Article

Johannine Ethics: An Exegetical-Theological Summary and a ‘Desiderative’ Extension of Mimesis

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Abstract: If we consider the Johannine literature to have primarily espoused an exemplary (rather than an imperatival) ethical paradigm, our understanding of its moral teaching becomes much richer. The Gospel of John does not provide a moral grammar primarily by conveying a set of commands or prohibitions, but through conformity to a moral example (Jesus Christ himself). More specifically, this paper initially approaches the issue by surveying the uses of the imperative in the Gospel of John, the appearances of ὀφείλειν and καθώς, related moral themes, the descriptions of the two Johannine commandments, and the statements of John 13:14–15. The essay then focuses particularly upon the recent work of Cornelis Bennema on the imitative or “mimetic” ethics of John. Bennema has emphasized the “cognitive mimesis” and “performative mimesis” of Johannine ethics, engendered and enabled by the Paraclete. Finally, through an exposition of John 8 and other relevant texts, this essay contributes to the conversation by adding “desiderative mimesis” to Bennema’s proposed framework. As one’s identity (who I am) is transformed, one’s desiderative inclinations (what I desire) are renewed, resulting in changed behavior (how I act).

Keywords: Gospel of John; First Epistle of John; New Testament Ethics; imitation; mimesis; virtue ethics; Paraclete; desires

1. Introduction

An integral field within biblical theology is biblical “moral theology”, or biblical ethics. Within the New Testament canon, some authors and corpora have received far more attention than others. Johannine ethics have often been “shunned” or relegated to the “periphery” (Estes 2019, p. 43; Koester 2013, p. 85). In the past, scholars commonly “overlooked or downplayed the potential contributions” of Johannine ethics, being “quick to dismiss” their value (Skinner 2017a, p. xvii), and treated the presence of ethical material in the Gospel of John with skepticism (van der Watt 2018, p. 363). The “elusive” nature of Johannine ethics stubbornly proved to be “a problematic and challenging area of research” (Trozzo 2020, p. 276; van der Watt 2006d, p. 107; 2011, pp. 431–32).

Through much of the twentieth century, many commentators had often assumed that the Johannine community suffered from a nearly complete lack of structured ethical teaching. Brown (1982, pp. 80–81) referred to the Fourth Gospel’s “strange silence on ethical matters” and theorized that “the lack of specific moral directives” led to a “lack of interest in moral behavior among the majority of the Johannine community”. Jack T. Sanders (1975, p. 100) even referred to the “weakness and moral bankruptcy of the Johannine ethics”. As late as a decade ago, Ruben Zimmermann (2012, p. 44) could claim “New Testament scholarship appears to find consensus on one subject—there is general agreement that the Fourth Gospel contains no ethics”.

Over sixty years ago, Noël Lazure (1965, p. 9) observed “L’aspect moral de la théologie johannique a été très peu étudié”. Apart from the famous love command, almost nothing of Johannine ethics had been considered, by some, to be retrievable (Houlden 1973, p. 36; Meier 2001, pp. 47–48). Frank Matera (1996, p. 92) highlighted the “major challenge” faced in reconstructing the ethics of the Gospel of John, with its “remarkably few references to
moral conduct”. János Bolyki (2003, p. 198) underscored the common charge that the ethical teaching of the Fourth Gospel “is limited, scanty and far from being part of an overall ethical system”. To complicate matters, although the Gospel lacks maxims, moral sermons, paraenetic sections, Haustafeln, virtue, and vice lists, etc. (Trozzo 2020, pp. 262, 278; van der Watt 2011, p. 445), it is flush with metaphors, pervasive ironies, double entendres, imagery, and symbolism (Culpepper 1991, p. 133).

Douglas Estes (2019, p. 44) maintains that modern biases have limited the study and understanding of Johannine ethics (cf. Wannenwetsch 2012, pp. 93–94). Explorations of Johannine ethics have suffered from the pincer movement of “a restricted definition and a limited imagination” (Skinner 2020, p. 283). Wayne Meeks (1996, p. 320) commented that “the Fourth Gospel meets none of our expectations about the way ethics should be constructed”. If one is searching for propositional ethics in the form of “specific injunctions or detailed parenetic passages”, one will remain disappointed (Schrage 1982, p. 297). One finds few rules of exact conduct, and nothing comparable to the Sermon on the Mount (Kanagaraj 2001, p. 34; Zimmermann 2012, p. 47). Willi Marxsen (1989, p. 286) rightly notes the complete absence of “specific instructions and admonitions” in the Gospel of John. Only within the last generation has scholarly interest in the ethics of the Fourth Gospel blossomed, causing Jan van der Watt (2018, p. 378) to underscore “the renewed interest in the ethics of John in the twenty-first century” (cf. Williams 2021, pp. 35–38). A “much richer, textured perspective” has flourished as scholars have moved beyond narrow understandings of “ethics” and an unwarranted obsession with paraenetic material (moral exhortation) alone (Skinner 2017a, p. xxxii). As Richard Hays (1996, p. 140) rightly insisted, “the ethical significance of the New Testament narratives cannot be restricted to their didactic content”. In a broader sense, an “ethical text” is one that “offers reflective orientation toward one’s way of life, defining how to behave according to a specific value system” in relation to others (Trozzo 2020, pp. 282–83).


In a review article, Craig Koester (2013) summarized the Johannine answers to the fundamental ethical question, “What should I do?” He listed the responses as “Do the loving thing”; “Do what gives life”; “Do what is true”; and “Follow Jesus”. In sum, “Do what is congruent with what God has done in Jesus” (Koester 2013, p. 88). In a recent study, Christopher Skinner (2020) has argued for an “emerging consensus” regarding Johannine ethics. Skinner’s “consensus” holds that “(1) the Gospel of John has ethical material, and (2) that material must be taken seriously by those reflecting on ancient ethical systems in general and New Testament ethics in particular” (Skinner 2020, p. 280).

This essay will follow Skinner’s move to simplify (by relating an exegetical summary and some resulting theological corollaries), but it will then nudge the conversation in a new direction by suggesting an overlooked facet of Johannine ethics, that of “desiderative mimesis”. In addition to norms (values, identity, rules, and principles) and behavior (ethos, actions, and lifestyle), the field of ethics also entails linking mechanisms such as dispositional desires and inclinational motivations. Nevertheless, scholars have neglected the desiderative facets (desires and motivations) of Johannine mimetic ethics. Therefore, after examining the exegetical foundations of Johannine ethics and some resulting theo-
logical corollaries, this article will add “desiderative mimesis” to Cornelis Bennema’s dual framework of “cognitive mimesis” and “performative mimesis”.

