“With each other, for each other, against each other”
Bonhoeffer’s Theory of Mandates as a Theological Contribution to Socio-Ethical Pluralism

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Ethics after Babel

Morality is undergoing radical changes in late modern society. Our visions on justice and on what it means to seek the good life are just as confused as the society in which we take part. Pornography, genetic manipulation, abortion, the natural environment - moral discussion on almost every topic leads to opposite outcomes, though each of them on plausible argumentations.¹ Not only the content, also the language of morality lacks the unity and transparency of a common moral vocabulary. Ethics has become an Ethics after Babel (J. Stout).² A confusion of tongues reigns; we do not understand each other any more. A consensus in matters of morality seems out of the question. How we can still do ethics after Babel?
Various responses to the experience of ethical crisis are possible. First, one can opt for an apocalyptic scenario. One ascertains that morality is loosing its regulating role in society and that morals are disintegrating, just like society as a whole. In the words of Y.B. Yeats³:

*Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;*  
*Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.*

The romantic nostalgia for a re-establishment of an eternal moral cosmos that reflects a metaphysical order of being leads to various forms of cultural conservatism and religious fundamentalism. Another possible response is what one might call the *dancing on the volcano* scenario. The adherents of this option do not deplore the contemporary feeling of moral crisis, but, on the contrary, evaluate it positively and radicalize it to its extreme. The moral subjectivism and relativism of so-called postmodern aesthetes reduces morality to a matter of personal taste. Good is what pleases; bad what induces disgust. Some, however, stubbornly stick to the Enlightenment scenario, which the postmodernists wish to abandon. They are - and that is a third option - still searching for a reasonable basis for a universal morality. Both John Rawls’
procedural reconstruction of a theory of justice and Jürgen Habermas' concept of the rationality of communicative action can be considered to be a direct continuation of the Enlightenment tradition. However, the moral consensus they seek, has lost much of its former substantial character. The question of the good life is eliminated from the rational procedure, resulting in a radical formalization of ethics.

A pluralistic ethics of institutions

There is, however, still another way of confronting the so-called moral crisis. The question is justified whether the analysis of the contemporary moral situation is correct. Perhaps it is not morality as such that is desintegrating, but our conceptions of morality and of how it functions. Maybe there is less Babel (and we share more morality with each other) than we think and perhaps a little Babel is not as bad as we might think (relieving us of the task of creating a unified morality). The vision on morality presumed by this position is what one might call a pluralistic one. It rejects the monism of both religious fundamentalists and enlightened adepts of a formal universal Reason. Morality seen in a pluralistic manner is a heterogeneous and polycentric network of values and norms, which cannot be reduced to or integrated within a single principle of rationality or a single metaphysical system. A universal morality does not exist. There are only local moralities, which overlap or conflict, or which are simply incommensurable with one another. There are many different ways in which one can be an ethical pluralist. But each of them shares the intuition that a plurality of moral values and norms does not have to be viewed as a loss, but rather as a benefit for the sake of the good life; even when various values conflict with one another.4

However, since there are various ways of construing ethical pluralism, a further qualification is needed. Does pluralism in ethics not imply relativism? If there are many moralities and no One Common Standard, do standards still exist? Or is the postmodernist scenario right, in stating that no moral criteria can be determined beyond the subjective and contingent perspective of an individual? Over against such subjectivism the objectivity of morals should be defended. Objectivity I understand here in a descriptive manner. Ideals of the good life and moral rules of behaviour do not spring from the heads and hearts of individuals, but are embedded in social practices by which people interact with each other. They exist relatively independent of the individual observer. Though they do not possess physical objectivity, or any analogy to it, they nevertheless possess a symbolic objectivity, which implies epistemological standards of truth.
Nothing withholds you from using a screwdriver as a can-opener; but in that case you *objectively* use it in a wrong way. Morality works in a similar manner. Nothing withholds you from killing another person, but according to the symbolic conventions that structure the fabric of (most, perhaps all) cultures, you are objectively wrong. Morality, seen this way, is a form of practical knowledge, embedded in habits, conventions and social practices, supported by institutions. To a substantial degree morality is the result of processes of institutionalization. In their diversity they embody, as products of collective action, shared meanings.

Of course, morality is more than that. Besides social morality, by which people regulate and test their relationships towards one another, there is also personal morality, by which they consciously give shape to their individual life choices. That individualized aspect of morality is so highly valued in our society, that it is almost identified with morality as such. Ethics is reduced to the subjective realization of one’s personal life plan. But in such individualism we fall victim to the misunderstanding that morality could be an individual *creatio ex nihilo*. Even the realization of personal authenticity is dependent upon life models which are made available by traditions. A personal morality is original in the way it deals with conventions, not in rejecting conventions.

My contention is that a pluralistic ethic, which reinvestigates the relationship between morality and the various institutions of modern society, can provide (at least a beginning of) an adequate answer to the mood of crisis which paralyzes contemporary ethics. By doing that, moral problems will not be solved once and for all, but they will be better localized, for moral questions always arise within certain contexts. Most of our actions are situated within shared patterns of collective action. Family, friendship, school, church, business, politics - all of those more or less organized conventions, social practices and institutions contain implicit moral values, which are seldom made explicit. In my opinion an essential task of ethics is to provide a moral *hermeneutics* of those social practices and institutions. Ethics is not a matter of constructing and implementing abstract, general principles, invented *ex nihilo* by rational individuals, but of interpreting and evaluating the patterns in which people live and act with one another. Liberal individualism has made us blind to the important role conventions play in sustaining the systems of morality.

