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THE VALUE OF SELF-KNOWLEDGE

What’s so good about self-knowledge and bad about self-ignorance? Suppose I’m right that self-ignorance of various kinds is inevitable and normal for human beings, and that we are all, at least to some extent, “strangers to ourselves”. Should we be upset? If by making an effort it’s possible to overcome some of our self-ignorance is it worth making the effort? Obviously the answers to these questions depend on the answers to many other questions: just how self-ignorant are we? What kinds of self-ignorance do we suffer from? How much effort would be required to overcome our self-ignorance? However, underlying these questions is a more basic question: what is the value of self-knowledge? Humans are prone to thinking that self-knowledge matters, and some pay therapists large amounts of money in pursuit of it. Are they right to think that self-knowledge is worth having and even paying for?

The natural assumption that self-knowledge is valuable is the assumption that various forms of what I’ve been calling ‘substantial’ self-knowledge are valuable. If you are thinking of joining the army it’s probably good to know if you are a coward. In this context, ‘good to know’ means ‘useful to know’; you will save yourself a lot of trouble and distress if you realize before signing up that you aren’t cut out for life in the military. It’s less obvious what good it does you to know that you believe you are wearing socks. It’s hard to imagine a more seemingly worthless form of self-knowledge, and yet the little that philosophers have written about the value of self-knowledge has focused on just this kind of case. It is not hard to work out why: the value of substantial self-knowledge is supposedly obvious, and so isn’t worthy of philosophical attention. In sharp contrast, the value of knowing your own standing beliefs and other attitudes is far from obvious. That’s why philosophers who think that this form of self-knowledge is valuable feel the need to explain how and why, usually by linking it with rationality.

As we will see, the idea that intentional self-knowledge is a precondition of rationality doesn’t have much going for it. Another idea that doesn’t have much going for it is that the value of substantial self-knowledge is too obvious to need explaining. You could think that substantial self-knowledge is intrinsically valuable or that it’s value is instrumental. It doesn’t look like substantial self-knowledge has intrinsic value. Something is intrinsically valuable just if it is valuable or desirable for its own sake rather than because it promotes some other good. If X is valuable only because it leads to Y, then X is extrinsically valuable as long as Y is valuable. If Y is valuable but it is impossible or inappropriate to attempt to explain what makes it valuable in more basic terms, then Y has intrinsic value. So, for example, you might think that well-being is an example of something intrinsically valuable because its value can’t be further explained. Well-being, for present purposes, includes happiness and success: it is what makes your life go better (Scanlon 1998). In contrast, it’s reasonable to ask why self-knowledge is valuable; it’s not like asking why well-being is valuable. Indeed, it seems likely that many people who think that self-knowledge is valuable think this because they think, perhaps mistakenly, that having it increases your well-being: crudely, your life is likely to go better with it than without it.

The idea that substantial self-knowledge is valuable because it promotes well-being isn’t the only way of making sense of the notion that its value is extrinsic. You can imagine a high-minded philosopher who believes that the true value of self-knowledge derives from its links with “higher” ideals like authenticity and unity. To be authentic is to be true to yourself, and the suggestion might be that you can’t be true to yourself unless you know yourself. On this account, substantial self-knowledge is necessary for authenticity. You can argue about the value of authenticity, but if authenticity is valuable then so is self-knowledge. In the same way, you might think that a unified life, that is, one whose various elements fit together in a rationally and morally coherent way, must be underpinned by self-knowledge.

These are examples of what might be called high road arguments for the value of self-knowledge. They are “high road” in two senses: they explain the value of self-knowledge by reference to abstract, high-sounding ideals, and they regard self-knowledge as necessary for the achievement of these ideals. The point of high road arguments is not to deny that self-knowledge can promote well-being or, as Carruthers puts it, ‘make all the difference to the overall success of one’s life’ (2011: xi). The worry is that such explanations of the value of self-knowledge are too prosaic, and that its value goes deeper than that. One of my questions apart from whether high road arguments are any good, is whether they are well-motivated, that is, whether it’s right to think of self-knowledge as having a value that is deeper and more fundamental than its supposed role in promoting well-being.

I want to suggest that we should be sceptical about this and other aspects of high road arguments, even though it can’t be denied that some such arguments have something going for them. The alternative to a high road account of the value of self-knowledge is a low road account. Low road accounts are content to explain the value of self-knowledge in pragmatic or practical terms, by reference to its contribution human well-being. Explaining the value of self-knowledge in this way doesn’t means that you demean or devalue it. There isn’t much doubt that self-knowledge can and often does promote well-being, and this is about as ‘deep’ an explanation of its value as one could reasonably wish for. As far as low road explanations are concerned there is no reason to think that there has to be more to it than that: there doesn’t have to be, and there isn’t. One attractive feature of low road explanations is that they offer some protection against scepticism about the value of self-knowledge. They do this because they don’t see its value as depending on links with supposedly higher ideals whose own value is open to question. They are refreshingly straightforward and concrete. They keep things simple, and don’t offer grandiose explanation of the value of self-knowledge.