2. Materials (Exegetical Foundations of Johannine Ethics)

2.1. The Use of the Imperative in the Fourth Gospel

The lack of propositional directives within the Johannine literature is manifested by the employment of the imperative in the Gospel of John. Numerous instances of the imperative appear on the mouth of Jesus, yet most are specifically bound to the persons in the contexts in which they are uttered: John 1:39; 2:7; 2:8; 2:16 (2 ×); 2:19; 4:7; 4:10; 4:16 (2 ×); 4:21; 4:50; 5:8 (3 ×); 5:11 (2 ×); 5:12 (2 ×); 5:14; 5:45; 6:10; 6:12; 6:20; 7:8; [8:7]; [8:11 (2 ×)]; 9:7; 9:11 (2 ×); 11:39; 11:44 (2 ×); 12:7; 13:27; 13:29; 14:31; 18:8; 18:11; 18:21; 18:23; 20:17 (3 ×); 20:22; 20:27 (4 ×); 21:6; 21:10; 21:12 (2 ×); 21:15; 21:16; 21:17. Other imperatives which Jesus pronounces are simply idiomatic, such as “Behold” (1:47; 4:35; 5:14; 16:32; 18:21; 19:26; 19:27; 20:27), “Do not marvel” (5:28), or “Do not think” (5:45). In other cases, Jesus uses the imperative with his Father; for example, “Father, save me from this hour” (12:27) and “Father, glorify your name” (12:28). Jesus’ imperatives addressed to the Father are more common in his “high priestly prayer”: “Glory your Son” (17:1), “Glory me in your own presence” (17:5), “Holy Father, keep them in your name” (17:11), and “Sanctify them in the truth” (17:17).5

Yet some imperatives uttered by Jesus, though relative to a specific situation, could lend themselves to universal implications in the Johannine community and/or among wider readers of the Johannine literature: 1:43; 4:35; 5:28; 6:27; 6:43; 7:24; 7:37; 10:37; 10:38; 12:26; 12:35; 12:36; 14:1 (2 or 3 ×);14:11 (2 ×); 14:27 (2 ×); 15:4; 15:7; 15:9; 15:20; 16:24; 16:33; 21:19; 21:22. For example, Jesus commands the disciples to lift up their eyes and look on the fields, ready for harvest (John 4:35). Such an imperative could continue to carry weight within the missional endeavors of the community. Another example is found in the precept of 7:24 where Jesus commands the Jews, “Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment”. In addition, Jesus commands his listeners to walk in the light (12:35) and to believe in the light (12:36), both imperatives that could be generally applied. The command to believe recurs (14:1; 11; cf. Brown 2017), as does the command to abide in Christ and his love (15:4; 9; cf. Caragounis 2012). Another general principle attached to an imperative is found in 16:24: “Ask, and you will receive” (cf. 15:7: “ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you”).

Upon examination, the imperatives in the Gospel of John do not provide much information about Johannine ethics. Although over 150 imperatives occur, most uses are so bound to their specific contexts as to be invalidated as universal ethical directives. There are some imperatives spoken by Jesus in the Fourth Gospel which could perhaps imply general ethical propositions, but these are relatively unsubstantial when compared with the Synoptics. For example, the Gospel of John does not contain anything resembling the moral teachings of the Sermon on the Mount in Matt 5–7 or the Sermon on the Plain in Luke 6:20–49 (cf. Matera 1996, pp. 42–50, 73–79). The Sermon on the Mount by itself contains over fifty imperatives in three chapters alone.

This examination of the imperatives in the Gospel of John confirms the supposition that John does not focus upon propositionally prescriptive ethics. Marxsen (1989, p. 294) even muses that “the dominant characteristic of the Johannic ethic” is that “there are no imperatives with specific content”. If one wishes to describe Johannine ethics, one must turn from an imperatival, propositional system to another form of ethics. The uses of ὁρεῖται, καθώς, ἐντολή, and ὑπάρχειμα in the Johannine literature provide us with clues.2

2.2. The Use of ὁρεῖται

An interesting paradigm of ethics in the Johannine literature is signaled by the use of the verb ὁρεῖται (“to owe, ought, be obliged”). One notes that the verb ὁρεῖται occurs six times in the Johannine writings. In order to incorporate all these instances, we cast our net to include the Johannine epistles as well as the Fourth Gospel, even while acknowledging the
distinctive purposes of the separate works within their historical contexts.\(^8\) The appearance of ὀφείλειν in the Gospel of John 19:7 is inconsequential for Johannine ethics, but the other five occurrences warrant examination.

First, Jesus told the disciples that they “ought” to wash one another’s feet, even as he had washed theirs (John 13:14). Second, the believer “ought” to walk in the same manner as Jesus walked (1 John 2:6; cf. Leung 2018, p. 125). Third, the believer “ought” to lay down his life for his fellow community members, even as Christ laid down his life for us (1 John 3:16).\(^9\) Fourth, the believer “ought” to love other believers, even as God loved us (1 John 4:11). Fifth, believers “ought” to entertain traveling missionaries (3 John 8).

An examination of the use of ὀφείλειν reveals that four of these five occurrences portray an example which “ought” to be followed (John 13:14; 1 John 2:6; 3:16; 4:11). Furthermore, three of these four particular constructions describe Jesus as the example to be imitated (John 13:14; 1 John 2:6; 3:16). This use of ὀφείλειν signals an exemplary system of ethics, wherein the Johannine literature underscores a foundational moral example.\(^10\) Moreover, the Johannine sense of imitation involves not only replication (acting like), but mission (acting as representative of) (van der Merwe 2017b, p. 4; Trozzo 2020, p. 306).

2.3. The Use of καθός

The word καθός (“as; just as”) is found thirty-one times in the Gospel of John and thirteen times in the Johannine epistles (de Dinechin 1970; van der Merwe 2017b, p. 5). The use of καθός in the Johannine literature further reveals an ethics of example (often correlated with the conjunction καί) (van der Watt 2001, pp. 139–40; Bennema 2018, p. 191). One finds a “mimetic chain” or “chain of imitation” (or a “laddering” of mimesis) in Johannine ethics.\(^11\) Schrage (1982, p. 306) notes, “The frequent repetition of ‘as’ is characteristic: on the one hand, it reflects the relationship of the Father to Jesus and of Jesus to the disciples; on the other, it confronts Jesus’ followers with Jesus’ own conduct as an exemplary realization of Christian life”.

First, “just as” (καθός) the Father has related himself to Jesus, so Jesus has related himself to his disciples. References to Jesus following the example of the Father are found in such verses as John 5:30; 8:28; 14:31; and 17:1–2. Jesus only judges as (καθός) he hears from the Father (5:30). Jesus speaks as (καθός) the Father taught him (8:28). Jesus acts as (καθός) the Father commanded him (14:31). Jesus glorifies the Father as (καθός) the Father has given him authority (17:1–2). Directly parallel constructions are found in 15:9, 17:18, and 17:23: Jesus sent his disciples as (καθός) the Father sent him (17:18; 17:23). Ultimately, Jesus loved the disciples as (καθός) the Father loved him (15:9).

