

Loving Understanding

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The Doors tell us that people are strange.¹ According to Amos Oz, “Another person is a mystery.”² Yet other people do not completely evade our epistemic grip, which in fact takes a variety of forms. Epistemically, some people are stranger or more mysterious to us than others, the ones we get. But the differences among these interpersonal epistemic achievements are themselves murky, and it is fair to say that epistemology—and its ally, the philosophy of mind—has not yet touched bottom.

My project is to explore the possibilities. One of my central theses is *pluralism*: our interpersonal epistemic achievements are many and varied. But my primary aim is to shine a spotlight on one particularly robust epistemic relation joining persons with persons which I discuss under the heading “getting another” (§1). I argue that this relation resists capture by extant approaches that privilege a kind of knowledge or understanding individuated by its complement content (e.g., -who, -why, or -how), empathic origin, or second-personal character (§§2–3). Their shortcomings teach the importance of an alternative, broadly functional view (§4). Yet the relevant function has affective dimensions, which presses the question: how could an epistemic relation be like *that*? To my knowledge, we currently lack a picture of epistemic achievement fitted to deliver an answer. Although few still accept the classical conception which pits Reason against Passion, it’s fair to say that philosophy is still working towards a compelling alternative. Hoping to sketch a way forward, I develop a positive account of the relevant epistemic achievement, one designed around an admittedly unorthodox approach to the epistemology of love (§§5–9).

1. Getting Another Person

To fix attention, focus on the people to whom you’re closest. Not geographically, and not just emotionally, but epistemically: you really know or understand them. More colloquially, you “get” them.³ Of course your GPS coordinates are likely to overlap with those you get. And your getting them, though not identical to any suite of emotions, is bound to rule out certain emotional profiles—for instance, those incompatible with possession of individual-specific capacities for trust and affirmation. (I’ll have more to say about this connection below.) Although paradigm cases involve psychological intimates, such as a spouse or partner, getting another person is not a matter of physical intimacy, à la “knowledge in the Biblical sense.” While sex might implicate epistemic phenomena, it’s not itself epistemic, whereas the getting relation is.

The classification is intuitive. It can be substantiated by observing that the relation not only exhibits intentionality, being directed at another person, but also marks a cognitive achievement, rather than a mere physiological, behavioral, or sensory success. Moreover, the cognitive achievement can be evaluated in epistemically relevant ways. Getting another person is compatible with various oversights. But you don’t get another at all if you’re wholly ignorant of or profoundly mistaken about them, and you get them less to the extent that your image of them is erroneous, incoherent, superficial, or indiscriminating.

¹ (When you’re a stranger.) Morrison and Krieger (1967).

² Quoted in Wachtel (1993, 72).

³ Colloquialisms are risky, but this one is intuitive and offers three assists: it avoids prejudging questions that are at this initial stage best left open (such as whether it is a type of knowledge, or instead understanding, and of what type); it allows us, in the remainder of this section, to explicate central features of the target relation; it permits further clarification of that relation via the examples in subsequent sections.

That getting another is gradable in these ways makes comparisons tricky and opens the door to ambiguous verdicts, or those requiring significant qualifications. Does Cordelia get Lear? In some respects, though perhaps in a way that falls short of how Alyosha gets Ivan, but still in a manner that surpasses how Harold gets Maude. Yet there are also clear cases; while you can probably draw on your own experience, below we'll consider a few examples in which it's present, along with several in which it's not. These cases will help further clarify our target. They'll also demonstrate that even a modest instance is a feat.

Indeed, getting another person is neither trivial nor generic. Perhaps there is a distant world in which everyone inevitably gets everyone else. For a host of reasons, such an Interpersonal Epistemic Eden is difficult to fathom. In the actual world, the relevant excellence is as difficult as it is rare. It's fair to say that, at least in our region of modal space, the epistemic relation you bear to those you get is substantive and selective in at least three concrete respects. You get some in a way that you do not get many (most, all) others in your life, and you get them in a way that many (most, all) others in their life do not. More basically, you get them in a way that is somehow attuned to their status as persons, and so is a relation you don't bear to mere things.

The relation is existence-entailing: you can't get another person if they don't exist. But it's not symmetrical: you may get another even if they fail to get you. That the relation's second relatum can't be replaced with something else that exists in all and only those worlds in which the person gotten exists—they are not substitutable *salva veritate*—indicates a sense in which the relation is hyperintensional. Arguably these formal features, like the concrete respects cited above, do not constitute but follow from the relevant combination of substantivity and selectivity. A principal task of an account of getting another is to illuminate that combination.

As we'll see, this is a large part of what makes theorizing in this area of epistemology so challenging. The next two sections argue that while extant approaches in terms of knowledge, understanding, and empathy describe genuine epistemic achievements, a rather different approach is needed to capture the epistemic relation you bear to your intimates insofar as you get them.⁴ That alternative, I'll argue, does not posit a motley or disjunctive kind. Instead I'll defend a unified view which captures diversity by identifying a single epistemic relation that is not only substantive and selective but also multiply realizable. [*Note to REC readers: those short on time might skim or skip the critique of extant approaches in §§2-3 (but please read §3's final paragraph); §4 begins to develop the positive view.*]

2. Knowledge and Understanding

2.1 Grasping facts and explanations

A useful starting point is reflection on testimonial uptake, understood as requiring not mere comprehension of the testimony's content, but also competent assessment of the informant and suitable cognitive processing of that content itself. Through testimonial uptake so conceived we learn numerous facts and gain “cognitive control” over associated explanations.⁵ This is not merely a way to improve our epistemic grip on mere things, delivering expertise about them. It also yields improvement in our epistemic relations to other people. Through it we can come to *know* and *understand* both *that* and *why* another person has, had, and will have assorted physiological, psychological, behavioral, and social traits. To be sure, such topical expertise, even when certain,

⁴ To be maximally clear: my claim is *not* that the authors quoted or cited below are mistaken about *their* topics (recall my pluralism), but rather that the types of achievements they depict don't capture *our* target here.

⁵ Testimonial uptake so conceived contrasts with naïve testimonial acceptance. Hills (2016, 663) introduces the term ‘cognitive control’ to refer to a certain suite of inferential and linguistic abilities, but one could also or instead invoke the abilities Price (1946, 34–8) highlights in his account of “familiarity with a universal”—one facet of which undergirds Strevens's (2025, 7) recognitional account of “grasping.”

is not obviously the epistemic ideal when it comes to relating to others. At least it doesn't exhaust the options. After all, through testimonial uptake basically anyone can become an expert about basically anyone else: you, me, Gandhi, Hitler. Lay out all the facts, spell out all the explanations, but such an expert would still fail to get these others in the way you get your intimates.⁶

That's an abstract way to make a point that applies broadly. It's been suggested that there's nothing more to understanding in general, and understanding a person in particular, than grasping explanations or "dependence relations" that, as Michael Lynch puts it, bear on

why something is the case. ... [Y]ou understand a person to the extent you don't just know that she is unhappy, but what makes her unhappy. ... In this sense, understanding a person amounts to grasping what "makes them tick."⁷

In *Understanding People* Alan Millar also privileges understanding why, adding that in the case of people it "not only has a distinctive subject-matter but is distinctive *qua* understanding" because it requires grasping an explanation that "implicates normative considerations" (such as reasons and justification).⁸ Indeed, those who appeal to understanding-why and related states when theorizing interpersonal epistemic relations tend to assign normativity a prominent role.

As a pluralist, I believe that such approaches depict important epistemic possibilities. But in my estimation none captures the epistemic relation you bear to your intimates insofar as you get them. Through testimonial uptake we may grasp explanations that specify "what makes them tick," "implicate normative considerations," or pinpoint "how things have value and meaning within [the] person's life."⁹ We may come to believe that "the person's ends [are] good or choiceworthy," or see "their motivating reasons as justifying reasons."¹⁰ Yet the person might be Gandhi, or a mere acquaintance, or a panoply of such—all of whom we've studied open-mindedly and meticulously from afar, but fail to get in the substantive and selective manner we get our intimates.

2.2 Interpersonal knowledge or understanding

What's missing isn't one or another familiar form of interpersonal knowledge, the sort restricted to "who" not "what." It's easy to *know who* Gandhi and Hitler are, but a whole other thing to get them.¹¹ *Understanding who* also lacks the requisite substance and selectivity. One person can understand who another person is simply by appreciating their standing or significance. A humble merchant privy to the source and extent of the Don's power understands who Don Corleone is. That's why they're so afraid.

Nor is the problem an absence of the sort of direct contact famously involved in *acquaintance* or *objectual knowledge*, where the latter is expressed by an instance of the schema 'S knows NP' (where 'NP' stands for 'noun phrase'). When their object is a person, both are person-directed epistemic relations. But neither approximates getting another person, and not simply because you might be acquainted with a person without recognizing her to be a person—as when Dorothy first "gazed thoughtfully at the Scarecrow."¹² Even were we to add a



⁶ Epistemic limits to testimony are familiar. My characterization of testimonial uptake rules out standard diagnoses. I consider other supplements (e.g., acquaintance) below, but to no effect.

