

R. Zimmermann

Prof. R. Zimmerman,
Research Center for
Ethics in Antiquity and
Christianity, Johannes
Gutenberg Universität
Mainz; Research fellow
Dept Old and New
Testament Studies,
University of the
Free State, South Africa.
E-mail: ruben.
zimmermann@uni-
mainz.de
ORCID: [https://orcid.
org/0000-0002-1620-
4396](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1620-4396)

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PAULINE “ETHICS OF RELINQUISHING”: “IMPLICIT ETHICS” OF THE BIBLE AS A SOURCE OF INSPIRATION FOR CURRENT ETHICAL DEBATE

ABSTRACT

Enhancing life in the world of the future will only be possible if people relinquish their claim to some of the legitimate rights to which they are entitled. This article is developed in three sections. In the first section, I contend that the source of inspiration for this ethics is the Bible and, in particular, the writings of Paul, which open up insights into moral principles and the ethos of Early Christian communities. In the second section, I take up insights from biblical ethics and develop foundational aspects of, and criteria for how such an ethics of relinquishing can be described on both a theoretical and a terminological level. In the final section, I describe possible acts of relinquishing in different fields of current ethical debate such as, for instance, the appropriate extent of medical treatment at the end-of-life, the use of media, and big data.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ethics has often had to do with justice and rights. The communication and debates concerning the norms of a community or society lead to legal prescriptions. That which a human society finds to be good and right governs laws, which, to a certain extent, ought to secure an equilibrium between rights, interests, and goods. In this way, modern ethics has dealt with rights and justice, whether in the form of the debate on human rights or the presentation of, for example, the justice and contract ethics of John Rawls (1971). Broadly speaking, the issue in this instance is always the protection and assertion of rights, in particular for those individuals who, due to their social position or the constellation of a society, either have few or no rights or are simply unable to assert them. The achievements of various movements concerned with such rights and the necessity of this line of ethical inquiry are in no way being questioned, in this instance. In my ethical thoughts,¹ however, I would like to take the line of inquiry in an entirely different direction.

The main topic of this article is as follows. Enhancing life in the world of the future will only be possible if people relinquish their claim to some of the legitimate rights to which they are entitled. Quality of life is enhanced not only through an expansion of rights, status and possibilities, but also through giving up such things.

I would like to develop this concept in three steps. After some preliminary remarks concerning a theory of biblical ethics and hermeneutical reflections, I will describe acts of relinquishing, according to Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. Secondly, I will provide insights into my “theory” of an ethics of relinquishing. I will conclude with a few examples in current ethical debate, in particular on end-of-life-decision (high level) and vegetarian food (low level of relinquishing).

2. ETHICS OF RELINQUISHING IN PAULINE WRITINGS

2.1 Preliminary remarks and the “implicit ethics” in Pauline writings

Paul was not a moral philosopher. He did not produce a work on ethics in the sense of a systematic theory of action or behaviour, nor did he write

1 The project is linked to the so-called “Enhancing Life Project” (see <http://enhancinglife.uchicago.edu/>), which was financed by the Templeton Foundation.

a narrative or thoughtfully composed drama. The Pauline texts that are known to us would not be defined as ethical treatises, according to either the above discussed contemporary standards or the ancient ones. Paul's epistles are, in the first instance, occasional writings addressed to specific situations. They have their origin in the common communication of everyday life and take up concrete issues and conflicts in the Pauline congregations. In part, these situations are explicitly brought to the attention of Paul through reports or questions that he is posed. The contexts in which the epistles are embedded, however, do not deny the possibility for ethics. In fact, they give rise to ethics in a broader sense. At our research centre of "Ethics in Antiquity and Christianity" (*e/ac*)² in Mainz, we work with the following, purposefully broad definition of ethics: Ethics is the reflective consideration of a way of living with a view toward its guiding norms and having as its goal an evaluation. This definition takes up the debate on ethics in antiquity, which is rather a rational theory in a modern sense, but a reflection on a "way of life", or the "art of living", as Hadot (1995) put it. Along these lines, the centre of philosophical reflection is not found in the theoretical treatment of problems. Rather, it is oriented towards the addressee and the

cultivation of a person, one's self-formation, the correction of a faulty approach to life or a fundamental reorientation of one's mindset (Horn 2010:16).