Second, “just as” (καθός) Jesus has related himself to his disciples, so they are to relate to one another. The second notion, that the disciples are to follow the example of Jesus, is found eleven times (in John 10:14–15; 13:15; 13:34; 15:10; 17:11; 17:16; 17:21; 1 John 2:6; 3:3; 3:7; and 4:17). Believers know Jesus as (καθός) Jesus knows the Father and as (καθός) the Father knows Jesus (10:14–15). Jesus states, “For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as (καθός) I have done to you” (13:15). The disciples are to be one as (καθός) the Father and Jesus are one (17:11; 17:21). The disciples are not of the world, just as (καθός) Jesus is not of the world (17:16). Above all, the disciples are to love one another as (καθός) Jesus has loved them (13:34). If the disciples keep the commandments of Jesus, they will abide in his love, just as (καθός) Jesus has kept the Father’s commandments and abides in his love (15:10).\(^12\) In this manner, “divine love is the foundation and calling of the Christian community” (Nissen 1999, p. 211). The unity of the Father–Son relationship forms a “template” for unity in the Christian community (van der Merwe 2017a, p. 6), and the familia Dei serves as the communal context of the “lived experience” of the love of God (van der Merwe 2020, pp. 4–5). Moreover, “The measure of our love toward each other is Jesus’ love towards us” (Bolyki 2003, p. 204).

This ethical use of καθός is more fully developed in 1 John (Schrage 1982, pp. 306–8; van der Watt 2014, pp. 210–19). Believers should walk as (καθός) Jesus walked (2:6). The believer purifies himself or herself as (καθός) Jesus is pure (3:3). The believer practices...
righteousness as (καθως) Jesus is righteous (3:7). As (καθως) Jesus is in the world, so the believer is in the world (4:17). Ultimately, the readers were to be willing to lay down their own lives for one another, based upon the example of Jesus’ own sacrifice, because “he laid down his life for us” (1 Jn 3:16). Such sacrificial love is demonstrated through care for those in need (1 Jn 3:17–18). Conversely, hatred of a brother or sister is tantamount to murder (1 Jn 3:15; van der Merwe 2006, p. 553).

2.4. Related Moral Themes

In general, trends deeply rooted in the Gospel continue in the first epistle, demonstrating continuity and adaptation within the community. Rhetorical accents upon such moral attributes or qualities as love, truth, light, life, goodness, and holiness persist (van der Watt 2013; Bennema 2017a, pp. 148–52, 157–59), often in the form of contrasts, such as love and hate, truth and falsehood, light and darkness, and life and death (Schrage 1982, p. 308; Reese 2013, p. 87). One also notices new emphases upon the virtues of purity and righteousness in the epistle. More specifically, 1 John exhorts its readers not to love the world (1 Jn 2:15–17; cf. Loader 2014), and its abrupt ending commands them to abstain from idols (1 Jn 5:21). The Johannine epistles also directly address such moral topics as proper speech and hospitality (Reese 2013, pp. 86–88).

In the moral theology of the Johannine literature, “believing, loving, following, abiding, obedience, serving, and testifying, authenticate and shape the family bond between the believer, God, and fellow-believers (identity)” (Bennema 2018, p. 190; cf. Bennema 2017a, pp. 83–142). Other related terms in the Johannine literature include hearing, knowing, continuing, coming, and receiving (Schrage 1982, p. 303). Throughout the Gospel, love leads to obedience, which is portrayed as “love in action” or “returned love” (Smith 2005, p. 49; van der Watt 2006d, p. 117). As Dirk van der Merwe (2017b, p. 9) comments, “love for Christ finds expression in the obedient action of his followers”. At the same time, in moving from the Gospel to 1 John, one notices a subtle shift from “direct relation to a tradition-oriented ethics” (van der Watt 2018, p. 374). Nevertheless, Jesus remains at the center of the ethical model, because “Christology determines ethics” (Kenney 2000, p. vii).

These examples of the use of καθως (and related common themes) in the Johannine literature reveal that the system of exemplary ethics was two-tiered. Jesus imitates the example of the Father, and believers are to imitate the example of Jesus.

2.5. The Johannine Commandments

The Gospel of John uses several phrases referring to obedience, including “following”, “doing the will of God”, “doing the works of God”, and “obeying/keeping commands” (van der Watt 2001, pp. 140–43; 2011, pp. 433–36). Many scholars have maintained that the Johannine literature only refers to one ἀκολουθέω (commandment), the “new” commandment to love one another (cf. Marxsen 1989, p. 286; Maston 1997, p. 221; Nissen 1999, p. 194). Manifesting such love is “the most overtly ethical imperative in the Johannine literature” and “an abiding theme across the entire corpus” (Skinner 2017a, p. xxxi; 2017b, p. 25). As Nissen (1999, p. 203) quips, “Love is seen as the badge of discipleship”. He reiterates, “The Johannine community is a community of love” (Nissen 1999, p. 212). While some have depicted the Johannine love command as narrowly sectarian or parochially exclusive, Skinner (2017b, p. 37) contends that the self-giving, missional, and open nature of love within the Fourth Gospel (rooted in God’s own sacrificial love for the entire world) reflects an “inherent and underlying universality”.

Urban von Wahlde, however, argued that there are actually two Johannine commandments (von Wahlde 1990, p. 110; cf. Brown 2017, p. 7). Specifically, these two commandments are to keep the word of Jesus and to love another. “The first commandment stressed fidelity to the word of Jesus as he had spoken it and as the community had heard it from the beginning” (von Wahlde 1990, p. 3). “The second commandment stressed the necessity of actively demonstrating love for one another within the community in imitation of the love of Jesus for them” (von Wahlde 1990, p. 3; cf. Stovell 2018). Furthermore, the juxtaposition
of the two commands links believing (faith) and love (Matera 1996, p. 111; Nissen 1999, p. 204; van der Watt 2006c, p. 158). Thus the “two primary commandments” of the Fourth Gospel could be construed as “to believe and to love” (Brown 2017, p. 7). The verb “believe” appears ninety-eight times in the Gospel, and its foundational role is already established in the prologue (1:12) and is reiterated in the book’s final purpose statement (20:30–31) preceding the epilogue (Brown 2017).

The use of “imitation” in von Wahlde’s definition of “the second commandment” is instructive, for it reveals that the two Johannine commandments also add to our understanding of Johannine exemplary ethics. Jesus was given two commandments by the Father: what to say and what to do (his words and works). Specifically, states von Wahlde, “it is clear that there are two commandments given to Jesus: to speak the word given him by the Father and to lay down his life on behalf of his own out of love for them” (von Wahlde 1990, p. 16). Similarly, Jesus gives two commandments to his disciples: to keep his words and to love one another (von Wahlde 1990, p. 31).17 The disciples are to keep/guard (τῷ ἑαυτῷ) the message of Jesus and to love each other sacrificially. The verb τῷ ἑαυτῷ indicates “an obedient orientation” (van der Merwe 2006, p. 544).

