

TRANSCENDENTALITY AND CONVERSATION: ON THE TRINITY AND 'WORD-EXCHANGE'

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Abstract

This article considers how the notions of 'word' and 'conversation' can contribute to contemporary developments in theological metaphysics by drawing on Christoph Schwöbel's ontological rendition of Martin Luther's theology. By way of reading Schwöbel's theological ontology of conversation with reference to John Milbank's theology of the gift, this article shows that Schwöbel's conception of the Trinity as an eternal 'conversation' can be understood as an ontology of 'word-exchange' in a fashion similar to Milbank's account of trinitarian 'gift-exchange'. Moreover, the article argues that Schwöbel's Lutheran construal of creation as God's 'created words' (*verba creata*) can present a transcendental account of 'word' or *verbum* which complements Milbank's ontology of the gift or *donum*. By bringing to light these perhaps surprising convergences between Schwöbel's Lutheran theology of 'the word' and Milbank's Christian Neo-Platonic theology of 'the gift', this article highlights some of the often-overlooked metaphysical insights in Luther's theology of the word, which can contribute not only to ecumenical theological dialogue, but also foster new perspectives and conversations for contemporary developments and discussions in theological metaphysics.

Introduction

In an impressive two-part article in *Modern Theology*, John Betz called for a renewed (or further) Christian theological engagement with metaphysical theorisation, which he believes is not only key to theology's task to 'address the question and meaning of being', but can moreover facilitate ecumenical dialogues between different theological traditions.¹ Indeed, contemporary theology has seen a surge in interest in speculative metaphysics, particularly in relation to the notions of gift-giving and receiving as well as the doctrine of

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¹John R. Betz, 'After Heidegger and Marion: The Task of Christian Metaphysics Today', *Modern Theology* 34, no. 4 (October 2018): 565–97 (quote 568); 'Mere Metaphysics: An Ecumenical Proposal', *Modern Theology* 35, no. 4 (October 2019): 683–705.

the Trinity.² In a recent article, I presented an interpretation of the notion of ‘gift’ as a ‘trinitarian’ transcendental term by comparing the common description of all created things as ‘gifts’ given by God to the scholastic theory of transcendentalism, in which every being is understood to possess universal ‘transcendental’ properties such as oneness, truth, and goodness which reflect the divine perfections of God.³ I argued that to the extent that a gift always carries with it an additional intelligible meaning as it is given to its intended recipient—an additional meaning that differentiates the gift from an ordinary object—it may be said that the gift is always supplemented by a meaning, message or indeed ‘word’ that is irreducible to the physical components of the given object. There is accordingly an intrinsic connection between ‘gift’ and ‘word’ that is reminiscent of the way in which the Holy Spirit (*the Gift*) always points towards the Son (*the Word*) in trinitarian theology. To this extent, to say that all creatures are universally ‘gifts’ created and given by God is to posit a certain trinitarian dimension underlying the structure of all created beings.⁴

In addition to Milbank’s theological ontology of the gift,⁵ in that article I also drew on a suggestion in Milbank’s early work that understanding ‘the word’ or *verbum* as a transcendental term would ‘personalise’ and even ‘trinitarianise’ the scholastic philosophical outlook of transcendental properties:

[T]he key transcendental is neither Being, nor Unity, but the *Verbum* itself... When *Verbum* is included as a transcendental, all the transcendentals are transformed into personal, intersubjective, trinitarian categories.⁶

However, with that article’s focus on the notion of ‘gift’, I did not offer any account of how the notion of *verbum* can be regarded as a transcendental term that is universally applicable to all being. In light of this, this present essay seeks to explore how ‘word’ or *verbum* might operate as a transcendental term and its implications for the doctrine of the Trinity and the metaphysics of creation. In particular, this essay considers how a theology of the Word can complement contemporary developments in Christian metaphysics by putting Milbank’s trinitarian ontology of the gift into dialogue with Christoph Schwöbel’s

²See, for instance, the opening statement in Andrew Davison, *Participation in God: A Study in Doctrine and Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 1: ‘Approaching the world in terms of sharing and receiving should be the bedrock of a Christian understanding of reality, and of Christian doctrine.’ Indeed, one significant development in Davison’s book is his consideration of participatory metaphysics in relation to the three divine persons of the Trinity and not simply the one divine substance (*ibid.*, 42–64). Other examples (from a diverse range of theological standpoints) of recent studies in theological metaphysics include: Catherine Pickstock, *Aspects of Truth: A New Religious Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); George Pattison, *A Metaphysics of Love: A Philosophy of Christian Life Part III* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); Steven J. Duby, *God in Himself: Scripture, Metaphysics, and the Task of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2019). While ‘metaphysics’ does not appear in the title of Bruce L. McCormack, *The Humility of the Eternal Son: Reformed Kenoticism and the Repair of Chalcedon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), McCormack says he is ‘doing a form of metaphysics’ (8) in this work to develop ‘a new theological ontology’ (6).

³King-Ho Leung, ‘Transcendentalism and the Gift: On Gunton, Milbank, and Trinitarian Metaphysics’, *Modern Theology* 38, no. 1 (January 2022): 81–99.

⁴*Ibid.*, 95.

⁵In a recent essay, Milbank discusses whether ‘gift should be raised to the status of a transcendental, like truth, goodness, beauty, unity, and being itself’. See John Milbank, ‘The Universality of the Gift’, *Comment Magazine* (3 March 2022): <https://comment.org/the-universality-of-the-gift/>

⁶John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 80. This statement is first published in John Milbank, ‘William Warburton: An 18th Century Anglican Bishop Fallen Among Post-Structuralists — II’, *New Blackfriars* 64, no. 759 (1983): 383.

ontological rendition of Martin Luther's account of creatures as God's 'created words' and of the Trinity as an eternal conversation.⁷

It may at first seem implausible that Luther's theology of the Word could offer any constructive insights for contemporary theological developments in speculative metaphysics, given that 'from early to late in his career, Luther resists metaphysics as a comprehensive enterprise'.⁸ But as this essay shows (section three), Luther's theological account of conversation coincides with many observations from accounts and analyses of speech and listening in post-Heideggerian philosophy. Similarly, it may also seem odd to engage Milbank's theology of the gift with a Lutheran theology of the Word, not least because of Milbank's critiques of Luther and the apparent incompatibility between Milbank's account of the relation between God and creation as a reciprocal gift-exchange and Lutheran theology's emphasis on the unconditionality of justification by grace through faith.⁹ However, as this essay also endeavours to show (section two), the Lutheran account of creation's relation with God as a 'conversation' presents an ontology that contains elements of exchange and reciprocity that very much resembles Milbank's metaphysics. But before turning to consider the philosophical and indeed metaphysical implications of Luther's (and Schwöbel's) theology of the Word, let us begin by examining Luther's notion of 'created words' and his account of the Trinity as conversation (section one).

Transcendentality and the Word

In the passage quoted above where he speaks of *verbum* as 'the key transcendental' which can be predicated of all things, Milbank is referring to Johann Georg Hamann's account of creation.¹⁰ While Milbank identifies Hamann as being 'in line with the tradition of theological speculation on *logos* or *verbum*, stretching back to Cusanus, Eckhart and Aquinas',¹¹ one might also note that as a devoted Lutheran, Hamann's theological or even transcendental account of *verbum* can be traced back to Martin Luther's rendition of creation as God's 'created words' (*verba creata*).¹² This is most clearly articulated in Luther's *Lectures on Genesis*:

God calls into existence the things which do not exist (Romans 4:17). He does not speak grammatical words; He speaks true and existent realities... Thus sun, moon, heaven, earth, Peter, Paul, I, you, etc.—we are all words of God ... the words of God are realities, not bare words.

⁷A powerful account of God as 'conversation' is of course also found in the influential American Lutheran theologian Robert Jenson's two-volume *Systematic Theology*, although he does not cite or refer to Luther's formulation of the Trinity as conversation. See Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology, Vol. 1: The Triune God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 222, 227; *Systematic Theology, Vol. II: The Works of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 26, 35, 45, 270, 369.

⁸Mark C. Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology of Beauty: A Reappraisal* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 100. See Luther's remarks in the *Heidelberg Disputation*, thesis 2, 3, 5, 8, 19, and especially 22 in *Luther's Works*, edited by Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis, MO: Fortress Press, 1955–1986), 31:39–40 (henceforth LW, followed by volume number); *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1883–1993), 1:353–44 (henceforth WA, followed by volume number).

⁹See note 94 below.

¹⁰Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 74–80.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 74.

¹²See Oswald Bayer, *Freedom in Response: Lutheran Ethics*, trans. Jeff Cayzer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 92–93. Cf. Oswald Bayer, 'Schöpfungstheologie als Rechtfertigungsontologie', in *Word-Gift-Being: Justification–Economy–Ontology*, edited by Bo Kristian Holm and Peter Widmann (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 19–25, 40–41.

