



Dietrich Bonhoffer

Ethics

(1940-1943, first published 1949)



Responsibility and Freedom

In the course of historical life there comes a point where the exact observance of the formal law ...finds itself in violent conflict with the ineluctable necessities; at this point responsible action leaves behind it the domain of principle and convention...and is confronted by the extraordinary situation of ultimate necessities, a situation which no law can control. ... These necessities...appeal directly to the free responsibility of the agent, a responsibility bound by no law.

Responsibility and Freedom

The extraordinary necessity appeals to the freedom of those who are responsible. There is no law behind which the responsible person can seek cover... Here one must make one's decision as a free venture, together with the open admission that here the law is being violated and that necessity obeys no commandment. ...One's own decision and deed are entrusted to the divine government of history.

Responsibility and Freedom

Jesus is concerned solely with love for the real person, and for that reason he is able to enter into the fellowship of the guilt of persons and take the burden of guilt upon Himself. ... From His selfless love, from His freedom from sin, Jesus enters into the guilt of humanity and takes this guilt upon Himself. ... (234-36)

Responsibility and Freedom

When someone takes guilt upon himself in responsibility ... he does it in the knowledge that this freedom is forced upon him and that in it he is dependent on grace. ... Before other men the person of free responsibility is justified by necessity; before God he hopes only for mercy. (244)

Responsibility and Freedom

Responsibility and freedom are corresponding concepts. ... The responsible person acts in the freedom of his own self... The proof of this freedom is the fact that nothing can answer for him, nothing can exonerate him, except his own deed... Neither the purity of the motivation, nor the opportune circumstances, nor the value, nor the significant purpose of an intended undertaking can become a law to which he can appeal as an authority, and by which he can be acquitted. For in that case he would no longer be truly free. The action of the responsible person is performed in the obligation which alone gives freedom...the obligation to God and to our neighbor as they confront us in Jesus Christ.

Responsibility and Freedom

Good, as what is responsible, is performed...in the surrender to God of the deed which has become necessary and which is...for that very reason free; for it is God who sees the heart, who weighs up the deed, and who directs the course of history.

Responsibility and Freedom

The person who acts in the freedom of his own most personal responsibility is precisely the person who sees his action finally committed to the guidance of God. The free deed knows itself in the end as the deed of God. The decision knows itself as guidance; the free venture knows itself as divine necessity. It is in the free abandonment of knowledge of his own good that one performs the good of God. (246f)

Responsibility and Freedom

Obedience and responsibility are interlinked in such a way that one cannot say that responsibility begins only where obedience leaves off, but rather that obedience is rendered in responsibility. ... Obedience without freedom is slavery; freedom without obedience is arbitrary self-will. ... Obedience binds the creature to the Creator and freedom enables the creature to stand before the Creator as one who is made in the Creator's image.

Responsibility and Freedom

Obedience knows what is good and does it, and freedom dares to act, and abandons to God the judgment of good and evil. (248f)

Responsibility and Freedom

There is a freedom from the whole of divine law, a freedom which breaks this law, but only in order to give effect to it anew. The suspension of the law can only serve the true fulfilment of it. In war, for example... (257)

Responsibility and Freedom

The commandment of God commands freedom...and that which lies beyond the range of what can be commanded, freedom, is the true object of the commandment. ...This permission and freedom...are never detached from God; it is always God's permission, and it is only as such that it gives freedom from the torment of anxiety in the face of each decision and deed...(277)

Conspiracy

In 1940, while he was working on Ethics, Bonhoeffer was brought into the conspiracy to murder Hitler and replace the Nazi government. There were different cells of conspiracy, mainly in the army, linked by secret communication. Records were kept of the atrocities, information that was given Bonhoeffer. The cell he joined consisted of higher officials of the “Abwehr,” the espionage and counter-espionage organization of the army. At the top was Admiral Canaris; all immediate subordinates were also conspirators.

Conspiracy

Bonhoeffer had no part in plans or acts to murder Hitler. He rather acted as a messenger between the conspiracy and the Allies, especially the British government. He could travel outside Germany as a secret agent of the “Abwehr.” In 1941 and 1942 he was three times in Switzerland, once in Italy, Norway and Sweden, all with the purpose of communicating with Allies on behalf of the conspiracy, whose plans and list of conspirators he passed on. During the trips to Switzerland he was also active in arranging for a group of Jews to escape Germany.

