Blended Reciprocation:
Mat 5:38–42 in Narrative Perspective

Ole Davidsen

Le monde ne peut être dit « humain » que dans la mesure où il signifie quelque chose.¹

1. Introduction

In Hesiod’s *Works and Days*, we find a gnomic sentence of particular interest: “Give is good, Grab is bad, a giver of death.”² The structural semantics of this sentence can be paraphrased as follows: to give, to let go, is to be a giver of life; while to take, to take hold of, is to be a giver of death, a taker of life. Giving and taking are here related to the question of life and death in all its aspects as basic actions in humankind’s existence.

Although this brief wisdom saying represents early Greek ideas and values of c. 700 BC, it would be wrong to isolate it as a cultural idiom specific to that particular time and place. Whatever the specific style of expression, the semantics of Hesiod’s sentence are of general function and may even refer to a universal level of meaning in humankind’s existence. Both as words and as actions, giving and taking concern sociocultural anthropology; that is, they both raise the social-anthropological question of how we humans establish and maintain our social world, as well as the cultural-anthropological question of how we humans make sense of ourselves and of the world around us. I approach this complex field of research from a specific position and with a specific focus. My theoretical basis is narratology (narrative semiotics), and my center of study is the New Testament.

One way in which we recognize ourselves and make sense of the world around us is by telling stories. We have reason to believe that storytelling—telling about actions involving persons and values—is basic to humankind, and that it refers to general cognitive dispositions and to a narrative mind. Early scholars of narratology saw narrativity as a formal feature of the figurative discourses that we call stories. Narrative semiotics (and other literary theories), however, have revealed the abstract forms of organization—the narrative structures—that govern the production and reception of stories. These point beyond mere textual features. Thus narrativity refers to a fundamental language

¹ A. J. Greimas, *Sémantique structurale*, 5.

and thought form, and the study of stories gives us privileged access to the understanding of narrative thinking as a basic function of the human mind. A limited number of standard narrative structures seem to guide and organize our ideas about, evaluations of, and emotional responses to various phenomena. Human thought, value, and feeling all imply emplotment—in other words, narrativization.²

Giving and taking are basic actions in stories. Both are fundamentally linked to the value-perspective of the narrative mind, and so to ethical and juridical questions of good and evil, right and wrong. We therefore have reason to assume that structures of exchange involving giving or taking form a fundamental anthropological level in social human life. Prior research has in fact shown that a focus on giving and taking is a rewarding point of entry to the study of New Testament religion, not least to the fundamentals of ethics and law. In this article, I shall analyze the Fifth Antithesis of the Sermon on the Mount, Mat 5:38–42, with a focus on the narrative character of the ethical instruction. Using narrative theory, I shall identify and describe certain general features of the text’s narrative conceptualization of social action.

The Fifth Antithesis, which forms a paragraph of its own, is often thematically entitled “On Retaliation.”⁴ As the history of interpretation shows, however, defining a coherent theme here is not that simple. We assume, of course, that a compiler sensed some sort of coherence because he connected the material, but we can still distinguish disparate elements in it, and identifying retaliation as the unifying theme is questionable. The general instruction in v38–39a obviously differs from the concrete examples in v39b-42; and while the “you” in v39b-41 is the inferior party, in v42 it is the superior party:

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I
v38 You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.”
v39a But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer.
IIa
v39b But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also;
v40 and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well;
v41 and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.
IIb
v42 Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.⁵
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⁴ This is also the case in Hans Dieter Betz’s outstanding commentary, The Sermon on the Mount, 274.
⁵ As reference translation I use the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).
In formal terms, the argument is clear. Part I rhetorically presents thesis and antithesis, since the statement of v39a contradicts the statement of v38. Part II then gives examples of how to react properly in particular situations. The example in v42 (IIb), however, differs from that in v39b-41 (IIa).

Before commencing a close analysis of the text, I shall briefly compare Mat 5:38–48 with Luk 6:27–36. This will highlight the Matthean specifics and will also introduce certain concepts that are useful in the first description of some basic features of the person and role-configuration that I detect in the implied conceptual world of these stories.

Thematically, Luk 6:27–36 corresponds to Mat 5:38–48, with the addition of Mat 7:12 (the Golden Rule). We are dealing here with Q-material, but it is difficult to see whether Luke’s reproduction of this, wholly or partly, is closer to the source than the rendering we find in Matthew. We can, however, clearly point to some significant differences.

If we exclude Luk 6:31 and Mat 7:12, the most striking difference is that while Luke fuses the material in one thematic unity (6:27–36), Matthew divides it into two thematic unities, one “on retaliation” (5:38–42) and one “on love of enemy” (5:43–48). The instructions on “retaliation” (or rather, non-retaliation) and on “love of enemy” may very well be closely connected, but it is easier to assume that Luke has brought material together than that Matthew has divided it. Furthermore, it is quite possible that Luke’s reception may often have inspired the history of interpretation. Not only is the interpretation of Mat 5:38–42 based on Mat 5:43–48, but that of Mat 5:38–48 is based on Luk 6:27–36 (with its inclusion of the Golden Rule).

The rhetorical figure of antithesis in Matthew (5:38–39a) is absent in Luke, which is why it is often assumed to be Matthew’s addition. On the other hand, because of their specificity, the three examples in Mat 5:39b-41 appear to be a more authentic tradition than the two in Luk 6:29.

Luke is generalizing, and thereby urges the sayings’ *generic level of signification*. The violent blow in 6:29a could be the act of any violent person, and the taking/theft in 6:29b and 6:30b of any robber/thief. Matthew is more specific: the blow in 5:39b hits the right cheek, and the clothing in 5:40 is taken through the agency of the court. As we shall see, both these specifications are important for understanding the scenarios of the examples as source stories: as scenarios that seem to specify and limit the maxim’s social context as target story. It is also more plausible that Luke has
deleted the example of the extra mile (in 5:41) because it was too particular (it presumably refers to the Roman occupation of the country) than that Matthew has added it.

Matthew’s reproduction of the examples, however, is not without difficulties. According to the Hebrew Bible, the sequence of events in Luk 6:29b—taking the cloak/outer garment (τὸ ἱμάτιον)/giving the coat/undergarment (ὁ χιτών)—is thus more intelligible than the reverse order in Mat 5:40.

Finally, Mat 5:42 presents a problem of its own. It juxtaposes (a) giving (δίδωμι) money (a gift, almsgiving as an act of mercy) and (b) lending (δανίζω) it (lending as an act of mercy or private service rather than as an act of professional money-lending or transaction). Luk 6:30 (“Give to everyone who begs from you”) corresponds perfectly with Mat 5,42a. The question is whether Luk 6:35 (“lend, expecting nothing in return”) or Mat 5:42b (“do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you”) is the more authentic saying. Here it suffices to point to the fact that lending money always involves the risk of financial loss. The idea in both cases could be: do not turn your back on one who wishes to borrow from you for fear of financial loss, but be willing to take the risk. The intentional loan may become an unintended gift (or be modified, as when parents let their children off a debt), something that the giver might have recognized as right to begin with. That may explain why giving and lending are mentioned in the same breath. Lending is a particular version of giving with a specific stress on the obligation to repay/to return. To give to all who beg from you is to give and not to expect return; the parallel idea could therefore be to lend and not to expect return. Nor do we foresee the lender recovering his claim through the courts (cf. Mat 5:40), since we can discern a particular idea of group solidarity behind both maxims.

1.2. Person and Role-configuration
In order to facilitate a first, general view, in what follows I shall introduce a few analytical concepts and give a preliminary description of the persons and interactive roles involved in the sayings. As an entry example, I shall use the condensed story that manifests itself in the instruction: “If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.”

1.2.1 Protagonist/Antagonist and Actor/Partner
The implied addressee of the saying (the “you”) is acting in an imagined story, a sequence of events involving two persons in two connected stages. In the first of these, the action, a person P2 strikes a person P1 (representing the addressee). In the second stage, the reaction, P1 offers P2 the other
cheek. I name the striker P2 and the person struck P1 because P1 is more significant than P2. According to the story’s narrative point of view and value, P1 is the story’s protagonist (its central character P+), while P2 is its antagonist (P−; the Greek agōnistēs, a combatant, is implicit in both these terms and points to a polemical aspect). The narrator is in solidarity with P1, and the events in question are evaluated as either good or bad from the narrator’s viewpoint.

Sometimes, however, the more neutral terms actor and partner may be more appropriate. The basic meaning of the concept “partner” is “the other half,” in this case of the confrontational interaction. The two persons are partners to one another in this social interconnection. The designation actor or partner is determined by the point of view of the in-group (the Jesus movement) and of the self of the individual member of that group: once we identify the actor as the protagonist and the partner as the antagonist, we have accepted the narrator’s viewpoint.

