Biased in a World of Bias: A Cognitive and Spiritual Approach to Knowing Racial Justice

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ABSTRACT
BIASED IN A WORLD OF BIAS: A COGNITIVE AND SPIRITUAL APPROACH TO KNOWING RACIAL JUSTICE

Stephen R. Calme
Marquette University, 2021

Even whites who desire racial justice often fail to recognize systemic racism and their complicity in it. Antiracist scholars such as Charles W. Mills and Barbara Applebaum identify this white ignorance as an active ignorance that results from a desire to maintain power and a sense of moral innocence. Whites’ disagreement with antiracist ideas is therefore received as an act of resistance rather than an honest contribution to dialogue. One overlooked aspect of whites’ response is white epistemic disorientation, a felt inability to participate in the knowing process about issues of race.

To help whites understand this identity-threatening disorientation, I explicate Bryan Massingale’s concept of cultural racism in terms of an epistemic environment’s distorting impact on meaning-making. Bernard Lonergan’s theory of human development clarifies how whites’ process of asking critical questioning about race remains biased because of the inauthentic culture in which it takes place. In this light, antiracists’ accusations of white ignorance are not attempts to stifle whites’ epistemic agency but to point out the shift necessary for whites to dialogue authentically. Whites have hit what Constance FitzGerald calls an “impasse,” and progress requires a holistic conversion that recalibrates their approach to discursive knowing. This conversion involves intellectual humility, in which whites critically examine not only their ideas about race but the authenticity of their approach to understanding race. As José Medina argues, whites’ social positionality hampers their ability to know racism, so I suggest the need for whites to increase their belief of people of color, who have epistemic advantage regarding race.

Whites struggle with the discomfort of self-critical intellectual humility, but framing this journey as a participation in Christ’s kenotic disposition may help. Sarah Coakley’s théologie totale offers a model for a kenotic intellectual humility that can 1. promote the self-emptying necessary for overcoming white ignorance, 2. provide a purified sense of agency to ensure whites remain active knowers, and 3. ground the dynamic in the goal of conformation to Christ and participation in the Trinity. Carmelite and Ignatian prayer practices can promote this growth, which must lead to communal epistemic solidarity.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Stephen R. Calme

Many people helped to make this dissertation possible. First, thanks to my dissertation board. Danielle Nussberger has guided me from my first days at Marquette, teaching me to bring all of my holy desires to scholarly work, offering constructive critique, and encouraging me in patient and life-giving ways. Conor Kelly’s insightful questions and attentiveness to ethical issues, along with his guidance on navigating life as a doctoral student, have enriched my professional and personal growth. Bryan Massingale kindled in me a concern for an issue I had previously largely ignored, and he continues to model what it looks like to bring together passion and intellectual precision in service to social justice. Bob Doran’s unfailing confidence in the human capability to know reality and to make responsible decisions, and specifically his unfailing confidence in this capability in his students, including me, kept me afloat when I felt overwhelmed by the surd of racism or the impenetrability of Lonergan. After his passing in January 2021, he became a regular recipient of my intercessory requests; God only knows how much I owe to his prayers this last year. Joseph Ogbonnaya’s accompaniment at Lonergan-related events and his opening of my mind to a more global horizon have pushed me to grow as a responsible theological citizen of the world. Many other faculty members at Marquette and Boston College have also been invaluable. I am especially blessed by their desire to live out the faith that they study, creating spaces where theology is a matter of the spirit and the mind.

Thanks to Marquette University and its donors, whose financial and institutional support made my studies possible, and especially to the Arthur J. Schmitt Foundation, which funded me in this all-important final year. Thanks to Carlow University for taking a chance on me as this project was still concluding. Thanks to my students, who renewed my enthusiasm for study.

Thanks to the colleagues and friends who supported me, including Tamara, Gayle, Kathleen, Aaron, Caroline, Jessica, Eric, Israel, Sarah, Gary, Paul, Nadia, Leatha, Brendon, Matt, Peter, Nicholas, Thomas, and many others. Thanks especially to Mairead, who loved me and reminded me of my goodness even at the dreariest moments of writing.

Thanks to my spiritual directors, psychiatrists, writing accountability partners, and mentor who somehow all managed to keep me an integrated human being through this process.

Thanks to my parish family at St. Francis of Assisi, Milwaukee, who invited me into the beauty of racially integrated worship and fellowship, and to the members of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, the Riverwest Food Pantry, and the Ignatian Spirituality Project, who kept me grounded in the world of God’s concrete love.

Thanks and love to my family: my mom, whose work ethic and passion for justice continue to inspire me, and whose unconditional love is felt no less from heaven; my dad, whose friendship, encouragement, faith, and interest in my research never let me feel alone during the long writing process; my sisters, Rachel and Christine, whose listening ears, compassion, and wisdom often removed the weight I carried and replaced it with the lightness of love; and my nieces and nephews, whose energetic spirit lit up my heart with joy and reminded me of the bigger picture of life.

Thanks be to God!
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INTRODUCTION

Starting from Experience

My earliest memory of white fragility takes me back to eighth grade. A teacher asked the class who Martin Luther King, Jr., was, and when no one else answered I said, “A Black civil rights leader.” My teacher (a white woman) responded, “Why did you call him Black? Why didn’t you just say he was a civil rights leader?” Her words were sharp, indicating that I had said something wrong or offensive. I understood her point—I would not have described George H.W. Bush as a “white president”—but I immediately felt angry, attacked, and defensive. I thought the interaction was about one thing (“Who was MLK?”) and suddenly it was about another: my unconscious white lens. My first reaction was by no means to acknowledge the lesson learned, but to stew in my sense of feeling repudiated despite my correct answer.

Much more recently, I attended a series of community antiracism workshops. On the first day, we discussed the definition of racism that would be used throughout the sessions. The facilitators asked if we had any comments or questions, and I asked about an element of the definition that sat poorly with me. Instead of offering a direct response, the facilitator said that this workshop would not be a time for detailed, analytical questions but for those in the white community to listen, receive, and work within the given paradigm. My expectations dipped: I had hoped to be able to voice and argue through the questions and hesitations that often rose within me when I encountered racially progressive perspectives, despite aligning myself with those perspectives. Instead, I was being asked to set aside my questions and just sit with the picture of racism that emerged throughout the series without immediately critiquing it. It felt like my curiosity and desire for truth were being stifled.
One of those same sessions occurred on November 9, 2016, the day after Donald Trump was elected president. As the results became clear the night before, I went to bed worried about how a man I deemed ill-equipped for political office would lead the country. But I was shocked at the next day’s workshop to see how much harder the news hit our facilitators and fellow attendees, especially those of color. There were tears of sadness, anger, and fear. It was a strange combination of dissonance: I was surprised at Trump’s election, but overall it meant little more than some bad judgment on the part of Americans; for conference attendees of color, this result had always seemed a real possibility, but it was a sign of imminent, dangerous, racist evil. I felt mentally and emotionally lost: How could there be such a gap between our understanding of the situation? What was I missing? I believed myself to hold similar ideals to the other attendees, so how could I apparently be so oblivious to the magnitude and potential impact of what had just happened? Did I even have the capacity to see what they were seeing or to know if they were overreacting or I was underreacting?

I begin with these personal anecdotes because my conversations and the literature suggest that these reactions are not unique to me. When engaging in issues of race, many of us in the white community have felt attacked when the discussion moves away from what we consider a detached, academic approach; we have felt unfairly silenced when we are told to just listen because we are missing the point; and we have felt like we are facing an unbridgeable gulf when our understanding of a situation differs so dramatically from others’. From our current white perspectives, we feel amply justified in dismissing these scenarios as the result of “reverse racism,” anti-intellectualism, or simply an honest difference of opinion. Yet I believe that a portion of whites suspect that the truth might be more complicated. Perhaps these situations are a glimpse into a reality we have been overlooking. This dissertation focuses on those who are open to that possibility. Indeed, it argues that, more than a possibility, these situations are
in fact best interpreted as a call to antiracist conversion for whites.¹ It proposes a framework for understanding and working through this white epistemic disorientation in a way that heals whites’ approach to knowing the truth about racism.

The Problem

For decades Blacks have pointed out the continued existence of racism even after the end of chattel slavery, the repeal of Jim Crow laws and many forms of legal discrimination, and the widespread social rejection of overt racial prejudice. With the protests following the murder of George Floyd in 2020, more and more whites have started listening, and yet even those who exhibit a desire to fight against racism often question truths that are clear to Blacks. Scholars and activists suggest that whites’ failure to acknowledge the realities of racial injustice is more than a case of honest disagreement. It is a case of active ignorance which is somehow purposeful.

Some whites feel forced into an impasse: they are told that they do not understand the racial reality of their world, and yet their attempts to understand it may be decried as violent because their epistemological method and cultural presumptions are based in the very cultural racism that people of color are trying to point out. The result is epistemic disorientation that often leads whites to disengage from racial dialogue and to entrench in their current, familiar beliefs about race.

¹ Conversion as used in this dissertation is not (necessarily) a change from one religious tradition to another, and it goes beyond a shift from one idea or opinion to another idea or opinion, though such a shift would be part of its fruit. The conversion that I describe for whites is a holistic change that affects a person’s identity because it affects one’s values and way of making sense of the world. Drawing on the work of Bernard Lonergan, Bryan Massingale zeroes in on the heart of this concept of conversion: it is “a fundamental shift in one’s paradigm of understanding, interpreting, and acting upon reality...a totally new horizon of reference and understanding that dramatically expands the scope of one’s interests and range of knowledge” (Bryan N. Massingale, Racial Justice and the Catholic Church [Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2010], 121). I suggest that the radical nature of this shift means that it requires a “leap of faith” that is distinct from the cumulative process of normal learning and development, though even this leap usually occurs over a long period of time.
Many scholars identify whites’ moral self-perception as the cause of whites’ failure to recognize systemic racism and their role in it. To admit that racism exists and that they are somehow complicit in it would be too painful for whites who desire to see themselves and be seen as morally good people. Many whites see their own moral goodness as such an incontrovertible fact that their participation in systemic racism, which they believe would make them evil, is a logical impossibility. I find whites’ epistemic self-perception to be another obstacle to their engagement with antiracism. Whites’ approach to understanding their world has generally allowed them to navigate society successfully. They see themselves as effective knowers whose common sense aligns with the way things are. Engagement with antiracism often disrupts this epistemic ease, however. Whites’ perspective on race conflicts with the antiracist perspective, but even more disconcerting for whites, their attempts to address this disagreement in their usual manner may be dismissed as inadequate or even offensive. Whether whites feel unfairly silenced or simply confused and self-doubting, they experience an

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2 For example, critical race theorist Charles R. Lawrence III argues that the fear of being called immoral prevents a person from acknowledging their unconscious biases: “We have internalized a set of beliefs about African Americans that has its origins in racist ideology—that black people are lazy, dirty, savage, impulsive, oversexed, or any number of other scary things….None of us wants to think of him- or herself as capable of this kind of thinking. So we deny these beliefs and thus the fear of blackness” (Charles Lawrence III, “Forbidden Conversations on Race, Privacy, and Community,” in Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge, Third Edition [Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013], 54 and 55). Education lecturer Frances E. Kendall uses the common “white guilt” nomenclature to describe a resistance to acknowledging historical and ongoing racist treatment: “If we see ourselves as white [instead of denying the relevance of race altogether], we have to deal with the guilt, shame, and confusion that comes up as we think of the treatment of African Americans, Latinos, American Indians, Japanese Americans, and so forth….When we come out of denial or un-anesthetize ourselves, we often feel overwhelmed by white guilt or other feelings we aren’t sure how to respond to, become uncomfortable, and return to denial” (Frances E. Kendall, Understanding White Privilege: Creating Pathways to Authentic Relationships Across Race, Second Edition [New York: Routledge, 2013], 102). The theme of white fear of being perceived as immoral is also prevalent in Robin DiAngelo, White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018) and Barbara Applebaum, Being White, Being Good: White Complicity, White Moral Responsibility, and Social Justice Pedagogy (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010).
uncomfortable epistemic disorientation in which they feel blocked from participating as
knowers in discussions of racism.

**Proposed Solution**

My goal is to facilitate the antiracism growth of these white subjects. The means of doing so is
not to explicate why antiracism’s understanding of society is true, though I assert that is the case. Instead, the means is to orient whites to the unfamiliar epistemic space in which they find themselves: one where they do not feel like the expert knowers, where they experience confusion, uncertainty, and lack of control. These feelings of disorientation may be unavoidable for those going through a conversion away from white ignorance, but there is an extra layer of discomfort that comes from not understanding why they are feeling that disorientation. This extra discomfort is not necessary, and I hypothesize that it prevents whites from responding effectively to the unavoidable disorientation that is part of conversion and even part of learning. My research intends to 1. clarify the situation that these whites are in, and 2. provide epistemic and spiritual justification for continuing on this unfamiliar path. To be able to name and understand a source of confusion and pain is to enable a person to better respond to that confusion and pain.

This dissertation therefore only attempts to add a small piece to the huge puzzle of overcoming structural racism. I am choosing a particular niche in the midst of a multifaceted struggle, not necessarily because I think it is the most essential one but because I think it is a helpful and even necessary one, and the one I am best positioned to address.

Without dismissing the need for pressure from people of color and the antiracist community, I presume that true racial justice will require whites to act justly not simply out of obligation or coercion but out of personal conviction. The ultimate goal is for whites to increase their own capacity to understand racism accurately. This is not to say that whites will arrive at this place without the influence of external structures or approaches of an antiracist society, but that whites would still need
to accept, appropriate, and respond to those external pressures. Whites need to do this for themselves, but not by themselves. Cultural malformation has left them with a paradigm within which they cannot properly understand racism on their own. Whites need to turn to people of color for the truth about racism.

Still, whites need some reason, comprehensible to them in their current state, to trust the antiracist understanding of racism. I hypothesize that this decision can be made based on the recognition of one’s own inability to know the truth about racism. That is, whites might not be in a position to say, “I have come to know the truth about systemic racism,” but they might be able to say, “I have come to know that when it comes to racism, I do not know. I need others—especially people of color—to help me come to know, and this process may be beyond the simplistically rational process I imagined.” When whites are in this uncomfortable, disorienting space of letting go of their own incorrect “knowledge” of racism and instead accepting antiracism’s understanding, they want to reach out for an anchor, something they know to be true: but they do not yet have the ability to know racism as people of color do, and to revert to their former “knowledge” would be to regress. I am proposing that instead of reaching for a propositional anchor (“I know that racism is X or Y”), they reach for a process anchor (“I know that my process of trying to know racism is flawed, and so this current state of disorientation may be necessary”).

I seek to hold together the demand that whites acknowledge the existence of systemic racism with the epistemological reality that each person must come to knowledge for themselves. By adopting this focus, I do not intend to cast doubt upon the reality of systemic racism but only to point out that coming to one’s own judgment about one’s understanding of systemic racism is an important but largely overlooked prior step, one that does not involve primarily giving evidence for the existence and impact of racism but rather promoting an
appropriate understanding of what it means to be a knower in this situation.³ In other words, before offering evidence for systemic racism, one must explain how that evidence is to be considered: the cognitive process for assessing evidence that falls within one’s current paradigm is different from the cognitive process for assessing evidence that falls outside of one’s current paradigm. My argument is that whites who are confronted by claims of structural racism need to be able to understand the cognitive processes necessary for addressing evidence that falls outside their current paradigm and experience. I further argue that acceptance of these cognitive processes requires a self-emptying humility and agency that, in the Christian context, is best described as kenotic.

By placing conversion from white ignorance into a Lonerganian context, I attempt to place it into a universal process of knowing.⁴ I argue, in other words, that the problem with white knowing is not that it claims that there is a universal logic and epistemological process but rather that it conflates its own limited logic and epistemological process with that universal one. What is universal is certain principles more basic than those of white epistemology, and antiracism points to the need for these universal principles though it does not undertake to systematically develop that underlying epistemic process in the way that Lonergan does. I will argue that this transcendental method of knowing holds potential for disrupting and purifying whites’ knowing process, including when it comes to racism.

Method

My approach to the question of what I am calling “white epistemic disorientation” addresses the internal epistemic space of whites. The Black experience is essential to the

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³ By knower, I do not mean a person who already has complete knowledge in an area but a person who has the capacity and skills to participate in the process that will lead to knowledge.
⁴ Bernard Lonergan, S.J., was a twentieth-century white, Canadian philosopher and theologian best known for his exploration of human knowing in Insight: A Study of Human Understanding (1957).
diagnosis of the problem of racism in the U.S. The question of how whites can properly receive
and engage this diagnosis, however, requires—at least in part—an inside assessment of the
white community. Thus, as a white American male, the value of my own contribution to this
issue is to be found less in diagnosing the problem of racism in the U.S. and more in 1)
diagnosing the barriers within the white community that prevent it from authentically engaging
antiracist assessments of the state of racism, and 2) proposing responses that will help the white
community overcome those barriers.

I do not aim to assess the rights and wrongs of all parties involved in interracial
discourse. I approach this project as a white individual within the white community, asking what
our role is in such discourse. My analysis and suggestions therefore focus on what the white
community can do to improve. I do not presume that people of color are omniscient or that
they engage in racial discourse in a flawless (or univocal) way. Certainly there are things that all
participants could and should do to improve, but I focus on whites, for several reasons. First, I
believe I am best positioned to speak to and about the white community’s failings. Second, I
believe that regardless of the situation it is most helpful to focus on setting one’s own house in
order. Too often we in the white community have criticized others while ignoring our own
flaws—or as a way of attempting to cover or deny our flaws. This study is an attempt to abide
by Jesus’s teaching to concern yourself with the wooden beam in your own eye before
addressing the splinter in your sibling’s eye (Matthew 7:3-5). Third, as this metaphor suggests, I
believe that the flaws in the white community’s approach to racism are much more significant
than whatever weaknesses the antiracist approach has. Whites continue to be the ones most
responsible for racial inequity and the failure of interracial discourse.

I address whites’ own initiative. By allowing that whites must ultimately judge for
themselves the truth of systemic racism, and by acknowledging the difficulty of this process, it
may seem that I am leaving too much power in the hands of whites or promoting a kind of gradualism. Such critiques against this work may turn out to be valid, but I will offer a brief justification of my approach so that any criticism accurately addresses my project and aims. First, cognitively, I follow Lonergan in asserting that an individual knows something only by going through a process of experience, understanding, and judgment that must be done for oneself (though it is also necessarily dependent on others). External situations can foster more or less willingness and ability for a person to know, but that act of knowing cannot be forced. It should be noted, however, that part of knowing is relying on others’ knowledge—believing. The self-appropriated knowing process is not a solipsistic one.

Second, the pace and intensity of the fight against racism should not be dictated by the readiness or unreadiness, the comfort or discomfort, of the white community that is complicit in causing racial harm, but by the urgency demanded by the ongoing harm committed against communities of color. In no way do I want to suggest that actions to stop and to remedy structural racism should be delayed until the white community is ready to accept those changes for itself. “The white community is not ready for change”: this phrase has been used as an unwarranted excuse for delaying justice. Yet the statement itself remains true. Whites are not ready for change. Many are not in a hurry to have a racial conversion, and, more to the point of my project, even those who are interested in overcoming racism are not properly prepared for navigating the difficult path through conversion without disengaging. I believe that the epistemic conversion I propose for whites is a prerequisite for achieving full and lasting racial justice. By no means, however, do I believe white epistemic conversion to be a prerequisite for a society to fight for full racial justice. To say it another way, my image of the beloved community goes beyond racial equity that is begrudgingly accepted by whites, although such a state of begrudging or coerced justice would still mark an important improvement on today’s
The ultimate goal of Christian justice, however, is the creation of the beloved community in which whites promote racial equity not out of obligation or coercion but out of charity.

I hold up this image of the beloved community not only as an idealized hope, but also because it has practical benefits: if whites treat blacks fairly only because they feel coerced to do so, there remains simmering the constant danger of injustice breaking to life again. Because neither the coercive approach nor the approach of charity is without its loopholes, both will remain necessary. Even well-constructed legislative or institutional antiracism efforts can be undermined by those who have not bought into the cause, and no community will be so spontaneously inspired by charity and justice that it does not require structural boundaries in place that attempt to enforce or prevent certain behaviors.

The fact that whites are not ready for change does not mean that society needs to be tentative in the move toward racial justice. It does mean, however, that the most aggressive approach to pushing racial justice must not only aggressively promote change but also aggressively form whites to accept that change. The two are parallel, not sequential. My project focuses on the latter.

Preliminary Assumptions and Scope

There are several assumptions and points of clarification that are important to state from the beginning:

Author’s positionality: I am writing as a Catholic, white, heterosexual, upper-middle-class male who is a U.S. citizen. I consider myself to have experienced no significant social

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5 “Beloved community” is a term coined by white philosopher and theologian Josiah Royce and popularized by Martin Luther King, Jr. (“The King Philosophy – Nonviolence365®,” The King Center, accessed October 24, 2021, https://thekingcenter.org/about-tkc/the-king-philosophy/).
oppression. The experience of marginalization is foreign to me. As a result, I am writing as one still on the way to antiracism. This dissertation is aimed at no one if not myself, and I write not as one who has gone through the conversion I describe and now offers wisdom from the other side, but as one still struggling with his own doubts and disorientation. This in-between location will certainly be evident at various places throughout the text in ways invisible to me, so I offer my gratitude in advance for patience and especially critique from those who can point out the failings of my argument.

Addressing racially progressive whites: The subjects of my dissertation are whites who desire to fight racism, including their own, but who fail to recognize the prevalence of overt racism and the depth of systemic racism, especially in their own lives. For instance, the “racially progressive white person” may have enough concern about the issue to sign up for an antiracism class, but then they will demonstrate what white educator Robin DiAngelo calls “white fragility,” or more generally “white resistance.”6 That is, when pushed outside of their comfort zone, and especially when their complicity in racism is pointed out, they resort to defense mechanisms to avoid taking those ideas seriously. Put differently, I focus on whites who condemn explicit racism and have generally good intentions but who do not have the epistemic or emotional tools to process their role in systemic racism. They have already been awakened in some way to the reality of such racism, but they continue to struggle with accepting and acting on that realization because they do not “know” it in the same gut- and intellect-satisfying way they “knew” the state of race in society through white ignorance. They are hesitant to accept antiracism more fully because it invites them to a different way of knowing. My modest hope is that whites who have started engaging with antiracist ideas and

find themselves wrestling with cognitive dissonance might find in this dissertation the grounding
to remain in that place of disorientation long enough to be changed, rather than fleeing the
discomfort and re-entrenching in their existing ideas about racism.

*Antiracism:* My presumption is for the antiracist perspective. For the sake of simplicity
and focus, I speak of one generic antiracist perspective, although of course the thinkers who fall
under this category vary in their exact ideas and may even disagree with one another on some
points. I assume the following basic judgments about current U.S. society:

- Blacks have less access to social goods (both material and non-material) than whites do.
- This inequality is a result and form of unjust treatment because of race, and therefore it
  is an instantiation of racism.
- The systemic nature of this racism means that whites participate in it and bear
  responsibility for fighting it simply by virtue of their identity as whites in a racialized
  society that unjustly privileges whites.
- Justice demands that whites take urgent action that will eliminate the racial discrepancy
  in access to social goods.

*Epistemic privilege of people of color:* For sociological and theological reasons, I presume
that people of color in systemically racist societies like the United States generally have a clearer
understanding of the dynamics of race and racism than do whites. I am not saying that every
person of color de facto has more accurate insights on racism than every white person but that
the social positionality of those who are marginalized creates opportunities for epistemic
development and access to experiences that are not as easily available to those who are
privileged.7

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7 José Medina maintains an enviable balance between asserting the epistemic privilege of those
who are oppressed while also recognizing that such clarity is neither *a priori* nor universal. See, for
example, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and
**Definition of race:** I rely on M. Shawn Copeland’s explanation of race, which draws on sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant. On one hand, a theory of race as an objective or inherently biological classification fails, as the history of changing racial categories proves. On the other hand, to say that race is simply an ideological construct devoid of any basis or significance also fails, because many people do find something called “race” to be an important part of their identity. In addition, the concept of race does have concrete effects in the world, particularly through racism; to say that race is an illusion is to say that racism is an illusion. Copeland instead settles on race as a “social constructed form of human categorization.” A society’s organization of racial groupings evolves over time, but this plasticity does not make race any less real: the “racial formation process” has concrete effects on social interactions and conflicts. Omi and Winant also argue that, despite the recognition that racial distinctions are not biologically dictated, corporeality and phenotype do remain important elements of race.

**Limited racial scope:** The focus of this project is relations between Blacks and whites in the U.S. While I recognize the oversimplification of this scope at a time when the importance of intersectionality and the fluidity of the concept of race are increasingly apparent, I maintain this limited focus for several reasons. First, I follow such theologians as Bryan Massingale who understand Black-white relations to be unique and central to the U.S. as a whole because of the history of institutionalized oppression, especially slavery. Secondly, although I acknowledge

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that this centrality of Black-white relations varies by geography based on which racial groups were originally present in, settled in, and immigrated to that area of the country, my own awakening to the presence of racism has occurred primarily in Cincinnati and Milwaukee. The most prominent racial strife in these two cities since the mid-20th century has been heavily a matter of Black-white relations. Thirdly, by narrowing my focus to Black-white relations, I aim to make the problem and proposed response clearer, which I believe will facilitate the further step (beyond the scope my project) of making possible the productive consideration of intersectionality and more complex multiracial dynamics.

**Chapter Summaries**

Chapter one examines whites’ failure to recognize systemic racism in contemporary U.S. society. Despite potential agreement on a core definition of racism as “unjust treatment because of race,” Blacks and whites largely interpret the concept differently. The core distinction is that whites hold a simplistic view of racism as malicious, individualistic, and based in prejudice, while Blacks understand racism to be often systemic in nature, built into social structures in a way that is self-perpetuating regardless of the intent or prejudice of individual whites. I draw out several features of the systemic view of racism, including its materialist and ideological causes and effects, and then I argue for the importance of an epistemologically-focused reading of Bryan Massingale’s description of systemic racism as cultural racism. Whites typically ignore the ways that social structures influence their understanding of race and promote unjust treatment on the basis of race. Rather than viewing these distorting social pressures as imposing racism directly into the hearts and minds of whites, the most accurate and effective interpretation is to understand them as creating a context in which whites’ own attempts at meaning-making will almost inevitably lead to racist conclusions. In other words, whites’ very *way of knowing* tends to result in skewed judgments which fail to recognize or
promote antiracist truths. I conclude the chapter by demonstrating how this epistemic aspect of white ignorance supports Massingale and James H. Cone’s theological assertions that systemic racism is a form of idolatry and leads to ignorance of God.

Chapter two describes the specific problem I seek to address, the epistemic element of whites’ resistance to engaging productively with antiracist ideas. Whites believe that their approach to understanding racism is sincere and rational. When antiracists attempt to point out that whites’ approach is already embedded in racism, whites experience “white epistemic disorientation” (WED), a felt inability to participate in the knowing process about issues of race. Because their foundational beliefs and their ways of knowing are critiqued, whites sense their epistemic grounding has been pulled out from under them—often unfairly. After offering various examples of the kinds of situations in which whites experience WED, I describe this disorientation as an experience of “impasse” in the terminology of Carmelite Constance FitzGerald. Analogous to the spiritual Dark Night, social impasse occurs when a person’s usual approach to problems is ineffective and even counter-productive because the current situation requires a paradigm shift that can only be achieved by acknowledging one’s blockage in a way that opens new, creative pathways. This shift requires relinquishing strongly-held habits and even one’s current sense of self. The discomfort involved leads whites to believe that this path of epistemic growth is actually an inauthentic rejection of their capacity as knowers, and they therefore resist the invitation to conversion.

The third chapter places WED in the context of Bernard Lonergan’s theory of human knowing and development to show that the impasse whites face is an opportunity for epistemic growth rather than an ideological trap. For lasting racial justice to be possible, external antiracist social pressures, policies, and structures must be combined with an internal conversion among whites that includes recognizing for themselves the reality of systemic racism.
and their complicity in it. Whites’ concern for an authentic approach to understanding racism is therefore an important concern, but they fail to realize that the antiracist approach that they find troubling is in fact pointing them toward more epistemic authenticity. In short, whites who are following their innate desire to know truth and attempting to (implicitly) follow what Lonergan identifies as the foundational process of human knowing may still be inauthentic knowers because the way and context in which they approach that knowing is biased. Whites will only break out of their flawed paradigm for understanding race if outside, nonrational influences interrupt them. This “healing from above down” is ultimately initiated by God’s love but is manifest in human love, particularly in person-to-person interactions with people of color. It affects not only the intellect but one’s character more widely and demonstrates that epistemic authenticity depends upon a more holistic authenticity of the entire person. By recognizing the meta-truth that they are not in a good epistemic position to understand racism, whites become more opened to self-critique that leads to conversion and openness to antiracism in the form of believing people of color as credible knowers of racism. The hope is that whites will also recognize the important ongoing role of healthy epistemic disorientation in their epistemic lives, especially as it relates to race.

Chapter four proposes a theological and spiritual lens for recognizing the authenticity of this challenging intellectual humility for whites. Properly humble human knowing has a kenotic aspect which includes a disposition of radical self-emptying, an agency that acknowledges one’s dependence, and an openness to being conformed more closely to God. Drawing on Sarah Coakley’s interpretation of kenosis as “power-in-vulnerability,” I argue for a kenotic intellectual humility in which whites accept a path of extreme disorientation while also trusting in God’s desire and ability to bring greater epistemic strength from it. Carmelite contemplative prayer
and Ignatian prayer clarify the value of a kenotic disposition and offer complementary practices for growing spiritually in ways that heal whites’ current, biased way of knowing racism.

The conclusion proposes epistemic solidarity as a concept that can place whites’ individual movement towards epistemic healing in the proper context of a communal search for truth.
CHAPTER 1: UNDERSTANDING RACISM

Introduction

At the beginning of *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, Bryan Massingale outlines three obstacles to engaging the issue of racism in the U.S.: we do not have a common, accurate understanding of what racism is; we do not know how to talk about race with people of other races; and we do not want to talk about race, especially because we fear “the personal and social changes that such honesty would demand.” Chapter one will examine the first obstacle: the lack of a common, accurate understanding of what racism is. Together with many race scholars, I argue that the primary cause of this obstacle is the white community’s insufficient understanding of racism. After presenting elements of a more robust, antiracist conception of racism, I will argue that an overly simplistic interpretation of this conception contributes to whites’ rejection of it. Instead, I will build on Massingale’s idea of cultural racism to propose an interpretation of antiracism in which racism is understood to be a matter of distorted meaning-making.

Problem Description

Statistics indicate that racial disparities persist in the United States despite the gains of the Civil Rights Movement and the overwhelming disapproval of overt racism. The death rate

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15 A Marist poll conducted shortly after the Charlottesville protests in 2017 indicated that 86% of adults nationally (88% of whites, 90% of African Americans, and 76% of Latinos) “mostly disagree” with the beliefs of the white supremacy movement, and 4% (3% of whites, 4% of African Americans, and 7% of Latinos) “mostly agree” with the beliefs of the white supremacy movement. “Mostly disagree” and “mostly agree” were the only two answer options offered in the poll’s wording (NPR/PBS NewsHour/Marist Poll, August 17, 2017, accessed August 15, 2021, http://maristpoll.marist.edu). Regarding whether others should be able to hold such beliefs, a Washington Post-ABC News Poll around the same time found that 83% of adults nationally (82% of whites, 85% of African Americans, and 83% of Hispanics) said it is unacceptable “to hold neo-Nazi or white supremacist views,” while 9% (9% of whites, 8% of African Americans, and 5% of Hispanics) said it is acceptable “to hold neo-Nazi or white supremacist views” (Washington Post-ABC News Poll, August 16-20, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/polling/). While many will find it disconcerting that any
for infants of Black mothers is more than twice that of white mothers. The death-by-homicide rate is seven times higher for Blacks than whites. As of May 26, 2021, Blacks were 2.9 times as likely as whites to be hospitalized due to COVID-19 and were 1.9 times as likely to die from the virus. Blacks have nearly twice the unemployment rate of whites. The Black median income has hovered around 60% of the white median income since statistics have been kept, starting in 1972. It is difficult to dispute that these facts point to a lower socioeconomic quality of life for the Black population in comparison with the white population. Blacks enjoy fewer goods of society (e.g., health, wealth, education) than whites do.

But what is the cause of this inequality? That question is far more often disputed. The answers tend to fall along racial lines. Many Blacks see these disparities as injustices caused in percent of the population believes in or accepts white supremacy, the point is that this population is a small minority.

16 The infant death rate (per 1,000 live births) for non-Hispanic white mothers in 2018 was 4.63, compared to 10.75 for non-Hispanic Black mothers (Danielle M. Ely and Anne K. Driscoll, "Infant Mortality in the United States, 2018: Data from the Period Linked Birth/Infant Death File," National Vital Statistics Reports 69, no. 7 [July 16, 2020]: 4, https://www.cdc.gov/).

17 In 2018 the age-adjusted death-by-homicide rate for non-Hispanic whites was 2.8 per 100,000; the non-Hispanic Black rate was 22.6 (Sherry L. Murphy, Jiaquan Xu, Kenneth D. Kochanek, Elizabeth Arias, and Betzaida Tejada-Vera, "Deaths: Final Data for 2018," National Vital Statistics Reports 69, no. 13 (January 12, 2021): "Table 10. Age-adjusted death rates for selected causes, by race and Hispanic origin and sex: United States, 2018," 56, https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr69/nvsr69-13-508.pdf).


20 The median income for non-Hispanic white households in 2016 was $65,041, and for Black households it was $39,490, meaning that the median Black household earns only 61% as much as the median white household. (Jessica L. Semega, Kayla R. Fontenot, and Melissa A. Kollar, U.S. Census Bureau, “Table 1: Income and Earnings Summary Measures by Selected Characteristics: 2015 and 2016,” Income and Poverty in the United States: 2016, [U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 2017]: 6, https://www.census.gov/). Despite some slight increases and decreases, this income ratio has hovered around 60% since data for these groups has been collected, showing no steady change between 1972 and 2016. Statistics for non-Hispanic Whites (as opposed to simply “Whites”) began to be tracked in 1972 (Semega, Fontenot, and Kollar, “Table A-1: Households by Total Money Income, Race, and Hispanic Origin of Householder: 1967 to 2016,” 25-27).
large part by a racism that is built into the fabric of U.S. culture. Many whites see the U.S. as a post-racial society in which inequality between whites and Blacks is primarily due to factors other than race.\textsuperscript{21} Polls show this divide. In a 2017 Pew Research Center survey, 59% of Blacks but only 35% of whites said that racial discrimination was the “main reason many blacks can’t get ahead.”\textsuperscript{22} Regarding the racism in the criminal justice system, 79% percent of Blacks but only 54% of whites said that fatal encounters between police and Blacks are signs of a broader problem, and 18% of Blacks but 44% of whites said those fatal encounters were isolated incidents.\textsuperscript{23} More recently, 80% of Blacks but only 38% whites said there is “a lot” of discrimination against Black people in the U.S.\textsuperscript{24}

Scholarship recognizes this divide in interpretation as well. Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva agrees with what “most analysts of post-civil rights matters” recognize: “that whites do not perceive discrimination to be a central factor shaping blacks’ life chances.”\textsuperscript{25} Psychologists Nelson, Adams, and Salter note it is a common observation that subordinate racial groups assert that there is more racism in society than dominant racial groups do.\textsuperscript{26} This discrepancy is often explained by identifying reasons that subordinate racial groups would overestimate racism, and by assuming that dominant racial group perceptions of racism are in line with objective reality.

\textsuperscript{21} In this view, to the extent that racism plays any role, it is the inevitable but rapidly decreasing result of past generations’ racism, occasionally exacerbated by rare, isolated acts of individual racism.

\textsuperscript{22} Pew Research Center, \textit{The Partisan Divide on Political Values Grows Even Wider}, 2018 (survey conducted June 8-18, 2017), http://www.people-press.org. Fifty-four percent of whites chose the other offered response, “Blacks who can’t get ahead are mostly responsible for own condition,” while 31% of Blacks chose that response.


and therefore do not need to be questioned or explained. Nelson, et al., instead critique the normativity of dominant race accounts (which minimize or deny racism), and argue the greater accuracy belongs to subordinate race accounts (which see greater prevalence of racism). This assertion of the privileged epistemic authority of subordinate racial groups has been the approach of many anti-racism scholars, and I adopt that presumption in this dissertation.

Some readers may reject the idea that any racial group would have a clearer understanding of racism than any other. Both Blacks and whites see from their own raced lenses, the argument goes, so each group is equally hampered by a limited viewpoint that keeps it from seeing the objective truth about the situation. Therefore, an accurate perception of racism is found in the middle, somewhere between the under-sensitivity of whites and the oversensitivity of Blacks. This middle-way response is exactly the type of reaction I seek to address in this dissertation. My argument is that what appear to whites to be extreme antiracist assertions that cross the boundary into “reverse racism” are often so-judged by a white epistemic framework whose criteria for justice and truth have been misshaped by the distorted status quo.

**White Ignorance and Black Epistemic Privilege**

Black authors—and Blacks’ own everyday experiences—have long suggested that whites’ and Blacks’ social positions in the U.S. have shielded whites from the reality of racism while granting Blacks relative clarity in recognizing and understanding racism. In contemporary scholarship, political philosopher Charles W. Mills has popularized the term *white ignorance* to describe the fact that whites consistently fail to recognize the impact of race on

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28 The concept owes much to W.E.B. Du Bois’s idea of “double-consciousness” in which their social position required emancipated Blacks to remain acutely aware of white society, especially how Blacks were perceived by whites (W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007 [1903]), 8-10).
their own choices and the society around them. Mills’s work is part of a field of scholarship on the “epistemology of ignorance” that understands some ignorance “not as a feature of neglectful epistemic practice but as a substantive epistemic practice in itself,” in the words of Linda Martín Alcoff. Such ignorances are structural and thus shaped by social positionality: “there are identities and social locations and modes of belief formation, all produced by structural social conditions of a variety of sorts, that are in some cases epistemically disadvantaged or defective.” Mills applies this concept to racial positionality and argues that “differential racial experience generates an alternative moral and political perception of social reality.”

Mills describes white ignorance as an actively produced ignorance that comes from having a need not to know something either due to “straightforward racist motivation” or “more impersonal social-structural causation.” Addressing the question of racism from the field of political philosophy, he takes social contract theory as his lens. White Western society sees itself as founded on a social contract which holds that all humans deserve equal rights. Mills argues that there is an unspoken Racial Contract that is prior to this social contract and that states that only whites are true, full humans. That is, whites say (and even believe) they are making decisions and organizing society in ways that protect and uphold the equal dignity of all individuals, but in fact they are doing so in ways that support the equal dignity only of white individuals while degrading or ignoring the dignity of individuals of color. In contrast, the nonwhite community easily recognizes the Racial Contract, and hence there is a gap between

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30 Alcoff, “Epistemologies of Ignorance,” 40.
white and nonwhite epistemologies. Whites deny racial reality and its effects, while nonwhites clearly see and experience racial reality and its effects. Mills writes, “Contemporary debates between nonwhites and whites about the centrality or peripherality of race can thus be seen as attempts respectively to point out, and deny, the existence of the Racial Contract that underpins the social contract.”

Mills argues that an essential factor in the continuation of racism is not simply the existence of the Racial Contract but its invisibility to whites. Counterintuitively, whites are the ones who wield structural racism and make it function, and yet they are largely ignorant of it. Nonwhites are the ones who understand how racism works. The result is that “[n]onwhites have always (at least in first encounters) been bemused or astonished by the invisibility of the Racial Contract to whites, the fact that whites have routinely talked in universalist terms even when it has been quite clear that the scope has really been limited to themselves.”

Mills’s purpose is to make whites aware of the Racial Contract by describing how it has functioned historically up to and including the current moment. He tells the presumed white reader that his work “is an attempt to redirect your vision, to make you see, in a sense, what has been there all along.” This involves not only laying out proof of the Racial Contract, but demonstrating how its existence has been kept invisible to whites: “Realizing a better future requires not merely admitting the ugly truth of the past—and present—but understanding the ways in which these realities were made invisible, acceptable to the white population.”

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In line with the epistemology of ignorance field, a main thrust of Mills’s argument is that history clearly demonstrates the existence of the Racial Contract. Its invisibility to whites cannot simply be a matter of an accidental gap in white knowledge but rather a sign of purposeful ignorance. He writes that “racial exploitation...has usually been quite clear and unequivocal (think Native American expropriation, African slavery, Jim Crow)” and therefore the white cognitive distortions about race must be largely influenced by “vested white group interest in the racial status quo,” presumably because it is implausible to think that whites would not see such obvious racism.\footnote{Mills, “White Ignorance,” 34-35.} Whether individual whites intentionally avoid recognizing the Racial Contract (“straightforward racist motivation”) or whether the White structures around them conspire to shield white individuals from recognizing its existence (“impersonal social-structural causation”), ignorance of the Racial Contract is necessary if whites are to continue life in society as it is.\footnote{Mills, “White Ignorance,” 21.}

I suggest that there are two types of ignorance at play here. First, some differences in the recognition of racism are due to factual ignorance: failing to know and accurately understand the dynamics of a situation. This would be the case, for instance, when whites do not know the facts and history of lynching or the rates of traffic stops by race. Whites, ignorant of this information, therefore underestimate racism in society. Yet overcoming such factual ignorance alone will not entirely bridge the gap in perceptions of racism. Whites and Blacks may agree in their understanding of the facts of a situation, yet still disagree on whether it is an instance of racism. In this case, the ignorance is not about awareness of raw information but how the information is given meaning by way of concepts and values. Among those concepts is the definition of racism.
Simple vs. Complex Racism

One often-cited cause and result of white ignorance is that whites are generally working from a different conception of racism than people of color. Contemporary race scholars identify a distinction between simple and more complex manifestations (and therefore understandings) of racism. Whites tend to focus on the former, while people of color are more likely to recognize the latter in addition to the former. The result is differing levels of recognition of racism between whites and Blacks.

The distinction is partially due to a historical shift in racism. Mills outlines two major periods of racism, or what he calls global white supremacy.\footnote{Mills describes white supremacy as “the [political] system of domination by which white people have historically ruled over and, in certain important ways, continue to rule over nonwhite people,” (Racial Contract, 1-2). I understand Mills’s use of this term to be a way of emphasizing the political nature and impact of racism, but not to be a distinct concept from racism. For instance, he writes, “What is needed...is a recognition that racism (or, as I will argue, global white supremacy) is itself a political system...” (Racial Contract, 3). I interpret his parenthetical remark not as distinguishing racism from global white supremacy but as introducing his preferred terminology for racism in the context of his argument about the Racial Contract.} Beginning with European conquest and colonization, the time of de jure white supremacy relied on an explicit Racial Contract (metaphorical, but instantiated in such concrete manifestations as treaties, papal bulls, legal structures, and academic discussions) which overtly asserted the superiority of the white race and the legitimacy of European power over all non-Europeans.\footnote{Mills, Racial Contract, 20, 72-73.} Today, such juridical support for white supremacy has been almost entirely rejected, but despite the formal inclusion of all races into the social contract, the Racial Contract continues to promote a de facto white supremacy which presumes the legitimacy of white “social, political, cultural, and economic privilege [that is] based on the legacy of [European] conquest.”\footnote{Mills, Racial Contract, 73.} Similar to Mills, Bonilla-Silva traces the evolution of racism in the U.S., from the overt racism of slavery and Jim Crow laws to
a more covert, subtle form of racism termed “new racism.” Bonilla-Silva calls this contemporary form “color-blind racism” because it is manifest in whites’ claims that race does not affect their thoughts or actions: they assert that they do not see race, nor act differently toward people depending on their race, nor receive differentiated treatment themselves based on their race.

In short, whites conceive of racism as it predominated during slavery and the Jim Crow era, and therefore they believe it has largely disappeared. Antiracists recognize that racism has evolved and so looks different today than it did in the past. Bonilla-Silva succinctly describes the difference: “Whereas for most whites racism is prejudice, for most people of color racism is systemic or institutionalized.”

Prejudice vs. Systemic Racism

The prejudice versus systemic racism distinction is worth unpacking. A racism-as-prejudice approach presumes some negative psychological attitude to be a necessary component of racism: racism is motivated by racial malice and animosity. According to Robin DiAngelo, simple racism is characterized by discrete acts that are “intentional, malicious, and based on conscious dislike of someone because of race.” Thus, many whites presume that

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46 DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, 71. As my dissertation focuses on the white response to antiracism, I rely heavily on the work of Robin DiAngelo in part because of its familiarity among whites at the time of my writing. That includes its popularity among white audiences seeking to overcome their racism as well as its condemnation by whites who argue that elites are pushing “reverse racism” dressed in the clothing of social justice. While I generally accept DiAngelo’s antiracist approach as one that centers systemic racism as an urgent issue that every white person must address, I recognize that her work has also been criticized by other antiracist scholars and activists. For example, the conservative critique of her work—that she wrongly stereotypes all whites as racists and uses the concept of white fragility to dismiss all dissent—finds a more legitimate manifestation in Kelefa Sanneh’s critique that by telling white people how much responsibility they have to overcome their own racism and by being “endlessly deferential” to whatever any person of color thinks of racism, she creates an overly simplified narrative which makes whites look like flawed but complex characters, while people of color remain rather distant and one-dimensional (Kelefa Sanneh, “The Color of Injustice,” *New Yorker* 95, no. 34 (August 19, 2019): 18–22;
racism is an obviously condemnable desire to do harm to a person because of his or her race.

One problem with this understanding of racism is that it leaves many factors that impact racial inequity outside the realm of what can be examined as racism, with the result that these factors are generally ignored when it comes to assessing and solving racial inequities. As DiAngelo says, “The dominant paradigm of racism as discrete, individual, intentional, and malicious acts makes it unlikely that whites will acknowledge any of [their] actions as racism.”

In light of the deficiency of conceiving of racism as individual prejudice, DiAngelo and other scholars and activists argue instead for an understanding of racism as systemic or structural. Theologian M. Shawn Copeland explains, “First and foremost, racism is a complex structural or systemic phenomenon” that “never relies on the isolated choices or actions of a few individual white men; rather, it is structured or institutionalized.”

A significant consequence of recognizing the systemic nature of racism is that it brings social location and power into the equation. Most proponents of seeing racism through a

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47 DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, 76.

systemic lens therefore argue that racism can be committed only by the racial group located in a position of power in the society. While anyone of any race might be prejudiced or commit acts of discrimination, the term “racism” is reserved for attitudes or acts of the dominant race—in the United States, whites. One reason is to distinguish the different level of effect that race-based attitudes and acts have based on social location. In a context where whites have supports and power built into all aspects of society, an act of racial discrimination against a white person has the potential to do only limited damage compared to an act of racial discrimination against a person of color, who has relatively little structural support and power in U.S. society.49

Continuity and Difference Between Definitions of Racism

It will also be helpful to identify a root understanding of racism that underlies all of the definitions. I posit that a root understanding that expresses the heart of the concept of racism for both Black and white communities is “unjust treatment because of race.” As suggested above, identifying manifestations of this racism in the world is dependent on two tasks:

1. accurately understanding the factual dynamics of a situation, and

2. judging that these dynamics constitute unfair treatment because of race.50

49 DiAngelo, White Fragility, 22.

50 These two tasks partially align with Bernard Lonergan’s distinction between judgments of fact and judgments of value. In general, a judgment of fact is knowledge of the reality of a situation, while a judgment of value is knowledge of the goodness of that reality and whether one should therefore act for or against the situation. To put it in the terms of knowledge of racism, judgments of fact answer questions such as “How are different racial groups treated? What is the relative status of different racial groups in the United States? What are the causes of that equality or inequality in treatment and status?” while judgments of value answer the further questions “To what extent is this racial situation just or unjust? Will I work to maintain or change that situation?” Lonergan, however, does not offer a thorough explication of judgments of value and their relationship to judgments of fact. His understanding of them developed over time: in Insight he includes judgments of value under the same general dynamic as judgments of fact, both results of experiencing, understanding, and judging; by Method in Theology he indicates that judgment of value is part of a distinct fourth stage of deciding and that value is known in feeling (Robert M. Doran, “Ignatian Themes in the Thought of Bernard Lonergan: Revisiting a Topic that Deserves Further Reflection,” Lonergan Workshop, 19 [2006]: 92-93). Still, this shift is neither absolute nor comprehensive. Doran suggests that, whether or not Lonergan understood the ideas in this way, both descriptions of decision-making based on value remain worthwhile, each in specific situations.
In some cases, recognizing the reality of previously overlooked dynamics in society is enough for whites to judge that these dynamics fit their definition of racism. They did not recognize this manifestation of racism earlier because they did not see or understand the dynamics of the situation. In other cases, however, even understanding the dynamics of a situation may not lead whites to identify it as racism. They do not believe that the root definition of racism is applicable in the situation. This is where the differing definitions of racism come into play. This difference of assessment between Blacks (who might think a particular situation involves racism) and whites (who might not think it involves racism) may be due to differing understandings of concepts in the root definition of “unjust treatment because of race”:

“treatment”: The question here is whether a certain situation can be attributable to a certain cause. Whites presume that a direct, immediate relation must

corresponding to distinct times of decision outlined in St. Ignatius’s Rules for Discernment (Doran, “Ignatian Themes in the Thought of Bernard Lonergan,” 93-95). Patrick Byrne argues that Lonergan’s later writings on these ethical questions relating to value “gave rise to many difficult questions which he did not himself answer explicitly, or that he addressed elliptically or in confusing ways,” inspiring Byrne’s own attempt at a systematic development of Lonerganian ethics (Patrick H. Byrne, The Ethics of Discernment: Lonergan’s Foundations for Ethics [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016], 3).

