The fact that I am not a philosopher but “only” a theologian and yet am addressing a philosophical topic is no accident. Rather, it makes palpably clear what I consider is the greatest deficiency in this area of research in the twentieth century.

“Philosophy has paid no attention at all to the strong upsurge in Luther research over the last few decades—a striking sign of the strange way in which philosophy and theology . . . in Protestantism coexist in relative isolation.” This is how Erwin Metzke begins his report on “Luther Research and the History of German Philosophy,” which appeared in the Journal of the German Philosophical Society, 1934/35.2 In 1948 the same author wrote an essay on “Sacrament and Metaphysics” that examined the state of Luther studies on the place of the bodily and material in Christian thought. The first sentence of the essay is telling: “Luther’s theology on the whole was given only scant attention by philosophy, despite its profound intellectual impact.”

That judgment, unfortunately, is all too true. To be sure, Leibniz refers to Luther several times in his Theodicy,3 Schelling expressly responds to De Servo Arbitrio (“The Bondage of the Will”) in his treatise on human freedom,5 and it can also be shown that Hegel’s philosophy does not just pay lip service to Luther but feeds off the spirit of Luther and Lutheranism.6 Indeed, scholars have tried to show that this is also true of the philosophy of Kant7 and Fichte.8 In sum, seen in the mirror of German Geistesgeschichte,9 Luther is a broad field. Not only the Reformation but also the person of Luther will always be important for the history of ideas as well as for the history of philosophy, as exemplified in Wilhelm Dilthey.10 Yet reference to Luther or discussion about him in a philosophical and systematic context that does justice to his intellectual significance is rarely found among philosophers. We find it, for example, in Arthur Schopenhauer,11 but especially in Ludwig Feuerbach,12 and of course, under entirely different circumstances, in Søren Kierkegaard.13 In the twentieth century—and here dialectical theology has to accept a fair share of blame14—the indifference of the philosophers only increased. The few exceptions
are men like Martin Heidegger, Erwin Metzke, Friedrich Brunstädt, and Rudolf Malter.

What is the origin of this scandalous indifference that damages philosophy and theology, church and culture? Luther has been clearly labeled a despiser and enemy of thought and philosophy, apparently because of his remark that reason is a “whore.” Consequently, a philosopher like Karl Jaspers, who inclined to Erasmian humanism, can only sound a warning against Luther: “The atmosphere that emerges from this man is strange and philosophically noxious.” Karl Popper made a significant remark over dinner when he was in Tübingen to receive the Lucas prize on May 26, 1981. He told me that originally he had intended to embark on a crusade against Luther’s martial-sounding phrase mundus tumultuatur (“the world is thrown into a state of tumult”) from his De Servo Arbitrio and to take up the cudgels for Erasmus and his Querela Pacis (“The Complaint of Peace,” 1521). But he changed his mind out of deference to the Evangelical Theological Faculty, which was responsible for awarding the prize, and decided not to proceed with his plan to launch a scathing attack against Luther. Herbert Marcuse, however, did go ahead and publish his tirade against Luther.

But why should a philosopher take seriously an enemy and despiser of logic, thought, and reason? Is it not enough, if he deigns to look at him at all, to summarily dismiss him as a “misologist” or, following Thomas Mann, as a “bull-necked, godly barbarian,” or to say with Kurt Wuchterl, “[For] Luther, logic was a work of the devil. We are called to pray and worship, not to argue or think logically.”

These sorts of perceptions of Luther, where opportunities have been lost or ignored, are typical of the way in which virtually all important philosophical problems have been handled: not only the problem of the human will and its freedom or enslavement, the problem of evil, the question of the subject of a good act, the problem of epistemology (including the suspicion of projection), but also the problem of the constitution of the world and of being, the problem of ontology, the problem of the perception of space and time, and the problem of nature and history, and fundamentally the problem of the understanding of word and language.

