

# The Virtue of the Negative: The Gospel Narrative of the Rich Young Person and the Paradoxical Relationship between Prohibitions and Love

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**Abstract:** This essay offers a ‘reflective meditation’ on the gospel narrative of the rich young person (Mt 19:16-19; Mk 10:17-19; Lk 18:18-20). In his quest for the fullness of life the rich young person turns to Jesus as if to some kind of ‘guru’ to show him the way. Refusing to act the role of absolute master, Jesus points his attention to the prohibitions of the second tablet of the Ten Commandments. This implies an ethical paradox, namely that of how the negative opens the door to the positive. As boundary rules, the formulated prohibitions create the conditions for love without defining that love as behavior prescriptively. This, in turn, opens up the perspective of the ‘aesthetics of ethics’ or the ‘beauty of the good’ and the ‘community of participation’, insofar as it gives shape to the attitudes and virtues that form the soul of the ethical prohibitions. From this it becomes clear how the prohibitions are merely the embedment and not the source or goal of ethical passion, nor that of qualitative human existence.

**Keywords:** The Rich Young Man • Prohibitions • Ten Commandments • Moral Community • Virtue • Desire • Love

## Introduction

People are looking for perspectives to succeed in life, to create happy and meaningful life. At the same time,

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people are looking for all kinds of sources of wisdom that can provide insight, inspiration, and orientation for this purpose. This puts us on the track of the well-known gospel narrative of the so-called ‘rich young man’, for he calls on Jesus for help “to enter into life” (Mt 19:17).

Then someone [a certain ruler] came to Jesus and said, ‘[Good] Teacher, what [good deed] must I do to inherit eternal life? Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you ask me about what is good? [Why do you call me good?] There is only one who is good. [No one is good but God alone.] If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments. He said to him, ‘Which ones?’ And Jesus said, [You know the commandments:] You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honour your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbour as yourself. (Mt 19,16-19; Mk 10,17-19; Lk 18,18-20).

Inspired by Xavier Thévenot, who presents his commentary as a “conférence spirituelle,”<sup>1</sup> I want to offer an actualizing ‘reflective meditation’ of this narrative rather than a biblical exegetical study that compares and discusses the different exegetical-scientific interpretations. Specifically, we aim for an interpretation of the narrative (especially of the first part) that makes everyone think about the relationship between law and life, in particular between prohibition and love. A Bible narrative, such as the narrative of the rich young person, does not coincide with its literary and contextual particularity, but contains a ‘message’ that can nourish the minds of all human beings and also humanize their existence and acting today.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Xavier Thévenot, *Souffrance, bonheur, éthique. Conférences spirituelles* (Mulhouse: Salvator, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> In our reflective reading we are not only inspired by Xavier Thévenot, but also by insights from Paul Beauchamp, Stanley

Our reflective, thoughtful reading begins with the rich young person who, in his quest for the fullness of life, turns to Jesus as a ‘master – a kind of ‘guru’? – to show him the way. In refusing to be some kind of absolute master, Jesus does point him to the prohibitions of the second table of the Ten Commandments. This implies a paradox, namely how the negative of the prohibitions opens the door to the positive: “the virtue of the negative.”<sup>3</sup> As boundary rules, the formulated prohibitions create the conditions for love, without defining that love in a prescriptive way. This also opens up the perspective on the ‘aesthetics’ of ethics, i.e. the good as the beautiful, and the ‘community of participation’, insofar as it gives shape to the attitudes and virtues that form the soul – the reverse and inside – of the prohibitions. In this way, last but not least, it will become clear how the prohibitions are only the embedding and not the source nor the goal of the ethical passion, nor of a meaningful human existence.

### **A wealthy and honoured (young) person**

Let us start at the beginning, namely with the rich young man, as he is usually called. The narrative about him can be found in the three synoptic Gospels – Matthew (19:16-19), Mark (10:17-19) and Luke (18:18-20) – with minor variations. In Matthew it is about a young man (“neaniskos”) (Mt 19:20), in Luke about a “ruler” (“archon”) (Lk 18:18). It is also certain that it concerns a rich person, since the three versions of the narrative explicitly mention this (Mt 19:22; Mk 10:22; Lk 18:23). This qualification forms an interesting point of

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Hauerwas, Louis Janssens, John Paul II, Emmanuel Levinas, Alasdair MacIntyre, Marc-Alain Ouaknin and Paul Ricoeur (cf. ‘Bibliographic References’).

<sup>3</sup> Thévenot, *Souffrance, bonheur, éthique*, 77.

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departure for further reflection on becoming human. This dynamic concept resonates in the description of the human being as an ‘attempt at being’ (*conatus essendi*; cf. Spinoza).<sup>4</sup> As a needy being, every human person, young or adult, strives to establish and develop one’s own being.<sup>5</sup> According to Kant and Ricoeur, in this pursuit and effort of being we discover three strong desires: having (*avoir*) as appropriating, with the derailment of greed (*Habsucht*); ability (*pouvoir*) as influence and power, this is like ruling over the other, with the derailment of the lust for power (*Herrschaft*); and finally to be worth (*valoir*) as the pursuit of recognition by others, with the derailment of lust for honour and fame (*Ehresucht*). These three desires are also closely related in their distinctiveness. Possession is not only a form of power over matter, but also enables power over other people and is also a source of recognition and appreciation: those who are rich are highly valued in the community. On the other hand, people higher up in society are not only expected to exercise power, but also to give shape to their position and power in wealth. So it is no coincidence that the rich person is called a ruler (Lk 18:18) by Luke in his version of the narrative, meaning not only that he enjoys recognition but also as an influential person clothed with power is regarded. Thus the three desires in the wealthy young person who enjoys prestige, as a ‘dream image’ of our human existence, form a beautiful unit!

