

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The Bonhoeffer dilemma: Sanctification as the increasing awareness of moral chaos

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## Abstract

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's pursuit of a sanctified life took a significant detour from the way in which he thought it would proceed. In seeking 'good' moral choices in the crucible of Nazi Germany, Bonhoeffer experienced a profound sense of what we now would recognise as moral injury, which proves to be a powerful and reflexive lens with which to examine his understanding of sanctification. Initially embracing pacifism as a fundamental pillar of Christian life, Bonhoeffer eventually became convinced that there are no pure or 'right' moral choices, only competing 'wrong' ones. He later wrote from prison that to be like Christ, and to come closer to holiness, was not to seek to avoid guilt, but to take on guilt for the sake of others. This recontextualisation of the idea of sanctification through the lens of Christ's substitutionary guilt suggests that for the responsible actor moral injury may be inevitable.

**Key words:** Dietrich Bonhoeffer; moral injury; responsibility; sanctification

The writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer have often been analysed in order to understand his move from an explicitly pacifist stance in *Discipleship* to a more nuanced understanding of violence in *Ethics*. This article will look at the move he makes through the lens of a maturing understanding of sanctification – not as one that has evolved uniformly, but rather as one that has been informed by the experience of moral injury. Thus, this article sets out to make three essential arguments and will examine some of their implications: first, that Bonhoeffer's famed 'ethic of responsibility' is the result of a maturing view of sanctification; second, that this more mature view can be understood as an experience of moral injury; and third, that his notion that we cannot ever justify a responsible action before God speaks to the experience of the morally injured today, though this 'good news' is perhaps problematically weighty and paradoxical.

## A maturing view of sanctification

In 1937 Bonhoeffer published *Discipleship*, a work that seems to sum up his thoughts from the 1930s on the shape that Christian resistance to National Socialism should take. Expressing the idea of sanctification in classical theological terms, Bonhoeffer notes that it involves the idea of becoming holy, fulfilling what he says is the 'will of God, who says,

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“Ye shall be holy: for I am holy.”<sup>1</sup> Further, he highlights that this entails a separation ‘by God from that which is unholy, from sin’, noting that the community of believing saints that is being sanctified is made so through a ‘clear separation from the world’ in a way that facilitates this separation from sin.<sup>2</sup>

For the Bonhoeffer of *Discipleship*, this separation from sin entails a commitment to follow Christ into the world and to the arduous task of commitment to Christ’s teachings. Seemingly arguing against an easy and malleable faith tradition that might easily bend to political ends or make compromises for the sake of temporal necessity, he emphasises the arduous nature of discipleship and the radicality of commitment to difficult commands. The separation that facilitates sanctification is not ambiguous. It involves a ‘simple obedience’:<sup>3</sup> following Christ entails an adherence to the Beatitudes, including especially a commitment to being ‘pure in heart’, and to the idea of peacemaking.<sup>4</sup> This means that Christians ‘renounce violence and strife’, for ‘those things never help the cause of Christ’.<sup>5</sup> As the church lives out these teachings, and thus lives the life through which they would be made holy, Bonhoeffer understands that the church will suffer. Indeed, the suffering of the disciple and the disciple’s willingness to suffer in following the commandments is a major theme within *Discipleship*. It is clear that Bonhoeffer is prepared for Christians to suffer for their nonviolent stance in following Christ, for he is concerned that the radicality of Christian discipleship is being marred by seemingly casual commitments. The church participates in bearing the weight of the world’s sin by forgiving wrongs, and sanctification here involves following, obeying, and a profound willingness to suffer as Christ did.

