Introduction: (How) Can We Talk About Johannine Ethics? Looking Back and Moving Forward

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Scholars in search of ethical material in the New Testament[1] have long overlooked or downplayed the potential contribution of the Gospel and Epistles of John.[2] Noting that the Fourth Gospel in particular lacks the same sort of ethical emphases as the Letters of Paul or the Synoptic Gospels, commentators have been quick to dismiss the Gospel as having little value for discussions of New Testament ethics. Expressing what has been a common view, one Johannine scholar has flatly asserted that "the Fourth Gospel meets none of our expectations about the way ethics should be constructed."[3] Others have gone so far as to deny that ethics can be found in the Johannine literature.[4] Fortunately, however, recent years have seen numerous attempts to revisit this discussion by shining a light on the "problem" of Johannine

1. I would like to thank Dr. Lindsey Trozzo for reading an earlier draft of this chapter and providing a number of insights and suggested readings.

2. For the purposes of this volume, we are focusing on the Fourth Gospel and the three epistles bearing the name of John. Since there are numerous questions about how the book of Revelation fits within the corpus traditionally known as the Johannine literature, we have intentionally left it out of our considerations here. Throughout this volume, our discussion will limit the Johannine literature to the Gospel and Epistles.

3. Wayne A. Meeks, "The Ethics of the Fourth Evangelist," in *Exploring the Gospel of John: In Honor of D. Moody Smith*, ed. R. Alan Culpepper and C. Clifton Black (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 320.

4. J. L. Houlden expresses this perspective: "Even when [John] speaks of the command to love and of doing what Jesus commands, John's real concern is not primarily ethical at all. His concern is with the new condition of life conferred on the believers through Christ" (*Ethics and the New Testament* [Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1973], 36).

ethics.[5] There is little doubt that previous commentators were correct in their assessment that the Johannine literature lacked the same explicit ethical instructions as the Letters of Paul (e.g., Gal 5:16–26; 1 Cor 13:1–13), or the teachings of the Matthean (e.g. 5:1–7:29) or Lukan Jesus (e.g., 6:17–49). But isn't this understanding of ethics necessarily narrow and shortsighted? Doesn't such an approach prejudice the discussion from the outset? Could it be that the Johannine literature has a rich understanding of what constitutes ethics, and that our problem is ultimately one of restricted definition and limited imagination? This volume operates under the conviction that the answer to each of the foregoing questions is yes.

As a way of situating this volume within the wider context of scholarship on New Testament ethics, this chapter considers the related questions, Can we talk about Johannine ethics? and if so, *How* can we talk about Johannine ethics? Specifically, we will explore the three most commonly articulated views on the presence or value of ethics in the Johannine literature: (1) the Johannine literature is essentially devoid of ethical material; (2) the ethics of the Johannine literature are limited, often being described as exclusive, sectarian, negative, or oppositional; (3) the ethics of the Johannine literature are inclusive or valuable for incorporation into broader schemes of Christian ethics or moral theology. Since this book is aimed primarily at students, this survey is not meant to be an exhaustive history of recent scholarship on the subject but rather representative of the most important conversations.[6] Our concern here is with tracing the major

5. See, e.g., Johannes Nissen, "Community and Ethics in the Gospel of John," in *New Readings in John: Literary and Theological Perspectives; Essays from the Scandinavian Conference on the Fourth Gospel in Aarhus 1997*, ed. Johannes Nissen and Sigfred Pedersen, JSNTSup 182 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 199, 210; Jey J. Kanagaraj, "The Implied Ethics of the Fourth Gospel: A Reinterpretation of the Decalogue," *TynBul* 52 (2001): 33–60; D. Moody Smith, "Ethics and Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel," in *Word, Theology, and Community in John*, ed. John Painter, R. Alan Culpepper, and Fernando F. Segovia (St. Louis: Chalice, 2002), 109–22; Hans Boersma, "A New Age Love Story: Worldview and Ethics in the Gospel of John," *CTJ* 38 (2003): 103–19; János Bolyki, "Ethics in the Gospel of John," *ActAnt* 44 (2004): 99–107; Jan G. van der Watt, "The Gospel of John's Perception of Ethical Behaviour," *IDS* 45 (2011): 431–47; van der Watt, "Ethics through the Power of Language: Some Explorations in the Gospel according to John," in *Moral Language in the New Testament: The Interrelatedness of Language and Ethics in Early Christian Writings*, ed. Ruben Zimmerman, Jan G. van der Watt, and Susanne Luther, WUNT 296 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2010), 139–67, and from the same volume, Kobus Kok, "As the Father Has Sent Me, I Send You: Towards a Missional-Incarnational Ethos in John 4," 168–96. See especially the essays in Jan G. van der Watt and Ruben Zimmerman, eds., *Rethinking the Ethics of John: "Implicit Ethics" in the Johannine Writings*, WUNT 291 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012).

6. For a recent comprehensive survey of this subject, see Jan G. van der Watt, "Ethics and

categories for speaking about ethics that have developed within contemporary research. After exploring these three approaches, we will then briefly introduce our integration of these approaches through the individual contributions to this volume and their potential for developing new proposals and categories for conceiving of Johannine ethics.

JOHANNINE ETHICS: WHAT ARE THEY SAYING?

