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The Epistemology of Interpersonal Relations

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Abstract: What is it to know someone? Epistemologists rarely take up this question, though recent developments make such inquiry possible and desirable. This paper advances an account of how such *interpersonal* knowledge goes beyond mere propositional and qualitative knowledge about someone, giving a central place to second-personal treatment. It examines what such knowledge requires, and what makes it distinctive within epistemology as well as socially. It assesses its theoretic value for several issues in moral psychology, epistemic injustice, and philosophy of mind. And it offers an account of the complex content in play if interpersonal knowledge is to be understood in terms of its mental states and their functions.

1 Introduction

When we first enter the world, we begin to know others. As we grow in maturity, an important factor in what makes life meaningful is one's relationships, a fact confirmed by correlations between depression and social isolation.¹ When it comes to professional or social advancement, a common mantra is that "it's not what you know, it's who you know."² Even children at a very young age are typically able, with some guidance, to master the difference between a stranger and someone they know.

These sorts of truisms invoke knowing, and they invoke relationships. We use the language of knowing other persons to identify some relation of epistemic and social interest. Yet epistemology has not much explored what

¹ See Ge, Yap, Ong, and Heng 2017, among many others.

² Compare Granovetter's (1973) landmark study in sociology.

these ideas really amount to, or what philosophical mileage there might be in them.³ The aim of this paper is to inquire further into what such knowledge is and why it might matter. In particular, I hope to make headway on what insights we can gain from such inquiries in epistemology and related areas in philosophy of mind, moral psychology, and social philosophy.

§2 situates the question of what knowing someone else involves, drawing on important recent work across other areas of epistemology. §3 assesses a puzzle, and examines the plausibility of some seemingly natural transparency principles which, one might assume, explain how *interpersonal* knowledge (knowing someone “personally,” as we say in English) and propositional knowledge about someone interact. §4 examines how interpersonal attitudes, particularly reactive and investment attitudes, arise out of interactions between those amenable to mutual interpersonal relationships, and relates these attitudes to understanding and addressing testimonial injustice. Finally, §5 offers a sketch of the complex contents of interpersonal knowledge, that is, what mental states and knowledge relations are in play, and brought to mind, when one knows someone in relationship. When one knows another, one’s perspective on them is not solely propositional, yet it shapes and structures the epistemic and empathetic states which make for minimally healthy relationships. These in turn allow us to understand normative notions of social and epistemic interest, such as when one may vouch for another.

2 Attitudes *de dicto* and *de te*

Recent epistemology in the analytic tradition was largely concerned with defining propositional knowledge or examining the nature of epistemic justification. To its credit, it has branched out over the last half century. Social epistemologists in particular undertook questions about how we can gain (propositional) knowledge from testimony, after philosophers of language had also invoked social (externalist) considerations in the theory of meaning and reference.⁴ Feminist epistemologists similarly invoked the relevance

³Some exceptions are Craig 1991 (chap. 16), Code 1993, Dalmiya 2001, Stump 2010 (chaps. 3–4), Matheson 2010, Lauer 2014, Talbert 2015, Benton 2017, and Lackey 2022.

⁴Coady 1992, Fricker 1995, Fricker 2007, Lackey 2008, among others on testimony; Kripke 1972, Putnam 1975, Burge 1979, among others in philosophy of language.

of social status and situatedness for how some knowers are prioritized and others marginalized, and to help reframe epistemological theorizing.⁵ Epistemologists explored connections between knowledge, action, and practical agency.⁶ Philosophers of mind and epistemologists made room for qualitative ('what-it-is-like') knowledge,⁷ and knowledge-how,⁸ often in forms irreducible to propositional knowledge. Investigations into self-locating (*de se*) belief began to attend to the spatial or temporal position of oneself, and what further thing one learns when one acquires knowledge of such positioning.⁹ Finally, research into the epistemological roles of acquaintance in perception, memory, and skill has fostered deeper discussions of objectual knowledge.¹⁰

These developments have enabled philosophers to explore what, exactly, knowing another person might involve, with some regarding it as the third great idea in the history of western philosophy.¹¹ Many epistemologists, however, acknowledge the common linguistic distinctions between propositional knowledge and other sorts of knowledge (like knowing someone), only to set them aside.¹² Some even claim that what it is to know someone doesn't, strictly speaking, fall under the purview of epistemology.¹³ As such, one might be forgiven for doubting that this is fertile terrain capable of bearing genuine epistemological fruit. Allaying such doubt is part of our present aim.

So what does knowing someone personally, or in relationship, amount to? And how might such *interpersonal* knowledge relate to, or differ from, propositional or qualitative knowledge *about* someone? Recent answers to

⁵Especially Lloyd 1984, Harding 1991, Code 1991, and Alcott and Potter 1993.

⁶E.g. Stanley 2005, Hawthorne and Stanley 2008, and Sosa 2015.

⁷Jackson 1982 and 1986, Lewis 1999, Ch. 17, Lee 2023, among others.

⁸Ryle 1949; Stanley and Williamson 2001; Stanley 2011; Pavese 2017; Hetherington 2011.

⁹Perry 1979; Lewis 1979 and 2001; Elga 2000; Titelbaum 2008.

¹⁰Duncan 2015, 2020, 2021; Farkas 2019; Grzankowski and Tye 2019, esp. 78–81; and Kukla 2022. Cf. Lopes 2005, 137ff., and Moss forthcoming.

¹¹Zagzebski 2021, Ch. 6.

¹²Cf. Lehrer 1974, 2; Lewis 1999, 289; Hetherington 2001, 7–8; Nagel 2014, 6; Ichikawa and Steup 2018, 2nd paragraph; contrast Craig 1991, Chap. 16, which is an exception to this trend. (Some work in philosophy of language, like Boër and Lycan 1986 on “knowing who,” brushes up against knowing someone in the interpersonal sense; but again, such work similarly focuses only on propositional knowledge.)

¹³“Interpersonal knowledge... is not strictly speaking knowledge, and its proper study is not epistemology, but the study of social, personal and emotional relationships” (Farkas 2023, 115).

both questions have invoked as crucial the notion of *second-personal* thought and treatment.¹⁴ Benton 2017 suggests three grades of personal involvement, the first two of which demarcate ways that, on the one hand, we can acquire knowledge about someone, but on the other hand, are insufficient for interpersonal knowledge.¹⁵

First grade (de dicto): propositional knowledge of one gained without perceptual experience of them (especially, for example, through testimony).

