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Intellectual Humility & the Difficult Knowledge of Theology

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Abstract: We seek, in this analytical essay, to complicate the conversation around knowledge production in the academy by proposing ‘intellectual humility’ as a mode for moving toward new avenues of knowledge-making, particularly as an epistemic stance against the kinds of ‘intellectual arrogance’ (Lynch, 2017) that have made certain avenues of knowledge, especially in the social sciences, mostly verboten in the last half century. Drawing on the conceptual frames of difficult knowledge (Britzman, 1998; Garrett, 2017; Pitt & Britzman, 2003) and weak theology (Caputo, 2006), we turn to our own stories of faith and inquiry as ways in to thinking humility, through which we draw broader conclusions about what humility may offer that’s especially useful in this particular post-truth moment. We might unsettle the dangerous story that theology has no use for educational research, other than as a caution against the backwardness of faith in a patriotic god. If we’re to consider the possibility of evidentiary epistemologies as valuable in the work of combating ignorance and asserting certain values in and around education, then we’d do well to further diversify our sense of the possible in public education to include the difficult knowledge of theology as a rich framework for pursuing new ends.

Keywords: humility, difficult knowledge, theology, post-truth

Introduction

Thomas Gilby, a Dominican theologian, was oft-quoted by the Jesuit, John Courtney Murray, as having said that ‘Civilization is formed by men locked together in argument.’ From this dialogue, he asserts, ‘the community becomes a political community’ (CF: Malone, 2017). Briefly: the Dominicans were originally an itinerant preaching order; the Jesuits are colloquially known as God’s Marines but theologically are perhaps most notable for St. Ignatius’ codification of an Examen of Conscience, something Foucault spent a great deal of his later lectures working through as he sorted the archeology of a particular kind of truth linked to avowal. The above can be taken in some sense only as background: here is Catholic trivia; in another way, however, it’s probably important to think through the intellectual history of a major preaching movement which saw dialogue as the formation of the political, reflected upon by an evangelical order, committed to contemplation of the self (or the creation of the self through the alethurgy of the bringing forth of truth through avowal, for Foucault, [2014]). This avowal, in turn, externalized a relation to truth which would be affirmed by the listener—in the monastic context out of which Foucault sees it arise, most often by the confessor—and keep the individual from false premises precisely through relationship to the interlocutor and ongoing dialogism with outside the mind (p. 150). Foucault sees this turn away from Greek prophecy and the interrogation of witnesses for verification as what ‘Christianity invented...[the] principle of veridiction of the self through a hermeneutics of thought’ (p. 152). Constant attention to the self and its many foibles could only be trusted in conversation (rooted in conversion, recall) and though hay has been made in educational research in particular around confession as a regime of truth (see, for example, Krondorfer, 2010), little attention has been paid to the underlying theology out of which new and different orientations to epistemology might arise. This is less a concern about a particular

theology—indeed we are primarily limited by our experiences in Christian contexts and with Christian (often Catholic) thinkers—and rather a call to think through religion and its stalking horse theology, in curriculum studies in particular, once again and robustly. In this manner, we’d suggest, different attenuations might arise around notions of truth and certainly its after-cousin, post-truth, both intimately linked, we think, in relationship with civility and humility. Murray, for his part, saw homo politicus as fundamentally in need of ‘reasoned debate’ not because of some politesse, but because it was deeply a part of human nature. Civility was necessary for the flourishing of human, political life.

We seek, in this analytical essay—in the midst of a retreat from reasoned debate for any number of reasons—to propose ‘intellectual humility’ as a mode for moving toward new avenues of knowledge-making in the academy, particularly as an epistemic stance against the kinds of ‘intellectual arrogance’ (Lynch, 2017) that have made certain avenues of knowledge, especially in the social sciences, mostly verboten in the last half century. Drawing on the conceptual frames of difficult knowledge (Britzman, 1998; Garrett, 2017; Pitt & Britzman, 2003) and weak theology (Caputo, 2006), we turn to our own stories of faith and inquiry as ways in to thinking humility, through which we draw broader conclusions about what humility may offer that’s especially useful in this particular post-truth moment. If we’re to consider the possibility of evidentiary epistemologies as valuable in the work of combating ignorance and asserting certain values in and around education, then we’d do well, we argue, to further diversify our sense of the possible in public education to include the difficult knowledge of theology as a rich framework for pursuing new ends.

