

# The theory–practice distinction and the complexity of practical knowledge

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Over the past few decades, theologians have recognised the value of practice but have been optimistic about the ease with which practice is incorporated into theology. People use all sorts of adjectives to characterise the complex relationship – 'integrally related', a 'deeper reciprocity', 'bound up in thickly intertwined ways' – but connecting the two is not as easy as these words suggest. This article returns to the age-old question about the relationship between theory and practice. But it studies this question from the angle of practice. Although many scholars have analysed the distinction between theory and practice as it functions conceptually, few have examined challenges in relating the two *as they emerge in practice*. The article argues that there is an inevitable distinction between theory and practice that receives considerably less attention and needs more understanding and even respect. It also argues that the discipline of practical theology adds a distinctive angle on this discussion because it considers how the concepts function practically.

## Introduction

In the late 1990s, University of Chicago professor David Tracy, now emeritus, named the split between theory and practice one of the 'great separations of modern Western culture' harming 'our ability to reflect on theological education' (Tracy 1998:235; see also Tracy 2011:49–61). However, in an interview with a Catholic weekly magazine, he clarifies, 'there is a need, of course, for a genuine *distinction* between theory and practice, as the scholastics used to say, but not for separation' (Burrows 1995:16, emphasis in the original). My essay is a meditation on Tracy's odd clarification – the need for a genuine *distinction* – and its implications for theological knowledge.

Tracy's clarification goes against the grain of conventional discourse. Many scholars in religion and theology today oppose the split between theory and practice as a detrimental remnant of modernism and seek ways to subvert it. This effort is particularly apparent in practical theology where questions about theory–practice have received undue attention for over two decades. Vivid depictions of a more dialectical relationship abound: the two terms are 'integrally related' (Forrester 1999:16–17) or 'bound up ... in thickly intertwined ways' (Mikoski 2014:179); their relationship is 'circular' (Heitink 1999:267) and 'complex and multiphased' (Mikoski 2014:179); the terms possess a 'deeper reciprocity' (Forrester 1999:16–17); they 'interpenetrate and overlap' (Browning 1999:55), 'indwell and mutually shape one another' (Mercer 2014:111) and so forth. 'What's being recovered, almost across the board', as Tracy remarks in his interview, is a 'classic link' between the two (Burrows 1995:16).

Reconnecting theory and practice in theology has not been as easy, however, as our many words and the wider discussion imply. I myself have tried to foster Tracy's 'recovery', most recently (2016) by arguing that the hegemony of theory over practice has functioned in theological studies like other binaries – to assign positions of inferiority and superiority that disadvantage those closer to material life and practice. But the more I explored the hegemony, the more I realised that there is a distinction between theory and practice not entirely erased or resolved by understanding the politics. Most practical theologians have been so busy moderating, mediating and overcoming the split that we devote little time to comprehending the necessary and useful differences.

This essay, then, explores the question: Even if we agree that the split between theory and practice has been destructive, what do we make of Tracy's claim that there is still a 'genuine distinction', a distinction that he describes as 'natural' and 'useful'? (1998:6). My interest is motivated by a larger long-time interest in and commitment to understanding how theology operates in ministerial and faith practices. An examination of superficial treatments of theology in practice that ignore,

overlook or refute the tensions between theory and practice reveals that most discussions of theory–practice underestimate the complexity of practical knowledge and its relationship to theory. Not only do issues of political power distort the institutional construction of theological knowledge, I argue, there is also an inevitable distinction between theory and practice that receives considerably less attention and needs more understanding and even respect. To put this argument together with my claim about the structural politics that continue to prioritise theory over practice, there *is* a difference between theoretical and practical knowledge that needs to be understood and institutionalised in less oppressive ways.

## Optimism about understanding theology-in-practice

To ‘understand God truly’, claims David Kelsey in a capstone statement of the well-funded US Issues Research on theological education in the 1980s and 1990s, one must begin ‘not with theory but with messy concrete realities’ (1997:132). Starting with messy realities, as ideal as this sounds, is easier said than done, however.

