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

The life and work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer quickly captured 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.¹ The *Ethics*, however, languished until the early 1980s, when a resurgence of Bonhoeffer research focused on determining the proper chronological arrangement of the *Ethics* fragments.²

Given 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."³ Furthermore, Rasmussen attributes this lack of framework not to the fragmentary, incomplete nature of Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*, but to its central motifs or, as Rasmussen puts it, "the most fundamental and most continuous elements."⁴ The present essay contests Rasmussen's claim. The twofold contextualism of Bonhoeffer's ethical thought provides a robust framework for adjudication between competing ethical claims while also preserving the ethical freedom of the individual Christian before God. What follows will unpack this claim by providing an account of the central themes and logic of Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*, illustrated by his engagement with the ethical question of self-inflicted death.

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, ed., Geoffrey Kelly and John D. Godsey, trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss, vol. 4, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001); Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Nancy Lukens, Lisa E. Dahill, and Isabel Best, vol. 8, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010).

² Ilse Tödt, "Preparing the German Edition of *Ethics*," in 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), 467.

³ Larry L. Rasmussen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reality and Resistance*, Studies in Christian Ethics (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1972), 151.

⁴ Rasmussen, *Reality and Resistance*, 150.

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 encompasses various exploratory beginnings and angles of attack for the work that Bonhoeffer intended to write.⁵ This makes it difficult to get at the logic of Bonhoeffer's thought in the *Ethics*, but it is not impossible. While each essay in the *Ethics* deserves careful scrutiny in its own right, it is also necessary to develop a more comprehensive and synthetic vision by analyzing the text in a primarily thematic rather than chronological manner.

One of Bonhoeffer's pivotal aims in *Ethics* is the reclamation of Luther's two-kingdoms doctrine from what he considers improper use and interpretation. In this regard, "Bonhoeffer styles himself the true Lutheran."⁶ This concern arises in Bonhoeffer's first essay, "Christ, Reality, and God." Instead of viewing the "church" and the "world" as distinct and separate realms, Bonhoeffer argues that these two realms are inextricably united in Christ. Treating them as distinct and separate would grant the world a sort of independence from God's presence and action in the church that Bonhoeffer, thinking in christological categories, rejects. For Bonhoeffer, "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 [*Christuswirklichkeit*], in which the reality of God and the reality of the world are united."⁷ The context for Bonhoeffer's ethics is this vision of the world grounded in and interpreted by Christ. That is what he means by "reality."

Furthermore, the unity of God and the world in a single Christ-reality is not a static condition established in the past. Rather, this intimate relation between God and the world is a dynamic unity that "established in Christ (repeats itself, or, more exactly) realizes itself again and again in human beings."⁸ The dynamic character of this continuing realization of the unity between God and world that is Christ-reality underscores that this unity must be the primary frame of reference for Christian existence. One betrays Christian existence by treating this unity as a stale reality, separable or distinct from the world in practice. True Christian existence means, rather, that "belonging completely to Christ, one stands at the same time

⁵ 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), 622-26.

⁶ Craig J. Slane, *Bonhoeffer as Martyr: Social Responsibility and Modern Christian Commitment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004), 186. For information on the targets of Bonhoeffer's intra-Lutheran criticism with reference to the two-kingdoms doctrine, see Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 56n36. For a valuable overview of Luther's two-kingdoms doctrine, see Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther: An Introduction to His Life and Work* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1986), 186-93.

⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, eds., Ilse Tödt, Heinz Eduard Tödt, Ernst Feil, and Clifford Green, vol. 6, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke (Munic: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1992), 43-4 ; 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), 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.

⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, 44-45; *Ethics*, 59.

completely in the world" because "there is no real Christian existence outside the reality of the world. ... For the Christian there is nowhere to retreat from the world, neither externally nor into the inner life."⁹ As James Woelfel helpfully summarizes, "God is to be found in the midst of the world and nowhere else."¹⁰

Bonhoeffer's fifth essay, "Ultimate and Penultimate Things," provides further conceptual specificity to the relationship between God and the world. 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: What is the relationship between the ultimate and the penultimate? There are two inadequate ways of conceptualizing this relation.

