An Epistemology for Listening across
Religious, Cultural, and Political Divides

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Author's Original Preprint Manuscript

Introduction

The difficulty of fairly and accurately understanding human beings across group boundaries haunted the humanities in the later twentieth century, and has taken on a new dimension and a new urgency in the twenty-first with the growth of populism and political polarization in many democracies. The rhetoric of cultural populism exploits and exacerbates the natural tendency for human communities to define their own identities by contrasting themselves with imagined Others,[1] and thus heightens the already formidable epistemic challenge of intergroup understanding. This essay follows the lead of virtue epistemology in proposing to evaluate intergroup understanding not in terms of the truth or justification of beliefs about Others, but in terms of the knowledge-forming practices and virtues of epistemic agents.[2] I propose an epistemology for intergroup understanding that I characterize as relational, recursive, eschatological, and sacrificial; and I apply it by advocating a practice of listening characterized by open-mindedness, empathy, epistemic justice, epistemic charity, intellectual humility, and what I will call epistemic selflessness: a willingness to sacrifice aspects of one's own self-understanding that prove to be grounded in self-serving misconstruals of the Other. This practice and its supporting epistemology, which were originally developed through reflection on my own scholarly practice in the field of religious studies, are disciplined and refined in this essay by the framework of virtue epistemology, and are broadened to apply generally to the problem of understanding across cultural and political as well as religious boundaries.

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[1]For an overview, see Kyle and Gultchin 2018. I will capitalize 'Other' to indicate a person belonging to a different religious, cultural, or political group than the epistemic agent.

[2]An earlier version of this paper was delivered as part of the Self, Virtue and Public Life Project of the Institute for the Study of Human Flourishing at the University of Oklahoma on October 9, 2019. I wish to thank the Institute, the audience, and in particular Nancy Snow and Wayne Riggs for their insightful and helpful engagement.

An Epistemology of Interpersonal Understanding

In what follows, I will be working toward a virtue-laden practice of sacrificial listening that I believe is necessary for ethical human interaction across religious, cultural, and political lines, particularly when these divisions have been amplified by populist rhetoric and political polarization. I define it as follows: Sacrificial listening is the practice of listening attentively to unfamiliar voices, constructing interpretive models that relate what one has heard to familiar categories, and then deconstructing and revising those models and categories through further acts of listening. I will return to sacrificial listening and its attendant intellectual virtues after laying out the epistemology of interpersonal understanding that undergirds it. That epistemology is encapsulated in a criterion for what counts as a good understanding of another human being: A person's understanding of another human being is good if it enables ethical human relationships characterized by integrity and by an ongoing process of coming to understand the other person.

This criterion is framed in belief-oriented rather than agent-oriented terms—meaning that it evaluates the epistemic agent's beliefs rather than her dispositions. Rather than evaluating propositional beliefs one at a time, however, it evaluates understanding—the holistic grasp of a topic, a thing, or, in this case, a person.[3] Catherine Elgin describes understanding as "an epistemic commitment to a comprehensive, systematically linked body of information that is grounded in fact, is duly responsive to reasons or evidence, and enables nontrivial inference, argument, and perhaps action regarding the topic the information pertains to" (Elgin 2017, 44). Whereas Elgin focused on scientific understanding, my criterion evaluates an agent's understanding of another individual—her holistic grasp of the other's identity, background, character, assumptions, values, and motivations. This understanding is formed through listening, observation, and interaction, and it enables the epistemic agent to interpret or explain the other person's words and actions, to anticipate future behavior, and ultimately to interact—to have a relationship.

Unlike our understanding of machines or natural phenomena, understanding another person involves getting into his mindset, imagining what it is like to have his experiences, attitudes, and perspective, and discerning the cultural assumptions that structure his view of the world (Grimm 2019, 345, 348). Karsten Stueber calls this distinctive dimension of understanding people 'reenactive empathy' (Stueber 2012, 26–29), while Sara Shady argues (in this volume) that this counts as the intellectual virtue of empathy only when it is relationally motivated—as my epistemology demands. Such empathetic understanding is difficult and probably impossible to achieve fully when attempted across deep cultural divides, and it requires not just special cognitive skills such as the ability to understand the Other's language, but also character-level virtues including open-mindedness, intellectual courage, intellectual humility, and the self-awareness to discern and bracket one's own implicit assumptions, which may be so taken for granted that one is not normally conscious of them (see Grimm 2019, 348–349). Open-mindedness is particularly relevant because it involves not just a general willingness to consider alternative views, but also the ability to imagine and inhabit new perspectives that render the

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[3]This is what Jonathan Kvanvig calls objectual understanding, as opposed to propositional understanding—understanding that something is the case (Kvanvig 2003, 189–192).

puzzling views of other people intelligible to oneself, so as to take them seriously on their own terms—no easy feat, according to Wayne Riggs (Riggs 2019, 141–149).

Because interpersonal understanding is so difficult (and also because, as the reader may have noticed, my criterion for assessing it looks suspiciously circular) it will become clear below that my belief-oriented criterion is not adequate in and of itself for evaluating the truth or accuracy of particular understandings of particular people in the here and now—though as we will see, it does point to an ultimate standard of objectivity. Applying the criterion will therefore depend on assessing the intellectual virtues and belief-forming practices (notably sacrificial listening) through which the epistemic agent acquires her understanding. Consequently, my criterion will turn out to have greater affinity with agent-oriented than belief-oriented epistemologies. Evaluating understanding will turn out to hinge on the kinds of character-level virtues emphasized by responsibilist virtue epistemologies. I will also introduce something analogous to a reliability requirement by showing how the experience of misunderstanding, encountered repeatedly in the course of sacrificial listening, can attest that the process of coming to understand is moving away from self-serving misunderstanding and towards the goal of understanding that does full justice to the Other.

