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# A Reformed Ethics for Feminist studies

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Within Reformed paradigm research, increased light has been cast on matters of gender equality as particularly expressed in the theological field of ethics. In the article, focus is lent to the central philosophical ethical schools of thought, both secular and Christian, with particular aim to explain a Reformed ethics suitable for scripturally based feminist studies. An overview of the historical-philosophical foundations is established for scaffolding the connection between secular and Christian schools of thought. It is demonstrated how neutrality or value-free ethical principles are non-existing, and the presentation includes and illustrates pivotal value aspects, particularly within the context of feminist research. It is illustrated how a constructive ethical approach, acceptable for Reformed utilisation is based on Christian attitudes of obedient servanthship to God, as explained through four key cornerstones of: love, stewardship, self-denial and obedience to God, an approach that is pertinent related to gender equality topics. It is outlined how Reformed ethics is built on the theological foundation of Luther and Calvin, further developed by Zwingli, as undergirded by the positive objectives shared through God's law, through God's grace, and the effects on Christian life. Such deontological foundations presuppose the possibility of free choice, as requisite for judgement in the Eschaton. A taxonomic overview of key Christian ethical vantage points is given, and a useful Reformed ethics for application in feminist studies is concluded. The established model is further connected to central Reformed paradigmatic positions on gender ethics and equality.

*Keywords:* Ethics, feminist studies, gender equality, virtue ethics, consequentialism, Reformed tradition, deontology, free will, Eschaton.

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# Реформатская этика как основа для феминистских исследований

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В рамках исследования реформатской парадигмы все больше внимания уделяется вопросам гендерного равенства, особенно выраженным в теологической области этики. В статье основное внимание уделяется центральным философским этическим школам мысли, как светским, так и христианским, с целью объяснить реформатскую этику, подходящую для основанных на Священных Писаниях феминистских исследованиях. Обзор историко-философских оснований сделан для установления связи между светскими и христианскими школами мысли. Демонстрируется, что не существует нейтральных или свободных этических принципов. Проиллюстрировано, как конструктивный этический подход, приемлемый для реформатского служения, основан на христианском отношении к послушанию Богу, что объясняется четырьмя ключевыми краеугольными камнями: любовь, управление, самоотречение и послушание Богу. Метод, который используется, основан на реформатской этике и строится на богословском фундаменте Лютера и Кальвина. Такие деонтологические основы предполагают возможность свободного выбора, необходимого для вынесения приговора в эсхатоне. Дан таксономический обзор ключевых христианских этических позиций и сделан вывод о полезной реформатской этике для применения в феминистских исследованиях. Установленная модель также связана с центральными парадигматическими позициями реформаторов в отношении гендерной этики и равенства.

*Ключевые слова:* этика, феминистские исследования, гендерное равенство, этика добродетели, консеквенциализм, реформатская традиция, деонтология, свобода воли, эсхатон.

# 1. Introduction

Ethics research within the Reformed tradition places emphasis on reaching scripturally-based foundations for human activity, which is based on a responsible hermeneutical method and in-context interrogation of biblical sources. That scriptural interpretation need be contextual is at the core of Reformed thought, as only through gleaning scriptural guidance that renders true utility to the human family will ethical studies reach its intrinsic potential and reveal its true value. In the following, an elaboration on the central philosophical ethical schools of thought will be given, where historical sources from different philosophical realms will be drawn on, and where the context of feminist studies will act as cognitive yardstick. The philosophies addressed will have different foundational underpinnings, dependent on their emphases on virtue, outcomes of actions, or the actions themselves as guidelines for moral choices. This will include addressing the consequentialist theories such as utilitarianism, and ethical thinking based on virtues, as well as deontological philosophies anchored in Scripture.

It will be demonstrated how neutrality or value-free ethical principles are non-existing, and it should already from the outset be mentioned that although the different philosophical schools may seem to be in apparent conflict, and/or based on different religious or secular foundations, to understand the main tenets of the different strands of thought may be useful, as none of them exists or has been developed in a philosophical vacuum.

Ethics and morality are often addressed when attempting to describe the differences between good and bad or right and wrong, or when seeking guidance to determine what one ought to do or the way we ought to live our lives. The core objective here will be to stay focused on gender equality whilst examining Reformed Christian-ethical values originating in scriptural principles. For this, it will be elaborated on different ethical philosophies spanning a vast period, to illustrate divergent views on which moral choices should be made. A central dividing line here will be to delineate between whether it is the actions themselves that are to be considered ethical or whether it is the outcome of the actions that will decide their ethicality. Focusing on the outcome of one's actions falls within the concept of utilitarianism (or consequentialism), whilst the focus on the action itself is termed normative ethics. One of the normative ethical directions is virtue ethics, emphasising the virtues of our mind and character, thus the discussion of human nature, including the scope of virtues, combined with interlinked topics, will be the typical mode of cognition within this variant (Wells & Quash, 2017). Another normative direction is pragmatic ethics, to some extent arguing that ethical thinking develops in the same way as science, relying on inquiry as a method to improve moral guidelines and criteria (Fesmire, 2003). It will not be given detailed attention to theories focusing on pragmatism or secular virtue ethics in its modern shape because of their assumed limited influence and relevance on the topic of this article. Thus, in this article, it is the third normative ethical direction, the so-called deontological, which relies on duties or rules that will have particular relevance.

As Reformed Christian ethics has emerged as a discipline influenced also by historical developments and philosophy, it will in the following be outlined three main schools of ethical thought: those based on virtue, consequences and the actions themselves. For ethical choices to be relevant in an eschatological setting there must be the possibility of free choice. In other words, if an ethical choice is not free, there can be no judgement in the Eschaton. This means that the

following presentation presupposes the possibility of free choice, with regard to the consequentialist and deontological paradigms both.

## 2. Virtue-Oriented Philosophies

### 2.1. Virtue ethics – historical development

Virtue ethics is a normative approach emphasising virtues of mind and character as guidance to moral problems. Views regarding virtues have developed over time, essentially focusing on character traits rather than single actions or attitudes, recognising that a virtue may reflect a positive trait, often habitual, that causes its holder to be perceived as a good human being. The historical developments can be traced back to antiquity. Plato and especially Aristotle are recognised as the founders of virtue ethics, both trusting that people's character traits guide their decisions on how to conduct their practical lives. Possessing traits further refers to a person's complex mind-set, such that a unique list of deliberations is the foundation for an action (Bennett, 2010).

Plato recognised four cardinal virtues as the main tools to fight evil actions: courage, prudence, temperance, and justice. He viewed justice as immensely important within government and political life. Aristotle added virtues such as truthfulness and modesty to Plato's list, also arguing that virtue contributes to shaping the human life by enabling the ability to recognise one's materiality. Aristotle went on to grade the virtues, advocating that the virtues associated with spirituality are the most valuable. The important role ethics plays in politics was evident to Aristotle, as he also argued that the true role of the state is being the moral guardian of the wellbeing of its people (Plato, 1977; Wells & Quash, 2017). Both Plato and Aristotle saw natural law as a source of ethical thinking, whereby, for example, Aristotle linked living in line with nature to living a virtuous life as a happy human being (Gill, 2012). One might argue that Aristotle's focus contradicts the Christian view of heavenly splendour, because of his ethical approach supporting a happy life on earth. This argument is documented in Martin Luther's antagonism against Aristotle, implying that Aristotle's explicit influence on modern Christian ethics may have a limited effect (Aristotle, 2009; Westberg, 2018).

