

THE “IMPLICIT ETHICS” OF NEW TESTAMENT WRITINGS: A DRAFT ON A NEW METHODOLOGY FOR ANALYSING NEW TESTAMENT ETHICS*

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Abstract

If ethics are defined as the theory of moral action, we must ask whether it makes sense to examine the New Testament narrative and epistle texts with regard to ethics, considering them as more than simply instructional texts for putting actions into practice. This article begins with the assumption that the New Testament contains ethics that, while not explicitly and systematically contemplated, are certainly indirectly assumed or represented when actions are explained, evaluated and required. Therefore, it is appropriate to speak of the “implicit ethics” of New Testament writings. In order to analyse this indirect structure of motivation, a methodology based on eight approaches is suggested:

1. Linguistic Form; 2. Norms and Values for Action; 3. History of Traditions of Individual Norms/Moral Instances; 4. Priorities of Values; 5. Ethical “Logic”/Structure of Motives; 6. The Moral Agent; 7. The Resulting Ethos as Lived; 8. Addressee/Field of application.

The complexity of contemplating actions taken from historical, written sources makes such a multiple approach necessary. If it is possible to enlighten and reveal a more systematic ethics and order of values underlying the texts, the role of New Testament ethics in the current ethical discourse—within theology and the church as well as in the wider fields of science and society—can better be reflected.

1. Ethical Theory, Ethos, and “Implicit Ethics”

“Ethics” can be defined as the systematic-theoretical examination of the lived ethos. It was Aristotle who referred in this way to “ethical theory”

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(ἠθικὴ θεωρία; *An. post.* 1.33 = 89b 9). For him, ethics questioned the foundation of the life of the πόλις composed in custom and habit (Aristotle, *Eth. nic.* 1180b 3) and he left us two ethical writings, which consist of systematic reflections on the values and motives of a certain behaviour.² In this tradition, “ethics” is concerned with a rational analysis of morals, the critical examination of ethos, and the questioning of the motives of morality. Ethics is a second-order activity, asking for the logic of moral discourse. According to Annemarie Pieper, ethics is the “science of moral action” that examines “human practice with regard to the conditions of its morality”.³ “Theological ethics” is then correspondingly the reflexivity on the moral judgements and actions of people in the scope of Christian belief.⁴

The question is, however, whether one can, according to this definition, speak of “ethics” or an “ethical theory” in the New Testament? Many scholars would answer this question in the negative. New Testament writings are—according to those exegetes—situation based writings that refer, as in the Pauline letters, to a concrete communication between an author and his addressee. To understand and analyse their ethical implications means to explore the situation and context in which they were written. Therefore, investigating the morality of the New Testament means looking at the ethos behind New Testament writings.⁵ According to the definition of Michael Wolter, ethos is based on the customs and conventions of actions in a concrete community.⁶ Based on the constitutive relatedness

2 See Aristoteles (transl. by Dirlmeier ⁴ 1984 and 2001); Broadie (1991); Höffe (1995); Bostock (2000); Wolf (2002).

3 See Pieper (⁴2000, 24-30).

4 See the definition in Hunold, Laubach and Greis (2000, here 3): “Theologische Ethik ist die wissenschaftliche Reflexion auf das moralisch-sittliche Urteilen und Handeln des Menschen im Horizont des christlichen Glaubens.” (Theological ethics is the scientific reflexion on the moral-ethical judgements and actions of people within the scope of Christian faith).

5 See for instance Meeks (1993). Meeks prefers to use the term “morality”, because it “names a dimension of life, a pervasive and, often, only partly conscious set of value-laden dispositions, inclinations, attitudes, and habits.” (ibid. 3f.).

6 According to Michael Wolter “the term ethos designates a canon of institutionalised practices, which a given group regards as liable.” See Wolter (2006, here 200). See also Wolter (2001; 1997, here 430f.). Jan van der Watt used a wider definition in his volume “Identity, Ethics and Ethos in the New Testament”. According to him, “ethos is understood not only as the specific, unique, and repetitive actions of a particular group or

of ethos to a social system, Thomas Schmeller uses the concordant definition “every ethos is actually a group ethos”.⁷

And indeed, there is no one systematic exploration on ethics, like the Aristotelian theory, within the New Testament. Does this mean that there is no interest at all in reflecting on the motives of morals? Is there no interest in using rational arguments to convince the addressees of the right behaviour? Must the exegesis be limited, with regard to New Testament ethics, to the focus of ethos or should we even abandon the term “ethics” of the New Testament as inappropriate?

