Bonhoeffer's Lutheran assertions: Cataphasis as teaching responsibility to the 'other'

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Abstract

Structural similarities have been noted between Dietrich Bonhoeffer's account of ethical responsibility and more recent accounts advocated by philosophers who emphasise responsibility to alterity. Yet, there remains one stubborn difference between Bonhoeffer and these philosophers: his unequivocal embrace of strongly cataphatic speech. This raises the following question: it is possible for contemporary Christian ethicists and theologians to enlist Bonhoeffer in the aim of reconceiving an ethic of responsibility to the 'other' when Bonhoeffer himself relies on such concrete, exclusive language? This article will argue that attention to Martin Luther's defence of theological assertions provides a lens through which the performative force of Bonhoeffer's cataphatic language can be better understood as a particular and traditional use of language that teaches an ethical posture of epistemic humility.

Keywords: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, difference, ethics, language, Martin Luther, responsibility

> The knowledge of good and evil appears to be the goal of all ethical reflection. The first task of Christian ethics is to supersede that knowledge.
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> Dietrich Bonhoeffer[1]

The aim of this article is to explore how dogmatic claims can perform ethical work beyond the question of whether they are merely true or false. I take the case of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* as my point of departure and examine what I see as an underexplored dimension of its Lutheran heritage. Like a number of continental philosophers, Bonhoeffer was intent on resisting ethical thinking mediated by knowledge, laws or principles in favour of rethinking ethics as concrete responsibility to the 'other'.[2] Yet, unlike these

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[1] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss et al., vol. 6 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works [DBW]* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), p. 299.

[2] For more on the relationship between Bonhoeffer and continental philosophy, see Peter Frick (ed.), *Bonhoeffer's Intellectual Formation: Theology and Philosophy in his Thought* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008); and Brian Gregor and Jens Zimmerman (eds), *Bonhoeffer and Continental Thought: Cruciform Philosophy* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 2009).

philosophers and more like Martin Luther and many Protestants before him, Bonhoeffer articulates his arguments by relying heavily on cataphatic claims, or theological language that seems to present claims about transcendent truths in positive and uncomplicated ways. In view of this, I am interested in the following questions. Can the clear and distinct use of Christian language also make space for epistemic humility, otherness, unknowing and the vulnerability of the subject who is using and identifying with the language? Can very specific and bold claims about Christ – claims that might seem exclusive – guide an ethic in which the subject of ethics is truly responsible before the body and mind of a concrete 'other' whose views and experiences are radically different?

This particular formulation of such questions became compelling to me after teaching a course that asked students to read Bonhoeffer and Luther alongside authors like Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler, guided by a common set of questions about how various thinkers have questioned the nature and knowability of 'goodness'. The latter philosophers – who evidence, in part, the influence of Emmanuel Levinas and the phenomenological tradition – tend to show particular concern over assertive, propositional language, worrying that the reification of a unitary, autonomous 'subject of knowledge' will be more likely to enact and perpetuate ethical violence.[3] To put it simply, those who understand themselves as unitary rational selves in possession of access to the truth about the good have inflicted a lot of damage on the world, often in the very name of reason, progress or advancing the good.[4] This becomes a risk when 'the good' or 'the truth' is assumed to be transparently available to those who think correctly or use the right language, and thus expected to be mirrored in others.

For those who are critical of this legacy of autonomy – not only authors associated with the phenomenological tradition, but also many of my own students – the task at hand is likely to involve rethinking what ethical

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I have placed 'other' in inverted commas here to indicate the sense in which I will be using this term, but will refrain using inverted commas hereafter.

[3] See Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991). See also Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), pp. 5–7 and ch. 2.

[4] In making this claim with such confidence, I am thinking not only of Bonhoeffer's own critiques – see e.g. Larry Rasmussen, 'The Ethics of Responsible Action', in John W. DeGruchy (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: CUP, 1999), pp. 206–25. I am also thinking of the wider body of literature (including the work of Talal Asad, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Kathleen Davis, and Tomoko Masuzawa) that treats the extent to which colonialism and racisms of various kinds have been perpetuated by self-assured notions of rationality.

responsibility might look like in the absence of certain knowledge about the nature of the good. This, in turn, requires rethinking many of the assumptions that attach to the ways we use ordinary language. If the link between truth claims and the putative possession of truth can be severed, then a subject might become more attuned to her own vulnerability and limitation. And if a subject can begin to speak and write in a way that does not reify the relationship between truth claims and the possession of truth, then one might hope to become responsible to what language *cannot* capture about matter, bodies or the experiences of others – and perhaps become able to receive and learn from another who is truly different from oneself.