Augustine of Hippo (354–430) addresses virtues in *City of God*, advocating that pagans, because of their lack of knowledge and love of God, could not demonstrate true virtues, only vices. For Augustine all Christian virtues are founded on one quality only, the Christian love founded on knowledge (Augustine, 2003; Gill, 2012).

Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) shared Augustine's view that by virtue, all living things are good, bringing his belief in God to a philosophical ethical stand, and stating that the best approach to the use of human powers is to obtain a good life by allowing the right reasons to conquer the lower bodily and sense capacities. To some extent, one could argue that Aquinas, when reading Aristotle, saw that God was missing, and recognised that Christianity offers the source for all laws ruling our world. In addition to the virtues and human powers, Aquinas argued four types of laws for moral guidance: natural, divine, human and eternal law, demonstrating his teleological ethical approach (Jones et al., 2006; Wells & Quash, 2017). As part of Aquinas' critical approach to Aristotle, he redefined nature as natural moral law as a counterpart to the supernatural, also linking all being to eternity. Though laying significant trust in natural law, Aquinas recognised some actions as violations, for example lying, self-love, etcetera (Aquinas, 1993; Gill, 2012).

## 2.2. Virtue ethics in the contemporary format

Even with the deep rooting in classical philosophy, virtue ethics is often seen as a new field within moral philosophy, partly responding to moral debates in the English-speaking world in the second half of the twentieth century, thus revitalising Aristotelian thinking (Bennett, 2010). Several attempts have been made to reclaim the concept of virtue for Christian theology. Bernard Häring (1961) advocates that Christian duties are embedded in spiritual practices not merely for those on a quest for higher perfection; therefore, moral problems cannot depend on moral laws only. Aquinas' influence is easy to recognise as Häring states the importance of theological virtues for activating grace (Anscombe, 1958; Gill, 2012).

Based on Nietzsche, Swanton (2014) applies a concept of creativity and expression to demonstrate how various forms of acknowledgement affect virtues, also distinguishing between true virtues and related vices. Nietzsche brought a critical approach to ethical philosophy, attacking the churches in what he claimed as failure to represent the life of Christ. He introduced transvaluation as a process for recognising the higher context, and rejected the existence of objective values and the use of reason for the purpose of justifying moral truths. His ethical position can be described as merging consequential perfection, relying on the theory of good, with his concept of human perfection, arguing two types of morality: the master version represented by the noble men and the slave morality represented by the weak men, captured in his theory of the *Übermensch*. Nietzsche's two moralities derive from separate value systems, whereby master morality is identified by actions scaled between good or bad consequences, while slave morality actions are scaled between good and evil intentions (Nietzsche, 2007). With his focus on the *Übermensch* distinct similarities to virtue ethics can be argued.

In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre (2013) addressed the need to revitalise virtues, and this is seen as one of the most significant works addressing Anglophone ethics and political philosophy in the twentieth century. In his book, MacIntyre, sets out to find an alternative to Nietzsche's approach, landing on Aristotle's virtue ethical views. Others have followed, often addressing the characteristics of Christian life, and exploring how virtue ethics may serve as the foundation for experiencing God's grace. When arguing the importance of a person's virtues, this is typically connected to dispositions that are rather resistant and persuasive versus the ones that easily disappear and lack influence on the person's actions. For example, if a person is generous, his or her behaviour will reflect generosity even when proven hard or expensive, in contrast to a person's behaviour where self-indulgence overcomes generous inclinations. In contrast to earlier thinkers who saw, for example, intelligence and wit as virtues, in our time virtues are normally recognised as commendable traits of character (Gill, 2012).

As mentioned above, for an action to be morally right, it needs to be performed from virtue, according to the ethical approach. Whatever ethical problems one may encounter, our actions should reflect traits like courage, honesty or justice, so that the chosen action demonstrates the applicable virtue, and hence demonstrate the preferred character (Bennett, 2010). Criticism of virtue ethics comes from different angles, one being that the foundation is based on promoting a form of utopianism lacking sustainability and foundation in real life. Identifying one set of virtues applicable to all is immensely difficult in our diverse world with contemporary secularised societies, cultural differences, varied political and

religious motivations, etcetera. Trusting in the moral character of persons and dispensing moral problems from guidance through rules adds to the challenge. Despite this, with all forms of virtue ethics we approach one major problem, which is to define what virtues are, and not least, on what are they founded. Because of these problems, it will be evident that this brand of ethical philosophy will not be useful for establishing an ethical foundation acceptable under the Reformed paradigm.

## 3. Consequence-Oriented Philosophies

### 3.1. Classical Utilitarianism

The term “consequentialism” is used when the ethical view is centred round the outcome of an act, thereby falling within the category of end-centric (teleological) moral thinking. Utilitarianism is a version of consequentialism focusing on the outcome of an action when faced with a moral dilemma. In short, utilitarianism recognises actions as morally right or wrong depending on their results. Contrary to other forms of consequentialism, such as egoism, merely focusing on the outcome of the one individual, utilitarianism focuses on the outcome for all humans equally.

Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) was the first to argue utilitarianism as an attempt to reform the criminal justice system, merging morality and law in line with quasi-science, and with clear logical judgement moving away from the somewhat mysterious will of God (Bentham, 1996). The key component in utilitarianism is opting for the solution that at the end of the day benefits the greatest number of people. Though early thinkers worked with the concepts later known as utilitarianism, Jeremy Bentham, drawing on these ancient hedonistic views, is recognised as its founder (Geisler, 2010). Bentham’s foundation for his stand is illustrated by his metaphor of the two sovereign “masters”, pain and pleasure, thereby stating that morally accepted actions support happiness, or pleasure, while actions promoting unhappiness or pain are disapproved. According to Bentham, both masters are subject to one method of calculation (hedonic calculus) therefore are not focused on self-interest, even though measuring pleasure indicating ethical egoism (Bentham, 1996).

While Bentham embarked on his ambitious quest applying ethical principles to bring the world to order through international jurisprudence, including revised civil, criminal, constitutional and procedural law, John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) who was influenced by utilitarianism, argued for economic social liberalism and the human obligation to strive for happiness, joy and safety as moral guidelines (Postema, 2018; Mill, 2016; Mill, 1871). After Bentham, utilitarianism has undergone refinements from classical utilitarianism to the so-called ideal utilitarianism, the latter supported by Georg Edward Moore (1873–1958), who aimed to move utilitarianism away from the hedonistic foundation by which we should promote the good, to a stance recognising a greater good that includes much more than pure pleasure (Moore, 1959).

### 3.2. Utilitarianism in the contemporary version

The introduction of act and rule utilitarianism was a further step taken to respond to various criticisms raised. During the 1950s and 1960s, John Jamieson Carswell Smart (1920–2012) and Henry John McCloskey (1925–2000) argued that



act utilitarianism supports the rightness of an action when it amplifies utility, and on the other hand, rule utilitarianism supports the rightness of an action when it aligns to the rule amplifying utility (Smart, 1956; McCloskey, 1957). The commonality between act utilitarianism and rule utilitarianism is the overarching guideline to choose the action creating the best result possible. Where these approaches differ is the method by which the best results are obtained. An act utilitarian advocates that the overall greatest net utility is decisive when choosing the right action. Utility in this respect is referring to the best overall outcome, something that needs to be addressed individually, case by case. A rule utilitarian refers to a two-step plan, underlining the significance of moral rules. This entails that actions are morally justified when aligned to moral rules, and a moral rule is recognised when supporting a higher utility than other potential rules, including the lack of rules. This approach means that all actions need to be judged in light of moral rules that are recognised within our moral code to support more well-being than other possible rules (Bennett, 2010).