Here men have differentiated between the uncreated Word and the created word. The created word is brought into being by the uncreated Word [*Verbum creatum est factum per Verbum increatum*]. What else is the entire creation than the Word of God uttered by God [*verbum Dei a Deo prolatum*], or extended to the outside?¹³

If all created things are, as Luther argues, ‘all words of God’ spoken creatively by God—they can be understood through (or even be predicated with) the notion of *verbum*, then there is intrinsic meaning and intelligibility in every created being. This is a point made by Christoph Schwöbel:

The metaphor of speaking creation into existence—creation as a divine speech-act—posits an indissoluble unity of being and meaning... The knowability of the created order of being was invested in creation from the beginning by God’s creative speaking.¹⁴

While Schwöbel also (rightly) notes that Luther’s notion of ‘the word’ is one which replaces the prime category of ‘substance’ in scholastic Aristotelian metaphysics,¹⁵ by reading Luther in light of Milbank’s interpretation of Hamann’s *verbum* as ‘the key transcendental’, one may argue that what we find in Luther’s account of all things as God’s ‘created words’ is nothing less than a transcendentalisation of the Word: making *verbum* ‘the key transcendental’ and thereby rendering *verbum* a transcendental term that can be predicated of all created things.¹⁶ Indeed, as Luther notes in his *Lectures on Genesis*: ‘God, by speaking, created all things and worked through the Word, and that all His works are some words of God [*verba quaedam Dei*], created by the uncreated Word [*per verbum increatum create*].’¹⁷

Here Luther is of course interpreting the creation narrative in Genesis in light of the Johannine prologue. And in his *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John* (1537–40), written around the same time as his *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–45), Luther provides a further qualification on the relation between the second person of the Trinity as God’s uncreated Word and the ontological status of created beings as God’s ‘created words’:

God is not created or made as we human beings are; He is from all eternity. No one has given Him His speech, His Word, or His conversation. What He is, He is of

¹³LW 1:21–22; WA 42:17.

¹⁴Christoph Schwöbel, ‘We are All God’s Vocabulary: The Idea of Creation as a Speech-Act of the Trinitarian God and Its Significance for the Dialogue between Theology and the Sciences’, in *Knowing Creation: Perspectives from Theology, Philosophy and Science*, edited by Andrew B. Torrance and Thomas H. McCall (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 57–58.

¹⁵See Christoph Schwöbel, ‘The Concept of Revelation in Christianity’, in *The Concept of Revelation in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, edited by Georges Tamer (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 88: ‘The prime category of Aristotelian metaphysics, substance, is replaced by the biblical category of God’s creative “word”.’ Cf. Gerhard Ebeling, ‘Luther’s Understanding of Reality’, trans. Scott Celsor, *Lutheran Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (2013): 56–75, especially 60–61, 65–67.

¹⁶Moreover, to the extent ‘substance’ is but one of the ten Aristotelian categories and that the transcendental properties are said to have a great universality and therefore ‘transcend’ the Aristotelian categories in scholastic metaphysics, even if Luther does critique the scholastic metaphysics of ‘substance’ and replace it with God’s ‘word’, this does not necessarily mean that Luther would refuse the framework of transcendental properties. For a related discussion, see Mattes, *Martin Luther’s Theology of Beauty*, 71–72, 78–80, and especially 100.

¹⁷LW 1:47; WA 42:35.

Himself from eternity. But whatever we are, we received from Him and not from ourselves. He alone has everything from Himself.

Therefore, this analogy of our word is very inadequate and vague. But although our Word cannot be compared to His Word, it affords us a faint idea.¹⁸

Not unlike how all creatures may be predicated with the traditional transcendental terms of oneness, truth, and goodness which reflect God's divine perfections of Oneness, Truth, and Goodness, according to Luther's account here, each and every being in creation may all be called a 'word' of God which gives us 'a faint idea' or reflection of God's uncreated Word, albeit in a manner that is 'very inadequate and vague'.¹⁹ However, as opposed to traditional scholastic metaphysics in which the transcendental properties of creatures correspond to the *one* divine substance, Luther's schema in his *Sermons* on John's Gospel posits that the creatures' ontological status as 'created words' of God corresponds to the uncreated Word, the second person of the Trinity.²⁰

But this does not mean that creation is only reflective of the works of the second person. For Luther, creation's existence as God's created words is rather reflective of the entire Trinity which Luther describes as a 'conversation' following the revelation that God has an uncreated Word. As Luther writes in his exposition of John 16:13 later in his *Sermons* on John:

[The uncreated] Word remains in the Father forever. Thus these are two distinct Persons: He who speaks and the Word that is spoken, that is, the Father and the Son. Here, however, we find the third Person following these two, namely, the One who hears both the Speaker and the spoken Word. For it stands to reason that there must also be a listener where a speaker and a word are found. But all this speaking, being spoken, and listening takes place within the divine nature and also remains there, where no creature is or can be. All three—Speaker, Word, and Listener—must be God Himself; all three must be coeternal and in a single undivided majesty... Therefore one cannot say that the Listener is something outside God, or that there was a time when He began to be a Listener; but just as the Father is a Speaker from eternity, and just as the Son is spoken from eternity, so the Holy Spirit is the Listener from eternity.²¹

According to Schwöbel, Luther's conversational account of the Trinity here should not be taken simply as a metaphor.²² For Schwöbel, Luther's conception of the Trinity *as*

¹⁸LW 22:9–10; WA 46:544.

¹⁹Cf. Schwöbel, 'We are All God's Vocabulary', 59: 'Particularity is... bounded together by the grammar of God's creative speaking, which is one universal that includes everything that is. While Luther can explain God's creation as calling into existence particular beings that can be understood as nouns, these nouns that indicate particular beings are nevertheless connected by the rules of divine grammar.'

²⁰To this extent, we might understand Luther's notion of 'created words' as an account of the 'word' as a 'trinitarian' or even 'Christological' transcendental term. Cf. Colin Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), especially 138–41.

²¹LW 24:364–65; WA 46:59.

²²Christoph Schwöbel, 'Einfach Gott: Trinitätstheologie am Anfang des 21. Jahrhunderts', *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 62, no. 4 (2020): 539–40; *Gott im Gespräch: Studien zur Theologischen Gegenwartsbedeutung* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 476–78; 'God as Conversation: Reflections on a Theological Ontology of Communicative Relations', in *Theology and Conversation: Towards a Relational Theology*, edited by Jacques Haers and Peter de Mey (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), 65–67. See also Schwöbel, 'We are All God's Vocabulary', 67.

conversation not only provides an ontological foundation for the aforementioned unity of being and meaning among created entities.²³ It is also a *trinitarian* framework which reinforces Luther's account of created beings as God's created words by the creative divine speech-act.²⁴ For while God the Trinity *is* a conversation, creation exists as something that is *in* conversation with God—with the God who speaks it into existence following God's very own 'conversational' nature. As Schwöbel puts it: 'God is *in* conversation with creation, because God is *as* conversation.'²⁵

While Luther's account of God as conversation is perhaps clearest in his exposition of John 16, the notion of an intra-trinitarian conversation can already be found in Luther's treatment of the Johannine prologue earlier in his *Sermons* on the fourth gospel. To quote Luther at some length:

When, for example, we think about something and diligently investigate it, we have words; we carry on a conversation with ourselves. Its content is unknown to all but ourselves until such Words of the heart are translated into oral words and speech... Not until then is our word heard and understood by others...

When a man has a thought, a word, or a conversation within himself, he speaks to himself incessantly and is full of words that suggest counsel as to what to do or not to do. He continually converses and deliberates on this within himself... For a word is not merely the utterance of the mouth; rather it is the thought of the heart. Without this thought the external word is not spoken; or if it is spoken, it has substance only when the word of the mouth is in accord with the word of the heart. Only then is the external word meaningful; otherwise it is worthless. Thus God, too, from all eternity has a Word, a speech, a thought, or a conversation with Himself in His divine heart, unknown to angels and men. This is called His Word.²⁶

Luther's division here between the 'internal' conversation one has within oneself and the 'external' conversation one has with others not only provides a model for distinguishing God's eternal conversation with the uncreated Word *ad intra* from God's conversation *ad extra* with the created words of creation. Luther's analysis of one's introspective 'internal' conversation within oneself can moreover be regarded as a rearticulation of Augustine's 'psychological' model of the Trinity in terms of speaking and conversation instead of intellectual or cognitive powers.²⁷

²³Schwöbel, 'We are All God's Vocabulary', 67.

²⁴Schwöbel, *Gott im Gespräch*, 477–78; 'God as Conversation', 66–67. See also Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 340–41.

²⁵Schwöbel, 'God as Conversation', 63.

²⁶LW 22:8–9; WA 46:543–44.

²⁷Cf. Milbank's reading of Augustine's psychological model of the Trinity as 'characterizing reason more as internal speech... Reason [by this rendition] has now become much more a word which we must first hear, first feel compelled by, before enunciating it in our own fashion.' John Milbank, 'Sacred Triads: Augustine and the Indo-European Soul', *Modern Theology* 13, no. 4 (2002), 462–63. For a discussion of Luther's views on psychological models of the Trinity, see Pekka Kärkkäinen, 'Trinity', in *Engaging Luther: A (New) Theological Assessment*, edited by Olli-Pekka Vainio (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010), 80–94, especially 82, 86–89; cf. Christine Helmer, *The Trinity and Martin Luther*, revised edition (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2017), 188–90.

