How I think Hauerwas thinks about theology

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Abstract

This paper highlights two aspects of Stanley Hauerwas's thought: philosophical ethics, which consists of second-order methodological claims; and moral theology, which consists of first-order, local, unsystematic moral descriptions. I show how the philosophical ethics relates to the moral theology by proposing a set of rules that constitute a 'grammar' of Hauerwas's thought. These rules are asymmetrical in that later rules presuppose earlier rules but earlier rules do not presuppose later rules. Each rule corresponds to texts that Hauerwas recommends and relies upon. The first rule prioritizes MacIntyre's concept of non-foundational 'practical wisdom'. The second rule, which draws on Aristotle, Wittgenstein, Anscombe and Kovesi to stress the impossibility of separating agent from act, influences the third rule that ethics is moral description. The fourth rule uses 'postliberal' theologians and draws on the liturgy, alongside Barth and Yoder, in order to redescribe the shape of Christian life in liberal modernity.

It is tempting to copy Stanley Hauerwas.[1] Not only is he a pivotal figure in twentieth-century Christian ethics, but he is also an interesting writer, a compelling character with a catchy style and a friend to many.[2] Much of his rhetoric makes use of memorable aphorisms to make broad, counterintuitive and controversial claims. His wide-ranging corpus provides readers with multiple entry points into his thought. He tends to approach a topic like liberalism, war, sex, disability, mental illness, evil, animals, justice, the nation-state, the university or the hospital, and then he redescribes that topic theologically and/or identifies and critiques second-order assumptions

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[1] When I refer to the character and the author, I call him Hauerwas and justify my claims based on publicly available evidence. When I refer to him personally, I call him Stanley and draw on personal interactions, though I do not believe that any claim I make is absent from his published work. Nothing I relate is private or arcane.

[2] See William Cavanaugh, 'Stan the Man: A Thoroughly Biased Account of a Completely Unobjective Person', in John Berkman and Michael G. Cartwright (eds), *The Hauerwas Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001); Stanley Hauerwas, *Hannah's Child: A Theologian's Memoir* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010).

behind the point he contests. Merely imitating his style or defending some provocative conclusion can be dangerous, however, because it is easy to copy the aphorisms or repeat the conclusions and miss what makes Hauerwas's work valuable.

At one point, I was tempted to copy Hauerwas. Like many late adolescents, I overreacted to the limitations of my upbringing. My harshest, and perhaps most sophomoric, critique was reserved for the parochial idiosyncrasies of my middle-class, white religious culture. I could see nothing but bourgeois assumptions, self-serving double standards, apolitical conservatism and intellectual unseriousness. In March 2003, I discovered *Resident Aliens* at a used bookstore and read it soon after George W. Bush told the country that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction and that the US would invade Iraq.[3] As the evangelical leaders that I had once trusted appealed to 'moderation' or 'political neutrality' either to support the war or to justify their silence, I was drawn to Hauerwas's articulation of Christian faith and especially to the book's description on the front cover: 'A provocative Christian assessment of culture and ministry for people who know that something is wrong'. The contrarian, christological pacifism gave voice to my disillusionment with a form of Christianity that either parroted or tacitly approved of the Bush administration's war propaganda. The book's diagnoses and church-based responses helped me recognize ways in which the evangelical culture of white, conservative, anti-political individualism sat uneasily and inconsistently with the thick forms of communal life I had experienced at church.[4]

'Stanley' the friend and graduate school mentor influenced me differently than 'Hauerwas' the theologian I had read over the years: mainly by comments on written work, conversations about ideas, exchanged book recommendations and co-taught seminars. Stanley took me under his wing even though he was not my supervisor, and over time I developed a sense of the logical ordering and sources of his thought. Engaging him on a variety of fronts taught me to anticipate his responses or articulate his views without reading them. Hauerwas has recommended something like an approach that reads him as Hauerwas the writer *and* Stanley the man: '"Hauerwas" is not fully determinative – nor fully descriptive – of who I am and how I continue to think.'[5] Reading this way may risk over-identification with one particular

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[3] Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989).

[4] Luke Bretherton made this point about the thick forms of evangelical community.

[5] Stanley Hauerwas, 'Remembering How and What I Think: A Response to the JRE Articles on Hauerwas', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 40/2 (June 2012), p. 297.

strand of his thought, as the temptation is to streamline his inconsistences in order to make his views more palatable to one's own perspective. While I regard it as an act of friendship to present the strongest possible form of his views, I am grateful that Stanley has always encouraged me to speak for myself. I am happy here to present his thought and not mine.

Hauerwas, who calls his thought 'unsystematic', recently listed his work's main emphases. The list lacks both a centre and an ordering rationale; it emphasizes: (1) the recovery of the virtues, (2) narrative for the intelligibility of an action description, (3) the church as the place where people are formed in virtue and (4) the significance of nonviolence as the hallmark Christian practice.[6] Hauerwas's thought is more than a catalogue of disconnected items. Its lack of a 'centre' is important, because the spatial metaphor falsely implies that some theological doctrine founds all the others.[7] Instead, he often uses the word 'determinative' to describe his estimation of a claim's influence or importance. Some truths are more basic than others, and true claims have systemic implications. His thought is in this way hierarchical. Elsewhere, he has called his thought 'web-like' because of how the various parts inter-relate.[8] I call the hierarchy of truth claims and the web-like logic the 'grammar' of his thought.

