

# Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* and Methods in Moral Philosophy

Nick Williams  
Philosophy

Graduate Advisor: Adam Cureton  
Dept. of Philosophy

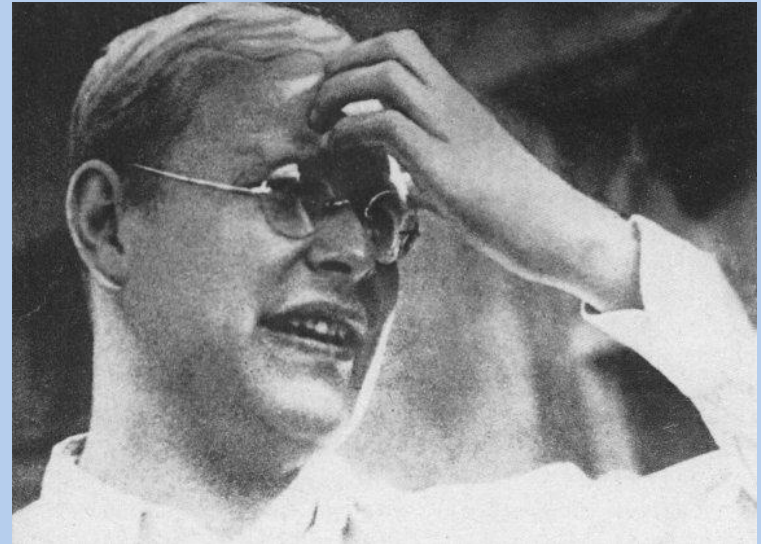
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Thomas E. Hill, Jr.  
Dept. of Philosophy



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## Background

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German theologian active during the 1930s, and is perhaps most well known for his involvement in a plot against Hitler. While in prison before his execution Bonhoeffer worked on a book, *Ethics*, which he hoped would enable Christians in Germany to respond responsibly to the atrocities of Nazism. The portions of the book which we do have are primarily interesting for Bonhoeffer's critique of an approach to ethics predominant in modern moral philosophy.



## Main Goals

My primary goal in this project was to analyze Bonhoeffer's criticisms of modern moral philosophy, focusing on his rejection of the sort of ethics that relies on moral principles or rules to tell us how we should act. I took Immanuel Kant's influential *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* as paradigmatic of the approach to Bonhoeffer rejects, and so I looked closely at Bonhoeffer's critiques of Kant. In addition to this primary focus, I also explored related issues raised by Bonhoeffer's work as well as his life: the relationship of religious convictions in the public sphere, the nature of moral obligation, and the role God might play in moral philosophy.

## **Conclusions: Against a Principle-Based Ethics**

Bonhoeffer rejects ethical systems like Kant's which try to establish moral rules or principles that try to answer the question, "What is the right thing to do?" From his experience resisting National Socialism, Bonhoeffer was convinced that moral principles could not answer this question. Against Kant he argues that human reason is not able to do the work that Kant's theory requires it to do in giving foundation to a "supreme principle of morality." More generally, Bonhoeffer argues that abstract moral principles cannot account for the fact that we, as human beings faced with concrete moral problems, are living in a specific historical context and within a complex web of relationships with other people. From the other direction, he claims that specific principles or rules would need a general foundation to be practical. It seems, however, that given these additional considerations, the ethical project simply becomes harder, not simply impossible. It seems that we could possibly articulate some moral principles reasonably between the two extremes Bonhoeffer attacks.

But not only does Bonhoeffer reject moral principles as an answer to the question, "What is the right thing to do?"— I found that he rejects the question, too. He argues that the proper ethical question is instead, "How should I live?" And he seems to think that this question, once answered, would enable a person to live, as Bonhoeffer says, responsibly. For Bonhoeffer, this means specifically living in obedience to divine commands, and I have found that there is interesting work being done today towards articulating a divine command theory of ethics, which Bonhoeffer seems to have anticipated.

Work is ongoing in this direction which will lead to a senior honors thesis in the UNC philosophy department.