UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD
FACULTY OF THEOLOGY AND RELIGION

SEAN MING-JUN LAU

The Relationship between Theology and Ethics in Modern Christian Thought

TRINITY COLLEGE, OXFORD

D. PHIL. THESIS AND ABSTRACT

ABSTRACT

Contemporary Christian theologians and thinkers frequently acknowledge the importance of the relationship between theology and ethics. However, no real consensus exists concerning that relationship's precise significance, and little work has been done to map the different approaches taken to it. Consequently, most treatments of the relationship proceed without sufficient critical interrogation of their assumptions, or awareness of possible alternatives. This produces further problems downstream for theological or ethical methodology.

The present thesis intends to rectify that deficiency. It first develops a typology of the three principal approaches taken in contemporary Christian thought with respect to the theology/ethics relationship. These are: (1) an interpretation of the relationship in terms of a dualism between theory and practice ("the theory/practice type"); (2) an endeavour to transcend the relationship through a third category which synthesises theology and ethics ("the metahistorical type"); and (3) an argument that theology and ethics reflect discrete aspects of a divinely revealed reality ("the theo-ontological type"). I evaluate these approaches through readings of systematic, liberation and practical theologians and Christian ethicists, including Karl Barth, Clodovis Boff, Sarah Coakley, Gerhard Ebeling, John Finnis, Stanley Hauerwas, Bonnie Miller-McLemore, Oliver O'Donovan and John Howard Yoder.

Following this diagnostic task, I outline a constructive way forward, by proposing a "critique of the Christian life". I argue each type above has persisted not merely due to entrenched disciplinary divides in the modern theological academy, but also because it captures an essential facet of that life. No type, however, has obtained a monopoly,

given other facets of the Christian life which the competing types have better preserved. Those facets are the responsibility of the Christian moral agent, the particular situations in which that agent is embedded, the coherence of the agent's life, and that life's distinctively Christian identity. A key error of modern Christian thought, accordingly, is either to disregard the irreducible integrity of each facet, or alternatively, to assume these facets can be considered apart from one another.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Early in Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead*, the narrating pastor observes that "I've developed a great reputation for wisdom by ordering more books than I ever had time to read, and reading more books, by far, than I learned anything useful from, except, of course, that some very tedious gentlemen have written books".[1] The present thesis is hoped to contribute, in some small but meaningful way, to that tedium.

This notwithstanding, it would be amiss not to express gratitude for the massive intellectual and emotional debts I have accrued throughout the project. That project originated from two Master's dissertations written at Nottingham and Oxford over 2015–16, and supervised respectively by John Milbank and Philip McCosker. In addition, some of its animating ideas were percolating slightly earlier, when I served, in 2014, as a legal officer at the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in Sydney, Australia. That said, the present thesis is very far removed from that heady context, though it would be inconsistent with its method for it to be completely so.

Above all, I would like to thank my supervisor, Johannes Zachhuber, for his guidance and support throughout this thesis. Other intellectual inspirations came from lectures and seminars audited at Oxford, including those by Alice Crary on critical theory; Matthew Kirkpatrick on Bonhoeffer; Diarmaid MacCulloch on Reformation history; Hindy Najman on ethical reading and exemplarity; and Simeon Zahl on Luther. I was also helped, indirectly but immensely, by participation in the 2017 Global Ecumenical Theological Institute in Berlin.

[1] Robinson (2005), 45.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This thesis, disciplinarily positioned within Christian theology, offers a novel account of the relationship between theology and ethics. Its contribution comprises its demonstration of why that relationship matters, its cartography of this heretofore mostly unmapped field, and its proposal of what might constitute a constructive path forward. For, although Christian theologians and other thinkers who have considered the relationship routinely acknowledge its importance, no real agreement exists concerning in what that importance consists, let alone the right way to construe the relationship.

My argument, therefore, is that the theology/ethics relationship has become an overburdened way to discuss the connection between the distinct facets of the *Christian life*, understood as a unique "form of life" in the sense often used in contemporary Frankfurt School critical theory. Thus past attempts to construe the relationship have paid insufficient attention to the full range of those facets. Instead, each attempt has typically emphasised only one of these, at the expense of the others.

Given such reductionism, those past attempts have tended to produce monochrome pictures of what counts as either "theology" or "ethics". This inhibits recognition of the subtle depths of both, and of the diverse questions we might want to pose in respect of each. Reductionism can also imply an ahistorical lack of awareness of the situations where the connection between theology and ethics seems troubling, as when a "correct" theology produces negative moral consequences.

The thesis is therefore broken into two parts. The first is diagnostic, developing a typology of the approaches which have been taken by modern Christian theologians and

thinkers to the theology/ethics relationship. Those approaches, however, have usually proceeded unaware of one another, and thus are ill-placed to scrutinise their basic assumptions, given the loss of a serious counterweight. Similarly, past typologies have either examined too narrow a range of literatures, or been insufficiently critical of the typology categories they have applied. Hence a principal task of this thesis is to map and compare the approaches in a way that has not previously occurred, including by more closely interrogating the key presuppositions of each.

I argue there are three main types of approach. Enormous variety can exist within each type, and a thinker may adopt different types at different stages of their presentation. Nonetheless, I posit, arguments within a single type share a basic argumentative structure. First, then, is the theory/practice type, which analogises the relationship between theology and ethics to one between theory and practice. Hence it endorses, as necessary, some form of binary thinking.

It has two further subtypes. One construes theory and practice as really concerned with theoretical and practical reason. Such an approach is intended to stress the singularity of a person's moral agency, and is popular among theological ethicists like Oliver O'Donovan, and the Catholic "new natural law" school. Accordingly, talk of "practical reason", and of an "ethics" autonomous of theology, is argued to be necessary to keep that agency in sight. In contrast, moral agency would be overlooked by a total subsumption of practical into theoretical reason, or of "ethics" into "theology".

Another subtype emphasises "praxis", not to emphasise moral agency, but to highlight the importance of context and the particular situation in shaping all theological and ethical reflection. Hence the theory/practice and theology/ethics divisions become ways

to warn against undue theoretical abstraction from the concrete circumstances in which humans live. So theory, no matter how insightful, can never substitute for praxis. This alternative construction of the theory/practice distinction is common among Latin American liberation theologian like Clodovis Boff, and several American practical theologians such as Bonnie Miller-McLemore.

The second type, which I call the "metahistorical", has attained dominance among contemporary Anglophone systematic theologians. It rejects the very legitimacy of the theology/ethics distinction, as reflective of theology's fragmentation as a discipline within modernity. In place of that distinction, metahistorical thinkers often propose a synthetic concept like "narrative" or "*paideia*", which they hope will reunify the divided terms. Further, they usually also develop a genealogy for how that concept was maintained by premodern Christianity, but then lost in a manner that produced theology's fracturing. Through such strategies, metahistorical thinkers seek to rearticulate the coherence of the Christian life in a secularised world, and thereby reclaim theology's relevance. To show this, I examine the works of American theological ethicist Stanley Hauerwas and Cambridge systematic theologian Sarah Coakley, as typifying metahistorical trends.

The third type I call the "theo-ontological". It construes theology and ethics as each corresponding to a different aspect of the relationship between God and humankind, such as the divine and human activities, or gospel and law. Hence the theology/ethics relationship is rooted in the connection between different aspects of a divinely illuminated reality. The ambition of such an attempt to ontologically ground the relationship is to emphasise the uniquely *Christian* character of a Christian ethic. For it is the connection of ethics to theology, and so also to this reality, that gives the former

its distinctive identity. Consequently, theo-ontological thinkers are deeply wary of the risk that this identity might be co-opted by a political or ideological agenda. This last type of approach is exemplified by Karl Barth, his Lutheran interlocutors such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Gerhard Ebeling and Helmut Thielicke, and also his notorious American student John Howard Yoder.

For each of these types or subtypes, the principal difficulty is that of its one-sidedness. That is, the type stresses a priority which we may indeed have good reasons to preserve in a Christian theology or ethic. However, it does so precisely by disregarding the priorities which the other types intend to acknowledge. Hence while each type typically pays lip service to the necessity of those other priorities, little room is nonetheless left for them, and accounts of them will usually remain underdeveloped. The inevitable result of this is an inconsistency between Christian theologians and thinkers' formal, methodological statements about the theology/ethics relationship, and the substantive theological or ethical claims those thinkers will frequently wish to advance. The formal statements will typically emphasise just one priority, but the substantive claims will usually also depend on all the others.

Accordingly, in this thesis' second part, I propose a constructive way forward. I contend that each type above has persisted not merely due to entrenched disciplinary divides in the modern theological academy, but also because it captures an essential facet of the Christian life. What is therefore now necessary is a more nuanced conception of that life, which is the presupposed background rendering all Christian theological and ethical claims meaningful and normative. Such a life has four facets, corresponding to the priorities of the above types, namely, moral agency, the particular situation, the Christian life's coherence, and that life's distinctively Christian identity.

For someone inhabiting the Christian life, I argue, each of these facets cannot be considered except through reference to the others. Simultaneously, however, each facet cannot be treated merely as an aspect of any of the others. Instead, it is irreducible. Putting these claims together, the Christian life is therefore characterised by its multiperspectivity, the way in which it views everything from distinctive but intrinsically related perspectives, each of which is centred on one of its different facets. I call such an account of the Christian life, and of the dual independence and interdependence of its constitutive perspectives, a critique of that life. Such a critique is similar to, but has key differences from, the notion of "immanent criticism" pervasive in critical theory.

In contrast, a crucial shortcoming of many modern Christian theologians and thinkers comprises their frequent attempts either to assimilate the four facets into one, or alternatively to assume that one facet can be treated completely separately from the others. Either half of this error will necessarily produce contradictions between theological or ethical claims and the conditions on which those claims are based. Hence the critique of the Christian life plays a modest but essential role, in articulating criteria with which such claims must comply in order to avoid said contradictions. Furthermore, the critique implies a picture of how theology and ethics both develop, namely, through the autonomous growth of each of the Christian life's constitutive perspectives, but in a way that enables each perspective to provide some basis for correcting the others.

To illustrate the potential of such a critique, I turn to certain contemporary debates about evil, suffering and theodicy. Those include liberation theology's preferential option for the poor, as well as analytic philosophical discussions around the "evidential" problem of evil. My contention is that the Christian life necessarily perceives evil and

suffering according to multiple perspectives. Hence evil and suffering are simultaneously viewed as threats to moral agency, irreducibly particular to the situation, phenomena to be incorporated into the Christian life's overall coherence, and utterly opposed to the God of Jesus Christ. These perspectives all presuppose one another and interact in complex ways, but cannot be collapsed. I argue that maintaining a clear sense of the relationship between these perspectives helps us disentangle several confusions which have plagued the aforementioned debates.

In my conclusion, I briefly consider what my critique of the Christian life might suggest about some of the commonly encountered historical situations where the theology/ethics relationship appears troubling. I also suggest the study of *wisdom* as a way in which to supplement the critique.

INTRODUCTION

This is a thesis about the relationship between theology and ethics in modern Christian thought. Its premise is that all past attempts to understand that relationship have seriously underestimated its complexity.

In the following introduction, I will (1) explain why the theology/ethics relationship seems so important to Christians; (2) argue that previous approaches to the relationship have produced one-sided conceptions of it; (3) propose a typology of those past approaches; (4) introduce my own approach; and (5) outline the structure this thesis will follow.

1 Why Does the Theology/Ethics Relationship Matter?

Another way we might pose this question might be as regards the relationship between *Christian beliefs* and *Christian actions*. Of course, putting things this way simply trades one overloaded set of terms for another. (What are beliefs? What are actions? What does it mean for either to be Christian?) Still, it at least has the advantage of foregrounding how Christians most likely care about the question deeply, be they academics, lay, or ecclesial professionals.

In contrast, several other ways of raising the question are prone to incite its immediate dismissal. Imagine, for example, if we asked about the relationship between "dogmatics" or "systematic theology", and "theological ethics". That inquiry is all too often understood as merely about the relative hierarchy of subdisciplines within academic theology. It would thus be easily ignored, as only of interest to specialists. Or, worse, it would be rejected as representing a heated but ultimately pointless feud

between intellectual guilds, jockeying for academic capital in the modern university ecosystem, with all its perverse incentives.[1]

However, while we almost intuitively sense that the connection between Christian beliefs and Christian actions is crucial, it is far from easy to pin down *why*. We might suggest it is of great *methodological* significance for the disciplines of Christian theology and ethics – but then we would have immediately lost the sense of its consequence outside the academy. Anyway, we would still need to specify what that significance was.

Alternatively, we could posit that the connection is of obvious *normative* importance. So of course we care how Christians' beliefs about, say, creation should influence their actions regarding the environment. Or we care about how their actions, like their liturgical worship, should influence what they believe. Thus the connection between Christian beliefs and actions matters, since knowledge of it might help us derive the appropriate content of both. Nonetheless, another issue the connection squarely raises is the very source of normativity, the meaning of the "should", which is far from simple.[2] Consider, for instance, a belief that the divine command is what gives morality its obligatory character. So not only does the connection between Christian beliefs and actions implicate the contents of both: it also raises fundamental meta-ethical problems for disputation. Accordingly, while it is reasonable to emphasise that connection's normative dimensions, doing so does not help us clearly delineate what those dimensions are.

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1 This, for example, is what underpins Hauerwas' essay "On Doctrine and Ethics" in Hauerwas (2016), 21–40. More on him below.

2 "[T]he moral philosophy of the modern period can be read as a search for the source of normativity": Korsgaard (1996a), 18.

Still, a third possibility arises if we consider what the above normative queries omit. They are formulated abstractly and hypothetically, about a possible future state of affairs. Thus they display limited *historical consciousness*, at least as framed. In contrast, we might wonder if a key reason why the connection between Christians' beliefs and actions seems so critical is because, in the past, we encountered occasions when that connection felt vital, and yet went unresolved.

One thing we could try, therefore, is to list those situations. Here are eleven; there are probably many more others. Several of the examples I cite might be empirically contestable, and the interpretations of them are hardly the only ones available. But the point for now is that they are at least *plausible*:

1. A Christian belief has had unexpected consequences on people's actions.

   Examples: Max Weber's controversial thesis that the Calvinist doctrine of predestination was instrumental in the rise of modern capitalism, with all its associated practices.[3] Charles Taylor's follow-up claim that certain Christian ideas about providence played a key role in the process of secularisation.[4]

2. A Christian belief has had negative consequences on people's actions.

   Examples: Claims that Christian supersessionism has contributed to antisemitism, or racism in general.[5] Contemporary fears that certain theological ideas about gender are linked to higher incidences of intimate partner violence.[6]

[3] Weber (1958).
[4] Taylor (2007).
[5] Carter (2008).
[6] Nason-Clark et al (2018).

3. Some egregious action has been justified through explicit appeal to Christian beliefs. (This is a similar situation to above, only with a different emphasis.)

   Examples: Justification of anti-miscegenation laws by appeal to theological notions of natural law.[7] Resort to the doctrine of the Trinity to legitimate patriarchy.[8]

4. A belief considered "wrong" or "heterodox" has nonetheless produced morally desirable consequences.

   Examples: Breakaway groups like the medieval Cathars seemingly living more austerely than the orthodox.[9] Various modern movements outside the Church, like feminism or Marxism, spotlighting injustices within it better than those on the inside.[10]

5. An "orthodox" Christian belief was reached, either originally or by individuals subsequently, through some morally ambiguous process.

   Examples: The politicking at major early church councils.[11] Forced coercion of individuals into adopting the "right" beliefs.

6. A Christian belief seems irrelevant to the actions of Christians.

   Examples: Worries that venerable christological and trinitarian formulae make no difference to modern Christians' lives or worship.[12] George Lindbeck's

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7 Pascoe (2009), 70–1.
8 Giles (2017).
9 Lansing (1998), 77.
10 C.f. Williams (2000a), 38–9.
11 MacMullen (2006).
12 See, famously, Rahner (1970), 10–15.

distinction between "official" and "operational" doctrines, of which only the latter still matter for church life.[13]

7. Some actions carried out by Christians have no apparent or necessary connection to their beliefs as Christians.

   Examples: Christians in religiously pluralist societies not living any differently from anyone else. Liberation theologians being accused of adopting a Marxist praxis that is not genuinely "Christian".

8. People, while agreeing on their beliefs as Christians, have disagreed on the consequences of those beliefs for their actions.

   Examples: Christians professing identical confessional stances nonetheless taking enormously different political positions. Disagreements over strategy, even when there is consensus on ethical and political priorities.

9. Christians, while agreeing on their ethics, have disagreed on which beliefs justify it.

   Examples: The claim that Protestants and Catholics in Reformation Europe had extremely similar moral positions, despite vehement theological differences.[14] Disputes over whether Christian support for human rights stems from the *imago dei*, or rather from the "worth" which God confers onto humans.[15]

13 Lindbeck (1984), 74.
14 Yoder (1984a), 20.
15 Wolterstorff (2008), 342–61.

10. People have focused too much on what are correct Christian beliefs, distracting them from consideration of correct actions.

    Examples: The Franciscan fear of the intellectual hubris encouraged by theological education.[16] The 19th century Presbyterian minister who coined the word "orthopraxy" to correct a single-minded focus on pure orthodoxy.[17]

11. People have focused too much on correct Christian actions, distracting them from consideration of correct beliefs.

    Examples: Lutheran suspicions that too much attention on "ethics" distracts Christians from the need for a saving faith. American evangelical scepticism of the social gospel movement, as emphasising social action over orthodox beliefs.

Again, interpretation is always involved in such situations.[18] So, for example, if appeal has been made to natural law in order to legitimate racism, we might try to argue it was merely "misused" or "perverted", and so can still be employed "in appropriate and constructive ways".[19] If Christians seem to have the same ethics as everyone else around them, one might still claim that their "Christian motivation" nonetheless makes all the difference. Or, if Christians cannot agree on their politics, we might wonder if they have divergent unarticulated beliefs, regardless of their explicitly shared confessions. And so on. But again, the interpretations I have suggested are plausible. In any case, the very fact of possible competing readings is part of what gives us pause.

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16 Şenocak (2012).

17 Woodburn (1940), 205.

18 As one Frankfurt School critical theorist has recently said, "[t]he fact that there is a contradiction between norm and practice may ... first have to be made apparent through interpretation – and may therefore be a matter of dispute". For example, "the insight that there is a contradiction between the commandment to love one's neighbor and the behavior of a community toward asylum seekers ... is the result of a particular interpretation and application of this commandment". Jaeggi (2018), 184–5.

19 So Massaro (2016), 68–9.

So my initial claim is that one crucial reason why Christians, myself included, care about the theology/ethics relationship is because of situations we have encountered where that relationship has been forced into the foreground. Hence our interest in that relationship cannot be reduced to a spat between academic disciplines, or questions of good research methodology, or hypothetical guidance about the future. All these might be involved, but cannot be exhaustive. Instead, the historical aspect of the theology/ethics relationship cannot be overlooked: the relationship matters because we have previously faced situations where it has perplexed us.

This underscores why the many attempts to deny the very legitimacy of inquiries into the relationship are ill-conceived. I have already alluded to these; I will shortly come to what motivates them. For now, we can take Stanley Hauerwas as representative: "To assume that a 'relation' between doctrine and ethics needs to be explicated unjustifiably presumes that something called 'ethics' exists prior to or independent from 'doctrine'".[20] But such a blithe dismissal, we can now see, implies disregard of the situations where the perplexities in the relationship have left us stunned. Or, at least, it ignores those situations' ambiguity, their capacity to be read in different ways.

Such disregard, I would nonetheless posit, is unlikely ever to be consistent. For a dismissal of the very question of the theology/ethics relationship still constitutes a response to that question. It is therefore still likely reactive, even if only unwittingly, to one or more of the situations where that relationship is raised. But in that case, there is a real risk it has not perceived those situations' full scope. Indeed, I will now argue that the greatest problem with almost all previous treatments of the theology/ethics

[20] Hauerwas (2016), 22.

relationship is their one-sidedness, their inability to recognise that relationship's many dimensions.

2 Approaching the Relationship: The Dangers of One-Sidedness

Something crucial to observe about the situations outlined above is how truly wide-ranging they are. Some involve what seems to be a morally dubious connection between Christian beliefs and actions. Others foreground irrelevance, when beliefs and actions have apparently nothing to do with one another. Still others raise the matter of a disputed connection, when it has become contentious which belief should be linked to which action. And yet a further group worries that one of either Christian beliefs or actions has crowded out the other. Further, I should reiterate, there are probably many more than just the situations I have mentioned.

This broad range points to something quite important about how we should approach the theology/ethics relationship. For if, as I suggest, a large part of why we care about that relationship is because of previous situations faced where it perplexed us, then we might be tempted to hone onto whatever appears the most urgent of those situations. But then, there would be a risk of presuming *this* to be "the" problem which the theology/ethics relationship must resolve. Whatever subsequent conception of the relationship we developed would thus likely be lopsided, insufficiently equipped to address the other situations.

I would argue that this is what has happened in much contemporary Anglophone systematic theology. That has become enamoured by its bid for relevance – to the Church; to the university; to wider culture. A great amount of intellectual effort has

therefore been directed at the sixth and seventh scenarios mentioned, that Christian beliefs and Christian actions have seemingly little to do with one another. So it is now often said that doctrine has no bearing on the real lives of Christians, and that accordingly, theologians must find ways to make it relevant again. That may involve drawing out the "practical" import of certain doctrines, as with social trinitarians arguing why the Trinity matters for human relationships. A frequent accusation against this strategy is that it risks distorting the content of traditional Christian teachings.[21]

Another strategy would be to "overcome" the theology/ethics, belief/action and theory/practice binaries in their entireties. In their places will be erected a more encompassing category, like that purportedly of "narrative", as supposedly presupposing an intrinsic unity in the Christian life which those binaries tore apart. This alternative strategy is often underpinned by theological readings of Alasdair MacIntyre's philosophical works on narrative and communal practices.[22] But having now identified that strategy, we can perceive that, when theologians have rejected even the value of asking about the theology/ethics relationship, those rejections do not lack an agenda. Rather, they constitute an attempt to reclaim theology's relevance, at a time of considerable anxiety within the theological academy over its marginalisation.

To now introduce terminology I will more precisely define later, the attempt to wholly transcend the theology/ethics relationship is part of what I will call a *metahistorical* approach to that relationship. I should observe here something else which this approach frequently attempts, namely, to offer a story or genealogy about how the distinction

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21 C.f. Tonstad's critique of "corrective projectionism", where the dynamics of some contemporary ethical problem which the doctrine of the Trinity is hoped to solve are then unhelpfully projected back into it: Tonstad (2015), 13–17.

22 See especially MacIntyre (2007).

between theology and ethics first arose. Thus once, it is frequently claimed, Christians would have found it nonsensical to distinguish between the two, since their beliefs and lives ran together in seamless harmony. That we now do so is therefore an illusion of thought, which has been encouraged by secularisation's long march. That has forced a cleft between our beliefs in a sacred realm, and our actions in a profane one.

Fuller appraisal of these strategies must wait.[23] For now, though, I will rest on how the theologians engaging in such strategies usually have little to contribute concerning the other situations above. They are concerned with relevance, above all else. Moreover, I claim, their focus on this makes them myopic to the many ways theology is already and plainly relevant, though not always desirably so. To be blunt, theologians who engage in sophisticated thinking about the problems of the theory/practice distinction may then put their foot in it when they opine about, say, insurgent Christian nationalism, or how to respond to ecclesial sexual abuse. They prove unable to distinguish or move between these different planes of discussion.

So far, I have mostly been referring to how the pursuit of relevance at all costs produces a distorted view of the theology/ethics relationship. But this is just an instance of a more elementary difficulty, one afflicting contemporary systematic theologians especially, but certainly also the theological academy more broadly. In short, modern treatments of the theology/ethics relationship, even if they are only implicit, tend to presuppose artificially constrained conceptions of at least one of "theology" or "ethics", and possibly both. Much because they have a limited view of the situations foregrounding the relationship, they each assume there is just one thing at stake in it – possibly the

[23] See especially Chapter III.

relevance of theology for modern life, but perhaps alternatively, the distinctive identity of Christian morality, the requirement to decide what is the right thing to do in ethically complicated circumstances, or the need to study those circumstances more carefully. But just *one* of these things, no more.

In seeking to preserve only one such priority, treatments of the theology/ethics relationship thus produce prematurely restricted versions of the terms they examine. For example, the meaning of "ethics" might be confined to a group's defining narrative; to a command emanating from the mouth of God; to a set of casuistical prescriptions for what to do in specific situations; or to a revolutionary praxis against an oppressive system. But what does *not* routinely happen is that these different images of ethics are recognised to be incomplete, and so juggled with one another to moderate their partiality. Hence "[a] picture held us captive", as Wittgenstein would have told us.[24]

Detrimental consequences follow. For if, when relating theology to ethics, we have assumed a narrow conception of either or both, then the same narrow conception will probably crop up elsewhere, not least when we are trying to articulate theology or ethics proper. If it did not, inconsistency would result – though, I will show, said inconsistency is in fact quite common. Accordingly, existing treatments of the theology/ethics relationship obfuscate all the different questions we might want to ask in respect of either theology or ethics.

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[24] Wittgenstein (1953), 48 §155.

My contention so far has been that, if we think more carefully about the situations where the theology/ethics relationship seems to matter to us, we would suspect that existing treatments have not quite kept track of all that relationship's moving parts. Thus in any attempt to move forward, we need to more clearly identify what these are. An important aspect of this involves describing the situations that seem to implicate the relationship, as I have started to do. But it is not enough, given those situations were always open to interpretation. Rather, and precisely to make better sense of them, we need to locate an appropriate interpretive frame.

One way we might try this is by borrowing from sociological thought. After all, we are unlikely to have personally experienced more than a handful of the scenarios throwing up the theology/ethics relationship. Rather, we know about most through painstaking work by historians and sociologists. Why not borrow their overarching frameworks as well, then?

But therein lays the problem. Theology, including Christian ethics, has long had a troubled relationship with historical and sociological research. That has especially been the case for systematic theology in the post-Barthian, post-Milbankian academy. But the roots of the divide go back to the 19th century German university, with the collapse of the "idealist programme" of theologians like Ernst Troeltsch, who hoped to bridge these drifting islands.[25] To be clear, many practical and contextual theologians have been able to offer powerful insights partly because they drew from sociological theories, or adapted ethnographical methods from the social sciences. But for much of the theological academy, history and sociology are better left unmentioned. The fear is that

[25] Thus Zachhuber (2013).

resort to them somehow implies an abdication of theological – or indeed Christian – identity.[26]

I am more sanguine than many other theologians about the usefulness of concrete historical and sociological study – which, I should stress, was never a unitary entity. But the issues are large. While those issues will need frequent consideration throughout this thesis anyway, I am weary of this thesis' intellectual burden shifting to principally an examination of the "right" way theology should interact with the social sciences. That would be distracting, not least since we would then be embroiled in yet another dispute over academic disciplinary boundaries. It would, furthermore, abstract us even further from the situations where the theology/ethics relationship seems to matter. Accordingly, I do not propose proceeding via an explicitly sociological programme by which to account for the theology/ethics relationship.

Instead, to get a better handle of the things going into that relationship, maybe we ought to examine what a wide array of Christian theologians and other Christian thinkers have previously said about it. From there, we can develop a typology of their various approaches, and of what is at stake in each. This, then, will be the tact the present thesis takes. Through such a comparative exercise, we might hope to avoid the one-sidedness which I have said characterises each existing approach.

However, the few past attempts to construct similar typologies do not constitute causes for optimism, instead only marginally transcending the partiality of what they consider.

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[26] So, e.g., for Milbank, famously, sociology purportedly reflects secular assumptions amounting to nothing more than a Christian heresy. Theology, he therefore says, must not borrow from the social sciences, but should swallow them whole. In this way, it "itself [becomes] a social science": Milbank (2006), 382.

For example, in German language scholarship, the theology/ethics relationship is usually discussed in terms of the relationship between dogmatics (*Dogmatik*) and ethics (*Ethik*). I am supposing these terminologies are equivalent, though that will need justification below. So in one currently popular handbook on theological ethics, the author posits six ways to understanding the relationship between the latter set of terms. These are: (1) ethics as dependent on dogmatics; (2) ethics as part of dogmatics (Martin Kähler; Karl Barth); (3) ethics done independently of dogmatics (Paul Tillich; Trutz Rendtorff); (4) ethics as critiquing and replacing dogmatics (Richard Rothe); (5) ethics as fundamental theology and the basis of all dogmatics (Wilhelm Hermann; Gerhard Ebeling); and (6) dogmatics as itself a form of ethics (Barth, again).[27]

Two observations are warranted here. First, there is the choice of interlocutors, all German language Protestant systematic or dogmatic theologians. Were no others worth considering within the rest of the world, or even outside Protestantism, or outside systematic theology? Second, the author divides the types according to the relative priority or ordering of dogmatics and ethics. But we are given no sense of why *this* criterion should be the one that matters, or what difference it makes to how either term is understood.

In the Anglosphere, typological work has focused on the relationship between *theory* and *practice*. Again, I assume this is an equivalent relationship. And again, that will require defence. But on one well-regarded Catholic theologian's typology, there have been five distinct theological approaches to that relationship:[28] (1) the primacy of theory over praxis (Catholic neo-scholasticism); (2) the primacy of praxis over theory

27 Honecker (1990), 25–8, building on an earlier typology by Birkner (1978).
28 And for another, see Fiorenza (1987).

(postmodern and Marxist theologies); (3) rejection of the theory/praxis distinction as externally imposed on theology, and emphasis on the categories of faith and love instead (Barth; Hans Urs von Balthasar); (4) the attempt to connect theology to an external theory (Rudolf Bultmann; Wolfhart Pannenberg; David Tracy); and (5) the attempt to connect theology to an external praxis (liberation theology).[29]

This typology has the advantage, at least, of a wider source selection. And the author, to his credit, recognises "the danger of taxonomic superficiality".[30] Still, the cracks in his construction show in the typology's inability to settle on criteria for distinguishing between its categories. For whereas the question of primacy dominates the first two types, it disappears from the last three. The latter are instead permeated by a sense of theory and praxis being "external" to theology – whatever this means. And it is an open question whether the third type belongs to the typology at all, given its wholesale and explicit rejection of theory/praxis terminology.

These ambiguities raise the matter of *why* the theory/praxis distinction is so important, so as to warrant inclusion even of thinkers who refuse to rely on it, and who reject its significance. It seems the author, in organising material according to that distinction, has become unable to place himself at critical remove from it. Accordingly, it risks becoming a distortive rubric by which to interpret his chosen material.

But despite these typologies' limitations, they at least alert us to how the conversation over the theology/ethics relationship is a deeply fragmented one. Those typologies are unwittingly limited, such as geographically, or in the operating distinctions they

29 Lamb (1996).
30 Ibid., 149.

employ. And since these typologies are partial and incomplete, then the treatments of the theology/ethics relationship to which they refer will almost certainly be as well, not even having had the benefit of such a classificatory exercise. Said treatments, then, are unlikely to be aware of one another, let alone capable of obtaining consensus.

We might suspect a couple of things to be happening here. First, if I am right in my suggestion that past treatments of the theology/ethics relationship have discerned very different priorities in it, then perhaps their failure to make contact should be unsurprising. They are concerned with such divergent things, that their inability to achieve mutual recognition is merely the natural outflow.

Second, there is the sociology of knowledge in the modern academy. That includes, certainly, how it is impossible to have read everything. But it also comprises the increasing specialisation of academic disciplines, as well as what is sometimes called the "politics of citation".[31] Consequently, debates outside the narrow few with which we are familiar are not readily discoverable or legible to us. Or, if we are vaguely aware of them, we risk prejudging them as irrelevant.

So, if we ask what might be omitted from the typologies above, one of the oddest exclusions would have to be of works by any practical theologian. That is especially glaring for typologies which confine themselves specifically to the theory/*practice* relationship. I will say more about this marginalisation in Chapter II. But for now, it is

[31] Marked by "an unwillingness by certain scholars to acknowledge others' disciplinary contributions through engagement, discussion, reference, or citation", such as because the latter represent subaltern voices. So Mott and Cockayne (2017), 956, drawing on the work of Sara Ahmed.

worth noting how it reflects, in part, the much greater discomfort which systematicians have had in adopting social scientific methods, in contrast to practical theologians.

3 A Typology of Approaches to the Relationship

Accordingly, in the typology I will construct in this thesis, I will need to cast a wider net, bringing into dialogue approaches not usually juxtaposed. That typology must also be more sensitive to what really animates each approach. Only in this way might we have a chance of comprehending the several different things which Christian thinkers have seen as going into the relationship.

So, while I will consider "systematic" and "dogmatic" theologians, I will also include Christian ethicists, who have also, oddly, not been included in past typologies. That will comprise at least one professional *theological* ethicist. But it will also involve considering some who style themselves as "philosophers" with a Christian commitment – itself a revealing stance. In addition, I will also extend myself further and examine liberation and practical theologians.

All this said, my choice of interlocutors is still very limited. I will remain focused on predominantly Anglophone and German academics, and mostly men. Thus I exclude lay voices, among many other things, despite how we might think the theology/ethics relationship is especially significant precisely because laypersons care about it.[32]

[32] Liberation theologians have long claimed to follow a collaborative approach with these lay voices. And c.f. recent efforts by practical theologians to study those voices more fully, as with Astley's conception of "ordinary theology" in Astley (2002), and another proposed typology of "normative theology", "formal theology", "espoused theology" and "operant theology" in Cameron et al (2010), 53–8. More generally, consider a dictum by Rowan Williams: "The forming of a corporate imagination is something that continues to be the more or less daily business of religious believers, and it needs to be acknowledged that this is a process

Further, I confine myself to modern figures, partly out of concerns of scope, and partly given the higher risk of anachronistic readings of the past.[33] And, even within my self-imposed restrictions, I cannot include everyone, or all relevant debates, just a minute handful. In short, I myself cannot avoid complicity in the sociology of knowledge and politics of citation, only try to do better than past attempts.

It follows that the proof for the typology I offer will have to be in the pudding. That is, whether it succeeds depends on if, for readers, it is heuristically and hermeneutically useful, including for thinkers or debates I do not cover – of which there are a very great deal. It should help the readers understand, in a clearer and deeper way than previous typologies, the different approaches which have been taken to the theology/ethics relationship, and what matters in each. But this is not something I can guarantee in advance. It will need to be for the reader to judge, when they try to apply the types I suggest to materials in which they are themselves invested.

On the basis of the above considerations, I propose that, on a wider reading of the literatures, there have been three principal types of approaches to the theology/ethics relationship. These are:

1. The *theory/practice* type, which interprets the relationship as corresponding to the distinction between theory and practice. Instances of this type have taken the

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immeasurably more sophisticated than the repetitive dogmatism so widely assumed to be the sole concern of those who employ religious language". Williams (2008), xi.

[33] A good example would be Mary T. Clark's reading of Augustine's *De Trinitate*. She suggests that the latter's distinction between *scientia* and *sapientia* can be "interpret[ed] ... as the current distinction between the theoretical and the practical intellect": Clark (2001), 98. However, this disregards the explicitly christological basis which Augustine gives the *scientia*/*sapientia* distinction, which complicates it enormously, and on which see Studer (1997); Ayres (1998). In brief, something far subtler is happening than what Clark recognises.

latter distinction in two broadly different ways, thereby producing two further subtypes:

A. The theoretical/practical reason subtype, which reads "theory" and "practice" as referring to distinct operations of human reason, which must not be collapsed. "Practical reason" therefore refers to the freedom to deliberate upon and make decisions for which one will be held responsible. Through such a framing, this subtype therefore prioritises the *moral agency* intrinsic to the Christian life.

   Examples: Professional theological ethicists like Oliver O'Donovan. Figures from the "new natural law" school, who may or may not position themselves outside the theological academy, such as John Finnis or German Grisez.

B. The theory/praxis subtype, which interprets "praxis" as connoting the concrete circumstances in which humans find themselves, and from which one must not unduly abstract. This subtype therefore prioritises the *particularity of the situations* in which the Christian life is always embedded.

   Examples: Liberation theologians like Clodovis Boff. Practical theologians such as Kathleen Cahalan and Bonnie Miller-McLemore.

2. The *metahistorical* type, which posits some higher, historically minded category like "narrative" or "tradition" as hovering above theology and ethics. The

division between the latter terms is thereby relativised in favour of such a category, which purportedly unifies the two. This type prioritises the *coherence* of the Christian life.

Examples: Anglophone theologians and especially systematic theologians, including J. Kameron Carter, Sarah Coakley, Paul Fiddes, Stanley Hauerwas, Willie James Jennings, John Milbank and other Radical Orthodox figures, Kevin Vanhoozer and Miroslav Volf. A handful of Christian social philosophers like Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor.

3. The *theo-ontological* type, which sees "theology" and "ethics" as corresponding to different aspects of the relationship between God and humanity, such as the divine and human activities, or gospel and law. Hence each term includes an ontic reference to a part of a divinely illuminated reality. This type prioritises maintenance of the *distinctively Christian identity* of the Christian life.

   Examples: Dogmatic theologians, especially German language ones or those they have influenced, such as Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Gerhard Ebeling, Helmut Thielicke, and John Howard Yoder.

Elaboration of this typology will occupy the first four chapters of this thesis. But three caveats are now needed, in order to ward off potential confusions even at this early juncture.

First, I am not suggesting that different thinkers within the same type or subtype cannot adopt wildly different projects, or take different or even contradictory stances from one

another. Further, by referring to *types* of approaches, I intend to emphasise that, even within a given type, wide varieties of treatments of the theology/ethics relationship will still be possible. This is even though said varieties will share an underlying structure, thereby pushing them to interpret each of theology and ethics in a similar general direction. But that push can be resisted; the direction is not an inevitable one. Hence belonging to a particular type is far from determinative of the exact shape any single project will take.

Second and similarly, while the three types nudge theologians and Christian thinkers in different directions, those types are not strictly incompatible. Instead of existing in unblemished purity, several may be mobilised by the same thinker, especially at different stages of that thinker's argument. So, while the examples I have given are suggestive of the type within which I think the thinker fits best, this does not exclude the possibility of that thinker's reliance on other types. Indeed, I aim to show that such reliance is *necessary,* albeit in a complex way that will warrant detailed elaboration in Chapter V.

Third and most elaborately, I have claimed this typology concerns different approaches to the relationship between *theology* and *ethics*. But I have already also been discussing the relationships between other terms: beliefs and actions, doctrine and theological ethics, theory and practice, and so on. Further, I have been presupposing that, in referring to said discussions, we have *not* entirely changed the conversation. That is to say, somehow or other, these various distinctions are equivalent to one another.

This last claim is far from obvious. Consider the three presently dominant lines of thought in intellectual history. There is the Cambridge School associated with Quentin

Skinner and J.G.A Pocock; German *Begriffsgeschichte*; and Foucauldian genealogy.[34] These schools have extremely different intellectual lineages and emphases. But they all stress careful, rigorous work on understanding the meanings of words and concepts in their historical contexts, and unearthing their subtle shifts over time. Yet my assumption of equivalence would seem to cut against this rigour, as well as my previous warning against anachronism.

We can address the above concern on a disciplinary level, by recalling theology's aforementioned troubled relationship with sociology and history. In short, for "theology" – whatever that may be – history cannot be all there is. Scholarly care for how the meanings of words and ideas change over time is paramount, and I intend for this thesis to show said care. But that must not be all that theologians do. For they also have to take a perspective *internal* to Christian faith, which cannot be subsumed to an *external*, historical one. This use, I acknowledge, of an internal/external distinction is itself deeply problematic; in Chapter V, I will have to define it far more precisely.

For now, I will make my point, perhaps cheekily, by reference to an essay by Nietzsche – not insignificant, given his influence on the contemporary genealogical enterprise. In "The Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life", Nietzsche writes that, to be human, one needs history – but not too much of it. While we do require "the power of employing the past for the purposes of life", it is simultaneously true that "with an excess of history man again ceases to exist".[35] Said excess "can cut off the strongest instincts of youth, its fire, defiance, unselfishness and love, at the roots, damp down the

34 See generally Richter (2003).
35 Nietzsche (1997), 64.

heat of its sense of justice".[36] We need not adopt Nietzsche's vitalism to appreciate his basic, even crass insight: doing *only* history can distract us from what to do *with* that history. So scholarly rigour is essential, but at some point we need to cut off our historical researches, and focus on the task ahead.

That task, as regards my typology, is what I have already indicated: to cast the net more widely vis-à-vis the sources to be considered regarding the theology/ethics relationship. And so, without suggesting that terms like "theology", "theory", "doctrine", "dogma", "dogmatics" or "systematic theology" are *identical*, I do suppose they are sufficiently connected to warrant consideration as a group. The same applies for "ethics", "morality", "practice" or "practices". Obviously, eliciting these terms' divergent histories and valences will be critical, precisely because it will shed light on varying approaches to the "theology/ethics relationship". Yet difference "all the way down" cannot be presumed from the outset.

That said, it may help the reader's orientation if I do now gesture at those different valences, at least as I see them. To begin on the "theological" side, we can say that "doctrine" denotes the teachings of the Christian Church. "Dogma" emphasises those teachings which the Church has formally and specifically authorised. "Dogmatics" refers to expositions by professional theologians of Church teachings. And "systematic theology" connotes the way Church teachings and beliefs fit into a coherent system.[37]

The words "theology" (without an attached adjective) and "theory" are trickier. We still need some sense of their meanings. But compared to the terms above, I suggest, we are

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36 Ibid., 115.

37 Here, I draw from Webster (2007), 1.

far more likely to be misled through reliance on what are effectively dictionary definitions. So we might define theology as something like "the study of God". But then we would not yet have any compass for apprehending why, for example, the academic study of modern Judaism has not occurred in "Jewish theology departments", and has often been confined to "Oriental studies" – itself a controversial term.[38] In short, the word carries not inconsiderable historical baggage. To this, all I will add for now is that it is curious that a word (*theologos*) rejected by early Christians, as too close to Greek polytheism, has now become a principal way to connote what is distinctive in Christian beliefs.[39]

The term "theory" is, if anything, even more fraught. Certainly, we can offer "a loose and formal notion" of the word, as does David Kelsey, "according to which a theory proposes a set of general principles that can explain an event or situation".[40] But again, history matters. As I will discuss in Chapter I, when Plato and Aristotle popularised the term *theoria*, they were furthering a particular political and cultural agenda in so doing. That agenda was furthered by *theoria*'s very claim to reveal universal truths, which thereby in turn *concealed* the political interests in play. I therefore claim, without suggesting the genetic fallacy, that use of the word "theory" is at ongoing risk of overlooking the ideological work which that word often effects.

On the "ethical" side, "ethics" and "morality" are often used interchangeably, including in this thesis. The etymological insight is useful that "ethics" comes from the Greek *ethos* (habit), and "morals" from the Latin *mores* (rules of behaviour),[41] but tells us little

38 See Wiese (2005).
39 See Chapter V, especially section 2.B.
40 Thus Kelsey (2005), 89.
41 C.f. Arendt (1971), 5.

about the words' histories since their points of origin. That said, the connotation of "ethics" as a specifically *Greek rational discourse* has occasionally proven important. Take debates over whether ancient Israel, predating Greece, was even capable of having an "ethics", notwithstanding obvious concern within the Hebrew wisdom over how to live a righteous life.[42]

Nonetheless, ethics and morality are often distinguished, including in contemporary philosophical trends, both analytic and continental. Thus "morality" is sometimes treated as an attempt to define an objective and universal discourse about right and wrong. In contrast, "ethics" more modestly grows out of concrete cultures, when those cultures reflect on what makes a life worthwhile.[43]

"Practice" – and praxis, which is sometimes distinguished – are also tricky terms, being the troublesome corollaries of "theory". For now, I will observe their double meaning: first as "action", and second as something like "how things really work on the ground". This split produces the two subtypes in the theory/practice type I have mentioned. In addition, when we move from "practice" to "practices", a tectonic shift is effected, even if it goes unrealised. This apparently innocent pluralisation injects historical consciousness into the term, forcing us to consider patterns of human activity developed over time, and which accrue cultural significances.

4 The Theology/Ethics Relationship and the Christian Life

The threefold typology I have set out is intended as one of this thesis' principal contributions. It is designed to be a diagnostic tool, to make sense of the increasingly

42 See Barton (2014), 273–6; Najman (2017), 512–23.
43 See, e.g., Williams (1985); Habermas (1990a).

fragmented debate over the theology/ethics relationship. And it functions as this precisely by collating and interpreting sources not usually considered together. However, given each type of approach to the relationship was characterised by one-sidedness, even while having something important to preserve, it is reasonable to ask if an alternative, more holistic approach is available. Or are we doomed to tunnel vision?

Following the typological chapters of the present thesis, I will indeed offer a way past the confusions I identify as inflicting the relationship. This way will not be a neat or tidy "solution", but rather a framing that helps us better recognise the open-endedness and complexities intrinsic to the issues at stake. I will briefly outline that framing here.

The theology/ethics relationship, I propose, is at bottom about the internal differentiatedness of the *Christian life*. I have already employed the concept of that life when introducing the three types above. It is, however, a slippery concept even in our common usage, and will require elaboration. At this point, we can think of it as a way of living that has a distinctively Christian identity. So Coleridge, famously: "Christianity is not a theory or a speculation; but a life; – not a philosophy of life, but a life and a living process".[44]

Yet the identity of that life is always elusive, because it always derives from God, whose simple presence can never be guaranteed. That is to say, the Christian life has a constitutively unstable identity, meaning that while one's beliefs, actions, practice, worship and everything else are necessary for that life, whether any of these are genuinely "Christian" remains solely in the hands of God. In contrast, it is idolatrous to

[44] Coleridge (1839), 146.

assume that the Christian status of any of these items can be taken for granted. And so, "[t]he history of Jesus enacts a judgement on tribalized and self-protecting religion, on the confusion between faith and ideology".[45]

The Christian life has four "facets", which correspond to the priorities of the four types or subtypes above. Those facets are hence the moral agency operative in that life, that life's particular circumstances, its overall coherence, and its aforementioned distinctive identity. All are essential to the Christian life, though none ever appears unmediated: in fact, each is mediated through the others. So part of why each of the four types or subtypes has persisted is because each has emphasised a different facet not entirely ignored, but still suppressed, by the other types. But the reason why none has attained complete dominance is precisely because of what each type or subtype omits concerning the other facets.

To *inhabit* the Christian life means to follow what I call that life's *multiperspectivity*. This means that, within the Christian life, every phenomenon one could conceivably encounter is always perceived through multiple different perspectives. Each such perspective, crucially, centres on one of that life's different facets. Hence like those facets, none of the perspectives is reducible to any of others. Still, a condition of inhabiting the Christian life is *also* that the perspectives mutually presuppose one another, given how the facets are only ever mediated via one another. Consequently, they must be thought both together and apart. In contrast, two key errors which previous approaches to the theology/ethics relationship have constantly made have been either to

[45] Williams (2000a), 104.

think that one perspective could become fully autonomous, or to assume one could be wholly assimilated into the others.

For reasons that will become clear, I will call my approach to the theology/ethics relationship a *critique of the Christian life*. It should not be read as a new approach to either theology or ethics, compared to more extravagant treatments of the relationship which I have associated principally with the metahistorical type. Rather, the critique plays a significant but narrow role, namely, to remind us that the Christian life always means looking at things in different ways and for different purposes, which are distorted if those things are only examined in a one-sided manner. Much mischief, I will argue, has therefore resulted from disregard of what should be this perhaps obvious insight. In addition, I should clarify, the critique cannot be enunciated a priori, but rather can only be developed by reflecting on existing treatments of how the Christian life operates. Consequently, while this thesis' typological part can be read separately from the critique articulated in its constructive part, the reverse does not hold true. Instead, the latter is necessarily premised upon the former.

The critique of the Christian life also implies a picture about how the Christian life *develops*. It does not develop through a top-down approach, whereby theologians revolutionise our understanding of everything there is. Rather, that life evolves through painstaking work undertaken in *each* of its constitutive perspectives, much of which career theologians will generally be ill-equipped to handle. By comparison, something like "doctrine" or "systematic theology" is typically worked through in only one of

those perspectives, namely the one pertaining to the Christian life's distinctiveness.[46] But this is only one perspective which makes up that life. And while it is proper and necessary for the perspectives to influence and correct one another, given their interdependence, none can be allowed to monopolise, lest the Christian life fall into ruinous contradiction. So the Christian life develops through careful attention being paid not only to its distinctive identity, but also to how its moral agency should be exercised, to the particular circumstances in which that life is embedded, and to its sense of wholeness.

5 The Structure of This Thesis

"I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Rom. 12:1).[47] In such a way, Paul shifts from his teaching on justification and election, and onto how the Roman church is to live. That shift, however, takes as its fulcrum a "therefore" (*oun*): two things have been set into connection.[48]

What the foregoing remarks have been intended to spotlight is how complicated this "therefore" really is. Nonetheless, at the present juncture, it is convenient to set out my two principal claims, the first critical; the next constructive:

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46 Hence "doctrinal definition [is] the attempt to make sure that we are still speaking of *God* in our narratives, not about transactions of mythological subjects or about the administration of religious power": Williams (2000a), 14 (emphasis in original).

47 All Biblical references in this thesis are to the Revised Standard Version|.

48 Likewise O'Donovan: "The moral arguments of the New Testament epistles often pivot on the word 'therefore', which links the evangelical proclamation with moral inferences". O'Donovan (1994), x.

1. Previous treatments of the theology/ethics relationship have distorted that relationship, by failing to recognise the multiple concerns which the relationship straddles. Those treatments can be arranged into three categories: the theory/practice type, the metahistorical type, and the theo-ontological type.

2. An explicit critique of the Christian life is therefore necessary, in order to engage with those concerns more holistically. Such a critique must recognise that life's internal differentiatedness, comprising distinct and irreducible facets that nonetheless cannot be considered apart from one another.

This thesis therefore folds into two parts, each corresponding to one of these claims.

The first and longer part develops my typology of existing approaches in modern Christian thought to the theology/ethics relationship. The first two chapters therefore examine the *theory/practice* type, and respectively its two subtypes. Hence in Chapter I, I examine interpretations of the relationship as corresponding to the difference between theoretical and practical reason. Through readings of evangelical theological ethicist Oliver O'Donovan and of the Catholic new natural law school, I will argue that these thinkers stress, above all else, the irreducible moral agency of each human person. In contrast, that agency would be overlooked by a total subsumption of "ethics" into "theology". Talk of "practical reason", therefore, becomes a necessary way to keep said agency in sight. Yet, I will argue, not only does such talk seem to disembody moral agency from the specific circumstances in which it is exercised, it also invites ongoing suspicion of how such practical reason might be truly "Christian".

Chapter II turns to another conception of theory and practice, but where "practice" has ceased to connote moral agency. Rather, it is used instead to warn against undue abstraction from concrete particulars. So by drawing upon the works of Latin American liberation theologian Clodovis Boff and several American practical theologians like Bonnie Miller-McLemore, I will show how this subtype's priority has shifted from moral agency to the specific circumstances in which real humans live. Nonetheless, approaches within this subtype have also been accused of losing their unique Christian identity.

In Chapter III, I move to the *metahistorical* type, which I have claimed now dominates contemporary Anglophone systematic theology. That type, as I will argue via discussions of Stanley Hauerwas and Sarah Coakley, is characterised by two main strategies. The first is to advance some overarching category like "narrative", or some synthesising style of theology like "*théologie totale*", in order to bridge a perceived divide between theology and ethics. Second, a narrative or story is offered about how the two came apart at all. The purpose of these two strategies is to emphasise the Christian life's coherence, which is sensed to have been lost in modernity. However, metahistorical approaches recklessly rick running over the nuances of whatever they touch, including one's sense of moral agency, the particularities of one's situation, and what really makes one's life Christian.

Chapter IV shifts to *theo-ontological* approaches. These attempt to correlate theology and ethics with different aspects of the relationship between God and humanity, as I will show through readings of Karl Barth; his Lutheran respondents such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer; and his (in)famous American Mennonite student John Howard Yoder. In so doing, they connect "ethics" inextricably with God, thereby emphasising the uniquely

Christian identity of a Christian ethics, as well as of the Christian life. But this, I will seek to show, also introduces a certain abstractness into ethics, therefore putting into doubt the Christian identity of anything we might actually encounter in that life.

With this typological exercise complete, I will move to the second and constructive part of this thesis. Chapter V therefore develops the "critique of the Christian life" I have now proposed, as a corrective to lopsided conceptions of that life. It first introduces the concept of the Christian life, by comparing it to the notion of "forms of life" presently popular in critical theory. I then elaborate on that life's four facets, from which emerges also that life's *multiperspectivity*. With these moves in place, I will then set out criteria with which theological and ethical claims must comply, in order not to contradict the conditions on which the Christian life is based. These criteria, while minimal, are nonetheless frequently and fragrantly breached in modern Christian theology and ethics, to the detriment of both.

Chapter VI attempts to make my critique of the Christian life concrete, by asking how it might help clarify a particular case study, namely that concerning debates around evil and suffering. I argue that the Christian life is characterised by four distinctive perspectives towards these, even though said perspectives are not typically distinguished. Nonetheless, recognition of their differences helps us understand what is at stake in such discussions as liberation theologians' advocacy for the preferential option for the poor, or the "evidential" problem of evil in analytic philosophy.

In my conclusion, I will finally be placed to decipher the situations with which I began this introduction, and which left us perplexed vis-à-vis the theology/ethics relationship. I will also suggest future directions which the present project might take.

CHAPTER I

THE THEORY/PRACTICE TYPE – I

One of the most frequent ways to make sense of the theology/ethics distinction has been to analogise between that distinction and another, namely that between *theory* and *practice*. The burden of the next two chapters will be to examine some of the main ways this has taken place in modern Christian thought.

"Theory" and "practice" are themselves far from simple terms, of course. The relationship between them has therefore been interpreted in myriad ways, ever since their original systemisation by Aristotle. That relationship has thus been often frequently understood in terms of yet a further binary, such as between universals and particulars, *sapientia* and *scientia*, contemplation and action, or "the good" and "the right". We should mind this complex reception history, and exercise care, for example, in using the English terms interchangeably with the Greek *theoria* and *praxis* – or, conversely, in assuming that these must be different.[1] Still, my suggestion is that those terms, whether English, Greek or otherwise, have become almost irreversibly embedded in our conceptual vocabulary. Hence it is thoroughly unsurprising how profoundly they often structure our understanding of the theology/ethics relationship. Consider, for example, how hard it can be to avoid saying "but in practice, what we find is ...".[2] Endeavours to secede completely from the distinction will therefore usually fail.

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1 Some authors prefer "praxis" over "practice", because they assume the former term has an intrinsic connection to theory which they wish to promote. Hence two practical theologians: "whereas practice implies the simple non-reflective performance of a task in a dispassionate, value-free manner, praxis denotes a form of action which is value-directed, value-laden and profoundly saturated with meaning". See Willows and Swinton (2000), 14. But *according to whom* do the two terms mean these things? My suggestion is that such definitions are too simple, because they unduly privilege single moments in long and ongoing contestations over concepts.

2 C.f. the title of an essay by Kant, that great divider of theoretical and practical reason: "On the Common Saying: That May Be Correct in Theory, But It Is of No Use in Practice". Kant (1996c).

Instead, they will typically settle for a mere inversion of the currently prevailing hierarchy between the two terms.[3]

Given the different ways the theory/practice distinction has been read, it is also unsurprising that its relevance for the theology/ethics relationship has been pushed in rather divergent directions. These two chapters will therefore examine what I suggest are the two main such directions in contemporary Christian thinking. In this chapter, then, I will consider a reading of the theory/practice distinction which treats it as one between theoretical and practical *reason*. In Chapter II, I will turn to another interpretation, whereby "practice" refers not to a mode of reason, but connotes the particular circumstances in which the human agent lives and breathes.

What these two interpretations nonetheless share is their assumption that theory and practice, and so also theology and ethics, name *discrete* domains of human existence, be it discrete operations of human reason, or instead distinct spheres of human activity. These domains have boundaries that are traversable, but no less real. Even the claim that theory and practice must be brought together presupposes an originary sense that they stand apart. Consider, for example, a widely read text on practical theology within the Anglosphere:

> "We come to the theological task with questions shaped by the secular and religious practices in which we are implicated – sometimes uncomfortably. These practices are meaningful or theory-laden. By using the phrase *theory-laden*, I mean to rule out in advance the widely held assumption that

[3] This is Arendt's critique of Marx's attempt to break from the distinction. The latter sought to escape the Platonic dominance of theory by elevating praxis over it, but thus affirmed the binary between the two even more forcefully. Hence "[t]he very assertion of one side of the opposites ... practice against theory ... necessarily brings to light the repudiated opposite and shows that both have meaning and significance only in this opposition": Arendt (1961), 35–6.

> theory is distinct from practice. All our practices, even our religious practices, have theories behind and within them."[4]

The trouble with this passage is that it presupposes and so affirms the very dualism it tries to overcome. It hence falls unavoidably into contradiction. For if practices are "laden" with theories, which in turn sit "behind" and "within" those practices, then of course a distinction between theory and practice exists, even if we also insist that they always go hand-in-hand. The more productive inquiries would be what kind of distinction this is; when the distinction is appropriate to make; when it is inappropriate; and so on.

Theory/practice thinking, in short, is binary thinking. The second type of approach to the theology/ethics relationship will try to overcome this stark segregation erected in the centre of the Christian life (Chapter III). But, within this first type, the existence of the binary immediately opens a host of other questions. Those include in what way "theory" and "practice" may develop and operate independently of one another, and what it means for these to be "consistent" or "consonant".[5]

Such questions, in turn, foreground some of the situations mentioned in the introduction which make us anxious about the theology/ethics relationship. If, for example, we have previously observed a theory or theology being put to some mischievous purpose,[6] then it is natural to debate what the criteria are for both its "salutary use" and its "idolatrous

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4 Browning (1991), 5–6 (emphasis in original).

5 Some recent discussions within patristic studies have also foregrounded this question of consistency between the doctrine and liturgical practices in the early church. Consider, e.g., McGuckin: "Athanasios knew that his doctrine of the deity of the Lord Jesus was in harmony with Scripture, as well as in consonance with the liturgy": McGuckin (2008), 111. That, of course, raises the matter of *in what such consonance consists*.

6 See section 2 of this thesis' introduction, and especially the second and third situations mentioned.

misuse".[7] Such debates were always possible, even without the theory/practice distinction. But the distinction's dualistic vocabulary render those debates more legible, and so more likely to develop into serious sites of contestation. This and the next chapter are therefore intended to capture that vocabulary's dynamics.

So far, I have not yet mentioned the issue of which of "theory" or "practice" should be prioritised over the other. Hence I take a different tact from the existing typologies of the dogmatics/ethics and theology/ethics relationships I have discussed, and which were far more interested in this.[8] That said, the question will indeed be addressed by the figures considered in these two chapters. They will variably prioritise theory over practice, practice over theory, affirm both priorities in different circumstances, or refuse any priority whatsoever. But, as I have suggested, what matters more than what priority is assigned is *what has led* to that priority being assigned in the way it has. For example, liberation theologians' affirmation of "the priority of praxis" remains unilluminating unless we first know why this priority is important. Hence in considering the different ways the theory/practice distinction has been interpreted, my emphasis will instead be on what they see as important in that distinction.

Accordingly, then, what is at stake in the first such interpretation, which treats theory and practice in terms of theoretical and practical reason? The answer this chapter develops is that the affirmation of practical reason, through its contrast with theoretical reason, has become a crucial way to articulate *the freedom of the moral agent*. By highlighting the human person's deliberative capacity to plot and execute their action, it is suggested, said action can be shown to really be the person's own. It is hence not, for

7 Thus Zahl (2018), 322, who looks at this question of misuse through the lens of Luther's theology.

8 See section 2 of my introduction.

instance, merely the mechanistic application of external forces onto a passive human canvas. In contrast, an account of moral agency located solely within theoretical reason would be incapable of rebutting a wholly deterministic reading of human action as merely a product of one's psychological, sociological or biological environment.

The two accounts of practical reason considered in the present chapter will treat this reason, and that moral agency, quite differently. The first, that of evangelical ethicist Oliver O'Donovan, will aim to frame both in terms of distinctively "Christian moral concepts". It thus takes the revelation of God in Christ's resurrection as its starting point. The second conception is that of the Catholic "new natural law" school associated especially with theologian Germain Grisez and legal philosopher John Finnis. Both thinkers posit practical reason as containing principles self-evident to all, though in fact usually congruent with the teachings of the Catholic natural law tradition.

These two approaches are extremely different in both their methods and their conclusions, such as concerning how moral agency should be exercised. Nonetheless, what they have in common is precisely their emphasis on the freedom of human action. This freedom, both approaches contend, is something which cannot be reduced to a foil for anything else, but must be treated according to its own integrity.

That shared emphasis, however, raises serious methodological questions about how moral agency should be interpreted. One issue causing especial consternation has been whether it is legitimate to resort to "theological" considerations when that agency is being examined.[9] Put another way, can and should there be a specifically Christian

[9] Further clarification of how complex the qualifier "theological" can be will have to await Chapters IV and V, even though it will need to be repeatedly discussed in the chapters prior.

theological account of moral agency? O'Donovan considers one essential; the new natural lawyers are more reticent. Their difference stems, in short, from divergent views about whether an appeal to theology bolsters or instead hinders the epistemic defensibility of such an account.

Further questions follow. For one, if moral responsibility is interpreted theologically, does this expose the exercise of that responsibility to the danger of ideological corruption? In other words, if someone were to interpret agency through resort to possibly faulty theological premises, could or will that person act wrongly as a result? More generally, is it even possible to describe moral agency in all its irreducibility, as O'Donovan and the new natural lawyers hope? Or will the endeavour to do so always involve resort to considerations – such as the theological – that in fact detract from said purity?

That is to say, it is possible that the freedom of the moral agent eludes every attempt to describe it. This chapter will begin to explore such ambiguities. However, their full nature will only become clearer through the contrast with other approaches to the theology/ethics relationship considered in subsequent chapters.

But before we exposit the works of O'Donovan and the new natural lawyers, a brief detour will be useful into the original systematisation of the theory/practice distinction, in order to observe that even this was hardly ethically or politically innocent. That origin, of course, does not determine all subsequent developments: the genetic fallacy should be avoided here. But it does underscore that, as deeply embedded the distinction has become, there is no single, canonical way it must be taken.

The distinction between *theoria* and *praxis* is first systematised in Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. There, Aristotle distinguishes between the five intellectual virtues: scientific knowledge (*episteme*), intuitive reason (*nous*), philosophic wisdom (*sophia*), art (*techne*) and practical wisdom (*phronesis*).[10] These five virtues also take three kinds of human activity as their counterparts. Thus *sophia* (alongside *episteme* and *nous*), *techne* and *phronesis* correspond respectively to theorising (*theoria*), making (*poiesis*) and practice (*praxis*).

In addition, the first three virtues reside in the part of the soul which "contemplate[s] the kind of things whose originative causes are invariable", that is, those things which are universal and changeless. However, the latter two virtues reside in the part which considers "variable things", namely things that are contingent and subject to change.[11] Only this second part of the soul, comprising *techne* and *phronesis*, engages in calculative or deliberative reasoning.

How does Aristotle define each of the intellectual virtues? *Episteme* is knowledge of what is *necessarily* the case, of "things that are eternal ... ungenerated and imperishable".[12] *Nous* is knowledge of the first principles that makes *episteme* possible.[13] *Sophia* combines *episteme* and *nous*, and is knowledge of "the highest objects".[14]

10 For these terms, I follow Ross' well-known translation in Aristotle (2009), 104 [VI.3].
11 Ibid., 103 [VI.1].
12 Ibid., 104 [VI.3].
13 Ibid., 107 [VI.6].
14 Ibid., 108 [VI.7].

