Paralysis by Analysis Revisited

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In his reply to my article "Overthinking and Other Minds: the Analysis Paralysis" (2017), Joshua Bergamin (2017) offers some fascinating thoughts about the nature of our knowledge of other people.

Bergamin is right in summarizing my claim that knowing another person involves fundamentally a know-how, and that knowing all the facts there is to know about a person is not enough to constitute knowing her. But, he argues, conscious deliberate thinking is useful in getting to know someone just as it is useful in learning any type of skill.

Questions of Ability

The example he cites is that of separating an egg's yoke from its white—expert cooks can do it almost automatically while the novice in the kitchen needs to pay careful, conscious attention to her movements in order to get it right. This example is useful for several reasons. It highlights the fact that learning a skill requires effortful attention while engaging in an *activity*. It is one thing to think or read about how to separate an egg's white from its yoke; it is quite another thing to practice it, even if it is slow going and clumsy at first. The point is that practice rather than reflection is what one has to do in order to learn how to smoothly complete the activity, even if the first attempts require effortful attention.[1]

On this point Bergamin and I are in agreement. My insistence that conscious deliberate reflection is rarely a good way to get to know someone is mostly targeted at the kinds of reflection one does "in one's own head". My claim is not that we never consciously think about other people, but that consciously thinking about them without their input is not a good way to get to know them. This leads to another, perhaps more important point, which is that the case of the egg cracking is dissimilar from getting to know another person in some fundamental ways.

Unlike an egg, knowing how to interact with a person requires a back and forth *exchange* of postures, gestures, words, and other such signals. It is not possible for me to figure out how to interact with you and simply to execute those actions; I have to allow for a dynamic exchange of actions originating from each of us. With the egg, or any inanimate object, I am the only agent causing the sequence of events. With another person, there are two agents,

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[1] There is some research that shows that conscious thoughtful reflection, indeed "visualization" can help a person perform an activity better. Visualization has been used to help promote success in sports, business, personal habits, and the like. Process visualization, which is sometimes used with varying degrees of success in athletes, is interesting for my purposes because it does seem to help in performing an activity, or to help with the know-how involved in some athletic endeavors. I do not know why this is the case, and I am a bit skeptical of some of the claims used in this line of reasoning. But I do not think we could use process visualization to help with our interactions with others and get the same kind of results, for the actions of another person are much more unpredictable than the final hill of the marathon or the dismount of a balance beam routine. It is also useful to note that some sports are easier than others to visualize, namely those that are most predictable. For more on this last point and on how imagery can be used to enhance athletic performance, see Christopher Cleary's "Olympians Use Imagery as Mental Training" (2014).

and I cannot simply decide how to make the interaction work like I want it to; I have to have your cooperation. This makes knowing another person a different kind of enterprise than knowing other kinds of things.[2]

I maintain that most of the time, interactions with others are such that we do not need to consciously be thinking about what is going on. In fact, the behavioral, largely nonverbal signals that are sent nearly instantaneously to participants in a conversation occur so quickly that there is rarely time to reflect on them. Nevertheless, Bergamin's point is that in learning an activity, and thus by extension, in getting to know another person as we learn to interact with her, we may be more conscious of our actions than we are once we know someone well and the interactions "flow" naturally.

Knowing Your Audience

I do not think this is necessarily at odds with my account. Learning how to pace one's speech to a young child when one is used to speaking to adults might take some effortful attention, and the only way to get to the point where one can have a good conversation (if there is such a thing) with a youngster is to begin by paying attention to the speed at which one talks. I still think that once one no longer has to think about it, she will be better able to glean information from the child and will not have her attention divided between trying to pay attention to both what the child is doing and how she sounds herself.

It is easier to get to know someone if you are not focused on what you have to do to hold up your end of the conversation. But more than whether we are consciously or unconsciously attending to our actions in an interaction, my point is that reflection is one-sided while interaction is not, and it is interaction that is crucial for knowing another person. In interaction, whether our thought processes are unconscious or conscious, their epistemic function is such that they allow us to coordinate our behavior with another person's. This is the crucial distinction from conscious deliberation that occurs in a non-interactive context.

Bergamin claims that "breakdowns" in flow are more than just disruptive; rather, they provide opportunities to learn how to better execute actions, both in learning a skill and in getting to know another person. And it is true that in relationships, a fight or disagreement can often shed light on the underlying dynamics that are causing tension. But unlike the way you can learn from a few misses how to crack an egg properly, you cannot easily decide how to fix your actions in a relationship without allowing for input from the other party.

Certain breakdowns in communication, or interruptions of the "flow" of a conversation can help us know another person better insofar as they alert us to situations in which things are not going smoothly. But further thinking does not always get us out of the problem--further interacting does. You cannot sort it out in your head without input from the other person.

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[2] This leads to another point that is not emphasized in my original essay but perhaps should have been. Insofar as I liken getting to know another person to the "flow" one can experience in certain sports, I do not sufficiently point out that "flow" in some sports, namely those that involve multiple people, involves something much more similar to the "know-how" involved in getting to know another person than in sports where there is only one person involved. Interestingly, "team sports" and other multi person events are not generally cited as activities whose success can be significantly improved by visualization.

My central claim is that knowing another person requires interaction and that the interactive context is constitutively different from contexts that require one-sided deliberation rather than back and forth dynamic flows of behavioral signals and other information. However, I also point out that propositional knowledge of various sorts is necessary for knowing another person.

Bergamin is correct to point out that in my original essay I do not elaborate on what if anything propositional, conscious deliberative thinking can add to knowing another person. But elsewhere (2014) I have argued that part of what it means to know someone is to know various things about her and that when we know someone, we can articulate various propositions that capture features of her character.

In the essay under discussion, I focus on the claim that propositional knowledge is not sufficient for knowing another person and that we must start with the kind of knowledge that comes from direct interaction if we are to claim that we know another person. We do also gain useful and crucial propositional knowledge from our interactions as well as from other sources that are also part of our knowledge of others, but without the knowledge that comes only from interaction we would ordinarily claim to know things *about* a person, rather than to know her.

Bergamin is also right in asserting that my account implies that our interactions with others do not typically involve much thinking in the traditional sense. They are, as he speculates, "immersive, intersubjective events…such that each relationship is different for each of us and to some extent out of our control." This is partly true. While I might share a very different relationship to Jamie than you do, chances are that we can both recognize certain features of Jamie as being part of who he is. I was struck by this point at a recent memorial service when people with very different relationships spoke about their loved one, impersonating his accent, his frequently used turns of phrase, his general stubbornness, generosity, larger than life personality and other features that everyone at the service could recognize no matter whether the relationship was strictly professional, familial, casual, lasting decades, etc.

I have tentatively spelled out an account (2014) that suggests that with people we know, there are some things that only the people in the relationship share, such as knowledge of where they had lunch last week and what was discussed. But there is also knowledge that is shared beyond that particular relationship that helps situate that relationship vis-à-vis other, overlapping relationships, i.e., while I share a unique relationship with my mother, and so does my sister-in-law, we can both recognize some features of her that are the same for both of us. Further, my sister–in–law knows that I am often a better judge of what my mother wants for her birthday, since I have known my mother longer and can easily tell that she does not mean it when she says she does not want any gifts this year.

Bergamin's concluding thoughts about the Heideggerian nature of my project are especially insightful, and I too am still working on the speculative implications of my account, which

posits that (in Bergamin's words), "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 to 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." My hope is that this is a project on which we and many other scholars will continue to make progress.

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