THERE ARE NO ETHICS IN THE JOHANNINE LITERATURE

The notion that the writings of John are devoid of ethical material has been a strongly held position for decades. Only recently has that near consensus been seriously challenged. As has already been mentioned, scholarly engagement with New Testament ethics has long suffered from a restricted definition of what constitutes ethical instruction, and this has no doubt set the lines for understanding John's contribution (or lack thereof) to the discussion. As a means of illustrating this we turn to a quotation from the well-known New Testament scholar John P. Meier. On the issue of John's ethics, Meier opines:

> Apart from the love that imitates Jesus' love for his own, *John's Gospel is practically amoral*. We look in vain for the equivalents of Jesus' teaching on divorce, oaths and vows, almsgiving, prayer, fasting, or the multitude of other specific moral directives strewn across the pages of Matthew's Gospel. Everything comes down to imitating Jesus' love for his disciples; *what concrete and specific actions should flow from this love are largely left unspoken*.[7]

Note that Meier's critique of John includes a seemingly fixed definition of ethics. He provides specific categories (Jesus must discuss *moral issues* like divorce or *religious issues* like prayer) and modes of

Ethos in the Gospel according to John," *ZNW* 97 (2006): 147–75; and Ruben Zimmerman, "Is There Ethics in the Gospel of John?," in van der Watt and Zimmermann, *Rethinking the Ethics of John*, 44–80. See also, Richard B. Hays, "Mapping the Field: Approaches to New Testament Ethics," in *Identity, Ethics, and Ethos in the New Testament*, ed. Jan G. van der Watt, BZNW 141 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006) 3–19.

7. John P. Meier, "Love in Q and John: Love of Enemies, Love of One Another," *Mid-Stream* 40 (2001): 47–48 (emphasis added).

instruction (what he terms "specific moral directives"). Further, his definition excludes anything implicit in the narrative that those without a preconceived notion of ethics might consider useful in evaluating the moral world of the Fourth Gospel.

Meier's negative assessment is one among many similar examples that we could introduce as evidence here.[8] If we approach the Johannine literature looking for an ethics that consists of explicit references to moral conduct, the observation of a set of rules, or the development of a series of virtues, there is a good chance that we will come away from our search disappointed. There is an equally good chance of our concluding that John has nothing to contribute to a conversation about New Testament ethics.[9] Thus before we are able to analyze the Johannine literature in new and potentially constructive ways, we must move beyond the standard definition of ethics that has long been applied to other New Testament literature. Noting the patristic proclivity for holding the Fourth Gospel in high regard for the development of moral character, Bernd Wannenwetsch asserts that there are "powerful and *specifically modern biases* that trigger the suspicion that with John we cannot do the sort of ethics we think we should be doing today."[10] It behooves us to think more broadly and across different historical, social, and theological contexts in our evaluation of the potential value of the Johannine literature for doing ethics.

In a recent comprehensive overview of the field, Ruben Zimmerman has sought to challenge the "outdated consensus" that the Gospel of John contains no ethics. Concluding his survey, he writes:

> The fact that research into New Testament ethics has concentrated on paraenetic text segments, which are not found in the Gospel of John and very infrequently in the Letters of John, has led scholars to disregard the fact that ancient ethical discourse was much less interested in the clarification of individual questions than has been perceived within the scope of New Testament research. *The separation of theology and ethics does not*

8. See the exhaustive survey of this particular judgment in Zimmerman, "Is There Ethics in the Gospel of John?," 44–57.

9. Boersma notes that we "must beware of the pitfall of simply combing his gospel in search for statements indicating a concern for broader moral or social issues. Such a search can only end up in disappointment. One looks in vain for explicit statements on the environment, on the treatment of the economically marginalized, or on Christian involvement in politics" (Boersma, "A New Age Love Story," 104–5).

10. Bernd Wannenwetsch, "Political Love: Why John's Gospel Is Not as Barren for Contemporary Ethics as It Might Appear," in *"You Have the Words of Eternal Life": Transformative Readings of the Gospel of John from a Lutheran Perspective*, ed. Kenneth Mtata (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2012), 93–94 (emphasis added).

> *correspond to ancient thinking, but instead reflects a structure of perception that was introduced by Rudolf Bultmann in order to describe Pauline ethics as an indicative-imperative schema.*[11]

I find myself in substantial agreement with Zimmerman's observation, though I think it could be stated more forcefully: Our obsession with Paul's Letters and their consistent emphasis on explicit ethical instruction has not merely influenced but rather tainted our ability to see other material in the New Testament as ethical. Contrary to this modern tendency, most of the essays in this volume work from the assumption that there are ethics in the Johannine literature.[12] Against that backdrop, we turn now to the remaining two perspectives from which our contributors will be working.

THE ETHICS OF THE JOHANNINE LITERATURE ARE SECTARIAN, EXCLUSIVE, NEGATIVE, OR OPPOSITIONAL

For the past five decades, scholars have paid particular attention to the sectarian nature of the Johannine literature. Beginning in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, a handful of scholars began setting forth serious historical reconstructions of the Johannine community. In particular, the groundbreaking work of J. Louis Martyn (along with important contributions from Raymond E. Brown, Wayne Meeks, D. Moody Smith, and R. Alan Culpepper) revolutionized contemporary readings of the Fourth Gospel; their work continues to be foundational for modern understandings of Johannine sectarianism.[13]

Martyn's argument for a two-level reading of the Fourth Gospel was a watershed moment in contemporary Johannine studies, shaping the way scholars have understood the *Sitz im Leben* of the

11. Zimmerman, "Is There Ethics in the Gospel of John?," 61–62 (emphasis added).

12. In her chapter, Adele Reinhartz takes issue with the current emphasis on finding ethics in the Johannine literature, preferring instead to locate herself in the camp of those who do not think John has much to say about a normative ethics.

