

Non-Competitive Agency and Luther's Experiential Argument Against Virtue

This article examines a critique that has been levied against Martin Luther's account of the passivity of the human agent in salvation, and his corresponding critique of Aristotelian and Scholastic accounts of virtue. According to Reinhard Hütter and Jennifer Herdt, among others, Luther's theology of passivity is primarily the product of a philosophical failure to recognize that divine and human agency can be conceived in non-competitive terms. In what follows, I will demonstrate through close analysis of Luther's arguments that this philosophical critique does not succeed in refuting Luther's theology of passivity. This is because it fails to recognize that Luther's view of human agency and his critique of virtue are based to a significant degree on a different kind of argument: namely, empirical reflection on the experience of sin, including especially experience of the unmasterability of sinful affections through discipline, habit, or effort of will. I conclude by arguing that until Christian virtue ethicists have reckoned with this experiential argument, they have not engaged with one of the strongest theological critiques of virtue-based paradigms of Christian moral transformation.

Divine and Human Agency in Recent Theology

It has become commonplace in recent theology to observe that debates about the role of free will in salvation are often built on what is now seen to be a basic philosophical error. This error is the belief that divine and human agencies must necessarily compete with one another on the same ontological plane. So the argument goes, it is in fact possible and even necessary to conceive of divine and human agency in 'non-contrastive' or 'non-competitive' terms. God and humanity are not opponents in some zero-sum game; to claim that they are is to misunderstand the transcendence of the God who created the universe *ex nihilo* by placing God on the same plane as the creature, and to preclude any coherent account of the integrity of creaturely freedom or of moral responsibility. In fact, the nature of divine transcendence is such that God is the cause of all things in such a way that creaturely freedom and the genuine contingency of human action are themselves manifestations of divine causality. Divine grace thus does not destroy human freedom but sources, enables, and sustains it.

On its own terms, this characterization of the relationship between divine and human agency is not an innovation. It is fundamental to the theology of Thomas Aquinas,¹

¹ As Aquinas puts it, 'God works sufficiently in things as First Agent, but it does not follow from this that the operation of secondary agents is superfluous' (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I.105.5); 'From this it is also evident that providence is not incompatible with freedom of will' (Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* 73.1). On these themes see especially *Summa contra Gentiles* 67-77 and *Summa*

and forms of it have also been identified in Augustine,² in Gregory of Nyssa,³ and in Anselm and Bernard⁴, among others. What has changed recently, however, has been a widespread promulgation and acceptance of this view of divine and human agency well beyond the boundaries of Thomist theology. Indeed it would seem to be developing into something of a standard view for academic theologians across confessions.⁵

In this development, no contemporary theologian has been more influential than Kathryn Tanner.⁶ In the now classic discussion in *God and Creation in Christian Theology*, Tanner makes a powerful argument, grounded primarily in the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, that the Christian concept of divine transcendence includes rather than competes with a belief in creaturely efficacy. According to Tanner, for God to be truly transcendent in relation to Creation, divine agency in the world must be understood to be ‘universal and immediate’, such that ‘everything non-divine must be talked about as existing in a relation of total and immediate dependence upon God’.⁷ It follows from this that divine agency does not operate on the same ontological plane as creaturely agency: ‘a God who transcends the world must not be characterized... by a direct contrast with it... A contrastive definition [of agency] will show its failure to follow through on divine transcendence by inevitably bringing God down to the level of the non-divine to which it is opposed.’⁸ This in turn means that ‘creatures can be said to gain those qualities [of power and efficacy] not in the degree God’s agency is restricted, but in the degree God’s creative agency is extended to them.’⁹ In

Theologiae I.105.5. For overviews of Aquinas on divine agency and human freedom, see Bernard Lonergan, *Grace and Freedom* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 94-111, and Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 158-69, 174-8. 266-8.

² See e.g., Harry McSorley, *Luther: Right or Wrong? An Ecumenical-Theological Study of Luther’s Major Work, The Bondage of the Will* (New York: Newman Press, 1969), 63-110; and Susannah Ticciati, *A New Apophaticism: Augustine and the Redemption of Signs* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 62-6.

³ See Natalie Carnes, *Beauty: A Theological Engagement with Gregory of Nyssa* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 105-15.

⁴ For both Anselm and Bernard see McSorley, *Luther*, 129-34. For an interpretation of Barth that bears some similarities, see Adam Neder, *Participation in Christ: An Entry into Karl Barth’s Church Dogmatics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

⁵ In addition to those already mentioned, see Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1988); Jennifer A. Herdt, *Putting on Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Jason Fout, *Fully Alive: The Glory of God and the Human Creature in Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar, and Theological Exegesis of Scripture* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 3-5; William C. Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 111-27; Kyle Wells, *Grace and Agency in Paul and Second Temple Judaism: Interpreting the Transformation of the Heart* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 295-301; John M.G. Barclay, ‘Introduction,’ in *Divine and Human Agency in Paul and His Cultural Environment*, ed. John M.G. Barclay and Simon J. Gathercole (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 7; Colin D. Miller, *The Practice of the Body of Christ: Human Agency in Pauline Theology after MacIntyre* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014); and Jeremy Begbie, ‘Room of One’s Own? Music, Space, and Freedom,’ in *Music, Modernity, and God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 145-6, 163.

⁶ Herdt, Ticciati, Carnes, Begbie, Placher, Fout, Barclay, Wells, and Miller all explicitly acknowledge Tanner’s influence.

⁷ Tanner, *God and Creation*, 84.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 85.

Tanner's view, then, the contrastive accounts of divine and human agency that theologians have presupposed '[f]rom the time of the Reformation'¹⁰ are built upon a fundamental philosophical and theological mistake: 'To exclude genuine created efficacy as a possible direct effect of God's agency is to misunderstand... the nature of transcendence implied by the supremacy, sovereignty and holiness of God.'¹¹

Although the basic concept here can be understood as kind of postliberal, 'rule'-based restatement of Aquinas' position on contingency and secondary causation, it is Tanner's version that has succeeded in breaking through to a wider theological audience. In recent theology it has been found useful for understanding a wide range of topics, from the theology of music, to the soteriology of St Paul, to the nature of artistic inspiration.¹²

My interest in the present article is in one particular theological use that has been made of the principle of non-competitive agency in recent years: namely, as a critique of accounts of the life of faith that emphasize the passivity of the human agent. In *God and Creation*, Tanner argues that the theology of Martin Luther, in particular, with its emphasis on 'extrospective faith, alien righteousness, and the *simul iustus et peccator* status of the faithful', is a classic example of a theology that emphasizes divine sovereignty at the expense of human efficacy.¹³ Because Luther lacked a non-contrastive vision of divine and human agency, the only way for him to maximize God's grace was to argue that the human person contributes nothing whatsoever to her salvation.

The implications of this application of the principle of non-competition to critique Luther's account of soteriological passivity are substantial, both for the evaluation of Luther's theology and for protestant soteriology more broadly. This article will focus one implication in particular. Part of what is at stake in the dispute about agency is the viability of a major argument in favor of virtue ethics as an ecumenical approach to sanctification and the Christian life. This is because the argument about agency appears to strike at the heart of Luther's famous critique of Aristotelian virtue. When Luther asserted in the *Heidelberg Disputation* that 'the righteousness of God is not acquired by means of acts frequently repeated, as Aristotle taught', but rather comes 'without work' to the one who 'believes much in Christ',¹⁴ he was arguing that the soteriology of justification as he found it in Paul was incompatible with soteriologies built around a Christianized account of the acquisition of virtue. This is because the latter, as he understood them, require the cooperation of the human agent in the acquisition and cultivation of saving righteousness, and he believed that the doctrine of justification by faith precludes all such cooperation. Recent advocates of virtue ethics have been aware of the connection between non-competitive agency and virtue-

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 87.

¹² Begbie, 'Room of One's Own?'; Wells, *Grace and Agency*, 295-301, and Barclay, 'Introduction'; Carnes, *Beauty*.

¹³ Tanner, *God and Creation*, 115, 112.

¹⁴ WA 1:364; LW 31:55.

based accounts of moral transformation. As Colin Miller puts it, ‘the eclipse of the virtues is implicated in the inability to conceive of a non-competitive divine-human cooperation.’¹⁵ Likewise, it is no accident that Luther represents the primary foil for the recovery of virtue that Jennifer Herdt advocates in *Putting on Virtue*.¹⁶ In light of this, the aim of the present article is to demonstrate that the widespread theological turn to virtue ethics in recent years has not yet taken account of one of the strongest traditional arguments against a virtue paradigm for understanding Christian moral transformation: Luther’s argument from experience.

Luther and His Critics

On the face of it, it is clearly true that much of Luther’s theology can be understood as a reflection on the unilateral character of divine grace and the corresponding passivity of the human agent in salvation, and to a significant degree in the Christian life as well. As Luther repeats over and over, what is needed is simply ‘that our works cease and that God alone works in us’.¹⁷ Although there are very many articulations of this theology of passivity in Luther’s writings,¹⁸ a particularly useful summary can be found in the opening pages of the 1531/35 *Lectures on Galatians*, where Luther famously frames Christian salvation in terms of ‘passive righteousness’ (*iustitia passiva*):

For here we work nothing, render nothing to God; we only receive and permit someone else to work in us, namely, God. Therefore it is appropriate to call

¹⁵ Miller, *Practice of the Body of Christ*, 21.

