



CRITICAL ESSAYS

READING *THE JEFFERSON BIBLE*: ELUCIDATING THE PHILOSOPHY OF JESUS OF NAZARETH

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Abstract

This speculative essay is focused on elucidating the ethics of Jesus as they appear in The Jefferson Bible. It offers a systematic view and analysis of Jesus' ethics as they differ from the common view associated with Christianity, which is traditionally related to Divine Command Theory and is deontological in nature. The essay incorporates Jefferson's thoughts on the subject of ethics and Jesus into a study that argues, by interpreting specific sayings and parables of Jesus, for a philosophical notion of ethics sharing a "family resemblance" with/to "agapism," "axiological ethics," and a modified form of "humanism" - an ethics that might be said to begin with what is identified as "sympathetic consensus," which is expressed within Jesus' reference to and philosophizing of the Golden Rule. It unfolds in four sections covering: The approach to Jefferson's Bible; the critique of the philosophical ethics of antiquity; the analysis of the parables of Jesus; and the detailed interpretation of the ethical philosophy of Jesus, which includes the analysis of the ethics of love and dignity, the Golden Rule, and the immediate experience of God and His Kingdom.

Keywords : Jefferson's Bible; Jesus of Nazareth; Ethical Philosophy; New Testament; Agapism



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INTRODUCTION

This essay is focused on elucidating the philosophy and ethics of Jesus as they appear in *The Jefferson Bible*, which is an abbreviated version of the New Testament (the Gospels) compiled by Jefferson, employing the cut-and-paste method, which highlights Jesus the man and his ethical message. Jefferson excluded Gospel passages focused on the working of miracles, the resurrection, the incarnation, and the ascension, all events that a modern reader might regard as *supernatural* events.¹ The essay offers a systematic view and analysis of Jesus' ethics as they differ from the common view associated with Christianity, which is traditionally related to Divine Command Theory and is *deontological* in nature, i.e., morality grounded in immutable imperatives/duties and the inherent "rightness" (morality) and "wrongness" (immorality) of actions. This speculative essay incorporates Jefferson's thoughts on the ethics of Jesus into a study that argues for a philosophical notion of ethics through interpreting specific sayings and parables of Jesus that share a "family resemblance" with/to "agapism," "axiological ethics,"² and a modified form of "humanism,"³ an ethics that might be said to begin with what is identified as "sympathetic consensus" as is expressed within the Jesus' reference to and philosophizing of the Golden Rule. In attempting to elucidate a view of ethics that Jefferson associates with Jesus, the essay includes analyses of systematic ethics, philosophical writings on Jesus, and contemporary New Testament scholarship focused on the interpretation of the historical Jesus. It is noted, however, that our reading is concerned with exploring the religious and spiritual aspects of Jesus' ethics, a critical concern that is also present to Jefferson's synthesis of the four Gospels, which represents a "harmony," for it weaves passages and relevant strands of text drawn from the (four) Gospels into a single, condensed, and coherent portrait of Jesus. The essay unfolds in four main sections, which explore the following topics: (1) The general approach to *The Jefferson Bible*; (2) Jefferson's critique of antiquity and religion in search of a superior vision of ethics; (3) Jesus as pedagogue and the use and function of parables as exercises in potential soul-transformation; and (4) A Jeffersonian interpretation of the ethics of Jesus of Nazareth, focused on the ethics of love and dignity, the Golden Rule, and the immediate experience of God.

APPROACHING THE JEFFERSON BIBLE: THE CONCERN WITH ETHICS OVER DIVINITY

Writing on *The Jefferson Bible*, Rollston (2020) states the following: "There is no commentary from Jefferson in this text at all, with a few exceptions of a few glosses about historical background...Rather it is just a selection or sections, which could be referred to as 'pericopes'...that Jefferson cut from the canonical Gospels, sections that he considered to be paradigmatic teachings of Jesus of Nazareth" (p. 1).⁴ It must be stated at the outset that since we are attempting to

¹ I thank both reviewers for their helpful suggestions that contributed greatly to improving this paper for publication. I also want to briefly address an issue raised regarding my choice of consulting and referencing the Wilder edition of *The Jefferson Bible* (see works cited) as opposed to other, more recognized editions. In my opinion, the Wilder printing offers intelligent laypersons direct and unadulterated access to the writing without the potential distraction of scholarly commentary through the use of footnotes or endnotes. It is my hope that readers will draw inspiration from this essay to seek out Jefferson's text.

² Axiological ethics focuses on morality as intimately related to values and value systems. "*Axios*" in the Greek refers to that which has value or is worthy of attention and praise (my translation).

³ Humanistic ethics (*secular humanism*) dismisses religion as the necessary foundation for morality and focuses instead on human potential when attempting to navigate the terrain of the normative. Many forms of humanism exist, e.g., Jean-Paul Sartre espouses an *existential* form of humanism and K. Nielsen, who is referenced in this paper, adopts a utilitarian approach to humanism as an *ethics without God*.

⁴ With respect to the use of the term *pericope*, Funk and Hoover (1993) clarify that *pericope* is a Greek term that literally means, "something cut out." It refers to a paragraph in an essay or a segment of a well-ordered story" (p. 547). The act of compiling a series of *pericopes* accurately describes Jefferson's approach to his succinctly revised version of the Gospels, wherein segments (*pericopes*) are carefully selected to reveal a living characterization of the morals of the historical Jesus, or as Jefferson prefers, "Jesus of Nazareth."



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interpret, by means of discerning the voice, vision, and message of Jesus emanating from the Gospel sayings and parables selected by Jefferson, it is difficult, if not impossible, to conclude with any degree of certainty that when (and if) Jesus states x , he indeed means y or z . Our approach aligns with Funk's (2002) conclusion: "All that we can hope for is a glimpse or intimation into Jesus' overall vision," and since Jesus' way of teaching works to challenge and "frustrate moralizing proclivities," his parables are "open to multiple and deeper interpretations as a way of keeping them open to reinterpretation in ever new contexts" (p. 12). Funk urges those embarking on the interpretation of the words and deeds of Jesus, to "follow their lead and figure out what meaning to give them in our own circumstances" (p. 12).

Jefferson sought to communicate the philosophical elements of Jesus' vision and project within an interpretive and radical abridgment of the four canonical Gospels (Mark, Matthew, Luke, John), serving as a corrective to what Jefferson identifies as the *corruptions of Christianity*,⁵ which Jefferson believes wrongly links Jesus' teaching and message primarily to the issue of divinity and his role as the "Christ," and so, as Tatum (1984) observes, this myopic view radically minimalizes what moved and most concerned Jefferson, namely, the ethical lessons that can be drawn from the "true style and spirit of the rich fragments [Jesus] left us" (p. 37). Jaspers (1967), who much like Jefferson, considers Jesus to be a paradigmatic philosopher, observes, "The historic reality of Jesus the man, which is so extremely important for us in the history of philosophy, is without interest to the doctors of the faith, either among rebels or the orthodox believers" (p. 86). In this way, as Cupitt (2009) observes, Jefferson is reminiscent of the Enlightenment critics of Christianity that "gradually broke up the gigantic religious ideology built around [Jesus, and] at last began to recover his original message" (p. 19).⁶ To this end, Jefferson explicitly states that he will leave certain questions unanswered, certain issues unaddressed, specifically those focused on Jesus's divinity.

The Jefferson Bible presents a succinct and unique portrait of Jesus and the essence of his ethical vision. The teachings of Jesus, as expressed through sayings and deeds, stress the pursuit of radical acts of charity and self-sacrifice, e.g., when urging followers to sell everything and give to the poor and destitute (Mark 10:21) or when eschewing the role of master and kneeling to wash the disciples' feet, and assuming the role of a slave (John 13:1-20). Corley (2002) claims that we can imagine Jesus "espousing either a radical Hebrew ideal of charity or a Hellenistic philosophical ethic, an ongoing altruistic ethic in the Kingdom of God" (p. 152). What we attempt to cull from *The Jefferson Bible*, this due to that lack of explicit interpretation or commentary on the passages he cut from the canonical Gospels and selected for inclusion, might be related to what in New Testament scholarship falls under the general scholarly pursuit: *The Search for the Historical Jesus*. Funk and Hoover (1993) contend that Jefferson scrutinized the Gospels with the intent to separate Jesus' historical moral ideals and ethical practices, "from the encrustations of Christian doctrines," or the

⁵ Although included by Jefferson, scholars generally recognize that the Book of John is primarily a divine "proclamation" Gospel, highlighting the many well-known, "I am" declarations that are attached to Jesus. For example, in relation to our focus on parables, Fortna (2002) points out that the "very form of the sayings in John underscores their late, Christian character...His parables usually end with a twist, a question, a startling assertion that forced the hearer to decide what was meant. But nothing of this sort is found in John; there are simply no parables there. In their place, usually set within long monologues, there are riddles and extended metaphors that are exclusively Christological" (p. 226-227). However, we note that in John the centrality of the ethics of Jesus, as related to our analysis, is introduced as a "new commandment" or ethical "directive," that the disciples *should* love each other, just as Jesus has loved them and has demonstrated, modelled, and instantiated what might be understood as *love-in-action*. (John 13:34; cf. 15:9-11; 15:12) See also: Burge, G. M. (1992). *Interpreting the Gospel of John*. Michigan: Baker Book House.