Something like this chain of thought has sparked renewed interest in historical theologians who have emphasised the limitations of language and understanding before the divine, stressing the need to both 'say' (*cataphasis*) as well as 'unsay' (*apophasis*) truths about transcendent things. Uttering the negation of statements about God bears witness to the fact that divine goodness is beyond being and beyond the grasp of human knowledge and language, and prepares the subject for an ecstatic relationship with that which is beyond the grasp of her faculties.[5]

Yet this is where my students have found Bonhoeffer to present a puzzle, because in spite of all of his concern over knowledge-based ethics, Bonhoeffer doesn't seem to worry about the capacity of his language to present Christian truths. My students can genuinely appreciate the extent to which Bonhoeffer is critical of the capacity of law or reason to transparently contain or communicate the good. They can see that he *wants* to theorise a kind of responsibility that undermines the stability and unity of the knowing self before the concrete face of the other, and particularly the other who suffers. Still, they struggle to get past the language, which recalls Sunday School sooner than it recalls a radical critique of the Western subject of knowledge. For them, it raises the very real question of whether Bonhoeffer's use of cataphatic language undermines the force of his well-intentioned critique by reinforcing the subjective mastery of self-identified Christians over others.

This theoretical question continues to haunt me, not only because I find it to be of genuine intellectual interest; but also because the question of whether specific, traditionally grounded, rich language can be genuinely responsible to the other is one that accrues urgency with nationalist identity movements gaining popularity in both Europe and the United States. These movements appeal, in part, because they assert a foundational relationship between language and ontological identity in a way that self-evidently justifies the

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[5] See the contributions in Chris Boesel and Catherine Keller (eds), *Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation, and Relationality* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010).

necessity of the exclusion of others. As the debate over political correctness suggests, the battle lines then become drawn between those who assert the right to use exclusionary language and those who want to revise and undo any language that might seem exclusive. One result is that the critique of cataphasis is then taken as an attack on the security and identity of the self.

To my mind, this presents an opportunity – perhaps even a responsibility – for those of us who work on theological sources to remember the multiple ways in which important authors from times past have approached and written strong claims about faith in ways that are designed precisely *not* to shore up a false sense of individual identity or to justify self-knowing. There is, in fact, a tradition of theological language that treats bold cataphasis as both necessary and useful precisely because such claims remind a subject of their own limitations, calling for a response of humility and openness to that which is not understood. I will argue that Bonhoeffer's writing constitutes a particularly compelling example of this use of theological language, and that it bears the marks of Luther himself. Rather than concluding that Bonhoeffer's cataphatic language undermines the force of his call to ethical responsibility, I want to suggest that one of Bonhoeffer's contributions to theological scholarship is precisely in demonstrating a use of Christian language – of clear, bold statements – that is capable of cultivating epistemic humility and contextual responsibility to the other. By examining these positions, it may be possible to remember a traditionally grounded use of language that nevertheless refuses to flatter the subject of knowledge, and calls instead for humility before the other.

Luther's critique of goodness

Using Luther as a resource for thinking about the nature of ethical responsibility to the other might seem especially misbegotten, given the many regrettable features of Luther's political and social record, – not least his rabid and shameful anti-Judaism, to which I will return later. Yet, with these difficulties acknowledged, it is important to also remember the extent to which Luther's reforming project – and specifically his bold and precise use of theological assertions – was shaped by his own critique of what he saw as a domesticated relationship between categories of human knowledge and the divine good. In fact, Luther was known to have employed simple and bold language precisely to undermine what he saw as an uncritical and deeply problematic association between the use of reason and a kind of moral status quo[6] – one in which authority structures and practices obscured the

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[6] Andrew Pettegree points out the strategic advantage of Luther's using simple, vivid language to define and build his movement: e.g. Andrew Pettegree, *Brand Luther* (New

relational nature of both salvation and ethics.[7] In this section, I take a step back to examine the extent of Luther's own critique of goodness in order to understand how it shapes his approach to dogmatic assertions.

Luther's critique of goodness was of course, closely tied to his defence of justification by faith rather than works – a scriptural insight that nevertheless emerged with a certain three-dimensional force due to Luther's historically located concerns over what he saw as an exploitative economy of merit. The Roman Catholic sacramental system was seen by Luther as a 'heavenward journey on which the travelers will break their necks'.[8] When presented in a milieu utterly shaped by that economy of merit, the doctrine of justification by faith was never *merely* a soteriological theory, but a concrete critique of the adequacy of all ordinary standards through which one might deem oneself 'good' – according to Carter Lindberg, no less than a 'transvaluation of all values'.[9]

Stephen D. Paulson describes the fuller implications of Lutheran theology's critical force in these dramatic terms:

York: Penguin Press, 2015), p. xii. There is no doubt a dimension to which Luther's language was not used merely to blunt the epistemological arrogance of his foes, but also to garner more trust in Luther himself. Yet, the inevitability of these mixed motivations and ends do not in my view undercut the theological force of reading cataphasis as a tool with critical potential.

[7] To be clear, my approach to questions of ethics is unavoidably anachronistic to Luther's sixteenth-century context. For Luther, questions of ethics would have been more easily categorised under the auspices of practical reason and apart from matters of soteriology. Even as he maintains justification by faith, and denies connection between merit and any human works, Luther will affirm the ethical use of both the law and practical reason in guiding the everyday ethical activities of a person in society. These Luther viewed, alongside vocations and worldly governance, as given by God for the maintaining of social order. Yet, when it comes to the question of a truly 'good' work – which is my question here – Luther was clear that good works can only be done by Christ, through the vessel of obedience in faith. There is a valid structural sense in which this contemporary critique of ethics is not so unfamiliar to Luther's thinking, as I will explore in this section. I have especially been aided by Gary M. Simpson's essay, 'Putting on the Neighbour: The Ciceronian Impulse in Luther's Christian Approach to Practical Reason', in Jennifer Hockenbery Dragseth (ed.), *The Devil's Whore: Reason and Philosophy in the Lutheran Tradition* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2011) p. 31–38.

