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The main characters in Ryan’s narrative are Elizabeth Anscombe, Stanley Hauerwas, Alasdair MacIntyre, Jeffrey Stout, and Charles Taylor, and Ryan’s storyline goes something like this: Elizabeth Anscombe establishes how practical reasoning must be linked with *human agency* and *politics* in order for an account of practical reasoning to become coherent, complete, and consistent. By “practical reasoning,” Ryan intends to describe “an interpretive window on a complex form of life.”¹ By “human agency,” Ryan means thick descriptions pertaining to moral psychology.² By “politics,” Ryan wants his readers to think in terms of actual communities who live out their beliefs, convictions, and practices together in ways that are comprehensible to others.³ If the three of these are not in a working relationship with one another,⁴ then an account of practical reasoning will be either incoherent or incomplete. Charles Taylor’s account of practical reasoning properly emphasizes human agency as the way in which we “become articulate” as moral agents.⁵ However, in Ryan’s view, Taylor’s account of practical reasoning is incomplete because it is too abstract in terms of the *political* ingredient. It is

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¹ Mark Ryan, *The Politics of Practical Reason: Why Theological Ethics Must Change Your Life*, (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 2. I believe that Ryan’s initial definition of practical reasoning is much more clear (which reflects my own Aristotelian dispositions), but he chooses not to take this route. Originally, he defines practical reasoning as “a component of a philosophical account of human agency, namely the deliberation that leads to decision and action” (1). He adopts the second definition because it is more vague and, therefore, allows Ryan to make “an argument concerning how practical reason should be conceived” (2).


³ See Ryan, *The Politics of Practical Reason*, 3-4; also see footnote #2 on pg. 2.


too abstract because there is no actual political community from which Taylor builds and/or references. Stanley Hauerwas’ early work, which borrows from Anscombe’s philosophy, accounts for the necessary relationship between human agency and practical reasoning. The middle part of Hauerwas’ writing career avoids the political abstraction committed by Taylor, and Hauerwas’ ecclesiology comes with a political community that grounds the logic of practical reasoning, and – with the work of the early Hauerwas – provides a coherent and consistent account of practical reasoning found within the construction of his theological ethics. However, the result of Hauerwas’ theological ethics is not merely to account for the relations between practical reasoning, human agency, and the politics of the church. Rather, the result – indeed the point – of Hauerwas’ work is to transform his readers into ecclesial-centered practical reasoners who sustain an awareness of their moral agency. Jeffrey Stout’s role in this story is that, while he relates practical reasoning to an actual political community, the link between human agency and practical reasoning in Stout’s work remains too thin. In Democracy and Tradition, Stout seeks to develop a notion of human agency through the virtue of piety. In order to make sense of piety, as a virtue, Stout needs to offer further reflections on how piety works alongside other virtues – what some philosophers call “the unity of the virtues.” This leads us to Alasdair MacIntyre’s appearance in the story. MacIntyre accounts for human agency when he emphasizes the unity of the virtues and how the virtues work alongside one another in moral agents. Instead of offering an account of politics, MacIntyre turns toward “narrative” and “tradition” for what grounds our practical reasoning. It seems that MacIntyre passes the test, on Anscombe’s standards for the necessity of the three ingredients (human agency, politics, and practical reasoning), but “narrative” and “tradition” replace the word “politics” in MacIntyre’s philosophical account of practical reasoning. According to Ryan, the shortcomings of Stout’s and Taylor’s accounts of practical reasoning is that they do not “change your

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9 Hence the sub-title of Ryan’s book: “Why Theological Ethics Must Change Your Life.”


life,” whereas the benefits of Hauerwas’ and MacIntyre’s accounts of practical reasoning is that they transform the life of the reader.