⁷ Lynch (2017, 196–7).

⁸ Millar (2004, 1 and 16–17).

⁹ John (2013, 288).

¹⁰ Grimm (2016, 219) and Dishaw (2024, 184), respectively. *Cp.* Cavell (1976) and Russell (2018) on "acknowledgment."

¹¹ On knowing who, see Boër and Lycan (1986) and Braun (2006).

¹² Baum (1900, 36). Traditionally, acquaintance is a real relation that is conscious, contentless, non-conceptual,

condition, such as a recognition requirement, that excludes this type of case, acquaintance and objectual knowledge would remain insufficiently substantive and selective. We recognizably know and are acquainted with many, but only get some. This isn't because when it comes to the many, we lack an individual concept or explanatory store of the sort we possess with respect to few. Interacting with Gandhi or Hitler while reading their Uberbiographies wouldn't guarantee a transition from not getting them to getting them.

Nor do we secure a guarantee by adding second-personal address, whereby you treat each as a *you*—another person, a bearer of stout normative status—rather than as a mere thing.¹³ Being respectful, you issue such treatment to everyone you meet.

How about *objectual understanding*, expressed by an instance of the schema 'S understands NP'? Even when the noun phrase designates a person, this is insufficient. A player understands the referee when comprehending his warning, grasping the content of his utterance or registering his intention; yet there is no getting another in our sense. That instance of objectual understanding misses our target because it measures communication. Other instances track practical coping. It's said that Putin understands Trump, largely due to a facility to handle or play him, one which perhaps extends to other egomaniacal autocrats. But Putin may not get any of them (or anyone else) in the way you get your intimates.

Maybe we should try a different reading of 'S understands NP'. According to Remy Debes,

When we [ask or say things] like “Why don't you understand me?” or “I don't really get her”—it does seem to be a person's point of view that we have in mind, that is, as what is to be understood.¹⁴

Michael Strevens also latches on to this phenomenon, though his explication is a bit more technical:

[U]nderstanding of another person ... involves grasp of certain 'hermeneutic structures'—namely, the structures that the person ... uses to make sense of the world—that contain representations of particular states of affairs and principles connecting them, both causal and evaluative.¹⁵

Here is an epistemic relation that holds in the first instance between a subject and a particular mental state, or set of mental states, presumably with the proviso that the subject recognizes the state as belonging to the other person. That isn't trivial. But unlike our target it could be borne to a mere acquaintance. Imagine meeting an enthusiastic conspiracy theorist whose perspective overtly incorporates bigoted ideas that have always struck you as deeply contemptible. After listening to him sound off, you may well *get how he's thinking*. But given his zeal for a point of view you abhor, there's an important sense in which you don't *get him*.

2.3 *Successful interaction*

Perhaps the secret lies in a connection to action? In *Epistemic Analysis* Paul Ziff proposed that to know another person is to be “in a position which facilitates overcoming his privacy and

singular, and immediate (see, e.g., Russell 1910). While some, such as Hintikka (1975, 19–20 and 50), equate being acquainted with a person and knowing them, others sharply distinguish the two, maintaining that the former permits only “a diminished sense of ‘know’” (Ziff 1984, 61; *cf.* Farkas 2019, 273).

¹³ For recent epistemologies that center reciprocal second-person address, see Lauer (2014) on “knowledge by interaction,” Talbert (2015) on “second-person knowledge,” Benton (2017, 2025) on “interpersonal knowledge,” and Gorodeisky (2025) on “second-personal mutual understanding”; *cf.* Diehl (forthcoming).

¹⁴ Debes (2017, 63–4).

¹⁵ Strevens (2024, 17).

encountering him.”¹⁶ Surely this demands more than what is in general required of simply knowing another person: you can know your neighbor even as they effectively (and understandably!) protect their privacy. Ziff’s condition also overshoots our target. Suppose a close friend is stubbornly aloof, or declines to let her guard down, perhaps owing to a mutually recognized trauma which refuses to heal. Your appreciating this—and, by implication, when all goes well, your *not* realizing “a position which facilitates overcoming [her] privacy and encountering [her]”—might actually be key to your getting her. Nor is Ziff’s condition sufficient. It could be satisfied by a savvy, disarming late night host. He may be excellent at coaxing your intimates to open up, or penetrating their borders, though he doesn’t really get them.

This also indicates that our target is not a species of *knowing how* or *understanding how*. Suppose you were to demonstrate a “capacity to interact with” another person “more smoothly and successfully than” the average onlooker—to quote from Edward Craig’s treatment of knowing a person.¹⁷ We’d rightly infer that you bear the *knowing how to interact with* relation to them. But even if such know-how is typically correlated with getting another, the two phenomena come apart. The people you get could be creative, impulsive, or unpredictable in ways that frequently trigger blunders or slip-ups: practically speaking, your interactions serve up a comedy of errors. More darkly, consider a socially intelligent villain skilled at manipulation. He might know or understand how to interact with many of a given type, including your intimates, far “more smoothly and successfully than” normal. No doubt there is a lot that he gets, such as an effective set of methods for exploitation. But that’s not the same as getting your intimates.

2.4 Full comprehension

Observing that in all the cases I’ve considered the subject’s knowledge or understanding is plausibly thin or limited in one or another respect, one might think the solution is to conceive getting another as knowledge or understanding that is enriched or unlimited—*full comprehension*, as it were. But this won’t do. Recall that getting another is gradable. Total conquest might be impossible. Indeed, the observation that we don’t *fully* know or understand our significant others is a cliché. And yet, at least in some cases, we get them, and we do so in a way that we don’t get virtually everyone else in our orbit.¹⁸

3. Empathy

Perhaps what’s missing is an epistemic achievement essentially forged through *empathy*, conceived here as “a method of mental imitation,” whereby you “put yourself in [another’s] shoes” to “experience what it is like to be another person.”¹⁹ Although theorists of empathy’s epistemic potential employ different terminology,²⁰ they tend to agree that there is a type of recognition or awareness whose “unique” causal source is empathy.²¹ Discussions of this empathy-sourced achievement move freely between the various complements discussed above, which could explain why it risks falling through the cracks in a complement-centric analysis. But it merits consideration here, since it purports to be an epistemic relation joining persons to persons that can’t be attained

¹⁶ Ziff (1984, 136).

¹⁷ Craig (1990, 146–7).

¹⁸ It’s tempting to try a disjunctive approach. That would require several candidates to be sufficient, but the cases above indicate otherwise.

¹⁹ The first quoted phrase is from Stueber (2006, 31), the second from Heal (1995, 47), the third from Coplan (2011, 6). Alternative conceptions of empathy invoke emotional contagion or sympathy; I discuss both below (§7).

²⁰ For example, “empathic knowledge” (e.g., Novitz 1987, 136), “empathic understanding” (e.g., Stueber 2006 and Zahavi 2014, pt. II), “experiential understanding” (Coplan 2011, §1.5), and “humane understanding” (Bailey 2021).

²¹ The adjective ‘unique’ is commonly applied; see, e.g., Coplan (2011, 6) and Bailey (2021, 50).

through testimonial uptake.

Seeking to develop Adam Smith's account of an epistemically significant "fellow-feeling" especially familiar to "the virtuous and humane,"²² Olivia Bailey labels the type of epistemic achievement borne of empathy "humane understanding":

To humanely understand another's emotion is to have a first-hand appreciation of the emotion's intelligibility. Securing that appreciation means imaginatively taking up the other's first-personal perspective and seeing the world as calling for the emotional response that the other is experiencing.²³

This formulation might suggest that what humane understanding understands is not other people, but only their "emotion's intelligibility"—that is, the mental state's "apparent propriety."²⁴ But Bailey insists that it also involves an epistemic relation to another person:

Humane understanding has two faces. The one who understands grasps the intelligibility of the outlook in which she is imaginatively immersed, and in so doing *she also recognizes the other as one whose emotions are intelligible*.²⁵

Empathy-sourced recognition of another person's emotional intelligibility is an undeniable element of interpersonal epistemic reality. And it differs from many, if not all, of the epistemic achievements (such as acquaintance, knowledge-who, and understanding-why) described in §2. (Remember my pluralism.) But it's insufficient for getting another person in our sense. After all, each of us tends to extend such recognition to a great many others. Yet only a small subset are the intimates whom we each get. The point is illustrated by good therapists, who are able to apprehend their clients' emotional outlooks and how they might make sense. So such therapists recognize all their clients as people whose emotions are intelligible. But it's not the case that they get each and every client.²⁶

Another way to appreciate that empathy-sourced recognition does not guarantee the type of epistemic relation I'm pursuing is that they have different functions. Bailey suggests that empathy's product quells the "anxiety" that "we make sense *only* to ourselves."²⁷ Others have claimed that empathy promotes moral conduct or "is crucial for facilitating identification with others in one's political community, thereby promoting civic friendship."²⁸ By contrast with all this, as noted when first introducing our target in §1, getting another person does something rather different. It bears a non-trivial connection to the capacity to trust and affirm that very person, the one we get. Its point is not to assure us of our own comprehensibility, promote upstanding conduct towards others (plural), or foster collegial dealings with members (plural) of the *polis*. Rather, as I'll elaborate in the next section, to get another is to be in an epistemic state marked by its role in forging or sustaining bonds with a specific individual.