13. See in chronological order, J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968); Wayne A. Meeks, "The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism," *JBL* 91 (1972): 44–72: D. Moody Smith, "Johannine Christianity: Some Reflections on Its Character and Delineation," *NTS* 21 (1974–1975): 222–48; R. Alan Culpepper, *The Johannine School*, SBLDS 26 (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975); and Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple: The Lives, Loves and Hates of an Individual Church in New Testament Times* (New York: Paulist, 1979).

community.[14] Martyn argued that the Johannine community was embroiled in a theological controversy with the local synagogue, a claim he attempted to validate through an examination of three passages in which the term *aposynagōgos* (out of the synagogue) is used (John 9:22; 12:42; 16:2).[15] There is no need to rehearse the finer points of Martyn's theory here, as it has been a topic of nearly continuous conversation in Johannine studies.[16] Suffice it to say that while there remains debate over the details of Martyn's proposal, along with a growing group of scholars who attempt to refute it altogether,[17] there is still fairly wide acceptance of the two-level hypothesis.

Related to the claim that Johannine ethics are sectarian and exclusive is the observation that the Johannine literature is negative or oppositional inasmuch as it is rooted in the pitting of different groups against one another. In the Gospel a group known simply as "the Jews" (Greek: *hoi Ioudaioi*)[18] is consistently at odds with Jesus, while the Epistles portray a conflict within the community that has led to a departure of some Jesus followers who hold a different christological point of view.[19] These observations have led some to conclude that the ethics of the Johannine literature do not reflect the

14. John Ashton has written that Martyn's book was "the most important single work on the Gospel since Bultmann's commentary" (*Understanding the Fourth Gospel* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1991], 107).

15. Among those who doubt the existence of a Johannine community are Richard Bauckham ("For Whom Were the Gospels Written?," in *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*, ed. Richard Bauckham [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 9–48), and his former student Edward W. Klink III (*The Sheep of the Fold: The Audience and Origin of the Gospel of John*, SNTSMS 141 [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007], Klink, *The Audience of the Gospels: The Origin and Function of the Gospels in Early Christianity*, LNTS 353 [London: T&T Clark, 2010]). See also the recent proposal of Urban C. von Wahlde, *Gnosticism, Docetism, and the Judaisms of the First Century: The Search for the Wider Context of the Johannine Literature and Why It Matters*, LNTS 517 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015).

16. Most recently, Jonathan Bernier (*Aposynagōgos and the Historical Jesus in John: Rethinking the Historicity of the Johannine Expulsion Passages*, BibInt [Leiden: Brill, 2013]) argues for the plausibility that the *aposynagōgos* passages reflect an experience of expulsion that took place during Jesus's lifetime.

17. The dissent of Adele Reinhartz on this question is particularly noteworthy; see e.g., "Judaism in the Gospel of John," *Int* 63, no. 4 (2009): 382–93.

18. Much has been written on this subject. For an accessible introduction to the issues that is accessible to students, see Jaime Clark-Soles, "The Jews in the Fourth Gospel," in *John*, vol. 1, *Chapters 1–9*, ed. Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson, Feasting on the Word Commentary (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014), xi–xiv.

19. These two discussions are obviously much more complex than we can cover here. The translation and identity of *hoi Ioudaioi* have been topics of seemingly endless discussion, as has the unfortunate legacy of Christian anti-Judaism spawned by particular readings of the Fourth Gospel. Also, the debate over the opponents in the Johannine epistles continues.

universal quality of Jesus's teaching elsewhere in the New Testament. For example, Luke's Jesus encourages his followers to love their neighbors (10:25–37), while Matthew's Jesus commands his followers to love their enemies (5:43–45), both of which can be applied universally. However, both the Johannine Jesus and the author(s) of the Epistles encourage love for "one another."[20] In the context of the Johannine community's ongoing conflicts, is this the same sort of inclusive love we see in Matthew and Luke, or is there an inherent tribalism embedded in this love?

In his analysis of the love relationships in the Gospel and 1 John, Fernando Segovia examined Johannine love language against the backdrop of the community's proposed history. Segovia grouped John's love commands into seven distinct categories: (1) the Father's love for Jesus, (2) the Father's love for the disciples, (3) Jesus's love for the Father, (4) Jesus's love for the disciples, (5) the disciples' love for the Father, (6) the disciples' love for Jesus, and (7) the disciples' love for each other.[21] Notice that there is no specific command that love be for all. Segovia's broader interest in the study was to better understand the redaction of the Fourth Gospel vis-à-vis 1 John, though he also argues for the sectarian character of the love commands expressed in these writings.[22] In this same vein, Wayne Meeks has commented that the "only rule [of the Johannine Jesus] is 'love one another,' and that rule is both vague in its application and narrowly circumscribed, being limited solely to those who are firmly within the Johannine circle."[23] Ernst Käsemann has written that there "is no indication in John that love for one's brother would also include love toward one's neighbour."[24] Similarly, Frank Matera wonders, "What is the content of this *love*? How do disciples exercise this *love* in real life situations? Whom does this *love* include? Is this a universal love such as is found in the Gospel of Luke, or has love become exclusive and sectarian in

20. E.g., John 13:34–35; 15:12, 17; 1 John 3:11, 14, 16, 23; 4:7, 11.

21. Fernando F. Segovia, *Love Relationships in the Johannine Traditions: Agapē/Agapan in 1 John and the Fourth Gospel*, SBLDS 58 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982).

22. In a related study, Segovia notes that "a number of recent exegetical studies on the different levels of the Johannine tradition have adopted the position that the community behind that tradition was consistently 'sectarian' in nature" (Fernando F. Segovia, "The Love and Hatred of Jesus and Johannine Sectarianism," *CBQ* 43 [1981]: 258).

