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Sacrificial Listening

An Epistemology and Pedagogy for Intellectual Humility in the Humanities

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Abstract

One component of intellectual humility is the discipline of listening to unfamiliar voices, interpreting them in terms of our own categories, and then deconstructing our interpretations and categories by listening again to detect where we are distorting others to serve our own ends and shore up our own identities. This practice is grounded in an epistemology that I will characterize as relational, recursive, eschatological, and sacrificial. It has implications for both methodology and pedagogy in the humanities. It emerged not from research in epistemology or educational theory but from reflection on my own practice as a scholar of Islamic hermeneutics and as a leader of class discussions about Islamic texts.

Introduction

By sacrificial listening I mean the practice of listening attentively to unfamiliar voices, constructing interpretive models that relate what one has heard to familiar categories, and then deconstructing those models and categories through further acts of listening.

This largely mental and intellectual practice *is* the scholarly discipline that I fancy myself to be engaged in, and that I aspire to, as a scholar and teacher of Islamic thought. A practice is not a virtue, but a person who practices sacrificial listening consistently demonstrates the virtue of intellectual humility in one important area: in her interpretations of what other people say. Sustained sacrificial listening also requires or instantiates several other virtues including

open-mindedness, self-awareness, respect for others, charity, integrity, perseverance, and hope.

This admittedly idiosyncratic description of my own discipline, Religious Studies, is grounded in an epistemology and a pedagogy that I will now describe. I approach this task not as a philosopher, a social scientist, or an educational theorist, but as a practitioner of scholarship and teaching in the humanities who has been reflecting on the nature of knowledge, the ethics of human relationships, and the goals of teaching in an all–too–isolated manner for some twenty years. I am glad, therefore, that you welcome practitioners to this forum, and I am grateful to Nancy Snow for inviting me, and for helping me to see how my theoretical reflections on what I do could benefit from the kind of interdisciplinary engagement that the Institute for the Study of Human Flourishing facilitates through these Virtue Forum Luncheons and many other initiatives.

Epistemology

To flesh out my bare–bones description of sacrificial listening, and show in what ways it involves intellectual humility, I need to develop in some detail the epistemology underlying it. I will describe that epistemology as relational, recursive, eschatological, and sacrificial. I will frame it as a criterion for what counts as good knowledge in both scholarship and teaching in the humanities.

Relational

That criterion is, first of all, relational:

> Knowledge in the humanities is good if it enables ethical human relationships characterized by integrity and by an ongoing process of coming to understand the other.

In other words, scholarship and teaching in the humanities aim at improving relationships between individuals rather than cultivating the individual herself, which is how the humanities are traditionally conceived. The goal of learning about Islam, for example, is not "talking knowledge"—the ability to make informed pronouncements about Muslims at cocktail parties or on exams—but "listening knowledge" that helps me to hear what Muslims are saying. I will not judge my scholarship to be successful because it leads to better predictions of human behavior, more universal generalizations about human nature, or more nuanced

classifications of human thought. I will judge it to be successful if and only if, in retrospect, it proves to have enabled human relationships characterized by an increasing level of understanding, and also by integrity, since relationships are a two–way street, and a relationship would not be ethical if someone acquired knowledge of the other while dissimulating her own identity, or cloaking it behind a veil of scientific or critical detachment (as happens all too often in scholarship about human beings).

Note that my criterion only requires integrity and increasing understanding on the part of the knower, not on the part of the person she is getting to know. No doubt my relationships will have greater moral worth when the other party also displays integrity and comes to understand me. But as Wayne Riggs pointed out last month, epistemologists have a longstanding habit of making knowledge hinge on the mental state of the individual knowing subject. Likewise, ethicists have a longstanding preference for making their moral evaluation of actions depend on things within the actor's control, and in this case the actor being evaluated is the knower.

Indeed, what I am offering here is as much ethics as epistemology. I could have claimed that in the humanities a belief simply does not count as knowledge unless it fulfills my criterion. But for now I am not claiming that; I am willing to allow that some true and well–justified beliefs about other human beings might not satisfy this criterion. Instead I am assessing the goodness of knowledge and scholarship in terms of the moral adequacy of a human relationship. A good relationship should include an attempt to understand the other person, and I value that understanding for the sake of the relationship and the other person, not simply for the sake of the knower and her knowledge.

For my own discipline of Religious Studies, this relational criterion demands a primarily hermeneutic rather than descriptive, analytic, social–scientific, or critical approach. Forms of analysis that are mainly historical, philological, psychological, psychoanalytic, sociological, functional, reductive, or critical can play a crucial role in understanding others, but they should remain subservient to a semiotic or hermeneutic project such as the anthropology of Clifford Geertz, who sought to understand religious and cultural symbol systems with the

ultimate aim of conversing with the people who inhabit them—"a matter a great deal more difficult," he added, "than is commonly recognized."[1]

Applied to the humanities as a whole, such a relational definition of good knowledge entails a recentering from the traditional humanistic project of forming the self and enriching its own culture, to what we might call the inter-humanistic goal of understanding and engaging others and their cultures.

The pursuit of good knowledge, relationally defined, requires a practice of sacrificial listening because coming to understand others—especially but not only those with very different cultures, religions, or worldviews—is far more difficult than simply gathering data about them or learning their language. It is more difficult than it sounds because we tend to squeeze people into mental boxes to keep them from disrupting our own identities and agendas. An ethical relationship, however, requires coming to understand people as they are, for their own sake, even when what they say and do does not fit our self–serving preconceptions of them.