The first "radical solution" conceives "only the complete demolition of the penultimate" where "Christ is the destroyer and enemy of everything penultimate and everything penultimate is the enemy of Christ." This approach to the relation between ultimate and penultimate highlights 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 evocative language, "The world has to burn."¹¹

Second, there is the compromise solution: the ultimate makes no claim upon the penultimate so that the penultimate "retains its inherent rights...[and] is not threatened or endangered by the ultimate." This approach to the relation between ultimate and penultimate highlights Christ's mercy, and Bonhoeffer rightly recognizes that such maintenance of the penultimate against the ultimate can result in their separation. This is the state of affairs that Bonhoeffer protested against in his reclamation of Luther's two-kingdom doctrine described previously, 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."¹²

These two inadequate conceptions of the relation between ultimate and penultimate do not result from failing to think about that relation centered in Jesus Christ. In fact, Jesus Christ is the keystone in both these conceptions. Neither of them violate Bonhoeffer's dictum that "the relationship between the ultimate and the penultimate is resolved only in Christ."¹³ It is the reductive understandings of Christ at work in these conceptions that make them inadequate. 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

⁹ Ibid., *Ethik*, 47–48; *Ethics*, 61–62. Perhaps we encounter here the theological seed whose logic would later bear fruit in Bonhoeffer's reflections on the need for a "religionless Christianity." Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 363.

¹⁰ James. W. Woelfel, *Bonhoeffer's Theology: Classical and Revolutionary* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1970), 154.

¹¹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, 144–45; *Ethics*, 153 (rev.).

¹² Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, 145; *Ethics*, 154.

¹³ Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, 148; *Ethics*, 157.

spells this out clearly: “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.”¹⁴

Only by considering Christ in the unity of incarnation, cross, and resurrection is it possible to discern the proper relation of ultimate to penultimate. Bonhoeffer frequently returns to this trifold elucidation of Christ’s work. He elaborates it briefly in “Ultimate and Penultimate Things,” but it receives more fulsome treatment in “Ethics as Formation” 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. God unites Godself not to ideal humanity in the incarnation but “takes on human nature as it is” in its sinfulness.¹⁵ This underscores God’s love for humanity in all its sin and weakness, rather than 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, is possible only “by executing God’s judgment on God,” which is accomplished because of “the love of God for the world, for human beings.”¹⁶ The judgment and reconciliation with God that occurred in Jesus Christ obtains for all human beings insofar as they are in Christ. This is a scandal to worldly eyes, in that it is only by death (judgment) that there can be life (reconciliation). Third, we behold in Jesus Christ the one who has arisen. There is not only death, but also resurrection. New life has arrived. While the penultimate persists, Jesus Christ takes humanity beyond it. As Bonhoeffer writes: “In Jesus Christ, the one who became human was crucified and is risen; humanity has become new...The new human being has been created.”¹⁷ 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.

It is only in light of the ultimate that the penultimate becomes penultimate, and vice-versa. As Bonhoeffer argues, the penultimate is and “must be preserved for the sake of the ultimate.”¹⁸ The penultimate, sinful world must exist if human beings are going to come to faith in the ultimate, Jesus Christ. Christians must contribute to this work of preservation or, as Bonhoeffer consistently calls it with allusion to Isaiah 40 and Matthew 3, “preparing the way.” This preparatory task does not in any sense make grace a human possibility. Bonhoeffer insists that “grace must finally clear and smooth its own way; it alone must again and again make the impossible possible.”¹⁹ Christians can, however – Bonhoeffer insists – remove penultimate obstacles to the event of grace. Ján Liguš rightly explains that circumstances of “desolation, poverty, exploitation,

¹⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, 149; *Ethics*, 157.

¹⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, 71; *Ethics*, 85.

¹⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, 75; *Ethics*, 88.

