Rethinking Reformation

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What Makes Us Human? The Lutheran Anthropological Link Between Wingren And Ricoeur

<https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2018-0023>

Received May 22, 2018; accepted July 30, 2018

Abstract: This paper explores the link between the *extra nos* in Gustaf Wingren's theological anthropology and the *homo capax* in Paul Ricoeur's philosophical anthropology, considered as two creative receptions of the tradition from Luther. I will argue that the reason that we find such synergies between these two thinkers, even though neither of them ever referred to the other, has to do with their common roots in, and their contributions to rethink, the tradition from the Reformation. Wingren takes his specific place in twentieth century theology as an angry critic of the dominant anti-liberal movements that took the distinctively Christian—in opposition to what we all share as human beings—as methodological starting-point when understanding the Christian faith, and as an alternative he developed understanding of what it means to be human by starting “outside” oneself. Ricoeur's philosophical position is developed as a creative alternative to both humanist and anti-humanist approaches, expressed as a *wounded cogito* capable of imagining “onself as another.” Taken together, these two thinkers provide us with a profound dialectical way of thinking what it means to be human by bringing together a de-centered self and a centered self as integral parts of a wider dialectics.

Keywords: philosophical anthropology, theological anthropology, reformation, extra nos, homo capax, Gustaf Wingren, Paul Ricoeur

This article explores the anthropological resources provided by what I dare to name the “Lutheran link” between the Swedish theologian Gustaf Wingren and the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur. My aim is, in accordance with the theme *Rethinking Reformation*, to show how the interplay between these two thinkers, representing on the one hand a theological, on the other a philosophical, reception of Lutheran anthropology, may contribute to an elaboration on one of the most urgent questions in our time: what makes us human?

1 Mind the gap: two parallel thinkers

The Swedish theologian, Gustaf Wingren (1910-2000), is one of the founding figures, and presented the most comprehensive version, of Scandinavian creation theology, perceived as a reconfiguration of the Reformation theology of Martin Luther by a creative mediation elaborated by N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783-1872), and mainly articulated by Wingren in a constellation together with K.E. Løgstrup and Regin Prenter.¹

The French philosopher, Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005), is one of the major representatives of contemporary philosophical anthropology and critical hermeneutics, who developed a transatlantic philosophical profile

¹ Gregersen, Kristensson Ugglä, Wyller, *Reformation Theology for a Post-Secular Age*.

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combining Continental as well as Analytical philosophies manifested in a series of complex and profound conflicts of interpretations.²

We may ask what these two thinkers have in common, since it almost seems that each has been living in his own intellectual universe. Neither ever referred to the other. They met just once, briefly, during their lifetimes. Wingren is never referred to by philosophers and may be considered as a *homo theologicus*, with philosophy his major blind spot; Ricoeur is frequently referred to by theologians, but he always strongly rejected the label theologian and mainly ignored systematic theologians (with few exceptions) to the extent that we may talk about an anti-theological approach.³ Despite these profound differences, both the theologian and the philosopher developed an understanding of the human condition informed by a distinct dialectical approach. Taken together and considered as two parallel receptions of Lutheran anthropology, they may provide us with important resources today when rethinking what it means to be human.

2 Coping with anthropological deficits

The common horizon for Wingren and Ricoeur is what they experienced as an anthropological deficit within contemporary theology (Wingren) and contemporary philosophy (Ricoeur). This is also my horizon of understanding, and this is what makes them relevant when we today are challenged by two interrelated anthropological gaps.⁴ The first gap has to do with the brutal, yet seldom recognized, contrast between the naïve, uncritical praise of humanism in public life, thus neglecting the massive critique against the assumptions associated with a traditional humanistic approach.⁵ The second deals with the theoretical anti-humanism emanating from strong versions of naturalism and the predominant poststructuralist and postmodern epistemologies that intend not to *understand* but to *dissolve* the human person. This “external” gap, between a society that pays homage to humanism and academic epistemologies that have left humanism long behind, is closely linked to the second, “internal” gap within the university, between *scholarly theory* and *personal experience*. When the social sciences are either influenced by current social theories, portray humans as de-centered subjects essentially governed by external social influences, or they develop a reductionist teleological perspective of humans as rational machines competing in society for material resources, strategically manipulating public presentations of self, and struggling with rivals for power, however, they do not make it clear why these human subjects should be bearers of rights, and be associated with equality and self-determination. Neither do they offer us any understanding of the meaning of tolerance, democracy, and human emancipation.

In this situation, when confronted with the question “what makes us human?”, we may ask what kind of contribution we can expect from a Lutheran tradition.