Purposes

Our goals here dovetail with those of Lynch (2017), from whom we borrow the term “intellectual arrogance”. For him, intellectual arrogance is a problem particular to this political moment, rooted in “the postmodernist generation of humanists [(Lynch among them)]” who “grew up...distrusting metanarratives and the very idea of objectivity” which was taken cartoonishly to extend “to a...complete...rejection of the idea that anything is true.” While we share much of his concern for the political state of this country and its consequences both in schools and beyond them, our interest here lies in his claim that research epistemologies in recent decades, fueled largely by the rise of the posts¹ in theory and inquiry, might be in part (though not entirely) to blame for the ascendancy of this most recent iteration of intellectual arrogance. Press on both the right (Ernst, 2017) and the left (Heer, 2017) have trumpeted (pun intended) this claim in dubbing this “America’s first postmodern president”, largely due to his flagrant disregard for evidentiary epistemologies in weaponizing the notion of post-truth. That is, Trumpism and its success largely depends on its ability to reject evidence when useful. Edsall (2018) helpfully voices the frustration—if not disgust—of many here, asking, “How should we explain the fact that President Trump got away with making 2,140 false or misleading claims during his initial year in office?” (Not, it seems, with recourse to evidence). Carlos Prado suggests that “post-truth is the final step in the misguided move away from objective truth to relativization of truth”, though to extend blame for an authoritarian’s penchant for lying misses the ways in which academic skepticism (brought forward in the postmodern) “about objective truth doesn’t as a rule deny that

¹ We might do well to take time and parse the varied “posts” we refer to here and throughout, though an extended discussion of the history of these terms is probably not feasible. Still, it’s worth keeping in front of us a distinction between the prefix ‘post-’, understood as a ‘coming after’ (e.g., after-Modernity), and its use signaling the intersection of ‘post’ theories like poststructuralism and postcolonialism with differing theoretical frames or fields (e.g., Lather & St. Pierre’s [2013] ‘postqualitative’). Of course, so much of what is generative about these theories—and makes them useful for challenging epistemic certainties as we seek to do here—is the playful indeterminacy of the terms; there’s a bit of messiness, a blurring and blending and bleeding together, and that is not, as we understand it, the problem with the ‘posts’ but rather their very strength.

we can know the fact of the matter” (Bromwich, as cited in Edsall, 2018). And besides, as Judith Butler reminds in the same article, thinking Trumpism as related to postmodernism would require imagining the man reading closely, and knowing deeply, literary and social theory. Still there are ways in which the explanatory power of the posts seems to have, in some sense, run out of steam (Latour, 2004) such that we in academic spaces can feel like we are rehearsing old arguments (Pinar, 2013) in the face of a tide of new absurdities.

In the current climate, Garrett (2017) notes, evidence isn’t a particularly good way to convince people of anything except that they are already right, even when they’re wrong. Part of the problem, according to Lynch (2017), has to do with the way knowledge circulates in a postmodern digital age, “feeding the human tendency to overestimate our knowledge of how the world works.” As critical scholars with a strong affinity for poststructural ways of knowing, this troubles us. Our purpose here then is to find new ways of reclaiming evidentiary epistemologies that might resist intellectual and epistemic arrogance, while also maintaining an engagement with the exciting challenges introduced by poststructural thought in the first place. Intellectual humility may just help in this regard; to think that, we might start with research—our own, most especially.

In the tradition of humanities-oriented research, this analytic essay embraces theoretical considerations of epistemic humility, drawing on both Caputo’s *weak theology* and the psychoanalytic notion of *difficult knowledge* as ways into thinking humility in the context of research and teaching. Additionally and importantly, our framing of humility, seen through weak theology and difficult knowledge, leads directly to the personal—this study, while not strictly autoethnographic, necessarily reads through the authors’ own understandings of and experiences

with faith, as scholars and teachers, in order to more, well, faithfully consider humility—which starts, we think, with ourselves.

