# A PLEA FOR CARDIOGNOSIS

In this brief essay, I wish to suggest there is a kind of knowledge which is properly our knowledge of persons and irreducible to any of the forms of knowledge with which philosophers are familiar. I shall use the unfamiliar though traditional term for this sort of knowledge, *cardiognosis*, or “knowledge of hearts.” Traditionally, this sort of knowledge is ascribed primarily to God, but I shall argue that it is also characteristic of human knowledge, especially of our knowledge of others persons. After suggesting some reasons why, my plea will be that philosophers seriously regard and study this unique mode of knowledge, which so far as I can tell has been almost completely ignored by analytic philosophers in general and epistemologists in particular. Yet I want to suggest that there is an obvious and familiar sort of knowledge that resists reduction to the standard paradigm for knowledge entertained by theoretical inquirers. This form of knowledge is direct rather than mediated, intuitive rather than discursive, affective rather than conceptual, and focused exclusively on particulars *as such* in their individuality.

I.

When philosophers discuss the nature of knowledge, they are primarily concerned with substantive theoretical knowledge, which is typically of the general or universal, and is the product of discursive reasoning. Such knowledge consists in propositional knowledge about non-propositional things, derived from observation of surface phenomena from which inferences are drawn and theories constructed, which theories are tested largely from a third-person point of view. Knowledge of this sort is primarily of the truth-values of propositions or sets of propositions (“theories”) and our knowledge of the things themselves both indirect and mediated by a great deal of “processing.” Some of this mediation is the product of non-rational physical processes, such as those involved in sense perception, which relates the (putatively) external object to the human inquirer qua perceiver. The rest is the consequence of largely mental, rationally directed processes involving the formation and testing of theoretical constructs intended to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the resulting phenomena interpreted as representations of non-mental realities existing independently of consciousness in the “real world.” Both philosophy and natural science aim to provide us with knowledge of this kind as the product of theoretical inquiry of the sort I have just outlined. Further, most philosophers and scientists would probably claim that knowledge of this sort is paradigmatic of knowledge generally, such that any sort of knowledge that cannot be reduced to this sort of knowledge does not count as genuine substantive knowledge at all. I wish to dispute this claim.

We do not always use the term “know” in this fashion. We sometimes use it in a way that suggests that *what* we know, what we might call the *object* *known* is neither propositional nor the product of ratiocination, and thus is not knowledge *about something*. Instead, we use “know” in such a way that what we claim to know is some pre-linguistic reality, apprehended intuitively and immediately, hence without existing for us as already linguistically formulated. This use of “know” certain unique features. For example, it is often convertible with one common use of the term “understand,” the sense cognate to such terms as *gnosis*, *intellectus*, and *verstand*. Consider someone’s claim to know calculus. Knowing calculus in this sense of “know” is not like knowing the periodic table or knowing how to change a flat tire. Although we study and learn calculus, the study of calculus is more than simply either the acquisition of a body of information or the mastery of a set of techniques. Knowing calculus is a matter of *understanding* rather than mere ratiocination and it comes in degrees. We say that individual persons know or understand calculus “a little,” “fairly well,” “really well,” or even not at all. In justifying such judgments we refer, for example, to a person’s ability to follow discussions of calculus without becoming lost or confused, to explain its basic concepts, applications, and procedures to others in a clear and helpful way, to solve calculus problems quickly and efficiently, to find new, more elegant solutions to calculus problems, to see further extensions of calculus as a branch of pure mathematics, to find new and useful applications of calculus as a branch of applied mathematics, and to teach or write about calculus in a clear, perspicuous and illuminating way. In the same way, one reveals one’s failure to know or understand calculus through one’s being unable to explain or articulate its basic concepts and principles, by exhibiting erroneous or confused ideas about it, by one’s limited ability to explain, apply, or use calculus in any way other than those one has been shown by others and learned by rote, by one’s inability to communicate or educate others in the theory and use of calculus in such a way as to allow them to master its intricacies, and so on. A few people, of course, perform well in all of these areas, some in few or none, perhaps most of us in some middling fashion; beyond this, there appears to an indefinitely large number of degrees to which one can know or understand this difficult material without there being any obvious way to quantify them. Indeed, it can also be the case that we judge that a person does in fact know or understand calculus, even though unable to express this knowledge clearly or adequately, due to lack of training or some cognitive defect that prevents him or her from being articulate about what they know.