And yet this satisfied person goes to Jesus with a question. We assume that this is not a rhetorical but a real question. This means that the wealthy (young)

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<sup>4</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Proper Names* [1976]. Translated by Michael B. Smith (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 71.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* [1990]. Translated by Kathleen Blamey (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 4-11.

person from the gospel in his fullness still feels an emptiness, which causes him to set himself in motion. He cannot rest in himself or in complacency. This is reminiscent of the so-called ‘push-push game’: a rectangle or square board on which, for example, all kinds of letters or numbers are mixed together, with the instruction to form words or numbers. This is only possible if there is an empty square on the board, so that the letter or number cubes on the board can be moved. If the board were completely filled with letter or number cubes, it would be impossible to form words or numbers. The empty space on the board makes it exactly possible to move the letter or number cubes. The negative makes room for the positive. A mere fullness establishes immobility. Only the negative in the fullness makes a dynamic in the fullness possible! Isn’t that just the source of desire: the negative of the positive? Isn’t that exactly the meaning of the question of the rich (young) person who in his perfection experiences an imperfection and emptiness? In fact, he not only acknowledges his imperfection but breaks out of it by addressing someone else with his negativity. Something special happens here because by expressing his negativity towards another person he transforms his need into a question. In other words, his necessity takes on a relational meaning by addressing it to someone as a request for help.

The question now is which question is at issue: what question does the rich (young) person address to Jesus? The narrative is clear; he wants to know what he must do to achieve eternal life. With eternal life is certainly meant a reference to the Eternal, so the life of the Eternal, the Infinite. This, of course, contrasts with the rich (young) person’s experience of his perfection as yet finite. That is precisely why he is looking for the infinite, the life of the Eternal, the full life. Later in the text, this eternal life is also called ‘life’ (“zōē” in Greek): “If you

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want to enter into life...” (Mt 19:17).<sup>6</sup> It is indeed clear that the rich young person is not concerned with the ‘life after this life’, but with the (full) life in this life, because he asks the typically Jewish question about ‘doing’: “What must I do (to enter into life)?” In the Jewish tradition, doing is central, although knowing and hoping are certainly not absent or unimportant: doing the Torah, the Law, is what matters to fulfill the Covenant. Hence the rich young person's question to Jesus, namely, what must he do to gain the full life.

### **Looking for a guide to the good**

Let us shed some light on the one to whom the rich (young) person turns in search of fullness of life. Perhaps we expect some kind of ‘guru’, a wise teacher who points the way to enlightenment... From the Jewish context, the rich young person addresses Jesus as ‘rabbi’, ‘teacher’ (Mt 19:16), as is also the case in other stories by a lawyer who enters into a dispute with Jesus (cf. for example Lk 10:25). This evokes the Talmudic masters, who are skilled in the interpretations of the Law, through all kinds of commentaries and discussions, as we find also in the Talmud.<sup>7</sup> And yet the rich (young) person does not simply address Jesus as a rabbi, but as a ‘good Teacher’, as is apparent from the versions of Mark (10:17) and Luke (18:18). According to the evangelist Mark, he even kneels before Jesus (Mk 10:17), thereby submitting himself to the mastery of the rabbi and surrendering himself completely. And in Matthew the question is not simply, as always, “What shall I do?” but, “What *good*

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<sup>6</sup> It is striking how the expression “to enter into life” contrasts with a saying that is also used for (assisted) suicide: ‘step out of life’.

<sup>7</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Beyond the Subject. Talmudic Readings and Lectures* [1982]. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 101-102.

deed must I do?" (Mt 19:16). The approach and claim seem to be an attempt to reinforce Jesus' mastership. In this we discover the temptation of an 'imaginary projection' or a form of idolatry. In other words, we discover an attempt to persuade Jesus to behave towards the rich (young) person as an absolute master, an absolute guru or 'leader' who determines for him what is good. Psychoanalysts call it the projection on the 'master' (counselor, educator, leader...) as "une autorité supposée savoir et pouvoir" – "an authority supposed to know and to can (with power)," leading to an 'idolatrous leadership'. This is recognizable today. In a plural world of values and meaning, which also entails its confusions and uncertainties, people are looking for 'constancy' and 'clarity' in reliable guides. Especially when in such a pluralistic context the emphasis is placed on autonomy, in the sense that each individual is expected to orientate one's own life on the basis of one's own insight and taste, the tendency arises to look for 'guides' and 'coaches' of all kinds, from whom absolute reliability is expected. Then one entrusts oneself to their authority, who must then – instead of the person – infallibly indicate which way to follow: 'the good that one must do'. An 'expert culture' is growing in various societies today, with an explosion of spiritual, ethical, psychological, socio-professional and practical experts and coaches who 'promise' people with their expertise and elaborate methods, whether or not (pseudo) scientifically substantiated, how to be able to live happily, decide, act good...