¹⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, 78; *Ethics*, 91.

¹⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, 152; *Ethics*, 160

¹⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, 154; *Ethics*, 162.

oppression, and hunger...make it nearly impossible to believe in God's justice and might."²⁰

The goal, then, is not to bring about the ultimate through all too human and penultimate activity, but to—in whatever halting and imperfect ways possible—establish conditions in the penultimate realm that minimize the obstacles that oppose encounter with the ultimate. This work is, to be sure, a relative measure: the penultimate remains sinful and estranged from God apart from the presence and activity of Christ. Still, it is not a matter of no concern that the penultimate corresponds relatively more than less to the ultimate. Bonhoeffer puts it this way: "To give the hungry bread is not yet to proclaim to them the grace of God and justification, and to have received bread does not yet mean to stand in faith. But for the one who does something penultimate for the sake of the ultimate, this penultimate thing is related to the ultimate. It is the *pen-ultimate*."²¹

This account of the relationship between ultimate and penultimate calls church and Christian to an existence characterized by freedom and responsibility. Bonhoeffer discusses this in his second essay on "History and Good." It is important to correctly identify the whence and whither of this freedom and responsibility, however. "Responsibility [*Verantwortung*]" is a life "lived in response [*Antwort*] to the life of Jesus Christ."²² It comes from and returns to the ultimate, Jesus Christ, but it does so by way of the penultimate. Christians are responsible before Christ for those aspects of the penultimate that have been entrusted to their care. This undergirds Bonhoeffer's claim that "the attention of responsible people is directed to concrete neighbors in their concrete reality."²³ Christ calls people of faith to exercise responsible care for those aspects of the penultimate within their purview.

Lest this responsibility seem overwhelming, Bonhoeffer's treatment of freedom provides balance. 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 retains such a position: "Jesus Christ is the one who sets the conscience free for the service of God and neighbor."²⁴ The consequence of Christ's reconciling work is that it is only Christ who ultimately judges human action. Christians are freed from the necessity of self-justification by means of any penultimate authority, freed to carry on with living in accordance with their responsibility for those aspects of the penultimate entrusted to their care. It is in this way that "responsibility and freedom are mutually corresponding concepts."²⁵ Christ frees human beings from the need to seek

²⁰ 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.

²¹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, 154; *Ethics*, 163 (rev.). The English translation transposes Bonhoeffer's emphasis. The German text gives "Vor-Letztes," or "pen-ultimate" (as above), rather than "Vor-Letztes," which one would expect from the *Ethics* translation, "pen-ultimate."

²² Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, 254; *Ethics*, 254 (rev.).

²³ Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, 260; *Ethics*, 261 (rev.).

²⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, 279; *Ethics*, 279.

²⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, 283; *Ethics*, 283.

justification in the penultimate for the actions that they 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."²⁶ 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. With one's justification before God 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."²⁷

Bonhoeffer does not descend into antinomianism, however. He reflects on the extent to which the law of God revealed in the Decalogue and in the divine mandates might establish a "boundary for any responsible action."²⁸ 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."²⁹ Law finally gives way to gospel; or, better, Bonhoeffer refuses to separate the law from its giver. While the law is invaluable for establishing general guidelines for exercising responsible care of the penultimate, situations may arise where violation of the law becomes a necessity for such care. However, violation of the law in those cases does not constitute a rejection of the law; rather, what occurs in those situations is an "act of breaking the law to sanctify it," or a "suspension of the law" that "serve[s] its true fulfillment."³⁰

How, then, 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 core 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."³¹ 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

²⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, 285; *Ethics*, 284. As Bonhoeffer says in his exposition of Genesis 3, to raise the abstract question of good and evil—even in an ostensibly pious way—"requires humankind to sit in judgment on God's word instead of simply listening to it and doing it." Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, trans. Douglas Stephen Bax, vol. 3, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004).

²⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, 288; *Ethics*, 287-88. As Wannenwetsch 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 Wannenwetsch, "'Responsible Living' or 'Responsible Self'? Bonhoefferian Reflections on a Vexed Moral Notion," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 18, no. 3 (2005): 140.

²⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, 297; *Ethics*, 296.

²⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, 298; *Ethics*, 297.

³⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, 298-99; *Ethics*, 297.

³¹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, 84; *Ethics*, 96.

the world that reflects—in their own capacity and context—the trifold form of Jesus Christ as incarnate, crucified, and resurrected.

It is here that the divine 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.”³² Still, their rather traditionalist appearance justifies questions as to whether Bonhoeffer successfully avoids the spectre of natural theology here. Two points are especially relevant in this connection. First, Bonhoeffer grounds his mandates in Scripture rather than an empirical or generalizing study of nature. Bonhoeffer is clear about this when he introduces the mandates, noting that “scripture names four...mandates.”³³ There is more to say about Bonhoeffer’s implicit hermeneutics here, especially in conversation with the concept of *Sachkritik*.³⁴ But it is clear that Bonhoeffer intends to ground the mandates on special rather than general revelation, so to speak. Second, no less an authority on the avoidance of natural theology, Karl Barth finds no reason to reject Bonhoeffer’s understanding of the mandates as revealed. The mandates “do not emerge from reality,” Barth says, “they descend into it.”³⁵

³² Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, 55–56; *Ethics*, 69.

³³ Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, 54; *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.

³⁴ For more on *Sachkritik*, see David W. Congdon, *The Mission of Demythologizing: Rudolf Bultmann’s Dialectical Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 714–37, and especially his discussion of the debate between Bultmann and Karl Barth on this subject on pp. 723–737.

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 bases 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 logical 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. Regardless of all this, it is certainly possible and necessary to subject both Bonhoeffer and Barth’s thought to searching criticism to elucidate how their social situation as privileged men in patriarchal European society shaped what they thought was “natural” about humanity and the world.

Rasmussen is correct when he describes the mandates in Bonhoeffer's thought as "the media of conformation."³⁶ They are conceptual designations for webs of relationship wherein Christians conform to Christ by crafting lives of free responsibility. Furthermore, each of these webs of relationship presents 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. Key here is Bonhoeffer's commitment to understanding responsibility as a product of relationship. As webs of relationship that present specific responsibilities, the mandates provide 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

Reflecting on 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 generally denotes 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 shows that 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 questions in his essay entitled, "Natural Life." Three features of this essay lend themselves to misinterpretation by those who are inclined to find casuistry in Bonhoeffer. First, while the term "natural" has negative connotations for many due to the castigation of 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. Bonhoeffer treats the natural in relation to Christ much as he does the relation between ultimate and penultimate. Indeed, he makes this connection explicit: "Only in Christ's becoming human does natural life become the penultimate that is directed toward the ultimate."⁴¹ It is because of God's saving work in

³⁶ Rasmussen, *Reality and Resistance*, 29.

³⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, 87; *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* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellon Press, 1987), 111.

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).

⁴⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, 165; *Ethics*, 173.

⁴¹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, 166; *Ethics*, 174.

Jesus Christ that creaturely existence is preserved in the wake of sin and, as it is preserved, it serves that saving work.

The second aspect of Bonhoeffer's essay that might seem to imply casuistry is the place that he assigns to reason in the knowledge of the natural. Reason is the organ by which one knows the natural. Two caveats must be made to understand this rightly, however. To begin, Bonhoeffer is perfectly clear that reason is both creaturely and fallen. It is "completely embedded in the natural" and "is not a divine principle of cognition and order in human beings, superior to the natural."⁴² Furthermore, that which reason knows – the natural – is nothing more (or less) than the created order as it is preserved in the face of sin. What reason knows, as such, is the existence of the world and that which supports the continuation of this existence. What reason knows in light of Christ is that God wills the continuation of this existence for the sake of God's salvific work.