God-hearing-Godself-speak

As noted above, in his rendition of the Trinity as a conversation, where God the Father is the Speaker, the Son the spoken Word, and the Holy Spirit the Listener, Luther remarks that 'it stands to reason that there must also be a listener where a speaker and a word are found'.²⁸ Luther's reasoning here coincides with some insights on the phenomena of speech and hearing in recent French philosophy. For instance, in his phenomenology of speech, Jean-Louis Chrétien asserts that 'All listening belongs to speech'.²⁹ As though echoing Luther's assertion that 'there must also be a listener where a speaker and a word are found', Chrétien argues that there must always be listening when there is an act of speech. Chrétien's view here is influenced not by Luther but by Heidegger, who, according to Chrétien, 'has shown, with great profundity, that speaking means listening and that listening means speaking'.³⁰ To quote Heidegger's original remarks:

[S]peaking is at the same time also listening. It is the custom to put speaking and listening in opposition: one man speaks, the other listens. But listening accompanies and surrounds not only speaking such as takes place in conversation. The simultaneousness of speaking and listening has a larger meaning. Speaking is of itself a listening.³¹

Heidegger's (and Chrétien's) point here is that when one speaks, one is always *also listening to oneself speak*, hearing one's own voice to orientate and conduct one's own speech.³² Indeed, as Derrida points out in his early work *Voice and Phenomenon* (1967),³³ even when we are speaking to *others*, we are always *simultaneously also listening to ourselves*:

To speak to someone is undoubtedly to hear oneself speak, to be heard by oneself... it belongs to the phenomenological essence of this operation that *I hear myself during the time that I speak*... It is implied in the very structure of speech that the speaker *hear himself*.³⁴

²⁸LW 24:364; WA 46:59.

²⁹Jean-Louis Chrétien, *The Ark of Speech*, trans. Andrew Brown (London: Routledge, 2004), 57.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 14.

³¹Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1982), 123.

³²Cf. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 35: 'speaking is already its own listening.'

³³As Ingolf Dalferth points out, Derrida's later deconstruction of gift-giving is modelled on his early criticism of Husserl's analysis of the originary self-giving evidence, 'the present or the presence of sense in a full and originary intuition'. See Ingolf U. Dalferth, *Becoming Present: An Inquiry into the Christian Sense of the Presence of God* (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 175; cf. Jacques Derrida, *Voice and Phenomenon*, trans. Leonard Lawlor (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011), 4. One might also observe a parallel development from speech to gift in the works of Derrida's one-time student, Jean-Luc Marion (whose account of gift-giving is often discussed alongside Derrida's), especially in his account of the human perceiver as '*l'interloqué*' who hears a call in his early work and of the human perceiver as '*l'adonné*' or 'the gifted' as the recipient of the excessive phenomenal givenness of a saturated phenomenon in his later work. See, respectively, Jean-Luc Marion, *Reduction and Givenness: Investigations of Husserl, Heidegger, and Phenomenology*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 198–202; *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 266–69.

³⁴Derrida, *Voice and Phenomenon*, 68, 66–67.

In this line of thinking, it would be impossible for one to speak to others if one could not hear oneself in the first place: there is no speaking without listening or hearing.³⁵ The hearing of oneself is a necessary condition for the possibility of speaking to others. As Chrétien remarks: 'In order to speak, I have to be able to hear myself.'³⁶

Following this philosophical emphasis on the simultaneousness of speaking and listening as well as Luther's imagery of one having a conversation with oneself, we may reconsider Luther's formulation of the Trinity and conceive of the trinitarian conversation not simply in terms of a divine Speaker opposed to a divine Listener who are the Father and the Spirit (what Heidegger calls 'put speaking and listening in opposition [where] one man speaks, the other listens'), but to conceive of the Father and Spirit in terms of the simultaneous acts of divine speaking and divine listening. While such a post-phenomenological re-reading of Luther's conversational model of the Trinity is admittedly speculative, it not only underscores the eternal—'simultaneous'—co-existence of Father, Son and Spirit (as the Father's divine speaking of the divine Word that is the Son automatically entails the divine hearing of the Spirit), but also the united subjectivity of three persons.

For as Derrida argues in *Voice and Phenomenon*, hearing or listening to oneself involves a unique sense of subjectivity that differs from other modes of auto-affection or self-perception:

In appearance, there is nothing like the phenomenon of the voice. Within phenomenological interiority, hearing oneself and seeing oneself are two orders of self-relation that are radically different.³⁷

Or as Jean-Luc Nancy puts it after Derrida: 'In terms of the gaze, the subject is referred back to itself as object. In terms of listening, it is, in a way, to itself that the subject refers or refers back.'³⁸ Whereas the subject looking at herself (whether through mirror reflection or directly observing one's body parts) would see herself as an *object*, in the case of hearing oneself speak, the subject would relate to herself as a *subject* insofar as the subject is simultaneously both the speaking subject *and* listening subject.³⁹ Understood in this way, a conception of the Trinity as a conversation or even as *God-hearing-Godself-speak* could avoid the potential problem or danger of introducing a subject-object opposition into the Trinity (as found in Robert Jenson's account of God as

³⁵In a perhaps ableist guise, Derrida goes so far as to argue that 'Being dumb and being deaf go together' (ibid, 67).

³⁶Chrétien, *The Ark of Speech*, 9.

³⁷See Derrida, *Voice and Phenomenon*, 65–66.

³⁸Nancy, *Listening*, 10.

³⁹For Nancy, this phenomenological difference between seeing oneself and hearing oneself is significant for our understanding and theories of subjectivity, for the western philosophical tradition has largely associated the faculty of sight with the faculty of the intellect, assuming that the visual bear a 'relationship to the intelligible as a *theoretical* relationship ([where] *theoretical* is linked to seeing)' (ibid). While Nancy's position might suggest that Augustine's conceiving of the divine persons in cognitive and intellectual terms in his 'psychological model' of the Trinity would introduce some kind of subject-opposition into God, as Rowan Williams points out, what Augustine articulates in his 'psychological' model is an account of human knowledge that differs radically from modern conceptions of the subject-object dichotomy. See Rowan Williams, *On Augustine* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 155–90, especially 163–68, 178. See also the similar reading of Aquinas' trinitarian theology in Rowan Williams, 'The Embodied Logos: Reason, Knowledge and Relation', in *Looking East in Winter* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 81–86.

conversation) or even a tritheistic division between the divine persons as though the Trinity were a society that consisted of three individual subjects.⁴⁰

While understanding the Holy Spirit in terms of the divine 'listening' may not necessarily lead to these problems, this interpretation of the conversational model of the Trinity does entail a pneumatology of double procession insofar as the Spirit is conceived as the listening or hearing 'back' from the second person *qua* the divine spoken Word. However, this does not mean that the conversational model presents the Spirit simply as 'the link between Father and Son' that is 'a closing of an eternal circle'.⁴¹ As Derrida remarks in his (obviously non-trinitarian) analysis of auto-affection in *Voice and Phenomenon*: 'Hearing-oneself-speak is not the interiority of an inside closed in upon itself. It is [rather] the irreducible openness in the inside.'⁴² According to Leonard Lawlor, what Derrida means is that:

[I]f we think of interior monologue, we see that a difference between hearer and speaker is necessary, we see that dialogue comes first... yet the process of dialogue... never completes itself in identity; the movement continues to *go beyond*...⁴³

By extension, if we think of the Trinity as a conversation or as *God-hearing-Godself-speak*, the intra-trinitarian difference between the divine persons would not be one of negation or opposition (e.g., between a subject and an object or where 'one man speaks, the other listens'), but a positive and generative difference.⁴⁴

Here we may consider the role of the Spirit as the Listener in the conversational model of the Trinity in relation to Milbank's account of the Spirit in his seminal essay 'The Second Difference', where he depicts the Spirit as the divine person who *listens* to the Son or the Word and interprets the Word for the Father:

[T]he Spirit which proceeds from the paternal-filial difference is genuinely a 'second difference' whose situation is that of a *listener* to a rhetorical plea of one upon behalf of the other.⁴⁵

⁴⁰This potential problem of conversational conceptions of the Trinity is noted by Anton Friedrich Koch, 'Rationalität im Gespräch: Grundlegendes aus philosophischer Perspektive', in *Rationalität im Gespräch – Rationality in Conversation: Philosophische und theologische Perspektiven – Philosophical and Theological Perspectives. Christoph Schwöbel zum 60. Geburtstag*, edited by Markus Mühling *et al* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2016), 22. On Jenson's 'Hegelian' conversational account of a subject-object opposition within the Trinity, see Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. I, 155–56, cf. 228–29. Jenson's 'Hegelian' position is also re-emphasised in his contribution to the *Festschrift* for Schwöbel's 60th birthday: Robert W. Jenson, 'Divine Converse, and the Possibility of Prayer', in *Rationalität im Gespräch – Rationality in Conversation: Philosophische und theologische Perspektiven – Philosophical and Theological Perspectives. Christoph Schwöbel zum 60. Geburtstag*, edited by Markus Mühling *et al* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2016), 195–97.

⁴¹See Colin Gunton, 'God the Holy Spirit: Augustine and His Successors', *Theology Through the Theologians* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 126.

⁴²Derrida, *Voice and Phenomenon*, 74.

⁴³Leonard Lawlor, 'Translator's Introduction: The Germinal Structure of Derrida's Thought', in Derrida, *Voice and Phenomenon*, xxiii (emphasis added).