 Leaving aside questions about what motivates them, are high road explanations any good in their own terms? One line of attack questions the value of ideals like authenticity and unity. A different line of attack targets the thesis that substantial self-knowledge is necessary for authenticity and unity. The suggestion is that it’s possible to live an authentic and unified life without substantial self-knowledge. If this is right, but you are still reluctant to abandon high road arguments altogether, then you can always retreat to a fallback position which says that self-knowledge matters not because it is necessary for authenticity and unity but because it makes it easier to be authentic and unified. On this account, self-knowledge facilitates the achievement of high ideals, but even this is open to question. Radical sceptics about high road arguments can see no connection between self-knowledge and the high ideals which supposedly account for its value. Some even suggest that self-knowledge can obstruct the achievement of such ideals.

The plan for this chapter is as follows: first, I will criticize arguments for the view that intentional self-knowledge, substantial or otherwise, is indispensable for rationality. Then I will move on to other substantial self-knowledge and consider various high road arguments for its indispensability. This will involve getting clearer about notions like authenticity and unity. Lastly, I will look some low road arguments for the value of self-knowledge. I want to suggest that high road arguments face some formidable challenges, which can only be dealt with, to the extent that they can be dealt with, by retreating to their ‘fallback’ versions. Even then, there are questions about the value of authenticity and unity, though I won’t be focusing on these questions here. Although high road accounts aren’t totally useless, it’s better to take the low road. High road accounts offer us ‘depth’, but the depth they offer is largely illusory. Low road accounts demystify self-knowledge and give us everything we need. However, they do raise questions about how much philosophy can contribute to our understanding of the value of self-knowledge.

 Why would anyone think that intentional self-knowledge is essential for rationality? In chapter 4 I talked about Burge’s idea that self-knowledge is necessary for so-called critical reasoning. You need intentional self-knowledge to be Burgean critical reasoner because such reasoning requires thinking about one’s thoughts, and also that that thinking ‘be normally knowledgeable’ (Burge 1998: 248). So if critical reasoning is essential for rationality then so is intentional self-knowledge. But the problem with arguing this way is that the more you build into the notion of critical reasoning the harder it is to maintain that it is essential for rationality. A simple way of bringing this out is to go back to Peacocke’s idea of ‘second-tier’ thinking. First-tier thought is thought about the world, without consideration of relations of support, evidence or consequence between thought contents. Consideration of such relations is built into second-tier thinking. Bearing this in mind, we can now argue like this: second-tier thinking is sufficient for rationality but doesn’t require self-knowledge. From which it follows that rationality doesn’t require self-knowledge.

In Peacocke’s neat example of second-tier thinking you infer from the fact that no car is parked in your driveway that your spouse is not home yet. Then you remember that the car might have been taken to have its faulty brakes repaired, and suspend your original belief that your spouse is not home yet; you realize that the absence of the car is not necessarily good evidence that she isn’t home. As Peacocke comments, there is nothing in this little fragment of thought which involves the self-ascription of belief. Yet there is thinking about relations of evidence and support, leading to the suspension of one’s initial belief. If you can get as far as thinking in the manner Peacocke describes then it’s hard to believe that you aren’t rational or, even in the non-technical sense, a ‘critical reasoner’. And yet your thoughts are all about the world rather than about your own thoughts. The fact that you lack intentional self-knowledge might mean that you aren’t a Burgean critical reasoner but that has little to do with whether you are rational being, thinking rationally.

Clearly, the notion of ‘rationality’ is fairly elastic but this should make you doubly suspicious of attempts to establish the value of intentional self-knowledge on the basis that it is indispensable for rationality. It’s hard to avoid thinking that philosophers who argue in this way are merely extracting from the notion of rationality what they themselves put into it. This is basically the problem that afflicts Shoemaker’s many arguments for the thesis that ‘given certain conceptual capacities, rationality necessarily goes with self-knowledge’ (1996: 49). One of Shoemaker’s ideas is that ‘it is a condition of being a rational subject that one’s belief system will regularly be revised with the aim of achieving and preserving consistency and internal coherence, and that such revision requires awareness on the part of the subject of what the contents of the system are’ (2009: 39). Shoemaker agrees that the updating of one’s belief system can be largely automatic and subpersonal but insists that in an important class of cases the revision and updating does require beliefs about one’s beliefs:

These are cases in which the revision of the belief system requires an investigation on the part of the subject, one that involves conducting experiments, collecting data relevant to certain issues, or initiating reasoning aimed at answering certain questions. Such an investigation will be an intentional activity on the part of the subject, and one motivated in part by beliefs about the current contents of the belief system…. Having full human rationality requires being such that one’s revisions and updating of one’s belief system can involve such investigations, and this requires awareness of, and so beliefs about, the contents of the system (2009: 39).