Some argue that act and rule utilitarianisms are hard to distinguish, partly because of rules being expanded by sub-rules (Barrow, 2015). R. M. Hare's (1919–2002) approach was to increase the general scope of rules by limiting their specificity, thus opening up for more interpretation and flexibility, also supporting his two-level utilitarianism (Hare, 1978). He went on to argue that an “archangel” embodies the supreme knowledge of any given situation totally lacking weaknesses and biases, thereby being able to apply critical thinking for solving any moral issue, while the “prole” is the opposite, totally lacking critical thinking and basing all moral decisions on intuition. According to Hare, all humans have a mixture of both, with the need for rules and further guidance (Hare, 1982). The focus on human traits draws some resemblance to virtue ethics, whereby moral dilemmas can be solved through applying a set of specific traits of character that is seen as morally honourable (Gill, 2012).

Even though further variations of utilitarianism exist, it will not be addressed here, instead it will be focused on the criticism of utilitarianism. As shown above, utilitarianism covers a spectrum of connected theories developed during the last two hundred years, and not one single ethical doctrine, and therefore, criticisms are raised from different angles. The basic challenge with utilitarianism, however, is that the end justifies the means, implying that even an otherwise morally unacceptable action can be accepted as long as the result brings happiness or pleasure to a wider group of humans. For example, if killing one person saves the life of one hundred people, the act of killing may be ethically defensible for a utilitarian.

Another key objection to utilitarianism is the lack of quantifiable values, whereby comparisons and measurement of wellbeing or happiness are impossible. Moreover, there are the essential questions of whose wellbeing or happiness counts, and how much weight should be attributed to the different measured goods? Even though it is commendable that for the utilitarian the interests of all people should be counted equally, also the interest of a possible offender should be measured and considered according to this paradigm. Linked to this is what might be seen as an excessive trust in human capabilities, disregarding the fact that humans do not always calculate outcomes, as habits and patterns tend to influence our behaviour (Bennett, 2010). A further challenge with utilitarianism is the impossibility of estimating or calculating consequences; this challenge is described by Dennett (1986) as the Three Mile Island effect. Dennett alludes to the fact that not only is it impossible to assess the utility value, but it is also

impossible to recognise whether such a major security incident as the near-meltdown at Three Mile Island in 1979 was positive or negative, as he points out the importance of the learning that the plant engineers gained from the experience as a positive effect.

Adding an interesting critical aspect is Hofstadter (1983), when he introduces reverberant doubt as part of the so-called “Wolf’s dilemma”. In short, he says that even when all potential consequences are positive, there may be a flickering doubt with respect to the outcome. He exemplifies this through the following scenario: what if a group of students is gathered for an experience, sitting in their cubicles in front on their computers, being told that any student pushing a key on their computer would receive \$100; however, if no one pushes any keys all would win \$1000 each. The obvious choice is not hitting any keys, as that will benefit the whole group. However, one student might start wondering if all have received the same information or starting to doubt the group’s alignment and motivation. As stated by Hofstadter, this flicker of doubt may cause an avalanche of doubt, convincing one student that pushing the key is the only solution.

When it comes to act utilitarianism, in addition to requiring everyone to maximise utility, the added aspect is the quest for doing so as impartially as possible. Merging these demands is debated as unreasonable because the well-being of a total stranger should be as important as that of our loved ones. With the mindboggling number of strangers in need of help, this may come across as a huge ask of any person. Hooker (2000), a defender of rule utilitarianism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, approaches this from two vantage points, first highlighting the huge sacrifices that are required by act utilitarianism, and secondly stating that no ethical ask can go beyond the call for duty. He goes on to state that unless the sum of happiness increases, any sacrifice that does not increase happiness should be considered as wasted.

Rule utilitarianism can be criticised for not succeeding in explaining the foundation for moral rules, and therefore failing to support its two-step approach of knowing and aligning to a rule which may amplify utility (Bennett, 2010).

The dilemmas arising from focusing on the potential outcome of any situation may also be visualised through the following non-dramatic everyday example, which could be called the armrest dilemma. Many airplanes are fitted with three-seaters with one seat at the aisle, one at the window and one between these two. The seats are divided with armrests, four in total, two dividing the three seats, while the additional two are by the aisle and by the window. As there are not two armrests for all three passengers, the question arising is, how should these armrests be divided among the three seated passengers? The dilemma has several aspects, and it is possible to argue that the passenger sitting on the aisle will have the advantage of more space to lean out to the aisle, and that the passenger at the window may have the advantage of having the wall to lean on as extra rest. Following this logic, the argument would be that to create the most happiness, the passenger in the middle is given both the middle armrests, so as to offset the advantages of the two others (aisle room and wall leaning). With this solution, all of the passengers will have some advantages and disadvantages, and they are all semi-happy with the situation, and no one is completely satisfied or completely unsatisfied. An alternative solution would be to let the window and aisle seat occupants use both of the middle armrests, leaving the middle passenger with none, thus leaving the aisle and window passengers completely satisfied and happy, while leaving the person in the middle unsatisfied and unhappy. The answer cannot really be given, as in the first solution no one is either fully satisfied



nor fully unsatisfied as measured against the maximum potential offered by the situation, and in the second solution, the majority (two) are fully satisfied, and one is completely unsatisfied. The example should fully illustrate the poverty of utilitarianism as a model for making ethical choices, not least as it shows the challenges connected to defining and measuring happiness, both on an individual and collective level.

With all forms of consequentialist ethics, we approach one major problem, being how to define what may be the acceptable consequences under the different circumstances, and not least, on what are they founded. As elucidated in the above, primarily highlighting that all moral dilemmas should be solved via the focus on the outcome without supplying any common framework for what outcomes should be sought and why, utilitarianism cannot be applied from a Christian ethical point of view. Thus, this brand of ethical philosophy (utilitarianism) will not be useful for establishing an ethical foundation acceptable under the Reformed paradigm.

## 4. Duty-Oriented Philosophies

### 4.1. Duty and free choice

Deontology is the term used for the ethical approach based on duty, it relies on moral rules, and in a Christian-ethical perspective, this strand of thought is sometimes termed divine command theory. While utilitarianism, as addressed above, advocates that an action's ethical value depends on its consequences, the deontological approach maintains that a consideration of the action itself is essential when establishing whether it is morally acceptable or not. In other words, where the consequentialist models promote actions according to their consequences, the deontological paradigms promote actions irrespective of their consequences.

The connection between moral duty and the concept of free will is primarily visible when focusing on the responsibility for choosing one's actions. In addition, free will may be linked to accomplishments, authority, and to some degree the dignity of human beings, including values linked to love and friendship. Distinguishing between freedom of action and freedom of will refers not only to our ability to choose, but also to whether the relevant factors are beyond our control, and to the external restrictions balancing the options present when facing an ethical problem. Some might argue that external factors may override our judgement, forcing us to take actions that remove our ability to choose freely. The individuals' freedom to choose is seen by many as a private personal domain, whereby what is not illegal is viewed as automatically permitted (Scanlon, 2010).

From a Christian point of view, the freedom to make an ethical choice is essential, as there can be no judgement in the Eschaton without it (2 Peter 3:9). Upon judgment day, all truth will be revealed and all, living and dead, will be judged (2 Timothy 4:1), something that presupposes the ability to exert choices based upon free will.