All this coalesces well with a system of mimetic ethics: just as Jesus received two commandments from the Father and faithfully kept them, so the disciples were to keep the commandments they had received. Hans Boersma declares, “Jesus does the Father’s works that he has commissioned him to do. The believers in turn do Jesus’ works that they have been commissioned to do” (Boersma 2003, pp. 115–16). Thus, a ladder of chain links “the Father”, “the Son”, and “believers” (Boersma 2003, p. 116). One may add another Johannine commandment, “to follow” Jesus—in the ethical sense of walking the path of discipleship (Collins 2017; Skinner 2020, p. 292). In addition, Glen Lund (2012, pp. 276–77) asserts that von Wahlde overlooked the “order” of being sent in mission (cf. Kok 2010).

2.6. The Statements in John 13:14–15

Even after having surveyed the two Johannine commandments, one is left with a sense of ambiguity. How did the two Johannine commandments play out in real-life, concrete situations? A clue may be found in John 13:14–15 (van der Watt 2006d, pp. 122–27). After washing the disciples’ feet, Jesus remarks, “If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought (ὀφείλεις) to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example (ὑπόδειγμα), that you also should do just as (καθὼς) I have done to you”. This passage combines the exemplary uses of ὀφείλεις and καθὼς, and it adds the explicit statement that Jesus is the “example” or “pattern” or “model” (ὑπόδειγμα) of the community (Skinner 2017b, pp. 28–33).

The sense of ὑπόδειγμα surpasses “an example to be imitated”, therefore, Robert Brawley (2013, p. 50) prefers the translation “revelatory pattern”. Jesus is the example in his person, he sets the basis for mimesis in his deeds, and he calls upon his disciples to grasp the full purpose of his actions (van der Merwe 2022, p. 6; van der Watt 2001, pp. 134–35; Bennema 2014, pp. 265, 268). Thus his action is not simply “an object lesson or template”, and the required mimesis cannot be “mindless copying” (Bennema 2014, p. 269; 2017a, p. 174). Alan Culpepper (1991, p. 139) has demonstrated that the foot-washing “functions metaphorically and proleptically in relation to Jesus’ death”. “It clarifies in advance the meaning of Jesus’ death” (Culpepper 1991, p. 139; cf. Skinner 2017b, pp. 31–33). In “responsive” interaction, one is not merely informed by his example, one is radically transformed by him and is called to act creatively and faithfully in response (Koester 2013, p. 88; Bennema 2014, pp. 273–74; van der Watt 2019, pp. 250, 257–58).

As Marxsen notes, Jesus’ statement that he is providing a ὑπόδειγμα was naturally to be taken more broadly than the specific action of washing feet (Prunet 1957, pp. 137–38). In all of life, Jesus was the ὑπόδειγμα of the community (Matera 1996, p. 105; Köstenberger 2004, p. 408). In this manner, the “exemplary character of Jesus” serves as “a prototype for his disciples” (Schrage 1982, p. 306). Therefore, the Gospel of John posits “a close connection between ethics and Christology, for it is in Christ that the character of God is
revealed and that people can clearly see what the right things are and how to do them” (Kanagaraj 2001, p. 60).

Thus far, we have noted a lack of Johannine propositional ethics, through the meager presence of imperatives in the Gospel of John. Then, through the occurrences of οφείλειν, the uses of καθώς, related moral themes, the two Johannine commandments, and the statements in John 13:14–15, we have established that the Johannine literature sustained a system of “exemplary” or mimetic ethics. As Olivier Prunet has written, “La norme de la vie morale revêt habituellement le visage de la loi. Mais dans la pratique, l’incarnation d’un idéal dans un individu exceptionnel joue un rôle non moins determinant. Une forte personnalité morale imprime sa marque à ses disciples, son histoire devient source d’inspiration, ses actes servent d’exemple” (Prunet 1957, p. 135). We now turn to focus upon the specific, theological topic of mimesis, which will lay a foundation for our own unique contribution of “desiderative mimesis” within Johannine ethics.

3. Results (Theological Corollaries and Desiderative Mimesis)

3.1. Mimesis and Moral Transformation

Scholars have frequently referenced the “implied” or “implicit” ethics of the Gospel of John (Kanagaraj 2001; Schroeder 2002; Liow 2007; Loader 2012, 2016);18 the ethical roles of story, narrative, and “narratological” characterization (Boersma 2003; Wagener 2015);19 the nature of having “fellowship” (van der Merwe 2006); rhetorical and dynamic uses of “imagery” (van der Watt 2006b);20 the nature of “radical love” (van der Watt 2006d); virtue ethics (Brickell 2012; Bennema 2013, 2017a); the foundational roles of “abiding” in Jesus and “following” him (Caragounis 2012; Collins 2017); sapiential themes (Glicksman 2012); “doing God’s will” and “doing God’s works” (Zimmermann 2012); linguistic fields of action (Weyer-Menkhoff 2014); eschatology or “living the in-between-time” (Balz 1986; Mabotja 2014; Moloney 2017); the rhetorical features of moral efficacy (Trozzo 2017a, 2017b); conceptual frameworks of time (Rahmsdorf 2019b); “discipleship as moral progress” (Shin 2019); and the “grammar” of ethics (van der Watt 2019); Others have investigated specific terms within Johannine ethics, such as “sin” (van der Merwe 2005); “holiness” (van der Merwe 2017a, 2017b); “work” (Löhr 2012); “life” (Stare 2012); the “good” and “true” (van der Watt 2011, 2013); and “obedience” (van der Merwe 2022).

Of course, the above listing is not exhaustive. A further (and fruitful) avenue of recent exploration has been the role of imitation or mimesis in Johannine ethics (Capes 2003; Burridge 2007, 2009; van der Watt 2016). In particular, Cornelis Bennema has developed this mimetic theme (Bennema 2014, 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2018, 2020). In his early work, Bennema (2016, p. 206) claimed that “mimetic ethics” in John had remained largely “uncharted territory”. He posited the following “working definition” of mimesis: “Person B represents or emulates person A in activity or state X in order to become like person A” (Bennema 2017a, pp. 25, 34, 193).

Bennema focuses upon both “state” and “activity” because the goal of mimesis is “moral transformation” as the imitator becomes like the exemplar in both identity and behavior (Bennema 2018, pp. 191–92). Bennema (2017a, p. 193) maintains that “Johannine
literature presents two types of mimesis—performative mimesis and existential mimesis”. In performative mimesis “believers imitate Jesus in their actions”, while in existential mimesis “the believer imitates Jesus in a particular state of being” (Bennema 2016, p. 215). Under this “mimesis of being”, Bennema (2016, pp. 215–17) lists “to be one”, “not to be of the world”, “to be sent”, “to be in”, and “to be where Jesus is”.