23. Meeks, "Ethics of the Fourth Evangelist," 318.

24. Ernst Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus: A Study of the Gospel of John in Light of Chapter 17*, trans. Gerhard Krodel (London: SCM, 1968), 59. Similar descriptions abound; see Mary E. Clarkson, "The Ethics of the Fourth Gospel," *AThR* 31 (1949): 112–15; Victor Paul Furnish, *The Love Command in the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), 144–48.

the Fourth Gospel?"[25] Thus one serious implication from observations about the various community conflicts is that while there are ethics in the Johannine literature, they are not suitable within the broader context of what could be termed "Christian" instruction.

In a well-known denunciation of John's "moral bankruptcy," Jack T. Sanders has written:

> Precisely because such [fundamentalist] groups, however, now exist in sufficient abundance to be visible, *perhaps the weakness and moral bankruptcy of the Johannine ethics can be seen more clearly*. Here is not a Christianity that considers that loving is the same as fulfilling the law (Paul) or that the good Samaritan parable represents a demand (Luke) to stop and render even first aid to the man who has been robbed, beaten, and left there for dead. Johannine Christianity is interested only in whether he believes. "Are you saved, brother?" the Johannine Christian asks the man bleeding to death on the side of the road. "Are you concerned about your soul?" "Do you believe that Jesus is the one who came down from God" "If you believe, you will have eternal life," promises the Johannine Christian, while the dying man's blood stains the ground.[26]

While there is some truth to this rhetorically powerful caricature, we can confidently say that Sanders has substituted one contemporary appropriation of the Gospel of John with the Gospel itself. The same sort of criticism Sanders raises against fundamentalist readings of John could also be raised against the egregious examples of anti-Judaism that have been justified by some readings of the Fourth Gospel over the centuries. While there is no doubt that many illegitimate actions have been justified by specific contextual readings of the New Testament, as we move forward here we will keep our reflections on the nature of Johannine ethics in the context of the history of the Johannine community rather than specific appropriations of Johannine texts.[27]

25. Frank J. Matera, *New Testament Ethics: The Legacies of Jesus and Paul* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 92 (emphasis added). It is important to note that Matera has a largely sympathetic reading of John's ethics, despite the way he has framed the question excerpted above.

26. Jack T. Sanders, *Ethics in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 99–100 (emphasis added).

27. A conspicuous example of using NT texts to justify illegitimate behavior can be found by looking at the arguments of American slaveholders against those advocating for the abolition of slavery. Slaveholders commonly used Pauline statements about "slaves obeying their masters" (Eph 6:5-8; Col 3:22; Titus 2:9) to justify slavery as a God-ordained institution.

The recent history of research has produced countless similar denunciations of Johannine ethics. While the most prominent arguments in favor of recognizing ethics in the Johannine literature have also argued that those ethics are negative, sectarian, or inward looking, more recent treatments have argued that the ethics of the Johannine literature are positive and potentially viable within broader schemes of Christian ethics. We turn now to those arguments.

THE ETHICS OF THE JOHANNINE LITERATURE ARE BROAD, INCLUSIVE, OR VALUABLE FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS OR MORAL THEOLOGY

The third and final position we will consider in our survey is the claim that Johannine ethics are suitable for incorporation into broader schemes of Christian ethics or moral theology.[28] This position has received little attention until very recently, though constructive conversations have given rise to new ways of conceiving of Johannine ethics. The South African scholar, Jan van der Watt has been particularly important to this movement, as he has helped bring forth three different volumes in the series Contexts and Norms of New Testament Ethics, a wider project on various ethical concerns in the New Testament (two of these have been coedited with the German scholar Ruben Zimmerman).[29]

One of the three volumes in this series focuses primarily on *Johannine* ethics, exploring "how the narrated text reveals an underlying

28. "Christian ethics" and "moral theology" are essentially the same enterprise with different names. Typically those working within the Protestant traditions are said to engage in the study of Christian ethics, while Roman Catholic scholars do moral theology. While there is some truth to this dichotomy, a more careful distinction should be made. Among Protestant theologians, there is no standard, widely accepted definition of Christian ethics. Stanley Hauerwas, one of the most recognizable mainline Protestant theologians, argues that "ethics is theology," and that as such it is quite naturally an enterprise of the church (see *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983], xv–xxvi). In Roman Catholic circles, moral theology is a subdiscipline within Catholic theology that addresses ethical issues, including those related to social justice, sexual and medical ethics, and moral virtue. For more on the history and practice of moral theology, see James F. Keenan, *History of Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century: From Confessing Sins to Liberating Consciences* (London: Continuum, 2010).

29. See van der Watt, *Identity, Ethics, and Ethos*; Zimmerman, van der Watt, and Luther, *Moral Language in the New Testament*; van der Watt and Zimmerman, *Rethinking the Ethics of John*.

value system and ethical reflection *sui generis*, which can retrospectively be classified as 'ethics' or better as 'implicit ethics.'"[30] Seeking to challenge the contention that the Johannine literature has no ethics, van der Watt notes that "by means of narration, there is a coherent reflection on values and behavior" embedded within the Johannine literature.[31] Such an approach constitutes a step beyond traditional approaches that sought to identify ethical concerns apart from sustained exegetical treatments. In other words, more detailed engagement with the wider narrative of the Gospel or underlying narrative of the Epistles has the potential to offer new insights and provide a fuller understanding of John's implicit ethics. Several contributions within these three volumes argue for a largely favorable understanding of the ethics implied in the Johannine writings.