⁶ As to the *corruptions of Christianity* of which Jefferson speaks, Cupitt (2008) argues: "Barely twenty years after Jesus' death a great religion began to grow up around his name. From the first it began to falsify his message: it exalted him to the heavenly world, it made him into the personification of his own teaching, it made of therefore himself just one more sovereign lawgiver, and built around him the ugly old apparatus of authoritarian, mediated religion – and so eventually it became a standing denial of his original message" (pp. 19-20)



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systematization of the Christian religion (p. 3). We reiterate that Jefferson did not seek to separate the Jesus of history from the Jesus of faith, but rather to separate Jesus the man from the figure of the “Christ,” i.e., all associations with divinity as a miracle-working messianic figure, and beyond, the Son of God, one fulfilling, through his resurrection, prophecy emerging from the Old Testament.

Tatum (1984) argues that Jefferson’s approach to Jesus is characterized by a rationalist view, for Jefferson holds the underlying belief that the miraculous or supernatural occurrences in the Gospels “contradict the laws of nature” (p. 39). In line with what we stated earlier, Tatum also goes on to recognize, “Jefferson highlighted Jesus’ teachings and omitted all supernatural occurrences including the miracles” (39). Indeed, even the common narrative structure, so essential to the Gospels’ accounts of Jesus’ life, ministry, betrayal and death, is present only in a threadbare form in Jefferson’s account, and his inclusion of the precepts of Jesus’ mortality, make his account unique and valuable to those embracing a philosophical mindset. It is the case, as Hoover (2002) contends, that Jesus’ use of “sapiential speech” included instances of instruction through direct (*protreptic*) exhortation, which might be understood as communicating moral commandments, we however, following Jefferson, opt for the term “precept” when addressing the principles of Jesus’ ethical ideals that he embraces, espouses, and puts into practice. Cupitt (2009) echoes this view and argues that when examining the philosophy of Jesus, “the first and most important point to be grasped is what is implied by putting ethics first in a uniquely thoroughgoing way,” for as we discuss below, Jesus moves away from the “old custom of deriving ethics [exclusively] from cosmology [i.e.,] seeing the moral life in terms of conformity to religious Law” (p. 87). So radical is Jesus’ project, as Crossan (1992) argues, that the parables, aphorisms, and exhortative sayings call for the transvaluation of traditional notions of ethics, for Jesus reveals to us, “how the logic of [traditional] ethics is undermined by the mystery of God and that, if one can accept it, it is the most critical moral experience of all” (p. 80).

JEFFERSON’S CRITIQUE OF ANTIQUITY AND RELIGION: THE QUEST FOR A SUPERIOR VISION OF ETHICS

In his justification for addressing the ethics of Jesus, Jefferson compares and contrasts Jesus’ teaching with the philosophers of antiquity and the religious moral system consistent with the practice of Judaism. Naming the ancient philosophers Pythagoras, Socrates, Epicurus, Cicero, Epictetus, and Seneca, Jefferson argues that their exclusive concerns were on self-inquiry and the development of the soul or intellect, e.g., engaging in practices and exercises that quell and control the raging passions that have the potential to corrupt the soul. According to Jefferson, these thinkers failed to adequately develop a legitimate view of *interpersonal* ethics. However, as we note, this critical assessment of Jefferson is undeniably debatable (Magrini 2017, 2018, 2021). However, Jefferson does raise an interesting concern regarding the range and scope of what constitutes ethical *interpersonal* relationships within the philosophy of antiquity, and his claim is that their view of ethics was neither expansive enough nor inclusive enough; their view of ethics did not, according to Jefferson (2007), equally welcome and include all types of people into “the [loving] circle of benevolence,” and beyond this, it ignored a view of ethics that inculcates “peace, charity, and love to our fellow-men, [it failed to] embrace with benevolence the whole family of mankind” (p. 9). Judaism also fails to adequately address our interpersonal connection to others, which exists outside and so extends beyond the inner circle of its systematized religious practices and rituals. So, according to Jefferson, the morality of Judaism was restricted and narrow in scope, and Jefferson goes so far as to state, and erroneously we must add, that the Jewish view of morality is anti-social in nature, and so requires a radical reassessment and reformation.

Cupitt (2009), who has perhaps published more on the philosophy of Jesus than any academic, reiterates elements of Jefferson’s view when contending that early Christian communities made

the decision *not* to impose observance of the Jewish Law upon gentile converts, [and this decision] could be read, and by many was read, as asserting that the new Christian ethic of mutual *human* love and



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forbearance had in a radical way fulfilled, displaced, and made quite redundant the old ethics of revealed divine Law. (p. 11)

Much like Jefferson, Cupitt is also highly critical of organized Christianity, and he believes that one devastating consequence of the entire mono-*theistic* tradition in religion and morality is that it has “produced too many tirelessly self-righteous people who neglect their neighbors” (p. 7).

We refrain from offering a detailed analysis of Jefferson’s embrace of religion or speculation on how this view might have manifested within his understanding and practice of politics.⁷ However, a few thoughts on the topic of religious belief are in order as we proceed, and in the following quotation, Jefferson (2007) succinctly expresses his personal relationship to Christianity, which is grounded in and driven by an undeniable sense of the ethical:

Say nothing of my religion. It is known to my God and myself alone. Its evidence before the world is to be sought in my life. If that has been honest and dutiful to society, the religion which has regulated it cannot be a bad one. (p. 7, emphasis in original)

Jefferson claims that Judaism is *deistic* in nature, and this claim requires clarification. *Deism*, as it is understood in the contemporary philosophy of religion, is the belief in a divine, omnipotent being who creates and establishes the universe and sets in motion its mechanistic unfolding, but does not respond to prayer and refrains from intervening in human affairs. In this view, God is *transcendent* but is not *immanent*. However, against Jefferson’s claim, Judaism, as a monotheistic religion, does indeed embrace both a *transcendent* and *immanent* God (*Yahweh*), who is omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, and omni-moral. As Pojman and Fieser (2009) point out, the idea of an intimately personal and loving God is wholly consistent with this monotheistic view (p. 56). Jefferson also embraces an omnipotent and omni-present God, which is in fact wholly consistent with the expression of *theism*. God is the prime mover (unmoved mover) who creates a rational universe, which can be approached and understood through reasoned thought. For Jefferson, God did indeed intervene in human affairs, making his presence known in time. However, according to Jefferson, God’s power to intervene is to be understood in terms of His manifestation through natural laws. Jefferson denies the Holy Trinity, and on that account, might be classified as a *Unitarian*, but although he embraces the active *transcendent* and *immanent* monotheistic God of *theism*, his strict rational denial of miracles and supernatural occurrences might be said to obliquely smuggle in elements of *deism*. Interestingly, this theological term is traceable to Samuel T. Coleridge, and as Cupitt (2006) recognizes, indicates a view that “affirms only the humanity of Christ” (p. 109). In line with this understanding, Jefferson’s view of the teachings of Jesus is focused on giving priority to a reasoned and concrete view of ethics, and for Jefferson, Jesus’ morality has its roots and is therefore undeniably grounded in a spiritual relationship to God, which includes faith and worship.

JESUS AS PEDAGOGUE AND THE USE AND FUNCTION OF PARABLES: SELF-REFLECTION AND THE POTENTIAL ETHICAL TRANSFORMATION OF THE SOUL

Sanders (1993) contends that Jesus might be referred to as a “rabbi” or teacher of the Law, and traditionally a rabbi “derived authority from studying and interpreting the Bible. Jesus doubtless did both, but it was not scriptural

⁷ In a letter of April 12, 1803 that Jefferson (2007) wrote to Dr. Benjamin Rush, which accompanied Jefferson’s manuscript (*TJB*), he indicates that the ideas contained in the manuscript are “very different from the Anti-Christian system imputed on me by those who know nothing of my opinions,” and in confiding this manuscript to Rush, Jefferson is confident that “it will not be exposed to the malignant perversions of those who make every word from me a text for new misrepresentations and calumnies.” Jefferson concludes, with a succinct and direct proclamation, “I am a Christian in the only sense in which [Jesus] wished any one to be; sincerely attached to his doctrines, in preference to all others” (p. 8).



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interpretation that gave him a claim on other people," instead, Jesus had such a powerful impact on people, and we might add, on history, because he "offered an immediate and direct route to God's love and mercy" (p. 239). Funk and Dewey (2015) indicate that both Jesus and John the Baptist were part of the "sons of Lady Wisdom" lineage that "reflects the prevailing Jewish Wisdom tradition," wherein it is believed that "Lady Wisdom (*Sophia/Hokmah*) not only manifested throughout time but had offspring" (p. 93). Hedrick (2002) offers a crucial caveat to this understanding of Jesus as a teacher and specifically a wise man, for Hedrick argues that Jesus "was certainly not a teacher, sage, or wise man in the modern sense (or even ancient) sense of the word, i.e., in the sense he passed on the content of community wisdom," for indeed a major theme of Jesus' public discourse, which includes the communication of an ethical component bound up with "the imperial rule of God, involved a new way of conceptualizing life that completely reversed conventional value systems" (p. 71). Cupitt (2009) also contends that, to fully comprehend the philosophical implications of Jesus' profound ethical vision, it is necessary to understand him as a radical "*transgressor*, someone who 'walks across' and violates deeply drawn social lines and boundaries [and as] an *anti-traditionalist* and *non-conformer*, and never a docile, conforming 'sheep'" (p. 78). Jesus' new vision of existing reality diverges from the notion that the world as fixed and established, recalcitrant to the efforts of the human will, for if we demonstrate the courage to follow his difficult moral teachings, we open the possibility of bringing into existence, and hence establishing, a transformed reality, including the *transvaluation* of traditional values. In this way Jesus might be said to be "an extreme voluntarist, someone who insists that if we choose a new world with sufficient decisiveness, then we'll find ourselves in that new world," which Jesus calls God's Kingdom (p. 79).