Bennema acknowledges that the exact term mimesis does not appear in the Gospel of John or Johannine epistles, except for 3 John 11 (μη μιμοῖο). Nevertheless, he focuses upon related linguistic expressions that indicate mimesis, including the employment (and interconnected use) of καθώς, καί, οὕτως, ὁμοίως, ὁμοίον, and ὁμοιότατον (Bennema 2017a, pp. 207–9). He contends that the conceptualization of mimesis is so central and integral to Johannine moral theology that “Johannine ethics is mimetic ethics” (Bennema 2018, p. 193; italics mine).

As Bennema himself recognizes, however, some avenues of further development remain to be explored (Bennema 2017a, pp. 204–6). For example, the notions of “disposition” and “desire” are key concepts within the virtue ethics tradition, yet desiderative facets do not play a role in Bennema’s dual construction of cognitive and behavioral virtues. As argued later in this essay, one could add “desires” to the mimesis of “identity” and “behavior”, and thus add “desiderative mimesis” to “existential mimesis” and “performative mimesis”. This desiderative mimesis bridges one’s being (identity) with one’s behavior (actions), as who one is changes what one desires and thus affects how one behaves.

3.2. Virtue Ethics and Pneumatological Transformation

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy explains, “A virtue is an excellent trait of character. It is a disposition, well entrenched in its possessor . . . to notice, expect, value, feel, desire, choose, act, and react in certain characteristic ways” (Hursthouse 2016; italics added). Eric Silverman (2019, p. 8) synopsizes, “Virtuous dispositions are excellent habitual patterns of thought, emotion, desire, and external behavior” (italics added). The essential linking of virtue ethics with dispositions and desires runs deep within the tradition. As Howard Curzer (2018, p. 106) elucidates, “Aristotle says that virtues and vices are dispositional passions as well as act in certain ways in certain situations (Curzer 2018, p. 106)”.

“Virtue ethics makes it clear that virtuous people also reliably desire and enjoy the right objects (i.e., act with certain motivations), and have knowledge (particularly about values). Elsewhere, Aristotle adds that they perceive in the right ways. To be virtuous, one must get all of these components of virtue right” (Curzer 2018, p. 106; italics added).

Following Thomas Aquinas, the virtue of love can be portrayed “as a disposition towards relationally appropriate acts of the will—consisting of desires for the ongoing good of persons and desires for ongoing proper bonds with persons—held as final ends” (Silverman 2019, pp. 3, 20; italics mine). Virtuous dispositions are, thus, properly ordered orientations of loves or desires. Virtues entail more than cognitive or rational aspects, even as they consist of more than behavioral activities. Virtues also encompass motivational facets like dispositional emotions and inclinational desires. In particular, “agent-based” forms of virtue ethics emphasize the motivational and dispositional qualities of agents (Hursthouse 2016).

The Paraclete plays a “central role” in Johannine ethics (van der Watt 2006a, p. 618). Although community members were expected to follow Jesus’ example, they were not expected to do so in their own power of resolve. The Fourth Gospel teaches that “People cannot set themselves in motion, activate themselves, and bring forth fruit on their own initiative” (Schrage 1982, p. 301). This is the lesson of the branches abiding in the vine (Skinner 2017b, pp. 34–36; Caragounis 2012). Jesus states, “Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:4–5).

Therefore, the example of Jesus is more than simply something “out there” to which the believer must strive. Rather, the example of Jesus is someone to whom the believer is
intimately related by faith (Kanagaraj 2001, pp. 58–59). Jesus abides in the believer, and the believer in Jesus. One might label Johannine ethics not merely as *imitatio Christi* (Barnette 1961, p. 80; van der Watt 2001) but as *unio Christi* (cf. Smith 2005, pp. 45, 48; Zimmermann 2012, p. 73). Especially in the case of love, as Eduard Lohse (1991, p. 170) explains, “Only the one who looks to Christ, believes his word, and abides in it can experience what love means”. Therefore, the imitation of Jesus becomes not only a form of ethics, but also a motive and power for the ethical life.22

Jesus’ Spirit empowers the believer in the process of conformity. The Gospel of John maintains that the believer enjoys the motivating and enabling presence and ministry of the Spirit (van der Watt 2001, pp. 143–47; Bennema 2017a, pp. 176–77). Jesus pledged that he would send the Paraclete to enable believers after his departure (John 14:17; 14:26). He also promised that the Paraclete would lead believers into all truth (John 16:13).

Put differently, Johannine mimesis is more than emulation (in which the externality of the exemplar remains sufficient) but entails an identity-formation through an internalized Spirit-transformation (van der Watt 2019, pp. 224–25). The Paraclete shapes the believer’s identity and behavior (as well as dispositional desires) and is a mnemonic agent in bringing Jesus’ teachings to remembrance. The Spirit thus ministers as an empowerment for ethical good within the believer. “La morale johannique, envisage comme une marche en Jésus, la vérité, ne se comprend pas sans l’assistance ou l’animation de l’Esprit à qui il revient de nous guider sur cette voie de la vérité” (Lazure 1965, p. 117).

The Spirit, however, empowers not only the individual but also the community (Hays 1996, p. 210).23 As Smith (2002, p. 117) has declared, “Johannine ethics and Christology are integrally related and closely tied to an understanding of Christian community” (cf. Nissen 1999). Within the Johannine literature, this believing community is contrasted with the “world” as a countercultural form of life and love (Meeks 1996, p. 324; cf. Rensberger 1989). In short, the Johannine community could be described as a “community of character” (see Nissen 1999, p. 200). As Nissen (1999, p. 212) comments, “The Johannine community is a community of love. In and through this love for one another the disciples are called to give public witness to the life-giving power of God’s love revealed in Jesus”. This Spirit-induced love relates to desiderative mimesis, an imitative notion interrelated with cognitive mimesis and behavioral mimesis, yet neglected within Johannine scholarship.

3.3. Cognitive, Behavioral, and Desiderative Mimesis

In 2017, Bennema published an essay in *Verbum et Ecclesia* entitled, “Virtue Ethics and the Johannine Writings”. Bennema’s investigation explores “two components of Johannine virtue ethics—virtuous behavior and virtuous thinking”, because Johannine ethics has “two components: (1) moral virtues that inform virtuous behavior; and (2) intellectual virtues that inform virtuous thinking” (Bennema 2017c, pp. 262, 266). Bennema (2017c, p. 275) thus structures his essay around “virtuous thinking” and “virtuous behavior”, which are “closely related”. “Virtuous thinking” involves the practice of “intellectual virtues” (like perception, knowledge/understanding, remembrance, and belief/fait) and aims at “the cognitive penetration of Jesus’s teaching in order to extract truth” (Bennema 2017c, pp. 272–75). The “intellectual virtues inform and direct virtuous behavior”, and in turn “virtuous behavior supports virtuous thinking” (Bennema 2017c, p. 275). “The practice of the intellectual meta-virtue of belief admits one into *zoë*, and the practice of the moral virtues affirms one’s participation in the divine life” (Bennema 2017c, p. 272). Bennema maintains that “the Spirit’s cognitive function has effectively enabled the community’s virtuous thinking”, and the Spirit also shapes the community’s moral vision and directs its actions (Bennema 2017c, p. 280).