Theoretical Framework

Borrowing again from Lynch (2017), “intellectual humility... refer[s] to a cluster of attitudes that we can take toward ourselves — recognizing your own fallibility, realizing that you don’t really know as much as you think, and owning your limitations and biases.” Thus, we understand any substantive engagement with intellectual humility as a turn towards ourselves, demanding a sincere ongoing encounter in self-theorizing about epistemology and teaching and writing. And in the process of that engagement, we found we needed to spend time considering our own faith lives. Here we’d note that to some degree we are Catholic, though perhaps in different ways (professed, schooled, birthed or otherwise). What we choose to attend to, however, is the notion of the small ‘c’ catholic which in its best manifestation means the universal; and we acknowledge that there’s a certain tendentiousness present when writing about humility and making claims in the direction of universality. However, we take this line in particular thinking with James Alison (2001) who notes that speaking of catholicity (universality, in some sense) “doesn’t mean a unity of perspective from which we start, but the discovery and construction of a real and surprising fraternity which begins with overcoming the tendency to forge from our own perspective a sacred which excludes” (p. 36). That may be a bit of a jump, so we’ll move first through two conceptual frames which took us, in the end, to ourselves.

Difficult Knowledge

We draw one such frame from the work of Deborah Britzman (1998; Pitt & Britzman, 2003) among others (Garrett, 2017): *difficult knowledge*, or “the representation of social trauma and the individual’s encounter with [it] in pedagogy” (Pitt & Britzman, 2003, p. 755). Scholars have taken up difficult knowledge in a variety of studies that engage curricular topics in which knowledge learned may be ambiguous, ineffable or traumatic, across fields and topics: Garrett & Segall (2013; Segall & Garrett, 2013) for example, leveraged the concept in their studies of Social Studies teachers’ knowledge and ignorance of, and resistance to, race and racism; Zembylas (2014) interrogated the difficult knowledge of affect in curriculum and pedagogy; and our own work (Jarvie & Burke, 2015; Burke & Jarvie, Under Review) used the concept to frame studies of the epistemic difficulties of teaching English and talking religion in religious (Catholic) schools. Garrett (2017) explains that difficult knowledge constitutes “a recognition of the unsteadiness of one’s understanding of the world and our place in it that comes about through learning.” (p. 19). That is, difficult knowledge is knowledge which makes apparent not only its own tenuousness, its incompleteness, and its uncertain status, but also calls the self into question. In our previous work, we’ve found that thinking with and through difficult knowledge with Britzman (1998) asks:

How [is] learning put into question? How [does] learning put the self into question? How [can] this work reverse its content and turn against the learner? And how [can] learning become entangled in the vicissitudes of unhappiness, suffering, conflict, accident, and desire? (p. 30)

One consequence of this framing is that it helps account for how “knowledge may be experienced as unwelcome” (Garrett, 2017, p. 111). Indeed, “difficult knowledge is a walk

toward the ways in which the tumult [of society] can make one feel diminished, worried, guilty, sad” (p. 19). All this parsing through of one’s place in society and the world, psychically reckoning with questions of how to be and live in community [communion?] with others, sounds, to our mind, like the work of (good) theology—more on that in a bit.

For our purposes, Garrett helpfully argues that “the acknowledgement of knowledge’s incompleteness marks a pedagogical hinging point for thinking about difficult knowledge” (p. 76). That is, the difficult knowledge of something like racism is confronted through the question, “Am I racist?” (or, “Are you?”), a question which in its very asking renders us vulnerable and destabilizes the closely held knowledge—for some—that we are indeed, of course, without a doubt, not racist. Difficult knowledge emerges and becomes useful when we unfix ourselves from our certainties about ourselves and our world; that is, it becomes difficult only when it disturbs the certainties that protect us from potentially undesirable or traumatic knowledge, knowledge that nevertheless cannot be left incomplete when our understandings of ourselves (as good, as right and righteous) hang in the balance. This necessitates the question of why we would want to invoke traumatizing knowledge in the first place. Importantly, for us and for others, difficult knowledge and the conversations it engenders, as well as its uses in pedagogy and research, affords something that would otherwise not be possible: it points to the ways in which we avoid knowledge to protect ourselves, this too often at the expense of our world and the others who live in it. Segall & Garrett (2013) conclude, for example “that race is time and again acknowledged in order to be used strategically to protect the speaker from implication in the difficult understanding that race makes radical differences to the ways people experience and understand the world” (p. 286). Difficult knowledge provides a framework for understanding how these mechanisms of avoidance work, in order that we might better redress their problems

as teachers and scholars. For our thinking here, it's the epistemic "incompleteness" of difficult knowledge that interests us: it may be that difficult knowledge, by providing a way of thinking about knowledge "as a process of engagement rather than an identifiable and quantified notion" (Garrett, 2011, p. 322), may make humbler and less arrogant forms of knowledge production—particularly, we argue, those which rely on conceptions of evidence—possible.

