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THE ULTIMATE AND THE PENULTIMATE: BONHOEFFER'S TWO-FOLD
CONTEXTUALISM AND ADJUDICATING BETWEEN COMPETING ETHICAL CLAIMS

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The life and work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer was quick to capture the imagination of theologians, clergy, and lay Christians in the years following the Second World War. His brave and theologically reflective involvement in the *Abwehr* plot to overthrow Hitler, and the untimely end he met as a result of that involvement, commended him to any Christian interested in bringing their Sunday faith with them to work and public service on Monday. Furthermore, his *Discipleship* offered a fresh perspective on communal spirituality attractive to many clergy and laypeople, and his *Letters and Papers from Prison* became important – perhaps wrongly – for theologians interested in the death of God. The *Ethics*, however, languished until the early 1980s, when a new wave of Bonhoeffer research began that focused on determining the proper chronological arrangement of the *Ethics* fragments.¹

When seen against this background, it is interesting that one of the earliest substantial treatments of Bonhoeffer's ethical thought would finally be critical of it. Larry Rasmussen argued already in the early 1970s that Bonhoeffer's ethical thought is inadequate insofar as it provides no framework for adjudicating between "different claims to Christian ethics, all of which assert that they bring to expression the will of God."² Furthermore, Rasmussen attributes this inadequacy not to the fragmentary and incomplete nature of Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*, but to its central motifs or, as Rasmussen puts it, "the most fundamental and

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Richard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Stott, vol. 6, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), Appendix 2 ("Preparing the German Edition of 'Ethics,'" Ilse Tödt), 467.

² Larry L. Rasmussen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reality and Resistance*, *Studies in Christian Ethics* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1972), 151.

most continuous elements.”³ It is the contention of this paper – contra Rasmussen – that the two-fold contextualism of Bonhoeffer’s ethical thought provides adequate grounds for adjudication between competing ethical claims while also preserving the ethical freedom of the Christian individual before God. While this paper does not respond to Rasmussen on a point-by-point basis, it presents an account of the central themes or logic of Bonhoeffer’s *Ethics*, illustrated by his engagement with the ethical question of self-inflicted death, that finally mitigates Rasmussen’s claim.

PARSING THE LOGIC OF BONHOEFFER’S *ETHICS*

The *Ethics* is not a unified treatise, nor even disparate chapters from what would be a unified treatise were it completed. Rather, it is comprised of various exploratory beginnings and angles of attack for the work that Bonhoeffer intended to write.⁴ This makes it difficult to get at the kernel of Bonhoeffer’s ethical thought in the *Ethics* and its internal logic, but such a task is not impossible. It does mean, however, that thoughts must often be traced across multiple essays and that, while each essay deserves careful scrutiny in its own right, a more comprehensive and synthetic vision is needed. Consequently, this paper’s treatment will proceed thematically and not chronologically, although the two sequences occasionally align.

One of Bonhoeffer’s pivotal aims in his *Ethics* is the reclamation of Luther’s two-kingdoms doctrine from what he understands to be improper use and interpretation. It is clear in

³ Rasmussen, *Reality and Resistance*, 150. Rasmussen is a well-respected and generally perceptive Bonhoeffer interpreter, and it is thus surprising to find him making this sort of claim.

⁴ For a helpful discussion of these “fresh starts,” see Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Man of Vision, Man of Courage*, ed. Edwin Robertson, trans. Eric Mosbacher, et al. (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 622-6.

this regard that “Bonhoeffer styles himself the true Lutheran.”⁵ This concern arises in Bonhoeffer’s first essay, “Christ, Reality, and God.” Instead of understanding church and world as two realms that are – and ought to be kept – separate, Bonhoeffer argues that these two realms are inextricably united in Christ. To treat them as separate would be to grant the world independence from God, and Bonhoeffer’s christology will not countenance such a concession: “The world has no reality of its own independent of God’s revelation in Christ...there are not two realms, but only the one realm of the Christ-reality.”⁶ It is important to establish the point that it is the world grounded in and interpreted by Christ to which Bonhoeffer refers when he speaks of reality.

Just as Christ is revealed to be the ontological foundation of the world, the incarnation also means that “God is to be found in the midst of the world and nowhere else.”⁷ Jesus Christ in his fully human and fully divine existence represents an intimate relation between God and the world, a unity that “established in Christ...realizes itself again and again.”⁸ This does not mean that such realization is brought about by human efforts. But it is because of this unity, established in Christ and continually realized by Christ, that Bonhoeffer cannot conceive of Christian existence apart from engagement with the world: “Belonging completely to Christ, one stands at the same time completely in the world” because “there is no real Christian

⁵ Craig J. Slane, *Bonhoeffer as Martyr: Social Responsibility and Modern Christian Commitment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004), 186.

⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 58. Or, as Rasmussen puts it, “Reality is the world as accepted by God in Jesus Christ.” Larry L. Rasmussen, “The Ethics of Responsible Action,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. John W. de Gruchy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 216.

⁷ James. W. Woelfel, *Bonhoeffer's Theology: Classical and Revolutionary* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1970), 154.

⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 59.

existence outside the reality of the world.”⁹ There simply is no Christian existence distinct from the world, although there is a particularly Christian understanding of the world, namely, as having its reality grounded in Jesus Christ.

Bonhoeffer goes on to consider the relation of Christ to the world, and therefore of the Christian to the world, in his fifth essay, “Ultimate and Penultimate Things.” For Bonhoeffer, the world’s reality as established and revealed in Christ is the ultimate. The penultimate is the world as conceived apart from Christ, either as temporally preceding Christ’s advent or as persisting in the stage of already-but-not-yet after that advent and until the *parousia*. The central question here is this: How are the ultimate and the penultimate related?

There are two inadequate ways of conceptualizing this relation. The first, “radical solution” is to see “only a complete break with the penultimate” where “Christ is the destroyer and enemy of everything penultimate and everything penultimate is the enemy of Christ.”¹⁰ Understanding the relation between ultimate and penultimate in this radical way emphasizes Christ’s judgment, and Bonhoeffer rightly recognizes that such an emphasis on the ultimate can lead to a lack of concern for the penultimate. If Christ is all, the logic might go, then all else is nothing. Or, as Bonhoeffer puts it in more colorful language, “The world must burn in any case.”¹¹ Here, judgment reigns and grace is lost. Second, there is the compromise solution, where the ultimate makes no claim upon the penultimate and the penultimate “retains its inherent rights...[and] is not threatened or endangered by the ultimate.”¹² Understanding the relation between ultimate and penultimate in this radical way emphasizes Christ’s mercy, and Bonhoeffer

⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 62, 61.

¹⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 153.

¹¹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 153.

¹² Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 154.

rightly recognizes that such maintenance of the penultimate against the ultimate can lead to a bracketing off of the ultimate from the penultimate. The result would be the sort of thing Bonhoeffer was protesting against in his attempted reclamation of Luther's two-kingdom doctrine, namely, the sort of Christian existence that fails to engage with the world. Worse still, it could be that the ultimate would finally serve – as it did in German Christianity – “as an eternal justification of all that exists.”¹³ Here, grace reigns and judgment is lost.

These two inadequate conceptions of the relation between ultimate and penultimate do not result from failing to think about that relation out of a center in Jesus Christ. Parallel to Bonhoeffer's reclamation of Luther's two-kingdom's doctrine, Jesus Christ is the keystone in both these conceptions. Neither of them, then, violate Bonhoeffer's dictum, “The relationship between the ultimate and the penultimate is resolved only in Christ.”¹⁴ What these inadequate conceptions are, however, is reductive in their understandings of Christ. They do not hold together Christ's incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection in their proper unity. Instead, they absolutize one of these aspects and neglect the others. Bonhoeffer himself spells this out: “A Christian ethic built only on the incarnation would lead easily to the compromise solution; an ethic built only on the crucifixion or only on the resurrection of Jesus Christ would fall into radicalism and enthusiasm. The conflict is resolved in their unity.”¹⁵

It is only by considering Christ in the unity of incarnation, cross, and resurrection that the proper relation of ultimate to penultimate can be discerned. This tri-fold elucidation of Christ's work is something to which Bonhoeffer returns frequently. It is elaborated briefly in “Ultimate and Penultimate Things,” but he treats it more clearly in “Ethics as Formation”

¹³ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 154.

¹⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 157.

