

## Inevitable guilt? The conflict of norms in political action according to Dietrich Bonhoeffer

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### 1. The Demonic Aspect of Power

“At the times in history when people sense something of the demonic aspect of power, they need not immediately feel that this is absolute evil. The demonic is not pure negation of the good; it is not the sphere of complete darkness in contrast to light, but rather that of unclarity, of ambiguity, of uncertainty, of that which is disconcerting at the deepest level.” (G. Ritter, *Machtstaat und Utopie. Vom Streit um die Dämonie der Macht seit Macchiavelli und Morus*, München / Berlin 1940, 9)

This quote comes from Gerhard Ritter, who traces two sorts of interaction with power in his study *Machtstaat und Utopie*: the subjection of all action and all norms to the activity of attaining and retaining power – here Ritter identifies Machiavelli as the archetype; and the ideal of an interaction with power informed by humanitarian, legal principles – the founder in this case being, according to Ritter, Thomas Morus in his *Utopia*. Under the surface, Ritter’s book, first published in 1940, provides a subtle analysis of the contrast between the contemporary totalitarian form of government and the liberal western form: The Italian Machiavelli stands for Italian fascism and National Socialism, whereas the Englishman Thomas Morus stands for the utopian ideal of power limited by law.

During the time spent preparing his work on ethics, Bonhoeffer interacted with this analysis of the ‘demonic aspect of power.’ He is referencing the passage quoted above about the moral ambivalence of power when he writes about the person who acts politically – as one bearing responsibility for others:

“Responsible action takes place in the sphere of relativity, completely shrouded in the twilight that the historical situation casts upon good and evil. It takes place in the midst of countless perspectives from which every phenomenon is seen. Responsible action must decide not simply between right and wrong, good and evil, but between right and right, wrong and wrong.” (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, Works vol. 6, 284; I’ve made small adjustments; the original translation is found in {curly brackets}. The few places with [square brackets] are original to the translation) This text stems from the ethics-manuscripts of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, from a fragment with the title “History and the Good”. At the time that this text was written, 1<sup>st</sup> half of 1942, Bonhoeffer had chosen between right and right, between wrong and wrong: Being a pacifist, he was a participant

in the preparations for a coup against Hitler and thus also in plans that expressly included killing not only Hitler but many of the leading National Socialist power-bearers – many hundreds of people, in fact; and he was fully aware that this coup would necessarily seal Germany's defeat in the war. He had made a decision in unclarity within the realm of political power; he had chosen according to the criterium of that which is politically necessary, and he had consciously pushed aside the objections of many Christian opponents of the Hitler regime who rejected participation in coups and murder as sins against the fourth and fifth commandments.

This situation is undoubtedly in the background of the text; on the whole, the text presents a foundation for an ethics of Christian political involvement.

## **2. Discipleship (*Nachfolge*) as the Duty to be Politically Active**

The central thesis of Bonhoeffer consists therein, that a Christian, in fact the Christian in particular, should act politically. Both versions of the text deduce, repeatedly and in a very direct fashion, expectations for the life of a Christian from the structure of the life of Jesus Christ; and the central expectation consists therein, that a Christian is to act “responsibly.” According to Bonhoeffer, “responsible action” is action in the interest of another, of a collective:

“Individuals do not act merely for themselves alone; each individual incorporates the selves of several people, perhaps even a very large number.” (Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 221)

The life of the Christian corresponds to the life of Christ only in such recognition and acceptance of responsibility – and specifically not in the isolated perfection of the individual; thus Bonhoeffer writes:

“His entire living, acting, and suffering was substitution {vicarious representative action}, [Stellvertretung]. ... In this real substitution {vicarious representative action} ... he is the responsible human being par excellence. Since he is life, all of life through him is destined to be substitution {vicarious representative action}.” (Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 258-259, cf. 231-232)

Following Christ only happens in the acceptance of responsibility, in the selfless love that advocates on the behalf of others:

“Vicarious representative action and therefore responsibility is possible only in completely devoting one's own life to another person.”