If we are to ask the question *what* we know when we *know* calculus, there is no way that we can give any sort of perspicuous answer. It is no mere matter of knowing a certain amount of information, nor even such information accompanied by technique. One can learn definitions, formulae, and even mathematical operations by rote in order to solve stock problems or make applications in areas where established solutions already exist, but this hardly counts as knowing or understanding calculus. Indeed, an engineer might survive largely by looking up the correct formulae in a book designed just for that purpose, without any deep understanding of what calculus is or how it works. Knowing or understanding calculus in the sense we are using it here appears to be the direct, intuitive, pre-linguistic apprehension of its object incapable of being described by us yet nevertheless capable of guiding our thoughts and being linguistically expressed. It has no phenomenology and is incapable of being introspected; we just find ourselves spontaneously “knowing the answer” or “knowing what to say” in response to an appropriate cognitive stimulus, sometimes quite to our surprise. At the same time, our responses are neither oracular nor merely mechanical; we can be just as surprised to discover that our understanding is defective or confused – a condition that further reflection is often capable of relieving. In the extremity, the discovery of “gaps” in one’s understanding of calculus can be alleviated by further study or research, while in others we have to admit that we have reached the limits of our capacity to understand. We can, in this way, both know that we don’t know and more or less precisely what it is that we don’t know. At any rate, while our explicit, occurrent thoughts about calculus and its use/applications is explicitly discursive, ratiocinative and testable in principle, our knowing calculus is not, and the extent or limitations of each individual’s apprehension of that subject matter can only be discovered *a posteriori* and based on evidence derived from a third-person perspective. Nevertheless, the knowledge is neither innate nor mystical – it is acquired through study and effort, rather more easily by some (the “mathematically gifted”) than others, without there being a strict correspondence between the amount of one’s effort and the resulting degree of understanding.

II

Something similar obtains in our knowledge of other persons, with the exception that, rather than being the apprehension of something general, the apprehension of a person always focuses on a discrete, unique individual *as such*. Of course, there are many particular things in the world, each of them unique and individual. However, it would ill repay one’s time to devote oneself to the study of most of them *as such*. No one would take, say, a single leaf, a randomly selected stone or giraffe, or even a human brain *just as such* to be worth of theoretical inquiry without some special reason. In ordinary circumstances, individual things are of interest to us only as a means by which we can acquire general knowledge about the type or kind to which that individual belongs, and study of the individual is for the sake of understanding the universal by means of a close examination of a single representative member of a kind. For the most part, we ignore those features of individual things that make them distinct from all other things in order to focus on their common features. To the extent that individuals *as such* (e.g., the *Titanic*, Mount Vesuvius, or the Sun) attract our attention it is due to their historical importance or their relation to standing human interests, not on their own account. For example, we may wonder why this particular leaf, alone among the rest of those that once were on this tree has not yet fallen. We might wonder how this stone, so different in mineral composition from those around it, happened to end up in this place. We may be concerned to ask why this apparently healthy giraffe suddenly died, or given that this is Einstein’s brain, whether there is anything unusual about it that might explain his superior genius, and so on. We might be interested in attempting to determine if, and if so, when the Sun will go nova, and so on. In these cases, it is the particular thing *qua* individual that interests us, but not simply *as such*. An old, rusty pistol, for example, takes on a wholly different significance when we are told that it belonged to Buffalo Bill, or is the gun with which Booth shot Lincoln.

When it comes to human persons, however, this is apparently far from the case. Human persons are endlessly fascinating to us just *as such*, in their uniqueness and individuality. However, while the metaphysics of personhood has received a good deal of study in recent decades, our concrete knowledge of persons in their individuality is scarcely ever discussed. While there are still sporadic (and largely futile) discussions of the problem of other minds, this only concerns the abstract question how it is that we can know that other minds exist. This is not the question that concerns me here. Instead, my question concerns the issue of how we can know what we ordinarily claim to be able to know about ourselves, our friends, and the other persons with which we are personally acquainted.

III.

One of the most common and distinctive uses of the term know is what we might call the *personal* sense of “know,” used in contexts in which knowledge of persons is at issue. Consider the following:

How well do you know Sally?

I have known Mike for over thirty years.

How should I know? You know them better than I do.

Fred is not the man I married. He’s changed. I just don’t know him anymore.

You think you know me, but you don’t.

