

A Book Worth Discussing

The Freedom of the Theological Word

Andrea Vestrucci's *Theology as Freedom*
and the Emergence of a *Nova Lingua*

Dennis Bielfeldt

Theology and the Freedom of Its Own Word

Every generation of theologians inherits not only a determinate set of doctrines but also the linguistic frameworks through which those doctrines can be asserted. The question confronting theology is therefore not merely what is affirmed, e.g., *God justifies the ungodly*, but how such a paradox can be linguistically possible. As I have argued elsewhere, Luther recognized that in matters of faith the majesty of the subject matter itself functions as a transcendental constraint on discourse: revelation demands a form of speech proportionate to its own reality. *De servo arbitrio* stands as his most systematic meditation on this necessity. Against Erasmus' rational piety, disciplined by the conventions of humanist and scholastic discourse, Luther forged a new grammar in which theological meaning emerges only through the disruption and reconfiguration of inherited logical forms. What is at stake, therefore, is not only the relation between grace and freedom but the deeper relation between divine locution and human signification, between Word as act and word as structure.

Andrea Vestrucci's *Theology as Freedom* addresses this problem not at the level of doctrine but at the level of formal structure. His thesis is both conceptually audacious and methodologically exacting: Luther's treatise does not merely argue about the will but performs a transformation in the logical preconditions of theological discourse itself. As Vestrucci states at the outset, "Theology is freedom: the freedom of its own word, the autonomy of theological language vis-à-vis every other form of reason."¹ With this claim he signals a Copernican reversal in theological method. The freedom of theology is not the liberation of doctrine from metaphysical constraint but the emancipation of theological discourse from the inherited logics—modal

1. Andrea Vestrucci, *Theology as Freedom: On Martin Luther's De servo arbitrio* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2021), 2.

and deontic—that once governed reason’s speech about God, and its reorientation toward the typological logic disclosed in revelation.

By analyzing the implicit logics operative in Erasmus’s defense of the will—the formal languages of possibility, obligation, and typological life that structure the *liberum arbitrium* debate—Vestrucci demonstrates that Luther’s apparent denials of freedom are, paradoxically, theology’s discovery of its own linguistic autonomy. Theology becomes free when it recognizes that its discourse cannot be regimented by the modal or deontic operators that govern philosophical reasoning. Freedom, in this sense, is not the negation of necessity but the liberation of language from an alien form. Hence the title: *Theology as Freedom*.

Vestrucci articulates the governing axiom of his project in a sentence that could stand as its formal key: “Divine revelation is not an object of investigation but the principle—the *lumen*—in whose light human forms and structures are re-considered as dependent on revelation and thus as theologically limited.”² This single sentence expresses what the *nova lingua theologiae* demands. Revelation is not an epistemic datum within an existing framework but the transcendental condition that reconfigures the framework itself. Theology’s freedom, therefore, is not independence from constraint but dependence upon the only constraint that makes truth possible.

The *lumen revelationis* is not an external illumination but the constitutive act by which finite rationality is re-specified for divine reference. While such a thesis recalls modern attempts to reclaim theology’s autonomy after the Enlightenment, Vestrucci’s originality lies deeper. “Theology does not describe freedom,” he writes: “it performs freedom. It enacts the liberation of language from heteronomous forms of logic.”³ In other words, theology is not a meta-commentary on revelation but a linguistic event generated by it. Freedom here is not a property predicated of the human will but a formal parameter of theological discourse itself; it is the capacity to speak under divine authorization rather than under philosophical necessity.

Luther’s paradox *servum arbitrium* becomes, for Vestrucci, the event in which reason, standing before divine majesty, discovers its own limits and receives a new grammar adequate to revelation. The paradox functions as a metalogical boundary condition, the point at which the language of philosophy ceases to apply and a new rule of formation is given by revelation itself. What I once called theology’s “strange language” finds in Vestrucci its formal articulation: a logic that must change because its subject matter exceeds the syntax of the finite.⁴

This concern for the formal authorization of theological speech intersects with my account of the *nova lingua theologiae*, a language constituted through divine

2. *Theology as Freedom*, 54.

3. *Theology as Freedom*, 4.

4. See Dennis Bielfeldt, “Luther and the Strange Language of Theology: How New is the Nova Lingua?,” in *Caritas et Reformatio: Essays on Church and Society in Honor of Carter Lindberg*, ed. David M. Whitford (St. Louis: Concordia Academic Press, 2002), 221–244.

causality rather than human synthesis. In my recent formulation of model-theoretic theology, I have proposed that theological discourse qua theological should be understood syntactically, as possessing felicity conditions rather than truth conditions, and that its internal grammar presupposes authorization by the Holy Spirit. Theological propositions are thus felicitous not by social convention but by pneumatological causality, for it is the Spirit who unites word and divine act. Vestrucci's *Theology as Freedom* provides the formal analogue of this thesis: where I pursue the metaphysics of participation, he specifies its logical structure in syntax.

Yet freedom of language is not yet freedom for truth. The emancipation of theological syntax from philosophical constraint does not by itself guarantee reference to divine reality. If theology is free only insofar as it no longer answers to the logics of philosophy, one must ask whether it can still answer to the Logos of God. Vestrucci's subtitle, *On Martin Luther's De servo arbitrio*, shows that his chief concern is methodological: Luther inaugurates a new mode of theological discourse. But here the decisive question arises. Does this nova lingua remain a self-enclosed linguistic revolution, or does it sustain genuine intentionality toward divine being? The enduring task of post-critical dogmatics is precisely to preserve the radicality of Luther's linguistic turn without forfeiting theology's referential realism. The Word that frees must also be.