A few years further into the moral crucible of Nazi-controlled Germany, Bonhoeffer was arrested for participating in an operation to smuggle several Jews into Switzerland in April of 1943. The Nazis later discovered his deeper involvement in the *Abwehr* conspiracy to kill Hitler and replace the entire Nazi regime, and Bonhoeffer was executed in 1945. In the writings that reflect his later thought and will come to be posthumously published as *Ethics*, he describes sanctification within similar theological boundaries as those he established in *Discipleship*, but with a distinctly different nuance. Whereas in *Discipleship*, the emphasis was on the church’s separation from sin for the sake of the world, *Ethics* begins with a shift in view of the world as the ‘*domain of concrete responsibility* that is given to us in and through Jesus Christ’.<sup>6</sup> He is consistent in the idea that the church must follow Christ into the world and indeed, to bear the world’s burden, but he now emphasises that one who acts responsibly in doing so must ‘relinquish an ultimately dependable knowledge of good and evil’, being willing to take on guilt for the sake of the other.<sup>7</sup> Becoming holy appears to involve an increased embrace of the willingness to become guilty in imitation of Christ, as he notes further that when we surrender ‘the knowledge of our own goodness, the good of God occurs’.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, vol. 4 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and John Godsey, trans. Martin Kuske, Ilse Todt, Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), p. 260.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 261.

<sup>3</sup>See the third chapter of *Discipleship*, pp. 77–83.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>6</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, vol. 6 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West and Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), p. 267.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 284.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 284–5.

Gone from this vocabulary is the assurance of separation from sin – what stands in its stead is a nuanced differentiation between guilt and sin.

For the Bonhoeffer of *Ethics*, becoming holy cannot simply be a more committed form of adherence to a particular set of commandments, but rather to see the world as a set of situations in which there is no ‘good’ moral answer, no refuge in a particular set action. He asserts, then, that Christ’s assumption of human guilt testifies to the inability of human beings to extricate themselves from the ‘community of human guilt’.<sup>9</sup> Jesus’ responsible action in taking on guilt for the sake of the other demonstrates true love and thus sinlessness. The actor, then, who has been freed to act responsibly through the example of Christ must be willing to break a commandment – to act in ways that contravene even the teachings of Christ from time to time in critical and extreme situations. This kind of action, he acknowledges, is stepping out onto a moral limb. The responsible actor can justify the action in pointing to the necessity of it for the sake of his fellow human beings, and indeed must feel that is in the interest of the larger community and for its sake that he acts – but he cannot claim a justification before God, only hope for grace and mercy.<sup>10</sup> In fact, the epitome of sin, he argues, is the person who either breaks a commandment casually without thinking, or is freely able to justify his actions entirely, forgetting that he owes an account to God.<sup>11</sup> We might say that sin – in terms of recklessly breaking the commandment or justifying oneself – is worthy of blame. Guilt, on the other hand is *potentially* blameworthy – it is the condition of breaking a commandment for the sake of another, willingly bearing the potential blame in their stead and hoping for divine understanding before God. In Christ’s perfect example, this assumption of guilt in perfect love is, in fact, perfect sinlessness; it risks condemnation for the sake of the other. Sin is ignorant and self-justifying, whereas guilt is incurred through responsible, thoughtful and selfless action.

With respect to the particular issue of sanctification, then, the movement from *Discipleship* to *Ethics* involves a movement from a sure moral foundation to a recognition that such a foundation does not exist. Giving up such a foundation, for Bonhoeffer, is a kenotic step in becoming holy. In his most famous letter from prison to Eberhard Bethge, he describes that it is precisely in giving up what one desires to become – either ‘a saint or a converted sinner or a church leader ... , a just or an unjust person’ – that one learns to actually have faith.<sup>12</sup> In *Ethics* Bonhoeffer essentially asserts that a baseline for becoming a more responsible actor, and thus more like Christ, is the recognition of moral chaos – that the choices faced are not between ‘right and wrong, good and evil, but between right and right, wrong and wrong’.<sup>13</sup> Only when one recognises this can one be willing to take on guilt by responsibly transgressing commandments for the sake of the other. To accept this kind of guilt, for Bonhoeffer, is to become fully human and to see the world as it is, accepting its disfigured moral order and attempting to act responsibly in it.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 234.

<sup>10</sup>This point is borne out in extended discussion in Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, pp. 284–98.