The Problem of Evidence

Difficult knowledge helps us make sense of the problem that evidence—as rational and reliable forms of knowledge, i.e., facts, which justify decision-making and facilitate deliberation—presents in a post-truth climate. The problem with evidence is that "standard cognitive/rational models do not appropriately account for affect in the evaluation and decision-making process" (Redlawsk, Civettini, & Emmerson, 2010, p. 565, as cited in Garrett, 2017, p. 69). Or, in other words, evidence is always mediated by and through the complexities of the self—its history, experiences, desires, and traumas. Additionally, as Biesta (2014b) reminds us, two crucial questions—"Evidence of what?" and "Evidence for what?"—too often drop from view in the rush to provide scientifically and politically useful knowledge. These questions, like Biesta's titular ask in that piece, "Who knows?" and its pair "Evidence for whom?", situate the production of evidence as part of a larger process of competing interests and implicate the self in the production and rhetorical deployment of that evidence. The latter point there in particular demonstrates that "conflict is not just between competing views 'out there'. The competition and conflict are also already on the inside" (Garrett, 2017, p. 75). Garrett continues: "Evidence has a much heavier emotional burden than normally thought. Evidence that counters belief is felt as an affective force...because that evidence induces conflict." (p. 72) Or, as Alcorn (2013) would have

it, people “do not abandon beliefs called into question by factual information; they resist modes of reasoning that threaten their identities” (p. 46) This helps us to see how the types of post-truth arguments—those asserting, say, the value of alternative facts or, really, those that suggest there was an agreed upon truth after which we now exist—that we see being made, arguments we might call intellectually arrogant, produce knowledge in the service of one’s own interest even and especially when rational knowledge might otherwise refute or undermine that knowledge, that interest. Intellectual arrogance may well be a form of “ignorance as evidence” (Garrett, 2017) which rejects the difficult knowledge of evidence that counters one’s own beliefs, values, and interests. Indeed, this is the domain of difficult knowledge: what makes it difficult is the way it implicates the self in relation to those “facts”: “The ways in which we relate to the facts of our resistance to facts, our predisposition toward comfort, and a realization of the indeterminacy of learning are the relations of difficult knowledge.” (p. 78)

Following Garrett’s assertion that he’s “not suggesting replacing any one agenda with any other agenda” (p. 77), we do not suggest here that we should necessarily replace old forms of evidence with new ones; the point of difficult knowledge is not to move past it and towards the impossible fantasy of complete knowledge (p. 76). Instead, what we’re more interested in is reorienting our (dis)positions in relation to evidence, positioning us “to understand that knowledge is something other than a part of an arsenal to deploy against a certain reality,” (p. 74) a move which we think might one way be accomplished via theology and more particularly through a theology that begins in weakness, in an acceptance of its own fundamental limitations and humility.

Weak Theology

There may be, for the social sciences in the second decade of the twenty-first century, no more difficult knowledge than that rooted in religion. This is both less and more true in specific subcategories of research on and about the human condition, we think. But to take an example that's close to our intellectual homes, we might note that Curriculum Studies has in fits and starts over the years (e.g. Pinar, 2006) come to grapple with religion and theology while still mostly leaving religious argumentation to the side. Or, differently, if we're to take Blumenfeld-Jones' (2016) argument seriously, Curriculum Studies has, like most secular institutions, left Protestant understandings (the large frame that blinds us to that which we cannot see, to borrow from Butler [2010]) centered without considering the implications of such a stance for, say epistemology or ontology. One can find, we'd note, scholars like Macdonald (1995) or Huebner (2008) or Rocha (2017) tooling at the edges with theology, but aside from some few interventions even from influential scholars, religion doesn't get, as the colloquialism goes, much burn. This is understandable, to a degree and recent work in secularisms—Asad (2003), certainly, but Jakobson and Pellegrini (2008) as well—is helpful for explicating the pretty easy march from the Enlightenment as a progressive narrative toward reason and away from superstition (read: religion) while holding onto the idea that what we understand as secular, we understand in relation to religion primarily, meaning the two flow into each other in ways we often don't much engage with. So, we'd propose here, getting religion for a bit, as it were, to see what it makes possible, understanding that a great number of people will have reason to resist—and understandably so given the repression and violence of much specifically Christian tradition in the US and beyond (see for example Armstrong, 2015 and Carroll, 2001). We also acknowledge

the apparent irony of looking toward a totalizing system (or systems) often beholden to omnipotence or omniscience in pursuit of humility. Bear with us, if you will, please.