Kelsey is not alone in overlooking the challenges. The turn to practice in theological and religious studies has marked a tidal wave of sorts, and scholars are still catching up with the implications for theological knowledge. In 1985 feminist theologian Sharon Welch declared in her widely-read *Communities of Resistance and Solidarity*, ‘My aim is to understand Christianity in terms of its practices, not just in terms of its symbols and doctrines’ (1985:18). A year later and from quite a different post-liberal communitarian angle, Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon describe theology as a ‘form of practical knowledge’ designed to ‘help congregations better understand the common but no less theologically significant activities that constitute their lives’ (1986:119). Early spokespersons in practical theology’s disciplinary revival in the United States actually adopted the term *practical theology* because it most clearly bridged a dissonance between ‘faith lived and faith thought-through’ (Mudge & Poling 1987:xiii). In general, all these voices, despite divergent political and social locations, represent what Mary McClintock Fulkerson describes as a rejection of theology as an ‘overly cognitive and abstract ... (useless) kind of theory relevant only to academicians’; these claims reflect a ‘turn away from ... the study of texts’ and a turn toward practice (2007:299). Twenty years earlier, Harvard Divinity professor Francis Fiorenza had already called the term *practice* a ‘shibboleth’ – a term used so frequently as a ‘password to cross from the dry desert of intellectualism into the land where theory and practice overflow each other’ as to lose clarity of meaning (1987:113).

Unfortunately, as Fiorenza implies, neither Welch nor Hauerwas nor the many who picked up the mantle of practice recognised the conceptual and logistical problems that surround its full inclusion. People eager to get beyond biases against practice have been especially careless and optimistic

about the ease with which scholars, students, and ministers can incorporate practice into theology and theology into practice. But, as field education professors, teachers of the ministerial arts, faculty members in integrative capstone courses, and new ministers already recognise more acutely than almost anyone else in theological education, discerning theology in common activities is not easy. Despite all the ink spilt on ‘how to think theologically’ (e.g. Duke & Stone 1996), theology faculty have been relatively unsuccessful in helping people employ in practice the theological knowledge they gain in school *and*, inversely, in helping them detect the theology already latent and operative in practice. In a word, we have not resolved the question of how theology is engaged in practice or how it emerges from practice.

Oddly enough, scholars who might have taken up the question in the 1980s and 1990s Issues Research program dismissed the interrelationship between theory–practice as an annoying distraction, merely a symptom of a bigger problem in the longer history of theology’s demise. This is unfortunate since the Issues discussion made great strides in establishing a more complex relationship between thinking and action, insisting that ‘nonpractical theological studies’ (though an inopportune portrait) should not be reduced ‘to the status of theory for clerical practice’ (Wheeler 1991:10) and that ‘practical studies’ are not without theory (Kelsey & Wheeler 1995:186).

Nonetheless, a fatigue with and unwarranted dismissal of theory–practice language comes through most clearly in a festschrift for Edward Farley, where Kelsey and Barbara Wheeler (1995) describe derogatorily previous efforts to address problems in theological education. Prior to Farley’s masterwork *Theologia* (1983), theological education ‘was larded with three slogans’, they insist: “‘effective preparation for the practice of ministry,” “the integration of theory and practice,” and “contextual” or “experiential” learning’ (1995:183). These ‘slogans’ sponsored what they perceive as a narrow-minded focus on pedagogical ‘techniques’ for ministerial ‘training’ (p. 184) – damning accusations because they signify for Kelsey, Wheeler, Farley, and others in this discussion the invasion of *techné* or instrumental means-end reasoning into theological education. Farley himself lamented in *Theologia* (1983) the ‘various devices’ that schools have created to translate ‘academic (theory) into the practical’ – efforts I see, by contrast, as incredibly valuable – such as ‘field-based education, case study pedagogies, enlarged faculties in the areas of ministerial skills and activities, interdisciplinary courses, increased offerings in culture-oriented and culture-valued skills (therapeutic, literary, political)’ (1983:5) All these attempts bespeak a problematic theory–practice ‘ethos’ (p. 19), in his words, that he blames for problems in clergy education. Indeed, as Kelsey and Wheeler conclude, the very ‘conceptual scheme that allows one to contrast “theory” and “practice” in such a way that they stand in need of “integration” is inappropriate to theological education’ (1995:184).