<sup>11</sup>See e.g. *Ethics*, p. 198.

<sup>12</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, vol. 8 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, trans. Isabel Best et al. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), pp. 267, 486.

<sup>13</sup>Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 284.

<sup>14</sup>See e.g. *Ethics*, p. 232: ‘Human beings are not called to realise ethical ideals, but are called into a life that is lived in God’s love, and that means lived in reality.’

## The redirection of moral injury

In my view, Bonhoeffer's more mature understanding of sanctification can be understood as a response to an experience of moral injury. Moral injury as a concept has emerged in research on post-traumatic stress in veterans, and connotes their experience of guilt and shame over actions taken in conflict. It has come to be more precisely described over the past two decades primarily by two definitions, one by psychologist Jonathan Shay (who is credited with bringing the term to the attention of the research community) and another from a team led by psychiatrist Brett Litz. Shay argues that moral injury is present when there has been 'a betrayal of what's right by a person in a position of legitimate authority in a high-stakes situation'.<sup>15</sup> The Litz group broadened the parameters of experience that constitute a situation of moral injury, noting that it involved 'perpetrating, failing to prevent, bearing witness to, or learning about acts that transgress deeply held moral belief'.<sup>16</sup> Both definitions involve the breach of some sense of ethical good that results in a deep moral ambiguity within a person about their action, non-action or witness.

Moral injury can be distinguished from the simpler psychological concept of regret in that it involves, as Shay notes, a certain betrayal of one's agency. The groups in which moral injury is most commonly identified, for example, are those that are marked by a particular code of conduct or honour: military veterans, policemen, and, most recently, doctors and medical professionals. Each profession has a well-defined and often stringent moral code, and yet many individuals within these professions, who stake their own honour and reputations in adherence to its moral guidelines, can find themselves suffering from guilt and shame. They adhered to a moral code that they understood would lead to virtue and moral uplift, but reaped moral stress and ambiguity as a result. Building on an Augustinian conception of sin and distorted human willing (as Bonhoeffer also does), I have argued previously that moral injury thus results when 'one commits oneself to a powerful and compelling moral orientation which one later understands to be false'.<sup>17</sup> It is, in many ways, a deformation of our sense of 'good', a realisation that a cause that we thought would lead to virtue and protect us from moral blameworthiness may not, in fact, do so.<sup>18</sup>

The Bonhoeffer of *Discipleship* is deeply committed to the idea that becoming holy entails a separation from sin, a 'clean hands' mentality that is costly, but which nevertheless can be lived out in practice as a fairly firm ethical ideal. Yet Bonhoeffer encounters a situation in which maintaining these clean hands will have a negative impact on others. In 1939 he is ordered to report to a German army unit for mandatory duty. He is ultimately granted a one-year delay, during which time he is able to measure his options and weigh the moral good of the avenues open to him in a context where the situation explicitly forces him to act.

Bonhoeffer appears to face a choice that has few good ethical outcomes. He can allow himself to be conscripted and likely be assigned to an infantry unit, meaning he would be

<sup>15</sup>Jonathan Shay, 'Moral Injury', *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 31/2 (2014), p. 183.

<sup>16</sup>Brett T. Litz et al., 'Moral Injury and Moral Repair in War Veterans: A Preliminary Model and Intervention Strategy', *Clinical Psychology Review* 29 (2009), p. 695.

<sup>17</sup>Brian Powers, 'Moral Injury and Original Sin: The Applicability of Augustinian Moral Psychology in Light of Modern Combat', *Theology Today* 73/4 (2017), p. 333.