[8] Martin Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St John: Chapters 1–4*, in Martin Luther, *LW 22, Luther's Works*, ed. by Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut T. Lehmann, and Christopher Boyd Brown (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House), p. 334. I am indebted to Carter Lindberg (see n. 9) for this reference and its interpretation.

[9] Carter Lindberg, 'Luther's Struggle with Social-Ethical Issues', in Donald K. McKim (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther* (New York: CUP, 2003), p. 166.

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Lutheran theology begins perversely by advocating the destruction of all that is good, right, and beautiful in human life. It attacks the lowest and the highest goals of life, especially morality, no matter how sincere are its practitioners. Luther said the 'sum and substance,' of Paul's letter to the Romans 'is to pull down, to pluck up, and to destroy all wisdom and righteousness of the flesh.' By the end neither grace nor love is spared this destruction . . . [One] task of theology is to make way for the declaration of a completely foreign, new righteousness that has no law in it at all – 'we must be taught a righteousness that comes completely from the outside and is foreign. And therefore our own righteousness that is born in us must first be plucked up.'[10]

For Luther, any ideological linkage between identity, knowledge and divine goodness posed a fundamental threat to salvation because it flattered the subject's ability to reason and act on its own strength – whether by means of institutional authority, conformity to law, sanctioned use of reason or exercises of prescribed ritual practice.[11]

Against these approaches, Luther's critique was twofold. First, he underscored the radical alterity of God's will and the consequent inability of the human will to satisfy divine demands on its own. Second, he reframed *faith* as the sole means through which a human person could have access to divine goodness – precisely because faith opens the subject to both confrontation with, and ultimately the inbreaking of, the alterity of the divine will. It is crucial for Luther that faith not be conceived abstractly as a vague belief or hope, but rather as a concrete response to the revelation of God's will given in the incarnation of Christ that calls one to love of neighbour.[12]

These two elements – the shattering alterity of God's hidden will, coupled with the relational and concrete call presented to believers through faith in the incarnate Christ – are often presented together in Luther's dialectical thought.[13] In the 1518 *Heidelberg Disputation*, for example, Luther asserts that 'the law of God, the most salutary doctrine of life, cannot advance man

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[10] Stephen D. Paulson, *Lutheran Theology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2011), pp. 1–2.

[11] See Denis R. Janz, 'Whore or Handmaid? Luther and Aquinas on the Function of Reason in Theology', in Dragseth, *The Devil's Whore*, pp. 49–50.

[12] Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), pp. 50–1; cf. Bernd Wannenwetsch, 'Luther's Moral Theology', in *Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, pp. 121, 128–9.

[13] For a nuanced discussion on the two different uses of hiddenness employed by Luther, see B. A. Gerrish's classic article, '"To the Unknown God": Luther and Calvin on the Hiddenness of God', *Journal of Religion* 53/3 (1973), pp. 263–92.

on his way to righteousness, but rather hinders him' and adds that 'much less can human works, which are done over and over again with the aid of natural precepts, so to speak, lead to that end' (Theses 1–2).[14] Then, in a reversal of ordinary logic, Luther ties the call of God to sites that would frustrate the ordinary expectations of a human being taught to rely on the familiar economy of worldly value: 'Although the works of God are always unattractive and appear evil, they are nevertheless really eternal merits' (Thesis 4). He ultimately ties this paradox to the counterintuitive force of the incarnation that ties the hidden divine will to a visible site of not only concrete materiality, but of the kind of ordinary suffering that would seem most alien to notions of divinity: 'He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross' (Thesis 20). The impulse to cognitive disruption reaches its end with a thesis that goodness can only be enacted through intersubjective relationality: 'The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it' (Thesis 28).

Luther would redeploy the basic structure of this argument six years later in his debate with Erasmus, which in many ways orbited around this very question of what, if anything, the human faculties can accomplish as pertains to achieving the good. In *On the Bondage of the Will*, Luther argues that God frustrates the self-glorification of human faculties and capabilities by revealing what can be 'known' of God *sub contrario*, or under the appearance of their opposite:

> Faith has to do with things not seen. Hence in order that there may be room for faith, it is necessary that everything which is believed should be hidden. It cannot, however, be more deeply hidden than under an object, perception, or experience which is contrary to it. Thus when God makes alive he does it by killing, when he justifies he does it by making men guilty, when he exalts to heaven he does it by bringing down to hell, as Scripture says: 'The Lord kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up.' This is not the place to speak at length on this subject, but those who have read my books have had it quite plainly set forth for them. Thus God hides his eternal goodness and mercy under eternal wrath, his righteousness under iniquity. This is the highest degree of faith, to believe him merciful when he saves so few and damns so many, and to believe him righteous when by his own will he makes us necessarily damnable, so that he seems, according to Erasmus, to delight in the torments of the wretched and to be worthy of hatred rather than of love. If, then, I could

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[14] Martin Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation*, in *LW* 31, p. 39.

by any means comprehend how this God can be merciful and just who displays so much wrath and iniquity, there would be no need of faith.[15]

This is an extraordinary and difficult passage, but the one element I want to draw out for present purposes is this: for Luther, those things that are presented with clarity are not always designed to be understood – in fact, they are designed precisely to confound comprehension. Faith, then, entails allowing comprehension to be undone before the sheer importance of the encounter with a divine reality that exceeds and frustrates the subject's cognitive grasp.