The difference between modern ethical theory and the art of ethical reflection in antiquity is also evident in Early Judaism. The grand narrative works of the Old Testament and the dialogical discussion of the Torah in Second Temple Judaism cannot be classified as "ethical theory", even though they contain highly nuanced discussions of ethical issues.

Ethics is necessary especially in conflict situations, when debates concerning norms and good behaviour arise. Such conflict or uncertainty compels Paul to provide a rationale for his values and directives concerning conduct over and against other possibilities or claims. The thoughtful handling of conflict opens the door to ethics. The Pauline epistles do not simply indicate how one should act, but also pursue the reasons or rationale for conduct along with strategies for the plausibility of a certain course of action. Ethics is thus initially pursued in the sense of the attribution of value in which, at times, it is quite clearly stated what is "good" and "evil" (see τὸ καλόν – τὸ κακόν, Rom. 7:13-21). Behaviour is to be subjected to a value judgement in a hierarchy of norms to enable one to choose the good

2 See www.ethikmainz.de (24 November 2018).

(see πάντα δὲ δοκιμάζετε, τὸ καλὸν κατέχετε, “but test everything; hold fast to what is good”, 1 Thess. 5:21).

These value judgements are not simply dogmatic statements. The individual paraenetic sections and values espoused are based upon implicit and, at times, explicit justifications, as an argument is constructed with recourse to certain ethical maxims and principles. These considerations are found in a multitude of forms (metaphors, narration, mimetic argumentation) and cannot be simply reduced to rational argumentation or logical conclusions. Furthermore, Paul is not merely a situational ethicist who is only interested in the *ad hoc* sorting out of individual situations. The latter provided the occasion for formulating rules of conduct and values through which supra-individual norms and justifications become visible. These then (at least in the canonical reception history) claim transcendent and sometimes even universal validity.

In light of the foregoing observations, I contend that it is legitimate to speak of a rationale for conduct in the sense of “ethics”, or more precisely “implicit ethics”, and not simply of the ethos of early Christian communities. Through the use of the term “implicit”, specific aspects of these ethics are to be considered along different lines and in different directions. That which is undeveloped, or perhaps even practically inaccessible, plays a role in juxtaposition to the developed and obviously “explicit” aspects. Thus, “implicit ethics” can be considered historically, literarily, hermeneutically, and conceptually (Zimmermann 2018:5-9). Finally, I distinguish between eight perspectives within my so-called “organon” (Zimmermann 2018:31), which has to be taken into account in analysing the moral significance of Pauline letters and New Testament/Biblical writings in general.

2.2 Acts of relinquishing in 1 Corinthians

In the first letter of the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians), there are reflections on several “acts of relinquishing”. I will approach this “implicit ethics” in the various perspectives of the organon (language, norms, moral agent, and so on), even though I will not follow them step by step.

Such ethics of relinquishing are most evident in 1 Corinthians 6:1-11, a passage with an overtly judicial dimension. In this instance, Paul addresses the issue of a legal case having been brought against a fellow member of the congregation. Initially, Paul considers allowing legal conflicts to be judged by recognised members of the congregation (ἄγιοι, v. 1; σοφός, v. 6). Then he requires a fundamental eschewing of juridical conflicts. This would mean that, even if Christians are in the right, they should relinquish the claim to their rights and accept the possibility of suffering “injustice”.

Yet, the apostle formulates his thoughts with rhetorical questions, not with imperatives. I would like to take up the motif of “relinquishing” and locate it within the broader context of Paul’s ethical reflection.