Substantively, Hauerwas's work is a modern *apologia* for the church's faith with an Anselmian approach: it defends Christian teaching by making it intelligible. The teaching is received, even suffered. His moral theology, then, is a distinct and eclectic but never privately constructed or invented articulation of that teaching. The *apologia* is church-oriented because it seeks to make the faith adequate to the lives of a 'plain Christian' at his or any other church.[9] On these terms, an immanent critique of a Hauerwasian claim would establish that the claim either undermines or obscures the faith. The philosophical ethics, which is not based in Christian teaching, makes his thought distinctive, modern and academically influential, and it informs his moral theology at almost every point. It ultimately serves to make a modern *apologia* of distinctly Christian faith possible.

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[6] Stanley Hauerwas, *A Cross-Shattered Church: Reclaiming the Theological Heart of Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009), p. 145.

[7] Nicholas M. Healy uses a spatial metaphor of centre and periphery to order Hauerwasian claims throughout his recent book, *Hauerwas: A (Very) Critical Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2014).

[8] For an explanation of how Hauerwas thinks of the nature of the claims he makes, see the introduction to Stanley Hauerwas, *Sanctify Them in the Truth: Holiness Exemplified* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998).

[9] An equivalent to Alasdair MacIntyre's account of the 'plain person', who is someone in a 14th-century Scottish fishing village.

The grammar of his thought, then, is the hierarchical logic of the claims that inform and constitute his articulation of Christian faith. The rules that make up the grammar are hierarchical in an asymmetrically dependent way: the less basic rules presuppose the more basic rules, but not the reverse. The grammar is not always visible, because his pedagogical rhetoric uses shocking or contradictory statements in order to move readers to examine and rethink their assumptions about reality.[10] Partly because his work is easy to misunderstand and to oversimplify,[11] a good deal of secondary reflection and critique of it has sought to identify its structure, order and underlying assumptions.[12] The grammar I propose frames and interprets Hauerwas's rhetoric by providing what M. H. Abrams calls 'exegesis outward'[13] of the following theological sentence: 'Practical wisdom, therefore, is a habit of attentiveness that makes past experiences a resource that allows the present ... "to unconceal" its peculiar significance.'[14] What follows describes this sentence, identifying each rule by reading 'out' from it to grammatical rules and conversation partners that the rules rely on.

Practical wisdom

Rule 1: The middle is the only possible place for 'practical wisdom' to begin.[15] By contrast, modern 'man' builds an account of universally accessible knowledge for all reasonable people on the foundation of abstract and universal reason. The moral philosophy of Alasdair MacIntyre responds to this distinctively modern man of universal reason by building on the Nietzschean critique that the universal, non-contingent, 'rational and

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[10] On the early Christian and Rabbinic practice of reading scripture this way, see David Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Identity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001).

[11] See Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), chs 6 and 7.

[12] See e.g. Jennifer A. Herdt, 'Hauerwas among the Virtues', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 40/2 (June 2012), pp. 202–27; William Werpehowski, 'Talking the Walk and Walking the Talk: Stanley Hauerwas's Contribution to Theological Ethics', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 40/2 (June 2012), pp. 228–49; Healy, *Hauerwas*. Cf. Stanley Hauerwas, 'Connecting Some of the Dots, or an Attempt to Understand Myself', in *A Cross-Shattered Church*, pp. 134–56; Stanley Hauerwas, *The Work of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2015).

[13] M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism; Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971).

[14] Hauerwas, *Work of Theology*, p. 16.

[15] Much of Hauerwas's philosophical ethics can be found in one of his first articles: Stanley Hauerwas, 'The Self as Story: Religion and Morality from the Agent's Perspective', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 1 (1 Oct. 1973), pp. 73–85.

rationally justified autonomous moral subject of the eighteenth century' is a particular, contingent, time-bound creature and therefore 'a fiction, an illusion'.[16] This critique of man applies equally to modern universalist moral theories, in which rules expressed as universal maxims are 'the primary concept[s] of the moral life'.[17] Because universal maxims presuppose the existence of universal subjects with a common form of life, MacIntyre argues, the modern, liberal moral framework (ironically) constitutes one among many particular, contingent and local moral traditions.

Hauerwas therefore rejects 'difference-denying approaches to morality as "autonomous"', which give 'pride of place to the analysis of specific moral acts, "quandaries", and individualized decisions concerning them'.[18] Approaches that presume an adequate, universal subjectivity establish practical reason on false pretences. Such frameworks ultimately inhibit moral formation because they cannot sustain coherent moral inquiry. Universalism separates formal political reasoning from judgements about substantive moral conceptions of the good, which are deemed private and individual.[19] When 'no overall [public] ordering of goods is possible', capitalist markets intervene by default and train individuals to pattern their moral judgements after the compartmentalised, subjective, emotivist logic of consumer choice.[20] The result is complete moral incoherence. 'To be outside of all traditions is to be a stranger to enquiry; it is to be in a state of intellectual and moral destitution.'[21]

Significant moral disagreement requires that we recognize the moral sources that inform our moral responses. Incoherent and fragmented, 'modern moral utterance and practice can only be understood as a series of fragmented survivals from an older past', which have generated 'insoluble problems . . . for modern moral theorists'.[22] For MacIntyre, the only solution

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[16] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. 114.