6 It is difficult to find a neutral designation for the other person, who appears as either opponent or ally (whether virtual, actualized, or realized). The concept “neighbor,” meaning either “fellow citizen” (cf. “foreigner”) or “friend” (cf. “enemy”), is no solution, but part of the problem. The concept “the other” is better. All Jews are fellow citizens to one another; but, embedded in the shared identity, we find oppositional roles like friend or enemy in different social contexts. This will always be the case where people disagree politically (that is, where they differ on how to protect and advance, formally or informally, particular ideas or goals affecting people’s daily lives), and it is hard to imagine a place without such disagreements. The difference between the other and myself replicates the difference between the out-group and my in-group.

1.2.2. Subject of Being and Subject of Doing
Every person in a story is at times subject of being, at others subject of doing. The subject of being (or the patient) is the person undergoing an action (for example being struck), while the subject of doing (or the agent) is the person performing the action (for example striking someone). A story may be now about the protagonist, now about the antagonist, but it will typically focus on the protagonist, sometimes as subject of being and sometimes subject of doing. It is the protagonist’s story that we are told: the story is told from the value-perspective of the protagonist.

In our example, the two stages of the sequence are connected in an action–reaction schema. In the action, the antagonist is the subject of doing when he strikes the protagonist as subject of being. In the reaction, the roles are reversed. Here the protagonist is the subject of doing as he offers his other cheek to the antagonist as subject of being. The implicit story, however, focuses on the protagonist, now as the subject of the antagonist’s action (being struck, distressed, forced, urged), now as the subject of doing, himself performing the acting (offering, surrendering, giving, lending).
1.2.3. Inferior and Superior

Another relevant opposition needs to be introduced. The three examples in part IIa (v39b-41) are characterized by the antagonist’s use of power and of the enforcement of the law, which defines the antagonist as superior and the protagonist as inferior with regard to established social command and authority. As we shall see, the antagonist may act officially and legally; what is contested by the protagonist’s reaction is the legitimacy of the established social order.

Status roles are therefore determined and may be reversed according to perspective. P2, the striker, is the protagonist of his own story, and understands himself as superior to the antagonist he is slapping; he represents the value system of the established society. P1, the person struck, is likewise the protagonist of his own story, and by his reaction—he believes in his self-esteem—he demonstrates his superiority (or at least equality); he represents the value system of an alternative subculture. Because of the narrator’s perspective, our text presents P1 as the real protagonist. In the three examples in v39b-41, P2 has the physical power and legal right, but not the moral right. P1 has the moral right on his side, but neither the physical power nor the legal right. And yet he is able to respond to defend his honor and self-esteem.

The last example, v42 in IIb, differs from previous ones in that the addressee (P1) is the superior and the other (P2) the inferior with regard to economic and social power. The use of “antagonist” and “protagonist” to describe the encounter between an importunate person and a virtual giver/lender may seem too rigid, but formally the addressee is still the protagonist as the agent of the implicit story.

1.2.3 Evil and Good

Finally, the text distinguishes between “evil” and “good,” because the antagonist P2 in IIa is seen as a representative of evil and is best understood as a human person, an evildoer, acting malevolently (cf. κακοποιέω) toward the protagonist P1 as subject of being. As subject of doing, on the other hand, the protagonist is encouraged/admonished to act benevolently (cf. ἀγαθοποιέω) toward the

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7 Although beyond the scope of this article, I wish to point to two sociological theories which seem highly relevant for understanding this particular strategy. On the one hand, “it is all a question of honor” (and shame), why Bruce J. Malina’s interpretation of the challenge–response pattern comes to mind; cf. The New Testament World, 27-57. On the other hand, the idea of self-stigmatization may also be significant; cf. Helmuth Mödritzer, Stigma und Charisma; further Gerd Theißen, Die Religion, 143-144; and Erleben und Verhalten, 424.
antagonist. In v42 it might be better to distinguish between actor and partner, since the pleading person is hardly seen as an enemy in any strict sense. And yet to give and to lend is to treat the partner as a friend.

Despite the text’s clear formal argument, it is, as mentioned, not easy to establish a coherent account of its meaning. This is probably due to the text’s history of tradition (the collection of heterogeneous material from different contexts) and compilation (reformulation and recontextualization of the material). The principal challenge, however, is in my view the text’s brief narrative exposition, which tends to mask the fact that the ethical instructions are based on a conception by a narrative mind of the meaningful act as social exchange.

2. An Elementary Model for Social Exchange

Mat 5:38–42 represents a normative ethics, since the text is giving instruction in how to behave. Using narrative theory, I shall identify and describe the general features of the text’s view of ethical action. Examinations have shown that the way in which the narrative mind conceives of such social ethical actions displays some general traits which can be summarized in the following model.8

We can distinguish between two forms of basic action. On the one hand, there is social interaction taking the form of an exchange of material objects. Giving and taking are fundamental acts referring to an idea of socially required reciprocity. Social interdependency (reciprocity, mutual dependence) implies an obligation to give, receive, and repay (as emphasized by Marcel Mauss). But we also encounter an obligation to take, which becomes clear when we recognize that the exchange of giving and taking is equivalent to the exchange of services (favors) and injuries (damage): giving corresponds to serving as taking corresponds to injuring. Furthermore, we need to recognize that the passive forms of action/response—non-giving and non-taking as well as non-serving and non-injuring—are as significant as the active forms.

In the context of friendship, the social bond calls for the exchange of gifts and services. With an enemy, on the other hand, the exchange is of acts of theft and of injury. Hence I offer the following definition of friend and enemy. A friend is someone from whom one has received, is receiving, or can expect to receive a gift/service, which one is both obliged to and ready to reciprocate. Similarly, an enemy is someone from whom one has received, is receiving, or can expect to receive a

taking/injury, which one is obliged to and ready to reciprocate. Thus the exchanges constitute friendship and enmity, and failure to reciprocate is a weakened form both of service and of injury.

The moral of this prototypical social economy of exchange is quite simple: morals prescribe giving and serving, and prohibit taking and injuring. And yet morals also prescribe the reciprocation of an illegitimate taking/injury (offense, evil-doing) with a legitimate taking/injury (revenge/punishment). 9

I summarize some of this conception of exchange or reciprocity in an elementary model consisting of two syntagmatic schemas:

Schema A. Giving: Positive reciprocity. (1) P1 renders P2 a gift/service. (2) This opening good deed implies that P2 now owes P1 a gift/service. P2 is under obligation to grant P1 a gift/service. P1 can claim and expect to receive a gift/service from P2. (3) When P2 grants P1 a gift/service, the account is in principle in balance. (4) If P2 does not grant P1 a gift/service, we have a weak form of taking/injury, which could provoke Schema B, whereby P1 inflicts a taking/injury upon P2.

Schema B. Taking: Negative reciprocity. (1) P1 inflicts a taking/injury upon P2. (2) This opening evil action implies that P2 owes P1 a taking/injury. P2 has the right to inflict a taking/injury upon P1. P1 is under obligation to and can expect to receive a taking/injury from P2. (3) When P2 inflicts a taking/injury upon P1, the account is in principle in just balance. (4) If P2 does not inflict a taking/injury upon P1, we have a weak form of gift/service, which could provoke Schema A: P1 grants P2 a gift/service.

Such general or generic schemas can assume several different concrete and more complex forms, in stories as in real life. But they give us a basis for understanding the elementary form and function of exchange according to the narrative mind and its folk theory of justice. And not least, they give us a clear picture of the moral order that Jesus’ sermon presupposes and which he sets himself against.

3. Narrative Analysis of Mat 5:38–39a: Lex Talionis and the Reaction to Evil

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9 The World Health Organization’s definition of violence gives the quintessential idea of what taking and injuring are referring to: “Violence is the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, which either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation.” (www.who.int/topics/violence/en/). I would like to add dispossession in the form of taking, with or without the use or threat of violence (as in, respectively, robbery and theft).
I am assuming that the ethical instructions in the sayings are based on a conception by a narrative mind of the meaningful act as social exchange. My analysis will therefore focus on narrative action, a concept with two faces. Stories recount persons’ doing and letting (non-doing), which is why narrative theory is a theory of meaningful action. On the one hand, the story’s actions are meaningful because a narrative mind is representing and interpreting them in an imagined story-world with persons and values; on the other hand, we perceive and interpret our social action-world through narrative conceptual schemas. Thus the semio-narrative approach may contribute to a general theory of action which includes cognitive/psychological and sociological dimensions. Here, however, the focus will be on narratively represented action rather than historical social praxis.

3.1. Lex Talionis: The Law of Retaliation (5:38)
The opening of this passage elucidates the speech’s polemical structure. The first saying (enunciate; v38) refers to an enunciation in the form of a rule stated by a messenger speaking on behalf of the accountable legislative power. We are not told who said “an eye for an eye,” but we know that it is ancient tradition, ratified by the scriptures (Exo 21:22–25; Lev 24:19–20; Deu 19:18–21). God himself seems to have established the legal principle and usage called Lex or Ius talionis, the law of retaliation, which says that “anyone who maims another shall suffer the same injury in return: fracture for fracture (...); the injury inflicted is the injury to be suffered” (Lev 24:19–20). Further, the harming person “shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe” (Exo 21:23–25). The management of this rigid law has no place for mercy: “show no pity” (Deu 19:21). Thus we can identify Moses as the messenger of God, the authority who guarantees the proclamation’s validity and truth. On behalf of God, Moses stated a rule; this however is now negated and substituted by another, stated by Jesus, also on God’s behalf. As a new authority, Matthew’s Jesus contradicts the tradition, although in order “not to abolish but to fulfill” (Mat 5:17). So let us have a closer look at this principle of retaliation.