²² Smith (1759/1982, I.I.I).

²³ Bailey (2021, 57–8).

²⁴ Bailey (2021, 55). Others such as Stueber (2006) assert, more strongly, that empathy reveals rationality, not merely the appearance of intelligibility, and does so for others' actions as well as their emotions.

²⁵ Bailey (2021, 61, emphasis added).

²⁶ Though I've focused on Bailey's account, the observation applies broadly. Zahavi (2014, 151) appears to concede: "when saying that empathy can provide a special kind of understanding, this is not meant to suggest that empathy provides an especially profound or deep kind of understanding."

²⁷ Bailey (2021, 60).

²⁸ Prescott-Couch (2025, 1). On empathy's moral contribution, see, e.g., Slote (2010). *Cp.* Darwall (2011, 18 and 2024, ch. 8) on how empathy helps cultivate "mutual openness" essentially involving "acknowledgment of one another's second-personal authority."

4. Role Playing

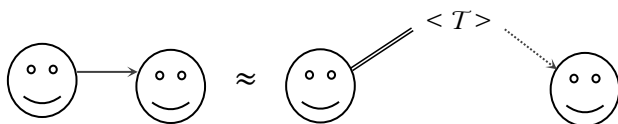
We're on the hunt for getting another person. I've considered numerous candidates, arguing that each lays down a condition that is either insufficient or unnecessary for our target. The remainder of this paper develops and defends an alternative view, which conceives getting another person as a particular kind of love. To get them is to love them.

I'll pursue this account in three phases. The first, undertaken in this section, offers a diagnosis of where the above candidates above go wrong: they narrowly focus on a type of state, or state-content pair, individuated independently of the specific role our target plays in the subject's affective orientation towards the other. Having already gestured at this role, I'll offer a fuller characterization and motivate its status as the difference-maker. The second phase begins with the observation that love plays this role. But love takes many forms, some of which are irrelevant. The central task in the second phase is to delineate a particular kind of love and, crucially, argue that it itself—rather than some state that necessarily accompanies it—is a substantive and selective epistemic achievement. Finally, in the third phase, I'll contend that the identification is extensionally adequate and explanatorily potent.

4.1 Diagnosis

Let's attempt to diagnose where the candidates in §§2–3 go wrong. Each appeals to a specific state-type: knowledge, understanding, or empathy-sourced recognition. Many candidates also invoke a specific content-type, whether explanatory (i.e., why the other person has certain features), hermeneutical (i.e., what their point of view is), practical (i.e., how to interact with them), “humane” (i.e., whether their emotions are intelligible), and so on. Accordingly, all are committed to the idea that getting another person is a matter of possessing an instance of a specific type or kind of mental state; many add that the state possesses an instance of a specific type of content.²⁹ In the form of a schema (where ‘ $\approx$ ’ stands for an intimate metaphysical relation at least as strong as necessary equivalence):

$S \text{ gets } (\rightarrow) P \approx S \text{ has a mental state of kind } K(\#) \text{ with content of type } T(<T>) \text{ about } (\rightarrow) P$

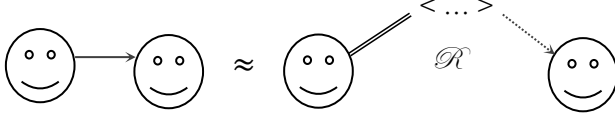


One thought is that the *getting* relation on the lefthand side is properly theorized as a complex relation of the sort depicted on the righthand side. That idea is unobjectionable. The problem lies elsewhere, namely, in the way each candidate we've considered restricts itself to a specific type of state or state-content pair (K and T). This introduces a constancy or single-mindedness that opens the door to counterexamples. For each candidate, an instance of the specific type it requires could be present though S does not get P . Or such an instance could be absent while S does get P . Previous sections described cases of both sorts.

This diagnosis also prescribes the cure: lift the restriction. Suppose we assign the theoretical lead to a rather different factor, such as the *role* played by a given state, or state-content pair, per the following schema:

²⁹ Candidates that posit a contentless state, such as acquaintance, omit the content clause in the schema below, altering the diagram accordingly. (In case a characterization is wanted: the content of a state σ is what specifies the conditions in which σ is true, accurate, correct, veridical, or satisfied.)

S gets $P \approx S$ has a mental state with some content $\langle \dots \rangle$ about P that plays role $\mathcal{R}$ for S



Such a view offers the flexibility we seek. Intuitively, getting another comes in many shapes and sizes. The counterexamples use this point to cause trouble for each candidate. We can avoid them once we remove the restriction to a specific type of state, or state-content pair, focusing instead on the role it plays in the emotional life of the subject. Getting another is not anything goes. But it can be realized in diverse ways by states, or state-content pairs, which play the relevant role.³⁰

4.2 Which role?

Let's now attempt to home in on the relevant role. Start with the observation, highlighted in §1, that the paradigms of those you get are your intimates: your spouse, or partner, or close friends. This isn't an accident. If you truly get another person, you aren't entirely indifferent about them. Nor are you filled with hatred and only hatred for them. Perhaps your feelings are mixed, but the people for whom you've harbored only loathing and contempt will be other, not gotten. They will remain at a distance. To get another person implies a type of psychological closeness that is lacking in relationships marked by ever-present indifference or hatred.

It's useful to compare Ziff's contention, discussed in §2, that to know another person is to be "in a position which facilitates overcoming his privacy and encountering him." As we saw, that's incorrect. But I think Ziff was on to something. At the heart of his view is the idea of an epistemic relation between persons linked to the attrition of emotional barriers that ordinarily divide people—or, more positively, to an increase in psychological closeness. To be sure, Ziff did not formulate his idea at this level of abstraction. (Another difference is that he ascribed the attrition to the second relatum rather than the first, making the relation weirdly intrusive.) Doing so is helpful insofar as it allows us to appreciate the region of conceptual space I'm encouraging us to explore.

Of course, we're looking for a particular landmark. What's wanted is a specific role—a determinate of the determinable *increasing psychological closeness*. Progress can be made by recalling our earlier observation about the connection between getting another and a capacity for trust and affirmation, one that is individual-specific. This motivates a conjecture, namely, that to get another is to bear a substantive and selective epistemic relation to them which facilitates these bonds.

To call the capacity 'individual-specific' is to say, at a minimum, that both its manifestation and success conditions reference a specific individual, the person gotten. Contrast the "civic friendship" mentioned in §3; this is likely to bring along capacities for trust and affirmation, though they will be perfectly general. By 'affirmation' I mean an attitude of positive evaluation, broadly construed to include forms of approval, recognition, and encouragement that are responsive to the other's personhood. By 'trust' I have in mind a distinctive variety of interpersonal reliance implicating not predictability but vulnerability, where this isn't merely material but centrally includes affective elements.³¹ The reliance isn't cold, but reflects emotional investment. While

³⁰ The thesis that every element of mentality is individuated by its functional role is called 'functionalism.' It would have us view each candidate in §§2–3 as individuated by a narrow role privileging a certain sort of complement-content (again, explanatory, hermeneutical, humane, etc.). By contrast, I'm suggesting that getting another is individuated by a broader role that does not privilege that. What it does privilege is explained next.

³¹ Jope (2025) helpfully distinguishes vulnerability from risk. Gunkel (2024) and Creasy (2025) emphasize the role of

relying thusly on another to keep one's secrets is a familiar example, others include relying on another to charitably interpret one's quirks, to issue or accept personal requests or commands, to offer or acknowledge sensitive criticisms, or to share a perspective which can be incorporated into one's self-conception. Of course, not just any manner of doing these things will suffice. Likewise for affirming. To be truly individual-specific, the capacity for trust and affirmation must be keyed into the particular modes that are fitting to the other; these are encoded in its manifestation and success conditions.

There are a million ways for an individual-specific capacity for trust and affirmation to reveal itself—for example, in a willingness to (in particular ways) touch or be touched, console or be consoled, challenge or be challenged, defend or be defended, cheer or be cheered, and so forth. Such willingness needn't be absolute. Both the trust and the affirmation are often properly qualified, and each may be defeasibly given. For example, awareness that an intimate is unreliable when absorbed in a project may legitimately inhibit or annul the trust you're poised to offer in such contexts.