Finally, the third point that might seem to imply casuistry is the emphasis Bonhoeffer places on the right to bodily life. This right guides Bonhoeffer's thinking through the particular ethical questions he addresses. But, importantly, this right to bodily life is not an abstract principle of the sort that could generate casuistry. Though reason knows bodily life 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: "Since by God's will human life on earth exists only as bodily life, the body has a right to be preserved for the sake of the whole person."⁴³ The right to bodily life is not an abstract principle, then, but a commitment based in the relation of the penultimate to the ultimate as demonstrated in Jesus Christ.

Rather than providing a foundation for casuistic reasoning, Bonhoeffer grounds all three of these aspects of his thought firmly in Christ. Examining Bonhoeffer's treatment of particular ethical questions, and especially his treatment of self-inflicted death, further underscores this conclusion.

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 makes human life what it is. Without this freedom, there could be no freedom for God in the sacrifice of life. Thus, it is on the basis of a penultimate, ascertained from reason, that Bonhoeffer considers the ultimate in providing 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 body to shield the body of a friend from a bullet" – and self-inflicted death as self-murder.⁴⁵ Bonhoeffer concludes that the former is

⁴² Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, 167; *Ethics*, 174.

⁴³ Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, 179; *Ethics*, 185.

⁴⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, 192; *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.

⁴⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, 198; *Ethics*, 201–202. It makes sense for Bonhoeffer to draw on examples of self-sacrifice from the context of military life given that he wrote this

an acceptable actualization of the Christian's free responsibility before God to serve others. This conclusion is consistent with the weight of Christian tradition on the subject. But Bonhoeffer's own logic pushes him in this direction because Christ's entire life, and especially in his crucifixion, provides the quintessential example of such self-sacrifice. As such, it is part of what it can mean for Christians to conform to Christ.

Bonhoeffer defines self-murder as self-inflicted death where "a person acts exclusively and consciously out of personal self-interest."⁴⁶ Whereas self-sacrifice occurs when 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 to usurp God's right over the end of human life. As such, it is "the ultimate and extreme self-justification of the human being as human," which is to say, it is "the sin of unbelief."⁴⁷ Importantly, however, Bonhoeffer admits that he can only make this claim from the perspective of the ultimate. There is no compelling reason to condemn self-murder from the vantage of the penultimate alone. If the right to bodily life is not grounded in God, if it is only a penultimate consideration, then that right is grounded only in the individual human person as one who possesses that life. But who is to say that the individual cannot surrender this possession?

There is a further important nuance in Bonhoeffer's treatment that shows his deep engagement with the penultimate concerns surrounding self-inflicted death. As soon as he defines self-murder as self-inflicted death arising from 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 sensitive to the ambiguities and complexities of penultimate life and, while he is clear that selfishly motivated self-inflicted death falls outside the bounds of human action taken in free responsibility with reference to the ultimate, he nonetheless refuses to pass judgment on those who succumb to what recognizes can be a very real temptation to this terrifyingly final act. "Who would say," he asks, "that under this most severe temptation [*Anfechtung*] the grace of God cannot embrace and bear even failure?"⁴⁹

material during World War 2. Many of his family members, friends, and associates were involved in the war effort. It is less clear for contemporary readers why suicide might pose such a pressing issue. However, suicide levels were elevated in Germany during this period. For a thorough sociopolitical analysis of this phenomenon, see Christian Goeschel, *Suicide in Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). Eva Bildt's life and death provides a particularly poignant example that occurred within Bonhoeffer's orbit, although at the edges. She was engaged to Helmut Gollwitzer, one of Karl Barth's students and an acquaintance of Bonhoeffer's. Eva and her father, Paul, attempted suicide together as the Soviet army occupied Berlin in April 1945. She succeeded. See W. Travis McMaken, *Our God Loves Justice: An Introduction to Helmut Gollwitzer* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017), 39–40.

⁴⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, 197; *Ethics*, 200.

⁴⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, 193–94; *Ethics*, 197–98.

⁴⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, 197; *Ethics*, 200–201.

