

## 1 Preliminaries

Philosophers working in epistemology typically seek to understand the nature of propositional knowledge. Where propositions are the contents of one's beliefs about reality, such propositions are true just in case they represent part of how the world in fact is, and false when they represent how the world is not. Epistemologists typically focus on how we can form (and sustain) beliefs that are ensured to be, or at least more likely to be, true; and when they are true, epistemologists examine the conditions under which such beliefs would be knowledge. One classic approach is to assess the evidence or arguments supporting one's beliefs: how sensory perception, one's reasoning processes, one's reliance on memory or on others' testimony, makes one's beliefs more reliable, even if fallible.

Epistemologists also wonder about *how much* we can know, and about which domains. Knowledge about the empirical world is perhaps one thing. But what about our beliefs in the areas of long past history, or mathematics, or morality, or politics? Or religion? A common view is that for many of these domains, it is much harder, and perhaps nearly impossible, to acquire knowledge. When considering the God of the monotheistic traditions, gaining *knowledge* about the existence and (if there is such a being) the attributes of God is often assumed to be out of reach. Philosophical examination of the possibility of such knowledge often focuses on arguments for and against the existence of God. The most prominent arguments for theism tend to be ontological arguments, such as those descending from Anselm, as well as cosmological arguments, teleological or (recently) fine-tuning arguments, moral arguments, and so on. The most prominent arguments against theism are from the problem of evil and suffering, or from divine hiddenness. These arguments are sophisticated and often quite technical, and philosophers disagree over which arguments are strongest. As such they also disagree over what, if anything, people should believe as a result. Thus, it is most often felt that the matter of whether there is a God is not demonstratively clear one way or the other.<sup>1</sup> Thus, philosophers (and many others) settle for talk of religious *beliefs* about the existence or nature of God, and similarly for atheistic belief: The common cultural question tends to be whether one believes that there is a God, not whether one *knows* that there is, or is not, a God. As such, the typical questions turn to what makes for justified or responsibly held theistic (or atheistic) beliefs, or under what conditions one might, with agnostics, withhold belief on the matter.

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<sup>1</sup> And then such entrenched disagreement is sometimes invoked against the plausibility of theism. For recent work on the epistemology of religious disagreement, see De Cruz (2019), Pittard (2020), and the essays in Benton and Kvanvig (2021).

This section considers a brief retrospective of how these issues are often framed, beginning with three influential parables from Antony Flew, R. M. Hare, and Basil Mitchell.<sup>2</sup> These parables orient us to three different views of religious epistemology, two of which dominated the themes of discussion for the last century, but one of which remains to be carefully developed; the sections of this Element aim to provide an account of this neglected theme. Looking ahead, Section 2 considers the nature of propositional knowledge in general, and how plausibly someone might gain knowledge that God exists, even given concerns about defeat and disagreement. Section 3 will draw on important recent work in epistemology concerning objectual or qualitative knowledge, practical knowledge, and interpersonal knowledge, in an attempt to motivate a broader approach to epistemology which moves beyond the focus on propositional knowledge. While such advances are independently motivated, we shall, in section 4, propose significant applications of them in religious epistemology, including one that several theistic traditions already recognize. Finally, Section 5 articulates an account of theistic faith in terms of the lessons learned from earlier sections.

### 1.1 Three Parables

Antony Flew adapted an anecdote from John Wisdom (1945) in order to lodge a combined epistemic and linguistic criticism concerning religious belief:

Once upon a time two explorers came upon a clearing in the jungle. In the clearing were growing many flowers and many weeds. One explorer says, “some gardener must tend this plot.” The other disagrees, “there is no gardener.” So they pitch their tents and set a watch. No gardener is ever seen. “But perhaps he is an invisible gardener.” So they set up a barbed-wire fence. They electrify it. They patrol with bloodhounds. . . . But no shrieks ever suggest that some intruder has received a shock. No movements of the wire ever betray an invisible climber. The bloodhounds never give cry. Yet still the Believer is not convinced. “But there is a gardener, invisible, intangible, insensible to electric shocks, a gardener who has no scent and makes no sound, a gardener who comes secretly to look after the garden which he loves.” At last the Sceptic despairs, “But what remains of your original assertion? Just how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all?”