¹⁶ In a review of *Putting on Virtue*, John Perry wonders whether Luther is the implied ‘villain’ of the book (just as Erasmus is the ‘implied hero’), though Herdt has protested this characterization. See John Perry, ‘“The Essential Theatricality of Virtue”: A Review of Jennifer Herdt’s *Putting on Virtue*,’ *Scottish Journal of Theology* 65, no. 2 (2012), 217; and Jennifer A. Herdt, ‘Back to Virtue,’ *Scottish Journal of Theology* 65, no. 2 (2012), 224. On Luther and non-competitive agency, in addition to *Putting on Virtue* see Jennifer A. Herdt, ‘Affective Perfectionism: Community with God without Common Measure,’ in *New Essays on the History of Autonomy*, ed. Natalie Brender and Larry Krasnoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 34-41.

¹⁷ Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke*. Kritische Gesamtausgabe, (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1883 -), 6:244 (henceforth WA followed by volume number); the English can be found in Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works* (St Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955 -), 44:73 (henceforth LW followed by volume number). Where possible, English translations in what follows are taken from *Luther’s Works*, with a few alterations by the author.

¹⁸ Passivity before God is already a key theme for Luther as early as the *Lectures on Romans*. See WA 56:375/LW 25:365 (‘we are capable of receiving His works and His counsels only when our own counsels have ceased and our works have stopped and we are made purely passive before God, both with regard to our inner as well as our outward activities’) and WA 56:277/LW 25:265. See likewise the *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology* (‘On the part of man... nothing precedes grace except indisposition and even rebellion against grace’ – WA 1:225; LW 31:11) and the *Heidelberg Disputation* (‘man must utterly despair of his own ability before he is prepared to receive the grace of Christ’ – WA 1:361; LW 31:40). For discussions of Luther’s theology of passivity see Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luthers Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 42-3; Wilfried Joest, *Gesetz und Freiheit. Das Problem des Tertius usus legis bei Luther und die neutestamentliche Parainese* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1961), 24-27; and Simeon Zahl, ‘What has the “Lutheran” Paul to Do with John? Passive Righteousness and Abiding in the Vine,’ in *The Vocation of Theology Today* (Eugene, OR: Cascade), 61-74.

the righteousness of faith or Christian righteousness ‘passive’... Without any merit or work of our own, we must first be justified by Christian righteousness, which has nothing to do with the righteousness of the Law or with earthly and active righteousness. But this righteousness is heavenly and passive. We do not have it of ourselves; we receive it from heaven. We do not perform it; we accept it by faith... Then do we do nothing and work nothing in order to obtain this righteousness? I reply: Nothing at all.¹⁹

Here, as elsewhere, Luther appears to be doing precisely what Tanner warns against. Throughout this passage he is treating divine and human agency as if they operate on the same plane, arguing forcefully that for the former to do its work the latter must vacate the scene. Given Tanner’s account of divine transcendence and ‘non-contrastive’ agency, what are we to make of this? Should Luther’s theology of passivity simply be dismissed, on the grounds that it is built around a fundamental philosophical and theological error in his understanding of agency?

Although Tanner largely refrains from such direct polemics in *God and Creation*, other writers have not hesitated to press Luther on this point. In Harry McSorley’s otherwise sympathetic account of Luther on the bondage of the will, it is the issue of human soteriological passivity which bears the brunt of McSorley’s criticism. According to McSorley, in rejecting the scholastic distinction between absolute and conditional necessity – the distinction which undergirds the traditional scholastic explanation for the coexistence of divine foreknowledge and the genuine contingency of human free will²⁰ – Luther is rejecting the position ‘not only [of] the Scholastics, but [of] all Christian thinkers as far back as Boethius and Augustine.’²¹ Otto Pesch – another interpreter sympathetic to Luther in other respects – makes the same argument: Luther’s view of the bondage of the will is shaped by the ‘fatal conceptual assumption... that whatever you attribute to human freedom must be taken away from God’s freedom’, thus putting ‘God and his creation on the same plane’.²² The idea

¹⁹ WA 40.1:41, 46-7; LW 26:5, 8.

²⁰ Traditionally this distinction is understood in terms of the difference between *necessitas consequentiae* (the necessity of the consequence) and *necessitas consequentis* (the necessity of the consequent). Hütter explains the distinction and its implications for contingency: ‘The classical illustration for this distinction is that of Socrates sitting or standing. When Socrates sits he sits, necessarily, as long as he is sitting (this is by *necessitas consequentiae*...), the reason being that it is impossible for him to sit and not sit at the same time. However, Socrates sits contingently, or freely (that is, not by *necessitas consequentis*), because it is always possible for him to stand. On the other hand, consider a puppet sitting on a chair. Unlike Socrates, the puppet must remain sitting on the chair until it is removed by another force... Hence the crucial difference between the two types of necessity: Contingency is excluded only by absolute necessity, not by conditional necessity’. Reinhard Hütter, ‘“Thomas the Augustinian” – Recovering a Surpassing Synthesis of Grace and Free Will,’ in *Dust Bound for Heaven: Explorations in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 258-9; see also McSorley, *Luther*, 150-3.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 242.

²² Otto Pesch, *Hinführung zu Luther* (Ostfildern: Matthias Grünewald Verlag, 2017), 206-7. All German translations are by the author unless otherwise indicated.

that ‘God’s transcendence means that his work does not exclude free human action, and indeed grounds it, does not occur... to Luther.’²³

More recently, Reinhard Hütter has updated the charge, attributing Luther’s ‘inability to conceive of a non-competitive account of divine and human causality/agency’²⁴ first and foremost to a nominalist metaphysics of univocity rather than just a general failure to understand Aquinas’ account of contingency.²⁵ Although Hütter does not cite Tanner, the substance of his argument parallels her account of divine transcendence quite closely:

Only by embracing... the kind of metaphysics of being that was put aside by nominalism [i.e., a Thomist ontology of participation] would [Luther] have been able to conceive of God’s creative power as genuinely transcendent, as a power that can operate through necessity as well as contingency and thus can very well effect even the free choices of humans.²⁶

Because he either could not or would not embrace such a metaphysics, Luther thus ‘went too far’ in his crusade against semi-pelagianism, making God ‘not merely the first and final agent of human salvation but its sole agent, with the human remaining purely passive.’²⁷ The result, according to Hütter, is a profoundly dehumanizing theology: ‘in the act of conversion the human being has to be less than a human person, less than the creature to whom God has granted the gift of created freedom.’²⁸

Perhaps the most influential critique of Luther along these lines can be found in Jennifer Herdt’s 2008 genealogy of virtue ethics, *Putting on Virtue*. Herdt focuses on the implications of Luther’s view of passivity for the theological category of virtue, which she rightly understands to be difficult to reconcile with Luther’s polemic against theological appeal to human agency.

At the heart of the book, Herdt engages in an extended critique of what she calls ‘hyper-Augustinian traditions of reflection on the false character of human virtue’.²⁹ According to these hyper-Augustinian traditions, ‘the project of acquiring virtue is fundamentally dishonest... because it is a false and fruitless assertion of human moral agency.’³⁰ Her constructive goal in the book is to move beyond these concerns to ‘assemble a rough sketch of true virtue and its acquisition that... is free of this untoward inheritance’.³¹ Of particular concern to Herdt is the idea that ‘human agency must be abandoned’, and that the entire onus the Christian life must therefore be put upon God’s unilateral action in and upon the sinner, rather than on any form of graced

²³ *Ibid.*, 208.

²⁴ Hütter, ‘Grace and Free Will,’ 262.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 251-3.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 260.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 257.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 260.

²⁹ Herdt, *Putting on Virtue*, 342.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

cooperation. This approach, she contends, entails a fundamental discontinuity with ‘ordinary moral psychology’, and with it the loss of ‘any sense that grace can work through ordinary processes of habituation’.³²

As the primary architect of the early modern protestant critique of virtue ethics, it is not surprising that Martin Luther soon emerges as the most important foil for the account of virtue that Herdt wishes to commend.³³ Ultimately, Herdt finds Luther’s account of agency and its relation to moral transformation to be baffling. In particular, she cannot find a way to understand Luther’s ability on the one hand to claim that ‘prideful human agency [must] be displaced by the indwelling Christ’, but on the other to affirm that good works do take place and that lives can in some sense be transformed, in the Spirit. ‘How’, she asks, ‘is a passive, displaced agency to be gradually transformed?’³⁴ She finds this dimension of Luther’s thought ‘difficult... to integrate’,³⁵ and ‘difficult to fathom’.³⁶ Ultimately, Luther’s emphasis on ‘the bankruptcy of human agency... threatens the coherence of any account of Christian moral agency’.³⁷

Like other commentators, Herdt again diagnoses the source of Luther’s ostensible incoherence first and foremost in terms of philosophical presuppositions that result in ‘[a] tendency to conceive of divine and human agency in competitive terms’.³⁸ If only Luther had understood, like Erasmus, that ‘the exercise of human agency involved in the imitation of Christ is at the same time an indwelling of Christ in us and thus a human participation in divine agency’,³⁹ then he would have realized that an Augustinian emphasis on divine grace and foreknowledge need entail neither a setting aside of human agency nor a rejection of Aristotelian concepts of virtue and habit.

Thus in McSorley, in Pesch, in Hütter, in Herdt, and perhaps also implicitly in Tanner, we find variations on the same argument: that Martin Luther’s stress on human passivity before God, and with it his rejection of virtue-based accounts of Christian moral transformation, is subject to fundamental critique on the grounds that he has failed to understand that divine and human agency need not and should not be construed as a zero-sum game.