¹⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 147.

through an elaboration of the Latin translation of Pilate's exhortation in John 19.5, *Ecco homo* – behold the man. First, we behold Jesus Christ as God incarnate, the embodiment of God's love for the world. What is more, God unites Godself not to ideal humanity in the incarnation but "takes on human nature as it is" in its sinfulness.¹⁶ In this we see that God loves humanity in all its sin and weakness, not humanity as ideally conceived. Second, we behold in the cross of Jesus Christ the reconciling judgment of God. Peace between God and humanity, and among humanity, can only be achieved "by executing God's judgment on God," which is accomplished because of "the love of God for the world, for human beings."¹⁷ Furthermore, because we are included in Christ the judgment and reconciliation with God that he experienced is ours as well. This is a scandal to worldly eyes in that it is only by death (judgment) that we can live (reconciliation). Third, we behold in Jesus Christ the risen one. There is not only death, but also resurrection. New life has arrived. While it is true that the penultimate persists, we are ultimately beyond it in Jesus Christ. As Bonhoeffer says, "In Jesus Christ, the one who became human was crucified and is risen; humanity has become new...The new human being has been created."¹⁸

The pattern here is that God affirms God's love for the penultimate – humanity and the world as it is separated from God in sin – in the incarnation, God judges the penultimate in the crucifixion, and God inaugurates a new mode of existence that moves beyond the penultimate without destroying it in the resurrection. After all, it is only in light of the ultimate that the penultimate becomes penultimate. And, Bonhoeffer argues, the penultimate is and "must

¹⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 85.

¹⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 88.

¹⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 91.

be preserved for the sake of the ultimate.”¹⁹ The notion is that the penultimate created world must exist if human beings are going to come to faith in the ultimate, Jesus Christ. Christians are called to this work of preservation or, as Bonhoeffer more consistently calls it with allusion to Isaiah 40 and Matthew 3, ‘preparing the way.’ This preparatory task is not in any sense a work of making grace a possibility. Bonhoeffer is insistent that, “Grace must finally clear and smooth its own way; it alone must again and again make the impossible possible.”²⁰ But, what we can do – Bonhoeffer insists – is remove penultimate obstacles to its coming. The pivotal insight here is that, as Liguš puts it, circumstances of “desolation, poverty, exploitation, oppression, and hunger...make it nearly impossible to believe in God’s justice and might.”²¹ The goal, then, is not to bring about the ultimate through our all too human and penultimate activity, but to – as best as we are able – establish conditions in the penultimate realm that oppose the ultimate as little as possible. This work is, to be sure, a relative measure: the penultimate remains sinful and estranged from God apart from the present and activity of Christ. Still, it is not a matter of no concern that the penultimate correspond relatively more than less to the ultimate.

In Jesus Christ God became incarnate, was crucified, and was resurrected. This both established and revealed the relation between the penultimate world conceived apart from Christ and the ultimate reconciliation and new life of that world with God achieved by Christ. As those awakened to the ultimate, Christians are to care for and preserve the penultimate in its integrity as that which is loved by and reconciled to God. Bonhoeffer sums things up nicely when he writes, “To give the hungry bread is not yet to proclaim to them the grace of God and

¹⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 160.

²⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 162.

²¹ Ján Liguš, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Ultimate, Penultimate and Their Impact," in *Bonhoeffer's Ethics: Old Europe and New Frontiers*, ed. Guy Carter, et al. (Kampen, The Netherlands: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1991), 64.

justification, and to have received bread does not yet mean to stand in faith,” rather, it is to do “something penultimate for the sake of the ultimate.”²²

This understanding of the relation that obtains between ultimate and penultimate calls church and Christian to an existence characterized by freedom and responsibility, which Bonhoeffer discusses in his second essay on “History and Good.” It is of vital import, however, to identify the whence and whither of this freedom and responsibility. Responsibility is a life “lived in answer to the life of Jesus Christ.”²³ It comes from and returns to the ultimate, Jesus Christ, but it does so by way of the penultimate. We are responsible before Christ for those aspects of the penultimate that have been entrusted to our care. This is why Bonhoeffer can say that “The attention of responsible people is directed to concrete neighbors in their concrete reality.”²⁴ We are called by Christ to exercise responsible care for those aspects of the penultimate within our purview.

Lest this responsibility seem overwhelming, it is balanced by freedom. As with responsibility, freedom comes from and returns to the ultimate by way of the penultimate. Because of the reconciliation wrought by Jesus Christ, Christians are freed from all else that would claim the right to judge their actions. Not even the conscience, Bonhoeffer tells us, retains such a position: “Jesus Christ is the one who sets the conscience free for the service of God and neighbor.”²⁵ In the wake of Christ’s reconciling work, it is only Christ who judges our action. Christians are freed from the necessity of self-justification by means of any penultimate authority, freed to carry on with living in accordance to their responsibility for those aspects of

²² Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 163.

²³ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 254.

²⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 261.

²⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 279.

the penultimate entrusted to their care. It is in this way that “Responsibility and freedom are mutually corresponding concepts;”²⁶ we are freed by Christ from the need to seek justification in the penultimate for the actions that we undertake in caring responsibility for the penultimate.