Since Matthew uses the saying as a condensed maxim with generic sense, it seems unnecessary to deal more closely with the legal theory and praxis of the Lex talionis. In his case, the literal meaning of the saying is quite clear. Instead, we need to focus on the concrete, figurative expression of the principle of retaliation. We shall therefore understand the saying as a sentence that implies a figurative story with a generic level of signification. We thus realize that “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” refers to a sequence of events in which a person P2 has injured another person P1, so that P1 has the right (and duty) to inflict the same injury on P2.
3.1.1. Measure for Measure

We detect two aspects in the elliptical saying “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” First, an injury must be matched by an injury; second, the returned injury should be of exactly the same kind. This double aspect represents an ideal of justice and fairness which appears in the Hebrew Bible as a sort of legal procedure. Such a legal system implies the existence of a legislative, judicial, and executive (sanctioning) power. However, it is difficult to imagine how a (weakly institutionalized) legal system would be able to implement such a penal system, which rather represents a folk theory of justice (with some social customary praxis for private revenge between individuals and their associates, whether these are family, kin, or allies). Legal systems deal with cases of bodily harm by using compensation in various forms. Literally, in fact, only “a life for a life” (in the form of the death penalty) seems to be much in use (although even here we meet the possibility of compensation in the form of a ransom). The concept of retaliation, however, is still intact, and the notion of equal for equal and measure for measure in the fixing of the punishment is still at work, even when modified by the idea of balance through compensation.

Thus as a principle of retaliation, Lex talionis focuses on negative reciprocity (cf. the above model for social exchange). The revenge or punishment is to be “evil for evil” (equal for equal) and of the same degree of severity (measure for measure). In praxis, people settle cases by agreeing a compensation. I have no room for a more extensive examination of this principle, but will briefly analyze and comment below on one example that will give me the opportunity to demonstrate essential aspects of method as well as matter.

3.1.2. A Model Example: Exo 21:26–27

According to Exo 21:26–27, the law says: “When a slave-owner strikes the eye of a male or female slave, destroying it, the owner shall let the slave go, a free person, to compensate for the eye. If the owner knocks out a tooth of a male or female slave, the slave shall be let go, a free person, to compensate for the tooth.”

Taken literally, the Lex talionis orders the slave to take revenge on the slave-owner by destroying one of his eyes. To avert this, the injuring party must give the injured party an amount of money or something else as acceptable compensation. It is for the (more or less institutionalized) court to fix the content of the compensation, but it is at least as important to declare the parties’ mutual account definitively closed as soon as compensation is paid, so that a long vendetta may be
The judicial system thus represents (to some degree) a more civil or more human way of resolving conflicts than the private vengeance according to which might makes right; but the talionis principle is still in evidence. The law of retaliation demands the infliction of an equivalent injury upon the person (P2) who caused the original damage. We would typically say that payment for the damage is a compensation for the caused injury. The victim (P1) is compensated for his/her loss.

However, a different interpretation is also possible: to see the compensation as equivalent to damage inflicted upon the person (P2) who injured the original victim (P1). In this interpretation, the person causing the damage is compensated as well. Instead of losing an eye, the slave-owner in our model example gets off with losing a slave.

We can methodologically analyze our model case using the schema for negative reciprocity (cf. above the model for social exchange). When the owner (P1) injures his slave (P2), damaging an eye or a tooth, the slave (P2) has the right to inflict an identical injury (damaging an eye or a tooth) upon the owner (P1). The owner (P1) is under obligation to and can expect to receive a taking/injury from the slave (P2). When the slave (P2) inflicts a taking/injury upon the owner (P1), the account is in principle in just balance and the parties are even.

However, a pragmatic modification appears. The slave is not allowed to inflict an identical injury upon the owner. Rather than bodily harm, the owner suffers pecuniary loss: he loses his slave. I explain the underlying logic of this displacement from bodily harm to monetary loss as follows. The slave (P2) refrains from inflicting an injury upon the owner (P1). This abstention corresponds with a weak version of rendering a gift/service (not injuring), which evokes the positive reciprocity schema. The owner (P1) is under obligation to render the slave (P2) a gift/service. The slave can claim and expect to receive a gift/service from the owner. When the owner (P1) grants the slave (P2) a gift/service (monetary compensation or freedom), the account is in principle in just balance. The parties are even: they no longer have any claim on each other, but are both set free.

In the case of difference in power and status, the fixing of the retaliation is of special importance. As a social inferior, the victim requires help from the court to ensure that he or she has received their rights, a penalty for the damage is imposed and that compensation is fair and effectual.

A propos the relationship between might and right in the social game, one might wonder what would happen if a slave were to strike and destroy his or her owner’s eye. Aristotle was well aware of the asymmetry between the idea of equal reciprocation and the established system of justice, with its social hierarchy of inferiors and superiors. In *Nicomachean Ethics* (1132b 28–31), he mentions that “if an officer strikes a man, it is wrong for the man to strike him back; and if a man strikes an officer, it is not enough for the officer to strike him, but he ought to be punished as well”; see *Betz, The Sermon on the Mount*, 287.
This modification does not revoke the principle of retaliation. The offender still has to suffer some harm, and the rule that loss must be repaid with loss is still in evidence. Rather than being injured, however, the offender is forced to give the victim something. The compensation to be paid by the offender is for the bodily harm he himself should have suffered (he is paying himself off, as it were). Therefore, one may consider whether the (forced or free) abstention from bodily harm in favor of compensation implies a sort of mercy or pity (as when a death penalty, for example, is reduced to exile). The non-taking of the offender’s eye or tooth is a weak version of giving, to be repaid by a further gift or service: in this case, the owner freeing the slave (a loss of property). In any case, a sort of reconciliation seems to be established by the offender’s exemplary injury or expiation.

3.2. Reaction to Evil (5:39a)
It is beyond doubt that 5:39a contradicts 5:38. The question concerns the meaning of the prohibition μὴ ἄντιστῆναι. What it is that one should refrain from doing toward τῷ πονηρῷ, i.e. the person who acts evilly (πονηρός; cf. κακοποιῶ) toward you? The challenge is the verb ἀνθίστημι, which means to stand up to, to resist another. The use of this verb points to a military confrontation in which a combatant stands ready to defy an enemy. Even if the use of military language may not be quite accidental (the Jesus movement could perceive its relation to the social establishment as a displaced replication of the relation between Israel and the Roman Empire), we need not take the martial tone too literally: confrontations are often expressed metaphorically in combat vocabulary. The idea could simply be: although the other has treated you as an enemy, do not react as an opponent (ἄντιστάτης) or enemy of the other, but as a friend.

3.2.1. Negative and Positive Reciprocation
In his examination, Hans Dieter Betz concludes that μὴ ἄντιστῆναι can only mean “Do not retaliate,” since the Lex talionis as a judicial and moral principle concerns retaliation: how to react to a caused harm so that justice is done (Betz, 280). By “retaliation” he understands “to return evil with evil” (Betz, 281). Hence, the moral rule orders one to abstain from returning evil with evil: to abstain from acting actively to take or injure when one is oneself the victim of taking and/or injuring.

12 The context shows that concrete persons are in mind; persons, however, who represent the malice of the world, if not simply the evil one, i.e. the Devil (Mat 13:19).
The question is, however, whether one should avoid acting actively in any way, even in the form of giving/serving. In 5:39b-41, all three examples comprise a clear call for active acting with precisely the form of giving/serving. Thus in the inner context of 5:38–41, the meaning cannot be that one should stay passive and simply give in (rather than stand up) to the offender. In response to evil, non-retaliation is a possibility, and since retaliation means returning an injury for an injury (or a taking with a taking), non-violence, refraining from physical violence intended to cause bodily harm (or usurpation), is also a possibility; but neither non-resistance nor non-reciprocation are possibilities. We have no prohibition on reciprocation.

In order to explain the blended nature of the sayings in 5:39b-41, we need to clarify the underlying semantic logic. A saying like “Return evil for evil” affirms a qualified (“evil for evil”) action (“return”). When we counter this saying with the negated version, “Do not return evil for evil,” we may either focus on the action in an unqualified sense, “Do not return at all,” or in a qualified sense, “Do not return evil for evil.” In the last instance, we might expect an affirmation of the semantic opposition to “evil,” as in the saying “Do not return evil for evil, but return evil with good”.

