


Knowing the City

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Abstract

What does it mean to know a city? Considering and synthesising two options—namely, that knowing a city is comparable to knowing a person and that a city is a process rather than a thing—this article explores how we can reasonably maintain to know a city. Taking cues from the everyday sense of understanding the question and using the example of the flâneur, walking is explored as a prime option to get to know the city by means of immersion. Participatory and procedural knowledge are identified as central to knowing a city in the relevant way and will illuminate unexplored paths to understanding the question of what a city is and does.

Keywords: procedural knowledge; participatory knowledge; immersion; walking; ordinary language philosophy

1. Introduction

What does it mean to know a city? Embedded in everyday conversation, our answer will likely take the shape of a series of exemplary character traits and salient features one knows a city to have. We might say that to know a city means to comprehend its public transport system, to be able to tell the “good” from the “bad” neighbourhoods, to understand the way its recycling is organised, to know places to get decent food or to run into familiar people. Knowing a city means knowing where to find its landmarks and iconic spots, and how to get from one to another. In an ordinary language setting, it is a small set of particular traits rather than their totality that makes the knower know a city. There seems to be something odd about how little we know about a city we claim to know if we think of how many things one *could* know about a city. Adding to this oddness, we might find only little epistemic overlap when we ask two people who confidently claim to know the same city to list all salient features known to them. Apart from the rough shape of the Eiffel Tower and the (arguably also pretty rough) summer smell of the Seine, Jane Birkin and Niki de Saint Phalle may well have held vastly different knowledge of Paris. What it is to know a city seems to escape a unifying answer.

Responding to this oddness, philosophically, we might want to treat the question in a more abstract way, intending to find a universal answer to the question “What is it to know a—that is, *any*—city?”. Opting for conceptual analysis, we might get to work by first defining what we mean by “city,” and then consider what it could mean to know such a thing that it is per our definition.

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We might begin by stating that a city is a three-dimensional entity. As we get into further specifications, we will quickly realise that a single-sentence definition will not capture what a city is. Leafing and scrolling through dictionaries, topical books, and specialised papers, we will find that existing definitions stem from various disciplinary interests in specific aspects of a city. Some focus on population size and density, while others hone in on architectural features or cultural and class diversity. Incorporating demographic as well as sociocultural aspects, we might settle for a working definition of the city as a relatively large, dense human settlement of socially heterogeneous groups and institutions. To know such a thing amounts to recognising those defining features when they occur together. Comparing examples, we can then begin to refine and expand our working definition. For instance, we might find that Burning Man fits the bill. If Burning Man is not commonly recognised as a city, we will adjust our definition accordingly: A city is a relatively large, dense, *permanent* human settlement of socially heterogeneous groups and institutions. Then someone brings up Los Angeles—undeniably a city, but not as dense in population as some villages. And so our quest continues.

The ordinary language and the philosophical sense of the question differ in that the former asks for particular features of a particular city, while the latter seeks to track what all cities have in common in order to determine the appropriate sense of knowing such an entity. This article considers what we can learn about the essential features of a city from the ordinary language sense of understanding the question. In order to get a better grip on what a city actually *is*, the article aims to highlight the significance of knowing particular, perhaps unique features of a single city for a richer picture of what this entity we call a city can be. Fundamentally, I will propose that knowing a city is a lot like knowing a person. Using a personality-based account of knowing a city as a point of departure, I will examine Achille C. Varzi's proposal to think of the city not as an object, but as a process.

The article elaborates on three intersecting aspects of what it is to know a city. The first claim is that knowing a city is in relevant ways like knowing a person. The second claim is that knowing a city requires the kind of knowledge we have of a process rather than a thing. The third claim is that knowing a city is knowing particulars rather than generalities. I will begin by stating the ways in which a city we know is like knowing a friend. I will then interlink the findings of their commonalities with the notion of process, and of procedural knowledge. The conceptual metaphor of language will help to appreciate getting to know a city as an act of participatory knowledge expansion. Making explicit the peculiar way in which we know a city by means of knowing a small sample, I will conclude with a set of character traits of the special kind of knowledge we can have of a city. Deeming the relevant kind of knowledge that we must attain 'procedural knowledge'—that is, know-how—will offer final cues about the participatory dimension of what it is to know a city.