A substantial body of recent scholarship in religious studies and related fields has shown that groups like nations or religious communities define themselves in relation to other groups, and that they construct the imagined identities that bind them together by highlighting some of the things that distinguish them from others, while downplaying equally real commonalities. We therefore naturally tend to imagine and understand Others through the prism of the boundaries that we have erected between us and them, as mirror images of ourselves that serve to define and sustain our communal self–understanding. If actually listening to the Other leads me to understand her otherwise, in terms of commonalities or of differences that were previously unnoticed, then the boundary marker that defined my own community is shifted, and my own sense of identity is thereby altered in some way. Since communities depend on the maintenance of their collective identities, they expend great energy defending their understandings of themselves and Others. Consequently, it often happens that Others are stubbornly imagined and interpreted in ways that have very little to

[1] "We are not, or at least I am not, seeking either to become natives (a compromised word in any case) or to mimic them. Only romantics or spies would seem to find point in that. We are seeking, in the widened sense of the term in which it encompasses very much more than talk, to converse with them, a matter a great deal more difficult, and not only with strangers, than is commonly recognized. [...] Looked at in this way, the aim of anthropology is the enlargement of the universe of human discourse." Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (N.p.: BasicBooks, 1973), 13–14.

do with how those others actually behave, speak, think, understand or represent themselves. More often than we care to realize, our relationships with Others are actually relationships with imagined and distorted Others who are more like projections of our own insecurities than like whole people with their own independent identities. We resist fully acknowledging Others' identities for fear of losing our grasp on our own.[2]

One of the main projects of critical theory (in the broadest sense of the phrase) has been to unmask this deceptive, self–serving, and very useful feature of the way we know or imagine Others. Postcolonial or decolonial critics, for example, blasted the discipline of Islamic studies as "Orientalism" designed to shore up colonial dominance and defuse insecurities about European superiority. Feminist theory, liberation theology, and other critical movements have likewise made it their task to reveal the self–serving and self–protective features of dominant and taken–for–granted modes of understanding Others in terms of gender, class, race, and other markers of difference that have been turned into boundaries. I am no more a theologian than a philosopher, but within my own Reformed branch of the Christian tradition we would identify this human proclivity for constructing our knowledge of others in unconsciously distorted and self–serving ways as one of the noetic effects of the fall, an epistemic facet of the corruption of human nature. All this gloom is generally supported by developments in cognitive science: the idea that we form our beliefs by rational deliberation about the data available to us has been displaced by empirical work showing that our knowledge of most things, including other people, is inescapably communal. Our knowledge–forming faculties are geared toward pursuing our own interests and functioning within our own communities rather than objectively understanding outsiders; and once formed our beliefs can be quite resistant to disconfirmation if they are shared and reinforced by our communities.[3]

If I want my knowledge to enable ethical human relationships, rather than just serving my own personal or communal interests, then my knowledge–forming practices must not instrumentalize the Other. My scholarship and teaching must model and promote interpersonal relationships in which the Other is known for who he is, without regard for

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[2] See David Vishanoff, "Boundaries and Encounters," in *Understanding Interreligious Relations,* ed. David Cheetham, Douglas Pratt, and David Thomas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 341–364.

[3] See for example Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber, *The Enigma of Reason* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017). Thanks to Wayne Riggs for directing me to this literature.

whether he fits my hopes or serves my agenda. That requires a relentless pursuit of understanding, and a willingness to sacrifice the advantages of my own epistemic framework, so that the person I get to know is really the Other and not a projection or mirror image of myself. I must regard the Other not as an object of detached study but as a moral and epistemic peer: an independent moral agent with whom I have a relationship of mutual responsibility, and an independent knower on a level with myself, in spite of the very real Otherness that makes us enigmas to one another. The act of listening to another person in this open, peer–to–peer, and non–instrumental manner is of fundamental moral value.

Two examples from my own experience may help to make this concrete. First, I was raised the child of Protestant Evangelical missionaries, and although I encountered some admirable exceptions (my father among them), most of the missionaries I knew seemed to have spent far more time studying the Christian message they sought to proclaim than the Muslim people they hoped to persuade. Among Evangelicals I encountered again and again the belief that Muslims must be legalistic, for example. Like most stereotypes, this one certainly had some empirical basis, but it was primarily a Protestant trope, serving to uphold Christians' view of themselves as bearers of a unique Gospel of grace to Others who, of necessity, must be legalists. Such identity–supporting beliefs are remarkably hard to disprove: if a Muslim pleads not guilty, then she must be either dissimulating or ignorant, and can be refuted with a proof–text from the Qur'an. I have even seen Christians end up in the absurd position of arguing with Muslims about what those very Muslims believe, refusing to take their word in the matter. Neither will they take my word: many a churchgoer, on learning that I am a scholar of Islam, has eagerly asked me some burning question about Islam only to reject my relatively expert answer because it does not confirm his own cherished theory.

It is easy to dismiss the prejudices of a few zealous Evangelicals. My second example comes from my own academic work on classical Islamic legal theory. When I decided to study Muslim theories of Qur'anic hermeneutics, I was stymied at first by the apparent absence of any classical Islamic discourse that addressed the questions of modern Western hermeneutics in any depth. As I sat through lecture after lecture on the interpretation of imperative verbs or plural nouns, during a semester studying traditional legal theory in Morocco, I began to despair of finding anything but the most simplistic grammatical analysis of language and meaning. I became frustrated. Why should it take my teacher an hour and a half to explain that

the general term “horses” refers to an entire class of beings, whereas the particular term “a horse” refers to just one individual from that class? If I was to avoid joining a long tradition of condescending Western scholarship on the simplemindedness of Islamic religious thought, I had to assume that it was I, not my teacher, who was missing something.

I was; but to find out what I was missing, I had to deconstruct my conception of hermeneutics. On the surface, Muslim legal theorists and modern Western theorists of language and interpretation appeared to be talking about entirely different things, and it took several years of picking sentence by sentence through arcane arguments before I was able to express Western questions about language and meaning in classical Islamic terms, and vice versa. Eventually I came to understand that the rules for interpreting general and particular terms were not simply a meticulous analysis of the obvious, but a powerful too for reinterpreting texts to mean things they did not obviously say (or even things they obviously did not say). Viewed through the lens of Western hermeneutical theory, Islamic legal theory turned out to be a powerful and flexible hermeneutical system.