Techne, by comparison, is instrumental knowledge about how to make things.[15] And finally, *phronesis* is concerned with deliberation towards right action. It does not merely focus on the universals of *sophia*, but rather comprises knowledge of how to apply said universals to particulars. Such *phronesis* is developed through experience, therefore implying that someone can have considerable scientific but little practical wisdom.[16]

The existence of a distinction between *techne* and *phronesis* (corresponding to a distinction between *poiesis* and *praxis*) is notable. Both are concerned with particulars. However, *techne* is concerned with instrumental knowledge, whereas *phronesis* connotes a realm of human activity outside of the instrumental, and which may be good regardless of its results. This is key, not least since a common critique of modernity is that it collapses *techne* and *phronesis*, such that "practice" becomes concerned solely with the most efficient way to obtain a predetermined end, without any criteria by which to decide if that end is worthwhile.[17] There has hence been a sustained interest, within many strains of contemporary philosophy, in retrieving Aristotelian *phronesis* as a corrective to instrumental reason's modern monopoly.[18]

All this said, it is striking that the *Nicomachean Ethics* is itself inconsistent in distinguishing between *techne* and *phronesis*. On first appearances, instrumentality is confined to the former. But in Book X, Aristotle argues that even the highest practical activities of *phronesis*, namely war and politics, are also aimed at some end. Hence they are still instrumental. That is what enables him to claim the superiority of *theoria*'s

15 Ibid., 105 [VI.4].
16 Ibid., 110 [VI.8].
17 See, e.g., MacIntyre (2007), 186–94, and of course the "critique of instrumental reason" associated with the Frankfurt School.
18 See the review in Volpi (1999).

contemplative activity, which "aim[s] at no end beyond itself".[19] Thus *phronesis* begins to resemble *techne*, in order that Aristotle can make the claim that *sophia* (and so also *theoria*) is of greater worth than both.

Notwithstanding this ambiguity, the basic shape of his attempted distinctions is clear: *theoria* is oriented towards knowledge of universal, unchanging things. In contrast, *praxis* and *poiesis* are, albeit in different ways, oriented towards particulars, and to contingent action. This thus comprises the first systematic distinction between *theoria* and *praxis*.

However, Aristotle himself builds on while simultaneously critiquing Plato's famous account of *theoria* as the philosopher's contemplation of the Forms.[20] Plato develops that account through an analogy with the Greek cultural practice of *theoria*, which we might crudely characterise as the classical Greek form of the 17th and 18th century European Grand Tour. A spectator (*theoros*) would undertake a pilgrimage from his city-state to see something elsewhere bearing religious significance, such as a festival or an oracle. He would then return to his city to declare what he had seen.[21] Alluding to this practice, the *Republic* therefore begins with Socrates recounting his spectating (*theasthai*) of the festival of the goddess Bendis.[22] And it ends with the myth of Er's pilgrimage to the world beyond.[23] In addition, the Allegory of the Cave itself includes the philosopher's departure from the human world, in order to contemplate the Form of the Good, and return to guide human society in light of that Form.

19 Aristotle (2009), 195 [X.7]. See further Knight (2007), 18–19.
20 And in which the contrast with *praxis* is at most implicit.
21 Nightingale (2004), 40–71.
22 Plato (1992), 2 [327a].
23 Ibid., 285–92 [614b–621d].

Notably, *theoria* as a cultural practice was principally undertaken by aristocrats, whose political leanings were typically opposed to democracy, given the diminishment of their power under that system. A passage from an important study by Andrea Nightingale is hence worth quoting at length, given what it suggests about why Plato and Aristotle chose an analogy with that practice:

> "The ancient conceptions of philosophic *theoria* are much more complex and sophisticated than modern and postmodern interpreters have allowed. ... From its inception, theoretical philosophy was a discipline characterized by an ongoing dialogue with voices both inside and outside the academy: the theorists picked a quarrel with traditional ideologies and practices even as they fought energetically for cultural capital. ...
>
> In addition to being great thinkers, Plato, Aristotle, and their associates were also great rhetoricians: against tremendous odds, they sought to persuade people that the theoretical philosopher is the most free, noble, and happy human being. ... In particular, the claim that *theoria* is nonproductive, leisured, and fully free directly reflects the aristocratic ideology of classical Greece. ... To be sure, these philosophers deploy aristocratic rhetoric in order to elevate themselves above traditional aristocrats; they do not simply pay lip-service to aristocratic ideology. But their use of this rhetoric reveals the elitist, antidemocratic aspect of theoretical philosophy in its foundational constructions."[24]

From its very origin, therefore, the *theoria*/*praxis* distinction partly served the purpose of advancing a particular political agenda. While we might debate exactly what this implies about our use of the distinction now, it should mean, at the very least, that we cannot adopt the distinction without critical interrogation about what is accomplished by its use.[25]

In this respect, it is obviously far beyond us to consider the distinction's full reception history within Christianity. Still, it is notable that, even in its initial adoption by

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[24] Nightingale (2004), 14–16.

[25] I have already used the term "ideology", and will continue to use it. Obviously, it is a contested term, especially in critical theory, which often positions itself as *Ideologiekritik*, and to a lesser but real degree in theology, on which see, e.g., Lash (1982); Williams (2000a), 1–15. The word thus defies simple definition.

Clement of Alexandria and Origen, a decisive shift had to be effected. Thus *theoria* came to connote contemplation of *God*, and *praxis* was linked to New Testament *agape*. All believers were said to be called to both of these, rather than merely one,[26] thereby mitigating some of *theoria*'s elitist tendencies. If the monastic tradition subsequently elevated the *vita contemplativa* over the *vita activa*, so as to eventually attract Luther's ire, this might be characterised as a rupture of the careful equilibrium which the church fathers articulated.

With these considerations in mind, let us turn to what two sets of contemporary Christian ethicists make of the distinction between theory and practice, and of how it bears upon the theology/ethics relationship.

1 The Evangelical Ethics of Oliver O'Donovan

It is helpful to begin with Oliver O'Donovan, given the especially lucid terminological delineations he offers. And, even though he commits sleights of hand at certain critical points, these can themselves be illuminating, if we pay attention.

In addition, O'Donovan is interesting, as a particularly sophisticated ethicist working within the politically powerful albeit diverse Protestant movement called evangelicalism throughout the Anglosphere.[27] It would do him disservice, however, to suggest that he could be reduced to a mere spokesperson for that movement. Rather, O'Donovan gathers together several key conversations which otherwise rarely meet, given current

[26] See Lobkowicz (1967), 60–4; McGinn (2002), 61–5.

[27] Although, when O'Donovan refers to his own work as an "evangelical" ethics, he defines "evangelical" as the recognition "[t]hat truth is constituted by what God has done for his world and for humankind in Jesus Christ": O'Donovan (1994), ix. The meaning of "evangelicalism" outside this reified theological description has become much more fraught, not least given its political connotations.

academic stratification. Thus he takes from Augustine, on whom he completed his doctoral work, a concern for a created moral order to which God calls the human agent to respond in love. He is also, and unlike many other Protestants, in dialogue with Catholic scholastic thought, especially that of Aquinas. O'Donovan, further, engages with several German language discussions – Barth is a key if complex influence, as well as the Catholic ethicist Robert Spaemann – as well as his own rich Anglican tradition. Yet, for all these influences, O'Donovan's own voice cuts through in his ethical and political writings, and can hardly be subsumed to that of anyone else.

Here, I will concentrate on how he (1) defines theoretical and practical reason and analogises these to theology and ethics, but then while (2) arguing for the autonomy of practical reason and Christian ethics because of the importance of moral agency, also (3) insists that said reason and agency must be interpreted *theologically*. This last move, I will suggest, forces an ambivalence into his whole schema, regarding whether some dubious theory or theology is capable of correction by its practical or ethical outworkings.

Textually, my primary focus will be on O'Donovan's recent trilogy, *Ethics as Theology*, as giving the most detailed consideration in his corpus to the place the theory/practice distinction occupies in Christian theology and ethics. That trilogy nonetheless builds upon his earlier works, especially *Resurrection and Moral Order*, not least through the latter's treatment of moral agency in principally *cognitive* terms.[28] More broadly, that earlier work offers a trajectory which the later trilogy follows, namely, the construction of distinctively "Christian moral concepts", without which "Christian ethics" would

[28] See, e.g., the claim that "[k]nowledge is the characteristically *human* way of participating in the cosmic order": ibid., 81 (emphasis in original).

degrade into a mere Christian *meta*-ethics.[29] Such a meta-ethics might provide an apologetic foundation for morality, but would not be able to specify anything about that morality's content. *Ethics as Theology* extends this earlier project by defending the integrity of Christian ethics as its own distinct theological subdiscipline, dependent upon dogmatics while remaining distinct from it. O'Donovan will thus resort to the distinction between theoretical and practical reason in order to establish this contrast between theological subdisciplines.

In the trilogy, O'Donovan uses both sets of terms of theory and practice, and of theoretical and practical reason. He prefers the latter set, while still also using the former. Thus talk of theory and practice, per se, has the "disadvantage" of being narrower in its field of reference. In contrast, theoretical *reason* more expansively covers "all kinds of assertion of truth" which may, nonetheless, not amount to fully formed "theories".[30]

What is the difference, however, between theoretical and practical reason? It cannot be that the former deals only with discursive description of the reality, and the latter only with action.[31] That would overlook how practical reason itself depends on knowledge of the world to make decisions, meaning it "has a vast stake in description".[32] Instead, the distinction consists in the way each of theoretical and practical reason begins and ends. Theoretical reason involves inferential reasoning from premises to conclusions, and so takes theoretical knowledge as its result. Practical reason, in contrast, has no fixed starting point, and does not end with a neatly finished product. Rather, it is interrupted

29 See especially the Preface to *Resurrection and Moral Order* at ibid., vii–viii.
30 O'Donovan (2013), 22.
31 Ibid., 23.
32 Ibid., 11.

by "the decision to act".[33] Indeed, practical reasoning may continue after that act's execution. At that point, however, it transitions into *reflection*, that is, consideration of the now past act. It is these features which provide the true "defining line that distinguishes practical from theoretical thought".[34]

Accordingly, practical reasoning really contains two distinct moments, "reflection" and "deliberation".[35] The former is responsible for the "descriptions of reality" necessary for planning action.[36] The latter then effects that planning, according to a more or less complex procedure of deliberation. This, however, suggests an ambiguity, precisely when O'Donovan denies any correspondence between reflection and deliberation, on one hand, and theoretical and practical reason on the other.[37] For why is the reflective moment confined to practical reason alone, instead of also being included in the theoretical?

Indeed, such a possibility seems presupposed in the claim that "[r]eflection in isolation [that is, divorced from deliberation] becomes ... 'abstract' or 'theoretical'".[38] The fact that O'Donovan nonetheless insists reflection is located only in practical reason seems premised on the above constriction of theoretical reason solely to deductive reasoning from premises to conclusions. Such a move relegates other patterns of descriptive reasoning to practical reason, and specifically to the category of reflection. To put it simply, O'Donovan can maintain a clear delineation of practical and theoretical reason because he, perhaps artificially, widens the former and narrows the latter.

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33 O'Donovan (2017a), 23.
34 Ibid.
35 O'Donovan (2013), 31.
36 Ibid., 32. See his description of the structure of deliberation in O'Donovan (2014), 179–88.
37 O'Donovan (2013), 31–2.
38 Ibid.

Nonetheless, on this delineation's basis, O'Donovan can begin a series of moves by which to grasp the distinctive character of Christian ethics vis-à-vis theology. First, he defines "moral thinking" as a subset of practical reasoning, which attains its moral character because of its connection to existential questions. Such questions include "what is this life about, which this action of mine contributes to".[39] Second, he describes "moral teaching" as communication between people regarding what constitutes sound moral thinking.[40]

Third, "ethics" is the discipline by which moral thinking self-reflexively considers both itself and moral teaching. Thus, "[c]ritically but sympathetically, ethical reflection takes up the categories of moral thinking, thinks alongside the moral thinker ... In Ethics normative thinking becomes normative about itself."[41] Finally, "Christian ethics", or "moral theology", is that ethics which sits under the Christian Scripture's authority, and reflects on how to act within the realities to which Scripture attests.[42]

Here, therefore, is an elegant cascade, from moral thinking as part of practical reason to moral teaching, from moral teaching to ethics, and finally from ethics to Christian ethics. That cascade provides the key for understanding the relationship between doctrine and dogmatics, on one hand,[43] and Christian ethics on the other. Doctrine, as the contrary of ethics, is left without explicit definition, but O'Donovan apparently equates it with the description of "the truths which Christians believe are supposed to

39 Ibid., 34.
40 Ibid., 60–5.
41 Ibid., 72.
42 Ibid., 76–80.
43 O'Donovan uses both words interchangeably, as suggested even by the Index to *Ethics as Theology*'s first volume, which aggregates the two.

shape their lives".[44] Both doctrine and Christian ethics are hence "systematic and ordered disciplines" which presuppose the Scriptural witness,[45] with the latter discipline taking its shape as an ordered reflection on practical reason in light of Christian faith.

Can we say then, that just as Christian ethics reflects on practical reason, doctrine reflects on theoretical reason, and specifically what the latter can discover about the truths of Christian faith? O'Donovan, it must be said, does not make such a connection explicit. Indeed, some suggestions he makes, such as that "[t]he proposition that God loves the world is in itself a work of reflection, a determination of the truth of things",[46] or that "[t]here is ... a sense in which all Theology is moral",[47] could be read as turning doctrine into a subset of practical reason's reflective moment. Such a conclusion would hardly be novel, conforming as it would to the view of the medievalist nominalists and the Reformers that all theology is a *scientia practica*, not a speculative but a practical science.

However, O'Donovan also insists on a relative *autonomy* of Christian ethics from doctrine. That autonomy would not be tenable, at least within his framework, if both of these were situated within practical reason. So, though not fully happily, we can indeed infer from O'Donovan a correspondence between theoretical and practical reason, on one hand, and (dogmatic) theology and ethics on the other. Each of the latter terms is distinguished by being a sustained and systematic reflection on one of the former ones.

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44 O'Donovan (2013), 81.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid., 32.
47 Ibid., 82.

Let us say more, then, about why O'Donovan insists on that autonomy. In fact, he walks a fine tightrope between how each of doctrine and ethics is distinct – implying said autonomy – even while the two are intrinsically connected. So on one hand, "Dogmatic and Moral Theology must make their own discoveries, each going beyond what the other could have told it", contra some of Karl Barth's statements suggesting a strict identity of the two.[48] For example, whereas doctrine considers sin to be "a universal truth about mankind, a generic disunity with creation", Christian ethics treats it as a "subjective reality" which may manifest itself in countless, contingent ways.[49]

On the other hand, doctrine and ethics must also be kept together, lest Christian ethics lose its connection to the Christian witness. According to O'Donovan, a loss of this necessary connection occurred with the rise of moral casuistry, an approach to ethics which prescribes increasingly specific rules in response to increasingly specific situations. Such an approach, on his characterisation, is motivated not by doctrinal priorities, but rather by an unprincipled "managerial flexibility".[50] Likewise, the "twentieth-century adventures which aligned Moral Theology with political agenda, whether of radical social change or of conservative resistance" crowded out the "properly reflective, critical role of disciplined thought" which theology demands.[51] Given these misadventures, it is not "in the least harmful" that some theological works embrace both doctrine and ethics in order to maintain their interconnection, since "Moral Theology does in fact reach out in both directions, towards the doctrinal and towards the practical".[52] And, actually, "Doctrine completes Ethics by speaking of an

48 Ibid. See Chapter IV.1 for my own consideration of Barth.
49 O'Donovan (2013), 82.
50 Ibid., 88.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid., 89.

end of God's works; Ethics completes Doctrine by offering it an understanding of itself as a practice of praise".[53]

And so, doctrine and ethics must remain bonded to ensure the latter's fidelity to the truths of Christian faith. We will need to say more about this below. But why also O'Donovan's claim that each must receive its own distinct sphere of operation? A cynical reading would be that this claim about disciplinary boundaries really constitutes a power grab in the modern theological academy. But at least on his explanation, there is the phenomenon of moral agency, as directed by practical reason, which will be inadequately understood if subjected solely to a doctrinal lens. What such a lens would omit is the fundamentally *practical* question of "how we are to think about how we are to live".[54] The answer to this question will rely upon theoretical truths. But it cannot be reduced to them:

> "When those who heard Saint Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost asked themselves, 'Men and brethren, what are we to do?' (Acts 2:37), it was a *next thing* that they asked about, not something they had already been told of in Peter's proclamation. There can be ways of framing doctrine which have had the effect of shutting the door in the face of that next thing, swallowing up the 'what are we to do?' in the irrevocable gift and calling of God."[55]

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So it is for the sake of moral agency that O'Donovan insists on the integrity of practical reason as distinct from theoretical reason, and so also of Christian ethics as distinct from doctrine. But we must therefore examine that agency in greater detail. While O'Donovan, unsurprisingly, has much to say about the subject, both in *Ethics as Theology* and in his earlier writings, a key recurring thread is that moral agency must be

53 O'Donovan (2014), 6.
54 O'Donovan (2013), 86–7.
55 Ibid., 82 (emphasis in original).

grounded and understood *theologically*. More precisely, our moral agency is ontologically enabled by and, epistemologically, to be rightly known via the distinctive contents of Christian faith.

We cannot overstate this move's importance. O'Donovan has just stressed the distinctiveness of practical vis-à-vis theoretical reason, and of Christian ethics vis-à-vis doctrine, precisely in order to defend the integrity of moral agency. That agency, however, is then immediately subordinated to what can be known through said theoretical reason and through said doctrine. Accordingly, O'Donovan wants to liberate moral agency, but without letting it off its theoretical-theological leash. Let us consider this juggling act more closely.

In *Resurrection and Moral Order*, the ontological and epistemological subordination of moral agency to theological concerns is framed in terms of the objective work of God, which is subjectively mediated to us by the Holy Spirit. Understanding moral agency in this way is necessary so that we can have "confidence in divine vindication" of that agency.[56] In other words, it is God who establishes our moral responsibility and reveals it to us, and this is what makes said responsibility both real and knowable. Thence one key passage:

> "The Spirit evokes our *free* response as moral agents to the reality of redemption. ... He confirms and restores us *as moral agents*, which is to say, *as the subjects of our actions*, not as divorced subjectivity which subsists in its own self-awareness. In confirming us as subjects, he teaches us how, within this age of eschatological judgment, we may act."[57]

56 O'Donovan (1994), xv.
57 Ibid., 106 (emphasis in original).

Ethics as Theology presupposes this same theological foundation for moral agency, but shifts its emphasis from the works of God and onto the moral agent's virtues. O'Donovan thus begins that trilogy by observing that all persons "swim in a sea of moral obligations", and have a "conscious experience [of] our sense of ourselves as *agents*". Thus practical reasoning is "our native element".[58] But while this experience of moral agency is common to everyone, it is nonetheless "insurmountably subjective".[59] It cannot stand by itself, but needs the right interpretive framework. And for that, we cannot merely cite the "self-evidencing certainty of experience"[60] – contra the thinkers we will examine next section, who make precisely this appeal.

Instead, for O'Donovan, the right framework is that of the Augustinian conception of the agent as formed by love. That love, according to the Bishop of Hippo, is not divorced from but "wholly informed by knowledge".[61] What is at stake, in particular, is the paradox of *self-love*.[62] For while self-love can be deeply selfish, as when someone elevates their needs over those of others, it may also take a subtler and positive form.

In this latter case, the self comes to love and know itself precisely on the basis that "God's love is the ground of our active self".[63] That is, God's love is generative of the moral self which, in loving itself precisely as that which God first loves, is thus able to exert practical agency and so love others. In this way, self-love can be considered the

58 O'Donovan (2013), 1 (emphasis in original).
59 Ibid., 11.
60 Ibid.
61 Ibid., 114.
62 O'Donovan's interest in this paradox goes back to his doctoral dissertation, *The Problem of Self-Love in St. Augustine*, published as O'Donovan (1980).
63 O'Donovan (2014), 53.

"condition of agent-existence", being the identification of "the self, called by God and responsible to God, as the presupposition of love".[64]

Notably, this description of self-love as the basis for moral agency is contained in O'Donovan's treatment of *faith* in *Ethics as Theology,* rather than in his examination of *love*. This faith is the "prior giftedness of the active self",[65] the decision which God bequeaths the self precisely *to be* a self, that is, an agent acting responsibly in the world. Such faith, taken by itself, has no content. Rather, it is the very openness of the self to a world which it is called to love. Faith hence precedes love, while also always anticipating it, and indeed empty without it.[66]

All this implies that self-love, in its positive form, really constitutes the reflexive operation of love on faith. O'Donovan therefore describes that self-love as involving two stages. First, there is the "motion" of faith by which the self is awakened to the world. And second, there is a moment during which "the world of the self's observation and understanding now reflects the self back to itself as one object of love among other objects".[67] This latter moment is what O'Donovan describes as the "calling of the wakened agent-self to practical engagement".[68] So self-love really points to how, through faith in Christ, the self is opened to the world, and through the world is opened back to oneself.

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64 Ibid., 51.

65 O'Donovan (2013), 105.

66 Here, O'Donovan diverges from Augustine, for whom love also takes on the functions which O'Donovan assigns to faith: see O'Donovan (2014), 49. This divergence may reflect the Protestant and Roman Catholic soteriological divide. C.f. Wannenwetsch's argument that the role that *love* plays for Augustine, in marking a radical receptivity to God's grace, is played, for Luther, by *faith*: Wannenwetsch (2015).

67 O'Donovan (2014), 53.

68 Ibid., 47.

Still, the minutiae of what O'Donovan says about the relationship of faith and love is less important than his overall ambition to ground moral agency – again, both epistemologically and ontologically – in terms of these Christian virtues. In such a way, that agency becomes subordinated to a further set of theological terms. So on one hand, the very existence of Christian ethics, as a field, is justified by the fact of that agency. But on the other hand, that agency is to be explained in purely Christian theological terminology, a point O'Donovan sometimes also expresses through his claim that ethics *follows* doctrine.[69]

Furthermore, while in one essay O'Donovan pays lips service to the notion that "[d]octrinal implications can be drawn from ethical premises, ethical implications from doctrinal premises",[70] it is in fact hard to see how the ethical correction of doctrine might ever occur within his schema. In that same essay, for instance, he asks whether the statement "God is good" can receive its content from the moral concepts furnished by ethics. For O'Donovan, the answer is no: moral concepts, while typically mediated via historical tradition, must ultimately be grounded on "categories that are universal, transcending particular differences of time and circumstance".[71] Those categories, purportedly therefore, must be provided by doctrine.[72]

So while ethics is subject to rebuke by doctrine, and practical reason and moral agency by theoretical reason, a lack of reciprocity is apparent. Thus doctrine and theoretical reason are mostly insulated from critique from the outside, the chain of command flowing only one way. Simultaneously however, O'Donovan is sensitive to the serious

69 See, e.g., O'Donovan (2013), 130.
70 O'Donovan (2006), 34.
71 Ibid., 37.
72 Ibid., 38.

mischief that results when practical reason is theoretically misled, and so recognises "the idea of corrupt love corresponding to corrupt knowledge".[73] The second volume of *Ethics as Theology*, for example, contains an especially incisive discussion of *the world* which Christians are commanded not to love (1 Jn. 2:15). That term performs, for O'Donovan, a similar role to what "ideology" plays in Marxist-inflected thought. Hence "the world" is not reality itself, but rather only our perception of it, which may well be "constructed by agreements on what to see and what not to see".[74] To love the world, therefore, is really to restrict it by one's limited imagination. One therefore falls into *folly*, defined as "the objective failure to live in a right relation to the world".[75]

But how, then, are one's inadequate theoretical descriptions of the world to be corrected? Or, as O'Donovan puts it, how "can we avoid a purely ephemeral love of an ephemeral world, unstable, disconsolate, unappreciative, unfulfilled ... [and] focused on what is not the case"?[76] His solution: we are "[t]o fix our love and action upon the object of God's will", and so "engage in the world of God's creation *really*, and not in fantasy".[77] In other words, claims about the world are to be arranged according to the *ordo amoris*, the order of love ordained by God, and through this standard judged as true or false.

But it is precisely here where O'Donovan also wants to insist that the "affective and cognitive" are intertwined. He therefore says that "[t]he answer to the question, 'What is to be known here?' cannot be disentangled from the answer to the question, 'What is to

73 O'Donovan (2014), 78.
74 Ibid., 73.
75 Ibid., 82.
76 Ibid., 75.
77 Ibid (emphasis in original).

be loved here?'"[78] In other words, it is precisely at this stage of his argument that O'Donovan balks at the stringent distinction between theoretical and practical reason he otherwise maintains. The prospect of a theoretical corruption of practical reason that is incurable except via purely theoretical reason is too much, it would seem. Instead, his proposed knowledge of the world loved by God, which he claims acts as a panacea to all theoretical corruption, somehow embraces *both* theory and practice.

Regardless of what we make of this discussion of the world, that discussion constitutes an exception to the general thrust of *Ethics as Theology*. For the weight of O'Donovan's arguments in that trilogy certainly falls upon the theoretical correction of practical reason. It is not counterbalanced by a sense that practical reason might lead to the chastisement of errant theoretical description. In fact, practical experience is to be distrusted, since it is "not coherent, gathered, and systematic".[79] This imbalance is apparent, above all, in O'Donovan's selection of concrete examples by which he illustrates his arguments. The effect of that selection is cumulative, rather than obvious from individual instances. Thus it is appropriate to cull a handful for mention:

- "Depression, when we withdraw from agency and gaze out on the world with emotionless eyes, may present us with the phenomenon of sloth in an acute and overwhelming form."[80]
- "If the idea of equality is cut off from that of co-humanity", one consequence is "a jungle of new and unsuspected duties ... Mainly new duties to animals, in the

78 Ibid., 77
79 O'Donovan (2017a), 73.
80 O'Donovan (2013), 14.

first instance; there is an organization, we are told, campaigning for 'fair trials for dogs'".[81]

- "[I]t may come about that generalized resentment or disparagement is our substitute structure of meaning, the sole basis on which we are capable of understanding the world." This is "wearisomely familiar in international relations, and into the 'victim mentality' which has become in our generation the ugly stock-in-trade of every social enthusiasm".[82]
- "Inconsiderateness is a failure to proceed towards self-contextualization. ... The tourists who crowd off their buses to beat the pavements of the great European cultural centres ... gaze at those who have business in those streets ... with unparticipating fascination".[83]
- "Pride, as military self-consequence, as wealth, or in any other form, is the sin that arises *after* the experience of self, world, and time in action. Pride is the sin of rest."[84]

My worry with the above examples is not that they somehow fail to illustrate the points O'Donovan seeks to elicit from them. Nor is the problem, at least by itself, that those examples are blatantly reductive of the phenomena they describe. That would be a minor issue, since the examples might be read as simply setting out the unique insights which Christian ethics can offer about those phenomena. They hence do not exclude insights from elsewhere, such as the social sciences.

81 O'Donovan (2014), 64.
82 Ibid., 67.
83 Ibid., 84.
84 O'Donovan (2017a), 70 (emphasis in original).

Rather, what I want to highlight is how, in each of these examples, a theological notion is used to diagnose and judge certain features of a concrete dilemma which calls for a practical response, like the sin of sloth being used to interpret clinical depression. Yet the diagnosis then ends, and O'Donovan, without skipping a beat, is freed to move onto his next point. And so the process is repeated, without any real interrogation of his own theoretical premises.

What is therefore ignored is the possibility that, if we considered those concrete dilemmas in greater detail, that might in turn reshape the theological notions being applied. For example, could the experience of depression lead to an alteration of O'Donovan's description of it as simply illustrative of sloth? Or might the concrete battle against oppression lead to a theological rethinking of the "generalized resentment" which he dismisses? Next chapter, we will turn to a different sense of "the practical", understood not principally in terms of moral agency, but instead of the particularity of the lived situations which call for a response. Here, however, what is important to highlight is how O'Donovan's Christian ethics are consistently patterned on an insularity of theoretical description from practical reconsideration.

I should note that the extent to which O'Donovan's actual theoretical premises warrant correction falls outside my purview.[85] The narrower point I have drawn, rather, is that

[85] Although one illustration of the danger is striking enough to mention. O'Donovan credits Augustine's notion of moral order as "making possible an ordered and consistent morality": O'Donovan (2013), 2015. In this respect, O'Donovan joins several other Anglican or Protestant theologians, including John Milbank and Eric Gregory, who are keen to revive Augustine as a counterweight to the perceived deficiencies of contemporary political liberalism.

But this Augustinian revival has not grappled, to the best of my knowledge, with how the Bishop of Hippo's possibly greatest influence in the 20th century lies in how he was read by neoliberal economists like Hayek. As one recent history puts it, "Hayek was explicit when he wrote that 'the only appropriate word' for the global market, or what he calls 'the extended order', is 'transcendent'. ... Augustine suggested a counterintuitive mode of observation. The viewer must guard against being deceived by a part misrepresenting the whole. ... It was a

where such critique has become necessary, O'Donovan's framing of the theology/ethics and theory/practice distinctions undercuts the possible resources we might use to articulate such a critique. That stems specifically from how, although O'Donovan seeks to defend the integrity of moral agency, he insists on subordinating it to an unaccountable theological lens. So rather than pursuing O'Donovan further at this point, let is turn to another treatment of moral agency, one which intends to prevent such subordination – but which thereby merely shifts the problem elsewhere.

2 The New Natural Law against the Old

As a counterpoint to O'Donovan which, nonetheless, remains firmly within this first subtype of theory/practice approaches, we could do worse than turn to the "new natural law" theory that has proven influential in contemporary Catholic moral thought.

First, it is worthwhile very briefly positioning this theory against the Christian tradition of natural law to which it is immediately responding.[86] That tradition is enormously wide-ranging, not least given its initial eclectic mix of Jewish, Christian and Stoic

common neoliberal critique of socialism that they failed to see the greater order. ... [Neoliberal] [o]rdoglobalism can be thought of as a negative theology, contending that the world economy is sublime and ineffable". Thus Slobodian (2018), 267–9.

Whether O'Donovan would endorse Hayek's economic programme is hardly the point. Rather, what matters is how O'Donovan's framework implies that this programme should be critiqued solely on the basis of the theological assumptions underpinning it, rather than through consideration of what is has actually accomplished in world history. If this generates a critique of the neoliberal reading of Augustine, it would be a shallow one indeed.

86 Though it is responding to many things, not least positivism within the philosophy of law. That is why Finnis – a trained Australian lawyer – is probably cited more frequently in jurisprudence than by theologians.

influences.[87] Among Protestants, the tradition fell out of favour in the 20th century, following Barth's polemics,[88] though it has recently seen revival.[89]

Among Roman Catholics, natural law has remained consistently popular, Aquinas being a major touchstone. One of its main modern expressions is thus the "Catholic Social Teaching" first promulgated in Pope Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical letter *Rerum novarum*.[90] And, while post-Vatican II encyclicals have invoked ideas of natural law to a perhaps lesser extent, they nonetheless remain key.[91] As a recent example, Pope Francis' letter *Laudato si'*, addressing the destructive effects of consumerism on the Earth's climate, appeals to the "moral law ... inscribed in our nature and ... necessary for the creation of a more dignified environment".[92] Adherence to this moral law requires "recovering and respecting the rhythms inscribed in nature by the hand of the Creator", as illustrated by the Sabbath command.[93]

In these traditional conceptions of natural law, a recurring theme is that moral obligations are derived from a divinely revealed order in reality, though possibly also discernible through reason alone. On this framing, we might therefore say, "ethics" depends upon a theological *theory* of that order – as O'Donovan similarly argued. This was even as he argued, however ambivalently, that the former must not be absorbed into the latter.

87 See, e.g., for its Greek origins, Striker (1996); and for the "natural morality" of the Hebrew Bible, Barton (2014), 124–6.
88 See Grabill (2006).
89 See, e.g., the essays in Doe (2017).
90 See O'Brien and Shannon (1992); Curran (2002).
91 On which see Massaro (2016), 162–4.
92 Pope Francis (2015), 76 [155].
93 Ibid., 38 [71].

Against such traditional conceptions, however, stands the "new natural law" associated, above all, with American theologian Germain Grisez and Australian-English philosopher John Finnis. It has also been advanced by many of their friends and allies, including Robert George, Joseph Boyle Jr., and William May. While initially claiming not to be doing more than retrieving Aquinas' conception of natural law,[94] the new natural lawyers have long openly acknowledged their originality.[95]

Though Grisez passed in 2018, and my sense is that academic interest in the new natural law has somewhat waned, a distinctive characteristic of its proponents is their ambition for impact outside of university life. In that respect, they have had remarkable success. Grisez, for example, has been credited with influencing Pope John Paul VI to maintain a hardline stance against contraception.[96] More recently, in 2017, President Donald Trump appointed one of Finnis' doctoral students and avid supporters, Neil Gorsuch, to the Supreme Court of the United States, one of the world's most powerful courts as regards its ability to invalidate government policy and legislation.

In the following reading of the new natural law theory, I will refer to its most important statements by Grisez, Finnis and others. I cannot be exhaustive: the new natural lawyers have published voluminously for around half a century. Thus parsing all the subtle differences in their texts would likely be more confusing than productive. Nonetheless, broader coverage than that of a single thinker is necessary: many treatments of the new natural law, especially by legal theorists, have considered Finnis' work exclusively, especially his *Natural Law and Natural Rights*. That, however, is one of the least overtly "theological" of the new natural lawyers' works. A single-minded focus on that

94 Thus Grisez (1965).
95 Grisez, Boyle and Finnis (1987), 149.
96 See Bamforth and Richards (2008), 76–83.

work, it has therefore been suggested, can be distortive of how one interprets the corpus as a whole.[97]

In what follows, I will (1) turn to the new natural lawyers' claim that the theory/practice relationship corresponds to a distinction between "is" and "ought". This prepares me (2) to articulate the principal contentions of the new natural law school, which concern the basic goods and the first principles of practical reason and of morality. I will then (3) examine the school's claim that these basic goods and first principles are "self-evident". Finally (4) it will be necessary to consider the complicated and ambiguous role that *theology* plays within these various arguments.

In passing through these various stages, I will aim to show that the new natural lawyers hope to place moral agency on a firmer basis than does O'Donovan. They attempt this precisely by separating that agency from possibly falsifiable theological arguments, making it instead depend on a theologically agnostic claim of self-evidence. Yet, as we examine their resulting account of natural law, we will see that their contentions are beset by the same problems regarding the risk of ideological corruption of practical reason as we saw as regards O'Donovan's work. Basically: the new natural lawyers distance their arguments from their own Catholic convictions, but are tempted to smuggle in the latter anyway.

Let us therefore start with perhaps the most crucial premise of the new natural law. This is that propositions about what one "ought" to do cannot be derived from propositions about what "is" the case. The attempt at such derivation is how traditional conceptions of natural law have purportedly erred, in trying to derive moral claims from theological

97 Ibid., 1–6.

ones about how the world is. While David Hume is the most frequently cited proponent of the is/ought distinction,[98] we can turn to how Grisez, Boyle and Finnis themselves make the point:

> "the moral *ought* cannot be derived from the *is* of theoretical truth – for example, of metaphysics and/or philosophical anthropology. Logically, of course, one can derive a moral *ought* from an *is*, whenever the *is* expresses a truth about a reality which embodies a moral norm. ... But from a set of theoretical premises, one cannot logically derive any practical truth, since sound reasoning does not introduce what is not in the premises. ... Therefore, the ultimate principles of morality cannot be theoretical truths of metaphysics and/or philosophical anthropology."[99]

This passage, importantly, clarifies that the is/ought distinction is not simply a matter of formal, syllogistic logic, lacking any necessary ontological reference to the world. Additionally, Finnis has argued that the distinction should not be equated with one between "fact" and "value", since even a value-laden truth is still a fact.[100] Rather, the difference is a substantive one, between *theoretical* and *practical* reason.

Theoretical reason, the new natural lawyers therefore say, deals with "the conformity of propositions to prior reality, actual and possible": that is, with how things already are.[101] Practical reason, in contrast, makes "one able to bring something into reality": in other words, it enables reality-shaping action.[102] Finnis acknowledges that this way of distinguishing between theory and practice departs from Aristotle and Aquinas. For those earlier figures, *both* theoretical and practical reason involve knowledge of a pre-existing reality. Finnis, however, considers such a view to engender confusion, precisely because it transgresses the is/ought divide in linking practical reason to what

98 See Hume (1978), bk. III, pt. I.
99 Grisez, Boyle and Finnis (1987), 102 (emphasis in original).
100 Finnis (2011), 42; see likewise Finnis (1983), 66.
101 Grisez, Boyle and Finnis (1987), 115.
102 Ibid., 116.

"is" the case. Nonetheless, he continues, we should keep the distinction between theoretical and practical reason around, precisely because "it witnesses to the ancient awareness of the basic distinction between 'is' and 'ought'", notwithstanding confusion in the ancients' own awareness.[103]

Accordingly, what the new natural lawyers intend is to build a more sturdily fortified wall between theoretical reason and practical reason. This is even though its bricks, we will soon see, will be laid more in a zigzag than in a single, straight line. Unlike O'Donovan, then, practical reason will not follow theoretical reason, but will rather walk its own path, with theoretical reason sheepishly trailing behind it.

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To show this, we should turn to the new natural law school's account of natural law as epistemically founded on practical reason alone, rather than in some theological or theoretical conception of human nature. One of that school's key ideas is that of the "basic goods", goods which have intrinsic rather than only instrumental value. In contrast, all other goods are instrumental, because they must be somehow explained as attaining their worth from the basic goods or combinations thereof.[104]

The new natural lawyers' lists of the basic goods have varied in what they have included. But, for example, Grisez lists them, in an important 1983 statement, as self-integration, practical reasonableness, justice and friendship, life, knowledge and beauty, work, and play.[105] Notably, marriage was added to the list from 1993, when the

103 Finnis (2011), 20–1.
104 See Grisez, Boyle and Finnis (1987), 103.
105 Grisez (1983), 124.

new natural lawyers wrote in response to social movements in several jurisdictions worldwide to decriminalise homosexuality.[106]

In addition to the basic goods, the new natural law school also posits "first principles of practical reason". These principles "direct action" to the basic goods: that is, they state that all human acts have the aim of realising and bringing about those goods.[107] Such principles cannot be regarded or ignored at a whim, but are presupposed in *all* free action:[108] we cannot act otherwise than to try to realise the basic goods, however defectively.[109] Consider, hypothetically, someone who makes the intentional if artificial choice to spend their money on a piece of artwork, instead of using it to save a life. But even here, that person is still pursuing the basic goods, and so following the first principles of practical reason. If we feel discomfited, it is for the more precise reason that one basic good, life, is being sacrificed to another, namely that of beauty.

This underscores how the first principles of practical reason do not themselves guarantee morality, but are only "pre-moral".[110] Morality arrives afterward, with the "first moral principle", which is itself only a secondary practical principle. The purpose of this first moral principle is to co-ordinate and harmonise the first principles of practical reason. Through such harmonisation, one's actions becomes "completely reasonable" and so also moral.[111]

What, then, is the first moral principle? The new natural lawyers have offered varying formulations. But in 1987, proclaiming their previous attempts "defective", Grisez,

106 Thus Grisez (1993), 568; Finnis (1994), 1064.
107 Grisez, Boyle and Finnis (1987), 113.
108 Ibid., 102–3.
109 Ibid., 120.
110 Ibid., 126.
111 Ibid., 121.

Boyle and Finnis advanced the principle as that, "[i]n voluntarily acting for human goods and avoiding what is opposed to them, one ought to choose and otherwise will those and only those possibilities whose willing is compatible with a will toward integral human fulfillment".[112] The pivotal idea in this statement is that of "integral human fulfilment", as what should ideally harmonise the pursuit of the basic goods. That idea functions somewhat similarly to a Kantian Kingdom of Ends, in making one orientate one's actions towards "[t]he happiness for which a morally good humankind would settle".[113] However, since 2013, Grisez and Finnis have diverged about if this is the best way to frame the principle.[114]

Accordingly, the basic conceptual movement of the new natural law school is first, from the basic goods to the first principles of practical reason, and then, from the first principles of practical reason to the first principle of morality. From here, the various new natural lawyers will seek to specify more particular ethical principles, and on that basis articulate positions on more concrete ethical situations.

For our purposes, however, we should now double back to the basic goods and the first practical and moral principles. Specifically, we should examine in some detail the new natural lawyers' crucial argument that all these are "self-evident" to practical reason.

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112 Ibid., 128.

113 Ibid., 132.

114 We need not pursue the details of that disagreement here. But in sum, Grisez has opted for the "simpler" principle that "[w]hen one's feelings incline one to choose what reasons indicate is not to be chosen or not to choose what reasons indicate is to be chosen, one ought to choose in accord with reasons": Grisez (2013), 444. But Finnis, while not denying the acceptability of this newer formula, has expressed doubt about the emphasis it gives to feelings and affect, and so has insisted that ""[t]he old formulations remain sound, and ... primary": Finnis (2013), 578.

First, what does it mean for the basic goods and first principles to be self-evident, that is, "known just by knowing the meaning of their terms"?[115] It is not that everyone *in fact* is aware of the basic goods and first principles: Finnis in fact contends that these are likely to only be recognised by "experienced and mature" people.[116] Instead, something is self-evident because it cannot be denied without producing contradiction. Hence for someone to deny the basic goods or the first practical principles would be to contradict the nature of the practical reason operative even when such a claim is being made.[117] If, for example, someone says that truth is not a basic good, even this utterance presupposes a framework of meaning-making reliant on the basic good of *truth*, but which has just been denied.[118]

Second, the self-evidentiary character of the principles of practical reason has the important consequence of insulating those principles from theoretical scrutiny, including from other academic disciplines. Thus the question of whether truth is a basic good cannot be answered by answering "the *entirely different* question of what are the physical, biological, and psychological preconditions" of our search for truth.[119] The principles of practical reason, then, must not be accounted for in terms of any historical, sociological or physical considerations. For example, something like Pierre Bourdieu's account of practical reason in terms of "habitus", that is, "a mental structure ... at the basis of the consensus on the sense of the social world",[120] can have no place in

115 Grisez, Boyle and Finnis (1987), 106.
116 Finnis (2011), 31.
117 Ibid., 69.
118 Finnis frames this basic good not principally in terms of truth but rather of knowledge, though the distinction between the two need not concern us here: ibid., 64–9.
119 Ibid., 65 (emphasis in original).
120 Bourdieu (1998), 66.

articulating practical reason's first principles.[121] Likewise, the new natural lawyers would claim that the accounts of practice which my next chapter will consider, and which do make historical and sociological references, are irrelevant to their project. Such a project therefore remains hermetically sealed.

Third, although the basic goods and principles of practical reason are self-evident, there is still an important sense in which they remain grounded in "human nature".[122] Like O'Donovan, the new natural lawyers distinguish between ontology and epistemology. So the basic goods to which all human action is oriented must stem from some *ontological* nature humans possess, which may well be created by God. Still, the fact the basic goods are what they are is only *epistemically recognisable* through practical reason.[123] From this practical recognition, we may indeed infer theoretical claims, and so move from practical to theoretical reason, though not the reverse. For example, and as O'Donovan himself comments on Finnis, we may begin with the self-evident good of friendship which practical reason acknowledges, and from this, develop a theoretical conception of the sociality of human nature.[124]

Fourth, and decisively, there are in fact several points where the new natural lawyers concede a closer integration of theoretical and practical reason than what seems otherwise implied by their claim that the first principles of practical reason are self-evident. However, precisely because of this claim, they are then led to try to

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121 It is here clearest that some of the new natural lawyers are, indeed, *lawyers*. Specifically, the insulation of practical reason from theoretical reason mirrors debates between legal positivists like Hans Kelsen and H.L.A. Hart, with whom someone like Finnis is in close if critical dialogue, and those advocating a sociological or historical approach to the study of law. For the legal positivists, legal norms have an independent existence of moral or social norms. See further Leiter (2001).

122 See, e.g., Grisez, Boyle and Finnis (1987), 127.

123 On this, see Black (2000), 130–6.

124 O'Donovan (1994), xi.

interpret the interactions between theoretical and practical reason in ways that could be read as intellectual contortions. For example, while the truth of the first principles of practical reason cannot be *established* through theoretical reason, they can nonetheless still be "rationally defended" by the latter.[125] This means relating those principles "to other knowledge", and showing that denying them "has unacceptable consequences".[126] However, such a difference between establishing and rationally defending something might appear to be hair-splitting.

Furthermore, the new natural lawyers conceded that, when we act, we never use practical reason alone, but will also always employ theoretical knowledge. As a result, while we can only recognise the basic goods through practical reason alone, "[t]heoretical reflection deepens understanding of [them]".[127] So it turns out that, at the actual coalface, knowledge of the basic goods is not as purely practical as we first thought, even while that knowledge is still self-evident.

In addition, recall that the self-evidentiary nature of the basic goods and first principles does not imply they are universally known. Rather, one must *become* aware of them. For this process, one will draw upon relevant "data", such as one's "natural appetites" or "emotional responses" to stimuli.[128] It is reflection upon these which produces knowledge of the first principles. But these data, Grisez, Boyle and Finnis freely acknowledge, constitute "theoretical knowledge, true opinion, and experience".[129] In that case, however, have we not just used theoretical knowledge to establish the

125 Grisez, Boyle and Finnis (1987), 111.
126 Ibid.
127 Ibid. See also Finnis (2013), 471: "Practical knowledge of goods ... partly presupposes ... our knowledge of the way things – not least we ourselves – are". Presumably, to be consistent, by "[p]ractical knowledge of goods", Finnis means a subsequent knowledge of goods that includes but also extends one's initial practical knowledge of the basic goods and first principles.
128 Grisez, Boyle and Finnis (1987), 108.
129 Ibid., 109.

principles of practical reason? The new natural lawyers would certainly not concede this point. But we are left asking in what sense the basic goods and first principles are still self-evident, given this self-evidentiary nature is compatible even with such reliance on theory.

To extend even further this list of artificial interactions between theoretical and practical reason, we can turn to the first chapter of *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, and the rather confusing set of claims therein. Finnis posits "a mutual though not quite symmetrical interdependence" between theoretical (or "descriptive") and practical reason.[130] Each informs the other, via a "movement to and fro".[131] So on one hand, practical reasonableness, because it is self-evident, provides an unassailable set of criteria for what is important – namely, the basic goods – which are then employable by theoretical reason. The former hence must precede the latter. On the other hand, theory can assist practical reason, because it can correct the "practical 'prejudices'" of the theorist "into truly reasonable judgments about what is good and practically reasonable".[132]

This latter reference to practical prejudices is left undeveloped, as intriguing as it is: what are these prejudices, and are they intrinsic to practical reason? Or have they crept in from, say, theoretical reason? If the former, we have something close to the poststructuralist critique of the assumption that reason is inherently oriented towards the truth. That reading seems implausible, however, given Finnis' identification of

130 Ibid., 19.
131 Ibid., 16.
132 Ibid., 17.

knowledge as a basic, self-evident good.[133] But the latter interpretation, whereby theoretical reason is allowed to corrupt practical reason, suggests another and unexplored way in which theoretical and practical reason might become entangled. This possibility, we should recall, is one with which O'Donovan likewise struggled. So do the new natural lawyers, it would seem.

With all these claims about the interactions between theoretical and practical reason now in view, we can see that what began as a simple claim that one cannot move from theoretical knowledge to practical reason has become something far more complex. And that complexity is necessary, precisely so that the new natural lawyers can save their claim that practical reasonableness is self-evident. So contingent theoretical knowledge is implicated before, during and after the process of discovering the principles of practical reason, and plays the role of purging practical reason of its prejudices. Yet, *somehow*, the principles can still retain a self-evidentiary nature free from theory.

How did we end up with this fragile conceptual ecosystem? The following framing might assist. The new natural law is premised on a sharp distinction between theoretical and practical reason, in order to provide a firm epistemological foundation for ethics. Thus moral knowledge can be said to be self-evident, stemming as it does from practical reason alone. This, we should observe, is a striking reversal: we might recall that, for Aristotle, it was *episteme*, *nous* and *sophia* that provided certain knowledge, albeit not

133 C.f. Kramer's critique of Finnis, namely, that the latter's claim about the self-evidentiary nature of the basic good of truth overlooks the existence of any of Nietzsche's writings: Kramer (1992).

regarding action, whereas *phronesis* always dealt with the uncertain.[134] But here, the theoretical is uncertain;[135] the practical is not.

The trouble arises because the new natural lawyers still intend for their ethics to reach determinate positions on concrete but ultimately still contingent issues which, within their schema, might be understood in more adequate detail via theory – historical theory, sociological theory, and so on. Yet they wish to avoid resort to that theory, because doing so would undermine the epistemic certitude they desire for their ethics. Thus the new natural lawyers are led to develop an account of the basic goods, in order to patch this gap. However, given the stark divide between theoretical and practical reason the new natural lawyers have constructed, they must place this account solely *within* the latter. That is, the basic goods are known by practical rather than theoretical reason.

All this, ultimately, may well be a matter of wanting to eat one's cake and have it too. The new natural lawyers want to have certainty with their ethics, while still allowing that ethics to address the contingent particularities with which human action deals. The former purpose is achieved by claiming that the account of the basic goods and the first principles is located within practical reason, such that these can be called "self-evident". But the latter purpose requires resort to theoretical reason, which would undermine the desired certitude. What is really behind the new natural lawyers' refinements and distinctions, then, is an attempt to straddle these two possibly incompatible goals.

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134 See the introduction to the current chapter.

135 With the exception of theoretical principles that the new natural lawyers occasionally describe as also self-evident, such as the rule of non-contradiction: Grisez, Boyle and Finnis (1987), 119; or mathematical principles: Finnis (2011), 32.

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Let us finally examine how the new natural lawyers interpret the way the theoretical/practical divide is connected to the relationship between theology and ethics. We have already seen that there is a link between practical reason and ethics, though the two cannot be equated: ethics presents the harmonisation of practical reason's potentially conflicting claims. Furthermore, the new natural lawyers seem to treat "theology" as a subset of theory, as their polemics against the theological basis of traditional natural law suggests. In short, a rough but real correspondence between the theory/practice and theology/ethics distinctions is apparent for the new natural lawyers, who seek to keep both of these dichotomies absolute.

We need to say more, though. For among theological critics of the new natural law school, a persistent worry is that this school, by so rigidly separating practical from theoretical reason, has severed its own connection to Christian faith. We can turn to O'Donovan's own critique of Finnis: "Here, possibly, may be a 'Christian' ethics, but not, I think, a theological ethics".[136] The intended – though not explicitly defined – contrast here between the "Christian" and the "theological" is that, while the words "Christian" simply expresses agreement with the *material contents* of Christian faith, "theological" goes beyond this, by implying a *method* deriving from that content. Thus Finnis just so happens to reach the same material conclusions on ethical matters as much of the Christian tradition. Still, what he does is not "theological", since he reaches those conclusions on the basis of a purportedly universally valid form of argumentation that cuts across theological divides.

136 O'Donovan (1994), x.

Why, though, does it matter if Finnis' natural law is not theological in this sense? Recall that, for O'Donovan, the theological regulation of moral agency was necessary in order to achieve certainty about that agency's proper exercise. Said certainty takes the form of "divine vindication" by revelation, contra the endlessly subjective interpretations of that agency to which we would otherwise be condemned.

Finnis, interestingly, would endorse the same goal: he, too, wants certainty in how we may act rightly as moral agents. Nonetheless, for him, practical rather than theoretical reason is that certainty's pallbearer. In short, for O'Donovan, certitude in practical reason is achieved by subordinating that reason to theology, but for Finnis, such theologising in fact undermines said certitude.

We cannot pursue the contrast between these two positions further here. Still, the fact of that contrast suggests a crucial possibility, namely, that different conceptions of certitude are being operationalised in the debate. Adjudicating between those conceptions, we might suspect, requires appeal to something beyond the terms of the debates as Finnis and O'Donovan construct them. And that, in turn, suggests how Finnis' claim about the self-evidentiary character of natural law itself relies on a number of (theoretical) assumptions, which remain uninterrogated.

Grisez, we should observe, is different from Finnis, precisely because he positions himself as a theologian rather than a legal philosopher. He therefore, and certainly unlike Finnis, begins his *magnum opus*, *The Way of the Lord Jesus Christ*, with the explicit premise that "the reader accepts everything the Catholic Church believes and

teaches".[137] Thus Grisez and Finnis differ in their expressly stated methods, particularly regarding the relevance of theological considerations in the articulation of natural law.

Yet a further worry of the new natural law school is that, rather than being insufficiently theological, it is in fact *too* theological, and merely disguises this fact. According to an important jurisprudential critique by Nicholas Bamforth and David Richards, the new natural law lawyers smuggle in certain Catholic theological assumptions under the garb of general epistemological validity. Thus it was a major oversight, in past appraisals of the new natural lawyers, "to take [their] arguments about law (in particular those of Finnis) at face value, and to ignore or gloss over evidence pointing to the conclusion that those arguments are in fact of a religious character".[138]

Such a critique should be carefully drawn, however. It needs to take into account the distinction the new natural lawyers occasionally draw between philosophy and theology. In this respect, Finnis and Grisez are sometimes explicit – though, it must be said, not consistently so – about when they are doing one instead of the other. An especially important statement by Grisez is thus that his "fullest presentation of our natural-law theory ... is *theological*", and that "Finnis provided the best *philosophical* development and presentation of the theory".[139] So while the new natural law school's claim of self-evidence could be said to be philosophically driven, the school also has a theological side. The latter can quite legitimately offer a theoretical account of natural law, as long as this does not displace the philosophical account derived from practical

137 Grisez (1983), xxx.
138 Bamforth and Richards (2008), 10.
139 Grisez (2016), 500 n. 1 (emphasis added).

reason alone. Such a move of trying to establish something *both* philosophically and theologically, we should acknowledge, is a classically Thomistic one.[140]

It must be said that Bamforth and Richards are not cautious in respecting the philosophy/theology divide: since some parts of the new natural law are theological, they seem to suggest, they all must be. Nonetheless, the two do indeed identify occasions of explicitly philosophical claims which, upon further scrutiny, do appear difficult to ground on practical reason alone. One well-known article by Finnis arguing for the immorality of homosexuality suffices as illustration. There, he claims to offer only "publicly intelligible and rational" arguments for his position.[141] But he proceeds to argue that, for a husband and wife, intercourse "really unites them biologically", whereas same-sex activities do not provide a similar unity, given those activities have "nothing to do with their having children".[142] Finnis acknowledges that sterility may mean a heterosexual couple are likewise incapable of producing children. Still, he contends, that couple's sexual actions would still constitute "acts of the reproductive kind", which can therefore still realise "the common good of marriage".[143]

Here, Finnis has indeed not brought theological considerations into his argument – at least, not explicitly. Consider, however, his use of terms, especially his notions of a biological "unity" created by sex acts, and of acts of a particular "kind" (that is, a reproductive one). But why are these ideas of unity and of something of a kind applicable for a heterosexual but not homosexual couple? No answer is possible on the

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140 C.f. Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, I.3–1.4. For Aquinas, some things can *only* known by revelation – for example, that God is triune. But other things can be known by *either* revelation *or* reason, such as that God is one. God reveals the latter things, despite their knowability by reason, effectively to provide a shortcut for humans.

141 Finnis (1994), 1055. See similarly Finnis (1997), 99 n. 6.

142 Finnis (1994), 1066.

143 Ibid., 1067.

face of the terms themselves. Rather, something further would be needed to make such a discrimination, such as an Aristotelian natural teleology. Yet it is precisely this that is excluded by Finnis' endeavour to engage in philosophy and practical reason alone.[144]

Accordingly, the dual criticisms that the new natural law is *insufficiently* theological and that *too* theological in fact converge. Both suggest that the claim of self-evidence cannot rest on itself, as it surely must in order to be effective. Instead, this claim must still resort to some kind of theory beyond its own terms. The new natural lawyers wish to resist such a conclusion, but also seem to smuggle in such a theory, without acknowledging it as such.

In sum, both O'Donovan and the new natural lawyers want to demonstrate a dignity of moral agency that is too often overlooked. Both, further, emphasise practical reason as an important way to achieve this. But the two sides disagree about whether this practical reason should be subordinated to, or instead separated from, the demands of theory and theology. We found O'Donovan, adopting the former path, was ill-equipped to address the risk that moral agency might be theoretically misled. The new natural lawyers, taking the latter path, appealed to the notion of self-evidence to prevent this possibility. But in that case, the concern merely shifts to whether the new natural lawyers, instead of expelling the likelihood of theoretical delusion, simply bring it in by subterfuge.

So much for this first subtype for understanding the theology/ethics relationship in terms of the theory/ethics distinction, with all its attendant ambiguities. But let us now

144 For a blunt characterisation of the identification of marriage as a basic human good as "quite hopeless", see Chappell (2000), 38.

turn to a second subtype. That will shift away from an emphasis on moral agency, and onto something quite different, though in a way that creates ambiguities of its own.

CHAPTER II

THE THEORY/PRACTICE TYPE – II

So far, we have seen that one way to understand the theology/ethics relationship involves linking it to a distinction between theory and practice. This can occur even without full identification of the two sets of terms. Further, in order to further specify the meaning of "theory" and "practice", one might then treat these as referring to theoretical and practical *reason*. The purpose of the previous chapter was to show how such a move brings to centre stage the sense of a free moral agent making decisions about how to act in the world.

This next chapter, however, examines another way to understand the difference between theory and practice, insofar as these relate to theology and ethics. According to that alternative approach, the primary referent of "practice" is not that of moral agency, but rather of the specificity of the situation in which the agent is embedded – we might say, "how things really are on the ground". So whereas theoretical and practical *reason* denoted two different modes of intellectual engagement with the world, "practice" now suggests the way this world actually is. In contrast, "theory" connotes an abstraction, however necessary, from that reality. On such a framing, moral agency will certainly still play a role – but it will cease, nonetheless, to be the dominant focus.

For this second way to understand the theory/practice distinction, the *historicity of practice* assumes especial importance. No longer is practice treated as principally hypothetical or in the future. Instead, practice has already occurred, is already all around us. Practice, therefore, not only becomes the subject matter which theory reflects upon, but also conditions every step that reflection takes. Of course, for an ethicist like Oliver

O'Donovan, "reflection" on past action was crucial – yet it remained just one moment within practical reason. Now, however, it becomes the protagonist.

It is worth observing that the intellectual inspirations for this second subtype differ dramatically from the first. For the subtype considered in the previous chapter, Aristotle provided a major touchstone. But for the understanding of theory and practice to now be considered, Marx will be a key influence, and especially the famous ending of the *Theses on Feuerbach*: "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is, to change it".[1] The lines of that influence will be complicated, and will be mediated through other traditions or schools such as Frankfurt School critical theory, Marxist-inflected sociology like that of Pierre Bourdieu, and the Christian existentialism of Paul Tillich and David Tracy.[2] But it will be no less real for this.

In this chapter, then, I will examine two texts which reflect this second interpretation of the theory/practice distinction, Clodovis Boff's *Theology and Praxis*, and the recently published *Christian Practical Wisdom*, co-authored by five well-known American practical theologians: Dorothy Bass, Kathleen Cahalan, Bonnie Miller-McLemore, James Nieman and Christian Scharen. The first work is a meta-reflection on the methodological commitments of Latin American liberation theology by one of its well-known figures. The second is a recent and important contribution to practical theologians' longstanding endeavour to reverse their field's marginalisation in the modern theological academy. I have picked these two texts precisely because they provide useful inroads into the debates about the theory/practice and theology/ethics relationships that are occurring in liberation theology and practical theology

1 Marx (1967), 402 (emphasis in original).
2 The best philosophical exploration of these disparate traditions remains Bernstein (1971).

respectively. This is not to imply, of course, that those two texts are somehow the authoritative representatives of their fields, not least when those fields frequently stress the importance of a plurality of voices. Indeed, we will see, both Boff and the authors of *Christian Practical Wisdom* are locked in deeply contentious debates with their respective colleagues precisely about their fields' proper contours.

In juxtaposing these two sorts of theologies, I also do not intend to elide them. They emerged from very different contexts, and both, in fact, strenuously argue how much slight divergences in context can have profound ramifications for the shape of one's theology. Thus, even if we were to group both under the heading "contextual theology", even that term might disguise the extent of diversity nested under it. Further, while liberation theology has undoubtedly influenced practical theology, the two cannot be set into a relationship of simple continuity. Indeed, an abashed acknowledgment made in *Christian Practical Wisdom* itself is that practical theologians have sometimes "harness[ed] [liberation theology] to re-establish the interests of the privileged"[3] – that is, adopted a distortive reading of key liberation theological texts for their own ends. So, while my interest in both fields stems their shared emphasis on the particular and concrete circumstances in which practice takes place, it will be important, in what follows, to recognise their differences as well.

Lastly, I should gesture at some of the key lines of criticism of this second form of the theory/practice type. For one, even a call to pay more attention to the specific situation far from guarantees that the situation will be fully grasped. Rather, it will always retain

[3] Bass et al (2016), 208.

aspects that elude us. Indeed, the call to take certain aspects seriously may well legitimate an enforced stupor towards others.

In addition, recall that, for the first subtype, a major point of critique involved the extent to which moral agency should be connected to Christian theological themes. We might now already add to this that O'Donovan and the new natural lawyers, by emphasising moral agency in the abstract, also left ambivalent the role of concrete circumstances in forming that agency. Such an emphasis, in other words, potentially detracts from *two* things. The first is the Christian life and Christian proclamation, in all their distinctiveness. And the second, we can now more lucidly glean, is the specific situation in which moral agency is always exercised.

This next subtype shifts its emphasis from moral agency to that specific situation. But that critique does not disappear. Rather, it transmutates. For the focus on particularity by liberation and practical theologians likewise raises the question of its connection to Christian distinctiveness. For liberation theologians, the criticism is sometimes framed as that, because of their Marxist influence which says that the concrete must be honoured, they have surrendered their Christian identity and are no longer really doing "theology". And for practical theologians, the implicit framing is that they are doing a defective form of theology, in contrast to the "purer" exercises of systematic theologians.

Furthermore, the emphasis on moral agency we saw in the previous chapter can itself be transformed into a criticism of liberation and practical theologians. By historicising practice, these theologians might be suspected of an implicit determinism. Notwithstanding their frequent talk about liberation, they might be read as seeing

human action as something embedded in the past, or in the present but captured by past oppressive structures, and so basically passive. In short, with this second subtype's change in emphasis, some things are more clearly seen, but others are left by the wayside.

1 Clodovis Boff and the Method of Latin American Liberation Theology

It is useful to open with some prefatory remarks about Latin American liberation theology. First, at least according to liberation theologians themselves, liberation theology *qua* a set of ideas is not identical to liberation theology *qua* a movement. The former, rather, follows the latter. Thence Gustavo Gutiérrez, in the movement's best-known manifesto: "The theology of liberation attempts *to reflect on* the experience and meaning of the faith based on the commitment to abolish injustice and to build a new society; this theology must be verified by the practice of that commitment".[4] Whether such a claim requires greater nuancing is something we will have to interrogate.[5]

Second, liberation theology as both theology and movement emerged from the end of the 1960s, and especially from the 1968 Episcopal Conference of Latin America ("CELAM") in Medellín, Colombia. It began as an attempt to reformulate Catholic theology to adequately respond to the situation of extreme poverty in Latin America. To gesture at that extremity, it is worth mentioning one incident Clodovis Boff describes:

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4 Gutiérrez (1973), 307 (emphasis added).

5 For now, it bears citing Smith's conclusion that "before the liberation theology movement was able to become a mass-based movement of excluded peasants and workers, the movement's leaders had to gain control over the Church's institutional authority and resources through a task logically akin to an organizational takeover": Smith (1991), 234. Which is to say, liberation theology has never been driven *solely* by grassroots practices, but has also been led by its ideas, and even by a different set of practices relating to elite capture of key institutions.