Here we don't make fine grained distinctions between the religious and the theological (though there are clear differences in history and application); rather we choose to take up Wexler's (2013) call for a resacralization of sociological research that examines how "the old language of mystical traditions offers a new vocabulary pertinent for understanding contemporary social life" (p. 13). We don't suggest that religion has somehow fallen out of favor in society, in mirror to right wing critiques of, say, rising secularism² in its most simplistic understanding. Rather we take it as gospel that, largely and perhaps in reasonable response to past (and ongoing) repressive tendencies tied to patriarchal religion, *theological* arguments that might otherwise be useful for understanding social processes have largely fallen from the table of sociological and thus educational analyses. If we're to take a queer phenomenological approach from Ahmed (2006), then we might need to turn around from that which we've been facing and realize that the table behind us might productively be an altar, the bracketing off of which has made some things im/possible in thinking research of late. We propose, then, engagement with the difficult knowledge that our own intellectual arrogance as a field (of education broadly) has turned us away from a collective deep discussion of human reality, purpose, and action for nearly half a century (see the work of Gert Biesta and Bill Pinar for exceptions). Our way back in, we think, is through something akin to Caputo's (2006) *Theology of the Event* (often doubled as *Weak Theology*) perhaps best manifest, actually, by Blumenthal (1993) who notes that "the intertextual approach to theology cannot yield absolute truth, valid for all. It can only lead to

² Parla & Davison (2008) are helpful here. They see an intermediate step between religious societies and secular ones: laicization. They write that "laicist political arrangements may separate religion and politics, but they also may retain an official or recognized status for religion" (p. 60) for the purpose of political control. This process of laicization moves from separation to control to full disestablishment, which would be the transition from laicization to secularism. The point would be there's nuance for us in thinking about religion and, say, curriculum studies, that doesn't need to freeze itself on the two poles of theological dogmatism and secular godlessness.

partial coherence” (p. 14). We think there is room for this partial coherence to matter around the immediate moment of alternative facts. Mindful, in particular about the ways in which this engagement with the sacred, such as it might be, has the potential, as above, to exclude but hoping that the divergent positions from which we begin, could well be oriented in a way toward convergence around the utility of thinking anew with theology.

Theology of the Event

Caputo’s (2006) project—and indeed it might be ours as well in some ways—is to undermine the sense of a God who is powerful or certainly at the very least, all-powerful. Blumenthal (1993) does something similar in a reflection on how to maintain God in the midst of the dual crises of the Holocaust and child abuse; less a text about theodicy than a psalmic lamentation, he’s working under the assumption that “sustained suspicion is a religiously proper faith stance toward God³” (p. 257). Such a stance will sound rather like a treatise on approaches to research data and epistemology, we suspect, and all the better. What we want to highlight, though, is that if we’re to maintain intellectual humility to a degree that we can reengage theology fruitfully in the social sciences and curriculum theory particularly, then we’re going to have to deal with God. Sigh. Caputo works to reclaim God from the smiting model of things—so many hurricanes to call up on account of gay people—and point her in the direction of, well, deanthropomorphization. “First,” he writes, “the name of God is the name of an event rather than an entity, of a call rather than of a cause, of a provocation or a promise rather than a presence” (2006, p. 12). On this we turn to Sr. Elizabeth Johnson, a woman who got herself sideways with

³ Alison (2001) suggests in a Christian context, similarly, that “ideological suspicion is not something alien to the Gospel, but is rather close to the heart of the project...which characterizes Jesus’ presence” (p. 50). We are reminded, of course, of Sedgwick’s (2003) engagement with the hermeneutics of suspicion and her not-so-gentle goad to consider a reparative reading practice that operates differently. It is perhaps in this light that we might consider theological suspicion as epistemologically different from the paranoid, and give, oddly, the hermeneutics of suspicion a reparative read.