Analysing the ethos behind the New Testament writings is without doubt a worthwhile and necessary task. However, it is by far not the only approach to ethical questions in the New Testament. Even if no systematic synopsis of these meta-reflections on norms for actions are to be found in the New Testament writings, implicit and sometimes explicit reasons as well as the argumentative recourse to certain ethical maxims and norms underlie the individual paraenesis.⁸ For example, Paul was not only a situational ethicist, interested in the clarification of concrete cases. Above and beyond this, he formulated rules of behaviour and value standards that could claim, in the middle of all the diversity, more than individual or perhaps even universal validity and could explicitly call on reason, as is shown clearly in Rom 12:1f.⁹

Furthermore, one basic form of reflexivity on ethos takes place within the perspective of value judgements and is thus concerned with the question of whether and why an action is “right” or “good” or, in the scope of a value hierarchy, if it is “better” or “worse” than another.

The New Testament undoubtedly contains texts that reflect actions and thus make value judgements. After telling the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus asks which of the three acted “correctly”—according to the Torah commandments that had been previously discussed: “Which of these

community, (...) but it is also used as a broader description of the behaviour as it is presented in the different books of the New Testament”, see Van der Watt (2006, here vii).

7 See Schmeller (2001, here 120): “Eigentlich ist jedes Ethos Gruppenethos.”; see the earlier Keck (1974).

8 See Horn (1999, 2:1608f.): “Although it may be based on a situation (...), this framework demonstrates a context of justification of ethics that goes beyond the situation”; Meeks 2002.

9 See on reason in ethics Stowers (1990; Scott 2006, here 53): “Paul’s ethical teaching is often supported by reasoned argument.” Also Betz (1994a, here: 199).

three, do you think, proved neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” (Luke 10:36). After the parable of the two sons and the father, Jesus asks: “Which of the two did the will of his father?” (Matt 21:31)—or in other words—which one acted “correctly” according to his father’s wishes? Matthew also puts “justice” as a main ethical norm in a comparative context by speaking of a “better justice” (see Matt 5:20: ἡ δικαιοσύνη πλεῖον τῶν γραμματέων καὶ Φαρισαίων). In the Pauline letters, ethics are also carried out in the scope of evaluations of “good” and “evil” (see Rom 7:13-21: τὸ καλὸν—τὸ κακόν). Actions should undergo an evaluation of values and legal interests in order to choose the good: πάντα δὲ δοκιμάζετε, τὸ καλὸν κατέχετε (“Test all things; hold fast what is good”; 1 Thess 5:21). Many more examples could be given.

In the end, focussing attention only on the ethos of the New Testament means not analysing the texts themselves, but looking behind the texts. The exploration of ethos is based on the historical question of what happened in a certain situation and community. Here the New Testament writings are to be read only as historic sources for Early Christianity.¹⁰ To overstate the situation, according to that approach the main issue is not understanding the New Testament text but understanding the historical situation behind the text.

However, it is not merely the situation, but rather primarily the text itself that had an impact on Christian ethics and has had an ongoing influence on morals and norms until the present day. New Testament hermeneutics must therefore deal with at least three perspectives in interpreting a text—the historical context, the text itself and the point of view of the reader who is trying to understand the meaning of the text.¹¹ Keeping this hermeneutical triangle in mind, only looking for the historical context, in other words for the ethos or morality of early Christian communities, would lead to a reduction of meaning. However, even within the concrete historical setting there have been moral conflicts which made it indispensable to investigate different ways of acting and to argue for one position and against the other. Therefore it is justifiable to speak of the “ethics” or better of the “implicit

10 Meeks even wanted to widen the view in integrating documents, that are later than any in the New Testament, up to the second century, see Meeks (1993, 3).

11 See on that hermeneutical model my article Zimmermann (2008).

ethics” of the New Testament.¹² This “ethics” should be called “implicit” because the New Testament authors themselves render no systematic account for norms of action and contexts of reason that would be similar perhaps to the ethics of Aristotle. In spite of a lack of systematization, they still have an order of values and ethical argumentation. We, however, can retrospectively derive, from individual elements of the text, an “ethical superstructure” underlying the specific communication of a certain writing and at the same time assemble the mosaic stones into a more systematic awareness of ethical argumentation. This underlying ethics is still strictly bound to the text itself, and cannot be misunderstood as something which is imposed upon the text from outside. Also, the term “implicit” (which has been borrowed from the literature of reader-response criticism¹³) takes its orientation here primarily from the writings themselves and less from the postulated authors of the works. It is thus more precise to speak of the “implicit ethics” of a New Testament *scripture*, which can be discovered (not only constructed!) by a reader.