Relational Epistemology

Given the difficulty of understanding other human beings fully or accurately, my epistemology does not define good understanding in terms of accuracy. Instead it is relational, assessing each understanding's value for ethical human relationships. This focus on practical rather than purely cognitive outcomes makes my criterion pragmatic.[4] It does not adjudicate what beliefs count as knowledge or provide a way to assess their truth, but evaluates their impact on lived relationships.[5] Elgin has pointed out that scientific understanding often rests on simplified models and assumptions that are acknowledged not to be true yet are accepted by the scientific community as crucial components of genuine understanding because they approximate or illuminate the features of a phenomenon that we care about most (Elgin 2017, 14–15, 23–31).[6] Similarly, interpersonal understanding need not be perfectly comprehensive or accurate. We are quick to construct simplified idealizations of others that we realize may be only partially or generally true, and may not count as knowledge, yet may be accepted as working hypotheses and even as genuine understanding if they help us to interpret and interact with Others.[7] An ethical relationship does not require and indeed should not pursue full and definitive understanding. On

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[4]Kvanvig notes that because understanding involves grasping explanatory connections between beliefs, it enables inferences that are useful as a basis for action, and thus has a pragmatic advantage over knowledge as such (Kvanvig 2003, 202). See also Grimm 2006, 532–533.

[5]Kvanvig further argues that understanding is not a species of knowledge, so that even good understanding does not necessarily count as knowledge (Kvanvig 2003, 196–200). This is disputed by Stephen Grimm (Grimm 2006). See also Riggs 2003, 217–220.

[6]Kvanvig, on the other hand, says that the kind of objectual understanding at issue in epistemology involves having true beliefs (Kvanvig 2003, 191–192, 201). See also Riggs 2003, 219.

[7]On the 'acceptance' of working hypotheses and other 'epistemically felicitous falsehoods' that we do not actually believe, see Elgin 2017, 18–20, 23.

the contrary, 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.

Unlike knowledge and truth, which arguably do not admit of degrees, understanding readily admits of being evaluated as more or less good (see Kvanvig 2003, 196). My criterion defines a minimum threshold for an understanding to count as good, and it locates that goodness not in the truth, quantity, or coherence of one's information about the Other, but in the ethical qualities of human relationships. I take it as axiomatic that a good interpersonal relationship should be characterized by, among other things, integrity and an ongoing process of coming to understand the other person. The goal of understanding another is to be valued both for the sake of the relationship (which I take to have intrinsic moral worth) and for the sake of the other person (also endowed with irreducible worth) who desires to be known and understood. The value of understanding does not reside solely or primarily in the epistemic good of the agent's being knowledgeable. Curiosity may be an intellectual virtue, but satisfying it is not a primary or even a sufficient justification for getting to know people.

Note that my criterion does not specify on whose part integrity and increasing understanding are required, or even whose relationships must be characterized by them. Ideally, an ethical relationship involves integrity and increasing understanding not only on the part of the epistemic agent, but also on the part of the person the agent is getting to know. Moreover, a scholar's understanding, shared through teaching and publication, is good if it enables ethical relationships for her students and readers, and deficient if it does not—even though that would not necessarily be the scholar's fault. Epistemologists, however, have a longstanding habit of focusing on the state of the knowing subject, and ethicists have a longstanding preference for making their moral evaluations depend on things within the agent's control, so this essay will focus on the epistemic agent's own relationship to the Other, and on her own integrity, increasing understanding, epistemic virtues, and belief-forming practices. Assessing the value of one person's understanding for other people's relationships is a more complex question that I will not address in detail.

It is, nevertheless, a question with important implications for scholarship in the humanities and social sciences, which ought to enable ethical human relationships not only for the scholar herself but also for other scholars, students, and the general public. My relational criterion implies that scholarship is successful not if it leads to more universal generalizations about human nature, better predictions of human behavior, or more nuanced classifications of human thought, but only if, in retrospect, it proves to have enabled human relationships characterized by an increasing level of understanding. Those relationships must also be characterized by integrity, since relationships are a two-way street, and a relationship would not be ethical if someone acquired knowledge of another while dissimulating her own identity or cloaking it behind a veil of scientific or critical detachment—as happens all too often in the humanities and social sciences. For my own discipline of religious studies, a relational epistemology calls for a primarily hermeneutic methodology. Forms of scholarship that are mainly descriptive, 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."[8] Applied to pedagogy, such a relational evaluation of understanding implies that the goal of teaching about human beings is not "talking knowledge"—the ability to make informed pronouncements about others at cocktail parties or on exams—but "listening knowledge" that helps one to hear and understand what other people are saying. Applied to academic research generally, it suggests that the best scholarship is not that which has the most to say, but that which helps other scholars to gain new insights into their own data. Moreover, a relational epistemology would reorient the humanities 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. That goal is an urgent necessity, and has become the humanities' principal justification in contemporary public discourse, but it is threatened by populist rhetoric that stereotypes Others for political gain and dismisses academics along with the rest of "the elite."