This activity for a collective and thus this political activity is the basic form of discipleship.

## **3. A Christian Ethics of Responsibility**

In choosing the term “responsibility” to designate the activity for others required of the Christian, Bonhoeffer is referencing the distinction that exists between dispositional ethics

("Gesinnungsethik") and ethics of responsibility ("Verantwortungsethik"). This distinction had been introduced into the discussion in 1919 by Max Weber in order to demonstrate that political activity could not be led by the norms of an ethics of principles drawn, for example, from religious provenance. A political ethics is oriented on the foreseeable consequences a decision has for the community which the politician represents; he is duty bound to the well-being of this community. According to Weber, a politician must be a responsibility ethicist; he must act oriented toward a goal; and he builds alliances for the sake of the goal also with means that are, according to religious judgment, morally apprehensible – in particular also the means of force.

When Bonhoeffer employs the term 'responsibility' and calls the Christian to 'responsible action' in the interest of a collective for which the Christian acts in a representative fashion, he is aiming toward a Christian ethics of responsibility, i.e. toward action that does not carry out ethical demands at any cost, but rather is duty bound in its doings and omissions to the existence of a community in a given situation.

#### **4. Logic and the Law of History: Action in Accordance with Christ and in Accordance with Reality**

4.1. According to Max Weber, realistic action according to the logic of power and the norms of Christianity are mutually exclusive. In the months Bonhoeffer wrote this part of the 'Ethics' manuscript, the monstrous economic and military successes of Hitler seemed to demonstrate that history functions according to the law of power – that, as Macchiavelli puts it, 'virtú' can master the destiny of history – 'fortuna'. Against this thesis – that the course of history functions according to the logic of power – Bonhoeffer contrasts his own counterthesis, central in both versions of the text of 'History and the Good', that one can only judge the law of history (Gesetzmässigkeit) from the perspective of Christ. On this account – per Bonhoeffer – it is not action oriented toward retaining power, but rather action oriented around Christ that actually accords with reality. Only on the basis of this central, also historico-theological, intention can the title of the fragment be understood: "History and the Good". The fragment offers a sort of 'Antimachiavell.'

4.2. Only action in accord with Christ accords with reality. This thesis must initially be read in the context of Bonhoeffer's own specific theology of revelation, according to which he understands Christ as the center of all reality:

"As the Real One he is the origin, essence, and goal of all reality. That is why he himself is the lord and the law of the real. The words {sayings} of Jesus Christ are therefore the interpretation of

his existence, and thus the interpretation of that reality in which history finds its fulfillment.”

(Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 263-264)

Action that accords with Christ accords therefore with reality because Christ is the origin and the lord of reality.

But what is ‘action that accords with Christ’? One could imagine a position that says that – because Christ is the center and meaning and the law of history – political action in accordance with the Sermon on the Mount must be the proper sort of action that is effective in history; this would mean orienting oneself – against all estimation of consequences – around the Sermon on the Mount, and trusting that this is proper, realistic action. This approach seems to appear in a few places in Bonhoeffer, but the whole of his work is distant from such principal-ethical intentions.

4.3. Instead, Bonhoeffer argues expressly against an understanding of the Sermon on the Mount and of Christian ethics as a whole as an abstract system of norms for action which – at whatever cost – must be carried out in reality.

Only such action that accords with reality accords also with Christ – with this thesis, one could summarize Bonhoeffer’s interpretation of the relation between reality-accordance and Christ-accordance of Christian action. Bonhoeffer deduces from Christology the duty of the Christian to engage in action that is in accord with reality and which does justice to the reality in which he finds himself: God became man and took on the concrete, existing reality and reconciled it to himself. Because of this, action that accords with this Christ-event is not bound to abstract norms, but to existing reality. Bonhoeffer contends against the antithesis of the realm of reality on the one hand and normative good on the other, arguing clearly for situational ethics:

“Those who act responsibly take the given situation or context into account in their acting, not merely as raw material to be shaped by their ideas, but as contributing to forming the act itself. It is not some foreign law that is imposed on reality. Instead, the action of the responsible person is most profoundly in accord with reality.” (Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 222)

This is situational ethics in that the norms of good and evil that direct the action are not fixed and predetermined before each situation; rather, in each specific situation, it is decided what is ‘good’ and what is ‘evil’ according to an estimation of the consequences which the action has for the people for whom the Christian bears responsibility.