<sup>18</sup>In privileging my own definition, it is certainly not my intention to devalue others. Indeed, a great benefit of the multi-disciplinary study of moral injury is that it produces definitions from different perspectives, all of which are of value in illuminating different facets of this phenomenon.

forced to fight on the front lines and 'do violence to my Christian conviction', both in general principle and for a regime and cause that he deeply opposed.<sup>19</sup> Alternatively, he could maintain his firm stance against participation as a conscientious objector, go to a military tribunal, and make a stand for which the Confessing Church in Germany was not entirely prepared – such that he feared he would 'cause a tremendous damage to my brethren if I would make a stand on this point which would be regarded by the regime as typical of the hostility of our Church towards the State'.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, there appears to have been significant concern on the part of other leaders within the Confessing Church that Bonhoeffer was even considering taking an explicit stance against military service.<sup>21</sup> Attempting, perhaps, to thread a delicate needle between these positions, Bonhoeffer attempted in September 1939 to serve as an army chaplain, but was denied by army high command on the grounds that 'only people with a record of active duty could become chaplains; all other applications were to be refused'.<sup>22</sup> In Bonhoeffer's own words, this regulation had a bitter twist of irony as well, as those who had previously served 'are of course conscripted to fight', presumably on account of that previous service.<sup>23</sup>

In the summer of 1940 Bonhoeffer avoided the front lines by joining the military intelligence service (the *Abwehr*) and became a part of its internal conspiracy to remove Hitler and other Nazi leaders from power. Likely in order to protect himself and his friends, he wrote in more coded language from here on, and there are fewer extant letters that describe his thoughts in detail or with the clarity present in earlier writings. Yet he began to work on *Ethics* as he led his double life, also continuing as a pastor in the Confessing Church alongside his role as an intelligence officer.<sup>24</sup> In describing Bonhoeffer's rationale for joining the active resistance against Hitler, Ferdinand Schlingensiepen notes that, while the temptation to join the Nazis in actuality was never one Bonhoeffer faced, 'another temptation was much greater: to withdraw into one's own inner world, and – hoping in God – to leave the outer world to the Evil One. ... That Bonhoeffer was not considering this option either is proven by his decision to join the conspirators'.<sup>25</sup> In other words, Bonhoeffer saw resignation and avoidance, a retreat to a 'clean hands' position – even if it were possible – as irresponsible.

<sup>19</sup>Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, revised edn, ed. Victoria J. Barnett, trans. Eric Mosbacher et al. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), p. 637.

<sup>20</sup>Quoted in Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, p. 637. Bonhoeffer's closest friend and confidant, Bethge lays out the struggle Bonhoeffer faced as his conscription date approached, pp. 633–80.

<sup>21</sup>See Ferdinand Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906–1945: Martyr, Thinker, Man of Resistance*, trans. Isabel Best (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), p. 208, where he writes: 'The Protestant church had neither theological concepts, nor yet any examples, of conscientious objection to military service. That Luther had expressly forbidden the participation of any Christian in an unjust war had long been forgotten, and if Bonhoeffer, one of the best-known theologians in the Confessing Church, should declare Hitler's war to be an unjust war, there was no doubt that the whole Church would be endangered. The German secretary of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, Dr. Hermann Stohr, took this stance at the beginning of the Second World War and was executed.'

<sup>22</sup>Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, p. 666.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup>See Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, pp. 246–52, for an excellent summation of Bonhoeffer's journey in this period. He notes that 'Bonhoeffer was now walking a path that only those who were pursuing the same path were allowed to know about, but that did not mean he had burned all his bridges behind him. He had to lead two lives, but to him this was not a contradiction of his faith, nor did he consider his ministry as a pastor and teacher in the Confessing Church to be over. He had taken the step of joining the Resistance on the basis of an ethical decision' (p. 246).

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 250.