But only through “a more thorough exploration of its historical genesis” would “philosophy necessarily arrive at the question: What aspects of an existential analysis, of an understanding of history and nature, are included in Luther’s theology and what do they mean philosophically?” These introductory remarks bring us closer to my assigned task.

The Task

Philosophical Modes of Thought?

“Philosophical modes of thought!” Are there also other than “philosophical” modes of thought? Are there, for instance, theological modes of thought, so that it would
be necessary to define “modes of thought” more precisely by means of an adjective? Or do modes of thought fall eo ipso to the competence of philosophy? Is there a specifically theological way of thinking and, correspondingly, a specifically theological understanding of reality that, even though it does not follow the philosophical tradition and is in contradiction to it, would still always be a philosophical way of thinking? To answer that question, we need to distinguish between Luther’s explicit self-understanding and the way he actually does his theology. If the first will reclaim the modes of thought mentioned below as genuinely theological, then a study of the latter will show how fundamentally these modes of thought are in fact indebted to an engagement with philosophy.

Furthermore, it is not clear what is meant by “mode of thought” (Denkform). The conceptual history of the term in the German Historical Dictionary of Philosophy—which characteristically begins in 1787 with an examination of Kant’s theory of the categories—concludes with the following statement that leaves us completely in the dark when it comes to defining our task: “At the present time, the term ‘mode of thought’ no longer has any conceptual precision. Today, it is used uncritically to designate various sorts of things and serves especially to describe styles of thought, mindsets, thinking techniques or methods of thought.” Be that as it may, the rest of the title of this lecture is fairly clear. It speaks of Luther’s “theology,” not just his “philosophy.” It also speaks about the modes of thought of “the” theology of Luther, not only the modes of thought “in” Luther’s theology. Finally, these modes of thought, whatever we understand them to be, need to be viewed as an “object” of inquiry, not as a “subject” of inquiry or as a lens for viewing the data, as important and appealing as that might be to consider.

The stated task, as I understand it, is to inquire into the modes of thought of Luther’s theology as identified by the history of philosophy, particularly those that are thoroughly characteristic of his theology and that are so essential to it that we could not imagine his theology without them.

**Orientation to Aristotle’s “Organon”**

On the way to explaining what is to be understood by “mode of thought,” I want to take my bearings from an institution: the arts faculty and its seven liberal arts, which had a lasting effect on the Master of Arts (magister artium) Martin Luther. The liberal arts include dialectics and philosophy, which Luther, however, did not want to see isolated from rhetoric and grammar. In fact, he gave grammar first place in the trivium. For Luther, philosophy, and the questions it poses, is no mere accessory or ornament that decorates his life and work; nor is it a ballast that he would have to jettison. For him it is simply essential. A glance at a representative text, such as the theses for the “Disputation concerning Man” of 1536, shows that Luther articulates his theology in close partnership with philosophy. This engagement with philosophy is not something secondary but constitutive.
The theses for the “Disputation concerning Man” are representative of Luther’s entire theology and its philosophical modes of thought. In fact, they show that the philosophical tradition in which Luther is most at home, and that he affirms as well as negates, is the Aristotelian. Not that other traditions do not also have significance! We only have to think of the neo-Platonic tradition of the via negationis or the way that Luther occasionally praises Plato himself. Yet these other traditions, apart from the fundamental importance of the via negationis for the pre-Reformation Luther, are not as determinative for his theology as the Aristotelian traditions.

That it is necessary to speak of Aristotelian traditions in the plural, and in what sense, has been carefully shown by Theodor Dieter, who is himself both a philosopher and a theologian, in his magnum opus, Der junge Luther und Aristoteles. The Aristotle that Luther refers to proves to be a multifaceted entity. Since Luther refers to the Aristotle that can be found in his works (today), and to the Aristotle that has been received and transformed by philosophy, as well as to the Aristotle of Scholasticism that has been integrated with theology, his relation to “Aristotle,” from a critically distanced perspective, can only be described by a series of antitheses with different referents. These forms of “Aristotle” differ from one other in somewhat far-reaching ways, despite the obvious commonalties; even a grave criticism of Aristotle in the Middle Ages can appear as an interpretation. If we ignore this diversity and simply speak of “Aristotle” without any further qualification, we will be dealing with an abstract entity devoid of any specificity (which is gained through a particular context of thought).