There is yet another compelling reason for scrutinizing our social conventions with regards to their implicit ethical content. Not only the neglected role which institutions play within morality justifies the development of an ethics of institutions, but also the fact that some modern institutions in particular are in bad shape. Since the sixteenth century the process of modernization has resulted in an enormous differentiation of
institutions. As analyzed by Max Weber, *instrumental rationality* constituted the dominant, though often hidden motive in that process of specialization. The belief of modernity is that for things to go well, things have to run efficiently and effectively. For that reason we have to specialize and subspecialize our social practices and institutions endlessly. As the Dutch multinational Philips has expressed in its public relations campaign, it is a rational necessity to keep making things better. ‘Let’s make things better’. But why should we be so efficient and effective? Why should we make things better? In order to reorganize the company and dismiss another thousand workers? The Dutch labor union replied to Philips: ‘Let’s make better things’. But to this appeal of substantial rationality the company staff remains deaf.

Philips stands for narrow-minded modernity. Power and money are ‘tyrannizing’ (M. Walzer) and ‘colonizing’ (J. Habermas) social practices in the life world. Technology and the capitalistic market threaten to become the new Leviathan. But friendship, authority, erudition, grace, intimacy, and beauty are values which you can not buy with money or generate with your computer. They are, as M. Walzer and A. MacIntyre point out, intrinsic values, inextricably embedded in the social practices from which they are gained. Those practices should be liberated from the pressure of the market.

To sum up, a re-examination of the ethics of institutions is important (1) in order to gain new insight into the plurality and objectivity of morals, as is expressed in collective patterns and shared conventions of human living and acting, (2) and with regards to the dominant character of some specific modern institutions, in particular technology and the market. I think Bonhoeffer’s theory of mandates can provide a fruitful impulse to such reflection, for historical reasons, because his concept forms a bridge between contemporary pluralistic concepts in political philosophy like that of Michael Walzer and the early modern tradition of the Reformation (especially Luther), but also for theological reasons. By discerning God’s continuing concern for human beings in the dynamic development of the cultural institutions within which they live and act, Bonhoeffer provides morality with a degree of objectivity. The religious intuition he articulates, that not we ourselves are the source and the standard of our morality, but God, is a healthy counterforce to subjectivism and individualism. Bonhoeffer’s simultaneous insight, that God devises space for a structural diversity anchored in creation, prevents a religious ethic from backsliding into some form of metaphysical or political monism. Bonhoeffer’s theory of mandates provides ethics with a theo-centric foundation, while at the same time uprooting any theo-centric aspiration.
Bonhoeffer’s Theory of Mandates

I start with some remarks on the origin and development of Bonhoeffer’s concept of mandates. I then turn my attention to the three different versions which the theory passed through in the course of Bonhoeffer’s work on Ethics, during the years 1940 - 1943. My contention is that the concept of mandates, which perhaps was initially intendent as only one chapter among others in social ethics, later became of decisive importance for the whole of Bonhoeffer’s design of ethics.

Origin and development

Bonhoeffer wrote on his Ethics during the first years of World War II. He had to abandon the work, incompletely on his desk, on April 5, 1943, when he was arrested by the Gestapo. The book carries the obvious, though carefully coded, marks of resistance to the nazi regime. At the outset, in 1940, the political pressure of the totalitarian state is emphasized. In 1941 and later on, however, Bonhoeffer’s attention shifted to the structure of a new social order to be constructed once the war had ended. In this regard Bonhoeffer’s Ethics can be considered both as an exponent of the German resistance movement and as a contribution to the reconstruction of a European ‘Nachkriegsordnung’, to be rebuilt on the ruins of the old order. For his design of a protestant social ethic, however, Bonhoeffer could hardly orientate himself on recent examples. The available positions which he rejected were the following:

- The German-national ‘Volkstum’ theology, which legitimized the political order theologically by defining the people (‘Volk’) as an order of creation.
- The neo-lutheran theology, which reformed Luther’s doctrine of the two kingdoms into a radical dualism, separating politics and religion into two different metaphysical realms. In his Ethics Bonhoeffer criticizes that way of thinking virulently, as a thinking in terms of two spheres (E 193ff.). It does injustice to the unity of the reality of creation, as it is revealed in Christ.
- But also a reversion to the liberal synthesis of 19th century German secular protestantism was not possible for Bonhoeffer. What was needed in a totalitarian context was not a turbid, liberal blend of the spheres of culture, state and religion in one, all embracing concept of ‘Sittlichkeit’, but rather a plea for difference and for the relative sovereignty of spheres. Theologically, Bonhoeffer felt himself at home with the position of Karl Barth, for whom the self-revelation of God in Christ constituted an a priori for any systematic talk of God. Bonhoeffer’s affinity with that theological position became even stronger during the time he was working on his
Ethics. He then visited Barth in Switzerland on his journeys at the service of the Abwehr. The influence of Barth’s Church Dogmatics, volume II, which Bonhoeffer read during his third journey in May of 1942 in a printer’s proof, is obvious in the 1942 manuscripts for his own Ethics. Yet Bonhoeffer’s theory of mandates was developed independently of Barth. In its christological basis and concentration the relationship to Barth is clearly visible. But there is no dependance at evident in its material content. Bonhoeffer drew upon his own Lutheran heritage, rather than upon the Calvinist Barth.

The doctrine of the mandates occurs four times during Bonhoeffer’s work on Ethics.

1. A first draft we find in the essay ‘State and Church’ which was written between April and November of 1941, for the Confessing Church (E 327 - 348). During that time, Bonhoeffer revised and rewrote his first manuscripts for Ethics, which originated in the summer and autumn of 1940. ‘State and Church’ came into being just after his first journey to Switzerland, where he had some intense talks with Karl Barth and W. Visser ‘t Hooft.

2. The passage on ‘divine orders’ (Bonhoeffer does not yet call them ‘mandates’) we find again in a slightly altered version as an insertion in the previously written manuscript ‘Christ, Reality and the Good’ (1941) (E 186 - 210). Similarities in the text prove that Bonhoeffer took his manuscript on ‘State and Church’ as a point of departure (See the Introduction, DBW 6, 19).

