



Digital Commons@

Loyola Marymount University
LMU Loyola Law School

Philosophy Faculty Works

Philosophy

2018

Flannery O'Connor and Religious Epistemology

Jason Baehr

Loyola Marymount University, jbaehr@lmu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/phil_fac



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Baehr, J. (2020). Flannery O'Connor and religious epistemology. *Religious Studies*, 56(3), 349–369.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412518000562>

This Article - post-print is brought to you for free and open access by the Philosophy at Digital Commons @ Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@lmu.edu.

FLANNERY O'CONNOR AND RELIGIOUS EPISTEMOLOGY

Department of Philosophy
Loyola Marymount University

What are the demands of religious inquiry? More precisely, what qualities or capacities are required for getting to the truth about religious reality? One natural, if less than illuminating, answer is: the same qualities and capacities necessary for getting to the truth about other, non-religious features of reality. Which are these?

An initial list might include a favorable network of background beliefs, well-functioning cognitive faculties, natural cognitive ability, and the intellectual skills required for good thinking and reasoning. This list, while a reasonable start, is incomplete, even as an account of the demands of non-religious knowledge.¹ For, a person can have the relevant beliefs, faculties, abilities, and skills but be *unmotivated* to use them, or be disposed to use them in the wrong way, at the wrong *time*, in the wrong *amount*, and so on. While intellectually well-equipped in certain respects, this person might be intellectually lazy, hasty, narrow-minded, or cowardly. Therefore, at least one additional item needs to be added to the list, namely, good intellectual *character* or the possession of intellectual virtues like curiosity, open-mindedness, intellectual carefulness, and intellectual courage.²

Is this an adequate account of what it takes to be a competent religious inquirer? To come at the question in a slightly different way, what should be made of the following principle?

If two people, S1 and S2, are identical in terms of the quality of their respective background beliefs, cognitive faculties, natural intellectual ability, intellectual skills, and

intellectual character, then S1 and S2 will be equally well-equipped to acquire religious knowledge.³

In the discussion that follows, I want to challenge this view of religious knowledge. I'll contend that the list above is importantly incomplete and that the principle just stated is false. The origin of my argument is the fictional narratives of the 20th century Southern Gothic writer Flannery O'Connor.⁴ My claim is that O'Connor's stories contain an interesting and plausible account of the mechanics of religious knowledge.⁵ I'll begin with an overview of three of O'Connor's stories, drawing attention to some of their key epistemic events and dynamics. Next, I'll formulate a model of religious knowledge inspired by these stories and consider its implications. Finally, I'll entertain and respond to a pair of objections.

I. The Stories

O'Connor lived from 1925-1964, dying of lupus at age 39. While best known for her short stories, she also wrote two novels, one of which will be discussed below. O'Connor's narratives are marked by violence, grotesque characterization, religious thematization, and dark comedy. These distinctive features of her work should be kept in mind as we consider selections from her short stories "Revelation" and "Parker's Back" and her first novel *Wise Blood*.⁶

In all three of the narratives just noted, the protagonist is found grappling with an item of religious knowledge. Early on she or he resists this knowledge. Over the course of the story, however, the protagonist moves from a state of epistemic *resistance* to a state of epistemic *acquiescence*, emerging with a deeper and more accurate grasp of religious reality and his or her

relation to it. In the remainder of this section, I provide an overview of the relevant stories, highlighting their key epistemic movements.

A. “Revelation”

The short story “Revelation” features a proper and self-satisfied Christian woman named Ruby Turpin. At the beginning of the story, Mrs. Turpin is assaulted in a doctor’s office waiting room and accused by her assailant of being a “wart hog from hell” (653).⁷ The remainder of the narrative tracks her struggle to reconcile this accusation with her perceived moral and spiritual standing.

At the center of “Revelation” is Mrs. Turpin’s resistance to a certain disagreeable view of herself, namely, a view according to which she occupies a relatively *low* position within the corresponding moral and spiritual hierarchies. Mrs. Turpin finds herself deeply disturbed and disoriented by this self-conception, for she prides herself on her generous, grateful, and otherwise morally “virtuous” disposition. For instance, she regularly passes time by ranking the various classes of people—rankings according to which she and her husband always fare well (albeit not *maximally* well, presumably so as not to suggest an unbecoming lack of Christian humility):

On the bottom of the heap were most colored people, not the kind she would have been if she had been one, but most of them; then next to them—not above, just away from—were the white-trash; then above them were the home-owners, and above them the home-

and-land owners, to which she and Claud belonged. Above she and Claud were people with a lot of money and much bigger houses and much more land. (636)

She also regularly praises God for making her a “good woman”:

To help anybody out that needed it was her philosophy of life. She never spared herself when she found somebody in need, whether they were white or black, trash or decent. And of all she had to be thankful for, she was most thankful that this was so. If Jesus had said, “You can be high society and have all the money you want and be thin and svelte-like, but you can’t be a good woman with it,” she would have had to say, “Well don’t make me that then. Make me a good woman and it don’t matter what else, how fat or how ugly or how poor!” Her heart rose. He had not made her [black] or white-trash or ugly! He had made her herself and given her a little of everything. Jesus, thank you! she said. Thank you thank you thank you! (642)

Mrs. Turpin’s self-satisfaction and self-righteousness run deep. The suggestion that she is in fact “a wart hog from hell” poses a mortal threat to her sense of self.

Her exalted self-conception notwithstanding, Mrs. Turpin is unable to shake the repugnant accusation. Initially, she rehearses the unfairness of it to herself. After returning home from the doctor’s office, she lies down to rest:

The instant she was flat on her back, the image of a razor-backed hog with warts on its face and horns coming out behind its ears snorted into her head. She moaned a low, quiet moan.

“I am not,” she said tearfully, “a wart hog. From hell.” But the denial had no force. The girl’s eyes and her words, even the tone of her voice, low but clear, directed only to her, brooked no repudiation. She had been singled out for the message, though there was trash in the room to whom it might justly have been applied. The full force of this fact struck her only now. There was a woman there who was neglecting her own child but she had been overlooked. The message had been given to Ruby Turpin, a respectable, hard-working, church-going woman. The tears dried. Her eyes began to burn instead with wrath. (648)

A few minutes later:

She scowled at the ceiling. Occasionally she raised her fist and made a small stabbing motion over her chest as if she was defending her innocence to invisible guests who were like the comforters of Job, reasonable-seeming but wrong. (648)

As the story progresses, it becomes clear that Mrs. Turpin is defending herself, not only to herself, but also to *God*, whom she identifies as the ultimate source of the accusation. Later in the day, while hosing down their pigs, she says “in a low fierce voice, hardly above a whisper but with the force of a shout in its concentrated fury”: “What do you send me a message like that for? ... How am I a hog and me both? How am I saved and from hell too?” (652). She continues:

“How am I hog?” she demanded. “Exactly how am I like them?” and she jabbed the stream of water at the shoats. “There was plenty of trash there. It didn’t have to be me.