As stated in the foregoing section, Jesus' teachings differ from and are for Jefferson superior to those of the ancient philosophers and the Jewish tradition in morality emerging from the *Torah* and represented in the rabbinic tradition. Jefferson (2007) informs us that although the ethics of Jesus relate to both family and friends, his vision of morality is more accurately described as a form of "universal philanthropy," a spiritual form of *egalitarian humanism*, limited not only to the "kindred and friends, to neighbors and countrymen, but to all mankind, gathering all into one family, under the bonds of love, charity, peace, common wants and common aids" (p. 10). Stressing this issue, Jefferson includes the parable *The Feast* ("The Bidden to a Feast"), where a certain man of considerable wealth gives a banquet and is ultimately left with an all but empty dining hall. He then orders his servant to leave no stone unturned and, "Go into the streets of the city, and bring in hither the poor, and the maimed, and the halt, the blind," and when guests arrive, the room is still not at full capacity, and so he orders the servant to search the "the highways and hedges, and compel [all] to come in, that my house may be filled" (p. 57). (Thom 64:1-12; Matt 22:1-14; Luke 14:16-24) The thrust of this parable, as some observe, such as Crossan (2002), inspires a notion of an ethic grounded in inclusivity, equity, and equality, representing a "social challenge of an egalitarian table," a radical "social challenge on the heart of society, the table, the place where persons meet to eat, the place where they establish a confront the [traditional, accepted, unchallenged] social order" (p. 164).

According to Jefferson (2007), rather than focusing on an ethics grounded exclusively in rule or duty driven behavior or action (*deontology*), Jesus, in terms of his commentary and amendment to the commandments and Laws of the *Torah* and Moses, recognized that "the Hebrew code laid hold of action only," whereas Jesus sought to extend ethics and so "pushed his *scrutinies* [ethical concerns] *into the heart of man*" (p. 10, emphasis added). Echoing Jefferson's observations, and to extend this line of reasoning, we note that Cupitt (2009) argues that the early Christian tradition that is traceable to the historical Jesus, "involved a shift from realism to emotivism, as the moral standard itself was brought down from heaven and relocated in the world of human feelings and relationships, the world of 'the heart'" (p. xiv). With this crucial move, Jesus radicalizes the "familiar themes he found in the Hebrew prophets, namely God's promise to relocate himself within the human heart" (p. 88).⁸ Such a reading indicates that the *humanistic* elements that

⁸ We note that where what we have termed *humanistic ethics*, Cupitt (2009) indicates that it is possible to classify and thus refer to



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Jefferson highlights represent an “important incentive, supplementary to the other,” namely, purely religious, “motives to moral conduct” (p. 88). We detail this issue below in our analysis of the sayings and parables of Jesus, which Jefferson emphasizes when illustrating Jesus’ living philosophy that guides and inspires his ethical interpersonal relationships with fellow humans, drawing its life and legitimacy from the transpersonal spiritual communion with God.

Parable, in the Greek *parabolē*, refers to comparisons between objects, events, and people, presented in the form of short narratives, which are related to similes, but their messages are more direct and less complex than metaphors. We separate Jesus’ use of parables from his incorporation of both aphorisms and proverbs. It is correct to refer to parables as example stories that inform readers through interpretive renderings. Funk, Scott, and Butts (1988) inform us that the purpose of the parables, despite the simplicity of presentation, is to invite the hearer to actively participate in the story, and due to its strange or puzzling content, it inspires active thought in the effort to offer a possible interpretation. Jefferson importantly recognizes that Jesus’ parables are indispensable to Jesus’ pedagogy and they reflect an undeniable ethical dimension, for they convey to readers, once interpreted, attitudes that motivate actions that *should* either be endorsed as ethical or rejected as unethical. However, as Funk (2002) stresses, parables “do not intend to provide their hearers with explicit instructions for dealing with specific situations, but convey a vision...in the confidence that once hearers have caught the vision, they will be able to recognize on their own what a particular [ethical] situation calls for” (p. 53). The parables also convey critiques of and amendments to the Laws of the Hebrew religious tradition, as they offer revised and renewed insight into a new, re-imagined world, a transformed ethical reality (Scott 2001; 2002). As Crossan (1992) contends, in line with what Jefferson indicates regarding the “inward” ethical turn, the care for the soul and disposition, the parables confront the “hearers with the necessity of saying the impossible and having their world turned upside down and radically questioned in its presuppositions,” with the goal to “break abruptly into human consciousness and overturn prior values, closed opinions, set judgments, and established conclusions” (p. 64).

Since, as stated, parables do not work by means of direct transmission or in terms of transfer learning, as they are not explicitly didactic in nature, they function more in terms of the type of inquiry and revelation consistent with *participatory* philosophical discourse, for they invite the listener’s active participation in the deciphering of their message. Crossan states: “Jesus created stories for his audience to interpret on their own,” ethics, we might say, in relation to the “empire of God becomes discerned when the listener actively works out the parables” (pp. 4-5). It must be stressed, however, if those hearing Jesus’ parables are able to understand, and ultimately, through interpretation and self-reflection in dialogue, embrace their messages by actively incorporating them into their lives, the potential exists for a spiritual and ethical transformation to the mindset, the soul. This transformative process, as Funk (2002) points out, depends “on both the tenacity with which one holds to the inherited scheme of things, and one’s willingness to cut ties to this comfortable tradition...the tension under such circumstances does not come easily” (p. 10). Through this participation, as Tatum (1982) argues in relation to Crossan’s claims regarding the potential for parables to overturn values, the participant experiences a radical crisis in knowledge (*aporia*), shaking the soul, inducing change or repentance (*metanoēō*), and, as stated, this transformation occurs through sustained reflection and self-examination, leading to a new or renewed relationship to God (p. 151).⁹ For example, in the parable of the *Prodigal Son*, listeners are

Jesus’ form of ethics as *utopian radical humanism*. Cupitt states, as related to “recent Anglo-Saxon moral philosophy, Jesus is an *emotivist* and a *voluntarist*, and in terms of English poetry he asks us to ‘live from the heart’” (p. 88).

⁹ Tatum (1982) explains that there is a suggestion among some New Testament scholars that in reading, for example, Mark 4:10-12, Jesus is adopting an esoteric approach to the parables and the intended audience thereof. If there is to be an understanding of Jesus as working to establish a secret sect, “the purpose of the parables is to conceal the message from outsiders - lest they accept it! Thus he identifies the parables as a means of concealment not revelation. The parables obfuscate. They do not communicate” (p. 147). In line with Jefferson’s view regarding Jesus’ desire to communicate his message to as many people who would listen and respond, Tatum claims the in Mark words and sayings are either wrongly attributed to the historical Jesus or are additions by the early Christian communities. Thus Tatum stresses the parables “exoteric” function, and in relation to our



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subject to a *reversal* of what might normally seem ethical, again, pushing against and challenging what is commonly understood about fairness, equity, and justice (Luke 15:11-32).¹⁰ For the youngest son squandered the father's inheritance, he was uncaring, wasteful, and unethical, and yet upon his return, after being broke, destitute, and hungry, his father showed compassion and forgiveness and goes on to plan a great feast in honor of his return (redemption). The eldest son, justifiably confounded by this behavior, is told by his father that accepting his younger son back into the fold, and forgiving his trespasses is the right, and ethical thing to do in this situation or set of circumstances. For the prodigal son was once dead and is now alive, *and was lost, and is now found*. Jesus reminds us with this parable that we *ought to* behave just and equitable and forgive sinners and celebrate their redemption, just as God would do. It is possible to live this ethical precept when our transformed attitude or disposition (internal) is instantiated and hence expressed in and through our ethically motivated actions (external).

A JEFFERSONIAN UNDERSTANDING OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF JESUS OF NAZARETH: ETHICS OF LOVE AND DIGNITY, GOLDEN RULE, AND IMMEDIATE EXPERIENCE OF GOD

Typically, New Testament analyses focus on Jesus' divinity and prophetic eschatology and relegate ethics to a secondary or tertiary role, most notably as this eschatology is presented in the Gospel of Mark. There is a way to graduate beyond this view, which Jefferson endorses, and his understanding of the Gospels and the teachings of Jesus, as related to what was earlier introduced, might be labeled an ethics without eschatology, or ethics set within a unique and reconceptualized view of eschatology. As stated, when speaking of the philosophy of Jesus, Jefferson is making reference to a specific view of ethics that might be understood in terms that are not wholly dependent on any organized, systematic view of religion, or even a nascent form of Christianity, as would be consistent with a contemporary view of religious morality. It is the case that when examining the sayings and parables of Jesus that Jefferson has selected and arranged for readers, the theory and practice of ethics encountered diverges from the traditional view of *deontological* morality, which excludes from the deliberative process of moral determination consequences, personal motivation, character, situation, and the concern for a sense of moral development or progress that is undeniably present to Jesus' view. When considering the issue of *moral progress*, Selsam (1965) is clear: "The warp of ethics lies in man's ability to see a contradiction between what he is, how he lives, and what he could be and how he should live" (p. 13).¹¹ The phenomenon of moral progress presupposes the existence of a malleable character, a disposition open and amendable to change and transformation, and is an idea of supreme importance and value within Jesus' vision, which embraces

interpretation, observes that most scholars are in agreement on the view that "Jesus intended for his Kingdom message to be understood by the general public" (p. 147), and so Jesus' call for the "radical reversal of one's life" represents a *universal* call for repentance (p. 149).