In what follows I will argue that these accounts all fail to address what may be the strongest argument in favour of Luther’s account of passivity. The problem is that each of these critics assumes that Luther’s emphasis on the passivity of the human agent in salvation (and often in sanctification as well) is primarily or exclusively a

³² *Ibid.*, 3.

³³ Herdt is mainly interested in Luther’s views on virtue in general, and Hütter is more focused on the specific issue of the *initium fidei*. Nevertheless, both focus their critical attention on Luther’s account of human passivity before God and its presumed philosophical presuppositions.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 188.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 184.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 188.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 175. See also 194, as well as Herdt, ‘Back to Virtue’.

³⁸ Herdt, *Putting on Virtue*, 195, cf. 343-4 and 189.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 119.

philosophical position. That is, they assume that Luther developed his theology of passivity primarily through reflection on the omnipotence and sovereignty of God and the radical priority of grace in divine-human relations, and that his position therefore stands or falls with his conception of the ontological conditions in which these agencies operate. We see this above all in the assumption, especially clear in Herdt and Hütter, that Luther's position on passivity is effectively refuted through the observation that divine and human agency need not be construed in competitive terms.⁴⁰

In fact, Luther's position is sourced to a significant degree by a very different kind of argument, namely: *empirical reflection on the experience of sin, including especially experience of the impossibility of mastering sinful affections like lust, fear, or anger through discipline, habit, or effort of will*. Understood this way, Luther's advocacy of passivity is only partially and secondarily related to the question of how to square divine omnipotence and foreknowledge with creaturely freedom, or to the character of divine transcendence implied in the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. Rather, arguably the most decisive reason God's grace must operate over and against the rebellious human agent is that Christian experience shows sinful desires to be unmasterable and unpurifiable in any other way. In other words, Luther was convinced of the unfreedom of the human will not just through philosophical (or indeed exegetical) reflection, but to a substantial degree through analyzing his own experience of trying and failing to become more holy. The question of agency in relation to sin and virtue is thus to a significant degree a pastoral and empirical one for Luther, rather than simply a philosophical or metaphysical one. The remainder of this article will provide an exposition and defense of these claims.

The Role of Experience in the Development of Luther's Theology of Passivity

There are two distinct but related features of Luther's experiential arguments for the bondage of the will and the consequent soteriological passivity of the human agent before God: (i) exegetical arguments that God's law is not obeyed where formal obedience to it is improperly motivated; and (ii) explicit appeals to experience of the insuperability of sinful affections and desires as a pastoral fact on the ground. In order to understand the latter, it is necessary to give a brief overview of the former. This is because Luther's appeals to experience in defense of his pessimism about virtue make sense only in the context of his early focus on the moral significance of affect and desire, starting in his first major work, the lectures on the Psalms known as the *Dictata super Psalterium* (1513-15).

⁴⁰ Herdt: 'Absent Luther's juridical framework for thinking of divine-human relations and his tendency to conceive of divine and human agency in competitive terms, his insistence that the starting point of the Christian life must be pure trust in God is no longer compelling' (*Ibid.*, 195). Hütter: Luther's rejection of the distinction between two kinds of necessity is the 'most consequential philosophical error' in the treatise *The Bondage of the Will*, as a result of which his account of grace and agency is fundamentally 'erroneous' (Hütter, 'Grace and Free Will,' 258, 262).

First in the *Dictata* and then in the *Lectures on Romans* (1515-16), Luther demonstrates intense interest in the question of the purity of ethical motivation before God. As I have shown elsewhere, his primary way of framing ethical purity in this period is in affective and desiderative terms.⁴¹ It is a striking fact, often overlooked or underestimated in Luther scholarship,⁴² that when Luther speaks about the law, the gospel, and the bondage of the will in their relation to the human person, his most common strategy is to deploy a cluster of terms associated with affect and desire. These include regular references to the general category of ‘affections’ [*affectus*] as well as to specific affections like fear, anger, hope, and joy; various forms of desire language, especially *concupiscentia* but also *appetitus*, *libido*, *cupiditas*, *voluntas*, and *desiderium*; and more general language about ‘the heart’, which for Luther encompasses both affective and desiderative factors.⁴³ We will see many examples of this practice in the next two sections.⁴⁴ In observing Luther’s sustained and deliberate use of affective language in these matters, already we see evidence that Luther’s thought tends to take its primary orientation from practical experience as interpreted through Scripture.

*The Problem of the Impure Heart*⁴⁵

After a number of years as a particularly scrupulous member of a particularly scrupulous monastic order, in the 1510s Luther still felt deeply anxious about his standing before God.⁴⁶ At the outset of the *Dictata super Psalterium*, in his discussion of Psalm 1:2 (‘But his will [*voluntas*] is in the law of the Lord’), Luther’s attention is

⁴¹ See Simeon Zahl, ‘The Bondage of the Affections: Willing, Feeling, and Desiring in Luther’s Theology, 1513-25,’ in *The Spirit, the Affections, and the Christian Tradition*, ed. Dale M. Coulter and Amos Yong (South Ben, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017), 181-205.

⁴² For exceptions, see Sebastian Degkwitz, *Wort Gottes und Erfahrung. Luthers Erfahrungsbegriff und seine Rezeption im 20. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 1998) and Karl-Heinz zur Mühlen, ‘Die Affektenlehre im Spätmittelalter und in der Reformationszeit,’ in *Reformatorisches Profil. Studien zum Weg Martin Luthers und der Reformation*, ed. Johannes Brosseder and Athina Lexutt (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995).

⁴³ ‘The heart’ can have multiple meanings in Luther. In the examples that follow it refers to the seat of affections and desires in particular. Philipp Melanchthon parallels and interprets Luther’s primary usage of the term when in 1521 he defines ‘the heart’ as ‘the seat of all affections – love, hate, blasphemy, and incredulity’ (Philipp Melanchthon, *Loci communes theologici* (1521), trans. Lowell J. Satre (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 47). For the complex case of *voluntas*, which can mean both will and desire, see Zahl, ‘Bondage of the Affections,’ 185-6, and Degkwitz, *Wort Gottes und Erfahrung*, 92. Illuminating here is Philipp’s Melanchthon’s equation in the 1521 *Loci communes* of the will with what he calls the affective or desiderative faculty (*Vis, e qua affectu oriuntur*), as well as the tight link he maintains between affect and desire (‘This faculty is sometimes called will, sometimes affection, and sometimes appetite’ [*Hanc vim alias voluntatem, alias affectum, alias appetitum nominant*] (Philipp Melanchthon, *Melanchthons Werke II.1* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann Verlag, 1952), 9; English: Melanchthon, *Loci communes* (1521), 23). Both claims reflect Luther’s own views in the period to 1521. For further discussion of all of these terms, with examples from Luther, see Zahl, ‘Bondage of the Affections,’ 185-8.

⁴⁴ I draw attention to such terminology by including the relevant Latin in brackets.

⁴⁵ The following three paragraphs recapitulate, with additional examples, an argument I make in *Ibid.*, 189-92.

⁴⁶ For an account of Luther’s *Anfechtungen* in this period, see Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation 1483-1521*, trans. James L. Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1985), 76-82.

immediately focused on the high ethical standard implied in the Psalm's description of the righteous man. According to Luther, we see in this verse – to which Luther returns again and again in these early years⁴⁷ – that the good deeds of the Christian cannot simply be coerced through unrighteous motivations like 'the fear of punishment [*pene timoris*] or... the hope [*spe*] of earthly gain'. Rather, to be truly virtuous such deeds must be 'spontaneous and willing' [*spontanei voluntarii*], 'cheerful [*hylari*] and free'.⁴⁸ This is because 'Christ does not want His rule to rest on force and violence... He wants to be served willingly and with the heart and the affections [*voluntate et ex animo et affectu*].'⁴⁹ The upshot of this is that a deed must be rightly motivated if it is to be considered righteous in God's sight – it is not just actions but the will itself that must be 'in the law of the Lord'.

In the *Lectures on Romans* a short while later, Luther continues to dwell on the requirement of purity of heart in obeying the law of God: because the law deals with 'nothing but love or the affections' [*non nisi de charitate seu de affectu*], a given act of obedience 'must be done... with the whole heart [*toto corde*], not with the fear [*timore*] of punishment in a slavish manner or because of some puerile desire [*cupiditate*] for comfort, but freely and out of love for God.'⁵⁰ But now Luther seems to have greater despair. Interpreting Romans 3:20, Luther observes that 'if we were righteous and good, we would consent to the Law with ready will [*prona voluntate*] and we would delight [*delectaremur*] in it, just as we now delight in our sins and evil desires [*desyderiis... malis*].'⁵¹ Instead, however, the further you examine your will, the more problematic it proves to be.⁵² Even if a person is not opposed to God's will in their actions, they will still be opposed to it 'in the heart' [*saltem corde*].⁵³

By the time of the 1517 *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology*, this pessimism about human ability to fulfil the law has become formalized as a doctrine of the bound will.⁵⁴ In theses 4-7, Luther argues that 'man, being a bad tree [cf. Matt. 7:17], can only will [*velle*] and do evil', that 'It is false to state that man's desire [*appetitus*] is free to choose between either of two opposites', that the appetite 'is not free but captive', and finally that 'without the grace of God the will necessarily produces an

⁴⁷ See e.g., WA 56:237/LW 25:222-3; WA 5:33-5/LW 14:295-8; WA 2:412.

⁴⁸ WA 3:17; LW 10:13. See also WA 3:30; LW 10:32.

⁴⁹ WA 3:17; LW 10:14.

⁵⁰ WA 56:337; LW 25:325.

⁵¹ WA 56:254; LW 25:240.

