

From Knowing Places to Knowing Persons

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ABSTRACT: This paper develops an account of knowledge of another person (i.e. interpersonal knowledge) upon which it is a non-propositional, embodied, and aesthetic form of knowledge. In general, knowledge of other people has not received as much attention in analytic epistemology as has knowledge of the external world or knowledge of facts in general. In “Knowing things and going places”, Quill R Kukla proposes an account of knowledge of objects generally based on knowledge of place. On their account, objectual knowledge (knowledge-of) is “active, aesthetic, first-person experiential knowledge of an existing concrete particular that depends on skill and is a matter of degree” (Kukla 2023, p. 274). Thus, the goal of this paper is to determine how to apply this to knowing a person. In full, to know someone is to be able to successfully navigate some social situations with them. By ‘successfully navigate social situations’, I have in mind participating in shared experiences and doing so in a way that realizes shared goals. Additionally, in this paper I raise objections to Matthew A. Benton’s causal account and David Matheson’s communication account and show that my preferred account avoids these objections.

KEYWORDS: Objectual Knowledge; Interpersonal Knowledge; Embodied Knowledge

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There can be no doubt that we *do* know one another. [...]

The question is *how* we know others.

— R.I. Aaron (1944, p. 63)

1. Introduction

When epistemologists of the 20th and 21st centuries are talking about knowledge, they are generally talking about knowledge of propositions or facts – *propositional* or *factual* knowledge or knowledge-*that*. In this vein, justification and belief – among other things – have been discussed as the primary requirements for securing knowledge.

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Beyond this kind of knowledge, knowledge how to do something has received the next most attention – knowledge-*how* or *procedural* knowledge. But in many anthologies and introductory texts, there is a third kind of knowledge that is alluded to: *objectual* knowledge or knowledge-*of*.¹

In this paper, I’m interested in objectual knowledge of persons – *interpersonal* knowledge. I focus on this kind of knowledge, because, following Matheson (2010, p. 438), I think that it “plays a distinctly meaningful role in everyday life” and is thus ripe for analysis. I aim to build out an account of interpersonal knowledge from Quill R Kukla’s analysis of objectual knowledge. To Kukla (2023, p. 274), objectual knowledge is “active, aesthetic, first-person experiential knowledge of an existing concrete particular that depends on skill and is a matter of degree.” Naturally, then, interpersonal knowledge should have all the same characteristics but take as an object another person. However, it takes some work to see what the skill and first-person experience mean in the context of interpersonal relationships.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows: In section 2, I reconstruct Kukla’s account of objectual knowledge. Section 3 applies this to the interpersonal case and offers a few clarifications about what kind of first-personal experience and skill are required for this kind of knowledge. In full, to know someone is to be able to successfully navigate some social situations with them. By ‘successfully navigate social situations’, I have in mind participating in shared experiences and doing so in a way that realizes shared goals. In section 4, I compare the resulting account of interpersonal knowledge to Matthew A. Benton’s causal contact account and David Matheson’s communication account. In each case, I show that there is some serious objection facing that account that the account developing in this paper avoids. Finally, section 5 concludes.

2. Knowing Things as Knowing Places

In “Knowing things and going places”, Quill R Kukla develops an account of what it is to know a place and then generalizes certain features to arrive at a conception of knowing

¹See the introduction to Pavese 2022.

things, that is, objectual knowledge. Kukla's conception of objectual knowledge is, roughly, "a matter of knowing what it's like to competently experience [the object of one's knowledge]" (Kukla 2023, p. 271). The purpose of this section is to reconstruct their rationale for arrive at this formulation of objectual knowledge before applying it in section 3.

For Kukla, I know a place if I know what it is like to 'competently experience' it. There seem to be two requirements packed into this notion. First, I must have a *first-person experience* of navigating the place – call this the Experience Requirement. And this seems to track with ordinary intuition: if someone says to me that he knows New York City but then says he has never been there – let alone navigated it – I will give him a quizzical look. Similarly, this requirement, I think rightly, suggests that one fails to know a place if one knows second-hand access how to navigate a city; hearing a story about walking down 5th Avenue to get to the Metropolitan Museum of Art is insufficient for knowing New York City.