The Problem of Intergroup Understanding

The pursuit of good understanding, relationally defined, is difficult (and a threat to the populist project of heightening the dichotomy between "us" and "them") because it threatens the epistemic agent's own self-understanding and sense of group identity. Coming to understand people with very different cultures, religions, or worldviews requires more than learning their languages, gathering data about them, getting into their mindsets, and discerning their deeply ingrained motivations and assumptions. Difficult as all that may be, the most stubborn obstacle to understanding is not a lack of information or of access to other peoples' minds; it is that our own identities are partly constituted by how we understand Others, so to be open-minded and allow Others to modify our understanding of them is to put our own identities at risk.

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 their equally real commonalities with those Others. 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 him otherwise, in terms of commonalities or differences that were

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[8]Geertz describes his project thus: "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" (Geertz 1973, 13–14).

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 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 (see Vishanoff 2013; cf. Volf 1996, 62, 69, 75–78, 90–91).

One of the main projects of critical theory has been to unmask this deceptive, self-serving, and very useful feature of the way we know or imagine Others. Postcolonial critics, for example, blasted my own 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 helped 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. Gayatri Spivak pointed out the "epistemic violence" done to Others when their ways of perceiving themselves are rendered unspeakable by the cognitive framework imposed upon them by those who interpret them (Spivak 2010). This critical insight was incorporated into virtue epistemology by Miranda Fricker, who pointed out the "epistemic injustice" of collectively imposing on Others an interpretive framework that does not allow them to be understood (or even to understand themselves) in terms that do justice to their experience (Fricker 2007, 6–7, 147–168).

This dynamic is characteristic not only of colonialism, and other forms of social and epistemic domination such as patriarchy and racism, but also of populism, especially the right-wing exclusionary varieties that seek to amplify boundaries and conflicts between "us" and "them," "the people" and outsiders, natives and immigrants, Christians and Muslims, and so on. Those populists who focus on cultural identity employ rhetoric that heightens and plays upon differences in ethnicity, race, religion, and national origin (Kyle and Gultchin 2018, 7–10, 13–14; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2018, 1669). Such political ideology not only prejudices people's initial understanding of Others, it also colors the lens through which they interpret new information as they get to know them. It has been shown, for example, that left-leaning voters tend to perceive immigrants more favorably the more they interact with them, whereas right-leaning voters who perceive immigrants as a threat tend to have that perception heightened or left unchanged by personal interaction (Homola and Tavits 2018).[9] But it is not just nativist and cultural populists who define themselves by contrast with imagined Others; all kinds of populists, by definition, portray society as divided between two reified and antagonistic groups, the good people and the evil elite, the latter imagined as a conspiring and diabolical Other.[10] Such rhetoric

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[9]Homola and Tavits propose that this is due to motivated reasoning shaped by political ideology rather than by anti-immigration rhetoric per se.

[10]According to "ideational" definitions of populism (see Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 514–

undermines empathy and the pursuit of understanding by imposing on the Other a distorting and self-serving interpretive framework, and it does so precisely for the sake of excluding and gaining power over the Other.

While such hermeneutical injustice is most serious when it stems from a systematic asymmetry of social power (Fricker 2007, 147–148, 151–158), the basic mechanism whereby epistemic agents construe Others in terms of self-serving categories that do not do justice to the Other's experience and self-understanding is by no means limited to the powerful, or to populists. It is a common feature of how humans come to understand Others and, through them, to understand themselves. In a politically polarized society, it is not just populists who construe Others as antagonistic reflections of themselves; even the anti-populist rhetoric of mainstream politicians often mirrors the populist's strategy by constructing populists as a homogeneous and dangerous Other (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2018, 1682–1684). Populists may be especially adept at exploiting this pernicious feature of human knowledge production, but in the polarized political environment that results, their opponents too will require a good measure of intellectual virtue if they are to avoid listening poorly, casting populists as everything that they themselves are not, and rhetorically excluding them from the community of discourse.

Is this pernicious human disposition a blameworthy trait—an intellectual vice—acquired by some individuals, abetted by some politicians, and distinctive of certain communities, or is it a universal and hard-wired feature of human ways of knowing? Recent developments in cognitive science suggest that it is at least partly the latter. The idea that we form our beliefs individually 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 (see, for example, Mercier and Sperber 2017).[11] Such epistemic selfishness may well have a certain evolutionary value for individuals and communities, but for a pluralistic society epistemic selflessness and sacrificial listening—even toward those one is most tempted to exclude—may turn out to be still more important for survival.

Regardless of whether this human propensity is acquired and blameworthy or natural and inescapable, the epistemic virtues required to overcome it are acquired dispositions. The pursuit of ethical human relationships across religious, cultural, and political divides requires, in addition to open-mindedness and empathy, the intellectual virtue that Fricker calls hermeneutical justice: the individual disposition to be aware of and account for the possibility of gaps in our collective interpretive frameworks or "hermeneutical resources" that may be hindering Others' attempts to convey their experiences, and also if possible to generate, through the very process of interacting with the Other, new hermeneutical resources that render their experiences intelligible (Fricker 2007, 6–7, 168–175). If we want our knowledge to enable ethical human relationships, rather than just serving our own personal or communal interests, then our epistemic practices must

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515; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2018, 1669–1670).