¹⁰ Funk and Hoover (1993) state that this parable might be linked with such stories that stress the following theme: *what was once lost, has now been found*, and it deals with the supreme value of repentance and the authentic ethical transformation of the soul or character, and this theme is encountered in the *Parable of the Lost Sheep* (Luke 15:4-7); Matt. 18:12-14) and the *Parable of the Lost Coin* (Luke 15:8-9). The *Parable of the Prodigal Son* can also be read in an allegorical manner, for in the "style favored by many in the early Christian movement: the father is understood to stand for God, the younger son the gentiles, the elder son for the Judeans or the pharisees" (157).

¹¹ When drawing the crucial distinction between what "is" and "ought," or "what is supposed to be" and "what ought to be," Hoover (2002) elucidates the distinction between the Pharisees ethical stance and that of Jesus, and states that the Pharisees sought to reform "Judaism in a perfectionist direction," and so their "traditional wisdom of the Pharisees was about how things are 'supposed to be,'" whereas in stark contrast, "the visionary wisdom of Jesus was about how things ought to be" (p. 48). With this distinction it is undeniable that based on Hoover's conclusions, Jesus spearheaded the move to push ethics into the realm or register of the *normative*, and his radical project might be summed up in terms of his enacting a "vision of the way things *ought to be*," while working tirelessly to challenge and "call the legitimacy of the way things are into question" (p. 43, emphasis in original).



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the concern for an internal, attuned ethical state of soul expressive of motives concerned with doing the right (moral) thing for the right (moral) reasons. This indicates one is ethically predisposed, educated, and otherwise inspired, to behave in such a manner, this despite the consequences resulting from the actions performed. This move to internalize ethics stands in contrast to religious morality grounded in *action-based* theory, which according to Pojman and Fieser (2009), is the view that we must judge people based on their actions alone, and not on their moral motives or intentions. *Action-based* ethics requires the moral agent's unwavering sense of duty to indelible principles that transcend any and all circumstances, and it discounts the idea of *moral progress* and the potential for character development, and this we linked earlier with *deontological ethics*.

For example, in monotheistic *divine command theory*, our actions attain the status of "ethical" when they strictly conform to the commandments of God's divine will, and we might say, actions emerging from this sense of duty to God are necessary, and never contingent upon what Kant (1958) in his *deontological* system identifies as "*talents* of the mind...*character...gifts of fortune...health, and the general well-being and contentment with one's condition which is called happiness*," including the sense of moral satisfaction accompanying ethical behavior (pp. 75-76, emphasis in original).¹² Instead, what is expressed through the parables Jefferson includes, which as stated function as dialogic, self-reflective exercises, points to a vision of ethics stressing motive and character and the ethical development thereof, in terms of inspiring a potential change or transformation to the soul, i.e., the "turn" (*epistrephō*) toward the truth (*alētheia*) and repentance (*metanoēō*), all the while focusing on the "right" or "good" intention as the origin and hence indicator of moral rightness. Jaspers (1967), in his influential philosophical reading of Jesus, pays special attention to this moment of transformation to the soul, stressing that the demands that the ethics of Jesus make on us, as discussed, radically alters our attitude, influencing our relationships in the world, and the demands made "are never fully expressed in instructions that need merely to be followed, [for] in order to understand them, one must experience some sort of transformation, a rebirth, a new awareness of reality, an illumination" (p. 90). For Jaspers, the immediacy of the transformation demanded by the teachings of Jesus are reflected in the *Parable of the Sower*, for when Jesus' ethical message is embraced and internalized, we are attuned, and this deepens our relationship to God, we are like "the good seed in good earth stands for those who listen to the message and hold on to it with a good fertile heart, and produce fruit through perseverance" (p. 90). (Luke 8:11-15)

Although distancing the ethics of Jesus from ethics that are *deontological* or *objectivist* in nature, we argue it is still possible to retain a unique sense of universalizability, or at the very least, a sense of *trans-subjective* legitimacy, and this is bound to the phenomenon of *sympathetic consensus*, which relates to Jesus' embrace of the Golden Rule as found in the *sermon on the mount* (Matt 5:1-7:27). As introduced, Jesus' ethical teachings often, but not always, focus on the exposition and amendment of the *Torah*, and the two main or grounding ethical precepts that Jesus embraces and espouses, which are focused on "love" and derived from scripture (Deut 6:4-5; Lev 19:8), are highlighted by Jefferson (2007): "Thou shalt love the lord thy God with all thy heart and soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as thyself...this do, and thou shalt live" (p. 54). (Mark 12:28-34) To abide by and adhere to these precepts, in thought and action, i.e., to *instantiate* and *live* these precepts, is worth more than "all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices" (p. 76). As Tatum (1982) stresses, for Jesus, love represents the cardinal ethical category, and is understood and embraced as *agapē*, the embodiment of Christian love. This is described in greater detail by Hoover (2002) in the following terms: The love called for by Jesus

¹² The Golden Rule, which Jesus embraces, as we show, might be read as a kind of "moral test," and yet Kant would disagree, for the Golden Rule would be classified by Kant as yet another instance and expression of the *hypothetical imperative* because it is driven by *inclination, want, and desire*, all of which have no place within Kant's moral system, which is focused heavily on our *duty* to the *categorical imperative*.



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is not affection, for which the [*Koinē*] Greek verb *phileo* would have been used, but unconditional good will, in Greek *agapao*, the verb used throughout the New Testament to characterize God's love for humankind...The love of human friendship is reciprocal; the love of God is unilateral; it is grounded in God's unlimited goodness, not in the mutuality of the likeminded. (p. 56)

Following Robinson (1976), it is possible to identify the form of ethics Jesus practices and preaches as "*agapism/agapeism*," which is, in direct terms, concerned with the manner and degree to which we pledge and dedicate our love to both God and our neighbors (p. 69). This idea has crucial implications for the directionality bound up with the ethics of Jesus, and this issue is indeed intimated in *The Jefferson Bible*, for it is possible, as Cupitt (2009) argues, to conceive ethical self-transcendence in a way that is freed from its servitude to an immutable objective law, and this demonstrates a concern for a *horizontal* form of human transcendence, which indeed harbors and includes a vertical and divine directionality, but does not embrace the view wherein the relationship to one's fellow human being and neighbor is relegated to the status of a secondary concern. For in moral objectivism, as Cupitt observes, "wrongdoing [is] regarded as a sin against God, rather than an offense against a wronged *fellow human*," but Jesus' radicalized ethics, and this is consistent with and traceable to Jefferson's view, places a heavy emphasis "upon the 'horizontal' relationship to the fellow human." (p. 13).

The new and bold ethical precept to love God and humanity, which instantiates the vision inspiring and guiding Jesus' ministry manifests in three ways: (1) through Jesus' direct statements or precepts, which unlike parables or allegories serve a didactic function, (2) through the revelation of an ethical ideal that emerges by means of listeners and followers of Jesus interpreting parables and allegories, and (3) through Jesus' immediate, concrete actions which are guided by a disposition that has been attuned by the experience of God's love, love of God, and love of fellow human beings. The *sermon on the mount*, which we discuss in detail below, is composed of sayings or precepts that serve to offer a formal and radical commentary on the *Torah*, wherein Laws are transformed in light of Jesus' new vision and philosophy. The prohibitions against murder, adultery, divorce, swearing, resistance to evil, and, as we explore, the fundamental ethical precept to love, are all reinterpreted in a way that jolts listeners out of their common or traditional ways of understanding. The new precepts contained in the sermon are referred to as the "antitheses," because they offer a view that contrasts the Laws that have been given by the prophets and accepted in traditional religious and moral practice. Jesus, however, assures the gathered crowd that his intent is not to dismantle the laws or the prophets, but rather to fulfill these laws in a new way for a new time and purpose. With respect to love (*agapē*), Jesus states,

Ye have heard that it hath been said, thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that thy hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you. (Jefferson, 2007, p. 24) (Matt 5:44; Luke 10:30-35)

To love one's neighbor as oneself, requires a radical reinterpretation of the commonly held understanding of what it is to be a neighbor, calling for us to extend, in relation to love, the definition and meaning of "neighbor" to include all of humanity, wherein the human race becomes and so is accepted and embraced as one's broad and inclusive brethren. This ethical precept and idea stands antithetic to the common view that insists we extend our love only to family and friends, but Jesus requires more, for it is easy to "salute your brethren only," and so the love Jesus calls for transcends our immediate brethren and opens a vista into a broader, far more inclusive community, which includes, strangers, sinners, and even our enemies (Jefferson, 2007, p. 24). Just as God's love knows no bounds, so too should humans aspire to embody this unconditional love and bestow it on others, and to reiterate, not only to friends, fellows, neighbors, those who will reciprocate love, but beyond this, love must also be extended to all people. To accomplish this, we must establish and nurture through love our intimate relationship with God, and hence become children of God. With respect to this difficult and demanding ethical precept ("*to love*") Funk and Hoover (1993) contend that this