[17] Ibid., p. 119.

[18] According to Wepehowski, 'Talking the Walk', p. 233: '[Hauerwas] contributed to an emerging 'particularist turn' . . . toward the distinctiveness of a Christian ethic rooted in religious and moral notions that describe a world agents see and inhabit' by drawing on Murdoch and Kovesi to illuminate the insights of H. R. Niebuhr and Wittgenstein.

[19] On moral sources, Hauerwas relies heavily on Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992). See also Mark Ryan, *The Politics of Practical Reason: Why Theological Ethics Must Change Your Life* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), ch. 2.

[20] Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), p. 337.

[21] Ibid., p. 367.

[22] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 111.

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is to recognize the incoherence and then to seek to locate oneself in a tradition of moral inquiry. This philosophically basic willingness to locate oneself makes practical reason possible. 'How is it rational to respond to [questions about truth and justice from other traditions]? The answer is: that will depend upon who you are and how you understand yourself.'[23] Self-reflexively understanding, revising, challenging and coherently ordering moral claims in dialogue with other traditions makes it possible to address 'insoluble problems'.[24] Practical reason thus requires that we embrace rather than avoid our contingency, for the middle is the only place we can truthfully begin.

Hauerwas's work begins in the middle. Stylistically, he writes conversational essays in dialogue with an eclectic range of intellectuals. Technically, he writes disputations, though his avoidance of scholastic method and technical terminology can mask what he is doing. He addresses a topic, identifies the central objections of an important disputant and then responds with his *sic et non* (often more *non*). Since he writes from the middle, no 'big book' lays out an overarching vision of his career, and no foundational theory establishes the system of his thought. Instead, since the essays tend to address particular topics, most of his books have an ad hoc, occasional feel.

A theologian of his time and place, Hauerwas thinks like a turn of the millennium, Texan, Methodist academic.[25] He is a liberal. Politically, a 'yellow dog Democrat' (he would vote for a yellow dog before a Republican), Stanley often laments: 'There is no left wing of the democratic party left!' His intellectual pedigree, academic concerns and institutional setting locate him as a liberal Protestant. The diffuse influence of this tradition in the context of the history of American Protestantism functions like a background at nearly every point in his writing.[26] It would be very difficult to make sense of his work apart from it. Imagine that, throughout his career, Hauerwas has composed his works on paper with an already-existing pattern as its background. His writing always accommodated the background: he wrote around it, through it and even sometimes allowed its lines and curves to complete letters, punctuation marks and whole words. Abstracting his writing from the background pattern would yield incomplete letters, unintelligible turns, unwritten marks and incomplete thoughts. So,

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[23] MacIntyre, *Whose Justice?*, p. 393.

[24] Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

[25] Hauerwas, 'Remembering', p. 296.

[26] R. R. Reno, 'Stanley Hauerwas and the Liberal Protestant Project', *Modern Theology* 28/2 (2012), pp. 320–6.

for example, Hauerwas rarely emphasises his sympathies with a mainstream progressive Protestant consensus on questions of gender, sexuality, etc. because he takes them for granted in the background. His frequent critique of liberal Protestantism is part of a lover's quarrel: his critique is strong because it is close, even internal. I do not believe Hauerwas knows how to compose on alternative backgrounds, nor has he tried. 'I have never tried to write for the ages.'[27] For that reason, his thought requires transposition rather than mere repetition into an evangelical or Roman Catholic setting. Their background patterns are different. If Hauerwas's work is abstracted and merely copied onto them, his writing's meaning is obscured and recast, usually in an unhelpfully conservative direction.[28]

The most telling sign of his liberal Protestantism is that moral epistemology rather than normative conclusions drives Hauerwas's work. Progressive arguments are self-undermining, he thinks, when they rely on universalising epistemologies rather than the resources internal to Christian

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[27] Hauerwas, 'Remembering', p. 296.

[28] Healy mostly ignores the pattern and tries to reconstruct Hauerwas abstractly. He concludes that Hauerwas is a liberal Protestant, but his reasons for thinking so differ from mine. I have located several places where our readings diverge. (1) Healy reads Hauerwas straight and at 'face value'. He artificially limits the interpretive options. Either statements are 'rhetorical flourishes that Hauerwas does not really mean', in which case, Hauerwas is a 'pamphleteer', or we should take him 'at his word' (p. 63). This reading strategy yields the conclusion that Hauerwas opposes the practice of reading the Bible for individual devotion. Healy ignores the historical conditions of the claim's intelligibility against a liberal Protestant background. (2) Healy argues that the particularities of Hauerwas's context do not matter for interpreting his writing. He conflates Hauerwas's personal experiences and 'authorial intention' with the background presumptions against which he writes and then claims that 'we can and should understand and critique their texts, insofar as they constitute a theological proposal, without knowing such things, or by ignoring them if we do' (p. 14). Sometimes, however, Healy draws on Hauerwas's context, and he even gives indirect warrant for doing so (e.g. p. 93; cf. p. 57, n. 22). This sort of abstraction of speech and argument from history and rhetoric is implausible to me, and it confuses the genre of Hauerwas's writing for a formal treatise. (3) Healy sometimes reads into silences and so presents weakened versions of Hauerwas's positions. The predictive power of Healy's reading suffers as a result. One example of this is when Healy proposes an account of the social theory underlying Hauerwas's understanding of social formation in the church. His proposed theory unnecessarily weakens Hauerwas's position and ignores Hauerwas's liberal Protestant backdrop (95). Generally, I disagree with Healy's interpretive framework because the hermeneutic, the use of arguments from silence, and the 'straight' reading together produce a highly implausible version of Hauerwas's thought, one that loses the power to predict how Hauerwas might respond. It thus fails the Wittgensteinian test of helping the reader to 'go on'.