The result of this coupling of freedom and responsibility is a movement in Christian ethics beyond “an ultimately dependable knowledge of good and evil.”²⁷ Because the Christian stands reconciled with God, the question that arises when faced with the need to act with free responsibility toward the penultimate is not whether a proposed course of action is morally good or evil, but whether that proposed course of action is better or worse for those it intends to serve. Our justification being settled in Christ, the only pertinent question that remains is this: Which course of action is better for my neighbor, on whose behalf I propose to act? One who acts in freedom and responsibility, Bonhoeffer writes, “dares to act and leaves the judgment about good and evil up to God.”²⁸

All this does not mean that Bonhoeffer descends into antinomianism. He recognizes that the law of God revealed in the Decalogue and in the divine mandates – which will be discussed further in due course – establish a “boundary for any responsible action.”²⁹ This is a serious consideration, but one that Bonhoeffer ultimately subordinates to Jesus Christ, who is “the ultimate reality to whom [responsible activity] is responsible.”³⁰ Law finally gives way to gospel, or better, the law and its giver and not separated. While the Law is invaluable for

²⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 283.

²⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 284.

²⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 287-8. As Wannewetsch describes Bonhoeffer’s thought in this regard, “Trusting in the grace and justification that they have received, Christians can leave the judgment about their individual deeds to God.” Bernd Wannewetsch, “Responsible Living’ or ‘Responsible Self’? Bonhoefferian Reflections on a Vexed Moral Notion,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 18, no. 3 (2005): 140.

²⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 296.

³⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 297.

establishing general guidelines for exercising responsible care of the penultimate, situations may arise where care for the penultimate can only be exercised in violation of the law. But, in such a case, we have not a rejection of the law but an “act of breaking the law to sanctify it,” or a “suspension of the law” that “serve[s] its true fulfillment.”³¹

At this point the following question might be raised: How do Christians become the sort of people who act in this freely responsible way? It is largely to answer such a question that Bonhoeffer writes his essay on “Ethics as Formation.” The idea here is that Christians are to assume the form of Jesus Christ or, better, that Christ takes form in Christians and the church. As Bonhoeffer says in no uncertain terms, “‘Formation’ means...Jesus Christ taking form in Christ’s church.”³² This taking form of Jesus Christ in the church does not mean that Christians become repetitions or exact imitations of Christ. Even less does it mean that humans become ontologically divine. Rather, it means that church and Christians develop patterns of free and responsible activity in relation to the world that reflect – in their own capacity and context – the tri-fold form of Jesus Christ as incarnate, crucified, and resurrected.

It is here that the mandates, which Bonhoeffer introduces in the essay “Christ, Reality, and Good” but which appear throughout the *Ethics*, have a significant role to play. The divine mandates are work, marriage or family, government, and church. Bonhoeffer insists that these mandates do not exist independent of Jesus Christ, and thus do not provide the basis for some sort of naturally derived ethics. Indeed, they “are divine...only because of their original and final relation to Christ.”³³ Still, their rather traditionalist appearance can easily raise questions as to the ultimate veracity of Bonhoeffer’s claim. Two points can be argued briefly

³¹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 297.

³² Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 96.

³³ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 69.

against this interpretation. First, the source of Bonhoeffer's mandates is Scripture and not an empirical or generalizing study of nature. Bonhoeffer is clear about this when he introduces the mandates, noting that "scripture names four...mandates."³⁴ Second, no less an authority on the avoidance of natural theology than Karl Barth finds no reason to reject Bonhoeffer's own understanding of the mandates as revealed. The mandates "do not emerge from reality," Barth says, "they descend into it."³⁵

The mandates are properly understood as, and Rasmussen gets this right, "the media of conformation."³⁶ They are conceptual designations for webs of relationship wherein Christians are called to live in free responsibility by being conformed to Christ. Furthermore, each of these webs of relationship presents one with a specific set of responsibilities. For instance, the mandate of marriage or family presents the responsibilities of parent to child, child to parent, and of spouse to spouse, while the mandate of government presents the responsibility of governor to citizen, officer of the law to criminal, etc. It is here also that we recognize that responsibility is a product of relationship. Each mandate, then, as a web of relationship that

³⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 68. Going beyond this, Brian Brock ties Bonhoeffer's thinking about the mandates to his contemporaneous engagement with Psalm 119. He concludes that the mandates are ways of conceptualizing strands of Scripture for the purpose of discernment. See, Brian Brock, "Bonhoeffer and the Bible in Christian Ethics: Psalm 119, the Mandates, and Ethics as a 'Way'," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 18, no. 3 (2005): 27.

