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Response to P. Hart

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Hart's essay begins with a brief mention of the "folk" understandings of the terms "method" and "theory," citing McCutcheon, by pointing out the difference in their perceived authoritative status: "scientific method" and "conspiracy theory." I would add that "method" in general is viewed as a "systematic procedure," connoting that it has been rigorously tested, while "theory" is often regarded as speculative and thus imaginary. "It's just a theory" means it is not proven, and so possibly not true (this meaning is highlighted by Hart later in the essay).

Regarding their use in the academic study of religion, and in course curricula in particular, Hart points out that an undergraduate degree in Religious Studies will often include a module on "method and theory," which is also the case in the UK context. If the study of religion is methodologically pluralist, then all the more reason to be explicit about the methods employed. However, one does not usually see method and theory as part of a Theology degree (in the UK, Theology and Religious Studies are often combined or taught alongside each other as separate degrees in the same department).¹ This omission in Theology does not mean that method and theory has been incorporated into other modules. Colleagues have

¹ "Theology and Religious Studies" is the title of the department or subject area at both Leeds Trinity University and the University of Chester, where I work. Typically, "method and theory" modules are taught as part of the undergraduate Religious Studies degree but not the Theology degree.

often lamented that, by the time students write their undergraduate dissertations in their final year, they do not seem to know what a method or theory is and therefore these go unstated, with the students failing to recognize that their work has any. To confuse matters, method and theory modules (usually in the first year of their degree) sometimes include “theology” as an approach, which also fails to identify the variety methods and theories employed in Theology. The dissertation students are typically enrolled in a module that instructs them on research methods where they are asked to identify their research question or problem, the theoretical framework they are employing, and how they will go about collecting and analyzing the data produced (the method).

One problem in the study of religion is distinguishing method from theory, which Hart’s essay, in part, seeks to address by investigating their etymologies in Greek and the analogies employed to explain them. One recent analogy given is Tweed’s (2006) idea of theory as a travel itinerary, which, as Hart points out, does not help to distinguish theory from method. As the essay reveals, in my view, the etymologies do not easily distinguish them either unless pushed. The essay shows that “method” in Greek is a compound of *meta* and *hodos*. Hart concentrates on the *hodos* part of the word, which means “way” or “road,” but metaphorically (in Parmenides) as a way to apprehend true knowledge. As for “theory,” early Greek usage suggests that it is an observation of a spectacle – or apprehension of true knowledge. This then makes “theory” the apprehension of true knowledge while “method” is the path taken to arrive at that apprehension. Since Hart treats the terms “method” and “theory” separately in the essay, the relation between them is not always this clear.

The idea of theory as the apprehension of true knowledge seems to align with Russell McCutcheon’s first notion of theory as “a rational, explanatory account for just this or that series of experiences, observations, and events” (2001: 112). The second notion, “theory-as-critique” (2001: 113), deconstructs explanatory theories, which Hart links to Lyotard’s idea

of the “incredulity towards metanarratives” (Lyotard 1984: xxiv). However, Hart sees this as really another theory-as-explanation and would subsume both notions as *myth-making* or *logos-making*, deriving these terms from Bruce Lincoln’s work (1999: 18).

Hart also states that “whether discourse is clothed in theory (coupled with method), *logos*, or *mythos*, it often seeks the same end – true knowledge – regardless of our inability to attain it.”

However, wouldn’t the *way* we seek be the method and *what* we seek be the theory? In practice, there is little separation between theory and method as they form a dialectical pair.

A method does not just happen without some purpose or proposition. Hart continues by saying that “the *pursuit* of truth itself, or metaphysics, would seem to be an immutable, inherent component of our condition as finite rational beings.” Presumably this is the madness that Hart refers to in the title of his essay. It is an endless occupation, like the punishment of Sisyphus, who rolls a boulder up the hill. He never reaches the top of the mountain before it rolls down again, thus never able to perceive the whole picture – a god’s eye view is denied him. Therefore, abandoning the search for truth might be the preferred option in the study of religion. Yet, unless we are sitting in absentmindedness, questions remain about what we are seeking and how.

Hart raises the issue of whether even by their “mere invocation” method and theory confer legitimacy on academic studies of religion. However, I would argue that the claim to superior insight or knowledge of truth *without* invoking these terms can also put on an air of legitimacy when scholars assert a “truth” without indicating how they got there or what they were looking for. At the Study of Religion as an Academic Discipline (SORAAD) workshop in Baltimore, ahead of the American Academy of Religion meeting in 2013, Philip Deslippe spoke about some advice given to him by Dan Montella: “You don’t collect data; you collect stuff that you turn into data.” The next day, in conversation with Russell McCutcheon, we concluded that data is not “out there” as undifferentiated “stuff,” because as soon as you

reach for it, it becomes data because there is some theoretical framework and method being used in order to direct the selection, the gaze. Nevertheless, I wholly agree with Hart when he suggests that “we must remain attentive to whether these terms actually possess inherent legitimacy, and how exactly they work [to] legitimize our academic products.”

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