tradition.[29] Here Hauerwas shares a basic starting point with 'subversive' Christian ethics.[30] Feminist, womanist, queer, black or postcolonial ethics begins epistemically by refusing deference to the dominant subject of universal rationality (white, heterosexual, male), just as Hauerwas refuses a politics that presumes a stable, universal subject of knowledge. Universalising justifications deploy liberalism's epistemic resources in order to settle for bland, conventional and often self-undermining modifications of liberalism. Though Hauerwas and subversive ethicists may differ in degrees about whether a form of traditional Christian orthodoxy can avoid reintroducing the same hegemonic subject, both similarly deconstruct progressive Protestantism in order to make it sustainable.

Hauerwas's frequent critiques of 'modernity' frame his creedal orthodoxy and adherence to classical doctrines. These critiques are similarly epistemically driven quarrels with the conditions of his formation. For Hauerwas, the European Enlightenment, essentially a form of the gnostic heresy, flowered in both productive and destructive ways. The desire for encyclopedic knowledge built on universally accessible foundations sustained disciplines of inquiry that eventually subverted their own epistemic premises. That is why the Enlightenment eventually produced both Kant's racial charts and Wollstonecraft's feminism, critical theory and free-market capitalism, the Declaration of Independence and the three-fifths compromise. Over time, external challenges to tradition illuminated blind spots and prompted deeper internal reflection and eventually revision. For example, *Dignitatis Humanae*, distantly indebted to Lockean arguments for tolerance, articulates justifications for religious freedom *internal* to Christian faith, which are sustainable even after the cultural particularities that once motivated its arguments have passed.

Habit

Rule 2: Our choices forms habits, which make us into characters; therefore ethics should never separate analysis of acts from their agents. Habits are settled dispositions to act a certain way; they come as 'second nature'. A virtue is a *moral* habit ordered towards the reliable production of a good life. The complex of virtues that we acquire makes our character.[31] Moral

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[29] For an example of a mainstream liberal conclusion via a traditionalist argument, see Stanley Hauerwas, 'Virtue, Description and Friendship: A Thought Experiment in Catholic Moral Theology', *Irish Theological Quarterly* 62/2–3 (1 June 1996), pp. 170–84.

[30] See Samuel Wells and Ben Quash, *Introducing Christian Ethics* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 146–79.

[31] By contrast, a skill (like piano playing) is a habit ordered to producing some specific external product or artefact (a piece of music) under a variety of conditions.

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reasoning rarely relies on prospective deduction from a practical syllogism, which consists of a universal claim (do good and avoid evil), a particular judgment (x is good), and an act (doing x). Instead, we have become ourselves through the habit-forming decisions that have preceded that moment, and so our response to any moral quandary relies on who we have become given the conditions of our formation. The moment of moral agency therefore always catches us in some middle position.

Hauerwas's most important contribution to theological ethics began with the revision of his doctoral dissertation, *Character and the Christian Life: A Study in Theological Ethics*,[32] which attempted to recover the connection between what we do (choices) and who we are (character). He relies most heavily for this framework on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*, especially the *Prima Secundae*, and (the frequently recommended) *Of Habit* by Felix Ravisson.[33] He critiqued the predominant framework of 'case studies', which presumed that ethics is about what an everyman ought to do independently of who he is. The deontological and consequentialist theories of ethics underlying the case studies tried to make practical reason non-contingent by focusing on just or charitable moral obligations and outcomes independently of the agent who performs the acts. Hauerwas identifies two problems with this approach.

First, case studies start with a foundation, not in the middle. They presume a theoretical structure of obligation accessible to all right-thinking people and then derive judgements from that structure independently of the particularities and contingencies of a tradition. This is impossible, because any judgment about the goodness of an act relies on contingently known, non-foundational claims about value and meaning. Though one can make universally true claims about value and meaning, one ought not to presume that they are universally available.

Second, analysing a practical syllogism prospectively neglects a particular agent's contingency in the analysis of an 'act'. For Hauerwas and Aristotle, by contrast, one can only practically reason in order to evaluate decisions retrospectively in light of who one has become and who one wants to be. Conceptually abstracting love and justice and then 'applying' duties to case studies without considering character is like expecting someone to produce a piece of music apart from training her to become a reliable music-producer. The subsequent focus on concepts like 'justice' or 'love' dominant in Protestant ethics neglects the significance of the virtues, which

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[32] San Antonio, TX: Trinity University Press, 1975.
[33] Trans. Clare Carlisle and Mark Sinclaire (London and New York: Continuum, 2008).