³⁵ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. and edited by Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance, 4 volumes in 13 part vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956-75), III/4, 22. Holbrook argues that Bonhoeffer's account is not as dependent on revelation as Bonhoeffer and others have claimed. He basis this contention on a consideration of christology, arguing that God's becoming incarnate presupposes that there is such a thing as humanity existing independently of Christ. See, Clyde A. Holbrook, "The Problem of Authority in Christian Ethics," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 37, no. 1 (1969): 40. Holbrook's charge ultimately fails for two reasons. First, he has failed to distinguish between logical presupposition and temporal presupposition. It is, of course, the case that human beings existed chronologically prior to the life of Jesus of Nazareth. But, the Augustinian tradition – of which Bonhoeffer and his Lutheranism are a part – understands the particular humanity of Jesus Christ to be the logic presupposition even of God's creative work. Second, Holbrook seems unaware of the *anhypostatic* christological point, namely, that the incarnation does not mean that the divine Son assumes an already existing human identity. Rather, the human identity of Jesus of Nazareth exists only in conjunction with and as a result of the Son's assumption of it. To claim otherwise would be to lapse into a sophisticated adoptionism.

³⁶ Rasmussen, *Reality and Resistance*, 29.

presents us with specific responsibilities, provides a concrete context for asking the question of “how Christ may take form among us today and here.”³⁷

SELF-INFLICTED DEATH: BONHOEFFER’S ETHIC IN ACTION

Thinking of the development of Bonhoeffer’s ethical thought, Rasmussen notes that, in the portions of the *Ethics* that deal with particular ethical questions, “the method of deciding, still done contextually, takes the form of something approaching casuistic reasoning.”³⁸ If by ‘casuistic reasoning’ Rasmussen means a general process of deliberation and discernment concerned with ascertaining what the best response might be to a particular situation, then he would be correct. But, this is highly unlikely given the technical nature of the term and the conceptual distinction that Rasmussen himself implies between a more mundane ‘method of deciding’ and casuistry, which is generally defined as a way of negotiating the conflict of abstract moral principles as they apply in a particular situation.³⁹ The following consideration of Bonhoeffer’s treatment of self-inflicted death will argue that the application of abstract moral principles is far from Bonhoeffer’s mind as he turns from his more theoretical material to the consideration of particular ethical issues.

Bonhoeffer most extensively engages in reflection on particular ethical question in his essay entitled, “Natural Life.” Three features of this essay lend themselves to easy misinterpretation by those who, like Rasmussen, are inclined to find casuistry in Bonhoeffer. First, while the term ‘natural’ has negative connotations for many due to the castigation of

³⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 99.

³⁸ Larry L. Rasmussen, “A Question of Method,” in *New Studies in Bonhoeffer's Ethics*, ed. William J. Peck, *Toronto Studies in Theology* (Lewison, NY: The Edwin Mellon Press, 1987), 111. This seems to be another uncharacteristic misstep by Rasmussen.

³⁹ This definition of ‘casuistry’ is based on that given by *The Oxford English Dictionary*, ed. J.A. Simpson and E.S.C. Weiner, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

natural theology by Karl Barth, Bonhoeffer speaks of the ‘natural’ as the state of creation after the Fall insofar as it is “directed toward the coming of Jesus Christ.”⁴⁰ That is, the natural is that condition of creation after the Fall whereby God preserves its being in the face of sin for the sake of God’s saving will. In this, Bonhoeffer treats the natural in relation to Christ must as he does the relation between ultimate and penultimate. This connection becomes explicit when he write, “Only in Christ’s becoming human does natural life become the penultimate that is directed toward the ultimate.”⁴¹ That is to say, it is because of God’s saving work in Jesus Christ that creaturely existence is preserved in the wake of sin and, as it is preserved, it serves that saving work.

This leads to the second point that could imply casuistry when misinterpreted, namely, the place that Bonhoeffer assigns to reason in the knowledge of the natural. Reason is the organ by which the natural is known. Two caveats must be made to understand this rightly. On the one hand, Bonhoeffer is perfectly clear that reason is a fallen, creaturely reality that is “completely embedded in the natural” and “is not a divine principle of cognition...superior to the natural.”⁴² On the other hand, that which reason knows – the natural – is nothing more (or less) than the created order as it is preserved in the face of sin. That is, what reason knows is the existence of the world and that which supports the continuation of this existence, and what reason knows in light of Christ is that God wills the continuation of this existence for the sake of God’s salvific work.