Frederick G. Lawrence notes the close relationship between judgments of fact and judgments of value: one cannot judge the value of something until one understands its facts, and although judgments of value are affect-driven they still remain based in intellect and reason (Frederick G. Lawrence, “Finnis on Lonergan: A Reflection,” Villanova Law Review, 57, no. 5 [2012]: 865-867.) In addition, Lonergan’s later recognition of the movement of development from above downward recognizes that love which shapes one’s values thereby influences one’s judgments of fact (Lawrence, “Finnis on Lonergan: A Reflection,” 868-870). The challenge of precisely navigating the distinctions between judgments of fact and judgments of knowledge therefore put the task beyond the scope of this dissertation, though a complete Lonerganian account of racism and white conversion to antiracism will eventually require taking up the question. In the present work, I focus primarily on whites’ struggles to arrive at judgments of fact about racism, which include not only data (e.g., the frequency with which Black drivers are pulled over) but also the frameworks that make meaning out of that data (e.g., the reason that frequency differs from the frequency for white drivers, how these traffic stops relate or not to other historical or contemporary relations between the Black community and police). Clearly one’s values influence even these judgments of fact, so I am not claiming to isolate judgments of fact from judgments of value entirely, only to indicate that my emphasis will be on the former.
exist between the actions of a distinct, identifiable actor and the resulting harm done to the victim of racism. Blacks interpret more indirect causes as also resulting in racist “treatment,” often even if those causes are structural and do not have a clearly defined agent behind them. For example, whites might identify as “treatment” the rejection of an apartment applicant because she is Black, and so that rejection would be a legitimate situation for possible analysis as racism. The woman’s resulting homelessness and consequent exacerbation of health problems might not be considered part of that “treatment,” however, because it is too many steps removed from the white landlord’s action and is the result of many converging factors (even if most of those factors are decisions made by different white people). Blacks would be more likely to consider the landlord’s rejection, the homelessness, and the health problems to all be part of the “treatment” that could be analyzed as a situation of potential racism.

“because of”: The issue here is intentionality and motivation. For whites, to be considered as potential racism, the treatment must be intentional (i.e., the resulting situation is what was intended by the white actor) and motivated by race (i.e., done as a response to the target’s racial identity). For Blacks, the treatment could be racism whether it is due to intention or carelessness, and whether it is due to direct racial motivation or a lack of attentiveness to racially disparate impact.

“race”: Whites often understand race to be a biologically-based characteristic that is manifested in a person’s physical traits. Therefore, for whites, racism involves mistreating a person or group because of their appearance or other (supposedly) innate physical characteristics.\textsuperscript{51} The Black community, and race scholars in particular,

\textsuperscript{51} This is true whether or not a white person is physically looking at a person of color. For example, from this perspective, a white employer’s ignoring of a resume because the applicant has a
recognize race to be a social construct based on physical characteristics but also involving culture. Because race is linked to culture, racism is not only about mistreating someone because of their innate physical appearance but also extends to mistreating someone because of an element of their culture. For example, banning employees from playing rap or R&B music at a store would not necessarily be seen by whites as racism because the judgment is being made about a cultural product, which is not properly about someone’s race (i.e., not about an innate physical characteristic). Blacks would identify such a ban as racist because a judgment on Black culture is a judgment on race.

“*unjust*”: I propose that in the realm of racial inequity, whites make a distinction between “unfortunate” and “*unjust*.” According to this view, a situation is unfortunate if a person or group suffers some difficulty due to something that is not their fault, but a situation is unjust only if that difficulty is maliciously caused by another person or group that can be held directly accountable. For many members of the Black community, the very fact of racial inequity is a sign of injustice, and the causation (whether or not “intentional and malicious” in the way whites understand those terms) is clearly connected to the white community’s actions or inactions. Whites may see certain race-based dynamics as less-than-ideal, even as problematic, but not necessarily as unjust in the sense of a human-caused evil that demands correction. For instance,

“Black name” would be racism not because of the employer’s prejudice against the name *per se* but because of her/his reaction to the physical appearance that s/he imagines to be associated with the name.

52 I specify “in the realm of racial inequity” because I hypothesize that this distinction would not hold so firmly for whites in other realms, especially in situations where whites themselves are experiencing difficulties. Here I rely on a general distinction between “unfortunate” and “*unjust*,” as my purpose is to capture their essence in popular thought. For a more theoretical account of when inequalities are unjust and not simply unfortunate or bad luck, see the “second Focal Question” that ethicist Norman Daniels addresses in *Just Health: Meeting Health Needs Fairly* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008) in the introduction and third chapter.
that which the Black community sees as unjust exclusion of Blacks from social influence is often dismissed by whites as simply the natural result of being any kind of minority population in a community. In this view, the fact that the majority carries more influence and that its ways are considered normative is a benefit of being part of the majority group and a difficulty of being part of a minority group, but this difference is not an injustice. Identifying that a particular treatment is unjust involves a value judgment of what constitutes injustice, and thus a discrepancy regarding how “unjust” is understood and applied is an especially contentious and challenging divide to bridge. Two groups may agree on a situation and its cause (“treatment”), why it happened (“because of”), and to whom (“race”) and still disagree on whether or not it is unjust and therefore racism.

Invisibility of Systemic Racism to Whites

At least two intertwined elements of systemic racism make it difficult for whites to recognize. First, what I will call the materialist supposition asserts that racism can exist even when there is no hostile disposition. Even if whites were correct in their assertion that they harbor no ill-will—consciously or unconsciously, individually or as a community—against people of color, still their ideas, actions, and society could be racist. In this materialist approach, anything that disproportionately negatively affects people of color is by definition racist, regardless of the intention. When confronted with materialist racism, whites can come to recognize the factual reality in question (they can see that certain laws do affect Black people more, even if those laws are not seen as intentionally race-focused), but they are unlikely to categorize it as racism.

The second element of systemic racism that makes it challenging for whites to identify is the attitudinal aspect. It suggests that there are negative race-based attitudes motivating
racism, but that they are difficult—and sometimes impossible—for whites to identify, even in themselves. In contrast to the racism-as-prejudice approach, in systemic racism, such hostility is not located primarily in the individual but in the collective ethos of a society, and it is generally manifested in individuals in ways that they are unaware of. The assertion here is that whites have underlying anti-Black sentiments that they just do not see. Whites may wonder how they (much less anyone else) can ever identify racial motivation that is purported to be so deeply hidden.\textsuperscript{53} It is difficult for whites to recognize the reality of this collective, unconscious hostility toward people of color, but if they do become aware of it, they are likely to identify it as racism.

Below I expand on this antiracist conception in which racism can be identified based solely on inequitable outcomes, yet where these outcomes result significantly from collective white attitudes.

**Materialist Systemic Racism**

The materialist approach, exemplified by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, attempts to remove prejudice from the equation altogether. Bonilla-Silva laments that many scholars’ interpretations of contemporary racism “are still snarled in the prejudice problematic and thus interpret actors’ racial views as \textit{individual psychological} dispositions.”\textsuperscript{54} He takes a different approach:

\begin{quote}
In contrast, my model is not anchored in actors’ affective dispositions (although affective dispositions may be manifest or latent in the way many express their racial views). Instead, it is based on a materialist interpretation
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{53} As one of Bonilla-Silva’s students asked, “How does one test for the unconscious?” (\textit{Racism without Racists}, 7) Or as Grant Silva explains, if racism is based in ill will, then accountability is a problem whether it’s conscious or not: “Without access to the interior of another person’s mind, we cannot prove that hatred accompanies (what appears to be) racist action. Racist individuals, from this perspective, are the sole arbiters and ultimate authority on racism, a move that delegitimizes the Black episteme as an authority in the identification of racism.” (Grant J. Silva, “Racism as Self-Love,” \textit{Radical Philosophy Review}, 22 no. 1 (2019): 91, referencing Kenneth W. Stikkers, “‘. . . But I’m Not Racist’: Towards a Pragmatic Conception of ‘Racism.’”\textsuperscript{54} The Pluralist 9.3 (2014): 1–17, at 5; and George Yancy, “Elevators, Social Spaces, and Racism: A Philosophical Analysis.” \textit{Philosophy & Social Criticism} 34.8 (2008): 843–76).

\textsuperscript{54} Bonilla-Silva, \textit{Racism without Racists}, 7.
of racial matters and thus sees the views of actors as corresponding to their systemic location. Those at the bottom of the racial barrel tend to hold oppositional views and those who receive the manifold wages of whiteness tend to hold view in support of the racial status quo. Whether actors express ‘resentment’ or ‘hostility’ toward minorities is largely irrelevant for the maintenance of white privilege.\(^5\)

Bonilla-Silva describes systemic racism as “a network of social relations at social, political, economic, and ideological levels that shapes the life chances of the various races.”\(^6\) It is the “racial structure,” the “totality of the social relations and practices that reinforce white privilege.”\(^7\) Bonilla-Silva is not claiming that prejudice—negative psychological motivation—does not exist, but that this prejudice is not what is central to racism. Racism is not about motivation but about power and concrete results. Regarding racial inequality, Bonilla-Silva argues that “the intentions of individual actors are largely irrelevant to the explanation of social outcomes.”\(^8\) Racism is embedded in social structures and systems that are beyond the control of any single individual and that can promote racial inequity apart from any individual’s motivation to do so. Self-sustaining systems and forces have been put in motion. As Mills explains, “Economic structures have been set in place, causal processes established, whose outcome is to pump wealth from one side of the globe to another, and which will continue to work largely independently of the ill will/good will, racist/antiracist feelings of particular individuals.”\(^9\) These racist structures often have their roots in the explicit, prejudice-based racism of previous generations but continue today even if they are not intentionally buoyed by hostile racial attitudes.

While a “racism as prejudice” approach generally identifies racism by analyzing its cause

\(^{58}\) Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists*, 102.
(“Did this person make a decision because of animosity toward people of color?”), Bonilla-Silva’s materialist-systemic approach generally identifies racism by its effects (“Did this person’s decision, or this institution’s policy, have a positive or negative effect on people of color?”).60 Take the example of a store banning its employees from wearing certain traditionally Black hairstyles “for the sake of professionalism.” From a racism-as-prejudice lens, such a policy would be racist only if it were discovered that certain whites in the organization hoped it would dissuade Black candidates from applying for jobs or that it would be an excuse for not promoting Black employees. From a materialist racism-as-systematic lens, this policy would be racist not only if it intended to create an unwelcome environment for employees of color, but simply by the fact that it did result in such an environment, intended or not.61

To push it to its logical end, a materialist approach to systemic racism argues that what matters is whether certain ideas, actions, and structures promote racial equity. Anything that does not actively promote that equity is, de facto, racism. Hence, certain acts and ideas are racist not necessarily because they are motivated by a conscious or unconscious animosity toward Blacks, but because in the current race-based, white-preferencing structure of society, they fail to fight against that structure and the race-based disparity that is a part of it. This key concept in the antiracist approach will be described more in chapter two. Ibram X. Kendi explains it succinctly: “A racist policy is any measure that produces or sustains racial inequity

60 See also Grant Silva’s critique of Jorge Garcia: “His view is input-oriented and centered on what goes into our actions rather than the consequences coming from them” (“Racism as Self-Love,” 90).
61 Exactly what entails an “unwelcome environment” would likely be disputed. Although I am proposing an approach that would give epistemic privilege to Black assessments of what constitutes an “unwelcome environment,” here my point is that a “racism as prejudice” approach would not even consider this question of the environment unless that environment were the intentional result of white animosity.
between racial groups. An antiracist policy is any measure that produces or sustains racial equity between racial groups.”

A corollary of the materialist supposition is that simply by existing as a white person in a white culture like the United States, an individual is complicit in racism. Barbara Applebaum argues that even were a white person to attempt to renounce the privileges that naturally accrue to whites in this culture, it would be impossible to avoid perpetuating racism to some extent. White privilege is not only a matter of desiring privilege but of the external social structures and culture in which it is enshrined and which act upon one regardless of one’s desire for it. A white person cannot control the initial trust that most other whites instinctively give them, for instance. Even the decision to attempt to let go of white privilege is a manifestation of white privilege, for people of color do not have the choice of whether or not to attempt to let go of the subordinated status that society places on them.

**Attitudinal Systemic Racism**

In addition to the materialist aspect, a second element distinguishes systemic racism from simply being a matter of prejudice, yet this element remains focused on motivation and disposition as markers of racism. What I will call the attitudinal supposition moves negative racial attitudes from the locus of the individual to that of the society, and from consciousness to the unconscious. The lens of systemic racism makes visible certain dynamics of racial disposition that are generally overlooked in a racism-as-prejudice lens. This section will examine several aspects of attitudinal systemic racism.

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63 See Applebaum’s discussion of the second type of white complicity in *Being White, Being Good*, pp. 14-19.
Unconscious Anti-Black Sentiment or Racial Hostility

Some scholars describe certain white attitudes in a way that makes them sound similar to prejudice. These attitudes are not consciously embraced by whites but rather are unknowingly imbibed from their social environment and its structures. For instance, DiAngelo writes,

I also recognize the deep anti-black feelings that have been inculcated in me since childhood. These feelings surface immediately—in fact, before I can even think—when I conceptualize black people in general. The sentiments arise when I pass black strangers on the street, see stereotypical depictions of black people in the media, and hear the thinly veiled warnings and jokes passed between white people.64

These deep negative attitudes are often connected to stereotypes about Blacks as violent. DiAngelo writes, “Today we depict blacks as dangerous, a portrayal that perverts the true direction of violence between whites and blacks since the founding of this country. This characterization causes aversion and hostility toward black people and feelings of superiority toward ourselves, but we cannot morally acknowledge any of these feelings.”65 Aversion and hostility based on inaccurate portrayals of the Black community: this certainly sounds like a simplistic, racism-as-prejudice approach. But DiAngelo distinguishes it from the “dominant paradigm of racism as discrete, individual, intentional, and malicious acts” by noting that it is about “the collective white consciousness” and that an “individual white person may not be explicitly aware of these feelings,” though DiAngelo is “often amazed at how quickly they surface with even the slightest challenge.”66 One does not need to be conscious of underlying feelings or their roots in racist frameworks in order to be affected by them.

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64 DiAngelo, White Fragility, 90.
65 DiAngelo, White Fragility, 91.
66 DiAngelo, White Fragility, 76, 91.
Philosopher Grant J. Silva similarly rejects the assertion that “a moral agent’s intentions, motivations, desires, wants, likes and dislikes do all the dirty work when it comes to racism.”67 He notes, “The absence of intentional hatred or ill will is not enough to avoid the charge of racism.”68 Yet Silva does not dismiss attitude and disposition as irrelevant to racism. Instead, he argues that racism is a distorted form of self-love. This approach “continues the theme of racism as ‘rooted in the heart’ or grounded in personal affect,” though like DiAngelo he focuses not on how racism is “introduced into the world via malicious or hate-filled moral agents (or even corrupt institutions)” but on “the workings of racism in social structures where racial injustice and inequality are already present.”69 Silva’s main example is the police officer who rashly shoots a Black individual out of concern for the officer’s own safety. Silva argues that the motivation is not necessarily hatred of the other but love of the self that prompts such racist shootings. And yet Silva connects these shootings to “nefarious stereotypes about Black criminality.”70 Whites continue to harbor anti-Black attitudes, but they are less obvious than in the past—even to those holding those attitudes. In the context of systemic racism we get a lens that allows us to recognize the existence and working of negative attitudes that are not obvious

67 Silva, “Racism as Self-Love,” 90. This quote is Silva’s description of Jorge Garcia’s explanation of racism.
68 Silva, “Racism as Self-Love,” 86.
70 Silva, “Racism as Self-Love,” 97. While I find Silva’s explanation of racism as self-love to be immensely clarifying, I also believe he limits the effectiveness of his argument by remaining focused on a self-love that is clearly distorted by some of whites’ baser racist stereotypes and fears. He writes, for instance, “Racist acts of self-love, in this sense, are an extension of racialized ways of seeing the world.... The specific fault lies in presuming that every Black man you encounter is just waiting to rob, rape, or rap (at) you...” (101). Silva moves toward an essential question: at what point does concern for oneself (including one’s comfort, one’s preferred cultural milieu, one’s family and friends) become unjust, in light of the harm (or lack of good) it does to those of other races? Yet he fails to directly address this question. For instance, he passes over the fact that some white fears are in fact accurate: as populations of people of color increase, the current white, Euro-centric customs and lens that is largely presumed in the U.S. will no longer hold such dominance. By expanding beyond a focus on whites’ unfounded fears, Silva could do greater justice to a central issue that must be faced: acting out of self-love is wrong not only when it is based on false fears or misconceptions about race, but even sometimes when it is based on accurate fears and true ideas about race.
and intentionally embraced but rather are part of the general social background in which whites are formed.

**Culture- and Identity-Based Racism**

One of the reasons these racist attitudes are so difficult for whites to recognize is that they are based in the society around them and have become part of whites’ identity. The result is that these attitudes just seem normal to whites. Massingale conceptualizes this reality by describing racism as a culture. Drawing on Bernard Lonergan, Gary Chamberlain, and Charles R. Lawrence, he argues that racism is best understood as “a cultural phenomenon, that is, as an underlying color symbol system that (1) justifies race-based disparities; (2) shapes not only behavior, but also one’s identity and consciousness; and (3) often operates at a preconscious or nonrational level that escapes personal awareness.”

This culture of racism is not primarily about the external elements that most people associate with a culture, things like music, food, language, or dress, although these are not irrelevant to it. Massingale focuses instead on culture as the *meaning* that underlies or is expressed by these outward aspects. He asserts that “racism functions as a culture, that is, a set of shared beliefs and assumptions that undergirds the economic, social, and political disparities experienced by different racial groups.”

Key to this view is the recognition that racial attitudes are the result of social conditioning. Describing Lawrence’s idea of “unconscious racism,” Massingale writes,

[B]ecause a racialized set of meanings and values permeates all of our society’s cultural products, we learn our culture’s ‘racial code’ almost by osmosis.... Unconscious racism, then, denotes the influence of a cultural frame or lens that

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72 Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, 16. Here he draws especially on Bernard Lonergan, as interpreted by M. Shawn Copeland. Further elaboration of the Lonerganian element of this conception of racism-as-culture—and a proposed extension of Massingale’s concept—will appear later in this chapter and in chapter three.
we have learned and act out of in unintentional and preconscious ways. It is shorthand for the concrete effects that result from a racial conditioning that is transmitted through unconscious socialization.74

What makes racist attitudes so elusive is that, as DiAngelo explains, most of the explicit messages about race that whites see today appear to be antiracist, and yet there are stronger implicit messages whites receive that foster negative racial attitudes.75 Whites receive and internalize messages without even realizing it, and at times without society intending to pass on those messages. These fall into the category of what Charles Lawrence terms “tacit understandings”: ideas (especially racial stereotypes and anti-Blackness) that are learned without being explicitly taught, including those learned by observing others’ behavior or by being exposed (or not) to certain experiences.76 For example, a child might have grown up hearing from her parents that all people are equal, that whites are no better than Blacks, and that you should treat people equally well no matter their race. The child adopts a consciously antiracist mindset and repeats those messages about racial equality. At the same time, she may be raised in an all-white environment in which little to no effort is made to interact meaningfully with people of color. She may sense her parents’ increased nervousness or vigilance around people of color. She may see people of color portrayed mostly in negative circumstances. The result is that the child adopts an unconscious anti-Black attitude that associates whites with comfort, home, and safety, and non-whites with discomfort, strangeness, and danger. Even as she reaches adulthood this attitude remains invisible to her because consciously she has adopted seemingly antiracist messages and actually believes that she is living out those

74 Massingale, Racial Justice and the Catholic Church, 27.
75 DiAngelo, White Fragility, 36-37, 83-84.
messages. She fails to recognize the disconnect between the explicit messages of equality she expresses (and passes on to others) and the implicit anti-Black attitude she lives out (and also passes on to others).\textsuperscript{77}

Although the white culture of racism exists in structures that go beyond the individual, it is not simply an external environment distinct from the individual. The culture shapes one’s identity. DiAngelo says that “anti-blackness goes deeper than the negative stereotypes all of us have absorbed; anti-blackness is foundational to our very identities as white people.”\textsuperscript{78} She is indicating that whites’ group identity has been constructed as a contrast to what whites have identified as other races, especially Blacks. Silva takes a similar approach. He writes, “I find the feeling or need for self-preservation in these examples [e.g., rash shootings of Blacks by law enforcement] to be corrupt; the fear and anxiety driving them are produced by \textit{self-conceptualizations} in which one’s racial status is operative in the estimation about what to expect from (racialized nonwhite) others.”\textsuperscript{79} The problem, according to Silva, is allowing one’s own sense of wellbeing and identity to be dependent upon a socially-constructed racialized view of the world that is based on false stereotypes of the racial other.\textsuperscript{80}

\textbf{Racism as Racial Preference: Self-Love, Racially Selective Sympathy, and White Privilege}

The above discussion has focused on the negative or hostile racial attitudes that come from systemic racism, but there are also racist attitudes that are not primarily animosity toward Blacks but partiality toward whites. This is what I will term “unconscious racial preference.” It is a deeply rooted preference for whiteness, not primarily in an intentionally excluding manner but in the manner of seeking what feels comfortable, familiar, and safe. An important aspect of

\textsuperscript{77} DiAngelo, \textit{White Fragility}, 36-37, 83-84.
\textsuperscript{78} DiAngelo, \textit{White Fragility}, 91.
\textsuperscript{79} Silva, “Racism as Self-Love,” 98.
whites’ unconscious racial preference is that its negative effect on the Black community may be as much a result of omission as commission. It is not necessarily that racial preference leads to malevolence toward Blacks, but that it leads to a lack of benevolence toward Blacks compared to toward whites.\footnote{By “benevolence,” I mean to indicate an attitude that seeks to do good to others; I do not intend the connotation the word sometimes carries as to the supererogatory nature of such an attitude.} Recall, for instance, Silva’s conceptualization of racism as distorted and excessive self-love rather than intentional hatred.\footnote{Silva draws on Rousseau’s distinction between self-love as a legitimate sense of self-preservation (amour de soi) and self-love as an unwarranted determination to maintain one’s unjust social standing (amour-propre) (“Racism as Self-Love,” 99, citing Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. “A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality,” in \textit{The Social Contract and The Discourses}, trans. G. D. H. Cole. New York: Everyman’s Library, 1993).}

Massingale clarifies this idea through Lawrence’s concept of “racially selective sympathy and indifference,” “the unconscious failure to extend to a minority the same recognition of humanity, and hence the same sympathy and care, given as a matter of course to one’s own group.”\footnote{Massingale, \textit{Racial Justice and the Catholic Church}, 32; citing Lawrence, “The Id, the Ego, and Equal Protection,” at n. 135.} Whites may not desire bad things for Blacks; they just do not desire their good as much as they desire the good of whites. The result is that the \textit{relative} difference in benevolence, especially in a context of severe racial disparity, results in a discrepancy of outcomes. Massingale develops this idea in terms of the sympathy, empathy, and solidarity that whites lack when it comes to the Black community.\footnote{Massingale, \textit{Racial Justice and the Catholic Church}, 116-120.}

Massingale notes that most whites “desire to denounce blatant racial injustices, and yet preserve a situation of white social dominance and privilege.”\footnote{Massingale, \textit{Racial Justice and the Catholic Church}, 41.} A common understanding among the white community is that the way of life and the social goods enjoyed by whites is a neutral, normative baseline which racism hinders or prevents Blacks from reaching. The presumption is that whites’ way of life and access to social goods is not affected by racism,
which in this view has only a disadvantaging effect. Anti-racism scholars argue instead that the current white way of life and access to social goods is affected by racism; in fact, it is supported and made possible by systemic racism, coming at the expense of Blacks. As Silva writes, “[S]elf-love racism is the inability and unwillingness to stop viewing the self in ways that depend on the oppression, objectification, and/or exclusion of racialized others.” Of course, whites typically do not see their self-image as connected to race, and certainly do not see their self-love as connected to oppression: “They do not feel their racial existence and thus mistake an elevated social status for basic forms of treatment guaranteed by the Constitution, law, God, or some other external source.” The problem is that society cannot eradicate the oppression of Blacks while keeping an elevated social status for whites. For this reason, antiracists intentionally use the term “white privilege” as a way to “[shift] the focus from how people of color are harmed by racism to how white Americans derive advantages because of it.”

White privilege demonstrates both the materialist and attitudinal elements of systemic racism. As indicated above, from a materialist perspective Applebaum argues that in U.S. society white privilege is given to individuals whether they desire it or not—and even if they actively seek to get rid of it. What matters is the effect of being perceived as white. Attitudinally, whites’ desire to succeed, to access social goods, and to be comfortable can lead them to grasp tightly to the systems that perpetuate their privilege and thus limit the opportunities for people of color.

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Racial preference is an especially challenging aspect of racism for whites to identify as unacceptable. Whites might expect that it is only natural to have unconscious—or even conscious—preferences for one’s own group, and that this is acceptable as long as it is special favor for one group and not malevolence for the other. Race scholars, however, suggest that these are just two sides of the same coin. White Americans are willing to decry the suffering side but are unwilling to give up the privilege side. In the end, racial preference might not be any strong preference at all, but simply a lukewarm indifference toward the issue of race or certain racialized groups in the context of severe racial disparity. A racist disposition is not only an attitude that is against the Black community, but a lack of concern for the Black community.

Ideology

These attitudes, including unconscious racial preference, contribute to ways of thinking and deciding that have significant impacts on society. In other words, they contribute to ideologies. Bonilla-Silva defines “racial ideology” as “the racially based frameworks used by actors to explain and justify (dominant race) or challenge (subordinate race or races) the racial status quo.” Copeland argues that systemic racism “does not rely on the choices or actions of a few individuals [but infiltrates institutions].... Racism exploits the interdependence of individuals in and upon society through the formulation of ideology.” It “is the product of biased thinking, an ideology that willfully justifies, advances, and maintains the systemic domination of certain race or races by another race.” With the movement from attitude toward ideology, racism moves into the realm of meaning: how one makes sense of the world.

89 cf. Massingale, Racial Justice and the Catholic Church, 37.
90 Bonilla-Silva, Racism without Racists, 9.
An important source of disagreement between white and Black understandings of racism is how much of a group’s framework for viewing the world is racial. Antiracism scholars broaden the concept of racism to include elements of culture and beliefs that most whites would not consider race-based. An example is the argument that failing to support Affirmative Action or reparations is failing to take racism seriously. Many whites would see their lack of support for such initiatives not as an issue related to race but related to the role of government. From this white perspective, although it has an impact on how racism is addressed, people can disagree on the appropriate scope of government intervention and not be guilty of racism. To understand racism as systemic, however, is to recognize how these political and economic stances are connected to racism. A whole culture of whiteness underlies and supports the direct manifestations of racism, and this culture also supports philosophical and political positions that whites erroneously believe are outside of the arena of racism.

This is one of Mills’s main points: the political system that whites say is race-neutral is actually heavily influenced by race. It is not necessary that political and economic beliefs be aimed explicitly at exploiting or degrading Blacks in order for those beliefs to be part of racist white culture. Any political or economic idea that is not actively advancing the empowerment of people of color can be considered to be contributing to racist culture. Bonilla-Silva identifies some of these ideas (which he refers to as the frames of color-blind racism): meritocracy, anti-government intervention, individualism. They fall under what he calls “abstract liberalism,” a frame that describes race-related issues in political or economic liberalism language, telling partial truths but essentially avoiding any action that would resolve the reality of racial inequality.93 While whites believe that the U.S. socio-political economic system has been

93 Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists*, 76; 80-83.
tainted by racism throughout its history, Blacks point out that the U.S. socio-political economic system is itself a racist system.94

**Summarizing Systemic Racism**

I have described two systemic elements of racism. Materially, it manifests in certain external structures (laws, policies, habits, legacy privileges, self-perpetuating status quo, etc.95) that result in disparities of social goods (health, wealth, education, etc.). Ideologically, it is the white community’s mental constructs that form and are formed by whites’ individual attitudes toward society and race. This ideology sustains the perpetuation of the material structures, and vice-versa. It is important to see the material and ideological together. Recognizing the material without the ideological leads whites to believe that they are not implicated in that racism if they did not set up those external structures. On the other hand, whites who recognize the ideological without the material may see systemic racism as merely an annoyance for people of color: if whites’ attitudes toward people of color are not connected to structures that have concrete effects, then whites may see racism as only resulting in “hurt feelings” or isolated incidents.96

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94 See Mills, *Racial Contract*, 56-57 for an assessment of how central or peripheral racism is to such systems.

95 By “legacy privileges” I mean the de facto situation of racial disparity, often initiated by earlier, overt racism. For instance, redlining and other discriminatory housing practices have resulted in a homeownership gap between white and Black households which has significant implications for those groups’ ability to accrue wealth and access social goods and power over generations.

By “self-perpetuating status quo” I mean the tendency of groups to seek what is similar and so maintain their existing framework. For example, companies “naturally” tend to hire people who seem to fit in with the current office culture, often people from their employees’ social or professional circles. If the existing makeup of a company is 95% white, the result will be that they will continue to hire almost all white employees, not necessarily because of any intentionally race-based policies but simply due to inertia combined with a lack of self-criticality.

96 As Luc Faucher writes, “If racism never had led to any actions, had not created and perpetuated inequality between groups, it is uncertain we would care about it as much” (“Racism,” in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Race*, eds. Paul Taylor, Linda Martín Alcoff, and Luvell Anderson (New York: Routledge, 2018), 407; as cited in Silva, “Racism as Self-Love,” 94).
A Continuum Approach

I conclude this unpacking of different understandings of racism-as-prejudice and structural racism with one additional way of relating them: as two general poles on a continuum. On the far end of prejudice, racism is understood as an individual’s direct, violent action against a person or persons because of conscious, malicious attitudes about the victim’s race. On the far end of a systemic approach, racism is the failure to create societal structures and ideologies that ensure all races have equitable enjoyment of all social goods. Sub-elements of these two general poles also fall along a spectrum. Some are proposed in the table on the next page.

Note three important things. First, the elements on the following table are not binaries but poles on a spectrum. Second, certain different elements may be coherently combined from different sides of the spectrum: one can conceive of a racism that is both conscious and that results primarily from pro-whiteness rather than anti-Blackness. One can also conceive of a racism that targets both physiological and cultural characteristics. Third, essentially all people agree that situations that involve the elements of racial prejudice (the left side of the spectrum) are racism. The question is how far toward systemic racism (the right side of the spectrum) a person or group’s conception of racism stretches. In general, whites will easily identify the left-hand side of the table with racism, but the further to the right side one moves, the less likely whites will be to consider it racism.
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Racism as prejudice</th>
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<th>Racism as systemic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Racism is largely determined by understanding the <strong>cause</strong> or agent of an action</td>
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<td>Racism is largely determined by understanding the <strong>effect</strong> of an action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racism is caused by an <strong>individual agent</strong>’s thoughts and actions</td>
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<td>Racism is embedded in and caused by communities and social structures</td>
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<tr>
<td>Racism is about the <strong>psychological and affective motivation</strong> of an action</td>
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<td>Racism is about the <strong>empirical consequences</strong> of who has power and how it is used</td>
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<tr>
<td>Racism is always <strong>consciously</strong> motivated</td>
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<td>Racism can be <strong>unconsciously</strong> motivated</td>
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<td>Racism is always <strong>intentional</strong></td>
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<td>Racism can include <strong>insufficient attentiveness</strong></td>
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<td>Racism is always <strong>active maliciousness</strong></td>
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<td>Racism can be <strong>insufficient beneficence</strong></td>
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<td>Racism only targets <strong>physiological traits</strong></td>
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<td>Racism can target <strong>cultural elements</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racism always involves <strong>antagonism</strong> towards another race (e.g., anti-Blackness)</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>Racism can be (<strong>distorted</strong>) love and support for a race (e.g., pro-whiteness)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racism is always <strong>exclusion</strong></td>
<td>---</td>
<td>Racism can be a <strong>lack of inclusion</strong></td>
</tr>
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</table>
| Racism always involves **physical violence** | --- | Racism can be **psychological violence, emotional violence, spiritual violence, symbolic violence, epistemic violence**, etc.  

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97 Spiritual violence is “the use of religion as a tool by which to promote injustice and bigotry” (Michael J. Mazza, “An Urban Pilgrimage: Thoughts on Race, Sexuality, and Spiritual Violence,” *Whosoever*, [May/June 2001]). It also “diminishes, and in some cases, may even destroy a survivor’s capacities for religious faith and other forms of spiritual engagement” (Theresa W. Tobin, “Religious Faith in the Unjust Meantime: The Spiritual Violence of Clergy Sexual Abuse,” *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 5, no. 2, article 5 (2019): 2). **Symbolic violence**, according to Pierre Bourdieu, is the way that a person or group is constrained by the categories a society has made available for understanding and acting in the world. Such violence is not necessarily deliberate but occurs due to a group’s use of the (only) structures available to them, which in turn reifies those structures (Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* [University of Chicago Press, 1992], 167-168; and J. Daniel Schubert, “Suffering/Symbolic Violence” in *Pierre Bourdieu: Key Concepts*, 2nd edition, ed. Michael James Grenfell [Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2014], 179-194). **Epistemic violence** “refers to the harm done to an individual when her understanding of her reality is ignored, obscured, and overridden by another person (or persons) who in words and actions redefine(s) that reality” (Courtney T. Goto, “Experiencing Oppression: Ventriloquism and Epistemic Violence in Practical Theology,” *International Journal of Practical Theology* 21, no. 2 [2017]: 182).
An Epistemological Reading of Cultural Systemic Racism

The argument of this section is that understanding systemic racism as cultural provides insight into the decentralized and dynamic nature of racism as an epistemic phenomenon. I have noted that on its own, a racism-as-prejudice approach is insufficient because it fails to account for the many ways that whites’ emotions, ideas, and behaviors result in relative harm to Blacks even when it is unconscious or unintended. The concept of systemic racism properly expands the notion of racism to make evident the role of social structures in this promotion and maintenance of racial inequity.

Still, the concept of systemic racism itself requires clarification. On one hand, models of systemic racism can imply a deterministic situation: individuals within white structures are swept into that viewpoint and behavior with little if any true agency. For example, drawing on the work of Judith Butler, Applebaum emphasizes the inescapability of the racist power structures in which whites live.98 The ubiquity of social influence is a key component of mapping racism, but I would add that a complete picture must also include whites’ acts of agency that occur within the bounds set by power structures.

On the other hand, to the extent that conceptions of systemic racism do address individual motivation and agency, they tend to focus on some variation of prejudice or distorted desire, even if these are more covert and socially-driven than a racism-as-prejudice model proposes. In other words, whites are rarely described as simply “incorrect” about racism. Whites’ distorted view of reality is attributed either to the insidious content fed to them by the dominant white society or to an irrational, affective selfishness that prevents them from accepting and acting on the obvious truth about racism. The complicating factor that I believe

98 Applebaum, Being White, Being Good, 53-90.
needs to be made more apparent is that from whites’ own viewpoint, their perspective on race is rational and seeks truth.

I believe that one motivation for whites is their desire to create a meaningful and accurate narrative about their world and to identify a coherent understanding of what justice entails. On some level, the whites under consideration in this project are concerned with making sense of race and with identifying what racial justice entails. Speaking about the problem as one of whites being “incorrect” about racism both expresses another element of the truth about whites’ conception of racism and can serve as an effective, practical lens through which whites can come to understand their own flawed approach to racism. I am not doubting that whites’ failure to arrive at correct conclusions about racism is a manifestation of active ignorance. I am saying that even when external power structures and internal affect and desire cause white ignorance, still the problem must be addressed not only as an issue of power or attitude and affective disposition, but also as one of knowledge.

An especially helpful framework for understanding this epistemic nature of racism is Massingale’s description of “cultural racism,” already mentioned. Whereas scholars such as Bonilla-Silva, Applebaum, and DiAngelo largely focus on the power dynamics of systemic racism and its effects on white attitudes and beliefs, Massingale’s understanding of racism-as-cultural humanizes the concept of systemic racism by addressing the dimension of meaning. Massingale constructs this concept on Bernard Lonergan’s understanding of culture, especially as applied to race by Shawn Copeland. I will seek to draw on Lonergan to extend what I believe is an implicit aspect of Massingale’s explanation of racism-as-culture: the idea that racism’s intractability is connected not only to culture as given meanings but culture as the context of meaning-making.
Massingale uses Gary Chamberlain’s idea of racism as a “symbol-system” and Charles R. Lawrence’s understanding of “unconscious racism.” Both can suggest a dynamic in which the white individual is passive and the culture around them actively and surreptitiously infects them with racist ideas, feelings, and attitudes. Chamberlain argues that “racism is a symbol-system which functions as an unconscious, unreflective meaning system resting upon symbols of color and sex which are deeply embedded in the fears and anxieties of white Americans.”

Massingale explains that for Chamberlain, “racism is a symbol system that malforms, conforms, and deforms us into an alien identity radically at odds with authentic Christian belief, so much so that most whites are unaware of how their identity is shaped by this consciousness.” As already cited above, Massingale says of Lawrence’s idea of unconscious racism, “[B]ecause a racialized set of meanings and values permeates all of our society’s cultural products, we learn our culture’s ‘racial code’ almost by osmosis. … Unconscious racism, then, denotes the influence of a cultural frame or lens that we have learned and act out of in unintentional and preconscious ways. It is shorthand for the concrete effects that result from a racial conditioning that is transmitted through unconscious socialization.”

Note the emphasis on racist ideas infiltrating whites: symbols that are “deeply embedded,” a symbol system that “malforms, conforms, and deforms us,” identities being “shaped,” learning “by osmosis,” “racial conditioning that is transmitted through unconscious socialization.” One can easily get the impression that an individual has little to no agency in the process and that culture simply imposes certain meanings onto a person. In some ways this is accurate: one of the important insights of framing systemic racism as a culture, as Massingale does, is to highlight the immersive and all-

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encompassing nature of racism. Central to this point is the pre-conscious or unconscious character of a culture’s influence.

The danger is interpreting this influence to be solely an imposition of racist conclusions on its members, as if a culture whispers assertions like “Affirmative Action is reverse racism” until a person accepts them. While some form of this direct indoctrination does often occur, there is another aspect to the dynamic: such conclusions are not only given by a culture but are arrived at within the context of a culture. It is a culture whose overemphasis on individualism and meritocracy, combined with a neglect of the current imbalance of racial power, leads its members to “logically” conclude that “Affirmative Action is reverse racism.” Cultural racism is not merely a force imposing racist ideas on an individual, but the environmental elements whose often-passive content shapes an individual’s own active meaning-making process.¹⁰³ When whites think of systemic racism as primarily the former, then they associate racism only with ideas and attitudes they have unthinkingly accepted. It is assumed that any racism they have absorbed from the culture would become obvious as racism once interrogated. Hence whites believe that any idea that they have intentionally questioned and still do not believe to be racist would therefore not have the possibility of being racist.

Drawing on Lonergan, Copeland describes culture not in terms of the resultant meaning but the very act of meaning-making: “Constituted in the spontaneously reflective effort to understand what is going on in a social order, culture is the result of human creativity, discovery, and decision in reflecting upon and so mediating the appropriateness, the meaning, the significance, the value of a way of life as a whole and in its parts.”¹⁰⁴ Culture is thus rooted in

¹⁰³ To put it in the Lonerganian terms to be addressed in chapter three, cultural racism is living within a horizon that has been shaped by an inauthentic culture.
the human desire to understand, both on the immediate level (“spontaneously”) and on the more deliberately reflective and critical level.

Lonergan distinguishes two levels of culture, both of which can harbor racism. One is the “meaning and value immediately intuited, felt, spoken, [or] acted out” in daily life: “the meaning already present in the dream before it is interpreted, the meaning in a work of art before it is articulated by the critic, the endless shades of meaning in everyday speech, the intersubjective meanings of smile and frown, tone and gesture, evasion and silence, the passionate meanings of love and hatred, of high achievement and wrathful destruction.” In this understanding of culture as immanent meaning, unconscious racial preference may be at work in one’s prethematic (but still socially-influenced) reactions to things, or inherent in the cultural items themselves (e.g. who is depicted in art and media, how they are depicted).

Second, Lonergan identifies a “superstructure” of culture, “an enormous process in which meanings are elaborated and values are discerned in a far more reflective, deliberate, critical fashion.” It is a more deliberate process of engaging with, understanding, shaping, promoting, and/or rejecting the first-level immediate meanings. Copeland describes this level: “The function of culture is not only reproductive, it is also critical—rejecting and purifying the elements of the social order that are judged to be meaningless, irrelevant, harmful, or just not worthwhile.” Although Copeland here points to the possibility of redeeming a flawed culture, even the critical function of culture may be distorted by racism. Unconscious racial preference may be at work in one’s more deliberate acts of judgment and decision. That is, just because a

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process is deliberate and reflective rather than immediate and intuited does not mean that it is free from bias. At this higher level of culture, an especially insidious racism results, in which whites believe they are performing this meta-function of cultural critique when in fact they are still caught in the bias of that culture.\textsuperscript{108}

In summary, understanding racism as culture does not only mean recognizing how an ideology impresses certain ideas onto members of a community but how those members use the ideas and resources in that ideological environment to make sense of their society. Ultimately, the end results may be similar: whether one conceives of racist attitudes as the result of whites passively imbibing negative messages about Blacks, or as the result of whites actively making meaning of their world by using the elements of a white ideology, the point is that their environment is limiting them to certain incorrect ways of thinking about race and racism. The benefit of including the latter model is that it may better describe the experience from the perspective of whites. It more fully accounts for situations in which whites reach conscious and deliberate conclusions that nevertheless promote systemic racism, allowing these situations to be critically interrogated.

\textbf{Cultural Racism as Idolatry}

Conceptualizing racism as systemic and drawing out its epistemic aspect also clarifies racism theologically. Massingale points out that white Catholicism has simplistically approached the problem of racism as a problem of prejudice. He writes that the Catholic Church’s teaching “lacks an extended theological or ethical reflection upon racism.... A coherent presentation of

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{108} For Lonergan, bias on the level of a whole society or tradition results in “major inauthenticity” that can make it very difficult for individuals to be authentic by only focusing on avoiding the “minor inauthenticity” of one’s own bias (Bernard Lonergan, \textit{Method in Theology}, Volume 3 in Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan, eds. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017], 77-78). Chapter three will engage more deeply this and other Lonerganian concepts described only briefly here.}
why, *in the light of faith*, racism is contrary to the Gospel is missing."\(^{109}\) For years, Black theologians have taught that racism is not only an ethical failure but an act against the core of Christian faith itself. Massingale argues that racism is an ecclesial and theological issue because it is a form of idolatry.\(^{110}\) He notes that the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explicitly makes this connection between racism and idolatry: “Idolatry consists in divinizing what is not God. Man [sic] commits idolatry whenever he honors and reveres a creature in the place of God, whether this be gods or demons (for example, satanism), power, pleasure, *race*, ancestors, the state, money, etc.... Idolatry rejects the unique Lordship of God; it is therefore incompatible with communion with God.”\(^{111}\) The idolatrous nature of racism has been suggested by Black writers and activists such as Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King, Jr.\(^{112}\)

Massingale draws particularly on theologian James Cone, arguing that idolatry is Cone’s primary understanding of sin. Sin is “the desire to be ‘like God’ through making one’s self or social group the ultimate locus of one’s loyalty and commitment and reshaping others according to one’s own designs.”\(^{113}\) Massingale explains the structural manifestations of this idolatry: “The *systemic relationships of domination and privilege* that White Americans enjoy and defend are manifestations of the desire to be ‘like God,’ the living a lie, the claiming of more for oneself than one ought, which are the essence of sin.”\(^{114}\) Idolatry is manifest not only in individual whites who see themselves as better than people of color; the whole racialized social hierarchy

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\(^{112}\) Massingale, “Response,” 131-132.


in the United States is idolatrous. Massingale asserts that this idolatry takes place in the white valuation of cultural elements:

In summary, what makes the Catholic Church complicitous in an idolatrous belief system is not the fact that many of its members engage in acts of race-based malice or bigotry. Idolatry, rather, lies in the pervasive belief that European aesthetics, music, theology, and persons—and only these—are standard, normative, universal, and truly “Catholic.” That only these can mediate the divine and carry the holy. That God can only be truly imaged in white. This is, I submit, idolatry, that is “divinizing what is not God.”

By restricting the elements of theological and spiritual meaning-making to white cultural products, white Catholics sustain a racism that distorts their conception of the Church and God.

Another way to describe this idolatry is to say that it makes white ways of meaning-making, and the cultural products available to guide it, normative when in fact they are not. Even if some aspects of the white approach to understanding faith, God, and all of reality are themselves good, humans are called to seek the God of mystery through ever-greater understanding of the world. Doing so requires a much deeper and broader engagement than the white way of knowing—or any single way of knowing—can achieve on its own. The white way of knowing is particularly limited, however, precisely because of the way it attempts to make invisible any other way of knowing. To maintain systemic racism is not only an ethical failure; it is an epistemic failure that significantly hinders one’s ability to know God.

White Ignorance of God

James Cone’s work suggests that the theological implications of racism are not only “divinizing what is not God” but also ignoring what is God, or what God is. Two of Cone’s

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115 Massingale, “Response,” 134. What Massingale says in this context about what whites see as truly “Catholic” could also apply to what whites see as truly “American” or even truly “human.”

116 While Massingale says that Cone primarily understands racism as the sin of idolatry, white theologian Jon Nilson suggests that Cone primarily understands racism as heresy (Jon Nilson, Hearing Past
best-known images suggest that cultural racism distorts whites’ understanding of God; white ignorance extends to the theological realm. First, Cone asserts that whites are blind to a fundamental truth about God: God is Black.\textsuperscript{117} The assertion that God is Black can be explained more generally as the idea that God has a preferential option for the poor and marginalized, that God is on the side of the oppressed. But to offer such an explanation of Cone’s assertion is partially to explain away its force. The shock to the white community of hearing that the corrective to the flawed assumption “God is white” is not “God is beyond race” (“God is post-racial”) but “God is Black,” is an important element. “God is Black” indicates that God’s solidarity with those who are marginalized—in this case, the Black community in the U.S.—is part of God’s very identity.

The difficulty that whites have thinking of God as Black says something about how racism has distorted their image of God. “God is Black” serves as a corrective to “God is white” by reminding whites that God is not raced, and yet Cone’s point is deeper than that. There is something more accurate about saying “God is Black” than “God is white,” and it is the fact that God sides with the oppressed. Cone argues that God’s preference for the oppressed is also necessarily a stance \textit{against} the oppressor. God takes sides, and whites have put themselves on the side against God. As Cone writes, “[I]n a racist society, God is never color blind. To say God is color blind is analogous to saying that God is blind to justice and injustice.”\textsuperscript{118}

If God is Black, and whites cannot properly understand Blackness, then whites cannot properly understand God. That is, if God is the God of the oppressed, then failing to understand

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\textit{the Pain: Why White Catholic Theologians Need Black Theology} [New York: Paulist Press, 2007], 68 footnote 5). These two ideas are not necessarily in conflict and in fact point to the same main conclusion: racism not only distorts human-to-human relationships but also the human-to-God relationship.


\textsuperscript{118} Cone, \textit{A Black Theology of Liberation}, 25.
who the oppressed are will mean failing to understand who God is. In *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Cone describes white misunderstanding of God in terms of the divergence between Black and white conceptions of God: “the oppressed and the oppressors cannot possibly mean the same thing when they speak of God. The God of the oppressed is a God of revolution who breaks the chains of slavery. The oppressors’ God is a God of slavery and must be destroyed along with the oppressors.”

In *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, Cone offers a second image. He argues that white theologians’ failure to see the crucified Jesus in lynched Black bodies is not only a failure to identify the proper course of ethical action (to speak out against race-based violence) but also a failure to understand who Jesus Christ is. Failing to understand the truth about people of color (their human dignity as made in the image and likeness of God and the injustice of their contemporary situation) is failing to understand the truth about God. Both instances of injustice are elements of racism.

Central to Cone’s argument is the idea that the universal God is only known in the particular. To say that “God is liberator” without recognizing the particular liberation that is necessary in one’s own context is to not truly understand or believe that “God is liberator.” That universal truth about God is only understood if its manifestation in the particularity of a specific context is understood. Cone’s argument is Christologically rooted in the historicity of the Incarnation: “The basic mistake of our white opponents is their failure to see that God did not become a universal man but an oppressed Jew, thereby disclosing to us that both man’s nature and God’s are inseparable from oppression and liberation…. Christ is not a man for all

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120 In the following chapters, I will take this idea a step further and argue that whites’ failure to seek the proper approach to understanding people of color is also a failure to properly seek God.
people; he is a man for oppressed people whose identity is made known in and through their
liberation.”121

The particularity of Christ in the first century points to Christ’s presence in other specific
situations of oppression. God is universally present in the particularity of the oppressed. In an
introduction written forty years after the original publication of A Black Theology of Liberation,
Cone writes that in addition to God being Black, in different contexts “‘God is mother,’ ‘rice,’
‘red,’ and a host of other things that give life to those whom society condemns to death. ‘Black,’
‘mother,’ ‘rice,’ and ‘red’ give concreteness to God’s life-giving presence in the world and
remind us that the universality of God is found in the particularity of the suffering poor.”122  God
may transcend race, but each person and situation can truly know God only as the particular
God of that historical situation, so for all intents and purposes God cannot be found in the
context of the racially unjust United States except as a Black God.123

Cone argues similarly for how to understand Christ’s cross. He writes, “Every time a
white mob lynched a black person, they lynched Jesus. The lynching tree is the cross in America.
When American Christians realize that they can meet Jesus only in the crucified bodies in our
midst, they will encounter the real scandal of the cross.”124  The cross may be the universal
symbol of salvation, the one sacrifice for all time, but this universal offer is only understood and

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121 Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 157. I do not believe that Cone is saying God is not
present in the context of whiteness and among oppressors but that God’s presence there takes the form
of an indictment and an invitation to leave that whiteness for Blackness, where God is not the indicter but
the liberator.