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call the operative division between 'theory' and 'application' into question.[34] Hauerwas's focus on the virtues, then, has reframed practical reason around the type of people that are being made over by Christ rather than on duties or outcomes, in order to reconnect act and agent in Christian ethics.

Attentiveness

Rule 3: Ethics is primarily moral description and is therefore intrinsically communal. Hauerwas's development of the claim that Christian ethics is moral description relies mostly on texts in ordinary language philosophy. Alongside Ludwig Wittgenstein's works, especially *Philosophical Investigations*, Iris Murdoch's *The Sovereignty of Good* and *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*,[35] and G. E. M. Anscombe's *Intention*,[36] Hauerwas draws heavily on Julius Kovesi's, *Moral Notions*,[37] which develops Wittgenstein's argument against private languages and extends it to moral concepts. Moral description, like any description, depends on language acquisition. There is no way to identify something by appeal to objective, uninterpreted 'facts' independently of a linguistic rule. A name or description depends for its intelligibility on some publicly recognizable notion. A notion is a rule that acts as the criterion for determining what the thing is. It specifies the formal qualities that persist in the object it names despite differences that may obtain in particular instances of that object. For example, the notion of 'table' makes sense because a shared rule determines what counts as a table. No number of material qualities or descriptions (colour, texture, appearance) constitute a description of a table apart from reference to the rule. Without a shared rule, a description lacks intelligibility.

Kovesi thus rejects any distinction between fact and value, which presupposes some operative, pre-linguistic access to reality. Every notion is instead embedded in a particular language and therefore a form of life. The language is passed on to individuals when the particular communities that form them teach them how to use words in ways that match the rules. The idea of 'private description' (something is this way *for me*) is as self-subverting as 'private language', for neither private descriptions nor languages can communicate.

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[34] Jennifer Herdt lays out with much more nuance the situation in the field of religious ethics at the beginning of Hauerwas's career and helpfully frames Hauerwas's work in light of it in 'Hauerwas among the Virtues'.
[35] London: Routledge, 2001/New York: Penguin, 1992.
[36] Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000.
[37] London: Routledge, 1967.

Moral descriptions are like any other descriptions that follow shared linguistic rules. 'Moral notions do not reflect the needs, wants, aspirations or ideals of any one person or a group of individuals, but those of anyone.'[38] Since moral description depends on shared language, language forms moral judgements.[39] As Stanley often repeats in his ethics courses, 'You can only act in or refrain from acting in a world you can see, and you can only see what you've learned to say.'[40] We cannot distinguish description from evaluation as fact from value. Values cannot be accidental qualities of acts, added to the material components.[41] It is nonsense to claim that two acts were identical except that one was good and the other was not, for a human act is never a merely physical event that can be described apart from the agent's interpretation of the event (we would not call 'growing hair' a human act or hold someone accountable for it).

The notion 'murder' is rightly used only when its use follows the rule for picking out murders: the unjustified taking of life. No list of material, uninterpreted 'facts' like 'plunged a knife into a his back' or 'pushed her off a cliff' will suffice, because such facts alone do not address the rule that murders only name unjustified acts of taking human life. Murder is an example of a 'complete moral notion', because the moral judgement is analytic in the concept and thus it neither requires nor admits further qualification. By definition, a murder cannot be morally justified. Killing, alternatively, is an 'incomplete moral notion', because the description is morally ambiguous and requires further qualification for a moral evaluation that would help us discriminate permissible and impermissible forms of killing.

Moral judgements depend for their intelligibility on second-order claims about the rules for words like 'good' or 'human'.[42] In the case of murder, it

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[38] Kovesi, *Moral Notions*, p. 111. This 'anyone' refers to human nature. No tradition-transcending, non-contingent access to human nature exists.

[39] Stanley Hauerwas, *Working with Words: On Learning to Speak Christian* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011).

[40] See Stanley Hauerwas, 'The Significance of Vision: Toward an Aesthetic Ethic', *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 2/1 (1 June 1972), pp. 36–49.

[41] Stanley Hauerwas, 'Situation Ethics, Moral Notions, and Moral Theology', *Irish Theological Quarterly* 38/3 (1 July 1971), pp. 242–57.

[42] Healy argues that since 'answering the question, "What are you doing?" requires us to give a description that reflects the logic of our beliefs about God' (p. 115), it follows that the intentionality of an action depends on the logic of belief. Therefore, Healy argues, Hauerwas's failures as a doctrinal theologian compromise his success as a moral theologian. But while doctrines certainly make intentional acts intelligible, the doctrines are functions of a community's social logic rather than an individual's cognitive awareness. Trustworthy faith requires reliable authority, not doctrinal understanding. An individual need not articulate the conditions of

would be impossible to know what it meant to take a human life apart from knowing the rule for 'human'. Even if we are unaware of them, we learn these concepts from the communities that taught us to speak.[43] Herbert McCabe's *Law, Love, and Language*[44] articulates the relevance of Kovesi's argument for theology and politics. Since human communities speak and need differently, moral notions are linguistically diverse and sometimes incommensurable. The location that makes moral perspective possible also limits it. Human 'unity is linguistic as well as biological, it is not simply given to us but also made by us', and so a group's moral descriptions will always be incomplete.[45] 'No traditional interpretation of the world is final.'[46] No language yet 'reflects the needs, wants, aspirations, or ideals of anyone'. Modern 'man' is imperialist when he pretends otherwise.