Stanley Hauerwas improves upon Charles Taylor’s work, and Alasdair MacIntyre’s improves upon Jeffrey Stout’s arguments. On the terms of disciplinary distinctions, however, Mark Ryan seems to get the relationships between characters wrong: it makes more sense to say that one philosopher (MacIntyre) improves upon another philosopher (Taylor), while one theologian (Hauerwas) improves upon a scholar of religious studies (Stout). However, Ryan does not play by these disciplinary rules. Rather, he locates Anscombe’s philosophical reasoning as the determining (and dividing) factor. Hauerwas and Taylor work toward fulfilling the ingredients that Anscombe identifies as necessary, whereas MacIntyre and Stout are off on their own projects that meet Anscombe’s standards only loosely and vaguely. Ryan makes the final judgment that Stout’s account of practical reasoning is incomplete while Taylor’s account of practical reasoning is incoherent, because it remains too abstract.

Why does this story belong in a series on “Theopolitical Visions”? On the surface, the answer seems that it does not belong. The editors describe the purpose of their series:

Theopolitical Visions seeks to open up new vistas on public life, hosting fresh conversations between theology and political theory. This series assembles writers who wish to revive theopolitical imagination for the sake of our common good.

Theopolitical Visions hopes to re-source modern imaginations with those ancient traditions in which political theorists were often also theologians. Whether it was Jeremiah’s prophetic vision of exiles “seeking the peace of the city,” Plato’s illuminations on piety and the civic virtues in the Roman Republic, St. Paul’s call to “a common life worthy of the Gospel,” St. Augustine’s beatific vision of the City of God, or the gothic heights of medieval political theology, much of Western thought has found it necessary to think theologically about politics, and to think politically about theology. This series is founded in the hope that the renewal of such mutual illumination might make a genuine contribution to the peace of our cities.

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13 Ryan says this quite clearly: “My greatest hesitation about Democracy and Tradition…is that it has not changed my life” (217).

14 On this point concerning MacIntyre’s work, see Ryan, The Politics of Practical Reason, 216-217; on this point concerning Hauerwas’ work, see Ryan, The Politics of Practical Reason, 219-224. Ryan defends Hauerwas’ account of practical reasoning in much stronger terms than he defends MacIntyre’s.

15 Ryan uses the word “incoherent” to introduce Stout’s account of practical reasoning, but he concludes his presentation on Stout’s Democracy and Tradition by saying that it is “incomplete.” I find the word “incomplete” to be more accurate than “incoherent” for the ways in which Ryan presents Stout’s case. (I beg to differ over some aspects of Ryan’s presentation of Stout, but this review is not the place to make my interpretive differences an issue.)

16 Thomas Heilke’s, D. Stephen Long’s, and C. C. Pecknold’s description of their book series can be found in Ryan, The Politics of Practical Reason, ii.
Ryan does not return to (a) the Hebrew Prophets, (b) Plato’s political philosophy, (c) St. Paul’s ecclesial-political vision, (d) St. Augustine’s complex account of the City of God and the City of Man, or (e) “the gothic heights of medieval political theology” (wording so dramatic that it should not be summarized in any other way!). What the editors describe is a kind of logic of return or pattern of retrieval in order to draw out the theological implications for politics as well as the political implications for theology. Ryan’s arguments remain squarely in the 20th and 21st centuries, examining philosophers and theologians who are alive and active (with the exception of Elizabeth Anscombe). The closest Ryan comes to a pattern of retrieval is in his exposition of MacIntyre’s account of practical reasoning where Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics* is taken as a normative and valid source for describing the moral life today. Is this sufficient to be included in *this* book series?

Also, Ryan neither “open[s] up new vistas on public life” nor does he host a “fresh conversation between theology and political theory.” He narrates a conversation between *philosophy* and theology, not *political theory* and theology. His ultimate goal is to not to host “a fresh conversation” but to draw lines in the sand based on the criterion of transformation: Stout’s and Taylor’s arguments are insufficient because they do not “change our lives” while Hauerwas’ and MacIntyre’s work is better because it remains transformative for their readers. In this sense, Ryan’s book is somewhat confessional: the fact that these two authors changed Ryan’s life means that they have the potential to change the lives of others, which renders their accounts of practical reasoning more complete and persuasive. Stout’s lack of attention to the unity of the virtues, however, means that his book does not have the potential to change the lives of others. This is not starting a “conversation” – either in the theological sense of directing our talk toward God or in the Rortyean sense of ensuring that one’s writing continues a conversation in the form of inquiry – because Ryan makes clear what the results of his story are: Taylor’s and Stout’s work will not transform the lives of their readers because they do not offer a coherent (Taylor) or complete (Stout) explanation of human agency as part of their accounts of practical reasoning. Does this mean that the conversation is not freshly started but, in fact, is over?