“If you like trash better, go get yourself some trash then ... If trash is what you wanted why didn’t you make me trash?” She shook her fist with the hose in it and a watery snake appeared momentarily in the air. (652)

Mrs. Turpin’s anger continues to build:

“Go on,” she yelled, “call me a hog! Call me a hog again. From hell. Call me a wart hog from hell. Put that bottom rail on top ... A final surge of fury shook her and she roared, “Who do you think you are?”

The color of everything, field and crimson sky, burned for a moment with transparent intensity. The question carried over the pasture and across the highway and the cotton field and returned to her clearly like an answer from beyond the wood.

She opened her mouth but no sound came out of it. (653)

The divine rebuttal “Who do you think *you* are?” silences Mrs. Turpin’s self-righteous rant. In the final moments of the story, still standing in the pig parlor, she remains frozen as the sun sets in the distance:

She remained there with her gaze bent to [the hogs] as if she were absorbing some abysmal life-giving knowledge. At last she lifted her head ... She raised her hands from

the side of the pen in a gesture hieratic and profound. A visionary light settled in her eyes. She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of [blacks] in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away. She lowered her hands and gripped the rail of the hog pen, her eyes small but fixed unblinkingly on what lay ahead. In a moment the vision faded but she remained where she was, immobile. (654)

While the story closes with this revelation, leaving the reader to speculate about its effect on Mrs. Turpin, the fact that it has occurred at all suggests that she has, at some level, acquiesced to a new and less flattering view of herself. According to the vision, she and Claud are *last* in the kingdom of heaven and their supposed virtues are being “burned away.”

B. *Wise Blood*

Wise Blood is one of O'Connor's two published novels. It is a story about Hazel Motes, an edgy and disaffected young man who goes to outrageous lengths to resist his calling as a preacher of the Christian gospel—lengths that include founding the “Church Without Christ,” in which “the blind don't see and the lame don't walk and what's dead stays that way ... it's the church that the blood of Jesus don't foul with redemption” (59).

At the heart of Hazel's resistance is his refusal to come to terms with one item of knowledge in particular: namely, his need for redemption by Jesus Christ. He adopts at least five different strategies to avoid this awareness.

First, Hazel decides that he can avoid his need for redemption by avoiding sin. When his grandfather, “a circuit preacher” and “waspish old man who had ridden over three counties with Jesus hidden in his head like a stinger” (9-10), declares as a kind of threat that Jesus “wasn't going to leave him ever” and would “have him in the end,” Hazel becomes aware of his own “deep black wordless conviction” that “the way to avoid Jesus is to avoid sin” (11). He adopts a morally rigid and ascetic lifestyle.

Second, when some “friends ... [who] were not actually friends” tell him that he does not have a soul, he decides that another way to avoid his need for redemption is to bring himself to believe *in nothing at all*: “[H]e saw the opportunity here to get rid of [his soul] without corruption, to be converted to nothing instead of to evil” (12). Hazel proceeds to try to rid himself of any metaphysical convictions. When a taxi driver tells him that his hat makes him look like a preacher, he replies: “Listen ... get this: I don't believe in anything” (17).

Third, and at cross purposes with his first strategy, Hazel tries to convince himself and others that he doesn't believe in sin (and therefore has no need for redemption) by *actively sinning*, for example, by sleeping with a prostitute and trying to seduce the daughter of a blind

preacher: “He felt that he should have a woman, not for the sake of the pleasure in her, but to prove that he didn’t believe in sin since he practiced what was called it” (62).

Fourth, Hazel buys a beat up old car as a way fleeing any situation in which an awareness of his need for redemption begins to dawn on him. When he feels threatened by what he perceives as the genuine faith of another character, he murmurs defensively, “Nobody with a good car needs to be justified” (64).⁸ Elsewhere he says: “This is a good car ... since I’ve had it, I’ve had a place to be that I can always get away in” (65).

Fifth, Hazel founds the Church Without Christ as a way of fortifying his unbelief. Standing outside a movie theater, he begins preaching to the crowd: “I want to tell you people something. Maybe you think you’re not clean because you don’t believe. Well you are clean, let me tell you that. Every one of you people are clean and let me tell you why if you think it’s because of Jesus Christ you’re wrong. I don’t say he wasn’t crucified but I say it wasn’t for you” (31).

It is important to consider *why* Hazel would resist the opportunity to be redeemed. Unlike Ruby Turpin, Hazel is neither self-satisfied nor self-righteous. Therefore, the prospect of needing to be redeemed is not an affront to his pride like it is for Mrs. Turpin. However, Hazel does appear to be in the grip of a subtler aspect or variety of pride. In particular, he is deeply fearful of and resistant to the *vulnerability, intimacy, and loss of control* entailed by a personal encounter with Christ the Redeemer. Such an encounter would force him to forfeit his autonomy, dealing a fatal blow to his self-possession.

That this threat is at the heart of Hazel’s resistance is evident in at least a couple of ways. In one of his earliest confrontations with the prospect of redemption, Hazel “saw Jesus move from tree to tree in the back of his mind, a wild ragged figure motioning him to turn around and

come off into the dark where he was not sure of his footing, where he might be walking on the water and not know it and then suddenly know it and drown. Where he wanted to stay was in Eastrod with his two eyes open, and his hands always handling the familiar thing, his feet on the known track, his tongue not too loose.” (11) Jesus is here presented as a threatening, destabilizing presence; what he threatens is Hazel’s need for control and self-possession.

Hazel’s resistance to a redemptive encounter with Christ also shows itself in his apparent fear of being *known* or *seen*. Hazel praises his car as being “something that moved fast, *in privacy*, to the place you wanted to be” (105; emphasis added). And when the girl he is trying to seduce says “in a playful voice,” “I see you,” he “jump[s] violently” and yells “Git away!” (70).

As the story unfolds, Hazel’s resistance begins to wane.⁹ He becomes captivated by and shows a kind of intense reverence for a fellow street preacher named Asa Hawkes, who is said to have blinded himself in a demonstration of the authenticity of his faith. And he finds himself mystified and disturbed when he learns that Hawkes is father to an illegitimate daughter (67-69). Hazel’s weakening resistance is also evident in his failures of nerve. He finds himself unable to follow through with his plan to seduce the preacher’s daughter (70). And he denies membership in the fledging Church Without Christ to some potential followers whose enthusiasm about his preaching is motivated by self-interest rather than a commitment to truth (88).