4.4. ‘Action in accord with Christ accords with reality’ – Bonhoeffer interprets this sentence such that only action which does justice to existing reality accords with Christ.

In consequence, Bonhoeffer subjects the Sermon on the Mount to the presupposition of this specific Christology: The Sermon on the Mount does not, in his view, present normative standards for orienting action; the basic intention of the Sermon on the Mount and of the normative standards of Christian ethics are thus much more the instruction to Jesus' form of existence – that is to selfless love or responsibility:

“The Sermon on the Mount as the proclamation of the incarnate love of God calls people to love one another, ... thus, and only thus, is one readied to perceive and undertake genuine responsibility. Thus, the Sermon on the Mount itself confronts a person with the necessity of responsible historical action.” (Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 242)

The Sermon the Mount as an ethics of love aims therefore toward an ethics of responsibility, toward action oriented by the consequences for a specific community, and specifically not at the application of normative principles which pays no mind to the consequences. Bonhoeffer comes to the rather breathtaking assertion that it is exactly the Sermon on the Mount that requires one to act in political responsibility and according to the rules of power; he writes with express reference to the Sermon on the Mount:

“Only where the incarnation {becoming human} of God's love is taken seriously can it be understood that God's love for the world also includes political action, and that the worldly form of Christian love is therefore able to take the form of a person fighting for self-assertion, power, success, and security. ... Political action means taking on responsibility. This cannot happen without power. Power is to serve responsibility.” (Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 245)

Thus, it is no longer the traditionally understood Christian norms – the decalogue or the Sermon on the Mount – that are criterium for what is ‘good,’ but rather the ‘good’ is defined by what in a particular situation is in the interest of the collective for which I bear responsibility. Bonhoeffer goes to some effort to reign in the consequences of his situation-ethical approach – but he does not succeed in safeguarding the thought against the consequences that it allows; he fails to answer the question of how the the purpose of the collective does not sanctify all means.

### **5. Representation as assumption of guilt in following Christ**

With the thought that I have presented thus far, Bonhoeffer opposes an approach to the Sermon on the Mount that understands the specifically Christian commandments as life orientation for the individual Christian but not as orientation for political action whilst bearing responsibility for others. Bonhoeffer wants much more to understand the Sermon on the Mount as a call not to individual perfection, but to responsible action that does justice to the situation and that also is political. This extends further:

5.1. Responsible action is a form of following Christ's vicarious action. This representative acceptance of responsibility, as Bonhoeffer further unfolds the thought, includes the vicarious assumption of guilt in action for another and participates also in this fashion in Christ's representative deed; with the following quote he refers to Christ's vicarious bearing human guilt: "In this guilty yet sinless Jesus Christ all vicarious responsible action has its origin. Precisely because and when it is responsible, because and when it is exclusively concerned with the other human being, because and when it springs from selfless love for the real human brother or sister – vicarious responsible action cannot seek to withdraw from the community of human guilt. Because Jesus took the guilt of all human beings upon himself, everyone who acts responsibly becomes guilty." (Bonhoeffer, 234)

In other words: True Christian action is not the path to perfection oriented around abstract norms but orients itself selflessly around the interests of other people. While doing justice to the situation, it must also be prepared to potentially take unavoidable guilt upon itself in the process of this responsible action. Precisely in the assumption of guilt does the Christian accord with the substitution, the vicarious action of Christ:

"Those who, in acting responsibly, seek to avoid becoming guilty, divorce themselves from the ultimate reality of history, that is, from the redeeming mystery of the sinless bearing of guilt by Jesus Christ, and have no part in the divine justification that attends this event. They place their personal innocence above their responsibility for other human beings and are blind to the fact that precisely in so doing they become even more egregiously guilty. They are also blind to the fact that genuine guiltlessness is demonstrated precisely by entering into community with the guilt of other human beings for their sake." (Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 234)

The paralleling of Christian action and Christology is pushed here so far, that Bonhoeffer wants even to see sinlessness in the act of the Christian taking guilt on himself in the interest of a collective entrusted to him.