Yet, while faith means the frustration of the understanding, it also makes possible a different kind of responsiveness on the part of the subject to what exists before it. Luther continues:

If God works in us, the will is changed, and being gently breathed upon by the Spirit of God, it again wills and acts from pure willingness and inclination and of its own accord, not from compulsion, so that it cannot be turned another way by any opposition, nor be overcome or compelled even by the gates of hell, but it goes on willing and delighting in and loving the good.[16]

Goodness, then, is made possible when the subject has given up its claim to mastery and become transformed by the action of divine love that enables the will to submit to that of Christ. According to Luther, this will grace the subject with a different kind of comprehension and invite the use of a different kind of reason – a 'reason of faith' made possible by the relationship to Christ.[17] Crucially, Luther will not limit this intersubjective comprehension merely to the relationship between the believer and Christ, but argues that it will of necessity engage other human beings – the will of Christ seeks love of neighbour. In one sermon, Luther describes this dynamic as follows:

God says: 'I do not choose to come to you in My majesty and in the company of angels but in the guise of a poor beggar asking for bread.' You may ask: 'How do you know this?' Christ replies: 'I have revealed to you in My Word what form I would assume and to whom you should give. You do not ascend into heaven, where I am seated at the right hand of My heavenly Father, to give Me something; no I come down to you in

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[15] Martin Luther, *On the Bondage of the Will, in Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, ed. and trans. Gordon Rupp *et al.* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), p. 138.

[16] Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, p. 140.

[17] Janz, 'Whore or Handmaid?', p. 50; Wannenwetsch, 'Luther's Moral Theology', pp. 129–30.

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humility. I place flesh and blood before your door with the plea: 'Give me a drink! . . . I do not need food in heaven. I have come all the way from Judea. Give me a drink!' I have had it announced to all the world that whatever is done to the least of My brethren is done to me' (Matt 25:40).[18]

Notice, once again, how the counterintuitive visibility of the incarnate Christ, detected by the believer through the reason of faith, mediates the relationship between (a) a divine opacity that *denies* the subject the ability to legislate morally on her own; and (b) a context of concrete call to action that *enables* a subject to be open and responsible to what is before her eyes. This effectively shifts the location of goodness away from the capacity of the knowing subject to judge with certainty, and toward the dependence of the subject in relation to the call of the other from beyond the boundaries of normative intelligibility.

Luther's understanding of theological assertions

What role, then, does language itself play in Luther's critique of the subject of knowledge? Luther was, after all, a vocal critic of what he saw as the apophatic obscurantism found in theological forebears like Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite.[19] Like many of his reforming contemporaries, he emphasised assertive language, promoting the priority of the *sensus literalis* and clear, biblically based preaching.[20] All of this might seem to suggest that Luther shares what has become a widespread perception of Protestantism more generally: the presumption that language, derived from scripture, can sufficiently convey truths about transcendent things, thus granting human beings cognitive access to the clarity and totality of a coherent worldview. Yet, these are not the terms through which Luther defends the Christian's use of scriptural assertions. In the 1524 Erasmus exchange, Luther's defence of clear, cataphatic assertions is framed in relation to the ongoing debate over the powers of the individual subject in relation to the good – and it emphasises the ethical importance of the *otherness* presented in the bold difficulty of such assertions precisely as a challenge to the reader's impulse to mastery.

Assertions emerge as a point of contention because Erasmus wants to maintain a necessary role for practical reason either to highlight or to pass by

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[18] Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St John*; see Lindberg, 'Luther's Struggle', p. 165.

[19] For an excellent treatment on how Luther's intolerance for apophatic theology might not be as vigorous as it seems, see Piotr Malysz, 'Luther and Dionysius: Beyond Mere Negations', *Modern Theology* 24 (2008), pp. 679–92.

[20] See Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, trans. and ed. Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), pp. 51–2.

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scriptural claims according to their relative difficulty. For, in Erasmus' words, 'it is better not to enforce contentions which may the sooner harm Christian concord than advance true religion' when 'there are other things which God has willed to be most plainly evident, and such are the precepts for the good life'.[21] In his reply, Luther contradicts this position with characteristic intensity:

> Nothing is better known or more common among Christians than assertion. Take away assertions and you take away Christianity. Why, the Holy Spirit is given them from heaven, that a Christian may glorify Christ and confess him even unto death – unless it is not asserting when one dies for one's confession and assertion. . . . But it is I who am the biggest fool, for wasting words and time on something that is clearer than daylight. What Christian would agree that assertions are to be despised? That would be nothing but a denial of all religion and piety, or an assertion that neither religion, nor piety, nor any dogma is of the slightest importance.[22]

Notice, here, that Erasmus and Luther are not disagreeing over the *content* of scriptural assertions. They are disagreeing over how a Christian ought to properly *engage* them. They're arguing over the nature of responsibility *to* the assertions themselves.

