

Making Contact: Interpersonal Connection and Our Knowledge of Other People

As social animals, we seek to live a life with other people. But, as thinkers from Aristotle to Tomasello have observed, human sociality seems to be special in the way it is pervaded by a distinctive form of communicative interaction. From infancy onwards, we seek to engage with others through eye contact, joint attention and conversation. We interact in these ways, moreover, not merely for the sake of the exchange of information or for the sake of influencing the actions of others but also, crucially, in order to connect with others.

But what is it to connect with another in this way? And why is it so important for our wellbeing? Despite its centrality to human life, the notion of interpersonal connection has escaped philosophical scrutiny. The aim of this project will be to develop a systematic account of interpersonal connection and to argue that it plays a central role in our knowledge of other people.

§1. Interpersonal Connection

In the first phase of this research, I will develop an account of interpersonal connection which builds upon my account of eye contact (see Laing 2021) to provide a general theory of interpersonal connection as it also applies to joint attention, face to face conversation, and other forms of joint activity.

According to the account I will develop, interpersonal contact is a dyadic emotional relation which does not admit of a reductive analysis in terms of the monadic states of mind of either of the individuals involved. This account will be shown to be superior to the reductive approaches of Peacocke (2014) and Tomasello (2019) insofar as they are unable to

satisfactorily make sense of the fact that interpersonal connection constitutes (a) a genuine ‘meeting of minds’ and (b) a constituent of human wellbeing. On the other hand, I argue that this approach is also preferable to an anti-reductive approach which assimilates the notion of interpersonal contact to the notion of perceptual contact insofar as this latter approach is unable to make sense of the intuitive thought that our relations to other people are importantly different to our relations to inanimate objects. An upshot of this discussion will be that although the notions of perceptual and interpersonal contact are closely related, they can come apart (*contra* Allen 2019). The resulting account will therefore be able to acknowledge the possibility for certain forms of technologically mediated interpersonal contact through certain forms of online and virtual reality technology whilst providing a compelling explanation of why existing forms of online interaction leave many feeling disconnected from other people.

§2. *Interpersonal Knowledge*

In the second phase of this research, I will investigate the ramifications of this account for debates about our knowledge of other people.

Epistemologists have sought to understand how it is possible for us to have knowledge of the minds of others. One recent debate focuses on whether this knowledge is acquired through perception of another’s mental states (McDowell 1998; McNeill 2012) or their expressive behaviour (Parrott 2017; Gomes 2019). Despite their opposition, these views share two assumptions. First, they assume that we can satisfactorily understand this perceptual knowledge by focusing on cases of ‘one way’ perception in which one person sees another regardless of whether the other is looking back. Second, they assume that the other’s eyes and facial expressions contribute to my knowledge only insofar as they are liable to reveal the other’s mental states.

An appreciation of the role of interpersonal contact in early development gives us reason to challenge each of these assumptions. Against the first, I will draw upon recent work in developmental psychology (e.g. Moll et al 2015; Khalulyan et al 2021) to develop a heterodox perceptual account of our knowledge of other minds which prioritises forms of bipolar perception such as eye contact and mutual touch. Then I will contest the second assumption by arguing that it is central to the epistemic role of others' facial expressions not merely that they express another's state of mind, but that, in doing so, that they act upon the looker in a particular kind of way (developing ideas introduced in Laing 2021 and Laing Forthcoming).

One advantage of this account is that it will provide a principled theoretical explanation of (a) the common idea that knowing someone as a person requires interpersonal interaction and (b) the associated idea that notion of 'personal knowledge' constitutes a genuine epistemic achievement that is not either reducible to propositional knowledge or practical know-how. This therefore constitutes a more robust vindication of each of these claims, which have tended to be defended on the defeasible grounds of intuition and fidelity to ordinary language (e.g. Benton 2017).

§3. Human Separateness

This account of interpersonal knowledge through connection will lead to an exploration of the limits of interpersonal contact and interpersonal knowledge.

One consequence of the tendency of analytic philosophers to focus on the question of how knowledge of others' mental states is possible is that, once this question is answered, the idea that others are a source of mystery in our lives receives little further scrutiny. A consequence of this, in turn, is that analytic philosophers have tended to fail to appreciate one way in which

other people by their nature elude our efforts to know them in a way that has no analogue in the case of self-knowledge.

I will offer two interconnected arguments for this conclusion. First, developing insights of Sartre (2018) and Levinas (1969), I will argue that it is a requirement on viewing another as a person that we regard them as transcending all of the facts we might know about them. Second, building on ideas from Murdoch (2011), I will argue that there is an ineluctably private dimension to a person's understanding of certain ethical concepts and therefore of their situation and self-conception which vindicates Simone de Beauvoir's (2011: 199) suggestion that 'each person's life has a unique flavor that, in a sense, no one else can know.'

In developing these arguments, it will be my aim to substantiate two thoughts. First, I will argue that the sense in which others elude our efforts to know them should not be viewed as resting on some controversial metaphysics theory of subjectivity, as Hamlyn (1983) suggests, but rather should be seen as an aspect of the phenomenology of interpersonal experience which any satisfying theory must acknowledge. And, second, I will seek to vindicate the idea that a full and proper recognition of the independent existence of the other is a difficult, anxiety-inducing, ethical achievement which can be opposed with the variety of objectifying attitudes we are liable to fall into in social life and philosophy.

§4. Bridging the Gulf that Separates Us: Romantic and Erotic Love

Finally, I will draw the different strands of this project together in a discussion of romantic and erotic love.

It is common for philosophers to observe that love involves the desire, on the part of the lover, to make contact with, and thereby to acquire knowledge of, the beloved (e.g. Chappell 2018; Jollimore 2011). However, the arguments of §3 lead naturally to the idea, expressed by Marcel

throughout Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, that any contact we can have with others is at best superficial and, at worst, a mirage.

Against Proust's pessimism, I will argue that once we carefully distinguish the way in which others elude our efforts to know them from the more radical scepticism sometimes espoused by Marcel, a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between love, interpersonal connection and personal knowledge becomes available. On this conception, a loving relationship is a never-ending, ever-deepening, form of interpersonal connection which is guided by a regulative ideal of 'full interpersonal contact'.

In this connection, I will explore the common idea that sexual interaction is an important and particularly apt expression of love. To know another, in the biblical sense, is to have intercourse with them. According to Erich Fromm (1957), this piece of literary language expresses a deep metaphysical insight. He argues that the reason why it is apt for love to seek consummation in sex is that sex is a form of interpersonal communion which enables us to know a person who otherwise transcends any of the facts we know about them. Although Fromm's account is insightful, it is liable to induce puzzlement in contemporary epistemologists. Why should we think others are unknowable? Why should we think sexual interaction constitutes a form, let alone a privileged form, of interpersonal knowledge? (e.g. Bennett Forthcoming). I will argue that my account of interpersonal connection and the ideal of full interpersonal contact provides the foundation for an analytically defensible idea of Fromm's insight.

§5. Methodology

Although this research will employ the methods of analytic philosophy, I will take an omnivorous approach to my source material, bringing insights from the existentialist tradition into dialogue with work in analytic philosophy. I will also draw widely on work in developmental psychology in

phases 1-2 and works of literature and literary criticism (especially Proust and his commentators, Leo Bersani and Gilles Deleuze) in phases 3-4. In pursuing this research I also hope to justify the methodological claim that a satisfying account of human intersubjectivity will only be arrived at by pursuing the philosophy of mind, ethics and epistemology *in tandem*.

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