4.3 *Illustrating the role*

It's time for an illustration, which may do double-duty as a motivation. In Dominic Starnone's *Trust*, the usually self-satisfied narrator Pietro is a teacher who has written a book on "the state of Italian schools." He describes a public debate with another teacher, Franchino, who turns out to be an unrelenting critic, delivering a "punctilious" analysis of the book laced with sarcasm and malevolence. "[S]pitting venom with evident satisfaction," his critique draws laughter and giggles. Initially inflamed, Pietro undergoes a "defining episode":

Once or twice, I felt dizzy and feared I would fall off the chair, but I continued to listen, attentively It really was a critical moment. ... [T]he more the lava that ran through my chest cooled, the more I perceived the basis of his suffering. ... I had been able to discern his unhappiness. It was an unhappiness I knew, that of an individual—a spasm of living matter in the form of a human organism—in front of a device that was poorly projected, poorly executed, poorly reformed—the lecture hall, the school, the teaching—which, in the beginning, appears correctable, only a small defect, but then expands to the whole scholastic institution, the family, the organization of collective life in all its incredibly precarious forms. That unhappiness touched me, and I was almost afraid of getting emotional when, after the audience's applause for Franchino, I began to talk ... I went on ... not for more than fifteen minutes, often touching [his] arm ... , even taking his hand at one point, the one that had the painfully marked thumb. I felt as if he were someone I'd sat next to in class since first grade They were fifteen truly amazing minutes, for how I felt close to the truth of things³²

Although getting another often arises gradually through a rich history of interactions, it may also emerge through an insight of the sort Pietro undergoes. To be sure, his sensibility, comportment, and (above all) background experience in the schools renders the insight possible. So too does his willingness to see more than his critic's rage, to notice "the paleness of his face, compared to the red in his eyes" and to resist distraction by "the details [or] quality of his critique" or "his

vulnerability in intimacy and loneliness, respectively. What I'm calling 'getting another' is, I surmise, the lynchpin for both.

³² Starnone (2019/2021, 93–5). I've elided Pietro's speech not only for concision, but also because on my view the exact content of his insight matters less than its role, emphasized next.

increasingly aggressive methods,” in order to perceive the “desperation,” “exhaustion,” and felt “debasement” propelling the assault. In these ways, Pietro’s insight is hard-won.

What’s more, in Pietro it’s not a mere intellectual shift, as it might be for someone without his resume or restraint, but amounts to what in other contexts could be called a spiritual conversion. His entire orientation to Franchino transforms. Almost immediately Pietro is poised to trust and affirm this specific individual—a capacity exercised by applauding his speech, praising his criticisms, touching his arm, taking his hand, connecting with him during the reception afterwards:

I sidled up on purpose. ... You said things that made me think. ... I gave him my phone number. I urged him: get in touch, let’s get together, let’s find time to keep talking.³³

Not only does Starnone’s text illustrate our role, along with its intimate relation to a state-content pair—Pietro’s insight—that, nevertheless, might not amount to getting another in other cases. We also find an example of how getting another may sometimes foster rather than follow joint activity or even friendship.

5. The Right Mixture

5.1 *A hypothesis*

To this point I’ve argued that getting another is a substantive and selective epistemic relation that is not reducible to a specific type of state, or state-content pair, individuated independently of an individual-specific capacity for trust and affirmation. This is the upshot of our mission’s first phase. Its conclusion is not that *any* state, or state-content pair, which plays the relevant role will be getting another. That there are further, independent constraints follows from the fact that our target is an epistemic relation. Completing our mission requires clarifying its epistemic character. The role, considered by itself, does not suffice.

That might inspire a worry. Is my approach committed to viewing getting another as an epistemic achievement—a cognitive state with a certain content—plus a non-cognitive extra, viz., the role? That picture would risk vindicating the objection, pressed forcefully by Katalin Farkas, that epistemology has nothing to gain from analyses of our interpersonal relations. She allows that those analyses might uncover factors—such as second-personal address, or social or emotional connections—not found in our epistemic relations to mere things. However, Farkas argues, such factors would be as relevant to epistemology as the sexual dynamic required by Biblical knowledge, which is to say not at all. For each such factor “lies beyond the realm of cognitive achievements”; being “non-cognitive,” it “lies outside the central concerns of epistemology.”³⁴

I regard the worry as serious. But it can be answered by an account of getting another that rejects the conjunctivist recipe the objection presupposes. The right approach is not to sprinkle a non-epistemic role on top of an epistemic achievement, as if each was a self-standing ingredient in a psychological sundae. I submit that comprehending our target calls for an interpersonal epistemic relation that is not merely conjoined with, but is instead somehow intertwined with, the relevant role. But what could that epistemic relation be? And what does such “intertwining” come to?

This brings us to phase two of our mission. It begins by identifying a selective psychological relation that implies an individual-specific capacity for trust and affirmation. One familiar relation with that property is love:

³³ Starnone (2019/2021, 96).

³⁴ Farkas (2019, 270); *cp.* Farkas (2023).

To love a particular person is, at least in part, to possess an individual-specific capacity for trust and affirmation of the beloved.

Even if the capacity goes unexercised, some such link is built into love's affective profile and animates love of diverse types—friendship, romantic partnership, and so forth. In a great many cases, love also exhibits phenomenological, physiological, and behavioral dimensions, such as “highly pleasurable” feelings, “conduct that is designed to be beneficial,” or “monomaniacal commitment.”³⁵ When it comes to love *per se*, arguably these are less central than the capacity in question, but I won't rely on this further assessment.

What I will advocate is the idea that when it comes to getting another, love is not a separate ingredient, added to a distinct epistemic relation. For love itself is the very epistemic relation we seek. How can that be? How can love be a substantive and selective epistemic relation?

To answer this question, I'll focus on a particular type of love, which features in a hypothesis according to which it is inseparable from a form of understanding. Not a form of understanding individuated by either its complement content (e.g., -who, -why, or -how) or its connection to empathy or second-personal address. Rather, it is a form of understanding individuated by the very connection to love that the hypothesis hypothesizes:

Hypothesis: There is a species of love that involves a form of understanding.

I'll call this species of love 'loving understanding.'

Suppose we were to conjoin the observation about love displayed above, which I'll simply assume, with this hypothesis, which I'll defend (in §§6-9). Then we have an answer to our questions: a substantive and selective epistemic relation that itself plays the relevant role. Getting another is a way of loving them—specifically, it is loving understanding.

5.2 Illustrations

Plainly the hypothesis is key. To help make it legible, let me offer a few illustrations, drawn from classical and contemporary literature that openly connects love with a substantial epistemic achievement.

Consider first the final scene of Plato's *Symposium*, which juxtaposes Socrates' ode to the abstract general Form of Beauty with Alcibiades' vigorous defense of his own love for a concrete particular, Socrates (who Feuerbach's painting depicts as turned away on the far right). The climax comes when Alcibiades (shirtless on the far left) confesses:

I can't live with him, and I can't live without him!
... Let me tell you ..., because, you can be sure
of it, none of you really gets [γινώσκει (*ginóskō*)]
him. ... I once caught him when he was open like
Silenus' statues, and I had a glimpse of the figures
he keeps hidden within: they were so godlike—so
bright and beautiful, so utterly amazing ...³⁶



³⁵ The quoted expressions come from Sidgwick's (1874/1981, 244), Frankfurt's (1999, 133), and Whiting's (2013, 409) discussions of love. I focus on love of a particular person. While love of groups or pluralities—White (2025) dubs the latter “general love”—also implicates trust and affirmation, it needn't do so in an individual-specific manner.

³⁶ Plato, *Symposium*, 216c–17a. Scholars agree that Plato uses γινώσκει to designate an epistemic achievement but debate whether it is best translated as ‘knowledge,’ ‘be(come) aware of,’ or ‘understanding’ (see, e.g., Barnes 1971, Burnyeat 1980/2001, and Lesher 2001).

This is not merely an exclamation of passion (though it is that as well). Alcibiades's declaration of love is fascinating in large part because it insinuates the epistemic claim that he alone gets his beloved.

Fast-forwarding a few millennia, a similar epistemic claim appears in Elena Ferrante's celebrated Neapolitan series. In *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, the powerful, menacing, and ruthless Michele hosts a love for the defiant, mercurial, and fiercely intelligent Lila (Lina) that is fused with an epistemic success. During a "melancholy" confession in which Michele privately "unburdens himself" to his fiancée Gigliola, we learn that

Lila was the only woman in the world he loved—love, yes, as in the films—and respected. ... [H]e didn't want her the way he generally wanted women, to feel them under him, to turn them over, turn them again, open them up, break them, step on them, and crush them. ... He wanted the subtlety of her mind with all its ideas. He wanted her imagination. And he wanted her without ruining her, to make her last He wanted to kiss and caress her. He wanted to be caressed, helped, guided, commanded. He wanted to see how she changed with the passage of time ... to talk with her and be helped to talk. ... He whispered: My brother Marcello, and ... Stefano, and Enzo ... , what have they understood of Lina? Do they know what they've lost, what they might lose? No, ... I alone know ... what she is, who she is. *I recognized her*.³⁷

The assertion may be overstated: Lila is elusive, and everyone knows it. Yet Michele bears an uncanny resemblance to Lila, as if he is the image to expect were she placed before a curved mirror: the ferocity of her intelligence becomes the ruthlessness of his will, for example. It's also clear that Michele (unlike his gangster friends) sees her as the force of nature she is, and is moved by that vision rather than by sheer lust or infatuation. So despite his profound flaws, the text's invitation to view his love for her as linked to a bona fide epistemic achievement rings true.