Christian ethics avoids chauvinism only if it depends non-coercively on the particularities of Christian speech. In the most basic sense, Christian moral description seeks to describe the world truthfully and deconstruct falsehoods that inhibit the truth. Success in this is always relative. Not even the church has overcome human linguistic limitations enough to describe the 'deepest meaning of an action'.[47] The only way to avoid theological imperialism is therefore to describe in hope. '[We] reach always beyond the language [we have] created, towards a future which, just because its language does not exist, can only be dimly perceived.'[48] Christian ethics remains incomplete until God reveals the 'one ultimate structure, one final community to which all [people] belong and into which all other communities are resolved'.[49]

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intelligibility. The relationship between particular doctrines and moral description is rather more complicated.

[43] See Stanley Hauerwas, 'The Virtues and our Communities', in *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), pp. 111–28.

[44] New York: Continuum, 2003. McCabe's book, the only one written by a theologian in this section, connects action, law, nature, language, description, eschatology and christology from a Wittgensteinian Thomist perspective. Hauerwas calls McCabe's book 'one of the most important books to have been written in ethics and theology in the last century' and an 'accomplishment . . . as important as MacIntyre's work'. He claims that it shows his own work to be 'unoriginal': 'Most of what I have said was said by Herbert in 1968.' Both McCabe and Kovesi (Hauerwas compares them) 'made description the center of ethical reflection'. Stanley Hauerwas, 'An Unpublished Foreword', *New Blackfriars* 86/1003 (1 May 2005), pp. 291–5.

[45] McCabe, *Law, Love and Language*, p. 67.

[46] Ibid., p. 90.

[47] Ibid., p. 100.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Ibid.

Resources of past experiences

Rule 4: Christian moral description derives its intelligibility from the events of Jesus' incarnation, death and resurrection by which Israel's Lord saves creation. Apart from reference to these events, Christian moral description lacks sufficient particularity.

By reputation, Hauerwas is one of the most explicitly church-centred theologians to emerge in the twentieth century. Ironically, however, his most important contributions to the study of Christian ethics are non-theological, second-order and formal in nature. The above rules about practical wisdom, habit, and moral description are thoroughly neutral with regard to substantive theological commitments. None depend on axioms peculiar to Christianity.

Though particularly Christian claims come last in the hierarchy of rules, the goal of sustaining a distinct, coherent and faithful Christian witness drives his thought from the beginning. The above rules attend to the conditions that make the particularity of any group possible and reflect his concern with moral epistemology. If the philosophical ethics is the formal cause of the moral description, sustaining Christian particularity is the final cause of the philosophical ethics. That makes the first-order moral theology the internal basis of the philosophical ethics. But the philosophical ethics is non-foundational and therefore it cannot provide the external basis of Christian moral description. Since theology needs no such basis, the philosophical claims merely provide a response to modernity.

Hauerwas's approach to the second-order questions about epistemic particularity dovetails with George Lindbeck's 'cultural-linguistic approach' to theology articulated in *The Nature of Doctrine*.[50] Lindbeck primarily addressed ecumenical questions about how to understand and assess opposed doctrinal claims. Doctrines, he argued, are best understood not as descriptions of experience or as verifiable, objective claims about reality, but as linguistic rules that sustain a group's life or culture.[51] Believing a doctrine means inhabiting the community it forms from 'the middle' of its particularities. As Lindbeck famously notes, the phrase, '*Christus est Dominus*', means something different for the crusader with a sword than it does for the martyr.[52]

Once inhabited, doctrines (like 'image of God') make moral notions (like 'murder' or 'lying' or 'torture') intelligible for Christians. The order

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[50] Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1984. Lindbeck relies heavily on the anthropological theory of Clifford Geertz. See Paul Dehart, *Trial of the Witnesses: The Rise and Decline of Postliberal Theology* (Malden, MA, and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006).

[51] Lindbeck, *Nature*, pp. 32–41.

[52] Ibid., p. 64.

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of discovery reverses the order of intelligibility. The notions depend on the doctrines for intelligibility, but the doctrines are discovered by participating in the moral life of the group. Stanley often says that you can sum up ethics in one rule: never tell a lie. The description 'lie' depends on the doctrine of the Trinity for its Christian intelligibility. But in the order of discovery, knowing the Trinity in a way that allows sufficient articulation of the moral description 'lie' depends on participating in the life of the group that does not lie because God is triune.[53]

Hauerwas's moral theology relies most heavily on theologians who attend to the second-order concerns that animate his philosophical ethics by embracing Christian particularity and creatively representing the first-order language of scripture and liturgy.[54] Above all, Karl Barth's work *Church Dogmatics* exemplifies for Hauerwas the full-throated dogmatic embrace of distinctively Christian witness in modernity.[55] Three features of Barth's work stand out. First, Barth unapologetically responded to the liberal Protestant demand to root theology in universal human nature by articulating the faith of the church in its particularities.[56] Hauerwas is fond of quoting Robert Jenson's identity description to represent this approach: 'God is whoever raised Jesus from the dead, having before raised Israel from Egypt.' Second, Barth articulates and exemplifies inhabiting 'the strange new world within the Bible' as the foundation for Christian moral description and politics.[57] Third, Barth helped recover the gospel narratives and the eschatological meaning of Christ's resurrection for Christian life and thought.[58] By contrast, Hauerwas shows little interest in interpretive debates within secondary Barth scholarship, and he has contributed nothing to them. Hauerwas follows some of Barth's doctrinal views, most notably the doctrine of election, which makes creation christological, but Hauerwas is not any more doctrinally Barthian than he is Thomist. His focus has not been 'the logic of Christian belief'

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[53] E.g. see Stanley Hauerwas, *After Christendom? How the Church Should Behave if Justice, Freedom, and a Christian Nation are Bad Ideas* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1991), pp. 107–11.

