
Bodies Now and Otherwise: Theology of the Cross and Trans Experience

Kai Daniel Moore

*PhD Candidate, Systematic Theology
The Graduate Theological Union
Berkeley, California*

What does a body ever “mean,” and what happens when that meaning seems to change? In this paper, I read Martin Luther’s theology of the cross using what might be called an epistemology of early transition; feeling a resonance with transgender experience in his call to look intently at the suffering body of Jesus and there to see a revealed identity which seems to conflict with what is visible. Learning to see both what is there and what is not (yet) there requires a shift in perspective, which I conceptualize here as a movement beyond the essentialist expectation that material reality clearly and singularly discloses the “truth” of itself. I look toward an understanding of the material body as essentially polyvalent and transitional, always in process and pointing beyond itself to an identity that emerges in relationship, gesturing forward and backward in time, which can only be encountered fully through an attitude of faithful trust. From a theological perspective, materiality is held as essential to, but not exhaustive of, the wholeness of human identity before God.

One of Luther’s primary innovations in the *theologia crucis*, as presented in the Heidelberg Disputation, is an epistemological one: the insistence that God can best be known through the cross, in defiance of the theological method of his day and despite the deeply counterintuitive nature of that claim. God’s nature and being is definitively shown there, and yet it is simultaneously both revealed and hidden. In fact, it is revealed precisely through its hiddenness, and cannot be perceived directly or analogized rationally according to scholastic method. It is only the eyes of faith that can perceive this revelation; a heart open to the complexity of what God is doing that opens beyond the direct information of the senses.

Further, Luther insists that this epistemology of the cross, integrating the deep bodily suffering of Jesus, is the only *true* way of knowing. A theologian of glory, who looks past the painful realities of the world in order to find God’s majesty transparently written on creation, necessarily “calls evil good and good evil.”¹ Their refusal to see and understand the world’s complexity means an inability to perceive the truth, either about God’s identity or

The technical parsing of the distinctions [Luther] makes between hiddenness *in* the cross and hiddenness *behind* the cross illustrates this struggle between his early modern language and the seeming contradictions of his ideas, which I argue are better understood through a postmodern lens that can articulate the complex relation of these seeming opposites. Luther returns repeatedly to images of contradiction and opposition.

human identity. As Gerhard Forde puts it, “Faulty seeing leads inexorably to false speaking.”² For Luther, the key to true speaking is willingness to confront apparent contradictions: that God, in all God’s glory and love, “can be found *only* in suffering and the cross.”³

Luther’s contemporary frameworks mostly do not have room for this kind of paradox—how can something be simultaneously glorious and awful, or revealed and hidden?—and he tries out different language across different works to capture this tension. The technical parsing of the distinctions he makes between hiddenness *in* the cross and hiddenness *behind* the cross⁴ illustrates this struggle between his early modern language and the seeming contradictions of his ideas, which I argue are better understood through a postmodern lens that can articulate the complex

1. Martin Luther, “Heidelberg Disputation,” with commentary by Dennis Bielfeldt. In *The Annotated Luther, Volume 1: The Roots of Reform*. Edited by Timothy J. Wengert. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 84.

2. Gerhard Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation, 1518*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 81.

3. Luther, 100, emphasis added.

4. Alister McGrath, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 219–223.

relation of these seeming opposites. Luther returns repeatedly to images of contradiction and opposition, as in the clear antitheses of the Heidelberg Disputation: a theologian of glory is opposed to a theologian of the cross, which includes a tension between hiddenness and revealedness, while the revelation itself is tension between God's love and human sin, demonstrating the sin-grace dynamic at the heart of Luther's teaching.

While he frequently utilizes these opposed pairs, his language often fails to capture the complexity of the relations between them, falling back on an insistence that once the theologian learns to see correctly, a thing will be revealed as unambiguously its opposite, as in thesis 4, "Although the works of God always seem unattractive and evil, they are nevertheless *really* immortal merits."⁵ Or as Forde interprets Luther's turn to suffering and the cross, "This suffering is from God and it is good."⁶ The tension between appearance and reality is only inadequate interpretation; once the interpreter changes their perspective, the seeming paradox is resolved. There appears to be no capacity (at least in the Disputation itself) to articulate an *unresolved* paradox on the level of epistemology or revelation, even while Luther's larger theological affirmation of *simul justus et peccator* suggests that the tension of apparent opposites is for him a core component of the nature of human reality.

