

# Editor's Introduction to the Reader's Edition of *Ethics*

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Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* has been called one of the greatest works of twentieth-century theology. Bonhoeffer regarded it as his major work, but he warns us that it is not what people might be looking for in a book on ethics. He begins with the outrageous demand that readers must give up the very questions that led them to a book on ethics: How can I be good, and how can I do good? Instead, he says, Christian ethics is about "God's reality revealed in Christ becoming real among God's creatures" (000; 6:47–49). This introduction explores what he means. It's about a theological ethic of reality and responsibility.

Bonhoeffer wrote his *Ethics* during the early part of World War II. He began in 1940 and wrote thirteen manuscripts before he was arrested and imprisoned in April 1943; these manuscripts have been printed as "chapters" in this book. Already in 1933 Bonhoeffer regarded the dictator Hitler not as a leader (*Führer*), but a misleader, a

tyrant. He opposed the militaristic nationalism of the new Germany, rooted in “blood and soil,” even as the German Evangelical Church and most of its leaders succumbed to the new ideology. By the early period of the war, the embrace of Nazi ideology at all levels of society had led to the complete corruption of social and personal ethical behavior among most Germans. Official murder, so-called “mercy killing,” was being carried out on physically and mentally disabled people who were classified as “life unworthy of life.” Invading German armies committed atrocities against civilians, especially on the Eastern Front. The antisemitism that had been official government policy since 1933 was moving toward full-scale genocide of the European Jews.

During this period Bonhoeffer was not officially serving the church as a pastor and theologian, but had been brought into the *Abwehr*, German military counterintelligence, where a small circle of the military and diplomatic resistance against Hitler and the National Socialist regime was located. He had been recruited by his brother-in-law, Hans von Dohnanyi, partly to keep him out of the army. But Bonhoeffer also had wide ecumenical contacts, especially in Britain and America, and this enabled him to serve as a courier for the resistance movement, providing information about the planned coup to the British government, and bringing news about Allied attitudes back to the conspirators in Berlin. Although Bonhoeffer was deeply committed to his Christian peace ethic, sometimes calling himself a pacifist, he agreed with the goals of the conspiracy, including the plans to kill Hitler. Passages in the *Ethics*, read after the fact, reveal his theological grounds for rejecting the Nazi regime as demonic and describing Hitler as a “tyrannical despiser of humanity” (000; 6:85); they also reveal his own thinking about involvement as a Christian in the conspiracy and about the question of tyrannicide (000; 6:273<sup>1</sup>). Work on his *Ethics* manuscripts was done in the intervals, sometimes

lengthy, between travels to places like Sweden, where he passed information about the conspiracy to the British government via his friend Bishop George Bell, and to Switzerland, where he met with Karl Barth and with leaders of the World Council of Churches in Geneva who were planning for postwar peace.

Written under these wartime conditions, the book we now have is not a finished work but a collection of manuscripts. Two different attempts to arrange the manuscripts were made by Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer's close friend, editor, and biographer. These two arrangements were translated into English and published, the first version in 1955 and the second in 1963. Readers debated for decades about how best to understand Bonhoeffer's ethical thinking as a coherent whole. In 1980, in preparation for the German edition of Bonhoeffer's complete works, intense new study of the manuscripts began, leading to the publication in 1992 of the German critical edition (second edition 1998). The English translation, the version in this book, followed in 2005. With only draft outlines from Bonhoeffer about how he might arrange the manuscripts into a book, the editors decided to publish them in the order in which they had been written. This edition, then, reproduces the new translation and arrangement of the text that was published in the definitive Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English Edition, and supersedes all other translations.

The book *Ethics* culminates an interest in ethical thinking found in Bonhoeffer from the beginning. His book on the church, the doctoral dissertation *Sanctorum Communio* (The Communion of Saints), was already a social-ethical approach to theology, with a central interest in human relationships and community, and a special focus on the

1. See also Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Reader's Edition 000 (Bonhoeffer Works volume 8, 40) on "action that alone strikes at the very core of evil" and "the one who is prepared to sacrifice all of these when, in faith and relationship to God alone, he is called to obedient and responsible action."