Second grade (de percipio): propositional or qualitative knowledge about someone gained by perceptual access to them (even if mediated by technology).

Through the testimonial means of the first grade of personal involvement, we are capable of learning a great many facts about someone. Through the perceptual means of the second grade we can learn facts about someone, but also, we can gain familiarity with qualitative features of an individual, such as what they look like, their mannerisms or habits, and so on, where many such qualities are not reducible to propositional knowledge.¹⁶ These two grades offer one knowledge-*wh* about someone, by which one might be able to answer correctly a *wh*-question concerning them, such as *Where is Anna?*, *What does Eli look like?*, or *Who is Keyser Söze?*¹⁷ The more you know about someone, the better positioned you are to answer a range of such *wh*-questions, depending on the conversational context. We typically associate rising through these grades with learning more about someone: learning facts and qualitative features of someone through perceptual access to them typically makes one

¹⁴Especially Reddy 2008, Eilan 2014, Lauer 2014, Heal 2014, Talbert 2015, Benton 2017, Salje 2017, and Zahavi 2023 (philosophical antecedents include Husserl, Buber, and Levinas, among others).

¹⁵Some parts of this section and §3 overlap with bits of Benton 2024a, §3.2 and 3.3.

¹⁶Such distinctions owe something to Bertrand Russell (1910 and 1998 [1912], Ch. 5), who importantly distinguished knowledge “by acquaintance” from knowledge “by description”; but his internalism assumes we are only (directly) acquainted with our own mental states, and thus his examples of someone who “knew” Bismarck (1998 [1912], 55–58) end up conflating what we are trying to distinguish, namely (what came to be called) qualitative knowledge with knowing someone in the interpersonal sense (about which more below).

¹⁷See Stanley 2011, 36–37, and Benton 2017, 818–819.

more epistemically authoritative about them than if one merely had a lot of propositional knowledge about them learned at second-hand.

Through the first two grades of involvement we can learn much about someone without at all interacting with them, for they can be passive modes of learning through testimony, or as a mere observer from afar. Given this, they appear to be insufficient for coming to know someone personally. Thus we may articulate a *third* grade of personal involvement which includes how one treats the other person, namely as a personal subject rather than a mere object learned about (Talbert 2015, 194–197; Benton 2017, 820–821). Each of the first two grades need not involve treating the person about whom one is learning in any way at all, whereas this grade requires that one treat the person in a “you”-like manner. Because it is second-personal in its mode of interacting, we might call this the *de te* or *interpersonal* grade of involvement:

Interpersonal grade (*de te*): A treatment by a subject *S* toward its recipient *R* is *second-personal* in virtue of *S* treating *R* as a subject (an individual “you”), where *S* offers some of *S*’s own thoughts, words, attitudes, or emotions to *R*, and *S* is, or largely intends to be, attentive to *R*’s thoughts, words, attitudes, or emotions.

The paradigm of such interpersonal engagement involves thinking of, and communicating with, another person in the cognitive modality of “I–you,” wherein one presents one’s thoughts, words, attitudes, or emotions to them, for them. This can be done in conversation, through facial or hand gestures, or even with intentional eye contact, relating to them typically in reciprocal fashion.¹⁸ When the “you” toward whom such second-personal treatment is conveyed is open and responsive to it, the reciprocating interactions ground a special form of epistemic positioning toward another subject.

Arguably then, to acquire interpersonal knowledge (“knowledge_{*i*}”) of someone, one must experience, and engage in, interpersonal encounters with the

¹⁸This blending of the *de se* and *de te*, at least for cognitively developed individuals, normally involves deploying conceptual and linguistic resources expressed in the (grammatical) first- and second-person. But it might be possible even for infants to engage in comparable abilities, particularly in the early stages of attachment through face-to-face interactions, including coy and clowning playful behavior. Much work in interpersonal neurobiology suggests that proper cognitive development depends on such interactions (see e.g. Reddy 2008, Green 2012, Siegel 2020).

following necessary conditions:

ENCOUNTER: S knows $_i R$ only if (i) S has had reciprocal causal contact with R , in which (ii) S treats R second-personally, and (iii) R treats S second-personally.¹⁹

Clauses (ii) and (iii) require each person to treat the other second-personally, and (i) requires the contact between two individuals to be *reciprocal*, which it will be insofar as each shares with the other some of their own thoughts, words, attitudes, or emotions in response to the other. Thus to facilitate the acquisition of interpersonal knowledge, these encounters must be intentionally two-way. For one would not come to know $_i$ someone by treating them as a “you” in a variety of ways specified by the interpersonal grade, but where they fail to notice, receive, and respond in kind to one’s interpersonal efforts.²⁰

These features of ENCOUNTER, according to which the sorts of interactions needed are such that both parties have engaged in them toward the other, reveal important ways in which interpersonal knowledge is distinctive from propositional and qualitative knowledge. Indeed, these aspects are departures from standard ways of theorizing in propositional epistemology: knowledge $_i$ is mind-dependent insofar as its object is itself another mind, and its reciprocal treatments make a difference to what is known.²¹ For when knowledge $_i$ is acquired or developing, the interpersonal exchanges shape their own objects in an intersubjective sense that requires each person to take the other seriously and allow them to influence their self-understanding (Dover 2022). Such features also suggest that knowledge $_i$ is symmetrical in structure:

SYMMETRY: S knows $_i R$ only if R knows $_i S$.

SYMMETRY could be true even if it is common for people to know each other at

¹⁹Cf. Benton 2017, 822ff. I eschew sufficient conditions for knowledge $_i$ partly because I think it unclear when and how knowledge $_i$ might be lost.

²⁰Cf. Zahavi 2023, explicating Husserl’s similar views.

²¹Hallmarks of mind-independence, and not altering or modifying the thing known, were stressed by the Oxford Realists against the idealists: see Cook Wilson 1926, Prichard 1909, and Marion 2000, esp. 307–308.

different levels of intimacy; what it rules it out is the possibility that someone could know_i someone without them being known_i by them, even minimally as an acquaintance, in return.²² Yet for the rest of this paper very little turns on accepting SYMMETRY, and it is enough to note that paradigm cases of knowledge_i are symmetrical.