Vestrucci's resolution unfolds through a triadic architecture—the modal, the deontic, and the typological. Each stage isolates a distinct philosophical grammar and then demonstrates its theological transposition. The result is not a reform of concepts but a re-specification of the rules governing meaningful discourse: a *metalogical Reformation*. The scholastic idioms that once secured theology's rational respectability are displaced by a paradoxical grammar in which negation, contradiction, and asymmetry become the privileged forms of revelation. Luther's paradoxes—*iustus et peccator*, *servum arbitrium*, *Deus absconditus*—are not rhetorical excesses but logical operations marking the point at which divine disclosure subverts human semantics. Language learns to signify by contradiction because grace communicates by inversion.

This reading situates *Theology as Freedom* within the broader trajectory of post-critical dogmatics, which seeks theology's internal normativity without relapse into pre-Kantian metaphysics. While thinkers such as Lindbeck, Frei, and the Finnish school have emphasized the self-referential character of theological language, Vestrucci distinguishes himself by giving that character formal precision.⁵ Theology, he argues, operates under a logical regime disclosed by revelation itself. Revelation

5. See George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 63–69; Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974); Tuomo Mannermaa, *Christ Present in Faith: Luther's View of Justification*, ed. Kirsi Stjerna (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 1–20. Lindbeck's "cultural-linguistic" model proposes that theology functions more like an internal grammar than a set of empirically verifiable or metaphysical claims. Frei foregrounds the irreducible narrative logic of Scripture in contrast to Enlightenment hermeneutics. The Finnish School, especially

is thus not a semantic content within theological discourse but the generative rule that determines its very syntax. *Theology as Freedom* therefore stands as one of the most exacting contemporary attempts to show how the language of faith arises from the *lumen revelationis*, the majesty of the subject matter speaking its own freedom.

Part I. The Modal Logic of Freedom and the Birth of a New Grammar

Andrea Vestrucci's *Theology as Freedom* occupies a central place in his wider intellectual project. Across his work in ethics, philosophy of language, and systematic theology, a single question governs his inquiry: what form of rationality can remain answerable to revelation without collapsing into pre-critical metaphysics or post-critical relativism? Earlier writings—*La responsabilité de la foi, Philosophie et théologie après Wittgenstein*,⁶ and a series of essays on ethics and linguistic responsibility—approached this question phenomenologically and ethically, asking how moral agency might be articulated under the conditions of a revelation that exceeds conceptual control.

Theology as Freedom represents the formal completion of that trajectory. What Vestrucci had previously framed in terms of moral responsibility and linguistic limitation is here transposed into the *metalogical structure* of divine address. His aim is not to produce a doctrinal synthesis but to show that *revelation generates the logical space in which theology can speak at all*. Across his corpus, Vestrucci consistently seeks a theological rationality governed not by external philosophical criteria but by the *internal normativity* of revelation itself. Positioned within the post-Kantian landscape as both logician and theologian, he attempts to show how theological discourse can remain formally rigorous while remaining obedient to the structure of divine speech. In this sense, *Theology as Freedom* is not merely a summit within his *oeuvre*, it is the hinge at which his philosophical and theological commitments converge. It offers a single formal horizon in which logic, language, and theological truth can be thought together.

Vestrucci's *Theology as Freedom* begins, characteristically, not with a doctrinal claim but with an analysis of the logical form that renders such claims possible. The opening chapters investigate what he calls "the logic of freedom . . . the modal structure that allows talk about the will to be possible."⁷ For Erasmus, freedom belongs

through Mannermaa, retrieves the ontological dimension of Luther's theology, highlighting union with Christ (*unio mystica*) as the inner logic of justification. Vestrucci's formalization of theology's internal logic builds upon this trajectory, moving beyond epistemological debates to assert that revelation discloses its own rational structure—what he terms the *lumen revelationis*.

6. Andrea Vestrucci, *La responsabilité de la foi* (Genève: Labor et Fides, 2014); and *Philosophie et théologie après Wittgenstein* (Genève: Labor et Fides, 2010).

7. *Theology as Freedom*, 27.

to the metaphysical schema of potency and act: *libertas est potentia ad oppositum*. Within this framework the human will occupies the region of possibility, its agency defined by its capacity to realize one potential among many under divine assistance. The logical field is therefore symmetrical: God and creature both operate within the same modal space, differing only in the kind of necessity or efficacy involved. As Vestrucci observes, this symmetry presupposes a shared grammar of possibility, a modal continuum in which grace and nature are commensurable.

Luther's *De servo arbitrio* shatters that continuum. The will is not a field of potentialities awaiting divine cooperation but the effect of divine causality itself. To speak of "freedom" in modal terms is already to have misdescribed revelation. "To maintain theology within the logic of modality," Vestrucci writes, "means to render its object unintelligible, since revelation does not belong to the order of the possible."⁸ What begins as a critique of Erasmus thus becomes a metalogical reformation: the creation of a grammar no longer bound to the possible but authorized by the revealed.

Vestrucci's decisive insight is that the dispute is not primarily about anthropology but about language. To speak of divine and human "possibility" under a single modal operator is to impose a univocal logic upon an analogical relation. The idolatrous result is a logic of freedom that presupposes commensurability between Creator and creature. Against this, Luther's theology introduces what Vestrucci calls "the operator of paradox," "the theological structure of meaning as asymmetry between divine revelation and human reason."⁹ Where the logic of possibility calculates, the logic of revelation discloses.

This move amounts to a redefinition of theological intelligibility. The "void name," as Vestrucci terms it, marks the point at which inherited logical structures fail to signify the divine relation and must be replaced by forms of speech generated within revelation itself. "The name of God," he writes, "functions as a void name for reason, a term that breaks the coherence of conceptual logic and opens language to revelation."¹⁰ Theological discourse becomes intelligible not by extension of prior semantics but by the emergence of a new semantics in which meaning no longer derives from modal comparability but from revelational participation.