⁴⁴'Generative' here does not refer to the technical trinitarian terminology of the 'generation' of the Son. As we shall see, Derrida's insights on the 'generative' difference in his analysis of one-hearing-oneself-speak which 'never completes itself in identity' but 'continues to go beyond' are echoed in Milbank's famous account of the 'second difference' of the Holy Spirit which 'overflows' from the 'first' difference between the Father and the Son within the Trinity.

⁴⁵John Milbank, 'The Second Difference: For a Trinitarianism Without Reserve', *Modern Theology* 2, no. 3 (April 1986): 230; reprinted in *The Word Made Strange*, 188 (emphasis added).

For Milbank, the paternal-filial difference between the first and second persons is ‘an exchange which overflows to a third, precisely because its return is not a return in pure identity, forming a closed circle which would be such that the Spirit might as well express only the will of the Father, rather than also the “ever-new” utterance of the Son’.⁴⁶ Following Milbank, we can understand the communicative or even dialogical difference between the Father and Son as an exchange of ‘words’, one where the generation of the Son from the Father as the speaking of the divine Word from the divine Speaker produces ‘an exchange which overflows to a third’ that is the Spirit who, as the Father’s *listening* of the spoken Word, is a ‘return [that] is not a return in pure identity’ but one which expresses ‘the “ever-new” utterance of the Son’.

*Can a Word be Given?*⁴⁷

As alluded to above, in Milbank’s outlook, the notion of ‘exchange’ applies not only to the dynamics between the three persons within the immanent Trinity *ad intra*, but also to the ontological relation between creation and God *ad extra*. Following his critique of Derrida’s account of unilateral gift-giving, Milbank contends that if we conceive of creation as a gift created and given by God, then we must admit a certain level of reciprocity into our understanding of the relation between God and creation.⁴⁸ Adapting the Derridean observation that the reception or even recognition of a gift *as* gift already constitutes an expression of gratitude or thanks-*giving* which amounts to a mode of return or giving-back,⁴⁹ Milbank argues that by virtue of existing, creatures are always already by definition receiving the gift of being from God—an ontological reception which constitutes a ‘return’ to God:

[D]ivine giving occurs *inexorably*, and this means that a return is inevitably made, for since the creature’s very being resides in its reception of itself as a gift, the gift is, in itself, the gift of a return... a return that constitutes the creature itself, and which God receives by grace... The Creature only *is*, as manifesting the divine glory, as acknowledging its own nullity and reflected brilliance. To be, it entirely honours God, which means it returns to Him an unlimited, never paid-back debt.⁵⁰

Because a created thing’s very being is itself a gift from God, the creature’s capacity to receive the gift of being—and to acknowledge its debt and gratitude to God and thereby give thanks ‘back’ to God—is *also* created and given by God. In other words, the created thing’s reciprocating act of responding—and ‘returning’—to God in thanksgiving is itself a gift from God. It is for this reason that Milbank describes the gift of creation as ‘an exchange as well as an offering without return’, an exchange which he calls an ‘asymmetrical reciprocity’.⁵¹

⁴⁶John Milbank, ‘Intensities’, *Modern Theology* 15, no. 4 (October 1999), 484; reprinted in John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2001), 57.

⁴⁷This section title is of course a reference to the classic article, John Milbank, ‘Can a Gift be Given? Prolegomena to a Future Trinitarian Metaphysic’, *Modern Theology* 11, no. 1 (January 1995): 119–61.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*

⁴⁹See Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 12–15.

⁵⁰Milbank, ‘Can a Gift be Given?’, 135.

⁵¹John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London: Routledge, 2003), xi, see also 46, 148, 156–57, 170.

This description of the relation between God and creation in terms of exchange and reciprocity may seem incompatible with the Lutheran emphasis on God's grace as a free and unconditional gift.⁵² However, a strikingly similar account of asymmetrical reciprocity can be found in Christoph Schwöbel's ontological rendition of Luther's account of God as conversation and creatures as God's created words:

Insofar as creation is addressed by God its whole being is responsive being, the existential response to the word of the creator. The relational order of created being is thereby characterised by reciprocity in the relationship to the creator. This reciprocity is strictly asymmetrical. In responding to God's address the creatures acknowledge their dependence on God's word.⁵³

For Schwöbel, as for Milbank, created being is 'responsive being', for creation exists as nothing other than an 'existential response' to God: just as Milbank argues that the creature 'only *is*... as acknowledging its own nullity' and its 'paid-back debt' to God for creating it, for Schwöbel creatures respond to God by 'acknowledg[ing] their dependence on God's word'.⁵⁴ To the extent that these creatures are, as Luther says, 'all words of God' created by God, what Schwöbel calls their 'existential response' to God may then be regarded as a 'return of words'—words of praise and thanks-giving—to the God who called them into being.⁵⁵ In short, the created words of God exist as a response and return of words to the God who created them through his uncreated divine Word.⁵⁶ If Milbank's account of God and creation is an ontology

⁵²See especially Berndt Hamm, 'Martin Luther's Revolutionary Theology of Pure Gift without Reciprocation', trans. Timothy J. Wengert, *Lutheran Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (2015): 125–61. There is much scholarly debate on the relation between 'gift' and 'grace' in Luther's theology and whether Luther held a reciprocal or unilateralist conception of gift-giving. For a reading of Luther's theology of gift contrary to Hamm's, see Bo Kristian Holm, *Gabe und Geben bei Luther* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2006). See also note 69 below.

⁵³Schwöbel, 'God as Conversation', 51–52.

⁵⁴See also Oswald Bayer, 'The Ethics of Gift', trans. Mark A. Seifr, *Lutheran Quarterly* 24, no. 4 (2010): 458: 'God's categorical giving does not exclude the counter-gift of the creature, but rather empowers the creature to this counter-gift as its response... [God] the Creator, as the unconditioned and unobligated Giver, wills to have a counter-gift, the response of faith... The gift calls for a counter-gift, a response... This contradicts Derrida's well-known thesis that every counter-gift—especially every expected counter-gift—turns a gift into an exchange, and thereby retrospectively annuls it as pure gift.'

⁵⁵Cf. *ibid.*, 458: '[The] triune God, who gives himself entirely to us together with all living creatures, in that we give back as a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to him—to the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit—that which we have received.'

⁵⁶See Christoph Schwöbel, 'God, Creation and the Christian Community: The Dogmatic Basis of a Christian Ethic of Createdness', in *The Doctrine of Creation: Essays in Dogmatics, History and Philosophy*, edited by Colin Gunton (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 164: 'The understanding of the act of creating as *creatio ex nihilo* implies a view of the world as creation, as *creatura*, as an absolute gift... as a gift that is to be responded to.' Cf. Christoph Schwöbel, 'The Eternity of the Triune God: Preliminary Considerations on the Relationship between the Trinity and the Time of Creation', *Modern Theology* 34, no. 3 (July 2018): 355: 'The relationship of the triune God to the world is in this sense understood as a relationship constituted in divine speech-acts, creative speech-acts to which humans (indeed all creatures) are called to respond in created speech-acts.' Echoing (Derrida and) Milbank's aforementioned argument that the reception of a gift already constitutes a 'return' and 'response' to the gift-giver, Chrétien contends that to hear and receive a word or call is already to respond and answer to it. See Chrétien, *The Ark of Speech*, 11: 'listening cannot be separated from replying to and taking up what we listen to.' Cf. Jean-Louis Chrétien, *The Call and the Response*, trans. Anne Davenport (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 27, 29–30: 'We hear the call only in the answer... I can only take by giving back, listen by responding... the call is heard only in the response.' Similarly, not unlike Milbank's insistence that the very being of the creature resides in its reception of itself as a gift, Chrétien maintains that 'We listen through our whole being only because listening constitutes our whole being' (*ibid.*, 28).

of 'gift-exchange', then perhaps one can call this Lutheran theological outlook an ontology of 'word-exchange'.⁵⁷

Such an account of 'word-exchange' is one that can be found in Schwöbel's articulation of Luther's conversational model of the Trinity:

Understanding the Trinity in terms of the conversation which God is, requires a [sense of] mutuality. The Father who is the initiating speaker in the Trinity also becomes the listener and the responsive speaker when the Son who is first the listener becomes the responsive speaker in his relation to God.⁵⁸

Just as this intra-trinitarian mutuality or 'word-exchange' between the Father and Son—or even between the divine Speaker and the divine Word—is constituted by the 'divine listening' which Luther associates with the Holy Spirit in Schwöbel's account of the Trinity, in Milbank's portrayal of the Trinity it is the Spirit who is envisioned as 'the realization of a perpetual exchange between the Father and the Son'.⁵⁹

For Milbank, the Holy Spirit is not only the realization of the 'exchange' between the Father and the Son within the immanent Trinity, but is moreover key to the 'exchange' between God and creation.⁶⁰ Speaking of 'the "return" of the Son to the Father through the Spirit' in the Trinity,⁶¹ Milbank draws a close connection between this intra-trinitarian 'return' of the Holy Spirit in the Trinity and creation's extra-trinitarian 'return' to God:

God the creator and revealer is one: his emanation of created being and his call to creation and humanity to return to him are a single same eternal unchanging action. Within God they are indeed further identical with the inner (relationally distinguished) Paternal generation of the Word, and the 'returning' procession of the Spirit through the Son from the Father.⁶²

A similar link between the activity of the Holy Spirit and creation's return and response to God can be found in Schwöbel's trinitarian ontology of conversation:

⁵⁷The 'word-exchange' or 'exchange of words' is precisely Hamann's one-phrase characterisation of Luther's theological outlook. See Johann Georg Hamann, 'Miscellaneous Notes on Word Order in the French Language (1760)', *Writings on Philosophy and Language*, trans. and edited by Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 22; cf. Oswald Bayer, *A Contemporary in Dissent: Johann Georg Hamann as Radical Enlightener*, trans. Roy A. Harrisville and Mark C. Mattes (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 25, 44, 48–50, 74. I am grateful to Adam T. Morton for drawing my attention to this connection. See also the discussion of 'asymmetrical reciprocity' in connection to the notion of 'gift' in Schwöbel, 'We are All God's Vocabulary', 60: 'Both the language of gift, so famously employed in Luther's expressions of God's Trinitarian self-giving, and the language of a divine conversation bridge the subject-object dichotomy by the reciprocal, though asymmetrical, character of personal relationships.'