Inappropriate to education? Certainly, polarisation of theory and practice, their relegation to restricted spheres and the

misperception of theory as something merely applied to practice have all been detrimental. But is the theory–practice schema itself inappropriate or at fault? Dismissal of the framework makes it difficult to go back and talk further about how various ways of knowing, often connoted as *theoretical* and *practical*, are related. The theory–practice distinction, I assert, is neither *source* of nor *solution* to theological education's problems. Rather these terms simply embody one way people struggle to talk about different ways of knowing. Kelsey and Wheeler go on to name 'conceptual gaps' in the Issues Research as one reason why the literature had so little consequence for education. But they mention only one 'important unattended topic' (1995:193) – anthropology – which happens to be Kelsey's next project (see Kelsey 2009). In my view, by contrast, understanding the complex dynamics of theoretical and practical knowledge within theology is as deserving.

For all Farley's criticism of pedagogical efforts to bridge theory and practice, it is he who later recants in retirement his mistake of teaching his subject matter as purely theoretical. Although he had questioned in his writing the misperception of theology as theory or a specialised disciplinary endeavour, he did not 'let the correction...find its way into my teaching' (2005:202). Instead, he continued to teach theology as an enterprise focused on textual interpretation and doctrinal exposition rather than on the situations, needs and interests of students – or what he describes as 'primary theology' or 'reflective engagement with situations under the Gospel' (p. 201) among believers and church leaders. Misperceiving attention to situations as corrupting or compromising pure theology, he left 'concern with situations' to other fields (p. 202). In the end, he admits that he does not 'know what a theological pedagogy ordered by the primary mode of theology would look like', except that it would necessarily be more 'rigorous and complex' (p. 203) than he realised, a reality practical theologians have long recognised.

Fulkerson, one of Farley's doctoral students who continued his interest in practical theology in her later work, concludes an account of the recent turn to practice by naming briefly several difficulties of such a turn, two of which have immediate relevance here – how to deal with the 'intersection of knowledges' (Fulkerson 2007:300), including the continued role of critical thinking, and how to adjudicate the 'increasing complexification of practice' (301). She does not develop either issue in any detail. But her notice of both problems – how to bring together different kinds of knowledge and how to study practices – is essentially a call to revisit issues of theory and practice. How does one sustain 'rigorous intellectual inquiry' (p. 301) in Fulkerson's words while appreciating the practical? And how does one study practice amid the 'ever-expanding' (p. 301) definitions and methods of understanding it?

## Theory–practice as differentiation between kinds of knowledge

One of the first observations to make may seem obvious. No matter how close the classroom comes to practice, what one

learns in a book or seminar still remains at a distance and therefore at least partly hypothetical by the very definition of classroom learning as a step back from the need to act. There has never been a time in reflective history where a difference does not arise between thinking about something and doing something or between what scientists and philosophers have called 'knowing *that*' and professional experience in 'knowing *how*' (see Benner 1984:2).<sup>1</sup> So, practical theologians use *theory* and *practice* to differentiate two sources and styles of knowledge.

Those in the social sciences use these terms differently. Modern scientists often contrast *theory* with empirical *data* rather than with *practice*. Data provide causal or correlational evidence for a hypothesised prediction; and theory provides the predictive and explanatory infrastructure for empirical research and, in turn, is developed out of new data (in fact, this latter move is supposedly the only way theory arises for those who employ inductive 'grounded theory' methods) (see, e.g. Miller 2015). For practical theologians, this view of theory as verifiable concepts, separate from 'data', seems truncated, even slightly positivist, because many believe there are no un-interpreted or un-theorised data. But even those in professions comparable to ministry, such as medicine and psychotherapy, employ theory to designate explanatory frameworks that stand above or outside clinical decisions and guide them, even though these professionals often align with practical theologians in juxtaposing theory and practice rather than theory and data. For the most part, in both the sciences and other professions, *theory* is not so much a term for a kind of knowledge but pertains to explanatory schemas. Consequently, few scientists, or nurses or therapists for that matter, would see 'tradition' in the same way religion and theology scholars often do – as a source of 'theory', and fewer still would set tradition (as theory) in opposition to experience (as practice) as different sources of truth.

