Three Rival Versions of Moral Reasoning: Interpreting Bonhoeffer's Ethics of Lying, Guilt, and Responsibility*

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Abstract

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's unfinished and posthumously published *Ethics* was intended to be his magnum opus. However, its incomplete structure and the distinct ethical approaches evident in its unfinished essays have allowed for considerable debate about its overall coherence and contours, as well as the hermeneutics appropriate to the text. This essay reconsiders prior interpretations of Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* through close readings that disclose three rival versions of moral reasoning operative in three manuscripts from Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*. Retracing his reasoning regarding the ethics of lying, the place of guilt, and the relation between the law of God and God's will, I argue that Bonhoeffer's detractors and defenders alike have misconstrued the controversial ethic of "actively embracing guilt" (*Schuldübernahme*). Far from the paradigmatic expression of Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*, its organizing theme, or the basis for his participation in the tyrannicide plot against Hitler, Bonhoeffer's reflection on *Schuldübernahme* is properly understood as an outlier—a short-lived thought experiment that he critiques and reconceives in two alternative versions of moral reasoning in later chapters.

Keywords

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, ethics, interpretation, lying, guilt, responsibility, law

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Introduction

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's ethics defy simple explanation. Chief among the interpretive challenges is how best to account for tensions between nonviolent, pacifist-leaning argumentation and forms of moral reasoning that condone violent, active, and even guilt-laden resistance. Scholars struggle to reconcile the strong pacifist tendencies of *Discipleship* and his 1934 Fanø address with well-known, provocative passages in *Ethics* that seem to provide warrants for lying, tyrannicide, and the attempted coup of the Hitler regime. Due to these seemingly divergent trajectories, scholars have often considered the ways that Bonhoeffer's moral reasoning might have evolved, and whether the perceived changes indicate a fundamental shift, a minor development, or perhaps a mere change of context.

Clifford Green, Larry Rasmussen, and Hans Pfeifer, for example, have attended to such questions since the publication of the critical edition of *Ethik* in 1992, each arriving at different conclusions that reflect distinct understandings of Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* as a whole. Whereas these scholars disagree with one another in important respects, their alternative interpretations of Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* all respond in accord to an older assessment that this essay seeks to revive in a revised form—namely, Eberhard Bethge's contention that *Ethics* manifests "different novel approaches" with distinct "theological starting point[s]."[1] Drawing upon the insights not only of Bethge, but also Green, Rasmussen, and Pfeifer, I argue that a hermeneutic sufficient to Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* must be able to account for at least three rival versions of moral reasoning operative in three different chapters drafted for his magnum opus. I bring these three distinct forms of ethical reasoning into relief through close readings of three essays composed for *Ethics*: "History and Good [2]," "God's Love and the Disintegration of the World," and "What Does It Mean to Tell the Truth?" Whereas these essays share basic continuities of practical judgments regarding lying and deception, I demonstrate that the moral reasoning about the place of guilt in these practical judgments evolves considerably.[2] In advancing my own alternative hermeneutic, I also argue that scholars have been wrong to represent a controversial account of "vicarious representative action" (*Stellvertretung*) that foregrounds an "active embrace of guilt" (*Schuldübernahme*) as the basis for Bonhoeffer's participation in the tyrannicide plot, the organizing theme of his *Ethics* as a whole, and his primary contribution to Christian ethics. Instead, Bonhoeffer's brief consideration of the "active embrace of guilt" is better understood as a short-lived thought experiment that becomes a quickly-retracted hypothesis—a wisely discarded possibility with which Bonhoeffer struggled uncharacteristically before pursuing two alternative forms of moral reasoning in

[1] Eberhard Bethge, "Editor's Preface to the Sixth German Edition," in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (trans. Neville Horton Smith; New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995) 15–18, at 15, 17.

[2] Larry L. Rasmussen, "A Question of Method," in *New Studies in Bonhoeffer's Ethics* (ed. William J. Peck; Toronto Studies in Theology 30; Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1987) 103–40, at 105.

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later chapters that reassess the meaning of responsibility, the ethics of lying, and the assessment of guilt.

Three Rival Interpretations of Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*

Responding to Bethge's 1962 "Editor's Preface" that proposes a chronology of four "approaches" as a way of organizing Bonhoeffer's diverse manuscripts for *Ethics*, interpreters such as Green, Rasmussen, and Pfeifer have advanced their own theories regarding what hermeneutic keys might be most appropriate. Green believes Bonhoeffer's theological ethics demonstrates considerable continuity. He understands Bonhoeffer's "Christian peace ethic," as he calls it, not as a principled pacifism, but as "distinctively theological and systematically embedded" in the whole of Bonhoeffer's life and writings.[3] While arguing for the continuity and coherence of this peace ethic in Bonhoeffer's thought, Green also discerns "new developments" in *Ethics* and cautions readers not to "oversystematize Bonhoeffer's incomplete and experimental manuscripts."[4] Where later developments in Bonhoeffer's thinking are evident, Green reminds his audience that these are wrongly understood as a "wholesale rewriting of his theology."[5] Apparent shifts in Bonhoeffer's moral reasoning are explicable, according to Green, because Bonhoeffer intends his one ethic to operate in two contexts. It addresses both a context of crisis in its resistance ethic for the exceptional case (*coup d'état* and tyrannicide) and a context of everyday life in its discussions of mandates, offices, and the duties and rights of natural life. Apparent inconsistencies, then, are attributable to Bonhoeffer's intention to speak to one context in some manuscripts and the alternative context in others.

Green offers his interpretive guidance, among other places, in a 2008 review of Larry Rasmussen's *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reality and Resistance*.[6] Green argues that his own reading "is clearly an alternative to Rasmussen's sequential interpretation which posits a trajectory of Bonhoeffer's ethics moving 'from pacifism to active resistance'" and "from nonviolence to violence."[7] Green rejects Rasmussen's assertion that "Bonhoeffer never wrote an ethic. . . . *Ethics* is constituted of different, and incomplete, approaches."[8] As Bethge before him, Rasmussen discerns in Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* "four different methodological entry points for

[3] Clifford Green, "Pacifism and Tyrannicide: Bonhoeffer's Christian Peace Ethic," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 18 (2005) 31–47; Clifford Green, "*Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reality and Resistance*, by Larry L. Rasmussen," *Conversations in Religion and Theology* 6 (2008) 155–65, at 163. See also Clifford Green, "Editor's Introduction to the English Edition," in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (ed. Clifford J. Green; trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Stott; Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 6; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005) 1–44.

[4] Green, "*Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reality and Resistance*," 159.

[5] Ibid., 163.

[6] Originally published in 1972, Green's comments respond to the 2005 re-publication.

[7] Green, "*Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reality and Resistance*," 165.

[8] Rasmussen, "A Question of Method," 103.

writing an ethic," evidencing "both literary and intellectual fragmentation."[9] Rasmussen's innovation, as Green notes, is to locate these distinct approaches not only chronologically but also constructively such that the later manuscripts build upon, improve, and advance beyond the earliest manuscripts written for *Ethics*. According to Rasmussen, two of the four approaches are more important and pervasive than the others—namely, ethics as formation and ethics as command. These two approaches are related such that the later ethics of command presuppose and serve as an amendment to the former ethics as formation. Throughout the various "methodological entry points," according to Rasmussen, Bonhoeffer's is fundamentally a *Gesinnungsethik*, an ethic of disposition.