> "[The bishop] replied that he had just seen a terrible sight: in front of the cathedral was a woman with three small children and a baby clinging to her neck. He saw that they were fainting from hunger. The baby seemed to be dead. He said: 'Give the baby some milk, woman!" ... she opened her blouse. Her breast was bleeding; the baby sucked violently at it. And sucked blood. The mother who had given it life was feeding it, like the pelican, with her own blood, her own life."[6]

In addition to the fundamental horror of poverty, liberation theology also owed its initial successes to a range of contingent factors. There was a sense of crisis in Catholic governance across the continent, due to declining Mass attendance; a chronic shortage of clergy; increased competition from Protestant missions; and the suppression of the Church in Cuba following the 1959 revolution. All these led to an appetite for alternatives to the prevailing conservative leadership. There was also, in response to the dearth of priests, the emergence of the Base Ecclesial Communities, that is, small lay-run churches which enabled the rapid dissemination of liberation theology's ideas on a grassroots level. Liberation theology, furthermore, borrowed legitimacy from earlier Catholic Social Teaching, and from the *nouvelle théologie* then prominent if controversial in Europe. It also drew from Vatican II, where many of the key liberation theologians first met, and which Medellín was intended to implement in the Latin American context.[7]

And third, while there has never been a single liberation theology, its proponents have operated via a constellation of shared ideas, both their own, and some borrowed from prevailing methods of social analysis. Such ideas include a conception of theology as a reflection on a pre-existent political praxis, which will provide the focus of this section. They also include the preferential option for the poor, being the notion that God has a

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6 Boff and Boff (1987), 1–2.

7 For a fuller analysis of these causes which draws from social movement theory, see Smith (1991), 71–149.

special love for the poor, and that the Church should also try to take their side and perspective.[8] There is also an emphasis on sin as manifested in oppressive structures, and on Christ as liberating us from such structures, rather than merely spiritually. From strains of Marxist thought, the liberation theologians have also adopted the reality of the class struggle as a major contributing cause of poverty, and dependency theory, which posits that global economic development necessarily enriches wealthier states at the expense of poorer ones.[9]

With all this in mind, the text on which this section will concentrate, Clodovis Boff's *Theology and Praxis*, was published in 1978, a significant moment for liberation theology. That was during the preparatory phase of the next major CELAM conference after Medellín, namely that in 1979 in Puebla, Mexico. Whereas the lead-up to Medellín in 1968 had involved little organised opposition to the liberation theologians, the conservative resistance in Puebla was far more concerted.[10]

Theology and Praxis, accordingly, can be read as a defence of liberation theology in the face of this hostility. But it also distances itself from what it considers to be theology's more extreme, less easily defensible positions, including a "theological immediatism" that refuses intellectual rigour in the name of political exigency.[11] The work thus represents an important snapshot of the movement, but far from the sole defining one.

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8 I will say more about the option in Chapter VI.

9 Overviews of writings by major liberation theologians such as Leonardo Boff, José Míguez Bonino, Gustavo Gutiérrez, Juan Luis Segundo, and Jon Sobrino are fraught precisely because of how pointedly liberation theology has tried to problematise the attempt to attain such a comprehensive view. That said, Boff and Boff (1987) remains an important introduction written by leading liberation theologians themselves.

10 See Smith (1991), 150–64.

11 Boff (1987), xxiii.

Something of this fraught context can be gleaned at the start of the work. There, Boff refers to the calls by liberation theologians for theology to engage in greater interdisciplinarity, to read Scripture in response to concrete political challenges, and to give priority to praxis over theory.[12] But he immediately comments that, "when liberation theologians are called to propound their *method*, they only return to the above 'positions', interweaving them with a variety of commentaries".[13] On the premise that this is insufficient to rebut "polemical attacks from without", Boff therefore sees his task as to articulate "a basic reflection having as its goal [as] to supply a critical basis for the above-cited postulates ... and then to articulate the findings in such a way as to lead toward the systematization of a method".[14]

Boff wants, in short, to locate a firmer grounding for liberation theology's priorities, and especially of the relationship it envisages between theory and praxis. Here then, I will (1) begin by elucidating Boff's terminology; (2) explore his insistence on a simultaneous autonomy and interdependence of theory and praxis, and how this indicates a tension between the ability of a theology to address particular circumstances and that theology's Christian identity; and (3) examine how the same tension is still manifest in his later work.

I note that most discussion of Boff's text has gravitated towards his articulation of the "socio-analytic" and "hermeneutic" mediations, by which traditional theological themes are put in dialogue with the social sciences.[15] In this section, however, my focus will be

12 Ibid., xxi–xxii.
13 Ibid., xxii (emphasis in original).
14 Ibid.
15 For important critiques of these, see, e.g., Sung (1994), 111 (that the socio-analytic mediation leaves no room for theology via the hermeneutic mediation); and Milbank (2006), 237–46 (that

on his consideration of the terms "praxis", "theory", "ethics" and "theology", plus their various interactions. To start with the first, Boff defines *praxis* as "any human activity calculated to transform the world".[16] This is not a comprehensive definition, and Boff frequently suggests a more complex conception of praxis than what the definition indicates. For example, praxis is not a single "practice", but a "complexus of practices".[17] In addition, Boff says that praxis has "a fundamentally *political* connotation",[18] though this leaves ambiguous the status of *non-political* human action, assuming such a thing exists. Furthermore, praxis "always includes its theory", that is, its own reflective element, such as "its reasons, its motivations, its finalities".[19]

Theory is a type of praxis. It is the activity of reflecting upon a pre-existing praxis, which therefore comprises theory's "proper material".[20] But because this still implies a gap between praxis, which is concrete, and theory, which is reflexive, theory is never identical to the realities it describes. Instead, a certain abstraction is always operative. As Boff says in illustration, "knowledge of salvation is no more salvific than knowledge of sugar is sweet".[21] On the basis of such a gap, we can speak of an "internal regime of autonomy" within theory, which derives from how theory evolves from and must be judged by norms it creates for itself.[22] This means that, when one moves from praxis to theory or vice versa, that can only occur via an "epistemological rupture" or "breach",[23]

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the socio-analytic mediation gives too much autonomy to the social sciences, which Milbank would prefer to assimilate *into* theology).

16 Boff (1987), 210.
17 Ibid., 6.
18 Ibid (emphasis in original).
19 Ibid., 210.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid., 17.
22 Ibid., 16.
23 Ibid., 176, 193.

terminology which Boff borrows from Gaston Bachelard, the mid-20th century French philosopher of science.[24]

Theology is a form of theory, and so in turn a kind of practice. Other kinds of theory, like sociology, can shed light on the character of theological theory. But care is needed, lest pertinent differences be collapsed.[25] Theory that is specifically theological is demarcated by its particular "formal object", namely God,[26] though it also looks at everything else in light of God.[27] That is, "[i]f God is actually the Meaning of the world and of history ... then, in very principle ... [e]verything is theologizable."[28] Without this object from which it derives its distinctiveness, theology would lose its "theological pertinence" or "theologicity"[29] – that is, what makes it genuinely Christian.

Boff refines these categories by drawing a distinction between "classic" or "first" theology, and "political" or "second" theology, which diverge in their principal subject matters. Classic theology addresses "specifically 'religious' realities" like "God, creation, Christ, grace, sin, eschatology, the virtues, the commandments, and so on". Political theology, including liberation theology, involves reflection upon a pre-existing liberative praxis.[30] It also addresses "'secular' realities" such as "culture, sexuality, or history".[31] The two categories of classic and political theology can blur, however. This is because classic theology cannot itself avoid dealing with non-specifically religious

24 Ibid., 281 n 2, citing Bachelard (1973), ch. 12 and Bachelard (1953), ch. 7.
25 Boff (1983), xxvii.
26 Ibid., 68.
27 Ibid., 89.
28 Ibid., 32.
29 Ibid., 76.
30 Ibid., 80–1.
31 Ibid., xxviii.

realities, given it inevitably uses "images, likenesses, and analogies drawn from human experience".[32]

Obversely, political theology is suspended between praxis and classic theology, standing in a relationship of dependence with both. Boff explains how political and liberation theology develop in terms of two "mediations", namely the "socio-analytic" and the "hermeneutical". The first of these involves the use of the social sciences to discover the causes of oppression. It is this which has proven most contentious among liberation theology's conservative opponents, given it provides the bridge to Marxist social thought. The second mediation involves the interpretation of these findings in light of the Scriptures and classic theology. Hence the socio-analytic mediation is what makes political theology *political*; the hermeneutical mediation makes it *theology* – that is, centred upon "Christian truth", rather than an "ideological substitute".[33] So on one hand, political and liberation theology are attuned to the social realities in which they are in embedded. On the other hand, theology cannot be reduced to these, being animated by its own internal logic.

Within this schema, *ethics* plays a key but largely underdefined role. Boff takes for granted a conception of that term as conformity to God's will by humans. "In terms of ethics, we may confidently draw up the equation: God's will = human will – with the equal sign designating an 'ought' in the sense of an ethical yardstick."[34] He also shows partiality towards a natural law ethic.[35] However, Boff further insists that the "ethical

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32 Ibid., 25.
33 Ibid., 80.
34 Ibid., 49. C.f. also the description of an "ethic" as "the way an action is carried out, a way of acting, a basic mode of behaviour" in Pixley and Boff (1989), 211.
35 See Boff (1987), 203.

perspective" carries an "abstract nature".[36] One implication of this is that classic theology, unassisted by the socio-analytic mediation, is capable of producing only an "ethical idealism" stripped of any real understanding of social phenomena.[37] It therefore needs political theology, concerned with real praxis, to render its ethics concrete.

In contrast, for political theology itself, where abstractness poses less of a worry, ethics serves the useful function of singling out what are the relevant social problems that need to be addressed via praxis. Further, it provides a criterion for deciding which modes of social analysis are appropriate.[38] So "the theologian is not deprived of certain precise, referential criteria for the selection of a determinate social theory and a determinate social practice ... found above all in the gospel. ... Thus we hear of Jesus' preference for the poor, his imperious, polemical attitude toward the prevailing order in the world, his message of justice and fellowship, and so on."[39] To be clear, "ethics" is not the only basis for judging the appropriateness of a social theory. For example, the extent to which it corresponds to reality can hardly be disregarded. Still, these two criteria should be kept distinct. So while ethics, left solely to its own devices *within* theology, will tend towards vacuous, abstract platitudes, it performs a critical function by interfacing *between* theology and liberative praxis.

What the above delineation of terms should make clear is how distant Boff is from the thinkers considered last chapter as regards the theory/practice and theology/ethics relationships. Above all, we should pay attention to how divergent their respective priorities are in setting up those distinctions. So in the previous chapter, practice was

36 Ibid., 8.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid., 58–9.
39 Ibid., 59.

distinguished from theory, and ethics from theology, in order to preserve the integrity of moral responsibility for our actions. Boff, in contrast, takes people's action to change the world as the starting point, meaning he treats ethical reflection by itself as unhelpfully abstract. Instead, the purpose of liberation theology is to examine, as closely as possible, the oppressive situations that demand said action. And this is despite how the theorising necessarily involved always implies some level of distancing from such circumstances.

In short, the purpose of the theory/praxis and theology/ethics relationships is to underscore those circumstances' particularity. More specifically, said particularity can only be preserved by acknowledging a certain autonomy held by praxis, which is paralleled by an autonomy of theory.

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Nonetheless, we should interrogate Boff's claim about the autonomy of each of praxis and theological theory more closely. For he simultaneously also wants to set the two into a relationship of interdependence. In so doing, however, Boff is pushed to make a series of claims about this relationship that are not entirely convincing. Those claims, caught between these conflicting priorities, fail to fully cohere. But much is at stake in their ability to do so, since maintaining both is what enables theology to stay politically engaged while still remaining, through its connection to faith and classic theology, "properly 'Christic'".[40] That is to say, what might seem a technical discussion of the theory/praxis relationship really stands for a more fundamental debate concerning

[40] Ibid., 33.

whether theology is capable of grappling with the nuances of concrete reality, while still maintaining its Christian identity.

It is useful, then, to review Boff's claims. He refers to three "modalities" by which theory and praxis are related. First, the theologian cannot avoid being socially located, that is, embedded in a set of social and political relations and sets of meaning.[41] Social location does not deterministically dictate a theologian's theoretical position, but it does define the range of possible theories a theologian may articulate.[42]

Second, praxis furnishes the raw material upon which theory reflects, as we have already seen. The theologian begins from their lived experience – "what are commonly called 'the facts', 'the situation', 'events', 'life', 'history' or 'praxis'".[43] They then abstract from this experience, isolating specific components of it as objects of study, and as part of the Bachelardian epistemological rupture.[44] This rupture is necessary for theory to attain its autonomy, and yet said theory can never be fully divorced from the lived experience from which it emerges. Theory, in short, "is but an island in the ocean of the real. And just as it arises from within that real, so also it will return there".[45] While this suggests a certain fragility of theory, that theory is still necessary precisely to illuminate praxis, which would otherwise remain uncritically internalised.[46]

Third, praxis and theory each have objectives that are aligned, even while remaining distinct. Boff therefore says that theory should remain disinterested and aim for knowledge alone, and yet he also acknowledges the force of sociological critiques of the

41 Ibid., 160.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid., 182.
44 Ibid., 176–7.
45 Ibid., 178.
46 Ibid.

nature of knowledge, which conclude that theory "always serves definite social interests".[47] Trying to reconcile this apparent tension, he posits the existence of two planes on which the objectives of theory operate. Hence theory, treated *internally* – that is, from the perspective of theory itself – does indeed seek knowledge for its own sake. But, if approached from the perspective of praxis, said theory is always *externally* oriented, towards certain practical objectives.[48]

In addition to these three modalities, Boff adds two further sets of claims about the theory/praxis relationship. The first relates to whether praxis is the "criterion of truth" of theory, as other liberation theologians have assumed. However, Boff says that, given the autonomy of each, the two must be said to belong to different "orders". Accordingly, whether a theological theory or praxis is "true" or false" must depend on the criteria relevant to whichever order applies.

There is, he therefore posits, a "theological criteriology" and a "pistic criteriology", corresponding respectively to each.[49] Theological criteriology has two parts: a "logical" instance, referring to the internal consistency of theological theory; and a "verificational" instance, referring to that theory's adequation to the content of Christian faith.[50] Pistic criteriology likewise has two components: the "analytico-strategic", which addresses how effective praxis will be and whether it hews to sounds social theory; and the "ethico-critical", which refers to whether that praxis is ethical, in the sense above.[51]

47 Ibid., 187.
48 Ibid., 188.
49 Ibid., 199.
50 Ibid., 199–200.
51 Ibid., 200.

Boff intends his discussion of criteriology to reinforce the distinctiveness and autonomy of each of praxis and theology. But his other set of claims is intended to emphasise their close relationship. He says that the term "dialectic" appropriately labels the "proper mode" of the theory/praxis relationship.[52] Specifically, it refers to "a particular manner in which reason operates, a fundamental attitude of the human mind". [53] According to that manner and attitude, the mind oscillates between different truth claims, thereby enabling each such claim to provide a basis for critique of the other.

This dialectic operates according to two "keys".[54] The first is the "minor" key, involving movement between the "theoretico-theoretical instance" and the "theoretico-empirical instance", that is, between classic theology and political theology.[55] But Boff is more interested in the "major" key, which involves movement between theory and praxis itself. The two influence each other, in a gradual and continual process of "blow and counterblow". Boff thinks this dialectical process is possible because of a "'mutual' overlap" between theory and praxis, an "area of coincidence" which implies "a kind of *perichoresis* between theory and praxis".[56]

With all these various and rather technical claims about the theory/praxis relationship now in our sights, the trouble with them is that it is far from obvious that they are reconcilable. If there is a commonality and possibility of mutual influence between theory and praxis, we are left to wonder in what way each is also autonomous, possessed of its own distinct criteria. That is, while Boff's overall intention to honour

52 Ibid., 206.
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid., 207.
55 Ibid.
56 Ibid., 216.

both autonomy and dependence is perfectly clear, his execution of that project must be said to be hodgepodge.

Take Boff's summary statement of the dialectic's major key that "praxis exerts pressure on theory (thesis); theory, reacting, modifies praxis (antithesis); theory and praxis are transcended, and sublimated in a synthesis; and so on in that order".[57] What, however, is the nature of this pressure, this modification, this transcendence, and this sublimation? Moreover, how do they preserve the autonomy of theory and praxis? One possibility, which Boff does not spell out but which I think is the most consistent with his account, is that autonomy derives from how theory and praxis have their own criteria. And dependence stems from how these criteria incorporate reference to the other order.

So for theological criteriology, the verificational instance enables the theorist to consider if a theological theory conforms to a particular praxis. And, for pistic criteriology, the ethico-critical criterion permits consideration of theological theory, at least as it is tapered to an ethical point. In this way, each of theory and praxis is permitted to consider the other, though only ever on its own terms.

But this identification of autonomy with conformity to the different criteria underlying theory and praxis still should not fully assuage us. Rather, it would produce other problems with the autonomy Boff is so adamant to defend. For theory, that autonomy would seem especially thin, in that it would refer simply to an adequate and consistent description of praxis. For praxis, that autonomy would imply a conflict between the analytico-strategic and ethico-critical instances. For the former emphasises efficacy, judging praxis according to whether it succeeds, but the latter, through its borrowing

[57] Ibid., 232.

from ethical theory, is concerned with a morality extending beyond this. Boff could hardly be unaware of how these instrumental and non-instrumental considerations can collide. But he does little to answer how such a collision might be resolved.

Boff is not helped, moreover, by the eclectic mix of philosophical theories he employs. On one hand, his emphasis on the gap between theory and praxis comes from Bachelard and Althusser's philosophy of science. On the other hand, his analysis of how theory and praxis come into contact via the mechanism of "dialectic" reflects Sartre, and above all Hegel.[58] We might add that, in adapting trinitarian and christological terminology in order to describe theory and praxis as "perichoretic",[59] Boff overlooks the not inconsiderable conceptual baggage that term carries. And so, it seems fair to say, "Boff's framework is quite a curious combination of conflicting sources. ... Such an unassimilated juxtaposition of conflicting paradigms is at best methodologically untenable".[60]

Accordingly, *Theology and Praxis* usefully highlights the distance we perceive between the particularities of the situations with which we engage via praxis, and the Christian faith that theological theory seeks to describe. It simultaneously also emphasises the need to place the two into dialogue. Boff's acknowledgment of the former priority is important because, by refusing an assertion of identity between the two, he creates space for both to be critiqued. And his examination of the latter is useful, because it acknowledges that any attempted synthesis of the two will always remain piecemeal. Still, the limits of Boff's analyses leave open whether these twins concerns can be served both adequately and simultaneously.

58 See Pilario (2005), 323–4.
59 Boff (1987), 213–14.
60 Pilario (2005), 327.

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To see how this tension comes home to roost, we can skip almost thirty years forward, to a fiery article Boff wrote in the aftermath of the next CELAM conference of real consequence after Puebla, namely that of Aparecida, Brazil, in 2007.[61] Among other things, that article opened a major rift between him and another leading liberation theologian: his brother Leonardo. To explain, the intervening decades between Puebla in 1979 and Aparecida had seen Latin American liberation theology on its back foot.[62] During the 1980s, the Vatican under Pope John Paul II had sought to undercut several liberation theologians, for example silencing Leonardo in 1985.[63] And, since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1990, liberation theology had faced a new set of predicaments. Those included the discrediting of the economic dependency theory from which it had extensively borrowed,[64] as well as the professionalisation of the field, which gained it academic respectability, but at the cost of disengagement from its animating praxis.[65]

The Aparecida documents themselves are something of a compromise. In their call for a great continental mission to Latin America, they claim continuity with Medellín and Puebla. Further, they reaffirm both the preferential option for the poor, and the significance of the Base Ecclesial Communities. But they also move focus away from

61 Though for a fuller review of Boff's later writings in light of *Theology and Praxis*, see Noble (2013), 125–48.

62 Notwithstanding important emergences throughout the globe of other kinds of liberation theology, such as black, feminist, womanist and queer theologies.

63 See Smith (1991), 222–33.

64 Thus Petrella (2004).

65 See especially Althaus-Reid (2005).

an emphasis on the economic and social structures that exacerbate poverty and other oppressions, albeit without denying their existence, and instead stress personal sin.[66]

The basic thesis of Boff's 2007 article, which defends the Aparecida settlement, is that liberation theology has too frequently advanced its concern for the poor in a way that displaces God as the centre of theology. The famous preferential option for the poor, he therefore argues, has been elevated to an "epistemological" principle.[67] Not only is the precise meaning of this elevation unclear, but it also leads to an instrumentalisation of faith in Christ, by subordinating that faith to a political agenda.[68] All this is the result of liberation theology forgetting its status as a *second* rather than first and classic theology.[69] And so, theology loses its own character, having being reduced to a merely sociological or political theory, a fact of which its "repeated ad nauseum buzzwords" are symptomatic.[70] In order to correct liberation theology, then, that theology must be led through Christ to the poor, rather than through the poor to Christ.[71]

This appraisal echoes the Vatican's earlier critiques of liberation theology as really masking certain political and especially Marxist ideologies, and that is exactly how Leonardo Boff, in a withering reply, reads his brother.[72] But just as important is how much the 2007 article manifests the same tension between the concreteness of praxis and Christic distinctiveness that drove *Theology and Praxis*, but which that work, as we saw, did not resolve. Accordingly, one way to read Boff's accusations is that much

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66 For a critical reading of Aparecida, see Libanio (2007). Yet Aparecida remains important not least because then Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, now Pope Francis, was president of the commission drafting the final document.

67 Boff (2007), 1001.

68 Ibid., 1003–4.

69 Ibid., 1005.

70 Ibid., 1006.

71 Ibid., 1011.

72 See Boff (2008), 702.

liberation theology, through its interpretation of the option for the poor, has eliminated the autonomy of theological theory from praxis. And so, in the tension between acknowledgment of concrete situations of oppression and the uniqueness of Christian faith, the former has swallowed up the latter.

Compared to *Theology and Praxis*, the 2007 article undoubtedly marks a shift in emphasis, although it is hard to tell if this reflects a change in Boff's underlying substantive position, or merely his polemical prose. The shift is in the direction of preserving Christian difference, which Boff thinks is undermined when liberation theologians insist that one must start from the poor, and only in this way come to see God. Such a move by Boff has invited the criticism that he has forgotten the dynamic nature of his dialectic between theory and practice, and instead presupposed a static faith in God as the starting point.[73]

Whether this criticism is justified pivots, again, on how Boff's verve should be read. Nonetheless, what matters more for our purposes is how both Boff's earlier and later works showcase the same tension between the different priorities animating liberation theologians: the demand for attention to concrete situations; and the requirement to retain something distinctively Christian in their faith. The earlier work tries to resolve the tension, but likely does not succeed. But the later work can be read as favouring the latter of the competing priorities, though at the cost of shattering the former.

Let us now continue this analysis, however, by exploring a rather different set of debates, but which nonetheless manifests the same tension.

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[73] See Susin and Hammes (2008).

2 The Practical Wisdom of Contemporary American Practical Theologians

As with Latin American liberation theology, it is useful to begin with some observations about how practical theology has developed as a field.

"Practical theology" is often used as a wider term than "pastoral theology", such that the latter is the subset of the former which addresses pastoral counselling and care. In some places, nonetheless, the two terms are used interchangeably, whether or not this is desirable.[74] My focus, in what follows, will be on the former term.

There have, of course, been works for how to live a Christian life for centuries, as with monastic training manuals. But it was only with the 19th century German university that a specific theological subdiscipline called *Praktische Theologie* emerged.[75] Thus Friedrich Schleiermacher, in his enormously influential *Brief Outline for the Study of Theology*, divided theology into three components: philosophical theology, historical theology, and practical theology. Importantly for this division, the second category, that of historical theology, had a much wider reference than simply an account of the development of theological ideas. Instead, it also included both constructive dogmatics and Christian ethics.

Hence on this schema, "Christian ethics" (a subset of the second category) and "practical theology" (the third category) came to refer to quite separate things. The former involves "explications of the Christian concept of what is good".[76] The latter,

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74 The two terms are typically differentiated in the United States, but outside it, and especially in the United Kingdom, they are frequently used interchangeably. See Miller-McLemore (2012a), 16–18; Miller-McLemore (2012b), 104.

75 On this history, see Farley (1983).

76 Schleiermacher (2011), 84 §223.

however, comprises not the application of this concept, but rather the narrower "technology" wielded by the church leadership in order "to hold the various concerns of the church together and to build on them further".[77] While Schleiermacher's typology is subtle, he has often been read as the culprit responsible for the "clerical paradigm", a way of thinking about practical theology that dramatically confines its subject matter to a narrow set of ministerial tasks.[78]

Over the 20th century, much of the crisis in practical theology has therefore concerned how to reconceptualise the field's proper object. In early 20th century American discussions, for example, this crisis manifested itself as the question of how to incorporate the insights of "secular" psychological study into pastoral practice.[79] But the real impetus for practical theology's rapid development as a field came in the 1960s, with the collapse of religious participation and of the Church's cultural and moral authority throughout the West.[80]

Practical theologians have therefore found themselves the sometimes surprised beneficiaries of funding intended to address the collapse.[81] And they have responded by shifting their field of study from the tasks of the ministerial professional to a much broader understanding of practice or praxis.[82] Said practice is thus no longer seen as monopolised by the pastor or priest, but instead something that can be carried out by

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77 Ibid., 12 §25.

78 This reading is most commonly associated with Farley (1983). But for a problematisation of that reading, see Miller-McLemore (2012b), 160–84.

79 On this, see Graham (1996), 64–73.

80 See Heitink (1999), 2–5.

81 As Miller-McLemore observes, practical theology was revived in the United States in no small part through grants from the Lilly Endowment, which was motivated by the sharp drop in attendances in mainline Christian congregations during this period: Bass et al (2016), 208.

82 In Anglo-American practical theology, the term "practice" is usually used, with "praxis" often not treated as having a separate meaning. In Germany, in contrast, "praxis" becomes the key term, and is distinguished from "practice" (*Übung*). See Heitink (1999), 7.

any Christian. In Germany and the Netherlands, this shift in perspective has led to a deeper engagement with Frankfurt School critical theory, and coalesced around a view of practical theology as a theology of praxis, praxis understood here as "action" that is always both interpersonal and socially located.[83] In Anglo-American debates, in contrast, the pivotal text has been Don Browning's *Fundamental Practical Theology*. That more eclectically borrows from Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics, Paul Tillich's "method of correlation", and David Tracy's "revised critical correlation" method.[84]

With this background in mind, I now want to look at the recent use, by certain leading American practical theologians, of the theory/practice distinction, even as they constantly intend to highlight its limitations. It will only be in the next chapter, I should note, that we will examine attempts to move wholly past the distinction. The main text I have in mind is *Christian Practical Wisdom: What It Is and Why It Matters*, a book co-written by Dorothy Bass, Kathleen Cahalan, Bonnie Miller-McLemore, James Nieman and Christian Scharen. The manner of the text's composition is itself telling. Most of its chapters are attributed to a single author. However, the authors also lived together while working on the book, in a Benedictine community in Minnesota, discussing their chapters and offering detailed feedback on those of others. This kind of collaboration, they contend, subverts the temptation to engage in "[i]ndividual projects

83 See ibid., 112–22. C.f. too a definition of practical theology oft cited in German discussions: "Practical theology must be conceived of as a theological theory of action within a theology that is understood as a practice-oriented science": Mette (1978), 9.

84 See Browning (1991).

driven by interpretive and authorial virtuosity", but which "could never get at the broad, rapidly changing contours of the phenomena anthropologists long to understand".[85]

In what follows, our interest will be with the notion of "practical wisdom" the authors articulate, and what it suggests about their conceptions of the theory/practice and theology/ethics relationships. But to understand why the authors insist on the notion as necessary, it helps (1) to begin by briefly mentioning some of Miller-McLemore's individual arguments about the theory/practice distinction. We can then (2) turn to the notion of practical wisdom per se, before (3) examining some of the dangers intrinsic to that notion.

Within modern theology, Miller-McLemore contends, the theory/practice distinction usually operates to devalue practical and context-specific knowledge, given the almost universal assumption of a "theory to practice" model. Such a model treats practice as the mere unidirectional application of theory, meaning the former cannot itself be generative, that is, something that shapes theory in turn.[86] Hence "those closer to practice (e.g., homiletics, pastoral theology) question their knowledge, while those who foreground theory (e.g., historical studies, systematic theology) assume an air of greater confidence".[87] This roadblock to a more dynamic relationship has persisted, even though "[t]he desire to repair the rife [sic] between theory and practice is apparent in almost every book on practical theology and theological education from the 1980s and 1990s".[88]

85 Bass et al (2016), 327.
86 Miller-McLemore (2016), 195.
87 Ibid., 190.
88 Ibid., 197–8.

The bias subordinating practice to theory is facilitated by the structures and culture of the theological academy itself. It begins when academics in better established and more prestigious fields like systematic theology assign "anything to do with ministry to the practical or ministry field".[89] But a vicious cycle thereby develops: those in the former fields increasingly exclude practical and pastoral theologians from academic conversations, claiming the latter "lack rigor and precision".[90] That in turn reinforces a perception of the latter fields as not worth engaging. The perverse result is that, even when systematic theologians concede that the theory/practice divide has become untenable, they still only ask other systematicians how things might be otherwise. This produces the phenomenon where they, in a bout of seeming originality, "attempt to reclaim the study of Christian practices as central, territory already traversed and studied by practical theologians".[91]

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Let us turn, then, to the alternative proposed by Miller-McLemore and her colleagues. In *Christian Practical Wisdom*, the authors treat theory and practice as forms of knowledge which, while different, nonetheless occupy the same spectrum. On one end are "*episteme* and *theoria*", collectively defined as a type of theoretical knowledge that "actively marginalizes embodiment and practical engagement".[92] This kind of knowledge has become dominant in modern Western societies, and includes theological subdisciplines like systematic theology, which have used their academic capital to

89 Ibid., 204, citing Hough and Wheeler (1998), x.
90 Miller-McLemore (2016), 208.
91 Miller-McLemore (2012b), 171. I will consider a fairly blatant example of this in the following chapter. See, similarly, McClintock Fulkerson's observation of the "virtual ignoring of the work of the so-called 'practical' field" by certain "academic guilds": McClintock Fulkerson (2007), 300.
92 Bass et al (2016), 1.

marginalise practical theology. But at the other end of the spectrum is purely practical knowledge, which is "only contextual, local, and particular".[93]

Between these poles, however, stands *practical wisdom*. This third form of knowledge embraces both the theoretical and practical, though it is "closer" to the latter pole.[94] Furthermore, it is knowledge that, while rooted in a moral tradition, is obtained via experience, and is flexible enough to be adapted to novel situations.[95] The authors compare the term "practical wisdom" to other related terms, such as "practical knowledge", "practical reason", "prudence" and "know-how". But they settle on the first, as best expressing the "fluid, embodied knowledge essential to Christian living", even as they acknowledge how their concerns cannot be "wholly resolved by a singular term".[96]

The word *wisdom*, I note, is of especial appeal to the authors because, in the Christian Scriptures, that wisdom is inexplicable apart from the revelation of God, involving as it does an "interplay between ... the living God of all that is and the temporal, embodies realities of daily life".[97] Wisdom, then, brings together theological knowledge with practical knowledge of the quotidian. One may therefore also speak of a specifically *Christian* practical wisdom, a wisdom centred on God's incarnation in Christ, although practical wisdom can be found in other religious traditions, as well as outside religion.[98]

Nonetheless, the authors say, such practical wisdom has been largely forgotten because of the dominance which theoretical knowledge has attained. It is this that has led to the

93 Ibid., 2.
94 Ibid.
95 Ibid., 5.
96 Ibid., 6.
97 Ibid.
98 Ibid., 7–9.

confinement of practical knowledge to either theoretically vacuous empirical research, or the technical guidance of ministers.[99] What is needed, then, is a "rebalancing" of theoretical knowledge and practical wisdom, though not one which swings the pendulum so far that the former is entirely devalued.[100]

The authors equate practical wisdom with Aristotelian *phronesis*, opting only for the term "wisdom" because of the latter's more overt associations with religion.[101] While I think that equation is oversimplistic, dwelling too long on this point would risk overlooking how the authors of *Christian Practical Wisdom* are quite expressly not concerned with conceptual or definitional precision.[102] They would, moreover, likely diagnose our demand for tidy definitions as complicit in the theory-obsessed malaise by which practical wisdom has been sidelined.

It is nonetheless still worth observing that, in *Christian Practical Wisdom*, the terms "theory" and "practice" are not described nearly as precisely as in the other treatments of the theory/practice distinction we have explored in this and the previous chapter. Likewise, while the authors clearly assume some close connection between ethics and practice, as when they say that *phronesis* is "a kind of knowing that is morally attuned",[103] this network of relationships is largely left implicit. And so, much because of the authors' desire to bring theory and practice back together, their understanding of the differences between these must be said to be a fuzzy one. This fuzziness will not just persist, but will also increase in the next chapter, when we examine certain attempts to

99 Ibid., 176 (Miller-McLemore).
100 Ibid., 3.
101 Ibid., 4–6.
102 Ibid., 10.
103 Ibid., 5. See, further, the claim elsewhere by Cahalan and Nieman that, while ethics is to be distinguished from practical theology, it also "aim[s] to affect ministry and discipleship", and provides the latter a "more complete sense of the Christian faith": Cahalan and Nieman (2008), 81–2.

transcend the theory/practice distinction entirely. Here, though, the authors are content to remain within the distinction.

In order to explain how theoretical knowledge has obtained its present monopoly, a chapter by Scharen offers a historical account of how that monopoly arose in early modernity. I will say more next chapter about this strategy of narrativising the reasons for our present conceptual divides, but for now, it suffices simply to outline Scharen's story. The destruction precipitated in Europe by the Thirty Years' War, he claims, led to popular demand for a conception of "abstract" reason. Such a form of reason, by transcending religious divisions, was hoped to be capable of resolving them.[104] Descartes was the one who met this demand, and so "led the modern West on a trajectory that prized abstract reason and universal truth over practical wisdom and embodied judgment".[105]

Scharen's chapter hence points to fascinating correspondence between him and the Bohemian Princess Elisabeth of the Palatinate. The latter called the former out on the gulf he was developing between abstract and practical reason. Yet Princess Elisabeth's voice has long been marginalised, not least because of her gender. That said, and in reaction to Scharen, we may well harbour doubts about whether the ideas of any single philosopher – even Descartes – could really be the principal contributing cause to the present imbalance between theoretical knowledge and practical wisdom.[106] Still, to effect the necessary rebalancing, the authors of *Christian Practical Wisdom* posit that

104 Ibid., 146.

105 Ibid., 145.

106 This chapter of *Christian Practical Wisdom*, it bears observing, claims influence from Charles Taylor's secularisation narrative in Taylor (2007): see Bass et al (2016), 147–50. And indeed, that text is mentioned as an important inspiration for the entire project: at 13. However, Taylor's narrative is considerably more intricate than what is suggested here, and has a somewhat more complex exploration of the role of ideas in history.

we must pay more attention to the concrete situations that require the latter sort of knowledge, in order to be properly addressed.[107]

The first half of their text is devoted to such situations. These are worth sketching, in order to display the full flavour of the authors' project. Miller-McLemore stresses the *corporeal* character of knowledge, observing for example that bodily gestures during worship, such as stretching one's hands forward to receive communion, play as great a role in the formation of faith as "big words and ideas".[108] Sensation is also paramount: children taking Mass thus focus not on doctrines like transubstantiation, but instead on the taste of the bread.[109] This is but one illustration of how "[w]isdom of God is bodily wisdom gained through everyday reminders of death and love".[110]

Cahalan explores how the practice of *lectio divinia* for scriptural reading transformed her pedagogical method as a theological teacher. By asking her students, in a pastoral care course, to memorise Psalm 23 and pray it spontaneously with one another, the students began to glean part of the wisdom of this Benedictine practice, which was to "discern which type of prayer is best for the person".[111] Bass recounts how she learnt practices of reconciliation by looking after the daughter of her husband's first marriage, and by engaging with his ex-wife.[112] Such quotidian problems, and the responses which one gradually learns are best through experience, enable "a kind of knowing that allows

107 Bass et al (2016), 16.
108 Ibid., 25.
109 Ibid., 26.
110 Ibid., 33–4.
111 Ibid., 61.
112 Ibid., 70–3.

one to recognize God's grace and healing, active in and for the world, and sometimes also to cooperate with it.".[113]

Nieman examines congregational wisdom, for example by considering the way a Lutheran church in rural Illinois assigned significant resources and cultural capital to its Sunday school program, on the basis that the program's children were the church's "new generation of members".[114] And finally, Scharen reflects on practical wisdom as embedded in popular culture, especially American rock and metal music, like that of Black Sabbath. Such music, being part of creation, can therefore be "full of God", while simultaneously "show[ing] its brokenness, its self-imposed exile from God".[115] Accordingly, said music can have "a theological depth that shouldn't be ignored and might be formative of faithful Christian living".[116]

These examples gesture at how infinitely varied the instances of Christian practical wisdom can be. They are "embedded in material realities of bodies, stuff, place, and communities in action".[117] And they cannot be grasped purely through "conceptual frameworks of philosophy and language", but must also be considered in their "nonverbal, aesthetic, narrative, symbolic, and embodies dimensions".[118] It is even somewhat risky to become too preoccupied with terms like "practical *reason*, practical *thinking* ... [and] practical *rationality*". For even these still connote some "mental

113 Ibid., 69.
114 Ibid., 112.
115 Ibid., 113.
116 Ibid., 130.
117 Ibid., 211 (Miller-McLemore).
118 Ibid., 210 (Miller-McLemore).

process located internal to the mind", and thereby overlook "practice-bound wisdom internal to action" itself.[119]

The great appeal of the notion of Christian practical wisdom, accordingly, is that it focuses our attention onto the *concrete situation*. It highlights how much of the knowledge we deem as essential for Christian living is not abstract, but rather inseparable from the particular circumstances in which it is operative. The "practical", on this view, therefore names the particular.

Such a concern for the particular is obviously similar to that which we saw in Boff's work, notwithstanding his rather more complicated theoretical apparatus. That is, both Boff and the authors of *Christian Practical Wisdom* worry about the abstract and prematurely universalised manner in which Christian theoretical claims are often expressed. Hence both try to draw theory and practice more closely together, by emphasising how the latter always conditions the former.

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There are nonetheless some key differences. Reflection on these, I contend, will elicit the profound tensions and trade-offs at stake in the treatment of the theory/practice distinction in a work like *Christian Practical Wisdom*. A basic difference involves the kind of practice that liberation theologians like Boff have in mind, compared to the practical theologians. The former's principal concern is with *political* praxis, with practice that frees us from oppressive structures. The latter would not deny that this sort of praxis is crucial: hence, for example, feminist theory's rapidly increased influence on

[119] Thus her critique of Browning's work at ibid., 195–6 (emphasis in original).

their field. But for them, nonetheless, "practice" still has a much wider reference, including for example matters that seem primarily interpersonal rather than political. Consider, as an illustration, whether Cahalan's description of the aftermath of a failed marriage's aftermath could have any place in a Latin American liberation theology.

This extended range of the term "practice" might seem entirely innocuous, and is of itself unproblematic. But it suggests other issues. Hence a second difference, namely that Boff's advocacy for the autonomy of theology for the sake of Christic distinctiveness is mostly absent from the practical theologians' conception of Christian practical wisdom. We recall that, for Boff, said autonomy was necessary to prevent debasing theology into mere ideology, that is, an uncritical rationalisation of a particular praxis. He may not have successfully reconciled that autonomy with the fact of interdependence. Still, Boff rightly perceived an uneasy tension between the need to acknowledge the specificities of the situation, and the requirement to uphold Christian distinctiveness.

Appreciation of this dilemma is often lacking in *Christian Practical Wisdom*. It is most apparent in the acknowledgement that Christian practical wisdom is only a subset of practical wisdom, and that something more is needed to justify the qualifier "Christian". The authors offer such a justification, I have observed, by appealing to the Incarnation. Thus "Christian practical wisdom emerges in relation to God embodied – not only materially (the Christian belief that God 'became flesh') but also purposefully, in relationship as a loving neighbour (Christ 'dwelt among us', bearing 'grace upon grace', John 1:14–16)."[120] However, this appeal to incarnational logic does not explain a

[120] Bass et al (2016), 8.

feature of Christian practical wisdom paramount for the authors, namely that it is "grounded in ordinary experience, and learned over time in the company of others".[121] How, that is, can I be sure that what I learn of how to live with others in the quotidian really reflects Christ's dwelling among us, rather than a merely illusory supposition that this is so?[122]

So, while the work seeks a "rebalancing" of theoretical knowledge and its titular Christian practical wisdom, its real fixation is on the particularity of the situations in which practice is embedded. Hence it operates principally on the level of assertion about what is "Christian" about that practice. This would seem to mandate one of two outcomes. On one hand, *every* particular practice becomes capable of being sanctioned as somehow reflecting Christ, which would raise thorny problems concerning the meaningfulness of the term *Christian*. On the other hand, it is possible that a select number of practices will be arbitrarily elevated so as to be called "Christian" ones. This latter route is prone to produce a vicious insider/outsider ideology: you do not act as we do; therefore you are not Christian.[123] Accordingly, the tension Boff identified, but did not resolve, is simply left unacknowledged in *Christian Practical Wisdom*.

But let us now consider the risk of ideology in a different direction. *Christian Practical Wisdom* advocates greater attention to the nuances of the concrete situation, and we can now see why this call stands in tension with Christian theology's distinctively Christian

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121 Ibid., 5.

122 See also Rowan Williams' essay "Incarnation and the Renewal of Community" for discussion of the ambiguities in relating the Incarnation to concrete forms of human existence: Williams (2000a), 225–38.

123 Thus Beaudoin (2016), drawing on the work of Boyarin (2004), 17, observes that even as practical theologians resist the assumption that "universal" Christian knowledge like that of doctrine is the only theological knowledge worth pursuing, they retain a vested interest in "Christianicity", that is, in defining what practices are "Christian", precisely to define in and out groups. I will say more about this notion of Christianicity in Chapters IV and V.

identity, as it does in Boff's work. In addition, however, advocacy for the particular can detract from the particular itself. This ironic result stems from the plurality of the concrete situation: when a given circumstance forces itself into our vision, it crowds out our ability to notice other circumstances. So, as Miller-McLemore acknowledges, "we should recognize the new knowledge production in practical theology as both disorienting earlier power relations *and* establishing new regimes".[124] To put this another way, the idea of Christian practical wisdom has rightly been used to criticise systematic theology for the false universalism of its truth claims. But then it simply erects its own fallible epistemic regime in the latter's place.

In this vein, some recent critiques of practical theology have foregrounded the question of *race* in that field's construction. In North America, at least, practical theologians are typically white, and assume their life experiences as white persons to be normative, thereby exoticising the experiences of all others. Courtney Goto, for example, has sought to apply, to the field, cultural critic Rey Chow's concept of "coercive mimeticism". That refers to when "a person of color ... is expected to participate in being and becoming who his/her 'captors' (i.e., members of one or more dominant cultures) deem this ethnic person to be".[125] Accordingly, Goto speaks of her experience as someone "encouraged to perform an assimilated Asian American who can move easily in white circles of discourse yet still be able to speak about her racial identity".[126] She refers, for instance, to the tendency to invite non-white practical theologians solely to write contributions about racial issues. In contrast, it is the white scholars who are

124 Miller-McLemore (2016), 210 (emphasis in original).
125 Goto (2016), 114; c.f. the longer definition in Chow (2002), 107.
126 Goto (2016), 117.

asked to address everything else in the field.[127] The former are therefore positioned as both on the outside and inside, "exotic but not too exotic".[128]

Coercive mimeticism is widespread in many societies, and connects, of course, to broader debates about intersectionality and post-colonialism. But it is especially galling that practical theologians, who have sought to unearth "obscured lived experiences of marginalization", have failed to discern how they themselves legitimate that marginalisation through their own disciplinary assumptions.[129] Nonetheless, Goto does not demand the abandonment of practical theology, or its attempt to emphasise the particular. Rather, she recommends, these should continue, but must be carried out with as great a sensitivity as possible to one's perspectival limitations. What is needed is "collaborative action in the many settings" in which coercive mimeticism is manifest.[130] That may include developing collective awareness of how that mimeticism can operate; partnering and having conversations across different social locations; and challenging "racializing practices".[131]

Other unsavoury illustrations of practical theology's blind spots could easily be added.[132] But we can frame what is at stake here as a formal methodological point, namely, that it is extraordinarily difficult for practical theologians not to rely on too few case studies for their analyses. The painstaking attention to detail, which is paramount when considering the particular, renders it difficult not to suggest premature generalisations. The risk of individual case studies, in other words, is that they can

127 Ibid., 111.
128 Ibid., 117.
129 Ibid., 118.
130 Ibid., 123.
131 Ibid., 123–8.
132 For more examples in respect of race, see Sheppard (2016); for black women as per a womanist perspective, see Parker (2012); for class, see Mercer (2012).

"mislead or misdirect readers to stereotypes, one-sided assessments or oversimplified analysis".[133]

Accordingly, as Eileen Campbell-Reed would contend, while case studies must be built up one by one, there is still a "need for multiple cases that together build practical wisdom over time".[134] It goes almost without saying that this process of using multiple case studies to critique the overbroad generalisations we have drawn from individual ones will always be incremental, and required to continue *ad infinitum*. Moreover, what will be needed at all times is epistemic humility about our limited ability to cognise every detail of our contexts.

So, although the practical theologians who authored *Christian Practical Wisdom* would define their project as that of illuminating the particular and concrete situation, such a project is more ambivalent than what might initially appear. It leaves open what sense in which the practice responding to the particular situation might be a "Christian" one. Furthermore, a call to pay greater attention to the particular circumstances might ironically abstract from these, given they are beyond our full grasp. The same difficulty, in fact, would also apply to the Latin American liberation theologians. So much is indicated by the accusations from black and queer theologians that Latin American liberation theology emphasises economic misery, but with a myopia to other kinds of oppression.[135]

In sum, this second way of approaching the theory/practice distinction has the ambition of promoting the concrete realities in which ethical action takes place. But its success in

133 Campbell-Reed (2016), 34.
134 Ibid., 49.
135 On this, see especially Althaus-Reid (2000).

this is deeply ambivalent: concrete reality is never fully grasped, and may distract attention from the distinctively Christian identity of those living within it. In what now follows, therefore, we will examine a very different approach to the theology/ethics relationship, one that seeks to leave the theory/practice distinction behind entirely.

CHAPTER III

THE METAHISTORICAL TYPE

Let us now examine a very different way to understand the theology/ethics relationship – though I should stress again that these approaches are not quite mutually exclusive, and may well be used by the same thinker at different points of their presentation. This second approach I will call the *metahistorical type*. It is this which, I suggested earlier, has attained dominance in contemporary Anglophone systematic theology.

A lengthy introduction is hence warranted. The type is best introduced by sketching one instance of it, which I hope will prove uncontentious as an illustration. The American systematic theologian Edward Farley, through his 1983 book *Theologia*, set off a firestorm in United States circles regarding the deficiencies of Christian theological education.[1] In an incisive analysis of the state of systematic theology and Christian ethics, one still deserving attention today, he laments that:

> "The struggle of the so-called normative or constructive disciplines like systematic theology and theological ethics to find and formulate their subject is well-known. Lacking a self-evident literature or historical period to function as the parameter of the discipline ... [t]heology and ethics thus search for that which will give scholarly status, and to this end easily transpose themselves into the categorical worlds of history of thought, social science, or philosophy. ... [Therefore] they tend to break up into either *agenda* subspecialities (Christian social ethics, philosophy of religion, theological language, method) or *literature* and *historical movement* subspecialities (Reformation, nineteenth century, a major figure, a philosophical movement)."[2]

What, however, explains this crisis in subject matter? Farley's answer takes two steps. He begins by positing that theology has lost its "primary meaning" as *paideia*, that is, as

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1 For a review of that debate, see Kelsey (1993).

2 Farley (1983), 129, 146 (emphasis in original).

a "personal and existential wisdom and understanding".[3] *Paideia* has in turn two dimensions. First, it implies a *lived faith*, which while "cognitive", also pre-exists explicit intellectual reflection.[4] Second, *paideia* comprises a "dialectic", that is, an ongoing movement by which the subject tries to *interpret* the "concrete situation and moment in the individual's biographical life set in a social space and historical time". That interpretation proceeds according to the "references of faith", that is, "the realities of faith carried in the imagery and even doctrinalizations of the ecclesial community".[5] These references of faith are in turn shaped by the concrete situation, meaning the two influence one another over time. So the dialectic between the two, Farley claims, overcomes oversimplistic models of theology whereby theory unilaterally influences practice or practice unilaterally grounds theory. In such a way, practice is "built into theology by definition".[6]

The second step of Farley's presentation involves an account of how theology as *paideia* "has long disappeared as the unity, subject matter, and end of clergy education".[7] Instead, what are actually taught under the descriptor "theological education" are increasingly specialised fields which, having lost their intrinsic unity, fail to constitute genuine theology. This fragmentation is apparent, above all, in the problematic relationship between "practical theology" and the so-called "theoretical" theological disciplines of Biblical study, systematic theology and church history. The

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3 Ibid., 153.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid., 165. Farley elaborates on this "interpretation of the situation" in Farley (1987) and Farley (1988).
6 Farley (1983), 132.
7 Ibid., ix.

former is now reductively conceived as the mechanical application of the latter to the tasks of the minister, an approach Farley famously calls the "clerical paradigm".[8]

To explain how theology arrived at its present dismal state, Farley offers a "historical narrative"[9] for the disintegration of the unity of theological education, one he says resembles a Foucauldian archaeology.[10] The "cataclysm", he says, struck in mid-18th century Germany through the theological encyclopedia movement,[11] which aimed to catalogue the relationships between the different theological sciences. The decisive work in that movement was Schleiermacher's *Brief Outline*, already mentioned in the previous chapter. While Schleiermacher wanted to retain the unity of those sciences, he chose to locate that unity externally, in the goal of the training of clergy. In so doing, he supposedly denied the intrinsic connection of the theological subdisciplines within *paideia* itself.[12]

Furthermore, the encyclopedia movement throughout the 19th century consolidated a "fourfold pattern" in theology. According to this pattern, there were four essential theological sciences: Biblical exegesis, dogmatic theology, church history and practical theology. But this has fractured theology further, not least due to the increasing specialisation demanded by each of those fields. Institutional structures have also

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8 See especially ibid., 98.

9 Ibid., ix.

10 Ibid., 30. Farley wrote *Theologia* too early in the Anglophone reception of Foucault to take into account the latter's shift from "archaeology" to "genealogy". The latter is intended to stress historical contingency more than the former, which still relies on a structuralist paradigm.

11 Ibid., 49.

12 In defence of Schleiermacher, he was motivated by a scepticism "about the ability of the human mind to construct a system of thought capable of explaining reality in its fullness", and so thought it more realistic to locate the unity of theology in its *institutional setting*, that is, in concrete communities of scholarship, rather than in an existential *paideia*. See Zachhuber (2013), 14.

proven key, by entrenching the process of professionalisation, such as through divisions within theological faculties, specialised graduate schools, and regular conferences.[13]

It should be noted that both steps of Farley's argument have been contested. First, he articulates his notion of *paideia,* as that which once unified theology and ethics, only in skeletal outline. Moreover, he primarily relies upon a nostalgia for an earlier time for its persuasive force. Thus "the context and actual exercise of *paideia* go largely unexamined. Little is said about how to cultivate and enact it".[14] Second, Farley's account of the theological encyclopedia movement may well overemphasise its culpability for our contemporary theological woes. It overlooks, for example, how the fourfold was sometimes used precisely in order to emphasise the unity of the various theological sciences in the work of God.[15]

However, what is more relevant for our purposes is how prevalent this two-step argumentative strategy has become in contemporary theology. That is to say, a great deal of theology now proceeds first by positing that there are one or more categories which must be retrieved in order for contemporary Christianity to survive. Second, it then offers an account of how these categories were lost.

This twofold strategy is significant for how concertedly it tries to overcome the dualistic structures which characterised the first type of approach to the theology/ethics relationship we considered. For theory/practice thinking, we have said, is binary thinking. That thinking says: there are two things which must be treated separately, in order to preserve the distinctiveness of each. What those two things are could vary.

13 Farley (1983), 113–14.
14 Miller-McLemore (2012b), 172.
15 Muller (1991), 32–4.

Nonetheless, when theory/practice thinking is applied to our interpretation of the theology/ethics relationship, it is unsurprising that a similar dualism between the latter two terms is affirmed, and that each is understood as corresponding to a discrete object.

The metahistorical type we are now considering, in contrast, eschews binary thinking, at least insofar as it can. Hence the dualism between "theology" and "ethics" is treated as not a *puzzle* to solve, but a *problem* to overcome. It is in some way a misstep, however now inevitable, to distinguish between the two. As a result, whatever these terms stand for, those things must now be brought back together. So when someone operating within this type proposes a category like *paideia* as demanding retrieval, such a category functions as a *tertium quid*, as a third term which renders any distinction between theology and ethics or between theory and practice nugatory.

In addition, I have chosen the label "metahistorical" for this type because of the second strategy it adopts, which is to offer a *historical tale* about how theology and ethic were originally united, came apart, and now must be rejoined. The culprit for the divorce is usually something like "modernity", "the Enlightenment" or "secularisation". However, other suspects are possible, such as Constantine's reconfiguration of Christianity as the Roman state religion. The story of how the divorce occurred can be told in consuming detail, or left almost wholly implicit. But even in its minimalist form, what is crucial is that it posits the third thing which unites theology and ethics as having some kind of historical reality. That third thing, in other words, is not an atemporal, free-floating idea, but something really embedded in the course of events.

Furthermore, this type is *meta*historical, because while its thinkers hinge their claims upon historical forces and currents, they would reject the conclusion that history is all

there is. They are not *historicists*, for whom the contingency of events would be primary. Instead, they still posit something – such as God – as transcending history, and in which the *tertium quid* between theology and ethics participates.[16] This of course raises questions of proper historical method, and we can already anticipate a common criticism of the metahistorical type, namely, that it simply does *bad* history.[17]

If I may speculate about this ambiguous relationship with historical study: the metahistorical type stands in uneasy and unacknowledged continuity with the idealist programme of 19th century German theology. That was associated principally with the Protestant Tübingen School, and was marked by an "ambition to integrate 'scientifically' respectable historical research into a genuine theological framework".[18] That programme ultimately failed to articulate that synthesis in a persuasive manner, and so gave way to the stark dichotomy we have now between Barthian-inflected theologies of revelation, which eschew empirical historical work, and methodologically agnostic studies of religion. The metahistorical type, therefore, can be treated as a renewed attempt to deliver this synthesis afresh, even as it consistently subordinates history to theology.

This chapter can only examine two instances of the type in any detail, namely those of American Methodist ethicist Stanley Hauerwas and Anglican systematic theologian Sarah Coakley. I have selected these thinkers because of how clearly they foreground

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16 C.f. MacIntyre, who makes the point by positing the necessity of a "metaphysical grounding" for "practices, traditions, and the narrative unity of human lives": MacIntyre (2007), xi.

17 Metahistorical thinkers are not frequently aware of the discussions around how to do intellectual history, and which were mentioned in section 3 of my introduction. Insofar as they do position themselves within such discussions, they will generally align themselves with Foucault's genealogical method. Even here, however, they typically overlook debates over how that method should be understood, such as regarding whether genealogy implies a "conceptual fundamentalism according to which the meaning of concepts is irrevocably determined by their origin", or is in fact intended to counteract that tendency. See Patton (2007), 218.

18 Zachhuber (2013), 288.

both the attractions and limitations of the metahistorical type. But it is important to gesture at how popular that type has become, including among figures whose projects are otherwise dramatically different:

- Miroslav Volf and Matthew Croasmun: "We ... propose that the current crisis of theology – a discipline that over the centuries placed the question of the *flourishing life* at the center of its concern – stems largely from its failure, especially in recent decades, to wrestle confidently with this question".[19] The crisis is external, with a shrinking job market and audience for theologians in recent years. It is also internal, with theology having conceded too much to standards of objective research in modernity. In contrast, theology that is properly centred on the question of the flourishing life "is not merely a set of beliefs ... It is an entire way of life".[20]

- Kevin Vanhoozer: Theology is "dramaturgy", a "working of drama".[21] Vanhoozer pairs this claim with a series of other theatre-related metaphors: Scripture as the script, theological understanding as dramatic performance, the church as the company, and the pastor as director.[22] Through these metaphors, he intends to overcome "[t]he theory/practice distinction, together with the contrast between doctrine and life to which it gives rise, [and which] is toxic to Christian faith".[23] That toxicity stems from the capture of theology, within

19 Volf and Croasmun (2019), 8 (emphasis added).
20 Ibid., 115.
21 Vanhoozer (2005), 244.
22 Ibid., xii.
23 Ibid., 13.

modernity, by a "particular view of science as an objective and empirical inductive procedure".[24]

- George Lindbeck: As a religion, Christianity is "a kind of cultural and/or linguistic framework or medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought".[25] On this schema, doctrines are not foremost propositions, but instead rules governing the "grammar" and "vocabulary" of this framework.[26] Through the communal development of such rules and of such a framework, "[t]he much-debated problem of theory and praxis is thus dissolved".[27] However, whether that development can still continue is an open question, having "collapsed under the combined onslaughts of rationalistic, pietistic, and historical-critical developments".[28]

- John Milbank: Milbank argues that Christianity must rediscover its "counter-history", based on Augustine's understanding of the two cities. That counter-history implies both a theory, that is, a "counter-ontology", and also a practice or "counter-ethics".[29] The theory "explicates this practice", and so always follows it.[30] But in turn, that theory also "works itself *back*" into the counter-historical narrative that informs the practice.[31] As is well-known among Milbank's readers, he sets that counter-history in opposition to the rise of

24 Ibid., 266.
25 Lindbeck (1984), 33.
26 Ibid., 81.
27 Ibid., 128.
28 Ibid., 119.
29 Milbank (2006), 383.
30 Ibid., 382.
31 Ibid., 387 (emphasis in original).

secularism in recent centuries, which he argues is a nihilistic attempt to think about the world apart from God.

- Paul Fiddes: Through a reading of Hebrew wisdom, Fiddes offers "a Christian wisdom-theology ... for a late-modern age".[32] Such a return to Hebrew *hokmah* "offer[s] a unique integration of *phronēsis* and *sophia*", given that it assimilates both "practical judgment when faced by situations of everyday life" and "systematic understanding of the world".[33] This approach is needed because of Christianity's participation in the "mood" of "our late-modern world", according to which "there is a crisis about the place of the self in the world", as many postmodern philosophers have articulated.[34]

There are also variations on the basic theme of positing a metahistorical concept and supporting it with a fall-from-grace narrative. For one, instead of a discrete concept such as *paideia* or dramaturgy unifying theology and ethics, a particular *style* of theology may instead function as the *tertium quid*. This chapter's second section will therefore consider Sarah Coakley's proposal for a "*théologie totale*". But we could have just as easily examined pitches of "lived theology" (Charles Marsh),[35] "transformation theology" (Oliver Davies),[36] or "engaged systematics" (Graham Ward).[37]

A second variation comes not from career theologians but from two Catholic social philosophers, Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor, whose works have proven a

32 Fiddes (2013), 12–13.
33 Ibid., 9–10.
34 Ibid., 11.
35 Marsh (2016).
36 Davies (2013).
37 Ward (2016).

conceptual boon for theologians. Each also offers a modernity narrative, the end result of which is that contemporary Christianity has lost something that previously enabled it to thrive. For MacIntyre, modernity has become alienated from the "practices" which animated the West's former, Aristotelian-Thomist moral consensus. Consequently, we have inherited a set of ethical concepts which no longer make sense to us. We "possess indeed simulacra of morality, we continue to use many of its key expressions. But we have – very largely, if not entirely – lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality".[38] For Taylor, who offers a weighty tome on the process of secularisation, that process has effected a shift in our "social imaginary", our stock set of images and practices by which the world is made meaningful to us. [39] We hence find ourselves in the "immanent frame", a new social imaginary which is not incompatible with an idea of transcendence or God, but still treats it as an optional extra.[40]

A third variation begins with the type's basic twofold structure, but then offers its photo negative. It is not that there was some metahistorical construct which Christianity once possessed but has now, unfortunately, lost. Instead, modern Christianity has *gained* a metahistorical construct, but then been perverted by it. I have in mind the critiques of the "racial imaginary" and of "whiteness" advanced respectively by Willie James Jennings and J. Kameron Carter, both of whom advance an account of Western theology's complicity in these ideas' development. Jennings locates that complicity in the long history of European colonialism,[41] and Carter offers a "genealogy" of whiteness catalysed by Kant's crypto-theological anthropology.[42] For both, then, the point is obviously not to restore the metahistorical construct, but to determine how we

38 MacIntyre (2007), 2.
39 Taylor (2007), 159–211.
40 Ibid., 539–93.
41 Jennings (2010).
42 See Carter (2008), 39–78.

might destroy it forever. Metahistorical reasoning comes in, therefore, not as a shield, but as a sword.

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What animates the metahistorical type, and explains its present popularity? Part of the answer would surely reference the palpable anxiety, by theologians and many Christians, over the present disconnect between "theology" and "ethics", however understood.[43] Such an anxiety is often expressed through a lament over the irrelevance of academic theology to real life. But this answer cannot be a complete one, since a perceived gap between theology and ethics was also something the liberation and practical theologians we considered last chapter tried to address. Yet they still presupposed some legitimate distinction between the two terms, whereas metahistorical thinkers want to be rid of the distinction entirely. Accounting for these rather different responses would therefore be useful.

It seems to me that underpinning the metahistorical thinkers' worry over the disconnection between theology and ethics is a concern over a *loss of coherence within the Christian life*. "Coherence" is, of course, a difficult term, the meaning of which is typically assumed by theologians, instead of interrogated. But it cannot be coincidental that Coakley demands "a coherent, and alluring, vision of the Christian faith",[44] that Hauerwas speaks of the need "of a central story that gives our life coherence",[45] that Lindbeck posits that Christianity as "a set of stories used in specifiable way to interpret

43 See sections 1 and 2 of my introduction. That said, the third variation of the type we have just considered is quite different. It is reacting against an undesirable connection between theology and ethics.

44 Coakley (2013), 41.

45 Hauerwas (1988), 38.

and live in the world ... seeks to be a coherent whole",[46] that Milbank refers "to the greater coherence in the Christian account of virtue, the city and soul",[47] that Vanhoozer emphasises the importance of a "theo-dramatic coherence" between life and doctrine,[48] that Volf and Croasmun claim that "[a]s Christians, we seek ... to make the practice of faith coherent",[49] or that Ward talks about the "coherence ... [of] the systematic order of the theological *poiesis*".[50] And while it is certainly the case that "when we see coherence propositions being deployed we should look around in order to see who is making a grab for academic power, who is attempting to marginalize whom", it is simultaneously true that "there are also genuine theoretical problems connected with coherence, problems having to do with disciplinary aims, methods, products, and audiences".[51]

When we speak of coherence, then, we may mean a few different things. We might mean that one set of propositions is consistent with another. Or prior to this, we may be referring to whether a proposition is meaningful so as even to be capable of being true, or capable of being consistent with other propositions. This is what Richard Swinburne intends, in speaking of the "coherence of theism", when he says that coherence is not the same as truth, but merely its condition. So "the moon is made of cheese" is a coherent though false statement, whereas "Thursday jumps loudly over the moon" is a flatly incoherent one.[52]

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46 Lindbeck (1984), 64.
47 Milbank (2006), 331.
48 Vanhoozer (2005), 419.
49 Volf and Croasmun (2019), 2011.
50 Ward (2016), 247.
51 Megill (2004), 207.
52 Swinburne (1977), 12–14.

Furthermore and crucially, "coherence" may not be a property solely of propositions. Instead, we may speak of our lives, our communities, or reality itself as forming coherent wholes. Inserting this ontic reference invites inquiry about what it means for distinct aspects of reality to cohere. Here, consistency and meaningfulness once again play a part. But in addition, aesthetic criteria are more obviously foregrounded: the components of reality might be said to cohere, when they come together in a beautiful way. Thus "[t]he primordial analogy ... between God and world is the analogy of beauty, of delight, artistry, even as creation's rational coherence speaks of the eternal *ratio* of God".[53]

Not all coherences are desirable, however. The critique of the racial imaginary and of whiteness by Jennings and Carter is predicated on how these notions invoke a coherent form of life which, through the racial hierarchy it legitimises, preys on those disfavoured by it. Likewise, Mieke Bal has identified a "politics of coherence" all too common in many readings of scriptural texts. That politics comprises a studied disregard of said texts' jarring features, such as the treatment of women in the Book of Judges, precisely because these features are difficult to place within a coherent whole.[54] The point is that it is all too easy to "discover" a coherent order of things when, in fact, coherence is frequently *imposed* onto a set of disparate elements, and in deeply reductive and destructive ways.