But Muslims themselves did not view it that way. They typically regarded their own legal theory as just a mechanical means of working out in detail how to apply the literal meaning of the Qur’an. They did not think they were reinterpreting the text to say what it obviously did not say. Had I discovered something they did not know about their own hermeneutics, or was the lens of western hermeneutical theory distorting my understanding of them and giving me a false sense of superior critical insight? How could I be sure that I was really understanding them, and getting to know their thought rather than just western thought?

Given what I have already said about the difficulty of genuinely coming to understand other human beings, it seems hard to know for sure when we have actually understood someone. Before moving on to solve that problem, however, I want to address a few potential objections to the relational framing of my epistemology that may already be on the tips of your tongues.

First, by asking that we sacrifice our own interpretations to accommodate what the Other says about herself, it may appear that I am being insufficiently critical, taking the Other at her word, and reducing scholarship to repetition or translation of others’ self-representations. There are scholars of Islam who do just that, uncritically echoing the facile and even deceitful public relations statements that Muslims are often bullied into making by the American media.

I might be suspected of holding that "if an Imam says the Qur'an teaches gender equality and democracy, then it must be so." After all, was I not just complaining about certain Evangelicals who do not allow Muslims to define their own beliefs?

This is not in fact what is required for "ethical human relationships characterized by integrity and by an ongoing process of coming to understand." A friend who believes all the self–serving tales I spin about myself, and never challenges my motives and self-understanding, is a poor friend indeed. A thoughtful challenge can be a perfectly legitimate part of a healthy human relationship; it may even be a sign of just how carefully I am listening. Critical scholarship is therefore warranted and even necessary.

But listening should start with the principle of charity. In my field one often gets the impression that critical study means adopting a hermeneutic of suspicion: never accepting at face value what religious people tell us about themselves, but always seeking to debunk their myths, explain away their experiences, or unmask the oppression they have clothed with piety. But scholarly critique, like the incisive questioning of a trusted friend, is not a project one may engage in for one's own gratification, or for professional accolades. If it constitutes just one moment in an ongoing dialectic, in which the Other is allowed to object and to question my interpretations, then critical analysis may be part of an ethical peer–to–peer relationship. But if it unilaterally cuts off the very relationship it is intended to serve, dismissing the Other's response as irrelevant to the scholar's project, then it fails my test of good knowledge.

Critical analysis, therefore, should be directed first at our own categories and interpretations: we should assume that what people tell us about themselves makes sense, even if seems to contradict some other evidence, and strive first of all to resolve the dissonance by adjusting our own interpretations. In the end, however, the principle of charity must give way to the requirement of integrity. An ethical relationship is a two–way street, and cannot be furthered by concealing our critical insights or our moral judgments about what the Other says and does.

I faced this dilemma in my own work on Qur'anic hermeneutics. I gradually became convinced that by the eleventh century Muslim legal theorists had sidelines several more principled hermeneutical theories and had settled on one that gave them the power to read into their scriptures just about any interpretation that was congenial to the community of legal scholars.

Those scholars were astonishingly adept at interpreting their scriptures to suit their own agendas, and their hermeneutical theories tended to mask or legitimate such self–serving forms of understanding. I pointed this out in my first book, hopefully with enough nuance and historical detail that it would not be dismissed out of hand by Muslim readers; and though that thesis has encountered some resistance I am glad to say the book has opened up more conversations than it has closed off, so for now it appears to be fulfilling my criterion for good scholarship. But it may turn out that continuing those conversations requires changing the nature of the questions I ask, or renegotiating the conceptual vocabulary with which I answer them, or even discovering that I was just plain wrong. If that transpires, then holding onto the conclusions I labored so hard to produce would be protecting my own scholarly identity and career at the expense of the relationships it is supposed to enable.

So a relational epistemology focused on listening does not exclude critique; indeed it demands it. But scholars of religion have found it all too easy to apply critical theory to Others, while all too often neglecting to turn it on themselves. Rather than triumphantly unmasking the hidden agendas of those we study, therefore, a relational epistemology calls for tentative critique, and the humility to acknowledge that our own knowledge is vulnerable to distortion by the same kinds of power dynamics that lead Muslim legal theorists, for example, to mask their interpretative freedoms in the cloak of a sophisticated hermeneutic. Indeed, the longer I study Islamic hermeneutical theories the more clearly I see that my own theological tradition employs similar maneuvers to bend its scriptures to its own preconceived judgments.

Another potential objection, which I can only acknowledge as a limitation of my relational epistemology, is that its focus on the ethics of interpersonal relationships pays insufficient attention to the ethics of institutional and social structures. If groups and institutions are more than the sum of their parts, and if relationships between groups are more than the sum of the relationships between their individual constituents, then my relational criterion may lead me to condone knowledge that enables ethical individual relationships within oppressive social structures while unwittingly reinforcing those structures. I am tempted to claim that the moral demands of intercommunal relationships are reducible, in principal, to the ethics of interpersonal relations, but I have my doubts about that, and I suspect that theorists of race and class may have a great deal to teach me on this point. For now I will only say that my focus on the individual as the primary locus of moral responsibility is a consciously chosen and

fundamental premise of my epistemology. This choice may limit the appeal of my theory, but it hardly an idiosyncratic choice, and it finds plenty of company both in Religious Studies and in the history of Western ethics.

What may seem more unusual is my decision to make the relationship between two individuals the primary locus of moral value, rather than locating ultimate moral value in a state of the individual such as happiness, knowledge, or virtue. For my criterion it matters more whether a relationship flourishes than whether the individuals involved flourish as individuals. If I were offering a general ethical theory, this would be an unusual move with some interesting potential but also many drawbacks. I do not want to deny that the individual herself is a fundamental locus of moral value; indeed my desire to know the other presumes that. Here, however, I am only assessing the morality of one person's knowledge about another, and since knowledge is itself a kind of relation, it makes sense to evaluate it in terms of the relationship between knower and known.