### 4.2. Historical influences

#### 4.2.1. Antiquity and mediaeval

As it is widely accepted that the early foundation for Western moral thinking and subsequently Christian ethics took place around the fifth and fourth century BC,

the classical Greek era, it would be prudent to start by addressing ethics from the perspective of the Old Testament (Wells & Quash, 2017). However, it should be kept in mind that Christian ethics has not developed in a vacuum, as historical movements and philosophical approaches have contributed to the various waves and developments of moral theory within Christian thinking, including that of the Reformed approach.

The Old Testament is often misinterpreted from a moral point of view, as its content — especially its descriptions of accepted social and moral practices — seen through the lenses of modern society, can come across as quite offensive. Examples are hitting babies' heads against stone (Psalm 137:9), requesting “an eye for an eye” (Exodus 21:24), accepting more than one wife (Genesis 29:21–30) or the killing of a whole town after it has been conquered to honour God through *herem* (Joshua 6:21; Collins, 2014). In addition, some of the laws applied in the Old Testament would be illegal and subject to criminal prosecution in today's modern society, as in some of the previous examples. Another example in total disharmony with modern societal norms is the use of capital punishment for several “sins”, like the use of the death penalty for hitting one's parents (Exodus 21:15) or adultery (Leviticus 20:10). Further, the Old Testament, and especially Genesis, makes room for human free choice, as God for example did not prescribe from which of the approved trees fruit could be eaten (Genesis 2:16–17) or what specific names had to be given to the animals (Genesis 2:19). Although some of the solutions of the Old Testament may seem outdated today, its foundational value for the formation of Christian ethics is formidable, as will be further addressed below.

One of the early ethical models that preceded the deontological paradigms is antinomianism, which implies that no binding ethical rules exist. Forerunners of antinomianism were scepticism, hedonism and processism, the last captured by Heraclitus (c. 535 — c.475 BC), an ancient Greek philosopher arguing the constant state of flux. Hedonism, stating that happiness is the absolute for humans, may be seen as paving the way for modern generalism (Geisler, 2010).

As addressed above, Augustine set his mark on virtue ethics, arguing that love is essential for moral decisions, and stating that love completes the virtues without absorbing them. His approach, however, is also argued from a duty-oriented ethical stand. This is visible, for example, through Augustine's view on lying, whereby he interpreted God's praise of the Hebrew midwives (Exodus 1:20) as praising them for showing mercy to people and their display of kindness, and not an acceptance of lying to the Pharaoh. Augustine's views may be seen as the foundation for graded absolutism, which accepts that some sins are more severe, thus recognising a hierarchy of sins (Geisler, 2010). This view will be elaborated in more detail below.

Even with the substantial influence of Christianity in medieval times, counter movements still argued for antinomianism via intentionalism, exemplified by Peter Abelard (1079–1142) stating that right acts are those done with good intentions while the wrong acts are based on bad intentions. Another example of antinomianism in medieval times is represented by William of Ockham (1285–1347), who supported voluntarism, maintaining that God's will is the source for all moral principles (Geisler, 2010).

#### 4.2.2. Reformation and onwards

Through the Reformation, Martin Luther (1483–1546) brought ethical thinking to the next level, by aligning it to the overarching doctrine of salvation. For Luther, one natural outcome of faith was lovingly and gratefully achieving the true result of the law, combined with thankfulness to God. The combination of faith and forgiveness paves the way for liberation, thus motivating Christians to serve their neighbours. Luther's gospel ethics are consequently based on God's love rather than divine laws (Wells & Quash, 2017).

John Calvin (1509–1564) aligned with Luther with respect to moral actions being an answer to grace rather than the effort of the human will independent of divine sovereignty. His *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (2012) is immensely important as part of the foundation for the Reformation, addressing theological subjects ranging from doctrines of the Church and sacraments to Christian liberty and faith, while criticising the teachings by the heterodox, including those of the Roman Catholic Church. Calvin's doctrine of election forms the basis for his ethical approach, stating that a successful life is lived in accordance with God's commandments. His views on work ethics merges theology, sociology, economics and history, emphasising that discipline, hard work, and moderation are all in line with values embraced by the Church. Calvin's work directly influenced the Industrial Revolution, in addition to setting his mark on multiple European countries in their development as commercial nations with subsequent powers (Tawney, 2014). When compared to Luther, Calvin demonstrates a greater acceptance for pursuing instructions within a Christian way of life, instead of having Christian ethics evolve around indications of grace. Within the Reformed paradigm, both constructive and negation-based perspectives are applied in the quest for guidance via revelation. According to Calvin, human lives need revitalisation through the words of God, covering all aspects of everyday life, also recognising that God exists on behalf of humans who live in God's presence. Consequently, Calvin did not recognise that Christians' lives were dependent on strict ethical assumptions, as human freedom is the purpose of God's work, thus also clearly signalling the true Christian existence. His legacy includes what later is referred to as the Five Points of Calvinism, typically abbreviated as TULIP: total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints (Wells & Quash, 2017:100).

Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531) advocated a more practical ethical approach than did Calvin and Luther, which led him to focus on the positive objectives shared through God's law, seen by him as gifts of God's grace, as affecting Christian life. This laid out the foundation for Reformed ethics. Embedded in this approach is the essence of the Ten Commandments as fundamentals also supported by nature and thereby known to all. Zwingli (2015) accepted that the law to some extent made life hard for any Christian, being well aware of inner conflicts like the tension between happiness and sadness, battles and enjoyment, strife and truce in the life of a Christian (e.g., Romans 7:14–21). The link to virtue ethics is visible, as Zwingli listed Christian virtues, laying particular emphasis on discipline, self-resistance, abstinence, typical traits associated with the internal spiritual battles.

After Zwingli, Reformed ethics has developed further, one fundamental change being the dismissal of his approach with regard to salvation as founded on natural law, while continuing his insistence that pleasing God requires the grace of God through Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit aligning to God's moral law. Guidance for making moral decisions may be found in specific scriptural revelations. The Reformed approach entails the belief that moral character may

be found within the hearts of people and within nature, as Scripture captures the divine truth of God. This is expressed, for example, in 2 Timothy 3:16–17, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work”. Even though linked, general and special revelation are not the same. General revelation is known to all independent of their religious beliefs, ethnic heritage or nationality (Rom 2:15), thereby subject to judgment by God “without excuse” (Rom 1:20). Special revelation, as opposed to natural law, is only accessed in writing in the Bible as “God-breathed” (2 Tim 3:16). While general revelation and natural law may be set aside, special revelation being the “word of God” (Matt 15:6) “cannot be set aside” (John 10:35) as it is explicit and infallible in its form.

Though it is tempting to say that Reformed ethics is simply an ethics of law, this would be oversimplifying the approach, as further ethical aspects are integrated with the legal ones. Reformed ethics can be misunderstood as situational ethics as the actions are to be focused on a future overarching goal, being the Kingdom of God, therefore requiring focus on the situation at hand, also reflecting the strain between the current and the future status. However, what clearly deviates from situational ethics is God’s will spoken through Scripture, and seeing faith and love as essential conditions for the good deeds, therefore also seeing the morally sound action not only as an external positive but also contributing to an internal purification of our souls (Zwingli, 2015).