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<sup>2</sup> From a symposium on Theology and Falsification, published in a now-defunct Oxford journal *University*, 1950–51, repr. in Flew, Hare, and Mitchell (1955) and in many later philosophy of religion anthologies.

Flew sums up his concern by noting that “[a] fine brash hypothesis may thus be killed by inches, the death by a thousand qualifications” (Flew, Hare, and Mitchell 1955, 96–97). Flew’s own discussion is unfortunately couched in the then prevailing orthodoxy of logical positivism (particularly given its expression, in Oxford, by Ayer 1936<sup>3</sup>): Flew invokes a falsification principle in order to focus on the *meaning* of the one explorer’s assertion that a gardener must tend the plot. For Flew, the meaning of the explorer’s assertion is given by the evidential conditions under which they could verify or falsify its truth, as opposed to the conditions under which it would be true. Flew explains that if we are in doubt about what someone meant by their assertive utterance, we can

attempt to find what he would regard as counting against, or as being incompatible with, its truth. For if the utterance is indeed an assertion, it will necessarily be equivalent to a denial of the negation of that assertion. And anything which would count against the assertion, or which would induce the speaker to withdraw it and to admit that it had been mistaken, must be part of (or the whole of) the meaning of the negation of that assertion. (Flew, Hare, and Mitchell 1955, 98)

Thus, Flew seems to insist along with Ayer that such religious assertions are “meaningless.” But with the benefit of later developments in philosophy of language, we can see that the epistemological issues are distinct from the semantic issues: evidence which would count against my belief that *p*, expressed by my asserting “*p*,” isn’t part of the *meaning* of my assertion. Suppose I assert “All emeralds are green,” and a budding gemologist counters this by pointing out (falsely) that some emeralds have been found which are red. Her testimony might be treated as evidence against my claim, and might lead me to retreat to “Oh, well that’s what I had learned”; or it might be rebuffed if I knew this rumor to be wrong. But my epistemic position (or dialectical ability) has no bearing on what the initial claim *meant*. A declarative utterance’s meaning is connected to its truth conditions, not its verification or falsification conditions. Difficulty (or ease) in empirically confirming (or disconfirming) some declarative claim doesn’t change its meaning: It will be true or false depending on how the world is, quite apart from whether we are well-positioned to discern how the world is. “The number of planets in the Milky Way galaxy is even” means what it does apart from whether any of us could ever verify it.

<sup>3</sup> Philosophical theologians had to reckon with the dominance of such positivism, particularly around Oxford; see especially Mitchell (1958). Cf. the introduction to Dole and Chignell (2005) for philosophical reception of the next half century; and Knight (2013) for two major twentieth century theological responses to the positivism of Ayer, Flew (incl. Flew 1966), and others.

We need not accept Flew’s semantic theory in order to acknowledge the important epistemological issue raised by the parable: It can seem increasingly irrational to accept a hypothesis when the evidence one would expect to find for it goes lacking. Flew’s believing explorer is insufficiently responsive to new evidence which fails to confirm his hypothesis that some gardener (still) tends the plot, and this seems to be mounting evidence *against* his (initial) hypothesis. Continuing to qualify the hypothesis in response looks like a desperate attempt to save it, rather than reduce one’s confidence in it. And Flew’s deeper concern is that a theist, much like his gardener-believing explorer, is insufficiently responsive to the evidence, particularly when significant counterevidence emerges, such as the evidence of evil and suffering which seem to tell against the Christian theist’s belief that there is a God of love.<sup>4</sup>

R. M. Hare’s response invoked his own parable, of a lunatic student who thinks all the university faculty are out to get him:

A certain lunatic is convinced that all dons [university professors] want to murder him. His friends introduce him to all the mildest and most respectable dons that they can find, and after each of them has retired, they say, “You see, he doesn’t really want to murder you; he spoke to you in a most cordial manner; surely you are convinced now?” But the lunatic replies, “Yes, but that was only his diabolical cunning; he’s really plotting against me the whole time, like the rest of them; I know it I tell you.” However many kindly dons are produced, the reaction is still the same. (Flew, Hare, and Mitchell 1955, 99–100)

Hare’s case is much like Flew’s gardener-believing explorer, in that they both seem to be improperly responsive to evidence, though for the lunatic student, the failure is plausibly one of not responding to counterevidence against his belief (rather than a failure to appreciate the ongoing lack of evidence for it). For “there is no behaviour of dons that can be enacted which he will accept as counting against his theory” (1955, 100).