⁵⁸Schwöbel, 'God as Conversation', 65, where Schwöbel is careful to add: 'This mutuality does not destroy the *taxis* in the Trinity, the order of personal relations whereby the Father generates the Son and not the Son the Father.' Cf. Christoph Schwöbel, 'Where Do We Stand in Trinitarian Theology?', in *Recent Developments in Trinitarian Theology*, edited by Christophe Chalamet and Marc Vial (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), 25: 'The inner-trinitarian relations are in a sense mutually constitutive and reciprocal, though asymmetrical, relations.'

⁵⁹Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, x.

⁶⁰See Leung, 'Transcendentality and the Gift', 98.

⁶¹John Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order: The Representation of Being and the Representation of the People* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 239.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 26.

'The Spirit, who has enabled creation to respond to the word of the Creator since the beginning, is also the one who restores the capacity to respond to the Creator where our words fail (Romans 8:26–27).⁶³ Indeed, in Schwöbel's Lutheran outlook, it is precisely 'Through the Spirit who listens in on the conversation between the Father and the Son [that] God speaks to us so that we can engage in a conversation with God'.⁶⁴ Thus, for Schwöbel, as for Milbank, the economic relation between God and creation is fundamentally rooted in the dynamics of the immanent Trinity which Milbank defines as 'gift-exchange' and Schwöbel construes as 'conversation'—what might be called 'word-exchange'.⁶⁵

However, here we also find some of the differences between Milbank's Christian Neo-Platonic metaphysics of the gift and Schwöbel's Lutheran ontology of the word—not least the difference between Milbank's trinitarian rendition of the Neo-Platonic schema of *exitus et reditus* and Schwöbel's adherence to the theological motifs of 'creation' and 'redemption'.⁶⁶ As opposed to seeing creation's redemption or return to God as an ontological outworking of the Holy Spirit's 'returning procession', for Schwöbel created beings' response to God rendered possible by the Holy Spirit is always fundamentally an act of faith: 'we can only respond to God by trusting promises: in faith.'⁶⁷ It is only through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit the eternal Listener of the Trinity that creatures can become proper *listeners* to God's divine address and respond to God in faith.⁶⁸ But although this Lutheran emphasis on justification by faith through grace and not works may first appear to be irreconcilable with an account of the relationship between God and creation as a reciprocal exchange such as Milbank's, as a number of Luther scholars have argued, a structure

⁶³Schwöbel, 'We are All God's Vocabulary', 64.

⁶⁴Christoph Schwöbel, 'Martin Luther and the Trinity', in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Martin Luther*, Vol. 3, edited by Derek R. Nelson and Paul R. Hinlicky (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 426. Cf. Schwöbel, 'Einfach Gott', 539, where he argues that Luther sees the Holy Spirit as the one who communicates the immanent eternal conversation within the Trinity to creation in the form of an economic conversation between God and creation: 'Luther hier dem heiligen Geist eine besondere Rolle zuschreibt, gleichsam als die Schnittstelle zwischen dem Gespräch das Gott ist und dem Gespräch, das er mit seinen Geschöpfen führt.'

⁶⁵See Schwöbel, 'We are All God's Vocabulary', 66: 'The metaphor of the inner-Trinitarian conversation... locates divine essence precisely in the eternal communicative exchange.' Cf. Schwöbel, 'God as Conversation', 45: 'the conversation that God *has* with creation has its roots in the conversations that God *is*.'

⁶⁶Schwöbel also holds that Luther's replacement of 'substance' with God's 'word' (see note 15 above) brings about a new ontology of communication that departs from Aristotelian-Thomist metaphysics' emphasis on causation: 'The paradigm of causality, explaining divine action in terms of cause and effect, is replaced by the hermeneutical paradigm of address and response, which now includes the causality of efficacious speaking and reception' ('The Concept of Revelation', 88). For Schwöbel, this ontology of communication not only underscores the unity of being and meaning in creation that is grounded in God's own 'communicative being' as a trinitarian conversation (*ibid.*, 89; 'We are All God's Vocabulary', 67), it moreover secures the freedom of both divine and creaturely agency (*Gott im Gespräch*, 262–64, 478; 'The Eternity of the Triune God', 353–54; 'God as Conversation', 66).

⁶⁷Christoph Schwöbel, 'Read–Pray–Trust: One Theologian's Encounter with Scripture', in *Theologians on Scripture*, edited by Angus Paddison (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 177. Cf. Christoph Schwöbel, 'Human Being as Relational Being', in *Persons, Divine and Human*, edited by Christoph Schwöbel and Colin Gunton (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 145, 147: 'Faith as the human response to God's revelation... is *ontologically* the mode of being in which human beings actualize their relational being in accordance with God's relationship to humanity.' See also Christoph Schwöbel, 'Divine Agency and Providence', *Modern Theology* 3, no. 3 (April 1987): 239.

⁶⁸See LW 22:8; WA 46:543: 'In the end only the Holy Spirit from heaven above can create listeners and pupils who accept this doctrine and believe that the Word is God, that God's son is the Word.' Cf. Christoph Schwöbel, *God: Action and Revelation* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1992), 11; 'Human Being as Relational Being', 150.

of reciprocity and exchange can be found in Luther's doctrine of justification by faith.⁶⁹

Just as the creature's very capacity to receive the gift of being is itself, as Milbank emphasises, a gift created and given by God, the (created) believer's faith in God is itself also a gift created and given by God.⁷⁰ In this dynamic we find a structure of asymmetrical reciprocity that very much echoes Milbank's 'gift-exchange': it is God who gives creatures faith, which creatures then 'return' back to God.⁷¹ As Oswald Bayer puts it in his reading of Luther:

In giving us faith God shows faith in us. The concepts of faith and faithfulness are both present. God pledges [*geloben*] himself to us and gives faith to us. Hence we too can have faith [*glauben*] in God and rely upon him.⁷²

In other words, God has faith in us and gives faith to us, so that we can in (re)turn have faith in God—just as we love because God first loved us (1 John 4:19).⁷³ We can have faith in God not only because God is the giver of faith, but more importantly because God himself *is* faithful: the God in whom we have faith is a promising God who always keeps his promise.⁷⁴

For Schwöbel, the very fact that God is one who faithfully keeps his promises is rooted in God's being.⁷⁵ Drawing on Luther's exposition of Exodus 3:14, Schwöbel argues that

⁶⁹For example, see Bo Kristian Holm, 'Gift in Martin Luther's Theology' in *Oxford Encyclopedia of Martin Luther: Vol. 1*, edited Derek R. Nelson and Paul R. Hinlicky (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 558–73; Bo Kristian Holm, 'Justification and Reciprocity: "Purified Gift-exchange" in Luther and Milbank', in *Word–Gift–Being: Justification–Economy–Ontology*, edited by Bo Kristian Holm and Peter Widmann (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 87–116; Piotr Malysz, 'Exchange and Ecstasy: Luther's Eucharistic Theology in Light of Radical Orthodoxy's Critique of Gift and Sacrifice', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60, no. 3 (2007): 294–308; Risto Saarinen, *Luther and the Gift* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017); Risto Saarinen, *God and the Gift: An Ecumenical Theology of Giving* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005); Gregory Walter, *Being Promised: Theology, Gift, and Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013). This is obviously a complicated debate. For overviews of different perspectives and the state of the debate, see Bo Kristian Holm and Peter Widmann, 'Word–Gift–Being: Introduction', in *Word–Gift–Being: Justification–Economy–Ontology*, edited by Bo Kristian Holm and Peter Widmann (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 1–16; Holm, 'Gift in Martin Luther's Theology', 567–69; Saarinen, *Luther and the Gift*, *passim*.

⁷⁰Schwöbel, 'Einfach Gott', 536: 'Die radikale Passivität des Empfangens ist jedenfalls bei Luther die Begründung verantwortlicher Aktivität.'