The first thing that we need to note is that the object of knowledge in these cases, i.e. what is known or claimed to be known is another *person*. Philosophers are likely to balk at this suggestion, since they generally suppose that the only possible object of knowledge is the truth of propositions. It thus goes hard with them to entertain the idea that we can know any *things* at all, unless those things are ideas, sense data, or something else upon which a claim to know the truth of a proposition can be founded. That is why I developed the example about calculus in the last section. Knowledge is not always explicit, occurrent, and internally represented in consciousness in words and sentences. In this context, to know is to intuitively understand in an affective, rather than representational, fashion. Yet how can a thing, in particular, a person (really a quite mysterious sort of thing indeed) be an object of intuitive understanding? I have discussed this topic elsewhere.[[1]](#footnote-1) I submit that, however mysterious persons may be and however paradigm-shattering the fact that we can know persons in this way might seem in terms of traditional categories, it is simply a fact that we possess knowledge of this sort. It is not merely metaphorical to speak of knowledge in this context, nor is it merely a sort of shorthand for the possession of a theory or complex inferential structure about the behavior of other people that we somehow unconsciously apply.[[2]](#footnote-2)

What is it that we know when we know a person? It is not a set of propositions or the consequence of theoretical activity, whether consciously or unconsciously applied. Instead, it is knowledge of the moods, habits, temperament, character, and motivational structure of another, concrete, individual person. This knowledge is based on long acquaintance, shared intimacy, and common experiences in which are revealed to us the true self behind the public façade that we all project in order to appear to be something that we may not be and perhaps wish we were, or at any rate when we are not merely cynically presenting a socially respectable “front.” The people who know us are the people with whom we “let down our hair,” share our secrets, express our frank opinion without mincing words, and have seen us at our worst as well as our best. This is especially the case with those to whom we are bonded by ties of blood, such as family members, or live with, such as spouses or children, or bond with, like one’s “drinking buddies,” or even just spend a long time with, such as one’s co-workers, when one has to work closely with them on some sort of common project over an extended period of time. In such cases, it is too exhausting to maintain the public façade behind which we mostly hide in our dealings with others. In such cases, the true self, both theirs and ours, inevitably obtrudes and is ineluctably revealed to others. Although we may protest that in those circumstances that we were not ourselves, reacted under stress, were taken by surprise, sleep-deprived, etc. everyone is quite aware that this is false, and the more a person protests the more he or she drives the point home.[[3]](#footnote-3)

This knowledge, of course, comes in degrees. Part of the reason for this is that our powers of affectivity are themselves limited and this hampers our ability to know others. There are people who seem to have little if any ability to know others, just as there are those with no head for math or languages. At the same time, some people are hard to “read” or so different from ourselves that they remain difficult to know, even if we spend a lot of time with them.[[4]](#footnote-4) Others, however, are (as the Italians say) “simpatico,” in that we find a natural affinity with them and, after even a short but intense conversation, come away feeling as though we have *known them* for years. By far the most singular cause of our lack of knowledge of others arises from the fact that other people deliberately withhold it from us, just as we in turn withhold it from others. Knowledge of this sort is prized by us and not to be shared with just anyone. We prefer others to judge us externals, such as our looks or our achievements, and to keep them at arm’s length, hoping that their good opinion of us will not be undermined by intimate acquaintance. This is one the reason that “tell all” and “unauthorized” biographies are so popular. We think we get to learn about famous people from those who know them, or at least been in physical proximity to them for a sufficient amount of time to have observed them away from the public eye and who are thus privy to “intimate” details of their lives that reveal what they are truly like.

This is no mere matter of withholding factual information about ourselves, or even disguising our true thoughts or feelings for fear that these would give us away. To the extent that the withholding of these sorts of facts about ourselves is relevant at all to the sort of knowledge we are concerned with here, it is only because these facts would reveal aspects of our personality and character that we would prefer to keep hidden from others, rather than that they would prove embarrassing, or attract criticism, or negatively affect our self-interest. Though these latter may be contributory reasons for our wanting to withhold that information about ourselves, this is likely the case precisely because that information would reveal us as we really are rather than as we would like to be thought of by others. It is much more common for us to allow others infrequent and unintentional glimpses of our true self *inadvertently* in momentary lapses or “slips.” All of us are prone to this, and despite our best efforts at exclusion and disguise, those with whom we are intimately acquainted generally know us much better than we wish they did.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The basic test of this knowledge is our ability to predict, on the basis of our acquaintance with them, the (otherwise) free actions of the individuals we claim to know. There is no space here to discuss the question of free will and determinism. My only point is that, regardless of whether or not determinism is true, our predictions concerning the behavior of those we know is not based on any sort of causal theory, either of human behavior or of the specific “forces” that have contributed to the formation of the individual characters of our intimate acquaintances. In the first place, despite the best efforts of scientists and philosophers, there is no theory of the first sort, even in embryo, and thus no way that such a theory could inform our ordinary judgments. As to the second, such a theory would be so complicated and the problem of weighing the different influences, even if they could all be known, would be a task so complex and fraught with difficulty that predicting the weather and handicapping horses, which arguably no one can do with anything approaching genuine adequacy, would be relatively easy by comparison. Yet our ability to predict the (from our perspective) free actions of others is surely statistically better than what we would expect if our attempts to do so were merely a matter of making an “educated guess.” In many cases we are not guessing at all – *we know* what they will do and make our “prediction” with perfect conviction. We are right often enough that no genuine doubt is cast upon these claims. More than this, we are irritated to find that our family and friends often know what we are going to do before we have even consciously decided to do it, so much so that they are often able to thwart our fondest schemes.