Refusing to lay claim to possible and actual rights that one is due, is a coherent component of Paul’s “implicit ethics”. In various contexts in 1 Corinthians, Paul advocates refusal or relinquishing as the action that, from an ethical perspective, is to be favoured. Thus, when considering eating meat sacrificed to idols (1 Cor. 8-10), Paul is not simply concerned with abstaining from indulging in meat, for he admonishes the addressees to refrain from acting on their own “knowledge” (Zimmermann 2018:180-181). According to 1 Corinthians 9, Paul does not lay claim to the right to bring along a believing wife³ nor to the right to the support that he, as an apostle, apparently had (Zimmermann 2012:1-8). An unusual climax can be found in 1 Corinthians 9:19-22, where Paul relinquishes the right to recognise norms such as the Torah, strength and status, and even freedom (1 Cor. 9:19). In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul urges the Corinthians to refrain from living out certain gifts of the Spirit (speaking in tongues, singing, praying) (Zimmermann 2018:151-154).

There is a common feature present in all of these reflections, namely that all the rights and norms that one should relinquish or not lay claim to are widely accepted and positively evaluated. The use of “reason” and insight is an important element in Paul’s measure of conduct (1 Cor. 1:5; 8:10-11; 14:9). “Freedom” is an important and highly valued norm (1 Cor. 9:1, 19), just as “rights” are not generally declared to be worthless. Paul praises those who speak in tongues and thanks God that he himself has this gift (1 Cor. 14:5, 18). The goods and norms that are to be relinquished or not claimed are judged to be ethically “good”, but they should nevertheless still not be employed.

Within the context of a concrete ethical process of reflection, they are brought into a hierarchy of values and subordinated to other norms. In this process, however, one does not find a linear derivation in the sense of an ethics of norms or duty nor a rationalistic weighing of goods as in utilitarianism. It is not the logic of a process of assessment, nor insight after a consensual discourse that leads to relinquishing or refraining, for,

3 In all likelihood, Paul did not have a wife (see Schnelle 2014:39). A different view is set forth by David Trobisch (2011:93-98), who, on the basis of the mention of a *σύζυγος* in Philippians 4:3, concludes that Paul was married, a view also held by several church fathers (for example, Clement of Alexandria, Origen). The Greek term *σύζυγος* can be either masculine or feminine. In the latter case, a translation such as “wife” = “yoke companion” would be possible. However, the vocative masculine adjective, *γνήσιε* (not the feminine *γνήσια*) seems to be a linguistic indication against this interpretation.

as can be noted in the controversy concerning the meat sacrificed to idols, the “strong” are certainly in the right, according to rational, theological consideration. The moral reflection upon the suggested conduct occurs along teleological lines; in other words, attaining certain goals or avoiding certain consequences (for example, edifying the congregation, not causing a crisis of conscience in another individual) are the standards of judgement, according to which behaviour is viewed as good or better. It is particularly social norms such as the edification of the congregation or considering the welfare of others that should lead to an attitude of relinquishing rights. Others are to be considered, even when they are not in the right. The weakness of another necessitates an ethics of relinquishing. Ethics of relinquishing can thus depart completely from an orientation focused on norms and actually order recognised norms according to the needs and weaknesses of another person or the community. They even go so far as to limit not only one’s rights, but also one’s own interests and possibilities in life.⁴

At the same time, ethics of relinquishing distinguish themselves from asceticism, willingness to sacrifice, or even humility in virtue ethics.⁵ The act of relinquishing is not performed for one’s own sake. It is found within a larger context and is aligned with higher goals and purposes. Ethics of relinquishing remain practical ethics and may not become principal ethics. This can be clearly observed within the broader context of the goods that are to be relinquished: Paul not only advises relinquishing eating meat (Rom. 14:21; 1 Cor. 9:4), but he also encourages the eating of meat (1 Cor. 10:25, 27, eat whatever is sold in the meat market/ whatever is set before you); he gives the advice that one should not marry (1 Cor. 7:7-8; 7:38), but also that one should marry (1 Cor. 7:9) and have sex with one’s spouse (1 Cor. 7:3-4). Paul relinquishes any claim to support for his living costs from the Corinthians (1 Cor. 9:7-15), but he accepts payment from the church in Philippi (Phil. 4:10). The ethics of relinquishing is not interested in setting up absolute norms and universal principles. It is a temporal and flexible ethic. In a specific situation and to a certain extent, it may be wise to relinquish, whereas, in other contexts, it can be good to lay claim on the same rights and possibilities.