ethical formation of the human person. We meet God, he wrote, in the midst of human relationships and encounters, especially in the church-community where God's judgment, love, and commandments are proclaimed and enacted. At the congregation he served in Barcelona in 1929, he gave an ethics lecture containing some ideas that remained important in the present book—and some, about war, that he quickly rejected.<sup>2</sup> During his postdoctoral year at Union Theological Seminary, New York, and particularly his participation in Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, he was concerned with the evil of racism in America and the struggle against it. At Union, too, the French Reformed pacifist Jean Lasserre was an influential friend; their discussions about the nature of Christian faith, and the place of the Sermon on the Mount in the Christian life, had a profound and lasting effect on him. This led to his important and much-loved book *Discipleship*, which is, in a special way, also a book of Christian ethics. And his book on the Genesis creation stories, *Creation and Fall*, discussed major ethical topics: the image of God, he taught, is not a personal attribute but rather a form of *relationship* with others that reflects, or images, the relation of God to humanity. *Creation and Fall* also presents a major theological argument he used against Nazi supporters in the church: social orders such as family, nation, ethnicity, and government are not divinely ordained “orders of creation,” as if one could read off the will of God from the historical-social creations of a sinful humanity; they are rather “orders of preservation,” orders that preserve life for Christ and whose relative validity is measured by their accountability to Christ. The topics of “nature” and “body” in *Creation and Fall* not only anticipate passages in the *Ethics*, they are also remarkably pertinent to the ecological issues that are so urgent today.

2. See “Basic Questions of a Christian Ethic,” in Bonhoeffer, *Barcelona, Berlin, New York, 1928-1931* (Bonhoeffer Works volume 10), 359–79, esp. 369–74.

But not only previous writings are relevant to *Ethics*. Bonhoeffer's other important writings from the resistance and war years are his *Letters and Papers from Prison*. How does the *Ethics* relate to the new theological ideas in Bonhoeffer's prison letters, especially the provocative ideas about "religionless Christianity" in a "world come of age"? While the *Ethics* was the first of Bonhoeffer's writings to be published after his death, excitement about his *Letters and Papers from Prison* tended to overshadow it. But Bonhoeffer himself explained how the two belonged closely together. The book he began writing in prison about a "worldly, non-religious Christianity" was, he said, "in a certain sense a prologue to the larger work [*Ethics*] and, in part, anticipates it."<sup>3</sup> So, the theology of the prison letters (beginning with the letter of April 30, 1944<sup>4</sup>) should be read as an introduction to the *Ethics*, and the *Ethics* should be read as embodying the theological outlook and ideas of the prison letters.

Central to Bonhoeffer's ethics is his Christology, in a twofold way. First, Jesus Christ is God-become-human, who reveals God's being-with and being-for humanity in the world. Indeed, the absolute bedrock of Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* is the affirmation that in Jesus Christ God and humanity are reconciled. This is the reality—against all estrangement and disintegration, and against every dualism—for all Christian ethical thinking and acting. "In the body of Jesus Christ, God is united with humankind, all humanity is accepted by God, and the world is reconciled to God" (000; 6:66–67).

Second, this reconciliation is also the transforming and humanizing presence of God in the world, forming human beings and con-

3. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Reader's Edition 000 (Bonhoeffer Works volume 8, 518).

4. *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Reader's Edition 000 (Bonhoeffer Works volume 8, 361); see also Clifford J. Green and Michael P. DeJonge, *The Bonhoeffer Reader* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 775.

forming them to Christ. Over and over again like a litany Bonhoeffer describes how Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection encounter human life, bringing both judgment and re-formation. The manuscript "Ethics as Formation" provides an excellent example, because it presents these themes in direct contrast to the ethos of the Third Reich. Thus God's becoming human (incarnation) leads neither to despising human beings nor idolizing them, but to loving them. The crucifixion means that we are reconciled to God and one another not through human success or failure, but only through God's merciful judgment and grace. And Christ's resurrection is a miraculous gift of new life that overcomes the idolization of death and frees us from either compulsively grasping at life or recklessly wasting it. Additional excellent examples of the way Bonhoeffer describes the humanizing effect of this threefold Christological schema are found in the manuscripts "Ultimate and Penultimate Things" and "The Concrete Commandment and the Divine Mandates" (000; 000; 6:157–59; 6:400–403).

Another characteristic of Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* is his insistence that Christian ethics is not composed of principles. By principles he means abstract ideas that are treated as universal laws, irrespective of the complexities of life; examples are telling the truth, freedom of speech, freedom of choice, or freedom of religion. To begin with, Christ is not a principle, nor is lived reality built of principles (000, 000; 6:98, 6:81). Here's an example of doing ethics by principles: "Treating truthfulness as a principle leads Kant to the grotesque conclusion that if asked by a murderer whether my friend, whom he was pursuing, had sought refuge in my house, I would have to answer him honestly in the affirmative" (000; 6:279). Bonhoeffer addressed the question of truth again in his essay "What does it mean to tell the truth?" written while he was in prison, trying to mislead his Nazi interrogators. Readers can find this essay and other texts on ethical topics in

*Conspiracy and Imprisonment: 1940-1945*, volume 16 of the Bonhoeffer Works.