In this sense, Luther's argument is not merely a critique of Erasmus's modal reasoning but a transformation of what it means for a proposition to be theologically meaningful. The shift from modality to paradox constitutes theology's liberation from the univocity of being and its entry into a logic of participation. The modal collapse is not a loss of rationality but the birth of a new grammar, one that is adequate to the asymmetry of Creator and creature, a grammar in which possibility itself is redefined as the openness of reason to the act of God.

8. *Theology as Freedom*, 29.

9. *Theology as Freedom*, 34.

10. *Theology as Freedom*, 37-38.

The Failure of Modal Translation

Vestrucci characterizes Erasmus's project as a paradigmatic instance of what he calls *modal translation*: the assumption that theological assertions can be rendered without loss of meaning within the language of possibility and necessity. Erasmus's discourse presupposes that divine and human predicates share a common logical space, that what *may, must, or can* apply to God may, *mutatis mutandis*, also apply to the human subject. The theological relation is thus expressed through the semantics of possible worlds.

For Vestrucci, this assumption is not simply mistaken but structurally incoherent, for the attempt to translate theology into modal form falsifies the asymmetry it seeks to describe. The divine \diamond and the human \diamond are not homonymous but equivocal, and to employ them under a single operator is to erase the categorical distinction between Creator and creature.¹¹ The logical apparatus of modality, designed to measure degrees of necessity within a finite domain, cannot accommodate a relation in which one term—God—is the ontological ground of the other. To speak modally of God and humanity as though they share a field of possible predicates is, therefore, to commit a category mistake.

Luther's rejoinder to Erasmus, as Vestrucci reconstructs it, is not an alternative modal theory but a performative critique of the entire modal framework. In denying the possibility of libertarian freedom, Luther exposes the linguistic inadequacy of modal discourse itself. The issue is not whether the will is free or bound *within* a given logical space, but whether the logical space presupposed by Erasmus is theologically legitimate. The relation between divine act and human response does not occur within a preexisting field of possibility but it rather *constitutes* that field.

Vestrucci identifies the *operator of paradox* as the formal sign marking the breakdown of modal symmetry and the inception of a new mode of predication. The paradox operator functions as a meta-linguistic instruction; it signals that the proposition in which it appears must be interpreted under the rule of revelation rather than under the rule of modality. Where classical logic seeks to resolve contradiction by refining definitions, theological logic accepts contradiction as the condition of meaningfulness when speaking of God.

This is what I have called theology's *strange language*, a speech compelled to twist and break its inherited syntax under the weight of the divine reality it must name. Theological language, Luther recognized, is not accidental metaphor but necessary excess. As I wrote many decades ago, such a language is one in which "the majesty of the subject matter demands a new form of thinking and speaking, one whose grammar is given with the object itself."¹² The demand is grammatical

11. In many modal logics, ' \diamond ' standardly means "it is possible that," while ' \square ' signs that "it is necessarily that."

12. Dennis Bielfeldt, "Luther, Metaphor, and Theological Language," *Modern Theology* 6, no. 2 (January 1990): 33.

before it is doctrinal. Vestrucci's "void name" is the logical analogue of that insight. It is the point where language, overwhelmed by the infinite, becomes free precisely by being broken.

Thus, on Vestrucci's reading, Luther's *De servo arbitrio* is not an anthropological thesis but a metalogical event; it is that moment in which the inherited syntax of possibility collapses under the weight of divine necessity. The language of theology, confronted with the infinite, is compelled to violate its own rules to remain truthful. Meaning is preserved only through formal rupture.

Vestrucci's reconstruction therefore recasts *De servo arbitrio* as a treatise on the limits of translation. To render theology in the grammar of modality is to translate revelation into an idiom that cannot contain it. The proper task is not to improve the translation but to abandon it, to allow the paradoxical logic of revelation to dictate its own operators, its own semantics, and finally its own truth conditions. In that surrender, theology ceases to be a species of philosophical discourse and becomes what it properly is: *a language generated by the act it names*.

Revelation and the Copernican Turn

Vestrucci renders this shift with exacting clarity. "Luther's *De servo arbitrio*," he writes, "inaugurates a Copernican revolution of thought: the center of theology is no longer the human intellect that thinks God, but the divine Word that thinks humanity."¹³ In the history of reason, this marks a third displacement: as Copernicus relocated the proximity of the earth by the distance of the sun, and Kant displaced the distance of the object by the proximity of the transcendental unity of apperception, so Luther displaces the proximity of human thinking of the divine by the distance of the divine thinking the human. The hiddenness of God (*Deus absconditus*) signals the inapplicability of modal predicates to the divine, for such predicates presuppose conditions of possibility internal to creaturely reason. Revelation (*Deus revelatus*) therefore introduces a new inferential space rather than supplementing an old one. Paradoxical predication becomes possible not because logic is suspended but because the domain of application has changed. "Freedom," here, designates the release of language from modal constraint; it is the point at which theological reasoning begins precisely where human reasoning reaches its limit.

At this point Vestrucci's position converges with my account of the *nova lingua theologiae*, where semantic determination occurs on the side of the object, not the subject. His framework formalizes what I describe now as the pneumatological felicity of theological speech: truth as divinely authorized assertion. On this view, theology does not generate truth-conditions but receives them from the act of divine speech. The Word is not a term within a model but the agent who establishes the model itself.

13. *Theology as Freedom*, 58.

Still, Vestrucci's formulation introduces a risk. If revelation is construed primarily as a reversal of inferential priorities, it can appear as a purely formal operation, an inversion rather than an act. This renders the "freedom" of theological language underdetermined. A logical transformation without an ontological agent collapses into abstraction. My model-theoretic realism addresses this by locating the revolution in the being of the speaker: the new grammar is not only given but caused. Revelation is an instance of divine agency, not a shift in logical protocol. The constitutive act of the Word grounds the inferential possibilities that Vestrucci identifies.