For example, in his chapter from the second volume in the series, Kobus Kok argues for a "missional-incarnational ethos" in the Fourth Gospel. He uses Jesus's interaction with the Samaritan woman (John 4) as the basis upon which to describe the Gospel as a "narrative of moral language."[32] He writes, "As Christians, the basis or motivation of our being is built on the basis of a particular understanding of God, the world and God's story of the world."[33] After a detailed exegesis of John 4, Kok wonders whether this particular story can be connected at the macro-level to the sending of the disciples and wider notion of "mission" in the narrative. He ultimately concludes in the affirmative:

> It could thus be argued that those who seek to speak of moral language in John (at least on the textual level) should probably also include the reality of a missional-incarnational ethos that will transcend all boundaries (cultural, social, economical, racial, etc.) to show love and be accepting of everyone. From the investigation above, it becomes clear that the narrative of Jesus and the Samaritan woman should be integrated not only with the sending motive and ethos of the Son, but also with the imperative of the missional ethos of the followers of Jesus (see John 20:21). Together these elements form an inclusive moral language or ethical paradigm of mission and give the reader a *full and integrated picture of the essence of behavior in following the way of Jesus*.[34]

30. van der Watt, preface to *Rethinking the Ethics of John*, x.
31. Ibid.
32. Kok, "As the Father Has Sent Me, I Send You," 169.
33. Ibid., 171.
34. Ibid., 193 (emphasis added).

Other studies, emerging from what might be called a "broadly evangelical" outlook, have sought to draw on a wider Christian theological framework. Building upon the work of N. T. Wright, Hans Boersma prefers to focus on what he calls "the biblical story," rather than mining the pages of the Fourth Gospel for explicit moral teaching. Boersma argues that the authority of the Gospel (or "story authority") comes from its place in the wider narrative of God's work in the world. On that basis he argues that John's worldview is not "sectarian and introspective in character," and that the Gospel makes "significant contributions to a Christian worldview."[35] Such claims stand in stark contrast to the decades-long emphasis on the inward looking perspective of the Johannine writings. In another study arising from this broadly evangelical background, Jey Kanagaraj argues that John roots his understanding of ethics in the Decalogue. He meticulously works through various passages of the Gospel, attempting to demonstrate how each of the Ten Commandments is implicitly embedded in the narrative. Arguing that this reinterpretation of the Decalogue is intentional, Kanagaraj avers that such "a narrative style is an evidence of the *positive approach that John takes in his presentation of the Gospel*. We have seen how John reinterprets the Decalogue *in its positive, redemptive, and practical dimension*."[36] It is also important to note here the work of Richard Burridge, who has sought to articulate an understanding of Johannine ethics in the Fourth Gospel in terms of "imitating Jesus."[37] Burridge's monograph treats the Fourth Gospel in the wider context of New Testament ethics, though he also has an essay in which he focuses exclusively on how this approach relates to John's ethics.[38] For Burridge, our understanding of the gospel genre is directly related to our understanding of the ethics embedded there. Since the gospels are widely held to be Greco-Roman biographies, which by their very nature are concerned with demonstrating the virtue of a given individual, Burridge

35. Boersma, "A New Age Love Story," 118.

36. Kanagaraj, "Implied Ethics of the Fourth Gospel," 61 (emphasis added).

37. See Richard A. Burridge, *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007). See also Richard B. Hays (*The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* [San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996], 138–57), who treats John as a positive contribution within the wider context of the NT ethics.

38. Richard A. Burridge, "Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to the Ethics of the Historical Jesus and John's Gospel," in *John, Jesus, and History*, vol. 2, *Aspects of Historicity in the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Paul N. Anderson, Felix Just, and Tom Thatcher (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 281–90.

argues that we should stop approaching the gospels as ethical treatises and instead read them with a view to imitating the actions of Jesus. With respect to the Fourth Gospel, Burridge argues that even though John's Jesus seems quite different from the Synoptic portraits, he is ultimately a model of imitable behavior in that he calls others to follow God and be part of an inclusive community.

Other studies have utilized a narrative-exegetical approach to suggest potentially positive prospects for speaking about John's ethics. Since many judgments about the presence or value of Johannine ethics are made outside the context of sustained narrative readings of the Gospel, an exegetically oriented approach has the potential to yield fresh contributions to this discussion.[39] This approach contrasts with that of Boersma mentioned above insofar as it is explicitly concerned with John's story world rather than the broader "Christian" story of Jesus.

After an assiduous examination of Johannine "love" language, Jörg Frey similarly concludes that John's love is universal rather than sectarian. Throughout his article he seeks to establish a "semantic network" of John's love language that connects the accounts of Jesus's public ministry (John 1–12), the Farewell Discourses (John 13–17), and the passion narrative (John 18–20). When this semantic network is appreciated through reading the Fourth Gospel in its entirety, he argues, the positive elements of John's ethical presentation organically emerge.[40]

In his recent volume, *Love in the Gospel of John*,[41] Francis J. Moloney raises the question of how to understand the various types of love discussed in the Fourth Gospel. Moloney's contributions in this volume are not limited to the discussions covered by this survey, but his methodology is important for analyzing our three approaches

39. The discussions of Johannine love commands discussed earlier (e.g., Meeks, Segovia, Sanders) were presented in the contexts of source- and redaction-critical arguments and showed a distinct concern to uncover the *Sitz im Leben* of the Johannine community. Moloney's approach is different insofar as it consists of a sustained narrative exegesis while also being squarely situated in the context of historical discussions about the Johannine community.