Opposition to abstract principles is only one aspect of Bonhoeffer's distinctive Christian ethic. Another is his affirmation of the natural. He began writing what would have been a long chapter on human rights, intended to cover rights of bodily life and rights of the mind, or spirit; he only managed to draft the first half. To define what he means by "natural" life, Bonhoeffer first draws on his distinction of ultimate and penultimate.

"We are living in the penultimate and believe the ultimate," Bonhoeffer wrote to his friend Bethge, and at one point he considered ordering the ethics book in two parts, penultimate and ultimate.<sup>5</sup> Qualitatively the "ultimate" is God's grace received in faith, life in Christ; temporally the ultimate is the end of history, the last things, eternity. But we live in history, not yet in the kingdom of God, when all things have been redeemed. What, then, is the place of the "penultimate," everything prior to the ultimate, in the Christian life? The penultimate is "a time of God's permission, waiting, and preparation" (000; 6:151). Bonhoeffer illustrates preparing the way for the coming of the gospel by alluding to Matthew 25. "The hungry person needs bread, the homeless person needs shelter, the one deprived of rights needs justice, the lonely person needs community, the undisciplined one needs order, and the slave needs freedom" (000; 6:163). Treating human beings as things, commodities, and machines is a special hindrance to receiving Christ (000; 6:165).

In *Creation and Fall* Bonhoeffer had argued that, because of sin, we do not know God's purpose in creation just by looking at human beings and the world and deciding what is "natural." Many vested

5. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Reader's Edition 000 (Bonhoeffer Works volume 8, 213), and *Conspiracy and Imprisonment, 1940-1945* (Bonhoeffer Works volume 16), 92.

interests hide behind that word. The pro-Nazi German Christians, for example, defined Jews as a “race” and concluded that one race was superior to another; in America many held that people of different races should not marry. Treating races as “orders of creation” was used to justify racism and antisemitism. Countering such arguments, Bonhoeffer insisted that Christ was the criterion of the natural. In a sinful world after the fall, the “natural,” which is human and good, is defined by its being directed toward the coming of Jesus Christ; the unnatural is closed off from the coming of Christ (000; 6:173). Natural life, then, becomes the penultimate that is directed toward the ultimate and discerned in the light of Christ. Bonhoeffer then describes the distinctive way in which reason discerns the natural in what is given in life. Case studies follow on topics like the right to bodily life; suicide; reproduction and developing life; and the freedom of bodily life (000; 6:185–217).

In all his theology Bonhoeffer understands human life as an intimate relation between individual persons and shared community. In the manuscript “The Concrete Commandment and the Divine Mandates” he looks at ethics from the perspective of God’s commandment in four forms that he calls “mandates”—marriage and family, work (or “culture”), church, and state. While these refer to four main areas of life, the focus is not on specific, existing social organizations, as if God’s commandment simply sanctifies what exists. Indeed, Bonhoeffer’s doctrine of mandates was aimed against theologians who regarded race and *Volk* as “orders of creation,” as if they were natural orders created by the unchangeable will of God. Rather, the emphasis is on the One who commands, or “mandates,” that there shall be marriage, work, government, and church. And while the mandates replace Bonhoeffer’s earlier idea of “orders of preservation,” he kept the conviction that Christ is the criterion of the validity of the actual form a mandate takes in government,



work, family, and church. Hence, “persistent, arbitrary violation of this [God-given] task through concrete forms of work, marriage, government, and church extinguishes the divine mandate” (000; 6:70).<sup>6</sup>

A very important section of *Ethics* is “The Structure of Responsible Life,” found in the second version of “History and Good,” the only manuscript Bonhoeffer rewrote. Responsibility, in Bonhoeffer’s theological sense, ultimately means “I *simultaneously* represent Christ before human beings and represent human beings before Christ” (000; 6:256). Such responsibility involves both freedom and being bound to other human beings and to God. This bonding and freedom has four dimensions: (1) vicarious representative action; (2) accordance with reality; (3) willingness to become guilty; and (4) freedom.<sup>7</sup>

Vicarious action on behalf of another—a parent for a child, a prophet or martyr for his people, an ambassador for her country—embodies the bond that all responsibility involves. Of this action on behalf of others, Jesus, the Son of God who became human, is the representative par excellence. Accordance with reality also embodies the bond of responsibility, but this does not mean either servile submission to the status quo or obsessive rebellion against it. It is not what is often called “realism,” because action in accord with reality reads the world through the eyes of Jesus Christ in whom God’s Yes and No to the world are embodied; so action in accord with reality simultaneously acknowledges the status quo and protests against it. This Yes and No toward the actual human situation is

6. More detailed discussion of mandates, and the related concepts of “offices” and authority, is found in the Editor’s Introduction to Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (Bonhoeffer Works volume 6), 17–23.