[11]Thanks to Wayne Riggs for directing me to this literature.

neither squeeze Others into our own mental boxes nor dismiss them as incoherent. Our scholarship, teaching, and conversation must model and promote interpersonal relationships in which Others are valued for who they are, without regard for whether they fit our hopes or serves our agendas. That requires a relentless pursuit of understanding, and a willingness to sacrifice the comforts and advantages of our own epistemic frameworks, so that the people we get to know are really the Others themselves and not just projections or mirror images of ourselves. The epistemic agent must regard the Other not as an object of detached study but as a moral and epistemic peer: an independent moral agent with whom she has a relationship of mutual responsibility, and an independent knower on a level with herself, in spite of the very real Otherness that makes him an enigma to her. The act of listening to another person in this open, peer-to-peer, and non-instrumental manner is of fundamental moral value.

Some Objections

If coming to understand other human beings is really as tricky as I have claimed, then it seems hard to know for sure when we have actually understood someone and when we have just been reinforcing our own self-interested preconceptions of them. Before moving on to solve that problem, however, I want to address a few potential objections to my relational framing of epistemology.

First, by asking that we sacrifice our own interpretations to accommodate what the Other says about himself, it may appear that I am being insufficiently critical, taking the Other at his word and reducing scholarship to repetition or translation of other peoples' self-representations. Is an anthropologist to believe everything her subjects say about themselves, and inquire no further? Am I advocating open-mindedness and empathy toward white supremacists and xenophobic populists, and discouraging criticism of their self-understandings?

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-justifying tales I spin about myself, and never challenges my motives or 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. Open-mindedness does not mean permissiveness, neutrality, or wishy-washiness about one's convictions (Hare 1983, 37–40; Spiegel 2012, 28–29). Empathy does not mean becoming the Other (Coplan 2011, 15–17).[12] Epistemic justice does not give credence to just anything (Fricker 2007, 170).

Nevertheless, listening should take epistemic charity as its starting point. In my own discipline of religious studies, one often gets the impression that critical study means adopting a hermeneutic of suspicion or even cynicism: 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

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[12]Coplan insists that clear self–other differentiation is essential for empathy.

gratification, much less 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 understanding. An ethical relationship—including ethical scholarship—begins with listening even if it ends in argument.

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 it seems to contradict some other evidence, and strive first of all to resolve the dissonance by adjusting our own interpretations. This is to apply the principle or intellectual virtue of charity discussed by Michael Berhow elsewhere in this volume. Doing so requires the intellectual humility to acknowledge not only that our initial interpretations might be wrong, but that the very interpretive lenses through which we came to them are susceptible to the same mechanisms of self-serving distortion that we are so quick to judge in colonialists, misogynists, racists, and populists. In the end, however, charity and humility must give way to integrity. An ethical relationship is a two-way street, and cannot be furthered by suppressing indefinitely our critical insights or our moral judgments about what the Other says and does.

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 suspect that this would miss something important, so here 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 is hardly an idiosyncratic choice, for it finds plenty of company in the history of Western ethics.

What might 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. From my criterion, it would appear that the flourishing of a relationship matters more than the personal flourishing of the individuals involved. If I were offering a general ethical theory, this would be an unusual move with some interesting potential and many drawbacks. I do not want to deny that the individual himself is a fundamental locus of moral value; indeed my desire to know the Other presumes just that. Here, however, I am only assessing the morality of one person's knowledge or understanding of 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 can be understood more or less accurately, and about which one can be correct or mistaken. Some contemporary scholarship 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 essence, personality, or identity. In fact, my criterion does not presume the stability of the object of understanding; it calls only for "an ongoing process of coming to understand the other person," which could very well chase its tail forever without ever settling on any final understanding. This is in fact a requirement of an ethical 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 his autonomy, whereas 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 others relate. One can only interact with those aspects of the Other's identity that he actually manifests, however indirectly, through his words and actions. One might wish for a precise phenomenological understanding of his experience or state of mind, but most scholarship in the humanities has given up on that possibility, and it is not the kind of knowledge my criterion requires. Ethical relationships cannot require mind-reading; one's moral responsibility toward another person is exhausted by the quality of one's interaction with the self to which one has epistemic access. An epistemic agent need not believe that the identity the Other constructs and performs is the whole story, and may include in her interpretive model her own hypotheses about his unarticulated assumptions and motivations, but she has no epistemic duty, or even a moral right, to uncover the deep truth about the Other at the expense of his own autonomy. My epistemology 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, total, or definitive understanding.

A Recursive Criterion

If the Other's identity is unstable and elusive, and the mechanisms by which I come to know it are self-serving, then good understanding is not easy to achieve. Worse yet, my criterion does not give me a way to know when I have achieved it, because as the reader may have noticed from the outset, my criterion looks suspiciously circular: understanding is good if it enables . . . an ongoing process of coming to understand. Presumably, we cannot evaluate the process of coming to understand without evaluating the understanding to which it leads. Or can we?

One way out of this apparent circularity would be to interpret the requirement for "an ongoing process of coming to understand" pragmatically, and measure understanding by the successful functioning of the relationship. In his later thought, Wittgenstein argued that 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 access to 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 the purchaser moves into her new house, the previous residents, who the day before would have fought tooth and nail to keep her out, put up no resistance to her invasion of 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 of language, and reassures us that communication is actually taking place (see Thiselton 1992, 13, 115, 126–128).