40. "The complete 'movement' of love, the 'cascade' of love relations from God to the world and to Jesus and the disciples to the communal love of the disciples (to be perceived by everybody) and backwards, including the possible perception or even belief by 'the world' can only be seen if the Gospel is read and interpreted in its entirety" (Jörg Frey, "Love-Relations in the Fourth Gospel: Establishing a Semantic Network," in *Repetitions and Variations in the Fourth Gospel: Style, Text, Interpretation*, ed. Gilbert Van Belle, Michael Labahn, and Peter Maritz, BETL 223 [Leuven: Peeters, 2009], 171–98 [198]).

41. Francis J. Moloney, *Love in the Gospel of John: An Exegetical, Theological, and Literary Study* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013).

to John's ethics. While showing a primary concern for interpreting the text as a complete utterance in its final form, Moloney is also at pains in this book to situate the Gospel in its historical and theological contexts. This results in a nuanced treatment that appreciates the inner workings of the Johannine community and its history, but also the universalizing role John has played throughout its reception history. After a helpful discussion of the failures of John's community, Moloney comments,

> If John's Gospel were a sectarian tract, an "inner secret" written for the private mutual exhortation of a secret enclave that failed—we would not have it as part of the Christian canon. . . . But in fact the Gospel of John is a story of Jesus that has been publicly proclaimed for almost two thousand years. It continues to ask readers and hearers to "remember Jesus" and to put their lives where their words are.[42]

In the context of this discussion, Moloney seems particularly annoyed by the "arrogance" of certain sectarian theories and their failure to consider the history of interpretation.[43] He closes the book by succinctly expressing the Fourth Gospel's positive, though admittedly limited, contributions to our understanding of love as a category within New Testament ethics: "The Gospel of John does say *something* about an understanding of Christian love, even though it must not be claimed that it says *everything*."[44] This recognition is a helpful safeguard against the all-too-common practice of insisting that each text in the New Testament is as robustly developed as the next for our contemporary understanding of theology or ethics. We know that this is very often not the case. As was the case with Frey's treatment, the virtue of Moloney's work is that it draws conclusions about specific themes (viz., love) only after sustained exegetical consideration. In many ways, this approach, irrespective of one's ultimate judgment

42. Ibid., 210. See also my own judgment regarding the potentially universal quality of John's love language in "Virtue in the New Testament: The Legacies of Paul and John in Comparative Perspective," in *Unity and Diversity in the Gospels and Paul: Essays in Honor of Frank J. Matera*, ed. Christopher W. Skinner and Kelly R. Iverson, ECL 7 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature 2012), 313–15.

43. He writes, "There is a sense of arrogance in the claim that for two thousand years the Gospel of John has enjoyed favor and had influence because it has been misinterpreted. . . . At last, it appears, with the arrival of the social science reading of the text, true light has dawned" (Moloney, *Love in the Gospel of John*, 201n45).

44. Ibid., 214 (emphasis in original).

on the value or presence of ethics in John, is a roadmap for how such research should be conducted.

It goes without saying that numerous other studies could be introduced into our survey as a means of illustrating all three perspectives I have chosen to highlight here. However, as indicated at the outset of this survey, my intent has been to be representative rather than exhaustive in my coverage of the subject. I have now considered the major categories and some of the important conversation partners in the broader discussion of Johannine ethics. This survey has shown that the field is open for ongoing dialogue about the presence, nature, and value of ethics within the Johannine literature. It is our hope that this book can facilitate those conversations by providing substantive discourse about the various positions mentioned above, while suggesting constructive prospects for the future.

JOHANNINE ETHICS: WHAT CAN *WE* SAY?

Since this book is dedicated to exploring the moral world of the Johannine literature—an undertaking that assumes the existence of ethical material—it naturally follows that many of the essays in this volume fit within the latter two categories covered by our brief survey of scholarly opinion. Each contributor takes their own approach to discussing the role of ethics in the Johannine literature, and there is great diversity of opinion about the presence, tone, extent, or value of that material. Therefore, their studies take different routes within those three categories, and this is intentional. The result of this open inquiry is a volume divided into three major sections that represent broad perspectives on both the foundational and applied ethics of the literature as well as directions for the future.

PART 1: THE JOHANNINE IMPERATIVES

The first part of the book consists of three chapters and focuses on the Johannine imperatives: believe, love, and follow. Insofar as explicit imperatives and prohibitions have played a foundational role in the development of both Jewish and Christian ethics, it seems prudent to consider how direct commands in the Gospel and Epistles contribute to our understanding of *Johannine ethics*.

In the first chapter of part 1, Sherri Brown argues that the core

proclamation of the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel (1:1–18) is that those who receive the Word are given the power to become children of God (1:12), and since the prologue is the gateway into the narrative, this is also the heart of the gospel message. In Brown's view, the establishment of childhood in God through Jesus Christ is the culmination of all God's dealings with the world, and is the *telos* of both creator and creation. Her argument explores how one receives and believes in the Word, what it means to become "children of God," and how this could be construed as the goal of the entire Gospel. The journey of believing thus becomes the foundation of the ethical life in the community of the Beloved Disciple.

In chapter 2, I undertake an examination of love—the most overtly ethical imperative in the Johannine literature. With an emphasis on both the historical development of the Fourth Gospel and the narrative in its final form, I attempt to demonstrate that the seemingly limited audience of John's commands to "love one another"—which we will come to understand as "sacrificial self-giving"—should be understood in a broader sense than the sectarian critique allows. With specific attention to the Farewell Discourse (John 13–17), I argue that the radical and countercultural vision of Johannine spirituality calls followers to reject sin and imitate Jesus's own example, and it is therefore not necessary to understand this call in a sectarian or exclusive manner. Rather, we should understand an implicit universality in the love commands of the Johannine Jesus.