The curious thing is that Jesus sees through the temptation of the rich young man, as evidenced by his prickly response, "Why do you call me good?" (Lk 18:19a) – "Why do you ask me about what is good?" (Mt 19:17a). Apparently, Jesus does not want to be 'elevated' to such an absolute authority – an absolutely good master – who tells the person what is the right way for him. To his

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critical reaction, Jesus adds: “There is only one who is good!” (Mt 19:17b). By this he means the Eternal One, as appears from Jesus’ reaction according to Luke: “No one is good but God alone” (Lk 18:19b). Jesus thus refuses to be made absolute into a divine guru or omniscient and omnipotent master who holds the secrets of life for every human being.

This is how we understand today that Jesus refuses to be a ‘sectarian authority’ because he does not want people to become so dependent on another that they are no longer free to act and determine the way and the meaning of their lives. No guidance nor counseling should ever mean that the counselee would no longer have the freedom to make one’s own responsible decisions through discernment. This implies the suggestion that a true master, does not want to destroy the desire, the passion. He does not want anyone to blindly obey another human being. An authentic master protects human freedom and dynamism. In this respect, the narrative of the rich young person can be interpreted as an emancipatory narrative. But it doesn’t stop here.

### **Prohibitions as pathways to full life?**

Jesus does not forsake the rich young person. After all, on closer inspection, he answers his question: “If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments” (Mt 19:17b). With this Jesus refers, as appears from what follows in the narrative, to the Ten Commandments, which are an essential dimension of the Torah, the Law, which is part of the Covenant between the Holy One and Israel. It is striking again how Jesus points away from himself. He does not say what one might expect: “Follow me (and drop the Law)”;<sup>8</sup> but he refers to the ‘objective

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<sup>8</sup> Jesus does not say “Follow me” until the end of the narrative, namely after he has not only shown the rich (young) person a ‘detour’



exteriority' of the Law, the symbolic order of values and meaning that is active and 'known' in the (Jewish) community. When the rich young man asks what commandments are involved, Jesus refers to the known ones: "You know the commandments" (Mk 10:19; Lk 18:20). That external otherness (of the known commandments), which does not bubble up from the inside of the teacher but represents a general frame of reference, implies that both the master and the pupil, refer to it as orientation. It also implies that, by its objectivity in the community, that Law is 'debatable' and 'interpretable' (as is apparent from the discussions of the lawyers and throughout the Jewish Talmud).<sup>9</sup> The approach of Jesus is itself already an interpretation, which is therefore open and invites further interpretation and dialogue. So, there is 'mediation' via a 'symbolic order', which orients people together and on which no one as an individual can seize or exercise a monopoly. This model of guidance differs from the well-known and widespread phenomenon of 'personal life coaches' today. Often this model is based on a one-to-one relationship between coach and coachee. This personal guidance model certainly has its values and possibilities, but it also implies the risk of exclusivity, dependence, and abuse of

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or the 'mediation' of the Law, but has also challenged him to turn from his (material, ethical and spiritual) obsession: "Go, sell your possessions...; then come to follow me" (Mt 19:21 ) (cf. Mk 10:21; Lk 18:22). Only in this way a non-idolatrous, free and mature imitation of Jesus becomes possible. This also implies that Jesus does not establish a contradiction between love and Law. Against this temptation that crops up again and again, he combines love and law: "Keep the Law and follow me". Even if love surpasses the law (with its norms, prohibitions and rules), there is no love without law and boundary rules, as the narrative of the rich (young) person unequivocally illustrates (Thévenot, *Souffrance, bonheur, éthique*, 75-77).

<sup>9</sup> Levinas, *Beyond the Verse*, 129-143.

power.<sup>10</sup> In any case, it is clear that Jesus does not intend a ‘dual’ but a ‘triangle’ relationship, through the detour of the Law, with the rich young person. In this regard, Jesus is an anachoretic or kenotic, a reserved and withdrawn master and teacher (*rabbi*)!

Now let us take a closer look at the commandments themselves, to which Jesus refers. It is noteworthy that he does not refer to the first table, at least not to the commandments that directly refer to God (“Recognize God as the One; do not worship other gods; do not make images of the One; do not pronounce His Name lightly; Sabbath observance”).<sup>11</sup> However, Biblical scholars, such as Paul Beauchamp, point out that this religious part is not lacking in the narrative,<sup>12</sup> since Jesus – in response to the claim by the rich (young) person as a ‘good Master’ (cf. supra) – explicitly states: “No one is good but God alone” (Mk 10:18b. Lk 18:19b) – “There is only one who is good” (Mt 19:17b). In this way the Jesus of Matthew, like the Jesus of Mark and Luke, refers to God, the Holy One, and at the same time rejects every form of idolatry, including Jesulatry, as we have already stated above. For Jesus also does not want to be an object of absolutization as a ‘master’. He does not want to block the way to God, but rather keep it free. Any ‘religious idolatry regarding Jesus’ is out of the question if it expresses an attachment to Jesus that does not lead to God.

Jesus specifically refers to the second table of the Ten Commandments: “You shall not murder”, “You shall not commit adultery”, “You shall not steal”, “You shall not

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<sup>10</sup> Hildegund Keul, “Vulnerability, Vulnerance and Resilience. Spiritual Abuse and Sexual Violence in New Spiritual Communities,” *Religions* 13, no. 5 (2022): 425, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13050425> (19 p.); Ute Leimgruber, “Vulnerance of Pastoral Care.” *Religions* 13, no. 3 (2022): 256, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13030256> (14 p.).

