aristotle is affirmed. This is not to say, however, that the Greeks somehow exhausted all that is to be said about humanity, as Schumacher is right to address the relationship of humanity to the word of God, as well as the important relational categories that have often been missing in older philosophical anthropology. However, such can be done without dismissing the entire classical essentialist tradition.

## **2.5. Linguistic Philosophy: Conclusion**

Oswald Bayer, Gerhard Forde, and William Schumacher each use JL Austin's theory of speech-acts as an essential component of

Lutheran thought. For Bayer, the distinction between constative and performative utterances coincides with Luther's understanding of the word of God as efficacious, rather than merely informational. He views the entire theological task as consisting in speech-acts and descriptions of those acts. In view of this, Bayer does not speak in terms of substance, and thus defines both God and man by way of the adjectives 'justifying', and 'sinful' respectively. The two problems with this approach are: First, that it is reductionistic, leading to a theology which is solely concerned with soteriology. Second, it is a reiteration of Flacianism, wherein sin is described as of the human essence itself. Gerhard Forde explains the same distinctions as does Bayer, though using the terms 'primary discourse,' and 'secondary discourse,' rather than 'performative,' and 'constative.' His view has the same problems as that of Bayer. Schumacher uses the insights of these two other writers in his criticisms of Tuomo Mannermaa and the Finnish interpretation of Luther. In doing so, Schumacher formulates a theological anthropology which is a 'real-verbal' one, in opposition to substantialist views of other authors. The problem with this is that the proposal itself is based upon a false dichotomy in which word and ontology are set in opposition to one another. The scholastic method allows for an adoption of the utilization of aspects of *both* ideas, instead of limiting soteriological language either to the ontological or the legal. Contemporary linguistic philosophy can be a helpful aid in expositing certain theological ideas. However, it is not an adequate system without the solid grounding of an essentialist metaphysic. This is further seen in an outgrowth of this linguistic turn in Lutheran writers which is an idea called *relational ontology*.

### 3. Relational Ontology

A further philosophical conception which arises out of the linguistic emphasis of contemporary Lutheran thinkers is *relational ontology*. There is no unified set of authors who identify themselves with a number of identical philosophical convictions which are then called relational ontology. However, despite differences on particulars, or even on the definition of exactly what relation is, there is one unifying theme which identifies a relational ontological system. In essence, a relational ontology is any system which prioritises the category of relation over that of substance. For Aristotle, relations are an accidental category of essences, but this movement proposes that instead, essences are defined by relation. For writers such as Bayer, Schumacher, and

Kolb, this relational ontology is an outgrowth of the centrality of the word.

### 3.1. Bayer's Relational Ontology

Bayer explains what he describes as a 'revolution in logic' within Luther's thought wherein a 'relational ontology' replaces metaphysical ideas as found in Aristotle (2007:19). Though he acknowledges that such an ontological schema is not adequate in explaining *every* aspect of reality, he contends that this is the only valid manner in which soteriology can be described. Salvation is purely relational—not ontological. Bayer further explains this by noting the relationship between various ontological systems and the two kingdoms. Within the civil realm, Bayer acknowledges that the category of 'substance' has some validity (2007:79). He rejects extreme forms of relational ontology by arguing that God is in essence God, regardless of his relationship to creation (2007:20). However, within the right-hand sphere, in which God is active in salvation, a relational ontology is the 'only appropriate one' (2007:79). This is explained in Bayer's understanding of faith, and ecstatic existence in Christ.