[54] Among Stanley's most cutting insults is the label 'conventional'.

[55] Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2001), pp. 141–241.

[56] Werpehowski, 'Talking the Walk', p. 240.

[57] Karl Barth, 'The Strange New World within the Bible', in *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (New York: Harper, 1957), pp. 28–50.

[58] See especially Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983). For Hauerwas's relation to Hans Frei, see 'The Church as God's New Language', in Stanley Hauerwas, *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. John Berkman and Michael G Cartwright (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), pp. 142–62.

or doctrinal theology, but on sustaining the particularity of Christian moral description from within a Christian social logic.[59]

John Howard Yoder's writings, especially *The Politics of Jesus*,[60] complement and complete Barth's embrace of particularity in modernity. Hauerwas thinks that Barth's Mennonite student builds on Barth's strengths and avoids his occasionalist and Kantian weaknesses. Yoder's pacifism displays more clearly the relation between theology, ethics and politics implicit in the second-order emphasis on moral description. Because moral descriptions reflect the way a group speaks about itself and its aims, moral, political and theological commitments are mutually determinative. Yoder's political commitment to non-violence, then, sustained by church practices of forgiveness and confession, depends on the christological claim that God rules by cross and resurrection rather than by cause and effect.

Pacifism is therefore not a moral commitment meant to make the world 'a better place' (as if some universally knowable outcome could justify any means of getting there), but a response to the truth of God's non-violent rule from the cross. The New Testament authors call Christians to follow Jesus by taking up their crosses, because God's way of ruling in Christ is true in the most basic possible way.[61] The peace churches have learned to speak about God and salvation in such a way that Christian life does not make sense apart from christological pacifism.[62] Pacifism then becomes a *sine qua non*, a hallmark of Christian life, which requires the radical identity of agent and act in order to sustain a far-reaching commitment that is simultaneously

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[59] Healy reads Hauerwas as a (failed) doctrinal theologian and critiques him because he conflates formal theological logics. Hauerwas's contributions to theology are primarily by way of creative redescription of the Christian life and second-order philosophical analysis, and thus not strictly 'doctrinal' in Healy's sense. Healy might have more productively criticised Hauerwas's univocal, untroubled, reified and often selective appeal to 'tradition'.

[60] *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1994).

[61] Ibid., ch. 7.

[62] Healy draws attention to Hauerwas's redefinition of salvation (as formation for moral healing), but his analysis of Hauerwas's exclusivism and lack of concern for the fate of individual souls neglects Hauerwas's quasi-universalistic assumptions, which are common in liberal Protestant circles.

theological, moral and political.[63] I am unconvinced that pacifism is as necessary to Hauerwas's thought as he says it is. Hauerwas's pacifism cannot be a 'position' to be decided on independently of the communities that embody it, and though a theologian may articulate academic theological justifications for pacifism, theologians need not live according to their own insights. It is not quite clear what it means for anyone, including Hauerwas, to call themselves a pacifist apart from their participation in a peace church. Further, I cannot tell why a strict version of just war theory would not sufficiently effect the identity of agent and act and thereby serve as a political, moral and theological witness to the resurrection.

Stanley frequently makes the following epistemic claim about the irreducible particularity of Christian ethics: 'The most determinative distinction is between church and world.'[64] For Hauerwas, the church 'functions' for ethics because of its form: the ideal-typical logic of the liturgical and sacramental practices that define its life. Part of the logic of practices like baptism, eucharist, marriage or confession is that they are irreducibly embodied. The only moral significance the church can have is through embodied sacramental participation in an ordering of reality to which it can only aspire – a form of life in community that always remains a gift. Attempting to 'grasp' that gift by sociological assessment of one particular community, then, confuses the embodied middle where we access grace with the logic of grace embodied in communal practices.[65]

The church's 'character' is what gives it the identity of Christ's body. Its 'act' is its fidelity to that sacramental logic. 'Christendom' describes the form that the church's departure from the sacramental logic of the Christian life

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[63] See especially Yoder, *Politics of Jesus*, ch. 12.

[64] Herdt argues that Hauerwas 'remains ambivalent between exclusive and comprehensive particularism' in 'Hauerwas among the Virtues', p. 220. The grammar I suggest weighs towards 'comprehensive' particularism. Part of the meaning of the church/world distinction is that, because God made us with these bodies for this world, truth is available everywhere, even if it is not reliably known or unambiguously accessible because of sin and limitation. It is odd to construe the church/world distinction as a sectarian claim about where truth is available.