By contrast, practical theologians regularly juxtapose theory with practice, not with data, to designate dissimilar ways of knowing. This usage follows theology's longer historical trail back to antiquity, as we saw in Tracy's own reference to the scholastics. Both *theoria* and *contemplatio*, originally the Latin translation of the Greek word *theoria*, have a long history as terms for a way of understanding that requires disengagement from material distractions. Grounded in Plato's assertion of contemplation of immutable forms as the highest kind of knowledge, this view assumes that to comprehend the highest reality and good (for Christians, God as immutable and unchanging), one needs to distance oneself from everyday life. Action in a changing world and the knowledge necessary to act or make things are seen as inferior to *contemplatio* and *theoria*, whether understood as discursive reasoning, immediate intuition, meditative or speculative thought.

A distant remnant of this location of ultimate truth in the contemplation of unchanging reality lives on in modernity's

1. Benner quotes philosophers of science Thomas Kuhn and Michael Polanyi. She also distinguishes between 'perceptual' knowledge – what nurses perceive in practice – and the 'conceptual' origin of knowledge – what they learn in class or books (1984:xviii).



idealisation of researcher objectivity as the location of pure or hard science and the pejorative, and even phallic, distinction between *hard* and *soft* sciences. The Western academic world has not entirely banished the Greek split between mind and body and the negative view of bodies and materiality as entrapments that impede knowledge. Although many practical theologians are worried about Western mind-body dualism and misogyny, only a few – Thomas Groome (1991) over two decades ago and Robert Smith (2008) more recently – have decried the epistemological consequences of the ‘hierarchy of knowledge’, in Groome’s words, that ranks ‘mind, ideas, and men over body, nature, and women’ (1991:37). The very social context for the categories of *theoria*, *phronesis* and *poesis*, as Robert Smith points out in an essay on ‘Black *Phronesis*’, was one in which only men participated in the pursuit of the highest knowledge, ‘specifically Greek, free, aristocratic males’ and ‘women, slaves, indentured persons, people of color and non-Greeks were excluded’ (2008:178).

So, why have practical theologians paid so much attention to theory–practice during the past several decades? Theory–practice debates reveal serious questions about what counts as knowledge and who is included and excluded in its production that practical theologians have felt especially acutely. Practical theological deliberations over theory–practice, therefore, are actually conversations about social and epistemological justice (for further exploration of this problem, see Miller-McLemore 2016). Moreover, more than most other academics, practical theologians constantly find themselves at the juncture, or more exactly the *disjuncture*, between kinds of knowledge in at least three ways. We are curious about how people bridge what they believe and what they do; we teach those who must acquire capacities to do what we teach (e.g. pastoral care); and we want people to reflect on and learn from their experience and, at the same time, utilise in their ministry what they learn in academic study.

So, practical theologians trade daily in different kinds of knowledge, perhaps more than those in other areas. Decisions about what to write, how to write, for whom to write, what to teach, how to teach, for whom to teach regularly provoke consternation about the boundaries between divergent forms of expertise (see Miller-McLemore 2012a:185–207 on pedagogy and practical theology). Our position in educational curricula that persist in splitting theory, practice and types of knowledge in unhelpful ways turns practical theologians into quintessential ‘bridge-makers’ across estranged lands (see Miller-McLemore & Gill-Austern, 1999:12; Osmer 2008:12–15).

## Reconsidering the value of theoretical knowledge

Given the political ambiguities of the Western epistemological heritage, I take a risky step in underscoring nevertheless the importance of disengagement from everyday distractions for knowledge formation. Faculty members at the University of Chicago where Tracy spent the majority of his career

have an unwritten motto that lends credibility to their reputation for speculative research: early twentieth-century social psychologist Kurt Lewin’s commented, ‘there is nothing so practical as a good theory’ (1951:169). One reason why the remark is well worn is that it captures in pithy fashion the value of both the distinction and the connection of theory–practice.