More notably, toward the end of the novel, Hazel follows through with the act that (it turns out) Asa Hawkes was unable to bring to completion: he blinds himself by rubbing lime into his eyes. In doing so, Hazel trades an immediate sensory connection with the material world for enhanced powers of spiritual perception. As O’Connor herself remarks in one of her letters: “When Haze blinds himself he turns entirely to an inner vision ... where he started out preaching the Church Without Christ he ends up with Christ without a church” (921). This new perceptual

mode is in sharp contrast with the familiar and safe sensory mode that Hazel depends on earlier in the story to avoid the “wild ragged figure” who moves “tree to tree in the back of his mind” (11).

Hazel also begins performing acts of penance. He wraps barbed wire around his chest (126) and puts rocks and broken glass in his shoes (125). His landlady, Mrs. Flood, accuses him of behaving like a monk (123) and a saint (127), and says: “You must believe in Jesus or you wouldn’t do these foolish things” (127). In contrast with his reaction to similar assertions made by other characters earlier in the story, Hazel presently makes no attempt to deny a spiritual interpretation of his actions. Indeed, when Mrs. Flood insists on knowing why he behaves in these ways, his response is: “To pay” (125). In the letter referenced above, O’Connor sheds light on the spiritual significance: “The penance are certainly acts of assertion even though they are instinctive. Haze is here asserting his wise blood in the ultimate way. When he says he does it to pay, he means to pay his part of the debt of Redemption” (921).

The story concludes with Mrs. Flood holding Hazel’s recently expired body. She closes her eyes and “sees,” also via spiritual perception, the figure of Hazel Motes beckoning her onto a religious journey of her own:

The outline of a skull was plain under his skin and the deep burned eye sockets seemed to lead into the dark tunnel where he had disappeared. She leaned closer and closer to his face, looking deep into them, trying to see how she had been cheated or what had cheated her, but she couldn’t see anything. She shut her eyes and saw the pinpoint of light [earlier identified as the star of Bethlehem] but so far away that she could not hold it steady in her mind. She felt as if she were blocked at the entrance of something. She sat staring with

her eyes shut, into his eyes, and felt as if she had finally got to the beginning of something she couldn't begin, and she saw him moving farther and farther away, farther and farther into the darkness until he was the pinpoint of light. (131)

C. "Parker's Back"

"Parker's Back" is a short story featuring another malcontent, ill-tempered young man, O.E. Parker. The story centers on Parker's mysterious compulsion to get a large tattoo of a "Byzantine Christ" on the only part of his body not already covered in ink: the center of his back. Like Ruby Turpin and Hazel Motes, Parker resists, or at least exhibits deep ambivalence about, a significant and religiously-charged item of self-knowledge. By contrast with *Wise Blood*, however, the full content of this knowledge is not revealed until the end of the story.

It is apparent from the outset of the story that Parker is profoundly deficient in self-understanding. In the story's opening lines, he finds himself unable to comprehend why he remains with his wife Sarah Ruth:

She was plain, plain. The skin on her face was as thin and drawn as tight as an onion and her eyes were grey and sharp like the points of two ice-picks. Parker understood why he had married her—he couldn't have got her any other way—but he couldn't understand why he stayed with her now. She was pregnant and pregnant women were not his favorite kind. Nevertheless, he stayed as if she had him conjured. He was puzzled and ashamed of himself. (655)

A short while later, the narrator observes: “He could account for her one way or another; it was himself he could not understand” (655).

Parker’s lack of self-understanding appears tied to his general malaise, the origins of which trace back to an experience in his adolescence. When Parker was fourteen, he attended a fair, where he beheld a man tattooed “from head to foot”: “The man, who was small and sturdy, moved about on the platform, flexing his muscles so that the arabesque of men and beasts and flowers on his skin appeared to have a subtle motion of its own. Parker was filled with emotion, lifted up as some people are when the flag passes” (658). This experience, while moving Parker deeply, also left him with a sense of existential anxiety:

Parker had never before felt the least motion of wonder in himself. Until he saw the man at the fair, it did not enter his head that there was anything out of the ordinary about the fact that he existed. Even then it did not enter his head, but a peculiar unease settled in him. It was as if a blind boy had been turned so gently in a different direction that he did not know his destination had been changed. (658)

Like Hazel Motes, Parker is fiercely resistant to being known by or beholden to another person. He is disturbed by the “all-demanding eyes” of the Byzantine Christ he gets permanently inscribed on his flesh: “[T]hough he could not summon up the exact look of those eyes, he could still feel their penetration. He felt as though, under their gaze, he was as transparent as the wing of a fly” (669). At several points in the story, he worries that someone (or something, like “the navy or the government or religion”) is watching or “trailing” him (661; 664; 673). And he has a

principled resistance to getting “tied up legally” with women and desires to “bring Sarah Ruth to heel” (665).

Parker’s fear of intimacy is bound up with how he thinks and feels about his own name. Not long after meeting the woman that would become his wife, Sarah Ruth asks him what the “O.E.” in his name stands for. Parker is reluctant to share this information with her or anyone:

He had never revealed the name to any man or woman, only to the files of the navy and the government, and it was on his baptismal record which he got at the age of a month ... When the name leaked out of the navy files, Parker narrowly missed killing the man who used it. (662)

Parker’s decision to get a tattoo of “the flat stern Byzantine Christ with all-demanding eyes” is more than a little puzzling. While he hopes it might command the respect of Sarah Ruth, he is no friend of religion. When Parker was younger, his mother took him to a religious revival: “When he saw the big lighted church, he jerked out of her grasp and ran. The next day he lied about his age and joined the navy” (658). When the tattoo artist inquires whether he has “gone and got religion,” he responds, “Naw ... I ain’t got no use for that. A man can’t save his self from whatever it is he don’t deserve none of my sympathy” (669). And when some men at a bar mock him for the new tattoo, asking whether he’s “got religion and is witnessing for Jesus,” he responds, “Not on your life” (671).

Once the tattoo is complete, Parker spends time “examining his soul.” The image on his back has failed to improve his self-understanding. Yet he finds himself somehow under its spell:

He saw [his soul] as a spider web of facts and lies that was not at all important to him but which appeared to be necessary in spite of his opinion. The eyes that were now forever on his back were eyes to be obeyed. He was as certain of it as he had ever been of anything. (672)

Confused and discontent, Parker returns home to show Sarah Ruth his new tattoo. When he arrives, she demands that he say his full name before she will let him in the door. He refuses several times. Upon a final request, he relents. “Obadiah,” he whispers. Immediately, Parker’s inner world is transformed: “all at once he felt the light pouring through him, turning his spider web soul into a perfect arabesque of colors, a garden of trees and birds and beasts.” “Obadiah Elihue,” he continues (673).