Once this ontological ground is acknowledged, the status of paradox is clarified. Paradox is not an indicator of inconsistency but the expected form of discourse when finite language is determined by an infinite agent. It marks the asymmetry between divine causality and human predication. The contradiction is not internal to theology but external: it arises from the mismatch between the categories of creaturely logic and the act that founds those categories. Paradox, therefore, is not a methodological concession but the grammar proper to revelation.

Paradox as Method

Paradox does not function in Luther as a negation of logic but as a specification of its theological limit. In *De servo arbitrio*, paradox marks the point at which the inferential resources of deontic and modal language fail to track the object they attempt to describe. The contradiction is not introduced rhetorically but arises from the mismatch between the grammar of human agency and the act of divine self-disclosure. Here Vestrucci is exact: paradox appears when a predicate continues to be used beyond the domain for which its rules were designed.

Under Vestrucci's analysis, this limit is not merely epistemic but structural. The paradox *servum arbitrium / liberum arbitrium*, for example, is not a metaphysical antinomy but a linguistic artifact generated by two incommensurable frameworks:

- (1) a deontic system in which *ought* presupposes *can*, and
- (2) a revealed framework in which the *Sollen* becomes the instrument of its own impossibility.

Theological paradox therefore names the point at which ordinary predicates lose applicability because the domain of evaluation has shifted. The grammar governing theological assertions is not an extension of the natural grammar of agency, but a rule system constituted by revelation. Paradox, therefore, is neither contradiction nor equivocation but a signal that the semantic conditions of evaluation have changed.

On this view, paradox becomes a methodological indicator. When a theological statement appears contradictory—for example, the will is bound in every respect and yet commanded without qualification—the contradiction is not resolved by appeal to higher-order modal distinctions. Rather, the appearance of contradiction is itself evidence that the assertion belongs to a different logical space, one whose rules are supplied by the divine Word rather than by the human subject. Paradox

thus functions as the boundary marker between the logic of creaturely possibility and the logic of revealed address.

Hence paradox is the formal footprint of revelation within language. It indicates that an assertion has crossed the boundary from a realm in which predicates are applied according to human capacities to a realm in which predicates are licensed by divine act. Paradox is therefore not a deficiency in theological speech but the expected consequence of its proper object. It is the linguistic evidence of a *nova lingua*: a grammar whose rules are authored by revelation and whose predicates receive their sense from the act that names them.

Freedom as Dependence

Theological freedom, in Vestrucci's account, is not an attribute possessed by the human subject but a structural feature of divine revelation. Freedom arises only when the inferential norms that govern theological discourse are no longer supplied by deontic logic where obligation is indexed to human capacity, but when they are provided by the divine Word itself. In this transition, freedom is not expanded agency but re-specified grammar.

The decisive analytic move is the suspension of the deontic implication *ought* \rightarrow *can*. This suspension is not a concession to human weakness but the result of a logical modification introduced by revelation itself. As Vestrucci repeatedly shows, the *Sollen* of Scripture is not a task assigned to human ability but an instrument of divine address. Consequently, what appears as heteronomy from within deontic language becomes autonomy from within theological language, for the norm is determined by the speaker rather than the agent. Revelation frees not by relaxing obligation but by relocating obligation's ground from human capability to divine predication.

Vestrucci characterizes this transition as a transformation in the "logistics of freedom," a transformation made possible only by revelation's unconditionality: "the theological conceptualization of freedom corresponds to the theological modification of these logistics of freedom in light of the unconditionality of divine revelation."¹⁴ This modification is formal rather than psychological. It shifts the agent from a normative space structured by ability to a normative space structured by promise. As his analysis of Luther's account of sin and forgiveness shows (pp. 135–148), the deontic consequence between action and judgment is annulled by divine promise: forgiveness becomes the negation of a negation, an absolution that presupposes not the capacity to realize the *Sollen* but the impossibility of doing so. Promise thus creates the very condition through which freedom is recognized.

Under this framework, dependence becomes the very condition of freedom. The human subject is freed precisely insofar as it becomes the object of divine

14. *Theology as Freedom*, 298.

predication. To be addressed by God is to be inscribed within a logical environment in which evaluative standing no longer turns on the realizability of the *Sollen* but on the stability of a divine promise. Freedom no longer signifies the capacity to act otherwise, but it now points to one's being located within an act of God whose efficacy precedes, grounds, and sustains all human agency. Freedom is dependence because dependence is what secures the unconditional space in which human action is as no longer the measure of obligation.

It is here that Vestrucci explicitly aligns with the semantic insight I first articulated forty years ago in my account of Luther's *nova lingua*: theological meaning is determined from the side of the object, not the subject. Accordingly, theological language must become strange because its object commands it; the majesty of the subject matter demands a new form of thinking and speaking, one whose grammar is given with the object itself. Vestrucci confirms this reading. On pp. 55–57, Vestrucci defends this claim against Graham White's charge of anachronism, arguing that the syntactic and semantic distinctions I draw do not impose external categories upon Luther but formalize an operation already implicit in Luther's own practice of theological speech. Vestrucci locates the logic of this operation not in speculative reconstruction but in Luther's insistence that theological language is governed by divine self-reference, for God is both agent and referent of theological predication.¹⁵ This is fully consonant with my recent model-theoretic formulation in which theological speech is defined not by truth-conditions but by felicity-conditions authorized by the Holy Spirit.

This vindication is not merely historical. It underscores the analytic point at stake. If theological meaning derives from divine predication, then theological freedom must likewise be traced to divine predication. Dependence is not a limitation within this logic but its necessary structure. Only an externally grounded norm can supply the stability required for freedom understood as promise rather than performance.