One of the central themes in Bayer's interpretation of Luther is the notion that faith always extends beyond itself to Christ. He argues that passive righteousness results in a life that is outside oneself, and found in another (2003:25). This identification with Christ externally frees one from the concerns of either self-judgment or the judgment of others, since one's identity does not exist within the self at all (2003:39). Good works flow out of this idea, as passive righteousness frees one from concerns of self-justification so that one might serve the neighbour freely. Paulson, following Bayer, describes this as being 'foreign to ourselves' (2011:2) and living 'outside one's self' (2011:3). It is faith which creates this reality, as faith clings to Christ who remains external. As do the Lutheran scholastics, Bayer and Paulson both emphasise the fact that faith never rests within itself or in any inherent quality of the human subject, but solely in Christ (Paulson 2011:57). In faith, the individual is 'created anew' (Bayer 2007:103). One then exists, not in the self, but within Christ, with whom one is permanently identified. For Bayer, this concept cannot coexist with essentialist metaphysics, since the Greek systems have no place for a notion of 'ex-centric being' in the identity of another (2007:103). While Bayer is correct in his contention that justification is relational rather than ontological, and that identity is to be found in Christ, his relational exclusivism in soteriology is problematic.

The first problem is that the natural result of this contention is that soteriology is limited to justification. Other parts of salvation, such as the mystical union, do not cohere with a purely relational ontology, and therefore they receive no treatment from Bayer. The only union which receives attention is a union of relations between the person and Christ, rather than one of essences (2007:79). This is also likely connected to his conviction that there is no fundamental differentiation between justification and sanctification (2003:59). There can be no progressive change in any ontological sense in the Christian, although he does acknowledge that there can be a kind of relational progress in connection with the new creature throughout the Christian life (2003:65). Both Scripture and the Confessions are far more multi-faceted than is allowed with Bayer's ontology.

Another issue with this relational emphasis is that, like Forde's existential approach to regeneration, it does not account for any continuity in the subject. While it is true that one gains a new identity in Christ in the great exchange, this identity does not erase the previous self. If the individual is, theologically, defined solely by relation, and one's relation to God changes before and after regeneration, then the self must become something utterly foreign. If there is a change of relation, then there is also a change of self. Furthermore, if one is identified *solely* with Christ in this supposed 'ex-centric' notion of being, then it would be more accurate to simply say that the individual *is* Jesus in faith. To be sure, Bayer himself does not make such connections. However, such is the result if there is no talk of human essence apart from relations within soteriological discourse. There must be a human ego and identity within the self in *some* sense, if the individual actually experiences redemption. Therefore, although there is a sense in which it is proper to speak about living in and through another, and being identified with Christ, this cannot be the sole means by which one exopts redemption. Identity is both in some sense within the self—or, again, there is no actual self to be redeemed in the first place—and in Christ. The problem is that Bayer forces an unnecessary dichotomy. His insights into ecstatic existence in Christ can be explained more properly not by dismissing ontology from soteriology altogether, but acknowledging the coherence of the two ideas within the broader scope of salvation.

### **3.2. Schumacher on Relational Ontology**

William Schumacher adopts a relational ontology from Bayer, and explores the fact that one is defined not purely by one's faith-

relation to Christ, but also to fellow creatures. He is highly critical of Platonic dualism of body and soul, even claiming that body and soul are not two separate substances, but two different ways of viewing the entire human person (2010:154). The soul describes the person in relation to God, and the body is one's self in relation to other creatures. It is in relation to others that Schumacher expands upon Bayer's relational emphasis. For Schumacher, relations to other individuals are not merely accidental qualities of people, but are actually 'constitutive of human nature' (2010:155). There is, then, no human essence which can be determined apart from connections between particular people. Schumacher further clarifies that relations constitute the human essence 'in the fullest sense' (2010:155). For Aristotle, in contrast, relations are accidental, since such relations are in flux and the identity of an object remains despite whatever relations it has at the present moment. If an individual becomes a widow, she remains the same self regardless of the changed husband-wife relation that defined a significant aspect of her life previously. Even within a relationship, there is constant flux so that no single relation or set of relations remains fixed through time. If one were to cut off every single relationship that one had, moving to a far away place or alone on an island, one's essential identity would not change. It is for these reasons that essence *has* to have a priority over relation. Schumacher himself basically admits as much when he says that if one were cut off from relations with other humans, one would still remain a human, 'in the same sense as a human being who has lost arms or legs or eyes is still human' (2010:156). The fact is that even though Schumacher wants to give relation priority over essence, he simply cannot do it consistently, and without seemingly realizing it, he comes to the same conclusion that Aristotle does. Relations are a fundamental aspect of what it means to be in a material world, and one is always standing in relation to others; however, those relations are not definitional of what an object is (its essence), since an object retains its identity as relations change. Again, Schumacher's insights are helpful, but only make sense within the essentialist framework from which he continually distances himself. The same problem arises in Kolb and Arand's work.