the last Pope for suggesting that, as Aquinas said, we suffer from a poverty of language in relation to the deity and that any naming is naming “toward God” (2011, p. 20) if it’s anything at all. Or, the symbols we use to encapsulate faith always point in the direction of something rather than representing the something itself⁴. For Caputo this means that “the weak force of God”, which is an invitation as much as anything else, “settles down in the hidden interstices of being, insinuated into the obscure crevices of being” (2006, p. 9). Fundamentally (pun intended) that means that God, if we’re to leverage weak theology for our thinking, means at most “a call that solicits and disturbs what is there” and is, at base, “an event...of this solicitation” (p. 39). There is room for debate, we think, between the construction of the invitation here and the hailing of interpellation that occurs for Althusser (1971) and produces certain versions of subjectivity; indeed we think the conversation ought to be happening more often. In any event, Caputo calls this all a move away from ontotheology and toward something else. For our purposes, we want to suggest that this most posits a way to use theology as a solicitation to consider the nature of being (and doing, and thinking) in different ways through different (even if old, ancient) lenses. Biesta models this quite well in his *Beautiful Risk of Education* (2014a) thinking through the Biblical Creation narratives to argue for education as an act of creation. The event, in this case, is the Elohim story, where being is fashioned as good, rather than conjured from nothing (as in the Yahwist Adam and Eve tale) and thus creation is more about the affirmation of, in this case, students coming into presence rather than being molded from lumps of clay or ribs or test scores.

⁴ This somewhat mirrors an early debate in Christianity where 9th century Benedictine monks—named, too perfectly, Ratramnus and Radbertus—argued over whether transubstantiation (the doctrine of the physical change of the bread and wine in Catholic services, into the body and blood of Christ) was literal or not. One had it that the change was symbolic—a bit of theological semiology adding up to a larger truth of the sacrifice of the Son for our sins; the other said it was merely accomplished through a bit of a parlor trick: the change happened, we drank blood, but God masked our eyes to the actual occurrence lest we weak willed sinners not be able to handle the implications of wine to plasma; dough to flesh. In any case, there’s much to suggest theology can turn nicely into poststructural frameworks, if we attend closely and/or long enough.

Intellectual Humility & Theologies of the Self

In the service of opening up new avenues for knowledge-making in the post-truth moment, especially those which might further diversify our sense of the possible in response to intellectual arrogance, we turn towards ourselves, reading our own stories of faith and inquiry through the lens of humility.

One consequence of coming to Caputo (and Augustine, and Walker Percy and Marilynne Robinson and a great many others) is that it becomes harder and harder to reject religion as a way of thinking and living outright. “What in us follows we do not name”, writes Dan Beachy-Quick (2016). Or Alice Fulton (2001): “Nothing will unfold for us unless we move toward what / looks to us like nothing: faith is a cascade.” Part of what was interesting about this project for me (the first author) is that it entailed taking seriously the realization that if the posts level the epistemic field, then that clears some room for taking up religious discourse, and its accompanying conceptual metaphors, as of approximate potential usefulness to conventional systematic analysis in considering essential human questions. I heard David Foster Wallace (2009) preaching: “In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship”—and not wrongly.

That required a particular kind of humbling on my part. A nominal Episcopalian (baptized Catholic; it gets confusing) growing up in Texas, the product of parochial, Catholic schools k-12 and on through an undergraduate and graduate degree, I was surrounded early and often and almost exclusively with religious—Christian—epistemologies and ethics. While skeptical of Christian claims to truth, it was the treatment of that latter realm, in class discussions and on assignments, in retreats and masses, that undid religion for me—though not without the

help of an exciting encounter with Nietzschean moral genealogy; uncritical moralizing and some pretty blatant anti-intellectualism proved too much. In the wake of these experiences, my atheism flourished, fed further by a shift towards progressive politics and reading poststructural theory for the first time (e.g., Baudrillard, Butler, Foucault) and perhaps primarily a budding interest in the fatalist/pessimist fiction of authors like Beckett, Joyce, and Cormac McCarthy⁵.