In what follows, particularly later in §§4–5, our focus will be on two-way, broadly mutual and voluntary personal relationships, including friendships or (mostly) healthy filial relations. Such relationships are valuable in part because of how they encompass dignity, respect, and care. But many other relationships, of course, are shaped and even constituted in an asymmetrical way, particularly in caregiving, or in child-rearing relationships (cf. Lindemann 2014 on “holding” another in their identity, and Dalmiya 2016 on care ethics); *mutatis mutandis* for cruel or abusive relationships, or those (such as many professional roles) structured by asymmetrical power dynamics.²³ Given the foregoing account of the necessary conditions for knowing_i others, in most such relationships subjects still know_i one another; but the availability of empathy or attentiveness can be very one-sided, which will affect the way such relationships, and even the identities of the individuals, develop. Some theorists may prefer to build respect or empathy or valuing another’s interests directly into the required second-personal treatment, insisting that only one party needs to treat the other this way; on such accounts there will be many cases of one-sided knowing_i.²⁴ On my approach, by contrast, the basic epistemic conditions, including their two-way second-personal structure, are the groundwork upon which the ethical and emotive aspects of our valued relationships are built.

Having thus differentiated how we gain propositional and qualitative knowledge about someone and how we can come to know_i them, one can nevertheless feel there is a strong connection between such knowledges. Some may even suspect there something incoherent about the idea that one could have knowledge_i without some specific propositional or qualitative knowledge about someone. The next section considers some transparency principles re-

²²See Benton 2017, 826–827 for further reasons in support of SYMMETRY.

²³Cf. White 2021 on how such relationships can affect norms of honesty and discretion.

²⁴Yet such a view will complicate how to think about cases of epistemic injustice, which I discuss below in §4.

lating knowledge_i to propositional knowledge about them.

3 Interpersonal knowledge and its limits

What is the relationship between propositional knowledge about a person and knowing_i them, or even merely treating them second-personally? Sharvy 1974 posed an epistemic puzzle gesturing at such connections:²⁵

Lucy and Benjamin have gone into a thick forest. Neither knows of the other's presence. In a clearing, Lucy sees a large flat rock, and she writes on it "Lucy was here." Benjamin saw this from a hiding place. So

(L1) Benjamin knows that Lucy is in the forest.

Lucy leaves, and then Benjamin comes out of his hiding place and writes on the same rock "Benjamin was here." But Lucy was hiding and saw this, so

(B1) Lucy knows that Benjamin is in the forest,
and, moreover,

(L2) Lucy knows that Benjamin knows that Lucy is in the forest.
Benjamin leaves the clearing, and then Lucy comes out of her hiding place and writes something else on the rock. But Benjamin was hiding and saw her, so

(B2) Benjamin knows that Lucy knows that Benjamin is in the forest, and

(L3) Benjamin knows that Lucy knows that Benjamin knows that Lucy is in the forest.

That is, Benjamin now knows the truths expressed by (B1) and (L2). This procedure may continue indefinitely, producing new truths each time. Let S be the set of all these propositions. ... But now imagine that Lucy and Benjamin meet face to face and look

²⁵Thanks to Paul Hovda for drawing my attention to Sharvy's puzzle.

each other right in the eyes. Then it seems that they both come to know some proposition P which is very *simple*, which entails every proposition in S , yet which is not entailed by any of them nor even by any finite set of them.

Problem: formulate P . (Sharvy 1974, 553–554)

The main candidate for an adequate answer, given these constraints, seems to be a proposition which is irreducibly *de te* in structure: either first-person plural (P), or what seems equivalent, the second-personal construction (P^*):

P : We see each other.

P^* : I see you while you see me.²⁶

P and P^* each satisfy the puzzle's requirements: each is learned by Lucy's face-to-face eye contact with Benjamin; and each entails every proposition in S , but is not entailed by any, or even a subset, of the propositions in S . Though P^* is much like a conjunction of two claims with first-personal and second-personal constituents, their equivalence to P seems evident, and P makes good on the desideratum that the proposition known be simple.

Is P/P^* genuinely second-personal, and irreducibly so? Why isn't P/P^* identical to Q ?

Q : Lucy sees Benjamin while Benjamin sees Lucy.

Answer: Q is not equivalent to P/P^* because an onlooker could learn Q without learning P/P^* . Moreover, someone else could learn Q from such an onlooker purely through testimony, whereas P/P^* do not seem to be the sort of propositions that could be learned through testimony.²⁷

²⁶Understood to build in the contextual elements of being face-to-face, in the forest, at this time, and so on. For ease of reading, I drop these elements from the examples.

²⁷If one individuates propositions in a Fregean way, P/P^* are clearly different than Q . For a Russellian, P or P^* might express the same proposition as Q for each of Lucy and Benjamin; yet such a proposition would only satisfy the puzzle's constraints when grasped under the 1st- and 2nd-personal modes of presentation. On this approach, for them to be learning Q and thereby be learning the same proposition, it needs to be a conjunction (where the order of the conjuncts doesn't affect the content learned).

This epistemic puzzle plausibly gains traction because our most common way of learning facts about someone else, and our prior interest in facts about such particular individuals, is guided by whom we know_i, whom in turn we often know most about. And when we are perceptually “locked in” on others through second-personal interactions, particularly through dyadic joint attention (of the sort which Lucy and Benjamin finally arrive at), or triadic joint attention on objects in our environment or topics of conversation,²⁸ we tend to acquire such propositional knowledge of the other person’s whereabouts almost automatically. Yet we also tend to assume that knowing_i someone ought to automatically issue in knowledge that they are known_i. Considering such cases can lead one to suppose that a strong transparency principle such as the following is true:

COMMON K If S knows_i someone R, then S and R both know that they know_i each other, and know that they know that they know_i each other, and so on.

Yet common knowledge is controversial and and overly strong.²⁹ So perhaps instead a KK-style principle is plausible, of knowing that one knows_i another:

KK_i If S knows_i someone R, then S knows that they know_i R.

Or if not KK_i, it can be natural to suppose that some weaker principle such as one of the following must hold:

LUMINOSITY K_i If S knows_i someone R, then S is in a position to know that they know_i R.³⁰

BK_i If S knows_i someone R, then S believes that they know_i R.

²⁸Cf. Eilan et al. 2005 and Goldman 2013 on joint attention.