There isn’t much here about the importance of self-knowledge, as distinct from beliefs about one’s own beliefs, but let that pass: the basic idea is that ‘full human rationality’ requires the capacity to form beliefs about one’s beliefs, and we can grant for present purposes that such second-order beliefs must be normally knowledgeable. The crux of the matter is whether ‘fully rational’ belief revision requires second-order belief.

It’s hard to see why. In Peacocke’s example, you aren’t conducting experiments but you are collecting data relevant to certain issues, in this case the issue of whether your spouse is home, and you have initiated reasoning aimed at answering the question whether she is at home. Your investigation of this question is an intentional activity but beliefs about your beliefs don’t come into it. You revise your belief that she is at home because you realize that your evidence isn’t necessarily good evidence that she is at home. That she is at home is the content of your initial belief but you don’t have to think of it as what you believe in order to understand the limitations of your evidence and take the necessary steps to modify your belief system. Your intentional activity can be partly motivated by beliefs about what are in fact the contents of your belief system without your having to think of them as what you believe. All your attention is focused on the world, on what is the case, and not on what you believe to be the case.

It might be objected that this doesn’t really do justice to what Shoemaker has in mind when he talks about the intentional activity of belief revision. You aren’t revising your beliefs intentionally if you don’t know that this is what you are doing, and that means knowing what you believe. But then it’s not clear why being able to revise your beliefs in this sense is in any sense a condition of being a rational subject. Belief revision, as Shoemaker conceives of it, is a reflective and self-conscious process, and it might be true that intentional self-knowledge is built into this particular form of belief revision. But then the question is: why do you have to be able to engage in reflective, self-conscious belief revision in order to qualify as a rational being? It’s helpful to think again about second-tier thinking: if you can engage in second-tier thinking then you are, to that extent, a rational being, but ‘a thinker can engage in second-tier thought without conceptualizing the process as one of belief-assessment and revision’ (Peacocke 1998: 277).

If you are a Kant aficionado you might be tempted to say at this point that if you can’t self-ascribe your own thoughts then they can’t be conscious thoughts. That is the point of Kant’s insistence that it must be possible for what he calls the “I think” to accompany all my representations if they are to mean anything to me. It’s not clear that Kant is right about this, since non-human animals presumably have conscious representations without being able to attach an “I think” to them. It’s also unclear what any of this has to do with rationality: even if consciousness requires self-consciousness, does rationality require consciousness. David Rosenthal points out that rational thinking is not always conscious and that rational solutions to problems often come to us as a result of thinking that isn’t conscious. Indeed, there is some evidence that ‘complex decisions are more rational when the thinking that led to them was not conscious’ (2008: 832). In a more popular vein, there are many variations on this theme in Malcolm Gladwell’s Blink, which picks up on the idea that ‘decisions made very quickly can be every bit as good as decisions made cautiously and deliberately’ (2005: 14). The quick thinking Gladwell has in mind is rational but unconscious. The implication is that you can be rational without being conscious, and you can also be conscious without being self-conscious. If this is right then you aren’t going to get very far in trying to explain the value of intentional self-knowledge in Kantian terms.

None of this is to say that intentional self-knowledge is redundant or plays no part in our cognitive lives. Whether or not you think that intentional self-knowledge is essential to rationality per se, there is no denying that the reflective reasoning which philosophers like Burge and Shoemaker have in mind represents a significant and perhaps distinctively human cognitive achievement. Intentional self-knowledge makes it possible for us to think about our own beliefs and desires in ways that go beyond mere second-tier thinking. To the extent that reflective reasoning is valuable to us, so is the intentional self-knowledge which facilitates it. The interesting question is not, “Does reflective, critical reasoning require self-knowledge?”, but rather, “What’s so great about reflective, critical reasoning?”. The answer to this question might seem obvious but isn’t. Being too reflective and critical can slow you down and lead to poorer decision-making than fast or unconscious thinking. This suggests that the value of intentional self-knowledge is highly context-dependent, as is the value of the kind of thinking it makes possible. It can be good to be reflective, but sometimes it’s counter-productive.

Bearing these complications in mind, perhaps it’s worth trying a different approach to explaining the value of intentional self-knowledge. Instead of focusing on rationality maybe it’s better to focus on examples of substantial self-knowledge such as knowledge of your own character. To know your own character you have to know your own beliefs, desires and other attitudes. So if substantial self-knowledge is valuable then so is intentional self-knowledge, substantial or otherwise. What makes it valuable, on this view, is its essential contribution to substantial self-knowledge. You need to know your attitudes in order to know yourself, and this brings us neatly to the next item on the agenda: what exactly is the value of substantial self-knowledge? In particular, how good are the prospects for a ‘high road’ explanation of the value of substantial self-knowledge? If the prospects are good then we can remain reasonably optimistic about the value of the intentional self-knowledge which substantial self-knowledge presupposes. Unfortunately, however, matters aren’t quite so straightforward.