The apostle often invites his addressees not to lay claim to something to which they are entitled. It is on this level that the communicative dimension

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- 4 A similar point is made in Hays (1998:46): “To imitate Christ is also to follow the apostolic example of surrendering one’s own prerogatives and interests.”
- 5 It is instructive to note that the root *ταπειν-* does not appear in 1 Corinthians. See Guttenberger Ortwein (1999:209). Becker (2015:130-137) notes close analogies between the perception of apostleship, Paul’s autobiographical presentation of himself as a *δοῦλος* in 1 Corinthians, and the later conception of humility.

of the ethics of relinquishing becomes important. Paul does not argue for a universal norm of relinquishing, nor does he ever command relinquishing. Rather, he challenges his addressees with rhetorical questions and mimetic reflection. Ethics of relinquishing requires a “voluntary” posture in refusing to lay claim to certain rights and behaviours. Such a posture cannot be forced. Relinquishing legitimate rights cannot itself become a law.

In order to relinquish rights, those rights and the possibility of laying claim to them through one’s conduct must, in principle, exist and be attainable. For this reason, one can conclude that ethics of relinquishing are addressed more to those who are in a position of having rights and being able to exercise them. This is certainly the case regarding the so-called “strong” in Corinth, for they have the insight and the possibility of indulging in the consumption of meat. It is also the case concerning the gifts of the Spirit for those who have the gift of glossolalia. In my estimation, therefore, ethics of relinquishing should not be reduced to a type of social justice ethics. Ethics of relinquishing are directed primarily at those with the power to act. Of course, they are often also the strong ones and those with financial means. In religious communities, in particular, there is also such a thing as the powerful in religious values (for example, in spiritual gifts or even humility). The danger, in this instance, is that such individuals turn their gift of relinquishing into a general admonition and requirement. From this point of view, one is dealing with “ethics for the advanced”, for those who would be able to exercise rights and follow certain norms, but who need to be reminded that doing so could be damaging to the community.

Ethics of relinquishing thus requires not only an orientation towards, but also the support of a functioning community. That which Vischer (1955:133) recognised with regard to relinquishing rights is valid in a broader sense:

In order for one to be able not to lay claim to a right in a free and unforced manner, the fellowship of the community must support and back the decision.

Ethics of relinquishing are necessary, because a community consists of different individuals and thus contains both differences and inequalities. Ethics of relinquishing operate, in particular, when they are carried by a community norm whose justification is not found in and of itself.

We may call this the “spiritual law” or “spiritual foundation” of an ethics of relinquishing, a foundation which I would like to explore on different levels. One is the temporal dimension. It is not only the proximate consequences or obvious goals of an action that should be taken into account. It is more about the wider horizon, ethics in the long run, that plays a role. Edifying the congregation is not to be considered only for a

short period of time. In fact, the issue has to do with promises and hope for the future. I would name this the sustainable dimension or, theologically speaking, the eschatological dimension of the ethics of relinquishing. The second level is the embedding in the community. Relinquishing always has a communal dimension. One relinquishes something not only for oneself, but also for others. One gives up one’s own privileges or possibilities in favour of others. This interrelatedness encourages and inspires acts of relinquishing for Paul. The view towards the common good inspires an individual to relinquish his/her individual goods. Finally, there is the level of personal conviction and belief. In this perspective, emotional aspects and spiritual grounds come into play. Paul speaks about passion, and even an inner urge (*ἀνάγκη*, 1 Cor. 9:16) as a driving force in the act of relinquishing. For Paul, all of these levels coincide in his Christian faith and love. That which is binding in the Christian community is Christ himself, a view that is expressed with the image and metaphor of a body (1 Cor. 12). Jesus’ love for others may serve as an example that clearly shows the coinciding of giving away and receiving, surrendering and gaining. Love for others has an impact on one’s own way of living.