[65] It does not follow that one can identify the concrete practices of any particular community with 'the church'. Though Healy rightly attends to the limits of liturgical formation, I do not know the extent to which Hauerwas's work is concerned with the pastoral mechanics of the relationship between agent-formation and moral improvement. Hauerwas's point seems to be not that moral problems would be solved if people would only go to churches that worship rightly, but rather that, if more people did worship rightly, such liturgically formed subjects would be different kinds of agents, whose liturgical practice provides a new, prophetic, immanent critique of their moral failings. See Healy, *Hauerwas*, pp. 73–99.

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and the pursuit of ends external to it – separating its act from its character – has taken. In Christendom, the church speaks a foreign language under the veneer of Christian faith. This critique of Christendom is rooted partly in Hauerwas's analysis of history and mostly in the view of particularity that drives his philosophical ethics. His thought is not inconsistent with Christian political engagement, even at the level of public policy, so long as such engagement reflects God's rule and thus sustains the integrity necessary for Christian truth claims to remain 'Christian' and 'truth claims' on their own terms.[66] The witness of the church, then, always political, depends primarily on its faithfulness to offering moral descriptions of the world from the gospel rather than a desire to shape favourable outcomes for Christians.

Bearing reality: how to copy Hauerwas

In his Presidential Address to the Society of Christian Ethics, Hauerwas reflected on the worldliness of Christian ethics in a talk titled 'Bearing Reality'.[67] J. M. Coetzee's novel *Elizabeth Costello* helped him to ask what it means to be attentive to a world that relies so heavily on realities like war, which it needs to hide in order to sustain the order.[68] Elizabeth Costello, a writer and a vegetarian, gave a public address comparing the brutalities that meat consumption inflicts on animals to the Holocaust. 'Bearing reality' for both Hauerwas and Costello is refusing to hide from the horrors inflicted on our behalf. Hauerwas thinks that the events of Christ's incarnation, death and resurrection make it possible to bear reality. Through them, Christians can begin 'to see history doxologically' and thereby reimagine the meaning of the present.[69]

One way of characterizing Hauerwas's approach to ethics is as a form of thick description, a phenomenology of Christian life built on the doxological view of history. Christian moral descriptions, always incomplete and often mistaken, maintain their integrity only if they continue to interpret

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[66] Various recent Augustinian approaches to political engagement follow Hauerwas's turn to epistemic particularity but interpret liberalism differently. See Charles T. Mathewes, *A Theology of Public Life* (New York: CUP, 2008); Eric Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Luke Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics: The Conditions and Possibilities of Faithful Witness* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

[67] *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 33/1 (2013), pp. 3–20.

[68] New York: Viking, 2003.

[69] J. Alexander Sider, *To See History Doxologically: History and Holiness in John Howard Yoder's Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2011).

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history through the gospel. Such descriptions depend not on unassailable foundations, but on faith in Christ and trust in a reliable process of Spirit-led discernment, the integrity of which is the only way to derive truthful descriptions from the true story. In this way, Christian ethics renarrates the meaning of everyday life through a doxological view of history. In order to do so, it undermines descriptions of reality offered by liberal democracy, capitalism and war, which so prominently claim for themselves a universal inevitability more basic than the Lamb's reign. Bearing reality thus seeks out cracks in the way things are presently ordered, deconstructs inevitabilities, demonstrates contingencies and imagines alternatives. In this context, pacifism most clearly protests the inevitability of alternatives to Christ's reign, all of which depend on violence.

Hauerwas thinks all theologians should copy him by 'bearing reality' from whatever middle they are in. Bearing reality grasps the significance of the present moment from the various middles of his life and the world's history. The reality he seeks to bear is broad – even universal. But the starting point is frustratingly particular: because acts are intelligible only with reference to the agents and the communities that form the agents, no framework offers an abstract and universally accessible method of moral analysis in order to determine right obligations or just outcomes. Instead, practical reason is moral description, and it relies on shared linguistic rules just like any other description. In order to understand the nuances of those rules in modernity, Stanley reads just about everything – more than anyone I have met. In this sense, Stanley will recommend just about everything and anything that has moral significance: political theory, literary analysis, philosophy and especially novels.[70] His essays, unsystematic and occasional, pursue his expansive goal:[71] the systematically unsystematic effort to 'bear reality' by describing everyday life from the perspective of God's faithfulness to Israel in Christ's resurrection.

Copying him here imitates the expansiveness of the discipline and the determination to be in continual dialogue with anything of moral significance. I once heard Stanley say, 'Ever since I read Foucault, I realized it's all power. I want power. I want to take over the world. I just want to do it nonviolently.' That is a fitting way to describe the scope of his engagement,

[70] Stanley Hauerwas, 'Constancy and Forgiveness: The Novel as a School for Virtue', *Notre Dame English Journal* 15/3 (1 July 1983), pp. 23–54.

[71] Herdt is surely right that 'the genius of his thought is its capaciousness, the way in which it is constantly being informed and enlivened by new categories, which are brought into creative relation with what he has been doing up to that point and developed in such a way that a new unity appears'. 'Hauerwas Among the Virtues', p. 221.

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a formal feature of the extraordinarily broad range of his work. Without expecting conversation partners to sacrifice their own terms from their own middle, his approach makes theological space for all of life by engaging it from the middle – of history, of the church, of a particular life.[72]

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