⁴⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, 193–94; *Ethics*, 203. Bonhoeffer's choice of the word *Anfechtung* in this statement is suggestive, given that it is a highly technical term in Luther studies. Martin Lohrmann explains the difficulties of translating it into English. He explains: "Another choice facing a translator is what to do with the German word *Anfechtung* (plural: *Anfechtungen*), a term that has major significance for Luther's theology. . . . *Anfechtung* can mean doubt, distress, assault, affliction, trials, or temptations. Since it has no clear single equivalent in English and is such an

Bonhoeffer is not engaged in casuistry when it comes to addressing particular ethical questions. Rather, both his answers to these questions and the framework within which he answers them are directly related to his more theoretical—and, fundamentally, *theological*—considerations. He consistently explicates penultimate as penultimate, that is, in light of the ultimate found in Jesus Christ. Furthermore, he undertakes at every point to discern how a Christian might act within a particular context with free responsibility before God and for neighbor in a manner that conforms to Jesus Christ.

Bonhoeffer's Twofold Contextualism

Having now spent considerable time with Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*, it will be helpful to pause briefly and consider what type of ethics—broadly conceived—best fits Bonhoeffer. Michael Palmer divides the field of normative 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." He argues that both approaches are ultimately reductive: "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 ready-made ethical standard. An ethic of disposition or intention is just as superficial as an ethic of consequences."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, 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, it is wrong to characterize Bonhoeffer as a natural lawyer since his mandates are not given by nature. Nor does his work finally fit within the realm of virtue ethics, despite his discussion of conformation, because the acquisition and possession of virtue is not his goal.

H. Richard Niebuhr's typological analysis comes closer to properly characterizing Bonhoeffer. Conceptually re-describing teleological ethics as

important term for understanding Luther, I have left it untranslated so that it can mean all those complicated things at once." Berndt Hamm, *The Early Luther: Stages in a Reformation Reorientation*, trans. Martin J. Lohrmann (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), xii–xiv. This terms many connotations highlight the ambiguity and complexity that Bonhoeffer identifies in the act of self-murder.

It is also interesting to note, as Rothuizen has done, how Barth draws on Bonhoeffer while developing his own account of suicide in *Church Dogmatics III/4*. 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* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellon Press, 1987), 173.

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

⁵¹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, 36–37; *Ethics*, 52.

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

“man-as-maker” and deontological ethics as “man-the-citizen,” he highlights the importance of responsibility in thinking about “man-the-answerer.” Understanding the moral life in terms of responsibility means thinking about “an agent’s action as response to an action upon him in accordance with his interpretation of the latter action and with his expectation of response to his response; and all of this is in a continuing community of agents.”⁵³ Niebuhr here provides a way of thinking about a contextual ethic, that is, an ethic concerned with the concrete context in which one encounters a demand for action, with the resources that one has for choosing and pursuing a course of action, and with the community to which one is accountable. Bonhoeffer’s ethical thought is closest to this contextual line.

If Bonhoeffer’s is a contextual ethic, however, what sort of contextual ethic is it? Answering this question will highlight the resources at Bonhoeffer’s disposal for adjudicating between different ethical proposals. The contextuality that characterizes Bonhoeffer’s ethics is twofold. First, there is a contextualism of the ultimate. Bonhoeffer brings his particular theological imagination to bear on his context. This particularity constitutes the contextualism of the ultimate in his ethics. Bonhoeffer’s conceptual tools—such as the divine mandates, the life of free responsibility before God and for neighbor, and the trifold form of Christ that takes form in the lives of church and Christian—are all aspects of this contextuality. Consequently, theological argumentation surrounding these and other aspects of Bonhoeffer’s contextualism of the ultimate provide tools for adjudicating between competing ethical proposals. For instance, it means something if Bonhoeffer’s understanding of the trifold form of Christ is correct insofar as it is a theological argument that has direct relevance for ethical thinking. In Bonhoeffer’s ethics, the entire scope of theological inquiry has become a field of contest for adjudicating between competing ethical claims.

