



Protestant Theological University

Interruption that liberates to love

Schaafsma, Petruschka

Published in:
International Journal of Philosophy and Theology

DOI:
[10.1080/21692327.2024.2302094](https://doi.org/10.1080/21692327.2024.2302094)

Published: 20/02/2024

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Schaafsma, P. (2024). Interruption that liberates to love: On the positive potential of the 'paradox of ethics'. *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology*, 84(5), 326-332.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/21692327.2024.2302094>

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons). You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal.

This publication might have been made available through the PThU Research Portal under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the PThU website: <https://www.pthu.nl/over-pthu/bibliotheek-pthu/diensten/article-25fa-taverne-amendement-end-user-agreement.pdf>

Takedown policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright, please contact us providing details, and we will investigate your claim and remove access to the work if necessary: bibliotheek@pthu.nl.

Downloaded from the PThU Research Portal (Pure): <https://pure.pthu.nl>.

Interruption that liberates to love. On the positive potential of the 'paradox of ethics'

Petruschka Schaafsma

To cite this article: Petruschka Schaafsma (2023) Interruption that liberates to love. On the positive potential of the 'paradox of ethics', International Journal of Philosophy and Theology, 84:5, 326-332, DOI: [10.1080/21692327.2024.2302094](https://doi.org/10.1080/21692327.2024.2302094)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21692327.2024.2302094>



Published online: 20 Feb 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 15



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Interruption that liberates to love. On the positive potential of the ‘paradox of ethics’

Petruschka Schaafsma

Professor of Theological Ethics, Protestant Theological University, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

In this contribution, I take Nicholas Adams’ discussion of the paradox of ethics as an occasion to further explore our present moral situation and the possibilities of ethics in it. This situation is characterised by pluralism of moral views, which gives rise to relativist and cynical reactions as well as to strong, polarising expressions. These tendencies feed a suspicion towards ethical reflection. In light of the paradox of ethics as discussed by Adams this may seem justified. I will argue, however, for a more constructive role for ethics. This can be elaborated by focusing on the transcendent character of the good, which is implied in the paradox. I will explore this transcendent character by turning to a Christian perspective on morality that elaborates this transcendence in a specific constructive way. From this perspective, the experience of the loss of self-evidence around which the paradox of ethics revolves may be seen as beneficial. It opens human beings to a transcendent good to which they can entrust themselves for a renewal of life. Thus, the good can be seen as something that makes an appeal to us that can liberate to a love that transcends doing good as a human project.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 7 October 2023
Accepted 2 January 2024

KEYWORDS

Paradox of ethics;
interruption; truth; value
ethics; pluralism

Nicholas Adams discusses what he calls the paradox of ethics. This paradox is the result of ethics’ effort to articulate what cannot and should not be articulated: our moral commitments in their character of being taken for granted. Adams’ reason for discussing the problem of articulation is that it tends to be forgotten in our present situations of plurality of opinions and beliefs. Adams notes the attractiveness of the idea that despite pluralism, there is some common ground in the form of basic commitments. These shared beliefs would, moreover, relate to moral, practical issues, rather than religious or theological issues; the practical issues would be less controversial than the religious ones in which the stakes are high. Adams particularly situates this search for a hypothetical moral common ground in projects of interfaith dialogue. It is here that he notes that the dangers become real of a forced articulation of one’s deepest commitments in projects of moral conversation. In fact, these are often not conversations in which one can speak honestly about one’s deepest convictions. Rather, they are dominated by what is seen as politically correct or academic. Conversation with the extremists remains out of the question. Adams sees the practice of scriptural reasoning as an exception to such projects, and as an alternative.