As a third and final illustration, recall Pietro from the previous section. The novella opens with his report of an obsessive love that "twists and distorts."³⁸ Later he has something very different in mind when invoking, in his phrase, "a loving form of understanding." His encounter with Franchino offers a glimpse of the latter. To be sure, Pietro comes away with an epistemic-cum-emotional achievement that is merely partial: neither his love nor his understanding is complete. To a large extent this reflects Pietro's own failings, which the novella stresses. But it also underscores the sense in which the task is ongoing, perhaps "endless."³⁹ While the epistemic relation posited by the hypothesis is robust, it's not always perfect. What the hypothesis asserts is simply that it's real.

Each of the foregoing passages illustrates the idea of a type of love intimately linked to understanding—"a loving form of understanding." Unsurprisingly, they also describe cases in which one person gets another person in our sense. This correlation is one reason to take seriously an account of getting another which incorporates the hypothesis that there is a species of love involving a form of understanding. I'll offer a fuller defense below.

³⁷ Ferrante (2013/2014, 208–9). 'Ferrante' is a pseudonym; conjectures abound (<https://gwern.net/doc/fiction/2017-tuzzi.pdf>). Some claim to have "unmasked" Ferrante as Starnone. Others identify Ferrante with Anita Raja, Starnone's spouse, while others allege that Starnone and Raja are, or are among, the co-authors of Ferrante's texts. For a recent textual analysis, see Cortelazzo et al (2024).

³⁸ Starnone (2019/2021, 9).

³⁹ According to Murdoch (1970/2014, 23), pursuit of an epistemically-infused love is "infinitely perfectible" and "an endless task."

5.3 Antecedents

But first I wish to recognize important antecedents. Numerous attempts have been made to theorize love's epistemic potential. Perceptual models treat love as—literally or analogically—a way of seeing or being aware,⁴⁰ while zetetic models treat love as motivating or guiding inquiry.⁴¹ Neither posits an intimate metaphysical relation between love and understanding, per the hypothesis. However, something like it is hinted at in Martha Nussbaum's insightful and innovative interpretation of the *Symposium*'s final scene. Aiming to decipher the epistemological theory encrypted in Plato's portrayal of Alcibiades, Nussbaum suggests that he both communicates and embodies the anti-Socratic thesis that

The lover's grasp of the particular other ... is itself a unique and uniquely valuable *kind* of ... understanding.⁴²

Nussbaum proceeds to develop an account of the relevant "*kind* of understanding." Rejecting analyses in terms of knowledge-that and acquaintance, she proposes instead that

the lover's understanding [is] a kind of 'knowing how.' The lover can be said to understand the beloved when, and only when, (s)he knows how to treat him or her: how to speak, look, and move at various times and in various circumstances; how to give pleasure and how to receive it; how to arouse desire and how to satisfy it; how to deal with the loved one's complex network of intellectual, emotional, and bodily needs.⁴³

Such an analysis reflects twentieth-century analytic epistemology's tendency to theorize in terms of knowledge, which was often divided into exactly three species: factual knowledge, knowledge by acquaintance, and knowledge how.⁴⁴ Within that narrow framework, Nussbaum's proposal is sensible. Still, the cases discussed in earlier sections speak against it. Recall the villain skilled at manipulation: he might possess all the know-how Nussbaum describes—and, if sufficiently corrupt, may even act on it—despite lacking "the lover's grasp."

Yet I accept Nussbaum's initial move, when she classifies Alcibiades's love for Socrates as an instance of *understanding*.⁴⁵ Of course, the classification is substantial. We can't simply assume that it's correct; the idea that love can be a site of genuine understanding requires defense.

My hope is to fill this hole with a pair of arguments for the hypothesis. The first exposes its intuitive plausibility (§6), while the second draws on abstract considerations in the philosophy of understanding (§§7–8). I'll supplement these arguments with replies to various objections.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ See, e.g., Murdoch (1970/2014), Velleman (1999, 362ff.), Johnston (2001, 182), and Jollimore (2011, ch. 3).

⁴¹ See, e.g., Jaggar (1989, §11), Lugones (1987), Nehamas (2007, 72), Brady (2013), Dover (2024), and Lord (forthcoming). *Cp.* Kottman's (2017, 4–10) view of "love as sense-making practice."

⁴² Nussbaum (1979, 157). Strictly, the quoted comment may not coincide with my hypothesis. The expression "the lover's grasp" allows that the grasp (*viz.*, understanding) *accompanies* the love without being in any way *involved* in it, per the hypothesis. Further, the hypothesis states that the lover's understanding is a *type of love* whereas Nussbaum merely says that the lover's grasp is a *kind of understanding*. There is also the difference described next.

⁴³ Nussbaum (1979, 160).

⁴⁴ See, e.g., Pears (1972, 5). Old habits die hard: see, e.g., Steup and Neta (2024, §§2.1–3).

⁴⁵ *Cp.* Scheler (1966/1973, 488–491) on "understanding love": "the act through which the ideal value-essence of a person is revealed to us is the full *understanding* of the person based on love." This, too, is in the vicinity of my hypothesis. But it differs in several ways: it posits a revelatory role (in a way reminiscent of some perceptual models), privileges an evaluative content (indeed, an essentialist one), invokes "full" understanding (contrast §2.4), and appeals to a basing relation (which seems to imply that the love is *not* an instance of understanding).

⁴⁶ While such replies may not enlarge the evidential base (as in 'primary' defenses), they do address candidate defeaters (and thus offer 'secondary' defenses). The distinction so-labeled is from Bengson et al (2022, ch. 5, §2.1).

Subsequently, I discuss how an account of getting another that incorporates the hypothesis handles relevant cases and explains relevant data (§9).

6. The Intuitive Argument

Some will call it inflated or quixotic to speak of love in the same breath as epistemic success. Thus spake Nietzsche: “Love is the state in which [one] sees things most widely different from what they are. The force of illusion reaches its zenith here.”⁴⁷ However, conceding that love is sometimes epistemically misshapen is not fatal. The hypothesis of loving understanding is not meant to cover every instance of love, but concentrates on one specific varietal. Nietzschean cynicism does not identify a reason to doubt it. But, as just noted, we also have not yet seen reason to accept it. One emerges through reflection on deficiencies of love and what’s involved in their repair.

Let’s start with self-love. I don’t mean narcissism, egotism, or even ordinary self-involvement, but something perfectly healthy: loving yourself. It’s a familiar thought that truly loving yourself involves seeing yourself as you are. Your self-conception can’t be deluded, or too confused. If you take yourself to be very different from who you are, then you don’t actually love yourself. Or at least not fully: your self-love is defective. Its repair proceeds through a more accurate and complete view of yourself, that is, an improved self-understanding.

Might understanding play this role in self-love but not in other-love? It’s difficult to see what could explain that. A more promising option recognizes that the connection between love and understanding shows up in at least some cases of other-love.

That assessment is independently plausible. Opportunities to overestimate or underestimate people abound: no one is an open book. Such ordinary opacity introduces a familiar threat. A partner who feels misunderstood may worry that they aren’t loved, at least not as they are. Maggie Nelson writes in *The Argonauts* of a friend who composed a long rhapsodic letter to his girlfriend; she replied “Next time, write to *me*.”⁴⁸ Perhaps the letter betrayed an image of her that was a tissue of fantasy or projection of desire, or demonstrated “an infatuation with overarching concepts or figures that ... run roughshod over the specificities” required to comprehend the beloved as distinct from other fish in the sea.⁴⁹ Whatever the explanation, it’s natural to interpret such failures, which imply a defect of understanding, as marking a defect of love, or one species thereof—a type of love liable to improvement via improved understanding.

Intuitively, then, there is a type of other-love that can be undercut or diminished by confusion, and its repair proceeds through improved understanding. That is the first premise in the intuitive argument. The second premise is that this evidences an intimate relation of the sort advanced by the hypothesis.

This form of reasoning seems in good shape. Consider certainty. One way it can be diminished is by a substantial reduction in confidence. In such a case, its repair proceeds through improved confidence. This supplies reason to think that certainty involves confidence. Or take a very different sort of case. The excellence of an athlete’s performance can be diminished by clumsy passing, shooting, and defending; its repair proceeds through increased skillfulness at these activities. This supplies reason to think that excellent athletic performance involves the exercise of skill.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Nietzsche (1889/1997, §23). *Cp.* Stendhal (1822/2004) on “crystallization.” More recently, Reeve (2005) explores “love’s confusions.” Others will insist that love is not delusive but blind.

⁴⁸ Nelson (2015, 45).

⁴⁹ As Nelson (2015, 45) suggests.

⁵⁰ One might worry that the reasoning overgenerates. A substantial reduction in oxygen intake is a threat to certainty and athletic excellence, since it obstructs mental functioning, but neither certainty nor athletic excellence involve

7. The U-Profile Argument

This section assembles a rather different style of argument, drawing on abstract considerations in the philosophy of understanding (discussed at length in my previous work, especially “The Unity of Understanding”). The strategy is to specify principal features of understanding, delineating the state’s “profile,” which can then be deployed to test whether understanding is present in a given instance of love.