⁵² 'We so rarely analyze ourselves deeply enough to recognize this weakness in our will, or rather, this disease... [T]hose who are truly righteous... see that they have an evil will [*voluntatem malam*] and thus are sinful before God, but also they see that they can never understand fully how deep is the evil of their will and how far it extends' (WA 56:235; LW 25:220-1). See also WA 56:237; LW 25:222-3.

⁵³ WA 56:237; LW 25:222-3. See also WA 56:201; LW 25:184. Here we see that Luther's pessimism has moved beyond mere acknowledgement of the fact that *akrasia* can occur for the Christian and into a more fundamental pessimism about the will as such. On this basis, Saarinen concludes that there is no real concept of *akrasia* as such in Luther. See Risto Saarinen, *Weakness of Will in Renaissance and Reformation Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 115-32.

⁵⁴ See also the slightly earlier *Quaestio de viribus et voluntate hominis sine gratia disputata* (WA 1:147).

act that is perverse and evil.⁵⁵ In theses 65, 67, and 68, Luther then glosses this general captivity of the ‘appetite’ in terms of the insuperability of the specific affections of anger and lust, from which it follows that human beings are unable to fulfill God’s law:

65. Outside the grace of God it is indeed impossible not to become angry [*irasci*] or lust [*concupisci*]...

67. It is by the grace of God that one does not lust or become enraged.

68. Therefore it is impossible to fulfil the law in any way without the grace of God.⁵⁶

From these examples we see that Luther’s growing despair over humanity’s ability to obey the law, and his corresponding belief that the will is not just weak but ‘evil’, are to a significant degree a consequence of reflection on specific ethical requirements he finds in certain passages in Scripture: (i) the requirement not just that God’s law be obeyed, but that it be obeyed for the right reasons (i.e., with cheerfulness and love rather than through fear or coercion), and (ii) the corresponding requirement that we desist not only from sinful acts but from sinful desires as well. Before God, Luther has come to believe, *the heart and its affections* rather than deeds are ethically primary, and it follows from this that God’s ethical standards – the standards on which salvation in the first instance depends – are impossible to attain through human powers.⁵⁷

It is in this context that Luther’s developing doctrine of justification by faith and theology of passivity must be understood. It is because of the impossibility of achieving anything remotely resembling the purity of desire required by God that Luther argues in the *Heidelberg Disputation* that ‘Free will, after the fall, exists in name only’ and that therefore ‘man must utterly despair of his own ability before he is prepared to receive the grace of Christ’.⁵⁸ The sinner loves sin and hates the things of God. Human agency is impotent here; only the Holy Spirit can change the heart.⁵⁹ In salvation, the human being therefore has nothing to contribute, and is entirely passive.

⁵⁵ WA 1:224; LW 31:9.

⁵⁶ WA 1:227; LW 31:14

⁵⁷ These mutually-reinforcing convictions about the power of sinful affection on the one hand and God’s requirement of a righteous heart on the other are later formalized by Philipp Melancthon into a full-fledged theological anthropology in which the will and the *ratio* are both dominated by the affective ‘power’. See note 43 above.

⁵⁸ WA 1:359-61, 207; LW 31:40.

⁵⁹ Cf. Luther’s later assertion that human beings ‘cannot possibly change their hearts by the power of their own nature without the grace of God.... Even though [a person] may go through the motions of doing good, these acts are nothing but lies, deceit, and hypocrisy’ (WA 7:355; LW 32:35); as well as Melancthon’s comment in the 1521 *Loci communes*: ‘The Pharisaical Scholastics will preach the power of free will. The Christian will acknowledge that nothing is less in his power than his heart.’ [*christianus agnoscet nihil minus in potestate sua esse quam cor suum*] (Melancthon, *MW II.1*, 16; Melancthon, *Loci communes* (1521), 30).

As Luther puts it already in the Romans lectures, ‘he is freed not by his own powers, but by God, who acts while he is merely passive himself.’⁶⁰

Luther understood this theology of passivity to entail a rejection of Aristotelian ethics. As he famously put it, it follows here that the righteousness that saves cannot come ‘by means of acts frequently repeated, as Aristotle taught’.⁶¹ What Luther appears to be referring to is Aristotle’s account in the *Nicomachean Ethics* of the necessity of action for the acquisition of virtue. According to Aristotle, because ‘like states arise from like activities’, it follows that ‘becoming just requires doing just actions first, and becoming temperate, temperate actions.’⁶² It is not that virtue itself consists merely in right actions – like Luther, Aristotle believes that the purpose of ethics is to form a virtuous person, not just to generate virtuous action⁶³ – but rather that virtue can be formed only through actions.

With the reference to ‘acts frequently repeated’, what Luther is criticizing is thus not the goal of Aristotle’s ethics, but the mechanism. For Aristotle, you begin becoming virtuous by performing virtuous deeds poorly, and then you gradually get better at it through a process of habituation over time.⁶⁴ If you begin by doing the right thing for the wrong reasons, you are still on the path to virtue, because you will eventually be shaped into someone who does the right thing for the right reasons, at least so long as you have virtuous examples to imitate. Luther’s theology of the affections helps explain how it is this principle in particular that Luther is rejecting in the *Heidelberg Disputation* and in the *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology*. Sin before God, as Luther understands it, simply cannot be overcome through ‘acts frequently repeated’. Sinful affections are too powerful. No matter how often you perform the right actions, the ‘heart’ maintains an effective resistance to such habituation, and the sinful affections remain. Thus for Luther the fact that ‘Outside the grace of God it is... impossible not to become angry or lust’ is proof that ‘We do not become righteous by

⁶⁰ WA 56:277; LW 25:265. It should be noted that Luther’s concept of soteriological passivity is not an undifferentiated one. In later works Luther describes, for example, the ‘worship’, ‘remembrance’, and ‘confession’ that are the proper response of the sinner who has been justified by God ‘freely out of pure grace without merit’ (WA 30.II:603; LW 38:107). The larger question of the relationship between passivity and good works in Luther is a complex one which there is no space to examine in detail in this article. At minimum it can be said that Luther’s understanding of Christian transformation and good works is always rooted in the theology of soteriological passivity described here, and in this remained opposed to virtue ethical accounts of Christian sanctification. For an account of how the proclamation of passive righteousness in early Lutheran theology was at the same time understood to produce real affective transformation, as well as a defense of the psychological plausibility of this account, see Simeon Zahl, ‘On the Affective Saliency of Doctrines,’ *Modern Theology* 31/3 (2015), 428-44.

⁶¹ WA 1:364; LW 31:55-6.

⁶² EN 1103b and 1105a. See likewise Aristotle’s use of the analogy of strength training to explain how virtue is acquired (1104a-1104b). English translations of Aristotle are taken from Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Roger Crisp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). For an overview of the relation between action and virtue in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, see Michael Pakaluk, *Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 98-104.

⁶³ ‘[T]he just and temperate person is not the one who does [just and temperate actions] merely, but the one who does them as just and temperate people do.’ EN 1105b.

⁶⁴ See Pakaluk, *Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, 102-3.

doing righteous deeds’, and that therefore ‘the entire *Ethics* of Aristotle is the worst enemy of grace’.⁶⁵ In Luther’s view, the core problem with Aristotle’s position is that it is naïve in its optimism about the power of outward action to shape the inner person. One could spend years engaged in the right actions – as Luther understood himself to have been in his life as an Augustinian friar – and yet find sinful affections to be as insuperable as ever.

It is important to note an interesting slippage that takes place here between political and theological ethics. As Theodor Dieter has pointed out, Aristotle and Luther’s arguments are somewhat at cross-purposes here. In developing his position on passivity, Luther is working with a late medieval theological framework that had transposed an Aristotelian moral system developed around political and social ethics into a Christian theological and soteriological realm that Aristotle never had in view.⁶⁶ This helps explain why Luther is so adamant that ‘acts frequently repeated’ cannot make the Christian righteous. Viewed from the perspective of divine judgment, Luther has come to believe that only an utter transformation of the sinner into a righteous person will do. The framework of Christian soteriology thus demands a moral transformation more fundamental and complete than the *Nicomachean Ethics* was intended to provide.⁶⁷ This also helps us to see why Luther is willing in later works to grant the value of Aristotle’s ethics in the realm of civil righteousness. For Luther, it is only in relation to theological virtue that the problems arise.⁶⁸

The Sources of Luther’s Theology of Passivity

The basic affective and desiderative shape of Luther’s developing doctrine of the unfree will in this period, and his corresponding affirmation of the passivity of the human agent before God and conviction of the ineffectiveness of the virtue paradigm where salvation is concerned, are now clear. But the question arises: where does Luther’s pessimism actually come from? *Why* does Luther think that sinful affections are not just powerful but ‘invincible’,⁶⁹ that human motivation is not just compromised but ‘evil’ all the way down, and that sinful affection therefore cannot be significantly transformed through the mechanism of habituation?

⁶⁵ Theses 65, 68, 40, and 41 of the *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology* (WA 1:226-7; LW 31:12, 14).

⁶⁶ Theodor Dieter, *Der junge Luther und Aristoteles: Eine historisch-systematische Untersuchung zum Verhältnis von Theologie und Philosophie* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2001), 168-70.

⁶⁷ Luther expresses this eschatological logic in the 1521 edition of the *Defense and Explanation of the All Articles*: because ‘nothing deficient can enter heaven’, it follows that ‘every disease and weakness, all spots, all wrinkles, and all such deficiencies must first be laid aside... if we are to enter heaven’ (WA 7:347; LW 32:30).