Here is what is at stake in this difference. Erasmus wants assertions judged according to what he takes to be the recognisable demands of the Christian life, arguing that those not deemed useful should be avoided like a 'Corycian Cavern' – a tunnel leading to the dangers of the underworld: 'For there are some secret places in the Holy Scriptures into which God has not wished us to penetrate more deeply and, if we try to do so, then the deeper we go, the darker and darker it becomes.'[23] Luther, on the other hand, argues that the appropriate response to scriptural assertions is to take delight in them, no matter their difficulty, treating them with 'a constant adhering, affirming, confessing, maintaining, and an invincible persevering'.[24]

What is crucial to notice, here, is that for Luther assertions are precisely *not* designed to be fused with the cognitive clarity of the reader. Instead, they remain at a distance from the reader's mind. They confront the reader *as other*, and in this way invite a series of affective and active responses, rather than merely cognitive assent or rejection. When assertions are encountered in faith, they ask not to be decided as truth claims, but to be encountered as

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[21] Erasmus, *On the Freedom of the Will*, in *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, p. 38.

[22] Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, p. 106.

[23] Erasmus, *Freedom of the Will*, p. 38; cf. Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, pp. 134–6.

[24] Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, p. 105.

performative artifices. That is, they function in a material way to fence and mark the life and thought of a Christian prior to their rational understanding or contextual application. They do not therefore replace or bolster the Christian's own subjectivity, but confront, challenge and engage it. This form of concrete presentness is what Luther calls the 'external clarity' of scripture, meaning that scripture faces someone as clearly as the face of the other – and it is no excuse to claim that *some* faces are too obscure or too dark to be addressed responsibly.[25]

It is only secondarily that scriptural assertions invite the subjective transformation of the reader's reason into the reason of faith. This is what Luther calls the 'internal clarity' of scripture. Internal clarity is created solely through the work of the Holy Spirit in the believer's mind, meaning that the internal clarity is not only intersubjective but also utterly reliant on the particular living context of the reader. The internal clarity of scripture, in other words, involves the rational cognition of the subject as she hears the Word and considers how it ought to be obeyed under particular and local conditions. This clarity cannot be extracted and codified timelessly; it emerges only when a person who has already affirmed the external clarity of assertions interprets them in a situation of moral complexity – before the call of a neighbour in need, or the demand for some act of duty.

Marius Mjaaland has expounded on the importance of scripture's materiality for Luther, specifically in its ability to undermine the putative mastery of the human mind in controlling truths or in uncritically indexing goods to worldly regimes of intelligibility. According to Mjaaland, assertions reveal

> the duplicity of what has become stabilized, standardized, and controlled within a particular system of meaning. [Scripture's very] ... writtenness points at a meaning of the word 'justice' which absolutely differs from the moral order [as we know it], escaping the political and pious control of worldly and ecclesiastic authorities. Scripture understood as scripture, and not simply preaching, praying, or professing the word(s), gives access to a space of freedom within language, and thus within human reality. In that sense, scripture becomes the condition of possibility for conceiving the world according to this gift of grace qua gift of justice (*ex Deo*) and at the same time it redefines the conditions for that conception.[26]

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[25] Ibid., pp. 112–13.
[26] Marius Mjaaland, *The Hidden God: Luther, Philosophy, and Political Theology* (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 2015), p. 59.

For Luther, the complaint that some passages are obscure and should be avoided like a Corycian Cave only valorises what is a fundamentally an ethical failing on the part of the *reader*: it accuses the *text* of having the problem, and presumes the already intact integrity of the mind of the reader. When the reader allows herself to be confronted by an assertion, however, the integrity of her subjective judgement is made vulnerable, and she becomes attuned to a call that goes forth from things that appear opposite to normative notions of divinity. Mjaaland, once again, writes that this 'danger zone' is precisely where the reader must be willing to go and dwell, for

> Life itself is at stake, according to Luther, and there is no safe place outside the text, no place of withdrawal or detachment. The place of scripture is not limited by Erasmus's proscriptions or the magisterial efforts at control; its purview might in principle be everywhere. Thus, Luther is not surprised when readers of scripture, including his opponent, are struck by anxiety and unease, since the space that opens up within scripture ceaselessly draws the reader into questions concerning the conditions of life and death, of hope and despair. This is not the time for retraction, though; it is the time for discoveries in the light of scripture, of discerning the decisive differences within the text in order to disclose the distinctions between the world which remains obscure and hidden and the world which proceeds in a different light.[27]

The written assertions of scripture, in other words, are given not to provide ethical 'answers', but to teach a Christian how to responsively be and act ethically in and before Christ. They performatively erect a materialised framework against which one can learn to struggle and trust, stripped of the false perception that goodness is achievable any other way than through intersubjective vulnerability and the responsive action of faith.[28]

Reconsidering Bonhoeffer's cataphasis

I have argued, so far, that Luther's approach to theological assertions carves out a kind of 'third way' to approach the use of cataphatic Christian language.