122 James H. Cone, “God Is Black,” in Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the
Underside, eds. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engel (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Harper &

123 I do not believe that Cone demands that U.S. Christians see God only as Black, nor only in the
circumstances of oppression. I do interpret him as saying that without this concept of God as a significant
and even controlling aspect of one’s understanding of God, that understanding will remain fatally flawed.

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accepted in the particularities of specific contexts. The crucified Jesus, says Cone, is accessible “only in the crucified bodies in our midst,” and a central and unavoidable locus of the crucifixion in the United States is the lynching tree.125

Overall, one might say that Black Theology suggests that there is a white ignorance at work in the spiritual element of racism that parallels the white ignorance Mills describes in the political sphere. Mills argues that whites claim adherence to one thing (a universal Social Contract) but in fact have a prior adherence to another (the Racial Contract). The work of Cone, Massingale, and Copeland similarly suggests that whites claim adherence to the Christian Creed but in fact have a prior adherence to a Racial Creed. Whites confess “one” “catholic” Church but limit its sacred expression to white culture alone. Whites confess a God who created “all things,” who created humans in God’s own image and likeness but see that imago dei reflected primarily in whites. Whites might even say that God is the God of the oppressed but prioritize God’s (and their own) compassion and justice for whites, failing to see or act against the oppression of Blacks.126 This Racial Creed keeps whites not only from following and obeying God, but even from knowing God and God’s commands.

Conclusion

Massingale and Cone bring into relief some of the idols of whiteness: white bodies, white religious cultural products, and white conceptions of God that have all been raised to the appearance of divinely-approved normativity. I would extend their insight to apply to whites’ flawed approach to meaning-making as well. White idolatry is found not only in the flawed

125 Cone, The Cross and the Lynching Tree, 158.
126 Cone has expressed exasperated wonder at white theologians’ ability to recognize and fight against the oppression of many groups but to remain blind or apathetic to the oppression suffered by Blacks. For instance, he writes, “What is it that renders White Catholic and Protestant theologians silent in regard to racism, even though they have been very outspoken about anti-Semitism and class and gender contradictions in response to radical protest?” (“Black Liberation Theology and Black Catholics: A Critical Conversation,” Theological Studies 16 (2000): 732).
conclusions that white bodies, cultural products, and conceptions of God are normative for Christianity but also in the distorted approach to meaning-making that leads to and maintains those idols. That is, whites’ distorted way of knowing *is itself an idol*. In fact, it is the first idol that must be toppled if whites are going to recognize the other idols as idols. In the next two chapters I will step back from the explicitly religious lens to explore, first, the epistemic disorientation that whites experience when antiracists challenge their flawed approach to knowing, and, second, a theoretical framework for understanding that flawed way of knowing. The fourth chapter will return to the religious theme, connecting epistemic authenticity to relationship with God.
CHAPTER 2: WHITE EPISTEMIC DISORIENTATION

Introduction

Chapter one argued that the common white understanding of racism-as-prejudice is deficient and must be combined with the antiracist understanding of systemic racism. I highlighted the epistemic element of systemic racism and suggested that a key element of white ignorance is the way whites attempt to make meaning within the unseen but restrictive bounds of white culture. Chapter two will clarify what Massingale identifies as the second and third obstacles to healthy engagement of the issue of racism: we do not know how to talk about race with people of other races, and we do not want to do so. Again, I focus on what I consider the largest problem in this area: whites’ failure to engage the issue of racism well. In addition to white ignorance, antiracists describe behaviors and attitudes that can be collectively termed “white resistance.” Not only are whites uninformed or wrong about racism, but they also are resistant to engaging in the issue of racism in order to learn. It is not only that the content of whites’ understanding of racism is incorrect; their approach to understanding racism is flawed.

In this chapter I explore an epistemic element of white resistance. I do so with the antiracist presumption that this resistance is not justified, yet I seek to describe it from the perspective of whites in order to better understand the essence of the obstacles and their potential solutions. Antiracists such as DiAngelo and Applebaum identify the main motivations for white resistance as the desire to maintain power (including the material, social, and psychological privileges that accompany it) and a sense of moral purity.\textsuperscript{127} I argue that one additional, under-acknowledged reason that whites fail to engage seriously with antiracism is the epistemic difficulty caused by that engagement. Most whites do not experience their

\textsuperscript{127} DiAngelo, White Fragility, 2, 47, 71-88, 102-103, 108-109; Applebaum, Being White, Being Good, 35-46.
hesitation about antiracist arguments as being due to a desire to protect their own power and moral innocence. Often, whites experience their hesitation about antiracist arguments as a matter of truth: whites believe that antiracist assertions about racism are incorrect.

Whites therefore expect that part of engaging with the issue of race means discussing with antiracists why they believe the latter’s assertions are incorrect. In the midst of this attempted discussion, however, whites often feel that antiracists are being resistant toward them, especially when their ideas and interactions are identified as racist. Whites sense—usually correctly—that antiracists have already made up their minds about the reality of racism and the demands of justice, and that any white beliefs or questions that significantly challenge these antiracist ideas are dismissed as ignorant or decried as offensive. Explicitly or implicitly, the message from antiracists is that whites are not in a position to judge issues of race. At this point, an easy exit for whites is to disregard antiracists as ideologues and leave the conversation. But for whites who want to continue trying to understand antiracism, the frustration and uncertainty that arise from being treated as non-knowers lead to what I call white epistemic disorientation (WED). Regardless of whether they accept or deny the antiracist claim that their understanding of race is not trustworthy, whites experience a felt inability to participate in the knowing process about issues of race. They lose confidence in the personal and social epistemic processes on which they have previously relied, and they do not know how to move forward in a way that is attentive both to their own sense of truth and to the claims of antiracists.

My goal in this chapter is to describe white epistemic disorientation so that whites might recognize the experience in themselves and antiracists might better understand this aspect of their white interlocutors. I will define WED and describe whites’ experience of it, identify types of interactions with antiracists that lead to this epistemic disorientation for
whites, and situate WED within a framework of spiritual impasse. I conclude with the assertion that WED can serve as a doorway to greater knowledge of racism and greater commitment to racial justice.

Looking ahead, this chapter will set up the problem to be addressed in chapter three. I confirm the antiracist assertion that white ignorance results in whites being unable to properly judge racism and that the solution is for whites to adopt a disposition of “radical openness.” I demonstrate why radical openness can seem to whites to dismiss the idea of objective truth (or at least the discursive process of knowing truth), then how it can be interpreted instead as supporting the discursive process of knowing truth. The latter approach understands radical openness not primarily as a willingness to accept antiracist ideas but as a willingness to interrogate one’s own epistemic authority.

The radical openness of postmodernity is a helpful epistemic disposition (that can be fostered by a spirituality), but the actual process of knowing must remain (by necessity of its nature, not just by moral demand) fundamentally discursive. Chapter three will use Lonergan to explore how the antiracist approach can indeed lead whites on the path to a purified discursive process of knowing (in part by forcing them to reckon with the necessity of conversion), while chapter four will use kenosis as a foundation for a spirituality of intellectual humility that can support the leap of conversion necessary for this purification of discursive knowing.

**WED in the Context of Other Types of White Resistance**

WED is part of the wider phenomenon of white resistance. Scholars across disciplines have noted that whites often resist engagement and learning when confronted with the topic of structural racism and white privilege, and antiracists have attempted to categorize and

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128 See, for example, Barbara Applebaum, "Comforting Discomfort as Complicity: White Fragility and the Pursuit of Invulnerability," *Hypatia* 32, no. 4 (November 2017): 862-875; Nolan L. Cabrera and Lisa
analyze this resistance. Black education scholar Joseph E. Flynn, Jr., identifies at least four distinct phenomena that scholars describe to explain white hesitation in recognizing systemic racism. First, while I use the phrase white resistance as an umbrella term, Flynn defines it more narrowly as a gut-level, “flat-out rejection of the principles of anti-racism altogether.” It is “irrational, an automatic reaction” that dismisses ideas about systemic inequalities because a person is not willing to question their own perspective.

White guilt, in contrast, is a response that arises from some recognition of the reality of historical white oppression of people of color and whites’ ongoing privilege as a result. Leonardo Zeus writes, “White guilt blocks critical reflection because whites end up feeling individually blameworthy for racism. In fact, they become overconcerned with whether or not they ‘look racist’ and forsake the more central project of understanding the contours of structural racism.”

Thirdly, as already referenced, DiAngelo describes white fragility as “a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress... becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves.” Flynn understands white fragility to be “an automatic, uncritical response to the
introduction of critical conversations about race and racism.” 135 In its automatic nature, it has similarities with white resistance.

Flynn’s own contribution is the concept of white fatigue, “a temporary state in which individuals that are understanding of the moral imperative of antiracism disengage from or assume one no longer needs to continue learning about how racism and/or white privilege function in light of the basic understanding of individual racism (i.e., prejudice and discrimination).” 136 He differentiates white fatigue from white fragility and white resistance by suggesting that it is not an automatic, gut response; rather, it occurs when one has engaged in some critical thought about racism but has failed to move from an understanding of racism as individual (i.e., the white understanding of racism I outlined in chapter one) to an understanding of racism as systemic (i.e., the antiracist understanding of racism). While white fatigue includes emotion (“impatience, flippancy, sarcasm, frustration, or resignation”), Flynn focuses more on the cognitive process: “White fatigue arises from the suspension of critical thinking about the complex nature of systemic and institutional racism.” 137

I add to this list “white epistemic disorientation,” not to argue that it is a separate category of white resistance (even the four distinct phenomena that Flynn identifies are not isolated from one another) but to add a dimension that is not captured in the others. WED may be most similar to white fatigue because both are cognitively focused and involve whites who recognize the moral obligation to better understand and fight racism, even before they fully know what racism is. 138 A central difference is that white fatigue is linked to the complicated...

135 Flynn, White Fatigue, 63.
136 Flynn, White Fatigue, 61-62.
137 Flynn, White Fatigue, 62.
138 Flynn, White Fatigue, 61, 63, 73.
nature of the concept of systemic racism (the object of knowledge), while WED focuses on the 
difficulties inherent in the white subject’s process and way of knowing.

Cognitive Barriers to White Knowledge of Racism

Flynn’s focus on the white cognitive perspective is similar to mine. He argues that there is cognitive complexity to understanding racism, which suggests that whites cannot become enlightened solely by a simple act or change in attitude. As I will attempt to demonstrate, whites often interpret antiracists as telling them that the truth about systemic racism and white complicity is obvious for anyone who is willing to put aside their biases and fears and honestly take a look. The difficulty, antiracist arguments seem to suggest, is not in knowing the reality of systemic racism and that it is wrong, but in the painful process of change that recognizing this truth would demand.

A corollary of this white-perceived antiracist stance is that whites’ failure to understand and fight against systemic racism is a problem of the will. Because the truth of racism is so obvious, only a failure to desire to know the truth could keep whites unaware of (or unacknowledging of) their complicity in systemic racism. Therefore, to suggest that it is necessary to go through a critical process of knowing in order to conclude that systemic racism is real is seen as offensive and dangerous. Anything short of immediate acceptance of the antiracist truth is an illegitimate act of skepticism that unjustly (and violently) disregards the lived reality and epistemic authority of the victims of racism.

Flynn, however, suggests that coming to understand the reality of systemic racism is no simple task. Without denying that many whites do exhibit willed ignorance, have ulterior motives for holding onto their ideas, and reject antiracism without real consideration, Flynn insists on the importance of acknowledging that some whites have difficulty recognizing the truth of antiracism even though they have a real desire to do so. Flynn writes,
[S]ome students enroll in our classes knowing that they need to know more. In order to honor those students, it is essential to inject more nuance about their reactions and struggles that is beyond vulgar resistance or guilt to include those who are understanding of the moral imperative of anti-racism but also wrestling with the challenges of learning that complexity—the fatigued.¹³⁹

His study of white fatigue “is an attempt to consider the humanity and struggle of White folks that are in the process of gaining a more nuanced understanding of how racism functions, which is not an easy process by any means.”¹⁴⁰

I would elaborate that whatever else white ignorance and white resistance are, it must be acknowledged that from the white perspective they result in intellectual disagreement with antiracism. To say it is an “intellectual disagreement” is not to deny that the antiracist assertion is true and the white denial of complicity in systemic racism is untrue, nor to claim that the processes that led each group to their different conclusions are equally epistemically and morally valid. It is simply to state that both sides are asserting what they actually believe to be the truth, and that these assertions conflict. Overcoming white resistance to antiracism will require somehow addressing this white experience of the situation while neither dismissing it without explanation nor giving it undue credibility.

I argue that even though there are unique elements to active ignorance that must be overcome, still whites must eventually also go through the fundamental process of knowing in order to grasp systemic racism and their involvement in it. The problem is that whites are not currently in a position to go through that process authentically. They are hampered by bias, not only specific prejudiced ideas about race, but the deeper bias that disrupts the knowing process itself.

¹³⁹ Flynn, White Fatigue, 72-73.
¹⁴⁰ Flynn, White Fatigue, 65.
Addressing Red Flags

My approach should rightfully raise red flags for readers. It may sound like I am forwarding a position of gradualism, the insidious argument that people of color must patiently await liberation until whites slowly and comfortably move toward antiracism at their own pace. Instead, I am suggesting that the process of whites coming to know the truth of the antiracist perspective is a long and ongoing process, and that to downplay this reality by presuming that whites can and should do so as a quick and determined act of the will is to risk short-circuiting antiracism. As Flynn says, the intention “is not to give White folks a pass on learning about and addressing race but to point out the complexity of ameliorating racism and further arguing for more progressive language that recognizes the reality of their struggles along with the struggles of historically marginalized others.” Flynn does not mean to equate whites’ struggle to understand and address their racism with Blacks’ struggle under the oppression of that racism. He is making a practical point about the need to take seriously the barriers to white antiracism: “If fragility and resistance or allyship are the only options we allow in the dialogue then we are creating the conditions for self-fulfilling prophesies of resignation and resentment [among whites]... After all, the ally does not begin at blind acquiescence but at constructive inquisition.”

At the same time, justice demands that whites support antiracism well before they have gone through this long process. I suggest that the more immediate possibility (and mandate) for whites is to recognize their lack of knowledge about racism and their need to give epistemic priority to people of color regarding racism. Whites must first use the discursive process of knowing not in order to know racism—for their current positionality, paradigm, and ignorance

make that nearly impossible—but in order to know how to know racism. Specifically, the discursive process of knowing can lead whites to take ownership of the fact that there is a moral and epistemic mandate to know racism by believing the authority of people of color (and by corollary white antiracists who have already accepted the authority of people of color), even as this belief is only the means toward the (perhaps never-achieved) goal of appropriating knowledge of racism for oneself.143

I have noted that I identify the same key sticking point in racial engagement that Flynn does: whites’ negative reactions to being identified as resistant. My approach, however, is the flipside of Flynn’s. He speaks primarily to antiracists (in particular, educators) in order to promote what he sees as a gentler, more nuanced, and more effective way of addressing whites’ failure to engage properly and adopt antiracism. I speak primarily to whites in order to suggest a way to more accurately and effectively receive antiracist responses to whites’ flawed

143 While this dissertation is more a work of systematic theology than theological ethics, it is worth noting an implied virtue ethic underlying my argument. This virtue-based approach places great importance on character development and emphasizes the long-term process of acquiring habits of moral goodness rather than simply learning and following rules for right and wrong. As will become clearer when I explicate the situation in terms of Bernard Lonergan’s framework, at least two elements of my argument are relevant to virtue ethics. First, with Lonergan I assume that knowing what is true or right does not automatically lead to acting in accord with that knowledge. For this reason, knowing is not enough, and so a wider personal transformation (i.e., acquiring of virtues) is necessary for ethical action. Second, I also assume that virtue has an impact on one’s ability to know. That is, knowing itself is affected by the person’s moral character, and so virtue ethics is relevant even to the epistemic. My approach therefore aligns with a “virtue epistemology” in which the focus is on the knower rather than the known. It presumes that “knowledge is acquired by processes requiring personal competency, constituted by skills and attributes developed by proper formation” (Grant Macaskill, The New Testament and Intellectual Humility [New York: Oxford University Press, 2019], 9). Within virtue epistemology I adopt an “agent-responsibilism” approach in which one’s character traits, including moral virtues, affect one’s ability to know accurately (Macaskill, The New Testament and Intellectual Humility, 10-11).

Another way to describe my use of virtue ethics is to say that my focus is on whites becoming good knowers, not just acquiring accurate knowledge, though obviously the former is pointless if it does not seek the latter. The presumption is that with the changing face of a society, knowledge must ever be arrived at anew and must ever be built upon. The skills and virtues for doing so are necessary for continued knowledge. A one-time learning of what constitutes racism is not sufficient. For example, the ability of racism to adapt and remain active through different historical periods, from being more overt and de jure to more implicit and de facto, suggests that whites have continually failed to properly understand and acknowledge new forms of racism.
engagement. My purpose in doing so is, first, to keep the onus of antiracism work on the white community, which holds the responsibility for racism, and, second, to demonstrate how a proper white attitude to antiracism can allow whites to productively receive even those messages that they find most difficult or jarring.

This goal of helping whites to be better recipients of antiracist messages leads me to focus more heavily on those antiracists who take a more hardline, “with us or against us” approach—likely some of the scholars and activists that Flynn is addressing. I identify George Yancy, Barbara Applebaum, Robin DiAngelo, James Cone, and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva as some of these scholars who take a hardline approach to white resistance. They demand that whites enter into the antiracist paradigm, rather than trying to work from a comfortable space for whites. They do not hesitate to identify white attempts at engagement as resistance. DiAngelo, for example, demands that whites ask not if they are racist but how they are racist. She challenges her white readers, “I repeat: stopping our racist patterns must be more important than working to convince others that we don’t have them. We do have them, and people of color already know we have them; our efforts to prove otherwise are not convincing.”

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144 Audre Lorde’s assertion (and essay title) that “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” captures the logic and sentiment behind what I’m calling the “hardline” antiracist approach (Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches [Berkeley, California: Crossing Press, 2007 (1984)], 110-114). This approach was exemplified in the beginning years of Black liberation theology. James Cone’s earliest work was criticized for its reliance on traditional theological sources, an act which maintained those white, European-centric texts as normative. As a result, Cone began grounding his theology more heavily in Black sources (the most notable of which may be Negro spirituals) that mainstream theology had ignored or denigrated as inappropriate for academic study. Both Cone and Lorde have contributed to the position that Black liberation scholarship must write and act on its own terms, prophetically building an authentic space of liberation and demanding that whites accept that paradigm rather than attempting to make persuasive arguments from within the white paradigm.

145 DiAngelo, White Fragility, 129.
**What Is White Epistemic Disorientation? The White Experience**

This section approaches white epistemic disorientation from several angles in order to provide a thicker explanation of the concept. First, I offer a case study example. Secondly, I describe the felt experience of white epistemic disorientation. Next, I propose a definition. Finally, I offer a version of epistemic injustice as a model for framing WED.

**Case Study of White Epistemic Disorientation**

In “Comforting Discomfort as Complicity: White Fragility and the Pursuit of Invulnerability,” white education scholar Barbara Applebaum begins with an anecdote of her experience as a guest speaker in a college class about white denials of racism. She narrates the following (which I have abridged):

[In the class discussion,] students [of color] gave numerous examples demonstrating how white denials of racism and complicity ... transpired in the very classroom in which I was invited to speak. Most significantly, they poignantly articulated the effects that such denials had on them.

Noticing that the white students in the class were silent, I pressed them to engage with what the students of color were saying. A white male student, clearly agitated, said he didn’t understand why the students of color were so “angry” and that they seemed to be over-sensitive and offended by practices that were not ill-intended. Two female students of color reacted to his comments with frustration and infuriation, one announcing that she was contemplating leaving the room, to which the white student protested with both anger and tears insisting that he was not racist....

Given that the very topic of my presentation was white discursive practices of denial, the white student’s violent resistance could not remain unchallenged. As I critically questioned the white student’s discomfort and drew attention to the violence the students of color were experiencing, the white colleague who invited me to speak to her class interrupted by reproaching me for being too “hard” on her white student. ... I immediately noticed that no one expressed the need to comfort the students of color who were experiencing difficult emotions. What just happened? White comfort was recentered, and white denials were protected in a class whose purported aim was exactly the converse.146

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146 Barbara Applebaum. “Comforting Discomfort as Complicity,” 863.
Tensions are high in this interaction, as Applebaum and some students of color hold the white student accountable for what Applebaum describes as his “violent resistance.” Notice, however, how Applebaum describes the white student’s objection: the student says that “he didn’t understand.” He clearly expresses disagreement with and disapproval of the views and reactions of the students of color, but a sense of confusion also contributes to his way of responding. Their views and reactions do not make sense to him. He has an alternative viewpoint and, given the encouragement to engage, he does so.

It also seems clear that the white student does not consciously interpret his own reaction as a “discursive practice of denial,” and certainly not as “violent resistance.” Rather, I suggest that what the white student thinks he is doing is seeking truth, primarily by identifying what in the conversation does not make sense to him and proposing a correction. His inner reaction to hearing the experiences of his classmates of color is discord, and so he attempts to name the source of that dissonance. In other classroom settings, this strategy has served him well: professors encourage dialectical conversation in which students offer honest, critical comments and questions with the goal of such back-and-forth eventually leading the class closer to the truth. This time, however, the white student’s contribution is rebuked, first by his fellow students and then by Applebaum.

The white student interprets these rebukes not as a continuation of the dialectical conversation but as a disruption of it. What had been a tense discussion about racism suddenly and inexplicably becomes an attack on him. He likely expected others to respond to his comments with a defense of their positions. Instead, as Applebaum narrates it, two students of color respond with strong emotion (“frustration” and “infuriation”) rather than explanation, and
one even threatens to leave the physical space of the conversation altogether. He senses that
the focus has shifted from the classroom’s racial dynamics in general to his own purported
racism, and his defensiveness now overflows in “anger and tears.” Rather than return the
discussion to the content of the white student’s original comment, Applebaum also seems to
disregard it and move instead to an interrogation of his discomfort. What’s more, she identifies
his responses as “violent,” and whether or not she used that exact word in the moment, the
regular classroom professor sides with the white student’s viewpoint that the discussion has
morphed into an unjust attack on an individual student.

The white students’ initial hesitation to enter the discussion now seems highly justified
in white minds. The male student who expressed his confusion and disagreement was
effectively silenced, confirming the white intuition that any honest but critical contributions are
not considered appropriate for racial discussions in this venue. White students who question
antiracism are treated not as knowers but as offenders. If the white student is confused by the
initial comments of the students of color, he becomes downright perplexed by their response to
his attempt at clarification. He may ask himself, “Do my ideas not count in this arena? Are they
not to be taken seriously? Am I allowed to bring my own experience and questions to this
discussion at all, or do I have to just agree with ‘antiracist’ positions?” The white student’s
contribution was not only unwelcome, but it has somehow disrupted and threatens to end the
whole discussion.

147 The reader has access to this incident only through Applebaum’s retelling of it, and some
cautions is necessary when interpreting the interaction based on this written narrative. Here, one
wonders whether Applebaum’s description of the strong emotion of students of color is influenced by
even her falling prey to the racist trope of people of color (especially Blacks) as irrational and angry. Her
description of the strong emotion of the white student in the next sentence allays those fears somewhat.
For my purposes, however, any such bias that does come through in Applebaum’s account only
underscores my argument that from the perspective of the white student, antiracist responses to his
inquiry serve more to apportion blame and end dialogue rather than to continue engaging with the topic
at hand.
The dynamic I want to bring attention to is this: in a dialogue about racism, a white individual thinks that his comments and questions are attempts at seeking the truth, but those same speech acts are received primarily as acts of violent power and even as acts of avoiding knowledge. In short, the white student doubts he is being taken seriously as a knower—not only as one who has knowledge but even as one who seeks knowledge. He experiences white epistemic disorientation.

My argument will be that the white student’s interpretation is not accurate to the situation. While Applebaum interprets her response to the student largely in terms of justice and power dynamics, ultimately it can also be interpreted as an attempt to create a clearer path to truth. Applebaum and the students of color are suggesting (consciously or not) that the disruption of the conversation—the act which threatened to obscure the search for truth—was the white student’s response. His doubts and criticisms were the beginning of a dynamic which antiracists have seen time and time again: a white person’s skepticism hijacks a conversation about race, centering white voices (and often re-entrenching white ideas about race) while leaving voices of color—those voices that have something new to offer the conversation—unheard. Applebaum sought to keep the conversation on course by pointing out that the white student’s response was leading them astray. She tries to show that the white student’s current approach to knowing racism is defective. The path to knowing requires him first to recognize his own biases and social positionality, of which he is currently unaware. Until he does so, he will lack the foundation for properly understanding racism, and his attempts to contribute to the discussion will create a hostile space for people of color.

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148 The same is true of the dynamic in the other direction: Applebaum’s response is received by the white student as an act of violent power and an attempt to short-circuit the search for knowledge.
An Explanation of the Experience of WED

White epistemic disorientation is a feeling that one can no longer rely on one’s customary ways of making sense of life. The epistemic floor seems to disappear from beneath one’s feet, leaving a person uncertain of how to move forward in the knowing process. A person feels they are or are considered to be a non-knower, someone without the cognitive tools necessary for making accurate judgments or without the epistemic authority to participate in social meaning-making. White feminist Marilyn Frye captures the sentiment in a reflection on being confronted with her own racial ignorance:

All of my ways of knowing seemed to have failed me—my perception, my common sense, my good will, my anger, honor and affection, my intelligence and insight. Just as walking requires something fairly sturdy and firm underfoot, so being an actor in the world requires a foundation of ordinary moral and intellectual confidence. Without that, we don’t know how to be or how to act...the commitment against racism becomes itself immobilizing....If you want to be good and you don’t know good from bad, you can’t move.¹⁴⁹

Note several elements in Frye’s description. She speaks not of needing to correct her ideas but her ways of knowing. She notes that foundational tools for meaning-making no longer seem to function. The result is a kind of paralysis. The difficulty is both moral and intellectual. Finally, even with the floor falling out from under her, she still maintains a desire to be good and to be committed against racism, though she does not currently understand what that means or what it would entail.

White epistemic disorientation may include the following:

- a feeling of irreconcilable tension between a desire to oppose racism and a commitment to certain ideas that antiracists argue are racist

a feeling that, in order to avoid being considered racist, one is being asked or forced to let go of an idea that one believes is true and to accept an idea that one does not believe is true

a feeling of exclusion or confusion that one’s honest, well-intentioned contributions to the discussion about racism seem to be rejected as racist and unwelcome

a feeling that the guidelines for engaging in discussion about race and the criteria for assessing ideas about race are unfair, biased against whites, or unintelligible

a feeling that one is working for the same general goal as antiracists—racial equality and justice—but that the antiracist paradigm for understanding this goal and the pathway to it is unintelligible to or incommensurable with one’s own paradigm for understanding this goal and the pathway to it

a feeling of isolation because all of these difficulties of communication and understanding suggest that humans might not share the same underlying values after all, or at least that there might be impenetrable barriers to mutual respect and understanding.

A Definition of White Epistemic Disorientation

I define white epistemic disorientation as a felt inability to participate in the knowing process about issues of race. Below I break down this definition:

Felt: WED describes a felt experience, not a mindset that whites are unaware they have. That is, it is not a description of whites’ misoriented, distorted views or viewpoint on race; it is a description of whites’ confusion and uncertainty about how and whether they can engage effectively in knowing about issues of race. It is a feeling of a lack of agency and self-efficacy.\(^{150}\) This emotional experience is inextricably linked to cognitive discord.

Inability: The felt inability describes either the feeling that antiracists are preventing whites from engaging productively in the knowing process, or whites’ own self-doubt about their capacity to do so. Either way, this feeling presumes that whites have a desire that is being

\(^{150}\) Self-efficacy, as described by psychologist Albert Bandura, is a person’s belief that their own efforts can achieve a desired outcome. Bandura explains it not as a negative, individualistic attitude but rather a healthy self-confidence that motivates action. See Albert Bandura, Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control (New York: W.H. Freeman and Company, 1997).
thwarted. Whites who are apathetic to developing a deeper understanding of racism would not experience WED because it arises from the tension between a desire to move toward antiracism and a sense that it is difficult to do so while remaining authentic to themselves as a knower.

*To participate in:* “Participate” indicates that the knowing process is communal, but it refers to engaging in both the interpersonal knowing process (i.e., direct communication with others, as in a dialogue) and the internal knowing process (i.e., thinking and processing on one’s own). Either type of engagement, however, must aim for a shared, communal knowledge of racism. That is, a white person who feels that they can come to their own, personal conclusions about racism without regard to what others think is not “participating in the knowing process” in the sense envisioned here.

*The knowing:* WED is about knowing. That is, WED results primarily from whites’ desire for truth rather than their desire for power, comfort, positive self-image, etc. These latter are connected to the desire for truth, but WED arises as a result of the truth-seeking component of an unavoidably complex set of motivations.

*Process:* WED describes whites’ feelings about a process, not simply about content. It is more than just whites doubting their ideas about racism; it is whites doubting their ability to engage in the process that leads to correct ideas about racism.

*About issues of race:* Although epistemic uncertainty about one’s knowledge of race can open a Pandora’s box of doubt about one’s knowledge in general, and this sprawl is a contributor to WED, I focus on the point of origin of this wider epistemic uncertainty: moments when whites’ ability to participate in *racial* knowing is questioned.
A Proposed Model: WED as Feeling Like a Victim of Epistemic Injustice

One framework for thinking about WED is that of the experience of epistemic injustice. White philosopher Miranda Fricker identifies a type of injustice that is specifically epistemic, that is, “in which someone is wronged specifically in her capacity as a knower.”\footnote{Miranda Fricker, \textit{Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 20. Emphasis original.} I propose that WED is like the feeling of being subjected to this epistemic injustice, though I am not suggesting that whites are actually being subjected to epistemic injustice in the dynamics under consideration. Many of the disorienting elements involved in WED are the same as those in epistemic injustice, even though I will argue that the former experience can ideally be purifying while the latter is dehumanizing.

Two Types of Epistemic Injustice

Fricker describes two categories of epistemic injustices: testimonial and hermeneutical. Testimonial injustice is when “a speaker receives an unfair deficit of credibility from a hearer owing to prejudice on the hearer’s part.”\footnote{Fricker, \textit{Epistemic Injustice}, 9.} Testimonial injustice is inflicted by the prejudice of an individual hearer, though it relies on socially-formed stereotypes.\footnote{Fricker, \textit{Epistemic Injustice}, 168. Fricker’s conceptualization of injustice diverges from the antiracist understanding of racial injustice outlined in the first chapter by emphasizing the necessity of prejudice for testimonial injustice. She is careful to distinguish ethical culpability from epistemic culpability. Testimonial injustice requires ethical culpability, “some ethical poison in the judgement of the hearer,” which she identifies as prejudice (22). Even an epistemically culpable mistake (she gives the example of a “hopelessly careless web search”) is not testimonial injustice because such an error, though it results in giving less credibility to a speaker than she deserves, is not based on prejudice and so does not undermine or wrong that speaker as a knower (22). It is not immediately clear to me why she indicates that a non-prejudicial deficit of credibility does not also undermine a speaker as a knower, but she may be proposing that such an epistemically culpable mistake on the part of the hearer results in an unfairly low evaluation of the content of the speaker’s knowledge rather than an unfairly low opinion of the speaker as knower because of the speaker’s social identity. Fricker’s emphasis on the necessity of prejudice (even if it is a culture-wide, systemic prejudice of stereotyping) conflicts with many antiracists who argue that systemic racism cannot be identified purely by prejudice, and with José Medina who suggests that at a certain point epistemic vices such as laziness are morally culpable (Medina, \textit{Epistemology of Resistance}, 52-53, 140-142).} Hermeneutical injustice
is “the injustice of having some significant area of one’s social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource.”¹⁵⁴ In other words, a society’s meaning-making resources do not provide the frameworks necessary to make sense of a significant part of one’s social life that one should be able to understand. It prevents the speaker, the hearer, or both from properly understanding the speaker’s experience. This injustice is connected to social identity because the power differential between social groups affects the social framework for meaning-making:

[relation of unequal power can skew shared hermeneutical resources so that the powerful tend to have appropriate understandings of their experiences ready to draw on as they make sense of their social experiences, whereas the powerless are more likely to find themselves having some social experiences through a glass darkly, with at best ill-fitting meanings to draw on in the effort to render them intelligible.]¹⁵⁵

Unlike testimonial injustice, however, hermeneutical injustice “involves no culprit. No agent perpetuates hermeneutical injustice—it is a purely structural notion.”¹⁵⁶

How People of Color Suffer Epistemic Injustice

Fricker’s work focuses on epistemic injustice towards those who are systemically marginalized, including women and people of color. She calls the “central case” of testimonial injustice situations in which a speaker receives a deficit of credibility, which generally occurs systematically only for underprivileged groups.¹⁵⁷ From the days when the testimonial credibility of people of color was degraded by force of law to today when whites’ skepticism of Black speech is more subtle, testimonial injustice by whites against people of color is a significant element of racism in the U.S.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁴ Fricker, Epistemic Injustice, 155.
¹⁵⁵ Fricker, Epistemic Injustice, 148.
¹⁵⁶ Fricker, Epistemic Injustice, 159.
¹⁵⁸ For a range of historical examples of testimonial injustice based on race in the legal arena, see Sheri Lynn Johnson, “The Color of Truth: Race and the Assessment of Credibility,” Michigan Journal of
According to Fricker, the primary harm of both testimonial and hermeneutical injustice is “prejudicial exclusion from participation in the spread of knowledge.” In addition to practical disadvantages, this exclusion results in a loss of epistemic confidence. As Fricker puts it, “When you find yourself in a situation in which you seem to be the only one to feel the dissonance between received understanding and your own intimated sense of a given experience, it tends to knock your faith in your own ability to make sense of the world, or at least the relevant region of the world.” This is not a superficial injury. Testimonial injustice undermines the speaker’s capacity to be a giver of knowledge and thus attacks their capacity for using reason. Fricker notes that as rationality is such an integral part of being human, this injustice therefore attempts to dehumanize. Hermeneutical injustice may even disrupt the proper construction of a person’s selfhood, preventing them “from becoming who they are.” In sum, epistemic harm reaches to the core of a person: “To be wronged in one's capacity as a knower is to be wronged in a capacity essential to human value.”

José Medina makes a similar assessment. Drawing on Mills and Frantz Fanon, he describes the central epistemic harm to those who are oppressed as “ego skepticism,” in which a privileged group’s questioning of an underprivileged group’s credibility leads the latter to an inferiority complex. This “skeptical self-questioning can go to the extreme of no longer having any certainty about one’s status as a real person with a mind with full cognitive powers, that is, about one’s status as a subject of knowledge, about one’s humanity and mentality.” In short,

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159 Fricker, Epistemic Injustice, 162.
160 Fricker, Epistemic Injustice, 163.
161 Fricker, Epistemic Injustice, 44.
162 Fricker, Epistemic Injustice, 168. See also Fricker’s second chapter.
163 Fricker, Epistemic Injustice, 44.
164 Medina, Epistemology of Resistance, 41-42. On racism-based inferiority and superiority complexes, see Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks (New York: Grove Press, 1967). See also Charles W.
when a person is regularly confronted with perspectives that unfairly question or inhibit their
capacity as a knower, the result may be a loss of epistemic confidence that disrupts even one’s
sense of self and ability to function in the world.

**How Whites Feel They Are Suffering Epistemic Injustice**

The frame of epistemic injustice can also help to explain the experiences of those who
are systemically privileged, such as whites. Medina expands on Fricker to show how excesses of
testimonial credibility and hermeneutical ease can negatively affect the privileged person as
knower. Because of their epistemic privilege, whites can easily fall into vices such as
epistemic laziness that hinder them from becoming good knowers in certain realms, particularly
that of race. Whites become overly confident in their knowing, fail to see the particularity of
their viewpoint, and presume instead that their sense of true and false, right and wrong is not
only trustworthy but even normative and universal. Thus white epistemic injustice against
people of color also harms whites as knowers, but in a different way than it harms people of
color.

My focus at this point in the argument, however, is that whites may *feel* that they are
suffering from the kind of epistemic injustice that people of color are *actually* suffering from: a
deficit of credibility and an unfair inability to access frameworks that make sense of their
experience. When whites engage the issue of race and their epistemic overconfidence is
challenged, they feel the danger of falling into that epistemic doubt that people of color

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Mills’s discussion of selfhood and existential doubts in white philosophy versus Black philosophy in the
chapter “Non-Cartesian Sums: Philosophy and the African-American Experience” in his *Blackness Visible:*

Medina, *Epistemology of Resistance*, 56-57. Still, these negative effects for whites do not
change the fact that they are primarily responsible for the situation of epistemic injustice. Privileged
communities are responsible for both sides of the coin: the deficit of credibility for underprivileged
groups, and the excess of credibility that they attribute to themselves (and which may at times even be
attributed to them by members of underprivileged groups).
experience in the midst of epistemic injustice. Antiracists invite whites into a way of thinking about racism that does not make sense to the latter. Antiracists question the credibility of whites’ ideas about racism. Antiracists appear to reject or denigrate what whites believe are honest contributions to discussions of racism. The result is that whites feel their capacity as knowers is being rejected or denigrated.

As Fricker and Medina suggest above, because meaning-making is so central to humanity, this epistemic doubt leads to crisis. On one hand, if whites internalize the assertion that their capacity for knowing racism is unreliable, paralysis may result. Recall Marilyn Frye’s quote: “…being an actor in the world requires a foundation of ordinary moral and intellectual confidence. Without that, we don’t know how to be or how to act…the commitment against racism becomes itself immobilizing.” Frye describes the disorientation that occurs when a person recognizes their own ignorance and flawed approach to knowing. I identify this as an experience of WED.

On the other hand, WED also occurs if whites revolt against the epistemic doubt caused by antiracist assertions. In this case, whites have confidence in their own ability to know but feel that this ability, and especially its exercise in social dialogue, is unfairly doubted and thwarted by antiracists. This situation commonly contributes to white resistance. For example, Robin DiAngelo offers anecdotes of antiracism workshop attendees who reject any suggestion that they are complicit in systemic racism. Whites who exhibit this “white fragility,” however, describe the dynamic in opposite terms: they are not the ones resisting engagement in the dialogue; DiAngelo and other antiracists are. DiAngelo gives multiple examples. A white individual expresses anger at the need to be “so careful” that he cannot “say anything anymore”

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because people of color had become “oversensitive.”\textsuperscript{167} A participant in a cross-racial dialogue complains, “I feel like everything I say is thrown back at me!... White people are being attacked and blamed, and we have to defend ourselves or just be used as punching bags. I give up! I am not saying anything else.”\textsuperscript{168} A frustrated white woman in a small discussion group on racism finally exclaims, “Forget it! I can’t say anything right, so I am going to stop talking!”\textsuperscript{169} In these cases, WED results from whites feeling blocked from participating in racial discussions. They feel so epistemically stymied by their antiracist interlocutors that they believe their only option is to remove themselves from the conversation.

Both causes of WED, a feeling of one’s own limitations and a sense of external constriction on one’s ability to participate as a knower, are supported by a 2005 study that examined white female education students. Kim A. Case and Annette Hemmings analyzed students’ use of “distancing strategies” to avoid engaging in discussions of racism despite the students thinking of themselves as antiracists.\textsuperscript{170} The study found that, among other causes, their silence was due to a lack of knowledge, a fear of being disapproved of by students of color, and an uncertainty of whether it was socially permissible for them to ask questions about race. As one student said in an interview, “I kinda feel ignorant to like how to approach things. Plus, it’s hard to ask questions about it because I want to know more about them [i.e., Black students] and what they do, but it’s hard ’cause you don’t want to offend anybody.”\textsuperscript{171}

In sum, the radical questioning of their ability to know destabilizes human beings on a foundational level, whether that questioning is unjust (as when people of color are not given the

\textsuperscript{167} DiAngelo, \textit{White Fragility}, 105.  
\textsuperscript{168} DiAngelo, \textit{White Fragility}, 99.  
\textsuperscript{169} DiAngelo, \textit{White Fragility}, 107.  
\textsuperscript{170} Case and Hemmings, “Distancing Strategies.”  
\textsuperscript{171} Case and Hemmings, “Distancing Strategies,” 615.
credibility or hermeneutical structures they deserve) or just (as when whites’ excessive
epistemic credibility and hermeneutical ease is challenged). Unjust epistemic disorientation
undermines a person’s capacity to seek truth as a member of a community, and it often occurs
by raising unfounded doubt about that person’s epistemic ability and credibility. Just epistemic
disorientation ultimately promotes a person’s capacity to seek truth as a member of a
community, and it often occurs through honest critiques that force a person to reassess and
improve their epistemic ability and credibility. The proper responses to these two situations are
quite different. Unjust epistemic disorientation should be ended swiftly so that those who
suffer from it gain confidence in their current approach to knowing (allowing, of course, for the
constant need to continue refining and growing in that approach). Just epistemic disorientation,
however, is a doorway to be continued through. While its paralyzing effect must be overcome,
the feelings of uncertainty and doubt can be purifying aspects of the difficult path towards
epistemic virtue. In fact, because unjust marginalization and privilege are two sides of the same
coin, overcoming unjust epistemic disorientation (i.e., epistemic injustice) for people of color
requires the embracing of just epistemic disorientation by whites.

**Triggers for White Epistemic Disorientation**

Multiple aspects of whites’ interactions with antiracists can lead to WED. Here I outline
two general categories: antiracist questioning of the content of the white worldview and
antiracist challenges to whites’ process of knowing.

**Content of Antiracism: Unfathomable Critiques of Foundational White Beliefs**

First, some antiracist critiques of the culture of whiteness simply do not make sense to
whites, largely because the assertions critique what whites presume to be normative or race-
less. Take for example white expectations for “professionalism” in the work environment. As
justice educator of color Aysa Gray writes, “In the workplace, white supremacy culture explicitly
and implicitly privileges whiteness and discriminates against non-Western and non-white professionalism standards related to dress code, speech, work style, and timeliness.” These white norms may be superficial cultural elements. James Cone, decrying “the destruction of black identity through assimilation,” writes that whites “want to integrate us black people into their society—straight hair, neckties, deodorant, the whole package—as if we had no existence apart from whiteness.” Many whites do not understand what they view as professional dress (e.g., neckties) to be specifically “white.” They might wonder why wearing a tie is not seen as an artifact of a business culture or of American culture, rather than an artifact of white culture. Even more, whites might find it difficult to believe that deodorant is a cultural imposition. “How is not wanting to smell bad (or not wanting to smell others’ body odor) a specific trait of whiteness?” they might ask.

Other antiracist assertions address more significant elements of whiteness. These critiques question beliefs and assumptions that seem to whites to be foundational, necessary, and unrelated to race. As a result, whites see antiracism as willing to disrupt essential elements of a healthy society. The clearest recent example is the antiracist call to defund and abolish the police. Even to many whites who acknowledge systemic, violent racism in law enforcement,

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174 It might be noted that when Cone was writing these words in 1970, deodorant was not as much of a presumed element of common hygiene as it is today, even among the white community. In addition, this issue is complicated because of the racist trope that non-whites have a foul odor. Most whites would agree that it is racist to say that all people of color smell bad but might be more hesitant to say that it is racist to argue that all people in the U.S. should wear deodorant as a courtesy to others. Many whites might also say that it is not racist to acknowledge that different cultures have different norms for personal scents (including how much of a person’s natural scent is acceptable, and the strength and types of scents of products such as perfumes) and to prefer the white American norms over others. (Among other objections to this white view, one might ask whether white Americans are more accepting of white Europeans’ different practices around personal scent than they are of those of people of color.)
175 While many supporters of this movement are only in favor of reducing and reimagining the role of police, others in fact desire to truly abolish policing. See, e.g., Mychal Denzel Smith, “Police Reform Is Not Enough,” The Atlantic, September 2020.
the proposal is unimaginable. It seems so obviously a disaster of an idea that any attempt to take it seriously may leave whites in epistemic vertigo: “Everything about my experience and my reason tells me we need police. What does it mean about my ability to know if that is wrong?” Still, at least “abolish the police” efforts are responding to a concrete problem (police brutality) that is visible to many whites, regardless of how institutionalized or widespread they believe that problem is. More confounding to whites are antiracist solutions for problems that whites do not even see.

Meritocracy in Hiring Practices

For example, in "Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others," Latinx critical race theorist Richard Delgado addresses the issue of meritocracy in hiring practices. Delgado tells a fictitious but reality-informed story of a law school's decision not to hire a Black candidate for a professorship. A white professor explains the decision in terms that likely appear completely legitimate to the white reader. The Black candidate "was vague and diffuse about his research interests. All he could say was that he wanted to write about equality and civil rights, but so far as we could tell he had nothing new to say about those areas....He wanted to teach peripheral courses, in areas where we already have enough people..... [He] has never written a line in a legal journal."\textsuperscript{176}

Delgado notes that this assessment of the candidate appears "meritocratic and fair" to the hiring white professor because it "measures the black candidate through the prism of preexisting, agreed-on criteria of conventional scholarship and teaching."\textsuperscript{177} The problem is that these criteria themselves are taken for granted as the right criteria: it is not acknowledged that


\textsuperscript{177} Delgado, “Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others,” 75.
these criteria are "chosen, not inevitable." In fact, Delgado argues, they are racially-biased; given the current hiring criteria, it is unlikely that a professor of color will be hired. The "standard indicia of merit—Supreme Court clerkship, high LSAT score, prep school background" are more easily accessible to whites because of the societal privileges that they experience. For instance, the standardized tests that allow whites to get into the highest-regarded schools "test exactly the accumulated cultural capital they acquired so easily and naturally at home." Similarly, in Delgado's story, the university judges classes in civil rights and employment discrimination to be "peripheral courses," a presumption based on a normatively white way of viewing the law.

Overall, Delgado deconstructs the white value of meritocracy as it is currently exercised. Adopting an antiracist approach to university hiring practices would involve uprooting the "standard indicia of merit." Whites might argue that it is not these criteria but their current inaccessibility to people of color that is the problem. LSAT scores, publication in legal journals, and clerkships appear to be helpful indicators of future success as a lawyer and academic; it is necessary to keep them while finding ways to decrease the barriers to people of color succeeding in them. Delgado and other antiracists suggest that any criterion that de facto makes it easier to hire whites than people of color supports racism. But a change in criteria only makes sense in the context of changes to the way the institution sees its very identity. If, for instance, the university continues to see courses on racial equality as "peripheral" to its central mission, then it makes little sense to adopt hiring criteria that would lead to professors who can teach such courses. Thus, it is not only the white culture's view of an ideal professor that needs

to change, but also the white culture’s view of what a law school should be—and, thus, perhaps even what law as a field should be. This revolutionary change may seem a bridge too far for many whites.

**White Fears of Disrupting a Functioning System**

One element of what Bonilla-Silva calls the racial frame of abstract liberalism\(^\text{182}\) is the white “professionalism” bias, a bias against those who do not fit into the existing values, culture, and operation of an institution. Antiracism asks employers to change their businesses to fit the variety of values, methods, and cultures of a diversity of potential employees, rather than asking a diversity of potential employees to adapt to the values, methods, and cultures of the white business or academic world. This whole approach may seem upside down to whites, not only because the current (white) ways of operating seem to them to be the best ones, but also because it seems more efficient that individuals should conform to an already-functioning organizational system. Antiracists, of course, would ask how a system that has consistently failed to attract and promote people of color could be considered the “best” or even “functioning.”

Whites are skeptical of antiracist suggestions not only because they would force whites into uncomfortable change and de-center whiteness, but also because whites believe that organizations would be less productive and effective with these changes.\(^\text{183}\) As one online

\(^{182}\) Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists*, 74.
\(^{183}\) Online comment posted by “Julie,” June 6, 2019, accessed April 21, 2020, https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_bias_of_professionalism Standards:
commenter (race unknown) said about Gray’s critique of white professionalism, “I just read this and see an activist academic who does not understand corporations. Efficiency and speed is related in not always related to race,[sic] but a focus on revenues that Chinese manufacturers will outcompete with similar products...Not everything is race. Some things are industrialism and capitalism as a practices [sic], which can be found throughout the world.”184 A self-identified white man commented, “A lot of [the elements of whiteness in the article] feel more related to specific org cultures and business practices than any broad concept of American whiteness.... The dominant culture in the U.S. is whiteness, and there is a dominant business culture, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that dominant business culture = whiteness. Many elements of being ‘professional’ are non-native to a lot of white folks.”185 To those in a whiteness culture, antiracism may seem to invent or exaggerate the racism in professionalism standards while ignoring the practical and unavoidable reasons that make such standards helpful and even necessary.