For this reason, Vestrucci's formalism converges with the model-theoretic realism I am currently developing. Both positions maintain that revelation determines the space of reasons within which theological assertions are true. In such a space, freedom is dependence because dependence is the only form of agency not hostage to the contingency or failure of human action. To be bound by the Word is to inhabit a grammar in which one's standing is given rather than achieved, and therefore a grammar in which freedom is not a property of the will but a consequence of being addressed by God. Vestrucci's conclusion captures this with crystalline precision: "To obey is to be free: theology's liberty lies in its dependence on revelation alone."¹⁶

15. *Theology as Freedom*, 299: "The novelty of the language of *De servo arbitrio* refers not to a metalanguage but to the theological reflection upon the validity of every possible metalinguistic proposition."

16. *Theology as Freedom*, 12.

Freedom, Formalism, and the Question of Truth

Any evaluation of Vestrucci's project must begin by identifying its principal achievement. He succeeds in giving a precise formal account of Luther's central claim in *De servo arbitrio*: that theological meaning arises not through conceptual derivation but through divine address.¹⁷ By reframing Luther's polemic as a transformation in the logical conditions of thought, he exposes the structural implications of the Reformer's insistence that the Word determines both the agent and the grammar within which the agent is understood.

The strength of this approach lies in its refusal to psychologize Luther. Vestrucci does not treat bondage of the will as a theory of motivation or a pathology of agency. Instead, he parses it as a modification of inferential norms. From this angle, the "bondage" thesis is not an anthropological claim at all but a meta-semantic one: the rules that govern theological discourse are not derived from human capacities but from divine speech. The human subject is not evaluated by its potential but by its placement within the divine assertion.

This structural recasting allows Vestrucci to explain, without recourse to speculative metaphysics, why Luther denies the applicability of modal predicates to God. If divine action is the condition of theological predication, then God cannot be located within the modal space that divine action generates. Luther's *Deus absconditus* is therefore not an epistemic gap but a formal boundary. The *Deus revelatus* is not an ontological contrast-term but the introduction of a new inferential environment within which theological statements obtain. As Vestrucci summarizes his project: *Theology as Freedom* is "not a theological system, but the formal reconstruction of theology's own system-breaking."¹⁸

Nonetheless, the project displays a set of limitations that follow directly from these strengths. By identifying revelation with a transformation in logical form, Vestrucci risks converting divine action into a purely structural operator. Revelation becomes a condition of intelligibility rather than an act of God; the grammar is retained while the speaker recedes. The danger is not heterodoxy but abstraction: a theological Copernican revolution without a theological sun.

This limitation becomes acute in Vestrucci's extended analysis of forgiveness, promise, and justification. His treatment of deontic language is exact, and his argument for the negation of "ought \rightarrow can" in the theological register is compelling.¹⁹ But the reconstruction remains at the level of formal consequences. *Gratia* becomes the name for an altered inferential rule rather than for a divine act that alters the world. Nothing in the logic is wrong. My concern is with an *ontological absence* that the logic cannot by itself remedy.

17. *Theology as Freedom*, 55-57.

18. *Theology as Freedom*, 298.

19. *Theology as Freedom*, 137-148.

What is missing is what analytic theology can supply: a semantics in which divine speech does not merely determine inferential patterns but *causes* them. A formal grammar of revelation requires an ontological ground if it is to avoid collapsing into a self-contained language-game. Without such grounding, the *nova lingua* risks becoming another linguistic turn, while brilliant and intricate, it is insufficiently anchored.

Vestrucci's analysis and my own model-theoretic proposals diverge here. While his account demonstrates the necessity of a new logical space, mine attempts to identify the agent who creates and sustains that space. For theology to speak truth rather than merely reconfigured coherence, revelation must be not only a rule-governed form but a real act. The transition from modality to promise cannot be merely conceptual; it must be metaphysical. While freedom is found "not [in] a theological system, but [in] the formal reconstruction of theology's own system-breaking,"²⁰ something more is needed, for while Vestrucci's formalism identifies the "new logical space" of theology, the task now is to identify the agentive ground of that space: the Logos whose act constitutes both meaning and world.

Part II. The Deontic Logic of Obligation and the Promise of Speech

Part II shifts from modality to deontology, from the grammar of possibility to the grammar of obligation. Erasmus's defense of *liberum arbitrium* presupposes a stable deontic architecture in which, if God commands, the human agent must be able to obey. The normativity of divine law is secured through the symmetry between *ought* and *can*. Within this structure, moral responsibility presupposes deontic feasibility; grace assists but does not displace natural capacity.

Luther's *De servo arbitrio* dismantles this equilibrium at the level of logical form. The command that cannot be fulfilled is not an anomaly but the very function of the law. The *ought* reveals the impossibility of its own realization. Vestrucci formalizes this as a transformation in the inferential structure of deontic logic. Classical systems assume the axiom

$$\bigcirc p \rightarrow \diamond p$$

asserting that if one ought to do p , then it must be possible to do p . Luther, on Vestrucci's reading, replaces this with:

$$\bigcirc p \rightarrow \neg \diamond p$$

This states that if one ought to do p , then it is *not* possible to do it. The law's role is therefore not directive but diagnostic. It does not delineate achievable moral space but exposes the absence of such space altogether.

20. *Theology as Freedom*, 11.

From within moral philosophy, this appears as a collapse of deontic coherence. From within theology, however, it becomes the disclosure of dependence. The impossibility of obedience is not an empirical limitation but a *formal one*: deontic demands terminate not in human ability but in divine action. The law is a logical limit, an operator that reveals incapacity by its very structure. Its “ought” acquires theological meaning only as the precondition for the promise that follows.

From Law to Promise

Vestrucci interprets Luther's inversion of the deontic axiom as the formal hinge on which theology turns from law to promise. Once the impossibility of the law is disclosed, the linguistic mode of theology must change. Deontic utterances—*you shall*—cede their place to declarative and performative ones—*you are*. Justification is not the consequence of satisfying a command but the effect of a promissory act. The Gospel's speech does not evaluate; it creates.