2. The Search for an “Implicit Ethics of the New Testament”

If we agree that there is an underlying ethics, a rational system of morality within New Testament writings, we should try to find a way to bring it to the forefront. The aspects that will be sought in such an investigation depend on the definition of ethics itself. Because ethics was defined as a systematic textual reflection of the motives for certain behaviour, it is these motives, or, ethically spoken, “norms” or “values” that are to be found. The values, such as virtues or the Torah, take their importance not from logic, but from their acceptance in a certain community. Thus, we must look at the tradition and background of these norms. Values in a text do not appear in isolation; rather they are used with argumentations, in comparison to other values or even in a hierarchy of values. This means that we must analyse the linguistic or rhetorical setting of the text as well as the logical order in which the values appear. However, the aim of biblical normative ethics is not only to describe, but also to prescribe the “good” or “bad”. The ethical logic or

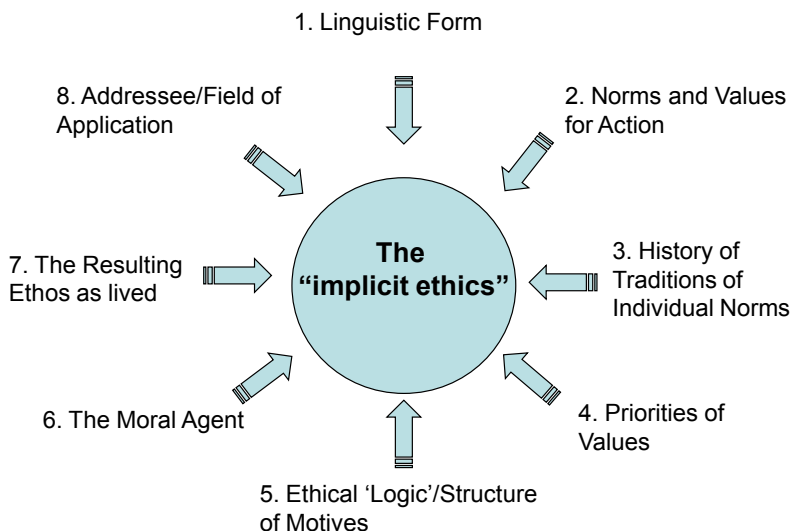
12 See Horrell (2005, 98): “Paul’s letters do not, however, only imply a particular kind of shaping of the community and its ethos, they also contain explicit and self-conscious argumentation on questions of conduct and attempts to articulate ways to resolve conflict and disagreement.” See also Löhr (2005, here 151).

13 See Iser (³1994).

rhetoric should lead to an ethical judgement. It is up to a moral agent (individual or collective) to find this judgement, which then leads to action. Sometimes this action has already taken place in the past and is subsequently evaluated in the New Testament writings. Sometimes the actions are to be carried out in the future and the ethical judgement should assist in doing the “right thing”. In any case, referring to action means that ethical argumentation is indeed embedded in the lived ethos of concrete people and communities. However, as the New Testament is used as a canonical text, the impact of the text can not be limited to the first communication situation. A certain tradition of reading and understanding the implicit ethics of a text also influences our reading.

If we try to put these ideas into methodological order, we can heuristically separate several steps or, better said, perspectives in analysing the implicit ethics. The following schema outlines a first draft, the steps of analysis of which could be useful in exploring the “implicit ethics” of the New Testament writings.¹⁴ The questions that introduce each section serve to focus on the specific topic.

14 I first pointed out these outlines in Zimmermann (2007), 272-276.



Perspectives in analysing the “implicit ethics” of New Testament Writings

2.1 Linguistic Form: Which linguistic form does the ethical statement take?

With regard to New Testament writings, the textuality of ethics is obvious. The text is the medium through which we find the implicit ethics. There is no ethics without language. Upon the background of this basic statement, the question arises as to the forms and levels on which this linguisticity of ethics enters our consciousness. We can differentiate among three levels of textuality: intra-textuality, inter-textuality and extra-textuality of ethics.¹⁵

On the first level, we could ask which syntactical forms, stylistic features, and structural logic are used in presenting ethical statements. There are several forms of imperatives. There is the complex difference between prescriptive and descriptive moral language. There are even narrative, metaphoric, ironic texts etc. that transport morality through their specific style.

15 See for more details Zimmermann (2010) (forthcoming).

Secondly, the nature of a particular unit of text (on the macro- and micro-levels) also influences its meaning and moral quality. Since the early days of form criticism, we have been used to classifying New Testament texts into certain genres, and we may ask in which way the form of a text transports its ethical meaning. According to new genre theories, form-building elements fulfil the function of categorizing individual texts into other, known text types and their specific uses. In relation to the example of the vice and virtue catalogue, the addressees of these texts are reminded of well-known sequences of value concepts as they commonly occurred, for instance in Hellenistic Jewish conversation theology.¹⁶ Only with the knowledge of the conventional use of text types in ethical discourse can the ethical character of an individual text be recognized.

Thirdly, the text is addressed to a reader. This appeal-structure of texts builds the bridge between ethical thinking and acting. I speak here of the “extra-textual” dimension, which means that the text remains the definitive source and component part of this approach. From the perspective of the text, we shall reflect, in this last point, on the historical and (when applicable) the present-day communication situation and potential impact of the text. We could take various methodological routes in this process. Ideas of literary hermeneutics could be used; methods of speech act analysis, reader-response criticism or pragmatics could be applied.