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represents, “the centrality of the love commandment [in relation to] Jesus’ repeated distinction between the qualitative fulfilment of God’s will and the formal observance of the Law, especially ritual Law” (p. 67).¹³

In the *Parable of the Good Samaritan* (Luke 10:30-35), the helpful Samaritan tends to an injured man on the road, probably a Judean, while others, including a priest and Levite, pass him by displaying what is far beyond heedless indifference, and more likely an ingrained sense of malice, the antithesis of the love Jesus embraces and teaches. The Samaritan’s actions born of an ethical soul, is associated by Jesus with the “Good” and the ethical, for the Samaritan shows true compassion and solicitous concern, ignoring the rift between the Samaritans and the Jews regarding the worship of God. Indeed, the Samaritan is seemingly blind to the animosity between the groups, traditionally conceived as *enemies*, for he is more concerned with loving fellow humans. This, as we have stated, is because Jesus emphasizes the notion of an ethical, altruistic attitude that is consistent with God’s love and a higher notion of human love (*agapē*), and this idea serves as perhaps the defining message of the parable, as we now explore. Importantly, not only does the Samaritan care for the man’s wounds, he goes beyond this, for he places him on his own beast and leads him to an inn and then provides money to the innkeeper with the promise that he will reimburse the innkeeper for any extra expenses incurred. The Samaritan, according to Jesus’ definition, was a good and ethical neighbor to the injured man, demonstrating pity, compassion and solicitous care, and so embodies the ethical ideal of *agapē*, i.e., love permeates his soul and motivates his ethical disposition to act.

Crossan (1992) informs us that the parable includes characters that are familiar to the listeners, but its message, when interpreted and taken to heart, induces a reversal, so that the world of the hearer is shaken up and inverted. The “whole thrust of the story demands that one say what cannot be said, what is a contradiction in terms: Good = Samaritan” (p. 62). The point is not merely that “one should help a neighbor in need,” far beyond this, “when good (clerics) and bad (Samaritans) become, respectively, bad and good, a world is being challenged,” an entire set of ethical beliefs is at issue, one’s present disposition is challenged, “and we are faced with polar reversal” (p. 63). Crossan argues that this type of radical reversal, which to reiterate, is highly reminiscent of the way legitimate dialogic philosophy unfolds, opens the possibility that one’s thought and action becomes open to critical self-inquiry, reinterpretation, and potential revision. For the hearer, in and through the interpretation and subsequent understanding of the story, struggles with the contradictory dualism inherent in the concept of the Samaritan being “good,” as this contradiction expresses, because it is grounded in, Jesus new precept to love (*agapē*) humankind wholly and unconditionally.

As Jefferson (2007) points out, Jesus’ embodies what it is like to “live under the bonds of love,” and through his ministry, through his concrete actions, Jesus instantiates and so models for his followers and intimate disciples, an ethics embracing charity, peace, compassion, acceptance, respect, hope, and as we have stressed, love - bound intimately with and drawing inspiration from God’s all-encompassing love (*agapē*) (p. 6). Jefferson included crucial *pericopes* from the Gospels that highlight Jesus, in a manner that challenged the Hebrew tradition, fraternizing and embracing with open heart and arms the disenfranchised, marginalized, and outcast, e.g., the poor, the downtrodden, and those deemed unclean by the Scribes and Pharisees. In more direct terms, Jesus consorts openly with sinners, this to the chagrin of those outside Jesus’ ministry, those who misunderstand him and even hatch plots against him. As is well known, Jesus had a special place in his heart for children, for he even urges his followers, beyond showing love and acceptance to

¹³ When speaking of ritual Law, we are probably most familiar with Jesus’ reinterpretation of the Sabbath, altering and even ignoring dietary rituals, e.g., dining with undesirables and the refusal to wash one’s hands before partaking in a communal meal (Mark 7:1-13; Matt. 15:1-9). For as we discuss, it is not the things we put inside us that corrupt the soul, but instead it is what comes out of us, what issues forth, produced in and through our thoughts and actions, that holds the potential to defile our character (Mark 7:14-15; Matt. 15:10).



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children, to *emulate* them, for they are “the greatest in the kingdom of heaven...Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Jefferson, 2007, p. 45).

This type of emulation, as related to Jesus’ ethical outlook, is grounded in what Hoover (2002) refers to as Jesus’ “cosmic outlook,” or *spiritual orientation*, that sustains the “vision of the Reign of God in which Jesus asks his hearers to trust God’s goodness and power absolutely and to *imitate* God’s indiscriminate generosity unconditionally,” and if we do this, we are living “the good life - life ordered by the ideal of the Good, the way life *ought* to be” (p. 44, my emphasis). To employ both imitation and emulation is a philosophical and pedagogical technique advocated by another great historical teacher of ethics, namely, Aristotle, who believed that behaving ethically or virtuously was not primarily a theoretical exercise, for direct instruction was secondary to the actual practice of ethics in the world or educational setting, and it is crucial that the teacher, according to Aristotle (1999), model ethical behavior for the student when attempting to mold and change the disposition (*hēxis*) or soul (pp. 18-19).¹⁴ Here, importantly, in relation to our discussion of the ethical *turn inward*, into the heart, and the change to the disposition, there must be an understanding, in the ethical education we are describing, of the distinction that Findlay (1970), in his exposition of axiological ethics provides, namely, the difference between and the crucial movement away from, “valuing object *x* towards valuing the attitude which values *x*” (p. 88). For example, in relation to Jesus’ understanding of ethics, this marks the crucial and authentic philosophical transition of the soul from valuing compassionate and benevolent actions to embracing the attitude or mindset that grounds and so produces and inspires actions that are compassionate and benevolent.

One of the most profound and powerfully moving ethical lessons that Jesus offers to his disciples, and is included by Jefferson (2007), traceable to John 13:1-5, is where Jesus kneels before the disciples and washes their feet in a manner that is at once clearly meant to teach through example, while simultaneously, in relation to Findlay’s claims, representative of an action motivated by and born out of a benevolent, compassionate, and loving disposition or soul: “He riseth from supper, and laid aside his garments...he poured water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples’ feet, and to wipe them with the towel” (p. 87). In this instance, Jesus is challenging and revaluing the traditional understanding of the relationship between pedagogue (*rabbi*) and student, putting in question the traditional hierarchical, asymmetrical power-relation and dynamic of *master-and-slave*. The reversal that Jesus enacts is so radical that it shocks and embarrasses the disciples, for as Peter exclaims, “Thou shalt never wash my feet,” to which Jesus responds, “If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me” (p. 87). Jesus explains, as is clearly related to the Golden Rule, that if he, as a master and teacher, took the love and care to wash the feet of his students, they “also *ought* to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example [that you *should* emulate and] do, as I have done to you” (p. 87, emphasis added). This propensity to emulate the “good” and ethical, in recognizing and respecting human dignity, will demonstrate for others the power of love, and through this, Jesus assures them, “all men [will] know that ye are my disciples, if ye have loved one to another” (p. 87). Here, such an act of humility that pushes hard against the common tendency to retain the divided sectarian or tribal mindset embracing the *us against them* or the *we are better than them* mindset and demonstrates a level of servitude, which breaks opens a vista into the good life as it is ordered by an ideal experience of God and ethical understanding of love and goodness.

Of course, an education in ethics by Jesus cannot end with mere imitation or even emulation, it requires, as stressed throughout, an interior dimension that is importantly expressive of motive with the potential for character development, i.e., the *ethical growth of the soul*, an instance of *moral progress* in *praxis*. Jefferson must be commended for recognizing, prior to any systematic New Testament scholarship, that Jesus transforms and pushes ethics away from

¹⁴ Aristotle embraced and practiced “virtue ethics,” which is a form of ethics grounded in “excellent” or virtuous behavior, and the goal of the moral agent is to seek the *virtuous mean* between two extremes of *vice*. For example, Aristotle said that we should, within the specific situations that we find ourselves, work to avoid the extremes (vices) of *cowardice* and *rashness* when striving to behave in a courageous manner.



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"action," as it is understood in the Hebrew tradition, or what we have termed the monotheistic tradition in Divine Command Theory, into the very heart, the interior moral center, of the human being. Cupitt (2009) also recognizes that the ethics of Jesus "radicalized a familiar theme he found in the Hebrew tradition of the prophets, namely, God's promise to relocate himself within the human heart," and, as mentioned, this idea reveals the "family resemblance" between the ethics of Jesus and *humanistic ethics* (p. 88). In this view, it is possible to determine the rightness of an act by examining the motives and intentions undergirding and inspiring the action, this as opposed to judging the ethical legitimacy of our actions by looking to the action itself or the consequences produced (as in Divine Command Theory and consequentialism or utilitarianism). For Jesus, the "goodness" of the character of the moral actor is bound up inextricably with intention, and, as stated, there is the potential in this view for the character to develop and make legitimate ethical progress, two elements or characteristics that tend to be ignored within the type of *action-based*, duty ethics consistent with Divine Command Theory. Crucially, as stated earlier, in this view, related to the idea of *moral progress*, the character is not immutable; there is no hypostatic human essence or substrate that is given in advance by either nature or God, and so the autonomy of the moral actor is stressed, and in Cupitt's philosophical reading of Jesus, this is related to *voluntarism*, the philosophical view that ethical responsibility is intimately bound up with the exercise of the free will. Thus, in the ethics of Jesus there is both the potential and need "to grow as a moral person so that one may be able to take on greater moral responsibility" (11).

