

**Martin Luther's Uphill Battle:
A Fight Against One's Own Intelligence**
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Martin Luther is perhaps best known for his opposition to the Catholic Church in early 1500s. From the posting of the *95 Theses* on October 31, 1517, to *Against the Papacy at Rome Founded by the Devil* published on March 25, 1545, Luther repeatedly expressed his displeasure with the Catholic Church and the ways he believed that Christians were being misled. Many Christians firmly believed they had been saved, yet Luther suspected eternal damnation was more likely in store for them after departing their worldly life. Luther's deepest concerns were over the salvation of the Christian people; souls for which he felt personally responsible as a priest. Luther's existential thinking -namely his concerns surrounding salvation and spiritual questions, contributed to misunderstanding and a breakdown in communication between Luther and the papacy. Modern educational theorist, Howard Gardner, would attribute this break in understanding to Luther's unique "intelligence."¹

Like Martin Luther, Howard Gardner is one of the most well-known thinkers in his field. Unlike Luther, however, Gardner's focus is on human intelligence rather than on religion; he examines what it means to be intelligent, and seeks to understand, ". . . HOW people are smart as opposed to how smart they ARE."² Gardner's studies and research have molded education systems across the globe and transformed the understanding of intelligence from one form, IQ testing, to another, his Theory of Multiple Intelligences. Intelligence henceforth was no longer to be seen as a singular measurement that could be found by completing one exam; Gardner introduced a series of complex variants that exist within intelligence, the variants that make each individual unique.

Gardner's *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, was first published in 1983³ and has been revisited several times in the last several decades as the author added and expanded upon his theory. The Theory of Multiple Intelligences, as originally published, identified seven Intelligences and suggested every person has some amount of each Intelligence, but most people are stronger in a few and therefore weaker in others. Even rarer are individuals who are extremely strong in one or two Intelligences.⁴ This theory has become imperative to educators as they incorporate it into their classrooms in order to reach all students effectively.

The original seven Intelligences identified by Howard Gardner are: Linguistic, Musical, Logical-Mathematical, Spatial, Bodily-Kinesthetic, Interpersonal, and Intrapersonal Intelligence.⁵ A decade after publishing his original theory, Gardner revisited the theory and

¹ Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1983), vii.

² Ian J. McCoog, "The Existential Learner," *Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas*, vol. 83, no. 4 (January 2010): 126-128 at 126.

³ McCoog, "The Existential Learner," 126.

⁴ McCoog, "The Existential Learner," 126.

⁵Gardner, *Multiple Intelligences*, vii.

determined, based on his previously established criteria, another intelligence needed to be added to the list: Naturalist Intelligence.⁶ Again, as Gardner published this information, he argued that people are a combination of different Intelligences in variations, and the human brain has the ability to constantly change.

In his theory, Gardner established basic criteria each “Intelligence” would have to meet before he would officially consider it one of the Intelligences. The first criteria is that the specific Intelligence must be able to be tied to one specific area of the brain. Secondly, the type of Intelligence needs to have been found in exceptional individuals within society. (One example could be a savant or prodigy who exhibits precision with the Intelligence.) Next, the Intelligence must have a set of “core operations” unique to it as an Intelligence. Additionally, the Intelligence must show development in humanity over time and history, supporting its importance as an Intelligence. There must be a “symbol system” that represents the Intelligence. And lastly, the Intelligence must be supported by psychological findings and studies.⁷

A brief explanation of each Intelligence runs as follows:

A person with high Linguistic Intelligence may be described as “word smart.” Language seems to come easily to him or her; this individual enjoys reading and writing different types of literature.

Musical Intelligence is the ability to learn to play a musical instrument quickly and without much difficulty, as well as the ability to understand more complex theory of music and how musicality functions. Aside from musical performance, individuals with high Musical Intelligence also find rhythms and patterns in the world around them.⁸

Logical-Mathematical Intelligence yields precise mathematical and reasoning skills. People with high Logical-Mathematical Intelligence have great problem-solving abilities.⁹

High Spatial Intelligence is responsible for accelerated understanding of physical space, and how objects in space interact with one another. Great visual artists and chess champions are expected to have high Spatial Intelligence because they can easily relate to the space in which they are working in.¹⁰

Individuals with Bodily-Kinesthetic Intelligence may have been described as “natural athletes” or “sporty” as children. For these individuals, motor coordination developed swiftly and they learn best in hands on, interactive environments where they can manipulate materials.¹¹

“People smart” is how individuals with high Interpersonal Intelligence are typically described. Interpersonal Intelligence gives people the ability to, “. . . notice distinctions among others; in particular, contrasts in their moods, temperaments, motivations, and intentions.”¹²

⁶ Kathy Checkley, “The First Seven . . . and the Eight: A Conversation with Howard Gardner,” *Educational Leadership* 55, no. 1 (1997): 8-13.