3. In the autumn and winter of 1942 Bonhoeffer took up the concept of mandates for a third time, in order to elaborate it more extensively. In ‘The Concrete Commandment and the Divine Mandates’ we finally find the first step towards a full-scale treatment of the mandate doctrine (E 281 - 297). It is a first step, for the work started in the beginning of 1943 was interrupted by his arrest on April 5, 1943. Only the first paragraph on ‘The Commandment of God in the church; could be written more in extenso, though it also remained incomplemented. The subsequent paragraphs, planned by Bonhoeffer, on ‘The Commandment of God in Marriage and Kinship’, ‘The Commandment of God in Labor’, ‘The Commandment of God in the State’, and a concluding paragraph on their reciprocal relationship ‘The with each other, for each other and against one another of the mandates’ never saw daylight. (See the editor’s Epilogue, DBW 6, 455 referring to E 287).

4. Once in prison Bonhoeffer did not give up his project on ethics, nor did he abandon reflection on the concept of the mandates. In his letter of January 23, 1944, to Bethge, he returns briefly to the mandates, in
connection with some thoughts on friendship. He then acknowledges some possible shortcomings in the concept. The sphere of culture and education (Bildung) should not be located in the mandate of work, but in ‘the broad area of freedom, which surrounds all three spheres of the divine mandates.’

For reasons of time and space, and also because the passage does not, in my opinion, represent a break with former thoughts on the concept, rather a radicalization of its last version, I will not analyze it extensively here.

Bonhoeffer’s treatment of the mandates included, in summary:

I State and Church (1941) (E 327 - 348)
II Christ, Reality and the Good (1941) (E 186 - 210)
III The Concrete Commandment and the Divine Mandates (1943) (E 281 - 297)
IV LPP 192f. (23.1.1944)

The content

My hypothesis is that during Bonhoeffer’s treatment of the theory of mandates, its meaning shifted and deepened, dependent on the theological context in which it was developed. At the outset it was perhaps no more than a chapter on social ethics among others, later the mandates came to represent an important section within, what I would call, a pluralistic theology of life.

I State and Church (1941) (E 327 - 348)

‘State and Church’ aims at the development of a theological theory of the state. Bonhoeffer does not wish with Thomas Aquinas to found the state on the rationality of human nature, nor with Calvin on the doctrine of sin, but in line with Karl Barth on Christ. ‘A solid basis is afforded only by the biblical derivation of government from Jesus Christ.’ (E 334) The government should serve the dominion of Christ on earth, by establishing and maintaining outward justice by means of the sword. Though in doing that the state can demand obedience in an ‘unconditional, qualitatively total’ manner (E 337), its moral legitimacy is rather limited, according to Bonhoeffer. The state only orders life; it does not create it. The state’s assignment is regulative, not creative. ‘However, it finds already in the world which it governs two institutions through which God the Creator exercises His creative power, and upon which it must therefore, in the nature of things, rely: marriage and labor.’ (E 339) Although Bonhoeffer
mentions the word mandate in this context once, he does not yet use it explicitly. Marriage and labor represent, in the words of Bonhoeffer, ‘divine institutions of discipline and grace’. Even after the Fall God continues to reveal himself as the Good Creator. Here, the introduction of marriage and labor serves only one purpose: to limit the totalitarian aspirations of the state. They cannot be deduced subsidiarily out of lower or higher orders like the state, but they represent an original order, founded in God’s act of creation. Marriage (sex and education) and work (under which Bonhoeffer also reckons science and art) possess their ‘own right’. ‘This means that for these fields the significance of government is regulative and not constitutive.’ (E 340)

Why these two orders, and no more, and why not others? There is a political reason on the background. Bonhoeffer rejects the ‘Volk’ as a divine order, and in doing so he marks clearly his distance to nazi ideology. Marriage and labor represent divine assignments, but the ‘people’ is only a historical reality. Scripture ‘knows that the people grows from below, but that government is instituted from above.’ (E 341)  

In introducing marriage and labor as divine orders, Bonhoeffer draws upon Luther’s doctrine of tres ordines, adapting it to the modernization process. While in Luther’s late medieval context marriage and work represent one and the same private ordo parentum, in Bonhoeffer’s 20th century they have become differentiated into two separated institutional spheres, a public and a private one. Sociologically, Luther’s three orders have to become for Bonhoeffer four mandates.

In his doctrine of the tres ordines Luther inserted the medieval, on Plato and Aristotle reminiscent, doctrine of three social classes into the Augustianian doctrine of Two Kingdoms. God governs and orders his worldly kingdom by means of three orders, the ordo politicus, the ordo parentum, to which also the oeconomia belongs, and the ordo ecclesiasticus. Each of them is ‘divine and ordered by God’. It is necessary that each of the ordes

‘will be kept within their borders, in order to enable each to fulfill his assignment (officium) and to prevent the various ways of life and their subsequent duties for becoming confused and mingled; Confusion here is not healthy (mixtura hic non valet). (...) When government is mingled with the family sphere, violations and other horrible outrages occur; when the family sphere is confused with the sphere of government, it results in tyrannies; when with the church, in heresies. In short, when these things get confused, then the devil is at work, and the devil=s works never yields good results. The prophets already did foretell, that the church should be a kingdom
different from that of the world, not a political, not an economical, but a spiritual one *(spirituale)*.\(^{15}\)

Obviously, Luther employs the critical relevance of this emphasis on the mutual autonomy of social spheres not only with regards to the conflict between church and government. For not even the church, but the *ordo parentum* represents for Luther the most valuable order of creation. Both Luther’s appraisal of natural, ordinary life and the critical principle *mixtura hic non valet* return in Bonhoeffer’s elaboration of the concept of mandates. To him, they represent the two main pillars on which a pluralistic ethic of institutions can be built, even with four centuries in between. For, abstracted from its medieval sociology, its fundamental regulating principle remains the same in both contexts: confusion of spheres leads to outrages, tyrannies and heresies.