At the same time, we can hardly do without some ideal of coherence, if it is indeed a precondition for meaningfulness and intelligibility in what we say. To adapt a common argument from critical theory, we cannot communicate with others without

53 Hart (2003), 309.
54 See Bal (1988).

presupposing that our communications are meaningful. And if they are meaningful, then they are also coherent in some way. Furthermore, there are enough elements of the Christian tradition that suggest an ideal of coherence beyond this bare minimum, as with its emphasis on the Oneness of God, on the catholicity of the Church, and on the "unity of the faith" (*henotēta tēs pisteōs*) which creates stability against "every wind of doctrine" (Eph. 3:13–14). So the question is not if we should chase after coherence. Rather, it concerns what sort of coherence is legitimate to pursue.

When metahistorical thinkers speak about coherence, they certainly mean something more than the coherence of a body of propositional truth claims. Nonetheless, it is unusual for them to specifically thematise that coherence – though again, I suspect that their work is haunted by the unfinished business of the idealist *Geist*, with its ambition to develop a coherent *Wissenschaft*. Still, metahistorical thinkers seem to mean something like the compatibility or aesthetic fittingness between the constituent elements of the Christian life. What those elements are depends on what the particular metahistorical thinker wants to highlight. But they will include, at least, the theological beliefs and the actions of the Christian person or community, and may extend to such matters as liturgical practices, interpretive frameworks, and supporting ecclesial or political institutions.

This goes some way in explaining why metahistorical thinkers are often eager to embrace interdisciplinary engagement with the social sciences, while simultaneously being deeply wary towards these. Milbank provides the clearest example, arguing that theology should itself be a kind of sociology, but must also reject all previous sociology

because of the latter's unacceptably secular presuppositions.[55] Similarly, both Hauerwas and Coakley, we will see, show interest in merging theology with thick description of congregational life. But both are likewise concerned about the legitimate theological use of ethnographic methods.

The paradox here is best understood on the basis that, on one hand, the drive towards coherence provides an impetus to integrate different disciplinary perspectives on the lives of Christian individuals and communities. On the other hand, the imposition of coherence requires flattening, in some way, the differences between these perspectives. That in turn demands the rejection of sociological insights that seem at odds with theological convictions.

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I will have more to say about coherence later.[56] But by emphasising it now as the principal concern of the metahistorical type, we can also more easily perceive that type's limitations. In short, "coherence" is a lens focused on drawing connections, rather than acknowledging differences. Metahistorical thinkers want to bring together a number of items – theoretical convictions and ethical practices; different disciplinary perspectives; and so on. But they are therefore at constant risk of overlooking how these are not identical, and may exist in multivocal, instead of univocal, relationships. A kind of determinism is thus encouraged: for example, if I have theoretical conviction X, then the subconscious logics underpinning that conviction will mean I will inevitably engage in practice Y, and vice versa. No room is thereby left for a process of moral reasoning

55 Milbank (2006), 382. For one of the more incisive critiques of him on this point, see Joas (2000).
56 See Chapter V.2.C.

or deliberation. And there is only a limited possibility that the specifics of a situation might shake those subconscious logics.[57]

A surprising but crucial consequence of this is that metahistorical thinkers will often refuse to advance specific ethical programs. Or they will believe that "ethics" is finished once they have completed their account of their preferred metahistorical construct. Hence they are concerned less with what actions must be taken in a response to a situation, and more with how the situation was originally framed. The assumption then is that, once a superior framing has been found, the question of "what should I do", which so perturbed many in the theory/practice type, will become trivial. In the case of Hauerwas, we will soon see, that assumption is explicit. As might be expected, this will invite worries that metahistorical thinkers have fallen into the fallacy of misplaced concreteness, that is, the "fallacy involved whenever thinkers forget the degree of abstraction involved in thought and draw unwarranted conclusions about concrete actuality".[58]

In addition, where a metahistorical thinker believes that a particular doctrine bears on a certain concrete ethical problem, that thinker invites the suspicion of what Linn Tonstad has called a "corrective projectionism". This is where the dynamics of the problem are projected back into the doctrine in ways that are serious distortive of that doctrine's internal logic.[59] Such a phenomenon is especially prevalent, including in respect of Coakley's theology, in endeavours to find a point of contact between the doctrine of the Trinity and modern life. That doctrine has thus been made the battleground for debates

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57 However, I should acknowledge that the social philosophers like MacIntyre and Taylor are more nuanced than the theologians on the point.

58 Daly and Cobb (1989), 36. See also Whitehead (1929), 11.

59 Tonstad (2015), 13–17.

over political organisation, gender roles and sexual identity, in ways it arguably cannot bear.

Let us now also recall how the third variation of the metahistorical type used metahistorical reasoning to diagnose a perverse form of life which we have unwittingly internalised. But what is striking in those diagnoses, however, is how monolithic their targets of critique seem to be. So, for Carter, "whiteness" often appears not to be a complex, differentiated phenomenon, as it always was for Africana philosophers like Frantz Fanon. Rather, it is nothing more or less then the "problematic vision of the human as closed within itself [and] sealed off from possibilities of cultural intimacy and thus reciprocity".[60] That is to say, precisely by focusing on whiteness as a totalising form of life, what Carter de-emphasises is its instantiation within particular moral decisions of the agent, or within that agent's concrete circumstances – that is, the very concerns foregrounded by the theory/practice type. Among other things, the possibility of leveraging tensions within that form of life's discrete elements precisely as a disruptive strategy is therefore foreclosed.

Finally, we should mention the intersection between the metahistorical thinkers' search for coherence, and an insistence they also share on maintaining what is distinctive about Christianity. Their assumption is that these tasks are complementary. Consider, for example, Coakley's repeated references to a holistic, systematic account of "Christian truth",[61] Hauerwas' "emphasis on narrative as theologically central for an explication of Christian existence",[62] or Milbank's contention that the theological counter-history that functions as an alternative to all existing social science "must articulate Christian

60 Carter (2008), 230.
61 Coakley (2013), 38, 41.
62 Hauerwas (2003), 28.

difference in such a fashion as to make it strange".[63] And so on. So, it is the total package of the metahistorical synthesis that is Christian, in juxtaposition to the pernicious, secular forces that have fragmented it.

What happens, however, if we find one or more elements of that synthesis to be dubious? Does the rejection of a part entail rejection of the whole? In turn, would this imply the denial of the Christian identity of one's life? Such an all-or-nothing approach assumed by metahistorical thinkers, I therefore suggest, obscures the complexity of Christian distinctiveness, with which they have thus not yet fully come to grips. This contrasts with the theologians we will turn to next chapter, who are far more sensitive to its difficulties.

We can now turn to how these complicated dynamics play out as regards two prominent metahistorical theologians.

1 Stanley Hauerwas and Narrative as the Bridge between Theology and Ethics

In this section, I will (1) examine the specific narrative Hauerwas tells about how theology and ethics fell apart; (2) parse how he narrowly and rigidly conceives the general category of "narrative", so as to make it the glue that sticks the two back together; and (3) briefly review some of the major criticisms of his work precisely in light of this narrow and rigid conception.

63 Milbank (2006), 383.

Before this, though, I should start with some interpretive comments about the general trajectory taken by Hauerwas, who has proven one of the United States' most influential theologians in recent decades, with his reach extending well beyond his own Methodist tradition. Some care is needed in so doing, however, to ensure we have read him fairly. This is not just because of the deeply polemical prose he often employs, but to which he would not necessarily commit himself. Beyond that, there is the matter of whether it even makes sense to impute a wider intentionality to Hauerwas' corpus. That question arises partly due to his own characterisation of his work as occasionalistic, rather than systematic.[64] But it is also, I suggest, because he has a propensity to lay down thoughtful and sensible methodological limits at times which, at other times, he brazenly trespasses.[65] Notwithstanding this, some overarching remarks about what Hauerwas has been trying to do throughout his career are perfectly possible.

In that respect, it makes heuristic sense to distinguish, as does Nicholas Healy, between Hauerwas' "general" and "particular" agendas.[66] The general agenda, which is more explicitly concerned with method, aims to reorientate Christian theology in a more forcefully ecclesiocentric direction. Hauerwas worries that modern theology gives undue primacy to abstract, disembodied ideas. In this way, the lives of actual Christians and their communities, and the ethics thereby implied, are consigned to second class status.

64 See, e.g., Hauerwas (2016), 1–3, 268.

65 As Stout says, "the early Hauerwas is his own best critic", his earlier writings having been much more careful vis-à-vis these limitations: Stout (2005), 170.

66 Healy (2014), 15–18. That Healy writes a "(very) critical introduction" is something we can put aside, at least for now. That said, for a more sympathetic survey of Hauerwas' works, see Wells (1998).

Against this tendency, Hauerwas argues that all theological work emerges from, and must therefore take as its starting point, the empirical reality of the Church. He therefore advances a specific conceptual vocabulary to describe that reality, such as that of the Church's distinctive *practices*; the *virtues* which Christians will develop and embody by participating in those practices; and the *narrative* into which Christians live through these practices and virtues. Each of these terms is capable of serving as a metahistorical construct, in the sense I have described, by providing a bridge between theological claims and ethical outcomes, and in a manner which purportedly renders the distinction between the two superfluous.

Hauerwas also has a particular agenda, which relates to his more overtly substantive positions. That agenda encompasses his rightly renowned writings on such issues as physical and mental disabilities, or the rapidly eroding life of the university. But it also comprises the most widely read section of his corpus, namely, his assault upon political liberalism, and his attack on Western Christianity for having unwittingly internalised said liberalism's assumptions. This is a point he frequently makes through his critique of "Constantinianism", a term he draws from John Howard Yoder, who I will consider next chapter.[67] Hauerwas and Yoder do not take that critique in exactly the same direction, but we can treat Hauerwas as criticising the Christian Church for having sold out to the values of secular liberal societies, and in this way lost its distinctive character.[68]

I now want to suggest that both these general and particular agendas are advanced by the two basic strategies of the metahistorical type which I have identified. First,

67 Though see, especially, Yoder (1984b).

68 See especially Hauerwas (1988), 180–4; and generally Hauerwas and Willimon (1989).

Hauerwas articulates a number of ideas – practices; virtue; narrative – which supposedly straddle both theology and ethics. In my exposition of Hauerwas below, I will focus, for manageability's sake, on the last of these. This is despite how the other categories are also illustrative and important, and despite the artificiality of such a separation.[69] Second, Hauerwas tells a particular narrative about how these categories were once taken for granted by the Church, but then lost in modernity.

We might accordingly say that Hauerwas' motive in bringing together theology and ethics lies in this move's potential both to centralise the place of ecclesiology within Christian theology (the general agenda), and to advance his specific critique of political liberalism (the particular one). These agendas are, of course, far from innocent. They discernibly shape how he treats his preferred metahistorical constructs, and how he tells his story about the Church's fall from grace in modernity. And they do this by bequeathing to Hauerwas a tendency towards coherence, understood as a tendency to emphasise the affinities between disparate items and issues, but in a way likely to obscure their very real differences. In this way, rather complex relationships between distinct objects risk being flattened.

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Hauerwas' treatment of the theology/ethics relationship is more immediately foregrounded by the particular fall-from-grace narrative he tells than by his use of the

69 Hauerwas has written voluminously – though not systematically – on both, but for one of his most sustained treatment of *virtue*, see Hauerwas (1988), 191–210. His treatment of *practices* is likewise extensive, though the term is typically left undefined, despite MacIntyre's strong influence on him. The most developed consideration would be that carried out via a critique of Barth's ecclesiology in *With the Grain of the Universe*: see Hauerwas (2001). Note especially his claim at 213 that "[a]lternative accounts of Christian practice often fail to do justice to events because such accounts divorce practice from belief".

first metahistorical strategy. We should therefore use that narrative as our starting point. However, it is closely tied to his aforementioned invective against "liberalism", which Hauerwas frequently also links with "modernity" and "secularism", though not always in clear ways.

I therefore first need to elaborate on that polemic. On one hand, Hauerwas acknowledges how diverse that liberalism is, both as a centuries-old political philosophy and a set of values we have inculcated.[70] But on the other hand, he frequently falls back onto a contractarian reading. On that reading, liberalism is a form of governance, where citizens collectively agree that each person should be able to pursue their own interests, however they see fit.[71]

Taken this way, liberalism is "particularly pernicious", because it "presupposes that society can be organized without any narrative that is commonly held to be true".[72] For all human life is story-driven, and liberalism, as a way of life, is no different. But that way of life falls into self-contradiction, precisely by assuming "[t]he story ... that we have no story".[73] Unsurprisingly, Hauerwas says, such a social form produces self-interested, shallow humans who, severed from a more adequate story about themselves, have become alienated from their neighbours and communities.

Worse, the Christian Church has unwittingly internalised this self-defeating narrative and its values, meaning it no longer seeks to live into its own distinctive story. Instead, it has been impeded by trying to translate its concerns into a "secular" vocabulary more

70 See, e.g., Hauerwas (1981), 12, 77–8.
71 On this critique, see Stout (2005), 169–87.
72 Hauerwas (1981), 12.
73 Ibid., 84.

readily digestible in the public sphere.[74] Even the idea of *justice*, as pursued by the Church, typically reflects "Christians' attempt to find a way to be societal actors without that action being colored by Christian presupposition".[75] In this way, the Church has lost any special standpoint from which it might advance more than a superficial critique of the liberal society surrounding it.[76]

Hauerwas' distrust of both liberalism and the Enlightenment is itself animated by two narratives, which he takes respectively from Yoder and MacIntyre. There is, first, a story about how the Church stopped being able to distinguish itself from the rest of society following Christianity's establishment as a state religion; and second, a story about how society fell into liberal vice. These two narratives interact in complicated ways.[77]

But within these broader narratives sits a more specific story Hauerwas tells, in the aptly titled essay "On Doctrine and Ethics", which concerns how theology and ethics were torn apart.[78] Prior to modernity, "there was no Christian ethics simply because Christians could not distinguish between their beliefs and their behavior".[79] Discussions of Christian life and of Christian doctrine simply ran seamlessly together, with

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74 Ibid., 72–3.

75 Hauerwas (1991), 58.

76 Ibid., 68.

77 Stout suggests that "[b]y combining the two stories in something like this way, Hauerwas leaves the world outside the modern church in a doubly darkened condition. It is a world not only outside the church, but also after virtue": Stout (2005), 167.

Hauerwas offers a patchwork response in Hauerwas (2004), 215–41, one I am unsure gets to the heart of Stout's critique. There, he appears to accept Stout's characterisation of him as merging the two different narratives of Yoder and MacIntyre, while simultaneously also expressing doubt at MacIntyre's "grand narrative", and specifically a "declension" narrative "that at one time Christians got it right but then 'something happened' and as a result Christians lost control of their world": at 233–4. But he does not address Stout's core criticism, of having merged two rather different stories in a way that encourages an unhelpfully sharp Church/world dualism.

78 Hauerwas uses "doctrine" and "theology" interchangeably in that essay. I will follow that use.

79 Hauerwas (2016), 22.

Christians lacking the very categories necessary to separate them. Admittedly, a "provisional" division was occasionally made between the two, "if only to emphasise various aspects of faith or underscore certain qualities of character". But it was never to suggest "ontological and practical independence".[80]

Still, that Hauerwas concedes the existence of that provisional distinction is suggestive. It should alert us to the psychological speculation intrinsic to his account of the lives of premodern Christians. Only with such speculation can the distinction between a "technical" and a "practical" separation seem to be anything more than hair-splitting.

Regardless, Hauerwas continues, matters dramatically shifted with the Protestant Reformation. First, the polemics of justification by *faith* led to a devaluation of *works* as part of the Christian life. Those works, which became associated with "ethics", began to assume an autonomy apart from Christianity. Second, the Reformation led to a hollowing out of ecclesiology, and specifically the "understanding of the church as the indispensable context in which order might be given to Christian life".[81] Without the Christian Church hence anchoring the content of ethics, a breakdown of consensus resulted concerning "what ethics is or how it should be done".[82]

The advent of the Enlightenment, with its concomitant scepticism, exploited this spreading ethical fragmentation. Its philosophers sought a basis for ethics independent of religious belief, given the latter's failure to eliminate moral pluralism, as manifested above all in violence between Protestants and Catholics. For Kant, most famously, ethics was to be grounded in (practical) reason alone, as articulated via the categorical

80 Ibid., 23.
81 Ibid., 31.
82 Ibid.

imperative. In this way, ethics became its own autonomous discipline. And, as modernity marched on, and as the fortunes of philosophical ethics soared while those of theology fell, the latter sought conformity with the former, as exemplified by the endeavours of 19th century German liberal Protestantism.

Only from this vantage point can the idea of "Christian ethics" be understood. It reflects an attempt to recombine theology and ethics, which should never have been separated. But this endeavour is doomed to fail, Hauerwas contends. For the solution it proposes of yet another theological subdiscipline is solely intellectual, and therefore "cannot restore what only a community can hold together".[83] And what that community must hold together is, of course, the various metahistorical concepts we have mentioned. As he describes elsewhere, it must live into its own narrative, and perform the "daily practices of the Christian Church: prayer, worship, admonition, feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, etc", as well as the various virtues these practices imply.[84] In this way, the Church will rediscover its own identity, namely as a counter-society which is "God's gesture on behalf of the world to create a space and time in which we might have a foretaste of the Kingdom".[85] Only through that identity can a synthesis of theology and ethics be reconstituted.

Faced with a story like the one Hauerwas gives, we could test it in a few different ways. For one, we might examine its descriptive accuracy. That includes whether it correctly describes the phenomena to which it refers, which is why I expressed doubt above about how much Hauerwas can really know about the inner lives of premodern Christians. It also encompasses whether he is right to draw the causal links he does, or if he attaches

83 Hauerwas (2003), 54.
84 Hauerwas and Pinches (1997), 69.
85 Hauerwas (1988), 106.

the appropriate weight to those links. So while Hauerwas suggests the Enlightenment as the main culprit for the modern theology/ethics divide, next chapter will consider an *ontological* explanation, that is, one that roots the distinction between theology and ethics in some feature of reality itself.

But we should also evaluate Hauerwas' story in terms of whether it succeeds in the normative functions it is intended to serve. One of those functions is to advocate the restoration of a particular ecclesial form. Once we are embedded in that form, Hauerwas suggests, we will stop distinguishing between theology and ethics. Instead, they will run in perfect synchronicity once again.

However, it is far from clear whether this means can indeed precipitate this ultimate end. I can reframe the point in the following way. As one contemporary critical theorist argues, the purpose of a genealogy of concepts (including of a conceptual division, like that between theology and ethics) is to help us understand how those concepts became dominant, precisely so that we can imagine how things could be otherwise. Genealogy, then, is the prescribed treatment for a "restricted consciousness", a way of thinking whose imagination has been constrained. That is not, it bears observing, quite the same as a "false consciousness", a way of thinking dependent on flatly erroneous (as opposed to unduly narrow) views.[86]

With these refinements in mind, Hauerwas advocates, through his story, a return to a status quo when the distinction between theology and ethics *was not made*. That is, he wishes for a time when these two things were simply united without the need for discursive work to put them together. Nonetheless, it is uncertain whether such a state

[86] Owen (2002), 220–4.

of affairs is really one to which return is possible. This is precisely because such a return would be to a state of pre-reflective innocence, instead of one we can imagine and build a bridge towards. So the medicine Hauerwas prescribes is not one that can have the hoped-for effects.

But regardless of any scepticism we might have here, there is another function which Hauerwas' fall-from-grace narrative serves. This is simply to elevate "narrative" into a category of basic importance. Such a category, even if it cannot perfectly harmonise theology and ethics, might at least spell out the basis for whatever unity they could indeed still have. Let us consider in greater detail, then, Hauerwas' treatment of that category which, along with works by Hans Frei and David Kelsey, formed the vanguard of the "narrative turn" gripping theology for about three decades from the 1970s.

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In the influential early essay "From System to Story", co-written with David Burrell, Hauerwas explains narrative precisely as a way by which someone imposes coherence on the disparate elements of that person's life. He defines the term, which he uses interchangeably with "story",[87] as a "connection among elements (actions, events, situations)". In other words, it is a framework by which what would otherwise appear as arbitrary, "contingent events" are ordered into a whole.[88] This ordering, he thinks, is teleological, in that there must be a "gathering to a point", meaning that the events must

87 Some narrative theorists would distinguish between the two. On Bal's structuralist narratology, for example, narrative has three components: text, story and fabula, with "story" being the specific angle chosen for examining the "fabula", that is, a particular series of events: Bal (2009), 6–7. In comparison, Hauerwas is concerned not with the selection of events, or their textual presentation, but rather only with the third element.

88 Hauerwas and Burrell (1977), 28–9.

be progressing towards a certain end.[89] Such a teleology implies that narrative deserves to be called a "rational discourse", though not one that is "scientific" or "objective", given that it cannot be judged from any external or ahistorical vantage point.[90] It does not connect contingencies via "logical rules", but merely via non-deterministic "plot".[91]

Understood in this way, narrative is paramount in order for a person to understand their life. Hence "there is a necessity of having a narrative to give our life coherence",[92] and conversely, a lack of any narrative implies "an utterly fragmented self".[93] Similarly, any description of one's moral experience will become unhelpfully abstract unless situated inside a narrative.

Hauerwas thinks that such ethical vacuousness is endemic to much contemporary moral philosophy. It is apparent above all in "quandary ethics", that is, ethics wholly preoccupied with exceptional, borderline situations where moral decision-making becomes immensely difficult.[94] Such an approach to ethics, he says, is myopic: ethics is more than just about occasional hard choices. Rather, it is more fundamentally about the convictions which shape one's whole life, convictions which manifest themselves precisely in narrative form, and are embodied in the distinctive practices of the Christian community. Without these encompassing narratives, ethical action would fail to touch the ground.

89 Ibid., 28.
90 Ibid.
91 Ibid., 30.
92 Ibid., 27.
93 Ibid., 39.
94 Ibid., 18–21. The expression originates from Pincoffs (1971), 55–71; and a principal target of Hauerwas is the "situation ethics" espoused by Joseph Fletcher and which had been hotly debated from the late 1960s: see Fletcher (1966).

At times, Hauerwas is explicit that narrative, as a coherence-imputing category, is what brings theology and ethics together as one. In another early essay, aptly titled "Story as Theology", he therefore refers to narrative as "a way to remind us of the inherently practical character of theological convictions", and which "are not told to explain as a theory explains, but to involve the agent in a way of life".[95] A statement like this, however, can be read in multiple ways. If narrative is the intermediate term between theology and ethics, and between theory and practice, does this mean that such distinctions no longer need to be drawn as long as we have the appropriate narrative in view? Or does it imply, rather, that these distinctions can and should still be drawn, but that theology and ethics are perfectly co-ordinated within the narrative?

In fact, Hauerwas opts for both these answers, despite their seeming incompatibility. Consider yet another early essay, "Love's Not All You Need", which indicts the superficiality of a "love ethic" for, among other things, not being able to articulate criteria for ethics to use as a basis for critique of one's own stances. Against this, Hauerwas posits that there must be a "genuine dialectic" between theology and ethics, according to which theology "form[s]" ethical behaviour, and in turn ethical experience "tests" one's theological beliefs.[96] Such a preference for a theory/practice dialectic resembles similar arguments advanced by the liberation and practical theologians who we considered last chapter.

However, as his career has progressed, Hauerwas has increasingly moved away from a simple co-ordination of the theology/ethics duality via narrative. Instead, his work has become premised on the assimilation of both into that higher category, so as to become

95 Hauerwas (1977), 73.
96 Hauerwas (1974c), 114.

indistinguishable. The point becomes clearest with his suggestion that one's narrative deterministically dictates how one will respond to an ethical dilemma. Thus in his ethical primer, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, he posits even *moral decision-making* as a non-sequitur, an overused locus for reflection. Rather, once a situation calling for moral action has been properly framed – that is to say, framed within the single Christian narrative – what to do will become blindingly clear. Thus "in matters of significance even involving the 'hardest choices' there was no 'decision' to be made. Rather, the decision makes itself if we know who we are and what is required of us".[97]

Such a position is, without doubt, a radical one. And I do not think it can be explained solely as a product of Hauerwas' intentionally provocative prose. Rather, such a denial of a place for ethical decision-making is closely tied to another assumption Hauerwas makes. This is that a narrative requires a closed structure, with a definite beginning and end, and with just one legitimate interpretation. That assumption was already inchoate in the earlier writings, but gradually becomes more pronounced. And it is on its basis that Hauerwas seems to presuppose that, "because members of the Christian community share a common story, they will share a common praxis", but such that he entirely overlooks "the variety of moral patterns derived from this story".[98]

Thus while Hauerwas had previously been open to the many functions of stories,[99] he has increasingly insisted accepted the notion that the whole point of a narrative is to exclude other narratives. This emerges with especial acuity in a 2004 essay, "The

97 Hauerwas (2003), 129.
98 So Lauritzen (1983), 339.
99 For example, he refers to how the multiple narratives which a person tells themselves can "check and balance" each other: Hauerwas (1974b), 75. And, in two essays in his 1988 collection *Christian Existence Today*, he examines the complex non-deterministic ways in which his two stories – that of being a Christian, and of being a Texan – are interrelated: Hauerwas (1988), 25–42.

Narrative Turn". There, Hauerwas explains that he has become suspicious of generally expressed notions of narrative.[100] He now prefers simply to focus on particular narratives, rather than engage in further meta-reflection.[101]

Yet, as Hauerwas elaborate, in the same essay, upon his own understanding of the Christian narrative, bracketed by creation and narrative, he appears to assume that such a narrative is nothing short of a grand metanarrative in the Lyotardian sense, a grounding for everything else. This is not a *metaphysical* grounding of the sort Heidegger deplored. Rather, it is one that demotes ontological questions in favour of the proposition that narrative is the most basic category of all. Hauerwas therefore says that while God's act of creation, being based on the gratuitousness of divine love, means there are no necessary ontological relationships between created things. Nonetheless, we can get to the essence of those things if we tell the story of how they came to exist within creation's free dynamic. Consequently, "the only way we have to know … ourselves is by the connections made possible by truthful stories and, in particular, the story that begins, 'In the beginning'".[102] In addition, understanding the way things really are also demands acknowledgment of how "[w]e were not created for no purpose, but rather for the glory of God. That alone is the story of stories".[103]

In this way, the Christian story provides the deepest understanding of things and events, namely, an understanding of how they arose, and how God has purposed them. There is nothing that can fall outside that story, Hauerwas insists. As a result, no other story can

100 See Hauerwas (2004), 135–50.
101 Ibid., 139–40.
102 Ibid., 142.
103 Ibid., 146.

be legitimate unless it is first "included in the story of Christ".[104] Hence narrative becomes something that constructs boundaries – a beginning with an end – within which all other stories must be assimilated, or else shut down.

So, despite some equivocation, Hauerwas ultimately opts for a conception of narrative as a closed structure. And it is exactly this which renders the theology/ethics distinction unnecessary. For, once such a narrative is told, all our beliefs and actions will unproblematically fall into place without the need for further deliberation. "Ethics" on this schema, we might therefore surmise, comes to refer to nothing more than the theological circumscription of a situation within the Christian story.

At this juncture, it is worth observing that such an understanding of narrative is out of step with the sophisticated – though certainly still contestable – conceptions of narrative that have been developing in literary theory in recent years.[105] I cannot more than allude to some of these debates, but we might consider the notion of "ideo-stories" which Mieke Bal develops through a reading of the Book of Judges. These are stories which "are not closed but extremely open; however they seem to be closed, and this appearance of closure encourages the illusion of stability of meaning".[106] That is, an ideo-story is one which can be placed in service of very different ideologies, and yet seems to support just one.

Alternatively, we might mention recent budding interest in "unnatural narratives". These are narratives which break previously understood conventions concerning how

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104 Ibid., 145.

105 Hauerwas can hardly be faulted for not engaging with these conceptions, given the difficulty generally of engaging in rigorous interdisciplinary work, and given how many of these understandings postdate Hauerwas' principal writings on narrative.

106 Bal (1988), 11.

narratives should work. They are therefore apt to make us "work on our cognitive architecture and ... develop new frames or scripts".[107] Said unnatural narratives are most commonly associated with postmodern authors, for example given their frequent challenges to temporal linearity and to perspective. But even something like the primeval history of Genesis could be counted, given it comprises "an impossible act of narration based on an impossible act of cognition".[108] The interest in unnatural narratives stems from the rejection of the view that "every aspect of narrative can be explained on the basis of our real-world knowledge and resulting cognitive parameters".[109] Actually, rule-breaking narratives, by pushing those parameters, can precipitate new kinds of experiences of the "real world".

Examples like these underscore, at a minimum, how Hauerwas operates with an exceedingly narrow version of what counts as narrative. He overlooks how, although it seems the elements of a narrative may seem to cohere in exactly one way, this appearance may be misleading, and other readings will likely be possible. And he disregards how narratives may not be simple movements from beginning to end, but might in fact put into question what "beginning" and "end" even are.

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The consequences of Hauerwas' presupposition of this restricted form of narrative are non-trivial. For that presupposition exacerbates some of the most common critiques of Hauerwas' works, by restraining the flexibility of his possible responses to them. Accordingly, I now want to briefly consider how that exacerbation occurs. To be clear,

107 Alber (2011), 64.
108 Pettersson (2012), 78.
109 Alber, Iversen, Nielsen and Richardson (2010), 115.

my purpose is not to directly join in existing critiques, but rather use them as a foil to shed light on the limitations of Hauerwas' metahistorical assumptions.

For one, Hauerwas extols the Church, with its narrative, practices, and virtues, as the site where the Christian life will be restored from its present dysfunction. However, he is not in fact especially keen to study actual churches. He refers occasionally to his own experiences, such as at Broadway United Methodist Church in South Bend, Indiana.[110] Still, Hauerwas does not seem aware of the risk, discussed by the practical theologians we considered last chapter, of an overbroad extrapolation of insights from a single case study.[111] Moreover, he deliberately avoids sustained ethnographical work on concrete congregational life, his reticence stemming from a Milbankian critique of sociological method, as implicitly reflecting anti-theological presuppositions. So, while Hauerwas says he does not "deny the value of sociological, psychological, and general socio-scientific accounts of the life of congregations", he nonetheless attacks the "uncritical use of the social-scientific paradigms which often ... preclude the theological claims necessary for the church's intelligibility".[112]

It is unsurprising, then, that Hauerwas has himself been suspected of an abstract conception of the Church. There is thus, in his work, "an ambivalence about whether he is discussing actual or idealised Christian communities and an increasing exaggeration of both Christian distinctiveness and worldly secularity".[113] In other words, Hauerwas positions himself as taking seriously contemporary anxieties that Christian theology has failed to be sufficiently concrete and practical. But in fact, he does not engage in the

110 See Hauerwas (1988), 115–26.
111 For critiques in this vein specifically directed at Hauerwas, see Scharen and Vigen (2011), 51–3 (chapter attributed to Scharen); Jones (2011), 120.
112 Hauerwas (1988), 130.
113 Gill (1999), 14.

actual empirical work necessary to address those anxieties. Rather, his metahistorical conceptual language of narrative, practices and virtue substitutes for the concrete reality of the Church he extols. Study of that reality is therefore left to sociologists and practical theologians, with whom Hauerwas has made little attempt at dialogue.

But I now want to suggest that this problem of an ecclesial abstractness cloaked by a rhetoric of ecclesial concreteness is in fact insoluble for Hauerwas, precisely given his operative understanding of narrative. That is to say, he *cannot* study church life in its actual particularity. For if he did, it would quickly put into question his insistence that there are certain and predictable connections between a person or community's narrative and its actions, which for example remove the need for a process of moral decision-making. In short, a concrete ecclesiology is actually antithetical to Hauerwas' project. As Christian Scharen, one of the practical theologians we considered last chapter, puts the point:

> "Whereas Hauerwas' rhetoric draws a simple church-world distinction necessary for discussing a Christian culture and its practices contrasted to the world and its practices, actual modern people, including Hauerwas, have commitment to work, family, citizenship, and leisure in addition to religion. ... This problem cannot be ignored, as Hauerwas does, because American society, like all societies that have passed through the painful process of modernization, is constituted by differentiated yet interrelated and interconnected spheres of activity, each with potentially significant tensions with theological commitments."[114]

Hauerwas' rigid conception of narrative, we might therefore say, inhibits him from looking more closely at the actual lives which he says must conform to that narrative. If he did so, he would realise how much cannot be fit within it, precisely because peoples' lives are always related to many narratives and frames of reference, not just one.

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[114] Scharen and Vigen (2011), 53 (chapter attributed to Scharen).

A second criticism of Hauerwas is that his rigid conception of narrative can uncritically legitimate certain dubious theological and ethical positions. So a common criticism, advanced by several feminist theologians, is that Hauerwas' polemic against liberalism, and call for retreat to the Church, blinds him to the brutal fact of patriarchy within the latter, and sanctions a male-dominated ecclesial ethics.[115] The accusation has been put most pointedly by Gloria Albrecht, who asks, "[f]or whom is 'fragmentation' the fundamental problem of modern society?"[116] The answer: "self-absorbed, power-seeking, rich Christians who live in Western industrialized societies".[117] So in Albrecht's reading, the "master narrative" Hauerwas tells about the liberal hubris which Christians have unwittingly imbibed is useful in some contexts.[118] However, it can too easily provide cover for the power held by economically privileged white males, not least in light of the Christian universality Hauerwas claims for that narrative.

I am not directly concerned here with whether this feminist critique of Hauerwas meets the mark.[119] At the least, there is a great deal to be said for Hauerwas being tone deaf to gender in ways he has not confronted. But he is right, I think, in his response to Albrecht, to pose a key issue as "whether or not there are resources in the tradition to locate and correct ... perversions [such as patriarchy]".[120] For according to Hauerwas, "the strength of Christian tradition is that such resources exist, not the least of which are precisely those practices necessary for maintaining descriptions such as rape, descriptions that help us discover in what ways we have been unfaithful to God and one

115 For a useful review of these criticisms, see Bennett (2010), 231–4.
116 Albrecht (1995), 109.
117 Ibid., 110.
118 Ibid., 111.
119 Though for an attempt both to question and bridge Hauerwas and Albrecht, see Murphy (2002).
120 Hauerwas (1997), 236.

another".[121] Basically: Christianity should provide the ways to resolve the problems within Christianity.

Nonetheless, what is put into question by the foregoing examination of Hauerwas' treatment of narrative puts into question, is whether Hauerwas' own theology fosters such resources. I have argued that, because of the way he uses that category to construct a univocal correspondence between theological and ethical constructions, he in fact constrains his own imaginative capacities to resist perversions to those constructions. That is, although he extols the tradition's ability to engage in self-correction, his idea of narrative presupposes an unhelpfully static conception of it.

But are these twin difficulties of ecclesial abstraction and tone deafness, especially in respect of gender, unique to Hauerwas? Or are they instead endemic of a more widespread problem with the metahistorical type? My suggestion has been that of the latter. But to illustrate this, let us now turn to a metahistorical theologian, one who seeks to incorporate both ethnography and feminist concerns into her own work.

2 Sarah Coakley and the Opposition of *Théologie Totale* to Binary Disjunctions

As eminent a reviewer as Katherine Sonderegger could say that reading Sarah Coakley was akin to "when the blind receive their sight": "they cannot recognize what they see, and find the experience dazzling, disorienting".[122] Praise like this undoubtedly stems, at least in part, from the remarkably broad range of themes Coakley collates in her recent but already best known work in systematic theology, *God, Sexuality and the Self: An*

121 Ibid.
122 Sonderegger (2016), 94.

Essay 'On the Trinity'.[123] Those themes include the Trinity, naturally, but also the nature of desire, contemplative practices of prayer, fieldwork she has undertaken into charismatic Anglican churches, and pressing contemporary debates on the politics of sexual difference.

Coakley's conception of theology as "*théologie totale*" gives us an especially useful instance of the metahistorical type, not least because of how doggedly that conception pursues the type's coherentist priorities. This, I suspect, goes far in explaining the rapturous reception of her work amongst its readers. It inspires awe through the dream it displays of an integrated and harmonious form of the Christian life – even though, as I have suggested, that dream is far from new. Consider, for instance, the claim she makes about presenting "a new vision of systematic theology", one which "aim[s] to bind questions of theological method, contemplative practice, and desire into a new tether".[124]

The purpose of this section, therefore, is to highlight how clearly Coakley's *théologie totale* exemplifies both the metahistorical type's appeal and limitations. On one hand, she is entirely right to advertise how "alluring" that theological programme is, precisely given its integrative tendencies.[125] It is attractive, that is, because of how it tries to draw together the various parts of the Christian life, the present chasm between which has caused no little anxiety for modern Christians.

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123 This text is the first of a planned three volume systematics. The second volume, "Sin, Racism and the Contemplative Life: An Essay 'On Human Darkness'", has a planned release later in 2019.

124 Coakley (2013), 35–6.

125 Ibid., 41.

On the other hand, the risk of the aforementioned fallacy of misplaced concreteness is especially acute for Coakley. That is not least given the way she subordinates her ethnographical insights, and her claims about sexual difference, to her trinitarian vision, in ways we might suspect flatten what is difficult and complicated but also most at stake in these. In what follows, then, I will (1) explore Coakley's general statements about *théologie totale*; (2) consider her more specific claims about this theological programme's bearing upon empirical work; and (3) appraise how she attempts to connect that programme to contemporary ethical questions about sex and gender.

Before this, however, I should observe that, like other metahistorical theologians, Coakley also advances a narrative about what modern Christianity has lost, compared to its forebears, and now needs restored. She does not, admittedly, set out that story as explicitly as does Hauerwas, and would certainly not position herself as a narrative theologian. Nonetheless, such a story is perfectly discernible in *God, Sexuality and the Self*, and goes something like this. For the patristic fathers, especially Augustine and Gregory of Nyssa, theological reflection on the Trinity was effortlessly bound up with embodied practices of ascetic prayerfulness. These together meant that theological work always included the reform of one's bodily and spiritual desires. That includes one's sexual drives, obviously. However, according to the Christian Platonism the fathers presupposed, such reform required the reordering of *all* of one's desires, in light of one's primordial desire for God. Said reordering is precisely what occurs via prayerful contemplation of the triune persons.

Modern Christianity, in contrast, has been perverted by its misshapen desires. For example, contemporary academic theology has been distorted by the assumption it can

be carried out without a "trinitarian ontology of desire"[126] equivalent to that of the ancients. No longer, then, do we recognise that the paradoxical trinitarian formulae are only meaningful in the context of certain ascetic practices that co-ordinate our worldly desires with our desire for God. Said lack of recognition has shattered the harmony of the Christian lives we lead.

This sheds new light on some of the most important objections to the modern systematic theological project – that it reduces God into a mere object, that it suppresses subaltern voices, and that it is subconsciously "phallocentric". For all these boil down to how "the systematician idolatrously *desires* mastery", whether of God, society, or the female body.[127] Such a perverted desire has been progressively normalised, because the trinitarian reshaping of our wants is in fact profoundly disruptive. And that has led the Church, throughout history, to marginalise the Christian sects that took this reshaping seriously – be it the 3rd century Montanists, or modern charismatics.[128] In contrast, mastery in its various forms has proven useful for "protect[ing] and sustain[ing] ecclesiastical and political order"[129] – but has been of little help to the Christian life itself.

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What, then, is *théologie totale*? It is theology understood as a kind of contemplation of God which, by leading the believer into participation in the divine life, enables the reordering of that believer's desires. Coakley describes it as having nine distinctive

126 Ibid., 6 (emphasis removed).
127 Ibid., 51 (emphasis in original).
128 See ibid., 121–6. This is though such groups tended to treat the work of the Spirit with such gravity that they disregarded the Father and Son, and so unfortunately followed an "anti-trinitarian tendency": at 152.
129 Ibid., 105.

hallmarks. First, it privileges *contemplation*, which I will describe more fully below. Second, it involves an ongoing journey of the self towards both God and creation.[130] Third, it is distinct from, but must engage with, philosophy and science.[131] Fourth, its goal is "orthodoxy", defined as not "mere creedal correctness" but a continuing project of response to divine truth.[132] Fifth, it is embedded but not reducible to particular social circumstances, which theology should therefore study via dialogue with the social sciences.[133] Sixth, it addresses but may also expand upon the classic loci of systematic theology.[134] Seventh, it takes into account the many different ways in which religious truth may be expressed.[135] Eighth, it resists the false divides into which theology often succumbs.[136] Finally, *desire* is its "constellating theological category".[137]

The categories of contemplation and desire warrant elaboration. First, Coakley, drawing from the patristics, describes contemplation as no mere intellectual rumination but, rather, "a particular set of bodily and spiritual practices" that constitute a particular manner of relating to the divine.[138] Hence the "tests" of contemplation are "endur[ance of] a form of naked dispossession before God", "surrender [of] control" and "accept[ance] of the arid vacancy of a simple waiting on God in prayer".[139] And the effects of such contemplation will be a "deepening of vision [of God]",[140] a

130 Ibid., 88.
131 Ibid., 89.
132 Ibid.
133 Ibid., 90.
134 Ibid.
135 Ibid., 91.
136 Ibid.
137 Ibid., 92.
138 Ibid., 16.
139 Ibid., 19. See also Coakley (2002), 40–54.
140 Coakley (2013), 19.

"reimagination of God's trinitarian relation to the created order", a "chastening of fallen desire",[141] and a "draw[ing out of] all dimensions of the self".[142]

Second, desire is not principally sexually or physiological desire but is, foremost, directed at God. Hence the classical Christian motif of union with Christ must be interpreted as both an *intensification* of desire for God, and a *purgation* of desire for ungodly things.[143] Understood in this way, desire takes on an irreducibly *trinitarian* dimension. Here, Coakley relies on Romans 8:26–7, where Paul writes of the Holy Spirit interceding for believers in their weakness. She reads those verses as implying "a movement of divine reflexivity ... a call and response of divine desire". Through such a movement, the Spirit "incorporates" the praying believer into the "divine life" of the Son, enabling that person to participate, in turn, in the Son's desire for the Father.[144]

But just as important as the place of contemplation and desire in Coakley's conception of theology is *théologie totale*'s eighth hallmark, that it overcomes the "false divides" that have become habitual for theologians.[145] *Théologie totale*, she therefore posits:

> "resists many of the binary disjunctions which so exercise, and distract, contemporary practitioners of systematic theology. It resists the divides between belief and practice, between thought and affect, between academic and accessible writing, between Christian theology and 'religious studies', between academic theology and 'pastoral' theology, and between 'liberal' feminism and postmodern gender theory".[146]

For our purposes, Coakley's rejection above of dichotomies between belief and practice and between academic and pastoral theology is especially pertinent. Wherefore,

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141 Ibid., 21.
142 Ibid., 66.
143 Ibid., 13.
144 Ibid., 113–14.
145 Ibid., 91.
146 Ibid.

however, this distrust of binaries? Here we arrive most obviously at the concern about the coherence and wholeness of the Christian life which animates the metahistorical type. For while Coakley pours scorn onto those theologians more concerned with pure "philosophical issues of coherence",[147] their failure was not in pursuing coherence, but rather in doing so insufficiently ambitiously. What they should have sought was not merely an airtight system of logical propositions, but rather, a more "complete vision of Christian faith", one capable of addressing "the philosophical, cultural, and political ethos" of the day, and so able "to recapture the contemporary imagination for Christ".[148]

In this respect, Coakley's choice of the term "*théologie totale*" is revealing, though it ironically also demonstrates the ambiguities in her expansionary ambitions for systematic theology. She explains that choice as based, "although only loosely", on an analogy with the *Annales* school of history, which at its peak influence aimed to provide a *histoire totale*, a "total history" of the world.[149] Coakley inserts several caveats: she is not suggesting that theology is "totalizing" in the sense of excluding debate or opposition; she certainly does not "share all the methodological presumptions of the school"; and, anyway, those presumptions have proven "controversial among historians".[150] Notwithstanding these riders, Coakley's choice of the analogy still constitutes an attempt to find an affinity between herself and that academic guild, and in such a way as to share in the latter's intellectual prestige. But that move has not, to my knowledge, been carefully scrutinised by her readers.

147 Ibid., 3.
148 Ibid., 40–1.
149 Ibid., 35 n 2.
150 Ibid., 35 n 2, 41, 62.

The *Annales* "school" or "paradigm" – though both terms are misnomers[151] – has long been associated with the journal *Annales d'histoire économique et social* (now titled *Annales: histoire, sciences sociales*), established in 1929 in Strasbourg. Much of that journal's purpose was to challenge the then monopoly of Marxist and political historical studies in France. One way it did so was by expanding the range of subject matters which history could permissibly address, entailing greater engagement with the social sciences. Fernand Braudel, a second-generation *Annales* historian and perhaps its best known overall, therefore articulated a three-layered conception of the past. That past, in the short-term, is shaped by individuals and events; in the medium-term by social forces; and in the long-term or *"longue durée*" by geographical considerations including climate, biology and demography.[152] Hence we arrive at the notion of *histoire totale* – never a precise notion, but one which gestured at trying to cover the whole past, instead of leaving explanatory gaps about how things have come about.[153]

It is understandable that Coakley, of all the historiographical currents she could have gravitated toward, chose the *Annales* school, given its ironclad conviction in "the unity of knowledge" and in "the necessity of synthesizing all knowledge in a historical framework".[154] Still, that school's fortunes should act as a cautionary tale for Coakley. For while the *Annales* has survived, and remains influential well beyond France, its influence has nonetheless waned since the 1970s. First, there was always a tension within the *Annales* programme, between its endeavour to expand the range of topics

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151 Given that it is a label applied from the outside, and one which *Annales* historians would themselves reject, given how it suggests a more unified orientation than their own self-understanding. One reason this matters is because there are several different generations of the "school", the differences between which may be elided by treating it as a singular entity. See further Burke (2015), 21–3.

152 For a useful but comparatively brief history of the *Annales* school, see Hunt (1986).

153 See Hexter (1972), 511.

154 Thus D'Ambrosio (1999), 379.

worthy of research, and its intent to integrate these topics into a unitary historical science. Such centrifugal and centripetal forces were never going to be easily reconciled. As it happens, it is the latter which have won out, through a fracturing of the *Annalistes*' historical works into increasingly narrow and specialised areas.[155]

Second, although *Annales* historians stressed the need to bring together the three *durées* in which the past consists, they tended to emphasise long-term structural forces. This was notwithstanding their recognition of the *mentalités*, the mindsets shaping individual human actions. Putting aside whether such subordination of the short-term to the long-term was justifiable, it reduced the school's explanatory capacity for disruptive events – not least the World Wars, which traumatised or even killed off the early *Annalistes*. Accordingly, not all but most studies published in the journal have focused on pre-1789 history. The *Annales* paradigm has proven far less useful for accounting for events since.[156]

Insofar, then, as Coakley wishes to analogise with the *Annales* school, we could reasonably expect her to take under advisement the problems that school has faced, and to have ideas about how to avoid similar difficulties. For example, given her intention to widen the range of topics systematic theology should include, we might hope she is aware of the difficulty in persuasively integrating those topics. Conversely, in light of her claim about *théologie totale*'s destabilising potential, we might anticipate a plan to counteract the way that destabilisation might cut against her desired holistic Christian vision. Might these expectations be met?

155 See Revel (1978), 17–18; Megill (2004), 214–19.
156 Hunt (1986), 214–16.

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Like the *Annales* school, Coakley advocates greater engagement with the social sciences. In *God, Sexuality and the Self,* that engagement takes the form of ethnographical work, which she sees as confirming her intuitions about trinitarian doctrine.

Coakley does spend some time justifying the necessity of said work for systematic theology. Hence she says the latter, by frequently refusing dialogue with sociology, has surrendered to its own irrelevance, having "displaced [itself] from the turbulent seascape of actual lived religion".[157] It has likewise also ignored how doctrine always has "an embedded texture, a set of subliminal cultural and societal associations and evocations".[158] Consequently, it demonstrates itself to be wholly insufficient.

But just as inadequate, Coakley says, would be an affirmation of the social sciences which turns out, on closer scrutiny, to really be an attempted theological conquest of them, à la Milbank. Such an approach is still incapable of dealing with the reality of lived faith, as we saw with Hauerwas' bait-and-switch of the messy, concrete Church for an idealised one. In this way, it "undercuts the possibility of receiving complicating or embarrassing reports from the ecclesiastical trenches".[159] Contra these, Coakley posits that theology can and must indeed connect itself to the social sciences – at least once the latter are stripped of their "secular reductive pretensions".[160] It will thus unearth "[t]he 'messy entanglements' of doctrinal truth and social reality, of buried

157 Coakley (2013), 68.
158 Ibid., 81.
159 Ibid., 74.
160 Ibid., 76.

treasure and ecclesiastical embarrassments".[161] Furthermore, the humility required by *théologie totale*, through one's self-abasement before God, prepares that theological method especially well to provide full attention to the Other, in that Other's full alterity.[162]

This sounds promising. Nonetheless, it is a curious omission that Coakley does not engage with the area of theology keenest to grapple with the social sciences, namely, practical theology. We have seen she rejects what she considers a false binary between that "practical" and her own "academic" theology. But one might have expected that said rejection would entail closer dialogue with practical theologians. Such dialogue might have revealed, as it did last chapter, that those theologians are not unaware of the need to connect their work to more "traditional" theological themes. Furthermore, those theologians are often profoundly sensitive to the methodological problems faced by ethnographical researches, including "coercive mimeticism", as well as the limits of the single case study. Coakley, unfortunately, has been accused of difficulties quite close to these.[163] Let us see how this occurs.

In her book's fourth chapter, Coakley invokes fieldwork she carried out into two Anglican congregations near Lancaster, England, as empirical confirmation of her trinitarian views. The second congregation had split off from the first, the original congregation having experienced charismatic renewal about ten years before Coakley's researches. But whereas that original had reined in many of its charismatic tendencies,

161 Ibid., 90.
162 Ibid., 83–4.
163 Thus Tonstad (2015), 119.

such as the public speaking in tongues, the second congregation, its offshoot, had embraced those tendencies in full.[164]

This fieldwork, I should observe, was undertaken by Coakley in her role as a member of the Doctrine Commission of the Church of England, with the relevant report on Anglican pneumatology published in 1991.[165] In contrast, *God, Sexuality and the Self* was published in 2013, though the relevant chapter of the latter is a reworking of the relevant chapter of the former. But while both works interrogate the relationship between prayer and the Holy Spirit, they can hardly be said to have the same purpose. The former is intended as a joint statement by leading Anglican theologians, ideally reached through a process of negotiation. The latter reflects an individual thinker's project. This, cumulatively with the time lag, increases the risk of a selection bias in what data are used or emphasised.

Regardless, Coakley reiterates her fieldwork to support her claim that, for the ascetic practices she advocates to be most effective, there must be a "precarious balancing" between an orthodox, ecclesially conservative avowal of trinitarian belief, and the unpredictable experience of the Holy Spirit typically found at the margins of the institutional church.[166] On her view, interviews with members of the first congregation provide evidence of that balancing's effectiveness. Hence the congregation was "initially attracted to a sectlike pneumatology", before being "nudg[ed] towards reflective trinitarianism" in the form of "[q]uieter worship, a greater respect for

164 Coakley (2013), 165–7.
165 Doctrine Commission of the Church of England (1991).
166 Coakley (2013), 182.

'tradition', and some dawning recognition of the convergence between charismatic and contemplative spiritualities".[167]

It is unclear, however, whether the data Coakley actually cites support this narrative. A crucial part of it is that the first congregation's developing "reflective trinitarianism" arose from "christological issues of prayer and pain, prayer and desolation, prayer and apparent failure".[168] Yet, she admits, it was only the congregation's minister who was willing to assert a link between spiritual growth through ascetic practices and such spiritual "desolation". In contrast, the congregants insisted that "their mood should primarily be characterized by joy". Thus they had to be "pressed" by Coakley into confessing alternative, non-joyful experiences.[169] Accordingly, the process of growth Coakley describes is one which everyone except the minister, with his own pastoral agenda, would not readily admit to having.

This is not necessarily fatal for Coakley. As Durkheim famously claimed, the real reasons for someone's behaviour, and by analogy someone's spiritual growth, may be hidden even from themself.[170] But it does mean that Coakley's interpretation of the congregation's growth would have to be accepted on the basis of evidence apart from what the congregation actually said. Said evidence, however, is not forthcoming, thereby inviting suspicion that her interpretation is projective.

There are other difficulties. First, there is the matter of whether the experiences of two Anglican congregations in northwest England can be probative of a more general

167 Ibid., 181 (emphasis removed).
168 Ibid.
169 Ibid., 176, 178.
170 See Durkheim (1951).

trinitarian claim. This worry about overgeneralisation is in fact supported by one of Coakley's stated concerns, namely to avoid the "ways in which powerful discourses, especially ones that aspire to a total picture, can occlude or marginalize the voices of those who are already oppressed".[171] For while charismatics are not the most powerful players in the Church of England, they still remain part of it. Thus their use as exemplars may unwittingly assume Anglicanism as the paradigm in what is being advanced as a "total" – and so universal – theology.

Second, Coakley often fails to sufficiently distinguish between her voice and the voices of those she interviewed. When, for example, she asked congregants about their experiences of the Holy Spirit, she reports that "[t]his was said to be 'the real thing', 'making yourself a channel for the Spirit's work', an intermingling of the human desire for God and the Spirit's interceding to the Father".[172] Here, the scare quotes matter. "Making yourself a channel for the Spirit's work" is what a congregant said to Coakley, but "an intermingling of the human desire for God and the Spirit's interceding to the Father" is Coakley's gloss.

This is an overt example of Coakley locating an ethnographic datum within an overarching explanatory framework. That is not a problem. But it becomes one if we suspect her data are being distorted – such as by being selectively used, or creatively misread – in order to grease the fitting. And as regards the congregant's quote above, it would appear that Coakley is imputing a more developed trinitarian theology to that individual, than what the quote can bear.

171 Coakley (2013), 47.
172 Ibid., 169.

These various difficulties, I should emphasise, are enabled because Coakley wants her fieldwork to "confirm" her views on the Trinity and ascetic practices.[173] It would be less amiss if her interviews were not *evidentiary*, but rather only *illustrative*. The former commits her to taking a definite interpretation of what she observed, but one possibly not justified by that data. The latter would have allowed her the space to advance her interpretation merely as a useful way to make sense of the congregations' experiences. But as matters stand, Coakley's framing leaves unclear where those experiences end and where her theological interpretation begins. And that puts into doubt the possibility that the former might ever seriously impugn the latter.

To put all this in a different way, Coakley is not as far from Milbank as she suggests concerning theology's relationship with the social sciences. Milbank, we recall, endorses a kind of theological imperialism in order to commandeer the latter. In contrast, Coakley's general statements condone a less combative, more dialogical approach. But her ethnography cuts against such an approach, by demonstrating an ongoing reticence for theology to be genuinely challenged by real empirical details. *Théologie totale*, then, risks becoming simply a different brand of imperialism – though one that achieves its aims with soft rather than hard power. In short, Coakley's strategy of "un-mastery"[174] risks accomplishing its opposite.

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We have observed that *théologie totale* opposes binaries, including the binary between theology and ethics. The very fact we separate the two, Coakley suggests, reflects our

173 Ibid., 181.
174 Ibid., 43.

modern malaises. She therefore contends that a healthier theology is one "*in via*": it should not merely lead to recommendations about how to live, but *is itself* "a recommendation for life", and which therefore unifies everything within it.[175] And so, through ascetic contemplation of God, "ethics and metaphysics may be found to converge".[176]

What does this convergence entail, however? What happens, for example, to queries we might have about what we in fact should do? Coakley cannot be said to appear especially interested in this question. Rather – though this is assumed, not articulated – she seems to take the position explicitly adopted by Hauerwas. Recall this as that, once we sort out our holistic Christian vision, everything else will automatically follow – including the answers to our burning ethical dilemmas.

That brings us to Coakley's intervention, at the end of *God, Sexuality and the Self*, into contemporary debates about gender and sexual difference. Her suggestion is that the ascetic practices of prayer she recommends will help overcome patriarchy and problematically hierarchical gender binaries. She thus begins with a reading of Augustine and Gregory of Nyssa, both of whom described their experiences of the triune God in ways that seemed to unsettle their understandings of the fixity of and subordination inherent to gender.[177] And while the patristics stopped here by extolling celibacy, we can extend their line of thinking by positing that the experience of the Holy Spirit can interrupt the hierarchialism of human sexual relationships. Accordingly, "human lovers [become] themselves aware of a necessary 'third' between them – both

175 Ibid., 18 (emphasis removed).
176 Ibid., 6.
177 Ibid., 300.

uniting them and protecting their integrity in a new ecstasy of exchange".[178] That third is of course the Spirit, as encountered via ascetic prayer.

Coakley then tries to connect the above to an objection pressed by many contemporary feminists against traditional Christian theology, that calling God "Father" necessarily introduces female subordination into theology's very core. Not so, Coakley responds: praying to the Trinity, understood rightly, in fact enables the label to be used non-patriarchally. Indeed, "slay[ing] patriarchy at its root" *requires* the label to so be used.[179] For there is a non-patriarchal, *trinitarian* meaning of the word "Father", though Christians can access that meaning through, and only through, the participation in the divine life enabled by ascetic contemplation. Hence:

> "[w]hat seemed at first like a Trinitarian formula with ... much traditional patriarchal authority ... begins to beome [*sic*] a Life into which to enter. As we enter, our presumptions about 'Fatherhood' strangely start to change ... and at last we follow Jesus into an exploration of the meaning of 'Fatherhood' beyond all human formulations."[180]

In this way, Coakley contends, we are led to a "radical rethinking of contemporary presumptions about sexuality, gender, and selfhood".[181] Such rethinking, however, depends on an unhelpful abstraction from the contexts in which gender and sex present themselves as urgent problems. As Tonstad puts it, for Coakley, the "right use of fatherhood" discovered through prayer ceases to be a "merely human usage" and becomes, instead, an apophatic one, steeped in "dazzling darkness".[182] This apophatic use of the term may well be a real one, but given the unusual way Coakley claims it

178 Ibid., 318.
179 Ibid., 327.
180 Ibid., 326.
181 Ibid., 26.
182 Tonstad (2015), 102.

must be accessed, it is not "publicly testable".[183] Accordingly, it stands in a "disconnection between liturgy, church life, and theology",[184] notwithstanding Coakley's stated intention to bring together trinitarian discussion with lived religious experience.

We can push this critique further by asking how Coakley's reflections on patriarchy and the Trinity might bear on the rather concrete questions which contemporary Christians face, and which she acknowledges as pressing. Those include "questions of sexual justice"; "questions of the meaning and stability of gender roles"; matters of "abusive sexuality" including clerical sexual abuse; and so on.[185] Coakley therefore suggests a "strategy of metaphorical profusion", that is, a conscious attempt to change the images and language by which we describe sexual desire.[186] This, we might nonetheless respond, is important but hardly sufficient. Our governing metaphors and images matter enormously, but operate on a very different level of response than that demanded by a question like "how do we eliminate child sexual abuse".[187]

Coakley commits a category error, in short. Because of her eagerness to highlight the intimate association of theological with ethical questions, her method of *théologie totale* refuses to acknowledge any sense in which these might nonetheless remain distinct. Instead, she thinks she has dealt with the latter solely by addressing the former. She thus only "solves" burning ethical dilemmas by transplanting them into a context far removed from the ones where those dilemmas were pressing.

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183 Ibid., 101.
184 Ibid., 194.
185 Coakley (2013), 2, 13.
186 Ibid., 325.
187 In this way, she leaves untouched the feminist criticism of her earlier work, namely that she "leaves the deeper dangers of theism and its masculinistic injustices untouched": Anderson (2012), 57.

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I would like to try to summarise this chapter in the following manner. C.S. Lewis once poured contempt on "the belief that reality never provides us with an absolute unavoidable 'either-or'; that ... some way of embracing both alternatives can always be found".[188] In contrast, the dream of metahistorical theologians like Hauerwas and Coakley is that the theology/ethics division does not in fact constitute an unassailable dichotomy. Rather, articulating a sufficient expansive vision of the Christian life will enable us to dissolve the distinction between the two terms.

We have now examined more closely the appeal of this procedure, namely, the sense of coherence it conveys onto the Christian life. But we have also pointed out the risk that it obfuscates the different questions we might wish to pose about that life's different components. Thus, by trying to overcome the disjunction between theory and practice, the metahistorical type is forced into its own questionable trade-offs.

Let us turn now to a last type of approach to the theology/ethics relationship, one that in multiple respects is responsive to the problems with these first two types, even if it itself is far from unimpeachable.

[188] Lewis (2012), vii.

CHAPTER IV

THE THEO-ONTOLOGICAL TYPE

This final type of approach to the theology/ethics relationship will try to ground that relationship in the connection between humanity and God. According to this type, which I will call the theo-ontological, theology and ethics refer to different aspects of a divinely illuminated reality.[1] Or, as John Webster would frame it, at stake is "a picture of the moral field", drawn as "a portrait of the identities of the divine and human agents in their encounter in the economy of God".[2]

A theo-ontological grounding of the theology/ethics relationship, in this sense, has been a commonplace in German language theology since at least Barth. It has been articulated in several ways. Barth's own formulation, at least when greatly simplified, is that theology and ethics correspond, respectively, to divine and human action. So theology emphasises what God has done; ethics what we must do. But there are other possibilities. For example, theology and ethics could correspond to different ways God relates to humankind, for example, through respectively gospel and law (Ebeling). Or the splitting off of ethics from theology might be claimed to be itself a product of the Fall, which has altered the nature of reality itself (Bonhoeffer).

That the distinctiveness and interconnectedness of theology and ethics are therefore rooted in the divine/human relationship gives this type a very different valence compared to the other approaches we have examined. Consider the metahistorical type, which treated the theology/ethics distinction as a kind of illusion in thought. That

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1 The label "theo-ontological", I should observe, is not intended to connote "ontotheology", in the Heideggerian sense of conflating God with Being. See Heidegger (2002).

2 Webster (2016), 11.

illusion's origins could be traced back to some historical accident like the Enlightenment, the noetic effects of which were treated as still in principle reversible. Not so for the theo-ontological type, for which the distinction is embedded in the non-socially constructed character of reality itself. If it does have a temporal origin, that would be the Fall, the effects of which cannot be avoided via clever theologians' stratagems. And so, "[t]he theological troublemaker ... is not Kant or Hume, it is the Old Adam".[3]

Contrast this type, too, with what I called theory/practice approaches. Both types insist we must maintain some kind of distinction between theology and ethics. But the distinction is grounded in very different ways. Thinkers in the theory/practice type treated the distinction as between different domains of human existence, be this of reason (Chapter I), or activity (Chapter II). An inchoate anthropology was therefore controlling. In contrast, theo-ontological theologians will seek to ground the distinction partly in something external to humanity, namely, God. This means that when theo-ontological figures assert not only the distinctiveness of theology and ethics, but also their unity, that assertion is based on the unity of God's ways of relating to humankind. Thence Barth: dogmatics and ethics must be co-ordinated, just as human action must be set into correspondence with divine action.

Of course, it matters greatly *which* aspect of God's relating to humankind is selected. As is well-known, Barth insists on the complete enclosure of human within divine action. But that means that, when he chooses this dynamic as the template for the relationship between theology and ethics, he is led to strongly integrative assertions

[3] Thus Zahl (2018), 319, on Luther, who I would suggest provides a major touchstone for the contemporary theo-ontological thinkers.

about the unity of the second set of terms. Unity thus trumps distinctiveness, even if Barth still affirms the latter's necessity. In contrast, if a stark Lutheran separation of law and gospel is chosen as the basis of the theology/ethics relationship, then it will be natural to emphasise the different paths taken by theology and ethics, over their intrinsic connection.