That does not mean that our ability to predict the free actions of others is infallible. However, when it fails, it is usually through our limited knowledge of the whole context in which an action occurs consisting in our ignorance of relevant facts or external influences impinging on the agent whom we know. On other occasions, we conclude that we did not know the person as well as we thought we did. On still others, we have to conclude that something has happened to the person to make him or her change in some basic way, or to have lost effective control over his or her character or actions, as in the case of a sudden onset of insanity. For the most part, however, these are as unusual and anomalous as optical illusions or other perceptual errors and thus far from enough to make us doubt that we have the ability to possess the knowledge we take ourselves to possess, whether it be of other persons or of material things. In most cases, as in a good murder mystery, once all is revealed, everything makes perfect, logical sense, regardless of how puzzling it all seemed before the detective presented the solution. As such, we have no more reason to be skeptical about our capacity for *cardiognosis* on this score than we do to be skeptical about our ability to perceive material things by means of the senses.

IV

If I have been able, by this point, to wring even a grudging admission that knowledge of this sort exists, or is even barely possible, the question remains – why should philosophers bother about *cardiognosis*? I think that cardiognosis both raises some interesting philosophical questions and also bids fair to provide a possible solution to others. Let me illustrate.

First of all, supposing that we possess the power of *cardiognosis*, why is self-knowledge so hard to come by? After all, we are closer to, more intimately acquainted with, and spend more time with ourselves than we do with anyone else. Despite this, it is on the whole much easier to know others than it is to know oneself, and for others to know us better than we know ourselves. Much to our chagrin, our family and friends often know what we are going to do before we ourselves do, and often prior to our having chosen to do it. In turn, we are often able to predict successfully what our friends will do, even in novel or counterfactual situations in which they are taken by surprise or have never even considered.

One answer to this problem, which I will throw out for consideration, is that the reason that self-knowledge is so difficult is that we are, so to speak, *too close* to ourselves to become objects for ourselves in a way appropriate to the acquisition of cardiognosis in our own individual case. The individual person is always a subject in relation to him- or herself, and thus despite the inexhaustible capacity for introspection, is incapable of attaining the impersonal perspective from which the self can appropriately be constituted as an object for that subject. If this is correct, then we learn something else about *cardiognosis*, that it requires a certain distance from its object that is easier to approximate with regard to others than it is with regard to oneself. It also means that knowing oneself is no mere matter of having complete information about oneself from a third-person point of view. Nevertheless, at this point alternate explanations are certainly possible and perhaps worth exploring further.

A second issue we might take up is the extent to which we can have *cardiognosis* of people whom we have never met, or who lived long before we did or in extremely different historical and cultural conditions. I have been speaking so far as though *cardiognosis* required personal acquaintance with its object, the person thereby known. I am not sure, however, that this is correct. Don’t I come to *know* an historical figure, like Jefferson or Napoleon, as a person and not simply a subject in the course of writing, say, a detailed biography of that person? Won’t that be especially the case if my research includes, not just chronology and events, but the private lives of such figures, what their friends and relations had to say about them, a study of their private correspondence, and so on? In some cases, biographers make strong claims to know their subjects as though they were a living person of their acquaintance. In other cases, such as Handel, all is withheld in such a way that no amount of study seems capable of turning up anything significant about the person’s personality and character. However, whether or not this sort of knowledge is genuinely possible, or merely analogical, or even merely metaphorical, remains an open question.