In response to Green's criticisms, Rasmussen concedes that in a sense Bonhoeffer's is a consistent Christian peace ethic. Bonhoeffer's *Gesinnungsethik* manifests an unwavering disposition towards peace consonant with Green's observations, and this disposition, which is basic to his ethic, does not change. However, Rasmussen maintains that "the understanding of the acceptance of guilt (*Schuldübernahme*) is crucial to Bonhoeffer's pivotal move from pacifism to active resistance."[10] He allows that Bonhoeffer's life and thought exhibit "basic continuity, and the *absence* of breaks," in spite of the fact that "not a single portion of his magnum opus, *Ethics*, was finished to his satisfaction."[11] Thus, even though there is a basic continuity in Bonhoeffer's disposition toward peace, several "apparent discontinuities" coincide with the shift "from nonviolence to violence as approved means." The pivotal move to acceptance of guilt and active resistance occur, according to Rasmussen, precisely when "deadly violence is . . . the only route left for reinstating nonviolent means themselves as the normal and normative course and practice."[12] What changes, then, is not Bonhoeffer's ethical disposition toward peace, but rather the approved means for ethical action. For this reason, Rasmussen stands by his description of Bonhoeffer's original position as pacifism and re-describes his later position as selective conscientious participation.

A third influential interpreter of Bonhoeffer's *Ethics,* Hans Pfeifer similarly observes that "the main issue in understanding Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* lies in the interpretive key we use."[13] In stark opposition to Bethge's initial appraisal and Robin Lovin's recent reiteration that *Ethics* "consists of . . . false starts and second thoughts," Pfeifer's reading of *Ethics* discerns a "well-constructed unity" consisting

[9] Ibid., 105.

[10] Larry L. Rasmussen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reality and Resistance* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005) 54.

[11] Larry L. Rasmussen, "Response to Clifford Green," *Conversations in Religion and Theology* 6 (2008) 165–173, at 166 and 168 [italics in original].

[12] Rasmussen, "Response to Clifford Green," 177.

[13] Hans Pfeifer, "Ethics for the Renewal of Life: A Reconstruction of Its Concept," in *Bonhoeffer for a New Day: Theology in a Time of Transition* (ed. John W. de Gruchy; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997) 137–54, at 138.

of early manuscripts' "foundations" and later manuscripts' "construction."[14] And although, like Green, Pfeifer emphasizes continuity, in opposition to Green, he finds "general terms, such as 'Peace Ethics' or 'Ethics of Resistance,'" unpersuasive and unhelpfully vague.[15] Accordingly, he acknowledges, "my organization differs from Green."[16] Instead, Pfeifer suggests that the later constructive chapters in *Ethics* present a "development of Bonhoeffer's thinking during his writing." Bonhoeffer's later essays "are to be seen as representing a reconsideration of the *Ethics*. . . . This is obvious in the case of 'What Does It Mean to Tell the Truth?'"[17] Pfeifer's claim that *Ethics* constitutes a "well-constructed unity" seems at odds with his assertion of "development of Bonhoeffer's thinking during his writing" and even more so with his identifying a "reconsideration of the *Ethics*" in the later essays. On Pfeifer's telling, however, the later constructive essays do not contradict the earlier ones but rather grow, organically almost, out of the fertile and still-reliable "foundations."

Divergent though they may be, it is nonetheless possible to reconcile prominent features of these rival interpretations of Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*. To do so, their respective contributions will be critically assessed in conversation with the moral reasoning on display in the *Ethics* manuscripts. Through close readings of selected essays—attending to ethical problems and themes with which Bonhoeffer wrestles and to which he repeatedly returns—I argue that interpretive preoccupation with certain aspects of continuity and development has served to elide or distract attention from a fundamental evolution in Bonhoeffer's moral reasoning. Acknowledging a basic continuity at the level of practical judgments, I will show that consistent features in Bonhoeffer's ethic of lying provide a stable backdrop against which novel developments in Bonhoeffer's moral reasoning are cast in sharper relief such that their significance might be interrogated. In this way, developments in Bonhoeffer's thought are neither minimized nor treated as if arising *ex nihilo*. Rather, understanding the significance of innovations is possible precisely because of continuities that are acknowledged and appreciated.[18]

Any interpretation of Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*—whether that of Green, Rasmussen, Pfeifer, or myself—might be assessed according to several hermeneutical criteria: Does a given interpretation account for consistent threads across *Ethics* and Bonhoeffer's broader corpus? Can it explain the emergence of novel developments in his ethical reflection where and when they occur? And does it offer a plausible means by which to reconcile apparently divergent moral judgments or trajectories in

[14] Robin Lovin, "Biographical Context," in *New Studies in Bonhoeffer's Ethics* (ed. William J. Peck; Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1987) 67–101, at 68; Pfeifer, "Ethics for the Renewal of Life," 139.

[15] Pfeifer, "Ethics for the Renewal of Life," 139.

[16] Ibid., 139, 145.

[17] Ibid., 139.

[18] Green conveys the consensus of the critical edition's editors: "Without minimizing changes throughout his life, a high degree of continuity and coherence characterizes his thought as a whole and specifically his writing for *Ethics*" (Green, "Editor's Introduction," 32).

his writings? Every interpretation of *Ethics* wrestles with these or similar questions, and, as we will see, some hermeneutics satisfy the various criteria better than others.

In the subsequent three sections, I lay the groundwork for reconsidering prior interpretations of Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* through close readings that show three distinct forms of moral reasoning operative across three manuscripts from Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*. The primary contribution of this interpretive work, however, is not that it reveals three versions of moral reasoning in Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* or that it serves as the basis for reconciling rival scholarly interpretations of *Ethics*. Rather, its primary significance for interpretations of Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* is that it calls into question a dominant narrative, shared by Bonhoeffer's defenders and detractors alike, regarding the ethic at the heart of Bonhoeffer's magnum opus. The paradigmatic exposition of *Stellvertretung*—translated variously as "substitution," "deputyship," and "vicarious representative action"—to which scholars invariably turn appears in the essay "History and Good [2]" under the heading "The Structure of Responsible Life." There, Bonhoeffer considers lying and, many scholars infer, tyrannicide and political resistance as inherently guilt-laden actions. The present essay argues that a selection bias and dependence upon this data point—the exposition of *Stellvertretung*, and more specifically the subsidiary notion of *Schuldübernahme,* or "actively embracing guilt"—unduly focuses attention on, and thus privileges, a second draft of an essay that Bonhoeffer himself sought quite intensively to develop differently in subsequent essays for *Ethics.* As we will see, three essays in particular—first, "History and Good [2]," second, "God's Love and the Disintegration of the World," and third, "What Does It Mean to Tell the Truth?"—manifest three rival versions of moral reasoning explored within *Ethics* that, when carefully attended to, demonstrate important continuities and intriguing developments in Bonhoeffer's notions of lying, guilt, and the law of God in relation to God's will. Retracing Bonhoeffer's moral reasoning regarding this constellation of concepts—the ethics of lying, the place of guilt, and the relation between the law of God and God's will—we discover that "History and Good [2]" is far from the paradigmatic expression of Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* that it is often taken to be. Instead, the innovative framing of these concepts that Bonhoeffer briefly entertains in "History and Good [2]" is better understood as an outlier—a short-lived thought experiment that Bonhoeffer critiques and reconceives in two alternative versions of moral reasoning in later chapters. Before turning to the subsequent course corrections, we must first attend to the provocative passages often presented as the heart of Bonhoeffer's ethic.

Lying and Guilt Actively Embraced in "History and Good [2]"

"The Structure of Responsible Life," a heading from the chapter titled "History and Good [2]," includes some of the most widely referenced passages in scholarship on Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*. Green reflects a broad consensus among Bonhoeffer scholars when he writes that this section presents "the heart of his ethics of tyrannicide and

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coup" and Bonhoeffer's mature theological "ethic of free, responsible action."[19] That "History and Good [2]" is the only extant chapter in *Ethics* for which Bonhoeffer composed two drafts (both unfinished) suggests that its subject matter is also remarkable for having given Bonhoeffer particular difficulty.