<sup>4</sup> “. . . it often seems to people who are not religious as if there was no conceivable event or series of events the occurrence of which would be admitted by sophisticated religious people to be a sufficient reason for conceding ‘there wasn’t a God after all’ or ‘God does not really love us then.’ Someone tells us that God loves us as a father loves his children. We are reassured. But then we see a child dying of inoperable cancer of the throat. His earthly father is driven frantic in his efforts to help, but his Heavenly Father reveals no obvious sign of concern. Some qualification is made—God’s love is ‘not a merely human love’ or it is ‘an inscrutable love’, perhaps—and we realize that such sufferings are quite compatible with the truth of the assertion that ‘God loves us as a father (but, of course, . . .)’. We are reassured again. But then perhaps we ask: what is this assurance of God’s (appropriately qualified) love worth, what is this apparent guarantee really a guarantee against? Just what would have to happen not merely (morally and wrongly) to tempt but also (logically and rightly) to entitle us to say ‘God does not love us’ or even ‘God does not exist?’” (Flew, Hare, and Mitchell 1955, 98–99).

Hare argues against Flew's approach to dismissing the believer's claim as meaningless. Though Hare seems to accept Flew's use of the semantic theory, he hopes to show that the function of certain beliefs (or belief-like commitments) reveals their roles in one's motivation and reasoning. For Hare, the lunatic student has a *blik*:

Let us call that in which we differ from this lunatic, our respective *bliks*. He has an insane *blik* about dons; we have a sane one. It is important to realize that we have a sane one, not no *blik* at all; for there must be two sides to any argument – if he has a wrong *blik*, then those who are right about dons must have a right one. (1955, 100)<sup>5</sup>

Hare insists that such *bliks* are not like standard beliefs which are, or should be, responsive to evidence; rather, they are presupposed in order for us to interpret what the evidence supports, perhaps even nonrational. The mistake of Flew's position, Hare suggests, "is to regard this kind of talk as some sort of *explanation*, as scientists are accustomed to use the word . . . as Hume saw, without a *blik* there can be no explanation; for it is by our *bliks* that we decide what is and what is not an explanation" (1955, 101). Thus, for Hare, the student's and the theist's *bliks* arguably function like hinge propositions: They frame what evidence is, and how it supports hypotheses (much like what formal epistemologists call a prior probability function). As Wittgenstein earlier (circa 1950–51) put it, "the *questions* that we raise and our *doubts* depend upon the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn" (Wittgenstein 1969, §341; cf. Pritchard 2000, 2012).

So Flew's and Hare's parables each characterize the theist as not responsive to evidence against their theistic commitments, although each in somewhat different ways. Flew's explorer continued to qualify his belief, thinning it out so as to change what evidence should be expected given it; whereas Hare's student's *blik* about dons remained intact, and it was so deeply embedded in the student's psyche that it served to constrain how they interpreted all new evidence. Hare also noted a further difference, namely, that the explorers are somewhat detached, not much minding about which of their hypotheses is true, whereas the student cares greatly about his, given the practical stakes for him about it (Flew, Hare, and Mitchell 1955, 103).

Basil Mitchell, writing in reply to both Flew and Hare, offers his own parable which borrows elements from each of their examples. Mitchell responds in

<sup>5</sup> Note how paradoxical Hare's line is, accepting Flew's semantic theory that the student's *blik* (if verbalized) "asserts nothing," but also assessing that *blik* as "wrong," since "those who are right about dons must have a right" *blik*. But if we are right about dons, that'd be because it's *true* that they are not out to murder, in which case its assertion cannot be meaningless.

partial agreement with Flew, namely, that theological utterances ought to count as assertions, and he also agrees about how theists should respond to the evidence: Mitchell acknowledges that the theist should treat some evidence, particularly facts about suffering, as counting against their beliefs.<sup>6</sup> He likewise sides with Hare in thinking that the theist's interests are not those of a detached observer, but of faithful commitment to trusting God. Thus, Mitchell insists that the theist's view, including the nature of their initial experience and evidence, should be reconceived in interpersonal terms. Mitchell illustrates this through his own parable of the Partisan and the Stranger:

In time of war in an occupied country, a member of the resistance meets one night a stranger who deeply impresses him. They spend that night together in conversation. The Stranger tells the partisan that he himself is on the side of the resistance – indeed that he is in command of it, and urges the partisan to have faith in him no matter what happens. The partisan is utterly convinced at that meeting of the Stranger's sincerity and constancy and undertakes to trust him.

