Practical Reasoning is not a matter of descending from the Olympian heights of impartial, objective, faceless rationality into the sobering valley of reality via the particularities of our lives. The points of departure for practical reasoning are our lived experiences; and the backdrop against which we have all such experiences is a community. Thus, what we take for granted and what we consider to be either reasonable or plausible is determined not in the abstract but in the context of a community. This is so even when community standards themselves are being rejected. For if nothing else, rejected standards serve as the baseline for what is deemed unacceptable. On this much Professor Hauerwas and I are in complete agreement.

So, we agree that impartialist moral theories are unsatisfactory insofar as they attempt to define a perspective from which moral behavior is to be assessed which is independent of any form of community life. The view from nowhere (to appropriate a turn of phrase on [5]) is not to be had; and that is why impartialist theories, with their insistence finding it, invariably miss the mark.

But, now, ‘Reconciling the Practice of Reason: Casuistry in a Christian Context’([4]), all parenthetical page references unaccompanied by a bracketed reference will be to this article) is not just a plea for community, but a plea for a certain kind of community, namely a Christian one. I imagine that the thesis which Hauerwas would like to maintain is this: The nature of the Christian community (properly conceived) is such that the forms of practical reasoning which flow from it are superior to the forms of practical reasoning which flow from moral but otherwise non-Christian communities. That is to say, members of the Christian community reason about moral issues in a morally superior way because Christianity defines or embodies a morally superior vantage point from which to do so. In commenting on the practice of Mennonites not to take one another to court, Hauerwas writes: ‘So not going to court has little to with overlooking wrong, but rather has to do with discovering a way that Christians can respond to wrong in a way that builds up rather than destroys community’ (p. 145). I take the distinguishing feature of Christianity to which Hauerwas is drawing our attention to be the doctrine’s admonishment to forgive those who trespass against one.
I shall challenge Hauerwas's position on three accounts: (1) The Mennonite community is a closed community and it may very well be that the practice of forgiving would flourish in any such community (Section I, Part I). (2) The Christian community at large is a non-closed community: and the practice of forgiving would not flourish in any non-closed community (Section I, Part II). (3) There are many moral issues the focal point of which is not that of moral wrongs; and there is no reason to think that, with respect to these issues, the practical reasoning of the Christian community will be superior to the practical reasoning of secular moralities. Thus, even if it can be shown that Christianity makes a difference in practical reasoning about moral matters, it will turn out that the scope of that difference is not as far-reaching as perhaps Hauerwas supposes it to be. I shall draw on examples in medical ethics to illustrate this point (Section II).

To meet the challenge of (1) and (2), Hauerwas must argue, respectively, that either (a) there is nothing about a closed community, as such, which makes it conducive to the virtue of forgiveness flourishing among its members, or (b) if individuals are Christians, then the virtue of forgiveness is favored to flourish in their lives regardless of the social circumstances of their lives. If they can be established, (a) would show that being a Christian is a necessary condition for the flourishing of this virtue, and (b) would show that being a Christian plays a most causally efficacious role in the flourishing of this virtue. To meet the challenge of (3), Hauerwas must show that the difference which forgiveness makes comes to more than just making it possible for moral debate to take place in a less hostile environment, allowing for the sake of argument that forgiveness does make this difference.

I. FORGIVENESS AND COMMUNITY

Then came Peter to him and said, Lord how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but Until seventy times seven (Matthew 18:21-22, emphasis added).

Christianity makes forgiveness a virtue. It is this distinguishing feature of Christianity to which Hauerwas draws our attention. Forgiveness is not a virtue of any secular moral theory. To be sure, no secular moral theory makes forgiveness a wrong, provided that one's doing so is not indicative of a lack of self-respect. Still, no such moral theory has it as an integral part of its theoretical structure that a mark of its adherents is their willingness to forgive.