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) was a devoted Christian and moral absolutist. He stated that our moral obligations are unconditional, whereby the outcomes or the consequences are subordinate to our duties. His deontological approach included declaring lying and killing as universal wrongdoings, the ethical essence being the good will. Embedded within the Kantian approach is the so-called categorical imperative, referring to the motivation for any action taken in a moral dilemma, separating us from other living beings, as all obligations and duties derive from the ultimate commandment of reason. His quest for an overarching principle of ethics led him to the categorical imperative, whereby he advocated that all actions should be conducted in a manner aiming to make them universal laws (Kant, 1993; Geisler, 2010).

Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) founded existentialism by to some extent merging Christian thinking with antinomianism. Positing that social norms cannot be justified by duties, Kierkegaard used Abraham’s potential sacrifice of his son Isaac (Genesis 22) to announce his stance, stating that Abraham by following God’s command recognised a duty elevated from both his duty not to kill and his duty to love his son (Kierkegaard, 2013).

The backdrop of the stark consequentialist totalitarianism displayed by the Nazis in the 1930s heavily influenced Karl Barth’s (1886–1968) ethical views. He advocated the legacy from Calvin, also affecting ecclesial ethics, trusting that moral decisions based on the divine commands are good. Barth considered the link between Church and theology as inseparable, recognising that the main task for the Church should be to share the will of God, while relying on God’s humanity (Barth, 1938).

The above shows a broad overview of the emergence of ethical thinking in the Western world, introducing the different waves of philosophical development, with the recognition of the influences that history and philosophy have had on Christian ethics and vice versa.

## 4.3. Alternative models

### 4.3.1. The foundations

In Scripture are embedded fragmented parts spanning from Genesis to Revelation listing principles, commands, counsels, etcetera intended to guide our behaviour and to ensure that we do what is good, right and celebrating God. Paul states that the purpose of Scripture is twofold, both revealing God's way of salvation and preparing us for a sinless life, being "equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:14–17). When addressing what a person ought to do, Christian ethics emerges, encompassing not only the Bible as a source but also nature, church practices and philosophical vocabulary (Wells & Quash, 2017). Ethical studies can also, as Vorster (2007) states, be viewed as incorporating human attitudes and the outcome of their actions.

Christian ethical thinking may be divided into the following categories: situation ethics, unqualified absolutism, conflicting absolutism, graded absolutism and the constructive model, all responding to the existence of moral laws in a variety of ways that will be outlined below in some detail. Whereas antinomianism states that no moral laws exist, situationism argues the existence of one absolute moral law. In between these there is generalism, holding that many moral laws co-exist, while classes of absolutism address whether moral laws are conflicted. As Scripture shapes Christianity, biblical or Christian ethics could be viewed as sequences of undertakings to manifest the guidance found within Scripture, for example, the second coming of Christ, the Parousia. In short, one could see the Church as the manifestation of Christian ethics. What is reflected in Christian ethics is primarily the focus on God's will, based on God's revelation, and seen as prescriptive and deontological (Messer, 2006; Geisler, 2010).

One further question related to Christian ethics is whether this applies to Christians only, or whether this should be perceived as general guidelines with a Christian foundation, thus applicable to all. MacNamara (1998) attempts to solve this question by addressing distinctiveness and specificity: whereas the Christian's faith underlines one's commitment to Christian ethics by the distinctiveness of respect, the specificity addresses whether conflicts exist between Christian ethics and ethics applied by non-Christians. God's creational gifts enable all people to have moral conscience. One example may be the view on abortion, where Christian deontological norms clearly will be restrictive, and give answers under such a paradigm (Messer, 2006). The position here is that Christian ethics is applicable to all, because Christianity plays a vital role in the foundation of the Western world, and its norms may be permeating most, if not all, of our ethical cognition.

The natural starting point when searching for sources for Christian-ethical guidance will be Scripture. As addressed above, the Hebrew Bible is sometimes misrepresented and misused in this respect, to some extent confusing the audience because of its use of archaic imagery pertaining to many aspects of life, and with particular relevance here, not least in some of its presentation of gender issues. The current use of the Hebrew Bible as a source for Christian ethics may be divided between the conservative and the liberal approaches. The latter points, for example, to the need for accepting that not all laws applicable in the Hebrew Bible may be applicable in today's world, and also recognises that the Hebrew language and culture is the framework and therefore not necessarily relevant in our current lives (Gill, 2012).



Applying the Hebrew Bible to our current ethical thinking is argued to involve accepting that parts represent historical narratives, entailing that Hebrew law needs to be understood in the historical aspect, and not as directly applicable to our current world. The next step is accepting that neither current nor historical ethical decisions are made in neutral circumstances. Another interesting observation is the moral debates shared in the Hebrew Bible, one example being God's discussion with Abraham, whether ten innocent men in Sodom should stop him from destroying the city, indicating that sparing innocent lives is more important than punishing wrongfully (Genesis 18:12). Further, ethical deliberations are found in Ecclesiastes, highlighting circumstances easily recognisable also today (Gill, 2012). Examples mentioned are, for instance, men accumulating honour and wealth with no ability to appreciate it, or poor wise men sharing valuable insight but then forgotten (Eccl 5:19; Eccl 9:15).

The New Testament plays a significant role in Christian ethics, as Christian ethics derives from Scripture, with moral guidelines, and not least the commandments of love shared by Jesus, which permeate all his teachings (e.g., 1 John 4:7; John 13:34; John 3:16; 1 Corinthians 8:1). The Gospels cover Jesus' life from his birth, through his life, death and resurrection. These narratives play a significant central role in the understanding of Christian ethics, as they portray Jesus as a definitive, exemplary or divine human. In this regard, views are divided between the illustrative and the normative approach. The illustrative view recognises Jesus as illustrating truths, hence exemplifying what is good, right and true irrespective of his life, while the normative view recognises Jesus as the founder of norms that would not have existed had it not been for his life. In addition to the above different approaches, the New Testament includes a considerable diversification of directions and standpoints. The authority of Scripture, as a cornerstone of Reformed theology, involves applying the dialogues within Scripture and extrapolating ethical positions onto current situations and circumstances, though not expecting to find a solution for all issues arising (Wells & Quash, 2017).

The value of biblical ethics as guidance for the ethical dilemmas arising in our modern life may be challenging. There is little doubt that biblical ethics as a concept plays a vital role creating the foundation for norms guiding our current ethical evolution also in modern times, based on God's revelation both in Scripture and in the book of nature (Vorster, 2017). The link between Scripture and Church is essential, as each can be seen as connecting to the other. Scripture through its collection of texts forms the identity of the Church, and the people within the Church draw their identity from these texts. In addition, the influences from society and cultural developments on the Church are often visible, thus affecting the messages while also affirming shifts of paradigms within Christianity. The social-environmental impact may span from institutionalism, with authoritative church leaders, to spiritualism, where the emphasis is on an inclusive community. As pointed out by Vorster (2007), the Church has the ability to play an active role in society while supporting a Christian attitude as set out in Philippians 2:5–11, whereby actions and beliefs are aligned to the four principles of love, self-denial, stewardship and obedience to God.

Another source for Christian ethics is universal natural law, which conceptually may be seen as originating in the ancient Greek civilisation. Examples can be derived from Plato's focus on the benefits of living according to nature, while Aristotle differentiated between natural justice and legal justice. Scripture refers to natural law as embedded in human lives. For example, the Lord declares, "I will



put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts” (Jeremiah 31:33). Paul writes, “For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made” (Romans 1:20). Paul also observes “the law written in their hearts” (Roman 2:15) etcetera.