Here, Bonhoeffer frames the formal elements of responsible action as a twofold determination. Responsibility takes place within and affirms, first, one's bond to God and neighbor and, second, the freedom of one's own life. This twofold determination of bond and freedom is subdivided such that the bond to God and neighbor takes the form of "vicarious representative action" (*Stellvertretung*) and "accordance with reality" (*Wirklichkeitsgemäßheit*), whereas freedom in one's own life takes the form of the "willingness to actively embrace guilt" (*Bereitschaft zur Schuldübernahme*) and the free venturing of a concrete decision (*Wagnis der konkreten Entscheidung*). Expositing responsible action as bound and free through these four subheadings, Bonhoeffer provides a moral description of action in accordance with the "vicarious representative action" (*Stellvertretung*) of Jesus Christ.[20]

In the subsection on living in accordance with reality, Bonhoeffer examines, first, creaturely existence and the incarnational rationale for necessary life-affirming action therein and, second, intrinsic laws of such subjects (*Sache*) as family, economics, and statecraft. A responsible life gives an answer, a response to God's action, and, in so doing, it accords with the action of Christ, our *Stellverterter* or Substitute. In accordance with Christ's actions, responsible actions "consider reality and do what is necessary" precisely "because God in Christ became human, because God said Yes to humanity, and because we as human beings are permitted and called to live."[21] God wills that responsible actions do what is necessary to affirm human life. Like Christ's action on behalf of humanity, responsible action attends to the realities of creaturely existence, including the necessities and manifold relations constituting human life.

Bonhoeffer observes that on rare occasions these basic necessities of human life come into conflict with an intrinsic law of the divinely-ordained mandates of the family, economics, or statecraft. This conflict gives rise to an extraordinary situation or borderline case—a moral dilemma. Guilt is unavoidable in borderline cases, according to Bonhoeffer's ethical reasoning in "History and Good [2]," because no guilt-free options present themselves: "responsible action must decide not simply between right and wrong, good and evil, but between right and right, wrong and wrong."[22] According to Bonhoeffer, those who would be responsible must choose

[19] Green, "Editor's Introduction," 12.

[20] See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 257–89.

[21] Ibid., 287.

[22] Ibid., 284. Importantly, Karl Barth's later, similar framing would omit a decision between wrong and wrong: "Living history poses questions in which right is not merely opposed to wrong, or wrong to right, but right to right" (Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of Creation* [ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance; trans. A. T. Mackay et al.; vol. 3.4 of *Church Dogmatics*; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1961] 457).

between "the eternal law or free responsibility that is contrary to all law but before God."[23] The decision must be made either for obedience to the law or for freedom that, appealing to necessity, violates the law before God.[24] According to Bonhoeffer, "neither side can claim to be more in the right. . . . [I]n either case one becomes guilty."[25] In such borderline cases, vicarious representative action that freely takes responsibility for others entails actively embracing guilt (*Schuldübernahme*).

Bonhoeffer is certain not only that all actions in a borderline case are guilt-laden but also that one cannot know the ultimate verdict about such actions—i.e., whether God will pardon them: "Responsible action renounces any knowledge about its ultimate justification."[26] Acting responsibly demonstrates the ethical agent's hope and trust in the righteousness of God who throughout history has graciously forgiven the guilt of sin, but upon whose grace one cannot presume. Bonhoeffer observes, "Those who in acting responsibly take on guilt—which is inescapable for any responsible person—place this guilt on themselves, not on someone else; they stand up for it and take responsibility for it."[27] Luther's doctrine of justification and *simul iustus et peccator* serve to advance this argument. God accomplishes God's justice in the Christ event, and responsible agents are simultaneously justified and sinners through the sinless Christ's vicarious representative embrace of human guilt. Bonhoeffer's argument eventuates in the claim that many have taken to be paradigmatic of his ethic: "Because Jesus took the guilt of all human beings upon himself, everyone who acts responsibly becomes guilty."[28] Human persons act in accordance with Christ by knowing a particular action to be sinful and actively embracing its guilt:

> Those who, in acting responsibly, seek to avoid becoming guilty divorce themselves from the ultimate reality of human existence; but in so doing they also divorce themselves 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. . . . Because of Jesus Christ, the essence of responsible action intrinsically involves the sinless, those who act out of selfless love, becoming guilty.[29]

In borderline cases, acting responsibly entails, first, discerning that a particular action is contrary to the eternal law of God and guilt-laden and, second, freely and actively embracing the guilt of one's vicarious representative action before God.

[23] Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 274.

[24] Further into the discussion of the problem of law and freedom, Bonhoeffer again contrasts obedience/law with freedom/God's will, associating obedience with "blindly following the law" and freedom with those who "affirm God's will . . . with open eyes" (Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 287–88).

[25] Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 274.

[26] Ibid., 268; see also 274–75, 282–85.

[27] Ibid., 282.

[28] Ibid., 275.

[29] Ibid., 276.

Denying the guilt incurred in responsible action rejects both the guilt of one's own action and the vicarious bearing of this same guilt by Jesus Christ.

Bonhoeffer employs Kant's principle of truthfulness as a foil in an illustration that is important for our purposes. According to Bonhoeffer, Kant's principle of truthfulness reduces all of reality to a single relation. Bonhoeffer's more holistic account of reality views the responsibility to tell the truth as but one relevant relation amidst a manifold, and therefore Bonhoeffer objects to Kant's conclusion: "Treating truthfulness as a principle leads Kant to the grotesque conclusion that if asked by a murderer whether my friend, whom he was pursuing, had sought refuge in my house, I would have to answer honestly in the affirmative."[30] Two of Bonhoeffer's multiple disagreements with Kant in this essay are noteworthy. First, he disagrees in his practical judgment regarding the appropriate action—Bonhoeffer states that the individual should lie. Second, there is disagreement about the moral status of telling the truth. Whereas Kant appeals to the categorical imperative to justify his principled truthfulness, Bonhoeffer maintains that telling the truth in this situation is guilt-laden. However, this does not settle the matter for Bonhoeffer, because just as telling the truth is guilt-laden in this situation, so is lying. For Bonhoeffer, unlike Kant, regardless of whether I tell the truth and betray my friend to the murderer or lie to the murderer and save my friend, I incur guilt.

Therefore, although Bonhoeffer and Kant agree on the meaning and moral species of lying (both hold that in this case a lie is being told to the murderer and lying is immoral), only Bonhoeffer argues that the friend ought to lie. Not only should the friend lie, however, the friend should also recognize and embrace the guilt of this action. "Any attempt to deny that we are indeed dealing with lying here is once again the work of a legalistic and self-righteous conscience," he writes, "refusing, in other words, to take on and bear guilt out of love for my neighbor."[31] One should lie, embracing the lie's guilt, because of one's responsibility for one's neighbor. On Bonhoeffer's reading, the situation Kant presents is one in which both telling the truth and lying are guilt-laden, but only the latter follows Christ's example of taking on guilt out of loving responsibility for the friend. Because a responsible lie imitates God's taking on guilt in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, a responsible person willingly accepts the guilt of the lie on behalf of another.[32] Importantly, to claim that such an act comprises anything other than a

[30] Ibid., 279.

[31] Ibid., 280. Bonhoeffer penned these exhortations to lie at the same time he was producing fictitious travel diaries for his intelligence reports, burdened by the responsibility of his own lies as part of the *Abwehr*, even as he was learning of the Nazi "Final Solution." For an account of Bonhoeffer's resistance activities while writing his *Ethics*, see Sabine Dramm, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Resistance* (trans. Margaret Kohl; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009).

[32] "As the one who loved without sin, [Jesus] became guilty, seeking to stand within the community of human guilt. . . . So Jesus is the one who sets the conscience free for the service of God and neighbor. . . . The conscience that has been set free from the law will not shy away from entering into another's guilt for that person's sake" (Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 279).

lie, according to this essay at least, evidences not only self-deception but a denial and rejection of Christ's reconciling activity. And yet, in these exhortations to embrace guilt, Bonhoeffer consistently refuses to the agent any knowledge about the ultimate justification of their actions.

A final important but under-appreciated concern comes to the fore in the last unfinished paragraph of "History and Good [2]." Bonhoeffer entertains a potentially troubling question about the implications of the moral description of responsible action advanced in this essay. More specifically, he asks whether the integrity of the divine will is compromised if God's will and God's law are in conflict.