### 3.3. Kolb and Arand's Ontology

In *The Genius of Luther's Theology*, Robert Kolb and Charles Arand argue that the idea of the two kinds of righteousness is a central theme in Luther's thought. In particular, they explore these themes as relational categories in connection with how one relates to both God and fellow creatures (2008:28). These types of

righteousness are *passive* and *active*. They each serve in a relational capacity to identify how one is to act with regard to God and humans respectively. One's relatedness to God is always passive, as an infant is with their parents (2008:28). God gives salvation as a free gift, and the man or woman can do absolutely nothing to earn it. They, therefore, enter before God in a purely passive stance, and receive their identity before God in Christ (2008:29). In connection to other creatures, however, one is to live a life of active obedience to God through works of love toward the neighbour (2008:29). Like Shumacher, Kolb and Arand connect this life of obedience largely with the relations that one has in various vocations and communities. In opposition to the monastic ideal, Christians live for the sake of those around them—always within community and in civil society at large. Both of these facets of human existence constitute human identity.

What is promoted by Kolb and Arand is a kind of relational ontology which purports that identity flows out of relations to both God and man. Speaking of one's *coram Deo* status, they argue that faith is not a mere accidental quality of the human creature, but instead that it 'lies at the core of human existence' (2008:38). They further clarify that Luther 'does not consider the human person substantially' (2008:49), but instead, he speaks of humanity in strictly relational terms. To make the point as clear as possible, Kolb and Arand also approvingly cite Bayer in saying that 'My very being is faith' (2008:51). This conflation of essence and relation is highly problematic. To say that one's being is identified with faith, or that both existence and identity are strictly tied to one's *coram Deo* status leads to a devaluation of the unbeliever. If one takes these statements in their strict and literal sense, then the individual who is devoid of faith therefore has no existence, identity, or being. The inevitable conclusion, again, is Flacianism. If reality is defined by relation, then one's own being is fundamentally altered in faith in which there is no continuity of subject. This is not to say that Kolb or Arand would themselves make such contentions. However, it does demonstrate the necessity of speaking of a continuous human essence which remains in the individual. A purely relational or linguistic ontology simply cannot account for this.

The criticisms which Kolb and Arand offer toward Greek metaphysics are mostly within the context of the Eastern doctrine of theosis, and especially its use by Tuomo Mannermaa. Kolb and Arand are highly critical of any soteriology which is ontological (2008:48). They categorise such approaches as a denial of human creatureliness, wherein the goal of redemption is to be 'absorbed

into God's divine being,' which results in the loss of individual creaturely identity (2008:48). This is then associated with the view of Andreas Osiander, who denied the forensic nature of justification, and then with the Eastern Orthodox tradition which operates from a supposedly 'radically different metaphysical base' than Luther (2008:48). Kolb and Arand are simply incorrect in their characterization of the Eastern tradition. Apart from absolute pantheism, no Christian theologian who identifies with Neoplatonism argues for a complete loss of the individual into the very substance of God. Nearly every Eastern Orthodox text on theosis makes repeated statements that such is not the case. This is, in fact, the entire point of the prominent distinction between God's essence (which is not participatory) and his energies (which are participatory) that assures that the believer never actually participates within the divine essence at all (Cooper 2014:9). Furthermore, it is not the contention of Eastern writers that the creature becomes in any sense less of a creature, but instead that theosis makes the individual more truly human (Cooper 2014:4-5). Here, the supposed opposition between a relational ontology that holds to a strong creature/Creator distinction and a Platonist one that does not is simply manufactured.