The institution, the basic university education in “dialectics” within the trivium, thus Aristotle’s “Organon,” produces a perspective that we cannot sidestep. The “Organon” begins with the Categories. These are the instruments for thinking and for bringing something into language as something. After the Categories comes the theory of the sentence: Περὶ ἔρμηνειας (“On Interpretation”). The third is the theory of the conclusion and demonstration (First and Second Analytic; I take both analytics together as a third).

Apropos these first three parts of the “Organon,” which are the main parts, I now propose to answer the question (which up till this point I have not yet answered): What could be meant concretely by “philosophical modes of thought” in the distinction between three levels of different meaning for Luther’s theology? First, as far as the “Categories” are concerned, his denial of the validity of substance ontology in the areas of trinitarian theology, Christology, and soteriology, as well as its “regional” affirmation, should be considered “an object of inquiry.” Second, as
far as the “sentence” is concerned, the linguistic-theological or linguistic-philosophical version of Luther’s fundamental criticism of substance ontology in the fields of trinitarian theology, Christology, and soteriology should become a topic for discussion. In my judgment, these are the two most important “theological modes of thought” as well as the two most important “philosophical modes of thought.” In brief and in sum, this is just another way of speaking of Luther’s ontological hermeneutic or his hermeneutical ontology.

Third, Luther uses “modes of thought” that are different again, especially in his disputations, above all in dealing with figures of conclusion and types of demonstration. These have been examined especially by Graham White but also by Heikki Kirjavainen, Simo Knuutila, Reijo Työrinoja, and others in their works on the history of philosophy, which are characterized by different ways of receiving the Aristotelian tradition.

In my stipulative definition of “modes of thought,” I must take up at least two further aspects of this term, found throughout Luther’s theology, besides the three just mentioned in connection with Aristotle’s “Organon.” First, there is the concept of movement and becoming, which took shape in Luther’s reception of the idea of motion in Aristotle’s “Physics.” Second, we must attend to the peculiar concept of knowledge, which can be explicated in relation to the Aristotelian teaching on the soul, Peri phŷsès (De anima, especially book III).

The final and most important part of this essay, which now follows, has five sections. These correspond to the five elements of my stipulative definition of the “modes of philosophical thought of Luther’s theology.” I would like to make a point of stressing that this approach is meant to provoke an attempt at falsification. Anyone who can demonstrate that there are more important “philosophical modes of thought of Luther’s theology” that cannot be made to fit the five we have mentioned, or that fit them only with difficulty, will have achieved the falsification required by science.

The Execution

The final five sections correspond to the five elements of my stipulative definition of the “modes of philosophical thought of Luther’s theology.” This approach is meant to provoke an attempt at falsification. Anyone who can demonstrate that there are more important “philosophical modes of thought of Luther’s theology” that cannot be made to fit the five we have mentioned, or that fit them only with difficulty, will have achieved the falsification required by science.
1. Substance and Relational Ontology

A relational ontology as well as the concept of “being as communion” are not characteristic of Luther as such. What is characteristic, rather, is the distinction Luther makes between the trinitarian-theological, christological, and soteriological realms, in which we do not think at all “in the category of substance but of relation” and the realm in which the “being-in-itself” of the thing, and therefore substance ontology, prevails. The fundamental difference between Luther and the post-Christian natural theology—especially a theologia crucis naturalis—typical of Hegel on this decisive point cannot be emphasized clearly and sharply enough. He is hardly ever mentioned in contemporary mainstream theological discourse but rather is glossed over and forgotten. Today, therefore, there is no awareness of a monumental mistake in the recent history of philosophy and theology, which I have tried to draw attention to since my inaugural lecture at Bonn.