> But now, is it not the case that the law of God as revealed in the Decalogue and in the divine mandates . . . establishes an inviolable boundary for any responsible action in one's vocation? Would any transgression of this boundary not mean a violation of the revealed will of God? Here the recurring problem of law and freedom presents itself with ultimate urgency. It [the problem of law and freedom] threatens to introduce a contradiction into the will of God itself.[33]

Here, Bonhoeffer asks for the first time whether the ethical framework that he has developed in this essay—presenting the structure of responsible life as a response to the problem of law and freedom—pits not only the will of God against the law of God but also threatens the integrity of the divine will, splitting it into two. Recall that the original condition of possibility for guilt-embracing, free responsible action was introduced by a potential conflict between life's basic necessities and the intrinsic laws of family, economics, or statecraft. As the essay draws to its conclusion, we find Bonhoeffer concerned with a second conflict that presupposes and follows from the moral description of responsible action under the conditions of the first. Bonhoeffer's re-framing of the original problem of law and freedom brings to the fore a conflict between God's will and God's law that, he worries, amounts to a contradiction within the will of God itself, dis-integrating or splitting God's will in two, precisely because God wills God's law—because God is the origin of the intrinsic laws of the mandates. In the few sentences that follow, Bonhoeffer reprises in condensed form a litany of features of responsible action that he had explicated in "The Structure of Responsible Life."[34] The under-appreciated and troubling

[33] Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 296–97.

[34] For example, Bonhoeffer reaffirms that God establishes the intrinsic laws of the divine mandates (see Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 271, 296); that extraordinary situations of ultimate emergency arise in which responsible action must transgress such laws (272–73, 297); that these transgressions incur guilt (275–83, 297); that free, responsible action transgresses the law in order to affirm it (274, 297); that killing, lying, and seizing property in war provide examples of such responsible action (273, 297); that an appeal to freedom is the basis for responsible action that transgresses the law (274, 282, 297); that the basic "question" or "problem" is whether "law" or "freedom" is ultimate (274, 297); that the agent is ultimately responsible to God as revealed in Jesus Christ (275–76, 297); that the guilt of breaking the law must be "recognized" (*erkennt*) and "borne" (*getragen*) (275–83, 297); that Jesus Christ reveals that the agent is "freed from the law" to perform responsible action (278–79, 297); that Jesus's violation of both the Sabbath and the honoring of parents provides examples of

concern in this final paragraph is its acknowledgement that a contradiction between the law of God and God's will threatens a contradiction within the divine will, and yet God's law and God's will are left un-reconciled as the essay breaks off.

According to "History and Good [2]," then, borderline cases are those in which God's will and God's law are in conflict, and God wills that human persons recognize and break the laws God sets for them and thereby incur guilt. In such borderline cases, obeying God's will in vicarious representative action requires the ethical agent knowingly and willingly to break God's laws and actively embrace the guilt of doing so. Leaving his second draft of "History and Good" unfinished, and under the influence of a fresh reading of the ethical portions of *Church Dogmatics* II/2, Bonhoeffer turned his attention to a manuscript that was to serve as a new introduction to *Ethics* as a whole.[35]

Guilt Displaced in "God's Love and the Disintegration of the World"

"God's Love and the Disintegration of the World" receives far less attention in studies of Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* than "The Structure of Responsible Life" in "History and Good [2]."

Since it appeared to be drafted as an introduction, Eberhard Bethge assumed "God's Love and the Disintegration of the World" was written in 1939 as Bonhoeffer was beginning work on *Ethics*. Later scholarship pushed the date back slightly to 1940, and subsequently, with the renewed forensic research for the critical edition, it was determined the essay had not been written until 1942. Readers of the critical edition might be forgiven if they come away with conflicting ideas about the significance of this later dating. The editors note that "[c]onversations with Karl Barth in Basel and access to the galley proofs of Barth's *Church Dogmatics* II/2 helped give Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* manuscripts of 1942 the freshness of a new beginning."[36] However, of what such freshness or new beginning consists is not entirely clear, given Ilse Tödt's caution in the German edition (echoed by Green in the introduction to the English edition) that even in the later manuscripts "Bonhoeffer did not experiment with any new approach to ethics in the larger sense."[37] Pushing the case for overall continuity—while footnoting disagreements with the estimations of Bethge, Rasmussen, Pfeifer, and Lovin—Green and Tödt's statements suggest that "the freshness of a new beginning," which they concede is apparent in the later manuscripts, does not involve any significant departures

responsible action (278–79, 297); that the act of breaking the law is "sanctified" because it is done out of freedom (278, 297); and that responsible action is done for God and neighbor together in Jesus Christ (283–84, 297).

[35] See Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 299 n.1, 415, 445–46.

[36] Ilse Tödt et al., "Editors' Afterword to the German Edition," in Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 409–49, at 415.

[37] Ilse Tödt, "Appendix 2: Preparing the German Edition of *Ethics*," in Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 467–76, at 476.

from earlier essays. Rather, any new elements will demonstrate continuity with the methodological approach and substantive judgments of the earlier essays.

Important indications of a fresh beginning in "God's Love and the Disintegration of the Word" are all the more apparent against the backdrop of the essay's broader continuities with *Ethics*' earlier chapters, as well as its remarkable parallels to *Creation and Fall* and *Discipleship*. For example, "God's Love and the Disintegration of the World" revisits themes of central importance to "Christ, Reality and Good," the very first essay written for *Ethics*, including its framing of ethics in terms of God's will and its locating the origin of reality in God's self-revelation in Christ. In addition to features that indicate it was to serve as a new introduction to *Ethics*, other elements of a "new beginning" are evident in that "God's Love and the Disintegration of the World" ushers in extensive reflection on the doctrine of election unprecedented in Bonhoeffer's corpus.[38] In fact, the continuous thread woven throughout this chapter is its affirmation of the unity of knowing and doing God's will as the proper response to God's election. Playing on a collocation of *Wahl, wählen,* and *Erwählung*—choice, choose, and election—Bonhoeffer argues that knowing oneself as elected by God entails jettisoning any knowledge of, or choice between, good and evil. Attempting to judge or to choose between good and evil, regardless of whether the judgment or choice results in a good act or an evil one, already evidences that one has usurped God's rightful place as the Origin, Judge, and electing God. Only by not judging and not choosing, and instead receiving God's choice, is one able to hear, know, and do God's will—that is, to love. Choosing, even if it is a choice for good and against evil, manifests that one has usurped God's rightful place as the electing God and thereby already rejected God's election.

Additional aspects of both continuity and development appear in discussions of the Fall and disintegration in terms of shame, conscience, judging, and the knowledge of good and evil. Whereas Bonhoeffer had explored these themes extensively in discussions of the Fall five, ten, and, in some cases, fifteen years prior (in *Discipleship*, *Creation and Fall*, and *Sanctorum Communio*), one term that featured prominently in the earlier discussions is notably absent here: guilt. The Fall had been discussed in previous writings in terms of judgment (human beings fall in the act of judging God, in their usurping God's rightful place as the judge of good and evil). But here, the numerous themes are framed for the first time in

[38] At this point, Bonhoeffer had not yet read the first half of *Church Dogmatics* 2.2—Barth's exposition of the doctrine of election—and is responding to Barth's ethics of election in the second half of that volume. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Conspiracy and Imprisonment: 1940–1945* (ed. Mark S. Brocker; trans. Lisa E. Dahill; *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* 16; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006) 359. Bonhoeffer incorporates Barth's exegetical work in his discussion of "discerning" (*prüfen*) the will of God in a manner similar to Rasmussen's observations regarding the "command of God" in *Ethics*' later chapters. See Rasmussen, "A Question of Method," esp. 119–25; Matthew Puffer, "Election in Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*: Discerning a Late Revision," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 14 (2012) 255–76, esp. 266–67.

terms of an election that precedes such judging. In this essay, human persons fall in electing to know themselves as the origin of good and evil. Those who know themselves to be elected by God are incapable of such knowledge or of choosing/electing between options. They are able to know and to choose/elect only one thing, the will of God. Knowing an act as good or evil usurps God's rightful place as judge. Here, knowing good and evil and doing God's will are mutually exclusive.