Resonant with notions of moral injury, Bonhoeffer experienced the distortions of the force of war upon ethical decision-making. His notion of the very ability to firmly embody the pacifist idea of Jesus was betrayed by the machinations of the state in ordering his conscription, as well as by the Confessing Church in its implicit refusal to support a firm stance against participation in the war. It is clear from his writings in *Ethics* that he no longer understood a firm sense of good, or of the concepts of 'right' and 'wrong' as such, in his situation. Current veterans returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan describe this upending of moral categories in direct situations of violence in analogous terms, as an eclipsing or collapse of moral order. Lieutenant Colonel Bill Russell Edmonds, a US Special Forces officer assigned to oversee Iraqi police interrogators in Mosul in 2005, writes of being haunted by the people he hurt because he 'couldn't see the right choices in front of me'.<sup>26</sup> He argues that morality essentially yielded for him into blunt utility – 'do what is necessary'.<sup>27</sup> David Peters, a US army chaplain in Iraq, describes a moment when he witnessed a particularly gratuitous act of violence against an Iraqi civilian as the death of notions of a moral divine presence: 'The God of my childhood, with His right and His wrong, drifts away like the air that billowed out of the old man's robe.'<sup>28</sup> For both, the beginning of a rebuilding of an authentic moral foundation begins with the acknowledgement of the reality of the collapse of the old.

In *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer comes to a similar acknowledgement – that clinging to firm notions of 'right' and 'wrong' is not only inadequate, but pathogenic. In terms of sanctification, the 'clean hands' stance does not lead to holiness, but rather to sin – the irresponsible self-justification of an action that provides inadequate resistance to a real evil. Bonhoeffer was clearly prepared to suffer for his convictions, but the choices he faced didn't simply lead to his own righteous suffering, but the suffering of many around him – and it was this that he couldn't countenance. Privileging my own definition of moral injury (namely, that it results when 'one commits oneself to a powerful and compelling moral orientation which one later understands to be false'<sup>29</sup>), then the term certainly can be applied to Bonhoeffer, who seems to clarify his prior view in *Discipleship*, when he writes in *Ethics* that

Those who, in acting responsibly, seek to avoid becoming guilty, divorce themselves from the ultimate reality of history ... 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.<sup>30</sup>

In my view, these are the reflections of one who has experienced personal guilt in the service of a moral order that has become odious to him. The tension that cannot be lost in his rationale, however, is that taking 'guilty' actions is *potentially* blameworthy: actions taken in contravention of commandments (and Bonhoeffer is certainly speaking here of the broad prohibition against killing) cannot be justified. This, too, resonates

<sup>26</sup>Bill Russell Edmonds, *God is Not Here: A Soldier's Struggle with Torture, Trauma, and the Moral Injuries of War* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2015), p. 41.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>28</sup>David W. Peters, 'Sin Eater', in Robert Meagher and Douglas Pryer (eds), *War and Moral Injury: A Reader* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018), p. 215.

<sup>29</sup>Powers, 'Moral Injury and Original Sin', p. 333.

<sup>30</sup>Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 234.

with the psychological difficulty that many morally injured veterans face today. Former US Marine officer Tyler Boudreau speaks in these exact terms about his own experience in Iraq, noting that the guilt of combat is one that ‘no justification, legal, political or otherwise, can heal’.<sup>31</sup>

Grounded, then, in the collapse of a stable moral order, Bonhoeffer’s later view of sanctification as ‘the willingness to take on guilt for others’ leads to a troubling conclusion that suggests, perhaps, that sanctification is something akin to a necessitated moral injury. In other words, because righteousness itself involves the willingness to become guilty for the sake of others, then the pursuit of righteousness leads to a moral ambiguity that we cannot assuage, but have to live with in the hopes of mercy before God.<sup>32</sup> Those who are the most practised at acting responsibly, then, are presumably those that are most willing to take on guilt – to perform actions that are necessary for the sake of others, but for which one will suffer unassuageable guilt and shame – certainly before others, but perhaps even before God as well.

### Consequences

In assessing where this view of sanctification leaves us in light of what we know about moral injury, it is probably safe to say that it offers a helpful theological authenticity and yet perhaps overestimates the human capacity to live without the psychological assurance provided by clear moral bounds. In terms of theological clarity, this view seems to dispense with the notion that Christian virtue can consist of a holiness that is based on the idea of ‘clean hands’ and the assurance of clear moral categories. The idea of acting responsibly is based for Bonhoeffer in the notion that we are to love one another, surrendering our ‘ego to God and others’ in imitation of Christ, who ‘broke the law of the Sabbath in order to sanctify it, out of love for God and human beings’.<sup>33</sup> Sanctification is not found, he notes, in the escape from or avoidance of the moral morass of human experience, but rather, in imitation of Christ; holiness is cultivated through an immersion in human life, surrendering one’s own sense of moral righteousness in addressing the anguish and suffering of the neighbour.