In this contribution, I take Adams' argument as an occasion to further explore our present moral situation and the possibilities of ethics in it. To this end, I will first briefly sketch and clarify tendencies in our moral situation using Adams' own formulation of the paradox of ethics. I think this situation boils down to a widespread suspicion of ethical reflection. Is this suspicion justified? I think precisely the awareness of the paradox of ethics allows for a more constructive role for ethics than can be found in Adams' argument. This can be elaborated by focusing more on the transcendent character of the good, which is implied in this awareness. I will explore this transcendent character by turning to a Christian perspective on morality that elaborates this transcendence in a specific constructive way. This perspective starts from the experience of interruption which leads to the loss of self-evidence around which the paradox of ethics also revolves. But it implies just as well the possibility of a beneficial interruption in the sense that thus renewal of life can occur which liberates to a love beyond a human project of doing the good.

Current suspicion of ethics

Let's begin to broaden the sketch of how morality is raised in our time in many societies in the global north. Adams focuses on the desire to find moral common ground by steering away from fundamental oppositions as it is present in interfaith dialogue. I think this desire is also at work beyond that dialogue. The longing for common ground in spite of differing basic convictions – religious or otherwise – is therefore directed to practical issues like a safe, green, orderly neighbourhood or society. But at the same time, there are powerful patterns of thinking that contradict this longing: relativism, cynicism and polarisation. People feel that they live in a time when higher, unifying ideals of a religious or socio-political nature that are taken for granted no longer exist. They value what they call their freedom; no one is to tell them what to do. This makes it difficult to raise the question of 'what to do' or discuss 'what is right to do', that is, to practice ethics. This difficulty may be intensified for relativistic reasons: one experiences pluralism so deeply that one loses confidence in speaking meaningfully about the good. A cynical argument is more radical because the distrust in this is more fundamental in nature: the good does not exist, moral language is often generalisation of well-understood self-interest and thus in fact a power struggle. Given these tendencies of relativist and cynical interpretations of pluralism, little impetus for ethical reflection and debate is to be expected. From the other end of the spectrum, such reflection is also hampered. For meanwhile, the good is brought up in a polarising dynamic, in an us-versus-them opposition. It is our own people, our economy or farmers who need to be protected from migrants, globalism or from dependence on imports. Or rather, topics like climate change or colonialist heritages divide people into groups that revile each other. For them, the question of the good is already clearly answered. Engaging in ethical reflection would mostly detract from that clarity.

For the purpose of further clarification of this situation, Adams' attention to the paradox of ethics seems valuable. The relativists may well have understood that one cannot simply do justice to one's deepest convictions in words, let alone that we can thereby come closer together in conversation. Aware of the power struggle behind the desire for moral conversation, cynics may affirm Adams' warning that ethics can

contribute to a break-down of self-evident commitments. The polarising expression of straightforward ideas about what is right, and what is not, seems understandable from the insight that a moral conviction is not perceived as a possibility, but as something taken for granted, which is how it should be once and for all. Awareness of the paradox of ethics thus seems to lead to the conclusion that betting on the potential of moral conversation for finding common ground does not make sense. The three anti-ethical tendencies arising from pluralism in our societies then seem to receive confirmation from insight into the paradox of ethics.

Meanwhile, our time is characterised by moral issues of unprecedented magnitude that demand deliberation and action. In this situation, is it the task of theological and philosophical analysis to point out, like Adams does, how difficult and risky moral conversation is, and in particular how difficult and risky ethics is as it arises from the breakdown of the taken for granted and actually may cause it? I think a different, more constructive elaboration of the insight into the paradox of ethics is possible – one which is barely needed in today’s moral climate. This would start from what I will call the transcendent character of the good.

Transcendence, truth and value

For the purpose of exploring this positive potential of the paradox of ethics, I explicitly invoke the help of theology. Indeed, theologians, or thinkers who reckon with the transcendent or with God, have reflected extensively on the good, seen as something transcendent, something of the sphere of the divine and not simply of the human, something that human beings cannot simply understand, let alone realise. In a Christian perspective, these two spheres come together – mysteriously – in the figure of Christ. The transcendent character of the good is thereby honoured but the good is also, in a special way, something of the earthly world. As a purely human project, however, the pursuit of the good is seen as problematic. This view may be related to the paradox of ethics in so far as the paradox calls attention to the unspeakable nature of our moral commitments. These commitments are not options you can calmly and reasonably name and consider in order to then come to an informed decision. The paradox of ethics thus also criticises the good as a human project.