Drawing upon these novel features (the fresh attention to election, the reframing of the Fall, and the absence of any discussion of guilt), "God's Love and the Disintegration of the World" advances a different account of the relation of God's law to God's will. Bonhoeffer's new framing of God's will and God's law constitutes a clear departure from the account entertained and left unresolved in the thought experiment at the conclusion of the previous essay. "History and Good [2]" had asserted that the ethical agent must recognize and sometimes choose between wrong and wrong, and had trailed off observing a threatened contradiction between God's law and will. Instead of such a conflict between God's will and God's law, this subsequent essay presents a picture that might well be read as a solution to or even a rejection of the dilemma just raised. Here, we are told that God's law cannot conflict with God's will. Instead, those who recognize their election by God simply are the "doers of the law" of God.[39] For them, there is "no place for the torment of being confronted with insoluble conflicts. . . . Judging [between good and evil] stands in opposition to doing [the will of God]."[40] Thus, "History and Good [2]" and "God's Love and the Disintegration of the World" share an imperative: obey God's will. However, whereas this imperative might involve breaking God's law in the former essay, such a possibility is excluded in the subsequent one.

Certainly, if one rejects the possibility of a conflict between God's will and God's law, then obedience to God's will can no longer involve actively embracing the guilt of breaking God's law. Absent a conflict between God's law and God's will, the "active embrace of guilt" is not only unnecessary, it is deprived of its very conditions of possibility. As a result, whereas other characteristic features of the section on "The Structure of Responsible Life" from the essay "History and Good [2]" remain pertinent in later essays, the "active embrace of guilt" (*Schuldübernahme*) is never again mentioned by Bonhoeffer after "History and Good [2]." Precisely where the ethics of election come to the fore, there is no longer a possibility that God would will that human action transgress the divine law. Importantly, recognizing and tracing the topics and themes to which Bonhoeffer returns across *Ethics*' manuscripts, as well as earlier writings, discloses the impossibility of actively embracing guilt in "God's Love and the Disintegration of the World" as a novel development in Bonhoeffer's ethical reasoning and as a second, alternative framing of the relationship between God's will and God's law.

[39] See Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 326–28.
[40] Ibid., 324, 327.

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Neither in "History and Good [2]" nor in "God's Love and the Disintegration of the World" can one be certain of the ultimate justification of the guilt of one's sin. In the latter, however, the ethical agent refuses, even in the present, to discern the good or evil of any action. Knowing only God's will, and not the guilt or innocence of any action, moral agents recognize themselves as God's elect and as such as the "doer of the law." It is not surprising, therefore, that there is no discussion comparable to the first framing in which the recognition that one is transgressing God-given laws out of free responsibility and in obedience to God's will was a precondition of actively embracing guilt. Given its disavowal of the knowledge of good and evil, not only in the ultimate sense of justification, but also in the penultimate sense of individual action, we can only say that this second version of ethical reasoning remains agnostic about the guilt of any action. One can hardly judge an act as guilt-laden or embrace the guilt of an action when "judging is itself the apostasy from God."[41] This, however, is not Bonhoeffer's final word on matters of law and guilt. In fact, Bonhoeffer's final extant essay composed for *Ethics* suggests a third construal of the place of guilt in relation to the emergent ethical agent, in the case of a child learning what it means to tell the truth.

Lying and Guilt Re-Placed in "What Does it Mean to Tell the Truth?"

On 18 November 1943, in Bonhoeffer's first unsurveilled prison letter to Bethge, he confides in him about three interrelated matters that were evidently of particular importance to Bonhoeffer: first, his newfound assurance of his task within the "borderline case"; second, his continuing preoccupation with the status of the *Ethics* manuscripts; and, third, his productive work on a new essay revisiting an old topic—the ethics of lying. Regarding his flagging confidence in his role, activities, and their consequences for his loved ones, he writes:

> In the beginning the question also plagued me as to whether it is really the cause of Christ for whose sake I have inflicted such distress on all of you; but soon enough I pushed this thought out of my head as a temptation and became certain that my task was precisely the endurance of such a boundary situation [*Grenzfall*] with all its problematic elements, and became quite happy with this and have remained so to this day.[42]

Regarding his *Ethics*, he shares, "Personally, I reproach myself for not having finished the *Ethics* (at the moment it is presumably confiscated), and it comforts me somewhat that I told you the most important things. Even if you were not to remember any longer, it would nevertheless resurface in some way indirectly.

[41] Ibid., 315.

[42] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (ed. John W. de Gruchy; trans. Isabel Best et al.; *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* 8; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009) 180. Bonhoeffer cites 1 Pet 2:20 and 3:14 here and in "Church and World," which discusses suffering for a just cause without an explicit confession of faith in Christ (see Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 346).

Furthermore, my thoughts were of course incomplete."[43] He returns to his third concern (revisiting and revising prior understandings of ethics) in several subsequent letters and in a new manuscript.

The essay "What Does It Mean to Tell the Truth?" was to be the last of Bonhoeffer's extant manuscripts self-consciously addressing ethics.[44] Although not included in the 1992 critical edition of *Ethics*, Bethge concluded both the 1949 and 1963 publications with the essay, and it is of a piece with the other manuscripts in its concerns and in the mind of its author, as the 18 November 1943 letter shows.[45] The essay pursues a phenomenological ethics of truth-telling in terms of veiling and unveiling, authority, office, and transgressions of limits.[46] For the first time since "History and Good [2]," he revisits Kant's illustration of the murderer seeking the whereabouts of one's friend. Bonhoeffer shares the general contours of the essay in prison correspondence with Bethge, but the elements of importance for the present investigation lie in details of the essay itself.

"What Does It Mean to Tell the Truth?" is best known for its illustration in which a child gives false information in response to his teacher's query regarding his father's drunkenness:

> In that it simply denies the teacher's question, the [child's] response indeed becomes untrue, yet, at the same time, it expresses the truth that the family is an order *sui generis* in which the teacher was not justified to intrude. Of course, one might call the child's answer a lie; however, this lie contains greater truth, that is, it corresponds to reality to a greater degree than if the child had revealed his father's shortcoming before the class. According to the measure of his understanding, the child acted rightly. It is exclusively the teacher who is guilty of lying.[47]

As in "History and Good [2]," here we find Bonhoeffer maintaining that lying is guilt-laden. Notice, however, that the accounting regarding guilt has changed dramatically.

The guilt of the lie is exclusively the teacher's and not the child's. The child's untrue response is not guilt-laden: "the child acted rightly." Instead, "It is exclusively the teacher who is guilty of lying." Bonhoeffer acknowledges that the child's untrue speech is called a lie in common discourse, but he contends that this convention threatens to mistake the child's speech for what it is not. According to Bonhoeffer, "Lying . . . is and ought to be understood as something plainly condemnable."[48] The

[43] Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 181. The sentence describing *Ethics* as "incomplete" is a marginal insertion.

[44] Ibid., 182. See also references to this essay in letters from Dec. 5 and 15 (216, 223).

[45] In *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, this prison fragment appears with the other writings from the period of his involvement with the conspiracy and during his imprisonment.

[46] Bonhoeffer explored this methodology and these themes previously in one of *Ethics*' final manuscripts, "The 'Ethical' and the 'Christian' as a Topic" (Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 363–87).

[47] Bonhoeffer, *Conspiracy and Imprisonment*, 606.

[48] Ibid.

mistaken understanding that Bonhoeffer intends to correct is "the usual definition, according to which the conscious contradiction between thought and speech is a lie."[49] This definition, says Bonhoeffer, "is completely inadequate."[50] First, the referent of something labeled a "lie" ought to be morally condemnable and, second, this child's speech is not guilt-laden. Thus, it is "completely inadequate" to label the intentionally false speech of the child a lie.