An illustration of the system of signification in which “to give/to serve” and “to take/to injure” mutually define each other may help to clarify the case:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Doing</th>
<th>Non-Doing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Giving/Serving</td>
<td>No Giving/Serving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking/Injuring</td>
<td>No Taking/Injuring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Evil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act</td>
<td>Non-Act</td>
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</tbody>
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We can identify four basic acts in this semantic universe:

- Positive active acting (giving/serving)
- Positive passive acting (not taking/not injuring)
- Negative active acting (taking/injuring)
- Negative passive acting (not giving/not serving)
From the context, we understand that our protagonist is the victim of an antagonist’s negative active acting in the form either of taking or injuring: the question is how to respond to that act. The lex talionis asserts that one should return a negative active action with a negative active action. Jesus negates this assertion: “Do not retaliate,” i.e. abstain from taking and/or injuring, which corresponds to a positive passive acting. Here we have a semantic leap from the negative to the positive half, from evil to good, and in a closed circuit (or a semantic world of limited values), the negation will tend toward the implied assertion: “Return evil with good.”

Despite some primitive judicial institutionalization, retaliation is seen as synonymous with (private) revenge or vengeance. A negative active act (as action) is returned by a negative active act (as reaction), corresponding to Lex talionis. However, this is not the only sort of possible return, which is why it is better to speak more generally of positive and negative forms of reciprocity, i.e. the behavior with which people tend to respond to each other. I shall thus focus on reciprocation in the sense of “a return in kind or of like value,” and on reciprocate in the sense of “to do (something) for or to someone who has done something similar for or to you” (Merriam-Webster).

This approach, distinguishing between positive and negative reciprocation, is justified by the New Testament’s use of language. In Rom 12:17 we find the saying “Do not repay anyone evil for evil” using the verb ἀποδίωμι, which literally means “to give back” and here means “to retaliate” (to take revenge). Elsewhere, however, for example in Mat 6:4 and 6:6, it means “to reward.” Likewise, in Rom 12:19 “to revenge” (ἐκδικέω) and “to repay” (ἀνταποδίωμι) are used as synonyms for negative reciprocation, while in Luk 14:14 ἀνταποδίωμι means “to reward,” to return/repay a gift/service, and thus points to positive reciprocation (giving in return). This clarification helps us to see that the three sayings are of a blended nature, because they represent a crossover between two regular modes of reciprocation.

3.2.2. The Three Realms/Orders of Being
Yet another short detour may prove to be a short cut to a more comprehensive understanding. I shall therefore take a quick look at the Sixth Antithesis in Mat 5:43–44: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies...”

We have seen that giving corresponds to serving, as taking corresponds to injuring. Now, in the perspective of action, “to hate” and “to love” are “to take/injure” and “to give/serve,” and according to the ordinary standards, one hates/injures one’s enemies and loves/serves one’s friends.
This is exactly what the thesis states: “You shall love your neighbor [friend/ally] and hate your enemy.” On the contrary, the antithesis states: “Love your enemies.” Here I am not asking what enemies Jesus (or Matthew) might have had in mind, but rather regard this last saying as an alternative general ethical rule. As a result, we can detect a semantic structure based on the combination of the two dichotomies friend/enemy and love/hate, pointing to three kingdoms or realms (orders of being):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Realm of Mercy</th>
<th>The Realm of Justice</th>
<th>The Realm of Evil</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Love your enemies</td>
<td>Love your friends</td>
<td>Hate your enemies</td>
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<td>Hate your friends</td>
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The **Realm of Justice** represents the ordinary rule which every society follows, in order to prevent social chaos or the **Realm of Evil**, in which the one takes from the other and all violently hate their neighbor in a war of all against all. Jesus proclaims another sort of social anomaly, a positive form of lawlessness, when he demands the sort of exchange which takes place in the **Realm of Mercy**.

The **Realm of Justice** subsumes two regular (even, equal) modes of reciprocation: to love your friend is to return “good with good” (positive active acting with positive active acting), and to hate your enemy is to return “evil with evil” (negative active acting with negative active acting).\(^{13}\)

Outside this regular domain, we find two irregular (uneven, unequal) modes of reciprocation. In the **Realm of Evil**, people will hate their friends (neighbors, family, in-group members, and allies/supporters of any kind) and return “good with evil.” In the **Realm of Evil** we find a suspension of good-for-good justice for the sake of one’s own gain (reflexive protection/progression). In the **Realm of**

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\(^{13}\) As said, a non-taking is a weak version of giving, as a non-giving is a weak version of taking. A similar structure holds for serving/injuring. In opposition to a doing we have a non-doing (cf. the schema above). In his book *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 90, Charles H. Talbert mentions an example, *b. Yoma* 23a, which illustrates the signification of such a non-doing as interactive social action, in this case retaliation motivated by hostility and thirst for revenge: “What is revenge and what is bearing a grudge? If one [P1] says to his fellow [P2]: Lend me your sickle, and he replies No, and tomorrow the second comes to the first and says: Lend me your axe! And he replies: I will not lend it to you, just as you would not lend me your sickle, that is revenge.” In this example, we have a combination of giving and serving, even if the lending is a particular kind of gift/service (P1 could have said, “Could you do me a favor and lend me your sickle?”). We can only guess why P2 refuses the request (for the most, stories are silent on the motivation for opening actions), but his non-giving/non-serving is a clear case of a negative passive acting. The example further demonstrates that the refutation of a request for lending/serving among neighbors is a weak version of evil/enmity. Finally, it is particularly illustrative because most of humankind’s moral failures are passive sins of omission: not to give, or not to serve, as the situation demands.
Mercy (or Love), people will love their enemies (foreigners, strangers, out-group members, and adversaries/opponents of any kind) and return “evil with good.” In the Realm of Mercy, we find a suspension of evil-for-evil justice for the sake of the other’s gain (transitive protection or progression):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Realm of Mercy</th>
<th>The Realm of Justice</th>
<th>The Realm of Evil</th>
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<tr>
<td>Return good for evil</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Return evil for evil</td>
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</table>

This makes perfect sense when it comes to Mat 5:43–49 and Luk 6:27–36. It may even catch the general sense of the admonition in Rom 12:14–21. We have reason to believe that the tradition which Matthew passes on more or less verbatim in 5:38–48 was influenced by thoughts similar to those expressed in Rom 12:14;17–21 (v17, “do not repay anyone evil for evil,” v19 “never avenge yourselves,” v21, “do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good”). Here there is an opposition between good (ἀγαθός) and evil (κακός), and the martial verb “to overcome” is used (νικάω; “to conquer” our own anger and thirst for revenge or/and the opponent’s attitude/conduct by taking him to task). We may thus restate the meaning of 5:38–39a as follows: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Repay evil for evil.’ But I tell you, do not repay anyone evil for evil, but return evil with good.” The basic meaning of “love of enemies” could simply be “overcome hostility with friendship,” “overcome evil with good.” An act of evil should be met with an act of good that is neither passivity (abstaining from action, inaction) nor expected activity (action as negative reciprocity, taking or injuring).

Things get a bit more complicated when we look at Mat 5:39b-41. There we do have an active reaction to the enemy’s action, since the protagonist is encouraged to return evil with good. As we shall see, however, this reciprocation is of a particular, humorous nature; it is also part of an offensive (rather than defensive) and aggressive (rather than peaceful) social strategy.

4. Narrative Analysis of Mat 5:39b-41: Three Examples of Proactive Resistance

Mat 5:39b-41 presents three examples of how to react to a doer’s evil action. We have interaction (action → reaction) involving two persons, a subject P1 as the protagonist and an anti-subject P2 as the antagonist (since the narrator’s point of view is in accordance with one of these persons, P1). The initiating action is viewed as an offense against the protagonist, and the question is how he should react to the antagonist (the offender, adversary, opponent, and enemy). In order to clarify the
underlying game between the characters, however, I shall distinguish between the offended *actor* (P1) and the offending *partner* (P2). The partner inflicts an injury upon the actor: he slaps the actor’s face, takes his cloak, and forces him to perform some service. From the actor’s point of view, the partner’s action is an evil action, that is, an action that either represses or destroys the actor’s life and life possibilities. The actor becomes a victim of repression or degression in the form of taking or injuring.

On the other hand, the partner may understand his action differently. As stated earlier, morals prescribe giving and serving; morals prohibit taking and injuring. However, morals also prescribe the reciprocation of an illegitimate taking/injury (offense) by a legitimate taking/injury (revenge/punishment). The partner may see the actor as an offender/enemy/opponent and his own act as a legitimate return, as revenge or punishment for a previous doing or non-doing on the part of the actor. In that case, we have a polemical relation not only between individuals, but between two opposed perspectives concerning right and wrong. Taking and injuring are bad or evil in a general moral perspective, since they repress or destroy a person’s life and life possibilities. They are, however, ethically justified as legitimate actions in return for illegitimate actions. In general, it is considered morally right and just to punish an evildoer.

The exhortation to “pray for those who persecute you” (5:44; cf. Rom 12:14) points to a context in which the actors addressed are at risk of being injured verbally and/or physically (regarding life, health, property, and honor—either as private revenge by an individual or a mob or as public punishment by court of law). We may think of members of the early Jesus movement or of members of Matthew’s community (if not of social classes regarding themselves as victims of a repressive and degressive society under heavy Roman influence). In any case, the partner regards the actor as an inferior person worthy of contempt and hatred, almost an outlaw whom no one would defend in case of injustice.