All this leads to the third point that could imply casuistry when misinterpreted, namely, the emphasis that Bonhoeffer places on the right to bodily life. It is this right that guides

⁴⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 173.

⁴¹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 174.

⁴² Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 174.

Bonhoeffer's thinking through the particular ethical questions addressed here. The important point is that this right to bodily life is not an abstract principle of the sort that could lead to casuistry. Though bodily life is known by reason as integral to the existence of the world, it is only in light of Christ that one can speak of a right to bodily life. As Bonhoeffer presents the logic, "Since by God's will human life on earth exists only as bodily life, the body has a right to be preserved."⁴³ The right to bodily life is not, then, an abstract principle but a commitment based in the relation of the penultimate to the ultimate as demonstrated in Jesus Christ.

When these three aspects are properly understood, one is not inclined to conclude that Bonhoeffer lapses into casuistry in his treatment of particular ethical questions. All three of the aspects discussed above that could lead in this direction when misinterpreted are actually grounded firmly in Christ. This opinion is strengthened by an examination of Bonhoeffer's particular treatments, especially by his treatment of self-inflicted death. Bonhoeffer begins with a point ascertained from reason, namely, that humans are distinct from other non-human animals in that they are capable of "voluntarily bring[ing] death upon themselves."⁴⁴ It is this freedom with relation to bodily life that establishes it as human life, for without it there would be no freedom for God in the sacrifice of life. Thus, it is on the basis of a penultimate point, ascertained from reason, that Bonhoeffer is led to a consideration of the ultimate wherein he provides a theological interpretation of self-inflicted death.

Bonhoeffer makes a fundamental distinction between self-inflicted death as sacrifice – such as in giving up space in the lifeboat of a sinking ship or in using "one's own

⁴³ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 185.

⁴⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 196. Concerning Bonhoeffer's treatment of suicide in general, Roark comments that Bonhoeffer "is weaker in dealing with suicide" than he is with reference to some of the other ethical problems he addresses. Dallas M. Roark, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Makers of the Modern Theological Mind* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1972), 100. Roark does not, however, offer an argument for why this is the case.

body to shield the body of a friend from a bullet”⁴⁵ – and self-inflicted death as self-murder. The former is, from Bonhoeffer’s Christian perspective, an acceptable actualization of the Christian’s free responsibility before God to serve. Although he does not explicitly make the connection, it is likely that this is such an easy move for Bonhoeffer to make not only because it is in keeping with the weight of Christian tradition on the subject, but because in Christ’s entire life and especially in his crucifixion we find the quintessential example of such self-sacrifice. It is, after all, the form of Christ that Christians are called to assume.

Self-murder, on the other hand, is defined as self-inflicted death where “a person acts exclusively and consciously out of personal self-interest.”⁴⁶ As opposed to the case of self-sacrifice where one’s life of free responsibility before God and in service of neighbor necessitates laying down that life for the benefit of others, Bonhoeffer understands self-murder as an attempt at usurpation of God’s right over the end of human life. It is, as such, “the ultimate and extreme self-justification of the human being as human,” “the sin of unbelief,” and “the epitome of sin.”⁴⁷ But, Bonhoeffer admits, such a claim can only be made from the perspective of the ultimate. Seen from the vantage of the penultimate alone, there is no compelling reason why such self-murder ought to be condemned. A penultimate construction of the right to bodily life is helpless here for, if that right is not grounded in God, it depends only on the fact that the individual possesses it. Who is to say that the individual cannot surrender this right?

One further and important nuance is included in Bonhoeffer’s treatment. This nuance in particular shows him to be deeply engaged with the penultimate concerns surrounding self-inflicted death. For, as soon as he defines self-murder as self-inflicted death arising from

⁴⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 201-2.

⁴⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 200.

⁴⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 197-9.

exclusive and conscious self-interest, he hastens to add, “But who would dare to speak with certainty about this exclusivity and this consciousness?”⁴⁸ Bonhoeffer is alive and sensitive to the uncertainties and complexities of penultimate life and, while he is clear that selfishly motivated self-inflicted death falls outside the bounds of that action expected in light of the ultimate, he refuses to pass judgment on those who succumb to what he sees as the very real temptation to this terrifyingly final act. “[W]ho would say,” he asks, “that under this most severe temptation the grace of God cannot embrace and bear even failure?”⁴⁹

In light of all this, it seems clear that Bonhoeffer is not engaged in casuistry when it comes to addressing particular ethical questions. Rather, and this is of vital import, both his answers to these questions and the framework within which he answers them are directly related to his more theoretical considerations. At every point he seeks to understand the penultimate as penultimate, that is, in light of the ultimate found in Jesus Christ. And, at every point, he seeks to discern how a Christian might act within a particular context with free responsibility before God and for neighbor in a manner that corresponds to the form of Jesus Christ.