Bonhoeffer's reasoning is worthy of consideration not only in itself but also in relation to his earlier exposition of Kant's essay which features prominently again in this later essay:

> If one then asserts that a lie is the conscious deception of others to their harm, this would also include, e.g., the necessary deception of the enemy in war or in analogous situations (of course, Kant declared that he was too proud ever to tell an untruth and was admittedly involuntarily at the same time compelled to extend this assertion ad absurdum by declaring that he would feel himself obligated to reveal truthful information on the whereabouts of a friend seeking refuge with him to a criminal in pursuit of the friend). If one characterizes such conduct as a lie, then lying receives a moral sanctification and justification that contradicts its meaning in every respect.[51]

Here, Bonhoeffer advances a substantially different account of guilt, God's law, and the divine will than that provided in the two essays considered above, evidencing once again Bonhoeffer's capacity to develop new approaches to recurring problems. In "What Does It Mean to Tell the Truth?" a novel ethic of lying unfolds that clearly contradicts the presentation in "History and Good [2]." Recall that in responding to Kant's illustration, the friend's untrue speech to the assailant was judged to be a lie, the guilt of which had to be recognized and actively embraced in order that one not deny God's justification of sinners. Here, however, a description of the same speech-act as a lie is explicitly rejected, precisely because this untrue speech has a moral sanctification and justification that the act of lying never possesses. In this later essay, the untrue speech of the friend is neither a lie nor guilt-laden, whereas previously Bonhoeffer had asserted that it was both. Likewise, we are told "it would be a complete misrepresentation" to label the untrue speech of the child a lie precisely because lying is condemnable and the child's act is not. Instead, the child's speech corresponds to the truth that God has mandated the family as a sphere into which the teacher may not intrude. This explanation gestures toward what Bonhoeffer means when he writes, "It is exclusively the teacher who is guilty of lying."

How is it that the teacher's unauthorized incursion, a transgression into the divinely-mandated order of the family, constitutes a lie? And how does the teacher's question entail guilt? One possibility might be that it is the child's subsequent

[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid., 606–607.

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lie which carries the guilt and that this guilt transfers somehow to the teacher as its cause. According to Bonhoeffer, however, it is the teacher's incursion itself that constitutes the lie. The teacher's question launched "an unjustified invasion into the order of the family. . . . The teacher disregards the reality of this order," and this invasion of the family that disregards its reality, *qua* divinely-mandated order, constitutes lying: "lying is the negation, denial, and deliberate and willful destruction of reality."[52] The teacher's inquiry echoes the serpent's pious question in the garden.[53] Both involve an unassuming assault on the order of the family. In the act of asking the question, the teacher denies the reality of a divinely constituted order. The teacher lies. And, because Bonhoeffer maintains that lying is guilt-laden, he concludes, "it is exclusively the teacher who is guilty of lying." Thus, it is not the truth-content of the teacher's words with which Bonhoeffer is now concerned. Instead, the act of asking this particular question transgresses a divine order, denying its reality, even as the content of the words themselves are not false. Without speaking an untrue word, the teacher's speech-act is already guilty of denying the true "creative and reconciling word of God."[54]

Reconsidering *Stellvertretung* and *Schuldübernahme*

A single passage for which Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* is best known and often criticized in "History and Good [2]" includes highly provocative discussions of responsibility, of guilt, and of lying that are framed in terms of a conflict between the law of God and God's will. Bonhoeffer returns to and develops each of these themes in very different ways in subsequent essays. Most significantly, the logic of Bonhoeffer's ethic in "God's Love and the Disintegration of the World" and thereafter makes no use of the concept of "actively embracing guilt" (*Schuldübernahme*). This term had featured prominently in a mere eight pages of "History and Good [2]" where Bonhoeffer offered an initial, critical yet appreciative engagement with Kant's illustration. *Schuldübernahme* appears nowhere else in Bonhoeffer's entire corpus. This fact alone would seem to warrant reassessing its centrality to Bonhoeffer's ethics and the vast majority of scholarly interpretations in which "History and Good [2]" and its discussion of actively embracing guilt are presented as paradigmatic of Bonhoeffer's ethics. After "History and Good [2]," conflicts between the law of God and God's will cease. As a result, the conditions that gave rise to an active embrace of guilt are no longer in place. God's will for human persons instead becomes synonymous with the doing of God's law. Furthermore, whereas lying to Kant's murderer had been guilt-laden in "History and Good [2]," when Bonhoeffer

[52] Ibid., 605–606, 607.

[53] See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1–3* (ed. John W. de Gruchy; trans. Douglas Stephen Bax; *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* 3; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004) 103–10.

[54] Bonhoeffer, *Conspiracy and Imprisonment*, 607.

revisits this case in "What Does It Mean to Tell the Truth?" the untrue speech to Kant's murderer is no longer a lie nor is it guilt-laden.

If the place of "actively embracing guilt" in Bonhoeffer's ethics warrants reconsideration, this need not entail jettisoning Bonhoeffer's related but distinct notion of bearing guilt, a more passive embrace of guilt. Bearing guilt, standing in solidarity with others in their suffering, does not involve premeditated guilt-laden action. Christine Schliesser teases out this important distinction between bearing guilt (*Schuld tragen*) and an active embracing of guilt (*Schuldübernahme*), arguing the latter is problematic while the former is exemplary and carefully developed across Bonhoeffer's corpus.[55] In Derridean fashion, Schliesser traces the development of "accepting guilt" from passive to active and from its Christological foundation to its ethical deployment. Her immanent critique finds Bonhoeffer's "guilt actively incurred for the sake of the other" ethically problematic, inconsistent with his best insights and other writings, and "not of primary relevance for contemporary Christian ethics."[56] And Schliesser is not alone in this assessment. Her critiques resonate with the earlier assessments of Rasmussen and Eberhard Jüngel who offer their own significant objections to the discussion of "The Structure of Responsible Life" in "History and Good [2]."

Jüngel shares Bonhoeffer's Barthian-Lutheran heritage, expressing great appreciation for Bonhoeffer's thought while maintaining a critical eye in appropriating his contributions. And yet, even more so than Schliesser and Rasmussen, he finds the broader discussion of "vicarious representative action" or "substitution" (*Stellvertretung*) in "History and Good [2]" to be profoundly problematic. He argues on dogmatic grounds that this concept mistakenly relates human persons to one another in a manner that is uniquely Christ's role as Mediator. In a nutshell, Jüngel's criticism asserts that the person and work of Jesus Christ *qua* Substitute is a singularity—"existing as a substitute is something that [other] human beings cannot do."[57] Bonhoeffer's depiction of vicarious representative action in "History and Good [2]" is "not only theologically unacceptable, but also dogmatically reprehensible."[58] Jüngel's assessment comports with Green's observation, "[t]he human ethical analogy [to *Stellvertretung*] is acting responsibly on behalf of others." But Jüngel seeks to articulate the precise manner in which human action in response to Christ's unique work cannot re-achieve what Christ's

[55] See Christine Schliesser, *Everyone Who Acts Responsibly Becomes Guilty: Bonhoeffer's Concept of Accepting Guilt* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005). Bonhoeffer's less active embrace of guilt, *Schuld tragen*, is often translated as "bearing guilt" and involves coming alongside others in their guilt and sharing the burden of that guilt together, with one another. It does not require one to recognize an action as both guilt-laden and willed by God before performing the action.

[56] Schliesser, *Everyone Who Acts Responsibly*, 204.

[57] Eberhard Jüngel, "The Mystery of Substitution: A Dogmatic Conversation with Heinrich Vogel" in *Theological Essays 2* (ed. and trans. John Webster; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995) 145–62, at 155.