They never meet in conditions of intimacy again. But sometimes the Stranger is seen helping members of the resistance, and the partisan is grateful and says to his friends, "He is on our side."

Sometimes he is seen in the uniform of the police handing over patriots to the occupying power. On these occasions his friends murmur against him; but the partisan still says, "He is on our side." He still believes that, in spite of appearances, the Stranger did not deceive him. Sometimes he asks the Stranger for help and receives it. He is then thankful. Sometimes he asks and does not receive it. Then he says, "the Stranger knows best." Sometimes his friends, in exasperation, say, "Well, what *would* he have to do for you to admit that you were wrong and that he is not on our side?" But the partisan refuses to answer. He will not consent to put the Stranger to the test. . . .

The partisan of the parable does not allow anything to count decisively against the proposition "the Stranger is on our side." This is because he has committed himself to trust the Stranger. But he of course recognizes that the Stranger's ambiguous behavior *does* count against what he believes about him. It is precisely this situation which constitutes the trial of his faith.

When the partisan asks for help and doesn't get it, what can he do? He can (a) conclude that the stranger is not on our side; or (b) maintain that he is on our side, but that he has reasons for withholding help.

The first he will refuse to do. How long can he uphold the second position without its becoming just silly?

I don't think one can say in advance. It will depend on the nature of the impression created by the Stranger in the first place. (Flew, Hare, and Mitchell 1955, 103–104)

<sup>6</sup> For clarity on the epistemological details of this view, in light of much recent literature on the skeptical theist response to the problem of evil, see Benton, Hawthorne, and Isaacs (2016).

Mitchell explains that the partisan's belief that the stranger is on their side is different from the *bliks* from Hare's parable, and in multiple ways. First, the partisan does feel the ongoing force of the evidence against his belief, and trust, in the stranger; whereas the student does not admit that anything counts against his *blik*. Second, the partisan has a reason for his belief in the stranger, owing to their encounter and his understanding of the stranger's character; whereas the student has no reason for their *blik* about dons. Third, Mitchell likewise thinks of the partisan's belief as an *explanation*, for "it explains and makes sense of the stranger's behavior." Moreover, Mitchell argues against Flew (and Hare) that the partisan's assertion of his belief in the stranger, much like a theist's that "God loves us," does indeed count as meaningful and an assertion (1955, 105).

## 1.2 Two Lessons

One significant lesson of these parables is that philosophers should examine what sorts of evidence or arguments contribute to a belief about God being rational or being knowledge, while being wary of how ancillary matters (such as whatever semantic theory is currently en vogue) might lead one astray.<sup>7</sup>

A second lesson, for our purposes, involves a crucial aspect of Mitchell's parable, and one which is also the least often discussed: It involves two people meeting and relating to each other, wherein the personal encounter between them enables the partisan to assess and understand the stranger's character. The partisan learns of the stranger's existence in a way which supports placing trust in him. The initial experience was interpersonal, of the sort which happens when one begins to know someone else personally, in relationship.<sup>8</sup> A natural way of understanding the partisan's scenario is comparable to many of our other personal interactions: what one person learns about the other in many such encounters is sufficiently rich as to provide rational support in the face of much doubt. If so, the epistemologist would like to have a fuller account of such knowledge, how it is acquired and sustained, and why it might matter. Given the importance of our human relationships and of social cognition,

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<sup>7</sup> Another example of this is medieval mystics' pessimism in the epistemology of testimony, which flows from their emotionist semantics and strong readings of *de re* content: see Fraser (2018).

