

A Relational, Recursive, Eschatological and Sacrificial Model for the Humanities

David R. Vishanoff

Religious Studies Program, University of Oklahoma

Harvey Fellows Symposium “Christ in the Culture 2017”

Wheaton, Illinois, September 16, 2017

My study of Islam is an exercise in understanding my neighbor, so it should be shaped by God’s command to love my neighbor as myself. That command suggests a criterion for evaluating work in Islamic studies, the humanities, and possibly some of the arts, sciences, and professions.

That criterion is, first of all, relational. The goal of scholarship is not “talking knowledge”—the ability to make expert pronouncements about Muslims—but “listening knowledge” that helps me to hear what Muslims are saying. Good knowledge is whatever enables me to enter into ethical relationships characterized by integrity and by an ongoing process of coming to understand the other. (This is more difficult than it sounds because we tend to squeeze people into mental boxes to keep them from disrupting our own identity and security. A good relationship requires understanding people as they are, even when that does not suit our purposes.) This criterion aims at improving relationships between individuals, rather than cultivating the individual herself, which is how the humanities are traditionally conceived.

But how do we know we have understood someone? My own studies, and the humanities in general, are haunted by the question of whether we human beings ever really understand one another, rather than just the imagined caricatures of each other that we construct for our self-serving purposes. My relational criterion does not appear to offer a solution. Because there is no immediate guarantee that I really understand another person, my criterion calls instead for “an ongoing process of coming to understand.” That means that to evaluate my present knowledge, I have to ask whether it will result in better understanding tomorrow; but to evaluate tomorrow’s knowledge, I have to ask whether it will result in even better understanding one hundred years from now. My criterion is recursive because it appeals to itself in an endless chain of deferred assessment.

My present knowledge, therefore, can only be evaluated from the perspective of eternity. Then

we shall know fully, even as we are fully known. Now we see as in a mirror, dimly, but then we shall see face to face. Then the discord of Babel, the brokenness that mars all human communication and keeps true understanding always just out of reach, will be dispelled in the immediacy of selfless divine love. Then I will know whether my scholarship on the history of Islamic law enabled me to love my Muslim neighbor as he is, or whether it distorted him for my own self-satisfaction, to the detriment of subsequent scholarship and human relationships. Knowledge in the humanities can only be assessed against this eschatological horizon. This is an epistemology of hope, eagerly anticipating the perfection of our knowledge, and an epistemology of humility, painfully conscious that genuine understanding remains for now deferred.

It is in this hopeful but painful condition that we must labor. But as we do so, on this side of eternity, how are we to evaluate our knowledge? How are we to know whether we are coming to understand or slipping into self-serving distortion? The answer, I think, lies precisely in the pain of failure and misunderstanding. We cannot be sure that we have ever truly understood another human being, but sometimes we can be sure that we have misunderstood. A conversation that seems to go smoothly may or may not produce accurate understanding, but when a conversation breaks down, when our words devolve into unexpected conflict, we know that we are misunderstanding something, and we have to repent, reexamine the categories into which we have squeezed the other person, and try to discover where we are hearing the other as we want her to be rather than as she wants to be heard. This painful experience of misunderstanding is an undervalued opportunity. It may not lead us directly to better understanding, but it does show that we are listening well enough to recognize our *misunderstanding*. As long as I repeatedly find that I have to sacrifice and revise my hard-won mental models of the other, then I can be confident that I am on the path of coming to understand. For now the best litmus test of our own life's work is whether our hearts and minds are continually being broken by the failures of understanding that distort our knowledge of one another.

That is my relational, recursive, eschatological, and sacrificial model for good scholarship, good teaching, good policy, good design, and good performance in the humanities and, perhaps, the arts, the professions, and maybe even the sciences. I'd love to think with you for a few minutes about whether it might be relevant for your own work, and what its implications might be.