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17 Interestingly, the first volume of this series does not return to any of these either: Stanley Hauerwas & Romand Coles, *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary: Conversations between a Radical Democrat and a Christian*, (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008). See my review of this inaugural volume in *Contemporary Pragmatism*, vol. 5, no. 1, (2008), 168-172. One of the connections between that first volume and Mark Ryan’s book is their criticisms of Stout’s *Democracy and Tradition* that it is not “radical” (Coles & Hauerwas’ judgment) or “thick” (Ryan’s judgment) enough – which means that, in some way, the book series *Theopolitical Visions* fosters “fresh conversations” correcting and critiquing Stout’s political vision.


19 Ryan reasons in terms of a radical “reader-response” criterion for evaluating the logic of moral arguments: our final judgments on moral arguments should be the degree to which they alter the beliefs and practices of their readers.
Should we conclude that Ryan’s book is misplaced – that it does not belong in this particular series? No. I think Ryan’s contribution to “Theopolitical Visions” is that it places Hauerwas’ and MacIntyre’s arguments concretely into the realm of the political – “to think theologically about politics” – and gives persuasive reasons for why this is so. Ryan makes clear how accounts of practical reasoning that claim to be part of “political theory” tend to abstract the notion of “political” in an attempt to be for everyone. Charles Taylor’s suffers from this tendency. In Hauerwas’ work, which claims to be “political” but not “political theory,” Ryan identifies a type of humility that resists universalization while simultaneously speaking from and to an actual community. Academics and scholars tend to speak to but not from communities.  

Why should scholars who practice Scriptural Reasoning read and study Mark Ryan’s ecclesial-centered version of practical reasoning? We should begin with the times that Ryan discusses the role of Scripture in the logic of practical reasoning. The following quotation is one of the few times that Ryan actually mentions Scripture:

"[T]he notion of narrative is an important component of Hauerwas’ account of agency and practical reason, for he believes Christians live by memory. Sacred Scripture is the clearest indicator that Christians are such a people and helps remind them of the connections between their history and that of the Jews."  

If I understand Ryan’s argument correctly, and seek to apply it to Scriptural Reasoning, then I would say that the practice of Scriptural Reasoning helps nurture the political ingredient required for sound practical reasoning. How so? Because Scriptural Reasoning teaches us to reason from an actual community – found in the traditions that consider these texts “sacred” – and toward an actual community – even if that community is “in the making” as we practice Scriptural Reasoning and as we develop a community of faithful inter-religious readers. On Ryan’s terms, I believe that Scriptural Reasoning remains insufficient for sound practical reasoning because it does not develop an account of human agency. However, Ryan emphasizes the importance of actual communities

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21 Another place containing a discussion on Scripture is in Ryan, *The Politics of Practical Reason*, 127-130. However, Ryan’s presentation of the role of Scripture in Hauerwas’ moral reasoning falls flat in three ways. First, Ryan makes Scripture sound very passive in Hauerwas’ theology: “it is within the narrative context [of] Scripture…that revelational claims become meaningful for Christians” (130). Do revelational claims merely become meaningful, or is it much more active and complex than this? Second, Ryan looks only to one different pattern of reasoning contrary to Hauerwas’ work: Richard McCormick, who “argues that to base morality solely on the particular scriptures of the Christian tradition is inherently limiting” (128). Surely, there are arguments in between those of Hauerwas and McCormick! Third, Ryan considers no criticisms of the role of Scripture in Hauerwas’ moral reasoning: Richard Hays, Jeffrey Siker, and John Howard Yoder all provide critiques of the relation between Scripture and practical reasoning in Hauerwas’ work – which renders their criticisms pertinent to Ryan’s argument and investigations in *The Politics of Practical Reason*.