[58] Jüngel, "The Mystery of Substitution," 155.

work has already completed—namely, taking on the guilt of human sin.[59] According to Jüngel, human action imitates that work in acts of loving responsibility without thereby becoming substitutes, vicarious representatives, or actively embracing guilt. It is precisely this element of actively embracing guilt—so often celebrated as Bonhoeffer's great ethical insight—to which Jüngel and Schliesser object. And, as I argued earlier, this central element of "History and Good [2]" is effectively ruled out by the reframing of God's law and God's will in "God's Love and the Disintegration of the World," just as it is excluded from consideration in the later ethics of lying.

In addition to Schliesser's and Jüngel's criticisms of *Schuldübernahme* on theological-ethical grounds, my account of the development of Bonhoeffer's moral reasoning across his *Ethics* manuscripts indicates that there are historical and textual reasons to reconsider the role of this problematic concept in Bonhoeffer's thought. Unlike Schliesser, Rasmussen and Jüngel's criticisms were advanced without the benefit of the extensive editorial work for the German critical edition of *Ethics*. It was not until this publication that a more reliable reconstruction of the manuscripts' sequence of composition was available. And, only as a result of that work, "God's Love and the Disintegration of the World" was placed not in 1939 or 1940, but immediately after "History and Good [2]" in a manner that casts in sharper relief than had earlier editions Bonhoeffer's distinct ways of relating God's law to God's will. The close proximity of the distinct presentations of God's will in relation to God's law, coupled with the fact that the first discussion breaks off as the second begins, provide good reasons to suspect that Bonhoeffer himself may well have anticipated the very concerns that Schliesser, Rasmussen, and Jüngel express. Indeed, the previous close readings of the distinct versions of moral reasoning across the three manuscripts suggest that Bonhoeffer himself recognized as problematic the account of *Schuldübernahme* in his earlier discussion of lying and guilt quite quickly—insofar as it introduces a conflict between God's will and God's law—and that he therefore subsequently stopped advocating this position. The second version of moral reasoning made it difficult to assess the guilt of any action, but that essay's framing was not Bonhoeffer's final word either. In the third version of moral reasoning, the discussion of Kant's illustration reintroduces guilt but no longer places the guilt of lying on the person who protects their friend. Instead, it locates guilt in the intrusive, transgressive question that denies and attacks a divinely ordered reality. Thus, the third essay reaffirms the prohibition of lying and the guilt lying entails, but does so within a version of ethical reasoning that reconfigures the meaning of lying, the place of guilt, and the relation of God's will to God's law.

Throughout his *Ethics*, of course, Bonhoeffer has in view a great deal more than the question of what is usually meant by lying. And, where lying is discussed, it is often with other larger concerns in mind. In an important sense, because *Ethics* was composed during Bonhoeffer's participation in the resistance to National

[59] Green, "Editor's Introduction," 12.

Socialism, the problem of lying helpfully illustrates Bonhoeffer's theological understanding of "reality." These discussions provide test cases, proxies for ethical problems related to war and "analogous situations," which must be inferred from historical and biographical sources external to the text.[60] In *Ethics*, truth-telling and lying are analogs for human acts that witness to a larger reality of God's reconciling the world to Godself through the person and work of Christ. Within this reality, Bonhoeffer understands confession as bearing witness to the manifold relationships in which people always already find themselves. His concerns remain simultaneously and thoroughly Christological and practical—one's actions ought always to manifest God's reconciling activity and one's response to the question of Kant's would-be-murderer ought always to protect one's neighbor. At the level of these dogmatic and practical commitments, Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* demonstrates a remarkable continuity that is all the more apparent precisely when the form of moral reasoning changes drastically—from a judgment that the friend's false-speech should be actively embraced as a guilt-laden lie to an account in which the guilt of lying falls upon the would-be-murderer's intrusive and transgressive question. Precisely in Bonhoeffer's repeated attention to the ethics of lying, the place of guilt, and the relation of the divine law to the divine will, we discover three different versions of ethical reasoning as he seeks increasingly adequate theological-ethical accounts of God's action in Christ and human action in accordance with that event.

Reinterpreting Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*

The extensive text-critical work of the past thirty years has opened up expansive vistas for further investigations into Bonhoeffer's thought during the course of *Ethics*' tumultuous production. The views from "God's Love and the Disintegration of the World" and "What Does It Mean to Tell the Truth?" afford two distinct perspectives on ways that theological ethics might reframe ethical dilemmas first considered in "History and Good [2]."[61] In "God's Love and the Disintegration of the World," the call to live beyond good and evil involves a refusal to judge the guilt of an action one undertakes. In "What Does It Mean To Tell the Truth?" where guilt reemerges it is accounted not to vicarious representative actions, but to transgressions of the reality of God's reconciliation. A hermeneutic sufficient to Bonhoeffer's ethics will have to account for these novel developments that are neither merely a matter of consistent construction upon earlier manuscripts' prior

[60] Bonhoeffer, *Conspiracy and Imprisonment*, 606.

[61] Drawing primarily on these two essays (and without the benefit of subsequent scholarship that gave a later date to these manuscripts) Norman Coles has argued that Bonhoeffer's ethics are only improperly understood as a *Gesinnungsethik*. He sees Bonhoeffer affirming a "principle of truthfulness," distinct from Kant's, which expresses action in response and correspondence to Christ's love for and sharing in humanity (Norman Coles, "Ethics and Politics: A Dispute about Interpreting Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*," *The Friends Quarterly*, October [1970] 608–16). In light of the later dating for these essays we might also ask whether the later *Grenzfall* discussion entails choosing between God's will and God's law, between two inevitably guilt-laden acts.

foundations nor merely a matter of addressing a different context—quotidian versus crisis.

In light of previous scholarship's interpretive heuristics, our examination of lying, guilt, God's will, and God's law in three separate manuscripts has significant implications for the sort of hermeneutic appropriate to Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* as a whole. For example, the two accounts of lying are, in a sense, perfectly compatible with Green's observations regarding a consistent "Christian peace ethic." The limitation of such an approach, however, is that by focusing on the peaceful "disposition" or "ends" of Bonhoeffer's ethic, it overlooks and thus fails to provide an explanatory account for the distinct versions of moral reasoning that we have observed in Bonhoeffer's disparate accounts of lying. Similarly, it is not clear how Rasmussen or Pfeifer's interpretive lenses would serve to explain the diverse forms of moral reasoning or the developments in Bonhoeffer's ethic. Pfeifer's two-fold interpretation of "foundation" and "construction" and Rasmussen's focus on two methodologies (ethics as formation and ethics as command) describe important features of Bonhoeffer's ethics. However, neither heuristic sheds light either on how to reconcile Bonhoeffer's two presentations of lying and guilt or on the distinct ways of relating God's law to God's will. The later manuscript's ethic of lying does not build upon a foundation laid in the earlier ethic, nor are the several aspects of the significantly revised account of Kant's illustration helpfully illuminated by a distinction between ethics as formation and as command. Furthermore, we cannot ascribe the two accounts of lying to the two contexts that Green identifies—such differences are not explained by attributing one account of lying to an ethic of resistance and one to an ethic of the everyday—due to the fact that in both discussions it is exactly the same situation to which identical practical responses are encouraged, albeit under two very different moral descriptions. The difference between Bonhoeffer's two discussions is not between resistance and everyday contexts, formation and command, or foundation and construction. Each of these interpretive heuristics lacks explanatory power because the two discussions do not address two distinct contexts, perspectives, or parts of holistic ethical theory. Rather, it is precisely the same situation approached through two very different forms of moral reasoning—i.e., with two different accounts of the relations between divine law and divine will, of the place of human guilt, and two quite distinct understandings of lying. If these prominent scholarly frameworks for interpreting Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* do not account for Bonhoeffer's distinct accounts of lying and guilt, an alternative explanation must be sought. Bonhoeffer himself offers an important clue when he claims, regarding the later account, that specific practices have proven generative for constructing his novel ethic of lying.