2.2 Norms and values for action: Which leading norms and values of action are mentioned?

Under the heading “norm”, “values” or “maxims for action”, we should designate here—in connection to the comprehensive definition of M. Forschner¹⁷—a basic principle that puts a normative obligation on the behaviour of the individual or the group. Thus, for example in Paul, general *moral instances* such as “nature” or “custom/habit” and institutionalized *moral codices* (e.g. the Torah) can be differentiated. Even individual *people* can obtain moral status if they enjoy authority within a peer group, such as Jesus or the presbyter of the letters of John. Finally, a norm can identify a goal that goes beyond the factual validity of rules. To demonstrate the

¹⁶ See Mott (1978).

¹⁷ See Forschner (⁴1992, 200-201).

variety of norms, the following list gives some insights into the norms to which Paul refers in 1 Corinthians:

Christ/Communion with Christ:	1 Cor 1:9; 3:11, 23; 5:7 (Pesach); 6:15; 7:22; 11:1; 12 <i>passim</i> (body)
Spirit (of God) (πνεῦμα θεοῦ):	1 Cor 2:4, 12; 3:16; 6:17, 19; 12:11 et al.
Sanctity, Sanctification (ἅγιος, ἁγιασμός):	1 Cor 3:17; 6:11, 19; 7:14, 34; 14:33
Paul himself (as model):	1 Cor 4:16; 11:1
Duty (ὀφειλή):	1 Cor 7:3; 11:7, 10 (see 7:36)
Jesus-Saying:	1 Cor 7:10f.; 9:14, see 11:23-25
Love (ἀγάπη):	1 Cor 8:1-3; 13 <i>passim</i> ; 16:14; see 4:21
Consciousness (συνείδησις):	1 Cor 8:7, 10, 12; 10:27-29 (see 1 Cor 4:4)
Freedom (ἐλευθερία):	1 Cor 9:1, 19; 10:29 (see 1 Cor 7:21f.; 7:39)
Torah-Law (νόμος):	1 Cor 9:8-10, 20; 14:34; 15:56
Gospel (εὐαγγέλιον):	1 Cor 9:12, 23
Affects, e.g. necessity (ἀνάγκη); lust (ἐπιθυμητής):	1 Cor 9:16; 10:6
Glory of God (δόξα θεοῦ):	1 Cor 10:31
Nature (φύσις):	1 Cor 11:14, see 2:14 (natural man)
Moral/Custom (συνήθεια, πρόπον, ἥθος):	1 Cor 11:13, 16; 15:33; general conventions also in 1 Cor 8:7; 9:7

The differentiation between *formal-ethical* principles (e.g. golden rule) and individual *material-ethical* goods (e.g. ἐλευθερία, ἀγάπη), that can be introduced as the instances of motive can also be useful. In analysing a text for its ethical implications, one has to find the ruling principles or values to

which an author refers. Searching for underlying norms does not mean that these principles, following the assumptions of linearity, must lead to practices. However, in any case, there are norms and values which play a role in arguing for a certain practice.

2.3 History of traditions of individual norms/moral instances: in which traditional and contemporary context do these norms exist?

This step is closely linked to the former one. Norms have a dimension of time and space or, in other words, of history and community. There are no absolute values and norms. Each norm is bound to a certain community in time in which this norm is considered to be important. There may be different stages of acceptance. Some norms, for example telling the truth, were wide-spread in ancient times. Others, like certain food restrictions, were limited to a special community, such as the Jewish community.

To evaluate a norm and its use in a text, it is therefore necessary to put it into the wider context of ancient society. Norms must be classified in tradition and religious history. In this process it can be helpful heuristically to differentiate ideal-typically between Jewish and Greek norms. Let us take, for instance, the value of “freedom” (ἐλευθερία).¹⁸

It is quite clear that “the terminological development of “freedom”/ἐλευθερία took place almost exclusively in the Greek world of the 1st century before Christ”.¹⁹ Within Judaism, the release from slavery in Egypt is one of the definitive and constitutive events in the history of the Jews. However, this deliverance is only regarded collectively and is characterized as an “exodus”, as a “leading out”. Thus, it is not reflected with the terminology of “individual freedom”.²⁰

18 See Schlier (1935, 2:484-500); Nestle (1967; 1972, 8:270-306); Jones (1987); Vollenweider (1989); Betz (1994b); Weder (1998); Dautzenberg (1996; 2001); Theißen (2002).

19 See Dautzenberg (2001, 57).

20 Correspondingly, the Hebrew term for ἐλευθερία, נַפְשָׁךְ, is found only in Lev 19:20; there it refers to a non Israelite female slave; the adjective נַפְשָׁךְ is more common, as for example Exod 21:2, 5, 6f.; Deut 15:12-18; Deut 21:14.