5.2. This is an entirely new thought that goes beyond the foundation of a situational ethics I just described – even if Bonhoeffer does not realize it. He attempts here no longer to interpret the action in accordance with the situation as that which is actually good; he is no longer aiming to replace a normative ethics with a situational ethics; Bonhoeffer instead maintains that the politically active person is often forced to become himself guilty, as in accepting responsibility he is forced to transgress the accepted norms of Christian activity – e.g. the Decalogue or the Sermon of the Mount. Precisely in this becoming guilty for the sake of the neighbor, he accords with the representative guilt-bearing of Christ and is thus sinless. Only the person who goes so far in his

selflessness, that he relinquishes his personal innocence for the sake of his neighbor or for the sake of the community he is responsible for, and loads guilt upon himself, only such a person accords with the action of Christ. The validity of normative ethics – the Sermon on the Mount or the decalogue – is maintained, but Bonhoeffer reckons with the possibility that one must act against these norms in a concrete situation, and he justifies this action as in accord with Christ by pointing to Christ's vicarious bearing of guilt.

5.3. This construction is in many regards theologically questionable – to note just the most important point: at least according to traditional understandings, Christ's assumption of guilt does not mean that he himself does evil, but rather that he bears the guilt of the deeds of others. In the background of these considerations stands Bonhoeffer's desperate search for a Christian foundation for his own political action – a pacifist determined to kill Hitler and many representatives of the Third Reich! In the background of these consideration stands the search for a foundation that successfully opposes referrals to the prohibition against killing and to the command to love your enemy. In a first step, as I tried to show, Bonhoeffer finds this foundation in the subsumption of the Sermon on the Mount in an ethics of responsibility which binds the actor to action that accords with the situation; then, secondly, he finds this foundation in the binding of the actor to the representative love which is prepared for the representative assumption of guilt in giving of oneself for others.

## 6. God's Action through Evil

Still, the abyss of the text has not yet been grasped. It lies in the unique metaphysics of history, recognizable in two places in the text: Bonhoeffer dispenses with every grounding of Christian activity through utopian ideals. He sketches no action-defining goal of history; he rather develops only a model for the structure of Christ-accordant action – the responsible action of love, which is duty-bound to the immediate situation, and which is prepared as a representative to take guilt upon itself. This action happens in free responsibility in the bond with the neighbor and with God: “Those who act on the basis of ideology consider themselves justified by their idea. Those who act responsibly place their action into the hands of God and live by God's grace and judgment. Thus a profound mystery of history as such is disclosed to us. Precisely those who act in the freedom of their very own responsibility see their action as both flowing into and springing from God's providence {guidance}. Free action, as it determines history, recognizes itself ultimately as being God's action, the purest activity as passivity.” (Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 225-226)

These sentences uncover a further aspect of the theology of history which this fragment as a whole unfolds in order to find a foundation for Christian Ethics: The idea that the course of history follows the law of Christology, means on the basis of this thought, that it is precisely the assumption of guilt in the interest of the neighbor, that also corresponds to God's plan for history. In this vicarious assumption of guilt, that is, through the doing of evil, God's plan for history is carried out.

This text is so eerie, because Bonhoeffer reintroduces a justification of evil deeds that goes so far, that he even describes the deed of Judas Iscariot, the betrayal of Jesus, as an example of evil through which God carries out salvation in history; and he implicitly identifies Judas as the one who does the necessary evil for God's plan of salvation:

"It is through Judas Iscariot that Christ becomes the redeemer of the world. ... the evil *must* take place; Judas *must* act ... The disciples of Jesus cannot accomplish what Judas Iscariot accomplishes. In this case, the servants of God's cause prove to be weaker ... than hostility against God." (Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 227)

Exactly this is his diagnosis of the contemporary reality, in which – according to Bonhoeffer – it is especially the Christians who, distancing themselves with principle-ethical reasons from murder and coup, oppose the will of God. God seeks to carry out the good through the evil, through the killing of Hitler, through Judas, who sins representatively for the disciples.