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[27] Ibid., p. 96.

[28] A similar pattern is visible in how Luther figures the performative functions of the law. For a subject standing in crisis prior to salvation, the law confronts the subject in a kind of battle to the death: either the subject is defective, or the law is defective. When approached in a faith that has already rendered the subject vulnerable to, and open before, the alien subjectivity of Christ, the law functions like an assertion to aid the Christian's activity in the world and before the neighbour. For an excellent treatment, see Simpson, 'Putting on the Neighbour', and Wannenwetsch, 'Luther's Moral Theology'.

It resists either reading such language (a) as a window to absolute truth, or (b) as something that must be constantly deconstructed through endless unsaying to avoid irresponsible exclusions. Taken to extremes, both options privilege language for its mental content instead of for its material and performative effects. For Luther, however, the external clarity of theological assertions is what confronts a reader with an alterity that cannot be grasped by understanding alone, asking instead for a range of affective responses – affirmation, confession, persevering. In this last section, I return to Bonhoeffer and look at several structural features of his cataphatic ethical writing in light of Luther's argument. My aim, here, is not to give a thorough account of Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* – many such accounts exist elsewhere. In keeping with present purposes, my focus will be on language and how it is designed to orient a subject in humility towards the concreteness of otherness.

The distinctive claim that Bonhoeffer defends in his ethical essays is that ethical action is not determined by principles or laws, but by the call of God's will discerned in concrete circumstances. He writes at one point that 'human beings are not called to realize ethical ideals, but are called into a life that is lived in God's love, and that means lived in reality'.[29] The themes that relate Bonhoeffer to the phenomenological tradition are discernible here: the emphasis on an understanding of 'reality' as constituted by both the external world and subjective experience; resistance to abstract ideals; the indexing of 'freedom' to the conditions impinging from subjective relationships and concrete contexts; and, of course, the refiguring of ethics as a posture of responsiveness.

Although Bonhoeffer indexes both reality and responsibility to Christ – reality is ascertained with reference to Christ, and responsibility is made possible in a 'definite field of activity' through its relation to Christ – he nevertheless insists that both reality and responsibility must confront and disrupt a subject as other, refusing the domestication of rational categories.[30]

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[29] Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 232. The German word often translated 'reality' is *Wirklichkeit*, which Bonhoeffer indicates must avoid any essentialist or identitarian sense. Rather, it refers to 'the bond between the external world and experiences', principally for Bonhoeffer the world as it exists in relation to the reality of Christ. This reality is always other to the ordinary person conceived in isolation, and certainly to that which the ordinary person's rational faculties can masterfully comprehend; yet it also represents that which calls to the person and renders her responsible. See Peter Dabrock, 'Responding to *Wirklichkeit*', in Kirsten Busch Nielson, Ulrik Nissen and Christiane Tietz (eds), *Mysteries in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), p. 54.

[30] Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 293.

Here is one passage where Bonhoeffer countenances the genuineness of this otherness:

> Again and again Jesus thus becomes the one who breaks through the law for the sake of the 'law' or, more clearly put, for the sake of the freedom of God's love. Love accepts what is real just as it is, as proper to love. Love does not despise what is real for the sake of an idea, but accepts it as a given and as loved by God. Love does not derive its way of dealing with what is real independently from the real, but from the reality of the real, from its being-loved-by-God. The nature of all concrete responsible action is to grasp in what is real the love of God with which the real, the world, was loved and then from God's love to find the way of dealing with reality . . . What confers the freedom to act responsibly toward the world and within history is to recognize Jesus Christ as God's love for the real people with real history, politics, etc., or, in other words, to recognize real human beings, circumstances, movements, i.e., the real world as present in Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ as present in the real world.[31]

The structure of responsible ethics is one in which divine love both draws and disrupts the subject at the hands of a reality that is not her own, and one that will inevitably disrupt whatever ideology the subject might otherwise carry into the encounter. Characteristically, Bonhoeffer links that disruptiveness – with all of its alien qualities, *irreducible* to what the Christian already thinks – to Christ himself: to Christ *as* the disrupter.[32]

This already echoes the dialectic of Luther's critique of goodness, first by tying Christ's presence to the disruption of human expectations (hidden *sub contrario*), and second by framing ethical action as intersubjectively constituted responsibility to and before God in the neighbour. Yet, there are other more subtle indications that Bonhoeffer's approach to Christian assertions themselves is similarly indebted to the notion that the performative alterity of dogmatic assertions is given, in part, to actively teach this kind of responsibility. In what remains, I'll touch on three of Bonhoeffer's characteristic uses of dogmatic assertions to materially frame the subjective life of the Christian – all of which will be familiar to readers of Bonhoeffer, because all three have a history in his earlier writings. When these are taken together, it is clear that Bonhoeffer envisions the proper use of the external clarity of scriptural assertions not as an offer of abstract knowledge designed to bolster the authority of the knowing subject, but rather as a means through which the subject confronts cognitive limitations.