⁷ McCoog, “The Existential Learner,” 127.

⁸ Gardner, *Multiple Intelligences*, 17.

⁹ Gardner, *Multiple Intelligences*, 20.

¹⁰ Gardner, *Multiple Intelligences*, 21-22.

¹¹ Gardner, *Multiple Intelligences*, 18-19.

¹² Gardner, *Multiple Intelligences*, 23.

Whereas a person with high *Interpersonal* Intelligence can “read” those around him or her, a person with high *Intrapersonal* Intelligence has a, “. . . viable and effective model of himself or herself.”¹³ These individuals are very aware of their *own* emotions, feelings, and thoughts.

Gardner describes the *Naturalist* Intelligence as the, “. . . human ability to discriminate among living things (plants, animals) as well as sensitivity to other features of the natural world (clouds, rock configurations).”¹⁴ Among those with high *Naturalist* Intelligence one would find highly regarded geologist, meteorologist, and plant taxonomists.

While these eight intelligences seem strikingly different at first, they all share together one common element that is often overlooked; a common relation to the *physical* world. Their primary concern is with the space, people, and other societal constructs such as language and music that surround human kind. As Gardner stated, people possess a combination of these intelligences, usually with a few that are stronger than others; however, it is possible for an individual to have a highly dominant Intelligence in one or two areas. This certainly seems to have been the case for Martin Luther who may have possessed what Gardner describes as the “half” Intelligence. More on this anon . . .

Gardner later revisited his theory and suggested yet another possible Intelligence: *Existential* Intelligence. People who possess a high *Existential* Intelligence may be described as “wonder smart” and they, “ponder the most fundamental questions of existence. Why do we live? Why do we die? Where do we come from? What is going to happen to us?”¹⁵ When evaluating whether *Existential* Intelligence could join the ranks as the ninth Intelligence, Gardner hesitated because, researchers have not yet been able to pinpoint the activity of existential thought to one *specific* area of the brain.¹⁶ This means *Existential* Intelligence falls short of one of Gardner’s eight criteria (earning the “half Intelligence” nickname), but that may not be the case forever as psychological science continues to expand and improve the understanding of function of the human brain.

As with any research, Howard Gardner has his critics. Susan M. Barnett, Stephen J. Ceci, and Wendy M. Williams have criticized Gardner’s theory, claiming that the theory focuses on a “. . . macrolevel orientation (for example, focusing on holistic performances such as spatial reasoning skills and verbal fluency) that can be distinguished from theories that focus on microlevel processing . . . In other words, multiple intelligence theories . . . usually are summarizations of macrolevel processes.”¹⁷ Barnett, Ceci, and Williams, argue that the Theory of Multiple Intelligences focuses only the overall performance of an individual as opposed to focusing on the more minute processes that lead to the completion of greater products. Gardner

¹³ Gardner, *Multiple Intelligences*, 25.

¹⁴ Checkley, “The First Seven . . . and the Eight: A Conversation with Howard Gardner,” 12.

¹⁵ McCoog, “The Existential Learner,” 127.

¹⁶ McCoog, “The Existential Learner,” 127.

¹⁷ Susan M. Barnett, Stephen J. Ceci, Wendy M. Williams, “Is the Ability to Make a Bacon Sandwich a Mark of Intelligence?, and Other Issues: Some Reflections on Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligences,” in *Howard Gardner Under Fire: The Rebel Psychologist Faces His Critics*, ed. Jeffery A. Schaler (Peru, Illinois: Carus Publishing Company, 2006), 102.

responded to this criticism by asserting that an individual could, “. . . belong to Mensa, with an IQ approaching 200, and yet never be able to execute anything of significance (except an IQ test!)”¹⁸ In Gardner's opinion, it does little good if a person has a remarkably high IQ, or is able to fine tune minute details, yet is never able to apply that information to create anything larger or more meaningful. The smaller processes must be present for an individual to create a grand final product, but the final product is that which indicates the Intelligence, making the final products the most noteworthy to observe.