<sup>8</sup> The account to be developed here thus aims to recover scattered interpersonal themes from the first half of the twentieth century, e.g., in C. C. J. Webb (1911 and 1920); William James (1912); John Cook Wilson (1926a); Norman Kemp Smith (1931), who called for an "altered theory of knowledge"; Martin Buber (1937); John Baillie (1939); a young John Rawls (1941; unpublished until 2009); C. S. Lewis (1955 and 1959); and H. H. Price (1965), among others.

we might well hope to make progress on understanding the details of an interpersonal epistemology more generally, unseating the dominant framework of propositional belief.<sup>9</sup> A philosopher of religion focusing on theism has a particular interest in how it might work should there be a God to whom humans might be related in structurally similar ways.

The most prominent theistic voices in religious epistemology of the last generation focused primarily on religious *belief*, and sometimes on *propositional* knowledge about God, but rarely examined what it might be to know God in some relational sense. William Alston, in his important book *Perceiving God*, acknowledges that his central thesis throughout concerns only the epistemic justification, rationality, and reliability of (propositional) belief about God, and says almost nothing about propositional knowledge.<sup>10</sup> Similarly Richard Swinburne defends theism as rational given a probabilistic framework for belief, but has little to say about propositional knowledge (Swinburne 2005, 63–65; cf. 2001, Chap. 8). Alvin Plantinga, in *Warranted Christian Belief* (2000), is focused primarily on a notion of warranted belief given his proper functionalist account of justification (developed more fully in Plantinga 1993), which he connects to the possibility of propositional knowledge.<sup>11</sup> Where Plantinga explicitly invokes such knowledge as part of his “Extended Aquinas/Calvin model” of what faith involves, he rarely appeals to knowing God in any personal or relational sense.<sup>12</sup> To his credit, Nicholas Wolterstorff gestured briefly, in early writings, at the connection between knowing and having faith in God,<sup>13</sup> but he says little else until very recent work (Wolterstorff 2016, 2021).

This not a criticism of these philosophers, for any recent work in epistemology of religion owes much to their pioneering work. In particular, arguments by Alston, Swinburne, Plantinga, Wolterstorff, and others did much to dissolve several philosophical objections to theistic belief according to which such belief is subpar by being irrational or unreasonable because it was thought to

<sup>9</sup> Note that Judaism arguably lacks the recent emphasis on belief: cf. Lebens (2013, 2023).

<sup>10</sup> Except for two pages, Alston (1991, 284–285).

<sup>11</sup> Plantinga regards warrant as whatever property turns true belief into knowledge. Yet understood this way, one could never have warranted false beliefs, and it is less clear how to evaluate true but unwarranted beliefs about God (he argues that “if Christian belief is true, then it is also warranted” (Plantinga 2000, xii), and that “the question whether theistic belief has *warrant* is not, after all, independent of the question whether theistic belief is *true*,” 191).

<sup>12</sup> Though see Plantinga (2000, 256–58, incl. fn. 30, and Ch. 9) on religious affections.

<sup>13</sup> “To have faith in God is to know him; to know God is to have faith in him” (Wolterstorff, Introduction to Plantinga and Wolterstorff 1983, 15); and “Interpretation of a person’s discourse occurs, and can only occur, in the context of knowledge of that person. . . . So too for God: to interpret God’s discourse more reliably, we must come to know God better” (Wolterstorff 1995, 239).

be insufficiently supported by argument or (certain sorts of) evidence.<sup>14</sup> We only note then that their arguments were centered on responding to skeptical concerns over whether and how one can hold rational or justified beliefs about God.<sup>15</sup>

Recent mainstream epistemology has largely turned away from “classical” (Cartesian) foundationalist and internalist views of knowledge which were more widely accepted during that earlier period, and which drove the common objections to theistic belief. Narrow or “classical” foundationalism held that all knowledge we might have comes from a limited range of sources of (or kinds of) evidence, such as through sensory perception, memory, reasoning, or some combination thereof. Some forms of internalism often complemented such a foundationalist picture, according to which the evidence on which one’s beliefs are based must, if such beliefs are to be knowledge, be immediately accessible or available to one.