⁶⁸ ‘Aristotle and Cicero, who are the most eminent men in this class, teach many things about the virtues, and bestow superb praise on them because of their civil purpose; for they see that they are beneficial both in public and in private life. Concerning God, however, they teach nothing’ (WA 42:349-50/LW 2:124, cf. WA42:505/LW 2:340, and WA 44:704/LW 8:171).

⁶⁹ See n. 93 below.

Part of the answer is Luther's discovery around 1515 of Augustine's anti-Pelagian writings, above all *The Spirit and the Letter* and *Against Julian*, which are quoted extensively in the *Lectures on Romans*, especially in the scholia on Romans 3 and 7. *The Spirit and the Letter*, in particular, reflects at some length on sin and the fulfilment of the law in affective and desiderative terms that are highly reminiscent of Luther's approach, and *Against Julian* provides the primary basis for Luther's crucial exposition of Romans 7.⁷⁰ Another important part of the answer, as I have indicated, is the influence of the biblical texts Luther is preoccupied with in this period, including Romans 7, with its repeated invocation of the powerlessness of 'the flesh' to overcome sinful desire, the discussion of the will of the righteous person in Psalm 1, and the discussions of good and bad trees and their fruit in the Gospels.⁷¹

A third piece of the puzzle is Luther's philosophical reflection on the topics of necessity, contingency, and predestination in light of scholastic terminology and debates. As we have seen, it is this piece that Luther's recent critics have assumed to be so decisive. Important here is Luther's discussion of necessity in the *Lectures on Romans*, where in his exposition of Romans 8:28 he rejects the core feature of medieval accounts of non-competitive agency, the scholastic distinction between *necessitas consequentiae* and *necessitas consequentis*.⁷² The presence of this discussion in this early text demonstrates that even if exegesis and experience do seem to have played a substantially greater role, philosophical debates about necessity and responsibility cannot be ignored in understanding Luther's intellectual development on this topic. The fact that Luther repeats his rejection of the distinction twice more over the years, in thesis 32 of the *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology* and then again in *The Bondage of the Will*, underscores the fact.⁷³ Analyzing the roots of Luther's views about the will, recent critics, especially in the Anglophone world, have tended to focus on these philosophical factors.⁷⁴

But how important is this handful of philosophical discussions – one of which is simply a response to Erasmus' appeal to different kinds of necessity – for the development of Luther's theology of passivity? Clearly Luther is interested in the metaphysical implications of his new theology. But the fact of this interest is hardly evidence, on its own terms, that such interests drive his theology of passivity. Before

⁷⁰ The definitive work on the influence of Augustine on the early Luther remains Dorothea Demmer, *Lutherus Interpres: Der theologische Neuanfang in seiner Römerbriefexegese* (Witten: Luther-Verlag, 1966). In Demmer's view, most of Luther's insights in the Romans lectures can already be found in Augustine. What separates him from Augustine in the end is a stronger sense of the distinction between law and gospel, though he builds quite directly on Augustine to get there. See 242, 213-42.

⁷¹ Matt. 7:17-18 and 12:33-35; Luke 6:43-45. This terminology is ubiquitous in Luther's discussions of anthropology and grace in this period. See Dieter, *Der junge Luther und Aristoteles*, 172, 243.

⁷² WA 56:381-3; LW 25:371-3. On this distinction, see n. 20 above.

⁷³ WA 1:225/LW 31:11 and WA 18:721-2/LW 33:192-5.

⁷⁴ In addition to Hütter and Herdt, see e.g., Robert Kolb, *Bound Choice, Election and Wittenberg Theological Method: From Martin Luther to the Formula of Concord* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 28-31; and Knut Alfsvåg, 'Luther on Necessity,' *Harvard Theological Review* 108, no. 1 (2015), 55-8.

turning to this question, however, it is necessary to examine the fourth and most overlooked influence on Luther's theology of passivity.

Luther's Argument from Affective Experience

Crucial for understanding the source of Luther's pessimism about affections and his corresponding critique of virtue ethics is a certain kind of argument from experience. Starting in the *Lectures on Romans*, in text after text Luther supports his views about the bondage of the will and the inability of human beings to fulfil the Law through arguments explicitly derived from *his personal experience of the insuperability of sinful affections and desires*. It would appear that much of the fuel driving both Luther's particular focus on the above scriptural texts and his interest in affect and motivation, especially during the early period when he was still in the cloister, was a personal and pastoral frustration with the fact that he found himself unable, despite enormous effort, to bring his heart and his desires into alignment with God's law or to cultivate the virtue he thought he had gone to the monastery to develop.⁷⁵

This dimension of Luther's argument has been almost completely missed by the critics examined above.⁷⁶ Luther's rejection of 'the attempt to act virtuously' is not grounded in the first instance in a worry that such attempts are 'essentially hypocritical', as Herdt alleges.⁷⁷ Rather, Luther rejects the virtue paradigm above all because such attempts simply did not work in his case. In other words, it is *damnation*, not hypocrisy, that Luther fears. Years of ascetic practice, community life, and prayer, under ideal early modern conditions for the production of virtue – a scrupulous Augustinian cloister – simply had no substantial effect in diminishing sinful desire that he could discern, and Luther feared for his soul.

In the 1531/35 *Lectures on Galatians*, Luther describes these spiritual frustrations in terms of his inability over many years to develop any mastery over sinful affections:

When I was a monk, I used to think that my salvation was undone when I felt any desires of the flesh [*sentiebam concupiscentiam carnis*], that is, any malice [*malum motam*], lust [*libidinam*], anger [*iram*], hate [*odiam*], envy

⁷⁵ Herdt's characterization of the psychological consequences of Luther's theology of passivity as 'despair', 'paralysis', and 'obsessive self-scrutiny' is deeply unconvincing (Herdt, *Putting on Virtue*, 194-5). It is precisely these sorts of feelings that Luther felt himself to be freed from and consoled in through his new account of justification. For a similar observation, see Gilbert Meilaender, 'Book Review: *Putting on Virtue*,' *Studies in Christian Ethics* 23, no. 1 (2010), 102. Nimi Wariboko is much closer to Luther's position when he characterizes the psychological and spiritual consequence of a unilateral understanding of divine grace in salvation as 'joyful play'. As he puts it, 'Grace is a negation of work. But play is its style of negation...' (Nimi Wariboko, *The Pentecostal Principle: Ethical Methodology in New Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 187, 183).

⁷⁶ Among these, Pesch alone appears to have reckoned seriously with the importance of experience in Luther's theology. See Otto Pesch, *Theologie der Rechtfertigung bei Martin Luther und Thomas von Aquin: Versuch eines systematisch-theologischen Dialogs* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald-Verlag, 1967), 935-48.

⁷⁷ Herdt, *Putting on Virtue*, 2.

[*invidiam*] etc. against any of my brothers. I tried many methods. I made confession every day, etc. But none of this did any good, because the desires of the flesh kept coming back [*semper redibat concupiscentia carnis*]. Therefore I could not find peace, but I was constantly crucified by thoughts such as these: ‘You have committed this or that sin; you are guilty of envy, impatience, etc. Therefore it was useless for you to enter this holy order, and all your good works are to no avail.’⁷⁸

Though this account is relatively late and benefits from hindsight, it does in fact map quite well onto what we have seen so far in the *Dictata*, the *Lectures on Romans*, and the *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology* – namely, that Luther’s growing pessimism about the will was connected to an increasing sense between 1505 and 1515 that the heart, and not just actions, must be righteous in God’s sight.

Although some commentators still fail to take this dimension of Luther’s developing theology into account,⁷⁹ its importance is well established. Bernhard Lohse speaks for many in taking as read that Luther developed his newly pessimistic doctrine of sin during the period of the *Lectures on Romans* ‘partly through critical self-examination and partly through intensive study of Paul.’⁸⁰ Berndt Hamm has recently reaffirmed the importance of Luther’s early spiritual struggles for his theology in some detail, arguing that ‘the first turning point of Reformation significance’ in Luther’s thought was the direct consequence of reflection on the ‘real history of the despair, disillusionment, and doubt’ that Luther experienced in the cloister between 1505 and 1511.⁸¹ Gerhard Ebeling, Heiko Oberman, and Albrecht Beutel have all characterized Luther’s exegetical method throughout his life in terms of a complex reciprocity between Luther’s experiences and scriptural texts, in which neither can be reduced to the other.⁸² Indeed, Luther himself describes just this reciprocity already in the *Dictata*: ‘in tribulation [the exegete] learns many things which he did not know before; [likewise,] many things he already knew in theory he grasps more firmly through experience’.⁸³ And it is dynamics like these in Luther’s thought that lie

⁷⁸ WA 40.2:91-2; LW 27:73. See also WA TR 4:260/LW 54:334 and WA 18:783/LW 33:288-9.

⁷⁹ In addition to Hütter and Herdt, see also Alfsvåg, ‘Luther on Necessity’.

⁸⁰ ‘Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther’s Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, trans. Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 248. See also Pannenberg, who describes the ‘foundational’ role played by what he calls *tentatio de indignitate* in Luther’s theological development (Wolfhart Pannenberg, ‘Der Einfluss der Anfechtungserfahrung auf den Prädestinationsbegriff Luthers,’ *Kerygma und Dogma* 3, no. 2 (1957), 110-11); and Kolb, *Bound Choice*, 28.

⁸¹ Berndt Hamm, *The Early Luther: Stages in a Reformation Reorientation*, trans. Martin J. Lohrmann (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 44 and 33; the whole of chapter two is valuable (26-58).