<sup>11</sup> Ex 20:1-11; Deut 5:6-14.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Beauchamp, *D'une montagne à l'autre. La loi de Dieu* (Paris : Seuil, 1999), 16-19.

bear false witness” [think of: “You shall not lie”] (Mt 19:18b; Mk 10:19; Lk18:20). Mark adds: “You shall not defraud” (Mk 10:19), which we might consider a variant or extension of “Do not steal”, or more broadly of “Do not harm anyone”. The series is concluded in the three versions of the narrative with a reference to the last commandment from the first table: “Honour your father and mother”. With this reference to the parents, Jesus confirms his previous allusion to the tradition of values, norms and meaning, which is passed on intergenerationally.<sup>13</sup> It is striking that the cited

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<sup>13</sup> The fact that Jesus ends the reference to the second table with a reference to the parents also has to do with what follows, namely the statement of the rich (young) person who says that he has “kept all these commandments since his youth” (cf. Mt 19:20; Mark 10:20; Lk 18:21) (Beauchamp, *D'une montagne à l'autre*, 20-22). He has honoured his father and mother, he has apparently integrated himself completely into the intergenerational dynamic... But perhaps he has not yet 'left' his father and mother, as the second creation narrative asks (Gen 2:24), which implies that one maintains the right proximity and distance. In any case, Jesus challenges him to go a step further and not just get stuck in that order of 'docility' and identification. According to Jesus, he lacks one thing, which is “to sell his possessions, and give the money to the poor” (Mt 19:21; cf. Mk 10:21; Lk 19:22). How to understand this statement of Jesus? We find a clear hint in the reaction of the rich (young) person. Jesus' proposal “shocked him and made him greatly grieved, for he had many possessions” (Mt 19:22; Mk10,22; Lk 19:23). The rich (young) person is apparently possessed by his possessions, and this not only on a material level, but also on an ethical and spiritual level. What he lacks is the lack. The happiness of the rich, powerful and esteemed (young) person is that of a collector. By fulfilling the Law he accumulates 'merits' for eternal life... Jesus turns everything upside down by inviting the wealthy (young) person, in pursuit of possessions and eternal, this is perfect, divine life, to get rid of his 'possessions' and 'greedy perfections', not so as to gather earnings, but to give “all what he owns” to the poor. The rich person is called to break free from his obsession by his possessions, as a condition of being able to give. He still lacks one thing: detachment from his attachments (of whatever nature they may be...). “The only thing you miss is to leave this 'too full” (Beauchamp, *D'une montagne à l'autre*, 28). Precisely this

commandments of the second table of the Ten Commandments do not contain positive behavioral rules, but are formulated as prohibitions, i.e. negative precepts. This immediately raises the critical question of how negative behavioral rules can point the way to life, as Jesus suggests... At first sight it seems indeed a contradiction that you can find the way to the full life by keeping the (listed) prohibitions. Isn't full life averse to rules and especially prohibitions? Prohibitions go against the desire, which does not want to be thwarted. The spontaneous human desire wants 'everything at once', uninhibited and without restrictions. That is precisely why prohibitions do not appeal to people. Rather, they identify with the slogan chalked up on the Parisian walls during the student revolt in 1968: "Forbidden to forbid!" (*Interdit d'interdire!*). This resistance to the prohibition is not a monopoly of children and young people, because adults – all people – also have a hard time with the frustration or the 'castration' that prohibitions bring about. Hence the recurring question whether desire and prohibition can coexist. The narrative of the rich young person already seems to suggest that the wisdom of life consists precisely in the connection between the two. Jesus unequivocally suggests that the road to real life is through the prohibitions (of the second table of the Ten Commandments).

The question now is: How? How can a prohibition that limits us and limits our freedom set us on the path to true life? A personal, rather anecdotal experience, together with a Salesian confrere, put me on the trail of the

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arouses in the rich (young) person stiffening sadness and great disillusionment, because he is possessed by his many possessions – and by his ethical and spiritual pursuit of perfection and control... How difficult, if not impossible, it is for such a person to enter the kingdom of God, according to Jesus (Mt 19:23; Lk 19:24). But he adds: "What is impossible for mortals is possible for God" (Lk 18:27), (cf. also Mt 19:26; Mk 10:27) (Thévenot, *Souffrance, bonheur, éthique*, 84).

answer. Jogging in a forest, we came to a clearing with five roads leading out. While we were taking a break there, we saw a family approaching. Father and mother on foot, the two boys on a bicycle. The eldest son, clearly with a new bike, wants to test it out. He notices the five roads and wants to take the leftmost road, but his father stops him: “You see that you are not allowed to drive there,” while he points to a pole with a placard that reads: “Dead-end road!” But the boy only hears the prohibition, which he understands as a “total prohibition” (“It’s always the same: I can never do anything!”). That makes him angry. And it awakens in him the desire to certainly drive into that forbidden road. After all, a prohibition makes something particularly attractive! Nothing is ‘fun’ without prohibitions, because then everything is allowed; everything becomes the same, there is no difference anymore! The exciting thing – the ‘kick’ – is precisely in violating the prohibition... The scene offers even more. The mother whispers something in the father’s ear and then gives the boy a sign that he can take that road after all (she probably knows the way and what will follow...). Minutes later, the boy drives back, clearly with an excited, angry face. He throws his bicycle against the ground and calls out to his father: “It’s a dead-end road!” To which father replies: “I told you so” (and points to the pole with the placard). But as already said, blinded by the prohibition as such, he hadn’t even heard the reason for the prohibition... resulting in his stubborn, almost fanatical resistance and transgression.