White antiracist educator Tema Okun writes that when she facilitated discussion of a list of fifteen white supremacy culture behaviors at a conference, a law student “shar[ed] that the list represent[ed] all the characteristics taught by law schools as essential to success in the profession.”186 “And that’s exactly the point”—Okun says, “these characteristics are highly

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185 Online comment posted by ”SWG,” June 6, 2019, accessed April 21, 2020, https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_Bias_of_professionalism_standards. He goes on to say, “In framing the dominant business culture in racial terms, I think Okun and Jones are to some extent racializing something that is not necessarily racial, and creating the assumption that the opposite of these things is necessary to advance equity. I don’t think I agree with that.”
valued by our institutions, which is why they are so prevalent in our culture.”

White culture cannot even imagine being without them, and so taking these antiracist critiques seriously leaves whites questioning their own sense of reason: how could a presumption that feels so obviously correct be wrong? Alternatively, if whites do not take the critiques seriously, then the patent absurdity of the arguments seems like proof that antiracists are not inviting whites into productive discussion about racism but simply “playing the race card” in order to gain power.

Challenges to Whites’ Process of Knowing

As the chapter’s opening case study indicates, when whites’ attempted engagement with the issue of race transgresses certain antiracist principles, antiracists will often interpret those attempts as acts of white resistance. Whites, however, will believe that they are making an honest argument, voicing a legitimate disagreement, or engaging in intellectual inquiry. There is a conflict not only over the content of racism, but about what is happening in the discussion about racism, and the proper methods of engaging in that discussion.

Conflicting Views of the Racial Epistemic Status Quo

The situation is complicated because the nature of systemic racism is such that whites’ ignorance of it and denial of it are themselves a manifestation of that systemic racism. The object of the discussion (i.e., racism) includes the very way that whites attempt to engage that object. The systemic racism that antiracists are trying to teach whites about is the very thing preventing whites from understanding it. Thus when whites are accused of being resistant they feel that the conversation is being moved away from the topic at hand (racism as some out-there-in-the-external-world problem) while antiracists believe that they are simply addressing the most immediate example of that topic: the racism evident in their white interlocutors’ speech. Whites therefore may feel that they are in a Catch-22. If they admit to being racist,

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187 Okun, The Emperor Has No Clothes, 4.
then they are considered racist. If they deny being racist, they are told that white denial of racism is a form of racism, and therefore they are considered racist. This is not simply a power move by antiracists, however; it is a logical consequence of the nature of antiracist ideas. The key to recognizing the legitimacy of the antiracist approach is to rightly understand the epistemic situation in society. Whites’ failure to do so sets the stage for the conflicts that trigger white epistemic disorientation.

As a reminder, my focus is on whites who desire to move towards antiracism but get tripped up by the unexpectedly radical content of antiracism and the unexpectedly difficult path to understanding, accepting, and living out that antiracism. One common challenge is that these white subjects recognize elements of epistemic injustice in society but fail to see their own connectedness to that injustice. As in other areas of life, white privilege leads to a sense of white entitlement about their epistemic situation, which hinders their clear vision of justice in society. These progressive whites often interpret the epistemic racial status quo to be the following:

1. People of color have an unfair deficit of epistemic credibility and hermeneutical access, which unjustly inhibits their ability to act as knowers in society.

2. Whites have an appropriate level of epistemic credibility and access to society’s color-blind, natural, normative hermeneutical frameworks. They are already excellent knowers in society. Even if they do not yet have all the necessary knowledge, they and mainstream (read: white) society have the proper epistemic virtues and frameworks for moving toward that knowledge.

3. In order for people of color to be treated justly as knowers, they need to be given increased epistemic credibility and the education, tools, and opportunities to use mainstream society’s hermeneutical frameworks to make sense of their experiences. People of color should be brought into society’s current epistemic world.

4. Since whites are already knowers, they do not need to question their own epistemic credibility nor significantly modify their framework for meaning-making. Challenges to whites’ epistemic credibility and efforts to change society’s hermeneutical structures are unjust attempts at reverse racism which would simply raise people of color to a place of epistemic privilege while attacking whites’ capacity to be knowers. Such challenges may even risk tearing apart the hermeneutical framework on which society’s functioning depends.

In short, to the extent that whites acknowledge racial epistemic injustice, they envision the path to justice as making space for people of color in society’s current epistemic framework, which whites believe is race-neutral.

Antiracists instead point out that society’s current epistemic framework is biased by whiteness. Overcoming its inherent racism is not simply a matter of removing barriers to access to society’s epistemic framework but empowering people of color to reshape that currently distorted framework by disrupting whites’ own epistemic presumptions. The actual situation of epistemic justice, as suggested by Medina’s work, is this:

1. People of color have an unfair deficit of epistemic credibility and hermeneutical access, which unjustly inhibits their ability to act as knowers in society.

2. Whites have an excess of epistemic credibility and an excess of the hermeneutical privilege of being in line with society’s white frameworks for meaning-making. The result is that whites develop stronger epistemic vices which prevent them from being accurate knowers, especially regarding racism.

3. In order for people of color to be treated justly as knowers, they need to be given increased epistemic credibility, and society’s hermeneutical frameworks need to be commensurable with their way of making sense of life.

4. In order for whites to become just knowers, they need to decrease their sense of their own epistemic authority and their expectations that society’s hermeneutical structures should map perfectly onto theirs.

While whites may correctly identify the same general injustice against people of color as antiracists do, they often fail to see their own positionality clearly, which distorts the whole picture. The appropriate fix to the current situation, which would be to reduce white epistemic
arrogance to a more appropriate epistemic confidence, feels to whites like an effort to reduce them from proper epistemic confidence to an unjust epistemic uncertainty. Overall, whites presume that they have an accurate lens for understanding and assessing racial issues, while antiracists argue that whites’ racial lens is flawed and that people of color have epistemic privilege in this area. These differences have significant repercussions for dialogue.

Conflicting Guidelines for Dialogue

Whites and antiracists both believe their own approach to discussion will lead to more freedom of conversation. Whites presume that an environment where anything can be spoken (especially if it is well-intentioned) will lead to the most open and productive conversations, allowing dialogue to flourish instead of being stifled. Antiracists believe that a laissez-faire environment permits elements of systemic racism to pervade the conversation space, and that what is needed is a space secure from power differentials, a space where oppression does not inhibit the speech and engagement of those who are marginalized.189 As Robin DiAngelo writes, “The very conditions that most white people insist on to remain comfortable are those that support the racial status quo (white centrality, dominance, and professed innocence). For people of color, the racial status quo is hostile and needs to be interrupted, not reinforced.”190 This dynamic is as true in the realm of racial dialogue as it is in the social realm in general.

The challenge in discussions of racism—as with many other topics of justice and identity—is that the assumptions underlying the proposed ground rules are precisely the ideas to be debated. Whites, presuming that society in general (or at least their own participation in society) is racially just, believe that they come to the conversation with people of color on equal footing and therefore should abide by exactly the same discussion guidelines. Antiracists,

189 Applebaum, Being White, Being Good, 103-104.
190 DiAngelo, White Fragility, 127-128.
presuming that society in general is racially unjust, believe that whites come to the conversation in a place of social power and ignorance and that people of color come to the conversation facing the same marginalizing barriers as they do in society; therefore, conversation guidelines are needed to balance out an otherwise imbalanced discussion. Only then will typically unheard voices be heard. The upshot of all of this is that how one views the state of racism determines how one believes dialogue about the state of racism should be organized. Hence, each side will see the other’s dialogue ground rules as anything but neutral: agreeing to those ground rules already implies an acceptance of the content of the other’s argument. The antiracist approach to discussion presumes that there are some who are privileged and some who are marginalized, that each group can be identified, and that each group should be treated in different ways in order to respond to the current dynamic between them. But these presumptions are often the very ideas about systemic racism that the white interlocutors are questioning.

Specific Ways This Dynamic Challenges Whites

Concretely, there are several ways that antiracism’s approach to engagement with whites prompts the latter to feel epistemic disorientation:

A. Antiracists presume that the Black perspective on race is more accurate and that the white perspective on race is distorted. Epistemic privilege is presumed for people of color.

B. Racial dialogue does not seem much like a dialogue because antiracists demand that whites accept their viewpoint on race. The boundaries of acceptable answers are a foregone conclusion, and so the process is not one of whites and antiracists collaborating to find truth but of antiracists telling whites the already-known truth.

C. When whites do attempt to raise critical questions or to dissent from antiracist assertions, their arguments are dismissed as ulteriorly motivated acts of power rather than principled disagreements.

D. The guidelines for acceptable expression appear to whites to be unfairly asymmetrical: antiracists reprimand whites for saying or doing things that antiracists themselves say or do.
Below I describe these situations largely from the white perspective, not to indicate that it is the most accurate perspective but in order to explore the white experience which they (and potentially antiracists) must somehow address in order to move whites toward antiracism.

A. It Is Explicitly Stated That Whites Are Ignorant About Race and People of Color Have Epistemic Privilege Regarding Race

Perhaps it is obvious that the phrase “white ignorance” makes whites feel that they are being denied equal participation in the conversation from the beginning. Antiracists state clearly that white culture has distorted white people’s understanding of race. They also state clearly that Black people have an epistemic privilege with regard to race which allows them to understand not only their own racial situation but also whites’ racial situation better than whites themselves. George Yancy reports that some of his white readers call him “arrogant” and “a bombast” because he claims to know that they are racist. In Backlash, he defends his presumption of knowledge as being part of a long line of Black epistemic advantage over whites with regard to racism:

What I told white readers not to do is partly the result of teaching about race and whiteness at predominantly white institutions of higher learning and having witnessed white students respond to issues of race and whiteness in very predictable ways. There is also knowledge that, as a Black person, one acquires as a result of occupying a specific racialized location within a white supremacist society. As bell hooks writes, “Black folks have, from slavery on, shared in conversations with one another ‘special’ knowledge of whiteness gleaned from close scrutiny of white people.” This is an important epistemological advantage that Black people possess in relationship to white ways of being, white ways of avoiding the truth about their whiteness. Robert Jensen puts it this way: “What if they [Black people and people of color] know about us [white people] what we don’t dare know about ourselves? . . . What if they can see what we can’t even voice?” And Du Bois writes, “Of them [the souls of white folk] I am singularly clairvoyant. I see in and through them.” He continues, “I see the working of their entrails. I know their thoughts and

they know that I know. This knowledge makes them now embarrassed, now furious! They deny my right to live and be and call me misbirth."¹⁹²

To be told that one does not know something is difficult. To be told that one does not know one’s own self can be infuriating. If whites disagree with the Black assessment of whiteness, then, like Yancy’s readers, they will see that assessment as a brazenly arrogant dismissal of white knowledge. They might think, “If Yancy thinks he knows even my own thoughts and motivations better than I do, then clearly he will not be open to any arguments I make.” If whites come to agree with the Black assessment of whiteness, then they are left agreeing that they are ignorant even of their own thoughts and motivations, a potentially terrifying and paralyzing realization.

In addition, whites’ ignorance is usually not described as a mere lack of information, as if Blacks have just read more studies about race than whites have (though that may be the case). As Yancy indicates in the quote, Blacks’ epistemic advantage is a result of their “specific racialized location.” Whites can never occupy that particular social positionality, and so it seems there is no hope of whites gaining epistemic authority on race in the eyes of Blacks. They can have no retort to the assertion, “You do not understand because you are not Black.” Even to accept this low assessment of oneself is to feel stymied: if antiracists are right about whites’ distorted lens for understanding race, is there any chance that a white person can come to knowledge of racism? Or will one’s own view of race issues always feel at odds with the antiracist view?¹⁹³

¹⁹² Yancy, Backlash, 63.
¹⁹³ This is a good point at which to remind the reader that I am not asserting that every white person’s encounters with antiracism lead to white epistemic disorientation. Some appear to easily accept the antiracist argument and/or antiracists’ epistemic authority without significant interior conflict. Note, for example, the sign occasionally seen being held by white people at protests following the murder of
B. Whites Are Told to Just Accept the Antiracist Viewpoint

Second, whites may feel that antiracist scholars and activists are demanding that they accept without question what antiracists say about racism. This is especially true when it comes to the key issue of whether all whites are complicit in systemic racism. Progressive whites may be willing to engage in what they believe is an open inquiry about racism, but they balk at the fact that antiracists claim to already know all the answers to this inquiry—at least when it reaches the point of contradicting the former’s closely-held beliefs. Whites sense that the social discussion on race is not a dialogue but a lecture in which they cannot participate as active knowers, only as passive recipients. We have already seen that DiAngelo insists that whites ask not if they are racist but how they are racist.194

Similarly, in his 2015 New York Times opinion piece “Dear White America,” Yancy asks whites to acknowledge their complicity in ongoing racial injustice. He writes, “What I’m asking is that you first accept the racism within yourself, accept all of the truth about what it means for you to be white in a society that was created for you.”195 In the open letter, Yancy makes no detailed argument to prove that systemic racism exists and that all whites are complicit in it. Instead he simply tells whites to accept that this is true. His aim is to explain to whites how to go about the process of accepting this truth, largely by preemptively rejecting common white excuses and arguments:

Don’t tell me about how many Black friends you have. Don’t tell me that you are married to someone of color. ... Don’t tell me that you don’t see color. Don’t tell me that I’m blaming whites for everything. To do so is to hide yet again. You may have never used the N-word in your life, you

George Floyd: “I will never understand. But I stand.” Whether such individuals never experienced WED to begin with or whether they are dealing productively with it is uncertain.

194 DiAngelo, White Fragility, 138.
195 Yancy, Backlash, 23.
may hate the KKK, but that does not mean that you don’t harbor racism and benefit from racism.\(^8\)

Not only is Yancy dictating from the start what whites need to believe (i.e., that they are racist), but he deems certain arguments to be off-limits, seemingly without giving them any consideration. These are what Bonilla-Silva describes as racial story lines: “socially shared tales that are fable-like and incorporate a common scheme and wording.”\(^{53}\) White story lines are easily available explanations that (at some level) feel correct to whites, but they feel correct largely because they have been part of whites’ social landscape and because they offer answers that maintain white innocence and power. Yancy therefore dismisses these story-line arguments as attempts to evade the difficult truth of white complicity. In Backlash, he interprets the feedback he received about his New York Times article as avoidance behavior:

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\text{White readers, you fled; you sought shelter, which is what I pled against. I requested that you take a deep breath as a way of preparing you for what I thought would be difficult to hear let alone accept, which most of you didn’t. In the letter, I said not to tell me how many Black friends that you have. Yet you did. I said not to tell me that I’m blaming white people for everything. Unfortunately, many of you did just that. I said not to run from your responsibility. Yet many of you abdicated. This wasn’t me being arrogant or ‘a bombast,’ as one writer claimed in the comments section at The Stone, the New York Times. My objective was to communicate to white readers in advance that there was something that I knew about the terrain of white defensiveness, white avoidance.}\(^{196}\)
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From the white perspective, however, the rebuttals that Yancy rejects as defense mechanisms are some of the strongest and most reasonable arguments against the assertion that whites are racist. Whites see them as sincere and relevant supports of their viewpoint, and so Yancy’s flat-
out dismissal of these ideas leaves whites feeling not only befuddled but unjustly excluded from the conversation.

In “Dear White America,” Yancy is not asking whites to consider his views as important dialogue partners, but to accept his views as the truth about racism. Yet he continually describes their rejection of his message in terms of a failure to consider it seriously. For example, he writes, “The majority of white readers who responded didn’t tarry with the message, with the discomfort that the letter was designed to create….Yet such candid and truthful speech creates a space for crucial opportunities for white people to engage in risking the self and the possibility for constructive transformation, something that is often painful.” Yancy seems to presume that if whites sit with this uncomfortable message and risk their selves, they will necessarily come to agree with his assertions about racism. His judgment of whether they “tarried” seems to be based on whether they came to agree with him. This approach appears to whites to discount the possibility of honest disagreement, to say that it is not possible for a reader to tarry, to think carefully, but in the end to come to the conclusion that Yancy is wrong about racism. Instead, Yancy presumes that any significant critique of his argument is a result of white resistance, a failure to actually engage the question. To whites it may seem that Yancy cannot fathom someone disagreeing with his view of racism. The overall result is that whites feel dismissed as non-knowers who have nothing significant to bring to the discussion.

Yancy is aware of this potential criticism and defends himself, saying, “This doesn’t mean, by the way, that all objections to my letter should be framed as examples of white defensiveness or as a failure to understand the letter.” Still, he maintains himself as arbiter of

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197 Yancy, Backlash, 55.
198 Yancy, Backlash, 63.
his own judgment: “I realize that there are white responses/reactions that need not necessarily indicate responding from a place of white suturing [i.e., the white dismissal of truth so as to avoid discomfort], but my understanding of whiteness and my personal experience with white people (and critically thinking about and listening to the collective experiences of black people and people of color) have taught me to trust my judgment, to trust my own testimony even as they are not incorrigible.”¹⁹⁹ Many whites, of course, would justify their disagreement with Yancy’s assertions by making the same claim about their own personal experience, judgment, and testimony. They therefore feel epistemically ungrounded: why should I trust Yancy’s experience and judgment of race over my own, especially when he admits that his is not perfect?

What is not explicitly stated in Yancy’s message (and what is overlooked by whites) is that he is not expecting whites to baselessly accede to his assertions simply because he tells them to. Instead, his confrontational rhetorical approach intends to jolt whites out of their current framework for assessing racism and redirect them to the more fruitful path of assessing their framework for assessment. Yancy’s message is best interpreted not as a demand that whites haphazardly abandon their arguments and unthinkingly accept his but as a demand that whites allow antiracist claims to challenge the white epistemic authority and assumptions on which those arguments are based. The result of this metalevel questioning will be a recognition of the authority of Yancy’s arguments.

C. Whites’ Attempts to Engage the Issue of Racism Are Dismissed as Invalid Acts of Power

As suggested in the example of Applebaum and the upset white student already described, the concept of “white resistance” indicates that whites’ failure to accept the truth of antiracism is best understood not as honest disagreement over ideas but as an act of power.

For instance, the main question Bonilla-Silva brings to white arguments against antiracism is “What is ideological about this particular story line?” While he does point out why certain white arguments are flawed logically, he interprets them not primarily as examples of a (misguided) search for truth but as socially-constructed white narratives which serve to maintain the racial status quo. DiAngelo’s analysis of whites’ defensive statements about race follows a similar line. She writes, “In my work to unravel the dynamics of racism, I have found a question that never fails me. This question is not ‘Is this claim true, or is it false?’; we will never come to an agreement on a question that sets up an either/or dichotomy on something as sensitive as racism. Instead, I ask, ‘How does this claim function in the conversation?’” Specifically, she asks to what extent whites’ claims serve to shield them from responsibility for racism.

Underlying this approach is the assertion that whites are motivated by a desire to maintain the “capital” of privilege, power, and a sense of moral purity rather than a desire to know the truth. Whites, denying this impure motivation (of which they may be conscious or unconscious), feel that antiracists are avoiding discussion of the argument’s content and instead are using unfair ad hominem presumptions to denigrate whites’ legitimacy as dialogue partners.

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201 DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, 78. Of course, some will point out that DiAngelo’s claim that every white person is inescapably racist seems to be a perfect example of reductionist thinking. I say this not as a criticism of her blanket assessment of whites but as a criticism of her hesitancy to acknowledge that even some questions about racism are in fact either/or, yes/no and must be treated as such.

202 Here I draw on DiAngelo’s use of Pierre Bourdieu’s vocabulary of “capital.” *White Fragility*, 102.
Antiracists evaluate racial discourse through a lens of power in two ways: by assessing the concrete consequences of ideas on racial equity and by assessing the effect of the discourse itself. First, returning to the materialist understanding of racism, any white ideas that do not lead directly to increased racial equity in the world are rejected as unjust, regardless of what other principles of abstract liberalism whites are trying to uphold by their argument. Bonilla-Silva recounts being asked, “Why do you question the obvious angst and ambivalence of your [white] respondents on these highly sensitive matters? For instance, you seem to question Whites’ sincerity when they state concerns about the children of interracial marriages…”203 He answers that the proof is in the outcome: “Whites express theoretical...support for the principles of integration in contemporary America yet maintain systemic privilege by failing to do anything about racial inequality. This amounts to telling people of color, ‘I believe you should have the same life chances as I, but disagree with all the policies that can make this reality possible.’”204 In the end, even the most supposedly principled white opposition to concrete solutions such as affirmative redress is racist because it prioritizes some other value (e.g., small government) over the value of concrete racial equity for people of color. Whites may feel that consideration of other essential principles is being superficially discarded in a narrowly insular focus on certain concrete outcomes, and that the conversation is thus artificially constricted.

Second, beyond the way white ideas would affect society, antiracists point out how whites’ speech can itself be an act of violent resistance. This is what we saw in Applebaum’s classroom interaction with the white student. What he presumably saw as an innocent, honest—if critical—comment was received as an act of epistemic injustice that denied the

204 Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva, “Toward a Definition of White Logic and White Methods,” 14 (Bonilla-Silva writing).
authority of students of color. Reflecting on her experiences of teaching, Applebaum asserts that whites’ use of language often protects white normativity, even when the speakers have good intentions, and “even within attempts to disrupt [whiteness’s] normative influence.”

Applebaum describes these situations in terms of two ways to conceptualize language: as representation and as discourse. Whites tend to presume a representational model in which language is understood as a neutral tool used by an autonomous, rational person to convey ideas. In this view, the speaker’s intention is the key to interpreting language: one properly understands the meaning of language when one attends to what the speaker intends to communicate. Applebaum, drawing on Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler, analyzes language according to the discourse model: language is about power, not just meaning. In this view, the force and ultimate meaning of language come not from the intention of the speaker but from the effect that an utterance has as a result of the context and social space of which it is a part.

The focus is not on what the speaker intends to communicate but on what that act of communication does; what effect it has; and what it presumes, reinforces, or challenges about the relationships between persons.

As described above, whites are left feeling blindsided by what they might call a “political correctness” which prioritizes the superficial comfort of discussion participants over substantive debate about truth. Or, if whites do recognize how their participation in racial discourse can unintentionally cause epistemic injustice, they may sense that there is no way to authentically but justly raise the questions they have about antiracist ideas.

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D. Whites See an Unfair Asymmetry of Dialogue Standards

Fourth, whites may feel rejected from participation in discussions of racism because the standards of dialogue appear to them to be applied differently to whites than to antiracists, especially people of color. For instance, in his study of racial privilege, education scholar John Ambrosio reports that one student “who was ‘sometimes ashamed’ of ‘being white,’” was concerned by the idea that “‘it is racist if I say I am uncomfortable in the ‘black’ part of town, but not so if a black person feels uncomfortable in the ‘white’ part of town.’” Ambrosio writes, “By appealing to narratives that claim an equivalence of racial group experience and victimization, these students insisted that a double-standard exists between whites and blacks who voice fears of random violence.” The same occurs with respect to the rules of discussion.

It seems to whites that elements of their approach to racial engagement are considered racist but that the same elements used by antiracists are considered liberative and just. When whites offend people of color by freely speaking what they think is true, it is racist violence; when people of color offend whites by freely speaking what they think is true, it is liberative empowerment—and whites are deemed overly fragile. When white women cry or show strong emotion, it is disruptive and oppressive; when people of color cry or show emotion it is appropriate and must be received respectfully. When whites speak of their negative personal experiences with people of color, they are rejected as nasty and inaccurate stereotyping; when people of color talk of their negative personal experiences with whites, they prove the injustice of whiteness overall. Whites are being asked to reconsider the assumptions and values that support their entrenched understanding of racism (i.e., that there is no systemic racism), yet antiracists do not appear to be willing to similarly reconsider their own assumptions and values.

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that support their entrenched insistence of the reality of systemic racism. From an abstract perspective, both sides are using similar epistemic tactics, yet one of these approaches is unjust and the other just. James Cone’s insight about sin is relevant to many other topics of race: “Since whites and blacks do not share a common identity, white people cannot possibly know what sin is from a black perspective. Only black people can speak about sin in a black perspective and apply it to black and white people. The latter’s vision of reality is too distorted and renders them incapable of talking to the oppressed about their shortcomings.”

The problem is that whites’ racial frame is distorted, so they fail to recognize the wider context.

In a situation of systemic bias, in which whites hold significantly more social and epistemic power than people of color, actions must be taken to diminish this inequality. An asymmetrical starting point requires an asymmetrical response. From whites’ perspective, however, the guidelines necessary to balance power—including the ability to participate in a dialogue that seeks truth in service to justice—will appear unjustly tilted against them. As mentioned, the challenge is that whites must come to recognize the reality of systemic racial injustice that underlies this imbalance, but that truth is one that even well-intentioned whites have difficulty recognizing in its entirety.

**Conceiving of WED as Impasse**

**Cognitive Dissonance**

To summarize the experience of white epistemic disorientation: While it may happen sooner for some and later for others, at some point in the engagement with antiracism, most whites seeking racial justice will run into a wall. The content of antiracist ideas and/or the antiracist expectations for engagement will go a step beyond what makes sense in the white

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208 Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 100.
person’s epistemic framework. Whites will experience a felt inability to participate in the knowing process about issues of race. This white epistemic disorientation may arise from feelings of being epistemically stifled externally (by antiracist approaches that the white person disagrees with), from feelings of internal epistemic impotence (if one recognizes one’s own bias and flawed way of knowing), or both. It is a place of epistemic uncertainty, but also possibility.

Psychology would identify cognitive dissonance as the heart of white epistemic disorientation and as a necessary dynamic for significant growth. White social justice educator Diane J. Goodman defines cognitive dissonance as “the discrepancy between what we currently believe to be true and other contradictory information.” White multicultural education scholar Paul C. Gorski calls moments of cognitive dissonance in his classroom “the critical crossroads of learning, the educational moments of truth.” Cognitive dissonance creates an opportunity in which existing ways of thinking can be tested, confirmed, modified, or rejected, and more accurate ways of thinking can be adopted. But there’s no certainty that this dissonance will lead to growth. Goodman describes the ambivalence of cognitive dissonance caused by becoming aware of systemic social injustice: “In many cases, this state of disequilibrium creates an openness to new information. However, this period also can be marked by fear and uncertainty. People may worry about the implications of this questioning and self-examination. If the discomfort or fear is too great, they may feel overwhelmed and close down....We often resist things that challenge our views of self, other, and how the world operates.”

Cognitive dissonance can lead to growth or to resistance.

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212 Diane J. Goodman points out that psychologists Simon, Greenberg, and Brehm identify at least three approaches to eliminating cognitive dissonance which embody some form of resistance. First, a person can try to decrease the inconsistency by discrediting the new information or by downplaying the
WED leaves whites stuck in this place of cognitive dissonance, with pressures on both sides: they want to remain true to their own ingrained paradigm and way of judging, and yet they also want to move toward antiracism. On one side are the epistemic pressures to resist antiracism once whites hit the wall: the fact that antiracist ideas seem to go too far and do not make sense to whites, the feeling that whites are being prevented from actively participating as knowers, the sense that whites really do not have the experiences or epistemic clarity needed to participate as knowers of racism, and the fear of the difficulty of the ongoing epistemic conflict and reevaluation.213 They reject uncomfortable aspects of antiracism and fall back on what fits in their existing framework. On the other side are pressures that urge whites to continue to engage and learn despite the wall: the desire to grow towards antiracism, the desire to be viewed as antiracist, the social pressure of political correctness, relationships with people of color and antiracists, religious or wisdom teachings, and the mysterious pull of conscience.

Impasse

Because of the depth of this tension and the fact that it involves not only one’s ideas but one’s sense of identity, I propose going further than cognitive dissonance and framing this experience as one of impasse. This framework will also be a re-entry point for a theological discussion that draws upon several theologians who explore impasse in the context of spirituality.

discrepancy between the two views. This includes blaming the victim. Secondly, a person can “trivialize the issue in order to reduce the importance of that which is creating discomfort.” This includes saying oppression is not that bad or that people are being oversensitive. Thirdly, a person can withdraw from the discussion or the issue. (Goodman, Promoting Diversity and Social Justice, 59; citing Linda Simon, Jeff Greenberg, and Jack Brehm, “Trivialization: The Forgotten Mode of Dissonance Reduction,” Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 68, no. 2 (1995): 247–260.

213 To clarify, I recognize the many other kinds of pressures also affecting whites, those that many antiracists point out such as desires for power, comfort, and a sense of moral innocence. I am seeking to expand the conversation without denying those motivations.
White theologian Belden C. Lane describes impasse as a situation in which a person reaches the limit of their current way of thinking and becomes trapped. The attempt to push through with their conventional problem-solving methods is useless and even counterproductive. As white theologian Constance FitzGerald explains, “[T]here is no way out of, no way around, no rational escape from, what imprisons one, no possibilities in the situation. In a true impasse, every normal manner of acting is brought to a standstill, and ironically, impasse is experienced not only in the problem itself but also in any solution rationally attempted.” Whites feel just this kind of impasse: they are told that they do not understand the racial reality of their world, and yet their attempts to understand it may be decried as violent resistance because their epistemological method and cultural presumptions are based in the very cultural racism that antiracists are trying to point out. The only solution, Lane says, is to “completely reframe the situation in one’s mind” and to achieve a “radical breaking out of the conceptual blocks that normally limit our thinking.”

Richard Delgado’s narrative about law school hiring practices, referenced above, provides an example. The white administration attempted to hire candidates based on a set of preexisting criteria for law professors. They also took pains to identify and include people of color as candidates. In their minds, they were addressing racial injustice in the hiring process as well as they could. Yet the community of people of color at the institution cried foul at this attempt, because the formal criteria for hiring and the informal influences on their decision-making made it highly likely if not inevitable that a white candidate would be chosen. Indeed,

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that is exactly what happened. The white administration’s actions, which they themselves viewed as a progressive attempt to fight racism, were simply another manifestation of that racism, in part because it allowed the institution to claim to be antiracist (and maybe even believe it was) without actually moving the dial on racial equity. The result was a hiding of the systemic racism, serving to more deeply entrench and justify it in the minds of whites and the culture of the institution. People of color at the law school saw that white administrators needed a radical breaking out of their conceptual blocks. Whites needed to question what seemed unquestionable: the very criteria for what makes a good law professor. Any solution attempted within the framework of the white centered educational institution would always fall short and, in some way, perpetuate the very racism they were attempting to uproot. Without recognizing this fact, the white administration will feel that its antiracist community is putting them in a no-win situation with no possibilities for rational escape. Using their existing constructs, they cannot easily think their way to true antiracism.

The Relevance of a Spirituality of Impasse to Human-Human Relationships

FitzGerald explores this experience of impasse in relation to Carmelite spirituality, in particular the Dark Night of St. John of the Cross. Her work identifies several elements of impasse that are helpful for understanding white epistemic disorientation. Although John of the Cross’s description of the Dark Night focuses on

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217 In “Impasse and Dark Night,” FitzGerald describes the movement from meditation to contemplation in St. John of the Cross. Twenty-five years later, in a published address to the Catholic Theological Society of America, she describes a “deeper experience of the Dark Night” in John of the Cross, the purification of memory (“From Impasse to Prophetic Hope: Crisis of Memory,” CTSA Proceedings 64 (2009): 21-42). The essential dynamics that I seek to highlight flow between both accounts, and so, encouraged by her assertion that her examination of the latter “experience of more profound impasse and deeper contemplative growth is integrally connected to my earlier interpretation,” I draw from both movements (from meditation to contemplation, and the purification of memory) without significantly differentiating the two (“From Impasse to Prophetic Hope,” 22). In chapter four I will draw upon a third article by FitzGerald, published between the others, in which she addresses the Dark Night of the spirit (“Desolation as Dark Night: The Transformative Influence of Wisdom in John of the Cross,” The Way Supplement 82 (1995): 96-108).
vertical relationship with God, FitzGerald recognizes that navigating impasse affects human-to-human horizontal relationships as well. She argues that “in our most significant human relationships we go through precisely the kind of suffering John
describes concerning the soul’s journey to God.”
Beyond the impasse that occurs within oneself and within one’s relationships, FitzGerald also notes that “even more significant today is that many of our societal experiences open into profound impasse, for which we are not educated, particularly as Americans.”
“Only an experience like this, coming out of the soul’s night, brings about the kind of solidarity and compassion that changes the ‘I’ into a ‘we,’” allowing a person to identify with those who are experiencing poverty, oppression, exploitation.
Fitzgerald is not attempting to secularize a spiritual dynamic but to connect the social to the spiritual. She says, “We close off the breaking in of God into our lives if we cannot admit into consciousness the situations of profound impasse we face personally and societally.”
If our relationship with God is largely developed through our relationships with others, then opening ourselves to the infinite mystery of God is accomplished in part through opening ourselves to the way that divine truth is manifested in the truth about others.

*Mapping White Epistemic Disorientation onto Impasse*

In at least five ways, FitzGerald’s explanation of spiritual impasse aligns with and illuminates the experience of WED that I have attempted to describe. First, impasse involves feeling disoriented and unable to move forward, “an apparent breakdown of communication

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218 FitzGerald, “Impasse and Dark Night,” 104.
219 FitzGerald, “Impasse and Dark Night,” 93.
220 FitzGerald, “Impasse and Dark Night,” 104.
221 FitzGerald, “Impasse and Dark Night,” 105.
and a powerlessness to do anything about it.”222 In the Dark Night, one’s images and understanding of God conflict with one’s life and prayer experiences. One feels stuck. FitzGerald extends this stuck-ness to social relationships: “This process presupposes that, in every significant relationship, we come to the experience of limitation, our own and others’.”223 For whites, reaching this point of limitation is reaching the wall referred to above. One’s standard ways of solving a problem are no longer useful and in fact may deepen the impasse. “A genuine impasse situation is such that the more action one applies to escape it, the worse it gets,” says FitzGerald.224 Recall, for example, the white student from Applebaum’s anecdote, who unwittingly digs himself into a deeper and deeper hole. The foundational structures and ways of making sense of reality that seemed to have served one well in the past now leave them stranded:

At the deepest levels of night, in a way one could not have imagined it could happen, one sees the withdrawal of all one has been certain of and depended upon for reassurance and affirmation. Now it is a question, not of [the withdrawal of] satisfaction, but of [the withdrawal of] support systems that give life meaning: concepts, systems of meaning, symbolic structures, relationships, institutions. All supports seem to fail one, and only the experience of emptiness, confusion, isolation, weakness, loneliness, and abandonment remains.225

The self-interrogation and social critique that antiracists demand of whites can lead to a similar sense of disorientation. Recall Marilynn Frye’s words: “All of my ways of knowing seemed to have failed me…. Just as walking requires something fairly sturdy and firm underfoot, so being an actor in the world requires a foundation of ordinary moral and intellectual confidence.

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222 FitzGerald, “Impasse and Dark Night,” 99. This is what St. John of the Cross identifies as the first sign of the Dark Night, according to FitzGerald.
224 FitzGerald, “Impasse and Dark Night,” 96.
225 FitzGerald, “Impasse and Dark Night,” 103.
Without that,...the commitment against racism becomes itself immobilizing....”226 Of self-interrogation, Applebaum bluntly states that “this type of criticality involves an openness to challenge the impossible and even our own beliefs and practices, the ones without which we literally do not know how to think and act.”227 Indeed, FitzGerald suggests there is no way out of this situation except through the panic-inducing “realization that there is no option but faith.”228 One can no longer rely on oneself.

Secondly, despite the painful feelings that make people want to escape it, the experience of spiritual impasse or white epistemic disorientation is a necessary path to substantial growth. There is a disconnect between an individual’s perception of what is happening to them and what is actually happening. What feels like confusion is drawing them toward clarity; what feels like regression is leading to growth. FitzGerald explains that John of the Cross believes humans feel their “infinite capacity for God” only when they realize the “illusory and limiting character” of “human knowledge, loves, memories and dreams that seem to promise complete satisfaction.”229 She describes coming to this realization as a purification of memory: growth demands letting go of the past.230 FitzGerald writes, “The key insight here is that it is the limited self constituted by the past that needs to yield to the transforming power of

228 FitzGerald, “Impasse and Dark Night,” 104. Emphasis original.
229 FitzGerald, “Impasse to Prophetic Hope,” 24.
230 At first glance this assertion appears to contradict antiracists’ emphasis on the importance of knowing history to rightly understand racism today, but the two are reconcilable. FitzGerald acknowledges the tension explicitly: “Suspended in an intellectual impasse, I struggle to hold in tension both the power of memory and the importance of history in giving us context, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the need to forget and be open to the radical transformation of the self and the memory” (“Impasse to Prophetic Hope,” 26). In her response to FitzGerald’s address, M. Shawn Copeland endorses this challenging call to the purification of all memory but cautions that misunderstanding this concept could have harmful consequences for those who have been oppressed (“A Response to Constance Fitzgerald,” CTSA Proceedings 64 (209): 44-45).
God’s call into the future.” To yield the memory-formed self is to open one’s current worldview to critique, resulting in existential uncertainty: “When memory is ‘de-constructed’ in the Dark Night, the past can no longer weave its thread of meaning through the person’s lived experience into the future….the certainties on which we have built our lives are seriously undermined or taken away – not only in prayer, but also in and by life, and a profound disorientation results. This is keenly felt as a loss of authenticity, truthfulness and even identity.”

For whites, the message is that they cannot receive the truth of antiracism without letting go of the memory-formed constructs that currently shape their white way of knowing. I find in FitzGerald’s writing a call to let go of the memory that has constructed and that sustains the invulnerable self, in order to be open to new self- and social understandings that God calls one to in the future. That is the offered opportunity, but getting past the pain of disorientation and reaching a new, deeper understanding is not an automatic process. As FitzGerald notes, growth in this situation requires a particular approach: “While nothing seems to be moving forward, one is, in fact, on a homeward exile—if one can yield in the right way, responding with full consciousness of one’s suffering in the impasse yet daring to believe that new possibilities, beyond immediate vision, can be given.”

Thirdly, as this quote suggests, the way through impasse (including white epistemic disorientation) is not to redouble the efforts that brought one up to this limit point, nor to attempt to escape the experience of impasse. One must accept that the impotence and confusion of the experience is itself a formative lesson in how to move forward. In other words,

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231 FitzGerald, “Impasse to Prophetic Hope,” 35.
232 FitzGerald, “Impasse to Prophetic Hope,” 23.
233 FitzGerald, “Impasse and Dark Night,” 95.
growth is achieved not by looking past the impasse but by looking at the impasse itself and accepting its limitations as a way of being opened to the newness that awaits beyond the impasse.

FitzGerald writes:

The psychologists and the theologians, the poets and the mystics, assure us that impasse can be the condition for creative growth and transformation if the experience of impasse is fully appropriated within one’s heart and flesh with consciousness and consent; if the limitations of one’s humanity and human condition are squarely faced and the sorrow of finitude allowed to invade the human spirit with real, existential powerlessness; if the ego does not demand understanding in the name of control and predictability but is willing to admit the mystery of its own being and surrender itself to this mystery; if the path into the unknown, into the uncontrolled and unpredictable margins of life, is freely taken when the path of deadly clarity fades.  

Impasse leads one to recognize their ultimate powerlessness, and it is only in this process that one’s deeper power can be found. For whites, it must lead to a recognition of their epistemic deficiency and a realization that only by acknowledging this ignorance can they move toward true knowledge of racism. Although whites cannot confidently understand and judge what is and is not racism, whites can at least come to understand this ignorance. That is, whites may have to say, “I do not know racism,” but they can arrive at the knowledge, “I know that I do not know racism,” or at least “I know that my ability to know racism is questionable.” The next chapter will delve into this line of reasoning.

Fourthly, the movement through impasse involves a permanent loss of a sense of self and identity. Fitzgerald states that one never returns to the same kind of autonomy and naïve confidence they once had: “The selfhood that is lost will never be regained and therein lies its

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234 FitzGerald, “Impasse and Dark Night,” 96.
235 FitzGerald, “Impasse and Dark Night,” 96.
hope. In this purification, the annulling of the memories, we are being dispossessed of the autonomous self, our achieved selfhood put together over a lifetime.”\textsuperscript{236} We are opened to hope, which is the “dynamic of being able to yield unconditionally to God’s future.”\textsuperscript{237} She describes the result as peace but not consolation: “openness and freedom in the liberated memory is experienced not so much as consolation but as a profound peace in the silent unknowing and in the dark empty space of encounter with God, the truly Other, an emptiness that is content not to seek fulfillment in its own time. I call this prophetic hope...\textsuperscript{238}

Similarly, WED does not eventually lead back to the same kind of epistemic assurance that one once had. Grant J. Silva uses a sobering metaphor to describe the ongoing nature of whites’ path to antiracism: “Devoting one’s self to combating racism implies a lifelong commitment, something akin to living the rest of one’s life with a disease for which there is no cure.”\textsuperscript{239} What is being asked of whites is not simply a movement from one set of ideas to another set of ideas, but from one way of knowing to another way of knowing.\textsuperscript{240} It is a movement toward a humble recognition of one’s limitedness, including a vigilance for the ways racism may be skewing one’s perspective. But this is not an epistemic nihilism or relativism. The foundation for one’s epistemic confidence is no longer certainty about one’s knowledge but

\textsuperscript{236} FitzGerald, “Impasse to Prophetic Hope,” 31.
\textsuperscript{237} FitzGerald, “Impasse to Prophetic Hope,” 34.
\textsuperscript{238} FitzGerald, “Impasse to Prophetic Hope,” 35.
\textsuperscript{239} Silva, “Racism as Self-Love,” 110.
\textsuperscript{240} As mentioned earlier in the chapter, even perfecting one’s way of knowing is not enough to make one a perfect antiracist, of course. A more holistic development and even conversion is necessary if one is to act on that knowledge. In addition, one does not perfect their way of knowing in a vacuum. Becoming a good knower requires the kind of wider virtue development that affects a person’s whole character. Still, my scope in this project is limited to the epistemic, and so here and elsewhere I speak of this development primarily in terms of its effect on the person as knower. Chapter three will offer one model for conceiving of the relationship between the cognitive/epistemic and the affective/moral/relational: the knowing process per se is a movement from experience to understanding to judgment that is authentic to the extent that it is driven by the intellect’s pure desire to know, but only a person whose holistic character has also been properly formed by the nonrational will be able to approach that process of knowing properly and authentically.
the trust that following one’s desire to know truth at all costs will lead one closer to the truth. As FitzGerald writes,

On one level these persons no longer know what they believe. But on a more profound level, they walk in faith, accustomed to doubt and inner questioning, yet possessed by a hope that is wordless and imageless in its expectation of ‘what eye has not seen nor ear heard’.... They are marked by a certain serenity of spirit indicative of the degree to which this dark theological faith has gripped the intellect and pure theological hope has filled the memory obscuring and emptying them and guiding the person toward the ‘high goal of union with God.’

Fifthly, moving through impasse involves a loss of goods (albeit lesser goods), not only a purification from evil. In a response to FitzGerald’s “From Impasse to Prophetic Hope,” Copeland points out the radical nature of FitzGerald’s proposal: the dispossession of the self that she calls for is not only a call to empty oneself of the false or distorted (e.g., the understanding of “autonomy as will-to-power”), but the “absolute surrender to God of all our cultural and social and religious and personal securities.” Among the “memories” that FitzGerald says we must let go of are “spiritual gifts and consolation, human achievements and natural endowments and...one’s carefully achieved selfhood.” Copeland argues that this surrender goes even so far as to allow the death of the Church, in order that, like the self that one hands over to God, it will rise again and be handed back to the people, purified by God. This purification is a realization that the future hope that God calls one to is always beyond any self they have already constructed, even beyond the gift of self they have so far been able to receive from God. One’s self is not only distorted but also incomplete. Considering the possibility that humanity is on the cusp of a significant evolutionary step, FitzGerald writes of

241 FitzGerald, “Impasse to Prophetic Hope,” 36, citing John of the Cross, Ascent of Mount Carmel, 1.4.1.
242 Copeland, “Response to Constance FitzGerald,” 45.
243 FitzGerald, “Impasse to Prophetic Hope,” 29.
244 Copeland, “Response to Constance FitzGerald,” 45-46.
those who have successfully gone through impasse, “The transformation taking place in the prayer of no experience opens into a profoundly different realm for which we do not have adequate words: the deconstruction of even healthy forms of autonomy that no longer represent the deepest possibilities of the person herself and the human with God nor the radical need of the human community for a deeper synergy.”245

The idea that purification of memory involves letting go of the good in addition to the bad is important for WED for two reasons. First, the impasse situations I am speaking about for whites are generally those in which they see their current ways of knowing as good. While there may be elements of their own racism that they recognize and are attempting to shed, the epistemic disorientation I am homing in on is challenging precisely because whites do not see a problem with their ideas or way of thinking. FitzGerald’s proposal that even good aspects of the self are not to be clung to may therefore loosen whites’ grip even on those elements of their thought that they believe to be foundational.

Secondly, it places the movement toward antiracism in a foundational Christian spiritual dynamic. The humility and radical openness that whites are called to with respect to racism is simply what the universal call to Christian self-dispossession looks like in that particular context. The experience of letting go of one’s foundational beliefs is an act rooted in a fundamental Christian attitude. This idea will be explored in chapter four.

*Imperfect Alignment of Impasse and WED*

Overall, FitzGerald successfully demonstrates that John of the Cross’s concept of the Dark Night is applicable to personal, direct interpersonal, and societal experiences of impasse. But not all aspects map perfectly onto WED. I find two significant elements of the Dark Night

245 FitzGerald, “Impasse to Prophetic Hope,” 38.
and personal impasse whose application to societal impasse requires adaptation and clarification, particularly in the context of white epistemic disorientation.

First, FitzGerald emphasizes that impasse shows the need to get beyond reason. The Dark Night involves a movement from rational, analytic, discursive prayer to intuitive contemplation. Reason can only take us so far in our relationship with God; at a certain point our connection deepens by leaving behind linear thought and language. Drawing on Michael J. Buckley, FitzGerald describes this movement as a tearing down of the self-made images we inevitably project onto God. She applies these lessons to our interpersonal and societal lives as well. In all of our relationships “[w]e come to the point where we must withdraw and reclaim our projections of God, of friend, of ministry, of community, and let the ‘others’ be who and what they are: mystery.”

FitzGerald makes a key point here about the necessary role of the spiritual and affective in one’s approach to others. Just as apophatic prayer can open a person to greater truth about God by resisting the urge to intellectually circumscribe God according to one’s own restrictive frameworks, so, in an analogous way, refraining from a purely and excessively intellectual approach to knowing others can open the path to a greater understanding of them. Still, I find an important distinction. Questions of racial justice demand that whites reach concrete, specific understandings of God and the racial other. If apophatic prayer and sitting in the other’s reality as mystery is taken too far and seen as an end in itself as a response to WED—as if simply accepting the deep unknowability of others is enough—then it is hard to imagine this view aligning with Cone’s assertion that God must be understood as for the oppressed and against

246 FitzGerald, “Impasse and Dark Night,” 99-100.
247 FitzGerald, “Impasse and Dark Night,” 100.
248 FitzGerald, “Impasse and Dark Night,” 101.
oppressors. One must arrive, for example, at specific judgments of who are the oppressed and who are the oppressors. Overcoming impasse does require going beyond reason, but in the realm of justice it is in order to return to a healed, purified reason. This process does demand withdrawing whites’ projections of the racial other, but the correlative act of “let[ting] others be who and what they are” must fill that conceptual void not only with a respect for their irreducible mystery (in justice terms one might say “dignity”) but also with knowledge of the specific requirements of just relationship.

Secondly, FitzGerald emphasizes that impasse results from human brokenness and finitude, but it is not the result of a culpable mistake. Impasse is not a sign that a person has done something wrong. FitzGerald indicates that impasse can lead one to feel that their own failures have somehow led to this situation, and she suggests that this is not correct.\textsuperscript{249} One’s entrance into the impasse of the Dark Night of the soul happens because one is entering an opportunity for growth, not because one has failed—even if that growth will involve moving away from sin. “Only when love has grown to a certain point of depth and commitment can its limitations be experienced,” she writes.\textsuperscript{250} In the case of WED, it must be admitted that the failure of the white community, and each individual’s complicity in it, is indeed the reason for this experience of impasse.\textsuperscript{251} Still, FitzGerald’s point is helpful for two reasons. First, much of

\textsuperscript{249} FitzGerald, “Impasse and Dark Night,” 94.
\textsuperscript{250} FitzGerald, “Impasse and Dark Night,” 98.
\textsuperscript{251} While I presume that whites have a level of culpability for racial inequity and, increasingly, for white ignorance and resistance, a deep examination of the nature of that culpability is beyond the scope of this project. In his Buckman Chair installation lecture of 2018, Massingale summarizes the challenge for Catholic moral theology. The Catholic tradition presumes an individual model of ignorance and culpability, in which socialized ignorance (as in the communal, active ignorance of racism) is treated as invincible ignorance because an individual cannot overcome it on their own. As a result, no one is viewed as morally responsible for systemic evils like racial injustice. Massingale concludes that moral theology needs to be restructured to incorporate a new understanding of moral culpability that accounts for collective ignorance and systemic injustices. (Bryan Massingale, “‘They Do Not Know It and Do Not Want to Know It’: Racial Ignorance, James Baldwin, and the Authenticity of Christian Ethics,” [Buckman Chair Inaugural Lecture, Fordham University, February 27, 2018]. Video accessed October 23, 2018,
whiteness is simply what whites have been born into, and so they are not directly guilty of actively developing the white ignorance and systemic racism that now requires they go through this impasse, though they still have complicity for failing to fight against it to the extent that they should have known better, and they still have the responsibility to overcome this injustice.  