23 In order to connect Ryan’s book with the practice of Scriptural Reasoning, I use this space to point toward two of my own essays. First, I attempt to offer a philosophical psychology that serves the logic of...
and actual practices: Scriptural Reasoning provides a community and serves as a practice that helps us “live by memory” and remember “the connections between” our Abrahamic histories.\textsuperscript{24} In short, Scriptural Reasoning fosters the political component necessary to meet the Anscombean requirements for practical reasoning.\textsuperscript{25}

Ryan’s account of practical reasoning is Christian/ecclesial-centered, but does this account stretch (or break) when applied in a Scriptural Reasoning context of Christians, Jews, and Muslims? I find that it stretches, mostly because of his non-binary emphasis on particularity over universality. It is non-binary in the sense that Ryan does not generalize about particularity; rather, he identifies ways in which the tendency to universalize – namely in Charles Taylor’s work but also a bit in Jeffrey Stout’s notion of piety – comes at the cost of either abstraction (Taylor) or thinness (Stout). Ryan does not fetishize the particular, as some thinkers tend to do in their criticisms of universality, but he carefully shows the limitations and problems of universalizing. If we searched them out with attentiveness and patience, I think that we would find analogues to Hauerwas’ and MacIntyre’s accounts of practical reasoning within Judaism and Islam.\textsuperscript{26} Perhaps a better claim, with the real possibility of more fruitfulness in The Society of Scriptural Reasoning, would be that by staying with the particularity emphasized in Hauerwas’ and MacIntyre’s ways of reasoning – and their accounts of practical reasoning – Ryan helpfully models what it looks like to maintain the ingredients necessary for a full account of practical reasoning: (a) human agency that takes seriously the complexities of moral psychology and (b) on-the-ground political relationships that provide a community for scholars to speak from and to. With this logic of practical reason, Ryan invites others to locate their own accounts of practical reasoning in relation to his. The conversation continues, and Ryan “freshly starts” it with his final paragraph of The Politics of Practical Reason:

In conclusion, recognizing the politics of practical reason will be important for us [as academics]…in clarifying crucial aspects of human agency where ethics is concerned…

\textsuperscript{24} See Jennifer L. Geddes, “Peacemaking Among the Abrahamic Faiths: An Interview with Peter Ochs,” in The Hedgehog Review, 6.1 (Spring 2004), 90-102.

\textsuperscript{25} The second essay of mine that raises questions concerning Ryan’s account of practical reasoning is: “What Is Reparative Reasoning? Jürgen Habermas’ Philosophy, Practical Reasoning, and Theological Hermeneutics,” in The Journal of Scriptural Reasoning, 10.2 (December 2011). I believe that Habermas’ account of practical reasoning provides more of a concrete place for Scripture in our actions, decisions, and judgments than Anscombe’s account of practical reasoning allows – at least, in the way that Mark Ryan presents Anscombe’s logic of practical reasoning. Scripture seems incidental within Anscombe’s account; it only makes a difference if (and only if) it contributes to the thick notion of “politics.” However, Habermas recognizes how (and not merely that) “Scripture provides the sources required for reparative reasoning to take place within religious traditions” (these are my words found in the Conclusion of “What Is Reparative Reasoning?”). For the clearest instance of Habermas’ view of Scripture, see The Future of Human Nature, (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2003), 101-115.

\textsuperscript{26} This is one way to read and understand David Burrell’s work on comparative Abrahamic medieval philosophy; see, for example, Burrell’s Faith and Freedom: An Interfaith Perspective, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004).
[and] in avoiding several temptations that impoverish our [scholarly] work. Learning to read Hauerwas well, though not uncritically, offers a skill for making us politically discerning.27

How can we develop the skills and tools needed for coherent, complete, and consistent accounts of practical reasoning in order avoid the “temptations” – like abstraction and thinness – that continually “impoverish our work”?  

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