The first ‘high road’ explanation of the value of substantial self-knowledge appeals to the notion of authenticity. Let’s assume that to be authentic is to be “true to yourself”. You might wonder whether authenticity, as such, has any value. Perhaps Stalin was being true to himself in ordering the summary trial and execution of thousands of former comrades but that doesn’t go on the plus side of a cosmic ledger whose minus side is infinitely long. Being true to yourself is not much good if the self to which you are being true happens to be a monster. Scepticism about the value of authenticity per se is a serious possibility but let’s worry about that here. The issue is whether, on the assumption that it’s good to be authentic, what makes substantial self-knowledge valuable is that it is indispensable for authenticity.

What would it be to be ‘true to yourself’? Suppose we say that to be true to yourself is to be true to your own character, values and emotions. If you are by nature generous then you are being true to yourself when you behave generously. If for some reason you fail to behave generously on a particular occasion then your behaviour is ‘out of character’, and you aren’t being ‘true to yourself’. Similarly, being true to your values and emotions means thinking and behaving in ways that reflect your values and emotions. When you are being true to yourself your actions and thoughts reflect the way you are because they are appropriately influenced by the way you are. If you are a generous person but only give generously at a charity event in order to impress your date then you aren’t really being true to yourself because it isn’t your usually generous nature that is motivating you to act on this occasion.

On this view of authenticity, why would you think it requires self-knowledge? A high road explanation of the value of self-knowledge would have to assume that you can’t be true to your character, values and emotions unless you know your character, values and emotions. It’s hard to see why. Why would you have to know you are generous in order to be generous, or to behave generously because you are generous? If you are generous, your generosity may enough to explain your generous behaviour, and self-knowledge needn’t come into it. The same goes for other character traits. In a previous chapter, I gave the example of fastidious Woody. Now imagine teenage Woody. Teenage Woody is as fastidious as grown up Woody but in order to fit in with his teenage friends he talks and behaves as if he couldn’t care less about neatness and order. When he goes to the cinema he litters the floor with popcorn, just like his friends, even though doing so makes him inwardly cringe. In aping the behaviour of his friends Woody isn’t being true to himself, and the reason he isn’t being true to himself is that he is pretending to be other than he is. To be authentic he would need to stop pretending, but that has nothing to do with him knowing that he is fastidious. He doesn’t need to know or believe that he is fastidious in order for him not to pretend to be like his friends. In order to be authentic his actions would need to reflect his true character, and his actions can do that without being mediated by knowledge of his true character, or any other substantial self-knowledge.

Being true to one’s values and emotions is no different from this. You don’t need to know your values in order for them to be reflected by your thoughts and behaviour, any more than you need to know your emotions in order for you to be true to them. Indeed, when it is a question of being true to your emotions you might think that self-knowledge can actually be an obstacle to authenticity. This is what Feldman and Hazlett argue. They distinguish several different conceptions or aspects of authenticity. On one conception, what it is to be authentic is to avoid pretence, and Feldman and Hazlett confine themselves to arguing that authenticity in this sense doesn’t require self-knowledge. This is the point I have just been making. There is, however, also the option of understanding authenticity as spontaneity. On this account you aren’t being true to yourself when you aren’t being ‘spontaneous’. Feldman and Hazlett argue that, far from requiring self-knowledge, authenticity on this conception is incompatible with it.

They give the nice example of self-conscious Sam, a philosopher from Boringtown, Connecticut, who had an affair with visiting speaker Grace and is now wondering whether to join her at her seaside Mediterranean villa. After much self-investigation self-conscious Sam concludes “I am in love with Grace, therefore I shall go on a tryst”. Compare unselfconscious Sam. His story is the same, with the same resulting action, but minus the self-investigation and self-knowledge. He also decides to visit Grace but makes his decision spontaneously, not knowing whether it is the right thing to do. Unselfconscious Sam takes a romantic risk, and this leads Feldman and Hazlett to comment:

[U]nselfconscious Sam enjoys a species of intuitively appealing authenticity, which self-conscious Sam lacks. The difference comes down (at least in part) to self-knowledge: unselfconscious Sam lacks self-knowledge, while self-conscious Sam has self-knowledge and acts on that basis… Self-conscious Sam’s action is motivated by the knowledge that he loves Grace; unselfconscious Sam’s action is motivated (only) by his love of Grace… In the case of self-conscious Sam, self-knowledge interferes with a proper focus of his attention on Grace. His action seems less motivated by genuine romantic love, and more by his self-directed concern (2013: 177).

Borrowing Bernard Williams’ terminology, Feldman and Hazlett suspect self-conscious Sam of having “one thought too many”, a thought about himself and his own feelings. When Sam wonders how he feels about Grace his thinking is unappealingly self-focused, and that is why his decision to visit her lacks the authenticity of unselfconscious Sam’s decision to visit. If authenticity is spontaneity then what it requires in such cases is not self-knowledge but self-ignorance.