The actor’s self-esteem may be quite the opposite. Deprived of his right to live with social and personal integrity and dignity, the actor develops a particular strategy for defense. He is powerless to overcome his enemy in a physical fight—whether because he lacks the means or is uncertain of the outcome or because of ethical restraints ruling out the use of violence/retaliation. Whatever the motive (and even if a virtue is made of necessity), non-violence is prescribed.
This is the point in Walter Wink’s article, “Neither Passivity nor Violence,” and in what follows I shall discuss Wink’s interpretation of the three examples. In order to understand the examples’ hypothetical interactions, we will need to investigate the meaning of the partner’s action and the actor’s reaction.

4.1. Turn the Other Cheek (Mat 5:39b)
The first example concerns a special kind of injury: “If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.” Walter Wink founds his interpretation of the antagonist’s action on the “backhand argument”. In the default situation, the partner is using his right hand; in a face-to-face situation, the only way to strike the actor’s right cheek would therefore be with the back of the hand. Such a blow has its own meaning as gesture. The intention with a backhand slap is not to injure the body as with a blow of a fist, but to hurt the person’s self, to insult and to humiliate, to put the actor in the right place. People with socially recognized power (masters, husbands, parents, men, and Roman and Jewish authorities) might use the backhand strike to reprove their inferiors in a hierarchical system of social class, ethnic identity, status, gender, and age. The inferior’s normal response to a blow of this kind would be submission, because retaliation would be suicidal, invoking veritable reprisals. This socially degrading enactment of inequality had its limited sphere of application. Striking an equal, a peer, was not acceptable conduct and would be subject to a serious fine (105).

Following Wink’s theory, I conclude that the partner is the superior and the actor the inferior person, according to the reigning social hierarchy of status. By his reaction, however, the actor bravely contradicts this social value system.

Wink founds his interpretation of the protagonist’s reaction on the “neither passivity nor violence” argument. The actor’s turning of the other cheek is itself a gesture laden with meaning. It is an offering, but a complex (waspish) gift of a kind: ostensibly the invitation to further humiliation, yet also a positive response that creates difficulties for the partner, who now physically cannot backhand the actor’s left cheek with his right hand. A slap with an open hand or a punch with a fist would change this meaning, because it would make the actor an equal and would open up the possibility of a brawl, in contravention of the social contract.

However, the point of the slap with the back of the hand is to reinforce the hierarchical system and its institutionalized inequality. To respond by turning the other cheek is to take a risk, since the

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actor cannot be sure how the striker will react—whether this conduct will confuse and paralyze or will provoke irritation, anger, or even rage. Unable to control his fury, the striker might even explode with an aggressive beating. In any case, the actor has irrevocably made his point: his gesture denies that the first blow achieved its intended effect, and he denies the striker the power to humiliate him. There is no surrender here in acceptance of the defined status of inferiority. The message stated, says Wink (105), is this: “I am a human being just like you. Your status (gender, race, age, wealth) does not alter that fact. You cannot demean me.”

If this interpretation is valid, it shows how the actor’s self-esteem is based on underlying natural grounds (being a human being, a subject of being, without social designations or insignia), rather than on unstable cultural grounds (such as social and cultural designations or insignia). It would be anachronistic to use the expression “human right,” and yet here we have some idea of the inviolability, not to say sacredness, of indefeasible rights. In any case, says Wink, the striker “has been rendered impotent to instill shame in a subordinate. He has been stripped of his power to dehumanize the other” (106). Thus the actor does not shelter in passivity, but acts, reacts, responds, and reciprocates openly. This active, offensive reaction, however, is non-violent, so we are dealing here with neither passivity nor violence.

4.2. Distrain of Belongings (Mat 5:40)
The next example has to do with the exchange of objects: “If anyone wants to sue you and take your tunic [shirt, undergarment], let him have your cloak [outer garment] as well.” The Hebrew scriptures testify to the custom of taking a debtor’s cloak as pledge (Exo 22:25–27; Deu 24:10–13, 17), and Matthew seems to have reproduced this saying in the wrong order. As in Luke, the handover of the undergarment is the response to the taking of the outer garment. If we bracket the legal setting, the saying goes “If anyone takes your cloak, give him your tunic as well.” The response to a taking is a giving (cf. Luk 6:29).

The legal setting, however, is important. A creditor is haling his debtor to court to wring out repayment by legal means with a warrant. The creditor may now legally seize the debtor’s goods and dispose of his property or effects. In this way, the creditor can force a poor debtor, who has nothing more than the clothes he wears, to deliver up his outer garment. There is a proverbial moral sense behind this idea of taking a garment as pledge in the Hebrew scriptures: an instruction that focuses on constraint. There is a limit to how far a creditor may deprive a debtor of his belongings. Jesus’ saying seems to imply that even if seizing a person’s outer garment is legal (according to the
society’s actual sense of justice), it is morally illegitimate. It is an illegitimate taking, and as such characterizes all kinds of plundering, exploitation, or impoverishment.

One way to defend one’s integrity in such a situation might be to respond using the means of the powerless, i.e. by some symbolic counteraction, in this case by offering up one’s undergarment as well.\footnote{By “symbolic action,” I simply mean a real, tangible action imitating another real action but with no other rational purpose than to convey an attitude and a message.} Besides showing that they have been stripped to the skin (“You cannot pluck a bald chicken”), the naked debtor is re-semanticizing the situation. The tables are turned. As mentioned by Wink, nakedness was taboo in Judaism; but rather than falling on the naked person, the disgrace falls on the person viewing or causing the nakedness (Wink, 107; cf. Gen 9:20–27). The creditor is the powerful party, humiliating the debtor, who is supposed to be ashamed of himself, just as the public sees him as disgraceful and deserving of social condemnation. By his outdoing cooperativeness and compliance, however, the debtor changes the role-configuration of the scene. Now it is the creditor who is humiliated and shamed. The debtor has neutralized the attempt to humiliate him and, further, placed the creditor in a shameful position, expressing protest against the system that generates such a debt. Jesus teaches, says Wink (108), “how to take on the entire system in a way to unmask its essential cruelty and to burlesque its pretentions to justice, law, and order.” Thus by this symbolic action the social system stands self-condemned.

4.3. Forced Labor (Mat 5:41)
The third example, “if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile,” implies some rule of service under compulsion or forced labor. Roman soldiers could order people to make their means and labor available for service, for example to help carry equipment or to relieve them of some other work (cf. Mark 15:21), but a king or his delegates could also claim the same right (cf. Mark 11:3). Restrictions were in force on the use of this privilege, but it could be misused (and soldiers punished for misuse). In any case, the rule of compulsory service was regarded as oppressive and humiliating and as a clear sign of oppressive governance, whether Roman or Jewish. Unlike the leaders of some other Jewish movements, however, Jesus did not counsel violent revolt, most likely because he viewed armed insurrection against the Roman imperial might and its Jewish collaborators as disastrous and vain. People had to mobilize other kinds of forces.
To do more than one is obliged to do is to give more than one owes. That amounts to a symbolic action by which, as Wink says, “the oppressed can recover the initiative and assert their human dignity in a situation that cannot for the time being be changed” (111). Like Wink, one may wonder how to understand this response. Is it a provocation, an insult, or a trial of strength; if not a kindness expressing servile compliance? What is the actor up to, and how does the partner interpret his action? We do not know, and have ourselves to do some interpretation. Wink suggests (111):

... the soldier is thrown off balance by being deprived of the predictability of his victim’s response. He has never dealt with such a problem before. Now he has been forced into making a decision for which nothing in his previous experience has prepared him. If he has enjoyed feeling superior to the vanquished, he will not enjoy it today.

This understanding implies that some struggle is at work, and that the actor is in some way victorious. How this victory is to be understood more precisely is, however, still open for discussion. On the imagined level, the humor in this scene must have been delightful and enlivening to those who were oppressed and thought themselves deprived of any opportunity to resist. Stories about the little one triumphing over the big one, the wise fooling the less wise, are very numerous. In real life, however, things can turn out differently. It is an open question how authority would react to the actor’s response, so the action Jesus counsels would be risky. On the other hand, the actor might put his trust in the social rules governing violent action, so the partner might be ashamed or scrupled to reciprocate a good deed with an evil one. If so, the actor has effectively cornered his enemy in a powerless position.