Begin with a truism: for one to genuinely understand something is for one to be related to it in such a way that it makes sense to one. This is a *standing state*, distinct from its exercises or effects (e.g. subsequent predictions or actions). This state is *psychological*, implicating mentality. Yet understanding is more than a personal feeling or sense; it involves genuinely cognizing something, and not simply enjoying a subjective sense of doing so—in this sense, it’s *objective*. It’s also *intelligent*, in a way that rote memorization and mindless behavior (however objective) are not, and *robust*, in a way that sustained acquaintance (however objective and intelligent) is not.

Understanding contrasts also with confusion and muddle. These, too, are standing psychological states, and both are capable of objectivity, intelligence, and robustness. Understanding stands apart by also exhibiting *coherence*, rather than inconsistency or bare association (as in confusion), and attaining *order*, of the sort absent from a miscellaneous list lacking arrangement or organization (as in muddle). This isn’t to suggest that understanding is always perfect. It can be or become better, greater, deeper, stronger, or richer along various dimensions (e.g., with respect to objectivity, intelligence, robustness, coherence, or orderliness)—in short, understanding is *multiply gradable*.

To be clear, I’m not proposing to analyze genuine understanding in terms of the preceding characteristics. This isn’t an attempt at a *theory* of understanding, but a relatively uncontroversial, theory-neutral description or explication that identifies its central features. These features jointly constitute understanding’s profile—hereafter, the ‘U-profile.’ While there may be open questions regarding the correct analysis of the features in the U-profile, or about how they relate to other epistemic phenomena normally covered in undergraduate surveys, this should not obscure broad agreement that understanding possesses all of them.⁵¹

Its status as substantive common ground positions the U-profile to serve as a test for whether genuine understanding is present in certain cases, such as those involving love. I’ll call the reasoning that employs this test the *U-Profile Argument*:

- Premise 1: x is a state of understanding if and only if x satisfies the U-profile.
- Premise 2: In some cases, a lover’s love for the beloved satisfies the U-profile.

It follows that

In some cases a lover harbors a love for the beloved that involves understanding.

This is what I’ve called ‘loving understanding.’ The remainder of this section is dedicated to defending each premise.

oxygen intake. The objection rests on a conflation. Increased oxygen intake doesn’t repair your certainty or athletic excellence. It may serve as a necessary condition for both, but that is not the same as repairing.

⁵¹ I should point out that the U-profile leaves open whether understanding is a particular species of knowledge, namely, one that satisfies the U-profile (viz., a state that possesses each of the features in the U-profile at least to some extent, and whose full realization possesses each feature to the maximal extent). I present my preferred theory of understanding in Bengson (2017, §2.4; *cp.* 2015), briefly sketching its contours in §9 below.

Premise 1 inherits all the virtues of the U-profile itself. Not only is it intuitive; it also captures paradigm cases, such as exemplary scientists or scholars (who clearly possess states satisfying the U-profile), and specifies features of agents that seem relevant to their status as understanders. Moreover, the U-profile is discriminating, in the sense that it identifies non-trivial features which together distinguish understanding from other mental phenomena. These include mental episodes (e.g., perceptual experiences and intuitions) and a host of standing psychological states—not just states of acquaintance, confusion, and muddle, but also memories, desires, intentions, hopes, supposings, and inclinations to believe, as well as familiar affective conditions such as happiness, anger, worry, and fear. Each lacks one or more features of the U-profile. They are not simply necessary for understanding, but are also jointly sufficient, as Premise 1 states.

Turn next to Premise 2. Plainly, loving one's beloved is a *standing state* that implicates mentality, and so qualifies as *psychological*. The examples mentioned in support of the intuitive argument above show that there is at least one species of love that is *objective* in the relevant sense. To love (oneself or another) in that way requires genuinely cognizing something, as opposed to merely seeming “from the inside” to do so. This is also evidenced by the illustrations in previous sections. For example, regarding Alcibiades's speech, Nussbaum observes that

Alcibiades is claiming not just an ineffable familiarity with Socrates, but the ability to tell the truth about Socrates. ... [T]hrough a lover's intimacy he can produce accounts (stories) that are more deeply and precisely true—that capture more of what is characteristic and practically relevant about Socrates, that explain more about what Socrates does and why—than any account that could be produced by a form-lover who [does not love him so].⁵²

We needn't accept every detail of this description to see it as zeroing in on a standing psychological state that differs from both rote memorization and personal acquaintance. So in addition to being *objective*, the state is *intelligent* and *robust*. Moreover, insofar as it comprises “accounts (stories)” with both depth and precision, there is more to the state than a set of associations or a miscellaneous list; it is also *coherent* and *orderly*. Nussbaum continues:

not just any successful lover would have had his [Alcibiades's] intellectual and emotional grasp. But there is no denying, either, that [t]here is a part of Socrates that remains dark and mysterious to him.⁵³

Although it's not a triviality that Socrates makes sense to Alcibiades, improvement is still possible. His love incorporates a conception of Socrates that is “more deeply and precisely” correct than it could have been, without being comprehensive or fully illuminating. Alcibiades's state is *multiply gradable*.

Similarly, consider Ferrante's depiction of the contrast between Michele and the other gangsters. While they are under the spell of passions for Lila that are distorting, impulsive, shallow, confused, or muddled, the standing psychological state of Michele's, directed at Lila, is portrayed as objective, intelligent, robust, coherent, and orderly. Readers are given to think that their states do not satisfy the U-profile, whereas his does, at least to some extent. Likewise for Starnone's rendering of Pietro's relation to Franchino. A reader can easily interpret that relation as possessing each of the features in the U-profile to some extent.

Are these appraisals cheap? Some will suspect that it's too easy to apply the U-profile's

⁵² Nussbaum (1979, 159–60).

⁵³ Nussbaum (1979, 160).

features to certify the desired result. According to this objection, while Premises 1 and 2 might seem legitimate when considered individually, their combination generates false positives. However, the contrast we just noticed between Michele and his gangster friends suggests instead that together the premises carve at a joint. For additional evidence that the suspicion is unfounded, we can test the U-profile against Sappho's description of a rather different species of *eros*:

That man seems to me peer of gods ...
that indeed makes my heart flutter in my bosom.
For when I see thee but a little,
I have no utterance left,
my tongue is broken down,
and straightway a subtle fire has run under my skin,
with my eyes I have no sight,
my ears ring,
sweat pours down,
and a trembling seizes all my body;
I am paler than grass,
and seem in my madness
little better than one dead.⁵⁴

Even at its best, such a state lacks most of the features in the U-profile, being neither objective, intelligent, robust, coherent, nor orderly. Infatuation and lust differ from paralyzing desire but merit the same verdict. Emotional contagion, as when “The human countenance ... borrows smiles or tears from the human countenance,”⁵⁵ fares better, since it exhibits a form of objectivity—plausibly, its success or fittingness conditions demand that the other exists and possesses whatever one borrows. But emotional contagion is an instinctual reaction, not an intelligent attitude, and it is hardly robust, coherent, or orderly. You may successfully or fittingly borrow an acquaintance's smile while being confused or muddled about her, her expression, or the emotion it expresses. Nor do sympathy or compassion preclude those conditions. Mencius expects that if “a man were, all of a sudden, to see a young child on the verge of falling into a well [h]e would certainly be moved to compassion.”⁵⁶ But such compassion could move the man even as he hosts a thin, incoherent, disorderly misconception of the child or her emotions. (This is familiar from literature and film: a man driven by compassion but steeped in patriarchy hastens to “save” a woman he has in fact profoundly misconstrued.)

When reflecting on the love exemplified by Alcibiades, Michele, and Pietro, we find a state that differs dramatically from these other passions. It satisfies the U-profile while they do not. Such contrasts teach another, arguably more basic lesson: both premises in the U-Profile Argument are substantive and disciplined. They don't overgenerate, either individually or jointly. Accordingly, I submit that when united with the intuitive argument, the foregoing defenses of those premises provide good reason to affirm our

Hypothesis: There is a species of love that involves a form of understanding.

8. Involvement

Do those defenses establish that it's the lover's *love* which satisfies the U-profile, as Premise

⁵⁴ Sappho, via Wharton (1885, 58–9).

⁵⁵ Horace via Hume (1751, §V.2).

⁵⁶ Quoted in Dobson (1963, §2A.6).

2 requires? A critic might object that they leave open that the love is accompanied by a *distinct* state that does so, in which case we're at most warranted in affirming the following, weaker premise:

Premise 2*: In some cases, a lover loves the beloved and has a state about the beloved that satisfies the U-profile.

Supposing Premise 1 is true, all that would follow from it and Premise 2* is that in some cases a lover loves the beloved and, at the same time, has some understanding of the beloved. This falls short of our hypothesis of loving understanding.

The truth of Premise 2* conjoined with the falsity of Premise 2 yields a *mere* conjunction that is compatible with a notable possibility: the first conjunct is made true by one state, while the second conjunct is made true by an entirely different state. The truth-makers just happen to obtain at the same time. In an important sense, their co-incidence is a mere coincidence.