[31] Ibid., p. 233.
[32] See Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, pp. 310–14.

First, Bonhoeffer insists repeatedly that the Christian must live with the knowledge that her limit is at the 'centre' of her subjectivity, rendering her other even to herself because that seat always already belongs to Christ: '*The human being's limit is at the center of human existence,* not on the margin'.[33] By occupying the very centre of the human self-consciousness, Christ acts as an other who demands the most intimate responsibility of the self to the self, prior even to the responsibility owed to another person. What is key here is that Bonhoeffer characterises this relationship in terms of a shift from a fact-oriented 'How?' – a question that asks for a theoretical accounting – to a person-oriented 'Who?' that requires the full range of affective perseverance.[34] This effectively shifts the meaning of christological assertions from language expected to yield truth content to language relied on to confront an individual with the limitations imposed by the opacity of another's presence.[35]

Secondly, Bonhoeffer makes a similar claim about the subject's temporal origins, this time to disrupt the subject's claim to grasp their own *archē*, or founding knowledge concerning their identity and purpose. In *Creation and Fall*, Bonhoeffer presents the force of scriptural assertions about origins as follows:

> The place where the Bible begins is one where our own most impassioned waves of thinking break, are thrown back upon themselves, and lose their strength in spray and foam. . . . That the Bible should speak of the beginning provokes the world, provokes us. For we cannot speak of the beginning. Where the beginning begins, there our thinking stops; there it comes to an end. Yet the desire to ask after the beginning is the innermost passion of our thinking; it is what in the end imparts reality to every genuine question we ask.[36]

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[33] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, trans. Douglas S. Bax, vol. 3 of *DBW* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), p. 86.

[34] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christology*, trans. John Bowden (London: Collins Press, 1971), pp. 32–3; see also Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, pp. 57–8, 83, 226.

[35] Judith Butler frames ethical responsibility to the other in strikingly similar, albeit utterly non-christological, terms: 'The question to ask is not "what" we are, as if the task were simply to fill in the content of our personhood. . . . The question most central to recognition is a direct one, and it is addressed to the other: "Who are you?" This question assumes that there is an other before us whom we do not know and cannot fully apprehend, one whose uniqueness and nonsubstitutability set a limit to the model of reciprocal recognition offered within the Hegelian [idealistic] scheme and to the possibility of knowing another more generally.' Butler, *Giving an Account*, pp. 30–1.

[36] Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, p. 25.

There is a striking debt to the Lutheran assertion in the claim that biblical revelation serves to quiet, rather than indulge, the desire to know with certainty from whence humanity came and what humanity is. Scriptural claims about creation quiet this desire by marking, again *in a concrete, physical way*, the passion and passivity of a human before conditions that she neither chose nor controls, thereby positioning her in relationship to the Creator rather than in possession of knowledge of creation itself.[37] In *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer picks back up on this theme to argue that that barrier imposed by lack of knowledge concerning human origins marks the condition against which the drive for the knowledge of good and evil emerges. It is precisely a drive to control the coincidence of language and ontological identity. Yet, when the question of origins is reconceived once again as a personal question, it sets up the relationship that Bonhoeffer sees as once more primary to ethics itself: the relationship of unity with Christ, who transforms the drive for knowing into responsible doing.[38]

Finally, Bonhoeffer draws from his first work, *Sanctorum Communio*, to underscore the fundamental sociality of Christ's reality as intersubjective community.[39] This claim effectively links Christ-the-centre and Christ-the-origin *to* Christ-the-other by tying the alterity of the self to the alterity of the other before whom one is responsible. If Christ resides in both self and other – and, indeed, draws and pushes the subject from both locations – then cataphatic claims about Christ function as a call for relationship between self and other *as* other, rather than an offer of privileged access to what lies behind the face of the other. Christ, in other words, marks the limitation before which a human being is called to cede the quest for knowledge in favour of affirmation and perseverance. According to Bonhoeffer, 'In that God became human, and only because of that, human beings and their world are accepted and affirmed.'[40] The very inability to understand claims about Christ, in other words, teaches the kind of posture with which one ought to responsibly approach other people in whom Christ's image resides.

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[37] The image, here, is not unlike the Derridean secret that is both kept in communication and motivates the desire for continued communication. See e.g. Jacques Derrida, 'On a Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy', in Peter Fenves (ed.), *Raising the Tone* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), pp. 152, 162.

[38] Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, pp. 300–17.

[39] See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens, vol. 1 of *DBW* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), ch. 5. See also Clifford J. Green, *A Theology of Sociality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999).

[40] Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 223.

In all three of these characteristic uses of dogmatic assertions, Bonhoeffer emphasises their performative function, or the way they structure certain limits around human cognition. Rather than using theology to provide his reader with an object of knowledge, he wields dogmatic claims to reorient the reader's affections and attention, placing her in a different orientation to both the claims of Christianity and the world in which those claims operate. The assertions are treated as meaningful by virtue of the *distance* that they conserve between the human person and the drive to know. At one point, Bonhoeffer even writes that 'there is a kind of confession of Christ that Jesus rejects because it is in contradiction with doing the will of God'.[41] Here, cataphatic language is only sanctioned when it is allowed to undermine the superiority of the human subject who confronts it, and in so doing to call that subject to a form of deliberative and responsive action before what exceeds the subject's grasp.