If we measured interpersonal understanding by practical success in concrete interactions, then my criterion would not be circular: it could be reduced to "good understanding enables ethical human relationships characterized by integrity and increasingly successful practical interactions." I am unwilling to adopt that solution, for two reasons. First, Wittgenstein 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 may not realize how much we are talking past each other. Apparent success may be largely illusory, as anyone who has lived in a cross-cultural situation for very long knows all too well. Second, 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 is not just a matter of words and ideas; it enables physical interactions, and if those transactions generate concrete economic goods then surely communication is succeeding by one important measure. Nevertheless, critical theory reminds us that we are far too prone to measure success in relation to our own needs and aims rather than the interests of others. I do not want to judge how well I understand people by how successfully I can manipulate them to serve my agenda. 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 is not my highest aim. Even peace, precious as it is in a polarized society, is not the highest aim of understanding others.

Such a pragmatic implementation of my criterion, then, is not the way to escape its circularity. But notice that it is not exactly circular: a present understanding is evaluated not by reference to that same understanding, but by reference to some future understanding enabled by the present understanding. The criterion does not pretend to evaluate understanding in the here and now; it only promises an evaluation in hindsight from some future perspective. To evaluate one's present understanding, one has to ask whether it will result in better understanding tomorrow; and to evaluate tomorrow's, one must ask whether it will result in even better understanding a year from now, or one hundred years from now, so that one can decide

in retrospect whether it ended up enabling a "process of coming to understand." The criterion is recursive because it appeals to itself not in a vicious circle but in a potentially endless chain of deferred assessments.

In other words, the criterion operates like a recursive function in a computer program. If you want a computer to calculate the value of x to the power of an integer y, for example, the most elegant approach is to write a recursive function $p(x, y)$ that simply computes and returns the value of x times $p(x, y\text{-}1)$, with the proviso that $p(x, 1)=x$. When the function is called with parameters x and y, the function simply calls itself using the parameters x and $y\text{-}1$, so the processor keeps creating copies of the function, each one pending the result of the next one. When it gets down to $y=1$, the function stops calling itself and just returns the given value of x, and then all the pending copies of the function can be resolved in reverse order.

But that, 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 Samantha's article about White Midwestern working-class Republicans in the 2016 U.S. election has enabled human relationships characterized by what we know in retrospect to have been increasingly accurate understanding, so that we can finally pronounce her article to have been a good piece of scholarship? No, my criterion will not enable us to say that in 2050 any more than it enables us to say that now. It provides no way to end the chain of recursion, so the computer will simply crash when it runs out of memory stacking up endless unresolved copies of the criterion.

An Eschatological Perspective

My criterion, therefore, cannot give a definitive evaluation of any particular understanding. If that only meant that it cannot finally decide whether an understanding is completely accurate, that would not be as big a problem as it sounds, since accuracy is not necessarily required for good interpersonal understanding. But in order to determine whether understanding qualifies as good, we do need to assess whether the relationships it enables are characterized by a "process of coming to understand." Deferring that assessment to an indefinitely future perspective is obviously problematic, but it does not quite make the criterion meaningless.

One way of anchoring the evaluation of understanding in an ever-receding future perspective was suggested by Richard Rorty, who identified pragmatism with a "willingness to refer all questions of ultimate justification to the future, to the substance of things hoped for" (Rorty 1999, 27). A pragmatist 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 look like 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 or Marx. Our present 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 (Rorty 1999, 27–30 and *passim*).

Rorty's pragmatist epistemology illustrates one possible solution to the quandary of endlessly deferred assessment, but I am unwilling to adopt that solution because it evaluates understanding in terms of its future usefulness for "us"—or worse, for the strong who survive—whereas the point of sacrificial listening is to know and respect Others who are not part of "us," and to treat them as valuable and worth getting to know for their own sake, rather than instrumentally. The goal is not for one's understanding and relationships to be successful in fulfilling only the interests of one's own tribe.

Another solution would be to appeal to the theological notion of an eternal perspective. 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 only illuminated by 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 (Pannenberg 1967, 147; Thiselton 1992, 25, 330–335). For the purpose of this essay, present understandings and relationships can be judged only from the eschatological perspective of their final consummation. In the words of the Apostle Paul, writing to Christians in Corinth: "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" (1 Cor 13:12, NRSV). Seen in this light, the epistemology proposed here is one of hope, eagerly anticipating the perfection of human understanding, yet also an epistemology of humility, painfully conscious that for now our understanding of others remains aspirational and inconclusive.

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. Not all philosophers would find such a theological approach palatable, though Rorty himself implicitly acknowledged a certain analogy between the hope of pragmatism and the faith of religion when he spoke of "the substance of things hoped for"—an allusion to Hebrews 11:1, which in the King James Version of the Bible reads "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." Pannenberg's eschatological explanation of deferred assessment fits better than Rorty's with the ethical priorities of my epistemology, but my goal here is not to defend one explanation or another; I only wish only to illustrate that there are meaningful ways of understanding an epistemological criterion that defers assessment to an indefinitely future perspective. Neither explanation enables us to assess understanding definitively in the present moment, but both endow the "ongoing process of coming to understand" with purpose and hope, and both ground the assessment of understanding in some formally definable and objective reality, even if that reality cannot be presently known.

My recursive criterion for good understanding may not be meaningless, then, but it is still practically useless. To evaluate particular understandings of particular people in the here and now, we must take a cue from virtue epistemology and apply my belief-oriented criterion in an agent-oriented manner, evaluating the "ongoing process of coming to understand" in terms of the belief-forming practices and virtues of the epistemic agent rather than the content of her

beliefs—without, however, abandoning a concern for the reliability of her belief-forming practices.