This shows the paradox of prohibition. It is marked by a double negativity: it forbids the negative! It goes back to the experiential wisdom of people who have discovered that certain behaviors end badly. That is why it is precisely the negative outcome of a certain behavior that is formulated in a prohibition. In this sense, the prohibition, by its negative formulation, warns against

the harmful effects of behavior, which in turn is also described as negative.

The paradox of prohibition as the virtue of the negative extends even further, for it stimulates ethical freedom, and this in a twofold way.<sup>14</sup>

In the first place, the prohibition or negative behavioral norm creates more room for creative freedom through its negativity than the commandment (to be understood here as a positive behavioral norm). A prohibitive ethical rule opens up the field of human possibilities, because it only defines the bottom line of the humane and does not itself define and fill in the humanly meaningful, normatively. The nature of the prohibition is that it appeals to human creativity by closing the deadlocks. The story of the family above illustrates this. By forbidding the dead-end road, the parents say nothing about the other four roads that are still open to the boy-with-his-bicycle. The prohibition does not say what he should do or what is best for him. It just tells him what not to do so as not to end up wrong or get stuck. In other words, the prohibition merely indicates the 'bad' way, without suggesting anything about the 'best' way. In other words, the ban only refers to 'other' options by forbidding access to the dead-end road. In other words, the boy has to creatively discover and realize the path that appeals to him the most and offers the best perspectives.

The prohibition also promotes ethical freedom in an even more fundamental way. After all, in its verbal expression, the prohibition is not coercion. As a 'word', interpreted by others – the previous generation – the prohibition only appeals to the freedom of choice of the person concerned without preventing them from taking the dead-end road, even if, for example, one tries to

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<sup>14</sup> Levinas, *Beyond the Verbe*, 106-107.

‘persuade’ children and young people.<sup>15</sup> Of course people can step into the dead-end road and try it out for themselves, if they want to. The prohibition does not prevent this as it only points out the risks of the choice in words, as a warning – without physical violence. In this respect, the prohibition is a form of language and dialogic. Due to the fact that the prohibition is spoken between people, the hearer of the prohibition can both positively listen (accept) and disregard this word. This shows how a prohibition is the very opposite of physical, psychological, social or spiritual coercion; in other words, how a prohibition not only presupposes but also promotes freedom. However, whoever disregards the prohibition and nevertheless takes the dead-end road will find that it is indeed a stuck choice that obliges one to retrace his steps (if that is still possible, because the ‘dead-end’ can be so deadly, that there is no turning back and that one cannot regain oneself).<sup>16</sup>

### **Basic conditions for a virtuous living and loving**

Let us now take a closer look at the cited prohibitions in terms of content. We find an interesting starting point for this in the commentary on the narrative of the rich young man with which John Paul II begins his encyclical on the foundations of moral theology *Veritatis Splendor* (1993) (cf. Chapter I: “Teacher, what good must I do...” [Mt 19:16] - Christ and the answer to the question about morality). Inspired by Augustine, John Paul II argues that the cited prohibitions constitute the first necessary

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<sup>15</sup> It is understandable and responsible to protect children and young people from their own harmful 'follies', when they do not (yet) have the necessary capacity to act freely and responsibly. But then we are not yet at the level of authentic ethical formation, which runs the risk of moral failure (otherwise there is no free choice for the good).

<sup>16</sup> Thévenot, *Souffrance, bonheur, éthique*, 77-78)

step towards, or better the “basic conditions” for love of neighbor.<sup>17</sup> We must take this expression literally: the prohibitions of the second table of the ten commandments are the indispensable ‘pre-requisites’ for a loving human coexistence, and by extension for any form of love, without describing or prescribing what that love means concretely. If they were to do this, they would determine too much while, as a dynamic event, they should hold an open – infinite – growth perspective. The prohibitions quoted only open the perspective of the integral excellence of charity and of any form of love, without portraying that love in a normative way according to concrete models and practices. It is therefore no coincidence that, according to Matthew, Jesus concludes his enumeration of the prohibitions from the second table of the Ten Commandments as the way to life with the reference to the commandment “to love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt 19:19).

To use a simple image from everyday life: prohibitions are like the bottom of the glass. The bottom does not determine which drink the glass should be filled with. It only prevents the drink from running out of the glass and being lost. Or to use an image that young people understand well; namely that of the cricket field or the playing field of a particular sport (football, basketball...). The lines and the goal on the cricket ground and the rules of the game make cricket possible but do not create the game of cricket. The rules of the game – and the umpire – indicate when a ‘mistake’ has been made, this is when it is not a real cricket game. In that sense, the lines determine the playing field, the rules of the game and the umpire(s) only define the ‘framework’ for the game of cricket. The game itself must be created by the players, and for that they must use all their abilities and talents,

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<sup>17</sup> John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* (Rome, Vatican City, 1993), no. 13.



which they have developed through training, under the guidance of inspiring and skilled trainers. When the team is playing fair and good cricket, the umpire is 'invisible', in the sense that he does not intervene to point out to the public the 'beautiful' play of one of the players or of the whole team. The referee whistles only to prevent the game from derailing or degenerating. Whether a team plays cricket well does not depend on the lines on the field of play nor on the rules and enforcement by the referee, but on proper preparation and supervision, on the personal commitment of the players and on the team spirit of a well-trained and collaborating team.