In these terms, *sola fide* becomes not merely doctrinal but grammatical. It marks a reconfiguration of the very conditions under which theological statements acquire sense. The Word that declares righteousness constitutes the state it predicates. Vestrucci's analysis captures this transition with admirable formal clarity, for the Gospel is not a moderated form of the law but a different linguistic regime altogether.

This transformation mirrors what I have elsewhere described as the birth of the *nova lingua theologiae*. Theological speech becomes “strange” because it must bear the majesty of the subject that utters it; its syntax bends beneath divine causation.²¹ In Vestrucci's terms, the transition from obligation to performative declaration marks the point where language ceases to legislate and begins to generate. Freedom is no longer the autonomy of the subject but the generativity of divine discourse within the subject; it is the freedom of a language spoken by God rather than determined by human agency.

The Promise as Divine Performative

Vestrucci's analysis reaches its height in showing that the Gospel's freedom is linguistic before it is moral. Justification by faith alone is the grammar of a performative utterance whose felicity depends solely on divine authority. In his reconstruction, the statement “*You are righteous*” is a speech act that accomplishes its own truth. Yet unlike ordinary performatives, divine speech presupposes no prior convention.

21. See Dennis Bielfeldt, “Luther on Language,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 25 (2011): 199–222. There I argued that Luther's *nova lingua* names neither a semantic innovation nor a syntactic anomaly but a structural transformation in which theological meaning is determined “from the side of the object.” The grammar of faith is generated by God's act, not by human linguistic competence. Vestrucci's formal distinction between philosophical and theological inference (esp. *De sententia Verbum caro factum est*) effectively confirms this thesis: the conditions of predication in theology are fixed by revelation, not by prior logical norms.

Rather, *it creates the very conditions of its felicity*. Here the “majesty of the subject matter” becomes logical necessity: the infinite speaker generates the syntax through which the finite may respond.

All of this aligns directly with the pneumatological realism I am developing. In human discourse, felicity conditions are conferred externally by social or institutional norms. In theological discourse, they are generated internally by the Spirit’s causality. The Spirit is the ground of the truth of divine speech. A promissory utterance is true because the Spirit makes it so. Vestrucci’s deontic inversion therefore anticipates what I elsewhere call Spirit-felicity: the coincidence of linguistic authorization and ontological efficacy.

Freedom as Obedience

The logical outcome of this architecture is the paradox Luther relentlessly asserts: freedom consists in dependence. Vestrucci formulates this with technical clarity. Once theology rejects the deontic assumption that “ought implies can,” it discovers that its freedom is not linguistic autonomy but subjection to revelation. Accordingly, to be free is to be bound to the Word that establishes its own grammar.

In analytic terms, theological freedom is the recognition that its inferential norms are externally grounded. The system’s integrity does not arise from internal coherence but from responsiveness to an authoritative agent. The theologian’s language is most free precisely when it is least self-governing. To speak truly is to be spoken.

This completes the deontic revolution. The subject’s capacities no longer delineate the space of obligation, for divine speech delineates the space of meaning. The law exposes incapacity; the promise constitutes agency. What results is not a moral psychology but a theory of linguistic causation: God’s Word is the ground of both theological grammar and theological truth.

At the heart of this revolution stands Luther’s enduring paradox: *to obey is to be free*. Vestrucci captures this with admirable precision. Theology becomes most autonomous when it is most obedient, for only then does it participate in the divine performative that grounds it. Just as the will’s bondage is its liberation, so theology’s captivity to the Word is its true autonomy. To speak within the Gospel’s grammar is to be spoken by God.

The analysis of deontic inversion yields a single structural conclusion: once $O p \rightarrow \neg \diamond p$ is recognized as the logical form of the law under revelation, the grammar of obligation ceases to function as a site of moral achievement and becomes instead a site of epistemic disclosure. The law’s impossibility establishes the conditions under which the promissory Word can operate as a performative creating the very states of affairs it declares. Theological freedom therefore emerges not as autonomy but as dependence: the linguistic space in which faith speaks is constituted by the divine act that precedes it. This result completes the deontic analysis and opens directly onto

the third movement of Vestrucci's argument, where the logic of promise expands into a typological account of history, time, and eschatological fulfillment.

Freedom as Obedience

The logical outcome of Vestrucci's architecture is Luther's central paradox: *freedom consists in dependence*. When theology abandons the deontic axiom that "ought implies can," it discovers that its freedom is not linguistic autonomy but responsiveness to revelation. In analytic terms, theological inference is normatively governed from outside; its integrity is grounded not in inner coherence but in its relation to an authoritative speaker. The theologian's language is most free precisely when it is most obedient, when it is spoken rather than self-generated.

This inversion marks the collapse of the classical deontic system. The law no longer functions as the site of moral agency but as the site of epistemic disclosure: it reveals incapacity rather than presupposing possibility. Within this exposed space, the promissory Word operates performatively, creating the very states of affairs it declares. Divine speech, not human ability, becomes the ground of theological grammar and theological truth.

Once the relation $O p \rightarrow \neg \diamond p$ is recognized as the formal structure of the law under revelation, deontic categories cease to regulate theology. Obligation yields to promise; human possibility yields to divine agency. *Theological freedom therefore emerges as dependence upon a Word that generates its own conditions of meaning*, opening directly onto the typological horizon Vestrucci explores in the third movement of his argument.

Part III. The Typological Logic of Life and the Aesthetics of Divine Speech

From Teleology to Typology

Having dismantled the modal grammar of possibility and the deontic grammar of obligation, Vestrucci turns to a third linguistic architecture: the typological grammar that shapes theology's account of life. Classical and humanist traditions construed life teleologically, a progressive narrative in which virtue leads to reward, providence secures continuity, and moral agency explains historical coherence. Vestrucci argues that Luther breaks this narrative logic. Life is not the unfolding of inherent capacities but the arena in which divine address interrupts, reconfigures, and reconstitutes the subject. Existence is not narrated; it is spoken.