Secondly, the pain and difficulty of impasse is not a sign that one is on the wrong path and that this impasse must be avoided.

**WED as an Experience of the Crossroads**

In her response to FitzGerald’s 2009 CTSA address, Copeland categorizes FitzGerald’s proposal as “that intimate and terrifying call to conversion...an invitation to a theology of radical openness, not so much as the processing of words, but the process of the work and will of the Word in our lives concretely, specifically, and particularly.” Copeland’s own writings offer a companion image to that of impasse, perhaps the most hopeful and powerful image for understanding the challenge and promise of WED. It is an image rooted in Black culture and spirituality: blues music’s metaphor of the crossroads. In “Theology at the Crossroads: A Meditation on the Blues,” Copeland describes the mystical element of Black Catholic theology, but her explanation suggests that this approach can be relevant to the white movement toward antiracism, too. She says that it serves as a corrective to the Enlightenment approach often...
associated with whiteness, and it “will have profound ramifications not for theology or black vernacular culture alone, but rather for all human life, especially wherever life is threatened by force, coercion, and cynicism.”

Copeland describes the crossroads as a “place or moment of deep imposing mystery, of access to dense and opaque power.” This ambiguous place contains both possibility and peril; it “insinuate[s] revelation and insight as well as disorientation and danger.” Practically, Black Catholic theology goes to the crossroads when it attempts to listen to and stand with those who are oppressed—those “who live the blues”—in order to prophetically call for a commitment to universal human flourishing. Echoing the Carmelite themes that FitzGerald brings to impasse, Copeland asserts that theology can only enter the crossroads if it is “deeply mystical”: “At the crossroads, theology plunges into the dark, and here it is blinded to insight by the luminosity of the transcendent God. Theology must learn to see in the dark.” Copeland describes it as entering the “darkness of God,” a place of uncertainty where the theologian “learns to wait—wait for understanding, wait for words, wait for flower and fruit,” and where the theologian “learns intimate lessons of sacrifice, suffering, and pain.” Copeland is clear that this is a risky and painful path, and yet worth it. She concludes:

The risks of the crossroads, of the crossing sign, of the ‘sign of the cross’ are many and they are significant, but the reward is a pearl of great price. And in the dark cloud that rolls across the crossroads and descends upon the cross, those who wait are likely to glimpse a bloodied dark man of uncertain race and

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256 Copeland, “Theology at the Crossroads,” 98.
257 Copeland, “Theology at the Crossroads,” 98.
259 Copeland, “Theology at the Crossroads,” 103.
origin, who will reach down from the cross and tune their hearts to the sound of
the gospel train that runs from here to heaven again.261

Copeland’s imagery of the dark crossroads is appropriate for what whites can expect of their
move toward antiracism as well: an encounter with the difficult truth of human suffering and
injustice and with the mystery of God. It will seem uncertain, difficult to see. God will be there,
but may be unrecognizable. It is not a place of controlling one’s growth but of allowing oneself
to be re-tuned by God and by those who have lived the blues caused by racism.

Finding a Path Forward

Connecting WED to the concepts of impasse and the crossroads suggests that this
difficult experience can also be a path to new life. It is not an easy path by any means. The film
The Color of Fear documents a challenging conversation about race between a racially diverse
group of individuals. At one point, a person of color explains to a white participant how
disorienting it will be to stop denying white privilege:

For you to understand what racism is about, you’re going to be so
uncomfortable, you’re going to be so different from who you see yourself to be
now, there’s just no way for you to get it from where you’re sitting. You need to
step outside of your skin, and step outside of what’s really comfortable and
familiar to you, and launch out to some real, for you, unknown territory...262

The speaker captures an important point: from their current white framework, antiracism will
never make sense to whites. Overall, the problem is that whites fail to interrogate their own
paradigm for making sense of the world. In A Black Theology of Liberation, James Cone suggests
that whiteness is simultaneously too self-absorbed and not self-critical enough. He forcefully
writes, “Whiteness symbolizes the activity of deranged men intrigued by their own image of

themselves, and thus unable to see that they are what is wrong with the world.” Antiracists’ suggestions for overcoming white ignorance include finding ways to break out of the limited, biased perspective that whites currently have, especially as caused by the biased, white culture around them.

What is needed is to move to the “unknown territory” of a different perspective, what I have been referring to as a different way of knowing. Chapter three will explore this transformation and the need for a holistic approach that goes beyond merely the cognitive in order to heal one’s way of knowing. These solutions emphasize the need for radical openness, self-critical vulnerability, and intellectual humility. This approach will not entirely free whites from epistemic disorientation but will help them respond to the disruption to their knowing in a productive manner, one that results in a more authentic way of knowing. The work of Bernard Lonergan, in dialogue with antiracist scholarship, will provide a theory of epistemic development that can clarify whites’ path through WED and to antiracism. While Lonergan offers an unrevisable, foundational method of human knowing, he also recognizes that the scourge of bias can rupture this process, requiring healing that cannot always be found within the process itself. Conversion, which ultimately begins with the movement of God’s Spirit, is necessary. Chapter four will propose kenosis, self-emptying, as a fundamental Christian spirituality that can provide grounding for the radical openness necessary to accept God’s invitation to conversion to antiracism.

CHAPTER 3: MAKING SENSE OF IMPASSE: WHITE EPISTEMIC DISORIENTATION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH

Introduction

The previous chapter argued that white epistemic disorientation (WED) is an aspect of white resistance to antiracism. WED was defined as a felt inability to participate in the knowing process about issues of race. In the midst of racial discourse, whites feel that they have hit an impasse. At some point, conflict between their own approach to thinking about racism and the approach of antiracists leaves them with two unpalatable options: either trust their own judgment and reject the antiracist perspective, or suppress their own judgment and accept the antiracist perspective. The former path is unacceptable because these whites recognize some underlying moral authority in the call to antiracism. The latter path is unacceptable because it feels unauthentic and even irresponsible to ignore what their own experience, mind, and culture tell them is true or just. Caught in this no-win situation, whites may despair of any authentic way forward on the path to addressing the question of racism. The response is often to blame and reject the antiracist ideas that have prompted WED.

I have proposed that Constance FitzGerald’s concept of impasse and Shawn Copeland’s image of the crossroads are fruitful for understanding WED. To embrace this imagery of occlusion is not to point to a lack of answers, nor an eternal ambiguity that leaves one paralyzed in a practical relativism, nor a rejection of reason. Instead, it suggests that one’s journey towards truth will be conceived of differently. One will recognize the natural and sinful limitations of one’s own epistemic viewpoint. One will recognize the value of others’ epistemic viewpoints precisely in their otherness. One will recognize the role of affect and relationality in knowing. One will recognize the need for God’s grace. And yet in the midst of this, there will still be a need to identify what is true in such a way that it can be used as a basis for concrete
decisions. There is a tension: whites must recognize the limitations of their knowing process and their knowledge, adopting intellectual humility, while also having enough epistemic confidence to pursue and respond to truth with real agency.

This chapter will use Bernard Lonergan’s work to offer a theoretical understanding of WED and suggest a productive way for whites to approach WED. How one approaches racial discourse matters. The criteria for success include not only white acquiescence to antiracism but also the epistemic authenticity of that acquiescence. Whites fear that they are being coerced into accepting antiracism in a way that degrades their identity as knowers. I will argue that, while concern for the epistemic integrity of all discourse participants, including whites, is essential to achieving racial justice for people of color, the antiracist approach does not degrade white epistemic authenticity but promotes it.

WED must be re-interpreted by whites. Within Lonergan’s framework of human development, their experience of impasse and the “leap” required to progress through it can rightly be conceived of as an aid to the discursive knowing process, rather than as a blunting or disruption of that process. Whites should understand the antiracist call for radical openness and epistemic humility as an invitation to knowing, not an ideological act that dismisses knowing for the sake of imposing an agenda.

While I will suggest a path through white epistemic disorientation to knowledge of antiracism, I will not attempt to provide step-by-step instructions. The human path to knowing is not so mechanistic as to allow for that. This chapter will be more descriptive than prescriptive, with the goal of helping whites to orient themselves within the necessarily disorienting process that coming to know racism demands. Much can be gained simply from recognizing the context in which one finds oneself. Regarding spiritual impasse, Constance
FitzGerald writes, “When I am able to situate a person’s experience of impasse within the interpretive framework of the dark night, that person is reassured and energized to live, even though she feels she is dying. The impasse is opened to meaning precisely because it can be redescribed.” Belden C. Lane makes a similar point about describing impasse as a “knot” from which there is no straightforward escape: “the very process of describing the impasse situation in this way is itself therapeutic,” a form of conscientization that can be a first step to change. My hypothesis is that if whites are able to locate their experience of WED within the larger framework of the process of knowing, they will find hope and meaning in the midst of their still-disorienting cognitive experience.

I draw on the theory of Bernard Lonergan, S.J., a white philosopher-theologian who was convinced that accurate theory, especially of human understanding, is necessary for achieving concrete justice in the world. Lonergan might seem an unusual choice for an antiracist project. His cognitive theory claims universality, emphasizes the role of the intellect, and focuses largely on the individual, asserting each person’s possibility for transcendence—all characteristics of the white epistemic paradigm. Lonergan transforms the approach, however, by adding an attentiveness to historical context, a sober recognition of human bias and decline, and an acknowledgement that the individual’s work of self-transcendence requires outside assistance. Contemporary theologians including Copeland, Massingale, John Nilson, and

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264 FitzGerald, “Impasse and Dark Night,” 97. See also “Impasse to Prophetic Hope,” 24: “Crucial to any personal appropriation of hope is the ability to read the signs of what is going on so as to remain with the unfolding process.”

265 Lane, “Spirituality and Political Commitment,” 198. Lane cites R.D. Laing as the source of the image of “knots” and Paulo Freire as the source of “conscientization” language.

266 Gerry Whelan, S.J., explains that the Great Depression and the rise of fascism in Europe formed Lonergan’s attentiveness to social concerns but that Lonergan came to believe he could best “devote his life to contributing to human betterment by addressing social problems at their intellectual root” (Redeeming History: Social Concern in Bernard Lonergan and Robert Doran [Rome: Gregorian and Biblical Press, 2014]).
Chanelle Robinson have drawn on Lonergan in their antiracist work.²⁶⁷ I find his theory of human development particularly helpful for exploring knowing and agency in a structured, metaphysical framework that nonetheless takes seriously contingency and context.

The Need for an Epistemically Authentic Approach to Justice

The pain and suffering caused by systemic racism demands an urgent response. As Shawn Copeland notes, even seemingly abstract systemic racism has a physical effect on bodies of color.²⁶⁸ Actions for justice cannot be deferred until a time when whites have arrived at a full and satisfactory understanding of racism. And yet, racial justice must also be achieved in an epistemically authentic manner, not primarily for the mental comfort of whites but because a deep and long-term antiracism depends upon whites understanding and embracing its premises.

For Lonergan, an individual’s development and a society’s progress depend upon epistemic authenticity, which is about faithful adherence to the process of knowing rather than to particular insights.²⁶⁹ Insights arise from the particularities of a concrete situation, and they also prompt and shape the actions that will change those situations. The reality of the new situation gives rise to further insights and revisions of existing insights. What is necessarily permanent is not the content of any insight but the process of arriving at and confirming insights. The insights that will be needed in the future cannot be known in the present but will only become accessible as insight builds upon insight. The failure to be open to one insight will also limit the possibility of higher insights that would have depended on it. For this reason, the freedom to think and ask questions, to seek insights that lead to a fuller truth, is essential not

only to more advanced ideas but also the improved concrete social situations that they can foster.  

Lonergan writes, “It follows that if insight occurs, it keeps recurring; and at each recurrence knowledge develops, action increases its scope, and situations improve.” The only way to ensure the possibility of ever-higher progress is to remain committed to the asking and answering of relevant questions, which is the heart of authentic knowing.

The opposite is also true, however: “As self-transcendence promotes progress, so the refusal of self-transcendence turns progress into cumulative decline.” When bias prevents good ideas from arising or gaining traction, flawed ideas are implemented instead; these implementations result in social surds; those surds become accepted in society and mistaken for intelligible structures and ways of operating; future ideas are influenced by and find their grounding in those surds, but an understanding that is based on flawed premises will itself be flawed; these new flawed ideas will reinforce and extend social surds; and the cycle will continue. Inauthenticity breeds inauthenticity.

This cycle of decline “is to be met, not by any idea or set of ideas on the level of technology, economics, or politics, but only by the attainment of a higher viewpoint in man’s understanding and making of man.” The essence of the solution is not to identify the precise concrete corrective to the social surd but to commit to a higher form of authenticity in human

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273 Lonergan, *Insight*, 254; 261-262. The cycle Lonergan speaks of in this case is what he calls the “longer cycle of decline,” which is caused by general bias, an excessive dependence on common sense to the exclusion of the theoretical thinking that could overcome the limitations of focusing solely on the practical. Lonergan insists that distinguishing between this cycle and the shorter cycle of decline, caused by group bias, is essential to finding an effective solution (*Insight*, 260). While it is outside the scope of this current project, further study on how the white community and antiracist community identifies the problem at hand as the shorter or longer cycle could be illuminating to the conversation. Despite the importance of distinguishing them, it is clear that the two forms of bias and decline do overlap as well.
knowing. This “higher viewpoint,” which Lonergan will name “cosmopolis,” “is the discovery, the logical expansion, and the recognition of the principle that intelligence contains its own immanent norms and that these norms are equipped with sanctions which man does not have to invent or impose.” In other words, the higher viewpoint is being faithful to what Lonergan calls the “transcendental method” regardless of its apparent benefit to one’s own situation.

Social progress and long-term justice must be based in an authentic epistemology; otherwise even the best-intentioned movement with short-term successes is planting the seeds of its own eventual failure. If whites do not come to an authentic judgment about systemic racism but instead settle for a superficial acceptance of the antiracist position, they are unlikely to make antiracist decisions when doing so becomes painful or requires trade-offs. Lonergan explains that human development must be integrated. If it is to last, the change in a person must eventually be supported at all levels: the organic, psychic, external, and intellectual. Development may be initiated by affect or by social pressure, but unless one’s intellect also comes to support that change the initiative will either fade or the person will become fragmented.

In short, whites who rebel against WED are not wrong because they want an epistemically responsible approach to racial discourse, as if this were an immaterial concern compared to the question of immediate redress of ongoing injustices. Epistemically responsible discourse is essential to racial justice. Rather, whites are wrong because they fail to see that the antiracist approach to racial discourse does promote epistemic authenticity. I argue that this error of interpretation results in part from whites’ lack of understanding of the larger picture of epistemic authenticity and its consequences for their understanding of race. Lonergan describes

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two complementary movements in the process of human development. The first is a movement from below upwards, the “creating” vector. The second is from above downwards, the “healing” vector. When whites act only within the first, they feel they are being epistemically stifled or pushed to epistemic irresponsibility. When whites take the second into account, it becomes clearer that antiracism is inviting them to a more epistemically responsible path and greater knowing. I will examine each of these movements in turn.

Movement from Below Upward: The Transcendental Method and Its Guidelines for Knowing

Lonergan argues that there is an innate, fundamental process to human development, the transcendental method. This process constitutes the movement from below upwards, and it arises naturally due to inherent drives within humans. Later in his career, Lonergan would refer to this movement from below as the “creating” vector. The transcendental method involves

1. being attentive to data (experiencing),
2. having insights that grasp meaning in that data (understanding),
3. confirming whether or not one’s insights are in fact correct (judging), and
4. determining how confirmed judgments should impact one’s actions (deciding/deliberating).

The first three of these steps constitute knowing.

Lonergan describes this method as the “spontaneous and self-correcting process of learning” in which insights become the data which spawn further insights. It cannot be radically questioned, for one cannot question it without using the method itself. Therefore, a

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278 While I argue that antiracism’s demands are generally in line with epistemic authenticity, I recognize that this alignment is not certain in all cases. All human viewpoints are susceptible to inauthenticity, and every individual and community must constantly strive against that danger. Still, my argument here is that the greater danger is whites’ inaccurate assessment of the antiracist approach as epistemically problematic.
279 Lonergan, “Healing and Creating in History.”
281 Lonergan, Insight, 197.
certain epistemic stability underlies all knowing. To disrupt or cut short this process is to be inauthentic and to disrupt human development. For those who are at the crossroads of white epistemic disorientation, it may be helpful to recognize that there is a foundation of knowledge that cannot be doubted even if this foundation is not a series of propositions but a method. At the same time, the inherent human drive to know leads whites to an implicit sense that such a method must be followed. This drive toward a normative method of knowing may be precisely what sets the stage for WED when whites feel that antiracist rules of engagement ask them to ignore that method.

**Following the Desire to Know**

Lonergan’s conception of development from below upwards includes several elements necessary for epistemic authenticity. First, the core of the creative vector of human development is what Lonergan calls the “detached, disinterested, unrestricted desire to know.” He writes, “Deep within us all, emergent when the noise of other appetites is stilled, there is a drive to know, to understand, to see why, to discover the reason, to find the cause, to explain... [T]he fact of inquiry is beyond all doubt.” This desire is what drives humans through the steps of the transcendental method. When one’s senses take in data they desire to find meaning in it. When one’s understanding has grasped some meaning in the data, they desire to ascertain whether or not that meaning is correct. Importantly, the desire to know is inherent to the human person and it is not satisfied to settle on a judgment until all relevant questions have been answered. The innateness of this desire is what allows normative judgments on the process of knowing. When a person fails to follow this desire—when they

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ignore relevant questions—they fail to act with epistemic integrity, a pillar of human development.

Perhaps that is why whites become so defensive when they feel that their questions or critiques are dismissed as forms of unjust white resistance. It feels like a limitation on their freedom to follow the desire that is central to their human identity and to engage in the process that is at the heart of meaning-making. Here we find echoes of Fricker’s assertion about epistemic injustice as an attack on one’s very humanity. Even for whites whose view is distorted, their attempt to assert their own ideas is not only a sign of selfish desire for control or excessive individualism. In some way it may arise from a misguided desire for epistemic integrity. One must be free to follow the desire to know, asking all relevant questions.

**Acting in Line with Knowing**

Secondly, a person has a duty to act in line with what they know. Human development does not end with arriving at knowledge but requires making decisions that follow from that knowledge.\(^{287}\) Lonergan argues that just as there is an innate desire to know which must be followed, so there is an innate desire to act in accord with what one knows. He writes, “I cannot prevent questions for reflection from arising; once they arise, I cannot set aside the demand of my rationality that I assent if, and only if, I grasp the virtually unconditioned; and once I judge that I ought to act in a determinate manner, that I cannot both be reasonable and act otherwise, then my reasonableness is bound to the act by a link of necessity. Such is the meaning of obligation.”\(^{288}\) Again, Lonergan states that “the final enlargement and transformation of consciousness consists in the empirically, intelligently, and rationally conscious subject [i.e., one

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who has reached a judgment] (1) demanding conformity of his doing to his knowing, and (2) acceding to that demand by deciding reasonably."

On a political level, whites may balk at antiracist legislative or legal action that they feel limits their freedom to act in alignment with their understanding of race in society. Similarly, at the level of discourse, when antiracists demand that whites conform to their guidelines for discussion, whites may feel they are being forced to act in a way that conflicts with what they currently know about racism. In this case, the feeling of inauthenticity is compounded because unlike a law that may dictate behavior but allows dissenting protest and speech about that behavior, when whites feel silenced in dialogue they sense they are being prevented from engaging in the very act necessary for arguing their case or even arriving at new knowledge.

**Search for Truth Must Be Open-Ended**

Thirdly, the search for knowledge is by nature discursive and open-ended. According to Lonergan, knowledge is reached neither by passively receiving a truth that impresses itself on us nor by a simple act of our will. Knowing involves asking a series of questions and seeking their answers. Our recognition of the fulfillment of those actions is not something we can force but rather an “insight” that strikes us. This is true for a community or individual on the road to new discoveries. It is also true once a community or individual has reached a judgment and is teaching it to others. The “teachers” may have a known truth that the “student” must learn, but even when the content to be learned is pre-determined, the process of acquiring that knowledge must be discursive and open-ended. Lonergan writes, “Indeed, what is true of discovery also holds for the transmission of discoveries by teaching. For a teacher cannot undertake to make a pupil understand. All he can do is present the sensible elements in the issue in a suggestive order and with a proper distribution of emphasis. It is up to the pupils

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themselves to reach understanding, and they do so in varying measures of ease and rapidity."\textsuperscript{290}

The learner must ask and answer questions until they reach an understanding of the content and then judge it to be a correct understanding. The learner must allow for the possibility of any number of understandings in order to be free to follow their questions wherever they lead. A learner who simply accepts the judgments handed to them will be able to state those judgments, but it will not be true knowledge. Lonergan writes, regarding a geometry lesson, "[I]t is that grasp that constitutes the insight. It is the occurrence of that grasp that makes the difference between repeating the definition of a circle as a parrot might and uttering it intelligently."\textsuperscript{291} The student must achieve some mental "grasp" of the meaning which the teacher attempts to communicate. This grasp is more likely to occur when certain environments, attitudes, and thinking processes are in place, but ultimately that moment when the data all fit together into something called "understanding" and then one recognizes that understanding to indeed be true in a "judgment" is something that happens to a person. As Lonergan puts it, "[I]nsight comes suddenly and unexpectedly."\textsuperscript{292}

The significance for white epistemic disorientation is that whites cannot force themselves to know antiracist conclusions as truths. They cannot enter a seminar or begin reading a book by thinking, "I will learn that systemic racism exists and that I am complicit in it." What they can think is, "I am going to learn some arguments that support the claim that systemic racism exists and that I am complicit in it, and I will be as open as I can to the possible judgment that this claim is accurate." This is not to say that whites need to enter every conversation with the presumption that any proposed answer is due the same benefit of the doubt as any other. The point is that whites must reach understanding and judgment by having

\textsuperscript{290} Lonergan, \textit{Insight}, 29.
\textsuperscript{291} Lonergan, \textit{Insight}, 33.
\textsuperscript{292} Lonergan, \textit{Insight}, 29.
relevant questions answered, and those answers are satisfactory not simply because they are given but because they satisfy the questions in a way that other answers do not. It is the nature of knowing that a person cannot dictate which answers will provide that sense of satisfaction which constitutes the “grasp” of insight. To attempt to do so, to presume an answer ahead of time, is to curtail and distort the knowing process. When antiracists demand that whites accept the truth of systemic racism and their complicity in it, even when that conclusion does not prompt a sense of satisfaction in whites, whites feel that they are being forced into epistemic inauthenticity.

Whites experiencing WED may believe that antiracists are falling into this error by evaluating racial discourse solely on whether or not it achieves the latter’s predetermined, practical goals regarding equity. What I referred to as “materialist” views of racism in chapter one are especially likely to stoke this white fear, as they draw on philosophical frameworks that center the question of power in a way that may seem to discount the importance of truth. For instance, Applebaum approvingly describes the Critical Pedagogy approach to social justice teaching in which “the question ‘who benefits?’ is prior to questions of truth.”\(^ {293}\) We have already seen similar expressions from DiAngelo and Bonilla-Silva in which the question of how power functions within an interaction (i.e., what the concrete result is, whether intended or not) becomes central. Rightly understood, this approach can point to the ways that having power within an unjust system hampers one’s access to and desire for truth, while the empowerment of those who are marginalized can lead to greater access to truth. Instead, however, it may

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seem to whites that antiracists are using this critical Foucauldian framework to obtain power while rejecting the importance of truth.

**WED in Lonerganian Terms**

The white epistemic disorientation outlined in the last chapter can now be described in terms of Lonerganian elements of epistemic authenticity. Whites feel that they are silenced from asking questions or asserting views that arise from their innate desire to know. They feel that their attempts to live in line with their honest understanding of race is maligned as injustice rather than recognized as integrity. They feel that the collaborative, open-ended dialogue about race that would lead to a discovery of true knowledge is hijacked by an antiracist agenda that attempts to unilaterally impose its ideas about race. For example, DiAngelo’s deference to people of color leaves some whites feeling little to no space to ask critical questions. One web writer complains that the term “‘white fragility’ becomes an Orwellian device to dismiss objections from white people.”

I take serious issue with the way [“white fragility”] is framed because it self-referentially dismisses dissent. According to this definition, if a white person voices any disagreement, such disagreement may be categorized as argumentation (which is assumed to be fueled by anger, fear, guilt). Therefore it is one’s white fragility that causes him or her to disagree. On the other hand, if a white person disagrees but doesn’t voice it (because he or she knows it will only draw such criticism and censorship), he or she remains silent or chooses to exit the conversation, and this too is due to white fragility. This means that whatever one does, he is termed fragile unless, of course, that individual agrees openly and submits to the label.

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These conservative critiques of DiAngelo raise concerns that I believe are shared, at least at a gut, reactionary level, even by progressive whites when the conversation about race begins to stretch beyond their comfort zones.

When fundamental epistemic principles are threatened, a person should feel an epistemic disorientation that rightly warns them to reject that threat in order to choose authenticity. The problem is that whites often misjudge when these epistemic principles are being threatened and when they are being recalibrated. Whites fail to account for the broader context of human development in which human bias and limitation prevent them from being faithful and self-sufficient in their use of the transcendental method.

**Need for Healing: The Insufficiency of the Creating Vector**

The transcendental method does not stand alone. Development also includes a movement from above downwards. Outside forces shape the effective bounds within which a person can pursue development from below upwards. When whites take into account the dynamic from above downwards then they may recognize more easily the distortions in their knowing process. Robert Doran speaks of the movement from above as an ultimately God-initiated process that heals one’s upward dynamic through conversion. It is an action of grace.296 Without denying the centrality of this healing and grace-based interpretation of the dynamic, Morris W. Pelzel concludes that over time Lonergan’s use of the metaphor of “development from above” also comes to include a more generic formation (“socialization, acculturation, education”) that can be either positive or negative (i.e., lead to a more authentic or less authentic movement from below upwards).297 First I will address the need for whites to

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296 Doran, *Theology and the Dialectics of History*, 32.
recognize how influences from above have misshaped their knowing process, then I will suggest how realizing their need for healing from above can increase their authenticity as knowers.\textsuperscript{298}

To say, as Lonergan does, that there is a natural human drive toward progress is not to say that human progress is automatic. Decline is always a very real possibility, and progress requires a never-ending “withdrawal from inauthenticity.”\textsuperscript{299} Inauthenticity results from disruptions to a subject’s adherence to the transcendental method itself. Lonergan calls these disruptions “bias.” Bias for Lonergan does not refer first and foremost to a prejudiced or narrow-minded idea but rather the cognitive disruption that leads to such ideas. Bias is a distortion in one’s meaning-making process that leads to or sustains biased conclusions. It is fleeing from the desire to know because following that desire might lead to discomfort.

Copeland contrasts Lonergan’s understanding of bias with a “commonsense notion of simple preference or inclination of temperament.”\textsuperscript{300} Instead, bias is “the more or less conscious and deliberate choice, in light of what we perceive as a potential threat to our well-being, to exclude further information or data from consideration in our understanding, judgment, discernment, decision, and action.”\textsuperscript{301} I understand “more or less conscious and deliberate” to mean that sometimes biased individuals are aware of allowing other desires to disrupt their detached search for truth, while at other times biased individuals are not aware that they are doing this. Lonergan describes some types of bias (individual bias and group bias) as falling more on the conscious side of the spectrum, and other types (dramatic bias) falling

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{298} Because of the bias involved in the white ignorance under consideration, I will describe the movement from above primarily as a solution to this bias. While Lonergan does speak of it as a “healing,” I follow Doran in reading Lonergan as indicating that even healthy knowing involves both movements (\textit{Theology and the Dialectics of History}, 32). Something of the dynamic from above would be an essential part of human knowing and development, even in the absence of distortions like those that mark the situation at hand.
\item \textsuperscript{299} Lonergan, \textit{Method in Theology}, 237.
\item \textsuperscript{300} Copeland, \textit{Enfleshing Freedom}, 13.
\item \textsuperscript{301} Copeland, \textit{Enfleshing Freedom}, 13.
\end{itemize}
more on the unconscious side. For the purposes of this study, however, a more relevant distinction is between individuals whose bias is clearer to them because it contrasts to some extent with the surrounding culture and individuals whose bias is so aligned with the bias of the surrounding culture that it remains invisible to them.

Massingale has pointed out that the systemically racist culture that forms whites is an example of what Lonergan calls “major inauthenticity,” the distortion of an entire culture by bias, as distinct from the “minor inauthenticity” of an individual’s bias. 302 Lonergan asks a key question at the beginning of Insight: “How is a mind to become conscious of its own bias when that bias springs from a communal flight from understanding and is supported by the whole texture of a civilization?” 303 Massingale argues that Black theology demands that the focus which has traditionally been on the minor inauthenticity of individuals’ biases be expanded to focus on the major inauthenticity of a biased culture. 304 He describes the dangerous power of major inauthenticity:

Sincere and righteous individuals in the midst of such a decadent and compromised (read, idolatrous) tradition find themselves facing a truly maddening situation. For with the best of intentions in fulfilling the requirements of attention, intelligence, reasonableness and responsibility, they become prisoners of false consciousness, a situation that Black and other liberation theologians call “ideological captivity.” (This is the state of affairs that King previously described when he noted the complacency of white Southerners with injustice because of the worship practices in their churches.)...The goal of

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personal (that is, minor) authenticity becomes perhaps even vitiated through the authentic appropriation of an unauthentic tradition.\textsuperscript{305}

As Massingale notes, Lonergan makes this point about major inauthenticity in the realm of religious tradition but also the wider realm of culture in general.\textsuperscript{306} Whites need to break out of their currently limited focus and see that the problem of racism is rooted at a deeper level. Racism therefore remains invisible so long as they do not interrogate that deeper question of society’s authenticity and its constraint of their own authenticity.

I propose that two varieties of active ignorance fit a similar distinction. As mentioned in chapter one, Mills writes that white ignorance arises from a need \textit{not} to know something either due to “straightforward racist motivation” or “more impersonal social-structural causation.”\textsuperscript{307} That is, one manifestation is an individual’s desire not to know something. A person ignores information that complicates their life or threatens their sense of security, and they avoid asking questions that might lead to such information. In Lonerganian terms, this type of white ignorance involves breaking from one’s pure desire to know, which is not uncommon, as Lonergan notes: “If everyone has some acquaintance with the spirit of inquiry and reflection, few think of making it the effective center of their lives; and of that few, still fewer make sufficient progress to be able to withstand other attractions and persevere in their higher purpose.”\textsuperscript{308} Whites might say, for instance, “I don’t care to learn about ‘social justice’ or the


\textsuperscript{306} Massingale speaks specifically about biased religious traditions, citing Lonergan’s question “[H]ow can one tell whether one’s appropriation of religion is genuine or unauthentic and, more radically, how can one tell one is not appropriating a religious tradition that has become unauthentic?” As Massingale makes clear, this focus is simply a particular instance of the more general problem evident in culture as a whole and any of its component parts. (Massingale, “Black Theology and Lonergan: The Challenge of Authenticity,” 9, footnote 22)

\textsuperscript{307} Mills, “White Ignorance,” 21.

\textsuperscript{308} Lonergan, \textit{Insight}, 251.
situation of people of color. My concern is for the health, safety, and happiness of myself and my family. I don’t need to know anything more.” In this type of active ignorance, whites are conscious of prioritizing some other desire or apparent good over the seeking of knowledge about race.

The other manifestation of active ignorance is more insidious: a socially-inherited culture instills in a person a meaning-making paradigm that leads them to judgments that do not align with reality. In this situation, their inherited and accepted way of knowing wrongly prioritizes or dismisses certain information, but in a way that seems rational and objective to that person. They may in fact be following the pure desire to know on one level, but the tools and frameworks they have for understanding and judging are skewed. Recall Bonilla-Silva’s description of the various ideological tactics that whites use to justify a “color-blind” mentality that maintains systemic racial inequity. That rationalization might not be a consciously disingenuous pretext for dismissing unwanted questions. Whites may sincerely believe they are seeking the truth about racism. Still, their formation within white supremacy culture misdirects that desire to know. As Lonergan says, “Without due perspective and discrimination, the exercise of genuineness...results only in the earnest person with a remarkable flair for concentrating on the wrong questions.”

In this situation, the “active” part of white ignorance is not primarily a conscious avoidance of knowledge by the individual. What is “active” is the culture’s self-protective way of maintaining the existing status quo. In the midst of such major inauthenticity, whites can remain dedicated to the pure desire to know on one level and yet still suffer from active ignorance. There is another level, however, on which whites are ignoring the desire to know in

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309 Lonergan, *Insight*, 502. The end of this chapter will explain in more detail what Lonergan means by “genuineness,” but in this current context the common understanding of genuineness suffices.
this situation. They flee from questions about the authenticity of their culture and its effect on their knowing.

Whites may attempt to be attentive, intelligent, reasonable, and responsible, in line with the transcendental method, but their sense of what data of experience are worth attending to, their existing schema of insights within which to understand the data, and their expectations of what the satisfaction of authentic judgment feels like are all so rooted in what white culture finds normative that their process of knowing will never lead to antiracist conclusions. What is needed is not for whites to ask questions within their upward way of knowing, but for whites to ask questions about that way of knowing itself. Such questions, however, shake what feels like the foundation of their knowing, and so it is rarely done. This is especially the case when the questions are prompting not simply an enlargement of their current foundation but a repudiation of some parts of it—what Lonergan calls “conversion.” I suggest that this deeper questioning is what antiracists are calling whites to do, but the destabilizing nature of such an undertaking leads whites to feel that their ability to know (and even reason and the objective process of knowing in general) is being dismissed. To recognize their epistemic distortion, whites must understand the role of the movement from above, which is both a cause of the distortion and its potential solution.

The Antiracist Push for Awareness of Major Inauthenticity

Antiracists argue that whites’ epistemic growth involves recognizing how the particular location they inhabit within social structures results in a specifically white horizon of meaning-making. Critiquing their own internal lens on the world therefore requires looking outward to the external forces that form that lens. Barbara Applebaum challenges progressive whites who would consider themselves free from racism. Drawing on white philosopher Judith Butler’s work, she argues that the human subject is always bounded by the systems of power of which
one is a part. \footnote{Applebaum, \textit{Being White, Being Good}, 77.} The idea of the independent individual knowing and acting from a space of pure objectivity and self-reliant agency is a myth. George Yancy similarly describes white ignorance as a kind of opacity of the self and white resistance as a “suturing” in which whites are closed off to learning that their true self is not the autonomously-constructed person they imagine but rather a socially-constructed self.\footnote{George Yancy, “Un-Sutured,” xiv-xvi.}

According to Applebaum, this lack of full autonomy does not doom humans to fatalistic determinism but does mean that responsible agency requires a self-critical approach—what Judith Butler calls “vigilance.”\footnote{Applebaum, \textit{Being White, Being Good}, 180.} The self-interrogation must be deep: a person must “be willing to be open to critique even the political and moral grounding from which one acts.”\footnote{Applebaum, \textit{Being White, Being Good}, 77. Emphasis original.} It must also be constant. Applebaum asserts, “As we cannot escape our social location, we must \textit{continually interrogate} our political practices for exclusions and omissions even when, and especially when, we think we are doing good.”\footnote{Applebaum, \textit{Being White, Being Good}, 70. Emphasis original.}

Yancy notes that whites’ development requires a self-interrogation that goes beyond introspection because whites have “undergone social and psychological anterior processes of white subject formation that profoundly limit direct \textit{epistemic} introspective access to aspects of the constituted white racist self.”\footnote{Yancy, “Un-Sutured,” xiv.} Whites can only find the truth about their current selves by looking outside of themselves to identify the structures of whiteness that have shaped them. This point is essential to prevent whites’ attempts at antiracist reflection from leading them into an even more insular cocoon of white centeredness. Moving toward antiracism requires whites to examine their own racism (including its presence in their very way of knowing), but doing this

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[310] Applebaum, \textit{Being White, Being Good}, 77.
\item[311] George Yancy, “Un-Sutured,” xiv-xvi.
\item[312] Applebaum, \textit{Being White, Being Good}, 180.
\item[313] Applebaum, \textit{Being White, Being Good}, 77.
\item[314] Applebaum, \textit{Being White, Being Good}, 70. Emphasis original.
\item[315] Yancy, “Un-Sutured,” xiv.
\end{enumerate}
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self-interrogation paradoxically requires learning about what is outside of the self, both the perspectives of people of color and the structures of whiteness that influence the white self.

Essentially, antiracists are arguing that it is impossible to be authentic within an inauthentic tradition, or at least that to be authentic within an inauthentic tradition is not enough. Minor authenticity is not enough to make a difference in the justice of the world, and therefore it is not enough to make those practitioners of minor authenticity just.

Horizons and the Vicious Circle

One way of explaining whites’ distorted approach to the transcendental method is in terms of what Lonergan calls one’s “horizon.” A horizon is a limit not only on what a person focuses on but on what a person is aware of. Lonergan says that “what lies beyond one’s horizon is simply outside the range of one’s knowledge and interests: one neither knows nor cares.”316 Doran explains it bluntly: “[B]eyond my horizon is the great realm of what I don’t even care about knowing, of what I pay no attention to, of what if it is called to my attention I simply disregard.”317 Copeland applies the concept to racism to describe the “racially bias-induced horizon” that leaves bodies of color invisible and outside the concern of whites.318 Within this horizon, the Black body is absent as a sacred, dignity-filled human person, and present as a personification of negative concepts such as “crime, wanton sexuality, evil, and sin.”319 White theologian Jon Nilson says that bias “creates foreshortened horizons, mistaken or incomplete fields of vision which are, nonetheless, deemed accurate and comprehensive enough by those who are biased.”320 Similar to what Medina calls “meta-blindness,” Nilson’s

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320 Nilson, *Hearing Past the Pain*, 90.
reading of Lonergan emphasizes that the “necessary correctives to [the biased, mistaken view] lie beyond the skewed field of vision” because the biased person excludes a priori the consideration of certain relevant questions and data.321

In a biased horizon, development from below can be trapped in what Lonergan calls “a vicious circle” that must be broken.322 Doran interprets this impasse as all but inevitable: “[I]f the movement from below upwards in conscious development is not met by a movement from above downwards, development will almost inevitably fall victim to some blend or other of the biases…. For there is a vicious circle in human development that cannot be broken by human resources alone, even by a self-correcting process of learning.”323 In its general form, Lonergan and Doran describe the vicious circle this way: “‘How is one to be persuaded to genuineness and openness, when one is not yet open to persuasion’ because of the biases that have distorted one’s own development?”324

The vicious circle here has to do with self-appropriation, a person’s understanding of what it means to know. Because self-appropriation requires one to apply their knowing process to their knowing process, one’s existing beliefs about knowing will skew attempts at self-appropriation.325 It is possible that whites could be following their inherent desire to know and even could be questioning their initial understanding (“Am I actually exhibiting racism in some way?”) in an attempt to know the truth. As long as whites’ understanding of what it means to be open to knowing is distorted, however, their attempts to seek the truth about racism will remain a dead-

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end for their antiracist development. Recall that Constance FitzGerald describes impasse as a situation in which one’s current rational approach to problems fails to be effective in the circumstance at hand, and in fact the harder one attempts this approach the less progress they make.

Lonergan indicates that a significant disruption is necessary to break out of this flawed understanding of what it means to know: “Spontaneously, naturally, your ideal of knowledge will govern your attempts at self-appropriation, and unless your ideal is perfectly correct before you start, it will prevent you from arriving. In other words, there is the need of some sort of a jump, a leap.”326 This leap is a participation in a movement from above that feels uncertain because it expands beyond or contradicts whites’ current movement from below. The leap is prompted by a disruption of one’s current approach to knowing from below. The following sections will demonstrate how the disruptive dynamic both expands beyond and remains rooted in the discursive process of knowing.

A Role for the Nonrational

Massingale argues that because of the “preconscious and nonrational character of racism and its role as an identity marker,” it cannot be overcome simply through rational thought: “Racism engages us viscerally. This makes racial injustice, on its deepest levels, impervious to rational appeals and cognitive strategies....Another kind of response is also needed, one that transcends the limits of logic and reason.”327 The concept of “white

327 Massingale, Racial Justice and the Catholic Church, 104-105. Note that in Racial Justice and the Catholic Church (2010), Massingale’s emphasis on the nonrational is focused primarily on moving the will to action. Compassion overcomes the inertia of indifference. By his 2018 Buckman Chair Installation Lecture at Fordham University, Massingale has expanded the work of the nonrational to more clearly include the way it shapes whites’ knowing, not only their acting. Drawing on James Baldwin, he describes love as helping whites to better understand the truth about themselves and their relationship to racism (Massingale, “They Do Not Know It and Do Not Want to Know It,”~1:08:00). In Lonergan’s theory this latter approach explains the role of the nonrational in terms of the first three levels of the transcendental...
ignorance” indicates that, consciously or not, whites’ understanding of racism is motivated not by the pure desire to know but by excessive, distorting desires for things like comfort, power, and a sense of moral innocence. Persuading whites to adopt antiracism requires an ethics that reaches not only the mind, but the “inner recesses of the human spirit.”

One way the nonrational can create space for whites to see beyond their current way of knowing from below is by appealing to the affect. For example, Massingale identifies lament as a practice that can promote compassion. In lamentation, people of color express “wails of mourning and sorrow in the face of unbearable suffering...a cry of utter anguish and passionate protest at the state of the world and its brokenness.” Massingale describes how this cry might affect whites:

The nonrational and unconscious dimensions of racism show us that this injustice cannot be defeated solely or even principally through intellectual responses. Lament, however, provides a language that can disrupt the apparent normalcy of a skewed racialized culture and identity. Its cry of pain, rage, sorrow, and grief in the midst of suffering interrupts the ‘way things are’ and demands attention. Lament makes visible the masked injustice hidden beneath the deep rationalizations of social life. It engages a level of human consciousness deeper than logical reason; its harrowing cries of distress indisputably announce: ‘All is not well! Something is terribly wrong! Such things should not and must not be!’

method, which constitute the process of knowing; the former approach explains the nonrational’s role on the fourth level, deciding and acting. My focus is on the knowing rather than the deciding and acting, though because one makes decisions about how to approach the knowing process, the fourth level of consciousness remains relevant even to this limited scope.

Massingale, “‘They Do Not Know It and Do Not Want to Know It,’” ~1:10:00.


Massingale, Racial Justice and the Catholic Church, 105. Although the focus here is on the expression of painful emotion, Massingale explains that, as with the psalmist, the lament of people of color also includes the paradoxical hope that God will be compassionate to their cries (Racial Justice and the Catholic Church, 107).

Massingale, Racial Justice and the Catholic Church, 110. Emphasis added.
Hearing others’ lament gives whites a reason and impetus to ask the further, difficult questions that will lead them closer to the truth. It brings to their attention human experience that they had previously ignored or downplayed. It jars or inspires whites enough to be willing to reassess their foundational presumptions, including the assumption that their current approach to knowing is authentic. The emotional, visceral impact allows the weight of the insight “Maybe I’ve been missing something in my understanding of society” to hit them before their discursive analysis of the lament can summarily dismiss it.

Another nonrational element that antiracists propose for overcoming white ignorance is interracial relationship and encounter. Massingale offers examples of close family relationships across the color line that can lead whites to the solidarity necessary for racial equality.332 José Medina emphasizes that developing a healthy white consciousness requires “actual bodily encounters with differently racialized others” and the epistemic friction caused by those encounters.333 When ideas about race become connected to an individual human being whom whites know and care for, the desire for that person’s good or the recognition of that person’s trustworthiness can disrupt whites’ adherence to their standard approach to understanding race.334

In short, when whites’ rational way of knowing (the upward movement in development) is distorted, the nonrational can interrupt that flawed but stubbornly self-justifying process. Nevertheless, affect and relationship do not directly imbue truths about systemic injustices;

332 Massingale, Racial Justice and the Catholic Church, 119-120.
333 Medina, Epistemology of Resistance, 222.
they prompt the healing of one’s process of knowing from below. Making a judgment about racism in society requires a discursive, rational method, even if it must be informed and shaped by the nonrational. Whites are unlikely to undergo a leap in their rational conclusions directly, moving from their current understanding of race seamlessly into an antiracist understanding. They must go through the interim step of recognizing the questionable authority of their current approach to knowing racism. This realization will require what Lonergan calls an “inverse insight.”

**Inverse Insight: Recognizing the Wrong Path**

Those who are trapped in an impasse need to shift to a different approach entirely. This shift may be prompted by an *inverse insight*. To have a direct insight is to reach some understanding (i.e., some conceptual grasp), whether correct or incorrect, of certain data of experience. To have an inverse insight is to recognize that the particular questions one brings to certain data of experience are not relevant, because the data can provide no intelligibility that satisfactorily answers the question. The reason is not that the answer is too complex to attain, but that the very nature of the question is misguided. Lonergan writes, “While direct insight grasps the point, or sees the solution, or comes to know the reason, inverse insight apprehends that in some fashion the point is that there is no point, or that the solution is to deny a solution, or that the reason is that the rationality of the real admits distinctions and qualifications.” Doran simplifies it: “[T]he inverse insight is that one is on the wrong track,

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335 In *Insight*, Lonergan addresses inverse insights in several domains: most thoroughly with regard to scientific knowing (43-50, 78-81), to some extent with regard to ethics (709-712), and least thoroughly with regard to philosophy (412). I draw on all of these descriptions, presuming the foundational essence of the inverse insight to be continuous across these various manifestations.

336 Lonergan, *Insight*, 44.

337 Lonergan, *Insight*, 44.
asking the wrong question.” Inverse insights lead investigators to recognize that another approach is necessary. These are not easy insights to arrive at, however, because they “deny an expected intelligibility.” Lonergan explains that “to deny an expected intelligibility is to run counter to the spontaneous anticipations of human intelligence.”

Inverse insights are especially relevant when inauthenticity has become incarnated in social structures, as in the case of systemic racism. Lonergan writes, “Now, inasmuch as the courses of action that men choose reflect either their ignorance or their bad will or their ineffectual self-control, there results the social surd. Then, to understand his concrete situation, man has to invoke not only the direct insights that grasp intelligibility but also the inverse insights that acknowledge the absence of intelligibility.” One cannot properly address social surds (social evils or injustices like systemic racism) while presuming that they have a basis in authentic knowing, deciding, or acting. Instead, “the evil of disorder is an absence of intelligibility that is to be understood only by the inverse insight that grasps its lack of intelligibility.”

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339 Lonergan, Insight, 45.
340 Lonergan, Insight 44.
341 Lonergan, Insight 44. To clarify, this “expected intelligibility” is not a specific answer to the question but an as-yet-unspecified answer that would meet the criteria of the heuristic implied in the question. An inverse insight is not the recognition that a previous direct insight is mistaken. It is the insight that denies that an expected intelligibility exists. For instance, it would not be an inverse insight to expect that the square root of 2 is 4/3 (or any specific fraction) only to realize that it is not that number; rather, an inverse insight would be expecting that the square root of 2 is some fraction (without necessarily having a sense of exactly which fraction) only to realize that it cannot be a fraction at all. In other words, an inverse insight is the realization that the type of heuristic that one anticipates can be fulfilled cannot be fulfilled. (See Lonergan, Insight, 45-46 for the investigation of the square root of 2 as an example of inverse insight.)
342 Lonergan, Insight, 711.
343 Lonergan, Insight, 709.
Lonergan explains that a social surd “(1) is immanent in the social facts, (2) is not intelligible, yet (3) cannot be abstracted from if one is to consider the facts as in fact they are.” The point is that there are realities that do exist in the world but that do not align with authentic ways of knowing, deciding, and acting. Because these surds exist alongside intelligible reality, people do not easily identify them as surds. It is the classicist mistake that what exists historically must have a good reason for being and so must be taken as serious and intelligible. When a social surd is considered just one more fact of reality, then people try to understand society in a way that finds intelligibility in the surds, which leads to further warping of theory and thus to a spiral of decline. For example, whites might think, “There must be some good reason (i.e., a reason that aligns with my current worldview) why the Black community has lower rates of wealth, health, and education, and higher rates of incarceration than the white community.” Whites tend to presume that social structures are intelligible, and that therefore it must be the behavior of individuals or communities within those structures that accounts for disparate outcomes.

The Wrong Question

The primary inverse insight that whites need to have regards their own approach to understanding racism. Whites tend to ask how they can come to know the reality of racism as a dynamic out in the world apart from them. Instead, whites must interrogate their own interiority for how racism is present within their process of knowing. The white standpoint is itself a manifestation (i.e., a result and a perpetrator of) systemic racism. Hence the white perspective is too caught up within systemic racism to identify that racism. To put it bluntly, systemic racism and white complicity can never be understood from the existing white standpoint. Instead of asking, “How can a white perspective properly know the truth of

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systemic racism and white complicity?” whites need to ask, “How does my perspective need to change in order to have the possibility of coming to an accurate understanding of systemic racism and white complicity?”

For whites who desire to understand racism, the first step forward is not a direct insight into exactly what racism is (“Now I understand!”). Such a path often attempts to make new data fit within one’s current horizon, and therefore fails to go deep enough. Nor is the first step a fatalistic dismissal of the possibility of insight that gives up in the face of conflicting experiences and understandings between groups (“I can’t know what is true about racism”). This path can lead to paralysis, a presumption that whites have no epistemic agency in this realm, and the conclusion that the structuring of society is purely a matter of power, detached from any truth about what is just.