To understand the significance of this moment, it is important to note the literal meaning of Parker’s first and middle names: “Obadiah” means “servant of God”; and “Elihue” means “my God is he.” Accordingly, in this mysterious moment of self-disclosure, Parker finally gains the understanding of himself that has been eluding him since adolescence. His soul, no longer a “web of facts and lies,” appears to him like the skin of the tattooed man at the fair, a magnificent and awe-inspiring panorama. An image of Christ emblazoned on his back, Parker confesses his true identity as an obedient servant of God.

II. The Model

The primary task of this paper is to extrapolate a model of religious knowledge from these bizarre yet strangely compelling stories. This could seem like a quixotic undertaking. Can

these fantastical characters and narratives really serve as the basis for a plausible model of religious knowledge? I believe they can. O'Connor takes familiar and realistic human impulses and develops dramatic, large-scale renderings of them. While the renderings themselves may be unrealistic, the basic psychological impulses they illustrate are not. O'Connor touches on this point in her essay "The Fiction Writer and His Country":

When you can assume your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal ways of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures.” (806-5)

My concern here is with the familiar and realistic human impulses and tendencies that O'Connor dramatically amplifies in an effort to awaken the moral and spiritual sensibilities of her readers.¹⁰ As will become evident below, nothing in my argument hangs on the (implausible) suggestion that her characters or what happens in her stories bear a literal approximation to real people or the actual world.

We can begin to formulate an O'Connor-inspired model of religious knowledge by noting a pattern exhibited by all three of the stories described above:

(A) At the outset of the story, the protagonist is presented with an opportunity to acquire knowledge of a religious claim or cluster of claims that is bearing down on his or her consciousness in a more or less explicit way. For Ruby Turpin, the claims include something like “I too am a sinner” and “My status in the kingdom of God is not what

I expected.” For Hazel Motes: “I am not clean” and “I need to be redeemed by Jesus Christ.” And for O.E. Parker: “I am called to obey Christ” and “My truest identity is that of ‘Obadiah’ or ‘servant of God.’”

(B) These claims are threatening to the characters in question: they represent a profound affront to some of their deeper cares and concerns. Mrs. Turpin prides herself on her (supposedly) elevated moral and spiritual status. Hazel is fiercely concerned with autonomy, control, and privacy, all of which are threatened by the prospect of a redemptive encounter with Christ. Parker’s similar desire for epistemic invulnerability and resistance to personal intimacy are threatened by a looming religious identity. While somewhat varied, these cares and concerns can be gathered together under a concept of “human pride” understood as a *misguided resistance to a range of human needs, limitations, and weaknesses, including moral imperfections, a lack of ultimate control, and a need for love and support from other persons*.¹¹ Accordingly, in each of the stories, the protagonist is confronted with an intense *conflict* between (i) certain deep-seated prideful impulses and (ii) an impending religious revelation.

(C) The characters initially respond to this conflict by *resisting*, to a greater or lesser extent, the impending knowledge. Mrs. Turpin delivers, first to herself and then to God, a vigorous defense of her moral and spiritual propriety. Hazel goes to extraordinary lengths to keep at bay his awareness of his need for redemption. And

Parker, while reluctantly acquiescing to the compulsion to get the religious tattoo, professes unbelief and mocks religion.

(D) Ultimately, however, the pride of these characters gives way, at least enough for the knowledge to take hold. Mrs. Turpin receives a divine revelation according to which she and Claud are “least” in the kingdom of heaven and their supposed virtues are meritless. Hazel blinds himself to enhance his spiritual vision and begins willfully participating in his own redemption. And Parker, in confessing for the first time his identity as “servant of God,” acquires the self-understanding he has sought for so long.

It is unlikely that O’Connor’s interest in telling these stories reflected a concern with what she took to be rare or idiosyncratic human proclivities or conduct. Rather, as indicated above, she presumably took herself to be portraying what she conceived of as deeply human impulses and reactions to the prospect of religious knowledge. The present claim is that a fairly general and plausible account of the mechanics of religious knowledge can be derived from the narrative pattern just identified.

The model begins as follows:

- (1) Human beings often are motivated by a range of prideful cares and concerns.
- (2) The prospect of God’s existence is inimical to these cares and concerns.

Concerning (1), a resistance to owning our moral flaws, a desire for ultimate control, and seeking autonomy and invulnerability in relation to other persons are familiar human tendencies (for a related discussion, see Plantinga 2007: Ch. 7). Therefore, claim (1) enjoys considerable plausibility. It is worth noting, however, that the plausibility or scope of (1) may vary to a significant extent from one place or time to another. For instance, cultures that exhibit a healthy respect for human limitations or that do not uphold autonomy as a personal or political ideal may be less inclined toward at least some of the relevant cares and concerns. In contexts like these, the model may have limited application.¹²

Claim (2) is extremely plausible given the conception of God that O'Connor, a devout Catholic, subscribed to.¹³ According to the Judeo-Christian tradition, there is no room for self-righteousness among the members of the human tribe, for "all have sinned and fall short of the glory God" (Rom. 3:23 RSV). That is, all persons stand in need of moral and spiritual redemption, which requires a divine encounter. God is also a mortal threat to the human desires for epistemic invulnerability, autonomy, and control. Ashamed of his sin, and resistant to God's penetrating gaze, Adam sought to hide from God in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3). And Jesus declares to his followers: "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Mat. 16:24-25 RSV). For these and related reasons, there is a deep principled conflict between the very character or identity of the Judeo-Christian God and the cares and concerns characteristic of human pride.

This conflict has been noted by some contemporary philosophers of religion. Paul Moser asserts that we "typically favor idols over a perfectly authoritative and loving God given our penchant for maintaining authority or lordship, over our lives. Our typical attitude is thus: I will

live my life *my way*, to get *what* I want, *when* I want it” (2008: 104). Similarly: “Typically we reassign, in effect, God’s supreme authority to *ourselves*, thereby seeking to be ultimately *self-governing* and *self-defining*. This involves a kind of *self-assertion* that disregards the supreme authority of God” (102). Alvin Plantinga, in a discussion of “pride, that aboriginal sin,” makes a similar observation:

And God himself, the source of my very being, can also be a threat. In my prideful desire for autonomy and self-sufficiency I can come to resent the presence of someone upon whom I depend for my every breath and by comparison with whom I am small potatoes indeed. I can therefore come to hate him too. I want to be autonomous, beholden to no one. Perhaps this is the deepest root of the condition of sin. (Plantinga 2000: 208)