Vitor Westhelle instead interprets Luther's language as strategic irony, and names the theology of the cross as an "attempt to free theology from the captivity of the dominant modes of rationality," which "signal[s] the point where the conventional semantic meaning of a rational discourse breaks down."⁷ I believe, with Westhelle, that the innovations of the *theologia crucis* can best be interpreted as an intervention at the level of the nature of meaning itself. Particularly when it comes to revelations of God's identity or of human identity, there is little—perhaps nothing—that signifies directly. Even as the suffering body of Jesus is the privileged site of revelation, that body both reveals and hides. The theologian must look beyond what is initially visible, but also must not look too quickly *past* that suffering flesh in search of an easier truth. This body is essential, in all its forms, but there is always more to see there that is only perceptible when the theologian looks with a heart of faith that is open to a genuine encounter with personhood in all its complexity.

Luther's articulation of the identity of God that is revealed through the cross stays in the realm of atonement theology, but while I disagree with him about the specific content of this revelation,⁸ his answer—the encounter of God's all-encompassing love with the depths of human sin—articulates a similar paradoxical complexity at the core of human identity. None of our

5. Luther, 82, emphasis added.

6. Forde, 86.

7. Vitor Westhelle, *The Scandalous God: The Use and Abuse of the Cross*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 47–48.

8. For my proposal of the divine character revealed in the crucifixion, see Kai Daniel Moore, *The Scandalous Body of Christ: Flesh, Power, and the Queerness of the Cross*, dissertation, Graduate Theological Union, expected 2021.

The theologian must look beyond what is initially visible, but also must not look too quickly *past* that suffering flesh in search of an easier truth. This body is essential, in all its forms, but there is always more to see there that is only perceptible when the theologian looks with a heart of faith that is open to a genuine encounter with personhood in all its complexity.

actions are what they first seem to be (even our best works are only ever sins), and our fundamental identity as beloved children of God is only accessible when it is held together in constant tension with our identity as sinners. These are inseparable, and trying to see a person or an action as only one and not the other is lying to ourselves. That is, trying to make something signify directly and unambiguously is to do violence to it and to miss the way God's work in the world, according to Luther, *always* operates in this tension of apparent opposites.

In a distinctly different sense of encountering seeming opposites, the experience of embodiment for transgender people has been reductively understood as one of "being in the wrong body," positing a male brain in a female body or vice versa, which must be "fixed" by surgical interventions to create a normatively sexed body in the target gender. This narrative should be understood, however, as a concession to essentialized notions of gender as a static, given fact of bodies and to medical standards which have made accessing surgical or hormonal interventions contingent on articulating a life story that conformed to doctors' limited expectations.⁹

S.J. Langer has developed a new theoretical framework which centers on the process of interoception in order to understand the feeling of gender within one's own body instead of relying on external assessments. In his model, dysphoria is what results when the sensory signals received by the brain do not align with what the brain expects given the body mapping of the "hidden cognitive process" of that person's gender. "In cisgender people, their gender identity and body are in equilibrium and they do not experience an incongruence between psychic gender and material body and therefore do not feel gender dysphoric. For trans people, their gender initiates the feeling of error within their body."¹⁰ Instead of

9. Ulrica Engdahl, "Wrong Body," *TSQ* 1 May 2014; 1 (1-2): 267–269.

10. S.J. Langer, *Theorizing Transgender Identity for Clinical*

treating the body as an essentialized whole, these “feelings of error” can be localized to specific parts or characteristics of the body. A major advantage of Langer’s model, then, is the way it recognizes the multidimensionality of gender, allowing for different parts of the body or elements of social life to have different gendered feelings, while also providing language for the deep feeling of *wrongness* that may occur in relation to certain aspects of the body (for many trans people but by no means all), which requires some kind of medical/social intervention for a person’s basic mental well-being.