7. This summary follows what Bonhoeffer actually wrote on pages 000–000 (6:257–89), and varies from his wording at the beginning of the discussion on page 000 (6:257).

based on the Yes and No to humanity in God's becoming human in Jesus Christ.

In the background of his discussion of the willingness to become guilty we can discern Bonhoeffer's personal reflection about his involvement in the conspiracy when he argues that responsibility entails willingness to take on guilt. He had already pointed to extreme situations—such as the war and Nazi Germany's anti-Jewish persecution—where the very fundamentals of life itself are at stake and where only last-resort actions are possible. Such situations transcend law, ethical rules, and reason, and they call forth “the free responsibility of the one who acts, a responsibility not bound by any law” (000; 6:273). Such responsible action incurs guilt. “The man who acts out of free responsibility is justified before others by dire necessity; before himself he is acquitted by his conscience; but before God he hopes only for grace” (000; 6:282–83).<sup>8</sup>

Freedom is the fourth dimension of responsible life. Freedom from the bondage of self is presupposed in acting vicariously on behalf of others, as it is in daring to take necessary action that incurs guilt. The concrete decision required to act in response to reality's challenges requires freedom. But freedom to act responsibly for Bonhoeffer is not simply the ability to choose, regardless of what one chooses; nor is freedom abstract, without content. It is freedom to act without the support of others, or drawing self-justification from fixed principles. Free responsible action is taken in the midst of life's relativity in which decisions are demanded not only between good and evil but also “between right and right and between wrong and wrong” (000;

8. The Bonhoeffer Works translation uses the plural, but Bonhoeffer's original German uses the singular to refer to “the man,” as quoted on page 000; see also *Ethics* (Bonhoeffer Works volume 6), 283, note 138, concerning the autobiographical implication of this sentence, which can also be seen in his essay “After Ten Years,” Reader's Edition 000 (Bonhoeffer Works volume 8, 40), in his answer to the question “Who stands firm?”

6:284). But such free action is bound to God and neighbor in a bond that is totally liberating.

So far this introduction has alerted the reader to leading ideas found in the pages of *Ethics*. Bonhoeffer himself provides a fitting conclusion with his essay “After Ten Years,” a letter to two members of the conspiracy written at Christmas 1942, published in *Letters and Papers from Prison*.<sup>9</sup> He was then in the midst of his work on the *Ethics* manuscripts—in fact, the section of “After Ten Years” titled “Who Stands Firm?” was actually lifted from the manuscript “Ethics as Formation.” As a survey and critique of traditional approaches to ethics that had failed during the first decade of the Third Reich, “Who Stands Firm?” reveals the options to which Bonhoeffer wanted to provide an alternative in his own *Ethics*.

*Reasonable people* find reason impotent to deal with systemic evil and either withdraw in resignation or are crushed by superior power.

Ethical *fanatics*, relying purely on fixed moral principles, focus obsessively on their principles rather than fighting the power of evil.

The person of *conscience* relies purely on his or her own conscience and, when confronted by evil's many seductive guises, loses the capacity to make a clear choice and settles for a salvaged but deceived conscience.

The devotees of *duty* abdicate responsibility—“I was only following orders”—leaving no room to “venture a free action that rests solely on their own responsibility, the only sort of action that can meet evil at its heart and overcome it” (000; 6:79).

The person who acts solely out of his own individual sense of *freedom* to do what must be done could decide to do something bad to prevent what he believes is worse. But it turns out “that the

9. “Prologue” to *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Reader's Edition 000 (Bonhoeffer Works volume 8, 37–52).

very thing he seeks to avoid as worse might well be better.”<sup>10</sup> For Bonhoeffer this is the raw material of tragedy.

Finally, those who protect their private *virtuousness* by fleeing from public controversy are deceived in feeling undefiled, when all they have done is close their eyes to the injustice all around them.

Reason, principle, conscience, duty, freedom, virtue—these are the ethics of an honorable tradition, but they have proved inadequate for the struggle Bonhoeffer is engaged in. He asks: “Who stands firm?” The answer is the spirit that informs Bonhoeffer’s *Ethics*:

Only the one whose ultimate standard is not his reason, his principles, conscience, freedom, or virtue; only the one who is prepared to sacrifice all of these when, in faith and in relationship to God alone, he is called to obedient and responsible action. Such a person is the responsible one, whose life is to be nothing but a response to God’s question and call.<sup>11</sup>

It is also Bonhoeffer’s personal answer.

10. *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Reader’s Edition, 000 (Bonhoeffer Works volume 8, 40).

11. *Ibid.*