But if the tone of this Christian perspective is again critical, how then may it lead to a constructive contribution? To explore how this may be possible, I turn to an article by the German theologian Eberhard Jüngel. In the article, entitled *Value-free Truth. The Christian Experience of Truth in the Struggle against the ‘Tyranny of Values’*, Jüngel begins his characterisation of a Christian perspective on the good as emerging from an experience of what he calls interruption. Obviously, Jüngel is not the only theologian who takes ‘interruption’ as a central notion to illuminate a Christian perspective. But since he discusses it in this text in relation to the paradox of ethics central to Adams’ article, I find his reflection highly relevant. Remarkably, I came across Jüngel’s article via anthropological literature, in a recent book by Joel Robbins, who also refers to theologians Johann Baptist Metz, Kevin Hart, and Lieven Boeve for this focus on interruption (Joel Robbins, *Theology and the Anthropology of Christian Life*, 31-55). In my own theological education, an impulse to connect a Christian perspective to interruption came from Gerrit de Kruijf. He opens his ethics with a reflection on the interrupting power of celebrating the

Sunday: ‘The normal pattern has to be broken. You have to get out of your normal. That broadens your perspective. You then begin to see that this delightful/terrible world will be rid of evil and that it is therefore worthwhile to commit to a better life’ (Ethiek onderweg, 31, my translation). This interruption is a parallel to the experience of the paradox of ethics in that it is also a moment of breakdown of the self-evident. Jüngel formulates it as an experience of something which has ‘stepped in between me and myself’, a becoming aware of ‘true life’ beyond my own life.¹ This alienates me from my own life and brings me into the paradox of wanting to regain the obvious, the continuity of life. In ethics, this desire easily takes the form of formulating the good as a commandment or obligation. But, as Adams indicated as well, this ethical imperative is always too late, that is, after the breakdown of the good that is taken for granted. Jüngel refers in this respect to the command not to murder as formulated after the murder has occurred.² According to Jüngel, a Christian approach, however, has to do with a way out of this interruption and the resulting paradox of ethics. He formulates this way out as freedom, that is, a liberation to love. Central to this approach is the notion of truth that is at stake in a Christian view of interruption. This is truth that is not only understood as an intellectual but also as an existential and ethical notion. In order to explain this understanding of truth, Jüngel compares it to value. Values are central to a different kind of ethical approach, that of so-called value ethics.³

Value ethics is the academic articulation of what Jüngel sees as characteristic of his time in general. We live in a time in which people are no longer asking about the truth of life. Rather they speak about the meaning of life or what is valuable, which Jüngel equals to an interest in what works. As regards ethics, the question is what values guide human action. Inquiring about the good is inquiring about the fundamental values that should be realised through action.⁴ This analysis of our time as turning away from truth towards value reminds us of Adams’ analysis of the turn from theological claims to moral issues, which should lower the temperature of the debate in the hope of practical agreement.

Jüngel further qualifies this turn to fundamental values. Speaking in terms of values does not mean that those values can be clearly articulated or defined; they are rather ‘patterns of an ethical ideal sphere’. This insight is reminiscent of the transcendence of the good I just pointed out. So how are values, if they are indefinable, still important in finding an answer to the ethical problem of what to do? In the moment, in the concrete situation, the value must become clear or self-evident. Conscience has an important function here. This picture resembles the situation of Adams’ taken-for-granted moral commitments. And like Adams, Jüngel refers to the problem that ethics is a form of reflection that always comes too late – in the case of value ethics by establishing a fundamental value as leading towards the good.⁵

Jüngel problematises this ethical approach to the good in terms of values. His analysis also reminds of that of Adams’ problematising of the forced articulation of our deepest values, but Jüngel’s is more detailed. He refers to Nicolai Hartmann’s notion of a ‘tyranny of values’ and Carl Schmitt’s critique of it.⁶ Schmitt points out the thoroughly aggressive nature of value thinking. Originally value is a concept in economics, where goods can be understood as having a certain value, which determines their price. But when the concept is transferred outside this economic sphere it is distorted, because it suggests that values can be understood in terms of less or more validated. People who claim a value as foundation for their moral conviction or action find others over against them who refer

to the same value or a competing one. The image of morality is that of a battle where the one value is defended over against the other. People claim objectivity for their value, which intensifies the battle because this does not reveal how they are themselves involved as subjects in the choice or formulations of value.