This means that the prohibitions do not exclude positive ethics. How they include this positive ethical perspective, we discover by turning the prohibitions inside out, that is, by trying to articulate them positively. This attempt leads us to a remarkable conclusion, namely that there is a shift from a behavioral to a dispositional norm. If we try to interpret a negative-sounding prohibition positively, we do not arrive at an action or behavior but at an attitude or disposition. This concerns a quality of human beings who act ethically – a quality also called 'virtue' n the opposite of a 'vice'. This ethical quality is usually expressed in a 'dispositional norm', namely an ethical rule that prescribes an attitude or basic value, such as, for example, love, justice, honesty... without determining the content of the behavior itself.<sup>18</sup> Dispositional (attitudinal) norms don't tell you what to do; they do not dictate how you should act, only how you should be as an ethically qualified person. This resounds in the 'virtue ethics', which does not speak primarily about the behavior but about the 'moral personality' or the 'moral character' of the person as the source of a particular ethical 'lifestyle' and of

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<sup>18</sup> Louis Janssens, "Norma and Priorities in a Love Ethics," *Louvain Studies* 6, no. 3 (1977): 207-238.

specific ethical ‘sensibilities’, which can (and should) be developed into permanent qualities or ‘moral virtues’.<sup>19</sup> It is the task of the human, or rather ethical creativity of the person to discover how the basic attitudes and sensitivities or ‘virtues’ can be given shape in concrete forms of behavior. Only through this concrete behavior do they become real and effective moral virtues: which in turn motivate and inspire new qualitative behavior: acquiring achievements in a never-ending dynamic way.<sup>20</sup>

Let us illustrate this by means of the prohibitions or (negative) behavioral rules of the second table of the Ten Commandments. ‘Thou shalt not kill’ indicates how violence, blackmail, manipulation, tyranny, intimidation and abuse of power – “there are so many ways to crush people”<sup>21</sup> – are ethically reprehensible. If we try to formulate the prohibition positively, we do not end up with a positive rule of conduct, but with the quality of ‘respect for life’, respect for and recognition of the other person in one’s dignity, caring for people, tenderness.... These are all ‘values’ that ‘command’ not actions but ‘modes of being’, both on an interpersonal and social level. This also applies to the prohibition on ‘lying’, (or ‘not witnessing falsely’). Interpreted in a positive way, we arrive at the basic attitude of ‘honesty’ and ‘sincerity’ – a ‘virtue’ that must result in concrete actions without prescribing them. *Idem dito* for ‘Thou shalt not steal’, which positively expresses the respect for the property – one’s own – of someone else. Not only on a material level, but also on a relational level. ‘Not stealing’ then means

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<sup>19</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory* [1981] (London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013).

<sup>20</sup> William C. Spohn, “The Return of Virtue Ethics,” *Theological Studies* 53, no. 1 (1992): 60-75; James Keenan, “Virtue Ethics and Sexual Ethics,” *Louvain Studies* 30, no. 3 (2005): 182-187.

<sup>21</sup> Levinas, *Is It Righteous to Be?*, 53.

‘not reducing the other person to yourself’. It is positive for every person to recognize and respect one’s individuality and difference. This is again a basic attitude that does not say how to realize this recognition of the difference in concrete deeds and expressions. The same paradoxical dynamic between the outside and the inside applies to the prohibition against committing adultery, the only explicit sexual behavioral rule in the second table of the Ten Commandments. After all, the positive interpretation of the negatively formulated prohibition appeals to the fundamental option and attitude of (sexual) lasting exclusivity and fidelity, without determining how that exclusivity and fidelity should be given shaped. In concrete terms, therefore, also without defining the ‘sexual (erotic) expression’ of the promised fidelity and love. Again and again we discover how the positive inner side or ‘soul’ of the forbidden behavior in its turn is not a behavior but a quality or virtue, namely the virtue of love, which is realized by the person with his whole being: “with all his heart, all his soul, all his strength, and all his mind” (cf. Lk 10:26). It is therefore no coincidence that Jesus (in Matthew), as already mentioned, positively summarizes his reference to the prohibitions of the second table of Ten Commandments with the dispositional norm or virtue of love of neighbor.

### **The good as the beautiful and the ethical ‘community of participation’**

Even though people are challenged to creatively shape the dispositional norms and the corresponding virtues that express love in its diversity, they are not left to their own devices – and to the burden of their solitary freedom. This is especially true for children and young people as they grow into adulthood. Hence our focus on

the ‘aesthetics of ethics’ or the ‘splendor of the good’.<sup>22</sup> People don’t really need behavioral norms that dictate how people should act in a human way. Rather, we need suggestive examples, inspiring models, testimonials and qualitative experiences, people who ‘show’ in an attractive way how it can be done, without this being imposed normatively, and thus without moralizing. As the saying rightly has it, “examples speak louder than words.” Or to paraphrase Max Scheler: “There is nothing in this world that at the same time originally, immediately and necessarily brings persons to themselves to become good as the clear and adequate contemplation of another good person in her or his goodness.”<sup>23</sup> The way in which people incarnate in concrete acting the dispositional norms of recognition and care, honesty and sincerity, respect for one’s own and the otherness of the other, loyalty and fidelity speaks more to the desire and the imagination than the obligation to act in in a particular way. Then the good appears as the beautiful, so that it also appeals to and attracts us. For example, if children and young people see how their parents and educators or the adults around them really take care of nature and the environment, they will develop the desire and the taste to live ecologically themselves.

