

Editorial: Ethics in Antiquity and Christianity

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Dear reader,

with its first edition of the *Journal of Ethics in Antiquity and Christianity*, the Mainz Research Centre “Ethics in Antiquity and Christianity” introduces an open access platform in order to extend its discourse beyond its previous scope and activities.¹

1. Ethics in Antiquity and Christianity: A Paradox?

Ethical issues may remain virulent for long periods of time and any “once and for all” responses remain elusive. Our questions concerning a good life and good actions; concerning standards according to which we should orientate our lives; concerning justice, freedom, and responsibility have to be asked over and over again. Is, therefore, the consideration of ethical traditions, especially ancient traditions, suspicious as it may be grasping for some type of “authority of antiquity” with which to conceal a lack of good arguments and protect that which exists from that which is new? Must referring to classical philosophical heavyweights or to a book that is called “Holy Scripture” take on the character of decisive arguments? Should not Epictetus, Aristotle, Philo, and certainly Job, Paul, and Augustine remain altogether silent in today’s ethical discourse and leave the stage to the—already sufficiently diverse—voices of the present? It is undeniable that classical and especially biblical texts were often used to legitimize coercion and the preservation of unjustifiable structures both in the past and the present. Thus, how can the copula “and” between the terms “antiquity” and “Christianity” be justified? How can a journal justifiably be called *Journal of Ethics in Antiquity and Christianity*? Although an investigation of ancient ethics can still be brought into conversation with the study of ancient Christianity, there seems

to be a “garstige[r] breite[r] Graben”² (an ugly broad ditch) between ancient and contemporary Christianity, between ancient and current ethical discourses. Pressing issues of the present, such as the ethics of digital space, global warming, or genetic engineering, seem, at least at first glance, to be categorically different from the questions raised by Aristotle, Qoheleth, or Paul.

2. Ethics in Antiquity and Christianity: A Context of Discovery?

The recourse to ancient, primarily Aristotelian, ethics has been prominently carried out in the last decades and been highlighted as such, and not just in the sense of purely historical reconstruction, but in direct conversation with, and sometimes in critical contrast to, contemporary ethics.³ At times, ancient ethicists seem to be closer to real life than ethical discourses focused on duties and rules, e.g., when they inquire into good life itself or take emotions into consideration. A more in-depth and differentiated view of ancient ethics, however, has also brought to light insights including the observation that even they are more polyphonic and more complex than many of the schematic overviews

² G. E. LESSING, Über den Beweis des Geistes und der Kraft (1. Schreiben), in *IBID.*, Sechs theologische Schriften, ed. W. GERICKE (Quellen. Ausgewählte Texte aus der Geschichte der christlichen Kirche Neue Folge 3; Berlin: Evangelische Verlags-Anstalt, 1985) 114–118: 117.

³ Cf. A. C. MACINTYRE, Der Verlust der Tugend. Zur moralischen Krise der Gegenwart (Frankfurt am Main/New York: Campus-Verlag, 2006) and M. C. NUSSBAUM, Upheavals of Thought. The Intelligence of Emotions (8th ed.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), further overviews in K. BAYERTZ, Antike und moderne Ethik. Das gute Leben, die Tugend und die Natur des Menschen in der neueren ethischen Diskussion, *ZPhF* 59 (2005): 114–132.

¹ Cf. <http://www.ethikmainz.de/en/> (last visited 01.02.2019).

describing them.⁴ Classical philosophers, biblical authors, and early Christian thinkers consider far more than fixed norms and rigid moral concepts. They discuss, evaluate, and argue for, various and quite different positions on ethical issues. Precisely because they are not monotonous but polyphonic, they stand in proximity to current ethical discourses—despite persistent differences in thinking and concrete evaluations (for example, on slavery). The “and” that connects ancient ethics to current ethics is thus not tension-free, but it is an inspiring, even a truly exciting one. Thus, old texts may provide a productive impetus and a space for discovery in current debates. Previous research on “ethics in antiquity and Christianity” at the Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz has already been fruitful, in that it has discovered, for instance, that New Testament ethics is much more differentiated and controversial than hitherto described and presented in the “indicative and imperative” model. It is precisely in its plurality that it is closer to current discourses on ethics than is often assumed.⁵ Ancient ethics in biblical and extra-biblical contexts makes use of a wealth of linguistic forms that have specific meaning for generating ethical significance, as the Mainz project “Metaphor, *Narratio*, *Mimesis*, *Doxology*” has shown.⁶ These ancient ethical forms, precisely because of our historical distance from their own context, draw attention to the way in which ethical significance is generated through different media, including in the present, a point which is rarely recognized in the current, scholarly discourse on ethics. Ancient ethical discourses will be examined here not as additional normative instances, but as simultaneously familiar and strange areas of discovery of ethical reflection: “Not, of course, that there is any magic about the past. People were no cleverer than they are now; they made as many mistakes as we. But not the *same* mistakes.... To be sure, the books of the future would just be as good as the books of the past, but unfortunately we can not get at them.”⁷

⁴ Cf. e.g. F. W. HORN/R. ZIMMERMANN (ed.), *Jenseits von Indikativ und Imperativ (Kontexte und Normen neutestamentlicher Ethik / Contexts and Norms of New Testament Ethics I = WUNT 238*; Tübingen: Mohr&Siebeck, 2009).