4.4. Strategic Reciprocation: The Power of the Powerless

From Wink’s social-history point of view, Jesus wishes not only to liberate people from their servile mentality and actions, but to assert that they can display courage and dignity and fight back despite their powerlessness. “Jesus’ sense of immediacy has social implications,” says Wink (111). “The reign of God is already breaking into the world, and it comes, not as an imposition from on high, but as the leaven slowly raising the dough (Matt. 13:33|| Luke 13:20–21).” Jesus does not propose armed revolution, but in advocating this strategic reciprocation as a sort of civil disobedience, he does lay a foundation for social revolution. That strategy was neither utopian nor apocalyptic, according to Wink, but “realistic in the extreme” (112).
I find it difficult to follow Wink to the extreme, but the idea that non-violent symbolic actions charged with ethical values might change people’s minds on how to act seems well taken. It is not impossible that Jesus and his followers were convinced that such behavior could bring about a new worldly reign, with or without some supernatural help from an intervening God (cf. Mat 20:25–28). They may have believed they were setting in motion an embryonic process (comparable to a natural process of growth) that was bound to reach its intrinsic goal, its fulfillment being only a matter of time. It is however hard to deny the utopian quality of this strategy if the results are tested against historical reality. This kind of resistance, taken to the extreme, tends to drive people toward fanatical eschatological and apocalyptic thinking. I do not deny the potential of such a strategy to function as a possible lever to obtain social improvement; I only wish to preserve a more realistic point of view. The utopian worldview endures in various Christian churches, all of which have to deal with the question of how to implement their values in the context of social reality. Sometimes communities decide that the ideal can become reality on a larger scale and begin zealously to act in order to bring about the fulfillment of their utopian aspirations, but we have not yet seen the reign of God being realized in any full sense.

5. Blended Reciprocity

Wink’s interpretation seems plausible, but we face here a complex case of exchange or reciprocity that is easier to grasp intuitively than to analyze theoretically. I shall now present some observations and considerations that might bring us a step further toward understanding these cases of blended reciprocity.

5.1. Confrontation Between Two Ideologies

The saying “Do not stand up against an evildoer” reveals that the actor regards the partner’s initiating action as an illegitimate and evil action. This cannot simply be because of the use or the threat of physical violence, although the use or threat of physical force is involved in all three examples. Even if the slap is intended to injure the self rather than the body, it is a physical act. To go to court is to enlist the force of the law to inflict distress on a recalcitrant debtor; to deny a request for help from a figure in authority (“Lend me your donkey!”) would surely be disciplined (“Give me your donkey or I will take it by force!). In all cases, in the partner’s view the use of force is legitimate.

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16 Talbert refers to Epictetus (Diss. 4.1.79), who says, “If a soldier commandeers your donkey, let it go. Do not resist or grumble. If you do, you will get a beating and lose your little donkey just the same.” Talbert, The Reading, 90.
The partner holds some position of authority, generally acknowledged by society, and in the social structure holds a position as superior to the actor, who is an inferior. The actor, however, challenges the legitimacy of the partner’s status and conduct. Therefore, we have to keep an account of two opposed sets of value-perspectives stemming from two conflicting parties, the larger society and a subgroup—in this case, the Jewish–Roman public ranged against Jesus with his disciples and supporters.

Socially accepted norms dictate that the execution of authority on any level may involve the use of physical force to punish and correct inferiors. However, when people judge enforcement of the law and the right to inflict corporal punishment to be evil, they view the actual social structures as unjust. They may be legal, but the actor judges them to be morally illegitimate. We have a confrontation not just between two individuals, but between two ideologies.

The one ideology represents the established society’s actual self-knowledge. The partner’s perception of his social role, his socially acknowledged status and his identity, with their implied self-esteem and self-respect, reflects, we assume, this ideology. The other ideology represents the self-knowledge of a social subgroup in conflict with the larger society. Again, the social ideology is, or should be, mirrored in the actor’s perception of his attributed role, with what that implies of self-esteem and dignity. The larger society may regard the actor as inferior, but he holds himself to be equal, if not superior. In a religious setting, the two ideologies might be conceptualized by the subgroup as a difference between humankind’s self-constituted and God’s revelatory normative perspective (while, on the contrary, the larger society would regard the alternative ideology of the subgroup as diabolical or heretical).

Whether we focus on the Jesus movement (before Jesus’ death) or on the Christ movement (after his death), we seem, sociologically speaking, to be dealing with a utopian movement in conflict with the larger society. Rosabeth Moss Kanter’s description of the utopians’ imaginary society may give us a very good idea of such a movement. She writes (1–2):

17 Kanter studied residential, intentional communities whose members held a shared social, political, religious, or spiritual vision, sharing resources and following an alternative lifestyle. She focused on such communities in the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but her sociological theory of utopian communes is of general relevance. The Qumran settlement at the Dead Sea and the Therapeutae in Alexandria (mentioned by Philo in De vita contemplativa) seem to have been such communities. The two summaries characterizing the Jerusalem community, Acts 2:42–47 and 4:32–35, also point in this direction. The Jesus movement and the early Christ movement may not be residential in the strict sense, but their members do share a religious utopian vision with a social idea of sharing resources and an ethical idea of an alternative lifestyle.
In the imagined utopia, people work and live together closely and cooperatively, in a social order that is self-created and self-chosen rather than externally imposed, yet one that also operates according to a higher order of natural and spiritual laws. Utopia is held together by commitment rather than coercion, for in utopia what people want to do is the same as what they have to do; the interests of the individuals are congruent with the interests of the group; and personal growth and freedom entail responsibility for others. Underlying the vision of utopia is the assumption that harmony, cooperation, and mutuality of interests are natural to human existence, rather than conflict, competition, and exploitation, which arise only in imperfect societies. By providing material and psychological safety and security, the utopian social order eliminates the need for divisive competition or self-serving actions which elevate some people to the disadvantage of others; it ensures instead the flowering of mutual responsibility and trust, to the advantage of all. . . At a number of times in history, groups of people have decided that the ideal can become reality, and they have banded together in communities to bring about the fulfillment of their own utopian aspirations.

Such an ideology, I wish to add, functions as a value-based set of motives for action. If a group of people become convinced that an ideal can become reality, they may act to bring about the fulfillment of their utopian aspirations. I identify the historical Jesus and his followers as such a group. They act in order to bring about the fulfillment of their utopian aspirations: the Kingdom of God. They believe the ideal can become reality, if people convert and act according to the utopian values. The ethics of the Sermon on the Mount teaches how to act both toward brothers and sisters of the in-group and toward outsiders in the larger hostile society, which may persecute (pursue and harass) the community because of its aspiration and attempts to create an alternative social reality.

Jesus’ teaching in words and deeds represents the “higher order of natural and spiritual laws.” It is higher than the old order, the Mosaic law and the kind of society it generates. That is only nomos, an artificial human construction compared to physis, natural law of a kind inscribed in and to be inferred from God’s ordering of the cosmos: rules representing life’s own law according to creation (cf. Mat 5:45). Although the love command (“You shall love your neighbor as yourself”; “the royal law according to the scripture,” Jam 2:8) is known from the law (the Torah) as nomos, it is itself a rule based on physis. The whole law (of nomos) is summed up in a single commandment (of physis; Gal 5:14), a more natural, cosmic, and spiritual law (like the exemplary Golden Rule, Mat
7:12). Thus an explanation of the social dynamics of the scene in the three examples should include a sense of this confrontation between an aspiring utopian and a well-established social ideology.¹⁸

5.2. Action and Reaction Between Presuppositions and Implications
In the sayings, we have two rounds or interactive steps: the antagonist’s action, and the protagonist’s reaction. The protagonist is in accord, the antagonist in discord, with the storyteller’s normative point of view. Action and reaction represent a sequence of two moves connected by narrative logic in the story. This story, however seems as manifest story to be only part of a larger story, of which some elements are presupposed and others virtually implied. In both cases, the question is how to understand the partner’s behavior. Why did the partner take action against the actor in the first place, and how does the actor expect the partner to react to his action? Obviously, a latent story borders the manifest story and requires to be taken into consideration in our interpretation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A: Preceding round</th>
<th>C: Succeeding round</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1: Action A</td>
<td>P2: Reaction A</td>
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<tr>
<td>P2: Action B</td>
<td>P1: Reaction B</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>P2: Reaction C</td>
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<tr>
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<td>P1: Action C</td>
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All three examples share this structure, but I will explicate it by means of the first example: the slap and the offered cheek. The manifest story of this saying concerns B, the present round, with an Action B, where the partner P2 slaps the actor P1, and a Reaction B, where the actor P1 offers P2 the other cheek.

Unless it is a case of random and meaningless offense, P2’s Action B is a Reaction A to a previous Action A by P1 in a preceding round. From the partner’s perspective, P2 could simply be punishing the insolence of P1. The story does not reveal what the conflict is about; but, as Reaction A, P2’s action is expected to give closure, ending the controversy (silencing the defiant P1). If the

¹⁸ I use the Greek words nomos (law, custom) and physis (nature) from the Sophist tradition to define what the utopians would regard as either humanly ordered cultural convention or divinely ordered natural rule. I find this distinction to be very helpful for understanding the tension between the Mosaic law and the teaching of Jesus (the “Jesuanic Law” or the “Royal Law” as James terms it). It is not simply a question of Jewish contra Christian law, since we are facing an intra-Jewish discussion of the foundation of the basic rules for life as nomos (referring to a theology of Revelation) or physis (referring to a theology of Creation).
partner or his ally were to retell the incident, the actor would be the antagonist, the partner the protagonist.

According to the story, P1’s offering the other cheek is a Reaction B to P2’s Action B; we have, in other words, an active action–reaction causation schema. However, things get tricky here, because P1 should either remain passive (make no reply, remain silent as if defeated) or respond by returning injury with injury (hit back; retort, answer back in a fight for domination or justice). However, P1’s Reaction B qualifies as an opening Action C in a succeeding new round. Offering the other cheek is a kind of gift and service at the same time.