As pastoral theologian Rod Hunter points out in his reflection on teaching pastoral care, the English word, *theory*, and its French and German cognates, come from the Greek root *to see*. It is related to *theatre* as a place of seeing. Stated most simply, theory is ‘a set of ideas’ (Hunter 2009:374) that helps us see what we might not otherwise see. Even though theorising about theory feels as if it puts us ‘five removes from real life’, theory is ‘just human activity bending back upon itself’, according to literary theorist Terry Eagleton (1990:24,27), a ‘social practice’ that ‘goes on all the time’ (p. 25) and becomes especially necessary when ‘something is amiss’ (p. 26). Hunter proposes his own ‘small theory of pastoral practice’ (2009:383) – three questions student should ask as they seek to perform care about what is happening, what is God’s will for the situation, and how might they proceed. As he notes in an extensive footnote, his own theory for the sake of practice is itself dependent on a long history of theory-making that includes reflection on ‘*phronesis*, *practical knowledge and reasoning*, *wisdom*, *praxis*, and the *theory or philosophy of action*, all of which entail numerous other [theoretical] issues such as the nature of volition and freedom, judgment and decision, ... and the theory and/or practice relation, as well as general theories of epistemology and the good’ (374, emphasis in original). In other words, despite all its historical and conceptual problems, the distinction between theory and practice has a valued role to play.

Several years ago, when the *International Journal of Practical Theology* solicited responses to my presidential address to the International Academy of Practical Theology (Miller-McLemore 2012b), I observed (Miller-McLemore 2012c:117–118), not without some irony, that one person appreciated my attention to the ecclesial and theological but considered my address ‘overly theoretical’ and not sufficiently attentive to ‘the particular and the lived’ (Ward 2012:60), while another praised my remarks as ‘quite “intellectual”’ in a discipline that is ‘not ...theoretical enough’ (Schweitzer 2012:100). Besides confirming my appreciation for both kinds of knowledge, including insisting that there is a ‘time and place for abstraction’ (Miller-McLemore 2012c:118), I conclude that, ‘practical theology as a discipline could stand to do more conceptual labor on the nature of both theory and practice’. In particular, ‘insufficient attention has gone to the role and function of theory’ (117). *Theory* as a term seems self-evident. But we need more work on its dynamics and limitations. Practical theologians tend to deploy theory to conjure all sorts of meanings, as ‘a catch-all of concepts, definitions, heuristic and interpretive frameworks’ for ‘anything that serves as a counterweight to practice’, as practical theologian Eileen Campbell-Reed observes (2016).

Those of us who strive to revalue practical knowledge are often tempted toward stark contrasts and unnecessary oppositions. Danish sociologist Bent Flyvbjerg, who I otherwise admire for his persuasive account of the value of concrete context-dependent knowledge, is a good example. In making his case, he draws the contrast too sharply at times with unnecessary superlatives, concluding, for example, that:

the *highest* levels in the learning process are reached *only* via a person's own experiences as a practitioner of the relevant skills. Therefore ... the *best* that teachers can do for students in professional programs is to help them achieve real practical experience: for example, via placement arrangements, internships, summer jobs, and the like. (Flyvbjerg 2006:223, emphasis author's own)

Although he is right that those seeking professional and practical expertise must have 'intimate experience with thousands of individual cases' (p. 239), not generalised formulas alone, and his effort to rescue case studies and practical experience as sources of knowledge is refreshing, the dichotomy that he sets up between case-based knowledge and generalisable theory can easily be misread as a blanket assertion of case studies as superior to theoretical knowledge. He allows that 'there is a need for both approaches' (p. 223) in their rightful time and place, but the repeated use of dichotomising rhetoric makes it harder to believe he means this.