⁷¹Bo Holm goes so far as to say that faith and promise are key to the phenomenon of *all* gift-giving: 'In order to recognize a gift as a good gift from a good giver, the trust of the receiver in the good intentions of the giver is needed. This simple model shows from the perspective of gift-giving why the promise (qualifying the character of the gift by pointing at the intention of the gift) necessarily corresponds with faith understood as confidence (in the giver's good intention). The relation between promise and faith calls for the clear revelation of the giver's intention.' Holm, 'Gift in Martin Luther's Theology', 564. See also note 87 below.

⁷²Oswald Bayer, *Living by Faith: Justification and Sanctification*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 52.

⁷³The masculine pronoun is used advisedly in the remaining paragraphs of this section to refer to God's giving and promising of Godself.

⁷⁴See Gregory Walter, 'Promise in Martin Luther's Thought and Theology', in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Martin Luther, Vol. 3*, edited by Derek R. Nelson and Paul R. Hinlicky (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 216: 'The relation of promise to faith is not unilateral but wholly reciprocal... Faith is crediting God what God promises and so treating God as true. This return to God in turn means that God treats those with faith as true as well.' Cf. Gregory Walter, 'On Martin Luther's Statement, "Fides Creatrix Divinitatis"', *Dialog* 52, no. 3 (2013): 197: 'promise is best understood as a kind of gift-exchange, and that faith properly abides as an act within that exchange.'

⁷⁵Cf. Bayer, *Living by Faith*, 52: 'The entire Godhead—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—communicates and imparts itself to that faith in the promise of God.'

God's declaration that 'I am who I am' or 'I will be who I will be' reveals that God is not only a promising God, but moreover a God who simply *is* promise:

Luther reads Exodus 3:14 as God promising Godself, so that this promise is God's essence in relation to which no creature has any essence. *God's essence, we can say, is that God promises Godself unconditionally.* By promising Godself, God is the ultimate goal and in this sense the primordial beginning, the only one who has essence. God as the 'ground of being' is dependent on God being 'the *telos* of being', and the being of every creature is in this way dependent on the God *who is promise*. Any created essence is dependent on this divine promise. There is no prior participation of created being in the ground of being, but only the participation communicated in God's promise.⁷⁶

God's act of revealing himself is itself an act of making a promise. And what God reveals *and* promises is, as Schwöbel argues, nothing other than God himself: what is disclosed in God's self-identification or even self-promise as 'I am who I am' or 'I will be who I will be' is that God is not only a promising God, but that God *is* promise in God's very own essence.⁷⁷

To promise someone is to give them your word (*sein Wort geben*); the act of making a promise is also the act of giving one's word.⁷⁸ In this regard, we can see why Schwöbel argues that 'the logic of promising entails the logic of giving'.⁷⁹ In Schwöbel's reading of Luther, there is a fundamental connection 'between the soteriological promise of Christian faith and the constitution of God's tri-personal being'.⁸⁰ As Schwöbel remarks, 'According to Luther, God's self-determination [as promise] is not the reflexive act of a solitary subject, but the conversation of the Father, Son, and Spirit.'⁸¹ God makes promises because God, so to speak, *gives his word*—because the trinitarian God is a conversational God who is essentially *always already giving his Word*.⁸² The Word that God gives is not just any word but *the Word* that is none other than God himself: what God gives *is* God himself, just as what God promises *is*

⁷⁶Christoph Schwöbel, 'Promise and Trust: Lutheran Identity in a Multicultural Society', in *Justification in a Post-Christian Society*, edited by Carl-Henric Grenholm and Göran Gunner (Cambridge: James Clarke and Co, 2015), 20–21 (emphasis added); cf. WA 16:41–54, esp. 16:49.

⁷⁷Schwöbel, 'Einfach Gott', 538: "Ich werde sein, der ich sein werde", Gottes Wesen als *promissio*—das beinhaltet auch, dass Gott nichts anderes verspricht als sich selbst."

⁷⁸Making a promise is of course the classic example of a performative speech-act in J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, edited by J.O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962). Without naming Austin, Schwöbel alludes to Austin's title in discussion of the communicative nature of divine action in *Gott im Gespräch*, 428. Following the previous discussions of Derrida's early work *Voice and Phenomenon* (1967) as well as his later critical account of gift-giving in *Given Time* (1991), we might also mention here Derrida's controversial critique of Austin's speech-act theory and his subsequent exchange with John Searle in the 1970s and 1980s: see Jacques Derrida, *Limited, Inc.*, trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988). For a discussion of the use of 'speech-act' in Lutheran theology in relation to Derrida as well as the notion of 'gift-exchange', see Walter, *Being Promised*; 'Luther's Statement, "Fides Creatrix Divinitatis"'

⁷⁹Schwöbel, 'Promise and Trust', 20.

⁸⁰Christoph Schwöbel, 'The One and the Three in Christian Worship and Doctrine: Engaging with the Question of Divine Unity in the Elaboration of Christian Doctrine', in *Monotheism and Its Complexities: Christian and Muslim Perspectives*, edited by Lucinda Mosher and David Marshall (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2018), 79.

⁸¹Schwöbel, 'Promise and Trust', 21.

⁸²Bayer suggests that Luther is the first in Christian history to name the second person of the Trinity—and not just the Holy Spirit—as 'the gift'. See Bayer, 'Ethics of Gift', 454: '[Luther] understands—and this to my knowledge is not to be found in the tradition before him—Christ as *donum*.' See also footnote 108 below.

nothing less than God himself.⁸³ God is essentially promise and *makes* promises because God in God's triune essence is an eternally *word-giving* conversation.⁸⁴ Understood in this light, God's self-identification in Exodus 3:14 as 'I am who I am' or 'I will be who I will be' is no longer simply the revelation of 'being *qua* being' or an abstract 'ground of being' as the simple being of the *one* divine substance. Rather, God's self-revelation as word-giving promise in Exodus is a proto-trinitarian revelation that foreshadows the New Testament revelation of God as the word-giving Trinity who gives—and reveals to—the created world his Word in the incarnation.⁸⁵

If God's act of creation is a creative speech-act which involves God giving God's word, then the divine act of creation *qua* word-giving would also be a divine act of making a promise.⁸⁶ Accordingly, to the extent that creatures exist as gifts or what Luther calls God's 'created words',⁸⁷ they are also in some sense words that are given by God: creatures are in this sense also God's 'created promises', created by a God who is 'uncreated promise' in his 'word-giving' essence.⁸⁸ To recall Schwöbel: 'the being of every creature is in this way dependent on the God who is promise'.⁸⁹ If creatures exist and persist as God's 'created promises' by virtue and by extension of being God's 'created words', then creation's existence does not only, in Milbank's words, 'manifest the divine glory'.⁹⁰ With their very being *as* God's created promise, creatures' gifted existence moreover testifies to the faithfulness of God who gives creation his Word.⁹¹ We can have faith in God and in God's promise not simply be-

⁸³Christoph Schwöbel, 'The Many Faces of Evil: Philosophical and Theological Conversations on the Experience of Evil', *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 78, no. 4–5 (2017): 344; 'Promise and Trust', 21–23. On the Lutheran notion of divine—and trinitarian—self-giving, see Schwöbel, 'Martin Luther and the Trinity', 417–22; Oswald Bayer, 'The Self-Giving God', trans. Karl Böhmer, *Lutheran Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (2019): 125–36; cf. Schwöbel, 'The Concept of Revelation', 87–89.

⁸⁴The promise that God makes to creatures is rooted in God's very own *promising* essence as instantiated in God's intra-trinitarian word-exchange or indeed intra-trinitarian *word-giving*, just as 'God's conversational relationship with creation is rooted in God's own communicative being as a Trinitarian conversation'. See Schwöbel, 'We are All God's Vocabulary', 67.

⁸⁵This anticipation is reinforced by the future-oriented character of Luther's reading of Exodus 3:14 as highlighted in Schwöbel, 'Promise and Trust', 19–20, 31.

⁸⁶See Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 119: 'creation out of nothing take[s] place only through this promise.'

⁸⁷In fact, Bayer argues that Luther is the first in the history of theology to describe creation as a gift. See Bayer, 'The Ethics of Gift', 453: 'Prior to Luther, creation never had been understood as a categorical gift, or at least was not spoken of in terms of "a giving" or "a gift". Biblical language seldom employs these terms in a context of a theology of creation. On the basis of his Reformational discovery—namely, that the word of institution of the Lord's Supper is at its core a word of gift: "Take and eat. This is my body, given for you!"—Luther found the understanding of creation as gift that is so characteristic of him. The few, isolated points at which the language of the Bible itself speaks of creation as a gift could hardly have brought him as such to that understanding of creation.'

⁸⁸Bayer, 'The Self-Giving God', 129–30: 'for Luther, "gift" and "promise" belong inseparably together... everything the triune God does is a giving promise and promising gift.' Cf. Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 112: 'For Luther the world is the world that God promises. *Creation is the promised world.*'

⁸⁹Schwöbel, 'Promise and Trust', 21. Or indeed, so to speak, dependent on God's *word*—see Schwöbel, 'God as Conversation', 50: 'God's word is the subsistence of created being.'

⁹⁰Cf. Milbank, 'Can a Gift be Given?', 135. See also Schwöbel, 'We are All God's Vocabulary', 51: 'all that God creates speaks to his glory, not only human beings but the whole of creation... Everything that exists testifies to the Creator who creates by performative and effective speech—through an activity that is communicative of God's glory.'