Furthermore, among the Jewish people, the condition of slavery was not treated in a similar way to that in the Greek world. While Judaism recognized the phenomenon of individual debt slavery, such relationships of dependance were, however, limited within their borders to a strict maximum of six years. Thus, freedom is a Greek phenomenon.

In the Greek tradition, the term “freedom” was discussed particularly by the stoics.²¹ Based on stoic determinism, in which fate works according to immutable laws, the question arises as to whether and where people have freedom and freedom of action. Based on such discussions, the Stoa went on the offensive and claimed freedom exclusively for itself: “Only the stoic is truly free!”²² The stoic philosopher Epictetus devoted his longest single diatribe entirely to the subject of freedom, see *Diatr.* 4.1: Περὶ ἐλευθερίας.

Nevertheless, Hellenistic Judaism, or perhaps the role of law in non-Jewish discourse,²³ demonstrates that one-sided determinations do not do justice to early Christianity. Instead of monocausal derivations, the goal of this methodological step should be no more but also no less than to develop potentials of meaning and scopes of understanding.

2.4 Priorities of values: Which inner context of different norms is produced? Which emphasis of norms, which hierarchy of values can be recognized?

The various norms are not positioned equally to each other. They are evaluated and are put into relation to each other within a hierarchy of values. Only in this way can the independent profile of the respective reflexivity of action be recognized. In 1 Cor 6:12, Paul refers to “freedom” as a guiding norm, but in his argumentation he demonstrates that “freedom” is not the most important norm in regards to relations with a prostitute. A relationship and even bodily union with Christ disallows sexual intercourse with a prostitute (1 Cor 6:15-17). Thus, the relationship with Christ is more important than freedom although freedom remains valuable, as we can see in the subsequent discourse of the letter (e.g. 1 Cor 9).

If one wishes to analyse the use of norms in New Testament texts in this regard, it is helpful, in connection to a moral-philosophical discussion, to

21 On this see Forschner (2019, 104-113); Vollenweider (1989, 124-133); Klauck (1996).

22 Klauck (1996, 104).

23 See Aristotle, *Eth. nic.* 1134a; Sonntag (2000); Haacker (2002).

differentiate between a “classificatory” and a “comparative” value concept.²⁴ An example: the Pauline admonition in 1 Thess 5:21 (“Test all things; hold fast what is good [τὸ καλόν]”) assumes a classificatory valuation that differentiates between good and evil, between “valuable” and “valueless”. In contrast, in 1 Cor 7:38 we see the comparative logic of values: “Thus he who marries his partner does well (καλῶς ποιεῖ), and he who does not will do better (κρεῖσσον ποιήσει)”. It is worthwhile mentioning that the New Testament writings generally do not offer a logical system of values; instead it seems at times that a certain system is meant to be questioned or taken *ad absurdum*. In this way, for instance, the normal use of justice as a system of proportionality is brought to an end with regard to the justice of God in Matt 20:1-16.²⁵ Nevertheless it is possible to investigate the relations and priorities among the values used in an argument, which to a certain extent can be described in a systematic manner.

2.5 Ethical “logic”/structure of motives: According to which internal structure of motives, according to which ethical argumentation does ethical judgement take place?

Ethics searches for the internal structure of motives according to which a norm or an action is judged to be “good” or “right”. Ethics is thus more than the rhetorical description of the argumentative pattern, even if this can be very useful in the perception of the ethical method of argumentation. Often New Testament authors use rational argumentations or even logical deductions to justify a demanded action or category of values. Thus we can ask: How does an ethical judgement arise, which strategy of argumentation is employed here?

Since Bultmann’s influential article on Paul’s ethics,²⁶ the idea that the New Testament “imperatives” are based on the “indicative” mode of speech has been used to describe an inner logic of ethics. However, even though there have been some modifications to this model, it is by far too simple to be used for describing the complex form of ethical structure within New Testament discourse. Analysed using logic, the terms “indicative” and

24 See Kutschera (1973, 85-87). The “metric” value term that is used also in analytical moral philosophy played no role in New Testament ethics.

25 See Zimmermann (2009, 259-261); similarly also the limits of the ‘logic of forgiveness’ in Matt 18:23-35 (2009, 261-263).

26 Bultmann (1924).

“imperative” are not ethical at all, but rather grammatical metaphors. Understanding them literally would lead to the so-called natural fallacy. And we could add even more reasons leading to the conclusion that the indicative-imperative-structure is not really helpful in describing the ethical structure of New Testament texts.²⁷

But which category would be more helpful? Which methods can be used to analyse the structure of motives, the internal conclusions, with which an ethical judgement is justified?