Truth instead of value

The fundamentally problematic nature of value thinking in ethics is not, however, a necessary consequence of the paradox of ethics, as far as Jüngel is concerned. He develops his constructive alternative by returning to the currently unpopular notion of truth. Jüngel relates truth to interruption, as I said, to a certain alienation, the experience that life is no longer self-evident. I already indicated the parallel of this interruption with the breakdown of the self-evident moral commitments that Adams discusses. But, as we will see, Jüngel's theological elaboration of interruption by truth leads to a more constructive view of ethics than Adams gives.

Jüngel starts his elaboration of truth as an alternative to thinking in terms of values at a general, so to say, phenomenological level. He presents interruption as inherent to the nature of human beings. They are 'discovering beings'.⁷ It lies in human nature to be interrupted, being taken out of continuity. Implied in this interruption of the continuity of being is a threat. The loss of continuity is the confrontation with the possibility of non-being or death. Truth, then, is about the enhancement of being that may come out of this interruption. This occurs when interruption leads to understanding, to language, creativity which makes being newer and richer. Interruption is therefore an ambivalent experience. In its deepest sense it is a religious experience of feeling to be close to truth, to God and at the same time profoundly threatened.⁸

On the basis of this general analysis of being human in terms of ambivalent interruption, Jüngel subsequently elaborates the specific character of a Christian religious view. Here the groundless, shattering experience of interruption is not seen as an open, undecided event of crisis. It can be faced on the basis of a trust in God. Interruption, being beside oneself with the danger of losing oneself is not an experience in which God is lost, but found. This trust is possible because God is seen as taking part in this interruption. God is not detached from the human experience of interruption but in Christ shares humanity in the non-being of death at the cross. This means interruption can become a moment of finding truth in God, which is experienced as a gift of being strengthened in one's life, being renewed and in that sense also true.

But isn't that very easy thinking, too good to be true, a closing of my eyes to the threatening abyss of non-being? This is where Jüngel's final step can be illuminating. It precisely concerns ethics. The 'proof of the pudding' of a Christian vision of truth lies in the action that can follow from it, or in other words, the practical handling of the problem of losing the taken for granted commitments with which Adams familiarised us. Jüngel returns to the way value ethics tries to handle this problem. As we have seen, there a fundamental value is established after the event of failure, that is, too late. A good is formulated but not one that is able to restore the self-evident. It is a claim on goodness which alienates me from the other with a different claim. As a result, guilt remains. The

same holds for an ethics as present in the ten commandments: they imply a compensating of evil by not doing it, or by establishing a good. But this does not make myself good or just or connected to others.⁹ Thus, it implies a being confronted with one's failure. According to Jüngel, a Christian perspective on interruption as becoming renewed, or true, is about a getting beyond this confrontation. The circle of evil and compensating it, trying to reduce it, the unsolvable paradox of ethics is broken. To indicate the alternative ethics that is thus initiated Jüngel uses the words freedom and love. One is freed from the aggressiveness of the struggle about values, and the guilt of not living up to the moral commands. This freedom originates in a trust that the interruption is beneficial, because truth is found in God, which is at the same time a renewal of oneself as becoming 'true'.

The possibility of beneficial interruption

We turned to Jüngel to explore the positive potential of the paradox of ethics. Is it possible to get beyond the suspicion of ethics and all projects of moral conversation that follows from the awareness of this paradox? I introduced this exploration as theological in nature in that it starts from a taking seriously of the transcendent character of the good. To conclude, I return to this formulation to connect Jüngel's analyses more explicitly to the account of our pluralist moral situation.