And yet, if critical/poststructural theory drew me further and further away from religion, it would also prove to be that which brought me around to it again, charitably though on different terms. Wrapping my head around Deleuze's (1996) *plane of immanence* and really taking seriously what foundational poststructural thought asks of us—for example, that there is nothing outside text (Derrida, 1998)—started to unfix me from my certainties, unbelief included. And the further I get into doctoral studies, the less compelling any kind of hard scientific atheism becomes and the more open I find myself to turning back towards religion, not perhaps as a practice of ritual and certainly not the capital-T Truth but rather as having some very worthwhile conceptual matter for thinking and living with (e.g., faith in the face of uncertainty, humility, radical compassion, etc.) All of which is to say that the unfixing I'm describing is a sort of radical acknowledgement of uncertainty, a disordering of things, and when I got to that point of utter disconcertion and incomprehension, someone like St. Augustine started to resonate: *Si comprehendis, non est deus* ("if you have understood, then it is not God.") One way of attempting to make sense of and work through concepts like ambiguity, doubt, ineffability, and mystery became looking at how central these postmodern concepts are in so much theology.

This, I imagine, is a similar path to what Caputo came to: as a poststructuralist, religion's

⁵ The role religion plays in McCarthy's work can be debated—there's certainly much there—as can the author's stance and the work's implications with respect to religious belief. Were you to argue to me now that McCarthy's work can be read convincingly as crypto- if not explicitly Christian (perhaps especially if you brought in Caputo's thought), I'd listen, but I wouldn't have then. But we're not interested here in literary criticism—the larger point is that the self mediates the production of knowledge; our move then is to call for an attendance to this phenomenon and the arrogance which may come to distort it.

theology all of a sudden becomes interesting and possible again. Or, as read through Kierkegaard, “Christianity is not to be confused with an objective truth” but is rather an existential one (Caputo, 2016, p. 154): our lives become entangled in the production of truth and religion, of all things, has admitted this for a long time in spite of our own not noticing.

Still, making a relation to difficult knowledge—and the difficulty of making religious arguments in the social sciences currently—for Garrett (2017), “means being able to recognize that there is knowledge we simultaneously do and do not want to have” (p. 24) whereby “sometimes the best lesson we can offer is that settled stories...and certainty are rather dangerous” (p. 34). We might unsettle the dangerous story that theology has no use for educational research, other than as a caution against the backwardness of faith in a patriotic god. There’s more there, humbly, in the weak event of taking up religious arguments again, we think.

The second author came to it differently, though not so differently. Cradle Catholic. Mandatory Mass attendance. Altar boy. Sunday school for public school Catholics; all-boys Catholic high school and all its trappings; retreats in college and after; Catholic school religion teacher. Powerful discourses around guilt as tied to sexuality in particular. A, perhaps, ill-considered tattoo in reflection on some Thomas Merton I was reading in graduate school. It was a dissertation study, thinking masculinity and sexuality through Foucault that probably got us here, though. While in the midst of a year at an all-boys Catholic school, wondering about the ideologies that shaped their—and my—masculinities and spiritualities, I spent time with boys whose encounters with religion had been, as mine, mostly cursory, cultural and we might say, of course, existential. And then they experienced deep loss: a classmate, dead of cancer. No way to explain it but to say that humans die, or to see the thing as somehow redeemed. Watching kids head to the chapel to mourn was powerful. So I read it as socialization; I read it as the

logical avenue that discourse made available, but I also read it, came to read it, back through the mystery made possible with, especially, feminist Catholic theology as a bulwark against the limitations of sexuality read through Augustine that permeated the place. I had an advisor who was interested in religion and not only dismissively, so it made sense to try to encounter the event of the theologically possible if only to play the believing game (Elbow, 1973) or to engage in the kinds of heterogeneous reading practices that Sedgwick (2003) suggests might allow us to think differently—neither better nor worse, but differently—about topics in front of us. What started as something along the lines of agreement with Steven Paulikas (2017), an Episcopal priest, that “only good theology can debunk bad theology” has mostly come to be: theology makes things differently possible, including engagement with the kinds of “bad theology” that have made religion mostly verboten in the social sciences of late. We can do different things, if we choose the encounter.