2. The City as a Friend

We can identify and locate a number of buildings in cities we know, but relative to how many buildings there are, only a very small portion. You might know an impressive triple-digit number of restaurants in Los Angeles, but a modern megacity such as L.A. is likely to have a five-digit number of places to eat. This suggests a rather low threshold for what it is to know a city in comparison to, for instance, what it is to know a specific restaurant or its signature dish. Yet it does not just seem to be the material size of the thing that lowers the threshold. For one, a city appears to be more than its material parts. As our working definition suggests, cities are the cities they are be-

cause of the people that move (in) them. Cities are not only material and spacial, but social in the sense that it matters for our knowledge of a city to know who moves (in) them. In other words, we know what typically *happens* in a city we know and who makes it happen. Again, we might only know a very small portion of what concretely happens in a city at any given moment, and we may only personally know a fraction of the people who make things happen, but there seems to be a sort of predictability of the kinds of people we meet and the kinds of things they do that makes up the social fabric of a city we are familiar with.¹

This suggests that the way we think of a city we know is more like thinking of a process than a thing, an action rather than an entity. Furthermore, taking into view the predictability and familiarity of the kind of knowing we are interested in here, we can notice that knowing a city is not unlike the knowledge we can have of a person. Before considering the procedural character of cities, we may ask: Can we think of a city we know the way we think of a friend?

Both a known city's and a friend's moving appearance will not catch you by surprise in the majority of encounters. They might surprise you occasionally with something out of character—an expensive vintage store pops up in a low-income neighbourhood, your friend arrives exactly on time even though they are usually late and chaotic—but this will not immediately or sustainably change your overall opinion of them. It will be noted as unusual until it becomes an apparent as part of a bigger change or trend.

Cities and friends change over time. The direction may be predictable if you keep paying regular attention to them. The vintage store might soon get a next-door smoothie store, an artisanal bakery, and a café with free Wi-Fi. You find new words to describe this neighbourhood. Gentrified. Posh. Your friend might transition into becoming a more organised person; she might get a wristwatch and a Moleskine planner and suggest meetings weeks in advance. You will begin to think of her differently. Punctual. Provident. In order to keep the kind of connection necessary for it to be appropriate to say that you know them, you must keep track of what is typical. To know a city is to entertain a relationship with it as a somewhat fluid entity. Just as one does with a friend, one finds a habitual balance between paying close attention to change while allowing for them to be reliably predictable according to their designated character traits—the landmarks of their identity. If we lose touch with someone—for instance, because we have moved away—we might say that we used to know them, or that we know *about* them.

The difference between knowing about someone and knowing someone also runs parallel to the knowledge we can have of a city: You might never have been to Los Angeles, yet you know that it has beaches and Hollywood and that the Viper Room is located on Sunset Boulevard. Similarly, you might know facts about your favourite celebrity that you have never met in the flesh. Having read his autobiography and numerous article-long portraits, you know that Werner Herzog lives in Hollywood, that he likes oranges, and that he had never seen a telephone until he was 10. Yet you would not claim that you know Werner. You might say that you know *about* him. If you happen to live near his favourite supermarket, you might see him at the fruit counter and strike up a conversation. You might decide to get coffee together. You might become *friendly* with each other, and it would from then on be appropriate to say that you know Werner Herzog.

¹ Likewise, this social fabric determines what makes a place an iconic spot. Landmarks, on this account, are not objectively verifiable categories, but depend on historically grown, social agreement. The classification of a particular space as iconic is dependent on consensus, which in turn must be known to the knower of a city.

Following David Matheson's account of personhood, we can adapt a distinction between personal and impersonal knowledge for our main question. The knowledge you have about Werner Herzog before you get coffee together is impersonal knowledge. It is the kind of knowledge that can be looked up online or passed on by means of gossip. It is theoretical knowledge that we can also attain about a city. Reading the Lonely Planet and an ethnography on its inner workings can get you great knowledge *about* Los Angeles, yet you will have to travel there, to spend some time and interact in it, in order to claim that you know the city 'personally.'