Conspiracy

The conspiracy planned to replace the Nazi government with generals and other officials who were a trusted part of the conspiracy. Bonhoeffer communicated to an English bishop about the plan of a conditional surrender after Hitler and the purging of his supporters in the government. The plan included the Allies' recognition of the new government. The bishop forwarded this to the British Foreign Office; presumably Churchill was made aware of it. But the plan was rejected, one reason being skepticism that the plan would work. The Allies would accept only unconditional surrender.

Conspiracy

Bonhoeffer believed the plan of the conspirators was the better alternative, because, among other reasons, it would demonstrate to the populace the anti-Nazi convictions of the conspirators, provide order and continuity in the transition, and prepare the way for new elections.

Conspiracy

On April 5, 1943, Bonhoeffer was arrested and imprisoned on charges of aiding Jews and interference with the obligation to serve in the army, which could carry the death penalty. He remained without trial in prison in Berlin for almost two years.

Report of a meeting in the home of a friend, Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann, 12/1942 [published 1969], in: L. Rasmussen, D. Bonhoeffer, Reality and Resistance, p. 141.

“The discussion of tyrannicide lasted into the early morning hours, especially with Werner von Haeften, who had access to military conferences held by Hitler, and it was possible for him to enter armed with a pistol. Zimmermann was certain about the points Bonhoeffer made over and over again. Von Haeften was speaking from a Christian conscience outraged at Hitler’s crimes and from a patriotism despondent over Germany’s future.

Report of a meeting in the home of a friend, Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann, 12/1942 [published 1969], in: L. Rasmussen, D. Bonhoeffer, Reality and Resistance, p. 141.

“He asked Bonhoeffer if he should kill Hitler. Bonhoeffer’s answer, as Zimmermann paraphrases it: (1) The issue is not between you and Hitler and his death and/or yours. Nor is it even between you and your conscience and Hitler’s crimes. The issue is between this demonic system and the future. Nothing is changed if Hitler is liquidated and Nazism remains in office. Things could even become worse. It is a question of outcome. The real question is what is responsible toward the future.

Report of a meeting in the home of a friend, Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann, 12/1942 [published 1969], in: L. Rasmussen, D. Bonhoeffer, Reality and Resistance, p. 141.

“(2) Hitler’s machinery is incredibly complex. I cannot tell you whether you should shoot him. That must be done by men in better positions to calculate the results. Nothing must be left to chance. All must be coordinated. If you do decide you can and should shoot, then we must all move together, but after the yet unforeseen complications have been discovered and measures have been taken to solve the tactical problems of the revolt.”

Report of a meeting in the home of a friend, Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann, 12/1942 [published 1969], in: L. Rasmussen, D. Bonhoeffer, Reality and Resistance, p. 141.

Bonhoeffer and von Haeften never did come to a decision about the “should” question, even though Bonhoeffer said the “may” question was answered in confession and absolution by God. -- Von Haeften was executed July 20, 1944, because of his part in the failed assassination attempt by Stauffenberg, July 20, 1944. “That morning he took communion at the church where Martin Niemoeller had confirmed him, knowing his friend and colleague Stauffenberg was on his way with the bomb.”

Stations on the Way to Freedom

July 21, 1945 (Letters and Papers, 370f)

Self-discipline

If you set out to seek freedom, you must learn before all things

Mastery over sense and soul...

Action

Do and dare what is right...

Bravely take hold of the real...only in action is freedom.

...come out into the tempest of living.

God's command is enough and your faith in him to sustain you.

Then at last freedom will welcome your spirit amid great rejoicing.

Stations on the Way to Freedom

July 21, 1945 (Letters and Papers, 370f)

Suffering

These hands so active and powerful

Now are tied; alone and fainting, you see where your work ends.

Yet you are confident still, and gladly commit what is right

Into a stronger hand...you yielded your freedom

Into the hand of God, that he might perfect it in glory.

Stations on the Way to Freedom

July 21, 1945 (Letters and Papers, 370f)

Death

Come now, highest of feasts on the journey to freedom eternal,
Death, strike off the fetters, break down the walls that oppress us,
Our blinded souls, our temporal body,
That we may see at last that which here remains hidden.
Freedom, long did we seek you in discipline, action, suffering.
Now as we die, we see you and know you at last, face to face.