Finally, and from the opposite side of the theistic aisle, Thomas Nagel’s candid acknowledgment of his own “cosmic authority problem” – which he surmises is “not a rare condition and ... is responsible for much of the scientism and reductionism in our time” – also illustrates the tension between the desire for autonomy and the very possibility of God’s existence:

I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn’t just that I don’t believe in God and, naturally, hope that I’m right in my belief. It’s that I hope there is no God! I don’t want there to be a God; I don’t want the universe to be like that. (1997: 130)

The next two claims constitutive of the model address some of the negative epistemic consequences that can arise from the combination (1) and (2):

- (3) In light of the threat that God poses to their prideful cares and concerns, human beings often engage in intellectual and other forms of conduct that *distort* their evidential perspective on matters pertaining to God (e.g. the status and implications of God's existence).
- (4) Moreover, if God exists, it is reasonable to expect that God might *withhold* theistic evidence from a person in response to the person's prideful posture (e.g. as a way of respecting the person's autonomy or allowing the person to discover the futility of life apart from God).¹⁴

According to (3), our prideful impulses can lead us to engage in activity (e.g., ignoring, suppressing, or misrepresenting evidence that conflicts with these impulses or putting ourselves in situations in which these impulses are likely to go unchallenged) that skews our epistemic perspective on theistic matters. Here, we distort our own perspectives, whether directly or indirectly, and we do so in a direct or immediate way. Claim (4) identifies a related but different way in which human pride might lead to epistemic distortion. The claim is that, were God to exist, God might *withhold* theistic evidence as a way of respecting our desire to be left alone or helping us to see the futility of radical autonomy. Again, while (3) and (4) capture ways that human pride can lead to a distorted epistemic perspective on theistic matters, (3) emphasizes

distorting effects brought about by us, while (4) emphasizes distorting effects that originate with God's response to our prideful impulses.

How plausible are these claims? Claim (3) enjoys considerable support from *within* the Judeo-Christian perspective. In his Epistle to the Romans, for instance, the Apostle Paul charges unbelievers with "suppress[ing] the truth" about God's "eternal power and deity," truth that "has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made," that is, in the created natural order. Such persons, he says, while "claiming to be wise," have become "fools" (Rom. 1:18-23 RSV). According to Paul, considerable evidence for God's "eternal power and deity" is available to all, but this evidence is suppressed or distorted by those who are resistant to God.

Once we step outside this theological framework, however, assessing (3) becomes more complicated. Its plausibility depends in part on what counts as "often." Furthermore, the *degree* of distortion wrought by pride may depend in part on whether theism is true. By hypothesis, human pride involves an exaggerated and inappropriate concern with self-righteousness, ultimate control, autonomy, epistemic vulnerability, and the like. But *how* exaggerated or inappropriate these are—or the precise *ways* in which they are exaggerated—may depend on whether a holy, powerful, authoritative, and omniscient God exists. These complications notwithstanding, there surely is something to the idea that if a person is in the grip of the sorts of prideful impulses at issue, and recognizes, at some level, that the prospect of God's existence is a threat to these impulses, this conflict might compel the person, whether consciously or otherwise, to comport himself in ways that leave him with a skewed evidential perspective on theistic matters.¹⁵ This is the gist of (3).

Plantinga and Moser make similar observations. For Plantinga, knowledge of God is mediated via the "sensus divinitatis," the proper functioning of which can be impeded by sin:

“[T]he deliverances of the *sensus divinitatis*, muffled as they already are, can easily be suppressed and impeded. That can happen in various ways: for example, by deliberately or semi-deliberately turning one’s attention away from them” (2000: 215). For Moser, the primary form of theistic evidence is a call to divine fellowship manifested in a person’s conscience. Individual persons are free to attend and submit to this call or to suppress and ignore it. Moser describes a rationale for resisting this call as follows:

I may not *want* to yield on this front, because giving ground here would seem to challenge my very self-definition and everything else I have supposedly self-achieved and credited to myself. I would then be left with a serious cognitive-volitional disconnect, because I would then *apprehend* correctly that I *should* yield to God’s call but still remain *unwilling* to yield to God’s call. My will would then be out of line with what I have apprehended correctly regarding God’s authoritative will, namely, that it is authoritative for myself and other humans. In that case, I may very well try to sidestep the disconnect by denying that I have actually apprehended God’s call. I would then purchase cognitive-volitional coherence at the price of denying what I have actually apprehended (Moser 2008: 77-78; emphasis in the original).

For Plantinga and Moser, a conflict between a person’s will and considerations telling in favor of God’s existence or character can lead the person to avoid or distort these considerations, thereby undermining the person’s evidential perspective.

Claim (4) is somewhat easier to assess. It brings to mind William James’s claim in “The Will to Believe” that the “desire for a certain kind of truth ... brings about that special truth’s

existence” (1907: 24). To adapt one of James’s illustrations, suppose person A is interested in forming a friendship with person B, but that A is reluctant to act on this inclination unless she first knows that B has a similar desire. Person A might never get the evidence she desires, for B in turn might be reluctant to reveal her interest in befriending A unless she senses that A herself is likely to be receptive to it. The general point is that persons sometimes refrain from revealing facts about themselves unless they know that the person to whom they are proposing to reveal these facts is likely to be receptive to them.¹⁶ While such reluctance can be due to factors such as self-protection, this is not a requirement. Again, a person might refrain from revealing certain facts about herself out of *respect* for what she suspects or knows to be another person’s lack of interest or positive disinterest in those facts.

This is largely the idea behind (4). The claim, again, is that God might withhold theistic evidence out of respect for a person’s volitional opposition to God (à la Nagel) or as a way of allowing the person to discover the emptiness of life apart from God. While this perspective enjoys support from within the Judeo-Christian framework, one need not accept this framework to find it plausible.

What does the model as developed thus far indicate about how a person might *overcome* the epistemic obstacles identified in (3) and (4)? That is, what might a person who is aware of having the relevant prideful impulses, and who cannot rule out the possibility that they are vitiating her epistemic perspective on theistic matters, do to mitigate their effects?

O’Connor’s stories are not especially helpful on this point. Her characters tend to be brought to their moral and spiritual senses, not primarily by their own efforts or attitudes, but rather on account of other, largely external factors (e.g. violence, illness, or the persistence of divine grace).¹⁷ However, if one wants to acquire religious knowledge but would prefer not to

have to suffer the travails of a Ruby Turpin or Hazel Motes, what course of action or posture might one adopt?

One fairly obvious answer is: a posture of *humility*. By humility I do not mean *intellectual* humility. The idea is not that a person in the relevant situation should be quick to admit her *epistemic* limitations and mistakes (though of course this might be helpful as well). Rather, I am referring to a more general and characteristically *moral* orientation, namely, an orientation whereby one *readily acknowledges and “owns” such limitations as one’s moral imperfections, one’s lack of ultimate control, and one’s need for the company and love of other persons*.¹⁸ Our model can thus be extended as follows:

(5) Humility is an antidote to pride.