Also in 2017, Bennema published an article in *In die Skriflig* entitled, “Moral Transformation in the Johannine Writings”. This article describes how “moral transformation” (which Bennema defines as “the shaping of, or change in, a person’s character and conduct”) involves how one must both “think and live” (Bennema 2017b, p. 1). Moral transformation thus embraces both character/identity and behavior (Bennema 2017b, p. 2).
According to Bennema, a virtue ethics approach “promotes moral thinking and behaviour” (Bennema 2017b, p. 6). Moral transformation entails both “a renewal of the mind and a corresponding change in behaviour” (Bennema 2017b, p. 30). “Moral reasoning” (or “thinking ‘from above’”) is a “renewed mindset” that “informs and shapes both thought and behaviour according to the beliefs, values and norms of the world above” (Bennema 2017b, pp. 2, 4; cf. Bennema 2018, pp. 187–88, 203). One’s “thinking” informs one’s behavior, and (in turn), moral behavior “strengthens and affirms moral thinking and character” (Bennema 2017b, p. 30).

Alongside the interrelationship of cognitive mimesis and behavioral mimesis, Bennema dialectically relates identity and behavior (Bennema 2017a, p. 164). The values of God’s character and world shape “the identity and behaviour of believers” (Bennema 2017b, p. 3). Therefore, “mimesis is intrinsically related to behaviour and identity” (Bennema 2017a, p. 169), and the Johannine writings “stress the correlation between identity and behaviour” (Bennema 2017b, p. 5). “Thus identity informs and demands corresponding behaviour, and conversely, behaviour reveals and validates identity” (Bennema 2017b, p. 5). “Thus there is a reciprocal, transformative dynamic between identity and behaviour; each has the potential to shape the other” (Bennema 2017b, p. 5). “We noted”, Bennema reiterates, “a transformative correlation between identity and behaviour where identity informs, shapes and drives behaviour, and in turn, behaviour reveals, affirms and strengthens identity” (Bennema 2017a, p. 161; cf. 163). “In short, there is a reciprocal, transformative dynamic between identity and behaviour; each has the potential to shape the other” (Bennema 2018, p. 190). “In conclusion, the believers’ moral transformation relates to the extent that they think and behave ‘from above’” (Bennema 2017b, p. 6; italics added).

It seems possible, however, to add “desiring” to “thinking” and “behaving”. This addition of “desires” emerges explicitly within the narrative of John 8, as well as appearing implicitly elsewhere in some other key texts.

3.4. Desires in John 8, 1 John 2, and John 3

It is certainly true that the Gospel of John is primarily structured by thinking (cognitive) and doing (behavioral) facets. “If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them” (John 13:17; italics added). Nevertheless, beyond norms (values, rules, and principles) and behavior (actions, habits, and lifestyles), the field of ethics also entails desiderative facets (inclinations, desires, and motivations). Cognitive linguists have explored the connections between emotions and ethics. Ethics cannot be divorced from emotions, and reason and emotions cannot be separated by an impermeable wall. The Johannine notion of love is not antithetical to the “emotional” orientation of the one loving, nor can these dispositional operations be fully understood on an individualistic, internalized basis completely divorced from the socio-communal context (Frey 2013).

Beth Stovell (2018, p. 436) has investigated the ethical role of emotions in moral transformation, including how the conceptualization of emotions relates to social identity. “While there has been some work in New Testament study on the relationship between social identity and emotions and an even smaller amount of focused work on social identity in relation to love in the Johannine corpus specifically, much of this analysis has not had the advantage of recent developments in identifying intergroup emotions and on studying the sociology of emotions” (Stovell 2018, p. 437). To complicate matters further, ancient contexts often reflected communal, intergroup perceptions of emotion and not merely individualized experiences of emotion (Stovell 2018, p. 437).

Within the Johannine literature, the believer is placed within the believing community (the family of God). When Jesus’ hearers inquire, “What must we do, to be doing the works [τι ἐργαζόμεθα] of God?”, he responds “This is the work [τὸ ἐργαῖον] of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent” (John 6:28–29). Jesus changes the plural of the inquiry (τα ἐργα) into a singular within his response (τὸ ἐργαῖον) (van der Watt 2011, p. 435). In this manner, he singularly focuses upon believing as “the necessary first action”, “the primary moral imperative”, “the basic ethical requirement”, and “the first and most crucial action required
to do the works of God” (Trozzo 2020, p. 296; Bennema 2017a, p. 153; van der Watt 2011, pp. 433, 435). “Since belief is the means by which Jesus’s followers are brought into unity with God, belief is the fundamental ethical action” (Trozzo 2020, p. 295; cf. Brown 2017).

Bennema (2017a, pp. 146–47) highlights the role of “believing” as a “moral act”, through which people attain ζωή or “life”, which is “the highest moral good”. This ζωή serves within Johannine ethics much like εὐδαιμονία acts as “the ultimate good” in Aristotelian ethics. The Word became incarnate so that believers “may have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10; Bennema 2017c, p. 265). Moreover, Johannine belief is not only accompanied by ζωή, but also by entry into the believing community as a locus of moral transformation. The enjoyment of ζωή begins with rebirth into God’s family, followed by a life journey of participation in the divine life (Bennema 2017c, p. 265).

As Lindsey Trozzo insists, abiding trust in Jesus (by its very nature) bears behavioral fruit (Trozzo 2020, p. 296; cf. Skinner 2017b, pp. 34–36). One could add that such abiding trust also manifests itself in dispositions, including a self-giving love that desires the well-being of others (Skinner 2017b, p. 36). Therefore, Johannine ethics addresses identity (who am I?) and behavior (how should I act?), but also dispositional inclinations (what should I desire?). Participation and fellowship in the proper family (the familia Dei) form and transform one’s desiderative orientation and inclinations.

The presence of “dispositional mimics” can be demonstrated through the exegesis of John 8, where the concept of “imitation” entails not only doing the “works” of one’s father but also possessing the same “desires” as one’s father (John 8:39–44). While “the Jews” (the adversarial leaders standing in opposition to Jesus) claimed Abraham as their father, their works demonstrated that the devil was their real father. If they had possessed God as their Father, they would have loved Jesus (John 8:42). In the only use of the word ἐπιθυμία in the Gospel, John 8:44 declares, “You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do [θέλετε ποιεῖν] your father’s desires [τὰς ἐπιθυμίας τοῦ πατρὸς υἱόν ἐστέ]” (cf. van der Watt 2019, pp. 122, 158).25 Bennema (2017a, p. 89) argues that the Jews’ “behaviour suggests that they are children of the devil and choose (θέλειν) to emulate their father”. However, in verse 44, the verb θέλετε is tied not only to “doing” or behavior (ποιεῖν), but also to desires (ἐπιθυμίας). Desiderative connotations also appear two verses earlier, when Jesus declares, “If God were your Father, you would love [ἠγάπατε] me, for I came from God and I am here” (John 8:42).