Second, I must know my way around the place, that is, have familiarity with the uses of and dynamic social patterns associated with the place – call this the Competency Requirement. Just as before, this requirement has its basis in first-personal experience. Unlike before, this requirement seeks to capture the sense in which when I know a city, "I know how to find my way around; I am a skilled navigator of it. The aesthetic legibility of the city for me depends on my ability to move around in it and not just on knowing how it appears in sensation" (ibid., p. 269). And Kukla means 'aesthetic' here in a broader sense than strictly concerned with beauty. Instead, they mean "knowledge of what it is like to have sensory (including kinaesthetic) experience of something, and that it involves our familiarity with patterns, harmonies, unities, and forms that show up at the sensuous level, in particularized experience" (ibid., p. 270). Hence, the fuller point is that when one knows a city, it is intelligible to them. But it is not just intelligible in the sense that they can tell you which streets intersect with which others. Rather, it is intelligible in the sense that one has a familiarity with patterns based on their experiences of those places. Examples of the sort of social

patterns that Kukla has in mind are far reaching; “People move in distinctive ways in train stations, grocery stores, and school yards, for instance, and these movements are shaped by and give meaning to the physical structure of these spaces. You cannot coherently move as you would in a grocery store if you are standing on a train platform, and vice-versa” (Kukla 2023, p. 270). So, part of this requirement is knowing when and how to engage in the correct social pattern.

With these two requirements – Experience and Competency – it is important to remember that place knowledge is an *active* form of knowledge. That is, knowing a place requires spending time in that place and, as Kukla says, “negotiate it over time” (ibid., pp. 269, 270, 275). Again, we expect someone who has spent a long time in New York to not only know it better than the someone who has visited once or twice, but to know it at all. And this is because the local navigates the city frequently; he gets lost and finds his way and, thus, develops his skill at navigating it.

To summarize then, Kukla’s view holds that our knowledge of places is knowledge of (1) some *concrete, particular* thing, (2) aesthetic insofar as it requires grasping patterns and legibility, (3) experiential, and (4) first-personal. And this provides something of a model for objectual knowledge. Thus, they suggest that knowing some concrete particular is a matter of knowing what it’s like to competently experience that particular, where one has had some first-person experience of that particular and “the ability to experience [that particular] is a skill that requires dynamic interaction with [it]” (ibid., p. 271). This generalization is meant to capture the kind of knowledge we are talking about when we say “I know *S*” in a way that is not short for “I know that *S*” or “I know how to *S*”. Hence, this account is applicable to, say, the kind of knowledge one has of their friends or family members, or a work of art. No matter the object of our knowledge, first-person experience with that object and competency are always required. The purpose of the next section is to explicate more fully what this looks like in the context of knowing other people.

3. From Knowing Places to Knowing Persons

In our lives, we probably come to know a great many people. The people we know best are likely our friends, romantic partners, and family members. But we likely also know our colleagues, teachers, or the staff at our favorite local restaurant. Any account of interpersonal knowledge should be able to tell us the difference between these groups; in what sense do I know my friend that I do not know my teacher or local bartender? What's more, such an account should also tell us why we do not know the stranger with whom I have ridden the train a handful of times but never talked to.

On a Kukla-inspired account of interpersonal knowledge, my knowledge of my friend should consist, in part, of some kind of grasp of patterns. After all, knowing a city consists partly in familiarity with, say, the patterns of behavior common in the supermarket or public square. So, likewise, there should be some sort of pattern that one grasps when they know someone. I want to suggest that the relevant patterns can be cashed out in terms of someone's *character*. By this, I mean the a person's set of stable behavioral and cognitive dispositions and traits. There was once doubt as to the possibility of a set of stable psychological characteristics – called the situationist critique² – but keen push back based in further empirical research assuages this doubt.³ Indeed, we really do have stable sets of psychological characteristics – such as grit, emotional intelligence, or cooperativeness – that motivate our behavior. It is important to note that by character I do not simply mean to call out sets of moral traits like courage or humility. My use of the notion is meant to be broader to include any stable traits and behaviors that one possesses.

But why think that character adequately gets at the patterns of others that we grasp? Since character includes both psychological and behavioral aspects of a person, it can explain a variety of ways in which we can be familiar with another. Indeed, one thing that I mean when I know my friend is that I know what makes her sad. For instance,

²See Alfano 2013, ch. 2 for a statement of this challenge. See Doris 2002; Harman 1999 for earlier statements of the challenge.

³See especially Fleenor et al. 2014; Slingerland 2011.