Conclusion

Too often, five hundred years ago and now, cataphatic claims are taken to offer some kind of privileged access to what is being claimed, and are therefore used to shore up what are perceived to be essential differences between persons. Luther himself was guilty of this, especially later in his life when he gave in to the disastrous temptation to assume interpretive clarity – and judgement – over interpreting and condemning the persistence of Jewish existence. By claiming some privileged insight over who was a recipient of grace and who was not, Luther's arguments behave as though his subjective judgement could, in fact, fuse with the inner clarity of scripture to interpret worldly phenomena more generally.[42]

Although Bonhoeffer's record was not perfect in this regard, his later response to Jewish existence nevertheless contrasts with Luther's and offers a much more consistent rendering of Luther's own, earlier teaching on the matter of ethical judgements.[43] When Bonhoeffer argues that the rejection of the Jews is the rejection of Christ, he more faithfully models someone who has been taught, by the text and details of assertions, how to respond to – and allow himself to be stopped by – the unfamiliar texture and details of other people.[44] He allows assertions to place a concrete limit on any urge to

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[41] Ibid., p. 331.

[42] Eric W. Gritsch, *Martin Luther's Anti-Semitism: Against his Better Judgment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), pp. 74–5.

[43] Stephen R. Haynes, *The Bonhoeffer Legacy: Post-Holocaust Perspectives* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006), pp. 73–4.

[44] Ibid., p. 142. See also Ruth Zerner, 'Church, State, and the "Jewish Question"', in *Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, pp. 190–205.

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intuit the big picture from some God's-eye view. Instead, scriptural assertions teach him to encounter the other first with 'a constant adhering, affirming, confessing, maintaining, and an invincible persevering'.

This does not mean there is no place for pursuing the inner clarity of scripture. Just as for Luther inner clarity was given by the Spirit, for Bonhoeffer it is given in the prayerful deliberations that must accompany the daily life and concrete practice of the Christian life. But, as Bonhoeffer writes at one point, 'The simplicity of not knowing one's own good because, entirely absorbed in doing, one looks only at Jesus Christ, is not thoughtlessness or carelessness toward oneself. [It is] a Christian self-examination, which, rather than focusing on one's own knowledge of good and evil and its realization in practical life, daily renews the knowledge that "Jesus Christ is in us".'[45] This is a reiteration of the kind of hope that haunts the ethical impulses of the phenomenological tradition – the hope that in the absence of certainty, and in the face of vulnerability and even impossibility, a gift will emerge from a place that is unexpected; that one might – for all sins of omission and commission, of knowing and unknowing – be forgiven.[46]

The particular question of how thick Christian claims might work alongside an ethic of responsibility to the other is one that takes on additional urgency given the media-driven social, political and religious fragmentation of the present. In part, this is because assertions are coming back with a vengeance in reaction to the rising perception that no serious assertion cannot also be endlessly problematised, and that certain identities are under threat of erasure by not being granted the right to exclude others.[47]

At times, the traditional theological tactic of apophatic unsaying is no doubt necessary to confront the way that bodies are violently shaped and affected by the force of a language that purports to define. Yet, it is also important to remember the extent to which the traditional repositories of dogmatic assertions can serve a similarly critical function. Assertions are not unlike bodies; they too resist the temporal and identitarian strictures placed on them, and may re-emerge unexpectedly to confront us with their

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[45] Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 325.

[46] For more on this logic of the gift in relation to responsibility, see Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 41. For more on the need for forgiveness as central to the structure of the ethical address, see Butler, *Giving an Account*, pp. 42, 136. For Bonhoeffer's references to the centrality of forgiveness to ethics rather than the aim of perfection, see *Ethics*, pp. 136–50. Ronald F. Thiemann has explored some of the further interesting resonances between Bonhoeffer and Butler in *The Humble Sublime* (London: IB Taurus, 2013), ch. 5.

[47] This, at any rate, seems to be the complaint at the heart of those who want to resist so-called political correctness.

strangeness, reminding us of everything we don't and can't know or master. In a world where opposing 'worldviews' are increasingly taken for granted as stable realities that define whole groups of people, it may yet be important to remember the differences that obtain between our assertions and ourselves – and to ask what it means to be responsible to that difference today.

This article has sought to recall an overlooked and underexplored debt that Bonhoeffer's writing owes to Luther's theory of assertions. I hope that thinking about assertions as sites of responsibility might offer some way forward, as many seem torn between some allegiance to 'truth' and to the claims of the other that might seem incongruous with that truth. This may be an important moment to hear the call to once more trade the claim to know for a 'constant adhering, affirming, confessing, maintaining, and an invincible persevering' alongside those one doesn't know.[48]

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[48] An earlier version of this article was given at the November 2016 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion for the Bonhoeffer: Theology and Social Action Section.