⁵ Cf. *ibid.*

⁶ Cf. U. VOLP/F. W. HORN/R. ZIMMERMANN (ed.), *Metapher – Narratio – Mimesis – Doxologie. Begründungsformen frühchristlicher und antiker Ethik (Kontexte und Normen neutestamentlicher Ethik / Contexts and Norms of New Testament Ethics 7 = WUNT 356*; Tübingen: Mohr&Siebeck, 2016) and D. ERBELE-KÜSTER, „Ethik (AT),“ in *Das Wissenschaftliche Bibellexikon im Internet (WiBiLex)*, <https://www.bibelwissenschaft.de/de/stichwort/17880/> (last visited 31.01.2019).

⁷ C.S. Lewis in his preface to an English translation of Athanasius, quoted from C. S. LEWIS, “On the Reading of Old Books,” in *IBID.*, *God in the Dock. Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. W. HOOPER (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1972), 200–207: 202.

3. Ethics in Antiquity and Christianity: An Open Network of Discourses

It is the goal of this *Journal of Ethics in Antiquity and Christianity* to provide a suitable forum for such discoveries. The questions to which reference was made in the first paragraph concerning the connection between the study of ancient ethics and current ethical discourses show that the “how” and “that” of the reception of ancient ethics or ancient writings can themselves become ethical questions in present ethics. The first issue of our *Journal of Ethics in Antiquity and Christianity* is dedicated to this question. The relevance of and potential for the reception of biblical ethics regarding the present, as well as the appropriate methods for doing so, are reflected upon by *John J. Collins* looking at the Old Testament text and *Robert L. Brawley* looking at the New Testament text. *Adela Yarbro Collins* conducts an analysis of Gal 3:28 from an ethical perspective and points to current sociopolitical contexts. *Wolfram Kinzig* investigates and makes plausible why ethical content has not found expression in the great creeds of the ancient church. *Christoph Jedan* pleads for an explicitly religious study of ancient ethics in the interest of the present. The dialogue between *Stephan Goertz* and *Marco Hofheinz* discusses, from a systematic-theological perspective, the significance the Bible can and should have in the ethical discourse of the present. *William Schweiker* presents perspectives of the research project “Enhancing Life” on the relevance of ancient ethics. *Jan Assmann* focuses on truth (*ma'at*) as a forgotten ethical term. A peculiarity of the first edition is the *series of theses for discussion* of the five editors, in which they themselves set forth their hermeneutical foundations for accessing ancient ethics, and thus at the same time attempt a further contextual definition of the project of this journal. Reviews present recent research on the question of the authority of the Bible for contemporary ethics.

It is the editorial board’s goal, however, that the journal moves beyond this “self-contemplation,” and offers a space for discussing the many-voiced and controversial ethical reflections of antiquity and the present. It goes without saying that the views expressed in each of the contributions may not be understood as the editors’ positions, but rather deliberately reflect a broad range of opinions and various disciplinary approaches. As is widely recognized, discourses thrive on differences and opposing perspectives. There will be opportunities for both meta-ethical and material-ethical discussion, for detailed studies and more general perspectives. The four formats provided by the journal open up possibilities for different forms of language and methods. Whereas the articles undergo an intra- and interdisciplinary peer-review process and are here presented as classic scholarly publications, the significantly shorter *miscellae* provide the opportunity for a broad range of content and freer forms of

writing. The *dialogue* points to the fundamentally communicative structure of ethics while our *reviews* provide the link to additional current research. The contributions in these four categories in this and further themed issues are thematically related. In addition, open issues are planned which will not be subject to a common theme and for which the editors are happy to receive contributions in all four categories. Contributions from all academic disciplines are welcome as long as they make reference to antiquity and ethics. With this interdisciplinary, methodological and thematic variety, a space is to be created for the development of a deeper understanding of ancient ethics, along with its lasting effects and transformations up to the present, as well as for the question of the relationship between ancient texts and positions set forth in

contemporary ethical discourse. Thus, the editors hope that this journal may also contribute to debates on current ethical issues in society.

This final point was influential in our decision to publish the *Journal of Ethics in Antiquity and Christianity* as an open access publication. The results of the academic examination and discussion of ancient ethics will thus be accessible to the ethical discourse of the present not only in the lecture rooms of financially strong Western universities, but will be available to scholars around the world in a wide variety of disciplines. Therefore, neither our authors nor our readers will be charged a fee. This is possible due to the hosting and the technical support of the journal by the University Library Tübingen for which we are sincerely grateful.