(6) Therefore, if one possesses the relevant prideful cares and concerns, one’s evidential perspective on matters pertaining to God is likely, other things being equal, to be better off if one adopts and acts from a posture of humility.

Claim (5) is uncontroversial, especially given the concepts of pride and humility employed here. Indeed, as we have characterized these states, the cares and concerns characteristic of pride are a matter of inappropriately neglecting or resisting certain human limitations, and humility is a matter of appropriately recognizing and accepting the same.

Claim (6) also is uncontroversial. It says that given the deleterious effects of pride on one’s capacity for acquiring knowledge of God, a posture opposite of pride can serve as a proper antidote to these effects, other things being equal. This follows straightforwardly from (1) – (5).

The O’Connor-inspired model of religious knowledge can now be stated in its entirety:

- (1) Human beings often are motivated by a range of prideful cares and concerns.
- (2) The prospect of God's existence is inimical to these cares and concerns.
- (3) In light of the threat that God poses to their prideful cares and concerns, human beings often engage in intellectual and other forms of conduct that *distort* their evidential perspective on matters pertaining to God (e.g. the status and implications of God's existence).
- (4) Moreover, if God exists, it is reasonable to expect that God might *withhold* theistic evidence from a person in response to the person's prideful posture (e.g. as a way of respecting the person's autonomy or allowing the person to discover the futility of life apart from God).
- (5) Humility is an antidote to pride.
- (6) Therefore, if one possesses the relevant prideful cares and concerns, one's evidential perspective on matters pertaining to God is likely, other things being equal, to be better off if one adopts and acts from a posture of humility.

Note that nothing about this model presupposes or even favors the truth of theism.

Indeed, while O'Connor's stories presuppose the existence of God (divine grace is an active, if elusive and mysterious, force in nearly all of them), the model we have extrapolated from these stories should be acceptable, not merely to the theist, but also to the agnostic and atheist.¹⁹ In accepting the model, an agnostic or atheist might reason as follows:

I agree that many people are bent on human pride, as O'Connor characterizes it. And it isn't difficult to imagine that, to the extent that this is the case, their perspective on theistic matters might be evidentially compromised, either because they might themselves distort this perspective, or because, were God to exist, God might withhold some relevant evidence. Therefore, if one also cares deeply about acquiring genuine knowledge of God, then to the extent that one suspects that one might be in the grip of the relevant prideful impulses, it would behoove one to try to adopt a posture of humility—humility being an antidote to human pride.

Of course, if the agnostic or atheist in question locates *himself* in the class of prideful persons, then he may find the model *motivationally* objectionable (the same can and should be said for the prideful theist). But there is nothing in his commitment to agnosticism or atheism *per se* that should prevent him from embracing it.

III. Implications of the Model

The paper began with a list of the qualities or capacities that might equip a person to acquire religious knowledge. All of the items on this list (*viz.*, background beliefs, cognitive faculties, natural cognitive ability, intellectual skills, and intellectual character) were robustly *cognitive* or *intellectual* in nature: they are the sorts of qualities and capacities an epistemologist might be expected to identify as important for acquiring knowledge (whether religious or otherwise).

From this list we derived the following principle:

If two people, S1 and S2, are identical in terms of the quality of their respective background beliefs, cognitive faculties, natural intellectual ability, intellectual skills, and intellectual character, then S1 and S2 will be equally well-equipped to acquire religious knowledge.

We are now in a position to identify a shortcoming of this way of thinking about religious knowledge.

According to the O'Connor-inspired model, whether a person is well-equipped to acquire religious knowledge is not strictly a function of her epistemic or cognitive abilities or virtues.²⁰ Rather, it is also a function of her *moral* character. Her fitness for religious knowledge is likely to be negatively affected to the extent that she is self-righteous or possesses an exaggerated concern for control, autonomy, epistemic invulnerability, and related states. And her fitness is likely to be enhanced to the extent that she is appropriately accepting of her moral, practical, and similar limitations and weaknesses. Put another way, in the domain of religious knowledge, *general* or *moral* humility functions as an *epistemic* or *intellectual* virtue.

This is a surprising and potentially counterintuitive finding. While it is uncontroversial to think of *intellectual* humility, whether in relation to religious knowledge or other forms of knowledge, as an intellectual virtue, the idea that a proper acceptance of our *moral and related practical limitations* should be knowledge-conductive is likely to strike many as puzzling at best and misguided at worst. What we have found, however, is that because the very idea of the Judeo-Christian God is at odds with certain widespread human cares and concerns, and because of how this tension might lead to the distortion and undermining of a person's evidential

perspective on theistic matters, moral humility, which mitigates the offending cares and concerns, can indeed play a broad and salutary epistemic role.

This conclusion poses an obvious problem for the way of thinking about religious knowledge proposed at the outset of the paper. Again, it shows that a person of extraordinary cognitive or intellectual excellence might be ill-equipped to acquire knowledge of God if this person is deficient in moral humility. Similarly, though two persons, S1 and S2, might be identical in terms of the quality of their respective background beliefs, cognitive faculties, natural intellectual ability, intellectual skills, and intellectual character, if S1 is in the grip of human pride, and S2 is morally humble, then S2 will be better equipped than S1 to acquire religious knowledge. Contra the principle above, S1 and S2 will not be *equally* well-equipped.

IV. Objections and Replies

I turn in this final section to consider a pair of objections to my argument and to offer a pair of replies to each one.

It might be objected, first, that the appeal to moral humility is *unnecessary*—that a person might just as effectively mitigate the negative epistemic effects of pride by *other, more familiar, and strictly intellectual or cognitive* means. For instance, suppose I care about acquiring religious knowledge, know that I tend to have strong impulses in the direction of human pride, and understand that these impulses could get in the way of my epistemic goal. Instead of trying to become more accepting of my moral and other practical limitations, I might opt instead, when thinking about theistic matters, to double down on my efforts at *epistemic* vigilance and conscientiousness. I might carefully monitor my thinking in this domain, including how I direct

my attention, the sorts of inferences I am tempted to draw, and so on. If these efforts are successful at correcting for my prideful impulses, the need for greater moral humility might never arise. According to the objection, this undermines the suggestion that something other than cognitive abilities or virtues is important to the acquisition of religious knowledge.