It is imperative *not* to set theoretical knowledge over against practical knowledge. Rather for the sake of practical knowledge itself, it is important to keep different knowledge types in synergistic relationship to one another. As I conclude in my presidential address response, I hope we can 'increase appreciation for practical knowledge without decreasing the value of theoretical knowledge' (2012c:119). This requires a '*richer understanding of diverse kinds of knowing and their complex interrelationship, especially when the subject matter is religion, theology, and practices of religious life and communities*' (p. 121, emphasis in the original). Most practical theologians would say that theory as knowledge gleaned from religious traditions and distilled at a distance from practice has a valid place, with disciplines such as systematic theology and biblical and historical studies offering concepts that Christian laity and professionals need as much as practical knowledge, just in different ways and at different points. We count on classical and contemporary doctrinal, systematic and/or constructive theologians to provide mental labour and constructs that deepen and extend practical knowledge, although practical theologians also need to contribute to such work.

## Making theory 'play a different role'

People today across many settings have greater appreciation for what German political theologian Johann Baptist Metz over 30 years ago called the 'intelligible force of praxis itself' or the knowledge that emerges within practices (1980:50). Intellectuals as divergent as Karl Marx, William James, and pastoral theology forerunner Seward Hiltner all suggest,

in contrast with antiquity's hierarchy of *theoria* over *praxis*, that practice produces valuable knowledge of a distinct order and kind, even if theologians are still uncertain about exactly how or what theological knowledge is created or fostered through practice.

To address this query, practical theologians have often worked at what I would call a meta-disciplinary level, focusing on all-encompassing methods for bridging theory and practice. Richard Osmer (2008) offers the most recent example. Like several scholars before him, such as Groome (1980), James and Evelyn Whitehead (1980), Joseph Holland and Peter Henriot (1983), Don Browning (1991) and James Fowler (1999), Osmer lays out 'four tasks of practical theology' (2008:4) – description, interpretation, discernment and action – that take on the entire seminary curriculum in an effort to help people navigate theology in practice, from class to class, course work to ministry, qualitative research and scripture to action and back again. Although helpful in guiding people from situational description to analysis of traditions before taking practical steps, these approaches often drift back to a flat, non-dynamic reading of doctrine, tradition and scripture as theory and of experience, action and situations as practice. These large-scale strategies are designed to bring into conversation the whole theological curriculum in the mind of the actor, whether minister, scholar or person of faith.

By contrast, something important might be learned about theology in practice not just by making sweeping curricular moves but also by considering how theory functions pragmatically. Practical theology 'does not renounce theory', says French Canadian Marcel Viau, 'but makes it play rather a different role' (1999b:145). I take his suggestion that practical theologians 'make theory play rather a different role' as invitation to think further about the distinct ways in which practical theologians employ theory. Practical theologians vary from those in other disciplines in how we *create, regard and convey* theory on the ground.

First, theory does not emerge from thinking alone but also out of pain and struggle, through participation and connection as much as through ratiocination and proclamation (see Miller-McLemore, 2012a:137–159). Second, the articulation of theory often requires close observation of and engagement in living realities (action, practice, life) and not (or not always) a distancing from an object. Third, theory is seen as indelibly shaped by character, personal and pastoral formation, social and political context, and history and historical location. As part of this dynamic, theory has a necessary affective component for practical theologians due to the emotional valence that surrounds issues of deep meaning. Purely rational discussion is inadequate to the task of intellectual change (see Miller-McLemore, 2012a:113–136; Cook, 2013:607–621; Miller-McLemore 2014:689–704). Fourth, to be understood by others, theoretical knowledge in practical theology usually requires translation, illustration and enactment, leading teachers of practical theological

disciplines to consider more active, bodily-engaged and experiential modes for learning (see Miller-McLemore, 2012a: 185–207; Cahalan, Hess, & Miller-McLemore, 2008:35–87). Fifth, practical theologians differ in why one pursues theory and what happens as a result. Theory is sought for wider purposes, usually not as an end in itself, and, since it changes what we see and know, it also creates responsibilities, often convicting and committing us to certain goods and unexpected transformations that run beyond anything theory alone might suggest.