I might know that seeing commercials showing caged animals makes her cry or that she feels compelled to stop and pet every dog walking by her. And, importantly, I know these from first-hand experience of watching such commercials with her or walking with her on the street when she exhibits such a reaction. In such a case, I gain familiarity with her stable character trait of emotional intelligence for non-human animals. Although it may well be that I know *that* my friend has such-and-such a stable trait, it is the non-propositional and embodied knowledge of my friend's behavior and psychology that is relevant. I know her in the sense that I know what it is like to spend time with her and that knowing-what-it-is-like involves my familiarity with her, say, compassion toward non-human animals.

Just as Kukla says of place knowledge, interpersonal knowledge takes time and experience to develop. And this makes sense. Character traits are stable and so we cannot come to know them (in a luck avoiding sense) without spending some time with the person who bears them. Indeed, this is why I fail to know strangers on the street. Perhaps in seeing someone yell at their spouse in the supermarket I correctly perceive that they are short-tempered but that does not mean I know them or, better yet, know them *as* short-tempered. That is, I lack the exposure to them to judge that this outburst is more than a one-off instance. Indeed, at best I have what Benton (2017) calls second-grade knowledge or what Matheson (2010) calls impersonal knowledge, that is, I have knowledge about facts about this stranger that were obtained through an interaction where "the causal direction is one-way, from the person to the knower" (Benton 2017, p. 820).

This discussion also motivates the importance of reciprocity and the active nature of interpersonal knowledge. After all, why don't I attain *some* level of interpersonal knowledge of the stranger since I have first-hand experience of navigating some interaction with them? The reason is that interpersonal knowledge differs from other objectual knowledge in that developing it requires reciprocity from the known.⁴ Knowing others requires their disclosure of character or, in other words, their acting au-

⁴This is recognized by many authors. See Benton 2017, p. 826; Kukla 2023, p. 272, n. 5; Matheson 2010, p. 443; Talbert 2015, p. 203.

thetically. While it is true that because one's character is composed of stable traits and qualities that one will generally act in alignment with them, what the situationist critique exposed is that one need not always act in alignment with them. And this shapes how I understand 'acting authentically'. For my purposes, one acts authentically when their exhibited behavior or thought is consistent with their stable character traits.⁵ Hence, interpersonal knowledge is 'active' or 'reciprocal' in the sense that it requires a rather particular kind of participation on the part its object.

Lastly, Kukla's place knowledge required competency in navigating that place and I want to make an analogous suggestion for interpersonal knowledge. Interpersonal knowledge requires competence in navigating experiences with the person known. Recall that in the case of place knowledge, the point about competency is that one knows, say, a city to the extent that they are able to get around in that city. The local – who knows the city well – knows not only how to get from the library to the supermarket but also knows to say 'Hello!' when they enter an establishment or to avoid the construction on 14th street. Analogously, one has a familiarity with, say, the emotional reactions of one's friends and so avoids discussing issues that would upset them. A better example comes from Bonnie M. Talbert (2015, p. 196): "when I am talking to Shannon, I find that I pace my remarks differently than I do when I am talking to Deme. Without thinking about it I seem to adjust the pace of my conversation to what I somehow perceive is most suitable to the interaction." Recall that I do not mean by character only those sets of moral traits discussed in the virtue ethics literature like courage, temperance, or generosity but a broader sense of stable psychological characteristics and behavioral dispositions. This allows me to make sense of Talbert's example. One aspect of her knowledge of Shannon is her ability to manage conversational pace at a speed helpful for Shannon to provide proper uptake. And this is precisely what I mean when I say that interpersonal knowledge requires competence in navigating experiences with the person known. The relevant kind of competence is maximizing uptake of speech. But in other situations competence might refer to the

⁵See Guignon 2008 for discussion of alternative approaches to authenticity.

achievement of any number of shared goals such as watching a television program together or playing a game.⁶

To summarize, I propose the following statement of the view that interpersonal knowledge deals with character:

IKC. *S* knows *R* interpersonally **iff**: (i) *S* has some (first-person) experiences with *R*; (ii) *S* has a grasp of *R*'s character as a result of such experiences; and (iii) such a grasp allows *S* to navigate experiences successfully.

As I have shown, understanding interpersonal knowledge in terms of character supplements the required notion of pattern recognition which Kukla suggests place knowledge in particular and objectual knowledge in general require. Additionally, in this section I hope to have motivated that the conditions in **IKC** are independently necessary and jointly sufficient for knowing someone in the relevant sense. That is, not only would we expect each of these conditions to be met on its own when someone says they know another, but we would in fact say that one knows someone when these conditions are met. In the next section, I'll compare this view to two others in the literature.