RECAPITULATION: BONHOEFFER’S TWO-FOLD CONTEXTUALISM

Having now spent considerable time with Bonhoeffer’s *Ethics*, it is fitting to pause briefly and consider what type of ethics we are here presented with. Palmer divides the field of normative

⁴⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 200-1.

⁴⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 203. It is interesting to note, as Rothuizen has done, the ways in which Barth draws on Bonhoeffer while developing his own account of suicide in *Church Dogmatics* III/4. In this account Barth self-consciously borrowed from Bonhoeffer while also going further than even Bonhoeffer did “to advocate the granting of forgiveness for the act.” Gerard Rothuizen, “Who Am I? Bonhoeffer and Suicide,” in *New Studies in Bonhoeffer’s Ethics*, ed. William J. Peck, *Toronto Studies in Theology* (Lewison, NY: The Edwin Mellon Press, 1987), 173.

ethics into two camps, the deontological and the teleological.⁵⁰ The former is concerned with an act as such and how it succeeds or fails in corresponding to a universal standard of the morally right or good, while the latter considers an action in terms of its consequences. Bonhoeffer consistently rejects both of these approaches, doing so programmatically early in the *Ethics*' first essay, "Christ, Reality, and Good:" "The question of good must not be narrowed to investigating the relation of actions to their motives, or to their consequences, measuring them by a readymade ethical standard."⁵¹ The reference to consequentialism is clear while that to deontology is veiled behind the language of motive. This language is an allusion to Immanuel Kant, deontologist extraordinaire, who made much of the importance of a will that is good "not because of what it performs or effects," that is, in terms of consequences resulting from the will's activity, "[but] is good in itself."⁵² Further, Bonhoeffer cannot be characterized as a natural lawyer for, as we have seen, his mandates are not given by nature. Nor does his work finally fit within the realm of virtue ethics, despite his discussion of formation, because the acquisition and possession of virtue is not his goal.

H. Richard Niebuhr's analysis brings us closer to characterizing Bonhoeffer. Conceptually re-describing teleological ethics as 'man-as-maker' and deontological ethics as 'man-the-citizen,' he introduces the concept of responsibility – an important notion for Bonhoeffer, as previously discussed – and sets about thinking of 'man-the-answerer.' Understanding the moral life in terms of responsibility is to think of "an agent's action as response to an action upon him in accordance with his interpretation of the latter action and with

⁵⁰ Michael Palmer, *Moral Problems: A Coursebook for Schools and Colleges*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2005), 13.

⁵¹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 52.

⁵² Immanuel Kant, *Basic Writings of Kant*, ed. Allen W. Wood, The Modern Library (New York: Random House, Inc., 2001), "Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals," 152.

his expectation of response to his response; and all of this is in a continuing community of agents.”⁵³ What Niebuhr provides here is a way of thinking about a contextual ethic, that is, an ethic concerned with the concrete context in which a moral agent is encountered with a demand for action, with the resources said agent has for choosing and pursuing a course of action, and with the community to which said agent is accountable. It is clear that Bonhoeffer’s ethical thought is closest to this contextual line. But, if Bonhoeffer’s is a contextual ethic, what sort of contextual ethic is it?

The contextualism of Bonhoeffer’s thought can be described as a two-fold contextualism, and it is here that the numerous resources at Bonhoeffer’s disposal for the adjudication between different Christian ethical proposals can be seen, against Rasmussen’s position encountered in the opening portion of this paper. First, there is the contextualism of the ultimate. Bonhoeffer is interested in bringing his theology and theological identity to bear on his context, and it is a particular theology and theological identity that he brings to bear. It is this particularism that constitutes the contextualism of the ultimate in his ethical thought. Bonhoeffer’s conceptual tools – such as the divine mandates, the life of free responsibility before God and for neighbor, and the tri-fold form of Christ that is to take form in the lives of church and Christian – are all a part of this contextual aspect. Consequently, theological argumentation surrounding these and other aspects of Bonhoeffer’s contextualism of the ultimate provide tools for adjudicating between competing Christian ethical proposals. For instance, it means something to Christian ethics if Bonhoeffer’s understanding of the tri-fold form of Christ is correct. This is a theological argument that has direct relevance for ethical thinking. In this way

⁵³ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 65.

we see that the entire scope of theological inquiry has become, within Bonhoeffer's ethical thought, a field of contest for adjudicating between competing ethical claims.