A Sacrificial Solution

We have already established that the virtues of open-mindedness, empathy, epistemic justice, epistemic charity, and intellectual humility are requisites for good interpersonal and intergroup understanding, and I will shortly introduce a sixth required virtue, epistemic selflessness. For those responsibilist virtue epistemologists who do not require that intellectual virtues reliably lead to truth, this set of intellectual virtues might serve as an adequate agent-oriented criterion for good understanding even without an eschatological reference point for assessing the truth, accuracy, or perfection of understanding. As stated earlier, my criterion for good understanding does not insist on the achievement of true beliefs about the Other. Nevertheless, in a move analogous to that of epistemologists who impose a reliability requirement on intellectual virtues, I will now offer an immediately accessible criterion for assessing not just the character of the epistemic agent but also the reliability of her virtuous and truth-motivated process of coming to understand.

Assuming that we can identify integrity on the part of the epistemic agent, in what way might we evaluate her "ongoing process of coming to understand" in the here and now? Even if she has all the requisite virtues and is motivated to pursue understanding that will be revealed as good from some future perspective, how can she decide right now whether she is even on the right track? How is she to revise and correct her understanding if she has no way of knowing when she is right and when she is wrong, or when she is coming to understand and when she is slipping into self-serving distortion? How can we be confident that the practice of sacrificial listening, with all its attendant intellectual virtues, reliably leads to good understanding—that is, if not to truth, at least to "an ongoing process of coming to understand"? The answer, I submit, lies not in knowing when one has understood, but in knowing when one has misunderstood.

I said earlier that I am 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, cognitive science, and the everyday experience of getting to know human beings all give reason to be cautious about just how reliable those cherished experiences of successful communication really are as evidence that one has come to understand another person—especially one whose religion, worldview, culture, or political views differ dramatically from one's own.

On the other hand, I do think that Wittgenstein's reflections suggest a useful negative test of communication (cf. Thiselton 1992, 13). 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 him to be rather than as he 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 or even conflict. The concrete lived interaction that accompanies verbal communication can indeed be a litmus test 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 the epistemic agent directly to a better understanding, but it does show that she is listening well enough to recognize her misunderstanding. If she were just pursuing her own agenda, and squeezing her interlocutor into the mold of her own personal or academic theories, she would not find her agenda frustrated; but if she recognizes that she has failed to understand, this tells her that she has allowed her own agenda to be disrupted by the hard reality of the differences between her and her interlocutor. As long as she repeatedly finds that she has to sacrifice and revise her hard-won mental models of the Other, then she can be confident that she is at least engaged in a process of coming to understand that is reliably self-correcting. For now, the best litmus test of our understanding of religious, cultural, and political Others 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 those Others.

Such "negative epiphanies," in which one understands that one does not understand, and realizes how one's cognitive framework is preventing one from understanding, have been highlighted by advocates of "poor theory"—a ragtag movement dedicated to the proposition that the theoretical lenses through which we view the world need to be weakened, not strengthened, and their limitations constantly rediscovered (see Beal and Deal 2011, 1057–1059). A similar point has been made by the Israeli anthropologist Zali Gurevitch, who, 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 subject 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 him from the projected image and the interpretive schemes that had been imposed upon him. 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 (Gurevitch 1989).

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." Good listening is inevitably difficult and uncomfortable at times, since it requires that we repeatedly experience and acknowledge failure; but what makes it truly sacrificial is that we must respond to that discomfort by giving up some of our own epistemic achievements and even some of our own identity. 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 self-understanding. To be consistently disposed to sacrifice one's own interests for the sake of others is a character trait (and sometimes a virtue) that we may call selflessness, and in this context the selflessness required is epistemic: the disposition to give up or modify aspects of one's cognitive framework that undergird one's own identity, whenever it becomes clear through an experience of misunderstanding that this is required for furthering the relationship and continuing the process of coming to understand.

Selflessness and sacrifice are strong and religiously charged terms that sit uncomfortably in epistemology and in the humanities generally. Jean Hampton, for example, has pointed out the exploitation and loss of self that can result from the unqualified assumption that selflessness is always good (Hampton 1993). It therefore needs to be emphasized that my criterion's integrity requirement places an important constraint on the epistemic agent's duty to sacrifice aspects of her self-understanding: she should only do so to the extent that she is able to integrate revised categories that do justice to the Other into a revised cognitive framework that does equal justice to the more fundamental elements of her own identity and worldview. But such change can still be profound without violating the epistemic agent's integrity and autonomy; no one would argue that integrity requires the avoidance of all challenging and transformative experiences.

With that caveat, I use the strong terminology of selflessness and sacrifice deliberately, in order to preempt the misunderstanding that what I am proposing amounts to no more than empathy 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 simultaneously creating vast new categories of excluded Others: intolerant fundamentalists whom we do not even wish to understand, but who are also not likely to embrace our pluralistic project anytime soon, so that we have no choice but to attempt to relate to them ethically—which I believe 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 own belief-forming mechanisms. 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 understand other human beings in a way that respects their integrity

just as much as our own. This claim—that an ethical relationship to the Other inescapably requires sacrificing part of one's own identity—has been developed eloquently by the Christian theologian Miroslav Volf in *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, a book born out of reflection on the conflict surrounding his native Croatia in the 1990's (Volf 1996, 9–10, 29, 71, 91, 143, 146–147, and *passim*).