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What is at stake in this move to interpret the theology/ethics relationship, not as dividing up realms of human activity, nor as a specious product of modernity, but instead as capturing something crucial about humanity's relationship with its God? Let me suggest that the answer reflects the theo-ontological thinkers' insistence that Christian ethics really be *Christian*. And they try to guarantee this precisely by defining said ethics, some way or another, in terms of the divine/human relationship. If, for example, theology and ethics respectively correspond to the divine and human action, then ethics could then be defined in terms of what is necessary for human action to be obedient to the divine work. It would be this that would give said ethics its uniquely Christian character.

By introducing this reference to the distinctively Christian identity of a Christian ethic, I have invoked a complicated debate over what is occasionally called "Christianicity", the "elusive quality of 'being Christian'".[4] I will use that terminology for the rest of this

[4] Hence Chin (2007), 105, writing on how Jerome, in the 4th century, sought to define Christian identity. The term has also seen occasional use in practical theology: see Beaudoin (2016), 17–25; and can be used to translate the somewhat more common German *Christlichkeit*. C.f., in this vein, Panikkar's definition of "Christianness" and *Christlichkeit* as the "mystical core" of religion, which is apparent when one is "adopting a Christlike attitude inasmuch as Christ represents the central symbol of one's own life": Panikkar (1987), 105.

thesis, since even the clumsiness of the term points to the aporetic content towards which it gestures.

We can perhaps elaborate on the matter thusly. In his essay "The Criteria of Christian Theology", Maurice Wiles begins by pondering a claim he has recently read that "the distinctive nature of Christian *ethics*" is conferred upon it by its connection to Christian *theology*.[5] With typical wit, he then wonders whether he, "as theologian, might not in turn be able to pass the buck on elsewhere".[6] The candidates he considers, however, are far from satisfactory. If, for example, Christian theology is that theology done by *Christians*, then we are then forced to ask who those Christians are, given the enormous variety of their contradictory beliefs – including ones which deny Christ's very importance. We would also need to address how they have often had their identities defined by ecclesiastical authorities with dubious agendas; the prospect that being a Christian may not merely be cognitive but may incorporate other (ambiguous) criteria too; and so on.

Throwing up his hands, Wiles concludes that whether a theology is Christian is not actually an important question. We are better off, he says, inclusively assuming "that any theology that emerges out of a serious attention to the Christian tradition has a *prima facie* claim to being considered a Christian theology ... The important issue that then arises is ... whether or not it is *true*".[7]

The elegance of this answer belies how unsatisfactory it would be to theo-ontological theologians. For Wiles splits off truth from matters of Christian identity, whereas for

5 Wiles (1976), 180 (emphasis added).
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid., 192 (emphasis added).

theo-ontological thinkers, *what is Christian implies truth*, albeit not in any simple sense.[8] That is to say, Wiles wants to judge the truth of theological claims according to some externalist criteria lying outside Christian commitment, that commitment having proven too difficult to pin down. He thus invites the Barthian (in Germany) or Milbankian (in England) riposte, whether or not justifiably, that he has sold out to secularist claims about the religious neutrality of truth claims.

So theo-ontological thinkers care that ethics is Christian, because this is what makes it true, good and right. Epistemologically, what is Christian tends to be what is divinely revealed (and so true), and ontologically, it is what corresponds to God (and so good and right). Hence Barth: "A *true* knowledge of ourselves as such, *and therefore of our Christian actuality*, stands or falls for all of us with the knowledge of Jesus Christ."[9]

Accordingly, the theology/ethics relationship is important, because theology is what bridges ethics to its Christian identity. But in so elevating the question of that identity, theo-ontological thinkers are then faced with the same perplexities over which Wiles despaired. For to treat the label "Christian" as something other than a loose sociohistorical description, and to impart to it some normative core, very quickly invites the suspicion of ideological delusion. In short, one opens themself up to the accusation of using the label to legitimate what are really just one's historically contingent beliefs. The supersessionist endeavours to define Christianity in sharp opposition to Judaism

8 See Hunsinger (1991), especially pt. II, discussing Barth's conception of *Wahrheit*.

9 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/2, 271 (emphasis added). In what follows, references to the *Dogmatics* will be abbreviated to *CD*.

provides a case in point,[10] as do calls for a Christian nationalism from the 19th century to the present.

Theo-ontological thinkers are mostly sensitive to this difficulty when they try to articulate criteria for what counts as Christian. However, their efforts suggest that such criteria are more easily applied negatively, to discern what is *not* Christian, rather than positively. Consider one formative context for many of the theologians within the type, namely, the *Kirchenkampf* (church struggle) of Nazi Germany, where distinguishing Christian theology from National Socialism assumed urgent priority.[11] In this respect, the claim advanced by both Barth and Bonhoeffer that the divine command cannot be known in advance, but must always be sought afresh, readily precludes any simple identification of the divine will with that of a totalitarian genocidal state. But it is less adept in specifying what the divine will positively *is*.

This asymmetry means that, while theo-ontological thinkers care deeply about what is "Christian", what is Christian approaches a vanishing point. That is to say, "Christianicity" assumes an apophatic structure: Christian identity is guaranteed by God, but this God remains hidden in some way, even as he reveals himself.[12] And that means Christian identity is also concealed: "Your life is hid with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3), Barth is therefore fond of quoting.[13]

When that apophaticism is applied to Christian ethics, which we have said derives its truth and rightness from its unique identity, it follows that it is far easier to say what is

10 See Boyarin (2004), 17.
11 On this, see, e.g., Duchrow (1977); Gorringe (1999), 117–63.
12 On this dialectic between divine hiddenness and revealedness, see McCormack (2008), 167–80.
13 See, e.g., *CD* IV/4, 161; Barth (1981a), 28.

wrong – that is, what is not a Christian ethic – than what is right. That is, a positive ethical programme becomes far less attainable. This explains one of the most persistent worries about Barth's writings. By positing that right human action must correspond to the divine action, but by also claiming that this divine action remains hidden, Barth suggests it is impossible for us to know if we have acted well. To God alone, rather, belongs such knowledge.

When theo-ontological thinkers do attempt positive ethical programmes, they are therefore constantly suspected of breaking their own stated methodological rules. Worse, because of the force of their rhetoric about how what is Christian must conform to the divine, they are even more at risk of claiming divine sanction for their own personal or cultural idiosyncrasies. In this chapter's last section, I will examine an especially perverse case of this, namely, the sexual abuses perpetrated by Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder, who claimed them as a "grand, noble experiment" in Christian discipleship.[14]

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The priority the theo-ontological thinkers assign to what is Christian, coupled with that Christian identity's apophatic quality, forces this third type into a difficult relationship with the priorities asserted by the previous two. We recall that those priorities were the responsibility of the moral agent (Chapter I), that agent's particular circumstances (Chapter II), and the coherence of the agent's life (Chapter III). None of these are forgotten by the theo-ontological thinkers, let alone denied. And yet they can only be awkwardly positioned in a framework whereby the assertion of anything as Christian,

[14] Price (1992), 15.

and therefore as true and good, is to be scrutinised as sheltering an ideology or idol. Incorporation is possible, but only via a relationship of constitutive suspicion.

Barth is again illustrative. We can safely disband with the old criticism that he leaves no place for moral agency. In fact, his elaborate descriptions of that agency, as developed through readings of biblical texts in the *Church Dogmatics*, are far richer than those his critics typically advance.[15] Nonetheless, it is undeniable that those descriptions are still of human responsibility "only in relationship to the divine and not in itself".[16] So the problem is not that he has no account of moral agency: it is rather that this account stands in systematic tension with his focus on the acts of God.

So too with the particularity of the situation and the coherence of the Christian life. As for the former, there is a paradox between on one hand, Barth's ringing endorsement of contextual theology,[17] and on the other, his distrust of casuistical reasoning, even though this might be what enables ethics to consider the concrete circumstances in which people live. For the latter, there is Barth's famous critique of "religion", treated as a holistic form of life. Such a form includes all the trappings of traditionally "Christian" practices and rituals, but nonetheless may completely fail to correspond with the divine will. That Barth sees fit to attack it illustrates how sceptical he is of the identification of Christian identity with any ensemble of components claimed to form the "Christian life".[18]

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15 See Quash (2005), 122–64.

16 McKenny (2015), 122. For other studies of Barth's ethics which stress the same point, see Webster (1995); Webster (2004); McKenny (2010); Werpehowski (2016).

17 See, e.g., the letter he wrote at the end of his life to certain Asian theologians, published in Barth (1969).

18 C.f. Greggs (2011).

Here, Stanley Hauerwas provides a useful foil. We noted last chapter that Hauerwas presupposes a series of practices which can be unproblematically labelled "Christian".[19] That presupposition was essential for his polemic against liberalism, because it enabled a clear divide to be drawn between Christian and modern, secular living. For Barth, in contrast, the practices of the visible Church stand in a complicated relationship – to be analogised with the Chalcedonian Definition – with the invisible Church, hidden in Christ, which is the basis of its unique identity. The two are connected, but do not exactly correspond.[20]

The arc of this chapter, therefore, will be one that considers the ways theo-ontological thinkers have tried to mediate between their principal priority of distinctively Christian existence, and the other priorities which they still insist Christian ethics should acknowledge. I will begin with Barth, who is the most uncompromising – though still far from consistent – in subordinating the latter to the former. Next, I will turn to some of Barth's Lutheran respondents, including Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Helmut Thielicke and Gerhard Ebeling. These figures are likewise deeply concerned to maintain the Christianicity of Christian ethics. However, they also worry about that ethics' ability to address "reality" (*Wirklichkeit*), even as their attempts to balance these considerations yield mixed results.

Finally, I will turn to Barth's student John Howard Yoder, who proposes to resolve the tension by centring upon the Church and its processes of moral discernment. That is, his claim is that the Church is precisely where all the above priorities can be properly

19 Healy criticises Hauerwas here, for underestimating the empirical difficulties in so sharply delineating what counts and does not count as Christian: see Healy (2014), 70–91.

20 See, e.g., *CD* IV/2, 59–60; and generally Bender (2005).

acknowledged. However, I will argue that Yoder's own life provide a useful though deeply disturbing illustration of the ambiguities intrinsic to this proposal.

1 Karl Barth and the Covenantal Context of Christian Ethics

Table-setting for Barth's theological project is a fraught task, given the near mythic stature with which he looms over contemporary theology. Nonetheless, some key moments in his life and work are worth mention here: his break from the German Protestant liberal tradition, catalysed by the experience of World War I; the reorientation in the second edition of his Romans commentary towards the radical transcendence of God; his polemic against all forms of apologetics and natural theology; the shift, however construed, from God's apophatic "No" to his self-revelatory "Yes" in Christ; and the systematic reworking, throughout the volumes of the *Church Dogmatics,* of the Reformers' thinking about such themes as divine election or sin.

My interest, in this section, will be on Barth's mature work. Thus I will (1) examine how the covenantal relationship between God and humankind shapes his understanding of how theology and ethics are connected. This enables me (2) to make sense of how, in Barth's thought, "ethics" itself seems to be shrouded within divine inscrutability; and (3) to show how this move is closely linked to Barth's concern to protect ethics' distinctively Christian character.

That said, an alternative and perhaps obvious way to approach Barth's treatment of the relationship between theology and ethics would be to start from his famous statement

that "[d]ogmatics itself is ethics; and ethics is also dogmatics".[21] This claim is typically assumed to be what is most important in how he handles the theme. Nonetheless, I would resist it as the most helpful starting point. For one, the claim of an identity of dogmatics and ethics forms only one part of Barth's wider account of the relationship between the two, raising the question of why it should so be privileged. Moreover, I suggest, it may not even be the most important part, since it may well be Barth's underlying *reasons* for asserting their identity that are more decisive.

That emerges clearly if we follow his own line of argument. We should consider, in particular, how he distances himself from Schleiermacher on the dogmatics/ethics question, despite striking formal similarities between the two. In the *Brief Outline*, the latter had likewise argued for a unity of dogmatics and ethics, contending that a separation between the two "cannot be regarded as essential".[22] Rather, such separation can only be pragmatically justified, as enabling each to be given due attention.[23] Thus only if we remember their intrinsic unity can we prevent dogmatic propositions from "degenerat[ing] into lifeless formulations", and ethical propositions into "bare, external prescriptions".[24] Claims like these could just as easily have been put onto the mouth of Barth, for whom any "separation must be merely technical in character, not based on principle and method".[25]

How, nonetheless, does Schleiermacher ground the unity of dogmatics and ethics? In *The Christian Faith*, he relates both terms to the three forms of the Christian's

21 *CD* I/2, 793; see likewise Barth (1981b), 63–6.
22 Schleiermacher (2011), 84 §223.
23 Ibid., 85 §224.
24 Ibid., 85 §225.
25 *CD* I/2, 795.

self-consciousness, "feeling", "knowing" and "doing".[26] Dogmatics and ethics correspond, respectively, to knowing and doing. But these derive their vitality from feeling, that is, the famous "feeling of absolute dependence" which constitutes the essence of religious experience.[27]

All three of feeling, knowing and doing, however, are united in "the very nature of the [human] subject itself".[28] Accordingly, and paralleling the theory/practice type, Schleiermacher grounds theology and ethics on different aspects of human existence. That anthropological grounding for the dogmatics/ethics relationship becomes especially obvious when Schleiermacher adds that his account of feeling, knowing and doing is not itself theological. Instead, it is "something borrowed from psychology" (*Seelenlehre*).[29]

It is this extra-theological grounding of the dogmatics/ethics relationship against which Barth rebels. He "concede[s]" that Schleiermacher had a "nice understanding of the inner nexus and the ultimate unity of dogmatics".[30] But Schleiermacher located that unity in "the idea of piety as a universal mode of human feeling" – essentially, the psychological account above. Hence he failed "to overcome the dualism of 'ways of knowing' and 'ways of conduct'", and so "maintained the separation of the two

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26 Schleiermacher (2016), 8–18 §3.
27 Ibid., 18–27 §4.
28 Ibid., 13 §3.3.
29 Ibid., 12 §3.3. By this, Schleiermacher means less empirical psychology and instead the then prevailing philosophy of mind. See thus Arndt's characterisation of Schleiermacher's *Seelenlehre* as grounded upon the "Spekulative zielenden Denken der Dialektik": Arndt (2013), 376.
30 *CD* I/2, 785.

theological disciplines".[31] In short: Schleiermacher overlooked the true basis for the unity of dogmatics and ethics, instead erecting an illusory foundation in its place.

Accordingly, what matters for Barth is not simply the bare assertion of dogmatics and ethics' unity, but also how one arrives there. And so, whereas Schleiermacher found that unity within the human self-consciousness, Barth will try to locate it in the covenantal relationship between God and humanity, centred in Jesus Christ. In what follows, I will therefore turn to that covenantal context.

The first sustained discussion of ethics in the *Church Dogmatics* appears in Barth's doctrine of God in Volume II.[32] Specifically, he places it at the end of his consideration of God's covenant with humankind, into which God elects to enter from eternity. Through that placement, Barth's suggestion is that ethics must be understood in its connection to the covenant, and not otherwise.

The covenant's "first element" is divine election.[33] In his famous treatment of that element, which he recognises as a substantial innovation to Reformed thought, Barth assigns to election a much more significant role than that of a single and potentially embarrassing aspect of soteriology.[34] Election is not principally about the ultimate destiny of the individual, though it includes this.[35] Rather, it is foremost about God's eternal decision to enter into covenant with humankind through Jesus Christ. Consideration of election therefore belongs to the doctrine of God, since that election is

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31 Ibid.

32 Not counting the short section "Dogmatics as Ethics" in the prolegomenal first volume of the *Dogmatics*, in which Barth's discussion of Schleiermacher, discussed above, is found: *CD* I/2, 782–96.

33 *CD* II/2, 509.

34 Ibid., 76–93.

35 Thus the last section of Barth's treatment of the doctrine: ibid., 306–506.

God's determination, not just of his plan for creation, but also of *himself*.[36] It is his "primal decision"[37] to be a God who does "not exist ... without the covenant with man which was made and executed in this name [Jesus Christ]".[38]

Yet, although God elects to enter into covenant with humankind, election does not exhaust the covenant's significance. Instead, that covenant has a second element, comprising humanity's response to God precisely as the latter's covenant partner. Barth therefore introduces the notion of the divine *command* to describe what form this response should take: "the divine election of grace ... demands that it be understood as God's command directed to man".[39] Such a command is not merely a specific commandment for how to act in a defined situation. It refers more fundamentally to the entire determination by God of humankind's existence within the covenant.

The whole treatment of ethics in Barth's doctrine of God is therefore really an elaboration on the nature of God's command, which he describes in three ways. First, the command is *claim*, in that it places normative requirements on the human person concerning what to do, namely, obey Jesus Christ.[40] Second, the command not only defines what humans should do, but is also a *decision* by God about what humans ontologically are, namely, creatures called to freely respond to him.[41] Finally, the

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36 Ibid., 3

37 Ibid., 50.

38 C.f. the extensive discussion of the implications of this divine determination, much stimulated by McCormack's contentious claim that election determines even God's trinitarian being: McCormack (2000), 101–4; for an oft-cited response, see Hunsinger (2008).

39 *CD* II/2, 512.

40 Ibid., 552–630.

41 Ibid., 631–732.

command is *judgment*. This includes a judgment of condemnation for our sin, but also a pronouncement of our righteousness in Jesus Christ.[42]

All this has significant ramifications for the dogmatics/ethics relationship. That relationship must now be framed within the context of the covenant between God and humanity, and not in any other way. In that vein, it is correct to posit that dogmatics describes the work of the electing God, whereas ethics describes human activity, which must not be abstracted from the covenant.[43] It is precisely to safeguard this connection between ethics and the covenant that Barth introduces the idea of the divine command. Hence:

> "dogmatics asks concerning the covenant between the true God and true man established in Him from all eternity and fulfilled in Him in time. But true man is characterised by action ... As dogmatics enquires concerning the action of God and its goodness, it must necessarily make thorough enquiry concerning active man and the goodness of his action. It has the problem of ethics in view from the very first ...
>
> Conversely, the ethical question ... cannot rightly be asked and answered except within the framework ... of dogmatics."[44]

We should observe that, by so locating dogmatics and ethics within a covenantal context, Barth undeniably stresses their *unity*. Nonetheless, and crucially, it is likewise the covenant that enables them to be *distinguished*.[45] Divine and human action are not identical, and neither therefore are dogmatics and ethics. And while Barth frequently

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42 Ibid., 733–81.

43 Rendtorff's simplification here is helpful, namely, that "Barth's argument here results in his taking 'God' and 'man' as analogous to the working concepts 'dogmatics' and 'ethics'": Rendtorff (1986), 17. It does, however, oversimplify, since it misses Barth's crucial rider that one cannot talk about God without discussing God's work in respect of humanity, and that one cannot talk about humanity without also referring to God.

44 *CD* III/4, 3.

45 Ebeling, for example, is keen to highlight how, even in Barth's inclusion of ethics wholly within dogmatics, a distinction between the two remains: "Is the distinction not revealed, even in the programmatic inclusion of [ethics] in dogmatics itself, so that there is a theologically significant duality of aspects which cannot be eliminated?" Ebeling (1960), 319 (translation mine).

claims that correct human action must "correspond" to the divine action, this does not imply replication of what God has done. Instead, it involves a correspondence of what is fundamentally unlike.[46]

Still, Barth does emphasise the unity of dogmatics and ethics more than the distinctiveness of each, and his reasons for doing so are illuminative. First, as we have already observed, Barth interprets divine sovereignty so as to understand human action as entirely enabled by and enclosed within the divine action. As a result, any attempt to escape the latter in fact constitutes sin. Hence emphasising dogmatic and ethical unity becomes a way to preserve the sovereignty and freedom of God.

A second and related concern is to take seriously God's monopoly over the good. "There is none good but one, that is God" (Mk. 10:18), he frequently reminds us.[47] Thus "[n]othing outside God Himself, and nothing that He Himself has created and created good, has any claim and right in and by itself to His good-pleasure and therefore to be called good with genuine and final truth".[48] Barth has been accused as being a voluntarist on this point, for making the good "literally arbitrary, purely the product of the absolute power and freedom of the divine will",[49] as well as an occasionalist, for "emphasiz[ing] the uniqueness of each moment of serious moral choice in contrast to a view that emphasizes the persistent, enduring order of moral life".[50]

Whatever the merit of these criticisms, Barth's essential point is that God's declaration of something as good can never be taken for granted, and is never predictable in

46 *CD* II/2, 577.
47 Thus *CD* II/2, 547, 614; III/1, 122; III/4, 4.
48 *CD* III/1, 122.
49 Biggar (1993), 24.
50 Gustafson (1978), 71.

advance.[51] So, for example, while Barth's ethics does not *exclude* an account of the virtues, it leaves little room for it.[52] For if we consider how the typical purpose of such an account is to suggest there are personal moral qualities that persist over time, this purpose still presupposes an endurance of the good outside of God which Barth would find troubling.

These two considerations – the priority of divine sovereignty over human action, and God's control over the good – are at the heart of Barth's argument about the unity of dogmatics and ethics. But they are only meaningful in the specific context of the covenant between God and humankind. They hence provide what I have called the theo-ontological basis for claims by Barth about the intrinsic connection between dogmatics and ethics. Thus they render plausible statements such as that "the dogmatics of the Christian Church, and basically the Christian doctrine of God, is ethics",[53] or that it is more precise to speak not of "dogmatics becom[ing] ethics" and, rather, of dogmatics "reveal[ing] its ethical content".[54]

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What consequences follow, for Barth's ethical method, from this theo-ontological grounding of dogmatics and ethics in the covenant? A first is a drastic reduction of the ways ethics can be "done". Barth therefore attacks what he calls the "general conception of ethics", that is, the attempt to evaluate what is right or wrong free of theological presuppositions.[55] This general conception, to its credit, still refuses to reduce good and

51 *CD* II/2, 548.
52 See McKenny (2015).
53 *CD* II/2, 515.
54 Ibid., 539.
55 Ibid., 513.

evil to mere conventionalism, that is, to observable but ultimately only contingent patterns of human behaviour.[56]

Nonetheless, and despite its seriousness, the general conception of ethics "coincides exactly with the conception of sin".[57] Its fundamental defect is to attempt to determine right and wrong apart from God's command in the covenant. And so, "as a result and in prolongation of the fall, we have 'ethics', or, rather, the multifarious ethical systems, the attempted human answers to the ethical question".[58] Burrowed here is an important reworking of Protestant ideas about total depravity: the whole of human history, Barth suggests, can be retold as a series of endeavours to decide what is moral and immoral. But those endeavours are themselves immoral, for seeking to reach such a decision apart from God.

A properly Christian or theological ethics, Barth proposes as an alternative, would do nothing other than attest to the good revealed in Christ.[59] Accordingly, and to his critics' chagrin, Barth argues that theological ethics cannot rely upon general ethical principles. For these imply inevitable abstraction – and hence departure – from God's command. Even apparently generalisable moral instructions in Scripture, like the Ten Commandments, must be read as "absolutely specific directions" to particular persons, rather than as timeless rules.[60]

It is impermissible, furthermore, for theological ethics to incorporate insights from fields like anthropology, history or philosophy, since these presuppose a vantage point

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56 Ibid., 515.
57 Ibid., 518.
58 Ibid., 517.
59 Ibid., 518.
60 *CD* III/4, 12.

other than simple obedience to the command of God.[61] Likewise, Barth rules out what he calls "casuistry", by which he means any process of ethical deliberation from principles to responses to specific situations.[62] Even this, he says, is forbidden, as yet another abstraction from the divine command. Such abstraction is unnecessary, he claims, because that command "leaves nothing to human choice or preference", and is "[t]o the last and smallest degree ... self-interpreted".[63]

Barth's critics are therefore correct to point out that his theology inhibits ethics from executing what they take as one of its most essential tasks, namely, to determine right and wrong human action.[64] Their criticism usually proceeds *ad absurdum*: Barth leaves no place for ethical deliberation, or insights from other disciplines. Thus his ethics must be rejected, to avoid such an unreasonable result.[65] That he himself was inconsistent, and failed to meet his own rigid standards in his positive ethics, is demonstrative of the point.[66]

Nonetheless, it is striking how much this criticism glosses over *why* Barth reaches the position he does, namely, because of his theo-ontological grounding of ethics within the covenant. By failing to take into account this covenantal context, his critics betray, as

61 *CD* II/2, 520–22.
62 *CD* III/4, 13.
63 Ibid., 12.
64 Examples of such critiques are numerous but, for the argument that one cannot arrive at this answer without some procedure of moral deliberation, see, e.g., Willis (1971), 40–5; Biggar (1989); O'Donovan (2014), 188–93. For a parallel critique of Barth's severance of ethics from interdisciplinary dialogue, see, e.g., Pannenberg (1996), 98–9.
65 Consider, e.g., the claim that Barth's stance "removes our claim to have heard a command of God, to have discerned what God is doing ... from the scope of critical scrutiny". As a result, we should "defend casuistry ... because of the necessity – not the sufficiency – of conceptual clarity and precision, in normative Christian ethics": Biggar (1989), 40.
66 See, e.g., the statement that "[i]t seems obvious that Barth's development of these points presupposes, implicitly, both the importance and the unavoidability of rational deliberation": Willis (1971), 334.

Barth anticipates, a "certain lack of seriousness".[67] That is, if we accept Barth's argument about the incorporation of ethics into the covenant, then we must also accept the consequences of this move, no matter how drastic.

This notwithstanding, Barth's critics are right to demand clarity about what these results are. What resources, then, does his ethics provide for determining what is right or wrong in a concrete ethical scenario? As observed, Barth claims the divine command is "self-interpret[ing]", meaning it grasps the particular without the need for any further ethical reflection by us. It is not yet clear, however, whether this amounts to more than a bare assertion.

It seems to me that the mature Barth offers three different strategies in answer to the question. The first is a suggestion of how to provide more concrete ethical analyses, which must nonetheless remain tentative, in order to avoid pre-empting God's command. Barth accordingly distinguishes between theological ethics' *vertical* and *horizontal* elements.[68] The vertical element comprises the meeting between humanity and the divine command, a meeting which exists "in a singularity and uniqueness which cannot be anticipated and which scorn[s] regimentation".[69] The account of the divine command in *CD* II/2 is thus wholly a description of this verticality. Leaving ethics here, however, would render it "monotonous, colourless and formless",[70] with nothing to say "to man in actuality".[71] It would also produce the ethical occasionalism of which Barth

67 *CD* III/4, 15.
68 Ibid., 17–19.
69 Ibid, 17.
70 Ibid.
71 Ibid., 16.

is frequently accused, but which he himself attacks as "an indefinite ethics of the *kairos*".[72]

Accordingly, Barth posits that there are indeed ethical truths which persist from situation to situation, and which therefore constitute a horizontal dimension to ethics. The last part of *CD* III hence attempts to articulate such truths in respect of the doctrine of creation, thereby grappling with such issues as the Sabbath, and relations between men and women, parents and children, and the nation.[73] Through such a means, theological ethics ceases to be abstract, and receives "a 'formed' reference".[74]

Nonetheless, such horizontal statements can never predict what the command of God will be in a given situation, lest they metamorphose into the casuistry Barth so despises. Hence the formed reference must not "pronounce an anticipatory judgment on the good or evil of human action in encounter with the command of God".[75] Thus while the horizontal aspect of ethics prepares us for the command, there will always be a possible limit case (*Grenzfall*) where God's command may *contradict* our expectations.

Barth's comments on suicide illustrate the point. God gives us life as an opportunity to receive his mercy and forgiveness. That implies suicide is wrong, since it suggests resistance to God's mercy.[76] Yet Barth insists on the possibility "that suicide might not

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72 Barth (1981a), 6.

73 Barth left unfinished *CD* IV/4, which were planned to articulate such truths in respect of the doctrine of reconciliation.

74 *CD* III/4, 18.

75 Ibid., 18.

76 Ibid., 405–10.

be committed as a crime and therefore as murder, but in faith and therefore in peace with God", as exceptional as this possibility is.[77]

Accordingly, the horizontal edges us closer to the divine command, but still does not quite let us touch it. We thus move to Barth's second strategy, the ethics of invocation, developed in the unfinished material envisaged for *CD* IV/4. Christians invoke God as Father by showing gratitude to him, praising him, and above all petitioning him, including by asking him to tell them what is right or wrong. Such invocation is "the basic act of the Christian ethos",[78] and is illustrated in the New Testament above all by the Lord's Prayer, and by Christ's prayer "Abba, Father".[79] It is the fundamental way through which Christians respond to God as his covenant partners, one which shapes all their other actions.

Further, when God is invoked, he will respond, having given Christians "the promise of his corresponding action and therefore of his hearing".[80] That response may include provision of "clarity of [Christians'] knowledge of their situation", and "courage to do what is commanded".[81] However, and once again to preserve God's freedom, his response can never be anticipated in advance. Rather, it must be sought "afresh each day".[82] The ethics of invocation, therefore, likewise omits to concretely say what someone should do in any particular situation, instead leaving it to God to provide this answer.

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77 Ibid., 410.
78 Barth (1981a), 102.
79 Ibid., 50–1.
80 Ibid., 104.
81 Barth (1981a), 71.
82 Ibid., 77.

Barth's third and most telling strategy is simply to deny the possibility that someone can know that they have acted in a way consonant with God. Despite how one might understand the horizontal reference, and despite how one might invoke God as Father, such a person may still remain in the dark about whether they have acted rightly. This strategy is manifest in one of Barth's last writings, the lecture series published as *Evangelical Theology*. In the chapter on temptation (*Anfechtung*), which connotes a much wider range of meaning in German compared to English,[83] Barth acknowledges the possibility that God might withdraw from a theologian's work, no matter how laudable the process by which that work has been carried out:

> "this theology can be outstanding; it may, perhaps, be conservative in the best sense, while at the same time being progressive and up-to-date. ... In short, a gratefully hailed light of the Church is kindled there and appears to shine forth. ...
>
> So excellent may be the theologian's work. But of what help is it? Everything is in order, but everything is also in the greatest disorder. ... What appears to take place there does not really take place. For what happens is that God, who is supposedly involved in all theological work, maintains silence about what is thought and said in theology *about* him ...
>
> It is a terrible thing when God keeps silence, and by keeping silence speaks. It is terrible when one or another theologian must notice or, at least, suspect that this occurs, and most terrible of all when many do not even seem to notice and perhaps not even suspect that this occurs."[84]

We therefore find here an unmistakeable affirmation that, no matter how well the theologian carries out their theological work, God might simply withdraw any correspondence between that work and the divine action. Further, the theologian will lack any way to know this has occurred. To avoid any charge of divine capriciousness,

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83 As Sonderegger observes, it can include "spiritual despair", or what "mystics term ... 'the dark night of the soul'": Sonderegger (2015), 211.

84 Barth (1963), 134–6 (emphasis in original).

Barth hastily adds that, should God do this, it will still be for his good purposes.[85] Nonetheless, the theologian will still be left ignorant of the true ethical status of what they have done. While here, Barth is speaking about theological work, there is no reason not to extend his remarks to human activity more broadly. Hence there is also no certain way of determining if, in God's sight, one has acted rightly or wrongly.

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Barth's theo-ontological grounding of ethics in the covenant does not merely hide the moral value of human action from us, but also has a second major consequence. It foregrounds the matter of what, above, I called that ethics' Christianicity, its distinctively Christian identity.

In rejecting the general conception of ethics, Barth equates the question of whether an ethics is *Christian* with the question whether an ethics is *right*. "Man does good in so far as his action is Christian".[86] There is, then, only one correct ethics, the Christian one, which follows the divine command. Either someone obeys that command, and so acts *both* Christianly *and* rightly, or one does not, and therefore does not so act. Similarly: if one acts Christianly, one has acted rightly, as well as obediently. But an ethics may also *cease* to be Christian if it exceeds what dogmatics allows, thereby disconnecting it from obedience to God under the covenant.[87]

This question of Christian identity, we may recall, was also relevant to the previous two types of approach to the theology/ethics relationship we have examined. So when we

85 Ibid., 137–8.
86 *CD* II/2, 547.
87 *CD* III/4, 3.

considered the theory/practice type in Chapters I and II, a major concern was for "practice" to remain connected to "theory". And this was because it was assumed to be the container of what was distinctively Christian. Clodovis Boff, for example, insisted that liberative praxis must stay rooted in the "theologicity" of classical theology. Without such a bridge, practice would become vulnerable to ideological distortion from sources outside Christianity. Worse, there would be a risk that such distortion might persist but remain unnoticed, meaning that a particular moral formation might be called "Christian" when it was anything but. We have seen, too, in respect of the metahistorical type in Chapter III, that similar temptations applied in respect of the metahistorical concepts on which that type relies.

Barth is hardly himself immune to this risk of ideological delusion. In fact, for him that danger is only intensified. For he claims that his ethics must reflect, and must *only* reflect, the divine command, and cannot carry any sense of human fallibility. Consequently, we might well expect him, as does Trutz Rendtorff, to be tempted to pass his own private moral judgments with the air of "undisputed dogmatic authority".[88]

To give just one example of this, an important front on which Barth's positive ethics has been challenged has been in respect of gender (*das Geschlecht*). He claims that gender "rests upon a structural and functional difference ... Hence in humanity ... the decisive, fundamental and typical question, is that of the relationship in this differentiation".[89] But this claim about a structural difference between the genders – what we might now call a gender essentialist position – has been impugned, and from multiple angles.

88 Rendtorff (1986), 18.
89 *CD* III/4, 117.

One queer theologian therefore contends that, through the aforementioned claim, Barth breaks his own stated methodological limitations, in that he has advanced a general ethical claim about gender which wrongly pre-empts the divine command. Thus Barth "developed a natural theology with regards to the ethical behavior of man *qua* man and woman *qua* woman ... One is what one is, man or woman, and is bound to act ... accordingly".[90] If he had been more consistent, he would have realised that his understanding of gender imputed a stability to nature which, elsewhere, he sought to avoid.

The same claim about an essential difference between man and woman can also be scrutinised from a very different perspective. For why are we emphasising the male/female relationship so much in the first place? Thence the critique of Sung Bum Yun, one of Barth's best-known South Korean students, that Barth has imbibed "the common western bias in treating first the relationship of man and woman, and only then taking up the question of parents and children".[91] Other familial relations are thus devalued. In a rather different way, therefore, Barth is again accused of illegitimately overemphasising a contingent cultural formation through his rhetoric of the divine command. He is unaware, in short, of the extent he still is a product of his time.

We could easily mine the *Church Dogmatics*, and Barth's other writings, for more instances of when Barth passes the accidental as irrevocably Christian. Nonetheless, his grounding of ethics in the covenant means that we have a clear criterion, arising from Barth's own system, as to why such instances are problematic. This is that they have gone beyond the warrant of what the divine command, in its hiddenness, permits a

90 Balboa (1998), 780, 783.
91 Yun (1977), 35.

Christian ethics to say. Even if Barth himself does not meet this criterion, its existence is precisely what enables his failure to be more easily diagnosed. Hence, for example, it is the restricted role he assigns to the horizontal reference of ethics which helps us perceive the shortcomings of what he claims about the fixity of gender. Barth, in short, becomes his own best critic.

We have now reviewed the two major consequences of Barth's particular theo-ontological grounding of dogmatics and ethics. First, there was the difficulty it engendered about how to ever recognise the human good. And second, there was the sharpened focus on what makes an ethics a distinctively Christian one.

But if we now consider these two consequences together, we can perceive that they, collectively, present to us a *tension*. Precisely because of Barth's stringent criterion about what makes Christian ethics genuinely "Christian", it becomes harder to connect that ethics to specific and concrete situations. If, for instance, we permitted ethics to borrow from sociological descriptions of the world, it might be easier to find an answer about what to do in certain defined circumstances. But, for Barth, such an ethics would no longer be a Christian one. The tension, accordingly, is between the Christianicity of an ethics, and its ability to address particularity.

That tension, nonetheless, might be one we suspect is peculiar to Barth's thought, and inapplicable to other theo-ontological interpretations of the theology/ethics relationship. Take, for example, Wolfhart Pannenberg's suggestion: "If the execution of this program by Barth ... gives us an occasion for doubt ... it may well be that such misgivings only affect Barth's argument, but not the option of a dogmatic grounding of ethics

generally".[92] Whether the tension between particularity and Christianicity can be isolated to Barth is a question to which we must now therefore turn.

2 Lutheran Responses to Barth: The Question of "Reality"

This section will argue that the above tension is not a quirk of Barth's alone. Rather, *any* theo-ontological grounding of the theology/ethics relationship will betray the same tension between the maintenance of the distinctively Christian identity of an ethic, and that ethic's ability to take into account particular circumstances or the irreducibility of moral agency. Thus the more one tries to address the latter, the less one can acknowledge the former.

I will illustrate the point, in what follows, through a whirlwind review of some of Barth's Lutheran respondents, mainly (1) Dietrich Bonhoeffer, (2) Helmut Thielicke, and (3) Gerhard Ebeling. These theologians wish to maintain Barth's concern to preserve the faithfulness of Christian ethics to God. But they also worry that Barth's own ethics omit to grapple with "reality" (*Wirklichkeit*) as it actually is. Yet, in their attempts to honour both priorities, they themselves fail to move past a trade-off between the two.

Before turning to these figures, however, I want to relate the above tension to a particular debate in German Protestant ethics emerging around the Second World War, and involving many of the same theologians. The debate revolved around whether certain Lutheran doctrines, namely that of the "two kingdoms" and of the "orders of creation", had been complicit in the rise of National Socialism, such as by legitimating

[92] Pannenberg (1996), 101 (translation mine). See, similarly, Rendtorff (1986), 18.

political acquiescence by Christians to the regime. The accusation was that these doctrines had treated the state as a God-ordained part of creation separate from the heavenly realm and from the Church, thereby immunising it from theological critique.[93]

Theologians could be unequivocally opposed to the Nazis but, nonetheless, take different sides regarding the appropriateness of the Lutheran doctrines. For example, Bonhoeffer and Thielicke would have merely reworked them. They would thus have redescribed the state as a "mandate", to emphasise how, despite how the state is given its authority by God, it still forms part of a fallen creation. In contrast, Barth and some his followers, including Jacques Ellul, contended that no social or political structure can be legitimate unless somehow grounded in the person of Christ.[94] On such a viewpoint, talk of "kingdoms", "orders" or "mandates" will always constitute an illegitimate abstraction from that person.

Neither side of this debate succeeded, however, at least on Pannenberg's appraisal, since neither could account for *specific* forms of social and legal structures. It does not matter, actually, whether one starts with the orders or mandates, or instead from Christ's person. For in both cases, it is impossible to then move to the "concrete expression" of "historically conditioned laws governing the form of life in a society".[95] Artificiality will be implied regardless.

Nonetheless, we might consider how the two sides framed the debate to itself be telling. Each represented itself as attuned to the particular and concrete – though, arguably,

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93 On this controversy, and the contentious question of continuity of the positions articulated therein with Luther's own writings, see Duchrow (1977), Crouse (2017), 35–60.

94 Thus Ellul: "No compartment of human life remains alien to Christ. ... By his submission he establishes human law, giving it at last a significance it never could have in itself". Ellul (1969), 53–4.

95 Pannenberg (1981a), 27.

neither was. Thus each side suspected the other of impermissible abstraction. That is to say, both sides tried, but failed, to connect Christian theology with the chaotic complexity of political engagement.

This gestures to what we might expect in the thinkers we will now consider. Their concern is with "reality", in its full, messy particularity. Yet their divided loyalties create a certain abstraction even in their appeal to this reality, one they never quite overcome.

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Let me turn first, then, to the theo-ontological type as we find it in Bonhoeffer, who among the theologians I consider here stands closest to Barth. In the *Ethics* manuscripts, Bonhoeffer situates the doctrine/ethics distinction within a complex theological framing, according to which "the reality of God has entered into the reality of this world".[96] Resisting both materialist and idealist understandings of reality, he offers a christological interpretation of that reality's content. Thus the person of Jesus Christ represents an interruption of our reality by the ultimate reality of God.[97] In contrast, "[a]ll concepts of reality that ignore Jesus Christ are abstractions".[98]

The connection between doctrine and ethics must be understood in terms of this interruption by God of human reality. Hence a key passage:

> "The subject matter of a Christian ethic is God's reality revealed in Christ becoming real among God's creatures, just as the subject matter of doctrinal theology is the truth of God's reality revealed in Christ. The place

96 Bonhoeffer (2009a), 54.
97 Ibid., 58.
98 Ibid., 54.

> that in all other ethics is marked by the antithesis between ought and is, idea and realization, motive and work, is occupied in Christian ethics by the relation between reality and becoming real, between past and present, between history and event (faith) or, to replace the many concepts with the simple name of the thing itself, the relation between Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit."[99]

Here, we find a blunt denigration of binaries often assumed to be foundational by many ethicists, such as between "is" and "ought".[100] Instead, Bonhoeffer promotes a distinction between doctrine, which refers to God's reality, and ethics, which refers to that divine reality "becoming real" within ours. As Philip Ziegler puts it, ethics can therefore be described as a "divine pragmatics", that is, "the reality shaping power of the active divine address … together with its concrete practical entitlements".[101]

This does not mean that distinctions such as between "is" and "ought" should be rejected outright. Instead, they should be reinterpreted, as necessary but as themselves reflecting our broken reality, and so in dire need of divine restoration. Through a reading of Genesis, Bonhoeffer contends that the very knowledge of good and evil which humans seek via ethical inquiry is the same knowledge implicated in the Fall.[102] "Instead of only knowing themselves in the reality of being elected and loved by God, they now must know themselves in the possibility of choosing, of being the origin of good and evil. … They are not the origin, however, but instead have bought this knowledge only by paying the price of disunion from the origin."[103]

Accordingly, all knowledge of good and evil, regardless of how hard-won, reflects our state of disunion. In that state, we inevitably resort to distinctions like that between "is"

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99 Ibid., 49–50 (emphasis removed)

100 C.f. the new natural lawyers considered in Chapter I.2.

101 Ziegler (2016), 108.

102 The material in the *Ethics* at this point is heavily anticipated by his lecture series on Gen. 1–3, delivered over 1932–3 in Berlin. See especially Bonhoeffer (2004), 111–20.

103 Bonhoeffer (2009a), 302.

and "ought", though these would have seamlessly run together for prelapsarian humans. Following the Fall, however:

> "everything splits apart – is and ought, life and law, knowing and doing, idea and reality, reason and instinct, duty and inclination, intention and benefit, necessity and freedom, the hard-won and the ingenious, the universal and the concrete, the individual and the collective; and even truth, justice, beauty, and love conflict with one another just as do desire and aversion, happiness and sorrow".[104]

Thus the is/ought distinction is not a mere historical accident, such as a mistake of modernity. It is, rather, a product of the Fall itself, and not capable of pre-eschatological elimination.

For Bonhoeffer as much as Barth, therefore, the theology/ethics relationship cannot be understood except against the nuanced backdrop of God's relation to humankind. Accordingly, Bonhoeffer is just as adamant as Barth that ethics remain Christian, and makes the same equation of said Christian ethics with what alone is right. "The knowledge of good and evil appears to be the goal of all ethical reflection. The first task of Christian ethics is to supersede that knowledge. … Christian ethics [is] thus to be considered an ethic only as the critique of all ethics."[105]

The two theologians do diverge, however, precisely because each stresses different aspects of the relationship between God and humankind. For whereas Barth emphasises the divine and human *actions* that comprise the covenant, Bonhoeffer focuses attention upon human *reality* being entered by the reality of God. Bonhoeffer's formulation, with its suggestion of the interruption of the human by the divine, suggests a greater distance than that which Barth assumes between human and divine action, notwithstanding

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104 Ibid., 308–9.
105 Ibid., 299–300.

Bonhoeffer's insistence that there is but *one* reality.[106] That greatened distance, I would contends, paves the way for a more granular ethical analysis of human reality apart from the divine, in a way that is minimal but still more than what Barth's theology would allow.[107]

We get a glimpse of this from the most eschatologically oriented manuscript of the *Ethics*, "Ultimate and Penultimate Things". The "ultimate", Bonhoeffer there says, represents the divine reality breaking into our "penultimate" one. The former is both *qualitatively* and *temporally* ultimate. Qualitatively, because it does not depend on anything that came before it within creation, but rather is unconditioned. And temporally, because it nonetheless still comes after the penultimate.[108] This double meaning, for Bonhoeffer, implies that the ultimate and penultimate stand in a paradoxical relationship of both radical discontinuity and radical continuity. On one hand, what God declares to be ultimate reality "involves a complete break with everything penultimate".[109] But on the other, that ultimate reality still depends on what preceded it.[110]

The Christian life is therefore marked by a profound tension produced from its simultaneous existence in both the penultimate and the ultimate. That tension must be preserved. One must not be "radical" and reject the penultimate for the sake of the ultimate, and likewise, one must not "compromise" the ultimate for the penultimate. The former error warrants elaboration. Radicalism, which "arises from a conscious or

106 Ibid., 58.
107 Bonhoeffer, we should acknowledge, is often accused of sharing in Barth's occasionalism: see, e.g., Biggar (1989), 36.
108 Bonhoeffer (2009a), 149–51.
109 Ibid., 149.
110 Ibid., 151.

unconscious hatred of what exists",[111] is a refusal of attention to the penultimate things of the world. It is thus to be cured by acknowledging that the penultimate "also has its seriousness":[112] we need to carefully consider the effects of our actions in this world, not least because of their potential bearing on the ultimate.

This renewed attention to the penultimate leads Bonhoeffer to rehabilitate the idea of *the natural* for Protestant ethics.[113] This natural "is that which, after the fall, is directed toward the coming of Christ", and includes things both as God created them, and as he preserved them following the advent of sin.[114] Bonhoeffer therefore finds it perfectly sensible to use such categories as "natural life",[115] "human rights",[116] and "natural rights",[117] which we might think provide a bridge to the particular, even if Bonhoeffer does not pursue such a route further. From the concept of the natural, furthermore, Bonhoeffer articulates the concept of the mandates already mentioned, leading him into direct collision with Barth.[118]

In short, while mirroring many of Barth's key movements, Bonhoeffer also intuits the need for Christian ethics to return to the ground, and takes small steps in that direction. But now I want to consider some theologians who push somewhat further.

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111 Ibid., 155–6.
112 Ibid., 168.
113 Ibid., 172.
114 Ibid., 173.
115 Ibid., 178–81.
116 Ibid., 205, 210–12.
117 Ibid., 182–5.
118 For Barth's critique of Bonhoeffer on this point, see *CD* III/4, 21–2.

Bonhoeffer's exhortation to take reality seriously has been embraced by Helmut Thielicke in his own theological ethics, whose formal claims I will very briefly consider. Like both Barth and Bonhoeffer, Thielicke seeks the integration of ethics into dogmatics. But certainly unlike Barth, he posits that such unity remains a work in progress, incapable of completion until the eschaton. Thus "[e]thics in its quality as dogmatics (!) has to understand itself as a task yet to be accomplished rather than as something already given".[119]

Thielicke reaches this conclusion by attending to the *lived experience* of ethics more closely than does Barth. He therefore defines ethics as "an interpretation of the believer's existence in faith". It also includes consideration of the basic nature of that existence, which is that of an embodied "existence in the world".[120] The latter inquiry has become urgent in modernity, since the process of secularisation has forced us to more carefully ask about the "whole human-historical reality" to which Christian theology must relate.[121] Crucially, however, that human-historical reality has proven capable of study on its own terms, rather than solely in terms of its connection to God.[122]

As a result, a theological ethic cannot assume it already understands that reality. Rather, it must do the hard work of researching the world in which people actually live. And so, "the battle groups of ethics [has] to make a sortie out of the dogmatic citadel. ... It

119 Thielicke (1966), 37.
120 Ibid., 38.
121 Ibid., 5.
122 C.f. Jüngel's similar proposition, also carried out in the theological analysis of secularism, that "[m]an and his world are interesting for their own sake": Jüngel (1983), 34.

cannot be content merely with looking out through the narrow peepholes in the fortress, much less with pure theorizing on the inside".[123]

This conclusion is one Thielicke seeks to buttress via the old Lutheran distinction between law and gospel. He hardly makes the simple equation of ethics with law, and theology with gospel, unlike another theologian to whom we will shortly come. Nonetheless, he insists that the distinction acts as a crucial reminder of the need to pay attention to reality on its own terms. Without that distinction, then, theological thinking will tend towards a troubling ahistoricity. Thielicke therefore indicts Barth of "[t]hreatening the historicity of existence",[124] through how the latter advances the grace of God as a "timeless, monistic principle" by which God works in the world.[125]

We might therefore imagine Barth, Bonhoeffer and Thielicke along a spectrum. Barth is on one end, because of how he seeks to preserve the Christian identity of a Christian ethic at all costs. Thielicke is furthest from him, given the greater allowance he makes for a Christian ethics to include consideration of the world in itself. Bonhoeffer stands somewhere in between.

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But to push this analysis yet further, I now want to turn to an exchange between two further Lutheran interlocutors of Barth, namely Gerhard Ebeling and Wolfhart Pannenberg. That exchange took place from 1960 to 1975, and concerned what had

123 Thielicke (1966), 37.
124 Ibid., 125.
125 Ibid., 106.

been labelled the "phenomenon of the ethical". In what follows, I will focus less on the nuances of the debate, and more on Ebeling and Pannenberg's global positions.[126]

We can start with Ebeling, who posits a universal experience of "the ethical" in itself. Despite the immense variety of *particular* moral claims we encounter, he says, we are nonetheless all aware of the ethical *in general* as a phenomenon.[127] That awareness can dim, as with the contemporary "crisis of ethics" precipitated by secularisation.[128] But it can never be fully lost.[129]

Theologians cannot afford to dismiss the phenomenon of the ethical, Ebeling says. Drawing on Heideggerian phenomenology, he claims it is more immediate to our experience as human beings than abstract doctrinal claims about reality.[130] Consequently, "theology cannot make itself understandable in what it has to say otherwise than by searching and meeting man in the ethical reality (*ethischen Wirklichkeit*) in which he finds himself".[131] In short then, theology must advance an interpretation of the ethical, or admit its own irrelevance.

That task of interpretation is complicated, however, by how the phenomenon of the ethical does not entail an experience of anything coherent. Instead, the ethical appears to us as "the fragmentary, the meaningless and evil".[132] We sense it, but know not what it is. It is, therefore, a profoundly *aporetic* experience, according to which "it belongs to

126 The relevant texts, in the order of their original publication, are Ebeling (1960); Pannenberg (1981b); Ebeling (1969); Pannenberg (1981c) and Pannenberg and Ebeling (1973). I will rely, for Pannenberg, on Keith Crim's English translation. The translations of Ebeling are my own.
127 Ebeling (1960), 326.
128 Ibid., 324.
129 Ibid.
130 Ibid., 327.
131 Ibid., 328.
132 Pannenberg and Ebeling (1973), 468.

the being [of man] to ask questions, which exceed the competence of the ethical".[133] Such aporiae cannot be disregarded by theological interpretation. Said interpretation might make suggestions about how to rejoin the fragments of the ethical, but cannot imperialistically assume it has all the answers for how to do this. Instead, it is necessary for Christian theology to enter into dialogue with treatments of ethics outside the Christian theological tradition, to become more aware of the incoherence of what it is considering.[134]

In addition, the relationship between the phenomenon of the ethical and the theological interpretation of that phenomenon mirrors the distinction between law and gospel.[135] It is this which provides for Ebeling the theo-ontological grounding for the former relationship. For the *law* manifests itself precisely in the experience of the ethical. Hence Christian theology's task is to articulate the *gospel* which, in its interpretation of the ethical, frees humanity from that experience's oppressive nature.

Let us now examine Pannenberg's response. Pannenberg perceives in Ebeling's contentions merely the latest reiteration of a position first advanced by Wilhelm Hermann during the Belle Époque. The latter had distinguished ethics from dogmatic theology, but merely to set up the former as a way to verify the latter's contents. Herman therefore posited there to be a "moral attitude of man" similar to the phenomenon of the ethical. It is this which provides the basis for recognising the

133 Ibid., 464.
134 Ebeling (1960), 327.
135 Ibid., 328.

"incomparable moral power" of Christ's personality,[136] even though it exists independently of that religious overlay.

Such an attempt to articulate an "ethical basis of theology", Pannenberg argues, has therefore found "its revival in Ebeling's work".[137] But that attempt constituted a dead end even in Hermann's time. For both Hermann and Ebeling presuppose that moral consciousness is universal to and self-evidently present within human experience, even if it is never uninterpreted. It was this that enabled both figures to claim that we intuitively recognise moral claims as *prima facie* binding.

However, Nietzsche, writing right before Hermann, had already discredited such pretensions of self-evidence. Hence for the former, morality is really something constructed, much by accident, by history's twists and turns: its self-evidence is a sham.[138] In addition, the appearance of self-evidence was only ever plausible because of the Christian religious consensus in Europe, which has long disappeared. And so, "Hermann's efforts were out of date before they saw the light of day".[139]

Accordingly, Pannenberg contends that the ethical can never be taken for granted as an unwavering feature of human experience. Rather, "[a] situation is never of itself clearly ethical; it is so only when confronted by a person who makes ethical decisions".[140] Thus ethics is not phenomenologically self-evident, but always dependent on a prior understanding of reality. The Christian theologian's true task, then, is to articulate a

136 Ibid., 68.
137 Pannenberg (1981b), 61.
138 Ibid., 62–3.
139 Ibid., 64.
140 Ibid., 65.

specifically *Christian* understanding of reality, which therefore must be logically and phenomenologically prior to "the ethical relevance of the Christian message".[141]

Ebeling and Pannenberg would agree, therefore, that ethical experience is never unmediated, but always filtered through an interpretive lens. Both, furthermore, are moral realists, to use the parlance of contemporary philosophy, in assuming that there are moral facts "out there". They are likewise also moral cognitivists, in considering that moral statements must be either true or false. Their disagreement, then, hinges on the more precise question of whether there is an essential moral datum present within human consciousness, even if, again, that datum is always interpreted.

The existence of that datum matters enormously. For if it can be properly investigated, as Ebeling suggests, it would then be capable of providing a bridge through which theology can connect to human experience. But Pannenberg, while also eager to find a bridge, considers the claim for such a datum suspiciously convenient for Ebeling's project of bridging Christian theology with the real world.

Let us now return to the spectrum we have been constructing between Barth and Thielicke as regards the tension between particularity and Christianicity. We might construe Ebeling as pushing even further than does Thielicke, in trying to relate Christian ethics to everyday, lived experience. But he can only do so under the strain of positing a kind of moral universalism with which theology should engage, and which, while minimal, has still fallen out of favour in our philosophical milieu. Pannenberg, in contrast, stands closer to Barth, given his more acute awareness of the difficulties in connecting theology with ethical experience.

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141 Ibid., 67.

In one respect, actually, Pannenberg goes beyond Barth. For even Barth seems to accept the universal experience of the ethical, calling it "an extremely instructive fact",[142] since it shows that humans can never put aside "the inescapable question of human existence" which the divine command raises.[143] Barth would refuse to infer anything else from this experience. Yet for him, nonetheless, that experience remains real. Pannenberg, in contrast, denies the experience entirely.

Regardless, the debate between Ebeling and Pannenberg, which reached no clear resolution, repeats similar dynamics to what we have already witnessed in respect of Barth, Bonhoeffer and Thielicke. That is to say, a focus on the Christian identity of Christian ethics makes it perhaps insurmountably difficult to describe how that ethics might bear upon human experience. And that difficulty, we have now established, was not confined to Barth. Rather, it can be perceived to be endemic to the entire theo-ontological type.

3 John Howard Yoder and Ecclesial Moral Discernment

The final instance of the theo-ontological type to be examined here will comprise the theology – and, crucially, also the deeply troubling life – of Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder. One of Barth's best-known American students, by the 1970s, Yoder had become the most famous Anabaptist theologian of his generation, and was "widely recognized as the leading contemporary American exponent of Christian pacifism".[144] My interest in his work, however, stems primarily from his meta-ethical analyses. In these, he roots both theology and ethics in the person of Christ, while simultaneously

142 *CD* II/2, 518.
143 Ibid., 516.
144 Ramsey (1988), 96.

advancing the congregation's ecclesial procedure as what gives Christian ethics its concrete form. That procedure, he argues, is what overcomes the tension we have been examining between the distinctively Christian identity of an ethic and its ability to address particulars.

Such an ecclesial reorientation, I nonetheless want to suggest, simply relocates the tension elsewhere, namely, to the question of what shape the congregation' procedure should take. Hence in what follows, I will (1) examine how Yoder develops a theo-ontological reading of the theology/ethics relationship by reference to the person and teachings of Christ; (2) review the ecclesial process he proposes of "binding and loosing" as an attempt to resolve the Christianicity/particularity tension we have been considering; and (3) explore how Yoder's own life manifests the ambiguities which such a process raises.

Yoder is not as systematic as Barth in his treatment of the theology/ethics relationship. Nonetheless, in the essay *Karl Barth and the Problem of War*, Yoder's most sustained examination of the topic, he concurs with the latter's integration of ethics into dogmatics in a way that firmly places him within the theo-ontological type.[145] Thus in a gloss on Barth, he posits that, just as dogmatics critiques the Church's preaching, ethics critiques the Church's moral decision-making, with both deriving their validity from the person and teachings of Christ.[146] Since each has this common root, "we must claim ...

145 Yoder (2003), 39. Though c.f. his claim elsewhere that "[t]he very concept of a split between belief and action is itself a doctrinal error", which is more suggestive of what I have called the metahistorical type: Yoder (2002), 390. This illustrates the modalities' possible overlap.

146 This is a gloss because, while Barth does indeed characterise the task of dogmatics as the correction of the Church's preaching (see *CD* I/1, 3–11), mention of said corrective purpose in fact disappears when Barth turns to ethics.

the same degree of certainty and universality for ethics as we are accustomed to claiming in Christology".[147]

In the above summary, the reference both to Christ's person and teachings matters, since it is this which provides the theo-ontological basis of Yoder's understanding of theology and ethics. For although he does not *expressly* affirm the ontological divine/human covenant which so drove, Yoder sets out a critique of Barth's stance on war very much indicative of him having parallel considerations in mind. According to that stance, Barth was opposed to participation in war in general, but also allowed for exceptional cases when that participation might become permissible, such as the defence of Switzerland against a hypothetical Nazi invasion. Thus he concluded that "Christian ethics can no longer be absolutely pacifist".[148]

This process of reasoning troubles Yoder. For Barth recognises Christ's unconditional refusal of violence. But he then proceeds by speculating about possible exceptions – the *Grenzfall*, or border case – when a particular command by God might contradict Christ's teaching. Hence although his intention is "to fully ... respect the [particular] situation",[149] Barth nonetheless abstracts from the full reality of the person of Christ. By so moving away from Christ's actual teachings, he is therefore led into a conception of divine freedom more akin to "modern pagan existentialism", where "God is capable of simply commanding different without providing us with any reasons".[150] Such a

147 Yoder (2003), 48.
148 *CD* III/4, 462.
149 Yoder (2003), 44.
150 Ibid., 48.

capricious concept of God's freedom is what, in fact, Barth's doctrine of election was intended to overcome.[151]

Consequently, Yoder posits, "we cannot count on situations ever arising in which God would take back what he said in Christ, or give us commands which are not concordant with his revelation of himself in Jesus Christ".[152] So the most concrete ethic we have is that we find in the person of Jesus, and any step away from that person is likewise a move into ethical abstraction. If we accept this claim, it follows that the *Grenzfall* is merely a "label" for how Barth "in certain contexts ... is convinced of the necessity of the not acting according to the way God seems to have spoken in Christ".[153] It is, in short, a way for Barth to dodge the full implications of what he is saying.

Yoder, then, seeks to root both dogmatics and ethics in the specific historical reality of Jesus himself. There will still be the question of how to apply Christ's teachings, embedded in his particular context, to our own.[154] But such a process of contextual transference must be embraced, not dodged as Barth attempts through the *Grenzfall*. Indeed, it is at this point where Barth is, on Yoder's appraisal, "most completely 'non-Barthian'".[155]

That last remark suggests, I should observe, that Yoder is trying to frame himself as simply rendering Barth more consistent to his own concerns, and this is how the former has been read.[156] But despite that framing's rhetorical power, I would suggest that Yoder is less correcting Barth using the latter's own resources, than setting out a

151 On this, see McCormack (2000).
152 Yoder (2003), 48.
153 Ibid., 54.
154 Ibid., 53.
155 Ibid., 85.
156 Thus Mast (2015), 168–74.

competing understanding of God's self-revelation in Christ. The basis of Yoder's position is that the person and teachings of the *historical* Jesus provide the most concrete instantiation of the divine command. For Barth, this person and his teachings are also key. But so is the trinitarian structure of revelation, according to which God reveals himself in the Son even as the Father remains fully concealed, with the Spirit mediating that revelation. Consequently, not only are the teachings of the historical Christ important, but also the ongoing Lordship of the *present* Christ.[157]

Such an emphasis on the present Christ is missing in Yoder's corpus. Instead, that corpus is deeply shaped by the claim that the historical Jesus is the foundation of Christian ethics. Thus his best-known work, *The Politics of Jesus*, is directed against the common contemporary dismissal of the relevance of Christ's person for ethics, such as because his teachings are considered to be inconsequential for modern life. But when this dismissal is internalised even by Christian theologians, what that really reflects, Yoder says, is embarrassment over the prospect of a "specifically Christian ethic".[158] In contrast, if we were to read the gospel descriptions of Christ more carefully, we would find that his "deeds show a coherent, conscious social-political character and direction, and ... [that] his words are inseparable therefrom".[159] That is, those descriptions of the historical Jesus demonstrate a distinctive ethic, one which theologians cannot surrender if they are to be worthy of the name Christian.

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157 Mawson, likewise, observes the lopsided reading of Bonhoeffer articulated by those who read him precisely through the lens of Yoder, so as to ignore Bonhoeffer's emphasis on "the present or living Christ", who "calls and gathers his disciples to himself directly": Mawson (2016), 133.

158 Yoder (1994a), 10.

159 Ibid., 112.

As we have already suggested, the claim that Christ is himself the theo-ontological basis of both ethics and dogmatics must still be followed by some process of moral discernment. Without this, we would not be able to determine what shape our obedience to Jesus should take in our own milieu.[160] Such a process, Yoder argues, must be an *ecclesial* one. It is to be carried out, not by individuals deciding good and evil for themselves, but rather by a congregation governed through the consent of its members. That congregation is exemplified, on his account, by the churches of the Radical Reformation, which have allegedly struck the appropriate middle ground between an unaccountable individualism and ecclesiastical authoritarianism. Accordingly, "the will of God becomes known in the gathered congregation, when proclamation and the present challenge meet in concrete processes of communication, mutual correction, conviction and commitment".[161]

This helps us make sense of Yoder's claim that "ecclesiology is social ethics".[162] By this, he means that the shape of what is right and wrong is to be determined by the Church itself, and not for example by individual Christians. Of course, that proposition foregrounds the question of exactly how the Church is to so decide. Across several writings, therefore, Yoder refers to what he calls the "binding and loosing" procedure of Mt.18:15–20, in which Christ speaks of what to do when a brother has sinned. As he

160 Cartwright would say that this move from the "biblical realism" of Christ's personhood to a further procedure of moral discernment is ultimately untenable precisely because it itself always involves abstraction: Cartwright (2006), 200–34. If this critique is accurate, it would suggest that Yoder has not really advanced much further beyond Barth vis-à-vis the problem of particularity in ethics.

161 Yoder (2003), 87.

162 See Yoder (1994b).

reads it, this passage sets out an ecclesial procedure whereby moral discernment is to be undertaken through a "person-to-person conversation with reconciling intent".[163]

Yoder's academic writings only ever set out broad guidelines for how this procedure should be carried out. It should involve prophecy, not in the sense of predicting the future, but rather through articulating "a vision of the place of the believing community in history".[164] It should also require deliberate recollection of the Church's past, which will help guide the present. There must also be "linguistic self-consciousness", that is, an awareness of the way language can alternately describe and obfuscate the reality to which the community belongs.[165] And finally, there should also be "order" and "due process", such as by ensuring "that everyone is heard, and that the conclusions reached are genuinely consensual".[166] I will return to this last characteristic shortly.