⁹¹Cf. Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 117, 111: 'God's promised world continues to exist because of his faithfulness... *The central point of Luther's understanding of creation is that the whole world and all creatures call upon him and that God uses this medium to promise and to give himself to us.*'

cause God first had faith in us but ultimately because God *is faithful*—just as we love not simply because God first loved us but ultimately because God *is love* (1 John 4).⁹² As Milbank concludes his landmark essay ‘Can a Gift be Given?’, ‘This is the one given condition of the gift, that we love because God first loved us. It being given that God is love.’⁹³

Conclusion

While Luther’s theology is often seen to be incompatible with or even antithetical to recent theological developments in participatory metaphysics and reciprocal gift-exchange,⁹⁴ a number of Lutheran scholarly works have highlighted many points of convergence between these theological sensibilities and Luther’s theology.⁹⁵ However, although these insightful works have produced many nuanced understandings of Luther’s theology and its legacy, there has been relatively little discussion of how Luther’s account of the Word and conversation can relate to contemporary Christian metaphysics and philosophical theology more broadly.⁹⁶ This essay has sought to contribute to this discussion by highlighting some of the parallels between Milbank’s theology of the gift and Schwöbel’s Lutheran theology of the Word as well as some potential ways in which the conversational model of the Trinity as conceived by Luther (and Schwöbel) can complement Milbank’s ontology of gift-exchange and other related developments in recent theological metaphysics.

⁹²Cf. Christoph Schwöbel, ‘God is Love: The Model of Love and the Trinity’, *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 40, no. 3 (1998): 307–28.

⁹³Milbank, ‘Can a Gift be Given?’, 154.

⁹⁴For critiques of Luther’s divergence from Christian Neo-Platonic participatory metaphysics, see John Milbank, ‘Reformation 500: Any Cause for Celebration?’, *Open Theology* 4, no. 1 (2018): 607–29; *Being Reconciled*, 110–11. Note however that Milbank affirms the Lutheran account of ‘promise’ once it is understood in participatory terms (when read through Hamann), see Milbank, ‘Reformation 500’, 624. For critical discussions of Luther’s theology’s (alleged) incompatibility with reciprocal gift-giving, see William T. Cavanaugh, ‘Eucharistic Sacrifice and the Social Imagination in Early Modern Europe’, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31, no. 3 (2001): 585–605; cf. John Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 97–116.

⁹⁵For example, on gift-exchange, see Holm, ‘Justification and Reciprocity’; Malysz, ‘Exchange and Ecstasy’; Saarinen, *God and the Gift*; Walter, *Being Promised*. A ‘participatory’ reading of Luther’s (early) theology is notably found in the so-called Finnish or Mannermaa school of Lutheran scholarship. See, for instance, Sammeli Juntunen, ‘Luther and Metaphysics: What is the Structure of Being according to Luther?’, in *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther*, edited by Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 129–60, especially 148–56.

⁹⁶Some notable recent examples include Marius Timmann Mjaaland, *The Hidden God: Luther, Philosophy, and Political Theology* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2016); Marius Timmann Mjaaland (ed.), *The Reformation of Philosophy: The Philosophical Legacy of the Reformation Reconsidered* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020); Steven D. Paulson, *Luther’s Outlaw God, Vol. 3: Sacraments and God’s Attack on the Promise* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2021); cf. Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*. A less recent example is Ingolf Dalferth’s insightful critique of Derrida and Marion’s accounts of gift-giving, which includes a critical engagement with Milbank. Dalferth perceptively argues that Derrida and Marion have the ‘phenomenological’ tendency to abstract the phenomenon of gift-giving from its ‘concrete communicative practices’ which are essential to our understanding and recognition of the reality of gift-giving (Dalferth, *Becoming Present*, 190–95). Dalferth also critically alleges that Milbank’s ‘emphasis on reciprocity is nothing less than the modernist claim that the sinner has not received the gift of creation—that he “is” without having been created’ (ibid., 178). However, despite this critique of Milbank, Bo Holm observes that Dalferth’s own ‘hermeneutical’ (as opposed to ‘phenomenological’) focus on the concrete reality of gift-giving is in fact a variation of Milbank’s insistence that ‘gift-giving is a mode (*the mode in fact*) of social being’ (*Being Reconciled*, 156). See Holm, ‘Justification and Reciprocity’, 95–96.

In comparison to the notion of ‘gift-exchange’ which, as Derrida, Kathryn Tanner and others have intimated, often comes with economic or contractual connotations, the idea of conversation as an ‘exchange of words’ or ‘word-exchange’ does not have the same possible connotations of commodification or commercial transaction.⁹⁷ Moreover, whereas it would be impossible for others to look into or participate in one’s inward subjective cognitive acts, it is possible for others to hear conversations that one might have with oneself or even respond to and converse with the one who is doing the speaking—to participate in the conversation of the original speaker.⁹⁸ Accordingly, as opposed to envisioning the Trinity according to some introspective account of one’s cognitive faculties which remains private and internal to one’s own inward thoughts, understanding the Trinity as a conversation presents the divine life as one which allows other subjects—namely, creatures—to listen in or indeed participate in the divine conversation.⁹⁹ In this regard, in comparison to psychological models, a conversational model of the Trinity seems better suited to complement or even facilitate a participatory account of Christian metaphysics (as advocated by Milbank and many other contemporary theologians).¹⁰⁰

As noted at the outset of this essay, Milbank argues that ‘when *Verbum* is included as a transcendental, all the transcendentals are transformed into personal, intersubjective, trinitarian categories’.¹⁰¹ Drawing on Schwöbel’s ontological construal of Luther’s theology, this essay has considered the different ways in which the theological notion of the Word can indeed, as Milbank suggests, give us a transcendental property that is ‘personal’, ‘intersubjective’, and ‘trinitarian’. Firstly, Luther’s conception of creatures as God’s ‘created words’ can foster an ontological outlook in which all created entities can be predicated with the universal property of ‘word’ which reflects the uncreated Word as a divine *person* of the Trinity—thereby presenting *verbum* as a *personal* transcendental term insofar as it refers to a divine person (and not just ‘abstractly’ to the one divine substance). Secondly, seeing all things as God’s ‘created words’ is also ‘intersubjective’, because creatures as God’s ‘created words’ by their very nature have their existence by virtue of being in conversation with God. If the relation between creation and God is indeed a conversation, there is then a certain sense of intersubjectivity in creation’s asymmetrical reciprocal exchange with God. As God’s created conversation partners, creatures exist not only in an intersubjective manner in their relationship with each other, but also in some

⁹⁷See Derrida, *Given Time*; Kathryn Tanner, *The Economy of Grace* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005); cf. Marion, *Being Given*, 71–118.

⁹⁸Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Hölderlin’s Hymns: ‘Germania’ and ‘The Rhine’*, trans. William McNeill and Julia Ireland (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014), 63 (translation modified): ‘We are a conversation... partaking in the conversation’ (*Wir sind ein Gespräch... teilnehmend am Gespräch*). See also the commentary on Heidegger’s reading of Hölderlin in Schwöbel, *Gott im Gespräch*, 435–49.

⁹⁹Cf. Schwöbel, ‘The Eternity of the Triune God’, 354–55. It is worth stressing here that this conversational model of participation does not necessarily compromise or collapse the ontological difference between God and creaturely participants: to the extent that we all hear ourselves differently from how others hear our voices, just as participants in a conversation do not and *cannot* hear the original speaker’s voice in the same way that she hears herself, God’s self is present to God and becomes accessible to creatures or participants in the divine conversation. See also Schwöbel’s account of participation in *Gott im Gespräch*, 261–69.

¹⁰⁰In addition to Milbank’s various works (e.g., *Being Reconciled* and *Beyond Secular Order*), see also Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Davison, *Participation in God*. Cf. Schwöbel, *Gott im Gespräch*, 253–61.

¹⁰¹Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 80.

sense in an intersubjective manner with God with whom they converse.¹⁰² For creation to exist in conversation with God means that God not only speaks to creation, God moreover *also* listens to creation as God's very own 'created words'.¹⁰³ To understand all creatures as God's 'created words' who exist in conversation in God is thus to attribute a sense of intersubjectivity to all created beings, thereby rendering 'word' not only a *personal* but also *intersubjective* transcendental term.¹⁰⁴

Thirdly, following the Johannine prologue's assertion that there is an uncreated and eternally coexistent Word within God, Luther conceives of God in Godself as a trinitarian conversation which consists of a divine Speaker, Word, and Listener. In this line of thinking, any proper consideration of the second person of the Trinity as the divine Word necessarily assumes the coexistence of some Speaker of this Word that is also listened to by some Listener (as we also saw in Derrida, Nancy, and Chrétien's philosophical analyses of the simultaneousness of speaking and listening).¹⁰⁵ In this case, if all created things are God's 'created words' which only have existence by virtue of being in a created conversation with God, then the being of all created things may be said to have a *conversational being* which reflects God's trinitarian being that is the originary uncreated conversation which gives being to all things. To the extent that the Trinity is conversation *par excellence* and that God's uncreated being and creaturely being are both 'conversational' (albeit in an analogical manner),¹⁰⁶ to see them

¹⁰²Schwöbel, 'Eternity of the Triune God', 355.