We now return to the *sermon on the mount*, for it is here we encounter Jesus' new ethical focus on inner attitudes and motives, for it is not committing the act of murder or adultery that makes one a sinner, but rather "whosoever is *angry* with his brethren without a cause shall be in danger of judgment [and] whoever looketh on a women to lust after her hath [already] committed adultery with her in his heart" (Jefferson 2007, p. 23, emphasis added). (Matt 5:27-29; 5:22) This concern with motive and character is also expressed in Jesus' declaration that there is "nothing from without a man, that enter into him can defile him: but the things that come out of him, those are they that defile the man" (p. 45). (Mark 7:14-15; Matt 15:10; Thom 14:1-5) For it is the case that "out of the *heart* of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders" (p. 45). This dichotomy of interior/exterior also manifests in the concern for the public praying of the pharisees, who seek to put their piety on display, when it is better and right to pray to God in the privacy of one's own room, away from the public eye. Jesus assures his followers that God sees and knows what is truly in the heart, which when ethical and righteous, is where one's true treasure is stored (Matt 6:5-14). Consider also the pharisees' dedication to the ritual cleansing and washing of "hands, cups, brazen vessels, and of tables," which again is the outward pretense of cleanliness, holiness, piety, and righteousness (p. 74). Despite such outward, superficial displays, Jesus assures his followers that their souls, their dispositions, "are full of hypocrisy and inequity," and so they resemble on the outside whited sepulchres, while on the inside they are "full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness" (p. 11). (Matt 23:27)

Exploring the disposition and its potential for change and development, we turn to Jesus' simple but somewhat perplexing parable centering on a fig tree that consistently fails to bear fruit. (Luke 13:6-9) Funk and Hoover (1993) claim that the *Parable of the Barren Fig Tree* is a story that "lacks a specific application, [although] an exaggerated hope of some sort is implicit, but not specified" (p. 345). However, it is possible, based on our foregoing remarks and interpretation of Jesus' ethics, to understand the gardener or vineyard attendant as advocating for the potential of what might be understood as the turning around, the transformation of barren ground into fertile soil, bringing forth the potential for the tree to eventually produce fruit that is rich and good. The attendant implores the owner, who advocates for its removal, "Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it and dung it. And if it bear fruit, well: and if not, then after that thou shall cut it down" (Jefferson, 2007, p. 38). Might not the message be interpreted to run thusly: Although the soul and character of the sinner has so far resisted an enlightened transformation, the ethical act of repentance required by Jesus, it is possible that the sinner's attitude will eventually change and come around when given, like the tree, life-sustaining and life-transforming care and attendance, e.g., the precise type of devoted and



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inspired love, compassion, and charity that Jesus unselfishly grants to all around him. All of this indicates, as Tatum (1984) recognizes, although he assures his readers that he is unconcerned with developing a philosophical portrait of the Nazarene, that Jesus is endorsing the *philosophical ideal* that a “person’s inner disposition and outward words and deeds in relation to others were more important than religious ritual” (p. 35).¹⁵

Recalling Jefferson’s words regarding his Christian beliefs that began the essay, which reveal the relationship between morality and his relationship with God, and while focusing on the ethical thoughts of Jesus, we must consider how this philosophy is intertwined with and dependent on Jesus’ relationship with God and to His Reign or Kingdom. Several New Testament scholars claim the Jesus’ immediate experience of God is an instance of what Dodd (1961) refers to as *realized eschatology*, Crossan (1992) terms *permanent eschatology*, and Sheehan (1986) names *lived eschatology* or “the eschatological present-future,” a novel thesis espousing the view that the vision and message of Jesus’s ministry is to proclaim the ever-present, immediate, and “permanent *presence* of God” (Dodd, 1961, p. 26, emphasis added). This indicates that Jesus was not “proclaiming that God was about to end *this* world, but, seeing this as one view of the world, he was announcing One who shatters [the experience of] world, this one and any other before or after it” (p. 26, emphasis in original). This understanding is also expressed within Jaspers’ (1967) philosophical reading of Jesus, arguing that Jesus had an attuned experience of the presence of the Kingdom of God, which was not an anticipated futural event, rather, a vision and experience that was already “present everywhere and nowhere” (p. 75). God’s Kingdom, His Holy Reign was already present in the life and world of Jesus, and as stated, the mission of Jesus’ ministry set about revealing and announcing this truth, and to reiterate this crucial point, God’s *presence* was not *immanent* or *futural*, it was already and immediately *present*. Jesus’ stories, sayings, aphorisms, and parables, indeed his entire notion of ethics, derive their weight and legitimacy only because the wisdom they shelter and reveal emerges from the *advent* of God’s Kingdom.

Robinson (2002) agrees, stating that the vision and experience of a loving God was at the “core of what Jesus had to say,” and this represents for Jesus, “both the good news [and] reassurance that good would happen to undo one’s plight in actual experience,” but only if, as our point has been throughout, we are able to reach and “call on people to do that good in practice” (p. 15). In line with these thoughts, Funk (2002) observes the following: “Jesus did not have a doctrine of God; he had only an experience of God” (p. 11). Borg (2002) describes Jesus’ unique experience of God in terms of an “ecstatic” occurrence or event, and in the Greek, *ekstasis* indicates that one *stands out and apart from* everyday modes of *being-in-the-world*. This type of transformative experience of the sacred “carries with it a vivid sense of epiphany, a strong subjective [internalized] sense that what one has experienced is indeed a disclosure” of a new reality, ultimately providing an “experiential sense of the reality of God” (p. 132). Such an experience, highlighted by the communion with a source that opens the *noetic* potential for receiving and acquiring new and revelatory forms of knowledge and understanding, which acts to enlighten and transform the disposition or soul. The radicality of such an experience puts in question our traditional notions of the limits of ethics.

Relating this foregoing discussion to Jefferson’s overarching purpose and goal, we envision a view and practice of ethics that is dependent on the love of humankind and self that emerges from the immediate experience of loving and receiving love from God, which is grounded in the decision to dedicate oneself wholly and unconditionally to God. Here, we highlight that Jesus’ relationship to God inspires and fosters not only the love and solicitous care for others, it also

¹⁵ Despite Jefferson downplaying the ethical force of the thought we encounter in the philosophers of antiquity, this notion that we have explored, namely, the consistency between one’s words and deeds, is a common and powerful theme in Plato’s Socrates, e.g., in the *Charmides* Socrates is adamant that the mere knowledge of definitions is not sufficient to make humans morally good. What is required by Socrates, much like our sketch of Jesus, is for us to internalize such definitions of the virtues, which is “living the virtues in *praxis*” (piety, courage, justice, *sophrosyne*, and wisdom), and through this process, we act in such a way as to instantiate the virtues. See also: Sallis, J. (1989). *Being and logos*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.



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engenders *care for the self*, which importantly includes the dedicated concern for the health or moral well-being of our own subjective soul or *selfhood*. "The rule of God," Tatum (1982) claims, "is spiritual insofar as the individual loves God and [it is] ethical insofar as he loves his neighbor" (p. 139). In this process, which is an unwavering and sustained way of *being-in-the-world*, the aim of Jesus is to inspire and induce a spiritual transformation (*theophany*) in those who follow him, in short, to transform the mind, character, and soul by way of repentance (*metanoëō*), which as stated, amounts to a reversal, a form of self-transcendence that occurs by way of a "revision of direction, a break with the past, a reordering of values and priorities" (p. 137). Robinson (1962) also offers insight into the relationship between self, neighbor, and God, when contending that "the Christian life and Christian ethics [*agapism*] are responsive in character - we love [God] because He first loved us" (p. 82). What is crucial here, is that the form of ethics Robinson discusses, *agapism*, encompasses a much larger sphere than any form or expression of *humanistic* ethics, for in *agapism*, "it is not only man who acts, but also God, and where...truth is not just monologic but dialogic" (p. 84). This form of ethics as related to Jesus might be said to function according to the Golden Rule, which is irreducible to either an adage or quaint slice of proverbial wisdom, for Jesus makes the bold declaration that it represents the Law in its entirety. Here, Jefferson (2007) quotes it: "Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: For this is the Law and the prophets" (p. 84). Keeping in mind the relationship to God developed, Robinson (2002) provides a way to grasp the Golden Rule in terms of an ethical, and indeed binding and demanding, grounding and guiding principle for action. Keeping in mind the potential for acute instances of human suffering, realizing the we, much like our neighbors, require love, attention, and care in light of human *fragility*, because we understand that all humans are radically limited and God sends the sun and rain on both the just and the unjust, the good and the evil (Matt 5:43-48; Luke 6:27-28). Jesus teaches that we *ought to* always keep the following in mind:

The human dilemma is in large part that we are each other's fate. We are a tool of evil that ruins the other person, as we look out for number one...But if I *would* cease and desist from pushing you down to keep myself up, and you on your part *would* do the same, then the vicious circle would be broken. Society would become mutually [ethically and lovingly] supportive, rather than self-destructive. Count on God to look out for you, to provide people that will care for you, and listen to him when he calls on you to provide for them. (pp. 15-16, emphasis in original).