Christ is, for Paul, above all the crucified one (1 Cor. 1:23) and, in his cross, one finds the reversal of all values, a point that is proclaimed in the programmatic speech at the outset of 1 Corinthians (1:18-25). An example for ethics of relinquishing can be recognised in the way in which Christ lived and in his death – as explicitly and mimetically formulated in Philippians 2 (Becker 2016). At the same time, passing from death to new life allows one to surmise that refraining from asserting one’s rights and relinquishing certain values and possibilities for one’s life does not lead to suffering a loss or deficit, but ultimately allows for unexpected possibilities and makes new forms of community and fellowship possible.

3. TOWARDS A THEORY OF AN “ETHIC OF RELINQUISHING”

In the second section of this article, I seek to take up the observations concerning “implicit ethics” in early Christian texts and develop them into an “ethics of relinquishing” on a more abstract level. This theory, taking into account hermeneutic transfer processes (Zimmermann 2019a), could be transferable and amenable to the current ethical discourse. The “ethics of relinquishing” does not make a claim to be an overarching theory of ethics that provides norms for everyone and every problem in life. It is a particular ethics (*bereichsspezifische Ethik*) for some individuals and certain groups in specific life situations. However, it differs in the way in which it argues

from traditional deontological or utilitarian ethics and it does not fulfil the criteria of responsibility found in discourse ethics. Therefore, it might be appropriate to describe it as an ethics *sui generis*. The ethics of relinquishing can be viewed as a subgenre of virtue ethics, due to the role and formation of the moral agent, as well as the (implied) critique of the rationale and the universal within the Kantian and utilitarian tradition.

I posit the following tentative and working definition of an ethics of relinquishing: A moral agent (1) consciously and voluntarily waives a claim (2) to something (3) in a specific context (4) on the basis of certain norms and values, (5) in order to achieve a particular goal (6). The act of relinquishing results in a balance between giving up and gaining (7).

3.1 The moral agent: Who is it that waives a right?

A moral agent is an independent actor in a position of consciously being able to act. Such an agent can be an individual or a collective group. In the latter case, it must be clarified how the group came to relinquish the right to a certain claim – was this determined through a democratic or consensual decision-making process?

The moral agent is enabled to waive a right or to relinquish a claim. This means that s/he is in a privileged position and a situation of having something or being entitled to something that can be relinquished.

A special case is when the person who surrenders cannot decide on his/her own, but others (parents, children) make the decision vicariously in favour of the affected person.

3.2 Consciously and voluntarily: How does one waive a right?

The act of relinquishing is based on a sovereign and voluntary decision. It is a characteristic of such acts that it does *not* occur based on a law or command of some other institution or authority. This voluntary decision includes the fact that, in principle, a right or claim exists and could, in fact, be exercised for the action or good that is relinquished. If something is withheld (a deficiency exists) or stipulated (a command/prohibition), the action is no longer an act of waiving or relinquishing.

A further question to raise, in this instance, is the extent to which one is able, if at all, to relinquish something that one does not have, but that one could strive for and gain? That is to say, is there such a thing as an anticipated or proleptic act of relinquishing?

3.3 That which is being relinquished: What “right” is being waived?

One relinquishes or waives a claim to something that is not inherently viewed as ethically problematic or evil. In fact, the rights and norms that one relinquishes or does not lay claim to are widely accepted and positively evaluated.

This “something” could be any number of things, including material goods (food, consumer products, physical aspects of life, and so on); performing a particular action (for example, in medical treatment, pre-natal diagnostic screening, reanimation, human cloning?); immaterial goods (knowledge, privilege, social status); the fulfilment of legitimate/extant desires (for example, sexuality, nourishment, longevity); implementing legitimate/extant rights (for example, legal action, tax-reduction strategies); ethically accepted norms and claims (for example, recompense), and achieving certain goals (for example, economic growth quotas).