⁸² Gerhard Ebeling, ‘Lehre und Leben in Luthers Theologie,’ in *Lutherstudien III* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1985), 9; Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*, trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 211-12; Albrecht Beutel, ‘Erfahrene Bible. Verständnis und Gebrauch des verbum dei scriptum bei Luther,’ in *Protestantische Konkretionen: Studien zur Kirchengeschichte* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998), 98-102. See also Eeva Martikainen, ‘Der Begriff “Gott” in De servo arbitrio,’ in *Widerspruch: Luthers Auseinandersetzung mit Erasmus von Rotterdam* (Helsinki: Luther-Agricola-Gesellschaft, 1997), 29.

⁸³ WA 3:44; LW 10:49.

behind Otto Pesch's characterization of Luther's approach to theology as 'existential', in contrast to the 'sapiential' approach of Thomas Aquinas.⁸⁴

Despite this widespread acknowledgement, to my knowledge the only comprehensive textual study of the category of the experience of sin in Luther's writings is in Sebastian Degkwitz's overlooked study, *Wort Gottes und Erfahrung*.⁸⁵ Although his work is primarily descriptive rather than synthetic, Degkwitz does succeed in demonstrating beyond doubt the enormous importance of 'experience' across a wide swathe of Luther's works. In what follows I build on Degkwitz's work to show that reference to what 'experience teaches' constitutes a specific strategy of argument employed regularly by Luther in support of his theology of passivity up to and including *The Bondage of the Will*.⁸⁶

Particularly instructive here, as Degkwitz notes, are the glosses on Romans 7 from 1515/16, where Luther repeatedly interpolates Paul's descriptions of the internal conflict of the 'divided self' with references to 'experience'.⁸⁷ Three times in this passage Luther glosses St Paul's statements about his knowledge of the 'carnal' self as knowledge derived specifically from *experience*: 'For I know...through... the experience of contending against sin'; 'So I find it... through experience'; 'But I see... by experience'.⁸⁸ And once again the experience in question is above all that of sinful desires and affections, especially 'lust' [*concupiscentia*] and 'hate' [*odio*]. In the early glosses on Romans Luther clearly thinks that Paul is referring to his own experiences in support of his point about the power and persistence of sinful desire. In the scholia, Luther turns this into a formal method, arguing that we gain 'knowledge of sin' (Rom. 3:20) in a two-fold way, through 'contemplation' of Scripture and 'through experience' [*experimentaliter*].⁸⁹

Luther then proceeds to take his own advice, repeatedly making appeal to his readers' own experiences of sin: 'if you do not believe the Scripture and its example, at least believe your own experience [*saltem proprie experiente credite*]. For through the Law you have deserved wrath and desolation'.⁹⁰ Likewise: if only 'the scholastic theologians' had paid attention to 'their own experience' [*experientia*], they would have 'recognize[d] the corrupt desires [*pravas... concupiscentias*] in themselves' and the fact that 'this concupiscence is always in us'.⁹¹ And again: 'experience bears

⁸⁴ Pesch, *Theologie der Rechtfertigung*, 935-48. There are significant parallels between the argument being made in this essay about the development of Luther's theology of passivity and Pesch's contention that Luther's is a fundamentally 'existential' theology. Certainly the latter would seem to be the case in relation to the theology of passivity, though it is beyond the scope of this essay to assess Pesch's account of Aquinas' theological method in relation to this.

⁸⁵ Cf. the pioneering though now very dated work, Hans Michael Müller, *Erfahrung und Glaube bei Luther* (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrich, 1929).

⁸⁶ Degkwitz, *Wort Gottes und Erfahrung*, 85-105 and 147-56.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 88-9.

⁸⁸ WA 56:70-3; LW 25:63-5. The words in italics are Paul and the rest are Luther. The whole passage is highly instructive for understanding Luther's burgeoning theology of experience.

⁸⁹ WA 56:254; LW 25:240.

⁹⁰ WA 56:291; LW 25:278.

⁹¹ WA 56:275; LW 25:260-2.

witness [*experientia testetur*] that in whatever good work we perform, this concupiscence toward evil remains, and no one is ever cleansed of it.⁹² In making such arguments, Luther is taking for granted that if his Christian readers honestly analyze their inner experiences and motivations, they will discover the same truths about sin and concupiscence that he himself has experienced.

Reference to inner experience of the power of sin soon becomes a standard feature of Luther's argumentation. In the 1518 'Explanation' attached to the *Heidelberg Disputation*, for example, Luther explicitly bases his argument against the scholastic idea that Christians must merely do their best in order to be saved (*facere quod in se est*) on the experience of the insuperability of sinful affections like lust, anger, and fear:

Let us stop this senseless talk and consult experience [*experientiam consulamus*]. Let anyone do what is in him while he is angry, irritated, or tempted... Why therefore do we grant that evil lust [*concupiscentiam*] is invincible? Do what is in you and do not lust [*non concupisce*]. But you cannot do that. Therefore you also do not by nature fulfill the law.... [D]o what is in you and do not become angry... Do what is in you and do not fear danger... Do what is in you and do not fear death. I ask, what man does not shudder, does not despair, in the face of death?⁹³

Here we see why, in Luther's view, any model of Christian salvation that depends on even very minimal cooperation from the will is inadequate: experience shows that strong affections simply are not subject to such control, at least not when it counts.

The same argument appears at various points in the treatise *Against Latomus* a few years later. Early in the treatise, Luther argues that we know sin and 'evil desire' [*concupiscentia*] persist in Christians because this is 'our daily experience and that of all the saints' [*ipsa experientia quotidiana nostra et omnium sanctorum*].⁹⁴ Likewise, commenting on Paul's description of the law of the flesh 'making me captive' (Rom. 7:23), Luther asks, 'And who does not sense that this is what happens in himself? Who never experiences [*non... sensit unquam*] these raging thoughts [*irae cogitationes*] and furious lusts [*furiosas libidinis*]...?'⁹⁵

⁹² WA 56:271; LW 25:259.

⁹³ WA 1:373-4; LW 31:68-9. See Zahl, 'Bondage of the Affections,' 192.

⁹⁴ WA 8:98; LW 32:216. Such sins and desires include 'anger, lust, avarice, and incontinence'.

⁹⁵ WA 8:122-3; LW 32:252. The appeals to Christian experience in *Against Latomus* appear in the context of what is perhaps Luther's most detailed examination of the nature of sin as it persists in Christians. Here Luther reflects further on the dynamics that in the Romans lectures he had summarized with the assertion that Christians 'are sinners in fact but righteous in hope' [*peccatores in re, iusti autem in spe*] (WA 56:269; LW 25:258). In *Against Latomus*, Luther distinguishes between the 'substance', 'essence', 'reality', and 'bondage' of sin (WA 8:93, 125; LW 32:208, 255), all of which persist in the Christian, and 'power', 'rule', and 'condemnation' of sin (WA 8:89, 92-3, 125; LW 32:204, 207-8, 255), which do not. The distinction is subtle, and leads to Luther making seemingly contradictory claims: on the one hand, in baptism the 'power of all [sin], and much of the substance, are taken away' (WA 8:93; LW 32:208); but on the other hand 'the motion of anger and evil is exactly the same in the godly and the godless, the same before grace and after grace' (WA 8:91; LW 32:207), and the 'fury' of sinful desire is 'untamed' (WA 8:123; LW 32:252). What does it mean for sinful

Luther makes repeated use of this argument in the various editions of the 1520/21 *Defense and Explanation of All the Articles* as well. Arguing that Romans 7 describes the experience of Christians, Luther concludes once again with an appeal to desiderative experience:

Let anyone try it for himself and find out! Let him fast, watch, labor even unto death, and be as holy as he possible can. Then tell him whether he still finds in himself evil desires [*bosse Lust*] and inclinations toward unchastity, wrath, pride, or the like.⁹⁶

And the same strategy is again employed in *The Bondage of the Will*: it is ‘manifest... from experience that man without grace can will nothing but evil’;⁹⁷ ‘Ask experience how impervious to dissuasion are those whose affections [*affecti*] are set on anything!’;⁹⁸ ‘Experience proves this [*Et hoc probat etiam experientia*]; for ask all the exercisers of free choice to a man, and if you are able to show me one who can sincerely and honestly say with regard to any effort or endeavour of his own, “I know that this pleases God”, then I will admit defeat...’⁹⁹

It is now abundantly clear that for Martin Luther one of the most important ways that human beings come to recognize the power and extent of sin is through experiencing their inability over time to master sinful affections like anger, lust, and aversion towards God’s commands. Altogether, these experiences seem to constitute, for Luther, a kind of empirical argument against the Aristotelian claim that just actions have the power to shape you into a just person. In Luther’s experience, this sort of habituation simply does not work for changing the core affections and desires at the heart of the disordered and sinful human will.

Before concluding, there are two important issues related to Luther’s theology of passivity on which light can now be shed. First, we are now in a position to evaluate Harry McSorley’s conclusion that Luther’s ‘either-or thinking about the relationship

desire to be ‘untamed’ in the Christian and yet no longer to ‘reign’? Some clue is given in a passage that echoes the *spe/re* distinction in *Romans*, where Luther argues that the manner of sin’s persistence in the Christian is quite precisely analogous to the Christian’s relation to death: ‘Sin is indeed present, but having lost its tyrannic power, it can do nothing; death indeed impends, but having lost its sting, it can neither harm nor terrify.’ (WA 8:92; LW 32:207) In other words, just as the baptized still die, but the ‘sting’ of that death is removed, so sinful affection still persists in Christians ‘exactly the same’ as before, only it neither damns nor condemns. The point here and throughout the treatise seems to be that there really is a pastoral and spiritual effect on the Christian that stems from the realization that in faith their sin no longer condemns – Christians really do live with a new kind of psychological freedom from the burden of the law’s condemnation that is different than their state before baptism – but that this must never be interpreted to mean that they have new powers over their sinful desires as such.