But this obscures the phenomenon in several ways. For one thing, it's not true to the phenomenology. From the perspective of a misunderstood beloved, for instance, love and understanding appear to be anything but coincidental. Defects in the lover's understanding sometimes present as defects in the lover's love. For another thing, the prospect of fortuitous co-presence seems false at a reflective level. In the cases we've considered—Alcibiades, Michele, and Pietro—it's dubious that their love and understanding are brutally correlated. After all, the truth of the counterfactual

If Alcibiades had not understood Socrates as he does, Alcibiades would not have loved Socrates as he does

provides evidence of a dependence relation linking the former's love to his understanding of the latter. Additional evidence for such a relation is the role of that understanding in his love's termination conditions:

If Alcibiades stopped understanding Socrates as he does, Alcibiades would stop loving Socrates as he does.

Notice, further, that in the cases we've considered, the lover's love for the beloved would improve via improved understanding of the beloved. It's also not fickle in the way that nearby emotions, such as liking or lusting, tend to be. All this is smoothly explained by Premise 2. Like the phenomenological observations and counterfactual considerations, it becomes more difficult to parse if, as Premise 2* allows, the love and U-profile satisfier are wholly distinct states that happen to appear at the same time in some cases.

The idea of a love involved with understanding, per the hypothesis of loving understanding, can be modeled on familiar complex mental phenomena. Take, for instance, *thrill*, which is constituted by excitement plus a judgment of danger or uncertainty. (This is a rough approximation; the exact details needn't detain us.) Thrill is a species of excitement, and so has an affective constituent—wherein lies a capacity to feel pleasure. The relevant species is one that also *involves* a judgment. Similarly, our hypothesis directs attention to a particular species of love. It is a species of emotion, and so has an affective constituent—wherein lies a capacity for trust and affirmation.⁵⁷ But the relevant species is one that also *involves* understanding.

⁵⁷ To simplify the exposition, I elide additional constituents of love, if any. White (2025, 857) maintains that love has “two constitutive features: the first is a way of feeling, and the second, a way of acting.” I am not sure about this. But my primary contention is that at least one type of love has a different “constitutive feature,” namely, an epistemic one.

It's natural to interpret complex mental phenomena such as thrill through the lens of constitution (as I did just above). So interpreted, the idea is that just as a thrill “involves” a judgment of danger in the sense that it is partly *constituted* by such a judgment, an instance of the relevant species of love “involves” understanding in the sense that it is partly *constituted* by such understanding. As I conceive it, constitution is an asymmetric, irreflexive relation holding between a and b just in case $a \neq b$, and what it is for a to exist is for b to exist. Constitution is also type-neutral, in the sense that it can relate entities of various types (objects, properties, states, facts, etc.). This helps to distinguish it from grounding (the *in virtue of* relation), whose field is restricted to facts. Yet grounding is another option. Perhaps an instance of the relevant species of love “involves” understanding in the sense that a correlative fact about love, $[S \text{ loves } P]$, holds partly in virtue of a correlative fact about understanding, $[S \text{ understands } P]$. Though I'm officially neutral about these metaphysical niceties, I'll employ the ideology of constitution when referring to the relation between the subject's love and her understanding in cases of loving understanding.

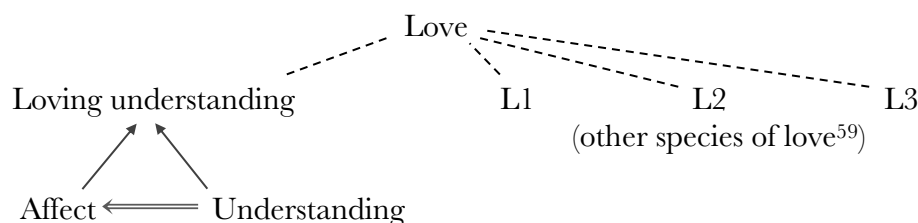
Just above I described the appeal to constitution as “natural.” It's also supported by the evidence against fortuitous co-presence. Notice that the counterfactual relations recorded above are comparable to those holding in paradigm cases of constitution, as in:

If the clay had not possessed the texture it does, the statue would not have felt the way that it does.

If the clay stopped smelling as it does, the statue would stop repelling visitors as it does.

Additional evidence for the constitution claim comes from the observation that, in the relevant cases of love, the lover's love for the beloved would improve via improved understanding of the beloved. So a feature of love is explicable in terms of a feature of understanding. That's precisely the explanatory structure we find in cases of constitution. For a great many properties F and G , the constituttee's being F is explained by the constitutor's being G . A vase may be fragile because the glass constituting it has a certain microstructure. A reunion may be successful because its constituent events—chatting, reminiscing, eating, and drinking—are enjoyable. A love may improve in virtue of an improvement in understanding.⁵⁸

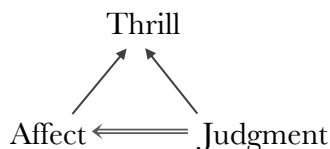
Letting dashed lines represent the *being a species of* relation and solid arrows represent the *partly constituting* relation, here's the picture I'm sketching:



By contrast, the double-lined arrow (at the bottom) represents the relation that holds among the constituents. Here, too, we can rule out brute correlation. First consider thrill:

⁵⁸ I'm defending the idea that a species of love is constituted by a form of understanding rather than the reverse because the evidence above supports the former but not the latter. Reflection on various counterfactuals and explanatory claims also tell against the latter. For example, on a non-causal reading, “If Alcibiades stopped loving Socrates as he does, Alcibiades would stop understanding Socrates as he does” appears false.

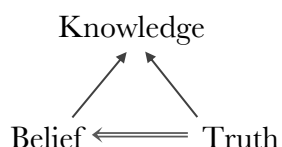
⁵⁹ For example, in *pathological love*, the affective element flows from infatuation; in *puerile love*, from pleasant feelings; in *stale love*, from sheer habit; in *spiritual love*, from an impression of the other's divinity or “sacred importance” (Auden 1964/1973, 101); and so forth.



Excitement about a stunt isn't a thrill if the affect is indifferent to the perceived danger. Perhaps one has become entirely desensitized to the hazards but gets excited by the media coverage. When it comes to thrill, the complex's affective constituent (excitement) does not merely co-occur with its cognitive constituent (judgment), but occurs partly *because* of it. Similarly, experiencing positive affect towards a person while understanding them doesn't amount to a loving understanding of them if the affect is indifferent to the understanding. When it comes to loving understanding, the affective constituent of love—including an individual-specific capacity for trust and affirmation—does not merely co-occur with the state's cognitive constituent (understanding), but occurs partly *because* of it.

That 'because' is explanatory. In the case of loving understanding it has a normative upshot. If a capacity for individual-specific trust and affirmation of another person is rooted in an understanding of that person, then exercises of that capacity owing to such understanding are justified or appropriate. In effect, the understanding 'substantiates'—both explains, at least partly, and warrants—those responses.⁶⁰

This view may feel unconventional. In a way, it is. But the basic idea of an epistemic state constituted by multiple elements not all of which are epistemic, but which are explanatorily and normatively connected, is mainstream. After all, a familiar approach to knowledge—whether it's correct doesn't matter here—sees it not as a mere conjunction whose conjuncts co-occur, but rather as an epistemic achievement constituted by a belief along with the truth of its content, where the former constituent is not accidentally related to, but is substantiated by, the latter:



9. Extensional Adequacy and Explanatory Power

Our mission has been to construct a theory of getting another built on the hypothesis that there is a type of love that involves understanding. I've illustrated the hypothesis, presented two arguments on its behalf, and outlined an approach to involvement that delivers a non-conjunctivist account of loving understanding's epistemic and affective dimensions. Along the way we've assembled the resources needed to clarify the epistemic character of our target.

Love in one of its species is an epistemic relation, whose epistemic character is that of *understanding*. Not just any state, or state-content pair, that poises its subject for individual-specific trust and affirmation is getting another. This is because, according to the account on offer, the relevant state must be an understanding of the other. Since any state of understanding possesses

⁶⁰ If the normative dimension is missing in the case of thrill, what explains the difference? One option is that thrill's affective component (excitement) is not liable to warrant (unlike trust and affirmation); another is that thrill's cognitive component (judgment) does not always come with a positive normative quality (unlike understanding). It's also worth contemplating the possibility that understanding sometimes substantiates alternative responses, such as an individual-specific capacity for *distrust* and *rejection*. Whether we're willing to countenance such 'loathing understanding' may depend on how we answer thorny questions about, *inter alia*, the nature of persons, which I lack space to engage here.

the features in the U-profile, this means that getting another requires having a psychological standing state regarding the other that is objective, intelligent, robust, coherent, and orderly. It is this state, or its possession by the subject, that explains, at least in part, why the subject is poised for individual-specific trust and affirmation of that other.

We are now ready to state the account:

S gets $P \approx S$ lovingly understands P ,

where

S lovingly understands $P =_{\text{def}} S$ is in a state about P that satisfies the U-profile and substantiates S 's being poised for individual-specific trust and affirmation of P .