It is worth noting that I do not wish to restrict the meaning of “waiving rights” to narrowly conceived rights, along the lines of legal rights or human rights, as this is not prescribed by the texts I am considering.

3.4 The time and space of relinquishing: In which situation and to what extent is relinquishing appropriate?

As noted earlier, the ethics of relinquishing is not an absolute value system or an universal ethics of principles. Quite the contrary. It is a temporal and contextual ethics that opens up horizons and provides flexibility to act in different manners according to different contexts. One is able to not lay claim to something in a specific context, but then make use of it in a different situation.⁶ The Kantian ethicist would question whether this can still be called “ethics”, or whether it is rather simply optional or arbitrary behaviour, driven by a situation-based mood. In my view, this flexibility is one of the strengths of an ethics of relinquishing. It is not about absolute principles, nor sharp distinctions between good and bad. It is still reflected and conscious behaviour that fulfils the criteria of ethics.

3.5 Norms and values: Why does one relinquish?

In this instance, the term “norms” is employed in a broad sense and used to identify every use of values and maxims utilised to justify action. What reasons are given for not claiming a desire, a right, a possibility, and for

6 See my BLOG on consuming vegetarian food. One can consciously relinquish to eat meat in a certain situation, without being a “confessing” vegetarian all the time.

not taking advantage of an opportunity to do so? What motivates a moral agent to relinquish such a claim and what enables him/her to do so? What is the source of the strength to waive a right? Is it the recognition of a bigger picture or subordinating the right to higher values? That is to say, is it due to external reasons? Or are there also internal reasons such as rational insight, joy at simplicity, emotions in general, or freedom in simplifying, the satisfaction of considering others?

Consonant with the insights set forth above, there is not one single norm to be followed, but a plurality of norms that stimulate and ground acts of relinquishing.

3.6 Goal(s): For what purpose and to what end is a right/option and so on waived?

The action of relinquishing pursues a certain goal or goals. One can distinguish between positive and negative perspectives in that I may waive a right, in order to avoid something (negative perspective) or in order to gain something of greater value (positive perspective). The value of waiving, relinquishing, or surrendering thus does not reside merely in the act itself, but also serves a greater purpose. One could, therefore, say that an ethics of relinquishing is a teleological or consequentialist ethics.

3.7 Suspenseful balance of relinquishing: Between giving up and gaining

Surrendering might be done for its own sake. There is some benefit to giving up and to not doing anything. However, the ethics of relinquishing is characterised by something else. One relinquishes or waives a claim to something (action, extant desires, legitimate rights), in order to gain something of greater value. Giving up and gaining remain intact. Indeed, it is painful to give up, but it is joyful to gain; both actions are in a reciprocal relationship. One gains by giving up; one surrenders but is enriched by doing so. In this way, both aspects form a suspenseful balance. The ethics of relinquishing differs from the tradition of asceticism (in certain forms). Giving up does not mean forcing oneself to do something.

4. ETHICS OF RELINQUISHING IN CURRENT ETHICAL DEBATE

In the final section of this article, I want to give an idea as to how the ethics of relinquishing could influence current ethical debate. I will briefly mention two fields, explored by two sample stories.

4.1 Not extending medical treatment as a high-level act of relinquishing

Case One:⁷ A 72-year-old female patient, widowed for three years, was diagnosed with advanced intestinal cancer. In fact, the cancer had already metastasized to the liver. The doctor observed: “You are still relatively young and spritely, and with aggressive chemotherapy the progression of the disease could be significantly slowed.” The patient talked with her family and considered her options. She knew how difficult and taxing chemotherapy can be. She considered: I lived a rich life and will die anyway in the near future. She decided against the treatment. Four months later, after a brief time of suffering during the last weeks, she died peacefully in hospice care surrounded by close friends, children, and grandchildren.