This example raises tough questions about our understanding of authenticity, as well as the relationship between self-knowledge and spontaneity. Suppose that unselfconscious Sam is normally an unspontaneous and careful person who hardly ever makes important life decisions without thinking through the pros and cons. However, on this occasion he is smitten and rushes off to see Grace without asking himself any of the questions he would normally be asking himself in these circumstances about his feelings for Grace or the wisdom of going to visit her. His behaviour has an uncharacteristic wantonness. On the assumption that being true to one’s own character is at least necessary for being authentic, Sam’s behaviour on this occasion is inauthentic. He might have he acted ‘spontaneously’ in deciding to visit Grace, but that doesn’t alter the fact that he wasn’t being true to himself. Spontaneity isn’t authentic when it is out of character, and it’s not clear in any case that Sam’s wantonness is a form of spontaneity, as distinct from a manifestation of a loss of his characteristic self-control.

It’s worth adding that romantic love is a special case. Suppose that Sam’s question is not whether he should visit Grace in Greece but whether he should switch from philosophy to investment banking. It would be bizarre to suppose that a spontaneous, spur-of-the-moment decision to switch to banking is more ‘authentic’ than a properly thought through decision. In arriving at his decision, self-conscious Sam might ask himself “What do I want to do with my life?” or “Will I be any happier as a banker?”. Although these questions are self-focused, that doesn’t make the resulting choice any less authentic. In this case, authenticity is compatible with self-knowledge, but still doesn’t require it. Even if Sam is by nature a reflective person who rarely leaps before he looks, being true to his reflective nature only requires him to think about what would be best for him before decides. He doesn’t need to know what would be best for him.

This isn’t quite the end of the road for the ‘authenticity account’ of the value of self-knowledge. Substantial self-knowledge might not be necessary for authenticity, but there is still the fallback position that you are more likely to be true to your own character, emotions and values if you know what they are. There is something to this. After all, most humans are buffeted by external events over which they have little control, and can easily be led by such events to operate in ways that are out of character, at odds with their values, or in some other way inauthentic. The fallback position maintains that the likelihood of this happening can be reduced by reflecting in an admittedly self-focused way on one’s values and character. For example, imagine being tempted to do something that doesn’t feel right, and thinking “I don’t do that sort thing”. This can be read as a statement about your values, your character, or both. Recognizing that you don’t do that sort of thing can help you not to do that sort of thing on this occasion, whatever the pressures or temptations. This claim has some plausibility, and is the probably best that can be done for a high road explanation of the value of self-knowledge by reference to authenticity. Having given up on the notion that self-knowledge is necessary for authenticity, those who still want to take the high road should concentrate on the different ways in which substantial self-knowledge can promote or facilitate authenticity. Thinking self-consciously about who you are – about what kind of person you are and would like to be - can make a difference to what you do by anchoring your thoughts about what to do in who you really are.

The next high road argument for the value of substantial self-knowledge claims you need this kind of self-knowledge in order to live a properly unified life. What is that? Imagine your life as constituted by your standing attitudes, actions, decisions, relationships, projects, and so on. Sometimes it’s very easy to see how all the various elements that constitute a life fit together. For example, your decisions make sense in the light of your values, your personal relationships and life projects are mutually supportive, and so on. Coherence in this sense is about intelligibility rather than mere consistency, though consistency certainly comes into it. A disunified life is one whose various elements do not fit together in a way that is rationally or morally intelligible, and the question is whether it’s possible to live a unified life without substantial self-knowledge.

This issue can be approached via the following semi-rhetorical question: how are you supposed to make it the case that the different elements of your life fit together if you don’t know what the different elements are? But if you know the different elements of your life and how they fit together then what you have is substantial self-knowledge. Your self-knowledge can regulate your life and maintain its coherence and unity by making it clear to you when a proposed course of action doesn’t mesh with your values, projects, or other elements of your life. For example, suppose you are doing your tax return and you think of a barely legal tax avoidance scheme which would substantially reduce your tax liability. This is another case in which you might think “I don’t do that sort of thing”. This is now not just a statement about your character and values but also about how you live your life. The realization that cheating on your taxes is inconsistent with a life like yours may deter you from cheating on your taxes. If it does, then the unity of your life is preserved by your deciding not to cheat on your taxes, and you decide not to cheat on your taxes because you know you don’t do that sort of thing.

One question about this argument is whether, in order for the various elements of your life to be unified, you need to make it the case that they are unified. Imagine deciding not to cheat on your taxes, but not because you are thinking about the unity of your life. You decide not to cheat because you think it’s wrong to cheat. By deciding to pay your taxes you are ‘making it the case’ that your life remains consistent in this respect but self-knowledge does not come into it because you aren’t paying taxes with a view to preserving the unity of your life: you don’t refrain from cheating because you know or believe that you don’t do that sort of thing. Self-knowledge would only be needed if ‘making it the case’ that your life is unified is something you do intentionally and self-consciously. Perhaps you can’t intentionally and self-consciously ‘make it the case’ that your life is unified if you don’t know its different elements and how they fit together but you can live a unified life without setting out to live in a unified way, just as you can live authentically without setting out to live authentically.