²⁹Lederman 2017 casts doubt on our ever having common knowledge of any sort; see Immerman 2021 for a rejoinder. Note that Sharvy’s puzzle seems to assume that interpersonal interactions somehow generate common knowledge, or something approaching it, of the other’s existence and whereabouts.

³⁰Williamson (2000, Ch. 4) influentially argues that knowledge is not luminous.

WEAK LUMINOSITY If S knows_i someone R, then S is in a position to believe (rationally) that they know_i R.

Are any such principles correct? If not, how does knowledge_i relate to propositional knowledge about others?

Though most of our relationships, even among mere acquaintances, satisfy principles like these, the following counterexamples suggest that even WEAK LUMINOSITY needs some refinement. Suppose James is sent off to war overseas, but before leaving has one last night with his sweetheart, Allie. Allie becomes pregnant but hides this from everyone around her, moving to a distant town to later have the child. All forms of communication during the war are compromised, so James never hears from Allie, nor Allie from James. Allie fears he has died or gone missing. She gives birth to a baby girl, names her Lydia, but soon after Allie dies of complications, with Lydia adopted by another family. James survives the war, and upon returning learns that Allie left their town and later died, yet never learns of the pregnancy. After many years and moves, James starts a store and works as shopkeeper, as it happens, in the same town where young Lydia lives. She frequents the store, sometimes daily, especially for the candies which James sells, but also because James takes a liking to her. Lydia and James get to know_i each other. James doesn't know that Lydia is his daughter, nor even that he has a daughter; and Lydia doesn't know that James is her father. At one point James asks Lydia about her family, and Lydia answers, "I'm adopted, I never knew_i my father or my mother."³¹ This last claim, unbeknownst to Lydia, is false: she actually does know_i her father.³² But Lydia is not in a position to believe that she knows_i her father. Nor is James in a position to believe that he knows_i his daughter.

Another case, from the Spiderman story: Mary Jane knows_i Peter Parker.

³¹We can assume what is denied is knowing_i rather than any knowledge-*wh* (for she might even have some: perhaps Lydia had learned a few facts about her father, but none that help her realize that he is James the shopkeeper).

³²Thus the "knows_i" predicate expresses an extensional relation; contrast intensional predicates like *believes that*, *knows that*, *hopes that*, etc. For the extensional point regarding such substitutivity for "knows_i", see Benton 2017, 818–819.

Suppose however that Mary Jane strongly doubts the existence of the supposed high-flying superhero, Spiderman. Because Peter Parker *is* Spiderman, in knowing_i Peter, Mary Jane thereby also knows_i Spiderman. This is so despite the fact that Mary Jane may believe that there is no person as Spiderman (just as James would deny that there is any person as his daughter).

These cases complicate WEAK LUMINOSITY, as well as each of the stronger principles. For Lydia is not in a position to believe that she knows_i her father *under the guise* of being her father; and Mary Jane is not in a position to believe that she knows_i Spiderman *under the guise* of Spiderman. Perhaps then we should understand the above principles as implicitly restricting the belief or knowledge under a relevant guise,³³ along the lines of, for example:

WEAK LUMINOSITY* If S knows_i someone R (under the guise of S's beliefs about R), then S is in a position to believe (rationally, under that guise) that they know_i R.

For Lydia surely still knows_i her father under the guise of James the shopkeeper; and Mary Jane still knows_i Spiderman under the guise of Peter Parker.

Yet even with such restrictions to the above principles, they have counterexamples. Take a different case where Sam knows_i and loves Rachel, but Rachel has gone missing. Sam, in grief, has suspended judgment about whether Rachel is still living. As it happens Rachel is still alive, but stranded on a remote island, never to be found. In such a case Sam may not be in a position to believe (rationally, under their guise for Rachel) that Sam still knows_i Rachel: since one's judgment that one knows_i another shifts to demurral upon learning of their death, it likewise calls for doubt when one does not know whether they live.³⁴ Or suppose that you've interacted in a second-personal manner, over many weeks, with someone online whom, it begins to dawn on you, might instead be just an AI bot—where such a bot, let's suppose, doesn't count as a person. In realizing that it may not be another person, you suspend judgment on whether you know_i someone through these online interactions, because you suspend judgment that any such person exists. You

³³On formulating an adequate guise theory, see Goodman and Lederman 2021.

³⁴Cf. Craig 1991, 147; Benton 2017, 826.

could nevertheless, upon finally meeting in-person this online acquaintance for the first time, rightly judge that you've known_i each other for much of the earlier period during which you had suspended judgment about whether you knew_i them. These cases show that one can know_i someone else while not even believing, under any relevant guise, that one knows_i the other or that they exist. Thus we find counterexamples even to WEAK LUMINOSITY*.³⁵

The foregoing shows that when S knows_i R, this fact is not guaranteed to be known, believed, or even available to be rationally believed by S. This result, along with ideas latent in the three grades of personal involvement distinguished in §2, appear to support AUTONOMY as well as OPACITY:

AUTONOMY One can know all manner of propositions about *R* without yet knowing_i *R*; and one can know_i *R* without knowing any particular set of truths about them (and without any specific qualitative knowledge of them).

OPACITY One can know_i someone *R* while failing to believe that one knows_i *R* (under the relevant guise), and even while falsely believing (under a certain guise), that they do not exist.

We find then a significant parallel between propositional knowledge and interpersonal knowledge: opacity for interpersonal knowledge is the analogue of non-luminosity³⁶ for propositional knowledge.

Given AUTONOMY and OPACITY, we have a better understanding of our typical knowledge_i ascribing behavior, including our natural inclination to think that knowledge_i must be neatly connected to propositional or qualitative knowledge about someone. Of course, paradigm cases of knowing_i others will involve acquiring propositional or qualitative knowledge about them, and knowing that (and how) one knows_i them. While we associate this knowledge with them, particularly when asked to substantiate how *well* we know someone, such knowledge which we typically acquire is not essential for

³⁵See Cullison 2010, 221 for a case of a lost loved one, as well as cases of relationships in his Turing Chat Room and Hallucination scenarios.

³⁶See Williamson (2000, Ch. 4). Strictly, OPACITY is the analogue of WEAK LUMINOSITY for propositional knowledge.

interpersonal knowing. For not all cases are paradigm cases: knowing_i someone can be fragmented from the other knowledge or beliefs we have about them. More precisely: no particular propositional or qualitative knowledge about someone is essential for knowing_i them, nor is having an accurate guise for them which organizes all that one knows of them. Nor even is believing, under the most relevant guise, that they exist, essential for knowing_i. What is essential is reciprocal second-personal treatment, and the “shared worlds”³⁷ this creates. (In §5 we shall examine one way to characterize the content of the worlds making up the knowledge_i relation.)