4. Comparison to Other Views

4.1. Avoiding an Objection to Benton's Causal Contact Account

Matthew A. Benton (2017, 2025) suggests that interpersonal knowledge is best understood with reference to reciprocal causal contact. Consider the following statement of the view that interpersonal knowledge requires reciprocal causal contact:⁷

IKR. *S* knows *R* interpersonally **only if**: (i) *S* has had reciprocal causal contact with *R*, in which (ii) *S* treats *R* second-personally, and (iii) *R*

⁶See Bratman 1992, 2013 on planning and shared intentions.

⁷See Benton 2017, p. 822. Benton uses the locution '*S* knows_i *R*' and I have replaced this with '*S* knows *R* interpersonally'. Other than this change, I reproduce his formulation (which he labels ENCOUNTER) exactly.

treats *S* second-personally.

For Benton, second-personal treatment means that “*S* offers to *R* some of *S*’s own thoughts, words, attitudes or emotions, and *S* is or for the most part intends to be attentive to *R*’s thoughts, words, attitudes, or emotions which might be given (to *S* as ‘you’) in return” (Benton 2017, p. 823). Thus, this clarifies the sense in which stalkers do not know their targets. Since a stalker *ipso facto* does not offer their own thoughts to nor intend to be attentive to the needs of their target, they cannot know them.

At least one objection to Benton’s view has already been developed. Katalin Farkas (2019) points out that what makes interpersonal knowledge irreducible to propositional knowledge – that it requires *second-personal* causal contact – is a non-cognitive requirement that also places it outside the *genus* of knowledge. Farkas writes:

Imagine a subject who has highly developed cognitive capacities, but is very deficient in social and emotional aspects. I don’t think this person can consider someone as a subject, and hence get to know another the way we do. If you disagree with this, if purely cognitive systems can know each other, then I return to the first strand of this argument: I challenge you to point at something that these systems have that is not propositional knowledge (produced in a certain way) but constitutes their knowing each other. (ibid., p. 270)

From this excerpt,⁸ it is easy to see that Farkas is suggesting that requiring second-personal treatment makes the relevant sense of knowledge one that drifts to far afield from the state of cognitive success that we typically take it to be.⁹ Thus, the force of this objection lies on, in his Benton’s “[locating] the irreducibility of interpersonal knowing in the two-way interactions characteristic of two subjects treating each other as subjects” (Benton 2017, p. 823). As a result, it is easy to see why, referencing Benton’s view, Farkas elsewhere writes that “interpersonal knowledge [...] is not strictly speaking

⁸As can be seen in this excerpt, Farkas is specifically offering a challenge to accounts of interpersonal knowledge that want it to be non-propositional. She suggests that the theoretical element that would make it non-propositional would disqualify it as knowledge. Although I cannot address this point fully due to limitations of space, I think that this is not quite right. The Kukla-inspired account that I offer here is non-propositional and still, I hold, a matter of cognitive success. That interpersonal knowledge is non-propositional is retained from Kukla’s construal of objectual knowledge as first-personal and experiential. I will show later why it is still a matter of cognitive success.

⁹I follow Farkas in using the term ‘cognitive success’ which, intuitively, characterizes the mental state of getting-things-right. But you might also call this a factive mental state.

knowledge, and its proper study is not epistemology, but the study of social, personal and emotional relationships” (Farkas 2023, p. 115). In sum, the objection runs as follows: if interpersonal knowledge denotes a non-cognitive relation of second-personal treatment, then it is not knowledge because knowledge is by definition a cognitive success.

How does my account avoid Farkas’ objection? I think that Farkas is right to push back against the characterization of interpersonal knowledge offered in **IKR**. Such an analysis of interpersonal knowledge does leave out something crucial. However there is a misstep in the excerpt above. Depending on what she means by ‘very deficient in social and emotional aspects’, Farkas seems to be suggesting that knowledge must be a result of cognitive capacities in a way that is whole divorced from, say, processes of social learning or what psychologists and philosophers of mind call ‘mindreading’ (attributing mental states to another).¹⁰ And this seems to me to be a mistake. Although the exact cognitive machinery which enables one to accurately attribute mental states to another person is debated, I think that all leading theories in philosophy of mind and psychology suggest that mindreading is a serious cognitive capacity which involves various representational and inferential processes.