Importantly, this model centers on a person’s own feelings and experience of themselves instead of external assessments. For many people, however, learning to recognize and name these feelings is a complicated, lifelong process. Human identity is formed in relation with others, and when the identity mirrored back to us does not align with our own sense of ourselves, feelings of misaligned gender can be buried and suppressed. The process of transition, then, becomes a process of learning to feel and see one’s own embodied self differently, trying out new clothes, hairstyles, hormones, and seeing what it feels like to be seen in different ways. For those who transition after childhood, it can involve recreating missed experiences of adolescence and youth, finding ways to re-do the developmental process of mirroring in the correct gender, through one’s own gaze and the gaze of others.¹¹ Trans community can be especially helpful in this process, with supportive friends to try out new names and pronouns, and celebrate the changes of transition. [“Your voice is different!” “*Your* voice is different!”] As one friend put it, “we recognize each other into existence.”

The body, especially in early transition, can become a site of euphoria as well as dysphoria. Where previously a body may have only been misinterpreted, only understood to “mean” something it didn’t mean, with experimentation sometimes something flashes through—a new dress that fits just so, or a glimpse of new muscles under the right light—and suddenly there’s a new bodily comfort that wasn’t there before. The beginning of hormone therapy is often experienced this way, with its broad array of subtle changes that impact countless different bodily systems, often unconsciously, along with other unanticipated effects of social and medical interventions.¹² “I didn’t expect the visceral pleasure, either; the joy I found laying a hand on my rising pecs or lifting my shirt to study the hard center of my abs. . . . I didn’t expect the calm at the core of me.”¹³ “My body itself reacted to being on the right fuel. I had panic attacks for 15 years. They went away, overnight, after my first dose of estrogen, forever.”¹⁴

The body becomes a process, emerging. As it is inhabited differently, it is seen differently, and its being-seen, both by self

Where previously a body may have only been misinterpreted, only understood to “mean” something it didn’t mean, with experimentation sometimes something flashes through—a new dress that fits just so, or a glimpse of new muscles under the right light—and suddenly there’s a new bodily comfort that wasn’t there before.

and by others, generates new feelings and new styles of being. Coming into one’s self is driven by the capacity and need to see something in one’s body which is not yet visible, catching glimpses as it emerges and re-forming the self in relation to what is not yet entirely tangible. Body parts are reinterpreted, renamed, because sometimes they matter deeply but cannot easily or accessibly be reshaped into a comfortable form. The processes of seeing and making meaning must themselves be relearned. “‘To see myself, I have to trust my gaze.’ My patient...said this to me when we were embarking on exploring their gender. It beautifully encapsulates how knowing one’s gender is not just about seeing, but about believing oneself.”¹⁵ In this way, the concept of *truth* itself must be questioned. As a person discerns that their internal reality is in conflict with what they have been taught about the very nature of their self, for their own survival they must learn to value their intuition and experience more highly than the things they have been taught. “One must develop one’s own philosophy of knowledge.”¹⁶

Further, the internal reality must be trusted over and against what has been presented as a “fact” of the material reality: the incorrect gender was not just a social experience, but was epistemologically grounded in an oversimplified interpretation of the material body itself. In a society that emphasizes a scientific approach to materiality, insisting on singular truths which are transparently interpretable through the material world, the process of articulating a truth at odds with the usual interpretation of a physical body requires a reworking of epistemology itself. If the body is presumed to clearly disclose one gendered truth, in order to accept one’s own internal truth of a “contradictory” gender, a person may need to learn to see not just their own material body differently, but also to rethink the capacity of the material to signify clearly at all.

The experience of trans embodiment, then, insists that

Practice: A New Model for Understanding Gender, (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2019), 21–23.

11. Langer, 183.

12. Langer, 28.

13. Thomas Page McBee, *Man Alive*, 2014, quoted in Langer, 43.

14. @ErinInTheMorn, Twitter Post, April 2, 2021, 10:40 am.