4 Interpersonal attitudes

The previous sections argued that interpersonal knowledge is logically independent of propositional or qualitative knowledge about someone, owing to the essential role of reciprocal second-personal treatments characteristic of interpersonal encounters. However an epistemology of interpersonal relations should go beyond such distinctions, to examine also how knowledge_i informs our moral psychology, and particularly how it develops within our most valued relationships. Aristotle regarded the most perfect form of friendship as involving the mutual recognition of bearing good will toward the other for their own sake,³⁸ and such valuing of another tends to be present in both friendships and healthy family relations. These relationships typically involve cultivating dispositions to share one’s (and listen to another’s) experiences, and typically include important roles for trust, loyalty, promising, or placing hope in another.³⁹ While good friendships typically involve some form of benevolence, a further topic concerns the extent to which knowledge_i, or at least the second-personal treatment which enables it, makes possible certain forms of love.⁴⁰ In addition, we might ask to what extent knowledge_i

³⁷To use Talbert’s (2015, 198ff.) phrase.

³⁸*Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. VIII.2, 1156a1–5, and Bk. IX.5, 1166b30–35.

³⁹Cf. Um 2021 on relational virtues, and Simpson 2023 on how trust is a way of realizing forms of interpersonal value in relationships.

⁴⁰Augustine argues that we cannot love individuals whom we do not know (*De Trinitate*, X.1–3; 1991, 286–298). Similarly, Scotus argues that singular cognition of someone is needed to love them (*De anima* q. 22, nn. 20–25; cf. *Questions on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, VII, q. 15:

is presupposed by, or contributes to, our best accounts of forgiveness. Forgiveness seems to be necessary for growth in healthy relationships, at least for relationships that last and engender deepening trust; and the paradigm cases of forgiveness involve a special form of second-personal treatment.⁴¹ If forgiveness is normatively significant in that it alters the norms bearing on the interactions between the wronged and the wrongdoer,⁴² how might knowing_i one another (for example, as friends, or even mere acquaintances) compare with cases where the individuals who have wronged and been wronged do not even know_i each other? Here I shall have to leave these ideas undeveloped, and will instead explore how knowledge_i provides the presupposed epistemic framework for certain reactive attitudes and investment attitudes: on the assumption that interpersonal epistemology undergirds the proper functioning of these sorts of attitudes, we shall examine to what extent they seem out of place apart from knowledge_i.

Strawson 1974 foreshadowed our discussion of second-personal treatment by arguing for an important difference between a participant attitude and an objective attitude toward someone.⁴³ For Strawson, “the many different kinds of relationship which we can have with other people” provide the context in which *reactive* attitudes most properly arise, and that in such relationships “we demand some degree of goodwill or regard on the part of” the other (Strawson 1974, 6). This good will or regard plausibly involves, at least, the minimal second-personal mentality of treating others with the dignity of being a subject rather than being treated as a mere object of observation, or worse, as a mere instrument of one’s own ends. While we might well carry on a superficial interpersonal relationship with some individuals where there is little good will or beneficence involved, such relations will typically be cloaked in faux nice-making public interactions for the sake of keeping up the appearance of decency, or in case one ever needs to depend on the other for instrumental help in achieving one’s own ends.

Etzkorn and Wolter 1997, pp. 254–265). For more contemporary discussions, see Kolodny 2003 and Setiya 2023.

⁴¹Pettigrove 2012 begins by focusing on the function of saying “I forgive you” to another.

⁴²Cf. Warmke 2016 and Green 2021.

⁴³Cf. Bennett 1980, who struggles mightily to locate the second-personal orientation which helps Strawson’s project make (more) sense.

Strawson contends that the participant and objective attitudes, though “not altogether *exclusive* of each other,” nevertheless “are, profoundly, *opposed* to each other” (1974, 9). And more significantly, he insists that engaging in the participant stance is required for having certain relational attitudes:

To adopt the objective attitude to another human being is to see him, perhaps, as an object of social policy; as a subject for what, in a wide range of sense, might be called treatment; as something certainly to be taken account, perhaps precautionary account, of; to be managed or handled or cured or trained . . . The objective attitude may be emotionally toned in many ways, but not in all ways: it may include repulsion or fear, it may include pity or even love, though not all kinds of love. But it cannot include the range of reactive feelings and attitudes which belong to involvement or participation with others in inter-personal human relationships; it cannot include resentment, gratitude, forgiveness, anger, or the sort of love which two adults can sometimes be said to feel reciprocally, for each other. (Strawson 1974, 9–10)

Strawson suggests that without the participant mode which forms and sustains one’s relationships, certain reactive attitudes would be unavailable, or at least out of place. Even if some reactive attitudes are possible without participant attitudes, they may seem to be psychologically irrational without the participant stance. At any rate, it seems clear that the *value* of such attitudes is enhanced within interpersonal relationships, for such relationships are paradigms for properly generating reactive attitudes like resentment or gratitude, or (for the wrongdoer) remorse or guilt. And the feeling, expressing, and communication of such reactive attitudes are significant for repairing relationships and for fostering healthy patterns of trust and cooperation (whether for practical or epistemic ends) with those whom we know_i.

Likewise, some relationships are the paradigms for *investment* attitudes such as hope and trust in another, particularly when the relationships form and grow under conditions of dependency or reliance (as for many parents and their children, or perhaps between those in leadership positions and those who serve under them). Finally, certain relationships enable us to articulate what *terminal* attitudes amount to, such as grief (at losing someone

with whom one has had a relationship): for example, grief is an appropriate reaction to losing someone (or knowledge_i of them), in whom you have had investment attitudes in, particularly when the relationship fostered mutual investment attitudes between two or more parties.