One way of putting this would be to say that the unity of a life can be a spontaneous or ‘given’ unity rather than a reflective or ‘imposed’ unity. A reflective unity is the product of self-focused thinking: your life is unified because you think in a first-personal way about what to do and how to live. That’s what you are doing when you are thinking thoughts such as “I don’t do that sort of thing” or, to take another example, or “She’s not my type”. A given unity is one that doesn’t arise as a result of this kind of thinking. The objection to the unity account of the value of self-knowledge is that the unity of your life can be a given unity, and so not depend on self-knowledge. It’s worth adding that the fact that the unity of your life is not anchored in self-knowledge doesn’t make its unity accidental. Just because the thought “I don’t do that sort of thing” played no part in your decision not to cheat on your taxes, that doesn’t make it an accident that you declared all of your income. You declared your income because you are the kind of person who declares his income, and not because you know that you are that kind of person.

So much for the idea that self-knowledge is valuable because you can’t live a unified life without it. You could argue in response that a reflectively unified life has more going for it than a spontaneously unified life, but this still won’t explain the value of self-knowledge. If a reflectively unified life has any added value that is because of the value we attach to self-knowledge, yet the value of self-knowledge is what we were supposed to be explaining. The best explanation of the value of self-knowledge is a fallback explanation: the point about substantial self-knowledge is not that your life can’t be unified without it but that your life is more likely to be unified, or be better unified, if you have self-knowledge. Why is that? There is no knockdown argument available, just a piece of common-sense psychology: you are more likely to live consistently and coherently if you reflect on how you live your life and on what fits your existing commitments, values, relationships and so on. You are more likely to be led astray if you don’t do this kind of thinking and just go with the flow.

It’s not clear how much weight to attach to this common-sense argument. One issue is whether it’s actually true that self-focused thinking is a more reliable route to unified living than thinking that isn’t self-focused. If you are basically honest and law-abiding, are you any less likely to cheat on your taxes if you think about whether it’s like you to cheat than if you think in impersonal terms about acceptability or otherwise of cheating? It’s certainly possibly to imagine self-focused thinking as a highly effective tool for regulating your life, but it’s just as easy to imagine such thinking as inefficient, disruptive and unreliable. It may not be quite clear to you what meshes with the rest of your life, and you might be more likely to be true to yourself if you just concentrate on the rights and wrongs of tax avoidance than if you try to calculate what would uphold the coherence of your life. The reason too much navel gazing can easily lead you astray is that it’s hard to think clearly and honestly about your own life. The necessary perceptiveness and self-honesty may be in short supply for any number of reasons, including fatigue, self-deception and confusion.

There is also the question why unity matters anyway. There is no doubt that “I don’t do that sort of thing” can give expression to a disagreeable self-importance and conservatism that limits the possibilities of change and destroys any element of spontaneity in one’s life. Too much consistency can be deadening, and doing what you don’t always do can be more fulfilling and meaningful than sticking to the well-trodden and familiar pathways of your life. However, there is also a point beyond which a lack of consistency or coherence can threaten your well-being. Most of us need to find our lives rationally and morally intelligible, and self-knowledge facilitates a degree of unity, consistency and coherence in our lives. This explains the value of self-knowledge in line with the fallback position: to the extent that unity matters, and that self-knowledge facilitates unity, self-knowledge also matters. Unity matters to some extent, and self-knowledge facilitates the unity of life to some extent. To that extent, self-knowledge matters.

This is about as far as we need to go in assessing the merits of high road explanations of the value of substantial self-knowledge. Two things are striking about such explanations: the abstractness of the ideals by reference to which they explain the value of self-knowledge and their insistence on the indispensability of self-knowledge. The fallback approach targets the second of these features and does so very effectively. Once you have the fallback position clearly in view it becomes hard to see why anyone would care deeply about indispensability. Why does it matter whether self-knowledge is strictly indispensable for, say, unity if it can be shown that self-knowledge promotes unity? Searching for necessary conditions is a bad habit you can pick up by reading too much Kant. When he tries to bring out the importance of a certain kind of knowledge, or a certain kind of thinking, he often does so by talking about how indispensable it is for something else we do or value. His arguments break down because it is extraordinarily difficult to establish non-trivial indispensability claims. You think that X is necessary for Y but then someone else thinks up a way in which you can have Y without X. That’s how it is with high road arguments for the value of self-knowledge. In every case in which it looks as though self-knowledge might be necessary for the achievement of some high ideal it turns out not to be. However, the right reaction to this is not disappointment but reflection on why it ever seemed a good idea to defend claims of this form. Self-knowledge is still valuable if it leads to other goods, even if those other goods could be achieved without it. Necessary conditions aren’t necessary, however neat it would be if they could be established.