An act of relinquishing that finally led to death. Was that the right decision for the patient? She could have survived longer, but she decided not to make use of treatment offered to her. I will analyse this case study, following the different aspects within the matrix of my ethics of relinquishing.

Moral agent (Who decides?)

The patient was in a position of consciously being able to act and make decisions. She is asked to decide about the treatment. In other words, she had the power and right to decide on her own. She can be named an autonomous patient.

However, no individual can make decisions by him-/herself as in a black box. There is some additional information regarding this woman’s biography and social network. She is a widow, apparently without a new partnership, but she is surrounded by children and grandchildren. Would it make a difference if she still had someone with whom to share life and responsibility?

Act of relinquishing (How) and context (Where and when)

The act of relinquishing is based on a sovereign and voluntary decision. The woman is not forced by anyone else to behave in this way. However, there is the advice of the physician. He offers the technical and medical possibilities of modern medicine. He also represents a voice of modern western society: Take the opportunities you have, go for the possibilities that are offered to you. All you can do – do it.

7 This case was discussed and studied during my research visit at the Chisholm Center for Bioethics, Melbourne, 2016.

In particular, in the hospital medical system, there is a dynamic of a self-regulating system that often does not leave open space for sovereign decisions. One asks for diagnosis, and ends up with the final concept of therapy. The interests of physicians and the medical industry accelerate the processes of decision-making.

In many instances, the act to relinquish has to contradict these regular procedures. The patient who wants to deny any treatment has to argue against the rule of daily routines. S/he has not only to say NO, but also to resist the challenging questions of the physicians and nurses: “Are you sure?”; “Maybe you want to reconsider your decision.”

Ultimately, such a free choice is much more than “giving up”; it is a conscious decision, not only against, but also in favour of something.

Object of relinquishing (What right/option is being relinquished?)

The patient relinquishes the maximum treatment possible, in our case aggressive chemotherapy, which is offered to her at no extra costs. Chemotherapy is a blessing of modern medicine. It is ethically by no means problematic to accept this treatment. However, it is also stressful and painful to go through weeks of application. Deciding to refrain from this treatment does not mean declining any form of medical treatment, for instance palliative care, which was given in this case.

Norms, values and goals (Why does one relinquish?)

In principle, medical treatment aims to cure disease and keep the person alive, thus basically leading to an extension of life. In our case study, however, there is no longer any real chance of recovery, but only to reduce the effects of a terminal illness, in other words, to slow down the process of dying. End-of-life decisions are, therefore, closely linked to issues regarding quality and quantity of life, or life in general. Is the extension of life the means to make one’s life rich and fulfilling? And what does “fulfilled” mean in this regard: “meaningful”, “happy”, “complete”? What makes life worth living and what does “enhancing life” mean in that regard?

In the case study, the patient is 72 years old, looking back on a “rich life”. She has obviously reconciled herself with her life and can look back peacefully. Is it easier or even necessary to relinquish, having experienced satisfaction within one’s life expectations? But what about the many, if not all, human beings who remain unfulfilled, to some extent, in their plans and hopes after a long life? Are there other ways to “fulfil”, to achieve a life that is

“well-rounded” and “satisfied”, as the Bible mentioned for Israel’s patriarchs (Gen. 25:8, 35:29; Job 42:17, see Zimmermann & Zimmermann 2020)?

Spiritual foundation (What enables the act of relinquishing?)

Human life has an unavoidable fragmentary character. It can never be “complete” in terms of goals and social experience. Nevertheless, in the case study, it seemed that the patient can accept the fragmentary character of her life. We do not know what enables her to relinquish; there is no information about spiritual grounds.

Following the German philosopher Sebastian Knell, to narrate a life story in a good way, which he calls the “eunarrated life” (2015:193), may help one feel that life is fulfilled, and satisfying. Or, as the theologian Henning Luther pointed out, the fragmentary character of human life is only completed and reconciled by embedding it in a wider story of community and tradition, theologically speaking the story of God and humanity (Luther 1991).