Typology, not teleology, governs this mode of life. It is not an exegetical technique for discovering symbolic correspondences but the very structure of revelation: meaning is given through inversion. Election—the elder rejected, the younger chosen—becomes the paradigmatic rule. Types anticipate their fulfillment not by similarity but by contradiction. This inversion is the grammar of grace.

The shift bears directly on theological semantics. Teleological narratives presuppose modal continuity; they presuppose a world where possibility develops toward fulfillment. Typological discourse presupposes divine causality and a world constituted by reversal. As I argued in *Luther and Metaphor*, the finite is bent into the form of the infinite without loss of identity. Vestrucci provides the formal analogue: typological reversal is the linguistic trace of divine action.

On this basis, Vestrucci sketches a “theology of life.” Life is not self-interpreting but revealed; its meaning does not arise immanently but is given from without. To live by faith is to receive one’s biography as a divine predicate. Human life becomes typological, for its shape is determined by the one to whom it is joined. Thus, typology is not merely a hermeneutical tool but an ontological description -- the believer is a life hidden with Christ in God – and theological language does not merely point to divine realities but participates in them. The life of faith becomes a sentence in a grammar authored by the Word.

Predestination, Aesthetics, and the Hidden God

Predestination stands at the center of this typological logic. Vestrucci captures it with striking concision: “For Luther, theology is *coram Deo abscondito*—theology before the hidden God. Divine revelation operates *sub contrario*, freeing reason from its own unconditional principles.” This is not rhetorical flourish but the formal principle of typology. Predestination extends typology to its deepest horizon: revelation appears in its opposite. Judgment appears as grace and absence appears as presence. The hidden God is not a residue of metaphysical opacity but the formal condition of revelation’s paradoxical grammar.

Predestination is therefore not primarily a metaphysical doctrine but a linguistic one. It expresses the manner in which divine speech addresses the creature through contradiction. The cross is the paradigmatic instance: the point at which divine action appears in its opposite and thereby determines the typological pattern of every believer’s life. Yet this interpretation requires completion. The cross is not merely figural; it is causal. Typology depends upon the real presence of the act it figures. Without this ontological ground, typology risks collapsing into aesthetic inversion. However, with it, typology becomes the linguistic surface of divine participation.

This leads naturally to the aesthetic dimension of Luther’s theology. For Vestrucci, the rhetorical form of *De servo arbitrio*—its hyperbole, antithesis, and paradox—is not ornament but substance. The aesthetic intensity of Luther’s prose is the perceptible form of its logic: beauty is the manifestation of order within contradiction. Theology becomes aesthetic because divine speech, entering finite language, generates a distinctive form—contradictions held in unity. This parallels my own insistence that metaphor is not optional but structurally necessary. When the infinite speaks finitely, language must break, stretch, and reform. Aesthetics is therefore not an auxiliary discipline but the phenomenology of divine causality in speech.

Still, beauty alone cannot secure theology. The *nova lingua* is beautiful because it is true, and it is true because it is grounded in divine agency. Here Vestrucci's formalism and my model-theoretic realism converge, for form without ontology is empty; ontology without form is inexpressible.

Part III therefore shows that theology's final grammar is typological: it speaks the logic of divine actuality rather than the logic of human potential or obligation. Typology, however, cannot stand on its own. Without an ontological ground, reversal becomes rhetorical display rather than revelatory event. When rooted in the causative Word, typology becomes a genuine semantics of participation—the *nova lingua* as the linguistic manifestation of divine being.

At this point Vestrucci's *Theology as Freedom* and my model-theoretic realism converge. His formalism identifies the logical space in which revelation speaks; my realism specifies the divine act that renders such speech true. Theology is free because it participates in that act, and its language is true because it is spoken by the Word. The *nova lingua* is thus the finite resonance of divine speech; it is precise, participatory, and ontologically real.

Part IV. Evaluating the *Nova Lingua*: Between Freedom and Realism

Andrea Vestrucci's *Theology as Freedom* is among the most formally ambitious contributions to contemporary Lutheran theology. By reading *De servo arbitrio* as a metalogical treatise, he argues that Luther's text effects a threefold displacement: the modal grammar of possibility yields to paradox, the deontic grammar of obligation yields to promise, and the teleological grammar of narrative yields to typology. In each case, the shift is not rhetorical but structural. Theology, once freed from reason's natural languages, speaks within a logical space constituted by revelation itself. The achievement is unmistakable: Vestrucci restores theology's internal normativity without retreating into pre-critical metaphysics or capitulating to post-critical relativism.

Three contributions stand out.

1. Vestrucci secures theology's intellectual dignity by relocating its rationality. Reason is not discarded but converted. Modality, obligation, and teleology are neither abolished nor ignored but reinterpreted through paradox, promise, and typology. Logic becomes responsive to divine speech.
2. He interprets justification as a linguistic act. The declarative "You are righteous" functions as a divine performative whose felicity depends solely on God's authority. Grace becomes linguistic causality; the Word does what it says. Deontic reciprocity (ought → can) collapses into promissory immediacy (God declares → it is so). This formalization gives Luther's forensic insight superior conceptual clarity.
3. Vestrucci's extension into typology and aesthetic form demonstrates that the logical transformations of Parts I and II are not episodic but structural.

Typology becomes theology's grammar of life. History is interpreted from a future already given in promise, and paradox becomes the stable form of revelation rather than a temporary rupture. The *nova lingua* is not simply a revised syntax but a reconfiguration of the logical space in which human life is understood.