3 Martin Luther

If we turn to the 2017 celebration of 500 years of Reformation, we find ourselves in a situation, at least in Sweden, when Martin Luther was frequently used in order to confirm our own contemporary values and opinions. However, when transforming Luther into a nice representative of our own modern values, such as individualism, humanism, education (*Bildung*), and even democracy and human rights, we underestimate how much of a Medieval person he was.

No matter how much the Reformation has meant to modernity, Luther himself was *not modern*. And for us today, this is an advantage, because it is mostly to the extent that Luther was *not* modern, that he may be recognized as an important resource for contemporary philosophical anthropology. From the internal

² Kristensson Ugglå, *Ricoeur, Hermeneutics, and Globalization*.

³ Cf. Kristensson Ugglå, “Ricoeur and/or Theology” and *Becoming Human Again*.

⁴ Cf. Kristensson Ugglå, “Coping with Academic Schizophrenia: The Privileged Place of the Person when Confronting the Anthropological Deficit of Contemporary Social Imagination: Christian Smith and Paul Ricoeur” and Smith, *What Is a Person?*

⁵ Braidotti, *The Posthuman*.

dynamics of his own tortured personal experience and by bringing together two apparently contradictory strands in medieval theology—mysticism and nominalism—he developed an unstable theological anthropology formed by the contradiction between the radical passivity of mysticism (Eckhart and Tauler) and the radical voluntarism of nominalism (Ockham).⁶

In a similar way, instead of the traditional view separating the freedom of lords and the duties of servants, Luther joined lord and servant *in one and the same person* by using two seemingly contradictory propositions in his tract *On the Freedom of a Christian*: “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”⁷ Thus, in contrast to Descartes’ turn to the subject, Luther’s inward turn leads to a contradictory subject that is full of paradoxes.⁸

Yet, what really makes Luther *not* modern is the experience of having his righteousness outside himself and his tendency to place everything that is really important to us outside ourselves – *extra nos*.⁹ In order to understand how this *extra nos* may be considered, not as sheer passivity and impotence, but as an integral part of a wider dialectical way of thinking about human capacity, I will now turn to Wingren and Ricoeur, both considered as two creative receptions of Lutheran anthropology.

4 Wingren: becoming human *extra nos*

The Lundensian theologian, Gustaf Wingren, takes his specific place in twentieth century theology as an angry critic of the dominant anti-liberal movements that took *the distinctively Christian*—in opposition to God’s omnipresence and what we all share as human beings—as methodology to understand the Christian faith. For Wingren, a prerequisite for embracing the unique elements of the Christian faith is instead that the universally human must be articulated and taken seriously as a horizon of understanding for the gospel. Coping with the anthropological deficit of contemporary theology in a post-liberal situation, and what Wingren mentioned as “a curious anti-liberal mania”¹⁰ of his time, he developed an alternative theological approach to what it means to be human, from the perspective of a kind of “post-liberal liberalism.”

In contrast to a liberal theological approach, focused on a centered self, the starting-point of Wingren’s reflections on theological anthropology is the profound experience of being *de-centered*, by gifts and demands that do not originate from the self. Everything important in life is located outside ourselves:

To live means to receive life from outside oneself. As soon as we are cut off from these external sources, life is extinguished. The resurrection life is the receiving of life from an external source, from which even now in faith man draws his sustenance. But the same thing holds good even now of the bodily life, and not just that of believers, but of all bodily life.¹¹

Wingren defended his doctoral dissertation, *Luther on Vocation*, in 1942 (later translated into English in 1957) and continued to publish on Luther until the late 1990s. We learn from Wingren’s interpretation of Luther, that nothing makes us so inhuman as the egocentric state of *incurvatus in se*. What makes us human is instead our capacity to place ourselves outside ourselves – *nos poni extra nos*. In this way we experience a de-centering move that can be generalized as an experience of the creation as gift (ontology), the ethical demand and calling as something *extra nos* originating from the other, “the neighbor” (ethics), as well as the experience of having ones righteousness outside ourselves (*extra nos*), baptism into the death and life

⁶ Taylor, *After God*, 55.

⁷ Luther, *Three Treatises*, 277.

⁸ Taylor, *After God*, 63.

⁹ It will take us too far from the discussion to enter into the general debate about concepts like “modern” (or modernity and modernism) here. Cf. Mühlen, *Nos Extra Nos*, for the historical context of Luther’s position between Mysticism and Scholasticism. Cf. Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World*, 169-84, for a more specific elaboration on the differences between the Lutheran “putting ourselves outside ourselves” (*nos poni extra nos*) and the Cartesian *Cogito* approach to modern metaphysics in terms of, a centered subject of production and security.

