

Babeş-Bolyai University – Cluj
Ecumene Doctoral School

Teaching Christian Ethics Through Stories

SUMMARY OF THE HABILITATION THESIS

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This thesis aims to present the experience gained and the achievements reached during my career as an academic researcher and lecturer. It discusses the diverse topics of research and the miscellaneous teaching activities involving a broad spectrum of methods and subjects to provide sufficient information about my works and achievements in these fields, in moral theology (Christian ethics).

The first part (Chapter 2) of the thesis presents the main ideas on the functioning of narratives, stories and thought experiments in Christian ethics. Chapter 2.1 aims to demonstrate how stories from beyond the barriers of academic ethical thinking might exemplify the features and functioning of canonized thought experiments. The examples taken from Hungarian literature and cinematic art serve as samples highlighting all necessary features of ethical thought experiments, such as existential force, rules limiting options of choice, and the tensions between the thinking and the reality of the audience. Through the analysis of these exemplary stories the pragmatics of thought experiments will be elaborated, which serves as a theoretical basis for the inquiries in the forthcoming chapters. It establishes a pragmatic definition of ethical thought experiments, according to which *ethical thought experiments are (1) imaginary scenarios (2) referring to selected morally relevant aspects of reality and (3) aimed at testing moral beliefs, theses or theories (4) by activating the moral intuitions of the audience.* The next two chapters (2.2 and 3.3) provide a detailed analysis of how biblical parables function, and the many ways they resemble thought experiments. The Parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10,25-37) and Nathans challenging story (2Sam 12:1-4). The common aim of thought experiments in ethics and many biblical parables is to achieve moral conversion by creating a tension between the story and the Lebenswelt of the audience through triggering their intuitive apparatus. This pattern is present also in the two classical thought experiments presented in the next two chapters. Robert Nozick's Experience Machine Thought Experiment (2.4) provides a deeper understanding of the ethical relevance of reality, personhood, and values by challenging hedonistic theories. This thought experiment provides a sufficient basis also for Christian ethics to incorporate inductive elements into theories of moral theology. Richard Routley's Last Man Thought Experiment is an early echo of the concerns formulated in encyclical *Laudato si'* of Pope Francis. It aims to establish the intrinsic value of nature unsuccessfully but provides a fundamental criticism of capitalism and consumer society. The different versions of the Last Man Thought Experiment not only give a social ethical analysis of the social processes effecting the created world, but also touch upon themes of theodicy.

The examples provided introduce intuition as a key element of moral education, which might be used on all levels, from kindergarten to university. Intuition is a tool serving as a starting

point for self-knowledge and ethical reflection due to its spontaneous nature, which can contribute to the mapping, the expansion, and the improvement of the moral horizon. By making intuition one of the key concepts of classroom and lecture-hall activities it is possible to transcend the boundaries of theory-centred teaching. By asking questions which simply cannot be avoided, stories challenging intuition compel students to reflect upon their ethical judgements.

The text shows that when we read and contemplate these thought experiments, we learn not only about how decisions are evaluated, but also about human nature. Thought experiments help us approach and resolve ethical dilemmas, to be sure, but their biggest benefit is the illumination of the human good. The text demonstrates how important intuitive judgements are to human morality and how much we can learn through them about human nature. The story of Tomoceuszkakatiti and Gyugyu reveals our desire to see ourselves as beings with a conscience, alongside our urge to be free from abjection and misery. The Experience Machine Thought Experiment makes visible our demand for reality and our willingness to relinquish certain pleasures to lead an authentic life. The Last Man Thought Experiment shows that we cannot view the world as a valueless entity, but rather assign an intrinsic value to all of creation.

Although these insights do not provide a complete and static description of human nature, they bring us closer to answering the anthropological question. They do so by triggering our intuitions, which makes thought experiments an excellent tool for educational purposes. The use of pointed imaginary scenarios facilitates a deeper involvement of students in the learning process, where the emphasis is on experience and reflection over mere information. This is true even if thought experiments have their weaknesses and often prove inadequate in attempts to resolve ethically difficult questions in the real world. They may even be abused for ideological purposes. Still, in the hands of well-trained teachers with morally sound intentions, thought experiments create a space for self-reflection and critical thinking. The challenge they pose to our intuitions might lead not only to rational conclusions but also result in true insight.

Chapter 3 and 4 deal with my scientific, professional, and academic achievements, and future plans for my academic career. It provides information on the biographical background of my professional development with respect to educational, research and teaching activities. The list of publications incorporating the habilitation theses are also listed here, just like all other relevant publications, lectures, and presentations at conferences. A special focus is given to the international teaching activities and academic initiatives and organizations I'm involved in. In the final chapter future research plans are presented in the following three fields: neuroethics,

the pedagogy of Bernard Lonergan and the development of moral theology – especially of Christian bioethics – in Hungarian theology in the last 50 years.