Finally, my criterion appears to assume that individuals have stable identities that one actually can get to know, accurately or inaccurately. Some contemporary scholarship in the humanities contests this notion, and regards selves instead as performances, as self–narratives subject to continual revision, as the products of ongoing social processes, or as entirely constituted by social interactions, without positing any underlying soul or personality or identity. In fact, however, my criterion does not actually presume the stability of the object of my knowledge. It calls only for "an ongoing process of coming to understand the other," which could very well chase its tail forever without settling on any final understanding of the other. This is in fact a requirement of an ethically adequate relationship; if I ever imagined myself to have achieved final and complete knowledge of another human being, I would not only be fooling myself, I would be presuming to strip the other of her autonomy, when a certain degree of autonomy seems necessary for an ethical relationship. Rather than presuming the existence of a stable and fully knowable Other, it is more realistic, and more respectful of the other's autonomy, to regard the human relationship as a forum in which each self is continually redefined and renegotiated in interaction with the other.

Moreover, even if an individual does have some kind of stable identity, that essential self is not actually the self to which we relate. We can communicate and interact only with the aspects of her identity that the Other manifests through her words and actions. My own virtue,

knowledge, and integrity may depend in part on my own hidden inner states, so the ethical value of my relationship may depend indirectly on unmanifest aspects of my own identity, but my moral responsibility toward the other person is exhausted by the quality of my interaction with the manifested self to which I have access at any point in time. I might wish for a precise phenomenological understanding of another's experience or state of mind, but most scholarship in the humanities has given up on this possibility, and fortunately that is not the kind of knowledge my criterion requires. The only knowledge I need, in order to fulfill my ethical responsibility toward another human being, is the knowledge to which her outward behavior and words give me access. I need not believe that the identity she constructs and represents to me is the whole story, and I may include in my interpretive model my own hypotheses about her unarticulated or subconscious assumptions and motivations, but my right to interact with a person, and my ethical responsibility to listen and understand, are limited to the identity that is presented and discovered through that interaction. I do not have some transcendent epistemic duty or even the moral right to uncover the deep truth about another person at the expense of her own autonomy. My theory presupposes the Other's existence as an independent and intrinsically valuable being who is worth knowing and respecting, but it does not call for direct or total knowledge of that person's intrinsic character.

Recursive

If that Other is there but elusive, and all my own knowledge–forming mechanisms are geared toward producing and maintaining interpretive models of the Other that serve my own self-interest, then good knowledge as I have defined it not easy to achieve. Worse yet, my criterion does not give me a way to know when I have achieved it, because as you may have noticed from the outset, it looks suspiciously circular: knowledge is good if it enables an ongoing process of coming to understand—or know—the other. How do I know whether I am coming to know someone well without knowing whether my knowledge of them is good?

I could choose to define understanding without reference to good knowledge. That would avoid the circularity. One promising model of interpersonal understanding that seems to offer a way around the self-deception of our knowledge–forming mechanisms, is suggested by the later writings of Wittgenstein. According to his analysis of human communication, we are able to know when human communication is succeeding, and when we are understanding one

another, not because of any stable or universal linguistic structures that give us secure knowledge of others' mental states, but only because verbal communication takes place within the larger context of lived interaction. We know when language is being used and understood correctly because we live and interact with others in ways that are not merely verbal but also practical and concrete, and we have common expectations and make shared judgments about when this interaction is successful and when it fails. Buying a house, for instance, is a highly symbolic affair that hinges on signed pieces of paper covered with words and numbers. The reason we all agree that this symbolic interaction has succeeded is that when I move into my new house, the previous residents, who the day before would have fought tooth and nail to keep me out, put up no resistance to my invading their home. Those signed pieces of paper—or, more precisely, the rule–governed rituals of signing them—have dramatic practical effects because they are part of a very practical and concrete game that we all agree to play. The practical success of lived human interaction is what gives cash value to the paper money or virtual money of language, and reassures us that communication is actually taking place.

If we define interpersonal understanding as practical success in concrete interactions, rather than as knowledge of the identities we suppose to be lurking inside people, then my criterion of good knowledge is not circular: it can be reduced to "good knowledge enables ethical human relationships characterized by integrity and increasingly successful practical interactions."

But I am not willing to adopt that solution. First of all, Wittgenstein's model assumes that the two parties are playing the same language game, whereas I am especially interested in cross-cultural and interreligious situations in which the parties to the relationship are steeped in very different linguistic, symbolic, and ritual systems. When getting to know someone very different from myself, I may think we have found a basis for conversation and are playing the same language game when in fact we probably have different understandings of the rules of the game, and probably do not realize how much we are talking past each other. Apparent success may be partly or largely illusory.

Secondly, by "ethical relationship" I do not mean "successful practical interaction." Given my focus on relationships, I do appreciate Wittgenstein's appeal to the lived interaction within which verbal communication takes place. Understanding does not happen simply at the level of ideas conveyed by words; it is a product of interactions that are physical as well as verbal, and if physical interaction succeeds in generating concrete physical or economic goods, then

surely verbal communication is succeeding by at least one important measure. Nevertheless, I am reminded by both critical theory and Reformed theology that I always measure success in relation to my own needs and aims. I do not want to judge how well I understand people by how successful I am in manipulating them to serve my interests. That may be my goal when I am buying someone's house, but if I consider him to be intrinsically rather than instrumentally valuable, and worth knowing for his own sake, then the success and smoothness of our interactions, and even peace—our ability to avoid conflict—is not my highest aim.