Coming to, Going Forward: (Self) Implications

Humility as we’ve written across both our stories requires an encounter, a Capuchin event that constitutes a “coming to” of the knowledge we possess and its limits. It matters less that one reveals this through the invocation of Christian texts which challenged his understanding of the possible with respect to religious thought, with later work in poststructural theory providing language for talking through the limits reached at the end of the epistemic road; just as another finds the encounter as one of real and human loss which pointed to the ineffability of knowledge. One implication of this study then for the work of researchers is that a renewed attendance to the particular events of knowledge-making may help elide the dangers of intellectual arrogance, opening other, humbler epistemic avenues otherwise closed-off. An openness to the event—

requiring humility in unfixing previously, sometimes dearly, held knowledge—belies its promise. “There is of course a risk”, writes Biesta (2014a). “To engage with openness and unpredictability...to be oriented toward an event that may or may not happen...means to take this risk seriously...to take the beautiful risk” (p. 140). It may be that when we’re at a loss for words, we’re able to gain knowledge in humbler ways.

A second implication centers around the role of our selves in the production of knowledge. Both stories testify⁶ to the power of our own pasts in shaping how we’ve come to think the possibility of epistemic humility. The point here is not just that particular events came to matter in our present understandings, but that our stories about these events, the knowledge we made, takes seriously the ways in which that past has come to structure our knowledge. (As one example, we note how hidden religion and Christianity in particular has come to shape much of what happens in U.S. schools today, in the ways we position students and teachers, in how we read, and of course in the language we use [Burke & Segall, 2017]). Researchers, then, would do well to spend time considering the ways in which all research is autoethnographic—not in purpose or in form perhaps but in consequence; too often arrogant thinking ignores this entirely, claiming to speak with certain superiority from a place beyond self-interest. While this self-focus affords the hope of certain epistemic protections, as scholars we know that “we do not live [or write] for ourselves”, and we think humility may help to keep this other-focus in mind while not losing sight of our own history and the biases which frame our thinking, thereby blinding us to what is outside or beyond the frame (Butler, 2010).

⁶ Another pun. It’s too easy with religion, and Christianity in particular—which speaks to its ubiquity in our purportedly secular discourse and the ways in which Judao-Christianity, though often hidden and overlooked, undergirds so much of the way we think and speak and write today, inquiry included.

Our work points then towards the possibility opened up in and through writing the self. This has long been the finding of difficult knowledge: what encounters with traumatic content or the vicissitudes of life so often necessitate is a turning back towards one's own psychic position, attending, as one commentator of Garrett's work noted, "to the inner lives of students and teachers in their encounters with the past" (Nelson, 2018, p. 480); this as a stopping through on the way to the larger work of what Garrett (2017) calls "learning to be in the world with others". We end by pointing to what our writing here opened up: it's not just that we were humbled by our own stories, and adjusted knowledge accordingly; we also made new and different knowledge possible through taking a lens of humility towards our own stories in and as research. It might be that Bernard Lonergan, the Jesuit philosopher, helps us think theologically about that humility again. He posited 'genuineness' as the developing understanding of the self as it encounters the universe around it, particularly as related to the realization that one might pursue that which (consciously) promotes development while being subject to that which (unconsciously) promotes illusion, whereby "genuineness is the admission of that tension into consciousness" (Lonergan, 1992, p. 477) and 'authenticity' is the will and ability to bridge the gap between the two. It might be that our work, in seeking humility in research and particularly through engagement with theology, is really seeking authenticity in the tension of not knowing the edges of the problems (and solutions) we might well be introducing (back) into a field.

What we've endeavored to offer in this essay is a way for epistemologies to speak back to and counter intellectual arrogance in the age of Trumpism—a version of thinking intellectual humility as a novel notion of particular significance in the post-truth era. Yes, we're post-Truth, perhaps, but not post-truth in the sense that we reject evidentiary epistemologies outright. Rather, we call for a greater humility in knowledge-making, an epistemic stance which says not "I'm

wrong” or “I’m unsure” but rather, and always, “I don’t know for certain and I don’t know everything”, which is really a call for renewed critical reflection. It’s an affirmation of the need to listen to and across difference, which may be difficult, but like Britzman and Garrett we often find the difficult things most worth working through both in teaching and research. If we’re to succeed in diversifying our sense of the possible with respect to knowledge production both within the academy and beyond it, such listening will require a commitment to generosity—a virtue increasingly scarce and, at least in our experiences, often undervalued in an academic climate bent on competition, self-promotion, and individual achievement; but, we think, a virtue at the heart of good teaching and writing and living, religious or otherwise.

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