Considering our foregoing thoughts in relation to Robinson's observation, noting that Jefferson explicitly chose to include the Golden Rule in his revision of the Gospels, there is a way to interpret this rule or precept as intimating and so functioning as an ethical test of sorts, and this type of test is certainly not uncommon to varying views of morality, e.g., as is well-known, Kant incorporates into his *deontology* the Categorical Imperative to serve as the maxim for one's moral behavior, asking, can we universalize this maxim? What would happen *if* everyone behaved in such a way, *if* one chose to either do or refrain from doing x, y, or z? Based on our analysis, it is argued that the Golden Rule has a similar, albeit not identical, function within Jesus' ethics, which we explore in detail below, especially when considering the notions of human *fragility* and sense of human *dignity* that Jesus embraces within his teachings, which is drawn from and dependent on his love of God and God's love for humanity. In their analysis of various ethical systems, Pojman and Fieser (2009) argue that what lies at the heart of any form of legitimate moral philosophizing is a view of the human that undeniably *should* include: The acceptance that each person is vulnerable to instances of pain and suffering, and that each person possesses an innate sense of "dignity and profound worth, which entails that he or she must never be exploited or manipulated or merely used as a means to our idea of what is for the general good (or any other end)" (p. 134). This crucial issue of *human dignity* is often overlooked by scholars analyzing the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, attention to this issue will enhance the view of ethics we are developing in relation to Jesus.

Jesus welcomes and embraces all people he encounters because they possess dignity. They are never treated by Jesus in a manner that would suggest that they merely possess *conditional* worth, and this is strikingly evident in his compassionate treatment of sinners and the lame and sick, his acceptance and inclusion of the marginalized within his



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peripatetic ministry. To concretize this notion of ethics embracing human dignity, consider Jesus' questioning and overturning of the rabbinic Law that prohibits working on the Sabbath. For Jesus, it is the embrace of and respect for the sense of human dignity that empowers him to declare with confidence and authority that the Sabbath is in all actuality made for the human and not the reverse, and this is why he heals, gathers food, and performs good deeds, even on that high holy day. To stress this point, Jesus declares that the Sabbath was in fact made for and stands in service of Adam and Eve (Matt. 12:1-8), hence reinterpreting "the creation story by giving humankind dominion over, not only the creation, but also over the institution of the sabbath," and also over the religious rituals "most widely practiced by Judeans" (Funk and Hoover, 1993, p. 288). His instructive comparison and contrast between the inherent worth of an animal and human speaks directly to this issue of human dignity. "Which of you," asks Jesus, "shall have an ass or an ox fallen into a pit, and will not straightaway pull him out on the sabbath day" (Jefferson, 2007, p. 56). To our point, Jesus asks us to consider how love, care, and concern is necessitated by the human being possessing inherent dignity. God's love embraces and nurtures this sense of dignity in and through His unconditional love, which God bestows on humanity, and in return, Jesus teaches that we *should* bestow this love on others, and all humankind is worthy of that love because of their dignity as children of God.

Nielsen (1992) claims that we do not require definitive ethical rules or principles that have been codified and objectified, from which to determine what behaviors *should be* prescribed or proscribed. His argument is that ethics need not begin with indelible, categorical principles, but with the general assumption that certain things are desirable (valuable) and others are never desirable (unvaluable), and when beginning from the general "moral impression" that human dignity is ultimately valuable, he concludes that such things as self-awareness and self-fulfillment, recognition of both the vulnerability and worth of others and the care thereof, are fundamental human "goods" that *should* and *ought* to be cherished, sheltered, and nurtured, forming a basis, offering a criterion from which to begin to consider ethical precepts. Nielsen admits that this initial "general (ethical) assumption" is impossible to prove in an objective manner, but he claims we can, through our interaction with others and by means of active reflection and dialogue, through what we have termed *sympathetic consensus*, "see that in [our] behavior [we] clearly show that [we] can subscribe to such a principle" (pp. 122-123).¹⁶ Although Nielsen does not formalize this *normative* notion, our acceptance of this unwritten grounding and guiding principle that his position requires, in terms of a "general (ethical) assumption," is also dependent on what Jesus and many others in the parables seem to possess, namely, an innate "moral sense". In essence, such a view hinges on the ability, as the internal is related to the external, to feel, sense, and judge (determine) what *ought* to be done. Jaspers (1967) suggests just such a position, indeed, the type of ethical transformation that we have argued Jesus requires of his followers, which Jaspers calls the *state of beatitude*, "cannot be demonstrated by miracles or by scripture...but is its own proof...Its proofs are the inner lights, feelings of pleasure and self-satisfaction" (p. 75).

Cupitt (2009) also believes that Jesus' ethics works in part by "appealing to our human 'social affections', feelings of the heart, sympathy, benevolence, and so forth," and unfortunately, as Cupitt laments, those adopting this philosophical view are far too often erroneously, "dismissed as sentimentalists" (p. 19). In relation to this point, the embrace of *objectivist ethics* persists, which harbors the belief that *if* morality is not objective, unchanging, in the style of religious ethics as discussed, *then* it necessarily devolves into relativism, or worse, nihilism. Cupitt, as we have stated, views Jesus as the historical precursor of "our radical humanist ethic, our 'subjectivism,' our emotivism," and when speaking of *subjectivism* and *emotivism* in this context, we note that Cupitt is not referencing "subjectivists, who define the rightness

¹⁶ Lamont (2013), a *philosophical humanist*, uses a similar argument from "intuition" when arguing for the existence of freewill, an intuition that is "as strong...as the sensation of pleasure or pain," and so forceful is this intuition that "the burden of proof is on the determinist to show that it is based on an illusion" (p. 366). Applying Lamont's line of reasoning to the argument for the existence and legitimacy of the human's "moral sense," it is possible to state that the burden of proof is on the skeptic, the objectivist, or the nihilist to show that the our perception and intuition of the *moral sense* is reducible to mere illusion.



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of actions and 'goodness of ends' in terms of [merely] the feelings of approval they elicit," neither is he embracing the understanding of the type of "emotivism" of which the logical positivist Ayer (2001) is highly critical. For Ayer argued that ethical expressions and judgments, expressed through "meaningless" locutions, serve no other purpose than to express "feelings about certain objects [or states of being], but make no factual [and indeed no ethical] assertion about them" (p. 111). Instead, although not developing this line of reasoning, Cupitt intimates an understanding of emotivism found in the ethical philosophy of Findlay (1970), who argues: "The emotivist analysis may have this amount of truth that it is only in feeling [ethical values], in being actually drawn to them, that we can fulfil or realize our understanding of what [ethical] values are" (p. 80).¹⁷ They can never be gleaned *a priori* or understood at an objective distance (*sub specie aeternitatis*), defined and classified employing a framework of detached argumentation, instead "they must be experienced as making an actual impression on us for them to be fully there for us at all" (p. 80).

It is possible, Findlay argues, to philosophically produce a legitimate ethical analysis that frames an "indirect characterization" of such values. Findlay stresses that the inability to produce a definitive, objectively universalizable categorization of ethical values, an issue we related to Nielsen's philosophy, does not indicate that we cannot "attribute such values," as experienced, "pinned down," and then related and "characterized to the framework of the universe" (p. 80). Robinson (1967), in direct relation to our analysis of the philosophy of Jesus, contends that the ethics of *agapism*, and the idea of "moral sense" discussed, makes reference to "practical reckoning" in ethics, which occurs and is experienced, "only by a moral agent, a moral conscience, *a conscience*, and all the more readily by one who has grown in grace and on the knowledge of God" (p. 87, emphasis added). In Noonan's (2007) reading of Hume and the sentimentalists, he argues that "sympathy converts ideas into impressions and hence the ideas of others' passions into the passion themselves,"¹⁸ and since humans relate to other humans, it is possible to develop and "achieve a general view from which moral judgments can be made" (p. 146). This offers a "principle of consistency," or the potential for the universalization (*trans-subjectification*) of our ethical principles or precepts as related to Jesus - again, consensus born of sympathetic agreement - indicating that such precepts or general assumptions about morality, born of our *moral sense* or intuition, might be said to apply to all individuals in similar circumstances and situations. We note, as related directly to our analysis, Pojman and Fieser (2009) argue emphatically: "If one judges that *x* is right [ethical] for a certain person *p*, then it is right [ethical] for any relevantly similar to *p*," and they go on to add that this trait of ethical principles, in direct relation to our analysis, "is exemplified in the Golden Rule" (p. 167).

¹⁷ Speaking to the crucial distinction between normative statements and propositions, recognizing the inherent limitations of both forms of expression, Findlay (1970) claims that "there really is, *it would seem*, an organized framework of [ethical] values and disvalues within which our practical decisions must be made, and philosophy must give some account of the structure of this framework and of the [ethical] principles guiding its construction" (p. 90). Although space does not allow for a more detailed analysis drawing out technical distinctions between what we have called "moral intuition" and "moral sense," it suffices to inform the reader that what we are philosophizing can be, as it is by Hudson (1967), related to an expression of "conscience" in the early philosophy of preacher Joseph Butler who was influenced by both "the rational intuitionists and the 'moral sense' school," [and] speaks of our moral understanding and moral sense...whether called conscience, moral reason, moral sense, or divine reason; whether considered as a sentiment of the understanding, or as a perception of the heart" (pp. 129-132). In addition, as related to our important discussion of ethical character development (*moral progress*), Hudson does not deny that "conscience may need to be developed or enlightened, and that it can be perverted" (p. 132).