Importantly, the right-hand-side is not one-size-fits-all. It can be realized in diverse ways by states, or state-content pairs, which satisfy the U-profile and thereby play the requisite role. Abstractly, then, the account has the flexibility we seek. Let's now consider, more concretely, whether it is fitted to handle relevant cases and explain relevant data.

The account appears to be extensionally adequate. For instance, it delivers the correct verdicts about all the cases discussed in preceding sections:

<i>Case</i>	<i>Getting another?</i>	<i>Loving understanding?</i>
Pietro with respect to Franchino (post-transformation)	To some extent	To some extent
Alcibiades with respect to Socrates	To some extent	To some extent
Michele with respect to Lila	To some extent	To some extent
An expert on Gandhi (or Hitler, or a barista) insofar as they are well-versed in his Uberautobiography.	No	No
Dorothy gazing at the Scarecrow hanging lifelessly.	No	No
A savvy, disarming late night host insofar as he is capable of smoothly conducting a revealing interview.	No	No
A villain skilled at manipulation insofar as they know or understand how to interact with their victims.	No	No
You simply grasp the point of view or "hermeneutic structures" of an enthusiastic conspiracy theorist.	No	No
A humble peasant insofar as he understands who Don Corleone is.	No	No
A cunning, seasoned autocrat insofar as he's adept at handling an egomaniacal aspiring autocrat.	No	No
A good therapist insofar as they recognize their clients as persons with intelligible emotions.	No	No
An intimate who remains stubbornly aloof due to a mutually recognized trauma which refuses to heal.	Possibly	Possibly

Does the account also explain relevant data? Yes. An explanation of the epistemic character of getting another appears just above: in short, it is epistemic because it involves understanding. It is existence-entailing because it is a matter of loving another, which requires the beloved. It is not symmetric but is hyperintensional because neither love nor understanding is symmetric but both are hyperintensional. Getting another is substantive, selective, and attuned in specific ways to the personhood of the person gotten because, as a type of understanding, it satisfies the U-profile while securing, in its status as a species of love, an individual-specific capacity to trust and affirm that

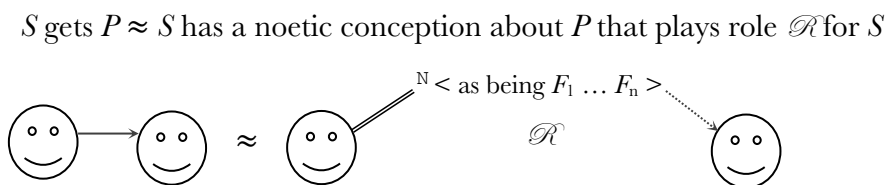
particular person as such.

The account also explains other observations that popped up in the course of our investigation. For example, getting another is incompatible with ever-present indifference because it is a species of love, which precludes that response. It isn't restricted to a specific type of state or state-content pair because it can be realized by *any* state-content pair that simultaneously realizes the U-profile and substantiates an individual-specific capacity for trust and affirmation. Getting another isn't secured via testimonial uptake because the latter does not itself ensure such a capacity. And it is not identical to any of the epistemic relations canvassed in §§2–3, such as acquaintance, knowledge-who, practical know-how, understanding-why, or empathy-sourced recognition, because those relations do not always amount to loving understanding, whereas getting another does.

No doubt there is more to say in each case. The point is that the account does not merely get the cases right, but also explains a range of data about getting another.

Additionally, it identifies where to look to achieve deeper explanations. To appreciate this, notice that the account invokes the U-profile. Earlier I emphasized that the U-profile isn't a theory of understanding. Such a theory will identify a set of claims that successfully answer the call to accommodate and explain the features in the U-profile. By identifying what underlies these features, the theory can provide a deeper explanation of the fact that getting another is a substantive and selective epistemic relation.

I present my own theory of understanding, according to which it is a matter of conceiving aright, and argue that it handles all those features, in “The Unity of Understanding” (§§2.4–5). That theory invokes not beliefs but *conceptions*, maintaining that a conception amounts to understanding only if it is *correct*, *complete*, and both internally and externally *coalescent* (where this is a cousin of coherence)—all are features of what I call a ‘noetic’ conception. It follows that when the question of whether one person gets another arises, what matters is how the first conceives of the second, and that conceiving thusly realizes $\mathcal{R}$, that is, makes the conceiver poised to trust and affirm the other. The conception's content, which has the canonical form *as being* $F_1 \dots F_n$, is represented in the following diagram by the material in corner brackets. That such a conception is noetic, and so amounts to understanding, is represented by the superscript ‘N’:



Some might like how such a theory avoids questions they regard as being out of tune with our target's essential character (such as: When you get another, which *propositions* about them do you *believe*? What is your *evidence* for getting them as you do? Etc.) More significantly, in my view, the theory captures what various forms of understanding have in common (*viz.*, a noetic conception), while respecting diversity among these forms (via their disparate roles).⁶¹ It also possesses the texture needed to make sense of philosophically interesting aspects of our target.

⁶¹ I've defended this approach on independent grounds elsewhere, arguing that theoretical understanding consists in a noetic conception poised to resolve explanation-seeking questions, while practical understanding consists in a noetic conception poised to guide intelligent action. (Throughout I use 'poise' to designate a complex capacity underwriting readiness or preparedness, rather than a simple disposition.) Every form of understanding has this non-conjunctive structure. See Bengson (2017, §2.1.2 and 2020).

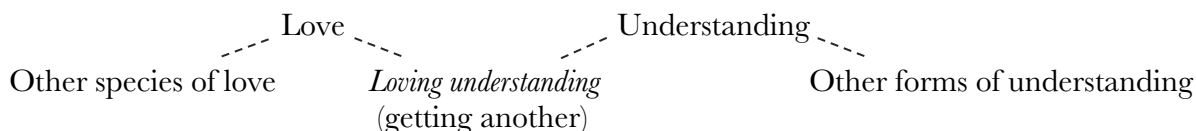
Imagine, for example, that I get both my partner and a close friend, but I get the former better than the latter. Why? Because my ‘trusting conception’ (as I’ll call it) of the one is either more correct, or more complete, or more coalescent than my trusting conception of the other. In fact, the theory can handle the wily scenario in which there are some ways in which I get my partner better than a close friend, but there are also ways in which I get my friend better than my partner. This can happen because my trusting conception of the one may be more correct, or more complete, while my trusting conception of the other may be more coalescent.⁶²

The theory makes sense of other possibilities as well. Suppose you and I have a mutual friend, whom we both get. But we get them in somewhat different ways or along disparate dimensions (e.g., their emotional life, intellectual outlook, or moral character). How? By the two of us having different noetic trusting conceptions of one and the same friend. Or suppose I get two different people in the same way. This is possible if I have the same noetic trusting conception of both. And so on.

The theory also helps make sense of the prospect that getting another in some sense enhances the other’s mysteriousness. How could this be? By exposing the beloved’s complexity and depth, which outstrips the lover’s ability to integrate in a *comprehensive* noetic conception, a trusting conception that is correct, complete, and coalescent to a high degree may actually bring the beloved’s inscrutability into focus.

10. Conclusion

I began by insisting on pluralism about our epistemic relations to other people. But the view that interpersonal epistemology is not monolithic is compatible with the thought that some interpersonal epistemic relations are particularly interesting or important. That’s what we find in the case of getting another, which inhabits the space where love and understanding meet:



It goes without saying that a general theory of a type of state, whether understanding or love, must cover all species of that state. So if getting another combines love and understanding in something like the way I’ve proposed—specifically, as an *epistemic relation* joining persons with persons individuated neither by its complement content (e.g., -who, -why, or -how) nor its connection to empathy or second-personal address, but rather by its *affective role*—then philosophical theorizing about each type must adjust accordingly.

What does that combination imply about Reason and Passion, mentioned at the outset? Although my account of getting another can be written in lower-case letters, I don’t oppose the following articulation: some instances of Passion involve instances of Reason, whose versatility manifests in embrace of role *R*. Put differently, Reason is poised to offer emotional support. Case (and metaphor) aside, at the heart of my approach is the idea that an emotion may itself be an epistemic achievement, constituted by understanding. While I’ve focused on a species of love, the

⁶² That completeness and coherence are gradable is evident. A conception is *more correct* to the extent that the features it ascribes to its object are possessed by that object. Does the demand for coalescence imply that an incoherent beloved can’t be lovingly understood? No. The mental state is one thing, its object another, and the former’s ascription of incoherence to the latter may be highly coalescent.

discussion provides a template for inquiry into the epistemic potential of wonder, anxiety, longing, and other emotions.⁶³

Getting another is loving understanding, which yokes affect to intellect within the context of a life lived with other people. Arguably it does not simply possess substantial value, but is fitted to serve as an epistemic and moral ideal for individuals and collectives. Lovingly understanding others is worth striving for. And being lovingly understood is worth hoping for.

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⁶³ The template contrasts with standard views of so-called 'epistemic emotions' as those required for epistemic success (Morton 2010) or those possessing epistemically-infused fittingness conditions (Diegan and Piñeros Glasscock 2024).

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