5.3. Challenging Reciprocation
P1’s Reaction B to P2’s Action B (which was intended to close) is a blend of different significations. It is an ambiguous, Janus-faced act. On the one hand, it is a prohibited response, since any response other than submissive obedience on the part of the castigated (supposedly silenced) P1 is an outrageous audacity, repeating or confirming the initially offensive Action A as resistance. The actor is not allowed to resist or to counterattack with negative reciprocation, be it verbal or corporal. Such a resistance would deny the partner his status of authority according to established social contract and challenge him to an open struggle for domination (the saying in 5:39a may precisely be a warning not to respond with negative reciprocity, in order to avoid an open struggle involving mutual retaliation and reprisals). The actor’s offer, on the other hand, is a prosocial behavior, demonstratively living up to the ethical request for gift and service. To complicate matters further, this reciprocation of evil with good in disproportionate servility is itself a confusing semantic conundrum with challenging qualities. What does it mean, to the actor, to the partner?

5.3.1. The Cunning Actor
The first thing to notice is that to offer the other cheek is to expose oneself to a second blow, and that to expose oneself is the diametrical opposite of shielding oneself. The partner cannot hit the actor’s right cheek in the first place if he wards off the blow by shielding himself with his arms. The actor is liable to punishment and must accept the penalty. Any resistance would imply further rebellion against authority. The actor is meant to expose himself to the slapping as a well-deserved retribution. Offering the other cheek could be the actor’s way of complying with the partner’s unspoken demand for an opportunity to strike again. Alternatively, the actor acts as if the partner actually desires such an opportunity and will be tempted to take advantage of it to strike again.
Here we encounter the first difficulty. If the slap is intended to humiliate rather than to punish, then one slap in the face would suffice. Offering the other cheek is a provocative and perhaps self-fulfilling act, since the invitation to strike again might be too tempting to resist. However, a response in the form of active rather than passive action might itself be seen as replication of the offense triggering the original slap, and therefore as calling for a repeat slap. This interpretation seems adequate on first examination, and yet there is a catch to it. As explained by Wink, the partner is physically unable to slap the actor’s left cheek with the back of his right hand, and other sorts of blow would change the scene. In this perspective, we might regard the offering of the left cheek as a kind of baiting of a trap. If the actor can inveigle the partner into striking him, he will have tempted him to go too far. On the other hand, if the partner respects the rules for backhand slapping, the offering of the left cheek is a mockery. The partner is offered a chance to slap (the actor does not try to ward off a second blow, but exposes himself invitingly) which, on close inspection, is no opportunity at all. The physical impracticality (“You cannot slap me!”) becomes a sign of a higher justice’s ethical constraint (“You may not slap me even if you can!”).

The subtle point is that the ambiguity of this gesture makes it impossible for the partner to accuse the challenging actor of disdain or insolence. Can one blame a person for giving or serving? The negative aspects of the action—that the partner unfortunately is physically unable to give a backhand slap—could simply be unintended side-effects. The seemingly innocent actor may be putting the best face on it; it is difficult to accuse him of malevolence, since he is obviously doing the partner a service. A cunning play is going on in this reversible semantic figure, comparable to the duck–rabbit illusion: at times the actor appears to be compliant, at others resistant, and it is impossible to establish what the case is objectively.

5.3.2. The Cornered Partner
What does the actor expect to achieve by this means? How does he expect this story to develop, for himself as well as for his partner? There is no causative relation between the actor’s action and the partner’s reaction, although the partner cannot avoid responding to the challenge, since even a passive reaction carries meaning. The question is what the actor and his audience in solidarity with him would expect this strategy to achieve.

Hans Dieter Betz’s answer to this question is based on his understanding of the Golden Rule in Mat 7:12: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you.” He finds that the
Golden Rule teaches a preventive ethics “built on the very old and universally accepted rule of behavior named by the formula Do ut des (‘I give so that you may give [in return]’)” (Ibid. 284).

Betz’s questionable understanding of the Golden Rule as the principle behind the rule of positive reciprocation might open a discussion in its own right, but here I shall focus on his hint that the prohibition on negative reciprocation (retaliation) seems to imply some idea of positive reciprocation. However, Betz has only non-taking and non-injuring, i.e. the weak version of giving and serving, in mind. To desist from retaliation, he says (284), “is a positive gesture of generosity that carries with it the expectation that the adversary will respond in kind.” The idea is that if I abstain from taking from/injuring my adversary, then he will stop taking from/injuring me.

Betz’s understanding takes for granted that we have a confrontation between individual neighbors “who should be friends and who may have been friends at one time” (283), that is, between equals or near-equals. The offering of the other cheek to the striker he recognizes as “a provocative invitation to receive a second strike” (290). Rather than weakness, it is a sign of moral strength. By his gesture, the actor exposes the offender’s act as morally repulsive and improper. By his renunciation of violence, he further “challenges the striker to react with comparable generosity” (290). If the striker ignores this gesture and strikes again, he will reveal himself as “an uncivilized brute.”

Betz’s interpretation, I find, focuses too much on passivity in the accentuation of the non-doing (non-taking and non-injuring). The three examples imperatively request a more active, offensive response in the form of giving and serving. Literally, the actor and the partner signify not (personal or social) friendship but an inferior party (representing a liberation movement) in conflict with a superior party (representing the established society). Therefore, the provocation may be more severe than Betz would like to acknowledge, and the partner’s reaction to the actor’s test accordingly less predictable. The idea that the rule of positive reciprocation is involved in this complex story is important, however.

Isolated the succeeding Round with P1’s opening Action C and P2’s closing Reaction C is an opening act of giving/serving, which the recipient is obliged to reciprocate with a counter act of giving/serving according to the common contractual social order. So far the challenge corners the partner. There is, however, no causal implication between action and reaction: the partner can react in various different ways. Following the exhortation to this kind of radical ethical behavior may in real life come close to committing social, even physical suicide, calling for severe punishment. After a brief commentary on Mat 5:42, I shall therefore discuss the seriousness of these drastic maxims.
6. Narrative Analysis of Mat 5:42: The Demand for Unrestricted Generosity

The last saying, “give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you,” comprises two distinct but connected imperatives: give to all who ask for alms, and lend to anyone asking for a loan. Since the second imperative is clearly about lending and borrowing (δανίζω) money, we assume that the first also concerns money. Someone is asking the actor for a gift or loan of money (although gift and loan could concern other things).

Almsgiving (ἐλεημοσύνη, cf. Mat 6:2–4), if that is what is being hinted at, points to a general kind of reciprocation in which giver and receiver are foreign to one another, in the sense that they do not form part of a stable friendly relationship involving mutual exchange of gifts and services. There is neither past nor future history of exchange between the donor and the recipient. Almsgiving is giving for free (cf. δωρεά, free gift, δωρεάν, gratis, freely, δωρέομαι, to give freely). Bilateral giving is not repayment for a preceding gift or service from the recipient, nor is the gift given with expectation of a succeeding repayment by the recipient.¹⁹

Nevertheless, some idea of repayment may still be involved. It could be the idea of a future divine repayment “at the resurrection of the righteous” (Luk 14:14; cf. Mat 6:4), or of a divinely ordained distribution of righteousness, as when a gift/service is thought to be repaid from an unexpected quarter. One might be motivated to give in blind faith in the belief that helping a fellow person in need will somehow secure help for oneself if needed in the future. The recipient in question could be a family member, a villager, a stranger to the village, that is, a person of the same cultural group but not resident (a Jew), or a foreigner, a person of another cultural group (a non-Jew). The answer to the question “Who is my neighbor?” depends upon the definition (particularly narrow or universally broad) of the district of jurisdiction for which some superhuman power is thought to stand surety for higher justice. Cf. Lxx Pro 19:17, “Whoever is kind (ἐλεέω) to the poor lends (δανιζω) to the LORD, and will be repaid (ἀνταποδίδομι) in full (κατὰ τὸ δόμα, i.e. equally to his own gift).” We have “blind faith” because the situation is incalculable. The donor will never know the “socio-magical” trajectory of the gift or service. In this perspective the recipient need not be a stranger or foreigner (whether Jewish or non-Jewish) to the donor. The actor may give money to a villager he is familiar with, a person he knows will be unable to repay. He owes and is willing to give because of group solidarity: those who have should support those who have not. One day he might himself be the beneficiary of this rule.

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Mat 5:38–42 deals with various different examples of reciprocation. Taken literally, the *Lex talionis* in v38 requests negative reciprocity, repaying an act of taking/injury with an act of taking/injury. In v39a we may have the idea that a taking/injury should be met with passivity (non-taking/non-injuring), but this clearly opposes v39b-41, which advocates reciprocating taking/injury with giving/rendering a service. Finally, v42 demands that one give/serve, and I suggest the following explication: “Give to everyone who begs from you [even if your other never will be able to repay you (ἀνταποδιδωμι; give back, return, repay; cf. Luk 14.14), i.e. to reciprocate you] and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you [even if you expect your partner unable to repay you (ἀνταποδιδομι or ἀποδιδωμι; cf. Mat 18.25)].“ In all its disarray, the unity of Mat 5:38–32 seems based on the fact that its various forms of reciprocation all refer to the same basic structural semantics of negative and positive reciprocity.