This brings us to the idea of the ethical ‘community of participation’, also called a ‘moral community’.<sup>24</sup> The ethical initiation and learning process do not go primarily through discursiveness and arguing, although these are certainly useful and necessary to form an empowered and

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<sup>22</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*.

<sup>23</sup> Max Scheler, *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. [1913-1916] (Bern/München: Kösel Verlag, 1965), 560.

<sup>24</sup> Jef Van Gerwen, *Niet uit eigen macht: De Kerk als morele gemeenschap* (Tielt: Lannoo, 1987).

critical ethical consciousness. As members of families, groups and communities of all kinds, we participate in the ethical life that is part of those communities as a form of ‘custom’ or ‘tradition’. We are dialogical, social and intergenerational beings, who learn from one another and develop ethical sensitivities and – through trial and error – learn to realize what is ethically good and right. We are dependent on our ‘predecessors’ in order to be able to grow towards moral sensitivity, truth and praxis. No one becomes ethically sensitive and active without others who allow us to participate in their qualitative ethical life (or in their troubled or ambiguous, or even distorted or immoral life...). Whoever cannot ‘share’ in values, modes of behavior and life, and this in its double sense of ‘co-experiencing’ and also ‘co-constructing’, can never acquire a sensitivity and taste for what is meaningful and loving life, neither for the joy that the effort and ‘burden’ thereof can bring along. This participatory ethical learning process is supported by the stories and testimonies, exchanges and discussions, in the living and learning community, which means that the ethical community of participation is also a ‘narrative community’.<sup>25</sup> An ethical narrative community is a community where people not only can tell their stories, but where the ‘founding’ stories, which preserve the experiential wisdom of the previous generations, are not only retold but also celebrated in symbolic signs, modalities, and rituals. Only shared ethical life is real, but also fruitful ethical life! It is precisely thanks to the community life anchored in space and time that the ‘aesthetics of ethics’ or the beauty of ethical living and acting, reveals itself and takes place. The ethical community of participation, which is also a narrative and

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<sup>25</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue. Essays in Christian Ethical Reflection* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1974).

discursive community, allows people (particularly growing up) to discover and ‘taste’ how the good and the beautiful are intimately connected. In this way they are also put on the track of the good as the truthful: “bonum, pulchrum et verum convertuntur” – “the good, the beautiful and the true converge”.

### **Last but not least: the prohibition of possessive desire**

Everything has not yet been said about the prohibitions as ways to life. Indeed, in the formulation of the second table of the Ten Commandments, as found in both Exodus and Deuteronomy, the last prohibition reads: “You shall not covet...anything that belongs to your neighbor.” (Ex 20:17; Deut 5:21). The literal reference to this prohibition lacks in the three versions of the narrative of the rich young person. And yet the prohibition is not entirely absent, as elsewhere in the Gospels it is not missing in Jesus’ message (cf. Mt 15:18-29; Lk 6:45).<sup>26</sup> Moreover, from the beginning of the narrative, which we deepen philosophically, mention is already made of the rich (young) person’s desire for a full life. We shall thus focus our attention on the last prohibition of the second table of the Ten Commandments because it will become apparent how comprehensive and orientating this prohibition is.<sup>27</sup> The first thing that strikes is how this prohibition is no longer about a behavioral norm but about what precedes acting, namely the motivation or drive and the inspiration of behavior. There are no four trespasses or sins (cf. also Am 2:6-8), there is only one form of evil: derailed desire is the

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<sup>26</sup> Beauchamp, *D’une montagne à l’autre*, 116

<sup>27</sup> Marc-Alain Ouaknin, *Les dix commandements* (Paris : Seuil, 1999), 245-275.

root of immorality.<sup>28</sup> In this regard, we can label the last prohibition as the ‘soul’ of the entire second table of the Ten Commandments, and thus as the inner side and culmination of all preceding prohibitions. After all, it is no longer about a particular behavior, but about the heart and the ‘guts’ or the ‘viscera’ of the human being, namely the relationship to one’s desire, one’s drive and passion. And this relationship can be found at the level of one’s aspiration, emotion and will, before being expressed in incarnate practices, ways of acting, and behavior.

Furthermore, this is not simply about desire in and of itself. This is important, otherwise the prohibition could lead to a rejection of desire itself, as has sometimes happened in the history of Christianity or of which the Church has been accused more than once. However, desire belongs to our human condition and is the root of human dreams, ideals, wishes, expectations, aspirations and goals, as the conversation between the rich (young) person and Jesus also shows. No human creativity and activity without desire and drive (passion). Life is desire. Existentially, a human being without desire is dead, even if one is still alive. One of the characteristics of human desire is that, as Plato puts it, it is not only a ‘child of wealth’, and thus of strength and energy, and thus counts as a sign of fullness, but is also a ‘child of poverty’.<sup>29</sup> Desire is also a need, and as necessity it strives for what it does not have. This deficiency makes it emerge from itself to something other than itself in order to find there a complement to its own deficiency, that is, a solution for its own finiteness, and at the same time thus to acquire satisfaction and sufficiency – through which the suffering

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<sup>28</sup> Beauchamp, *D'une montagne à l'autre*, 45.