Bennema (2017a, pp. 88, 91) argues that John 8 speaks of a “filial mimics”, a “family mimics” that “lies beneath the surface” (cf. van der Watt 2019, p. 157). While the “Jews” claim Abraham as their father, Jesus retorted that “if this were the case their conduct would show it” (Bennema 2017a, p. 89). Bennema focuses upon this demonstrative conduct through highlighting that “their behaviour does not show they belong to God’s family”, because “their behaviour suggests they are children of the devil” (Bennema 2017a, p. 89). Regarding “familial mimics”, Bennema (2017a, p. 165) further declares that “mimics is a form of family ethics that shapes both character and conduct” (italics original). “This means mimics shapes both the believer’s behaviour and identity within the context of the divine family” (Bennema 2017a, p. 165).

In this manner, Bennema underscores the notions of behavior and identity within John 8 but overlooks desires. Bennema is not alone in neglecting the desiderative facets of Johannine mimics within the passage. Lindsey Trozzo (2020, p. 283) affirms that “we are particularly interested in the story’s ability to influence an audience-member to think or to act in a certain way” (italics added). In his focused exposition of John 8, Jan van der Watt (2010) highlights the ethical facets of “sin”, “following”, “walking”, “doing”, “abiding”, “keeping”, “love”, “truth”, “works”, “honor”, and “glory”. van der Watt (2010, p. 164) maintains, “The structure of the argument is based on the assumption of the interrelatedness of identity and behavior” (italics original). van der Watt (2010, p. 164) insists, “identity determines deeds and deeds show identity”. He particularly emphasizes the “proverbial-like remark” that “a child does what his father does”, which “forms the basis for the rest of the argumentation that takes behaviour as indication of identity” (van der Watt 2010, p. 164).
Father–Son relationship forms a “template” for unity in the Christian community (van der Watt 2010, p. 155). Bennema himself finds a correlation of identity and behavior in John 8:39–47, which twice employs an “if you were . . . you would do” construction (Bennema 2017b, p. 5). The passage contrasts “two mutually exclusive families”, having the devil as one’s father or having God as one’s Father, and “identity and behaviour are inseparable in either family” (Bennema 2017b, p. 5; 2018, p. 189). “Becoming part of God’s family does not only result in a new identity but also a new mode of conduct” (Bennema 2018, p. 189; italics added). “The believer’s participation in the divine relationship is dynamic, and sharing in this divine identity is profoundly transformative, affecting one’s being, thinking and doing” (Bennema 2017b, p. 6; italics added). Bennema follows these themes of familial identity and behavior into 1 John (1:6–7; 2:3–6; 2:9–11; 3:7–10; 3:17–19; 4:7–8; 12, 15; 5:2–3; cf. Frey 2013).

It would seem, however, that materials within 1 John 2:15–17 are equally relevant. “Do not love [ἀγαπάτε] the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves [ἀγάπη] the world, the love [ἀγάπη] of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desire [ἐπιθυμία] of the flesh and the desire [ἐπιθυμία] of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desire [ἐπιθυμία], but whoever does the will of God abides forever.” In this passage, one observes the interplay of “love [ἀγάπη]” and “desire [ἐπιθυμία]”. Yes, love is a mindset (cognitive) and an action (behavioral), but it also interrelates with desiderative facets, such as affections, attractions, and attachments.

Returning to the Gospel of John, the roles of attraction and aversion related to love and hatred are more fully developed in John 3:19–21. “And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved [ἡγάπησαν] the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates [μισεῖ] the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God”. While God’s children are attracted to the light, those having the devil as father love darkness and hate the light, and, therefore, display an aversion to the light (and have no desire to come to it).

Love serves as an inclination and motivation. The theme of contrasting loves (and love contrasted with hate) resurfaces on several occasions within the Gospel. “Whoever loves [ψιλὸν] his life loses it, and whoever hates [μισάω] his life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (John 12:25). John 12:42–43 narrates, “Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in him, but on account of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; for they loved [ἡγάπησαν] the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God”. A similarly dissuading and deterring “fear of the Jews [τῶν φόβου τῶν Ιουδαίων]” reappears in John 7:13; 19:38; and 20:19; cf 9:22.

On a positive note, 1 John 4:18 affirms the power of love over fear: “There is no fear [φόβος] in love [ἀγάπη], but perfect love [τὸ τελεία ἀγάπη] casts out fear [φόβον].” For fear [φόβος] has to do with punishment, and whoever fears [φοβοῦμαι] has not been perfected in love [τὸ τετελείωτα ἐν τῷ ἀγάπῃ].” Ultimately, as a manifestation of desiderative mimesis, the believer’s love is responsive to (and mimetic of) God’s love. The following verse succinctly declares, “We love [ἡγάπησαμεν] because he first loved [ἡγάπησεν] us” (1 John 4:19). Then the passage immediately broadens the scope of love: “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother” (1 John 4:20–21).
4. Conclusions

New Testament ethics remains a vibrant sub-field of biblical theology. However, as Allen Verhey (1984, p. 152) has pronounced, “To fashion the great variety of New Testament ethics into one, massive, undifferentiated whole is impossible and impoverishing”. Within the New Testament, “no single ethical structure or code or set of guidelines exists” but rather a “tapestry” (van der Watt 2006a, pp. 611, 632). Unlike the Synoptics, Johannine literature contains very few ethical propositions (such as imperatives, rules, or maxims). Instead, the Johannine literature stresses an exemplary ethics of mimesis. This emphasis is demonstrated by the uses of ὀφείλειν and καθώς, by the inclusion of relevant moral themes, by the description of the two Johannine commandments, and by the statements of John 13:14–15. Moreover, the indwelling Paraclete and abiding unity in the Son empowered believers in the Johannine community “to follow [ἀκολουθεῖν]” the example of Jesus (van der Watt 2019, p. 260).

Bennema acknowledges that “Johannine ethics have flourished in recent times”, but argues that “scholars have yet to reach the heart of the matter”, which he maintains is the role of mimesis or imitation in moral transformation. He insists, “mimesis is at the heart of Johannine ethics” (Bennema 2017a, pp. 23, 26; italics original). I have argued that Bennema’s own explanation of mimesis has fallen short of a full reflection of the “heart of the matter” in one regard, by focusing upon thinking (intellectual virtues) and behavior (moral virtues) to the neglect of dispositional desires (John 8:44; 1 John 2:15–17). In Johannine ethics, “love” (a key moral category) transforms one’s identity and shapes one’s behavior, but as a dispositional inclination love also impels and empowers.