The Virtue-laden Practice of Sacrificial Listening

Good understanding requires "an ongoing process of coming to understand the other person," and that process can be evaluated in the here and now, and can be judged to be on the path of increasing understanding, only if it involves repeated experiences of misunderstanding that demand changes to the epistemic agent's cognitive framework and thus to her own identity as it is defined in relation to the imagined Other. This is the process of continual revision that was described above as sacrificial listening: the practice of listening attentively to unfamiliar voices, constructing interpretive models that relate what one has heard to familiar categories, and then deconstructing and revising those models and categories through further acts of listening.

It should now be clear why this process is called sacrificial, and why it requires epistemic selflessness—because it asks the listener to sacrifice aspects of the very mental architecture that undergirds her own sense of identity, for the sake of understanding the Other. For example, someone who thinks of herself as more caring than her politically conservative in-laws, because she supports a stronger social safety net than they do, may have to broaden her concept of "caring" as she discovers how compassionate her mother-in-law is in personal interactions, and may consequently come to see herself more modestly as someone who cares deeply about social issues but is a bit more prone to treat individuals cold-heartedly than she had previously realized. In adjusting her conception of herself in this way, for the sake of achieving a cognitive framework that does justice to her mother-in-law, she exhibits the virtue of epistemic selflessness. For the purpose of our relational epistemology, we may define epistemic selflessness as a character trait that disposes the epistemic agent to sacrifice aspects of the cognitive framework that undergirds her own identity whenever she discovers them to be implicated in self-serving misconstruals of the Other, and to be hindering the process of coming to understand. That trait is virtuous only to the extent that she is able to integrate her new insights and categories into a revised cognitive framework that still does justice to her own personhood and experience of the world.

We have also seen along the way that this process requires the intellectual virtue (assuming it is one) of open-mindedness. By this is usually meant the willingness to recognize that one might be wrong and to entertain other possible beliefs, which is certainly required since sacrificial listening involves deconstructing and revising one's understanding. We have noted Riggs' insight that open-mindedness requires the ability to imagine the perspectives of others so as to render their views intelligible to oneself, which is even more specifically relevant to understanding other people. And as Riggs points out, rendering the Other intelligible may entail revising not only specific beliefs but also one's "perspectives"—one's integrated and deeply ingrained ways of perceiving things (Riggs 2019, 141–149). This is part and parcel of sacrificial

listening, which involves deconstructing and revising not just one's interpretive models, but also the very categories with which one thinks.

Imaginatively taking up the perspectives of others is a central feature of many accounts of empathy, a kind of understanding or cognitive process that is sometimes counted an intellectual virtue. We have noted Stueber's description of 'reenactive empathy'—the cognitive process of imagining another's situation, perspective, and motivations in order to understand his actions (Stueber 2012, 26–29). Amy Coplan describes a related imaginative process of 'other-oriented perspective taking' (representing the other's experience from his point of view), but adds that the kind of experiential understanding she calls empathy also requires 'affective matching'—meaning to experience the same types of emotions (Coplan 2011). Such phenomenological access to others' inward emotional states might have some value for human relationships, but here I am concerned only with the cognitive, not the affective dimensions of understanding, and with verbal and practical interactions, rather than intangible emotional sympathies. Better tailored to my concerns is Shady's definition (in this volume) of empathy as an intellectual virtue: "an intentional attempt to inhabit another person's standpoint for the purpose of understanding their perspective in relation to my own, in a manner that humanizes the other and helps to foster a connection between the self and other." Shady argues that this kind of relationally motivated empathy is precisely the intellectual virtue required for engaging political opponents and overcoming "populist rhetoric which misunderstands, misrepresents, and excludes the other from political representation." According to the relational epistemology proposed here, such empathy is essential for understanding any religious, cultural, or political Other.

We have also noted the importance of epistemic justice, which Fricker defines as a corrective virtue that mitigates epistemic injustice. Fricker focuses on testimonial justice, an epistemic agent's disposition to correct for the influence of prejudice in her judgment of others' credibility, but adds that this must be supplemented with hermeneutical justice. The latter involves not only making allowance for the difficulty a speaker may have in making himself intelligible because he is disadvantaged by the available hermeneutical resources, but also cooperating with the speaker to cobble together, through the very act of conversing, a more adequate 'hermeneutical micro-climate' that enables greater understanding (Fricker 2007, 5–7, 168–175). It is this last dimension of epistemic justice that most concerns us here. Fricker is especially concerned with the hermeneutical injustice suffered by the powerless, who are unable to participate equally in the creation of collective hermeneutical resources that would do justice to their experiences (Fricker 2007, 147–158). Our concern here is not with power relations per se, but with the dynamics of Otherness, which engender a particular type of hermeneutical injustice: since Others are by definition outside the listener's epistemic community, they have not participated in forming the relevant aspects of the hermeneutical apparatus that was created by the listener's community for the maintenance of its own group identity, and are therefore likely to have difficulty articulating their own experiences and identities in terms that are both true to their own self-understanding and intelligible to the epistemic agent. The corrective virtue of epistemic justice therefore requires, in the context of interaction across group boundaries, that the epistemic agent make allowance for the likelihood that her interpretive categories are hindering her understanding of the Other, that she give him the benefit of the doubt and start

from the assumption that his incomprehensibility stems not from his incoherence but from gaps in her own hermeneutical resources, and that she attempt to reshape her interpretive framework in ways that make the Other more intelligible—even if that undermines her own self-understanding.