In my analyses, I presented Jüngel's investigation of the specific character of Christian ethics as a constructive way out of current experiences of the paradox of ethics. The experience of a breakdown of the self-evident and the rise of the question of what to do is pervasive in today's pluralistic situation. It is an experience that discourages rather than encourages moral conversation and ethical reflection. It is a discouraging experience because there seems to be such a wide spectrum of moral views, all claiming to be true. That must make you a relativist, if you don't already take a cynical view of those claims because you see them mainly as expressions of power. Also discouraging is the experience that when one does express moral views, it easily leads to polarisation and condemnation of the other's point of view. The latter may be seen as attempts to regain a new self-evidence beyond the shattering experience of interruption, of being beside oneself.

With Jüngel we may now analyse these experiences as having a constructive potential. The moment in which the self-evident continuity of everyday life is lost may become a moment of renewal, and enhancement of life. The crux of this possibility seems to lie in becoming aware of the transcendent origin of this renewal. In the moment of interruption, the good is no longer seen as a human project, something human beings themselves can establish, by making laws, or deciding on the fundamental value. The good is transcendent but human beings can be open to this transcendence and relate to it, even become part of it.

This means a reinterpretation of the pluralist, discouraging experiences themselves. Interruption is not just a negative experience of not being able to understand the other human being, or being confronted with one's own failure. The experience that the good cannot be formulated as a value or a commandment so that it becomes a human project, points to the good as transcendent. In the moment of interruption, a positive appeal may be discerned of the good as transcendent. This discernment can

enable moral conversation in our current climate of suspicion of ethics. Taking seriously that I cannot formulate nor do the good can enable a conversation with people with relativist and cynical reflections. Taking seriously the strong character of the appeal may enable understanding for strong formulations of the good in polarising discussions.

A dialogue with Jüngel's Christian perspective has thus revealed the key question of whether I resign myself to failure, impressed by non-being, or whether I trust that the transcendence of the good offers the chance for a new attitude: one of being freed from worrying about goodness, or being pulled back and forth between conflicting values so that I discover what needs to be done, to love. Perhaps this shared experience of interruption by a transcendent good may even be called a moral common ground.

Notes

1. Jüngel, "Value-free Truth," 204–205.
2. Jüngel, "Value-free Truth," 212.
3. For this, he refers to the ethics of Max Scheler and Nicolai Hartmann.
4. Jüngel, "Value-free Truth," 191, 194.
5. Jüngel, "Value-free Truth," 199, 212.
6. Jüngel, "Value-free Truth," 203.
7. Jüngel, "Value-free Truth," 206–207.
8. Jüngel, "Value-free Truth," 209.
9. Jüngel, "Value-free Truth," 213.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Petruschka Schaafsma is Professor of Theological Ethics at the Protestant Theological University in the Netherlands. She runs a research program in the field of ethics and theology on the meaning of family, with special attention for the aspects of givenness and dependence (*Family and Christian Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, 2023). She is project leader of the Moral Compass Project which explores the potential of views of divine law for current morality (*The Transcendent Character of the Good*, Routledge 2022).

Bibliography

- Jüngel, E. Value-Free Truth. The Christian Experience of Truth in the Struggle Against the 'Tyranny of Values.' In *Theological Essays II*, Translated by Webster, J. B. and Neufeldt-Fast, A. 191–215. London: Bloomsbury, 2014.
- Jüngel, E. Wertlose Wahrheit. Christliche Wahrheitserfahrung im Streit gegen die 'Tyrannei der Werte.' In *Wertlose Wahrheit: Zur Identität und Relevanz des christlichen Glaubens (Theologische Erörterungen)* edited by E. Jüngel, 45–75. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003.
- Kruijff, G. de *Ethiek onderweg*. Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2008.
- Robbins, J. *Theology and the Anthropology of Christian Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.