All agree that “love” is a core component of Johannine ethics (Zimmermann 2012, p. 47). Is love a facet of “identity” or “behavior” (to use Bennema’s two facets of “moral transformation”), or both? Moreover, are there desiderative facets of love that can expand our understanding of the cognitive and behavioral facets of Johannine ethics? Indeed, love is manifested in affection, attraction, and attachment, as well as in mindset and action (cf. Jackson 2017, p. 593). In Johannine ethics, the Spirit brings Jesus’ teachings to cognitive remembrance (John 14:26; cf. Bennema 2017a, pp. 178–80, 189–91), but he also motivates and empowers through renewed and transformed desiderative dispositions and inclinations (cf. Pregent 2007, p. 209).30

The command to love as Jesus loved (John 15:12) can be construed as imitating the compassionate disposition of Jesus, and not only the resulting behavior. Love is a virtue that “should be tangible” in one’s behavior (Bennema 2017b, p. 30). Love is “a moral property” that compels one to act morally (Bennema 2017c, p. 269). Love is “a virtue to be practiced” as well (Bennema 2017c, p. 269). However, love is also a desiderative orientation of one’s affections, attractions, and attachments. A “desiderative mimesis” of orientation and inclination, although it may not stand out as prominently as “existential mimesis” and “performative mimesis” within Johannine ethics, nevertheless plays a secondary role in the immediate background. As one’s identity is transformed (who I am), one’s inclinations are renewed (what I desire), leading to one’s behavior being changed (how I act).31

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Notes
1 There have been exceptions. In 1901, John Haas referred to the “deep and wonderful ethic” of the Gospel of John (Haas 1901, p. 207).
3 Meeks (1996) went on to discuss the hurdles posed by the gospel’s narrative form, high Christology, dualistic sectarianism, and predestinarian theology.
Father–Son relationship forms a “template” for unity in the Johannine literature. Skinner (2017, p. 37) contends that the self-giving, missional, and open nature of the Father–Son relationship is similarly more prevalent than this single instance.

There is some question as to whether the first πατερέας in John 14:1 is an imperative or an indicative, since the second person plural of each has the same morphological form (see Morris 1971, pp. 636–38). John 5:39 and 15:18 entail similar indicative/imperative decisions of interpretation.

Other clues include the verb ἀγαπάω and the motivational function of ἐὰν ... μὴ (“if ... not” or “unless”). See (van der Watt 2001, pp. 132–34; van der Merwe 2017b, pp. 3, 6–7). Van der Merwe includes a helpful list of Johannine ἐὰν ... μὴ constructions on p. 7. A concept related to ἀγαπάω is the verb προσπάθειν (van der Watt 2010, p. 149; Leung 2018, pp. 125–26). One can also add the discussions of “reward” to the fabric of Johannine ethics (van der Merwe 2020, p. 8).

According to van der Watt (2018, p. 376), “Within the narrative of John every aspect of the Decalogue is found implicitly confirmed within the ideology of the narrative.” For example, moral norms of worshiping God, keeping the Sabbath and honoring parents foundationally lie beneath the surface of the Gospel, and the Gospel’s castigation of murder, bearing false witness, and adultery determines deeds and deeds show identity.” He particularly emphasizes the “proverbial–cognitive” and an action (behavioral), but it also interrelates with desiderative facets, such as desires (desiderative mimesis) in his exposition of John 8.

“Jesus gives his followers the new commandment of love as it is based on the example of his self-sacrificial death” (Boersma 2003, p. 119). The grain of wheat must first die before bearing fruit (John 12:24). See (van der Watt 2006b, pp. 436–40).

According to Johannes Nissen (1999), the ethics of the Gospel of John include, but are not limited to, exemplary ethics.

The phrase “mimetic chain” appears in Bennema (2017a, pp. 194, 200); “chain of imitation” comes from Bennema (2020, p. 106); in previous presentations, I have referred to the “laddering” of Johannine ethics.


Scholars have debated the chronological priority of the Gospel and Epistle (for an overview, see Trozzo 2017a, pp. 182–83).

On the Johannine use of ἐκ τοῦ λαίμος, see also Kanagaraj (2001, pp. 35–36).


von Wahlde (1990, p. 99) finds two commands in 1 John: to believe in Jesus and to love one another (cf. 1 John 3:23; Rensberger 1992, p. 299).

Skinner (2020, p. 292) distinguishes three Johannine imperatives: to believe, to love one another, and to follow; (cf. Collins 2017).

According to van der Watt (2018, p. 376), “Within the narrative of John every aspect of the Decalogue is found implicitly confirmed within the ideology of the narrative”. For example, moral norms of worshipping God, keeping the Sabbath and honoring parents foundationally lie beneath the surface of the Gospel, and the Gospel’s castigation of murder, bearing false witness, and adultery all assume the nature of ethics embodied in the Decalogue (see also van der Watt 2006d, pp. 110–14). Cf. 1 John 5:21.

“How to take one’s place within the biblical story” (Boersma 2003, p. 105). Moral transformation through characterization can include the role of vilification. “Vilification encourages positive choice by showing the negative aspects of what should not be chosen” (van der Watt 2010, p. 157).

Imagery is “social phenomena” that draw “a whole world of latent and implicit social knowledge into the narrative”, and thus they function as “pregnant vehicles for ethical arguments” (van der Watt 2006b, pp. 446–47).

On “abiding” and Johannine ethics, see (Matera 1996, pp. 107–8; van der Merwe 2017b, pp. 8–9). While the Synoptics emphasize discipleship as surrender, the Gospel of John focuses upon discipleship as abiding (Matera 1996, p. 116).

“Above all this motive unfolds in a new way that is only possible within Christianity, that is, by the imitation of Jesus” (Schneckenburg 1965, p. 165).

Perhaps the Johannine literature reflects the “sectarianism” of a community affected by conflict (see Perkins 1992; van der Watt 2006d, pp. 128–29). But see Skinner (2017b). Culepper (2017) widens the Johannine moral horizon to include “creation ethics”.

Similarly, Olivia Rahmsdorf (2019a, p. 474) affirms, “Johannine ethics, therefore, are not restricted to single, imitable deeds, but can embrace entire ways of living and life orientations. They are not restricted to rational discourse, but can also be discovered in their emotional, sensual, and spiritual dimensions”.

Admittedly, “desire” appears only once in the Gospel of John (John 8:44). Even so, by analogy, imitate/imitation occurs explicitly only once within the Johannine literature—in 3 John 11 (as recognized in Bennema 2020, p. 104); yet the conceptualization of imitation is similarly more prevalent than this single instance.
Imageries are “social phenomena” that draw “a whole world of latent and implicit social knowledge into the narrative”, and “a turning point” within Johannine scholarship.

The title of Pregeant’s work is Knowing Truth, Doing Good: Engaging New Testament Ethics. Our study has shown that a fuller framework could perhaps be Knowing Truth, Desiring Virtue, Doing Good: Engaging New Testament Ethics.

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