15. Langer, 141.

16. Langer, 141.

identity can never be *reduced* to the body, but also that the body itself profoundly matters. Bodily forms and processes exert an undeniable force, which can sometimes feel “right” and sometimes deeply “wrong,” while social life, identity, and experimentation likewise shape both a person’s body and their internal experience of it. The body is both *me* and *not-me*, while these shift and change from moment to moment and context to context. In Karen Barad’s conceptualization, matter itself “is a wild exploration of trans* animacy, self-experimentations/self-re-creations....Matter is not mere being, but its ongoing un/doing.”¹⁷

To try and make a body “mean” something, singularly and/or transparently, is to miss the nature of the body itself. The changingness of bodies is an unavoidable reality, even as Western cultural norms both gender and racialize these changes at every turn, underlining not just transphobia but all the interlocking systems of white supremacist heteropatriarchy. The central Christian affirmation of a *body* which reveals God’s nature, and Luther’s particular emphasis on the crucified body, transitioning *in extremis* from life to death and back to life again, as the privileged site for that revelation, means that this body of all bodies cannot be adequately perceived with a single glance, one snapshot in one moment. Rather, *as a body*, its very existence is change. The shape of Jesus’ body at any given time is an incomplete story, whether it is in the moment of being transfigured, broken by trauma, ascended in glory, or simply aging and growing as all human bodies do. In any of those moments, that body is really and truly Jesus, but what is visible in that moment is only a small piece of who he is.

But by the same token, the complexity of Jesus’ identity as incarnate Logos cannot be perceived by looking *past* his fleshy body in any of its experiences, no matter how distasteful an interpreter might find it. “Instead of trying to see *through* the world and the cross to the invisible things of God, we are turned back,” in Luther’s framework, “to what is ‘visible and manifest’ of God here among us, and we ‘comprehend’ it through suffering and the cross.”¹⁸ Luther’s concern is “the difference between what our theologians look at and what they see.”¹⁹ That is, true seeing requires both looking at what is materially visible and comprehending it with a heart of faith that interprets the visible in light of everything else which has been disclosed. The tangible body at any given moment is both self and not-entirely-self, both central to personhood and also pointing beyond itself to a future, imagined, or presently-hidden identity. Luther’s focus on the cross as a key site of revelation emphasizes both the multidimensionality of what is signified and the conflicted valence of the signification itself. That is, the horror of the cross and the glory of what it reveals are *opposites* (in Luther’s understanding) which must be held together in uncomfortable tension.

The paradox of this framing, which Luther struggled to articulate, can be productively named through the lens of trans

The central Christian affirmation of a *body* which reveals God’s nature, and Luther’s particular emphasis on the crucified body, transitioning *in extremis* from life to death and back to life again, as the privileged site for that revelation, means that this body of all bodies cannot be adequately perceived with a single glance, one snapshot in one moment. Rather, *as a body*, its very existence is change.

experience: a body can be simultaneously or in turns a site of both the pains of dysphoria and the integrated joy of euphoria, never just one thing but a dynamic process shaped over time in community and in relationship. As we begin to know ourselves and others differently, our seeing is shaped in the faith and trust of relationships, perceiving what is known internally and trusting what our loved ones show us about themselves. The material body becomes polyvalent, never a single source of “meaning” transparently or in isolation from its changing shape and feeling.

Barad asks, “What would it mean to reclaim our trans* natures as natural? Not to align ourselves with essence, or the history of the mobilization of ‘nature’ on behalf of oppression, but to recognize ourselves as part of nature’s doings in its very undoing of what is natural?”²⁰ The idea of “naturalness,” which is undone here, is the essentialist construction of the material as determinative of identity; the claim that binary gender is a fundamental truth about human life despite its being neither biological nor experiential reality.²¹ Such an ideology constructs an image of the material body and then insists that this image signifies directly and unambiguously to the truth of a person’s identity. I have argued that Luther’s epistemology of the cross envisions a different kind of signification, in which the depth of identity can only be perceived through a relational faith that sees the material body and its suffering but also comes to know and integrate a larger personhood that may even be perceived as that body’s “opposite.”