Taking up the discussion of ethics in analytic philosophy, we can describe these structures with categories of logic which are linked to linguistic form or syntax.²⁸ In this way premises can be determined that lead to conclusions. In this process there are inductive and deductive conclusions, enthymemes and syllogisms. One can also define so-called “presuppositions” or “implicatures”. Presuppositions²⁹ are understood to be the implicit presumptions of a statement.³⁰ The term “implicature”, which goes back to the linguistic philosopher Paul Grice,³¹ attempts to capture the phenomenon in which aspects of meaning are alluded to and presupposed in linguistic statements, but are not themselves stated.

However, is it permissible to use modern ethical theory to analyse New Testament ethics? This question has to be taken seriously because there is always the danger of misunderstanding a text due to inadequate methods and terms. On the other hand, New Testament scholarship has had long experience of using methodology from other disciplines (such as linguistics or archaeology) to gain a better understanding of the text. So why do we not

27 For more details see my article Zimmermann (2007, 259-267) and now Zimmermann/Horn (2009). For the same conclusions see also Backhaus (2000); Schnelle (2003a, 629-644; 2003b, 116).

28 So Bocheński (⁴1973, 11): “(Logik ist) die Lehre von der Folgerichtigkeit. Da für die Folgerichtigkeit nicht die inhaltliche Bedeutung, sondern die syntaktische Form der Ausdrücke entscheidend ist, sprach man auch von formaler Logik.” (Logic is the teaching of congruity. Because, in congruity, it is not the contextual meaning but rather the syntactic form of the expressions that is important, one spoke also of formal logic).

29 Petöfi and Franck (1973); Kempson (1975).

30 B. Russell’s classical example is “The present king of France is bald.” This statement includes the presupposition that there currently is a King in France; thus, it is called “existence-presupposition”. Cf. Vater (2005, 32).

31 Grice (1975). An example of a *generalized, conversational implicature* would be a sentence like “I have four children” which suggests that the speaker has no more than four children for if one had five or six children, the sentence would also be valid.

use the complex and well-defined terminology of philosophical ethics, which is primarily derived from ancient ethics itself? Why are we fixated only on the ethical field of oversimplifying categories like “indicative” and “imperative”? Without a doubt, there are basic problems and phenomena in ethics that have been discussed from ancient times up to now. Irreconcilable contradictions are revealed, demanding a particular judgement, or arguments are made with analogies or with the figure “a minore ad maius”. Beyond “pure logic” a whole series of such structures of motive are used within the New Testament, as they were also described especially for the letters of Paul.³²

Thus the figure of the postulated consequences of action within the scope of the “act-and-consequence connection” also belongs to the classical repertoire of ethical grammar. In order to attain or avoid certain consequences, a certain action is classified as correct and good. Corresponding sentences are found in document Q:

Q/Luke 6:37:

Καὶ μὴ κρίνετε, καὶ οὐ μὴ κριθῆτε· καὶ μὴ καταδικάζετε, καὶ οὐ μὴ καταδικασθῆτε. ἀπολύετε, καὶ ἀπολυθήσεσθε·
(Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven);

Q/Luke 6:38:

δίδοτε, καὶ δοθήσεται ὑμῖν· μέτρον καλὸν πιεσμένον σεσαλευμένον ὑπερεκχυννόμενον δώσουσιν εἰς τὸν κόλπον ὑμῶν· ὃ γὰρ μέτρῳ μετρεῖτε ἀντιμετρηθήσεται ὑμῖν.
(Give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For the measure you give will be the measure you get back.)

According to the terminology of ethical tradition, one can characterize such a justification as “teleological” because an act is evaluated in terms of a particular goal (gr. τέλος). The basic differentiation which is used here has been common since C. D. Broad.³³ He distinguished between

32 See Vos (2002); Wolbert (1981, 54-71); Furger (1984)—as the corresponding reply of Schnackenburg (1984); most recently see Fenske (2004).

33 See Broad (1930, 206f.); factually—although using different terminology—also in Sidgwick (1874, 200), further Paulsen (1889, 221-250).

“deontological” and “teleological” argumentation. The ethical argumentation is called *deontological* when the customarily correct action is deduced from a prescribed norm (Greek τὸ δέον—the obligation, the duty) (Imperative: Do the prescribed good for its own sake). The motive is *teleological* or consequential when the value of an action is measured by the aims of the action (Greek τὸ τέλος) or the consequences (Imperative: Do so, so that a desired goal is reached). A. Pieper differentiated seven more ethical structures of motives, such as the discursive, the dialectic, or the analogous methods³⁴ that can serve as heuristic instruments.

The degree of discrimination with which ethical argumentation can take place is seen in 1 Cor 9:1-23 on the question of the right to a livelihood.³⁵ Paul justifies a worker’s right to wages by referring to many different norms, whether they be the customs of other professions such as soldiers and shepherds (1 Cor 9:7), a quotation from the Torah (1 Cor 9:9), the customs of the payment of temple personnel (1 Cor 9:13) or lastly a saying of Jesus (1 Cor 9:14). This method of justification using references to such norms can be characterized as “deontological” because a prescribed maxim becomes a norm for future behaviour.