The Stoic Cicero (106–43 BC) founded his universal, ethical, unchangeable standards on natural law, while Augustine saw natural law as equal to the will of God. Aquinas recognised ethics in a wide context as part of an overarching universe created by God, also distinguishing between eternal law that governs the universe, divine law in the Old and New Law, holding our moral standards, and positive human laws (Aquinas, 2011). The link between natural law and moral thinking is also visible in Kant’s categorical imperative and through the recognition that humans should be treated as the ends not the means (Kant, 1947). The essential role of natural law as above any human laws was recognised by Calvin, who also saw the revelation of God demonstrated through natural law, further acknowledging the bond between God and humans (Calvin, 2:8:12; 4:10:3).

Throughout history, the applicability of natural law has been debated both within Christianity and among non-Christian thinkers. The current view is debated not only amongst Christian theologians, but also amongst the churches, some seeing natural law rooted in different religious traditions, even though the language has a Christian origin (Dierksmeier & Celano, 2012; Gill, 2012). The debate has also been visible amongst Reformed thinkers. Karl Barth and Emil Brunner (1889–1966) were engaged in a heated debate on the topic, after Barth renounced the concept, while Brunner accepted the concept and founded his view of the link between God and humans. Barth’s key objection was that humans should not play a role in their own salvation (Brunner & Barth, 2002). Essentially this paved the way for a wider acceptance in neo-Calvinist thinking, especially notable under the contemporary two-kingdom doctrinal view aiding modern social thinking (VanDrunen, 2012).

The ranking of natural law and Scripture should reflect that the written word of God is at an epistemologically prior level, thus above natural law. In the Reformed paradigm, Scripture holds the divine truth that the written laws of God are authoritative and specific, something that is lacking in universal natural law.

#### 4.3.2. Situation ethics

Situation ethics arose in the 1960s with the Christian Episcopal priest Joseph Fletcher (1905–1991) in the space between natural law and divine commands on the one side, and spontaneity and unprincipled actions on the other side, whilst contrasting against absolutism and moral relativism. Fletcher argued that a set of circumstances impacts moral decision-making, stating that a full understanding of the situation is necessary to complete a moral judgment, while letting love act as the overarching principle to minimise discord and maximise harmony (Fletcher, 1966).

Situation ethics, situational ethics or situationism, can be categorised in some respect as a consequentialist view of ethics because of its focus on the outcome of the action in question as opposed to evaluating the action itself as intrinsically good or bad. Because of its focus on consequences, this ethical view is often confused with utilitarianism, as the foundation for the latter is the greatest good for the greatest number, while the focus of situationism is to create as much

love as possible originating from different angles. Another way of looking at situationism is linking it to “proportionalism” whereby opposing a principle can be justified only through proportionate reason.

Fletcher’s situationism includes norms, even though the name of this ethical view might indicate something else. Placed between legalism and antinomianism, whereby laws exist for either anything or nothing, situationism relies on one law, the law of love. Fletcher’s approach takes a stand against extremes at either side, laying the foundation for one absolute norm applicable without exception to all ethical dilemmas. Applying love as the solution underlines the belief in love as the only norm that unconditionally reflects what is good. Two principles can be applied to anchor this approach. First, underived norms cannot be derived, as only one universal is given. Secondly, the number of different situations whereby ethical dilemmas may arise are numerous, meaning that having one ethical law (for example) per situation is close to impossible. The wide concept of love can be applied to any situation or context, thus solving any challenge that may be set forth. For Fletcher, love is not an attribute but an attitude, consequently something that humans give and receive. A further aspect of Fletcher’s concept of love is that he sees the opposite as indifference and not hate, stating that hate at least involves strong feelings about a person, whereby indifference views the person as an object. A natural consequence of applying love as the one universal law is that love abolishes conflicting laws, meaning, for example, that it is a Christian’s responsibility to elevate love over any law, as love equals justice (Fletcher, 1966; Geisler, 2010).

Within Fletcher’s approach is also pragmatism, relativism, positivism and personalism, as additional principles, making situationism an ethical approach based on a pragmatic strategy, using tactics based on relativism, all the time relying on a positive view of life centred on a personal value centre. Even though there are many positive aspects of situationism, one of the main challenges is the lack of content prior to any given situation, whereby the situation in itself determines the approach, ironically implying that the concept of one moral law results in no moral law. In this respect, one may say that the approach is self-contradictory, because a belief in the overarching rule of love may be challenged when love is not the appropriate basis for an action, thus questioning the standard defending this mandate (Fletcher, 1966; Geisler, 2010).

Another criticism is the risk of love being subjective, something also visible in Fletcher’s work where the term “love” is defined in many different ways, allowing the situationist to define love in any given circumstance. The consequence of this is that God is dethroned as the moral ascendant in our universe and thereby these decisions are delegated to humans.

Situationism is also based on the assumption that one can always easily decide the correct action based on love, and thus actions like lying, murder, adultery, etcetera, could be acceptable as long as they are performed in the context of love. As mentioned above, one of Fletcher’s aims was to have a more practical and simple approach than the forerunner, utilitarianism, and so he proposed love as the sole principle in situationism. His further steps, however, confuse the approach, whereby he seeks to define love by establishing numerous principles, making it even less practical and even more complicated than utilitarianism.

Though one could argue that situational ethics gives the individual the responsibility to make his or her own decision, the individualistic approach may easily provide people with excuses potentially to follow their selfish needs and wishes. This subjective angle to situational ethics is fully visible as the individual

makes his or her choice based on their sole perception of the situation and their interpretation of love. The reliability of that choice may be questioned. One may say that situational ethics is ready to support any action as morally defensible even though many people would see the action itself as unjustified. A final criticism is that the essence of situation ethics, being that the preferred ethical solution equals the most loving choice, comes across as vague and circular instead of giving reliable guidance to any ethical dilemma (Miller, 1988). Based on the above criticisms, it will be clear that the relativity of the situation ethical model collapses it into a version of consequentialism, which is unsuitable in the Reformed tradition.

#### 4.3.3. Unqualified absolutism

A Christian ethical approach that contrasts with situationism advocates that moral absolutes exist. Unqualified absolutism recognises no ethical dilemmas, as all perceived conflicts are not proven real, and thus unacceptable sins can always be prevented. The basis for this stand is the assumption that any moral law is absolute and is never in real conflict with another moral law. There are many approaches to unqualified absolutism, but, from a Christian point of view, the conclusion will always be that God is constant, with ethical laws streaming from his unchangeable character. According to this view, God would never send contradicting messages, ensuring that no moral laws conflict nor can they be broken (Geisler, 2010).

Augustine was an unqualified absolutist, though sometimes mistaken for a situationist. His approach to lying exemplifies the position of unqualified absolutism: telling the truth, even though exposing others or oneself to great danger, is an unbreakable absolute, the only caveat being the liar's intention, meaning that intentions are decisive for whether or not speaking the truth should be viewed as a sin. As lying breaks down all certainty, this, even temporary evil, can never be accepted (Augustine, 1887a; 1887b).

The unqualified absolutist school of thought contributes many positive views, including the emphasis on God's unchangeable position, and the adjuring duty to obey God and have faith in him. However, unqualified absolutism is full of contradictions, and consequently it is hard to practice and rely upon. Even Kant, as an agnostic unqualified absolutist, pointed out that exceptions to rules prove that the rules are not truly universal. Inevitably, unqualified absolutists are also prone to add qualifications that reduce the absolutes by maintaining the foundation for God's will versus nature, by recognising some laws based on the assumption of equality, or by qualifying laws as not binding from a moral standpoint because of their civil or ceremonial character; all such qualifications result in the system overthrowing itself (Kant, 1947; Geisler, 2010).