To say that Martin Luther was an individual of extremely high Existential Intelligence may seem somewhat controversial to some, but after analyzing his works and life, I would argue that Luther fit the explanation outlined by Gardner. Luther spent decades of his life writing and speaking out against the Catholic Church, well aware of the possible repercussions, because of his devotion to the spiritual well-being of his parishioners. From his time as a monk, throughout the rest of his life, Luther focused his thinking on a main question that fits closely with Gardner's description of Existential Intelligence: What is our role on earth?

For Luther, life on earth is meaningful, but not in the materialistic way as understood by so many. Luther developed an interesting understanding of labor and vocation that was, predictably, rooted in his relationship with God. In Luther's opinion, “God has called men to labor because . . . [God] labors.”¹⁹ Luther describes the importance of every vocation from tailors to shepherds to fisherman. To Luther, each vocation was crucial and respected because it was guided by God, and by serving in their vocation, humans were serving God and their fellow humans. The role of humans on earth, as understood by Luther, is to serve God and one another through vocational works, providing for and taking care of each other in times of need. Now, to others these vocations were likely “talents” or “trades,” but Luther's Existential Intelligence led him to understand that there was greater meaning, or at least that there should be, behind the day to day tasks that humans fulfil. Through the completion of these vocations, and serving neighbors and God, Luther's Existential conclusion is that humans receive the grace of God through faith in God's promises and thereafter selflessly perform works out of their faith in God.

Through examination of the *95 Theses*, one can see how Martin Luther might have had an *extremely* high Existential Intelligence. Luther posted the *95 Theses* on October 31, 1517, on the Castle church at Wittenberg to express his concern over the actions of the papacy, especially in regard to the sale of indulgences within the Catholic Church. In ninety-five succinct statements Luther explained what he felt the papacy was doing wrong, and how the church officials were leading the followers of the church astray. The posting of the *95 Theses* was the beginning of Luther's years long clash with the papacy at Rome which ultimately ended in his excommunication.

The key point and common theme in the *95 Theses* is Luther's concern regarding the salvation of his parishioners. His greatest fear was his parishioners would die believing they had achieved salvation solely based on the fact that they had heeded the warning of the papal nuncio

¹⁸ Howard Gardner, “Replies to My Critics,” in *Howard Gardner Under Fire: The Rebel Psychologist Faces His Critics*, ed. Jeffery A. Schaler (Peru, Illinois: Carus Publishing Company, 2006), 301.

¹⁹ Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Meridian, 1995), 181.

Johann Tetzel and had purchased indulgences, when in fact at least some of them would ultimately face eternal damnation because they were relying on a piece of paper rather than the living Word of God. For Luther, as a person with an extremely high Existential Intelligence, he was ultimately unconcerned with worldly problems that did not impact one's spiritual life. Instead, he stood up adamantly against the papacy in matters he believed could impact the salvation of his parishioners. His concerns about the Church's penitential practices were outlined throughout his *95 Theses*.

In Thesis Twenty-Seven Luther wrote, "There is no divine authority for preaching that the soul flies out of purgatory immediately as the money clinks in the bottom of the chest."²⁰ Luther was referencing the apparent promise of Johann Tetzel, a Dominican who sold indulgences in German territories, as well as high ranking officials at Rome, that indulgences had the power to reduce the time of a stay in purgatory. These individuals implied that a family member could even purchase an indulgence for a loved one who had already died, to reduce the time in purgatory for the deceased loved one. Luther was critical of this practice because there is no scriptural support for the sale of indulgences or what they may, or may not, be capable of. As a strong Existentialist, Luther was appalled that people were encouraged by the papacy to use a worldly currency to "purchase" their eternal salvation or "buy" reduced time in purgatory because he could clearly see that this was merely a worldly action fulfilling a worldly need, the papacy filling its pockets with money from indulgences, and not based upon faith in God at all. To Luther, this seemed perilous because he had become convinced that faith was the only way to ensure salvation, not meaningless actions on earth.

Thesis Seventy-Five reads, "It is foolish to think that papal indulgences have so much power that they can absolve a man even if he has done the impossible and violated the mother of God."²¹ Luther made it clear he believed the pope did not have the power to absolve such an extreme sin. He also took issue with the fact that the papacy was selling indulgences, something worldly and not of scripture, to absolve something so serious, even if it may have been only an exaggeration. Again, this shows Luther's contempt for the corrupt role of worldly religious officials in matters of faith. In his opinion, the only facet of power in these religious matters was the faith of the believers. The pope has no control over the faith each individual has in God, Luther argued; therefore, he has no power to absolve such sins simply as he sees fit.