Second, there is the contextualism of the penultimate. Bonhoeffer's ethical thought is not interested in questions of good and evil absolutely conceived. Because of the reconciliation between God and humanity achieved in Jesus Christ, such questions of self-justification must be sidelined. The question that matters as church and Christian prepare to act in free responsibility is whether or not a proposed action will serve the preservation of the penultimate and its preparation for the ultimate, that is, whether a proposed action "helps my neighbor to be a human being before God."⁵⁴ It is here that sensitivity to the penultimate context is vitally important, for one must be able to ascertain whether an action will have the desired effect. Thus, engagement with the whole of penultimate sociological, political, economic, psychological, and any otherwise characterized inquiry is required. Furthermore, because such inquiry is required, it presents an expansive field for adjudication between ethical proposals as the potential effects of these competing proposals are ascertained and weighed. In many respects, the expansiveness of this field is almost crippling, and it may very well have been recognition of this breadth that lead Bonhoeffer to emphasize that we must finally act in free responsibility, leaving the final judgment of our action to God.

The important thing to note here, however, is that such pragmatic considerations are not additions to Bonhoeffer's thought meant to plug practical holes that his more theoretical thought – grounded theologically in Christ – is unable to address. That they are such superfluous additions is Rasmussen's contention, saying that such considerations do not "have any necessary

⁵⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 99.

methodological connection to [Bonhoeffer's] christological ethics."⁵⁵ The ability to make such a statement suggests that Rasmussen has seriously misunderstood Bonhoeffer's thought in the *Ethics*. It is precisely Bonhoeffer's christology that leads him to engagement with the world, and it is again this ultimate in Jesus Christ that frees him for such engagement. As Ziegler rightly discerns concerning Bonhoeffer thought on this point, "There is freedom to be about the penultimate and worldly things of human life, not in spite of what is ultimate, but because of it and for its sake."⁵⁶

CONCLUSION

In the volume wherein he charges that the core commitments of Bonhoeffer's ethical thought provide no basis for adjudicating between various Christian ethical proposals, Rasmussen's focus is on Bonhoeffer's involvement in the *Abwehr* resistance to Hitler. It is likely that this single-minded focus lead to a distortion in Rasmussen's understanding of Bonhoeffer, for Bonhoeffer's resistance work was only one of two motivations that lay behind his work in the *Ethics*. It is Bonhoeffer's other motivation, namely, "his desire to contribute to the reconstruction of life in Germany and the West in the peace that would follow the war,"⁵⁷ that this paper has endeavored to bring to the fore.

The paradigm of ethical thought that emerges from such a reading is one that allows and compels the Christian to act in free responsibility before God and in service of the neighbor, within the context of the relationships conceptually organized by the divine mandates,

⁵⁵ Rasmussen, *Reality and Resistance*, 162.

⁵⁶ Philip G. Ziegler, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer: An Ethics of God's Apocalypse?," *Modern Theology* 23, no. 4 (2007): 588.

⁵⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, "Editor's Introduction to the English Edition" (Clifford J. Green), 1.

for the preservation of the penultimate and its preparation for the ultimate, and in correspondence with the tri-fold form of Christ. Such an ethical paradigm is characterized, this paper has argued, by a two-fold contextualism that seeks to bring a particular understanding of the ultimate to bear on a particular situation within penultimate existence with the goal of benefiting that existence. In this way, the whole scope of theological inquiry and the whole scope of inquiry about the penultimate world – including sociological, political, economic, psychological, or any otherwise characterized inquiry – provide fields of contest for adjudication between disparate and contradictory Christian ethical proposals.

It is certainly true that Bonhoeffer envisages “extraordinary situation[s]” and “borderline cases”⁵⁸ where actions that contradict the usual guidelines within both ultimate (i.e., the Decalogue) and penultimate (i.e., civil law) contexts must be ventured. The existence of such cases, and the necessity of such action, results from a disorder in the penultimate situation and not from a disorder in the ultimate. Such actions truly are a last resort, required when the penultimate threatens its own preservation. In such a situation, church and Christian may find that they are called to act against the penultimate for the sake of the penultimate. But, even here, ethical action is undertaken in free responsibility before God and in service of the neighbor, within the context of the relationships conceptually organized by the divine mandates, for the preservation of the penultimate and its preparation for the ultimate, and in correspondence with the tri-fold form of Christ.

⁵⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 273. Bonhoeffer certainly understood the *Abwehr* resistance to Hitler as such an action within such a context. History has validated this assessment.

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