Turning finally to problems to which cardiognosis may offer a solution, we might consider the grounding problem for Molinism. According to Molinists God possesses, in addition to His knowledge of all possibilities and all actualities, a special “middle knowledge” of the free acts of created persons, such that God knows what every agent would freely choose in any set of circumstances. The obvious difficulty with this view is that there seems to be no way to specify the truth-conditions for these so-called “counterfactuals of freedom.” On the one hand, if these choices are truly free, then it seems that there cannot be any determinate truth-value for such propositions, since they are made to be true by my free choices and are therefore not knowable until I decide what I am going to do. If so, there seems to be no truth-conditions for so-called counterfactuals of freedom, hence no way that anyone, even God, could know them. On the other hand, if we suppose that there are truth-conditions for these counterfactuals, then it seems that the obtaining of these truth-conditions determine which choice would be made in those circumstances, in which case there are no open alternatives and thus, no genuinely free choices after all. This is the notorious “grounding problem” for Molinism, and while several clever and sophisticated philosophers have attempted to meet the challenge of this argument, to this point they have failed to silence their critics.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Cardiognosis provides a possible solution to this dilemma. As we noted above, cardiognosis in our own case makes it possible for us to predict the actions of others without any causal theory or relying on any sort of inferential strategy. It is thus consist with those actions being freely chosen by those persons whose actions we foresee and predict. Cardiognosis is classically attributed to God, and thought in His case to be so exhaustive that God is said to *supercomprehend* his creatures, knowing them more completely than they know themselves. Since God is our creator, there is nothing about us that God does not know and no way for us to disguise or hide our true selves from Him. Indeed, if God has, as is often thought, direct and complete access to the contents of my consciousness as I experience them – such as a telepath would – then divine cardiognosis would give Him the maximal ability to predict my free actions possible through intimacy with another. If so, it might be possible for God to be practically infallible with regard to human free choice in every possible circumstance, whether actual or possible. By simply *seeing* what I would freely choose to do in every possible set of circumstances in which I could exist, God could *know* what I would do in every such circumstance, and thus my actions, though freely chosen by me, would still possess epistemic necessity from God’s point of view. This would solve the grounding problem, and thus remove one of the major objections to the notion of “middle knowledge.”

At this point, of course, this is nothing more than a suggestion. However, I hope that it is tantalizing enough of a suggestion to direct philosophical attention to the claims I have been making here and their judicious investigation. If that is so, then the plea of my title will not have been in vain.

1. I refer the reader to my essay “Seeing Other Minds,” published originally in the Seattle Critical Review and also posted on PhilPapers. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This does not mean that we cannot have such theories, or even, in an extended sense, “theorize” about other people in lieu of knowing them as individuals. This, however, is a consequence of not knowing the person in question and is thus an attempt to “fill a gap” in our knowledge through other means. Particularly tiresome are those people in the grips of a theory, such as Freud’s or Skinner’s, who attempt to treat the behavior of others in theoretical categories designed to supersede and supplant the need to know them in the sense I am talking about here. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It needs to be emphasized at this point that this knowledge is *no*t the product of the exercise of empathy or of any form of imaginative projection. Such a suggestion would make our knowledge of others the product of discursive reason, based on something like an hypothesis about what is going on inside their minds (Well, if I was in that situation, I would feel such-and-such and would express it in this fashion, something to be confirmed somehow by the observation of external behavior. However, our knowledge of other persons both more basic, less sophisticated, and more reliable than any conjectures about persons that we could arrive at in that fashion. It may be, of course, that I have failed to understand what empathy is, and I am willing to accept correction on that point. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. One of the most common claims made by Stalin’s associates was that he was a complete cipher, and that no one could really know him, even after years of close association. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. It does not follow from this that the sort of person who is willing to share the most intimate details of their lives with virtual strangers are easier to know than those who tried to keep those things hidden. Indeed, to do this sort of thing is very often an unconscious strategy of obfuscation intended to manage other’s perceptions of oneself. Indeed, among the most unbearably tedious people are people who cannot talk about anything other than themselves and believe that every thought and feeling they have needs to be expressed, and expressed publically. Such people are so distasteful that few even *want* to know them – which may just be the point of such behavior *strategically* considered. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For a good, brief discussion of this problem, see Thomas P. Flint, *Divine Providence: the Molinist Account*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University press, 1998, especially pp. 123-37. Other proponents of Molinism include Alfred J. Freddoso and William Lane Craig, who has done the most to develop and promote this solution to the divine foreknowledge problem. I am not myself a Molinist, but I recommend cardiognosis to them as a possible solution to this particular difficulty for their view. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)