Importantly, the binding and loosing process will lead to a particular moral decision about what to do in a given situation. And that decision, Yoder says, will be granted a "transcendent moral ratification".[167] So if, indeed, "what you bind on earth shall be considered as bound in heaven" (Mt. 18:15), then what a congregation decides to be right really *becomes right*, in the sight of God. Such divinely sanctioned decision-making is to be treated as nothing short of one of the Church's "sacramental works".[168]

Yoder's ethics, we might therefore say, is deeply proceduralist in character. And, at first glance, it would seem to provide a productive way to navigate the tension between

163 Yoder (1994c), 328.
164 Yoder (1984a), 29.
165 Ibid., 30–3.
166 Ibid., 33.
167 Ibid., 27.
168 Yoder (1991), 35.

particularity and Christianicity which we have been exploring throughout this chapter. The first is honoured, because any participant "can bring into the discussion aspects of the picture that would not be taken into account in general statements of rules".[169] That is, the dialogue intrinsic to binding and loosing enables congregants to voice their insights about the concrete context in which they find themselves. And the second is respected, precisely since God himself will sanction the procedure's outcome.

However, whether these advantages will in fact materialise is far from clear. For despite the prospect of divine ratification, Yoder nonetheless concedes that the moral decision reached by the community may still be *wrong*. This may be either on *procedural* grounds, as when the community's "agreement" is not truly consensual, or on *substantive* grounds, as when it is "disobedient or misinformed", such that an individual must disagree with its conclusion.[170] But the latter case seems impossible to reconcile with the transcendent significance Yoder attaches to the community's decision-making. For if God has ratified what the community has decided through a formally correct procedure, how can that community err? And if it can, this reopens the question of whether the community's decisions truly are "Christian".

Even the former possibility of procedural errors raises difficulties. Why Yoder acknowledges that possibility is readily understandable: if the congregation has followed the wrong procedure, then it can be characterised as not having really engaged in the binding and loosing process described in Mt. 18. Accordingly, God cannot be said to have sanctioned the procedure's outcome.

169 Yoder (1994c), 333.
170 Yoder (1984a), 35.

But in that case, what counts as a right procedure? Again, Yoder's descriptions of binding and loosing are left solely on the level of guidelines, not strict rules. Furthermore, his appeal to "due process" as an important part of correct procedure is revealing. That term originates from English legal history, and has remained current because of its ongoing use in United States jurisprudence.[171] But it undeniably reflects an idea extrinsic to Mt. 18. Hence we might plausibly treat it as Yoder's own imposition onto the text, therefore resurrecting the problem of Christianicity he is trying to nip in the bud. For if a congregation models its decision-making off a "secular" legal tradition, can it said to be acting purely Christianly? In any case, if we actually examine that secular jurisprudence, we would find an emphasis by courts on the idea that good procedure can never be deduced entirely from abstract principles, but is always responsive to the particular inquiry in question.[172] By comparison, Mt. 18 does not lay down specific requirements to be followed, but leaves these as gaps to be filled in.

All this is to say that, if the benefit of the binding and loosing procedure is to maintain the identity of a Christian ethic while allowing it to be responsive to particular circumstances, crucial questions still remain. Above all, we are left to wonder how the procedure is to be designed so as to honour these dual priorities. Hence the Christianicity/particularity tension has not yet been resolved. It has, rather, merely been deferred.

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171 See, generally, Orth (2003).

172 Thus "due process is flexible and calls for such procedural protections as the particular situation demands": *Morrisey v. Brewer*, 408 U.S. 471, 481 (1972).

Tragically, these ambiguities are illustrated by the binding and loosing procedures under which Yoder was himself placed when his serial sexual predations came to light. Parts of that story are thus worth summarising here.[173]

From the 1970s to 1990s, Yoder sexually harassed and abused a large number of Mennonite women, many of them his students: likely more than fifty, and possibly more than a hundred.[174] The nature of the harassment and abuse varied. But it could include disrobing, touching the women's genitals and pressuring them to touch his own, sexual intercourse, and then subsequently forcing them to write for him what he had taught them about Christian sexual relationships.[175] The abuse was hardly spontaneous, Yoder rather engaging in what would now be called extensive and prolonged grooming behaviour.

Indeed, he repeatedly claimed a theological justification for his behaviour. Thus in private correspondence, Yoder characterised his actions as "experimental", a "testing" of a new theology of sexuality.[176] According to that new theology, Christ had a "familial", "non-genital" or "non-erotic" sexuality, which Christians ought also to practise as Christ's disciples.[177] This type of sexuality, as opposed to a "genital" one, would take the form of heterosexual relations outside of marriage, and could still extend to penile-genital penetration so long as there was no ejaculation.[178]

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173 In what follows, I will rely on the detailed account of historian Rachel Goossen, who was commissioned by Mennonite Church USA to study both Yoder's abuses and the institutional response to them: Goossen (2015).

174 Goossen (2015), 10–11.

175 Ibid., 7, 11, 31.

176 Ibid., 37.

177 Ibid., 25.

178 Ibid., 31, 34.

In response to emerging complaints, the attempts to curb Yoder's abuses began from the late 1980s, and were explicitly framed in terms of Mt. 18. The first took place at Goshen Biblical Seminary, where Yoder was on faculty. There, from 1980–2, two small groups from the seminary and the local Mennonite community were brought to hear the case against Yoder.[179] However, that case was only ever framed as a theological dispute about Yoder's views on human sexuality. Hence the point "was to consider only theoretical perspectives, not actual experience. Thus Yoder never referenced his experimentation".[180]

Out of this process, nonetheless, Yoder entered into a "Covenantal Agreement". That mandated him, in Goossen's words, "to initiate steps toward healing and reconciliation wherever his actions had caused injury".[181] However, all the contacted survivors of Yoder's abuse refused to participate, given they were "afraid of unpleasant or harmful consequences, either from John or from broader damage to their reputations".[182] And this was something Yoder exploited, claiming that "[i]n terms of the reconciliation mandate of Matt. 18 ... we cannot proceed in the absence of accusers".[183] He also characterised other aspects of the reconciliation procedure as involving "sweeping legalistic restrictions",[184] and claimed to have been denied "due process".[185]

In 1990, Yoder's local church began a new investigation, also within the framework of Mt. 18, though without requiring personal confrontation by the survivors of Yoder.[186] Although the investigation led to widespread public knowledge of his actions, and to his

179 Ibid., 39–41.
180 Ibid., 40.
181 Ibid., 39.
182 Ibid., 41.
183 Ibid., 41–2.
184 Ibid., 44.
185 Ibid., 47.
186 Ibid., 53–4.

ministerial credential being suspended, it was also questioned by some survivors. They rejected the very applicability of Mt. 18 "as a model for process ... appropriate in this case", given their lack of desire for an "ongoing relationship" with Yoder.[187] A further process concluded in 1996. That declined to reinstate his ministerial credential, but encouraged "the church to use his gifts of writing and teaching".[188] Yoder died the following year.

The above events raise a great number of issues. And we might find that, if we were to try to interpret those events via the previous two types of approach to the theology/ethics relationship we have considered, the factual matrix would very quickly highlight the limitations of those types as well.[189] Here, however, I will confine myself to the way those events impugn the binding and loosing procedure which Yoder so extolled in his academic work. For when he himself was in the dock, he intentionally derailed the various processes he recommended via procedural disputes, such as over his purported right to confront his accusers personally.

187 Ibid., 56.

188 Ibid., 72.

189 It would be amiss, however, not to mention here Hauerwas' complicated interpretation of – and involvement in – the events, given our consideration of him last chapter. Hauerwas was a friend of Yoder and, in 1994, tried to pressure the Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference to end its accountability process, in favour of reinstating Yoder's ministerial credential: Goossen (2015), 77–8.

In 2017, in the wake of the global #MeToo movement, Hauerwas apologised for the attempted interference. He thus wrote online that "[he] did not appropriately acknowledge how destructive John's behaviour was for the women involved ... [he] simply did not understand what was going on. However, in truth, [he] probably did not want to know what was going on": Hauerwas (2017). But the online article has itself been criticised for demonstrating insufficient curiosity about why his previous understanding of events was so deficient, or why he so readily discounted the reports he had received of Yoder's wrongdoing: see Scarsella (2017).

Without having space to go into further detail, we might say Hauerwas erred precisely because he, as a metahistorical thinker, applied an overbroad narrative about the merits of reconciliation to a complex factual matrix. That narrative distracted him from the actual facts and, in particular, from the concrete sufferings of Yoder's victims.

Similar disputes, we should note, are routinely faced by lawyers and judges regarding what is the best procedure in sexual assault cases. Take, for example, debates over the ways in which complainants might be appropriately cross-examined. The answers to such procedural questions, again, can hardly be said to irresistibly flow from first principles. Rather, it is typical for lawmakers to say they reflect an at least partly arbitrary balancing act between different competing interests, such as those of the accused and the complainant.[190] Likewise, it is true that the absence of accusers in Yoder's processes did deny both him and his adjudicators an important source of information. That is, and in our above terminology, it denied him access to knowledge of the *particular situation*. Still, there were obvious and sympathetic reasons why his victims were not present. It would thus seem an odd conclusion for the binding and loosing procedure to pursue particularity at all costs, so as to require them to be there.

In addition, an important question raised by subsequent commentators on the processes against Yoder was whether reconciliation under Mt. 18 was even appropriate in the first instance. It may have been that those processes should have been wholly bypassed, and a referral to law enforcement made instead. Thus Goossen: "One might reasonably imagine that, upon reading this memo [by Yoder admitting to the abuses], President Miller [the seminary president] called the police and pressed charges against the 51-year-old professor who was methodically perpetrating sexual violence on female students and presumably other women on campus. But this was 1979".[191] Similar issues have been raised, I note, in respect of confessed child abuse to priests and ministers.

190 See generally Roach (1999).
191 Goossen (2015), 8.

This issue of the relationship between an internal process and referrals to external law enforcement raises important questions about the limits of the binding and loosing process. Those include what to do if the process is unlikely to achieve reconciliation, or if said reconciliation is the only goal, or if there are other goals such as, say, the prevention of future sexual abuses. Hence, on one hand, it is undoubtedly true that those who would call for an immediate criminal justice referral "would not imagine they are denying their allegiance to Christ".[192] On the other hand, there is a serious and budding controversy nonetheless at stake here. For an authority external to the Church – the criminal justice system – is being invoked both to settle the matter and undercut the Church's own processes. But those processes are what, on Yoder's account, guarantee the Christian character of the Church's ethics. And, in the specific context of the Anabaptist tradition, the invocation of that external authority is peppered with even greater anxiety, given fears of a "Constantinian" intermingling of the Church with the state.[193]

All of this is to say that binding and loosing is not the panacea Yoder imagines it to be. For the specific shape it takes will be subject to a long series of competing but legitimate considerations. Those considerations may themselves put into question either the uniquely Christian identity or the ability to find all the relevant details of the resulting procedure. Hence the Christianicity/particularity tension remains, but simply manifests itself now in this question of procedural design. And the best illustration of this is Yoder's own life.

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192 Ibid., 120.
193 Martens (2016), 118–19.

I have now completed the first part of this thesis, with its typology of the major approaches to the theology/ethics relationship in contemporary Christian thought. Before proceeding to the second and constructive part of this thesis, a brief review of those approaches may assist.

The first type likened the theology/ethics relationship to a distinction between theory and practice. That distinction was itself hardly uncontentious or stable, given its complicated roots in Platonic and Aristotelian thought. Still, I identified two major subtypes for its use in modern Christianity. One subtype, popular among professional Christian ethicists, interpreted it as really about a division between theoretical and practical *reason*. The former leads to knowledge of the world and God. But the latter is intended to plot human action. In distinguishing the latter from the former, those employing the distinction considered themselves to be defending the freedom of moral agency from a reductive determinism.

The other subtype was concerned less with the different operations of reason, and more in "praxis", in the sense of what liberative action "really" looks like on the ground. On this interpretation, favoured by liberation and practical theologians, the theory/practice division is one between abstract speculation and the rolling chaos of reality. Hence the theology/ethics relationship usefully directs our attention to how the times and places in which we live always exceed the overarching descriptions we impose on them.

The second type I called the metahistorical. This was more ambivalent towards the theology/ethics relationship, sensing in the fissure between the two a major catalyst for theology's marginalisation in the modern research university. Thinkers in that type therefore tried to articulate one or more overarching categories, such as narrative, which

embraced both theology and ethics according to their purportedly intrinsic unity. In this way, they tried to preserve the coherence of the Christian's life.

The final type, the theo-ontological, saw in the theology/ethics distinction nothing less than contrasting dimensions of reality, such as the action of God and the action of humankind, or gospel and law. This approach was most obviously represented by Barth. That said, I took pains to observe how other figures within the type took very different stances to him, even while sharing his deepest assumptions. At the heart of this type was a sense that the theology/ethics relationship should illuminate how Christian beliefs and actions must be genuinely "Christian" ones. Hence when theo-ontological thinkers stress the unity of theology and ethics, they often do so as part of a larger argument for why both only receive their validity from the God of Jesus Christ.

Let us now ask what the fact of these very different types might suggest about how to understand the theology/ethics relationship as we go forward.

CHAPTER V

A CRITIQUE OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

The theology/ethics relationship, I have claimed, has proven vexing because each major approach to that relationship perceives something quite different at stake in it. Thus the theory/practice type distinguishes ethics from theology to defend the irreducibility of moral agency, or alternatively the particularity of the agent's circumstances. The metahistorical type tries to overcome the distinction between the two terms for the sake of the Christian life's coherence. And the theo-ontological type is concerned to preserve the distinctively Christian identity of ethics. To be clear, none of these priorities entirely disappears for any of the three types. Rather, all remain apparent in some form for each of the latter, however minimally. This fact will be intensely significant for the chapter which now follows.

In addition, each above type is capable of enormous internal variation, accommodating very different theological and ethical stances. Nonetheless, and despite this fluidity, the different variants of each type or subtype manifest the same basic structure for understanding the relationship between theology and ethics, linked to how they see the same priority to be upheld through the relationship. Such a shared priority, I have argued, is what justifies my otherwise eclectic groupings.

Accordingly, the existence of the three types demonstrates that radically different concerns have come to be nestled under a single conceptual distinction between theology and ethics. No wonder then, why so much confusion about that distinction has prevailed! That confusion also produces the result that, although thinkers within each

type would hardly reject the priorities championed by the competing types, they can only awkwardly fit these other priorities within their own frameworks.

Our task of diagnosing the three types now complete, the remainder of this thesis will seek a way forward. In this chapter, therefore, I want to propose an account of the *Christian life*, to advance beyond the perplexities that were apparent from the types. I have already been using that term throughout this thesis, but it now requires elaboration. In short, the Christian life is the presupposed background of all three types, without which neither "theological" nor "ethical" claims could be meaningful or binding. That life comprises the four priorities mentioned above, which I will henceforth call *the facets of the Christian life*. All theological and Christian ethical claims feel the gravitational pull of all four facets, even if they tend to rotate primarily around just one.

The Christian life also implies what I will call the *multiperspectivity* and the *perspectival equiprimordiality* of its four facets. By these, I mean that it is intrinsic to the Christian life to see reality in several different ways. Specifically, to be Christian implies maintaining a series of perspectives, each of which is based on one of the discrete facets of that life. Those perspectives, I argue, both are irreducible to but also presuppose one another. In contrast, the failure to recognise this simultaneous unity and differentiatedness of the Christian life has produced considerable mischief among theologians and Christian thinkers. For they, in lopsidedly focusing upon just one facet and on the perspective centred upon it, mistake that facet and perspective as the only ones.

My proposal can be usefully contrasted with two competing responses to the diversity of approaches to the theology/ethics relationship. The first we might call a

disaggregation response, and would conclude that the relationship is a chimera. It has come to refer not to any single debate, but to several.[1] Accordingly, the mistake in talking about *the* relationship between theology and ethics is that no such single relationship exists. Rather, "theology" and "ethics" are both unstable terms, varying their meaning depending on the debate in which they are presently participating. Conceptual good practice, therefore, requires us to more clearly delineate between those debates, including by using distinct terms to refer to each. Hence we should disband with talk of "the relationship between theology and ethics". Or, at a minimum, we should restrict that talk to just one debate.

There is much to be said for minimising the confusion engendered by a *duality* between theology and ethics, not least because the state of play, I have claimed, is much more of a *quadrupole*. Or, to shift metaphors, it cannot help that two-dimensional terms are being used to describe three-dimensional space. Still, what the attempt at disaggregation assumes is that the debates to be split up are indeed entirely disconnected from one another. Yet again, when we examined each type, what was clear is that none was *solely* concerned with the facet of the Christian life it prioritised. Rather, each paid credence to all four facets, though it could only problematically incorporate the other three.

So there is not only difference, but also interdependence. We might say that the types do not represent fundamentally disconnected debates, but instead take very different starting points in the same far-ranging one. That it is only one debate is nonetheless obscured by each type's refusal to stray too far from the place from which it began. In

[1] C.f., in liberal political philosophy, Laborde's "disaggregation strategy", according to which "religion", as a general concept, is impossible for a legal system to satisfactorily define. That system should therefore target more discrete dimensions of religion for regulation, for example, religion as a mode of human association, or as a conception of the good life: Laborde (2017).

contrast, the purpose of a conception of the Christian life is to recognise this complex but still single topography.

A second and opposite response to the fact of the three types is one we might term, loosely after Hegel, a *sublation* response. On this view, each type suffers the defect, not of being wrong, but of being incomplete. Each grasps an important truth, but fails to appreciate the truths the other types hold dear, like the blind men feeling different parts of the elephant. Accordingly, instead of disaggregating the theology/ethics relationship into its constituent debates, we should try to ascend to a higher perspective, one which seamlessly co-ordinates the different types' priorities.

The trouble with this alternative parallels the criticism commonly advanced against the Hegelian dialectic. That is, the sublation response fails to recognise the irreducibility of each type's priority, and its resistance to being incorporated into a greater whole. For example, to try to absorb moral agency and responsibility into a comprehensive framework quickly tends towards a determinism which destroys what is unique about that agency. Thus a wider recontextualisation of moral responsibility implies, in fact, that responsibility's abdication. Accordingly, the distinctive moments prioritised by the three types must still be preserved, not absorbed: the bacchanalian revellers should not collapse into one another, but must remain standing.[2] Such ongoing differentiation is what the following account of the Christian life is intended to acknowledge.

This chapter, then, begins by introducing the concept of the Christian life, by comparing it to the notion of "forms of life" presently popular in critical theory. That discussion will foreground the need to more carefully scrutinise what it means to take a perspective

[2] C.f. Hegel (2018), 29 [47].

either “internal” or “external” to the Christian life. Second, I will describe that life’s four facets. This entails, in effect, reviewing the priorities of the three types examined in the previous chapters. Third, I will extend my analysis of internal and external perspectives, by arguing that the Christian life really comprises four different perspectives, each focused on a particular facet of that life, and which must be kept distinct notwithstanding their mutual presupposition. Fourth, I will turn to how this account of the Christian life sets limits on how theological and ethical claims may be articulated, and suggests a picture of the way those claims dynamically develop.

Given these several steps, it may help to keep the endpoint in mind from the beginning. My contention, to reiterate, is that there has been a continued failure by many contemporary Christian thinkers (theologians, ethicists, and otherwise) to recognise that the Christian life is always comprised of multiple interconnected but also distinct perspectives. But the consequences of this failure of recognition are non-trivial. It has inhibited the ability of Christian thinkers to appreciate that no single perspective has all the answers. Thus, for example, the Christian life does not develop through brilliant auteurs making profound new proposals for how to do theology. Rather, it advances through careful attention to each of the constitutive perspectives which comprise that life. In such a way, those perspectives will then be able to inform and mutually correct one another, though without swallowing one another whole. In contrast, the failure to acknowledge this dynamic obscures the real crises that arise when the perspectives fall into contradiction, rendering those crises that much more difficult to resolve.

1 The Christian Life and Forms of Life

What are we even talking about, when we talk about the Christian life? When Karl Barth defines *das christliche Leben* as a human life "grounded in the knowledge of God in Jesus Christ and oriented to the effected justification, sanctification, and vocation of man in him",[3] this is certainly not equivalent to Oliver O'Donovan's argument that the "permanent and invariable structure of the Christian life" comprises the theological virtues of faith, hope and love.[4] In turn, both claims are far from identical from Stanley Hauerwas' suggestion that "[t]he idea of character ... provide[s] a way of making the Christian life intelligible".[5] And none of these proposals can be equated with the one advanced by six practical theologians, who say that "the practices of faith, including the arts of ministry .... are not merely tools", but are themselves "both the goal and the path of the Christian life".[6]

But while these various statements are not the same, they are not obviously incompatible. Nor is it apparent they are using the "Christian life" as an empty placeholder, or referring to fundamentally different *concepts* of it. Instead, the statements are plausibly using *the same concept* of that Christian life, but that concept is complex and differentiated. They are thus describing that life from different perspectives, focusing on different facets of it. This multiperspectivity is all-important, and the common disregard of it, I will argue, is at the core of the contemporary confusion over the theology/ethics relationship.

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3 Barth (1981a), 37.
4 O'Donovan (2013), 99.
5 Hauerwas (1994b), 143.
6 Bass and Dykstra (2008), 358.

That multiperspectivity, nonetheless, needs explication in several steps. The following section therefore introduces us to the concept of the Christian life, by (1) comparing it to an idea presently in vogue in critical theory, that of the form of life (*die Lebensform*). While there are similarities, the differences will (2) require closer examination of what is entailed by the *identity* of the Christian life, and so also what is meant by being "inside" as opposed to "outside" it. My argument will be that even someone participating within the Christian life always has dual perspectives, meaning that they also always perceive it from without. The need for clarification of these dual perspectives will push us, in the next section, to consider more closely the specific facets of the Christian life. Finally, I will (3) explore a closely related difference between the generic conception of forms of life and the idea of the Christian life, namely that regarding the *continuity of identity* of each.

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What is a form of life? The term can be used in an extraordinarily wide array of contexts. We may therefore speak about religious forms of life; the nuclear family as a form of life; the forms of life of cosmopolitan elites as opposed to a geographically immobile working class; forms of life under liberal democracy or under late stage capitalism; modern forms of life in contrast to premodern ones; and so on. What, however, unites these usages?

I will adopt, in what follows, the philosophical account of forms of life recently articulated by critical theorist Rahel Jaeggi. First, it is worth quoting the orienting definition she offers:

> "talk of forms of life ... refers to forms of human co-existence shaped by culture, to 'orders of human coexistence' that include an 'ensemble of practices and orientations' but also their institutional manifestations and materializations. Therefore, differences in forms of life find expression not only in different beliefs, value orientations, and attitudes but are also manifested and materialized in fashion, architecture, legal systems, and forms of family organization, in what Robert Musil called ... 'the durable stuff of buildings, laws, regulations, and historical traditions' that constitutes our lives".[7]

To give a snapshot of Jaeggi's more formal and elaborate account, forms of life are *ensembles of social practices, together with the norms they embody*. First, said social practices are repeated and habitual sequences of actions with social meanings. Those sequences may be as quotidian as making a bank transfer, or as dramatic as the Eucharist.[8] Their social basis means they have an "active-passive" character, being actively participated in while also pre-existing their subjects.[9] Hence we shape our practices, even as they, in becoming "second nature", shape us, such as by encouraging certain self-understandings and frameworks of meaning.

Second, forms of life are *ensembles* or *networks* of such practices. Those practices are therefore interlinked, and contribute to common purposes, even while each practice makes its own distinct contribution to the overall goal. So it makes sense to speak of, say, industrialised economies as involving a "functional nexus" comprising agricultural practices, urban consumption practices, ways of organising work and transport, and so on.[10] Such a nexus also provides the interpretive framework for understanding what the purposes of such practices are, and without which it would be impossible to glean how those practices are meaningful. In addition, because forms of life can be analysed according to their component social practices, those forms can overlap because of

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7 Jaeggi (2018), 3.
8 Ibid., 56–7.
9 Ibid., 60–1.
10 Ibid., 64.

practices they share, and which contribute to multiple forms. Or they might take the shape of small-scale forms of life which are themselves components of larger forms.[11]

Third, forms of life embody more or less explicitly articulated *norms,* which exert pressure for how to live on their participants, and possibly also non-participants. They require, permit and forbid various forms of behaviours and social interactions. And, more basically, they "structur[e] the space of possibilities of action itself that is given with this form of life, by dividing up the domain of human action into right and wrong, appropriate and inappropriate, intelligible and unintelligible".[12]

Such norms are justified both *functionally*, by contributing to the preservation of the form of life or its constituting practices, as with the norm "You must keep your promises", which encourages long-term relationships of trust.[13] They are also justified *ethically*, by specifying what makes the practice "good".[14] That said, these two types of justifications usually arrive mixed. Consider ethical professional norms that define good medical practice, but which are also functionally justified based on the role doctors play in society.[15] Thus functional and ethical rationales may well complement one another.

A few other features of forms of life bear mention here. They have a certain stability over time, distinguishing them from mere *lifestyles* or *fashions*, though they are still unlikely to last forever.[16] And they are responsive to the conditions of reality in which life is lived, such as the climate, the urban density of big cities, public statuary which

11 Ibid., 51–2.
12 Ibid., 95.
13 Ibid., 109.
14 Ibid., 111–12.
15 Ibid., 112–13.
16 Ibid., 38–43.

symbolically encourages certain forms of life over others, and institutions like government agencies or ecclesiastical structures.[17]

That helps us understand one of Jaeggi's most important formulations, that forms of life are "problem-solving processes".[18] Such "problems" are not the same as bare physiological needs. They are, rather, "culturally specific and historically socially shaped" tasks that need to be addressed in order for a form of life to achieve the goals it has set for itself.[19] So for an agrarian form of life, an unprecedentedly severe drought is not of itself a "problem", since it is purely external. The problem, rather, would be the task of coping with the new conditions the drought brings on. Or, if that coping ability proves inadequate because of social or political inertia, the problem would be the task of undoing such blockages to a satisfactory response.[20] Forms of life, accordingly, are learning processes for finding solutions to problems like these, and a sufficiently huge failure to do so will deliver a form of life into crisis, or destroy it entirely.

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Is the Christian life simply one form of life, then? Yes and no. Yes, because of course it is meaningful, and potentially powerfully illuminating, to speak of Christianity as a set of interlocking practices that impose norms upon adherents, and which have both endured and evolved over time.

But there are also important differences between the Christian life and the generic account of forms of life now outlined. Of course, many forms of life would likely be

17 Ibid., 70–5.
18 Ibid., 133.
19 Ibid., 137.
20 Ibid., 165–7.

considered by their adherents to be *sui generis*. Still, there are two particular features of the concept of the Christian life that warrant attention, the first relating to that life's *identity*.

We can approach the matter in terms of spatial imagery, by asking what it means to be *inside* or *outside* a form of life generally, and what it means, in contrast, to be *within* or *without* the Christian life specifically.[21] As for the former, to be inside a form of life (and so to identify with it) means to participate in its practices and norms, and to be outside it means not to so participate. But between these polarities are *deficient* instances of a form of life, which sit ambiguously both within and without it. If, for example, a family is so dysfunctional it has broken down, it is not merely emphatic to say "that's not a family". But it also not *not* a family. Jaeggi explains this double status through appeal to the Hegelian concept (*Begriff*): the dysfunctional family is still being judged according to a concept of what a functioning family is, even if it fails to correspond to it.[22]

This issue of internality and externality is of especial interest to Jaeggi because of what it suggests about the different ways one may engage in criticism (*Kritik*) of a form of life. A form of life might thus be criticised *externally*, as when a European criticises certain non-European practices of arranged marriage. Here, the norms from one form of life are being used to attack another form.

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21 Though we should be cautious about the unconstructive paths onto which such spatial imagery might nudge us. C.f. Kitching's argument about the confusions into which Marx's descriptions of society are led because of the latter's use of spatial imagery: Kitching (2003a), 53–70; and Williams' scepticism of the "*territorial* cast of the imagery" used by theologians like Lindbeck in describing the nature of religion: Williams (2000a), 29 (emphasis in original).

22 Jaeggi (2018), 118–21.

External criticism allows for a wide range of possible criticisms, but is frequently suspected of being imperialistic, and of failing to understanding a form of life's internal complexity. The latter issue stems from how someone outside the form of life will lack the interpretive matrix to make sense of its practices and those practices' complex, interlocking relationships with one another. For this reason, liberal societies often discourage external criticism, as with the dictum that each person should be free to pursue their own version of the good life. Such a dictum remains influential, even as those societies are constantly accused of implicitly favouring certain conceptions of the good life over others anyway.[23]

Alternatively, a form of life might be criticised *internally*, as when a pastor chastises their congregation for falling short of standards it claims to hold dear.[24] This internal criticism is rhetorically more powerful than external criticism, because it holds adherents to standards to which they have previously agreed. Plus, it tends to come from insiders already trusted by adherents.[25]

Still, its transformative potential is limited. First, a form of life's standards may be open to interpretation, so as to produce gridlock over whether they have really been breached. What, for example, might it mean to love one's neighbour in the context of contemporary and complicated migration policies?[26] Second, even when a breach is clearly identified, it may be more convenient to not reform the standard, but instead dilute the norm. Jaeggi thus singles out "the fate of Christian sexual morality in modern

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23 C.f. Jaeggi's discussion of such "ethical abstinence", as advocated by Rawls and Habermas, in ibid., 9–21.

24 Ibid., 117–18. Jaeggi's account of internal criticism is developed in conversation with Michael Walzer: see, e.g., Walzer (1987).

25 Jaeggi (2018), 183–4.

26 See ibid., 185.

Western societies" as an instance "in which the spread of a divergent practice led society to conclude that norms and moral conceptions had become outmoded and to abandon them".[27] Third, internal criticism takes a form of life's norms as given, not thinking to critique these as well. In this sense, it is still conservative.[28]

Given the limitations intrinsic to the two forms of criticism above, Jaeggi proposes a third, which in the tradition of critical theory she calls *immanent criticism*. That begins with the norms and practices of a particular form of life, such as that of bourgeois capitalism, but then tries to show how those norms and practices eventually lead into contradiction. Take the famous Marxist contention that capitalism sows the seeds of its own destruction.[29] That is to say, the form of life is led through its own motions into *crisis*, and the immanent critic's aim is to use said crisis as an opportunity for changing the form.[30] Hence, on Jaeggi's characterisation, the critic begins *internally*, but precisely to develop a criticism that operates *externally*, such that "it no longer even makes sense to ask what is inside or outside".[31]

If we were to accept these remarks about the internality/externality distinction, what might they suggest about what it means to fall inside or outside the Christian life? To exist within that Christian life, we might say, means participating in practices included in that form of life, such as prayer, liturgical worship or the sacraments. For the rest of this chapter, I will call this state of being inside the Christian life a state of *inhabiting* that life.[32] Conversely, someone who does not participate in those practices, or does so

27 Ibid., 186.
28 Ibid., 186–7.
29 Ibid., 191–7.
30 Ibid., 201–2.
31 Ibid., 195.
32 In this respect, following ibid., 128–9, which in turn follows Pinkard (2012).

badly, does not inhabit the Christian life. Or perhaps they do, but deficiently, in the sense described above.

In addition, no one ever follows a *single* form of life, but always straddles multiple ones. So someone might be a Christian, but also be a citizen of a liberal democracy, and so engage in practices like voting which are, *prima facie*, only referrable to the latter. Thus crucially, one never exists solely *within* the Christian life but, through their other forms of life, also simultaneously stands outside it.

There is another reason for this dual inside/outside status. Recall Jaeggi's description of a form of life as a *network* of practices. Some of those practices might belong to that network alone, but others may belong to multiple networks, not all of which will have an obvious Christian referent. Consider a church secretary working on the church's tax returns. This could plausibly be characterised as a practice falling within the Christian life, and simultaneously *also* a practice falling inside the form of life we associate with the modern regulatory state. So no one is ever solely inside the Christian life, but everyone who is inside is simultaneously outside, and is examining that life from both within and without. We should be sensitive, then, to how there is no inhabitation of the Christian life without this dual status. Thus the general account of forms of life has considerable explanatory power in describing what it means to identify with the Christian life, though said identity, we have now seen, bears a profound spatial instability.

But I now want to argue that the identity of the Christian life also raises issues unique to that life alone. In particular, what we have called the Christian life's *Christianicity* has no equivalent in other forms of life. For there is something essential, however also

elusive, about the fact that the Christian life is indeed Christian. In contrast, for say a feminist form of life, the word "feminist" may have important strategic uses, or may simply be a convenient shorthand for certain features of the form. But the word is not ultimately indispensable for the form of life's preservation: the form may change labels, while remaining basically the same. Likewise, the immanent critic, while starting from a form of life's norms, has no necessary interest in maintaining that form's identity, as with the Marxist committed to destroying bourgeois capitalism from within.

In contrast, to reduce the label "Christian" to a mere sociological descriptor would be to miss the whole point. There is something important about *remaining* Christian, of running the race already set before oneself (Heb. 12:1), instead of becoming and doing something else. It was the theo-ontological thinkers I considered in Chapter IV who proved most sensitive to this. Recall that, for a theologian like Barth, to be a Christian or to act Christianly is in God's hands alone. Hence even the theologian who does all the right things in preparing their theological work, and whose work reaches all the right conclusions, may nonetheless have God withdraw from it. Accordingly, Christian identity is not guaranteed merely by engaging in "Christian" practices, adhering to the "Christian story", or having the right "Christian" convictions.

Instead, and to reiterate, Christian identity is unstable and apophatic. Or in Barth's telling formulation premised on his doctrine of justification, "[a] first thing which characterises the Christian ... [is] the orientation of man on Jesus Christ. ... At the very centre of his being he is no longer here or there, but at this very definite place outside

himself".[33] That is, the centre of the Christian life is Christ, but on Barth's provocative suggestion, this centre is *outside* that life.

Once again, then, the internal/external distinction is problematised – but in a way without parallel for Jaeggi. That is, a person is both inside and outside the Christian life, but this is not solely because they always participate in practices belonging to other forms of life. Rather, it is also because the practices and norms comprising the Christian life *themselves* always exist in an aporetic relationship with the source of their Christian identity, namely, God. So stereotypically Christian practices like singing hymns or almsgivings may be Christian – but maybe not, if God turns his face away.

It is worth observing that, from a viewpoint completely external to the Christian life, the belief in a distinctive identity of the Christian life provided by God will of course appear as a kind of *false consciousnes*s, an ideological claim that might be fruitfully deconstructed.[34] But even for someone existing within that life, the fact they also exist outside it implies a *dual consciousness*. By this, I mean that the world is never seen purely from the standpoint of Christian identity, but also simultaneously from the outside. And that, to summarise the foregoing, is first because one always participates in forms of life other than the Christian one. Second, many of the practices one performs as part of the Christian life are also referrable to other forms of life. And third and most decisively, there is no practice within the Christian life that does not have an unstable relationship with its own Christian identity.

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33 *CD* IV/1, 743.

34 Consider, e.g., religion scholar Tomoko Masuzawa's contention that Barth's emphasis on the "singularly alien prophetic monotheism of the Hebrew" can be included within a wider genre of arguments about Christian uniqueness, but which really assist in the West's "colonial self-articulation": Masuzawa (2005), 299–300.

I want to stress that this dual sense of seeing things from both inside and out does not warrant an elimination of the distinction between the two, since what is important is precisely the multiperspectivity suggested by the distinction. But that dual sense does highlight the limits of the spatial language of internality versus externality. It hence indicates the need to articulate a more nuanced account of the multiperspectivity at stake here. This will be the task of the following sections. For now, though, I want to gesture at the knots in which theologians and Christian thinkers have found themselves when they disregard the dual consciousness characteristic to the Christian life. I will name two.

First, consider how, during the 20th century, the academic study of Christianity split into two irreconcilable halves. On Johannes Zachhuber's characterisation, we are now left with both "a secular science of religion" and "a decidedly Christian 'theology of revelation'". The latter has "sought to consolidate its academic credentials as a hermeneutic theory of explaining Christianity from within",[35] with never the twain meeting. Thus the academic study of the Christian life has fractured into perspectives looking at it from without, versus those trying to examine it wholly from within.

Naturally, Zachhuber names Barth as a clear instance of the latter. But if, as I have argued, a purely internal view of the Christian life is actually impossible, then we should expect Barth's attempt to produce distortions. For example, a common response by forms of life which perceive themselves to be under siege within liberal democracies has been "to essentialize and petrify",[36] that is, to resist change and to deny their previous dynamism. As much is illustrated by difficult contemporary controversies over

35 Zachhuber (2013), 292.
36 Jaeggi (2018), 23 (emphasis removed).

cultural appropriation. Analogously, if Barth's concern is to explain the Christian life entirely from within, we might anticipate that his rendering of that life will be uncomfortably static.

And this is precisely what we found when, in Chapter IV, I observed that Barth's powerful emphasis on Christianicity tended to render the moral value of the Christian's life invisible. For this can be recast as that Barth offers a fixed image of the Christian life centred upon the work of God. That image, we have seen, is difficult to reconcile with the plurality of human existences that might constitute a faithful response to the divine action. Thus the pressure for theology to remain academically rigorous has in fact produced accounts of the Christian life which, in trying to stay wholly internal, portray that life as more stationary than what is actually the case.

Second, when theologians do try to describe the internal dynamism of the Christian life, they are often confused about what exactly they are seeking to do via that description. Recall, for instance, Clodovis Boff's account of the mediations between liberation theology and both classic theology and liberative praxis (Chapter II). But he was also ambivalent about whether that account counts as "philosophy", or instead "theology". So on one hand, the account is an example of what "classic tradition had denominated 'philosophy'", characterised by "the ceaseless, indefinite reappraisal of its own presuppositions".[37] Yet on the other, Boff imagines that "[w]hatever contribution [he] may make ... will be in the area of theology".[38]

37 Boff (1987), 165.
38 Ibid., 157 (emphasis removed).

Of course, there are endless resources from which Boff could draw from his own Catholic tradition, and which would suggest an entwinement of philosophy and theology. But this is what he does not do. Instead, he assumes a rigid distinction between the two, and then equivocates about which he is doing. Or, to return to spatial imagery, Boff assumes the Christian life must be described from *either* within or without, but then cannot decide which standpoint he has adopted.

An alternative example would be George Lindbeck's "cognitive-linguistic" conception of doctrines as rules governing a religion. Lindbeck claims this conception "is not specifically ecumenical, nor Christian, nor theological", but is instead derived "from philosophical and social-scientific approaches".[39] At the same time, it "has advantages ... for Christian ... ecumenical and theological purposes", which thus constitute its "focus".[40] He thus positions himself as taking a position of the Christian life from without – but one he hopes will be adopted by ecumenists considering that life from within. Yet this transition to within is never finally clarified. Lindbeck therefore opens himself to the common suspicion of theories of religion which, while claiming general validity, really take Protestantism as their implicit paradigm.[41] Such theories therefore claim to represent external points of view, while really staying internally based.

In this chapter's last section, it will be incumbent upon me to clarify what I think I am myself doing in the present account of the Christian life.

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39 Lindbeck (1984), 7.
40 Ibid., 7–8.
41 See Asad (1993), 28.

There is a second, closely related difference between the concept of the Christian life and the general account of forms of life, which can be more briefly described. It is readily illustrated if we imagine, say, a contemporary church seeking to live out the communal life described in Acts 2 and 4, or a modern theologian advocating the practices of prayer of this or that patristic thinker. We frequently call this the retrieval of the tradition. Yet, for our purposes, the critical point really concerns the *continuity of identity* between the Christian life of those in the apostolic and patristic church and the Christian life of contemporary Christians. Such retrieval, therefore, is fundamentally different from say, the appropriation by Renaissance scholars of a certain image of Greek and Roman antiquity. Both cases involve an attempt to reclaim the past. But for the latter, that past remains foreign even as it is held up as a model, whereas for the former, that past is thought to be somehow already "ours". If such a sense of continuity were lost, the unacceptable result would follow whereby, as Rowan Williams puts it, "the 'salvation' of the medieval peasant and of the twentieth-century bourgeois would operate in mutually inaccessible frames of reference".[42]

Continuity of identity also cuts geographically, rather than solely temporally. An evangelical Christian in the United States and Orthodox Christian in Syria, both living in the 21st century, are likely to share few practices, and unlikely to be able to reach an understanding of the other's theological beliefs. But it is at least plausible they would affirm a shared "Christian life" in which both participate.

Given the myriad ways forms of life may be delimited, it is not impossible to accommodate this sense of a shared life within the general account of a form of life. So

[42] Williams (2000a), 21.

one might suggest that the evangelical American and Orthodox Syrian Christians each has practices which point to their common belonging in the universal Church, like affirming the same creed. But such accommodation is still awkward, precisely because there are still far too few shared practices to constitute a common form of life. For example, and to focus on time instead of place, even if we were to retrieve some of the patristics' practices, the disjunction between our context and theirs is simply too great, and the problems (in Jaeggi's technical sense) we face are so different from theirs, that we cannot readily conclude that we inhabit the *same* form of life.

And so it may seem that the claimed shared belonging does not entail a single form of life. It is, rather, merely *imagined*, akin to the characterisation of a nation as an imagined community of people who will never meet each other.[43] Such imagining can still have titanic effects, not least in the construction of the social world. But those effects may not be contiguous with the development of the interlocking social practices that comprise a real form of life.

Yet from "within" the perspective of the Christian life, the identity held in common by the Church universal is not solely an imagined one. Rather, if the identity of the Christian life is derived, however aporetically, from God, then so too is that identity's continuity. So while Christians from different contexts might have very little in common, they might still share an identity, since that identity does not only stem from having the same practices. Instead, it is given by God, who cuts across this seeming lack of continuity.

43 Anderson (1983), 5–7.

2 The Facets of the Christian Life

The previous section introduced the concept of the Christian life, and suggested it can only be considered from a multiplicity of perspectives. To further this analysis, I now turn to that life's four facets, namely, the responsibility of the moral agent, the particularity of the situation, the coherence of the Christian life, and that life's distinctively Christian identity. Next section, I will argue these facets provide a more nuanced way of delineating the different perspectives intrinsic to the Christian life.

Here, I should observe that the following review will not argue in favour of any specific interpretation of any of the facets. As the previous chapters suggest, an enormously wide range of competing positions are possible in respect of them, which would be hopeless to try to reconcile here. Instead, my purpose is rather narrower: through the series of obviously unsynthesisable theological and non-theological voices I now collate, I aim to show that, although the facets are not reducible to one another, it is hard, when describing one, not also to refer to all the others.

A Moral Agency

"We swim in a sea of moral obligations, tangled in seaweed on every side, acknowledging claims here, asserting responsibilities there".[44] As O'Donovan rightly discerns, we are *thrown* into moral responsibility and agency. Thus we feel their pressure, even though we are often unsure about from where they came, or where they are pushing us.

[44] O'Donovan (2013), 1.

Interest in the experience of moral agency extends well beyond theologians. For Kant, for example, that interest is expressed in terms of *wonder*. "Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and reverence", he famously writes in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, "the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me".[45] For while contemplation of the celestial bodies makes me aware of my own cosmic insignificance, the very fact I feel bound to a moral law signals an importance I have *independent* of the universe, and therefore "infinitely raises my worth".[46]

On Kant's account, this sense of the moral law derives from my status as a reasonable self. Such a status, he argues, cannot be explained by reference to phenomena from the sensible world. Thus my experience as a responsible self cannot be reduced, say, to a by-product of human evolution, or to historical contingencies discoverable via Nietzschean genealogies. Explanations like these may be illuminating, but miss precisely the quality of selfhood which Kant wants to highlight, namely, its freedom. Instead, as the well-known argument of Section III of the *Groundwork* runs, we cannot *know* our freedom from the sensible world; rather, we simply "cannot act otherwise than under the idea of freedom".[47]

Among theologians, different explanations for moral agency have been offered, some more flattering towards that agency than others. A contrast between two examples demonstrates the point. On one hand, there is the pessimistic reading of agency offered by theologians within the theo-ontological type, particularly Barth and Bonhoeffer, notwithstanding more positive appraisals elsewhere in their works. For them, moral responsibility is something to which we are *condemned*, because of our sin. Thus in his

45 Kant (1996b), 269 [5:161].
46 Ibid., 269 [5:162].
47 Kant (1996a), 95 [4:448] (emphasis removed).

lectures on Genesis, Bonhoeffer identifies the knowledge of good and evil which humans have from eating from the tree with how they constantly judge themselves and others. The capacity for such judgment is what turns humans into moral agents. But that judgment is itself wrongful, since trust in God would mean doing good without further thought, and without any need to distinguish it from evil.[48]

On the other hand, a more positive appraisal of moral agency is offered by David Kelsey, who looks not to Genesis' primeval history, but rather the creation theology of Hebrew wisdom. Kelsey hence reads Job 10 as telling two complementary but different stories about what it means to be human. First, Job has been created as a "living body", a biological, social and cultural entity distinct from creation while also being "ontologically ambiguous", that is, inseparable from its environment.[49] But second, Job has been *given* a living body by God, and is therefore called by God to *respond* to him. This responsibility is unsubstitutable, for every person's responsibility conferred by God is singular. "None can respond to God in place of another. No one is accountable for another's response to God. It is in being responsible and accountable, to the extent that we are capable, that we are each unsubstitutable by any other human living body."[50] It is this fact of a divinely conferred moral agency, rather than any biological, social or cultural characteristic, that explains each person's uniqueness.

Thus many explanations have been offered about why we experience moral agency in the way we do. Such explanations underscore an all-important point, namely that what I choose to do cannot be reduced to my environment, as profoundly as that environment has shaped me. So a deterministic account of moral agency misses precisely what is

48 Bonhoeffer (2004), 84–93, 112–13.
49 Kelsey (2009), 245–70.
50 Ibid., 274.

important in its subject. In Chapter I, the claim of the new natural lawyers regarding the "self-evidence" of the principles of practical reason was intended to make this point, as ambiguous as the claim in fact proved. And in Chapter IV, the "phenomenon of the ethical" advanced by Gerhard Ebeling aimed to capture a similar notion.

But while moral agency is not reducible to its environment, neither are the two separable. So when we speak about this first facet of the Christian life, it is impossible not to also refer to the others. First, and most basically, moral agency is always exercised in respect of particular situations, rather than existing in the abstract. Consider the detached sense of the moral self which Alasdair MacIntyre claims is characteristic of modernity. "To be a moral agent is, on this view, precisely to be able to stand back from any and every situation in which one is involved, from any and every characteristic that one may possess, and to pass judgment on it from a purely universal and abstract point of view".[51] But even this detached self, while seeking to distance itself from its situation, nonetheless pronounces judgment precisely upon it.

Second, in speaking about moral agency, it becomes very hard not to refer to notions of *coherence* as well. While I will defer a more precise examination of that term to later in this section, two examples of the interconnection may be helpfully mentioned here. For one, Christian theologians have typically treated as unacceptable the prospect that moral demands might contradict one another, as with the conflict between human and divine laws so dramatically represented in *Antigone*. This is part of why Augustine has proven so important for the Christian ethical tradition. Thus, on O'Donovan's characterisation, his account of love "mak[es] possible an ordered and consistent morality by banishing

[51] MacIntyre (2007), 31–2.

the specter of unreconcilable claims that made nonsense of the agent's responsibility".[52] And as another example, consideration of moral agency leads to reflection on the stability of the *moral agent*, notwithstanding Nietzsche's cynical dictum that "the 'doer' is merely tacked on as a fiction to the doing – the doing is everything".[53] That agent might be described through such ideas as virtue or character. Alternatively, the coherence of the agent might itself be turned into the basis of moral action, as with Socratic and Kantian arguments that morality is rooted in the respective fears of self-contradiction and self-contempt.[54]

Finally, there is of course no universal societal assumption that moral agency must be connected to Christianity. Nonetheless, among the theologians and other Christian thinkers we have considered, there was a marked interest in how moral agency is to be exercised *Christianly*, thereby suggesting a necessary connection between the two *in the context of the Christian life*. The exception to this was, perhaps, the new natural lawyers in Chapter I, through their contention that the principles of practical reason were self-evident even to those outside of Christian faith. Yet even they claimed consonance between those principles and the teachings of the Catholic Church. The reason for this apparently intrinsic connection between moral agency and Christian identity will warrant further consideration in the next section.

B The Particularity of the Situation

Moral agency presents us with one kind of particularity, namely, that of said agency's irreducibility to anything else, including the circumstances in which it is exercised. But

52 O'Donovan (2013), 115.
53 Nietzsche (2014), 236 [13].
54 On this, see Arendt (2003a), 77–8.

there is another kind of particularity, comprising those circumstances themselves, be they physical, biological, social, cultural, historical, or otherwise.

Such circumstances comprise one's *situation*. Here, one might choose to introduce a number of related terms, such as "background", "context", "environment", "location" or "position". It might be helpful, depending on one's purposes, to distinguish between these.[55] But regardless of the exact terms employed, a paramount aspect of the situation is that it is absolutely particular. No two situations are ever the same, despite the great many generic features they might share.

It follows from this that the situation is infinitely divisible. One can zoom into or out of any aspect of it, and do so *ad infinitum*. This is why situations may be defined with extraordinarily different degrees of abstractness or particularity. They thus "can be very brief in time (such as a thunderstorm or a marital quarrel) or very protracted (such as the Western epoch, the nuclear age). They can also be very local (the situation of a specific family) or very global (the ecological situation of our planet)".[56]

It also follows that one's understanding of a situation is only ever partial. Some parts of it will stand out; others will remain invisible. Consider, for example, the preferential option for the poor advanced by Latin American liberation theologians, who seek to

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55 For Farley, background "names ... cosmic, biological and historical conditions"; situation "names the particular configuration of the elements of the background as they bear on an individual, community or other social entity in a particular time or place"; location "names those aspects of a situation that bring about social and psychological identity"; environment can refer to any of background, situation or location; and context "names the ways in which human life and action are subject to the pushes and pulls of an environment": Farley (2002), 15. Compare this with Jacobsen and Kelly, for whom context comprises "those enduring realities of culture, society, and language that shape our understanding and orient for good and ill", whereas a situation is limited to the more particular "moment or crisis that evokes a sense of limit or finitude that calls forth a decision": Jacobsen and Kelly (2009), 29–30.

56 Farley (1987), 12.

highlight economic oppressions too often ignored by other theologians.[57] But I have already noted how they have been criticised, in turn, for disregarding other injustices, such as those concerning sex or gender. Given this incompleteness, perspective-taking is necessary to keep ascending to more complete perceptions of the situation, or what Hannah Arendt called an "enlarged mentality".[58]

The particularity of the situation cannot be reduced to a mere moment of the other three facets of the Christian life. Within that life, however, consideration of the situation also presupposes those three facets. Take, first, moral agency. The concrete situation and this agency are not, we have already said, the same. But that situation is only meaningful because of one's pre-existing interest in it. Such an interest need not be merely instrumentalist, but approximates Heideggerian "care".[59] Hence the situation "arises through an interaction between actor and world. Such a connection, as something that is practically generated, is to a certain extent founded by the acting subject who interacts with the world".[60] Thus, for example, when Latin American liberation theologians chastise their Western colleagues for inattentiveness to life's actual circumstances, they do so precisely because of the demands of liberative praxis, which is therefore presupposed in their social descriptions.

Second, the particularity of the situation is both in tension with and dependent upon a sense of a coherent whole. This dual relationship is both epistemic and ontic. Epistemic, because one only ever makes sense of particulars via overarching categories, which are

57 I will consider the option further in Chapter VI.2.

58 Arendt (1961), 220–1.

59 See Heidegger (1962), 225–73 §§39–44.

60 Jaeggi (2018), 142. This I take as the chief flaw in Farley's account of the theological "interpretation of the situation" in Farley (1987). He makes laudably clear how the theologian's task is not finished with the interpretation of scriptural or theological texts, but also includes consideration of the situation at hand. Yet Farley also seems to presuppose an originary sense in which the situation exists apart from the agent, rather than something that agent always inhabits.

nonetheless reductive of those particulars. Hence we find frequent proposals of a "hermeneutical spiral" between the parts and the whole, each of which helps us gradually understand the other one better.[61] And ontic, because there is a genuine order in reality other than that imposed by the observer, and in which the particularities do participate. That reality, then, cannot be said to solely comprise metaphysical differences that go "all the way down",[62] without anything further uniting these.

Finally, and in respect of the Christian life's identity, those who do not identify as Christian obviously do not assume the situations they face can only be understood via some underlying conception of Christian truth. However, for those who do inhabit the Christian life, the sense is real and potent that one's interest in the situation is precisely that of one's interest *as a Christian*, and that the two cannot be divorced. What would be truly terrifying, in contrast, is the idea of a situation wholly untouched by God.[63] Thence Bonhoeffer's famous insight of a "this-worldliness" (*Diesseitigkeit*) motivated by Christian discipleship. Such discipleship means "living unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously, not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world – watching with Christ in Gethsemane".[64] In short, to live within the concrete particularities of the world is itself intrinsically connected to Christ.

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61 John Dewey produces an especially interesting articulation of the point from his American pragmatist tradition. For him, a "situation" is "*not* a single object or event or set of objects and events", but rather is always "connect[ed] with a contextual whole": Dewey (1938), 66–7 (emphasis in original). That situation, however, "becomes problematic" when we start to notice features of it that do not readily fit, rendering the situation "indeterminate": at 107. He therefore proposes *inquiry* as the process needed "to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole": at 104–5.

62 Thus Deleuze (1994), 38.

63 Hence, e.g., Jüngel's insistence that, although "[m]an and his world are interesting for their own sake", even this fact is to be proven theologically: Jüngel (1983), 34–5.

64 Bonhoeffer (1971), 370.

C The Coherence of the Christian Life

In Chapter III, I argued that the metahistorical type was driven by a concern for maintaining *coherence* among the different parts of the Christian life. While there, I began to explain the term, further explication is now required.

I previously also said that coherence is necessary to ensure the Christian life's basic meaningfulness. As a common example, it seems endemic to think that one's life as a Christian will appear fragmented and incoherent unless it can be fit within a providential plan for human history. This plan might be understood in more open or more closed ways, but must somehow still be affirmed. Thus, as I will explain next chapter, one reason why the existence of evil is perceived as threatening is precisely because it puts that plan into doubt.

Coherence suggests a sense of consistency. What that means is readily explicable in respect of a set of propositions: there, formal logic readily provides criteria to determine whether said consistency is present. But the criteria for consistency are more opaque when speaking, say, of consistency in one's character, consistency between one's convictions and actions, or consistency between one's life projects and God's providential designs. In such instances, the items sought to be rendered coherent are fundamentally unlike. For what might be the meaning of consistency as between beliefs, actions, facts of human biology, psychology and culture, temporal events (both of one's life, and of salvation history), and acts of the divine?

Metahistorical thinkers, we therefore saw, frequently proposed synthesising constructs like narrative, or "styles" of theology like *théologie totale*. Their hope was that these

would act as mortar to make what was essentially different nonetheless stick. But the danger was that the complexity of those individual parts would be oversimplified in order to fit the mould. From this, we might infer that trying to attain coherence by imposing some external criteria or schema onto the components will necessarily be reductive. In contrast, more appropriate criteria will not be divorced from, but instead immanent to, what is sought to be rendered coherent. This last point in turn suggests that the coherence of the Christian life has its own internal complexity, tailored to that life's individual components, rather than being anything generalisable.

Here, we may derive some clues from Jaeggi's discussion of "fit" as regards forms of life. That fit, she says, can be understood in three ways: between different social practices, between a social practice and the interpretive matrix associated with the form of life in which it participates, and between a social practice and the form of life's purpose.[65] These three ways of treating fit greatly overlap, but are also distinguishable. Jaeggi's example is that of parents charging their children for the costs of raising them. This would be at odds, simultaneously, with other social practices which encourage emotional and not merely contractual ties between parents and children; with customary understandings of the family as a form of life; and with the purposes of that familial form of life, however understood. But what is crucial, for our purposes, is how the conclusion of a "lack of fit" is reached *from within* the complex interpretive matrix of the family, rather than from without.

It is hence deeply significant that, among the metahistorical thinkers we considered, we did not find a singular conception of coherence, but rather a multiplicity of *coherence*

65 Jaeggi (2018), 69–70.

relations. Thus "virtue" expresses a kind of coherence between the inner and outer lives of an individual or community; "narrative" indicates coherence between temporal events; "practices" suggest coherence between actions and norms; and so on. So coherence also does not exist purely in the abstract – the infamous "night in which, as one says, all cows are black".[66] Instead, it always requires reference to *what is made coherent*. Rowan Williams, for example, argues that the "unity of Christian truth" consists in an "analogy" between the unity of God's acts and "the unity or continuity of the possible forms that human life, individual or corporate, may take before God".[67] One of theology's essential tasks, therefore, is "to search out and display" these unities. Yet it must also "be abidingly conscious of its peril in this regard", namely that of an undue abstraction from the phenomena and objects it seeks to analogise with God's work.[68]

Simultaneously, however, coherence does indeed somehow exist "apart" from what it sews together: the whole really is more than the sum of the parts. This is why ideas like aesthetic fittingness have often proven an appealing alternative to talk of strict consistency. Hence ideas about divine glory, like that of the "beauty of the infinite",[69] derive their popularity much because they suggest a wholeness which, paradoxically, subsists both *through* and also *beyond* its constituent parts. And so Hans Urs von Balthasar: "Christian dogmatics unfolds in the medium of faith, and for Paul this means a faith lived in one's existence: here is to be found the proof of dogma, its *coherence*".[70] But inseparable from that medium, he adds, is "the light of faith", namely, the *beautiful form*. This "not only 'points' to an invisible, unfathomable mystery": instead, the

66 Hegel (2018), 12, [16].
67 Williams (2000a), 23.
68 Ibid., 14.
69 Hart (2003).
70 Balthasar (1982), 222.

beautiful form "is the apparition of this mystery, and reveals it while, naturally, at the same time protecting and veiling it".[71] Both beauty and coherence, then, only exist through their manifestations, while also always exceeding these.

I should observe, further, that a similar sense of coherence as existing beyond its parts is also present in philosophical discussions of messianism. This is why Pauline eschatology has proven an important resource for recent continental discussions.[72] An oft-cited quote by Franz Kafka makes the point: "The Messiah will come ... only on the day after his arrival; he will come not on the last day, but on the very last".[73] That is to say, and as Walter Benjamin shrewdly observed, the moment of history when the full meaning of every past event will be rendered into a meaningful unity will not be that of the teleological *end* of history. Instead, that moment will be an eschatological one *after* the end, a moment which therefore falls wholly outside that history.[74]

Earlier in this section, I highlighted that, in speaking about either moral agency or the specificity of the situation, one was led into coherence language as well. But obversely, we can also point out that reflection on coherence, in the context of Christian life, requires us to also reflect on everything in which that coherence consists, including these first two facets.

In addition, given that coherence points in some way beyond itself, as with talk of beauty or glory, then in discussing the coherence of the Christian life, we are pointed to the source of that coherence *as underscored by that life's distinctive character*. That is,

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71 Ibid., 146–7.
72 See generally Harink (2010).
73 Kafka (1979), 182.
74 Benjamin (1999b), 264.

we are pointed to *God* as the granter of coherence and consistency, lest the latter become wholly humanly constructed and so idolatrous. This in turn suggests that coherence is never something we can fully grasp and control, instead remaining in the hands of God.

D The Distinctive Identity of the Christian Life

The final facet of the Christian life comprises its unique identity. This "Christianicity" is something I have already discussed, both in Chapter IV and in the current chapter's first section. Further remarks, however, are now helpful.

It is worth beginning with some observations about the language we use to gesture at the Christian life's distinctively Christian character. It is striking how ubiquitously the descriptor "theological" is now used by Christian theologians to refer to said distinctiveness, as with calls for a properly "theological theology".[75] But that usage is itself historically contingent, with the early church distancing itself from terms like *theologia* or *theologos*. The latter term meant, at least on Plato and the pre-Socratics' understanding, someone who spoke about the gods in the style of Greek poetry. It was therefore suspected by Christians of impious polytheistic associations.[76] Thus it was only medieval Christianity that adopted the word *theologia* less ambivalently, to label a particular intellectual discipline.[77] Accordingly, even this all-important term for connoting what is unique in Christianity itself has a non-Christian source.

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75 See, e.g., Kasper (1982), 15; Webster (1998).
76 See Kattenbusch (1930).
77 See Pannenberg (1973), 11–12.

Something not dissimilar applies to the word "Christian". If the account of Acts 11:19–30 is to be believed, that term (*Christianos*) was not chosen by Christians themselves. Instead, it was derisively imposed upon them by outsiders, to refer to what was perceived as merely a socially disruptive cult. Hence the label was developed so that the Romans could conveniently distinguish, according to their own categories, yet another "publicly identifiable group" from other groups.[78] It therefore did not originally express an internal understanding by Christians about what was so special about themselves.

Further, even following the label's appropriation by "Christians", an ambiguity remains through how the primary referent of "Christ" is not merely that of a person (Jesus of Nazareth), but also a title deriving its significance from Second Temple Judaism's conceptual horizons. So Maurice Wiles: although "even within the New Testament [the word's] titular force has often disappeared ... [it] is never wholly lost. It suggests with roughly equal immediacy divine role and historical person".[79] And, while "[t]his ambivalence gives [the title 'Christ'] a special religious value",[80] that title therefore has embedded within it a difficult, uncomfortable debate about the borderlines between Christianity and Judaism.

In short, even the words we use to connote what is unambiguously Christian are themselves only ambiguously Christian. And that linguistic paradox mirrors an epistemic and ontic one, one I have repeatedly stressed. That is that the Christian life's identity is both only tentatively perceived, and only apophatically present. So it is impossible to have a sure grasp of what is Christian about one's life: that knowledge, rather, belongs to God alone. And while this might constitute a mere problem of

78 Rowe (2009), 131.
79 Wiles (1976), 185.
80 Ibid.

research design for, say, a civil servant drafting a census questionnaire, it poses a more fundamental existential dilemma for Christians.

As an important illustration, we might turn to contemporary efforts to elevate certain doctrines to the role of what ensures Christian identity. The doctrine of the Trinity is a popular contender, as are also contemporary "theologies of the cross".[81] Hence on Paul Molnar's assessment of the former, without "a properly formulated doctrine of the immanent Trinity, all theological statements about the significance of created existence become ambiguous and constitute merely human attempts to give meaning to creation, using theological categories".[82] Molnar is concerned to rebut trinitarian understandings based on "generally understood religious experience instead of in revelation",[83] thereby implying that he has remained wholly within the latter. But the queer theological critique against him has been precisely that he has failed to stay in such a lane, in light of his reliance on patriarchal language. So Linn Tonstad, bringing Marcella Althaus-Reid to bear on Molnar: his "'ecclesiological hermeneutics' of the church take place 'in a closed circuit of signifiers in which the main signifier is a sexual name, the name of the Father'".[84]

It is not so easy, therefore, to have any doctrine function as the guarantor of Christian uniqueness. For none operates except within a system of signs containing at least some non-Christian referents. The same applies to any attempt to preserve Christian identity through purportedly Christian symbols, Christian practices, Christian ethical claims, Christian stories, and so on. These can always be subjected to a hermeneutics of

81 For critique of the latter in a parallel vein to what follows, see, e.g., Fiorenza (2015), 105–39.
82 Molnar (2017), xiii. Likewise consider Torrance's claim that the doctrine of the Trinity is "the ground and grammar" of theology: Torrance (1980), 146–77.
83 Molnar (2017), xii.
84 Tonstad (2015), 212 n. 24, citing Althaus-Reid (2003), 30.

suspicion, through which the "cultural representations considered as disguised symptoms of disguise and fear" underlying them might be revealed.[85]

So Christianicity stands apart from any of its instantiations. But on the observe side, it cannot ever be considered without the latter. If it could, that would suggest an entirely negative theology, about which one would have to remain wholly silent. But such an apophaticism, with no cataphatic counterweight, has not been taken as a serious option within the tradition.[86]

In sum, Christianicity both remains apart from the other facets of the Christian life, but also cannot be considered apart from these. Reflection on Christian identity, therefore, shifts our attention to the how moral agency might be exercised Christianly, to how the

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85 So Ricoeur (2004), 438.