Instead, a first step is for whites to have an inverse insight that recognizes the lack of intelligibility in their current approach to understanding racism. Whites must come to the judgment “I know that I do not know racism.” In other words, the inverse insight (stated in terms of a direct insight) is the realization, “I am not in a good epistemic place from which to understand and judge racism authentically.” Although antiracists may have already been telling whites this about their perspective, having the inverse insight means that whites are recognizing and appropriating this truth for themselves. This path maintains whites’ epistemic agency while also opening them up to the movements from above that can heal their knowing process and lead them to truth.

Agency of the Non-Knowing Knower

Typically, admitting ignorance or uncertainty about a proposed insight is a sign of a lack of knowledge. But if that act of judgment is itself judged to be true, the affirmation of one’s ignorance or uncertainty becomes an act of knowing. Agency in knowing can include judgments
in which a person affirms that they do not know whether an insight is correct or not. Lonergan argues that ultimately a person must take ownership of their knowing through the process of self-appropriation: one’s “thinking as a whole cannot depend upon someone or something else. There has to be a basis within himself; he must have resources of his own to which he can appeal in the last resort.... The value of self-appropriation, I think, is that it provides one with an ultimate basis of reference in terms of which one can proceed to deal satisfactorily with other questions.”

Epistemic genuineness requires that a person understands what knowing is and confirms themselves to be a knower. Importantly, affirming oneself to be a knower is different from affirming that one knows a certain amount (or really anything at all) about any particular topic. This is because epistemic genuineness is not primarily a matter of making accurate judgments about the objects to be known, although that must be the ultimate goal; it is first and foremost a matter of making accurate judgments about one’s own ability to judge. As will be explored at the end of the chapter, epistemic genuineness involves recognizing one’s current epistemic status, the kind of knower one is called to become, and the path to get from the former to the latter. As long as whites focus on trying to identify the presence of racism as a malicious prejudice in themselves or others, or as an external structure imposing itself on them or others, they fail to recognize that the very assertion of their competence to judge that racism is itself rooted in racism. Whites’ approach to understanding racism is part of the social surd of racism.

Paradoxically, the inverse insight by which whites grasp the weakness of their epistemic authority regarding race is also the basis for their epistemic genuineness regarding race. Instead

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of focusing on racism as the intended but elusive object of knowledge ("I am not in a good place to understand racism"), they can reframe the judgment by placing their own ability to understand racism as the intended object of knowledge: “I know that I am not in a good place to understand racism” or even “I know that I am uncertain about whether I am in a good place to understand racism.” By shifting the focus from racism itself to one’s epistemic authority on racism, whites address a foundational question for moving towards antiracism, for entering the path to becoming more genuine knowers, and for finding a basis for their own epistemic agency.346

Lonergan notes that one challenge to identifying inverse insights is that they can only be explained in the context of the larger development of thought that they helped to instigate. An inverse insight can only be expressed in relation to resulting “concomitant direct insights.”347 Once that larger development has occurred, however, its direct insights become familiar and therefore occlude the fact that the initial investigation anticipated a direct insight that had to be rejected by an inverse insight.348 In the case of race, whites and antiracists may be on opposite

346 I am proposing that this approach might be more accessible to whites, but that does not mean it is easy or automatic. Even if whites make this shift to a more helpful question, the possibility still exists for whites to wrongly self-assess as credible knowers of racism. At the very least, however, they would be arriving at wrong answers to the right questions. Growth can happen from there. Recall as well that the primary subject of my study is the white person who already has some inclination towards antiracism but struggles with the resulting sense of epistemic disorientation. The approach described here allows some epistemic confidence within that experience of unknowing.

There are spiritual parallels to this approach of finding assurance by removing oneself one step from one’s ambiguity and reflecting on it. Ignatius’s *Spiritual Exercises* asks the retreatant to pray for particular graces at particular times. When the retreatant does not feel a desire for that grace, even when they recognize it is a holy grace, Ignatian spiritual directors will often suggest that they tap into their desire to have that desire for the grace (i.e., “pray for the desire for that grace”). Thomas Merton’s famous prayer, often called “The Merton Prayer,” has the same kind of back-stepping to a wider and wider view until certainty is reached: “My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going...and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing....And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road...” (Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* [New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, (1958) 1999], 79).


sides of this divide, which affects not only their understanding of racism but their view of the other’s epistemic authenticity. To antiracists, who are entrenched in the higher integration that the inverse insight leads to, the inverse insight that whites need to have looks like a direct insight that should be easily within whites’ grasp. Whites’ questions do not appear to be guided by a sincere if incorrect “spontaneous anticipation”\textsuperscript{349} but by an obstinate commitment to a disingenuous path. To whites who have not yet had the inverse insight that their inquiries are misdirected, antiracists seem to be dismissing essential questions.

To summarize this section in terms of the creating and healing vectors, whites need to have the inverse insight that their current way of knowing from below can never understand racism. Whites must begin by recognizing that systemic racism is embedded in the approach they are using to try to understand systemic racism. Healing must come from above to redirect their knowing more productively. They must be open to that healing though it feels like it puts them on uncertain epistemic terrain over which they have little of the control to which they have become accustomed.

The Path Forward: Conversion and Belief

Two “movements from above” can help to heal and develop whites’ process of knowing: conversion and belief.

Conversion

Massingale argues that to reach a commitment to racial solidarity, whites first need to “shatter [their] false personal identity built upon the racialized ‘set of meanings and values’ that informs American society.”\textsuperscript{350} He draws on Lonergan’s concept of conversion to describe the radical nature of this transformation of identity. Conversion is “a fundamental shift in one’s

\textsuperscript{349} Lonergan, \textit{Insight}, 45.
\textsuperscript{350} Massingale, \textit{Racial Justice and the Catholic Church}, 120.
paradigm of understanding, interpreting, and acting upon reality...a totally new horizon of reference and understanding that dramatically expands the scope of one’s interests and range of knowledge.”351 Below I elaborate on Lonergan’s idea of conversion to provide a structure for understanding WED as a response to the antiracist invitation to this “fundamental shift.”

**Description of Conversion**

First, conversion is a healing of bias. Recall that for Lonergan, bias is not primarily a prejudiced judgment but a conscious or unconscious “flight from understanding.”352 Since bias concerns a distortion in one’s process of knowing, conversion is a healing of a person’s understanding of, commitment to, and execution of the fundamental process of knowing. The conversion necessary for overcoming white ignorance is best conceived of not as a movement from holding white judgments about racism to holding antiracist judgments about racism, but as a movement from a biased approach to the knowing process to a more authentic approach to knowing.353 Of course, I am presuming that this healed epistemic approach will lead whites to antiracist judgments about racism. The movement from below—the discursive process of the transcendental method—remains the path to knowing. Conversion orients the subject to engage this process more authentically. Lonergan writes, “Intellectual self-transcendence [the goal of intellectual conversion] is taking possession of one’s own mind. It is a matter of attending to each of its many operations, of identifying them, of comparing them, of distinguishing them, naming them, relating them to one another, grasping the dynamic

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352 See the preface to *Insight*, 5-8, for Lonergan’s basic description of the “flight from understanding.” See *Insight*, 214-215, for Lonergan’s distinction between “scotosis” (the distortion of the process of knowing) and “scotoma” (“the resultant blind spot”) within his discussion of dramatic bias. Throughout his work Lonergan is much more focused on understanding and eliminating scotosis than he is on specific scotomas.
structure of their emergence and development, and so coming to clarify the workings of the mind in mathematics, in science, in common sense, in history, in philosophy.”354 This self-transcendence is necessary because “when one moves beyond the limits of commonsense competence, when one wishes to have an opinion of one's own on larger issues, then one had best know just what one is doing. Otherwise, one too easily will be duped and too readily be exploited.”355 Far from whites’ fear that they are being asked to discard rational knowing, conversion actually supports such knowing. At the same time, the shifting of their knowing process will likely feel uncomfortable and disorienting.

Second, Lonergan describes three types of conversion, and Doran a fourth, that together depict conversion as involving the whole human person. While Lonergan allows that these different conversions may occur to different extents and in different combinations within an individual, the ultimate goal is conversion in all of its forms.356 Intellectual conversion, most obviously relevant to this discussion of the epistemology of racism, consists in arriving at an accurate knowledge of and commitment to the authentic process of knowing.357 Lonergan emphasizes its connectedness to other types of conversion: healing the “flight from understanding” requires a more holistic approach than simply recalibrating the rational intellect. Conversion “is a process that may be occasioned by scientific inquiry. But it occurs only inasmuch as a man discovers what is unauthentic in himself and turns away from it, inasmuch as

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357 Lonergan, Method in Theology, 223-224.
he discovers what the fulness of human authenticity can be and embraces it with his whole being.”

This discovery, and the overall process of conversion, typically begin with religious conversion, a falling in love with God (often mediated through the authentically lovable in creation), which itself is prompted by the experience of being loved by God. One’s heart is captured by that which is of ultimate value. From this nonrational experience flows subsequent types of conversion. Next, moral conversion is the movement from making decisions based on what satisfies one’s self-focused desires to making decisions based on what is of true value. Lonergan concludes this series with intellectual conversion, which is not directly caused by assessing the truth about the world but by assessing one’s own approach to knowing in that world. Although intellectual conversion does not generally arise solely from reasoned argument, its result is to heal one’s ability to know rationally and decide responsibly via the transcendental method. Doran makes explicit one more type of conversion, psychic conversion, whose seeds are in Lonergan’s work. Psychic conversion is the movement towards a healthy internal censor that brings to consciousness the images, memories, feelings, etc., that are relevant for following the pure desire to know in each situation. Overcoming white ignorance will require that whites experience this intellectual healing within the holistic movement of these various types of conversion.

Third, conversion must be distinguished from the learning that takes place within the movement from below. Lonergan describes this distinction in terms of types of relationships between horizons. A person may develop inside a given horizon, coming to a greater grasp of

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that which is within their awareness. A person may also develop by moving to a different horizon. Drawing on Joseph de Finance, Lonergan describes a decision made within an existing horizon as an exercise in horizontal freedom. A decision that moves one to a different horizon is an exercise in vertical freedom.\textsuperscript{362} If the former horizon and the new horizon are related complementarily or genetically, then the movement is additive.\textsuperscript{363} The foundations of the former horizon remain valid, although they must now be understood in the new context. If the former and new horizons are related dialectically, however, then the movement is a conversion that rejects the former. This type of development “involves an about-face; it comes out of the old [horizon] by repudiating characteristic features; it begins a new sequence that can keep revealing greater depth and breadth and wealth. Such an about-face and new beginning is what is meant by a conversion.”\textsuperscript{364}

White epistemic disorientation can be conceived of as the dissonance that arises when whites try to understand antiracism either within the context of their existing horizon or as related genetically or complementarily to their existing horizon. The problem is that the same sense of satisfaction that humans seek and achieve when learning within that scenario of horizons cannot be the criteria for how one should feel when moving to a dialectically-related horizon in the process of conversion. The dissonance that is a warning sign when new data of experience, insights, or judgments contradict a healthy horizon is instead a sign of development when new data of experience, insights, or judgments contradict an inadequate horizon and push the subject towards a new horizon. Massingale addresses the difficulty of this process:

Conversion demands the successful negotiation of a time of passage and transition, of a period of crisis and intense change. Yet this crisis is not always successfully resolved. The experience of conversion—involving as it

\textsuperscript{362} Lonergan, \textit{Method in Theology}, 223.
\textsuperscript{363} Lonergan, \textit{Method in Theology}, 222.
\textsuperscript{364} Lonergan, \textit{Method in Theology}, 223.
does the crumbling and surrender of the old and familiar when at times not even the outline of the new can be discerned—is often an experience of tension, fragmentation, fear, panic, and anxiety. These reactions can lead one to abort the conversion process.365

Even if whites do see that they are being called to move into a new horizon, they often do not understand that the new horizon will be dialectically opposed to their former horizon. Colorblind racism fails to recognize that there is a difference of horizons between whites and people of color. Somewhat racially progressive whites understand the difference to be complementary: whites and people of color both have their different perspectives, and each offers an equally valuable and necessary contribution to understanding race. More progressive whites believe the horizons of whites and people of color to be related genetically: the antiracist horizon is more advanced than the white horizon, and so whites should strive to grow into the antiracist horizon. The problem with this more progressive view is that it presumes that antiracism is simply an outgrowth of their current understanding of race. These whites therefore reject aspects of antiracism that would contradict significant elements of their current understanding, refusing to move to a new horizon that their current horizon cannot accommodate. Explicit racism and antiracism both understand the horizon of whites and the horizon of people of color to be dialectically related. In this way, both antiracists and overtly racist whites know something that non-racist whites do not: the horizons of antiracism and whiteness are not compatible, and therefore much is at stake in their conflict.366 The difference is that explicit racism wrongly believes the white horizon to be authentic and accurate, while antiracism correctly believes the horizon of people of color to be authentic and accurate.367

366 To put it in Doran’s terms, whiteness and antiracism are a dialectic of contradictories, not contraries, and so one must be chosen, the other rejected (*Theology and the Dialectics of History*, 9-10).
367 White theologian Jon Nilson addresses this difference specifically in Black and white theologians and comes to a different conclusion: “I believe that the difference between the horizons of
Conversion as Decision

Although conversion is ultimately God-given, it demands that the subject make a decision. Specifically, conversion asks a person to make a choice about their fundamental orientation to the world. That kind of decision may contribute to WED for whites who presume that all growth should be a smooth, almost automatic progression from one’s current viewpoint to an obviously better viewpoint.

On one hand, conversion is a gift, a gratuitous movement initiated by God’s grace. For whites who tend towards individualism, independence, and desire for control, the kind of humble receptivity necessary for accepting and responding to this grace might not come naturally. The vulnerability of being shaped by a perceived external force may create such dissonance with their typical self-sufficient approach that they interpret invitations to conversion as dangerous temptations to irresponsibility.

On the other hand, Lonergan speaks of conversion as leading to a heightened level of responsibility for active decision-making. Because conversion is a never-ending process and because even a converted subject has freedom of choice, whites cannot expect to be passively guided on an easy road to development even if they are open to conversion. To dedicate oneself to the complex path of authentic knowing, to commit oneself to choosing value over mere satisfaction, to seek value as what is truly good from the perspective of divine love rather than...

black theologians and white Catholic theologians is genetic, not necessarily dialectical. The white Catholic theologians’ horizons are limited not by bad will or a deliberate turning away from the light, but from a lack of development in authenticity. We have not yet grasped and absorbed the full implications of our social, academic, Christian, and Roman Catholic commitments as theologians in ‘Racist America.” (Nilson, *Hearing Past the Pain*, 73). I agree that there are whites whose movement to antiracism would be more genetic than dialectical, but I question Nilson’s assumption that the need for conversion is necessarily caused by bad will. Note Lonergan’s insistence on getting this identification of difference of horizons correct: “On the level of meaning it is important not to confuse the genetic with the dialectical,” for the intelligent writer and reader will grow in ways that force them to contradict or revise their earlier assertions (*Insight*, 613).
than from one’s own self-focused perspective: all of these decisions for self-transcendence are challenging. In light of white epistemic disorientation, I will examine intellectual conversion in particular.

In *Method in Theology*, Lonergan relates conversion to the functional specialty of *foundations*. He speaks in the context of the process of theology, but his arguments are relevant for human development more widely. Foundations involves taking account of the multiple, conflicting viewpoints laid out by the functional specialty “dialectic” and making “a decision about whom and what you are for and, again, whom and what you are against....It is a fully conscious decision about one’s horizon, one’s outlook, one’s world-view.”\(^{368}\) Lonergan notes that this level of intentionality is “high achievement,” for most people “merely drift into some contemporary horizon” without even recognizing other possible horizons, much less choosing to move beyond the horizon one has inherited.\(^{369}\) To make decisions about one’s knowing process, rather than simply accepting the seemingly “natural” way of knowing that one has been socialized into, can feel arbitrary and disorienting.

For whites, going against their feelings of what is true may seem insincere and unauthentic. They may expect that moving from one framework to another should feel as natural as learning within a framework. When the new framework for understanding and judging does not confer the same gut-level sense of affirmation and satisfaction as the former one, the decision to venture beyond that older framework might even seem to be arbitrary and irresponsible. Lonergan points out that this is not the case: “Such a deliberate decision is

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\(^{368}\) Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 251. It should be noted, however, that Lonergan explains that these deliberate decisions are not acts of the will but rather, in the context of his theory of “intentionality analysis,” a work of the conscience (*Method in Theology*, 252).

\(^{369}\) Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 252. See also the distinction between “drifting” and “autonomy” in Bernard Lonergan, “Self-Transcendence.”
anything but arbitrary. Arbitrariness is just unauthenticity, while conversion is from unauthenticity to authenticity. It is total surrender to the demands of the human spirit: be attentive, be intelligent, be reasonable, be responsible, be in love."370 One can and must make a deliberate decision to move from one framework to another, and that decision of conversion will feel to some extent unsettling. It will be a different sensation, perhaps less natural and more “forced,” than when one develops within a single framework. The comprehensive nature of conversion as religious, moral, and psychic, can contribute to making the decision of intellectual paradigm shift more comfortable, but in the end it involves a decision.

The Long Process of Conversion and the Immediate Need for Justice

To say that conversion involves a decision is not to say that conversion can be forced. It is to say that one must assent to the movement of conversion, usually through many decisions over an extended period of time. A conflict arises because coming to knowledge of something as complicated as racism, in a way that overcomes what antiracists note is a deep-seated, communally-supported white ignorance, is a long and difficult task, but there is an immediate moral urgency to stop the injustices of racism. Lonergan explains that development inherently takes time because one’s knowledge, will, and affect all take time to change, and “[n]o one can postpone his living until he has learnt, until he has become willing, until his sensitivity has been adapted. To learn, to be persuaded, to become adapted, occur within living and through living.”371 The full solution to the problem of evil is not within reach at all times because during decline we may be too far gone to be able to grasp the solution. Instead, at these times we have only enough intelligence, will, and sensitivity to lead us to a place from which we will then have a non-zero probability of grasping and acting on the solution.372 To will the order of the

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universe is not to expect immediate perfection but to expect and will development towards an eventual perfect order.373 This assertion of the practical limits to human development collides with the urgency of overcoming injustice. Antiracists critique classically liberal approaches like Lonergan’s.374 Liberalism overlooks the fact that, historically, attempts at persuasion have failed to bring about justice, and they risk downplaying the serious harm of injustice by holding out for an idealized solution rather than one that stanches the harm immediately through whatever means possible.

Belief may offer at least a partial path around this problem. Whites do not need to reach a place from which they can directly know racism; they only have to come to know that they are not in a place from which they can directly know racism. Once whites can recognize their own epistemic insufficiency, they can come to the insight that the most trustworthy path to knowledge of racism is not to push forward with their own judging of racism but rather to believe those who are better positioned to make those judgments. Note that this is the inverse insight described earlier: whites must grasp that they will make no headway through their impasse by continuing to strive within their current way of knowing. Instead, they need to turn their critical eye on that way of knowing.

Belief

When antiracists assert the epistemic privilege of people of color regarding racism, they are essentially asking whites to believe people of color. Doing so feels to whites less epistemically rigorous than relying on their own direct knowledge, both because they doubt the trustworthiness of belief in general and because they doubt the impartiality of people of color,

especially when it comes to racism. Lonergan notes that at times of cultural shifts, people become epistemically suspect of belief. He writes, “[I]n times of little social or cultural change, beliefs are stable and little open to question, but in times of great social and cultural change, beliefs too are changing, and because they are only beliefs, because they are not personally acquired knowledge, such change leaves believers at a loss. They are disorientated. They do not know which way to turn. They feel that all they have taken for granted is menaced. They may be tempted to unbelief as a liberation…”\textsuperscript{375} The shifting demographics of the U.S. and the increasing prominence of antiracism creates this type of situation for whites today. This section will address two questions. First, why should whites be open to belief in general as a means for knowing about racism? Second, how should whites decide whom to believe about racism?

\textit{The Necessity of Belief}

Lonergan’s defense of belief first of all points out that it is an existing fact: “Most of what any of us knows depends to a greater or lesser extent on belief.”\textsuperscript{376} Each person’s experience is necessarily limited, and a fuller understanding of reality requires reliance on others’ judgments that a person cannot confirm for themselves. Belief is what allows human collaboration. Despite Lonergan’s emphasis on the necessity of the individual’s self-appropriation of knowing, he writes, “Man’s coming to know is a group enterprise. It is not the work of the isolated individual applying his senses, accumulating insights, weighing the evidence, forming his judgment. On the contrary, it is the work of many, with each adding, as it were, to a common fund the fruits of his observations, the perspectives caught by his understanding, the supporting or contrary evidence from his reflection.”\textsuperscript{377} Basic survival depends upon knowledge a person can only access by belief. Overcoming a society’s surds also

\textsuperscript{375} Lonergan, “Belief: Today’s Issue,” 77.
\textsuperscript{376} Bernard Lonergan, “Belief: Today’s Issue,” 75-76. See also Lonergan, \textit{Insight}, 726.
\textsuperscript{377} Lonergan, “Belief: Today’s Issue,” 76.
requires the collaboration that is only possible through belief: “To grasp the contemporary issue and to meet its challenge calls, then, for a collective effort. It is not the individual but the group that transforms the culture.” Lonergan explains, “The classicist was aware that men individually are responsible for the lives they lead. Modern man is aware that men collectively are responsible for the world in which they lead them.” Both individual and communal progress are impossible without belief.

At their deepest level, white ignorance, white resistance, and systemic racism are rooted in what Lonergan calls the problem of evil. Belief is a necessary element of the solution to that fundamental problem. Lonergan identifies two main causes of the “reign of sin” in which humans fail to achieve their self-transcendence. First, a person is forced to continue living even while they are developing. One cannot pause decisions and actions until they are perfectly intelligent, good-willed, and self-controlled. At each moment a person has no choice but to live their life in the imperfect condition in which they find themselves. Secondly, no person has the stamina or desire to push themselves to be even as intelligent, good-willed, and self-controlled as they could be in the moment. People choose what is easier, the way of less reflection. These two limitations of individuals also infect the concrete social situation. Overcoming the sinful social situation requires dialectical analysis, but even if someone were able to do that analysis based on a correct philosophy, that philosophy would be “too complicated to be commonly accessible and too alien to sinful man to be widely accepted,” and most people would continue following other, wrong philosophies. Although humans have the capacity to overcome evil, they cannot fulfill that potential on their own. Lonergan writes,

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380 Lonergan,Insight, 715.
381 Lonergan,Insight, 715.
“But there is no easy solution. To recognise and acknowledge the authentic, one already must be authentic. If already one is unauthentic, such recognition and acknowledgement, is beyond one’s effective reach. Such is the moral impotence of man, the concrete fact of original sin.”

Lonergan’s heuristic of the solution to the problem of evil points to the necessity of a leap of belief, but a leap that it is reasonable to take. This solution will be commensurate with human reality (that is, it will “come to men through their apprehension and with their consent”), and yet it will be transcendent because it must lead to new habits of intellect, will, and sensitivity that humans cannot reach through their own upward development. They have the capacity to understand the solution, but they will only reach that understanding through believing God’s revelation. Similarly, I argue that although whites have the capacity to arrive at antiracist judgments (i.e., those ideas are intelligible), whites are unlikely to reach that knowledge on their own. They first need to believe people of color. In both cases, the act of belief must itself be intelligible and responsible: humans in general must recognize that it is intelligent to go beyond their own intelligence by trusting God; whites must recognize that it is intelligent to go beyond their own intelligence by trusting people of color. In both cases, reason leads to the recognition that a leap beyond one’s own reason is required.

**Distinctions Between Direct Knowing and Believing**

Lonergan considers beliefs and “personally acquired knowledge” to “form a single, more or less coherent whole, with our knowledge checking and controlling beliefs and with beliefs filling out and completing and underpinning knowledge.” Believing and directly knowing are

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both ways of accessing truth.\textsuperscript{386} Belief is not the surrender of one’s epistemic agency, reason, or responsibility. Properly done, it is a rational means of extending one’s access to knowledge in an authentic way, by recognizing one’s healthy dependence on others. Whites can take comfort that, like direct knowing, believing relies on the transcendental method and demands inquiry that arrives at a judgment. Responsible belief is not just based on a hunch, nor an arbitrary ceding of epistemic authority.

Still, there is a significant difference between direct knowing and belief that may feel uncomfortable to whites. Lonergan describes the process of belief: “But whatever the procedure [for making preliminary judgments about whether a particular proposition deserves to be believed], the only general rule is to be alertly intelligent and critically reflective; and however intelligent and critical one may be, the result is to be named not knowledge but belief, for one ends with an assent to a proposition that one could not oneself grasp to be unconditioned.”\textsuperscript{387} Knowledge and belief both involve a grasp of the unconditioned, but of different objects. Knowledge grasps as unconditioned (i.e., as true) the content of a particular proposition. Belief grasps as unconditioned “the value of deciding to believe a given proposition,” that is, whether one should trust the other’s purported knowledge.\textsuperscript{388}

While knowing concludes with the act of judgment that grasps the unconditioned, belief has further steps. Once a person has judged that assenting to the offered proposition is a good that is worth pursuing, they have to then decide to assent. This decision to believe may feel arbitrary to whites because in the realm of direct knowing one does not decide to know something; one simply follows their inherent process of knowing and eventually arrives at a

\textsuperscript{386} Lonergan, \textit{Insight}, 727. \\
\textsuperscript{387} Lonergan, \textit{Insight}, 733. \\
\textsuperscript{388} Lonergan, \textit{Insight}, 731.
sense of satisfaction that indicates that they know something to be true. In belief, that sense of satisfaction will not necessarily be linked to the insight about racism. It will be linked to the insight that a certain person or group’s insight about racism is worth believing. Belief may also feel destabilizing to whites because the invitation is not only to believe people of color about facts but also about the interpretation, the meaning, of those facts. Videos of police violence now allow almost universal access to certain experiential data, and yet the justice or injustice of these incidents—not to mention whether and what kind of racism is involved—often remains a point of disagreement between whites and antiracists. The experience of being a person of a particular race shapes one’s way of knowing in addition to the data of experience a person has access to. Rather than simply viewing the voices of people of color as a source of data for their own insights and judgments, whites must take the further step of being open to believing the judgments of people of color. This level of belief is necessary because of the depth of bias in whites’ way of knowing.

**Believing Antiracists**

In theory, therefore, belief is an authentic pathway to truth, including truth about racism, but why should whites actually choose to believe people of color in the current situation? First, it should be made clear that the choice is not strictly between directly knowing racism and believing others about racism. As explained earlier, whites’ current understanding of racism already depends upon beliefs inherited from the white community, although whites generally receive them uncritically and even confuse this belief for direct knowledge they have arrived at themselves. The problem is not that their understanding is based on belief, as if belief

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were by nature epistemically problematic, but that in this case it is based on mistaken beliefs. The idea that whites could reach authenticity by jettisoning all belief and relying solely on their own direct knowing is a fiction. The question before whites is whom to believe in order to arrive at a greater grasp of the truth about racism.

The scope of this project does not allow an in-depth examination of the philosophical principles of epistemic trust or the arguments for the extent of trustworthiness of whites’ perspective on race versus the perspective of people of color on race. A brief comparison of white versus Black epistemic authority on the issue of racism will have to suffice. Multiple approaches to the question indicate that the Black perspective on race is theoretically more trustworthy than the white perspective.

Historically, whites have held many ideas about race and racism which now are recognized as verifiably false, including pseudo-scientific assertions that Blacks are biologically sub-human. Most whites look back at slavery, lynching, and Jim Crow laws as morally reprehensible, yet many whites at the time failed to recognize the immorality of those practices. This now-visible pattern of whites being ignorant of the racist evil they were perpetuating suggests that the same ignorance may be afflicting whites today. Scholars such as Charles W. Mills, Michelle Alexander, and Willie James Jennings offer compelling studies of how white political and religious institutions’ once-explicit racist ideologies became baked into social structures in a way that allows racist discrimination to be maintained today even without explicit recognition of it by its agents.

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390 As I have attempted to show in this dissertation, whites’ ignorance is a lack of knowledge, regardless of whether it is willful active ignorance or a less culpable form of ignorance.
From a very practical standpoint, whites obviously do not have the lived experience of people of color and so do not have the day-to-day data of navigating society as a person of color. One might argue that the opposite is also true, that people of color do not have the experiences of whites and so they cannot judge interracial relations any better. The flaw with this argument is that in general people of color are forced to interact with the white community because those who define and hold power in most public spaces (e.g., school, work, government environments) are largely white. People of color need to be attentive to whites’ perspectives in order to be successful, while whites can often succeed without needing to pay close attention to the perspectives of the people of color in those environments. Population numbers play some role in the fact that people of color are likely to interact with more whites than vice-versa, but it is largely de facto segregation and decisions by whites that have caused this imbalance, even despite—or perhaps as a protective response to—the increased “browning” of the U.S. population.391

José Medina makes clear the epistemic impact of this sociological situation. He builds on feminist standpoint theory, the assertion that “[s]tarting off research from women’s lives will generate less partial and distorted accounts not only of women’s lives but also of men’s lives and of the whole social order.”392 Medina argues that the majority group in a society rarely has its viewpoints significantly challenged, while minority groups must regularly contend with the

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391 Psychologists Maureen A. Craig, Julian M. Rucker, and Jennifer A. Richeson find that the increase of racial diversity and concomitant reduction in whites’ numerical majority initially leads whites to feel threatened and take negative intergroup stances (“The Pitfalls and Promise of Increasing Racial Diversity: Threat, Contact, and Race Relations in the 21st Century,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 27, no. 3 (2018): 188-193). The authors suggest that whether that defensive response continues or whether more positive intergroup attitudes develop likely depends on whether whites retreat into segregated spaces or whether increased contact with neighbors of color leads to more positive contact experiences and hence “more positive intergroup relations” (190-192).

majority viewpoint. The result is that minority groups are more likely to grow in the habit and ability of critically questioning their own views, which can lead to a more accurate perspective.\textsuperscript{393} Majority groups have no reason to question their own views, which can lead to an epistemic laziness and arrogance that makes them less likely to identify errors in their perspective.\textsuperscript{394}

Theologically, Catholic scholars have posited that the preferential option for the poor extends into the epistemic realm as well.\textsuperscript{395} Caring for those in poverty is best done not only by focusing one’s gaze at them but by viewing the world through their perspective.\textsuperscript{396} This perspective offers practical assistance to one’s service to others, for instance by helping one to better understand the needs of those in poverty. Liberation theology goes further, however, and posits that the viewpoint of those who are marginalized can provide a more accurate and more Christian perspective on all of reality.\textsuperscript{397} Latin American theologian Jon Sobrino argues

\begin{itemize}
\item[395] As mentioned in chapter two, there is the prior problem that whiteness not only questions the validity of the perspective of those who are marginalized but even questions who is marginalized. To some extent this problem can be avoided by focusing on the plain facts of socioeconomic data, which clearly indicates lower levels of socioeconomic standing for people of color. While theologians have emphasized the preferential option for those who are marginalized in various ways (e.g., due to race, gender, sexual orientation, disability), Scripture particularly emphasizes God’s care for those who are materially poor. Therefore, regardless of the role that racism has played in the impoverishment of people of color, their material struggles are enough to suggest that they deserve some preferential epistemic authority.
\item[397] Hugo Assmann is credited as the first Latin American theologian to discuss the “epistemological privilege of the poor” (Tomás Hanks, “El Testimonio Evangélico a los Pobres y Oprimidos,” \textit{Vida y Pensamiento} 4, nos. 1-2, 1984). Assmann notes that this privilege should not be automatically assumed of all those in poverty but reserves that privilege to a certain subgroup within “the poor”: those who are fighting for a better life. He writes,
\begin{quote}
Not in every context, not under every oppression, can the word of God be heard. In order to be in such a privileged position, it is absolutely necessary to be a \textit{struggling} poor person... A struggling poor person means a poor person with at least a beginning of class consciousness, class awareness, and this implies a lot of things on a socio-analytic level. Struggling means loving in an effective way, with a revolutionary horizon, with strategic goals and practical praxis steps. I can’t accept a general privilege of the poor.
\end{quote}
\end{itemize}
that “in the world of the poor there is a light that enables the intellect to see objects that are
hard to see without this light.” 398 He says, “This does not mean reducing the whole to one of its
parts, but we hope—and in this sense the option is also a ‘wager’—that from the point of view
of the poor we will see more and see more clearly than from any other position.” 399 Copeland
writes similarly from a womanist perspective. She argues that the Enlightenment’s turn to the
subject resulted in “the anthropological displacement of human being with bourgeois European
white male being.” 400 By “accord[ing] hermeneutical privilege to \textit{black-embodied-being-in-the-
world}, specifically that of black women,” Copeland’s goal is not to replace one false normative
model of humanity with another, but rather to return to a focus on what is central to all human
beings. 401 She asserts that in the present historical context, the best way to do so (and the way
that Christianity upholds) is to adopt the perspective of those who are most on the margins of
society, “exploited, despised poor women of color.” 402 Their perspective “holds substantial
social and cultural, moral and ethical, psychological and intellectual consequences for us \textit{all}.” 403
Such an approach will be challenging for whites, however, who are not used to seeing people of
color as epistemic authorities.

**Concluding Thoughts on Belief and Conversion**

A complicating factor is that not all people of color—not even all exploited, despised
poor women of color—hold the same views about racism. Quantitative and qualitative data

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398 Sobrino, \textit{Jesus the Liberator}, 33.
399 Sobrino, \textit{Jesus the Liberator}, 33.
show that whites and Blacks have significantly different racial attitudes, and yet in almost every situation some percentage of Blacks take positions that are not consistent with antiracism. Bonilla-Silva accounts for this reality by arguing that whites’ ideology of colorblind racism has infiltrated Black political consciousness and impacted Blacks’ views, even if that impact is much less than on whites. Regardless of the cause of non-antiracist views among people of color, the existence of a diversity of perspectives makes it impossible to say that whites should believe (i.e., adopt) a person’s judgments on race solely based on that person’s racialized identity. While the precise criteria for belief deserve fuller exploration, in this dissertation it will have to be sufficient to say that there are multiple reasons that giving greater epistemic credibility to people of color will lead whites closer to the truth about racism.

Despite this argument that believing people of color is a rational path for whites who want to understand racism, the vicious circle remains. If white ignorance prevents them from direct knowledge of racism, it may also keep them from recognizing the need to believe people of color. This path of belief still requires conversion. Conversion, however, is often prompted by interactions with others, and so even entertaining the possibility of believing people of color, and therefore giving a greater hearing to their insights, will likely promote whites’ development.

In short, both conversion and belief involve a kind of epistemic leap that can free whites from the biased impasse of their current flawed process of knowing from below. Both involve receiving something from the movement from above that would not be accessible solely through the movement from below, and yet they do not replace but supplement the transcendental method. Conversion heals it, and belief relies on it for judging the value of believing in a particular instance.

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Healthy Epistemic Disorientation

The goal of this chapter is to help whites understand WED and the path to antiracism by explaining why their fear that this path leads to unauthenticity is unfounded. At the same time, their epistemic disorientation can be a helpful instance of cognitive dissonance that provides the opportunity for whites to pause and reassess their approach to race. There will be a healthy sense of disorientation as whites are being converted from inauthentic ways of knowing to authentic ways of knowing, but there is also an experience of ongoing disorientation that is necessary in the critical epistemic approach of the converted, authentic knower—in part because the retreat from inauthenticity is a never-ending process.

Antiracists assert that vulnerability and uncertainty are not only transitional feelings during a one-time conversion to antiracism; rather, they are elements of the lifelong disposition that whites must adopt in order to strive for ongoing authenticity regarding racism. Applebaum warns fellow progressive whites, “As we cannot escape our social location, we must continually interrogate our political practices for exclusions and omissions even when, and especially when, we think we are doing good.”406 Medina links epistemic health to continual openness to new ideas and critique: “The normative and hermeneutical task of making sense of our experience remains always unfinished and open to contestation, that is, forever open to the challenges and calls for transformation that can emerge from indefinitely many perspectives.”407 Yancy describes whites’ “un-suturing” as “a powerful process of being uncovered, open, and having the capacity, even if it waxes and wanes, to avoid narrative closure, denial and evasion.”408

406 Applebaum, Being White, Being Good, 70. Emphasis original.
408 Yancy, “Un-Sutured,” xvii.
Humbly enacting this process of self-interrogation will involve “a sense of deep anguish” and disorientation, and these will never go away entirely.409 It is “demanding as it will require an iterative process of losing one’s way vis-à-vis one’s whiteness, especially as white social norms work against this process.”410 Whites never reach a place of completion but are always on the disorienting path of identifying and attempting to mitigate their whiteness. Lonergan’s theory can account for a form of continued disorientation as part of healthy livelong growth as a knower. I turn now to two concepts Lonergan uses to paint a picture of the authentic human being moving toward development: cosmopolis and genuineness.

**Cosmopolis**

Lonergan names the ideal attainment of authenticity “cosmopolis.” It is not a grasp of all truth and all correct propositions, for it is not an accumulation of content but an effective dedication to the transcendental method.411 Cosmopolis is the “higher principle” that can overcome the long cycle of decline.412 There is a tendency for groups in power as well as subsequent reforming groups to create their own myths that excessively demonize defeated regimes and to “envisag[e] [themselves] as the immaculate embodiment of ideal human aspiration.”413 Cosmopolis maintains a sober assessment, acknowledging the goodness of needed reform while also making clear the biases and “nastiness” that reformers carry with them and attempt to raise to universal principles.414 Cosmopolis breaks away from what has become common sense in order to allow society to recognize and critique the limits of its common sense.415

409 Yancy, “Un-Sutured,” xvi.
415 Lonergan, *Insight*, 266.
Yet even cosmopolis itself “must be purged of the rationalizations and myths that became part of the human heritage before it came on the scene.”416 It therefore requires an ongoing self-critique that never takes for granted its own authenticity but repeatedly submits it to scrutiny. As Lonergan emphasizes, cosmopolis “is not easy. It is not a dissemination of sweetness and light, where sweetness means sweet to me, and light means light to me.”417 Whites, like all people, will never be able to fully relax into a presumption of their own authenticity and normativity. Given whites’ history and privileged social location, this epistemic obligation may be an unwelcome surprise for them in particular. The achievement of antiracism involves an ongoing epistemic humility to which whites are often not accustomed.

Genuineness

Central to that continued human development is what Lonergan calls a “law of limitation and transcendence.”418 The law holds that human development requires maintaining a contrary tension between a tendency for a person to remain as they are (limitation) and a draw to become the more authentic, responsible, loving person they might become (transcendence).

Lonergan describes these two poles in several ways. Limitation is the “self-centered sensitive psyche content to orientate itself within its visible and palpable environment and to deal with it successfully.”419 This pole includes acquired habits, which have inertia: “The whole tendency of present perceptiveness, of present affectivity and aggressivity, of present ways of understanding and judging, deliberating and choosing, speaking and doing is for them to remain as they are.”420 Limitation keeps a person self-centered. It emphasizes humans’ animal-like

417 Lonergan, *Insight*, 266.
embodiment, keeping a person attentive to their current, most immediate horizons. On the transcendence side is the detached and disinterested desire to know, that is, the human inclination to seek knowledge whether that knowledge is comfortable or not. This pole locates the self in the wider context of the universe and imagines what a person could (and should) be within that world—what role is theirs to play.

Rather than being contradictory dialectics in which one pole should eliminate the other, Lonergan argues that they should be what Doran would later call contrary dialectics: both are needed. Both are part of the one, united human self, the “I.” At the same time, this tension of equilibrium is not a 50/50 split, not some milquetoast middle-of-the-road compromise between the two. Lonergan says that transcendence must dominate if development is to happen, but it must do so by transforming and “sublating” limitation, not destroying it.

After introducing this law of limitation and transcendence, Lonergan defines genuineness as “the admission of that tension into consciousness.” It is a necessary condition for human development, and it involves understanding who one currently is, who one is called to become, and the path between the two. Lonergan describes it as “an unwelcome invasion of consciousness by opposed apprehensions of oneself as one concretely is and as one concretely is to be.” Living within the tension of limitation and transcendence is often uncomfortable. One must own their imperfections and accept the difficult work of change. One

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422 Doran, *Theology and the Dialectics of History*, 9-10.
must be willing to remain in the midst of a sometimes disorienting struggle for development.

Lonergan describes this attitude of openness to growth:

[Genuineness] does not brush questions aside, smother doubts, push problems down, escape to activity, to chatter.... It confronts issues, inspects them, studies their many aspects.... Though it fears the cold plunge into becoming other than one is, it does not dodge the issue, nor pretend bravery, nor act out of bravado. It is capable of assurance and confidence, not only in what has been tried and found successful, but also in what is yet to be tried. It grows weary with the perpetual renewal of further questions to be faced, it longs for rest, it falters and it fails, but it knows its weakness and its failures, and it does not try to rationalize them.427

The genuine person plods ahead along the upward movement of development, and Lonergan’s description of persistence and dedication to the truth can be a fitting call to overcome white resistance.

Lonergan describes genuineness in terms of genetic development, which is growth from below upwards. A person must develop in genuineness, which looks different based on one’s epistemic situation. If “errors have become lodged in the habitual background whence spring our direct and reflective insights,” then genuineness may require “extensive self-scrutiny.”428 Lonergan asserts, “Without due perspective and discrimination, the exercise of genuineness, as described above, results only in the earnest person with a remarkable flair for concentrating on the wrong questions.”429 Instead, to remain genuine, a person must grow in their approach to genuineness: “as [a person] develops, the content of the analogous requirement of genuineness-for-him shifts from the simple demand of the pure desire for detachment to an ever-more intelligent, more wise, more self-reliant unfolding of that desire.”430

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genuineness involves an ever-evolving commitment to remain in the tension between one’s current status as a knower and the more authentic knower one is to become. The genuine person will learn to handle the disorientation that accompanies this tension not as a paralyzing lack of grounding but as a constant spur towards authentic development.

*Whites and Genuineness*

It can be uncomfortable for whites to live in the tension of limitation and transcendence. The temptation is to choose one side over the other. The more obvious danger is to embrace the pole of limitation and ignore the call to the transcendent. Clearly it is problematic for whites to hunker down in their current approaches to race and refuse to consider how they might become better people with regard to racial justice. Excessive emphasis on limitation, on the inertia of human habits, can also lead to a gradualism that centers the comfort of whites over justice for people of color.

The opposite danger may be more relevant for—and hidden from—whites who recognize the need for racial justice. This pitfall is to live only within the transcendent pole, ignoring whites’ continued limitations. It may be aligned with what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva calls “colorblind racism,” and it is a mentality that says, “I desire to be antiracist, and I’m there!” In this situation, whites find it too painful to recognize the parts of themselves that are not yet where they want them to be, and so they pretend that they do not have any ongoing biases, that they do not have any questions or doubts about antiracism. The result is a superficial alignment with racial justice, without the deep knowing and true commitment to the cause.

One result is that whites, considering themselves “woke,” presume to be the judges of what constitutes racial justice. When they fail to identify their own continued biases and ingrained habits of whiteness, these become folded into their criteria for what is racist and what is not. Antiracist arguments that collide with those biases and habits are deemed “reverse
racist” or simply inaccurate assessments of racism, because if whites believe they have reached a state of antiracism, then their sense of racial justice is normative. Antiracism becomes what white self-proclaimed antiracists say it is.

Another result of overlooking the pole of limitation is that, undealt with, it can rise up unexpectedly. Consider the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Many whites had felt that they and their communities were against racism, but then Donald Trump campaigned with rhetoric that roused their latent biases or fears, or even just appealed to other ideals that promised greater satisfaction, causing whites to ignore the value of antiracism. And in the privacy of the voting booth (and later more overtly in public discourse), the power of that limitation pole came roaring back to overtake the transcendence they thought they had already reached. In other words, the danger with whites who ignore their limitations, their honest selves with the weaknesses and blemishes that they don’t want to see, is that as soon as antiracism requires sacrifice or pushes them out of their comfort zone, that unaddressed pole of limitation rises up and they retreat from the challenges of racial justice.

Overall, this is what Yancy, Applebaum, DiAngelo, Bonilla-Silva, Massingale, and other antiracists are attempting to get whites to do: to recognize that they remain at an in-between place, still held by the limitations of their socially-imbued, perhaps unconscious, racism. Once whites accept that they must interrogate their own epistemic authority regarding race, they may enter a new and unavoidable epistemic disorientation. No longer will they have the easy confidence of presuming their own normativity and epistemic clarity. They now have to recognize that their own views may be shaped by bias, that they have to rely on belief in others’ perspectives, and that the ideas and ways of knowing that were once unquestionable are not necessarily universal. This new space of intellectual humility naturally leads to an unease and discomfort for those who are used to not having to question their own perspective. This white
epistemic disorientation, when it guides whites to attentiveness to their own potential biases and does not completely paralyze them, is something to be lived with and even to be grateful for as a prompt for ongoing genuineness and development. Chapter four will suggest a Christian framework for justifying and supporting that path.

**Coda: On Epistemic Idolatry**

I close this discussion with an epistemic application of Massingale’s assertion that racism is idolatry. In the next chapter, we will see that Sarah Coakley finds a common source of theology’s faults in the fact that “the systematric idolatrously desires mastery.” Indeed, she describes her own proposed theology as involving “practices of un-mastery.” In the epistemic sphere she says, “It is the idolatrous desire to know all that fuels ‘onto-theology.’” To avoid interpreting this argument as anti-intellectual, I would clarify that to seek masterful knowledge of all things, including God, is not idolatrous but holy and part of being in the image and likeness of God. It is a natural result of the innate human desire to know everything about everything. What is idolatrous is to claim to have reached masterful knowledge when one does not have it, or to attempt to master (i.e., dominate) some object of knowledge by distorting it to fit one’s own framework.

The danger is not seeking to know God but going about it in a way that is unauthentic to one’s positionality as a creature. In onto-theology, the problem is seeking to know God as an object like any other object. In a parallel fashion, I have tried to show in this chapter that the

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434 Lonergan describes the desire to know as “unrestricted.” The scope of things about we can ask questions is limitless, though this is not to say that every formulated question is a worthwhile question. It is the prior desire to know rather than its manifestation in specific questions that points toward God. (Lonergan, *Insight*, 375-376)
problem is not that whites seek to know the truth about racism in a rational fashion but that they go about it in a way that is unauthentic to their social positionality. In both cases, the issue is how one’s positionality affects their epistemic clarity and, as a result, the way of knowing that is appropriate. The danger of onto-theology and of white ignorance and resistance is failing to account accurately for one’s epistemic limits in that situation.

The sin at hand is the sin of seeking knowledge in the wrong way, as if humans could know in the way that God knows. Such sin is the idolatry of saying that one can know completely and absolutely, as opposed to knowing as humans know, through the ongoing process of questioning and learning, which involves openness to critique and reliance on others.

In addition to the Christian idea that God is truth, and so arriving at truth is to be closer to God, Lonergan suggests that the search for truth is also a place of relationship with God. The Augustinian argument that “the ultimate goal of inquiry is union with God”435 resonates with Lonergan’s view that “the question of God” (i.e., our awareness of the possibility of God) “rises out of our conscious intentionality, out of the a priori structured drive that promotes us from experiencing to the effort to understand, from understanding to the effort to judge truly, from judging to the effort to choose rightly...”436 For Lonergan, God is not just the content of understanding, like some infinite data storage device. As a rational self-consciousness, God is “the act of understanding that grasps everything about everything.”437 The capacity to ask questions as part of the process of understanding is therefore a “spark of the divine” in humans.438

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The fundamental epistemic process not only points the human being toward the question of God but is also the conditioned manner in which a created person can participate in the unconditioned knowing of the God who is an “unrestricted act of understanding.” 439 To embrace as fundamental any form of the transcendental method that is not in fact fundamental (i.e., that is less than an aspect of the image and likeness of God in the human person) is to commit a type of idolatry. The human impetus to self-transcendence, which begins with the pure desire to know, is so interconnected with the God who is the aim of that self-transcendence (as the act of complete understanding and love) that to make a distorted version of the path to self-transcendence the foundation of one’s epistemic life is to make a distorted version of God the goal of one’s epistemic life. This truth has important implications for whites: white ignorance involves ignoring or distorting the innate desire to know that is a divine spark. It also involves taking a culturally-interpreted, particular way of approaching the transcendental method and confusing it for the fundamental, unrevisable method itself. In short, it is to fall into idolatry. To avoid this risk of idolatry is to take the challenging road of intellectual humility, and persevering will require seeing beyond the difficulty to the beauty at the heart of an approach to knowing that is rooted in a Christ-like kenotic attitude.

Chapter 4: Kenotic Intellectual Humility as Pathway to God

Introduction

Chapter three argued that the shift from a non-racist, white paradigm to an antiracist paradigm involves an epistemic leap that is more disruptive than the standard learning process from below upward. The shift requires that whites change their way of knowing racism in various ways:

- by allowing antiracism to raise questions about their approach to meaning-making,
- by turning a critical lens on themselves and their own epistemic authenticity regarding race,
- by acknowledging the epistemic credibility of the experiences, insights, and judgments of people of color regarding race,
- by recognizing that authenticity is found in the ongoing tension of genuineness, not in a false sense of invulnerability or perfection, and
- by opening their whole selves to new experiences and opportunities for growth, recognizing that the social and the nonrational influence their discursive knowing.