In the final chapter of part 1, Raymond F. Collins considers the Johannine imperative to follow. In the Fourth Gospel, only two persons are said to receive the imperative invitation "follow me" from Jesus. Gathering his first disciples, Jesus says to Philip, "follow me" (John 1:43). In the Gospel's epilogue, the risen Jesus twice tells Peter to "follow me" (John 21:19). Nevertheless, Collins contends that the command embraces the Johannine story *in its entirety*. The intervening narrative describes many disciples following Jesus, and while these characters follow Jesus in a nondescript fashion, two *logia* uttered by Jesus point to the ultimate significance of the imperative to follow. On the one hand, following Jesus is a matter of hearing his voice (John 10:4–5), and on the other, it is a matter of receiving the light of life (John 8:12), rooted in a personal relationship with Jesus.

PART 2: IMPLIED ETHICS IN THE JOHANNINE LITERATURE

The second part of this book consists of seven chapters and is dedicated to exploring various angles on the implied ethics of the Johannine literature. R. Alan Culpepper begins part 2 by providing a close reading of the Fourth Gospel, focusing on the role of the Prologue in developing John's creation ethics. The Prologue establishes the theme of life so prominent in the rest of the Gospel, and grounds it in God's creative work through the Logos. Culpepper aims to draw out the implications of this narrative opening for the ethics of John. In particular, the wisdom background and the context of creation give the theme of life a universal rather than sectarian dimension. The sacredness of life is also deeply rooted in Jewish ethics, which recognizes both creation and covenant as ethical foundations. When these associations are clarified, John's ethics can be seen in a much richer, textured perspective: Jesus restores and points to the completion of human life. The love command is set in a universal rather than sectarian context, and distinctions of ethnicity, gender, and social standing are diminished.

Incarnation is a crucial theme in the Gospel's Prologue and is foundational to all of our thinking about Johannine Christology. In the next chapter, Jaime Clark-Soles uses this affirmation as a starting point to examine the relationship between ethics and incarnation, with specific emphasis on disability studies. Drawing on insights from social and cultural models, Clark-Soles explores numerous texts with a view to answering the question: From a disability perspective, what are the promises and pitfalls of these texts with respect to ancient audiences and later interpreters? She recognizes that, with respect to persons with disabilities, the Gospel of John has both liberative and problematic potential. She is concerned to uncover the ways in which the text possesses liberative potential and in the ways in which it presents obstacles for those seeking abundant life (John 10:10). She argues that through the insistence on material creation as the locus of God's attention and activity, the Fourth Evangelist emboldens the audience to interpret the text in ways that promote the flourishing of all, even when that entails resisting some of the text's own contextually bound perspectives.

In the next chapter, Adele Reinhartz evaluates arguments that the

Gospel implies an ethical system and presents Jesus as an ethical model, and aims to challenge the more recent, optimistic view about finding moral precepts beneath the surface of the Gospel. Focusing on John 7, the text in which Jesus secretly goes up to Jerusalem for a Jewish festival after informing his brothers that he does not intend to go, Reinhartz argues that John's implied author is not concerned to show Jesus as an ethical actor but rather is entirely focused on the Gospel's central message: the importance of belief in Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God. Reinhartz thus regards this presentation of the Johannine Jesus as duplicitous.

The next two chapters in part 2 are devoted to examining the difficult issue of Jesus's enemies in the Fourth Gospel. First, Michael J. Gorman explores John's implied ethic of love toward enemies. As noted above, the Fourth Gospel has been criticized for its restriction of love to the believing community or, in a more extreme form of criticism, for its "moral bankruptcy" with respect to its apathy toward, and even hatred of, outsiders. Gorman proposes that in spite of these criticisms, the Gospel has an implicit ethic of enemy-love, grounded in the divine act of sending the Son into a hostile world to save it and implied in the Son's similar sending of the disciples into a hostile world to live missionally and peacefully by means of the Spirit.

In the next chapter, Alicia Myers provides the second sustained reflection on Jesus's potential opponents in the Fourth Gospel. She begins by noting that of all the ethical categories at play in the Gospel, the presentation of "the Jews" (*hoi Ioudaioi*) ranks among the most fraught. Given the negative ethics that the Gospel has been used to justify against Jewish people, John's often negative portrayal of the Jews in his narrative requires continued study and reflection. Recognizing both the enduring argument of a two-level drama (Martyn) and the significant work of problematizing the ease of the two-level reading (Reinhartz), Myers focuses on the ethics of John's presentation of the Jews in terms of the Gospel's literary and rhetorical aspects, rather than positing a possible historical reconstruction. In particular, she examines the "character" (*ēthos*) and characterization of the Jews in John according to rhetorical categories and constructions of identity common to the ancient Mediterranean world. Myers concludes that the rhetoric of the Gospel ultimately creates empathy between the Gospel audiences and the Jews who struggle within the text,

rather than necessitating the antipathy and condemnation that has unfortunately so often resulted.

Toan Do next seeks to draw out a connection between the Johannine request to "come and see" with John's ethic of love. In a recent study, Peter J. Judge links the invitation "come and see" with Johannine Christology.[45] The imperative "come and see" occurs several times in the Gospel of John, with different inviters to different invitees: one from Jesus to the two disciples of John the Baptist (1:39), one from Philip to Nathanael (1:46), one from the Samaritan woman to her villagers (4:29), and finally from the Bethany villagers to Jesus (11:34). Do poses a simple question in his study: Is Christology sufficient in the Johannine invitation "come and see," especially in the case of Philip's invitation to Nathanael? John 14:8–14 seems to prove negatively the christological aspect of this invitation; then in John 14:15 Jesus rightly places an ethical aspect of seeing and knowing Jesus, namely, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." Do concludes that in the end, *love for Jesus* will sufficiently sustain and preserve the Johannine invitation to "come and see."

