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To Know and To Be: Second-Person Knowledge and the Intersubjective Self, A Reply to Talbert

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Bonnie Talbert's (2017) article opens up some fascinating questions stemming from the nature of our second-person knowledge, which led me on a thought-provoking journey from questioning what it takes to *know* another person, towards wondering what *is* a person, in itself? In this reply, I explore Talbert's claim to getting to know a person is akin to the 'knowing-how' of a skill. However, I question her assertion that the propositional 'knowing-that' of 'figuring someone out' is of secondary importance, noting the important interplay of knowledge-how and knowledge-that in the process of skill-acquisition. I try to resolve this by asking *what* is it that we are trying to know when we come to know another person, which offers some intriguing (if speculative) hypotheses on the nature of our second-person relationships.

### **Knowing a Person**

As Talbert points out, knowing a person differs from other types of knowledge especially insofar as people are “moving targets” (2). Human beings are in a constant state of change. As well as physically growing and ageing, facts about our personalities and lifestyles are also in continual flux. A disciplined child can become a scatterbrained adult, while a mid-life crisis mellows into a graceful old age. We can go from disliking scotch whisky to collecting it, from being thrilled by big city life to annoyed by it, or from being avowed pacifists to hard-headed *realpolitikers*. And if such changes aren't hard enough to keep track of, we are at all stages bundles of contradictions, capable of holding and acting on conflicting views, like a chain-smoking doctor who counsels her patients to quit, or a professor of logic whose day is brightened by a fortune cookie.

Knowing someone, we feel, must be more than knowing if they still like bourbon, or are a smoker, or a hypocrite. Knowing all the facts about what a person might do or say in a situation, Talbert argues, does not help us really get to *know* them, anymore than knowing facts about their hair colour or their shoe size. It's arguable that Facebook or Amazon 'know' more about your politics, your wardrobe, even who you've got a crush on, than all but your closest friends. Yet nobody really thinks that such systems (or those with access to them) could actually *know* you better than your friends do. All the same, we're still left with an uncertainty about just what the 'knowing' at stake consists of.

Talbert's answer is that getting to know someone is something like learning a skill. Acquiring a skill, goes the argument, is not simply a matter of learning propositional facts about it, but involves the non-propositional knowledge that one gains through immersion in an activity. For example, to cook a good spaghetti carbonara, it's not enough to know *that* the sauce contains only the yolk of the egg, or what the ratio of pancetta to garlic is. Really knowing *how* to mix the eggs and add them to the pasta requires actually practising making the dish, and in that process acquiring what Harry Collins (2010) calls the 'tacit knowledge' that helps us judge when to take the garlic out, or if the pasta is *al dente*, and other subtleties that can't be easily be captured in propositions. Cooking a *really* good carbonara, moreover, requires what Collins & Evans (2007) call the “interactive expertise” that you can't learn from a recipe book, but only through 'hanging out' with the right people; that is, with other practising experts who—through conversations, demonstrations, and sharing the act of

cooking and eating together—socialise you into the best practices and family secrets, gradually transmitting the subtleties of an art that goes beyond what words can describe.

In this respect, I think Talbert has hit on something quite insightful. Getting to know another person is the intersubjective experience *par excellence*, and I suspect that the growing ease and comfort with which we interact with someone as we get to know them is more than analogous to our growing sense of confidence as we become familiar with a task. Yet I think that, in highlighting the significance of tacit knowledge, Talbert is overly dismissive of the role of explicit knowledge-*that* in coming to know another person, as when she argues (pp. 3-4) that trying to 'figure someone out' is counterproductive.

### **Skill Acquisition**

In building her account, Talbert draws on work on skill acquisition, especially that of Hubert Dreyfus, who famously argues (2005; 2007; 2013) that that too much (deliberative, propositional) thinking interferes with performance. Dreyfus' (2007, 354) paradigm example is the baseball player Chuck Knoblauch, who at the peak of his career was plagued by rookie errors in simple situations where he had ample time to act. Curiously, however, in tighter situations, where he had no time to think, he completed difficult throws with the expertise that got him into the big leagues in the first place. Dreyfus' conclusion is that Knoblauch was over-thinking on his simple throws—focusing too much on the uncountable minutiae of body movements rather than acting holistically, 'in the flow.'

While I am sympathetic to Dreyfus' account (and have defended it elsewhere (Bergamin 2017)), it is important to note that it applies to an expert at the peak of their game. The road to *becoming* an expert, on the other hand, involves quite a lot of thinking and puzzling over knowledge-*that* (see Dreyfus & Dreyfus 1986, 2005). Dreyfus (1991, 68-9), drawing on Heidegger's (1962) so-called 'theory of equipment,' gives a special emphasis to the 'breakdown' that happens during smooth-coping, and which draws our attention to the elements of our action. Separating an egg's yolk from its white, to take a simple example, takes a bit of sticky practice to do smoothly. While your grandmother might do it almost automatically and with her attention elsewhere, on your first couple of tries it's helpful to concentrate and think deliberately about the steps of the task. Even once you've mastered it, and can do it 'without thinking,' your attention still gets drawn back to the objects and deliberative thought when things go wrong—say, if the egg doesn't crack as expected. This interruption breaks the phenomenological 'flow' of the task, but also provides fodder for further learning and refining your skill.