<sup>29</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity. Essay on Exteriority* [1961], translated by Alphonso Lingis (The Hague/Boston/London: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1979), 114-115.

that ensues from one's own deficiency, is abolished.<sup>30</sup>

This shows how the negativity that characterizes desire has a healthy and beneficial dimension. At the same time, desire appears to be ambiguous, since it is also essentially marked by risk. This is apparent from the way in which the last prohibition of the second table of the Ten Commandments is formulated. After all, it forbids us to appropriate what does not belong to us: "house, wife, male or female slave, ox or donkey, field... or anything that belongs to the neighbor" (Ex 20,17; Deut 5.21).<sup>31</sup> We want to get what we lack or need. In other words, as a need, desire becomes a form of "reduction of the other to the same".<sup>32</sup> Desire becomes possessiveness, as we have also discovered materially and ethically in the rich (young) person. In itself, the drive to possess knows no boundaries. In its spontaneous absoluteness it wants to appropriate the other: 'for me', as a part or a function of myself. Because of my 'attempt at being' (cf. supra) I not only see in the otherness of the world but also in the other person a means and possibility to develop my own existence. Therefore, I want to understand not only the world but also the other person. As an extension of the dynamics of indigence, this leads to direct or subtle forms of 'getting a grip on the other person'. Indeed, the formulation of the Decalogue's last prohibition refers to

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<sup>30</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Humanism of the Other* [1972], translated by Nidra Poller (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 29-36.

<sup>31</sup> Today we feel this enumeration, in which the wife is simply included next to house, land and livestock, as unworthy of women and anti-emancipatory. This should not distract us from the focus of the prohibition on the possessive relation to what does not belong to us, especially the other. No other human being may be the 'object of property' of another human being. This includes the condemnation of any form of 'slavery,' including those deemed socially acceptable according to Exodus and Deuteronomy.

<sup>32</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 43.



the desire to eat (to assimilate, dominate, control...) the other person. 'Eating' means to annul the difference between me and the other. What one eats one becomes oneself, so that the other disappears in me, becomes part of me. Then the other stops being 'an-other-face-to-face-to-me'. To 'eat' the other person is to destroy the other as other. And thereby the other person is deprived of the 'word', that is, of speaking as self-expression, as a 'revelation' of someone's otherness. The prohibition against covetousness not only limits the possessive desire, but also questions that covetousness. This crisis of possessive desire allows the other person to be acknowledged as other. This is how the correct relationship to the other person is established, or rather, that relationship is established as an ethical task and choice. In this way, the 'shudder' is introduced as a dynamic of restraint into desire. The humane desire is striving to touch the other, and at the same time the shudder of this touching, an already withdrawing into the act of touching: a coming closer without collusion or fusion, a proximity that holds back. In other words, the humanism of the Ten Commandments is, in other words, the humanism of the other person as other. Desiring what belongs to another – possessive desire – leads to destroying, denying, disdaining the other ('killing' somehow); it leads to deceiving and cheating the other, both through untruthfulness and infidelity; it leads to stealing from the other, whereby the uniqueness of the other (and of myself!) is annulled. Possessive desire is jealous of the other and in its extreme tries to assimilate the other person in such a way that the other becomes not only 'mine' but also 'me'. One desires not only what the other person has, but also what the other person is. Possessive desire destroys the irreducible otherness of the other, and thus also the authentic face-to-face. It is precisely to enable this relationship of respect and

acknowledgement of the other that all prohibitions of the second table count as ‘basic conditions for love’, this love being animated by the culture of a ‘civilized desire’.<sup>33</sup>

**Conclusion: On the source, embedding, and destination of ethical life**

I want to end with a story from my childhood. We lived with our family (father, mother, four children) in the countryside. On Sunday afternoons, if we were able to ride our bicycles, father cycled with us, more than once, to a meadow where water welled up from the ground and made its way through the adjacent meadows and fields. In order to avoid too much soggy swamp and flooding and thus waste land, the water was dammed up into a real brook, which then flowed between the fields and then continued into a river that flowed to the sea. This image – that experience – has always stayed with me. It has also become for me the image that helps to better understand ethical life, following the philosophical reading of the Gospel narrative of the rich (young) person. It is clear that the prohibitions are not the source of ethical life, but only the embedding of what wells up from the source. And we discovered that source in the desire, which produces the dynamics of creating and loving (an echo of this we find in Bergson’s idea of ‘*élan vital*’ – ‘vital force’). Indeed, experience teaches us that the effervescent passion of desire needs to be embedded in order not to end up in a devastating flood. Moreover, the prohibitions are not the goal, the destination: that is the high seas, to which the water from the source finds its way thanks to the embedding. In other words, the prohibitions only channel the living water that wells up from the well, so that it can

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<sup>33</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *New Talmudic Readings* [1996], translated by Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1999), 59-62.

flow towards the sea. They are not alpha and omega, but the channeling of the way between alpha, the source, and omega, the sea. They enable the desire for the other to develop into the full life of love for one's neighbor (and of any love), as Jesus reveals in the narrative of the rich (young) person. And this without spasm, but in complete freedom, as John-Paul II suggests in his encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* (no. 13): "[The prohibitions of which Jesus reminds the young person] are the first necessary step on the journey towards freedom. The beginning of freedom, Saint Augustine writes, (...) only the beginning of freedom, not perfect freedom."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *In Iohannis Evangelium Tractatus*, 41, 10: CCL 36, 363.

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