So my criterion still appears to be circular. But notice that it is not exactly circular: I am evaluating my present knowledge not by reference to that same knowledge, but by reference to some future knowledge. Because there is no immediate guarantee that I really understand another person, my criterion calls instead for "an ongoing process of coming to understand." It does not pretend to tell me now whether my knowledge is good; it only promises an evaluation from the perspective of hindsight at some time in the future. To evaluate my present knowledge, I have to ask whether it will result in better understanding tomorrow; and to evaluate tomorrow's knowledge, I will have to ask whether it will result in even better understanding a year from now, or one hundred years from now, so that I can decide whether it enabled a "process of coming to understand." My criterion is recursive because it appeals to itself not in a vicious circle, but in a potentially endless chain of deferred assessments.

The criterion operates like a recursive function in a computer program. For example, if you want a computer to calculate the value of x to the power of y, you have to get it to multiply x by itself y times over, and the simplest and most elegant way to do this is to create a recursive function p that, given parameters x and y, returns x to the power of y. It is quite simple to write: the function merely needs to compute and return the value of x times (x to the power of y-1). It's that simple: when the program calls the function with parameters x and y, the function simply calls itself using the parameters x and y-1, so the processor keeps creating copies of the function, each one pending the result of the next one, until it gets down to y=1, at which point it needs to be programmed to just return x, rather than calling itself yet again.

But there, of course, is where the programming analogy breaks down. When can my recursive criterion stop calling itself and return a definite value? Will we be able to say in 2050 that David's publications have enabled human relationships characterized by what we now know beyond a doubt to have been increasingly accurate understanding, or good knowledge, so that

in retrospect we can now say that his scholarship was already good when it was published? No, my criterion will not enable us to say that in 2050 any more than it enables us to say that now. I have no way to end the endless chain of recursion, so the computer will simply crash when it runs out of memory stacking up endless unresolved copies of the function.

Eschatological

So I have no way to ever finally decide whether my knowledge is good. Now, if that only meant that I have no way of finally deciding whether my knowledge is accurate, it would not be as big a problem as it sounds. After all, I do not need to know that I have finally understood my wife in order to treat her with respect, charity, integrity, open-mindedness, and intellectual humility. If the goal of scholarship in religious studies or the humanities is simply ethical human interaction, then scholars have no need to achieve full phenomenological understanding of the Other's experience, or any knowledge beyond what is necessary for and derived from ordinary human interaction. That our understanding of other human beings always remains tentative and flawed is only a failure if the goal of scholarship is some kind of objective description, classification, explanation, or prediction of human behavior. If the goal is only ethical human relationships, then understanding need not, indeed it must not be final or complete, but must always remain subject to revision. In a healthy friendship we do not expect to reach a state of perfected understanding; rather, we expect an ongoing dialectic in which each party forms an understanding of the other sufficient to permit productive interaction, and then repeatedly revises that understanding in response to new information, misunderstandings, or breakdowns in the relationship.

Knowing whether our knowledge of others is accurate may not be necessary for ethical relationships, but in order to know whether our knowledge is *good,* and whether the relationships it enables are ethical, we do need to assess whether we are at least in the process of "coming to understand," so deferring that assessment to an indefinitely future perspective seems problematic. But there are several ways of making sense of it. Some religious people are actually willing to defer judgment of our knowledge and relationships to what they could call the perspective of eternity. In a theological development of Hegel's philosophy of history, the Lutheran theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg (1928–2014) argued that "the meaning of the present [is] illuminated in the light of the future," and can only be fully known from the perspective of history's end, from an "eschatological horizon" that is at present only

provisionally accessible, having been partially revealed in Christ's death and resurrection. That which is partial takes on full meaning only in the context of the whole; a work of art cannot be judged prior to its completion; or, to put it in my terms, our present knowledge and relationships can be judged only from the eschatological perspective of their final consummation.[4] In the words of the Apostle Paul in I Corinthians 13:12: "Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known" (NRSV). Then I will know whether my scholarship on the history of Islamic hermeneutics enabled me to understand and 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. What I am proposing is an epistemology of hope, eagerly anticipating the perfection of human understanding, but also an epistemology of intellectual humility, painfully conscious that for now good knowledge of others remains aspirational, and its final assessment remains indefinitely deferred.

Pannenberg did not think that his appeals to Christian doctrine made his epistemology parochial, but regarded it as a universal and objective theory of human understanding. Lest anyone distrust him on this point, let me point out that it is not just theologians who are willing to evaluate present knowledge from the perspective of a future that is not yet clearly known. Richard Rorty identified pragmatism with a "willingness to refer all questions of ultimate justification to the future, to the substance of things hoped for."[5] (He was alluding to Hebrews 11:1, which in the King James Version reads "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen;" so Rorty himself made the analogy between the hope of pragmatism and the faith of religion.) A pragmatist, then, is not concerned with whether her knowledge of another person corresponds to or is progressing toward an accurate representation of the reality of the other person, but only with whether her knowledge is useful for getting what she wants, or creating a better future. What that "better" future might be is not known in advance, because in Rorty's pragmatism there is no grand ideal toward which history is progressing, as there was for Hegel, Marx, or Pannenberg. Our present

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[4] See Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 25, 330–335.

[5] Richard Rorty, "Truth without Correspondence to Reality," in *Philosophy and Social Hope,* 23–46 (London: Penguin Books, 1999), 27.

knowledge, therefore, can never be finally evaluated or justified; the best we can say is that it is moving us toward something new that we hope will be better than the present.[6]

So an epistemology that defers the assessment of knowledge indefinitely may still be practically useful, even if we do not yet quite know what end it is useful for. The problem with a pragmatist interpretation of my epistemology, however, is that "useful" is defined by us (or, worse, by the strong who survive). I want to know and respect Others who are not part of "us," who belong to other communities and cultures; and I want to treat them as valuable and worth getting to know for their own sake, not instrumentally. I do not want my knowledge and relationships to be successful merely in fulfilling the interests of my own tribe. I therefore prefer Pannenberg's theological, eschatological explanation of why it might not actually be useless to defer the assessment of my knowledge in an indefinite chain of recursion.