The fact that sanctification is bound to responsibility for a community and yet holds the violation of clear moral guidelines to be so weighty also wrenches it away from the notion of individual moral journeys and places it in a uniquely communal context that may facilitate a more authentic dialogue between veterans and civilians regarding the morality of conflict, particularly in Christian communities. Over the course of American history, the cultural intractability of the concept of American exceptionalism amongst the civilian populace often has clashed with veterans’ traumatic experiences of war. In recognising that those who have attempted to act responsibly in the world have taken on extreme guilt and moral anguish, Bonhoeffer perhaps marks out a space wherein a dialogue may occur, as his conception of responsible acting does not threaten the civic idea of military virtue – according to which those who are most righteous also suffer the most guilt – while also providing space to recognise the great moral suffering that the exercise of such virtue entails. Bonhoeffer’s view exhibits a recognition of the real difficulty of attempting to live a responsible and sanctified life in this moral crucible.

<sup>31</sup>Tyler Boudreau, ‘The Morally Injured’, *Massachusetts Review* 52/3–4 (2011), p. 748.

<sup>32</sup>With the addition of moral guilt and the implication that a Christian must renounce his or her own righteousness, Bonhoeffer significantly nuances the admonitions found in *Discipleship* (see e.g. p. 106).

<sup>33</sup>Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 278.

For Bonhoeffer the moral burden of responsible action seems bearable in hope of ultimate divine forgiveness in a classically Lutheran understanding of justification. His idea of that hope is bound with the notion that we are justified before God through faith – that is, that we receive a righteousness that is Christ's and reckoned by God to be ours. In *Ethics* Bonhoeffer demarcates the axiological consequences of this conviction quite carefully and particularly in light of his experience, arguing that the imputation of Christ's righteousness must mean a complete relinquishing of our own understanding of good and evil. In fact, he notes that in 'usurping' God's role as the judge of good and evil, we have affected a state of 'disunion' with God and all of creation.<sup>34</sup> Echoing the language of *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer maintained in *Ethics* that a full and careful discernment of the 'will of God' was what faith demanded; but this idea was now framed by the conviction that 'Jesus Christ has become my conscience'.<sup>35</sup> Insofar as this conviction involved taking responsible action and bearing the guilt of it, Bonhoeffer understood that the Christian was living and dying with Christ, who stood and acted 'within the community of human guilt'.<sup>36</sup> One's hope was, of course, that having died with Christ, one would rise with Christ as well.

Yet in attempting to flesh out what living in God in faith by discerning the 'will of the living God' looks like, Bonhoeffer is careful to guard against any notion that we can ever conclude that our actions are morally good prior to God's final eschatological judgement.<sup>37</sup> In the section of *Ethics* titled, 'God's Love and the Disintegration of the World', he offers some guidelines for decision-making in light of this eschatological proviso, as follows: discerning has to be a communal rather than an individual exercise;<sup>38</sup> it must be governed by a 'sober attitude',<sup>39</sup> with 'self-examination' occurring frequently;<sup>40</sup> it must not be consumed with judgement, but rather with 'doing the law' in concrete and responsible deed;<sup>41</sup> and it must ultimately be governed by a sense of 'love', as we attempt to love as God loves.<sup>42</sup> In this way, he maintains a necessary connection between faith and obedience in a manner that is at least conceptually consistent with his argument in *Discipleship*. In *Ethics*, however, he is clear that we can never assess our actions as hitting the mark, or be assured that they are right and proper interpretations of the will of God. He is cautious to note the pitfalls in every one of the guidelines noted above in the service of the overarching idea that our own anxiety about our own moral performance 'will be overcome in the knowledge of Jesus Christ, who alone exercises gracious judgment; this will allow one's own goodness to remain hidden in the knowledge and grace of the judge until the proper time'.<sup>43</sup>