Given that processes undergirding interpersonal knowledge as understood in **IKC** are genuinely cognitive, we can see why it is also a matter of cognitive success, or ‘*getting things right*’. When one knows an object, one has an experiential (embodied) familiarity with that object in the sense that they know its patterns and how to navigate it. In the context of knowing other people, the relevant notion of patterns is, I suggest, someone’s character. And indeed because I reject the situationist critique, I think that there really are facts of the matter as to whether one has a given trait. Because of this, it makes sense for us to talk about one getting-it-right with respect to someone else’s character. But, again, the sense in which they get it right is a matter of their ability to successfully navigate experiences with that person.

¹⁰See Goldman 2012 for a helpful overview of approaches to ‘theory of mind’ or ‘mindreading’. See also Carlson, Koenig, and Harms 2013.

4.2. Avoiding an Objection to Matheson's Communication Account

Matheson's account of interpersonal knowledge portrays knowing another as strictly a matter of knowing propositions about the other that they have shared with you.¹¹ Consider the following reformulation of conditions for interpersonal knowledge dependent upon the communication of private information:¹²

IKP. *S* knows *R* interpersonally **iff**: (i) *S* knows personal information about *R*; and (ii) *R* communicated that information specifically and manifestly to *S*.

To Matheson, you only know me to the extent that I have told you information about myself. Here, he understands 'personal information' to be "the sort concerning which an individual can have privacy" (Matheson 2010, p. 441). Of course, some pieces of information, such as that $12 \times 13 = 156$, can be inferred on the basis of some mathematical axioms, so no one can reasonably claim to have privacy with respect to that fact. Additionally, Matheson observes that just because a piece of information is *about* persons does not mean it is personal information: consider the fact that the United States has a population greater than 330 million or that "my rate of free fall is that same as that of a small pebble". Instead, "[t]o be able to have privacy about some piece of information about you, that information has to reveal something rather intimate about you, something that cannot be inferred about you simply on the basis of the logical, statistical, or scientific laws under which you fall" (ibid., p. 441).

One objection that we can offer to this view is motivated by the intuition that sometimes others know things about us that we do not know about ourselves. For instance, in an episode of the sitcom *How I Met Your Mother* Marshall and Lily have been together for 11 years but neither of them realized that Lily chews rather loudly.¹³ Lily doesn't

¹¹His account is not too different from Jennifer Lackey's; see Lackey 2026, ch. 4. Although, importantly, Lackey's account is meant to capture the phenomenon of knowing someone in a particularly reparative way whereas Matheson's is meant to capture the everyday sense of knowing someone.

¹²Matheson (2010, p. 443) writes: "One individual knows another just in case the first knows personal information about the second as a result of the second's having communicated the information specifically and manifestly to her." Thus, I have reformulated this into two conditions to match the format of **IKC** and **IKR**.

¹³See Fryman 2007.

learn this fact about herself until a friend tells Marshall who in turn tells her. Although it would be weird to say that Ted or Marshall's knowledge of Lily consists solely in this knowledge, it is not weird to say that they know this because they know her. Or, in other words, that part of what it is to know someone is to be able to point out habits or traits that they did not know they had. On Matheson's view, this doesn't seem to be something that we should be able to do. Indeed, his account would have to disqualify this as an aspect of knowledge of someone and say that it is, in his terminology, and '*impersonal*' form of knowledge on par with knowing her hair color. But this strikes me as wrong. After all, the sort of knowledge we want to capture when we are talking about interpersonal knowledge is, again in Matheson's words, '*intimate*'. And being able to point out someone's habits or traits – even (perhaps especially) if they have not communicated them to us – strikes me as intimate information or, at the very least, something that tends to require intimation.

As opposed to **IKP**, **IKC** handles this objection quite nicely. When one knows an object, one tends to have knowledge of particular propositions which obtain for that object (Kukla 2023, p. 275). What's more, our knowledge of such facts helps guide us in our experiences with that object. And the same is true for our knowledge of other people as well. In the previously mentioned example, for instance, Ted's knowledge of Lily – developed over a decade of friendship and some time as roommates – results in his knowing-*that* she chews loudly.

5. Concluding Thoughts

As I said at the start, epistemologists have generally not said much about our knowledge of others. Despite this, it is quite intuitive that we *do* know others and that we even know some quite *well*. The aim of this paper has been to offer an analysis of such knowledge. Building on Kukla, I suggest that knowing others consists (jointly) in having experiences with them, grasping their character, and successfully navigating further experiences as a result of grasping their character. And this knowledge is fundamentally an experiential and active kind of knowledge. It is embodied in our

successfully securing shared goals with others.

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