Sacrificial

Still, what about the here and now? How do I decide now whether I am even on the right track? How do I revise and correct my understanding if I do not know that I am wrong? For my knowledge to be good, it does not necessarily have to be accurate, but it does need to enable a "process of coming to understand." How am I to know whether I am coming to understand or slipping into self-serving distortion? The answer, I think, lies not in knowing when we have understood, but in knowing when we have misunderstood.

I said I was less optimistic than Wittgenstein about the possibility of knowing, through practical interaction, that communication has succeeded. We do from time to time experience wonderful moments of communion with other human beings, in which we feel certain that we understand each other; and for all practical purposes perhaps we do understand all we need to at that moment. But critical theory, Reformed theology, cognitive science, and my own personal experience of living in other cultures and simply getting to know my wife and children all give me reason to be cautious about just how reliable those cherished experiences of successful communication really are as evidence that I have come to understand another human being—especially one with a religion, a worldview, or a culture dramatically different from my own.

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[6] See Richard Rorty, "Truth without Correspondence to Reality," especially pp. 27–30.

On the other hand, I do think that Wittgenstein offers us a useful negative test of communication. I may not ever be sure that I have truly understood another human being, but sometimes I am sure that I have misunderstood. A conversation that seems to go smoothly may or may not produce accurate understanding; but when a conversation breaks down, when words devolve into bewilderment or unexpected conflict, then we know that we are misunderstanding something, and we have to 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. If we think we are playing the same language game but actually are not, eventually the game will break down into practical failure perhaps conflict. The practical interaction that accompanies verbal communication can be an indication of understanding—not of its success, but of its failure, which is the crucial moment in the process of coming to understand through sacrificial listening.

That 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 *mis*understanding. If I were just pursuing my own agenda, and making my interlocutor fit into a mold that allows me, the scholar, to fit him or her into my own theories, I would not find my agenda frustrated; but when I recognize that I have failed to understand, this tells me that I have allowed my own agenda to be disrupted by the hard reality of the differences between me and the Muslims I am studying. 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 at least engaged in a process of coming to understand. For now the best litmus test for scholarship in the humanities is whether our best efforts are repeatedly frustrated, and our conclusions repeatedly undermined, by experiences of misunderstanding that alert us to the self-serving interpretations we are imposing on others.

The Israeli anthropologist and poet Zali Gurevitch, reflecting on dialogues among Jewish–Israeli and Arab–Palestinian groups, observed that the usual strategy of trying to understand the Other through exchanging information and finding common ground often led to breakdowns rather than breakthroughs. He proposed that what participants first mistook for an "ability to understand" each other was actually an "inability to not understand:" each side was so wedded to its own prior understanding of the other that it could only interpret what the other said in terms of its existing conceptions, and so at most could make only minor

revisions to its old understanding, without being able to recognize that in fact the other was so strange to them that they had no adequate categories for interpreting them. But then, Gurevitch recalled, one secular Israeli teacher listening to her more religious interlocutor describing the importance of prayer suddenly blurted out "What, you mean to tell me that you really believe in all this?" That moment of recognition of the other person's utter incomprehensibility was the key, Gurevitch said, to moving from the "inability to not understand" to the "ability to not understand"—the ability to respect the other as a free and independent other irreducible to one's own categories. That recognition alone does not produce understanding, but it does clear the way for a new attempt at understanding, and it improves the relationship by recognizing the independence of the other and freeing her from the projected image and the interpretive schemes that had been projected upon her. But it requires a relinquishment of part of the listener's prior, egocentric or ethnocentric understanding of the other, and with it a change in her understanding of herself—in her own identity.[7]

It is precisely because our ways of imagining Others are partly constitutive of our understandings of ourselves that I think it appropriate to call this kind of listening "sacrificial." What must be sacrificed is not just one's preconceived image of the other; sometimes it is the very categories in terms of which that image is articulated, and inevitably such changes impinge upon the knower's own identity.

Sacrifice is a religiously charged term, and I mean it not in some generically religious sense but in the specifically (though not exclusively) Christian sense of self-sacrifice for the sake of the other, even one's enemy. The idea that sacrifice and revision of one's own identity is not only a necessary part of relating to Others but also of knowing them has been developed eloquently by the Christian theologian Miroslav Volf in a book titled *Exclusion and Embrace* that was born out of reflection on conflict surrounding his native Croatia in the 1990's.[8]

Such a religiously charged term sits uncomfortably in the humanities, but I use it to preempt the misunderstanding that what I am proposing amounts to no more than empathetic

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[7] Z. D. Gurevitch, "The Power of Not Understanding: The Meeting of Conflicting Identities," *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 25.2 (1989): 161–173.

[8] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

listening or tolerance. The prevailing ethos in the humanities today seems to me overly optimistic: surely if we all think fairly and open–mindedly, exhibit virtues like tolerance and civility, and calibrate our social structures more equitably, then we will be able to appreciate cultural differences and understand others' points of view, and most of our conflicts will simply evaporate. This attitude seems to me unrealistic on three counts. First, we are quick to pride ourselves on embracing some kinds of others while creating new and vast categories of others: intolerant fundamentalists whom we are not willing to understand at the cost of revising our own self-affirming categories, but whom we are also not likely to convert to our pluralistic project anytime soon, so that we have no choice but to attempt to relate to them ethically, which requires attempting to understand them as they are. Second, we fail to take seriously enough the insights of critical theory into the profoundly self-serving nature of our knowledge–forming mechanisms, and consequently we are willing to apply those insights to our analysis of others but often neglect to turn them on our own scholarship. Third, many of us are simply unwilling to allow that overcoming misunderstanding and conflict might require anyone to sacrifice part of his or her identity. But that is just what I am saying is necessary, to some degree, if we want to come to understand other human beings in a way that respects their integrity just as much as our own.