86 I should give one relatively recent and revealing but also rather complex example here. That example relates to certain Anglophone interpretations of Barth, popular especially in the 1990s, which aligned him to the philosophical concerns of Jacques Derrida. The latter had emphasised, throughout his *oeuvre*, how linguistic and phenomenological meaning, which he linked with presence, finds itself in a perennial play with absence. Hence presence is what we seek, but at which we never unequivocally arrive. The postmodern theologians reading Barth as close to these concerns therefore advanced an apophatic interpretation of him, highlighting in particular the earlier Barth's statements about the impossibility of knowledge of God: see, e.g., Lowe (1993); Ward (1995); Johnson (1997). In contrast, those trying to articulate a more "orthodox" view of Barth stressed how, for the later Barth, divine absence remains important, but is clearly subordinated to the divine presence. See, e.g., Webster (2000); McCormack (2008), 109–65.

In retrospect, it seems obvious that the orthodox reading maintained greater fidelity to Barth's expressly stated priorities. Hence Barth was indeed more concerned about what can be said about God, than in revelling in what cannot be said: God's No does not stand apart from but is included in his Yes. Yet, we must also say, the postmodern camp was more attune to a genuine tension in his theology, namely the way in which God's presence and absence, his revealedness and hiddenness, do indeed sit uncomfortably with one another. They thus do not solely exist in a relationship of complementarity.

This tension is something of which Barth himself, at places, demonstrates awareness. On one hand, he says that the Christian's proclamation of the "concrete encounter of God and man to-day" must be given in a way "intelligible *in his own words* to the men of his own time": *CD* I/1, 59 (emphasis added). But on the other hand, this affirmation of flexibility in theological expression sits uneasily with Barth's rigidity regarding what can and cannot be said about God. Distinguishing, for example, between permissible *interpretation* and impermissible *illustration* of revelation, he claims that "[i]nterpretation means saying *the same thing* in other words. Illustration means saying the same thing *in other words*": at 345 (emphasis in original). We must, then, speak about God in the language of our day, while simultaneously also refusing to speak about him in this language. Proper talk about God, in short, involves a performative contradiction.

peculiar circumstances of one's life might be seen in a Christian light, and to the way in which one's sense of one's life might be Christianly redeemed. I now turn to the ramifications of these complex relations of independence and interdependence.

3 The Multiperspectivity of the Christian Life

On the basis of the previous two sections, I now want to elaborate on my claim that the Christian life is characterised by a *multiplicity of constitutive perspectives*. Each such perspective is centred upon one of the four facets outlined above, though unavoidably also premised on some conception of the other facets. Furthermore, these perspectives are incapable of being synthesised into a higher one: hence all remain essential to the Christian life. This combination of mutual presupposition and irreducibility I will call that life's *perspectival equiprimordiality*.

An illustration may help, prior to further conceptual elaboration. Consider two passages about the Christian understanding of sin, respectively by Reinhold Niebuhr and Oliver O'Donovan:

> "One interesting aspect of the religious yearning after the absolute is that, in the contrast between the divine and the human, all lesser contrasts between good and evil on the human and historic level are obscured. ... the tendency to lose moral distinctions in the emphasis upon the religious aspect of sin remains a permanent characteristic of vital religious life. In the modern Barthian revival of Lutheran orthodoxy ... to all intents and purposes, creation and the fall are practically identified and, everything in human history being identified with evil, the 'nicely calculated less and more' of social morality lose all significance."[87]

> "The complementary and non-exchangeable relation between [Dogmatic and Moral Theology] is clearly illustrated by the way each treats of sin. ... As an objective reality, sin is a universal truth about mankind, a generic disunity with creation and a solidarity in refusal of the good. But sin is also experienced as a subjective reality ... Dogmatic Theology has stressed the impossible universality

[87] Niebuhr (1936), 68.

> of sin, its significance as the defining qualification in the mis-relation between mankind and a holy God, where it has fallen to Moral Theology to speak of its possible contingency, to identify it as a horizon continually to be recognized and refused in each action that we undertake."[88]

Both these passages take as a given that, within Christianity, there will exist a view of sin as an absolute disjunction between humanity and its transcendent God. But both also highlight this perspective's limitations, in being unable to acknowledge that we do constantly distinguish between greater and lesser wrongdoings (Niebuhr), or that sin is concretely manifested in our actions, and may therefore be consciously avoided to greater or lesser degrees (O'Donovan). That is to say, both theologians acknowledge the fact of a perspective on sin aimed to articulate a distinctively Christian understanding of that phenomenon (the fourth facet). Yet both are *also* concerned to understand sin from the perspective of the particular situation (Niebuhr; the second facet) or of moral agency (O'Donovan; the first).

Niebuhr and O'Donovan's responses to the existence of these multiple perspectives are far from identical. The former, sensing their basic, irreducible difference, focuses his ethics upon a perspective centred on the situation faced by the modern-day American, and hence dismisses one centred on Christian difference as irrelevant. This move has attracted considerable criticism, precisely that he has sacrificed Christianity for a realpolitik, à la "the poverty of Niebuhrism".[89] In contrast, O'Donovan affirms the importance of both perspectives on sin he considers. His doing so, however, is connected to the ambiguity observed in Chapter I about how the two should be related to one another without risking an ideological false consciousness.

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88 O'Donovan (2013), 62–3 (emphasis removed).

89 See Milbank (1997c).

Hence both theologians grapple with the multiperspectivity of the Christian life, though only the second affirms what I call the equiprimordiality of that life's perspectives. And even then, he does so only problematically. In what follows, therefore, I will consider (1) multiperspectivity; (2) equiprimordiality; and (3) the question of what might constitute this equiprimordiality's "proof".

By multiperspectivity, then, I mean that the Christian life involves a structured form of knowing, according to which everything encountered by that life is seen in multiple distinct ways. Each way interprets whatever it encounters principally by reference to one of the Christian life's constituent facets. So sin is seen as something the moral agent must avoid; as a possibility latent in one's particular circumstances; as a corruption of one's sense of the whole; and as the ultimate disharmony between a person and God. These are evidently different perspectives on sin, not incompatible with but also far from identical to the others.

That the Christian life is so characterised by these different perspectives does not, of course, mean we will always find those perspectives clearly distinguished. Nor does it mean we cannot combine them. To the contrary, within any "Christian interpretation" or "understanding from a Christian worldview" of some phenomenon – such as sin, artificial intelligence, a recent political election, all human history – it is usual to find that the perspectives have been run together. In addition, I am certainly not making a temporal claim, namely that there was an originary moment when the perspectives stood apart, and then only subsequently mixed. Rather, the claim about multiperspectivity is that, even when the Christian life's constitutive perspectives are combined into further perspectives, *they also continue to exist in their original, distinctive forms*, and that a condition of the Christian life is that this remains so.

In short, then, this life always involves looking at the same phenomena but from different perspectives, with each perspective centred on one of that life's different facets. Once we understand this, we can add that the phenomena so examined may very well be that life's *other facets*. So a perspective centred on Christian distinctiveness might try to explain moral agency, as we saw, as the product of the knowledge of good and evil that has been stolen from the tree. In addition, doctrines like the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in believers or Christ's real presence in the Eucharist are enormously rich in their significations. Still, at least one of their functions is to suggest that some or all concrete situations a Christian faces are potential sites of divine disclosure, and so also of Christian identity.

To provide further examples, a perspective focused on moral agency might make recommendations about how to take into account the other facets of the Christian life during that agency's exercise. So in her musings on education, Simone Weil commends the virtue of *attention*, defined as an openness to the world as it really is, a "seiz[ing] hold of reality".[90] Or we might articulate moral duties about how to develop a coherent understanding of our pasts. In this respect, Miroslav Volf therefore writes of an ethics both of remembering and of forgetting. The purpose of that ethics is to promote truth, healing and love, precisely by situating our pasts within God's salvific plans.[91]

And so on. In all these various cases, potentially invaluable insights are being offered into the different facets of the Christian life. Nonetheless, each insight is still framed according to just *one* of the Christian life's perspectives, and so only ever provides a partial view of what it considers.

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90 Weil (1956), 527.
91 See Volf (2006).

Once we appreciate that a constitutive perspective of the Christian life can examine other facets of that life, further operations become possible. For example, a perspective emanating from one facet might explore *the connection between other facets*. So the Christian doctrine of providence, it is sometimes said, matters most when it is most invisible: it is precisely when God's good designs are least apparent that I have the greatest need for faith in them. Hence "[k]nowledge of providence ... is bound up with faith in ... the one who upholds the universe ... Providence is not known simply by taking observations of the world".[92]

A claim like this can be understood as centred upon the perspective of Christian distinctiveness. But more precisely, what it does is examine the connection between the particularity of the situation, on one hand, and the Christian life's coherence, on the other. Framed in this light, the claim posits that it may often appear that one's circumstances cannot be fit into one's sense of a grander design – "where is the place of understanding?", Job therefore asks (28:20). Still, the claim continues, one must have faith that such a fit remains real, despite remaining hidden.

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In addition to multiperspectivity, the Christian life is characterised by an *equiprimordiality* of its constitutive perspectives. This means that no priority can be assigned to any one perspective as regards the way it manifests itself. Rather, each perspective remains distinct and originary, even while presupposing all the others.

[92] Webster (2012), 163.

My claim about perspectival equiprimordiality might be distinguished from one about logical, ontological or causal equiprimordiality. That is to say, while I deny any priority between the facets *qua* their *manifestation* within the Christian life, this does not preclude the possibility that some facets precede others in other ways. Recall, for instance, how "Christianicity" refers to a Christian identity conferred by God alone. On this basis, one might plausibly claim that, just as this identity is God-given, so too are the other facets of the Christian life – a person's sense of themself as an agent, the situations that person faces, and the coherence of that person's life. Accordingly, one might go on to argue, Christianicity comes closest to naming the ontological ground of the Christian life, and so should be treated as pre-eminent among that life's facets.

But even this claim for ontological priority is still only a second-order one, in terms of how the perspectives comprising the Christian life actually manifest themselves. That claim, in other words, is only possible because it *already* assumes the presence of all four facets, between which it then proposes an ordering. The reverse, however, is impossible: we cannot proceed from an assertion that Christianicity names the ground of the other facets, to the view that we become aware of our Christian identity, rooted in God, before anything else. To so convert a claim about ontological priority into a perspectival ordering would be to destroy the very conditions on which the claim for ontological priority is premised.[93]

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[93] Consider, in this light, the debate between Barth and some of his Lutheran interlocutors about whether knowledge of sin can precede knowledge of God. For Barth, the answer is obviously not, since knowledge of sin depends on knowledge of God's saving works, which reveal that sin. But the Lutheran response is that this is experiential nonsense. For in order to understand salvation, of course we must first understand what we are even being saved from. See *CD* IV/1, 358–413; IV/2, 378–403; IV/3, 368–71.

This controversy has parallels to the contrast I am describing between perspectival and ontological equiprimordiality. That is, Barth's ontologising of sin within God's salvific action leads him to claim that someone can have no awareness of sin unless they first have a

Perspectival equiprimordiality has important implications for how we interpret the fact that the perspectives are typically found mixed, instead of cleanly distinguished. On one hand, that admixture is thoroughly unsurprising, given the perspectives' mutual presupposition. On the other hand, if we find we *cannot* distinguish between those perspectives, despite concerted effort, this might be symptomatic of a defective conception of the Christian life. Such a conception would not acknowledge those perspectives' irreducibility, and would therefore have failed to develop one or more adequately. Hence why it has blended them.

More elaboration will be necessary as regards this point, but at stake here is the failure to acknowledge the different questions intrinsic to the Christian life. Consider, hypothetically, an academic theologian's suggestion that a particular scandal a congregation faces must be solved by recovering traditional concepts of Christian moral virtue. We might rightly suspect that this "solution" has not been made to fit the real problem, which exists on a different and more concrete order. That problem, then, has not been truly appreciated by the theologian who has set out to solve it.

In addition, the claim of equiprimordiality implies a nuancing of the account of the internality/externality distinction raised in section 1. There, I argued that the Christian life is never viewed purely from the inside, but always also from without. This dual consciousness was a feature of all forms of life. But, for the Christian life, it also arose from how anything that might conceivably fall within the Christian life, such as Christian social practices, only ever stood in an aporetic relationship with its own Christian identity.

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perspective on God. But it is precisely this, as I argued in Chapter IV, which renders it hard for him to recognise a perspective of sin that acknowledges our concrete experience of it.

To this we can now add: the relationship between internality and externality is the same as that between the Christianicity of the Christian life and the other three facets. Christianicity is what places one inside the Christian life; but moral agency, the particularity of the situation and coherence guarantee a continued sense of being outside. This does not mean, however, that a perspective centred upon Christianicity is purely internal. As we have said, even that perspective is premised on some understanding of the other facets, and therefore has an "external" referent. Conversely, the perspectives centred upon the other facets all presuppose some conception of Christian identity, and so have an "internal" referent. As a result, each perspective comprising the Christian life's multiperspectivity is *both* internal and external, though the emphasis will lie more on one than the other.

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What, however, provides the proof for the perspectival equiprimordiality I have been describing? Said equiprimordiality, I now want to suggest, follows from the review of the Christian life's facets in the previous section. That review highlighted both that the facets were irreducible to one another, but also that they could not be discussed except with reference to all the others. The former is what ensures the distinctiveness of the perspectives focusing on each facet; the latter those perspectives' mutual presupposition.

As regards the latter, however, I stressed that the mutually reciprocated reference was one that only seemed necessary *in the context of the Christian life*. For example, when talking about moral agency, not everyone will find it necessary to also discuss their Christian identity – since, obviously, not everyone is a Christian. There are therefore

many accounts of that agency which seek to render reference to God optional, as with Kant's famous claim that "the Holy One of the Gospel" provides, at most, merely an exemplary instance of an ethical life.[94] In contrast, only those already inhabiting the Christian life will see their Christian identity as paramount in the way they deliberate as free moral agents.

Another way to say all this is the Christian life's equiprimordiality can *only* be recognised by someone who already inhabits that life, and so adopts perspectives simultaneously internal and external towards it. By reflecting on what that life entails, that person will gradually realise that to deny any of the mutually presupposing perspectives will eventually lead them into contradiction, and into a sense they have failed to properly inhabit that life by addressing all it requires. The previous section can be read as an attempt to show precisely this, as can this thesis' typological part, comprising Chapters I–IV. By contrast, equiprimordiality will remain impenetrable, or a dangerous ideological illusion, to those standing entirely outside that life.

There is therefore a binary between equiprimordiality having already become a condition of one's reflections, versus it being entirely opaque. That binary will remain in place even if we try to describe the process by which someone *moves* from outside the Christian life to inside. So Paul can remind his readers of a time before they inhabited that life, when few of them were powerful or of noble birth (1 Cor. 1:26). He then immediately moves to the present tense, when God is recognised as "the source of your life in Christ Jesus" (1 Cor. 1:30). Yet the intervening process, through which Christ "*became* for us wisdom from God", is left unparsed. That experience of

[94] Kant (1996a), 63 [4:408].

conversion is difficult to describe as a present experience, as opposed to something already in the past tense.

As another way to explain this, we might turn to a set of distinctions proposed by David Kelsey, namely between the "logic of beliefs", the "logic of coming to belief", and the "logic of the life of Christian believing".[95] Kelsey wants to keep the three logics separate; this thesis could be read as an attempt to understand the extraordinarily difficult relationship between the first and third. But the second logic, that of coming to belief, might here be raised via the question "how does one enter into the state where one recognises the irreducible, mutually presupposing perspectives which comprise the Christian life?"

The difficulty arising is that any answer we might offer will either be already situated within the first and third logics, because it comes from within the Christian life. Or else it will stand outside those logics entirely, but simultaneously also deny the Christian life's multiperspectivity – that is, it will be suspicious of the basic integrity of this second logic. To put it more plainly, there is no logic of coming to belief that exists *on its own terms*. Rather, it is always something retrospectively incorporated into the other two logics, or else treated as reflecting a false consciousness by a wholly externally standpoint. So one is either not a Christian, or has already become one, with the moment in between elusive.

Accordingly, while I would now like to add flesh to this account of equiprimordiality, by suggesting an account of the *historicity* of the concept of the Christian life, this should not be read as somehow ridding us of these aporiae. Rather, I will merely be

95 Kelsey (2009), 27.

gesturing at how deep those aporiae run. Let me start by referring to a class of ideas proposed by philosopher Walter Bryce Gallie, which he labels "essentially contested concepts". These include the work of art, democracy, and pertinently, the Christian life. What makes such concepts distinctive is that there is something about each that makes contestation over their "true" meaning unavoidable. Said contestation, then, cannot be explained simply on the basis that the concept has come to straddle multiple different meanings which could be disassembled.[96] Rather, what is "essential" about essentially contested concepts is the inevitability of the disputants each advancing a single meaning as the *sole* right one.[97] Thus any ultimate consensus about that meaning becomes impossible.

What, however, provides the basis for said essential contestation? The difficulty in answering this has proven the most fruitful line of attack on the category's viability. Eugene Garver has therefore pointed out how problematic it is when philosophers, who are often not actual disputants to the debate around a concept, diagnose that concept as essentially contested. Such a diagnosis presupposes that the philosophers have access to the true source of the controversy, in a way more privileged than the disputants themselves.[98] For example, imagine if we say that "religion" is an essentially contested concept, of which Christianity and Judaism provide competing versions. But if we do this, we ought to be careful not to imply that there is somehow a suprahistorical notion of "religion" animating the dispute, but which methodologically agnostic philosophers can more clearly perceive than Christians or Jews themselves.[99]

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96 Gallie (1956), 175.
97 Ibid., 168.
98 Garver (1990), 258.
99 Ibid., 254–6.

Gallie himself, however, offers an interesting explanation about how concepts become essentially contested, one that relies on the process of their historicisation, and specifically, their *exemplification*. He posits that such a concept must derive "from an original exemplar whose authority is acknowledged by all the contestant users of the concept".[100] That is, there is an initial instantiation of the concept, the normative force of which is accepted by all subsequent disputants. The contestation subsequently emerges, since the concept is internally complex enough that, when interpreted in different and future contexts, there will always be ambiguity concerning whether these future interpretations conform to the original exemplar.

It would not be incompatible with this chapter's analysis of the Christian life to accept Gallie's account of it as an essentially contested concept. We might even improve upon that account. To do so, we would highlight how the Christian life's essential contestation also stems from the ongoing and complex interactions between that life's constitutive perspectives. Further, we would add that this essential contestation can only be perceived from the perspectives which fall inside that life, in the sense described above. In this way, we can avoid the accusation of a delusional philosophical objectivity.

A more interesting avenue of inquiry, however, would start with Gallie's cue about the exemplary nature of the Christian life. It would then turn to early, authoritative representations of that life and observe how they reflect the multiperspectivity I have described. Through such an inquiry, we would therefore emphasise the *historical nature*

[100] Gallie (1956), 180.

of the Christian life, paralleling how we become aware of the theology/ethics relationship precisely via our historical consciousness.[101]

In this respect, we could do worse than to turn to the Sermon on the Mount in Matt. 5–7. We can set aside many of the difficult interpretive questions which have emerged, like those concerning its genre and process of composition. For our purposes, rather, it suffices to highlight certain salient features of the text Augustine called "the perfect measure of the Christian life".[102]

First, the Sermon on the Mount "obviously has an eschatological framework",[103] being framed by the beatitudes (Matt. 5:3–12), and by its three final sections, which deal with the final judgment (Matt. 7:13–27). Those beatitudes, we should note, straddle both the present and an eschatological future: "As principles of eschatological and divine justice the Beatitudes are ipso facto future-oriented; as principles pronounced in the present they have an impact on the present as well".[104] Thus the Sermon provides a coherent sense of history, into which the hearer is parachuted, so as to anticipate the fulfilment of the kingdom of heaven.

Second, the two exordia following the beatitudes, in which Jesus describes his disciples as the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matt. 5:13–16), are concerned with the distinctive identity of the community which Christ has called. Third, and to make an obvious point, the whole Sermon is preoccupied with the responsible exercise of one's moral agency, as with for example with the so-called Antitheses addressing moral and

101 See section 1 of my introduction.
102 Augustine (1973), 1.
103 Baasland (2015), 630.
104 Betz (1995), 96.

legal prescriptions (Matt. 5:21–48). And fourth, the final third of the Sermon shifts from the right interpretation of the law, and onto "the most mundane issues of the daily life, beginning with money and its accumulation".[105] It thereby indicates that these, too, fall within the Christian life's scope.

In short, what I have called the four facets of the Christian life can be clearly discerned in the Sermon, and so, too, by implication, can the perspectives centred on those facets. Insofar as the Sermon has become binding upon us, we are hence forced to reckon with the equiprimordial perspectives to which this representation of the Christian life bears witness.

But if we now ask *how* that representation becomes authoritative, any answer we might suggest will itself either already presuppose equiprimordiality, or alternatively deny it. An example of the former might say that we accept the Sermon's authority because the Holy Spirit has led us to do this. But this answer, given its resort to pneumatology, obviously already presupposes the Christian life's normativity. Such an answer, then, would merely constitute a self-reflexive consideration of that life from within.

For an instance of an explanation that denies equiprimordiality, we might turn to debates occurring in classical reception studies around the "logic of exemplification", the way the past is constructed to become normatively binding on the present. Simon Goldhill has highlighted two of that logic's features. First, there is an *idealisation* of a moment of the past, such as that of antiquity. Second, there is the construction of a *genealogy* linking this past moment to the present, such that the latter must be framed

105 Ibid., 423.

and understood according to the former.[106] Thus Goldhill, writing with Constanze Guthenke:

> "The exemplar is ... a mode of encounter with antiquity, a mode of knowing and of organizing knowledge of the past. ... But the exemplar, rhetorically the figure of a past historical character, event, or locus, emphatically *interrupts* context. ... The exemplar, then, is first of all a persuasive genealogy that asserts the past as a model, that interrupts the context of the present with the claim of an elsewhere and other time, that reads selectively, normatively, hopefully."[107]

Goldhill suggests that this process of exemplification might be driven by political agendas, or by considerations relating to desire, sexual or otherwise.[108] As a pertinent example of the latter, Simeon Zahl observes that, when a theologian recommends retrieving past tradition, such a suggestion is always motivated by that theologian's "affective economies".[109] These economies profoundly shape what part of the tradition is chosen for retrieval, and the use to which said tradition is put.

Such discussion of the logic of exemplification might, I suggest, have profound insights to offer. But it still framed from an external perspective, one that does not treat the relationships between the perspectives comprising the Christian life as necessary. Or, at the very least, it does not treat these as anything other than deconstructable by a sufficiently savvy hermeneutic of suspicion. Accordingly, the process of entering into the Christian life remains opaque.

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106 Goldhill (2017), 417–8.
107 Ibid., 422 (emphasis in original).
108 Ibid., 432.
109 Zahl (2018), 309–10.

4 The Regulative Role of the Concept of the Christian Life

What good is served by the account of the Christian life I have been developing? For what purpose might it assist?

Certainly, that account cannot generate a new or comprehensive way of doing theology or ethics, contra the extravagant proposals that characterised the metahistorical type in Chapter III. Those, we recall, included "theology as a social science" (Milbank), theology as "dramaturgy" (Vanhoozer), and a "total theology" or "*théologie totale*" (Coakley). Actually, my account of the Christian life suggests a reason why such proposals are doomed to fail. By prioritising the coherence of that life above all else, these overburden one of that life's constitutive perspectives, so as to deny the very autonomy and integrity of the others. They thereby become myopic to the distinctive questions which the latter pose, and so undermine the conditions on which the Christian life is based. I will say more on this below.

Similarly, this account of the Christian life cannot offer a conclusively correct way to understand the theology/ethics distinction. As indicated, I am sympathetic to the view that the distinction risks becoming unhelpful and confusing, given the multiple different issues that have been nestled within it. Still, it has become very deeply embedded in much Christian vocabulary. Moreover, the fundamental problem underpinning the distinction, which I have tried to capture through the concept of the Christian life, is a genuine one. What matters more, therefore, is that we keep clear sight of that problem, regardless of the specific terms we use.

Rather, the present account's function is more modest, and primarily critical. This is namely to lay down minimum criteria which "theological" or "ethical" claims must meet in order not to undermine the Christian life. It cannot answer how such claims should proceed, but it can set outer limits concerning what they must not do. Those limits, nonetheless, do imply a picture of how the Christian life might develop, namely through a combination of autonomous development and mutual correction.

To elaborate on this, let me suggest that the concept of the Christian life regulates a category of claims I now need to define, and will label "theo-ethical discourse". That consists of all claims made from the perspective of the Christian life or, more precisely, from a perspective forming part of that life's multiperspectivity. The latter perspective is therefore both "internal" and "external" to that life, in the sense described above.

Theo-ethical discourse thus includes all kinds of statements we might variously call "theological propositions", "doctrines", "dogmas", "ethical stances", "theological interpretations of the situation", and so on. It cuts across both "academic theology" and the views articulated by clergy or laypersons. Indeed, the category's advantage is to sidestep tricky but, for my purposes, unproductive typological debates about such distinctions.

Instead, the relevant distinction is the one I developed last section, namely, that between the different perspectives comprising the Christian life, each based on one of that life's four facets. Any given theo-ethical discourse either centres on just one facet, or will be able to be broken down into smaller bits of discourse, each of which will have this singular focus. Thus expressly or impliedly, theo-ethical discourse will emphasise the moral agency of whoever is inhabiting that life, the circumstances in which that person

find themselves, the coherence of that person's life as a Christian, or that life's uniquely Christian identity – but only one of these, no more. If, even after extensive parsing, it is still focused on more than one facet, then it will do so badly, given the inherent difficulty in capturing what is specific about each.

The category of theo-ethical discourse, as I envision it, is extremely wide. It includes, to take a very small sample, Bonhoeffer's message to his fiancée that "[o]ur marriage must be a 'yes' to God's earth";[110] Kathryn Tanner's recent argument that "Christian beliefs about a shared origin and fate entail ... a refusal of the privatizing of risk and reward at the heart of finance-dominated capitalism";[111] Hamlet's complaint of how "the Everlasting had ... fix'd / His canon 'gainst self-slaughter";[112] Pope Francis' call for people to "come together to take charge of this home which has been entrusted to us, knowing that all the good which exists here will be taken up into the heavenly feast";[113] and the musing of the Calvinist pastor in Marilynne Robinson's novel *Lila* that "[t]hings happen for reasons that are hidden from us, utterly hidden for as long as we think they must proceed from what has come before, our guilt or our deserving, rather than coming to us from a future that God in his freedom offers to us".[114]

In addition, many claims may be but are not obviously made from the perspective of the Christian life. Their status as theo-ethical discourse is therefore ambiguous. Consider the reported deathbed words of priest and poet Gerard Manley Hopkins: "I am so happy. I am so happy. I loved my life".[115] These words have no explicit Christian referent,

110 Bonhoeffer and Wedemeyer (1995), 64.
111 Tanner (2019), 154.
112 Shakespeare (2003), 20 [I.2.131–2].
113 Pope Francis (2015), 177 [244].
114 Robinson (2014), 222.
115 Pick (1942), 155.

though for Hopkins we may certainly wish to imply one. But it is not certain we must do so, and we might instead interpret his words as a humanistic and agnostic celebration of a life constantly beset by doubt of God.[116]

In cases like this, whether a claim counts as theo-ethical discourse will depend on how it should be interpreted in context. That inquiry may be far from a simple one. Nonetheless, such an inquiry might not be especially necessary. Instead, it may be more productive simply to proceed through a hypothetical: *if* the claim constitutes theo-ethical discourse, *then* it is regulated by the concept of the Christian life in the way I will now describe.

Accordingly, on the basis of the above, my account of the Christian life suggests three criteria which theo-ethical discourse must meet:

1. Theo-ethical discourse must develop according to the particular logic of the perspective of the Christian life it reflects.
2. Theo-ethical discourse reflecting one perspective of the Christian life must not contradict theo-ethical discourse reflecting other perspectives.
3. Theo-ethical discourse must not be misrepresented, so as to be claimed to embrace perspectives other than what it does, or to be entirely independent of the other perspectives.

I will now develop each criterion in turn, also paying attention throughout to what these criteria imply about the Christian life's development.

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116 C.f. Wiman (2013), 35–6.

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1. *Theo-ethical discourse must develop according to the particular logic of the perspective of the Christian life it reflects.*

As each perspective is irreducible to the others, it must examine whatever phenomena come into its purview *on its own terms*. If it did not, this would suggest it has merely copied from one of the other perspectives, and failed to offer its own unique insights.

For example, theo-ethical claims centring on moral agency presuppose that the agent is free. They would thus be typically concerned with how that agency should be exercised. By comparison, claims centring on the situation's particularity should try to understand that situation better, including, if need be, with the tools of the social sciences or ethnography. Further, claims centring on coherence must articulate how whatever is examined may form part of a greater whole. And claims centring on distinctive Christian identity should try to grasp the "grammar" about what makes the Christian life unique, such as through the tools of doctrine.

A pithy way to say all this is that each perspective must follow its own logic. The word "logic" is not a happy one, given its connotations of abstract systematicity. Those connotations may certainly be appropriate when discussing the coherence and the distinctive identity of the Christian life. But they are trickier to apply to moral agency or the particularity of the situation, except through a much expanded, probably Hegelian conception of the term.[117] The latter, nonetheless, is the direction in which Lindbeck

[117] See, of course, Hegel's *Science of Logic*: Hegel (2010).

seems to move when he refers to a religion's "internal logic or grammar",[118] as does Clodovis Boff in speaking of an "internal regime of autonomy" contained in both theory and praxis, such that each possesses certain "criteria of truth corresponding to itself".[119] But regardless, what is more essential than specific terminology is that each perspective remains focused upon the facet of the Christian life around which it orbits, and therefore uses a method of inquiry suited to that facet.[120] This is why, for example, ethnography may be perfectly appropriate for uncovering the nuances of a situation. But, when used to describe Christian distinctiveness, it will reductively view that distinctiveness as itself a product of historical contingencies.

A rather important consequence of all this is that the different perspectives of the Christian life will develop according to their own dynamics, and at their own paces. Hence, for example, a Christian's perspectives on their situation and on their distinctive Christian identity will develop partly autonomously of each other. One perspective does not deterministically dictate the other's course. Accordingly, working on just one will never produce "all the answers": all need development. And so, the specialisation encouraged by the modern theological academy, despite its frequent malignment, at least has the benefit of facilitating the evolution of each perspective on its own terms.

In contrast, an attempt to develop multiple perspectives simultaneously will likely lead to a botched job for all of them, whereby their distinctive dynamics are conflated. Willie James Jennings suggests a tragic instance of this in the endeavour of John Colenso, a

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118 Lindbeck (1984), 28.
119 Boff (1987), 16, 199.
120 C.f. a similar argument by Barth, in his examination of what makes theology a science: *CD* I/1, 3–11.

19th century British missionary to Natal, South Africa, to translate classic Anglican theology into the concerns of the natives to whom he was ministering:

> "Colenso was in fact an overwhelmed theological teacher caught in the middle of the intensely challenging situation of a translator. Not only was he trying to translate Christian Scripture into another language and thereby bring that native world into a Christian discursive universe, but he was also trying to respond to the questions raised by indigenes. Those questions focused light on precisely the fit of that Christian discursive world with native logics. In so doing, those questions pressed Colenso into grasping both the inner logics of Christian theology and inner native logics. This was beyond his ability. ...
>
> Grasping the inner logics of both worlds required a depth of intimacy with both that Colenso lacked."[121]

Of course, we may still ask how the perspectives might influence one another, notwithstanding their autonomy. Likewise, if each perspective must use a method appropriate to its facet, is there any way for those methods be critiqued from the outside? For example, if the Christian life is always lived within particular situations, which can be investigated with the methods of the social sciences, how might one correct any erroneous assumptions which those methods adopt? This leads to the second criterion for theo-ethical discourse we must consider.

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2. *Theo-ethical discourse reflecting one perspective of the Christian life must not contradict theo-ethical discourse reflecting other perspectives.*

The different perspectives of the Christian life are all irreducible, but they also presuppose one another. Each therefore depends on understandings of the other facets of the Christian life, as developed by the other perspectives. This mutual presupposition is

[121] Jennings (2010), 149–50.

what enables the perspectives to be critiqued by the others, though this does not enable the assimilation of any one by another.

Accordingly, while the different perspectives produce distinct views of their objects, each of those views must remain compatible with the others. Consider, for example, when the use of social scientific methods to investigate the concreteness of a situation seems to contradict the perspective centring on Christian distinctiveness. In such a case, at least one of these must give way, and potentially both. Here, though, it is worth highlighting that the latter perspective (centring on Christian distinctiveness) will itself depend, even if only implicitly, on some conception of the particular situation. And that means it is able to be critiqued by the former perspective. In short, the facts known on the ground do not necessarily have to be ignored because of a theological dogmatism. Rather, it is entirely possible for said dogmatism to be corrected via reflection upon what it indicates, or fails to indicate, about the particular situation.

These first two criteria for theo-ethical discourse, taken together, indicate that the constitutive perspectives of the Christian life develop not solely on their individual motions, but also through a movement back and forth between the different perspectives. So any one perspective might discover novel insights, which can then be transferred to the others. Or even absent a new discovery, it might nonetheless become clear that a contradiction has manifested between perspectives, thereby requiring at least one to be adjusted. In both cases, the movement back and forth will continue, even if it remains unnoticed. That movement is therefore a precondition for the Christian life developing without falling into ruinous contradiction.

Putting things this way, I note, is a more nuanced way to articulate the hermeneutical spiral of "practice-theory-practice" advanced by a practical theologian like Don Browning.[122] That latter framing, in contrast, obscures that there are more than two perspectives at stake in the Christian life, rather than merely the "theoretical" and the "practical".[123] Moreover, that framing only acknowledges half the picture, since it overlooks how each perspective develops not only through the hermeneutical spiral, but also through its own internal dynamism.

What criteria apply, however, in respect of determining whether the different perspectives "contradict", so as to engender this motion back and forth? That is, how can we decide that the perspectives have become incompatible, so that at least one needs to be updated? The difficulty in answering this stems from how, on my account of the Christian life, that life comprises multiple irreducible perspectives, above which there is not hovering any higher viewpoint. If this higher viewpoint existed, it would provide the applicable criteria. But absent that viewpoint, the criteria must be issued by *those perspectives themselves*.

It follows that, if it seems that two perspectives constitutive of the Christian life are in conflict, whether that is actually the case must be determined according to criteria articulated from *within* those two perspectives. And those perspectives, having different criteria, might sometimes make different determinations. In short, deciding that the Christian life has fallen into contradiction is not easy, and said contradiction may take a long time to become clearly manifest.

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122 See Browning (1991), 9.

123 Likewise, O'Donovan's argument that each of dogmatics and ethics "must make their own discoveries ... going beyond what the other could have told it" has more general application than to merely those two terms. See O'Donovan (2013), 82.

This also implies an open-endedness regarding what counts as consistent transference from one perspective of the Christian life to another. The question of that transference may arise, for instance, when we wonder if an ethical stance comprises a congruous application of a doctrine, or if a claim about someone's place in history faithfully represents the particulars of that person's situation. We might analogise with the translation of a text: the translator must have a good ear for what is grammatically correct and also what is idiomatic in both languages. In that respect, we are familiar with, on one hand, translations that have taken too many liberties with the original. And on the other hand, there are translations which, in the pursuit of absolute fidelity, have become stodgy in their prose, to the point of incomprehensibility. In both cases, only one language has been treated with full seriousness. Likewise for theo-ethical transference: the integrity of both perspectives in question must be respected.

There will be times, however, where a profound contradiction between perspectives goes unnoticed, or is detected but goes unresolved. And, given that the different perspectives of the Christian life develop according to their own dynamics, a protracted delay will likely lead to the contradiction deepening, as the unreconciled perspectives spin off further from one another. Such an occurrence we might call, to adapt Jaeggi's Hegelian parlance, a *crisis* in the Christian life, characterised by its constitutive perspectives having become fully autonomous, instead of also interdependent.

When such a crisis takes place, one of at least three things may occur. First, the Christian life may simply disintegrate. For example, if I cannot reconcile my Christian identity with my particular situation, and choose to give the latter its full weight, then I may decide to surrender the former. Second, with perseverance I might eventually find a way to resolve the crisis. Third, the Christian life may not disintegrate even though the

crisis remains, and so remains in a dissonant state, adopting contradictory perspectives to everything it encounters. Such dissonance will likely worsen over time.

Even here, however, disintegration is never *inevitable*, given the unstable, aporetic quality of Christianicity that bequeaths the Christian life its identity and continuity of identity. That quality might remain, despite the chasms that have opened between the perspectives. And so, those perspectives await eventual, if unforeseeable restoration.[124]

As tedious as Christian critiques of modernity have become, it is therefore at least arguable that much of the contemporary theological academy is characterised by an elongated, unresolved crisis in this sense. In this respect, recall Zachhuber's diagnosis of the 20th century study of Christianity as having broken into wholly external perspectives, like a methodologically agnostic sociology of religion, and wholly internal perspectives, such as a Barthian theology of revelation. Biblical scholars and church historians, facing this stark divide, allied themselves with the former, whereas systematic and practical theologians had little choice but to adopt the latter.[125] Zachhuber attributes this fracturing to the failure of 19th century German idealist theology to reconcile traditional theology with the "historicist" programme, which sought to understand Christianity in terms of an underlying historical story.[126] Here, I note that this historicism was in fact mild in its emphasis on radical historical

124 Hence Bonhoeffer, reflecting on an irreconcilable tension between his perspective on his situation, and his understanding of God: "One may ask whether there have ever before in human history been people with so little ground under their feet – people to whom every available alternative seemed equally intolerable, repugnant, and futile, who looked beyond all these existing alternatives for the source of their strength so entirely in the past or in the future, and who yet, without being dreamers, were able to await the success of their cause so quietly and confidently". Bonhoeffer (1971), 1.

125 Zachhuber (2013), 286–7.

126 Ibid., 7.

contingency, at least when compared to 20th century developments.[127] Nonetheless, the historicist programme can still be treated as an attempt to take the particularity of Christianity's historical situation more seriously than had previously occurred.

In other words, the 20th century breakdown can be understood not only, as I argued in section 1, as a divide between internal and external perspectives towards the Christian life. Rather, it can also be treated as a separation of perspectives centred on that life's particular situation from those perspectives centred on its uniquely Christian character. This provides a further explanation for the inertness I highlighted before in Barth's descriptions of the Christian life.[128] His theology is one that has been deprived of ready ways to take into account new discoveries or redescriptions of the Christian's situation. As a result, he often relies on oversimplistic or outdated understandings of the latter.

Any further diagnosis of our present state of affairs would take us too far from our present task. However, in this thesis' conclusion, I will briefly make suggestions as to the support structures that might assist the Christian life from falling into ruin.

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3. *Theo-ethical discourse must not be misrepresented, so as to be claimed to embrace perspectives other than what it does, or to be entirely independent of the other perspectives.*

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127 As Hunt puts it, "Foucault radically historicized all beliefs and, by insisting on discontinuity in discursive formations, he also seemed to render futile any investigation into historical process ... It is small wonder, then, that most historians find Foucault useful only in small doses": Hunt (1986), 219.

128 See section 1.

This final criterion does not directly relate to how the different perspectives of the Christian life *develop*, but instead to how those perspectives are *presented*. It therefore guards against the possibility of overreach, that is, the possibility that theo-ethical discourse is being represented as doing more than what it possibly can. Such overreach may involve disregarding the relative autonomy of the perspectives, or alternatively their mutual presupposition.

In respect of the former, I have already singled out arguments within the metahistorical type as frequently guilty of this overstep. The problem with them is that they are positioned from one perspective of the Christian life –that focusing on its coherence – but are framed so as to swallow up the other perspectives. Such arguments, accordingly, pretend to do more than they can. So while metahistorical theologians believe their works to have profound ethical ramifications, those works often obscure basic but essential ethical questions such as "what should I do?" This is not to imply that such overreaching claims cannot ever be insightful. Their defect, rather, involves a failure to recognise that such insights are only ever partial.

Take, as just one example, Lindbeck's contrast between a "rule" (or "cognitive-linguistic") conception of doctrine with "propositional" and "experiential-expressive" conceptions. Propositional conceptions understand doctrines as truth claims, referring to a definite ontological reality. Experiential-expressive conceptions perceive them as merely expressions of "inner feelings, attitudes, or existential orientations".[129] But a rule conception understands doctrines as "communally

[129] Lindbeck (1984), 16.

authoritative rules of discourse, attitude, and action":[130] they regulate what members of a specific religious group can and cannot do or say.

Lindbeck is cautious in stating his primary ambition as just to prove the "availability", not the "superiority", of the rule conception.[131] Nonetheless, he also argues explicitly for the latter. A rule theory, he contends, more plausibly explains doctrinal change than a propositional theory. Further, it "makes church doctrines more effectively normative by relating them more closely to praxis".[132]

But it is precisely here, I suggest, that Lindbeck throws himself into confusion. For in claiming that rule theory is not just *one* way of understanding doctrine, but the *preferable* way, he assumes that there is just one right angle from which to understand the Christian distinctiveness sought to be articulated via doctrine. In so doing, he prematurely dismisses the legitimacy of understanding Christian truth claims about reality precisely as such. That is, he treats those truth claims as functioning *only* as rules, instead of simultaneously *also* as attempts to describe what is unique in a Christian understanding of existence. Why, however, might not both perspectives be illuminating?

In fact, Lindbeck's conception of doctrines as rules conflates at least three of the Christian life's distinct perspectives. He is engaged in a metahistorical search for *coherence*, but one which collapses doctrines, as markers of *Christian distinctiveness*, into principles of Christian *moral agency*. As a result, his claim that a rule theory relates

130 Ibid., 18.
131 Ibid., 91.
132 Ibid.

doctrine “more closely” to praxis creates uncertainty as to what said praxis even is. That claim is thereby emptied of clear meaning.

Overreach may also occur when theo-ethical discourse is presented as operating entirely independently of other facets of the Christian life. We saw this, for example, with the new natural lawyers’ claim that the principles of practical reason governing moral agency were self-evident, even though our constant suspicion was that these principles were really based on unarticulated assumptions from Catholic theology. In such a case, what has been ignored is precisely how the Christian life’s perspectives influence and correct one another.

In either direction, overreach may be a symptom of a crisis in the Christian life as earlier described. That is, when theologians articulate either totalistic or atomistic conceptions of the Christian life, this suggests that the contradictions between that life’s constitutive perspectives have become unbearable. In such circumstances, theologians are tempted to overcompensate, and assert a unity between the perspectives which those perspectives never had. Or, alternatively, they push the separation even further, and claim complete autonomy for one perspective, in order to save the latter from the sinking ship. But such misrepresentation, in either case, obscures the true problem.

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I have now finished sketching my account of the Christian life, and how it regulates theo-ethical discourse. All this now complete, it is finally worth briefly considering the nature of that account itself: what have I been doing in the process of formulating it?

It is easiest to answer this by reference to the debates and distinctions I have touched upon over the course of this chapter. So first, the above account of the Christian life is situated from a perspective *within* that life. However, as I argued in sections 1 and 3, there is no such thing as a purely internal perspective: rather, every internal perspective also has an external referent. Thus my account of the Christian life is both internal and external to that life.

Second, while this account is ultimately situated from a perspective focused on the Christianicity of the Christian life, it has in fact attempted to model the circling back and forth between perspectives which this last section has outlined. It has done so two times: once throughout the typological part of this thesis; and then again in section 2 of the present chapter.

Third, let us also recall Jaeggi's distinction between immanent, external and internal criticism. The process described here about how theo-ethical claims develop shares features of both immanent and internal criticism, though it cannot be fully assimilated to either. For like immanent criticism, it is concerned with exploring the contradictions that emerge within the Christian life, and with showing how that life evolves by overcoming these contradictions. But unlike immanent criticism, and more like internal criticism, it is still deeply concerned with maintaining the fundamental identity and basic structure of the Christian life, calling it to be more consistent with itself. Hence like internal criticism, it will still probably be suspected from the outside of being too conservative.

I would prefer, then, simply to call this account of the Christian life a *critique* of that life. That term means many things,[133] but here, it refers to an attempt from within that life – though simultaneously also from without – to describe it.[134] Ideally, the role of such a critique in Christian theology and ethics would be modest. For again, it does not say how theological and ethical claims should positively proceed, only what they must not do. That is to say, the more a critique of the Christian life is needed, the more crisis-prone that life has probably become.

I turn now, in this thesis' final chapter, to one complicated set of debates which a critique of the Christian life might usefully clarify, thereby proving its mettle.

133 See the review in Asad (2009), 46–55.

134 I would prefer not to use the term "phenomenology", though that of course also means many things. Still my concern lies in the word's frequent connotations of methodological agnosticism – that is, of standing *entirely* outside the Christian life – and of a fixity in the objects of phenomenological analysis. These ambiguities are partly explored in the "phenomenology of the devout life" proposed in Pattison (2018).

CHAPTER VI

EVIL AND SUFFERING AS A CASE STUDY FOR THE CRITIQUE

The *concept* of the Christian life is presupposed, however obliquely, in every discussion of the relationship between theology and ethics. That concept's internal complexity, characterised by its autonomous but also interdependent perspectives, explains much of why the relationship has proven so difficult to master. Consequently, the purpose of a *critique* of the Christian life is to delineate that concept and its perspectives, so as to identify the outer boundaries which theological and ethical claims must not overstep. Transgressing those limits, in contrast, will push the Christian life into contradiction.

However, the critique of the Christian life sketched last chapter was primarily abstract. Accordingly, this final chapter will try to render it concrete, by asking whether and how it might illuminate theological and ethical debates over *evil and suffering*. Other case studies are of course possible. To name just a few, I could have easily considered "applied ethical issues" like those concerning sexual ethics; questions of general ethical discourse such as regarding the compatibility of Christianity with human rights; or the moral implications of classic Christian doctrines like the *imago dei*.

There are two reasons, nonetheless, why discussions of evil and suffering are especially enlightening for the critique of the Christian life. First, many of the recent controversies surrounding these are framed as a contest between "theoretical" and "practical" perspectives on evil. The latter thus often accuse the former of a weightlessness unbecoming of the subject's gravity. Such an invoked distinction between theory and practice should raise red flags, given the present thesis' contention that the distinction

has become an important but imperfect way to describe the different perspectives comprising the Christian life. That framing therefore warrants further examination.

Second, a striking emphasis in the recent discussions has lain on how little we can meaningfully say about evil. Evil, Paul Ricoeur says, creates a "broken dialectic" in our speech and thinking, a borderline beyond which reasonable discourse must not trespass.[1] Whether we agree with this characterisation, it is hard to deny a certain inexplicability to evil. That makes it an especially good example of the limits of any single perspective of the Christian life to understand the phenomena it encounters. Multiple perspectives are necessary, therefore, in order to better grasp the ungraspable.

Accordingly, this chapter begins by highlighting how the four different perspectives that comprise the Christian life produce four different perspectives on evil and suffering. From the perspectives of moral agency, the situation's particularity, coherence, and Christianicity, we view evil and suffering as, respectively, an enemy of moral agency, intensely particular and alienating experiences, anomalous phenomena to be reabsorbed into a meaningful framework for our lives, and forces opposed by God. These ways of seeing evil are irreducible: we cannot leave them behind by synthesising them into a more comprehensive viewpoint. Evil, therefore, does indeed have "many faces" – but these are not merely the so-called "logical", "evidential" and "religious" problems of evil; or alternatively, evil's distinct oppositions to the Father's creative agency, the Son's transforming agency, and the Spirit's perfecting agency.[2] Such typologies may be insightful, but still obscure the Christian life's underlying perspectival structure.

1 See Ricoeur (1985), 642–4.
2 Thus, respectively, Feinberg (2004); Schwöbel (2017), 339–42.

Following elaboration on that structure, I will proceed to consider three very different discussions of evil and suffering which it might helpfully clarify and, where need be, correct. Those discussions comprise David Kelsey's endeavour to "imagine" the redemption of a suffering family he knew; descriptions by liberation theologians of the preferential option of the poor; and debates about the problem of evil in analytic philosophy. I will apply, to these discussions, the three criteria of theo-ethical discourse articulated at the end of last chapter. By so doing, I hope to show why a critique of the Christian life is useful for understanding the stakes of a rather wide range of discussions, and for providing a standard for assessing whether they have gone astray.

That will not mean, however, that I will do anything vaguely close to "settling" the problem of evil. As I have said, the role of the critique of the Christian life is significant, but still modest. At most, it can clarify what underpins a discussion about evil or suffering, and delineate that discussion's necessary limits. That constitutes a real contribution, but still a constricted one. It will be for others, more directly involved in such discussions, to attempt more substantial advances.

Two other caveats. First, the following analysis concerns both evil *and* suffering. These overlap. However, they are not the same, except perhaps through some extension of the category of suffering in a way that exceeds its ordinary use.[3] The difference between the two is signified, for example, through the distinction frequently drawn between moral and natural evil. Only the former is produced through human agency, whereas the latter befalls humans through no apparent fault of their own. So while natural evil almost always implies suffering, moral evil might exist even without such a connection.

[3] C.f. in this vein Stump (2010), 10, who suggests the idea of an "objective side of suffering", rooted in an "objective fact of the matter about what will make a human person flourish".

But it would be unwise, I think, to focus on just one of the two.[4] This is partly because they are still evidently connected. Furthermore, our very interpretation of that connection, and of which of the two we perceive as more prominent, may well reflect which one of the four perspectives on evil and suffering we have emphasised. Hence to focus on just one of evil and suffering would prematurely limit our examination.

Second, although we must not unduly disaggregate evil and suffering, I will not focus in this chapter on a third category, that of *sin*. Of course, there is also considerable overlap here, such that it is partly artificial to disconnect these. But the theo-ethical discourse around sin, as we began to see last chapter,[5] has been specific and involved enough to be impossible to do any justice here. Certainly, we cannot avoid talking about sin entirely, not least when relating evil to moral agency. Nonetheless, it cannot constitute our focus.

1 The Christian Life's Perspectives on Evil and Suffering

In the previous chapter, I reviewed the four facets of the Christian life. This section, in outlining the Christian life's constitutive perspectives towards evil and suffering, parallels that review. Hence from each facet – moral agency, the particularity of the situation, the Christian life's coherence, Christianicity – emerges a different perspective towards the object examined. Accordingly, within the Christian life, we always view evil and suffering from several different perspectives, instead of ever adopting a single, comprehensive one.

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4 C.f. Plantinga (1974), 57–9, who focuses on evil and speculates that all natural evil might be a subset of moral evil; and compare with Stump (2010), 4, for whom "suffering, not evil, seems ... the salient thing".

5 See the discussion of O'Donovan and Niebuhr in section 3 of that chapter, and of Barth at n. 93.

Here, it may help to distinguish between the *perspectives* and *views*. The perspectives of the Christian life are constitutive parts of that life, and cannot be disregarded. Each is defined by the facet of the Christian life to which it corresponds. However, within each perspective, a wide range of views are possible. Perspectives cannot be described except through views, yet no single view is mandatory. This section's argument, therefore, is that the perspectives are paramount, but not any particular view within them.

A Evil and Suffering as Enemies of Moral Agency

> "The rational origin, however, of this disharmony in our power of choice ... i.e., this propensity to evil, remains inexplicable to us, for, since it must itself be imputed to us, this supreme ground of all maxims must in turn require the adoption of an evil maxim."[6]

> "Christians are called to suffer with God in the fight against evil in the present age. ... The oppressed are called to fight against suffering by becoming God's suffering servants in the world. This vocation is not a passive endurance of injustice but, rather, a political and social praxis of liberation in the world".[7]

A first perspective towards evil and suffering concerns how they oppose the Christian moral agent. Broadly speaking, that opposition can take two forms. For one, the delineation of "moral" from "natural" evil suggests how evil can be treated as something that corrupts moral agency. That agency, once corrupted, itself begins to inflict evil and suffering. In this way, evil can be construed as *sin*.

Obviously, a smorgasbord of philosophical and theological models has been proposed for understanding how said corruption occurs. Here, I will mention just Kant's, given its relative precision, notwithstanding its contradictions.[8] For him, evil is a "propensity"

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6 Kant (1996e), 88 [6:43].

7 Cone (2008), 163.

8 See Bernstein, for whom Kant "is the modern philosopher who initiates the inquiry into evil without explicit recourse to philosophical theodicy": Bernstein (2002), 4. Moreover, the

(*Hang*; *propensio*), not part of human nature even while freely chosen by the will.[9] It is chosen when a person opts to subordinate the moral law to some other incentive. Once this occurs, evil becomes "radical" (*radikal*), since it then "corrupts the ground of all maxims".[10] That is, although someone might perform many evil actions, there is a single, unitive "power of choice that precedes every deed".[11]

Nonetheless, as the quote from Kant opening this discussion suggests, why one might choose evil at all remains "inexplicable". That is, there is no reason why anyone would choose the predisposition towards evil over the moral law – and yet everyone does. Hence on Kant's reading, the account of the Fall in Genesis is merely a mythological way to represent that mystery.

There is a second way evil and suffering are opposed to moral agency. Instead of evil corrupting that agency, the subject/object relationship can be reversed: evil and suffering thus become problems to be actively addressed by the moral agent. Each is therefore something "which ought not to be and which action must struggle against",[12] with failure to take such action implying abdication of one's moral responsibility. And, even when most possibilities for action have been forcibly curtailed, it is possible for seemingly "passive" strategies of resistance to hold considerable symbolic value. In that sense, they remain "active".[13]

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contradictions in his thought anticipate the perplexities faced by subsequent continental thinkers, in grappling with 20th century evil.

9 Kant (1996d), 76–7 [6:29].

10 Ibid., 83 [6:37].

11 Ibid., 79 [6:31] (emphasis removed).

12 Ricoeur (1985), 642.

13 See, e.g., Hauerwas' contention that Christian peace is an "unsettling" one: Hauerwas (2003), 145.

The ways we might actively work against evil and suffering are potentially endless. In part, this mirrors the multifarious ways the two may manifest in our various situations, a point to which I will shortly come. Unsurprisingly, therefore, broad categories have been suggested to distil the different kinds of action possible in response to suffering and evil.

So, for example, we might distinguish between "private" and "public" actions, as fraught as that distinction is. The latter connotes political or collective activities, which would otherwise be avoided from within the "sanctuary of private virtuousness" that Dietrich Bonhoeffer derided.[14] A similar preference for public over private action recurs in contemporary arguments that sin is too often construed in an unhelpfully individualistic manner, instead of as something reinforced by social structures.[15] And, of course, that preference provides a lynchpin for many contextual theologies concerned to combat structural oppressions, as the quote from James Cone above indicates.

Not entirely dissimilarly, we might also draw a line between "doing good" and "avoiding evil". Devotion to the former might suggest a willingness to bear the unforeseen, unintended or unavoidable harms that result from pursuing good.[16] Or it may suggest a search for a pure good without evil, one that pushes a person outside the public realm entirely.[17] And, of course, we can also distinguish between violent and non-violent action, with the former sometimes suggested to be intrinsically evil.[18]

14 Bonhoeffer (1971), 7 (emphasis removed).
15 See, e.g., Emerson and Smith (2000); Moe-Lobeda (2013), 49–81.
16 Cavanaugh (2006).
17 Thus Arendt (1998), 73–8.
18 See, e.g., Milbank (2006), 440.

One might also try to catalogue *distinctively Christian actions* taken in response to suffering. In that vein, John Swinton suggests a series of acts which he says collectively comprise a "practical theodicy". These include practices of lament, by which suffering is reframed as that which God will overcome; of sitting in silence, by which one shares in others' sufferings; and of the forgiveness of evil, by which we witness to God's coming kingdom.[19]

Within this latter list, I should observe, the reference to the *framing* of suffering matters. It points to the tension between the explanations we offer for evil and suffering, and the ways the latter tear at and undermine those explanations. That tension principally concerns the next two perspectives on evil and suffering that I will consider. But it cannot be ignored even with this one.

B Evil and Suffering as Irreducibly Particular

> "We encounter evil in many different modes, as moral wrongdoing in actions, as the seemingly meaningless suffering of body and soul, as the breaking of legal agreements and the violation of personal relationships, as the entanglement in evil structures, as being exposed to cruelty and violence, as sinking into meaningless without finding anything to hang onto – the list could be continued. The pluriform ways of the manifestation of evil make it impossible to reduce all experiences of evil to one single and simple reality in different forms of appearance."[20]

> "[F]or the person in pain, so incontestably and unnegotiably present is it that 'having pain' may come to be thought of as the most vibrant example of what it is to 'have certainty', while for the other person it is so elusive that 'hearing about pain' may exist as the primary model of what it is 'to have doubt'. Thus pain comes unsharably into our midst ... it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language."[21]

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19 Swinton (2007).
20 Schwöbel (2017), 335.
21 Scarry (1985), 4.

We do not view evil and suffering solely in terms of our active responses to them. Hence they are, second, *irreducibly particular features* of our various situations. Another way to say this is evil and suffering have their own perverse breadth and depth: breadth, because of their *pluriformity*; depth, because of their *singularity*.

First, as indicated by the first quote above, evil and suffering manifest themselves in uncountable ways. This is something acutely understood by novelists, dramatists, or really any attentive observer of the world and human behaviour. Within theology, however, it is most readily perceived in treatments of evil as a *privatio boni*. If the goods of existence are multitudinous, then so are the evils corrupting them. It makes sense, therefore, to speak of the "grammar" of evil, that is, the "process in which good is lost".[22] So evil and suffering cut across all dimensions of created existence – the physical, embodied, mental, phenomenological, spiritual, linguistic, cultural, historical, cosmic, and so on.

Furthermore, if innovation is possible in respect of the world's goods, then an "inventiveness of wickedness" is readily explicable as well.[23] Suppose we consider humans as *homo faber*, creatures able to creatively shape their physical, social and linguistic environments. That creative capacity, however, will not lead solely to an increase in the good, but also facilitates new kinds of evil. For example, recall from Chapter III the attempts by J. Kameron Carter and Willie James Jennings to diagnose *race* as a constructed but perverse theological category. On their diagnosis, common in post-colonial research, race was invented to divide humans into distinct groups, in order

22 Williams (2000b), 105.
23 Strauss (1953), 161.

to justify the oppression of some. If the category appears natural or God-given, that only speaks to the innovation's horrific "success".

Second, the particularity of evil and suffering also means that each is *singular*. That is, neither is reducible to the nexus of circumstances of which it is a part. Rather, each stands apart from that nexus.

This is easiest to grasp as a phenomenological point, one about our *experience* of evil or suffering. Nonetheless, I am also making an ontic claim about their reality. Thus the second quote above, by Elaine Scarry, gestures at how suffering feels so real that it makes all other experiences seem *unreal*. Or, as Hannah Arendt writes, intense pain "actually deprives us of our feeling for reality", and is so "removed from the world of things and men that it cannot assume an appearance at all".[24] To these claims, we can add that evil and suffering in fact create their own counter-realities, inhabited only by their victims, which is why the experience of either is so private and incommunicable. The sufferer may even find it difficult to communicate to themself what has occurred, as with the well-known phenomenon where trauma survivors simply cannot recollect the event, despite its ongoing repercussions.

Accordingly, it is extraordinarily difficult to *compare* evils or sufferings, even when they befall just a single sufferer. We often do so, of course, as when I tell the clinician that the pain is greater in my big toe than small toe. But that is a fundamentally different kind of assessment than that "[t]here is a difference between even the worst attack of toothache and the memory of twelve years of continuous sexual abuse as a child".[25] In

24 Arendt (1998), 51.
25 Williams (2007), 257.

the latter comparison, as Rowan Williams identifies, the language of quantity or proportion has ceased in usefulness. And it is easy to understand why, if we remember that both a toothache and ongoing molestation are reality-destroying, rendering talk about quantity facile, even as we instinctively recognise the latter to somehow be of greater gravity than the former.

So evils and sufferings frequently cannot be compared directly: past a certain threshold, they become incommensurable. From then on, we are only able to compare their proxies. Those might include their durations, the different extents they tear at our narratives or frameworks of meanings, the variable degrees of moral culpability, and so on.

There is, consequently, some use for a category like that of "horrendous evils" proposed by Marilyn McCord Adams. She offers it out of worry that the theodicies and defences of analytic philosophers like John Hick or Alvin Plantinga are only addressed at evil *in general*. They are therefore not concerned with specific, shocking evils like genocide, which makes the question of justifying God appear in a very different light than vis-à-vis a toothache. Horrendous evils, then, are "evils the participation in which ... constitutes prima facie reason to doubt whether the participant's life could ... be a great good to him/her on the whole".[26] Williams rightly scrutinises this definition, again as inappropriately relying on a quantitative measure.[27] But despite this difficulty, the definition does usefully draw attention to evil's meaning-destroying capacity, or what I have called its singularity.

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26 Adams (1999), 26.

27 Williams (2007), 256–7.

My own doubt about Adams' definition is that it overlooks how *all* evil and suffering – even the stubbed toe – has the objective tendency to corrode our frameworks of meaning. Given the mentioned pluriformity of the two, that corrosion may happen in myriad ways. Thus, individuals and communities, and their respective forms of life, will develop very different resiliences to different kinds of evils and suffering. Some are thereby rendered seemingly trivial – and yet their corrosive tendency remains. *All* evil, then, is therefore potentially "horrendous", given its singularity.

C Evil and Suffering as Phenomena to be Rendered Coherent

> "[T]heodicy has an irreducibly historical core precisely because it is the product of the collision between: (1) *theological* narratives (i.e. certain historically and socially conditioned textual renditions of the (triune) reality of God); (2) *the personal narrative of the theodicist* (whose biography is itself a product and a reflection of historical conditions), and (3) an *episteme* or *historical reality* itself (which, in this post-Enlightenment context, takes the form of a narrative, or set of narratives, that, directly or indirectly, renders problematic the notion that there is a God".[28]

> "This is how one pictures the angel of history. ... Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed."[29]

Evil and suffering, I have just said, must be seen as destructive of our frameworks of meaning. But there is also a necessary obverse perspective, namely that evil and suffering are what must be *incorporated into* the coherence of the Christian life. That coherence, I argued in the previous chapter, takes many dimensions. Thus evil and suffering must be accounted for within, for example, my intellectual belief system, sense of self, practices, life narrative, and position in salvation history. Indeed, and as the first quote above suggests, one way to consider evil is in terms of the conflict

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28 Surin (1986), 48 (emphasis in original).
29 Benjamin (1999b), 249 [IX].

between these dimensions, such as when I cannot fit my personal story into God's providential designs. In such a case, what is needed is *more* coherence, one that enables these dimensions to be better co-ordinated.

A "theodicy" might therefore be defined as an attempt to locate and articulate said coherence in its various forms. That term, of course, has often been used to refer specifically to arguments that evil is compatible with God's existence. But this use is a narrow one. It is concerned with the coherence of a specific selection of beliefs, like those in J.L. Mackie's famous formulation that "God is omnipotent; God is wholly good; and yet evil exists".[30] Yet such a context does not exhaust the width of the term "theodicy".

Indeed, even if we remain focused solely on the coherence of one's *beliefs*, other selections of beliefs than the above are possible, and which would make said coherence look rather different. So as Charles Taylor and others have argued, the theodical question has assumed a distinctive form in the modern, post-Leibnizian age, compared to its premodern iterations. We now think of it in terms of justifying God's existence. But previously, that existence was taken for granted: the real question was why God our helper did not prevent our afflictions. So on Taylor's account, the modern theodical form really depends on yet another belief, namely that concerning our "heightened sense of ourselves as free agents", which arose from startling advances in technology and forms of governance.[31] This belief has made, by analogy, God's own ability to prevent evil seem ironclad. It therefore provides a premise of Mackie's formulation of the problem of evil, even while remaining unstated. Before modernity, in contrast, the

30 Mackie (1955), 200.
31 Taylor (2007), 306.

absence of that premise meant that, in thinking about evil, the weakest link was not belief in God's existence, but rather belief in his power. Hence "coherence" as regards one's beliefs towards evil appeared in a fundamentally different light.