Sixth and worth more commentary at this point, practical theologians are especially sensitive to the limitations of theory. Practice escapes or surpasses theory in everyday life in two important ways: it eludes theory and it trumps theory. By *eludes*, I mean that theory cannot contain all the richness of practice, and by *trumps*, I mean that practices such as taking care of a child or responding to someone dying become, in the immediacy of the demand, more important than stepping back to theorise about them.

First, on how practice eludes theory. Practical theologians are cautious about putting too much weight on theory. Theory does not always fit. So, sticking to it inflexibly limits and even harms the knowledge one might glean via practice, which outgrows and subsumes theory. In Tracy's (1983) earliest essay on practical theology, written for a conference that initiated a revitalisation of the discipline in the United States, he describes praxis as 'theory-laden' and uses an unfamiliar term *sublate* to capture the elusive nature of practice, perhaps drawing on a theory–practice typology developed by Matthew Lamb (1976) and philosopher Nicholas Lobkowitz's (1967) more elaborate overview. More common in science and German philosophy, the term *sublate* means to assimilate as a part within a larger whole. Tracy observes that 'praxis can sublimate theory, neither merely apply nor simply negate it' (1983:61). Lamb says, 'no theory ... can fully sublimate praxis, although praxis is able to sublimate theory' (1976:172). Although neither Tracy nor Lamb offer helpful example to show what they mean here, and their analysis remains highly abstract and difficult to understand, I interpret their turn to the term *sublate* as a means to underscore how practice outreaches theory. One cannot simply apply in practice what one learns in theory elsewhere; nor can concrete action itself provide everything that is 'necessary for truth in theology' (Tracy 1983:61). Rather practice takes theory into itself and transforms or surpasses it.

Others, such as Viau, focus more explicitly on the 'limits of language as a tool' in comprehending the subject matter that practical theology studies – performance, individual and social practices, or what he calls 'interactions in experience'. Consequently, our discourse, Viau says, is a 'kind of handiwork', a 'human fabrication' that is 'by nature artistic or "poietic [sic]"' (1999a:39). Many people describe religious life as an experience or a reality where a 'surplus of meaning' or 'excess' abounds, thereby making religion, as Tracy

comments, the 'most difficult and thereby the best test of any theory of interpretation' (1987:x). But psychologists and anthropologists also encounter the elusive nature of practice and insist that theory not impede perception of clients or cultural subjects by limiting what one sees. Practice has certain properties that 'by definition escape theoretical apprehension', as anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu remarks (1972:110). Hence, we should 'avoid asking of [practice] more logic than it can give' (p. 109). Words often limit and falsify the temporal and corporeal 'relations which the language of the body suggests' (p. 120). 'Something essential may be lost' through the summarising or generalisation required by theory (Flyvbjerg 2006:239).

Self-psychologist Heinz Kohut employs the terms *experience near* and *experience distant* to differentiate levels of theory, 'one of which proceeds to closure without the necessary data', as a prominent follower Arnold Goldberg explains, 'whereas the other waits for the confirming data to emerge' (Kohut 1984:226, editor's note). *Experience distant* ideas develop from *experience near* clinical engagement and must be held lightly so as not to impede understanding the client's reality, creating what medical anthropologist and psychiatrist Arthur Kleinman calls a 'false subject' (1995:96). To understand 'what is at stake for particular individuals in particular situations' (p. 96), as Kleinman says, one must employ theory nimbly and sustain instead what Kohut describes as 'long-term empathic immersion' (1977:xxi–xxii) in the clinical field or an intersubjective data gathering process with a continuous feedback loop between impressions and conclusions. The practical order is simply less 'amenable' to the 'type of scientificity' characteristic of the 'theoretical order' (Ricoeur 1991:199).

Finally, practice not only eludes theory; practical commitments also 'trump' theory and challenge us to justify our pursuit of theoretical knowledge. Marian Wright Edelman, founder of the Children's Defense Fund, declares, 'I am less interested in formulating theoretical frameworks than I am in feeding, clothing, healing, housing, and educating as many American children as soon as possible' (1987:viii). Ministers and those economically, politically and socially disadvantaged, as Hugo Santos illustrates in his reflection on teaching practical theology in Argentina, face a similar choice (2006:141–142). Those closest to practice have the least amount of time and energy, social, economic and political resources, and power to give conceptual framework to the knowledge they acquire.