There are evidently both positive and negative aspects of unqualified absolutism. The positives, all noble attempts to create guidance, include, for example, reliance on God's unchanging nature, emphasis on the need to apply rules and not merely to focus on results, and prevention of sinful actions. The criticisms of unqualified absolutism may be summarised through some key issues. First, the approach is seen as unrealistic, and secondly, so far not successful in solving ethical dilemmas, partly because of the lack of solutions offered to genuinely conflicting moral situations. In a real and far from ideal world, conflicts that need to be addressed and solved will arise with the need for sound answers reflecting the world we live in (Geisler, 2010). Due to its uncompromising legalistic and

unforgiving character, the model of unqualified absolutism is not acceptable for use under the Reformed paradigm.

#### 4.4. Conflicting absolutism

A further approach to handle ethical dilemmas is to accept their existence and to approach solving them directly. In short, this is the position of a conflicting absolutist, also called ideal absolutism or the lesser-evil view. This approach, which is typically associated with Lutheranism, recognises that ideally the laws of God do not conflict, but within our fallen world it is impossible to avoid moral conflicts, including conflicts that are due to our lack of clarity (Geisler, 2010).

The conflicting absolutist position can be explained through the following example. When the Hebrew midwives were confronted with the ethical dilemma of lying to protect the male children from being killed (Exodus 1:15–16), they chose the lesser of the two evils available to them. In other words, the conflicted absolutist sees lying as a lesser sin than not being able to protect the life of a child, thus accepting that what has been chosen is wrong, but repenting and asking for God’s forgiveness. This was also the outcome, as God rewarded the women for their faith and did not chastise them for their lying (Exodus 1:20–21). Helmut Thielicke (1908–1986) was a twentieth-century proponent of conflicted absolutism. He acknowledged that conflicts are often unavoidable, and hard to solve, and consequently there needs to be an acceptance of sin as an outcome in any borderline situation. Thielicke links our sinful, fallen world to the Fall, thereby stating that had it not been for the Fall, our world would not have been sinful, and neither would there be any ethical dilemmas (Geisler, 2010; Thielicke, 2016).

The strengths of conflicted absolutism are primarily advocating absolutes and, secondarily, facing ethical choices head on, while retaining a realistic view on dilemmas. The obvious shortcoming of this approach is the weakening of the chosen absolutes when linking them to a fallen world. In addition, this approach implies that Jesus was also a sinner, on the basis of the assumption that even Jesus may have been forced to choose between two sins. The conflicted absolutists also believe that God will grant forgiveness when asked, assuming that the sin will not repeat itself; this is a challenging circular argument because the core of this stand is that dilemmas are real and that we should choose the lesser evil, hence, allow ourselves to sin repeatedly (Geisler, 2010). These weaknesses mean that the model of conflicting absolutism is not satisfactory for use under the Reformed paradigm.

#### 4.5. Graded absolutism

Graded absolutism is the third approach within absolutism. This approach is also described as contextual absolutism or “the greater good” view. According to this view, some actions to solve moral dilemmas are right while others are wrong, regardless of the consequences of the actions, and basically regardless of the intentions behind the actions.

Like the other absolutisms, this approach confirms that there is an absolute principle of ethics, revealing God’s commandments to us. Breaking God’s law equals committing a sin, though some moral obligations are greater than others. A graded absolutist will, for example, state that “You shall not murder” (Exodus 20:13) is a greater moral absolute than “You shall not give false testimony” (Exodus

20:16), implying that murder is a greater sin than lying. This view accepts that there may be situations where the options to solve an ethical problem contradict, so that the person's obligation will be to choose the greater good. In doing so, even though the person is violating one of God's commandments, by choosing the lesser sin, he/she is not committing a sin (Geisler, 2010).

By applying the aforementioned guidelines, the graded absolutist will acknowledge that saving life is more important than telling the truth. In short, a graded absolutist may have an ethical duty to tell a lie, for example, if he/she is threatened by a gunman to reveal the whereabouts of a person whom the gunman is planning to kill. In this situation, graded absolutism advocates that not lying would in fact be a sin. This does not imply that evil is good, merely that when conflicted the lesser evil should be chosen. Allowing people to sin has been one of the root causes for criticising graded absolutism, which is therefore referred to by some as unbiblical and more reliant on obeying people than obeying God (Geisler, 2010).

The real moral dilemma is not that we are faced with opposites, in other words good versus evil, as the obligation is to focus on the greater good, but that we are constrained from performing the two conflicting absolutes simultaneously. The situation as such, or the context, determines the conflicting absolutes, and for this reason some argue that this approach in fact should be viewed as situational ethics. However, as the greater absolute guides the resolution of the conflict, there should not be similarities between graded absolutism and consequential ethical views. Graded absolutism is the generally accepted ethical model among Reformed thinkers, and thus, maintains the position as the model embraced under the Reformed paradigm.

#### 4.6. Constructive model – The feminist alternative

Although it is above established that graded absolutism is the accepted model in the Reformed tradition, this alone will not suffice when mining out practically useful ethical guidance for real-life use. Approaching the ethical dilemmas by focusing on the don'ts instead of the do's is seen by some as the appropriate thinking, and is not uncommon even among Reformed theologians. Geisler (2010) is one example, targeting activities that Scripture forbids, leaving the followers with a sense that doing nothing may be the safer moral option. Vorster, on the other hand, embraces a constructive ethical vantage point, whereby Scripture's guidance to solve contemporary ethical dilemmas is identified, and argues another approach, which can be seen through what Vorster refers to as the Christian mindset reflecting *the attitude of an obedient servant to God*, where the human family is called to action by way of attaining such a benign proactive demeanour (Vorster, 2007:133). Vorster promotes a proactive approach to solve ethical problems within the Christian heritage, exemplified by his stance on post-apartheid South Africa, supporting the rebuilding of his country into a liberal democracy. He posits that it is essential for any Christian to have a constructive outlook on the individual and society, thus laying the foundation for a practicable Christian ethical approach (Vorster, 2004; 2007).

On the basis of the strong statement of Christian attitude in Philippians 2:6–11, Vorster (2007) has developed a productive ethical position, highlighting the constructive Christian-ethical perspective. His position can be explained through four key cornerstones: *love, stewardship, self-denial and obedience to God*. Love in this respect is the all-inclusive love, demonstrated by being both compassionate



and humane in addition to supporting others through comfort, dignity and respect. Stewardship involves imitating Christ by stepping into the servant role, supporting the community while striving for peace and social moral order. Self-denial is a further imitation of Christ demonstrating the ability to sacrifice personal interest. Obedience to God, as the fourth and last principle, characterises the life of a Christian aligned to the will of God, thereby seeking moral social order together with a pure life. This constructive ethical position, founded on the above four principles, can be seen as a set of guidelines complementing other hermeneutical principles relevant to ethics, and is broadly relevant in today's societies for guiding any ethical dilemma (Bøsterud and Vorster, 2017).

Bøsterud and Vorster (2017) use Jesus' and Confucius' explanations regarding the golden rule of reciprocity to illustrate these different approaches. Jesus encourages a proactive path urging to action: 'So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this summarise the Law and the Prophets' (Matt 7:12), while Confucius opts for a passive attitude applying negation in his version: 'That which you do not desire, do not do to others' (Confucius 2015). From a feminist perspective, supporting a positive versus a negative approach comes across as closely aligned to the Christian attitude referred to above, which will be expected to inform matters of gender equality from a Christian ethical vantage point.