However, Paul subordinates these norms to others when he justifies his own renunciation of wages by referring to freedom or even to emotion (the compulsion to preach the Gospel, 1 Cor 9:16f.). According to 1 Cor 9:19-23, the goal of his actions is “to win over as many as possible (ἵνα... κερδήσω, v. 19-22a and ἵνα πάντως τινὰς σώσω, v. 22). Everything he does, he does only to serve the Gospel (v. 23). His behaviour here is no longer justified deontologically with respect to prescribed norms, but rather teleologically with regards to the goals to be reached.

2.6 *The moral agent: Who is the ethical subject, the carrier of ethical judgements? Which factors constitute the ethical subject?*

Ethics is linked to judgement, which cannot be separated from human beings. Even the most convincing logical argumentation must be understood by a concrete person. Without certain decisions from concrete persons in concrete situations, ethics would remain in the ivory tower of academics. In

34 See on the methods of ethical arguing the list of Pieper (⁴2000, 200-232).

35 See for details Zimmermann (2007, 279-282).

order to make an ethical judgement, it is necessary to have a so-called moral agent,³⁶ in the sense of personal arbitration.

The moral agents found in New Testament writings have several facets: There are some characters that serve simply as models to be imitated.³⁷ Others, such as the servant in the parable of the “unmerciful servant” (Matt 18:23-35) or the couple Ananias and Sapphira, who sold a piece of property and kept back part of the proceeds without telling the truth (Acts 5:1-11), are presented as anti-models.

Paul especially grants us insights into the various factors that influence the carriers of ethical judgement in their decision-making. It would be idealistic to think that logic or argumentation is the only reason for making ethical judgements. Personal decisions are determined by various factors, such as reason (see Rom 12:1; Phil 4:8), emotion (see 1 Cor 9:16; Rom 7:15) or consciousness (1 Cor 8:7, 10, 12).

However, in order to call a decision an “ethical judgement”, it is necessary to reflect the reasons that influenced the decision. In this process, we may ask: Has the decision been made “autonomously” or “heteronomously”? Which order of preferences has been followed? What is the relationship between the moral agent and other people, higher authorities or powers (see Rom 7:18f.)? How do individual ethics and social ethics relate to each other—can the subject also have a collective dimension?

2.7 The resulting ethos as lived: Which concrete ethos corresponds to or contradicts the ethical argumentation?

As helpful as it is heuristically to differentiate the investigation of norms and the motive of actions from their actual implementation, it is equally impossible to separate them. Ethics is, in the end, the reflection of a lived ethos and thus reciprocally interwoven with it. Therefore, the aspects that can socio-historically be raised to an ethos of the community can and must be brought into the ethical system as a whole. The separation between ethos and ethics does, however, make it possible to keep the contra-factual function of ethical reflection in view, as difficult as this is to name in each case, when the text does not do it itself.

36 See Wolter (2003).

37 According to R. Burridge Jesus himself is the leading model to be imitated, see Burridge (2007).

As mentioned above according to Michael Wolter “the term ethos designates a canon of institutionalised practices, which a given group regards as liable”.³⁸ Ethos is thus based on the customs and conventions of actions in a concrete community.

The methodological question is: How do we explore these practices behind the text?

There are only few texts which refer directly to a congregation’s customs, such as taking care of widows in Acts 6-7. But even then, we do not know if the author is reflecting a real practice or is giving us an idealistic (and individual) or even contra-factual view of how the community should act.

All reconstructions of ethos as lived are still limited to historical sources—mostly text sources.

Instead of speaking of an “historical ethos”, we should speak of an “ethos remembered” because the ethos of a group must be communicated and reflected within the group in order to have an identity-building function. Ethos is therefore tied to the text in so far as a community establishes its own morality not only in rituals and customs, but primarily through texts. Collective identity always requires an entrenchment in media, and language, especially conventionalized forms of language as they are found in genres, is the media singled-out for this self-reflexivity. Prime examples of linguistic forms of ethos are commands, community rules or house rules. They are the morals, set down in text, of a particular group.

2.8 *Addressee/field of application: To whom is the text addressed? Which field of application of a norm is mentioned?*

New Testament texts often appeal directly to an addressee who is directed to act in a certain way. The question then arises as to who in particular is addressed. Is there one concrete person, as, for instance, Philemon, the master of the house, in Paul’s letter to Philemon (Phlm 1f.)? Or is the text addressed to a whole congregation dealing with community problems, as in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians (2 Cor 6:11; see also 1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1)? Paul often deals with the concrete ethical questions of his community. In doing this he differentiates between norms of action that are valid for him, for his assistants, for individual community members or for the community

38 See finally Wolter (2006, here 200); for former works see n. 5.

as a whole. Beyond this, he makes general-anthropological value judgements that go far beyond the concrete situation.

