

# Narrative and Truthfulness through the Body: Interpreting Mark Wynn

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## Abstract

This short article responds to, and interprets, two epistemic claims made by Mark Wynn concerning truth and Christian ethics. The first claim concerns how the body knows something prior to an operation of reason. The second claim concerns the relationship between narrative and metaphysics, particularly when considering the eucharist. The article interprets these claims by drawing upon Wynn's previous work in religious epistemology, and it points to its moral and doctrinal relevance for Christian ethicists today.

## Keywords

religious epistemology, narrative, metaphysics, eucharist, body, Mark Wynn

## Introduction

In this brief response, I examine two epistemic claims that Mark Wynn makes concerning truth in the Christian life. The first claim holds that 'truthfulness takes the form of an acknowledgement of storied identities ... [which] is realized primordially in the responses of the body'. Following this, a second epistemic claim states that, through the eucharist, an acknowledgement of storied identities allows Christians 'to recognize the [eucharistic] narrative that constitutes the order of the world' and, importantly, 'to be incorporated into' that narrative.<sup>1</sup> For Wynn, these epistemic claims gain normative direction through the biblical ideal of neighbour love.<sup>2</sup> Yet the links between Wynn's

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1. Mark Wynn, 'Truth and Christian Ethics: A Narrativial Perspective', *Studies in Christian Ethics* 35.1 (forthcoming), p. 34.

2. Wynn, 'Truth and Christian Ethics', pp. 24–26.

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religious epistemology, on the one hand, and Christian moral reasoning, on the other, merit further investigation particularly if we are to benefit from—or wrestle with—the normative and doctrinal implications of Wynn’s claims. In what follows, therefore, I investigate each claim in turn, drawing upon Wynn’s previous work in philosophical theology in order to establish more of the meaning and significance of Wynn’s proposal for Christian ethicists.

## First Body, Then Mind

To start, we might say that Wynn’s first claim offers an epistemological conundrum. By Wynn’s lights, truthful acknowledgement of a storied identity ‘is enacted *fundamentally* [or *primordially*] in bodily terms’; it is ‘only *secondarily* an object of reflection’.<sup>3</sup> Interpreted temporally, this claim suggests that the body acknowledges truth before the cognitive faculty of reflection. But how exactly does the body ‘confess knowledge of’<sup>4</sup> a story, if that story is not first known by, or is the object of, a form of (moral) reasoning? Wynn’s use of the term ‘primordially’ may gesture towards an answer—for instance, it may be a phenomenological point of fact that we simply and automatically acknowledge truth in bodily terms. But this response may not eliminate the conundrum outright, especially for ethicists who consider discursive analysis of freely chosen actions to be a central task of moral reflection.<sup>5</sup>

One way out of this conundrum, then, may be found elsewhere in Wynn’s scholarship, in particular, his work on religious epistemology. In his 2009 book *Faith and Place*, Wynn argues that physical proximity to a place can reveal its significance, doing so in a way that is distinct from psychologic approaches (which use a place simply as a rationalistic *aide-mémoire*) and from metaphysical approaches (which anchor significance in the occurrence of divine action in the place).<sup>6</sup> If we take physical proximity—or, more generally, Wynn’s so-called ‘knowledge of place’—as a guide, then we may interpret the body’s fundamental acknowledgement of a storied identity in placial terms. In other words, the body is said to acknowledge truth in a primordial way by simply being present in, or to, a place. This is an existential path to truthfulness, one which suggests that bodily presence is a prelude to, or a condition of, an accurate and informed exercise of discursive moral reflection.

Another, and perhaps complementary, way out of the first-body-then-mind conundrum is through the Aristotelian concept of *habitus* (which is perhaps more familiar to Christian ethicists than Wynn’s theory of knowledge of place). Discussed in Wynn’s most recent book,

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3. Wynn, ‘Truth and Christian Ethics’, p. 30; emphasis mine.

4. The word ‘acknowledge’ has its origins in the late fifteenth century from the Middle English verb *acknow*, which means to confess knowledge of something. See *Oxford Dictionary of English*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), s.v. ‘acknowledge’.

5. G.E.M. Anscombe, ‘Good and Bad Human Action’, in M. Geach and L. Gormally (eds.), *Human Life, Action, and Ethics: Essays by G.E.M. Anscombe* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2005), pp. 195–206.

6. Mark R. Wynn, *Faith and Place: An Essay in Embodied Religious Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 148.

*Spiritual Traditions and the Virtues*, habituation is said to generate a second nature in the individual: through habit, a person acts justly as if compelled by nature itself.<sup>7</sup> This point suggests that habits allow a person to acknowledge truth without need for an involved and deliberate reflection, as when, say, a genuinely empathetic person characteristically attunes her eyes and ears to another's concerns without effort.