7. Concluding Observations and Remarks
In his book *The Literary Mind: The Origins of Thought and Language*, Mark Turner suggests that “narrative imagining—story—is the fundamental instrument of thought,” and that “the mind is essentially literary.” We use narrative imagination to predict, to plan, and to explain; thus our narrative mind points to a general cognitive competence. From the point of view of *narrative exegesis* (the analytical study of Biblical texts based on semiotic narrative theory), Turner’s cognitive–literary approach is useful because it so clearly combines language and mind. Narrativity is a linguistic and literary quality of certain texts or discourses as claimed by narrative semiotics; but narrative language, as an expressive instrument of thought, reveals important aspects of how we as cognitive subjects perceive meaning and make sense. In this final section, I shall therefore combine Turner’s insight with the use of narrative exegesis to understand the narrative character of the ethical instructions in Mat 5:38–42.

Turner’s parable theory is of primary importance for narrative exegesis. By *parable*, he means the combination of *story* and *projection*: “The essence of parable is its intricate combining of two of our basic forms of knowledge—story and projection,” he says, and this combination “produces one of our keenest mental processes for constructing meaning” (5). Projection refers to the cognitive phenomenon in which we project one story onto another. What exegetes usually understand by

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21 Cf. David Herman (ed.), *Narrative Theory and the Cognitive Sciences*. 

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“parable” (as oral or written discourse) is however only one kind of cultural product of our mental parabolic activity. Turner himself uses “parable” with two meanings. The word refers to the result of a mental process, as well as to the mental process itself as a special kind of cognitive activity, that is, at times to a parable (a parable story), at times to a parabolic or narrative way of thinking.

Turner’s parable theory concerns not only how we construct stories, but also how we understand them. The interpretative aspect he explains by his observation that proverbs frequently “present a condensed, implicit story to be interpreted through projection” (5–6). This insight may be important for our notion of narrative interpretation in general; it seems however to be of particular importance for the analysis of Mat 5:38–42, because the sentences of this passage present just such a condensed story.

A proverb such as “When the cat’s away, the mice will play” does not tell us anything about the situation or the target story to which it refers. Using our narrative competence, however, we project the overt source story (the proverb) onto a covert target story (the situation in question in the context of use, for example turbulence in the classroom when the teacher is away doing an errand). If we encounter this proverb outside any context, however (for example in a book of proverbs, or in a fortune cookie), we can, says Turner, “project it onto an abstract story that might cover a great range of specific target stories and muse over the possible targets to which it might apply” (6; for example, the relation between the teacher and his pupils, between parents and their children, between the cuckold and his wife etc.). The source story thus seems to be “pregnant with general meaning” (7), to have an abstract and general level of signification, and Turner suggests the “abstract story” implies “the existence of a common third” (called generic space) which “has an actual conceptual existence of its own” (86ff). A generic reading will interpret the proverb “When the cat’s away, the mice will play” as a story of mice who behave well when the cat is at home, but wildly when it is out. The generic information of this story is an abstract story (87): “One agent or group of agents constrains another agent or group of agents, and when the governing agent is inattentive, the otherwise constrained agent or agents behave more freely.”

Turner’s focus on the proverb and the generic story is evidently of great value for narrative exegesis. Facing a series of pronouncements with the status of maxims, we can methodologically focus on two kinds of questions. We can analyze the maxim as source story and ask for the inherent abstract story, and/or we can ask for the implicit target story in a given communicative situation, a specific verbal context.
I shall focus on Mat 5:39b-41, whose three examples of proactive resistance, as mentioned by Charles Talbert, “are very specific (how often is one backhanded on the right cheek, sued for one’s underwear, or forced by a soldier to carry his gear?).” They are, furthermore, extreme, and Talbert regards them as part of an open-ended series establishing “a pattern that can be extended to other instances. The meaning of the text, therefore, cannot be restricted to what it says literally. In each of the . . . cases, the action commanded runs counter to our natural tendency, reversing it.” Talbert concludes: “this type of language functions to form moral character. . . a person who does not retaliate.” Thus Talbert regards the sayings as a series of source stories referring to the same generic story: when someone by injuring you or taking your property from you treats you as enemy, do not retaliate, i.e. do not repay evil for evil. This is the kind of interpretation that tends to identify an abstract and general ethical rule for passive behavior (non-reciprocation), perhaps not that different from a compiler’s similar result in 5:39a.

Another question concerns the target story. On one level of signification, the three examples may refer to three different specific contexts. On another level, they may refer to a more general common context. The projected target stories may come within the sphere of morality between neighbors in the village or of politics between classes (or superior and inferior in any relation) in a stratified society. In our interpretative labors, we may muse over the possible targets to which the maxims might apply, but it makes a difference what we find the most convincing.

Mat 5:42 could point to a face-to-face ethos of the village or of the community, and could possibly function as a sign for understanding the entire passage, perhaps already by Matthew himself as well as later interpreters. Mat 5:38–39a could even support the idea that it is all about submissive non-retaliation. The specificity of the three core examples, however, points according to Walter Wink in another direction, and our narrative analysis generally confirms Wink’s understanding.

One could object to the use of the proverb as an analogy to the maxim, since they differ on certain points. While the former points to an expected rule or regularity in social behavior (if A happens, then B will happen), the latter states an unexpected rule or regularity for social behavior (if A happens, then B’ ought to happen). The first is descriptive and predictable; the second is normative.

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and unpredictable. These differences, however, do not contest the validity of the parable theory for analyzing the maxims.

Wink mentions that the maxims are, of course, “not rules to be followed literally but examples to spark an infinite variety of creative responses in new and changed circumstances.” Thus he reckons with some generic story of confrontational strategies encouraging “subversive assertiveness among the poor.” There is, however, more to it, than this, and the additional factor has to do with a further difference between proverb and maxim. A proverb does not tell us about the situation or target story to which it refers. The specificity of the three core maxims, on the other hand, indicates the situation or target story to which they refer. Jesus’ words seem to address a powerless audience whose members regularly experienced, whether directly or at one remove, violence and exploitation exercised by the forces of authority. The three core maxims are only significant examples of an infinite variety of exploitative actions experienced by the powerless.

The examples, says Wink, “break the cycle of humiliation with humor and even ridicule, exposing the injustice of the system. They recover for the poor a modicum of initiative that can force the oppressor to see them in a new light (115).” This seems a fair interpretation of the rationale behind this social counter-strategy. It is still a question, however, how seriously one should take the examples as a call for individual social action. Most people, in the time of Jesus as well as in Matthew’s time, might simply have enjoyed the implicitly humorous narratives and felt encouraged by the imaginative victory over the oppressors, without ever transitioning to action. Much of the instruction of the Sermon on the Mount may have had this kind of edifying function in respect to self-esteem and the hope of a better life. It is joyful to experience oneself prevailing, even if only in the mind. Making the transition to action demands the courage to break with ordinary social rules in order to pursue the utopian ideals, a courage which is allotted only to the very few.

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25 The humorous feature gives the three core maxims a joke-like quality. The encouraging response to the superior partner’s offense is unexpected and functions for the intended audience as a punch line, evoking laughter. In the communicative situation where the teller and listeners share a common identity and set of values, no one will object to the plausibility of the involved story. More importantly, perhaps, no one who understands the communicative situation would begin to wonder what happened hereafter. The punch line always has the final word (as Jesus has it in the controversy stories).

26 That is why we admire the non-violent but assertive idealized subject, who willingly risks his life and often ends up as holy martyr; cf. for example the Gospel of Mark’s presentation of Jesus compared with that of the cowardly behavior of his disciples.
Social life in the world of history is one thing; social life in the world of story is quite different. I have not tried to reconstruct the social reality of a group of people in the time of Jesus or Matthew. My focus has been on narrative action, on how the ethical instructions in Mat 5:38–42 are based on our narrative mind’s conception of the meaningful act as social exchange. I have a special interest in the three core examples, which demonstrate how we may find a generic story in different specific target stories. The generic story I focus on, however, is of a very abstract nature. It refers to a generic schema for exchange, sometimes as giving/serving or positive reciprocity, sometimes as taking/injuring or negative reciprocity. This generic schema helps us to see that the social strategy proposed by Jesus in seemingly paradoxical or even absurd maxims in fact has its own reasonableness, even shrewdness, when he blends the two forms of otherwise well-known conventional reciprocity. Jesus advocates a certain social strategy for those who find themselves facing superior opponents. This consists neither in passive submission nor in exchange of takings and injuries, but in proactive assertiveness in the form of blended reciprocation. This unconventional behavior is founded on solid anthropological experience. Taking and injuring are bad and are a force for death, since they hamper or destroy life and life possibilities, while giving and serving are good and are a force for life, because they promote and protect life and life possibilities.

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