Summarizing, we can conclude that by introducing a plurality of institutional orders Bonhoeffer first of all aims in *State and Church* at a limitation of state authority. Secondly, he legitimates a rejection of people (*Volk*) as a primary order of creation, in that has merely a historical, and not a divine origin like the others. The mutual relations and delimitations between the different orders is not yet under discussion.\(^{16}\)

However, in introducing the categories of work and marriage, Bonhoeffer opens for himself a possibility to elaborate more substantially his ethic of ‘natural life’, on which he had worked already until the spring of 1941, a work interrupted by his first journey to Switzerland. The short section then written on the order of marriage (*E* 339f.) fits perfectly with the earlier fragment on ‘The Right to Bodily Life’ (*E* 154ff.). There, Bonhoeffer had already emphasized the fact that human ‘natural life is formed life’. (*E* 148).

The mandates can be considered as a direct elaboration of the insight, articulated in that context: ‘God desires life, and He gives life a form in which it can live, because if it is left to itself it can only destroy itself.’ (*E* 149, ital. mine). The political aim of *State and Church* does not yet allow Bonhoeffer to reflect more extensively on the relationship between life and the process of institutionalization, nature and culture in general.

II. Christ, Reality and Good (1941) (*E* 186 - 210)

In the summer and autumn of 1941, after he returned from Switzerland, Bonhoeffer submitted the previously composed manuscripts of his *Ethics* to revision. As a consequence some fragments from ‘State and Church’ were inserted into the original text of ‘Christ, Reality and the Good’, one of the first sections written for the *Ethics* (summer/ autumn 1940). The enlargement is explicitly dedicated to the theory of mandates (*E* 201 - 210).
The new passage is worded in almost exactly the same manner. The theological context, however, has radically changed. The framework is no longer juridical and political, as in ‘State and Church’. Bonhoeffer turns in the first place to a debate with his own ecclesiastical tradition. ‘Christ, Reality and the Good’ is written in opposition to the thinking in terms of two spheres, as Bonhoeffer characterizes the way in which neo-Lutheranism separated the secular and the religious into two metaphysical realities. Such a dualism legitimated the political indifference of his fellow protestant Christians after 1933. Bonhoeffer defends on the basis of God’s incarnation in Christ a different thesis: ‘There are not two realities, but only one reality, and that is the reality of God, which has become manifest in Christ in the reality of the world. (...) There are, therefore, not two spheres, but only the one sphere of the realization of Christ, in which the reality of God and the reality of the world are united.=(E 195) Over against a metaphysical ‘division of total reality’, Bonhoeffer accentuates ‘the indivisible whole of divine reality’ (E 194, 191).

Does this emphasis on the unity of reality not result in a neglect of the differences, the fractures and conflicts within that same reality? No, Bonhoeffer answers. ‘God and the world are thus at one in Christ in a way which means that although the Church and the world are different from each other, yet there cannot be a static, spatial borderline between them. The question now is how one is to conceive this distinction between Church and world without relapsing into these spatial terms.’ (E 204) In this specific context Bonhoeffer reintroduces his concept of mandates. Although there is no dualism within creation, he wishes to acknowledge explicitly that there does exist a plurality in creation ordered by God. Bonhoeffer once again provides those orders with a christological basis. For, the ‘world is relative to Christ, whether it knows it or not. The relativeness of the world to Christ assumes concrete form in certain mandates of God in the world. The Scriptures name four such mandates: labor, marriage, government and the Church.’ (E 204) The theory of mandates in this section of Ethics is directed not against state totalitarism, but against the theological dualism of the church. For the first time Bonhoeffer employs explicitly the concept of ‘mandates’. Every possible association with the notion of an order of creation is now avoided. The mandates order and maintain life, not because of their ontological status ‘as such’, but because of their origin in the commandment of God.

In this context, the unity of life within the mandates gets more accent than the inherent pluralism which is also implicated. The church plays a central, integrating role in this respect. ‘The first three mandates are not designed to divide man up, to tear him asunder; they are concerned with the whole man before God, the Creator, Reconciler and Redeemer; reality, therefore, in all
its multiplicity is ultimately one; it is one in the incarnate God Jesus Christ, and precisely this is the testimony the Church must give.’ (E 208; ital. mine) The unity of reality, according to Bonhoeffer, is not ontologically given, nor is it a psychological burden for the individual. It rests only in the reconciling unity of God Himself. In spite of the emphasis on unity over against the thinking in two spheres, the fundamental pluralism implicit in the theory of mandates is still maintained. There is no sociological unity to suppose, somewhere hidden behind the diversity of mandates. Unity is found only in faith in God.

Summarizing we can conclude that in ‘Christ, Reality and the Good’ the question of the unity of life and reality is dominant. Contrary to a thinking in two spheres, Bonhoeffer points out that ‘reality, in all its multiplicity is ultimately one’.

III The Concrete Commandment and the Divine Mandates (1943) (E 281 - 297)

The third and last opportunity at which Bonhoeffer works systematically on the theory of mandates is at the same time the most exhaustive one. Although the work was interrupted by the Gestapo, the fragment left behind suggests that on that occasion the mandates represent more than just another chapter in social ethics. Instead ethics as a whole is embedded here in a theology of life, which now utilizes the concept of mandates as a theory of institutionalization.

This conclusion compels itself especially by virtue of the introduction, ‘The “Ethical” and the “Christian” as a Theme,’ which preceeds the concrete explication of the mandate theory (E 259 - 281). Perhaps the prologue is more important for an understanding of the mandate theory than the unfinished section on mandates itself.