If getting to know a person is something like learning a skill, then the kind of 'breakdowns' that help us learn skills should also apply to getting to know someone. A couple's first fight, for example, is often a defining moment in their relationship. In the flurry of a new romance, it's easy to feel like we've found someone who really 'gets' us—everything is exciting, smooth, and flowing. But sooner or later, inevitably, something goes wrong—we say or do things that are unexpected, surprising, hurtful. But then (hopefully), after the fighting and the tears, we talk about it; we step back from the situation and share why we felt the way we felt

and said the things we said. We make up, and feel closer, with the feeling that we now *know* each other a little bit better than before.

Talbert argues that trying to 'figure someone out' is counterproductive. And past a certain point, it probably is—trying to psychoanalyse a new partner is like trying to write out a recipe you haven't yet tried. Yet it doesn't follow from this that 'figuring out' has no place, and indeed, I would argue that it is a *necessary* element of coming to know someone—with the caveat that it is only part of our 'practice' of getting to know someone. It's through a combination of both the interactive, shared activity that Talbert recommends, plus direct questions and reflection, that help us really get to know a person—to know that when he says he doesn't mind, he actually really does, or when she goes quiet, it's because she's shy, not rude.

### **Learning, Knowing, Practicing**

Importantly—just like with a skill—as we become proficient, we stop needing to actively 'work someone out' but we learn to read them intuitively. However, as Dreyfus argues, reaching this point requires a combination of reflection plus lots of practice.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, I suspect that we have to start more-or-less from scratch with each new individual we get to know. To hold that actively 'figuring someone out' is better left to the side implies that getting to know someone is a skill that, once mastered, one could apply to different, particular individuals. Yet that—I believe—comes from a confusion over the object of our knowledge, and is where the 'skills analogy' starts to break down.

The skills analogy is confusing in that, unlike the kinds of embodied skills that Dreyfus, Collins, and others discuss, knowing another person has no clear success conditions. Talbert, rightly I believe, rejects simply predicting behaviour, since an impartial psychologist or even an algorithm can do that with some degree of reliability. All the same, knowing *some* facts about someone must be important, since Talbert also—again, I think, rightly—rejects simple ease-of-interaction, since a gifted psychiatrist, host, or salesperson can 'read' a person and make them feel 'at home' without knowing anything concrete about them. Furthermore, it isn't even obvious that getting along well with someone is a sign of actually knowing them—many bad relationships are rooted in the fact that two people know one another *too* well. If knowing someone is like a skill, then, we must ask, what is the object of that skill? What are we doing when we *know* another human being?

Knowing a person is, of course, very different to cooking pasta, or to any other skill that we might learn. Most skills, like cooking carbonara or riding a bike, are what Setiya (2014, 12-3), in an interesting reading of Aristotle, calls *telic*—they are directed at an end (*telos*), such as

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<sup>1</sup> It's significant that Dreyfus & Dreyfus (2005) find that people who are emotionally-invested in their activities—who rejoice in their successes and are despondent at their failures—are more likely to become expert in a certain activity. In the context of getting to know someone, it follows that—as we would expect—we get closer to people that we really care about. Cf. Benner (1984).

impressing a date, or getting to work on time. As Heidegger (1962, 118-9) points out, however, we apply ourselves to such ends not as ends in themselves but 'in order to' perform something much more meaningful. These more meaningful, *atelic* activities, Heidegger argued, are 'for the sake of' being a certain kind of person—in an important sense, they define who we are. A good cook, an attentive lover, a punctual worker—each of these discloses an ethical value in a broad sense. They are who we want to be.

Really *knowing* somebody is an *atelic* activity—a 'for the sake of itself.' One can, of course, get to 'know' somebody 'in order to' do something else, such as to survey them as an anthropologist, or 'network' with them to advance one's career. But that isn't really the sense that I think is at stake in Talbert's discussion. Getting to know somebody—whether intimately or casually, by choice or by happenstance—is something that we continually engage in as an essential part of living a human social life.

If knowing another person is an open-ended, *atelic* 'for the sake of itself,' this leads us towards the fascinating possibility that each relationship is a kind of identity, a way of being in itself. This applies not just to our significant relationships with lovers and close friends, but with casual acquaintances and interactions on the street. Talbert's conclusion implies the Heideggerian point that our everyday interactions tend *not* to involve much thinking, but are immersive, intersubjective events. We act (and react) without a lot of deliberative thinking, such that each relationship is different for each of us, and to some extent, out of our control. You and I might be great friends, but while you and Jamie are always laughing together, he and I never manage more than an awkward conversation. It's as though I'm a different person with you than I am with Jamie—or more precisely, the being-together that you-and-I share is different to the being-with of me-and-Jamie.

This conclusion is, of course, a bit speculative. But it's an interesting hypothesis that Talbert's work brings forth for me. If people are 'moving targets,' then we are not 'things' but 'processes,' systems that are in constant flux. To know such a process is not to try nail down the ever-changing facts about it, but involves interacting with it. Yet we who interact are ourselves a similar kind of 'process,' and in getting to know somebody we are just as much the known as the knower. Our relationships, therefore, are a kind of identity, that involves us and yet exceeds us—growing and evolving over time.

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