In this connection I also have to criticize the otherwise commendable and remarkable works of the Roman philosopher Stefano Leoni. Following in the footsteps of Enrico De Negri, he takes relational and communal ontology in the sense of a single, universal, and consistent concept of being and rejects a “regional” ontology, which, in my opinion, Luther supports.

2. “Extremorum compositio”

Besides the mentioned distinction between substance and relational ontology, there is a specific linguistic-theological or linguistic-philosophical form of the relational or communal ontology characteristic of Luther’s theology and its philosophical mode of thought. On the surface, this linguistic form of Luther’s ontology looks very similar to Hegel’s “speculative sentence” and his concept of the “concrete spirit,” but it is of a different type, as can be shown from linguistic philosophy, as for example in the later Wittgenstein.

If we compare the facts to be considered in this second subsection to the second part of Aristotle’s “Organon,” where he writes about the sentence (Περὶ ἐρμηνείας), then we can see at once the contrast between Luther’s explanations of the union of God and humanity, as well as bread and body, which are highly significant for theology and linguistic philosophy, and the λόγος ἀποφαντικός, the declarative sentence (or proposition). The sentence “this is my body” is not a declarative sentence, at least not semantically and pragmatically, and therefore, according to Aristotelian logic, it is not capable of being true. With this promise and gift, two entities clearly separate from each other without the word that unites them are joined together, indeed united, into one. The body, however, is not “declared” or signified by the bread. Luther is able to prove that a nonapophantic sentence is true, not only by referring to the linguistic usage of the Bible but also to ordinary language. He appeals to the reason inherent in the general use of language. This is a
concrete example of Luther’s correction to traditional Aristotelian logic and at the same time an example of his demonstration, based on grammar and rhetoric, that a sentence that is not a declarative sentence is capable of being true.⁶²

The union of the dissimilar, which is most remarkable also philosophically, is not found before the reformational turn in Luther’s theology.⁶³ Anyone who tries to determine the christological dimension of the reformational concept of promissio will see the constitutive role played by the promise in Reformation Christology and the way that it is closely interwoven with the new understanding of the Lord’s Supper. The fact is that Luther discovered his reformational Christology and his reformational understanding of the Lord’s Supper at the same time.⁶⁴

The simultaneity of God and humanity, life and death, forgiveness and sin that the church proclaims in the public, oral, external “bodily” word speaks against a secret identity of these antitheses or of an immanent peripety. At this point philosophy and theology go their separate ways. For philosophy can think of the simultaneity only analytically, not synthetically (and if synthetically, then speculatively or existentially but not linguistically and concretely). It understands the “sign” as a representation of an absence, not the presentation of a presence. For “a philosophical sign is the mark of a thing that is absent; a theological sign is the mark of a thing that is present.”⁶⁵

The promise is the medium in which the vere homo and the vere Deus are inseparably united. This means the est that mediates the vere homo and the vere Deus—God’s life and Jesus’ death—cannot be understood predicatively or apophantically. It does not declare the meaning of an already fixed subject but is the movement in which the reality of both is established at the same time. It does not mean a significative copula but an effective one, in fact a synthetic one. If the natures need the promissio as a copula, then the copula in turn is determined solely by the natures—hence, Luther’s identification of verbum and Christ himself as Verbum. What the promissio, the verbum, is, it is only as the presence of the Verbum in which God is human. All our christological speech about the unio personalis would for its part degenerate into a mere intellectual game or be nothing but a cipher for the hidden true nature of every human being, if we were to forget that it is nothing but the contemplation of that event that enters constitutively into the realm of the bodily word, which is both oral and public.