However, even within the original historical situation, the focus of the addressee can move from a concrete group to a wider group. 2 Cor 1:1, for example, integrates “all the saints who are in all Achaia” in addition to the church at Corinth. Or for example, Paul addresses the letter to Philemon not only to the master of the house but rather, consciously, to all members of the house in order to give the problem an importance greater than the individual.

Some letters (Gal, Heb, Jude) do not even mention a particular congregation. At least at the stage of canonization, the New Testament texts are not limited to a certain situation but are addressed to all Christian readers who are looking for ethical advice. Finally, the canon as the location of tradition de-contextualizes concrete individual decisions and gives them a universal claim that must be reflected hermeneutically. Thus, the question is asked here as to the differing scopes and fields of application of ethical judgements. In other words, we are concerned with the problems of particularism and universalism. What happens to a certain ethical rule in the process of de-contextualisation? Can all the ethical implications of the text be used in a different context? Which ones can be considered universal and which ones cannot? And for what reasons? Why, for instance, does (hardly) anyone understand the rule for hairdressing in 1 Cor 11:6, 14f., which could be read as a guideline for present day behaviour, as a universal ethical principle, whereas sexual intercourse with prostitutes (1 Cor 6:12-20) is still understood, among Christians, to be unethical?

Thus, looking at the fields of application of ethical texts leads us to the broad and complex hermeneutical questions of using, applying and understanding New Testament ethics in current ethical discourse.³⁹

3. Some Final Remarks

Generally speaking, “methodology” is a set of procedures that works toward a particular goal. Applied to New Testament exegesis, methodological interpretation can help understand particular aspects of a text better by means of a regulated and intersubjectively comprehensible procedure. It is generally recognized that there is close correlation in this process between a particular method and the expected answers.

39 On this important question see e.g. Hays (2006).

With regard to my narrow investigation into a method for the understanding of the ethics of New Testament writings, we can say that, in the end, each text can be examined for its ethical implications. Every canonical and thus, for the community of faith, normative text can be read as an “ethical text”. Nevertheless, the ethical part of the text is not limited to the field of application (= 8). It is, however, the goal of the methodological steps outlined here to unearth the ethical dimensions of a text on very different levels. The question then is whether the individual steps should be executed in sequence or indeed how they are related to one another.

Are there “steps” at all—is there an order in which to ask the questions? Some approaches are closely linked. Analysing, for instance, certain norms against their traditional background is not possible without having already located these norms in the text. It is possible to link various ways of asking to a linear path of exegesis, e.g. norms > background of norms > hierarchy of values in the text etc. However, it is also possible to construct a network from one approach to other different ones. Thus, the first linguistic analysis of a text does not only mean to describe a text on an intra-textual, grammatical level, but represents within a linguistic style a certain norm (e.g. commandment > law), which can be analysed with regard to genre on an inter-textual level. Further, the hierarchy of values can be described as a linguistic or rhetorical structure and even the field of application is based on extra-textual e.g. pragmatic implications of the text.⁴⁰ Thus it becomes clear that the above differences fulfil a heuristic function. Individual points should not be considered as self-excluding aspects but rather demonstrate overlaps with other perspectives. Nevertheless, it is worth looking with greater precision at each individual aspect on its own.

Indeed, the various approaches seem to be a “mixture” of different scientific traditions and methods.⁴¹ Are we allowed to mix different approaches in this way? Is it appropriate to read the text with different, and thus modern methods?

40 On this structure of intra-, inter-, and extra-textual dimension see my article Zimmermann (2010) (forthcoming).

41 On this Engberg-Pedersen (2009, 268): This set of methodological questions “constitutes a mixture of perspectives derived from the western philosophical tradition of ethics combined with perspectives derived from contemporary, linguistic analysis of literary forms and from traditional (and newer) tools of New Testament exegesis. To a large extent the attraction of this framework lies in the fact that it brings together these various perspectives into something like a unified grid that is also sufficiently differentiated.”

The guiding principle for doing this is understanding and analysing the ethical dimension of the text as well as possible. Because ethics is complex, a corresponding methodological guideline cannot be too simple. Within a threefold hermeneutical approach including historical, textual and reader-orientated aspects, no one single method will be sufficient to cover all aspects. Various perspectives may be brought into play with each other and can reinforce one another as part of a comprehensive interpretation of the text.⁴²

If it were possible to enlighten and reveal a more systematic ethics and order of values underlying the texts, the role of New Testament ethics in the current ethical discourse—within theology and the church as well as in the wider fields of science and society—could better be reflected.

Whether the configuration of these approaches will stand the test, whether this configuration will have to be reduced or expanded and whether it can be applied equally successfully to different areas within the New Testament—all of these questions will be answered only through more comprehensive studies that apply this methodology.

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42 See on this evaluation also Engberg-Pedersen (2009, 269).

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