### **7. A Dangerous Neighborhood: Necessary Action in Consciousness of the Proximity to Hitler's Lawlessness**

Precisely in the conscious doing of evil, in the assumption of guilt in the interest of the neighbor, God's action in history carries itself out – this is an assertion that shows itself to have much darker aspects in the second version of the fragment 'History and the Good' than in the first.

7.1. Bonhoeffer turns his attention in a passage there to the problem of the emergency situation in the state and formulates the following with express reference to Machiavelli's concept of 'necessità':

"There are occasions when, in the course of historical life, the strict observance of the explicit law of a state, a corporation, a family, but also of a scientific discovery, entails a clash with the basic necessities of human life. In such cases, appropriate responsible action departs from the domain governed by laws and principles, from the normal and regular, and instead is confronted with the extraordinary situation of ultimate necessities that are beyond any possible regulation by law." (Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 272-273)



This state of emergency only exists when the “naked life” of the collective entrusted to you is endangered, and this situation forces action against the formal governmental laws and the principles of national coexistence; the action in violation of the laws that is then necessary is identified by Bonhoeffer with the representative assumption of guilt by the person bearing responsibility.

Bonhoeffer maintains expressly that such necessities do exist; they create an extra-ordinary situation:

“They no longer permit human reasoning [ratio] to come up with a variety of exit strategies, but pose the question of the *ultima ratio*. In politics this *ultima ratio* is war, but it can also be deception or breach of contract {breaking a treaty} for the sake of one’s own life necessities. In economic life it means the destruction of people’s livelihoods for the sake of business necessities. The *ultima ratio* lies beyond the laws of reason; it is irrational action.” (Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 273)

Where it is a matter of the naked existence of those for whom one bears responsibility, the means of the *ultima ratio* – war, deception, destruction of others – are unavoidable.

7.2. Certainly Bonhoeffer is unfolding here an ethical foundation for his decision to take part actively in the assassination plans against Hitler – but he does it in such a way that he – entirely intentionally – allows the ways of speaking to shine through in his justification, with which Hitler himself had justified the violation of moral order and governmental and international legality in his speeches. This proximity is sought intentionally – it does not happen by accident; This can be most clearly demonstrated on the basis of the following passage:

“Extraordinary necessity appeals to the freedom of those who act responsibly. In this case there is no law behind which they could take cover. ... Instead, in such a situation, one must completely let go of any law, knowing that here one must decide as a free venture. This must also include the open acknowledgment that here the law is being broken ...; ... thereby affirming the legitimacy of the law in the very act of violating it. In thus giving up the appeal to any law, indeed only so, is there finally a surrender of one’s own decision ... to the divine guidance of history.” (Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 274)

For comparison, the following quote comes from Hitler’s self-justification before the Reichstag after the murders at the occasion of the so-called Röhm-putsch on 13 June 1934 – and I apologize expressly for having to quote Hitler:

“If someone would hold against us the accusation, [asking] why we did not draw on the proper courts for sentencing, I can only answer him: In this hour I was responsible for the fate of the German nation and thus I was the highest judge of the German people! ... I gave the command to

shoot the chief parties guilty of this betrayal, and I gave further the command to burn out the virus of the inner poisoning of the well all the way into the raw flesh.” (Hitler’s Reichstag speech on 13 June 1934, according to: M. Domarus, Hitler. Reden und Proklamationen 1932-1945, 2 Bde., Neustadt 1962/3, here 1,421)

Bonhoeffer’s words quoted before clearly allude to this speech of Hitler; this allusion would have been recognizable to every contemporary. In the background of Bonhoeffer’s language of unavoidable guilt, the form of Hitler can be seen; the quotation of Bonhoeffer above by mentioning “the divine guidance of history” clearly alludes to the providence that steers history, to which Hitler felt himself responsible. By describing the emergency situation, Bonhoeffer alludes explicitly to the many public justifications of National Socialist wrongs through reference to the emergency situation.