⁹⁶ WA 7:334/LW 32:22; see also WA 7:386/LW 32:54, and WA 7:115.

⁹⁷ WA 18:786; LW 33:293.

⁹⁸ WA 18:634; LW 33:64-5. See also WA 7:448/LW 32:93 and WA 7:145. Luther continues to make use of this argumentative strategy throughout his career, but it is his use of it up to and including *The Bondage of the Will* that concerns us here.

⁹⁹ WA 18:769/LW 33:265-6. See also WA 18:674/LW 33:122 (‘Scripture... prods him and seeks to... make him recognize from undeniable experience [*experientia certa*] how incapable he is of any of these things’).

of God's and man's will in salvation is the cause, not the result of, his refusal to make use of the distinction [between the necessity of the thing consequent and the necessity of consequence] in the question of predestination.'¹⁰⁰ In McSorley's view, the reason Luther does not appeal to secondary causation in his discussions of necessity and predestination in the *Lectures on Romans* and in *The Bondage of the Will* is that his thinking was already determined in advance by a univocal metaphysics that understood divine and human agency as a zero-sum game. Thus when Luther claims that, once the necessity of the consequence has been established, talk of the necessity of the thing consequent is simply 'empty words',¹⁰¹ McSorley concludes that Luther simply has not understood the concept of secondary causation.¹⁰²

Attention to the importance of experience in Luther's theological method points to a different explanation for Luther's claim. McSorley's analysis appears to take for granted that the key issues at stake in the question of predestination and divine foreknowledge are moral responsibility and theodicy. The primary purpose of the distinction between the two kinds of necessity, as McSorley expounds it in Augustine and Aquinas, for example, is to explain how God can know all that will happen and yet not be morally responsible for evil that happens.¹⁰³ For Luther, by contrast, the doctrine of predestination is not about the coherence of human moral responsibility before God. Rather, it is about pastoral consolation. Where McSorley wants to take what Pesch calls a 'sapiential' (objective, 'God's-eye') perspective on the issue, Luther is in the process of developing what Malysz rightly calls an 'actualistic and anti-speculative' approach to theology that sets aside theodicy as an 'impossible' question.¹⁰⁴ In this Luther's comments on necessity exhibit the same anti-speculative impulse that is evident, for example, in his critique of theological attempts to gain knowledge of 'the invisible things of God' in the *Heidelberg Disputation*.¹⁰⁵

For Luther, the reason there is no 'point' in discussing secondary causation is that once you know that God is good and that he already knows in advance everything that will happen, then the pastoral function of the doctrine of predestination is already secure, even if the philosophical coherence of human moral responsibility is not. In other words, in Luther's hands God's determination of all things has become less a problem to be explained than a resource for ministry to the anxious sinner – the sinner whose actual experience of their own agential efficacy, Luther believes, is

¹⁰⁰ McSorley, *Luther*, 319; see also 231, 242, 319, and 321.

¹⁰¹ 'For if you know that everything takes place entirely by the necessity of the consequence, what point is there in knowing further whether or not at this point it is contingent?... [T]he answer is that with God there simply is not contingency, but it is only from our perspective' (WA 56:383; LW 25:372-3). See also WA 18:722; LW 33:194.

¹⁰² McSorley, *Luther*, 319.

¹⁰³ See e.g., McSorley's discussions of these issues in Augustine and Aquinas in *Ibid.*, 66-7, 109-10, 158-9.

¹⁰⁴ Piotr J. Malysz, 'Martin Luther's Trinitarian Hermeneutic of Freedom,' *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*. 22 May. 2017.

<http://religion.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.001.0001/acrefore-9780199340378-e-355>.

¹⁰⁵ WA 1:362-3; LW 31:52-4.

characterized more by the unmasterability of sinful affection than by efficacious cooperation with God. From Luther's perspective, the problem with a philosophical distinction that allows for co-inhesion and cooperation between human and divine agency is therefore not its theoretical plausibility, but the way it is 'heard' by the sinner who does not find herself able to overcome sinful desires through force of will, however graced.

Luther's rejection of secondary causation is thus better explained as a function of his pastoral and existential approach to soteriology, built on his own personal experience, than it is through his allegiance to a prior metaphysics. And this explanation is in fact stated clearly in the text: Luther frames his discussion of necessity in the Romans lectures as being about how to 'preach correctly', and then states that his ultimate purpose in the scholion on Romans 8:28 is to 'give consolation to those who are frightened by these things' and 'to inspire hope.'¹⁰⁶

A second issue in Luther studies that is reframed through attention to Luther's argument from experience is the question of whether and in what ways Luther's critique of virtue ethics applies to the soteriology of Thomas Aquinas. In his book on Luther and Aristotle, Theodor Dieter has pointed out that Luther's theology of passivity in the *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology* and in the *Heidelberg Disputation* is directed against a concept of natural human freedom prior to grace that can indeed be found in Biel and Buridan, among others, and which undergirds the scholastic principle *facere quod in se est*, but which is not present in Aquinas. For Dieter, it follows that Luther's theology of passivity, in its early and most explicitly anti-Aristotelian form, is misunderstood when it is applied to the question of a virtue ethics that follows from, rather than precedes, the action of grace.¹⁰⁷ Luther's critique of the idea that virtue arises through acts frequently repeated thus 'cannot be made to apply to Thomas', for whom, in Dieter's view, arguably even the earliest movements of the will towards God are graced.¹⁰⁸

Attention to Luther's arguments from experience problematizes this interpretation. On the one hand, it is clearly the case in the *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology* as well as in the *Heidelberg Disputation*, as Dieter observes, that Luther frames his theology of passivity in relation to the powerlessness of the natural, 'untransformed' human being over 'lust', 'anger', and so on. The explicit reference point throughout the *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology* is indeed 'man... by nature' and before grace.¹⁰⁹ However, if we pay attention to Luther's experiential arguments about the unmasterability of sinful affection in the same period, both before and after these

¹⁰⁶ WA 56:383; LW 25:372-3.

¹⁰⁷ Dieter, *Der junge Luther und Aristoteles*, 212.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 255; see also 213.

¹⁰⁹ See e.g., thesis 5 ('It is false to state that man's inclination is free to choose between either of two opposites'); thesis 17 ('Man is by nature unable to want God to be God'); thesis 30 ('On the part of man... nothing precedes grace except indisposition and even rebellion against grace'); thesis 68 ('Therefore it is impossible to fulfil the law in any way without the grace of God'); etc. WA 1:224-7; LW 31:9-14.

disputations, we see that these latter arguments in support of the theology of passivity refer nearly always to the *baptized Christian*, not to the natural human being prior to grace. For example, when Luther interprets discussions of *concupiscentia* in the 1515/16 glosses on Romans 7 as being about what we learn *per experientiam*,¹¹⁰ he is clearly talking about the Christian: the main force of Luther's argument in the scholia on this chapter is that Paul is talking about 'spiritual man', not 'carnal man'.¹¹¹ Likewise, in most of the examples discussed above it is his fellow theologians – baptized Christians – whom Luther urges to consult their experience. And ultimately it is Luther's personal experience of the way that 'the desires of the flesh kept returning'¹¹² precisely while he was a devout Christian monk that helped spur the development of his theology of passivity and his critique of the mechanism of habituation.

In Dieter's argument that Luther's critique of Aristotle's theory of moral transformation does not apply to Aquinas, we see the danger of overinterpreting Luther's formal philosophical and theological statements at the expense of the larger experiential context of his thought. The fact that Luther framed his argument about soteriological passivity in relation to the natural human person at key points does not mean that he thought the dynamics were fundamentally different for the Christian who also must learn all her life to trust in passive rather than active righteousness. Luther's arguments from experience, like his many discussions of Romans 7, make clear that the intended audience for his theology of passivity is not restricted to the non-believer, but includes the 'simultaneously righteous and sinful' Christian.¹¹³ Dieter's claim that Luther's critique of habituation through activity in the key disputations of the early period 'cannot be applied to Thomas' may thus be technically true, but only trivially so.

Conclusion

We can now see why, contrary to what a number of critics have maintained, Luther's arguments about passivity and virtue cannot be reduced to a philosophical and metaphysical position on the relationship between divine and human causality. We have seen strong evidence that Luther's theology of passivity, and his corresponding conviction of the bondage of the will to sin, developed in significant part through reflection on his own experience of what he understood to be sinful affections and desires. We have also seen that, as has often been recognized, the context for much of this reflection on experience was an exegetical one, in which Luther developed a method of reciprocal and mutually-reinforcing engagement between Scripture and experience. In failing to reckon with the role of experience in Luther's thought, recent

¹¹⁰ See above.

¹¹¹ WA 56:347; LW 25:336.

¹¹² WA 40.2:91-2; LW 27:73. See also WA TR 4:260/LW 54:334 and WA 18:783/LW 33:288-9.

¹¹³ See n. 95 above for Luther's later and more sophisticated account of the power of sin in the Christian in *Against Latomus*.

critics of Luther's theology of passivity have failed to engage with what Luther himself clearly considered to be one of the most persuasive features of his critique of virtue-based soteriologies.