Based on the foregoing, it will be clear that the constructive deontological approach to Christian ethics as outlined above will be applicable to solving the problems pertaining to gender equality, and not least because it is founded on Scripture. Therefore, this brand of ethical philosophy will be useful for establishing an ethical foundation, as fully acceptable under the Reformed paradigm for the purpose of scriptural feminist studies.

## 5. Gender ethics – praxis and theology

### 5.1. Gender praxis

Ethical cognition at times addresses the gender balance or lack thereof in society. Relevant topics in this respect are, for example, characteristics based on whether a person is male or female, and behaviour or social roles attributed to males or females. Perceptions and gender biases are often linked to the thinking that males and females have different roles and abilities, thus explaining lack of equality with a causation based on etiologically biased observation only. This is where gender becomes an ethical topic. More precisely, even though the main differences can be said to be within the reproductive area, a very natural outcome of sexual dimorphism, essential here is the much-debated question of how far gender differences should apply in life.

For a significant part of Christian history, women's roles have been linked to their childbearing capacity, which has generally been interpreted as a subordinate role at home and in society. Men, on the other hand, were considered natural leaders not only in society but also within the four walls of the home, hence supporting a patriarchal system. Some Christian men even view the subordinate role of women within the household as a moral duty bestowed upon them. These gender differences throughout history are reflected in Christianity's four first centuries, upholding females as the weaker sex with respect to both intellect and judgment. On the other hand, women were regarded as equal when it came to serve in the early religious societies, not only when escaping patriarchal life



and vowing virginity — something many did to avoid marriage and family life by joining institutions where gender inequality was especially visible. The inequality implied, for example, that young girls were forced to marry without concession and that the *paterfamilias* had full control over family life. The Reformation brought new light on gender and ethics, adding, for example, the importance of partnership and companionship within family life, opening the way for more balance, while not abandoning the patriarchal stand (Gill, 2012).

In contemporary society, both genders are set to tackle feminism and masculinism in an ever-changing economic, political and global environment while balancing family and professional life in ever-changing new practical settings. Feminist theologies often address oppression rooted within the concept of patriarchy, whereby men exert power while women take on a subordinate role, even within Western societies where Christianity has prospered. The lack of balance in power has several ramifications, one being that men predominantly hold power positions. Another is that in a male-powered society most problems are addressed from a male point of view, thereby lacking the female outlook and knowledge, which could have added different perspectives and knowledge. This somewhat wry perception of the world tends to “justify” the lack of power balance between the genders, even in some situations perceiving women as not complete humans and blaming women for many of the challenges within society. Some may even say that our world needs a radical restructuring (Messer, 2006).

## 5.2. Gender theologies

Feminists have accused the Church for taking an active part in the oppression of women, putting Christianity amid these challenges. Parsons (1996) addresses this through what she presents as a framework of Christian feminist theologies, applying the foundations of philosophy such as liberal, social constructionist and naturalist concepts as a taxonomy of paradigms, thereby strengthening the relationship between feminism and Christianity. Her approach adds to those of other Christian feminists in striving to remove patriarchal elements from within the Church.

The *liberal paradigm* highlights equality and independence as fundamental moral values, imperative for the preservation of our human virtue, also reflecting personal sovereignty and human rights. With this backdrop, the liberal view eradicates the importance of gender, and acknowledges that all people have equal rights to education, jobs, and equal pay, as there are no inherent reasons for treating men and women differently in any aspect of life (Parsons, 1996). This paradigm is supported by Galatians 3:28: “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”.

The *social constructionist paradigm* highlights the fact that many current values are founded on the way things are, without daring to question the status quo supported by the establishment. To overcome this, it is essential to seek new identities for both genders, breaking the historic patterns of relationship. According to Parsons (1996), Christian ethical principles support these views and obtain support in the Bible; for example, Christ’s treatment of women countered contemporaneous views on the female sex (e.g., Luke 8:1-3; John 4:4–30).

The *naturalist paradigm* focuses on the differences between the sexes, while stressing the need to reassess potential intrinsic human characteristics. One example is psychological differences, illustrated by males’ tendency to focus on

justice, while females display a tendency to focus on relationship (Messer, 2006). Embedded in this paradigm is the perception that society is organised to favour the male way of performance, thus advocating the need to ensure that the female approach does not harm social constructions, including work life. Christians pursuing this line of naturalist feminism may see our two sexes as explained via creation, and supported by modern science's demonstration of biological differences in all animals, thus explaining the doctrine of creation (Gill, 2012). This paradigm is challenging because of the risk of semiotically echoing current stereotypes by way of perpetuating the status quo, one example being healthcare, where the ethics of care has been essential, thus allowing nurses (often females) to be the caring profession while reporting to the superior doctor (often males). The level and extent of differences between males and females are also debated (Messer, 2006).

Though differences with respect to experience of life and values may apply on both individual and cultural levels, these should not be disruptive within Christian ethical theory or practice or used as justification for structures accepting exclusion or oppression. The Christian doctrines of reconciliation and redemption should be used for the support of an inclusive and liberating view of gender balance within Christian ethics (Gill, 2012).

Interestingly, Parsons (1996) does not select one of the three paradigms as preferable to the others, instead she sets out to merge communalities from all three to support gender-balanced ethical discussions. The approach starts with a universal moral standard offering the foundation for equal treatment, adding a "redemptive community" taking us beyond individualism, and then embedding a fresh approach to human nature where both sexes are recognised as created in the image of God (Messer, 2006).

Vorster (2007) argues that the traditional sentiment is based on a literal and narrow biblical understanding not reflecting the overarching attitude, and he aligns with Parsons' holistic position as he highlights the overall scriptural message and advocates Christianity's important role in the liberation of women not only within the Church but in society.

## 6. Conclusion

In the above have been elaborated different philosophies pertaining to ethics, both in general and in particular, with gender equality and feminist studies in view. As have been evidenced, the most important division between different schools of thought within the realm of ethics is whether the focus should be on the outcome of an action sought by the person facing an ethical problem or whether it is the action itself that determines whether it is acceptable or not. The virtue-based models have been exposed as void of utility as they fail to define what virtues are, and on what are they founded. Furthermore, it has been elaborated how the consequentialist paradigms fail when addressing ethical problems due to their relativity, their lack of defining what may be the acceptable consequences under the different circumstances, and not least importantly, the obscurity of their moral foundations, if any. For the Christian exegete, whether concerned with gender questions or otherwise, it has been demonstrated how solely the deontological trajectory is the one that can be found acceptable. So also in the Reformed tradition, for which it in the above has been explained a constructive and proactive approach to practical ethics, built on a Christ-imitating attitude as based on the pivotal scripturally founded values of love, stewardship,

self-denial and obedience to God. It will have become clear that only through such servanthood to God can scriptural truths be excavated with full utility in the field of theological feminist studies. As it has been exhibited in the elaboration, various practical and philosophical strands of argumentation have been in use to keep the societal position of women marginal, and the Church and its institutions have not been an exception to this. Thus, the call for increased focus on scripturally motivated feminist inquiry is clear and pertinent, further interest in this realm of ethics is necessary and welcome, and the biblically founded ethical clarification on gender equality in all areas of human life will be essential.

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