¹⁰ Wingren, *Creation and Law*, 12.

¹¹ Ibid., 18.

of Christ (in order to become human) as an experience of being outside oneself—and an ecclesiology formed by creation as the “horizon of understanding.” Wingren writes in 1960:

The Church exists for the sake of the non-Christian humanity who are outside it. This is its *raison d'être*. If instead it exists only for the sake of its members it will be in continual conflict with its indwelling Lord.¹²

As an attempt to rethink what reformation means in the late twentieth century, Wingren developed a kind of *post-Constantinian Lutheran theology educated by the pre-Constantinian theology of Irenaeus*. This significant first century theologian encapsulated everything associated with salvation in the concept of *recapitulatio* (restored creation, i.e., an understanding of salvation as becoming human again), thus presuming an original affirmation of creation-given human life and an understanding of humanity, not as an opposite but as something that is to be restored, by the gospel. The historical fact that this theology emerged from a theologian leading a martyr congregation that found itself in an extreme minority situation, makes it obvious for Wingren, that the doctrine of creation, i.e. God's universal presence in all creatures, should not be considered as something exclusively associated with a Christian majority culture.¹³

In 1967, on the four-hundred-fiftieth anniversary of the Lutheran reformation, Wingren elaborated on how we in two directions live outside ourselves: in part, in relation to God, and in part, in relation to our fellow human beings. “In this dual ‘outside myself,’ there is a sort of humility that is not at all modern,” writes Wingren.¹⁴ Moreover, this dual externality in which we live outside ourselves becomes in a double sense, a way in which we realize our full humanity. No relationship is as personal as this one, in which we live outside ourselves in a double sense. And Wingren also touches on the inherent *dialectics* of this experience of *extra nos*:

If we were able to be ‘outside ourselves’ and simply listen to the word, we would thus be able to be within a much greater Human Being that we are ourselves, one who lived for nothing other than to give himself for us.¹⁵

In this dialectical way of thinking, *extra nos* is situated within an inter-subjective framework wherein this experience is related to the capacity of being “for others.” Here, being outside oneself is also an experience of “being outside oneself within oneself.”¹⁶ From this unfolds a particular understanding of the human condition: “Through our common, everyday work, we exist *in* each other's lives.”¹⁷ In another text, Wingren also presents a negative articulation of what this dialectic means: “If we flee from our neighbor to God, we come not to God but to ourselves, to our own selves.”¹⁸

Thus, the *extra nos*, according to Wingren, is not only comprehended as a reminder of the fact that the most important things in life are to be considered as phenomena outside ourselves, but this de-centering move is, moreover, a part of a wider dialectics, which relates this initial experience of being de-centered to a new centering move of action.

Wingren developed a kind of “humanism of the other,”¹⁹ which distanced him from the anthropocentrism and self-glorification of liberal theology, as well as Barth's anthropoclasm and rejection of human achievement. In terms of theological anthropology, the gift of creation primarily means a de-centering of the subject. Yet, the economy of gift also generates a re-centering of the subject, conceived as an affirmation of human capacity. This profound dialectical way of thinking, i.e. where an original de-centering move is balanced by a new centering move, is made evident when Wingren in his dogmatics explicates how creation and law are interrelated: “Only through our work, the harvest will become bread, the wool clothes.”²⁰

¹² Wingren, *Gospel and Church*, 10-11 (corrected translation).

¹³ Wingren published two major books on Irenaeus: *Man and the Incarnation* (1947/1959) and *Människa och kristen* (1983).

¹⁴ Wingren, “Vad betyder Luther idag?” 16.

¹⁵ Ibid., 21.

¹⁶ Cf. Fareld, *Att vara utom sig inom sig: Charles Taylor, erkännandet och Hegels aktualitet*.

¹⁷ Wingren, “Vad betyder Luther idag?” 21.

¹⁸ Wingren, “Arbetets mening,” 286.

¹⁹ I have borrowed this phrase from Lévinas, *Humanism of the Other*. Cf. Kristensson Ugglå, *Becoming Human Again*, 60.

²⁰ Wingren, *Creation and Law*, 9.

The metaphor of *the grain of wheat*, applied within an eschatological perspective as *a grain of wheat eschatology*, served as a paradigmatic model for Wingren's theological anthropology.²¹ The grain of wheat achieves nothing for itself when it falls onto the ground and dies. But later on, it provides new life—for others. Thus, for Wingren, the secret of the grain of wheat is a matter of being for others, a de-centering of ourselves, in accordance with *nos poni extra nos*, where we posit ourselves outside ourselves.