Matheson offers what he calls a communication account of knowing a person. On this account, to know a person, they must choose to communicate information about them to you directly. This personally transmitted knowledge, in turn, is special in the sense that it signals a special type of interactional bond: "From the fact that you know me it follows on the communication account that I have taken pains to single you out in particular as a being worthy of my self-revelation" (2010, 448). While I do not wish to attribute human agency to a city, I would like to suggest that we can adapt this distinction to tease out a feature of knowing a city, namely the feature of being embedded in a reliable structure of interaction with it. Similarly, to what is described in the communication account of knowing a person, the city reveals itself; it responds to the one who speaks its languages and knows when to code-switch into the appropriate dialect. This can mean dressing up befitting the neighbourhood you intend to dine in, adjusting your rhythm of walking to the stream of local pedestrians, or ordering a beer without puzzling your waiter. While strictly speaking, it is not the city, but your waiter, who interacts with you, the overall experience of the series of interactions with objects and subjects that make up your evening in that particular city bar space—including your handling the local customs of bathroom line chat, the swinging doors, the tipping, and so on—collectively represent a manifestation of your local knowledge

Adopting a wide notion of language, to know a city would mean to keep the flow of conversation going and, if one knows it well, to be fluent in its prominent dialects. But how do we get to know a city in the first place? How do we become conversant with a city?

3. Making Acquaintance: Walking the City

How we go about learning things we want to know depends on what it means to know them. Knowing a song is different from knowing Gödel's incompleteness theorems and different from knowing German, and yet different again from knowing how far one can swim. Correspondingly, the ways in which we come to know these things differ. How do we get to know a city?

Movement seems to be an intuitive key technique because due to a city's size compared to ours, we cannot see all of it at once. Taking another cue from everyday life, we might consider the epistemic techniques of an urban tourist, the paradigm figure of getting to know a city. Following their example, a suitable way to get to know a city is to go for a walk in it. As the social theorist and philosopher Michel de Certeau stated in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), walking in the city follows its own rhetoric. In its perhaps most famous chapter "Walking in the City," de Certeau draws an analogy between urban systems and language, comparing the improvisational walking (that is taking shortcuts, promenading, wandering, ambling, and so on) with inside jokes, turns of phrases, metaphors, or stories. He states that "[t]he walking of passers-by offers a series of turns and detours that can be compared to 'turns of phrase' or 'stylistic figures.' There is a rhetoric of walking" (1984, 100). De Certeau's technique of teasing out ways to understand the inner workings of a city is thinking about city life the way we think about speech acts. He proposes that "[t]he act

of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language or to the statements uttered” (1984, 97). De Certeau prefers walking in the city instead of viewing it from above. As he points out, a bird’s-eye view means to sacrifice our knowledge of the intimate details of city life for an impersonal outline. This impersonal outline corresponds with the impersonal knowledge a fan has attained about Werner Herzog and runs counter to the personal knowledge we have of a friend. De Certeau describes the city as a ‘space of enunciation,’ where walkers demonstrate possibilities through their walking choices. The process of acclimatising oneself to the rhythm of a new city represents an immersed, participatory learning path.

To know a city is to know how to move in it. And the city moves fast. As Monica Smith states in her book *Cities: The First 6,000 Years*, “coming into a city, you feel the clip of urban walk-worlds as something faster than a rural gait, and you find yourself stepping up the pace” (2019, 35). The social fabric of the city is made up of conventions that must be aptly performed again and again. This applies to the rhythm of walking. We can evoke the theoretical framework of what Marcel Mauss, exploring socialised habits of how we move our bodies in public (1934), might call a habitus of urban behaviour, which allows the movement of the city to run in a predictable, and thus smooth, rhythm. This aspect of habitual knowledge leads us to consider how knowing a city dovetails with knowing a person in a way we have only noted in passing before: the aspect of predictability. We expect the city and the friend to continue their existence in the manner that we have framed as typical. A glimpse of a small part of their being represents its typical features, their personality, their character. But what is typical of something that, like a person and a city, is a three-dimensional entity that is constantly in motion?

4. The City as a Process: Acquiring Knowledge of Flow

In his essay on the question “What is a city?” (2021), Achille C. Varzi asks how a city can both remain the same and yet constantly change. Evoking Heraclitus’ puzzle about the conceptual nature of a river—in which we are pressed to consider how it can be that the river is always changing, yet it seems possible to bathe in the same river twice—he proposes that we understand a city as a sort of identity while at the same time experiencing its changes because the city is not a thing, but a *process*. The puzzle can be resolved by letting go of the false belief that all three-dimensional, persisting entities—like cities—extend in space but endure in all their parts in time. Rivers don’t, neither do cities nor persons. There is a sense of change and simultaneous enduring identity regarding how we experience all three.