Yet such accounts struggled to explain how it is that we commonly acquire knowledge from another person’s testimony, an especially pressing problem given how much of what we know is socially dependent on others’ knowledge. Such views likewise seem unable to explain how we can know a great deal about other people, like those we interact with daily. John Greco nicely summarizes these inadequacies: such foundationalisms and internalisms try

to explain all of our knowledge in terms of too few sources of knowledge, too limited a variety of evidence. One place this becomes evident is regarding our *knowledge of persons*. How is it that we know what other persons are thinking or feeling, or that they have minds at all? If we have a limited conception of the sources of knowledge, it will be very hard to say. (Greco 2017, 10; italics mine)

As Greco notes, mainstream epistemology has largely moved beyond this outdated approach to knowledge, turning more toward broadly externalist approaches to knowledge, such as causal, or reliabilist, or proper functionalist, or virtue epistemology theories, or even “knowledge-first” approaches to epistemology which regard knowledge as the fundamental and unanalyzable notion in terms of which epistemic theorizing is to be done.<sup>16</sup> Contemporary

<sup>14</sup> See especially Plantinga (1967); Swinburne (2004 (1st ed., 1979)); Alston (1982); Plantinga and Wolterstorff (1983) (Alston, “Christian Experience and Christian Belief,” especially 103–110; Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God,” at 20–39; and Wolterstorff, “Can Belief in God Be Rational If It Has No Foundations?,” sects. 3–7); and Plantinga (2000, Ch. 3). See Moon (2016) and McNabb (2019) for apt overviews of “Reformed” epistemology.

<sup>15</sup> See Dunaway and Hawthorne (2017) on skepticism about theism.

<sup>16</sup> See especially Goldman (1967 and 1986) for causal and reliabilist views; Plantinga (1993) and Bergmann (2006) for proper-functionalist accounts; Sosa (2007) and Greco (2010) for virtue epistemology; Williamson (2000) for knowledge-first epistemology. Most such externalist

theorizing also draws on related advances in the cognitive sciences, which have discovered that human cognition depends on “a rich variety of integrated modules or faculties, each with its own job to do in different domains of knowledge” (Greco 2017, 10).

Importantly for our focus, Greco situates the present state of play thus: “Religious epistemology and the epistemology of theology have followed suit, by rejecting outdated models of our knowledge of God,” a movement borne out by much recent work.<sup>17</sup> Greco continues:

Most prominently, both now challenge the idea that our knowledge of God must be by means of ‘proofs’ or ‘demonstrations’, as if knowledge of God were akin to knowledge of mathematical theorems. On the contrary, contemporary religious epistemology takes seriously the idea that our knowledge of God is a kind of knowledge of persons. But in general, our knowledge of persons is by means of our interpersonal experience of them, as well as by means of what they reveal about themselves with their own words and actions. Religious epistemology is nowadays interested in pursuing analogous models of our knowledge of a personal God. (Greco 2017, 10–11)

Thus in this Element we shall be less preoccupied with arguing against skepticism or charges of irrationality, and shall aim to make progress on what other sorts of knowledge of God one might have, with a focus on what *interpersonal* knowledge of God might involve. The overall approach centers the notion(s) of knowledge in order to reveal the many dimensions of cognition which we already recognize in human affairs, and to assess how plausibly they might apply to us with respect to God, if there is a God. This is highly relevant given that the lived experience of many religious believers includes a nuanced understanding of their religious experiences and the practices through which they encounter God.<sup>18</sup>

In Section 2 we shall survey some views about propositional knowledge in general, and the possibility of propositional knowledge about God, if there is

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views are coupled with a version of foundationalism (understood merely as the view that there are some beliefs, or sources of them, which are properly basic and not derived from other sources); yet such views are more permissive about those sources than the broadly classical foundationalism dominant even up through the mid-twentieth century. For discussion of “classical” versus more plausible foundationalisms, see Plantinga (2000, 82–99), and Bergmann (2017).

<sup>17</sup> Note, e.g., that the essays in Benton, Hawthorne, and Rabinowitz (2018), or Ellis (2018), or recent articles like Griffioen (2022), contain very little mention of foundationalism or internalism.

<sup>18</sup> “Knowing God involves training, and it involves interpretation . . . as people acquire the knowledge and the practices through which they come to know that God, the most intimate aspects of the way they experience their everyday world change. . . . They have different evidence for what is true” (Luhmann 2012, 226; cf. 317–321. See especially Luhmann 2020 for more).