Using Lonergan’s theory of development, I demonstrated that these moves by whites can be epistemically authentic even though they prompt feelings of uncertainty and disorientation. This feeling of dissonance arises acutely during conversion but is also part of a healthy ongoing epistemic disposition. The discomfort may be heightened in whites because society has largely insulated them from the critique, self-awareness, recognition of interdependence, and openness to change that are part of an authentic epistemic life. Whites must embrace this discomfort that prompts them to ongoing growth as properly humble knowers.

Chapter three placed white epistemic disorientation in the context of human epistemic development; chapter four will place it in the context of Christian spiritual development. The
distinction between epistemic and spiritual development is not a separation, however. Grace is the ultimate source of all forms of human development, including the movement toward cognitive authenticity. While this chapter will presume the need for grace working from above downwards, the primary goal is to describe some of the human actions and dispositions that embody responsiveness to grace. I ask what it looks like for whites to receive that “universally accessible and permanent” grace that can promote their development.

The type of conversion called for by the move to antiracism is disorienting on a deep level, at the core of one’s identity. Massingale argues that only something as foundational as spirituality can provide the necessary support. He writes, “Situating our ethical strivings in the context of a larger, broader, and deeper narrative [than the American ethos]—within an alternate cultural set of meaning and value—is an important end even indispensable contribution that religious faith can make toward the goal of achieving a more racially just society.” Whites need spiritual grounds for engaging in the unfamiliar, uncertain intellectual humility that antiracism demands. My thesis is that the decentering aspect of an authentic way of knowing is part of an overall kenotic dynamic of Christianity. Understanding intellectual humility as a participation in Christ’s self-emptying disposition can give spiritual motivation and meaning to whites' uncomfortable path towards knowledge of racism.

This chapter will begin by describing intellectual humility as a secular basis for the virtue that whites must cultivate. Then I will propose Sarah Coakley’s théologie totale as a model for

\[440\] Doran, *Theology and the Dialectics of History*, 636.
\[441\] Doran, *Theology and the Dialectics of History*, 32.
\[443\] One might ask why love for the Black human beings physically present before them would not be a fully sufficient motivation for whites to persevere through WED. Relationship across racial lines is indeed key to whites’ epistemic development. My approach seeks to add to, not replace, the power of those horizontal relationships by contributing a way of thinking about them and WED in the context of one’s vertical relationship with God.
an epistemic approach based in kenosis. Next, I explore three aspects of a kenotic disposition which make it especially relevant for white intellectual humility: 1) the impetus to radical self-emptying, 2) the necessity of agency in this self-emptying, and 3) the conformation to Christ and proleptic participation in the divine which occurs in kenosis. Finally, I will address how Carmelite and Ignatian prayer practices can promote these elements of a kenotic intellectual humility.

**Intellectual Humility**

One way to express what antiracists are demanding of whites epistemically is to say that they are calling for whites to have intellectual humility. Medina and Massingale suggest epistemic arrogance and presumption of normativity are central characteristics of white, dominant culture. The un-suturing and the uncertainty, humility, and self-critique that Yancy and Applebaum propose also point to a need for intellectual humility.

To set the stage for exploring this Christian understanding of openness and vulnerability, I will first offer an interdisciplinary overview of the virtue of intellectual humility as a concept that unites various elements of the disposition whites need to adopt. Many fundamental elements of the interdisciplinary conception are also foundational to the Christian theological conception of it. In addition, these largely secular descriptions better address the human intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics of intellectual humility than do many Christian descriptions and so keep my examination rooted in those dynamics. Finally, while my study takes an explicitly Christian approach, I hope that by grounding it in a broader understanding of intellectual humility I may offer a connection point for future studies from other religious or non-religious viewpoints. For the purposes of my argument, I will leave aside the disagreements

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about precise definitions and instead outline a variety of proposed elements of intellectual humility that are relevant to overcoming white ignorance and resistance.446

First, intellectual humility involves recognizing and taking responsibility for one’s intellectual limitations.447 Beyond just assessing the accuracy of one’s judgments, it is a matter of one’s metalevel epistemic attitudes: intellectual humility involves accurately assessing the level of epistemic trust that should be accorded to one’s own views.448 For example, psychologists Mark R. Leary, et al., state that intellectual humility includes not only a recognition of the limitations inherent in the evidence for a belief but a recognition of “one’s own limitations in obtaining and evaluating relevant information.”449 This approach aligns with Medina’s assertion that active ignorance is a type of “meta-ignorance that involves inadequate second-order epistemic attitudes, that is, wrong attitudes about epistemic attitudes.”450 For whites, recognizing their limitations will mean rethinking their ideas about race but also reassessing their own epistemic credibility in the realm of race.

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446 Much recent scholarship has attempted to define intellectual humility, but disagreements continue. I will draw from multiple characterizations which may be distinguished from one another in scholarly literature but which in this chapter will be treated as contributing elements to the present discussion of overcoming white epistemic disorientation. For a summary of recent scholarship on intellectual humility, see “Part 5: The Epistemology of Humility” in Mark Alfano, Michael P. Lynch, and Alessandra Tanesini, eds., The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Humility (New York: Routledge, 2021), 269-372; and Ian M. Church and Peter L. Samuelson, Intellectual Humility: An Introduction to the Philosophy and Science (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).


450 Medina, Epistemology of Resistance, 58.
Philosophers Whitcomb, Battaly, Baehr, and Howard-Snyder assert that a person must also “own” those limitations. This ownership of limitations “involves dispositions to: (1) believe that one has them; and to believe that their negative outcomes are due to them; (2) to admit or acknowledge them; (3) to care about them and take them seriously; and (4) to feel regret or dismay, but not hostility, about them.” I would add that these dispositions must lead to action that mitigates the negative consequences of one’s intellectual limitations. Whites must take responsibility for their epistemic weaknesses by changing their way of knowing, though that is far from an individualistic, self-contained endeavor.

A second characteristic addresses precisely that point: intellectual humility focuses on a person’s epistemic health in relation to their environment, including other people. Philosopher John Greco asserts, “What matters for intellectual status is a function both of a) what goes on internal to cognition, and b) how that cognition relates to the world; e.g., whether the agent’s environment is enabling or undermining.” Rejecting the illusion of self-sufficiency, one who is intellectually humble “embraces a notion of autonomy that sees individual autonomy as consistent with dependence on other persons.” Whitcomb, et al., anticipate that intellectual humility will “increas[e] a person’s propensity to defer to others who don’t have

452 Some scholars limit intellectual humility to a recognition of one’s own epistemic weaknesses, preferring to distinguish it from other-focused virtues such as open-mindedness and epistemic trust (e.g., Whitcomb, et al., “Intellectual Humility,” 521; and Katherine Dormandy, “Intellectual Humility and Epistemic Trust,” in The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Humility, eds. Mark Alfano, Michael P. Lynch, and Allesandra Tanesini [New York: Routledge, 2021], 292). These distinctions would add unnecessary complexity to the current argument, so I use the term “intellectual humility” more broadly to encompass both 1) the attitude towards one’s own epistemic weaknesses and strengths and 2) one’s epistemic relationship to the external environment, especially other knowers. John Greco takes this approach, writing that “intellectual humility is characterized by a realistic estimation of one’s own abilities and an appreciation of one’s epistemic dependence on others” (“Intellectual Humility and Contemporary Epistemology: A Critique of Epistemic Individualism, Evidentialism and Internalism,” in The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Humility, eds. Mark Alfano, Michael P. Lynch, and Allesandra Tanesini [New York: Routledge, 2021], 271).
her intellectual limitations, in situations that call upon those limitations.”455 Recognizing one’s own epistemic limitations leads to seeking epistemic assistance from others. For whites, this aspect of intellectual humility would mean turning to the insights and guidance of people of color who do not share their same intellectual limitations.

Third, intellectual humility includes space for a healthy form of epistemic agency. As a virtue, it is described as a mean between the extreme of intellectual arrogance and dogmatism on one hand, and intellectual servility and timidity on the other.456 It is having a proper, accurate level of trust in one’s epistemic authority. Philosopher Katherine Dormandy argues that intellectual humility includes effective epistemic self-trust, which involves attentiveness to which affective, volitional, and cognitive situations tend to improve or decrease one’s own intellectual performance.457 This honest self-assessment combined with a desire for knowledge “disposes a person to grow in epistemic trustworthiness.”458 Thus an intellectually humble person seeks and maintains a level of autonomy, but one that is appropriate to their epistemic status and that recognizes the need to depend on others. For whites, this means that complete and uncritical deference to others—even antiracists of color—is not intellectual humility but rather a form of shirking the responsibility of being a knower. Even if, as I argue, whites should trust the antiracist perspective and question their own, this act should not be a result of defeatism or apathy but part of an attempt to grow in their ability to know.

A fourth characteristic of intellectual humility is that a person’s epistemic approach is motivated by the search for knowledge rather than the desire for other goods such as status,

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power, or acceptance. Philosophers Robert C. Roberts and W. Jay Wood conclude that intellectual humility is “an unusually low dispositional concern for the kind of self-importance that accrues to persons who are viewed by their intellectual communities as talented, accomplished, and skilled, especially where such concern is muted or sidelined by intrinsic intellectual concerns—in particular, the concern for knowledge with its various attributes of truth, justification, [etc.].” Dormandy points out that errors to either side of intellectual humility may be connected to a failure to focus on specifically epistemic goals: “intellectually arrogant or servile agents are not disposed to strive for epistemic self-improvement, at least not for its own sake.” In this understanding, whites would not be manifesting intellectual humility if they adopted antiracist views in order to gain status or to avoid appearing immoral, just as they lack intellectual humility when they refuse to consider antiracist views in order to avoid admitting ignorance or a need to change.

Finally, intellectual humility is related to the whole person, not just the intellect. Virtue epistemology argues for the need to focus not just on whether an object of knowledge is justifiably believed but on how the subject’s qualities impact knowledge. It “shifts the focus from the known to the knower.” Within this framework, antiracism aligns more with an agent-responsibilism approach that focuses on the knower’s character traits and dispositions, as distinct from an agent-reliabilism approach which focuses more narrowly on the proper working

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of the intellectual faculties. The former presumes that the intellectual and moral faculties are closely related, the latter presumes that they are more independent of one another.\textsuperscript{463}

Whitcomb, et al., assert that “owning an intellectual limitation consists in a dispositional profile that includes cognitive, behavioral, motivational, and affective responses to an awareness of one’s limitations.”\textsuperscript{464} In other words, the work of intellectual humility can only be accomplished by addressing one’s whole person, because all aspects of an individual impact one’s approach to knowing. For whites, this means recognizing how the nonrational aspects of their lives dispose them to be either more or less open to seeking a greater understanding of racism, wherever that search leads. A holistic approach to white intellectual humility would include one’s spiritual and religious life, and to that I now turn.

**Kenosis: A Keystone of Christian Humility**

One approach to exploring Christian intellectual humility would be to seek an example in Jesus Christ’s own epistemic approach in the Gospels. Instead, I address the broader question of how Christ’s overall humility offers a basis for an authentic epistemic disposition. I propose that intellectual humility and its accompanying disorientation can conform whites to Christ’s general kenotic disposition. This approach sets intellectual humility within the wider context of general humility. As Scripture scholar Grant Macaskill notes, “within the biblical material, there is no distinctive category of ‘intellectual humility’ that can be isolated from ‘humility’ in general. Intellectual humility is simply a label for how a humble person thinks. The ‘humility of mind’ that


we see in Jesus, and that we are exhorted to have within ourselves as Christians, is a
deliberative outworking of our humble state.”

I focus my investigation on Christ’s kenosis, the self-emptying that Paul describes in
Philippians 2:6-11, for several reasons. First, as a Christ hymn that likely predates Paul’s letter,
this passage is one of the earliest expressions of the Christian community’s understandings of
Jesus Christ and has had a central place in Christianity’s understanding of Him, both in liturgical
worship and theological study. Second, the text itself and the theological tradition arising from
it point to humility as central to Christ, and to the concept of kenosis as encapsulating the
essence of that humility. Third, Paul’s introduction of the hymn as a description of Christ’s way
of thinking (phronein) suggests its relevance for epistemology. Finally, the context of this
passage within the letter suggests that Paul means for Christians to adopt a similar attitude as
the one Jesus exhibits in the hymn.

To be clear from the start, I propose that kenosis is a call for all Christians, but that this
might be lived out in different ways depending on one’s situation. Below I focus specifically on

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466 The Greek phronein (“phroneite” in Phil 2:5), often translated “to think,” is not only an act of
the intellect but a more holistic sense of knowing that includes the affect, takes into account relationship,
and is connected to action. Bonnie Thurston notes that the term indicates a whole head-and-heart
disposition towards something (Thurston, Judith Ryan, and Daniel J. Harrington, Philippians and Philemon
relationship or communal context; it involves an attentiveness to those around you, not just to your own
self and mind (“Head and Heart in the New Testament: the Philippian Correspondence as a Case
Study,” Touchstone 23, no. 1 [January 2005]: 16-17.) This thinking is related to practical thought and
intention to act. Ralph P. Martin understands it to suggest “a positive source of action,” and Frank Stagg
describes the verb as indicating “I have a mind to do it” (Martin, A Hymn of Christ: Philippians 2:5-11 in
Recent Interpretation & in the Setting of Early Christian Worship [Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity
no. 3 (1980), 337-347, at 338). All of these connotations align phronein with the wider understanding of
epistemic development adopted in this dissertation, one which recognizes that the relation between the
“creating” (development from below upwards) and “healing” (development from above downwards)
vectors means that an individual’s autonomous, rational process of knowing is embedded within a
communal context, depends upon the nonrational, and is part of a unified movement towards
transcendence which includes decision and action.
whites within a society that is systemically racist against people of color. In doing so, I suggest parallels between Christ’s kenosis and what whites are called to. There is a real danger that this could be interpreted as if whites are naturally more akin to Christ or more inherently called to perform a Christ-like role than non-whites. That is not my intention. Blacks and other people of color are also called to Christ-like kenosis, though given their positionality in society it will often be manifested differently than for whites. I would argue that the persistence, sacrifice, and continued love that Blacks have demonstrated as they have fought for racial justice demonstrates that they have been more attentive to following the Spirit into a kenotic disposition than have whites. I would also note that the invitation for whites to follow Christ’s kenotic love is in addition to, not in place of, seeing the unjust treatment of Jesus as paralleling whites’ unjust treatment of Blacks. As Cone argues, if whites are to understand Christ today, they must understand the connection of Christ’s crucifixion with the literal and metaphorical lynching of Blacks.467

Biblical Text and Questions of Kenosis

The concept of *kenosis* has its basis in Paul’s letter to the Philippians. In the second chapter, Paul urges the community to find unity through imitating Christ:

> Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus,  
> Who, though he was in the form of God,  
> did not regard equality with God something to be grasped.  
> Rather, he emptied himself,  
> taking the form of a slave,  
> coming in human likeness;  
> and found human in appearance,  
> he humbled himself,  
> becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.  
> Because of this, God greatly exalted him  
> and bestowed on him the name  
> that is above every name,  
> that at the name of Jesus

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467 Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 160, 163-166.
every knee should bend,
of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue confess that
Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.
So then, my beloved, obedient as you have always been, not only when I am present but all the more now when I am absent, work out your salvation with fear and trembling.  (Philippians 2:5-12)

The passage has been interpreted in various ways in the centuries since Paul’s composition of the letter. As Friedrich Loofs writes at the start of his classic treatment of the term, “The word ‘Kenosis’ is applied in Christian theology to that attitude or action of Jesus Christ, or the Logos, referred to by St. Paul in Ph 2: 6f., where he says of Jesus Christ: ['though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave']. This is practically all that can be said with certainty on the subject.” Among the scholarly debates have been the Christological interpretations and Trinitarian implications of Jesus Christ’s kenosis, the extent to which humans can and should imitate that kenosis, and the dangers of self-emptying as an ethical model for those

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469 One point of contention is whether the passage refers to the Incarnation, thus suggesting the pre-existent Logos, or whether it simply refers to the humility and self-sacrifice of the historical Jesus. In Sarah Coakley’s summary of the history of the concept, she lists some of the complexities: "whether kenosis involves pre-existence (or not); whether it implies a temporary loss of all or some divine characteristics (or neither); whether the 'emptying' applies to the divine nature or the human (or alternatively rejects 'two natures' Christology altogether); and whether the effects of kenosis pass to the eternal nature of the Godhead (or not)” (Sarah Coakley, “Kenosis and Subversion: On the Repression of ‘Vulnerability’ in Christian Feminist Writing,” in Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy, and Gender [Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 2002], 31).

who are oppressed. This chapter relies primarily on Sarah Coakley’s understanding of kenosis. As a white systematic theologian, her conception of “self-emptying” expands beyond a strict reading of its usage in Paul’s letter, but, I believe, in ways that do not contradict its meaning there.

Coakley on Kenosis as Power-in-Vulnerability

Most simply, Coakley defines kenosis as “power-in-vulnerability.” Christologically, she argues that it is only Jesus’s human nature that self-empties, not his divine nature, but this human vulnerability creates the space for divine power to work. Humans are to do similarly,
especially through contemplative prayer: “what Christ on this view instantiates is the very ‘mind’ that we ourselves enact, or enter into, in prayer: the unique intersection of vulnerable, ‘non-grasping’ humanity and authentic divine power, itself ‘made perfect in weakness’. It is not Christ’s specific actions but his kenotic disposition that is the primary model for humans, though a kenotic disposition must be embodied in actions. Jesus shows what a proper kenotic disposition looks like for humans: by emptying oneself of that which keeps a person from being fully open to divine power, one allows God to work more directly through them.

A Kenotic Approach to Knowing

In chapter two, I described Copeland’s theological riff on blues music’s image of the “crossroads,” a space of encounter with mystery that contains promise and peril. When practitioners of Black theology place themselves alongside those who have been marginalized, they enter not only into the darkness of the victims’ suffering but also the potentially revelatory darkness of the blindingly transcendent God who is present there. As they learn to “wait for understanding, wait for words, wait for flower and fruit” in this “deeply mystical” approach, theologians may encounter “a bloodied dark man of uncertain race and origin, who will reach down from the cross and tune their hearts to the sound of the gospel train that runs from here to heaven again.” Although Copeland focuses on Black theology’s unique relationship to the blues, the fact that she contrasts it with the Enlightenment approach often associated with whiteness suggests that she intends this Black theological method as an example for white theology to learn from as well. Even more generally, Copeland’s imagery of the crossroads is appropriate for what whites can expect of their move toward antiracism.

474 Sarah Coakley, “Kenosis and Subversion,” 38.
476 Copeland notes that the black vernacular culture of the blues is at the heart of black, Catholic theology, but that this approach “will have profound ramifications not for theology or black vernacular
I find Sarah Coakley’s proposed method of systematic theology, *théologie totale*, to be an example of a white theologian’s attempt to embrace the kind of crossroads experiences that Copeland demands. Coakley introduces *théologie totale* in her 2013 *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, the first of an anticipated four-volume systematic theology. Just as Copeland insists on encounter with those on the margins, so Coakley includes real-world fieldwork, including personal encounter, in her theological methodology. Just as Copeland stipulates that the internal epistemic work will involve a kind of mysticism, so Coakley argues for the privileged place of contemplation and the action of the Holy Spirit within *théologie totale*. I will focus on the latter of these elements: I presume the importance of encounter but will explore primarily the internal spiritual and epistemic development that complements it.

In *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, Coakley does not use the term *kenosis*, but she clearly has it in mind as she expounds on contemplative prayer as a “moral and epistemic *stripping*” and a “practised *self-emptying*.“ The problems and correctives she identifies for the current predominant approach to systematic theology parallel the problems and correctives I have described for white ways of knowing racism. *Théologie totale*’s kenotic character therefore might act as a template for white intellectual humility.

Coakley lists three postmodern criticisms of systematic theology as it currently functions: it claims too much knowledge of God and, “idolatrously, turns God into an object of human knowledge”; it attempts to universalize the experiences and ideas of those in power, culture alone, but rather for *all* human life, especially wherever life is threatened by force, coercion, and cynicism (“Theology at the Crossroads,” 98-99).

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thus becoming “necessarily suppressive of the voices and perspectives of marginalized people”; and it engages in a “male” way of knowing which seeks control and clarity through analytical thinking but is “repressive of creative materials culturally associated with ‘femininity’ and the female body.” These critiques of systematic theology resonate clearly with antiracist criticisms of the white approach to knowing racism. At the root of both is a criticism of the epistemic arrogance that presumes its own way of knowing is fully sufficient and that fails to be open to perspectives outside of one’s own position of power and privilege.

Coakley recognizes the truth in these postmodern critiques, and yet she believes that they lose their sting when systematic theology is placed in its “properly contemplative matrix.” Her proposal is to retrieve an “apophatic sensibility” and a commitment to the “ascetic transformation” of the theologian in order to rightly balance and order theology’s philosophical, analytical aspects. Note the parallels with the suggested path for overcoming white ignorance and resistance. To be purified, both the white way of knowing and systematics need to be understood in a wider context, essentially acknowledging what Lonergan calls the healing movement from above in addition to the creating movement from below. Both need to recognize the limits of their current way of knowing and accept head-on their inability to know everything. Both need a transformative conversion of the knower, not simply a change in their technical process of knowing.

Coakley’s proposal for a théologie totale also aligns with the experience of WED. Her corrective for theology emphasizes openness to continual change and a resulting disorientation. She writes, “The vision [théologie totale] sets before one invites ongoing—and sometimes

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480 Coakley, God, Sexuality, and the Self, 43.
481 Coakley, God, Sexuality, and the Self, 43.
disorienting—response and change, both personal and political, in relation to God. The task of theology is always in motion (in via), always undoing and redoing itself. For Lonergan, the refusal to close off the possibility of further relevant questions is not a move toward relativism but a dedication to seeking ever-greater knowledge of truth. Coakley describes the lifelong task of théologie totale similarly: “[T]he project of being in via is seen as purposive: as a ‘journey into God’ rather than as a floundering on perilous, non-foundational quicksands.” She also identifies the same risk at the heart of theology as Massingale identifies in racism: idolatry. The ongoing nature of théologie totale is intended to avoid the “ever-present” “seductive tug of idolatry.” Instead, one is always experiencing “the deep propulsion” to have one’s desire fulfilled only by its ultimate goal, God.

Coakley’s 2015 Annie Kinkead Warfield lectures, “Knowing in the Dark: Sin, Race, and the Quest for Salvation,” build on her work in God, Sexuality, and the Self. She argues in agreement with Black theologian Willie James Jennings that race is perceptual and epistemological, and that race has been built into the Christian way of making sense of the world, especially in the concepts of sin and the Fall. She draws on the epistemological work of white philosopher Miranda Fricker to suggest that overcoming racism will require a change in one’s epistemic approach to others. Coakley asserts that in contemplative prayer the Holy Spirit can accomplish this conversion through a purification of one’s desire, and she turns to a Carmelite spirituality of self-abandonment and ascetic purgation to explain the dynamic. At the center of Coakley’s proposal for systematics is the practice of contemplative prayer which

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483 Coakley, God, Sexuality, and the Self, 18.
484 Coakley, God, Sexuality, and the Self, 19.
485 Coakley, God, Sexuality, and the Self, 267.
486 Coakley, God, Sexuality, and the Self, 267.
487 Coakley, “Transforming Theological Anthropology in a Théologie Totale.”
488 Coakley, Knowing in the Dark, Lecture V, ~49:00.
489 Coakley, Knowing in the Dark, Lecture IV, ~9:00.
enables theology to be “not merely the metaphysical task of adumbrating a vision of God, the world, and humanity, but simultaneously the epistemological task of cleansing, reordering, and redirecting the apparatuses of one’s own thinking, desiring, and seeing.” She writes,

The willingness to endure a form of naked dispossession before God; the willingness to surrender control (not to any human power, but solely to God’s power); the willingness to accept the arid vacancy of a simple waiting on God in prayer; the willingness at the same time to accept disconcerting bombardments from the realm of the ‘unconscious’: all these are the ascetical tests of contemplation without which no epistemic or spiritual deepening can start to occur.

Coakley therefore leads us to the intersection of kenosis, antiracism, epistemology, and contemplative Carmelite spirituality. I suggest that the kenotic disposition underlying théologie totale can serve as a model for the intellectual humility that is necessary for whites.

**Three Aspects of a Kenotic Disposition**

Three central elements of a kenotic disposition make it relevant to whites’ struggle with the disorienting move to antiracism. First, a kenotic disposition demands the kind of self-emptying and decentering of oneself that is necessary for whites’ intellectual humility. Second, despite being an act of letting go of control, kenosis paradoxically also involves a deepening of one’s agency and effectiveness, as does intellectual humility. Self-critique and obedience to a proper authority are themselves authentic acts of agency, and they also ultimately lead to a greater, purified power and way of knowing than would otherwise be accessible. Third, a kenotic disposition is primarily rooted in and aimed at relationship with God, providing a foundation for the intellectual humility that similarly involves being conformed to God.

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The Kenotic Disposition Promotes Radical Self-Emptying

First, the radical self-emptying embraced by Christ and experienced in contemplative prayer in the context of epistemic purification indicates that extreme disorientation can be part of a life-giving movement. As described in chapter three, whites experiencing WED may believe that the upheaval they feel when engaging with antiracism is a sign that this engagement is not a healthy path. Massingale notes that racial conversion “is often an experience of tension, fragmentation, fear, panic, and anxiety” that “can lead one to abort the conversion process.” Scripture and tradition both provide a basis for a kenosis that goes beyond what might seem reasonable and which involves discomfort, even pain. As recounted in the Philippians hymn, Jesus’s kenotic decentering runs from divinity down to one of the most despised situations in the imagination of the first-century world. What begins with the privilege of being “in the form of God” becomes a three-fold descent, a multi-layered revelation of the extent of Christ’s humility. He foregoes any controlling grasping at divinity, assumes human nature and an attitude of obedience, and accepts the most extreme form of human death: crucifixion.

White theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar has speculated on the radical nature of Christ’s experience of self-emptying. He suggests that although Christ’s kenosis was not an actual

492 Massingale, Racial Justice and the Catholic Church, 122.
493 See also Jürgen Moltmann, who insists that “Jesus’ experience of God on the way from Gethsemane to Golgotha has to be understood as the experience of the hidden, absent, even rejecting Father” and that Jesus’ final cry (“My God, why hast thou forsaken me?”) is proof that he “died with the signs and expressions of a profound abandonment by God,” even believing his proclamation of the kingdom of God was dying with him (Jürgen Moltmann, The Spirit of Life, trans. Margaret Kohl [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001], 65; Jürgen Moltmann, The Crucified God: the Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology, trans. R.A. Wilson and John Bowden [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993], 146-151). I draw on Balthasar rather than Moltmann because the latter goes too far by presuming a real ontological break between the Father and Son, who remain united only by a common will (or possibly even parallel wills): “In the cross, the Father and Son are most deeply separated in forsakenness and at the same time are most inwardly one in their surrender” (Crucified God, 244). At times, Balthasar’s descriptions of Christ’s felt experience of abandonment read like an ontological break, and he identifies a “reciprocal personal forsakenness on the part of Father and Son” as the reason one can say that “the Father does not leave the Son for a moment, even in the final abandonment” (Hans Urs von Balthasar, Theo-Drama 5, The Last Act [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998], 263; as cited in Henry L.
relinquishing of his divinity, by entering and experiencing earthly life as a fully human person, Christ did experience a true sense of vulnerability. Jesus’ suffering was beyond what others have suffered: “[A]ll the experiences of night in both Old and New Testaments are at best approaches, distant allusions to the inaccessible mystery of the Cross — so unique is the Son of God, so unique is his abandonment by the Father.”\(^{494}\) Balthasar speculates that Jesus truly feels alienated from the Father on the Cross and cannot know that his mission is thus being accomplished; it seems like utter failure to him.\(^{495}\) In Christ’s kenosis whites find not only an example of humility to imitate but also Jesus’s accompaniment as one who also has experienced the confusion and pain that often results from making oneself vulnerable.

Coakley relies on Carmelite spirituality as a means of epistemic purification, and that tradition recognizes the depths of self-emptying. In his description of the Dark Night, John of the Cross roots a person’s experience of humbling disorientation in Jesus’s own example of extreme self-emptying\(^{496}\) and in Jesus’s extreme teachings about the narrowness of the road to eternal life.\(^{497}\) John asserts that Jesus “accomplished the most marvelous work of His whole life,” “the reconciliation and union of the human race with God,” precisely “at the moment in which He was most annihilated in all things: in His reputation before people...; in His human nature, by dying; and in spiritual help and consolation from His Father, for He was forsaken by His Father God.”\(^{498}\) John even suggests, through the psalmist’s words, that Christ was

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\(^{497}\) John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel* 2.7.1-8, (Selected Writings, 93-97).

\(^{498}\) John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel* 2.7.11, (Selected Writings, 97).
epistemically bereft: “I was brought to nothing and did not understand” (Ps 72:22).⁴⁹⁹ Those who follow Christ must recognize that the same pattern applies to them: “When they are brought to nothing, the highest degree of humility, the spiritual union between their souls and God will be effected.”⁵⁰⁰ John describes the Dark Night of the spirit as an “emptiness and darkness” of the human faculties: “in order to journey to God the intellect must be perfected in the darkness of faith, the memory in the emptiness of hope, and the will in the nakedness and absence of every affection.”⁵⁰¹

Coakley also emphasizes that contemplative prayer involves discomfort and destabilization. Contemplation is a “vertiginous free-fall…by which a disciplined form of unknowing makes way for a new and deeper knowledge-beyond-knowledge.”⁵⁰² It “inculcates mental patterns of ‘un-mastery,’ welcomes the dark realm of the unconscious, opens up a radical attention to the ‘other’” and results in “radical practices of attention to the Spirit.”⁵⁰³ Overall, contemplation is a “profound intellectual vertigo” in which we learn not to grasp God but to allow ourselves to be grasped: “the Spirit’s simultaneous erasure of human idolatry and subtle reconstitution of human selfhood in God.”⁵⁰⁴ John and Coakley’s assertion that this challenging path leads to epistemic fruitfulness may help whites understand healthy epistemic disorientation as a natural result of allowing the Spirit (and Spirit-filled others) to disrupt and purify their way of knowing.

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⁴⁹⁹ John of the Cross, Ascent of Mount Carmel 2.7.11, (Selected Writings, 97).
⁵⁰⁰ John of the Cross, Ascent of Mount Carmel 2.7.11, (Selected Writings, 97).
⁵⁰¹ John of the Cross, The Ascent of Mount Carmel 2.6.1, (Selected Writings, 93.)
⁵⁰² Coakley, God, Sexuality, and the Self, 43.
⁵⁰³ Coakley, God, Sexuality, and the Self, 43, 49.
⁵⁰⁴ Coakley, God, Sexuality, and the Self, 23.
The Kenotic Disposition Involves Agency

It is important to get whites’ full buy-in on antiracism, yet this buy-in must be different from the epistemic commitments they are used to, in which an insight makes sense based on their current way of knowing. How can whites commit to the antiracist perspective when their positionality and entrenched bias keeps them from reaching an immediate, accurate understanding of it? How can they avoid distorting antiracism to fit their own frameworks, and yet still “own” antiracism for themselves? Thinking about white intellectual humility in terms of kenosis provides a way of conceiving of agency within the acceptance of one’s epistemic uncertainty. It does so because kenosis involves an embracing of limitations and acceptance of the unknown consequences out of a sense of loving, trusting obedience to a greater cause—namely, God and God’s values, including love of truth and love of neighbor. I have argued that white epistemic disorientation causes whites to resist engaging antiracism when they inaccurately feel that their epistemic agency is being denigrated and that they are (or are treated as) non-knowers. In one way, agency is found precisely in the act of self-emptying; in another way, the kenotic path leads to enhanced agency.

Kenosis as a Freely Chosen Disposition and Act

Accepting the limits of one’s control, being obedient, submitting one’s own authority to the authority of another, and even acceding to a situation into which one is initially involuntarily forced are not mere negations of a person’s agency. They are acts of agency themselves. The Philippians hymn describes Jesus Christ as the active subject who chooses the downward path of humility (vv. 6-8). He emptied and humbled himself, by his own will. This is the case even though, interpreted in the context of the Christian tradition, the passage indicates that Jesus is acting in obedience to God’s will. In other words, Jesus’s loving relationship with the Father leads him to freely submit his will to the Father’s. As Scripture scholar Bonnie Thurston says, the
death that Christ undergoes is not described as something necessarily chosen by Christ but rather as a consequence that he fully accepts as a result of his choice to be obedient to God’s plan. Coakley is clear that kenosis is a human action (even if preceded by grace), not divine coercion: “[I]t is a feature of the special ‘self-effacement’ of this gentle space-making — this yielding to divine power which is no worldly power — that it marks one’s willed engagement in the pattern of cross and resurrection, one’s deeper rooting and grafting into the ‘body of Christ’.” Putting aside one’s existing agency is an act of agency.

There are parallels here with knowing. As explained in chapter three, whites need to have the inverse insight that they are not currently in a place from which to reach true knowledge of racism. Whites will take ownership of their knowing process precisely by admitting that they do not have full, proper control of their knowing process—both in the sense that they have improperly allowed it to get off track and become distorted, and in the sense that they now understand that an authentic way of knowing requires that one rely on others, not just one’s own capacity. In an environment that constantly tells whites they are normative, in control, and have the greatest epistemic credibility, relinquishing their control by putting their ears, minds, and hearts at the disposal of people of color might be the most authentic act of agency possible.

In addition, healthy self-emptying is always done for the sake of a higher goal or value. The Philippians hymn describes it as an obedience to God the Father. Coakley describes it as aimed at creating space for God’s presence and power. In the epistemic context, it is for the

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505 Thurston, *Philippians and Philemon*, 83.
507 Michael J. Gorman, “‘Although/Because He Was in the Form of God’: The Theological Significance of Paul’s Master Story (Phil 2:6-11),” *Journal of Theological Interpretation*, 1, no. 2 (Fall 2007), 165; and Thurston, *Philippians and Philemon*, 83.
goal of pursuing truth. The point is that kenosis involves directing one’s agency towards that which is most worthwhile to such an extent that the person willingly becomes obedient to that goal even when it requires forgoing other desires. Self-emptying is not primarily about letting go of negative things but prioritizing and responding wholeheartedly to that which is most desirable. White intellectual humility must involve repentance for the racial injustice caused by white epistemic arrogance, but by framing it in terms of this understanding of kenosis, I argue that intellectual humility will first be inspired by a desire for truth (and the justice and love interconnected with it) and will only secondarily lead to whites’ recognition of their racial sins.

Finally, agency is not only compatible with kenosis; kenosis requires agency. While a person can be forced to relinquish goods or privilege, kenosis cannot be forced upon someone. A person must choose it for themselves. This is because kenosis does not describe an emptying but a self-emptying, not just the enduring of a limitation but the embracing of a limitation. Regarding humility, white theologian Stephen T. Pardue writes, “Merely living within, or even recognizing, one’s limits is not sufficient; desirous souls only reap the benefits of limitation when they embrace it as a normative element of their intellectual and moral lives.”

One who is invited to an act of letting go and does so begrudgingly or for selfish reasons is not self-emptying. One who is forced to let go of a seeming good and chooses to willingly assent to that force may be self-emptying. Thus, even if whites feel that antiracists are unjustly creating situations that externally force them to let go of privilege—for instance, when whites feel “silenced” or “canceled”—still the path of kenotic agency is open to whites if they humbly adopt as their own the decentering that antiracism (rightly) forces.

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508 Ultimately, all of these goals and any others that are part of a holy kenotic disposition are manifestations of the one ultimate goal of loving and receiving the love of God. Only by focusing on this highest of all values can a person avoid slipping into idolatry.

Kenosis Opens the Door for Holy Empowerment, Enhanced Agency

Kenotic intellectual humility even leads to enhanced agency because it heals one’s way of knowing, leaving a person more effective as a knower. In the Philippians hymn, Christ’s descent is not the end of the story. “Because” of Jesus’s humility, God exalts him, thereby bringing unforeseen holy empowerment out of apparent annihilation (Phil. 2:9-11). As Coakley does not view kenosis as leaving Jesus bereft of all power, so she does not believe kenosis leaves humans completely powerless. Instead, Jesus’s own kenotic disposition shows that the perfect human state is to be “willfully vulnerable” because “true divine ‘empowerment’ occurs most unimpededly in the context of a special form of human ‘vulnerability’.” That is, human decentering creates the space for God’s power to work through a person. Coakley asserts that “this special ‘self-emptying’ is not a negation of self, but the place of the self’s transformation and expansion into God.” It is “‘empowering’ in a mysterious ‘Christic’ sense.”

Pardue identifies an enhanced ability to know as a result of a properly Christian intellectual humility. He argues that from the secular perspective, intellectual humility means recognizing and accepting the hard and fast limits of human knowing. In contrast, he says, a Christian approach sees the very act of recognizing and accepting one’s human limitations as opening a person to grace-enabled knowledge beyond what humans are capable of on their own. Pardue argues that Christ’s kenosis is both effective (through grace) and exemplary: Christ empowers us to follow his example. Pardue writes, “In short, it is because of the

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510 Coakley, “Kenosis and Subversion,” 32.
512 Coakley, “Kenosis and Subversion,” 36.
513 Coakley, “Kenosis and Subversion,” 35.
metaphysical claims being made in the incarnation that Christians can pursue the kind of
cognitive renewal that comes from imaging the divine life itself, through the graceful acquisition
of virtue and the empowering attention to cognitive limits that comes with humility in
particular.”517

This healed epistemic agency is embedded in the communal context. The intellectually
humble Christian “will be profoundly aware of her limitations and those of her intellectual
community, but she will also recognize that this is only half of the story; as the incarnation
suggests, the Lord of heaven is in the habit of crossing boundaries, and thereby bringing
fecundity where barrenness otherwise reigns.”518 The community is not only a source of
limitations; it is also a path to transcending them. According to Pardue, the humble person who
“recognizes that her intellectual resources are both situated and limited” will then “[adopt] a
posture that is conducive to addressing her limitations, seeking to understand alternative
positions and surrounding herself with intellectual companions that will expose her to the best
possible counterarguments to her perspective.”519 Recall Greco’s comment above that one who
is intellectually humble “embraces a notion of autonomy that sees individual autonomy as
consistent with dependence on other persons.”520 Whites who embrace intellectual humility
are not losing agency as knowers but using their agency to tap into a greater epistemic agency,
that of the wider community of knowers.521 As Coakley asserts, “To adopt the standpoint of one
who is marginalized or voiceless is to extend one’s objective success, in epistemological terms,

519 Pardue, The Mind of Christ, 176. Note the echoes of Medina’s insistence on seeking out
healthy epistemic friction.
521 This strength-in-community theme is not absent from the Philippians letter, as Paul urges the
community to follow Christ’s kenotic attitude specifically for the sake of unity: “complete my joy by being
of the same mind, with the same love, united in heart, thinking one thing” (Phil 2:2).
rather than to simply take up a variety of different positions that have no opportunity to be mediated objectively.” From this perspective, whites’ kenotic intellectual humility involves giving up a lesser agency and results in gaining a fuller agency, in line with Coakley’s assertion that kenosis is ultimately empowering.

The Kenotic Disposition as Commitment to Relationship with God

This humility-to-transcendence dynamic is not transactional but relational. Kenosis is not an alternative, more effective path to gaining worldly power; it is a redefinition of what power is. The Philippians hymn begins with Jesus refusing to grasp equality with God. At its conclusion, Jesus receives universal glory, and yet the confession of Jesus as Lord is “to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:11). This exaltation is not an exaltation to the false power and glory which Coakley says Jesus refused to grasp earlier; it is exaltation to a holy power and glorification shared with the Father. In other words, although I have described kenosis as aiming at an ultimate goal, kenosis is not simply a transitional means to achieving a predetermined end. It is a participation in relationship with God that is an end in itself. A kenotic disposition sets its sights on that which is absolutely ultimate and then humbly accepts the consequences. In this way it aligns with the necessary open-endedness of the search for truth. Commitment to this highest good of love of God makes all other goods subservient to that one. As Paul says, all else appears as “rubbish” in comparison, even that which is not objectively bad (Phil 3:8).

Two caveats are necessary. First, only if this goal is truly ultimate and rightly understood can it properly relativize all else. Coakley insists that self-emptying must not be in

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522 Coakley, “Knowing in the Dark,” Lecture V, ~49:00.
523 Coakley, “Kenosis and Subversion,” 11.
subservience to any human power but only to divine power. In other words, the only good worthy of kenotic commitment is eternal loving relationship with God. If something else is raised to the level of ultimate goal, then it will lead to distortion and idolatry. Second, to focus on the ultimate good is not to dismiss all other things entirely but to see them in relation to that good. Only in light of the love of God can all things be both relativized to that final end and yet also given their full due, for their ultimate fulfillment is to be found in their relation to God. Rather than relativize all other things blanketly, a kenotic disposition is ultimately a means of distinguishing the priority of each within a given context. Below I elaborate on these two elements of kenosis: the need to be centered on one’s ultimate goal, and the difficulty of relinquishing that which could be a good if not for its larger context.

Kenosis as Path to Participation in Divine Life

In the Christian tradition, the telos of love of God is eternal participation in the Trinitarian life. Kenosis is more than just an arbitrary task assigned by God. It is somehow the way in which humans participate in God. Pardue writes, “[W]e cannot escape the conclusion that when Paul here [in Philippians 2] calls for imitating Jesus he is calling for behavior in conformity to the divine identity, especially as it is revealed in Isaiah 40-55.” This call is “most straightforwardly ethical, as readers are instructed to acquire the very dispositions that caused

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526 In this assertion I draw on the Ignatian concept of holy indifference, which insists on making use of that which promotes relationship with God in one’s particular situation and relinquishing that which does not. I will engage this topic in more depth later in this chapter. See the “First Principle and Foundation” in Ignatius of Loyola’s Spiritual Exercises, §23 (The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius: Based on Studies in the Language of the Autograph, trans. Louis J. Puhl, S.J. [Chicago: Loyola Press, 1951], 12).
Jesus to live and minister...after the pattern of the Isaianic Servant.” 528 But Pardue notes that the call also “is metaphysical because readers are arguably being called to a participation in the divine life that is similar to (though not identical to) Jesus’.” 529 Pardue’s slight hesitancy about the metaphysical arises from a theological disagreement about to what extent Jesus’s kenosis reveals God to be kenotic. Balthasar and Coakley have different conceptions of the Godhead’s relationship to kenosis and its relevance for human kenosis.

Both Balthasar and Coakley say that humans should be conformed to Christ’s kenotic example. For Balthasar, who sees Christ’s kenosis in the economy as made possible by and revelatory of an analogous kenosis in the immanent Trinity, human self-emptying is somehow also a process of being conformed to the self-emptying triune God. 530 Coakley resists the idea that humans could have knowledge of the immanent Trinity, much less that they could imitate it. 531 For her, self-emptying (at least as far as one can know) remains in the human realm. Christ’s self-emptying is an aspect of his human nature, not his divine nature. His kenotic disposition is what creates space for the divine. Human imitation of Christ’s kenosis, therefore, is not an imitation of an analogous self-emptying in the Trinity, but a human self-emptying that

528 Pardue, The Mind of Christ, 59. Note Robert M. Doran’s similar insistence that Lonergan’s ethical concerns demand that Christians act in line with the love depicted in the “Deutero-Isaian servant of God” (Doran, Theology and the Dialectics of History, 202).
530 Balthasar is responding to two Trinitarian errors he sees: failing to take seriously enough the distinctions in the immanent Trinity so that God’s “true, earnest self-revelation and self-giving” only take place in the economic Trinity (Balthasar’s accusation against Karl Rahner) and believing the immanent Trinity to develop more fully into Itself through Its economic interactions in the world (Balthasar’s accusation against Jürgen Moltmann) (Balthasar, Theo-Drama Volume 4, 320-321). Balthasar sets up the problem as one of balance between God’s interaction with but sovereignty from the world: “A way must be found to see the immanent Trinity as the ground of the world process (including the crucifixion) in such a way that it is neither a formal process of self-communication in God, as in Rahner, nor entangled in the world process, as in Moltmann” (Balthasar, Theo-Drama Volume 4, 322-323). See also Balthasar, Theo-Drama Volume 5, 427.
531 Coakley, God, Sexuality, and the Self, 309-310.
makes one receptive to the Holy Spirit’s shaping of the individual into the mysterious pattern of
the Trinity.

In short, the question is whether kenosis directly makes a person more and more like
the Trinitarian God (in which case they are being conformed to a kenotic divine form, even if
there remains a great gap between its expression in the created world and its expression in the
immanent Trinity) or whether kenosis makes a person more and more able to be conformed to
the Trinitarian God (in which case the divine form to which they are being conformed is not
[necessarily] kenotic). Balthasar suggests the former, Coakley the latter. Both together are
helpful for rightly ordering whites’ kenotic intellectual humility. Balthasar’s approach highlights
the intrinsic meaningfulness of human kenosis through its continuity with the divine. The
kenotic path is more than an arbitrary gauntlet through which one earns access to relationship
with God; human kenosis is itself a proleptic participation in the divine kenosis for which one is
being prepared. If this is the case, then whites’ disorienting kenotic openness to antiracism is a
participation in God. Coakley’s approach retains God’s mystery more securely and highlights
Jesus’s role as the sufficient revelation of God for humans.\textsuperscript{532} By emphasizing the discontinuity
between humans and the immanent Trinity, Coakley points to the importance of a person
recognizing their created nature and not seeking to transcend it in a distorted fashion that
ignores positionality. For whites this means recognizing what it means to be a human knower
rather than a divine one. It means avoiding the idolatry of thinking that whites know like God
knows.

\textsuperscript{532} I do not mean to imply that Balthasar fails to recognize Christ as the revelation of God, or that
Christ’s revelatory role is somehow “insufficient.” By refusing to make some of the more speculative
theological moves based on that revelation, however, Coakley leaves the spotlight, as it were, more fully
on Christ’s incarnate revelation.
Overall, intellectual humility is not only a remedy for white ignorance, like a pill that is taken for a few weeks to overcome a disease; intellectual humility is the constantly sought disposition of the authentic knower who seeks truth. Intellectual humility is normative because it is a manifestation of the broader dynamic of kenosis which is inherent to humanity’s participation in God. Loving self-gift conforms one to Christ in a way that allows one to participate in God as love and justice; the self-emptying of intellectual humility conforms one to Christ in a way that allows one to participate in God as truth. The openness to self-emptying in any aspect of one’s life—relationships, service, prayer, sacraments, social engagement, work—contributes to one’s openness to self-emptying in other aspects of one’s life, so that ultimately conversion to kenotic participation in God is a matter of the whole person.

Kenosis as Letting Go of Seeming Goods

I suggest that kenosis refers specifically to the painful letting go of goods or seeming goods that are intertwined with one’s sense of self. This understanding of kenosis is relevant to racial justice because of the roles privilege and self-love play in systemic racism. In one way, white privilege and excessive self-love are sinful because of the directly oppressive underside of each. Whites usually recognize the racism involved when privileges result from actively rejecting people of color or taking what rightfully belongs to people of color, or when self-love results from and leads to anti-Black stereotypes. One might compare this aspect of white privilege and self-love to a powerful person stealing a scarce medication from someone else who needs it. Even if the theft is motivated by a desire to save oneself, it clearly has a direct, negative impact on another and clearly is sinful.

In another way, however, white privilege and self-love are sinful because they support what I called in the first chapter “unconscious racial preference.” In these cases they are not immediately connected to active animosity or harm towards people of color; instead, they result
from and maintain a lack of concern for people of color. Whites often fail to identify these situations as racist because the privileges and the self-love are portrayed as goods, while there appears to be no identifiable oppressive underside since their negative impact is not from the presence of an evil act but from the absence of a good act. In addition, as white theologian Roger Haight notes, some of the privileges that whites have are not evil in and of themselves but rather are goods that everyone should be able to access.533 These might include a sense of belonging and stability and a trust that one will be judged on one’s actions and character rather than something more superficial. The problem is that by grasping onto these goods for themselves and their in-group, whites fail to work for the greater common good that would overcome embedded racial inequities. In terms of the kenotic context I have been describing, whites’ desire for good is shortsighted and grasps onto these white goods as if they were ultimate, rather than properly relating to them in the context of a more universal love of God and neighbor. An apt comparison to this aspect of white privilege and self-love might be if a state committee tasked with distributing a scarce medication developed protocols that fit their own families’ and communities’ routines without researching or taking into account others’ ease of access.

Kenosis is a relevant concept here because whites must let go of things which may be goods (or potential goods) in the abstract but which, in the context of a systemically racist society, are barriers to the greater good which justice demands, and therefore are sinful.534 This


534 These two aspects of white privilege and self-love align with Iris Marion Young’s description of two conceptions of responsibility: a liability model which is backward-looking and blames or praises past actions, and a political responsibility model which is forward-looking and calls for efforts to reform and develop society for the better (“Political Responsibility and Structural Injustice” [The Lindley Lecture, University of Kansas, May 5, 2003] accessed August 2, 2021, https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/).
idea is relevant to the epistemic realm, too. White ways of knowing can be good and fruitful within certain contexts—the artificial contexts imagined by white ignorance. Many democratic ideals, social advances, life-giving relationships, beautiful and enlightening artistic and academic works, and technological breakthroughs have resulted from Eurocentric ways of thinking. The problem is that these have taken place and are judged as positive within a false context, one which presumes whiteness to be normative and has maliciously or neglectfully excluded people of color. Take Mills’s idea of the Racial Contract as an example. White political philosophy has offered insights into social systems and government models that promote freedom, equality, participation, and prosperity—but primarily for the most privileged subset of white society. When examined in the context of a diverse society in which great inequalities are embedded, these same insights of white political philosophy are revealed as ignorant. They require rethinking in order to achieve actual freedom, equality, participation, and prosperity across all groups, including racial ones.