Bonhoeffer's later phenomenological account of truth-telling is informed largely by his prison readings. Though works by Barth, Heidegger, Husserl, and others clearly inform his thinking, Bonhoeffer himself places greater emphasis upon his reflections on texts from the Hebrew Bible in which duplicity serves to achieve

God's purposes: "In addition to daily Bible study, I have read the Old Testament two and a half times through and have learned a great deal."[62] What impact did this practice have upon his ethical reflections? In the letter to Bethge cited earlier, Bonhoeffer shares the dramatic effects of his return to these scriptures.

> I notice more and more how much I am thinking and perceiving things in line with the Old Testament; thus in recent months I have been reading much more of the Old than the New Testament. . . . Whoever wishes to be and perceive things too quickly and too directly in New Testament ways is to my mind no Christian. . . . The consequences are very far-reaching, . . . for the use of the Bible, and so on, but above all certainly for ethics. Why do people in the Old Testament vigorously and often lie (I have now collected the citations) . . . to the glory of God whereas in the New Testament there is none of this? "Preliminary stage" of religion? That is a very naïve explanation; after all, it is one and the same God.[63]

Along with voracious reading of philosophy and theology, Bonhoeffer claims that his thinking has been shaped significantly by the narratives of the Old Testament and the distinct ethics that they seem to suggest as compared to those in Kant or the New Testament. When the accounts of lying in scripture do not conform to his expectations or his received tradition, Bonhoeffer seeks to subordinate traditional notions to his scriptures rather than *vice versa*. In this letter, he refers to a particular collection of verses that he had jotted on a scrap piece of note paper: Gen 3; 13; 18:15; 22; 27; 31; 34; 37; 44; Exod 1:1, 19–20; 3:18.[64] These passages record the deception and deceit of the serpent in the garden, Adam and Eve, Sarah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Jacob's sons, Joseph, the Hebrew midwives, and Pharaoh. As a result of his reflections on these Old Testament episodes that feature lying, Bonhoeffer pens the account of truth-telling that would become the final extant essay for his *Ethics* in which an alternative ethic of lying is developed.

Bonhoeffer had previously challenged Kant on Kant's own terms—he conceded Kant's account of what it means to lie and the guilt of this act. The later essay's title, "What Does It Mean to Tell the Truth?" indicates something of Bonhoeffer's new approach. Shifting attention from lying to truth-telling, Bonhoeffer's phenomenology is framed less by Kant's terms than by the Hebrew Bible's questions about who authorizes one's speech such that it might be truthful. Throughout the essay, Bonhoeffer addresses the question "How?": How is it that one speaks truth? How is speech authorized? How do roles and relationships of authority impact the veracity or mendacity of speech? Bonhoeffer proposes that truth-telling "means to say *how* something is in reality," and the reality he describes is essentially one of reconciling relations.

[62] Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 181.

[63] Ibid., 213–14.

[64] See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Register und Ergänzungen* (ed. Herbert Anzinger and Hans Pfeifer; *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke* 17; Gütersloh: Christian Kaiser, 1999) 143–46.

As a result of his reading of biblical narratives, Bonhoeffer reconceives the lie which had been encouraged even though it was sinful as neither a lie nor a sin. A passage already referred to above articulates Bonhoeffer's new perspective:

> The usual definition, according to which the conscious contradiction between thought and speech is a lie, is completely inadequate. . . . If one asserts that a lie is the conscious deception of others to their harm, this also would include, e.g., the necessary deception of the enemy in war or in analogous situations. . . . If one characterizes this sort of behavior as a lie, then lying receives a moral sanctification and justification that contradicts its meaning in every respect.[65]

What had been characterized as a guilt-laden lie is flatly rejected as contradicting the meaning of lying "in every respect." Keeping in view Bonhoeffer's particular situation, we can appreciate that telling falsehoods to his Gestapo interrogators is understood here as actualizing the truth, bearing witness to the reality of God's reconciliation with humanity. Providing factually correct accounts of the conspirators and the resistance remains absurd, but the reasoning has changed. His Lutheran-informed intuitions previously led Bonhoeffer to a form of moral reasoning that amounted to loving God and sinning boldly—the guilt of lying was recognized and embraced. Inspired by "people in the Old Testament [who] vigorously and often lie . . . to the glory of God," Bonhoeffer recasts truth-telling, and therefore lying, in a phenomenological register that relocates guilt and obviates the need to resolve a conflict of God's law with God's will.[66]

Although Green, Rasmussen, and Pfeifer present three rival interpretations of Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*, their points of agreement are considerable. Each upholds an important orthodoxy in Bonhoeffer scholarship by giving a position of particular prominence to "History and Good [2]" and its discussions of "vicarious representative action" and "actively embracing guilt." And although their interpretive differences raise important questions regarding which elements of Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* warrant greater emphasis and how to frame the whole, none of these interpreters note the evident changes in Bonhoeffer's moral reasoning regarding divine law and God's will, or lying and guilt manifest within the *Ethics* manuscripts themselves.

By teasing out the rival forms of moral reasoning operative in the *Ethics* manuscripts, the various construals of the relationship of God's will to God's law, the interpretations of lying, and the place of guilt, we do more than simply set alongside others a fourth, additional, competing hermeneutic through which to understand Bonhoeffer's ethics. Rather, I hope both to ventilate a staid tradition of interpretation that foregrounds "History and Good [2]" and its short-lived thought experiment about actively embracing guilt and also to open up new possibilities for thinking about how rival versions of moral reasoning within Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* might be reassessed and the whole better understood. At the same time, my argument

[65] Bonhoeffer, *Conspiracy and Imprisonment*, 606–607.

[66] Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 116.

requires both affirmation and qualification of aspects of previous interpretations. With Green, we can affirm a consistent non-principled peace ethic and yet assert that developments in Bonhoeffer's moral reasoning evidence discontinuities not accounted for by the contexts of the resistance and the quotidian. We can appreciate Rasmussen's proposed vantages of an "ethics as formation" and an "ethics as command," but do so without either requiring that that the latter be subordinated to the former or claiming that this distinction holds explanatory power for the distinctive accounts of lying and guilt. Likewise, my argument affirms Pfeifer's observations that the later essays "are to be seen as representing a reconsideration of the *Ethics*," and that "this is obvious in the case of 'What Does It Mean to Tell the Truth?'"[67] And yet, I want to emphasize that the constructive proposals of the later manuscripts do not simply build upon foundations provided by the earlier ones. In the cases of lying, actively embracing guilt, and the relation of God's will to God's law, "God's Love and the Disintegration of the World" and "What Does It Mean to Tell the Truth?" reconsider, revise, and develop alternative proposals to unresolved questions in "History and Good [2]." The later developments certainly demonstrate extensive continuities with theological commitments apparent in the earlier foundations, yet they also offer new vantages from which Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* can already be seen to be addressing precisely those criticisms of vicarious representative action and actively embracing guilt later voiced by Rasmussen, Jüngel, and Schliesser.

In the end, it is possible to affirm alongside all of the aforementioned interpreters that Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* manifests creative and consistent attention to the manifold ways that human witness and resistance accords with God's reconciling activity. Constructing a practical ethic that coherently and faithfully responds to this activity remains a challenge confronting interpreters of Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* today, no less than articulating such an ethic proved challenging for Bonhoeffer. Bethge discerned "different new approaches" in *Ethics* and emphasized in his introduction to the first edition in 1948: "This book is not the *Ethics* which Dietrich Bonhoeffer intended to have published. . . . [H]e continued to concern himself with these matters until the very end."[68] The three rival versions of moral reasoning in Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* that we have observed were composed as he wrestled with the great moral challenges of his day in conversation with diverse and provocative interlocutors. His intensive wrestling with difficult texts and contexts gave rise to moral reasoning and judgments that are not readily reconciled across the *Ethics* manuscripts. For this reason, they continue to inspire diverse interpretations and to stimulate creative forms of witness and resistance for our own day.

[67] Pfeifer, "Ethics for the Renewal of Life," 139.

[68] Eberhard Bethge, "Editor's Preface to the First Through the Fifth German Editions," in Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (1995) 11–14, at 11, 13.