The idea of sacrifice meets with some resistance in the humanities, but it addresses a keenly felt need. The humanities 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. There is a widely shared sense that the continued vitality of the humanities depends on their ability to serve the cultivation of human selves and of cultures that are not self-contained but open to engagement with all kinds of others. The existence of this Forum testifies to a felt need for scholarship and teaching that cultivate not only the virtues of a well–regulated individual but also virtues that shape our relationships and our knowledge of others, such as respect for others, open-mindedness, and intellectual humility. I hope that you might be able to suggest to me some vocabulary that would appear less theologically parochial, and that would address more directly the present concerns of the academy, without losing the provocative force of my stark claim that good listening and good knowledge are necessarily self-sacrificial.

Pedagogy

That stark claim, however, meets with less resistance from my students. The present generation of undergraduates seems to have grown up taking for granted the suspicions of critical theory, and they seem less devoted than most of the academy still is to an Enlightenment optimism about human progress. They are hungry for authentic relationships, even with people who are not like them, and to that end many seem willing to rethink their own identities and to contemplate sacrificing quite a bit of their comfort and security.

It is partly through teaching undergraduates that I formulated the idea of sacrificial listening and the epistemology underlying it. There would be many ways to implement this epistemology in the classroom, but I have developed only one, so I will describe some of its features to illustrate what a difference epistemology can make to one's pedagogy.

Teaching, like scholarship, is a form of human relationship. My goal in teaching is the same as in my scholarship: to enable the development of ethical human relationships characterized by integrity and by an ongoing process of coming to understand others. I tell my students that I do not aim to give them "talking knowledge"—the ability to make informed pronouncements about Muslims in conversations or on exams—but to help them acquire "listening knowledge:" the ability to listen attentively to Muslims, construct interpretive models that relate what they hear to their own mental, moral, and religious categories, and then listen again until their interpretations start to break down and they are forced to modify those categories and try again. Consequently, I do not give traditional exams, but only assignments that amount to listening exercises; and instead of secondary textbooks I assign only primary texts written by Muslim authors.

This has not always gone smoothly. Primary texts are harder to digest than secondary textbooks, and they often address issues that are not immediately relevant to my students, especially when they were written in a remote time, place, culture, and intellectual universe. I find pleasure in puzzling over a medieval argument for the created nature of the Qur'an, or a detailed set of rules for ritual purification, and trying to discern the tacit assumptions and guiding values of their Muslim authors; but I do not want to do that work for my students, and then give them the results in a lecture. (Nor do they want me to do so, I quickly discovered.) What I want to give them is the experience of struggling with the interpretive process. So

instead of outlining in advance the insights that I want to convey to students, I prepare for class the same way I want my students to prepare: by reading the assigned texts and jotting down my questions and some relevant page numbers. I open class with a question, and leave the conclusions in the students' hands. I try to limit my role to asking questions, orchestrating discussion of their observations and interpretations, keeping them honest by making them refer every answer to the text, and taking notes so that I can write up our collective conclusions, disagreements, and lingering questions after class and post them online so that we can remind ourselves of them before the next class.

I am sure many of you know from experience how nerve–wracking it can be to put the success of a class so squarely on the students' shoulders. Many students would prefer to read a well–written textbook, hear a well–crafted lecture, and take a well–designed test. But I do not know how to reconcile that model of teaching with my relational epistemology. Students do need to develop some vocabulary and a basic mental map of the history of Islam, so that they can fit what they read into some kind of framework, but I believe that framework is better acquired inferentially than received from textbooks and lectures, for three reasons. First, we remember better the things we figure out for ourselves. I do not need to tell them who Muhammad was; they will figure it out soon enough, and they will not even have to try to remember it. Second, textbooks and lectures necessarily present someone else's thoroughly digested interpretations of primary data, and inevitably reflect and protect their author's identity and self–interest. This is the very thing I want my students to become more aware of and learn to deconstruct, so when I do offer them fully formed interpretations I do so only for the purpose of deconstructing them. Rather than receiving expert pronouncements as gospel truth, I want them to hold their interpretations lightly, and they are more likely to do that when they have formed them themselves out of very limited data and realize full how fragile they are. (In this respect the kinds of well–intentioned lecturing about Islam that goes on in popular books and church education classes often does more harm than good, so I avoid such one–time speaking engagements, and prefer to stick to semester–long conversations. I do not really have anything to say about Islam that can be said in a thirty–minute monologue.) Third, no amount of background knowledge is ever really adequate for interpreting the next human being we encounter, who probably will not quite fit into the pre–formed categories we have at our disposal; indeed, if we think they do, we are probably not listening well enough. And since the

goal of my teaching is not just to understand the Muslims whose works we read in class, but to train students to listen and relate well to Muslims and other Others they encounter over the course of their lives, I want them to know how to infer the needed background knowledge themselves as they go, continually constructing, questioning, and then reconstructing their own mental maps and interpretive frameworks.

Regardless of how students get their mental maps, that kind of background knowledge is never adequate, and is not the most important prerequisite for understanding and relating ethically to another human being. Far more important are the mental skills and the personal and intellectual virtues that my classes seek to cultivate. Listening attentively to strange–sounding Others (including fellow students) demands and hopefully cultivates open–mindedness. Having to revise our collective and individual interpretations every time we turn the page, or every time we encounter a new author, demands and hopefully cultivates intellectual humility. Not being allowed to dismiss authors we don't like (or fellow students we think are crazy), and having to craft a productive conversation with them over the course of a whole semester, demands and hopefully cultivates respect for others and charity in one's interpretations of them. Additionally, in recent years I have been paying more and more attention to students' self–awareness and integrity as intellectual and moral agents in their own right. I now use the first week of each semester to have students articulate the goals, guiding values, and prior convictions that guide their education and their study of Islam. I ask them to pursue those goals and values explicitly in our conversations and in their writing over the course of the term, and then to assess and reformulate them during the last week.