¹⁸ We must note that Findlay (1970), as we have referenced above, in his vision of "axiological ethics," also focuses on *sympathy* as a key to experiencing and establishing ethical values: All of our encounters with the world (nature) and others contain an undeniable exterior and interior aspect, and "through sympathy, which is not necessarily based on one's own personal experiences, one enters into the not straightforwardly observable inner life of others, which always has a necessary place in our world, though the precise content may be filled in, often with grave need of correction, by experience, imagination or inference" (p. 82).



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To conclude this discussion of our inherent *moral sense* and the potential for ethics to rise to the level of *trans-subjective* legitimation through consensus, we bring the reader's attention to two illuminating examples from the Gospels where such an intuitive understanding of morality, in terms of "moral sense," "practical reckoning," "moral conscience," is at work: First, we turn to group of sayings that are grounded in the mode of the interrogative, appearing in both *Matthew* and *Luke*, and although these queries of Jesus might appear obvious and trite, they are nevertheless in search of a response that clearly draws from because it awakens the listener's internal sense of what is ethically right, what *should be* done in these specific circumstances: "Which of you fathers would hand his son a snake when it's a fish he's asking for? Who among you would hand a son a stone when it's bread he's asking for? Or a scorpion when it's an egg he's asking for (Luke 11:9-12; Matt 7:9-10)? Second, let us consider the instance of a friend arriving in the middle of the night at our house at an inopportune moment, asking for a favor. Jesus asks us to consider what is at stake if we flatly refuse the friend's request and abruptly turn him away. For Jesus, this is the recognition that such an act of refusal would bring shame and weigh heavy on one's moral conscience, indeed, Jesus observes that we *should* "give the other whatever is needed because [we'd] be ashamed not to" (Luke 11:5-8). Undoubtedly, these passages are driven by Jesus' use of rhetorical irony and hyperbolic comparison, but importantly, related to our concerns, all of these situations are testable according to the Golden Rule, and all depend on the hearer drawing on his or her internal and intuitive sense of the ethical: Who would want x when one is asking for y? Would you want to find yourself in this situation? Would you do such thing to others? Jesus wants us to consider such pressing queries, embracing the Golden Rule, when thinking, deliberating, judging, and ultimately choosing, because we are ethically inspired, the appropriate and ethical response. It would be exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to find any person to respond in the affirmative when confronted with question of whether he would offer a person a cold stone in place of the warm bread that a hungry person requests. Here, Jesus believes that hearers can arrive at a sense of agreement on the matter regarding what ethically *should* be done in such circumstances.

Based on our analysis, it is clear that Jesus advocates for vigorous self-reflection, turning inside to honestly determine the ethicality of one's character leading to action, and then assessing when and why changes to one's behavior is required. This understanding is expressed within the *sermon on the mount* when Jesus speaks about the rash and inappropriate judgment of others, "Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye" (Jefferson, 2007, p. 26). Here, we encounter what has been discussed regarding motive, character, and the potential for ethical progress, for it is the case that Jesus is instructing judgmental individuals to assess the state of their soul's development, to search out and identify any potential ethical shortcomings, and then to take appropriate corrective actions in response. This we relate directly to Jefferson's remarks concerning the *doctrine of a future state* as it is bound up with Jesus' ethics. Following Jefferson, if, as we have done, disregard the talk of (futural) religious eschatology, it is possible to understand that Jefferson might be intimating the human potential for the type of *horizontal* transcendence discussed, or the propensity for the futural moral transformation of one's character, in terms consistent with the type of philosophical soul-searching/building occurring in the company of others that is necessary for erecting, fostering, and nurturing a flourishing and developing ethical community. This view is discussed by Tatum (1982), who argues that it is possible that "Jesus' basic objective was the transformation of the human heart although he may have desired all society to be increasingly brought under the rule of God," i.e., a futural ecumenical community brought together and united through the love of God, self, and others (p. 139). We relate this line of thought to an issue discussed earlier, that of Jesus' urging his followers to become like children, "Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Jefferson, 2007, p. 45). (Mark 10:15; John 3:3)



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CONCLUDING REMARKS: IN PURSUIT OF JESUS' INCOMPLETE ETHICAL PROJECT

It is possible to draw at least three key components from our reading that characterizes the philosophy of Jesus as they emerge from *The Jefferson Bible*. (1) Jesus stresses that a change to one's ethical disposition is necessary, and we can affect this change or transformation through self-reflection and our interaction with others, highlighted above all by the love we give and receive under God's watch and care; (2) Jesus insists that we must adopt a resolute openness to and receptivity for our self-transformation in love, we must like children recover a lost sense of innocence, releasing ourselves over to the potential for *new beginnings*, embracing the potential of *natality*,¹⁹ for our continued ethical development (*progress*) is always on the approach as futural potential; and (3) Jesus embraces an undeniable spiritual element that is expressed through his philosophy and pedagogy, but it need not be thought of in terms of the drive for otherworldly transcendence or salvation, and instead might be related to a deep and pressing concern for our worldly relations as these are penetrated, enhanced, and sustained by God's all-encompassing love. Jesus says: "No man putteth new wine into old [skins]; else the new wine will burst the [skins], to be spilled and the [skins] shall perish...new wine must be put into new [skins]; and both are preserved" (Jefferson 2007, p. 42). (Matt 9:16-17; Luke 5:36-38; Mark 2:20) This relates to the radical change to our soul and disposition required by Jesus, which demands the deconstruction, criticism, and when necessary, the rejection of unexamined beliefs previously held, and through that arduous process, the potential exists for a new and transformed self to emerge. Jesus calls us to shed our old skin, to reject and discard our old ways. For the new self that now lives in the loving light of God and loving presence of our neighbors and brethren, is utterly incompatible with the old self that must die in order for the new self to be re-born, to live - *let the dead bury the dead!*

Much like Jefferson (2007), we recognize the perennial nature of Jesus' ethical teaching, and this represents the drive for a better world, which is expressive of the epochal appeal and persistence of Jesus' philosophy. We agree with Jefferson's sentiments: "The true style and spirit of the rich fragments [Jesus] left us [represent] the most perfect and sublime [ethics] that has ever been taught by man" (p. 10). The view of Jesus' ethical philosophy that emerges from our reading of *The Jefferson Bible* stands in stark contrast with the conception of Jesus' moral views found in Niebuhr's (1963) elucidation of Christian ethics, which has only a vertical dimension and is unable to, "deal at all with the immediate moral problem of every human life" (P. 23). Jesus' ethics "may offer valuable insights to and sources of criticism for a prudent social ethic which deals with present realities; but no such [*horizontal*] social ethic can be directly derived from a pure religious ethic" (p. 24). Despite Niebuhr's claim that it is near impossible to derive either a theoretical or practical ethics from the religious philosophy of Jesus, Hoover (2002) urges that we should not shy away from the worthwhile task of attempting to interpret and understand the relationship between Christian theology and ethics, which, he insists needs to be "acknowledged, not explained away" (p. 56). Jesus' vision and project, Hoover argues, is an instance of a "theologically, socially, economically, and politically unfinished work" (p. 61). Hoover's conclusion serves as an invitation to complete this work, with the following caveat and supreme understanding of the responsibility entailed when attempting such a challenging interpretive endeavor, for "every interpreter will be held accountable for the perspicacity and pertinence of his or her thought and judgment," answering for "the fitness and quality of what he or she constructs" (pp. 61-62).

We conclude by relating to what Jaspers (1954) says about all great philosophy to our characterization of Jesus, and observe that Jesus lived his life beholden to what Jaspers terms, as an homage to Kant, the *unconditional imperative*,

¹⁹ "Natality" is the neologism Arendt (2018) employs to indicate the human's ontological potential for "new beginnings," or the potential for transcendence in knowledge and learning, the open possibility to continue to grow as a person and continually, in an ever-renewed fashion, become "new" to oneself. Dolan (2004) observes that it is interesting that Arendt, "a Jew, nevertheless credits Christianity with the greatest expression of natality" (p. 606).



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which is ultimately expressive, we argue, of the love of God and neighbor. This notion is born of Jaspers' understanding of the religious mode or dimension of *Existenz*, expressed in terms of the Comprehensive consciousness of God in "faith and obedience" (p. 46). When dedicated and beholden to living in the light and under the burdensome responsibility of the *unconditional imperative*, "our empirical existence becomes in a sense the raw material of the idea, of love, of loyalty" (p. 52). To dedicate one's life to the *unconditional imperative*, as did Jesus, is to steadfastly remain "loyal where disloyalty would have destroyed everything" (p. 53). Adherence to this type of imperative, is difficult indeed, but as Jesus teaches, the way to truth always goes and treads the narrow and potentially hazardous way, but amid the danger, as Heidegger (1977), referencing the German poet Hölderlin recognizes, "*grows the saving power also*" (p. 28. emphasis in original). (Matt 7:13-14; John 14:6)

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