Adrienne Martin (2019) develops an account of interpersonal hope, where hoping in someone, particularly someone in a specific relationship, is a way of socially extending one's causal agency through them. When you invest hope in someone in this sense, you "count on" them to achieve some mutually desired end, such as that of a father who "hopes his daughter will have a more comfortable and fulfilling life than he has" (2019, 229). Such hope is "the basis for a number of expectations" he presses on himself, centered around "providing opportunities for his child and raising her to take advantage" of those opportunities:

As she nears adulthood, the hope also becomes the basis for a number of expectations the father holds *her* to... At the point where he forms these expectations of his daughter, the father's hope for his daughter becomes an interpersonal hope. He invests his hope *in* his daughter; he hopes *in her* for her better life. (Martin 2019, 229)

The father then counts on his daughter to recognize and take advantage of the opportunities he aims to provide her, to do her best to make good on those opportunities. As Martin puts it, "when we invest hope in people [in such cases], we hope to create a certain intertwining of our agencies," involving a socially extended "reliable causal coupling of one's agency with that of another person's."⁴⁴ Indeed, Martin argues that personal relationships "are the contexts where we are most likely to seek to extend our agency through other people," and investing hope in another can even be a way of initiating a new relationship, or changing a current one (2019, 235). Given this, socially extended agency can presuppose and rely on knowledge_i, yet knowledge_i can also be sought by socially extending one's agency toward a subject not yet known_i.

⁴⁴Martin 2019, 230–231. "To socially extend our agency, we provide *agential resources* for use by the investee," such as material resources, educational labor and support, emotional resources (2019, 235).

In the contexts of such relationships invested with interpersonal hope, one can feel “let down” by the other person, in a special second-personal sense: they let *you* down. Such let-down marks a person’s failure to act in a way that is adequately appreciative of the relationship of extended agency (Martin 2019, 241). This is a negative dissolution of the interpersonal hoping attitude, especially the positively valenced “what if” attitude one had to the possibility of achieving the mutual ends.⁴⁵ The feeling of let-down can be contrasted with the positive dissolution of the hopeful “what if” attitude, resulting in a feeling of *pride in another*, particularly (though Martin does not put it like this) through an attitude of being “proud of you,” signaling an achievement gained through their relational capacity to make collaborative efforts toward the end you’ve together achieved. Martin thinks of trust as a “thickening” of interpersonal hope (2019, 241), where the extreme version of let-down can even be a feeling of betrayal. Thickening it in another way gives us generous benefaction, which seeks an ongoing relational connection between the benefactor and the beneficiary, and where gratitude is the apt reaction on the part of the beneficiary (2019, 244–244).

What is significant about all these interpersonal attitudes of reaction and investment, or terminal attitudes such as grief, is that we find they are most rational and valuable only in relationships of knowing_i one another, or in pursuing such relationships; and hence interpersonal knowledge makes a distinctive contribution to their fittingness. The richest versions of let-down, of taking pride in someone, or of grief at the rupture or cessation of a relationship, only make sense when we know_i each other. For only through such relationships can we accomplish the right sort of intertwining of our agencies: the reciprocating second-personal treatments required for knowing_i involves ways of influencing and learning from another, so as to achieve such extended agency. Any parasocial relationships of placing such attitudes in those not known_i personally are inevitably weaker, less rational, or perhaps based on

⁴⁵ “When hope is interpersonally invested it has these three components: first, a belief that it is possible but not guaranteed that one’s agency will be extended through another person and thereby contribute to the realization of the hoped-for outcome; second, a desire or preference for that extension; and some third thing that amounts to a positively-toned “what-if” attitude toward a future containing that outcome produced through a process that includes this extension of agency” (Martin 2019, 232).

pretense or delusions of knowing_i others when one in fact is not in relationship with them.

One important further domain that an account of interpersonal knowledge can illuminate is in diagnosing, and to some degree addressing, testimonial epistemic injustice (see esp. Fricker 2007, Medina 2013). At stake here, of course, are not only the ethical ways we respond to others in their capacity as knowers, but also the epistemic relevance of dignified second-personal treatment for whom, and how well, we come to know_i others, where these even affect our assessments of someone's epistemic position. For example, two of Amia Srinivasan's (2020, 395–400) cases challenging internalism about justification are interpersonal interactions with socially marginalized agents.⁴⁶ These cases depend on someone being treated second-personally in key ways, where the subject in question is also well-attuned to sensing or recognizing such oppressive treatment directed at them as a “you”.

Insofar as identity-prejudicial credibility deficits can be partially corrected by becoming more closely acquainted with those whose social identities subject them to such prejudices, knowing_i others and understanding their experiences will contribute to developing the virtue of testimonial justice. Fricker 2007 argues that interpersonal relationships can be one of the contexts for

⁴⁶In *RACIST DINNER TABLE*, Nour is a young British woman of Arab descent, invited to dinner at the home of a white friend from university. The friend's father is polite and welcoming, generous with the food and wine, and asks Nour a series of questions about herself, and the evening is an amiable one. But she comes away with the unshakable conviction, somehow she “just knows,” that her host is racist. And in fact he is racist toward Arabs, giving off subtle cues which Nour subconsciously picked up on, which lead her to the believing that her host is racist. In *CLASSICIST COLLEGE*, Charles is a young man from a working-class background, the newest fellow of an Oxford college. The college's Master, also from a working-class background, is committed to equality and diversity. He acknowledges that it remains dominated by fellows from elite backgrounds, yet he says Charles will be welcomed and feel included. But on learning he went to state school, some fellows remark, “but you're so well spoken!” At pubs some fellows sing the Eton boating song while Charles sits uncomfortably silent. Charles learns that some now call him “Chavvy Charles.” Given his a dependable sensitivity to classism, Charles reports these incidents to the Master. The Master assures him that none are genuinely classist incidents, but playful, innocuous interactions characteristic of the college's communal culture; he also suggests that Charles is being overly sensitive. Yet Charles is unmoved, continuing to believe he has faced classist discrimination in the college, dismissing the Master's claims to the contrary. Charles meanwhile is unfamiliar with the idea of false consciousness, particularly of working-class people who have internalized bourgeois ideology (Srinivasan 2020, 395–397).

more “spontaneous” ways of becoming a more virtuous hearer:

plain personal familiarity can melt away the prejudice that presented an initial obstacle to an unprejudiced credibility judgement being made: an initially socially loaded accent gets normalized with habituation; the colour of someone’s skin become irrelevant; their sex no longer impinges; their age is forgotten. ...with the degrees of familiarity—gained over the duration of a conversation, or perhaps a more sustained acquaintance—the prejudiced first impression melts away, and the hearer’s credibility judgement corrects itself spontaneously. (Fricker 2007, 96)