This kenotic emptying of our own need to know that we are 'good', even if we hold our 'good' actions to be the reflection of the goodness of God, is perhaps psychologically difficult to maintain. The idea of taking action that violates known boundaries in the hope of mercy before God supposes a high capacity for moral ambiguity. As

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 301.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., pp. 320, 278.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p. 279.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p. 326.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 322.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p. 324.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 326.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. 328.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p. 335.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p. 324.



Bonhoeffer was significantly distanced from having to perform acts of violence himself, perhaps he did not grasp the profoundly corrosive psychological effects of ‘responsible guilt’ on those who were on the proverbial tip of the spear. The testimonies and suffering of the morally injured suggest that this is a weight that our psyches simply are not able or designed to bear. As US Navy psychiatrist William Nash notes, one of the most profound consequences of combat trauma is the loss of confidence in a moral framework by which one can judge one’s own actions and the actions of others.<sup>44</sup> A critical effect of moral injury, if not the heart of moral injury itself, is the loss of assurance that we are participating in a morally virtuous way of living. Bonhoeffer’s understandable weariness about self-justification does little to rebuild that assurance, since it offers only an ephemeral sense of moral order. He vehemently argued that no action that transgressed a divine commandment could ever be ‘justified’: a wrong act remained wrong, even if it could be considered ‘responsible’. Thus, his conception of ‘responsible guilt’ suggests that ‘betrayals of what’s right’ and ‘transgressions’ of moral boundaries are, in fact, endemic to responsible actions in the ‘high-stakes’ moral situations that arise in wartime.<sup>45</sup> This is so, not because of weak moral leaders or insufficient moral courage, but because in such situations, nearly every action in a given situation has a negative moral consequence. For Bonhoeffer, satisfying his own moral conscience by trying to maintain ‘clean hands’ meant abandoning the world to the violent, yet picking up a weapon and fighting was to break a commandment. For the morally injured, there are many similar sets of consequences: not to fire is to endanger one’s friends, whereas to fire is to kill and often also endangers innocents.<sup>46</sup> Bonhoeffer makes an inherent supposition here that the weight of living with decisions like these is simply the weight of responsibility – a suffering with Christ. Yet as we continue to study moral injury, it seems that this is certainly an incredibly weighty proposition.

In a sense, this leaves Bonhoeffer with a stark version of the gospel and the sacrifice of Jesus – yet one that does seem in many ways deeply resonant with the derelict cry of Christ on the cross and the larger themes of classical Christian theology. Perhaps for the Bonhoeffer of *Ethics* – in concordance rather than discord with his larger point in *Discipleship* – the price of following Jesus into the world is immeasurably high, not simply in terms of physical suffering or loss of wealth and prestige, but in moral terms as well.<sup>47</sup> Relinquishing a firm knowledge of good and evil was a final stage of living out the gospel, an abandonment of any principle or structure by which we might hope for salvation apart from Christ. In this, we are united to the one who bore the weight of human guilt on the cross and died proclaiming his feeling of God’s absence, rather than God’s assurance.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>44</sup>See William P. Nash, ‘Combat/Operational Stress Adaptations and Injuries’, in Charles R. Figley and William P. Nash (eds), *Combat Stress Injury: Theory, Research and Management* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>45</sup>Combining here the language of both Bonhoeffer and Shay.

<sup>46</sup>A dilemma American soldiers in Iraq would face regularly in the form of a vehicle that would not stop at a checkpoint when signalled. Insurgents would often use suicide bombers in cars as vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (IED) to wreak significant damage to checkpoints, bases, troops and the civilian populace. The car refusing to stop could be a suicide attacker with a car laden with explosives, or a father driving his family back from a trip, distracted and unaware of the soldier waving for him to brake. It was not uncommon for soldiers to fire heavily upon such a vehicle only to discover the bodies of a young family inside. Either choice the soldier makes is fraught with moral dangers.