5 Ricoeur: becoming human as *homo capax*

If we turn to Paul Ricoeur, his extensive philosophical project immediately raises questions like this: what kind of intellectual position is implied in a philosophical project that started its journey in the intellectual soil of French and German existential phenomenologies, that successfully managed to navigate in the anti-existential (and anti-humanistic) cognitive landscape of structuralism, and finally blossomed in the context post structuralism?

Ricoeur's extraordinary capacity to navigate in the polarized cognitive landscape between the centering subject of humanism (in France represented by existential philosophy and phenomenology) and different approaches influenced by structuralist and poststructuralist thoughts aiming at de-centering the human being, may be comprehended from the background of his profound dialectical way of thinking, which always relates the de-centering and centering of the subject, passivity and activity as well as receptivity and productivity. This, thus, places his *wounded cogito* (*cogito blessé*) at an equal distance from both Descartes and Nietzsche.²²

In his later works, Ricoeur preferred to speak about his philosophical anthropology in terms of a capable human being – *homo capax* – comprehended in accordance with a profound dialectical way of thinking. The acting human being is always a suffering human being, and the suffering human being is never only a victim, but also a person capable of developing actions. The inherent complexity of human action and interaction, in Ricoeur's hermeneutics of the self, is thus articulated as a dynamic correlation of *intentions*, *causes*, and *coincidences*.²³

Ricoeur always strongly defended the philosophical identity of his work. However, for those who are trained as theologians, it is not difficult to detect influences from Luther's theology in Ricoeur's anthropological considerations. In his doctoral dissertation from 1950, Ricoeur did not, in contrast to Sartre and others, define human freedom as a sheer negating act, originating from pure spontaneity, but as a "situated" and incarnated" freedom, wherein the body, perceived as both activity and passivity, cannot be reduced to an obstacle to freedom, but needs to be considered as a prerequisite for its realization. Ricoeur concludes this work by stating that freedom has to be considered as human, not divine, and he closes with the following words: "To will is not to create" – *Voloire n'est pas créer*.²⁴ These final words disclose an obvious theological inspiration behind Ricoeur's philosophy of the will. This is also the case when he speaks about an "only human freedom" which appears in terms of a fragile synthesis of freedom and nature and when he defines choice as a paradox of initiative and receptivity, irruption and attention. We may also identify an echo from Luther in expressions such as "the paradox of captive free will—the paradox of *servil will*" where the internal structure of his interpretation of the Lutheran concept of *self-arbitre* (how we can be at once bound and free) can even be recognized as a predecessor of the wounded cogito (*cogito blessé*). This is seen in statements like "Evil is both something brought about now and something that is always already there; to begin is to continue" and finally in the conviction that evil cannot be as primordial as goodness.²⁵

Ricoeur's understanding of the capable human being is rooted in a philosophy of creation and gift, inspired by the incarnational mystery of one own living body in Gabriel Marcel's philosophy. According to

²¹ Wingren, *Credo*, 21. Cf. Kristensson Uggla, *Becoming Human Again*, 153-66.

²² Cf. Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy* and *Oneself as Another*.

²³ Ricoeur elaborated on this kind of critical hermeneutics and hermeneutics of the self in a long series of work from 1950 to 2004, the most systematic presentation of his philosophical anthropology is found in *Oneself as Another* (1990/1992).

²⁴ Ricoeur, *Freedom and Nature*, 456.

²⁵ Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil*, 152, 155-6.

Ricoeur, the positive side of the most fundamental motivation behind the deconstruction of the security of modern man and the recognition of the limitations of the subject are recognized by an original affirmation founded on creation faith. To be de-centered means to be a *recipient* of life and meaning from outside, yet this de-centering move is simultaneously a part of an economy of gift, where it is correlated by a centering move. As a kind of ontological prerequisite for Ricoeur's hermeneutical philosophy and philosophical anthropology, we may identify in Ricoeur's thought a surplus of meaning, where the epistemological "seeing as" and is linked to a the surplus of life associated with the ontological "being as." Against the negativism of existentialism, where freedom is defined by a sheer negating act, Ricoeur stresses the "Yes" of creation, the abundance of the incarnated mystery, and an original affirmation that is more fundamental than all negation.²⁶