A further problem with Kolb and Arand's criticism is that they continue to promote the false dichotomy that either one adopts a relational understanding of salvation or a metaphysical one (2008:49). There is no reason why the two concepts must necessarily be opposed to one another. It is true, certainly, that justification is a decidedly relational category, which refers not to a change in substance, but in the individual's relatedness to God. However, when the Lutheran scholastics developed the *ordo salutis*, they acknowledged the broad variety of realities involved in salvation, though without negating the unique forensic nature of justification (Schmid 1899:409). Kolb and Arand's helpful insights surrounding the two kinds of righteousness need not negate essentialist ontology as a subject of soteriological discourse (Cooper 2016:120). The complete disregard for any metaphysical discussions related to the human subject in Kolb and Arand's work lead to a rather unique view of sanctification.

Kolb and Arand contend that there is no 'progress upward on a spiritual continuum' in the Christian life (2008:49). At one point it is even stated rather clearly that there is no growth in sanctification at all (2008:126). This is not to say that the Christian does not participate in good works, according to Kolb and Arand. However, these good works are not the result of a process of the individual becoming more holy. Instead, the believer is

completely holy in Christ, and that holiness is only partially manifested in the world before the eschaton (2008:125–126). Kolb and Arand demonstrate this through the popular phrase *simul iustus et peccator*. This phrase, in their view, refers to two totalities. One is completely righteous in relation to Christ, and completely sinful in oneself (2008:49). The movement between these two realities is never one of actual change from one to the other, but is purely psychological (2008:49). This seems to be the inevitable conclusion of a relational ontology. If being is by relation, and justification is a perfect act, then there is no place for partial righteousness at all, as one is already perfectly related to God. Good works then are dealt with in the category of inter-human relationships, especially within the context of vocation. This denial of any sense of partial righteousness or sanctification seems, however, to contradict Biblical texts which speak of a process wherein the individual is changed (2 Cor. 3:18, Phil. 3:12, Heb. 10:14, 2 Pet. 1:4–8), along with passages contained in the Book of Concord that speak about progress in sanctification (LC II.54, 57, Apol. IV.124, FC SD III.32). These passages are explained in detail in *Hands of Faith* (Cooper 2016). It is the Lutheran scholastic tradition that is able to hold both to a strong notion of forensic justification alongside an ontological change in sanctification.

Any ontology, from a Lutheran perspective, has to wrestle with two realities: Luther's doctrine of justification, and genuine change in the Christian life. For Kolb and Arand, this means either making justification an ontological change (which they reject) or arguing that there is no actual progress in sanctification (which they affirm). The Lutheran scholastics posit both a legal and relation conception of justification, and speak in Platonic and Aristotelian categories about being. Both the Platonic and Aristotelian traditions have ways of speaking about change in the Christian without somehow subsuming humanity into divinity, as Kolb and Arand fear (2008:48). For the Platonist the ideal human—in the mind of God—is a sinless one. As one is involved in the process of sanctification, or Christification, one participates more in that ideal, and thus becomes more truly human. This is why the Eastern tradition can speak of divinization as the fulfilment of human nature, rather than a loss of one's creatureliness. For the Aristotelian, sanctification can be placed in the category of accidental change, rather than substantial. Throughout the process, one retains the same ego and essence, but genuine change does occur, though without a change from one essence to another. In each of these ways, the classical

metaphysician is able to argue for the reality of some kind of ontological change over time, while simultaneously affirming the consistency of human identity. An ontology which favours relation over essence cannot do this.