<sup>47</sup>See Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, p. 106.

<sup>48</sup>At least in the Markan and Matthean versions of the gospel.

Perhaps, too, there is something of a paradox at the intersection of Bonhoeffer's understanding of sanctification and what we know about moral injury. On the one hand, by setting sanctification within the context of moral chaos, Bonhoeffer essentially affirms the experience of those who are morally injured as an unyielding gaze into the abyss of the world's axiological patterns. The move through the recognition of moral chaos is the path towards freedom and new life dependent on the sure mercy and grace of God rather than any relative and shifting moral construct. It is the actor who attempts to act responsibly in the world and experiences the crushing loss of ethical moorings who sees the world as it is and is the only one capable of truly acting in selflessness and love. This actor thus is the one who is able to begin to be sanctified by the Spirit, emptying herself of all concern for her life and certain moral goodness for the sake of the world. On the other hand, the weight of this version of holiness itself seems to be deforming and damaging. The ones who do indeed act out of a sense of responsibility apart from a moral foundation often experience the greatest moral anguish over their decisions and the unshakable consequences of them.

Bonhoeffer might argue that this paradox is the difficult truth of the gospel, yet it is certainly incomplete without some profound articulation of the completion of sanctification in the Spirit – some promise of eschatological healing and peace in which the sinful might experience the full joy of moral redemption.<sup>49</sup> For Bonhoeffer, the thin thread of hope was, of course, at once tangible and fragile – responsible action in the world was to 'participate indirectly in the action of Jesus Christ', and to thus go to death looking, in hope, to the resurrection.<sup>50</sup> On his way to the gallows, Bonhoeffer said goodbye to a friend with the words: 'this is the end – for me, the beginning of life'.<sup>51</sup> Unfortunately, many veterans seem to long for this same end and new beginning, and pursue it by their own hands. For those who are struggling with their own guilt, an unnuanced appeal to resurrection hope can be slightly dangerous – at best a back-handed version of 'good news' for the morally injured. Yet at the same time, Bonhoeffer's vision might serve as a reminder that those who do suffer such moral struggle, contrary to what they might think, are not disconnected from a larger community that suffers yet lives in hope. Nor does Bonhoeffer think are they without reason in their anguish – they have experienced the brokenness of the world at its most profound level and face the real difficulty of achieving solace as a result. Perhaps his conception of sanctification may build a contextual foundation in which they may view their actions

as those of people who, unlike so many who never experienced the distorting effects of

<sup>49</sup>Such as that which would be articulated by Bonhoeffer's countryman Jürgen Moltmann e.g. when he speaks of the promise of God's act of judgement and recreation in the following terms: 'In that Judgment, all sins, every wickedness and every act of violence, the whole injustice of this murderous and suffering world, will be condemned and annihilated, because God's verdict effects what it pronounces. In the divine Judgment all sinners, the wicked and the violent, the murderers and the children of Satan, the Devil and all the fallen angels will be liberated and saved from their deadly perdition through transformation into their true, created being because God remains true to himself, and does not give up what he has once created and affirmed, or allow it to be lost.' Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM Press, 1996), p. 255.

<sup>50</sup>Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 279.

<sup>51</sup>Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, p. 378. Schlingensiepen does note that a popular account of these words, from SS doctor H. Fischer-Hullstrung, 'is unfortunately a lie' (p. 406). He argues that Bonhoeffer delivered these words, not upon the gallows, but to Payne Best as he was summoned to his execution. Best later delivered them, along with a short message to the Bishop of Chichester, George K. Bell, in 1953.

combat, saw the world as it is and acted as responsibly as they could. In this way, perhaps in the weight of their moral suffering they may be seen to bear a particular solidarity with the holiness of the anguished Christ in unmasking the moral chaos and toxicity of the violence in which we so often participate.