Second, there is a contextualism of the penultimate. Bonhoeffer’s ethical approach is not interested in questions of good and evil absolutely conceived. Asking—and, especially, trying to answer!—those questions become improper forms of self-justification because of the reconciliation between God and humanity achieved in Jesus Christ. 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 Sensitivity to the penultimate context is vitally important here, for one must 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. This inquiry presents an expansive field for adjudication between ethical proposals as the potential effects of these competing proposals are ascertained and weighed.

Has Bonhoeffer reintroduced consequentialism in this contextualism of the penultimate? His rejection of consequential analysis as a mode of determining the moral quality of an act still holds. No amount of penultimate analysis will determine whether an act is good or evil.

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

⁵⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, 86; *Ethics*, 99.

Attempting such a determination is a sinful act of self-justification, as discussed previously. Furthermore, Bonhoeffer notes that such analysis is infinite in scope, which means that it is an entirely arbitrary exercise to halt that inquiry at any given point and make a judgment about an act's moral quality.⁵⁵ Rather than attempting to determine an act's moral quality, penultimate analysis on Bonhoeffer's model merely attempts to determine what is a more or less responsible act in its particular penultimate context. After suitable penultimate analysis, one must finally leave the final judgment of moral quality to God and act in free responsibility.

Rasmussen contends that these contextual considerations do not "have any necessary methodological connection to [Bonhoeffer's] christological ethics."⁵⁶ In other words, they are attempts to plug practical holes that his more theoretical approach—grounded theologically in Christ—is unable to address. This is incorrect. 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 Phillip Ziegler rightly discerns on this point, Bonhoeffer affirms that "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."⁵⁷

Conclusion

In the volume wherein he charges that the core commitments of Bonhoeffer's ethical thought provide no framework for adjudicating between various Christian ethical proposals, Rasmussen's focus is on Bonhoeffer's involvement in the *Abwehr* resistance to Hitler. Bonhoeffer's resistance work was only one of two primary motivations that lay behind his work in the *Ethics*, however. Bonhoeffer's other motivation was the "desire to contribute to the reconstruction of life in Germany and the West in the peace that would follow the war."⁵⁸ The present essay provides a reading that honors this motivation.

The ethical paradigm that emerges from such a reading 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, for the preservation of the penultimate and its preparation for the ultimate, and in correspondence with the trifold form of Christ. It involves a twofold contextualism provides a robust framework for adjudication between competing ethical claims insofar as it brings a particular understanding of the ultimate to bear on a particular situation within penultimate existence with the goal of preserving and promoting what is good about that existence. 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 the fields of contest for such adjudication.

⁵⁵ See Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, 37; *Ethics*, 52.

⁵⁶ Rasmussen, *Reality and Resistance*, 162.

⁵⁷ Philip G. Ziegler, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer: An Ethics of God's Apocalypse?", *Modern Theology* 23, no. 4 (2007): 588.

⁵⁸ Clifford J. Green, "Editor's Introduction to the English Edition," in Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 1.

It is certainly true that Bonhoeffer envisages “extraordinary situation[s]” and “borderline cases [Grenzfälle]” where one must risk actions that contradict the usual guidelines within both ultimate (i.e., the Decalogue) and penultimate (i.e., civil law) contexts.⁵⁹ 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, they undertake that action 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 trifold form of Christ.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, 272–73; *Ethics*, 273. Bonhoeffer certainly understood the *Abwehr* resistance to Hitler as such an action within such a context. History has validated this assessment. For a thorough treatment of these cases, see Matthew Puffer, “The >>Borderline Case<< in Bonhoeffer’s Political Theology,” in Kirsten Busch Nielsen, Ralf Wüstenberg, and Jens Zimmermann (eds.), *A Spoke in the Wheel: The Political in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Gütersloh, Germany: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2013), 257–69.

⁶⁰ This essay began its life in Dr. Nancy J. Duff’s doctoral seminar on ethics at Princeton Theological Seminary in 2008. Thanks to Kaitlyn Centini and J. Scott Jackson for their comments on earlier drafts.