Varzi concludes by urging us to reconsider what we deem to be necessary parts of a city, and points out that it is not entirely transparent what a process actually *is*. For the purpose of our investigation, we can extract Varzi’s insight about the process-like nature of a city and apply it to our overarching question by stating that the kind of knowledge we can attain of a city is procedural knowledge. Furthermore, taking up the question of what kind of process a city is, I propose to combine Varzi’s insight with Matheson’s communication account of knowing a person. For it seems that knowing a person is much like knowing a process, a course of action enacted by a known entity. Targeting this point, Kenny Easwaran (2021) has argued for understanding a city as a rational, collective agent. Accordingly, we should understand the city as a “community of people whose daily lives are tied together by geography, rather than a governmental entity or a legal border” (2021, 409). Using this view as a lens onto Varzi’s question of what the parts of the city are, we might say that the city consists of groups the way a group consists of individuals, yet the group is more than the sum

of its individuals in the way the city is more than the sum of its groups. It is the process of how the moving parts intersect and interact that constitutes the inner workings of a city, and to know them means to not only interact with but to belong to at least some of its parts. In the bar, you become part of the city for others by co-creating their city-experience. More generally put, and connecting with the previous claim about the procedural nature of knowledge we attain of a city: To know a city is to be a participant in rather than a mere observer of its flow.

This points back to De Certeau's preference for an immersed over a bird's-eye view of the city. It also brings this investigation full circle by returning to the ordinary language way of responding to the question, "What does it mean to know a city?" In a last step, we can now consider why it seems reasonable to maintain that knowing a city can mean knowing only a small portion of it.

5. Knowing the Whole by Knowing a Part

Revisiting the ordinary language sense of understanding and responding to our main question, we might still wonder what it is about a city that makes us confident to know it by only knowing a small portion of an enormous, ever-expanding, and changing set of its parts. There seems to be a peculiar way in which we know a city by virtue of knowing which traits matter to us as we remain immersed in it. Following De Certeau's analogy between the flow of a city and the performance of a speech act, we could say that to know a city might only require one to speak one of its dialects.

When our friend invites us to her home city and shows us around, the sense we get is that she knows that city like the back of her hand because of a structural awareness of the difference between the places and people who matter and those who don't. Following this observation, it seems that knowing a city means knowing how to choose from an abundance of possibilities of what to do, led by inner preferences and outer constraints.

Thinking of knowing a city in terms of constraints reveals another trait of cities in general. Considering social obligations, Smith states that "[t]he physical structure of cities—their formal routes, roads, and pathways, along with the written and unwritten rules for empty spaces like parks and plazas—all provide containers that simultaneously constrain physical opportunities and paradoxically free people from the cognitive overload of what would otherwise be an overwhelming number of social obligations just for the sake of movement" (2019, 36). If cities structure spaces to facilitate our preferences for specific social encounters, knowing a city means knowing this very structure.

It would be distorting to conclude from this that knowing this structure translates into knowing the entirety of spaces. In this regard, knowing parts of a city does not amount to knowing the entire city. However, Smith's observation helps to foreground two noteworthy aspects of the relationship between the particular experiences we make and the general way to experience moving (in) the flow of the city as a familiar process we co-create. The first aspect leads back to De Certeau's thoughts on knowing a language. Language is structured by the rules of grammar. Knowing this structure helps expand one's knowledge of a language: Once we know how to put together a sentence in English, we are able to pick up new vocabulary more quickly. Likewise, knowing the above-mentioned structures and rules of a city will allow for increasingly easy access to further knowledge about it. In this sense, knowing parts of a city does not automatically amount to knowing its entirety, but partially knowing its structure fosters movement toward knowing it more deeply. Circling back to my opening remark on how little knowledge two knowers can share of the same city, we can now add that this minimal sense of shared knowledge must be not only procedural but structural as well.

The second noteworthy aspect about the relationship between particular and general ways of knowing a city brings us to the final, third claim of this paper: Immersion rather than detached observation is the mode in which we get to know a city and maintain participatory, procedural knowledge of how to navigate the city as a process.