### **3.4. Relational Ontology: Conclusions**

Bayer, Schumacher, Kolb, and Arand all have strong and important modifications to Christian anthropology and the notion of relations. Bayer rightly argues that there is a sense in which Christian identity and existence is not within the autonomous self, but in Christ. However, he wrongly puts soteriology solely in this category, and thus negates the redemption of the human essence itself. Schumacher is correct to note the communal nature of humanity. God did not make individuals to live or subsist solely within themselves, but in the context of the broader human community. However, Schumacher's points cohere perfectly well within the essentialist metaphysic from which he continues to distance himself. Kolb and Arand identify how the two kinds of righteousness spoken of by Luther are to be applied to the notions of relatedness to both God and creatures. However, they unnecessarily then dismiss substantial understandings of humanity, and in doing so, they mischaracterise Neoplatonism and the Eastern tradition. They also are forced, by their relational ontology, to deny any real sense of progressive sanctification, though this teaching is prominent in both Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions. Each of these relational approaches brings important aspects of nuance to a theological anthropology. However, they can provide a more balanced explanatory function only when based upon an essentialist ontology.

## **4. Conclusion**

This essay began as an exploration of the impact of linguistic philosophy in contemporary Lutheranism. The impact of Austin's speech-act theory has been demonstrated, and it has been shown that though there can be beneficial ways to speak in such categories, they cannot replace classical metaphysical categories of essence or substance. The findings of the study are presented here.

Oswald Bayer draws from JL Austin's speech-act theory in his exposition of Luther's thought, which distinguishes between constative and performative speech. Forde holds to a similar distinction, using the terms 'secondary discourse' and 'primary discourse' respectively. For Bayer, this performative speech-act constitutes the very essence of Christianity, thus strongly

differentiating his own view from most (all?) previous theology. William Schumacher follows this centrality of divine speech in his criticism of the Finnish school of Luther interpretation defended by Tuomo Mannermaa. For Schumacher, classical philosophy and Luther have two opposing systems of reality. Reality is either defined, according to Schumacher, by essences in themselves or by the word of God. He opts for the latter. It was demonstrated that each of these proposals is built upon a false dichotomy. There is no reason why these models of speech are necessarily a replacement of essentialist categories. One can adopt the usefulness as the category of performative speech in connection with sacramental theology without then also negating essentialist metaphysics. Schumacher, especially, wrongly divides these two truths and misunderstands essentialism by arguing that classical philosophy somehow assumes autonomy in the subject. This is simply not the case. The scholastic method can validly incorporate the insights of Austin, Searle, and others while simultaneously affirming real-essentialism in either its Platonic or Aristotelian form.

Connected with this shift to linguistics, Schumacher, Bayer, Kolb, and Arand all argue that relation is a more proper category than substance, at least in connection with soteriology. Through his word, God creates a new relation between himself and the human subject. The relatedness to God constitutes one's passive righteousness and identity *coram Deo*. This notion of identity is definitional of humanity, rather than a shared essence of humanness. Bayer identifies faith as one's being. This relational ontology is tied, not only to God, but also to fellow human creatures. Schumacher argues that the human essence itself is constituted by such relationships. This entire argument, again, is based upon a false dichotomy. The Lutheran scholastics all argued for justification as strictly forensic relational terminology without negating essentialist concepts. For them, forensic and participationist soteriological categories were not pitted as two opposing systems, but two aspects of the comprehensive reality that is salvation. This relational ontology, if it negates any other ontology in reference to salvation, does not have any proper place for the language of the mystical union, which is both a Biblical and historically Lutheran idea.

It is apparent that the Radical Lutheran theological method, in its use of linguistic and relational ontology, falls short in its attempt to formulate a doctrinal system. There are simply too many aspects of Christian theology which simply cannot be explained without a classical essentialist metaphysic. The doctrines of both God and man are strongly altered by this rejection of substantial

ontology, and not in a manner that is either helpful or consistent with Scripture. While the church today need not simply reprimand the thought of the Protestant scholastics in every area, in the realm of metaphysics, this older view proves to be one which is relevant and beneficial today.

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