Yet the very elegance of this architecture raises the question of realism. Vestrucci explains with rare clarity how theological language operates under revelation, but not how that language is true. While paradox, promise, and figure function as operators within discourse, theology also claims that divine speech effects realities outside discourse. At this juncture the pneumatological dimension becomes indispensable. The Spirit is not a rule of inversion nor a formal constant but the agent who unites illocution and ontology. Model-theoretically, one might say that the Spirit ensures that theology's assertions hold in the model constituted by God's self-communication. *Felicity*—the internal authorization of assertion—and *reference*—its adequacy to divine reality—coincide only because the Spirit bridges them. Without this mediation, theology risks becoming an elegant but self-contained construction: free, but not yet true.

This is precisely where Luther exceeds the limits of a purely formal account. The paradoxes of *De servo arbitrio* are not linguistic maneuvers but statements grounded in the incarnate Word whose divine act constitutes their referent. The *nova lingua* is free because it participates in that act, because the One who speaks it causes its truth. Seen through this pneumatological and ontological lens, Vestrucci's project becomes a summons to theology's vocation. The *nova lingua* is not the invention of a conceptual scheme, but the reception of a grammar given in revelation. Theology's freedom is its obedience to that grammar. To think God is to be disciplined by divine speech, and autonomy is found only in dependence. Theological speech must die to itself that it might live in the Word. Vestrucci has uncovered the theology of the Cross in its purest linguistic form. His formalism now gives this claim new structural clarity: the *nova lingua* is a mode of life before it is a mode of discourse. It is a participation in the divine act by which creaturely speech is taken up into divine intelligibility.

Viewed in this light, *Theology as Freedom* accomplishes the formal prolegomenon to a renewed theology. It shows how revelation reorganizes the logical space of human thought. Yet the project can reach completion only when the formal revolution is grounded in ontological participation. Theology's freedom is identical with its truth because both depend upon the Spirit's causality. The *nova lingua* speaks truly not because it follows a new syntax but because it is sustained by the divine being who speaks through it. In contemporary metaphysical terms, the divine act that sustains theological language functions as its truthmaker. In this union of form and reality—paradox and truth, promise and fulfillment—revelation becomes intelligible without ceasing to be divine. Theology's language is free because it is true, and it is true because it participates in the One who speaks it.

Epilogue: From Freedom to Truth— The *Nova Lingua* and the Future of Theology

Theology as Freedom concludes with a sentence that encapsulates the whole work: “Theology’s liberty lies in dependence on revelation alone.” Across its pages, Vestrucci traces a threefold transformation in rationality. First, theology is freed from modality—what *may* be yields to what *is* revealed. Second, it is freed from deontic obligation—what *ought* to be gives way to what the Word declares. Third, theology is freed from teleological progression into typological participation—history becomes intelligible not as moral development but as figure and promise. Through these movements, he relocates theology from the conditions of philosophical discourse to the act of revelation itself.

Seen in this light, *Theology as Freedom* offers a form of post-critical dogmatics. It neither reinstates premodern metaphysics nor dissolves theology into linguistic pluralism. Instead, Vestrucci argues that revelation generates its own logical space: its own operators, inference rules, and conditions of felicity. In this way, he retrieves a principle Luther grasped but modern theology neglected: the logic of theology must arise from the majesty of its subject, not from the capacities of the finite mind.

This project reflects Vestrucci’s broader vocation. Trained in ethics, logic, and systematic theology, he has long sought to unite formal precision with obedience to revelation. *Theology as Freedom* achieves this aim: ethical and phenomenological themes are transposed into a metalogical register where theological claims can be analyzed with rigor while remaining ordered to divine speech. What had been moral inquiry becomes a grammar of address; what had been conceptual analysis becomes formal theology.

Yet the achievement raises the unavoidable question this article has pressed: Can theology’s freedom endure without ontology? If revelation functions only as a linguistic operator, theology risks becoming formally elegant but metaphysically inert. Divine speech, however, is not structure alone; it is act. Its truth depends upon its reality.

Here the pneumatological dimension is decisive. The Spirit is not a logical constant but the agent who unites language and being. In model-theoretic terms, the Spirit secures the correspondence between the theory (the internal grammar of revelation) and the model (the divine reality that renders that grammar true). Without this mediation, the *nova lingua* would float free of ontology: grace without enactment, freedom without world.

To say, therefore, that theology is freedom is to say that theology participates in the divine act of speaking. The *nova lingua* is not constructed; it is received. Its freedom is the freedom of obedience, the grammar of those addressed and constituted by God. In a theological culture tempted either toward moralism or toward aesthetic mysticism, *Theology as Freedom* recalls that theological language is accountable only to truth *spoken by God*.

In this way, Vestrucci's formalism and my model-theoretic realism are complementary: he clarifies the logical conditions under which revelation liberates language; I articulate the ontological ground that renders such liberation true. The Spirit stands between them as the bridge by which language participates in being. The future of dogmatics may well depend on holding these dimensions together: formal freedom and participatory truth.

Theology as Freedom thus points beyond itself. By articulating the formal conditions of theological discourse, it opens a path toward a pneumatological ontology of truth adequate to the revelational logic it describes. Only then will the *nova lingua* fully resound: the divine Word spoken in human language. It is true because free, and free because true.

Dennis Bielfeldt (Ph.D., University of Iowa) is President of the Institute of Lutheran Theology, Chancellor of its Christ School of Theology, and Professor of Theology and Philosophy. He has published widely on theological realism, language, and metaphysics, with essays appearing in *Modern Theology*, *Dialog*, *Zygon*, and multiple edited volumes. His recent work develops a model-theoretic approach to theology, integrating formal logic and participatory ontology to recover the referential and causal integrity of theological language. His forthcoming book, *Model Theory and the Meaning of Theology* (Cascade), and his multi-volume *Collected Works* continue this project, exploring how the Word's causality grounds theology's truth and freedom alike.

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