Bonhoeffer takes his starting point in the implicit normativity of daily interaction. Ethics is preceded by life, Bonhoeffer judges. From that point of view he takes up anew an element from the philosophy of life, an important and almost constant impulse in his thinking, which shortly before led him to a positive acknowledgment of the value of ‘natural life.’ The ‘shall’ and ‘should’ follow the ‘is’, not the other way around. When morality is no longer self-evident (F. Th. Vischer), then and only then does the ethical become a theme. The ethical phenomenon is a peripheral event, a Grenzereignis (E 261f.), situated at the boundaries of ‘the abundant fullness of life’. (The expression is used several times consecutively, E 263.) Ethics should not wish to do more than ‘to help people learn to share life’ (E 265, ‘helfen, mitleben zu lernen’). Although Bonhoeffer will later use Barth’s concept of divine commandment, he understands ethics in the first place as
an ethic of solidarity or conviviality. Ethics seeks to learn to share in life, in 'the abundant fullness of the concrete tasks and processes of life with all their infinite multiplicity of different motives.' (E 265)

Bonhoeffer thus takes his starting point in the pre-ethical 'flow of life' (E 278). This basic impulse from the philosophy of life is subsequently worked out in a theory of institutionalization, which obtains its theological status as a theory of mandates. Even when life goes on of itself, it is, according to Bonhoeffer in his section on 'natural life' where he rejects an unqualified vitalism, formed life ('gestaltetes Leben'). After two different efforts to develop a theological theory of social order, he is now prepared to define the concrete orders in which life takes its human form: in the divine mandates. “My living in the fellowship of a family, a marriage and in an organization in which I work and own property is primarily an obligation in which I acquiesce freely and one in which the ‘ethical phenomenon’, the objective and subjective aspects of ‘shall’ and ‘should,’” does not come to light but remains dormant. ‘Shall’ and ‘should’ make themselves heard only at the point where this fellowship is disrupted or the organization is endangered, and as soon as order is restored they have nothing more to say.” (E 262)

By binding ethics to the pluriformity of life, Bonhoeffer disassociates himself sharply from the ‘timeless and placeless ethical discourse’ (E 266) of the Enlightenment tradition. Ethics always lies, according to him, embedded in ‘certain definite sociological relations which involve authority’. (E 267f.) By abstracting the normativity of ethics from the objectivity of the ‘concrete and infinitely manifold relationships of responsibility of men for one another’ (E 268f.), the substance of the ethical is destroyed. But from what or whom does one borrow an ethic, which so closely wishes to follow the flow of life, its warrant, when it is not from the arbitrariness of the dark powers of life itself? Bonhoeffer rejects, however, decisively such a positivist grounding of morals. Moral authority cannot be deduced empirically out of the ‘actual power’ of life, nor be founded metaphysically in a divine order of being. (E 271) The sole and only basis for the good that Bonhoeffer acknowledges is theocentric. The Good is known and revealed by God. God is the absolute Good. In his goodness He lets us participate in his good and makes it manifest to us in his commandment. Therefore: ‘God’s commandment is the only warrant for ethical discourse.’ (E 272) In focusing strongly on God’s commandment Bonhoeffer joins Karl Barth, whose Church Dogmatics, Vol. II/2 he read in May of 1942. However, Bonhoeffer uses the concept of commandment quite independent of Barth by incorporating it in his own theology of life. That becomes evident in the strongly incarnational determination which he attributes to the notion of divine commandment. The transcendent commandment is characterized
simultaneously as radically immanent. God's commandment becomes, like God in Christ, flesh and blood in the flow of life itself. Only God’s commandment possesses ultimate moral authority. That means that life and the good, ‘is’ and ‘ought’ do not coincide naturally. The commandment of God does not spring from the created world. It comes down from above. It does not arise from the factual claim of earthly powers and laws on men, from the claim of the instinct of self-preservation, or from the claim of hunger, sex or political force. It stands beyond all these as a demand, a precept and judgment.’ (E 274, ital. mine). The Good is transcendent to creation, and, in this respect, also absolute. However, Bonhoeffer continues, the commandment of God has become manifest in Jesus Christ and can there be known by us. God=s transcendence took on an immanent form. This holds also for His commandment. In the movement from above to below the commandment of God has become concrete, as God became concrete in Christ. Bonhoeffer not only founds the commandment epistemologically in Christology, but also ontologically. Ethics, as we could already learn in a previous section of Ethics, has to be seen as the ‘formation of Jesus Christ’ in the world. (E 66ff.) God reconciles Himself so radically with the world, that in Jesus Christ (and only in him) the gap between ‘is’ and ‘ought’, ontology and ethics has been bridged. Ultimately, there is only one implicit normative reality, and that is the reality of God in Christ.

The commandment of God is incarnated in our world and is only to be heard in the ‘multiplicity of concrete correlations and limitations’ (E 275) of social life. It mixes itself up with our daily environment, unalloyed and unchanged, though simultaneously undivided and unseparated (Chalcedon). It is in this specific context, that Bonhoeffer, for the third time, introduces his concept of mandates. How does God’s commandment become concrete? ‘God’s commandment, which is manifested in Jesus Christ, comes to us in the Church, in the family, in labor and in government.’ (E 274) The commandment of God follows life in its differentiated flow. God’s commandment ‘is not only obligation but also permission. It does not only forbid, but it also sets free for life; it sets free for unreflected doing. It does not only interrupt the process of life when this process goes astray, but it guides and conducts this process even though there is not always need for consciousness of this fact. God’s commandment becomes the daily divine guidance of our lives.’ (E 275) It ‘guides and conducts’, even unconsciously. How does that occur? God’s commandment becomes concrete in our collectively shared patterns of conduct, in different institutional spheres. Bonhoeffer takes family life as an example. There, the commandment does not only exist in the solemn form of, for example, the Fifth Commandment, ‘It exists also in the form of
everyday words, exhortations and appeals for some particular concrete conduct and action within the community of the family’. These give life ‘a clear direction, an inner continuity and a firm security.’ (E 276) Generally one can say: ‘God’s commandment itself can give life unity of direction and personal guidance only in the form of seemingly small and insignificant everyday words, sayings, hints and help.’ (E 279) In the different mandates God’s ordering activity and the self-organizing power of life come together in conventions and the institutions, which support and sustain them. In the form (‘Gestalt’) of the mandates, church, family, culture (formerly: labor) and government, and not in theoretical speculations, the commandment of God ‘presents itself’. (E 281)

Mandate is defined by Bonhoeffer as ‘the concrete divine commission which has its foundation in the revelation of Christ and which is evidenced by Scripture’. (E 282) The notion of mandate involves not only the commandment as such, but also its area of competence and the legitimation of its carrier’s moral authority. The commandment is understood in the first place as a gift, a permission, before it reveals itself as an obligation. God follows, if possible, the flow of life. He does not wish to deny it.