¹⁰³As noted above with reference to philosophical insights from Derrida, Nancy, and Chrétien, speaking is always simultaneously listening, thus God's act of speaking created words into existence also entails that God can and does listen to these created words that he has spoken. Cf. Schwöbel, 'Promise and Trust', 21: '[God's] self-determination [as promise] includes the active ability to be determined by what is not God, i.e. by God's creatures, [who are] called into being in order to hear the address of the creator, and respond to the creator.'

¹⁰⁴See also the discussion of different notions of 'intersubjectivity' in relation to his theory of the gift in John Milbank, 'The Soul of Reciprocity Part One: Reciprocity Refused', *Modern Theology* 17, no. 3 (July 2001): 335–91; cf. 'The Soul of Reciprocity Part Two: Reciprocity Granted', *Modern Theology* 17, no. 4 (October 2001): 485–507.

¹⁰⁵In an observation not dissimilar to my account of the intrinsic connection between gift and word in 'Transcendentality and the Gift', 95, Chrétien argues in *The Ark of Speech*, 113, 111: 'every gift is sealed by words... Speech alone opens the dimension of the gift, for without speech I could never be assured that something is being given, or that is indeed to me that it is being given, or, by accepting it, take cognizance of the way that someone else has renounced it so that I can benefit from it.' This philosophical analysis is also echoed by Bayer's Lutheran analysis of the Lord's Supper: 'Bread and wine are given—yet comprehended and impenetrated by the *Word*: by a *definite* word, no assertion, no command, no description, but rather nothing other than a promise. A gift obviously requires a word in order to count at all as a gift, to be apprehended as a gift, to be received as a gift, to be "heard" as a gift' (Bayer, 'The Ethics of Gift', 457; cf. 'The Self-giving God', 128–30). A version of this association of gift with 'word' can also be found in Dalferth's 'hermeneutical' emphasis on situating gift-giving in 'concrete communicative practices' as opposed to the 'phenomenological' tendency to treating gift-giving as an abstract phenomenon (even though Chrétien's approach is undoubtedly phenomenological), as mentioned above in note 96. See also the explication of Luther on the intrinsic relationship between 'gift' and 'word' (which closely echoes Milbank's) in Holm, 'Justification and Reciprocity', 113: 'The relationship between word, gift and being could be articulated as follows: The Word is the proclamation of realized exchange, which is the only way of securing the reality of the gift. Only with the precondition of an already established reciprocity can gifts be given. "Reciprocity" itself is therefore the gift.'

¹⁰⁶Cf. Schwöbel, 'Human Being as Relational Being', 155–56.

as God's 'created words' is to also consider them in conversational and indeed *trinitarian* terms.¹⁰⁷ Accordingly, to transcendently predicate all creatures with *verbum* does not simply imply that all things are created through the uncreated divine Word as a person of the Trinity (cf. Col. 1:16), it is moreover to understand creatures *qua* God's 'created words' in conversational terms. The universal predication of all things as God's 'created words' is therefore a rendition of all creation in a transcendental term that is not only *personal* (as it refers to a person of the Trinity), but also *intersubjective* (insofar as it is conversational) and indeed *trinitarian* (as the Trinity is the originary conversation which gives conversational being to all things).¹⁰⁸

If Milbank is right to hold that 'all the transcendentals are transformed into personal, intersubjective, trinitarian categories' when *Verbum* is included as a transcendental,¹⁰⁹ then we can conversely note that, by virtue of being 'personal', 'intersubjective' and indeed 'trinitarian', all the transcendentals would in some sense also be 'conversational'.¹¹⁰ By extension, if all the transcendentals are conversational, 'conversation' itself would also be transcendental: in addition to *verbum*, we might also say that conversation *is* a transcendental term. What this means is that created beings are not simply universally one, true and good (*à la* scholastic metaphysics of being) or God's 'created words' (*à la* Luther's theology of *Verbum*) but more fundamentally—and indeed transcendently—conversational: 'being *is* conversation'.¹¹¹ According to this *analogia transcendentalis* (to use Schwöbel's phrase), created being no longer finds its analogue exclusively in the perfections of the *one* divine substance (following scholastic metaphysics of transcendental properties) or solely in the second divine person *qua* the uncreated Word (as implied by Luther's account of creatures as 'created words').¹¹² Instead, to the extent that creatures only exist 'conversationally' by virtue of being in conversation with God who is *the* originary divine conversation, created being is reflective neither of the one divine substance nor one of the three divine persons but rather of the entire Trinity which Schwöbel

¹⁰⁷Although Luther's account of creation's conversational being and God's uncreated conversational being appears to be an 'analogy of (conversational) being' and his notion of 'created words' created by God's 'uncreated Word' can be seen as a kind of 'analogy of word' or *analogia verbi*, Jenson insists that understanding creation as God's divine speech-act entails the univocity of being. See Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. II, 38: 'if God's creating word is an actual utterance and not an unspoken mental form actualized by will... [then] whatever God himself means by "be" is exactly what it means for a creature to be... Therefore insofar as "being" says something about God or creatures, "being" must after all be univocal rather than analogous.'

¹⁰⁸Following my suggestion in 'Transcendentality and the Gift' that 'gift' can be regarded as a 'trinitarian transcendental' with creaturely being conceived as a gift given by God which reflects the Trinity as the originary 'gift-exchange', it is worth noting that Schwöbel argues that Luther is the first in the history of theology to speak of all three persons in the Trinity in terms of gift. See Schwöbel, 'Martin Luther and the Trinity', 418: 'While the language of gift (*donum*) was formerly used mainly in connection with the Holy Spirit, it is now extended to all three persons.'

¹⁰⁹Cf. Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 80.

¹¹⁰Cf. Luther's line of reasoning that the revelation of *Verbum* as a person in the Godhead implies that God is in God's essence a conversation (LW 24:364–65; WA 45:59).

¹¹¹Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. II, 49 (emphasis added). Jenson famously concludes his *Systematic Theology* by connecting the divine conversation with music and melody: 'In the conversation God is, meaning and melody are one. The end is music.' Ibid. 368; as favourably cited in Schwöbel, 'The Eternity of the Triune God', 355. One can compare this to Milbank's argument that trinitarian theology presents an affirmative ontology of 'transcendental difference' in which difference is understood as peace and harmony, as opposed to the 'ontological violence' which Milbank finds in postmodern construals of difference. See John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Order* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), especially 422–34.

¹¹²See Schwöbel, 'Human Being as Relational Being', 155–56.

understands as an eternal and perfect conversation.¹¹³ As Schwöbel puts it: ‘The conversation God *has* with his creation is ultimately rooted in the conversation God *is* in his trinitarian being.’¹¹⁴ We love and have faith in God not only because God first loved us and first had faith us but ultimately because God *is* love and God *is* faithful. Likewise, we have a conversational relationship with God not only because God first spoke us into being to converse with us, but ultimately because God *is* conversation—because God is *trinitarian*.

Drawing on Christoph Schwöbel’s ontological rendition of Luther’s theology of the Word, this essay has sought to show how a theological ontology of conversation can foster new perspectives and indeed new *conversations* for contemporary developments and discussions in theological metaphysics, particularly in relation to the doctrine of the Trinity as well as the notions of gift-giving and reciprocal exchange.¹¹⁵ Following his understanding of the Trinity and the relationship between God and creation, Schwöbel insisted good theology must always be conversational, for theology is nothing but ‘an ongoing conversation about God and with God’.¹¹⁶ As Schwöbel wrote:

We enter into this conversation when we... plac[e] our trust in God, and address[] God in response to his address—in thanksgiving, praise, petition and lamentation... It is this conversation, the exchange between a promising God and his creatures who are called to respond in trust, which defines the story of creation.¹¹⁷

And indeed, we may add, the practice of theology.

*In Memory of Christoph Schwöbel*¹¹⁸

¹¹³This ‘conversational’ understanding of being is reinforced by Schwöbel’s aforementioned Lutheran reading of God’s self-revelation as ‘I am who I am’ as ‘word-giving’ promise, such that ‘Being itself’—traditionally associated with God’s self-identification in Exodus 3:14—is revealed to be trinitarian and conversational.

¹¹⁴See especially Schwöbel, ‘We Are All God’s Vocabulary’, 67.

¹¹⁵Cf. Schwöbel, ‘Promise and Trust’, 19, n. 7: ‘The most interesting perspectives for the interpretation of Luther’s theology are opened up when the emphasis on the theology of giving is brought into contact with Luther’s theology of the Word.’ Also recall Betz’s aforementioned contention that engagements with metaphysics can foster ecumenical theological dialogues (Betz, ‘Mere Metaphysics’), such as the one between Milbank’s Anglo-Catholicism and Schwöbel’s Lutheranism here.

¹¹⁶Schwöbel, ‘God as Conversation’, 45.

¹¹⁷Schwöbel, ‘Read–Pray–Trust’, 179.

¹¹⁸This paper was first presented in March 2022 at the Theology research seminar at the University of St Andrews, formerly led by Christoph Schwöbel, who passed away six months earlier on 18 September 2021. I would like to thank Adam T. Morton, George Pattison, and especially Katrin Bosse for their comments and conversations on an earlier version of this paper.