Although the fallback view doesn’t explicitly target the other dimension of high road arguments, their emphasis on high ideals like authenticity, unity and self-improvement, there is certainly room for debate about whether it’s right to explain the value of self-knowledge in such abstract terms. We have seen that unity and authenticity can be overrated, in the former case because it can be deadening, and in the latter case because it’s not clear what is so great about being true to yourself. We clearly don’t want people like Stalin and Hitler to be true to themselves but authenticity can be a mixed blessing even in less extreme cases. Do we want garden-variety prigs and bores to true to themselves, or over-ambitious politicians who would sell their own grandmothers in return for high office? In the case of the thrusting politician who metaphorically just that, do we view them any more favourably when someone points out, “Well, at least he was being true to himself”? No doubt there are limits to how far scepticism about authenticity can be pushed, but it’s hard not to think that the effectiveness of high road explanations of the value of self-knowledge is diminished by such scepticism.

In that case, why not take the low road? The most straightforward low road account of the value of self-knowledge says that having more of it rather than less of it makes a positive difference to one’s overall happiness or well-being. There are several reasons why, at least from a philosophical perspective, you might be reluctant to take the low road. Here are three:

1. You think that it devalues self-knowledge to explain its value in these terms.
2. You aren’t convinced that having self-knowledge does make a positive difference to your well-being.
3. You don’t see what philosophy has to contribute to our understanding of the value of self-knowledge if we take the low road.

Taking these in turn, 1 can be dismissed fairly quickly. Why does it devalue self-knowledge to explain its value by reference to well-being? There might be something to this if you think that its value is intrinsic rather than extrinsic, but that is not a defensible view. It’s really just a form of obscurantism to say that self-knowledge is intrinsically valuable, and the possibility of explaining its value in pragmatic terms shows why: to say that self-knowledge is valuable because it increases our well-being is to explain its value in more basic terms, by reference to another good. You might wonder whether this account satisfies our longing for a deeper explanation of the value of self-knowledge. Perhaps not, but the appropriate reaction to this is to question the longing. Talk of the connection between self-knowledge and ‘higher’ ideals has a nice ring to it but low road explanations see the depth on offer in high road explanations as largely bogus. The downgrading of well-being as the main source of its value is a form of puritanism about self-knowledge which there is no very compelling reason to endorse. There remains the nagging thought that there must surely be more to it than that, but why must there be? On any sane view, what the low road explanation offers us should be good enough, even if high road explanations offer tantalizing glimpses of what more can be said.

There are three kinds of worry that might underpin 2:

1. Having more rather than less self-knowledge doesn’t always make a positive difference to one’s overall well-being. You can have too much self-knowledge for your own good, and less can be better than more.
2. In cases in which self-knowledge seems to be making a positive difference what is making the difference isn’t your knowledge but your beliefs about yourself. These beliefs don’t have to be true, or qualify as knowledge, in order to be beneficial.
3. Even if self-knowledge is good for you that doesn’t mean that seeking out self-knowledge is good for you. There are costs in terms of time, effort, and energy to the pursuit of self-knowledge, and these might outweigh the value of self-knowledge.

With regard to (a), it’s undoubtedly true that self-knowledge can be a mixed blessing. There may be painful truths about yourself you would be better off not knowing, and there is no question that mild self-ignorance can increase levels of well-being. For example, having a more positive self-image than is warranted by the facts might be beneficial. Depending on the kind of person you are, self-illusions can motivate self-improvement, and thereby make your life go better. However, there is also plenty of evidence that only moderate self-illusions are beneficial, and that extreme self-illusions can easily undermine well-being (Wilson and Dunn 2004). By and large, the positive effects of self-knowledge outweigh the mild benefits of self-ignorance. Self-illusions can promote self-improvement but so can self-knowledge. Suppose that you are chronically unassertive and that your lack of assertiveness is causing problems in your personal and professional life. You are unhappy because you have the impression that people don’t take you seriously but it’s a mystery to you why they don’t take you seriously. Eventually you figure it out and sign up for assertiveness training. As a result you become more assertive and your life goes better. In this example, it is knowing that you aren’t assertive – a piece of painful and perhaps hard-won self-knowledge- which prompts you to do things which boost your well-being. In this case, as in many others, the link between self-knowledge and well-being is indirect. It isn’t realizing you are unassertive that increases your well-being but the things you do as a result of realizing that you are unassertive. Obviously, you could figure out that you have a problem and still do nothing about it. Self-knowledge without the motivation to improve gets you nowhere, but it’s part and parcel of what gets you to improve when you are motivated.