The metaphor ‘above and below’, which Bonhoeffer subsequently employs to define the moral competences within the different institutional spheres themselves, furnished the theory of mandate with its dubious reputation in the history of its reception. Barth spoke of a ‘taste of northern German patriarchalism’, of which he could not relieve himself. He stands model for many, who have reproached Bonhoeffer for an authoritarian and elitarian political ethics. I think, however, that, even if it be impossible to make a genuine democrat of him, a careful reading will tone down a lot of the criticism.

1. In the first place, the metaphor >from above< stands for the transcendent, theocentric origin of moral authority, which expresses itself in the mandates. It does not legitimate any social status quo. On the contrary, the image is directly precisely against a confusion of life and the good. The authority from ‘above’ does not run parallel to the given structures of power. ‘On the contrary, it is characteristic of the divine mandate that it corrects and regulates the earthly relations of superior and inferior power in its own way.’ (E 284) Perhaps, before God, that belongs above, what in our eyes belongs below, and vice versa.

2. Within the historical circumstances in which Bonhoeffer wrote his Ethics, one in which ‘demonic forces emerge from below’ (E 286), the metaphor sounded quite revolutionary. The real carriers of moral authority did in fact find themselves below, in the resistance movement or in captivity, while those, who belonged below, actually remained above. Moral competence and the positions of social power were in a reversed
relation to each other. Despite the dangers, Bonhoeffer wishes to bind moral competence to concrete sociological roles and positions. His incarnational ethics of life restrains him from stating that moral authority floats freely in the air. ‘The commandment of God wishes to find man always in an earthly relation of authority, in a clearly defined order of superiority and inferiority.’ (E 284) After half a century only few of us are able to follow Bonhoeffer here without reservation. The image of above and below is historically too burdened to serve ethics any longer. Perhaps, however, Bonhoeffer’s still valid, basic intention should be worked out in terms of competence, or in terms of his own conception of responsibility. Bonhoeffer’s chapter on the structure and the place of responsible life (E 220ff.) could be taken here as a point of departure. For what else is a mandate than the institutional embedment of ‘the place of responsibility’? (E 250f.) The theory of mandates can fruitfully be used and elaborated without the metaphor ‘above and below’.

The same judgment applies in my opinion to Bonhoeffer’s definition of the concrete number and content of the mandates. Why four of them, why these and no others? This was not only Karl Barth’s question, but also, as we can see in his notes for Ethics, already Bonhoeffer’s own. It seems that the question should not be answered to rigidly. It would be better to follow with Bonhoeffer the stream of life and listen to ‘the abundant fullness of the concrete tasks and processes of life with all their infinite multiplicity of different motives.’ (E 265) The mandates should be defined as products and consequences of the evolutionary process of social life, not the reverse. When God is immanent, when the good is implicit in the development of life, the mandates cannot be deduced from a static ontology of creation or an authoritarian theology of revelation. They are the result of continuing theological interpretation of the dynamics of cultural evolution. The content of God’s commandment in the mandates is not given a priori, nor is it revealed once and for all by a word of power. It can only be discerned by the participants in the social practices involved, in an open communication process in which questions as: What are we doing together? Why we are acting together? What is the good we are seeking? How are our responsibilities to be taken? How should our competences be acknowledged?, are constantly under discussion. This is what I meant by a hermeneutics of institutions. I think that, as long as Bonhoeffer’s theory of mandates is interpreted against the background of his theology of life, its opening towards our more dynamic, late modern context is possible and legitimate. This does not imply automatically that the number of mandates becomes infinite. The basic anthropological conditions exercise their limitations,
notwithstanding the institutional differentiations within modernity. People are born and die, they are hungry, they look for shelter and safety. Many more than the four mandates which Bonhoeffer discerned are probably not likely to be found.\textsuperscript{24} To fix them however precisely is not a theological, but an empirical matter. Essential, however, for a rehabilitation of his theory of mandates will be our acknowledgment of his definition of the reciprocal relationships between the different mandates. He follows there, as we have already seen, a long tradition going back to Luther’s \textit{mixtura hic non valet}. At this point we encounter the valuable, critical heart of the doctrine of mandates:

‘It is only in conjunction (Miteinander), in combination (Füreinander) and in opposition with one another (Gegeneinander) that the divine mandates of the Church, of marriage and the family, of culture and of government declare the commandment of God as it is revealed in Jesus Christ. No single one of these mandates is sufficient in itself or can claim to replace all the others. The mandates are \textit{conjoined}; otherwise they are not mandates of God. In their conjunction they are not isolated or separated from one another, but they are directed towards one another. They are for one another; otherwise they are not God’s mandates. Moreover, within this relation of conjunction and mutual support, each one is limited by the other; even within the relation of mutual support this limitation is necessarily experienced as a relation of mutual opposition. Wherever this mutual opposition no longer exists there is no longer a mandate of God.’ \textsuperscript{(E 286)}

The flow of life obviously cannot be left to its own, but has to be followed critically. It has to be limited from above, by God, the origin and destination of all Good. But indirectly it is limited by life itself, namely by the plurality of its forms, which mutually realize themselves. ‘Life is its own physician, whether it be the life of an individual or the life of a community,’ Bonhoeffer wrote previously in his section on ‘the Natural’ (E 147). The theory of mandates in its last version is the social-ethical elaboration of that belief in the ultimate trustworthiness of the processes of life, not from a vitalistic a priori, but because they are believed to be sustained by God the Creator and Redeemer.