The belief to be in God’s hand during dying and even beyond will help one surrender to the process of dying – and yet end life in peace. This also helps relatives say goodbye. In this way, even this extreme case of relinquishing reveals some kind of gaining while giving up.

4.2 Not consuming food as a low-level act of relinquishing

Case two (as experienced by myself): At my home institution, the Johannes Gutenberg-University of Mainz, Germany, a student and some of her peers entered the Mensa to share lunch. There are two menus from which to choose: Viennese schnitzel with French fries and a side salad or a vegan burger.

The students take the vegan burger. A colleague asks: Don’t you remember how delicious the schnitzel was last time? The student answers: Sure. However, I had meat yesterday and want to reduce consuming meat. A second peer cheeks: Yeah, are you turning to the vegans then? The student says: No, not in principle, but from time to time it’s good to do something for animals, which are also God’s creatures. And by the way, this burger also looks delicious and is healthier.” I will closely examine what is happening, in this instance, in terms of ethical reasoning.

Moral agent (Who decides?) and object of relinquishing (What right/option is being relinquished?)

The student, once again, is privileged to make a free choice concerning food.

Act of relinquishing (How) and context (Where and When)

In this case it is a decision in the short term, nothing that influences future ways of living or that even leads to death. It is, what I call, “temporal act of relinquishing”. This is pointed out explicitly when the student denies that she is a vegan, in principle.

Nowadays, the vast majority of consumers of vegetarian food are not political or idealistic activists. This leads me to the foundational value system.

Norms, values and goals (Why does one relinquish?)

Occasional vegetarians do not view themselves as following an agenda of “vegetarian rights” nor a law of justice for animals, nor do they live according to a fixed code. This ethics is far beyond deontological normative ethics and universalism. However, they also mention reason and arguments, in this case two: compassion for animals and health benefits.

Spiritual foundation (What enables the act of relinquishing?)

Once again, hardly anything is mentioned about a religious or spiritual background. But the animal is evaluated as God’s creature.

Suspenseful balance of relinquishing: Between giving up and gaining

The student decided voluntarily to give up eating meat on this day, but still wanted to consume good food. She liked to simultaneously relinquish and enjoy.

There are many other replacement products such as alcohol-free beer and e-cigarettes that work the same way. German economists, with whom I work, call these “*Verzichtsprodukte*” – “products of relinquishing”. This term may seem paradoxical, but it illustrates an important aspect of the ethics of relinquishing, which I am exploring in my Enhancing Life research project. On my account, an ethics of relinquishing specifically holds together this dynamic of gaining and giving up. The action of surrendering is not done for its own sake, but because it serves a certain goal or greater purpose.

5. CONCLUSION

Only two examples represent the variety of possible fields of application. The transformative power that the ethics of relinquishing could have in our contemporary society of growth and longing for more is readily apparent. There are many fields of possible application (for example, bioethics, medicine, enhancement drugs, consuming of goods, use of media or knowledge [big data] and even the exercise of rights and legal options). Within a modern, constitutional state, the application of legal regulations can develop its own momentum, which then begins to work against foundational societal norms. Thus, it becomes a sign of intelligence and shrewd living to maximise the rights to which one can lay claim. Who would not take advantage of the possibilities for lowering one’s taxes, paternity leave, tax credits for solar panels, and so forth? The use of legal norms can, however, lead to abuse when self-interest and personal gain are the only norms of conduct. Legal norms must be counter-balanced and tempered by other norms concerned with the good of the community.

Paul’s implicit ethics of relinquishing provides a challenge at this point and leads to a reconsideration, especially by the rich and powerful, who are not only aware of their rights, but also claim them with consideration of others and without a broader perspective.

The ethics of relinquishing, as inspired by the Bible, can help cultivate a habitus of relinquishing in a culture of more. The important aspect of this ethics, the inner logic, can be described as follows: We gain when we give up. Life is enhanced by relinquishing.

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