As noted earlier, epistemic justice does not entail an uncritical surrender of one's own interpretive framework. We do not need to believe everything others tell us about themselves, let them unilaterally set the terms of the conversation, or limit our understanding of them to repeating what they say about themselves. But sacrificial listening does require recognizing when our interpretive framework is failing to do justice to another's self-understanding, and when it is distorting our perception of him for our own epistemic advantage. And as Fricker notes in passing, it also involves participating in a collective restructuring of the epistemic environment that renders it less unjust—for example, by helping to defuse populist conceptions of immigrants, Muslims, "the elite," and other Others (Fricker 2007, 174–175).

Starting with the assumption that one's difficulty in understanding the Other likely results from gaps in our own interpretive framework, rather than from the Other's incoherence, is part of what is required for the intellectual virtue of epistemic charity, according to Michael Berhow's definition in this volume. Berhow also requires respect for the Other, which would seem to be an important starting point for any ethical relationship, though it is not explicitly required by sacrificial listening. Berhow restricts his discussion of the virtue to conditions of perceived epistemic hostility, such as when two polarized groups of populists each believe the other to be hostile and deceitful. In such a case open-mindedness might not actually be virtuous, but epistemic charity would still be virtuous regardless of the Other's worthiness, and would help to remedy the hostile epistemic environment. Indeed it is precisely the lack of such a disposition toward political Others that allows such a polarized political environment to spring up in the first place. My epistemology does not presume such a hostile situation, but Berhow's essay shows that for a democracy threatened by populist polarization, the virtue of epistemic charity, like the other attendant virtues of sacrificial listening, is a vital antidote.

Since epistemic charity involves contemplating the inadequacy of our own interpretive frameworks, it depends upon the additional virtue of intellectual humility. Many accounts of this virtue have been proposed, but the most relevant for our purposes is what Dennis Whitcomb, Heather Battaly, Jason Baehr, and Daniel Howard-Snyder call "owning one's intellectual limitations:" being aware of them and attending to them when appropriate, regretting and admitting them, recognizing their consequences, and striving to overcome them for the sake of understanding (Whitcomb, et al. 2017, 516–520). This means acknowledging not only the possibility of errors in our understanding of Others, but also the likelihood that the interpretive frameworks, lenses, and categories with which we form and revise our understanding may be inadequate or even prejudicial, self-serving, and unjust.

In addition to these six principal intellectual virtues, which are particularly relevant for the uniquely difficult process of coming to understand human beings across deep cultural divides, and are thus especially important for a pluralistic but polarized society, the practice of sacrificial listening also requires and instantiates a range of other intellectual virtues that are less specifically related to interpersonal or intergroup understanding. By definition, sacrificial listening requires

attentiveness. It also assumes certain intellectual faculties that not all philosophers would call epistemic virtues, such as the relevant linguistic skills and the mental ability to construct coherent interpretations out of disparate articulations of ideas expressed in unfamiliar terms. It also demands the self-awareness to recognize the categories in terms of which one interprets the Other, and the intellectual courage to let those categories be challenged. Moreover, given the difficulty and the ongoing iterative nature of sacrificial listening, it undoubtedly calls for perseverance; and given the indefinite deferral of any assurance that one really understands the Other, it also seems to require hope. Both perseverance and hope may be considered epistemic virtues when exercised in the pursuit of understanding under appropriate conditions.[13]

Having sketched out the virtues involved in sacrificial listening, we can now expand our criterion for good understanding to specify the kinds of virtues and belief-forming practices that it requires:

A person's understanding of another human being is good if it enables ethical human relationships characterized by integrity and by an ongoing process of coming to understand the other person through belief-forming practices, such as sacrificial listening, that implement intellectual virtues including open-mindedness, empathy, epistemic justice, epistemic charity, intellectual humility, and epistemic selflessness.

Sacrificial listening, as I have defined it, may not be the only way of engaging in an ongoing process of coming to understand Others. Other belief-forming practices with similar dynamics might be adequate. But whatever those practices might be, they will require at least the six intellectual virtues listed here, and thus would have to count as selfless and sacrificial in some respect. There is no easy or comfortable path for ethical scholarship in the humanities or social sciences, or for citizens of a pluralistic society wishing to overcome the kind of polarization that populism elicits from both its supporters and its opponents.

Conclusion

The continued vitality of the humanities depends on their ability to support the cultivation of human selves and cultures that are not self-contained but are open to engagement with all kinds of Others. The growth of populism and political polarization in the 21st century only heightens the need for scholarship and teaching that cultivate not only the virtues of a well-regulated individual but also the virtues that enhance our relationships and our understanding of other people—virtues such as open-mindedness, empathy, epistemic justice, epistemic charity, intellectual humility and, I submit, epistemic selflessness. As the essays in this volume demonstrate, the intellectual virtues and the humanities themselves are not mere adornments for the elite, but necessary instruments of survival for any pluralistic society, especially under

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[13]For perseverance to count as an intellectual virtue, Nathan King requires continued pursuit of intellectual goods, with serious effort and despite obstacles, for an amount of time appropriate to the pursuit's importance and its expected likelihood of success (King 2014, 3057 and *passim*). Nancy Snow argues that hope can be an intellectual virtue because it motivates the pursuit of understanding and also facilitates it by engendering other epistemically valuable dispositions including perseverance (Snow 2013; cf. Cobb 2015).

conditions of populist polarization. This essay has shown how six particular intellectual virtues might be put to use in a disciplined practice of sacrificial listening, and how that virtue-laden practice and the intergroup understanding it produces might be evaluated. Both the intellectual virtues and the practice of listening 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 deepening religious, cultural, and political divides.

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