In any case, theodicy as the attempt to formulate coherence extends well beyond the coherence of abstract beliefs. This is why a theodicy, as Peter Berger argues, is implied just as much when "[t]he illiterate peasant ... comments upon the death of a child by referring to the will of God", as when "the learned theologian ... writes a treatise".[32] In this way, many theological ideas that *prima facie* have nothing to do with evil can be shown to be powerfully responsive to it. Those include mystical union with God, in the face of which all our sufferings are rendered trivial. Or consider ascetic self-surrender to God, ecclesiologies that absorb the individual into the community, millenarianism and eschatology, and Gnostic dualism.[33] Each of these tries to function, however variably, as a "plausible theodicy", one which "permits the individual to integrate the anomic experiences of his biography into ... the scheme of things, which consequently is protected from the threat of chaotic disintegration that is always implicit in such events".[34]

As should be obvious, this and the previous perspective on evil and suffering are two sides of the same coin, presupposing each other even while also at war. So evil and suffering are breaks or disruptions to the Christian life's coherence, but also what that coherence must overcome. Once we notice the fact of this struggle, instances of it become simple to find.

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32 Berger (1967), 53.
33 Ibid., 60–73.
34 Ibid., 58–9.

Here, I will mention just two. First, a promising avenue in recent biblical scholarship has involved the application of trauma studies to scriptural texts.[35] For example, while the Hebrew Bible often claims the fall of Jerusalem and the exile to be a punishment inflicted by God for Judah's sins, "[t]rauma interrupts this explanatory narrative ... putting this speech on trial and rendering it ambiguous, making any certainty in explanation impossible".[36] The Book of Lamentations encapsulates the point. Whatever the authorship of its five poems, these cycle back and forth between attempts to comprehend the destruction, and laments at the destruction's utter incomprehensibility. Hence the first poem claims that the suffering is the consequence of Zion's transgressions (1:5, 8–9, 14, 18), and waits upon Yahweh to punish its tormenters for their own sins (1:21–22). But the second and third poems each represent a reset: the previous explanation has been inadequate to silence the lament, which therefore continues. The book ends, notoriously, without comfort or closure: "you have utterly rejected us, and are angry with us beyond measure" (5:22).[37]

Second, in the voluminous theological discussion of memory, a question has arisen about the ethics of *forgetting*. Miroslav Volf has therefore argued that it can indeed be good and right to forget painful memories, against a popular view that honouring victims means preserving the past forever. By "forgetting", he does not mean completely erasing memories, but instead the subtler notion of "not-coming-to-mind". That is, the memories will still exist, but will "simply fail to surface in one's consciousness".[38] Volf admits that forgetfulness of this kind is only eschatologically attainable. That is, there are certainly wrongs we must not forget about in the present, in

35 See, e.g., Becker, Dochhorn and Holt (2013); Carr (2015).
36 Janzen (2012), 59.
37 I have drawn this reading from Janzen (2018).
38 Volf (2006), 145.

order that we might rectify them and not prematurely excuse the wrongdoers. Full forgetfulness, nonetheless, remains the ideal.

However, Stanley Hauerwas has challenged Volf's eschatology, suggesting it does not take seriously God's redemption of *all* world history. Instead, it assumes redemption encompasses only the parts of history we enjoyed. In contrast, Hauerwas contends, even evil and suffering must be redeemed, rather than merely stricken from our consciousnesses. Thus, since "time has been redeemed by Christ ... we do not need to deny our memories, shaped as they are by sin, but ... can trust memories to be transformed by forgiveness and reconciliation".[39]

In this dispute, Volf and Hauerwas in fact operate with subtly different conceptions of suffering. Volf assumes that suffering has an element of excess, a portion utterly incapable of redemption or subsumption to meaning-making. Hence it must be forgotten. But for Hauerwas, Christ's triumph means that everything, however grim, must have its redemptive value. In that case, however, the two theologians are merely acting as representatives of the two perspectives we have just been examining: Volf emphasises the unbridgeable singularity of evil and suffering; Hauerwas the need to render these coherent. And their dispute mirrors those perspectives' irreconcilable clash.

D Evil and Suffering as Utterly Opposing the God of Jesus Christ

> "The Bible does not seek to impart information about the origin of evil but to witness to its character as guilt and as the unending burden that humankind bears. ... I have committed evil in the midst of the original state of creation. The complete incomprehensibility of this act is expressed in Genesis 3 by the fact that an evil force does not suddenly and manifestly break its way into creation

[39] Hauerwas (2000), 43.

> from somewhere or other; instead this evil is completely veiled in the world of creation, and it takes place in creation through humankind."[40]

> "[Nothingness] 'is', not as God and His creation are, but only in its own improper way, as inherent contradiction, as impossible possibility."[41]

Evil and suffering can be understood as problems to fought, as irreducibly particular, and as phenomena to be rendered coherent. But accordingly to a fourth and final perspective, they must also be seen as opposed by and opposing God.

Hence among the theologians I described as *theo-ontological*, a curious emphasis those theologians share is on evil's metaphysical inexplicability. That is to say, evil exists, and can be found in creation. But it is not part of it, even while it cannot be explained as coming from anywhere else.

A conception of evil as *privatio* also approaches this insight. But such a conception, depending on its precise formulation, may not acknowledge how evil appears not merely as an *absence*. Instead, it also manifests as an active, destructive presence, an "alien power which annihilates creaturely existence and thus discredits and disclaims the Creator".[42] However, when this latter perception is coupled with the classic Christian rejection of metaphysical dualism, it follows that the alien power's existence is utterly incomprehensible. Without that perception, in contrast, it is always possible to mistake evil simply as the gap between creature and Creator, a sign not of discord but merely of distance.

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40 Bonhoeffer (2004), 105.
41 *CD* III/3, 351.
42 Ibid., 310.

Thus on this fourth perspective, evil's opposition to God is such that it exists even while falling outside his designs. Putting the matter this way makes this last perspective seem similar to the second one, which emphasised how evil tears at humans' frames of meaning. But the difference is that evil now also opposes *God*, who exceeds all such frames.

As a result, this fourth perspective is the one that points most directly – though still aporetically – to how evil is to be understood in a distinctively Christian way. Hence in, say, the works of Jürgen Moltmann and Eberhard Jüngel, it is at Christ's crucifixion where evil is forced into fullest display, precisely so that God might defeat it there.[43] In this way, theodicy and the *theologia crucis* become inseparable.

So far, I have of course been drawing from Barth's account of nothingness (*das Nichtige*), his label for evil's metaphysical dimension. It is worth now outlining that account a little more systematically. As Wolf Krötke usefully summarises:

> "Nothingness is essentially inexplicable because God himself did not explain it. Thus, in Barth's work nothingness is called an 'impossible possibility', an 'ontological impossibility', 'the absolutely abnormal and vacuous', 'that which is repulsive in itself', 'the absurd', and 'the essence that which is without essence'. God's own renunciation of an explanation of nothingness has condemned nothingness to 'exist in this way'. Barth wants to take seriously this judgment about nothingness while yet avoiding making it into a component of a system."[44]

Let me review the steps in Barth's own exposition. First, he considers nothingness to be something that exists, despite the unusual character of its existence. It would be a

43 Moltmann (1974); Jüngel (1983).
44 Krötke (2005), 28.

mistake, then, to simply equate nothingness with what "is not". Rather, its existence "derives from its ontic peculiarity. It is evil".[45]

Second, nothingness exists as alien to creation. God exists, and creation exists. But nothingness only exists in a "third way".[46] This third way Barth describes, in Kierkegaardian terminology, as the "impossible possibility", in order to connote nothingness' paradoxical character.[47] Consequently, nothingness is not a creaturely possibility available to humans, notwithstanding how they repeatedly sin. It cannot, for example, be explained as an unfortunate but necessary result of free will.[48] Against this, "all conceptions and doctrines which view nothingness as an essential and necessary determination of being and existence and therefore of the creature, or as an essential determination of the original and creative being of God himself, are untenable from the Christian standpoint".[49]

Third, nothingness must therefore be inexplicable. We can describe *what* it is, namely that which God has rejected. But we must not speculate *why* nothingness exists in its parasitic disruption of God's good creation, or from *where* nothingness arose. Barth thus writes that an appropriate account of nothingness "must not strain after completeness and compactness".[50] And he likewise criticises the speculative nature of most theodicies, for seeking to discern the "ground" of nothingness.[51]

45 *CD* III/3, 353.
46 Ibid., 349.
47 Ibid., 351.
48 Ibid., 192.
49 Ibid., 350.
50 Ibid., 295.
51 Ibid., 366.

Crucially, this paradox, whereby nothingness cannot exist but still does, is only known through God's self-revelation in Christ. Without that revelation in clear sight, Barth argues, one half of the paradox will disappear. This provides the basis for Barth's critique of Heidegger and Sartre's respective accounts of nothingness. Observing that those philosophers' phenomenological methods mean they "have remarkably little to say about God",[52] Barth therefore claims that, no matter how much Heidegger and Sartre write about the phenomenon, in fact "[w]hat they see, describe and proclaim is not real nothingness".[53]

This last proposition, given our review of the different necessary perspectives on evil, has a point, even if it exaggerates somewhat. Since Heidegger and Sartre do not see nothingness in light of God, obviously they cannot understand it as in opposition to him. But this does not mean they might not possibly offer useful perspectives, even while omitting this crucial one. So, while Barth makes a plausible ontological claim about nothingness, and claims a monopoly for it, he mistakes this as also implying a perspectival monopoly.

2 Theodicy and the Interactions of the Perspectives

These, then, are the four constitutive perspectives of the Christian life towards evil and suffering. Each is necessary for that life, none is assimilable to the others, and yet each also presupposes those others. Once we have clearly delineated the perspectives, we can begin to appreciate their complex interactions. But much mischief results, I suggest, when they are not clearly distinguished, or if any is not treated as important in its own

52 Ibid., 344.
53 Ibid., 346.

right. Failures like these are prone to create an endless loop-the-loop of contentions about what the "real" problem of evil is.

In this second section, therefore, I want to explore some recent discussions of evil and suffering, precisely to show how these might be elucidated by the critique of the Christian life I have set out. Here, I should reiterate that I will not offer any paradigm-shifting insights about the topic. Rather, my aim is simply to demonstrate that a clear conception of the Christian life's constitutive perspectives provides a useful hermeneutic key for interpreting what is at stake in several debates about evil and suffering. I also intend to show that those debates cease being productive when they become confused about the limits of each constitutive perspective.

At this point, I should relist the three criteria with which, I argued last chapter, theo-ethical discourse must comply. The purpose of those criteria, I said, was to facilitate the Christian life's development without it falling into flagrant contradiction. The criteria were:

1. Theo-ethical discourse must develop according to the particular logic of the perspective of the Christian life it reflects.
2. Theo-ethical discourse reflecting one perspective of the Christian life must not contradict theo-ethical discourse reflecting other perspectives.
3. Theo-ethical discourse must not be misrepresented, so as to be claimed to embrace perspectives other than what it does, or to be entirely independent of the other perspectives.

In what follows, I will examine three discussions of evil and suffering, each of which foregrounds at least one of the criteria above. I will begin with a relatively simple discussion, before moving to cascadingly more complex ones.

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First, consider a lecture series by David Kelsey, published as *Imagining Redemption*. There, Kelsey considers the story of Sam, the son of a man he knew. Just before he turned eight, Sam inexplicably developed a case of the rare Guillian-Barre Syndrome. That left him almost fully paralysed for four months, required paediatric rehabilitation for seven, and caused irreversible brain damage and ongoing seizures. Long-term behavioural problems also resulted. These, plus the strain of taking care of Sam, led to the breakdown of his family. Eventually, Sam's mother suffered a depressive episode, and killed herself.[54]

Responding to this devastating story, Kelsey poses two closely related questions: "[w]hat earthly difference can Jesus make here";[55] and what does "redemption" mean, at least "Christianly speaking"?[56] He observes these cannot be answered solely through careful analysis of Christian doctrines, which are too abstractly framed for that purpose. Rather, "what 'redemption' concretely means for Christians is relative to the concrete particularities of the situations and events that cry out for redemption".[57]

54 Kelsey (2005), 23–6, 44–5.
55 Ibid., 6.
56 Ibid., 85.
57 Ibid., 2.

Simultaneously, however, there must still be a sense that, "[w]hatever 'redemption' means, Jesus defines the God who does it".[58] Both these priorities must be preserved.

The answer Kelsey offers to these questions is thoughtful, and admirably aware of its own limits, even as it takes a rather different tact compared to what we might expect from a professional systematic theologian. He discerns three subtly different senses of redemption, and "imagines" what each means for Sam and his family. Those senses are of redemption as making up for the world's bad performance; redemption by God from control by oppressive forces; and redemption as God making good on his promises. So, in Sam's case, redemption first means creating a new context for him, characterised by God's promise of a new world.[59] Second, it implies liberating him and his family from being defined by horrific past events.[60] And third, it suggests that Sam and his family are now set free from their previous vicious cycles, and can begin to live lives of redemption promised by God.[61]

What is actually happening in this analysis of Sam's situation, however? What is at stake in it? Let us start with Kelsey's self-presentation. In a methodological coda to the lectures, he says he has combined systematic and pastoral theologies, two disciplines normally kept separate.[62] Furthermore, he contests a conception of those disciplines which would understand systematic theology as a comprehensive "theory", which is then applied to the "practice" of pastoral theology.[63] Such a conception, he says, is far too roughshod to account for "the concrete particulars of actual situations", and

58 Ibid., 9.
59 Ibid., 38–9.
60 Ibid., 59–61.
61 Ibid., 81–3.
62 Ibid., 86–7.
63 Ibid., 89.

therefore also for "the concreteness of ... what needs redemption and of its actual redemption".[64]

To put it another way, Christian beliefs about redemption are varied and complex. Some, like those focusing on God's atoning work at the Cross, can only be narrated, not set within a general theory. But others can be, like those relating to the "subjective" side of salvation and how people are justified by grace. And still others, about how people's concrete lives may be redeemed by the evils befalling them, can also be theorised – though only in a manner "not very illuminating of the practices of Christian life".[65] To this final subtype of beliefs, Kelsey applies his well-known phrase: we must be "systematically unsystematic", weaving threads from Christian teachings about redemption with "[r]emarks about the structure and dynamics of the narrative of a particular situation of evil".[66]

These methodological comments are enlightening. Still, I think there is a clearer way to grasp what Kelsey is attempting, instead of relying on his own framing concerning which parts of redemption can and cannot be theorised. Let me, therefore, attempt my own characterisation.

First, by showing concern for concrete situations of evil, Kelsey recognises the importance of the second perspective towards evil and suffering I have named. But second, in also asking what redemption means "Christianly speaking", and the difference Jesus makes, he alludes to the fourth perspective as well. And third, Kelsey refers to *imagining* redemption, where imagination is defined to include "the human

64 Ibid., 85.
65 Ibid., 92.
66 Ibid., 94.

ability to recognize in an act of perception the constitutive pattern that makes a complex whole the whole it is".[67] Thus he acknowledges the third perspective, concerning how evil and suffering might be placed into a coherent whole.

So when Kelsey, in each lecture, picks a different sense of Christian redemption and imagines what it implies for Sam and his family, he is in fact bouncing between three separate perspectives towards evil in the Christian life. It is this multiperspectivity which animates his recognition that, "while 'redemption' has several meanings, Christianly speaking it does not mean any one thing that can be neatly summarized in a general way".[68] In this manner, Kelsey acknowledges the irreducible integrity of each of these perspectives, even if only implicitly. He therefore respects the first criterion of theo-ethical discourse, which mandated that each perspective of the Christian life must develop according to its own dynamics. Kelsey's lectures, therefore, comprise an attempt to relate these perspectives, but in a way that leaves these dynamics intact. It is *this* that is at stake in his endeavour to be "systematically unsystematic".

We might suspect, nonetheless, that Kelsey's analysis of what redemption means to Sam and his family still feels in some way "abstract". After all, he has offered no new "solution" to the evil in Sam's life, only sought to reframe it. But that only reflects the difficulty in relating the different perspectives, and how their process of mutual influence is only ever gradual and partial. I now turn, then, to an illustration of how said influence might occur.

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67 Ibid., 100.
68 Ibid., 85.

The next and rather different discussion of evil and suffering I consider, therefore, will foreground the second criterion of theo-ethical discourse. This, to recall, concerns the need for consistency between the Christian life's constitutive perspectives.

Among liberation and contextual theologies, a consistent emphasis has been on the need to take seriously the sufferings of the oppressed. That idea's most famous iteration has been the "preferential option for the poor", first formally articulated by Latin American liberation theologians at the 1979 Puebla Conference, though predating it.[69] Initially, the option was used to refer to the conditions of abject economic poverty in Latin America. But it has since been applied – sometimes retrospectively – to calls by other groups, including women, black people, Hispanics and indigenous persons, to pay closer attention to their own structural oppressions.[70]

The meaning of the option has been deeply contested, and several definitions have been attempted.[71] Here, I will rely on two pithy but relatively precise formulations. One is by Gregory Baum. "The preferential option consists of a twofold commitment: first, to read society and its texts from the perspective of the poor and oppressed, and second, to give public witness of one's solidarity with their struggle for liberation. The first commitment has hermeneutical implications and the second activist ones."[72] The other definition is by missiologist David Bosch: "the poor are the first, though not the only ones, on which God's attention focuses and ... the church has no choice but to

69 For commentary, see Eagleson and Scharper (1979).
70 See, e.g., Gutiérrez (1992b), 32.
71 C.f. Petrella's suspicion of how the Vatican, and of all organisations the International Monetary Fund, have used the term but interpreted it so as to lead to conservative outcomes: Petrella (2004), 2–23.
72 Baum (1994), 5.

demonstrate solidarity with the poor. The poor have an 'epistemological privilege'; they are the new interlocutors of theology, its new hermeneutical locus".[73]

Given the different constitutive perspectives on evil and suffering above, how might we interpret the preferential option? That option, I suggest, is an attempt to articulate Christians' moral duty to acknowledge the circumstances of suffering caused by deprivation. In other words, the option for the poor implicates the first two perspectives on evil and suffering I have described above, relating to moral agency and the particularity of the situation. First, it constitutes an instruction to moral agency, to combat evil. But that instruction directs this first perspective to the second, which considered evil and suffering in their irreducible particularity. The preferential option thus effectively says: consistency between these two perspectives requires amending the second, so as to take more seriously poverty and certain other evils. The failure to do so, then, implies not only a miscarriage of observation, but also of moral responsibility. Ignorance will not be innocent.

Accordingly, debates about the proper scope of the option are often really debates about the appropriate interactions between these two perspectives. For example, consider criticisms of Latin American liberation theologians for being too focused on economic deprivation. Thus other structural degradations, like concerning race, gender or sexual orientation, are omitted, even though these typically exacerbate material hardships.[74] What is operative here, therefore, is an attempt to expand the instruction addressed to moral agency, by accusing it of not going far enough and by saying that other injustices must also be examined.

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73 Bosch (1991), 446.

74 See, e.g., Althaus-Reid (2000); Tamez (2007), 49–53; Cummings (1990), 90–132.

Alternatively, consider worries that the option might be applied paternalistically or condescendingly. Such a criticism is usually taken on board by insisting that the oppressed must speak in their own voices.[75] In this case, the fear is that moral agency will indeed focus on the poor, but in a condescending and so inappropriate way. Likewise, therefore, what is key here is how one perspective of the Christian life (moral agency) is interacting with one another (particularity of the situation).

So the first perspective directs us to the second. But our analysis, I suggest, can be furthered to involve the last two perspectives as well. For how did this newfound moral emphasis on combating poverty and oppression arise? As Taylor recounts, in premodern Europe, "it was unthinkable that one try actually to abolish poverty".[76] The rich and aristocratic would certainly offer distributions to the poor, not least since they saw this as helpful to their own salvation. Still, the "aura of sanctity around poverty" made it impossible even to ask about how it might be eliminated.[77]

Obviously, matters stand very differently now. I have already alluded to Taylor's account of how the tectonic shift occurred. Key to his story are the rapid advances, in early modern Europe, in both technology and modes of government. These formed part of a much wider movement Taylor calls "Reform", whereby elites attempted to reorganise society from bottom-up. In so doing, they would make it physically safer, more economically productive, and more spiritually pious. Their astonishing success gradually led to a different picture of humans' place in the cosmos, whereby those humans have untrammelled moral agency to shape and reshape their physical and social

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75 See Gutiérrez's own characterisation of liberation theology as "an expression of the right of the poor to think out their own faith": Gutiérrez (1988), xxi; see also Bosch (1991), 446.

76 Taylor (2007), 123.

77 Ibid., 108.

world. This "picture" is one about which Taylor is deeply ambivalent, but nonetheless, it is part of the immanent frame impossible to avoid in the West.[78] And its result, as Berger says, is that we now live in an "age of revolution", where "[h]istory and human actions in history have become the dominant instrumentalities by which the nomization [that is, legitimation] of suffering and evil is to be sought".[79]

It follows, therefore, that the third perspective towards evil, which treats it as something to be absorbed into our coherent of frame of meaning, has plausibly played a role in shaping the preferential option. That is to say, the option presupposes an understanding of moral agency as indeed capable of substantial action against poverty and oppression. But such an understanding of agency was in turn effected by the West's – including Western Christians' – revised world picture, and their place in it to combat suffering. So whereas the first perspective is intended to shape the second, the third perspective has already dramatically changed the first.

We may mention the fourth perspective, too, relating to evil and suffering as opposing and opposed by God. As we saw in Chapter II.1, an ongoing concern with liberation theology has been how "Christian" it really is, or in Clodovis Boff's terms, if it has maintained its "theologicity". Nonetheless, according to many liberation and contextual theologians themselves, their own work is intended to recover a concern for the poor which they see as apparent in scriptural texts, and in the figure of Christ. In short, they say, the moral directive represented by the option is itself derivative from Christian identity. For example, opening the Aparecida Conference in 2007, Pope Benedict XVI positioned "the preferential option for the poor [as] implicit in the Christological faith in

78 Ibid., 565.
79 Berger (1967), 79.

the God who became poor for us".[80] Commenting on Aparecida, Gustavo Gutiérrez similarly claims that the option "points to ... walking with Jesus the Messiah", and involves "a spiritual experience of the mystery of God".[81] So, despite how nothing has an unambiguously Christian identity, the preferential option quite plausibly also represents a bona fide attempt to reclaim it.

All this is to say that the preferential option provides a useful illustration of the dynamic development of the Christian life. That development, I claimed last chapter, proceeds back and forth between the Christian life's perspectives, whereby insights gleaned in one perspective engender corrections to the others. Here, changes in the third and fourth perspectives, relating respectively to coherence and Christianicity, conceivably effected an alteration in the first perspective, relating to moral agency. And that led, in turn, to renewed attention to the second perspective, concerning the particularity of suffering. Obviously, I stress, these changes are far more causally complicated than what I have been able to indicate here. Yet the account I have outlined of how the preferential option implicates all four perspectives is, I suggest, at least a plausible one.

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Let me turn to the third and by far most involved discussion. In addition to the second criterion of theo-ethical discourse, it will also raise the last, namely that said discourse must not misrepresent what it is actually achieving.

The discussion I have in mind comprises some longstanding debates around "theodicies" and "defences" advanced by analytic philosophers, and by theologians who

80 Pope Benedict (2007).
81 Gutiérrez (2009), 319; see similarly Gutiérrez (1997).

consider what those philosophers are doing unsatisfactory. Again, I would emphasise, I am not trying to "settle" those debates, but rather clarify their stakes for the Christian life. Those debates, however, require some preparatory work to explain.

I have already referred to Mackie's paradigmatic formulation of the problem of evil, whereby the existence of evil was argued to disprove the existence of a good and omnipotent God. But the analytic philosophical conversation has since moved on. Most strikingly, an "evidential" problem of evil has been pried out from the "logical" problem. The logical problem posits that evil is *logically incompatible* with the existence of God; but the evidential problem only that evil renders God's existence *improbable*.[82] Following Plantinga's famous free will defence, the logical problem is nowadays typically treated as "bankrupt";[83] the evidential problem remains urgent.

In addition, I have already alluded to how the word *theodicy*, first coined by Leibniz, has assumed a technical meaning in these debates. For Plantinga, and those after him, it has become common to distinguish between "theodicies" and "defences", though the exact difference has not been settled. Both articulate a story where God has sufficient reasons for allowing evil. According to Plantinga, however, a theodicy says this story is *true*, whereas a defence says it is merely *possible*.[84] The latter, while obviously a weaker claim, suffices to rebut the charge of logical inconsistency between evil and God's existence, thereby answering the logical problem of evil.

However, as attention has shifted to the evidential problem, the bare *possibility* that God has reasons for allowing evil has not sufficed, since the debate is now about *probability*.

82 Rowe (1979), 335 n. 1.
83 Thus Alston (1991), 29.
84 Plantinga (1974), 28–9.

Philosophers like Peter van Inwagen suggest that the best path forward to address this evidential problem is still via defences. Those defences, however, need to imply something more ambitious than what they did for Plantinga. They should now incorporate considerations of plausibility, that is, "some desirable feature that does not entail truth – perhaps (depending on the context) logical inconsistency or epistemic possibility (truth-for-all-anyone-knows)".[85]

What, then, is the current state of play, including in respect of how theologians have responded to these philosophical debates? For those professing Christian commitment – or in my terminology from last chapter, for those inhabiting the Christian life – we can discern three vying groups. The first comprises those still wishing to advance defences, of which Plantinga's remains the best known. For him, it is possible that human free will increases the overall good in the world, even though it also makes possible moral evil, as something humans can choose.[86] More recently, Eleonore Stump has provided her own version of the same defence, one formulated in Thomistic terms. According to her, suffering is a God-given opportunity to enter into closer union with him, should we appropriately respond to that suffering via free will.[87]

John Hick's "soul-making" theodicy has also long held currency, according to which God permits obstacles like evil because they contribute to our moral and spiritual formation.[88] But a more recent touchstone has been the defence given by Marilyn McCord Adams. Above, I noted Adams' worry that Plantinga and Hick both fail to account for "horrendous evils". She therefore distinguishes between God "balancing"

85 Van Inwagen (2006), 7.
86 Plantinga (1974), 29–34.
87 Stump (2010).
88 See Hick (2010).

evil against some greater good, versus "defeating" evil by incorporating it as a part of that good.[89] This matters because horrendous evils can only be defeated, not balanced. What is necessary, therefore, are ways to suggest that, "from the vantage point of heavenly beatitude, human victims of horrors will recognize those experiences as points of identification with the crucified God, and not wish them away from their life histories".[90] Adams suggests five such ways.[91]

The second and most presently vibrant group is also concerned to address the evidential problem of evil. However, they reject defences as a viable strategy. Instead, these "sceptical theists" stress the limits of human understanding concerning what goods evil might enable. If we cannot discern God's purposes for allowing evil, we need not infer that there are no such purposes. It may be, rather, that they exist, but we are incapable of knowing them. As one influential text therefore says, "we have no good reason to oppose the suggestion that the goods we know are representative of only a minor portion of the goods there are ... it wouldn't be the least bit surprising if reality far outstripped our understanding of it".[92] Sceptical theistic arguments, I should note, have been advanced in increasingly technical ways, one common strategy being to muster Bayesian probabilistic reasoning in support.[93] But what remains key is the suggestion

89 Adams (1999), 156–7.

90 Ibid., 167.

91 Specifically, horrendous evils are seen in a different light (1) by transforming them into a show of solidarity with the suffering God; (2) by turning them into a point of access into the beatific vision of God's inner life; (3) through God's gratitude to us for having undergone suffering; (4) through God's Incarnation in Christ turning them into secure points by which to experience God; and (5) through Trinitarian identification. See ibid., 159–77.

92 Bergman (2001), 284.

93 See Stephen Wykstra's epistemological principle of "CORNEA" (Condition of Reasonable Epistemic Access), according to which "[o]n the basis of cognized situation s, human H is entitled to claim 'It appears that p' only if it is reasonable for H to believe that, given her cognitive faculties and the use she has made of them, if p were not the case, s would likely be different than it is in some way discernible by her": Wykstra (1984), 85. This is given an explicitly Bayesian justification in Wykstra and Perrine (2012), 391–5.

that those offering defences and those rejecting them *both* overreach, since both claim to know more than they possibly can.

The third group espouses what is sometimes called anti-theodicy. These thinkers also reject defences, indeed usually not even distinguishing these from theodicies. However, their rejection is framed not epistemologically but, instead, morally. So theodicies, someone like Fleming Rutledge says, "are ultimately offensive, because they ask us to believe that there is some meaning or purpose in such suffering. ... Efforts to give an intelligible account of the presence of evil are not only intellectually inadequate but also morally offensive".[94] Anti-theodicists are therefore quick to point to especially horrific evils like Auschwitz, and say that any attempt to impute a higher meaning to these is profoundly disrespectful to the victims. One line by Irving Greenberg is hence fondly quoted, namely that "[n]o statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of burning children".[95]

The moral objection, to be clear, is what is primary for anti-theodicists. However, they often add the argument that theodicies are typically framed in a reified philosophical language distant from traditional Christian confession. This implies, first, that theodicies are too abstract for use by Christian laypersons, given how far removed the former are from immediate experiences of suffering. And second, theodicies presuppose intellectual commitments in tension with Christian orthodoxy. I will consider one important example of this below. It is therefore common to assert that said theodicies

94 Rutledge (2015), 444–5.
95 See, e.g., Surin (1986), 147, 151, citing Greenberg (1977), 23.

invoke a "God of the philosophers" or "God of classical theism", stripped of almost everything important to say about the Christian God.[96]

Other than seeking the abandonment of theodicies, anti-theodicists vary widely about how Christians should respond to evil. For example, Kenneth Surin still hopes to articulate an account of said evil, though one that does not suggest *reasons* for its existence. Rather, such an account should merely describe how it has been overcome by Christ at the Cross. Only this way of tackling the subject, he says, is capable of acknowledging the evils of Auschwitz.[97] Surin adds that he believes such an account will "guide and inspire action designed to overcome pain and misery",[98] though exactly how is left unanswered.

By comparison, Sarah Pinnock, through readings of Gabriel Marcel, Martin Buber, Ernst Bloch and Johann Baptist Metz, discerns two key anti-theodical responses to evil: "hope", and "other-regard". Each such response has both an "existentialist" and a "political" mode. So the content of "hope" can vary, referring either to hope for one's survival, or hope for political liberation. Likewise, "other-regard", the ability to acknowledge others' sufferings, can be embodied in individual, interpersonal practices. But it can alternatively manifest in practices of memory, through which one comes to understand the structural causes for others' afflictions.[99]

None of these various responses, however, amounts to anything like the social and political programmes advanced by many liberation and contextual theologians, who in

96 Phillips (2004) presents the most recent sustained form of this critique.
97 Surin (1986), 24–8, 144–51.
98 Ibid., 162.
99 See especially Pinnock (2012), 97–128.

fact share similar concerns, at least on paper, as the anti-theodicists. These theologians thus also complain that philosophical theodicies have abstracted too much from concrete sufferings. So Jon Sobrino:

> "Latin American theodicy has peculiar features of its own insofar as liberation theology arose out of active praxis rather than static contemplation. Faced with a pervasive situation of misery, it does not take the classic tack to be found in the Book of Job, in the work of Dostoyevsky, and more recently in Rabbi Rubinstein's query as to how Jews can believe in God after Auschwitz. It is not concerned with finding some way to contemplate God and captivity in a meaningful relationship. Instead it is concerned with the practical problem of building up and realizing the kingdom of God in the face of captivity. …
>
> The question of justifying God seems to be all too theoretical in the face of the real-life need to make people just. It is reality that must be reconciled with the kingdom of God, and the quandary of theodicy must be resolved in praxis rather than in theory."[100]

Likewise, we might point to a black theologian like James Cone, who laments that "theologians spend more time discussing metaphysical speculations about the origin of evil than showing what the oppressed must do in order to eliminate the social and political structures that create evil".[101] Sobrino and Cone, and many others, do envisage particular political agendas through which their "practical" theodicies might overcome evil. And yet, they are typically ignored in the analytic discussions, unlike anti-theodicists like Surin, who are still mentioned, even if derisively.

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The above therefore reflects the current state of debate among Christians regarding the philosophical problem of evil. Both sceptical theists and anti-theodicists converge in opposing defences to the problem. Still, the sceptical theists and those offering defences

100 Sobrino (1978), 36.
101 Cone (2008), 165.

are in a sense closer to one another, than either is to the anti-theodicists. For whereas these first two groups agree on the importance of addressing the evidential problem of evil, the anti-theodicists reject the problem's very legitimacy on moral grounds. Thus the first two groups are playing chess; the third wants to clear the board and set up checkers.

With the foregoing in mind, how should we interpret the differences between the three groups? Once again, my claim will be that a clear delineation of the Christian life's perspectives helps enormously in this task. But prior to that, I should mention the various camps' own framings about what underlies the differences.

There are a few such framings, mostly by the anti-theodicists. A first is suggested by their characterisation of the other positions as presupposing only the "God of the philosophers", not the God of Christ. This would imply that the division between the first two and the third groups reverts to the divide between philosophy and theology. A second, related framing would posit that the divide is between *analytic* philosophy and *continental* theology. The former, allegedly, would imply an "ahistorical and individualistic quest for logically stable notions, exact axioms, and rigorous chains of deductive inference".[102] Only the latter, in contrast, cares about history, or the animating ideas and images of the Christian theological tradition.

Clarity is not helped, however, by how neither of these framings distinguishes between the various ways the philosophy/theology divide could be read. One would be as a divide between two institutionalised disciplines in the university, each with a long, complicated history. Another would be as between two fundamentally different modes

[102] Surin (1986), 13.

of inquiry, which therefore transcend their institutional manifestations, perhaps as they respectively respond to reason and faith.[103] If we assume the former reading of the divide, then a claim that this separates the three groups is readily falsified, even before we remember the diminishing importance of the analytic/continental divide in recent years. For those thinkers offering defences are not only professional philosophers, but also career theologians like Adams, who draws from continental thinkers like Moltmann. And, even among career philosophers, someone like Hick refers to Barth's dogmatics extensively in his own work.

However, if philosophy and theology instead refer to qualitatively different kinds of inquiry, this of course raises the question of what that difference is – and, more importantly, of how this shapes the divergences between the groups. For in fact, as I have highlighted, the anti-theodicists still want an account of evil. This would not be an account that offers a "ground" for evil's existence, which would purportedly trivialise it, but one which narrates how it has been overcome. Yet the difference between the types of "accounts" sought, I suggest, is not helpfully grasped by a distinction between philosophy and theology. Such a distinction lacks the nuance to be useful: something more granular is needed.

There is a third possible framing, and which I have already mentioned. According to this, the first two groups represent "theoretical" perspectives to evil, but the third a "practical" perspective. This way to put things, indeed, has not been accepted solely by the anti-theodicists. Thus Hick and Plantinga have suggested their projects to be

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103 To take one well-known example, this is what underpins the encyclical *Fides et ratio*: see John Paul II (1998).

"theoretical"[104] or "philosophical",[105] which they contrasted with those that are "practical"[106] or "pastoral".[107] The anti-theodicists, by comparison, have positioned their own offerings as "practical"[108] or "existential",[109] and sharply condemned theodicies and defences' "theoretical" posture.

This framing, I would argue, lands closest to the heart of the matter. But it still obscures the many ambiguities of the theory/practice distinction discussed throughout his thesis, and the various ways the distinction has been read. Above all, it obfuscates the mutual presupposition of the Christian life's different perspectives, which the second criterion of theo-ethical discourse aims to preserve. That is, it assumes that "theoretical" and "practical" perspectives on evil and suffering can be carried out without reference to one another. The present thesis has repeatedly sought to show why this assumption is dubious.

So let me now offer my own reading of the differences between the three groups, and through which I will problematise the theory/practice framing. Via that reading, I will also argue that the different camps misrepresent what they are really doing, so as to breach theo-ethical discourse's third criterion.

Defences such as those offered by thinkers like Plantinga, Hick, Adams and Stump are firmly centred on the third constitutive perspective towards evil, namely that of articulating the Christian's life coherence, and fitting evil within it. Those thinkers aim to show that it is not improbable that God's existence, his goodness and his power are

104 Hick (2010), 10.
105 Plantinga (1974), 28–9, 63.
106 Hick (2010), 10.
107 Plantinga (1974), 63.
108 See, e.g., Ricoeur (1985), 645–8; Surin (1986), 67; Pinnock (2012), 7–20.
109 See, e.g., Phillips (2004), xi.

compatible, notwithstanding the fact of evil. It is this pursuit of coherence which they think justifies the label "theoretical" for their defences. Take, for instance Hick, who originally advanced his soul-making theodicy as "offer[ing] an understanding of our human situation; but this is not the same as offering practical help and comfort to those in the midst of acute pain or deep suffering".[110]

On the other hand, the theory/practice divide has proven harder to maintain than those who offer defences have perhaps anticipated. So, as Hick's thought developed, he himself started to blur that divide, such as when he characterised his soul-making theodicy as really a "myth". According to his mature work, "[a] statement ... about X is mythologically true if it is not literally true but nevertheless tends to evoke an appropriately dispositional attitude to X. Thus mythological truth is practical or, in one sense of this much abused word, existential".[111] It follows that the soul-making theodicy is not a "theoretical truth", only a "practical or pragmatic" one.[112]

In other words, Hick came to appreciate the interdependence between the third perspective towards evil, on which he had been focusing, and the first one, on moral agency. He realised that offering a coherent story about God and evil, as his previous work had sought, had to be somehow connected with fostering appropriate "practical attitudes ... amid the evils of human life".[113] Accordingly, he hoped to tailor the former to the latter. But that required abandoning the claim that his theodical project was "theoretical", concerned with coherence alone.

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110 Hick (1981), 68.
111 Hick (2004), 348.
112 Ibid., xxxiv.
113 Ibid., 359–60.

Furthermore, the mutual presupposition of the perspectives has landed other defences into turbulence. Consider, above all, the free will defence. That defence is especially interesting for our purposes, precisely because it wields *moral agency* to answer what is, I have said, a coherence problem. It therefore proposes that God might permit evil in order to enable this first facet of the Christian life, understood as free will, to exist.

It is nonetheless widely recognised that the defence could only possibly succeed by assuming that free will is both *libertarian*, concerned with a choice between different options. Further, free will must be *incompatibilist*, inconsistent with external determination, such as by God determining what we will do.[114] These assumptions, however, have frequently been doubted, as likely at odds with a Christian orthodoxy that tries to claim consistency between free human action and divine determination.[115]

Put another way, the worry with the free will defence is that it does not respect the Christian life's unique identity. For that identity requires moral agency to be understood in a way inconsistent with what the free will defence assumes about the nature of moral agency. Accordingly, the defence conflicts with two of the Christian life's constitutive perspectives.[116]

In comparison, the sceptical theist position also comprises an attempt to work through the Christian life's coherence. Intriguingly, however, it seeks to refigure that coherence, precisely by suggesting that said coherence is beyond human cognitive capacity, and comprehensible only by God. In a sense then, sceptical theism intends to *unsettle* the

114 See, e.g., Stump (2010), 165–8.
115 See, e.g., Baker (2003).
116 I note here that it does not matter that the defence is presented as only a *possible* story. For that story to be useful, it does require us to commit, however minimally, to the picture of moral agency it provides.

perspective towards evil that is geared towards coherence. And it does so by reference to the apophaticism that formed a crucial dimension of the fourth perspective, which viewed evil and God in utter opposition.[117]

It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that a key concern expressed against sceptical theism is that it seems to arbitrarily pick the contexts in which it says scepticism is appropriate. For example, if we should doubt our ability to recognise goods for the sake of which God might not prevent evil, why should this not imply a more general moral scepticism?[118] Likewise, the problem of "divine deception" has become prominent in the recent literature. If there are things we can only know because God reveals them to us, we cannot dismiss the possibility he might be lying to us for about these. Indeed, he might be lying precisely for the sake of goods beyond our comprehension.[119] Both these worries echo the same paradox we have observed with the Christian life's identity: it must manifest itself concretely, but simultaneously eludes any manifestation we might imagine.

Finally, let us consider the anti-theodicists. These thinkers emphasise evil's absolute particularity; its incapacity to be subsumed into a narrative. Furthermore, by stressing that we cannot explain evil, and instead merely affirm that God has defeated it at the Cross, they appeal to a perspective on evil as that which God utterly opposes. In short, anti-theodicists are trying to combine at least two distinct perspectives towards evil – an awkward positioning, given my claim about those perspectives' irreducibility. To the anti-theodicists' credit, they are wary not to dishonestly force theological constructions

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117 C.f. Kant, who anticipating this position, would include as a theodicy "'the defending of God's cause', even though the cause might be at bottom no more than that of our presumptuous reason failing to recognize its limitations": Kant (1996d), 24 [8:255].

118 See Howard-Snyder (2009).

119 See especially Wielenberg (2010), 513.

onto horrendous sufferings. Yet, on their own acknowledgment, they themselves are academics divorced from the horrors they invoke.[120] They are thus at constant risk of abstracting from the sufferings to which they demand attention must be given.

Indeed, by their frequent invocations of Auschwitz, anti-theodicists unwittingly participate in a long, unfolding process of cultural representation which has produced the Holocaust's present peculiar status in Western historical consciousness. Thus the Holocaust, as sociologist Jeffrey C. Alexander has argued, is "regarded as radically different from any other evil act" and yet, paradoxically, also "provide[s] a standard of evaluation for judging the evility of other threatening acts".[121] Hence "[t]he Holocaust is unique and not-unique at the same time".[122] In short, even while insisting on evil's absolute particularity, the anti-theodicists cannot themselves avoid the pursuit of some kind of coherence. They are, therefore, still implicitly committed to the project they attack.

What, then, should we make of their claims regarding their projects' "practical" character? Importantly, although the anti-theodicists embrace that label, they also argue that "theoretical" theodicies are practical as well,[123] as Hick eventually conceded. Hence "*all* philosophical and theological reflection, no matter how abstract such reflection may be, inevitably mediates a certain social and political praxis".[124] And, in the case of theoretical theodicies, the praxis they reflect is suspected to be a self-satisfied,

120 See, e.g., Surin (1986), xi; Pinnock (2002), 10.
121 Alexander (2002), 51.
122 Ibid., 52.
123 See, e.g., Phillips (2004), xiv–xxi; Pinnock (2012), 134.
124 Surin (1986), 50 (emphasis in original).

bourgeoisie morality, one which "averts its gaze from the cruelties that exist in the world".[125]

Nonetheless, if we now try to identify the way in which the anti-theodicist position is itself "practical", we may well have the exact same suspicion. As I mentioned, it is certainly not practical in the same way as are liberation or black theologies. Rather, for a theologian like Surin, the principal "practical" question is "[w]hat does *God* do to overcome the evil and suffering that exist in his creation?"[126] So just when we might expect him to finally recommend some firm action by which to fight evil, he pivots, and instead asks again what story might best fit evil's existence.

The point, therefore, is still to offer a coherent account of evil, just not one that articulates its "ground". Instead, that account must simply better recognise evil's particularity, and God's opposition to it. In this way, as Pinnock acknowledges, *both* theoretical defences *and* the anti-theodicists' "practical approaches" still "perform the same basic function: the task of making faith plausible".[127]

Accordingly, the "practical" approach advocated by anti-theodicists turns out to rely on a rather constricted understanding of practice. In this light, the particular criticism by anti-theodicists of defences, that they are too removed from the Christian theological tradition, is severe but not fatal. It amounts to saying that existing defences are not fit for purpose, rather than that this purpose of attaining coherence is an illegitimate one.

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125 Ibid., 51.

126 Ibid., 67 (emphasis in original).

127 Pinnock (2002), 11. Or, as Adams put it, anti-theodicists are still primarily concerned with "plot invention": Adams (1999), 185.

Instead, those defences must simply work harder to recalling and to not reduce the other perspectives towards evil within the Christian life.

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We may summarise this relatively complicated analysis of the current debate over the analytic problem of evil as follows. First, those offering defences try to find a place for evil and suffering within a coherent schema for the Christian life. But the risk befalling them is that their attempts end up contradicting that life's other necessary perspectives towards evil. Second, sceptical theists also pursue coherence, though in a way more sensitive to the Christian life's ephemeral identity. That, however, introduces the same ephemerality into how they understand that coherence: there may well be a way everything fits together, including evil. But whatever that way is, it is beyond us. Still, this remains the least objectionable of the three camps, at least for the critique of the Christian life I have articulated, precisely because sceptical theism is sensitive to the way that life's constitutive perspectives should check each other.

Third, anti-theodicists support a "practical" approach towards evil. This for them means acknowledging evil's particularity, and its opposition to God. But, in fact, they obfuscate the fact they are seeking coherence as well. They thus consistently overstate their distance from the other positions. Further, their trying to synthesise three quite perspectives towards evil has also produced a myopic conception of what a "practical" perspective entails.

My perhaps controversial suggestion, then, is that the sharp oppositions that have been drawn between the three groups, especially by the anti-theodicists, have in fact hindered

progression of the debate. There are indeed serious problems with some existing defences to the problem of evil. But what is not needed is further one-upmanship between "theoretical" and "practical" approaches, which tends to blinker us to how there are four distinct perspectives towards suffering and evil in the Christian life. Rather, there must simply be painstaking work on *each* of those perspectives, with none being neglected, and so as to enable insights in one perspective to filter through to the others.

From these three examples, therefore – one systematic theologian's attempts to understand a Connecticut family's plight; the preferential option for the poor in liberation theology; and debates around the problem of evil in analytic philosophy – we should now have a better sense of how the critique of the Christian life can be of assistance. The multiperspectivity which this critique tells us to respect provides us an interpretive tool for understanding the complex movements between perspectives apparent in those examples. In addition, it helps us diagnose when those movements have faltered, such that discussion of evil and suffering has been inhibited from moving forward.

Having now considered how the critique of the Christian life can assist with a specific case study, in this thesis' conclusion, I will briefly consider its potential for clarifying other situations.

CONCLUSION

Both the typological and constructive tasks of this thesis are now complete. In this conclusion, I will (1) return to and comment on the situations which originally perplexed us vis-à-vis the theology/ethics relationship; and (2) propose the investigation of *wisdom* as a means for taking the critique of the Christian life I have articulated forward.

1 The Situations Where the Theology/Ethics Relationship Matters

I began this thesis by naming eleven situations which seemed to raise the theology/ethics relationship for consideration. My claim was that the relationship seems important to Christians much because of their historical encounters with such situations. Said importance, therefore, could not be reduced to academics wanting to define correct research methods or appropriate disciplinary boundaries. Rather, the theology/ethics relationship appears key precisely because of the perplexities intrinsic to Christians' experiences throughout time and place.

However, I continued, those historical experiences were never unambiguous. They always needed interpretation, and thus also an interpretive frame. The circuitous path this thesis has taken has sought to locate such an adequate frame, which I have called a *critique of the Christian life*. I illustrated that frame via a case study, namely that of the different perspectives Christians have taken to evil and suffering. But it is now convenient to return to the situations which initially stimulated this thesis, in order to indicate how the critique might usefully illuminate these as well.

Nonetheless, those situations were framed generally enough that I cannot do more than briefly comment on each. Accordingly, my aim will not be to "solve" the situations' perplexities, but simply to highlight helpful ways to think about them.

1. A Christian belief has had unexpected consequences on people's actions.

   Examples: Max Weber's controversial thesis that the Calvinist doctrine of predestination was instrumental in the rise of modern capitalism, with all its associated practices. Charles Taylor's follow-up claim that certain Christian ideas about providence played a key role in the process of secularisation.

   Analysis: Christian beliefs, while often concerned to articulate what makes the Christian life distinct, do not float abstractly in the air. Rather, when those beliefs are translated into action, a fundamental shift is effected from one perspective of the Christian life to another. This latter perspective is qualitatively different from the first, given it focuses on the exercise of moral agency rather than on Christian distinctiveness. Furthermore, there is a similarly dramatic shift in the move from Christian beliefs to consideration of one's specific circumstances. So, when determining how Christian beliefs are "applied" to what one's actions, there are implied at least three distinct perspectives of the Christian life, none of which is reducible to any of the others.

   It follows that, when Christian beliefs are translated into action or into one's concrete circumstances, we should expect the unexpected. In other words, that translation will never occur in a fully predictable way.

2. A Christian belief has had negative consequences on people's actions.

   Examples: Claims that Christian supersessionism has contributed to antisemitism, or racism in general. Contemporary fears that certain theological ideas about gender are linked to higher incidences of intimate partner violence.

   Analysis: As above, the translation of belief into action is not deterministic. Instead, it always retains unpredictability because it implies a shift between different constitutive perspectives of the Christian life. From this, it also follows that, when the translation leads to morally reprehensible acts, the fault *might* lay not with the belief, but rather with the subsequent process of moral deliberation that directly led to the act. That is, the error lies with one's perspective on moral agency, which therefore requires correction. The belief, then, is innocent.

   Nonetheless, there is a more complex set of possibilities, suggested by the mutual presupposition of the Christian life's perspectives. If a belief produces morally detrimental effects, it is still indeed possible that the belief itself was erroneous, but that fact has only now been foregrounded. Hence that belief may indeed warrant correction, precisely because of what has been revealed by its negative effects.

   Alternatively, and to introduce an intermediate step, it might also be that the belief has shaped the Christian's overall sense of coherence – their "social imaginary", perhaps. And it is this that has then led to the reprehensible exercise of moral responsibility. In this case, it might be either the belief or the sense of coherence which is at fault – or perhaps both.

3. Some egregious action has been justified through explicit appeal to Christian beliefs.

   Examples: Justification of anti-miscegenation laws by appeal to theological notions of natural law. Resort to the doctrine of the Trinity to legitimate patriarchy.

   Analysis: This situation differs from the previous one primarily because the link between belief and egregious action is now doubted, and suggested to be an *ex post facto* rationalisation. So a similar analysis applies: there are potentially three constitutive perspectives of the Christian life implicated, any one or combination of which might be flawed. However, the suggestion of a rationalisation of already terrible behaviour by appeal to one's beliefs may indicate that it is the process of moral reasoning that is culpable here, and not that belief.

4. A belief considered "wrong" or "heterodox" has nonetheless produced morally desirable consequences.

   Examples: Breakaway groups like the medieval Cathars seemingly living more austerely than the orthodox. Various modern movements outside the Church, like feminism or Marxism, spotlighting injustices within it better than those on the inside.

   Analysis: Once again, the translation from beliefs to actions is unpredictable. So, when apparently "wrong" beliefs produce beneficial results, this might simply

be explained as the inevitably by-product of that unpredictability. That said, there is another possibility, namely that said beneficial results demonstrate that the "wrong" beliefs are in fact *right*, in ways that "orthodox" ones are not. In other words, "you will know them by their fruits" (Matt. 7:16): those results may well foreground erroneous assumptions in apparently correct Christian beliefs.

5. An "orthodox" Christian belief was reached, either originally or by individuals subsequently, through some morally ambiguous process.

   Examples: The politicking at major early church councils. Forced coercion of individuals into adopting the "right" beliefs.

   Analysis: This situation, unlike those above, also forces us to reflect on when one party seeking to influence the beliefs and actions of others.

   That said, the situation at base highlights how the perspective of the Christian life centring on that life's unique identity, such as through the articulation of doctrine, is never wholly independent of the other perspectives, but is always also shaped by them. On the other hand, when "correct" beliefs have been reached through apparently illegitimate means, such as via coercion, this amounts to a denial of the relative autonomy of that perspective.

6. A Christian belief seems irrelevant to the actions of Christians.

   Examples: Worries that venerable christological and trinitarian formulae make no difference to modern Christians' lives or worship. George Lindbeck's

distinction between “official” and “operational” doctrines, of which only the latter still matter for church life.

Analysis: The relative autonomy of the Christian life’s perspectives means that Christian doctrines and beliefs do not always have to shape each other. That is, there is such a thing as an appropriate irrelevance. However, irrelevance might also be a symptom of a genuine problem, namely that the relative autonomy of the perspectives of the Christian life has become a complete one, and that these perspectives are no longer able to influence or correct one another.

7. Some actions carried out by Christians have no apparent or necessary connection to their beliefs as Christians.

   Examples: Christians in religiously pluralist societies not living any differently from anyone else. Liberation theologians being accused of adopting a Marxist praxis that is not genuinely “Christian”.

   Analysis: A similar analysis applies to that above. Christians’ actions can never be demonstrated to be unambiguously “Christian”. Rather, they always have a relative autonomy from their beliefs, and from their senses of coherence. Thus an inability to trace a connection between what one believes and what one does is not necessarily a problem. But it might suggest a problem, if it indicates an inability of the Christian life’s perspectives to engage in mutual correction.

8. People, while agreeing on their beliefs as Christians, have disagreed on the consequences of those beliefs for their actions.

   Examples: Christians professing identical confessional stances nonetheless taking enormously different political positions. Disagreements over strategy, even when there is consensus on ethical and political priorities.

   Analysis: As mentioned with the first situation in this section, a complex and unpredictable process of translation occurs when moving from consideration of one's distinctive beliefs to considerations of one's exercises of moral agency and of one's circumstances. The last of these, in particular, may justify radically divergent applications of beliefs, since people's circumstances can differ dramatically.

   Nonetheless, some disagreements about the application of theological ideas to life cannot be explained on the basis that people's circumstances are different. Instead, there are alternative possibilities. One is that there are flaws in how one person has understood their moral agency or their circumstances, and that this shortcoming has produced the disagreement. Another is that the beliefs being applied are indeed different, notwithstanding similarities in their explicit formulations. It is this implicit difference that has produced divergent results.

9. Christians, while agreeing on their ethics, have disagreed on which beliefs justify it.

   Examples: The claim that Protestants and Catholics in Reformation Europe had extremely similar moral positions despite vehement theological differences.

Disputes over whether Christian support for human rights stems from the *imago dei* or rather from the "worth" which God confers onto humans.

Analysis: As I have said, the perspective of the Christian life focusing on one's moral agency does not stand in a deterministic relationship with the perspective focusing on the Christian life's uniqueness. So it is possible for very different beliefs to nonetheless produce similar moral positions.

However, when Christians act in identical ways despite their divergent beliefs, it is alternatively possible that this results from a complete separation of the Christian life's perspectives. In other words, their actions have become entirely independent of their beliefs, instead of merely relatively independent. Such a complete autonomy would indeed be a problem.

10. <u>People have focused too much on what are correct Christian beliefs, distracting them from consideration of correct actions.</u>

    Examples: The Franciscan fear of a hubris encouraged by theological education. The 19th century Presbyterian minister who coined the word "orthopraxy" to correct a single-minded focus on pure orthodoxy.

    Analysis: The fear here might be over how the perspective of the Christian life centred on its distinctiveness has swallowed the other perspectives, especially the one emphasising moral agency. In that case, the fear is justified, and the perspectives' relative autonomy must be stressed as a corrective. But it might instead be that the fear is really underpinned by a desire to emphasise the

perspective focused on moral agency at the expense of the other perspectives, that is, to care *solely* about what one does, instead of also about what one believes. That would itself be an error.

11. People have focused too much on correct Christian actions, distracting them from consideration of correct beliefs.

    Examples: Lutheran suspicions that too much attention on "ethics" distracts Christians from the need for a saving faith. American evangelical scepticism of the social gospel movement, for emphasising social action over what to believe.

    Analysis: This is the obverse of the previous scenario, and a similar analysis applies. The anxiety here is that an essential perspective of the Christian life, namely that pertaining to its distinctive identity, has been lost. That worry might be legitimate. But it may itself reflect insufficient care for the Christian life's other perspectives.

2 The Christian Life and Christian Wisdom

I have repeatedly stressed that the critique of the Christian life articulated here cannot substitute for close and engaged work on each of that life's perspectives. For that critique does not itself tell us how to exercise moral agency, what our particular circumstances are, how the Christian life adds to a coherent whole, or the content of this life's unique identity. Instead, it simply reminds us that all of these are paramount for that life, and must therefore be considered both together and apart.

This might be read as suggesting that, once the critique is in place, there is not much left to say about it. It serves a key regulatory role, but as long as it keeps doing so, it is best left as a supporting player in the background. In contrast, if foregrounded, it risks distracting us from the hard work necessary to actually advance the Christian life.[1]

However, what we have repeatedly found throughout this thesis is that the critique of the Christian life has typically *not* succeeded in its regulatory role. The balance between the independence and interdependence of that life's perspectives has much more often than not been disregarded. Hence those perspectives have either become entirely separated from one another, or been assimilated so as to lose their distinctiveness. Therefore, in such circumstances of non-optimal functioning, the critique of the Christian life warrants supplementation.

Broadly, said supplementation could take one of two forms. One would involve consideration of how the careful balance that ideally marks the Christian life has historically become unstuck. It would investigate, in other words, the previous ways the Christian life has fallen into *crisis*. The many examinations of the theological academy's overspecialisation in modernity, which produces an unbridgeable divide between the Christian life's perspectives, fall into this genre.

Such historical investigations may be invaluable, not least if they assist in diagnosing our present situation. Nonetheless, they must also be cautious not to naively assume an original homogeneity to the Christian life that it never actually had. Moreover, such studies, by themselves, do not suggest *solutions* to the problems they diagnose.

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1 C.f. Lindbeck's lament about how unproductive an obsession with method can be. "There is much talk at present about typological, figurative, and narrative theology, but little actual performance": Lindbeck (1984), 135.

The second avenue of inquiry, by comparison, would examine the conditions under which the Christian life has proven *more likely* to maintain its precarious balance. That will also involve historical researches. However, what I envisage here would begin with that life's exemplary sources to see how these themselves consider how best to preserve the Christian life. Obviously, I can provide only the barest sketch of what this future direction of research might entail. Still, I would explain it as follows.

In Chapter V, I compared the Christian life to the notion of forms of life, as explored by critical theorist Rahel Jaeggi. Her project, we recall, was to articulate the procedure of immanent criticism, whereby forms of life are radically transformed, but without the coercive imposition of external norms. As part of that project, Jaeggi eventually turns to the idea of forms of life as themselves *learning processes*. That is, upon entering into crises, those forms must learn to adapt and reform themselves. Jaeggi attempts to describe what it might mean to be a successful or failed learning process by reference to what three rather different philosophers have said about the transformation of social dynamics: John Dewey, Alasdair MacIntyre, and G.W.F. Hegel.

A similar philosophical investigation might be profoundly illuminating for this thesis, for what it might say about how the Christian life adapts over time – or about how the Christian Church is *semper reformanda*. But it seems to me that the Christian life already has a concept ready at hand for describing this reforming process. That concept is *wisdom*.

We have already encountered this concept over this thesis, not least in Chapter II, which examined the "Christian practical wisdom" proposed by several practical theologians. The term, however, risks becoming a buzzword, not least when vaguely equated with

Aristotelian *phronesis* – itself hardly a simple idea – in order to act somehow as a counterweight to modern instrumental rationality. So when metahistorical theologians – I have David Ford and Paul Fiddes in mind[2] – use the word, I worry they prioritise its synthetic implications above all else. That is, Ford, and to a lesser extent Fiddes, are primarily concerned with how wisdom connotes a wholeness to human knowledge allegedly lost in modernity.

That seems to me to entirely overlook the complexities of Hebrew *hokmah*. Certainly, the present thesis is not a work of biblical scholarship, and can only repeat actual biblical scholars' insights into an extraordinarily complicated difficult field of research.[3] But consider, for example, the conclusion of Gerhard von Rad in his famous study on wisdom:

> "The man who listens, who reflects and who entrusts himself to his perceptions; that is the highest form of human existence in the eyes of the wise men. But that this picture of man had to remain open in many directions was already clear from the presuppositions from which these teachings began, for this desire for education was also aware of God and of the unpredictability of his actions. For this reason, all objects of human knowledge were on the one hand knowable and, on the other, subject to a divine mystery to which God could at any time recall them, thus concealing them from man. Under such circumstances could even a single perception be satisfactorily achieved or a problem acquire ultimate solution? ... The perceptions achieved are not built into a comprehensible system. On the contrary, they are basically left in the form in which they were originally expressed, and, without the slightest need for harmonization, perceptions of a different kind could be placed alongside them."[4]

Von Rad therefore paints a picture of Hebrew wisdom the insights of which could not, by design, be easily synthesised. Instead, they had to be left in their fragmentary forms. This, I suggest, has a striking resemblance to what I called the Christian life's

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2 See Ford (2007); Fiddes (2013).

3 Interest in that field remains intense. Obviously, I will not even try to cover the different points of contestation here. But to gesture at how deep those controversies run, even the term "wisdom literature" has been recently challenged, for reflecting 19th century German scholarly categories more than it does a real genre of texts. See Kynes (2018).

4 Von Rad (1972), 310–11.

multiperspectivity, where that life's constitutive perspectives could neither be collapsed nor completely severed. But, to further the analogy, it helps to briefly draw attention to some further features of wisdom in the Hebrew Bible.

First, there is of course the close association drawn between *hokmah* and *tzedekah* (righteousness). So the prologue of Proverbs opens by announcing its purpose, namely, "that men may know wisdom and instruction, understand words of insight, receive instruction in wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and equity" (Pro. 1:2 –3). Here, the shift from wisdom to righteousness is seamless. Indeed, in this passage, "the individual terms used are differentiated from each other; but perhaps not in a way which can be precisely defined, for they also obviously overlap with each other, too".[5]

Second, a text like Proverbs has a distinctive interest in the plurality of situations which one will face in life. Disregard of this interest has in fact hampered study of the work, with past commentators often seeking to impose a rigid narrative logic on the situations the text describes. That is why the book has frequently been portrayed as presenting a simple, mechanistic morality, whereby God rewards the righteous but punishes the wicked. Only this narrative, it is assumed, can fit the fragmentary nature of the work. Such an approach, however, is reductive. For "the poetic medium presents episodic situations and highly contextual admonitions, not all of which are entirely consistent with one another. Far from simplicity or doctrinaire rigidity, the poetic form requires of its students the imagination and perception to become a moral agent who can navigate the episodicity of the moral world".[6]

5 Ibid., 14.
6 Stewart (2016), 200.

Third, it is notorious that that *hokmah* in the Hebrew Bible stands at some distance from ideas of covenant or of the history of Israel. That produces Ben Sira's eventual attempt to unite these concerns, precisely through his identification of *hokmah* with *torah*. Nonetheless, works like Job and Ecclesiastes are of course deeply concerned with God's guidance of a person's life, and with that life's place in his providential scheme, as elusive as these may be. Consider, then, Robert Alter's characterisation: the author of Job "expresses his outrage at the spectacular injustice of a world governed by a purportedly just God"; and likewise, Qoheleth is concerned "with the structure of reality and how ephemeral human life is locked into that structure".[7]

And fourth, Hebrew wisdom is frequently characterised by an awareness of its own dismal limitations. Those limitations can be misunderstood, such as if we try to ground them too conveniently in an alleged conflict between the wisdom and covenantal traditions.[8] Yet the book of Job, for example, "marks the failure of wisdom – it defines the limits of the exercise when experience proves that life does not follow a strict pattern of justice. ... Job is obeying the rules of wisdom and yet his experience proves that an order cannot be known through man's experience".[9] Indeed, the arguments between Job and his friends over the applicability of their experiences are finally "settled" only through interruption by God, speaking out of the whirlwind.

My very preliminary suggestion, then, is that "wisdom" names the process through which the different perspectives necessary to live a life under God can be aptly juggled. In the Hebrew Bible, those perspectives include wisdom's emphasis for righteous living, its attention to the nuances with which life is lived, its concern for meaning

7 Alter (2010), vi.
8 See Weeks (2016).
9 Dell (1991), 82.

within a wider understanding of God's purpose, and its own vulnerability to contradiction by the divine voice. These perspectives are evidently related – but, again, they can hardly be collapsed into one another. And then, of course, there are Christian readings of *sophia* in the New Testament – including interpretations of the epistle of James as its own Christian wisdom, and Paul's opposition of "the wisdom of the world" to "the wisdom of God", which he identifies with Christ (1 Cor. 1:20–1).

The Christian study of wisdom, therefore, would be the study of how the Christian life has previously learned how to progress – or failed to so adapt. The latter is not impossible; wisdom can certainly die.[10] That study would start with Christian Scriptural texts, but then turn to a study of wisdom as it has manifested itself in the Church's history. By understanding how the Christian life has previously survived, even in times of crisis, we might glean insights for how it might thrive now. In this way, "wisdom is justified by all her children" (Lk. 7:35).

[10] C.f. Walter Benjamin: "The art of storytelling is reaching its end because the epic side of truth, wisdom, is dying out". Benjamin (1999a), 86.

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