The insistence that the material signifies singularly and directly has haunted feminist and queer theory, such that frequently the attempt to get beyond essentialism means the stubborn fleshiness

17. Karen Barad, “TransMaterialities: Trans*/Matter/Realities and Queer Political Imaginings,” *GLQ* 21:2–3, 411.

18. Forde, 77, emphasis added.

19. Forde, 77, n 6.

20. Barad, 413.

21. Susan Stryker, “(De)Subjugated Knowledges: An Introduction to Transgender Studies,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, (New York: Routledge, 2006), 9.

of the body itself becomes problematic, leaving trans theory—with its affirmation of the importance of the body and its shapes—as an even more marginalized discipline. I suspect that this limited cultural view of the possibilities of the material is a key factor in the attraction of many trans and queer people to gnostic and dualistic forms of spirituality; if the material body can only ever mean something that is felt as deeply *wrong*, then it is no surprise that healing and wholeness would be sought by leaving the material behind entirely.²²

A Christian theology that affirms the created goodness of the material world and the revelatory incarnation of Jesus must, then, also deal theoretically with the fact that sometimes material bodies are a source of physical and emotional pain, *at the same time* as they are good and beloved creations of God. Jesus' body, likewise, suffered agonizing torture and death, and in these same moments revealed the glory of the living God. These affirmations require learning to think materiality differently, not just in a simplistic switch from "materiality is bad" to "materiality is good" but by challenging the very epistemological assumptions that presume that materiality can mean something singularly or directly at all. Bodies are only ever in process, polyvalent, pointing back and forward, inside and outside, *becoming* in growth and relationship and community. Theology can and must learn to speak of bodies that both reveal and hide, whose change signifies not death-as-an-effect-of-sin but rather life in all its complexity.

Some, like Luther himself, might argue that human life is so deeply corrupted by sin that its physical properties cannot be trusted as God's intention. But this argument does not hold up in the face of the sinless body of Jesus, which holds together both the glory of divine revelation and the dramatic change from life through agonizing death transformed into resurrected life, joining all these multiple meanings together in his holy transitioning flesh. From a historical angle, concepts of the changingness and impressibility of flesh have been wielded differentially to reinforce social divisions between bodies in a variety of ways, whether it is to insist that the specific changes of gender transition (unlike other kinds of bodily growth and intentional or unintentional changes) are violations against God's will as creator, or to enact racial divisions by which some bodies are understood as resistant to the refinements of civilization while others can utilize their vulnerability in service of (racially coded) self-improvement.²³ In order to speak truly of material bodies in a way that does justice to their created complexity and does not create or perpetuate sinful

Learning to see our own embodied selves and the selves of others both in and beyond the specific shapes of our bodies, trusting our own felt sense and, in faith, accepting and looking toward the revealed selves of others, both visible and not-yet-visible, may be its own kind of spiritual discipline.

divisions in the human family, then, it is essential to bear in mind that the transitional and multiply-signifying qualities of flesh are equally qualities of *all* bodies, regardless of race, gender, or gender modality (or any other social location), and that these qualities cannot be held to be effects of sin but are essential characteristics of materiality itself.

Learning to see our own embodied selves and the selves of others both in and beyond the specific shapes of our bodies, trusting our own felt sense and, in faith, accepting and looking toward the revealed selves of others, both visible and not-yet-visible, may be its own kind of spiritual discipline. It is not always easy to hold together ideas or experiences that seem to conflict or even be "opposites," but as Luther maintained, coming to see and understand the world this way is necessary to see God's self-revelation on earth. Looking at one another with eyes of faith and with trusting hearts, we likewise may better come to know God's brilliant and multi-faceted creation.

22. This pattern can be productively illustrated by *The Matrix* film trilogy, which was widely interpreted as a gnostic allegory before recently being claimed by its creators as a trans allegory. Materiality (or a limited understanding of it) is felt as a lie and a prison, and finding oneself entails escaping into another separate, truer world. This sociological trend, I suspect, would reward further study from a cultural-theological perspective. I am grateful to Kevin Mellis for bringing it to my attention.

23. Kyla Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 20–22.