The argument that has been made here has several implications that can now be drawn out. First, and most importantly, it is clear that *reducing* Luther's theology of passivity to metaphysical considerations is unacceptably simplistic. For all the power of Tanner's account of non-competitive agency, like most purely philosophical accounts of historical developments it is misused if it is accorded too much explanatory power. Herdt and Hütter's critical interpretations of Luther's theology of passivity are elegant, consistent with a certain contemporary theological mood, and at least partially true. But they also display the procrustean impulse, common in theology today, to reduce the past 800 years of Christian history to an intellectual battle between Thomas Aquinas and John Duns Scotus.¹¹⁴ To explain the core premise of Luther's theological anthropology as nothing more than the philosophically misinformed deduction that 'in order to secure God's freedom, human liberty must be denied'¹¹⁵ is to ignore obvious complexities and counter-interpretations to fit a narrative. The young monk's growing conviction about the unmasterable force of sinful desire was first and foremost the product of an existential and spiritual agony, not an abstract philosophical deduction. Even where Luther does engage explicitly with medieval discussions of necessity and causation, his approach to the issue is shaped substantially by pastoral and existential considerations that appear to precede rather than follow from his understanding of the relation between divine and human agency in salvation.

In this respect, the argument I have made in this article underscores the value of a methodological principle I have argued for elsewhere: namely, that attention to the role of emotion and experience in theological arguments – 'the affective salience of doctrines' – can be a particularly powerful tool for exposing and repairing the distortions that can arise when theological judgments are inadequately tethered to bodies and to history, including in certain forms of philosophical theology.¹¹⁶ In the present case, attention to the affective salience of the theology of passivity for Luther has thrown into relief a crucial dimension of his theology that recent critics have missed.

Throughout this article I have drawn attention to the difficulties that can arise when Luther is viewed primarily or exclusively as a thinker shaped by metaphysical considerations. However, nothing that has been argued here is intended to suggest that Luther was not interested in metaphysical questions as such, or indeed that various metaphysical revisionings of his scholastic inheritance are not an important feature of Luther's work. Theodor Dieter and Graham White have demonstrated the enormous complexity of Luther's engagement with Aristotelian and nominalist traditions,

¹¹⁴ See especially Herdt, *Putting on Virtue*, 92-94; and Hütter, 'Grace and Free Will,' 252-62, 282.

¹¹⁵ Herdt, 'Affective Perfectionism,' 41.

¹¹⁶ See Zahl, 'On the Affective Salience of Doctrines,' 428-44.

respectively, making it clear how difficult it is to reduce Luther's engagement with his philosophical inheritance to any one simple narrative.¹¹⁷ Likewise, the profoundly metaphysical debate over the relative importance of ontologies of substance vs. ontologies of relation in Luther's soteriology is ongoing, and stands close to the heart of the continuing controversy over the Finnish interpretation of Luther.¹¹⁸ What has been argued here, rather, is that a key dimension of Luther's early soteriology, his theology of passivity, cannot be made sense of apart from Luther's analysis of his own Christian affective experience. In our zeal to rediscover the metaphysical Luther, it is important to avoid overcorrection, lest we ignore the many dimensions of his thought that really are 'existential'.

A second implication of the argument I have made has to do with agency questions in theology more broadly. We see from the above that the question of divine and human agency can be at least partially disentangled, theologically, from the concerns about theodicy and moral responsibility that have often driven it. A crucial argument behind belief in the genuine contingency of human action is the argument that only so can we avoid making God the author of sin, and make sense of human moral responsibility before God. These are a considerations of great theological importance, both historically and systematically. However, to allow them sole or exclusive control over how theologians are to understand divine and human agency is to privilege moral philosophical reflection at the expense of the historical experience of the church.¹¹⁹ Through the example of Luther and his critics, this article has given evidence that a strong privileging of philosophical and metaphysical reasoning in theology is itself a theological decision, to be defended or contested in relation to other kinds of theological argument rather than simply taken for granted.

¹¹⁷ Dieter, *Der junge Luther und Aristoteles*; Graham 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-Society, 1994).

¹¹⁸ For debates about Luther's ontology of the person, the foundational texts are Gerhard Ebeling, 'Die Anfänge von Luthers Hermeneutik,' in *Lutherstudien I* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1971), and Wilfried Joest, *Ontologie der Person bei Luther* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967). For critiques of Ebeling and Joest on this point, see especially Miikka Ruokanen, 'Das Problem der Gnadenlehre in der Dogmatik Gerhard Ebelings,' *Kerygma und Dogma* 35(1989); Sammeli Juntunen, 'Luther and Metaphysics: What is the Structure of Being according to Luther?,' in *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson 1998); and Simo Peura, *Mehr als ein Mensch? Die Vergöttlichung als Thema der Theologie Martin Luthers von 1513 bis 1519* (Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 1994), 79-85. For a measured assessment of the debate, see Risto Saarinen, 'Finnish Luther Studies: A Story and a Program,' in *Engaging Luther: A (New) Theological Assessment*, ed. Olli-Pekka Vainio (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010). For an overview of the major topics in Luther's engagement with metaphysics more broadly, see Dennis Bielfeldt, 'Martin Luther and Ontology,' *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*. 5 Oct. 2017. <http://religion.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.001.0001/acrefore-9780199340378-e-351>.

¹¹⁹ It should be noted that Luther's understanding of the bondage of the will does not preclude belief in human moral responsibility for the will's actions. This bondage, while unbreakable through human powers, nevertheless is not a matter of 'any compulsion' but of 'sheer pleasure and desire' (WA 18:616; LW 33:39) and is in this sense is freely chosen. As Gerhard Forde puts it, 'We all do what we want to do! That is precisely our bondage' (Gerhard Forde, *The Captivation of the Will: Luther vs. Erasmus on Freedom and Bondage* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2005), 37).

But what of the actual content of Luther's argument? During his life as monk, Martin Luther gradually came to believe that all Christians, if they are honest and attentive to their inner life, will recognize the unmasterability of powerful sinful desires as an empirical fact. Luther also came to believe that the view that soteriologically significant moral transformation could take place in a baptized Christian 'by means of acts frequently repeated' – i.e., through the mechanism of habituation through graced action – was likewise empirically false. This is what Luther meant when he responded to Erasmus' plea for evenmindedness and common sense with the retort, '[T]his gouty foot laughs at your doctoring... [Y]ou are putting out fire with straw.'¹²⁰ Once again, the parting of ways here is fundamentally about theological attention to experience: on the question of virtue, Luther argues that he has 'tested these spiritual matters in experience', whereas 'Thomas... and all those who write and speak similarly' have 'neglected this'.¹²¹

A final implication of recognizing the role of experience in Luther's theology of passivity is therefore that critics of Luther on passivity do have to reckon – as it seems to me the contemporary revival of virtue ethics in theology has not yet adequately reckoned – with the fact that Luther came to reject virtue ethics while living, praying, and working in a monastic context specifically designed for the cultivation of virtue. The assumption that the failure of late medieval monastic spirituality to 'work' for Luther and many of his peers is primarily explicable on metaphysical grounds is both a misunderstanding of Luther's position and a serious underestimation of its force.¹²² For Luther, Aristotle's claim about the power of action to foster significant and durable moral transformation is one that can be tested in Christian experience, and which in Luther's case was indeed tested, and found wanting. In light of this, Herdt's judgment that 'contemporary Christian reflection on virtue' has now 'largely... overcome' many of the specific problems associated with 'early modern hyper-Augustinian' anxiety about virtue, including worries about human agency, is premature.¹²³ Until the experiential dimension of Luther's argument is engaged on its own terms, the early Protestant protest against virtue has not yet been refuted, and the recent theological revival of virtue ethics is on less solid ground than it appears.¹²⁴

¹²⁰ WA 18:626; LW 33:53. On this point see Forde, *The Captivation of the Will*, 33-4.

¹²¹ WA 8:127; LW 32:258. Observing the critical and creative power of Luther's way of engaging with experience in theology, we can see why Kierkegaard described Martin Luther as 'an extremely important patient for Christianity' (Søren Kierkegaard, *The Journals of Søren Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 508).

¹²² Gilbert Meilaender makes a similar argument from experience in his review of *Putting on Virtue*. Characterizing Herdt's view of Christian moral transformation as an 'incarnational' model of 'continuity' and thus of moral progress, Meilaender observes: 'It may be, alas, that the struggle to live the Christian life will, from time to time, impress upon our experience the case for discontinuity'. Meilaender, 'Review,' 102.

¹²³ Herdt, *Putting on Virtue*, 349-50.

¹²⁴ The present critique raises the question of what a positive account of the Christian life might look like that takes account of Luther's experiential argument and thus of his theology of passivity, while also taking seriously Herdt's worry that 'Christian moral agency' would thereby become nothing more than 'a miraculous surd', and grace thus become 'denaturalized and deracinated', as well as Hütter's similar concern that such a theology is dehumanizing. In my view, attention to the category of affect

and especially to the work of the Spirit in affective transformation can provide a compelling response to both concerns that is grounded in the long history of theological reflection on St Paul's theology of the fruit of the Spirit. Rightly understood, a sophisticated theology of affect and desire can provide a persuasive account of how a theology of passivity like Luther's involves real changes in bodies, and is thus neither 'denaturalized' nor 'deracinated', without having to postulate an overly optimistic (and therefore pastorally questionable) connection between outward action and inner moral transformation. For my own constructive position on passivity and Christian life, which draws on just such an 'affective Augustinian' account of the work of the Spirit in relation to bodies, affects, and desires, see the chapter 'Life in the Spirit' in Simeon Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience* (monograph currently in preparation for Oxford University Press).