Yet, on this latter point, we would do well to take philosopher Lesley Brown's comment to heart: Aristotelian habit, Brown notes, is 'not to be thought of as unthinking, but rather as *intentional* habituation, which then becomes second nature'.<sup>8</sup> To some extent, then, habits of second nature are not devoid of cognitive reflection. Nevertheless, it is plausible to conceive of habits developing in an unintentional or 'unthinking' way: consider any number of (seemingly) innocuous habits that a person picks up over time. Thus, in support of Wynn's first epistemic claim, we may say that habituation allows a person first to acknowledge a storied identity in a bodily (and virtue- or character-relevant) manner and then to subject that identity to discursive reflection. Indeed, we might add that the virtuous person (having intellectual humility, for example) may come to know the truth implied in that identity better than her vicious or intellectually arrogant counterpart.<sup>9</sup> As Wynn might say, she would characteristically adopt 'relevant attitudes' (e.g., open-mindedness 'to shine through the inflexions of the body')<sup>10</sup> or, more generally, a bodily comportment (e.g., open ears and a closed mouth) that better 'reckons with [an object's] storied significance'.<sup>11</sup>

## First Narrative, Then Metaphysics

I turn next to Wynn's second claim that, through the eucharist, Christians not only 'recognize the [eucharistic] narrative that constitutes the order of the world' but are also 'incorporated into' that narrative.<sup>12</sup> Given its dependence upon the first claim, this second claim can also be interpreted as epistemological in nature. With many ways to probe this claim, I here focus upon one question in particular: How might we conceive of the relationship between the eucharistic narrative and a eucharistic metaphysics? As with the mind-body conundrum above, our answer to the present query may have significant doctrinal and moral implications.

First, we enquire into Wynn's position on the matter. On balance, his paper points not to strongly metaphysical claims about the eucharist (for example, his quotation from the *Summa theologiae* III, q. 75, a. 1 could be interpreted in a metaphorical sense<sup>13</sup>), but rather to inter-personal or ethical claims following from a scriptural

7. Mark R. Wynn, *Spiritual Traditions and the Virtues: Living between Heaven and Earth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 35.

8. Lesley Brown, explanatory notes to Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross and ed. Lesley Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 212; emphasis mine.

9. For example, see the discussion in Lani Watson, 'Educating for Good Questioning: A Tool for Intellectual Virtues Education', *Acta Analytica* 33.3 (2018), pp. 353–70.

10. Wynn, 'Truth and Christian Ethics', p. 28.

11. Wynn, 'Truth and Christian Ethics', p. 24.

12. Wynn, 'Truth and Christian Ethics', p. 34.

13. Wynn, 'Truth and Christian Ethics', p. 30.

understanding of neighbour love. And whilst Wynn nods towards a presumably metaphysical end of the eucharistic narrative (the eucharist being ‘a proleptic enactment of the ideal of life that will be realized in the eschaton’), even this is foregrounded by discussion of ‘inter-human solidarity’ here and now.<sup>14</sup> Hence, it seems that Wynn invites us to consider narrative—and, in particular, the eucharistic narrative—in largely ethical terms.

That said, at a pivotal point in Wynn’s discussion, a substantive connection is made between narrative and metaphysics. In his treatment of the Sedna sea story, Wynn offers a distinctly metaphysical, and specifically Platonic, account of the Christian narrative: the story of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection constitutes the ‘fundamental structure of the world’.<sup>15</sup> Here, a *Logos* metaphysics is equated with the divine narrative.

Yet this close connection between story and metaphysics does not seem to constitute the main thrust of Wynn’s discussion of the eucharist in particular. Indeed, story alone—including one’s bodily and ‘due recognition to [the] overarching story’<sup>16</sup>—seems to be Wynn’s concern. So much is clear if we engage once more with Wynn’s religious epistemology. Turning again to *Faith and Place*, we read that the ‘symbolic density’ of a place fixes meanings that establish a (moral) fit between a place’s storied context and ethically appropriate human behaviour; metaphysics, Wynn argues, supervenes and is not necessary for this task.<sup>17</sup> In other words, metaphysical conclusions, such as those concerning divine action in the world, are not required for an understanding of moral significance. Instead, the narrative itself, inclusive of the ‘physical congruence’ of the individual to the narrative’s referent (e.g., a beloved’s grave or even the eucharistic elements themselves) are fundamental: these concepts—apart from metaphysical speculation—are sufficient to generate moral significance.<sup>18</sup>

In sum, we might say that Wynn outlines a distant relationship between the eucharistic narrative and a eucharistic metaphysics. This position, of course, may be for purely pragmatic or ecumenical reasons. Nevertheless, it may have far-reaching implications for Christian moral reasoning. For one, it may de-emphasize entrenched doctrinal positions concerning the eucharist. These might include claims about its metaphysical status (the eucharist literally incorporates Christians into a mystical body<sup>19</sup>), its ecclesiological status (the eucharist demarcates who is in, or out of, a church<sup>20</sup>), and its moral status (the eucharist demands reception in a state of grace<sup>21</sup>).

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14. Wynn, ‘Truth and Christian Ethics’, p. 29.

15. Wynn, ‘Truth and Christian Ethics’, p. 33.

16. Wynn, ‘Truth and Christian Ethics’, p. 33.

17. Wynn, *Faith and Place*, p. 80.

18. Wynn, *Faith and Place*, p. 152.

19. Edward A. David, *A Christian Approach to Corporate Religious Liberty* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), p. 177.

20. Joseph Ratzinger, *God is Near Us: The Eucharist, The Heart of Life* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), p. 119.

21. The Vatican, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2020), para. 1415.

So, the nature of Wynn's second epistemic claim, which builds upon our response to the mind-body conundrum, is important to investigate in terms of its logic and practical scope. Should truthfulness need not rely on metaphysical presuppositions in the first instance, then Christian ethicists (especially practitioners) may do well to employ placial tactics of the sort implied by Wynn's approach. These might include tactics of physical proximity, congruence to storied identities and, in general, personal means of being present to, and encountering, others. Such an approach does not dismiss metaphysics outright (and how could it, if 'on the orthodox Christian perspective, ... the stories of Jesus should be in certain fundamental respects literally true'?<sup>22</sup>). But, practically speaking, the bodily inflexions involved—whether the attentive nod or the sympathetic smile—may make all the difference.

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22. Wynn, 'Truth and Christian Ethics', p. 7.