To be sure, merely getting know_i others across social identities is not sufficient for becoming a virtuous hearer who will uniformly and reliably correct for prejudicial credibility deficits. For many will still harbor implicit prejudicial attitudes toward certain marginalized groups while knowing_i many of them, and many others will remain passive under the influence of persistent negative stereotypes latent in the social imagination. Yet it is a commonplace that increased exposure to, and developing deeper friendships with, those of different social identities tends to reduce bias and increase awareness of others’ different experiences. Such relationships are a main site of seeing and hearing those who go unseen and unheard, particularly for victims of (all forms of) injustice.⁴⁷ Thus intentionally fostering such knowing_i relations is a significant step toward reducing epistemic injustice and developing various relational virtues (Um 2021).⁴⁸ And of course, the inverse is also true: cases of epistemic injustice, or even perceived injustice, can plausibly hinder people from entering into the kinds of relations which enable them to know others interpersonally. People will naturally want to associate with and befriend those who regard them as worth listening to and trusting, and thus testimonial injustice can create obstacles to interpersonal efforts to know_i others. Though many of our relationships are entered into and upheld for how they bind us

⁴⁷As Lackey (2022, 61) argues, “the right to be known is an overtly interpersonal phenomenon... victims themselves have a right to be seen and heard—to have their stories be given proper uptake.”

⁴⁸Cf. important work in social psychology on intergroup contact (Allport 1954), and the common ingroup identity model (Gaertner et. al. 1993).

together with those who share our social identities, becoming more virtuous hearers can cultivate more opportunities to know_i others across different identities.

5 Empathic entanglement

The last section sketched the sorts of attitudes which are enabled or made (more) appropriate when formed in dignified knowing_i relationships, such as in friendships or (healthy) filial relations. But what is the nature of the shared worlds which comprise someone's perspective or understanding of the person known_i? Relatedly, a question which implicitly surfaced in §3, given both OPACITY and AUTONOMY, concerned how one's qualitative or propositional knowledge of someone would figure in what it is that one knows when one knows_i someone. Thus this final section will attempt to summarize one approach to filling in, and organizing, the complex but epistemically significant contents of the knowledge_i relation.⁴⁹

We start with the basic notion of having a perspective on another person. Recall from §2 that one can acquire propositional or qualitative knowledge about someone (through the first and second grades of personal involvement), where it need not be gained through second-personally structured interactions characteristic of the interpersonal (*de te*) grade given the ENCOUNTER principle. Yet such interactions, in which one treats another in second-personal ways, are crucial for coming to know_i someone; indeed, it is through these experiences that people begin to form relationships. Thus the sort of perspective in play is one which is acquired by two people getting to know each other relationally, wherein their interactions enable the development of a unique set of skills which are responsive to what and how each learns about them. Qualitative and propositional knowledge are gained, but the jointly cooperative endeavor of sharing one's own attitudes and emotions with another as a *you*, and the jointly responsive practice of receiving and remembering such offerings, contribute to the skill or knowledge-how needed to have a rapport with

⁴⁹*Pace* Farkas (2023, 114), who argues that “when it comes to knowing people, it seems that the emphasis is on the encounter itself, rather than the knowledge gained through this encounter.” Cf. Farkas 2019, esp. §7.

each other.⁵⁰ Such interactions need not be just about each other, of course: they usually center on shared projects or joint actions, and involve conversational topics about sport, art, literature, politics, or other interests. These experiences build an understanding of the other person through sharing, receiving, and joint-doings: the cooperative nature of such exchanges builds a perspective each person has of the other, even by allowing the other to shape one's own view of oneself (cf. Dover 2022). This repertoire of knowledges—qualitative, propositional, and practical—are linked together in one's frame for understanding the other.

Elisabeth Camp (2013, 2017, 2019a, 2019b) influentially argues that “*frames* are representational vehicles with the function of expressing *perspectives*. Perspectives in turn are open-ended dispositions to interpret, and specifically to produce intuitive structures of thought about, or *characterizations* of, particular subjects” (2019b, 18–19). Characterizations are “intuitive patterns of thought, which guide what an agent just does naturally notice, what explanatory connections they do tend to form, and how they immediately respond in cognition and action” (2019b, 22). As applied to other persons, our perspectives on others can be gained from afar, without trying to interact with or get to know_i them; we can gain a lot of propositional and qualitative knowledge about someone only through the first and second grades of involvement outlined earlier in §2. Yet as I shall hope to show, mutually reciprocating second-personal interactions impart a richer suite of connections between the sorts of knowledge which such interactions enable, because the responsive and coordinated efforts shape each person. Thus when your perspective on someone is gained through second-personal experiences, your characterization of them (and theirs of you) facilitates, in an ongoing manner, the relationship itself.

On Camp's view, characterizations are “informationally, experientially, and affectively rich, integrating as much data as possible into an intuitive whole”; and they “connect the many constituent features that they attribute to their subjects into a complex multidimensional structure, reflecting the different ways in which a feature can *matter* in an agent's characterization

⁵⁰Hence knowing_i tends to cultivate a distinctive interpersonal skill akin to what Pavese (2015) calls a *practical sense*.

of a given subject” (2019b, 20).⁵¹ Applied to the sort of understanding we can acquire of those we come to know_i in relationship, how and why we treat someone as a *you* in the ways we do ends up shaping how we regard them, in particular, what sorts of character traits in them we notice and find attractive (or repulsive, or neutral).

Thus the “shared worlds”⁵² comprise that which each offers to and remembers about the other. Such traits and experiences of the other which one comes to value about them contribute to the ethical and emotional responses through which one interprets and relates to them, at least in cases of healthy relationships. Each person’s way of treating the other second-personally will often attend to the other’s vulnerabilities and experiences in empathy, showing a concern for and trust in the other person: on one plausible view of empathy, this involves “imaginatively taking up the other’s first-personal perspective and seeing the world as calling for the emotional response that the other is experiencing” (Bailey 2022, 58). When deployed in moderately healthy relationships, one’s empathetic response shows a second-personally structured concern for another when they are treated as a “you” who can be (for oneself) a trusted “you” in return. And one shows trust when sharing aspects of oneself with another who will, hopefully, exhibit grace and gentleness in listening, in remembering, and in supporting one’s own emotional or social needs. Even when one needs to grow in maturity, the person whom one knows_i through a healthy relationship will use care and empathy in encouraging us to become better versions of ourselves.⁵³

In this way, friends and loved ones, usually exemplars of healthy relationships, will become empathically entangled with one another; and this struc-

⁵¹Where the two dimensions of “mattering” include *prominence*, namely features of a subject more initially noticeable and easier to recall, and *centrality*, which determines how they matter, “by connecting features into explanatory networks” (Camp 2019b, 20–21).