In Thesis Eighty-Two, Luther questioned the power of the pope when he asked, "Why does not the pope liberate everyone from purgatory for the sake of love Meanwhile he redeems innumerable souls for money, a most perishable thing, with which to build St. Peter's church, a very minor purpose."²² Luther questioned the importance of worldly objects by referring to money and St. Peter's church as "perishable" and "minor," respectfully. In the eyes of the members of the Catholic Church, St. Peter's was built to be a tribute in honor of St. Peter, but Luther saw it as excessive and unnecessary, built on lies the papacy imposed on the lay

²⁰ Martin Luther, *The Ninety-Five Theses*, in *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (New York: Anchor Books, 1962), 489-500 at 493.

²¹ Luther, *The Ninety-Five Theses*, 498.

²² Luther, *The Ninety-Five Theses*, 498.

people of the church. Luther's Existential mindset leads him to be extremely critical of how the pope is spending money, practically picking the pockets of fearful parishioners rather than displaying Christian Charity towards them. As an individual of extremely high Existential Intelligence, Luther clearly sees the insignificance of St. Peter's church in relationship to the salvation of church members, rather than encouraging greater faith in the power of God amongst the followers of Christ, this church building would only instill greater awe of the wealth of Rome and the papacy.

Similar to the *95 Theses*, Luther's *Appeal to the Ruling Class of German Nationality as to the Amelioration of the State of Christendom* (1520) holds more insight regarding Luther's Existential Intelligence. In this treatise, Luther, ". . . calls upon the ruling class to reform the Church, since the Church will not reform itself."²³ Luther outlined to the ruling class the problems developing within the church and the papacy. He then offers twenty-seven suggestions for improvements that the ruling class, as the secular authority, may implement in order to bring structure and righteousness back to the church.

Luther's Twenty-First suggestion regards poverty and the action of begging within the cities. Luther states, "No one living among Christians ought to go begging. It would be an easy law to make, if only we dared, and were in earnest that every town should support its own poor."²⁴ Luther suggested to the secular authorities that they must make it the responsibility of the entire town to care for those living in poverty within their community. Although Luther recognized that this might be difficult to implement unless the town's citizens were sincere, he seemed to believe wholeheartedly that this potentially could permanently solve the issue of poverty throughout Germany. Again, this ties to Luther's Existential Intelligence and his belief that the purpose of each individual in life is to serve his or her neighbor. Thus, Luther turned to a truly spiritual ideal in order to solve the worldly dilemma of poverty, once again showing his extremely strong Existential thinking.

Similarly, in his Eighteenth suggestion, Luther addresses the problem of the toxicity of festival days for church members. Luther wrote, "All festival days should be abolished, and Sunday alone retained . . . The reason for the proposed change is the present misuse of festival days in drinking, gaming, idleness, and all sorts of sins . . . no service is done to God . . ." ²⁵ Luther took issue with the excessive number of festival days, which were meant to be spent giving thanks to God, but instead, by his day, had become whirlwinds of sin. Luther mentioned the fact that on these days, no service is done to God or others, for that matter, as parishioners spend the day idly. While others may have regarded festival days highly because of the possibilities for greater worship of God, Luther and his Existential Intelligence saw it as an excuse for people to unnecessarily cease fulfilling their servanthood before God and one another by putting off their divinely-sanctioned vocation in order to celebrate sinfully in the physical world.

²³ Luther, *The Ninety-Five Theses*, 403.

²⁴ Luther, *The Ninety-Five Theses*, 460.

²⁵ Luther, *The Ninety-Five Theses*, 455.

Based on his writings, especially the *95 Theses* and *An Appeal to the Ruling Class*, one can conclude that Luther possessed an extremely high Existential Intelligence, perhaps so dominantly Existential that he found it difficult at times to relate to others who did not see things in the same way. Imagining Existential Intelligence as one of nine (or eight and a “half”) Intelligences, and considering that it is the only intelligence that focuses on non-earthly relationships and ideals, one may assume that most people in the general population have a greater amount of intelligence in the other eight intelligences. Therefore, the majority of the population would have exhibited a greater concern over worldly preoccupations due to their own Intelligences, which were likely based on worldly ideas. For Luther, on the other hand, the primary concern was over greater existential questions, most importantly the salvation of his parishioners and their role on earth. At times, he surely must have felt that he was fighting an uphill battle since so few of his parishioners really understood his concerns. This difference in concerns and world-view between those with high Existential Intelligence, such as Martin Luther, and those with high and moderate Intelligence in any of the other eight Intelligences, the majority of the population, is a foundational reason why so many people, including other religious leaders, secular leaders, and lay people misunderstood or brushed off Luther’s passionate pleas.