A way of putting this would be to say that self-knowledge serves as a guide. Knowing what you are like, good at, what makes you happy, what is important to you, or how you feel can improve your choices and thinking in ways that objectively make your life go better. But does it matter that you know these things, and don’t just have the corresponding beliefs? This is the question (b) raises. In the last example, knowing that you are chronically unassertive might prompt you to try to be more assertive, but merely believing you are unassertive would presumably have the same effect. The belief doesn’t even have to be true, and so doesn’t even have to amount to self-knowledge: the belief that you are unassertive might encourage you to be more assertive even if you are already assertive.

There are two things to say in response to this. First, it does sometimes matter that your beliefs are true. In the case of the coward who is saved from a life of misery in the army by his recognition that he is a coward, he is better off for not having joined the army because it’s true that he is a coward. In the last example, being more assertive makes your life go well because you are chronically unassertive. Being more assertive when you are already assertive enough might diminish your well-being. Second, depending on your theory of knowledge, the difference between merely having the true belief that you are unassertive and knowing you are unassertive might be the difference between your true belief having an unreliable source and its having a reliable source, or the difference between having a true belief about yourself on inadequate grounds and having the same belief on adequate grounds. There is no denying that having a true belief on inadequate grounds can lead to increases in well-being, but it’s important not to exaggerate the significance of this. Your life will go better on the whole, and your well-being maximized, if your self-assessments are reliable and well-grounded than if they are not. What matters is not just that you have true beliefs about your character, values, talents, and so on, but that your self-assessments are reliably true, that you can trust them and act on their basis. This kind of trustworthiness is what you get when your self-assessments are not just true but knowledgeably true: self-knowledge is better than mere true belief because when you have self-knowledge your self-assessments are guided by the facts (cf. Hyman 2010).

As for (c), there is no question time spent seeking self-knowledge isn’t always time well spent. Self-knowledge can result from self-inquiry, and self-inquiry takes time and energy. When the costs of self-inquiry outweigh the benefits of self-knowledge, the net value of self-knowledge is diminished. The principle here is that ‘the disvalue of inquiry about whether P might trump the value of knowing whether P, as when acquiring knowledge about some question is not worth the cost of inquiry about that question’ (Feldman & Hazlett 2013: 160). Aside from considerations of cost, there is also something deeply unattractive about the vision of the sadhu or mystic who dedicates himself to the search for self-knowledge. The self-indulgence and self-importance of such characters is hard to stomach. Still, to the extent that self-knowledge is worth having, it must sometimes be worth the effort of acquiring it. Anyway, the effort required isn’t always that great. Sometimes you only have to listen to what other people are saying; the acquisition of substantial self-knowledge can be passive as well as active.

That leaves 3, the worry that philosophy has little to contribute to an understanding of the value of self-knowledge if we take the low road. This isn’t exactly an objection to taking the low road since you might be happy to accept that philosophy doesn’t have a great deal to contribute on this topic. After all, you don’t need philosophy to tell you that self-knowledge has something to do with well-being, and if you want to understand how the two connected you would probably do better to read the work of empirical psychologists or novelists like Proust or Henry James. Does philosophy really have anything to add? Maybe not as much as its practitioners would like to think, but not nothing. Philosophy has things to say about the nature and sources of self-knowledge, as it does about the nature and sources of well-being. It is for philosophy to explore and, if necessary, debunk claims about the links between self-knowledge and other ideals, and comment on whether the value of self-knowledge is intrinsic or extrinsic. Clearly, there are limits to what philosophy can say about the means by which self-knowledge enhances well-being or the extent to which it does so. These are empirical matters, and indeed many of the most pressing questions about self-knowledge are empirical. It’s no insult to philosophy to say that these are questions it isn’t really equipped to answer. Philosophy, biology, psychology, and literature all contribute to our understanding of the value of self-knowledge, and taking the low road enables you to do justice to that obvious fact.

The last question is this: suppose it’s true that the value of substantial self-knowledge has something to do with human well-being, or even ideals like authenticity or unity. Where does that leave the value of intentional self-knowledge that isn’t substantial? Having rejected the suggestion that intentional self-knowledge is strictly necessary for rationality, it started to look as though its value might be related to the value of substantial self-knowledge: you can’t have substantial self-knowledge unless you know your beliefs, desires and other attitudes. In that case, can it not be said that intentional self-knowledge derives its value in part from the value of substantial self-knowledge? This wouldn’t be wrong but there is more to it than that. There is now also the possibility of giving a more direct low road explanation of the value of intentional self-knowledge: having it makes it possible for us to think and reason in ways that not only make us what we are but enable us to live better than would otherwise be the case. These are the types of thinking and reasoning people like Burge and Shoemaker are interested in, and I’m suggesting that their value is also partly practical. Explanations of the value of intentional self-knowledge by reference to what is necessary for rationality are high road explanations but in this domain, as in others, the low road more straightforward. Once again, the lesson is: when you are trying to explain the value of self-knowledge, don’t be shy about stating the obvious: self-knowledge derives whatever value it has from the value of what it makes possible, and what it ultimately makes possible is for us to live well.