I must admit that I do not have sophisticated methods for assessing whether or not my students actually grow in the virtues of open–mindedness, intellectual humility, charity, self–awareness, and integrity. I know that measuring virtue is of interest to some of you, and I am interested in your thoughts about how my courses could promote and assess such virtues more effectively. But my pedagogy does have this one advantage: it is not simply training and preparation for the real work of getting to know Others in real life; it is that real work—the same hard work of understanding others that will continue—hopefully with greater skill, character, and commitment—long after the class if over. So in grading students' writing and their contributions to class discussion I am assessing the desired skills and virtues directly. I would do well to incorporate a list of specific virtues into my syllabus, grading rubrics, and

class discussions; but I am not sure I need any special laboratory test for measuring virtues. In this case the class is real life, and the virtues displayed there are precisely those needed for a life of coming to understand others, with integrity, in ethical relationships. I imagine that philosophers might feel the same way: your students are not just preparing for rigorous thinking; they are doing it. No additional real–life service–learning component is required.

Even more important than skills and intellectual virtues, to my mind, is the moral commitment that this pedagogy demands of students. Reading primary texts that one does not have enough background knowledge to understand, full of ideas one finds foreign, uninteresting, or even appalling, is not most students' idea of a fun class. Often the instructor himself does not understand the texts very well. So we struggle to make sense of them, and reach a tentative conclusion one day only to find the next that we had overlooked something and must revise our interpretation. This is by nature a frustrating process that goes against our natural dispositions. Most of us love clarity, and we are quick to pigeon–hole people based on our first impressions. We are happiest if we can keep people in the boxes we construct for them, interpreting everything they do and say to fit our prior impressions of them, whether those be positive or negative. Sacrificial listening means committing to get to know people for who they are, not who we want them to be, and that means constantly questioning our interpretations, so that we spend most of the semester in unsettled confusion. As I tell every class on day one, this kind of study requires moral commitment, because it will not always be fun or even interesting.

But often I have found in teaching, just as Gurevitch did in Israeli–Palestinian dialogue, that it is the moments of frustration and misunderstanding that turn out in retrospect to be most generative. The positive understanding that students achieve cannot confidently be regarded as successful; it can only be evaluated from the perspective of an indefinitely deferred vantage point. But the unpleasant experience of trying and failing to understand is itself a kind of success, because according to my epistemology that is the only thing that can reassure us that we are not trapped in a vicious circle of self–reinforcing preconceptions about the Other, but are actually listening well enough to be in the process of coming to understand the other as he is and not as we want him to be. In addition to intellectual virtues like humility and self–awareness, therefore, this pedagogy also requires and cultivates perseverance and, hopefully, hope.

I can expect and demand a certain level of moral commitment and perseverance from my students. What I cannot require, but certainly hope for, is a willingness to sacrifice aspects of their own identities for the sake of understanding others. What I am inviting them do is to let the practice of listening to others challenge and revise the very intellectual and moral identities—the goals, guiding values, and prior convictions—that I ask them to articulate at the beginning of the term, and that I encourage them to uphold with self–awareness and integrity throughout their studies. There is a tension in my epistemology and pedagogy between integrity and openness, and it can only be resolved if central to one's own identity is a commitment to understanding others as they are, even if that costs me a part of my own identity. I cannot require that level of sacrifice from my students, but they often surprise me.

I am not asking for more than I am willing to give. My teaching no less than my scholarship has challenged various aspects of my own self–understanding over the years. Listening to my students has proved at times to be even more bewildering and challenging than listening to Muslim intellectuals. If teaching, like scholarship, is first and foremost a form of human relationship, then it too needs to be characterized by sacrificial listening. Students' contributions must be given the same quality of attention as the texts being studied, so that they too may spark revisions in my ways of thinking and teaching.

Certainly my understanding of specific texts is often challenged and changed by students' observations in class, but much more difficult for me has been letting students change my ideas about teaching itself. For years I was frustrated by the mismatch between my sophisticated pedagogy and their naive and unselfconscious pedagogies, or the mismatch between the texts and issues I thought they needed to engage and the shallow, presentist, or even theological questions (anathema in Religious Studies) that they brought with them into the classroom. Slowly and somewhat reluctantly I have been making more room in each class for students' own intellectual agendas. The questions they instinctively ask are often simply not amenable to historical inquiry: questions such as "is Islam compatible with Christianity?" But I am finding that many of their questions are in fact bigger and more important than the ones my graduate training taught me to address. So I have not only changed reading assignments to address more of their silly questions; I have also begun to find that my own perspective is stretched and enriched by their naive interests, and that by making their questions my own I have become more successful in helping them understand the others we

are studying. At least I am modeling more consistently the respect for others as moral and epistemological peers that I hope I am cultivating in them.

Conclusion

Just as my students have challenged my pedagogy, it is possible that the Muslims I study will object to the epistemology I bring to bear on them. If my Muslim interlocutors work with different conceptions of knowledge, ethics, or human relationships, then pursuing those relationships could eventually require me to sacrifice my theory of sacrificial listening.

But today I submit it for critique not to the people I study but to you, my colleagues in the humanities, the social sciences, and education. I am grateful to Nancy Snow for giving me this opportunity to hear your suggestions about holes to plug, mistakes to fix, resources to draw on, new directions to take, and possible collaborators for an interdisciplinary grant–funded project on the practice of listening and the virtue of intellectual humility. It seems to me that the time is right for such a project. Listening has not been at the forefront of our K–12 and college curricula—though I am delighted that one of this year's presidential dream courses is called The Listening Project, taught by Julie Jones in the College of Journalism and Mass Communication. Both listening and intellectual humility will need to receive more focused attention in both our theory and our pedagogy, if the humanities are to play their much–needed role in advancing human communication, understanding, and relationships across religious, cultural, and political divides.