The figure of the flâneur evoked by de Certeau offers itself for making this final point. Through the work of Honoré de Balzac (1853), Søren Kierkegaard (1978), Charles Baudelaire (1970) and others, the dandy figure of the flâneur became prominent as a literary type and an insider icon of exploring the modern metropolis. A connoisseur of city life, the flâneur is seen promenading urban spaces in style and self-paced inquiry.² He explores urban territory while performing a bohemian lifestyle befitting its environment in sauntering otiosity. He seems to be fluent in the dialects of the neighbourhoods he visits. His walking appearance stands out, yet somewhat subtly: While much of what he does in his capacity as a flâneur overlaps with the walking practices of his surroundings, he is not to be confused with the common man on his way to work, nor the sluggard roaming the streets to find amusement. For the flâneur, the act of walking is ascribed an epistemic value. He walks the city to learn about his surroundings, and about the urban world more generally. Elaborating on the flâneur as a cosmopolitan, Bart van Leeuwen has characterised him as a representation, or allegory, of “the ambivalent attraction to the strange and unknown in the experience of anonymous city life” (2019, 301). The flâneur chooses a mix of immersed, participatory, and detached, observant positions to get to know the city, bit by bit. Following the anthropological ideal of the participant observer (Bloom-Christen 2023), he learns to become fluid in the dialects of specific neighbourhoods by means of induction: Practicing participation in particular settings rather than reading other peoples’ travel reports, he discovers the particular traits of his city as a means to resonate—as Balzac, Baudelaire, and Kierkegaard did—about the state of the city in general. Training his senses, the city’s secrets that are hidden to the untrained eyes become visible to the one who participates in its daily flow of interactions.

I have introduced the flâneur to function as a heuristic device to show the ideal of movement from particular to general knowledge of the entity we call a city. It is an interactional movement performing procedural as well as structural knowledge of his surroundings. In conclusion, we can now return to the real experience of walking and knowing a city.

6. Conclusion

There is more than one way to know one city. Not unlike the way we know a person, the familiarity status of a city can be that of an older sibling (you might know them from birth), a distant cousin (whom you have spent many childhood summers with and since lost touch), a new flatmate, or a long-time co-worker. Each personal relationship contains partial knowledge about the other, which in turn correlates with the procedural nature of maintaining a social connection. Cities, like people, are always changing. We may feel a deep sense of familiarity and belonging as we immerse ourselves in the flow of interaction. Likewise, we might become estranged and lose the kind of know-how—

² The absence of the *flâneuse* in the literature indicates the manifold restrictions for women moving about in public space, and the gender-biased connection between procedural knowledge and masculinity. For female perspectives on walking, see Elizabeth Wilson (1992); specifically on the history of gender-based public harassment, see Carol Brooks Gardner (1995). More recently, Lauren Elkin (2016) has written a book on the figure of the *flâneuse* in 19th-century cities, which uncovers the hitherto untold stories of female intellectual urban life of that time.

procedural knowledge—that enables us to smoothly interact with them. There is a sense of liability inscribed into the notion of knowing a city that holds true for knowing a person as well. Cities and persons can be predictable, yet we are sometimes—even when we know them well—surprised by their atypical behaviour, and may have to reconsider what we take to be their core characteristics.

This article considered the commonalities between knowing a city and knowing a friend by reflecting on their common features of personal and impersonal attributes. Adapting Matheson's communication account of knowing a person to the entity of a city, we could see how knowing a city means, in a broad sense, to be in conversation with it. Employing Varzi's insight about the procedural nature of a city, we saw how knowing a city requires knowing its inner workings and actualising this knowledge by participating in the flow of interactions collectively deemed typical for that particular environment.

The offered account raises ontological questions about the interactional character of a city: What does it mean to depict a city as an interactional partner rather than a passive object? Harking back to the core implications of the communication account, we might wonder: Can a city “choose” to hide some of its traits to some knowers the same way a person might choose to conceal parts of their personality?

As stated at the outset, I do not wish to assign human agency to the conceptual category “city,” but emphasise the interactional character of how knowing a city is *performed*. Taking seriously Varzi's proposal of a city as a process, rather than an object, I propose that the kind of knowledge that qualifies us to rightly claim to know a city is procedural rather than objective. Importantly, this is not to deny that there is objective knowledge to be held about a city—Birkin and De Saint Phalle both knew about the existence of the Eiffel Tower—but that this is not the kind of knowledge that captures the ordinary language sense of what it is to know Paris. Evoking the allegory of the flâneur, we could see how it is rather the immersed interaction around—and with—the tower that can partially and gradually turn the distant observer into a knower of a city. This final observation underscores and brings us back to the significance of the ordinary way to understand and to respond to our initial question: What it means to know a city is to be able to move in it as one of its parts, thus co-creating the process that it *is*.

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