In this connection, we could investigate a remarkably seldom-asked question in Luther research: How does Luther, who before 1518 denied the world, arrive at his concept of worldliness and the essential worldly mediation of all spiritual reality?⁶⁶ For the “hermeneutical” form of the relational and communal ontology has to be characterized as a “bodily word” if considered from the standpoint of Christology and sacramental theology. Johann Georg Hamann can open our eyes to this, for instance, with his formula: creation is an “address to the creature through the creature.”⁶⁷ If we read Luther through this lens, we will be surprised to discover
what creation theology, specifically its ontological dimension, really means for his theology.

3. Techniques of the Disputation

What would normally be set out here has already been briefly hinted at above.

4. “Semper in motu”: Becoming

Especially instructive for our topic is Luther’s engagement with the Aristotelian theory of motion. Since, as Luther sees it, sin is not completely driven out by grace in the blink of an eye, he comes to realize that a Christian has to be righteous and a sinner at the same time, and he has to give a new answer to the question of the duration of a person’s existence in grace, since the concepts of *qualitas* and *habitus* are now no longer available to him. Luther understands the being of the justified as the motion of becoming justified.

Since the scholastic reception modified the Aristotelian theory of motion in many ways, it is only after a study of the reception of this theory in Thomas Aquinas and Ockham that we can say exactly which Aristotle Luther receives here and how he has modified him in the process: it is the Aristotle interpreted by Ockham. Luther now integrates the two motions that are strictly distinguished among the scholastics—the instantaneous movement from the existence of the sinner to the existence of the righteous (*e contrario in contrarium*) and the movement of the *aumentum gratiae seu caritatis*—and interprets them by means of the Ockhamist theory of motion. In this way we can understand a motion, also the intensification of a quality, as an infinite variety of moments of motion that are characterized by a combination of affirmations and negations. Against Ockham’s intentions, but by his means, Luther explains being righteous as a growth of the believer and at the same time a constant transition from the being of the sinner to the being of the righteous. For being righteous, understood as motion, is the unity of the motions of fundamental importance. This presupposes the unity of time whose linguistic signal is the very frequent *semper*. The phrase *proficere est semper incipere* (“to progress is always to begin again”) should never be understood, as often happens, to mean that the Christian always has to begin anew, like Sisyphus, from the same starting point. The phrase is almost a definition of motion and means that every point of motion as such is the endpoint of the preceding motion and the starting point of the further motion. The main point of the phrase is that the Christian should never cease from moving.

Also, the *partim–partim* phrase arises from the Aristotelian tradition: the object moved may be partly at the beginning (*partim in termino a quo*) and partly at the end (*partim in termino ad quem*). Luther adopts an Ockhamist interpretation of this phrase that deviates from the Aristotelian understanding: the object moved stands simultaneously under an affirmation and under a negation or an infinite number
of negations (further moments of motion). Thus, the partim–partim is not in com-
petition with the simul of being righteous and being sinner, even if Luther’s use of
the phrase is not uniform.

5. Luther’s Reception of Aristotelian Epistemology

The idea, developed in the Aristotelian tradition, that a knowing subject (Erkenne-
des) and a known object (Erkannte) are one, offers Luther the model of a nonsub-
stantial unity of a believer and the word that still permits us to declare: we are the
word.71 Also, the fact that the person who becomes the word is nothing in his or her
own eyes can be accounted for by this model. It is evident from this that Luther at
any given time takes up only those aspects of an Aristotelian idea that can clarify the
theological matter to be considered without ever worrying about the consistency of
the various aspects among themselves.

In these last two sections I have presented the results of the groundbreaking re-
search of Theodor Dieter. His work Der junge Luther und Aristoteles: Eine historisch-
systematische Untersuchung zum Verhältnis von Theologie und Philosophie72 marks a new
chapter in Luther research and, more specifically, makes a significant contribution to
our question concerning the philosophical modes of thought of Luther’s theology.