## 8. Criteria for Justified Assumption of Guilt

8.1. Bonhoeffer reflects and grounds here his own action, the extra-ordinary decision to participate in the killing of the ruler of the state. But beneath the words with which he describes the violation of the law as assumption of unavoidable guilt and in this way as sinless action, Bonhoeffer allows the caricature of this thought at the same time to shine through as a lasting warning: Hitler’s claim, which itself refers to his unlimited responsibility for the fate of an entire people. It is the ideology of the ‘Führer’ (leader), of the one who alone acts in responsibility to ‘providence’, in dangerous proximity to which Bonhoeffer sees his own decision to assume as a representative guilt for the killing of men. He justifies his assumption of guilt in the execution of situation-accordant political action as *ultima ratio*, but at the same time he makes the extreme danger which is born with this option clearly recognizable and visible.

Thus Bonhoeffer positions his own option in this nearness and in indistinction from Hitler’s lawlessness. Anyone who would seek to justify his action in violation of the norms with reference to Bonhoeffer must also, according to Bonhoeffer, see that he acts in nearness to Hitler.

8.2. At this point, one must ask about the bounds of this proximity. Of course it is clear, for Bonhoeffer, that the assumption of guilt can only be given after extensive evaluation of the situation and exclusively for the saving of the lives of others, and only in a situation in which no other solution is possible – but this is what Hitler claimed for himself. And still, there is a difference which Bonhoeffer notes, when he maintains that the *ultima ratio*, the employment of deception, war, and breach of contract for the survival of the state, cannot be made into a norm:

“It would now be a complete and total misunderstanding if the ultima ratio itself were again turned into a rational law, if the borderline case were made the norm, the necessità a technique. ... At no price” may “the extra-ordinary be exchanged with the normal, the law,” the relative order, that which accords with the law, may not be switched with chaos for the sake of a marginal case (cf. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 273; 274.).##

In the discussions of the groups opposed to the Third Reich, this was exactly the diagnosis of the National Socialist system: a form of ruling in which lawlessness itself becomes law. Bonhoeffer sees the distinction between himself and Hitler therein, that Hitler makes this wrong into a principle, declares it to be right, and abolishes the principial distinction between right and wrong.

8.3. This demarcation has a systematic point that Bonhoeffer does not expressly develop: Even if the readiness to act against the law unavoidably is part of the action of the one bearing representative responsibility, even if the execution of action led by love for the neighbor and only for him leads into real sin, still this readiness to do evil in order to save others must not lead to the reversal of the categories of good and evil, of right and wrong. Evil must not be presented as good, but rather the doing of evil must be confessed *as guilt*. The deed against the norms in order to save others is only sinless when and in as far as this determination of sinlessness at the higher level does not become a contest of the guilt which the doer took upon himself in the violation of the divine or governmental law. What distinguishes Hitler from the doer Bonhoeffer is Hitler’s denial of the validity of normative differences between good and evil in the doing of evil. The planned killing of Hitler and his entire surroundings, which Bonhoeffer had approved of and supported, is only sinless in as far as it recognizes the actually violated norm as also valid in this case and thus even the killing of Hitler is confessed as guilt. Following this fragment of his ethics, one would say that this deed loses its sinlessness in the moment in which the killing of a person – unavoidable as it may be in a situation of action in responsibility for a collective is no longer defined as the guilty deed forbidden by God.

Forced by the situation, an action in political responsibility for others may lead the Christian into violating divine and state law; but it has to recognize the contrast of good and evil in the recognition of guilt. In order to point out the danger of this situation, Bonhoeffer absolutely intentionally alludes in the quoted passages to Hitler’s tyrannical arbitrariness.