White privilege includes being able to limit one’s epistemic boundaries to white culture, thus enabling a level of certainty and normativity to one’s knowing that would be shown to be artificial in the larger context of a multiracial, multicultural world. This epistemic privilege feels like a good to whites, and indeed a certain amount of confidence in one’s ability to know (one’s self-appropriation as a knower) is a good—but only if it is based in reality and does not slip into epistemic arrogance. A kenotic intellectual humility requires whites to leave this epistemic bubble in order to wade into territory that feels less secure and less epistemically authentic. Only by recognizing that this dynamic is part of a larger movement towards a greater good, one which they cannot completely understand at the moment and which will reveal their currently grasped goods to be problematic, can whites release their hold on epistemic whiteness. A kenotic intellectual humility would seek truth beyond white boundaries, giving full rein to the
detached desire to know which seeks God by seeking to know all about all. It is by aiming high, at ultimate truth, that whites will come to humbly recognize and be led beyond the limitations and bias of white ignorance.

**Prayer’s Effect on Knowing**

The previous section described three qualities of kenosis that make it a productive Christian framework for understanding white intellectual humility. Antiracism demands that whites decenter their way of knowing; the kenotic disposition consists of a willed radical vulnerability. Whites fear becoming oppressed as subservient non-knowers; the kenotic epistemic approach leads to a purified, communally-embedded sense of epistemic agency. Overcoming white ignorance disrupts whites’ sense of identity; kenotic intellectual humility promotes the most foundational of Christian identities: conformity to Christ and deification. This section will address the more practical question of how prayer can foster that kenotic intellectual humility in whites. The nature of my inquiry focuses on the experience of the individual in prayer, but I presume the communal context of all Christian spirituality. In particular, the one praying will be best encouraged and guided through the difficulty and uncertainty of these practices if they have a trustworthy spiritual director. A close community of fellow believers will also be important. Finally, although prayer that focuses specifically on racism is also necessary, my aim here is to describe prayer that focuses on one’s way of knowing.

Whites will best embrace the uncomfortable vulnerability that necessarily accompanies their conversion to intellectual humility when they rightly understand it for what it is: part of the

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535 Coakley notes that a good spiritual director is particularly important during an experience of the Dark Night, when the director can help one recognize God’s positive action even when all feels like it is going “off the rails” (“Knowing in the Dark,” Lecture 5, ~10:00).
overall Christian vocation to being conformed to Christ. As an intentional, heightened space of growing in this vocation, prayer is a natural training ground for incorporating the movement towards epistemic authenticity into that overall framework. I propose Carmelite contemplation and the Ignatian examen as complementary prayer practices which embody and foster a kenotic disposition in a way that can root whites’ sense of vulnerability within a stabilizing (yet dynamic) Christian narrative. The challenge is to help whites adopt and maintain a kenotic disposition of intellectual openness while also reaching firm judgments, specifically about the evil of systemic racism. Examining these two spiritual approaches can illuminate this productive tension.

Carmelite contemplative prayer offers an apophatic experience of God as the elusive mystery who nevertheless resides at a person’s most intimate center and remains the absolute foundation beyond which one cannot fall. The Ignatian examen offers a more kataphatic experience that seeks to know God’s presence and will within the particulars of one’s daily life in the world. From the epistemological perspective, Carmelite contemplation is a purgation that helps to clear a person’s biases and recalibrates a person’s values through intimate experience of love of God, while the examen is a process of learning to incorporate and incarnate those values in one’s intellectual life. Apophatic contemplation works behind one’s approach to knowing and therefore can escape the vicious circle and lay the groundwork for healing from above downward. The Ignatian examen does the grunt work, one might say, of drawing on that groundwork to reform and reconstruct one’s approach to knowing. After briefly describing the two prayer practices, I will examine them according to the elements of a kenotic disposition presented above: consent to radical self-emptying, centrality of relationship to God and conformity to Christ, and a sense of agency-in-dependence.
Defining Carmelite Contemplation and the Ignatian Examen

Carmelite Contemplation

Theologian Keith J. Egan writes that “there is a simple sacramental principle upon which Carmelite prayer rests: God is within. Carmelite prayer is a call to make a journey to the center of one’s being.”\textsuperscript{536} It is “simple loving attentiveness to God present within.”\textsuperscript{537} Carmelite scholar Ernest E. Larkin similarly describes contemplative prayer as reaching that “still point of the soul, the dwelling place of God” which is “the very heart and soul of all prayer.”\textsuperscript{538} While God is the central actor in contemplation, Larkin says that there is a human disposition that welcomes God: a patient attentiveness that “make[s] oneself as vulnerable as possible to the divine in-breaking.”\textsuperscript{539} Coakley similarly says that common to the many different forms of contemplative prayer is a “regular and repeated ‘waiting on the divine’.”\textsuperscript{540} Contemplative prayer inspired by the Carmelite spiritual tradition takes various forms, but drawing on Coakley and FitzGerald, I will focus especially on the apophatic aspects of contemplative prayer. At its extreme, such prayer focuses simply on being in God’s presence, without mediation. As Larkin says, it gets “beyond the imagination or the processing of deep thoughts...not only beyond words, but beyond images and concepts, beyond discursive reasoning and the outpouring of affections.”\textsuperscript{541}

A particularly important contribution of the Carmelites to Christian spirituality has been the exploration of what John of the Cross has called the “Dark Night,” the experiences of

\textsuperscript{537} Egan, “Carmel, A School of Prayer,” 20.
\textsuperscript{539} Larkin, “Contemplative Prayer,” 100.
\textsuperscript{540} Coakley, “Kenosis and Subversion,” 35.
\textsuperscript{541} Larkin, “Contemplative Prayer,” 94.
dryness in prayer that are actually times of great potential growth. As described in chapter two, FitzGerald transposes the concept of the Dark Night from the realm of prayer into the interpersonal, societal realm as “impasse.” The connection between the two are reciprocal, however, and she asserts that one’s experience of societal impasse must lead them back to prayer:

Today, instead of realizing that the impasse provides a challenge and concrete focus for prayer and drives us to contemplation, we give in to a passive sense of inevitability, and imagination dies....Yet it is only in the process of bringing the impasse to prayer, to the perspective of the God who loves us, that our society will be freed, healed, changed, brought to paradoxical new visions, and freed for nonviolent, selfless, liberating action, freed, therefore, for community on this planet earth.542

She concludes this passage with imagery akin to self-emptying: “Death is involved here--a dying in order to see how to be and to act on behalf of God in the world.”543

The Ignatian Examen

I focus on Ignatian prayer and spirituality because it plays in the background, though rarely explicitly, in Lonergan’s work and because its active, kataphatic nature provides a complement to apophaticism.544 If Carmelite contemplative prayer seeks direct union with God with as little mediation possible, Ignatian prayer seeks union with God by relying heavily on mediation, especially of the imagination, the affect, and the created world. This is especially true of the examen of consciousness, which is derived from a type of examination of conscience proposed in Ignatius’s Spiritual Exercises.545 It has been adapted in various ways, but in its contemporary form it usually involves a prayerful review of one’s day in five steps: 1.

542 FitzGerald, “Impasse and Dark Night,” 107.
543 FitzGerald, “Impasse and Dark Night,” 107.
544 On interpreting Lonergan’s work through the lens of Ignatian spirituality, see Doran, “Ignatian Themes in the Thought of Bernard Lonergan.”
545 Ignatius, Spiritual Exercises, §24-43, but especially §43, the General Examination of Conscience (Puhl, 15-23).
Attentiveness to God’s presence and request for guidance as one looks over their recent experiences, 2. Recalling in gratitude the gifts of the day, 3. Noting the internal movements of consolation and desolation from the day, and reflecting on one’s responses to those movements, 4. Asking for forgiveness when necessary, 5. Requesting God’s accompaniment and grace for the day ahead. Multiple versions of the Ignatian examen have been created that specifically focus on growing in antiracism, but here I look at the practice more generally in its potential for promoting intellectual humility.546

White spiritual writer George Aschenbrenner, S.J., describes the examen as a movement from the head to the heart: it is a practice of learning to sense and follow the internal movements of the Spirit.547 But it can also be described as moving from the heart to the head: it is a practice of learning how to interpret internal movements so that one can properly choose which to follow, so that one does not simply get swept away uncritically by their strongest nonrational impulses.548 This latter function is especially relevant in the context of white ignorance because of what Ignatius says about those who are heading in the wrong direction: their felt sense of consolation and desolation is backwards.549 In the examen, one has daily practice in bringing the kenotic intellectual humility nurtured in contemplation to bear on one’s

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549 Ignatius, Spiritual Exercises §314-315 (Puhl, 141-142), §335 (Puhl, 149).
lived historical context. It is a practical opportunity for the disposition healed by the movement from above to change a person’s approach to knowing from below.

Radical Self-Emptying

_Carmelite Contemplation as Practice in Purgative Self-Emptying_

I have argued that a key element of whites’ conversion to antiracism is a self-critical turn that makes whites aware of the particularity of their viewpoints. They must recognize that their way of knowing is shaped by their social situation and therefore is contingent and not necessarily normative. Medina describes this awareness as “lucidity,” and he proposes developing it through concrete encounter with different viewpoints in society.\(^{550}\) Recent cultural movements have made whiteness more visible, to the point that many whites can no longer automatically presume the universality of their perspective; at the very least, it becomes a question that they must address.\(^{551}\) Even this increased awareness often remains much too superficial, however. Medina calls it “white consciousness without racial lucidity” in which “white people become self-conscious about their racial identity but insufficiently lucid about how deep this identity goes and about its multifaceted complicity with relations of oppression.”\(^{552}\) Contemplative prayer cannot replace the awareness-raising epistemic friction that comes from interactions with people of different backgrounds, but it can play the complementary role of promoting a disposition that is open to deep self-awareness and self-critique. I suggest three ways that the self-emptying process of apophatic contemplative prayer might lead whites to a more lucid account of themselves as inherently dependent knowers. On one level, contemplation makes visible different aspect of the self so that they are available to be acknowledged and assessed. On another level, contemplation enhances one’s ability to

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\(^{550}\) Medina, _The Epistemology of Resistance_, 213-217.
\(^{551}\) Medina, _The Epistemology of Resistance_, 217.
\(^{552}\) Medina, _The Epistemology of Resistance_, 217.
evaluate those elements correctly, by putting one in touch with God’s wisdom in order to
distinguish the aspects of the true self from those of the false self. On still another level,
contemplation moves beyond any coherent sense of self and meaning-making at all to focus on
its ultimately mysterious foundation in God.

First, on a basic level, contemplative prayer can increase general awareness of one’s
consciousness. By seeking to quiet all inner activity in order to be united with God, one
becomes aware of just how much is happening in their consciousness, even beyond the loudest
thoughts, images, and emotions. What previously had been the unnoticed backdrop, presumed
to be natural and necessary, is now recognized as contingent. Instead, one grows in awareness
of God’s presence as that which is completely foundational and impossible to fall beyond.

Second, in contemplative prayer, not only does one become aware of their various
mental and emotional activities, but one begins to recognize that many of these are elements of
a false self. As FitzGerald explains, John of the Cross offers two reasons that the Dark Night
leads to self-understanding, especially of one’s shadow side: “First, the light and development of
contemplative love show up one’s limitations. Second, the withdrawal of accustomed pleasure
in life, and the consequent frustration of desire, trigger one’s seemingly destructive tendencies
and move them into action on a level that is beyond conscious control.”553 Larkin adds that in
addition to revealing the otherwise hidden elements of the false self, contemplation encourages
the individual to address that falseness.554 In the quiet, space is created for otherwise unnoticed
or ignored limitations, bias, and critical questions of oneself to arise, perhaps even from the
unconscious. This place of vulnerability is fruitful for identifying the undue influences—
excessive desire for comfort, control, self-protection—that create a veneer over the true self,

553 FitzGerald, “Impasse and Dark Night,” 102.
including the self-as-knower. Instead of seeking an immediate fix, which would likely be superficial and overlook the depth of one’s brokenness (recall Medina’s “white consciousness without racial lucidity”), the person who contemplates is forced to sit with their weakness and sinfulness, allowing the loving God to reveal the full extent of the false self that needs to be relinquished. FitzGerald points out the radical nature of this awareness, in which God-as-Wisdom identifies the sinful side even of those elements of identity that one has considered life-giving: “Sophia turns life upside-down, challenges my most deeply held beliefs and values, undermines what I have learned, claims whom and what I possess, and highlights the limitations and oppressive character of what I depend on most for satisfaction and assurance.”

Finally, FitzGerald suggests that this upheaval pushes the emptying to another level. She argues that contemplation in the Dark Night teaches a person not only to let go of the distorted elements of the false self but also, in a move she recognizes as “dangerous,” to let go of the good elements of the self—even to let go of one’s concept of the self altogether. The experience of a person’s own emptiness includes losing their meaning-making ability. As John writes, “God leaves the intellect in darkness, the will in aridity, the memory in emptiness and the affections in supreme affliction, bitterness and anguish.” FitzGerald homes in on the epistemic elements of this darkness:

> If in earlier times the Dark Night wove its way in and out of life bringing dryness, boredom and absence of satisfaction, this darker Night removes the very

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555 FitzGerald, “Desolation as Dark Night,” 100. Emphasis added.
556 While such a proposal deserves careful critical assessment, that is beyond the scope of this chapter, and so for the time being I accept the validity of FitzGerald’s radical invitation. See Copeland’s response to her CTSA address for some commentary. FitzGerald also makes it clear that this emptying in the Dark Night is not something that a person should try to initiate on their own; it should only be entered into as a response to God’s call, as known through the calling of the Dark Night.
557 John of the Cross, The Dark Night, 2.3.3, in John of the Cross: Selected Writings, ed. Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D., (New York: Paulist Press, 1987): 199; quoted in FitzGerald, “Desolation as Dark Night,” 103. Note the similarity with the beginning of Ignatius of Loyola’s “Susciepe” prayer, discussed later in the chapter: “Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and my entire will, all that I have and possess” (Ignatius, Spiritual Exercises, §234 [Puhl, 102]).
support systems that have structured our lives, given them meaning and value, and provided a source of affirmation and final assurance. But what precisely can John mean when he says the intellect is emptied and left in darkness? Perhaps he warns us that the time will come when our philosophy of life, our theology and our carefully constructed meanings fall apart before our eyes.558

She emphasizes the failure of meaning-making in this context. The person’s mind is not literally wiped of all memories: there are still plenty of images and experiences in the mind. The difference is that “now the imagination can no longer connect life’s memories to create meaning and hope.”559 Memories are nothing but “scattered remains,” devoid of any coherence that would offer security and purpose.560 Note the parallels with white epistemic disorientation. A person’s epistemic grounding is pulled out from under them. One may feel abandoned by God.561 This experience purifies a person of two things: “[their] isolated self-sufficiency…and [their] unfree dependence and fear of transformation and evolution.”562 They can only be filled once they have recognized their emptiness and failure.563

By leading an individual to release, at least temporarily, all that anchors them to a sense of self and meaning in the world, apophatic contemplation creates space between a person and their socialized frameworks for meaning-making. If whites attempt to evaluate their epistemic approach to race, they are likely to fall into the vicious circle of using a distorted lens to evaluate itself. By asking the white pray-er to allow themselves to be emptied of all elements of meaning-making, even language and images, contemplation in the Dark Night simply moves behind all aspects of the self without, for the moment, dealing with the question of which are good and which are not. This separation permits whites to reflect on the contingent (which is

558 FitzGerald, “Desolation as Dark Night,” 103.
559 FitzGerald, “Desolation as Dark Night,” 104.
560 FitzGerald, “Desolation as Dark Night,” 104.
561 FitzGerald, “Desolation as Dark Night,” 104.
562 FitzGerald, “Desolation as Dark Night,” 104.
563 FitzGerald, “Desolation as Dark Night,” 98.
not to say arbitrary or relativistic) nature of all human knowing, opening them to questioning its previously unquestionable aspects. By getting beyond all elements of the self (so far as possible), contemplative prayer gives whites the experience of questioning and letting go of more of their sense of self than they ever thought possible. It is practice in a self-emptying disposition that seeks God, a disposition that can be transposed to the realm of epistemology as intellectual humility.

Ignatian Examen as Practice in the Discerned Self-Emptying of Holy Indifference

Ignatian spirituality promotes a similarly extreme self-emptying, most notably in the Suscipe prayer, part of the “Contemplation to Attain Divine Love” at the apex of the Spiritual Exercises. After walking the retreatant through imaginative reflections on various ways God’s love is at work in the world, Ignatius invites the retreatant to respond to that love through a commitment of self-gift like that of the Suscipe:

Take, Lord, and receive
all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and my entire will,
all that I have and possess.
Thou hast given all to me. To Thee, O Lord, I return it.
All is Thine, dispose of it wholly according to Thy will.
Give me Thy love and Thy grace,
for this is sufficient for me.\footnote{Ignatius, \textit{Spiritual Exercises}, §234 (Puhl 102).}

The prayer is a complete handing over of every aspect of oneself to God, reminiscent of the ever-greater letting-go fostered in Carmelite contemplative prayer.

Ignatian prayer emphasizes self-emptying in a different context than Carmelite prayer does, however. While the stripping of oneself in Carmelite contemplation is open-ended in order to engage the present-but-unknown God not as object but as Mystery, the analogous stripping that occurs in Ignatian indifference is more clearly aimed at discerning and centering a
distinct, known aspect of God’s will for a person. While apophatic contemplation has union with 
God as its goal, it focuses on letting go of all creaturely things, with the result that one will fall 
into the presence of that which remains: God, who transcends the creaturely. The Ignatian 
examen, in contrast, promotes self-emptying for a more contextualized goal: whatever 
embodied actions will support the particular way that a person is called to union with God at 
that time and place in their life. In other words, Ignatian self-emptying is part of what Ignatius 
calls “indifference.” Indifference is a matter of relinquishing those created things that are 
unhelpful and holding fast to those created things that are helpful.565 Pedro Arrupe, S.J., calls it 
“not being tied down to anything except God’s will.”566 White philosopher Marina Berzins 
McCoy captures the dual aspects of indifference, calling it “the capacity to let go of what doesn’t 
help me to love God or love others—while staying engaged with what does.”567 Carmelite 
contemplation can help lead to indifference in general, in the form of a desire for God above all 
else. When it comes to putting that indifferent desire into action in a particular context, 
however, discernment is necessary. In distinction to apophatic spirituality in which, as John 
says, all creaturely things must be relinquished to open the space for union with God, Ignatian 
spirituality moves into discernment of how to best unite with God in the midst of one’s worldly 
life. It involves discerning which particular goods are most worthwhile in one’s (God-)given 
context and therefore which created things to use as tools for reaching that good and which 
created things to relinquish as distractions from reaching that good. Indifference focuses on 
positionality (i.e., context) and asks for kenosis: a person lets go of certain things not because

565 See the “First Principle and Foundation” in Ignatius, Spiritual Exercises, §23, (Puhl, 12).
566 Pedro Arrupe, S.J., “Men for Others,” (Address to the Tenth International Congress of Jesuit 
Alumni of Europe, Valencia, Spain, July 31, 1973). Accessed November 14, 2019, 
567 Marina Berzins McCoy, “Ignatian Indifference,” accessed August 5, 2021, 
https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-indifference/.
those things are evil in and of themselves but because in the current concrete context they support evil situations by preventing that person from contributing to a greater good. For whites who seek to know racism better, indifference would involve letting go of the familiar frameworks for understanding society, which in certain white contexts have seemed to work so well for them.

Grounded in God, Conformed to Christ

Carmelite Contemplation and the Elusive but Omnipresent God of Mystery

Carmelite contemplative prayer is not self-emptying for emptying’s sake but for union with God.\textsuperscript{568} It can show whites that at its deepest, their foundational identity in God (identified by recognizing God in that “still point” within themselves) is beyond whatever elements of the self they believed to be fundamental, including white ways of knowing. In their writings on contemplative prayer and the Dark Night, Coakley and FitzGerald emphasize God’s transcendence, mystery, and dynamism. To remove all that mediates one’s relationship with God—emotions, images, memories, language—and to simply be attentive to the stillness of God’s mysterious presence within is both an exercise in seeking that which is most foundational, and a realization of the conceptual elusiveness of that transcendent foundation. One learns to find peace in openness and discursive uncertainty. In Coakley’s words, one learns “un-mastery,” a contemplative openness that allows the unpredictable Holy Spirit to engage in divine in-breaking that upends a person’s own ways.\textsuperscript{569} Recall FitzGerald’s comment that in impasse humans are called to “withdraw and reclaim our projections of God, of friend, of ministry, of community, and let the ‘others’ be who and what they are: mystery.”\textsuperscript{570}

\textsuperscript{568} Egan, “Carmel, A School of Prayer,” 20. John of the Cross, \textit{The Ascent of Mount Carmel}, 1.4.1, (Selected Writings, 65).
\textsuperscript{569} Coakley, \textit{God, Sexuality, and the Self}, 43, 56, 127.
\textsuperscript{570} FitzGerald, “Impasse and Dark Night,” 101.
Apophatic prayer fosters a disposition of openness to the other because the “other” it waits on is God as Mystery. In *Method in Theology*, Lonergan argues that love of God (i.e., one’s love for God, which is a gift of grace) is a “major exception” to the general rule *Nihil amatum nisi praecognitum*, “Nothing is loved unless it is known.”571 God’s gratuitous gift of love, which prompts the response of love by the receiver, typically precedes knowledge of God. The all-consuming love for God need not have a known object; this love is therefore an “orientation towards an unknown,” that is, towards God not as a knowable object but as “transcendent mystery.”572 Because knowledge is not a prerequisite for loving God in this state, the desire for God as transcendent mystery in contemplative prayer will not be corrupted by one’s biased approach to knowing. One is opening oneself to God on a higher, more foundational level, though not one that replaces the desire to know God. This pre-thematic openness to God both allows God to work directly on a person’s heart, shaping their desires, and offers an experience of the presence and stability of God at its most basic, as it were, below any ideas about God.

I suggest that with any other act of love, some intellectual discernment of the object is necessary in order to ensure one’s love is ordered to a good. In extreme apophatic prayer, however, because the “object” constantly recedes (i.e., one continuously relinquishes whatever concept of God arises in one’s mind), one’s love is never in danger of attaching to that which is not good, for it instead intends the Good that underlies all goods. It intends this Good not by attempting to identify it as some specific thing but rather by loving the transcendent heart of all existence. This unique situation allows one to be radically open in their love and to release all

intelligently apprehended objects. It thereby acts as a cleansing, a (re-)connection to the most fundamental relationship with God. This union reorients one’s desires, and it also becomes the basis of their union with creation, including other human beings.

Coakley explains that during the Dark Night of the senses, the intellect and will both face a blank, but there develops an awareness of the transcendence and intimacy of God. A person realizes that their continued existence is due to God’s continuous love of them, and that this God is both unimaginably beyond their intellectual grasp and more intimate to them than they are to themselves. Although during the Dark Night it may feel like everything is going wrong, in fact “our capacity for rationality is being pulled and tugged into a new register by this practice of attending to God directly, without any kind of sensual intermediary.”

Overall, apophatic contemplation prepares one for union with God as mystery. It simultaneously demonstrates the stability as well as the elusiveness of God: God is recognized as the foundation that remains when all distractions are stripped away, the horizon a person can never wander beyond; at the same time, this God eludes one’s conceptual grasp and is most found precisely in a non-grasping, open receptivity.

*Ignatian Examen and Adopting God’s Perspective on Daily Life*

John of the Cross speaks of Carmelite contemplation as leaving the world in order to reach union with God. In contrast, Aschenbrenner writes that the steps of the examen “are to be seen, and gradually experienced in faith, as dimensions of the Christian consciousness, formed by God and His work in the heart as it confronts and grows *within this world and all of reality.* If we allow the Father gradually to transform our mind and heart into that of His Son, to

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574 Coakley, “Knowing in the Dark,” Lecture IV, ~32:40.
become truly Christian, *through our living experience of this world*, then the examen...will seem much less contrived.\textsuperscript{575}

The examen focuses on the concrete details of one’s life. It is generally not a prayer of mystical union with God or of passive reception of God’s presence. While one does ask to be guided by God in the examen, still there is a mental activeness on the part of the pray-er that is distinct from the experience of Carmelite apophatic contemplation. The goal of the examen is to recognize the ways that God is speaking and making Godself known throughout one’s days. It is an attempt to come to know God not as irreducible divine mystery but as the one who revealed Godself to the world through the Incarnation. The examen promotes the kind of connection between spiritual attentiveness and the intellect that can help provide the bridge from contemplative experience of God’s presence to the need to understand concretely one’s relationship with the world in order to know how to better follow God in that world. This certainly includes questions about how to do the work of justice, but it also includes how to seek the knowledge that justice requires.

Still, the examen it is not so much a recognition of God in the world but God in oneself: how God attempts to guide a person’s decisions and actions in the world through God’s interior communication with them.\textsuperscript{576} That is, the examen is more about becoming attentive to one’s way of making meaning in the world, and the tools available for that understanding. In particular, a person learns to recognize and interpret the inner movements of the Spirit. Aschenbrenner writes, “It is here in the depths of our affectivity, so spontaneous, strong, and shadowy at times, that God moves us and deals with us most intimately.”\textsuperscript{577} Apophatic

\textsuperscript{576} Aschenbrenner, “Consciousness Examen,” 18.
\textsuperscript{577} Aschenbrenner, “Consciousness Examen,” 18.
contemplation forms a person in extreme receptivity of the transcendent, and this connection may be the basis for an attentiveness to the movements of the Spirit in one’s day. Overall, in the examen a person develops a new lens for interpreting the world. Doing so requires the kind of graced self-reflection that is also necessary for overcoming white ignorance. One prays “[t]hat the Spirit may help me to see myself a bit more as He [sic] sees me Himself!”578 In this process, a person becomes more conformed to Christ’s way of understanding and deciding in the world: always attentive to God’s will through the Spirit.

Healed Sense of Agency

Contemplation Purifies Desire

In God, Sexuality, and the Self, Coakley emphasizes the centrality of desire to the human person. She argues for the role of the Holy Spirit in purifying and shaping one’s desire, and for radically self-emptying contemplative prayer as a practical means for encountering that action of the Spirit. FitzGerald speaks similarly of contemplation during the Dark Night, but in the mode of Wisdom Christology rather than pneumatology: “[i]f you channel your desire toward knowing Jesus Christ, the one you will learn to know is loving Sophia who will slowly and secretly redirect and claim your desire and subvert your life. Desire is educated, therefore, by the companionship, the friendship, of Jesus-Sophia. This dynamic underlies John’s whole philosophy of prayer and indicates how a conscious decision of the heart for Christ takes place, how a shift in the focus of desire and meaning begins in our lives.”579 Coakley’s 2015 Warfield Lectures develop the epistemic element of the argument. She explains that desire affects perception, and so contemplative prayer that reshapess one’s desire also reshapess one’s way of understanding the world.580 The Carmelite approach to contemplative practice, as found in

578 Aschenbrenner, “Consciousness Examen,” 17.
579 FitzGerald, “Desolation as Dark Night,” 98.
Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, “unlocks afresh an older patristic teaching on ‘spiritual sense,’ and thus opens up a vista of ‘theology in via’ in which human epistemological and moral responsiveness expands and ascends through the processes of the purgation of desire.”

Drawing on her own experiences leading contemplation classes as a chaplain at a Boston-area jail, Coakley applies these insights to the context of racial injustice. She suggests that purification of whites’ desire can affect how whites perceive race, opening them to a clearer recognition of systemic racism.

FitzGerald is on a similar page regarding desire’s impact on knowing:

The contemplative posture of faith, hope and love slowly repatterns or transforms desire and consciousness and prepares the human person for the participatory love-driven knowledge Divine Wisdom is and gives. This subversive dynamic of beloved Sophia is set in motion when human suffering, loss and emptiness have reached such a pitch of consciousness, are such a reflection of Jesus silenced, rejected, abused, dismissed or abandoned, that the capacity of the human person is hollowed out for deeper knowing, deeper mutuality, a Wisdom presence and vision in the world.

For FitzGerald as for John, the crucified Jesus is a privileged image for preparing us for greater union with and knowledge of God. This “love-driven knowledge” is a “transformed or mystical consciousness,” an “experience of mutuality, communion, connectedness and kinship with the earth.” If this “deeper” knowing is intended to replace rational, discursive knowing, then we are left with a rejection of reason. Instead, “the participatory love-driven knowledge Divine Wisdom is and gives” is better interpreted as the experience of the love of God which Lonergan identifies as beyond the realm of discursive knowing, yet which does not do away with it. Rightly focused desire does not lead to an immediate epiphany of knowledge about racism, nor does it

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581 Coakley, “Knowing in the Dark,” Lecture I, 16.
582 Coakley, Knowing in the Dark, Lectures II-III; and Sarah Coakley, “Jail Break.”
583 FitzGerald, “Desolation as Dark Night,” 105.
make the truth about racism “obvious,” as if it were an object sitting alone in the middle of a table. Instead, from a Lonerganian perspective, purified desire leads to an unbiased way of knowing, one which weakens the many possible undue influences that would distract from the pure desire to know. Especially at its extreme, contemplative prayer encourages single-heartedness of desire. One seeks union with God above all else, leaving behind every other desire, even seemingly good ones and even the desire for the felt consolation of union with God. One desires for the sake of the desired. Such prayer may give a taste for the desire to know which seeks truth at any cost.

As described in chapter three, however, in the midst of deep bias, even following one’s desire to know can lead down the wrong path, for that desire would be operating within one’s distorted way of knowing. But the openness to the Spirit which Coakley encourages (and which is itself a desire) may also be (and lead to) what Lonergan calls “universal willingness.” A person in such a state is “antecedently willing to learn all there is to be learnt about willing and learning and about the enlargement of one’s freedom from external constraints and psychoneural interferences.” The “key point” in that freedom, Lonergan says, “is to reach a willingness to persuade oneself and to submit to the persuasion of others.” This concept aligns well with the call to intellectual humility.

By speaking of “willingness,” Lonergan describes the fourth level of intentional consciousness, decision, which is beyond the first three which constitute knowing. Because deciding not only occurs subsequently to knowing but also involves choosing how one will approach the knowing process itself, it is an important element of breaking out of whites’ biased

585 Lonergan, Insight, 647.
586 Lonergan, Insight, 647.
587 Lonergan, Insight, 646-647.
way of knowing. In short, to the extent that self-emptying contemplative prayer creates the
opportunity for the Spirit to shape whites’ desire to be more aligned with divine desire, it
promotes not only a love that is often associated with desire but also a devotedness to the pure
desire to know and to a universal willingness. Divinely-shaped desire may motivate whites not
only to an affective sense of human connection across race; it may also motivate them to
persevere through the disorienting, difficult process of seeking an epistemic authenticity that
will bring them closer to knowing the truth about the context of systemic racism in which that
connection would take place.

This rightly-directed desire for union with God spills over into a desire for union with
others. Coakley argues that self-emptying is not for its own sake but to be more attentive to
other perspectives. She asserts of “authentic contemplation” that “its very practice of gentle
effacement allows communication with the ‘other’ at a depth not otherwise possible, indeed
perhaps not even imaginable. To contemplate is to invite uncomfortable change, not to
bludgeon the other with one’s certainties.”

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Well-intentioned people of privilege can easily ignore the voices of those who are marginalized, drowning them out with theories and plans for
how to “save” them.

Ascetical contemplation is an antidote: “Its practised self-emptying
inculcates an attentiveness that is beyond merely good political intentions. Its practice is more
discomforting, more destabilizing to settle presumptions, than a simple intentional design on
empathy.” Coakley argues that one’s dependency on others can be correctly discerned in
light of one’s dependency on God, and so practicing that dependency on God is necessary for
rightly discerning human relationships. Similarly, she notes that Gregory of Nyssa and the

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588 Coakley, God, Sexuality, and the Self, 86.
589 Coakley, God, Sexuality, and the Self, 47.
590 Coakley, God, Sexuality, and the Self, 48.
Carmelite saints believed that through purification a person is able to have direct encounter with Christ in this life, and she gives this concept an antiracist application by suggesting that those who encounter Christ in prayer can also come to see Christ in others across racial lines.592

Through contemplative prayer, whites may learn to be more patient and more willing to listen, receive, and sit with the other precisely as other, without forcing them into whites’ own mold of thought. Contemplation builds the attitude necessary for acknowledging dependence upon others’ knowledge, opening whites to being unsettled by taking seriously the antiracist perspective. In the context of white resistance, such prayer can help whites learn to receive Blackness as it is rather than projecting a whiteness frame onto everything. It can push whites beyond their areas of comfortable agreement with antiracism and prepare them to sit in the discomfort necessary to engage antiracism’s more demanding ideas. In doing so, whites’ agency as knowers will become more effective.

Examen Reveals Agency as Responsiveness to God

Earlier in this chapter I partially justified apophatic contemplation with Lonergan’s assertion that God’s gift of love (which evokes our responding love for God) is prior to knowledge of God. Lonergan goes on to say that the experience of this love is not sufficient in this world: “Our love reveals to us values we had not appreciated, values of prayer and worship, or repentance and belief. But if we would know what is going on within us, if we would learn to integrate it with the rest of our living, we have to inquire, investigate, seek counsel.”593 The

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592 Coakley, “Knowing in the Dark,” Lecture 6, ~7:00.
593 Lonergan, Method in Theology, 118. See also Method in Theology, 316, where Lonergan argues that although God is not an object during apophatic contemplative prayer, after the prayer a person can think back and “objectify in images and concepts and words both what they have been doing and the God that has been their concern.” He says that “withdrawal is for return,” and I would extrapolate that assertion to propose that the return from the experience of the “cloud of unknowing” involves not only discursive processing of what occurred in prayer but also discursive processing of the implications for the rest of one’s life in the world.
experience of contemplation shapes one’s desires toward truly worthwhile values, but the examen helps one learn to live out those values concretely.

Aschenbrenner identifies a problem similar to the individualistic approach that often characterizes whiteness: “So often our activity becomes primary to us and all sense of response in our activity is lost. We become self-moved and motivated rather than moved and motivated by the Spirit (Rom 8:14).”594 Through the examen, a person learns attentiveness to God’s movements within them, and they therefore begin to understand their decisions and actions as a responsiveness to an interdependent community—primarily relationship with God, but also its manifestation through relationship with those around them. Aschenbrenner argues that a main purpose of the examen is to understand one’s decisions not primarily as independent assertions of the self, but as responses to God’s invitations. The prayer teaches that listening receptivity is first, and one’s active response is second. This may be a helpful exercise for whites in learning to listen to others in general. It teaches a patient attentiveness that contradicts whites’ presumption of their own epistemic normativity. It reminds whites that the day as interpreted in the moment through their own way of knowing is not the whole story—or even necessarily an accurate story. Allowing God to shape their reflective reinterpretation of their experiences and responses not only conforms whites more to God’s vision but can open them to considering others’ perspectives as well, including those of people of color.

One especially relevant way that the examen promotes an epistemic responsiveness to God is by encouraging a person to be open to uncomfortable insights about one’s sinfulness. While contemplation reveals general elements of a person’s false self, the examen pushes one to address particular elements of that sin and weakness as it manifests concretely in one’s life.

Aschenbrenner notes that God often lifts up one specific element of a person’s life that needs consideration and conversion, but that “[t]his is often precisely the one area we want to forget and (maybe!) work on later.” Aschenbrenner’s choice of words here is important. He does not say “sting of conscience,” which would indicate a moralistic pang of recognizing that one has sinned, but rather “sting of consciousness,” which indicates a “sense of [God’s] personal challenge to us” through affective interior movements. White ignorance and distortion of conscience often means that whites do not immediately recognize their complicity in systemic racism, and without the sting of conscience they reject antiracist insights about that complicity. Instead, I suggest that there is a discomfort that whites feel, and at least part of it is white epistemic disorientation: God is pushing them to examine their approach to knowing race. In other words, whites’ defensiveness may not be an attempt to cover up feelings of guilt per se (because without proper knowledge of systemic racism they lack the correct framework for identifying their sinful complicity), but to avoid the Spirit’s uncomfortable prodding to examine or rethink their relationship to race and racism. This is not to say that whites are not guilty of racist complicity but that before arriving at that recognition they must first have their approach to evaluating racism shifted, and it is the discomfort that comes from this invitation, rather than (or perhaps in addition to) the not-yet-felt discomfort of knowing one has sinned, that whites flee.

**Conclusion**

Kenotic intellectual humility will involve a sense of disorientation, acutely at certain points of conversion but also in a more tempered, ongoing way even after conversion. What

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595 Aschenbrenner, “Consciousness Examen,” 19.
596 Aschenbrenner, “Consciousness Examen,” 19.
597 Aschenbrenner, “Consciousness Examen,” 19.
makes this kenotic is the extremity of the self-emptying, the trust that it will lead to a divinely-empowered way forward, and its ability to conform one to Christ.

Chapters three and four together can be conceived of as arguing that the ultimate foundations of reality are inherently dynamic, and so the most sure and stable grounding is not static but dynamic. Chapter three showed that epistemic authenticity is a matter of fidelity to the ongoing process of the transcendental method. The ongoing openness to new questions is paradoxically the basis of confident knowing; that is, epistemic authenticity is not a matter of arriving at the truth (though that must be the goal) but of adhering to the inherent, unrevisable process of knowing. Chapter four has suggested that self-emptying is paradoxically the basis of conformation to the unchanging, omnipotent God.

Conformity to Christ is a matter of ongoing self-emptying. In short, the Truth that is the origin of all reality is a radical openness, a holy vulnerability, and so participating in that foundational Truth (whether in its manifestation in horizontal relationship with creation or vertical relationship with God) requires an approach to knowing, deciding, acting, and loving that embodies radical openness and holy vulnerability. Paradoxically, stability is found only in a constant openness to change. In both cases of “letting go,” whites need not fear falling into meaninglessness, for that “letting go” is a participation in the kenosis which is itself one’s access to the foundation of all truth, love, and reality.
CONCLUSION: TOWARDS EPISTEMIC SOLIDARITY

Summary

Whites first encounter the truths of antiracism, like all truths, as truth claims. Epistemically speaking, those claims are subject to whites’ understanding them and affirming them as knowledge. This is not to say that the truth about systemic racism depends on whites’ affirmation of it; the antiracist perspective remains true whether or not whites rightly judge it to be so. The continued scourge of systemic racism, however, does significantly depend on whether or not whites come to understand and affirm the truths of antiracism (even if they attain that knowledge through belief).

In an effort to promote that affirmation, I have argued that the white community’s failure to recognize and acknowledge systemic racism and their complicity in it arises in part from white epistemic disorientation (WED), a felt inability to participate in the knowing process about issues of race. Because overcoming racism will ultimately require that whites do come to know racism through participating in that process, whites must work through WED. They will have to come to understand that what seem like antiracist roadblocks to their free engagement in the search for truth are actually guides to rethink and heal their way of knowing in order to facilitate the search for truth. The disorientation that whites feel need not be feared as a sign of epistemic inauthenticity but can be embraced as a call to humble epistemic authenticity. Embracing that call is difficult, but it is part of the overall Christian call to follow Christ’s example of holy vulnerability through a kenotic disposition.

Addressing the Communal: Epistemic Solidarity

Driven by a belief that knowing in its essential form occurs in the consciousness of a single person, I have focused largely on WED and kenotic intellectual humility within the
individual. To conclude, I want to point toward the communal aspect of antiracist knowing by framing this proposed pathway in terms of epistemic solidarity.

Antiracist theologians have emphasized solidarity as a key means and end for overcoming systemic racism. For James Cone, it is the essence of how Christians live out relationship with God: “The real scandal of the gospel is this: humanity’s salvation is revealed in the cross of the condemned criminal Jesus, and humanity’s salvation is available only through our solidarity with the crucified people in our midst.” As Copeland puts it, solidarity is “the empathetic incarnation of Christian love.” In *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, Massingale argues that solidarity is the key to racial reconciliation. He affirms and elaborates on Pope St. John Paul II’s definition of solidarity as “a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all.”

Massingale describes solidarity primarily in terms of prompting whites to act against a known reality of racism. He writes that authentic solidarity “makes [whites] effective agents of racial reconciliation who are willing to speak the truth and endure the demands of affirmative redress that are essential for real social transformation.” While sharing the same ultimate goal, my project has focused on a prior need, the epistemic solidarity in which whites are willing to seek the truth and endure the demands of that epistemic process. I define epistemic

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598 Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 160.
602 I say that epistemic solidarity is prior to the solidarity of action (i.e., general “solidarity”) because before someone can act on knowledge or speak a truth they must attain that knowledge and know that truth. Still, in many ways I see epistemic solidarity as one element of general solidarity and chronologically concurrent with it. Even if they are actively ignorant of many truths about racism, whites understand some aspects of racism and fail to act in solidarity with those suffering from even these known racial injustices. I am not suggesting that whites hold off on action until they have a perfectly
solidarity as a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common search for truth. Part of the common good is a common epistemic authenticity, a culture that not only promulgates specific accurate judgments but that promotes the virtues and structures necessary for authentic meaning-making in a society. This is what I suggest antiracists are doing: attempting to live out epistemic solidarity by promoting the common good of epistemic authenticity. While other scholars in different fields have used the term “epistemic solidarity” to describe one underprivileged group sharing their knowledge internally in order to better promote their own interests against the interests of another dominant group, or to describe a person or group acting in a manner that increases the epistemic power of another underprivileged group, my definition emphasizes a common, universal solidarity (as opposed to solidarity only within a limited group) and aims at finding shared truth (as the final end of promoting equity of epistemic power).

Epistemic solidarity is a common search for truth in multiple ways. First, it presupposes a common truth; that is, reality is the same for all people, and each person or group’s unique experience and understanding of reality must be commensurable with that shared reality. To put it another way, there is objective truth, and the fact that this truth is understood through a variety of subjective perspectives does not deny the fact that it transcends any individual or comprehensive knowledge of racism. Indeed, although antiracists warn that whites’ immediate desire to “solve” a racist situation can leave them with a superficial understanding that promotes an inadequate solution, when done with intellectual humility, acting in solidarity on what whites already know about racism is an important path to deeper knowledge about racism.

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605 This is not to say that a particular kind of solidarity within certain subgroups and a healing of unjust epistemic power differentials are irrelevant. In fact, they will be key to reaching the epistemic solidarity I describe. My definition simply identifies the larger goal.
group. The goal is for all people to arrive at and agree on that same, shared truth. Second, epistemic solidarity recognizes that the imperative to seek knowledge goes beyond the questions that seem to be in one’s own interest and includes seeking all truth, particularly that which affects one’s wider community. Third, epistemic solidarity results from an acknowledgment of one’s own limitations and a recognition that the most complete knowledge of truth requires engagement and even friction with many different perspectives. Fourth, epistemic solidarity presupposes a common, fundamental process of knowing (the transcendental method). There must be a common understanding of what knowing is, and I propose Lonergan’s definition as foundational. Fifth, epistemic solidarity involves developing...
an environment that promotes epistemic virtues. It encourages all members of the community to develop as authentic, participating knowers, and it promotes the social structures necessary for that ongoing development. Finally, for Christians, epistemic solidarity has a common grounding in God. Just as human solidarity in general is based in the universal shared siblinghood of God’s children, so epistemic solidarity is based on the fact that God is the truth to which all questions ultimately point, and that each person’s ability to know is a gift of God.

Proposed Criteria for Epistemic Solidarity

In Massingale’s elaboration on John Paul II’s definition of solidarity, I identify six criteria for true cross-racial solidarity. Below I list them and propose what the criteria might look like for cross-racial epistemic solidarity.

1. Solidarity recognizes the interdependence of all people: “Solidarity is based upon the deep-seated conviction that the concerns of the despised other are intimately bound up with our own….solidarity is the means by which all—victims and beneficiaries of systemic injustice—realize their full humanity.”

Epistemic solidarity recognizes the interdependence of all knowers. One’s knowledge depends on others, and vice versa. Epistemic solidarity demands that whites take more responsibility for their knowing because it affects others. When a white person remains complacent in their current racial knowledge or current way of knowing, they not only remain in ignorance themselves, but they contribute to a white culture of ignorance.

2. Solidarity involves special consideration for the marginalized: “the acid test of solidarity is our sense of connection with and commitment to the poor and excluded.”

individual and cultural difference with regard to the way that method is instantiated in particular contexts.

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608 Massingale, Racial Justice and the Catholic Church, 116. Massingale cites Martin Luther King, Jr., and James H. Cone as promoters of these ideas.
609 Massingale, Racial Justice and the Catholic Church, 117.
Epistemic solidarity recognizes the importance of social positionality. To be in solidarity with other knowers requires understanding one’s epistemic relationship to them, including the strengths and weaknesses of each. For whites, this means coming to understand how their view of race has been skewed by their dominant racial position and how people of color have acquired a more accurate understanding of race from their marginalized racial position. As a result, cross-racial epistemic solidarity will decenter whites and center the experiences and knowledge of people of color instead. Copeland states, “Solidarity begins in anamnesis—the intentional remembering of the dead, exploited, despised victims of history.” She argues that to make their stories the lens through which we make sense of our past and present is not an act of “identity politics” nor an erasure of the humanity of those from dominant groups. Instead, this centering of “exploited, despised, poor women of color” is a way of making the truth about our communities more visible, more accessible. In particular, it reveals to whites that they cannot presume their own epistemic authenticity or that of the dominant society.

3. Solidarity reaches deep into the heart: “the only way for cross-racial solidarity to occur is through the recovery or development of compassion,” a “gut-wrenching response to human suffering” that builds on sorrow for and identification with the sufferer, and moves one to action on their behalf.

One desires to know in the context of love. Epistemic solidarity cannot be removed from the context of solidarity overall, and the innate desire to know is recognized in its most life-giving, full context, as a means of deepening relationship and union with God and others. Whites must recognize the role of the nonrational in their way of knowing, acknowledging that

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the social and affective ties to others that are natural to the human condition do not replace the discursive process of knowing but are essential to its proper working.

4. **Solidarity risks vulnerability**: one shares the sufferer’s life so fully that one enters situations where they will personally endure some form of the same injustice and/or pain as the sufferer.\(^{614}\)

Epistemic solidarity risks disorientation and dependency. It recognizes that the search for truth is ongoing and requires a willingness to have one’s own ideas challenged by others, especially others whom one is tempted to ignore. To seek truth as part of a community is to open one’s ideas to critique and to be unable to avoid facing difficult truths. For whites, it means letting go of the empty privilege that allows them to remain in a comfortable epistemic echo chamber.

Part of this vulnerability is taking responsibility for one’s own social group. Even if an individual white person is not actively engaged in the general problems and distortions of white culture, still that person holds some responsibility for the ignorance and education of their group. Epistemic solidarity means accepting responsibility for the ignorance that one has inherited and inadvertently maintained simply as a result of being part of a certain group. It involves accepting the painful reality of complicity.

5. **Solidarity demands action, including work for social transformation**: one takes concrete action to overcome “structures of sin” and create an environment that promotes the common good.\(^{615}\)

Epistemic solidarity demands action, including working for cultural transformation in order to promote major and minor authenticity. This means that even though each individual

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will ultimately have to affirm knowledge for themselves, it is not a matter of creating a society of supposedly neutral or objective facts where all viewpoints are given equal weight. Instead, epistemic solidarity demands that social structures and institutions promote ideas and approaches that align with truth and epistemic authenticity. Social constructs are never epistemically neutral, and so one must actively seek to create a society in which truth and the promotion of epistemic authenticity is built into its structures. For whites, this involves willingness to create communities that no longer sustain active ignorance of racism but rather promote ideas and ways of knowing that support the truth of antiracism. Granted there will always be need for conversion, and society must always be open to being questioned, but the goal is to overcome the current social surd in which the dominant culture malforms whites’ epistemic approach to race from the start. The point is not to create a new hegemony but to recognize the need for the foundational structure of the community to promote its current best understanding of the truth and of the epistemic processes that support it, even as they remain open to critique.

6. **Solidarity involves a conversion of personal identity:** “Racial solidarity is a *paschal* experience, one that entails a dying of a false sense of self and a renunciation of racial privilege so as to rise to a new identity and status that is God-given.”

Epistemic solidarity entails dying to a false sense of being a self-enclosed knower in order to be reborn as a knower who is dependent on God and community. For whites, it involves re-grounding their epistemic selves not on the truths they think they know but on the commitment to the ongoing process of knowing that will continually uphold, modify, or negate those truths. This ongoing process hits one’s identity especially powerfully because it also involves an ongoing reassessment of one’s approach to knowing. As Massingale suggests,

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surviving this conversion of identity requires recognizing the role of God in it. Living out epistemic solidarity is a movement towards greater union with God because it is growth in the disposition and skills of an authentic knower who in seeking truth seeks God, and who does so in the context of God’s presence in all members of one’s community.


Gorman, Michael J. “‘Although/Because He Was in the Form of God’: The Theological Significance of Paul's Master Story (Phil 2:6-11).” *Journal of Theological Interpretation*, 1, no. 2 (Fall 2007): 147-169.