The doctrine of mandates remained a torso. The with, for, and against each other of the different institutional life spheres could not be worked out further. In a last section, only the limits of competences between the church and the state were critically clarified. But the structure and the theological framework in which the mandate theory was developed seems to me of
equal importance as its material content. As far as the structure is concerned, the emphasis on the irreducible plurality of the life spheres is noteworthy. They are not forced into an all embracing scheme of, for example, an organic community or a hierarchical corporation, or harmonized into the ideal of some political unity. In this respect, Bonhoeffer’s theory shows a striking resemblance to the neo-calvinistic principle of ‘the sovereignty of spheres’, as it was developed in the Netherlands by Abraham Kuyper and, contemporarily to Bonhoeffer, by Herman Dooyeweerd.

With regard to the theological foundation one can observe Bonhoeffer’s effort to free his argumentation from any actualism, voluntarism and decisionism, which characterize Karl Barth’s ethics. The commandment of God seems to coincide ultimately with life in good institutions. In this respect, the divine commandment is priestly and sacramental rather than prophetic and proclaiming. ‘The commandment of God becomes the element in which one lives without always being conscious of it’. (E 276)

Bonhoeffer, however, imbues the notion of *permissio* with a strong personal emphasis, by situating it within his theology of life. The mandate doctrine has to be interpreted as the institutional counterpart to his earlier ethics of natural life. Both its inherent pluralism and its roots in a concept of life opens perspectives for creative development, beyond the limits of the historical and cultural horizon in which it originated. His theory of institutionalized life continues the tradition of natural law, in a way that avoids a reversion to some eternal moral order of being. In my opinion, the way in which the process theology of, for example, John Cobb and, in a more feminist approach, Sallie MacFague takes up the evolutionary notion of life as a basic category in theology, is a fruitful continuation of Bonhoeffer’s line of thought.

The tyranny of spheres (Walzer and MacIntyre)

In political philosophy Bonhoeffer’s mandate theory also has its heirs and allies. Its hard core can be used fruitfully whenever forms of totalitarianism arise, whether they are dressed in a personal political dictatorship or in anonymous economical structures of oppression. The way in which political philosophers such as Michael Walzer and Alisdair MacIntyre criticize the monopolistic tendencies of modern rationality is directly reminiscent of Luther’s *mixtura hic non valet* and Bonhoeffer’s *Mit-, Für-, and Gegeneinander*. Michael Walzer also considers morality to be embedded in
concrete social practices. Living and acting together in conventions and institutions presuppose basic, shared understandings. Such internal goods of institutions should not be allowed to dominate outside the sphere in which they originate and belong. The relative autonomy of institutional spheres, is according to Walzer, a necessary condition for a just society. Just like Luther, Walzer considers a transgression of borders to be a form of tyranny. In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre tries to rehabilitate the internal goods of social practices, over against the external goods of institutions, power and money. What are friendship, making music, playing a game, raising a child, loving a person good for, what do they really mean? In this manner, both Walzer and MacIntyre plea for a hermeneutic of institutions, in order to explicate and revalidate the understandings we share by living and acting together, against the dominant pressure of instrumental rationality in technology and the market. In this way they contribute to the purpose Bonhoeffer had in view for ethics: ‘helping to learn to share life.’ (see above).

Orders of creation

I conclude with some theological remarks. The theological material Bonhoeffer brings together in his theory of mandates generally is structured by protestants in a doctrine of the orders of creation. That doctrine is the expression of the legitimate, vital religious intuition that God’s creative activity is not only present in nature, but in human culture as well. Bonhoeffer, however, had significant strategic reasons to reject the concept. The notion ‘order of creation’ was declared an ‘occupied area’, since categories such as race, people and nation had been religiously sanctioned by that doctrine. Having initially having coined the polemic notion of ‘orders of preservation’ (Erhaltungsordnung), Bonhoeffer finally abandons that expression in his *Ethics*, in favor of the word mandate. The latter notion, however, still fulfills the same theological function as the former ones: certain ways of living and acting together are provided with a divine qualification. However, the concept of mandates is doubly armed against the possibility of sanctionizing a factual social status quo: First, mandate is not an ontological category, but a commandment of God. The actualism in the divine command ethic of Karl Barth can gratefully be used, as Bonhoeffer also did in the last version of his mandate theory, as a barricade against a reactionary sociology. Secondly, the orders of creation undergo a radical Christological restyling, again in close alliance with Barth. The mandates cannot be read out of nature directly, but can only be known from God’s acting grace in Jesus Christ, as exclusively witnessed in Scripture.
Although fully legitimate and perhaps unavoidable against the backdrop of the thirties and forties in Germany, one can ask whether this theological strategy still deserves credibility with regard to our situation today. In order to avoid any theological legitimation of an existing or desired social order, and, at the same time, still confess God’s ordering presence in our human world, one can on the one hand say, together with Bonhoeffer: There are certain orders of creation, but they can only be known, they only have their existence in Christ. To support this christocentric position, a rather exclusive concept of biblical revelation is required in which the figure of Jesus of Nazareth fulfills a universal, cosmological role. Bonhoeffer decides in Ethics for both. In his chapter ‘Ethics as Formation’, he lays in an impressive manner the basis for such a christocentric ethic. ‘The way in which Christ takes form among us here and now’ (E 87), has become the central question of ethics to him. The mandates represent the way Christ takes form socially. One can wonder, whether a biblical Christology can bear the heavy weight Bonhoeffer places upon it. For in that case, Jesus Christ is the only symbol used to express Christian faith in the immanence of God. Perhaps there are other theological possibilities to express the same intention, more adequate also to a global, multi-religious cultural setting. One of them is not to bind the incarnation exclusively to the person of Jesus of Nazareth, but to interpret it as a metaphor for God’s immanence, exemplary and in that respect normatively manifest in Jesus.\(^{33}\) Another option is to broaden the doctrine of God in a trinitarian way and acknowledge the Holy Spirit as the power of God’s immanence among us, the Spirit of Life.\(^{34}\) This pneumatological way of thinking has, in my opinion, great advantages. It combines congeniality to the biblical tradition and an emphasis on both the sovereign transcendence and the graceful immanence of God with a genuine disclosure to other religious traditions, where the Spirit of God also manifests itself.