My reply to this objection is twofold. First, the objection is not inconsistent with the model defended here. Claim (6) says that humility is *an* antidote to the cares and concerns characteristic of human pride; it does not claim that humility is the *only* antidote. What is important, for the purposes of the model, is that moral humility be capable of improving a person's evidential perspective on a reasonably wide scale. If the model is right that human pride is relatively widespread, and that moral humility can serve to mitigate its negative epistemic effects, then the model retains its force: it remains plausible to think that moral humility can function as an intellectual virtue in the domain of theistic knowledge. This is entirely consistent with the idea that further efforts at intellectual vigilance, conscientiousness, carefulness, and the like might also help combat the negative epistemic effects of human pride.

Second, while this matter cannot be settled here, I find it implausible to think that further efforts at intellectual vigilance and so on are likely to mitigate the negative epistemic effects of human pride, such that any significant need for moral humility is eliminated. Compare (i) a person who seeks to mitigate the epistemic effects of her prideful impulses strictly by means of further intellectual vigilance and conscientious with (ii) a person who does the same *and* makes serious and efficacious attempts to accept her moral faults, lack of ultimate control, and need to be known and cared for by others. Plausibly, the second person's epistemic perspective on theistic matters is less likely (other things being equal) to be clouded or contaminated by her pride compared with that of the first person. An explanation for this is readily available: moral

humility strikes at the *root* of human pride, while intellectual vigilance and conscientiousness address its epistemic *symptoms*. Therefore, we need not expect an exercise of intellectual vigilance and conscientiousness to obviate any need for moral humility.

A second objection begins with the observation that the cares and concerns of *pride* are not the only ones that might bear on a person's evidential perspective on theistic matters. Indeed, a more familiar observation in this vicinity is that many people have a deep-seated *desire for immortality* or intense *fear of death* and that these impulses can and do have a detrimental effect (e.g. through the mechanism of wishful thinking) on the quality of their thinking and reasoning about theistic matters (Freud 1961; Becker 1997). What should we make of these apparently conflicting impulses and their epistemic implications? One reply might be that the pro-theistic distorting effects of a desire for immortality *cancel out* the anti-theistic distorting effects of human pride, such that moral humility does *not* function as an intellectual virtue, at least in the person who is motivated by impulses of both sorts.

This objection is problematic on two counts. First, it is no more plausible to think that the epistemically distorting effects of, say, a desire for immortality cancel out or eliminate the need for moral humility than it is to think that the potentially beneficial effects of moral humility negate the epistemic value of greater intellectual vigilance or conscientiousness. Rather, in the latter case, both moral humility *and* intellectual vigilance or conscientiousness are worth exercising. Accordingly, to the extent that a person has reason to think that her assessment of religious claims might be skewed on account of her desire for immortality or intense fear of death, she should manifest intellectual vigilance and conscientiousness in her thinking about religious matters. If the same person is also susceptible to self-righteous impulses or has an intense desire for control or autonomy, then, according to the argument put forth here, she should

also pursue greater moral humility. There is no logical or necessary psychological tension, let alone any contradiction, between these prescriptions. The call to moral humility is *not* a call to intellectual laxity or indifference; it does not in any way imply that the prideful person ought to lower her epistemic standards in her thinking about God.

Second, there is reason to think that moral humility can, rather than compound any negative epistemic implications of a desire for immortality, actually serve to mitigate these effects. While I do not wish to suggest that a desire for immortality or fear of extinction is irrational in the way that, say, a desire for ultimate control or complete autonomy is irrational, it is not difficult to imagine that moral humility, as we are thinking of it here, might go some way toward mitigating the sting of mortality. If there is no afterlife, this is a major human limitation. As such, the morally humble person will be better equipped to accept this limitation, whether understood as a mere possibility, probability, or fact. If so, moral humility can serve to mitigate the negative epistemic effects both of a desire for immortality and the various cares and concerns characteristic of human pride. In this way, the desire for immortality underscores, rather than negates, the need for moral humility.

V. Conclusion

I have argued that moral humility can function as an epistemic virtue in relation to theistic knowledge. While this finding is significant in its own right, it also has traction beyond religious epistemology. I will conclude by briefly noting some of its potential ramifications.

First, there is reason to think that moral humility can function as an epistemic virtue, not just in relation to theistic knowledge, but also in relation to other kinds of knowledge. Given the

myriad ways in which human beings are limited, together with a familiar resistance to acknowledging these limitations, moral humility often is critical to self-knowledge. That is, whether a person knows her limitations is likely to depend in no small part on the extent to which she is open to recognizing and accepting that they exist.²¹ Moral humility is also importantly related to interpersonal knowledge. In keeping with the Jamesian point noted above, people are less likely to reveal important facts about themselves to people they consider arrogant or bent on concealing their flaws and limitations. Conversely, people who are comfortable with and willing to acknowledge their flaws are in a better position to acquire important information about others.

Nor do these points apply only to the virtue of humility. Other moral virtues also can have salutary epistemic effects. Compassion and empathy, for instance, can provide access to important facts about the mental states of others, for example, the character of another person's suffering or why a person views the world the way she does. Like the connection between moral humility and theistic knowledge, these connections have received little attention within contemporary virtue theory or epistemology.²²

Finally, the main argument of this paper may also have broader applications within the philosophy of religion.²³ One such application is to the problem of divine hiddenness (Schellenberg 2015), wherein it is claimed by some that a person's lacking sufficient evidence for God's existence is, by itself, evidence that God does not exist. The argument might also be relevant to an understanding of the project of natural theology (Craig and Moreland 2012), to meta-ethical debates about God's relationship to morality (Adams 2002), and to grappling with the problem of evil (where it might be used to buttress the increasingly popular defensive strategy of "skeptical theism" and in developing what William Rowe has called "the Moorean Shift" [Dougherty and McBrayer 2014]). While these applications cannot be developed here, it

should be clear enough that the O'Connor inspired model of religious knowledge might have some significant philosophical reverberations.²⁴

REFERENCES

- Adams, Robert. 2002. *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (Oxford: OUP).
- Baehr, Jason. 2011. *The Inquiring Mind: On Intellectual Virtues and Virtue Epistemology* (Oxford: OUP).
- Bailey, Olivia. Forthcoming. "Empathy and Testimonial Trust," *Philosophy*.
- Becker, Ernest. 1997. *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press).
- Craig, William Lane and J.P. Moreland. 2012. *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell).
- Dougherty, Trent and Justin McBrayer. 2014. *Skeptical Theism: New Essays* (Oxford: OUP).
- Fantl, Jeremy and Matthew McGrath. 2009. *Knowledge in an Uncertain World* (Oxford: OUP).
- Freud, Sigmund. 1961. *The Future of an Illusion* (New York: Doubleday Anchor).
- James, William. 1907. *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Longmans, Green, & Company).
- Moser, Paul. 2008. *The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology* (Cambridge: CUP).
- Moser, Paul. 2010. *The Evidence for God: Religious Knowledge Reexamined* (Cambridge: CUP).
- Nagel, Thomas. 1997. *The Last Word* (Oxford: OUP).
- Nemoianu, V. Martin. 2015. "Pascal on Divine Hiddenness," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 55/3: pp. 325-343.
- O'Connor, Flannery. 1988. *Collected Works* (New York: Library of America).