In the final chapter of part 2, Francis J. Moloney raises a crucial question: is love the only substantive element in Johannine ethics? Within the Johannine literature, God's action of loving has initiated the presence of Jesus in the world (John 3:16–17). Moloney uses this observation as a basis for his exploration of the God who sends, the task of the Johannine Jesus who makes God known, and the request that disciples and followers of Jesus manifest love in a certain way. In the first place, little consideration is given to the enduring presence of a traditional eschatology in John (e.g., 5:28–29; 6:40, 54), and the importance of "deeds" or "works" in John (e.g. 3:19–21). Against the all-too-common focus on using imperatives as the primary basis for ethics, this chapter tests the hermeneutical intuition that Johannine ethics have their basis in God's love, but are best articulated in the narrative expression and experience of love, rather than in the love commands. The Johannine Jesus points out that good and evil deeds performed between the now of Christian life and the future judgment lead to life or condemnation (5:27–29).

45. Peter J. Judge, "Come and See: The First Disciples and Christology in the Fourth Gospel," in *Studies in the Gospel of John and Its Christology*, ed. Joseph Verheyden, Geert van Oyen, Michael Labahn, and Reimund Bieringer, BETL 265 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2014), 61–69.

PART 3: MOVING FORWARD

The final section of this volume consists of three chapters that attempt to advance our discussions of John's moral world beyond what has already been proposed in contemporary scholarship. In the first chapter of part 3, Lindsey Trozzo combines genre analysis and rhetorical criticism to consider how the Fourth Gospel's participation in the *bios* genre and incorporation of the encomiastic topics might shed light on Johannine ethics. Through a comparative examination of Plutarch's *Lives*, Trozzo seeks to demonstrate that though it is not a straightforward ethical commentary, John's complex biographical narrative delivers implicit moralism and carries significant ethical force. Without expecting every episode within the Fourth Gospel to offer ethical content, she argues that within the overall rhetorical trajectory of the *bios*, each episode plays a part in establishing the ethical force of the text. Since the text incorporates certain rhetorical features, rhetorical analysis can be utilized to provide a new way of reading and a new set of questions that can be applied to the pursuit of Johannine ethics.

In the second chapter of part 3, Dorothy Lee explores a heretofore-untapped area of potential ethical inquiry in the Johannine literature. She begins by noting that the theology of the Fourth Gospel has tended to be interpreted within a human-centered framework, focusing exclusively on the relationship believers have to God and to one another. As a consequence, little emphasis has been placed on the place of creation in the Gospel. Seen from a wider perspective, however, the Johannine worldview presents the Word made flesh in divine solidarity not only with humankind but also with the life of creation. The echoes of the creation stories in Genesis 1–3, along with the language of "flesh" found throughout the Fourth Gospel, imply God's commitment to the flourishing and transforming of all created things. This transformation has ethical as well as spiritual implications. Lee argues that the flesh of Jesus, radiant with divine glory, bridges in every sense the gulf that divides creation from God. This is the basis of John's ethical understanding, in which God's re-creation embraces the material world in all its variety and complexity. It implies a corresponding ethical responsibility for the well-being of creation on the part of the community of faith. From this viewpoint, the Johannine love command has the potential to extend not only to

human beings but also to all living things ("all flesh") created by the divine-human Word.

Cornelis Bennema closes out part 3 with a chapter on virtue ethics and the Gospel of John. Virtue ethics, deontology, and consequentialism constitute the three major approaches in normative ethics. Virtue ethics have played an important role in the Western philosophical tradition, from the early Greek philosophers—most notably Aristotle—to the medieval Christian period, finding their fullest Christian expression in the writings of Thomas Aquinas. The basic concept behind virtue ethics is that virtues are morally valuable character traits or dispositions firmly entrenched in a given individual. While virtue ethics is the oldest of the three, it became marginalized during the Enlightenment, and was only revived in the late twentieth century. In contrast to duty, rules (deontology), or the outcomes of actions (consequentialism), virtue ethics stresses moral character and the virtues that a character embodies as the basis for determining or evaluating ethical behavior. Bennema argues that virtue ethics is the most conducive approach for exploring Johannine ethics going forward. For John a virtuous life of allegiance to Jesus, guided by the Spirit, leads to and expresses the ultimate moral good of participation in the divine life. Since a number of characters in the Fourth Gospel display aspects of such a virtuous life, an agent-focused approach such as virtue ethics proves useful in discussions of Johannine ethics.

JOHANNINE ETHICS IN PROSPECT

In the final chapter, Sherri Brown and I conclude this volume with a discussion of Johannine ethics in prospect. The first part of the present introductory chapter has concentrated on the three common approaches to grappling with Johannine ethics in an attempt to set the stage for the essays that follow. In our concluding chapter, we will reflect on the findings of our contributors and suggest prospects for the future. While varying approaches to understanding the moral world of the Johannine literature will likely persist, the implications for a way forward offer insight into the understanding of right action as revealed in the life and ministry of the Johannine Jesus and the life of the Johannine community. It is incumbent upon the future of Johannine scholarship to reckon with this important and long-neglected aspect of the Gospel and Epistles of John.