What does this mean for the doctrine of the orders of creation or the theory of mandates? At least the doctrine should be relieved of its biblicistic foundation. It is no longer possible, as Bonhoeffer still believed, to deduce it exclusively from the Bible. But, at the other extreme, giving up the notion of orders of creation totally means an even greater loss. We would do better to maintain the idea, but then in a somewhat skeptical manner as, for example, James Gustafson has proposed.\(^{35}\) There are certainly orders of creation, but we do not know precisely which ones, nor can we point out exactly what they should look like. Believing in God the Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer, we are able to discern in the reality of people living and acting together a certain number of sustained, ordering patterns. Basic institutions like family, work, politics and religion represent in their historical and cultural diversity available solutions to the possibilities and
impossibilities of the human condition. In that process of ordering believers discern some signs and signals of God’s creative and ruling activity. In its ‘is’ we infer God’s ‘ought’ to be present. In the processes and structures of life we discern the traces of his Good. But more than moral indicators we cannot discover. They provide necessary conditions for our ethics, not sufficient ones. Orders of creation, therefore, are constantly subject to interpretation and are never the result of deductive knowledge. Such necessary self-restraint is due to the limitations set by our human perception. But the important role we ourselves play in the dynamic of cultural evolution is another reason to remain modest. It means it is better to speak of ‘creation orderings’ than of ‘orders’. But the acknowledgment of their implicit normativity is a necessary and objective condition for realizing a good life. In that respect the ordering patterns are to be seen as a gift of God’s grace, as both a claim and a possibility.


4. 'The basic belief that unites pluralists is that good lives require the realization of radically different types of values, both moral and non-moral, and that many of these values are conflicting and cannot be realized together.' (J. Kekes, The Morality of Pluralism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 11)


13. The metaphor ‘below and above’, here still mentioned in passing, will play an important role in the later versions of the mandate theory.

14. For the following, see O. Dittrich, *Geschichte der Ethik*. Die Systeme der Moral vom Altertum bis zur Gegenwart, IV, Leipzig 1932, 58ff. The Luther quotation can also be found there. See W. Maurer, *Luthers Lehre von den drei Hierarchien und ihr mittelalterlicher Hintergrund*, München 1970. I gratefully use the references made by the editors of DBW6, 393, note 3 and 397, note 19.


16. Cf. his remark on E 340: ‘... within limits (which cannot be discussed in detail here)....’

17. E 205: ‘It is not because labour, marriage, government and church are that they are commanded by God, but it is because they are commanded by God that they are.’


19. ‘The ethical, in this sense of the formal, the universally valid and the rational, contained no element of concretization, and it therefore inevitably ended in the total atomization of human society and of the life of the individual, in unlimited subjectivism and individualism. When the ethical is conceived without reference to any local or temporal relation, without reference to the question of its warrant or authority, without reference to the concrete, then life falls apart into an infinite number of unconnected atoms of time, and human society resolves itself into individual atoms of reason.’ (E 268) For similar statements, see also the essay, written in prison, ‘What is meant by “telling the truth”?’, in E 358 - 367.

21. The notion of ‘order’ would fit also. However, Bonhoeffer notes, the word is historically too burdened with romantic-conservative associations. The expression ‘estate’ (Stand), however, reminds him of unjustified privileges. The Lutheran notion of ‘office’ (Amt) finally, is in his view too profanized and bureaucratized to be credible anymore. For that reason he holds for the present to the word mandate, ‘for lack of a better word’ (E 284).


26. A. Kuyper, Lectures on Calvinism, Grand Rapids 1931 (1898); Herman Dooyeweerd, A New Critique of Theoretical Thought, 1969, vol. II.


28. The correction Bonhoeffer proposes in prison, returning to the mandates in his letter of January, 23, 1944, should not be considered as a criticism of the concept as such, but as its radicalization and a renewed emphasis on its initial intention. He wonders where the phenomenons of culture and Bildung should be classed in his mandate theory, and concludes: ‘They belong not in the sphere of obedience, but to the broad area of freedom, which surrounds all three spheres of the divine mandates.’ (LPP 193; ital. mine) It is obvious here how Bonhoeffer considers freedom to be constitutive of all mandates.


30. He defines a social practice as ‘any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized...’ (o.c. 187).

31. J. Burtness, Shaping the Future. The Ethics of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Philadelpia 1985. 80, cites for example a Declaration of Principles, June, 6, 1932 from the German Christian Movement: ‘We see in race, folk, and nation, orders of existence granted and entrusted to us by God. God’s law for us is that we look to the preservation of these orders.'
Consequently miscegenation is to be opposed. For a chronology of Bonhoeffer’s growing opposition to the concept of orders of creation, see Christoph Strohm, *Theologische Ethik im Kampf gegen den Nationalsozialismus. Der Weg Dietrich Bonhoeffers mit den Juristen Hans von Dohnanyi und Gerhard Leibholz in den Widerstand*, München 1989, e.g. 19 - 22, 111 - 113, 131 - 135.