Plantinga, Alvin. 2000. *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: OUP).

Schellenberg, J.L. 2015. *The Hiddenness Argument: Philosophy's New Challenge to Belief in God* (Oxford: OUP).

Stump, Eleonore. 2010. *Wandering in Darkness* (Oxford: OUP).

Whitcomb, Dennis, Heather Battaly, Jason Baehr, and Daniel Howard-Snyder. 2017.

“Intellectual Humility: Owning Our Limitations,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 94.3: pp. 509-539.

Zagzebski, Linda. 1996. *Virtues of the Mind* (Cambridge: CUP).

¹ Throughout the paper I'll be referring to the “demands” of “religious knowledge.” By “demands” I am not thinking of the *defining* or *constitutive elements* of religious knowledge. Rather, as will become apparent, I am thinking more about certain personal or characterological background conditions conducive to religious knowledge. Moreover, as will also become apparent, I am thinking of “religious knowledge” in broad terms, such that it includes, for instance, certain forms of *self*-knowledge that have clear religious or theistic implications.

² For further discussion of these epistemic qualities and capacities, see Zagzebski (1996: 106-115) and Baehr (2011: Ch. 1).

³ Cf. the epistemic “purism” discussed by Jeremy Fantl and Matthew McGrath in (2009: 28).

⁴ How can *fictional* narratives form the basis of a serious *philosophical* model of religious knowledge? While a reasonable question, my answer to it will unfold over the course of the paper. See also Stump (2010).

⁵ This model is discontinuous with much of contemporary religious epistemology, which often proceeds against the backdrop of a kind of epistemic purism or egalitarianism à la the principle

just noted. However, as I explain below, elements of the model can be found in work by Paul Moser (2008, 2010) and Alvin Plantinga (2000). Moreover, the idea that important aspects of religious cognition can be illuminated by the study of narratives is central to recent work by Eleanore Stump (2010).

⁶ The epistemic model embedded in these stories can also be found in several other of O'Connor's short stories (e.g. "The Enduring Chill," "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," and "Everything that Rises Must Converge") and her second novel *The Violent Bear It Away*.

⁷ All references to O'Connor's stories and letters are from her *Collected Works* (1988).

⁸ Taken at face value, this remark is a *non sequitur*. The deeper, relevant meaning is that if one has a good car, one can, precisely as Hazel does throughout the story, escape the sense that one needs to be "justified," that is, to be forgiven for one's sins.

⁹ As O'Connor remarks in one of her letters: "[*Wise Blood*] is about somebody whose insistence on what he would like to think is the truth leads him to what he most does not want. As I see Haze, he most does not want to have been redeemed. He most wants to be shut of God" (918).

¹⁰ For more on this, see the essay just referenced and "The Church and the Fiction Writer" (807-812).

¹¹ Paul Moser and Alvin Plantinga also discuss the significance of pride, similarly conceived, in the context of religious epistemology. See Moser (2008: 43-44; 2010: 113) and Plantinga (2000: 211).

¹² Thanks to Stephen Grimm for this point. Of course, even in societies that don't uphold personal autonomy as an ideal, other aspects of human pride (e.g. a concern for moral perfection or a fear of personal intimacy) may be prevalent.

¹³ When I say “given the conception of God” O’Connor subscribed to, I am not assuming that this conception corresponds to anything in reality. The acceptance of (2) does not require the acceptance of any form of theism. Rather, (2) simply stipulates a *principled* tension between God, conceived of in a particular way, and a subset of human desires or impulses.

¹⁴ For a helpful discussion of these and related points in the context of Pascal’s thinking about divine hiddenness (which overlaps significantly with the themes from O’Connor discussed here), see Nemoianu (2015).

¹⁵ Compare this with the familiar observation that a person’s handling of theistic evidence is vulnerable to error to the extent that one fears death and sees the existence of God as securing a life after death. The present point is closely analogous, though here the existence of God poses a *threat* to some of our deepest fears and desires, making us vulnerable to error in the opposite direction, as it were. I address this issue in greater detail below.

¹⁶ This is an “adaptation” of James’s example because his concern is with the volitional contingency of certain *facts*, whereas our concern is with the contingency of theistic *evidence*. I take it that the adaptation is no less plausible than James’s original point.

¹⁷ Accordingly, while the present model is inspired by O’Connor’s stories, certain aspects of it are more present in her stories than others. That said, it would be a mistake to think that her characters play no active or personal role in their own spiritual-cum-epistemic progress. For instance, O’Connor herself credits Hazel’s “integrity” for his inability to “get rid of the ragged figure who moves from tree to tree in the back of his mind” (1265). And surely it is at least partly to Ruby Turpin’s credit that she does not simply write off her assailant’s insult as an outburst from a disgruntled teenager.

¹⁸ For a related account of *intellectual* humility, including an account of what might be involved with “owning” a limitation, see Whitcomb *et al* (2017).

¹⁹ While divine grace occupies an important role in most of her stories, I have been careful to formulate the model in such a way that it does not presuppose the existence of any supernatural entities.

²⁰ This is true even if, as Plantinga argues, our cognitive faculties include a *sensus divinitatus*. The bare existence of such is no guarantee of fitness for acquiring religious knowledge. For, the functioning of the *sensus divinitatus* is precisely the sort of thing that is likely to be marred by human pride. To function properly in such cases, the *sensus divinitatus* may need to be accompanied by moral humility.

²¹ This is not a trivial fact. A good deal of self-knowledge, including some knowledge of one’s limitations, is ineluctable.

²² Thanks to Paul Moser for raising this point. For a related discussion of how empathy bears on the epistemology of testimony, see (Bailey, forthcoming).

²³ Special thanks to Dan Speak for suggesting these connections.

²⁴ Many people have been kind enough to listen to my excited ramblings about O’Connor’s religious epistemology, including participants in several O’Connor reading groups I’ve facilitated over the years. These discussions have deepened and sharpened my understanding of O’Connor’s work. I am especially grateful to Dan Speak and Michael Pace for several helpful conversations on this topic. Paul Moser, Stephen Grimm, Chris Davidson, and an anonymous referee also provided helpful feedback on an earlier draft. Work on this paper benefitted from a fellowship at the Academy of Catholic Thought and Imagination at Loyola Marymount University during the fall of 2017.