⁵²Cf. Talbert 2015, 198–202, though her unpacking of this idea, while second-personally constituted, is more informationally structured; whereas my account aims to unite the many sorts of knowledge along with the dispositions characteristic of know-how, the emotional valences built into such relationships, and the broader understanding one gains of someone through this perspective.

⁵³By contrast, of course, most of the above features are lacking or not obligatory in most relationships structured by asymmetrical power dynamics, or relationships of utility (as Aristotle calls them), even when superficial knowledge_i is had.

tures the focal points of what and how one knows about the other. A trusted friend will remember and remain aware of our sensitivities or traumas, and take care in engagement with us over those areas. Essential to understanding another in these ways is a prioritization of key facts and experiences known about them, while judiciously exercising the skill of how to relate to them given these priorities.⁵⁴ Empathy is manifested in attending to them through a sort of interpersonal-practical wisdom, with kindness and allegiance, where those are exactly what that person would (or might) need (in a given conversation, for example). Or, similarly, this would involve knowing how and when to invoke a new consideration in challenge to their evaluation or interpretation of some matter, though always with care, where that might be what one needs. In other words, in healthy relationships, one's perspective of the one known_i will typically treat them charitably, empathically, and foster more occasions for trusting interactions, in addition to having and engaging over the usual shared interests or experiences which build up the sorts of knowledge shaping one's understanding of the other through that perspective.

The empathic structure of trust in such relationships enables us to predict circumstances of extending the epistemic goods characteristic of such knowing_i relations. For example, it makes possible a natural account of knowledge_i norms of certain speech acts hitherto unexamined. For example, we often are willing to trust on another's say-so precisely when someone is willing to *vouch* for them, namely, where it is someone whom they know personally *and* where they are on good terms with them. As Grace Paterson puts it, "vouching for someone is a way to enable trust in situations there is not sufficient time for it to develop organically through a relationship" (Paterson 2021, 7). When the person vouched for is known personally by a speaker and judged to be reliable with respect to the matter vouched for, we tend to think that the speaker is rightly situated, epistemically speaking, to engage in

⁵⁴One might attempt an account of such prioritization in terms of how each individual would rank order certain facts or features of themselves, where someone else knows_i them best (or well) only when one's perspective on them includes a similar (or very close) rank ordering, gleaned from interpersonal encounters with them. Note that this might permit a *subjective* rendering of knowing_i someone well where their orderings coincide, contrasted with an *objective* ordering of those facts or qualities which (unbeknownst to the subject and another who knows_i them) are actually most important for knowing_i them best. Articulating and exploring such ideas must await another occasion.

such vouching. “Generally speaking, the better we know someone, and the better they know us, the easier it is to depend on them to make decisions that are in our best interests (or not, if we come to distrust them instead). Ongoing relationships with repeated interactions therefore provide the conditions most conducive to trust. Strangers, by contrast, are comparatively difficult to trust even if we are able to rely on them in certain ways” (Paterson 2021, 7).

Arguably then, and in line with arguments for a knowledge norm of assertion,⁵⁵ there is also a knowledge_i norm of vouching:

KNV One must: vouch for S (with respect to X) only if one knows_i S and through knowing_i S believes S trustworthy (with respect to X)

KNV makes sense of why it’s somehow impermissible to vouch for people one doesn’t know_i.⁵⁶ It thus explains the relevance of challenge questions when someone might vouch for another person, like “How do you know them?” or “You don’t know them, do you?” Similarly, KNV explains why it would also be impermissible to vouch for someone known_i but whom one doesn’t regard as trustworthy on the matter vouched for. Finally, it also explains why it would be subtly problematic to vouch for someone whom one knows_i, and thinks is trustworthy on the matter vouched for, but where one’s knowing_i them (or one’s experiences with them) is not the basis for judging them to be trustworthy in that domain.

This section has argued that second-personally structured interactions which constitute the means of getting to know_i another person may be captured by how the knowledge gained is organized into a perspective for understanding them. The rich connections between what is known about someone, particularly when it is elicited and given in shared experiences of mutual communication, are constructed from our attentive regard for them: through such attention we learn of their experiences, interests, character traits, and how they prioritize what matters to them. When things go well, such as in mutual and healthy relationships, each person’s perspective on the other person

⁵⁵Williamson 2000, Ch. 11; cf. Benton 2024b for an overview.

⁵⁶This is of a piece with social-epistemic norms requiring that one have first-hand experience to make evaluative claims: e.g., one normally cannot claim that a restaurant’s cuisine is good when one has never tried their food.

is built by coordinated reciprocation, a form of interpersonal sharing which is supported by one's affective attention involving empathy and trust for the other, arising out of their dignified treatment as a *you* worth relating to and knowing. Such a multidimensional frame for understanding someone thus known_{*i*} is mutually shaped by the empathic entanglement of two subjects: it depends on each sharing and receiving, but likewise allows the other to shape how someone understands themselves, and even whom they become.

6 Conclusion

Knowing someone in relationship, particularly when two people are on good terms engendering trust and empathy, is an important but largely neglected area at the intersection of epistemology and social philosophy. I have argued that knowing someone personally is structurally discrete from the sorts of knowledge about someone which typically accompanies knowing them in relationship—propositional, qualitative, and practical knowledge—and how these are organized into a second-personal perspective. Such knowledge_{*i*} exhibits an opacity comparable to the non-luminosity of propositional knowledge. Yet its dependence on *de te* second-personal interactions make possible a rich perspective on the person known_{*i*}. The sort of knowledge and interpersonal understanding arising from such interactions can rationalize a variety of interpersonal attitudes, and in healthy relationships, foster empathy and trust. In such better cases, knowledge_{*i*} can go some distance toward addressing cases of epistemic injustice, and it also positions us to extend our agency and our trusting attitudes through social communication. These do not exhaust the relevant insights available from an interpersonal epistemology. Rather, these ideas hopefully represent some further initial steps toward larger questions for exploration at the interface of epistemology, philosophy of mind, and social cognition.⁵⁷

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