Practical theologians join a long legacy of scholars who must figure out how to justify theoretical research that seems removed from addressing dire circumstances – the notorious ivory tower. 'What business does anyone have', law professor Martha Nussbaum asks, 'living in the happy and self-expressive world, so long as the other world exists and one is a part of it?' (1994:3). She begins a study of theory and practice in Hellenistic ethics by contrasting two worlds – the world of leisured reflection and the world in which 'hunger, illiteracy,



and disease are the daily lot' (p. 3) for a large number of people. Similarly, in introducing Eagleton's *The Significance of Theory*, English professor Michael Payne (1990) observes:

In the midst of preparing a lecture or writing an article – possibly after having torn themselves away from a family event or news of the latest world crisis – [literary] critics will ask themselves ... 'What is the point of this work I do? Does it relate intrinsically to anything that is genuinely important in my life or in the world at large?' (p. 1)

The 'fear that opposes reading to active life' has a long history, as Stephanie Paulsell observes (2001:143), going back to Plato's *Phaedrus*. She is one of the few theological educators who has also grappled with questions about the value of long hours of library study. The *Phaedrus* tells Socrates' story of King Thamus who rejects the gift of writing because he fears it will impede live conversation and mislead people into believing that wisdom is available to all (Paulsell 2001:144–145). Questions about concentrated scholarship emerge from her own experience and her students. Will reading Kierkegaard do any good 'when our world is on the verge of war?' – a student asks (p. 148). Can Paulsell herself justify hours spent reading medieval church history and mystical theology for doctoral exams while her sister risks her life working for human rights in war-torn El Salvador?

These questions especially haunt practical theologians who assume as a core feature of our identities influence on the world. Nussbaum answers her own question by insisting that 'philosophy itself, while remaining itself, can perform social and political functions, making a difference in the world by using its own distinctive methods and skills' (1994:3). The sources to which she turns, Epicureans, Skeptics, and Stoics, spent time on urgent commonplace trials – 'fear of death, love and sexuality, anger and aggression – issues that are sometimes avoided as embarrassingly messy and personal by the more detached varieties of philosophy' (pp. 3–4). They saw philosophy 'not as a detached intellectual technique dedicated to the display of cleverness but as an immersed and worldly art of grappling with human misery' (p. 3). The pursuit of messy subjects that sometimes embarrass us also typifies practical theologians. For Paulsell, the intellectual life is itself a spiritual practice with repercussions for the betterment of human life in at least two ways: study hones attention, and reading itself can serve as a subversive act, sparking action 'rather than passivity', as it did for her own sister's activism (2001:145–146). Inculcating appreciation for intellectual work as a 'way of reading on behalf of the world' (p. 148) is especially important among ministry students tempted to see coursework as a means to acquire a credential or an 'interruption on the way to the real work of ministry' (p. 145).

Years ago, Browning said, 'we will never have an adequate practical theology unless we first learn to reflect critically and think abstractly' (1983:6). Although his call to think abstractly seems like a strange recommendation for practical theology,

perhaps he meant something similar to my argument in this essay for the validity of a distinction between practice and theory and for the value of theory. Until recently, these conceptual questions have mostly interested philosophers. But this is a discussion practical theologians need to have precisely because our pragmatic orientation to how theory and practice operate in the everyday offers fresh perspectives. Most theories about the theory–practice relationship present tidy answers, resolving what is actually a perpetually tumultuous relationship between theory and practice when encountered on the ground. What is often missing is a dynamic analysis of how theory functions in practice. The theory–practice problem is not merely hypothetical; it has implications for faith and ministry in concrete contexts. There is, in short, a need for more analysis of how theory and practice function dynamically *in practice* and for fresh appreciation for the complications of their pragmatic relationship.

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