Ricoeur's complex constitution of the capable human being is not only part of his explicit philosophical anthropology, but also an integral part of his text hermeneutics. Here, his understanding of *homo capax* forces us to elaborate on a philosophy of action determined by *the death of the author*. These two notions together constitute a philosophical anthropology where subjectivity never appears as the first but always the final category. In Ricoeur's text hermeneutics, the "death of the author" never meant to be acknowledged as a theoretical anti-humanism declaring the author's death as the death of the subject in general, in accordance with structuralism and some post-structuralist stand points. However, after the death of the author, the former power of the almighty author as the source of all meaning cannot be easily transferred to the reader. The understanding of text interpretation may rather be linked to the dialectic of distanciation and appropriation in the act of reading. We may say that the death of the author does not necessarily imply the disappearance of the author as a person, but rather the death of the person as author. Thus, when a text is completed the person as author dies, but he or she does so only in order to allow the birth of the reader—that is, a cultivated act of reception as well as production in the world in front of the text, within a wider dialectic of appropriation and distanciation.²⁷

This transformation of the author into one among the readers of the text presupposes a self-understanding which actively includes—and welcomes—a de-centering of the self, a self willing to lose oneself in order to find oneself as another—i.e., to be placed outside ourselves. According to Ricoeur, the new self-understanding attained by the subject brought forth in the world in front of the text leads to a liberation of the narcissistic ego—here, we may use Luther's term *incurvatus in se*—and the insight that it is only through critical distanciation that one may find oneself and recognize the original affirmation. Thus, the concept of interpretation originating from the situation in front of the text has notable anthropological implications:

To understand is not to project oneself into the text but to expose oneself to it; it is to receive a self enlarged by the appropriation of the proposed worlds which interpretation unfolds. In sum, it is the matter of the text which gives the reader his dimension of subjectivity [...] in reading, I 'unrealise myself.'²⁸

Instead of a "narcissism of the reader,"²⁹ where the subject is defined as the radical origin and ultimate source of meaning, to Ricoeur, the work of distanciation in every appropriation means that the text may only become my own if I disappropriate myself and enhance "distanciation at the very heart of the experience of belonging."³⁰ At this point, *extra nos* and *homo capax* are joined together in a dialectical understanding of the capable human being, which also discloses what makes us human.

²⁶ Kristensson Ugglä, "Ricoeur and/or Theology," 19-21.

²⁷ Kristensson Ugglä, *Ricoeur, Hermeneutics, and Globalization*, Chapter 1: "As Books Should be Read". Philosophy of Action and the Death of the Author: Paul Ricoeur," 9-29.

²⁸ Ricoeur, "Appropriation," 93.

²⁹ Ibid., 87-90.

³⁰ Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 116. Cf. *ibid.*, 143.

6 Conclusion: What makes us human?

We may now conclude. Despite their significant differences, we have found some remarkable resemblances between the anthropologies of Wingren and Ricoeur, largely due to their common Lutheran roots. And these two attempts to rethink the anthropological contribution from the Reformation also disclose in what great extent Luther may be recognized as part of a profound tradition of dialectical thinking. We have now identified in both Wingren and Ricoeur a dialectical anthropology that takes us beyond both anthropocentrism and anthropoclasm. By relating the two notions *extra nos* and *homo capax*, a dialectical way of thinking has been disclosed relating the centering and the decentering of the self. If Wingren's anthropological considerations starts in the experience of *extra nos*, yet acknowledged as a robust foundation for a capable human being. Ricoeur's starting point is a double Copernican turn, by which the centered subject also is being de-centered, and where the capable human is referred back to an original affirmation. In both cases, human identity is perceived as, in terms of what Ricoeur has mentioned, a series of unstable heterogeneous syntheses.³¹ This also reminds us about Luther's provocative statement in his commentary on Galatians: "This is why our theology is certain, that it sets us outside ourselves."³²

If it is true, as Christoph Schwöbel has repeated, that "the *art of drawing distinctions* [...] is at the heart of Luther's theology,"³³ Wingren and Ricoeur has disclosed how productive it is to make dialectical relations out of paradoxes if we want to understand what it means to be human. Within this dialectical framework, the distinct experience of placing oneself outside ourselves (*extra nos*), conceptualized in terms of a capable human being (*homo capax*), leaves us with the challenge how to articulate love as an transformational interpretation that takes us from the experience of *extra nos* to the capacity of being *for others*. That is what makes us human!

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³¹ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Volume 3*.

³² Op.cit. Ebeling, *Luther: An Introduction to His Thought*, 174.

³³ Schwöbel, "Promise and Trust: Lutheran Identity in a Multicultural Society," 33.

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